

KJELD MATTHIESSEN, *Euripides, Hekabe, Edition und Kommentar*, Berlin - New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010, pp. viii + 458, ISBN 978-3-11-022945-5.

This critical edition with translation and commentary constitutes the “swan song” of the distinguished classical scholar Kjeld Matthiessen who died on February, 26, 2010, some months before the publication of the book. At the same time, this edition culminates his time-long engagement with *Hecuba*: his comprehensive study of the manuscript tradition of the play, in his *Studien zur Textüberlieferung der Hekabe des Euripides*, Heidelberg 1974, his interpretation of the play in *Die Tragödien des Euripides*, Munich 2002, and his edition of *Hecuba* planned for a Greekless or with a little Greek reader, in *Euripides Hekabe, Herausgegeben, kommentiert und übersetzt von Kjeld Matthiessen, Griechische Dramen*, Berlin - New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, are counted among the most authoritative contributions to the text and interpretation of *Hecuba*.

The *Hekabe* comprises Introduction (1-79); Critical Edition and Translation (81-249); Commentary (251-420); Metrical Analysis of the anapestic and lyric passages (421-37); an Appendix (439) with a list of textual divergences from Diggle’s text (441-2); a selected bibliography (443-53); and a general Index (455-58).

Matthiessen’s Introduction deals comprehensively with various issues pertinent to *Hecuba*, including the poet’s biography, the play’s date, mythical background, structure and production. As far as the much debated issue of the dramatic unity of the play is concerned Matthiessen acknowledges its episodic, “diptych”, structure according to Aristotle’s criteria (*Poet.* 1451a 32-4), although he warns against applying the rules of 4th century *Poetics* to 5th century tragedy. He would rather describe the play on the basis of criteria supplied by the play itself considering also the poet’s entire output and the historical background. At any rate, he sees the unity of the play in the central character of Hecuba who dominates both episodes of the play, each one of them dealing with the fate of one of her children. Further, Polydorus’ body which was brought and unveiled on stage and which initially was mistaken by Hecuba for Polyxena’s body conduces also, in his opinion, to the binding up of the two actions and to the smooth transition from the one to the other (13-15).

In his interpretation of the play Matthiessen’s explicit (but quite slippery) aim is to reconstruct as far as possible the perspective of the contemporary spectator. So, he argues, Polyxena’s sacrifice would have been accepted by

the ancient audience as an element of the myth, without any concern as to its justification. He claims that far from putting it into question, Euripides takes human sacrifice for granted. It is we, modern readers, brought up with Christianity, Enlightenment and Neohumanism, who react against such monstrosity (17-19). But the text provides evidence that things are not quite so. First, the military assembly is divided as to the sacrifice (131), before Odysseus persuaded them, with his forensic mastery, to vote for it. To say the least, such an attitude implies that human sacrifice is not something to be taken for granted. In addition, the anachronisms surrounding the proceedings of the military assembly in regard to the sacrifice and some of the characterizations attributed to Odysseus by the chorus (e.g. ἡδυλόγος, smooth-talking, δημοχαριστής, people-flatterer, 132), which pertain to the demagogues at the Popular Assembly in 5th cent. Athens, incite the audience to perceive the sacrifice in terms of their own society, not in terms of a distant mythical past.

Furthermore, Hecuba argues forcefully against human sacrifice in general and Polyxena's in particular from a social, moral, political, legal and religious point of view (251-95), Matthiessen's playing down of such criticism notwithstanding (19). Nonetheless, as Matthiessen also concedes, Odysseus never refutes Hecuba's arguments with the consequence that they retain their validity and whatever impact they may exert on the audience. In his response to her (299-331), Odysseus' main defense for the imminent human sacrifice involves arguments to which in principle no one would object, namely patriotic conventions and the alleged honour due by cities to their heroes. However the issue is not the honour due to heroes in general, but the kind of honour Achilles' ghost demands and Odysseus champions. To this question Odysseus never answers.

It is refreshing that Matthiessen, close to the text, interprets Polyxena's death scene as a token of her noble character and heroism: she prefers death to a life of slavery and humiliation. It is the only way to preserve her freedom. Ironically, this barbarian slave dies for the ideal of freedom. Even though he concedes that some erotic element may be detected in this scene, such an element, in his opinion, is not emphasized, otherwise the main purpose of Talthybius' speech (518-82), that is the glorification of Polyxena's courage and of her noble attitude, as well as some consolation to Hecuba, would have been impaired (21).

In regard to the controversial Polymestor-action, the contemporary audience, in Matthiessen's point of view, would consider the punishment of the villain king fair and in proportion to his crime, as it is implied by the play's evidence -- no character criticizes it as unfair, and the "trial" leads to the same conclusion. Historical evidence as well testifies to a criminal's punishment along with his children. In addition, Polymestor's children, as shadowy characters, cannot emotionally engage the spectators and so

they cannot claim their compassion (23-27). On the whole, in my opinion, Matthiessen is sensible in his interpretation, although some thought should be perhaps given to Polymestor's acquired authority at the end of the play as prophet of the god (1267). Is there here involved, ironically, the kind of reversal Euripides is so fond of in his plays? Matthiessen is well aware of the potential reversal of spectators' compassion regarding the suffering female characters in the first half of a play who are transformed to successful avengers (e.g. Medea) in the second half, but he deems insubstantial such a reversal in Polymestor's case.

In his assessment of the main character, Hecuba, Matthiessen, keeping as close as possible to the text, refutes some of the critical views on Hecuba prevailing until recently (27-33). In spite of dissenting voices, he stresses the consistency of Hecuba's character throughout the play: it is the same person who strove forcefully to avert the death of her daughter (251-95) and who had the courage to curse Helen (441-43) in the first part of the play as the person who managed, with Agamemnon's complicity, to exact revenge from the murderer of her son, in the second part. Nor does he regard Hecuba's revenge an exceeding one which causes her a loss of humanity, allegedly exemplified by her prophesied transformation into a dog at the end of the play (1265), as several critics maintain. In his opinion, Hecuba was right to avenge the atrocious murder of her son, provided that Agamemnon, albeit the highest authority in the army, was unwilling to dispense justice. The contemporary social standards which as yet condoned the taking of the law into one's hands, are conducive as well to Matthiessen's point of view. Her action, he asserts, would have been disturbing to contemporary spectator only because Hecuba, a woman and a slave, could accomplish such a revenge, transgressing thus the boundaries of her sex and social position. In Matthiessen's opinion, Hecuba's future transformation as well as her death come in consequence of her transcending such boundaries and constitute not a punishment in any way, but liberation from a miserable life and slavery. To his account of Hecuba's fortunes perhaps one could additionally pose the question about the "cost" Hecuba had to pay in order to achieve her fair revenge—"there are cases where even justice causes harm" (Soph. *El.* 1042). And contrary to Matthiessen's opinion, I would say that, far from being "less sad" at the end of the play, Hecuba experiences all along unrelenting suffering and loss accentuated by the prophecy of Cassandra's prospective murder at Clytemnestra's hands (1275).

Matthiessen deals also aptly with several themes involved in the play as the power of rhetoric, the charis, dynasts and democrats, Greeks and barbarians, freemen and slaves (34-42). Matthiessen maintains, drawing upon the undisputed evidence of the text, that the notion "barbarian" is frequently employed not geographically but morally in Euripides' plays (38). The women-captives of *Andromache*, *Hecuba* and *Troades* are nationally

barbarians and are reduced to slavery, but in all other respects they are equal to Greeks and morally they are superior to them. By means of the Euripidean technique of irony, Matthiessen explains, in context always, some utterances of the Greeks referring to barbarians. When, for instance, Odysseus suggests sarcastically to Hecuba that the barbarians should keep not honoring their friends so that they will suffer more, while Greece will prosper (328-31), this sarcasm comes from a man who has just rejected Hecuba's supplication, despite her well-founded claim to his friendship, as savior of his life in Troy. Obviously Odysseus' words are used ironically and they by no means constitute evidence that Greeks are presented as superior to barbarians in this play. The same holds true in regard to freemen and slaves. In Matthiessen's point of view *Hecuba* is a "didactic" play in regard to real and ostensible freedom, and to a great extent the real freedom is represented by Polyxena and Hecuba, whereas the ostensible one mainly by Agamemnon (41).

In the Introduction Matthiessen deals also with the Choral songs (42-4), the function of the gods (45-6), the blowing of the winds and the gods (46-7), the sign of Dionysus (47-8), the maxims (48-50), *Hecuba* and *Troades* (51-52). Special mention should be made of the comprehensive chapter which treats the history of the play's reception from the early roman tragic poets (3rd cent. BC) to the 20th cent. (52-71). In this well informed chapter the vicissitudes of *Hecuba* are followed from the play's first free translations by the Romans, to the height of its popularity in the Byzantine period (it belongs to the Byzantine triad), to the popularity of the material of *Hecuba* and *Troades* in the 16-18th cent., to the critical voices in the 18th and 19th cent., centered around the play's dramatic unity and mood, the cruelty of Polymestor's punishment, the depiction of an entirely vile character, Polymestor, and Hecuba's quick transition from suffering to vindictiveness and cruelty.

Matthiessen treats the history of the text succinctly asserting that *Hecuba* does not seem affected by actors' interpolations (71). He refers also to play's rich ancient scholia, which he utilizes in the critical apparatus and in the commentary (72-3). As to the Testimonia, his list counts some 330 references to verbatim or almost verbatim citations of *Hecuba*'s text by ancient and Byzantine authors. His list includes also some 40 Imitations of *Hecuba*'s passages by ancient and Byzantine poets. The comprehensive critical apparatus of Matthiessen's edition is based on his own collation of the manuscripts. For the selection of the manuscripts he cites he follows the rules he has formulated in his *Studien zur Textüberlieferung der Hekabe*. He cites six more manuscripts than Diggle (RfRwS and ZbZmZu).

As a textual critic Matthiessen is a confirmed conservative. For example, he defends rightly, I think, the manuscript readings at 540- πρηνενοῦς, at 824- κενόν, at 1162- πολεμίωv, at 1215- καπνῶ. He retains vv. 211-15, 441-43, 599-602, 793-97, 831-32, 974-95, 1185-86, and he adheres to the traditional order of lines 415-20. In some other cases his options in favor of

the tradition could raise some questions as when he argues for the authenticity of lines 73-76 and 90-97, on the ground of their alleged indispensability for the elucidation of meaning. In any case, the meaning seems quite clear even without the disputed verses. In addition, he rather easily assumes no metrical correspondence between Hecuba's monody (154-74) and Polyxena's (197-215), in spite of strong evidence to the contrary. The double comparison also involving the double relatives, ὅποῖα and ὅπως (398) hardly seems sound. (In his translation Matthiessen does not render the double relatives.) His option of Herwerden's σὲ μὲν ἀμείβεσθαι to cure the problematic σοὶ μὲν εἰρήσθαι (236) does not seem quite convincing. In fact Hecuba, a slave, seems rather to ask permission of the master Odysseus to pose her questions than she tries to secure the answers to these questions. At any rate, Odysseus' answer points to such a suggestion: he grants permission to Hecuba to ask him questions, he by no means commits himself to answering them. Likewise the crux βίον (1270) is not cured by Weil's φάτιν; cf. 1265 which suggests that Hecuba will be first transformed into a dog and then she will die. Then Hecuba's question at 1270 (θανοῦσ' ἢ ζῶσ' ἐνθάδ' ἐκπλήσω φάτιν;) is rendered redundant. Occasionally Matthiessen opts for emendations which do not seem so compelling; e.g. πεμπομένα (Willink) instead of the transmitted πεμπομέναν (456), and ἔχουσ' ἄοικος (Willink) instead of ἔχουσαν οἴκοις (457). The women of the chorus will not be ἄοικοι for long; they are wondering at whose house they will arrive as slaves (448-50) in which house they will live a miserable life (457). One could further discuss some other choices of Matthiessen, but in general his textual options serve Euripides' text well.

His commentary is grounded in common sense and firm adherence to the text. His familiarity with *Hecuba* and with Euripides' plays in general emerges throughout his work as well as his command of the secondary literature, his by-passing of some far reaching interpretations notwithstanding. (The problem is how much "interpretation" a text could sustain before "collapsing".) For example, he explains Polyxena's partial nudity at the scene of sacrifice not so much in erotic or sensual terms, as the critical trend seems to be nowadays, but in aesthetic ones, as the comparison of Polyxena's body with a statue seems to indicate (p. 325 at 560f.). Further, he sensibly points out that the aim of Talthybius' speech is to console Hecuba, and Hecuba on her part does not consider her daughter's behavior offensive (p. 326 at 568-70, p. 327). (One could cite ample additional evidence of the text to support further Matthiessen's interpretation.)

No doubt, some questions could occasionally be raised by his comments; for instance, the ambiguous syntactically phrase χῶ κείνων κρατῶν/ Νόμος (799 -800) means either "their (of the gods) law which rules", (as Mathiessen also points out) or "the law which rules over them (the gods), and not "the law which rules over men". In context, the meaning of the ambiguous phrase probably is "their (of the gods, divine) law which rules".

The German translation keeps as close as possible to the Greek original.

In conclusion, Matthiessen's edition of *Hecuba* constitutes a major contribution to the text and interpretation of this play¹.

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¹ I have counted some 94 misprints in the Greek text.