

Monumentalizing Polyxena: Grave Reliefs in Euripides' *Hecuba*

The first half of *Hecuba* (c. 424 BCE), raises moral challenges for Athenian grave practices similar to those scholars have noticed Euripides raised the following year in *Suppliants* 857-917, though *Hecuba*'s discussion centers on the recent (c. 430 BCE) practice of erecting relieved grave monuments on state and family graves rather than funeral orations.

A reexamination of *Hecuba* 409-443 reveals that from 422 until 437 the actors playing Hecuba and Polyxena stood facing each other, holding hands in profile. In that position they formed a tableau for the audience with *dexiosis* as its central motif. Context encourages the audience to associate the sight with the family grave monuments they themselves had recently begun erecting. The *dexiosis* tableau accordingly functioned as Polyxena's gravestone, transforming the audience's last sight of her into a proleptic memorial. Most scholars concur that *dexiosis* on Attic grave monuments benefitted the family by signifying its enduring solidarity. Such monuments helped mourners navigate the grieving process by depicting the family's persistent unity despite the disruption death caused (e.g., Meyer). Gravestones also advertised the family's civically beneficial virtues by depicting family members as idealized archetypes of valuable Athenians, with *dexiosis* symbolizing their resolute integration into the *oikos* and *polis* (e.g., Bergmann). The manner in which Polyxena consoles her mother during the tableau confirms that it serves the former function; her previously declared desire to die nobly and impending death, which the tableau anticipates, help it fulfill the latter function.

Yet in anticipating Polyxena's death, the tableau also anticipates its own subversion. When Polyxena kneels and exposes her breast, her comparison to a sculpture (558-561) points to two iconographic referents: images of soldiers dying nobly in battle and of women denuded by physical violence. Combining these valences into a single image channeled through the equally

polysemous κάλλιστα (560) encapsulates how Odysseus conditions and circumscribes Polyxena's nobility so that it facilitates her politically expedient and brutal death. Simultaneously, an echo of Polyxena's address to her mother's maternal breast during the *dexiosis* tableau (Loraux) underscores how Polyxena's death eradicates the family line by precluding her potential progeny and rendering Hecuba's maternity futile. Because both of the functions *dexiosis* served on family grave monuments depended upon the family's continuation, Polyxena's statue-simile reveals that the very virtues the *dexiosis* tableau ascribes to her lead her to embrace a death that negates the tableau's functionality. In the sociopolitical circumstances Odysseus sets for Polyxena, the grave monument promotes ruin for the very people it should benefit.

The simile has this effect because Polyxena dies on a state grave, erected by the polity for someone who (reportedly) died on its behalf. Odysseus's arguments for killing Polyxena recapitulate one of state graves' fundamental purposes, stripped of all rhetorical pretense: to honor those who died "nobly," i.e. for the state, so that others will gladly die fighting in turn because they expect similar honor. State graves' orations and inscriptions employed traditional aristocratic terminology, as Odysseus does, while their monuments depicted individuating monomachies such as Achilles fought. Yet state graves provided communal honor that disregarded soldiers' individual motivations, actions, and identities. As voiced by Odysseus, that dissonance constitutes an inherent sophism that jeopardized families. It encouraged men to sacrifice themselves without the possibility that either they or their families would receive the rewards that might accompany the archaic aristocratic noble death whose signifiers state graves appropriated. Both times Odysseus argues for honoring Achilles, he treats him simply as a synecdoche for all slain Greek soldiers. Athenian families were complicit to the extent that their

monuments, like the *dexiosis* tableau, touted their dead as idealized archetypes of politically expedient Athenians.

Polyxena embodies this system. Her desire for aristocratic nobility, conditioned by Odysseus's speech, leads her to die in a manner that can be redefined regardless of her actual intentions as the sort of "noble death" Odysseus attributes to Achilles, whose own death is similarly reinterpreted as "most noble" (κάλλιστα, 310) because he too died benefitting Greece. Polyxena's death is demanded not only as a sacrifice, as often recognized, but also as the monument for Achilles' state grave (40-41, 113-115, 319-320). The simile comparing her to a statue accomplishes that transformation (Mossman) at the moment her body combines in one image her death's nobility and the systematic brutality with which the Greeks kill her to benefit themselves without concern for her intentions or the cost to her family. Polyxena thus becomes a monument that commemorates *Hecuba's* vision of the new monumentalizing system itself.

Bibliography

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