IV. — Hecuba and Nomos

GORDON M. KIRKWOOD

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

The two main incidents of Euripides' *Hecuba*, the sacrifice and the revenge, are connected only by the bearing of each on the personality of Hecuba, and there is a startling difference in the behavior of Hecuba between the two parts of the play. The explanation of this difference, and hence the link between the two parts, is found in Hecuba's speech of appeal to Agamemnon (786–845), which consists actually of two appeals very different in nature. The first is based on the demands of Nomos; in the second, Hecuba deliberately abandons Nomos for Peitho.

In the course of one day, Hecuba sees her daughter Polyxena led away to be slaughtered by the Greeks as an offering to the shade of Achilles, is presented with the corpse of her murdered son Polydorus, and exacts from his murderer a terrible revenge. Human sacrifice and savage vengeance: such are the events of Euripides' *Hecuba*, linked only by the figure of Hecuba. There seem, moreover, to be two Hecubas: one is a figure of passive suffering, who feels herself tortured by the cruelty of Odysseus and the Greek army, is grief-stricken at the fate of her daughter, and yet maintains in spite of her suffering a restraint and a stability, inspired, as she herself says (591–2), by the heroic example of Polyxena; in sharpest contrast, there is the vengeful Hecuba, the fiend incarnate, moral precursor of the "prowling hell-hound, baying on the plains of Troy,"[1] into which she will later be bodily transformed, who slaughters the young sons of Polymestor before his eyes, then mutilates the eyes of the wretched father and triumphs in reckless exultation as her sightless victim gropes on all fours in hopeless pursuit of his tormentor.

How does Euripides explain this appalling transformation? What is there to link the two incidents and to make compatible the two presentations of Hecuba? The majority of critics have

[1] Louise E. Matthaei, *Studies In Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1918) 118. Miss Matthaei's very readable chapter on the *Hecuba* is the most instructive essay on the play known to me. It contains a résumé of important nineteenth century criticism of the *Hecuba*. Miss Matthaei's study does not, however, give due attention to the part of the play to which the present paper will be mainly devoted; and its account of the connection between the incidents of sacrifice and revenge is weak. See below, 62.

felt that there is no explanation and no link; 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.[2] Nor have the few critics who do not share this general dissatisfaction offered much help toward making the connection clear. Theories are offered, as in Miss Matthaei's assertion that "without having been stung past all bearing Hecuba would not have dared to plunge into her fury of revenge; the cumulative effect of finding the body of Polydorus after having seen Polyxena taken away is the deciding factor; otherwise the end of the play would have been simply unbelievable."[3] This could be true; but it is entirely hypothetical, and in a play one should not have to rely on hypothesis to fill in so large a lacuna. Nor is the argument really convincing, for without further guidance the reader would be entitled to suspect that Hecuba might, after all, have behaved just as she does even if the sacrifice of Polyxena had never taken place. Mr. Grube, recognizing this, maintains that the order of events, though not inevitable, is "dramatically far more effective: we see Hecuba first as the suffering queen; after Polyxena has gone, all her hopes are concentrated upon the life of her last son: and he has been foully murdered. Then something snaps. She loses all dignity and nobility in her thirst for vengeance."[4] But why does "something snap"? We should, of course, have expected Hecuba to attempt revenge, but the brutality that she displays is quite another matter. Such startling conduct needs a more specific explanation than this. Furthermore, Miss Matthaei's suggestion and Mr. Grube's both rest on the assumption that Hecuba's murderous course is set from the time when she discovers the fate of Polydorus. There is no evidence for this in the play; on the contrary, it is quite clear that she would have been willing to entrust the punishment of Polymestor to Agamemnon, if Agamemnon had consented to undertake it.

The suggestion has been made that we need not reconcile the

[2] It does not seem necessary to name those who have attributed these faults to the play, for the list would include most critics of Euripides of the last hundred or so years. For a full and rigorous criticism of these points, and of other lesser demerits such as irrelevancy and misplaced rhetoric, see Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*[2] (London, 1928) 216–219. G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London, 1941) 93–97, defends the play against some of the charges.

[3] *Op. cit.* 140.

[4] *Op. cit.* 84.

two Hecubas, that the play is not a study of Hecuba at all, but has for its theme "one overriding idea, the suffering which the human race inflicts upon itself through its own follies and wickednesses."[5] That Euripides meant to present some basic idea such as this in the *Hecuba* is, I think, undeniable; indeed certain features of the play cannot well be explained otherwise.[6] But it seems equally impossible to deny that in embodying this theme Euripides meant to use the person of Hecuba as a focus; not merely as a connective symbol for a series of outwardly unrelated incidents as in the *Troades*, but as a central figure upon whom the whole action of the play bears. Throughout the play, from the prologue onward, the many external linking devices make it evident that Euripides intended the events of sacrifice and revenge to be closely connected; the play is meant to have unity of action, not merely the inner unity of theme of the *Troades*.[7]

I believe that there is in the *Hecuba* a logical unification, and a reconciliation of the two personalities of Hecuba; and that recognition of this element has been hampered by the tendency of critics to think too exclusively of the play as being divided into two "parts," the sacrifice and the revenge. These events are, of course, the striking features of the play, and it is natural for attention to fall first and chiefly on them. But there are actually six parts, exclusive of the lyrics, in the *Hecuba:* the prologue, the seizing of Polyxena, the report of the sacrifice, Hecuba's persuasion of Aga-

[5] H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1939) 219.

[6] Two features of the play, the detachment of the choral odes from the action, and the curious intrusion, just at the end, of references to the unhappy fate in store for Agamemnon, strongly suggest, as Kitto insists, that Euripides had in mind a broader concept than the personal tragedy of Hecuba. It is also true that Hecuba's tragedy is not one of character in the same way as that of Sophocles' Oedipus or Electra. One does not feel that what happens to Hecuba does so precisely because she is the person that she is: these things could have happened to some one else. All this may be recognized, and we may feel that Euripides is tending in the direction of the *Troades*, where the personality of the characters is subordinate to the underlying theme; but this does not alter the fact that in this play the person of Hecuba is still the focus of the tragic idea, and its unifying element.

[7] Some of these links are: the mention by the ghost of Polydorus, in the Prologue, of the fate of Polyxena (40–44), and his reference to Hecuba in connection with his own death and that of his sister (45–46); Hecuba's dream (73–75); Polyxena's reference to Polydorus (428); the finding of Polydorus' body by an attendant sent for water with which to bathe Polyxena; Agamemnon's entrance at 726, to urge Hecuba to hasten the burial of Polyxena, whereby he becomes involved in the revenge; Hecuba's expression of her wish to have a single funeral for both children (894–897); Agamemnon's reference to the two corpses (1287–1288).

memnon, the revenge, and the trial scene. It is the fourth of these parts, and especially Hecuba's great speech of appeal (786–845), which, in my opinion, provides the link that gives the play a logical unity.

The murdered Polydorus has been carried in by an attendant and received by the grief-stricken Hecuba (657–692), who divines almost at once that Polymestor is responsible (694–720). Agamemnon enters at this point, and in a series of asides Hecuba steels herself to ask his help, enemy though he is, in avenging her son's murder (736–751). Agamemnon is informed of the situation (761–785), and Hecuba then launches her appeal. The speech falls into two emphatically differentiated parts. In the first (787–811), Hecuba makes her case depend on the power and the demands of Nomos. Polymestor has committed a violent outrage against Nomos in its deepest sense of everything that a man's moral and religious consciousness knows to be right and necessary. Formerly a trusted guest-friend of Priam, he has murdered his own guest, a helpless boy. It requires no effort of historical adjustment for us to sympathize with Hecuba's feeling about the deed. Dante might have consigned the wretch to the ring of Ptolemy in the lowest circle of Hell, and our feelings to-day can be no warmer toward this ἀνοσιώτατος ξένος.[8]

At this point, for the sake of clarity, we must dwell briefly on the importance of Nomos in the earlier part of the play. The sacrifice of Polyxena was made by the Greeks in obedience to the demands of Nomos. It was not a capricious act of violence, but a deliberate measure adopted for the good of the Greek army. Odysseus, who represents the opinion of the majority, who were in favor of the sacrifice, states the principle with perfect clarity in the course of the debate between him and Hecuba which precedes the sacrifice: it is a common source of ruin to States if a man who has toiled well and willingly for the general good sees himself gain no more reward than his inferiors (306–308); but the Greeks know enough to honor their heroes, and therefore Achilles' demand will be satisfied, Polyxena must be sacrificed. This is the Greek way of thought, Odysseus insists, and if to honor a worthy man is a

[8] 790. Not only in this speech, but also when Hecuba first recognizes that the crime has been committed by Polymestor, and in the prologue, the special infamy of the murderer's position as ξένος is stressed repeatedly. See lines 7, 19, 26, 710, 715.

bad Nomos (εἰ κακῶς νομίζομεν, 326), then the Greeks will stand convicted of folly. Odysseus says "if," but he is sure that the principle is a right one; it is, indeed, a mark that distinguishes Greek from barbarian; it contributes to the success of Greece, the lack of it to the failure of the barbarians (328–331). Euripides passes no overt judgment on this highly civilized justification of human sacrifice; whether the Greeks are to be condemned outright, or pardoned for their cruelty on the score of necessity, is not made perfectly clear.[9] The theme of the play does not require this point to be settled; the important thing is the effect on Hecuba; and to Hecuba, this principle, with its grim consequence, the sacrifice of Polyxena, is a cruel and inadequate kind of Nomos, of which she herself, as well as Polyxena, is the victim. Her reaction to the arguments of Odysseus, and later to the sacrifice of her daughter when it is described to her by Talthybius, is one of helpless bewilderment. Of itself, this reaction would not be enough to explain her later conduct in the revenge.[10] But its force is felt in her scene with Agamemnon, where the theme of Nomos reappears. To this scene I now return.[11]

Having established the heinous nature of Polymestor's crime, Hecuba recognizes her own helplessness against it (798). Then she continues, and this is the climax of her argument (799–805):

"But the gods have strength, and that which rules the gods, Nomos; for on Nomos is based our belief in the gods, and by it we distinguish, in our lives, unjust acts from just. To your hands Nomos is now entrusted, and if it perishes, if those are unpunished who slay their guests and dare to pillage things sacred to the gods, then all righteousness is gone from the affairs of mankind."

The responsibility for maintaining divine and human rights is

[9] Opinions vary on this point. The unfeeling smugness of Odysseus' manner seems to me to suggest Euripides' condemnation.

[10] Hecuba's downfall is ironically foreshadowed here in her reply to Talthybius (585–628). She reflects on the difference between man and nature: nature's product varies with circumstances, bad land may yield good crops and good land bad crops; but man is unchanging, the scoundrel is always evil, the good man always good, in spite of catastrophe (592–598). She is thinking, of course, of Polyxena, of whom this is true; but Hecuba herself will prove to be a signal exception to her own rule. Cf. Grube, *op. cit.* (above, note 2) 95–96.

[11] For an ampler discussion of the early part of the play, the reader is referred to the account of it in Matthaei, *op. cit.* (above, note 1), especially 128–147, with which I agree substantially.

Agamemnon's; let him therefore, continues Hecuba, respect this plea. She is concluding with an appeal for mercy and a reference to her pitiful fall from queenly power to slavery, when suddenly she exclaims (812):

οἴμοι τάλαινα, ποῖ μ' ὑπεξάγεις πόδα;

Her plea has failed: "It seems that I shall gain nothing" (813); Agamemnon is on the point of withdrawing without so much as an answer. If ever the high demands of Nomos ought to have swayed a man's nature, this was the time; and yet Agamemnon is unmoved.

Suddenly the realization strikes Hecuba that it is useless to depend for success on the strength of pious principles. She has seen her daughter torn from her side to be butchered for the sake of a cruel and narrow principle, and now she sees Nomos of a far more valid and universal nature utterly disregarded. With great deliberation, Hecuba shifts the ground of her argument: it is only Peitho that has power over men, "Peitho, sole queen of mankind" (816). We may find the manner in which Hecuba ponders the nature and power of Peitho a bit pedantic, but to question the relevance of her reflections is to miss entirely the critical change of attitude that this passage marks. In her helplessness, Hecuba doubts her own power to persuade — her sons dead, herself a captive, Troy smoking in ruins (820–823) — but she hits unerringly on the one thing sure to influence Agamemnon, his love for Cassandra. In the following lines (826–835), she exploits this infatuation in a way that is anything but attractive. The idea of a mother using as a bargaining point her daughter's status as a concubine is, in itself, repulsive enough; Euripides underlines the sordidness by making Hecuba dwell graphically on the matter for several lines. The passage is meant to repel: Hecuba becomes the very personification of Peitho, entirely devoid of moral content. She ends her speech with further urging, on this new basis, that Agamemnon help her in the revenge on which she is determined. Agamemnon now consents, not indeed to take an active part in the revenge, but to countenance it. Where Nomos failed outright, Peitho carries the day.

The contrast between the two parts of the speech is too striking to be accidental — they are markedly different in tone — and too

fundamental, for the presentation of Hecuba, to be disregarded.[12] Here the two Hecubas of the play meet: the Hecuba who extols Nomos and depends on its power is the crushed but still noble figure of the earlier part of the play; the Hecuba who flings Nomos aside and becomes the embodiment of Peitho, utterly reckless of her own decency, has already embarked on the career of moral degeneration which will culminate in the brutality of her revenge on Polymestor.[13]

The transformation is a sudden one, dramatically so, but it requires no mental leap to understand it. It is a moral *peripeteia*, brought about by Agamemnon's callousness toward principle. Firmly resolved on revenge for her son's murder, and with a profound conviction of the justice of her resolution, Hecuba has appealed for assistance to the proper authority, the commander-in-chief of the victorious Greeks. But the king of men has no interest in maintaining a principle, and Hecuba, already shaken and confused by the Nomos of Odysseus, now follows the example of Agamemnon and abandons Nomos.

The passage under view is only the beginning of Hecuba's degeneration, but by its tone it sets the pattern for the rest. The next step is for her to realize, when Agamemnon refuses to take an active part, that she herself can contrive the revenge, contrary though it is to Nomos for a woman to behave so. This further failure of Agamemnon to act according to principle[14] provides the impulse needed for Hecuba's complete moral ruin. Had he possessed the moral energy to take Polymestor's punishment into his own hands, the subsequent events could not have taken place. But

[12] The contrast is given a formal emphasis by the similar and prominent positions of the two words, Nomos and Peitho, when they are first introduced. Each stands at the beginning of a verse (800, 816).

[13] It is tempting to follow out the theme of Peitho from the speech of appeal through the revenge episode and the concluding trial scene. Is it significant that Hecuba, having once acknowledged the sovereignty of persuasion, proceeds to consummate her revenge largely through the use of persuasion? For it is by persuasion that she brings Polymestor into the tent, to his downfall. Her newly acquired excellence in this art is again displayed prominently and triumphantly in the trial before Agamemnon, where she easily overcomes Polymestor in a contest of eloquence.

[14] In refusing to act, Agamemnon is not guided by any opposing principle. His reason is that Polymestor is an ally of the Greeks. But it is not that Agamemnon really *feels* a division of loyalty between his duty as commander and his good will toward Hecuba, but only that he does not want to *seem* to be helping an enemy against an ally (855). It is entirely a matter of appearances.

it is Hecuba who acts, and, robbed of her reliance on Nomos and of her belief in it, she yields to a frenzy of revenge and commits the most revolting atrocities without a trace of moral compunction. Even Polymestor's prophecy of her transformation into a "fiery-eyed hound" (1265) fails to move her. Her one thought is (1274),

οὐδὲν μέλει μοι σοῦ γέ μοι δόντος δίκην.

She has lost herself completely. Goaded by Odysseus' inadequate conception of Nomos, and by Agamemnon's disregard of Nomos, she has been seduced from her own staunch belief in that principle. The appalling result to her personality is the tragedy of Hecuba.