

A VALUABLE GUIDE TO *HECUBA*

H. P. FOLEY, *Euripides: Hecuba*, (Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy) Bloomsbury Academic: London / New York 2015, pp. 146, ISBN 9781472569080.

HELENE P. FOLEY'S INTRODUCTORY monograph on Euripides' *Hecuba* is one of the most recent additions to the 'Bloomsbury [formerly Duckworth] Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy', a series of studies useful to both student and scholar, featuring up-to-date discussions of various aspects of individual plays while also dealing with their reception and performance history. Foley's book, packed with information and offering a reliable and insightful guide to the study of *Hecuba*, is undoubtedly one of the best in the series.

"What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba / that he should weep for her?" These lines from *Hamlet*, quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1 ("The Play and its Context"), epitomize a central question for Foley's study, namely: which aspects of Hecuba have been most relevant to antiquity, early modern times and the current era? In order to place the drama in its contemporary political context, the author aptly refers to the debates on justice, law and retribution taking place during the Peloponnesian War and more precisely around the year in which the play was performed (most probably 424). Relevant Thucydidean passages illuminate this crisis of values, while they also shed light on the suspicion surrounding aristocratic connections — a theme prominent in *Hecuba* — from the democratic point of view prevalent at Athens.

Chapter 2, 'Theatrical Festivals and the Mythical Tradition', deals first with the stage arrangements of the performance at the Dionysia and then proceeds with a discussion of the mythical background of the play. It is of particular note that Foley takes into account not only the literary antecedents of Euripides' play, but also the evidence from visual arts (vase-painting, relief sculpture). What is foregrounded is the introduction of specific innovations by Euripides concerning the revenge plot as a whole, but also as regards the character of Polymestor, the setting in Thrace, as well as the allotment of a more active role to Polyxena and Hecuba.

Chapter 3, ‘Dramatic Structure and Unity’, features a succinct delineation of the action of the play,¹ followed by a discussion of the ‘problem of unity’, in other words of the manner in which we might interpret the two-fold structure of the play. First mentioned is the view that the play traces an evolution (in a negative sense) in the character of Hecuba, marked by her adoption of dubious modes of persuasion in tandem with her gradual moral corruption.² Foley then focuses on a more positive reading of Hecuba’s rhetoric by a number of scholars,³ especially by James Kastely.⁴ Rhetoric, according to this view, primarily reflects (despite its ambiguities) a commitment to justice and a vehicle of principled resistance to the cruelty and outrage with which the protagonist is confronted. Further, this rhetoric notably combines outmoded aristocratic viewpoints with democratic principles (e.g. equality under the law). The author concludes, with good reason, that it would be commendable to study in detail the sequence of scenes and arguments without relying on a particular case for ‘unity’ or ‘thematic coherence’. She equally resists the attempt “to create a psychologically coherent persona for Hecuba”;⁵ this approach is certainly sensible and in my view it could optimally be combined with a move towards uncovering a ‘tragic idea’⁶, an overarching theme which shapes the plot and might well be regarded as taking precedence over character delineation.

The fourth chapter, ‘Interpreting the Action: Hecuba and the Power of Persuasion’, involves a succinct yet nuanced reading of the play up to line 863. The treatment of the debate between Odysseus and Hecuba⁷ lays appropriate emphasis on the fact that Odysseus’ rhetoric reflects the prioritizing of collective needs over those of the individual, a stance reminding us of that of the Athenian democracy, especially after Pericles. Hecuba’s arguments, on the contrary, relying as Foley states on *δίκη* and *χάρις*, “belong to a pre-city state world”⁸. Equally nuanced is the discussion of Polyxena’s noble

1. Foley (2015) [henceforth ‘F.’] 25-29.

2. To Foley’s references (at notes 6-9, p. 115) may I also add Morwood (2014) 389: “Polyxena’s heroism inspires her with a noble endurance, while her revenge for Polydorus shows her degeneration into animalism.”

3. F. 31-33.

4. Kastely (1993).

5. F. 33.

6. For instance, “one that embraces both the Greeks and Hecuba as wrongdoers, and both the Greeks and Hecuba as the victims of wrongdoing”: so Kitto (1961, 216-223: 222), from whose insights we may still profit.

7. F. 38-42.

8. F. 41.

death, which is nevertheless ‘theatricalized’, as the young woman invites the desiring gaze of the army by partially revealing her body. A number of critical views are mentioned, but the author refrains from any ultimate answer, although rightly insisting that “Polyxena’s gesture, by speaking through the body as well as words, underlines the power of performing her choice rather than simply articulating it”.⁹ Foley’s attentive reading is also evident in her analysis of Hecuba’s supplication of Agamemnon, especially as regards the thorny issue of Hecuba’s appeal based on Agamemnon’s relationship with Cassandra.

The ensuing fifth chapter, ‘Hecuba’s Revenge’, deals with the action of the play until the end. Foley lays proper emphasis on Hecuba’s shift now from forthright speech to cunning as well as on the surprise of the audience as they realize the nature of her revenge on Polymestor (his blinding and the murder of his children, rather than his own murder). Due stress is equally laid upon the manner of Polymestor’s entrance that follows and the fact that his violent, emotional song effectively destabilizes his identity as a “rational male”.¹⁰ The chapter evolves into an attempt at an evaluation of Hecuba’s revenge,¹¹ a discussion to be continued in Chapter 7. Foley, while not aiming to reach any final verdict, succeeds in foregrounding questions of key importance for the interpretation of the play, such as the meaning of the protagonist’s prophesied metamorphosis into a dog.

The next chapter consists in a brief consideration of the choral odes of the play, aptly underlining the Chorus’ role in foregrounding the grim fate of Troy. In my view this discussion could have taken place earlier in the book, since in its present location it disconnects the analysis in Chapter 5 from its actual continuation in Chapter 7. The latter bears the title ‘Sizing up Revenge Tragedy’ and begins by seeking to discover the way in which an ancient audience would actually respond to Hecuba’s manner of revenge: a response which, according to Foley, might in fact be less negative than what we might expect (revenge being regarded under specific circumstances as a form of *δίκη*). Foley then refers to the positive reception of the play from the Renaissance up to the sixteenth century: indeed, the bloody acts of vengeance were not regarded as detracting from its quality; moreover, the drama’s structure was equally spared from criticism.¹² From the seventeenth

9. F. 42-45: 45.

10. F. 53-54.

11. F. 55-60.

12. F. 69-72.

century onwards the play has received considerable criticism with regard to both its plot structure and the extreme brutality of Hecuba's vengeance, a stance that only in the last decades has begun to change. Foley emphasizes the importance of the rhetorical/philosophical confrontations within this drama, which she believes to be of greater significance than the manner of Polymestor's punishment; hence, even if Hecuba's character "does in any way descend through enacting violence, her language and her claim to justice ascend and are increasingly corroborated by her opponents".¹³ In my opinion one ought to give more attention to the morally questionable character of the revenge enacted by the protagonist and to whether the whole notion of vengeance — so prominent at times of war, as when *Hecuba* was performed — is implicitly undercut by Euripides.

The final chapter of the book (Chapter 8) deals with modern performances of *Hecuba*. In this necessarily selective account Foley chooses for more extended discussion a number of productions (Martha Graham's dance version and Carey Perloff's productions, for example) which help foreground the relevance of the play to the modern world and more specifically to such issues as human rights abuses, justice and revenge.

There follows a quite informative chronological table, extending from the archaic period to landmarks of later reception of the play in antiquity and then to its productions from the sixteenth century onwards. Next we find a Glossary, which is certainly useful, especially for undergraduate students, whereas the Guide to Further Reading is helpful to both students and scholars alike.¹⁴ The book concludes with Notes, Bibliography¹⁵ and Index.

All in all we are dealing with a nuanced and thoughtful book that goes beyond merely fulfilling the need for an introduction and study guide to *Hecuba*. The author's perceptive and well documented readings offer valuable insights to scholars, as well as the instigation for further research on this challenging play.

13. F. 73.

14. Note that Matthiessen's commentary for the 'Griechische Dramen' series (2008), mentioned in page 107, has been published again in 2010 in a significantly expanded form.

15. The Index at times appears to be curiously selective; for instance, to 'Battezzato, L.' add 116n20, 127n23; to 'Mossman, Judith' one may add 120n38, 126n4, 7, 8.

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