

THUCYDIDES 3. 52-68 AND EURIPIDES' HECUBA

JAMES C. HOGAN

UNTIL RECENTLY INTERPRETATIONS of the *Hecuba* were reasonably similar in their assessment of the affective powers of the play. Most commentators have felt that Hecuba's suffering is treated sympathetically in the first half of the play, but that her character suffers grotesque distortion during the revenge scenes; Odysseus has usually been described as cynical and brutal, Polyxena is the selfless martyr, Agamemnon a pusillanimous, intimidated King, while Polymestor appears to be a surprising variation on the role established by Hecuba.¹ But accepted opinion, ably represented and culminated by Conacher, has been contested by A. W. H. Adkins in "Basic Greek Values in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Hercules Furens*."² Adkins' arguments on Greek values and the "competitive" and "co-operative" excellences are now well known. Believing that traditional competitive values continued to hold the field in the twenties and that their use in the *Hecuba* would have significantly conditioned audience reaction, Adkins has directly and indirectly assailed several commonplaces of recent criticism. Among other positions which fall if Adkins' argument is valid are those which suppose that Odysseus' private debt to Hecuba would be considered by the audience more compelling (obligatory) than the public debt to Achilles: in Adkins's view Odysseus can reasonably demand the life of the slave Polyxena, and the Greek audience wasted no great sympathy on her, at any rate not so much as to affect its judgment. Throughout the play we are urged to see the claims of *arete* and *philia*, in the traditional sense, taking precedence over claims and persuasive definition pertaining to *dike* and *charis*. More fundamentally, what Adkins has taken from the play is the sense of conflict. Though the debate may be lively, Hecuba not only has no chance

¹The most recent full study of the play will be found in D. J. Conacher's *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto 1967) 146-165, which appeared too soon to consider the article by A. W. H. Adkins cited below. Among those who praise the play E. L. Abrahamson ("Euripides' Tragedy of *Hecuba*," *TAPA* 83 [1952] 120-129) is typical, though perhaps more enthusiastic ("this great and powerful tragedy") than most. Many critical treatments have been concerned with the structure of the play; among the most influential of these, both of which attempt to demonstrate the unifying effects, are Max Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie* (Göttingen 1954) 277-284, and G. M. Kirkwood, "Hecuba and Nomos," *TAPA* 78 (1947) 61-68. In the subsequent pages these works and Adkins' article will be cited by the author's name.

²*CQ* n.s. 16 (1966) 193-219. The impulse for the first half of the article, which studies the *Hecuba*, came from the remarks of Lionel Pearson in *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (Stanford 1962).

of persuading Odysseus but, more significant for criticism, the audience has prejudged the issues in favour of the advocate of traditional *arete*. Since students have generally held that Hecuba and Polyxena do win a sympathetic hearing and that this sympathy lends credit to their arguments, it seems worthwhile to consider Adkins' analysis carefully in order to determine whether the traditional view has indeed been struck down.³

The basic question is quite simple: what arguments and what actions have the most validity? Will Hecuba's misery, Odysseus' debt, and Polyxena's sacrifice win the audience more than the propriety of Achilles' demand and the social and political good urged by Odysseus? Hecuba argues the "justice" of two actions (262 ff.; 799 ff.). How will the audience respond to these claims made in the name of *dike*? No one will suppose that answers to such questions, i.e., those requiring information concerning Greek response, will be ready at hand. The kinds of conflict and transition in social values Adkins discusses in *Merit and Responsibility* do not occur easily or at once.⁴ Adkins argues that the side which the playwright intended us to sympathize with will have the stronger arguments; in the light of the traditional *arete* standard Odysseus clearly has the stronger case; therefore the audience was not, nor did Euripides intend them to be, so moved by Polyxena's sacrifice that they might "abandon the base on which their [values] rested, and had rested since Homer" (200). Two assumptions give his analysis a circular appearance: that the Homeric world-view and its competitive excellences retains its hold on late fifth century Athenians; and that Euripides does not argue against such a view but expresses it. Both assumptions seem to me dubious. Euripidean drama offers abundant evidence for a spiritual and intellectual crisis in the late fifth century, and few would argue that Euripides is simply a man of his time, reflecting the values and beliefs of the average theatre-goer.⁵

Yet counter-assertions do not make an argument. What is wanted is, in the first place, external evidence to corroborate the intuition that Odysseus' arguments do not necessarily reflect the dominant thought and reaction of his audience; and secondly, the play itself ought to provide evidence against Adkins' interpretation, if indeed he is mistaken. Both are, I believe, available.

Thucydides 3.52-68 offers a number of parallels to situation and argu-

³Lesky has briefly noted the importance of Adkins' approach, while questioning the dogmatism of his judgments, in *AAHG* 21 (1968) 12.

⁴Oxford 1960.

⁵On this subject see Karl Reinhardt, "Die Sinneskrise bei Euripides," reprinted in *Euripides: Wege der Forschung* 129 (Darmstadt 1968) 507-541. Though "der Machtbereich des Göttlich-Dämonischen" is not present in the *Hecuba*, here too "tritt ein neues weites Feld, einladend zu Entdeckungen: das Feld der Kämpfe, Irrungen, Täuschungsmanöver und Paradoxien der Psyche" (517).

ment in the *Hecuba*.⁶ The occasion for this set of speeches by the Plataeans and Thebans is the conditional surrender of Plataea. When the judges arrive from Lacedaemonia no accusation is brought against either individuals or the group, but rather a question is put to the Plataeans: "What good have you done in this war for the Lacedaemonians and their allies?" Well aware that the question belies the stipulation that "no one will be punished contrary to justice," the Plataeans request an opportunity to speak; subsequently the Thebans wish to reply. Numerous parallels to the *Hecuba* occur in this passage. In both cases the prisoners of war helplessly anticipate a fate worse than they had expected. ἐρήμοι καὶ ἀτιμώρητοι (57.4), the Plataeans may yet suffer the death penalty for not being "useful." The Trojan women, already condemned to slavery, find the royal princess demanded as a sacrifice. Both parties possess a kind of grim utility for their masters; though both are allowed to appeal, neither has much chance of success. Their cases are prejudged (ἐπὶ διεγνωσμένην κρίσιν 53.4; ψῆφόν τε τὴν κρανθεῖσαν 219) from political expedience (τὸ ὠφέλιμον 56.4, 68.5 *passim*; 306 ff.). As the Plataeans observe in their preface (53.4), the facts are known; while the audience may be surprised by Odysseus' "debt" to Hecuba (239 ff.), he is not. Despite the apparent hopelessness of their causes both parties argue for mercy. How effective are these pleas? Adkins has argued that the Greek audience would be unaffected by the efforts of Hecuba and Polyxena to influence value judgments by "persuasive definitions" and appeals to quiet and co-operative excellences. Yet the Plataeans adopt many of the same topics and rhetorical devices, and if the Theban response is a fair testament, this line of argument must be considered so persuasive that it requires refutation on its own terms, not merely from assertion of the self-evident claims of traditional competitive values. If Thucydides had more than a rhetorical exercise in mind, the Thebans must be assumed to have a reason for "fearing that the Lacedaemonians might be moved to give in somewhat by their speech" (60.1). A closer look at the arguments will show why the Thebans feel a refutation is necessary and what arguments they think most effective against the Plataean appeal. A comparison with similar motifs in the *Hecuba* will help to clarify likely responses by the Greek audience.⁷

⁶After noting a number of parallels between the situation and language of play and history I read John H. Finley's "Euripides and Thucydides," *HSCP* 49 (1938) 23-68. I have reversed Finley's approach, not to demonstrate a date but to highlight the topics in the *Hecuba*.

⁷There is little reason to suppose Thucydides had a detailed report of these speeches (Gomme, *Commentary on Thucydides* 2 [London 1956] 354). I would not claim that the Plataeans actually moved the Spartans to a change of sentence before the Theban speech, only that Thucydides assumes that the topics raised have some cogency, enough to warrant careful refutation. Finally "advantage" prevails, but not before the claims

We must first see what particulars are shared by the Trojan and Plataean speeches. All speakers, with the exception of Odysseus, consider pity an emotion likely to influence decisions significantly. Concluding their refutation the Thebans urge the judges not to be softened by pity (μη . . . ἐπικλασθῆτε . . . μηδὲ δλοφυρμῶ καὶ οἴκτῳ ὠφελείσθων 67.2), which is a direct response to the ἐπικλασθῆναι τῇ γνώμῃ οἴκτῳ σώφρονι λαβόντας in the Plataean summation (59.1). The Thebans are not contemptuous of this appeal; in fact they recognize its validity if the party pitied suffers ἀπρεπές τι and can rightly find δίκη on their side (67.4). The plain implication of this last passage, οἴκτου τε ἀξιώτεροι τυγχάνειν οἱ ἀπρεπές τι πάσχοντες τῶν ἀνθρώπων, οἱ δὲ δικαίως, ὥσπερ οἶδε, τὰ ἐναντία ἐπίχαρτοι εἶναι, is that mercy should be extended to those who suffer unjustly. We shall return to arguments on δίκη later; here it is sufficient to note the Theban concern and the parallels in the *Hecuba*. There, as in the Plataean speech, the cry for pity is tied not only to arguments for justice but also to respect for the suppliant's role. Hecuba reminds Odysseus that he was once at her feet:

Εκ. ἤψω δὲ γονάτων τῶν ἐμῶν ταπεινὸς ὢν;
Οδ. ὥστ' ἐθανεῖν γε σοῖς πέπλοισι χεῖρ' ἐμήν. [245 f.]

but her own request (276 ff.) falls on callous ears. Later she tells Polyxena to try to rouse some pity in this man who is also a parent:

πρόσπιπτε δ' οἴκτρῳ τοῦδ' Ὀδυσσεὺς γόνυ
καὶ πείθ'—ἔχεις δὲ πρόφασιν· ἔστι γὰρ τέκνα
καὶ τῷδε—τὴν σὴν ὥστ' ἐποικτῆραι τύχην. [339 ff.]

Just as the Thebans see that *ικέται* who call upon θεοὺς τοὺς ὁμοβωμίους καὶ κοινούς τῶν Ἑλλήνων (59.2), who claim to be χεῖρας προῖσχομένους (ὁ δὲ νόμος τοῖς Ἑλλήσι μὴ κτείνειν τούτους) (58.3), may sway the judges, so in the play we see the efficacy of the women's appeal in Talthybius' pity (518 f.) and later in Agamemnon's patient attention and reluctant acquiescence (850 ff.).⁸ Even Odysseus is moved, though not enough to spare Polyxena (342–344). Agamemnon's reaction parallels the dilemma of the Lacedaemonians; moved to pity he may act contrary to his own self-interest. But Agamemnon is not touched by supplication alone; other arguments and claims increase the affective power of both speeches.

The Plataeans, fully aware of their danger, speak of themselves as ἄλλοις χάριν φέροντες (53.4). The theme of χάρις, gratitude and recompense, runs through both works. The Plataeans rehearse their ἀρεαί in resisting the Persians, helping the Spartans during the helot revolt, and loyally following Athens while resisting Theban coercion. This record shows

of *dike* and *charis* are laid to rest. Cf. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (New York 1963) 40.

⁸Hans Strohm, *Euripides, Interpretationen zur dramatischen Form* (Munich 1957) 71–72, calls attention to Agamemnon's sympathy prior to Hecuba's request.

them to have been truly *ὀφέλιμοι* (56.4), for they evinced the greater *προθυμία* (56.5) in a crisis which threatened all Hellas. The death sentence which hangs over them will result from a *χάρις* owed the Thebans; they urge the judges to show *σώφρονα ἀντὶ αἰσχρᾶς χάριν* (58.1). Conacher has rightly emphasized the importance of this theme in the *Hecuba*. Odysseus owes the queen his life and cannot deny it, but he will not grant her request for the life of Polyxena. Consequently she condemns him as *κακός* (251, 253), *ἀχάριστον σπέρμα* (254), a man who would say anything *τοῖσι πολλοῖς πρὸς χάριν* (257). Likewise the Plataeans assert that the Lacedaemonians run the risk of *κακία* and *δύσκεια* if they act to please others (58.2). Though both cases are decided on the basis of *τὸ παραντίκα ὀφέλιμον*, we can see from the Theban reply that even claims as remote as those of the Plataeans are compelling. They do not deny a *χάρις* due the defenders of Hellas against Persia, but they do insist that their medizing is excusable and that they have resisted Plataean and Athenian aggression against Hellas (62). The burden they accept is not so much direct refutation of Plataean claims concerning their services in the Persian wars as an assertion that their own claims are larger, and that whatever services to the Greeks the captives may have rendered are more than offset by their crimes. Whereas Odysseus finds it sufficient to adduce the honour (309, 316, 320) owed Achilles, the Thebans feel they must refute the Plataeans' assertions that they have been *εὐεργέται* (58.4; 59.1), *φίλτατοι* to Lacedaemonians of the previous generations (cf. *ἐκ φιλίας χώρας* [58.4] and *ἐν γῇ τε φιλίᾳ* [58.5]), and *προθυμότατοι* for all Hellas (59.4). We might suppose the fact that these Plataeans are clearly *ἐχθροί* would be decisive, but the Thebans apparently do not think this fact speaks loudly enough.

The parallels between the two situations must remain inexact: Hecuba can only tacitly claim to be a friend of Odysseus (*φίλους* 256), but on the other hand her service to him is hardly so remote as that of the Plataeans to the Lacedaemonians. Consequently her arguments for justice have a more immediate and personal cogency than those of the Plataeans. Yet we shall now see that the Thebans devote much energy to refuting the justice of their opponents' actions. A consideration of these arguments offers good evidence for the conclusion that appeals *κατὰ δίκην* are forceful and especially persuasive when tied to the kind of debt associated with *χάρις*.

We need only recall 2. 74 and Archidamos' invocation of the gods to see that the Spartans are sensitive to the charge of attacking an old ally. Perhaps for this reason the terms they offer happen to be particularly vulnerable to "persuasive definition." 3. 52.2 echoes 2. 74.3:

ξυγγνώμονες δὲ ἔστε τῆς μὲν ἀδικίας κολάζεσθαι τοῖς ὑπάρχουσι προτέροις, τῆς δὲ τιμωρίας τυγχάνειν τοῖς ἐπιφέρουσι νομίμως (2.74.3)

τούς τε ἀδίκους κολάζειν, παρὰ δίκην δὲ οὐδένα (3.52.2)

Most relevant is the rare absolute sense of *δίκη* ("justice" rather than the usual "penalty", "satisfaction," "trial") in the second passage and the thematic contrast which follows when the question, *εἴ τι Λακεδαιμονίους καὶ τοὺς ξυμμάχους ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ τῷ καθεστῶτι ἀγαθόν [τι] εἰργασμένοι εἰσὶν* is posed.⁹ Obviously, reply the Plataeans, such a question is not addressed to us as *πολέμιοι* but as *φίλοι* (54.2). And this is the point they attempt to establish. Their argument may be summarized: the justice of our cause (54.1) ought to be judged from our services to you and all Hellas; our *προθυμία* (56.5; 59.4) and *φιλία* are demonstrated by deeds for which *χάρις* is due those who rendered the greater service (56.4). This last point is pressed vigorously, and it is rejected with equal zeal by the Thebans. We may compare Hecuba's argument, which follows Odysseus' admission that she saved him:

οὐκουν κακύνῃ τοῖσδε τοῖς βουλευμασιν
 ὃς ἐξ ἑμοῦ μὲν ἔπαθες οἷα φῆς παθεῖν
 δρῶς δ' οὐδὲν ἡμᾶς εὖ, κακῶς δ' ὅσον δύνῃ;
 ἀχάριστον ὑμῶν σπέρμ', ὅσοι δημηγόρους
 ζήλοῦτε τιμάς· μηδὲ γιγνώσκοισθέ μοι,
 οἱ τοὺς φίλους βλάπτοντες οὐ φροντίζετε,
 ἦν τοῖσι πολλοῖς πρὸς χάριν λέγητέ τι. [251–257]

Though the lines lead to a general and topical reflection, the initial interplay of first and second person and the violence of this inversion of values (*κακύνῃ*, *ἀχάριστον* [cf. 138], *ζήλοῦτε τιμάς*) assure the dramatic point of the entire passage. Certainly there is an implicit redefinition of terms such as *κακός* and *φίλος*. Odysseus' reply weaves together traditional and contemporary values, the honour owed the dead hero and an ethic with a radically political base. Would Homer have thought that Achilles died on behalf of Hellas (310)? One wonders if the anachronism of this speech would not have been more evident than Adkins appears to think. Odysseus virtually ignores his personal debt to speculate on the fate of cities and expeditions if the *ἀγαθός* is not honoured. Consequently there is something abstract, remote, about his reply, especially if we notice how he ignores Polyxena altogether.¹⁰ His argument may be powerful, but many will feel it is much more an attitude than a counter-argument. The metaphor of distance may

⁹The most recent discussion of justice is that of Pierre Huart, *Le vocabulaire de l'analyse psychologique dans l'oeuvre de Thucydide* (Paris 1968) 475 ff. Two of the four absolute uses of *δίκη* cited (476) occur in our passage. After the two speeches Thucydides reaffirms the Spartan concern for (at least) the appearance of justice: *ἡγούμενοι τῇ ἑαυτῶν δικαίᾳ βουλήσει ἔκσπονδοι ἤδη ὑπ' αὐτῶν κακῶς πεπονθέναι* (68.1). See Gomme (2. 355 f.) for a discussion of emendations here; his own understanding of the passage seems to me the clearest, and most consistent with the theme.

¹⁰Cf. Hecuba's frequent use of the demonstrative (259, 263, 264, 279, 280) with Odysseus' single reference to "your daughter" (305).

also be applied to the Plataean argument which depends on ancient *arete*, whereas the Thebans, like Hecuba, can point to more recent, present, claims. Odysseus' principles are removed from the dramatic scene; the Plataean alliance with Athenian aggrandizement, much stressed by the Thebans (e.g., at 64.4), remains more vivid to the Spartans than their fathers' virtue.

Twice in the play Hecuba invokes justice in an absolute sense; both speeches also include appeals to νόμος. In the first passage (263-271) she argues that Helen was actually responsible for Achilles' death, and is the more fitting sacrifice if one is necessary.¹¹ The argument is neatly ordered (ἐνδίκως 263, τῷ μὲν δικάῳ 271) and followed by a complementary claim of personal debt.¹² But since Helen has no part in this play the motif is less compelling than the condemnation of Polymestor, hypocrite and murderer, ξένος ἀνοσιώτατος (790). A different kind of νόμος from that of 291-292 is associated here with the gods and human justice:

ἀλλ' οἱ θεοὶ σθένουσι χῶ κείνων κρατῶν
 Νόμος· νόμῳ γὰρ τοὺς θεοὺς ἡγοῦμεθα
 καὶ ζῶμεν ἄδικα καὶ δίκαι' ὠρισμένοι· [799-801]¹³

Despite its ambiguities the passage, and the lines following it, make powerful demands upon Agamemnon's dispensation: his reply indicates that it is not altogether *Κασάνδρας χάριν* (855) that he bends to her supplication.

καὶ βούλομαι θεῶν θ' οὐνεκ' ἀνόσιον ξένον
 καὶ τοῦ δικαίου τήνδε σοι δοῦναι δίκην [852 f.]

In passing judgment after Hecuba's revenge he again uses her language (1249; 1254).¹⁴ This topic will receive fuller treatment below, but for the

¹¹For the Helen motif and its dramatic integration see Wolf Steidle, "Zur Hekabe des Euripides," *WS* 79 (1966) 133-142, esp. 135-136.

¹²Adkins (196) says: "the claim of δικαιοσύνη is opposed to the claim for a χάρις which follows." But the μὲν . . . δέ . . . construction need not mark opposing rather than contrasting arguments. Paley translates: "Against his [Achilles'] claims on the score of justice I press this (the above) argument; and now hear what I demand from you on the law of requital." As Hecuba sees it, justice and equity *both* support her claim. So Arrow-smith in his translation.

¹³νόμος seems to be another intentionally ambiguous term; see F. Heinimann, *Nomos und Physis* (Basel 1945) 121-122, whose reading has been accepted recently by Martin Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy* (Oxford 1969) 38. I have not seen Lanza's "Νόμος e ἔσον in Euripide," *RFIC* 41 (1963) 416-439, reviewed by Lesky, *AAHG* 21 (1968) 12. Pohlenz (282 f.) has amplified the thematic significance of νόμος considerably; he sees it as a purely subjective notion in this play, and has probably over-extended its actual dramatic value. Abrahamson (n. 10, 123 f.) discusses earlier views which make Nomos the central idea of the play (Matthaei, Pohlenz, Kirkwood).

¹⁴1254 is given to Hecuba by P, *fortasse recte* (Murray).

moment it will suffice to notice that just as the King utilizes Hecuba's language to condemn Polymestor, so too the Thebans feel obliged to respond in kind to the Plataean speech. When the Spartans use *δικη* in an absolute sense (52.2) and the Plataeans attempt to create an antithesis between true justice and craven expediency (e.g., at 62.3), the Thebans think a refutation necessary, nor do they simply urge "advantage." In fact they want to turn the Plataean language and argument against them to show that they are not victims but aggressors who have wronged Hellas more than the Thebans ever did (63.1). Unless the plea for mercy from justice is effective, why would they adopt language so similar? *καὶ λέγετε ὡς αἰσχρὸν ἦν προδοῦναι τοὺς εὐεργέτας· πολλὸν δὲ γε αἰσχρὸν καὶ ἀδικώτερον τοὺς πάντας Ἕλληνας καταπροδοῦναι* (63.3). Nor is it an *ἴσην χάριν* (63.4) which the Plataeans returned to the Athenians, but rather it was shameful. The last sentence of 63 argues that *χάρις* can be returned honourably only when it does not lead *ἐς ἀδικίαν*.¹⁵ This kind of language continues to dominate the Theban speech: *τίνες ἂν οὖν ὑμῶν δικαίωτερον . . . μισοῦντο* (64.4); the Plataeans followed *ἄδικον ὁδόν* (64.5), though they claim *ἀδικηθῆναι* and to have been attacked *παρανόμως* (65.1); *ἡδικήσαμεν οὐδένα* (66.1). All these passages impugn the justice of the Plataean cause; we are not required to think that the Thebans really cared for a just verdict to see that the peroration reflects the tenor of the entire speech and their effort to assuage any Spartan doubts: "you can now see that you will condemn them *δικαίως*, while we will be righteously avenged (*δοσιώτερον τετιμωρημένοι*)" (67.1–2). While Thucydides' Thebans answer in kind to arguments which are essentially "persuasive," *der kalte Politiker* Odysseus simply ignores the claims of equity and pity.¹⁶ If Spartans and Thebans can be credibly represented as sensitive to such arguments, would the Athenian audience have been more brutal? A comparison of the Theban speech demonstrates how limited a position Euripides has actually given his skilled rhetorician. Unlike Odysseus they attempt to prove not only that they are worthy of a *χάρις* for their *προθυμία* but also that this debt is congruent with *νόμος* and *δικη*: *ἡμῖν ἄνομα παθοῦσιν ἀνταπόδοτε χάριν δικαίαν ὧν πρόθυμοι γεγενήμεθα* (67.6).

¹⁵See Gomme, *loc. cit.* (2. 349). All comment I have seen on the passage explains it thus, but no one thinks the sentence perfectly clear. Bloomfield (*The History of Thucydides* [London 1829]), with more candour than most, observes: "The manifest sense of the words is so contrary to what the course of the reasoning would seem to require, that the ancient, and some modern commentators supply a negative, *οὐ* or *μή*" (2. 114–115). If the sentence could be cast as a question it would yield the required sense.

¹⁶"Persuasive definition": Adkins (*Merit and Responsibility* [Oxford 1960] 38 ff.) has borrowed this phrase from C. L. Stevenson to denote those uses of language which attempt to alter normal usage, especially those cases where the new "definition" suggests a "quieter" or "co-operative" sense of value opposed to traditional ("competitive") usage.

As noted above, the situations are not exactly parallel. When the Lacedaemonians say they will punish no one contrary to justice they concede ground never granted Hecuba. Yet the conditional surrender of the Plataeans has made their position more precarious. If they could truly claim, as the women can (288 ff.), that they were suppliants on the field of battle, their position would be stronger, or at least so we would gather from the Thebans:

παρενόμησάν τε οὐ προπαθόντες ὑφ' ἡμῶν, μίσει δὲ πλέον ἢ δίκη κρίναντες καὶ οὐκ ἀνταποδόντες νῦν τὴν ἴσῃν τιμωρίαν ἔννομα γὰρ πείσσονται καὶ οὐχὶ ἐκ μάχης χεῖρας προῖσχύμενοι, ὥσπερ φασίν, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ ξυμβάσεως ἐς δίκην σφᾶς αὐτοὺς παραδόντες (67.5).¹⁷

Hecuba invokes the *νόμος* accorded suppliant captives, and Odysseus cannot say that Polyxena will suffer *ἔννομα*. The theatre audience must judge which plea is more effective, and, as the Theban topics suggest, they might be expected to weigh seriously the claims of *δίκη*, the rights of suppliants, and the pity naturally accorded those helpless and threatened. Perhaps Hecuba's greatest rhetorical advantage derives from the disinterested character of her audience. Unlike the Lacedaemonians, but like Adkins' Agamemnon, the theatre audience represents an impartial arbitrator.

That the Plataeans do not convince the judges to change the original question does not imply that their arguments are weak or invalid but only that the Lacedaemonians were more influenced by political expediency (68.4-5). That self-interest may be set aside is shown by Cleon's admonition to the Athenians not to be moved *τρισι τοῖς ἀξυμφορωτάτοις τῇ ἀρχῇ, οἴκτῳ καὶ ἡδονῇ λόγων καὶ ἐπιεικείᾳ* (3.40.2). And as Gomme points out, pity and humanity seem to have been the primary factors in the remission of the sentence.¹⁸

II

Should we not doubt that the audience will identify so readily and completely with Odysseus' arguments? Though Adkins grants that Polyxena's case is pitiable, he does not think this emotion would affect the audience's judgment. His reading seems to me not only too rationalistic and literal but also clearly incomplete. Ignoring the fears of Cleon and the Thebans we must assume that the Athenians maintained values

¹⁷Gomme remarks of this argument that "though hateful and sophistic, (it) is not entirely empty: it was wrong to kill an enemy in battle who offered to surrender; but if he surrendered unconditionally, he could, legally, be executed—like the Mytileneans as well as the Plataeans" (354).

¹⁸See his note *ad* 3. 40.2, where he refers to 36.4 and the reason for the Athenian *μετάνοια* (*ἀναλογισμὸς ὡμὸν τὸ βούλευμα καὶ μέγα ἐγνώσθαι*); Diodotus realizes that *οἴκτος* and *ἐπιείκεια* favour his argument but cleverly urges expediency (47.5 and 48.1).

little different from those of the *Iliad*, that they were rigorously competitive even at the play, that their emotions did not sway their judgment, and, finally, that they ignored Euripides' own questioning voice, which is evident in crucial passages.¹⁹ The play is argumentative, but to be dramatically effective the various arguments must have at least a degree of cogency. Adkins' reading frees both character and audience from the kind of tension engendered by such conflicting divisions. In the following notes I wish to point out those passages which have a special bearing on dramatic complexity and tension, and to suggest that certain unresolved conflicts make the *Hecuba* more than a study in motivation.

In at least two respects the prologue may mislead us. The prominence of the *ξενία* motif is not fulfilled until the second half of the play; though Polydorus may introduce a significant theme, the mere planting of the idea, or word, does not make the two episodes dramatically cohesive. Secondly, the prologue, especially 37 ff., implies that the context and action will be Homeric. The daemonic spirit of Achilles restrains the army (38), demands a sacrifice which is termed a *γέρας* (41), and we are told that Polyxena is fated to die this day (43-44). The ghost should be an authority and know "necessity" when he speaks of it; the request for a *γέρας* entails, as Adkins says, a recognition of his *ἀρετή* and, in short, a Homeric system of values. Yet neither "necessity" nor "Homeric context" is maintained. The first crucial passage ignored by Adkins is the Chorus' report of the Greek debate (116 ff.). Plainly the Greeks rebel at the prospect of the sacrifice; the division of the assembly (117) and Agamemnon's opposition indicate that half of those present (131) do not feel compelled, despite the appearance of Achilles above the tomb, to offer the girl as sacrifice.²⁰ Whatever Agamemnon's motive (impugned by the sons of

¹⁹I must add here that even so far as the earlier tradition, exemplified for Adkins by the *Iliad*, is concerned, I have more than a few reservations on the degree of dominance of competitive virtues urged in *Merit and Responsibility*. Apollo's powerful condemnation of Achilles' (*Il.* 24. 44 ff.: ὥς 'Αχιλεὺς ἔλεον μὲν ἀπώλεσεν . . .) and the hero's own reaction (516 ff.) point to an affective power more prominent in the epic than his study suggests (for his comment on Apollo's speech see page 38).

²⁰How, then, can we be so confident as Adkins ("her death has been represented as essential to the security of the Greek army" [200])? For *ἀνάγκη* as a false clue see Pohlenz, 281. (Yet Adkins, in a more recent study, *From the Many to the One* [Ithaca 1970], uses Achilles in the *Hecuba* as an example of "superabundant power for good or evil" ascribed to the dead [70].) The blatant anachronism of the assembly's debate and the romantic motive attributed to Agamemnon immediately call into question whatever elements are "traditional" by their incongruence with them. So too the division between the sons of Theseus (123 ff.; cf. the Scholiast's long note [Schwarz, *Scholia in Euripidem* 1 (Berlin 1887) 24-25]) and the story of Odysseus' visit (239 ff.; οὐχ 'Ομηρικόν, schol. ad 241). We are not told why the assembly is divided. Grube (*The Drama of Euripides* [London 1941]) assumes that the army considers Polyxena a suppliant, which would anticipate Hecuba's argument of 288 ff. (83). The obscurity is

Theseus, 127-129), he evidently does not feel caught in the kind of dilemma so easily imagined here, and perhaps given him by Sophocles.²¹ Some may feel these doubts are later borne out by the failure of the wind to rise immediately after the sacrifice. In any case the illusion of a Homeric context is also violated by the vehement debate and deciding speech of ὁ ποικιλόφρων/κόπις ἡδυλόγος δημοχарιστῆς/Λαερτιάδης (131-133). Euripides has bypassed one type of dramatic dilemma, in which characters are compelled to choose between equally unattractive alternatives, in order to depict one altogether more problematic. Eloquence, not divine necessity, moves the army to acquiesce in Achilles' demand. Significantly, Odysseus never says the army has no choice but to sacrifice the girl. The values he advocates are to be judged solely in terms of what they offer and what they require; apparently many in the assembly did not find them *prima facie* so desirable. This impression is reinforced by the behaviour of the Greeks at the sacrifice.

Adkins grants that Polyxena is pitiable, but not that this would markedly affect the judgment of the audience.²² Though this opinion seems suspect *per se*, we need not argue on a purely theoretical level.²³ Her behaviour, as reported by Talthybios (see esp. 548-552), is proof in action of the dignity of the speech to Odysseus. There she scorned

compounded if Paley, following the Scholiast, is correct in saying of δισσῶν μύθων (124): "The meaning is that they both voted that a sacrifice should be offered but one then was in favour of slaying Polyxena, the other a different captive." Did Achilles actually specify Polyxena? So Polydorus says (40), but W. H. Friedrich (*Euripides und Diphilos* [Munich 1953]) does not think so: the shade demanded a noble Trojan girl, and this prompts both Polydorus and Hecuba to think of Polyxena (32). This is similar to the view of Henri Weil (*Sept Tragédies d'Euripide* [Paris 1913]), and may ease apparent inconsistencies, if only at the price of the obvious sense of lines 38-44.

²¹W. M. Calder III ("A Reconstruction of Sophocles' *Polyxena*," *GRBS* 7 [1967] 31-56) argues (following W. H. Friedrich; see 34-35 of *Euripides und Diphilos*) that Achilles' ghost demanded Polyxena in the prologue of Sophocles' play. Conacher is skeptical of this interpretation and appears to prefer Weil's view that the ghost appeared only after the sacrifice (148 f.). Calder's interpretation seems more attractive from a dramatic point of view, but the inference (based on imitations of Sophocles *fr.* 523 P in the prologues of the *Hecuba* and Seneca's *Agamemnon*) is hardly compelling.

²²Typically, Adkins is satisfied to note that neither the characters "nor those Greeks who were opposed to the sacrifice, have used any *word* to censure it morally" (196; my italics), but he does not consider in his paper Talthybius' report. Cf. the implicit assessment of that report evident in the Schmid-Stählin (*Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur* 1.3 [Munich 1940] 466) comment on Hecuba's reaction: "Ihrer Tochter gegenüber empfindet Hekabe vollkommen griechisch, wenn sie in dem Hochsinn und edlen Anstand, mit dem Polyxene ihr Schicksal erleidet, einen Trostgrund findet (591 ff.)."

²³Aristotle (*Poet.* 13) clearly connects pity and fear with the audience's sense of the propriety of the suffering (ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον). See Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass. 1957) 370-371. Many studies, e.g., Abrahamson's, assume that the connection between feeling and judgment is a valid basis for interpretation.

(θάρσει, 345) an appeal which she knew would be fruitless. The biased reaction of the Chorus,

δεινὸς χαρακτήρ καπίσημος ἐν βροτοῖς
ἐσθλῶν γενέσθαι, καπὶ μείζον ἔρχεται
τῆς εὐγενείας ὄνομα τοῖσιν ἀξίοις [379–381]

anticipates the reaction of the assembled Greeks to her dying:

Ἔστηκας, ὦ κάκιστε, τῇ νεάνιδι
οὐ πέπλον οὐδὲ κόσμον ἐν χεροῖν ἔχων;
οὐκ εἴ τι δώσω τῇ περισσ' εὐκαρδίῳ
ψυχὴν τ' ἀρίστη; [577–580]

From viewing her as *κακή* they now curse themselves; having offered her as a gift to the dead they now bring gifts to her pyre; Achilles, *ἄριστον Δαναῶν πάντων* (134), has been eclipsed by one *ψυχὴν τ' ἀρίστη*. Talthybius has been sympathetic from the first; looking at the prostrate queen he echoes, and thus approves, the sentiment of Polyxena that death is preferable to such shame (374; 497–498). Neither he nor Neoptolemus are so unaffected as Odysseus (321 ff.) by the claims of pity. The messenger weeps when reporting her death, just as he did when she died (518–520). The son of Achilles seems to hesitate for a moment out of pity:

ὃ δ' οὐ θέλων τε καὶ θέλων οἴκτω κόρης [566]

The shade and the purpose of the sacrifice seem completely forgotten in the second half of the report, and meeting the demands of the warrior becomes incidental to honouring the princess. Agamemnon's ambiguous appraisal,

τάκειθεν γὰρ εὖ
πεπραγμέν' ἐστίν—εἴ τι τῶνδ' ἐστὶν καλῶς [731–732]

hardly commends either the advantage or morality of the sacrifice.²⁴

Eventually the winds are favourable, ironically so for the Greek king (1289–1292), but it cannot be said that Euripides has in any way stressed the efficacy of the sacrifice. Odysseus' arguments are basically political, not religious or moral; had the daemonic influence been more thoroughly carried through, the Greeks might have claimed that the barbarity of human sacrifice was not altogether their responsibility. Of course they do not overtly repent. Yet it does not seem too far from the mark to suspect

²⁴Consequently we must reject opinions such as that of Webster (*The Tragedies of Euripides* [London 1967] 279), who considers the scene merely one of five in Euripidean drama "where this theatrical scene may almost be termed a standard interlude." While the scene is more integrated into the play's argument than Webster's remark suggests, we need not concede that it is as dramatically unifying as others, like Conacher, would have it.

that Neoptolemus hesitates because the sacrifice itself is polluting, and dangerously reminiscent of a scene at Aulis.

A third problem, which unlike the preceding two Professor Adkins treats extensively, concerns the position of Agamemnon in the last scene. The king uses Hecuba's language to condemn the murder of Polydorus, which prompts Adkins to ask: "Is Euripides, through the mouth of Agamemnon, rejecting the earlier view, by which the sacrifice of Polyxena was justified?" (205). If so, says the critic, the dramatist is "cheating flagrantly." What worries Adkins here is the fact that Agamemnon apparently ignores, or sets aside, the bonds of *φιλία* uniting the army, and so himself, to Polymestor. To do so, of course, is to validate the persuasive claims of Hecuba against the traditional claims of *ἀρετή*. The crucial passage is Agamemnon's own assertion, never qualified, that

τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον φίλιον ἡγέεται στρατός,
τὸν κατθανόντα δ' ἐχθρόν· εἰ δὲ σοὶ φίλος
ὁδ' ἐστί, χωρὶς τοῦτο κοῦ κοινὸν στρατῶ. [858-860]

If this is the case, how do Polymestor's claims on the Greeks differ from those of Achilles, and why is he sacrificed to the revenge of a slave and enemy? Adkins rallies two arguments to counter the apparent facts. First, Agamemnon does not say that *he* is *φίλος* to the Thracian king. Secondly, Adkins accepts Hecuba's argument (!) that, because the barbarian could not be a friend to the Greeks and because his motive was not a *χάρις* for them (1200 ff.; p. 203 ff.), "Polymestor (unlike Achilles) is not *φίλος* to the Greeks" (205). It is tempting to dismiss these points as rather obvious *a priori* argumentation. Agamemnon is a member of the group constituted by the army; if he can dissociate himself from it, even covertly, then Odysseus' arguments for group loyalty and the claims of *ἀρετή* are surely weakened. The army, moreover, still considers Polymestor *φίλος*, whatever Hecuba may say of his motives, and it remains difficult to see why they, or their representative Agamemnon, should care about motives at all, if only competitive excellences and the murder of an enemy (Polydorus) are involved. However vile his betrayal of *ξενία*, Polymestor has in fact benefited the group which considers him a friend. Despite Hecuba's cries of *ἀνόσιον*, little in our play suggests the gods will punish either the malefactor or his group. Consequently we have no reason to believe that Odysseus, who does subscribe to the harsher old way, would not have judged the murder, if we may assume for the moment that he would even have permitted Hecuba's revenge, quite differently from the way Agamemnon does.

After all, Agamemnon has stood apart from the group throughout the play. He opposed the sacrifice, apparently for romantic reasons, and listens sympathetically (e.g., at 785) to her story. But he is not a bold or

commanding figure, to say the least, and Hecuba must mix the strongest moral argument with a reminder of Cassandra's favours to obtain even passive aid. Not the slightest irony of the play derives from the use of this pusillanimous hero as judge. If he is an "impartial arbitrator," he is also furtive and reluctant (898-899).

III

In some respects the king typifies Euripides' treatment of plot in the *Hecuba*.²⁵ Both are weak, slightly unpredictable, more interesting for the problems faced than attractive in their solutions. However imposing the queen's presence may be, the play remains bipartite. Her "inner experience," emphasized by Pohlenz and others, neither dominates and shapes the play nor finds a firm correlative in the rhythm of the action. On the other hand the thematic lines hardly seem so neatly woven and clear as some studies suggest. The *ξενία* theme, for example, appears emphatically in Polydorus' prologue but has no vehicle in the first half of the play, and in the second half is grotesquely illuminated by Hecuba's hospitality to Polymestor and his children. While it is obvious from verbal repetitions that Euripides wants to explore certain ethical problems, the argument often seems overwhelmed by theatrical devices or submerged in the episodic plot.

The *charis* theme is a good example. Euripides uses this theme to juxtapose a personal view of ethical responsibility and a public view. The most explicit statement of this division appears in the interview between Odysseus and Hecuba: she confronts him with a personal debt and he replies that the public debt takes precedence. By bringing Polyxena onto the stage early (175) Euripides dramatizes, in a way Homer never does with Briseis, the fact that this is a human being who is to die for a dubious

²⁵Abrahamson offers a sound analysis of Agamemnon's character and rôle, though he is more certain than seems to me possible of the king's reasons for adopting Hecuba's language (*op. cit.* [above, n. 1] 125-127). Kirkwood, too, sees no moral principle in Agamemnon (67, and n. 14). The king has, however, no particular reason to use her language (surely he does not expect to impress her); if we recall his sympathetic dialogue with her (736 ff.) and the apparent risk he runs in betraying the army's friend, his moral vacillation may appear only the natural expression of a weak character, and not the result of gross indifference to principle. We are reminded of the vagaries of perception and criticism by Grube's comments: "Commentators have emphasized that his motive is unworthy, but this is only partly true. If the king has committed sacrilege in forcing to bed the priestess of Apollo, he is surely the less a scoundrel in that he feels a genuine affection and kindness for her kindred. . . . Agamemnon in this play is delightfully human" (222). Perhaps the most sympathetic view of Agamemnon in the play is Strohm's (*op. cit.* [above, n. 8] 71-72). It is well to remember that Agamemnon's "love" is based on a choral report of an accusation and his own expressed desire not to *seem* to act for the sake of Cassandra; this is rather thin evidence for the dogmatism of some views (cf. Schmid-Stählin 1. 3.466 f.).

public advantage. If the playwright had not presented a divided assembly, if he had given the prologue to Achilles' shade, thereby stressing the necessity of the sacrifice, there would be far less irony in Polyxena's

ὥς ἐψομαί γε τοῦ τ' ἀναγκαίου χάριν [346]²⁶

Her role as *χάρις* thus has more significance for the theme than for the plot; the first half of the play (1-628) is about her, but she has no effect on the action. In the second half of the play both personal and public *charis* is abused. Hecuba's degeneration is usually marked from her argument that Agamemnon owes her a favour in return for Cassandra's favours (828 ff.).²⁷ Is this serviceable prostitution effective? We do not know. On the one hand Agamemnon uses Hecuba's "persuasive" language (852 f.), but on the other he fears that the army may think him guilty of planning the murder *Κασάνδρας χάριν* (855). A further irony finds him granting the favour only because the winds have not changed (898-902). Odysseus at least has his reasons; Agamemnon only fears for an already tarnished reputation. Polymestor completes the trio. His bonds with the family make it natural for Hecuba to appeal to him for a favour:

Πλ. ἔτ' οὖν τι βούλη τῶν ἐκεῖ φράζειν ἐμοί;
Εκ. σῶσαι σε χρήμαθ' οἷς συνεξήλθον θέλω. [1011-1012]

Adkins is surely wrong to see no appeal for a *χάρις* here. The word is absent, but Hecuba leads Polymestor into her tent by playing on the appearance of personal ties and obligation which in his greed he pretends to honour.²⁸ Having seen how little intrinsic power the claim on personal gratitude has, she offers it as a fair pretext to the hypocritical king. The *charis* theme consequently finds its most effective dramatic employment when it is most specious.

One can speak here of an abuse of *Peitho*, but the confusion and inversion of values would probably contribute more to dramatic rhythm.²⁹ This confusion appears in certain arbitrary turns, such as the use of Agamemnon as judge in the final scene. As I argued above, Polymestor's claim (1175-1176) would probably be acceptable to a *real Politiker* like

²⁶The lines of argument in the play are more varied than the scope of the present paper will suggest. Conacher examines the *charis* theme in greater detail. An example of one of the subtle ways Polyxena's speech continues the debate between Hecuba and Odysseus through a modified "understanding" of his language will be found in Strohm's pages (*op. cit.* [above, n. 8] 56-57).

²⁷This is the subject of Kirkwood's paper.

²⁸The most serious fault in Adkins' method can be seen in his comment on these lines: "In fact, she appeals to his greed (1002 ff.): no word for 'favour' occurs in the Greek. This point requires no discussion here" (194).

²⁹Conacher (163) speaks of "her power of rhetoric which becomes . . . the more effective the more unscrupulously she employs it."

Odysseus, who would be less interested in motives than facts. When Hecuba asks how there could be any friendship between Greek and barbarian (1199 ff.), the question may have some point—until we recall that the Greeks do consider him a friend (858). No doubt he did not intend a *charis* to the Greeks, but since an enemy is dead and no harm has come to their own group, are we really to be persuaded the army offstage and its representative Odysseus would condemn a *philos*, especially in the terms Agamemnon uses:

τάχ' οὖν παρ' ὑμῖν ῥάδιον ξενοκτονεῖν
 ἡμῖν δέ γ' αἰσχρὸν τοῖσιν Ἑλλήσιν τόδε.
 πῶς οὖν σε κρίνας μὴ ἀδικεῖν φύγω ψόγον;
 οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην. [1247 ff.]

οὐκ οὐν δικαίως, εἴπερ εἰργάσω κακά; [1254]

Euripides is “cheating flagrantly”: characters are not types nor representative of systems; the facts do not add up to a neat sum with no exceptions or contradictions. Earlier commentators have noticed this situation when they considered how our early sympathy and pity for the Trojan women is transferred to Polymestor. What makes the play so problematic emotionally is the manner in which it shifts the audience’s sympathy. From first pitying those who, ἀνάξιοι ὄντες, suffer terribly, perhaps even unnecessarily, we are finally constrained to loathe their revenge. The king who has acted monstrously reacts nobly. Our pity seems to have been spent in vain: Hecuba no longer merits it, for she has acted pitilessly in murdering the children. Except for Polyxena, every character in the play seems designed to bring *any* moral order into question; in word and deed they betray themselves, and the final prophecy (1259 ff.) becomes a fit judgment on the survivors.

The common fault in analyses such as those by Adkins and Conacher derives from the implicit insistence on unity, in theme or argument. Such unity is then taken to imply a dramatic unity, which many have felt the *Hecuba* lacks. Conacher’s analysis accurately traces the thematic lines of χάρις and πειθῶ, but these themes make their dramatic appearance in terms of “contrast” (154 f.), which seems to ignore the fact that the contrasts are not synthesized, that later actions and decisions repudiate earlier positions but offer no solutions.³⁰ We note thematic development

³⁰Similarly Abrahamson speaks of the two sides of Hecuba’s δυστυχία which together form a dramatic unity (128). Summarizing earlier criticism Kirkwood says: “the play has often been severely criticized for a want of causal connection between its two incidents, and for a lack of consistency in the character of Hecuba” (62). Despite his persuasive argument for “a logical unification” I think that a dramatic unification is wanting, and that this is a function of an incompleteness and incoherence in plot, characterization, and argument.

defeated by dramatic quirkiness; the lack of resolution is patent in both the final prophecy and the characters' inability to understand it. So it is difficult to believe that the *Hecuba* would appear as coherent on the stage as these analyses suggest. More than a tale of horror, it still plays havoc with every affective tone established, because of the constant undercutting of secured sympathies. Though Polyxena has much more to do with the argument of the first half of the play than Adkins admits, she is nevertheless forgotten in the rapid action, pathos, and debate of the following scenes. At least Hecuba's frenzied desire for revenge ignores the example she lately found in her daughter's conduct (591 ff.). There is something arbitrary in her sudden fury, as in Agamemnon's feeble support, that denies theme a firm correlative in plot. Both Adkins and Conacher bring the play into focus at the expense of significant yet ruptured components of the whole play.

Even the gods are swayed by pity.³¹ No wonder the Thebans fear that the Spartans may be moved by the Plataean plea to relent. For the *Hecuba* to have any meaningful dramatic tension it is necessary that Hecuba and Polyxena, and we might add Polymestor, not only be pitiable, but that the audience's sympathy for them be seen as a mode of dramatic argument against those traditional and contemporary values (denoted for Adkins and Conacher by ἀρετή and πειθώ) which are utilized to defend and justify human suffering and duplicity. The *Hecuba* fails to sustain a tragic tone because its uses of feeling are attenuated by characterization (e.g., Agamemnon's vacillating position) or contradicted by violent reversals. Hecuba's disregard for personal integrity and her brutal revenge revoke earlier pity, while Polymestor's paternal suffering and ultimate dignity secure for him our reluctant commiseration.³² The final irony of tone stems from the distrust of any feeling. But if we distrust our own feelings we are not condemned to acquiescence in Odysseus' pragmatism or Agamemnon's moral ambiguity. Finally, the moral disorder so effectively embodied in the character of Agamemnon mirrors the play. The play repudiates humane feeling as an adequate touchstone of experience. By engaging pity only to disarm it Euripides has produced a treacherous melodrama, but hardly a tragedy.

ALLEGHENY COLLEGE,
MEADVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

³¹

οἶκτῳ γὰρ ἐπίφθονος Ἀρτεμις ἀγνὰ . . . [Ag. 135]

³²Cf. Abrahamson on Hecuba's moral tragedy (128), when he refers to her transformation into "a ferocious animal." Kirkwood sees a "moral *peripeteia*" and concludes: "the appalling result to her personality is the tragedy of Hecuba" (67 and 68).