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EMOTION AND ABJECTION: VOICES OF DESPAIR



ABSTRACT: I argue in this paper that *Troades* is a study in the psychology of helplessness, of the hopes, the evasions, the self-deceptions and transient highs, the lows as the bitter realities reassert themselves, that Hecuba and the other enslaved women experience over the course of the play. There are momentary pleasures that derive from fantasies of revenge, or from escapist thoughts of suicide, or from the belief that one can reason with the masters and thereby exercise at least a minimal form of agency. In the end, however, there is no refuge in the mind, no way in which the women can salvage their moral identity in the face of slavery. The play thus flirts with allowing the women an illusion of agency, with which to counteract the hopelessness of their situation, but then immediately deprives them of it, drawing them back to despair.

EURIPIDES' *Troades* is a play about the response, emotional and intellectual, of women whose city has been conquered and who henceforward will be distributed to the conquering forces as slaves. The play has been described as episodic, since, although Hecuba remains onstage the entire time, the action is punctuated by the appearance of various characters who interact with her. Her main interlocutors are women: first Cassandra, then Andromache, and finally Helen, though men do appear, specifically the herald Talthybius and Menelaus, before whom the debate between Hecuba and Helen is staged. It has been said that there is no apparent order in which three women enter,¹ but in fact there is, as I hope to show, a logic to it. What is more, as Hecuba engages with each successive fellow slave, she acquires an ever greater sense of agency, which, although ineffectual, lifts her out of her initial despair and helps her to face her destiny.

Now, to the details. To begin with, I agree with David Kovacs that *Troades* is not a morality play, intended to instill a sense of guilt or anxiety

1. Cf. Kovacs (2018) 52: "as far as plot is concerned the Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen episodes could have been presented in any order".

in the Athenians for their extermination of the male population of Melos and the enslavement of the women and children, shortly before the tragedy was performed. It is true, of course, that, in the prologue, Poseidon agrees to cooperate with Athena in bringing hardship to the Greeks as they sail for home, because they did not condemn Oilean Ajax for violating her temple and carrying off Cassandra. But there is no hint that Greek cities will be destroyed and their populations enslaved, as happened to Troy. What is more, as Kovacs observes, Athens comes in for special praise several times in the play.² Kovacs himself takes the theme of the tragedy to be the uncertainty of human life. As he writes, “The unity to which these episodes contribute [...] is a meditation on the ways of the gods, sometimes inscrutable, sometimes perfectly intelligible, and the fragility of human happiness” (2021, 52). This seems to me too general an account, one that could be applied to virtually any tragedy. *Troades* is about women facing slavery. Yes, this can happen, in theory, to anyone; but it has already happened to the women of Troy, and they must now process the consequences.

When we first see Hecuba, she is prostrate and overcome with grief and despair. Although the term is not used in the passage (it is largely restricted to prose), I would describe her condition as *athumia*, “despondency”. She is paralyzed, and sees no point either in speaking or in keeping silent (τί με χροή σιγᾶν; τί δὲ μὴ σιγᾶν; 110). It is the zero grade of emotion, and requires, not argument or exhortation, but some unexpected sign or event to snap one out of it.³ The passions singled out as tragic by Aristotle are not absent. Hecuba recognizes that her condition is pitiable (cf. οἰκτιρῶς, 142), and the chorus (or half-chorus) hear her cries as pitiful (ἄιον οἰκτιρος οὖς οἰκτίζη, 155).⁴ They also experience fear (φόβος, 156), since they are still uncertain about when they will be shipped off to slavery. The second half-chorus too experiences fear, or rather, shock: ἐκπληχθεῖσ’ ἤλθον φοίκα (183), and instinctive shudder, a reaction more elementary than *phobos*. They have a moment in which they seem briefly to console themselves with fantasies about the lovely and exotic places to which they may be transported (214–29), but this is interrupted by the arrival of Talthybius, with word about the assignments of

2. This is why I believe that, contra Kovacs, the prior enmity that Athena mentions between herself and Poseidon must refer to their contention over Athens, now happily resolved, rather than, as Kovacs maintains, to the fact that they were “on opposite sides in the war” (2018, 133 *ad v.* 50: ἔχθραν τήν πάρος). Indeed, they were on the same side during the Trojan War.

3. See Konstan (forthcoming).

4. But οἰκτιρος may suggest just misery, rather than pity proper; cf. vv. 197, 206.

Cassandra, Andromache, and Hecuba herself. Talthybius obscurely refers to the fate of Polyxena, who was sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles, declaring simply that she is well (*ἔχει καλῶς*, 268), and free of troubles (270). But at the news that she has been allotted to Odysseus, Hecuba lapses into anguish once again, undercutting any illusions about the charms of slavery.

The first sign of an other-regarding sentiment on Hecuba's part is her sense of the shame (*αἰσχύναν*, 171) that Cassandra's appearance before the Greeks will cause her.⁵ But until Cassandra's appearance, Hecuba remains "an image of a corpse" (*νεκροῦ μορφά*, 193). The first moment in which Hecuba does more than weep and rail is when her daughter Cassandra enters. As Kovacs notes, Cassandra's behavior is extraordinary, and must have been a shock to the audience.⁶ She chants a wild bridal song, joyfully celebrating her coming marriage to Agamemnon (308–41).⁷ It turns out, however, that the source of her joy is not marriage at the cost of her sacred virginity or the privilege of being the concubine of Agamemnon, but her foreknowledge that she will witness, and in part be instrumental in, his death at the hands of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. As she says, "I will kill him and take vengeance for my brothers and father" (*κτενῶ γὰρ αὐτόν, κἀντιπορθήσω δόμους / ποιὰς ἀδελφῶν καὶ πατρὸς λαβοῦσ' ἔμοῦ*, 359–60). Although her words are opaque to Hecuba and the chorus of Trojan women, the audience knows that they are prophetic, and will be one element of Athena's vengeance against the Greeks. Cassandra further argues that the Greeks died far from their homes and families, while the Trojans died for their country, were buried in their own land, and Hector himself died in glory. She concludes that Hecuba should not pity Troy or her marriage, for by it she will destroy their greatest enemies (404–5).

Hecuba pities her delusion, and Talthybius avows that he ignores her dire proclamations only because she hasn't all her wits (*οὐ γὰρ ἀρτίας ἔχεις φρένας*, 417). But both, as the audience knows, are mistaken. Cassandra's anticipated revenge is true, and her claims concerning the superior fortune of the defeated Trojans at least deserves a hearing. The question is whether her elation is warranted, given her imminent servitude and death at Clytemnestra's hands. Imagining that misery has befallen and will befall her captors

5. Cf. Kovacs (2018) *ad v.* 171.

6. Kovacs (2018) 53: "To call Cassandra's entrance surprising is to understate the matter: it administers a shock as great as any in tragedy."

7. Her appearance with torches may echo a similar entry in the *Palamedes*, the first play of the trilogy.

is one way in which a woman destined for slavery might reconcile herself, at least momentarily, to her condition. Still, there is undeniably something manic about Cassandra's ecstatic outburst; as Talthybius says, Apollo put her wits in a Bacchic frenzy (*Ἀπόλλων ἐξεβάκχευεν φρένας*, 408; cf. 500, Hecuba speaking). She replies haughtily to Talthybius, predicting the tribulations of Odysseus and dubbing herself as one of the Erinyes (457), who will die victoriously (*νικηφόρος*, 461) upon wiping out the house of the Atrides — an exaggeration, this, but part of her aspirations. Aristotle avers that the anger provoked by belittlement is not just painful but also brings some pleasure in imagining the vengeance one hopes to exact. But such exultation offers no comfort to the other women of Troy.

When Cassandra is led off, Hecuba collapses to the ground, and then offers what is effectively a refutation of Cassandra's euphoria. She is a fallen queen, aged, who has seen her sons slain and her husband slaughtered before her eyes, her daughters carried off, and herself bound for servitude. She is without hopes (505), and her thoughts turn to suicide (506–9). It is true that she does not believe her daughter's claims, but her behavior is, I think, a rejection of such fantasies of vengeance, which do nothing to alleviate the pathos of her decline. Her suffering is too great to be sublimated that way. The chorus then sing of how Troy was captured unawares by the ruse of the wooden horse, blood running everywhere, a victory wreath for Greece and grief for the Phrygian nation (566–67).

The next episode begins with the entry of Andromache, carried in, along with her infant son Astyanax, on a wheeled cart. She laments along with Hecuba in what almost amounts to a competition in misery, until Andromache springs on her mother the news that Polyxena has been slain (622–23). Andromache, however, insists that Polyxena's fate is superior to her own (630–31), to which Hecuba replies that death is sheer annihilation, while in life there are always hopes (632–33). The difference in their views gives rise to the second grand *agôn*, in which Andromache maintains that death is preferable to a life of misery, beginning with the earliest version I know of what would later be called the symmetry argument, that being dead is like never having been born (636–37).⁸ Andromache emphasizes the high station from which she has fallen, and the ethical dilemma she faces in transferring her loyalties from her blameless husband to her new master. She concludes by directly challenging Hecuba's final claim, asserting that

8. Cf. Kovacs (2018) *ad* v. 638, who cites Lucretius 3.832–842; the idea likely goes back to Epicurus.

she has not even hope, for she cannot deceive herself into believing that she will accomplish anything good or joyful in the future (681–83).

Hecuba replies —despite declaring that she is speechless (*ἄφθογγός εἰμι*, 69)— that there is indeed reason for Andromache to hope, since by yielding to her new master, Neoptolemus (the son of Achilles, who killed Hector), she may safely raise Astyanax, who may when he comes of age restore Troy. Although Kovacs comments that Hecuba “does not explain why, if she herself is without hope, she is encouraging Andromache to entertain hopes for herself and Astyanax” (2021, 236 ad vv. 686–705), the prospect of reestablishing Troy is, if not a reason why Hecuba herself should continue living, nevertheless something to anticipate with pleasure. It differs from Cassandra’s dreams of revenge against the Greeks, which, though they will prove true, are no compensation for the slavery the women must endure. That prospect gave no relief to Hecuba’s misery, but the hope of rebuilding Troy might enable her and the Trojan women generally to cope with their servitude.

This reverie, however, is immediately dashed when Talthybius enters to announce the Greeks’ decision to kill Astyanax, the son of so valiant a father (723); the implication is so that he may not, when mature, take vengeance on the Greeks. He warns Andromache not to resist or curse the Greeks, lest they refuse to let her give the boy a proper burial. Once again, the women are left with no hope or fantasy by which to lighten the doom of slavery. Andromache takes tearful leave of her infant son —her words must have roused the pity of the spectators— and, in her despair, her thoughts turn to Helen as the cause of woes both to Trojans and to Greeks (766–73), though she then ascribes the cause of Troy’s destruction to the gods (775–76). So deep is her gloom that she is now indifferent to her enslavement, remarking bitterly on the “fine marriage” (*καλὸν [...] ὑμέναιον*, 778–79) that awaits her — an ironic reminiscence of Cassandra’s expectations. Hecuba too yields once more to despondency (790–98). But the mention of Helen hints at the third *agôn*, immediately following the choral interlude, a curiously nostalgic recitation of the earlier sack of Troy by Hercules and Telamon and Zeus’s passion for Ganymede, Dawn’s for Tithonus, both sons of Troy.

Menelaus enters abruptly, and orders his men to drag Helen from the tent by her hair, declaring his intention to take her back to Sparta, where he will slay her. His words exhilarate Hecuba, who praises Zeus, or whatever power it may be (an anticipation of her theological skepticism), for guiding human affairs toward justice (884–88). Menelaus is puzzled by her odd prayer, but Hecuba explains that she will be grateful if he will kill his

wife. This, she implies, will be justice enough for her. The formal debate between Helen and Hecuba over her guilt has elicited various reactions and interpretations on the part of scholars, who have expressed doubts about its relevance, its appropriateness to the tragic context, and whether Hecuba or Helen emerges victorious.⁹ What I wish to highlight, in connection with my focus on the emotions of the enslaved women, is the way in which Hecuba now fixates on the punishment of Helen as compensation for her sufferings. Cassandra's evocations of the future misfortunes of the Greek captains had not comforted her, though to be sure she thought that these were mere ravings of her demented daughter. The hope that Astyanax might restore Troy gave her some solace, till they were dashed. The difference now is that Hecuba believes herself to be in a position to influence the outcome, and prevent Helen from persuading Menelaus to spare her. Her first recommendation is that he not even look at her (891), but once she is on stage, Hecuba demands that she be given license to speak, so that she in turn may expose the full tally of Helen's treacheries (906–10). Menelaus yields to her wishes. Of course, a debate between the two women provides entertainment for the audience, but why should Hecuba insist on it? The answer, I think, is that it allows her to influence the course of events, it grants her agency, something that none of the women had or imagined she had till now, not even Cassandra. This is small satisfaction, but when all independence of action is stripped away and a person can do no more than submit passively to greater force, even so slight a chance to act is precious and restorative, if only temporarily.

Helen cites the judgment of Paris (and the failure of his parents to expose him as an infant) as the true cause of the war, in which she was simply a pawn, the reward promised to Paris if he voted for Aphrodite as the most beautiful of the goddesses. She alleges, moreover, that this choice was nevertheless beneficial to the Greeks, since Athena and Hera had promised him wide dominions, and so Greece was not subject to barbarian rule. Helen further excuses her elopement with Paris by adducing the inexorable power of Eros, to which the chorus too had alluded, and claims that once Paris was dead she sought to escape from Troy but each time was apprehended. Hecuba, in turn, undermines her defense with a rationalistic critique that subverts the mythological tradition, denying that the three goddesses would ever have entered into such a tawdry competition or that Aphrodite would have accompanied Paris to Sparta and instilled an irresistible desire in Helen. The fact is, she avows, that Helen simply fell in love with the handsome,

9. Summarized by Kovacs (2108) 261–66.

elegant foreigner; she was not carried off by force. Once in Troy, she declined Hecuba's offers to help her steal away, nor ever once considered suicide, as an honest wife ought to have in the circumstances. Within the context of the play, Hecuba wins the debate hands down: Menelaus is persuaded by her arguments, and agrees also to send Helen home in a different vessel, so as not to risk being seduced by her beauty and his former passion. What is more, she has dismantled the mythological armature and laid responsibility for actions on the human actors. Whatever conjectures the audience may have entertained about Helen's ultimate fate, based on their familiarity with traditional stories, for example the fourth book of the *Odyssey*, Hecuba can enjoy this moment of triumph, although Euripides does not permit her to express her sentiments at this point.

Hecuba's small victory represents the last shred of dignity that remains for her or the Trojan women, and it will not endure. The chorus, perhaps infected with Hecuba's skepticism, wonder whether Zeus cares at all about the destruction of their city (1077–80), and at the same time pray that Menelaus and Helen may never reach Laconia (1110–17), thus raising the suspicion that, should he get home, he may not carry out his intention to kill Helen. In the finale, Talthybius brings the body of the slain Astyanax for burial by Hecuba, since Neoptolemus, in a hurry to depart, has taken Andromache with him and so she cannot offer the last rites for her son. Hecuba, in a futile attempt to belittle her captors, ignores her earlier dream that Astyanax might rebuild Troy and asks rhetorically whether the Greeks were afraid that the boy would do just that (1160–61; cf. 1189–98), a lone child, when Hector and his cohorts were no match for them. She scornfully deprecates such fear as irrational. Hecuba is given to gnomic utterances, which Aristotle says befit the aged (*Rhetoric* 2, 1394a19–1395b19), and she duly remarks that fate is fickle and no one remains fortunate (1203–6). But the scene as a whole is given over to mourning, accentuated by the young age of Astyanax, a theme common in epitaphs for those who died *ἄωροι*, prematurely. Hecuba repeats Cassandra's wan consolation, that if the god had not cast them down, the Trojans would have remained obscure and not a theme for song for ages to come (1242–45), recalling too the sentiment expressed by Helen in the *Iliad* (6.357–58). But the thought is evanescent. Upon seeing flames dart up from the walls of Troy, Hecuba contemplates rushing into the fire and dying nobly, together with her burning city (1282–83), a recollection of Andromache's affirmation that death is preferable to servitude. But it is all vain, the fleeting notions that pass through the minds of people who have lost everything. As the chorus sing in what are almost

the final verses of the play, “the name of our land is obliterated” (*ὄνομα δὲ γᾶς ἀφανὲς εἶσιν*, 1322). And with this the women march to the ships of the Achaeans and the day of their enslavement, a variation on the epic phrase *δοῦλιον ἤμαρ*.¹⁰ There is nothing more to say.

Troades, as I read it, is a study in the psychology of helplessness, the hopes, the evasions, the self-deceptions and transient highs, the lows as the bitter realities reassert themselves. There is the momentary pleasure of fantasies of revenge, escapist thoughts of suicide, the belief that one can reason with the masters and eke out some small token of justice, but in the end there is no refuge in the mind, no way to salvage one’s moral identity. The play flirts with allowing the women an illusion of agency, with which to counteract the hopelessness of their situation, but at once deprives them of it, drawing them back to despair. As Warren TenHouten writes (2023, 93), “Following failure upon failure, without the psychological cushion of even a bit of sanguinity, goal-seeking can be abandoned, and, bereft of hopes and dreams, one can sink into a dark state of despair.”¹¹

Why should Euripides compose a tragedy on such a theme, even allowing that it is the third play in a connected trilogy, in which it may have provided a kind of resolution? Why stage so vividly the inner world of women undergoing what Orlando Patterson called social death?¹² What kind of tragic pleasure would it have given the audience? Pity, perhaps, unless the Athenians believed that the Trojans had it coming, not an implausible attitude. Fear? Perhaps, if they put themselves in the place of the women, rather than the Greeks, a possibility, no doubt, but not one we can take for granted. I suggest rather that what *Troades* offered was not empathy so much as understanding. Athens was teeming with slaves, Athenians lived with them in close quarters, they were nurses of their children. How did they feel, when the unthinkable overtook them? What did they say to themselves and among themselves? It might not be wholly wrong to suppose that the pleasure in viewing such a play was in part voyeuristic. Perhaps too it was eye-opening to see how desperately the Trojan women grasped at the least figment of autonomy. Something like this constituted, I think, the emotional heart of the play.

10. *Il.* 6.463, *Od.* 14.340, 17.323; cf. Kovacs (2018) ad v. 1330.

11. Cf. Cherry (2023): “Learned helplessness occurs when a person who has experienced repeated challenges comes to believe they have no control over their situation. They then give up trying to make changes and accept their fate.” See also Lazarus (1999).

12. Patterson (2018).

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