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Euripides' *Hecuba* and Vergil's Polydorus: "Staging" an Alternative to the Corrupt Murder Trial in Augustan Rome

Vergil's debt to Euripides' *Hecuba* in the Polydorus episode of *Aeneid* 3 has been evident to scholars at least since Heinze remarked a series of verbal echoes between Vergil's text and two passages in Euripides' play: the prologue spoken by Polydorus' ghost and the "trial" of Polymestor near the drama's conclusion. Recent work has emphasized the ideological import of the Vergilian scene. In Quint's reading (*Epic and Empire*, 1993), Vergil uses Polydorus to develop a parallel in Book 3 between the Trojans, confronted with painful memories of their traumatic past, and Augustan Romans, likewise in need of putting to rest the painful memories of the civil wars. But Vergil's references to the *Hecuba* would have also recalled Augustus' efforts at judicial reform. Vergil in effect replaces the conclusion of Polydorus' story as staged by Euripides—Polymestor's corrupt "trial"—with a pious funeral and the Trojans' departure from Thrace, events more representative, he suggests, of the Augustan emphasis on piety toward the dead and social renewal than the event they supplant. Vergil here opposes epic's emphasis on linear narrative to tragedy's interest in exploring the ambiguous implications of legal conflicts. By re-writing Euripides, Vergil dramatizes, as it were, the social benefits of relegating to the past the very types of corruption in a legal system that Augustus took pains to correct.

Augustus' influence on the judicial system included the reform of corruption and other abuses left over from the late Republic and perpetuated during the civil wars of the 30's BCE. Suetonius refers to brigandage, organized crime under the façade of the guilds, blackmail, and various technical and procedural impediments in the execution of the law (Suet. *Aug.* 32.1-2). Tacitus admits the popularity of Augustus' reform of the judicial system in the provinces, where "feuds among those in power" and "the greed of the magistrates" had left the public vulnerable to system disrupted by "force," "solicitation," and "wealth" (Tac. *Ann.* 1.2).

Recalling Euripides' *Hecuba*, Vergil directs his audience's attention toward a dramatization of virtually the same kinds of corruption in a legal "system" that the historians identify among Augustus' chief concerns (the Latin adaptation of Euripides by Ennius would seem to assure broad familiarity among Vergil's audience with the *Hecuba*'s "trial" scene; cf. esp. fr. 211-12 V3). The similarity of these influences to those deplored by Tacitus as a corrupting presence in the Roman provincial justice system is especially close. In Euripides, Polymestor's greed and betrayal of Priam lead to the murder of Polydorus and the attempt to disguise it (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.2: *certamina potentium...avaritia...pecunia*); Agamemnon fears the power of the Greek host (cf. *vi*) and is convinced by Hecuba's solicitation (cf. *ambitu*) to grant her the personal vengeance she craves. Euripides, although he is not Vergil's only source for the Polydorus story, provides him with a memorable staging of problems seen as endemic to Roman judicial process.

In addition to alluding to Polymestor's "trial," Vergil points to the corruption of forensic inquiry through Aeneas' own behavior. As Putnam suggests, Vergil portrays Aeneas "as himself a form of corruptor" (1995, 52). This helps make Polydorus' funeral all the more appealing as an alternative to Polymestor's "trial," since the Trojans themselves are implicated in a process of inquiry tainted by corruption.