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Queens of Failing Nations in Classical Tragedy

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Abstract

This thesis will compare the role that queens in failing nations, motivated by revenge, play as tragic heroes in Classical tragedy. Focusing on the classical tragedies of Euripides' *Medea* and *Hekabe* to Seneca's *Medea* and *Trojan Women*, this thesis compares the roles that these queens play as tragic heroes in both the Greek and Roman renditions. As politically significant characters and tragic heroes, Medea and Hecuba both operate as both poison and cure, representing nations and houses that are failing, on the basis of their identity and their actions. I have focused on how Euripides and Seneca offer queens and tragic heroes, ultimately creating a similar outcome--they nobly face dilemmas, for which there is no "easy" or "right" choice, and that they attain magnificence through the endurance of their unique plight.

In their respective tragedies, Euripides and Seneca explore the boundaries of female agency, particularly in the sense that the Euripidean Hekabe actively resigns to her fate as a barking dog, explaining to Polymestor that "paying you back is my only concern" (1244); Seneca's vision for Hecuba and Andromache is much more passive. Seneca's queens suffer simply because they are mothers; instead of being the source of life for Troy and tasked with extending Troy's legacy, they are forced to witness the destruction of their kingdom and sacrifice the last of their children in the process.

Ultimately, the aftermath of nations that have fallen is a liminal state. The queens who live in these in-between places face the question of how to endure life as the consequence. For queens like Medea and Hecuba, endurance is synonymous with suffering; suffering is synonymous with mothering children and mothering the nation that defines their authority. In essence, classical queens achieve tragic heroism because they

suffer as women in the state of motherhood, both poison for the grief that comes with losing children, losing husbands and monarchs, and the very land in which the nation sits, and cure in their ability to perpetuate a nation through childbearing, or even through a queen's dignity and ability to negotiate with their captors.

Montclair State University

Queens of Failing Nations in Classical Tragedy.

By

Katie L. Toledano

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2018

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department: English

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Montclair, NJ

2018

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my loving husband, Jesse Toledano, and to my loving son, Benjamin. I have written this thesis with every ounce of love and pride that I have for my family.

--Katie L. Toledano, April 2018.

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1. Thesis Text pp. 6-34.
2. Bibliography pp. 35-36.

Euripides of Athens and Seneca of Rome wrote comparative tragedies about 400 years apart, and wrote from vastly different cultural and generational perspectives. Nonetheless, Euripides and Seneca were both drawn to many of the same myths in order to address that their respective cultures might be in decline. Speaking of Euripides, Helene Foley writes that he was “the last of the three great Attic tragedians,” “[capturing] the demise of a great empire and of an extraordinary genre” for “philosophy soon challenged the intellectual role of drama” (9). Essentially, Athenians of Euripides’ day, roughly the fourth century BC, began to experience a shift in values that led them away from the tragedies sponsored by the Dionysian festival (Lattimore v). In contrast, Seneca’s Rome relied heavily on the study of Stoic philosophy in particular, and yet Seneca reverted back to the art form of his Greek predecessor in writing tragedy with some uniquely Roman attributes. He likely did so to attest to the idea that Nero’s Rome was a time “of decline and degeneracy from the lost glory days of the Roman Republic,” resulting in Senecan characters who “express the fear that the time of greatness may be over, and that their culture may be bankrupt” (Wilson xxii).

Euripides and Seneca share another remarkable similarity in that they both draw upon the fate of Hecuba of Troy and Medea of Corinth in order to define a certain reality about their respective civilizations, as both playwrights explore the path by which queens of failing nations succumb to a tragic fate through actions and behaviors that secure their heroism and yet guarantee nearly inhuman degrees of suffering. The Euripidean tragedies *Hekabe* and *Medea* explore how the two queens, motivated to seek justice through revenge, act as poison and cure to the nations that have defined their authority. They both endure the complete devastation of motherhood, and attain magnificence through the

actions they undertake in an attempt to restore social order. Greek female tragic heroes rise as a product of their respective cities, for they have its support, as explored in the way that the Chorus in both plays empathizes with their unique situation. Therefore, they act in response to what the community requires, and restore order and moral sense as a result of their deeds. Seneca's tragedies *Trojan Women* and *Medea* push the boundaries of female agency to an absolute limit by presenting a wholly active and aggressive queen and sorceress in *Medea*, and a Trojan queen turned Greek slave in Hecuba who both suffer as mothers in response to the prevailing sense that an orderly universe is a facade; they must submit to a chaotic setting in order to continue life. . In essence, Senecan female tragic heroes violate cultural norms in order to maintain their personal dignity, and they persist in doing so while witnessing the destruction of the lineage they have created.

Just as it is important that the playwrights showcase the decline of nations through the perspective of queens, who are typically responsible for a nation's continuity, it is of equal value that Euripides and Seneca identify and explore their respective cultures through the perspective of female agents. In considering the plights of Hecuba and *Medea* as tragic heroes, Naomi Liebler argues in her introduction to *The Female Tragic Hero in English Renaissance Drama* that the experiences of male and female tragic heroes are not distinct from one another, for "the law of tragedy calls for a representation of the futile struggle of a protagonist within and against a specific political or social arena; that is, it is in the nature of the genre to present the *agon* of a protagonist who will, for a variety of reasons, be destroyed in its process" (2). Liebler views the plays of Euripides or Seneca as *tragic*, that is, a "futile struggle," and therefore undervalues the

individual testimonies of female mythological characters who fulfill tragic fates. In order to understand the realm of female tragic heroes as being just as significant as the those possessed by male tragic heroes, Liebler affirms that tragedy tells stories about civilization that “comprise the private as well as the political...[telling] the tale of a culture in crisis,” and “[depending] no less on what happens in domestic arenas than it does on what happens on battlefields” (Liebler, *Female* 3). While Liebler defines tragedy as a place to examine the failure of civilizations, this definition does not address the uniquely female elements that set apart figures like Hecuba and Medea from the fate of men in their respective communities. These are stories of women who fight domestic battles which take place after the political “battlefield” has determined a losing line. In both cases, these are political significant women who bear the burden of the losing side by enduring its demise.

In order to drive home the chief distinctions between Euripides’ tendency to resolve social order through justice in his tragedies and the Senecan community’s lack of mercy given to female tragic heroes, it becomes important to examine the centrality of the Chorus in all four plays. The chorus featured in Euripides’ *Medea* and *Hekabe* pities the central character, and reinforces that Medea and Hekabe respond to oppressive, patriarchal political powers that offer no viable solution to Greek women, let alone foreign women, who have been disinherited from these communities. The chorus of both plays is strikingly similar in advising Medea and Hekabe to accept despair and misfortune and look forward to the end of their lives. The Corinthian Chorus advises Medea that it is common for a man to betray his wife with another woman, saying “it often happens. Don’t be hurt” (157), establishing the expectation that Corinthian women

should merely resign to the fact that men are likely to break their marital oaths to their wives. The Trojan Chorus registers the news that Polyxena has been rendered a sacrifice to the ghost of Achilles as an element of their fate, passively stating that “it was ordained for [us]—catastrophe. / It was ordained for [us] —grief” (615-16), suggesting no active lamentation for the girl’s death beyond accepting that it was meant to happen. It is out of these submissive and acquiescent female networks that characters like Medea and Hekabe reinstate their citizenship and authority, and actively resist the obedience that is expected of them. Medea’s actions fully contradict the beliefs of the Chorus. They pity her, but they “do not approve of her infanticide” (Fletcher 35). Hekabe brings her Chorus of Trojan Women into the act of punishing Polymestor, making it clear that Polymestor’s destruction of her son Polydorus was an action against the whole of Troy’s women. Since the actions of Medea and Hekabe are inspired by the Chorus’s responses to their situation, it is easy to understand that the singular trait that distinguishes the Greek tragedies of Medea and Hekabe from their Roman counterparts is the centrality of the revenge act to the construction of the female tragic hero.

The Chorus in Senecan tragedies supports the reversal of fortune for these tragic figures by initially praising or acknowledging the deeds of a male victor, such as Jason or the Greeks. Medea responds to the Chorus’ tendency to make her a scapegoat by acting as embodiment of their worst nightmares of the foreign villain, and Hecuba honors the chorus of Trojan Women by becoming their spokesperson for the “truth of grief”-- offering the perspective that civility was always meant to be a temporary state —that they always going to revert to “beastliness,” misery, and slavery (Seneca, *Trojan Women* 991).

Seneca defines Medea as a tragic hero who acts against “masculine deception and betrayal” (Liebler, “Mothers” 276), by having her appear on stage first. She introduces Jason’s betrayal, establishing him as a “faithless man whose oath is broken, / who is forsworn, and offers again his empty / promises” (8-10). Medea’s statement reveals that her hatred and anger is personal against her husband who has broken his marriage vows and now goes on to marry another, offering to his new wife another series of vows that he is likely to break. Medea “calls down curses upon his head” (20); the nature of her outrage permits the reader to feel sympathy for her plight and to take considerable issue with the prevailing logic of the Corinthian Chorus, who celebrates Jason by claiming that “only a hero like Jason could merit / such a prize” (76-77), “this husband [surpasses] all other husbands” (87-88), and “the place of the mad woman of Colchis/ is filled by the fairer” (95-96). The Chorus defines the scapegoat of Corinth as “the one...who steals away unhappy, / who scuttles into the gloom, stopping her ears / against our songs and laughter that insult and assault her spirit” (107-10). Medea’s outrage towards her husband alienates her from those who support Jason, thus embedding Seneca’s central question: is there such a thing as an orderly civilization if an outcast exists among the happy people? And furthermore, how will Medea address the Chorus’ assumption that she will quietly accept her exile and leave?

Seneca’s *Trojan Women* identifies a new reality for Hecuba and Andromache — “the sun still shines, in mockery and deception” on the leftover women of this lost nation (171-72), and asks how the Trojan women can accept this new fate and still maintain their dignity. Hecuba, former queen of Troy, represents the overwhelming grief of the lost nation. She must, on behalf of all Trojan women, accept the reordered universe, that

“wilderness...overwhelms all our pretensions” (990-91). Figures like Hecuba and Andromache must relinquish all remaining ties to dignity and motherhood to relent to suffering in ways that are worse than death itself, making the memory of massacred heroes into those of “Happy Priam” (153). Unlike Euripides’ version of Hecuba’s fate explored in my previous section, Seneca’s Trojan women have no opportunity for revenge, nor do they have the option to die themselves. Since active resistance is not an option for Troy’s women, they must accept passive suffering and redefinition as enslaved beings, “indifferent to landscape, threshold, / and face and name of the lord and master / who chose [them] or to whom [they] have fallen / by the casting of lots” (840-45). Trojan women achieve in their misery a certain distinction that cannot be undone; Hecuba and Andromache remain as models for survival without hope for their nation’s future. According to Frederick Ahl, “Hecuba orchestrates the lamentations of the Trojan women as she once ruled their lives” (36). Thus, Hecuba’s survival becomes the symbol of a Greek commander’s greatest fear: complete devastation and living with the constant reminder that they have been defeated.

Despite significant contrasts between the Euripidean and Senecan approaches to these tragedies which will be explored throughout this thesis, the playwrights do offer fundamental continuities in how they define these figures. For example, Euripides and Seneca are consistent in representing Medea and Hecuba figures who find indestructible authority in response to isolation from their respective cultures. They acquire this by actively choosing to remove themselves from the plight with which motherhood has presented them. Both playwrights are consistent in rendering these figures as highly intelligent and emotionally savvy women who possess the ability to successfully contend

with powerful men for opportunities that suit their needs. Euripides and Seneca highlight Medea's negotiation with Creon as a major signpost of her intellectual capacities.

Euripides uses the exchange to make important associations between Medea's womanhood, her abilities as a sorceress, and her clever nature in order to show viewers and Corinth alike that he has reason to fear her, and therefore can justify his decision to exile her from the city. Creon acknowledges that Medea's "cleverness" is one of the reasons that he has decided to exile her from Corinth; he appears to hold no personal grudge against her. He exiles her on the basis that she is "versed in evil arts" (285). Furthermore, he acknowledges Medea's outrage, and takes pity upon her in the same way that the Chorus does.

Seneca's Creon is far more hateful towards Medea. He labels her as a dangerous foreigner, an "Oriental" who doesn't "understand the value of human life the way we do" (183-84). He manipulates the shared history of Jason and Medea to decide that he "must purge [his] kingdom / from deadly poison" (270-71), simultaneously casting out Medea, privileging Jason as hero and marrying him to his daughter Creusa, believing that this marriage will perpetuate the order of his kingdom. Seneca uses the exchange in order to drive home Creon's ruthlessness and Corinth's distortion of the shared history between Medea and Jason that she singularly confronts with rational thinking. She succeeds in offering clear and logical reasoning to support that her actions were not considered punishable when the outcome was fortuitous for Greek heroes who went on to become kings. She asks why she should have to leave by herself if "we arrived together and share in our guilt: for him, / I killed King Peleas, not for myself. We fled / together, killed my brother together. For him, / I deserted my father" (276-79). Although Creon has limited

interest in listening to her remarks, Seneca's Medea convinces the viewer that her actions are logical and sound, where Corinthian thinking is irrational, xenophobic, and short-sighted.

These differences in Creon's response towards Medea highlight many of the chief thematic distinctions between the two playwrights. Through the pity shown through Euripides' Creon, the reader is able to understand that there is a prevailing sense of morality which can and will be restored through the play's resolution, and through Medea's tragic actions. The fact that Seneca's Creon shows a considerable lack of regard for Medea's plight reminds the reader that Medea acts completely by herself in order to work towards justice in a world which guarantees none.

In spite of two very different Creons, only the Euripidean Creon acknowledges that showing mercy on Medea goes against his better judgement, but grants her leniency anyway. He identifies his hamartia, stating that "by showing mercy I have often been the loser. / Even now I know that I am making a mistake" (348-50). He creates his own tragedy by granting her one more day, assuming "you can do none of the things I fear" (356), thus proving that her "clever" mind is both the source and remedy of her acute suffering, as she chooses the fate that will make her the "most unhappy" of women (818).

Seneca's Creon is not nearly as self-aware as Euripides' Creon. He lacks the foresight to acknowledge that by granting Medea one day, she may have just enough time to do her work, proving the Chorus' perception to be accurate: that Medea's vengeance will "[turn] to conflagration and [ruin] / the house and the city" (609-10). His ruthless, unfeeling regard for her plight enrages Medea further, so that she acts upon the *polis'* deepest fears about foreign women and makes those fears wholly realistic. Seneca's

rendition of *Medea* not only coordinates a woman's act of revenge against a faithless husband, but against a short-sighted and hypocritical community as well. It is through Seneca's scene between Medea and Creon that he offers a major contrast between his work and that of Euripides. He shows the reader exactly how much value Euripidean (or any Greek) tragedy relies upon the perspective of the Chorus in order to decide who the hero is. He achieves this distinction by placing Medea firmly outside of the *polis*' measurement of how a woman should act.

In considering the traits of female tragic heroes in Greek tragedies, Donald Lateiner writes that these figures frequently behave in ways that are "beyond human sympathy" (192). He states that

Mothers in Attic tragedy are certainly central, but often murderous, incapacitated, estranged from their children, or unhelpful...Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, Sophocles' Antigone, and Euripides' Medea are plainly strong women, but no one's role models for healthy family dynamics. [They] portray abused, but finally malevolent, wives, women almost beyond human sympathy. (192)

Lateiner focuses on the female tragic hero's capacity for "malevolence," but does not adequately consider the cause of her violent behavior. He acknowledges that she is abused, which for a brief moment validates that she does suffer, but then he writes her off as being "almost beyond human sympathy" (192), which diminishes her potential for heroism. Lateiner does not address how these female tragic figures respond to the often unreasonable expectations for women in the communities that render their abuse. Therefore, Lateiner's definition does not account for the incomprehensible grief that Medea and Hekabe face from losing their connection to the civilizations that define their

authority. He writes them off as malevolent or even devious because they are women, and does not consider that nearly any human who suffered as they do would respond in similar way. Euripides creates tragic heroes in *Medea* and *Hekabe*¹, outsiders and barbarians according to Greek principles, who insist on sacrificing their own children or other people's children in order to get revenge on an unjust fate. Both plays revolve around revenge as the central, required act that will provide justice to these women in the mortal sphere, explained by Dana Gioia as "the central dramatic action" which "[creates] a single narrative line that moves in measured steps to a fateful and usually dire conclusion while also ironically underpinning key events along the way" (xxx).

Medea contradicts many of the rules of conduct for a Corinthian Woman, or for a woman anywhere —she purposefully destroys her children and justifies it as a required act of revenge against a husband who has betrayed her. In most tragedies where children are killed on purpose, the act is considered a sacrifice required by angry gods or the angry dead, and men are typically called upon to carry out the killing act. For their role in the killing act, these same men are avenged by the mothers of those sacrificed children. Only in *Medea* does a mother argue for the death of her *own* children as a requirement for revenge, and therefore does not think in the way that Greek women are expected to think. For example, *Medea* is offended by the notion that "[women] have a peaceful time / Living at home, while [men] do the fighting in war. / How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand / Three times in the front of the battle than bear one child" (244-50). Because *Medea* would more willingly go into battle than bear a child, her response to Jason's outrageous betrayal is more in line with how a man might respond--she is more

¹ In an effort to distinguish my discussions of the figure of Hecuba between Euripides and Seneca, I will refer to Euripides' Hecuba as "Hekabe," and the Senecan Hecuba as "Hecuba."

inclined to wage war, which could potentially annihilate a nation, than she is inclined to stand by and nurture children. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz expresses that Medea's outrage is seen as masculine from the first moment that she appears on stage, "shown in the manner of her coming out, in her assertion of herself, and in the language used about her by others" (202). Rabinowitz also writes that Medea tells the Corinthian chorus that "if she did not come out, she could be blamed for being haughty or proud, a charge not really typical of an Athenian woman as much as of an Athenian male citizen or aristocrat" (202). Rabinowitz's view that Medea asserts herself in a masculine way corresponds with Jan Kott's argument that Medea "is locked within herself with her misfortune, as if inside an egg. Medea's mad monomania is undoubtedly a Euripidean discovery. Monomania singles Medea out, separates and cuts her off from the real world. Through her monomania Medea is alone. Heroes of tragedy have to be alone" (Kott 237). Keeping in mind Kott's perspective that tragic heroes act alone (237), Medea, isolated and foreign, never wavers in her belief that she has earned the right to act as a citizen of Corinth on the basis of her marriage to Jason and through her role of mother to his children.

Therefore Medea's resolution to avenge Jason is tied to the citizenship she has been granted through motherhood. Medea constructs two battlefields in exacting revenge by killing her sons, the political and the personal. Applying Nicole Loraux's logic that Medea has "[borne] sons for the city," she believes that she is within her rights to destroy those civic offerings if the *polis* refuses to acknowledge her as a citizen, in the case of Creon's decision to exile her (12). She expresses her outrage by constructing a plan of revenge against Jason's intended wedding to the Corinthian princess; she constructs a

domestic battlefield in an effort to avoid the humiliation that Jason's marriage will bring to her.

In the case of Medea, killing her children actively destroys her lineage, providing the source and the solution to the *agon* of her tragedy. In *Hekabe*, the onset of the play presents to the audience an entirely liminal queen--the queen of a civilization that no longer exists, the mother to numerous children who have nearly all perished in the war. Her complete reversal of fortune is a prevalent theme in many Greek tragedies, that prosperity and good fortune are unlikely to last forever, described by Aristotle as "a combination of recognition and reversal" which "will produce pity or fear...since both affliction and prosperity will hinge on such circumstances" (Halliwell 43).

The ghost of Polydorus, appearing at the beginning of *Hekabe* serves to define the unique authority and predicament of his mother as much as providing the circumstances of his death well before his mother knows of his murder at the hands of "guest-friend" Polymestor. Polydorus establishes that the fallen Trojan Queen has suffered beyond her comprehension, for she has "[gone] from a house of kings to a day of slavery. / [Her] grief is as great as [her] splendor was: /Some god is weighing the one out equal to the other" (58-60). This statement is made prior to Hekabe's introduction, which means that the audience immediately associates Hekabe, no longer the queen of Troy, with a title of equal weight--queen of unparalleled grief. Hekabe's complete reversal of fortune alienates her from every other individual in the play, which becomes all the more clear when it is discovered that the spirit of Achilles requires a Trojan sacrifice in his honor. Hekabe begs the Greek army not to kill her daughter, claiming that this child "is [her] city, [her] walking stick, [her] way on the road" (284-85). Hekabe makes this statement

assuming that she does so with the agency of a former queen. She does not seem to recognize that by stating that “Polyxena is [her] city,” she refers to a whole civilization that no longer exists (284). Loraux argues that Hekabe’s statements in this circumstance are nearly blasphemous to Greeks:

Polyxena is my city: an utterance that would be impossible and virtually forbidden to women in Athens outside of the theater —women, who do not have the title of “citizen” but must devote themselves to the city. Hecuba, it is true, is queen and barbarian, and like a good Greek, Odysseus throws back at her the image of the genuine city, where the man of valor--in this case Achilles--is more honored than the coward. The word of a man against the word of a mother: if Hecuba were not so already, she is defeated now, and in the future she will be called *apais apolis*, childless, cityless. (40)

“Childless, cityless,” Hekabe continues to draw upon her identity and agency as former queen to advise the currently victorious Greeks that they “may not always be on top. / I was once. Look at me now. / One day took a world away” (292-5). Hekabe consistently identifies herself as a living token of a nation that no longer exists; she works in this play to maintain a queen’s dignity and authority through her ability to negotiate with Agamemnon and mimic his inclination towards ‘necessary acts’ in order to avenge the greedy Polymestor.

In turn, Hekabe mimics the child-killing actions of the Greeks when she orders the Trojan women to kill Polymestor’s sons as revenge for Polydorus’ murder. Tanya Pollard argues that Hecuba acts pragmatically “in translating her bereavement into purposeful and effective action...she does not lament passively; her grief mobilizes her to

enact justice for her son Polydorus' wrongful death by punishing his murderer, Polymestor (11). Therefore Hekabe, accounting for the loss of two of her children on the same day, becomes her own agent of revenge. She succeeds in blinding the greedy Polymestor by entrapping him in a tent full of Trojan women, and concludes that the sight of the blind, tormented Polymestor "has given me justice. / Here he comes, look. I'll get back out of range / His fury is fantastic" (1016-20). She has achieved "justice" through her actions and its effect on Polymestor —his outrage now matches hers.

Medea and Hekabe both rely on the act of killing children, their own or other people's, in order to assert their authority and citizenship to the culture that defines them. While both Medea and Hekabe resort to child-killing as their method for avenging men who have broken their trust, the acts of both women may be seen as a sacrifice instead of a violent killing. Helene Foley defines Greek sacrificial actions as those which "deny, neutralize, and exclude the violence involved in the killing of the victim.... Up to a certain point sacrificers and victim are identified with each other, since both are garlanded and purified" (30-31). By associating sacrificers and victims as connected entities, Foley downplays the violence involved in these actions. However, this association does not leave any room to fully explore the residual effects that Medea and Hekabe will experience as a result of committing violence against innocent children.

Jason responds to Medea's violence by insisting that she only resorted to the tragic actions because she is "barbaric." Medea, in turn, maintains that killing her sons is a complete necessity in order to preserve her dignity, even though she suffers greatly by doing so. She recognizes that "it is the most dreadful of roads for me / To tread, and them I shall send on a more dreadful still" (1067-68). Although she can rationalize the

deed, Medea still has to call upon the mental fortitude to commit the act. The reader has every reason to believe that she is in complete agony. She has to force herself to not think of them:

How sweet they are, and how you are their mother. Just for

This one short day be forgetful of your children,

Afterward weep; for even though you will kill them,

They were very dear--Oh, I am an unhappy woman! (1246-50)

Ironically, these are far from the words of a woman who hates her children, but rather a woman who has to fulfill a miserable fate, which both creates and dissolves her agency in one action.

Medea's lament allows for the viewer to understand that Jason's decision to marry the princess of Corinth, disavowing his wife and children of their legitimate title puts Medea into a situation that is worse than death. She, like Euripides' and later Seneca's Hecuba, experiences a fate that makes her beg for death, a "release," which allows her to "leave hateful existence behind [her]" (143-7). In the case of Medea, begging for death suggests how the endurance of this fate is actually worse than death, for she must destroy her children in order to cure them "from a disease they caught from their father" (1364). Medea is "clever" and therefore "blessed" to contemplate killing her kids in the first place—she can outsmart the shame of Jason's infidelity and destruction of the house that she has created. Thus, Medea's actions become curses; she is "cursed" in the sense that she will carry out a nearly unthinkable deed that she will have to live with for the rest of her life.

Hekabe learns the lesson that child-sacrifice is sometimes a necessary action through her own dealings with Odysseus as he acts on the Greek requirement to sacrifice the Trojan maiden Polyxena to appease the angry soul of Achilles. Just as Hekabe represents grief, loss, and doom, Odysseus and Agamemnon are represented as men who wish only to finalize the war and return home, acting on “necessity” alone. These are not blood-thirsty men, keen on hating the enemy. Odysseus’s statements compel the audience to consider the similar circumstances of Greeks and Trojans at the end of the war. Victory is a shallow reward for the Greek Army, and this is especially evident when Odysseus considers the costs. He reminds Hekabe that suffering is not a title she wears by herself by asserting that the Greeks have also experienced “agonies on our side too” (334). In making this statement, he makes Polyxena’s death relevant to the central idea of the play. The young girl’s death becomes a necessity in order to appease the miserable ghost of Achilles; this is a death that pleases no one. Anne Carson comments that

Polyxena’s death does not change the plot of other people in any substantial way; and it forces us to no moral conclusion at all except that such sacrifice is irrelevant to the world in which it is staged. Polyxena is a shooting star that wipes itself across the play and disappears. And Euripides wants us to notice this--this irrelevance of Polyxena. (92)

Yet Carson does not take into consideration that Trojan women reflect upon the event as “a dreadful thing [that] has boiled up over Priam / and his city,” and label it “god’s necessity” (573-74). If the Trojan women are capable of recounting the death of one of their own as a required act, something that serves a purpose, then it is not so far-fetched for Trojan women to register that killing Thracian children could be required to avenge

the cruel death of Polydorus. Polymestor's outrage that Hekabe could gain revenge on him and be validated by Agamemnon matches Jason's shock that Medea could commit the unthinkable act of killing their children, and proudly take credit for the action on the basis that she not a Greek wife. Medea is acutely aware of the prejudice against her through the tragedy, but never wavers in honoring her nature, and her commitment to the actions she believes are necessary. At the beginning of the play, Medea defines herself as "deserted, a refugee, thought nothing of / By my husband--something he won in a foreign land" (255-56). Even the Nurse who tends to her children defines her a "strange woman," reckoning that "it won't be easy / To make an enemy of her and come off best" (44-45). Because Medea is a "strange woman," and decidedly *not* Greek, the audience can anticipate that her response to Jason's betrayal will fall outside of the code of conduct to be expected by a Greek wife in a similar situation. The fact that Medea can act as her children's murderer and can afterwards continue to rationalize the act is enough to make Jason see her as a monster, "an evil thing, /A traitress to your father and your native land" (1331-32). After Medea has succeeded in killing the children, Jason is sure that "there is no Greek woman who would have dared such deeds" (1339).

Medea argues that her actions are completely necessary to avenge the betrayal of a Greek man, that it "was not to be that [Jason] should scorn [her] love, / And pleasantly live [his] life through, laughing at [her]; / Nor would the princess, nor he who offered the match, / Creon, drive [her] away without paying for it" (1354-57). She does not allow for figures like Jason, Creon, and Corinth's princess to make a mockery of the legacy she has created, regardless of the choices she had to make to marry Jason to attain the status of "Greek wife."

The fact that Hekabe and the Trojan women are capable of killing Thracian children horrifies Polymestor, that they could be responsible for his new reality, making him “bereft of [his] children, / torn apart by these Bacchantes of hell/ Cut to bits and thrown out on the mountains / as a bloody breakfast for the dogs” (1040-44). Polymestor’s fate now resembles Hekabe’s as he asks “where can I stop / where can I step, / where can I turn...to guard my children” (1045-50). Polymestor now grapples with the grief felt by Trojan women over losing their lineage. By identifying Trojan women as “Bacchantes of Hell,” Polymestor channels what Froma Zeitlin defines as “Dionysiac plots, [those] that arouse men’s deepest fears, when mothers who love their 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” (176). Hekabe finds a way to “do injury to the body” of Polymestor; his suffering gives him the ability to forecast all of the future ways that a woman might adversely affect a man’s fate. He foreshadows Hekabe’s transformation into a dog “with eyes of red fire” (1235) and Agamemnon’s death, revealing that “[Agamemnon’s] wife will kill [Kassandra]...and him too, when she lifts her axe high” (1249). Polymestor’s suffering possesses him with knowledge that Agamemnon is unable to accept right now, that women can and will kill. Unfortunately, this prophetic ability will not extend far enough to reach Agamemnon, who will later come to terms with his role in the death of his daughter, when his wife acts in revenge against him. It is through this final network of converged dilemmas that Euripides constructs his full argument about the capacity of foreign women within Greek circles-- that “foreign” or “alien” women become tragic heroes by killing children (theirs or others as required), and that Greek women like Clytaemestra will eventually find heroism by

killing Greek husbands. It is within this crucial moment of the play that Euripides offers to the Greek audience a commentary on their shared nation's history, a network of revenge killings all tied to the theme of "justice," which often simultaneously results in the complete devastation of a family line.

The reflection point on "complete devastation" is temporarily interrupted by the Euripidean tendency to restore order by means of an unexpected resolution. The gods, conspicuously absent for most of both tragedies, find a way to settle the final score on whether or not Medea and Hekabe could be redeemed. Helene Foley identifies the powers of the Greek gods as

[serving] to integrate man into the social order and social hierarchies, into nature, and into a sacred order. They justified human culture yet kept it within strict limits, so that the power that men received through sacrifice was precisely the power that gave cohesion to the community. For this reason, perhaps, sacrifice could be used to enforce oaths or remove pollution from a criminal and permit his reentry to society. (Foley 34)

Foley's view is that there *is* resolution at the end of Euripides' tragedies, however complicated that resolution may be. In their limited roles, the Gods do allow for Medea and Hekabe to continue after their ordeal has been resolved. Medea takes flight in her grandfather Helios' chariot, which delivers her from Corinth to Athens. Hekabe is given a prophecy from Polymestor that Dionysos has ordained for her to be transformed into a barking dog as a symbolic reversal of her role as Queen of Troy. By providing a "resolution," the Gods involved in these plays do not provide a simple living reality, but

an impossible fate for Medea and Hekabe. The gods make sure that these mortal women will face consequences that will ensure only future misery.

Senecan tragedy differs from the Euripidean model by removing catharsis from the equation, offering “no pity and awe —just horror” (Gioia ix). The emphasis on “horror” in these plays is a result of the Roman experiences of Seneca’s day defined by Christopher Trinacty as “decision making under emotional distress, the position of the individual in society, and the calamitous results of seemingly innocuous actions” (30).

Seneca’s plays promote the exploration of true irony. An example of this is shown in *Medea*, where the Nurse observes her making a poison strong enough and reckless enough to bring about the “complete devastation” (895) of Corinth, the city which Creon has attempted to control according to his own view of an orderly *polis*. It could be quite simple to view Medea making this poison as a truly horrific act; the nurse even acknowledges that most civilized people will “dismiss these primitive practices, superstitions from far away” (733-35). Respecting and acknowledging that Medea is not Greek and will not behave as a Greek woman, the nurse instead credits Medea for the gravity of her choices and the questions she asks herself in plotting the murder of Creon, Creusa, and finally, her own children (733-35). As Medea mixes her “loathsome pot” (733), she considers the value of being “evil in a good / and orderly universe,” or contemplates the alternative, “[admitting] the darker and unlikelier choice--that there is no order” (738-40). Seneca’s tragedies illustrate the concerns of female tragic heroes who attempt to create their own moral order in a violent, unjust world which offers no acceptable resolution to their suffering. Instead, Medea and Hecuba acquire agency by simply recognizing their individual and collective defeat by the enemy party in order to

live with “the truth of [their] grief” (*Trojan Women*, 1032-33). M.L. Stapleton supports this claim, arguing that

Seneca’s tragedies imply that the inhabitants of an amoral environment must adapt to it or become prey. Some of the inhabitants, fueled by craft and guile, employ individual initiative to survive. Others find it just as useful to think in programmed patterns or to live by aphorisms. (108)

Seneca’s *Medea*, clearly “fueled by craft and guile,” devises a plan for vengeance on the basis that foreign women are given no other option for survival (108), reacting to being treated as a scapegoat by the Athenian *polis*. Hecuba, responding to a network of disenfranchised women who represent the lost nation of Troy, does not have the option to be anything other than passive. Senecan female tragic heroes “employ individual initiative to survive” (108). They survive an unfair, unjust world by saving themselves through the destruction of their motherhood and citizenship. These choices go against prevailing cultural expectations for women in their situations; there are no gods to determine fate for them.

Medea achieves permanent authority despite a wholly perverse world that honors Jason and condemns her for participating in the same acts. Medea reclaims the rights of heroism as her own, and simultaneously dismantles the theory that Jason acted heroically by choosing remarriage over his vows to her. Jason is unsuccessful in attempting to define his choice to remarry as a hero’s dilemma. Seneca defines Jason as one who relies on the rhetoric of many Greek tragedies, that fate is cruel, and “harder / when it finds a cure for our ills” (460). Jason speaks ironically, admitting that in the case of his dilemma, “faithful to my wife, I die. Alive, / for the children’s sake, I must betray the

mother,” he has made the easier choice (461-62). He doesn’t seem to understand that by making the “easier” choice for his children, he hasn’t endured a tragic dilemma, and therefore doesn’t qualify for the heroic status he thinks he has achieved. Through Jason’s faulty logic, Seneca critiques Greek heroes for their inability to see their limitations, and an opportunity to Medea to address them. This is shown through Jason’s lesser choice to remarry instead of honoring the family he has already created—Medea makes this the source of her agency, for Jason’s love for his children becomes “the tender place / where [she] shall wound him, the perfect spot to strike” (569-70). Therefore, where Jason fails to make the heroic or noble choice, Medea succeeds. Where the larger civilization of Corinth sees only a happy remarriage of the heroic Jason to Creon’s daughter Creusa, Medea sees the opportunity to make Jason understand true suffering. The play concludes when Medea has killed her children and made Jason “recognize / the wife [he] loved, and “remember / who I was and who I am” (1042-44). Only when Jason sees the winged chariot does he truly experience chaos, uttering “there are no gods. No gods! There are no gods” (1050). Medea succeeds in putting him more on equal terms with the ordeals of truly tragic figures like Oedipus, and certainly, her own.

Seneca’s *Trojan Women* redefines Hecuba as a female tragic hero by removing her revenge. Instead, the Senecan Hecuba views the death of her remaining daughter as freedom from that which forces her to continue life, which makes Trojan motherhood by definition the tragic hero and scapegoat. Hecuba comments that “[Polyxena] is the only voice that calls for “Mother” / and rouses, if for a moment, my numbed spirit, / calling me back to a kind of life. Her death / would free my obstinate soul at last to flee / this broken body and all its earthly torments” (960-65). Since motherhood is a state that

continues “earthly torments” for Hecuba, then certainly the death of her sole remaining child becomes a cure of sorts; this death gives the former queen of Troy the opportunity to accept her kingdom’s demise and to accept her new title: slave to the deceitful Ulysses.

Even Ulysses, responsible for claiming the last remaining Trojan children as Greek sacrifices, acknowledges there is “no end of weeping and groaning on this blasted [Trojan] shore” (613-14). He grants Trojan women a special designation for the simple fact that their “hearts / are devastated, sacked, and burned” (405-06), and yet their lives are far from over. This endless devastation is characterized by Andromache’s loss of her son Astyanax. She suffers the loss of identity as mother and therefore any hope that comes with nurturing future generations of children and wondering what they may achieve in the name of their nation and cultural identity. In saying goodbye, Andromache accepts that Astyanax will never “make the laws, / nor accept the tribute of conquering nations,” nor will she “watch [him] grow into manhood, playing / with toys that soon turn real, becoming weapons / worthy of blood--of game and then of Greeks, / as the shouts of excited children playing deepen, / becoming battle cries” (769-70; 775-79). In lamenting that she will not experience a child’s games turn into a man’s battles, Andromache speaks ironically, helping readers to understand that in her new role as slave, motherhood is only agony. If her son dies now, she will not have to watch him grow only to die as her husband did—on a battlefield, in the midst of a relentless war. Astyanax’s death prevents a future of his mother’s fear that he will die somewhere else. Severing ties to motherhood becomes a cathartic process; Andromache and Hecuba actively resign themselves to bondage, which becomes a kind of agency, for they

represent their suffering as a trademark of a Trojan woman's identity: "the bedrock truth of what [they] have seen / and heard and felt" (1033).

Both of Seneca's plays promote female tragic heroes who insist upon seeing the gory remains of their children as a featured aspect of their despair. This feature promotes a chief Senecan theme, defined by Dana Gioia as "[enduring] a world in which there is no justice, no safety from tyrants, no guarantees —political or divine —of human dignity," a notion which was "not theoretical in Nero's Rome" (xxviii). Living in a time period that court mandated violence, often reducing human life to gory remains would compel Seneca to render physical human remains as a central visual effect in his play. The tendency of Senecan tragedy to turn towards physical violence is demonstrated by Medea's insistence that the corpses of her sons prove that "there are no limits to love, nor should there be / to hatred, for they are two aspects of the same passion" (418-20), and by Hecuba achieving wisdom by confronting the hard truth that comes with witnessing so many deaths, recognizing that human bodies are "fragile meat" (1021). Frederick Ahl argues that the physical violence of these plays is an opportunity for the

To envisage the scene from Greek myth in terms of the familiar horror of ritual death in the Roman theater. And he asks them to censure those who hated what they saw but watched anyway. Roman readers could hardly fail to see themselves reflected in the Senecan mirror. (22)

Ahl depicts the Senecan tendency to feature violent acts on stage as virtually having the same effect as watching a train accident —one does not want to look at the unpleasant events, and yet he cannot turn away. This is precisely the reason that many Classicists criticized and rejected Senecan tragedy, arguing that "Seneca's vision is ultimately not

tragic, only terrifying” (Gioia ix). Those who disregard Seneca miss the combined effect of terror and tragic circumstances, the very trait that makes *Medea* and *Trojan Woman* timeless and enduring.

When Medea considers appropriate retribution at the beginning of the play, she states that she must suppress “womanly hesitations” and “civilization’s restraints / in which I no longer believe” (41-44), in order to arrive at the action that will bring her “the bloody truth / of what life is” (55-56). Medea relishes the violent murder of her children believing they will “pay for their father’s crimes —as happens / often in this vile world” (94-45). She culminates her murderous activities by extracting an unborn child from her womb, proudly declaring that the two sons who have been killed will “have at last a younger brother...kin / of my dead father and dead brother. Our blood / shows itself in awful profusion” (97-75). She conveys that “two is not enough. A thousand would not be enough. / If, in my ovaries, children of yours were lurking, / I’d stab each one to death with a pin” (103-35).

For Trojan women, the visual of dead Trojan children allows them to distinguish the trademark of their fate, that they become heroic by surviving the death of their nation and the death of all children who could have perpetuated Troy. This is Andromache’s gory, grisly realization when she attempts to bury Astyanax’s remains and learns that his “brains are a pink smear on the rocks below” (1110), and horrific for Hecuba when she learns that Polyxena’s body is desecrated on top of Achilles’ grave; her blood “[soaking] into the thirsty earth / that drinks the copious gore until it is gone” (1146-47). This visual is a rare nod to the expectations of the Roman audience. The Roman viewer’s expectations have an effect on the perceived shared experiences of Trojan women. They

have witnessed the defilement of rulers, husbands, and children. They are on intimate terms with that process by which a loved one becomes bloody remains.

Both Euripides and Seneca make the reader confront the extent to which Medea and Hecuba understand survival at the end of these tragedies. Euripides resolves his plays by introducing the limited role of the Gods, who merely allow for Medea and Hekabe to continue life. Medea takes flight in her grandfather Helios' chariot, which delivers her from Corinth to Athens. Hekabe is given a prophecy from Polymestor that Dionysos has ordained for her to be transformed into a barking dog as a symbolic reversal of her role as Queen of Troy. By providing a "resolution," the Gods involved in these plays do not provide a simple living reality, but an impossible fate for Medea and Hekabe. The gods make sure that these mortal women will face consequences that will ensure only future misery.

In Euripides, the Corinthian Chorus does not support Medea's actions, and is therefore bewildered when Helios seemingly "rewards" Medea by sending the chariot to rescue her at the end of the play. The chariot is so far beyond the comprehension of the Chorus as to make them resolve that "What we thought / Is not confirmed and what we thought not god / Contrives. And so it happens in this story" (1415-19), nearly writing off the events of the play as beyond human. Nonetheless, if we accept that Medea's tragic action is punishment in and of itself, then it becomes easier to accept the chariot from Helios as a viable conclusion. Stuart Lawrence points out that Medea's "apotheosis is merely figurative, for Medea is *en route* to Athens and Aegeus, rather than to Olympus" (54). Therefore, if the chariot merely brings her to Athens and not Olympus, this means that Medea has been granted the freedom and agency she sought by destroying her

husband in her children, but makes us remember that nothing she did in this play came without a cost.

Hekabe's eventual transformation into the barking dog of Cynossema can be understood in similar terms with the notion that Medea's chariot to Athens means that she escapes punishment for her crimes. Hekabe appears to disregard Polymestor's prophecy; the only thing she cares about is getting her revenge on him. Her suffering, according to Anne Carson, "for the original sin of having been born is already off the human scale. Really there is nowhere for her to go but out of the species" (90). While this actual transformation does not occur within Euripides' narrative², Hekabe pays it no mind, she feels justified that Polymestor's prophecy is a price worthy of her revenge. Anne Carson's view is confirmed by the Chorus of Trojan Women who have no remarkable response to the events that have just transpired. They return to bondage, "[tasting] the hard work of slaves" (1267-68).

The wisdom of the Trojan women in both Euripides and Seneca perpetuates the platitude that "[hardship] is necessity" (Euripides, *Hekabe* 1268) and that survival grants the female tragic hero both poison and cure. This is explored in Seneca's *Medea* when in the scene where she sacrifices her children, she premeditates the action by exclaiming "there's nothing I cannot endure" (Seneca, *Medea* 985). In this statement, Seneca's *Medea* reduces her achievement in the play to its single common denominator; she will succeed in this action and live to reflect upon it.³ The resolution for Seneca's *Trojan Women* is virtually the same, as Hecuba and the women she represents merely reflect

² Contrary to how these events are rendered in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where Hecuba's transformation is the literal and immediate consequence of her revenge.

³ See also Naomi Liebler's "Mothers from Hell."

upon the source of their grief as the same as “what [they] know / of life and the world, which is to say / of suffering and somehow enduring” (1025-26).

Endurance, as Seneca suggests, has significant limitations. “Somehow enduring” returns to curse Hecuba at the play’s conclusion as she continues to wish for her death (1026). She resents that death has “shunned” her, and wishes

That these rattling breaths would stop at last, that the beating
Of this exhausted heart would no longer cause me
Throbbings of exquisite pain each moment brings
In which I continue conscious.

I stood near Priam,

And not an arrow, not a firebrand

But whizzed by harmlessly, and every miss

Now seems a mortal wound. (1164-71)

Hoping for her breath to stop and for her heart to stop causing her pain, Hecuba makes her desires known--she wants to become “meat.” Each moment of continued life brings her “throbbings of exquisite pain” (1166), which can only be extinguished by her body’s reduction to gore. In imagining that she stands next to Priam with arrows passing her by, she declares that “every miss / now seems a mortal wound” (1171). She resolves that her forced existence and endurance draws out moments of anguish and pain, that a mortal wound would be a blessing. Until then, she is cursed with the burden of life.

Students of tragedy will surely find that many tragic theorists updates Aristotle’s view of the form as an imitation of man’s nature. For example, Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed* identifies that the heroes of tragedy “tend to perfection, [but] does not

mean that [he] always attains it... Nature has certain ends in view, states of perfection toward which it tends--but sometimes nature fails" (9). Therefore Classical tragedy forces its viewers to experience the "failed nature" of men through all of which simultaneously makes them great, and ultimately requires them to suffer (9). In the case of the tragedies explored in this thesis, it is important to keep in mind that Boal states that "nature fails" (9) forcing us to conclude that the failure in these plays does not belong to Medea and Hecuba, but to the cultures that are attempting to disqualify them. Boal's recognition of man's failed nature is well developed by K.J. Dover's *Ancient Greek Literature* as

Hatred of our parents or our children, lust for revenge on a brother, self-destruction in preference to suffering the humiliation of irremediable injustice, are all recurrent phenomena in human history; their nature as experiences transcends the centuries, and so does their expression by a playwright who knows what he is about, however diverse their occasions and however alien to us the theatrical conventions in which they are presented. (54)

Dover's analysis of tragedy showcases the patterns in human history that continue to make this genre relevant to viewers, regardless of historical period or particular circumstances of a culture. The tragedies of Ancient Greece serve to reinforce the dilemmas that require "self-destruction in preference to suffering the humiliation of irremediable injustice," and furthermore to make the point that female tragic heroes such as Medea and Hecuba, suffer from within the circumstances of their cultural and sociological expectations.

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