A Preliminary Analysis of *Coincidentia Opporitorum* in Euripidean Drama:
The Case of *Hecuba*¹

John Panteleimon Manoussakis
(College of the Holy Cross and Australian Catholic University)

**The Structure of the Play**
The structure of the play has caused some considerable troubles to its critics.² It seems as if Euripides had brought together two different stories, namely, the one staging Polyxena's sacrifice and the other narrating Polydoros' murder.³ And indeed, the play in its present form is a kind of stitching together of these two pieces⁴ and the exact point of their seam can be unmistakably found in verse 658 when, for the first time, the serving-woman begins to speak, after her return from the shore, and carrying in her hands Polydoros' corpse, announces to Hecuba the bad news of her son's death. From here on, Polyxena disappears and Polydoros' dead body haunts the stage; the sacrificed daughter gives precedence to the murdered son.⁵ Furthermore, some characters appearing in the first half of the play, like Odysseus and Talthybius, are not even mentioned in the second half; while Polymestor, the *causa malis*, stays on the stage for as many as 342 verses, up to the end of the play. However, the dichotomy of the play becomes more obvious through the development of the characters. During the play's course the initial depiction of each main character suffers its uttermost alteration (μετάστασις, 1266).⁶ After these characteristics of the play's structure are taken into consideration, there is no wonder why generations of classicists are at pains to resolve this annoying "defect" which splits Euripides' *Hecuba* into at least two different components. The majority of them propose that the figure of Hecuba be seen as the connecting link between the play's two halves.⁷ They have not paid enough attention, however, to the fact that Hecuba's personality is the one which changes more dramatically and deeply than any other. Thus, we have to turn elsewhere in our search for the reason of such emphatic duplicity.⁸

Change and instability in every aspect is the only real theme of this play. Playfully, we can say that the play's narrative tends to escape our attempts to transfix it into one particular theme like the sand of the shore (ἀκτή, ἐπ’ ἀκταις, 28, as in the
play’s opening scene). And, moreover, it is not the escape of a theme that matters here, but rather the inability to grasp such a fixed point in the narrative; the fluidity itself that permeates the play’s development and gives shape to whatever we might like to call the topic, or even the motif of the play. This impossibility prevails over the play. *Hecuba* is νόμος (song/melody) composed by the νόμοι (laws/rules) not of harmony, but rather of counterpoint. Like a fugue every theme presented here, soon or later, will be overcome by its counter-theme. Theme and counter-theme are interdependent and interrelated. This double character—the duality itself as the play’s norm (νόμος) provides the wider exemplum in, and according to, which the characters, their actions and their language follow this flux of perpetual change.

The Setting of the Play

Speaking of the play’s setting, critics have noticed its sinister character. It has been characterized as a “haunted” place. Within the ten first verses the identity of the place has been explicitly stated: we are in τίνδ’ ἁρίστην Χερσονησίαν πλάκα Ἐρημικίου ἕξον (7-8). Thrace, this Thrace, must be placed beyond the boundaries of proper geography. It is the place of no-where, an almost utopian landscape. It lies between two renowned places, Greece and Asia, but it does not belong to either. The time is lapsing to the same category: before the return to homeland (πρὸς ὸκον εὐθύνοντας, 39), and after the capture of Troy (ἐπεὶ δὲ Τροία ἀπόλλυται, 21). The time of the play fills the gap between these two crucial events of the epic tradition. We are introduced to that place and time by two ghosts: Polydoros and, through Polydoros’ speech, Achilles; the latter representing the honors of the heroic past and the former the hopes of a peaceful future, now of course, both lost. Two tombs frame the play as well: Achilles’ tomb in the beginning and Hecuba’s cenotaph in the end. Anticipating the play’s plot, Polydoros announces in the prologue that his mother is about to face two deaths, the murder of her two children and thus two corpses (δύοιν δὲ παιδοίν δύο νεκρῷ κατόψεται, 45). In this way, the play is split into two distinct dimensions: the realm of the dead (Achilles, Polydoros, and soon after, Polyxena) and the realm of the living (Odysseus, Agamemnon, Polymestor). Therefore, duplicity penetrates the setting which is literally haunted by the number two.
Stagecraft

The stagecraft directions, as they are indicated by the text itself, provide the persons on the stage with no less or more than two pairs of option: left or right (in the horizontal axis), and up or down (on the vertical axis). In the play’s prologue, Polydoros is floating in the air above his mother (ὑπὲρ μητρὸς φίλης/Εκάβης ἀίσσω, 30-1) having first descended to the chthonic realm of the underworld’s gods (τοὺς γὰρ κάτω σθένοντας ἐξηιτησάμην, 49). The same vertical gesture is suggested by the Chorus when it exhorts Hecuba to invoke for help both the gods above and the gods below (κήρυσσε θεοὺς τοὺς τ’ οὐρανίδας/τοὺς θ’ ὑπὸ γαίας, 145-6).

It appears that this “up-and-down” movement, when it occurs, testifies to something more poignant than being merely an accidental description: in the peak of his anxiety, Polymestor, after having seen his children killed and himself having been blinded, expresses the wish to fly up to the high of the stars (ἀμπτάμενος οὐράνιον ὑψιπετὲς ἐς μέλαθρον/Ὡαρίων Ἡ Σείριος, 1100-1), or to descend down to Hades (ἢ τὸν ἐς Ἅιδα/μελάγχρωτα πορθμὸν ἄιξω τάλας; 1104-5). The same up-and-down movement will be enacted by Hecuba herself when, according to Polymestor’s prophesy, she will trace this double direction, perhaps as a part of a ritual, before she meets her apotropaic fate (κρύψηι μὲν οὖν πεσοῦσαν ἐκ καρχησίων...αὐτὴ πρὸς ἱστὸν ναὸς ἀμβήσηι ποδί, 1261, 1263).

Ascending to a high point to be followed by a dramatic fall seems to prescribe a standard “movement” in the course of human affairs in general. It is almost a νόμος (norm/law) of the human condition. It certainly describes the fate of both Hecuba and Polyxena, as well as that of all other Trojan women, inasmuch as in the past they reached the zenith of their prosperity and fortune, and in the present they are lying in the depths of their misfortune, being thus deprived of all things once dear to them.12 “Up-and-down” is the most profound meaning for that enigmatic verb which Polydoros uses in order to describe the fate of his mother upon her first arrival on the stage: ἀντισηκώσας (57). The double motion which the verb expresses is fully developed in the two rhēses; the first delivered by Hecuba (verses 154-168), and especially that of Polyxena’s address to Odysseus (verses 349-367). In the case of the latter, Polyxena gives an account of her previous status: she was almost “equal-to-gods” (ἰση θεοίσι πλην το κατθανείν μόνον, 356), while now she finds herself beneath the human status since she
is a slave. Therefore, she chooses exactly the thing that in the past differentiated her from the gods: τὸ κατθανεῖν.

Up-and-down, but also right-and-left. Horizontal locomotion is governed by the same duality as well. In moments of great anxiety, the characters on the stage can see only two possible ways: left or right. Hecuba, after having learned the bad news of the Greeks’ decision concerning her daughter’s sacrifice, bursts out saying: “What road am I to walk, either this or that?” (ποίαν ἢ ταύταν ἢ κείναν/στείχω; 162-3). In a similar condition of grief and anger, Polymestor duplicates Hecuba’s gesture towards a two-fold escape asking: “Which way shall I change to, this or that?” (ποίαν/ἡ ταύταν ἢ τάνδ’ εξαλλάξω; 1059-60). And few verses later he repeats the same exclamation: “Where am I to turn myself, where make my way to?” (ποί τραπόμαι, ποί πορευθῶ; 1099).

Language
Euripidean vocabulary in Hecuba seems, and not without good reason, to put an emphasis on terms and words of duplicity. So, we must listen again—and this time more carefully—to the text itself.

What I hear now is always already double! Like the words spoken from a mountain’s rock, Echo duplicates them (Ηχὼ διδοῦσα θόρυβον, 1111).13 If we re-narrate Hecuba’s story so that the twin leitmotif can be clearly heard (imagine it as two knocks on your door repeated over and over) then, the text’s double rhythm should be something like this:

This is Hecuba’s story; the story of a δύστηνος woman. She suffered the cruelty of seeing the two corpses of her two children (δυοῖν δὲ παῖδοιν δύο νεκρῷ, 45). Polydoros, her son, was murdered and abandoned in the double motion of the sea’s waves (διαύλοις κυμάτων, 29); her daughter, Polyxena, was sacrificed in Achilles’ tomb, because the two sons of Atreus (δισσοί τ’ Ἀτρείδαι, 510) persuaded the Greek Army to offer her as the honor-prize to the hero’s tomb. They did so by the false power of their double arguments (δισσῶν μύθων, 123). Hecuba then, wished to die along with her daughter so that the hero may be more satisfied by a double portion of blood (δίς τόσον πῶμ’ αἵματος γενήσεται, 391). However, Odysseus refused such an option and Polyxena was slaughtered. Hecuba learned about Polyxena’s death by a messenger, named Talthybios, to whom, even the narration of Polyxena’s sacrifice caused a double amount of tears (διπλὰ με χρήτες δάκρυα,
At that moment, Hecuba discovered her son’s dead body and in the midst of the uttermost pain, she decided to take revenge for the two dead (διπτύχους νεκροὺς, 1287). So, she invited Polymestor, the person who had killed her son in order, as he said, to rid the Achaeans of a double labor (πύνον ἀπαλλάσσον διπλοῦν, 1197), and after stripping him of his twin lances (διπτύχου στολίσματος, 1156), she blinded his two eyes and killed his two sons (παίδων τε δισσῶν σώμαθ’ οὓς ἔκτει ἐγὼ, 1051). After that, she was about to take care of her double anxiety (δισσὴ μέριμνα, 896), and bury her two children before she joined the remainder slaves and the Greek army in their sail back to Greece.

Calling attention to duality and to the twofold-character of the play is achieved to a greater degree by a consistent double repetition. Euripides calls forth every linguistic technique and the echoing duplicity resounds even more effectively. We can provide three different groups of duplicated language. In the first, and larger, category belong words repeated twice successively and in the same form: ἀπ’ ἐμᾶς ἀπ’ ἐμᾶς (96), ἀπωλέσατ’ ὠλέσατ’ (167), ἔξελθ’/ἔξελθ’ (173-4), οἵαν οἵαν (175 and 199), μᾶτερ μᾶτερ (177), δειμαίνω δειμαίνω (184), τέκνον τέκνον (186, 684, and again 694), μάνυσόν μοι, μάνυσον (192-3),14 φίλους φίλους (328), ἐσθλὸς ἐσθλὸς (597), καινὰ καινὰ (689), κακῶν/κακόν (903-4), δορὶ δὴ δορὶ (908), ὀλέθριον ὀλέθριον (1031), ἀκέσαι ἀκέσαιο (1067), βοὰν βοὰν (1092), δεινὰ δεινὰ (1097). In the second category belong those words which are followed immediately by the same word but in a different case or number: γοερ ὸν γοεραῖς (84), Δαναοὶ Δαναοῖς (138), δειλαία δειλαίου (156), δειλαία δειλαίωι (203), δειλαία δειλαίων (206), κακῶν κάκ’ (233), κακῶν κακοῖς (588), ἔτερα δ’ ἀφ’ ἔτερων (690), κακὰ κακῶν (690), νόμος νόμωι (800), τυφλὸν τυφλῶι (1050), πήμα πήματος (1168). In the third category the effect of repetition is attained either by words followed by a synonym—e.g., ἀκλαυτὸς ἄταφος (30), ἄνυμφος ἄνυμεναιος (416), ἀστένακτος ἀδάκρυτος (691)—or by words followed by the same word in a negative form—e.g., γάμος οὐ γάμος (947), ἀπώλεσ’ οὐκ ἀπώλεσ’ (1121), νῦμφην τ’ ἄνυμφον (612), παρθένον τ’ ἀπαρθένον (612).

Characters
From studying of the development of the characters, it is instantaneously noticed that attributes of a character match,
resemble or confront characteristics of another to such an extent that becomes especially difficult, if not impossible, to analyze a character individually. Rather, we need to look at both, to place the one next to the other, to compare them so that we may enable ourselves to comprehend the context of their actions. The characters of this drama are interrelated; they could not exist, at least in the way they do, on their own. The other is always needed; it is through their other that their actions are prompted, as they always speak and behave in always response to this other.

In consistency with the profound dual quality of the drama, I think that the characters should be discussed in couples, that is, in units of two. Since every person imitates, anticipates and reacts to the actions of another, we need to consider both of them as a single unit which functions in this or that way within the broader development of the play. These units, however, are not firm; two persons come together, let’s say under the same label, but only in regard to a certain aspect or on the basis of a specific concept (e.g., revenge, sacrifice, nobility). Therefore, treating the characters as two-fold entities allows us to get a more complete picture of the dynamics followed by the drama’s discourse. The suggested couplings of characters are the following: 1) Polymestor and Polydoros, 2) Polyxena and Achilles, 3) Polymestor and Hecuba, and 4) Hecuba and Hecuba.

1. Polymestor and Polydoros:
Both, Polymestor and Polydoros, the victimizer and the victim, have been united under the powerful sign of crime. Murder has bound them eternally together. Their relationship appears to be quite stronger than that between a lover and a loved one. I am not saying this as a mere metaphor. Who doubts that death and especially murder have sexual overtones? Moreover, Polydoros’ identity cannot be fixed in any stable category. He is only defined as a being “carried about” all binary oppositions. He is φορούμενος (29). He belongs to that ambivalent space; to the gray area; to whatever occupies the space in between: “between Hades and the living, between sea and land, between life and death.” This ambiguity, profoundly infecting his status, must be applied, I think, to every aspect of his identity and thus to his sexuality as well.

This is the picture: Polymestor has penetrated the young body of Polydoros by his sword (σιδαρέωι τειμών φασάγαναι, 717). Polydoros met his fate naked (ἀθρησον σῶμα γυμνωθέν
νεκροῦ, 679). There is something emphatically pederastic here which cannot be avoided. Wasn’t the body of Polydoros, after all, taken as a girl’s body? Hecuba in the process of anagnorisis (670-80) assigned two possibilities, first Polyxena and then Cassandra, as the possible identity for Polydoros’ corpse. We have to imagine him, therefore, as bearing potentially effeminate characteristics.

Later the roles between Polydoros and Polymestor were reversed. Polymestor met his fate while stripped of his garments as well (γυμνὸν μ’ ἔθηκαν, 1156). Naked. But not only that. It would not be enough. He was also blinded. Blinded of his two eyes! Eyes: this metonymic image of one’s testicles. Polymestor has crossed the defined boundaries of the sexes. This enables him to prophesize; uttering the dark prophecies about Hecuba’s metamorphosis and Agamemnon’s murder he was masquerading as Tiresias, the famous seer and androgyne. Tiresias was also blind. Polymestor was castrated and thus feminized.18

Segal has drawn attention to the fact that Polymestor’s character, his name, his cannibalistic fury and his desire for revenge enact the mythical realm of Homer’s Cyclops and especially Polyphemos.19 However, Zeitlin alone examines this parallel on the grounds of a Euripidean play which deals with the same theme, namely the Cyclops.20 Unfortunately, she misses the allusion to the pederastic passion, so obvious and self-evident in Euripides’ aforementioned play. As a small example, we can offer a representative passage in which Polyphemos says: ἥδομαι δὲ πως/τοῖς παιδικοῖσι μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς θήλεσιν (583-4). Therefore, if there indeed exists a parallel between the Thracian King and the blinded Cyclops, we should list under their common characteristics, besides the violation of xenia, the anthropophagy and the blindness, the pederastic desire as well.21

Polymestor described himself as a ship “carried about” on the sea’s waves (φέρομαι..., 1075, 1080). The corpse also of the boy, who had never become a man, was found on the seashore (ἐπ’, 28, 36, 697). What exactly is a seashore? Isn’t this the ambivalent space in which the sea is mixed with the land? To what dominion then does the seashore belong? To the sea’s? To the land’s? What is the realm to which Polydoros belong? Is he a male or a female? Is he alive or dead?

We will understand more completely how this fatal couple functions if we turn to the second unit of our analysis, that of Polyxena and Achilles.
2. Polyxena and Achilles:
If with Polydoros and Polymestor we have entered the realm of Eros and Thanatos, with Achilles and Polyxena we will conclude it. What is the element that has brought these two persons under a single heading? If crime unites the previous unit, nobility (and later on, sacrifice) is the common ground for this one. The epithet ἄριστος is attributed only two times to two different persons in the course of the entire drama. Achilles is characterized as “the best of all the Danaans” (ἄριστον Δαναῶν πάντων, 134), and Polyxena is said to have “noble spirit” (ψυχήν τ’ ἀρίστην, 580). Nobility, the most prevailing component of the heroic world, sustains its meaning in the deeds of a dead hero—therefore idealized by his companions—and in the decision of a young girl to die early enough so as not to be corrupted by the unstable postwar conditions.

According to Bataille, sacrifice is nothing else but the “sacred” side of murder’s coin. Achilles appears to have demanded Polyxena as his κλέος. But the only evidence of this is found in Polydoros’ prologue. Hecuba seems to ignore (or, at least, to pretend to ignore) such an explicit demand, focusing individually on Polyxena; that explains, inter alia, her attempt to convince Odysseus that Helen or any other of the Trojan women could be a potential victim as well. But that is quite not the case. Achilles’ nobility ought to be honored with an equally noble victim. Therefore, Polyxena’s nobility has anticipated her fate. Like a mark, a sign, “a marvelous stamp of distinction” (δεινός χαρακτήρ κἀπίσημος, 379) on her skin, nobility has distinguished her from the beginning and has made her the appropriate sacrificial victim. Polyxena is doomed to die because of her nobility; her noble character opens the unavoidable way to death. On the sacrificial altar she fulfills her destiny: she takes in marriage the worthiest husband that she could have ever dreamt of, an equally noble man, Achilles himself.

Polyxena’s sacrifice recalls in our minds the death of another virgin, namely, Iphigeneia; but the latter—at least in the Euripides’ account—was not sacrificed; she had escaped death, at the last moment, by being substituted by an animal. Polyxena, however, was sacrificed, and her position was nothing but the one appropriate to a beast. We have an case of a human sacrifice (ἀνθρωποσφαγεῖν) there where the sacrifice of an animal (βουθυτεῖν) ought to have been appropriate (260-1). Polyxena’s replacement of the traditional bestial victim opens a twofold potentiality: the sacrifice of a human being instead and in the place of an animal “is answered by a transformation of human
murders into their bestial equivalent.” The scheme has as follows: either a human being sacrifices an animal or a human being is sacrificed as an animal and therefore it is the victimizer who turns to play the role of the victimized animal. Here, we face another aspect among the many which demarcates the multiple crossing of the human/animal boundaries.

If the attitude of the Greek soldiers, standing there and illicitly watching her, has something of voyeurism, that is because a sacrifice bears always a certain resemblance to sexual intercourse. Polyxena’s sacrifice has a little more. She herself exposes her body and strips her body naked, so beautiful to be compared only with a statue. And then, on the one hand we have the violence of the sword penetrating her naked body, violating her virginity, and on the other, her blood which saturated the ground of Achilles’ tomb, an eloquent image of her hymeneal blood. She was given. She willingly offered herself to Death. She became a bride of the dead Achilles. Hence the “anomalous status of her virginity”; she is a virgin no more, no longer a maid (νύμφην τ’ ἄνυμφον παρθένον τ’ ἀπάρθενον, 612), for at the moment of death she is given to him. According to a well-known legend, Achilles, during his life, had been in love with Polyxena; if this is the case, then the unfulfilled desire became truth (Achilles had made Polyxena his wife), through death, or better, because of death, at the very moment of her sacrifice.

3. Polymestor and Hecuba:
Our decision to form the characters of the play into two-fold units can be justified and moreover, manifested in the most explicit way, in the case of Polymestor and Hecuba. At last, the necessity which forces such a combination will reveal itself in all its sharpness. For even Polymestor and Hecuba are nothing more but a simple variation on the same theme; two instant appearances of the same character; two inseparably halves of the same horrific mask; a single person named differently. This coincidentia reigns over the whole Euripidean drama. It is the most frightening point of his thought. It stretches to death our least effort of understanding; before anything else, the coincidentia has rendered any hope for meaning useless, nonsensical and vain. And that because our thought needs both division and opposition in order to classify things and understand them. Coincidentia denies to our thought the privilege of these bipolar oppositions; it is not so much that it disturbs every potentiality of order, but rather, it marks the limits of
order itself by putting it in question. It is impossible to think of something coinciding in two opposite categories at the same time; of something “negative” and simultaneously “positive”—a contradiction to itself. This coincidentia is Euripides’ final statement on the politics of his time. More about all this later.

Back to Hecuba’s and Polymestor’s case. Close your eyes now and imagine. Recall for a moment in your mind Hecuba’s first appearance on the stage. She has just left Agamemnon’s tent, she is a helpless woman, with her city and all her previous prosperity lost; she was once a queen and now a slave, her friends proved to be her most bitter enemies; moreover, she has to face the death of her two children, she does not know where to stand, where to go.

Let me start again: Close your eyes and imagine. Recall now the moment when Polymestor enters the stage for the second time. He has just left Hecuba’s tent. Do you notice any essential difference? He is a helpless man, deprived of his city and with all his previous prosperity lost; he was once a king and now almost a slave, his friends proved to be his most bitter enemies; moreover, he faced the death of his two children, he does not know where to stand, where to go.

Euripides is “cheating” his audience by making his drama start and end with the same gesture. It is not difficult to imagine him laughing up his sleeve; he made Hecuba and Polymestor appear like the King and the Queen of the same playing-card, the only difference is how you look at it. Whatever has been said about Hecuba is equally accurate for Polymestor as well.

But let us take a close look at their similarities. Hecuba suffers the loss of her children but so does Polymestor. Both wish nothing more than to take revenge on those who had hurt them. Both approach bestiality; Hecuba will be transformed into a dog (κυών γενήσῃ, 1265) and similarly Polymestor describes himself as a hunted beast which is eager to rend and devour the flesh of its hunter (σαρκῶν ὀστέων τ’ ἐμπληθὸ/θοίνας ἄγριων πιθέμενος θηρόν, 1071-72). Agamemnon, the traditional enemy of Hecuba, has proved himself a friend, while he treats Polymestor, his traditional friend, as an enemy. Both, Polymestor and Hecuba, share, to a certain degree, an association with Dionysus; the former appears as the god’s prophet (ὁ Θρηιξὶ/μάντις εἶπε Διόνυσος τάδε, 1267), while Hecuba—besides the double connection of her name with ivy (3 and 398)—decides and accomplishes her dreadful deed under Bacchic influence (κατάρχομαι νόμον/βακχεῖον, 685-6), and as a bacchant of
Hades (1076). Throughout the play, Hecuba makes an extended use of her skills in sophistry and rhetoric (at least once she weaves the encomium of Persuasion (814-819) while later, she accuses Polymestor for being a sophist himself (1187-1194). However, the pleas of both, Hecuba’s towards Odysseus and Polymestor’s towards Agamemnon, failed to achieve their purposes. They both experience the double condition of the victim and the victimizer; they are both, deceivers and deceived. Summarizing it in a single phrase: “the opposites become twins.”

4. Hecuba and Hecuba:
The omnipresent phenomenon of duplicity enables us to speak of a double or even of two Hecubas. Within the ever-changing character of the drama, Hecuba suffers a dichotomy inside her own personality. On the one hand, we have the submissive, patient, nobly suffering Hecuba; she is singular and feminine; we can call her as the “Poly xenian” Hecuba. But next to her, the figure of another Hecuba stands; she is distinguished as wild, masculine and plural; she “will do anything to obtain revenge,” this is the “Polydorian” Hecuba. The former is the old Queen who appeals to justice and seeks the νόμος who condemns sophistry and desperately wishes the maintenance of the present world and its order because she honestly believes that after all “that a virtuous man is never anything but virtuous, his nature uncorrupted from misfortune but always good” (ὁ δ’ ἐσθλὸς ἐσθλὸς οὐδὲ συμφορᾶς ὑπὸ/φύσιν διέφθειρ ὀλλὰ χρηστός ἔστ’ ἀεί, 597-8). The only kind of reciprocity acceptable by her is that of χάρις; it is the mutual exchange of favors which preserves personal relationships and human societies.

“Polydorian” Hecuba destroys the law for the sake of a “new” law, the law of a new order, the order of a different world; her world. Now she places herself on the side of sophistry, and there where the old idol of the insufficient law used to stand, now she erects a new, dreadful image, of a new deity: Persuasion the Queen, created after the image and the likeness of this new Hecuba. The only kind of reciprocity, known to her, is that of χάρις: it is the mutual exchange of favors which preserves personal relationships and human societies.

Now, it was Hecuba herself who gave birth to this monster: namely Hecuba. It was the seed of revenge inside her brain that was fed by both the wrong actions and the egoism of the others. These attitudes form a kind of a womb in which the monstrous fetus was growing. This is the vengeful baby: Hecuba’s new child. She had conceived it and she carried it
inside her head. The world is ready to accept it, since the “new order” has prepared the world for it; the world in its harsh reality functions as a disfiguring mirror; Hecuba’s reflection in it, (her de-formed, or rather, trans-formed idol), is deadly. Her gaze, like Medusa’s, petrifies whoever will dare to look at it. By the verse 736, the malicious baby is a “human being” already; Hecuba addresses it and names it: it is Hecuba again. She duplicates herself—as its dark twin.

The point of the intersection between the two distinct and opposite Hecubas is to be found in verses 736-751. Eight verses which, as the stichomythia between Hecuba and Agamemnon, mark the play’s turning point. Euripides has illustrated the event in a unique and brilliant way: the new Hecuba addresses the old one: “Hapless!—it is myself I speak of when I speak of you, Hecuba…” (δύστην, ἐμαυτὴν γὰρ λέγω λέγουσα σέ,/ Ἑκάβη..., 736-7). Segal points out that “by naming herself ‘unfortunate,’ she is naming a different Hecuba, one who will no longer be the savior or mourner of a child but the avenger of a child.”

In other instances, Euripides has anticipated this duality within his heroine; Hecuba suddenly starts to refer to herself with participles of plural number and also in a masculine gender (e.g., ἔρωτῶντας, 237; θανουμένους, 511; ἀτεκνοί, 514; εἰδόσιν, 670, and so on). She has become a “collective personality,” she embodies all the miseries, the sufferings and the injustices which have been faced and experienced by all the unprivileged ones throughout the centuries; she will act on behalf of all those and, in their name, she will take the most harsh revenge.

But by doing so, she becomes herself a wrongdoer; acting unjustly leads to more injustice, violence to more violence. By returning the suffering with suffering, she perpetuates and reinforces the existence of evil. Consequently, she is doomed to fight herself; she is condemned to become alienated from herself; “she will become literally a stranger to herself.”

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title “Overcoming Metaphysical Polarity in Greek Literature” at the meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature (IAPL) in the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 3-8 June 2002. I use the text and the translation (whenever the translation of the Greek is given, unless otherwise

2 Probably the oldest example (1831) of such a critique in the modern times was expressed by Herman (quoted by D. Kovacs in *The Heroic Muse*, [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987], p. 80): “stories joined in time but not in substance.” Conacher, in *Euripidean Drama, Myth, Theme, and Structure* (Toronto, 1967) says *inter alia*, “the play falls into two clearly distinguished parts” (p.146). Kovacs agrees that “the shape of the play…fall[s] into two parts,” and asks: “why has Euripides chosen to combine two stories that do not have anything essential to do with one another?” (*The Heroic Muse*, p. 79). Rabinowitz inherits the same tradition: “the problem that has most consistently bothered critics about *Hecabe* is its apparent lack of unity or coherence” in *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 106).

3 “In the symmetry of the play’s bipartite structure, the action moves from Polyxena to Polydorus,” Charles Segal, “Violence and Dramatic Structure in Euripides’ Hecuba” in *Violence in Drama* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 37. Also, Luschnig, speaking of the Polydoros’ prologue, points out that it is a dramatic device which “connects the two actions of the drama...which in a purely rational sense are unrelated” (“The Time is Out of Joint” in *The Classical Journal*, 71 [1976], pp. 193-243, at 227).

4 Aristotle suggests that a single plot is more effective and artistically elaborated: “[n]ecessarily, then, a plot that is fine is single rather than (as some say) double…” (*Poetics*, 1453a12; translated by Richard Janko, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987, p. 16). This observation seems to contradict an earlier statement of his, namely that “the construction of the finest tragedy should be not simple but complex” (1452b31-2, p. 16). The difference lies, I think, on the terms μθον [plot] and σύνθεσιν [composition]; the plot must be a single one, while its composition complex. *Hecuba* obviously violates, at least, the first rule.

5 Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz estimates that the play follows this chiastic structure: Polydoros/Polyxena-Polyxena/Polydoros which “gives way to Polydoros” (*Anxiety Veiled*, pp. 107-8).

6 The term μετάστάσεις is borrowed from the context of Hecuba’s physical transformation which could be taken as a term describing, or visualizing, the broader “transformation” of the
play itself. The term, however, occurs only five times in the whole of the exact corpus of Greek dramas. The normal term for change in the play’s plot is what Aristotle uses in his Poetics: μεταβολή. See also note 15 below.

7 “According to the first (main line of defense of the play’s unity) the real unity of the play lies in the person of Hecuba. Thus Hecuba is said to ‘experience’ both actions...” Conacher, Euripidean Drama, p. 152. Charles Segal also observes “commentators generally find what unity they allow to the play in the figure of Hecuba” (in “Violence and Dramatic Structure in Euripides’ Hecuba,” p. 38). The problem of the play’s unity, as the attempt to ground such unity on a single character, was known to the ancient critics. Aristotle, for example, writes in disagreement that: “[a] plot is not unified, as some suppose, if it concerns one single person. An indefinitely large number of things happens to one person, in some of which there is no unity. So too the action of one person are many, but do not turn into a single action” Poetics, (1451a16-17, p.11).

8 “Even if there are two plots, might we not still look at the juxtaposition of the deaths of two children as simply doubling Hecabe’s pain?” (Rabinowitz, Veiled Anxiety, p. 107, my emphasis).


11 Where should Hecuba be placed? Among the dead or among the living? While being alive, she declares herself, several times, dead. For example: οὐκέτι μοι βίος/ἀγαστός ἐν φάει (167-8), τέθνηκ’ ἔγογε πρὶν θενεὶν κακῶν ὑπὸ (431), ἀπωλόμην, φίλαι (440), ἀπωλόμην δύστηνος, οὐκέτ’ εἰμί δή (683). Although, such expressions are expected in moments of great anxiety, however, the frequency and the explicit nature in which they are uttered do not allow me to place Hecuba neither to the realm of the living, nor to the realm of the dead. Moreover, it is interesting that these expressions occur only in the first half of the drama. The last such expression is found in the verse 638 which is exactly at the point of Hecuba’s “revelation.” Perhaps, we can suggest that it is the old, “Polyxenian,” Hecuba that dies just before the new Hecuba put her plans for revenge in action.
See the section on “Hecuba and Hecuba” under the analysis of characters below.

12 On Aristotelian terms these are the consequences of μεταβολή [change]; however, the Euripidean text focuses on a more in-depth understanding of this term. Aristotle perceives μεταβολή simply as a deprivation of a character’s previous prosperity and happiness—this fact itself functioning as a factor for περιπέτεια [reversal] along with ἀναγώρισις [recognition], see Poetics, 1452a22 and 1452a31). But this kind of μεταβολή—the one that Aristotle has in mind—lies beyond or before our play itself. The only μεταβολή to be found here, that is, within the play’s scope, is the one taking place inside Hecuba’s mind and will manifest itself immediately afterward as the μετάστασις of her form.

13 Among the many examples that will occur later in the course of this essay of transformation and σπαραγμός, we have to allow a place for Echo as well. According to the myth, Pan fell in love with Echo who refused his sentiments. Pan, then, “maddened the shepherds so that they tore her to pieces, leaving only her voice. She, too, was changed into a stone, a cliff echoing back her voice,” Carl A. P. Ruck and Danny Staples, The World of Classical Myth: Gods and Goddesses, Heroines and Heroes, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1994), p. 133.

14 Up to this point the repetitions are found exclusively in the lyric parts of the play, while now they begin to invade the dialogue as well. More specifically, the iambic trimeters which include such repetitions are the following verses: 233, 328, 588, 597, 800, 903-4, and 1168.

15 For a complete study of the connections between the violence of death and the violence of sex see: Georges Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality, translated by Mary Dalwood, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).


17 For the sword as a phallic symbol, especially in art, see: Smith (1985), 205.

18 The two themes, that of blindness and that of castration have joined each other several times and in various places; as an example I offer here a citation from Jorge Luis Borges’ “Blindness.” In this text, Borges traces his blind ancestors in the “gallery of Western literature,” after having mentioned Homer, Milton and Joyce he continues: “Democritus of Abdera tore his
eyes out... Origen castrated himself” (from Seven Nights, translated by Eliot Weinberger, New York, 1984, p. 119). Although these two phrases seem irrelevant to each other, their connection is obvious enough to need any further explanation. For a discussion on the connection between blindness and castration, see Jacques Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins, translated by Pascale Brante and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 33-6.

19 Segal, Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow, pp. 162 and 182-5. Note also the identical structure and the similar meaning of the two names: Poly-mestor/Poly-phemos.

20 Zeitlin, Playing the Other, pp. 195-7. She is the first scholar, as far as I know, who suggests that the Cyclops is the satyr play to Hecuba’s trilogy.

21 William Poole has analyzed the topic of homosexuality to a sufficient extent in his essay “Male Homosexuality in Euripides” in Anton Powell (ed.), Euripides, Women and Sexuality, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). However, he does not make any mention to the possibility of seeing Polymestor as a pederastic character.

22 Segal, Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow, p. 180.

23 Bataille, again, writes: “a sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion. Or rather, a rudimentary form of stage drama reduced to the final episode where the human or animal victim acts it out until his death” (Erotism, p. 87). In the performance of the sacrifice a) the prohibition of murder is violated and the violation of the prohibition sanctified by the society and because of the society and b) the spectators of the sacrifice experience a sort of identification with the victim (or the victimizer), in a similar way to the identification which takes place in theater (between actors and spectators), an identification which for Bataille is purely sexual. In regard to the first point, about the sanctification of the violation of a strong prohibition, we can point out the following: the death of Polyxena does not actually affect Hecuba to the extent that the discovery of Polydoros’ dead body does. Her daughter’s death causes pain or suffering, perhaps a few lines of praise for her heroic attitude, but it is the son’s death and this alone that demands action, reciprocity, revenge. The son’s death must be paid by blood. However, this is not a matter of gender controversy. Polyxena’s death took place through a legal process, a sacred ritual which did not threaten the stability and the coherence of the society.
(on the contrary, it may improve it). Polydoros’ death violates two very crucial notions of the Greek thought: the duty of xenia and that of funeral rites.

24 Sometimes the virgin-victim of a sacrifice is given not only to death but also to every male participant of the sacrifice. Walter Burket suggests that Polyxena’s name indicates such a possibility, especially on the support of Pindar’s testimony (fr.121.1), who uses the interesting term “πολύξεναι νεάνιδες” in order to name (after Polyxena’s example?) all the analogous cases of girls who were not only sacrificed, but also sexually abused (Homo Necans: An Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth, translated by Peter Bing, [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983], p. 67). Polyxena’s eagerness to meet her sacrificial death and her remarkable beauty, remarked upon quite explicitly, make us suspicious of such an association.

25 Zeitlin, Playing the Other, p. 177.

26 Hyginus, Fabulae, 110; see also, Oxford Classical Dictionary (1996), 1213.

27 Both Segal and Luschnig have drawn attention to the similarities between Polymestor and Hecuba. They focus, however, on two or three common characteristics and in a more loose way than the one employed here.

28 Segal, Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow, p. 185.


30 Segal, Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow, p. 201.

31 “Revenge, for Hecuba, is the nomos that fills the place left by the collapse of the old. We do not know that it is the only possible replacement; but it is, clearly, her replacement. ‘I shall place everything in good order,’ she tells Agamemnon, as she inaugurates her scheme” Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 409.

32 That is a “point of revelation” for Hecuba. She begins to understand a “new reality (or a new order/νόμος). But this new understanding is caused by what Aristotle calls ἀναγνώρισις [recognition]. Ἀναγνώρισις is again a kind of μεταβολή [change], but, this time, from ignorance to knowledge either for friendship or for enmity: “[a] recognition, as the word itself indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and so to either friendship or enmity among people defined in relation to good fortune or misfortune” Poetics, 1452a30-32, (p. 14).
Collard in his commentary states that this phenomenon happens “where a woman generalizes about herself or other women she normally uses the masc. plural” (p. 144). Although, this seems to be the case of ἑρωτῶντας (237), in the case of θανουμένους (511) it is hard to consider the participle as a general statement since Hecuba alone had expressed previously the wish to die along with her daughter (396), and she now expects that the coming of the messenger may fulfill her wish. Besides, in both instances, where she expresses the desire to die, she shifts to the singular number: πολλή γ’ ἀνάγκη θυγατρὶ συνθανεῖν ἐμέ (396) and ὦ φίλτατε, ἄρα κάμ’ ἐπισφάξαι τάφωι (505). Why we should take these statements as generalizations? I have the impression that it is Collard who generalizes at this point.