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Hecuba and the Maternal Body in Seneca's *Troades*

This paper examines ways in which Seneca's *Troades* uses images of women's injured and debased bodies as visible signs of the Greeks' conquest of Troy. Throughout the literary tradition, Hecuba is a figure of maternity gone tragically bad. The reversals of Hecuba's fortunes--from motherhood to childlessness, from queen to slave, and from human to animal--seem tailor-made for a Stoic lesson on the transience of human glory. In *Troades*, Seneca connects these inversions intimately with Hecuba's own body and with the bodies of other Trojan women.

In the beginning of *Troades*, as Hecuba describes the downfall of Troy and of King Priam, she herself takes responsibility for this disaster, because she was the mother of Paris. Hecuba urges the chorus of Trojan female captives to illustrate their grief with their own bodies. In the Trojan women's laments, their treatment of their bodies is unusually brutal and graphic. Their bodies, particularly their breasts, are severely wounded and abused. Hecuba tears open the scar she made when beating her breast for Hector. Her description of the maternal breast, once shown to him in supplication and now wounded in mourning, serves almost as a rebuke to him. Other female characters, such as Andromache and Polyxena, also describe inversions of their feminine status or role. While the chorus women, in Stoic fashion, claim not to care about the debasement or injury of their bodies, they do seek the release brought by death, which only Polyxena finds.

Several conclusions can be drawn from Hecuba's identification of her physical suffering with the fall of Troy. First, it illustrates the theme of a woman's fertility as the source of external political disaster. Secondly, Hecuba's physicality in *Troades* calls our attention to a general association, throughout epic and tragedy, between Hecuba and bodies, specifically the bodies of the dead--the mutilated Hector, the headless Priam, the abandoned Polydorus, the mangled Astyanax. Thirdly, the analogy between Hecuba's body and the fate of Troy reflects a larger ancient tradition that identifies women's bodies with particular locations. Like Andromache's falling headdress in *Iliad* 22, Hecuba's debasement symbolizes Troy's fall in a personal and visible way. Finally, in Senecan dramatic terms, Hecuba's physical reversals can be seen as part of the Stoic background of the play and as part of Seneca's tendency to make all things concrete. The connection between Hecuba's bodily injury and the fall of Troy depicts a Stoic sympathy between the abstract and the physical.