

HORROR IN EURIPIDES' *HECUBA* AND *HERACLES*

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## ABSTRACT

DEREK SMITH KEYSER: Horror in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Heracles*  
(Under the direction of Peter Smith)

This dissertation investigates horrific material in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Heracles*. It applies analytic models found in modern horror criticism to discuss graphic violence and the contradiction of normative cultural conventions within these plays. It argues that in both plays Euripides uses horrific material to demonstrate the inadequacy of such conventions as protections against ruthless brutality. It concludes that by eliciting horror from his audiences and denying them the possibility of resolution following disaster Euripides invites them to question the stability of their cultural framework.

In my first chapter I discuss how we should define and identify horror in ancient tragedy. I begin my investigation with an analysis of fear in Aristotle's *Poetics*, but I turn to modern horror theory to find a more suitable approach for identifying tragic horror. I adopt the approach of Noel Carroll, who argues that horror is generated by severe and violent contradictions of normative cultural categories.

In my second chapter, I focus on horrific disruptions found in the *Hecuba*. I focus on three areas of the horrific in this play: the presence of ghosts, incidents of aberrant violence against φίλοι, and the manipulation of cultural categories in Hecuba's revenge. In my third chapter I analyze the way the horrific massacre in the *Heracles* subverts traditional assumptions concerning religion, family, and home.

For Cathleen, whose smile brightens the darkness

and

For Dr. Paws, who kept the perimeter secure

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been long recognized that Greek tragedy elicited the most profound emotions from its audience. Plato complains of its ability to bring even the most self-possessed to weep in sorrow and shudder in fear (*Rep.* 387a-387e and 605a – 607a, *Phdr.* 268c-d); Herodotus mentions that Phrynichus' *Sack of Miletus* brought the entire audience to tears, and the Athenians prohibited the material from appearing in future productions (6.21); in the *Life of Aeschylus* we read that the monstrous chorus of the *Eumenides* was so shocking that it caused children to faint and pregnant women to miscarry (*Life Of Aeschylus* 1.35-1.38). While the last story is likely apocryphal,<sup>1</sup> its essential point, that the opening of the *Eumenides* horrified its audience, does not seem controversial. Aristophanes makes a similar claim about Aeschylus' fondness for shocking material in *Frogs* 962, and modern critics have frequently described the play's opening as horrific.<sup>2</sup> Although Aeschylus is the tragedian most frequently associated with horror,<sup>3</sup> gruesome and shocking material can be found also in the works of Sophocles and Euripides: the oozing sores of Philoctetes and Medea's chariot bearing her own children's corpses are no less disturbing than the monstrous Furies.

Despite the pervasive presence of horrific material in tragedy there has not been an adequate treatment of horror and its function in the plays. Many scholars apply the terms

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lefkowitz (1981) vii-xi on the general unreliability of the *Lives*. Regarding this specific passage, however, she notes: "Detail makes the story sound plausible" (71).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Kitto (1961) 87-88, Taplin (1977) 371, Stanford (1983) 161-162, Belfiore (1992) 21-25. I offer a provisional discussion of the passage in my first chapter pages 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> In discussing the monstrous spectacles condemned in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Lucas (1968) ad 1453b9 notes: "It is not known to what [Aristotle] is referring unless it be Aeschylus." Cf. also De Romilly (1958) and Konstan (2006) 144-148.



horror and horrific to tragic passages without defining them or explaining how these scenes achieve this effect. Rosenmeyer, for example, sees “sheer horror” and tragedy as mutually exclusive categories but does not offer a clear explanation of this distinction.<sup>4</sup> Kitto describes the report of Creon’s and Glauce’s deaths in the *Medea* as “sheer Grand Guignol,” an example of horror not “enveloped in the greater emotion of pity.” He also claims that the audience experiences a “catharsis of horror” after realizing that these characters “are the victim of an almost external force.”<sup>5</sup> Kitto’s reading, based on ideas found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, is more developed than Rosenmeyer’s account, but it does not explain fully how Euripides achieves this horror nor why violence from an “external force” relieves the audience of the feeling.<sup>6</sup> This kind of analysis is common in modern scholarship: critics assume that descriptions of graphic violence and monstrous spectacles can safely be dubbed horrific without further qualification.

I contend that we should be more cautious in our assessments of tragic horror. Casual references to the horrific are not very useful to readers who wish to understand the emotional effect of ancient tragedy; often these references merely tell the reader what he or she already knew (i.e. that a scene is graphically violent) but fail to explain how the horrific fits into the play as a whole. Since tragedy appealed to its audience largely by eliciting particular emotional reactions from them,<sup>7</sup> we should examine specifically what prompted these emotions and how the generation of these emotions affected the audience’s assessment of the

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenmeyer (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Kitto (1961) 192-197.

<sup>6</sup> He initially cites Aristotle’s contention that a kinsman knowingly slaying another kinsman is the worst sort of violence, but his focus on the horrific death of Glauce, who shares no relation with her killer, does not fit with this premise.

<sup>7</sup> This is Aristotle’s contention (*Poet.* 1449b24-1449b28); cf. Heath (1987) 37-89.

scene and of the entire play. In this dissertation I investigate both of these issues through discussions of ancient and modern theories concerning emotional responses to fiction and through analyses of horrific content in two dramas. I focus on two Euripidean plays, the *Hecuba* and *Heracles*, for several reasons. First, they contain an abundance of material that can be described as horrific, according to definitions I shall provide. Second, they are notoriously difficult plays and I believe my analysis can contribute to critical discussions of their meaning. Finally, there has not been a comprehensive examination of horror in the works of Euripides, and I believe the analysis of these two plays can help us to understand other Euripidean tragedies.

In my first chapter I discuss how we should define and identify horror in ancient tragedy. I begin my investigation with an analysis of fear in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is commonly considered an authoritative text on the emotional effects of Greek tragedy. While Aristotle provides valuable insights, especially in his cognitive theory of emotions, his account of tragic fear is limited by his focus on form rather than content. I examine in detail one passage in the *Poetics* that seems promising for understanding tragic horror, namely Aristotle's condemnation of ὄψις and its tendency to produce τὸ τερατῶδες rather than τὸ φοβερόν (1453b8-1453b10). I show through an investigation of τέρας-words in the Aristotelian corpus that the philosopher is not, as many scholars claim, condemning monstrous spectacle (e.g. the Erinyes in *Eumenides*) but rather spectacles that deviate from an established plot arrangement.

Because the *Poetics* fails to define clearly what constitutes fearsome or horrific content in tragedy, I turn to modern horror theory to find a suitable approach for identifying tragic horror. I adopt the approach of Noel Carroll, who argues that audiences experience

horror when confronted with a monster that is not only frightening but also repulsive. He appeals to the anthropological research of Mary Douglas in defining this repulsion as a reaction to an impurity based on a contradiction of cultural categories. He concludes that when audience members witness a fictional character confronted by such a repellent threat, they share with these fictional victims an assessment of the threat as something repulsive and frightening, and consequently they relate to the victim through a sympathetic emotional reaction of horror. I then propose an application of Carroll's model to the horrific in tragedy, which I define as the severe and violent contradiction of normative cultural categories. I conclude with a discussion of the benefits of this approach for understanding the difficult and contradictory material found in the plays of Euripides. I argue that his tragedies, like the bleakest of modern horror fictions, presented the audience with anomalous disruptions of social order that can never be fully eliminated or resolved.

In my second chapter, I focus on horrific disruptions found in the *Hecuba*. Many critics have assessed the play on an ethical basis, particularly through their praise or condemnation of the eponymous protagonist and her gruesome revenge. I argue that such readings are inadequate since Euripides persistently inserts confusing and contradictory elements that resist simple moral evaluation. I focus on three areas of the horrific in this play: the presence of ghosts, incidents of aberrant violence against *φίλοι*, and the manipulation of cultural categories in Hecuba's revenge. In the first section of the chapter I analyze how Euripides contrasts the ghosts of Polydorus and Achilles to create a severe disjunction between appearance and reality: Polydorus' unkempt and disfigured image suggests threatening behavior, but he does not express violent desires, while Achilles' resplendent armor and distinguished tomb contrast with his dissatisfaction with his burial and consequent

bloodlust. This contradiction establishes a chaotic atmosphere in which violence can come from unlikely sources. In the second section I discuss how two killers in the play, Odysseus and Polymestor, appropriate the language of friendship (*φιλία*) to defend horrific acts of violence against innocents. The similarities between the two reveal how easily bonds of *φιλία* can be distorted so as to incorporate the sort of repulsive violence against which *φιλία* relationships are supposed to protect people. Then I examine Hecuba's subversion of familiar political and gender-based distinctions in avenging her son. She allows others to presume that she as a female slave is harmless, but her horrific revenge is associated with masculine aggression and regal authority. I conclude by examining the Final Girl motif in modern horror fiction and its relevance for our understanding of Hecuba's character. I argue that Euripides, like modern producers of horror, offers this horrific depiction of her revenge not for the sake of moral condemnation but in order to challenge his audience's preconceptions about their world. The tragedian reveals the instability of cultural distinctions and categories, and he shows how this instability results in human vulnerability.

In my third chapter I analyze the way the horrific massacre in the *Heracles* subverts traditional assumptions concerning religion, family, and home. Scholars have noted some of the play's disturbing contradictions (e.g. Iris and Lyssa, Heracles' dual parentage), but their readings are limited by their contention that Euripides resolves these contradictions through the appearance of Theseus and the departure to Athens in the finale. I argue that the drama resists such resolution; the disruptive elements found in the massacre are present throughout the play and the horror it generates is never purged. In the first section of the chapter I examine how Euripides distorts fundamental structures of Greek religion. The shocking appearance of Iris and Lyssa confirms the unreliability of human belief found in the first half

of the play. The goddesses introduce unsettling contradictions by challenging the Greek belief in divine reciprocity, disrupting the play's narrative movement, violating traditional dramatic conventions, and defying expectations based on visual appearance. I argue that these contradictions are never fully resolved: the rational approach of Theseus does not sufficiently account for the many complications following the massacre, such as the pollution of Heracles and his weapons. In the second section I explore the horrific disruption of the family. Before the massacre the tragedian depicts two competing models of fatherhood for Heracles: Amphytrion as vulnerable but attentive and Zeus as powerful but remote. The messenger's description of the massacre illustrates a horrific contradiction of these two models. While his family repeatedly appeals to their kinship with Heracles, he acts like a foreign intruder in his own home and slaughters his family as though they were enemies. The family is never restored, as Theseus' offer to bring Heracles to Athens permanently removes him from his home and from his father. In my final section I discuss the violent corruption of the home. Euripides establishes the house as a secure place of refuge during the first half of the play, but the massacre undercuts this assumption. The intrusion of Lyssa and Heracles' rampage demonstrate the building's permeability. The messenger's explicit descriptions of familiar architectural details corrupted by unsettling violence call further attention to the home as a locus of horror. I compare this corruption of a familiar safe space with a similar trope found in modern horror fiction. I conclude that the *Heracles*, like the *Hecuba*, ends with the irreparable disintegration of cultural distinctions and categories.

Ultimately this dissertation demonstrates that scenes of horror are important for our understanding of tragedy and its audience. Though Euripides' interest in defying tradition

and shocking his audience is well known,<sup>8</sup> my investigation of the contradictory elements in his depictions of gruesome violence reveals a sustained interest in exposing the instability of cultural categories and distinctions. The tragedian used horrific spectacles and descriptions to probe the fundamental assumptions that Athenians took for granted. He invited them to consider how the familiar institutions and values that failed to protect tragic characters onstage might also fail to protect the audience from the horrors of the everyday world. Though Euripides did not present Athenians with instruction on the proper way to address such disruptions, I contend that his use of the horrific nonetheless served a valuable function. By upsetting his audience's assumptions he encouraged them to think critically about the fragility of the social and cultural structures that defined their lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Michelini (1987) 70-93.

## I. DEFINING HORROR IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

An action represented in tragedy may be too bloody and atrocious. It may excite such movements of horror as will not soften into pleasure; and the greatest energy of expression, bestowed on descriptions of that nature, serves only to augment our uneasiness. Such is that action represented in “The Ambitious Stepmother,” here a venerable old man, raised to the height of fury and despair, rushes against a pillar, and striking his head upon it besmears it all over with mingled brains and gore. The English theatre abounds too much with such shocking images.

- Hume *Of Tragedy*

This critique of horror in 18<sup>th</sup> century English drama could easily be applied to tragic productions from Athens more than two millennia earlier.<sup>1</sup> We find in these plays graphic descriptions of blood and gore (*Medea*, *Agamemnon*), on-stage representations of corpses brutally murdered (*Bacchae*, *Heracles*), actors suffering gruesome torture and punishment (*Prometheus Bound*, *Trachiniae*), and many other unpleasant features that Hume would likely deem “shocking images.” The abundant supply of such material in ancient drama raises two significant questions: how did ancient audiences react to these explicit depictions of violence? And if they, like Hume, found these depictions shocking and horrifying, why did ancient tragedians include such material?

In this chapter I will discuss some preliminary considerations that will help answer these questions in later chapters. My primary aims in this chapter are to establish the presence of horrific material in Greek tragedy, to provide a satisfactory approach for identifying the horrific in tragedy, and to explain how an examination of the horrific might help modern readers to understand ancient dramas, particularly those of Euripides, more

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<sup>1</sup> Dadlez (2005) notes this similarity by comparing Hume’s approach to tragic spectacle to that of Aristotle.

fully. I have divided the chapter into four sections: in the first part I discuss briefly several scenes from ancient drama that are relevant to a discussion of tragic horrors; in the second I analyze ancient literary criticism, particularly Aristotle's *Poetics*, in seeking an explanation for tragic horror from a source familiar with ancient performances and audiences; after establishing the inadequacy of ancient treatments, I investigate modern approaches to horror in the third section; in the final section I explain how an application of modern approaches to horror can help modern readers understand the complex plays of Euripides. Like producers of modern horror, the tragedian presents his audience with chaotic environments in which disturbing, aberrant violence cannot be predicted or prevented. We should not condemn the ambiguous and contradictory nature of these scenes as evidence of poor artistry or mere rebelliousness.<sup>2</sup> We should instead appreciate Euripides' ability to use horrific descriptions and spectacles to challenge his audience and encourage them to ponder the fragility of familiar conventions and distinctions that they took for granted.

### **A) What Horror? Preliminary Examples in Ancient Tragedy**

Before discussing the horror to be found in the tragedies of Euripides, we first must identify horror and consider whether it is relevant to ancient drama. Contemporary scholars define horror as an emotional reaction comprised of fear and repulsion.<sup>3</sup> It is the feeling humans experience when confronted with a stimulus that conveys danger and generates disgust, such as a rotting corpse or a room full of roaches. The reaction is commonly associated with the horror genre, which is largely defined by its intended emotional effect.<sup>4</sup> Modern horror films generate this emotion by depicting violent actions or entities that are not

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<sup>2</sup> Both criticisms have been applied to Euripides frequently .Cf. my discussion on pages 51-55 below.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Colavito (2008) 13, Cavallaro (2002) 2-5, Carroll (1987) 52-53, Stanford (1983) 34.

<sup>4</sup> This is the view of Noel Carroll, whose work I shall discuss thoroughly in section C below.



only frightening but also gruesome and repulsive. The removal of either element from such a film would change its classification. Action films, such as *Die Hard* (1988) or *Batman* (1989), are full of tense and frightening situations, but the heroes and villains are not revolting, nor is the violence presented as something repellent. Similarly, audiences are not horrified by the graphic dismemberment found in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) because the comedy lacks the frightening component of horror. While horrific moments can be found outside of the horror genre,<sup>5</sup> this genre's focus on gruesome acts and characters within frightening contexts helps clarify the emotional effect it frequently generates.

But does this modern explanation of genre and emotion resonate with ancient Greek thought? There was no ancient literary genre comparable to modern horror and no single Greek word for "horror." While several terms designate fear (e.g. φόβος, δέος, τάρβος)<sup>6</sup> and disgust or repulsion (e.g. στύγος, μῖσος),<sup>7</sup> no single term combines both elements. The term φρίκη and related words are the closest in meaning to the Latin word *horror*, which denotes a physical response involving shuddering or trembling often associated with fear. The use of φρίκη-terms also frequently denotes intense fear in Greek literature: Aristotle argues that Greek tragedy causes even those who read the play without witnessing its performance to shudder with fear (φρίττειν, 1453b5). It should be noted, however, that the fear associated with φρίκη-terms does not necessarily include repulsion: Creon in *Antigone* shudders (φρίσσω, 997) upon hearing Teiresias' vague pronouncement of danger. Similarly, other promising

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<sup>5</sup> There can be horrific moments within other genres. In the action film *Mad Max* (1979) for example, the protagonist punishes one of the villains by forcing him to sever his own foot; the same scenario can be found in the horror film *Saw* (2004). Similarly, I contend that Euripidean tragedies, while not examples of horror fiction *per se*, contain horrific scenes.

<sup>6</sup> De Romilly (1958) 14 n. 1 contains a fuller list of these terms. See Stanford (1983) 27-28 for further discussion of their specific implications.

<sup>7</sup> Stanford (1983) 34.

terms reveal a broad semantic range. Belfiore has noted the frequent appearances of *ἐκπληξίς* and related terms to describe the shocked and frightened reactions caused by the Gorgons,<sup>8</sup> whose dangerous powers and repulsive snake-haired appearance one can reasonably describe as horrific. Stanford adds that horror, unlike terror (*φόβος*), “tends to paralyse and transfix” and thus the Gorgon was “the chief emblem of paralysing horror in ancient Greece.”<sup>9</sup> Like *φρίκη*-terms, however, *ἐκπληξίς*-words can denote emotions not related to fear or disgust: for example, Plato and Euripides use *ἐκπλήσσω* to describe those afflicted with intense feelings of lust and love (*Symp.* 192b7, *Hipp.* 38).

The lack of a precise Greek analogue for the modern term “horror” does not, however, prove the absence of an analogous emotional response in the ancient world. Greek emotional vocabulary in general is often incongruous with modern classification. Some emotion-related terms, such as *θυμός* or *ἔλεος* cannot be precisely and conveniently expressed by one word in English: while modern translations typically render them “anger” and “pity,” respectively, the exact meanings are more complicated.<sup>10</sup> The discrepancies in terminology should not prompt us to conclude that Greeks did not experience “anger” as we know it (or that we do not experience *θυμός*) – there are many examples of ancient emotional descriptions that fit the modern criteria for anger.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, there is literary evidence that suggests Greeks felt the same combination of emotions, fear and repulsion, that can be found in

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<sup>8</sup> Belfiore (1992) 21.

<sup>9</sup> Stanford (1983) 34.

<sup>10</sup> Stanford (1983) 21-48, Konstan (2006) 3-40.

<sup>11</sup> Konstan differentiates ancient Greek emotions from modern ones by noting that Greeks “understood emotions as responses not to events but to actions, or situations resulting from actions, that entail consequences for one’s own or others’ relative social standing” (40). This distinction is useful in analyzing Greek descriptions of emotions, but should not influence our understanding of the reactions themselves. Konstan notes, for example, that the Greeks might not have designated as an emotion (*πάθος*) sadness resulting from a natural event (e.g. the death of a loved one from illness), but that classification does not prove that Greeks did not feel grief in such situations.

modern definitions of horror. We should pay careful attention to the language and context of the passages in which these emotions seem to appear and use these passages to consider ancient attitudes towards this material. I will consider briefly one such instance in tragedy and then discuss some of the larger concerns that even a superficial reading presents.

The *Eumenides* of Aeschylus provides an illustrative example of horror in Greek tragedy. At the beginning of the play, the Pythia is terrified and repulsed after witnessing the polluted Orestes and monstrous Erinyes. Her account of the scene conveys horror through incorporation of terms relating to fear and disgust (34-59). She clearly indicates her fear at the outset of her speech, labeling the material that follows as both terrible to report and terrible to behold (ἡ δεινὰ λέξαι, δεινὰ δ' ὀφθαλμοῖς δρακεῖν). Soon after she notes that she has become so frightened that she has reverted to a childlike state (δείσασα γὰρ γράψς οὐδέν, ἀντίπαις μὲν οὖν). The Pythia further highlights the repulsive qualities of these figures: she views Orestes as someone defiled and loathed by the gods (θεομυσῆ). She finds the Erinyes even more repellent, calling them disgusting (βδελύκτροποι) and noting the foul material (δυσφιλή λίβα) issuing from their eyes. The Pythia's explicit references to the frightening and repulsive aspects of these figures reveal her horrified reaction and perhaps serve as helpful prompts for the audience's response to the Erinyes when they appear onstage.<sup>12</sup>

The terms of fear and disgust are helpful for identifying this passage as horrific, but we must consider other elements and contextual cues such as the actor's gestures and the tone of these lines. The Pythia's speech contains many such implicit signs of fear and

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<sup>12</sup> The relationship between characters' emotions and those of the audience is complex. It is not necessarily the case, for example, that the original audience shared Creon's anger in *Antigone* or the protagonist's joy after mutilating her enemy in *Hecuba*. I agree with Mastronarde (2010) 96-97 that characters without a personal stake in the play's immediate drama, such as the Pythia here or (often) members of the chorus, can provide "an internal analogue" for the theatrical audience and thus prompt the appropriate emotional response. Easterling (1990) notes that when the characters are more fully engaged in the dramatic conflict, the audience members' reactions depend on assessments of these characters' actions and beliefs.

revulsion. Her frantic repetitions and retractions (δεινὰ ... δεινὰ; γυναικῶν ... οὔτοι γυναῖκας), her intense physical reaction which prevents her from walking upright, her vivid descriptions of dripping blood and oppressive snoring, her allusion to the notorious Gorgons, and her judgment concerning the impropriety of the monsters' presence inside the temple (κόσμος οὔτε ... δίκαιος οὔτ') all suggest extreme emotional disturbance involving the same combination of fear and disgust that are explicitly present in emotional vocabulary discussed above.

This example conveniently includes both implicit and explicit cues for interpreting the scene as something horrific, but there are many tragic passages that present similar material without the same detailed emotional vocabulary; though the eponymous hero of *Philoctetes* is explicitly called frightening (δεινός, 147), his repulsive aspects are first conveyed through vivid descriptions of his grotesque affliction (e.g. 7-11, 37-38). Therefore, if we are to locate and analyze horrific passages in Greek tragedy generally, we must be prepared not only to isolate specific terminology related to fear and disgust but also to consider other linguistic and performative elements that elicit the same emotional reaction. By looking closely at these elements we can discover what ancient audiences found horrific and how ancient tragedians like Euripides incorporated horrific material into their plays.

In the following sections I will provide a more detailed discussion of horror in ancient tragedy. I shall begin by looking at the role of fear and horror in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Then I will discuss the contribution of modern horror scholarship to our understanding of horror in tragedy. Finally, I will present a new approach to horror that incorporates elements of both ancient and modern theories and that shall serve as a guide for analyzing the horror found in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Heracles*.

## B) Aristotle and Horror

Aristotle is the first extant thinker to attempt a thorough schematic account of how a poet or speaker generates specific emotional responses from an audience.<sup>13</sup> Of particular concern for this discussion is his analysis of tragedy found in the *Poetics*, in which the philosopher identifies the essential parts of a tragic drama and notes the characteristic emotional reactions it elicits from an audience, namely pity and fear. Unfortunately, as I shall discuss below, his remarks on fear in the *Poetics* are often unclear; moreover, he does not treat disgust as a significant emotion related to tragedy. In order to alleviate the first problem, I shall first discuss briefly the definition of fear in the *Rhetoric* before analyzing its role in the *Poetics*. I will then consider his remarks on spectacle and the monstrous, which are relevant for our understanding of tragic horror. I conclude, however, that the Aristotelian emphasis on form, particularly plot arrangement, does not adequately account for the horrific content found in tragedy.

### B.1) Rhetoric

Aristotle presents detailed accounts of several emotions, including fear, in the *Rhetoric*. The philosopher offers a cognitive account of the emotions: our emotions are essentially judgments concerning particular stimuli that cause concomitant physical responses.<sup>14</sup> He thus categorizes emotions based on these cognitive and physical aspects: the cognitive dimension entails a judgment of the potential benefits or harms of the stimulus, while the physical dimension entails pleasure or pain as a result of that judgment. While Aristotle does not discuss repulsion in detail, he defines fear as a pain felt at the thought of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Halliwell (1986) 170 n. 3 on more general accounts concerning poetry and emotional response in Greek literature before the *Poetics*. Evidently rhetorical texts before the *Rhetoric* included detailed advice on arousing the emotions of the audience (*Rhet.* 1354a14-1354a18), but these are no longer extant.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Aristotle's theory of the emotions see Fortenbaugh (2002) 9-22, Nussbaum (1996), Leighton (1996), and Konstan (2006).

some destructive or painful event in the future (ἔστω δὴ ὁ φόβος λύπη τις ἢ ταραχή ἐκ φαντασίας μέλλοντος κακοῦ φθαρτικοῦ ἢ λυπηροῦ, 1382a21-1382a22). He further specifies the objects of our fear as things of sufficient magnitude and nearness – evils that are essentially harmless or very remote are unlikely to trigger our fears (1382a22-1382a27). Furthermore, if these threats are very near and very large, the subjects will be totally overcome by intense fear (ἐκπεπληγμένοι) and unable to feel any other emotions, such as pity (1385b29-33).<sup>15</sup> If an orator wants to put his audience into such a state of fear, Aristotle recommends that he “make them feel that they really are in danger of something, pointing out that it has happened to others who were stronger than they are, and is happening, or has happened, to people like themselves, at the hands of unexpected people, in an unexpected form, and at an unexpected time” (1383a9-1383a 12).

The emphasis on unpredictability suggests that there are two sides to fear-mongering. The speaker must present the threat as something identifiable and imminent; vaguely foreboding statements do not satisfy the condition of nearness needed to arouse fear. By using specific examples of victims who are similar to, or even stronger than, the audience, the orator can amplify the immediacy and magnitude of the danger and enhance the listeners’ terror. But, conversely, the threat must also have some mysterious or unpredictable qualities. Aristotle stresses the presence of the unexpected in these examples. Though we fear particular objects (e.g. violent criminals and disease), these prospects are all the more frightening when they occur without forewarning. If an orator wants to frighten his audience as much as possible, he should make the threat identifiable and specific, but also something that the subject cannot reliably predict and thus avoid.

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<sup>15</sup> The *Rhetoric* presents pity and fear as related emotions: we feel fear for anticipated harm for ourselves or those close to us, pity for similar harm for others who are like us and who do not deserve it (1382b25-1382b26).

## B.2) *Pity and Fear in the Poetics*

Although in the *Poetics* Aristotle identifies fear as one of the predominant emotions elicited by tragedy, he does not define it as clearly as he does in the *Rhetoric*. He makes no explicit reference to the latter text in the *Poetics*, but his treatment of fear in the two works seems consistent, for the most part.<sup>16</sup> The importance of pity and fear for Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy's function is shown by their inclusion in his definition of tragedy (1449b24-1449b28), in which he argues that through pity and fear tragedy effects a cleansing of these emotions (*δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν*). This notoriously ambiguous statement has been discussed at length by scholars interested in determining the meaning of tragic *κάθαρσις*,<sup>17</sup> but the nature of tragic pity and fear in the *Poetics* is hardly much clearer. Aristotle does distinguish the two, noting that the audience's pity depends on the excessive and unfair nature of the tragic victim's suffering (*ἐλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον*) but that fear depends on the similarity between the victim and the audience (*φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον*, 1453a5-1453a6). Pity thus depends on an ethical judgment about the victim, fear on the audience's ability to identify with him or her. But while this distinction is important and will serve as a focal part of my discussion below, it is important to note that the pair is, for the most part, inseparable in the *Poetics*.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he does not clearly delineate the types of objects that will elicit an audience's fear or pity by, for example,

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<sup>16</sup> In both works the philosopher claims that one feels fear when confronted with a painful event suffered by another that she herself might also suffer. I will note some important distinctions below. Cf. Halliwell (1986) 168-201 for a defense of reading the treatment of fear in the two works as consistent.

<sup>17</sup> For thorough discussions of the various theories on the nature of tragic *κάθαρσις*, see Lear (1992), Halliwell (1986) 350-356, Nussbaum (1986) 388-391, and Belfiore (1992) 257-290.

<sup>18</sup> Bywater (1909) *ad* 1452b32 argues that Aristotle use of these terms in disjunctive statements (e.g. *ἡ γὰρ τοιαύτη ἀναγνώρισις καὶ περιπέτεια ἢ ἐλεον ἔξει ἢ φόβον*, 1452a38) shows that he consistently treats them as distinct elements. These disjunctions, however, show no true distinctions beyond stylistic variation, as has been shown by Lucas (1968) *ad* 1452a38, Halliwell (1988) 175-179, and Belfiore (1992) 231-232. There is an important exception in the discussion of fear in 1453b8-1453b11, which I shall discuss on pages 23-33 below.

isolating a certain scene as especially fearsome or pitiable.<sup>19</sup> In the *Poetics* Aristotle is more interested in identifying the formal elements of tragedy that will produce both pity and fear in the audience than in distinguishing the two emotions.

The most important element of tragedy according to Aristotle is the plot, namely the way the events of the tragedy are arranged (ἔστιν δὲ τῆς μὲν πράξεως ὁ μῦθος ἢ μίμησις, λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων, 1450a3-1450a5). Aristotle champions the story and its arrangement because he sees tragedy as an imitation of events and life, not of men (1450a15-1450a23). Accordingly, pity and fear are generated by the arrangement of events in the tragic plot. The events are most likely to induce fear if they are unexpected and yet logically consistent (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα, 1452a4). Such an arrangement will produce wonder (τὸ θαυμαστόν), which Aristotle treats as a critical component of both pity and fear (1452a1-1452a11).<sup>20</sup> There are many different types of arrangement, but Aristotle claims the best plot contains a disastrous misfortune (πάθος), a reversal of fortune (περιπέτεια), and a recognition of an unknown person or situation (ἀναγνώρισις, 1452a11-1452b34).<sup>21</sup> Aristotle further qualifies the ideal tragedy – and hence the one most likely to produce pity and fear – by identifying the best types of these three components: the best πάθος should occur between friends and family (1453b14-1453b22);<sup>22</sup> the best περιπέτεια should involve a person who is neither too virtuous nor too wicked, and he should suffer a change from good to bad fortune because of a terrible mistake (1453a7-1453a10); the best ἀναγνώρισις should occur

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<sup>19</sup> He does discuss *types* of scenes that generate pity or fear, but his analysis of these scenes, as I shall argue below, lacks depth: he is far more interested in dissecting the ways a tragedian can arrange these events (1453b14-1454a15).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. pages 25-28 below for a more thorough discussion of tragic wonder.

<sup>21</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad* 1452a29-1452b8 observes that recognition can be of either people or circumstances, but Aristotle's concentration on people in his examples has caused some confusion.

<sup>22</sup> Belfiore (1992) 137-138.



simultaneously with the *περιπέτεια* (1452a32-1452b8). In his qualifications of these three components, Aristotle defends his recommendations in each case by noting that other possibilities (e.g. *πάθος* between enemies, *περιπέτεια* of a wicked man from good fortune to bad) would not generate pity or fear. There is then a vital connection between the form of the play and the emotional reactions it elicits from its audience.<sup>23</sup>

Aristotle, interestingly, does not seem particularly interested in the nature of a play's content (i.e. the types of frightening and pitiable events). Readers of the *Rhetoric* might expect the *Poetics* to explain how tragic events serve as the objects that, by virtue of their nearness or magnitude, elicit the audience's emotion, but Aristotle devotes considerably more attention to the arrangement of these events. Although he identifies *πάθος* as a critical part of the plot, his treatment of it is not particularly thorough. For example, he begins his discussion of *πάθος* by claiming that he will take up "what sort of events are frightening or what sort are pitiable" (*ποῖα οὖν δεινὰ ἢ ποῖα οἰκτρά*, 1453b14). But he never explicitly defines the kind of act that generates these emotions. His treatment instead defines the relationship between agent and victim (i.e. enmity, indifference, friendship) and the consciousness of the agent when committing the act. Aristotle's most explicit comment concerning the type of act that is frightening or pitiable can be found in his explanation of character relationships: he remarks that the poet should seek acts where family members commit murder (*ἀποκτείνῃ*) or a similar act of violence (*τι ἄλλο τοιοῦτον ὁρᾷ*) against each other (1453b20-1453b22). His limited discussion of *πάθος* seems to render the nature of the violent act as a negligible component of the audience's emotional reaction, and this restricted definition leads to some problematic conclusions. For example, it seems unlikely that audiences should be equally frightened by hearing about Oedipus' unwitting murder of his father Laius in *Oedipus*

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Halliwell (1986) 168-172.

*Tyrannus* and Agave's deranged dismemberment of her son Pentheus in *Bacchae*. It also seems similarly improbable that they would be unaffected by the agonizing death of the princess in *Medea* merely because she was the enemy of the protagonist. It is perhaps unfair to assume that the *Poetics* forces us into such readings. Aristotle does admit, albeit obscurely, that acts of violence committed between enemies might arouse fear or pity through the act itself (κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ πάθος, 1453b18). But he does not elaborate here, or anywhere else, what sort of action "in and of itself" would generate such emotions. It is clear that Aristotle finds the conditions surrounding the frightening events, including plot arrangement and character status, to be more significant sources of fear than the nature of the acts themselves.

Though Aristotle considers the plot arrangement the most important tragic element in arousing the audience's pity and fear, I must note several qualifications to this position. First, despite its subordination to plot, character (ἥθος) plays an indispensable role in the audience's emotional reaction. Aristotle's definitions of pity and fear in the *Poetics*, as mentioned above, depend on ethical judgment (ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον) and a sense of affinity (φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, 1453a5-1453a6), respectively. Even this distinction is problematic: while the feeling of affinity is essential for tragic fear in the *Poetics*, it is associated with pity in the *Rhetoric* (1385b16-1385b19). Conversely, fear in the *Rhetoric* is usually felt for oneself or those close to oneself, as we fear for ourselves what we pity in others (φοβερὰ ἐστὶν ὅσα ἐφ' ἐτέρων γιγνόμενα ἢ μέλλοντα ἐλπεῖν ἐστὶν, 1382b25-b26). How, then, should we interpret the affinity-based fear in the *Poetics*? Halliwell argues that in the *Poetics* pity and fear share an "interlocking nature" depending on sympathetic imagination: the audience members feel pity at misfortunes that they can imagine happening to themselves (and thus they also become frightened). Conversely their fear at these imagined sufferings can create a sympathetic bond

with characters undergoing these misfortunes.<sup>24</sup> The consistent pairing of pity and fear in the *Poetics* suggests that Halliwell's interpretation is sound. Aristotle views fear and pity as codependent emotional elements, which both rely on the audience's affinity with the characters.

The nature of this affinity, however, is not immediately clear. In what way is the spectator "similar" (ὅμοιος) to the character onstage? Aristotle's conception of identification seems to be based essentially on ethical judgments, namely the way the audience assesses a character's virtue as it relates to his or her fortune. Thus we should apply the consideration of merit (ἀνάξιος) to fear as well as to pity, just as I noted above that affinity belongs to pity as well as fear. Spectators are unlikely to identify with wicked characters and will feel no fear from their downfall or success (1452b36-1453a7). Conversely, the audience cannot identify with characters who are too virtuous (ἐπικεικός), and they find the suffering of such upstanding men to be disgusting (μιαρόν) rather than fearsome (1452b34-1452b36).<sup>25</sup> Aristotle concludes that the audience is most sympathetic with those who are not completely virtuous or wicked and who commit some mistake (ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν ... ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά, 1453a8-1453a10).<sup>26</sup>

There is no evidence in the *Poetics* that the audience is meant to identify with the characters on any other level besides ethical considerations – modern conceptions of

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<sup>24</sup> Halliwell (1986) 176-177.

<sup>25</sup> The usage of ἐπικεικός here is problematic. As Lucas (1968) *ad* 52b34-36 notes, the term frequently denotes wealth and social prominence (like χρηστός or σπουδαῖος) and does not normally carry ethical implications. Aristotle further confuses the matter by advocating later that poets represent their characters as ἐπικεικός (1454b13). In this instance he seems to apply the normal use of the word. Cf. Belfiore (1992) 103-107. The terminological confusion should not be especially troubling for my purposes, as in both passages Aristotle recommends that the poet show his characters in the best light while at the same time revealing their flaws.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Stinton (1975) and Halliwell (1986) 215-230 for detailed discussions of the complex ethical implications of ἁμαρτία in the *Poetics*.

personality or individuality are not applicable here, since Aristotle's definition of *ἥθος* depends on *προαίρεσις* (1450b8-10), a term that in the Aristotelian corpus denotes deliberate moral choice.<sup>27</sup> Even when Aristotle discusses considerations of character unrelated to ethical considerations, these are subordinated to moral concerns and are not treated with any depth. For example, he mentions likeness (*ὅμοιος*), the very term that was critical for eliciting fear in 1453a5-6, as the third most important feature of character besides goodness (*χρηστός*) and appropriateness (*ἁρμοδίῳ*, 1454a16-1454a28). His discussion of likeness here is not enlightening; though Lucas claims that it means “the characters should be like human beings,”<sup>28</sup> Aristotle's only observation is that likeness is “different from” (*τοῦτο γὰρ ἕτερον τοῦ...*) goodness and appropriateness. As Jones notes, Aristotle's terseness here is an indication that the reader should refer to the earlier discussion on character types that elicit pity and fear (1452b36-1453a10), in which likeness relates to an imperfect but virtuous moral state to which the audience can relate.<sup>29</sup> The audience becomes afraid when someone like them, someone whose ethical views match their own, but who is still liable to make some mistake, meets with terrible misfortune.

The ethical dimension here separates tragic fear from “real” fear (i.e., fear of real circumstances) as it is presented in the *Rhetoric*, in which the orator frightens the audience by making an *a fortiori* argument concerning a misfortune that has struck victims stronger or more resourceful than the audience (1383a9-1383a12). It is clear that the orator intends to arouse in the audience fear for themselves and those close to them: by highlighting the victims' strength the speaker has found an avenue to target the audience's vulnerability. It is

<sup>27</sup> Halliwell (1986) 150-153, Jones (1962) 29-46. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1111b4-1113a14 for *προαίρεσις* as a deliberate, moral choice.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad* 1454a24.

<sup>29</sup> Jones (1962) 38-39.

not quite as clear whether Aristotle views tragic fear as the audience members' fear for themselves (like the fear of a rhetorical audience) or fear for the characters in the play, whom they also pity. This question has generated much debate. Halliwell interprets Aristotle's conception of tragic fear as largely (though not entirely) altruistic; if we identify *too* closely with characters, then excessive fear will predominate and we will be unable to feel pity for them, as mentioned in *Rhetoric* 1385b29-33.<sup>30</sup> Bywater goes even further, claiming that it is a "disinterested fear for another" without the personal dimensions found in the *Rhetoric*.<sup>31</sup> Lear, however, questions this altruistic interpretation and rejects the possibility that the audience need only "identify imaginatively" with the characters in the play. He notes Aristotle's insistence that the audience can only fear things that may happen to them (*Rhet.* 1382b31) and argues that tragic fear then must be grounded on the audience's recognition that they, like the play's characters, may possibly suffer terrible fates.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Belfiore suggests that translations of φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον as "fear (is felt) *for* someone similar" are misguided; she interprets περὶ as "concerning, in the case of," in which case audience members realize their vulnerability and thus fear for themselves.<sup>33</sup> I would contend, however, that tragic fear involves both fearing for oneself and for the characters. Aristotle's emphasis on similarity in the *Poetics* recalls the self-oriented fear of the *Rhetoric*, but, as Halliwell has noted, the close connection Aristotle maintains between tragic pity and tragic fear suggests aesthetic distance between characters and audience. At any rate the philosopher's emphasis

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<sup>30</sup> Halliwell (1986) 176-179.

<sup>31</sup> Bywater (1909) 211.

<sup>32</sup> Lear (1992) 329-335.

<sup>33</sup> Belfiore (1992) 230-231.

on moral evaluation suggests that tragic characters needed to earn audience sympathy before they could elicit fear.

### B.3) *Spectacle and The Monstrous*

Although the *Poetics* treats fear as the natural consequence of a well-constructed plot involving morally sound characters, Aristotle admits that plot is not the *only* tragic element that can generate pity and fear so much as it is the *best* and *most tragic*. He notes that spectacle, ὄψις, can elicit these emotions, but that this means of achieving an emotional reaction is inferior to the proper arrangement of the plot (1453b1-1453b3). Aristotle provides several reasons for his disdain of spectacle: it is less skillful (ἀτεχνότερον), requires expensive production (χορηγίας δεόμενον), produces merely “the portentous” (τὸ τερατῶδες μόνον) rather than the truly fearsome (τὸ φοβερόν),<sup>34</sup> and does not belong to the specifically tragic pleasure (οὐ γὰρ πᾶσαν δεῖ ζητεῖν ἡδονὴν ἀπὸ τραγωδίας ἀλλὰ τὴν οἰκείαν, 1453b3-1453b11). The majority of these criticisms seem to be based on the poet’s lack of involvement in creating spectacle. The word ἀτεχνότερος denotes not simply poor craftsmanship but a distinction between the craft of the poet and those of the stage and costume designers. Aristotle makes this point more clearly in an earlier passage where he claims that the construction of spectacles belongs more to the art of the costume designer than to the art of the poet (ἔτι δὲ κυριώτερα περὶ τὴν ἀπεργασίαν τῶν ὄψεων ἢ τοῦ σκευοποιῶν τέχνη τῆς τῶν ποιητῶν ἐστίν, 1450b19-1450b20). Similarly, the poet has no authority over the expense of spectacle since funding depends on the contribution of the χορηγός, who paid for the training, costuming, and

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<sup>34</sup> “The portentous” is Lucas’ (1968) *ad* 1453b9 translation of τὸ τερατῶδες. In this section I will discuss the meaning of this obscure phrase and its significance for our understanding of horror in the *Poetics*.

living expenses of the tragic chorus.<sup>35</sup> The implication here, and throughout the *Poetics*, is that the art of tragedy – or rather the ideal tragedy – belongs singularly to the poet and not to the other members who contribute to tragic productions.

The distinction between τὸ τερατῶδες and τὸ φοβερόν is a more intriguing feature of Aristotle’s dismissal of ὄψις, since it relies not only on a material difference (i.e., who is responsible for particular elements of tragic performance) but also on a difference of emotional categories. As I have discussed above, Aristotle’s definition of fear in the *Poetics* is not particularly thorough, but his treatment of “the portentous” is maddeningly obscure. He does not even offer a superficial definition of τὸ τερατῶδες in the *Poetics*, and this is the only instance of the word in the book.<sup>36</sup> In Greek literature, the word τέρας and related terms can denote omens, wonders, and monsters. This last denotation is particularly interesting within the context of this passage: is Aristotle condemning a particular type of content (i.e. monsters and/or monstrous situations) that causes something terrifying but not truly fearsome (i.e., not producing the fear proper to tragedy)? Does τὸ τερατῶδες relate to the emotion of horror (i.e. feelings of fear and repulsion)? To answer these questions I shall examine the precise meaning of this term in the *Poetics* and the Aristotelian corpus.

It is not clear whether Aristotle’s condemnation of ὄψις is based on its tendency to show what is generally wondrous and fantastic (e.g. gods flying above the stage, elaborate props and costuming) or specifically the morbid and gruesome (e.g. monstrous creatures like the Erinyes). Commentators have adopted both interpretations: Lucas translates τὸ τερατῶδες

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<sup>35</sup> This contribution was often quite substantial. One tragic χορηγός at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century spent 3,000 drachmas at the City Dionysia (Lys. 21.1); another spent 5,000 (twice!) at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Lys. 19.29, 42).

<sup>36</sup> Schrader emends the corrupt section at 1456a2 to include τὸ τερατῶδες as one of the four parts of tragedy. Cf. Else (1957) 525 and Taplin (1977) 45 n.3 for arguments against this emendation.

as “the portentous,” Halliwell calls it “the sensational”;<sup>37</sup> Else associates it with “mere horror,” Belfiore labels it “the monstrous” and defines it as “a kind of horror very different from the true tragic quality, ‘the fearful,’ that accompanies the pitiable.”<sup>38</sup> I will consider both options before addressing the relationship between τὸ τερατώδες and τὸ φοβερόν and discussing the possibility of horror in the *Poetics*.

The adjective τερατώδης is more often associated with the wondrous and sensational than with the horrific: Plato, Isocrates, and the Hippocratic corpus all use the term to indicate something marvelous or extraordinary, but not horrific.<sup>39</sup> But if Aristotle is condemning ὄψις because it creates wonder and amazement, then this criticism is inconsistent with his numerous endorsements of the wondrous and astounding in tragedy. He calls the wondrous (τὸ θαυμαστόν) an essential part of tragedy (δεῖ μὲν οὖν ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις ποιεῖν τὸ θαυμαστόν, 1460a11-1460a12), and he treats it as a product of a well-constructed plot. Aristotle’s conception of tragic wonder depends on the unexpectedness (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν) of fearsome and pitiable events and on the strength of their causal connection with the plot (δι’ ἄλληλα, 1452a4). The generation of tragic wonder is similar to the orator’s technique for eliciting fear (*Rhetoric* 1383a9-1383a 12), which depends on his ability to persuade his audience not only that a frightening event has happened to others but also that it happened unexpectedly. Though the spectators may not have been surprised by the events themselves, as tragic plots were usually based on familiar myths, they nonetheless feared for the characters and for

<sup>37</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad* 1453b9, Halliwell (1986) 341.

<sup>38</sup> Else (1957) 410, Belfiore (1992) 232.

<sup>39</sup> ...τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα οὐκ ἔχω ὑμῖν πῶς ἀμφισβητοῖν, οὕτως εἰς σοφίαν τερατώδεσιν ἀνθρώποις, ὅπως ἐγὼ οὐ πάντα ἐπίσταμαι ... (Pl. *Euthyd.* 296e); ... εἰς ὁμόνοιαν δὲ καταστήσας τὰ μὲν περιττὰ τῶν ἔργων καὶ τερατώδη καὶ μηδὲν ὠφελοῦντα τοὺς ἄλλους ὑπερεῖδεν... (Is. *Pan.* 77); Εἰ δὲ διὰ τὸ θαυμάσιον θεῖον νομιεῖται, πολλὰ τὰ ἱερὰ νοσήματα ἔσται καὶ οὐχὶ ἐν, ὡς ἐγὼ ἀποδείξω ἕτερα οὐδὲν ἥσσον ἔοντα θαυμάσια οὐδὲ τερατώδεα ἃ οὐδεὶς νομίζει ἱερὰ εἶναι (Hipp. *On the Sacred Disease* 1.10).



themselves, lest they too might suffer such unexpected evils.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle endorses tragic wonder as something compatible with and dependent on these sympathetic fears of the audience.

It is possible, however, that τὸ τερατῶδες may designate a specific *type* of wonder that is inappropriate for tragedy.<sup>41</sup> It might refer to lurid thrill at particularly gruesome sights such as the monsters that τέρας-words can denote. Several scholars have interpreted τὸ τερατῶδες in this way and have suggested that Aristotle is here critiquing the macabre elements found in the works of Aeschylus, particularly the *Eumenides*. Lucas, for example, notes that “[i]t is not known to what [Aristotle] is referring unless it be Aeschylus.”<sup>42</sup> While it is unclear whether Aristotle has Aeschylus in mind when condemning spectacle,<sup>43</sup> Aeschylus certainly had earned in antiquity the reputation for presenting shocking material. For example, it is said that the sight of the Erinyes so completely terrified (ἐκπλήξαι) the audience of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* that children fainted and pregnant women had miscarriages (*Life Of Aeschylus* 1.35-1.38). A few lines earlier, the author notes that Aeschylus employed both spectacle and plots to elicit terrified shock (ἐκπλήξιν τερατώδη, 1.29-1.30) from his audience. While this later account of Aeschylus’ reception is likely exaggerated, it provides an example of τὸ τερατῶδες as a term related to monstrous spectacle

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<sup>40</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad* 52b7. Belfiore (1992) 132-134 notes that “contrary to expectation” in the *Poetics*, as in the *Rhetoric*, refers to the victims’ surprise, not the audience’s. She thus finds little evidence for sympathetic surprise, but she notes that unexpected suffering causes the audience to fear for themselves by reminding them that “human suffering is in fact likely when unexpected” (134). But, as I argued above, it is misguided to remove the sympathetic aspect from tragic fear; it is reasonable then that Aristotle allows for the audience to share in some way in the surprise of tragic characters.

<sup>41</sup> In comparing epic and tragic wonder, Halliwell (1986) 75 n. 41 suggests that there may be different “degrees of wonder” appropriate for particular genres.

<sup>42</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad* 1453b9.

<sup>43</sup> I tend to agree with Halliwell (1986) 342-343 and Taplin (1977) 45, who argue that Aristotle is more likely critiquing the extravagant spectacle found in contemporary theater of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

and consequent shock (ἐκπληξίς). Contemporary accounts confirm that Aeschylus had a reputation for shocking his audience. In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Euripides claims that he, unlike Aeschylus, never resorted to terrifying (ἐξέπληττον, 962) his audience. Aristophanes here uses the same terminology, ἐκπλήσσω and related words, found in the more sensational account in the *Life of Aeschylus*. Is there any indication that the *Poetics* draws a similar connection between gruesome spectacle and feelings of terrified shock (ἐκπληξίς)?

It would be useful to consider how ἐκπληξίς and its cognates function inside and outside of the *Poetics*. In Greek literature, this set of terms has a broader semantic range than θαυμαστός and related words: ἐκπληξίς and its cognates can denote simple amazement, but they are often used to indicate overwhelming feelings of emotion, usually shock and fear.<sup>44</sup> They are frequently found in passages describing the shocked and frightened reactions of those confronted with gruesome and monstrous sights. Belfiore has observed that ἐκπληξίς and the related term κατάπληξίς are the standard reactions to the sight of a Gorgon in Greek literature.<sup>45</sup> Aristotle also suggests that those who are totally overcome by terrified shock (ἐκπεπληγμένοι) are unable to feel pity (*Rhet.* 1385b29-33). We might assume that such an emotional state is not appropriate for tragedy, in which both pity and fear are operative.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Stanford (1983) 28-29. Some examples include: Atossa's frightened reaction to the messenger's catastrophic report in Aeschylus' *Persians*, τοῖα κακῶν ἐκπληξίς ἐκφοβεῖ φρένας (606); Isocrates' description of the fear felt by kings when they saw Evagoras, τοσοῦτον γὰρ καὶ ταῖς τοῦ σώματος καὶ ταῖς τῆς ψυχῆς ἀρεταῖς διήνεγκεν, ὥσθ' ὅποτε μὲν αὐτὸν ὁρῶεν οἱ τότε βασιλεύοντες, ἐκπλήττεσθαι καὶ φοβεῖσθαι περὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς (*Evag.* 23-24); Thucydides' account of the panic induced by the lighting of the beacons on Salamis during the Peloponnesian War, ἐς δὲ τὰς Ἀθήνας φρυκτοὶ τε ἤρουντο πολέμιοι καὶ ἐκπληξίς ἐγένετο οὐδὲμιᾶς τῶν κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον ἐλάσσων (2.94.1). These feelings, as Stanford observes, are not necessarily limited to those of fear; ἐκπληξίς is associated with overwhelming feelings of love and lust in Plato's *Symposium* 192b7 and Euripides' *Hippolytus* 38.

<sup>45</sup> Belfiore (1992) 21 cites Plato (*Symp.* 198b5) and Aristotle (fr. 153), though in 216-222 she notes that ἐκπληξίς and κατάπληξίς were also associated with powerful rhetoric.

<sup>46</sup> Belfiore (1992) 231-234.

Aristotle's conception of *ἐκπληξίς* in the *Poetics*, however, seems to be limited to surprise and amazement, without the specific connotations of intense fear or monstrous sights. He does not condemn it as an emotion inappropriate to tragedy, but rather advocates its presence in tragic recognition (*πασῶν δὲ βελτίστη ἀναγνώρισις ἢ ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων, τῆς ἐκπλήξεως γιγνομένης δι' εἰκότων*, 1455a16-1455a17). Later in the *Poetics* he notes that impossibilities (*ἀδύνατα*) are acceptable in poetry if they achieve the end of the work and make it *ἐκπληκτικώτερον*, noting as an example the pursuit of Hector in *Iliad* 22 (1460b22-1460b27). There are no monsters or gruesome details in this example, merely an intense scene of conflict. Aristotle in fact uses this same example earlier to show how epic can present irrational (*ἄλογον*) events (i.e. Greek soldiers standing awkwardly by as Achilles pursues Hector alone) to elicit wonder (*τὸ θαυμαστόν*, 1460a11-1460a17). Though Aristotle does not endorse the presence of such irrational elements in tragedy (1454b6-1454b10), it is clear that in both tragedy and epic the element of wonder, be it *ἐκπληξίς* or *τὸ θαυμαστόν*, is a desirable quality. There does not then seem to be much difference in the *Poetics* between *ἐκπληξίς* and *τὸ θαυμαστόν*, except perhaps in degree.<sup>47</sup>

It is more likely that *τὸ τερατώδες* in the *Poetics* does not refer to a particular type of monstrous spectacle but to the relationship of this spectacle to the arrangement of the plot. Outside of the *Poetics* Aristotle uses *τερατώδης* primarily in descriptions of abnormalities and aberrations, particularly in the case of physical anomalies and mutations in the animal world.<sup>48</sup> In *On the Generation of Animals*, Aristotle defines *τὸ τερατώδες* as that which happens contrary to the usual tendencies (*διὸ καὶ δοκεῖ τερατώδη τὰ τοιαῦτ' εἶναι μᾶλλον, ὅτι*

<sup>47</sup> Bywater (1909) *ad* 1454a4 notes the similarity between these terms, while Lucas (1967) *ad* 1460a12 suggests that *ἐκπληξίς* is the thrill produced by *τὸ θαυμαστόν*. Aristotle himself defines *ἐκπληξίς* in *Topics* as “an excess of wonder” (*δοκεῖ γὰρ ἢ ἐκπληξίς θαυμασιότης εἶναι ὑπερβάλλουσα*, 126b17).

<sup>48</sup> E.g. *EE* 1231a4, *Gen. Anim.* 770a25-770a26, *Hist. Anim.* 496b18, and *Hist. Anim.* 544b21.

γίγνεται παρὰ τὸ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ καὶ τὸ εἰωθός, 772a36-772a37) and he similarly defines *τέρας* as something that is contrary to nature as it usually occurs (ἔστι γὰρ τὸ τέρας τῶν παρὰ φύσιν τι, παρὰ φύσιν δ' οὐ πᾶσαν ἀλλὰ τὴν ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ, 770b9-770b11). Such deviations include creatures with multiple heads (GA 769b26-769b27), chickens with four feet and four wings (GA 770a18-770a21), and even in some sense a child not resembling her parents (τρόπον τινὰ τέρας), for in her case “nature has deviated from the type” (παρεκβέβηκε γὰρ ἡ φύσις ἐν τούτοις ἐκ τοῦ γένους, 767b5-767b7). These aberrations are in conflict with the philosopher’s general depiction of nature as orderly and logical. He explains in the second book of the *Physics* that nature is not merely coincidental but rather a cause acting for the sake of some purpose (ὅτι μὲν οὖν αἰτία ἡ φύσις, καὶ οὕτως ὡς ἔνεκά του, φανερόν, 199b32-199b33).<sup>49</sup> Aberrations (τέρατα) do not contradict this logical arrangement but are merely mistakes (ἀμαρτήματα), which are inevitable in any formal system (199a33-199b4).

What connection, if any, can be established between these physical anomalies and the emotion associated with τὸ τερατώδες? While descriptions of abnormalities in scientific treatises may not seem relevant to a discussion of aesthetics, the biological references in the *Poetics* indicate that Aristotle’s approaches in these different works are not wholly incommensurable.<sup>50</sup> He notes that tragic genre itself has a φύσις that has evolved and achieved perfection (μεταβαλοῦσα ἡ τραγωδία ἐπαύσατο, ἐπεὶ ἔσχε τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν, 1449a14-1449a15). Lucas notes the biological parallel: “the tragic form, like an organic growth,

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Waterlow (1982) 48-92 on this formal definition of nature and the competing material definition Aristotle offers in the same chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Biological references in the *Poetics* can be found at 1448b11-1448b19, 1450b34-1451a6, 1459a20-1459a21 ; cf. Belfiore (1992) 3-4 for a defense of using the biological treatises, among others, in interpretations of the *Poetics*.

develops until it reaches its τέλος....”<sup>51</sup> The tragic plot is similarly compared to the living body of an animal: the beauty of both depends on proper arrangement and scope (τὸ γὰρ καλὸν ἐν μεγέθει καὶ τάξει ἐστίν, 1450b36-1450b37). This plot arrangement, like nature itself, involves logical consistency based on causation (δι’ ἄλλα, 1452a4) and aims at an ultimate purpose (τέλος), namely to arouse pity, fear, and wonder from the audience so that they may attain a sense of relief (κάθαρσις, 1449b28) or pleasure (τὸ δὲ θάυμαστον ἡδύ, 1460a17).<sup>52</sup> The philosopher’s scientific work confirms the connection between art and nature: he introduces τέρατα as mistakes that reveal purpose (as opposed to random accident) by noting that writers and doctors also make such errors (*Phys.* 199a33-199a35). Halliwell aptly observes that “the firmness of his allegiance to *phusis* as the ultimate explanatory principle, in poetry as elsewhere, is uncompromising.”<sup>53</sup>

In the context of the Aristotelian corpus, then, it seems likely that we should read τὸ τερατῶδες in the *Poetics* as an emotional effect resembling mere shock that results from a violation of organic plot arrangement. Halliwell has noted the connection between the logical arrangement of the plot and the anomalous intrusion of spectacle, but he still maintains that Aristotle here refers to “unnatural phenomena (grotesque horrors).”<sup>54</sup> The immediate context of the passage itself focuses on an aberration of form rather than on one of content: those producing τὸ τερατῶδες have nothing in common with tragedy proper (οὐδὲν τραγωδίᾳ κοινωνοῦσιν) or the pleasure that befits it (ἡδονήν...τὴν οἰκείαν) 1453b9-1453b11), which should be found in the action written by the poet rather than the spectacle over which he had no

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<sup>51</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad* 49a 15.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. note 17 above on interpretations of κάθαρσις. I agree with Lear (1992) that it must involve a sense of relief in experiencing normally unpleasant emotions in a safe, imaginative environment.

<sup>53</sup> Halliwell (1986) 95-96.

<sup>54</sup> Halliwell (1986) 66 n. 26.

control (1453b9-1453b14). Emotional reactions caused by spectacles alone may entail a type of fear (1453b1-1453b3), but because they are independent of the plot they are anomalous and inappropriate, and thus do not elicit the same type of fear and pity aroused by the plot. These spectacles can involve gruesome monsters, but the mere presence of such creatures does not necessarily generate τὸ τερατῶδες. Other sights that deviate from the plot could similarly frighten the audience (e.g. angry gods appearing unexpectedly above the stage, actors' unwarranted gestures). Moreover, the only passage in the *Poetics* that explicitly mentions gruesome material does not condemn it. In 1448b10-1448b15, Aristotle notes that things we find painful (λυπηρῶς) to look at in reality, we enjoy (χαίρομεν) when they are replicated with the utmost accuracy in art; his examples include grotesque animals and corpses (Θηρίων τε μορφὰς τῶν ἀτιμοτάτων καὶ νεκρῶν). Admittedly, Aristotle is making a descriptive comment about art generally and that this pleasure depends on recognition and learning, not from tragic wonder or fear at their appearance (1448b15-1448b17). Nevertheless there is no evidence that suggests his condemnation of τὸ τερατῶδες is an attack against such gruesome material.

Ultimately the *Poetics* does not associate τὸ τερατῶδες with any particular type of content. Aristotle seems to criticize spectacle on the grounds that it can generate emotion inorganically, divorced from the natural growth of the plot. His few remarks on the type of content that produces such emotions, however, indicate that deviant and unnatural actions are the most fearsome and pitiable. For example, as I mentioned above, Aristotle recommends that the πάθος should occur between φίλοι. This advice is certainly consistent with the stories found in many extant tragedies, such as those centered on the houses of Atreus and Oedipus. But, given Aristotle's conception of φιλία outside of the *Poetics*, such violence among kin

and friends should be considered aberrant and unnatural. The philosopher sees human behavior as governed by φύσις, and his depiction of φύσις in his political and ethical works is largely consistent with that in his scientific works.<sup>55</sup> He declares in both the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* that man is by nature (φύσει) a political animal (*Pol.* 1253a2-1253a3, *NE* 1097b11), and intrafamilial relationships in particular are fundamentally governed by nature. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, he claims that the φιλία between parents and their offspring extends beyond the human species and can be attributed to nature (φύσει, 1155a16-1155a21). Similarly man and wife form the first and most essential union, joined for reproduction like all living organisms (*Pol.* 1252a24-1252a31), and a village composed of immediate relations is the most natural (μάλιστα κατὰ φύσιν, *Pol.* 1252b16-1252b18).

Aristotle's examples of tragic πάθος, however, all involve violence between family members.<sup>56</sup> Intrafamilial violence thus represents a fundamental violation of natural order, as the institution of family exists to ensure the members' survival (*Pol.* 1252a24-1252a30) and φίλοι generally are supposed to feel pain when the other suffers harm (*Rhet.* 1381a1-1381a7). It is perhaps for this reason that in contemporary Athens there were no specific written laws prohibiting parricide and matricide – Athenians evidently found the acts so innately repellent that they thought specific prohibition unnecessary.<sup>57</sup> In his discussion of epic poetry he cites less aberrant violence between enemies (e.g. Achilles and Hector). Although he mentions violence between φίλοι as something characteristic of tragedy, he does not explain clearly

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<sup>55</sup> Miller (1995) 27-66. Frank (2004) argues convincingly against interpreting φύσις as a completely fixed prescriptive force for human behavior in the *Politics*, but it is nonetheless clear that Aristotle sees φύσις as a significant factor in explaining human activity.

<sup>56</sup> As Belfiore (2000) notes, Aristotle's condition πάθος that occur between φίλοι is not necessarily limited to blood kin and immediate family, as tragedy often depicts violence against ξένοι or other φίλοι outside of the οἶκος. But Aristotle's focus on familial violence in the *Poetics* is striking.

<sup>57</sup> Clay (1982) 288.

why such anomalous and unnatural behavior should generate fear more effectively than the martial hostility found in epic.<sup>58</sup> I contend that he does not press the distinction between epic and tragic violence because he is primarily concerned with the form of the drama rather than its content. That tragedy consistently depicts the “most revolting, the least defensible of human actions” is, for Aristotle, a given;<sup>59</sup> he is more interested in delimiting the proper way to present these gruesome crimes than in explaining the repulsion that such acts in and of themselves might generate.

Although the *Poetics* offers many important insights into ancient tragedy and its reception, it does not give an adequate account of the horrific elements in tragedy. While it does include the emotional response of fear, a critical part of horror, in the definition of tragedy, its emphasis on an audience’s ethical evaluation of fictional victims limits its value for those trying to identify horrific moments, especially since Aristotle imposes no such restriction in the *Rhetoric*. Moreover, Aristotle does not seem particularly interested in analyzing the horrific content that can be found in many of the plays. He does not discuss in depth the nature of the violent events (πάθη) that occur in tragedy, concentrating instead on the arrangement of these events and the circumstances of the characters’ relationships and decisions. He censures formal incongruity as something monstrously unnatural (τὸ τετρατῶδες) and particularly untragic, but does not note how aberrant tragic violence tends to be. There is no evidence then that the philosopher condemns horrific monsters or actions in the *Poetics*, as some have claimed from their readings of 1453b1-1453b14. But if we are seeking a

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<sup>58</sup> That epic poetry can produce fear through enemy combat is confirmed by Plato (*Ion* 535b). Aristotle never distinguishes epic and tragic poetry on emotional grounds, but rather notes that epic storytelling can violate some of the formal requirements of tragedy (e.g. plausibility, 1460a-1460b).

<sup>59</sup> Else (1957) 415.



thorough account of what sort of material horrified ancient audiences we must look elsewhere.

### **C) Noel Carroll and Modern Horror**

Since Aristotle does not fully discuss the emotion of horror or the types of content that elicit this emotion from an audience, I move now to a field that treats these topics more thoroughly, namely modern horror fiction. Horror is a relatively new genre,<sup>60</sup> but it contains a wide variety of entries that make it somewhat difficult to define. Typically, works of horror feature many, if not all, of the following: the presence of a monster, often supernatural and grotesque, that threatens the main characters; vivid depictions of violence, frequently with explicit descriptions or displays of blood and gore; unexpected incidents designed to startle and shock the audience; endings that lack a firm resolution, thus suggesting that the threat still lingers; and the tendency of such grotesque monsters and graphic violence to elicit feelings of fear and disgust from the audience.<sup>61</sup> Several of these qualities do not apply to ancient tragedy: tragic plots, with the exception of that of the *Eumenides*, do not involve supernatural monsters,<sup>62</sup> and the threat of violence is typically resolved at the end of each play or trilogy.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Many scholars date its emergence with the publication of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 and the rise in popularity of subsequent Gothic fiction, including the works of Edgar Allen Poe and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Cf. Colavito (2008) 25-62 for details on the emergence of Gothic horror fiction and its features.

<sup>61</sup> These features are mentioned (with differing priorities and emphases) in Carroll (1990), Colavito (2008) 13, and Cavallaro (2002) 1-17.

<sup>62</sup> Griffith (1998) 240 suggests that the absence of mythological monsters onstage in tragedy is perhaps related to difficulties in staging or costuming. Mastronarde (2010) 55-56 notes that monstrous figures are more commonly found in satyr plays, where the hero often defeats an "ogre-like" villain.

<sup>63</sup> I would, however, argue that many tragedies have problematic conclusions that do not comfortably resolve the horror contained within the play. I will discuss this point more fully in the following chapters. Cf. Easterling (1996) on the lack of closure in tragedy.

The emotional dimensions of horror, however, are applicable to our understanding of Greek tragic response. Fear, as I have discussed, is an integral part of Aristotle's conception of tragedy's function. Moreover, many tragedies contain scenes that present disgusting and frightening material, as the examples from the *Eumenides* and *Philoctetes* at the beginning of the chapter illustrate. It will be useful, therefore, for me to concentrate on modern interpretations of horror that analyze the way recent works generate these emotions in their audience. In particular I will focus on the work of the philosopher Noel Carroll. His approach, like Aristotle's, concentrates on the emotional effects of the genre, but he pays particular attention to how the content of horror fiction arouses the characteristic emotion of the genre. His analysis, which I will discuss more fully below, provides a fruitful model for identifying horrific moments in tragedy. I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of how Carroll's work and other modern treatments of horror can be applied to ancient drama.

Carroll offers a systematic account of the relationship between horror fiction and the audience's reaction. He pays particular attention to the monsters often found in horror fiction and to the way these creatures affect the audience. Such fiction elicits horror (he dubs the emotion "art-horror") under the following conditions: first, the audience suffers physical agitation related to emotional disturbance; second, this agitation is caused by the presence of a monster that is threatening and repulsive; finally, the thought of this monster is associated with the audience's desire to avoid touching it.<sup>64</sup> We saw several of these elements in the earlier discussion of Aristotle;<sup>65</sup> Carroll's conception of emotion involves both physical and

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<sup>64</sup> Carroll (1990) 27. I shall discuss his definition of impurity below.

<sup>65</sup> Carroll himself claims that it is his "intention to try to do for the horror genre what Aristotle did for tragedy" (8).

cognitive components, and the subject's cognitive assessment of the stimulus is the ultimate determinant of the particular emotional reaction. But his account offers a more thorough explanation of the relationship between the object of emotion (the monster) and the subject (the audience) than the one found in the *Poetics*. Horror fiction horrifies its audience not merely through its narrative structure but also through a specific type of content not found in other genres, namely a monster that is deemed repulsive by the other characters. I shall discuss each of these features in more detail below and offer some modifications of Carroll's position.

While there is no need to elaborate on how a horrific monster causes fear,<sup>66</sup> its repulsive qualities are not obvious. Many monsters in the genre are physically disgusting, such as zombies marked by rotting flesh and open wounds, aliens composed of oozing slime, giant bugs, and other mutant vermin. Disgust, like fear, involves cognition and physical reaction: when we recognize that something is somehow contaminated, we feel nauseous. This contamination may be related to the sense of taste, as the most basic form of disgust entails nausea at unappealing objects that would harm us if ingested. Contamination is often applied to other senses not related to taste, and we are disgusted by a variety of stimuli.<sup>67</sup> Rozin et al. note nine different categories of stimuli that in North Americans elicit disgust, including animals, contact with corpses, and "violations of the exterior envelope of the body (including gore and deformity)."<sup>68</sup> The monsters found in horror and their gruesome acts of violence frequently involve such violations. Stephen King argues that horror fiction "invites

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<sup>66</sup> Carroll does not dwell on this issue, but notes generally that the monster "threatens danger" to other characters (22). Aristotle's definition of fear as the expectation or imagining of harm seems sufficient for my purpose.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Rozin et al. (2008) 757-758.

<sup>68</sup> Rozin et al. (2008).

a physical reaction by showing us something which is physically wrong,” and provides as an example a story involving a “living corpse” whose movement is slowed “because little pieces of [him] keep falling off.”<sup>69</sup> Such depictions elicit immediate and instinctive repulsion by depicting creatures with patently disgusting features.

Carroll’s conception of repulsion is not, however, limited to what is physically disgusting. He contends that monsters found in horror fiction are essentially repulsive because they are categorically impure, and he applies the anthropological work of Mary Douglas to explain this position. Douglas defines impurity and pollution as instances of disorder or deviation. Humans avoid what they deem impure or polluted not because it is potentially dangerous (as, e.g., rotten food) but because it threatens to undermine the normative social structures that govern behavior within a community. As Douglas notes, “Culture, in the sense of the public, standardised values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered.”<sup>70</sup> Anything that contradicts established cultural categories presents a threat to confidence in the stability of the community and thus causes repulsion. Some of these contradictions are not limited to particular communities; for example, most cultures find blood and other bodily fluids to be repulsive since they have transgressed the bodily boundaries that kept them internal and have become external.<sup>71</sup> Others are limited to particular social groups, as in the dietary restrictions found in the Old Testament. Douglas argues that Jewish law did not deem pork unclean because it caused

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<sup>69</sup> King (1981) 22-23. King makes a distinction, however, between horror, in which he sees both intellectual and physical components, and the purely physical “gag reflex of revulsion,” which can be produced without “any real logic, motivation, or character development” (23-25).

<sup>70</sup> Douglas (1966) 40.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 121-123.

trichinosis, as some have argued, but because pigs defy the categories defined by the ancient Jews (i.e. pigs have cloven hooves but do not chew their cud like other herd animals).<sup>72</sup> She maintains that pollution depends on such contradictions, and can only exist when societal structures and boundaries are clearly defined. People and objects that defy categorization challenge these structures and definitions, and thus are often considered unstable, dangerous, and powerful anomalies.

Carroll affiliates the monsters found in horror fiction with these dangerous anomalies and identifies several categories into which these creatures fall. These include the following: interstitial beings (e.g. vampires that are neither living nor dead), hybrid creatures (e.g. werewolves, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), and monsters that are formless (e.g. the Blob) or categorically incomplete (e.g. disintegrating zombies, murderous severed hands).<sup>73</sup> These monsters elicit revulsion not because they are physically disgusting (though they often are) but because they contradict fundamental assumptions of their victims and of the audience. Stevenson's novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* illustrates clearly this concept. One character describes Mr. Hyde, Dr. Jekyll's villainous alter ego, in the following way:

There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarcely know why. He must be deformed somewhere...although I can't specify a point. He's an extraordinary looking man, and yet I can really name nothing out of the way.

Mr. Hyde is a hybrid monster whose repulsive qualities can be detected despite the absence of obvious physical contamination.<sup>74</sup> Hyde's monstrosity involves the contradiction between his savage impulses and his civilized appearance. He is a figure utterly divorced from the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 42-58.

<sup>73</sup> Carroll (1990) 31-35.

<sup>74</sup> King (1981) 73 cites this passage "one of the most telling descriptions of the Werewolf in all of horror fiction." He uses the term Werewolf for all such hybrid monsters.

familiar social and ethical codes that Jekyll and all others follow, yet he looks like an ordinary, law-abiding citizen and so causes confusion and revulsion. Confusion and disbelief are frequently generated by such transgressive monsters. A familiar trope in horror fiction involves one character vainly trying to convince others that such an anomalous creature exists.<sup>75</sup> This reluctance is understandable, as its deviation from familiar categories renders the community ignorant and vulnerable.<sup>76</sup> As King notes, “it is not the physical or mental aberration in itself which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order these aberrations seem to imply.”<sup>77</sup> These monsters horrify because they threaten to dismantle the structures which the audience takes for granted.

Carroll’s definition of monsters provides a sufficient explanation for the generation of horror, but his insistence that these monsters be limited to “creatures not countenanced by contemporary science” is unnecessary.<sup>78</sup> The same contradictory properties that he applies to *monsters* in horror fiction can also be applied to *situations* and *actions*. I agree with Holland-Toll that the most distinctive feature of horror fiction is its “sense of extreme, exaggerated, and unresolvable antinomy, which effectively resists closure and resolution more radically

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<sup>75</sup> An amusing representative example can be found in the film *The Thing From Another World* (1951). After a scientist explains that the deadly alien is a vegetable, a journalist responds “Dr. Carrington, you won the Nobel Prize. You’ve received every kind of kudos a scientist can attain. I’m not, therefore, gonna stick my neck out and say you’re stuffed full of wild blueberry muffins. But I promise you, my readers are gonna think so.”

<sup>76</sup> The creature in film cited above, for example, lacks vital organs and is impervious to the guns which the soldiers normally use for defense.

<sup>77</sup> King (1981) 41.

<sup>78</sup> Carroll (1990) 36-37. He argues that such a limitation is necessary to distinguish horror from other genres that elicit similar feelings, such as thrillers.

than most other fictions.”<sup>79</sup> This antinomy, that is the contradiction of cultural categories, can result from the actions of human characters who are not scientific impossibilities. Many examples of the genre feature disturbed individuals who, in and of themselves, are not categorically contradictory, but commit acts that both frightening and repulsive.<sup>80</sup> In the film adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example, Hannibal Lector cuts off a guard’s face and wears it on his own. The depiction of Lector’s act is repulsive on two levels: not only does the bloody and gory detail nauseate the viewer, but the notion that someone might remove the most recognizable feature of a human and appropriate it as his own defies our conception of bodily recognition.<sup>81</sup> The repulsive component of horror is based on an unsettling feeling of disruption, what King calls “a cold touch in the midst of the familiar.”<sup>82</sup> Since, according to Carroll, emotional reactions stem from “the subject’s cognitive construal and evaluation of his/her *situation*” (emphasis mine),<sup>83</sup> it seems appropriate to include contradictory actions and events as objects of horror.

Carroll’s theory of horror also explains the role of other characters within the story. The audience’s reaction to a threatening contradiction of cultural categories is influenced by the reactions of the victims. We may see the same monster (e.g. an ogre) appear in a fairy

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<sup>79</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 16. While monsters feature prominently in her treatment of horror, she does not limit her definition of monsters to the scientifically impossible; she labels otherwise normal characters who commit horrific acts as human monsters.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Gaut (1993) for a critique of Carroll’s focus on monsters and failure to account for realistic killers in horror fiction.

<sup>81</sup> Gaut (1993) 334 notes Hannibal Lector as an example of an ordinary being who commits horrific acts. Carroll (1995) 68-69 counters that Lector is a monstrous example of exaggerated real-life phenomenon (psychosis), in the same way that giant lizard monsters are examples of exaggerated biology. This defense seems unnecessarily forced, and I maintain that applying categorically contradictory properties to actions is simpler and more plausible.

<sup>82</sup> King (1981) 281.

<sup>83</sup> Carroll (1990) 27.

tale and a horror story. While characters in fairy tales may or may not be frightened by such a monster, they treat it as a normal part of their universe; characters in horror not only are frightened by the creature but they view it as something revolting and unnatural.<sup>84</sup> The responses of the characters in horror fiction demonstrate the horrific nature of the creature and thus prompt the audience to have a similar emotional reaction. The narrative structure of horror stories often encourages the audience to share the same dread and revulsion as the fictional victims. For example, horror films frequently do not show the audience what the creature looks like until the movie is nearly over, leaving viewers as ignorant about the dangers as the characters and forcing the audience to confront the hideous spectacle at the very moment the victim does.<sup>85</sup> Carroll claims that this emotional parallel between characters and audience, which he dubs the “mirroring-effect,” is a key feature of horror not found in all other genres: audiences laugh at the misfortunes of fictional characters in a comedy and do not share in Othello’s jealousy or Achilles’ wrath.<sup>86</sup>

Since the characters within horror fiction signal proper emotional response to the audience, the audience’s horror must depend on some sympathy or identification with the characters if it is to achieve the desired emotional effect. Jonathan Cohen, a researcher of media studies, notes that an audience member must empathize and identify with a character

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<sup>84</sup> Carroll (1990) 15-16.

<sup>85</sup> William Castle’s 1961 film *Mr. Sardonicus* illustrates how a delayed reveal can create a common emotional reaction between character and audience. During the first half of the film, both the protagonist and the audience wonder why the eponymous villain hides his face behind a mask. Later Sardonicus recounts, via flashback, how he was forced to dig up his father’s grave to retrieve a valuable item and was confronted with the shocking sight of the decomposed corpse. When he returns home, his hideous smile is shown on screen for the first time at the very moment his wife sees it; the recoil of her body and her piercing scream signal the appropriate reaction for the audience.

<sup>86</sup> Carroll (1990) 18. This does not mean, however, that the audience *cannot* share an emotional reaction with fictional characters in other genres, but rather that this feature is more consistently found in horror than in other types of film and literature.



in order to “simulate the feelings and thoughts appropriate for the events that occur.”<sup>87</sup> As I have discussed, Aristotle’s conception of audience identification is primarily ethical: the best tragic plots involve virtuous, but imperfect figures, figures resembling the audience (*ὁμοίως*), who suffer as a result of some error. Certainly ethical considerations influence audience sympathies. We cheer at the violent deaths of cruel villains, but are anxious when a similar threat faces a beneficent hero. But modern studies of audience reaction to fictional characters have considered issues outside of Aristotle’s formulation. Researchers have noted that audiences frequently identify with characters who share similar external traits, such as age, sex, and race.<sup>88</sup> It is no coincidence that horror films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) tend to attract younger viewers who are more like the teenage victims of the film than their deceptive parents or their grotesque killer.<sup>89</sup> Audiences also tend to identify with characters who share internal characteristics such as personality traits or ethical beliefs.

Though the existence of similarities, both internal and external, between audience and fictional characters affects the audience’s ability to identify with these characters, the process of identification has a number of complexities that prevent one from adopting a simple formula based on plausibility or resemblance.<sup>90</sup> For example, one must additionally consider how the author of the fiction shapes the presentation of the narrative to influence the audience’s identification. Writers who relate the internal monologue of a certain character or

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<sup>87</sup> Cohen (2001) 252.

<sup>88</sup> E.g. Maccoby and Wilson (1957), Turner (1993), Cohen (2001) 259-260.

<sup>89</sup> Clover (1992) 23 notes that horror films of the “slasher” variety, which focus on (usually deformed and/or psychotic) killers who kill multiple (usually teenage) victims, draw audiences that are typically young and male. She observes, however, that the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series also has a significant (young) female following.

<sup>90</sup> The topic of identification with fictional characters has been treated by scholars from many different fields, including psychologists, literary theorists, specialists on mass media, philosophers, and film theorists. For brief, but comprehensive treatments of the subject, see the work of Jonathan Cohen (2001 and 2006), a media specialist who incorporates psychological and literary treatments in his analysis.

filmmakers who consistently show the action through the point of view of one figure prompt the audience to adopt the perspective of that character.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, audience identifications are frequently multivalent and not limited to one character.<sup>92</sup> These identifications may change as the story progresses (e.g. a spectator might initially be drawn to Antigone's resolution but then ultimately sympathize with Creon as he begins to show remorse) or as the author shifts the presentation of the text (e.g. by using the camera to reveal another character's viewpoint).<sup>93</sup> The fluidity and malleability of audience identification is particularly important in horror fiction. As Clover notes, viewers of horror films will often cheer in the early stages of the film as the villain gruesomely slaughters innocent victims, but towards the film's end will root for the protagonist to do away with the killer.<sup>94</sup>

Carroll acknowledges the complexity of audience identification and ultimately finds the concept too problematic when considering an audience's emotional reaction to horror fiction. He observes that the term *identification* implies that the viewers in some way see themselves as identical to a character; they thus submit to the illusion that the character's thoughts and feelings are equivalent to their own.<sup>95</sup> An audience cannot entirely identify with a character in a vampire movie because they know these creatures are fantastic, while the character must confront them as a genuine threat. Moreover, audiences do not always have

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<sup>91</sup> Cohen (2001) 252.

<sup>92</sup> Cohen (2006) 185, Clover (1992) 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> Audiences can also identify with multiple characters *at the same time*. Psychoanalytic theory holds that "competing figures resonate with competing parts of the viewer's psyche" (Clover 1992, 8). Cohen (2006) 185 agrees that audience members can simultaneously hold several subject positions, but suggests that usually there is one dominant position for each moment. The concept of concurrent identification is significant, but for this study I will be concentrating primarily on audience identifications with individual characters or groups (e.g. the chorus) rather than on competing characters.

<sup>94</sup> Clover (1992) 45-46.

<sup>95</sup> Carroll (1990) 88-96.

the same emotional responses as the fictional characters. While Carroll does argue that horror audiences frequently react in ways similar to those of the characters within the fiction, he finds that even in horror these emotional parallels have limits. For example, those viewing a protagonist wrestling with a hideous monster typically feel suspense and revulsion, while the character herself is likely too preoccupied with surviving to register these same emotions.<sup>96</sup> Carroll therefore avoids entirely the problem of conflating audience and character by concentrating on how the audience assesses the object of these emotions (i.e. the monster) and comparing their assessment with that of the character. He suggests that we should label the audience's interaction with the fictional characters as assimilation.<sup>97</sup> When viewers assimilate the situation of a fictional character, they consider that character's perspective and situation, but they also view the circumstance from an external perspective as well. The audience, like the fictional victim, recognizes that the horrific creature is a revolting and dangerous entity; as Carroll notes, "the consumer of the fictions and the protagonist share the same culture," and so "can readily discern the features of the situation that make it horrifying to the protagonist."<sup>98</sup> But viewers have the privilege of viewing this struggle from a distance, and thus they have the opportunity to process fully the material, that is to "respond not only to the monster, as the character does, but to a situation in which someone, who is horrified, is under attack."<sup>99</sup> The audience's sympathy for the fictional victims therefore depends on shared cognitive assessment. The mutual recognition of a frightening and repulsive situation

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 95-96.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 96.

allows the audience to sympathize with the character and experience similar, but not identical, horror.

Carroll's focus on situational assessments rather than on character identification is a useful approach for understanding the relationship between audience and character. His theory of assimilation does not contradict the notion that physical and psychological similarities influence audience reaction, but it does allow us to concentrate on a relatively consistent feature of horror fiction. That is, we need not evaluate the many and complex dimensions of character and audience identity to discuss the how the audience relates to the characters; instead, we can investigate how the reactions of fictional characters correspond to the audience's. Carroll's arguments are, however, somewhat circular. Fictional characters model the appropriate response for the audience, yet the audience's relation to the characters involves assessing whether this reaction is appropriate. His theory depends on underlying cultural similarities between audience and character that allow both to feel horror at violent contradictions of cultural categories. But as I noted above he limits his treatment of horrific monsters to scientific impossibilities, and this in turn limits his theory of assimilation. The unnatural monster is obviously contradictory and repulsive, but horror also includes more subtle violations of cultural categories, such as the ambiguously gendered heroine in slasher films.<sup>100</sup> I contend therefore that we must pay careful attention to the nature of the horrific contradictions within the context of each fiction.

#### **D) Application to Greek Tragedy**

Carroll's approach to the horror genre provides a framework for identifying horrific content, namely situations, actions, and figures that audience and characters deem frightening and repulsive (i.e. which involve a contradiction of cultural categories). Such a framework is

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<sup>100</sup> Clover (1992) 48-64. I discuss this contradiction in more detail at the end of the next chapter.

a fruitful one for identifying horrific moments in Greek tragedy, especially when one considers the limitations of Aristotle's *Poetics* in this regard. I will identify characters and events that involve a violent disruption of the cultural principles and distinctions familiar to the tragic audience, and I will explain how these horrific moments fit within the context of the plays. Since this interpretive approach necessarily involves assessments by characters and the audience, my examination of tragic horrors will involve careful readings of the texts and discussions of the cultural background of the spectators. The nature of the tragic genre and the cultural distance between its audience and modern readers raise some difficulties in using Carroll's approach to interpret tragedy. I contend, however, that his methods, when thoughtfully and judiciously applied, enhance our understanding of tragic horrors and the way ancient audiences responded to them. They are particularly useful for interpreting the confusing and disturbing plays of Euripides, as I shall explain at the end of this chapter.

My investigation of the texts will focus on ambiguous and contradictory depictions of violence. Tragic horror depends not only on the threat of violence but also on a severe disruption of cultural categories. That is, there is a significant distinction between what is frightening and what is horrific. Konstan notes the difference in his analysis of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*; while in the first part of the play the chorus fears military invasion (a substantial threat but one that does not contradict cultural categories), they later are horrified by the notion of fratricide and the pollution such perverse violence causes.<sup>101</sup> The plays occasionally signal such horrific moments through references to the characters' confusion or disgust in response to violence, but more often the repulsion component of horror can be found in the flagrant contradiction of previously established distinctions.

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<sup>101</sup> Konstan (2006) 147. Though he does not offer a formal definition of horror, Konstan's association of horror with pollution is consistent with the accounts of Carroll and Douglas discussed above.

My investigations of the *Hecuba* and *Heracles* show that Euripides tends to generate horror from the following narrative pattern: first a familiar social convention, institution, or distinction is established as a plausible source of protection for particular characters; afterward these characters suffer violence from the dissolution or perversion of the convention, institution, or distinction on which they had relied or which they had taken for granted. For example, in the following chapter on the *Hecuba* I discuss how Agamemnon and Polymestor voice traditional assumptions about women, namely that they are physically weak and incapable of committing violence; Hecuba's brutal vengeance against Polymestor contradicts these assumptions and generates horror from Agamemnon and the audience. Euripides, like any author of horror fiction, shows his audience "the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness."<sup>102</sup> In the following chapters I will discuss how he weaves this social fabric before ripping it into shreds.

Since an audience's horror depends on the ability to relate in some way with fictional victims, I will also consider how ancient audiences likely responded to these scenes of contradictory violence. Carroll's theory of assimilation, which posits that the audience shares characters' assessments of the repulsive and frightening situations (objects) but need not specifically identify with these characters (subjects), is suitable for my investigation of tragic horrors. This approach accommodates the broad character types typically found in tragedy, which lack the idiosyncrasies and nuanced personalities of modern literary characters. As Jones notes, Greek characters onstage are essentially the masks they wear, bearing "conventional signs" that signified age, sex, and rank, but declaring "the whole man" rather than suggesting "further realities" hiding behind them.<sup>103</sup> While Easterling suggests that

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<sup>102</sup> King (1978) xi.

Jones perhaps overstates the importance of the mask, she agrees that tragic characters are best understood within the “dynamics of action and interaction” onstage and should not be read as fixed and static personalities.<sup>104</sup> Carroll’s theory of audience assimilation likewise involves situational assessment: the audience relates to fictional characters that respond appropriately to their circumstances.

There are two limitations on applying this approach to tragedy. The first involves the nature of tragic discourse. Carroll assumes that because an audience of horror fiction can readily assimilate the experiences of the fictional victims through shared cultural background, the frightening and repulsive monster or situation is manifestly horrific. While characters who have not encountered the monster may doubt its existence, characters who have witnessed it never seriously question its horrific potential. In tragedy, however, the dramatic conflict often depends on controversy related to these cultural categories, and characters offer competing views of the viability of particular conventions, institutions, and distinctions. As Goldhill notes, “the specific genre of tragedy with its disruptive questioning highlights these tensions and difficulties in a normative discourse rather than offering any harmonized view of the workings of society’s attitudes.”<sup>105</sup> In the *Antigone*, for example, the struggle between Creon and Antigone involves conflicting attitudes toward the codified law of the πόλις and the traditional customs related to the οἶκος, and the play refuses to present its

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<sup>103</sup> Jones (1967) 43-46. He supports Aristotle’s view that tragedy is about general types and not specific characters, which are more suitable for histories (ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποιήσις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ’ ἱστορία τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστον λέγει, *Poet.* 1451b6-1451b7).

<sup>104</sup> Easterling (1990) 88. She generally agrees with Gould (1978) that the interaction of tragic characters metaphorically represents human experience and that individual characters need not accurately reflect particular human beings.

<sup>105</sup> Goldhill (1986) 113.

audience with a resolution that clearly establishes priority between the categories.<sup>106</sup> Any investigation of violations of these categories must therefore consider how ancient audiences would assess competing claims involving their cultural system. This conclusion leads to a second limitation in applying Carroll's approach, namely the cultural distance between ancient and modern audiences. Modern readers cannot easily detect the significance of the particular conventions being disrupted in the plays of Euripides, and thus it is difficult to gauge accurately the original spectators' response.<sup>107</sup> If the distinctions between masculine and feminine behavior were not clearly delineated for ancient audiences, for example, then they would not react to Hecuba's vengeance with the same horror that Agamemnon and Polymestor do.

While these difficulties prevent me from presenting a conclusive and certain account of audience reaction, my investigation uses external evidence whenever possible to support my positions. Relevant literary sources roughly contemporary with the original performance of the tragedy often clarify how an audience likely responded to a particular event or character. These sources include historical texts, philosophical works, and forensic and political speeches, as well as fictional accounts found in epic poetry and other tragedies. I do not use these texts to establish simple definitions of Greek beliefs regarding their cultural conventions and distinctions. Diverse and conflicting attitudes towards social mores can be found in every society, particularly in the intellectually and socially dynamic climate of fifth-century Athens.<sup>108</sup> But I contend that literary sources can offer modern readers perspective concerning Greek cultural categories by revealing significant patterns of behavior and

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. Goldhill's discussion on the instability of this opposition (104-106).

<sup>107</sup> Easterling (1990) 88-89.

<sup>108</sup> Mastronarde (2010) 23, Goldhill (1986) 110-115.



thought. My examination does not require that ancient audience members shared identical beliefs with each other and with fictional characters but rather that they all shared a cultural background defined by particular structures and distinctions.<sup>109</sup> As Douglas has noted, these structures mediate human experience by arranging activities into meaningful and well-ordered categories.<sup>110</sup> Literary sources contain many references to categorical distinctions that were significant for ancient Greeks. The anticipation of severe objection to female Guardians in Plato's *Republic*, for example, suggests that many Greeks saw a strong distinction between masculine and feminine behavior (453b7-453d11); this and similar comments allow us to infer that ancient audiences likely found Hecuba's violation of traditional matronly behavior as surprising and disturbing as do the play's male characters. In the following chapters I will discuss the specific cultural categories found in each play and the way Euripides disrupts them: in the *Hecuba* these include Greek burial traditions, *φιλία* and *ξενία*, and distinctions between masculine and feminine behavior as well as between regal and servile roles; in the *Heracles* they include the relationship between gods and men, the role of the father, and the function of the *οἶκος*.

I turn now to a more general question: how do modern interpretations of horror films help us to understand the plays of Euripides? For one thing, there is an abundance of shocking, frightening, and repellent material within his plays, and any critical reading must take this material into consideration. This is not to say that scholars have ignored these

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<sup>109</sup> Even within the mythological settings of the plays characters frequently reference institutions, practices, and values that belong to the contemporary world of the audience.

<sup>110</sup> Douglas (1966) 40. See my discussion of Douglas and pollution on pages 37-38 above. Segal (1986) 21-43 discusses the importance of social structures in interpreting Greek tragedy.

horrific elements, but frequently they take the term “horrific” for granted.<sup>111</sup> It is tempting to label Medea’s murder of her children or Hippolytus’ agonizing death, for example, as obvious horrors without any further qualification. While I would agree with such assessments, I would also contend that our immediate emotional reactions warrant further examination. These passages contain a number of categorical contradictions, some of them immediately apparent to modern readers (e.g. mother as destructive rather than nurturing force, the unnatural and monstrous bull that gores Hippolytus), others requiring at least some understanding of Athenian aesthetic and cultural associations (e.g. Medea’s appropriation of stage space and dramatic function typically reserved for gods, the bull’s association with aberrant sexuality).<sup>112</sup> If these scenes remain as terrifying and repulsive to modern audiences as they did for ancient ones, it is a testament to their artistry and not an invitation to take them for granted. Carroll’s work provides a framework for evaluating the contradictions that arouse horror without nullifying traditional interpretive strategies; attentive reading of the plays and careful consideration of their immediate cultural context can allow modern readers to identify important cultural categories operative in the play and, consequently, the horrific moments that violate these categories.

The application of modern horror theory is particularly useful when considering a common source of frustration in Euripidean scholarship, namely the tragedian’s tendency to include a variety of conflicting tones, registers, and actions within his plays. The plot of the

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<sup>111</sup> Rosenmeyer (1987), for example, considers whether the *Hecuba* should be deemed a proper tragedy or a horror story without formally defining the latter category. Stanford (1983) 106-121 mentions many examples of horrific contradictions in tragedy (e.g. the perversion of nature in Clytemnestra’s dream of suckling a snake in *Libation Bearers*), but does not provide a systematic account of what makes these scenes horrific.

<sup>112</sup> Medea’s appearance above the stage, whether on the *theologeion* or *mechane*, visually associates her with the gods, as does her delivery of prophecy in the play’s finale. Cf. Cunningham (1954) 158-160 and Hopman (2008) 175 on the incongruous visual effect, Michelini (1987) 103 n. 54 on the prophetic element. The bull in *Hippolytus* recalls the bestial lust of Phaedra’s mother, Pasiphae, among other things. Cf. Segal (1965) 145-148 for a fuller discussion of the bull’s significance in the play.

*Orestes*, for example, concentrates on banal (and anachronistic) political maneuvering during its first half only to shift its focus in the second half onto a wild murder plot that threatens to undermine mythical tradition before the conflict is resolved by the appearance of Apollo *ex machina*.<sup>113</sup> Such conflicts permeate the Euripidean corpus, in relation not only to larger issues of plot construction (e.g. the bifurcated nature of *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *Heracles*) but also to the characters' attitudes towards the events of the play. For example, the carnage found in the second half of the *Orestes* is interrupted by the appearance of a hysterical eunuch whose exaggerated histrionics perhaps add a comic touch to an otherwise terrifying scene.<sup>114</sup>

More importantly, many scholars in the past have attempted to dismiss the elements of Euripides' plays that do not fit the tragic pattern established by Sophocles and by Aristotle's endorsement of Sophoclean composition. Euripides challenges this pattern through the inconsistent tones and structures of his plays and through the frequently debased characters that feature in them.<sup>115</sup> Kitto, for example, labels several Euripidean tragedies as "tragicomic" or "melodramatic" – the former silly, the latter grim – for their lack of tragic

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<sup>113</sup> This is admittedly a simplistic summation of a very complicated play. Cf. Verrall (1905) 199-264 for an attempt to formulate a unified interpretation, though he resorts to excising the chorus and Apollo from the drama in order to make it intelligible. Cf. also Reinhardt (1957) 298-313, who finds the two parts of the play to be irreconcilable, and Vellacott (1975) 53-81, who sees in the play's variety a consistent ironic condemnation of the protagonist.

<sup>114</sup> Verrall (1905) 249-253 sees this disruption as a test on the horror of the scene: "The sense that *we cannot smile* [emphasis his], that we do not, even though we perceive a call, is the supreme test and confirmation of gravity ...." He notes aptly that the interaction between the murderous Orestes and the whimpering slave "might make us laugh or, more likely make us sick."

<sup>115</sup> Micheline (1987) 52-69 discusses the essential distinctions between the two authors. Following the scholarly tradition (60 n. 34), she concludes that Sophoclean drama typically has a unified style that focuses on an individual protagonist and excludes social, temporal context in order to emphasize the individual's experience, and has a consistently serious tone; Euripides reacts against the Sophoclean tradition by including a variety of viewpoints and styles, presenting inconsistent protagonists, overtly challenging cultural norms, and including both serious and flippant tones. Mastronarde (2010) 52-54 generally agrees with Micheline's assessment, though he notes that the paucity of extant plays and Aristotle's agenda should caution us against considering this Sophoclean tradition as fixed and certain.

sincerity and the absence of a central unifying theme. Without these, Kitto argues, tragedy can only create excitement for its own sake and is thus too sensational to be in the same category with other tragedies.<sup>116</sup> The denigration of the sensational and uncomfortable elements in Euripides, including the perverse violence that generates horror, has been all too common. But Micheline correctly notes that these are “elements of considerable aesthetic significance, valid parts of a system of literary meaning that derives from the Euripidean plays’ combative relation to its audience.”<sup>117</sup> We should not ignore the horrific violence in these plays or dismiss them as superficial but rather understand them as part of Euripides’ challenging and frequently polemic approach to tragedy. I propose that a closer examination of these horrific elements and how they fit into the aesthetic and intellectual program of the *Hecuba* and *Heracles* will allow for a greater understanding of each work.

Another benefit of using modern horror scholarship is that it allows readers to avoid overly moralistic readings, a frequent pitfall for Euripides’ critics. Kitto’s approach, cited above, depended on the assumption that tragedies should have a central unifying theme; others, such as Pohlenz, go further in assuming that this theme should involve a moral dimension and that the playwright was responsible for the moral education of his audience, a task Euripides failed to complete.<sup>118</sup> The conception of the tragedian as educator can also be found in antiquity, most notably in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. In that play Aeschylus and Euripides argue over who best taught the Athenians (1006-1098), and Dionysus ultimately decides in favor of Aeschylus so that he may give useful advice (1418-1421) and instruct the

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<sup>116</sup> Kitto (1961) 311-369. Cf. Micheline (1987) 22-24 for a critique of his approach and Mastronarde (2010) 58-62 on the problem of such generic labels.

<sup>117</sup> Micheline (1987) 71. Cf. her discussion in 3-51 for a detailed account of the scholarly tradition concerning Euripides and its tendency to excise or ignore elements that do not fit with the Sophoclean model.

<sup>118</sup> Pohlenz (1954) 431-439. Cf. Micheline (1987) 21 for a critique of his approach.

Athenians (1500-1503). But Dionysus' decision does not prove that Euripides or his audience was principally interested in tragedy's moral function. As Mastronarde has shown, Aristophanes' debate must be understood within the intellectual context of the performance; the author uses comic exaggeration to champion a traditional way of thinking symbolized by Aeschylus rather than the more contemporary intellectual or sophistic approach represented by Euripides.<sup>119</sup> Those looking for instructive models of ethical behavior in the *Hecuba* or *Heracles* are bound to be disappointed: in both plays the few honorable and innocent characters suffer repellent violence, and there is little hope that morality offers humanity any immediate benefits.

Recent discussions of Euripides have addressed the inconsistencies in his plays and their ambiguous morality by considering the immediate social and literary context of their performance. Mastronarde, for example, has noted the variety of emotional registers and literary forms in the poetic tradition, arguing that Euripides' difficult and contradictory material reveals the tragedian's interest in "exploring the potentialities of a living genre."<sup>120</sup> Michelini similarly claims that his plays demonstrate competitive desire to distinguish himself from other tragedians, particularly Sophocles, whose works featured unified plots and consistent characterization.<sup>121</sup> Other scholars attribute the lack of a clear ethical program to the ambiguous nature of theatrical context. Zeitlin, for example, in her discussion of *Hecuba* claims that the play's rampant violence and grim outlook reflect the amoral nature of the Dionysiac setting.<sup>122</sup> Such treatments provide valuable insight into the world of Euripides

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<sup>119</sup> Mastronarde (2010) 23-25.

<sup>120</sup> Mastronarde (2010) 54.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. note 115 above.

<sup>122</sup> Zeitlin (1991).

and his audience, and I will frequently refer to these and similar works and other classical interpretations in my analysis of the plays and the emotional reactions they elicited from ancient audiences. But they do not fully account for the relentless attacks against social structures found in Euripidean drama. I contend that the tragedian's focus on violent and unsettling disruptions of social conventions and distinctions can be better understood by recognizing the function of the horrific, which, as I shall argue below, entails challenging the cultural preconceptions of the audience. My investigation into this component of Euripidean drama allows us to attain a fuller understanding of the plays.

I believe the function of horrific material in Euripides' plays is consistent with the aims of modern horror fiction. The horror genre invites its audience to become curious about the difficult and problematic features of the material. Carroll notes that a distinctive feature of the genre involves "narratives of discovery and proof" in which characters and audience must reconcile a terrifying anomaly with their presuppositions about their world.<sup>123</sup> The radical confrontation between normal and paranormal experience is often sensational, but it is not devoid of social value. King observes that horror fiction presents sudden and extreme disruptions of cultural conventions so that the audience may reflect on their own attitudes towards these conventions; thus horror helps its audience "to understand what those taboos and fears are, and why it feels so uneasy about them."<sup>124</sup> While I agree with this assessment of the genre, I find King's explanation of horror fiction's ultimate purpose unsatisfying. He views the function of horror as essentially conservative; the presence of monsters and

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<sup>123</sup> Carroll (1990) 184. Euripidean horror, as I shall argue in the following chapters, similarly involves events that the characters deem incredible before being presented with physical proof, typically in the form of destroyed and/or mutilated bodies. But unlike Carroll's monsters, the horror of these tragedies does not always involve a supernatural or fantastic element, but more frequently depends on an unexpected violation of traditional values or practices that challenges the characters' (and audience's) assumptions about their world.

<sup>124</sup> King (1981) 139-140.

monstrous acts reinforces the need for social conventions, and the defeat of the monster reassures the audience that their own conventions are satisfactory. We enjoy horror, according to King, because it allows us to see examples of disorder, and thus we can appreciate the structured and harmonious nature of our normal lives.<sup>125</sup>

Holland-Toll's offers a more persuasive interpretation of horror's function. She proposes that horror fiction can be classified into two distinct groupings based on relationships to cultural models.<sup>126</sup> Affirmative horror fiction introduces a monstrous threat that is eventually defeated, and the traditional cultural models are reaffirmed and strengthened. Disaffirmative horror conversely challenges these models by depicting violent subversions that completely disrupt social order and negate the possibility of restoration. Holland-Toll contends that the latter model is preferable: "The most effective horror fiction is relentlessly confrontational in its refusal to accept compromise or resolution; the exaggeration and the graphic nature of much horror fiction, the relentless rending of social constructs, even the constantly recurring strategies of exclusion function to deny even 'carriage comfort.'"<sup>127</sup> The value of disaffirmative fiction is not immediately evident, as its audience is left with only unpleasant and irreparable disruptions of the social fabric. But this type of fiction performs an important function within society. Rather than offering models of appropriate behavior that can be emulated, disaffirmative horror provides its audience with "a means to think about [themselves], defining certain aspects of a social reality which the

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 185, 210-211.

<sup>126</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 14-25. She actually offers three categories, but the second group ("mid-spectrum") is essentially a mixture of the first and third types. She offers the following definition for "cultural models," cited from Quinn and Holland (1987) 4: "*Cultural models* are presupposed, taken for granted models of the world which are widely shared...by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of their world and their behavior in it." The phrase thus carries the same meaning as the cultural categories I discuss above.

<sup>127</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 25.

audience and readers share.”<sup>128</sup> It provokes its audience with difficult questions instead of mollifying them with clear solutions and thus encourages them to reflect on the instability of their cultural categories and perhaps reassess them.

I contend that Euripides’ *Hecuba* and *Heracles* are similarly disaffirmative fictions. I will argue in the following chapters that the violent cultural disruptions found in these plays resist simple resolution and thus deny the possible restoration of the social fabric. Hecuba and Heracles may find some comfort at the ends of their respective plays, but as a result of horrific violence they have lost not only their families but also their faith in the institutions they had erroneously assumed would protect them. Even though Hecuba and Heracles are anomalous characters, the horrific suffering that they both experience and commit occurs because of the fragility of social structures that apply to everyone around them. Consequently there is little indication that these structures offer reliable security for anyone.

It was through these disaffirmative horrors that Euripides encouraged his audience to think critically about their vulnerability in an unstable world. This critical engagement provided valuable practice for the audience. Active engagement in political dialogue and public deliberation in Athens required “rapid but thoughtful assessment of different opinions and narratives,”<sup>129</sup> and the ability to process contradictory claims. Yet the function of horrific extends beyond political advantage. The disaffirmative tragic horrors found in Euripidean drama reflected the disintegrating values and social structures of the world around them. As Thucydides famously observed, the excessive brutality of the Peloponnesian War caused a fundamental disruption in the social order that extended even to the meaning of words; familiar distinctions between bravery and cowardice, prudence and recklessness, and trust

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<sup>128</sup> Tompkins (1985) 200.

<sup>129</sup> Mastronarde (2010) 23.



and suspicion no longer applied in a world where a bloodthirsty ally was dearer than one's own family (3.82.3-3.82.8). In the *Hecuba* and the *Heracles* Euripides did not reassure his audience by offering them hope for the restoration of order but presented them a fascinating and grim portrait of its irreparable disintegration.

## II. HORROR IN EURIPIDES' *HECUBA*

The *Hecuba* serves as a suitable starting point for a discussion of horror in tragedy. Even a casual reader of the play cannot fail to notice its many disturbing elements. Child murder, mutilation, human sacrifice, and multiple ghosts are central features of the play's plot, and Euripides' ambiguous presentation of this material does little to ease the feelings of discomfort such material arouses. Modern scholars have found the tragedy's depiction of unrelenting violence to be "emotionally problematic" and have noted that it "plays havoc with every affective tone established."<sup>1</sup> The play has for this reason, among others, been considered particularly difficult to interpret;<sup>2</sup> some have even argued that the play can be properly called a tragedy and not simply a horror play.<sup>3</sup>

It is not clear, however, whether ancient audiences found the play similarly disturbing. We can only speculate concerning their reactions, as the few ancient sources that refer to this play primarily cite gnomic phrases and other choice quotations without consideration for their dramatic context.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that Renaissance audiences appreciated the play's carnage. Stiblinius ranked it first among the Euripidean plays largely because of its *atrocitas* and includes in his praise a list of the play's most

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<sup>1</sup> Hogan (1972) 66-67. Mossman (1995) 3 cites Hogan as an illustrative example of critical attitudes toward the *Hecuba*.

<sup>2</sup> Mossman (1995) 3. The apparently bipartite structure of the play has also generated critical controversy. Cf. Conacher (1961) 1-8 for a discussion of the play's unity. I do not discuss this matter at length, though my discussion of the play's movements and developments will show the significance of each part for the generation of horror.

<sup>3</sup> Hogan (1972) 67, Rosenmeyer (1987).

<sup>4</sup> Heath (1987b) 40-42.

gruesome elements: *habet enim, Hecubam captivam, Polyxenam mactatam, Polydorum crudeliter interfectum, Polymestorem exoculatum, liberosque eius misere laniatos atque occisos*.<sup>5</sup> Therefore while we may find *Hecuba* to be “one of the most brutal and grim plays of a brutal and grim tragedian,”<sup>6</sup> we cannot take for granted that the original audience shared our assessment. In this chapter I will argue that the play’s brutal violence and its contradiction of familiar cultural categories were, in fact, constructed to elicit horror from its fifth-century audience. I will analyze the effects of the play’s horrific material and show how a reading of the play as disaffirmative horror can contribute to our understanding of it.

There have been many distinct attempts to account for the brutality of the *Hecuba*, but for the sake of simplicity I will discuss three significant trends here before I move on to the play itself. The first kind of approach finds the violence within the play to be shocking and repugnant, and condemns its perpetrators, including Hecuba, as morally degraded. Abrahamson’s interpretation of the work as a “concentration camp play” is illustrative: he argues that the horrific violence suffered by Hecuba and her family causes her to experience an ethical breakdown that compels her to return atrocity for atrocity.<sup>7</sup> The second interpretive approach agrees that Hecuba suffers gross indignities and repellent violence, but sees her revenge against Polymestor as fittingly severe and morally unproblematic: “There is nothing inhuman by Greek standards about Hecuba’s revenge. It is extreme, but so was the crime that

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Heath (1987b) 46. Cf. his article *passim* for a detailed and convincing discussion of Renaissance reception. His conclusion that Renaissance interpretations are closer to ancient opinions than the negative reactions found in modern scholarship is intriguing, but this chapter will refine this judgment substantially.

<sup>6</sup> Mossman (1995) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Abrahamson (1952). Similar views are presented by Grube (1941) 84, Vellacott (1975) 162-163, Reckford (1985), and Nussbaum (1986) 397-421.

provoked it.”<sup>8</sup> Since both views address the play’s final portion, I will discuss them more in the final section of this chapter. I note here, however, that these two approaches are limited by their moralistic tendencies. This is not to claim that ethical considerations are absent in the play; in fact my examination will show that they are quite prominent. But they are part of a larger system of cultural categories that Euripides relentlessly assaults in this play without providing hope that this system can be repaired. Those who attempt to extract a clear moral lesson from the repulsive and terrifying material will be limited by the tragedian’s refusal to provide a clear verdict in the play. The ambiguous and confusing nature of the play’s violence – including both its ethical and non-ethical dimensions<sup>9</sup> – likely generated more questions than answers from ancient audiences.<sup>10</sup>

I therefore align my interpretation of the horrors in the *Hecuba* and their context with approaches that distance themselves from moral assessments of the play. Zeitlin, for example, argues that the play’s excessive violence must be considered within its Dionysiac context (including both Bacchic references in the text itself and the ritual nature of its performance). She contends that though the gruesome material “puts maximum pressure on our moral sensibilities,” the religious considerations should prevent judgmental readings that interpret the play “with the single aim of repudiating the moral world the play presents.”<sup>11</sup>

This is a welcome shift from the moralistic approaches mentioned above, but it gives

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<sup>8</sup> Kovacs (1987) 108. Similar views can be found in Meridor (1978) and Gregory (1991) 110.

<sup>9</sup> I do not intend to create a sophisticated distinction between ethical and non-ethical here or in the dissertation as a whole. Although there is a substantial overlap between things considered transgressively repulsive and those considered immoral (e.g. Douglas’ (1966) 42-58 explanation of Jewish dietary restrictions), subjects can also identify frightening and repulsive objects that do not carry an overtly ethical connotation (e.g. a giant cockroach).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Michelini (1987) 70-94 and Mastronarde (2010) 22-23 for this tendency in Euripides generally. Cf. Mossman (1995) 202-203 on moral ambiguity in *Hecuba*.

<sup>11</sup> Zeitlin (1991) 57.

unwarranted significance to the few references to Dionysus found in the play.<sup>12</sup> Mossman claims that the *Hecuba* can be appreciated on aesthetic grounds: the play's "dramatic technique" – including structure, stagecraft, characterization, plot, and the rhetorical effect of the speeches – are worthy of admiration.<sup>13</sup> She contends that through this technique Euripides elicited confusion and doubt from his audience, as the play closes with the world in disorder.<sup>14</sup> I agree with Mossman's assessment of the play's aesthetic merits and her acknowledgement of the play's disturbing nature, and I shall use her study to support several of my own interpretations. I do not think, however, that her comprehensive account of the play gives full consideration to the specific horrors found within it and their cumulative effect. While she recognizes, for example, the ambiguous nature of Hecuba's character,<sup>15</sup> she does not fully analyze the pervasive contradictions related to Hecuba and her actions throughout the second half of the play: Hecuba defies the fundamental distinctions between male and female, queen and slave established in the first half of the play. I propose that a more detailed investigation into the *Hecuba*'s horrific material and its context in the drama and within fifth-century Greece will illuminate some of the more difficult questions posed by Euripides in this play.

My examination is divided into three main sections. In the first section, I analyze how the ghosts found in the first half of the play create a gruesome and unsettling atmosphere that will remain throughout the drama. In the second, I discuss horrific aspects found in the

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 121. Cf. Heath (1987a) 37-89 on the aesthetic and emotional (as opposed to moral or intellectual) purpose of poetry.

<sup>13</sup> Mossman (1995) 3-5. She also treats the complex themes found in the play, but argues that these can only be understood via "a full study of the whole play."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 204-209.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 194-201.

deaths of Hecuba's two children, particularly their killers' distortions of *φιλία*-based exchange. In the final part, I consider Hecuba's macabre revenge as a breakdown of traditional conceptions of law, political status, and gender. While I am not particularly concerned with debates over the play's apparent lack of unity,<sup>16</sup> I do think that my examination shows that throughout the play there is a consistent pattern involving the horrific disintegration of social structures. Ultimately I argue that we should not simply interpret the horrific material in terms of moral approval or condemnation of particular characters but that we should rather appreciate the ambiguity and discomfort these scenes generate. Euripides, like producers of modern horror, reveals that the civilized qualities on which the Greeks pride themselves "are as subject to alienation and subversion as they are to validation and reaffirmation."<sup>17</sup> The dramatic setting of the *Hecuba* may be remote, but its values and structures are very similar to those of the audience. By disaffirming the stability of these values and structures within the play Euripides revealed to his audience how easily their world might similarly fall apart.

#### **A) Humble Spectres and Gruesome Gifts: Ghosts in the *Hecuba***

The opening of the *Hecuba* is striking because this is the only instance in the extant tragedies in which a dramatic prologue is delivered by a ghost. While ghosts do appear onstage in Aeschylus' *Persians* and *Eumenides*, the audience is prepared for these scenes either by an elaborate ritual introduction (*Persians*) or by events that occur earlier in the dramatic trilogy (*Eumenides*). Moreover, in both of these cases the ghost represented a well-

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<sup>16</sup> The first half of the play focuses on Polyxena's sacrifice, while the second centers on the discovery of Polydorus' corpse and Hecuba's vengeance against Polymestor. Cf. Conacher (1961) 1-8 for a discussion of the interpretive difficulties. I agree with Michelini (1987) 117-128 that we should appreciate Euripides' fondness for juxtapositions and oppositions without searching for the narrative focus and unity that are characteristic of Sophoclean drama.

<sup>17</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 12.

known historical or mythological figure. The sudden and unannounced appearance of the ghost of the relatively unknown Polydorus therefore had the potential to mystify and shock the unprepared audience.<sup>18</sup>

In order to determine more precisely the effect of his appearance at the play's opening, I will consider its literary and cultural context, the possible staging of this scene, and the function of Polydorus' ghost within the context of the *Hecuba*, particularly the relationship between his spirit and that of Achilles. Though this approach is not exhaustive and will not resolve all difficulties, it does provide a valuable framework for our interpretations of this scene. I argue that Euripides' depiction of Polydorus is ironic: on the one hand, a potentially dangerous figure is revealed to be pathetic and harmless; on the other, the heroic ghost that serves as Polydorus' counterpoint demonstrates the capacity for gruesome excess within the traditional code of honor. The opening reveals the disturbing atmosphere of the play that governs the repellent acts of violence within it. This is a world in which horrors come from unexpected sources, where they are the products of the banality of human experience rather than of supernatural forces.<sup>19</sup>

#### A.1) *Cultural and Literary Context*

Ancient Greek attitudes concerning ghosts are difficult to pinpoint because, like most Greek beliefs about the afterlife, they were typically not declared as explicitly as other religious beliefs were.<sup>20</sup> While we would like to know all the associations that ghosts had for ancient audiences, our sources present differing accounts that suggest that these associations

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<sup>18</sup> Polydorus appears briefly in the *Iliad* as the youngest and dearest son of Priam who is easily dispatched by Achilles (*Il.* 20.407-418). Euripides incorporates the traits of youth and innocence into his version of the character, but in all other respects deviates from the myth. Cf. Mossman (1995) 29-31 on Euripides' innovations here.

<sup>19</sup> Kastely (1993) 1037-1039.

<sup>20</sup> Burkert (1985) 198-199.

were context-dependent and highly malleable by individual authors. Despite this variability, there is significant evidence that ancient audiences considered ghosts, especially those belonging to people who died violently and prematurely without proper burial, to be potentially dangerous threats.<sup>21</sup> This is significant for our understanding of the opening of the *Hecuba*, especially since Polydorus' ghost is not discussed by any other character in the play who might clarify how the audience should react to his presence. I shall argue below that Euripides contrasts the audience's preconceptions of vengeful ghosts with the pathetic features of Polydorus.

Due reverence for the dead was a customary practice for ancient Greeks,<sup>22</sup> and in cases where the dead were neglected or mistreated their ghosts posed a significant threat to the living. Johnston defines three types of "restless dead" that can be found in Ancient Greek and other cultures: the unburied (*ἄταφοι*), those who have died prematurely (*ἄωροι*), and those who have died violently (*βιαιοθάνατοι*).<sup>23</sup> The *ἄταφοι* are consistently depicted as bitter and unhappy: Patroclus' spirit tells Achilles that he cannot join with the other spirits in Hades and is condemned to wander until he receives proper burial (*Il.* 23.71-74); Herodotus relates that the ghost of Melissa, Periander's wife, was buried without clothing and so suffered, cold and naked in the afterlife (5.92η); Elpenor reminds Odysseus that if he does not receive the due honors he will bring vengeance with the help of the gods (*μή τοί τι θεῶν μήνυμα γένωμαι*, *Od.*

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<sup>21</sup> I will discuss the threat of the dishonored dead below, but the fear of ghosts generally can be seen in the Anthesteria festival celebrated in Athens. During the festival, the souls of the dead were thought to roam the earth. In addition to making private and public offerings for the deceased, Athenians would chew on hawthorn leaves and smear their doors with pitch to keep away unwanted ghosts; at the end of the festival, people would banish the spirits by shouting *Θύραζε κῆρες · οὐκέτ' Ἀνθεστῆρια ἤ*. Cf. Rohde (1925) 198-199.

<sup>22</sup> Burkert (1985) 194. Rohde (1925) 166-168.

<sup>23</sup> Johnston (1999) 127-128.



11.73).<sup>24</sup> The *ἄωροι*, according to Tertullian, had not completed their allotted time on earth, and so they were condemned to haunt the place where they had died.<sup>25</sup> Hecate included them in her band of violent ghosts, possibly for this reason.<sup>26</sup> The dangerous potential attributed to such ghosts is corroborated by curse tablets, which are frequently found near grave-sites of *ἄωροι*.<sup>27</sup> The *βιαιοθάνατοι* were also frequently summoned in curse tablets,<sup>28</sup> but they were more widely feared because of the threat of pollution associated with their deaths. Antiphon warns judges that those who unfairly judge in favor of a murderer will bring the burden of the victim's vengeance, *μίσσημα*, to the whole community (*Tetr.* 3.1.3).<sup>29</sup> Even when murderers received purificatory rites to cleanse the blood from their hands, these attempts prove futile if the victim's spirit still rages, as Clytemnestra's does in the *Eumenides*.<sup>30</sup>

Though Greek attitudes towards ghosts are not uniform and consistent, Johnston's categorization of the restless dead explains why certain spirits are more dangerous than others. Significantly, she notes that all three types of restless dead possess a liminal and

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<sup>24</sup> While Homer does not explain how exactly Elpenor might exact this vengeance, it is telling that this warning appears even in this predominately pitiable and pathetic situation (11.55-56, 12.11-12). Hector delivers a similar threat to Achilles after the latter vows to deny the former burial after battle (*Il.* 22.358).

<sup>25</sup> Tert. *An.* 56.

<sup>26</sup> See Rohde (1925) 593-594 for a fuller list of ancient sources. Gello, a particularly frightening ghost, was said to have died as a maiden and consequently was rumored to take the lives of young children and unmarried women in vengeance (Zenobius *Prov.* 3.3). Cf. Johnston (1999) 165-183 for a broader account of Gello and other violent ghosts of *ἄωροι* in the ancient world.

<sup>27</sup> Notably Gager (1992) #73 (*Defixionum Tabellae* #52), which mentions the unmarried status of the dead souls being addressed. See Johnston (1999) 77-80 for more examples.

<sup>28</sup> Johnston (1999) 77-79.

<sup>29</sup> See also *Tetr.* 1.3.10 *ἀδίκως δ' ἀπολυομένου τούτου ὑφ' ὑμῶν, ἡμῖν μὲν προστρόπαιος ὁ ἀποθανὼν οὐκ ἔσται, ὑμῖν δὲ ἐνδύμιος γενήσεται.*

<sup>30</sup> Parker (1983) 107-109 concedes that Antiphon and Aeschylus may present worlds "too thick with spirits for everyday habitation," but he notes that their accounts are corroborated by more nuanced references in other authors. Plato, for example, cites an "old tale" concerning the spirits of those killed violently who are unable to find peace in death (*Laws* 866 d5-e6).

transitional status: lack of burial, premature death, and death by violence prevent spirits from becoming fully integrated into the world of the dead.<sup>31</sup> These spirits are thus neither fully alive nor fully dead according to Greek standards, and this defiance of cultural categories makes them unsettling. It is true that the restless dead are also pitied for the marginal status and the suffering they experience in the afterlife,<sup>32</sup> and ancient authors often choose to focus on this aspect of their situation, particularly when the material concerns the victim's family.<sup>33</sup> But the terrifying and repellent qualities of these ghosts cannot be dismissed, particularly when they interact with the living. Tragic depictions of such interactions, in particular, highlight their horrific potential.

Onstage appearances of tragic ghosts mark disturbing experiences for the other characters and presumably for the audience. In Aeschylus' *Persians*, the ghost of Darius is not unwelcome: he is summoned by his wife Atossa, he does not intend any harm against the living, and he does not fit into any of the categories of restless dead mentioned above. But the narrative structure and the immediate reaction of the chorus highlight the shocking nature of the appearance. The first references to Darius involve simple propitiations asking him to provide help from below, and there is no indication that he himself will visit the living. He is lumped together with the gods of the underworld and the dead generally (219-221, 522-523), and he is initially asked to send up gifts to the light and retain everything harmful below (ἐσθλά σοι πέμπειν τέκνω τε γῆς ἔνερθεν ἐς φάος, / τᾶμπαλιν δὲ τῶνδε γαίᾳ κάτοχα μαυροῦσθαι σκότῳ, 222-223). Atossa's first reference to necromancy therefore was likely surprising for

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<sup>31</sup> Johnston (1999) 9-11. Cf. Garland (2001) 101-103.

<sup>32</sup> Rohde (1925) 594 notes that gravestones often refer to the dead as ἄωρος in lamentation.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. the characters in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Suppliants* seek proper burial for the family members as a matter of filial piety and do not fixate on the dangers of their restless ghosts.

the original audience.<sup>34</sup> Her request is unorthodox, as Darius himself remarks that he had difficulty convincing the gods of the underworld to let him return (688-692). And though Darius later shows himself to be a piteous figure, the chorus members are at first awestruck (σέβομαι 694 and 695) by his appearance and are too frightened (δίομαι 700 and 701) to discuss the dire fortunes of the kingdom, though this fear is partly an extension of their previous dread of the living king (σέθεν ἀρχαίῳ περιῖ τάρβει 696).

If an invited ghost can be frightening, an unwelcome one, like Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides*, can be even more terrifying. She appears onstage to chastise the sleeping Erinyes for not chasing Orestes;<sup>35</sup> her influence over the foul goddesses, whom the terrified Pythia vividly describes in lines 50-56, illustrates how dangerous she can be. Clytemnestra's appearance is likely as frightening as that of the Erinyes; she graphically describes and points to the wounds she bears as the result of her violent death (103) – typically ghosts resemble the physical form of their former bodies, including the mutilation done at their demise.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Darius', her death was caused by violence, and she is consequently unable to live peacefully in the underworld (αἰσχρῶς δ' ἀλῶμαι 97).<sup>37</sup> She is scorned by the other spirits for her previous crimes and needs retribution for her own death, but she cannot exact vengeance without the help of the Erinyes. Her admonition is focused solely on rousing the goddesses so that they can exact terrible punishment from Orestes. I shall discuss below in more detail the

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<sup>34</sup> Hickman (1938) 21-24.

<sup>35</sup> It is not entirely clear whether her ghost actually appears onstage. Taplin (1977) 365-369 does not rule out the possibility that the audience only heard her voice coming from offstage, but he notes several reasons for preferring an onstage appearance, including the delayed reveal of her identity (an immediate identification would be welcome for an audience that could not see her) and her specific prompts to look at her form.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Odyssey* 11.40-41 and Plato *Gorg.* 524c for further examples.

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, she is allowed into the realm of the dead, unlike the ghosts of murdered victims mentioned in Plato's *Laws*.

parallels between Clytemnestra's ghost and the ghost of Polydorus in the *Hecuba*; for now I note that Darius and Clytemnestra, the only other onstage ghosts in extant tragedy besides those in the *Hecuba*, are depicted as unusual, frightening, and potentially dangerous figures. This tragic trend, in addition to the general anxieties about restless ghosts discussed above, suggests that the unprompted presence of the ghost at the opening of the *Hecuba* was at least somewhat unsettling. I will argue below that Euripides exploits the horrific potential of Polydorus' ghost but subverts his audience's expectation by presenting him as a pathetic figure, especially in contrast with the cruel spirit of Achilles.

## II.2) *Staging Polydorus*

Since Polydorus receives no verbal introduction prior to his entrance, the staging of this scene significantly influenced the audience's reaction. The ghost might have seemed fearsome and repulsive, but it is also possible that he appeared more ethereal and pathetic.<sup>38</sup> Reconstructing the staging of any ancient play is, of course, highly tentative since we have no stage directions aside from the comments made by the characters themselves.<sup>39</sup> But we can achieve a more plausible, if not conclusive, conception of the visual scene by considering not only cues within the text but also other sources, particularly other tragedies, that provide social and dramatic context for the scene. I argue that the staging of Polydorus' ghost is consistent with, though unfortunately not proof of, the position I will elucidate more fully in the next section: the sight of this ghost at the beginning of this play is horrific, but Euripides subverts his audience's initial horror by contrasting the ghost's dreadful appearance with his pathetic speech. My discussion here will focus on the location of the actor and his costuming.

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<sup>38</sup> Scholars have adopted both positions, as I shall argue below.

<sup>39</sup> Taplin (1977) 7-9.

Scholars are divided concerning where the ghost stood as he delivered his monologue. Some argue that the actor delivered the prologue from on high, either on the *skene* roof or suspended from the *mechane*,<sup>40</sup> but Lane has convincingly argued that such a staging is unnecessary and obtrusive: no other ghost in the extant tragedies appears above the stage, and the textual evidence for Polydorus on high is not compelling;<sup>41</sup> furthermore the ghost's decision to depart in order to avoid contact with Hecuba (*γεραιῇ δ' ἐκποδὼν χωρήσομαι* / *Ἐκάβῃ*, 52-53) suggests that he is on her level.<sup>42</sup> The presence of the ghost on the stage level gives the character a frightening immediacy that might be lost if he were on the *theologeion* or *mechane*. While it is true that figures on high can terrify other characters and, presumably, the audience (e.g. Iris and Lyssa in *Heracles*, Medea at the end of *Medea*), the distance between these figures and the characters onstage reveals superior, typically divine, power that cannot be overcome. Ghosts, on the other hand, do not pose the same type of threat that the gods do: they are specifically chthonic figures that are most frightening when they are in close contact with the living. Hecate, whom I mentioned above, is an illustrative example: she, a goddess, exerts her influence from afar by sending the vengeful ghosts in her service against living victims. Polydorus' ghost confirms that his presence onstage is frightening in his departing remarks: he wants to avoid confronting Hecuba, who comes

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 30, Mastronarde (1990) 276-277. The case for an elevated placement largely depends on Polydorus' remark that he "hovers over" Hecuba (*νῦν δ' ὑπὲρ μητρὸς φίλης* / *Ἐκάβης αἴσσω* 30-31, *αἰωρούμενος* 32) and the tragic convention of placing gods, who often deliver Euripidean prologues, above the stage.

<sup>41</sup> Lane (2007) 290 notes that the two verbs cited as evidence of Polydorus' flight above the *skene* are not conclusive: *αἰωρέσθαι* can denote floating rather than flying high and *αἴσσω* does not carry any implications of flying at all.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 292. Gods who appear above the stage, such as Athena and Poseidon in *Trojan Women*, do not seem to share this worry; conversely Apollo appears on stage level in the prologue of the *Ion* and deliberately departs to avoid human contact (76).

onstage already frightened of his spirit (φάντασμα δειμαίνονσ' ἐμόν, 54); seeing his ghost immediately before her would thus only intensify her fear.<sup>43</sup>

The actor's costume is difficult to discern since no other character sees Polydorus' spirit nor does the ghost describe his appearance in detail. It is not immediately clear whether the actor's costume and mask resembled the appearance of the dangerous ghosts mentioned above or whether he donned less gruesome garb. Scholars have offered both suggestions. Nussbaum, for example, assumes that the character "retains the appearance of the living child without decay or wound" so that Euripides may shock the audience through the contrast between his innocent appearance and the dark opening lines (Ἦκω νεκρῶν κευθμῶνα καὶ σκότου πύλας / λιπών, ἴν' Αἰδης χωρὶς ὤικισται θεῶν, 1-2).<sup>44</sup> While this would create a profound effect, there is no basis for the firmness of her conviction. In fact, many have argued that these lines appear flat and unadorned, especially in comparison to a similar passage Sophocles' *Polyxena*.<sup>45</sup>

Gregory's suggestion that the ghost donned slashed and bloodstained clothing seems more persuasive; she notes that such an appearance would befit Polydorus' mutilated corpse and rent clothing, on which Hecuba and Agamemnon comment explicitly (716-720, 733-735, 782), since Greek popular belief held that spirits resembled their bodies.<sup>46</sup> Literary evidence supports the notion that ghosts resembled their corpses: Odysseus sees in Hades spirits with

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<sup>43</sup> As Gregory (1999) *ad* 53-54 notes, Hecuba's fear is not caused by actually seeing Polydorus; rather, as we learn later (68-97), she is stirred by dreams concerning the fate of her children. That Hecuba fears *for* her son and that his ghost is unlikely to do her harm is an important consideration.

<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 397-8 and 504n. 2.

<sup>45</sup> The lines of *Polyxena* are as follows: ἀκτὰς ἀπαίωνάς τε καὶ μελαμβαθεῖς / λιποῦσα λίμνης ἧλθον, ἄρσενας χοὰς / Ἀχέροντος ὀξυπλήγας ἠχούσας γόους (fr. 523 Radt). Calder (1966) 54-55 condemns Euripides' prologue as a "prosaic travel narrative" and considers it derivative. Mossman (1995) 46 disagrees with his critique, but agrees that the Sophoclean precedent explains the swiftness of the reference.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 1-97.

spear wounds (*Od.* 11.40-41); the ghost of Melissa, Periander's wife, appeared naked before him since he had buried her without ceremonial attire (*Hdt.* 5.92η). Dramatic productions also seem to have followed this precedent: the ghost of Darius likely appeared on stage in majestic attire, since the chorus attribute their fear of him to his former regal status (*Pers.* 694-696);<sup>47</sup> Clytemnestra's spirit explicitly calls attention to the wounds she bears as the result of her violent death and the lack of due treatment following it (*Eum.* 103).<sup>48</sup> If Polydorus appeared onstage without any signs of the mutilation he suffered or the neglect shown to his corpse, this costuming would deviate significantly from literary and dramatic convention. It is impossible to rule out innovation in this case, especially given the innovative use of a ghost to deliver the play's prologue. But, as I will argue, this scene's effect remains strikingly original, in fact is more so, without deviating from traditional visual representations of ghosts.

The gruesome appearance of Polydorus' ghost likely horrified the original audience. As I noted in the section above, ghosts frequently elicited fear and repulsion from ancient Greeks, particularly those liminal spirits who were killed violently and did not receive proper burial. This horrific effect is consistent with Polydorus' remark that Hecuba enters "fearing my phantom" (φάντασμα δειμαίνουσ' ἐμόν, 54). Soon after she emerges, Hecuba echoes Polydorus' remark by claiming she has been roused by "fears, phantoms" (δείμασι φάσμασιν, 70) in her dreams. Her description of these dreams indicates that they were particularly monstrous (μελανοπτερόγων μάτερ ὀνείρων, 71) and violent (εἶδον γὰρ βαλιὰν ἔλαφον λύκου αἵμονι

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Taplin (1977) 115, who does not comment explicitly on the costuming but notes that his appearance must be "majestic."

<sup>48</sup> Mossman (1995) 50 correctly notes that Polydorus, unlike Clytemnestra, does not call attention to his physical wounds or clothing in his monologue. But we should not accept this as evidence that his appearance did not reflect his violent death and the mistreatment of his corpse. Polydorus ghost addresses no internal audience within the play, nor does he share in Clytemnestra's desire to arouse anger and indignation at his mistreatment.

χαλαῖν / σφαζομέναν, 90-91). I am not suggesting that Hecuba's remarks are meant to describe literally the costuming of Polydorus' ghost, as has been suggested.<sup>49</sup> I do contend, however, that the repetition of key terms relating to fear and ghosts as well as the following morbid descriptions of Hecuba's dream imply that Polydorus' spirit was costumed in a manner that reflected the macabre tone of the dream.

The contrast between the pathetic tone of Polydorus' speech and his horrific appearance is striking. Some scholars have avoided this contrast by arguing that the costuming should reflect his humble words. Mossman, for example, proposes that "this ghost appear as delicate and fragile as possible" in order to distinguish himself from the powerful ghost of Achilles, which appears (offstage) to the Greek army demanding a human sacrifice for his tomb (35-44).<sup>50</sup> But the difference in power is not the only point of consideration here. Achilles appears before the army above his tomb dressed in gold armor (110), which illustrates not only his military prestige but also the considerable effort the Greeks have made in giving him a proper burial.<sup>51</sup> Polydorus' ghost announces that he has received no such burial (ἄταφος, 30), thus making his note that Achilles' spirit appears over his tomb (37) all

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<sup>49</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1909) 446-447, for example, interprets Hecuba's comment on "black-winged dreams" (71) as an indication that Polydorus's ghost, like some depictions of spirits on amphorae, appeared either on stage or in Hecuba's dream as a figure with black wings. The desire to consult iconographic evidence is understandable, but unfortunately representations of ghosts in antiquity are not consistent: while some vase paintings depict ghosts as winged, others present spirits as virtually indistinguishable from the living. Cf. Vermuele (1979) 29-32. Moreover, given the frequent designation of dreams as "winged" in Greek literature, Gregory (1999) *ad* 71 is probably right in condemning Wilamowitz's suggestion as "too literal-minded."

<sup>50</sup> Mossman (1995) 50. She does not, however, adopt Nussbaum's position that the ghost should appear simply as a child, but instead argues that his costume most likely indicated clearly that "he was royal and that he was dead," perhaps including an "unnaturally pale" mask (50 n. 9).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Scott (1918) 682-684 on the presence of armor in funeral rites, including those of Eetion (*Il.* 6.417-419), Elpenor (*Od.* 12.12-15), and Ajax (*Ajax* 576-577). Achilles' famous armor was not of course included in his burial, but his corpse was adorned with "immortal clothing" (ἄμβροτα εἴματα, *Od.* 24.59). At any rate, the contrast between the description of his gleaming arms here and the later description of Polydorus' mutilated body (716-720) is striking.



the more significant. Polydorus' torn and bloody clothing would emphasize the difference between the dreadful treatment of his body and the honors shown to that of Achilles.

I contend that Euripides presented the pathetic ghost of Polydorus in horrific costuming in order to demonstrate a sharp contrast between appearance and reality. This would not be the only such instance in which a character's costuming is more frightening than his or her actions. For example, the chorus in the *Heracles* is initially terrified by the grotesque appearance of Lyssa, but the ensuing dialogue reveals that she is the only divine voice of reason, whereas Iris and Hera are the bloodthirsty proponents of violence (814-858). I argue that Euripides here similarly presents Polydorus' ghost as a horrific figure whose threatening nature dissipates as his prologue reveals that he is uninterested in violent retribution. Such a staging would create a chilling atmosphere for the audience, an atmosphere in which appearance and reality are not in accord and in which violence comes from unexpected sources. This account of the staging of Polydorus' ghost fits with the disaffirmative tone of the play, as I shall argue throughout this chapter, as well as with the limited evidence we have for ghosts in Greek culture and in tragedy.

### II.3) *The text of the Hecuba*

Polydorus' ghost at the beginning of the play presents potential dangers that are ultimately discarded by the end of his monologue. I would like to discuss three features of his character that would likely generate feelings of fear and repulsion from the audience: his correspondence with literary precedents for dangerous spirits, the liminal and ambiguous nature of his self-identification, and the disturbing dreams his presence generates for his mother.

Polydorus' ghost reveals that he possesses all of the traits associated with particularly dangerous ghosts. As I mentioned earlier, Johnston has noted that violent and restless ghosts frequently belong to those who have not received proper burial and who have been killed violently, particularly if they were very young. Polydorus' body lies neglected in the ocean and unburied (ἄταφος, 30), he suffered a violent death at the hands of Polydorus (κτείνει με ... κτανών, 25-27), and he was killed at a young and vulnerable age, a point that receives particular emphasis (παῖς 3; παισί, 12; νεώτατος, 13; οὔτε γὰρ φέρειν ὄπλα / οὔτ' ἔγχος οἶός τ' ἢ νέωι βραχίονι, 14-15). I also argued above that such ghosts were likely repulsive because of their liminal nature. Since they have not fulfilled their natural life or received proper burial, they belong to neither the underworld nor the world of the living. They defy the essential distinction between living and dead and consequently are endowed with destructive power.

The opening monologue of the *Hecuba* further establishes Polydorus' liminal nature by having him identify both with his spirit and with his corpse. There are seven shifts in first-person subject between Polydorus *qua* ghost and *qua* corpse. He introduces himself as a spirit residing in Hades (Ἦκω νεκρῶν κευθμῶνα καὶ σκότου πύλας / λιπών, 1-2). He then associates himself with his corpse by claiming that he lies on the beach (κεῖμαι δ' ἐπ' ἀκταῖς, ἄλλοτ' ἐν πόντου σάλῳ, / πολλοῖς διαύλοις κυμάτων φορούμενος, 28-29). His remark that he hovers over his mother's head reveals that he has resumed identifying as a ghost (νῦν δ' ὑπὲρ μητρὸς φίλης / Ἐκάβης αἰσσω, 30-31). Following this, he pronounces that he will appear (φανήσομαι, 47); the audience might interpret the verbal resonance with the appearance (φανείς, 37) of Achilles' ghost as an indication that Polydorus is referring to himself as a spirit, but the next line reveals that he means as a corpse on the beach (δούλης ποδῶν πάροισεν ἐν κλυδωνίῳ, 48). He then describes his request to the gods below (ἐξήγησάμην, 49) to show

that he is again presenting himself as a ghost, but his request “to fall into his mother’s arms” (*κάς χέρας μητρὸς πεσεῖν*, 50) again assumes an identification with the corpse. His departing remarks indicate that his final self-reference is as a spirit (*γεραιᾷ δ’ ἐκποδὼν χωρήσομαι*, 52). The character’s confused identity is further revealed through the comments *σῶμ’ ἐρημώσας ἐμόν* (31) and *φάντασμα δειμαίνουσ’ ἐμόν* (54), which are nearly identical in meter and phrasing and in which Polydorus distances himself from his corpse and spirit, respectively.<sup>52</sup>

The latter phrase is particularly intriguing because it is unclear how Hecuba, the subject of *δειμαίνουσ’*, relates to Polydorus’ ghost. She incorporates the same vocabulary into her monody soon after she emerges onstage: *τί ποτ’ αἶρόμαι ἔννυχος οὔτω / δείμασι φάσμασιν*; (69-70). The proximity of these lines indicates that this verbal echo is significant and that Polydorus’ ghost is correct in claiming that his presence causes his mother to fear. The specific way in which the ghost relates to Hecuba’s dream, however, is not quite as certain. It is difficult to ascertain whether Polydorus’ ghost appears directly in Hecuba’s dream or whether he is in some way causing the dream. This is not a case of dream visitation, as Gregory rightly observes, since Hecuba’s confused description of the dream makes clear that she has not communicated directly with her son’s spirit.<sup>53</sup> She associates the intense fear (*οὔποτ’ ἐμὰ φρήν ὧδ’ ἀλίσστον / φρίσσει ταρβεῖ*, 85-86) generated by the dream with Polydorus’ fate (*ὦ χθόνιοι θεοί, σώσατε παῖδ’ ἐμόν*, 80), but she never acknowledges explicitly that she has seen her son’s spirit. She mentions, moreover, multiple apparitions (*φάσμασιν*), as opposed to the singular used by Polydorus’ ghost earlier. Lane contends that it is possible that one of

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<sup>52</sup> See Gregory (1992) for a defense against those who consider 54 spurious.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 53-54.

these apparitions belongs to Polydorus, but concedes, with Gregory, that there is no evidence that such is necessarily the case.<sup>54</sup>

There does, however, seem to be evidence that the presence of Polydorus' ghost is causing the dream. Hecuba's concern for her son soon after she wakes and her later recognition that her visions related to him (*ὄψιν ... ἃν ἐσεῖδον ἀμφὶ σοῦ*, 704-6) suggest that the source of the dream had an interest in Polydorus' fate. The notion that proximity with a ghost causes disturbing dreams is not unprecedented. Clytemnestra's ghost in the *Eumenides* attempts to rouse the Furies by detailing her sufferings and urging them to take vengeance on Orestes, and in so doing she "creates a climate for their dream" without necessarily appearing directly to them in their sleep.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the presence of Polydorus' spirit causes Hecuba to experience macabre dreams full of violent images, including the bloody slaughter of a deer.

These horrific elements of Polydorus' ghost are undercut, however, by his lack of interest in attaining vengeance. Though in many respects he resembles dangerous ghosts with which tragic audiences would be familiar, the miserable fate suffered by Polydorus does not arouse his wrath. Clytemnestra's spirit lists the indignities she has suffered, in both the world above and below, as reasons why the Furies should be enraged (*μηνίεσται*) on her behalf and take vengeance on Orestes (*Eum.* 94-139). Polydorus' ghost delivers a monologue that follows a similar pattern: he first recounts the brutal nature of his death, the neglect shown to his corpse, and the consequent restlessness of his spirit (*Hec.* 1-34); then he explains his desire – not for vengeance, but to fall into his mother's hands and to obtain proper burial (49-52). The fourteen-line passage separating his suffering and his wishes serves several important functions. They of course provide the audience with essential background

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<sup>54</sup> Lane (2007) 291, Gregory (1999) *ad* 53-54.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory (1992) 269.

information (i.e. the appearance of Achilles' ghost and its significance for Polyxena and Hecuba) that one expects to find in an opening monologue. But they also generate dramatic tension by delaying the revelation of the ghost's purpose and by offering a point of comparison, Achilles' ghost, which the audience can consider when reacting to Polydorus' spirit.

The change in subject from Polydorus' current status to the circumstances in the Greek camp creates suspense concerning his ghost's intentions. He ends the account of his sufferings by noting that he has been hovering over his mother for the previous two days (30-34). Though it is clear he intends no harm for his "dear mother" (*μητρὸς φίλης*), he does not indicate initially the purpose of his visit. Given the precedents for the behavior of ghosts, the original audience could not rule out that Polydorus might want in addition to burial vengeance against the man who killed him and neglected his corpse. When he resumes his own account, he begins by proclaiming "I will appear" (*φανήσομαι*, 47); he uses the same verb to indicate the appearance of Achilles' ghost (*φανείς*, 37), and this verbal similarity perhaps suggests that he will make similar demands upon his mother for due honors. But Polydorus is referring to his body here, not to his ghost (48), and his spirit never communicates his wishes to his mother openly. He instead pleads with the gods below for burial, and burial only (*ὅσονπερ ἦθελλον τυχεῖν*, 51), at his mother's hands. The simplicity and innocence of his appeal is made all the more striking by this lack of direct interaction between Polydorus and his mother. Though he influences her dream, Hecuba does not understand it fully until later (*ὅψιν ... ἂν ἐσεῖδον ἄμφι σοῦ*, 704-6). Moreover, Polydorus' body is discovered only while Hecuba's fellow slave looks for water for Polyxena's burial; Polydorus' request is thus answered only indirectly and as a consequence of the gruesome request of another ghost, that of Achilles.

The description of Achilles' ghost in the monologue introduces an important juxtaposition that affects our interpretation of Polydorus' ghost. Euripides does not frequently incorporate ghosts into his tragedies: Polydorus and Achilles are the only significant ghosts within the extant Euripidean corpus.<sup>56</sup> We should not, therefore, assume that the representation of these two spirits is merely coincidental. Rather, they pose a significant contrast that reveals not only the important distinction between appearance and reality in this play, but also the instability of the characters' (and, by extension, the audience's) assumptions about honoring the dead. As in my discussion of Polydorus' spirit, I will look at significant literary precedents as well as the play itself in my examination of the function of Achilles' ghost, particularly how it may be compared with the ghost of Polydorus.

As I noted above, Polydorus' ghost possesses characteristics of the restless ghosts that Greeks considered to be most threatening, but his pitiful nature defies expectations. Achilles' ghost seems to present the opposite predicament: he suffered an honorable death and received proper burial, but he is discontented and wants further offerings, he is able to communicate his wishes directly to the Greek army, and he significantly affects the course of action in the first half of the play. Euripides does not provide many details concerning the Greek soldiers' treatment of Achilles prior to this appearance, but there is little to suggest that the Greeks did not honor him with a proper burial after his death.<sup>57</sup> The play contains repeated references to his tomb, which occur in all three accounts of his appearance (37, 93,

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<sup>56</sup> Hickman (1938) notes the presence of "pseudo-ghosts" in the extant plays (e.g. hallucinations of Clytemnestra in *Orestes*, the phantom double of the eponymous protagonist referenced in *Helen*) and inconclusive descriptions found in fragments (e.g. the tale of Glaucus in *Polyidus* and the brief return of the fallen hero in *Protesilaus*).

<sup>57</sup> The audience was familiar with the funeral of Achilles from accounts found in the *Aethiopis* and in *Od.* 24.43-94.

109).<sup>58</sup> These references to honored burial are in stark contrast with the treatment of Polydorus, who remains unburied (ἄταφος, 30), so that his spirit does not have a fixed location where he can appear. He claims to have deserted his body (31) in order to visit his mother, but he also claims to have come up from the underworld (1-2). As I noted earlier, this migratory nature is characteristic of ghostly unrest and is understandable in the case of Polydorus.

It is unclear, however, why Achilles' spirit should be discontented with the tomb and burial provisions provided by the Greeks. Euripides is not the first to mention the sacrifice of Polyxena at Achilles' tomb, nor is it likely that he is the first to depict Achilles' spirit demanding this sacrifice.<sup>59</sup> But even these earlier treatments do not fully explain why Achilles' ghost demands such an offering. His desire for human sacrifice is perhaps prefigured by the sacrifice of twelve Trojan youths that he carried out for his dead companion Patroclus (*Il.* 21.25-32, 23.175-177). Homer's remark that Achilles "plotted evil deeds in his mind" (κακά δὲ φρεσὶ μῆδετο ἔργα, 23.176) suggests that this act was meant to appease his own wrath rather than to honor Patroclus, whose spirit requested only immediate burial and a shared grave with Achilles (21.65-92). King proposes that Achilles' request may also be related to the "vengeful nature of Greek hero-ghosts."<sup>60</sup> These hero-ghosts are

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Gregory (1999) *ad* 37 for the location of the tomb on the Thracian side of the Hellespont, instead of the traditional location on the other side.

<sup>59</sup> The sacrifice of Polyxena was first referenced by the author of the *Sack of Ilium*, as reported by Proclus in *Chrestomathia* fr. 239 Severyns. Achilles' demand for this sacrifice may have been in Simonides, but Conacher (1961) 4 notes that the author of *On the Sublime* 15.7 only writes that Simonides vividly presented the hero's ghost, and he does not explicitly mention Polyxena. Cf. Gantz (1993) 657-659 on variations of the myth. Sophocles' *Polyxena*, to which the author compares Simonides' depiction of Achilles' ghost, was likely produced not long before *Hecuba* and therefore may have been the most familiar to the audience, though unfortunately we know little about the context of the appearance of Achilles' ghost in fr. 523 Radt. Cf. Mossman (1995) 31-32 for a brief discussion of literary antecedents and 42-47 for a more detailed examination of the relationship between *Polyxena* and *Hecuba*.

<sup>60</sup> King (1985) 49.

frequently found as active agents in local Greek legends, typically plaguing communities for grievances suffered by the heroes while they were alive or for disgraces to their sanctuaries after they had died. For example, a hero-ghost at Temesa, enraged at the local population who stoned him to death for raping a virgin, demanded a yearly sacrifice of a beautiful maiden.<sup>61</sup>

In the *Hecuba* Achilles' ghost does not appear to be angry at a past wrong so much as he seems discontented with the offerings that have been given to him. In each account of his appearance there is a reference to his desire for a *γέρας*, a Homeric term for a prize of honor (41, 94, 115). The emphasis on this type of reward may be a specific reference to the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in the first book of the *Iliad*, in which the merit of the two heroes and the rewards due to them, specifically foreign concubines, is of particular concern. Just as Agamemnon refuses to give up his concubine and go "ungifted" (*ἀγέραστος*, *Il.* 1.119), so Achilles's ghost is angered at being denied a prize of honor (*ἀγέραστον*, *Hec.* 115).<sup>62</sup> The presence of the adjective in both texts is significant: it is not a common term in either the *Iliad* or the Euripidean corpus,<sup>63</sup> and so audiences likely detected the Homeric echo, especially given the familiar epic context. The similarity in circumstances, however, only reveals the "aberrant quality" of this sacrifice.<sup>64</sup> Whereas the transmission of concubines to living heroes was a standard way of rewarding successful heroes, the same honor is not typically conferred to the dead. Homeric warriors honor their dead with ritual offerings,

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<sup>61</sup> Rohde (1925) 135-136. The story of the hero-ghost at Temesa can be found in Pausanias 6.6.4-6.6.11.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Mossman (1995) 31-34 and King (1985) *passim* for a discussion of the parallels between Achilles in the *Hecuba* and in *Iliad* 1 and 9.

<sup>63</sup> It occurs only here in the *Iliad*, and Euripides uses the term here and again in *Bacchae* 1378. There are no other examples of the word in tragedy.

<sup>64</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 113-15.



lamentation, proper washing and adornment of the body, cremation before burial, and a social gathering usually including feasting and funeral games.<sup>65</sup> The dead suitors in the *Odyssey*, for example, complain that their bodies have not been cleansed and their friends have not lamented them, actions that are labeled “the prize of the dead” (γέρας ... θανόντων, 24.188-190). Human sacrifice for a fallen warrior is highly irregular, one that Garland deems “unique and horrifying.”<sup>66</sup>

Achilles’ request in the *Hecuba* thus should horrify by its violent distortion of customary behavior. He appropriates a familiar term that represents a common practice among the living, but employs it in order to receive an uncommon gift, one that generates fear from the victim’s family (καὶ τόδε δεῖμά μοι, *Hec.* 92) and forces the Greeks to commit a perverted sacrifice that would likely cause revulsion. In Greek literature human sacrifice is almost always presented as a savage act.<sup>67</sup> Herodotus identifies human sacrifice as a practice found primarily among uncivilized foreigners, such as the Scythians and Taurians; when the Greek king Menelaus sacrifices two boys in Egypt, the historian calls the act impious (περὶ ἡγῆμα οὐκ ὅσιον, 2.119.2).<sup>68</sup> The eponymous maiden of *Iphigenia among the Taurians* considers the Taurians savage and their practice of human sacrifice unspeakable (30-41). The chorus of *Agamemnon* consider the king’s decision to sacrifice his daughter to be impious and unholy (δυσσεβῆ ... ἀναγνον ἀνίερον, *Ag.* 219-220).

In the *Hecuba*, however, Achilles’ appearance and perverse request do not seem to elicit fear or revulsion from the Greek generals. Some have interpreted the lack of emotion in

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<sup>65</sup> Garland (1982) *passim*, Finley (1964) 138-139.

<sup>66</sup> Garland (1982) 72, in discussing Achilles’ sacrifice of the Trojan youths for Patroclus.

<sup>67</sup> Segal (1974) 301-307 discusses human sacrifice and cannibalism as characteristic behaviors of uncivilized peoples.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Hughes (1991) 8-10 on human sacrifice in Herodotus.

the Greeks' response as evidence against the horrific nature of this ghost. King, for example, argues that the Homeric reference found in the ghost's speech and the "mundane politics" in the ensuing debate among the Greeks illustrate that Achilles' spirit "has not arisen simply from the dark regions of Greek religion; this ghost is a literary caricature."<sup>69</sup> I contend, however, that the Greek generals here are not reliable indicators of the ghost's emotional effect. The horror of this scene largely depends not only on Achilles' misappropriation of an acceptable form of honorable recognition, but also on the willingness of the Greeks to accept this misappropriation without significant hesitation or doubt. The chorus' description of the debate reveals that the perversity of human sacrifice is never considered, not even by those opposed to the sacrifice. Agamemnon is the only voice on the opposing side mentioned by the chorus, and his efforts are explained as an attempt to promote Hecuba's interest (i.e., because of his relationship with her other daughter Cassandra, 120-122). Hecuba alone recognizes the aberrance of the act by noting that an animal sacrifice (*βουθυτεῖν*) would be more fitting than human sacrifice (*ἀνθρωποσφαγεῖν*, 260-261). The latter term is a hapax legomenon that condenses the perversity of ritual slaughter and human victim into a single word.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, the Greek debate concerns only the marginal status of the human victim

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<sup>69</sup> King (1985) 51-52.

<sup>70</sup> Adkins (1966) 199 and Gregory (1999) *ad* 260-62 note that her condemnation (*μᾶλλον πρέπει*) is not particularly vehement and argue that if Euripides had wanted to emphasize the repellent qualities of human sacrifice he would have had Hecuba label the act as *κακόν*, *αἰσχρόν*, or *άνόσιον*. It is true that Hecuba's comments concerning human sacrifice here are not as strong as those she makes in *Trojan Women* (*άνοσίων προσφαγμάτων*, 628), but this is not an indication that neither Hecuba nor the audience found the act repellent. The chorus' earlier report of the Greek debate made clear that the issue at stake was not whether they should offer human sacrifice but rather whether they should sacrifice Polyxena. Hecuba, accordingly, mentions the impropriety of the sacrifice without particular emphasis so that she can suggest a more fitting victim (i.e. Helen) without hypocrisy (262-270).

(*δούλων σφαγίων*, 135) and the prestige of the dead hero who will receive her (*ἄριστον Δαναῶν πάντων*, 134) without regard for whether such a sacrifice is appropriate.<sup>71</sup>

The ambiguous limits of Achilles' power underscore the horrific nature of the Greeks' ready assent to commit human sacrifice. The Greeks are not frightened by his ghost's appearance, nor do they consider the implications of denying his request. Some scholars have suggested that Achilles is preventing the soldiers from leaving (*κατέσχ'*, 38; *ἔσχε*, 111) by stopping the winds. These scholars thus see a parallel between the sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena: the Greeks sacrifice the former to induce Artemis to prevent adverse winds and allow them to travel to Troy (Ag. 104-255); they sacrifice the latter to appease Achilles and thus end the adverse winds blocking their return home.<sup>72</sup> While this explanation would clarify how Achilles holds back the Greek army, it cannot be supported by the text. For one, the Greeks were already at sea when Achilles appeared; the chorus notes that Achilles stopped the ships as their sails were already pressed against the forestays (111-112), which would be impossible if the winds were adverse at this point.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Agamemnon mentions the lack of favorable winds *after* the sacrifice of Polyxena (898-901).<sup>74</sup> Therefore, if this sacrifice had been intended to improve sailing conditions, it was ultimately

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<sup>71</sup> Pace Kovacs (1987) 86, who claims that Odysseus' mention of *δούλων σφαγίων* (135) suggests "that the shedding of human blood, even that of a slave, was deemed by some to be a repugnant measure." His later contention that the chorus' account does not describe a debate about the identity of the victim (i.e. suggestions for alternate victims) is correct (113-114), but Euripides withholds any other arguments against sacrificing Polyxena besides her connection to Agamemnon. The only signs suggesting that the Greeks in this play find the act of human sacrifice to be repugnant are Odysseus' offhand remark at 395 and Neoptolemus' hesitation before slaying Polyxena. See my discussion on pages 94-99 below on the Greeks' acceptance of the sacrifice.

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Collard (1991) *ad* 33, Hughes (1991) 61-62, Anderson (1997) 59-61.

<sup>73</sup> Kovacs (1987) 145n. 58.

<sup>74</sup> Agamemnon attributes the weather conditions to a god (*οὐ γὰρ ἦν σ' οὐρίους πνοὰς θεός*, 900), not to Achilles. It is unlikely that the Greek king is using *θεός* to refer to Achilles. Kovacs (1996) 63-65 ) notes that neither the appellation nor the ability to control the winds are associated with dead heroes in Greek literature before the *Hecuba*. He concedes that Achilles' spirit, like those of other heroes, may have some limited powers, but that the Greeks are more worried here that "like anyone else he can put the kibosh on an enterprise by uttering words of bad omen at a crucial time" (65).

unsuccessful, and the lack of any mention of this failure in the second half of the play would seem clumsy.<sup>75</sup> Achilles' ghost does not then pose any immediate physical threat to the Greeks; rather, he incites his living comrades to commit a savage act in the guise of honoring the dead.

The juxtaposition of the ghosts of Polydorus and Achilles, then, reveals two horrific elements found in the *Hecuba*. The first of these is the subversion of the traditional Greek conceptions of ghostly activity. Polydorus' ghost suffers unrest as a result of his brutal murder and the neglect of his corpse, but does not crave vengeance as many other spirits do in such circumstances. This ghost is liminal in nature and potentially threatening, but the potential horror of his character is defused by the modesty and innocence of his desire for burial alone. Achilles' ghost does not have the same cause for complaint nor does his spirit possess the liminal features that violent ghosts typically exhibit. He nevertheless demands a prize that entails the slaughter of an innocent maiden, and he perverts a traditional method of honoring the living by applying it to the dead. The second horrific element is found not in the ghosts themselves but in the behavior they inspire in others. Polydorus' ghost can only communicate indirectly with his mother through dreams that cause Hecuba to feel intense fear and confusion. He shares his prophetic knowledge with the audience, but he does not or cannot convey this important information to the mother whom he loves and laments; Hecuba does not glean any useful information from the dream, learning its true meaning only after she finds his body. Achilles' ghost communicates openly with the Greeks and convinces them to commit a monstrous act of human sacrifice. Despite his powerful appearance, he does not incite sacrifice through the exertion of physical power, as a god might, but by misappropriating a familiar practice among Homeric warriors. It is the Greeks' acceptance of

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<sup>75</sup> Gregory (1999) xxix-xxxi and *ad* 900, Kovacs (1996) 63-5.

this misappropriation that brings about the death of Polyxena. These elements create an unsettling atmosphere that will be sustained throughout the play, an atmosphere in which threats emerge from unexpected places and in which established codes of conduct are neglected or perverted.

### **B) τίνα δὲ καὶ σπεύδων χάριν; Foul Friendship in the *Hecuba***

I would now like to discuss more fully violations of these codes of conduct and how they contribute to the horrific nature of Polydorus' murder and Polyxena's sacrifice. Polydorus' ghost informs the audience at the play's beginning that Hecuba will see "two corpses of her two children" (δυοῖν δὲ παῖδων δύο νεκρῶ κατόψεται, 45). The use of the dual number and the repetition of the word *δύο* in this terse summation closely joins the fates of Polydorus and Polyxena in the audience's mind:<sup>76</sup> Hecuba's two children are reduced to the same state by the play's end, both innocent victims of murderous *φίλοι* (Odysseus and Polymestor, respectively). This is not to say that the differing circumstances of their deaths are insignificant for our understanding of these violent acts. Rather, Euripides explores how the killers' different assessments concerning bonds of *φιλία* and the obligations these relationships entail can lead to similar horrific consequences. I will examine the repellent and frightening qualities of each murder separately, as well as the justifications offered by those responsible for each death. As above, I will consider the cues within the text and relevant contemporary sources in determining the emotional effect of these scenes. I argue in this section that the horrific violence in the play arises because of the fragility of private bonds of *φιλία*. The killers of Hecuba's children, namely the Greek soldiers (particularly Odysseus)

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<sup>76</sup>Hecuba's use of the dual in her request to bury her two children together confirms that she considers their deaths to be closely related (ὥς τῷδ' ἀδελφῶν πλησίον μιᾷ φλογί / δισσή μέριμνα μητρὶ, κρυφθῆτον χθονί, 896-897).

and Polymestor, offer distinct, yet mutually reinforcing, conceptions of *φιλία* that allow them to destroy those who most need their protection.

To understand how *φιλία* operates in the *Hecuba*, I would like to discuss briefly its importance in fifth-century Athens as well as Greek tragedy. The term indicates not simply affection, in fact such feelings need not necessarily apply,<sup>77</sup> but rather a “series of complex obligations, duties and claims.”<sup>78</sup> A Greek’s *φίλοι* included his immediate family members, remote kinsmen, close friends, members of his tribe, guest-friends, and political allies, among others; he was expected to defend their interest whenever possible.<sup>79</sup> Such relationships depended on acts of reciprocity that solidified these bonds: parents were expected to raise their children and the children, in turn, were expected to honor their parents’ graves; fathers endowed their daughters with dowries and other marriage gifts to show goodwill to their sons-in-law and secure the bond between the married couple, as well as the two houses being joined;<sup>80</sup> guest-friends, as *φίλοι* belonging to separate communities, defined their relationship through exchanges of gifts and favors.<sup>81</sup> Bonds of *φιλία* were at the core of ethical, legal, and political matters: “to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies”

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<sup>77</sup> Adkins (1963) 36.

<sup>78</sup> Goldhill (1986) 82.

<sup>79</sup> This traditional and inclusive conception of *φιλία* has been challenged by Konstan (1997), who argues for a more restrictive sense involving friendship (not kinship) based on affection, not on obligation. I, however, agree with Belfiore (2000) 19-20, who gives a spirited defense of the traditional conception using examples from tragedy and Aristotle while acknowledging that in many cases Konstan’s emphasis on affection is warranted. My discussion of the *Hecuba* should make clear why we should not dismiss the importance of mutual obligation in *φιλία*.

<sup>80</sup> Lacey (1980) 107-110.

<sup>81</sup> See Herman (1987) 16-31 on *ξενία* as a type of *φιλία*. He defines *ξενία* as “a bond of solidarity manifesting itself in an exchange of goods and services between individuals originating from separate social units” (10). The exchange of armor between Diomedes and Glaucus in *Il.* 6.212-236 is a paradeigmatic example.

was a fundamental principle that could justify almost any action.<sup>82</sup> There were obstacles, however, that prevented one from always assisting his *φίλοι*, particularly when he had to choose between competing claims of obligation. For example, the democratic culture in Athens encouraged citizens to seek the communal interest of the *πόλις* over their familial relationships.<sup>83</sup> The tensions between such competing claims proved to be fertile ground for tragic conflict.

Tragic acts of violence frequently occur between *φίλοι*, and Aristotle argues that such conditions are the most likely to arouse pity and fear from the audience (*Poet.* 1453b19-22). I contend that violence against a *φίλος* additionally generates feelings of horror, in that those harming their kin or friends, whether this act is intentional or not, violate a significant cultural category associated with mutual protection and benefit. To slay one's mother, as Orestes does, is to commit a paradoxical act that defies a fundamental bond established by nature and held sacred by society.<sup>84</sup> Greeks depended on *φίλοι* to promote their safety and interest in the private and public spheres; without these relationships, one was vulnerable to attacks from enemies within the community and from those outside of it. It is essential to understand the nature of the bonds of *φιλία* in the *Hecuba* in order to gauge the effect of the killings within the play. Both Polyxena and Polydorus are involved, directly or indirectly, in *φιλία* with their killers, but the killers neglect these relationships in favor of material gain or competing claims from other relationships.

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<sup>82</sup> Dover (1974) 180-181. The Greeks adherence to this principle should not be overstated, but I agree with Pearson (1962) 17-18 that "popular ethics does not abandon a traditional precept simply because it is found not be universally applicable." Cf. Blundell (1989) for a more detailed discussion of this principle as it appears in Greek tragedy.

<sup>83</sup> Pericles' funeral oration is the most commonly cited text in support of this claim (Th. 2.40).

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Goldhill (1986) 84 on how "the language of kinship attempts to deal with the family at war with itself."

### B.1) *Odysseus, Hecuba, and the Sacrifice of Polyxena*

The relationship between Hecuba and Odysseus is difficult to define because they each have different conceptions of it: while Hecuba believes that Odysseus is a *φίλος* and is obligated to protect her daughter, Odysseus denies *φιλία* between the two and therefore dismisses the claims that such a bond would entail. The “great contest” between them (*ἀγὼν μέγας*, 239) is a debate fundamentally concerned with the implications of Polyxena’s sacrifice for preexisting bonds of *φιλία*. The audience is confronted with competing claims about the nature of this killing, and their interpretation of the act depends largely on the position they accept: is the sacrifice an honorable offering to a *φίλος* who deserves reward or the callous murder of a *φίλος* out of political ambition? I contend that neither position is completely tenable and that this scene is not meant to illustrate the complete moral failings of either figure. Rather, the irreconcilability of these competing conceptions and the horrific result that follows demonstrate a larger crisis in the play, namely the breakdown of *φιλία* as a source of protection for the weak and its role as a primarily destructive force in the play.

Euripides’ deviation from traditional myth demonstrates his interest in challenging traditional conceptions of *φιλία*. The original audience had no reason to assume the existence of any significant relationship between a Greek soldier and the captive slave of his ally. The play introduces Odysseus as the foremost proponent of sacrificing Polyxena, and he convinces the Greek generals by emphasizing mutual obligations between Greeks (*Δαναοὶ* *Δαναοῖς*) and noting that the sacrifice of a slave (*δούλων σφαγίων*) should not deter them from honoring their comrade (131-140). Like the other generals, he does not explicitly mention the name of the sacrificial victim, much less any claim she might have on his friendship. But in the later confrontation between Hecuba and Odysseus the tragedian radically complicates this



situation. In supplicating Odysseus Hecuba makes an appeal to his previous supplication of the queen and her decision to spare his life, and this Euripidean innovation reveals a surprising twist to their conflict (239-250).<sup>85</sup> Her reference to this previous favor is powerful, as reciprocity is one of the most compelling arguments a suppliant can offer: such appeals call attention not only to the previous benefits offered but also to the relationship established between the two after the acceptance of the first supplication.<sup>86</sup> It is clear then that Euripides is inviting the audience to consider seriously this slave's claim to *φιλία* with her conqueror, a claim that otherwise might be casually dismissed.<sup>87</sup>

Hecuba considers her act of mercy to be the foundation of a bond of *φιλία* between Odysseus and herself. She explicitly uses the term *φίλος* twice in reference to their relationship: once in condemning Odysseus' act of harming *φίλοι* (*οἱ τοὺς φίλους βλάπτοντες οὐ φροντίζετε*, 256), then appealing to him within a formal supplication (*ἀλλ', ὦ φίλον γένειον, αἰδέσθητί με, / οἴκτιρον*, 285-286). She makes a connection between this bond, generated by a previous act of goodwill, and the favor, *χάρις*, Odysseus consequently owes her. To spare Polyxena is to return the favor (*ἀντιδοῦναι δεῖ σ' ἀπαιτούσης ἐμοῦ*, 272; *χάριν τ' ἀπαιτῶ τήν τόθ'*, 276), but to commit the sacrifice is to be ungrateful (*ἀχάριστον*) and to gratify (*πρὸς χάριν*) the masses over the *φίλοι* who deserve his favors (254-257). Though she never says so explicitly, Hecuba's conception of *φιλία* here is very similar to *ξενία*. She was supplicated by

<sup>85</sup> The mention of Helen at 243 suggests that Euripides is drawing from the story of Helen's recognition of Odysseus in Troy (*Od.* 4.242-268). The notion that Hecuba was also privy to this recognition is found only here, perhaps because, as the scholion on 241 notes, it is implausible.

<sup>86</sup> Naiden (2006) 79-84, 116-122. He notes, however, that references to reciprocity frequently offend the one being supplicated, perhaps because the reminders seem impertinent. Aristotle claims that appeals to favors received are unpleasant because it reminds the one being supplicated of previous weakness (*EN* 4.1124b12-17).

<sup>87</sup> Adkins (1966) 197-201 argues that even with this private claim, Hecuba "as not merely not a member of the group but a prisoner of war and a slave ... has really no rights at all." Adkins' position depends on the notion that the competitive values operative in Homeric poetry have not substantially changed in the plays of Euripides, a position that, as I will argue below, is difficult to maintain given the many complications in this dialogue.

a hostile stranger, she accepted his plea and conferred a benefit upon him, she believes this *χάρις* established a bond of friendship between the two, and she expects that this bond will continue, being inherited by her descendants.<sup>88</sup>

Hecuba's interpretation of the situation is not unreasonable. Successful supplication of a foreign enemy frequently ends in *ξενία*. Odysseus' tale of his supplication of the Egyptian king is one such example (*Od.* 14.257-286).<sup>89</sup> Her position is complicated, however, by her oblique reference to Odysseus' words at the moment of the previous supplication; after she asks him if he remembers what he said at that moment, Odysseus declines to repeat his words and instead dismisses whatever vows or pledges he had made as "inventions of many words to avoid death" (*πολλῶν λόγων εὐρήμαθ' ὥστε μὴ θανεῖν*, 250). The audience thus does not know what specific commitments Odysseus has made, nor can Hecuba rely on the words of the man she considers a *φίλος*.

*φίλος* and *χάρις* are important terms in Odysseus' rebuttal, but he does not accept that these terms apply to the relationship between Hecuba and himself. Though he acknowledges that Hecuba's mercy deeply affected him (242) and vows that he would save her life were it at stake (301-302), he does not recognize any *φιλία* between them. Rather, the only person Odysseus labels *φίλος* in this scene is Achilles. The *φιλία* between the two heroes has no personal dimension: Odysseus does not discuss any instance of direct interaction between the two nor any feelings of intimacy such as Achilles and Patroclus share in the *Iliad*. It is Achilles' military service that makes him a *φίλος* to all Greeks, and Odysseus considers it

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<sup>88</sup> This fits many of the elements of model *ξενία* formation proposed by Herman (1987) 41-72.

<sup>89</sup> It is true that there is a wide variety of situations involving supplication and consequently the expectation of *ξενία* or other form of *φιλία* is not a guarantee; hostages also supplicate their captors for freedom with promises of ransom or beg for a life of slavery over death. Cf. Naiden (2006) 116-122 and Herman (1987) 54-58. But neither Hecuba nor Odysseus mentions a financial dimension to the previous supplication, and therefore the implications of Hecuba's mercy are all the more difficult to pinpoint.

shameful (*αἰσχρόν*) to treat a man as a friend while living but fail to honor him as such in death (306-312). He therefore maintains that Achilles, not Hecuba, deserves *χάρις* from the Greeks (315-320), and that to deny the fallen hero his prize would be an ungrateful act (*ἀχάριστοι*, 137) that would, moreover, harm the living as well as the dead by destroying the army's morale. The essential values are thus not in question: both parties agree that one should provide *χάρις* to his or her *φίλος*. Yet the two characters do not agree on what constitutes *φιλία* and what obligations it entails: while Hecuba is exclusively interested in private relationships generated and maintained by acts of personal goodwill that continue into successive generations, Odysseus favors political alliances that ultimately serve communal interest.<sup>90</sup>

Scholars have not hesitated to choose sides in this contest: while most reject Odysseus' claims as calculating and heartless, a few see Hecuba's arguments as unconvincing, however pitiable her situation may be.<sup>91</sup> But Euripides refuses to offer his audience a clear moral victor in this debate. Odysseus triumphs in the end because he wields political authority over Hecuba (*οὐ γὰρ οἶδα δεσπότης κεκτημένος*, 397), not because he has made a more convincing case.<sup>92</sup> But by presenting Odysseus as a fervent spokesman for conventional values Euripides has made this argument more than a simple matter of might over right.<sup>93</sup> His professed loyalty to fallen comrades is consistent with both Homeric and

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Stanton (1995) 16-19 on private and political conceptions of *φιλία* in this play.

<sup>91</sup> Critics of Odysseus note that his speech is refined and well-constructed, but so patently cruel that audiences would find it unappealing. These critics include Abrahamson (1952) 123, Conacher (1961) 16-18, Hogan (1972) *passim*, Reckford (1985) 115, Mossman (1995) 116 among many others. Kirkwood (1947) 64-65, Adkins (1966) 96-100, Heath (1987) 66 and Michelini (1987) 144-148 maintain that Hecuba's arguments, while emotionally moving, do not effectively counter Odysseus' articulation of Greek values.

<sup>92</sup> As Kastely (1993) 1038 notes, "when power is held unequally, force determines the outcome, and further that the force need not actively repress speech, because the inequality of the speakers renders rhetoric irrelevant in the determination of the encounter."

fifth-century practice.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, his commitment to honor communal will over private relationships reflects popular political sentiment that would have been familiar to the play's audience. Pericles, for example, renounced his claim to family property during the first invasions of the Peloponnesian War because he feared the Spartans might refrain from destroying it because of the *ξενία* between himself and Aristarchus; such a move, whether it was well-intentioned or deliberate political sabotage, would have offended Athenians whose lands had been ravaged.<sup>95</sup> Hecuba's accusation that Odysseus is purely interested in flattering the masses to secure his own personal interest is dubious (254-257); Odysseus is a character notorious for his interest in profit,<sup>96</sup> but there is no indication in this play that he will receive any private benefit from this sacrifice.<sup>97</sup> Hecuba's anger, however righteous it may be, perhaps leads her to make stinging attacks rather than persuasive arguments.<sup>98</sup> While her supplicatory stance and appeal to reciprocity serve as powerful emotional appeals, she cannot comprehend Odysseus' fervent and exclusive commitment to the military any more than Odysseus can appreciate her devotion to personal relationships.

It is precisely through the irreconcilability of these two competing notions that Euripides develops the horror of the situation: the frustrated debate validates neither position,

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<sup>93</sup> Pace Reckford (1985) 115, Odysseus' arguments do not reflect the absence of moral and religious values, but rather what Michelini (1987) 90-91 calls "outrageous virtue" – that is his willingness to follow traditional values to "eccentric and abnormal lengths."

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Adkins (1966) 196-200.

<sup>95</sup> Th. 2.13. Cf. Herman (1987) 1-9 and 118-161 on the tensions between upholding private relationships of *ξενία* and demonstrating loyalty to one's community in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. especially *Philoctetes* 108-111.

<sup>97</sup> His stated interest in receiving a distinguished tomb for himself (319-320) reflects conventional heroic values and is not particularly damning; in fact, it is the traditional nature of this wish, as I shall argue below, that makes it so problematic in this context, as it highlights the unorthodox nature of Achilles' request.

<sup>98</sup> Michelini (1987) 145-146 observes that ancient audiences were more likely to listen to moral arguments when the speaker treated them as upstanding people likely to pursue moral conduct.

and the failure to reach mutually acceptable definitions ensures that the contest will end in slaughter. The uncertain nature of values in this debate makes Hecuba's plight all the more unsettling. She is not the victim of a heartless villain who denies that one should honor φίλοι, but rather suffers at the hand of one who would utterly invalidate her conception of φιλία. Odysseus accuses her and all foreigners of failing to recognize φίλοι (οἱ βάρβαροι δὲ μήτε τοὺς φίλους φίλους / ἡγεῖσθε, 327-328). That Odysseus can make such an accusation against one pleading for her daughter's life reveals not only the discrepancy in their conceptions of φιλία but also highlights the fragility inherent in both conceptions. Odysseus claims that his definition of φιλία, which entails honoring one's dead comrades, is responsible for Greece's prosperity (εὐτυχῆ, 330); he also remarks, however, that he prospered (ἡτύχουν, 302) from Hecuba's previous act of mercy. Therefore while Odysseus and Hecuba have disparate conceptions of φιλία, he derives benefit from both, she from neither; had she followed the principles espoused by Odysseus in this debate, the Greek would not be in a position to harm her daughter. In this play no good deed goes unpunished; the bonds of φιλία are too unstable to protect the weak in moments of crisis.

Similarly fragile in this debate is the duration of friendship and gratitude for favors. Hecuba believes that her previous χάρις created a bond of φιλία and that this bond should, as frequently happens with ξενία and other types of φιλία, become inherited by her daughter Polyxena. Odysseus does not accept this proposition, claiming that his only obligation lies with Hecuba (301-302). His claim that favor is long-lasting (διὰ μακροῦ γὰρ ἡ χάρις, 320) seems contradictory in this context, since the χάρις he received from Hecuba did not create an obligation that extended to succeeding generations of her family. The longevity of gratitude is further undercut by the specific type of χάρις that Odysseus mentions before this comment.

He explains that he expects a conspicuous tomb from his allies and that this *χάρις* would be sufficient reward for his service – but it is because this same favor failed to satisfy Achilles that the Greeks need to provide him with another *χάρις*. Just as Hecuba’s explicit reference to her past mercy fails to move Odysseus, Odysseus’ reference to an impressive tomb indirectly recalls the Greeks’ failure to appease Achilles with this traditional type of *χάρις*. The ineffectiveness of these two favors reveals the limitations of such offerings generally: a previous *χάρις* does not guarantee future goodwill or protection from those one considers *φίλοι*. It is thus significant that the audience never learns how Achilles’ ghost responds to the sacrifice, whether this violent offering will suffice or whether he will need additional offerings of this type in the future.<sup>99</sup> But even more disturbing than this possibility, however, is the notion that the ineffectiveness of previous favors leads not only to the dissolution of some relationships (i.e. Odysseus and Hecuba) but also to acts of gruesome violence undertaken to retain other relationships.

I have already discussed the horrific nature of human sacrifice above, but Euripides further amplifies this horror through Odysseus’ presentation of the act as an acceptable *χάρις* between *φίλοι*. Human sacrifice in tragedy is typically depicted as an offering made by humans to gods in order to avert an immediate crisis; tragedians thus can exploit the tension between the sacrificants’ aversion to committing such gruesome acts and their fear of the danger resulting from not committing them.<sup>100</sup> Odysseus concedes that he would rather not

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<sup>99</sup> King (1985) 49 and 62n.19 provides examples of further demands for human sacrifice made by Achilles’ ghost. Though she cites sources from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries A.D., she notes that the stories themselves may be older.

<sup>100</sup> In the *Heracleidae*, Iolaus accepts the maiden’s offer to be sacrificed to Persephone and thus save her family and host city, but because of his worries about pollution will not command her to do so or forbid her from doing it (539-561); Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia, an act labeled impious by the chorus, so that Artemis may still unfavorable winds and thus end the suffering of the soldiers at Aulis (Ag. 192-247); Teiresias explains to Creon

sacrifice Polyxena (μηδὲ τόνδ' ὠφείλομεν, 395), but he does not suggest that he fears any immediate danger from not committing it; Achilles' ghost has made no threats or promises in relation to this request, nor do the Greeks at any point consider the potential dangers of his anger or benefits of his goodwill. Instead, Odysseus appeals more broadly to the tradition of honoring fallen comrades and the long-term dangers to the army's loyalty should such honors be denied. But his unwavering commitment to this principle requires him to provide an unorthodox favor, human sacrifice, instead of the more traditional ones requested by Hecuba (i.e. sparing her daughter's life) and expected by Odysseus (i.e. proper burial). The sacrifice of Polyxena thus raises the unsettling notion that such perverse acts of violence are an acceptable form of social currency.

The performance of the sacrifice, which Talthybius reports to Hecuba, confirms that this type of exchange is disturbing even within the context of war. Many readers of the play have interpreted the sacrifice as a showcase for Polyxena's heroism and have consequently found the scene to be lacking in horror, especially in comparison with Hecuba's vengeance at the play's end.<sup>101</sup> Daitz, for example, claims that Polyxena's willingness to die transforms "the revolting murder of a slave into a moving spectacle of human strength, dignity, and renunciation."<sup>102</sup> The problem with these readings is, as Segal has noted, that they "confound the admiration we are supposed to feel for the victim with the circumstances of her death."<sup>103</sup> It is true that the Greeks admire Polyxena's virtue, but this admiration does negate their

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that he must sacrifice his son to Ares to save Thebes, noting that these "great evils" will benefit the city (*Phoen.* 911-959).

<sup>101</sup> E.g. Murray (1946) 43, Pohlenz (1954) 277-283, Conacher (1961) 18-19). Cf. Segal (1990) 113-114 for a fuller listing of such readings.

<sup>102</sup> Daitz (1971) 220.

<sup>103</sup> Segal (1990) 114.

willing participation in a brutal act; moreover, as I argued above, their assessments of the sacrifice are not reliable indications of the audience's reaction. One of Hecuba's objections to the sacrifice is the inherent dehumanization of the act: it is substitution of human for traditionally animal victims (*βουθυτεῖν* vs. *ἀνδρωποσφαγεῖν*, 260-261). Talthybius' report confirms that the Greeks, at least initially, treated her like an animal. He tells Hecuba that young men surrounded Polyxena "in order to check the leaping of your calf" (*σκίρτημα μόσχου σῆς καθέξοντες*, 526). Not only do the Greeks conceive of Polyxena as a traditional animal victim, the assumption that she might leap (*σκίρτημα*, another word typically associated with skittish animals)<sup>104</sup> reveals that they (or at least Odysseus and his men) have taken no account of the willingness and courage she demonstrated earlier by accepting her fate (342-378). The first part of Talthybius' report reveals that the soldiers were determined to conduct this sacrifice as they would any other, and thus, like Odysseus, their total commitment to honoring their comrade prevents them from seeing the perversion of their act.<sup>105</sup>

Polyxena, however, disrupts the proceedings by reminding the Greek soldiers of her humanity. Her speech of assent (546-552) is not a mindless expression as was commonly elicited from animal victims,<sup>106</sup> but a meaningful signification (*ἐσήμηνεν*), just like Neoptolemus' command to Talthybius (*σημαίνει*, 529). Her repeated references to her desire to die a free woman (*ἐκοῦσα, ἐλευθέραν ... ἐλευθέρα*) serve as a rebuttal to Odysseus' dismissal of *δοῦλων σφαγίων* (135), the argument that ultimately won over the Greek soldiers. She

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<sup>104</sup> E.g. Io in *PV* 599, 675.

<sup>105</sup> The ritual initially follows a normal pattern of sacrifice: introduction of victim (523-524), offering of libation (527-529), call for ritual silence (529-533), spoken prayers (534-541), and preparation to slaughter the victim (542-545). Cf. *Il.* 1.447-461 and *Od.* 3.430-458 for examples of traditional sacrifice and Burkert (1985) 56-57 for a brief outline of the traditional features of animal sacrifice.

<sup>106</sup> Sacrificants typically sprinkled water on the victims' heads to stimulate nodding. Cf. Burkert (1985) 56.



bare her torso before her death, and Talthybius provides a detailed description of her body parts, including her breasts, shoulder, and navel (558-560). The herald's explicit comments on the female body and his erotic appraisal of it (*κάλλιστα*, 561) violates "the rigidity of tragic decorum" – descriptions of these parts of the female body are usually limited to brief and conventional remarks.<sup>107</sup> This shocking act of exposure forces her killers to acknowledge her "corporeal reality ... as a human sacrificial victim."<sup>108</sup>

Polyxena develops this point further by giving Neoptolemus a choice: he can strike her chest or slit her throat. The choice is significant because sacrificial victims traditionally have their throats cut, while chest wounds are more commonly associated with the deaths of epic heroes.<sup>109</sup> It is only at this point that Neoptolemus, whom Polydorus has earlier condemned as bloodthirsty (*μιαιφόνου*, 24), seems disturbed by Polyxena's behavior and loses resolve (*οὐ θέλων τε καὶ θέλων*, 566). It is easier to feign animal sacrifice than to admit to killing another human being. But after he slits her throat in the manner of an animal victim,<sup>110</sup> the Greeks do not show any other signs of regret for their role in taking away her life. Talthybius' comments on the final state of Polyxena's body are telling: he mentions briefly the bloody aftermath of the killing (*κρουνοὶ δ' ἐχώρουν*), but expounds more fully on her forethought (*πρόνοιαν*) in concealing her genitals as she died (568-570). The statement reflects the Greeks' attitude towards Polyxena's final reminders of her own humanity: their praise for

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<sup>107</sup> Micheleni (1987) 161-162. Cf. *ibid.* 158-170, Rabinowitz (1993) 59-60 and Segal (1990) 14-18 for detailed discussions of the erotic implications of this scene.

<sup>108</sup> Segal (1990) 18.

<sup>109</sup> Mossman (1995) 160. Loraux (1987) 49 also notes a gender distinction here, as female characters in tragedy frequently perish from hanging or other neck wounds.

<sup>110</sup> The anatomical reference in *πνεύματος διαρροάς* (567) is unclear, but Gregory (1999) *ad* 567-568 argues that the plural here is likely poetic and thus refers to the trachea, which the priest severed during animal sacrifice.

her nobility (*ἀριότητα*, 580) deflects the gruesome nature of her death and their agency in executing it.

The Greek admiration of her death, as Kastely notes, thus serves as “a transfiguring lie that allows power to rest comfortably in its own brutality.”<sup>111</sup> The soldiers initially approved the sacrifice on the basis that a slave’s life was negligible and that their comrade deserved compensation (*χάρις*); Achilles’ ghost specifically demanded a prize (*γέρας*), suggesting a submissive concubine like Briseis or Chryseis in *Iliad* 1.<sup>112</sup> Polyxena’s demonstration of her own worth seems only to increase their admiration for her without making them question the nature of the exchange or confronting the conflict between Achilles’ desire for a slave in Hades and Polyxena’s refusal to be one. That the sacrifice has no effect on the situation in the Greek camp – the soldiers still cannot leave Thrace because of adverse winds, Agamemnon still defers to the will of the masses, the soldiers still consider Hecuba’s other child an enemy (*ἐχθρόν*, 859) – is a testament to the banality of their violence.<sup>113</sup> Though Euripides provides many details that attest to the unsettling and repellent nature of the sacrifice, Talthymbius and the Greek soldiers, like Odysseus, fail to see the contradictions in incorporating horrific and aberrant violence into their system of social exchange.

Euripides gives the final word concerning the sacrifice to Hecuba, and she, unlike the Greeks, recognizes that her daughter’s virtue does not absolve them from their repellent crime. While she agrees that her daughter’s final acts confirm her nobility (*γενναῖος*, 592), she does not trust the “unbridled mob” (*ἀκόλαστος ὄχλος*, 607) of Greek soldiers to provide

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<sup>111</sup> Kastely (1993) 1039.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Kirk (1985) on *Il.* 1.114-115 concerning heroic expectations of concubines and wives.

<sup>113</sup> Kastely (1993) 1039.

her child with proper burial. It is unclear what harm Hecuba fears,<sup>114</sup> but her distrust of the mob seems warranted given the communal nature of the debate that sealed her daughter's fate and the execution of the sacrifice that ended her life. Though scholars have attempted to characterize Odysseus as particularly vile in comparison with the sympathetic figures of Talthybius and the common soldiers,<sup>115</sup> the entire army subscribes to the same philosophy that condones brutality for the sake of honoring their peers. The relative ease with which they all adopt, defend, and ultimately ignore aberrant violence in their system of social exchange reveals the fragility of the *φιλία* in this play. Traditional acts of goodwill, such as Hecuba's mercy towards Odysseus, may appear to secure binding relationships, but they ultimately offer little security: the recipient can discount previous declarations and deny obligations to protect those related to the previous benefactor. Moreover, the reciprocal nature of *φιλία* can be twisted so as to include horrific acts of violence that are contrary to the principles that define civilized communities.

## B.2) *Hecuba and Polymestor: Guest-friends*

Polymestor, like Odysseus, bears responsibility for the death of a child of Hecuba. But his murder of Polydorus is more patently heinous than the sacrifice of Polyxena: he was involved in an undeniable bond of *ξενία* with his victim's family, he committed the murder deceitfully, and he was motivated by greed alone. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hecuba and other characters condemn his crime more vehemently than the sacrifice conducted by the Greeks. They rightly label Polymestor's disregard for the sanctity of the guest-friend

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<sup>114</sup> Michelini (1987) 166-168 suspects necrophilia given the erotic nature of the sacrifice and Talthybius' objectification of Polyxena's body in his comparison of her nude torso to that of a statue (560-561). Gregory (1999) *ad* 606 argues that Hecuba's remark is too vague to warrant such an interpretation and suggests that it refers generally to mutilation. At any rate, Hecuba's concern for her daughter's body effectively prefigures the discovery of Polydorus' mutilated body.

<sup>115</sup> E.g. Abrahamson (1952) 128-129.

relationship and of the right to proper burial as abhorrent, and their reactions illustrate the horrific nature of the crime. While I argued above that Polyxena's sacrifice is an example of banal horror resulting from excessive commitment to traditional practice, Polymestor's crime shows, on the contrary, complete disregard for customary obligations. But despite Agamemnon's protestations against Polymestor's outrageous cruelty, Euripides presents the Greek's judgment as a condemnation of political rather than moral failing: the Thracian is not necessarily more vicious than Odysseus, but he does not defend his viciousness with the same rhetorical finesse. In this section, I will follow the play's chronology by looking first at Polymestor's crime and then considering his defense. Although the horrific nature of the Thracian's crime seems obvious, it is still worth analyzing because it shapes the audience's reaction both to the act itself and to Hecuba's vengeance.

Polymestor commits murder against a ξένος. While Euripides never elucidates fully the nature of the relationship between Hecuba and Odysseus, he leaves no doubt that Polymestor and Hecuba are joined by an established bond of ξενία. Polymestor is called a ξένος of the Trojan house twelve times in the play by multiple characters, and this status is frequently given particular emphasis. In the first mention of the murder, for example, Polydorus' ghost leaves the identity of the perpetrator in suspense by enjambling the subject of the verb into the following line (κτείνει με χρυσοῦ τὸν ταλαίπωρον χάριν / ξένος πατρῷος, 25-26). The unsettling juxtaposition of murder and guest-friendship continues throughout the play. Before Hecuba makes an accusation against her son's murderer, she calls his guardian Polymestor a "Thracian man" (Θραῖξ ... ἀνὴρ, 682); but when the chorus asks Hecuba to identify the killer, her immediate reply is "my, my guest-friend" (ἐμὸς ἐμὸς ξένος, 709). Similarly, Agamemnon initially refers to the Thracian king by name in discussing Polydorus'

stay in Thrace (771); but after Hecuba refers to the killer as ξένος (774), the Greek king accepts the term and repeats it when describing the murder and its aftermath (κτανών νιν, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐκβάλλει ξένος, 781). The disturbing combination culminates in Agamemnon's ultimate condemnation of ξενοκτονεῖν, "guest-friend killing," the only instance of the verb in Greek tragedy.<sup>116</sup> The unorthodox verb is appropriate for an unorthodox situation that would likely elicit revulsion from the audience.

Polymestor's murder of his guest-friend and the neglect of his corpse are considered vile and repellent actions by Hecuba and Agamemnon, and contemporary sources suggest that the play's audience would have a similar reaction. Hecuba's condemnation of her Thracian ξένος reveals her extreme revulsion at his deeds:

*ἄρρητ' ἀνώνομαστα, θανμάτων πέρα,  
οὐχ ὅσι' οὐδ' ἀνεκτά. ποῦ δίκαι ξένων;  
ὦ κατάρρατ' ἀνδρῶν, ὡς διεμοιράσω  
χρόα, σιδαρέωι τεμῶν φασγάνωι  
μέλεα τοῦδε παιδὸς οὐδ' ὠικτισας.*

Unspeakable unnamable acts, beyond wonders! Not holy nor at all bearable!  
Where is the right of guest-friends? Cursed of men, how you tore apart  
his skin, having cut with an iron sword the limbs of this child here, nor at all  
did you pity him. (714-720)

This passage contains an abundance of terms that highlight the shocking and horrific qualities of his crimes. The important features include the unspeakable nature of killing a guest-friend, Polymestor's impiety, and the grotesqueness of his mutilation of his young guest-friend. I will discuss each of these features in detail, as they play a significant role for the play as a whole as well as for this particular passage.

The term "unspeakable acts" (ἄρρητα) indicates the severity of the categorical violation here. In tragedy the term is used to denote particularly repellent deviations from

<sup>116</sup> The verb appears in one previous instance, in Herodotus 2.115, in which an Egyptian king refuses to kill Paris only because he considers mistreating guests to be most impious (ἀνοσιώτατον).

customary behavior, such as Phaedra's love for her stepson Hippolytus (*Hipp.* 602) or the incest and parricide committed by Oedipus (*OT* 465, *OC* 1001). The term also has legal implications: the use of ἀπόρρητα against another constituted a form of verbal abuse so damaging that it could be prosecuted in court.<sup>117</sup> We do not have a complete list of these unspeakable words, but Lysias mentions several in his speech *Against Theomnestus*. The examples he provides are compound nouns that pointedly juxtapose terms that are normally incongruent, such as “father slaying” (πατραλοίαν) and “mother slaying” (μητραλοίαν).<sup>118</sup> Unspeakable terms were reserved for abhorrent acts that contravened fundamental human values. Parricide, for example, was deemed so perverse that there was no specific law prohibiting it;<sup>119</sup> Solon reportedly left it out of his law code because he hoped no law would be needed (διὰ τὸ ἀπελπίσαι, *DL* 1.59). Words that conjured such unnatural and repellent notions and turned them against another citizen were considered to be very dangerous since they generated “complex and ambiguous feelings of fascination and recoil” in those who heard them.<sup>120</sup> It is likely that murdering one's guest-friends belongs to the category of unspeakable acts.<sup>121</sup> Aristophanes suggests that those who wrong guest-friends share the same miserable fate in the underworld as those who beat their parents (*Frogs* 146-151). Isocrates similarly joins the killing of guest-friends with the killing of family members, as well as other taboos “excelling in impiety and cruelty” (τῶν ὑπερβαλλόντων ἀνοσιότητι καὶ δεινότητι) such as incest, mutilation, and cannibalism (12.121-122). Aeschines is perhaps,

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<sup>117</sup> Clay (1982) 281-284.

<sup>118</sup> Lys. 10.8. Cf. Clay (1982) 281-283 for a detailed discussion of this speech and 282n. 10 for more examples of trials concerning verbal abuse.

<sup>119</sup> Clay (1982) 288, Todd (1993) 258-261.

<sup>120</sup> Clay (1982) 283.

<sup>121</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 713.

then, using one of these *ἀπόρρητα* when he calls Demosthenes a *ξυνοκτόνος* for killing a guest-friend whom Demosthenes suspected to be a spy; Aeschines' denunciation of this impiety (*ἀσέβημα*) and Demosthenes' response were apparently so upsetting that the jury shouted in protest (*Against Ctesiphon* 224). We should, then, treat Hecuba's assessment of Polymestor's crimes as *ἄρρητα* as an indication that she considers them to be particularly horrific, and we should moreover assume that the audience would have shared her assessment.

If the audience found the murder of a guest-friend to be shocking, then the details concerning the mutilation of his corpse could only add to their feelings of horror. Although Polydorus' murder had been revealed in his opening monologue, Hecuba is the first character to describe explicitly the wounds and disfigurements on Polydorus' corpse. Literary evidence suggests that Greeks found the practice of bodily mutilation to be abhorrent. The earliest Greek examples can be found in the threats of Homeric warriors in the *Iliad*, who often vow to let their enemies' corpses become food for dogs and birds. The violent context of these threats, delivered in the passion of battle, reveal that such punishment was considered severe,<sup>122</sup> but its potency is confirmed by traditional Greek burial practice: to deny another's corpse burial was to prevent that person's soul from obtaining peace, and to allow the corpse to be violated was to amplify his suffering.<sup>123</sup> Classical sources confirm that Greeks of the fifth century also considered such mutilation to be disturbing. Herodotus notes, for example, that Pausanias refused to decapitate the slain Persian general Mardonius, denouncing such an act as fit for barbarians and claiming that he preferred pious (*ῥοια*) actions and words (9.79). The historian notes several other instances of mutilation in his *Histories* that corroborate both

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<sup>122</sup> Segal (1971) 9-17. Greek heroes frequently threaten this punishment (though rarely carry it to completion); as Segal notes, even if such an act is "justified as a practice of war" it "does not make it the less horrible" (15).

<sup>123</sup> Cf. my discussion on pages 64-67 above.

elements of Pausanias' assertion. Non-Greek rulers are frequently the agents of disfigurement, responsible for cutting in half the sons of treasonous citizens, putting an enemy's skull in a wineskin, and flaying a dishonest judge and using his skin for the next judge's seat (7.39, 1. 214, 5.25), among other examples. When Herodotus notes instances of Greeks committing acts of disfigurement, he often calls attention to the impiety of their behavior: after impaling her enemies and cutting off the breasts of their wives, Pheretime became infested with maggots and thus revealed the gods' anger at such activity (2.202-204); the gods punished the Apollonians with famine and plague for blinding a shepherd who had slept while on watch (9.93). Even among foreigners mutilating another is often treated as impious: an Egyptian thief who decapitated his brother, who had become ensnared in a trap, calls this action the most unholy thing he had done (*ἀνοσιώτατον*, 2.121ε); an Ethiopian king, after a dream instructed him to cut in half all the priests of Egypt, fled rather than commit an impious act (*ἀσεβήσας*) and thus be punished (2.139).

Hecuba similarly draws a connection between the mutilation of her son's body and Polymestor's impiety. She repeatedly accuses him of impiety and puts these accusations in places of prominence; she mentions her most impious guest-friend (*ἀνοσιωτάτου ξένου*) and his most impious deed (*ἔργον ἀνοσιώτατον*) at the beginning of her first plea for Agamemnon's help (790-792) and after exacting vengeance she concludes her defense speech by asking Agamemnon to refrain from helping a guest-friend neither devout nor pious (*οὔτε εὐσεβῆ ... οὐχ ὅσιον ... ξένον*, 1234-1235).<sup>124</sup> Soon after denouncing Polymestor's crime as "not holy" (*οὐχ ὅσι'*), Hecuba draws attention to the disfigurement of her slaughtered son. She claims that Polymestor tore his skin apart (*διεμοιράσω χροά*) and cut his limbs with a sword (*τεμὼν*

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<sup>124</sup> Hecuba is not the only one to level such accusations against him; Agamemnon, after hearing Hecuba's first plea for help, also calls him an impious guest-friend (*ἀνοσιον ξένον*, 852).



φασγάνῳ μέλεα). The verb *διαμοιράω* is particularly vivid: it is not a common word, and outside of the *Hecuba* it usually denotes the dividing and apportioning (*μοῖρα*) of goods, such as roasted meat (*Od.* 14.434, *Ath.* 1.12e), for the sake of fairness.<sup>125</sup> In this case, however, the body being divided belongs to a human, not an animal, and it is not done to preserve friendship through equal shares but rather to destroy a friend to obtain all of his. The striking use of a typically mundane verb highlights the shocking cruelty of this mutilation and the banality of the killer's motive.<sup>126</sup>

Hecuba later appeals to the sight of her son's corpse to achieve justice. After encountering the corpse of Polydorus unexpectedly, Agamemnon reacts to the sight with shock and revulsion (*ἔα· τίν' ἄνδρα τόνδ' ἐπὶ σκηναῖς ὄρω / θανόντα Τρώων*; 732-733).<sup>127</sup> Hecuba appeals to his horror by emphasizing the gruesome mutilation suffered by her son. When he remarks that her guest-friend killed her son and neglected his corpse, she specifies that Polymestor has cut up (*διατεμὼν*, 782) her son's body. She then explicitly asks Agamemnon to look at the body again (*τὸν θανόντα τόνδ' ὄρας*, 833), hoping that the shocking sight will provoke him to take action. Her attention to her son's mutilated corpse confirms the horrific nature of Polymestor's crimes: it serves not only as testament to the unspeakable murder of a guest-friend but also highlights the repellent treatment he received after his death.

<sup>125</sup>Cf. also the allotment of rowing places in *Argon.* 1.395. Euripides uses it once outside the *Hecuba*, when the wounded and suffering Hippolytus longs for a spear to cut short his life (*διαμοιρᾶσαι ... τὸν ἐμὸν βίοντον*, *Hipp.* 1375-1377). It thus has the same violent force as in the *Hecuba*, but the immediate context of the verb and its object do not match the explicit violence in the *Hecuba*.

<sup>126</sup> The same verb also appears later in the play, when the blinded Polymestor worries that his children are being mutilated by the Trojan women. Cf. page 138 below.

<sup>127</sup> Fraenkel (1950) III 580 n. 4: "Without exception in Euripides [*ἔα*] expresses the surprise of the speaker at some novel, often unwelcome, impression on his senses, the visual sense or another."

On the surface, Polymestor's actions seem more obviously than those of Odysseus. This disparity may be evidence that Euripides intends to put the Greek hero in a position of favorable contrast: if the audience was unsure how to react to a human sacrifice committed by another Greek, they would no doubt find the savage Thracian's brutality to be inexcusably horrid and be satisfied with his fittingly gruesome punishment. There is no denying that Polymestor's actions are more reprehensible than those of Odysseus, especially considering the Thracian's dishonesty and greed, traits not displayed by the Greek hero.<sup>128</sup> But if Euripides intends to distinguish these two characters and their motives for killing Hecuba's children, he undercuts this distinction through the similarities between their statements defending these killings. The *ἀγών* between Hecuba and Polymestor, like the earlier *ἀγών* between Hecuba and Odysseus, raises the possibility that even obviously horrific crimes could become acceptable in the political arena.

Polymestor, like Odysseus, dismisses his relationship with Hecuba and her family and presents the killing as an action promoting Greek interest. When asked by Agamemnon to explain the reason for his punishment, he admits killing Polydorus without dissimulation (*τοῦτον κατέκτειν'*, 1136). This is a change from his dishonesty prior to Hecuba's revenge (989-997) and the statement's starkness resembles Odysseus' admission of his role in persuading the Greek army to sacrifice Polyxena (*οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι*, 303). Polymestor's defense thus depends not on a denial of the crime itself or of his role in it, but rather on an argument concerning his motivation. He contends that he murdered Polydorus for the benefit of Agamemnon (*σπεύδων χάριν ... τῇν σήν*, 1175-1176) and claims that by killing his enemy (*πολέμιόν γε σὸν κτανών*, 1176) he prevented him from restoring Troy and seeking vengeance

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<sup>128</sup> Abrahamson (1952) 127: "In the greedy and shamelessly hypocritical Polymestor Euripides has drawn a further and differently significant picture of human depravity."

(1138-1139). Polymestor's designation of the act as a *χάρις* invites the same considerations that were at stake in the debate between Hecuba and Odysseus. Though Hecuba maintains that Polymestor should have remained true to his *φίλος* despite the trouble of the Trojan family (1226-1229), Polymestor presents his allegiance to the Greeks, his political *φίλοι*, as more binding. His defense before Agamemnon does not explicitly acknowledge his *ξενία* or *φιλία* with Polydorus, though he admits that Priam had sent the boy to him to be reared in safety (1133-1134). This is another change from his previous interaction with Hecuba, in which he readily mentioned the *φιλία* between them (*ὦ φίλτατ' ἀνδρῶν Πριάμε, φιλτάτη δὲ σύ, / Ἐκάβη*, 953-954; *φίλη μὲν εἶ σύ*, 982). After his punishment, however, he only refers to his *φιλία* with the Greeks, addressing Agamemnon with the same term of intimacy that he previously had addressed Hecuba (*ὦ φίλτατ'*, 1114). Conversely, he labels Polydorus as an external enemy, *πολέμιος*, in order to stress that his alliance with the Greek side trumps any personal relationships he might have with their foes.

Though it is obvious to the audience that his justifications are specious, it is important to note that Polydorus is not fabricating a relationship between himself and the Greeks. He mentions his *φιλία* with the Greek army before his punishment (*προσφιλὲς δέ μοι τόδε / στράτευμ' Ἀχαιῶν*, 982-983); moreover, Agamemnon confirms that the Greek army considers him to be *φίλιος* and Polydorus to be *ἐχθρός*, and he privileges the Greeks' relationship with Polymestor over Hecuba's claim to *φιλία* with him (858-860). Polymestor loses the contest only because Hecuba proves that he withheld the gold, the true motive for the murder, from those whom he claims to be allies and who needed his help (1217-1225, 1243-1246). The similarities between Polymestor's defense and that of Odysseus are significant because they both present situations in which murder of innocents with whom one is intimately connected

can be considered acceptable. Polymestor's argument fails not because he committed a horrific murder against an innocent φίλος but because this murder was not, as he claimed, in the best interest of the Greeks (οὐτ' ἐμὴν δοκεῖς χάριν / οὐτ' οὖν Ἀχαιῶν ἄνδρ' ἀποκτεῖναι ξένον, 1243-1244). The presence of the debate itself confirms that such violence *could* be considered a viable form of honoring one's political allies, a notion first raised by the earlier sacrifice of Polyxena; Agamemnon had recognized the injustice and repugnance of Polymestor's crime before Hecuba exacted vengeance (850-853), but these considerations had not been enough to motivate him to participate actively in punishing him.

The second part of his judgment thus seems somewhat disingenuous: he makes a broad claim about the difference between Greeks and foreigners, noting that murdering guest-friends is "easier for you (foreigners), but this is shameful for us Greeks" (τάχ' οὖν παρ' ὑμῖν ἑφ' ἑαυτοῖς ξενοκτονεῖν / ἡμῖν δέ γ' αἰσχρὸν τοῖσιν Ἑλλήσιν τόδε, 1247-1248). This claim to ethnic superiority is reminiscent of Odysseus' earlier insinuation that Greeks prosper over non-Greeks because they honor their φίλοι (328-331). Whereas Odysseus' claim seems patently contradictory (for there is no question that Hecuba, in trying to save her daughter's life, has great respect for φιλία), Agamemnon's similar remark subtly reinforces this contradiction. The Greek can condemn the murder of a guest-friend as both selfish and shameful, but his army is no less willing to slaughter the innocent when it is politically expedient. Therefore while his judgment against Polymestor is sound, his final remark introduces a note of hypocrisy that undermines the stability of φιλία: neither he nor the Thracian actively upholds private bonds of friendship when competing political or material advantage is present. The precedent of Polyxena's sacrifice and Polymestor's incorporation of the argumentation used by Odysseus suggest that in situations of political benefit to those

in power there is little protection from or retribution for even the most repellent crimes against φίλοι.

The play ends, as Polydorus predicted, with Hecuba left to tend to the “twofold corpses” (διπτύχους νέκρους, 1287) of her children. Though the circumstances of their deaths and the motivations of their killers are quite different, both children suffered perverse ends (Polyxena and human sacrifice, Polydorus and mutilation) and in each case a bond of φιλία failed to protect them. Not only do Hecuba’s claims to intimacy prove futile, but the killers use alternative claims to φιλία as pretexts for the brutal slayings for which they are responsible. The *Hecuba* demonstrates how these bonds, the very ones on which all Greek citizens depended for protection within their community and especially outside of it, can be twisted to harm those who most need that protection. The horrific acts of violence found within the play are appropriated by the killers as instances of honoring one’s φίλοι rather than as betrayals of φιλία. This appropriation sets the *Hecuba* apart from other tragedies that depict violence against φίλοι. Typically these instances of violence occur in extraordinary circumstances, such as ignorance of the victim’s identity (e.g. Oedipus’ murder of Laius in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Iphigenia’s plan to sacrifice Orestes in *Iphigenia at Taurus*), divine compulsion (e.g. Apollo’s command to Orestes in *Choephoroe*, Artemis’ demand for the sacrifice of Iphigenia in *Agamemnon*), or in retaliation to a previous act of betrayal (e.g. Clytemnestra’s revenge against Agamemnon in *Agamemnon*, Medea’s murder of her own children to destroy Jason in *Medea*). But in the *Hecuba* the killers are motivated by much more mundane considerations: Odysseus advocates human sacrifice not as a means of averting an immediate crisis, but as a natural part of the system of rewarding political allies

with *χάριτες*; Polymestor's interest is purely material, his desire for gold trumps any concern for protecting his *ξένος*.

Carroll notes that one of the distinguishing features of modern horror is that the characters within the story consider the gruesome monsters and the repulsive acts of violence to be completely abnormal. In many of these modern horror stories secondary characters, particularly those who should provide assistance to potential victims, simply refuse to believe the stories of the protagonist: incredulous sheriffs, soldiers, and politicians who scoff at the wild stories of unnatural occurrences are familiar staples of the genre. But even more frightening than the inept authorities who fail to protect are those that succumb to the horrific circumstances and incorporate them into the existing structure – essentially converting the abnormal into the normal. In Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*, for example, a veil of normalcy conceals the horrific circumstances in which the protagonist is unwittingly involved. Rosemary Woodhouse is deceived by a Satanic cult into delivering the Antichrist. The cult achieves this goal through their conformity with social mores and their adoption of traditional parental roles: their members are predominantly elderly, including the leaders who enjoy gossip, travelling, and storytelling; their group includes a well-respected obstetrician who prescribes Rosemary plenty of organic vitamins; they “protect” Rosemary from outside influence that might cause her stress or tension. Similarly, the killers in the *Hecuba* depend on normalcy to effect their gruesome aims. Odysseus and Polymestor both present the murder of innocents as an acceptable form of social exchange among political allies.<sup>129</sup> No Greek in this play explicitly questions this premise, though Euripides' inclusion of gruesome details and repellent juxtapositions likely caused discomfort for his audience. Rather than

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<sup>129</sup> Cf. Holland-Toll (2001) 145-147 on the banality in horror. She notes that the most disturbing fictions present communities composed “of people like ourselves, who turn out to be moral monsters, people who lack some essential connection to humanity...” (146).

confirm the stability and security of *φιλία* properly practiced, the *Hecuba* challenges fundamentally the protective value of friendship by revealing how claims of dutiful *φιλία* can be used to destroy as well as to preserve.

### **C) Fugitive Queen and Bloody Mother: Hecuba's Vengeance**

I now turn to the play's most detailed depiction of violence, Hecuba's mutilation of Polymestor and her killing of his sons. One of the most pressing scholarly controversies concerns the radical shift in focus from Hecuba's immense suffering depicted in the first parts of the play to the gruesome violence she inflicts towards its end. Some readers see in this shift the inconsistency of Hecuba's character in the play. Kirkwood, for example, argues that there is an "appalling transformation" that results in two Hecubas: "one is a figure of passive suffering ... in sharpest contrast, there is the vengeful Hecuba, the fiend incarnate ...."<sup>130</sup> Others argue that only the circumstances, not her character, undergo significant change: "Where each of her children are concerned, Hecuba sets to work at once, in one case trying to prevent, and in the other to avenge, a killing."<sup>131</sup> This disagreement is firmly rooted in terms of ethical evaluation: those who see transformation in Hecuba condemn the corruption of her character;<sup>132</sup> those who do not find any significant inconsistency defend the righteousness of her behavior and dismiss the possibility that her actions are disturbing.<sup>133</sup>

In this section I will suggest that such ethical evaluations do not sufficiently account for the ambiguous nature of Hecuba's vengeance. Euripides shows little interest in providing

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<sup>130</sup> Kirkwood (1947) 61.

<sup>131</sup> Kovacs (1987) 99.

<sup>132</sup> In addition to Kirkwood, Grube (1941) 84, Abrahamson (1952), Reckford (1985) 124, and Nussbaum (1986) 410-414 share similar views.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Steidle (1966) 136-140, whom Kovacs (1987) 143 n.46 claims has "laid to rest" the notion of two Hecubas, and Gregory (1991) 110 for other arguments on the consistency of her character.

his audience with simple moral instruction,<sup>134</sup> and in fact he complicates almost every episode with conflicting considerations, both ethical and non-ethical.<sup>135</sup> The contradictory aspects of Hecuba's character should not merely be condemned or explained away in such absolute terms. Other scholars, such as Mossman and Zeitlin, have noted the limitations of moralistic readings of the *Hecuba*. While my reading of the play is heavily indebted to their work, particularly Mossman's, I contend that my application of modern horror scholarship offers a different perspective concerning the function of the play's violence. While Mossman is content to acknowledge that moral approval is not a necessary part of tragic enjoyment and that ambiguity is "integral to the drama," she does not account fully for Euripides' relentless attacks against the social and cultural structures familiar to his audience, nor does she provide a detailed explanation of the effects of the disturbing ambiguity found in the *Hecuba*. I contend, however, that we can gain a fuller appreciation of these ambiguities by comparing the play to modern horror fiction, in which such contradictions play a central role. Carroll notes that the monsters that appear in works of horror frequently defy conventional cultural categories.<sup>136</sup> Hecuba, like these monsters, contradicts the rigid categorical schemes that the other characters in the play take for granted:<sup>137</sup> she exerts both royal power and servile obedience, and her behavior blurs the distinction between masculine aggression and female

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<sup>134</sup> Cf. my discussion in Chapter 1 pages 53-54.

<sup>135</sup> Some examples of these complications include the obstructing winds that appear only *after* the human sacrifice (900-901), Talthybius' simultaneous interest in describing explicitly Polyxena's bare torso and in praising her modesty for covering her genitals (558-570), and the similarly ethnocentric language used by Odysseus and Agamemnon to endorse human sacrifice and to defend the concept of *ξενία*, respectively (326-331, 1247-1251).

<sup>136</sup> Carroll (1990) 31-35. Cf. my discussion in chapter 1 pages 37-40.

<sup>137</sup> I am not using "monster" here as a term of moral condemnation but rather as classification of aberrance. As Carroll notes "there are lots of monsters that are good guys" (41). This distinction is particularly important in my discussion of the *Heracles*, in which the play's central character is manifestly virtuous but still a monstrous aberration.



passivity. In this section I will explore how Euripides establishes traditional cultural categories involving law, political status, and gender during the first half of the play before challenging them in the second half, where Hecuba confounds familiar distinctions between slave and queen, mother and killer.

I propose that we can achieve a fuller understanding of Hecuba's character and her revenge by acknowledging these contradictions and examining how they serve as disruptive forces within the world of the play and potentially within the world of its audience. As in most horror fictions, the *Hecuba* shows its audience a place in which familiar codes and social structures fail to protect innocent victims from violence. Hecuba is a fitting protagonist for such a world; she is both victim of cruel circumstances and agent of similarly monstrous violence. I therefore offer an interpretive model found in modern horror scholarship, namely that of the Final Girl in slasher films, in order to explain the significance of her ambiguous nature within this environment. I conclude that Euripides' provocative manipulation of familiar political and gender distinctions serves not only as a sensational form of entertainment but also as an invitation for the audience to question the stability of their assumptions.

#### C.1) *The Limits of νόμος*

Hecuba's status as a woman and a slave initially serves as an obstacle to her desire to avenge Polydorus. She explains to Agamemnon that she is "a nothing" (μηδέν, 843) and thus incapable of achieving vengeance on her own. Her assessment here seems consistent with the cultural distinctions of the play's original audience. In fifth-century Athens neither women nor slaves were considered fully responsible agents. Women were constantly under the supervision of guardians, κύριοι; if a woman's κύριος died she either remained in the household

under the guardianship of an adult male in the immediate family (usually her son) or, if no such man was present, was transmitted to another male relative.<sup>138</sup> There were many laws in place to protect women from violent abuse,<sup>139</sup> but only adult male citizens were able to initiate legal action and represent themselves in court; women thus depended on their *κύριοι* to plead their cases and take full advantage of this legal protection.<sup>140</sup> As Gould notes, Athenian law defines a woman as someone “incapable of a self-determined act, as almost in law an un-person, outside the limits of those who constitute society’s responsible and representative agents....”<sup>141</sup> Slaves similarly relied on their owners for protection against violence. While Athenian law prohibited citizens from attacking slaves belonging to another, only the owner could prosecute in cases where such attacks occurred. Conversely, if the slave committed a crime the owner was almost always held accountable in some form, as the law assumed that “a slave was normally under his owner’s supervision and control.”<sup>142</sup> Since slaves and women were vulnerable to abusive violence, they relied on the law and their guardians to protect them; there was little opportunity for them to redress this abuse on their own, and the Athenian community, if its laws are any indication, likely doubted their capacity to do so.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Gould (1980) 44, MacDowell (1978) 84.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Cohen (1995) 145-151.

<sup>140</sup> MacDowell (1978) 84-108.

<sup>141</sup> Gould (1980) 44-45.

<sup>142</sup> MacDowell (1978) 81.

<sup>143</sup> Athenians did recognize that slaves were capable of violence. Hunter (2000) 5-6 notes that slaves were brought to trial in their own name when they committed a wrong without prompting from their master. But she also observes the ideological distinctions between slaves and free men: slaves could not train in the *palaestrae* and *gymnasia* nor could they participate as hoplites in the army, and so they were considered physically inferior to the citizens who regularly engaged in these practices (14-15).

It is not surprising then that references to the law play a considerable role in Hecuba's defense of her children. In her debate with Odysseus, she makes an anachronistic appeal to *ἰσονομία*, a familiar democratic notion that granted equal protection under law for all citizens and, according to Hecuba, for slaves (νόμος δ' ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς τ' ἐλευθέροις ἴσος / καὶ τοῖσι δούλοις αἵματος κεῖται πέρι, 291-292).<sup>144</sup> Hecuba similarly condemns Polydorus' murder on the grounds of its illegality. In her first plea for Agamemnon's help, she calls upon law (νόμος) as the supreme force in human affairs and argues that it is by law that men distinguish unjust and just acts (νόμῳ ... ἄδικα καὶ δίκαι' ὠρισμένοι, 800-801). Though her use of νόμος here is likely a reference to universal law,<sup>145</sup> she believes Agamemnon is no less bound to enforce it than the written laws he is authorized to maintain. She argues that Agamemnon, as ruler, is obligated to ensure that men who kill guest-friends pay the penalty (δίκην δώσουσιν, 803). Though this phrase is not uncommon in tragedy, it is usually limited to instances when one character is exacting or threatening to exact vengeance on another. The appeal to another authority to enforce this retribution impartially thus calls to mind another context, namely punishments determined by a judge.<sup>146</sup> She concludes this speech by reminding Agamemnon of his civic duty to "serve justice" (τῇ δικῇ θ' ὑπερετεῖν, 844) by punishing the wicked.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 291-292 notes that Hecuba is likely referring to some specific law, perhaps the law forbidding *ὑβρις*, which Demosthenes claims protects slaves as well as free men (21.46-50) or the law against murder, as Antiphon claims that those who murder another's slave can be prosecuted on this charge (5.48).

<sup>145</sup> Pace Nussbaum (1986) 400-406, who argues that Hecuba's use of νόμος here indicates "convention," i.e. of human creation without any sense of absolute moral order. While νόμος can denote artificiality, particularly among the sophists, Gregory convincingly argues that νόμῳ cannot mean merely "by convention" in this context; Hecuba is trying to convince Agamemnon to punish Polymestor, and since she is a slave and an outsider her argument depends on the universality of the standards of justice (798-800). Nussbaum's larger points, that Hecuba's "unsuspicious trust in the authority and efficacy of νόμος" leaves her vulnerable (403) and that the play presents a "total disintegration of a moral community" (404), are more convincing.

<sup>146</sup> Meridor (1978) 29-30.

<sup>147</sup> There does not seem to be any specific legal reference here, though obedience to the law is a common topos in Greek rhetorical and philosophical thought. Cf. Carey (1996) 36 on the "ideology of obedience to *nomos*."

Hecuba needs Agamemnon to serve not only as a judge distributing punishment, but also as a representative bringing forth the charge. The Greek king is not only a political authority responsible for enforcing the law but also a *φίλος* of Hecuba and her son, according to her, by virtue of his relationship with Cassandra (824-835).<sup>148</sup> Given the legal associations in this context Hecuba seems to be asking Agamemnon to plead her case as her *κύριος*. As a female slave who is in her words weak (*δοῦλοι τε κάσθενεῖς*, 798) and “a nothing” (*μηδέν*, 843), she wants Polymestor to be prosecuted and needs a *φίλος* who will represent her interests. She reinforces this point by referring to Polydorus as Agamemnon’s in-law (*κηδεστήν*, 834). This claim perhaps exaggerates a soldier’s responsibility to his concubine’s family;<sup>149</sup> there is no reason to assume, however, that soldiers always held their wives and concubines in sharp distinction,<sup>150</sup> especially since Agamemnon has shown earlier a desire to protect Cassandra’s kin (120-122). Hecuba’s first speech to Agamemnon thus calls for him to fulfill two complementary roles, that of an impartial judge who can “stand at a distance, like a painter” (*ὥς γραφεύς τ’ ἀποσταθείς*, 807) in assessing her case and that of a prosecutor seeking retribution for a family member.

Though Hecuba’s pleas for just and legal retribution are valid, she does not find satisfaction through legal recourse. Agamemnon initially refuses to serve as either prosecutor

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<sup>148</sup> Many critics have found Hecuba’s claim to *φιλία* with Agamemnon through his sexual relationship with her daughter to be crude and debased. Cf. Kirkwood (1947) 66-67, Conacher (1961) 24-26, Reckford (1985) 121, Nussbaum (1986) 414-415, and Michelini (1987) 151-152. I agree with Mossman (1995) 127 that the appeal itself is not particularly offensive, given Hecuba’s apologetic tone and Agamemnon’s earlier attempts to save Polyxena, which the chorus attributed to his relationship with Cassandra (120-122). Gregory (1991) 106-107 adds that parents in Greek tragedy generally show little reservation in discussing their children’s sexual behavior and its impact on the other members of the family. At any rate, Hecuba’s reference to her daughter here is ultimately more pathetic than shocking, as it reopens the conflict between Agamemnon’s private interests and his public duties that dominated the debate over Polyxena’s sacrifice.

<sup>149</sup> Scodel (1998) 143-144. She notes, however, that there is no indication that Hecuba is morally wrong in trying to exploit Agamemnon’s goodwill for the sake of her family.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Gregory (1999) *ad* 834 for examples of Greeks in committed relationships with concubines.

or judge. He cannot pursue the case as a prosecutor out of personal obligation because, like Odysseus, he privileges his responsibilities to the Greek army over any private bonds of *φιλία* he may have with Polydorus (*εἰ δ' ἐμοὶ φίλος / ὅδ' ἐστί, χωρὶς τοῦτο κοῦ κοινὸν στρατῶ*, 859-860).<sup>151</sup> He seems more willing, however, to perform judicial duties. He agrees with Hecuba's assessment of Polymestor's injustice and he asserts that he wants to act on behalf of justice (*οὐνεκ' ... τοῦ δικαίου*) and to provide the punishment for which she is asking (*τήνδε σοι δοῦναι δίκην*, 852-853).

But the strength of his assertion dissipates as his speech continues. He begins by expressing a strong wish to help (indicative *βούλομαι*, 851). He then adds an unlikely condition (future less vivid protasis) and impersonal construction that reveal his lack of commitment in upholding justice: “if somehow it might come about so that it be well for you” (*εἴ πως φανείη γ' ὥστε σοί τ' ἔχειν καλῶς*) and the army might not assume that he punishes Polymestor as a favor to Cassandra (*Κασσάνδρας χάριν*, 854-856). The mixed condition reveals the impotence of the king and, by extension, the law, since the validity of the law depends on authorities who can enforce it. Agamemnon does not challenge the injustice of Polymestor's crimes, but he cannot handle the case as a judge because the Greek army, which considers Polymestor a *φίλος* (858), will not accept him as a disinterested party, nor can he offer Hecuba any other solution that will address the injustices she has suffered.<sup>152</sup> His offers to assist her depend not on any political or judicial authority that would enable him to punish injustice but on contingencies over which he has no control.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. Gregory(1999) *ad* 859 for a defense of Elmsley's emendation *δ' ἐμοί* over the manuscript *δὲ σοί*.

<sup>152</sup> Abrahamson (1952) 126n. 18 contends that Agamemnon's professed interest in pursuing justice and piety here is proven false by his gesture of refusal, i.e. turning around and avoiding Hecuba's glance (812-813), while she discussed these same values. I agree that this gesture reveals the inefficacy of Hecuba's arguments, but this should not lead the audience to believe that Agamemnon is callous rather than merely impotent. Abrahamson seems to agree with this point, but he thinks that compassion and “frightened helplessness” are somehow mutually exclusive (126), despite saying that “Agamemnon is not cold, as Odysseus is” (126-127 n. 20).

It is surprising then that so many scholars have seen Hecuba's first appeal to Agamemnon as successful on the basis of his rather limited offer of support.<sup>153</sup> His initial promises to help are each followed by conditions that he not have to defend his actions before the army (852-855, 861-863). He does not suggest any alternatives through which Hecuba might attain her goal of vengeance, nor does it appear that he thinks such an alternative might exist. Hecuba's request was predicated largely on her utter helplessness and his tremendous authority (841-843); his first reaction to her declaration to pursue vengeance independently is filled with disbelief rather than support (*πῶς οὔν*; 876). It seems likely then that his offer to be a "willing" (*ῥέλοντα*, 861) partner is, much like Odysseus' offer to save Hecuba's life while she begged for her daughter's, essentially meaningless, if not disingenuous. Though Agamemnon may not be as callous as Odysseus, he is similarly unwilling to commit himself as an active proponent of Hecuba's cause despite his sympathies. Even the time he grants to Hecuba so that she can pursue vengeance on her own, which he considers a personal favor (*σοι δοῦναι χάριν*), he grants only because the winds prevent the army from sailing (898-899).

His final words to Hecuba before she enacts her vengeance reflect his passivity:

*γένοιτο δ' εὖ πως· πᾶσι γὰρ κοινὸν τόδε,  
ἰδίαί τ' ἐκάστωι καὶ πόλει, τὸν μὲν κακὸν  
κακὸν τι πάσχειν, τὸν δὲ χρηστὸν εὐτυχεῖν.*

But may it somehow turn out well. For this is common to all, both to each man in private and to the city, that the wicked man suffer something wicked, and that good man prosper. (902-904)

This gnomic comment serves as a counterpoint to the end of Hecuba's first plea: while she claims that justice depends on a good man actively punishing the wicked (*ἔσθλοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς τῇ δίκηι τ' ὑπηρετεῖν / καὶ τοὺς κακοὺς δεῖν πανταχοῦ κακῶς ἀεῖ*, 844-845), Agamemnon can

<sup>153</sup> E.g. Tierney (1946) xviii, Reckford (1985) 121, Michelini (1987) 142, Zeitlin (1991) 78-79.

offer Hecuba only fond wishes, not action. His wishes may accurately reflect the traditional Greek concept of reciprocal justice, but the comment rings hollow here: good deeds (e.g. Hecuba's mercy towards Odysseus) are not always rewarded, and wicked ones will not be punished unless someone actively pursues justice. The failure of reciprocal justice in the *Hecuba* provides the impetus for the brutal acts of vengeance in the final section.

### C.2) *Hecuba's Vengeance*

After Agamemnon refuses to assist Hecuba, the play moves into a new direction of horror. Hecuba's interactions with Odysseus and Agamemnon reveal a world in which standard sources of protection – i.e. obligations stemming from interpersonal relationships, codes of law and justice enforced by political authorities – fail to prevent or correct acts of perverse violence. The perpetrators, in fact, use these very same standards as justifications for their crimes. Hecuba, recognizing Agamemnon's impotence, formulates a plan to achieve justice independently. Although Agamemnon has acknowledged that her desire for retribution is reasonable (852-853), her behavior in the last part of the play reveals several disturbing contradictions in her character. Other scholars have identified the shift in her character as a moral breakdown: Kirkwood, for example, argues that after νόμος fails Hecuba she becomes utterly lawless herself and has “embarked on the career of moral degeneration.”<sup>154</sup> I shall argue below that Hecuba's vengeance does involve transgressive behavior, but that we should not limit our interpretation to legal and ethical codes. Hecuba herself emerges as a contradiction of normative political and sexual categories taken for granted by other characters and likely by the original audience as well. Moral assessments of her character fail to recognize the provocative tensions Euripides has developed here and throughout the play. I contend that her gruesome vengeance and ambiguous character are part

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<sup>154</sup> Kirkwood (1947) 66-67.

of the fundamentally unstable world of the *Hecuba*. To praise or condemn her behavior seems to miss the point, as the rules by which one might make such assessments no longer apply in such a world.

Hecuba's first reaction to Agamemnon's refusal to act foreshadows the dangers of allowing individuals to ignore legal restrictions. She lists written laws as one of the obstacles preventing men from "acting in their custom according to their will" (νόμων γραφαὶ / εἴργουσι χρεῖσθαι μὴ κατὰ γνώμην τρόποις, 867-868). Her tone suggests that this is a sympathetic remark acknowledging Agamemnon's impotence without condemning it. But the Greek king did not mention written law as a reason for his refusal – on the contrary, he conceded that Hecuba had justice on her side, but the political situation prevented him from enforcing it. This consideration sheds a different light on her comment. Hecuba presents the prohibitive force of law as something regrettable, but a member of the play's original audience might have considered the same statement as a point of pride.<sup>155</sup> Her attack on city majorities (πληθὺς πόλεως, 866) is similarly problematic. While the sacrifice of Polyxena has shown that the masses can approve terrifying decisions, the reference to the πόλις evokes the civic context of the audience, where the notion that communal benefit trumps individual will was a basic principle of Athenian democracy.<sup>156</sup> Hecuba's attack against written laws and democratic values implicitly undercuts the audience's cultural framework and reveals the potential threat she can bring.

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<sup>155</sup> The former Spartan king Demaratus, for example, observes that the Spartans are slaves to the law, and the Spartan resistance at Thermopylae confirms that their obedience to the law proves stronger than foreigners' obedience to their king (Hdt. 7.104, 7.234-237). In Athens, obedience to the law was often cited as an ideal quality for Greek politicians. Cf. note 147 above.

<sup>156</sup> Reckford (1985) 122 compares her remarks to similar renunciations of law and custom in other ancient texts, including the one made by the amoral Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*.



Gregory observes that Hecuba's complaint here reflects a return to an "aristocratic perspective" after her attempts to appeal to Athenian and universal laws that protect the weak (291-292, 799-805).<sup>157</sup> I would agree that her revenge plot does entail the re-adoption of her former regal disposition, but it also depends on her willingness to embrace and exploit her slave status. She presents both versions of herself, queen and slave, as they benefit her. Consequently, neither the other characters nor the audience can be entirely sure which Hecuba they are seeing. After Agamemnon's refusal to help, she depicts the Greek king as a slave by noting that he, like all other men, is not free (*οὐκ ... ἐλεύθερος*) but a slave (*δοῦλος*) to the obstacles mentioned above. The observation initially seems sympathetic: just as Hecuba is a slave to the Greeks, so Agamemnon is a slave to the various social constraints limiting his power. But as she continues, Hecuba deliberately plays with the traditional conceptions of master and slave. She promises to make Agamemnon free of fear (*ἐγὼ σε θήσω τοῦδ' ἐλεύθερον φόβου*, 869), using the same expression Agamemnon used earlier in his offer to make her life free of slavery (*ἐλεύθερον / αἰῶνα θέσθαι*, 754-755). Then her refusal of his offer revealed that she, unlike Polyxena (357-368, 551-552), was not particularly ashamed to live as a slave, provided that she could attain vengeance against the wicked (*τοὺς κακοὺς δὲ τιμωρουμένην*, 756). Now she assumes not only the freedom to act on her own but also the position of queen and master over the Greek king.

Hecuba's attitude towards her fellow slaves further illustrates her ability to balance her regal disposition and servile rank. Agamemnon dismissively calls the other slaves "spear-captives" (*αἰχμαλώτους*) and "prey of the Greeks" (*Ἑλλήνων ἄγραν*, 881). Hecuba dubs them a band of Trojan women (*Τρῳάδων ὄχλον*) who will join with her (*σὺν ταῖσδε*, 880-882), in contrast to the band of Greeks whom Agamemnon fears and serves (*ἐπεὶ δὲ ταρβεῖς τῷ τ'*

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<sup>157</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 866.

ὄχλῳ πλέον νέμεις, 868).<sup>158</sup> In the presence of Polymestor, however, she readopts the persona of a humble slave and calls them captives (*αἰχμαλωτῖδων*, 1016), using Agamemnon's nomenclature to convince the Thracian that they are harmless. Similarly, Hecuba uses her former regal status in her forceful summons of Polymestor, instructing her messenger to tell him that the former queen of Troy (*ἄνασσα δὴ ποτ' Ἰλίου*) calls and that her need is a priority (*σὸν οὐκ ἔλασσον ἢ κείνης χρέος*, 891-892). But in the presence of the Thracian king she assumes a more humble tone, refusing to look at him directly and claiming that she is ashamed to be seen in her current station (968-973).

Hecuba's ability to adopt both regal and servile dispositions is not the only source of tension in her character. She also defies traditional distinctions between masculine and feminine behavior. Polymestor's willingness to dismiss his guard and enter the tent depends on his presumption that the absence of men signifies safety from violence (981, 1017) – a fatal misconception that Hecuba is all too willing to exploit. Polymestor is not the only character who overestimates Hecuba's physical limitations: Agamemnon similarly assumes that a band of women cannot overpower a man (*πῶς γυναιξὶν ἀρσένων ἔσται κράτος*; 883; *ῥῆλυ μέμφομαι σθένος*, 885). Hecuba assuages his doubts with a brief mythological reference to the Danaids and Lemnian women (886-887). She does not dwell on these examples, nor does she allow Agamemnon to reply before she changes the subject to specific preparations. But though Hecuba's casual reference may serve as a concise demonstration of women's ability to overcome men, these mythological allusions hold a deeper significance for the audience and, consequently, for their interpretation of her plot. In both myths, a female collective

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<sup>158</sup> Cf. Micheline (1987) 154-155 for Hecuba's disdain for "the mob" and democratic subservience to it. Stanton (1995) 18 notes that the *ὄχλος* of Trojan women are "clearly ... of inferior status" to Hecuba. One wonders if the former social distinctions should hold true among slaves in the Greek camp, but at any rate their allegiance to their former queen is never in question.

slaughters not just one man but (virtually) all of a male collective. These acts of wholesale murder subvert traditional Greek patriarchy: instead of fulfilling their social roles by submitting to their husbands or prospective mates, they violently reject traditional duties and assume dominance by destroying their male partners.

The story of the Lemnian women is particularly gruesome, inasmuch as the disgruntled wives of the island kill not only the husbands who have rejected them, but the whole male population (save Thoas, who is merely exiled) for the sake of completion.<sup>159</sup> The chorus of the *Choephoroe* deem the tale the foremost example of female horrors (*κακῶν δὲ πρᾶσβεύεται τὸ Λήμνιον / λόγῳ*, 631-632). Herodotus notes that the macabre story was so well-known throughout Greece that “Lemnian deeds” was a proverbial expression for any act of excessive cruelty (*γενόμισταί ἀνὰ τὴν Ἑλλάδα τὰ σχέτλια ἔργα πάντα Λήμνια καλέεσθαι*, 6.138.4).<sup>160</sup> Even Hecuba’s brief reference to the Lemnian women conveys the severity of their violence: whereas the Danaids simply “overpowered” (*εἰλον*) the sons of Aegyptus, the Lemnian women “utterly depopulated” (*ἄρδην ... ἐξώκισαν*) their island of men. Hecuba’s comparison thus presents disturbing implications: in seeking just retribution, she puts herself into the category of violent women who did not kill a single unjust offender but completely destroyed an entire population and consequently overturned a patriarchal system. Just as Hecuba’s revenge plot generates tension between her former role as queen and current slave status, so also it creates a conflict between restoring a system of orderly justice and overthrowing it completely. Agamemnon’s naiveté thus elicits an unexpected and potentially horrifying response. He blames (*μέμφομαι*) women on the grounds that they are weak, but

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<sup>159</sup> Cf. Burkert (1970) 6 for a succinct account of the myth and a brief survey of ancient sources.

<sup>160</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 886-887. It should be noted, however, that Herodotus refers to two instances of Lemnian violence as the source of the expression, the myth discussed here and the later murder of Attic women and their children committed by the Pelasgians.

Hecuba's mythological allusions remind him that women have committed devastating actions of violence that are far more worthy of blame than mere physical weakness.

Euripides then uses the plotting scenes before the vengeance to establish familiar assumptions regarding feminine and servile behavior and to introduce some subtle disturbances of these assumptions in Hecuba's character. These contradictions of traditional distinctions will become more obvious in the vengeance itself, as I shall argue below. I note first, however, that though Polymestor and Agamemnon fail to recognize Hecuba's deviance from these familiar cultural categories, their false assumptions can hardly be attributed to incompetence. On the contrary, viewers have witnessed Hecuba act in a way consistent with their assumptions during the first parts of the play. Polydorus' ghost pities Hecuba for her intense suffering and his lamentation for her downfall gives no indication that she is capable of punishing her enemies (55-58). Other characters deliver similar sentiments, corroborating the notion that she is pitiable and helpless.<sup>161</sup> Moreover, Euripides makes frequent mention of her old age and sex, and her consequent physical weakness: Hecuba's first words refer to herself as an old woman (*τὴν γράῳ*) and beg for physical support from her fellow slaves (59-61). Polyxena warns her not to fight with more powerful men, noting that such a conflict would result in her aged body being thrown to the ground and wounded (405-408). Hecuba does, in fact, end up on the ground on several occasions in the early parts of the play, either kneeling in supplication (273-286, 752-753) or throwing herself to the ground in grief (438-504, 683-687).<sup>162</sup> The repeated sight of her on the ground reinforces the audience's

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<sup>161</sup> E.g. Talthybius (580-582), Agamemnon (850-851), the attendant who finds Polydorus' body (667-669), and Hecuba herself (798, 843).

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Michelini (1987) 173-176 on Hecuba's awkward postures during the play's first half.

impression of her helplessness. Agamemnon's doubt concerning Hecuba's physical strength is therefore an assessment the audience likely shared.

After the conception of her plan, however, the audience witnesses a new side of Hecuba's character. Whereas her earlier weakness was confirmed by her frequent position on the ground, she remains standing continuously after she announces her plot. The different postures she adopts before Polymestor illustrate her ability to exploit these contradictory physical features. During their first meeting, Hecuba refuses to look directly at the Thracian king, maintaining that shame prevents her from meeting his gaze. The false modesty recalls Hecuba's earlier interaction with Agamemnon, where she turned her back on the Greek king in fear that he might reject her plea (739-740). But after Hecuba and her allies finish mutilating Polymestor and killing his children, she resumes the confident stance she displayed when announcing her plan to Agamemnon. She invites the chorus to watch her mutilated victim ( ὄψη, 1049; ὀφθαλμοί, 1053); it is now the blind Polymestor who does not, because he cannot, meet her gaze as she beholds her work from afar. Her position above Polymestor further confirms her physical dominance: while Hecuba stands apart (κάποσ' ἵσθαι, 1054) from the wounded Thracian, he is crawling on all fours like an animal (1056-1058). The stark contrast between Hecuba as prostrate victim and as conqueror standing upright further illustrates her contradictory nature.

These ambiguous features of Hecuba's character are essential for understanding the horrific violence she enacts. Like the impure monsters Carroll observes in modern horror fiction, she defies traditional cultural categories and thus generates discomfort from the audience.<sup>163</sup> Admittedly, she does not meet the precise criteria for horrific monsters proposed by Carroll: the categorical contradictions in her character are not as obvious and innate as,

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<sup>163</sup> Carroll (1990) 27-35.

say, Dracula's defiance of the traditional distinction between life and death. But Carroll admits that characters who blatantly contradict familiar cultural categories, like Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960), are "abnormal" and "interstitial" figures and thus can stand in for monsters as "powerful icon[s] of impurity."<sup>164</sup> It is thus reasonable to align Hecuba with such impure figures as a result of her own "impurities" (e.g. the unclear distinction between ruler and slave, male and female in her character). These monstrous features of her behavior are essential for understanding the audience's reaction to her vengeance. As these contradictory characteristics begin to surface in her plotting, the audience is likely to be somewhat disturbed at her casual violation of familiar distinctions relating to political and gender status. These impurities thus serve as the foundation for the extreme violence at the play's end. Neither Agamemnon nor the audience knows exactly what she plans to do, but the ambiguous features of her character foreshadow her willingness to defy expected patterns of behavior: that is, it is because of these contradictory features that her brutal vengeance, once it is finally revealed, can surprise and horrify the other characters as well as the audience. I shall discuss below the graphic and disturbing violence in Hecuba's vengeance before returning to the contradictory elements of her character as they appear in her revenge.

The surprising incorporation of mutilation into Hecuba's revenge adds to the horrific tenor of violence in the play. Before her attack the precise nature of her plot was unclear, and its grotesque nature had not been anticipated by anyone other than Hecuba herself.<sup>165</sup> As I

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<sup>164</sup> Carroll (1990) 38-39.

<sup>165</sup> She claims that she will "plot some evil against" (τι βουλευῶσιν κακόν, 870) and "avenge" (τιμωρήσομαι, 882) her son's killer. The former remark may, in fact, be a subtle revision of Agamemnon's assumption that Hecuba wants him to "plot this murder against" Polymestor (τόνδε βουλεύσασθαι φόνον, 856). But though she does not specifically vow to murder Polymestor, her comments concerning the revenge seem to corroborate the assumptions of other characters, and the audience, that she is planning to kill the Thracian king along with his sons.

mentioned earlier, Greeks considered mutilation to be savage and repulsive.<sup>166</sup> This attitude is confirmed in the *Hecuba*: the continuous onstage presence of Polydorus' disfigured corpse, the impetus for Hecuba's revenge, serves as a testament to Polymestor's brutal crime.<sup>167</sup> The repeated references to the mutilation of the Trojan prince (716-720, 782, 833), moreover, draw attention to the excessive cruelty of his fate. Euripides also pays particular attention to the act of mutilation found in Hecuba's revenge, evoking similar feelings of dread and discomfort found in the discovery of Polydorus' corpse. After Polymestor enters Hecuba's trap, his first offstage cry reveals that he has been blinded (ὥμοι, τυφλοῦμαι φέγγος ὁμμάτων τάλας, 1035). The revelation that she has also killed his children comes in his second cry (1037), even though his later account of the murder indicates that he witnessed his children's death before being blinded (1160-1167). The mutilation receives similarly privileged placement in Hecuba's account of the event (1045-1046, 1050-1051) and Agamemnon's initial reaction to its aftermath (1117-1118).<sup>168</sup> Hecuba, moreover, relishes describing her victim's blind state, emphasizing his disfigurement through polyptoton (τυφλὸν τυφλῶ, 1050) and contrasting repetition, such as when she tells Polymestor that he will not see (οὐ ... ὄψῃ, 1046) his children living, then in the first word of her next line tells the chorus that they will see (ὄψῃ, 1049) the wounded Polymestor emerging.

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<sup>166</sup> Cf. pages 103-106 above.

<sup>167</sup> Pace Mastronarde (2002) 131-132. I acknowledge that the textual evidence supporting the continued presence of the corpse is not certain – i.e. Polymestor might not be literal in claiming to see what he thinks is Polyxena's corpse, Hecuba's use of τοῦδε in reference to Polydorus (1219) might be anaphoric, as Mastronarde argues, rather than deictic. But given the lack of evidence for moving the body after Agamemnon's departure, I agree with Gregory (1999) *ad* 1049-1051 and Mossman (1995) 63-68 that having Polydorus' corpse remain onstage fits with the few textual references we have and allows for better dramatic effect. I discuss the significance of the corpse's presence on pages 139-140 below.

<sup>168</sup> Mossman (1995) 190.

The horrific consequences of this mutilation are further established by the emergence of Polymestor onstage. Immediately after the offstage cries and Hecuba's reappearance onstage reveal the true nature of her plot, the chorus and the audience are given an opportunity to witness the physical effects of the disfigurement. Because Hecuba decided to mutilate rather than murder him, Polymestor is not harmless corpse but rather a disturbing figure still capable of harming his attacker. In stark contrast to his earlier portrayal of regal politeness, he now resembles a savage and ferocious beast: he walks on all fours and leaps like an animal (τετράποδος βάσιν θηρὸς ὀρεστέρου / τιθέμενος ἐπὶ χεῖρα καὶ ἵχνος, 1058-1059; ἐκ δὲ πηδῆσας ἐγὼ / θῆρ ὡς διώκω, 1172-1173) and longs to consume the flesh of his enemies (σαρκῶν ὀστέων τ' ἐμπλησθῶ, 1071). Several scholars have claimed that the blinded Polymestor here recalls the wounded cyclops Polyphemus, a paragon of the uncivilized and bestial in the *Odyssey*.<sup>169</sup> Such an allusion would further highlight the blind Polymestor's monstrous qualities, though there is more than enough material within the context of this play to suggest that the audience would find his behavior dreadful and repulsive. For example, when Polymestor learns that Hecuba is near, he reacts so violently that Agamemnon restrains him and commands him to "remove the savagery from (his) heart" (ἐκβαλὼν δὲ καρδίᾳ τὸ βάρβαρον, 1129).<sup>170</sup>

Polymestor's mutilation has also left him looking physically repulsive: both Polymestor and Agamemnon reference the blood around his eyes (ὀμμάτων αἱματόεν βλέφαρον,

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Segal (1990) 123 n. 45 for brief survey of the scholarship and Zeitlin (1991) 70-71 on the structural similarities between their situations, including the violation of *ξενία*, revenge consisting of blinding, and the mutilated victim's vain attempt to grope for his attackers.

<sup>170</sup> The Greek's association of animal savagery with foreignness (τὸ βάρβαρον) is not unorthodox; the notion that non-Greeks were lawless and savage barbarians was a common sentiment, and has already been voiced by Odysseus earlier in the play (328-331). It plays a significant role in Agamemnon's later judgment, which condemns guest-friend murder as characteristic of non-Greeks (1247-1248). Cf. Segal (1974) *passim* for a more general discussion.



1066; αἰμάξας κόρας, 1117).<sup>171</sup> At any rate, Agamemnon reacts to the Thracian king's appearance with an expression of unwelcome shock (ῥα, 1116).<sup>172</sup> Significantly, this is the same expression he makes earlier when confronted with the body of Polydorus (733). The implication of this reaction to Polymestor's mutilation is thus twofold: first, Agamemnon is genuinely surprised to see Polymestor disfigured in this way, even if he does feign ignorance concerning the culprit;<sup>173</sup> second, the sight of the Thracian's mutilated face is, at least initially, repulsive, much like the sight of a corpse. Agamemnon reserves judgment until he has heard both Hecuba and Polymestor explain their cases, but his first impression confirms that Polymestor's disfigurement has transformed him into a revolting sight.

But Polymestor is not the only monstrous figure in this episode. The emphasis on mutilation in Hecuba's vengeance further illustrates her categorically contradictory characteristics discussed above. The inclusion of disfigurement develops the tension between her former regal status and her current position as a slave. Acts of disfigurement were frequently executed by (typically Eastern) despots as punishments against insubordinate inferiors, and consequently they reaffirm the status of the despot as master and the victim as slave.<sup>174</sup> Herodotus provides many examples of this type of mutilation: the Egyptian king Apries cuts off the nose and ears of a herald who failed in his mission (2.162), Xerxes severs in half the eldest son of a subject who requested that this one son be released from military

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<sup>171</sup> The actor's mask may have been painted around the eyes to reflect these wounds, though it is unclear whether such adornment would be necessary or observable. Mitchell (1998) 244-245 notes that tragic characters describe eyes in great detail, including veins and eyeliner, though certainly such details either would not have been painted on masks or would not have been observable for most of the audience, to whom the actor's masks would look like "pinheads."

<sup>172</sup> Cf. note 127 above.

<sup>173</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 1116-1119.

<sup>174</sup> Hartog (1988) 332-335; Hall (1989) 159 cites Hecuba's vengeance here as "an example of 'barbaric' justice."

service (7.39), and Xerxes' wife severely mutilates a sister-in-law who has unintentionally won her husband's affection (9.112).<sup>175</sup> The act of blinding is a particular vicious form of punishment; Herodotus relates a tale in which a Thracian king, angry at his sons for joining the Persian army, commits the "monstrous deed" (ἔργον ὑπερφυές) of ripping out their eyes upon their return as their reward (μισθόν) for disobedience (8.116-117).<sup>176</sup> Hecuba, like the despots just mentioned, considers her act of mutilation to be a just punishment for Polymestor's crimes (δίκην δέ μοι / δέδωκε, 1052-1053; σοῦ γέ μοι δόντος δίκην, 1274). She had previously asked Agamemnon to exert his political authority and ensure that Polymestor paid the penalty (803, 844, 853), but in exacting vengeance herself Hecuba has reassumed the role of queen: she determines Polymestor's punishment but orders her former slaves to execute it.<sup>177</sup> By reassuming her regal authority she can devise penalties unsavory to the Greeks within the play (i.e. Agamemnon), and that were likely unsavory to the Athenians in the audience.

But unlike the despots mentioned above, Hecuba cannot exert her will openly and without repercussion. Though she summons Polymestor as the former queen of Troy (891), she depends on deception (δόλω, 884) rather than on authority to enact her plan once he

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<sup>175</sup> Though characters within the *Histories* often condemn mutilation as a barbaric and impious practice (9.77-9.78), Herodotus also depicts Greek rulers, such as Pheretime (4.202) and Xanthippus (9.120), engaged in such behavior. The disfigurement of insubordinates by an authority can also be found in Homer; Odysseus' mutilation of the treacherous goatherd Melanthius, who had previously abused his disguised master (17.212-253), is an important part of the restoration of order in Ithaca (22.437-445, 22.474-477).

<sup>176</sup> While it is true that the adjective ὑπερφυής need not necessarily be negative (e.g. a messenger uses the same term to praise Pausanias' victory at Plataea in 9.78), it always indicates something excessive or extraordinary (*LSJ* A.2). In this example, Herodotus uses it to illustrate the excessive gruesomeness of the punishment. Cf. Macan (1908) *ad* 8.116. Aelian confirms the barbaric nature of this act, condemning it as "not Greek" (μὴ ποιήσας Ἑλληνικά, *VH* 5.11).

<sup>177</sup> Pace Meridor (1978) 30-31, who contends that Hecuba's delegation of the actual slaughter to her fellow slaves recalls the Athenian law that prevented a convicted murderer from being handed over to the victim's family (Dem. 23.69). Hecuba has already tried (and failed) to convince Agamemnon to assume responsibility for upholding νόμος, and her independent pursuit of vengeance is clearly antithetical to the philosophy behind the Athenian law.

arrives.<sup>178</sup> Polymestor only enters the tent because of the false promise of gold, and he is disarmed not by force but by the slaves' feigned admiration for his clothing and weapons (1152-1154). Furthermore, her vengeance does not reaffirm her authority as queen and master: she does not directly confront her victim in triumph, as despots who mutilate their victims frequently do, but gloats only while Polymestor is indoors and unable to reach her (1044-1046).<sup>179</sup> She and her compatriots flee the enraged Thracian, acting more like political exiles (*φυγάδες*, 1172) than regal authorities.<sup>180</sup> Thus while Hecuba's mutilation of Polymestor evokes the familiar trope of a foreign despot reaffirming authority over an insubordinate subject, this act of retribution leaves her more vulnerable than she was before the attack. That she views the gruesome act as an end in itself, without concern for future suffering (*οὐδὲν μέλει μοι, σοῦ γέ μοι δόντος δίκην*, 1274) or shame at slavery (*τοὺς κακοὺς δὲ τιμωρουμένη / αἰῶνα τὸν σύμπαντα δουλεύειν θέλω*, 756-757), makes the grim determination of a queen in slave's clothing unsettling.

The mutilation of Polymestor also highlights Hecuba's contradiction of traditional distinctions involving gender. Before her revenge, Agamemnon and Polymestor voice doubts concerning women's ability to inflict violence on males; Euripides, moreover, misleads the audience into accepting their assumptions by consistently portraying Hecuba as physically weak during the first part of the play. Any act of violence against Polymestor would have

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<sup>178</sup> This is not to say that despots do not deceive their victims. For example, Astyages punishes the disloyal Harpagus by offering him a feast, concealing the fact that the food is actually Harpagus' dismembered and cooked son (Hdt. 1.118-119). But despots typically undertake such acts of deception in order to amplify the severity of the punishment, not to ensure the success of their attempt nor to protect their own safety – Harpagus, after discovering the foul nature of the meal, can only pick up the remains of his child and quietly return home until he discovers some way of displacing the king.

<sup>179</sup> This separation is in part owed to tragic convention. But, as I argue on pages 135-136 below, Hecuba's behavior after the slaughter is significantly different than that of other female killers in tragedy such as Clytemnestra and Medea.

<sup>180</sup> Euripides uses *φυγάς* in almost every case to refer to exiles from a community, such as Medea (*Med.* 706), Polynices (*Ph.* 76), and Orestes (*IT* 929).

served as a striking corrective to these notions, but Hecuba's decision to blind her victim adds a sexual dimension to her vengeance. In Greek mythology, blinding was frequently a punishment inflicted against sexual deviants.<sup>181</sup> The most famous instance of blinding in tragedy is, of course, Oedipus' act of self-mutilation after discovering the nature of his crimes, including incest. Psychoanalysts have speculated that this and other instances of blinding serve as symbolic acts of castration.<sup>182</sup> Though this is by no means the only connotation of Hecuba's blinding of Polymestor,<sup>183</sup> Euripides' particular emphasis on Hecuba's gender in the development of her plot invites reading this act as a form of emasculation. The women blind Polymestor not with conventional masculine weapons, like the swords they used against his children (1161), but with their dress pins (πόρπας, 1170), the same feminine decorative items used by Oedipus (*OT* 1268-1270, *Phoen.* 61-62) to blind himself.<sup>184</sup> The mutilation can thus be seen as an even greater threat to the gender delineations expressed by male characters in the play. Hecuba proves that women can not only kill male adversaries but also deprive them of their masculinity.<sup>185</sup>

It is interesting, then, that Polymestor calls the Trojan women "man slayers" (ἀνδροφόνους, 1061). This martial epithet, which Homer applies to the greatest warriors of the

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<sup>181</sup> Cf. Devereux (1973) 41 for a list of examples.

<sup>182</sup> Devereux (1973). Cf. Goldhill (1997) 340-43 for a brief account of psychoanalytic approaches to Oedipus and other tragedies.

<sup>183</sup> Cf. Buxton (1980) for a rebuttal to Devereux. He contends that while Oedipus' self-blinding may have been "appropriate" punishment given his sexual crimes (25), the nature of blindness has a stronger affiliation with knowledge and prophecy in Greek thought and in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Euripides, too, capitalizes on the association of blindness and prophecy by presenting the blind Polymestor as a mouthpiece for Dionysus, the "Thracian seer" (ὁ Θρηξὶ μάντις, 1259-1281).

<sup>184</sup> Cf. Jenkins (1983) for more examples of the dress pin used as a weapon by women. He concludes that such stories provide little historical truth, but confirm male anxieties concerning potential female violence and "the unconscious desire to disarm women of their secret weapon" (32).

<sup>185</sup> Segal (1990) 122 n. 41 observes that the murder of Polymestor's children further suggests that Hecuba is committing emasculation, since she deprives him of living children and the potential to sire future ones. Cf. also Zeitlin (1991) 65-66 on the relationship between light, vision, and children in the play.

Greek and Trojan sides,<sup>186</sup> is an unexpected description for Hecuba and her women, who have defeated their victim through the use of deception and seclusion rather than openly on the field of battle. Gregory argues that the incongruous description expresses Polymestor's astonishment at being defeated by a group he had previously thought incapable of committing the same violence as men.<sup>187</sup> But Hecuba has already shown in her earlier discussion with Agamemnon that she considers her band of Trojan women to be her soldiers: within the space of fifteen lines, the Greek army and the Trojan women are called an *ὄχλος* (868, 880), and both are said to provide assistance to their benefactors (*ἐπικουρία*, 872, 878).

Polymestor's choice of adjective is also problematic at face value: the Trojan women have not killed (*φόνος*) any man (*άνήρ*), but rather have wounded one and killed his children. The term perhaps is a subtle reference to their emasculation of Polymestor, who serves as the male antagonist in the battle of the sexes described by Agamemnon and Hecuba (880-887). Before the revenge, Polymestor is called an *άνήρ* nine times by other characters, three times more than any other character;<sup>188</sup> in defeating the male adversary, Hecuba destroys his masculinity (he is no longer called *άνήρ* after emerging mutilated onstage) and reduces him to a state of incredulous shame:

γυναῖκες ὤλεσάν με,  
 γυναῖκες αἰχμαλωτίδες·  
 δεινὰ δεινὰ πεπόνθαμεν.  
 ὦμοι ἐμᾶς λώβας.

Women destroyed me! Women, captives of war! We have suffered terrible, terrible things. Woe is me for this insult against me. (1095-1098)

<sup>186</sup> It is a common epithet of Hector (*Il.* 1.242, 6.498, 9.351, et al.) and is also used to describe Achilles' hands (18.317, 24.479).

<sup>187</sup> Gregory (1999) *ad* 1061.

<sup>188</sup> Polymestor (19, 682, 716, 771, 790, 858, 873, 1004, 1036). The term is used three times each to describe Polydorus (733, 1230, 1244) and Achilles (304, 307, 310), and once for Agamemnon (844) and Priam (953).

Polymestor's application of the heroic epithet *ἀνδροφόνος* to the Trojan women, therefore, may not only reflect the women's adoption of masculine warrior roles but also connote the disgrace (*λώβας*) of Polymestor's emasculation.

Though Hecuba proves that women can be just as formidable as Homeric warriors, she still displays signs of weakness. Since her mutilation of Polymestor has not completely disabled him or his "seething, most hostile Thracian anger" (*θυμῷ ζέοντι Θρηικὶ δυσμαχωτάτῳ*, 1055), she must avoid contact with her victim by standing away from him and perhaps moving quietly around the stage in flight (*κρυπτὰν βάσιν αἰσθάνομαι / τάνδε γυναικῶν*, 1069-1070). Moreover, though she taunts Polymestor while he is offstage, Hecuba does not openly boast after her enemy returns onstage to confront her, as other female killers in tragedy tend to do: Clytemnestra, for example, confronts the hostile Argive chorus after slaying Agamemnon (*Ag.* 1372-1576), while Medea taunts the enraged Jason after slaughtering their children (*Med.* 1317-1414). While those two characters are powerful and resourceful enough to avoid immediate retribution from those offended by their violence, Hecuba is still vulnerable after her revenge has been completed. She does not openly confront Polymestor until Agamemnon's verdict confirms that the Thracian cannot harm her. Hecuba can thus prove the dangers in underestimating women's capacity for violence, but her lingering vulnerability to male force demonstrates that she is no superhuman sorceress or axe-wielding warrior. Her character seems more plausible and in some ways more disturbing than these murderous women. While Clytemnestra's deceit and brutal attack were no doubt shocking to the original audience of the *Agamemnon*, her anomalous status as both masculine and feminine is established early in the play (*ἀνδρόβουλον...κέαρ*, 11).<sup>189</sup> Hecuba, however, is revealed as anomalous only when the social structures on which she depends (i.e. *νόμος* and

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. Winnington-Ingram (1948) on Clytemnestra's ambiguous gender in this play.

φιλία) disintegrate. The extremity of her circumstances and her continued vulnerability align her more closely than other female killers in tragedy with what the audience might have considered a “real woman.” The notion that any woman under similar duress might commit such aberrant behavior is particularly unsettling, as it suggests that communities are unable to identify and prevent such violence.<sup>190</sup>

Hecuba’s revenge also involves a subversion of traditional conceptions of motherhood. In the first part of the play her status as a (former) mother is treated as a critical part of her identity.<sup>191</sup> She uses the term to describe herself ten times throughout the play, nine of which occur before she first mentions her plan for revenge.<sup>192</sup> During the first portion of the play, Hecuba also refers to her children affectionately as τέκνα, particularly in moments of great distress: she addresses the recently condemned Polyxena as τέκνον τέκνον μελέας ματρός (186); when she discovers Polydorus’ corpse she laments over him ὦ τέκνον τέκνον ταλαίνας ματρός (694). τέκνον is a more intimate term than παῖς that in tragedy is used predominantly by parents to refer to young children, often in direct address.<sup>193</sup> Though Hecuba does use both terms to refer to her children in the first part of the play,<sup>194</sup> she tends to

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<sup>190</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 98.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. Tarkow (1984) for a fuller discussion of motherhood as a defining characteristic of Hecuba during the first half of the play.

<sup>192</sup> Before mentioning revenge: 172, 174, 186, 336, 427, 439, 513, 621, 694; after revenge: 897, a reference to the burial of both children.

<sup>193</sup> Golden (1990) 12-13. He argues against a strict formulation here since παῖς can also be used with affection, though he does not cite any examples of τέκνον that lack intimacy. Thury (1988) 302-303 and 305 n. 9 argues that the similarities in their frequency in the plays of Euripides (i.e. for every appearance of τέκνον there is, on average, a corresponding instance of παῖς) show that the tragedian’s preference depends solely on *variatio* and not on any distinction in meaning. This broad statistical approach cannot account for the specific passages in which the words are used (i.e. Hecuba can refer to her child formally as παῖς in one line, while intimately calling her τέκνον in the next).

<sup>194</sup> E.g. Hecuba’s first address to Polyxena is ὦ τέκνον, ὦ παῖ (171). Golden (1990) 13 uses this example as evidence against pressing the distinction between τέκνον and παῖς without considering context. In this case, however, I think it is telling that Hecuba’s addresses to Polyxena in this scene seem to develop into an

use *παῖς* when making an unmarked reference to her child and *τέκνον* when evoking pathos. For example, she refers to Polydorus as her *παῖς* when she first identifies the corpse (681), but then repeatedly cries *τέκνον* as she begins to lament his death (684).

Once she formulates her revenge, however, she no longer uses the term *τέκνον* in reference to her own children. Instead, she calls the slain children of Aegyptus *τέκνα* (886), an odd label for men who were old enough to wed. And unlike her previous uses of the term, Hecuba does not apply the word to these victims to generate sympathy but rather to ally herself with the women who killed them. While Hecuba may use *τέκνα* here instead of *παῖδας* for the sake of variety, I would contend that this term foreshadows another important group of *τέκνα* in this play, the children of Polymestor. Hecuba calls the Thracian's sons both terms shortly after the reference to the Danaids (*καὶ παῖδας, ὥς δεῖ καὶ τέκν' εἰδέναι λόγους*, 893), and does not use the word *τέκνον* for the remainder of the play.<sup>195</sup> Hecuba's previous appeals have failed to secure the safety and dignity of her children; thus she transforms from one sympathetic to the suffering of innocent youths to an agent of violence against another set of children.

It is true that Hecuba's desire to avenge her child by killing the children of her enemy does not *per se* involve a contradiction of traditional maternal behavior. As Kovacs notes, in such situations Greek popular morality not only permitted but even encouraged acts of vengeance on behalf of one's family.<sup>196</sup> But regardless of moral justification, the execution of Hecuba's vengeance involves a number of horrific distortions involving motherhood. The

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emotional crescendo: first *ὦ τέκνον, ὦ παῖ* (171), then *οἱμοὶ τέκνον* (180), finally *τέκνον τέκνον μελέας ματρὸς* (186).

<sup>195</sup> She does, however, use the related verb *τίκτω* in 992. I shall discuss the significance of this below.

<sup>196</sup> Kovacs (1987) 99. Cf. 143 n. 48 for literary evidence of this belief. It should be noted, however, that the obligation to avenge one's kin belonged exclusively to men in Athenian society. Cf. Gould (1980) 43-44.



most obvious example can be found in the murder of Polymestor's children. In his account before Agamemnon, the Thracian king notes that the women separated the children from their father by feigning the desire to nurture them:

ὅσαι δὲ τοκάδες ἦσαν, ἐκπαγλούμεναι  
τέκν' ἐν χειροῖν ἔπαλλον, ὥς πρόσω πατρὸς  
γένονιντο, διαδοχαῖσ' ἀμείβουσαι χειρῶν.

But all who were mothers, began to fondle my children in their hands with great admiration, exchanging them from hand to hand so that they might be far from their father. (1157-1159)

The Trojan women exploit their status as women who have delivered children by treating Polymestor's sons as babies. They “dandle in their hands” (ἐν χειροῖν ἔπαλλον) the Thracian children, just as Hector dandles (πῆλ' ἐτε χειρσίν) his infant son who has become frightened by his father's helmet (*Il.* 6.474). Like that scene in the *Iliad*, the women's behavior simultaneously conveys their own (feigned) tenderness and the children's genuine vulnerability. The same hands that fondle Polymestor's sons also exchange them from one woman to another (διαδοχαῖσ' ἀμείβουσαι χειρῶν), an act designed to convey their mutual adoration (ἐκπαγλούμεναι) of the children but given sinister significance by Polymestor's proleptic explanation. The reversal of these women from mother figures to child-slayers happens suddenly (εὐθύς) and Polymestor's description of his children's end is similarly blunt and unornamented (κεντοῦσι παῖδας, 1160-1162). The Thracian also worries that the Trojan women will mutilate his children's bodies (διαμοιρᾶσαι, 1076). This is the same term Hecuba used to describe Polymestor's mutilation of Polydorus' corpse (διεμοιράσω, 716), and the repetition of this uncommon verb invites a comparison between the acts of child murder.<sup>197</sup> The roles have reversed: while Polymestor adopts the role of distraught parent, Hecuba has become the child-killer. Although her justification for the murder is stronger than

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<sup>197</sup> Cf. my discussion on pages 105-106 above.

Polymestor's, her simulation of traditional maternal behavior in this act generates an uncomfortable tension between maternal affection and the slaughter of children.

The same tension between nurturing mother and merciless killer underscores Hecuba's manipulation of her own son's corpse to attain vengeance on his behalf. As I noted above, Polydorus' body remained onstage throughout the play after its initial introduction.<sup>198</sup> It is covered before Polymestor's arrival,<sup>199</sup> and he assumes, as Hecuba did earlier (667-680), that the covered body belongs to Polyxena. Mossman notes, however, that Hecuba's misidentification served as a pathetic prelude to her recognition, while the presence of Polymestor's slaughtered victim makes his false promises of his safety more reprehensible.<sup>200</sup> But the presence of the corpse also illustrates another disturbing element in the deception scene, namely Hecuba's willingness to manipulate her child's body in her revenge scheme. Onstage corpses are a staple of tragedy, but rarely does the misidentification of a corpse lead to further violence – the only other example in the extant tragedies can be found in Sophocles' *Electra*, where Aegisthus is fooled into thinking that Clytemnestra's corpse is that of Orestes (1466-1480).

The ghost of Polydorus has explained earlier that his only desire is to fall into his mother's hands and be buried (50). But ultimately Hecuba privileges her revenge – something the ghost of Polydorus notably omitted in both his requests and prophecy – over the burial of her children. Agamemnon's first question to Hecuba during their initial encounter is “why do you delay burying your child?” (τί μέλλεις παῖδα σὴν κρύπτειν τάφῳ,

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<sup>198</sup> Cf. note 167 above.

<sup>199</sup> It is unclear when the covering is restored. The corpse is uncovered (γυμνωθέν, 679) by an attendant, remains visible during the debate between Hecuba and Agamemnon (726-864), and is covered when Polydorus sees it at 955. Gregory (1999) *ad* 896-897 suggests that Hecuba recloaks the body as she discusses the future burial of her children.

<sup>200</sup> Mossman (1995) 64.

726). Hecuba does not initially respond, but it becomes clear that she plans to bury her two children together (τῶδ' ἀδελφῶ πλῆσίον μιᾷ φλογί) only after she has completed her plan (896-897).<sup>201</sup> This plan contains a dreadful contradiction: she seeks justice for her slain child but to obtain it she must use the child's body as a prop to deceive Polymestor. In order to generate his pity and spur him to action Hecuba had previously asked Agamemnon to look at her son's corpse and consider it as that of a relative (κηδεστήν, 834-835). In cloaking her son, she does the opposite: she divorces the corpse from its immediate signification, treating it not as the remains of an intimate relation but as an object that will enable her to fool her enemy.<sup>202</sup>

### C.3) *Aftermath*

While Hecuba's character is marked by contradictions of familiar cultural categories and by unpredictable behavior, in one area she remains consistent, namely her commitment to reciprocal justice. Hecuba devastates the house of Polymestor in the same way he and the Greeks have destroyed her own. Just as she must live as a powerless slave while retaining the will of a queen, so her mutilation of her enemy reduces him to the status of a king without political power. There is no indication in the text that her violent attack has deposed the Thracian from his kingship or severed the Greeks' allegiance to him. It is unclear then why Agamemnon does not hesitate to banish him to a remote island, given that the political obstacles that prevented such punishment earlier in the play should still be operative. Yet

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<sup>201</sup> If Gregory's conjecture that Hecuba covers the body while discussing her children's burial is correct (see note 199 above), then the gesture adds a haunting quality to her remark. She will perform appropriate maternal duties in giving her children proper funeral rites, but first must use her son's corpse as a tool of deception.

<sup>202</sup> Cf. Griffith (1998) 232 on tragic manipulation of corpses and on the corpse as a representation of the human body as "pure thingliness, divorced from the person who inhabits it."

Polymestor does not immediately invoke his right as king to punish Hecuba.<sup>203</sup> Instead, he submits to a trial before Agamemnon where his claims to *φιλία* with the Greeks prove as fruitless as Hecuba's. Similarly, Hecuba's vengeance against Polymestor devastates his parental status in retribution for the murders of her children: just as she is a mother without children (421, 439-440, 495, 514, 621-622, 810), so her punishments ensure that he will never again see his children alive (*οὐ παιῖδας ὅψῃ ζῶντας οὐς ἔκτειν' ἐγώ*, 1046).

While Hecuba fails to achieve true reciprocity in either the private sphere (her claims of *φιλία* with Odysseus and Agamemnon) or the public (her appeals to *νόμος*), she ultimately finds satisfaction in an exchange of pain. When Polymestor laments his misfortune, she replies “Are you in pain? What then? Don't you think *I* feel pain for my child?” (*ἀλγεῖς; τί δ'; ἦ μὲ παιδὸς οὐκ ἀλγεῖν δοκεῖς*; 1256). Her commitment to reciprocation of violence allies her with the Hecuba of the *Iliad*, who wishes to devour the liver of Achilles in order to attain just requital for her the death of her son Hector (*Il.* 24.212-214). Kovacs sees a sharp distinction between this Hecuba and the one found in Euripides' play; he notes that the tragedian could have incorporated the “extreme savagery” of the *Iliad*'s Hecuba into his character but instead applied it to Polymestor.<sup>204</sup> But this moral distinction fails to account for the many disturbing features of Hecuba's vengeance mentioned above. I contend that there is a distinction between the two figures but that this distinction depends on the differing circumstances, not differing values. Holmes has observed that the *Iliad* passage is important for understanding “the exchange of pains in the *Iliad*'s economy of *τιμῆς*,” noting that Hecuba, as a mother, is “shut out of its central exchange” and can only make threats of “bestializing lust” in return

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<sup>203</sup> Kastely (1993) 1045.

<sup>204</sup> Kovacs (1987) 108-109.

for her own maternal suffering.<sup>205</sup> I would argue that Euripides has in this play given Hecuba the opportunity to enact the same violent desire she displayed in the *Iliad*. This Hecuba, unlike that of the *Iliad*, lives in a chaotic world in which people distort or neglect fundamental social structures (*φιλία* and *νόμος*) in instances where the victims are most in need of protection from these structures. She responds by subverting traditional cultural distinctions involving political status and gender in order to deprive Polymestor of the same things that she has lost (i.e. regal status and children) and thus cause him to suffer identical pains.<sup>206</sup> She abandons helplessness for horror, as her only means of attaining reciprocal justice is to exploit cultural distinctions others take for granted.

Because she has totally committed herself to vengeance, Hecuba can claim triumph even when the audience can see the many signs of defeat that she cannot escape. One of these signs is slavery, a fate that every Trojan character denounces as abject.<sup>207</sup> Although Agamemnon offers Hecuba freedom, she replies that she would gladly endure slavery if she could avenge those who harmed her (756-757). As I discussed above, rather than reject her slave status, as Polyxena does, Hecuba exploits it to deceive her victim into believing that she is harmless. She is not, therefore, offended when Polymestor complains that he was defeated by a slave (*ἡσσωμένος δούλης*), but rather takes pride in the justice (*δικαίως*) of her punishment (1252-1254). Similarly, Polymestor's prophecy concerning her death and metamorphosis into a dog fails to upset her (1259-1274). She reacts to the revelation of her fate with the same commitment she showed before her vengeance: "It matters not at all to

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<sup>205</sup> Holmes (2007) 47-49, 77-79.

<sup>206</sup> Michelini (1987) 170: "The perfect revenge demands reciprocity between the wronged and the wronger, so that exactly comparable wounds are suffered by each, and each becomes the image of the other."

<sup>207</sup> Polyxena, in particular, considers slavery shameful and unendurable (357-368, 551-552), but similar assessments are delivered by Polydorus' ghost (55-58), the chorus (100-103, 332-333, 475-483), and Hecuba herself (157-158).

me, since you at any rate have paid the penalty to me” (οὐδὲν μέλει μοι, σοῦ γέ μοι δόντος δίκην, 1274).

But while slavery is a definite source of shame and suffering in the play, it is not altogether clear how the audience should interpret the prediction of Hecuba’s metamorphosis. Metamorphoses in Greek literature are a “widely applicable motif” that can serve, for example, as punishment from an angry god or as relief from mortal suffering.<sup>208</sup> Critics of the *Hecuba* are divided on the implications of this transformation: some interpret it as the punishment for and culmination of Hecuba’s bestial degradation, while others suggest that Polymestor’s condemnatory tone does not reflect any fault or savagery on her part.<sup>209</sup> Neither interpretation by itself, however, adequately accounts for the deliberate ambiguity that Euripides creates in this scene. Mossman notes several of these ambiguities:<sup>210</sup> Hecuba will become a dog, a creature often considered base and repulsive by ancient Greeks,<sup>211</sup> but she will have “blazing eyes” (πύρσ’ ἔχουσα δέργματα, 1265), a trait possessed by supernatural figures;<sup>212</sup> Hecuba will die by drowning, a particularly horrible death in the ancient world, but unlike most who drown, she will not die anonymously and will have a famous tomb (1273). This prophecy is not delivered by a god, who might clarify for the audience whether

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<sup>208</sup> Burkert (1979) 7.

<sup>209</sup> The former view is held by Abrahamson (1952) 121, Reckford (1985) 118, Nussbaum (1986) 414, Michelini (1987) 172, and Segal (1990) 120-121. The latter by Meridor (1978) 32-35, Kovacs (1987) 108-109, and Gregory (1999) xxxiii-xxxiv.

<sup>210</sup> Mossman (1995) 196-201

<sup>211</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 414: “Above all, it is despised and feared as the animal that devours the flesh of human corpses, indifferent to the most sacred law of human society.”

<sup>212</sup> Zeitlin (1991) 63-4 compares Hecuba here to Sirius, the dog of Orion; Mossman notes a connection with Charon (198).

the metamorphosis is punishment or relief, but by an enemy whose aim is to upset her.<sup>213</sup>

This transformation itself admittedly does not seem very pleasant; the closest tragic parallel is Dionysus' prediction of Cadmus' unwelcome metamorphosis into a powerful serpent at the end of the *Bacchae* (1330-1351). But the *Hecuba* lacks the clear articulations of divine punishment and human misery found in that play. Here, Euripides resists providing his audience with clear indications of praise or blame, reward or punishment.

Mossman's reading admirably avoids the moralistic approaches that have plagued scholarly interpretations of this play. She does not, however, completely dismiss its ethical implications but contends that these ambiguities are part of "a most complex moral problem" that the audience must consider: "[Euripides] offers us no easy answers; indeed he creates a world where easy answers are a thing of the past; and the state of flux he represents is reflected in the structure and expression of the play."<sup>214</sup> While I agree with this assessment, I believe we can press Mossman's claim even further. Euripides' grim depiction of the unstable and violent world of the *Hecuba* does more than invite ethical speculation: it encourages viewers to question their most fundamental assumptions about the social and political structure of the world. We have seen in this chapter that contradictions of familiar cultural categories pervade the *Hecuba* and that the fragility of these categories underscores human vulnerability. The character of Hecuba in particular not only defies the moral distinctions that other scholars have tried to find in the play but also challenges basic distinctions between male and female, slave and queen. It is because of these contradictions that she is a monstrous aberration that commits disturbing violence. But since she is also a

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<sup>213</sup> No one could claim that Polymestor, who names Dionysus as his source (1267) and accurately predicts the deaths of Agamemnon and Cassandra (1275-1281), is lying. But Mossman notes that in his anger he likely wants "to put the worst construction on what he has been told" (199).

<sup>214</sup> Mossman (1995) 203.

sympathetic victim who exacts vengeance from a vicious adversary, we are left with a complex figure whose actions cannot be neatly labeled as heroic or villainous.

#### C.4) *Hecuba and The Final Girl*

Though we cannot determine precisely how ancient audiences reacted to violent and contradictory features of the *Hecuba*'s protagonist, we may gain some insight from an analogous example found in modern horror fiction. Hecuba's ambiguous nature and grisly behavior closely resemble the Final Girl in horror films of the slasher genre. In slasher films, a deranged, frequently monstrous, killer dispatches his teenage victims one by one until the protagonist, almost always a female, turns the tables on him. Clover defines the Final Girl as follows:

The one character of stature who does live to tell the tale is in fact the Final Girl. She is introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid it that hers is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, levelheaded; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat .... We register her horror as she stumbles on the corpses of her friends. Her momentary paralysis in the face of death duplicates those moments of the universal nightmare experience – in which she is the undisputed “I” – on which horror frankly trades. When she downs the killer, we are triumphant. She is by any measure the slasher film's hero. This is not to say that our attachment to her is exclusive and unremitting, only that it adds up, and that in the closing sequence (which can be quite prolonged) it is very close to absolute.<sup>215</sup>

On the surface, this description could be applied to Hecuba: she is the focal character for most of the play; her terrified and frantic reactions to the death of Polyxena and the discovery of Polydorus' corpse help the audience to register the horror in those situations; and though initially she is extremely distraught at her children's gruesome fates, she eventually triumphs

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<sup>215</sup> Clover (1992) 44-45. Her description fits most closely with slasher films from the late 1970s until the late 1980s; Gill (2002) 22-23 observes that slasher films after this period frequently deviated from the strict gender requirements.



over Polymestor by her cunning and grim resolve. While there are some obvious distinctions between the Final Girl in horror and Hecuba (e.g., Polymestor is not a serial killer; Hecuba's own safety is not initially at risk), the similarities between the two reveal significant considerations concerning the original audience's reaction to her revenge. Hecuba, like the Final Girl, is formally the hero of the play, but her disturbing triumph invites confusion as well as satisfaction from audience members.

The Final Girl's triumph typically involves single-handedly defeating the killer of the slasher film. Her independence does not stem from her stubbornness or solitary nature. On the contrary, she frequently tries to find allies who might help her defeat the villain. But these allies ultimately fail her, especially authority figures (e.g., parents, police officers) who refuse to believe her, are unwilling admit publicly that such a monster exists, or are in some way powerless to combat it.<sup>216</sup> In Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), for example, Nancy tries to persuade her father, a police lieutenant, that Freddy Krueger, a former child-murderer burned alive by parents and now haunting children's dreams from beyond the grave, is threatening her and her friends. The father does not initially believe her, and even when she provides proof (a hat snatched from a dream with Krueger's name sewn inside) his response is unhelpful at best. He attempts to alleviate her fears by placing protective bars on her bedroom windows, paradoxically locking her in the room where she is most vulnerable. In the *Hecuba* Agamemnon, like Nancy's father, is well-intentioned, but his inability or unwillingness to extricate himself from the political sphere renders his passive offers of support insufficient. The *Hecuba* thus presents its audience with a world very

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<sup>216</sup> Dika (1987) 91 observes: "In the stalker film, however, these traditional authority figures have lost their power: they are usually friendly and concerned about the welfare of the young community, but they have no power to alter the events of the film." The incredulous police officer is a stock character found also in older horror films such as Yeaworth Jr.'s *The Blob*, Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

similar to the one found in many slasher films: the social structures designed to protect the innocent and vulnerable (e.g. *φίλοι*, laws, political authority) cannot accommodate the monstrous evil that threatens the central character. Consequently, the protagonist must act outside these social structures to achieve her aims; for the Final Girl this is survival, while Hecuba seeks retribution. But by defying these structures the heroine simultaneously confronts the threats that the social framework fails to resolve and challenges the framework itself by exposing its vulnerabilities. Hecuba's shocking vengeance ends the reign of one killer while signaling her own ability to deceive, kill, and mutilate.<sup>217</sup>

The emergence of Hecuba as the play's triumphant killer illustrates another similarity between her character and the Final Girl: the capacity to adapt and transform herself in order to defeat the villain.<sup>218</sup> In slasher films this transformation is provoked by the killer and the extraordinary situation into which he forces the Final Girl. As I have argued above, Hecuba undergoes a similar transformation during the play: in order to achieve her vengeance, she successfully negotiates her former regal authority with her current limitations as Agamemnon's slave. Like the Final Girl, Hecuba displays cleverness and ingenuity as she adapts her plan to accommodate Agamemnon's abstention. She not only exploits Polymestor's weaknesses (i.e., greed, arrogance) in order to draw her villain into the tent, she also adapts her arguments during the final debate (i.e., by concentrating on Polymestor's failure to uphold his political alliance with the Greeks) in order to secure Agamemnon's favorable judgment. These dynamic qualities allow her to find agency in a world that has denied her everything, even the survival of her children. The audience thus can find some

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<sup>217</sup> As Trecansky (2001) 68-71 notes, there is a similar paradox in modern horror: the Final Girl and the slasher villain are both outsiders who do not fit into traditional social categories.

<sup>218</sup> Hills (1999) 40, Trecansky (2001) 65.

pleasure in Hecuba's hard-fought triumph over a villain whose inner (and now outer) monstrosity contravenes essential beliefs of Greek society.<sup>219</sup>

While Hecuba's adaptability are part of her dynamic heroism, they also serve as indications of her ambiguous nature. The Final Girl model is useful for investigating the implications of this ambiguity. Clover contends that the Final Girl demonstrates contradictory gender associations: she is manifestly female, but her "unfemininity" can be found in her lack of erotic interest and appeal, her willingness to confront the killer violently on his own terms, her adoption of male phallic weapons that penetrate the villain, and her metaphorical emasculation of the killer as a result of this penetration (i.e. by penetrating him she prevents him from penetrating his victims).<sup>220</sup> Other females in slasher films frequently act as objects of sexual and violent desire. Their boyfriends lust after them, the audience ogles their bare bodies, and the killer gratifies himself by violently dispatching them (frequently while they are in a place of erotic vulnerability, such as in bed or in the shower).<sup>221</sup> The Final Girl serves as a dramatic contrast to these female victims by her refusal to succumb to either the sexual lust of the male characters or the killer's sadistic desires. Laurie, the protagonist of *Halloween* (1978), is the most sexually reserved of her friends, but as the film's director John Carpenter notes, "the one girl who is the most sexually uptight just

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<sup>219</sup> Not only does Polymestor violate *ξενία*, his savagery following the mutilation prevents reasonable legal discourse (1129). In defeating him, Hecuba resembles also the hero of the *Odyssey*, whose resourcefulness enables him to defeat the lawless Cyclops. Cf. note 169 above.

<sup>220</sup> Clover (1992) 48-49.

<sup>221</sup> In *Halloween*, for example, the killer Michael Myers disguises himself with a sheet before finding one female victim nude in bed. She assumes that Myers is her boyfriend playing a prank, thus allowing the killer to play his own (more deadly) game with her.

keeps stabbing this guy with a long knife .... She uses all those phallic symbols on the guy.”<sup>222</sup>

A similar gender pattern can be found in the *Hecuba*. Talthybius represents Polyxena as the ideal submissive female who not only offers herself freely to her male killer but also bares her torso, thus inviting an erotic comparison to a beautiful statue. Ultimately her body, like a slasher victim’s, ends covered in blood (558-561, 568-570). Hecuba, in contrast, adopts the submissive female persona when tricking Polymestor. Her revenge, as I have argued, depends on her ability to confront the villain on his own terms: she assumes the role of killer, mutilator, and, through the symbolic castration of her victim, the heroic victor and “man-slayer” (1061). Hecuba’s unexpected triumph against a cruel villain may delight audience members, but her replication of the villain’s brutality also creates an unsettling alignment between her and the play’s obvious monster.<sup>223</sup> The ancient audience was thus challenged to reconcile their sympathetic feelings towards Hecuba’s plight with the unease generated by her contradictory nature and brutality.

The similarities between Hecuba and the Final Girl can help us to understand how ancient audiences reacted to one of Euripides’ most shocking plays. I have argued against moralistic readings, and I contend that consideration of the play’s horrific material provides several possibilities for its appeal to ancient audiences. First, by creating situations and characters that defy normal classification, Euripides arouses his audience’s curiosity. Carroll argues that although the emotion of horror is *per se* unpleasant, the monsters found within the horror genre are “classificatory misfits” that elicit fascination: “The very fact that they are

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<sup>222</sup> Carpenter (1980) 23-24.

<sup>223</sup> The resemblance between the Final Girl and the killer is another common feature of horror films. Hills (1999) 46, for example notes the similarities between Ripley and the vicious monster in *Alien* (1979).

anomalies fascinates us. Their deviation from the paradigms of our classificatory scheme captures our attention immediately .... One wants to gaze upon the unusual, even when it is simultaneously repelling.”<sup>224</sup> The concomitance of fascination and horror is also suggested by Aristotle: he claims that humans enjoy seeing artistic representations of things normally deemed repulsive in the real world (e.g. corpses) because we can learn (*μανθάνειν*) from these depictions (*Poet.* 1448b15-1448b17).

Hecuba’s anomalous qualities perhaps also made the grotesque and repulsive violence she commits more palatable. Clover contends that the Final Girl’s ambiguous gender provides an ideal “identificatory buffer” for the primarily male audience of slasher films who, according to Clover, do not mind, in fact like, the repellent violence found in these films, but only when they can “explore taboo subjects in the relative safety of vicariousness.”<sup>225</sup> The Final Girl can suffer and display fear during the first part of the horror film without challenging the audience’s notion of masculinity, but at the end her assumption of the masculine heroic role allows male viewers to take pleasure in her triumph. The primarily male audience of Euripides’ *Hecuba* might have found similar comfort in the aesthetic distance created by Hecuba’s liminality.<sup>226</sup> The suffering she experiences in the first half of the play is extraordinary, as is her abasement when she grovels before Odysseus and Agamemnon.<sup>227</sup> There are, of course, other distancing mechanisms present in the *Hecuba*,

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<sup>224</sup> Carroll (1990) 188, 191. Though he calls this conclusion “confessedly pedestrian,” he argues that it counters a common critique made against horror fans – i.e. that their enjoyment of horror fiction is actually a sadistic pleasure derived from watching others in pain.

<sup>225</sup> Clover (1992) 51.

<sup>226</sup> Whether women were present during the original performance does not significantly affect my argument, as I am assuming that the audience was either fully or predominantly male. Cf. Podlecki (1990), Henderson (1991), and Goldhill (1997a) on the presence of women in the Greek theater.

<sup>227</sup> The importance of aesthetic distance was noted by ancient writers, as well: Aristotle claims in the *Rhetoric* that audiences will be overcome with panic if the orator provides examples of suffering that are too immediate

including the mythological setting, the exotic Thracian locale, and the non-Greek ethnicity of Hecuba's victim. But the contradictory elements of her character allow her to behave in ways typically unavailable to males,<sup>228</sup> and so the audience might have thrilled at her triumph without feeling overwhelming discomfort at her suffering.

But ultimately I do not think we can completely discount the potential unease caused by Hecuba's contradictory nature. The constant pattern of contradiction in the *Hecuba* suggests that the original audience felt not merely fascination (Carroll) and detached enjoyment (Clover), but also discomfort as the familiar codes of social interaction, codes that served as sources of protection for the vulnerable, disintegrated amidst the play's brutal violence. Therefore I think Holland-Toll's distinction between affirmative and disaffirmative horror is most useful here.<sup>229</sup> As I noted at the end of my first chapter, affirmative fictions present the restoration of social structures after a horrific disruption, while disaffirmative fictions depict disruptions that leave social structures irreparably destroyed.<sup>230</sup> Many slasher films offer an affirmative, albeit perverse, attitude toward the cultural associations of their audience. The killer often "punishes" the teens who use drugs or have promiscuous sex, thus validating social taboos; when the chaste Final Girl defeats him the community "returns to normal" without any significant change.<sup>231</sup> But other films, like *Halloween*, suggest that cultural distinctions and institutions are insufficient. Neither psychiatrists nor the police can

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(1385b29-33), and the reaction to Phrynicus' *Sack of Miletus* demonstrates that tragic audiences required some distance from the material (Hdt. 6.21).

<sup>228</sup> Foley (2001) and Zeitlin (1996) have made similar observations about female characters in Greek tragedy.

<sup>229</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 14-25.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. pages 46-47 above.

<sup>231</sup> The fact that these films often suggest that the threat may return does not contradict their affirmative nature, as the killer does not destroy the social fabric but rather enforces the repressive aspects of the society's values (Trencansky 2001, 68-71).

restrain Michael Myers or adequately explain his behavior; Myers is depicted as a force of evil that resists human compassion and that defies the institutions that protect civilization from chaos.<sup>232</sup>

There are no such “bogey-men” in the *Hecuba*, but there is a similar breakdown of social conventions: *φιλία* and *νόμος* are distorted and abandoned in the first half of the play, and Hecuba defies political and gender-based distinctions in its second half. Agamemnon’s final judgment against Polymestor fails to resolve these disruptions. In fact it confirms the disintegration of the social fabric that preceded it: he learns no new information from the debate between Polymestor and Hecuba, and the only significant change in situation since his earlier refusal to help Hecuba is the gruesome violence she perpetrates. His decision thus continues the pattern of horrific violence that pervades the play: victims (Polyxena, Polydorus, and Polymestor) receive no benefit from appeals to *φιλία* and *νόμος*, but those who manipulate conventional distinctions (Odysseus, Hecuba in the second half) can achieve their desires. The rest of the play’s finale is similarly grim: Hecuba will transform and die, Agamemnon will be murdered along with Hecuba’s daughter Cassandra, Polymestor will be exiled, and his children’s corpses presumably will remain unburied. While the play ends with the resolution of the play’s original crisis (i.e. the unburied Polydorus will receive burial), it also presents an amplification of the social disorder behind that crisis (i.e. there are two unburied corpses instead of one, Polydorus’ burial is delayed for the sake of revenge). The original audience of the *Hecuba* may have been deeply disturbed in a way similar to that of an audience watching a disaffirmative horror film.

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<sup>232</sup> Dr. Loomis, the killer’s doctor, refers to Myers as “it.” When the sheriff expresses his shock at the doctor’s lack of compassion, Loomis answers: “I met him, fifteen years ago. I was told there was nothing left. No reason, no conscience, no understanding, even the most rudimentary sense of life or death, good or evil, right or wrong.... I realized what was living behind that boy’s eyes was purely and simply *evil*.”

Reading the *Hecuba* as an example of disaffirmative horror allows us to appreciate its unsettling contradictions of cultural categories. While the play does not offer ethical instruction, it serves an intellectual function. Holland-Toll observes that disaffirmative fiction presents its audience with a “true image” of their society: “all of the qualities on which we pride ourselves...are as subject to alienation and subversion as they are to validation and reaffirmation.”<sup>233</sup> This image may not be pleasant but it encourages us to think critically about the values and distinctions we take for granted. Euripides seems to have had a similar agenda in the *Hecuba*. It was not uncommon for fifth-century Athenians to encounter conflicts similar to (albeit less extreme than) the ones faced by the characters in the *Hecuba*. Pericles, for example, was compelled to prove that his political allegiance to Athens trumped his personal friendship with the Spartan general Aristarchus.<sup>234</sup> It was beneficial for the audience to think about the cultural distinctions and structures that Euripides subverts in this play, especially in the tumultuous social and political climate of the late fifth century.<sup>235</sup> The ability to think critically about these distinctions and structures not only allowed them to deal with the moral complexity discussed by Mossman but also encouraged them to reflect on their society in a more general sense.<sup>236</sup> The horrific violence in the *Hecuba* serves as a vivid representation of human vulnerability in an unstable world.

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<sup>233</sup> Holland-Toll (2001) 251.

<sup>234</sup> Th. 2.13. Cf. Herman (1987) 1-9 and 118-161 on the tensions between upholding private relationships of *ξενία* and demonstrating loyalty to one’s community in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. my discussion in chapter 1 on pages 57-58.

<sup>236</sup> See my comments on Mossman on pages 143-145 above.



### III. HORROR IN EURIPIDES' *HERACLES*

The *Heracles* contains clear relevance for this investigation of Euripidean horror. Its macabre nature is obvious from even superficial readings: its virtuous hero is driven mad by pitiless gods, then forced to slaughter his innocent family, and finally restored to sanity in order to confront the mayhem he has committed unwillingly. The play is shocking by both ancient and modern standards. According to the precepts of Aristotle's *Poetics* this plot is "foul" (*μιαρόν*), for Heracles is morally blameless (*ἐπιεικής*) and his punishment is utterly unwarranted (1452b34-1452b36).<sup>1</sup> The vivid depiction of the hero's madness was so shocking that the politician Cleon reportedly charged Euripides with profaning the Dionysian festival; though the story is almost certainly spurious, it suggests "an ancient discomfort with this bloody and bewildering drama."<sup>2</sup> Modern critics have had similar difficulties interpreting the play's "overwhelming horror and despair."<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship has focused on several questions: why do the gods act so cruelly towards Heracles? How does the protagonist's heroic identity relate to his deranged attack? What lesson can the audience glean from this grim drama?

Though critical responses to these interrelated questions are many and diverse, there are two common interpretive approaches. The first sees a relatively optimistic tone following

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<sup>1</sup> Lucas (1968) *ad loc.* notes the problematic nature of Aristotle's judgment as it concerns tragedy ("...we might do worse than define tragedy as the passage of *ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας*, admirable men, from prosperity to adversity"). Cf. my comments on the term in chapter 1 page 20 n. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Papadopoulou (2005) 71, who cites *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 2400 (vol. 24: 107-109, lines 10-14), a list of rhetorical exercises in which this tale can be found.

<sup>3</sup> Yunis (1988) 139.

the carnage. Though these critics acknowledge the irrational nature of the play's deities, they judge the hero triumphant in the end because he has adapted (as far as one can) to extreme adversity by refusing suicide and following his friend Theseus to Athens. Wilamowitz, for example, sees a movement in the play from a traditional, violent model of Doric heroism towards a more advanced model based on cooperation and friendship.<sup>4</sup> These commentators conclude that Euripides reveals how "human virtues, especially friendship, could enhance life in a world ruled by capricious divinities."<sup>5</sup> In this view Euripides presents Heracles as a tragic and vulnerable mortal so that the audience can more fully identify with his suffering and admire his steadfast resignation amidst dreadful circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

The second approach includes more pessimistic interpretations of the *Heracles*. These critics see little hope at the end of the play since "any mortal pretension to autonomy, knowledge, and grandeur that is exclusive of the gods has been destroyed."<sup>7</sup> There is no triumph of human virtue or friendship in these readings; Heracles' submission to Theseus' request highlights his inability to participate in traditional familial relationships.<sup>8</sup> While such interpretations see many of the same conflicts and contradictions mentioned in optimistic readings, these commentators see no resolution of them in the play's conclusion. They propose that the audience did not see Heracles as a model of humanity's ability to withstand

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<sup>4</sup> Wilamowitz -Moellendorff (1895) ii.127-128.

<sup>5</sup> Hartigan (1987) 132. Cf. Chalk (1962), Conacher (1955) 148-152, Papadopoulou (2004) 267-268 for similar views.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Ruck (1976), Gregory (1977), and Silk (1985).

<sup>7</sup> Burnett (1971) 179, though she admits the play reveals "a kind of restoration for humanity" involving Heracles' self-salvation (179-180).

<sup>8</sup> Padilla (1992) 11-12, Griffiths (2002) 655.

sorrows but rather as a tragic anomaly condemned to destroy those whom he most desires to join.

A close examination of the contradictions underscoring the *Heracles*' shocking depictions violence may resolve some of these interpretive difficulties. I have noted in earlier chapters Holland-Toll's distinction between affirmative horror (fictions where an anomalous figure or event threatens the social fabric but is defeated; social structures are thus restored and reaffirmed) and disaffirmative horror (fiction in which the anomalous figure or event irreparably destroys these social structures and/or reveals their inadequacy). I argued in the previous chapter that the horrific violence in the *Hecuba* performed a disaffirmative function: in a world where social conventions fail to protect those most in need of their protection Hecuba can triumph only by exploiting her ability to subvert familiar cultural categories. I will argue in this chapter that the *Heracles* contains a similarly disaffirmative portrayal of a horrific world in which conventions and structures familiar to the audience are unraveled. I will examine three distinct yet interrelated aspects of the central massacre and their relevance to the play: the gods, the family, and the household. In each of these Euripides elicits horror from his audience through unsettling juxtapositions that challenge their preconceptions about the structure of their world. Instead of reaffirming the protective value commonly attributed to each of these institutions, the tragedian highlights their fragility and the lurking dangers for those who take them for granted.

Although my reading of the play is consistent with the pessimistic interpretations noted above, it contains a more comprehensive account of the play's subversion of cultural categories. The complete disruption of order in both divine and domestic arenas precludes any hope of peaceful resolution not only for Heracles but for ordinary people as well.

Whereas much of the horror in the *Hecuba* depended on human agency, the *Heracles* presents contradictions in divine realm that result in brutal violence and a subversion of mortal distinctions. Stephen King divides horror stories into two types: “those in which the horror results from an act of free and conscious will ... and those in which the horror is predestinate, coming from the outside like a stroke of lightning.”<sup>9</sup> According to this distinction *Heracles* belongs to the latter category: the play provides no reasonable explanation for the divine wrath behind his punishment. But the monstrous Iris and Lyssa not only destroy their victims but transform familiar sources of comfort into horrific distortions. After Lyssa enters the body of the family’s patriarch and their home neither can be restored to their former role in protecting the family. My examination thus moves from the flagrant cosmic disruption caused by Iris and Lyssa to contradictions of the more intimate categories of family and home.

#### A) *Ἱεοὶ οὐδαμοῦ*: Divine Savagery and Mortal Confusion

The portrait of the vicious divine realm in the *Heracles* represents the bleakest view of the gods in extant Greek tragedy. Unlike other cruel deities, such as Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* and Dionysus in *Bacchae*, Hera does not appear onstage to voice her anger, but instead employs Iris to explain her obscure grievances. Consequently, the play’s human characters, as well as the audience, are forced to confront an obvious divine animosity that cannot be explained away as simple jealousy. Euripides representats the gods as monstrous contradictions of traditional Greek beliefs, and their inexplicable brutality invites confusion from human characters. The effect is so jarring that some scholars have suggested that the tragedian is here denouncing traditional accounts of the gods as unbelievable.<sup>10</sup> I shall argue

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<sup>9</sup> King (1981) 64.

against such readings in this section: the shocking intrusion of Iris and Lyssa is an upsetting reflection of the irrational brutality of the world and the insufficiency of human piety as protection against it. The mortal characters within the play express various sentiments concerning the gods, including both traditional and rational professions of faith, but all mortal beliefs are shattered by the revelation that the gods act as forces of violent disorder.

#### A.1) *Doubts and Revisions*

The human characters in the *Heracles* do not hesitate to speculate concerning the gods. Amphytrion, Theseus, Heracles, and the chorus often comment on the nature of the divine at each stage of the play's action: Heracles' initial absence, timely return, and deranged rampage are all attributed to the intervention or abstention of a god. These speculations are not mere tangents but essential to the movement of the plot: debates concerning Heracles' divinity and the will of the gods generate much of the play's dramatic conflict. These mortal evaluations, however, prove consistently unreliable. New events contradict previously stated beliefs, and the characters frequently revise their opinions.<sup>11</sup> The play's structure emphasizes these revisions and contradictions.<sup>12</sup> While many scholars have proposed a two or three-part structure for the play,<sup>13</sup> there are at least five sections marked by

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<sup>10</sup> Greenwood (1953) 67, for example, suggests that "Euripides says to us, in effect: 'What you see in my play could not have occurred; but if the received story were true, what *would* have occurred is just what you see in my play.'" Conacher (1955) 150-152 claims that the audience, unlike the play's characters, recognized the impossibility of such gods and thus appreciated the tragedian's endorsement of rational faith that fit the fifth-century intellectual milieu.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Yunis (1988) 139-171 for a detailed discussion of these revisions.

<sup>12</sup> The organization of the play and its lack of unity have generated much scholarly discussion. Cf. Barlow (1982) 115-116 for a brief survey of critical approaches. I agree with Conacher (1955) and Michelini (1987) 232 that the absence of causal connections within the *Heracles* is not a literary defect but a deliberate representation of the play's chaotic world.

<sup>13</sup> Those dividing the play into three parts include the suppliant drama culminating in Heracles' victory over Lycus (1-814), the appearance of Iris and Lyssa (815-1041), and Heracles' struggle to recover from the massacre (1042-1428). Cf. Kamerbeek (1966) 1-4 for a representative treatment. Michelini (1987) 231 n. 1.

reversals in human beliefs: the family's doubts concerning the gods prior to Heracles' arrival, their subsequent joy and pious celebration following his return, the chorus' shock at the appearance of Iris and Lyssa, Heracles' despair after the massacre, and his revised view of the gods and pollution after he discusses these topics with Theseus.

I shall argue in this section that mortal confusion concerning the gods is a pervasive feature of the *Heracles* and that, contrary to the assessments of several scholars, Euripides does not offer ultimate clarification or reassurance to his audience. The fictional characters' confusion was also likely shared by the audience, who shared at least some of the contradicted sentiments and could not anticipate the play's shocking reversals. The dangers of misguided assumption are most evident in the dreadful appearance of Iris and Lyssa. Their attack is made particularly horrific by the juxtaposition of humans' stated faith in divine reciprocity with the subsequent revelation of the gods' irrational anger. Euripides offers little hope that mortals can understand anything beyond that the gods heed nothing but their own inscrutable desires.

The most pressing source of confusion concerning the divine involves the relationship between Zeus and his son Heracles.<sup>14</sup> Though the dual origin of the hero is a familiar element of myth,<sup>15</sup> Euripides utilizes this origin as a matter of doubt and dissent, particularly in the scenes before the hero's arrival. In his prologue, Amphytrion repeatedly claims to be

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claims that the Iris-Lyssa scene serves as a "quasi prologue" for the second half and thus argues that the drama has a bipartite structure. While the precise number of sections has little significance for my discussion, discussions of the play's divided structure are useful for two reasons: first, as I mention in the note above, the strong narrative disjunctions within the play highlight its chaotic atmosphere; second, references to distinct parts are convenient for discussion of the dramatic movement.

<sup>14</sup> Ruck (1976), Gregory (1977), Silk (1985), and Papadopoulou (2005) 47-48 have emphasized the ambivalence of divine and human in Heracles' character as a central conflict in the play. I shall discuss this question in more detail on pages 201-210 below.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Silk (1985) 6-7 on the duality of Heracles in mythology.

Heracles' father (πατέρα τόνδ' Ἡρακλέους, 3; παῖς ἐμός, 14; τοῦμοῦ γὰρ ὄντος παιδός, 37; παῖς ἐμός, 46; οὐμός εὐγενῆς τόκος, 50); his first statement, however, is an acknowledgement of Zeus' part in the birth of Heracles (Διὸς σύλλεκτρον, 1). Lycus mocks references to kinship with Zeus as "empty boasts" (κόμπους κενούς, 148), while the chorus expresses doubt concerning the hero's paternity (εἴτε Διὸς νιν εἴπω / εἴτ' Ἀμφιτρυῶνος ἴνιν, 353-354). The stakes of this speculative question are critical for Heracles' family: Lycus will either burn them alive together at the altar where they supplicate (240-246) or have his soldiers dispatch them one by one as the others watch (320-326). Their only hope of salvation depends on the return of the head of their household from the world of the dead, an unlikely feat for someone who is merely mortal. Only the optimistic Amphitryon, who at first endorses waiting for his son, makes a genuine appeal to Heracles' divine parentage before the hero's return. Even in his defense of this heritage he delegates the responsibility of confirmation to Zeus: τῷ τοῦ Διὸς μὲν Ζεὺς ἀμυνέτω μέρει / παιδός (170-171); in his later renunciation it is clear that Amphitryon believes Zeus has failed to answer (340-347).

When Heracles does return, his arrival is interpreted as confirmation of his divine parentage: Megara's first reaction upon seeing her husband is to compare him to Zeus (ἐπεὶ Διὸς / σωτήρος ὑμῶν οὐδέν ἐσθ' ὅδ' ὕστερος 521-522); the chorus confidently assert "He is Zeus' son" (Διὸς ὁ παῖς, 696) and renounce their former disbelief (802-804). Amphitryon's deceptive assurance to Lycus that Heracles has not returned "unless one of the gods should restore him" (εἴ γε μή τις θεῶν ἀναστήσειέ νιν, 719) carries ironic resonance: Heracles' return answers Amphitryon's prayers for divine assistance (170-171, 498-502) and fulfills his prediction of Lycus' ruin from "the wind of a god" (θεοῦ πνεῦμα, 216). For Amphitryon and

the others, Heracles' return gives proof not only of his divine parentage but also of Zeus' active interest in preserving his son's family.

This change of heart – from doubts about the gods' interest in protecting deserving mortals to renewed faith in divine beneficence – initially seems unproblematic within the context of the play's structure: the hero's return resolves the dramatic conflict and removes the characters' doubts concerning the gods. Scholars have, in fact, condemned the first part of the play (i.e., the material before Iris and Lyssa appear) as lacking in suspense: "It is the first part of the play which has been criticised most adversely. The charges are that it is melodramatic, and that it is flat and largely irrelevant."<sup>16</sup> For these critics the mortal speculations about the will of the gods are mere distractions that lull the audience into a false sense of security before they are devastated by "the great surprise" of the play, namely the shocking appearance of Iris and Lyssa.<sup>17</sup> While I agree that Euripides uses the first part of the play to manipulate his audience's expectations before the startling reversal, this section is not merely "a mechanical progression of incidents involving mechanical characters."<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, this part of the drama introduces pressing questions about the nature of the gods and the ability of mortals to understand it. The sudden divine disruption does not simply negate these questions but forces the characters and audience to reevaluate their previous assumptions.

Burnett is therefore correct in condemning interpretations that see the first half of the *Heracles* as Euripides' attempt to lull his audience into "stupefied complacency" before

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<sup>16</sup> Chalk (1962) 8. Though Chalk himself does not agree with this assessment, see Kitto (1939) 240, Ehrenberg (1946) 158, Norwood (1954) 46, and Michelini (1987) 240-41 for representative examples of critical dismissal of the play's first part.

<sup>17</sup> Arnott (1978) 6-12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 8.



smiting them “with the whiplash of truth” in the second half.<sup>19</sup> Her attempt to restore the importance of the play’s beginning suffers, however, from extreme moralism. She contends that the family’s despair, culminating in their decision to leave the altar where they supplicate so that their death may be honorable, marks them as impious aberrations: “[The suppliant drama’s] outrages upon the settled canons of tragic suppliance are indeed so flagrant that we are forced to recognize a major intention of the poet in this marked deviation from the norm.”<sup>20</sup> While this reading acknowledges the unsettling features of the family’s crisis in faith, its simplistic condemnation fails to acknowledge the tensions between faith and doubt and, moreover, nullifies the *pathos* of the family’s dreadful fate.<sup>21</sup> I shall argue that the play’s first half neither lulls or outrages its audience. Rather, its conflicting accounts of divine will reveal signs of mortal confusion that prefigure the flagrant disruption caused by Iris and Lyssa. Euripides manipulates his audience by presenting them with familiar religious beliefs that prove inadequate in the context of the play.

The play’s first section contains several signs of confusion and fallibility in the human characters’ assessments of divine behavior. Amphytrion, the chorus, and Heracles show themselves to be unreliable judges of divine actions and motives. The chorus confidently proclaim that only a fool could accuse the gods of lawlessness and weakness:

τίς ὁ θεοῦς ἀνομία χραίνων, θνατὸς ὢν,  
 ἄφρονα λόγον  
 γούρανίων μακάρων† κατέβαλ’ ὡς ἄρ’ οὐ  
 σθένουσιν θεοί;

Who is the one, though mortal, who ascribes lawlessness to the gods  
 and hurls this foolish account against the heavenly gods, that the gods in fact

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<sup>19</sup> Burnett (1971) 157-158.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 158.

<sup>21</sup> She acknowledges that their fate is “horrible” but mitigates the horror by claiming that it was “freely chosen by those who have suffered it” (172).

have no strength? (757-759)

It is not clear who this *τις* represents,<sup>22</sup> but the chorus here and throughout the third stasimon (772-773, 811-814) adamantly insist that Lycus' death proves that the gods are capable and eager enforcers of justice. But though Lycus' willingness to murder suppliants is obviously impious, he never makes any claim concerning divine behavior. On the contrary, it is Amphitryon, the most pious character prior to Heracles' arrival, who comes closest to uttering the "foolish account" (*ἄφρονα λόγον*) condemned by the chorus:<sup>23</sup>

σὺ δ' ἤσθ' ἄρ' ἤσσον ἢ ὀόκεις εἶναι φίλος.  
ἀρετῇ σε νικῶ θνητὸς ὢν θεὸν μέγαν.  
παῖδας γὰρ οὐ προὔδωκα τοὺς Ἡρακλέους.  
σὺ δ' ἐς μὲν εὐνάς κρύφιος ἠπίστω μολεῖν,  
τάλλότριά λέκτρα δόντος οὐδενὸς λαβών,  
σώζειν δὲ τοὺς σοὺς οὐκ ἐπίστασαι φίλους.  
ἀμαθὴς τις εἴ θεὸς ἢ δίκαιος οὐκ ἔφους.

But you [Zeus] were, as it turns out, less dear than you seemed to be. I trump you in courage, though I am a mortal and you a great god. For I did not betray Heracles' children. And you knew how to seduce surreptitiously and snatch another's wife though he did not grant permission, but you don't know how to protect your dear ones. You are a foolish<sup>24</sup> god or are not by nature just. (341-347)

Amphitryon's reproach against Zeus indeed marks a sudden and dramatic change of heart. As Yunis notes, he subverts his former faith by applying formulae commonly found in prayers to deliver a stunning renunciation of the god.<sup>25</sup> The language of this passage also strongly resembles that of the account condemned by the chorus: both the chorus' unnamed critic and

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stinton (1976) 73 on a similar passage involving an indefinite *τις* (Ag. 369): "Aeschylus is not inviting us to speculate on the identity of *τις* ... it is simply an emphatic way of saying that the gods are concerned with human behaviour."

<sup>23</sup> Burnett (1971) 167.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bond (1981) *ad* 347 on *ἀμαθής*. He notes that its distinction from injustice suggests that it denotes a "strong intellectual element" (i.e. Zeus is either unable to help or unwilling). If the term denotes immorality, as Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1895) *ad loc.* contends, the force of this contrast is lost.

<sup>25</sup> Yunis (1988) 142.

Amphitryon accuse the gods of injustice (*δίκαιος οὐκ ἔφους*, 347; *ἀνομία*, 757) and (intellectual) weakness (*ἀμαθής*, 347; *οὐ σθένουσιν*, 759), and both assume knowledge of the divine though being mortal (*θνητὸς ὢν*, 342; *θνατὸς ὢν*, 757). It is tempting then to read the chorus' rejection of this opinion from an unnamed sceptic as a correction of Amphitryon's reproach, much as they correct their previous doubt concerning the hero's paternity. Thus even the pious Amphitryon, the only member of the household who has faith in Heracles' return and who continues to pray to Zeus even after this reproof (498-502), apparently misjudges divine behavior.

But the chorus' corrections are similarly unreliable, as they also condemn the gods (for intellectual weakness) and apply human standards to divine behavior. While lamenting their old age and feeble strength, they complain that the gods should grant a second youth as a reward for virtue (*ἀρετᾶς*); since the gods do not grant this reward, they lack intelligence (*ξύνεσις*) and human wisdom (*σοφία κατ' ἀνδρας*, 655-672). Their presumption here matches that of the "foolish account" they later condemn, as their desire for youth is similarly based on the assumption that gods should adhere to mortal wisdom.<sup>26</sup> It is likely that the chorus' wish is inspired by Heracles' return from the dead; the old men are presumably wondering "why all good people (like themselves) should not receive the distinction of a second life."<sup>27</sup> Yet Heracles' own evaluation of his extraordinary return exposes the naivety of their desire: he does not cite the completion of the twelfth labor and his timely return as proofs of his *ἀρετή*, but he condemns the labors generally as useless (*μάτην*) distractions (*χαιρόντων πόνοι* / *μάτην γὰρ αὐτοὺς τῶνδε μᾶλλον ἥνυσσα*, 575-576). After the massacre, he describes his life as

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<sup>26</sup> Gregory (1977) 266.

<sup>27</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 655-672.

the continuation of an endless series of toils culminating in the “final labor” of killing his own family (τὸν λοίσθιον δὲ τόνδ’ ἔτλην τάλας πόνον, 1279).<sup>28</sup>

Heracles’ final summation of his toils also illustrates his inability to assess the will of the gods. After arriving, he informs Amphitryon that he recognized from a bird omen that “some toil had befallen the house” (ἔγνων πόνον τιν’ ἐς δόμους πεπτωκότα, 597). Bond condemns this remark for its unconvincing attempt at “realistic plotting” for Heracles’ surreptitious arrival.<sup>29</sup> While I admit that the account seems improbable, its function is not limited to narrative convenience. Rather, it reveals that Heracles suffers from the same confusion as the other characters in the play. Though the hero apparently can read divine omens, his father’s immediate response suggests that Heracles lacks some understanding: Amphitryon must remind his son to worship the domestic gods before commencing with the slaughter of his enemies, and the hero acknowledges his father’s wisdom and his own impetuosity (599-609).<sup>30</sup> But it is after the massacre that Heracles’ inability to understand the will of the gods is most evident. The hero correctly recognized that a labor (πόνος) awaits him at home, but he did not fully grasp its nature until it is too late (1279). Like Amphitryon and the chorus he presumes that he understands divine intentions, but in reality they all fail to comprehend the true purpose the gods have for his arrival.

Heracles’ initial misunderstanding concerning this particular labor is related to a larger source of confusion that also affects the audience of this play: the ambiguous motivation behind the twelve labors. In traditional accounts, Heracles’ labors serve as

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Willink (1988) 86-87 on the significance πόνος in this play and in the myth of Heracles generally. Euripides frequently exploits the underlying tension between the term’s heroic connotation (i.e. the twelve labors) and its negative aspect (i.e. “toil, suffering”).

<sup>29</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 595-598.

<sup>30</sup> *Pace* Foley (1985) 188, who claims that the hero “immediately thinks of his duty to the gods....”

divinely distributed punishment for killing his family.<sup>31</sup> Euripides reverses the accepted order by presenting the labors as prior to the murders. As a result, the audience members' expectations have been challenged, and they cannot be entirely sure why Heracles must fulfill these toils. Rather than provide a single mythological variant, Euripides deliberately exploits the ambiguity of the labors to highlight the human characters' inability to comprehend divine motivations. Human confusion is evident from the outset, as Amphitryon provides three possible motives for the hero's labors: his son's wish to provide compensation to Eurystheus and thus to restore the family to Argos (πάτραν οἰκεῖν θέλων /καθόδου δίδωσι μισθόν Εὐρυσθεῖ μέγαν); compulsion from Hera (εἴθ' Ἥρας ὑπο /κέντροις δαμασθείς, 20-21); or simple necessity (εἴτε τοῦ χρεὼν μέτα, 17-21). These three explanations – human interest, divine will, and impersonal fate – recur throughout the play as the human characters and the audience vainly attempt to comprehend Heracles' previous labors and the drama's central massacre that constitutes the hero's "final labor." By confronting his audience with these contradictory accounts,<sup>32</sup> Euripides denies viewers easy answers that might clarify the hero's suffering and the repulsive violence he commits.

Amphitryon and the chorus glorify the hero's accomplishments in ridding the world of savagery. Heracles has "tamed the land" (ἐξημερώσαι γαῖαν, 20), made the sea accessible to

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<sup>31</sup> Apollodorus notes that the Pythia assigned the labors to Heracles and implies that they serve as punishments for the murders (2.4.12). Gantz (1993) 382 and Bond (1981) xxviii-xxx note that most evidence for this is post-Euripidean, but the consistency of the murders preceding the labors in these accounts suggests an independent tradition that predated Euripides.

<sup>32</sup> It is true that multiple motivations *per se* are not necessarily contradictory. Dodds (1951) 1-27 has noted "overdetermination" in Homer, and there are several similar examples of double motivation in Greek tragedy in which a character is directly influenced by the gods but still held accountable for his or her behavior. Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*, for example, claims responsibility for murdering her husband at one moment (1379-1381), then attributes the same act to a divine avenger (ἀλάστωρ, 1501); Oedipus similarly can blame both Apollo and himself for his misfortune (*OT* 1329-1332). There need not be contradiction in such examples. Jebb *ad* 1329 remarks: "Apollo was the author of the doom (τελῶν), but the instrument of execution (ἔπαισε) was the hand of Oedipus." But while the characters in those plays do not seem interested in discussing the incompatibility of divine and human motivation, in the *Heracles* human characters do question the relationship between divine will and human accountability, as I shall argue below.

sailors by removing monsters (400-402), and punished those who violated sacred law (391).

The goddess Lyssa confirms the civilizing nature of his efforts:

*ἄβατον δὲ χώραν καὶ θάλασσαν ἀγρίαν  
ἐξημερώσας θεῶν ἀνέστησεν μόνος  
τιμὰς πιτνούσας ἀνοσίων ἀνδρῶν ὕπο.*

But he tamed unapproachable land and savage sea, and alone (of men) he restored honors belonging to the gods, honors that were being ruined by impious men. (851-853)

While Lyssa's assessment of the civilizing nature of the labors cannot be disputed, within the context of this play her claim that Heracles has benefited the gods is more problematic. Like Lyssa, the human characters in the play assume that the gods welcome these civilizing missions.<sup>33</sup> But the chorus' detailed report of the twelve labors concentrates on the benefits Heracles confers on mankind rather than on the honors he bestows upon the gods (359-435).<sup>34</sup> In fact they mention the gods explicitly in only three of the labors: the killing of the Nemean Lion, the slaughter of the hind of Artemis, and the meeting with Atlas. Moreover, I shall argue that the choral descriptions of these exploits undercut their assumption that the gods find them pleasing. Ultimately their confusion serves as critical background for the play's central horror: mortals may assume that they can contain the monstrous elements that plague their world, but the invasion of Iris and Lyssa reveals how little control mortals have in protecting themselves against savage violence.

Though the chorus' description of Heracles' first labor, the defeat of the Nemean

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<sup>33</sup> The chorus members are not as explicit as Lyssa in describing the labors as pleasing to the gods, but they consistently associate Heracles' triumphant return from Hades with divine favor (e.g. 694-700, 735-739, 769-773).

<sup>34</sup> Bond (1981) xxvi-xxviii and *ad* 853.

Lion, is not problematic,<sup>35</sup> their treatment of the myths of the hind of Artemis and Heracles' meeting with Atlas are provocative and potentially unsettling. Euripides' account of Heracles defeating the hind deviates significantly from other sources (375-379). In his version the hind is a menace to farmers (*συλήττειραν ἀγρωστῶν*) and Heracles glorifies Artemis by killing it (*κτείνας*). Neither of these aspects is found in other literary accounts and artistic depictions of the labor.<sup>36</sup> Euripides' "uniquely malevolent" version defines the act as a civilizing labor benefitting humans,<sup>37</sup> but at the same time its violence undercuts the chorus' assumption that it pleased Artemis. While the traditional versions of the myth implicitly or explicitly indicated the goddess' acceptance of the labor, the suggestion that the act honored her is problematic. The destruction of an animal commonly considered sacred to her was thus potentially unsettling to audience members familiar with the original myth.<sup>38</sup>

The account of Heracles' meeting with Atlas presents similarly problematic views of divine will. In the version of the myth likely most familiar to Euripides' audience, Heracles holds up the sky for Atlas so that the latter can claim the golden apples of the Hesperides.<sup>39</sup> Euripides, however, has the hero visit Atlas and uphold the heavens without cause, since

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<sup>35</sup> The chorus explains that the hero "cleared the grove of Zeus of its lion" (*Διὸς ἄλσος / ῥεήμωσε λέοντος*, 359-360), which is consistent with other accounts. Bacchylides, for example, mentions "the plain of Nemean Zeus" (*Νεμεαίου / Ζηνὸς ... πέδον*) as the site of the labor (*Ep* 9.4-9). Apollodorus specifies a closer connection between Heracles and Zeus: after the hero completes the labor, his host sacrifices to Zeus (*Bibl.* 2.75).

<sup>36</sup> In Pindar's version of the tale Heracles is sent by Eurystheus to capture (*ἄξονθ'*) the deer, which has already been consecrated to Artemis (*Ol.* 3.25-30). Apollodorus notes that Heracles takes great pains to keep the elusive animal alive in order to avoid Artemis' wrath, and even after capturing it he must defend his actions to the goddess before taking it to Eurystheus (*Bibl.* 2.81-82). Cf. Gantz (1993) 386-389 and Bond (1981) *ad* 375-379 on these literary treatments as well as artistic representations, which rarely even depict Heracles with a weapon as he completes this labor.

<sup>37</sup> Gantz (1993) 388.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gantz (1993) 386-387 on Pindar's abbreviated version of the myth and the likelihood that it was familiar to his audience.

<sup>39</sup> This was Pherecydes' account, which is referenced in the scholia to Apollonius' *Argonautica* 4.1396. Apollodorus corroborates the basic elements of the story (*Bibl.* 2.5.120). Cf. Gantz (1993) 410-412.

Heracles has personally obtained the apples himself prior to visiting the giant (394-399). This element of the story is retained, as Bond argues, in order to stress the hero's *εὐαννορία*: "and he held fast the starry homes of the gods by means of his manly strength" (*ἀστρωπούς τε κατέσχευεν οἷ- / κους εὐαννορία θεῶν*, 406-407).<sup>40</sup> The juxtaposition of *εὐαννορία* with *θεῶν* in this passage is striking. Not only do the gods depend on Heracles to protect them from the ruinous collapse of the heavens, they rely specifically on his exceptional humanity (*εὐαννορία*) rather than on strength from his divine heritage.<sup>41</sup> It is not then an act of piety from which the gods receive direct benefit but rather a display of humanity's strength and the gods' dependence on it.

The emphasis on human achievement in this ode does not reveal impious behavior on the part of the chorus,<sup>42</sup> but it does introduce some disturbing signs of confusion concerning divine will. Arnott doubts that the "unoriginal" and "unimaginative" audience familiar with contemporary depictions of pious Heracles saw anything unconventional in Euripides' account.<sup>43</sup> But the affinity Arnott suggests between the choral ode of the *Heracles* and contemporary depictions of a pious hero is subverted by Euripides' manipulation of the myth. The play's original viewers were predisposed to see the hero's achievements as pious acts: Pindar had presented the civilizing labors as part of the hero's ascendance to divine status (*Nem.* 1.60-72); the labors also adorned several temples, most famously on metopes of the

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<sup>40</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 403-407.

<sup>41</sup> *εὐαννορία* and related terms in Greek literature typically denote nobility in civic and martial contexts. In praising the kindness of Electra's husband Orestes notes the difficulty in discerning nobility (*εὐανδρίαν*) by common social distinctions (*El.* 367); Pindar applies these words to communities with brave citizens, such as Syracuse and Acharnia (*Ol.* 1.24, *Ol.* 5.20, *Ol.* 6.80, *Nem.* 2.17).

<sup>42</sup> Pace Burnett (1971) 178-179. As Barlow (1982) 119 notes, the chorus' song demonstrates their continued faith in the piety of the hero after Lycus has dismissed this aspect of the labors (*τί δὲ τὸ σεμνὸν σὺ κατείργασται πόσει*, 151).

<sup>43</sup> Arnott (1978) 9-10.



temple of Zeus at Olympia, which contained depictions of divine figures assisting the hero.<sup>44</sup> The ode of the *Heracles* significantly differs not only in its focus on the hero's humanity but also in its bleak tone. The ode ends not in triumphant apotheosis, as in Pindar, but in mortal despair: the hero will not return to save his family, and they will travel the "god-forsaken way" (*κέλευθρον ἄθρον*) of the underworld (425-435). While we cannot be certain what the audience did or did not detect, the contrast between the chorus' blind faith in the labors as pleasing to the gods and the deviation of their account from traditional myth establishes an unsettling tone of confusion within their hymn.

The chorus' beliefs regarding the labors are further examples of mortal confusion concerning divine motivation that recurs throughout the play. The doubts, misunderstandings, and contradictory claims in human assessments of divine behavior cause feelings of unease and discomfort from the audience, who, like the characters within the play, cannot fully disentangle the complicated and obscure schemes of the gods. Stephen King has compared the writing of horror to the composition of music: "one off-key note, then two, then a ripple, then a run of them. Finally the jagged discordant music of horror overwhelms the melody entirely."<sup>45</sup> This, I contend, is the function of the play's first part. The audience did not, as Arnott claims, have "their senses dulled by so much of the play's first 700 lines,"<sup>46</sup> nor did they condemn the mortal characters for their impiety and expect due punishment from the gods, as Burnett suggests.<sup>47</sup> The signs of confusion serve as essential components in the development of the play's horrific centerpiece, the appearance of Iris and

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Cohen (1994) 705-714 on the presence of Hermes and Athena in the iconography.

<sup>45</sup> King (1981) 329.

<sup>46</sup> Arnott (1978) 10.

<sup>47</sup> Burnett (1971) 177-180.

Lyssa and the ensuing slaughter. While the human characters and audience vainly attempt to comprehend the cosmic forces behind the family's suffering, Euripides unveils a shocking spectacle that simultaneously demolishes the audience's assumptions about divine justice and their familiarity with dramatic plot construction and theatrical devices.

#### A.2) *Divine Disruption*

The appearance of Iris and Lyssa in *Heracles* serves as a horrifying culmination to the characters' misguided speculations about the gods. Many scholars have noted the starkness of the Iris-Lyssa episode and its bleak implications for the play; Michelini aptly remarks that their interference "presents us with a part of reality usually left out of drama, a sequence of events that, like many sequences in life, is arbitrary, senseless, and contradictory."<sup>48</sup> The most comprehensive discussion of the scene's many contradictions has been that of Lee, who offers a compelling assessment of their function in the play.<sup>49</sup> But even his treatment does not account fully for the extent and complexity of these contradictions as they unfold. Euripides reveals instability on many levels: these goddesses do not act like (traditional conceptions of) themselves, the supposed harmony between divine and mortal values is dissolved, and familiar dramatic conventions are broken. I shall look at each of these features and identify elements that would contradict cultural categories familiar to the audience. I shall then conclude by discussing how Euripides uses horrific imagery to challenge the traditional conceptions of theodicy and of divine civility.

Euripides contravenes familiar tragic practice by having Iris and Lyssa appear in the middle of the play to disrupt the narrative. While the tragedian is fond of using the *deus ex*

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<sup>48</sup> Michelini (1987) 232.

<sup>49</sup> Lee (1982).

*machina* device in his work,<sup>50</sup> he nearly always positions these divine appearances in the opening or closing moments of his plays. These scenes typically act as framing devices introducing or resolving the narrative conflicts with clear demarcations.<sup>51</sup> The gods are therefore frequently involved in establishing initial conflicts (e.g. Aphrodite in *Hippolytus*) or resolving them (e.g. Apollo in *Orestes*), but do not typically interfere directly with tragic plots while they are in progress.<sup>52</sup> The sudden appearance of Iris and Lyssa thus presents a shocking formal deviation involving a complete reconfiguration of the play's narrative.

In many ways it acts as a second prologue:<sup>53</sup> the first part of the drama contains no mention of these gods nor provides any reason why they (as opposed to Hera or Zeus) should be interested in Heracles' plight;<sup>54</sup> like the gods in prologues they must introduce themselves; their dialogue explains the new terms of the dramatic conflict. At the same time, however, their appearance appropriates and distorts the narrative forms that precede it. Euripides uses familiar tragic exposition to develop Heracles' triumphant defeat over the obvious villain Lycus, including the formulation of the scheme (601-606), initial deception of the victim (701-725), the victim's screams as he dies offstage (750-761), and a celebratory

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Appleton's (1920) 11 observation: "[Euripides] uses the *deus ex machina* exactly ten times more frequently than any other tragedian whose works have survived!"

<sup>51</sup> Michelini (1987) 104-106. She notes, however, that orderly function of the device exists primarily on the formal level (i.e. to signal the completion of the performance); Euripidean gods frequently fail to resolve the thematic problems within the play (108-112). Cf. Appleton (1920) on Euripides' use of the *deus ex machina* to complicate the dramatic conflict.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Lee (1982) 44. Aside from the *Heracles*, the only notable exceptions can be found in the *Bacchae*, *Rhesus*, and possibly the fragmentary *Protesilaus*. In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus is a central character whose on-stage presence for most of the play disguised as "the stranger" aligns him more with human characters than with divine forces. In the *Rhesus*, Athena directly influences Odysseus and Diomedes as they prepare for the play's climactic murder; she does not, however, derail the action. Hermes' role in the *Protesilaus* is unclear, though as Mastronarde (2010) 175 n.49 observes he may have conducted the protagonist's spirit to the world above in the middle of the drama.

<sup>53</sup> Michelini (1987) 231 n. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Stinton (1975) 249: "The visitation of Lyssa which causes the tragic act is not grounded in any part of the previous action: it has no causal antecedents in the action, and it has no kind of moral justification."

song from the chorus (763-814).<sup>55</sup> Iris and Lyssa interrupt this progression and immediately begin a new, unprecedented cycle of violence: Lyssa outlines her scheme (861-871), the audience hears offstage cries from the new victims (886-909), and a messenger provides explicit details about this unexpected slaughter (922-1012). The striking juxtaposition of similarly-structured violent episodes illustrates the strange and unsettling disruption of tragic form. The audience must confront a new drama in which the signals of the family's glorious triumph now denote their hideous defeat.

Euripides generates maximum shock from this divine revelation by using the chorus as the focal point for the reversal. In addition to the peculiarity of a divine appearance in the middle of the tragedy, the tragedian provides an unusual internal audience for Iris and Lyssa. The tragic chorus does not typically serve as the only onstage witness for a *deus ex machina*. Gods who appear in tragic prologues speak directly to the audience with no other human characters onstage; those who reveal themselves at the end typically address only the main characters, since they are the most invested in the dramatic conflict. The revelation of the *Heracles* falls somewhere between these patterns: since the central characters of the *Heracles* are inside the house when Iris and Lyssa suddenly appear, the juxtaposition between the chorus' celebration and their reaction to the gods' appearance serves as the only onstage cue for the reaction of the play's audience.

Iris and Lyssa do not comment on the immediate dramatic action (i.e. the defeat of Lycus), but their dialogue serves as a counterpoint to the tone and theme of the choral song they have interrupted. The preceding choral ode celebrates Heracles' victory and proclaims the gods' active role in rewarding just men and punishing the unjust. Their song culminates

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<sup>55</sup> These narrative conventions occur, albeit with notable variations, in the revenge schemes in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Medea*, *Hecuba*, *Bacchae*, and *Orestes*.

with an assertion of theodicy (εἰ τὸ δίκαιον / θεοῖς ἔτ' ἀρέσκει, 813-814).<sup>56</sup> In the lines immediately following, they express extreme confusion and fear at the sudden spectacle: ἄα ἄα· / ἄρ' ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν πίτυλον ἤκομεν φόβου (815-816). While the chorus' repetition of ἄα conveys their utter surprise,<sup>57</sup> the announcement of their descent into “the very pulse of fear” likely cues a frantic physical reaction, such as spastic convulsions or falling violently.<sup>58</sup> The audience sees the chorus' drastic transformation – from complete confidence to utter fear, from stable postures to uncontrollable spasms – within a few lines. Moreover, Iris confirms the gods' interest in pursuing justice (δόντος δίκην, 842), but this execution of divine justice contradicts completely the chorus' conception of it: Iris puts Heracles in the same category in which the chorus has placed the vile Lycus (διδοῦς ... δίκην, 756). I shall discuss the significance of this contrast between divine and mortal justice more fully below, but it is clear that the chorus's reaction highlights the extremities of this reversal. The audience thus sees and hears how quickly the gods can destroy humans' beliefs and devastate their confidence.

Euripides renders this reversal even more surprising by manipulating appearance and reality in this scene. The tragedian defies the audience's preconceptions of the two goddesses by presenting a bloodthirsty Iris and a reluctant Lyssa. The chorus' initial reaction to the goddesses suggests that their sudden emergence was conspicuous, likely accompanied by a startling musical disruption and a visual shock from the characters' frightening clothing.

<sup>56</sup> It is clear from context that the conditional statement does not indicate a “tentative proposition,” as Bond (1981) *ad* 813 suggests. The chorus is not at all doubtful here or in the preceding lines, and so it is preferable to interpret this remark as emphatic affirmation: Lycus' death is proof to anyone who can see (ἔσορῶντι φαίνει, 811) whether (i.e. that truly) the gods find justice pleasing. Cf. Orestes' confidence after dispatching Clytemnestra in Sophocles' *Electra*: τὰν δόμοισι μὲν / καλῶς, Ἀπόλλων εἰ καλῶς ἐδέσπισεν (1424-1425).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. page 106 n. 127 above on ἄα as indication of visual shock in Euripides.

<sup>58</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1187 notes the parallel in *Iphigenia at Tauris* 307, where “[t]he tossing of the head, the trembling of the hands ... constitute a πίτυλος or ‘pulse’ of madness.”

Neither goddess can be found in any other extant tragedy, and it is therefore difficult to determine how each appeared.<sup>59</sup> It is likely, however, that Lyssa's costume was the more terrifying of the pair. Representations of Iris in ancient art and literature are not uncommon and consistently depict the goddess as a winged messenger without aggressive tendencies.<sup>60</sup> It is unlikely that her costuming in the *Heracles* significantly deviated from these traditional depictions, especially since Iris is the first goddess to speak and provides only a modest introduction for herself as "the servant of the gods" (τὴν θεῶν λάτριν, 823).

Lyssa was not as popular in literary or artistic representations, but in her few appearances outside of the *Heracles* she is frightening and repulsive. Vase-paintings depict her wielding snakes and bearing wings and a dog's head attached to her own.<sup>61</sup> Iris' opening statement to the chorus seems to confirm that Lyssa's appearance in the *Heracles* was similarly horrific. She assumes a reassuring role in telling the chorus not to feel fear looking upon Lyssa, whom she calls "child of Night" (Νυκτὸς τήνδ' ὀρεῶντες ἔκγονον, 822). By repeating and elaborating this ominous description (Νυκτὸς κελαινῆς ἀνυμέναιε παρθένε, 834) Iris presents Lyssa as a pitiless monster (ἄτεγκτον συλλαβοῦσα καρδίαν, 833), allied with dark forces rather than with the Olympian gods. The chorus echoes these sentiments in calling Lyssa a "Gorgon of Night" who possesses a monstrous head full of snakes and a gaze that can turn men to stone (Νυκτὸς Γοργῶν ἑκατογκεφάλοις ὄφεων ἰαχήμασι Λύσσα μαρμαρωπός, 883). This description of a Gorgon-like monster suggests that Lyssa may be costumed like

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<sup>59</sup> Riley (2008) 31 n. 64 provides a brief overview of dramatic precedents. Iris appears in Aristophanes' *Birds* 1199-1268, where her wings and flying ability become an appropriate source for mockery. Cf. Lee (1982) 46 n. 9 on Iris' costuming. Lyssa appeared in Aeschylus' *Xantriae* and perhaps in the *Toxotides* of the same author. Duchemin (1967) provides a fuller examination of mythological and dramatic precedents for Lyssa in the *Heracles*.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Gantz (1993) 17-18 for a brief account of her role in epic poetry and vase paintings.

<sup>61</sup> Padel (1992) 163. Cf. also Trendall and Webster (1971) 62, III.1.28, and III.1.15.

the terrifying Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.<sup>62</sup> Euripides seems to have presented the chorus and audience with familiar depictions of a neutral messenger goddess and a destructive figure of horror.

But Euripides distorts and perverts these familiar images by endowing the goddesses with behavior that contradicts their respective costuming and reputations. As the goddesses begin to express their own feelings it becomes clear that Iris, not Lyssa, craves destruction and that Lyssa, in turn, attempts to mediate the conflict between divine and mortal. Lee claims that Iris' anger "is only part of her characterization as *λάτρισ τῶν θεῶν*,"<sup>63</sup> but her dialogue suggests otherwise: though she honors Hera, her wish for the doom of Heracles is startlingly personal. She inserts a reference to herself whenever mentioning Hera: Hera "wishes" for Heracles to slay his family, Iris "co-wishes" it (*Ἥρα ... θέλει / ... συνθέλω δ' ἐγώ*, 831-832); Heracles will discover the *χόλος* of both goddesses (840-841); Hera's plots also belong to Iris (*τά θ' Ἥρας κάμᾶ μηχανήματα*, 855). Iris' first reference to Hera is perhaps most telling:

πρὶν μὲν γὰρ ἄλλους ἐκτελευτῆσαι πικρούς,  
τὸ χρεὶν νιν ἐξέσφινεν οὐδ' εἶα πατήρ  
Ζεὺς νιν κακῶς δρᾶν οὔτ' ἐμ' οὔθ' Ἥραν ποτέ·

For until (Heracles) completed his bitter labors Necessity protected him, and his father Zeus would not allow either me or Hera to harm him. (827-829)

Iris presents herself here not as an obedient servant but rather as an irritated victim of Zeus' command who, like Hera, has a personal desire to harm Heracles. Moreover, she emphasizes that she wants Heracles' destruction for herself, and not just for her mistress Hera, by her

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<sup>62</sup> Duchemin (1967) 132.

<sup>63</sup> Lee (1982) 52.

privileged place in the word order.<sup>64</sup> Her wrath here is surprising, as the goddess typically delivers messages between gods and mortals without personal intrusions. In the *Iliad* she is often sympathetic to humans; she answers Achilles' prayer to the winds on her own accord (23.192-211) and consoles the anxious Priam by speaking gently (τυτθὸν φθελγξαμένη, 24.170).<sup>65</sup> It is unclear then why Iris should share Hera's cruel determination to see Heracles suffer since she, unlike Hera, has no obvious reason for despising the hero. Scholars have tried to mitigate this difficulty by claiming that she serves as a dramatic substitute for Hera.<sup>66</sup> But these attempts to dismiss Iris' disturbing cruelty are unwarranted, especially since we can see similar contradictions in the depiction of Lyssa.<sup>67</sup>

While the *Heracles* presents Iris as uncharacteristically brutal, it also depicts Lyssa as an unexpected source of calm rationality. In her first speech Lyssa acknowledges that her lineage derives from Night, but she immediately qualifies this origin by mentioning her "noble" father Ouranos (ἐξ εὐγενοῦς μὲν πατρὸς ἔκ τε μητέρος / πέφυκα, *Νυκτὸς Οὐρανοῦ*, 843-844). She further complicates her affiliation with Night by calling upon the Sun as witness before driving Heracles mad (858). Lyssa thus paradoxically aligns herself with both light

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<sup>64</sup> Pace Bond (1981) *ad* 832 who sees Iris' repeated self-references as a sign of "total obedience to her mistress's wishes."

<sup>65</sup> Her opening lines in the *Heracles* may allude to her speech to Priam in *Il.* 24.171-187. In both passages the goddess first commands the addressee(s) to take heart (*θαρσεῖτε; θάρσει*), then identifies her role as servant of the gods (*λάτρισ τῶν θεῶν; Διὸς ἄγγελος*), reassures that she means no harm to the addressee(s), and finally explains her purpose. In the *Iliad*, however, Iris explains that Zeus cares and pities for the mortal Priam, whereas in *Heracles* there is no sign of divine pity for humans. As Konstan (2001) 107-110 notes, the gods found in Greek tragedy are often pitiless, but it is nonetheless odd that the usually disinterested Iris should harbor such rage here.

<sup>66</sup> Wilamowitz -Moellendorff (1895) ii.122 argues that Euripides depicts Iris as a surrogate for Hera in order to avoid controversy that would be caused by blaspheming openly the "Kultus die Himmelskönigin." Lee (1982) 46-47 contends that Hera's presence would negate the dramatic tension in the argument between two gods of equal standing. Neither claim is supported by the text.

<sup>67</sup> Wilamowitz -Moellendorff (1895) ii.124 acknowledges that Lyssa is essentially "eine Contradictio in adjecto und eine Blasphemie so gut wie die Frivolität Heras und die Verworfenheit der Iris."



and dark forces, defying the simple categorizations that Iris and the chorus provide for her (833-834, 883).<sup>68</sup> Similarly confusing is Lyssa's defense of Heracles, in which she claims that the hero is her *φίλος* and that by ridding the world of monsters and impious men he has honored all the gods (846, 851-853). Lyssa does not specify what honors Heracles has established, nor does she identify the impious men whom he has slain;<sup>69</sup> as I have argued above, the chorus describe Heracles' labors as primarily beneficial to mankind rather than to the gods.

Lyssa's motivations, like those of Iris, are obscure, and her call for mercy is surprising given that she is the goddess of madness. Iris commands her to unleash *μανίας* and violent mayhem (835-837), but Lyssa would rather provide sensible advice: she counters the joint wishes of Hera and Iris (*θέλει, συνθέλω*) for Heracles to spill blood (831-832) with her own wish to persuade them against such violence (*παραινέσαι ... θέλω*, 847-848). It is again paradoxical and contradictory for the goddess of madness to promote its opposite, *σωφροσύνη*, but this is precisely what Iris accuses her of doing (*οὐχὶ σωφρονεῖν γ' ἔπεμψε δεῦρό σ' ἡ Διὸς δάμαρ*, 857).<sup>70</sup> Lyssa eventually proves that she is quite capable of generating *μανία*, as she reveals in her final monologue her plan to unleash cataclysmic havoc that trumps any natural disaster (861-863) and to promote her namesake (*ἐμὸς λύσσας*, 866) rather than rationality (*οὐ σωφρονίζει*, 869). But though she fulfills the role Iris and Hera demand, Lyssa emerges as a contradictory character that represents both rationality and madness, salvation and doom.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) iii.ad 858, Bond (1981) ad 858, and Barlow (1996) 8.

<sup>69</sup> I agree with Bond (1981) ad 853 that the impious men cannot refer to the Giants, and so must refer to the savage villains Heracles killed during the twelve labors, who were "more notorious for the harm they did to men."

<sup>70</sup> For *μανία* and *σωφροσύνη* as opposites, cf. Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.16, Plat. *Phdr.* 240e8-245c4 and *Prot.* 323b3-323b5.

<sup>71</sup> Lee (1982) 47-48.

The most unsettling contradiction of all, however, is the ambiguous explanation for Heracles' punishment. Though Lyssa speaks in defense of Heracles' nobility and his service to the gods, Iris ignores these arguments and ridicules the notion of *Λύσσα σωφρονοῦσα* (846-857). The audience is left then with Iris' initial explanation for punishing Heracles:

ἢ θεοὶ μὲν οὐδαμοῦ,  
τὰ θνητὰ δ' ἔσται μεγάλα, μὴ δόντος δίκην.

Or else the gods will be of no account, and mortal affairs will be great, unless  
he pays the penalty. (841-842)

This brief comment provides the only clue why Hera and Iris have such animosity towards the play's protagonist. Hera's personal vendetta and jealousy at her husband's bastard son are not mentioned here;<sup>72</sup> instead, we have a more general, albeit vague, expression of divine *νέμεσις* at the success of a mortal who has transgressed the will of the gods. The need for retributive punishment (*δόντος δίκην*) is peculiar because Heracles has not, as far as human characters and audience know, committed any offense against the gods that would warrant penalty. Griffiths notes the phrase *δίκην δοῦναι* has specific dramatic relevance: "In every case when Euripides uses the term the reference is to paying a penalty for an action which has occurred, or is alleged to have occurred, within the scope of the drama."<sup>73</sup>

Many scholars have thus sought signs of *ἀμαρτία* or *ὑβρις* in Heracles in the events prior to this revelation.<sup>74</sup> Wilamowitz, for example, contends that Heracles is being punished for his previous accomplishments, which in their violence display the outdated ideals of

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<sup>72</sup> This is the traditional source of her anger in most versions of the myth. Yunis (1988) 151 n. 21 sees no reason to seek further explanation: "Hera's anger needs no accounting for: it is a datum of the myth retained by the poet." Bond (1981) xxiv-xxvi similarly champions the "mythological apparatus" of Hera's jealousy as the operative force. But this cause is surprisingly absent in this play: only Heracles cites this as the specific cause (1309), though other characters, who consistently blame Hera for the attack, may have this reason for her anger in mind (1127, 1189, 1311-1312).

<sup>73</sup> Griffiths (2002) 644-645.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Yunis (1988) 151 n. 21 for comprehensive list of such interpretations.

Doric heroism.<sup>75</sup> Burnett and Griffiths similarly maintain that the divine anger stems from Heracles' labors, but they contend that his crime is found not in violence but in his defiance of human mortality by returning from Hades with Cerberus.<sup>76</sup> Although the chorus' description of the labors contains many unsettling assumptions about the gods, neither explanation can fully account for the gods' anger here. Wilamowitz's moralistic approach does not fit with the tone of the first part of the play: Euripides presents Heracles as a virtuous figure who renounces his labors before the madness occurs.<sup>77</sup> Griffiths and Burnett are correct in noting the problematic elements in Heracles' return from the underworld,<sup>78</sup> but Iris' account of the labors does not suggest that they were the immediate cause: while she has disdain for these feats (*ἄθλους... πικρούς*), she considers them obstacles (*πρὶν... ἐκτελευτῆσαι*) against Hera's and her long-standing desire to harm the hero (827-828).<sup>79</sup>

I contend that Euripides deliberately presented the gods' explanation for Heracles' punishment as ambiguous in order to emphasize their failure to conform to human standards of justice. The appearance of the goddesses after Lycus' murder contradicts the chorus' stated belief in theodicy (739, 772-780, 813-814); the divine explanation for Heracles' punishment is juxtaposed with the mortal account of Lycus' punishment (*διδούς ... δίκην*, 756).

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<sup>75</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) ii.127-128.

<sup>76</sup> Burnett (1971) 177-179, Griffiths (2002) *passim*. The two interpretations differ concerning the precise role of the labors: Burnett interprets them as a threat to the gods, while Griffiths considers the Cerberus labor as "an excuse, a supposed crime of Herakles that (Hera) could respond to, and thus unleash her wrath under the guise of *δίκη*" (645).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Kroeker (1938) 114-124 for a more thorough rebuttal of Wilamowitz.

<sup>78</sup> Burnett's (1971) 179 comparison to Asclepius is interesting, though she goes too far in treating Heracles' labor as a totally impious act.

<sup>79</sup> Other scholars have designated the hero's ambiguous nature as the source of divine rage. Silk (1985) 17 offers the following explanation: "the cosmic order will be upset, Heracles is a threat to it, not because he is a man, nor indeed because he is a god, but because he is anomalous and neither." While this interpretation reflects the tension between mortal and divine in Iris' remark, there is no evidence in the text that this is her justification for Heracles' punishment.

The latter example fits traditional standards of Greek justice; as Amphytryon observes, one who acts wrongly should expect to suffer wrong in return (*προσδόκα δὲ δρῶν κακῶς / κακὸν τι πράξειν*, 727-728). Iris' conception of just retribution (*δίκην δοῦναι*) is not only unjust (Heracles has committed no crime) but also without aspects of retribution: it is precisely *because* the phrase normally signifies a retributive reaction to a specific act that Iris' atypical usage is so striking and yet so fitting. The goddesses appropriate and pervert terms typically found in human celebration to describe the destruction of Heracles' family (*καλλίπαιδα στέφανον αὐθέντη φόνω*, 839; *χορεύσω καὶ καταυλήσω φόβω*, 871). They use *δίκη*, a term humans use to denote proper compensation for a (typically unrighteous) deed, to refer to an act of cruelty lacking specific cause.<sup>80</sup> Iris' elusive justification suggests that divine and human worlds are incompatible since the gods do not follow mortal conceptions of justice.<sup>81</sup> This shocking proposition not only contradicts the chorus' assertion of theodicy that precedes the Iris-Lyssa scene but also taints their earlier celebration of the hero's labors: how can humans find joy in the defeat of monsters and savages if the gods themselves are savage? Even Zeus, the god who should have the most interest in preserving Heracles, does not intercede; though Iris notes that he initially prevented attack against his son (*οὐδ' εἴα πατήρ / Ζεὺς*), his pairing with *τὸ χροή* in this sentence aligns him with impersonal and irrational force.<sup>82</sup> The striking silence from the god whom Amphytryon and the chorus have championed as a god of justice suggests that callous savagery pervades the divine realm.

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<sup>80</sup> Lee (1982) 49-50. He limits his claim of divine savagery, however, to Hera alone; Iris' unwarranted wrath against Heracles and her broad reference to the gods in explaining his punishment suggest that more than one goddess is to blame.

<sup>81</sup> Chalk (1962) 15.

<sup>82</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 828 f. Homer presents a far more intimate description of Zeus in *Il.* 16.431-461; there the god is not a solemn partner to fate but one who reluctantly and tearfully submits to it after his wife admonishes him.

The bizarre and confusing role of Athena in Heracles' madness further illustrates the unpredictable and irrational nature of the gods in this play. If Iris is a representative of Hera,<sup>83</sup> then Athena can reasonably be called a representative of Zeus.<sup>84</sup> Not only is the goddess his daughter, her affiliation with civilization and reason fits with roles of Zeus to which the human characters have made appeals. Furthermore, her direct interference ends the hero's rampage and thus might seem to confirm her interest in restoring due order. Burnett claims her interference adds a note of optimism to the massacre: "Evidently more than one deity has the ear of Zeus, for Athena expresses in action the same quality of mercy that Lyssa's words had betrayed."<sup>85</sup>

But the goddess of wisdom, whatever her intentions, generates primarily confusion in the human characters and the audience. Athena's offstage appearance, like the onstage appearance of Iris and Lyssa, shocks and upsets the human characters who witness it, as is evident when they react to the earthquake that shakes the house following Heracles' slaughter (*Θύελλα σείει δῶμα, συμπίπτει στέγη*, 905). While the audience and chorus have heard Lyssa's plans to shatter the household (*καταρρήξω μέλαθρα*, 864) and unleash the "Dooms of Hell" (*Κῆρας ἀνακαλῶ τὰς Ταρτάρου*, 870), Amphytryon assumes that it is Athena, not Lyssa, who is causing the "hellish disturbance" to the house (*τάρραγμα ταρτάρειον*, 907). The messenger similarly seems to associate the earthquake with Athena. He mentions the broken column as the result of the fallen roof (*πρὸς ἡμᾶσι στέγης*, 1007), and his brevity suggests that he associates this damage with his preceding description of Athena's violent

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<sup>83</sup> Though not a mere substitute, as I argue on pages 176-177 above.

<sup>84</sup> Her frequent presence on the Heracleian metopes in the Temple of Zeus seems to corroborate that her alliance with Heracles was in service to their mutual father. Cf. Cohen (1994) 711: "At Olympia the hero's only helpers are the divine children of Zeus – Athena and Hermes...."

<sup>85</sup> Burnett (1971) 172.

hurling of a rock at Heracles (1002-1004).<sup>86</sup> The audience, despite having privileged knowledge concerning Lyssa, has not been prepared for Athena and thus can only understand her actions within the context of these confused reports. Athena does not speak, and so no one can know why she arrives so late, why she saves only Amphytrion, and how she relates to the chaotic maelstrom that destroys the house after Heracles' slaughter. She is not a correction to the brutal and irrational divine realm: she is another inexplicable part of it.

The contradictory and unintelligible nature of the divine is a significant source of horror for this episode and for the play as a whole. The audience was familiar with the conception of Zeus as an enforcer of justice; Homer, Hesiod, and Solon, among others, had portrayed the god as having a particular interest in rewarding the good and punishing the wicked.<sup>87</sup> While these accounts of theodicy were not without complications,<sup>88</sup> the withdrawn and unsympathetic Zeus of the *Heracles* provides a radical departure from these traditional accounts.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the gods of the play are not only unjust but fail to conform to human belief in reasonable reciprocity. Yunis notes that one of the fundamental Greek religious beliefs was the notion that gods in some way reciprocated human offerings; even if the Greeks acknowledged that the gods may lack virtue, they nonetheless felt that the gods were

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<sup>86</sup> Pace Bond (1981) *ad* 1007. I agree that the earthquake precedes Athena's hurling of the rock, but it is not clear that the messenger can distinguish the earthquake that immediately precedes Athena's appearance and this goddess' action. Bond seems to acknowledge this later in his note, when he remarks "The breaking down of the doors, the earthquake, the throwing of the stone which caused Heracles' fall, all happened (in that order) in a short space of time. The participants, who did not know about Lyssa, may well have been confused." This seems to be an accurate interpretation of the scene, but I would add that the audience, even though they know about Lyssa, might be just as confused – especially since they have not been prepared for Athena's appearance and only hear confused accounts from witnesses.

<sup>87</sup> E.g. *Od.* 1.31-43, *WD* 213-285, Solon fr. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1983) 28-54 for a fuller discussion of these limitations.

<sup>89</sup> As Lawrence (1998) 143 notes of the Iris-Lyssa episode as a whole: "Even a spectator previously content with unjust Olympians is required here to question their morality or at least be stirred to uneasiness through indignation at the hero's fate."

influenced by ritual activity, prayer, and sacrifice.<sup>90</sup> The conspicuous lack of divine reciprocity in the *Heracles* was thus unsettling: Iris' reference to reciprocal punishment not only defies the standards of human justice but also any rational conception of reciprocity, as no specific cause for this punishment is evident.<sup>91</sup> Finally, the gods in the play fail to conform to the categories humans have assigned for them. Greek divinities possessed particular roles and provinces (e.g. Hermes was the god of travelers, Demeter the goddess of the harvest). The gods in the *Heracles* are categorical contradictions: the usually diplomatic Iris acts with unprovoked hostility; the goddess of madness Lyssa demonstrates *σωφροσύνη*; the goddess of wisdom and traditional benefactor of Heracles, Athena, assaults the hero and causes even more confusion. While Euripides was not the first poet to note the inscrutable nature of divine will,<sup>92</sup> his stark depiction of pitiless gods who defy traditional mortal distinctions fully exploits the horrific potential of this inscrutability.

### A.3) *Permanent Stains*

The play's final section portrays the difficulties faced by Heracles and others in coping with the cosmic horrors discussed above. The ending, in which Heracles chooses to follow Theseus to Athens rather than to commit suicide, has been seen largely as an endorsement of human virtue within a chaotic world.<sup>93</sup> In this section I will argue against such readings by demonstrating the play's continued focus on mortal confusion and

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<sup>90</sup> Yunis (1988) 45-58. He posits the three fundamental beliefs in Greek religions: the gods exist; the gods are aware of human behavior; reciprocity exists between gods and mortals. He draws these three beliefs from Plato's *Laws* 885b4-885b9 but revises Plato's third belief, that the gods are just and are not swayed to injustice by prayers and sacrifices, to incorporate the often-amoral reciprocity Greeks sought from the gods.

<sup>91</sup> Yunis (1988) 149-169.

<sup>92</sup> E.g. Solon fr. 17, Xenophanes fr. B34. Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1983) 161-164.

<sup>93</sup> E.g. Chalk (1962) *passim*, Conacher (1955) 148-150, Hartigan (1987) 129, Ruck (1976) 70. Cf. Holmes (2008) 232 n. 3 for a fuller bibliography.

contradictory beliefs. Heracles' recovery from madness involves two related processes: first, he tries to understand what has occurred and why he was punished; second, he decides whether he should refuse to live in such a terrible world or continue facing it despite his experience. I will address each feature separately and show that the hero's recovery is frustrated by mortal confusion and unreliable assumptions, respectively. While the audience can sympathize with Theseus' rational explanations and well-intentioned consolations, Euripides highlights the inadequacy of such reactions amidst such bloodshed. The play's ending thus maintains the bleak theological outlook of the Iris-Lyssa episode and confirms the drama's horrors as disaffirmative:<sup>94</sup> mortal distinctions cannot recover from divine violence.

Heracles' family and friends try to offer the confused hero a consistent account of his suffering. Though all acknowledge his role in slaughtering his family, they also unanimously attribute the hero's madness to divine origin. The recurrence of Hera's name in their accounts suggests that they are confident about the cause of the divine rage. Theseus concludes their consensus succinctly: *Ἡρας ὅδ' ἁγών* (1189). Amphitryon shares this assessment with an additional charge against Zeus for his passive acceptance of her rage (*ὦ Ζεῦ, παρ' Ἡρας ἄρ' ὁρῶς θρόνων τάδε*; 1127). Heracles asserts Hera's jealousy over her husband's infidelity as the cause of the punishment (1303-1310). The chorus concurs with this assessment and echoes Theseus in saying that "this trial was the work of none of the gods other than the wife of Zeus" (*οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλου δαιμόνων ἁγών ὅδε / ἢ τῆς Διὸς δάμαρτος*, 1311-1312). When faced with overwhelming sorrow these characters seem to embrace the mythological framework familiar to the play's audience.

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. my discussion on pages 55-57 and 156-157 above.



Their reliance on the traditional account is complicated, however, by signs of doubt and confusion. Though Amphitryon calls on Zeus and Hera to witness his son's plight (1127), immediately afterward he warns Heracles not to fixate upon the divine source of his punishment (τῇν θεὸν εἰσας, 1129). Similarly, when Heracles asks his father about the damage to the house, Amphitryon, who witnessed the destruction and attributed it earlier to Athena (906-908), responds: "I do not know anything except the following: your affairs are entirely ill-fated" (οὐκ οἶδα πλὴν ἔν· πάντα δυστυχεῖ τὰ σά, 1143). Bond argues that the audience is "adequately informed" and thus would not share Amphitryon's confusion.<sup>95</sup> But, as I argued above, the audience was not prepared for Athena's appearance and can rely only on ambiguous accounts from confused witnesses. Amphitryon notably invokes Zeus and Hera only once each; after advising his son against blaming "the goddess" he hesitates to name specific deities (θεῶν ὃς αἴτιος, 1135), and Theseus only infers Hera's agency from Amphitryon's generic reference (πρὸς θεῶν, 1180).

While Amphitryon's doubts highlight the tenuousness of the mythological explanation, the chorus' confidence in this explanation similarly exposes their confusion. Theseus' assessment of the hero's ἀγών (1189) similarly suggests the inadequacy of assigning all blame to Hera. Theseus, unlike Amphitryon and the chorus, was not present for the massacre and so makes his evaluation of the divine cause after hearing only a brief summary of Heracles' madness (1180-1187). His inference concerning Hera's responsibility is reasonable given his background knowledge, and the Athenian's concise three-word judgment does not belabor the point. The chorus, however, are the best witnesses of the gods' role in the affair, as they are the only characters who have heard Iris proclaim her personal desire to destroy Heracles and who have seen the monstrous Lyssa enter the house. It is

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<sup>95</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1143.

surprising and unsettling, then, that they not only echo Theseus' claim but also elaborate it with restrictions (*οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλου δαιμόνων*, 1311).<sup>96</sup> The audience, like the chorus, has seen multiple deities at work and has heard Iris explain that the hero's punishment depended not on the jealousy of one goddess but on general divine resentment against mortals. The chorus may be simplifying a complicated affair into a coherent narrative (i.e., Hera sent Iris and Lyssa and is thus ultimately responsible), but if it is a simplification it differs significantly from the manifest incoherence of divine cruelty that Euripides has presented to the audience. At any rate the chorus seems unable or unwilling to acknowledge the complex and disturbing implications of what they have witnessed. Their reiteration of Theseus' assessment is a testament to the continued presence of mortal confusion concerning the inscrutable gods.

The clearest example of human confusion, however, can be found in Heracles' remarks on the nature of the gods. Theseus consoles the hero by comparing his sorrows to those of the gods who, according to the poets, suffer as a result of their transgressions, including adultery and binding each other (1314-1321). Heracles responds:

*ἐγὼ δὲ τοὺς θεοὺς οὔτε λέκτρο' ἂ μὴ θέμις  
 στέργειν νομίζω δεσμά τ' ἐξάπτειν χερσῶν  
 οὔτ' ἠξίωσα πώποτ' οὔτε πείσομαι  
 οὐδ' ἄλλον ἄλλου δεσπότην πεφυκέναι.  
 δεῖται γὰρ ὁ θεός, εἴπερ ἔστ' ὀρθῶς θεός,  
 οὐδενός· αἰοιδῶν οἶδε δύστηνοι λόγοι.*

But neither do I believe the gods have unlawful affairs and attach chains to the arms (of other gods), nor have I ever judged it right nor will I believe that one god has been lord over another. For the god, if in fact he truly is a god, lacks nothing. These are the wretched stories of poets. (1341-1346)

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<sup>96</sup> Pace Foley (1985) 187 n. 67, who attributes these lines to Theseus to support her position concerning choral silence following Heracles' awakening. I follow Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1895) and Bond (1981) *ad loc.* in giving these lines to the chorus.

The meaning of these lines and their function in this part of the play have been the subject of intense critical debate.<sup>97</sup> How can Heracles claim both that Hera's sexual jealousy motivated her attack (1308-1310) and that no god commits adultery? The contradiction is obvious, and several scholars have claimed that Euripides is here inserting his own rational viewpoint outside of the "dramatic scaffolding."<sup>98</sup> Bond similarly advises against taking these lines as the hero's own "considered view" since the hero is not "an academic philosopher who has thought out the implications of everything that he says."<sup>99</sup> Although Heracles is no philosopher himself, his remarks here bear a striking similarity to those of Xenophanes;<sup>100</sup> even if many members of the original audience did not recognize the reference, they would likely detect a philosophical strain in the claim concerning divine self-sufficiency, which was a popular motif in contemporary sophistic thought.<sup>101</sup> We should not discount the hero's words, however, as extra-dramatic commentary that does not bear relevance to the plot.<sup>102</sup> As Yunis rightly observes, readers "must not shy away when philosophy surfaces in Euripidean drama; it is integrated into the drama, and is not a sideshow or display."<sup>103</sup> Heracles has shown throughout the play that he is just as interested in making speculations about the

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. Lawrence (1998) for a survey of the discussion. He examines *nine* distinct interpretations of this passage.

<sup>98</sup> Conacher (1955) 152. Cf. Greenwood (1953) 66-68 and Halleran (1986) 179-181 for similar views.

<sup>99</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1341-1346. He notes, however, that it is another matter entirely whether Euripides might be endorsing such a viewpoint.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Ps-Plutarch's account of Xenophanes' theology (οὐ γὰρ ὅσιον δεσπότησθαι τινα τῶν θεῶν· ἐπιθεῖσθαι τε μηδενὸς αὐτῶν μηδένα μηδ' ὄλως, *Strom.* 4 [Eus. 1.8.4]= DK A 32). Whether the claim in this form can accurately be attributed to Xenophanes is uncertain. Cf. Leshner (1992) 189-196 on Xenophanes and the doxographical tradition. In any case Heracles' speech here clearly resembles philosophical discourse. Cf. my note below.

<sup>101</sup> Yunis (1988) 163-164 n. 46 observes: "It remains likely that Euripides is in some way elaborating on an idea from the philosophical tradition, be it from (Xenophanes or Antiphon), the Eleatics (cf. DK 28 B 8.5-6, 22-25, 33), Diogenes of Apollonia (cf. DK 64 B 5), or elsewhere."

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Lawrence (1998) 132-135 for a survey and rebuttal of these readings.

<sup>103</sup> Yunis (1988) 160 n. 37.

nature of the gods and their motivations as Amphitryon and the chorus are (e.g. 1243, 1262-1265, 1362-1363).

Yunis presses the point too far, however, in claiming a resolution for the contradiction in the hero's "new creed" based on the standards of morally sound reciprocation. He contends that although Heracles must endure his extreme punishment, the hero can deny that an immoral god such as Hera is truly a god (*ὁρθῶς θεός*).<sup>104</sup> The hero's final mention of Hera (*πάντες ἐξολώλαμεν / Ἥρας μὲν πληγέντες ἄλλιοι τύχη*, 1392-93) is, according to Yunis, a sign of victory against her: "Hera's behavior is...no more rational, no less prone to moral obscenity, hence no more dignified, than *τύχη*. Having denied to Hera the status of god in his distinctive sense, he refuses to observe the validity of the stigma which she has imposed."<sup>105</sup>

While I agree that Heracles' association of Hera with impersonal and irrational *τύχη* is fitting, there is little evidence that Heracles has considerably changed his worldview or that his previous statement on divine immorality constitutes an adequate philosophical response to the horrors in the play. On the contrary, Heracles' comments in 1340-1346 reveal his failure to reconcile his previous assumptions about the gods with the grim reality of their brutality. The philosophical tone of the speech only highlights the inadequacy of such rational approaches: Heracles claims that he does not derive any benefit from Theseus' "pointless" (*πᾶρεργα*) mythical exempla about immoral gods (1340), but his rejection of divine immorality and weakness neither clarifies how such an *ὁρθῶς θεός* might exist nor

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 155-166.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 166-169. Cf. Desch (1986) 22: "Weder Hera noch Herakles triumphieren völlig in diesem gewaltigen Kampf, aber beide triumphieren..." Papadopoulou (2005) 97 similarly notes: "By doing this (Heracles) also gives power to humans over the gods, in the sense that the role of the divine will be conditioned by human standards."

indicates how such an idealized deity might improve his situation.<sup>106</sup> Iris has clearly stated that the gods care little for mortal conceptions of justice (841-842, 857), and it is unlikely that mere change in nomenclature based on moral evaluation might harm the gods. Heracles' denial is merely a slightly revised version of the false assumption of theodicy held by Amphytrion and the chorus; the hero's version is phrased as rational philosophy, while his father and the chorus express conventional piety. In both cases, however, human inability to comprehend cosmic forces is apparent: the hero denies the divine cruelty that the audience has witnessed directly; the chorus proclaims that the gods reward just behavior before the gods fundamentally distort the term *δίκη*.

Human fallibility is also evident in the second process of Heracles' recovery, namely his decision to continue living rather than to commit suicide. While the hero's choice involves several considerations (e.g. his friendship with Theseus, his glorious reputation), the most relevant issue for this discussion is his preoccupation with pollution following the slaughter. Greek conceptions of pollution involved not only social alienation for the defiled but also supernatural dangers; victims of murder could send up avenging spirits to punish the one stained with their blood as well as anyone who contacted or associated with the killer.<sup>107</sup> In the *Heracles*, however, Theseus dismisses the risk of contamination and confidently embraces the killer before he has been purified. Scholars have praised the Athenian for his

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<sup>106</sup> Yunis (1988) 163-164 admits the lack of clarity in Heracles' conception.

<sup>107</sup> The fears of supernatural punishment against the polluted are most evident in Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Parker (1983) 108 concedes that these texts perhaps exaggerate the threat posed by such supernatural avengers, but he counters that such exaggerations would not have appealed to their audience unless they reflected "the fundamental structure of popular belief."

lack of superstition and his rational virtue in embracing a friend in need.<sup>108</sup> Foley, for example, contends that the Athenian's offer to bring the hero to Athens resolves the contradictory violence that pervades the previous action: "The play finally recreates heroism through catastrophe, praise through blame, and disrupts ultimately to restore the reciprocity of past and present."<sup>109</sup> I contend that the play's ending does not balance or resolve the tensions involving purification and guilt but rather continues to illustrate the uncertainty of human belief. The play demonstrates no strong preference for the traditional conceptions of pollution espoused by Heracles or the intellectual revisions offered by Theseus; rather, it highlights how both fail to resolve the contradictions found in the hero's horrific slaughter. The Athenian's offer does not, as many scholars have claimed, completely absolve his friend of guilt or reintegrate him into human society.<sup>110</sup> The play ends with Heracles still contaminated with blood, and there is little hope that he will overcome the contradictions underscoring his vulnerability and isolation.

While Greek attitudes toward pollution were complex and diverse, Parker observes several consistent features of defilement related to blood-guilt that relate to the *Heracles*: pollution follows an act of unjustified killing; the polluted agent need not have killed deliberately, but he must be causally responsible for the victim's death; polluted individuals could be targeted by supernatural forces, including vengeful spirits associated with victims,

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<sup>108</sup> E.g. Conacher (1955) 149-150, Chalk (1962) 13-14, Ruck (1976) 69-70, Papadopoulou (2005) 159-165. Cf. Quincey (1966) 153: "Euripides cared nothing for the question of pollution in this context; but he could not afford to ignore it."

<sup>109</sup> Foley (1985) 193. Papadopoulou (2005) 55 disputes Foley's contention that the play's ending resolves the many contradictions of the play, but her interpretation similarly claims that Theseus' offer "redefine(s) problematic issues and hold(s) them in equilibrium."

<sup>110</sup> I should clarify here that my argument does not depend on a condemnation of Theseus. His beneficent intentions are admirable. But as I have argued throughout this dissertation, horror does not require moral evaluation. The central question is whether Theseus' good-natured attempts can adequately address the horrific disruptions found in the play; I contend that they cannot.

and these supernatural threats could extend to the killer's community; thus the public response to those polluted frequently involved some sort of shunning, including prohibition from sacred areas or exile from the community; acts of violence against family members were most subject to concerns of pollution since, as Parker contends, religious customs are most potent in cases where legal recourses are limited.<sup>111</sup>

Pollution appears to operate on two levels for the Greeks. The first level is its practical function as a marker of disorder. Douglas argues that taboos relating to pollution primarily serve as reinforcements of cultural codes and categories.<sup>112</sup> Parker similarly defines pollution by its functional role in Greek society as a "vehicle through which social disruption is expressed."<sup>113</sup> Those who kill unjustly, and particularly those who kill family members, disrupt the social order and invite chaos into the community; by shunning those who defy social structures other citizens can restore social order.

The second level involves the underlying beliefs associated with pollution and purification. This aspect is for obvious reasons more difficult to examine, but nonetheless scholars frequently have dismissed the possibility that fifth-century Athenians felt genuine fear towards pollution *per se*. Adkins suggests that the dread of supernatural punishment was not particularly potent during the age of Euripides.<sup>114</sup> Parker adds that pollution, absent all other considerations, lacked "coercive force" for Athenians; prosecutors targeting others on the basis of pollution alone in order to please the gods, such as the eponymous prosecutor in

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<sup>111</sup> Parker (1983) 104-143.

<sup>112</sup> Douglas (1966) 115-130.

<sup>113</sup> Parker (1983) 121.

<sup>114</sup> E.g. Adkins (1966) 195.

Plato's *Euthyphro*, were considered fanatical.<sup>115</sup> He nevertheless concedes that because of the “intense emotions” associated with pollution we cannot rule out the possibility that Athenians may have felt “imaginative terror” at the prospect of supernatural punishment such as the plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus*.<sup>116</sup> The frequent appearance of such divine retribution in Greek literary sources, particularly tragedy, confirms that Athenians continued to be unsettled by this feature of pollution even though there is little indication, outside of Antiphon, that it influenced their behavior outside of the theater.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, as Carroll notes, an audience's emotional reaction to a fictional representation does not depend on a commitment to its (potential) veracity: viewers do not need to believe that Dracula is real in order to be frightened because the mere thought of the character can invoke feelings of horror.<sup>118</sup> Euripides' incorporation of traditional taboos regarding pollution serves a similar function: it evokes the audience's potential fear of supernatural punishment as well as marking Heracles as a monstrous outsider.

Euripides establishes Heracles' pollution immediately after the messenger's report of the massacre. The staging of the hero's return demonstrates the frightening and repulsive qualities of defilement: the hero is rolled onstage via the *ekkyklema*, still sleeping and bound to the broken column mentioned by the messenger (1010-1012); he is surrounded by the corpses of his family, and the other characters stand far off from him (1047). The tableau confirms the messenger's report and provides a visual illustration of Heracles' situation: he is a dangerous killer who is still polluted by the blood of his victims and, like other defiled

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<sup>115</sup> Parker (1983) 120-130.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 128-129. He notes that Heracles in this play inspires similar revulsion, though Theseus makes a “magnanimous” choice by helping his friend (317-318).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 127-128.

<sup>118</sup> Carroll (1990) 79-88.



murderers, shunned as a result. Initially the other characters seem motivated by simple fear of violence: Amphytrion worries that, if awakened, the hero will destroy the city as well as what remains of the household (1055-1056). But as he tries in vain to silence the frantic chorus, he introduces pollution as another significant consideration:

... ἀλλ' εἴ με κανεῖ πατέρ' ὄντα,  
πρὸς δὲ κακοῖς κακὰ μῆσεται πρὸς Ἐρινύσι θ' αἷμα  
σύγγονον ἔξει.

... but if he slays me, his father, then he will plot evils on top of evils  
and will add [more] familial blood to the Erinyes [he has already incurred].<sup>119</sup>  
(1075-1076)

Amphytrion's mention of the Erinyes reminds the audience that Heracles must still account for the pollution he incurred as a result of killing his family. The Erinyes are, of course, relentless when pursuing those who have spilled familial blood, as seen in the *Oresteia*.<sup>120</sup>

The father's fear, however, is complicated by the grim situation. Heracles can incur *additional* pollution from killing Amphytrion; once the madness subsides, he is still polluted and remains a danger to himself and to those around him until he is purified.<sup>121</sup> Heracles himself realizes this soon after he regains full consciousness, and his anxiety concerning pollution dominates his interaction with Theseus. He hides himself so that his "child-killing infection" (τεκνοκτόνον μύσος) cannot be seen by Theseus (1155-1156); he refuses to speak in fear of polluting his friend, as Theseus' question suggests (ὥς μὴ μύσος με σὼν βάλη  
προσφθεγμάτων; 1219); Heracles shrinks from being touched for fear of spreading the polluted blood on Theseus' clothing (ἀλλ' αἷμα μὴ σοῖς ἐξομόρξωμαι πέπλοις, 1399). Heracles' shame

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<sup>119</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1076 notes that *Ἐρινύσι* and *αἷμα σύγγονον* are essentially synonymous.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Parker (1983) 107-109.

<sup>121</sup> Amphytrion does not express fear that his son's pollution will affect himself or the community. It is unclear whether he does not believe the pollution to be communicable or is merely focused on his son's plight. Given the context of 1075-1076, the latter seems more likely.

and anxiety are not unwarranted; all of these avenues – sight, hearing, touch – can transmit pollution, and the intentions of the polluted agent are irrelevant.<sup>122</sup>

Theseus, however, does not treat Heracles as a repulsive or threatening figure but challenges traditional conceptions of pollution. When Heracles mentions the potential damage such pollution can cause, Theseus is dismissive:

*Ηρ. τί δῆτά μου κρᾶτ' ἀνεκάλυψας ἡλίω;  
Θη. τί δ'; οὐ μαιίνεις θνητὸς ὢν τὰ τῶν θεῶν.  
Ηρ. φεῦγ', ὦ ταλαίπωρ', ἀνόσιον μίασμ' ἐμόν.  
Θη. οὐδεὶς ἀλάστωρ τοῖς φίλοις ἐκ τῶν φίλων.*

Her.: Why then did you uncover my head before the sun?

Thes.: Why? As a mortal you cannot defile what belongs to the gods.

Her.: You poor soul, avoid my unholy pollution!

Thes.: No avenging spirit can come to friends from their friends. (1231-1234)

Theseus here presents two viewpoints contrary to traditional views on pollution: first, he suggests that the gods are not offended by human defilement;<sup>123</sup> second, he proposes that friendship can overcome the threat (*ἀλάστωρ*) of pollution. Bond sees these emendations as reflective of a “new rationalistic spirit” that treats divine elements, such as the sun, as existing for mankind’s benefit and promotes sensible human conduct over superstition.<sup>124</sup> It is possible that the original audience approved of Theseus’ conduct; Amphitryon’s claim that Theseus is the product of Athenian virtue (1404-1405) suggests that his behavior here

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<sup>122</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1155f.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Creon’s similar remark in *Antigone* (εἰ γὰρ οἶδ’ ὅτι / θεοὺς μαιίνειν οὔτις ἀνθρώπων σθένει, 1043-44). Jebb *ad loc.* contends that the remark *per se* is consistent with the “most orthodox Greek piety” and cites Theseus’ *εὐσέβεια* in the *Heracles* to support his position. But even if the gods themselves could not be polluted – though many tragic passages seem to suggest that Greeks felt they could, cf. Bond (1983) *ad* 1232-4 – they were still liable to be offended by pollution and to refuse to answer mortal prayers and sacrifices, as Teiresias notes earlier in the play (1015-1022).

<sup>124</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1232-1234. He compares this passage with Anaxagoras’ πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπος.

conforms to other positive depictions of Theseus in tragedy as a representative of Athens' tolerance and prudence.<sup>125</sup>

But Theseus' dismissive attitude towards pollution remains problematic within the context of the play. As several interpreters have noted, his benevolence does not remove the unorthodox nature of his comments before a fifth-century audience that continued to shun people and objects deemed polluted.<sup>126</sup> Anxieties concerning blood-guilt were not easily shaken, and the continued references to pollution in the play reveal the tenuousness of Theseus' position. Although he convinces his friend to set aside his fears of communicating his defilement (1231-1235),<sup>127</sup> Heracles does not seem to accept that *φιλία* removes this danger. Soon after uncovering himself he reaffirms his own pollution and claims that he inherited it from his father (*προστρόπαιος*, 1258-1261).<sup>128</sup> The traditional belief that blood-guilt is transmitted from generation to generation is familiar in tragedies concerning the houses of Atreus and Laius, but it also affected historical figures such as Pericles and Alcibiades.<sup>129</sup> Heracles' conventional remark is therefore not provocative in and of itself, but it undercuts

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<sup>125</sup> Especially his roles in *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides' *Suppliants*. For more detailed discussions of Theseus in tragedy as a representative of Athens see Walker (1995) and Mills (1997).

<sup>126</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) iii: *ad* 1234 remarks: "Der Vers ist auch für uns ein schöner Spruch, so dass man sich verwundert, dass er im Altertum nicht populär geworden ist. Das liegt, aber daran, dass er die eigentlich antike Anschauung so ganz durchbricht." Michelini (1987) 232 adds: "Traditional attitudes toward pollution were among the most persistent and the least rational elements in the Hellenic moral system, and the problem of assigning penalties for unintentional offenses was still a matter for controversy in the fifth century."

<sup>127</sup> I agree with Quincey (1966) 153 that Heracles' initially accepts (*ἐπήνεσ'*, 1235) Theseus' request that he remove his covering and disregard the matter of pollution. But I disagree with his contention that this exchange is merely "the dramatist's way of raising and settling a minor difficulty which impeded the further development of the dialogue." The later references to pollution and purification suggest that this interchange does not fully settle the issue.

<sup>128</sup> Heracles' belief that a *προστρόπαιος* communicates his pollution to others does not seem to have changed; before Theseus' arrival he makes a similar point (1158).

<sup>129</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) iii: *ad* 1234.

his earlier acceptance of Theseus' claim that pollution cannot be communicated between φίλοι.

Euripides in fact presents a close relationship between pollution and *φιλία* for Heracles: despite his best intentions to honor his φίλοι Heracles harms them and defiles himself. This contradiction is particularly stark in the juxtaposition of Heracles' mention of Amphitryon's blood-guilt with his following declaration of allegiance to him over Zeus (1264-1265). The tragedian's manipulation of myth has established this tension between filial piety and the dangers that accompany it. As has been noted, Euripides rearranges traditional chronology so that the twelve labors no longer serve as acts of expiation for killing his family but rather are heroic feats that precede Heracles' downfall. In this play the hero undertook the labors in order to compensate for his father's pollution and restore him to the land from which he had been exiled (14-20). His completion of these tasks, however, does not purify his father but instead invites slaughter and additional pollution to his family; the gods delay their attack until the labors are finished (827), and there is no indication that Amphitryon will be restored to Argos at the play's end. The massacre itself serves as another example of frustrated purification resulting in further contamination. Heracles becomes deranged during a ritual purification of the house following the slaughter of Lycus (ἱερά... καθάρσι' οἴκων, 922-923).<sup>130</sup> As Foley notes, the timing of the gods' punishment suggests their total rejection of Heracles' attempt to restore himself within his household.<sup>131</sup> Theseus' claim that *φιλία* cannot

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Foley (1985) 153 n. 11 on the nature and function of such purification sacrifices.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 155-162.

be affected by pollution is thus undercut by the close connection between filial piety and pollution in this play.<sup>132</sup>

Heracles' assessment of his weapons confirms that he will remain tainted by his crime despite Theseus' rational outlook and kindness. The Athenian offers a brief assurance that he will receive purification in Athens (1324) before detailing the honors the city will bestow on him and the glory (εὐκλείας) it will obtain by helping a brave man (ἐσθλόν) who has completed extraordinary heroic feats (1325-1335).<sup>133</sup> Foley claims the audience saw the positive implications for these appeals to such honors and feats: the Athenians, unlike the Thebans, can offer Heracles an appropriate context for his heroic valor.<sup>134</sup> But the weapons with which Heracles completed these achievements are permanently tainted by pollution. His famous bow and club served as the instruments of slaughter in the corrupted purificatory sacrifice; the horrific shift from peaceful ritual to polluted sacrifice was marked by an exchange of equipment:

*ἐκχεῖτε πηγάς, ῥίπτετ' ἐκ χειρῶν κανῶ.  
τίς μοι δίδωσι τόξα; τίς <δ'> ὄπλον χερός;*

Pour out the (cleansing) water, toss the sacrificial baskets from your hands.  
Who can give me my bow? Who can give me my club? (941-942)

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<sup>132</sup> The disturbing relationship between pollution and filial piety continues at the end of the play. Heracles designates Theseus as son substituting for the hero's slain children immediately after a reference to pollution (1399-1401).

<sup>133</sup> Theseus' reference to his defeat of the Minotaur and his appeal to heroic glory (εὐκλεία, ἐσθλός) echo descriptions of the glorious Heracles (εὐκλεής, 290; ἀνὴρ ἄριστος, 183) and his labors found in the first part of the play.

<sup>134</sup> Foley (1985) 167-175, 192-200.

The striking contrast between the ritual accoutrements and violent weapons designated the latter as essential components of Heracles' "paradoxical coexistence" as hero and murderer.<sup>135</sup>

In his final monologue the hero further develops the weapons' association with his polluted state by comparing them to their victims: Heracles holds the weapons "embraced against his side" (πλευρὰ τὰμὰ προσπίτνοντ', 1379) as one might hold a child;<sup>136</sup> he draws a parallel between the bitter pleasure of bearing his weapons and the same feeling from kissing his family (ὦ λυγραι φιλημάτων / τέρψεις, λυγραι δὲ τῶνδ' ὅπλων κοινωνίαι, 1376-1377). These weapons are, moreover, personified with voices that serve as a constant reminder of the pollution they share with their owner:<sup>137</sup> they call themselves παιδοκτόνοι (1381), the same term Lyssa uses to describe Heracles' delusions (835).<sup>138</sup> Though he decides to keep them partly because of their role in previous heroic exploits (1383), these weapons remain permanently contaminated and like their owner retain the monstrous potential to destroy the innocent as well as the villainous.

The *Heracles* presents a chaotic world in which mortals are subject to the cruel and inscrutable will of the gods. Human assumptions concerning the gods, including traditional beliefs and intellectual revisions, are unreliable. The Iris and Lyssa scene presents a shocking disruption that not only confirms the futility of human speculation but also demonstrates the horrific potential of unreliable speculation when irrational divine forces attack: since the gods do not conform to mortal conceptions of justice or reciprocity, there is little hope that humans

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<sup>135</sup> Michellini (1987) 266.

<sup>136</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1379 observes that this passage "is uncannily like a description of children" and notes similar references to children at 79, 986 and 629ff.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Parker (1983) 117 and MacDowell (1963) 85-89 regarding pollution trials for inanimate objects.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. also Heracles' mention of his τεκνοκτόνον μύσος (1155).

can avoid their wrath. The *Heracles*' depiction of the gods and religion is ultimately disaffirmative because it offers little hope that mortals can understand or influence the gods and because it challenges the notion that Heracles can be purified fully. In the following section I will explore further evidence for the play's horrific nature in the contradiction between the hero's role as a father and his reputation as a heroic fighter. Euripides similarly presents the family as an unstable institution that fails to protect the innocent and that remains inaccessible to Heracles despite his intense desire to belong.

### **B) Fathers and Monsters: A Family Dissolved**

In the previous section I discussed how human attempts to understand divine will in the *Heracles* prove unreliable in the face of unpredictable savagery from the gods. The human characters and audience are left with feelings of fear and confusion as they attempt to cope with extreme violence and suffering. The gods are the driving force of the play's horror; like the most horrific monsters, they defy simple categorization or explanation and they render moot the efforts of their victims to establish civil institutions as a form of protection. But the gods not only threaten to destroy the innocent, they also cause men like Heracles to become polluted monsters themselves. As I have noted above, many scholars have suggested that this play concludes with an affirmation of human relationships in the face of cosmic malevolence. Chalk contends that Heracles has by the end of the play gained a complex “new ἀρετή” that recognizes the place of both *φιλία* and *βία* in a dangerous world.<sup>139</sup> Foley adds that the hero's violent and contradictory nature is resolved by Theseus' offer to admit him into Athens, where he can apply this virtue to the benefit of the city.<sup>140</sup> In this section, I will

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<sup>139</sup> Chalk (1962).

<sup>140</sup> Foley (1985) 192-200.

explore how the play's depiction of the relationship between Heracles and his family undermines any hope of social reintegration.

Euripides presents the massacre as a shocking perversion of familiar experience: the family members witness their beloved patriarch become a mad killer who denies the ties of intimacy and kinship that should compel him to protect rather than slaughter them. While this reversal provides the clearest illustration of the contradiction between father and killer, Euripides prepares the audience for it with paradoxical depictions of fatherhood that add to the unsettling depiction of family in this play. I will first examine the role of fathers within the play by comparing Amphytrion, Zeus, and Heracles as models of fatherhood. I will then analyze how these models influence Euripides' treatment of the family as a whole, with particular attention to the messenger speech that details their final moments.

#### B.1) *Models of Fatherhood*

The nature of fatherhood in this play poses many difficulties. As I noted above, Heracles' dual parentage serves as an important matter of speculation in the first half of the play.<sup>141</sup> While scholars have discussed this duality as a source of tension between divine and human nature in Heracles,<sup>142</sup> they have glossed over the tension between the parental roles of the hero's two fathers. While Zeus is noticeably absent from the dramatic action, Euripides presents the feeble Amphytrion as a devoted guardian of his son's family. Heracles' relationship to his own children and wife reflects this tension: in some places the hero seems remote and more interested in aggressive action; in others he appears vulnerable and affectionate. Euripides thus presents Heracles as a contradictory father-figure whose unstable

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<sup>141</sup> Cf. my discussion on pages 159-161 above.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. note 14 above for references.



identity culminates in horrific disruption. As I shall argue in the next section the massacre generates horror through frightening contradictions of these paternal models of behavior.

In the beginning of the *Heracles* Amphitryon and his son seem to have radically different roles within the family. Amphitryon repeatedly laments his weakness and inability to defend his grandchildren against Lycus. He refuses even to be called a man because of his old age and lack of fighting strength (εἴ τι δὴ χρηὴ καὶ ἐν ἀνδράσιν λέγειν, / γέροντ' ἀχρεῖον, 41-42). His explicit denial of virility fits with his description of his function within the family. He identifies his role as that of nurse (τροφόν) and ward (οἰκουρόν) in Heracles' absence (44-45), terms typically applied to women.<sup>143</sup> Megara wants him to assume an aggressive stance in ensuring the family's safety (80-81), and she attributes his passivity to cowardice (φιλεῖς οὕτω φάος; 90). Her stated willingness to "play the role of the man" (ἐμοί τε μίμημ' ἀνδρὸς οὐκ ἀπωστέον, 294) casts negative light on Amphitryon's lack of masculine vigor. The effect of Amphitryon's physical limitations on his role as father is most evident in his unorthodox conception of virtue. He defines an ἀνὴρ ἄριστος as a man who "always trusts in hope" (ἐλπίσιν / πέποιθεν αἰεὶ) as opposed to the ἀνὴρ κακός who is utterly without resources (τὸ δ' ἀπορεῖν ἀνδρὸς κακοῦ, 105-106). But here Amphitryon poses a false dichotomy, since the traditional ἀνὴρ ἄριστος can provide active resistance against his enemies – one who relies on hope is, practically speaking, on par with the ἀνὴρ κακός in that neither has adequate resources to defend himself.<sup>144</sup> Amphitryon's novel conception of ἀρετή thus expresses an

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<sup>143</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 45. Cf. Barrett (1964) on *Hippolytus* 786f., who observes that οἰκουρός most commonly refers to "the wife who is in charge of the house when her husband is...away."

<sup>144</sup> Adkins (1966) 213.

overall outlook or attitude (i.e. hope over despair) rather than an external manifestation of courage or strength.<sup>145</sup>

Heracles' physical strength and courage serve as a bold contrast to Amphytrion's passivity and weakness. Amphytrion in fact offers a remarkably different account of the *ἀνὴρ ἄριστος* in defending his son against Lycus' accusations of cowardice. Less than 100 lines after defining *ἀρετή* as a hopeful attitude, he invokes his son's victory over the vicious centaurs, among other martial triumphs, as proof of his status as *ἀνὴρ ἄριστος* (181-183).<sup>146</sup> Lycus' cheap attempts to belittle the hero's labors (151-164) are unconvincing;<sup>147</sup> all agree that the hero's return would signal the end of the despot's reign (97, 145-146, 434-435, 717-718). Heracles' exceptional courage offers his children the opportunity to become similarly strong and capable in the future. Amphytrion acknowledges that Lycus has good reason to fear that the sons of the brave will become brave themselves (207-208). Megara notes that the hero allowed his children to handle his prized weapons (465-473) and took pride in their potential to demonstrate the same exceptional strength (*εὐανδρία*, 475) that their father demonstrated in his labors (407).<sup>148</sup> The family thus praises Heracles for his physical strength, and they recognize the immediate need for his presence against the threat of Lycus. It is no surprise that when the hero finally appears, Megara immediately exhorts her children to cling to him, since his martial prowess makes him "not at all inferior to Zeus Savior." Heracles thus initially resembles his powerful divine father rather than his weak mortal one.

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<sup>145</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 105f., Adkins (1966) 212-214.

<sup>146</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 183 notes that "Heracles was the acknowledged *ἀνὴρ ἄριστος*" in Greek literature.

<sup>147</sup> Lycus mocks Heracles' use of the bow and his battles against monsters. Cf. Michelini (1987) 242-246 and Foley (1985) 169-172 on the social and literary context underlying Lycus' endorsement of hoplite warfare.

<sup>148</sup> See my discussion on pages 168-169 above concerning this term.

But the comparison to Zeus also invites a more troubling association. Like his divine father, Heracles is absent during the first part of the play. Megara contrasts the closeness of her children with the remoteness of her husband: she can offer kisses and embraces to her offspring (485-489), but she can conceive of Heracles only as a shade (*σκιά*) or dream (*ὄναρ*, 494-495).<sup>149</sup> She witnesses his returning in the flesh soon after these comments, but she retains this hazy conception of her husband and has to correct herself after calling him a dream (... *εἰ μὴ γ' ὄνειρον ἐν φάει τι λεύσσομεν. / τί φημί; ποῖ' ὄνειρα κηραίνουσ' ὀρῶ;* 517-518). The alienation from his wife and children ironically seems tied to the defining quality that his family consistently praises. The hero's might allows him to defeat savage monsters and rescue afflicted communities, but it also seems to prevent him from remaining in one place. The hero's family currently resides in Thebes, where Heracles defeated the Minyans and gave the citizens freedom (220-221). He is not content, however, with his newly-freed community, so he undertakes the twelve labors in order to restore Amphitryon (and himself) to his father's native home in Argos (*πάτραν οἴκεν Ἰέλων*, 18). The labors themselves are examples of the hero's wanderlust: the chorus' report details trips to the fringes of the known world (Amazons in the East; Hesperides and Geryon in the West; Diomedes' mares in the North) as well as exploits that test the boundaries of the earth (Atlas and the sky; the descent into Hades).<sup>150</sup> The chorus concludes its account of the labors with a striking contrast that highlights the separation between the hero and his home. Though they indicate that the doomed family is headed to Hades, the very place where they presume Heracles remains, they do not mention a bittersweet reunion; instead they conclude their account of the labors

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<sup>149</sup> Burnett's (1971) 161 contention that Megara "calls like a necromancer for a revenant from hell" is unwarranted. The invocation of the dead was a familiar tragic trope, and Megara's pathetic appeal lacks malevolence.

<sup>150</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 359 ff., Barlow (1982) 18, Burnett (1971) 178-179.

by focusing on the father's absence: "the house looks to your hands though you are not present" (ἐς δὲ σὰς χέρας βλέπει / δώματ' οὐ παρόντος, 434-435).

The Heracles that appears onstage, however, is quite different from the character described by his family and the chorus. He comes to the realization that his endless battles come at the expense of his family's well-being:

τῷ γάρ μ' ἀμύνειν μᾶλλον ἢ δάμαρτι χρὴ  
καὶ παισὶ καὶ γέροντι; χαιρόντων πόνοι·  
μάτην γὰρ αὐτοὺς τῶνδε μᾶλλον ἥνυσα.  
καὶ δεῖ μ' ὑπὲρ τῶνδ', εἶπερ οἶδ' ὑπὲρ πατρός,  
θνήσκειν ἀμύνοντ'· ἢ τί φήσομεν καλὸν  
ὔδρα μὲν ἐλθεῖν ἐς μάχην λέοντί τε  
Εὐρυσθέως πομπαῖσι, τῶν δ' ἐμῶν τέκνων  
οὐκ ἐκπονήσω θάνατον; οὐκ ἄρ' Ἡρακλῆς  
ὁ καλλίνικος ὡς πάροιθε λέξομαι.

For whom should I protect more than my wife, children, and aged father? Forget my labors! For in vain did I achieve those feats rather than the labors here (at home). And I ought to die on behalf of these members of my family in defending them, since in fact they were to die for their father. Or how shall I call it noble to come into battle with a hydra and a lion on Eurystheus' dispatch, while I will not labor over my own children's death?<sup>151</sup> Then I shall not be called "Heracles the glorious victor" as I once was. (574-582)

Heracles' might can benefit his family only if he is present to protect them. His absence not only leaves these family members vulnerable to harm but also causes the ties of intimacy binding them to disintegrate. Foley has noted that Heracles' rejection of the labors was likely very surprising for ancient audiences. They were no doubt familiar with the "the epinician hero" described by the chorus, since Heracles was often depicted as a victorious conqueror found in epic and lyric poetry; it is unlikely, however, that they had seen the "domestic

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<sup>151</sup> Cf. Bremer (1972) 238-240 on ἐκπονήσω. He observes that while the context demands that this mean something like "work hard to prevent," such a reading does not fit with any other instance of the verb in the Euripidean corpus. He posits that the audience would initially recoil at the most likely literal meaning ("I will fully accomplish my children's death") before reconciling the verb with the context and Heracles' obvious intention (i.e. as synonymous with, e.g., κωλύσω). I agree with Bremer that this unorthodox usage introduces shocking ambiguity to speech otherwise filled with simple sincerity, and I will below discuss how the contradictory and confusing elements in Heracles' role as father prepare the audience for the horrific violence he executes.

Heracles,” a “very human” character who willingly abandons his labors in service of his family.<sup>152</sup> The tension between these two versions of Heracles reflects his dual parentage: the epinician hero is like Zeus invincible but alienated from his family, while the domestic figure seems to resemble Amphitryon in prioritizing close care for the family over heroic accomplishments. Heracles longs to apply the best features from each of his fathers (i.e. Zeus’ power, Amphitryon’s devotion), but ultimately he cannot reconcile these two models of fatherhood. The contradiction between these models creates an unsettling tone for his behavior before the massacre. Though his return seems to promise safety for the family, there are signs that his contradictory nature will prevent him from fully integrating himself into the household as a stable father.

The contradiction between the two models of fatherhood is evident in Heracles’ presentation of himself as a domestic figure. He announces his willingness to become, like Amphitryon, a devoted caretaker for his children:

*οὐ γὰρ πτερωτός οὐδὲ φευξείω φίλους.  
 ....  
 ἄξω λαβών γε τούσδ’ ἐφορκίδας χερσῶν,  
 ναῦς δ’ ὥς ἐφέλξω· καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἀναίνομαι  
 θεράπευμα τέκνων. πάντα τὰνθρώπων ἴσα·  
 φιλοῦσι παῖδας οἳ τ’ ἀμείνονες βροτῶν  
 οἳ τ’ οὐδὲν ὄντες· χρήμασιν δὲ διάφοροι·  
 ἔχουσιν, οἳ δ’ οὔ· πᾶν δὲ φιλότεκνον γένος.*

(Don’t fear) for I have no wings nor shall I desert those I love.

....  
 I will take hold and lead these little boat-followers in my arms, and like a tugboat I shall bring them in tow; for truly I do not refuse the care of my children. In this regard the affairs of men are equal. Both distinguished men and those of no account love their children – they differ only in means: some have money, some don’t. The human race universally loves its children. (628, 631-636)

<sup>152</sup> Foley (1985) 175-190. Her discussion of this tension focuses on a “poetic crisis” involving competing literary traditions (e.g. epic, lyric, and hymnic poetry). Though I adopt her phrasing, my examination does not concentrate on the literary tradition, and I do not agree with her conclusion that there is a resolution of this tension between epinician hero and domestic figure following the massacre.

In tending to his children, Heracles assumes that he belongs to a community of mortals in which parental affection joins all as equals. But this assumption, however touching and sincere, does not fit with the Heracles the audience has encountered throughout the play. For one, Heracles' attempt to reduce human distinctions to matters of wealth does not sufficiently account for the hero's true source of distinction, courage and strength. He is an *ἀνὴρ ἄριστος*, surpassing all other men in courage (181-183) and deservedly praised as a superlative individual (150, 493). Moreover, Heracles attains this distinction as a solitary fighter without close ties to other humans: he defeats the Minyans by himself (*εἶς*, 220), he undertakes his labors alone (*μόνος*, 852),<sup>153</sup> and he has no friends in his own homeland (*οὔτω δ' ἀπόντες ἐσπανίζομεν φίλων*; 557). The hero's use of the bow serves as an illustration of his distance from the community. Lycus' attack against the bow presents no reasonable proof for Heracles' cowardice (157-164), but it is true in at least one regard: he would rather avoid standing in rank with other soldiers (*τάξιν ἐμβεβώς*, 164), an observation confirmed by Amphytryon (190-194).

Heracles' initial reaction to his family's suffering further illustrates his isolation. Though he renounces his previous labors as distractions from his paternal duties (574-582), he prefaces this renunciation with violent threats and epic boasts against the community of Thebans: he vows to leave immediately so that he may destroy Lycus' palace, mutilate the king's body, and fill the local rivers with the bloody corpses of his enemies (566-573). The gruesome details – Lycus' head will be “dog food” (*κυνῶν ἔλκημα*), the hero will “dismember” the Thebans with arrows (*διαφορῶν τοξεύμασιν*) – have led some scholars to

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<sup>153</sup> The chorus notes that Heracles defeated the Amazons with the help of friends (*φίλων*, 411-412), but these friends are not named, perhaps because, as Bond (1981) *ad* 412 claims, “no other individual may share Heracles' glory in this ode.”

condemn these threats as irrational and excessively brutal.<sup>154</sup> But there is no sign of moral or mental failing in these colorful and unsettling remarks. They are consistent with the play's depictions of the hero as one who resolves conflict through sheer might.<sup>155</sup> They do reveal, however, his inability to assume the role of nurturing caretaker. Not only do Heracles' violent impulses conflict with domestic duties,<sup>156</sup> but his strict adherence to solitary fighting draws him away from them. His first instinct is to leave the home (εἴμι, 566) and fight the forces of Lycus on their own grounds. The staging of the scene further illustrates the contradiction between the hero's martial instincts and his wish to become a supportive father; he declares his plan to leave after his wife has instructed their children to cling to him and most likely while these children still hold onto their father.<sup>157</sup> It is only after Amphytrion advises him that Heracles decides to go into the home (εἴ γὰρ εἶπας· εἴμι' ἔσω δόμῳ, 606) and to reintegrate himself into domestic life by praying to Hestia, the goddess of the hearth (609).

One final complication found in Heracles' attempt to join the community of loving parents is his identification with the race of mortals. As I have noted in my first section, Heracles' paternity is a source of speculation throughout the play. Several scholars have posited that this ambivalence between divine and mortal in his nature serves as the play's

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<sup>154</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1895) iii: *ad* 566 claims it is a "wilder Ubertreibung" indicating madness; Burnett (1971) 165 does not specifically associate this speech with the later madness, but she sees similar "aberrant violence" in both.

<sup>155</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 562-582, Foley (1985) 189.

<sup>156</sup> Burnett (1971) 163-165 notes the unsettling contrast between the hero's vow to fill Dirce and Ismene with bloody corpses (572-573) and the chorus' hymn to these same rivers (781-789).

<sup>157</sup> Megara instructs the children to cling to their father and to continue holding him at 520-522; at 627 Heracles notes that family continues to hold his clothing. Kaimio (1988) 41-42 argues convincingly that the children likely remained by their father throughout 520-636 since other interpretations (i.e. the children do not heed their mother's command to embrace their father until 629; the children initiate contact at 520, disengage without remark, and then resume contact at 627) seem awkward. Bain (1981) 28 n. 7 notes that staging the revenge speech in the immediate presence of children would be unsettling, but his dismissal of such staging in order to avoid this contrast is unnecessary.

fundamental conflict.<sup>158</sup> Silk applies Douglas' anthropological investigations in identifying the hero as an interstitial and anomalous figure; such figures defy cultural categories and thus seem to possess "dangerous, uncontrollable powers" within their society.<sup>159</sup> Silk concludes that the interstitial Heracles presents audiences with a paradoxical mixture of vulnerability and danger: "an ideal to dream of and a horror story to shrink from."<sup>160</sup> Like Silk, I see this ambivalence between mortal and divine as a source of horror for this play. Heracles considers himself one of *οἱ ἄνθρωποι*, but in many ways he acts more like the gods: he is remote from everyday human life, he possesses supernatural might, and he uses violent methods to resolve problems.<sup>161</sup> This irreconcilable tension reaches its most horrific pitch during the hero's delusional rampage, which I shall discuss more fully below.

The contradictions found in Heracles' role as father resemble the contradictions that define monsters in horror fiction. Carroll, like Silk, adopts Douglas' approach in defining horrific monsters as interstitial figures that defy normative social categories.<sup>162</sup> Heracles in this play is such a monster, a Jekyll and Hyde-type character who vacillates between extreme affection and extreme violence. This is not to say that he is evil: the tragedian takes great pains to show the hero's innocence in the face of cosmic brutality.<sup>163</sup> Carroll's definition of horrific monsters, however, does not depend on moral evaluation: monsters are, regardless of

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<sup>158</sup> Silk (1985), Gregory (1977), Ruck (1976). Cf. Micheline (1987) 254-258 and Foley (1985) 157-162 for similar discussions.

<sup>159</sup> Douglas (1966) 104, cited in Silk (1985) 6.

<sup>160</sup> Silk (1985) 6.

<sup>161</sup> Scholars have noted further parallels between Heracles and the gods. Padilla (1992) 3 sees allusions to Apollo in Amphytrion's praise of his son's ability to strike from afar without being seen, and Silk (1985) 13 compares the hero's threats against the Thebans with Poseidon's threats in *Trojan Women* 88-91.

<sup>162</sup> Carroll (1990) 12-58. Cf. my discussion of Carroll in chapter 1 pages 37-40.

<sup>163</sup> Foley (1985) 160-161, Yunis (1988) 151 n. 21.



intent, entities that defy categorical distinctions and threaten to bring immediate harm to others.<sup>164</sup> Sympathetic monsters are commonly found in horror fiction: Frankenstein's monster saves lives in addition to destroying them; Regan, the possessed girl of the *Exorcist*, is not responsible for the repulsive words and actions committed by the demon in control of her body. Similarly, Heracles' abnormality results, through no fault of his own, in an act of savage brutality that destroys innocent victims and brings contamination upon himself. The gods who cause his madness reject his triumphs as examples of mortal arrogance, but their punishment forces the hero to alienate himself from his family and, as I shall argue below, the entire human race. The horrific massacre thus destroys an innocent family and prevents its unwilling agent from fully belonging to either divine or mortal communities.

#### B.2) *The Massacre*

Just as the Iris and Lyssa episode serves as a horrific culmination of the confusing and unsettling presentation of the divine in the play's first half, so the messenger's report of the massacre presents the gruesome manifestation of previously developed contradictions in Heracles' role as father. The hero previously struggled with competing notions of fatherhood, but his divinely-inspired madness causes him to employ distortions of these models in murdering his family. The messenger's account presents the hero as a man of unstable identity and unrelenting aggression against whom his victims cannot contend.

Scholars have concentrated on the "almost continuous insight we are given in this messenger-speech into Heracles' deranged mind,"<sup>165</sup> and treat the massacre as the impetus

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<sup>164</sup> Carroll (1990) 41.

<sup>165</sup> De Jong (1991) 171. Most interpreters concentrate on Heracles' suffering during the final parts of the play – e.g. Foley (1985) 199-200, Conacher (1955) 147-152, and particularly those who dismiss the first part of the play as insignificant, such as Michelini (1987) 240-266 and Arnott (1978).

for the hero's bittersweet movement towards humanity.<sup>166</sup> But the messenger pays considerable attention also to the family members who suffer the consequences of his derangement. The audience experiences the horror of gruesome slaughter through the members of the household, whose speech and actions reflect the dreadful contradictions of their fate. Their developing fear and confusion in the face of their patriarch's monstrous behavior makes their plight more identifiable and unsettling for the audience. Moreover, the continuous presence of their corpses onstage after the massacre is a testament to their suffering; this reminder of their hideous fate should prevent us from concluding that the contradictions of family structures found in the massacre have been adequately resolved by the end of the play.<sup>167</sup>

The description of Heracles' madness entails a process of complete transformation. His affliction is evident from its symptoms: initial pause, rolling and bloodshot eyes, foaming mouth, and manic laughter.<sup>168</sup> The hero's bizarre behavior and repulsive physical symptoms signal a break from his "true self" and his emergence as an alien being: "he was not longer the same man" (ὁ δ' οὐκέτι' αὐτὸς ἦν, 931).<sup>169</sup> This dramatic breakdown of the hero's personal identity is ominous. Neither the human characters nor the audience can predict how Heracles will behave once he has abandoned the self familiar to others (though Iris and Lyssa have

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<sup>166</sup> Silk (1985), Gregory (1977), Ruck (1976).

<sup>167</sup> Silk (1985) and Foley (1985), for example, both contend that the massacre allows Heracles to reconcile previously contradictory features of his personality. I shall provide more detailed arguments against such readings below.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Bond (1981) *ad* 930-1009 and Holmes (2008) on the similarity between these symptoms and ancient descriptions of those suffering from epileptic fits. The image perhaps then carried some immediate resonance for members of the original audience who had experienced or witnessed such episodes.

<sup>169</sup> As Riley (2008) 14 notes, the familiar English idiom "he wasn't himself" unfortunately dulls the "extraordinary impact" of the Greek.

prepared the audience for the ultimate consequences, if not the specific means, of his madness).

But the “new” Heracles is not merely a random and unpredictable madman. On the contrary, the divinely-inspired madness causes him to adopt a perverted version of his earlier behavior.<sup>170</sup> That is, the gods incite the mad hero to complete grotesque elaborations of previously established contradictions in his role as father. Not only does he “leave” his family on a vain quest against a phantom enemy, but his insane determination prevents him from recognizing the pathetic appeals to intimacy and kinship before his own eyes. Through the messenger’s report we see how Heracles’ trademark heroic virtues have been corrupted into a monstrous frenzy and how this corruption destroys the fundamental notions of family that his victims take for granted.

I shall discuss the disturbing contradictions in the hero’s behavior, but first I would like to note how Euripides’ attention to the victims in this speech clarifies the horrific nature of the massacre. The messenger’s account of the slaughter includes direct speech from five different speakers, the most in any Euripidean messenger speech.<sup>171</sup> Irene De Jong has noted the diversity of voices here, but her discussion presents them merely as indicators of Heracles’ madness.<sup>172</sup> It is true that the speeches serve this function, but they also allow the audience to register more fully the horror of the situation. The family’s frightened and confused reactions provide the audience with ample opportunity to assimilate the view of the

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<sup>170</sup> Burnett (1971) 171. Ruck (1976) 68 similarly calls the deranged Heracles “a grotesque repetition of his former self.”

<sup>171</sup> Only *Helen* 1526-1618 has an equal number of direct quotations. Cf. the index of direct and indirect speech in De Jong (1991) 199-201.

<sup>172</sup> De Jong (1991) 171.

characters and sympathize with their dreadful experience.<sup>173</sup> Every party involved is given a voice: Heracles, his father, his wife, his children, and the household slaves.<sup>174</sup> The comprehensive depiction here is important because the audience has already been thoroughly prepared for the messenger's dread report: they have seen Iris and Lyssa explain in detail the gods' awful plan for Heracles, including his madness and kin-slaying (822-874), and they have heard the shouts from Amphytrion within the house (875-909). By including speeches from the family members Euripides draws the audience away from their preconceptions and back to the victims' unexpected suffering and their feelings of horror.

The victims respond with fear and confusion as they attempt to decipher the confusing behavior of their patriarch. The slaves' initial reaction provides the audience with their first glimpse of the horror caused by Heracles' madness. The hero imagines that he must undertake another journey in order to kill Eurystheus (*πρὸς τὰς Μυκῆνας εἶμι*, 943). This announcement of departure echoes his previous threat against his Theban enemies (566), and his demand for his bow and club in place of ritual accoutrements (941-942) suggests that the epinician hero has replaced the domestic figure. But his actions are deranged simulations of heroic behavior; he enters an imaginary chariot and pretends to drive it with his hand as if he were using a goad (946-949). The slaves respond to this derangement with a blend of fear and laughter (*διπλοῦς δ' ὁπαδοῖς ἦν γέλως φόβος ὁμοῦ*, 950). As Bond notes, the term *διπλοῦς* here denotes not only the simultaneity of these responses (as does *ὁμοῦ*) but also the “dubious” nature of the emotional combination.<sup>175</sup> This emotional ambiguity reflects the

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<sup>173</sup> Cf. my discussion of Carroll's theory of assimilation in chapter one, pages 43-45. I use the term assimilation rather than identification to emphasize an assessment of the situation shared by characters and audience.

<sup>174</sup> While it is true only one of the three children speaks, it is likely that Euripides has limited the number of direct speeches for the sake of economy and that this one child is representative for all.

<sup>175</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 950-952.

contradictory behavior of the hero: he is no longer the domestic figure that the ritual context demands but an almost parodic distortion of his heroic persona.<sup>176</sup>

Similar confusion can be found in the reactions of the other victims as the deranged heroism develops into horrific violence. After Heracles imagines traveling to Megara and enjoying a banquet there, Amphytryon asks him: “What is the manner of this foreign behavior” (τίς ὁ τρόπος ξενώσεως / τῆσδ’; 965-966). The term *ξένωσις* is a *hapax legomenon* in tragedy and scholars have suggested various readings, including psychological (“*alienationis*”) and physical (“foreign travel”) interpretations.<sup>177</sup> Given the confusion and conflation established in the slaves’ reaction, we do not need to seek one fixed meaning for the term. Euripides may have chosen this ambiguous word to highlight the contrast between the delusionary trip Heracles is taking and the mental derangement recognized by others. At any rate, the peculiarity of the word and its “foreign” root (*ξεν-*) are appropriate given the distorted signs of the epinician hero and Amphytryon’s inability to connect with his son. Heracles’ heroic impulses previously caused him to wander as a stranger (*ξένος*) throughout the Greek world. He is now acting like a stranger in his own home: though Amphytryon addresses him as son (*παῖ*), the hero recoils in horror from his own father (*πατέρα προταρβοῦνθ’ ἰκέσιον ψάειν χερσός / ὤθει*), who he imagines is the father of Eurystheus (965-969). The unorthodox term *ξένωσις* thus highlights the horrifying contradiction in Heracles’ role as deranged hero and alien father.

Like Amphytryon, Megara and the children attempt to remind him of the familial bonds he shares with his victims. After Heracles prepares his bow and threatens immediate

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<sup>176</sup> Riley (2008) 36-37.

<sup>177</sup> Denniston (1933) 213-214 and Bond (1981) *ad loc.* favor the psychological view; Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1895) iii. *ad loc.* suggests that it refers to the entertainment of a *ξένος* in a foreign land.

violence, the children scatter as they become “frightened with terror” (*ταρβοῦντες φόβῳ*, 971, a pleonastic expression that vividly describes the intensity of their fear). Before the first murder Megara addresses him as *τεκών*, (975), which as Bond notes is a very uncommon address for a wife to apply to her husband.<sup>178</sup> It is more intimate than the English “father” in that the *τεκ-* root stresses the genetic relationship Heracles has with his children as their begetter and their guardian.<sup>179</sup> She follows this unusually intimate address with a further appeal to this close relationship (*τέκνα*, 975), thus packing two words with the same genetic stem (*τεκ-*) into a short, six-word speech. Similar clustering of *τεκ-* terms can be found earlier in the play: the chorus uses the same terms to remind Heracles about a father’s obligation to help his children (*δίκαια τοὺς τεκόντας ὠφελεῖν τέκνα*, 583); the hero uses related words in his own vow to tend to his children (*θεράπευμα τέκνων*) and join the “child-loving race” (*φιλότεκνον γένος*) of humans (633-636). Though it recalls the language and values of these passages, Megara’s appeal lacks their confidence and certainty. Her distressed shout has transformed the previous assertions into confused questions (*τί δρῶς;*) and contradictory juxtapositions. Her reference to *τέκνα* is immediately followed by the verb *κτείνεις*; the close position of these two words and their similarity in sound further highlights the tension between parental love and savage violence.

The same contradiction can be found in the plea from one of the hero’s sons, the second victim of the slaughter. Like Megara, the child tries to appeal to his connection with Heracles: the first line of his entreaty displays a chiasmic structure that begins and ends with vocative appeals to his “dearest father” (*φίλτατ’ ... πάτερ*), and the next line uses anaphora (*σός ... σός*) to emphasize the familial connection (988-989). The hero ignores these appeals,

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<sup>178</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 975.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. my discussion in chapter 2 pages 136-137.

but his behavior reflects a horrific distortion of the domestic Heracles: he perverts established symbols of intimacy into tokens of hideous violence. This perversion begins even before the son speaks: while he still crouches by the altar “like a bird” (*βωμόν ὄρνις ὥς ἔπτηξ’ ὕπο*, 974), Heracles, having killed another son, gloats over “this one dead chick here” (*εἷς μὲν νεοσσὸς ὄδε θανών*, 982). The unsettling remark misappropriates a term previously established as one of nurturing affection. Megara had compared her maternal responsibilities to those of a bird tending her chicks (*οὐς ὑπὸ πτεροῖς / σῶζω νεοσσούς ὄρνις ὥς ὑφειμένους*, 71-72); Amphitryon similarly chastised the Thebans for not looking after the “chicks” (*νεοσσοῖς*, 224) he was feebly trying to protect. Heracles, however, corrupts this affectionate term into a “grotesque and horrifying” boast.<sup>180</sup> There is similar corruption in the hero’s first reaction to his son’s appeal. The act of “rolling his savage Gorgon eyes” (*ἀγριωπὸν ὄμμα Γοργόνος στρέφων*, 990) simultaneously reflects the hero’s famous “gorgon-gaze” that he shares with his children (*πατέρος ὥς γοργῶπες*, 131-132) and the monstrous fury unleashed against his family by the gorgon-like Lyssa (*Νυκτὸς Γοργών*, 883-884).<sup>181</sup> Finally, Heracles kills the boy with his club (*ξύλον καθήκει*, 993), the very same one that he had once allowed the child to wield as a gesture of affection (*ἐς δεξιάν τε σὴν ἀλεξητήριον / ξύλον καθίει δαίδαλον, ψευδῇ δόσιν*, 470-471). The phrase *ξύλον καθήκει* initially described a playful gift (*ψευδῇ δόσιν*) but now has been distorted into a description of brutal and sudden carnage (*ἐρρηξε δ’ ὀστᾶ*, 994).

While earlier parts of the play signal obliquely the incompatibility of the domestic Heracles and the epinician hero, the family’s detailed responses reveal the disturbing consequences of this incompatibility. They find their worst fears realized in the man they had

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<sup>180</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 982.

<sup>181</sup> Kamerbeek (1966) 6 notes the significance of the recurring Gorgonic imagery. He contends that its presence before and during the massacre helps to create a thematic unity joining the disparate sections of the play. Cf. Padilla (1992) 7-8.

thought would protect them. The mad Heracles ultimately fulfills the threats to his family made by his enemy Lycus.<sup>182</sup> Amphytrion, for example, makes the following pathetic request from Lycus:

*κτεῖνόν με καὶ τήνδ' ἀθλίαν παίδων πάρος,  
ὥς μὴ τέκν' εἰσίδωμεν, ἀνόσιον θέαν,  
ψυχρορραγοῦντα καὶ καλοῦντα μητέρα  
πατρός τε πατέρα.*

Kill me and this poor woman before the children, so that we may not see the children – unholy sight! – as they breathe their last while calling upon their mother and grandfather (322-325).

Amphytrion encounters the very “unholy sight” he wished to avoid during Heracles’ rampage, but the circumstances are even more horrifying than the old man had anticipated: the children call upon their father (πάτερ, 988) not in an appeal for assistance but in vain attempt to remind their killer of his identity.

Despite the messenger’s attention to the family’s suffering, many scholars have focused exclusively on the hero’s plight and have treated the travails of the family, particularly in the events prior to the massacre, as “a red herring.”<sup>183</sup> While it is true that Heracles is a rich and complex character that deserves critical attention, his family serves an indispensable role in the play’s conflict. It is through their eyes that the audience can fully experience the magnitude of the gods’ punishment, and Euripides does not treat their suffering superficially. Moreover, Megara and the children maintain a significant narrative presence even in the events following the massacre. Their corpses remain onstage for the duration of the play, and Heracles spends the majority of this time lying onstage surrounded by their remains. When Theseus arrives, he notices these bodies first and comments on the

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<sup>182</sup> Cf. Ruck (1976) 57-59 for further parallels between Heracles and Lycus.

<sup>183</sup> Arnott (1978). Cf. pages 169-171 above.



perversity of this slaughter of innocents (1176-1177). He does not recognize Heracles, who has covered himself in shame, and even when Amphytrion explains the situation, Theseus considers the hero a stranger amidst the corpses (τίς δ' ὁδ' οὖν νεκροῖς, γέρον; 1189). The alienation between father and family continues even after the madness has subsided.

The destruction of the family and Heracles' alienation from it suggest that the end of the play should not be read as a triumph of *φιλία*, as some have claimed.<sup>184</sup> Rather, the play seems to focus on its fragility in a senselessly violent world. Heracles' desire to assume the role of domestic father figure is completely frustrated as a result of the massacre, and his departure for Athens does not resolve his contradictory status as father and killer. As I noted above, the hero's decision to retain the weapons stained with his children's blood reveals his inability to escape his crimes. His bow and club act as surrogate children: he clutches them to his breast like infants (πλευρὰ τὰμὰ προσπίτνοντ', 1379) and feels the same bitter pains from them as he does from his slaughtered family (λυγραί...λυγραί, 1376-1377). The hero's decision to retain these weapons is reluctant (ἀσλῖως δὲ σωστέον, 1385), but it nonetheless continues the trend of corrupted affection found in the messenger speech. Since Heracles continues to conflate intimacy with violence, the contradiction between epinician hero and domestic figure cannot be resolved.

Theseus' offer to bring the hero to Athens serves as proof of his friendship, but it also reinforces Heracles' alienation from his family. The Athenian rebukes his friend for wishing to embrace his father and reminds him of his labors (1410). Despite Foley's claim that Athens provides a more appropriate context for such heroic feats,<sup>185</sup> there is no indication in the play that Heracles has reconsidered his disdain for the labors (574-582, 1269-1280). The

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<sup>184</sup> Chalk (1962), Barlow (1981), Conacher (1955) 150, Hartigan (1987) 132.

<sup>185</sup> Foley (1985) 167-175. Cf. my discussion of her argument on pages 191 and 198-200 above.

hero asks Theseus to aid him in bringing Cerberus to Argos, but he offers the following explanation for this request: "...so that I may not suffer anything because of grief for my children while I am alone" (λύπη τι παίδων μὴ πάθω μονούμενος, 1387). The labors offer him, at best, only temporary distraction from grief, and this relief comes primarily from his friend's companionship. Yet at the beginning of the play Amphytrion claimed that his son undertook these labors in order to restore his family to Argos (17-19). The hero's tasks now compel him to abandon his father, who must tend to the family's burial and live the rest of his life miserably in Thebes (οἶκει πόλιν τήνδ' ἀθλίως, 1365).<sup>186</sup> By distinguishing Amphytrion and the labors, Theseus confirms that heroic feats and *φιλία* within the family are, for Heracles at least, mutually exclusive.

The play ends with Theseus leading Heracles helplessly like a boat being towed (ἐφορκίδες, 1424); this image recalls an earlier scene in which the hero compared his children's tenacious embraces to such boats (ἐφορκίδας, 631). The reversal, as many have noted, reveals the hero's humility and dependence on *φίλοι*.<sup>187</sup> But it also illustrates his alienation from the domestic sphere and suggests that he is not the "fully human" figure that many scholars have claimed.<sup>188</sup> In the earlier scene the reference to towed boats is followed by Heracles' identification with the *φιλότεκνον γένος* of mortals (636), and he enters the house accompanied by his family. In this final scene the towing metaphor similarly precedes a speech praising *φιλία* (1425-1426), but Theseus "tows" his friend away from his father and from his home. Heracles will find many honors in Athens, but he will not be fully integrated

<sup>186</sup> Padilla (1992) 11. Lines 1420-1421, in which Heracles vows to bury his father at some future point in time either in Thebes or in Athens, are confusing and likely corrupt. Cf. Bond (1981) *ad* 1420f. for a discussion of these difficult lines. At any rate it is clear that Heracles' promise does little to mitigate the painful separation between father and son.

<sup>187</sup> E.g. Silk (1985) 16, Fitzgerald (1991) 91.

<sup>188</sup> Silk (1985), Gregory (1977).

into a human community. He will have divine precincts (τεμένη) and receive sacrificial offerings (θυσίαι) after his death (1324-1335).<sup>189</sup>

The hero's ultimate decision to leave his household and his father reveals his inability to participate in the domestic sphere. It is not that he has, as Griffiths claims, "failed to grasp...that it is specifically *philia* within the *oikos* which is central."<sup>190</sup> There is little indication that Euripides condemns Heracles for moral or intellectual failings; the tragedian suggests rather that forces outside of his control (e.g. Iris and Lyssa, Theban νόμος in 1322 and 1361) prevent the hero from fulfilling his domestic duties. But because of these external forces he remains a monstrous contradiction unable to fulfill his earlier wish to abandon the labors and serve his family. The horrific disruption that occurs during the massacre is never resolved, and thus Euripides leaves his audience with a provocative dissolution of familiar domestic structures. I shall argue in the next section that this dissolution is further established by the tragedian's presentation of the house itself as an unstable setting that is unable to protect its occupants.

### C) ἀπορία σωτηρίας: The House as (Un)safe Space

In the previous sections I have argued that Euripides generates horror in the *Heracles* by undermining familiar assumptions about the gods and family. He depicts the gods as savage, inexplicable forces that render meaningless humanity's attempts to civilize the world. He furthermore presents Heracles as a monstrous example of fatherhood, a contradictory figure who alienates himself from his family and destroys those most in need of his protection. I would like now to discuss one final horrific element in the play, namely the role

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<sup>189</sup> Theseus' description of these honors demonstrates the continued ambiguity between human and divine in Heracles' character: he will die (1331), but the ritual offerings Theseus mentions seem to indicate that he will be worshiped as a god. Foley (1985) 165-166 notes the tension between divine and mortal here, adding that the Athenians took particular pride in offering both Olympian and chthonic sacrifices to the hero.

<sup>190</sup> Griffiths (2002) 655.

of the house in the family's slaughter. The characters in the play presume that the house is a source of safety against brutal violence, much as they assume the gods and Heracles can offer them protection. But the house proves to be just as unreliable. I shall begin by examining references to the home as a safe space prior to the massacre. Then I shall examine how the messenger speech contradicts this characterization by revealing how domestic space fails to protect the family in their final moments. I argue that Euripides' elaborate descriptions of the interior space of the household makes the violence more immediately identifiable and chilling for his audience. The familiar and mundane setting becomes horrifically distorted by grotesque violence, which compels the desperate victims to manipulate familiar space in unfamiliar ways.<sup>191</sup> This contradiction resembles the disruption of safe spaces in modern horror fiction, and I argue that it serves a similar function in this play in challenging the audience's preconceptions about the security of the house.

### C.1) *The House in Heracles*

Before the massacre, Heracles' family views the house as a source of safety from which they have been displaced. Amphitryon remarks in the prologue: "For we sit (outside) barred from our home without any means of safety" (*ἐκ γὰρ ἐσφραγισμένοι / δόμων καθήμεθ' ἀπορίᾳ σωτηρίας*, 53-54).<sup>192</sup> The audience can see the family and the house simultaneously, so the staging reinforces this division between the victims and their salvation. Other family members similarly treat the house as a source of comfort and familiarity. The children interpret the creaking of its doors as a sign of their father's return (77-79). Megara notes that the house still retains her family's name even if others have taken control of it (338). When

<sup>191</sup> For example, the second son seeks refuge at the altar in the center of the courtyard, but he does not appeal to its normal protective function for suppliants; for him it is merely a hiding spot.

<sup>192</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 53 notes that the phrase "sealed out" (*ἐκ...ἐσφραγισμένοι*) is a striking transference, as it is the house, not the family, that Lycus has locked up. The odd phrasing calls attention to Amphitryon's desperation; he believes that the family is "locked"

Heracles returns, his first words are a greeting to the house; like many travelers, he assumes that the sight of home signals the end of his troubles (523-524).<sup>193</sup> Amphytrion soon after convinces the enraged hero that he will find safety (*ἀσφαλεία*) inside the home instead of marching against Lycus' palace (604). Lycus is thus easily deceived by Amphytrion in believing that the family remains inside the home in a vain attempt to prolong their life (712-716). The chorus signals what they believe is the end of the family's suffering by noting that "the house is silent" (*σιγῇ μέλαθρα*) after Lycus' death (761). Euripides allows these characters, and his audience, to assume that the household is a secure place: once the reunited family regains control of the home, it appears that they have averted all danger.

The surprising appearance of the Iris and Lyssa, however, contradicts this assumption. The goddesses defy the fundamental distinction between domestic space and the outside world. Nevett has argued that the architecture and design of ancient houses reveals that Greeks considered the separation of inside and outside space as a priority: most homes had only a single entrance from the street and high, inaccessible windows; the guest areas were clearly marked by distinct decoration and potential isolation from other domestic space.<sup>194</sup> Amphytrion assumes that the house is a securely closed structure from which the powerful can bar the weak (53-54) and, conversely, in which the restored patriarch can confine a guilty trespasser (*κεκλήσεται*, 729). The goddesses not only threaten the house itself (*ἐνὸς δ' ἐπ' ἀνδρὸς δώματα στρατεύομεν*, 825; *καταρρήξω μέλαθρα*, 864) but also reveal the building as permeable and vulnerable to intrusion. Lyssa's quiet entrance into the house (*ἐς δόμους δ' ἡμεῖς ἄφαντοι δυσόμεσθ'* *Ἡρακλέους*, 873) involved a descent from the *skene* roof

<sup>193</sup> Cf. Bond (1981) *ad* 523f. on such stock greetings.

<sup>194</sup> Nevett (1999) 70-74. She notes that the architecture allows owners to separate guests from more private areas by controlling movement. While a guest could conceivably travel to other rooms besides the guest-room (*ἀνδρών*) via the central court, the decorated path from court to the *ἀνδρών* and the limited view of the rest of the house from its inside indicate that the host retained firm control over access to his household.

through a trap door or stairway into the house.<sup>195</sup> The staging disrupts the visual pattern established in the first part of the play. The front doors of the *skene* had served as a prominent onstage feature; they represented a symbolic fulcrum of power, as only those in control had access to the home. But Lyssa bypasses this entrance entirely, and her surreptitious descent demonstrates how easily the home's defenses can be penetrated. Her eventual destruction of the roof and structural supports confirms that the house can only offer its occupants limited protection against invasion from the outside.

The messenger-speech further illustrates how Euripides subverts the notion of the house as protected space. This speech includes an abundance of architectural detail, including descriptions of columns, door panels, orthostates, and altar-bases, among others.<sup>196</sup> Though we might expect the play's mythical hero to dwell in an ornate palace, Euripides concentrates on common architectural features that would be identifiable to most members of his audience. Bond compares the messenger's depiction of the house to the fifth-century *pastas*-style houses at Olynthus.<sup>197</sup> These houses contained a central open courtyard bordered on one or more sides by a roofed colonnade (*pastas*); all other interior rooms radiated from these central areas.<sup>198</sup> The descriptions of the hero's movement are consistent with such houses: he begins at the altar of Zeus, a common feature of central courtyards,<sup>199</sup> and the action revolves around this area as the hero enters connecting rooms such as the ἀνδράων and the inner chamber where Megara hides. By including realistic descriptions of familiar domestic space,

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<sup>195</sup> Mastronarde (1990) 268-269.

<sup>196</sup> Rehm (2000) 369.

<sup>197</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1008.

<sup>198</sup> Nevett (1999) 63-68.

<sup>199</sup> Rehm (2000) 368-369.

Euripides made the family's horrific experience more immediate and identifiable for the audience. The messenger-speech contains two significant areas of contradiction involving the house: the first involves the tension between the deranged hero's hallucinations and his actual location; the second concerns the family's misappropriation of household architecture in their desperate efforts to survive.

The messenger juxtaposes Heracles' deluded impressions of the space around him with descriptions of the actual household geography. Though the messenger lucidly differentiates hallucination and actuality, his attention to mundane details and the specific contradictions arising from these details illustrate how confusing the domestic space has become. After entering his imaginary chariot, the hero claims that he has arrived in Megara though in reality he is within his own house (*μέσον δ' ἐς ἀνδρῶν' ἐσπεσὼν Νίσου πόλιν*, 954). The messenger generates confusion by introducing the two locations in the same line and postponing the clarification of the delusion (*ἤκειν ἔφασκε*) until the next one (955). The *ἀνδρῶν*, which was typically used to entertain guests, is a fitting location for the beginning of the hero's delusional journey, as the room serves as a transitional space between the outside world and the private residence of the family. But the contradictions between actual and imaginary locations become more exaggerated as Heracles moves into the interior of the house. The mundane details within the messenger's account illustrate the extent of the hero's distance from reality: he holds a communal feast (*δοίῃ*) for himself alone, he dines in private quarters (*δωμάτων τ' ἔσω βεβῶς*) rather than the designated guest space (*ἀνδρῶν*), and reclines on the floor (*κλιθεὶς ἐς οὔδας*) instead of on a couch (955-957). The hero's delusions challenge familiar demarcations of the household, and the audience hears conflicting notions of domestic space.

The hero's family does not share his delusions, but his deranged attacks compel them to treat familiar domestic space in unfamiliar ways as they search for refuge. The first child victim tries hiding behind a column (ὑπὸ κίονος σκιάν, 973), presumably part of the colonnade abutting the courtyard.<sup>200</sup> The column is a narrow supporting structure and cannot adequately hide a human being, no matter how small. Consequently, the child's only hope is to use the column as an *ad hoc* barrier as his father chases him in circles (ἐξελίσσων παῖδα κίονος κύκλῳ / τόρνευμα δεινόν, 977-978). Euripides' attention to the circularity of movement here is striking; in less than two lines he employs three words that denote the cyclical nature of this chase (ἐξελίσσων, κύκλῳ, τόρνευμα). This emphasis on circularity illustrates the futility of the child's attempt to flee. While there is continuous motion (ἐξελίσσων), the victim essentially stays in the same place and is stopped immediately when the father finally blocks his path (ἐναντίον σταθείς, 978). The child's final movements demonstrate the inadequacy of the column's protection. The vertical support remains (for the moment) standing upright and intact, but the slaughtered boy sinks downward against it and lies prone (ὑπτιος δὲ λαΐνους / ὀρθοστάτας ἔδρευσε, 979-980).

The second child tries to hide at the base of the courtyard altar (βωμὸν ὄρνις ὥς ἔπτηξ' ὑπο, 974). Altars are traditionally places of refuge, and earlier in the play the family supplicated at a public altar outside of the house in the hope that Lycus would not violate the sanctity of this edifice (48-50). The courtyard altar, dedicated to the "Zeus of enclosure" (Ζεὺς ἐρκεῖος),<sup>201</sup> was a familiar feature of ancient Greek homes believed to prevent outside

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<sup>200</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1008.

<sup>201</sup> Rehm (2000) 369, Bond (1981) *ad* 922.



threats from entering the home;<sup>202</sup> for this reason it served as the locus of ritual action immediately before the slaughter (922). But the child does not make any appeal to the altar's sacred protective function in his pleas before his father; the boundaries between the internal domestic space and external threats are no longer applicable, as Heracles belongs in both categories. The young boy only hopes that he can avoid his father's notice by crouching at the base of the domestic altar platform (ἀμφὶ βωμῖαν / ἔπτηξε κρηπῖδ' ὥς λεληθέναι δοκῶν, 984-985). The son's feeble attempt to use the altar as hiding place thus does not depend on the structure's symbolic significance, and its prominence in the center of the open courtyard renders the effort futile: his killer in fact finds that the child's hiding spot has drawn him too close. Heracles cannot use his intended weapon, the bow, because of this proximity and so strikes the son with a club (991-994). The messenger compares this deadly stroke to the hammering of a blacksmith (μυδροκτύπον μίμημ', 992), a vivid metaphor that simultaneously illustrates the brutal force of the blow and emphasizes the mundane horror of violence near a traditionally sacred space.<sup>203</sup>

The mother and third son, the final victims, attempt to find safety in the house's inner chambers (ἀλλὰ φθάνει νιν ἢ τάλαιν' ἔσω δόμων / μήτηρ ὑπεκλαβοῦσα καὶ κλήει πύλας, 996-997). This private section of the house should be the place furthest from dangers; one of the speakers in Xenophon's *Economics*, for example, notes that he keeps his most valuable property in an inner chamber (θάλαμος, here designating the storeroom) "since it is in a position of security" (ἐν ὀχυρῷ ὢν, 9.3). Euripides does not specify the common function for the room in which Megara and her child hide, but the tragedian suggests that this chamber

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<sup>202</sup> Burkert (1985) 130.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. Barlow (1982) 120-121 on the "close, grim, and ugly" effect of such realistic metaphors and descriptions in the messenger speech.

will provide greater security through its locked doors (*κλήγει πύλας*). Megara, unlike the previous two victims, seems to be looking for protection in an appropriate place.

Unfortunately, the locked doors prove to be insubstantial obstacles, ultimately no more effective against Heracles than the column or altar. The hero has already announced his plan to dismantle the Cyclopean foundations of Mycenae with levers (*μοχλούς... Κυκλώπων βάθρα*, 944). By locking themselves into the inner rooms, the mother and son inadvertently allow the hero, still believing himself in Mycenae (*ὥς ἐπ' αὐτοῖς δὴ Κυκλωπίοισιν ὦν*, 998), to fulfill his vow by dismantling the door posts and door jambs (*σκάπτει μοχλεύει θύρετρα κακβαλὼν σταθμά*, 999). The contrast between the Cyclopean masonry of Mycenae and the ordinary architecture of the household doors demonstrates the fragility of the home's defenses.

Heracles was prepared to "shatter with a trident" (*συντριαινῶσαι*) the artfully constructed Mycenaean palace (945-946). As Barlow notes, the rare verb *συντριαινόω* adds a superhuman dimension to the hero's boasts since it is found most often in descriptions of Poseidon.<sup>204</sup> But before the simple door posts and door flaps of the inner rooms in his own house, the hero's incredible might is overwhelming and terrifyingly abrupt. His boast to dismantle the Mycenaean palace extends for four lines (943-946), while his destruction of the doors spans is limited to one line and opens with asyndeton (*σκάπτει μοχλεύει*) to emphasize the intensity of the action. In an instant the deranged killer renders futile his wife's attempts to lock him out, and his brutal slaughter of the mother and child confirms the family's complete vulnerability within the domestic space.

In addition to highlighting the inadequate protection found in individual areas of the house, through the sequence of the murders Euripides also undermines the home in general

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<sup>204</sup> Barlow (1996) *ad* 946. She fails to note the appearance of the verb in *Bacchae* 1103, where the wild followers of Dionysus attempt to overturn the tree holding Pentheus. But her argument is still sound, since there the term similarly describes the actions of human characters endowed with superhuman strength from the gods.

as a safe space. There is a dramatic crescendo as Heracles penetrates the building and invades the safest places in the house: the rampage begins in the courtyard and the *ἀνδρών*, common guest areas that mediate between internal domestic space and the outside world;<sup>205</sup> it ends in the most intimate areas of the house as Heracles dismantles the doors to its innermost chambers. But the killer's penetration of the house also carries symbolic importance: each family member seeks shelter within the "symbolic cornerstones of Greek domestic life,"<sup>206</sup> and with each victim the symbolic significance of their hiding place grows. The first child hides behind a column, a generic structure that would be found in many types of buildings. The next son, however, chooses to crouch at the family altar in the courtyard. As I noted above, this domestic altar to *Ζεὺς ἑρκεῖος* contrasts with the public altar that the family had previously supplicated. The latter edifice served as an accepted place of refuge for community members seeking protection against a political enemy; the domestic altar functions as a locus for family worship and protects the house by "walling it off" (*ἑρκεῖος*) from the outside world. Heracles' failure to recognize its domestic significance complements his inability to accept his son's appeal to their kinship. Finally, the remaining child cowers under the robe of his mother (*ἐς πέπλους...μητρὸς ταλαίνης*, 972-973), and she in turn leads him into the inner chambers of the house. The final act of violence thus occurs within the most intimate areas of the home against a child still being held by his mother (*δάμαρτα καὶ παῖδ' ἐνὶ κατέστροωσεν βέλει*, 1000). It is essentially an attack on the most basic conception of the house: a huddled family in a single room with only a locked door separating them from an external

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<sup>205</sup> Nevett (1999) 70-71.

<sup>206</sup> Rehm (2002) 107.

threat.<sup>207</sup> The audience of the *Heracles* is thus confronted with a contradiction of the familiar intimacy of the household. Though the family and audience expect the house to protect its occupants from the dangers of the outside world, in this play it can only lock victims in as they vainly attempt to escape the horrors within.

Euripides provides little assurance that the shattered house can be restored following this brutal slaying. Athena's interference ends the massacre, but her confusing actions confirm that the house is fragile and unsafe. As I noted above,<sup>208</sup> the coincidence of Lyssa's earthquake and Athena's appearance confuses Amphitryon and the messenger, and they are not sure whether the destruction of the house is caused by the hero's rampage or the goddess' interference. Bond speculates that the stone hurled by Athena (πέτρον, 1004) may have come from the shattered house.<sup>209</sup> But even without this tentative proposition, the end of the massacre is still marked by the chaotic destruction of the building: after such slaughter there is no hope that the home can retain its former promises of security and stability.

Amphitryon and the other survivors continue to rely on household architecture as a source of safety following the massacre. They chain Heracles to a column broken as a result of the earthquake (1006-1011). He has already circumvented an intact column (κίονος, 977), the raised platform of an altar (βωμίαν...κρηπίδ', 984-985), and bolted doors (κλήρει πύλας, 997). But now the survivors hope that he can be stopped by less secure analogues. This column is broken (διχορραγής, 1008), its platform (κρηπίδων ἔπι) does not support a sacred edifice that might offer at least symbolic protection, and the "corded snares" (σειραίων βρόχων,

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<sup>207</sup> Cf. Aristotle's definition in the *Economics*: μέρη δὲ οἰκίας ἀνδρωπός τε καὶ κτησίδς ἐστίν (1343a20). The κτησίδς here is the room itself and the barrier separating it from the surrounding area.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. pages 182-183 above.

<sup>209</sup> Bond (1981) *ad* 1003. He suggests that the text originally may have explicitly mentioned the source of the stone in this corrupted line.

1009) that tie him to the column can hardly restrain a man who can dismantle Cyclopean masonry as well as a door frame. Amphitryon concedes that Heracles once awakened could easily escape such restraints (ἡ δέσμη' ἀνεγειρόμενος χαλάσας ἀπολεῖ πόλιν, 1055). Moreover, the staging of the hero tied to a broken column confirms the bleak depiction of the home found in the messenger's report. As Rehm notes, iconographic sources frequently incorporate a single column as a symbolic representation of the home.<sup>210</sup> The image of Heracles beside a broken column thus succinctly encapsulates the utter dismantling of the household resulting from this rampage. The presence of this broken column throughout the rest of the play served as a reminder to the original audience of the contradictions underlying the violence found in the messenger speech: the unstable boundaries and limited protective features of the home leave its occupants vulnerable to unexpected and overwhelming dangers.

### C.2) *Horror and the Bad Place*

The violation of spaces traditionally considered safe is a feature of the *Heracles* that is also prominent in the modern horror genre. The monsters and killers in this genre often strike when their victims feel safest but are in reality quite vulnerable. The chases in horror films often climax with the victim arriving at a presumably safe location that offers refuge from the threat lurking outside. Inevitably the security of the location is compromised and the victim becomes trapped. In some cases, the killer's relentless attacks against the outside structure of the building prevent the terrified occupant from leaving and force her to wait anxiously until the killer finally enters. In Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), for example, a murderous gang transforms a police station, a typically secure area, into claustrophobic nightmare as the officers and other workers wait in vain for outside support. In other cases, the killer is *already inside* the building and surprises the victim who thought

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<sup>210</sup> Rehm (2000) 370 n. 21.

she had escaped. In Clark's *Black Christmas* (1974) sorority members are surprised to find that the disturbing phone calls that they continuously receive originate from their own house; in the final chase, the protagonist flees to the basement where she bludgeons the man she assumes is the killer.<sup>211</sup>

The trope most effectively generates horror when the safe space is the protagonist's own home. Stephen King notes:

Our homes are the places we allow ourselves the ultimate vulnerability: they are the places where we take off our clothes and go to sleep with no guard on watch.... When we go home and we shoot the bolt on the door, we like to think we're locking trouble out. The good horror story about the Bad Place whispers that we are not locking the world out; we are locking ourselves in... with *them*.<sup>212</sup>

Since horror fiction essentially deals with the violation of cultural categories and distinctions, the house presents an ideal location for horrific violence. Its boundaries seem well-defined and within the control of its inhabitant; she can lock the doors, pull down the blinds, and remove even the thought of the outside world and its dangers.<sup>213</sup> The horror villain violates these boundaries, often in a slow and agonizing fashion: he can be heard from outside, he is visible through a window, he begins to turn the knob of the front door, and finally he shatters the door and enters.<sup>214</sup> The killer's invasion undermines the distinction between inside and outside, safe and unsafe space. This contradiction also involves a reversal of control, since by penetrating the house the villain reveals that he, not the victim, can determine who has access to it. This reversal is often prefigured before the killer enters; he may cut off the power

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<sup>211</sup> Clark ends the film with the shocking revelation that the true killer remains in the attic tending to the body of his first victim, now wrapped in cellophane.

<sup>212</sup> King (1981) 281.

<sup>213</sup> Kawash (2000), Morgan (2002) 183-184.

<sup>214</sup> These tropes are common in slasher films such as John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), but can also be found in supernatural horror films such as M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002).

supply or sever the phone lines, thus leaving the victim vulnerable and unable to contact outside help. He has completely subverted the function of the house: "...the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in."<sup>215</sup>

Violence within the house also horrifies because of the symbolic connection between the building and its inhabitant. It is a place of common activity, and for its occupants it is full of memories and meaning.<sup>216</sup> We identify with our homes and arrange them in ways that reflect our personalities. The violation of this space is thus particularly disturbing and immediate. Anne Siddons, the author of the haunted-house novel *The House Next Door*, notes:

[The house] is an extension of ourselves; it tolls in answer to one of the most basic chords mankind will ever hear. My shelter. My earth. My second skin. Mine. So basic is it that the desecration of it, the corruption, as it were, by something alien takes on a peculiar and bone-deep horror and disgust. It is both frightening and...violating, like a sly, terrible burglar."<sup>217</sup>

The hostile invasion of the house is in itself an act of horrific violence, a rupture of one's "second skin" that in such fictions is often followed by the destruction of the inhabitant's body.<sup>218</sup> Horror fiction further exploits the connection between the victim and her home through depictions of corrupted household space after the killing. When the surviving characters discover the victim's body, the surrounding area is similarly mangled and tainted by her blood; in some horror films the director uses similar camera angles to juxtapose

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<sup>215</sup> Clover (1992)

<sup>216</sup> Cf. Smuts (2003) 162-165 for a brief account of the psychological projection of feelings and memories onto the house and its implications for horror fiction.

<sup>217</sup> Quoted by King (1981) 287.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Kawash (2000) 199-206 on the body as an analogue for the house in Western thought.

images of a once mundane domestic space with its later state of bloody disorder.<sup>219</sup> Episodes of horrific violence can corrupt the house permanently. Tales of haunted houses almost always involve what Stephen King calls “a supernatural provenance,” some previous horrific event that has converted the house into a Bad Place.<sup>220</sup> This genre of horror fiction inverts traditional attitudes toward the home: we normally project fond memories of comfort and familiarity onto our houses, but the haunted house is marked by bad memories and the inability to recover from a past disruption.<sup>221</sup>

The motif of the unsafe and corrupted house seems similar to Euripides’ treatment of the hero’s home in the *Heracles*. As I have argued above, the play contains an unsettling contradiction between the victims’ assumption that the house is a closed, secure space and Lyssa’s surreptitious entrance through the roof, an unexpected avenue. The abruptness of this shift from safe to unsafe domestic space is characteristic of modern horror fiction.<sup>222</sup> But Euripides seems more willing to manipulate his audience’s emotions and expectations than modern writers of horror. His depiction of the house is marked by two significant reversals: the first involves the family’s recovery of control over the house following Heracles’ arrival; the second involves their loss of control as the hero begins his deranged killing. The first reversal deceptively reinforces the initial assumptions of the play’s characters. The displaced family had assumed that access to the home guaranteed safety, and Heracles saves the family

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<sup>219</sup> In Dario Argento’s *Tenebre* (1982), for example, two women are shown quarreling at the opposite ends of the home’s central staircase. The police later find their bodies in similar positions amidst shattered household objects.

<sup>220</sup> King (1981) 277-284. He proposes that the haunted house is essentially “a house with an unsavory history” (281).

<sup>221</sup> Haunted houses are usually manifest deviations of normal homes; they are marked by deteriorating architecture, cobwebs, foul odors, and other signs that no one lives or should live in them. Cf. Morgan (2002) 185-189.

<sup>222</sup> Cf. King (1981) 281: “It doesn’t hurt to emphasize again that horror fiction is a cold touch in the midst of the familiar, and good horror fiction applies this cold touch with sudden, unexpected pressure.”



by taking them within the house and killing Lycus there. The audience had thus been focused on the house from the beginning of the play, and the second reversal represented a severe contradiction not only of their own associations with the house as a safe space<sup>223</sup> but also the play's continued emphasis on the house as a supposed site of security.

Heracles' destruction of the house is in some ways even more horrific than the invasion of the killer in modern horror films. It is not an alien intruder that gains control over the family's home but a man they love and trust. The victims in the horror film at the very least know that their house has been invaded and their security has been compromised. Heracles' family cannot so easily distinguish the familiar patriarch from the deranged killer that pursues them. The father and his family also view the house itself in vastly different ways: for the mad Heracles it is an epic obstacle, a Cyclopean palace that he must raze to the ground; for the family it is a much more mundane dwelling, marked by ordinary architectural features that cannot protect them against the fury of an insane warrior.

Euripides also establishes a symbolic connection between family and home, though it is a different type of connection from the one found in modern horror. The tragedian does not concentrate on sentimental or idiosyncratic details; there is no indication that this home is designed to reflect the particular personalities of its inhabitants.<sup>224</sup> Instead he draws on a more general and fundamental connection between the Greek house and its occupants. As Lacey observes, the term *οἶκος* had two levels of meaning for Athenians: on the material level it denoted the house itself and the surrounding property where the family lived, but on the social level it established their membership in the community, and it was of the utmost

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<sup>223</sup> Cf. my discussion concerning Greek houses on pages 222-223 above.

<sup>224</sup> This is consistent with the archaeological evidence. Nevett (1999) 68-74 notes that ancient Greek houses, unlike modern ones, did not have many rooms that were assigned one specific purpose; rather the houses were designed to allow flexible functionality in the private quarters and the potential to close off these quarters from more public areas of the house.

priority to retain this property in order to ensure the survival of their *γένος*.<sup>225</sup> In the *Heracles* the family strongly identifies with their home. Even when they have lost control of the building, they do not doubt that it essentially belongs to them. Megara remarks: “Others control [the property] but the name is still ours (ἄλλοι κρατοῦσι, τὸ δ’ ὄνομα’ ἔσθ’ ἡμῶν ἔτι, 338). They similarly treat the house as an essential part of the family. The returning Heracles first addresses it before reuniting with his wife and children (523-524); Amphytrion instructs his son to “allow your paternal home to see your face” (δὸς πατρώϊοις δώμασιν σὸν ὄμμα’ ἰδεῖν, 600).

The destruction of the house during the massacre marks an irreparable loss of identity for Heracles. Not only has he slaughtered his children, whom he imagined would inherit his estate and his heroic reputation (460-475), he has destroyed the foundation of his *γένος*. The play presents the massacre as a kind of *κατασκαφή*, a razing of the house.<sup>226</sup> Heracles earlier vowed to raze Lycus’ house to the ground (*κατασκάψω δόμους*, 566); in his delusions he now similarly threatens to dismantle the palace of Eurystheus (943-946), though he ultimately dismantles (*σκάπτει*, 999) the inside of his own home.<sup>227</sup> The practice of *κατασκαφή* was considered one of the most severe punishments in the Greek world, reserved for acts of heinous murder and treason.<sup>228</sup> It targeted not just the offender but his entire *γένος*: it was often accompanied by the denial of burial for the criminal and the disinterment of his previously-buried kin. It therefore represented “the extirpation of the individual and his

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<sup>225</sup> Lacey (1968) 88-99.

<sup>226</sup> Connor (1985) 89-90.

<sup>227</sup> Neither Heracles nor Lyssa literally razes the house to the ground, as the structure is still standing after the massacre; Amphytrion worries that the sleeping hero might completely destroy the house if awakened (1056).

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Connor (1985) 79-88 for literary and epigraphical evidence for the practice.

immediate kin from the society.”<sup>229</sup> Following the massacre the shattered house reflects the hero’s broken identity. He appears for most of the play beside a broken column, a symbolic representation of a broken home.<sup>230</sup> He also uses architectural metaphors to explain the disaster: in describing Amphitryon’s pollution he remarks that it is natural for offspring to suffer “whenever the foundation of the race is not rightly established” (*ὅταν δὲ κρηπὶς μὴ καταβληθῇ γένους / ὁρθῶς*, 1261-1262); he compares himself to a building that Hera has overturned by its very foundations (*αὐτοῖσιν βάθροις / ἄνω κάτω στρέψασα*, 1306).<sup>231</sup>

Euripides uses the subversion and destruction of the home to amplify the horror of Heracles’ madness. He contradicts traditional conceptions of the house as a closed and secure space in much the same way that producers of modern horror fiction do. The invasion of the home in the *Heracles*, however, is more sinister. The gods in the play transgress not only the boundaries of the house but also the boundaries of the human body. Lyssa vows to enter Heracles’ chest as well as his home, and blurs the distinction between herself and the hero in killing the children.

*οἶ’ ἐγὼ στάδια δραμοῦμαι στέρον εἰς Ἡρακλέους·  
καὶ καταρρήξω μέλαθρα καὶ δόμους ἐπεμβαλῶ,  
τέκν’ ἀποκτείνασα πρῶτον· ὁ δὲ κανὼν οὐκ εἴσεται  
παῖδας οὓς ἔτικτεν ἐναρών, πρὶν ἂν ἐμὰς λύσσας ἀφῇ.*

Such terrible races I shall run into the chest of Heracles. And I will shatter his house and enter his home, after first killing his children. And he, the killer, will not recognize that he is killing the children whom he sired until he casts off my madness.

She acknowledges that the hero will eventually be rid of her influence, but the play makes clear that neither Heracles nor his home can be fully restored. In modern horror fiction acts

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. pages 229-230 above.

<sup>231</sup> Rehm (2002) 108.

of horrific violence convert a home into a Bad Place, a permanently tainted location where the carnage is often repeated. The house of Heracles is similarly tainted by the gods and the deranged patriarch, but there is no threat of future violence. Instead the implications of the massacre involve a destruction of agency and identity; a hostile force has invaded the house and its owner, and both the family and their home have been annihilated. The play ends with a separation of father and son in disturbing variations of their original predicaments: Heracles pursues his final labor without any hope of benefiting his family; Amphitryon alone tends to his son's now devastated house and looks after his now dead wife and children. The horrific violence within the play then is fundamentally disaffirmative and disruptive. In the *Hecuba* Euripides illustrates how humans defy and manipulate social conventions in horrific ways, but in the *Heracles* he reveals how even the most virtuous and brave people are helpless in the face of irrational cosmic forces.

## CONCLUSION

The most effective horror fiction presents its audience with a frightening disruption of the familiar. Stephen King compares this practice to that of a martial artist paralyzing her opponent: both are engaged in “the business of finding vulnerable points and then applying pressure there.”<sup>1</sup> In the *Hecuba* and *Heracles* Euripides probed some of the most fundamental assumptions of his fifth-century audience and demonstrated their instability. The violence within these plays defies traditional distinctions between the masculine and feminine, friend and enemy, and domestic and outside space. The dramas achieve a similar emotional effect despite significant differences in plot, character, and setting. The *Hecuba* concentrates on a deliberate act of vengeance enacted by one non-Greek against another. Its protagonist is moreover an aged former queen whose ability to commit violence is in itself shocking, and the action occurs in a savage foreign land where the gods are noticeably absent. The *Heracles* focuses on deranged and spontaneous violence caused by inexplicable divine anger, its protagonist is one of the most renowned heroes of Greek myth, and the slaughter unfolds inside domestic space familiar to the play’s audience. In both dramas, however, there is a similar pattern involving the evocation of familiar cultural distinctions followed by a hideously violent disruption. Euripides possessed great skill in manipulating his audience’s emotions: in constructing these familiar categories he introduced subtle contradictions within

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<sup>1</sup> King (1981) 71.

them, cracks in the foundations, before he demolished the categories entirely through manifestly horrific disorder.<sup>2</sup>

If we acknowledge some similarity between these plays and modern horror fiction, this allows us to appreciate the tragedian's skill in plays that have been condemned for their lack of unity.<sup>3</sup> These plays of "multiple action" deviate radically from Aristotle's ideal single-plot tragedy,<sup>4</sup> and they do not conform to the standards of plausible and logical action espoused in the *Poetics*. But it is through the violation of plausibility and logic that an author can most effectively generate horror. Modern horror fiction concentrates on fantastic monsters and situations that raise doubt even among the characters and that defy normative cultural categories often without a clear logical purpose. The audience feels horror when the plausible order of human life is suddenly destroyed. Euripides achieves a similar effect in the *Heracles* and *Hecuba*: the former play features the sudden intrusion of inscrutable gods who corrupt the most intimate areas of human life; in the latter Hecuba's desire for vengeance is itself logical, but the shocking nature of this vengeance and her defiance of political and gender-based categories are horrific. The many apparent inconsistencies found in these plays are not examples of poor composition. Rather through these disturbing contradictions and shocking revelations Euripides offered his audience a provocative emotional experience.<sup>5</sup>

Investigations of horrific moments can aid our understanding of other Euripidean plays, as well. Violent contradictions of cultural categories can be found in almost every one

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the discussion of "off-key notes" in Chapter 3 pages 170-171.

<sup>3</sup> See the respective articles of Conacher (1955 and 1961) for a summary of the controversies regarding the bipartite structure of each play.

<sup>4</sup> Burnett (1971) 1-17. She distinguishes the *Hecuba* as a play of "multiple plot but constant overturn pattern" lacking the "heterogeneity of action" and "conflicting moods" found in the *Heracles* (1). As should be clear from the previous chapters, I see no sharp distinction between the two plays on these grounds.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Heath (1987) 79-80 on enjoying tragedy for the "coherence of the whole as an emotional experience."

of his dramas, though these contradictions do not always serve the same purpose. The *Orestes* and *Andromache*, for example, resemble the plays discussed above in their apparently bipartite plot structure and in the sudden violence that erupts during the second half of each. Euripides dwells on contradictory details in each description of slaughter. References to the Trojan War pervade the Phrygian's account of the gruesome attack (*Or.* 1453-1536), but these allusions reveal the perversion of heroic motifs: Hector and Ajax are conflated into one figure, Pylades (1478-1480), Helen, the original prize of war, is now a target of violence (1500-1502), and Greek military might is now tested against women and eunuchs (1483-1488, 1527-1528). In *Andromache*, the messenger's report of the death of Neoptolemus highlights the contradiction between the holy site of Delphi and the merciless violence enacted by its citizens and the god Apollo (1085-1165). The end of his speech contains a disturbing juxtaposition between Neoptolemus' mutilated corpse and the incense-bearing shrine from which it is ejected (1152-1157).

These horrific details are not merely signs of moral condemnation against the killers.<sup>6</sup> Rather we see in these descriptions the distortion of social and cosmic order: the three conspirators of the *Orestes*, like Odysseus in the *Hecuba*, honor bonds of *φιλία* through outrageous violence;<sup>7</sup> in the *Andromache* the "wise" (*σοφός*) Apollo, like the gods of the *Heracles*, seems so intent on vengeance (1162-1165) that he encourages violence against a suppliant within his precinct.<sup>8</sup> The severe narrative disjunctions and contradictions of cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Vellacott (1975) 79 describes the end of the *Orestes* as an "ugly mockery" of the values espoused by the characters directed against the original audience. Burnett (1971) similarly sees "moral infirmity" (221-222), though she notes that Orestes' ethical stance is complicated by external factors such as the Furies.

<sup>7</sup> The conspirators' original plot is couched in the language of *φιλία*: Menalaus fails to save his *φίλοι* (1059); Pylades, Orestes, and Electra are *τρισσοὶ φίλοι* (1190), and immediately after hearing Pylades' plot Orestes remarks *οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν κρεῖσσον ἢ φίλος σαφής* (1156). Burnett (1971) 221 aptly dubs their conception as "undiscriminating *philia*."

assumptions in these plays may have been intended to achieve the same disruptive effect discussed in earlier chapters: Euripides challenges his audience's preconceptions and horrifies them by portraying a world in disorder.

Euripides was not the only tragedian to generate horror by contradicting familiar cultural distinctions, but he seems to have been the most eager to bring these contradictions to extreme levels of dissonance. Aeschylus' Clytemnestra defies traditional conceptions of feminine weakness and submissiveness: she is from the outset of the *Agamemnon* defined as woman with masculine will (γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον κέαθ, 11), and this tension in her character culminates in the surprising revelation of her personal agency in Agamemnon's slaughter.<sup>9</sup> But the horrific contradictions within her character are never depicted as starkly as those found in Euripides' female killers. The *Medea* and *Hecuba* each present a horrific act of female vengeance as the final blow in a prolonged and explicit battle of the sexes. Moreover, while Clytemnestra represents a monstrous disruption of social order, Orestes' revenge, purification, and absolution in the court of the Areopagus suggests that the monster can be contained. There is no such hope in the Euripidean dramas: after slaying her children Medea is beyond the reach of her husband, and there is no indication that civil institutions within Athens will mollify the destructive figure headed in the city's direction at the play's end; Hecuba's gruesome revenge is ratified by judicial proceedings, but her sole focus on revenge renders this judgment futile – after executing her plot no fate can upset her, neither slavery nor bestial metamorphosis.<sup>10</sup> Both women seem to find satisfaction in revenge itself despite

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Detienne and Doueihi (1986) 48-50.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Winnington-Ingram (1948).

<sup>10</sup> Polymestor can provoke her only by focusing on the suffering of her daughter Cassandra (1275-1278).



their otherwise miserable circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Hecuba is unmoved by the disgrace of slavery, and Medea sees the painful loss of her children as a reasonable price for victory against her husband. Euripides presses the horrific potential of the contradictory nature of these characters to its limit and shows how such deviations can lead to sheer mayhem.

It is difficult to determine why Euripides concentrated on moments of extreme horror. There is, as Carroll notes, a paradoxical quality to horror fiction: the genre is most pleasing when it arouses an emotion normally considered unpleasant.<sup>12</sup> Carroll attempts to resolve this paradox by claiming that the same contradictions that arouse horror also cause fascination, and in seeking fascination the audience must suffer horror as a side-effect. Carroll's theory does not, however, sufficiently explain the horror found in Euripidean drama: there is no shortage of fascinating and sensational material in these plays, but if the tragedian sought only to present intriguing marvels he could have resolved the unsettling contradictions that persist throughout these dramas. It is more likely that he specifically aimed to arouse feelings of fear and repulsion through the sudden and unexpected disruption of the familiar. It is through such horrific disruption that Euripides could explore the complex and unstable cultural institutions that his audience took for granted. He did not attempt to reassure them by portraying these institutions as a sufficient source of protection against violence. Instead he revealed how those who relied on them were vulnerable to attacks from manipulative people and irrational supernatural forces. While these plays are grim and often pessimistic, they nonetheless present complex and engaging conflicts relevant to their audiences; Athenians took pride in their ability to make quick judgments concerning complicated matters (Th.

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<sup>11</sup> Clytemnestra finds disturbing joy in killing her husband, but her victory also grants her political power over Argos.

<sup>12</sup> Carroll (1990) 158-206

1.70, 1.140, 2.40.3, 2.41). The horrific violence in Euripidean drama presented them with severe contradictions involving familiar sources of tension in their world (e.g. political vs. personal interest, religious ritual practice vs. apparent divine irrationality). The suggestion that these tensions could not be satisfactorily resolved was likely unsettling, but the audience may have appreciated the honest reflection of a world that was frequently in disorder.

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