Quisquis est Hecubae est miser (1062) ¹

Traditional readings of Seneca’s TROADES do not make much of the Chorus or even of the Trojan Women generally and of themes of irony and paradox. The conventional interpretation of the Senecan TROADES is as a Stoical lesson in dying well. Most of the play is considered as merely preparatory to the «heroic» deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena: these two, it is usually concluded, instruct both Greeks and Trojans alike how to bear adversity with bravery, and how to bear one’s self at the moment of death, like a Cato, with apatheia and philosophic control ². True enough, the victims are calm, stately, even radiant, and the Greeks themselves are moved by and weep at the event. Yet we must remember that the whole of these death scenes recounted by the Nuntius are coarsened throughout —exposed as being a «show» or «spectacle» like the Roman games ³, the hoardes trying to obtain good «seats», clambering upon every available tree, pillar, tomb, or ruin like so many maggots or flies. Portrayed in this way, they are a gross comic caricature of mobs at a Triumph, at a New Year’s Day Parade, at an outdoor Rock Concert. The vulgarity of the gathering —incorporating Greeks and Trojans alike— is another point made by the drama in addition to any stressing of the heroism of the martyrs.

¹ The view of Hecuba as exemplar of the Suffering Mater is illustrated by the player’s speech in Hamlet (II.ii. 423-506), who, as Aeneas, tells of Pyrrhus’ slaughter of Priam and weeps at Hecuba’s extreme torments. Thence follows, of course, Hamlet’s great soliloquy on Hecuba, tears, and motivation.

² Consult esp. B. MARTI, «Seneca’s Tragedies. A New Interpretation», TAPhA 76, 1945, 226; N. T. PRATT, «The Stoic Base of Senecan Drama», TAPhA 79, 1948, 3; and E. FANTHAM, Seneca’s TROADES: A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary, Princeton, 1982, pp. 16-19, 89-90. PIERRE GRIMAL similarly urges that the plays were written with political and instructional purpose, regularly utilizing themes dealt with in Seneca’s philosophic writings (Sénèque ou la conscience de l’Empire, Paris, 1979, p. 424; see pp. 424-31). J. F. BRADY, JR., A Study of the Stoicism in Senecan Tragedy (unpub. Ph. D. diss., Columbia University, 1958), maintains that Stoic teaching is the single purpose of all the dramas: «Communication of Stoic doctrine is the prime consideration, all else is accidental» (p. 294).

³ On the crudeness of the setting, and repeated references to gaming and shows, consult esp. lines 861, 1075-87, 1125. Then, too, Polyxena is consciously playing the last «role» in Troy’s drama before the crowd: «partem ruentis ultimam Troiae uident» (1131).
We should remember as well that the vast majority of the other matter of the drama is equally important, dealing as it does with the acute suffering of the Trojan Women; such a play is not devised brokenly—simply so that a Nuntius in the closing moments can relate two brief events when young victims were brave—no more than we should conclude that all of Tacitus's Annals were composed only to highlight the brave demise of a Petronius and a Seneca. We should note, however, that the manner of their deaths is, in accordance with the theme of paradox we have been tracing, unusual and unexpected. Astyanax had seemed a mama's boy and frightened earlier. Polyxena had appeared rash in her excitement and eagerness to die. Neither, therefore, have prepared the audience to anticipate that they will appear at their executions intrepid (1093), proudly ferocious (like the lion, 1098), modest and refulgent (1138), brave (1146), ferocious again (1152), and irate (1159). We should add that neither dies as planned by the Greeks; both in some sense disrupt the cruel rite in which they are being sacrificed, and accordingly constitute bad omens for the Greek forces. Their proud deaths are thus surprising and climactic, and Seneca certainly thought of these events as part of the pinnacle of the tragedy, what Aristotle would call «tragic» scenes of death and overt suffering.

4 In Astyanax's one spoken line he implores his mother to have tender sympathy and compassion for him as he is led away to his fate: «Miserere, mater» (792).

5 FANTHAM (above, n. 2), p. 91 (but see also p. 18), observes that such expressions of anger and the passions (found everywhere in the play) run «contrary to his own moral theory». Rightly, she notes that Seneca apparently «delights» in such contradictions, and it is true. But too many critics have made much about Seneca's «betrayal» of Stoic doctrines. He was not bound absolutely to such doctrines of apatheia; as an eclectic, he would take ideas from whatever source. Moreover, any writer would know that one cannot have «drama» and tension (or even action) without the passions. In his philosophical writings, he reasons that even sage wise men cannot avoid certain natural emotions (vid. Epp. 11.1-7, 57.4-5; De Ira II.i.i; II.iii.2-3). Moreover, the absolutely good man is a rara avis, perhaps arriving once in every five hundred years (Ep. 42.1; cf. De Tranq. An. 7.4).

6 Polyxena dies with a gesture of rebellion:

\[
\text{~\textit{nec tamen morti\textcolor{red}{e}ns adhuc}}
\]
\[
\text{\textcolor{red}{d}epot animos; ~\textit{cec~i~d~i}, ut A~c~h~i~l~l grauem}}
\]
\[
\text{\textcolor{red}{f}actura terram, prona et irato impetu (1157-59).}
\]

And the intrepid Astyanax leaps of his own will to his death before Ulysses can complete the words of the ritual:

\[
\text{~\textit{ac, dum uerba fatidici et preces}}
\]
\[
\text{\textit{concipit Vlixes uatis et saeuos ciet}}
\]
\[
\text{\textit{ad sacra superos sponte desiluit sua}}
\]
\[
\text{\textit{in media Priami regna— (1100-1103).}}
\]

Such disruptions of these rituals can only augur ill, and presage future catastrophes.
But their demise is only the vertex of a long series of preparatory events. What «sets off» and highlights their being dispatched is the whole sweep of the play, more than a thousand previous lines detailing the mounting anguish of the Trojans but leading up to and culminating in such a tragic ceremony. For the anguish and pathos, as we have shown, lies with all of the Trojan Women themselves —with the Chorus and with Andromache as well as with Polyxena. Perhaps in the vanguard among the Trojan Women —and the one who endures the most concussive suffering— is Hecuba herself, and she deserves special scrutiny in this drama, for she opens the play, and it is she, after the executions of the children, who gets the final scene and almost the drama’s last words. Like Brecht’s Mother Courage, she occupies the most prominent post among a legion of the tormented because she stands as the symbol of Trojan authority, one who, as the Queen, has lost virtually all of her innumerable children (as well as her husband, her citizens, and her city) in the war. Her behavior needs close analysis, for she helps supply much of the significance and meaning to the play’s central themes.

From the outset, Hecuba is the drama’s most intensely pathetic creature. Like a frame-figure or umbrella, she is present at play’s beginning and end (lines 1-164; 861-1179). She is the eldest, and she has lost the most —her kingdom, her husband-king, virtually all of her children, any kind of hope; shortly she is to be allotted as slave to some Grecian soldier, and shipped away. She is numbed and almost totally defeated from the very start. As the most elderly, she continually prays throughout for death (vid. 42, 963-65, 1000-1002, 1171-72). She is like the pathetic old man in Chaucer, virtually condemned to live forever, who incessantly implores Death to admit him to her great kingdom:

Ne Deeth, allass, ne wol nat han my lyf.
Thus walke I lyk a restelees kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf bothe erly, and late,
And seye, ‘Leeve moodre, leet me in’.

But yet to me she wol nat do that grace,
For which ful pale and welked is my face 7.

7 «The Pardoner’s Tale», Canterbury Tales, IV, 727-31, 737-38, in The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. J. H. FISHER, New York, 1977, p. 228. What is important here are the reasons Hecuba seeks death. She may be compared with the suffering Job, who repeatedly longs for death (esp. chh. 3, 6, 7). What is particularly common to both is their perplexity at witnessing the advancement of evil; in Job’s words, «Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?» (21:7).
Naturally, Hecuba’s prayers are never answered, and her pathetic pleas are so paradoxical, as she acknowledges in her last lines (1176-77), for all in the realm of Troy have met with death, collapse, fire: it is absurd that she alone, who had stood so near the throne, has been ludicrously spared and left alive.

Furthermore, her fate is cyclic. At play’s commencement, in her stunned confusion, she wonders in what order she should lament her woes: the burning of her country, her deceased husband, her dead son Hector, or the whole troop of her slaughtered children (28-33). At play’s end —although fresh new griefs and horrors totally unsuspected have additionally befallen her— she still dazedly wonders whom to lament or in what order (1167-68). She has wanted to die throughout, and yet she survives, and the circular motion of her misery and befuddlement only intensifies our response to the staggering old and new series of catastrophes she has had —and will continue to have— to endure.

In addition, the cruel irony of such circularity (repetitious eternal motion is normally associated in myth with the damned: *vid.* Sisyphus, Tantalus, Prometheus) is powerfully reinforced by the theme of prophecy. Significantly, Cassandra, the traditional Trojan prophetess, is missing from this play. One good reason for her absence is the fact that Hecuba replaces her in that role. Hecuba, after all, as she observes, had been the prophetess unheeded (*prior Hecuba...*, 36-37) when she had dreamed of giving birth to a firebrand, that proved to be Paris, the cause of Troy’s destruction. And again, at the play’s climax, Hecuba earns some of her most powerful moments when she once again turn prophetess, after almost unendurable spates of suffering, as she tells Ulysses:

\[
\text{...non pelago quies} \\
\text{transulla ueniet, saeuiet uentis mare,} \\
\text{et bella et ignes et mea et Priami mala}
\]

(994-96)

(«...no tranquil calm
shall come upon the deep, the sea
shall rage with the winds and so will
wars and fires and my ills and the ills
of Priam»).

And again:

\[
\text{precord} \\
\text{his digna sacris aequora; hoc classi accidat} \\
\text{toti Pelasgae, ratibus hoc mille accidat} \\
\text{meae precabor, cum uehar, quidquid rati.}
\]

(1005-1008)
(«I pray
to seas worthy of these rites; whatever I
shall call down on my own vessel when I set
sail, may it befall the whole Pelasgian fleet,
may it befall the thousand ships»).

In her forcefulness 8, such an Hecuba figure is clearly related to other
powerful and vengeance-seeking females in the Senecan theatre—a
Medea or a Phaedra. But, unlike them, she is powerless, a helpless figure
inspired by visions but, like Cassandra, misunderstood, impotent, and
unheeded.

She is similarly a powerful ego-figure, naming herself as the first pro-
phetess of Phrygian doom (36-37), and goes much further, assuming
responsibility as sole cause of Troy’s downfall: meus ignis iste est,
facibus ardetis meis (40, «mine is that fire, by my firebrands are you burn-
ing»). And she continues to be ego-assertive throughout, most notably
when she claims to be the only object left alive fearsome to the Greeks:
mea sors timetur, sola sum Danais metus...

(«My lot is dreaded, I alone am the object of
dread to the Greeks...»).

She is similarly boldly self-assertive when she pronounces vengeance
upon Ulysses:

interim hoc poenae loco est —
sortem occupavi, praemium eripui tibi

(997-98)

(«meanwhile this is a temporary sub-
stitute for vengeance — I have seized your
lot, I have snatched the prize from you»);

when she shouts at Pyrrhus, daring him to kill her (1000-1002); or, at the
last powerful moment upon the stage, when she wonders whom to mourn
for, and then addresses Death with quiet force:

[fleam] an omnia an me sola? mors uotum meum,

.................................

........................... me solam times
uitasque...

(1171, 1173-74)

«The Excerpta Thuanea and the Form of Seneca’s Troades 67-164», Hermes 98, 1970,
367, overstresses the fact that Hecuba is passive and «immobilized». She suffers much, but
also can break out of the passive mold most strikingly.
(«Shall I mourn all or myself alone?
Death, my prayer, ...........
me alone do you fear and shun...»).

There is assuredly potent irony here, that Troy’s greatest living sufferer is in some sense the instigator and the cause of all that suffering; and certainly there is an additional weight of irony owing to the fact that this very self-assertive woman is simultaneously helpless, enslaved, impotent, and self-effaced. Indeed, such contradictions and ironies provide the drama with much of its friction and effectiveness.

But there is more to the role of Hecuba in this drama, supplying some of the play’s most viable ironies and revolutions. For the drama is strong not because it features the slaughter of two innocent children who become brave at the moment of their destruction. More central to the unfolding drama is the growth and alterations in Hecuba’s character. True, ironically enough, she is largely a helpless figure, but all the more singular and virile because she shifts and varies as a human being, while all about her remain rather monolithically unchanged —cruel victors or prostrate victims.

As we have noted, Hecuba all along has sought death. She recognized as much when she urged the Chorus to celebrate the dead Priam as being *felix* (144). At one key point, Andromache provides an urgent outbreak, announcing that it is the *living* who should be mourned (a complete reversal, the dead being considered happy and quick; the living, no more than the living dead):

*Nos Hecuba, nos, nos, Hecuba, lugendae sumus...*  
(969)

(«We, Hecuba, we, we, Hecuba, should be mourned...»).

Hecuba concurs, and asserts that Polyxena, about to be sacrificed upon the tomb of Achilles, should «rejoice» at such a fate (967). By persisting in such assertions, and by her repeated quest for death, Hecuba remains constant throughout the drama.

But in other ways she alters dramatically —and importantly— contributing to the development of the play’s major meanings and themes. She has been buffeted by one loss after another, and, in a sense, the results of the drawing of lots (by which she is bestowed as slave upon Ulysses) appears to her the last straw. In anguish, at a crucial moment, she cries:

*nunc uicta, nunc captiua, nunc cunctis mihi
obsessa videor cladibus...*  
(988-989)

(«Now indeed do I seem vanquished, now a prisoner, now besieged by all disasters...»).
She recognizes fully at this point that such a «lot» is the blind senseless cruelty of a perverse god (*sinister deus*, 983). Indeed, she had just recovered from an apparent fainting spell, and the strains of suffering are presumed to be at the uppermost when she learns that one of her last surviving children, Polyxena, is to be butchered in a savage rite 9.

\[
\text{at misera luctu mater audito stupet;}
\]
\[
\text{labefacta mens succubuit. asurge, alleua}
\]
\[
\text{animum et cadentem, misera, firma spiritum.}
\]

(949-51)

(«but the wretched mother is stupefied upon hearing the sad news; her weakened mind has succumbed. Rise up, lighten your soul, wretched woman, and strengthen your failing spirit»).

Nevertheless, she recovers with a vengeance, only to comprehend clearly the full extent of the malevolence of the gods. At that moment of insight she obtains renewed strength, and it is immediately thereafter (991 ff.) that she commences to deliver a series of curses that prove to be prophetically true, foretelling the loss of so many of the thousand Argive ships at sea and Ulysses' long years of wandering; she even foresees that she will not die in Ulysses' domain. The paradox here is that, so soon as she recognizes the full extent of the cruelty of the gods and the fates, and the desperateness of her own «lot», at that very instant she is infused with new strength and god-like insight. What could be more perverse, than that the god-forsaken, coming to know that fact, becomes thereby the god-inspired? The deities are sinister indeed in such a drama.

Furthermore, her growth is not merely supernatural, her personality also alters, becomes more expansive, more inclusive, more humane. Slowly, through the ironic utilization of the imagery of drawing «lots» (*sors*), Seneca is able to signify the misery of a universal condition—the whole sad spectrum of the «human lot». One is reminded of the consul Aemilius Paulus in Livy who, contemplating the sudden fall of King Perseus and the abrupt loss of all that proud king's armies and possessions, is suddenly moved to lament the human situation: *ipse inlacrimasse dicitur sorti humanae* 10. In the play such a mournful recognition is tellingly brought home to Hecuba as the messenger arrives to detail the executions

9 It is more effective (dramatically and emotionally) if Polyxena is treated as Hecuba's last and only surviving child, whether it be true or not. Ovid did much the same: «nata, tuae... dolor ultime matris» (*Met.* 13.494).

10 Livy 45.4.2-3.
of Astyanax and Polyxena. In a moving moment of all-inclusiveness, Hecuba expands in empathy to mourn for the human race:

Quoscumque luctus fleueris, flebis meos;
sua quemque tantum, me omnium clades premit;
mihi cuncta pereunt: quisquis est Hecubae est miser.

((Whatever woes you lament, you will lament mine; only his own disaster weighs down each one, the disaster of all oppresses me; for me do all things perish: whoever is miserable is Hecubay's»).

This is not merely one further assertion of her ego, but a genuine expansion of her capacity for sympathy and her range of consciousness: like a finely-tuned instrument, she has become acutely sensible to all human suffering. After that high-point of realization and development, the suffering matron of all of Troy descends from the pinnacle to a position of greater quietus. In her last speech she is stunned and subdued, and in quiet stately speech she reverts to many of her earlier themes: she knows not whom to lament first, and resumes her supplication to Death. But she also enunciates some of the play's sharpest paradoxes at this point: the world is topsy-turvy, for even children are dying, but not herself; everything and everyone in Troy is being annihilated, yet she, she alone, elevated so near the throne, has escaped the general devastation. Moreover, her irony, her quiet control, and our knowledge of her past godlike prescient powers, her fury, and her eminence at Troy, render her still more dynamic and touching. In coming to synchronize herself with all of mankind's sufferings, she has come to symbolize all

11 This evolution of extreme humanitas is observed in passing by C. Marchesi, Seneca, Messina, 1920, p. 239; the Chorus and Hecuba reveal «voci di dolore e di pietà che appartengono a tutti gli uomini». Fantham (above, n. 2), p. 368, disagrees; she believes Hecuba selfish and withdrawn: «Obsessed with her own dolor, rather than [with] her children, the proper object of her love, Hecuba has passed beyond true grief into the self-centered condition that Seneca condemns in Marc. 5.5». Such a reading, of course, discerns no evolution whatsoever of Hecuba's sensibility and awareness.

12 She is quietly but powerfully ironic in speaking, at the close, to the entire Greek forces:

Ite, ite, Danai, petite iam tuti domos;
optata uelis maria diffusis sect
secura classis. concidit uirgo ac puer;
bellum peractum est (1165-68).

They may now rest at ease; the war is over once they have slaughtered two little children. Such irony is so extreme as to suggest sarcasm.
mankind itself. The final paradox is that she sees in overview the human condition at large—like Troy, man is doomed to fall and to be overthrown. All, all is toppling and descending, while only she, for the moment, quivering with sensitivity, insight, and pain, has been cruelly commanded to survive, to witness, and to stand.

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