

When Euripides' *Hecuba* was first performed at Athens, in about 424 BC, the Greek world had been engaged in the increasingly savage Peloponnesian War for several years. During the course of the conflict several non-Greek, 'barbarian' nations also became involved; the violence engulfed much of the eastern Mediterranean. The fundamental enmity was created by the rival imperial claims of Athens and Sparta; they both treated cities who rebelled against their command with appalling savagery, routinely killing all the men, enslaving all the women (which meant subjecting them to hard domestic labour and sexual servitude), and razing city walls to their foundations. Children were far from exempt; when some mercenaries from Thrace, to the north of Greece, invaded a city in central Greece, they not only slaughtered the women and farm animals, but every single child attending the largest local school.

The historian Thucydides, Euripides' contemporary, says that it was the love of power that led people at this time into previously unknown atrocities. The original reasons for fighting certainly became obscured as reprisals and feuds escalated, and civil strife affected every inhabitant of almost every Greek city; Thucydides memorably describes the women of Corfu joining battle, and raining the tiles of their houses down onto the heads of their factional enemies in the streets below; he also speaks of families thrown into murderous conflict by desperate competition for the most basic resources and by ideological differences. It is in this context that Euripides composed *Hecuba*, which examines the impact of war on individual families, above all on traumatised female survivors, represented by the collective lyric voice of the chorus. But its constant and unremitting theme is slavery: the physical humiliation of literal enslavement is reflected in humanity's metaphorical enslavement to its own self-destructive drives, which compel it towards catastrophe.

Set in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Troy, *Hecuba* brings the Greek king Agamemnon, the Thracian warlord Polymestor, and the Trojan queen into a perverted intimacy born of reciprocal brutality. While Hecuba's former friend Polymestor becomes her bitterest enemy, and her deadly opponent Agamemnon becomes a temporary ally, the tragedy emphasises the volatility of loyalties in times of crisis. This vicious triangular plot is played out on the harsh, wind-battered, marginal region of the Thracian Chersonese, where Asia turns into Europe across the straits from the Trojan mainland; this atmospheric setting underscores the tragedy's psychological interests: how humans harden themselves to barbarism, the darker

edges of the self, the disintegration of social boundaries, and strange mental and physical transformations.

*Hecuba* places the psyche of the Trojan queen under a theatrical microscope; already multiply bereaved, she undergoes two further excruciating losses which precipitate her mutation into a vindictive aggressor. The first part of the play dramatises her reactions to the news that her daughter Polyxena must be sacrificed to appease the ghost of Achilles; the second part presents her with the corpse of her son Polydorus (who has been murdered by Polymestor, king of the wild Thracian land where the play is set), and enacts the dreadful reprisal she exacts. The ancient Greeks were capable of emotional honesty in articulating the human drive for revenge. Thucydides records a speech made to the Syracusans by their leader before they joined battle with the invading Athenian imperial army; he urged them that 'in dealing with our enemy it is both just and lawful to claim the right to slake the fury in our soul', and adds that vengeance provides the 'most acute of all pleasures.' *Hecuba* concentrates on the psychology of revenge, the process by which victims begin to act out and repeat what they have suffered. The anthropologist René Girard called this the 'mimetic' nature of violence; some psychoanalysts would call it 'the internalisation of the oppressor'.

The play includes several passages which show why Euripides was regarded in antiquity as the absolute master of the tragic emotion of pity; the last parting of Polyxena from her mother is one of the most painful moments in western theatre. Indeed, the play consciously makes its audience meditate on the aesthetics of tragic theatre. Unlike the drama of the Renaissance, Greek tragedy never talks explicitly about theatre or uses figures of speech such as 'all the world's a stage', perhaps because the classical tragedians were attempting to recreate a Bronze Age world where theatre had not yet been invented. But Euripides, who was held in antiquity to have been a painter as well as a poet, used analogies with the visual arts which force the audience into thinking about the visual dimension of theatre. Thus Talthybius' shocking account of the princess's courage and dignity, as she bared her breasts to the sacrificial sword, remarks that she appeared 'as beautiful as marble', like a statue; later, Hecuba asks Agamemnon to stand back and look at her 'like a painter does and notice the details of the pains endured'. Passages such as these remind the audience, rather uncomfortably, that they are colluding in the theatrical process precisely by gazing on -- and feeling aesthetic pleasure in -- the enactment of sadism and anguish.

The Greeks in the play, with the sole exception of the herald Talthybius, display a casual cruelty. Although Hecuba once saved Odysseus' life, he persuades the Greeks to sacrifice Polyxena, and makes his most shameful appearance in literature when he arrives to justify arresting her. Indeed, the play dramatises the total failure of those social institutions, such as arenas for political debate and the administration of law, that are supposed to regulate the expression of human passions and prevent injustice and atrocity. These institutions were particularly important in Euripides' own city-state, Athens, because it was a democracy; Athenian decisions were taken by the majority vote of all the male citizens who presented themselves at debates in the Assembly, held in the open air on the Pnyx hill beside the very Acropolis where *Hecuba* was itself performed, at the theatre of Dionysus, in front of these same citizens. The voting -- which on important issues might involve twenty thousand of Euripides' compatriots -- followed the verbal combat in which the speakers for and against any particular measure competed in the oral delivery of political harangues, often in competition with the noisiest heckling (the poet Pindar, who came from the quieter, non-democratic Thebes, called Athens 'the noisy city' on account of its political arenas). The Assembly was divided along class terms, confronting semi-literate working-class men from the port area of the Piraeus with arrogant, hard-drinking, horse-breeding aristocrats. As if to reinforce the parallel between the contemporary Athenian Assembly and the mythical assembly of Greeks at Troy, who voted to sacrifice Polyxena, the audience are told that of all the Greeks it was the sons of Theseus -- that is, the Athenians -- who most bloodthirstily demanded the maiden's blood. The Greek assembly is revealed to be no dignified arena of deliberation, but an unthinking mob, manipulated into sanctioning an outrageous human sacrifice by the words of the spin-doctor Odysseus, aided by Athenian thugs.

There is no doubt that the Athenian Assembly, of which Euripides himself was a member, often voted in favour of terrible acts of violence. Just a couple of years before the première of *Hecuba* the Athenians had taken an outrageously hasty decision to slaughter the entire male population of the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, which had revolted from the Athenian empire. The Athenians had called an assembly in a fit of vindictive fury, and within hours had sent a trireme sailing off over the Aegean to carry out the mass execution. The extreme volatility of mob rule is shown by what happened the very next day: after 'a sudden change of heart', they

called a second assembly, and after another debate of extreme intensity, voted -- narrowly -- to rescind the measure taken the day before. This meant that they had to send a second ship off to overtake the first, and countermand its orders, in a desperate race against time.

The popular politician who had masterminded the plan to execute the Mytileneans was Cleon, according to Thucydides 'the most violent' person in Athens, a brilliant public speaker, but, it seems, an unprincipled demagogue. It is undoubtedly the power which Cleon and men like him held in Athens that Euripides has in mind in his picture of the influence exerted over the Greek assembly at Troy by Odysseus; it is clearly the type of drastic decision exemplified by the Mytilene debacle that informs his unflattering picture of the Greek conduct of the entire Trojan war. The play unflinchingly examines the effect of legitimising mob emotion in times of crisis; this suggests why Euripides ended his days in self-imposed exile far away from Athens, after becoming estranged from the radical democrats; he became, instead, court playwright for King Archelaus, ancestor of Alexander the Great, in the decidedly undemocratic but now inexorably rising kingdom of Macedon.