

**THE COMIC IN THE TRAGIC**  
**Parody and Critique in Modern Productions of Euripides'**  
***Hecuba***

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Productions of Euripides' *Hecuba* in the autumn of 2004 and spring of 2005 offer a distinctive insight into ways in which the contexts of production and reception and the aesthetic forms of Greek drama performances on the modern stage have become a site for the working out of various kinds of transversibility, that is, the crossing and even dissolution of the porous boundaries of genre, of authorship, and of inter and intra-cultural concepts and categories. Research on translation techniques is a significant part of this investigation, especially the issues involved in the successive processes of translating *for* the stage (dramatic rewriting) and then transplanting the translation *to* the stage, which of course involves further reworking and rewriting. The staging itself represents a meeting point for the inter-subjectivities of writers, directors, designers, actors and audiences. This paper is one of a series in which I consider various aspects of these questions and here I shall focus on the relationship between parody and tragedy and its reception by critics.

This discussion will focus on three recent productions of *Hecuba* in the UK. There have also been significant recent productions in the USA, including one in a translation by the classicist Marianne McDonald, staged by 6<sup>th</sup>@Penn Theatre in San Diego, California in November and December 2004 and directed by Esther Emery. The front cover of the programme for this production included a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi – 'If the world keeps on taking an eye for an eye, soon everyone will be blind'.<sup>1</sup> It appears that *Hecuba* has become the play of choice in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by forces of the US-led and UK-supported coalition and there are a variety of instructive reasons for this theatrical trend, including the impact on the choices of producers, directors and audiences. The play deals not only with the suffering of the victims of war and the displaced but also with revenge and with what Nehad Selaiha has called 'the equally destructive intolerance of the oppressed'.<sup>2</sup> In an investigation of this kind I prefer to discuss only those productions that I have personally attended so I will confine the detailed discussion to the three UK productions. These are:

1. Autumn 2004: a touring production by Foursight Theatre in a new translation by John Harrison, directed by Naomi Cooke. Foursight is an arts theatre company based in Wolverhampton, a culturally diverse area in the West Midlands of England. The company specialises in new work and built its reputation on workshop creativity and developing feminist perspectives. In 2002 they staged Euripides' *Medea* and this sparked the company's interest in Greek drama.<sup>3</sup> In 2004 they staged Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in a community centre in a production that developed the multi-lingualism and ethnic diversity of the Chorus to explore the themes of war and homecoming.<sup>4</sup> *Hecuba* represented the last staging of a Greek play that the company plans for the foreseeable future. John Harrison is a professional classicist and his translation is closely based on the Euripides text. It is to be published by Cambridge University Press in its Translations of Greek Drama Series.
2. Autumn 2004: production of Euripides' *Hecuba* at the Donmar Warehouse theatre, London, in a new version by Frank McGuinness. McGuinness is an established dramatist, whose previous translations/ versions for the stage include Sophocles' *Electra* (Donmar, London, and Broadway, New York, 1998) and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Peer Gynt*. His best known new plays are *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992) and *Observe The Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), as well as *Carthaginians* (1988). For his version of *Hecuba*, McGuinness worked from a literal translation by Fionnuala Murphy.<sup>5</sup> The director was Jonathan Kent who, like McGuinness, is well-known for previous work on Greek drama. Clare Higgins won a national acting award for her performance as Hecuba.
3. Spring 2005: production of *Hecuba* at the Albery Theatre, London, for the Royal Shakespeare Company, in a new translation by Tony Harrison, directed by Laurence Boswell and starring Vanessa Redgrave as Hecuba. The production marked the return of Redgrave to the RSC after a gap of many years. It had been planned to start at the company's main theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in early 2005 but this part of the run was cancelled, ostensibly because of Redgrave's illness. The poet and dramatist Tony Harrison is classically trained and works direct from the Greek text. He is well-known for previous classical work, including his translation of the *Oresteia* (1981) which was directed by Peter Hall in 1981 and 1982<sup>6</sup> and his film-poem *Prometheus* (1998).<sup>7</sup> Tony Harrison is associated with left-wing views. Redgrave was for many years a leading figure in the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party. This production of *Hecuba* was savagely criticized by reviewers (on the grounds of Harrison's translation, Boswell's direction and Redgrave's restrained acting)

in a manner which is almost unique in recent years for the critical reception of Greek drama. This contrasts with a recent vogue for versions of Greek plays which critique war, oppression and imperialism, for example Katie Mitchell's direction of Ted Hughes' version of Aeschylus *Oresteia* (1999) and of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* in a translation by Don Taylor (2004). Several modern plays critical of the invasion of Iraq have been well received by critics so there are questions about why the RSC/Tony Harrison production of *Hecuba* has been singled out for such a degree of abuse.

Key issues in the translation and adaptation of Euripides' text for the stage and for its reception by critics and audiences revolve round the representations of violence and the parody of established institutions. The representation of violence (on and off the stage) and of responses to it, including revenge and attempts to procure justice, whether retributive or restorative, is crucial to the conceptualisation of pain and suffering and its consequences and central to understanding of the impact of Greek drama on the contemporary stage. Although my focus on this discussion is on parody, the issue of pain and suffering and their consequences is always just under the surface, reminding us how parody brings comedy and tragedy together.

Two aspects of the productions of *Hecuba* involve parody of established institutions, both Greek and modern. The parody has implications both for the society depicted in the play and for the modern analogue created by the responses of spectators and critics, which is sometimes in tension with the analogue constructed by the writer and actors. The key aspects of parody in *Hecuba* are:

- (i) how the abuse of *xenia* (hospitality) is handled in the verbal translation and the non-verbal aspects of staging
- (ii) how the parody of democratic debate and decision making is presented.

In both cases, critique of these institutions is part of the dynamics of Euripides' play so the manner in which these aspects are transplanted to the modern stage reflects interpretation of the Euripides text as well as revealing assumptions about the cultural horizons of modern audiences.

### Paratragedy

The contexts of parody in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE have been discussed by Michael Silk in his essay 'Aristophanic Paratragedy'.<sup>8</sup> He notes that the terms paratragedy

and parody are often used interchangeably and that paratragedy has been categorised in a number of aspects (literary genre, *locus*, scene, formal elements, conventions, motifs), but argues that while all parody is paratragic, not all paratragedy is parodic. The distinguishing feature of parody is that it is satirical and subversive, that it recalls a more or less specific original and subverts it. In his play *Acharnians*, Aristophanes has lines that profess the seriousness of comedy:

"I talk affairs of state in a comedy.  
You see, comedy has a sense of duty too"  
(*Acharnians* 499 – 500).

Dikaiopolis' 'sense of duty' can be interpreted in many ways and these almost always mark a prolonged, complex and paradoxical engagement with tragedy.<sup>9</sup> In Aristophanes' terms, this involved parody of scenes and lines from tragedy for comic effect. In Euripides' *Hecuba*, the dynamics of the engagement are different – the focus of tragedy is realigned through parody of social and political institutions and conventions. In Aristophanes, comedy is explored through the appropriation of tragic language. In Euripides, tragedy is explored through comic variants on situations that should be serious, and are. There is a sudden switch from a social norm to something incompatible with it. In terms of staging, the move may be accomplished verbally or through situation and the physicality of the body. The disruptions to the norm offer a satirical image that moves beyond comedy to align ironically with the reversal mode that is central to tragedy, where the self-referentiality is to the institutions of the *polis* and its cultural context, rather than primarily to the play itself. This brings the sustained authority associated with the 'sense of duty' in Aristophanes.

My discussion here broadens the scope of the concept of parody in that I extend it to parody of institutions and social conventions which are both represented in tragedy and in other texts and institutions central to the ancient Greek experience. I also emphasise the point that parody can occur within tragedy itself. Thus, in *Hecuba*, the treatment of *xenia* and the associated values and obligations of reciprocity alludes metatheatrically to the *Odyssey* and its structuring theme of the use and abuse of hospitality in the context of Odysseus' return to Ithaca after the Trojan war, when he finds that the suitors for Penelope have abused his household and wealth. Similarly, the treatment of democratic debate and decision-making alludes to the practices of the Athenian democracy as well as to drama. Furthermore, in the fifth century BCE, there was contemporary debate about the role of the *xenos* or guest-friend in war.

Thucydides alludes to the fear of the Athenian leader Pericles that his *xenos*, the Spartan leader Archidamus, would spare Pericles' estates in Attica when the countryside was ravaged by the Spartans – Pericles made over his land to the polis in order to avoid accusations of preferential treatment<sup>10</sup> (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.13).

In the cases both of *xenia* and of *demokratia* there is a collision between the idealised cultural stereotype and the evidence for its fragility. It is noteworthy that in Aristophanes *Frogs* (405 BCE), the debate on whether Euripides or Aeschylus should be recalled from the underworld hinges on the value of each dramatist for the citizens. The treatment of Euripides is based on his stylistic characteristics; the treatment of Aeschylus is based on his lessons for the citizens. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* had, in 458 BCE, presented a situation in which the endless cycle of revenge could be ended by civic and legal conventions. This was possibly a nostalgic ideal for citizens at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century after the miseries and brutalities of the Peloponnesian war. If a date towards the end of the 420s is accepted for *Hecuba* (an argument based partly on Aristophanic parody of the play and partly on metrical analysis<sup>11</sup>), then the atrocities perpetrated by the Athenians in Thyrea and Scione would have been fresh in the public mind, as would the issues concerning the treatment of the defeated that provoked the Mytilene debate (427 BCE), later to be semi-dramatised by the historian Thucydides (Thucydides 3. 36 – 50). Thus there is a certain slipperiness concerning what is the 'original' experience, text, institution or convention that is being parodied in the *Hecuba*. The audience, whether ancient or modern, is an active participant in making decisions about what precisely is being parodied. There is, too, an important distinction between the impact of comedy in reconstructing the audience's knowledge and the trickier question of how comedy may bring about the reconstruction of attitudes, preconceptions and sympathies.<sup>12</sup> These nuances are compounded in the case of parody.

In the productions of *Hecuba* that are under discussion the examples of parody focus on the debasement of institutions:

#### *Xenia* – hospitality

In the Donmar *Hecuba*, McGuinness' script was spare. It followed the Euripides closely in outline but eschewed verbal decoration and metaphor and left substantial breathing spaces for the direction and design to engage the audience's response. This was a vital aspect of the use of parody and depended on the

interplay between linguistic aspects of the play-text and the semiotic systems that make up the theatrical event.<sup>13</sup> The perversion of *xenia* was exposed when Hecuba discussed with Polymestor his care of her son, but the setting was the incongruous one of a tea-party on a seaside beach, complete with tartan picnic rug and tea cups. Of course, she knew that the youth had been murdered for the Trojan gold and to appease the Greeks but she discussed him with Polymestor without giving any indication of her awareness. The contrast between her demeanour as social hostess and her ragged clothes and dire situation, exposed on the beach in Thrace, lent a blackly comic dimension to the ritual of the beach picnic, in which the rug was carefully laid out and the social rituals of the pouring of tea and handing round of tea cups and sandwiches were meticulously observed. The contrast with Hecuba's behaviour at the end of the play could not have been more acute. She ended pawing at the sand with her fingers like the dog that she was fated to become.

The tea-party ritual served two ends. It used a culturally iconic but slightly outdated modern western social ritual to explain the conventions of hospitality to an audience that was probably not aware of the intertextual and metatheatrical allusions in Euripides. It did this in a way that also tricked the audience by implying the triviality of a convention eroded and degraded by misuse and only retaining cultural validity and authority in the ancient text if embedded in religious sanctions. Thus in one sense *xenia* was domesticated into English tradition, yet because of this the horrific impact of Hecuba's vengeance was intensified and the scene in which the blood-stained parcels containing the remains of Polymestor's children were thrown around as if in a party game turned into a variation on *sparagmos*, in which Hecuba's role has been partly that of a Bacchic maenad (Euripides *Hecuba*, line 1077). When she saw her dead son she had begun a Bacchic lament, now she became the initiator in the tearing apart of the children.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, too, the scene in the Donmar production parodied the cultural (mis)understanding by 'middle England' that understood neither the Greek nor the Asiatic values in which hospitality and reciprocity were and are embedded, and hence also did not understand the way that abuse begets abuse and the victim becomes the avenger. The anodyne associations of 'hospitality' in modern England were exposed but the semiotic and structural force of the scene was also used to develop the audience's understanding of the abuse of *xenia* by Polymestor and the reciprocity implicit in Hecuba's revenge.

### *Demokratia: the democratic process*

In the RSC *Hecuba* the key aspects of parody were parody of democratic debate and decision making. This pointed up the contrast between the acceptance by the Greeks that democracy was absolute and their betrayal of democracy in the decision to sacrifice Polyxena (recounted by an Odysseus whose quasi-American accent was ridiculed by the critics) and, even more prominently, the mock 'trial' by Agamemnon after the grotesque exercise of reciprocity by Hecuba. Here the Chorus stood grouped behind him, a back-drop that ironically suggested an alternative silent and silenced jury. In the Foursight company's production, which had an all female cast, Agamemnon was played by a Chorus member as were the other main parts. Changes of costume were made on the stage and the singing of the Chorus was in a number of different languages. Thus questions about judgement and of guilt and responsibility were more open-ended whereas in the RSC production, democracy was shown to be perverted and corrupted by the very people who proclaimed its values.

The responses of theatre critics and audiences to the RSC production focussed on surface issues, especially its perceived anti-Americanism rather than on the deep-seated question of the critique of democratic processes. The critics' attacks on the RSC *Hecuba* mainly use the language of theatre and aesthetics, yet the focus seems to be partly on the perceived attacks on the 'use and abuse' of the ideals and processes of democracy. The production was interpreted by critics as an attack on the US and UK 'coalition' in the invasion of Iraq. Tony Harrison's translation was attacked by critics for 'thumping down every modern parallel'.<sup>15</sup> There also seems to have been a sense of ideological weariness at a time when so many productions of Greek plays turned the text to attack the neo-conservatives in Washington. There was also perhaps some 'tragedy fatigue'; as Clapp put it 'the cycle of revenge with its bloody display of children's bodies, now looks almost routine'. The production was 'read' as crudely identifying Greeks with the USA and UK and as identifying the Trojans not merely with Iraqi people but with Islamic tradition. The Chorus was repeatedly spoken of by some critics as though it was represented by the heavily veiled Muslim women depicted exotically in the art photos in the programme.<sup>16</sup> These programme photographs were actually in contrast to the costumes in the production itself, which were compatible with any eastern European, Balkan or near-Eastern situation.<sup>17</sup> Apart from some textual references to 'coalition forces' (which were arguably not inappropriate as a description of the Greek alliance under Agamemnon) and the American accent affected by the actor playing Odysseus, the set, costume and acting styles in London did not suggest a narrowly focused presentist interpretation of the play. Furthermore, although Tony Harrison's

introduction to the published text did refer passionately to the Iraq situation as a stimulus to the production this was contextualised in its performance history and the parallels drawn between the suffering depicted in Euripides' plays and those of communities ravaged by war at all times and in all places.<sup>18</sup>

The US tour of the play, for which the initial director Laurence Boswell was in effect replaced by the writer Tony Harrison, appeared to counter-attack the critics by replacing the politically neutral set used in London with one made up of military tents bearing the markings 'USA' and 'UK'. Harrison has stated that he obtained the tents from military suppliers and that they still smelled of chemical weapons.<sup>19</sup> In the reception of both the UK and the US stagings, opportunities for discussion of the implication of Harrison's translation and Euripides' text for critique of the workings of democracy were lost in the debates about Iraq and anti-Americanism. To some extent, the reception of the play by theatre critics seems to indicate a back-lash against the use of theatre as a platform for protest against the actions of the American and British governments. The theatre critic of the *Scotsman*, Joyce Macmillan made a telling point in her comments on the impact of anti-Americanism in comedy shows at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2005 when she said that this detracted from and deflected attention away from British involvement in Iraq and other aspects of American foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> There was an analogous situation in the critics' response to the RSC *Hecuba* in that the attention paid to the perceived anti-coalition rhetoric of the production deflected attention from the much deeper-seated issue of the parody of the processes of democracy, embedded in the Euripides text and actualised by Harrison in his translation and in the semiotics of the production. It appears that parody of the claims of democracy is thought to be more threatening to modern western senses of cultural identity than is the blander and politically 'acceptable' reading of Euripides' play as an attack on war and on mistreatment of the defeated in general. In addition to the reluctance of critics and audiences to respond to the play's parodic questioning of the processes of democracy there is a further iconoclastic dimension in that present-day classicists tend to allude to ancient democracy and its inheritance as a justification for the continued study of their subject. Therefore it may be considered threatening to the classical tradition when attacks on the neo-conservative appropriation of the concept of democracy as a justification for attacks on non-democratic states also involve a critical assessment of the operation of ancient democracy and of the implications of ancient critiques.

Taken together, the parodies of *xenia* and *demokratia* must have been devastating to Euripides' audience. According to Herodotus, the Athenian playwright Phrynichus was fined because the contemporary allusions in one of his

plays reminded the Athenians of their current troubles (Herodotus, 6.21). Tony Harrison took up this allusion in his play *The Labourers of Heracles* (first performed in Delphi 1995) in which he himself spoke as The Spirit of Phrynichos:

“The spirit of Phrynichos cries out...  
*Cast aside mythology and turn your fearful gaze*  
 To blazing Miletos, yesterday’s today’s”.<sup>21</sup>

The ‘Phrynichos effect’ on modern western audiences is equally challenging and merits further research. Certainly it seems as though all the 2004/5 productions of Euripides’ *Hecuba* used parody effectively to reconstruct audience’s knowledge. However, the RSC production at least was less successful in its radical use of Euripidean parody as a means of actually transforming audience’s assumptions about the workings of democracy. The transfer of critical attention to the immediate issues of US/UK policy and actions in respect of Iraq also involved a denial about the deep issues underlying the perceived genealogy of democracy in the tradition running from ancient Athens to modern western society and democracy’s current status as a ‘foundation myth’, the cornerstone of western identity and justification for western foreign and military policy. This issue raises a number of research questions about the cultural and political contexts in which Greek plays were created and those in which they have been received and I shall hope to discuss these in future papers.

#### Notes

- 1 Marianne McDonald (2004).
- 2 Nehad Selaiha (2002), p. 16.
- 3 John Harrison (1999).
- 4 Lorna Hardwick (2005), pp. 6-8.
- 5 Frank McGuinness (2004).
- 6 Tony Harrison (1985).
- 7 Tony Harrison (1998).
- 8 M.S. Silk (1993), pp. 477-504.
- 9 M.S. Silk (2000), chapter 2.
- 10 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2, 13.
- 11 Justina Gregory (1999), pp. xii-xiii.
- 12 Christopher Pelling (2000), pp. 133-134.
- 13 Cristina Marinetti (2005), pp. 31-42.
- 14 For reciprocity, see Richard Seaford, “The Reciprocity of Vengeance” in: Richard Seaford (1994), pp. 25-29. Also Judith Mossman discusses in her study *Wild Justice* ancient revenge practices described in Herodotus. See Judith Mossman (1995), chapter 6.

- 15 Susanna Clapp, *The Observer*, 10 April 2005.
- 16 On the perceived Islamicisation of the Chorus, see Lorna Hardwick (2007).
- 17 Carol Gillespie and Lorna Hardwick (2005).
- 18 Tony Harrison (2005), p. x.
- 19 Tony Harrison on Cheltenham Literature Festival, 15 October 2005.
- 20 Joyce Macmillan for BBC Radio 4, ‘Today Programme’, 25 August, 2005.
- 21 Tony Harrison (1996), p. 145.

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