

**The feminine Other in Euripides' *Hecuba*:
exploring tensions in the masculine classical
*polis***

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the feminine Other is used by Euripides in the *Hecuba* to highlight certain tensions between an aristocratic ideal of manliness and a classical democratic masculinity in the fifth century Athenian *polis*. The first chapter will establish the masculine nature of the Athenian *polis* and discuss the different elements which highlight the inherent masculinity of Athenian society. The second chapter provides a socio-political context for the position of women in fifth century Athens and explores the otherness of the feminine in the masculine *polis*. Chapter three explores the problematic nature of speech in the democratic state and uses the feminine Other in the *Hecuba* to examine possible tensions between an outmoded aristocratic ethos and the democratic ideal of manliness. In the fourth chapter Euripides' use of the Other in the *Hecuba* is utilized to discuss violence, revenge, and masculinity in the Athenian *polis*. The final chapter provides a discussion on *nomos* and how the tensions between aristocratic and democratic ideals problematise the authority of traditional laws and how Euripides uses the feminine Other in the *Hecuba* to emphasise these issues.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die wyse waarop Euripides die vroulike Ander in Hecuba gebruik om spanning tussen die aristokratiese ideaal van manlikheid en die klassieke demokratiese manlikheid in die vyfde-eeuse Atheense *polis* na vore te bring. Die eerste hoofstuk sal die manlike aard van die Atheense *polis* vestig en sal die elemente wat die inherente manlikheid van die Atheense samelewing beklemtoon, bespreek. Die tweede hoofstuk vervat die sosio-politieke konteks van die vrou se posisie in vyfde-eeuse Athene en verken die andersheid van die vrou in die manlike *polis*. Hoofstuk drie verken die problematiese aard van spraak in die demokratiese staat en gebruik die vroulike Ander in Hecuba om moontlike spanning tussen die verouderde aristokratiese etos en die demokratiese ideaal van manlikheid te ondersoek. Die vierde hoofstuk ondersoek Euripides se gebruik van die Ander in Hecuba om geweld, wraak en manlikheid in die Atheense *polis* te bespreek. Die finale hoofstuk vervat 'n bespreking van *nomos* en die problematiek ten opsigte van die outoriteit van tradisionele wette as gevolg van die spanning tussen aristokratiese en demokratiese ideale en Euripides se gebruik van die vroulike Ander in Hecuba om hierdie geskilpunte te beklemtoon.

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Introduction

Athens in the late fifth century was a society that had already moved from its aristocratic past into a democratic present. This movement between political ideals created a set of tensions in its androcentric society which was debated in the philosophy and literature of the time. I will attempt to show that these particular tensions between the different masculine ideals of the Athenian *polis* were explored by Euripides through the vehicle of meaning created by his use of the feminine Other in the *Hecuba*¹. There seem to be some important differences between the masculine identity of the archaic age and that of the classical age. Homer's heroes were seen as courageous and honourable, and they valued above all else the unwritten *nomoi* of their society, but they were also men who interacted with their reality on an emotional level, grieving for loss and fearing suffering. The classical male was expected to uphold those same ideals of courage and honour, but any feeling was to be suppressed by rational thought and argument. Was this a realistic goal, and could it be attained? I think that Euripides in particular explored the ideas of what it meant to be a good man in the Athenian *polis*, both in a moral and a social sense, and brought these tensions between the ideal archaic and the ideal classical traits to the fore in his plays.

Separating myth from social commentary in a medium such as tragedy or comedy is not a simple task and is fraught with interpretive pitfalls. It is however accepted that these dramatic texts are a way for the playwrights not only to entertain their audiences, but also to explore tensions that may have been present within the society and to create a safe space for the discussion of these issues (Gregory 1991:1-9; Foley 2001:4; Segal 1993:4). Cartledge (1998:62) expresses this form of discussion as "the city of Athens talking to itself", communicating with the intellectual elite in particular about the problematic differences between what the city was and what it wanted to be.

¹ All translations are by David Kovacs (1995) unless stated otherwise.

The Athenian citizen was categorized as being a mature male who owned property and was born of citizen parents (Fisher 2006:327). Being a citizen was the same, to an Athenian, as being a man, there was no distinction between the two, and equally there was no distinction between being a *good* man and a *good* citizen, since to be one a man also had to be the other. The city-state defined itself according to masculine lines, setting itself against anything Other (barbarian, slave, or feminine) in order to create its identity (Hall 1989:3). As Blundell (1995:180) explains “the masculine *polis* invents itself by establishing what it is not”. The Athenian *polis* establishes its identity through its masculinity; citizenship and excellence in war are the foremost ideals of the *polis*, neither of which avenues are open to foreigners, slaves or women. The masculine ideal of the state, however, is a problematic combination of aristocratic systems of honour and democratic ideals of what it means to be a good citizen and therefore a good man.

Three of the essential elements of this masculine state are the equal rights of speech, the validity and force of the state’s laws, and the necessity of violence for the winning of masculine honour. If any of these aspects of the *polis* are abused by an individual or the community itself it compromises the masculinity inherent in the self-identity created around the manliness of honour and morality. However, if these aspects of the state are themselves problematic, then how should one define the masculine state in order to function without these tensions between democratic and heroic honour and morality, if indeed such a solution is possible?

The shift from an individualistic moral code which acquires status and honour through a certain amount of self-interest to a society which prides itself on a strict sense of community is expressed in Attic tragedy. Tragedy discusses contemporary tensions set in a heroic age context on stage. Here, the familiar heroes from Homer’s epics stand depicted as representatives “of an older aristocratic society, out of tune with the newer communal values of the emerging democracy” (Van Northwick 2008:79).

Masculinity, as a socially constructed ideal, was an idealised norm, a social 'umbrella' encompassing all aspects of everyday life in the *polis*. By implication, whatever did not fall under the umbrella, specifically the feminine, would be excluded by the masculine ideal and would become the Other, the outsider, unable to be a fully accepted member of the group without relinquishing her femininity, which would not be possible. The feminine represents the chthonic, the irrational and the emotional. It is perceived as being dangerously fickle and without reason. The classical commentary and references to women's speech all refer to the insidious and manipulative nature of female speech and its natural tendency toward gossip and the promotion of promiscuity (McClure 1999: 29). This dangerous speech was a threat to the Olympian, rational and masculine ideals of the Athenian *polis* (McClure 1999:6).

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all use the Other in their tragedies to discuss and explore the ramifications of these tensions in society. The feminine Other is a particularly useful tool employed by the playwrights since female figures are recognizable and familiar to the audience (unlike a Persian or Scythian barbarian), but are othered by the masculine *polis* which they inhabit. Most of the female characters are themselves barbarians, but the Iphigenias and Andromaches of the stage were known to espouse the ideals of the Athenian *polis* as perfect, virtuous women playing their own ideal roles as unblemished sacrificial virgins or the brave, stoic wives of heroes. Aeschylus' 'rhetorical' villain Clytemnestra illustrates the problematic nature of speech and power in the democratic *polis*, and Sophocles' morally superior maiden Antigone explores the difficulty of acting for the good of the individual when it agrees with traditional law, when the act conflicts with the best interests of the community according to the powers that be.

Euripides has a wealth of female characters who speak out on a variety of issues which may have been present in the fifth-century *polis*. I argue that the feminine Other as depicted in the *Hecuba*, by Hecuba, the Chorus, and Polyxena, is used by Euripides to explore specific concerns with regards to speech, violence and traditional laws (*nomoi*), and the relationship they have

with the problematic nature of masculinity in the Athenian state. Blundell (1995:180) explains that the masculine identity of Athenian society undergoes a crisis when “the boundaries it has created are undermined” by its own internal tensions and that this self-emasculatation is eloquently rendered by the feminine Other in Attic tragedy. Hecuba takes on a distinctly masculine role in order to become a paragon of manly virtue which contrasts unpleasantly with the weak, immoral and deceitful male characters in the play. The woman uses masculine virtue to illustrate the complex set of problems which are inextricable from that particular type of virtue and the associated values and morals.

I will examine the characterisation of Euripides’ unlikely heroines in the text and compare them with the contrasting male characters. Certain topics, discussed through the vehicle of tragedy, require characters on each side of the moral, social, cultural, or political argument, but if one side of the argument is typically unflattering for a male voice, it would seem reasonable to use an atypical female voice to express these views (obviously a traditional female voice would not express the issues in the same way). In support of this argument, Foley (2001: 172) argues that “the gendering of ethical positions permits the public exploration of moral complexities that would not otherwise have been possible”. By using one of the marginalised, Other groups of his society (identified, in this case, as the feminine Other) the dramatist is able to draw attention to issues of masculinity, rationality, violence and the dangers of excess. By enabling his female characters to assume masculine characteristics of rational, rhetorical speech and vengeful violence, Euripides gives the audience the opportunity to explore the pitfalls of the masculine ideal in classical society. I will look at the way in which these Others use masculine language and violence to achieve their goals as well as how they use their otherness to take revenge on male characters. I will also be exploring the relationship between the feminine and *nomos* which is a recurring theme in Euripidean tragedy where the feminine Other becomes the defender of religious values in the face of hyper-rational masculinity.

The secondary sources have asserted, on the whole, that the strong roles portrayed by female characters in tragedy in general, but especially in the tragedies of Euripides, go against the social norm with regards to traditional roles assigned to women in classical Athenian society. Foley (2001; 4), in particular, points out that these outspoken, violent female figures from tragedy, while not being the only representations of women, “represent the greatest and most puzzling deviation from the cultural norm”. Rabinowitz (1993: 9) also explains how the status of women in fifth-century Athens conflicts with the dominance of the women in tragedy, especially in the plays of Euripides. Furthermore, these sources agree that such female characters are used by the tragic and comic poets to explore social and political problems faced by the *polis* (Foley 2001; McClure 1999; Zeitlin 1996). There are various interpretations of the specific presence of these figures, from feminist commentary to a direct tool used to warn women about the dangers of stepping outside of their prescribed traditional roles. McClure (1999), in particular, stresses the importance of the tensions between masculine and feminine speech, highlighting classical Athenian democracy’s dependence on masculine speech (especially rhetoric). Zeitlin (1996) focuses on the Other, particularly the feminine Other, and its use as a vehicle for meaning in Athenian tragedy. While it has been more difficult to acquire literature on current studies on masculinity in the classical world, Foxhall (1998) and Van Wees (1998) have provided examinations of the masculine ideals of classical Athens as well as the link between the masculine and violence. Burnett (1998) provides a thorough discussion on vengeance in the *Hecuba* while Fisher (1998) explores the problem of vengeance and violence in the masculine *polis*.

The thesis will be structured as follows: chapter one will be a brief discussion on the masculinity of the Athenian *polis* establishing the manly context of tragic drama. The second chapter explains the situation of women within the masculine society and discusses notions of *self* and *other* with regards to its uses in Attic tragedy. It is important to understand the social and political status of women in classical Athens so that we might acquire a better understanding of the use of the feminine Other on the tragic stage. The final

three chapters form a discussion of the *Hecuba* and the problematic nature of speech, violence and *nomos* in a society which has difficulty reconciling its aristocratic ideal past with its democratic present and how Euripides uses the feminine Other to explore these elements of Athenian masculine identity. These aspects of the society are intertwined with one another and one cannot speak about one without referring to another. Speech, violence and traditional laws work together to help define and establish what it means to be a man in the Athenian *polis*. While I will examine them individually, it is inadvisable to view them as discrete entities which do not impact on one another and a certain amount of overlap is to be expected in the final three chapters.

Chapter One: The masculine *polis*

In an attempt to understand the significance of the role of the feminine Other in the *Hecuba* one must first accept that fifth-century Athenian society was divided, in a variety of ways, along gender lines. The fact that the protagonists of so many tragedies are female is peculiar when placed within the context of such a masculine society. In this chapter I aim to establish the masculine context of the Athenian *polis* in order to make the distinction between the feminine Other and the masculine norm apparent for the purpose of my study of the text.

Athens in the fifth century defined itself by its democratic system of government and its prowess on the battlefield. Both of these aspects of Athenian society were rooted in an intrinsic masculinity. Only men could compete in battle and only men were designated as citizens of the *polis*. Dillon and Garland (2012:22) point out that the actual citizens of Athens would form a small part of the population in comparison with the number of slaves, metics and other foreigners that made up the inhabitants of the city, yet it was this minority that was the focus for all the activities and events that formed the cultural backbone of the *polis*. Citizenship was reserved for Athenian males over the age of eighteen who had gone through whatever initiation rituals were required by the deme or the phratry². These Athenian men had to be born of citizen parents and presented to their father's phratry a few days after their birth in a ceremony called the *amphidromia* which publicly acknowledged the child as the citizen-born legitimate offspring of his father (Pomeroy 1997:114). After Pericles' citizenship law of 450 BCE, any children that a citizen male may have with a foreign woman could not become citizens. If a citizen should try and pass his non-citizen children off as citizens he would be liable for prosecution and a large fine. Women and children would have the right to inherit the property of citizen family members, but would not have the

² They would be considered part of the citizenry after being presented to their demes at the age of eighteen, but would not be able to fulfil their obligations as jurors until they had reached maturity at the age of thirty (Dillon and Garland 2012:25).

same rights and responsibilities which were available to men. These privileges and civic obligations were public declarations of one's status as a citizen and it was not unheard of that a man would risk his property and his reputation by trying to get his non-citizen offspring falsely accepted as citizens so that they might reap the benefits of citizenship³.

Unlike in some modern societies, there was no process of naturalisation for foreigners. Foreign men who had settled in the polis as metics would pay tax in order to reside in the city, but would never attain citizen status and would not have access to the benefits of being a citizen. These benefits included a pension, financial aid if the man could prove that he was in need of monetary assistance, as well as a disability payment. Citizens were also compensated by the government for any work that they may have been forced to miss due to their civic duties such as acting as jurors or judges in the famous Athenian law courts. Owning property in Athens was also restricted to citizens, which added to the prestige of being a male citizen of the *polis* (Fisher 2006:327). Status and prestige, from an Athenian perspective, were only available to a very specific set of men. Metics and other foreigners may have been regarded with respect by citizens, but they would always be second-class inhabitants of the *polis*, with no way of moving up the social ladder, in the same way that Athenian women born into the citizen caste, as it were, would remain eternal minors under permanent supervision by a male spouse or relative.

Citizen participation was essential to the functioning of the state as well as being a source of pride for a population of citizens which had suffered under the rule of previous tyrants. The citizen men of the city had a say in nearly every aspect of the rule of the *polis*. They played an active role in the courts and in all administrative offices. Dillon and Garland (2012: 17) state that "any citizen was capable of holding office" in Athens and their qualifications outside of these offices were not as important as their participation in these functions. All positions were not only filled by citizen men, but were also policed by the

³ The most infamous recorded case is that of Neaira and Stephanos who tried to pass off their children as citizens (Demosthenes 59).

citizenry. Judges, for example, were examined on exiting their positions (Dillon and Garland 2012:18) and whatever laws they had passed during their terms of office could be challenged and revoked. This equality for all (as long as the 'all' were citizen males over the age of thirty) did not imply a socialist state where all members of the elite ruling class were in fact of an equal status. The *isonomia* did bring all citizens to an equal level of privilege within the state, but the wealthy had added responsibilities because of their wealth. They had to sponsor certain events and religious functions as well as equip military excursions (Pomeroy et al. 2004:148). Public events like the plays performed at the Great Dionysia were sponsored by rich patrons, which added to their status and increased their power in the male-run society. The equality of the citizens meant that it was right and just to protect and stand up for the weak⁴, whether financially, physically or legally. War orphans are a particular example of the state's need to look after the weak. This fostered a greater sense of community in the polis as well as creating an impression of social responsibility which made the citizens accountable for each other's well-being and, to a certain extent, their actions against one another. Young men, who had been orphaned by any one of the battles in which Athens had taken part, would be provided with hoplite arms⁵ and equipment at the state's expense and paraded in full regalia at the Great Dionysia in a very public display of wealth and the political ideal of masculinity. Being a soldier was synonymous with being a citizen, which further excluded women, slaves and foreigners from the close-knit minority of men who ran the city.

Citizenship was so prized that the two most serious consequences for behaving inappropriately, for example committing adultery with another man's wife, or for behaving in an unmanly manner such as suffering a severe defeat in battle or being cowardly, would be death or ostracism. Having one's citizenship revoked was a great deterrent and something that was in all

⁴ One could argue that as women and children were physically and politically weaker than the men of the citizenry, the traditional position of *kurios* which I will explore in the next chapter was put into practice on the basis of this ethos.

⁵ "[B]eing a man in classical Athens is being a hoplite man, the hoplite is the masculine norm" (Cartledge 1998:63).

likelihood feared by the citizen populace (Dillon and Garland 2012:22). Having one's citizenship called into question not only jeopardised one's family's standing, but was also a threat to one's masculine identity, since being a man who represented the masculine ideal of the *polis* was inextricably tied to being a citizen.

1.1. Speech in the masculine *polis*

Free speech (*parrhesia*) was one of the most highly valued symbols of masculinity and citizenship in the *polis*⁶. McClure (1999:9) explains that “the right to speak publicly in classical Athens was so essential to political identity that one of the primary results of *atimia*, ‘loss of civic rights’, was the denial of speech”. This right was exclusive to men over the age of thirty and the vast majority of the city's inhabitants were forced to find representatives in order to speak for them in the law courts⁷. McClure (1999:10) also points out that the most effeminate action for a man, that of prostitution, which violated and invalidated their masculinity, was another cause for being barred from speaking in the Assembly or the law courts. Only true men, the impenetrable heroes who have never run away in battle or sold themselves to be subordinate to other men, could address the Assembly or participate in the city's great love of litigation.

With the rise of the importance of speech and participation as part of the fabric of the democratic *polis*, being proficient in the style of rhetorical speech required by the Assembly and the law courts became vital for citizens who wished to excel politically and socially (Raaflaub 2006:398). Speech was commonly used by politicians to promote the state and to unify the citizens, emphasising the importance of the democratic system of government. Pushing the democratic agenda encouraged the populace not only to support the system of government, but also to keep engaging publicly and

⁶ “To be a citizen was an act of speech, since to be a citizen meant to participate actively in the speech of the city” (McClure 1999:8).

⁷ This was especially the case with women in the city who could only speak in court through the voice of a male relative or spouse (McClure 1999:20).

participating in the rule of the city. If the citizens supported democracy and felt that they were benefitting from this system, especially if it increased their status within the *polis* even though they did not come from one of the traditionally powerful aristocratic families, then they would be less inclined to revolt or seek to promote an oligarchy.

Due to the importance of rhetorical skill, it was unsurprising that the groups of teacher-philosophers, known as sophists, became quite powerful in their own right, as they were willing, for a fee, to impart their rhetorical skills to any citizen, regardless of that citizen's background or family status. Pericles himself was an avid supporter and sponsor of the sophists as he believed that it was through the art of rhetoric that the state would remain stable and that the *peitho*, or persuasion, which was such an important aspect of rhetoric, would be a key element in manipulating and persuading the citizenry (McClure 1999:10).

This persuasion, however, created its own problems in the *polis*. Since the sophists offered their rhetorical lessons to all citizens equally in theory, the aristocratic families who traditionally held power in the *polis*, specifically during the rule of the tyrants, were suspicious of their motives especially as "the traditional boundaries between aristocrats and the mass" became challenged and eroded if everyone could speak with equal proficiency (McClure 1999:12). As McClure (1991:11) points out, Athenians "exhibited a deep-seated ambivalence toward the art of rhetoric, particularly when it became the means for nonaristocratic members of the polis to have access to political power and to manipulate the lower classes".

The sophists' outspoken beliefs about the nature and order of well-established traditional laws did not endear them to the populace either. Protagoras, acknowledged as the first of these philosophers to refer to himself as a sophist, and many other sophists, such as Antiphon, were quite infamous for their cultural relativism which called into question the nature of authority and

law (Dillon 2004:62)⁸. These factors, as well as the famous statement about sophists being able to teach one to make the weaker argument resemble the stronger (they taught speakers to be able to argue both sides of any argument) led to the more popular belief in the latter part of the fifth century that the words of these teachers of rhetoric implied “deceit and quackery” (McClure 1999:11) and could not be trusted⁹. Rhetoric was thus a vital part of Athenian masculine society, but it was also problematic and engendered distrust of the validity and honesty of a speaker’s words.

Speech, as a right of citizenship, was therefore inherently masculine and excluded the feminine and the Other. This masculine speech was also directly linked to logic and reason which was the antithesis of what was represented by the conventional views of what it meant to be a woman or, in broader terms, what was understood by the notion of effeminacy. I will explore this further in subsequent chapters, but it is important to note that Homeric heroes would have been permitted to express their emotions with groans and manly lamentations. Van Wees (1998:12) provides a list of words specifically used to describe men’s emotions which would in all likelihood have been gender-specific and not used to describe the same emotional outbursts in women. It is a masculine vocabulary which legitimizes the male display of emotion and which shows that the Homeric audience would not have found these displays of grief unacceptable (Van Wees 1998:12). Foxhall (1998:4) explains that these weeping heroes of Homer “maintain their masculinity, despite potentially ‘feminine’ emotional displays, through their prowess in battle”. It is unclear when and why the Athenians shifted from this view that feminizing actions like weeping were acceptable to men. Although a classical audience would idolize heroes such as Achilles, they would not tolerate the same emotional expression in their contemporaries as an excess of feeling would be seen as womanly (Van Wees 1998:16). Classical men constantly had to attempt to

⁸ It would be unlikely that playwrights like Euripides would have been unaware of this public debate.

⁹ This is illustrated by Aristophanes in his comedy *Clouds*.

reconcile Homeric ideals with their own classical rational ideals of what it meant to be a manly man.

1.2. Violence and manliness in the *polis*

Violence is an essential part of classical masculinity and is “integrated into the definition of manhood, however problematically, in part because it is never a characteristic of the feminine” (Foxhall 1998:4). From a young age Athenian citizen-born men would be exposed to a certain amount of physical training which was a mark of their status as citizens as well as a basic preparation for the warlike spirit that was perhaps not as prominent in Athens as it was in a *polis* like Sparta, but which was nonetheless a part of the Athenian identity. Cartledge (1998:61) states that “political power...rested on the organization of violence” and Athens certainly became as powerful as it was in the late fifth century due to the ‘violence’ to which it had access in the form of its hoplite warriors and the strong presence of its navy.

The connection between being a man and participating on the battlefield is especially relevant to Greek society in general. While it is difficult to find reliable sources for pre-classical times, the literature, especially Homer’s epics, makes it quite clear that a man acquired worth by accruing honour and that this honour, or *kleos*, was attained on the battlefield. A man was honourable if he was a good warrior, brave as well as noble. The heroic age warrior had to acquire as much honour for himself on the battlefield as possible, while always respecting his fellow warriors. The Greeks had endless respect for Hector, although he was a Trojan, because he had much *kleos*, but was also respectful of the other heroes, which was why Achilles’ mutilation of his corpse was abominable behaviour in the eyes of the Greeks as well as the Trojans. Achilles was not only defiling the body of a great hero, he was also denying him the right to burial, which was a very important traditional law that would have serious consequences if violated.

Achilles problematizes the correlation between prowess on the battlefield and being honourable. He was a great warrior, and is often referred to as the greatest of all the Greek warriors, which meant that he had more honour than

most of the Greeks; however, he was not a good role-model for a classical audience. Achilles was often driven by his emotions and always put his interests above those of his troops and the rest of the Greek army. The classical Athenian male had to straddle the line between the heroic idea of valour and violence and the democratic ideals of logic and reason, the latter expressed most clearly through their beliefs about the differences between themselves and their own women as well as the barbarians they often placed in antithesis to themselves. Van Northwick (2008:91-2) further explains that the connection between the heroic age man and the classical man becomes problematic since the Homeric warrior embodies an individualistic drive, a need for power and recognition. This drive has the potential to either strengthen or destroy a community, as is illustrated by Achilles' removal of himself from the battlefield in the *Iliad*. Van Northwick (2008:92) argues that "this double-edged nature of the warrior's power within the community is yet more challenging in a society where old ideas about human excellence are no longer taken for granted".

Honour and manliness were inextricable from one another, thus violence was an essential part of what it meant to be a man in the fifth century. Van Northwick (2008:92) argues that the "collective excellence" of the male citizens in the *polis*, specifically that excellence which is displayed in battle, is one of the essential aspects which differentiates between masculine and feminine in the state. Honour is only available in an arena where women are strictly not permitted to participate. The other domain in which a form of *kleos* can be won is in the law courts of Athens, which is another space where women were not welcome, and therefore unable to acquire honour of their own. The city was firmly held by its masculine norms, privileges and practices. Violence was just as closely associated with power as clever speaking was in public spaces in the *polis*. The more adept one was at violent action, such as competing in the games (on a more casual level) or defeating the enemy in battle, the greater was one's social standing as well as one's political cachet, especially in the context of war.

There were other socially acceptable forms of violence in the Athenian *polis*, according to Fisher (1998:74-7). Violent sports involving animals, such as cock fighting, as well as physical contests in the gymnasium and post-symposium 'bar brawls' were all common elements of male entertainment in the *polis*. This acclimation to violence was probably linked to the physical training that all young male citizens were expected to undergo to prepare them for war. Van Northwick (2008:98) describes this physicality of Greek males as a representation of the self-control and power over others which are "measures of successful masculine agency". Events such as the Panathenaic games were not limited to citizen men, but were open to all. However, "there were also in the programme Athenian-only events, organized on a tribal basis, and among these was the *euandria*, a contest of manly beauty and strength" (Cartledge 1998:61). Another element of masculine society, one which occasionally ended in mildly violent outbursts, were the symposia, which were open only to the men of the city (and their less reputable non-citizen female companions). The consumption of too much wine at these gentlemen's club evenings is humorously depicted on cups and vases of the time and did indeed involve occasional brawling due to some personal insult or jealousy concerning *hetairai* (Fisher 1998:73).

Being insulted, especially in public, was not something that a man could let go without some kind of retaliation. If the insult was public or grievous enough, especially if it involved harm to one's person, then those Athenian citizens who had been insulted had every right to seek restitution so that they might "preserve or restore their wounded masculinity and honour" and in fact the loss of face that would occur if the man did not respond to the insult would be just as damaging to his reputation as the insult itself (Fisher 1998:78). Walking away from such an offence would be a sign of effeminacy and weakness which would be intolerable. Hubristic actions, such as physical insults, were viewed as a threat to the whole community (Fisher 1998:81). Hubris was one of the cardinal sins in Athenian society. Dillon and Garland (2012:26) define hubris, in a democratic context, as being a violent action undertaken by the strong against the weak. Regulations and fines were in place to protect citizens, their spouses and their offspring against such insults.

Hubris was a public crime, not a private one, and any Athenian, not merely the victim or a member of his or her family, could bring the charge (Dillon and Garland 2012:26). As Fisher (1998:74) explains, self-defence was an “undeniable” right available to all citizens in the face of hubristic insults.

Revenge in the heroic age would have involved immediate retaliation in the face of an attack on one’s honour. In classical times the retaliation would be no less of an imperative, but it was in the state’s interest to police private violence, transforming it into a public act which threatened the well-being of the *polis* as a whole (Fisher 1998:74). The entrenched ideals regarding revenge and retaliation would be intertwined with manliness to the extent that it would not be in the state’s best interest to deny its male citizens the right to defend their honour, so by making it a public violation there was the option of sublimating the immediate gratification of doing personal violence against the instigator of the original insulting act by referring it to the courts. This allowed the individual to get his revenge in a public sphere, while protecting the *polis* from any possible feuding. Presumably one could infer that this also kept the levels of physical violence in the city down as it could end in public humiliation and loss of face which would decrease one’s masculinity in the eyes of others. According to Fisher (1998:75), the reliance on the legal system by the general citizenry “attempts to combine the particular desire for extra honour (*philotimia*) of the elite, harnessed through the mechanisms of acceptable honorific returns (*charis*) for their public services, with the people’s desire to use the elite’s competitiveness and the institutions of the courts to control undue violence, luxury or ambition among this same elite”, thereby levelling the political and social playing fields in order to emphasise the *isonomia* which was a point of pride for Athenians.

The citizenry’s love of litigation, fostered by the possible increase of status it could provide as well as possible financial gain, made the public courts the ideal space to get their non-violent, and therefore safe, revenge (Fisher 1998:74). Using the law courts as a place to achieve revenge did not mean that it was a social or masculine imperative which had been watered down or that it had lost its significance to the men of the city. Fisher (1998:86) confirms

that although there may have been the potential for financial gain by receiving a fine from the individual responsible for the insult, the evidence in the extant writings of figures such as Demosthenes shows that the driving force behind the litigation was often the need for revenge and the preservation of honour rather than the desire for monetary recompense. Honour and violence, as mentioned above, were inseparable aspects of masculine culture (Van Wees 1992:62). The fifth-century tendency to secure honour on the legal battlefield, as it were, while still emphasising the importance of the physical and the violent in the attainment of honour, shows an interesting amalgamation of the Homeric ideal of heroic behaviour with the classical imperative, which requires men to place the well-being of the *polis* above their own needs and desires. The hero of the classical Athenian polis had to be a brave warrior as well as an excellent wielder of rhetoric. The state required total loyalty and obedience from its citizen in practice, while allowing an exploration of the nature of law, violence and power in its public forums, especially in Attic tragedy.

1.3. Placing the community above the self

As I have mentioned previously, democracy required the individual citizen to put the needs of the *polis* above his own. One of the most well-known examples of the state's influence on the demarcation between what is public and what is private in the *polis* is the prosecution of Socrates for the corruption of the youth and for impiety. The individual beliefs Socrates may have had were not viewed as private opinions, but rather as being a direct threat to the community. His personal ideal came into conflict with the state's ideal, while still being a demonstration of the free speech permitted in the *polis*. This creates a contradiction illustrating the difficulty involved in integrating the ideal of the masculine prerogative to defend one's honour with the democratic ideal of resolving conflict in the public space for the good of the community. This was also an indication of being a "good citizen and hence a 'masculine' ideal" (Fisher 1998:74-5).

The sense of community necessitated by this system of government created a certain amount of tension between the heroic masculine ideal and the

democratic masculine ideal. Van Northwick (2008:48) describes one aspect of these tensions between old and new by saying that “the advent of Athenian democracy brought with it increased anxieties among thoughtful citizens about how to accommodate the forces of aristocratic individualism within a system that distributed political power – and thus social leverage – across a much broader segment of society”. The aristocratic ideal had rules and laws which were so deeply ingrained in the Greek psyche, for example the connection between valour and honour and traditional laws about revenge and burial, that the only way to move forward with a democratic political system would be to integrate the two separate ideals, since “the inherited aristocratic code was out of alignment with contemporary social reality” (Gregory 1991:8).

This could not have been a problem-free endeavour¹⁰ and I would argue that this is reflected in the literature, especially both tragedy and comedy, of the fifth century. One cannot separate the ideals of either the aristocratic past or the democratic present from what it means to be a man in classical Athens since elements of each of these ideals are essential for the construction of the masculine *polis*. This inherent conflict between the male drive for power and control and the need for human cooperation to ensure a healthy community was always at the centre of Greek ideas about masculinity (Van Northwick 2008:156).

¹⁰ Of course it is impossible to know whether or not this integration of moral codes and values was an organic evolution or if it was more carefully directed by politicians such as Pericles.

Chapter Two: Women in the classical *polis*

The study of any aspect of classical culture is always fraught with the same problems: context, lack of evidence and the extreme distance between modern society and what we can access of the classical *polis*. It is difficult to set aside modern concepts of equality and human rights in order to explore a society which seems familiar and tangible, but which is in fact in the far distant past to which we have only the most tenuous of connections. If our civilisation were destroyed and all that remained to be discovered two thousand years in the future were our great cathedrals, one of Damien Hirst's cows in formaldehyde and the complete works of Agatha Christie, what would our distant descendants have to say about our sensibilities, our beliefs and interaction with others?

Discussing the social status of women in an ancient civilisation is especially difficult. The position of women in the twenty-first century is dramatically different from that of women in the fifth century BCE. It is tempting to point fingers at men in the classical Athenian *polis*, to berate them for their seemingly misogynistic treatment of their female population. The ancient commentary on women is particularly offensive to a modern audience in the denigrating, belittling statements of some of the greatest thinkers of the Western world. It is not useful, however, to apply anachronistic thinking to classical Athenian society. The task is to use the available evidence to piece together a picture of how women interacted with their world, and how their world interacted with them, rather than to make judgements on whether or not these interactions are up to modern standards of morality.

Considering the actual status and position of women in Athenian society is important so that a comparison may be drawn between this and the depiction of women in literature, specifically in tragedy. This is further problematized by the lack of evidence we have for women that are not depicted through the eyes of men. Unlike in the case of their male counterparts, there are no texts written by women in Athens in the fifth century of which we know, which

establish their position in society from their own perspectives. We need to establish a context for the 'oddness' of the female characters of Euripides and how their difference from the traditional Athenian woman is a useful tool for the playwright.

2.1. Women and classical Athenian law

In this section I will discuss the position of women in society and the laws pertaining to this position. The particular laws which had direct influence on an Athenian woman were the citizenship laws created by Pericles, marriage law, and the laws of female inheritance in fifth century Athens.

In order to fully comprehend the contradictory status of women in classical Athens one needs to examine the laws of citizenship as implemented by Pericles in 451/450 BCE. It became law that an individual could only claim citizenship if he was descended from citizens on both sides, from his father and his mother, instead of only from his father's side (Dillon and Garland 2012:152). This causes some confusion, as now we must understand how a man can claim citizenship from his mother, if his mother is never technically classed as a political entity. It is easy enough to say that *her* parents should both be citizens, but this just brings us back to square one: if a woman is never a true citizen, how can she produce citizens?

As Gould (1980: 46) neatly assesses: "Women stand 'outside' society, yet are essential to it (and in particular to its continued, ordered existence); their status derives from males but theirs, in turn, from the women who are their mothers." Rabinowitz (1993: 5) points out that "women thus moved from one *kurios* to another – father, husband, son – and never reached majority". This is a very incisive view of the position of women in Athenian society from a legal perspective, for while women in the *polis* were necessary for the continuation of citizen families, they themselves did not have the legal rights or obligations of citizenship as the term was defined in classical Athens.¹¹ As

¹¹ Rabinowitz, amongst others, seems to require a sense of righteous indignation at the situation of women in that time. I think we should be well advised to consider the positions of

a child her *kurios* would be her father, and as she grows older this position of *kurios* would be held by a husband, perhaps more than one, by her brothers and finally by her own sons. Her *kurios* is her representative in areas of society where she cannot, for reasons of propriety, be present. He is also her legal and financial representative. A woman must always have a *kurios* (Dillon and Garland 2012:144).

As discussed in the previous chapter, in order for a male child to be accepted as a member of his phratry and to be recognised as a citizen, he is introduced to this phratry a few days after his birth at the *amphidromia*. There has been some debate about whether or not girls could, or would, have been introduced to the phratry. I side with Pomeroy (1997:116) and Gould (1980:42) in arguing against the introduction of a female child into the phratry. I cannot think of a practical reasoning behind the introduction of female offspring into a phratry. It would not be necessary, as she would not require the introduction to be recognized as an Athenian citizen. Pomeroy (1997: 116) suggests that a child who is to become an *epikleros* (heiress) may have to be introduced into the phratry. Gould (1980:42), however, asserts that if this did occur (though in his opinion the relevant textual material is too contradictory or obscure to be certain) it would only have been due to some unusual circumstance. Pomeroy (1997:118) takes this point further by saying that if a father did not introduce his female infant at the *amphidromia* then it would be even more unlikely that she would be introduced by her groom at their marriage feast. The term *gamelia*, according to Pomeroy, probably referred to a 'men only' event, a bit like a stag night, in which the groom announced his marriage so that the union might be witnessed by other members of his phratry in order to make sure that whatever children were produced by the union would be recognized as legitimate. It is unlikely that the woman would be present at this event, as has been supposed, because it would be improper for a woman to be in the company of so many men that are not members of her nuclear family: "If an entire phratry knew a woman, such familiarity would be prima facie evidence of her lack of respectability, and if she were introduced to a series of phratries

our own grandmothers and great-grandmothers and ask whether their positions in society were that different. I do not think it is useful to take a moral position on this topic.

(her father's, then each husband's at subsequent marriages) she would be quite notorious" (Pomeroy 1997: 118). Perhaps Pomeroy is correct in saying that it is this lack of group membership that is the factor responsible for making it possible for women to move from one group to the next. They always retain strong ties with their natal families, but this lack of membership, the lack of a record of their place in the family, in the *polis* itself, makes them invisible to historians.

The Athenian concept of marriage, then, resembled a witnessed agreement to cohabit rather than what a modern audience would understand by the term 'marriage'. The marriage consisted of a betrothal (the *eggue*) followed, usually quite some time later, by the pledging of the young woman to her new spouse by her *kurios* (Rabinowitz 1993:4). This pledging was accompanied by the woman's dowry, together forming the *ekdosis* (literally the 'giving to'). It was traditional that young men established themselves within their society (and more than likely got their full share of carousing done) before acquiring a wife (Cox 2011:232). Brides were usually about half the age of the groom. The age difference between the bride and groom could, therefore, be explained by "the delayed transmission of property from father to son" (Cox 2011: 232).

It is also understandable that women were married off quite young, as this is when they would not only be at their most fertile, but may also have been more likely to survive the dangers of childbirth in the ancient world. Athenian men married Athenian women to produce heirs. This was the most important part of a woman's role in Athenian society (if of course by society we are referring to members of the citizenry). Marriage was monogamous, but fidelity on the part of the husband was not a prerequisite for that monogamy. Cantarella (2011: 335) describes the range of women available to the Athenian male, according to Apollodorus, in this way: "An Athenian could have three women: a wife (*damar*) for the procreation of legitimate children, a concubine (*pallake*) for the care of the body and, finally, for pleasure, a companion (*hetaira*: a high-level prostitute that accompanied a man at social occasions to which his wife, as was the practice of well-to-do women, was not admitted)." It was not unseemly or, even worse, dishonourable for a man to

have more than one partner, as long as it was kept strictly outside of the household. I would assume that having a concubine or *hetaira* (or both) could be perceived as a sign that the man had enough wealth to provide not only for his wife and legitimate children, but also to afford his kept women. It would, however, be in extreme bad taste, not to mention disrespectful and shaming to his wife and *oikos* if he were to bring the 'other woman' into his home (Cox 2011:233). This seems to imply that a wife had a certain amount of say, if not power, with regard to the make-up of her household.

Ancient sources indicate that while marriage in classical Athens was very much like arranged marriages among the European elite throughout Western history; this did not mean that there was no affection between spouses (Cantarella 2011:334). When it came to public displays of affection, however, "such behaviour could lead to gossip that the woman was not the man's wife, but his *hetaera*" (Cox 2011: 233). Aristotle (*Pol.* 1.1253b2-8) defines the *oikos* as an aspect of the *polis* which is comprised of three fundamental relationships: owner and slave; husband and wife; father and son. The word *philia* is used to refer to the second of these relationships which, as Cantarella (2011: 334) explains, was not a feeling of erotic love or passion, but rather "a tranquil, peaceful feeling necessary to the harmony of the *oikos*". *Philia* is based on either equality, for example between friends, or on superiority, specifically between father and son, and husband and wife (Cantarella 2011: 335).

As should be clear from the information above on a man's potential claim on more than one woman, a man can only be accused of adultery¹² if he is found *in flagrante delicto* with a married woman. This would be enough cause for the wronged husband to kill the man found in his home for violating the sanctity of his *oikos* (Fisher 1998:79). For the female party the punishment was severe, if not as severe as loss of life. She would lose certain social and religious privileges, and a husband who did not divorce his adulterous spouse would be liable for numerous fines (Cantarella 2011: 338). The punishment of adultery was so severe because an adulterous wife was a threat to the stability of the

¹² *Moicheia* is the law which deals with adultery.

oikos. Not only would her behaviour shame the entire household, but more importantly, it would cast doubt on the paternity of the children, which in turn calls into question their legitimacy. The citizenship of the children required the legitimacy of both parents. If the husband could not clearly claim the children as his offspring it could lead to a legal wrangle about the inheritance of his estate on his death which, in turn, could mean that the property and monetary wealth could be passed to the 'wrong' relative. Uncertainty of a child's paternity is a very serious concern in a society where succession, inheritance and bloodline are traced through the patriline.

A woman's dowry was an important aspect of the marriage process. In Homeric epic we find that a woman requires a bride price and unions are traditionally exogamic. The endogamic unions of classical Athens required a woman not to be exchanged for a sum of money, but to come with her own money, as it were. It seems that if a young woman was unable to provide a dowry, in the case of orphans in particular, one would be provided for her by a wealthy relative of one of her parents or by the state (Dillon and Garland 2011:147). A woman was unlikely to be wed if she did not possess a dowry.¹³ As Cox (2011: 237) sums it up: "Although the dowry was never legally required, it was a social obligation: not only could a marriage be suspect without it, but also the prestige of the family depended on a good match acquired through a substantial dowry." This bride gift, which was usually made up of a sum of money as well as gifts of jewellery and clothing, belonged to the woman and not her husband; however, she had no access to the funds and could dispose only of the physical gifts should she so wish. In case of divorce the dowry would be returned, with the woman, to her family. It is unclear what happened to the dowry through the course of the woman's life if she kept the same spouse into her old age, but it can be speculated that it formed a legacy to her children and that should her husband divorce her once she had passed a suitable age for remarrying, then she, and her dowry, would pass to one of her children.

¹³ This is particularly relevant when discussing the elite of Athens, but may not be as applicable to the poorer classes of the city. Unfortunately, very little information survives about the working class women of classical Athens.

The dowry was also an incentive to avoid divorce. According to Cox (2011: 235), the dowry could be used by the husband, amalgamated into the estate of his household. The husband would, however, be expected to pay the dowry back in full if he divorced his spouse. The dowry was a way of facilitating “the unification of the *oikos*” (Cox 2011: 234). In this way, even though the woman retained strong ties to her natal family, she would be accepted into her husband’s family and the husband would be motivated by the financial boost to his household, in the form of the dowry, to keep his wife and maintain the union. A woman was unlikely to receive any other part of her father’s estate on his death (unless she was heiress to the estate) as her dowry served as a “pre-mortem” inheritance (Cox 2011:236). After her father’s death it became the responsibility of the woman’s brothers to look after her interests and safeguard her dowry. If she should be divorced or widowed she would become part of her brother’s household until she was remarried.

There has been some discussion about the possibility that gendered infanticide was practised in ancient Greece. Pomeroy (1975) voiced the hypothesis that parents would expose any unwanted daughters due to the financial pressure of providing daughters with a dowry. I agree with Ingalls (2002: 246-54) in his disagreement with this supposition. He states that Greek families were small, not by choice, but due to an extremely high infant and child mortality rate. According to Ingalls (2002: 246-247) “it generally took two live births to produce one adult”, which does not factor in stillbirths and “the almost certain fatality of breech and other non-standard presentations and the large number of full term babies who died”.

In my opinion, it is unlikely that with such an exceptionally high mortality rate (statistics show that more than half of those born who did survive infancy would never make it past the age of twenty) parents would choose to expose their children at birth if there was no guarantee that another child would survive to adulthood (Ingalls 2002:247). Exposure might be understandable in cases of deformity, disease, severe poverty (when another mouth would be too much for the *oikos* to bear), or possibly due to the illegitimacy of the child, but certainly not due to the pressures of providing a dowry for a daughter. As

discussed above, dowries were not compulsory, especially not for the working classes who would presumably be the class that would struggle most with the provision of an adequate dowry, and the dowry was the portion of the father's estate that was allotted to the daughter, not an extra expense in addition to her inheritance. Furthermore, the dowry, in comparison to the amounts passed on to sons, was a relatively small percentage of the whole estate (Dillon and Garland 2012:147). This would make sense in Athenian society and is not a slight against daughters, but rather a practical measure. Women did not need to create their own *oikoi*, but joined their husband's *oikos* and did not require their dowries to support themselves, their husbands or their children. A dowry is, amongst other things, a tool a woman uses to acquire a husband, not an income.

Divorce was a simple process for a husband. All that was required of him was to dismiss his wife. She, on the other hand, had to present her case before the *archon* (Dillon and Garland 2012:147). While divorce was an easy process, it was not as popular as one would think. As Cox (2011: 233) points out, "a woman's divorce could lead to gossip about her behaviour and, therefore, bring shame to her". According to certain ancient texts, men, on divorcing their wives, would be sure to praise their spouses, especially the virtue of the woman in question, so that the divorce would not shame her. Isaeus (2.6) mentions one instance in particular of an older man who requested permission from his wife's brothers to divorce his young wife because their union had proved to be unfruitful. He asked for help from her siblings in order to convince her that another marriage would be beneficial to her and her chances of bearing children. The woman was apparently not interested in her husband's offer, pleading with him that their relationship was enough for her, but with the help of her brothers her husband convinced her that divorce was the sensible option, though he wished it were otherwise (Cox 2011:233).

An important aspect of female life in Athens is that of becoming an *epikleros*, as it holds a very special position in Athenian society (Rabinowitz 1993:5). As briefly mentioned above, a woman becomes an *epikleros*, or heiress, on the

death of her father in the absence of any direct male heirs. A man's estate would go first to any surviving sons, but should there be no sons living, a daughter will be next in line to inherit her father's estate. This estate will be held in trust for her sons, or her own daughter. The inheritance cannot pass directly to another male relative on her father's side. It must stay, as far as possible, with the direct descendants of the head of the *oikos*. The catch, as it were, for the *epikleros* was that she was required to marry her father's closest male relative upon claiming her inheritance (Dillon and Garland 2012:149). This was usually her uncle or a cousin. If she was married her husband would be obliged to divorce her so that she may marry back into her own family in order to keep the estate as close to the bloodline as possible. The status of an *epikleros* may seem contradictory in light of a woman's lack of legal and financial independence in classical Athenian society, but it is not about the woman at all, rather the importance is attached to her bloodline, not her sex. It is true that the woman has no say in whether or not she becomes an *epikleros*, but if her gender was so objectionable to Athenian men, then surely they would have created a measure to do away with the necessity of an *epikleros*.¹⁴

It is tempting to place male and female in binary opposition to one another as represented within Athenian society. While it is possible to do so with regard to a woman's legal position in the *polis*, since she was unable to act in so many situations on her own behalf and needed a man to speak for her, it is not as easy to divide the public and private spheres of Athenian life in the same way. Women may not have been able to speak in public in the courts or the Assembly, and certainly not on the stage, but they did have legitimate public roles in the *polis*. Women had religious duties which they performed as part of their civic obligation for the well-being of the state (Dillon and Garland 2012:110). Women also had very specific roles to play in lamenting the dead and preparing the body for the funeral, although this role was rigorously policed by the *polis* since it was "construed as a source of danger and

¹⁴ Although one must honestly say that there would be no reason to object to a woman inheriting if she would have no control over the money anyway.

disorder liable to undermine the stable, masculine community of the *polis*" (McClure 1999:40-1).

Positioning the classical woman within the law allows one to examine the differences between male and female, masculine and feminine in the *polis*. It is not necessary to go into as much detail when discussing the male citizen's position within the law to the same extent, as the Athenian man created the laws and had freedoms and privileges which were not available to women. In this chapter I have tried to illustrate that women, while not reviled by their society, were placed in a subordinate position to the men who made up the dominant group in the state and their lives and actions were heavily policed and regulated by the masculine *polis*. Women were vital for the functioning of the state, but they would always be outsiders, in a sense, within their own city. It is this outsider status which is so useful to the playwrights and poets of the classical era who used the Other to explore their own realities.

2.2. A question of audience

There is some debate surrounding the question of whether or not women were present at the Great Dionysia, more specifically, we ask whether or not women were in the audience as spectators to the plays performed as part of the festival. It is impossible to confirm the presence of women in the audience. We simply do not have enough evidence to make a factual statement in this case. However it is useful to make an educated guess about the make-up of the Athenian audience in order to ascertain the target audience of the plays produced at the festival. Any text has an ideal audience or an ideal reader, this is the group or individual that the poet, playwright, historian or writer of fiction is aiming to please with whatever it is that he or she has written. In the case of Athenian tragedy the poet would have a very specific audience in mind. It should also be remembered that the production of these tragedies was part of a competition, which makes the ideal audience even more important. If the playwright did not meet the expectations of the audience he would be the least likely candidate for the first prize.

Texts, in general, can and probably should be interpreted in a different manner according to the projected demographic of the ideal audience. For instance, if the audience at the Great Dionysia was made up only of Athenian women, then the impact that a play such as *Medea* would have on the audience would probably be quite different to the impact the play would have on an audience of Persian men. In a politically charged environment such as that of the fifth century Athenian *polis*, the poets crafted their plays with the same care, and the same audience manipulation, as the great rhetoricians of that time.

One camp asserts (Goldhill 1997:53-68) that while slave women, *hetairai* and metic women may have attended, the daughters of citizens would not have attended the theatre due to the unspoken prohibition on citizen women being seen in public. Athenian citizen women were traditionally kept separate from the rest of the population, especially from men outside of their nuclear families. The other camp is of the opinion that ancient written evidence as well as the vital role women played in all religious events in Athens motivates for the attendance of women (Henderson 1991:133-147). Women traditionally attended and fulfilled specific and important functions in the religious ceremonies of the *polis* and this would mean that it would be unlikely that they would not participate in an event as important to the city as the Great Dionysia. It is important to ascertain whether or not women were likely to be a part of the audience since the project of the text would not be the same if women were prominent members of the spectatorship at the theatre.

The problem of the 'invisibility' of women in historical and social accounts leads me to the opinion that while women were allowed to attend the festival, as theorised by Henderson (1991:133-147), the project of the plays performed there would be a distinctly masculine one. I agree with Blundell's (1995:180) assessment that the presence of women in the audience should not challenge the "view of drama as a male project" since women in Athenian society would not be the target audience of the dramas on show. If women are not intended to engage intellectually with the play by the playwright, then making statements about a possible 'feminist' attitude of Euripides would be

unrealistic since “literary representations of women may be viewed as male constructs appropriated by men for the purpose of speaking about male concerns rather than simple reflections of social reality” (McClure 1999:5).

2.3. The Feminine as the Other in Athenian Society

Being Greek was a concept that evolved over time. In order for one to set up an identity for oneself, a comparison with another group identity is needed, an *us* and a *them*. The process of othering is a natural one that is necessary both for self-identity and for group identity, a sense of belonging that pushes a group to defend themselves, working together to care for the weaker members of the group, as well as to protect their belongings (land, mineral wealth, natural resources, and women) which are necessary for the survival of the group. Without the survival of the group, the individual has less chance of thriving.

The Other in classical Athenian society is very clearly defined in the literature and the art from that period. Vases and temple friezes regularly portray the battles between the heroic Athenian men and a variety of barbarians, animals and monsters. The Centauromachy depicted on the south metopes of the Parthenon is a timeless example of this. In these scenes the heroic, clean-shaven men battle the barbarous, bearded, half-man-half-horse forms of the centaurs who are trying to steal away the women of the Lapiths. The centaurs are the physical embodiment of everything Other that the Athenians use to shape their own identity as the cultured, rational norm. Literature from ancient Greece in general emphasizes a desire for a greater understanding of what it means to be a Greek-speaking individual. Whether in the historiographical texts of Thucydides and Herodotus, the epic poems of Homer, the philosophical and scientific endeavours of Aristotle, Plato and Hippocrates or the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, uncovering the self and what is required in order to belong to the group (the norm) was an ongoing, never-ending search.

Tragedy is set in a far distant mythical past outside of Athens in foreign climes. One could say that Greek tragedy is a theatre of the Other. It takes the Athenian audience outside of its home, its 'natural' space, placing it in an alien or impossible context to explore or expose social or political issues. The characters are traditionally foreigners, barbarians, from a social elite in a mytho-historical setting. Attic Old Comedy, on the other hand, uses absurdity to draw attention to social issues, a political cartoon of what is happening close to home. It others itself, its own people and society, and in doing so provides a dissection of society without harming it. Aristophanes performs his social commentary by using vulgar language and physical humour, but it is no less effective as a form of criticism of Athenian society. It is 'safe' to use the Other to speak out against the trauma of war, or to address the difficulty of doing the right thing, the tension between gods and man, or the dichotomy between reason and feeling. It does not threaten the audience, even though the characters, especially the female lead roles, would not be socially accepted within Athenian society.

Magic Realism uses oddness or out-of-the-ordinary strangeness in a similar way to Athenian tragedy by taking the everyday and turning it into something otherworldly to highlight certain issues within the everyday. By making it Other, Magic Realists, in art and literature, draw attention to this oddness. In this literary form, as in Athenian tragedy, the audience is required to suspend its disbelief in order to explore the questions posed by the author or playwright. Athenian tragedy often uses women who step outside the boundaries of what is acceptable in the everyday to voice problems within that space. Women, slaves, foreigners, children,¹⁵ old men¹⁶ and animals are all

¹⁵ None of these individuals would have had the same rights in society as a man over the age of eighteen.

¹⁶ Men who are past a certain age are no longer seen as 'useful' to the society because of their inability to take part in protecting the *polis* from enemies, and a man who is no longer strong or capable physically is not as valid a member of society as a younger, more vital man.

established as Other, as outside the norm.¹⁷ Lefkowitz (1981:11) argues that, as is expressed in many Athenian tragedies, “women and old men, who must sit on the sidelines, and endure the consequences of the action in the arena, are best able to interpret its meaning, and, as survivors, to demonstrate its consequences. They show us what we as audience must learn from the epic that is sung to us or from the drama that we see performed in the theatre”. The *Trojan Women* of Euripides is a good example of female characters exploring the consequences of war. In this tragedy, which is set after the Trojan War, the surviving women of the captured city lament their fate and voice the other side (and Other side) of war and its effects on those who were not able to take part in the war, but whose lives are irrevocably changed nonetheless.

Using gender as a signifier of Otherness has been a common tool in many cultures throughout history. The physical differences between male and female provide intuitive materials for understanding nature and humankind’s interaction with it.¹⁸ Zeitlin (1996: 9) explains the usefulness of gender as Other as follows:

“Gender can always be used as a coded sign to stand for some more abstract category in organizing a specific world view and the means to its maintenance or transformation; gender can and does migrate across boundaries from public to private discourse, reframed as metaphor (and sometimes metonym) in broader spheres of reference that are concerned with hierarchies of priority and value.”

In this way masculine and feminine, and the socially constructed differences between them,¹⁹ become a common mechanism through which meaning can be derived or unpacked especially within the context of literature.

¹⁷ I would add divinities to this list as there do not seem to be the same moral restrictions on Greek gods as there were on their human counterparts.

¹⁸ It is no coincidence that many ancient cultures associate fertility with a female deity as the female of the species is responsible for the survival of that species by giving birth.

¹⁹ This is not necessarily the same as the physical differences between ‘male’ and ‘female’. Male and female traditionally refer to physical differences dictated by nature, while masculine and feminine are defined by social norms, attitudes, and behaviour.

Using the feminine to denote the Other is a logical step in ancient Greek literature. Athenian society uses its masculinity to create its self-identity, to shape its society and how it interacts with outsiders through the state's prowess in war, its masculine hierarchical political system of equals as long as the 'equal' is a male, the masculinity of *logos*, *kleos* and *time*, and the very masculine *agon* of rhetoric. They have shaped their society to think of themselves as the norm and women as part of the outside, as essential, but incomprehensible and untrustworthy. Because of this, using an Other which is still valued by the society (procreation being impossible without women, to the men's constant consternation) is a logical step in disseminating information about the society. While masculinity may be the *ideal* of the society (all good things that are right and purposeful are also masculine) classical Greek society did still believe in a balance in all things: day must become night, summer must become winter. A coin has two sides and the feminine is often the other side of the Athenian masculine social currency. One often makes the mistaken assumption that because one thing is accepted as a norm in a given society this means that whatever is *other* to this *self* will be labelled as negative. While it is clear from the previous section that women did not have access to the same rights as men (socially or politically) they were still valued by their society. If this were not the case then it would be nearly impossible to understand why such a masculine society would use the otherness of femininity to create complex arguments, which I argue are what tragedies are, so that they may gain a greater understanding of themselves.

Women in classical literature behaving in an 'unfeminine' way, particularly in Athenian terms, are not rare. Tragedy is well populated with what would have been viewed as oddities in Athenian society: Medea murders her children to exact revenge on her husband, Clytemnestra kills her husband and his concubine as a power grab and punishment for the sacrifice of her daughter, Antigone defies her uncle to pay tribute to her brother, Pentheus is torn apart by his kinswomen, and Hecuba blinds the traitorous Polymestor and kills his children as he killed hers. One can argue that if there are so many of these 'odd' women, then their oddity is negated because they are not strange if they

are so common. It is, however, unlikely that the peculiarity of these forthright women would go unnoticed by an audience even if the audience has become accustomed to seeing such female characters on stage.

The women in Athenian tragedy who are of particular interest to this discussion are the extreme Others. They are not only outsiders in their society, being female, but they also transgress the established boundaries which keep masculine and feminine apart. These women exhibit masculine ways of speaking, using rhetorical, logical arguments in their defence, and often perform acts of bloody violence. Medea is the most well-known of these female figures. She uses feminine tools at first to try and get her way (manipulation, subterfuge, trickery, poison), but in the end she resorts to masculine means to destroy Jason by killing her children. She is the most threatening of the extreme Others as she is a barbarian, sexually active woman who is renowned for her ability as a witch who can control natural elements (in the form of potions and poisons) and who has the support of her grandfather Helios in all her endeavours. This implies that she is able to control her mercurial emotional qualities which traditionally separate the feminine from the masculine. These qualities are non-threatening as they prevent women from being a threat to masculine physical and rational power, but at the same time they are dangerous due to their volatile nature which is inexplicable to the dominant males. Blundell (1995:180) explains that these “radical Others” are important facets of Greek tragedy as they provide a way “to examine and reconstruct male behaviour and values” and that it is through the voice of the Other that the masculine norm can reach a greater understanding of itself.

Aristotle is one of a number of ancient writers who has tried to explain the difference between men and women from a scientific perspective:

“The wife is more compassionate and given to tears than her husband, and also more jealous and complaining, and more reproachful and combative. The female is also more dispirited than the male and more despondent, more shameless and more given to lying, more ready to deceive and less likely to forget, more wakeful and more hesitant, more

inactive in general than the male, and takes less nourishment.”
(*Historia Animalia* 608a).²⁰

Philosophers worked hard at defining and highlighting the *differences* between men and women biologically and psychologically to understand their own place in the socio-political hierarchy that was essential to the functioning of Athenian society. Science is used throughout history to emphasize differences between groups in order to make the usually negative treatment of that group a justifiable necessity to preserve the wellbeing of the in-group.

An insight into the status of women in Athenian society and a reflection of their Otherness in that society is apparent in the commentary on women from primary sources of the classical period. Aristotle has a very clear idea of how women were physically and psychologically different from men, while Plato’s musings are more ambivalent on the usefulness of women in an ideally functioning society. Both can be seen as valuable sources not only because of their iconic status in Western philosophy, but since one does not have direct access to a society set as far into the past as that of classical Athens, the opinions of individuals respected by their peers within the educated circles of that society provide us with a reflection of the mindset of an educated group operating within that society. This can, of course, only provide us with one view of that society, which may or may not be the prevailing view.

2.4. The feminine Other on the classical stage

In order to balance out the educated view of the classical Athenian philosophers, one needs to access a more popular reflection of social paradigms and dynamics. In classical Athens this balancing element can be found in Attic Old Comedy. The comedies of Aristophanes are valuable tools for examining the common man’s outlook on social norms and dissonances. Just as jesters and comedians throughout western history have had a special licence to speak out against any issues within the masses or the ruling class, Aristophanes, the only poet of Old Comedy whose works survive, liberally

²⁰ Translated by Thomas van Northwick (1998:50).

uses humour, absurdity, profanity and a topsy-turvy inversion of gender to relay his commentary on classical Athens. Tragedy interacts on a more abstract level with social and political issues, it uses a foreign, mythical setting and the characters are generally from an elite social group, for example royalty, in order to examine any relevant issues within Athenian society. Comedy “engages more directly with contemporary political issues” and uses Athens as its setting and Athenians, as well as some metics or foreign inhabitants of the city, as its protagonists (McClure 1999:205). The issues dealt with are more clearly and directly referred to (for example in the *Lysistrata* and the *Thesmophoriazusae*) than one finds in tragedy. What is particularly pertinent to this discussion is how Aristophanes uses the female voice in a way similar to tragedy to vocalize the problems dealt with in the play. Aristophanes also makes comments about the status and position of women in Athenian society through his female characters in a more direct way than Euripides does in his works, and also makes these comments more often. One could assume that the works of Aristophanes should then be considered important texts for understanding women in Athenian culture. Comedy, however, comes with a necessary caveat. One cannot accept or assume any truth in a genre that deals so exclusively with mockery and satirisation.

Aristophanes cannot be relied on for historical truth, but his commentary on women and on life as a woman in Athens is more likely to be closer to the truth than depictions of women in tragedy (McClure 1999:205-259). As much as he uses the feminine voice as a vehicle for his examination of political issues, these figures must still be believable to the audience as real-life women, or slapstick, mocking pastiche, and the problem for the modern audience is that we do not have enough evidence always to be sure of what Aristophanes’ intentions were. This does not devalue the worth of his evidence on the position of women, but it does ensure that the reader should never take anything at face value. In the *Ecclesiazusae* the poet reiterates a common view that women were naturally predisposed to being liars and deceivers: “There’s nobody more inventive at getting funds than a woman, and when in power she’ll never get cheated, since women themselves are

past masters at cheating (236-238)²¹. I think that it is reasonably safe to assume that while silence was a desirable attribute for a woman, the reality was more likely that women could be vocal and outspoken, but only in very specific spheres (again this refers to the opinion that women may possibly have had more power in their domestic settings than has been previously accredited to them). It is also unlikely that everything said by a woman was untrustworthy because of the general view that female speech was deceitful. I think it would be safe to amend that statement that *feminine* speech or *effeminate* speech was seen as dangerous to the *polis* due to the duplicity inherent in those forms of speech (Aristophanes is quite clear in his attack on rhetoricians and corrupt politicians who use words and carefully constructed arguments to mislead and lie to the general populace).

It cannot be inconsequential that almost all of the extant tragedies have essential female characters without whom the action or the necessary result of the play would not be able to occur (only one tragedy which we have, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, does not contain any female characters). It is surely also significant that the majority of the remaining texts are named for their main female characters. The use of the feminine Other is not specific to, or peculiar to, Euripides and in fact is prevalent in both tragedy and comedy. This general use of the feminine Other implies an insight into society that would not be possible without the use of this particular Other. It is by assuming a masculine role, whether in their actions or speech or beliefs, that the female characters in Greek tragedy investigate the masculine norm of the *polis*. In doing so they explore the problems which may come to the fore in a society where old ideas of masculinity occasionally clash with new ideas of what it means to be a man in Athens.

²¹ Translated by Henderson (2002).

Chapter Three: Speech and masculinity

In this chapter I will attempt to show how Euripides uses the feminine Other in the *Hecuba* to explore the problems of rhetoric and power in the classical *polis*. Free speech was an essential aspect of the democratic *polis*, as has been discussed previously. It was not, however, unproblematic and in the *Hecuba* Euripides uses the characters of Hecuba and her daughter Polyxena to illustrate the tensions between the masculine ideal of speech as a social 'leveller' and the powerlessness of speech in the hands of the weak. It is important to note that speech, in Athenian society, was closely linked with violence and with traditional law. The *Hecuba* shows how empowered free speech is necessary for the fulfilment of righteous violence and the enforcement of traditional law.

3.1. Gendered Speech in Euripides

As I have shown in previous chapters, while it is not advisable to split classical Athenian society into binary opposites, there are certain opposing concepts that hold true for this society. The most relevant for this discussion is the visibility of Athenian men speaking and acting in public, in stark contrast with the required silence and invisibility of Athenian women. This, then, makes the prominent presence of articulate and powerful female characters on the tragic stage an intriguing contradiction.

Speech in Athenian society was divided into the political speech of Athenian male citizens, characterized by rhetoric, and the religious speech of women (which included lamentation and certain religious rites). These were the only occasions when speech in public by a woman would not only be acceptable, but also necessary for the well-being of the city. These instances of public female speech were, however, strictly policed by the male citizen authority.²²

²² I do not include in female public speech religious rites attended only by women, such as the *Thesmophoria*, even though they would be regarded as religious rites for the benefit of the city. While they may have been for the good of the public, they were not held 'in public', but rather were so private that we have very little record of what occurred at these rites.

Speech in Athens, just like almost all the aspects of that society, was strictly divided into gender roles. Winkler (1990:174-175) and Cameron (1985:105) suggest that women in Athenian society had to be 'bilingual', code-switching between the rhetorical language of the masculine political sphere and their own domestic one in order to operate and survive "as a linguistic minority in a culture whose public actions are all conducted in the majority language" and in order to take part in the public sphere "the minority must be bilingual [...]". Public speech by women was regarded as indecent and as a potential threat to the woman's reputation, as Plutarch²³ illustrates in the following extract:

"Theano exposed her arm as she was putting on her cloak. When someone said, "What a lovely arm", she replied, "But it's not for public." Not only the arm of a virtuous woman, but even her speech ought not to be public, and she ought to restrain her voice, since it exposes her, and be modest in the presence of outsiders" (Plutarch *Mor.* 142C-D).²⁴

One of the most famous speeches reported in the fifth century, by Thucydides, is the funeral oration delivered by Pericles in 430 BCE. Pericles was recognised as one of the foremost politicians and rhetoricians in Athenian history. As a leading citizen in Athenian society his opinion carried much weight in the public domain and would have represented the general attitude of the dominant male populace. Thucydides (2.45.2) reports Pericles as giving one piece of advice to the women of his city²⁵, that their fame, in contrast to that of the men of the city, would not be gained by acting publicly for the good of the state, but rather by remaining silent in public, especially by avoiding at all costs being spoken of by men in the *polis*. Their good reputations were maintained by remaining invisible in the masculine domain.

Women in classical literature are especially linked with treachery and deceit. While female figures such as Penelope will stand as paragons of virtue, only

²³ While Plutarch's timeline does not coincide with Euripides' tragedy, his commentary on Athenian society is still valid.

²⁴ Translated by L. McClure (1999:61).

²⁵ This is the only mention of women in Pericles' funeral speech.

the virgin sacrifices such as Iphigenia and Polyxena are truly regarded as blameless and without deceit. Even Penelope practises misdirection and dishonesty through her endless weaving to delay the misbehaving suitors. The traditional literary view of the falsehood and trickery of womankind was first established by Hesiod (*Op.* 60-80) in his unflattering depiction of Pandora as the root of feminine wiles and the bane of men. Hera and Aphrodite are also traditionally depicted as using their seductive persuasion to achieve their goals (McClure 1999:62). Homer and Hesiod both remind their audience that women will use whatever trickery they can, especially through seduction, to deceive men: “He who believes a woman, believes deceivers” (Hesiod, *Op.* 75).

3.2. Speech and deception

Similar conventions exist in Athenian tragedy with regard to the difference between women’s speech and men’s speech – women’s speech is manipulative and deceitful, while men’s speech is rational, logical and honourable. Euripides and Aeschylus, in particular, play with the idea of speech being a purely masculine realm where women are not welcome, nor are women ever expected to be able to speak as boldly as men do. Female characters like Medea and Clytemnestra go out of their way to use masculine forms of speech (such as the *agon* and the *apologia*) so that they might prevail against male characters who have wronged them, beating them at their own game, as it were. This proficiency in masculine speech is rarely used for the greater good. As McClure (1999:26) asserts while a female character had the ability to use her rhetorical prowess for the good of the state, as Antigone attempted to, “typically her persuasiveness involves trickery and deception to challenge and subvert the status quo”. It is typical of Athenian drama to portray female characters in this way and there are few exceptions to the norm. But what is the function of these opposite types of speech, deception on one hand and truth on the other? One could be tempted to place deceit in opposition to reason in Attic tragedy. Deception and cunning, being more closely associated with ‘foreignness’ and emotion, have long been the opponents of reason and logic in ancient Greek literature, even

though one may use reason and logic in order to deceive, as one can argue Clytemnestra does to get Agamemnon into a position where she may kill him safely.

There is nothing 'manly' or heroic about deception in the eyes of the ancient Greeks, not even if it leads to the achievement of one's goals or if it is for the greater good. Honesty and honour are intricately entwined around what it means to be a man. Odysseus is the marked exception in Homer's works. He uses guile and cunning to win the greatest Achaian victory over the Trojans for which the winning army will always be grateful, but while he is never vilified by the Hellenes for his trickery and deceit, it is also worth mentioning that he is never regarded as a hero in the same way that Achilles or Heracles were viewed as heroes since his cunning will never make him entirely trustworthy. Deceitful men may make realistic opponents on stage, just as realistic, if not more so to an Athenian audience, than outspoken, cunning women, but the value of the treacherous Euripidean female does not lie in her deceit, but rather in the safe space she presents to the audience. The female character can say things, do things, feel things that a male, on the stage or in real life, would not be permitted. As discussed previously, speech in classical Athens was a right given only to citizens of the polis. It was a privilege that was not extended to outsiders and which was vital to the democratic process. To speak out on issues not condoned by the polis, or to question the legitimacy of law or democracy itself would in theory have been permitted, but it most likely would not have been welcomed by the Assembly.

3.3 The voice of the Other

Through the female voice, the voice of the Other, the playwright can explore problems that would be too risqué or too difficult to accept by an Athenian audience. In the case of Euripides' *Hecuba* the voice of the barbarian queen explores the problem in the polis with regards to the requirement of free speech for the optimal functioning of the state. According to the democratic ideal all citizens should have equal right of speech; however, those citizens

who were from families who traditionally had more power also had more status and therefore had more power in the Assembly and in the law courts. This meant that 'weaker' citizens, those with less political power, may have had the same rights in theory, but in practice their speech would not have had the same force in the public arena.

Foley (2001:10) explains, in agreement with Zeitlin (1996:363), that "‘Playing the other’ on the Greek stage permitted an explanation and expansion of male identity. A form of initiation into the mysteries of what the culture defines as the feminine Other - the tensions, complexities, vulnerabilities, irrationalities, and ambiguities that masculine aspiration would prefer to suppress or control – tragedy imagines a ‘fuller model for the masculine self’". While one cannot assume that social commentators like Euripides and Aeschylus did not have an opinion on the role and rights of women in their own society, they rather used these fictional women to create a dialogue with the ruling elite, the male citizens of the *polis*.

Euripides plays devil's advocate by giving his female characters strident voices, unlike their everyday counterparts. But in doing so he is not commenting on the position of women in society, he is using these non-traditional figures to highlight masculine tensions. The female characters give voice to the things that men would not normally say, action to the things citizen men would not normally do (Zeitlin 1996). They challenge accepted behaviour and bring to light the clashing moralities of pre-democratic manliness and democratic hyper-rationality. His female characters respond in ways no woman would have the licence to, they ask dangerous and difficult questions about what it means to be good and honourable. He writes his plays about issues of morality and honour, but without making any judgments himself. He is not there to judge, only to bring to light difficult issues relating to what it means to be a good citizen in the Athenian polis.

3.4. The masculine *agon* and the feminine Other

Establishing that speech roles were strictly divided according to gender is necessary in order to illustrate the ‘unfeminine’ behaviour of the lead female character in Euripides’ *Hecuba*. Her character in this play is twofold, divided by the events that shape her actions and her speech: the sacrifice of her daughter and the murder of her son. At Hecuba’s first appearance she is clearly characterized as an old woman (59-67), bowed by grief for the loss of her home and her freedom. Her fears for her children are foremost in her mind and this establishes the primary focus for Hecuba, the preservation of her family and the importance of her maternal responsibilities, emphasising her femininity. Hecuba calls on the gods to save her precious children from harm as she is haunted by a terrifying dream that plagued her sleep (70-76). Unfortunately for Hecuba the fears from her dreams become a reality: the Chorus informs her of the army’s decision to sacrifice Polyxena at the request of Achilles’ ghost, and Hecuba’s words turn to lamentation (as discussed previously this was one of the few sanctioned outlets for female speech in the polis). Her cries anticipate the death and burial of Polyxena, a pre-emptive mourning, as it were, acting as a sign of more death to come. Polyxena joins in her mother’s lamentation, not for herself, but for her mother who will live on alone and enslaved while Polyxena escapes from her enslavement to the house of Hades²⁶ (211-12). Female speech by female characters is the expected norm, in this case embodied by the lamentation of the queen, Polyxena and the Trojan women of the Chorus. What would not conform to the socially prescribed speech form for a woman in Athenian society is the way in which Hecuba discards her womanly lamentation and armours herself with a rhetoric that would have been the sole purview of the Athenian male citizen. Hecuba’s shift from a feminine speech form to one associated only with the public speech of citizen men is an important signpost for the audience

²⁶ Polyxena is thus the perfect woman, in the eyes of the Greeks: she is solicitous of her mother, and speaks only at sanctioned times, she submits quietly to whatever task is required of her by her male protectors, and while she is safely bound in marriage to Achilles (which would have been a prestigious match for the Trojan princess had both of them lived) her body will remain forever pure and virginal. *νύμφην τ’ ἄυμφον παρθένον τ’ ἀπάρθενον* (“bride that is no bride, virgin that is virgin no more” line 612).

to indicate her shift from the acceptable gender role of grieving mother to that of a gender-inappropriate knife-wielding logician. I will argue that this change is not unrealistic in the circumstances and that Hecuba is simply taking on the mantle of her own *kurios* since that position is vacant due to the deaths of her male family members and Agamemnon's refusal to fulfil that role (even though he has taken her into his household as part of his spoils of war).

While I will not further explore the importance of rhetoric to the stability of the polis I will be referring to some aspects of rhetorical speech to show how it is, or is not, used by the characters to achieve their goals. In a state defined by its masculinity and masculine laws, as Athens is, rhetoric is an important tool, a vital part of the *peitho* (persuasion) necessary for the successful function of the state. It was necessary for all citizens to have an equal stake in the public sphere of the *polis* since the citizenry had, through previous experience, learned to distrust tyranny and the rule of the elite few. Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1.1.1355a), in his work on rhetoric, describes the important function of rhetorical speech as a tool for ascertaining the truth of a matter. According to the philosopher, persuasion is as useful as reasoning for finding the truth in any argument. By arguing both sides of the debate one can draw out the truth by analysing the facts and how they are presented. He also states that things that are true are easier to prove than things that are false and they are also easier to believe. Thus the most believable argument should be the argument that is true.

This in itself was made problematic by the role of the sophists, as has been mentioned in chapter one. It would have been the opinion of the general populace that their ability to twist truth and deception for their own purposes was counter to the ethos of the validity and trustworthy nature of speech as a reflection of a man's status and honour. In the *Hecuba* Euripides allows the Trojan queen, a figure who is undeniably othered by her status as elderly, barbarian, female, and enslaved, to use a form of speech intended for the courtroom, which was a space traditionally not only reserved for men, but also a space and a platform for speech which was part of what defined a man in classical Athens.

With regards to *Hecuba* I will only be discussing the *agon*, merely one aspect of the form of rhetorical speech made popular in the law-courts of the fifth century. An *agon* can be described as a verbal conflict consisting of two speeches, of more or less the same length, containing opposing views. The speeches are carefully structured to promote the argument as being valid and logically sound as well as to persuade the audience cleverly, but without deception (this would alienate an audience who traditionally dislikes trickery or arrogance from speakers, as is illustrated by Aristophanes in his depiction of the sophists in *The Clouds*). *Agones* in Greek tragedies are usually followed by sections of angry dialogue which differentiate them from near-*agones* (Lloyd 1992:8). Euripides seems particularly fond of using *agones* in his plays, particularly in cases when rhetorical expertise is part of the characterization of stronger female figures such as Hecuba as well as Medea and Andromache²⁷. Lloyd (1992:8) asserts that there is only one *agon* in *Hecuba* (between Hecuba and Polymestor at 1132-1237) and the other important speeches are either near-*agones* or more like *epideixis* scenes²⁸. While this is technically correct, for ease of reference I will be following Kastely's identification of various *agones* in order to include the longer exchanges between Hecuba and Odysseus, and Hecuba and Agamemnon.

Kastely (1993:1037) presents the view that *Hecuba* is, foremost, a discussion of "the need for and precariousness of rhetoric" in a society where the potential for force and violence to become the overriding power is a real danger to Athenian society. It is not a flaw in Hecuba's character that forces her to behave in a violent manner against Polymestor, but rather a failure on the part of rhetoric. Her arguments are well-reasoned and valid, but still they fail to persuade either Odysseus or Agamemnon to come to her aid. Her momentary lamentation in her speech to Agamemnon (812-820) expresses

²⁷ The other famous examples of unusually rhetorically proficient female characters include Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and Sophocles' Antigone.

²⁸ Lloyd (1992: 10) describes *epideixis* scenes as follows: "[...] one character makes a long speech in response to some provocative behaviour or proposal. The tone of the proceedings might or might not be contentious, but what all these scenes share is that they lack the balance of speeches which is so characteristic of the *agon*".

her regret that *peitho*, which in a more ordered society would be efficacious in eliciting the help she requires, can only be useful if it is practised by everyone. The isolated contradictory space where the Greek army finds itself, where humans are sacrificed to ghosts, children are murdered for money, and women behave like men, cannot support the necessity of persuasion, because the 'state' of the camp has devolved into a place where every man acts in his own interest. Self-interest is a direct threat to the democratic ideal and it is only by preserving the sense of community required by democracy that society and civilisation are maintained.

Following Kastely, there are three important sections of dialogue to examine when discussing masculine speech in *Hecuba*: the supplication of Odysseus, the appeal to Agamemnon, and the *apologia* in defence of Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor. Each of these debates, or discussions, shows Hecuba adopting a male speech role in order to further her agenda. The sanctioned female speech role of ritual lamentation is not ignored by Hecuba. The audience is aware from her first moment on stage that this is a woman grieving for her life, not to mention those she has lost through the horrors of war. Her sorrowful cries and pleas to the gods, as well as her references to her maternal responsibilities and the joy she received from her children are an emotional expression of her character at the beginning of the play (79; 83-4; 96-7; 154-8). It is only when she realises that there is no one to speak on her behalf, that she is not only an old woman in a society where the elderly and infirm are invisible, and also a slave, only then does she comprehend that she must take the law into her own hands. Voiceless, she must speak for her children and for divine law as a man would speak and, as mentioned previously, a woman would not normally be permitted to speak on her own behalf and would require a *kurios* to speak for her. Her arguments do still contain remnants of her maternal grief, especially in her argument against the sacrifice of Polyxena (251-95), but these fragments of femininity are there to colour her words, to tint them with enough grief, perhaps, to make the resolve of her masculine opponent soften. Hecuba's grief is thus well established as feminine and maternal, fixing her Otherness in the minds of the audience,

which makes her change from wailing woman to wrathful crosser of gender roles a shock to the viewer.

The first *agon*, between Odysseus and Hecuba (251 – 331), is the first gender ‘transgression’ which Hecuba undertakes in order to save Polyxena from being sacrificed as Achilles’ bride. Hecuba’s verbal fight to save her daughter from the knife can be viewed as a plea made out of self-interest as she does not wish to lose her daughter for her own sake. This loss would leave her even more bereft and alone in the hostile Greek environment. However, this is not the argument she uses to defend her daughter’s life; instead she calls on traditional laws²⁹ of supplication, reciprocity and justice: τῷ μὲν δικάϊω τόνδ’ ἀμιλλῶμαι λόγον (271) (“Justice is the ground on which I make this plea”). Her argument is based on three logical points that refer only briefly to her grief as a mother: Odysseus is in debt to her in return for his supplication of her during the war (272-4); the sacrifice of a human being is unseemly (260-1); Polyxena did not harm Achilles in any way to deserve an act that so closely resembles one of retribution (263-5). For these reasons it would be unjust for Odysseus to claim Polyxena for sacrifice. Odysseus’ response is equally measured and rational. He is not moved by Hecuba’s words, but will adhere as closely to the law of supplication as he can by saving Hecuba’s life as she saved his. In his eyes it is not his responsibility to save the girl, but rather to look after the interests of the army as a whole. The Ithacan general has the power to grant Hecuba her wish, as a well-respected male within the Greek army who is also known for his skilful and persuasive speech, but he refuses to use his power. There is also no evidence in the text that Polyxena herself was specifically chosen by the ghost of Achilles to serve as his bride. Hypothetically Odysseus could have found another victim for the sacrifice.

Odysseus is not a well-received character in this particular play. The audience expects him to act in a manner befitting the cunning wordsmith that we know from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but instead Odysseus bows to the pressure of the mob and is persuaded that it is right and proper to sacrifice Polyxena. As

²⁹ I will discuss this further in the following chapter on *nomos* and the feminine other.

Burnett (1998:161) explains: "According to his own words he stands for *psephos*, the sort of law that a demagogue can elicit from a mob (219; cf. 196), and he also stands for the power of the strong over those who are weak (227)." *Psephos* is the type of law which could, according to the warnings of Aristotle (*Pol.* 1292a24), be strong enough to override *nomos*, like the *nomos* against human sacrifice or improper burial. Odysseus argues that his actions are for the good of the community, which would be correct to the letter of the law, but it denies the help due to those who ask for it. Helping those who could not help themselves was also in the best interest of the community.

While Odysseus is not acting immorally by attempting to save the Greek forces from their becalmed state, he is acting on the self-interest of an individual. Achilles demands honour and tribute as is his right, but he does this to the detriment of others as well as violating laws governing appropriate sacrifice. The most forceful aspect of Odysseus' speech is his reference to *timē* and the associated prizes awarded to a soldier who has proved his manly worth on the battlefield (303-20). It would have been both acceptable and necessary to honour Achilles for his deeds at Troy, but it should not have been acceptable or necessary to honour him with human blood³⁰. Hecuba's argument against the sacrilegious sacrifice (258-9) carries more weight than Odysseus' claims of honour. This is our first introduction to the ethical convictions that Hecuba stands for throughout the play, convictions which have sometimes been ignored or misidentified as a deterioration of her character or as a descent into "the realm of the demonic and monstrous" (Segal 1993:182). Her shift from the expected behaviour of a respectable and nobly born matron to her 'masculinised' self, characterized by her use of masculine speech, is not a sign of "psychological disintegration" (Segal 1991:38), but rather a plottable point of necessity on the map of Hecuba's revenge.

³⁰ While it is not possible to judge whether or not Euripides would have viewed this reciprocation for honour as anachronistic or archaic, the treatment of Polyxena's sacrifice does lend itself to a problematic interpretation of the validity of the warrior's honour.

The death of Polyxena again reminds the audience that Hecuba is merely a grieving woman, not a soldier or a politician. Her words change dramatically from the structured argument of the *agon* (and the traditional angry dialogue which follows it) to the highly emotive lament of a bereaved mother (438-9; 511-17). Once she has accepted the news of her daughter's death she behaves and speaks as a woman should with all the proper respect afforded to the customs of death and burial and, in particular, a mother's responsibilities with regard to these customs. Her lamentation continues once she learns of the death of her only remaining son, Polydorus. This is the turning point for Hecuba, the trigger for her metamorphosis from traditional mature female figure to the bloodthirsty avenger that characterises her final stop before her ultimate transformation into a dog of stone. Hecuba's faltering state of mind in lines 736 to 751 is described by Segal (1991:38) as "one of Euripides' subtlest portrayals of violent, pathological movements in personality at the limits of human endurance". Her fraught asides show that she is wrestling with necessity, with what must now be required of her. She is required to seek vengeance on Polymestor not because of the irreparable damage done to her motherhood, but rather because of the acts committed against universal laws which prescribe certain actions to maintain order in society. The overlap between speech, righteous violence, and the traditional laws is unmistakable. To attain any of these ideal elements of the masculine society one must use all three aspects.

As much as Hecuba must grieve as a mother, she practises no deception (perceived as a female form of persuasion which one expects from tragic female characters such as Medea and Clytemnestra) to attain her goals at this stage; rather she tries to use masculine persuasion, the rational speech of *peitho*, to appeal to Agamemnon's role as preeminent general amongst this "corrupt, mean-spirited mob whose leaders are governed by self-interest, greed and lust" (Segal 1991:39). Agamemnon is a weak figure in this play. He clearly understands the logical argument that Hecuba makes, but chooses to turn from her as he fears censure from the army more than he respects justice (850-6). It is understandable that Agamemnon would fear being viewed as weak since that kind of weakness would unman him in the public domain.

Since he relinquishes his responsibility to the weak individuals (the slaves) in his care he gives in to his weakness by refusing to stand for the weak. As Fisher (1998:82) points out, a popular view in fifth-century Athens was that only a slave, as opposed to a man³¹, could not act for himself or for his dependants. Female members of the *oikos* were the most vulnerable in the household and therefore had to be protected by their male relatives. To deny the supplication of a woman in his care would not make Agamemnon a good provider for his household.

Hecuba's plea to him is more impassioned than her supplication of Odysseus. She would use any weapon in her rhetorical arsenal to persuade him that he must act on her behalf and punish the unjust and villainous act of Polymestor. This section does, as Lloyd points out, lack the balance of a true legal, or tragic, *agon*. The queen's speech is more than three times the length of Agamemnon's. While it echoes the nature of her argument with Odysseus, she at least has slightly more success with her supplication of Agamemnon. Once again Hecuba uses *dike* and *nomos* as vehicles to explain why her course of action is required. She knows that unless she can prove to Agamemnon that Polymestor's guilt was based on one of the tenets of his own laws (that of the sanctity of hospitality and fostership), she will not succeed in gaining his aid. Unfortunately, the rational argument which was designed to appeal to a virtuous man fails.

The next part of Hecuba's argument is probably the most contested of the queen's speeches. In this section (824-35) Hecuba attempts to persuade Agamemnon by calling on his relationship with her daughter Cassandra. Critics like Segal (1993:182) have used this as an example of Hecuba's descent into immorality, 'using' her daughter to purchase her vengeance. I agree with Lloyd (1992:95-6) and Kastely (1993:1041) that while this argument does smack of desperation on Hecuba's part, it is not shameful or immoral, but rather an obvious reference to a familial bond that is now in place between Agamemnon and Hecuba and which deserves a measure of

³¹ Slaves were not viewed as masculine entities (Fisher 1998:82).

respect from Agamemnon. It also forces Agamemnon into a position of accountability. If he is the only male with any ties to the Trojan women, then surely it would be his responsibility to act as *kurios* for these women. Alternatively, as their master, in the master/slave relationship forced upon these women by the war, Agamemnon should also have a set of responsibilities to these women.

As discussed previously, in democratic Athens, being a man was being a citizen, and this meant that the individual had certain responsibilities as well as privileges. An 'unmanly' man who refused to act, to participate in his society, would be a threat to that society. As Kastely (1993:1041) explains: "the presumption that Agamemnon will be willing to pay for the sexual advantages that he acquired as spoils of battle is absurd". What is more interesting is that this seems to be the only argument that had much of an effect on the Argive. Again the expectations are turned around: where a logical and rational 'masculine' argument failed to convince Agamemnon, he was moved by an emotional and quite 'feminine' appeal. In this way Hecuba finalises her ascent into a position of power over all the male figures in the play which in turn feminizes them. With her persuasion she has pushed the great manly leader Agamemnon, renowned for both his force and his persuasion, into a subordinate position. He will not act on her behalf out of his fear of the mob and consequent self-interest, but his tacit approval of her actions allows her to take control of the situation verbally and physically in a way that should have been impossible for the ageing queen.

The final 'law-court' scene between Hecuba and Polymestor is constructed to emphasise the injustice of the Thracian's actions (1132-1251). Euripides assigns Polymestor a speech which more closely resembles one usually delivered by a messenger, rather than a rhetorical *agon* (Lloyd 1992:97). His prosecution of Hecuba is marred by his admittance of his unjust murder of Polydorus and his thinly veiled self-interest which he justifies as an act committed not only on behalf of his own people, but also as a sign of friendship towards the Greek forces (1136 – 1144). All of his words, when combined with his actions, only serve to 'feminize' him, representing him as

unmanly and deceitful. His greed, as Hecuba points out in her carefully crafted speech, compels him to ignore his responsibilities as a host and as Polydorus' foster parent. He tries to use Hecuba's *dolos*³² in luring him into her tent under false pretences against her (1145-1148), but succeeds only in highlighting his avaricious nature.

Polymestor's speech then moves to a narration of Hecuba's violent action against himself and his sons: rather than presenting any further argument he seems to try to elicit the pity of the judge, stressing the horrifying nature of the queen's action (1132-82). Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1.1.1354a) clearly states that "the arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts, but is merely a personal appeal to the man who is judging the case", which reinforces Polymestor's lack of rhetorical technique. His only nod to rhetorical style is his use of the phrase ἅπαντα ταῦτα συντεμὼν ἐγὼ φράσω (1180) ("I shall sum up all their words") which he uses to sum up his conclusion on the unspeakable nature of women. His argument lacks structure and does not utilise any of the tools used by rhetoricians. Polymestor's lack of rhetorical skill is a calculated move on the part of the playwright.

Rhetorical ineptitude in the Athenian courts was a cause for mockery and would make whatever argument that was made by the defendant ineffectual in the eyes of the jurors. This skill was highly prized in the *polis* and reflected the speaker's status and training. A citizen who is not well-spoken was, therefore, at a distinct disadvantage, as no matter how accurate or valid his argument may have been there would have been no guarantee that he would win his case. The weaker speaker had equal rights in the *polis* in theory, but in practice speech was only a useful tool in the hands of those who already had power and status in the city. Polymestor does have some recourse to justice due to the way in which Hecuba took her revenge, but Agamemnon, and presumably the Athenian audience itself, disregarded this aspect of his case due to his lack of skill at defending himself. Equal speech and equality before

³² Hecuba's deception of Polymestor is discussed in chapter five.

the law were important ideals in the *polis* and were important means of the public expression of masculine status, but Euripides illustrates through his characterisation of Hecuba and Polymestor that this ideal was almost impossible to reach.

Hecuba has a very different strategy; she realizes that this is her last opportunity to bring to light Polymestor's violent offences against decency in a public forum, having previously been denied the male aid that she has repeatedly requested through the actions of the play. Lloyd (1992:97) describes her reply as "one of Euripides' most sophisticated pieces of forensic rhetoric". The persuasion which is seen as being the territory of citizen men is adopted by Hecuba and used to much greater effect than Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Polymestor have managed. This speech (1187-1237) utilises most of the traditional features of a legal speech. It is possible to divide the *apologia* into a proem, arguments from probability (*hyperphora*) and an epilogue in the form of a formal appeal to the judge. The proem is a statement used to introduce the subject and perhaps gain the attention of one's audience (Lloyd 1992). In *Hecuba* it is specifically identified with the word *φροίμιος* (1195), or prelude, and is a strong reminder to the judge, in the form of Agamemnon, that sophistry is a rhetorical tool used by the unscrupulous speaker, but that it will not help a man if his deeds match the falsehood of his words (1186-1190).

This rhetorical self-consciousness, commenting on the power of speech and its reliance on action, is a typical tool of the public speaker in Athens (Lloyd 1992:34). The next indicator of the rhetorical nature of the speech is Hecuba's structured attack, point by point, on Polymestor's argument using *hyperphora*³³ and introducing each argument with words and phrases commonly used in court [*πρὸς τόνδε δ' εἴμι* (1196); *ἐπεὶ δίδαξον* (1208); *ἄκουσον* (1217)]. The hypothetical syllogism in the final argument against

³³ Lloyd (1992:29) gives the following definition: "The speaker poses a problem or question; various alternative solutions are suggested, standardly in the form of further rhetorical questions; each solution is then rejected, often by means of another rhetorical question".

Polymestor is Hecuba's final flourish, the last piece of evidence she needs to convince the judge not only of her rhetorical superiority, but also to reiterate for the last time that it was without a doubt his greed and self-interest, not a regard for the Greeks, which caused him to violate the *nomoi* of *xenia* and burial:

χρῆν σ', εἴπερ ἦσθα τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖσιν φίλος,
 τὸν χρυσὸν ὃν φῆς οὐ σὸν ἀλλὰ τοῦδ' ἔχειν
 δοῦναι φέροντα πενομένοις τε καὶ χρόνον
 πολὺν πατρώας γῆς ἀπεξενωμένοις·
 σὺ δ' οὐδὲ νῦν πω σῆς ἀπαλλάξαι χερὸς
 τολμᾶς, ἔχων δὲ καρτερεῖς ἔτ' ἐν δόμοις.

If you were a friend of the Argives, you should have taken the gold, which you admit was not yours to hold but his, and given it to them since they were in need and had spent a long time away from their native land; yet not even now can you bring yourself to let it out of your hand but still persist in keeping it in your house.

(1218-23)

Hecuba's closing argument addresses Agamemnon directly, challenging his own morality. The Trojan queen's speech does not use any appeal to the judge to elicit pity or sympathy; she uses a ruthless rhetorical, and therefore masculine, approach to prove that actions should not be permissible based purely on the power or eloquence of the 'doer'. Hecuba attempts to prove that justice and morality are the only safeguards against the threats of seductive persuasion and unnecessary violence which are the unethical champions of a state governed by self-interest, cowardice and greed. It is important to note, as Kastely (1993:1044) does, that this *agon* is key to understanding the possible greater project of the play as a whole: "If Euripides were only charting Hecuba's ethical disintegration in her obsession with revenge, the play should end with her gloating over her victory".

Euripides specifically includes this speech to emphasise the balance justice requires between violence and persuasion. If Hecuba had only acted out her

revenge, but did not have the ability to defend it skilfully within the law, then she would be no different from the male figures acting out of selfish needs and desires. Through her interactions with Odysseus and Agamemnon Hecuba becomes aware that words can and do fail if both speakers aren't dedicated to upholding traditional values reinforced by the art of rhetoric. Hecuba's adoption of masculine words and deeds is not a sudden change in her character. This progression can be mapped through her speech which starts as female lamentation and pleas for pity. The occurrence of female speech in Hecuba's addresses diminishes with each speech, escalating until she finalizes her 'masculinisation' with an act of violence which should have been anathema to a classical woman. The masculine aspects of her character are like pieces of armour which she slowly dons as the play progresses. Once she has committed the final act of violence her transformation is complete and it is because of this that her speech against Polymestor is such an excellent example of masculine rhetorical persuasion.

It is important to note that Hecuba's speech occurs after she has taken her revenge. It would be customary to defend one's right to vengeance in the law-courts and technically Hecuba, if she had been a man acting on a dire insult in Athens, would have been seriously reprimanded for acting violently without applying to the court for this right.³⁴ This series of events shows that Hecuba's words, the words of a weak individual, were powerless on their own. It was only through the combination of words and actions that she could take her revenge, but either of those things, both of which were prized as symbols of manhood, is problematic when wielded by the weaker individual.

While Euripides sets his play in an aristocratic era, the references, especially those which refer to the rights of speech, point to a dysfunctional democracy which is further damaged by the individualistic actions of figures like

³⁴ It is not unheard of for a citizen to plead his case after the fact, but this was rarely necessary. Such direct action was a great risk for the citizen and for the community. The legal system supported the avoidance of physical conflict as a means to secure the stability of the state. This creates a certain amount of tension in a state which requires violence in order for the citizen to acquire honour and to assert his masculinity.

Agamemnon and Polymestor. It is only by working within the systems, political, legal, and social, and by winning honour “through service to the community” that a man can be viewed as “a good or distinguished citizen and thus a good man” (Fisher 1998:92). The aristocratic ideal privileges the individual and rewards him for acting for himself and in his own interest.³⁵ The remnants of this attitude towards the individual are still present in the democratic society with regards to the importance of honour and the manliness inherent in the acquisition of honour in order to gain a higher status in the *polis*. This creates a tension between the heroic ideal and the democratic ideal of what it means to be a good man who is valued in his society for his masculine worth. In the Athenian democracy acting out of your own self-interest threatens the society that relies on a sense of one’s position in a community. The male characters in the *Hecuba* relinquish their masculinity by denying the weak the power of equal rights of speech.

³⁵ Achilles is a good example of this kind of aristocratic individual.

Chapter Four: Violence and vengeance in the *Hecuba*

4.1. Violence and masculine society

Violence has rarely been thought of being a domain in which women are welcome, either in antiquity or in modern times. Violence, war in particular, was a masculine aspect of Athenian political life, as mentioned previously. It would only have been in myth that women would wield swords as Amazons or tear men limb for limb as bacchantes. This is not to say that women could not perform acts of violence, as Medea or Clytemnestra did off-stage, but it would have been out of character for an Athenian woman to behave in this way. Violence was a necessary component of ancient Greek life, part of the balancing act between persuasion and force required by the polis in order to rule a group of citizens successfully. It is important to note, as Goldhill (1991:24) does, that “the values of citizenship and militarism are deeply intertwined in any Athenian sense of self. Warfare is a natural state of affairs for the Athenian male.”

One might be inclined to divorce the classical polis from the archaic warrior state, but the influence of the military on the organisational principles of Athens and the assortment of conflicts in which Athens was involved in the fifth and fourth centuries should not be ignored in favour of a view of a more ‘enlightened’ society of artists and philosophers untarnished by war or bloodshed. The combination of art and philosophy in the cultural elite of Athenian society culminating in the representation of that society on the dramatic stage creates the perfect space to explore questions of how violent acts and war affect society. The dramatic exploration of violence also raises questions about the role of violence in democratic society and how it is still affected by a heroic or aristocratic view of what it meant to be a man in the Athenian polis.

Certain acts of violence were required for the restitution of honour or to effect punishment in the masculine realms and these acts of violence were themselves outward physical representations of Athenian manhood (Fisher 1998:70). Revenge, in particular, was an important component of the heroic society of the archaic age and, as Burnett (1998:65) argues, “in early Greek thinking, successful revenge was an orderly justice-bearing action which proved that the world was on the right track”. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, honour was most easily acquired on the battlefield; thus violence and honour are uniquely connected in a manner that has long outlasted the ancient Greeks into the modern Western ideals of manliness and male honour.

Non-violence, therefore, was the norm for women and silent passivity was considered the ideal behaviour for a classical Athenian woman while violence and war were a necessary part of Athenian masculine self-identification. To commit an act of violence would be anathema to a respectable woman. As Burnett (1998:143) explains, a woman who attempted a violent act, especially one such as vengeance, “would be by definition an unwomanly, unnatural creature, her act an indecent error”. Hecuba takes the starring role in the eponymous play as female avenger who transgresses all of her traditional gender roles in order to stand in opposition against the apathetic, self-interested male figures.

4.2. Violence in the Hecuba

Violence and sanctioned violence in the form of justified revenge are essential themes in the Hecuba. The poet sets the stage by providing not a god or a king to introduce the events to the audience, but rather by giving a voice to the ghost of Polydorus, the young Trojan prince slain by the Thracian king Polymestor. Against the backdrop of war, the spirit of the dead describes his own death to the audience and announces the violent death of his sister that is still to come (1-58). It seems likely that Euripides would have been conversant with the canonical works of other playwrights, especially the Oresteia, which is arguably Aeschylus’ most influential work. Euripides could

then be said to be purposefully placing the actions in the drama between the Trojan War, as depicted by Homer, and the famous death of Agamemnon and his concubine Cassandra at the hands of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Thus the past, present, and future are all defined by violence and bloodshed. Segal (1991:36) asserts that the *Hecuba* explores issues relating to the brutality and barbarism of war and Euripides wrote a number of plays set in the context of war with tragic female figures taking centre stage, for example *The Trojan Women*, *The Suppliants* and *The Phoenician Women*. I do not completely agree with Segal's emphasis on Euripides as being wholly anti-war; rather, Euripides often uses war as a medium of discussion for exploring other issues such as those of speech, power and morality. It is the misuse of those aspects of society, which does often occur in times of war, which, in my opinion, are of greater interest to the playwright.

The violence of war was a part of the masculine psyche of the Athenian polis. Athenian society was organised along military principles and the males of the city would all be expected to participate as it was deeply ingrained in the society. Berent (2000:258) points out that "violence and military skills were central to the dominant ethos" in the polis and while Euripides may have disliked war, it is unlikely that in a time of war he would have been permitted to speak out freely against the war without some kind of social or political censure. I would argue that in the *Hecuba* Euripides is not exploring war and the male-female conflicts in the polis, but rather that it serves as a discussion of what happens to a society when *nomos*, honour and law are abandoned for self-interest, fear and greed. As mentioned previously, it is not advisable to try to separate violence from speech and *nomos* in a discussion of the *Hecuba*. The tensions created by the interactions of potentially outdated moral systems or ideas of what constitutes honourable behaviour creates a situation that leaves the society open to the threat of diminished values and a lack of interest in the importance of community in the democratic domain. Speech, violence, and traditional law work together in the play, illustrating these tensions within the masculine *polis*.

The physical setting of the play creates an atmosphere conducive to a believable context for unthinkable acts of violence. The isolated Thracian Chersonese is a remote and barren space lacking any kind of settlement to act as surrogate polis for the stranded Hellenic army, a space “remote enough to function symbolically as a kind of moral no-man’s land, a world where all morality is endangered” (Segal 1993:172). In the absence of the traditional sets of laws that come with civilised society, such as those laws familiar to Euripides’ Athenian audience, the horde devolves into a tense group of dispirited men whose leaders can offer no solutions, acting only out of self-interest. This environment informs the audience that the king of Thrace is a murderous and greedy man who cannot be trusted.

The absence of the gods from Polydorus’ introduction to the drama creates a sense of unease. This unease is mirrored in the far-distant landscape which seems to straddle the two worlds - war behind them and home in front of them - unable to move in either direction. I agree with the assessment of Segal (1991:43) that this lack of any divine presence could be a reflection of an absence of morality as well as “an indication of the chaotic state” of the space in which the dramatic actions occur. The promise of succour from the gods is usually present in tragedies and epics: a timely prayer, a generous sacrifice is usually all that is needed to turn the tide. Here, however, ghosts are the masters of the Greeks’ fates. The ghost of Achilles holds their journey as his hostage, with the death of Polyxena as his ransom (35-41). Polydorus’ ghost, a representation of the body which is about to be discovered, will prove to be the catalyst for Hecuba’s violent revenge.

As Zeitlin (1996:209) explains, violent death provides the foundation of the play. The violent death of Polydorus and the dishonouring of his corpse is “contrasted ironically with the honours to be paid to another corpse, which is made the occasion for discovery of the first one” and this ironic contrast is highlighted by the sacrifice of Polyxena as “an excess of honour paid to the heroic dead in the name of a masculine military code that demands another death as its right” (Zeitlin 1996:209). Thus the aristocratic values which require violence as a means of winning honour have a detrimental affect on

the well-being of the community, problematising the relationship between democratic and pre-democratic mores.

4.3. The sacrifice of Polyxena

The descriptions in Polydorus' speech of the events prior to those in the play are filled with violent imagery, a forewarning for the audience that the events to follow will be no less bloody. The first violent act to be performed during the course of the play is the sacrifice of Polyxena. The audience is aware that this will take place before the Chorus makes Hecuba aware of her daughter's impending doom (98-152). Polydorus makes it very clear that Achilles will ask for his sister as his honour-gift, and that the Greek force will acquiesce and commit an act which is not only unnatural in the mythical world of tragedy, but also unacceptable in the classical world of Athens. The taboo of this sacrifice changes the act from being something required by and sanctioned by the gods, an act that sheds blood but would not be regarded as violent, to an ungodly human sacrifice.

As has been previously discussed, Odysseus provides a reasonable argument in support of the sacrifice of Polyxena based on political expedience and, from his perspective, for the good of the community (303-320). The problem is whether or not the well-being of the community should outweigh the conventions against human sacrifice. However, Hecuba's response to Odysseus' plan to kill the girl for the sake of Achilles is in character as she stands as "the only standard-bearer in the play for an objective moral order" (Zeitlin 1996:210). She is the only advocate for "the norms of justice and fair treatment, the sanctions of respect and pity for the weak, the rules pertaining to *xenia*, and, of course, the proper treatment of the dead" (Zeitlin 1996:210). Hecuba reminds the audience that the sacrifice of humans is not fitting nor expected, and that it is not *nomos* that requires this, but the *σόφισμα*, or verbal cunning, of a clever general:

ἀτὰρ τί δὴ σόφισμα τοῦθ' ἠγούμενοι
 ἐς τήνδε παῖδα ψῆφον ὤρισαν φόνου;
 πότερα τὸ χρη σφ' ἐπήγαγ' ἀνθρωποσφαγεῖν

πρὸς τύμβον, ἔνθα βουθυτεῖν μᾶλλον πρέπει;
ἢ τοὺς κτανόντας ἀνταποκτεῖναι θέλων
ἔς τήνδ' Ἀχιλλεὺς ἐνδίκως τείνει φόνον;
ἀλλ' οὐδὲν αὐτὸν ἦδε γ' εἴργασται κακόν.

But what cleverness did they imagine it was when they passed a sentence of death against this girl? Was it Fate that induced them to perform human sacrifice at a tomb, a place where the sacrifice of a bull is more fitting? Or if Achilles wished to pay back those who killed him, is it right for him to murder her?

(258-264)

The queen also makes reference to the traditional laws of reciprocity when she points out to Odysseus that Polyxena's death may have been permissible if the girl had in some way harmed or wronged Achilles, but her daughter was blameless and thus could not be held to the justice of revenge³⁶ (264-6). A balance is required between the needs of the group as a whole, represented in the play by the Greek army, and the principle which promotes the protection of the weaker members of the society by those in a position of power (Fisher 1998:68). One could view Hecuba's request to spare the life of her daughter as the representation of the self-motivated need of the individual, but the queen's speech makes it quite clear that her argument against Polyxena's death is motivated by the taboo against human sacrifice. Achilles does not need this death, even though Odysseus insists that this action is required in order to honour the warrior as the greatest among them. Achilles may have been viewed as the greatest of the Achaian warriors, but he received more than his fair share of honour-gifts during the course of the war³⁷ and it should not have been necessary to honour the soldier in this way. Unfortunately, whatever Achilles asked for would always be given to him due to his status as

³⁶ I will discuss *nomos* and reciprocity in chapter five.

³⁷ Achilles was an excellent warrior who embodied the strength and courage needed to be a successful hero. However, as a role model for men in classical Greek society he was not as much of a success. His need for attention and constant demand for trinkets and women was never for the betterment of the army as a whole, but rather to gain more 'honour' and fame for himself.

first among warriors and so his greed would rob an innocent young girl of her life.

As Segal (1993: 176) points out: “Odysseus maintains the right of the all-male society of warriors to give the bodies of its women to the best men as a reward for valour and a mark of honour (306-20)”. Polyxena will be a tool in death for the strengthening of social and political bonds just as she would have been as a marriageable princess in her Trojan home. The commodification of women in democratic Athens would not be problematic in itself, but the idea of a marriage to the dead would be unnatural and would not provide any benefit to the society or produce any offspring for the continuation of that society. Certain rules with regards to honour should be as inviolable as the laws of *xenia*, but the soldiers choose to ignore whatever laws do not fit in with their desire for personal gratification, and because of this they can rationalise the sacrifice of Polyxena as required by their laws of rewarding those who have gained great honour on the battlefield.

The sacrifice as reported by Talthybius is problematic. As Henrichs (2000: 184) argues, the act of ritual violence would be regarded as a necessary, everyday violence, while the sacrifice of humans, regardless of their social status, nationality or gender, would be considered “an aberration” by the general populace. However, there is a sense of nobility, a beauty to the death of Polyxena which one does not expect from an event which Euripides has specifically set up as being on the verge of sacrilege. Polyxena shows a nobility and bravery (547-551; 579-580) which is not displayed by any of the male figures in the play. Hecuba and Polyxena stand for a set of laws that remain untouchable even in slavery and death. Henrichs (2000:174) explains the significance of Polyxena’s death as a process of “reconceptualising and verbalizing murder as a rite of sacrifice” and argues that by doing this, “tragedy turns mundane acts of self-motivated aggression into quasi-religious events, thereby magnifying them and elevating them to a rank compatible with its ritual frame, moral authority, and interest in the divine”. The moral authority of the female figures in Euripides’ play complies with the description by Zeitlin (1996:172-216) of the *Hecuba* as a Dionysian play rich in examples of typical

Dionysian violence, for example the threat of sparagmos, the animal imagery and in particular the human sacrifice of the Trojan princess. Polyxena becomes a moral ideal for the Greek army, embodying all the honourable characteristics conspicuously absent from the male characters in the play. Her femininity should prevent her from becoming a role model for the men, but her nobility and self-sacrifice allow her to assume this masculine position of authority regardless of her status as Other.

I agree with the assessment of Burnett (1998:159) that Odysseus was merely bartering with the dead “to buy future exploits” rather than trying to repay a debt owed to Achilles for his courageous performance on the battlefield. The death of Polyxena could be viewed not as a signifier of honour and public recognition, but as a bribe for Achilles so that he would release the fleet and allow the Greeks to return to their homes. It is interesting to note that although they completed the sacrifice to Achilles, the ghostly hero did not have enough power to ensure the freedom of the stranded fleet. The winds that would have sped them home disappeared after the sacrifice of Polyxena and only returned after Polymestor had been punished and judged for his actions. Burnett (1998:162) argues that the Hellenes had to relearn certain universal laws: that it is right and good to praise and be grateful to those who aid you and that it is equally honourable to punish those who are dishonourable; only then could they return home. By removing the horror from Polyxena’s death, by making it a proud and noble act, Euripides establishes the princess as a role model for the Greeks. They can learn from her example what it means to have honour by sacrificing oneself for the good of the whole. One could argue, therefore, that it is not the gratitude of Achilles, having been presented with his bride in death through human sacrifice, which sets the fleet free, but rather the self-sacrifice of Polyxena. Her actions were without guile, honourable in their honesty and described by Euripides with grace and a horrifying beauty. The generous depiction of Polyxena’s death is a reflection of the princess’ largess in offering, freely, her own life in exchange for the welfare of the community.

4.4. Hecuba's revenge

Revenge, like other forms of violence, is a male domain, a masculine act performed when a man's honour is compromised by another man (Fisher 1998:70). He can also act on behalf of individuals who are unable to act for themselves (for example a woman or a child in his care). There has been much discussion about the validity of Hecuba's actions, with critics like Segal (1993:179) viewing Hecuba's revenge as a monstrous disintegration of her character. Revenge as a divinely sanctioned act is clearly illustrated throughout the heroic epics. While it might be arguable that this kind of reciprocal justice would not have resulted in the kind of violence depicted in Euripides' play in the classical era,³⁸ it does not mean that the audience would have been unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to her revenge. The more common form of revenge in classical Athens would have been that attained within the court system of the polis. If the litigious nature of Athenian society is in any way significant, one could assume that the idea of revenge is one that the classical audience would have been quite comfortable with (Fisher 1998:74). The rhetorical form of the final debate between Polymestor and Hecuba reinforces the justification of Hecuba's actions in the minds of the audience as it is made familiar to them. Hecuba attempts to follow the democratic ideal which prefers the settlement of personal insults in court. Her rhetorical supplication of Odysseus and Agamemnon functions as her appeal to the law-court in order to justify her subsequent violence against Polymestor. In classical Athenian society one would not have been able to take personal revenge without public intervention; otherwise there may have been serious consequences for that individual. Hecuba's requested revenge would have been in the best interest of the community, setting an example for the Greek army of what would happen if one disregards the social and legal conventions established to preserve the welfare of the state. Polymestor had to be punished or he would set a dangerous precedent.

³⁸ Harris (1997:365) argues that this system of justice "has in principle replaced personally inflicted physical retaliation with legal process".

Harris (1997:363), in his criticism of Herman's interpretation of Athenian beliefs about revenge, points out that even Aristotle (*Nic. Ethics* iv.5.1126a7-8) considered revenge to be a normal action and that, as Burnett (1998:65) explains, "to abstain from vengeance was a problematic nonaction" which could reflect poorly on the honour and masculine identity of the abstainer. Fisher (1998:82) reinforces this view, stating that Athenians were expected "to retaliate swiftly and 'like men'" when facing any kind of insult to their masculinity, property or female dependants.

It is also important to note that Euripides specifically uses the word *timwrew* and its related forms, to refer to Hecuba's vengeance in her speech throughout the play. Meridor (1978: 29) points out that this particular word is rather rare in Euripides' works as a whole and has the connotation of just or righteous vengeance. In Lysias' (I.47) well-known court case, in which Euphiletus must defend his actions in killing Eratosthenes when he found him sleeping with his wife, the defendant refers to his actions (which were sanctioned by law in classical Athens) as his *τιμωρία*:

ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν, ὦ ἀνδρες, οὐκ ἰδίαν ὑπὲρ ἑμαυτοῦ νομίζω ταύτην γενέσθαι τὴν τιμωρίαν, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ τῆς πόλεως ἀπάσης. οἱ ψὰρ τοιαῦτα πράττοντες, ὀρώντες οἷα τὰ ἄθλα πρόκειται τῶν τοιούτων ἀμαρτημάτων, ἦττον εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους ἐξαμαρτίσονται, ἐὰν καὶ ὑμᾶς ὀρώσι τὴν αὐτὴν γνώμην ἔχοντας.

"I therefore, sirs, do not regard this requital as having been exacted in my own private interest, but in that of the whole city. For those who behave in that way, when they see the sort of reward that is in store for such transgressions, will be less inclined to trespass against their neighbors, if they see that you also take the same view".³⁹

Polymestor's actions violate some of the most important ethical codes in heroic society. The laws of *xenia* are sacred and to murder a guest is a monstrous act. Not only did Polymestor kill the child placed in his care, the last of Priam's heirs, but once the boy was dead he denied him the proper burial required by *nomos* and cast him into the sea. To add insult to injury,

³⁹ Translated by W.R.M. Lamb.

Polymestor did not kill Polydorus to save himself or right some personal wrong, but committed the horrifying act out of greed. The fortune that was entrusted to Polydorus proved too much of a temptation to the Thracian king. Hecuba accurately describes the impiety of Polymestor's actions as she laments over the body of her last son:

ἄρρητ' ἀνωνόμαστα, θαυμάτων πέρα,
 οὐχ ὅσι' οὐδ' ἀνεκτά, ποῦ δίκαια ξένων;
 ὦ κατάρατ' ἀνδρῶν, ὡς διεμοιράσω
 χροῶ, σιδαρέω τεμῶν φασγάνω
 μέλεα τοῦδε παιδὸς οὐδ' ὄκτισσας.

A crime no word or name can describe, more than amazement can take in, impious and unendurable! Where is the justice of hosts? Cursed man, how you rent the child's flesh and cut his limbs with the iron sword, showing him no pity!

(714-720)

Hecuba, Agamemnon, and the women of the Chorus leave the audience in no doubt as to the magnitude of Polymestor's guilt. Some act of vengeance, it was expected, had to be performed on behalf of the murdered Polydorus as the society would require justice. Since revenge is a masculine action, Hecuba acknowledges the difficulty of her situation for she is an old slave woman with no power to act violently on behalf of her son: οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην τοῦδε τιμωρεῖν ἄτερ τέκνοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖσι. τί στρέφω τάδε; τολμᾶν ἀνάγκη, κἂν τύχῳ κἂν μὴ τύχῳ ("I cannot have vengeance for my children without his help. Why do I keep pondering this question? I must be brave whether my request is successful or not") (749-51). The audience has already been made aware of the Trojan queen's strong belief in traditional law and custom and would not struggle to believe that this terrible event would be a wrong that she would need to correct. Hecuba tries to avoid taking action herself and follows the correct protocol for a woman who no longer has any living male relatives to act in her stead. As discussed previously, an Athenian woman would require the aid of her *kurios* to perform certain public actions (financial and legal transactions being the most important of these). Agamemnon, as leader of the

Greek army and as Cassandra's master, would be the natural choice for Hecuba's *kurios* in this situation, since he holds the highest position in this stranded society. The queen supplicates Agamemnon not only as a mother, but as a devotee of justice. She does not wish to act on behalf of justice, as it would not be right in her position as a woman, and asks Agamemnon to offer his hand in place of her old womanly one. For as she reminds him: ἔσθλοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς τῆ δίκη θ' ὑπηρετεῖν καὶ τοὺς κακοὺς δρᾶν πανταχοῦ κακῶς ἀεί ("For it is the duty of a good man always to serve justice and to punish the guilty") (844-5).

Hecuba knows what is required according to laws of reciprocity, but Agamemnon does not act in the way one would expect a Greek man to behave. He relinquishes his responsibilities as pre-eminent male in the company and hands this duty as the guardian not only of the weak and female, but also the guardian of justice, over to Hecuba. She would not have acted in the way that she did if it were not for Agamemnon's refusal to behave in a customary manner due to his fear of the army, over which he should have had absolute control (857-63). His fear of their impression of his actions was more powerful than his belief in justice. Agamemnon's actions make him a threat to the democratic ideal as his behaviour is contrary to the manliness required of a citizen male. His masculinity is undermined by his fear and cowardice to act justly on behalf of his ward. This conflict between his heroic imperative to find honour for himself and the Athenian requirement for honour while still protecting the weaker individuals within the society, in itself an action worthy of honour (Fisher 1998:70), does the community a disservice. This series of actions leads directly to Hecuba's inevitable appropriation of the masculine role, the role of *kurios* for her unprotected family. But in addition to acting on behalf of her family, Hecuba has also disempowered Agamemnon by being a stronger moral role model than the Argive king and thus, as Burnett (1998:165) argues, "she must act as the vengeance agent that he would like to be", and by doing this she relieves the king from any responsibility he might have borne. Hecuba must now prove that her actions are just and set an example for the Greek force.

Hecuba does not fall under the traditional category of avenging females in Greek tragedy. Burnett (1998:143) explains that most cases of women acting in retaliation or committing acts of murder are “cases of villainy, not of vengeance”, as “these destructive women worked in self-defence or for material advantage, not for an ideal restitution of honour”. Hecuba is merely attempting to follow society’s rules, but as a woman she is disqualified by her gender as an agent of vengeance. This masculine action taken by a woman colours the just quality of her actions. Segal (1991: 36) argues that the “ingenious cruelty and success of Hecuba’s revenge render her justice problematic. We want her to succeed. With Agamemnon, we connive at the revenge. But when it bursts out on the stage, in the form of the blinded barbarian roaring like an animal, we are horrified by it”. As a modern audience, influenced by Western society’s disapproval of revenge, we are horrified by this kind of violence, but it is unlikely that a classical audience would have found this act of vengeance horrifying, although the brutality of the act may have been alarming. What would, perhaps, have been horrifying to a classical audience would be that the social order had disintegrated to such an extent that a man would not act in a way sanctioned by the gods and the law, but instead would abandon a woman so that she must act as her own *kurios*. Burnett (1998:144) explains that the ‘unnatural’ behaviour attracted unnatural events towards it, including “motifs such as cannibalism, child-murder, incest, and human sacrifice” which highlight the aberration of a woman taking her revenge as a man would, forsaking her feminine role. If this course had been taken by a male figure in the play it is doubtful that an audience, modern or classical, would have been as dismayed by the violence. Hecuba’s position as a disempowered woman who traditionally possessed no honour of her own, but could only try to maintain the honour of her family and her *oikos* now destroyed in the war, places her in a perfect position to act as Euripidean avenger in a play that, according to Zeitlin (1996:176), “is a staging ground for many familiar Euripidean themes and techniques: the oppositions between virgin and mother, slave and free, Greek and barbarian, public and private, enemy and friend, male and female, beast and human”.

Gregory (1991:110) identifies an interesting parallel between Hecuba's transformation and the agents of vengeance. She states that dog imagery seems to be specific to references to the Furies who were the embodiment of revenge against one's blood relatives. They are famously associated with the madness with which Orestes was afflicted after his execution of his mother, but they are not limited to violent actions against one's own family members. Hecuba's transformation into a dog aligns her with the just form of vengeance championed by the Furies in their new incarnation as Athena's agents in the polis. The legitimisation of the Furies by Aeschylus, shifting their representation from monstrous feminine entities to a more rational one, "makes it clear that wounded honour, anger and revenge are not superseded by the legal system and its supernatural backing, but incorporated within the system" (Fisher 1998:83). Hecuba's own recourse to vengeance as a form of justice is legitimised by this representation, drawing together the Athenian 'popular fiction' of Aeschylus with the well-known landmark of Kunossema to create a realistic context for Hecuba's revenge and subsequent transformation (1265).

Another factor one should consider in viewing Hecuba's revenge as justified lies in both the punishment itself and the way in which it was carried out. The execution of Polymestor's heirs does not sit well with a modern audience, and it is unlikely that an Athenian audience would not have been moved by the plight of the two small bodies at first lovingly cosseted by the Trojan women only to be viciously stabbed by the swords hidden in their clothing (1160-1162). Unfortunately for the children, and for Polymestor, the Thracian king killed the last of Priam's sons and left the line without an heir. In Polymestor's self-interest he destroyed the last of the Priamides and now, in order to balance the scales, Hecuba must do the same to his family. The nature of this violence is what has so often led to the criticism of Hecuba's humanity,⁴⁰ but it is the unpalatable shock-factor of the death of the children that makes it so

⁴⁰ This is also problematised by Ovid's description of Hecuba's transformation (*Metam.*13. 565-570) which seems to have become conflated with the prophecy recalled by Polymestor at the end of the play (1265).

effective. It is often overlooked that Hecuba does not bloody her own hands when the revenge is carried out within her tent. Polymestor does not once name her as the one who committed the violent act, only as its instigator. It is important to note, as Meridor (1978:30-31) does here, that “when her plan is carried out Hecuba does not with her own hand perpetrate either the killing of Polymestor’s children (1161-62) or his blinding (1167-71). This agrees with the spirit of Attic law which specifically forbade [one] to hand over a convicted murderer to the injured party”. Hecuba also shows a self-restraint in her revenge, which would have been viewed as admirable and worthy of social honour by an Athenian audience (Fisher 1998:82), by not rushing into her act of vengeance, but first trying to secure sanctioned aid from Agamemnon and by arguing her case eloquently. The queen reinforces her position as a champion of Athenian masculine virtue, embodying the elements which, as mentioned before, should characterise the male heroes in the play. The audience has expectations of figures like Agamemnon rooted in the established characterisation of the general throughout Greek myth and literature.⁴¹ Euripides plays his version of Agamemnon against the established character. Thus, the weakness of the male figures and the unlikely heroism of the female characters are emphasized.

Segal (1993:180-1) seems to transpose the bestial behaviour of Polymestor as he leaves his tent bloody and blinded onto the characters of the Trojan women (1054-78). The description of their behaviour as a “Fury-like sparagmos” (1993:181) confuses the raging Polymestor’s cries for the blood and flesh of the women with the women themselves. Polymestor’s later description of the Trojan women’s actions against him in his agon against Hecuba speaks of their treachery, but does not refer to them in any way that would make them seem beast-like, and in fact it is himself that he characterises as a beast (1056-1078; 1125-6; 1172-5). This would not have made him worthy of pity or sympathy from an audience, since he insists on ‘othering’ himself to seem more violent and less human, which makes his action against Polydorus all the more plausible and hateful.

⁴¹ The acceptance of Odysseus as a virtuous warrior is more problematic.

Polymestor's identification as a king of Thrace is another established literary trope which gives the audience a set of expectations with regards to the barbarian, greedy and deceitful nature of the man. Euripides uses these expectations to accentuate the otherness of the king. Polymestor goes on to ask whether he should behave like Orion and fly to the heavens (1100-2). This reference to Orion again emphasises his guilt and the unsympathetic nature of his character.⁴² In the agon against Hecuba Polymestor is given the opportunity to convince Agamemnon and the Athenian audience that he did not deserve his punishment, and that Hecuba was remiss in avenging Polydorus. Polymestor does not take this opportunity to clear his name, and perhaps even take his own vengeance on Hecuba. Burnett (1998:172) argues that "Polymestor has been presented throughout as a greedy and grotesque barbarian, a savage who feeds on others' civility, and in these final scenes his punishment is an ugly but exact communal return upon him". Meridor (1978:31) and Burnett (1998:172) agree that if Euripides would have wished his audience to find Hecuba's revenge unseemly or unjust, then he would have portrayed the figure of Polymestor in a more favourable light. His status as the reprehensible antagonist in the play is necessary for the acceptance, by the Athenian audience, of the negative qualities which he embodies. An Agamemnon figure who behaved so far out of character, much further out of character than the way he is portrayed in the play, might not be as believable to the audience.

Burnett (1998:177) describes the paradox of motherhood in plays such as *Hecuba* and *Heraclidae* as "the impulse that moved Alcmena and Hecuba to unsex themselves and behave like men", and the maternal aspect of Hecuba's character cannot be ignored. It is emphasised by Euripides appealing to the sympathies of the Athenian audience who would readily accept the maternal imperative to protect her children. Her children are all she has left to live for, and if she should lose them to the greed and selfish desires

⁴² Orion, having assaulted Oenopion's daughter Merope, was blinded and banished. Polymestor would not be as fortunate as Orion in having his sight restored by the sun.

of the Greeks then she will perform her just violence in return. The old queen has no fear of death, for death would be a welcome release from her grief and her slavery; thus she is free to act outside of her gender's boundaries as she does not fear the social repercussions of her actions, having no desire to protect her reputation over the life of her child. She is defending the honour of divine law and social contract. Without these the society in which these figures exist would begin to resemble the stranded Greek army: directionless, leaderless and without moral compass. It is only after the joint attempts of mother and daughter to act in accordance with age-old laws of sacrifice and revenge, a gift for a gift, a wrong for a wrong, that balance is restored and the ocean and the winds become favourable once more. It is this balance which is required in the Athenian *polis*, but, if one follows what Euripides illustrates in the *Hecuba*, this balance is difficult to achieve, fraught with moral debates and a serious enquiry into the relative importance of the different aspects of masculine society in Athens.

Chapter Five: *Nomos* in the *Hecuba*

In the previous chapters I have discussed the tensions within the Athenian masculine *polis* which Euripides explores in the *Hecuba* with regard to democratic rights of speech and the conflicts between aristocratic or heroic violence and revenge and what was appropriate in a democratic context. In this chapter I will discuss the difficulty classical Athenian society may have had reconciling traditional laws and values which could empower the individual at the expense of the community, or could benefit the community to the detriment of individual self-interest. I will also discuss the necessity of these laws in shaping the Athenian notion of civilisation and how a lack or loss of these laws, which the male figures in the play seem to support, could have an impact on the 'civilised' identity of Athenian society. This identity was necessary for Athens to disassociate herself from the population groups which she sought to control after the formation of the Delian League. If, however, a loss of *nomos*, which Gregory (1991:105) defines as "a shared intellectual awareness of obligation", was necessary to gain the kind of power which Athens sought in the late fifth century, then she might also lose her claim to civilisation, which would in turn have consequences for how the *polis* shaped its own identity.

5.1. *Nomos* and the feminine

Women have a special relationship with the religious health of the *polis*. While women were not welcome in all public spheres of Athenian society, religious observances were the purview of the wives, mothers and daughters of the citizens of the city. Private and public were not clearly divided according to gender lines in classical society. Men had their own roles to play in the traditionally female dominated space of the *oikos*, just as women had positions of power within the state's public religious forum. The role of women in tragedy as 'defenders of the faith' is therefore a reasonable characterisation for these figures. The *nomoi* are entrenched in the political and social make-

up of the *polis* and are plausibly associated with the religious aspects of the *polis*.

The *nomoi* are viewed as being sanctioned by the gods, and the moral virtues associated with these laws can place them within the scope of the female domain in the public sphere. Polyxena and Hecuba as maiden and matron represent the feminine aspect of society associated with emotion and mystery, which is far removed from the logic and violence of the masculine territory of the *polis*. It is only by combining their feminine responsibilities with their masculine words and actions that the audience can accept that *nomos* could be the aspect of their civilisation which draws together all the different spheres of the society: male, female, slave, and metic. This *isonomia* is intended to protect all those who live in the *polis*, but if traditional values are threatened by democracy and fade in the face of imperialism, then the moral integrity of the *polis* also seems to be under threat. Gregory (1991:100), with reference to the *agon* between Hecuba and Odysseus, speculates that while Hecuba's attempt to convince Odysseus to respect the Athenian norms (*nomos* and *xenia*) is unsuccessful, it does make the audience more sympathetic to her cause and "may inspire them to question the double standard of justice prevailing in fifth-century Athens: within the *polis isonomia*; outside the *polis*, the ruthless imposition of Athenian power".

5.2. *Nomos* in Greek philosophy

The concept of *nomos*, and its counterpart *physis*, provided philosophers in the fifth and fourth centuries with a lively debate reflected in the drama and literature of the time. *Nomos* is accepted as referring to a series of laws or moral obligations established by custom. Bryant (1996:158) explains that "it provided a bulwark for the law-abiding citizens, a resource that offered not only moral guidance and 'good order', but also ensured the practical efficiency of those principles so essential to the proper functioning of the *polis koinonia*". *Physis* refers to the natural order and natural behaviour of all things. In classical Greek thought it was generally believed that all things that occurred in nature or behaved according to their natural tendencies were good and

right and would lead to a prosperous life in the fulfilment of the ultimate happiness (Taylor and Lee 2012). One side of the debate asserts that the *nomoi* are not natural and are merely created by humans in order to police them and deny their natural instincts. These natural instincts, as reflected in nature, included the exploitation of the weak by the strong and encouraged the individual to act out of his own self-interest. If *nomos* was not natural then it could not be right or truly just and was therefore without any real authority. Taylor and Lee (2012) provide the following perspective: “Humans adopt moral conventions as a necessary survival strategy in a hostile world”, but this survival strategy requires the individual to abandon his or her natural instincts of self-preservation⁴³. The other side of the debate argues that this necessity for human survival which leads to the creation of *nomos* is a natural process. In order for society to exist and function at its highest level, humans are led by their natures to create laws and moralities which would sustain their civilization. While self-interest is argued to be a natural inclination, the survival of the species would take precedence.

Another version of the defence of *nomos* is the argument that some laws and customs are not natural constructions and these laws seem to be specific to certain societies and not others, as discussed by ethnographers like Herodotus (Segal 1993:198). Other laws are universal, like the laws to worship one’s gods and respect one’s parents. These universal laws are not written into existence by human hands, but are a natural expression of being human and therefore are accepted as having authority (Taylor and Lee 2012). Bryant (1996:174) argues that “while a majority appear to have followed Protagoras in holding that ‘natural man’ was incomplete and unviable, and that human life required the higher civilising contribution of *nomos* to ensure its existence and perfection, others viewed the welter of prevailing customs, laws, and beliefs as mere artifice, conventions designed to serve the interests of certain groups at the expense of naturally superior individuals”.

⁴³ Taylor and Lee (2012) describe this as a “stunting of human nature”.

5.3. *Nomos* and society

In a society which defines itself through its political system and martial prowess, discussions of right and wrong, just and unjust, honour and dishonour, reward and punishment are all important debates for the survival of the state. It is understandable that such a society would see the value in debating the validity of the state's authority over individuals. While, as I have mentioned previously, Athens may have prided herself on putting her own needs above all others, individual Athenians were discouraged from acting out of self-interest in order to protect the whole. The problem with the significance of *nomos*, then, is that if the *nomoi* (and any other social norms) were man-made and without authority, then the state would not be able to control its individuals by using these laws. If the state, then, cannot control its individuals in cases of war, in particular, the state could not act as a unit in its own interests against the aggressor. Gregory (1991:8) argues that the virtues and morals which were such an essential part of what it meant to be a hero in the heroic age, according to Homer in particular, "could prove problematic for a society like that of democratic Athens, which depended for its successful functioning not on an outstanding individual accomplishment but on the unified efforts of a majority of citizens". In the context of the *Hecuba*, Agamemnon's desire to keep up appearances in front of the army, Odysseus' need for expediency, and Polymestor's blatant avarice are the actions of individuals who are acting out of their own interests. The complexity of *nomos* is that it was established in a time when, as Gregory explains above, the interests of the individual were the priority of the society, and thus it was necessary to preserve these interests. However, what the *Hecuba* seems to illustrate is that even in a democratic state in which the interests of the group as a whole take precedence *nomos* is still required to preserve the moral integrity of the state.

The importance of *nomos* to Greek society is further complicated by the relationship between *nomos* and religion. If *nomos* was an artificial contrivance, and had its basis in religious belief, then religion too could be viewed as a mere convention without any 'natural truth'. Bryant (1996:174)

explains that the connection the *polis* has to its religion is one of the elements which binds the people (not just the citizens) of Athens to form a strong ties to the *koinonia* of the *polis*. By removing the support structure of *nomos*, which takes the form of the validity and authority of religion in the Athenian *polis*, these traditional laws become destabilised and invite social confusion and behaviour which endorses self-interest at the expense of the community (Bryant 1996:174). This connection between *nomos* and religion may explain why the gods are not obviously present in the play. It seems that the gods are made conspicuous by their absence in the *Hecuba*. Only Dionysus is specifically named in the text, and this only occurs at the very end of the play (1267). There is no *deus ex machina* to visibly guide the events of the play; instead the dead lead the characters from misfortune to misfortune. Zeitlin (1996:172-216) argues that there is enough evidence in the play to support the presence of Dionysus as the director of the disasters and the punishment of the immoral Polymestor. The animal imagery, the images of cannibalism and *sparagmos*, the importance of prophecy to the final actions, the bestial madness of Polymestor, alludes to an “exemplary Dionysiac plot, the one that arouses men’s deepest fears, when mothers who love children and hold them close turn in anger against them – their own or those of others – and in a reversal of roles do injury to the bodies of men”. The inversion and reversal of roles, as well as the transgression of moral boundaries, are common themes in Dionysian tragedy (Segal 1982:160). This nominal presence, combined with the thematic links scattered through the text attested to by Zeitlin, reflects the murkiness of the discussion of *nomos* in the Athenian philosophical consciousness. The Homeric ideals of religious observance and adherence to customs which had been embedded in the Hellenic ethos had become problematic issues in the fifth century and Euripides uses the *Hecuba* as a testing ground for a hypothetical society where these norms are in flux.

A breakdown of *nomos* in classical society would come with its own set of socio-political problems which would, in turn, find an outlet in tragedy. Seaford (1998:11) explains that the new preference for commercial exchanges, instead of the traditional *nomos* of reciprocation, would “bring into the moral world of every Athenian a new kind of anxiety requiring the kind of symbolic

resolution, the reconciliation of the old with the new". I would argue that the *Hecuba* illustrates this anxiety about how a man can retain his honour, power, rights as a citizen, and, most importantly, his freedom while attempting to balance his own interests with the interests of the *polis*.

Euripides was known for exploring a variety of social, political and philosophical attitudes at play in fifth-century Athens and as Dillon (2004:48) attests Euripides was acknowledged in later antiquity in particular as "a mouthpiece of philosophical doctrines, both ethical and 'physical'". It would have been no surprise to Euripides' audience that he would explore as topical an issue as social norms and moralities. Hall (1989:215) confirms that Euripides does seem to be familiar with the views of the sophists which are reflected in certain passages in his works. The *Hecuba* is more a discussion of acceptable social behaviour than it is a story of an enslaved queen wreaking havoc on unsympathetic men. I agree with Bryant (1996: 179) that Euripides was not "a shield-bearer for any particular school of thought" and so would have been unlikely to subscribe to one particular side of the argument. In this play Euripides pits the argument supporting the natural authority of the *nomoi* against the argument which denies this natural authority of traditional law. The latter is represented by the antithesis of the masculine hero in the form of the aged slave woman.

The social attributes and problems which impede the authority of *nomos* are represented by the flawed male characters in the play, with both Greeks and Thracians behaving badly, slaying innocents for personal gain. As mentioned previously, Odysseus approaches Hecuba on the pretext of honouring Achilles as the greatest of Greek warriors by sacrificing Polyxena. Odysseus insists that this is not only a reasonable request, but it is also in accordance with the *nomoi*. This sacrifice fulfils two *nomoi*, the first being the prize, often in the form of a captive woman, owed to honour, and the second the blood sacrifice which is necessary for a proper burial. It is Polyxena's great misfortune that she must become a prize for the honourable dead. However the sacrifice more closely resembles an attempt to buy off Achilles' ire so that

the army might be released to return home, as illustrated in the previous chapter. This would not be covered by the expectations of *nomos*, but rather the self-interest on the part of the dead hero and Odysseus himself. Odysseus exasperates Hecuba further by ignoring her supplication of him. The customary laws of supplication require Odysseus to return the favour should this favour be called in by the one who stayed the hand that would have killed him (Bryant 1998:82). Odysseus' supplication of Hecuba during the war requires him to respond in kind, but Odysseus uses that law only as far as it suits him, without blatantly violating the *nomos*. He agrees to spare a life for Hecuba, as long as that life is Hecuba's and not her daughter's. There is no law that would prohibit him from exchanging Polyxena's life for Hecuba's, but this would not serve his plan. Zeitlin (1996:194) takes Odysseus' obligation to Hecuba one step further by arguing that Odysseus is Polymestor's equal since he is responsible for the death of Polyxena, in a sense, as Polymestor is for the death of Polydorus.

Agamemnon behaves equally poorly when his fear of what the army would think of him if he sided with the victim overwhelmed his role as a justice-serving king who should bow to the demands of *nomos* and not the demands of the mob. As the principal general of the Greek force it should be his responsibility to set the standard for the moral behaviour of the entire army. What makes Agamemnon's refusal to participate in the punishment of Polymestor frustrating, for Hecuba and the audience, is not that like Odysseus he has used only the parts of the law that are useful to him, but that he agrees that Polymestor should be punished. However, his desire for justice is not as strong as his cowardice: καὶ βούλομαι θεῶν θ' οὔνεκ' ἀνόσιον ξένον καὶ τοῦ δικαίου τήνδε σοι δοῦναι δίκην ("for the gods' sake and for the sake of justice I desire that your impious host should pay the penalty for his deeds") (852-853). The Argive king finds a variety of excuses to support his argument that it would not be prudent for him to act on Hecuba's behalf (854-863), but none of these reasons should be strong enough to override the *nomos* of Hecuba's act of supplication or Polymestor's dangerous violation of *xenia*. It is only in the aftermath of Hecuba's punishment, once she has acted as role

model for the Greeks and done what he could not, that Agamemnon acts in accordance with the laws and judges Polymestor in Hecuba's favour. Gregory (1991:101) points out that this conclusion points to the dependence of *nomos* on "the willingness of the powerful" to sanction the laws rather than any "independent authority" that the *nomoi* may possess.

Polymestor is clearly the most badly behaved of these three kings, with his greedy grasping of Polydorus' Trojan treasure, and it is this same greed which Hecuba uses against him to lure him to his death. Burnett (1998: 163) refers to Polymestor as "an enemy of culture" as he has broken the *nomos* of *xenia* which is one of the most important laws in heroic culture. *Xenia* was the ultimate gentlemen's agreement where everyone agreed to play according to the same rules.⁴⁴ It was a sacred trust extended to strangers, foster children and diplomatic envoys, and was policed by Zeus himself. Polydorus was Polymestor's responsibility as his guest and his foster child, and also because of the social contract between Priam and Polymestor entrusting the money and the boy to his care. Polymestor makes his despicable actions even more horrific by denying the boy his right to a proper burial. Epic literature and popular myths are very clear on the rights of the dead and the audience would not have been surprised to see Polydorus' ghost wandering without comfort instead of taking his rightful place in the realm of Hades, the sad illustration of what happens when one does not look after one's dead.

It is interesting to note that none of the Greeks in the play are punished beyond the gods' prevention of their *nostoi*.⁴⁵ The barbarian king acts as a scapegoat for all the male characters, a sacrifice on behalf of all the male figures to find the moral equilibrium once more. While the slaying of Polymestor's children is horrific and tragic, they too could be seen as reparation for the other two young lives lost in the course of the play's

⁴⁴ In a time before inns and hotels the kindness of strangers would be essential for one's survival in a potentially hostile climate. *Xenia* kept all the players of the heroic game alive and ensured everyone's best diplomatic behaviour.

⁴⁵ Could we view Agamemnon's death and Odysseus' dangerous voyage as their delayed punishment for their actions on this spit of land?

injustices, a reciprocal action just as horrifying as Polymestor's slaughter of Polydorus.

5.4. *Charis*

Charis, defined for the purposes of this thesis as reciprocity, is one of the fundamental elements of *nomos*.⁴⁶ The reciprocation of both gifts and violence is an important theme in the epics of Homer and is established as a crucial part of archaic Greek life. This *nomos* is what prompts the sacrifice of Polyxena as well as the revenge on Polymestor. Reciprocity itself was a custom in crisis, threatened by the new form of government, democracy. By the time Euripides staged the *Hecuba* (approximately 425/424 BCE) democracy had become an essential aspect of what it meant to be an Athenian man. Athenians were extremely proud of their status as a *polis* ruled by the citizens and not by a single ruler or an oligarchy. However, democracy and the traditional customs and laws of Athens did not necessarily make good bedfellows. Seaford (1998: 10) argues that the classical *polis* would not do away with reciprocity in its entirety and that it would have remained important to a nation which values its past and its heroic heritage, but *charis* would become "marginalized and problematized" for a variety of reasons. Missiou (1998: 188) describes reciprocity as incompatible with fifth-century democratic policies with particular reference to foreign policy: "Government of a monarchic or aristocratic type seems to have needed and used the rhetoric of reciprocity in their foreign policy; for them inter-state relations were personal relationships between members of their elite".

This aristocratic obligation would not have been necessary in a democratic *polis*. Missiou (1998:181-197) specifically compares the behaviour of Sparta to that of Athens in the period just before and then during the Peloponnesian War. While Sparta had certain expectations of Athens' obligation to them, Athens would not reciprocate appropriately. It is unclear whether this shift away from traditional custom was a purposeful move on the part of Athens. It

⁴⁶ In the same way that *xenia* can be said to be a part of the social laws that make up the *nomoi*.

is, however, quite clear that without the power they had accumulated as 'leaders' of the Delian League their obligation to honour the gifts, whatever form they might take, would probably have been more compelling as they would not have had the wealth and the power to support their move to disregard *charis*, which was an obvious affront to the Spartans. Missiou (1998:184) uses the Mytilene debate (427 BCE) as another indicator of the evolving perspectives on the place of reciprocity in fifth-century society. In this debate (Thuc. 3.36-48) the more traditional Cleon argues for the wholesale execution of all the people of Mytilene, including the women and children, in order to fulfil the *nomos* of *charis* since everyone took part in the revolt in one way or another. Diodotus does not disagree that there should be punishment for the revolt; however, he argues that only those individuals who led the revolt should be executed. This more lenient approach to the actions of the Mytileneans reflects a possible shift from the traditional view of violent justice to one of political expedience.

Charis in the *Hecuba* is most clearly embodied by Hecuba's revenge, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. While the sacrifice of Polyxena goes against the *nomos* which prohibits human sacrifice, and Odysseus' validation of the excuse in the name of honour is only compelling as a tool to accomplish his own ends, it should be noted that Hecuba does not take any action against Odysseus for this act. She is willing to overlook the sacrifice, even though she regards it as improper. Polyxena herself behaves admirably and with more honour than the male characters, who have been honoured so highly in war. She takes on a role which makes her seem more than human, an ideal rather than a murdered slave girl and is honoured in turn with gifts and all the trappings of a suitable burial for a princess. As mentioned above, Burnett (1998:159) explains that the actions of these feminine others stand as examples of proper behaviour in Greek society, teaching them that "a return is always owed from one creature to another, whether for splendour or for viciousness, and in the course of this tragedy they help their Greek counterparts to relearn this great *nomos*, first as the law of gratitude, then as the law of retaliation".

One of the examples given, by critics of her conduct like Segal (1993), to prove Hecuba's callous and dishonourable behaviour is her deception of Polymestor in order to lure him to his punishment in the tent of the Trojan women. As discussed previously, deception, especially the deception linked to speech, is traditionally linked with the feminine. While Zeus' famed disguises to trick women into his bed are viewed as manly pursuits, in tragedy it is usually the female characters that use their words and wiles to achieve their ends. The most famous examples of this are Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, Euripides' Hermione and his Medea with her poisoned gifts. Hecuba fulfils the traditional form of untrustworthy femininity by playing her role as a deceitful woman. Agamemnon asks her how it will be possible for a woman to overpower a man (876 – 79) and she replies that the tent conceals (κεκευqας= 880) a throng of Trojan women. It is clear from her intended actions that Hecuba knows that it is unlikely that a woman can physically harm a man on her own and without the help of a man. She has prepared for this weakness and uses it to her own advantage since Polymestor would never expect a woman, or even a crowd of women, to be a threat to his person. The Trojan queen admits that δεινὸν τὸ πλῆθος σὺν δόλῳ τε δύσμαχον ("There is terror in numbers, numbers joined with guile") (884).

It is my opinion that this guile makes Hecuba a more believable character to an Athenian audience. Her actions throughout the play are so masculine, from her speech to her violent actions, that she would be less likely to stand as a fully formed character without her feminine flaws. There are few 'perfect' female characters in Attic tragedy and those that do exist usually represent the ideal woman such as Alcestis or Andromache. These female characters represent all that classical Athenian society might wish a woman to be. Hecuba is a referent for Euripides' hypothetical experiments and is not meant to represent an ideal, but rather a difficult and complex character which generates a dialogue about notions of power and morality in the last years of the fifth century.

Hecuba resorts to dishonourable deception in order to enforce her rights as an avenger. Her weakness as a woman and a slave, as well as her otherness as a barbarian, means that she relies on the socially constructed strength of *nomos* to ensure that justice is achieved. The weak have no other recourse in Greek society other than these traditional laws which are supposed to protect the powerful and the weak equally. When *nomos* fails those who do not have the force that arms or reputation or wealth provide cannot protect themselves from injustice. Hecuba has no power in this situation and is forced to use underhanded methods to punish Polymestor and avenge her son out of necessity, not due to a flaw in her character.

While it is dangerous to speculate on whether or not Euripides is making a reference to a particular event in Athens' history, the events leading up to the Peloponnesian War are littered with the consequences of city-states that chose to revolt against the leadership of Athens as head of the Delian League. These weaker states did not have the wealth or force of arms that Athens had, nor did they have the opportunity to engage with Athens on their most popular playing-field, that of the law-courts, in order to convince the ruling power that their needs were not being met or that they felt that Athens was abusing her power. Revolution became the tool of the weak, and Hecuba's violent and deceitful actions are a form of revolt against the uncaring ruling powers represented by Agamemnon and Odysseus. If the weak have no recourse to justice they revolt in whatever way they can. Gregory (1991:88) asks the following: "Do the victors have a right to behave exactly as they please, or are they subject to universal standards equally applicable to strong and weak?"

The universality of the *nomoi* becomes an important issue for a nation entering into a phase of imperial rule. It is easier to wield power if there are no laws protecting the weak, or, in this case, if the laws can easily be ignored if it suits the powerful. Agamemnon, Odysseus and Polymestor all rationalise their choice to disregard *nomos* as it does not aid their personal agendas. Their self-interest is more powerful than the law and so they will twist *nomos* to fit their purposes. This leaves Hecuba at a serious disadvantage and she is

unable to act as justly as the critics of her behaviour might wish her to. The queen uses Polymestor's blind greed as a lure, lying to him about the contents of the tent and hiding behind the traditional non-threatening powerlessness of her femininity. Hecuba argues for the universal validity of *nomos*, that these laws should apply to all peoples regardless of where one comes from. In the end even Agamemnon judges Polymestor according to *nomoi* which would traditionally exclude barbarians and be the sole purview of Hellenes: τάχ' οὖν παρ' ὑμῖν ῥάδιον ξενοκτονεῖν· ἡμῖν δέ γ' αἰσχρὸν τοῖσιν Ἑλλησιν τόδε ("Perhaps in your country it is a small thing to kill guests, but to us Greeks this is an abominable deed") (1247-8). In this case neither Polymestor's wealth nor his armed soldiers who escorted him are more powerful than the *nomoi*. His clumsy attempt at speech-making cannot dissuade Agamemnon from his judgement as the Argive states that if he sided with the Thracian he would be as shameful as the barbarian king. However, Agamemnon chooses to take the side of *nomos* more out of a concern for how he would be perceived by others, especially the Greek army, than by his respect for traditional laws (1249). Agamemnon has the power to deny the law, but his self-interest and fear of the disapproval of his men motivates him to do the right thing and side with Hecuba. Euripides makes a point of representing *nomos* as being meaningless without some force or power to support it.

5.5. *Nomos* as a prerequisite for civilisation

Whether one subscribes to the idea that *nomos* is man-made or natural, it would seem that it is required for civilized society to exist. If one perceives *nomos* as something specific to Greek society, which is implied in the text and which is the opinion of the historiographers of the fifth century, then the further implication is that Greek society is set apart by *nomos*, amongst other things. If barbarians are not subject to these laws then they cannot be viewed as of an equal status with the Hellenes, specifically the Athenians. Thus the barbarians cannot truly achieve civilised status. Euripides is careful to contrast the barbarians with the Greeks through the descriptions of Polymestor's kingdom and the traditional heroic reputation of figures such as Agamemnon

and Odysseus. However, as I have mentioned above, the Greek generals behave just as poorly as the barbarian king. It is only by their reputations for excellence in the Homeric epics that the audience would successfully be able to identify them as the civilised ‘protagonists’ of the play, not through their actions. Hecuba straddles the line dividing Greek civilised behaviour from barbarian savagery. She is a barbarian queen reduced to slavery, but she relies on the laws of the Greeks and behaves and speaks in such a way that she would not be viewed as alien and unrecognisable to an Athenian audience⁴⁷.

This familiarity would be necessary for the audience to empathise with Hecuba, but the play does not let the audience forget that she is still a barbarian. This combination of Greek and barbarian traits places Hecuba, once more, on the threshold of civilisation as is reinforced by the space where the actions take place. As Segal (1993:202) explains, “What is at stake here, as in much of late fifth-century literature, is the thinness of the line between civilization and savagery and the ease with which morality and its safeguards can be swept away. Without something like Hecuba’s all-pervasive *nomos*, men would relapse into the pre-civilised condition of Protagoras’ myth”. Euripides places the relevance and validity of *nomos* in the hands of a variety of his female and feminine characters in his extant tragedies, from his Iphigeneias to Dionysos in the *Bacchae*. Sophocles’ Antigone also fulfils this purpose of a defender of *nomos*.

This trend of calling into question the authority of the *nomoi* in tragedy seems to imply that the *nomos/physis* debate was widely known in the educated circles of Athens. *Nomos* is easily associated with the heroic age, and this is illustrated in Attic tragedy with its characters so familiar to the audience from epic poetry. The presence and influence of *nomos* in fifth-century society

⁴⁷ Hecuba does have some heroic cachet due to her status as a Trojan. Trojans were seen, at least in Greek literature, as being the most honourable of the barbarian peoples, which is most apparent in the depictions of Hector. Her Trojan nationality earns her a certain amount of respect, but her status as a woman would negate her heroic birthright, even though she is the mother of Hector.

seems to be less clear if one views the questioning of traditional morality, and the subsequent implications, within tragedy as any kind of reliable measure of what the reality was for classical Athenians. The shift from heroic age ideals of right and wrong seems to have evolved as democracy flourished and imperialism set in. This would probably be a natural process, but one that would not have been without difficulty. As I have mentioned above, and as Gregory (1991:7) explains classical Athens, as a democratic state, was socially and politically innovative in ways which reach as far as our modern age. These innovations were unlike the previous system and so it would not be unreasonable to assume that they required a “wholesale readjustment of the aristocratic code”; the resulting ‘democratic code’ had to undergo its own readjustment as Athens became a greater political power in Greece, renegotiating power and freedom.

Once individual force and power become less of a priority, and the interests of the people as a group become more important, the laws which defend the interests of the individual seem to lose their power. The *Hecuba* appears to question this shift in the moral priorities of Athenian society and the character of Hecuba attempts to show that without the traditional values civilised society degenerates and the weak become even more powerless. The Trojan queen holds herself, the barbarian king Polymestor and the Greek generals to those traditional principles, although the question of whether or not *nomos* is a universal human authority is left open. It could be argued that Hecuba uses the Greek principles of *nomos* in order to exact her revenge out of self-interest and not out of a higher moral purpose.

In the process of his judgement against Polymestor, even Agamemnon mentions that although Polymestor is a barbarian and may not have respect for the sanctity of hospitality, as a Greek Agamemnon is horrified that the Thracian might have ignored this sacred role of host. If *nomos* is not a universal principle, then perhaps it can be regarded as one of the aspects of civilization that draws the line between barbarian and Greek. If this should be the case, then Hecuba’s support and defence of *nomos* puts her firmly on the side of the Greeks, although they destroyed her family and her home, rather

than taking the side of the barbarian king who may have been able to assist her in attaining her freedom.

Surely it would have been preferable for Hecuba to live to the end of her life in Thrace, a country considerably closer to what had been her home, with a friend who had been given the sacred honour of protecting her son, even if he had abused that responsibility, rather than live as a slave to a Greek. Agamemnon offers Hecuba her freedom (754-5), but she gives it up in return for the punishment of her son's murderer. She has no interest in putting her life first; rather she chooses to put justice first. Whether she does this out of grief and her own interests or purely for justice is debatable, as I have mentioned above, but I would argue that Hecuba and Polyxena, the barbarian females, are the only characters in the play who defend *nomos* as the element which separates the good, the just, and the civilised from the savage injustice represented by the male characters stranded in the liminal space of Thrace.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that the *Hecuba* is an example of how tragedy, specifically the tragedy of Euripides, explores tensions within the masculine *polis* through the medium of the feminine Other. While tragedy cannot be relied on as a factual source or a direct reflection of the society in question, it can be viewed as a form of social commentary expounding popular views of that time or commenting on problems or tensions within the society. Euripides, as well as the other extant playwrights of fifth century Athens, use the feminine Other in particular to discuss topical issues which arose in Athenian society. This Other is especially useful in exploring masculine norms or problems which are relevant to the dominant male elite who ruled Athens in the fifth century. By creating a safe space for discussion in tragedy the feminine Other can voice concerns which would be difficult for a masculine voice to express.

Having established the *polis* as masculine, and women as Others in Athenian society, I have addressed three areas which are particularly problematic to a masculine audience. Athens in the fifth century tried to balance the masculine ideals of its pre-democratic age – especially with regard to how one acquires honour through acts of violence – with the new democratic ideals of equality, free speech, and the promotion of the interests of the community above those of the individual. The conflicts between these two ideals problematize the overlapping areas of speech, violence, and traditional law. These three areas of discussion were necessary in order to maintain the power of fifth century Athenian society and became intrinsic components of what it meant to be a man, and therefore a citizen, in Athens.

Free speech was an essential principle of the democratic state necessary for the ideal of social and political equality espoused by the *polis*. This impression of equality is made problematic in the *Hecuba* by revealing the inequality created by the emphasis placed on the ineffectual nature of speech when used by a socially weaker individual, in this case represented by the Trojan

queen Hecuba. The power associated with speech was only feasible if all parties had access to the same rhetorical skills. In the *Hecuba* the queen is portrayed as being a skilled rhetorician, a role not traditionally associated with women in Athens, who attempts to use her verbal dexterity and proficiency to move the powerful male figures to uphold the laws which she supports. These attempts fail due to her position as an enslaved foreign woman and the power of her speech and her status as a suppliant are ignored. Euripides raises questions in this play about whether or not speech can stand alone as a tool of the everyman, or whether it is only reliable in the hands of the powerful. If the self-interested individual has more power than the socially weaker supporter of justice, which would have been possible in an oligarchic society, then one should ascertain whether or not speech is a trustworthy element of democratic society. The aristocratic ideal of individual honour, attained through speech and war, is therefore at odds with a state that claims that all its elite members, in other words male citizens, have an equal status in the eyes of the law in the public, 'spoken' sphere.

The second problematic aspect of Athenian masculine society, as discussed in the *Hecuba*, is the significance of acts of violence and violent revenge in the democratic *polis*. Once more Euripides explores the tensions between the heroic or aristocratic manly ideal and the ideal behaviour of the masculine democratic state. Violent acts are intertwined with honour to the extent that one cannot free violence from the acquisition of honour in the fifth century. While it was possible to win honour through speech in the social and political domains of the *polis*, the most masculine honour was reserved for one's actions on the battlefield.

This need for asserting one's own interests, at the expense of others, was in direct conflict with the democratic necessity to preserve the well-being of the community as a whole. The *Hecuba* illustrates the difficulty of maintaining the heroic views on and ideals of violent actions when these have the potential to be harmful to the community. Violent revenge, as opposed to the legal revenge promoted by the democratic state, is especially problematised in the *Hecuba*. The queen must take her vengeance on Polymestor as it is the right

action to pursue in this situation and in Athenian society it would have been unmanly not to have one's revenge against the one who has insulted you or harmed your household. Hecuba's use of deception and her recourse to a heroic, violent form of revenge raises questions about the difficulty an individual has when the legal system has failed him, as it failed Hecuba when she entreated Agamemnon to no avail and had to take Polymestor's just punishment into her own hands. The power of violence overlaps here with the power, or lack of power, that speech has in the *polis*. These masculine elements, as employed by the feminine Other in the play, seem to require the presence of one another in order to fulfil the requirements of masculine action which, in turn, is defined by the demands of traditional law or *nomos*, but they are further complicated by the role of *nomos* in Athenian society.

Nomos is set up by Euripides in the *Hecuba* as a prerequisite for civilised society. This civilization, in comparison with barbarian society, is a point of pride for Athenian male citizens, and is also used by this dominant portion of the state to create a masculine self-identity. To be an Athenian citizen one must be rational, courageous and well-spoken, while barbarians are most commonly represented as being effeminate and irrational without the civilised habits associated with being an Athenian man. *Nomos* is thus a necessary facet of the Athenian identity, a set of laws which separate them from barbarians. These laws, often associated with the actions of the just, were social constructions which are assumed to have been established in pre-democratic times.

In the *Hecuba* Euripides shows how these laws which should protect all the citizens equally only have the required force if both violence and rhetorical speech are present to support them. A further tension is identified in the play when it becomes apparent that individuals who have sufficient force to support the laws also, therefore, have sufficient power to ignore them in order to safeguard their own interests. This aristocratic self-interested and self-motivated attitude towards traditional laws is a threat to a democratic state which requires the individual to put aside his own desires so that he might prioritise the needs of the community.

Euripides uses the bad behaviour of the male characters in the play to emphasise the nobility of Hecuba's actions, which stand out even more due to her status as Other. By portraying the heroic figure in the play as a woman, her nobility and the justice of her actions are made more apparent and make the ignoble actions of the male figures more offensive to the audience. These actions of the feminine Other stand in opposition to the individualistic motivations of the powerful male characters and highlight the tensions between the democratic masculine ideal and the manly models established for the *polis* in a pre-democratic age. The *Hecuba* then, emphasises the problematic power struggles between the weak and the strong individuals which are entrenched by the tensions between the two contrasting masculine ideals of the *polis*.

The *Hecuba* is unlike the *Helen*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians* or the *Oresteia*, where terrible things happen to good people, but all is well in the end. It is a powerful and highly emotive hypothetical illustration of what happens in a society when the most authoritative aspects of that society, in this case identified as free speech, righteous violence and the *nomoi*, are abandoned in favour of self-interest and greed. The tensions between the heroic and democratic ideals of masculinity leave a society open to adversity, as Euripides demonstrates in this drama which offers no resolution, no easy ending, for the audience.

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