

**Bifocal Reception: *Hecuba* vs. *The Trojan Women*\***

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**Resumo:** Nas últimas décadas, vários especialistas tentaram descobrir um termo geral único para aplicar ao estudo das relações entre autores antigos e modernos. Mas afinal das contas talvez não haja um termo melhor, visto que o processo em si é essencialmente dialético e complicado, e todas as possíveis candidatas – por exemplo, recepção, tradição, influência, transmissão – captam apenas um aspecto disso e, por isso, falsificam-no, pelo menos parcialmente. Ao invés disso, seria muito mais útil dedicar nossa atenção em reunir mais estudos de caso e pensar sobre as questões metodológicas gerais que ainda confundem o estudo da tradição clássica e que vale a pena ser considerada – por exemplo, a inclusão de objetos e práticas além dos textos, o alargamento de nossa visão para além da Europa Ocidental e América, o julgamento de níveis de validade entre as recepções, e a determinação de nosso ponto de vista dentro da recepção como especialistas da recepção – e reunir mais estudos de caso. Por exemplo, os estudos de recepção tendem a focar apenas sobre textos e autores principais e sobre as tradições que criaram. Mas os textos, assim como os autores e vendedores, têm sempre de competir um com o outro para a atenção e prazer de seus públicos, e examinar casos duplos de recepções competitivas pode explorar novas questões que recepções únicas talvez obscureçam. Eurípides escreveu por volta de 424 AEC, e *As Troianas* de 415. Ambas concentram-se em Hécuba e lidam exatamente com o mesmo material mítico: o sofrimento das troianas, imediatamente após a queda de Troia. Mas as duas peças são construídas de forma

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muito diferente: *Hécuba* centra-se nos sofrimentos e ações da rainha, e constrói uma trama unificada a partir de sua miséria e vingança; *As Troianas*, ao contrário, apresenta um conjunto de tableaux de sofrimento e não tem a linha da trama muito bem amarrada. Os contrastes de sua recepção pode nos dizer muito sobre a mudança de gostos.

**Palavras-Chave:** Recepção Bifocal; *Hécuba e as Troianas*; Mudança de Gosto.

**Abstract:** Over the past decades a number of scholars have attempted to find just the right single general term to apply to the study of the relations between ancient authors and modern ones. But there may not be one best term, since the process is dialectical and complicated, and all the possible candidates – reception, tradition, influence, transmission – grasp only one aspect of it. It might be more useful instead to dedicate more attention to general methodological issues – the inclusion of objects and practices other than texts, the enlargement of our vision beyond Western Europe and America, the adjudication of degrees of validity among receptions, and the determination of our own standpoint within reception as scholars of reception – and to gathering more case studies. For example, reception studies have tended to focus upon single major texts and the traditions they have generated. But texts, like authors and merchants, must always compete with one another for their audiences’ attention and pleasure, and examining double cases of competitive receptions can open up new questions that single receptions may obscure. Euripides wrote *Hecuba* about 424 BCE and *The Trojan Women* in 415. Both focus on Hecuba and deal with the same mythic material: the sufferings of the Trojan women immediately after the fall of Troy. But the two plays are constructed very differently: *Hecuba* focuses on the queen’s sufferings and actions, and constructs a unified plot out of her misery and then revenge; *Trojan Women* instead presents a set of tableaux of suffering and does not have a tightly knit plot line. The contrasts in their receptions can tell us much about changing tastes.

**Keywords:** Bifocal Reception; *Hecuba and The Trojan Women*; Changing Tastes.

Over the past decades various scholars have attempted to find just the right single general term to apply to the study of the relations between ancient authors and modern ones. But there may not be one best term after all, since the process involved is essentially dialectical and complicated, and all the possible candidates – for example, reception, tradition, influence, transmission – grasp only one aspect of it and thereby falsify it at least in part. “Reception” places too much weight upon the hospitable act of welcoming and suggests associations with drinking parties that, in this context, are a bit

unwelcome; “tradition” sounds hoary and encrusted and perhaps does not leave enough room for creativity and subversion; “influence” is astral or medical and tends to demonize the power of the remote but still efficacious source; and “transmission” either is a bit mechanical, sounding like something from motoring, or focuses attention too much upon the purely textual and manuscript side of a complex and fluid process for which texts and manuscripts are only one aspect, albeit a very important one. But why do we need to search for only one word after all? It might be more useful instead to dedicate our attention to gathering more case studies and to reflecting on general methodological issues that still perplex the study of the classical tradition and that are well worth pondering – for example, the inclusion of objects and practices other than texts, the enlargement of our vision beyond Western Europe and America, the adjudication of degrees of validity among receptions, and the determination of our own standpoint within reception as scholars of reception.

Such questions are already being asked wherever Classical reception studies are being practiced nowadays; and this expansion of our horizons and newly urgent questioning of traditional privileges can only be welcomed. But other problems have not yet received the attention they deserve. For example, reception studies, in Classics and in other fields, have traditionally tended to focus upon single major texts and authors, and the interpretative, literary, and artistic traditions that have arisen in connection with them. Why this has so often been the case is an interesting question. It is probably due in part to a lingering tendency to see literary and artistic history as the set of triumphal effects due to a few great male cultural heroes – perhaps some of us still tend, like Dante in the fourth canto of *Inferno*, to see the great texts we have inherited from the past in the form of a small number of authoritative white males who have died but were certainly prolific. In other words, some scholars may be influenced themselves by an unexamined and not fully conscious analogy between the propagation of cultural values and the traditionally patrilineal transmission of economic ones.

But in fact the kind of ideological singularity that might wish to privilege unique individual authors and unique individual texts never exists in the reality of cultural production and reception. For texts, like authors and merchants, must always compete with one another for their audiences’ attention, pleasure, time, and money, and they derive their meaning and value not intrinsically from themselves alone but rather by

competition and comparison with other options and possibilities fulfilled and unfulfilled. A kind of Saussurian play of difference ensures that authors and texts will always establish their meanings not only positively by what they themselves are and do but also negatively by what other authors and texts are and do differently from themselves. Even if the act of writing, the production of culture, usually requires privacy and withdrawal, nevertheless authors and texts as objects for consumption and transmission, the reception of culture, are by nature gregarious creatures that are never found in solitude but always in groups – after all, even in Canto 4 of the *Inferno*, Dante encounters in Limbo not just one grand shadow but four together, Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, who joyfully receive the returning Virgil back to their group, and welcome Dante as a new sixth member of the club.

If authors and texts are found not in the singular number but in the plural or at least dual, then examining multiple or at least double cases of comparative receptions might well succeed in opening up new hermeneutic questions that focusing too restrictively upon merely single receptions might instead obscure. Consider, for example, two plays by Euripides, the *Hecuba*, which he wrote about 424 BCE, and *The Trojan Women* from 415. Both focus on Hecuba and deal with exactly the same mythic material: the sufferings of the queen and of the other Trojan women in the few days immediately after the fall of Troy and before the enslaved captives embark with their new masters, the departing Greek victors. But if the contents of the two plays are very similar, their construction is very different. *Hecuba* combines two stories from the fall of Troy, both involving the sufferings of its last queen, Hecuba. First her daughter Polyxena is sacrificed by the Greeks to the dead Achilles. Then she learns that her youngest son Polydorus, who had been entrusted for safekeeping to the Thracian king Polymestor, has instead been treacherously murdered by him. Hecuba avenges herself upon Polymestor by blinding him and killing his children; at the end it is foretold that she will be transformed into a dog. The two stories are tightly knitted together not only by significant similarities and contrasts of theme and tone but also by specific circumstances of plot: for it is only when a Trojan handmaid goes to the sea to get water to wash the dead Polyxena that she discovers the dead Polydorus – Hecuba’s prolonged mistake, seeing the shrouded corpse and mistaking it first for one dead daughter and then for another one rather than recognizing it as her dead son, not only creates a

dramatic irony that increases the pathos of her suffering but also underlines the intricate construction of the plot.

If *Hecuba* focuses on the queen's sufferings and actions, and builds a carefully unified dramatic structure out of first her misery and then her revenge, *Trojan Women* by contrast presents a set of tableaux of suffering and does not have a tightly knit plot line. *Trojan Women* portrays the fall of Troy from the point of view of the defeated: given that all of the Trojan men have been slain by the Greek victors, it is their women – mothers, daughters, wives – who can now alone give voice to the suffering of the city. After a divine prologue, in which Poseidon and Athena set aside their opposition during the Trojan War and amicably negotiate the destruction of the victorious Greeks for their sacrilege during the sack of the city, the play then moves to a purely human level of unrelieved distress focused above all on Hecuba and her family. In contrast to the tragedy *Hecuba*, here the woman who had ruled Troy, and with her the defeated Trojan women and children, are deprived not only of the act, but even of the bare hope, of vengeance. Amid the laments of the chorus of anonymous Trojan captives, the various members of Hecuba's family are assigned as slaves or concubines to their future Greek masters; the prophetess Cassandra exults over the death of Agamemnon which she can foresee; Hector's widow Andromache announces that Polyxena has been sacrificed to the dead Achilles; Andromache's young son Astyanax is carried off to be killed by being hurled down from the city's walls. After Helen debates with Menelaus and Hecuba to what degree she is to be blamed for what has happened, finally the corpse of little Astyanax is brought on stage and mourned, and Hecuba and the remaining Trojan women leave to sail off with Odysseus, to whom she has been assigned.

Thus the two plays, despite the similarity of their contents and themes, are very different indeed in their construction and effects. Glyn Maxwell's remarkable recent play, *After Troy* (2011), attempts valiantly to combine both of them into a single dramatic structure; but, despite its ingenuity and partial success, there remain manifest difficulties and tensions that can tell us much about the insuperable differences between the two Greek tragedies. And, in a larger sense, the contrasts in their receptions can tell us much about how changing tastes have responded to these differences.

We do not know how *Hecuba* fared in the dramatic competition when it was first produced, but *The Trojan Women* was evidently a failure: Euripides came in second that

year to the obscure playwright Xenocles – a scandal in the eyes of Aelian, who reports this. A few months before the play was produced, the Athenians had captured the small Greek island of Melos and slaughtered all the adult men and enslaved all the women and children; it is difficult not to see Euripides' play, with its extended reflection on the piteous fate of a defeated city and its people, as being colored by that well-known recent event, and, despite the facts that this was only one of four plays he produced that year and that Euripides lost in the competition at the dramatic festivals so many times that we tend to seek explanations not for his many defeats but for his few triumphs, one cannot help wondering whether this play's failure might not have been due in part to the displeasure of the Athenians at not only being reminded, sharply and unpleasantly, of that incident but also at hearing the divine announcement, in the play's beginning, of the imminent punishment of the Greek victors, which could easily be interpreted as an only slightly veiled warning against the Athenians themselves.

Throughout antiquity thereafter, *Hecuba* was much more popular than *The Trojan Women*, as evinced by quotations and allusions by later authors and by papyri (at least 10 of *Hecuba* vs. only a couple of *The Trojan Women*). Nonetheless, during the Imperial period both plays were selected among the ten canonical plays, and so both have survived intact. Why *The Trojan Women* was made one of the select plays is hard to guess; perhaps it was chosen in order to strengthen further the already substantial group of Trojan tragedies (also represented by *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *Rhesus*), next to the smaller ones on Thebes (*Phoenician Women*, *Bacchae*), Argos (*Orestes*), Athens (*Hippolytus*), Corinth (*Medea*), and Thessaly (*Alceste*). Be that as it may, the insertion of *The Trojan Women* into the group of select plays certainly did help to secure its survival and influence alongside that of *Hecuba*. Thus the Latin dramatists Ennius, in his tragedy *Hecuba*, and Pacuvius, in his tragedy *Ilione*, seem to have taken *Hecuba* as their model; while *The Trojan Women* seems to have inspired Roman tragedies by Ennius (*Andromache*) and Accius (*Astyanax*), both lost, but also Seneca's *Troades* (*Trojan Women*), containing many close echoes of Euripides' play along with some others from his *Hecuba*, which survives and was widely read during the Renaissance.

In the Middle Ages the receptions of the two plays diverged once again. *Hecuba* was included in the so-called Byzantine triad together with *Orestes* and *The Phoenician Women*; as a result, it is transmitted by hundreds of medieval manuscripts and is

equipped with very full ancient and medieval commentaries. By contrast, only three medieval manuscripts transmit *The Trojan Women* and the ancient and medieval commentaries on it are much more modest. The mediaeval predominance of *Hecuba* continued into the Renaissance. The fact that *Hecuba*'s title is alphabetically the first in the Byzantine triad meant that it was usually the first play of Euripides to be read in medieval Byzantium as well as in the West during the Renaissance. As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the first part of the Greek play was accompanied by an interlinear Latin translation, intended to make the play more accessible, that scholars attribute to Leonzio Pilato, who taught Greek to Petrarch and Boccaccio; and a number of other Latin translations survive, starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and culminating in Erasmus' successful metrical version. In the same century, Latin and then vernacular translations began to proliferate; and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Hecuba* was the most translated and imitated Greek play of all. Euripides' play was especially admired for its demonstration of the mutability of fortune, for its careful dramatic construction, for the polished eloquence of its speeches, and for its excessive violence. For the authors and audiences of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, *Hecuba* was a particularly compelling study of the nature and limits of vengeance. So too, the sacrifice of Polyxena fascinated many European painters starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Pietro da Cortona, before 1625; Nicolas Poussin, ca. 1645-50; Giovanni Francesco Romanelli; Luca Giordano; Giovanni Battista Pittoni).

The traces of reception of *The Trojan Women* in this period are much more exiguous. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance Euripides' *Trojan Women* was largely overshadowed by his *Hecuba* (and by Seneca's *Trojan Women*). But things have been very different in modern times. Already in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hector Berlioz based the first two acts of his opera *Les Troyennes* (1856-59) not only, unsurprisingly, upon Virgil's *Aeneid* but also, innovatively, upon *The Trojan Women*. And since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the experience of the horrors of war, along with changes in dramatic taste, have led to a remarkable resurgence in this play's popularity, and in the past decades it has become – astonishingly – the second most frequently staged of all Greek tragedies, certainly overshadowing *Hecuba*. The play has been successfully adapted by such authors as Jean-Paul Sartre (*The Trojan Women*, 1965), Suzuki Tadashi (1974), Hanoach Levin (*The Lost Women of Troy*, 1984), Andrei Serban (1974/1996; with music by Elizabeth Swados), Charles Mee (n.d.), and Ellen McLaughlin (2008). It has also been the subject of notable



films by such directors as the Mexican Sergio Véjar (*Las Troyanas*, 1963) and the Greek Michael Cacoyannis (*The Trojan Women*, 1971, starring Kathryn Hepburn, Vanessa Redgrave, and Irene Papas). In most modern versions, allusions to current political events, perhaps already implicit in the Greek original, are made fully explicit and the horror of Euripides' play is, if anything, heightened even further.

By contrast, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Hecuba* entered a period of prolonged disparagement and neglect. August Wilhelm Schlegel's influential Vienna lectures *On Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808) established a view of the play as the worst tragedy by the worst Greek tragedian – indeed as the worst surviving Greek tragedy of all – that dominated for more than a century. The play's portrayal of unrelieved suffering, its lyric excesses, the balanced rhetoric of its speeches, and its claustrophobic focus on Hecuba were regarded as intolerable weaknesses. It required considerable changes in Classical scholarship, in modern drama, and not least in our sense of our world as a whole, changes characteristic of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before *Hecuba* could come back into its own. Only recently has this tragedy begun to recover its prominence, both in the estimation of scholars (especially philosophers) and as a dramatic force in the theater – and largely because of the very same features that 19<sup>th</sup> century readers had scorned.

The greater popularity of *Hecuba* from antiquity through the Renaissance is certainly connected with its inclusion among the Byzantine triad, but probably also reflected a wide-spread fascination with revenge and a taste for well constructed dramatic plots. The contrast with the preference for *The Trojan Women* over the past two centuries is quite remarkable and cries out for some kind of explanation, at least a speculative one. Must we conclude that contemporary audiences are much less interested in finely shaped plots and in the bloody revenge of those who have suffered than in the repeated representation of hopeless suffering itself?

There is something to be said for this view. And yet broadening our focus beyond just these two plays suggests that it cannot be the whole story. For one thing, the most popular Euripidean tragedy on the stage today is *Medea*, more so even than *The Trojan Women*, and *Medea* certainly displays the bloody revenge of someone who has suffered. So why is *Medea* such a success today and *Hecuba* not? And would it really not be too



reductive to claim that *The Trojan Women* is popular simply because it provides the repeated representation of hopeless suffering?

These are the kinds of questions that reception studies can raise and towards whose answer they can surely provide an important contribution. I conclude tentatively with a few suggested answers of my own. In the contrast between *Medea* and *Hecuba*, it is surely crucial that Medea kills her own children while Hecuba kills someone else's: Medea's suffering extends beyond what Jason and other men have done to her and includes, even worse, what she does to herself and those she loves. This makes for a far more complex, powerful, and disturbing effect on the viewer. And the quasi-forensic trial scene between Hecuba and Polymestor at the end of *Hecuba* certainly corresponded to ancient tastes but seems inevitably rather frigid to ours – can Polymestor really be suffering so atrociously, we think, and can Hecuba really be so furious, if they can still engage in these legalistic niceties? It is not surprising that Glyn Maxwell left out this scene altogether from his *After Troy*. As for *The Trojan Women*, the opportunity to make allegorical or even explicit reference to contemporary political events has certainly been a crucial factor in its success. So too, the extraordinary lyric quality of the play enables it to create a theatrical space for public mourning of the dead that is often lacking in other cultural sectors of our modern Western world.

In the end it is perhaps Euripides' minutely controlled construction of the plot of *Hecuba* that lessens its pathos for modern audiences, and what can be misunderstood as a loss of formal control in *The Trojan Women* but in fact is calibrated with great care and precision, that makes this latter play so appealing to modern audiences. We await with eager curiosity the new directors, scholars, and poets who in coming years will bring both plays to life again in unimaginable ways.

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