

HECUBA AND THE DEMOCRATS: POLITICAL POLARITIES IN EURIPIDES' PLAY*

In an article in *The Classical Quarterly* in 2009 I suggested that it was high time that those Euripides scholars who believe that the demagogues were 'a bad thing' woke up to the fact that historians of the fifth century had long since discredited that view and had been portraying them in a favourable light.¹ The Euripideans' conviction that the passages in the plays which denounce democracy were objectively justified had led them to confuse what the playwright's characters say with what he himself felt, which of course is unknowable. I focused then on *Suppliant Women* and *Orestes*. In this article I turn the spotlight onto *Hecuba*, understanding of which I feel has been damaged by a failure to take on board the clear polarizing of democratic Greeks and royalist Asians upon which the tragedy insists.

As long ago as 1987 David Kovacs drew attention to the contrast 'between dynastic figures like the Trojan queen and princess and members of a democratically run commonwealth like Odysseus and Agamemnon', or, putting it more generally, 'between the newer democratic world of the Greek army and the older dynastic world of the barbarian nations'.² Kjeld Matthiessen judges this contrast to be 'of no great significance' if one takes an overall view of the play.³ I beg to differ.

Sadly, so far as I can see, Kovacs' wise words fell on deaf ears. This is puzzling, since it does not take much insight to observe that the denunciations of the democratic process in the play fall exclusively from Asian lips. The chorus of Trojan women unsurprisingly excoriate Odysseus, the 'people-flatterer' (δημοχαριστής), for urging the sacrifice of their former princess Polyxena (131–40). That fine scholar Edith Hall is just the latest apparently to assume that the description 'that cunning-hearted, logic-

* This article began life in 2012 as a talk at Sydney University. I am grateful to Frances Muecke for asking me to give it, and to Alastair Blanshard, Paul Roche, and Peter Wilson for their helpful comments.

¹ J. Morwood, 'Euripides and the Demagogues', *CQ* 59.2 (2009), 353–63.

² D. Kovacs, *The Heroic Muse* (Baltimore, MD, 1987), 81, 82.

³ K. Matthiessen (ed.), *Euripides. Hekabe* (Berlin and New York, 2010), 36–7.

chopping, sweet-tongued people-flatterer' (131–3) is objectively true.⁴ Then, in Hecuba's anguished discussion with Odysseus, she hisses out a protest against demagogic populism (254–7). After the sacrifice of Polyxena, she speaks slightly of the *nautikos okhlos* ('naval mob'):⁵

σὺ δ' ἔλθῃ καὶ σήμηνον Ἀργείοις τάδε,
μὴ θιγγάνειν μοι μηδέν' ἄλλ' εἴργειν ὄχλον
τῆς παιδός. ἔν τοι μυρίῳ στρατεύματι
ἀκόλαστος ὄχλος ναυτικὴ τ' ἀναρχία
κρείσσων πυρός, κακὸς δ' ὁ μὴ τι δρῶν κακόν. (604–8)

But you go and take this message to the Argives, that no one should touch my child but that they keep the mob away from her. In a vast army the mob is hard to control, and the riotous behaviour of soldiers is harder to check than fire. The man who does no base deed is called base.

Her comments here are totally unreasonable. She has just heard from Talthybius of the enormous admiration of the sailors for her daughter's nobility and the generous enthusiasm of their response (573–80), and she later makes it clear that she has digested this (672–3). The former Queen of Troy quite fails to relate to the movingly collaborative activity of ordinary people. Indeed, she talks the idiolect of the enemies of democracy, who, as Harvey Yunis has observed of this period, speak 'with a blatant disdain for the common people who form the vast majority of the citizen population and, therefore, of the decision-making audience in the Assembly and courts' – and, one can surely add, of the theatre audience as well.⁶ Even though Aristotle uses the word *okhlos* (the mob) in a favourable sense when he argues that a crowd (an *okhlos*) often judges better than an individual since the many are often less corruptible than the few, less likely to be overcome by anger and to make a mistake (*Pol.* 1286a), the term can become a word loaded with disdain, as in the context in which Hecuba uses it in 607.⁷

⁴ E. Hall, *Greek Tragedy. Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford, 2010), 257–8.

⁵ Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 883; Thuc. 6.72.4; Eur. *IA* 914; Arist. *Pol.* 1327b: Aristotle argues that there is no need to include 'the teeming population that grows up in connection with the sailor crowd (*ton nautikon okhlon*)' in the citizen body. However, the sailors will be citizens.

⁶ H. Yunis, *Taming Democracy. Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 39. See also J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens. Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, NJ, 1989), 11; J.T. Roberts, *Athens on Trial. The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 38, 55, 76–7.

⁷ It is a mistake to think that Euripides generally employs the word with a pejorative meaning. In his surviving work, neutral or laudatory uses are significantly in the majority. Context is all-important.

Perhaps most tellingly, Hecuba later sees the ‘democratic’ leader Agamemnon as bring fettered by his position:

φεῦ.
 οὐκ ἔστι θνητῶν ὅστις ἔστ’ ἐλεύθερος·
 ἢ χρημάτων γάρ δοῦλός ἐστιν ἢ τύχης
 ἢ πλῆθος αὐτὸν πόλεος ἢ νόμων γραφαὶ
 εἴργουσι χρῆσθαι μὴ κατὰ γνώμην τρόποις.
 ἐπεὶ δὲ ταρβεῖς τῷ τ’ ὄχλῳ πλέον νέμεις,
 ἐγὼ σε θήσω τοῦδ’ ἐλεύθερον φόβου. (864–9)

Ha! There is no mortal who is free. Either he is the slave of money or of fortune, or the city mob or the written laws prevent him behaving as his judgement suggests. Since you are afraid and allow too much importance to the common people, I shall set you free from this fear.

Hecuba has earlier pleaded with Odysseus to use his *auctoritas* to manipulate the democratic process for private reasons (286–95). What will the democratic Athenians in the audience have made of her regret that the people of the city and the written laws prevent a man from following his bent as he decides? After all, in 409,

the city Dionysia had been the momentous occasion for a set of highly politicized rituals, the taking of the oath of Demophantus against anti-democrats by the assembled citizenry and the announcement of honours for Thrasybulus of Calydon, the assassin of the oligarch Phrynichus, architect and leading agent of the anti-democratic revolution of 411.⁸

Indeed, it was the *nautikos okhlos* at Samos which had kept the flame of democracy alive while Athens endured that oligarchic takeover. To the objection that these events took place a decade after the performance of *Hecuba*, one can simply point out that that not only was a curse pronounced at every meeting of the assembly against whoever intended to become a tyrant or to join in restoring the tyranny,⁹ but also, in the highly relevant context of the City Dionysia, a decree was read out annually, probably through most of the fifth century, proclaiming a reward for killing any of the tyrants.¹⁰ Democracy wore its heart on its sleeve in Athens; even if the theatre of Dionysus appears to have shrunk in size and contained fewer people almost every year,¹¹ it

⁸ I am grateful to Peter Wilson for this quotation.

⁹ See Ar. *Thesm.* 338–9, with Sommerstein’s note at 331–51.

¹⁰ See Ar. *Av.* 1074–5, with Dunbar’s note ad loc.

¹¹ E. Csapo, ‘The Men Who Built the Theatres: *Theatropolai*, *Theatronai*, and *Arkhitektones*’, in P. Wilson (ed.), *The Greek Theatre and Festivals. Documentary Studies* (Oxford, 2007), 96–7.

remained a profoundly democratic institution. An Athenian audience would surely have been fully aware of how far distant this wife of an Eastern potentate is from any understanding of the concept of democracy. This impression would have been heightened by her unknowing adoption of the standard Athenian anti-democratic terminology.¹²

To return to the Asians and *Hecuba*, the queen's daughter, the princess Polyxena, of course sets enormous store on her former royal status, dwelling on it with poignant nostalgia:

τί γάρ με δεῖ ζῆν; ἦ πατήρ μὲν ἦν ἄναξ
 Φρυγῶν ἀπάντων· τοῦτό μοι πρῶτον βίου·
 ἔπειτ' ἐθρέφθην ἐλπίδων καλῶν ὑπο
 βασιλευσί νύμφη, ζῆλον οὐ σμικρὸν γάμων
 ἔχουσ', ὅτου δῶμ' ἐστίαν τ' ἀφίξομαι·
 δέσποινα δ' ἡ δύστηνος Ἰδαίαισιν ἦ
 γυναιξὶ παρθένους τ' ἀπόβλεπτος μέτα,
 ἴση θεοῖσι πλὴν τὸ καπθανεῖν μόνον: (349–56)

For why should I go on living? My father was king of all the Phrygians. That was how my life began. Then I was nourished by fair hopes as a bride for kings, and many were the rivals who competed to take me off to their hearth and home as their wife. I, now unfortunate, was a mistress to the women of Ida. Among those women, both young and old, it was I who attracted all men's gaze. Mortality apart, I was the equal of the gods.

Now that she is a slave she longs to die (357–8, 367–8). The chorus, in an emphatic three lines (one expects just two in such choral comments), praise the nobility that arises from her high birth:

δεινὸς χαρακτήρ κάπσιμος ἐν βροτοῖς
 ἐσθλῶν γενέσθαι, κάπὶ μείζον ἔρχεται
 τῆς εὐγενείας ὄνομα τοῖσιν ἀξίοις. (379–81)

The stamp of royal birth is a wonderful thing. It marks people out and its glory grows greater when they prove worthy of it.

¹² Sometime in the future I would like to examine the passage in the posthumous *Iphigenia in Aulis* where the Greek kings Agamemnon and Menelaus criticize Calchas and Odysseus on the grounds that they might actually communicate their hugger-mugger dealings to the Greek army (513–27). Menelaus even suggests that they kill the seer and Agamemnon seems unfazed by the idea (519–20). What would the first audience have made of this lack of transparency among *Greeks*?

The editor Tierney comments that

Euripides only partly agrees with Burns that ‘the rank is but the guinea stamp’ though he does hold that rank is enhanced by virtue. This reverence for rank is a surprising trait of the democratic Athens at their finest hour.¹³

But Tierney is making an elementary mistake. This is not Euripides or even democratic Athens speaking. It is a chorus of Trojan women gushing forth their royalist heroine-worship.

This kind of blunder can have serious consequences. At the very end of the seventeenth century the Rev. Jeremy Collier included in his attack on the Restoration theatre an onslaught on the ‘Immorality of the Stage’. Of Valentine, the spendthrift hero of Congreve’s *Love for Love*, he remarks that ‘*This Spark, the Poet would pass for a Person of Vertue*’. In his robust 109-page response, Congreve asked the question, ‘Why is he to be passed for a Person of Vertue?’ He is ‘a mix’d Character; his Faults are fewer than his good Qualities’. The only person who says that he has virtues is a character in the play, his mistress Angelica, who remarks that he has virtues in the final act after he has sacrificed everything to his love for her, thinking all else of little worth. His virtues, Congreve remarks, are in respect of her, and hers is the only reference to his virtue in the course of the play.

Congreve might have saved his breath to cool his broth. Collier’s cloddish misreading directed – or possibly followed – public taste and led to a cleansing of the supposed licentiousness of Restoration comedy. Congreve’s plays were still performed, but only after they had been subjected to what Sheridan called a bungling reformation. Collier’s crass Puritanism led to the sanitizing of English comedy. In fact, this did not prove disastrous. Goldsmith and Sheridan himself were to operate effectively within the enforced restrictions. But the Collier episode does illustrate the dangers of confusing the contextualized comments of dramatic characters with the pronouncements of their creators.

To return to our play, the contrast between the royalist Asians and the Greeks is extreme. Kovacs puts it in starkly negative terms when he says that the Greek leaders ‘enjoy no power whatever except insofar as they can persuade the demos that the policies they recommend are in its interest’.¹⁴ But, from a democratic viewpoint, is that such a bad

¹³ M. Tierney (ed.), *Euripides. Hecuba* (Dublin, 1946), n. ad loc.

¹⁴ Kovacs (n. 2), 82.

thing? And anyway it is surely not entirely true. Agamemnon finds sufficient room for manoeuvre to give Hecuba the support she asks of him (870–4).¹⁵ And is Hall necessarily justified when she writes that Odysseus ‘makes his most shameful appearance in ancient literature when he arrives to justify arresting [Polyxena]’?¹⁶ Much will depend on how the actor playing him delivers his notorious opening lines:

γύναι, δοκῶ μὲν σ’ εἰδέναι γνώμην στρατοῦ
 ψῆφόν τε τὴν κρανθεῖσαν· ἀλλ’ ὅμως φράσω.
 ἔδοξ’ Ἀχαιοῖς παῖδα σὴν Πολυξένην
 σφάξαι πρὸς ὀρθὸν χῶμ’ Ἀχιλλεῖου τάφου.
 ἡμᾶς δὲ πομποὺς καὶ κομιστήρας κόρης
 τάσσουσιν εἶναι· (218–23)

Lady, I think that you know the army’s intention and the vote which it has passed, but I shall tell you nevertheless. The Achaeans have decided to slaughter your child Polyxena on the tall mound of Achilles’ tomb. They have appointed us to fetch and escort the girl.

The decision to sacrifice the Trojan princess is, of course, horrific. Odysseus’ bluntness could well be simply brutal. But it could also be the expression of an appalled embarrassment at what he feels must be done. How could he possibly convey so grim a message in a diplomatic fashion? At least he has the courage to go through with the terrible scene when he could have left it to Talthylbius to tear the girl away, as happens with Astyanax in *The Trojan Women*.

At this point I hope I can be forgiven if I swerve aside in the manner of a Lucretian atom and make a point that seems to be not at all appreciated but of considerable importance in the discussion of Greek tragedy and plays generally. This occurs when there are two (or indeed more) equally valid ways of playing a scene or a dramatic moment. I can show what I mean by looking at some famous lines from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* when the protagonist and his wife are discussing the murder of Duncan:

¹⁵ Matthiessen (n. 3), 37. It is true that, according to Thucydides, Nicias, an Athenian general in the calamitous Sicilian expedition of 415–413, allowed his fear of what the soldiers would say when they got back to Athens to influence his strategy on Sicily (Thuc. 7.48.4); but he is being held up as an example of bad leadership.

¹⁶ Hall (n. 4), 256. See also the hostile estimate of Jaroslav Daneš, *Political Aspects of Greek Tragedy* (Červený Kostelec, 2012), 92: ‘Euripides’ Odysseus in Hecuba is portrayed as a model of a demagogue who manipulates the crowd and disseminates brutality and violence in order to increase his prestige’.

MACB. If we should faile?
 LADY. We faile?
 But screw your courage to the sticking place,
 And wee'le not fayle: *Macbeth*, First Folio (1623), 539–42

There is no Quarto text of this play. Its first appearance is in the First Folio, seven years after Shakespeare's death. If we try to do justice to the question mark after the Lady's 'We faile', we shall need to take 'But' in the following line as meaning 'only', 'simply', or 'just' (It's crazy to talk of failure. If you just screw your courage...). But if we ignore the question mark, we find a far more natural flow (If we should fail, we fail). We also find a completely different Lady Macbeth. Who is to say which is the right one? We are in a similar dilemma over, for example, the final line of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (1278):

κοῦδὲν τούτων ὄ τι μὴ Ζεὺς.
 and none of these things is not Zeus.

This can be legitimately delivered either as an earnest summation or as scathingly ironical. The whole interpretation of the play is defined in diametrically opposite ways by the choice that the director makes here. The most notorious exemplar of this is probably Sophocles' *Electra*, which can be seen (in Gilbert Murray's formulation of Schlegel) as 'a combination of matricide and good spirits'.¹⁷ Alternatively one can find in the tragedy a deeply disturbing undertow of dark elements. I know what I think – or at any rate which view of the play I would prefer – but is anyone in a position to say definitively which interpretation is 'right', what Sophocles (I scarcely dare to pen the word!) *intended*?

To return to *Hecuba*, it may well be that Odysseus is not being crassly brutal in 218–23; he may be doing his best to make something horribly unacceptable totally clear.¹⁸ He is surely endowing it with a sense of objectivity when he employs the terminology of the Athenian assembly (ἔδοξε, 220): he makes the decision sound official. And then his later comment that the Greeks have their own share of the bereaved finds poignant endorsement when the Trojan chorus sing movingly of a Spartan girl lamenting by the Eurotas, Sparta's river, and a mother

¹⁷ G. Murray (tr.), *The Electra of Euripides* (London, 1905), vi.

¹⁸ One might here point to an intertext between this passage and *Iliad* 9.312–3, where a critical Achilles tells Odysseus that he hates like the gates of hell the man 'who hides one thing in his heart but says another'. Plain-speaking can be seen as a virtue.

mourning her dead sons (650–6). While it is interesting that he does not say that they need to conduct the sacrifice if they are ever going to get away from Thrace, his argument about the need to honour the Greeks' greatest warrior has considerable force – and a sympathetic prelude (299–320). Ancient audiences may also have been more alert than we are to the compelling political demands that are operating here. One of the most painful scenes – perhaps *the* most painful scene – in Greek tragedy is the moment in *Troades* when Talthybius comes to take Astyanax from his mother Andromache so that he can be flung from the battlements of Troy. But Odysseus was right to argue that they should not raise the son of Hector to manhood (723). Immediately before Talthybius' arrival, Hecuba had expressed the hope that sons descended from him should one day re-found Troy (702–25). One's heart breaks but one's head nods sagely. Such are the grim realities of war.

The Odysseus of *Hecuba* rejects the queen's supplication that the life of Polyxena should be spared, but he is prepared to reciprocate her saving of his life by saying that he is ready to save hers (301–2). While it can of course be objected that nobody is threatening her life apart from Hecuba herself (386–9), his words at 394–5 are a sympathetic response to an intolerable situation and there is surely no reason to disbelieve him:

ἄλλις κόρης σῆς θάνατος, οὐ προσοιστέος
ἄλλος πρὸς ἄλλω· μηδὲ τόνδ' ὀφείλομεν. (394–5)

The death of your daughter is enough. We must not add one death to another. If only we did not have to go through with hers.

To bolster my case for Odysseus, I now refer to F. S. Naiden's important 2006 book, *Ancient Supplication*, whose message, I suspect, has yet to filter through to writers on Greek tragedy. Naiden has read not only the whole of Greek and Latin literature but the Bible too, and he overturns the conclusions of John Gould in his famous 1973 article 'Greek Supplication' in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. Gould's basic argument was that if a supplicant got his approach to the person supplicated and his subsequent gestures right, he was likely to be on a winning wicket. Not so, argues Naiden. Among a number of other factors, the content of the supplicant's appeal and the response to it were also of critical importance. By and large, the person supplicated had nothing to fear either from gods or from men if he rejected the appeal. My own feeling is that supplication in fact retains a strong force in tragedy, as

is implied in our play when Polyxena says to Odysseus, 'I see that you are hiding your right hand under your cloak and turning your face away so that I may not touch your chin. Courage! You have escaped from my Zeus of Suppliants!' (342–5). The worldly-wise Odysseus would not be making these efforts to avoid contact with her if he were not seriously worried. Yet even so, if Naiden is right, we can see Odysseus' attitude here in a more objective light.

It will be clear by now that I am suggesting that the original democratic audience would have been likely to find Hecuba's attitudes unsympathetic and would have felt some sympathy with the Greek leaders as they tried to operate in impossible circumstances. If this view is accepted, it will lead to a certain realignment of the sympathies that it has been traditional for modern readers to feel in this play.

However, the last thing I wish to propose is that the audience would have experience any less sympathy for Hecuba, her daughter, and the chorus as war victims. Their agonies tear at the heartstrings. And Anne Pippin Burnett, in her uncompromising book on Greek revenge in Attic and Renaissance tragedy, is surely right to argue that the audience would have had no problem at all with Hecuba's taking revenge on Polymestor. Admittedly, Burnett's view that 'revenge was far from being a crime that men had to abjure if they were to enter a regulated community',¹⁹ has been attacked by Gabriel Herman, who shows that Athenian litigants 'are generally at great pains to insist they want vengeance only in the form of state-sponsored acts of repression and are not interested in private acts of violence'.²⁰ The obvious objection to this is that people who decided to go to court to win revenge would naturally take that line. In her 2010 book, *Elizabethan Revenge Drama*, the English scholar Linda Woodbridge endorses Burnett's view of Attic revenge tragedy but points out that Renaissance English plays have no problem with revenge either: 'The alleged Christian abhorrence of revenge', she writes, 'proves on closer inspection a chimera.' Woodbridge's book is far more sensitively nuanced than Burnett's. She justly complains that 'Burnett does to Renaissance tragedy what she complains about critics doing to the Greeks: she reads [Renaissance] effusions of joy in revenge as obviously ironic, given Christian aversion to revenge.'²¹

¹⁹ A. P. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley, CA, and London, 1998), 64.

²⁰ G. Herman, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens. A Social History* (Cambridge, 2006), 189–94, with quotation from 190–1.

²¹ L. Woodbridge, *Elizabethan Revenge Drama* (Cambridge, 2010), 36, 32 n. 24.

But it is hard to argue with the fundamental drift of Burnett's thesis. For one thing, Hecuba has no access to legal processes. We can hardly count Agamemnon's kangaroo court, which of course sides with Hecuba, as a shining example of a judicial system. And it is surely entirely appropriate that she takes revenge into her own hands. And yet we are left to confront what taking revenge does to her, how it tragically debases and narrows down her character. The sour ironies of the brilliant scene in which she lures Polymestor to his doom reveal in her an extraordinary intensity as she focuses on her objective. Her character, previously marked by its philosophical and imaginative reach and range, has degenerated; her address to Polymestor and Agamemnon begins with mechanical gnomonic rhetoric (1187–94). Her espousal of the vendetta ethic renders her grimly one-dimensional. Even if Polymestor may win scant sympathy when his children are killed and he is blinded, we may well find ourselves alienated by Hecuba's handiwork. Her prophesied transformation into a dog may thus be a reflection of the dehumanization that she has undergone in the course of the play. Cicero is surely right when he writes in his *Tusculan Disputations* that 'Hecuba is imagined as having been changed into a dog on account of a sort of bitterness and frenzy of spirit' (3.63.13).

Though of course catastrophe awaits Agamemnon on his return, for the Greeks as a whole the tragedy has a 'happy ending'. The winds blow and will release them from this desolate shore. 'I see the wind', says Agamemnon, causing me at least to wonder whether some kind of wind machine is ruffling the costumes and the hair.²²

Hecuba's fall has been drastic in the extreme, and this is given an eerie emphasis when Polymestor tells her that she will climb up the mast of a ship in her canine form before falling into the sea (1259–65). This once great queen, whose uncompromisingly regal attitude, as I hope I have shown, survived her transformation into a captive slave, will prove to have been repellently bestialized. Those royalist credentials add piquancy to the Aristotelian concept of a tragic change from happiness to misfortune (*Poetics* 1452a & b). Hecuba's could well be the most perpendicular exemplar of such a fall in extant tragedy.

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²² F.W. King (ed.), Euripides, *Hecuba* (London, 1938), n. at 1289–90: "'See", because the breeze was fluttering the tents and the plumes of the soldiers' helmets.'