BARING THE BREAST IN HOMER AND ATTIC TRAGEDY: DEATH, DUNNING AND DISPLAY

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the subject

CLASSICAL STUDIES

at the

University of South Africa

Supervisor: Philip Bosman

December 2015
Breast-baring occurs in fifth century Attic tragedy in a variety of situations, but almost always within a mournful context. Many connotations of the naked breast—vulnerability, womanhood, motherhood, and voluntary humiliation—can be evoked. Breast-baring can be a precursor of the death of the woman who exposes herself or of the death of the person to whom she makes the gesture. The most commonly represented context is the supplication of a son by a mother, a topos which finds its origin in Hecuba’s supplication of Hector (II. 22.79-89). As a consistent failure, breast-baring during supplication reinforces the idea, commonly held in the society of the time, that female power is inferior to male power. The motivations for the gesture will be examined both within the respective literary contexts and within the society of the period.

Key Terms: Homer; Aeschylus; Euripides; women in antiquity; supplication; breast-baring; mother-child relationships; mourning; αἰδώς
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my nurslings, Rachel and Jack, who first inspired me to study mothers and children in Greek drama, and to the many people who have nurtured me along the way: my friends Teresa, Sue Shank, Susan PO, and Rachel Hile; my loving and supportive parents, George and Arlene; and of course my rock, my shelter, mi media naranja, José Gomez Marquez.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aims and objectives

Breast-baring occurs in fifth century Attic tragedy in a variety of situations, but almost always within a mournful context; more specifically, when a character's death is imminent. Such scenes are found in Aeschylus Choephori lines 896-898 (Clytemnestra supplicates Orestes), Euripides Phoenissae lines 1567-1569 (Jocasta supplicates her sons) and Sophocles Trachiniae lines 923-926 (Deianira removes the top of her πέπλος before suicide). Breast-baring can be a precursor of the death of the woman who exposes herself or it can be a precursor of the death of the person to whom she makes the gesture. The most commonly represented and referenced context is the supplication of a son by a mother, a topos which finds its origin in Hecuba’s supplication of Hector (II. 22.79-89). All instances of breast-baring in Attic tragedy and other sources can be grouped into the following three categories based on the circumstances which prompt the gesture: supplication based on maternal claims, exposure of the breasts with an element of erotic appeal (although the intentions that prompt this vary), and breast-baring as an act which immediately precedes a character’s death. The motivations for the gesture will be examined both within the respective literary contexts and within the society of the period.
The multiple and wide occurrences\(^1\) of the act of breast-baring gives indication of its literary significance, but while individual passages have received scholarly attention (Whallon 1958:271-75 and 1980:127-42, Devereux 1976:171-218, Margon 1983:296-297, O’Neill 1998:216-229, et al.), as a group they have not been examined comprehensively in terms of literary function and variety and the socio-cultural aspects that influenced their performance. When considering the largest category, a son’s supplication by a mother, these socio-cultural aspects would include personal obligation being overruled by societal expectations, male overruling female, and the young overruling the old, thus forming junctures of socio-cultural conflict.

The category of supplication largely based on erotic appeal has only one instance in Attic drama—Helen successfully persuading Menelaus not to kill her—but there are other examples in oratory and history. With the case of Helen, Euripides may be commenting more on proper behavior for men than for women. He would also be engaging the Greek notion of feminine sexuality as inherently powerful and dangerous (Walcot 1996:93)—something that can unduly influence a man. On the other hand, when the hetaera Phryne (Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* Book 13.59) or the German women in Tacitus (*Germania* 8) expose their breasts, feminine sexuality is being used in a way that reminds men of their social obligations. Phryne wins her case by associating herself with the reverence due to

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\(^1\) In addition to the examples given above a few other instances are Aristophanes’ *Lys.* 155; Euripides’ *El.* 1206 and *Or.* 527; Herodotus’ *Hist.* 2.85; and Stesichorus’ *Geryoneis* frag. 13.
Aphrodite, and the German women embolden their husbands to protect them and fight on.

Finally, the category of exposing the breasts because of fear or grief can be seen as an extension of the usual beating and tearing at the breast that accompanies mourning. There is also strong evidence that baring the breast as a gesture of acute emotional distress was an accepted convention in visual art which also pertained in literature (Bonfante 1997:175, Cohen 1997:79, Steiner 2001:246). In addition, this could function as a male fantasy that, when in an altered state of consciousness due to a strong emotion such as grief, a woman’s reaction would be to violate social norms in a manner which gratifies a male viewer.

A number of issues need to be considered in order to provide the broad context in which tragic employment of this literary motif should be understood. One issue is the extent to which the tragic poets had the Homeric exemplar in mind rather than their contemporary audiences. That is, was the frequent use of the gesture based more on its venerable Homeric antecedent or on its popularity with the theater-goers? In terms of stagecraft, the question of how the gesture would have been performed by a male actor playing Clytemnestra, the single instance of its representation onstage (and whether this could have had any erotic connotation), will be considered. Finally, I will argue that baring the breast was probably regarded by the male authors and audiences of the time as having a primarily pathetic rather than sexual significance.

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2 *E.g.*: Deianeira in the *Trachiniae* or Polyxena in the *Hecuba*.

3 These actions were common to both the tragic stage and Greek culture (Hogan 1984:243).
The passages which will be analyzed in the three main chapters are the following: Hecuba supplicating Hector in *Iliad* 22:79-89, Clytemnestra supplicating Orestes in *Choephori* 896-902, and Jocasta supplicating her sons in *Phoenissae* 1431-1435 and 1566-1578. The scene from Homer is the literary prototype of a mother pleading with her son and employing breast-baring as a critical part of that plea. Later authors are imitating and reacting to the Homeric presentation of this motif, therefore the original requires careful analysis. The use of breast-baring supplication in the *Choephori* and the *Phoenissae* merits detailed discussion because the act is performed at a climactic moment in the plot. Aeschylus and Euripides, like Homer before them, use this exchange between mother and son/s to add tension and pathos to a central scene. Although the other examples of breast-baring are useful for studying the cultural themes and conflicts that underlie the gesture, the centrality of that gesture in Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides marks it as having greater importance within the works.

This study will attempt to go beyond existing scholarship on the topic in these ways: it aims to present a comprehensive overview of the gesture of breast-baring, in particular in early Greek literature; it will consider the motivation for the gesture as a method of supplication; and it will look for the literary and cultural reasons why the gesture never once succeeds—when performed by a mother towards a child—in its aim as a form of supplication in extant Greek literature.
1.2. Literature review

1.2.1 Hecuba in Homer’s Iliad

In addition to the standard commentaries and guides to the Iliad (Willcock 1976, Richardson 1993, Cairns 2002, DeJong 2012), more specific works dealing with the functioning of the heroic code (Redfield 1975, Van Wees 1992, Nagy 1998, etc.) and the roles of men and women in Homer (Beye 1974:87-101, Foley 2005:55-70, Salzman-Mitchell 2012:141-65, etc.) were consulted. Crucial to an understanding of Hector’s response to his mother’s supplication is an understanding of the background of what motivates Homer’s warriors to act as they do and the societal roles of men and women. Therefore, works that emphasized these themes were an essential starting point.

Van Wees’ book Status Warriors (1992) describes how the men of the Iliad are engaged in a constant struggle to acquire status (τιμή) and how “this struggle is at the centre of the heroes’ lives” (Van Wees 1992:64). Individuals and families are ranked according to the status they gain (Van Wees 1992:69), and it is Hector’s duty as the prince of Troy to maintain the royal family’s standing at the top of that ranking through his success as a fighter. “Thus heroism is for Homer a definite social task” (Redfield 1975:99), not something that Hector—or his family—sees as a choice. Redfield (Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector) looks at the Iliadic warriors more broadly, examining their responsibilities to the rest of the
society and the conflicts that they encounter as they try to fulfill their roles as fighters as well as sons and husbands. In Nagy’s *The Best of the Achaeans* (1998), Hector’s function as the protector of the city as a whole is examined. This element is so central to his character that it is reflected in his own name as well as his son’s (Nagy 1998:145-46). Thus, when he refuses to retreat from the duel with Achilles, Hector, “as a hero of responsibilities” (Redfield 1975:110), is fulfilling a role that underpins his identity as well as his family’s position.

On the other hand, the role of mortal women in the *Iliad* is much more constricted, although goddesses such as Hera, Athena and Thetis are capable of powerfully assisting or impeding the action of the male heroes (Foley 2005:106-07). Foley (“Women in Ancient Epic”) does point out that an exceptional woman such as Helen possesses a certain amount of agency, but most Homeric women remain on the margins of the action as keepers of the household or mourners (Foley 2005:110-12). In “Male and Female in the Homeric Poems,” Beye shows how women as objects of exchange can cause massive strife among men (Beye 1974:90), but this is a fact which emphasizes their powerlessness. Most often, women in the *Iliad* are notable for their dependency on men. Andromache’s and Briseis’ speeches (*Il. 6.41ff. and 19.287ff.*) highlight their lack of extended family and their reliance on a male protector; their status in the social hierarchy is also below a man’s father, mother and sons (Beye 1974:87-88). Since the proper female role is conceived of in these ways, it is no surprise when a woman offering advice to a man meets with rejection. The urgings of Andromache (*Il. 6.431-38*) and Hecuba (*Il. 22.79-89*) to fight a more
defensive war are dismissed by Hector. Finally, Salzman-Mitchell ("Tenderness or Taboo: Images of Breast-feeding Mothers in Greek and Latin Literature") observes that in the process of a breast-baring supplication, the positive and accepted position of women as nurturers of babies is confused and corrupted when transposed onto the relationship of a mother and grown son (Salzman-Mitchell 2012:158). This greatly undermines Hecuba’s plea.

Several works were useful for their examination of the influence of αἰδώς on Hector’s behavior and of how αἰδώς, a demand for reciprocity, and ἔλεος function in Hecuba’s supplication. Cairns, in his book Aidos, devotes a significant section to this sentiment in Homer and to how it affects Hector in particular (Cairns 1993:48-146). When his parents beg him to retire from the battle in Book 22 and when Andromache does the same in Book 6, Hector “sees his choice to remain in the field in terms of aidōs” (Cairns 1993:80-81). He would be failing in his duty to protect the city and he would be, in his mind rightly, held in disgrace for such a failing (Cairns 1993:81-82). But Hecuba also has the force of αἰδώς on her side as a parent and she attempts to leverage it in her plea, asking that he feel reverence for her breast, the symbol of the comfort and sustenance which she gave him as a baby (Il. 22:82-83).

Besides the respect that he should show to his mother simply as his mother, Hector is also susceptible to Hecuba’s call for reciprocity; he is indebted to her for his upbringing. In his discussion of the different strategies that suppliants use to sway their supplicandi, Naiden (Ancient Supplication) argues that this claim that Hecuba, the suppliant, is owed a favor is the strongest argument to advance during
a supplication (Naiden 2006:79). The last emotional tactic that she employs is trying to elicit pity (ἔλεος) from her son. Crotty’s book *The Poetics of Supplication* (1994) examines the important role that memory plays in prompting the pity which results in an effective supplication (Crotty 1994:70-88). Hecuba asks Hector to remember the care she gave him as a child and the care that she will have to give him if he is killed; “her exposed breast suggests the vehemence of the bereaved mother’s grief” (Crotty 1994:74). But as a warrior, Hector cannot be overly swayed by pity, even though he may feel its force (Crotty 1994:50-51).

1.2.2 Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*

There are several scholars who contrast the role of Orestes’ nurse with the role of Clytemnestra in the *Choephoroi* or who call into question the veracity of Clytemnestra’s claim of having nursed her son and therefore her ability to dun him based on his nurture. Whallon (“The Serpent at the Breast”) is strident in his assertion that Clytemnestra “is neither nurse nor parent” to Orestes (1958:274), supporting his argument with evidence from the nurse’s speech (*Cho. 731-65*), to demonstrate that she has no basis for her claim.⁴ On the other extreme is Garvie in his commentary on the play (1986:248 n.750) who is equally convinced that there is nothing in the nurse’s speech which conclusively proves that she, not Clytemnestra, suckled baby Orestes. Vellacott (“Aeschylus’ *Orestes*”) demonstrates that there is a

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⁴ Later Whallon does temper his position somewhat to allow for the possibility that Clytemnestra might have also nursed the baby (1980:147-48 n.16).
strong possibility, based on the historical practices of 5th century Greece, that both women could have shared the responsibility of feeding him (1984:154-55).

Devereux (*Dreams in Greek Tragedy*) also argues against Clytemnestra having nursed Orestes (1976:171-218). He analyzes the breast-baring gesture from a Freudian perspective and, although some of his conclusions seem to be supported more by his theoretical framework than by the text, his detailed assessment is valuable. In addition, Devereux’s Freudian analysis engages the possibility of a sexual element in Clytemnestra’s plea (1976:206). Zeitlin’s article “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*” (1984:159-193) picks up this theme and develops it further, focusing on the conflict that is created for the adult son (as mentioned above with Hecuba) when the maternal breast is bared. The mother hopes to emphasize the breast as nurturant, but it is impossible to repress the sexual significance entirely (Zeitlin 1984:167-68). Lefkowitz (*Women in Greek Myth*) contends that too much attention has been given to the sexually threatening aspect of Clytemnestra’s character, and that it is important to balance that aspect with her other traits (2007:176).

O’Neill (“Aeschylus, Homer, and the Serpent at the Breast”), pays careful attention to the play’s manipulation of the Homeric antecedent. As he asserts, the similarity between the two maternal supplications opens the way for further, less obvious connections to be drawn by the reader and for contrasts to be formed as well (1998:216-29). Whallon (*Problem and Spectacle: Studies in the Oresteia*) focuses on those contrasts, highlighting the very different circumstances and the distinct
motivations of the two women (1980:135-36). Aeschylus takes full advantage of the
audience’s knowledge of Homer to enrich the resonance of his own work, and in
addition he draws on other motifs from Stesichorus (Whallon 1980:132).

1.2.3 Jocasta in Euripides’ Phoenissae

Because Jocasta is such a sorrowful figure, her breast-baring places more
emphasis on the mournful element which was found to some degree in Hecuba’s
supplication and which will be developed further in the instances discussed below
(Section 1.2.4). Some analysis of Jocasta’s breast-baring in the Phoenissae is found
in the commentaries (Craik 1988, Matronarde 1994, Papadopoulou 2008) and in a
broader context in Loraux (The Experiences of Tiresias). Her perspective is that the
bared breast is the ultimate symbol of maternity (1995:135ff.), but a maternity
which is, as in Jocasta’s case, associated more often than not with πόνος (1995:29).
Loraux also draws attention to the Greek poets’ frequent juxtaposition of birth and
death (1995:31), which is found in Homer and then used to great effect by later
writers, especially Euripides.

Scholars have also examined the play’s presentation of the concepts of
maternity and nurture as they fit into the themes of taboo and familial strife.
Scharffenberger (“A Tragic Lysistrata?”) focuses attention on the centrality of
Jocasta in the attempt to reconcile the warring brothers (1995:312-36); the men in
the family are only interested in fighting for control while Jocasta tries to restore
harmony, even drawing Antigone into her efforts (*Phoen*. 1264-82). Podlecki (“Some Themes in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*”) discusses this decision to involve Antigone, taking her away from her role as a young girl safely outside the action, and propelling her into the midst of the conflict of her family (1962:369-72). Unlike the daughter of a typical family, Antigone becomes a “Bacchante of Death” (Podlecki 1962:371), a paradox which embodies the way in which the Labdacid house is moved by forces beyond its control (like a bacchante under the spell of Dionysus) which propel it towards destruction. Finally, Luschnig (“*Phoenissae*: On Ares’ Crowns”) analyzes the taboo nature of Jocasta’s maternity. He asserts that this play centers on Jocasta as a mother first and foremost (Luschnig 1995:176) and that the action is “colored from the start by Jocasta’s perspective” (Luschnig 1995:163), heightening the pathos through the lens of her love for her ill-fated nurslings.

### 1.2.4 Other instances of breast-baring

Regarding breast-baring as a means of supplication and as a feature of mourning, MacDonald (“The Breasts of Hecuba and Those of the Daughters of Jerusalem”) provides a thorough consideration of the multiple occurrences of the gesture over a wide variety of ancient sources (2005:239-54). Examples of breast-baring which are clear imitations of Homer are found in Stesichorus’ *Geryoneis* (Schmidt 2004, Krummen 2009), Vergil (Page (1894) 1967, Tarrant 2012), Chariton
(Schmeling 1974, Tilg 2010), and Caesar (Goldsworthy 2006, Kraus 2010). Although the scholars cited have noted the imitation, there has been little further analysis. McClure in her book *Courtesans at Table* (2003) and Naiden (2006) have identified instances of breast-baring in which the erotic element seems to be primary. They argue that when Helen reveals her breasts to Menelaus and when Phryne reveals herself to her jurors, an interpretation of the gesture as erotic is possible, but there are also associations with the goddess Aphrodite which the women are invoking. Polyxena’s self-exposure before her execution in the *Hecuba* has been discussed extensively by Collard (1991), Mossman (1995) and others, with many different motivations being assigned to the act (e.g.: it emphasizes her youth, it deemphasizes her humanity, it adds to the sensational nature of the scene, etc.). The mournfulness of Andromache’s references to breasts and breastfeeding before the death of her son in the *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women* has received some scholarly attention as well (Allan 2000, Dué 2006, etc.). Finally, Bonfante (1997) and Cohen (1997) have focused on visual artists revealing the breasts as a symbol for feminine grief or fear.

1.3 Chapter layout

The first three chapters (concerned with the *Iliad*, the *Choephori*, and the *Phoenissae*) will follow this basic structure: a brief discussion of the author and the work in its time, a summary of the action to help situate the supplication within the
work, a translation of the breast-baring scene, an analysis of some points of diction in the supplication, and a consideration of literary and cultural elements specific to each piece. By analyzing the three primary instances of maternal breast-baring in this way, it is hoped that shared themes as well as features unique to the individual works will emerge more clearly. The chapter devoted to other instances of breast-baring will provide an overview across a variety of genres and times of how some of the same themes emerge despite contextual differences.

Within the discussion of each passage, the following themes will be considered: the success or failure of the supplication, any relationship between the passage and the Homeric precedent, sexual elements which may be present, and the connection in art between naked breasts and women in danger. The analyses will focus on the failure of breast-baring as a tactic used by a mother towards her son because of cultural norms which make it impossible for a grown son to accept the directives of his mother. This rejection of the mother’s pleas is reinforced by the artistic tradition surrounding the breast-baring gesture which stems from its use in the *Iliad*. However, the Homeric exemplar provides more than a model for imitation, and attention will be given to how authors create their own effects by deviating from that model. In the instances when a woman reveals her breasts as part of a supplication outside of the parent-child relationship, the different socio-cultural and sexual forces involved will be examined. Finally, breast-baring as a well-established symbol of grief and terror in Greek visual arts of the 5th century, which is also recognized as such in literature, will be discussed.
1.3.1. Homer, the *Iliad* 22:79-89

In the first chapter of this study, significant attention is to be devoted to the major precursor of the breast-baring gesture in tragedy, namely *Il. 22:79-89*, in which Hecuba follows Priam in their attempt to dissuade Hector from facing Achilles. Baring her breast, Hecuba implores Hector to obey her due to the comfort she gave him through nursing. Both of these attempts to change Hector’s mind are unsuccessful, but it is Hecuba’s attempt, with its insistence on the debt of nurture, that is picked up and repeated by later authors (*e.g.*: Stesichorus, Aeschylus, and especially Euripides).

Scholarship (Redfield 1975, Murnaghan 1992:249-250, MacDonald 2005:245, *et al.* ) on the passage emphasized the following aspects: Hector’s duty as a son vs. his duty as the defender of Troy, the juxtaposition of the two extremes of life represented by Hecuba’s breasts and Hector’s imminent death, and the violation of social norms due to the potentially shameful nature of the gesture itself. But there are more issues to be considered: is Hecuba’s primary motivation to save her son’s life (and to spare herself grief) or, corroborating Priam’s plea, is her primary motivation the safety of the city (and of her family and herself)? A determination must be reached as to how her claim on him as a dutiful son fits into the other claims on Hector (dutiful husband, dutiful warrior) and how these competing claims lead to his rejection of her supplication. Careful analysis of the Homeric scene
serves as a fixed point of comparison for the variations and deviations of the topos in tragedy.

1.3.2 Aeschylus, Choephori 896-902

Following the Homeric precedent, at lines 896-898 of the Choephori, Clytemnestra, begging for her life, asks Orestes to αἰδεῖν the breast that provided him with nourishing milk and, although she is ultimately unsuccessful, she does manage to give him pause. The case of Orestes is complicated because his nurse has also suggested that she breastfed him, making Clytemnestra’s dunning of him based on nurture more subject to question. Like Hecuba, Clytemnestra would have been unlikely to have nurtured her son because of her social status, so this introduces the question of to what extent the fictional rejection of maternal prerogative is based on the lack of validity of the claim in real life terms. Clytemnestra’s supplication is also less compelling than Hecuba’s because of its selfishness and more complex because, as Devereux (1976:206) and Zeitlin (1984:167) have noted, there might have been a sexual element present which was entirely lacking in the Homeric scene.
1.3.3 Euripides, *Phoenissae* 1431-1435 and 1566-1578

In the *Phoenissae* of Euripides, Oedipus is the only one of Jocasta’s children whom she did not nurse; she breastfed her sons and daughters by Oedipus and even Menoeceus, the son of her brother, Creon. Euripides plays against the positive aspect of maternal care through nursing; he uses the image of Jocasta’s breast and its association with unnatural nurture and the bared breast as a sign of mourning to evoke a sense of foreboding. He represents Jocasta’s attempt to parlay this nurture into a basis for a supplication of her sons as a double failure: she cannot persuade them because she arrives at the battlefield as they are dying, too late to plead with them.

1.3.4 Other instances of breast-baring

(i) *Other supplications inspired by Homer*

Besides the examples in tragedy that draw their inspiration from Homer, there are many other supplications with breast-baring in (mostly later) literature. Stesichorus, in the *Geryoneis*, his lyric work about the fight between Hercules and the monster Geryon, has the mother of Geryon beg him not to fight in a manner which clearly recalls Hecuba’s attempt with Hector. Vergil uses *Iliad* Book 22 for the basis of his scene in which Amata pleads with Turnus and, in a first century CE
Greek novel of Chariton, the mother of the hero quotes Hecuba directly when supplicating her son. Finally, in the account of a historical event, Caesar borrows Homeric elements when describing the attempts of Gallic women to save themselves and their children.

(ii) Supplication based on erotic appeal

Helen’s actions at the fall of Troy when she encounters her husband again provide the only example of successful supplication by breast-baring in tragedy (Euripides And. 629-30 and 685-686, Aristophanes Lys. 155-156). At first glance, Helen seems to corrupt the Homeric gesture even further than does her sister Clytemnestra by reducing it to a sexual ploy. However, an argument will be made that her gesture is rooted in the equation found in the visual arts where bared breasts often mean a woman who is physically threatened. Helen’s success viewed against the failure of the other women who use this strategy raises issues about Greek views of female sexuality and men who are susceptible to it.

The account of the trial of the hetaera Phryne which is found in Athenaeus and Tacitus’ description of how German women inspire their men will be discussed briefly. Although these sources are later and, in the case of Tacitus, within a different cultural context, they still provide an interesting contrast—because of their success—with the failed tragic supplications. The examples of Phryne and the German women show that erotic appeal when combined with other factors (such as
religious awe and the desire to protect one’s family and possessions) can be an acceptable motivation for men’s actions, unlike simply succumbing to lust.

(iii) Breast-baring before death

At *Trachiniae* lines 923-926 and *Hecuba* lines 558-570, women—Deianeira and Polyxena—who know that they are about to face death remove the top of their πέπλος in preparation for meeting their end. That there was a well-established connection between disrobing in this fashion and death in tragedy is shown by the nurse’s reaction to Deianeira’s gesture; it is not until she unfastens her πέπλος that the nurse fully realizes her suicidal intention. Likewise, the crowd witnessing Polyxena’s disrobing is not reported to be shocked by her action, rather they admire her courage. Since there is no practical purpose to the gesture, this section of the study will explore other motivations for this tragic topos.

(iv) The “wasted work” of nursing

This section discusses the marked propensity that Euripidean heroines have for mentioning breasts and breastfeeding immediately preceding the deaths of their children or even their own deaths.
1.4 Translations and spelling

The translations from Greek of the primary passages being discussed in the chapters on the *Iliad*, the *Choephoroi*, and the *Phoenissae* are my own. Translations by other authors are noted. American spelling (*e.g.* behavior, honor, etc.) is used.
Chapter 2: Homer, *Iliad* Book 22: Hector in No-man’s Land

2.1 Introduction

Hecuba’s supplication of Hector in Book 22 of the *Iliad* is the starting point for this investigation since it is the literary exemplar which informs all later instances of breast-baring supplication, either as a model or as a point of contrast. It is necessary to look carefully at the context of the scene, the specific language of her entreaty, and the issues that Homer is engaging with in order to better understand the context, language, and issues raised by the gesture in Aeschylus, Euripides, and other authors. In Homer, the theme of proper behavior in the face of conflicting obligations—the debt of τροφή vs. the warrior code—is the primary focus for Hector and, therefore, for the scene, but Hecuba’s gesture as an expression of grief is also significant. Later poets will use or discard these themes (and often add their own), so it is essential to examine how the themes function in Homer in order to appreciate the variations.

Establishing the context of the scene will necessitate some discussion of the Homeric poems in broader terms than will be needed for the dramatic works. Some of the larger issues that affect any study of Homer will be briefly surveyed: the question of composition, the difficulty in determining what time period (if any) is reflected by the society and material culture represented in the poem, what value system the heroes of the poem adhere to, and what role αἰδώς plays in that value system.
system. Once this groundwork is laid, there will be a summary of the action leading to the supplication, a translation of that supplication, and a discussion of the diction, followed by a more extensive interpretation of the passage. My primary theoretical basis will be feminist literary criticism which has been applied frequently to the *Odyssey* (Murnaghan 1992:242-64, Salzman-Mitchell 2012:141-65, et al.), with additional insights from psychoanalytical criticism (Devereux 1976:205-08, Rutherford 2001:260-93, Holway 2012:105-30). This chapter will explore how Hector, as a good son and husband who protects his family from attackers, simultaneously disobeys his parents, acts as a good warrior by facing his foe, and ultimately leaves his family defenseless.

### 2.2 Homer as a model

In a world where imitation and adaptation were well-respected forms of artistic production, Homer was the ultimate source for such inspiration; his masterful storylines, scenes and phrases were re-used by countless later authors. Books 6 and 22 of the *Iliad*, with their touching dialogue between family members (e.g., Hector and Andromache *Il*. 6.404-93), the highlighting of man’s helplessness before the gods (e.g.: the Trojan women’s failed supplication of Athena at *Il*. 6.301-11; the weighing of Hector’s soul in the balance at *Il*. 22.208-13) and, of course, the thrilling yet heartbreaking duel of Hector and Achilles (*Il*. 22.273-363), are the most imitated books of the poem (Garner 1990:179). Therefore, it is no surprise that
Hecuba’s supplication of her son from the walls of Troy is a scene that later authors return to again and again, sometimes replaying it almost exactly and sometimes retaining only the framework. It has all the weight of Homeric precedent combined with the emotional appeal of a parent trying to protect her child, herself, and her city from harm and grief.

It is this natural impulse of a parent attempting to shield her child from harm—presented in a context which makes it clear that such an attempt is doomed—that creates the dramatic effect of the scene. Hecuba has been set up by Homer to fail in part because of the emotional impact that he gains from this outcome. The core of the pathos produced by the scene is the juxtaposition of birth and death (MacDonald 2005:245), certainly a common enough trope. As Jones comments on lines 641ff. of Book 16 where soldiers swarm around the dead body of Sarpedon like flies around overflowing pails of milk in the spring, “Spring, the season of new life, and milk, with all its maternal connotations, is used to illustrate death” (2003:234) just for this reason. It greatly heightens the poignancy of the moment of a man’s death to harken back to his birth or childhood. There is also the tendency of parents to think back, at critical junctures in their child’s life (modern examples would include graduations, weddings, etc.), to when s/he was little and the parents could protect her/him. Thus it is the drama of such a moment in

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5 An example of this is found at II. 17.4-6 where “Menelaus stands beside Patroclus’s corpse to defend it ‘like a lowing cow, who yesterday still knew nothing of motherhood, [lies] at the side of a newborn calf’” (Loraux 1995:31).

6 Citizen Kane’s “rosebud” provides a comparatively modern example. The main character of the film whispers “rosebud” at the moment of his death; it is later revealed that this refers to a sled he had as a child (1941). Dué remarks that “in traditional laments for the dead the contrast between past and present is invoked” (2006:122).
addition to the centrality of Homer in the Western literary tradition that makes the reiteration of the encounter between Hecuba and Hector a focal point for this study.

2.3 Homer as history

Part of the enduring allure of the *Iliad* stems from the intriguing possibility that along with its magnificent poetry it might provide specific, historical insights into the ancient world it describes. Separating the art from the history has not proved easy though, and the debate over the historical origins of the events recounted in the *Iliad* has raged for more than a century and has been the occasion for much bitterness. Gradually, perspective on the issue has taken this form: some of the broad strokes of the *Iliad* reflect historical realities (i.e., there was a city like Homer’s Troy which came into contact and possibly conflict with groups from Greece [Sherratt 2010:3]), but the specifics (from the small ones such as characters’ names [Raaflaub 1998:391-92] to the larger ones such as the existence of a united Greek force) are not to be trusted. The largest obstacle to any argument for the poem representing some continuous historical record is the occurrence of the “Dark Ages”

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7 One example is the literary scuffle between Blegen and Finley, in which Blegen was convinced by the archaeological evidence of the time (1963) and the “internal evidence” of the *Iliad* that the Trojan War occurred, more or less as described by Homer; Finley sharply disagreed (summarized by Raaflaub 1998:387).
8 “The only evidence that [Troy’s] destroyers were an Achaean army led by the lords of Mycenae and all the cities listed in the Achaean catalogue in Book 2 of the *Iliad* is the poem itself” (Knox 1990:23-24).
(ca. 1150-750 BCE) between the destruction of any city which is a candidate for Bronze Age Troy and the composition of the *Iliad*.\(^{10}\) Raaflaub goes so far as to say that “the disjunction caused by the collapse of the Mycenaean palace societies and the subsequent period of instability was an unbridgeable gap” (1998:397) over which accurate, historical memories could not have extended. He also puts forth the compelling idea that “unless the memory of certain events or conditions of a distant past remains constantly and essentially important to all successive generations, it will be lost” (1998:399). Thus, a past consisting of mighty cities, massive armies, and international conflicts would not have been “essentially important” to later people living in smaller, more isolated groups; they would have had greater interest in songs that dealt with “heroic exploits in local wars and raids” (Raaflaub 1998:397).

If it is assumed that Homer is not presenting a detailed record of how life was lived during the Bronze Age, that does not diminish the established fact that he does portray many elements relating to weaponry, dress, housing, etc., that are known to come from centuries before his own time (Schein 1984:16). The time-span for “[t]he majority of datable material cultural references fall into the long and rather amorphous ‘post-palatial’ period of the 12th to earlier eighth centuries, with only a few scattered references to the material culture of the later eighth century” (Sherratt 2010:4). Some of the datable references even extend as far back as the 17\(^{th}\)

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\(^{10}\) “The most likely date for the composition of the *Iliad* is the fifty years running from 725 to 675 B.C.” (Knox 1990:19).
century BCE (ibid.), making it evident that the heroes whom he describes are living in a world constructed from the material culture of many centuries.

Thus the problem of determining the origins of the material culture of the *Iliad* is daunting, but the complications involved in trying to discern the basis for Homeric society are even greater.\(^{11}\) The necessarily complex and inconclusive efforts to disentangle the strands that went into the creation of the Homeric world are not within the scope of this study. Rather, I will be adding another difficulty to the problem by considering how the actions of Homer’s characters—whether they are authentically Bronze Age, of Homer’s age or of no age at all, but rather literary constructs “invented” by the poet—were understood by the Greeks of the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century. My analysis will focus on the motivations for 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century authors for imitating Hecuba’s breast-baring supplication, and the contemporary (5\(^{\text{th}}\) century) social resonance that prompted them to make that choice.

**2.4 Oral composition**

\(^{11}\) For an overview of the problems and the state of the debate, see Osborne 2004:206-19. Essentially his conclusion is that “Bronze Age as well as early Iron Age archaeology can help us understand the resources out of which Homer’s society is created. But the Homeric poems show an awareness of particular material circumstances not found before the later eighth or early seventy centuries” (218). So just as the poet imports physical elements from a wide time range, he does the same with social elements.
Unlike an epic poem such as the *Aeneid* which is known to have been composed in writing by a single author, there is still dispute about how exactly the text of the *Iliad* that we now have was arrived at. Historically, scholars accepted that there was a poet who composed all or most of the epic, but that line of thinking was called into question, and “the modern debate began in 1788 with the publication by Villoison of the scholia in the tenth-century manuscript of the *Iliad*” (Fowler 2004:220). This gave rise to the Analyst school of criticism “which sought to distinguish [the *Iliad’s*] various historical strands” (Fowler 2004:221); this school was opposed by the Unitarians “who stressed the planful design and artistic quality of the poems, which argued for a great poet’s involvement at a late stage in their evolution” (*ibid.*).

The next major advance in Homeric scholarship came with the theories of oral composition which Milman Parry began to develop in the 1920’s and then confirmed through his field work with oral poets who were still performing in the 1930’s in Yugoslavia (Schein 1984:3). Parry studied the use of formulas—“repeated words and phrases [which] tend to recur at the same metrical positions in the line” (Schein 1984:4)—and decided that “this system had been developed by and for the use of oral poets who *improvised*” (Knox 1990:15). According to the ideas of Milman Parry which were elaborated by Albert Lord and others, oral composition of a poem on the scale of the *Iliad* is possible through the training of the bards and through the use of formulas (Fowler 2004:223). Parry and Lord demonstrated that in pre-literate/oral tradition societies, oral epics could and did (in the Serbian heroic epics
that they studied\textsuperscript{12} evolve from these formulas’ being incorporated into typical storylines (Schein 1984:12). The poems would vary from singer to singer and even from performance to performance (Fowler 2004:224).\textsuperscript{13}

For the purposes of this study, the \textsl{Iliad} will be regarded as the literary unit known to later audiences.\textsuperscript{14} I will not be engaging the question of whether that literary unit was arrived at through oral composition techniques which were then set down in writing at a certain moment or whether it was the work of one poet, in line with the views of Unitarian or Neoanalytical\textsuperscript{15} critics. Although the existence of a single person named “Homer” seems improbable in light of the evidence regarding the different story strands and the potentially long-term nature of the process of oral composition,\textsuperscript{16} Homer will be referred to as the author of the poem for the sake of convenience.

\section{2.5 Homeric values

\textsuperscript{12} Examples from Africa and Asia exist as well (Fowler 2004:223).
\textsuperscript{13} This presents another argument against any historical content being retained over the long term.
\textsuperscript{14} When this literary unit was committed to writing is also uncertain. The “Peisistratid redaction” (commissioned in sixth century Athens) was the first text of the poem that is known with certainty to have existed (Fowler 2004:224), but that does not mean that it was the first one to be created (Fowler 2004:224-25).
\textsuperscript{15} Unitarian criticism arose in the early 1800’s as a response to the Analysts, and begins from the premise that \textsl{Iliad} is “the work of a single artist” (Schein 1984:10). Neoanalysis began with the work of Ioannis Kakridis in the 1940’s and “is consciously and explicitly Unitarian, starting from the belief that the \textsl{Iliad}, virtually as we have it, is the work of one great poet” (Willcock 1997:174), but also incorporates a study of the relationship among the Homeric epics and the Epic Cycle. For a survey of the scholarship see Willcock 1997:174-89; cf. Kakridis 1971:68-75 and bibliography.
\textsuperscript{16} When describing Parry’s observations of the poets’ craft in what was then Yugoslavia, Fowler writes that formulas “had to be the creation of tradition, not of any one bard” and “[i]t became clear that archaisms and neologisms could exist side by side as bards employed formulas originating at different times in the tradition” (2004:221); this phenomenon can be assumed for the Homeric poems as well.
Assuming that the *Iliad* is a self-consistent artistic unit and since the focus of this study is to delve into how its characters respond to one another based on the value system presented in the work, a brief summary of the work already done concerning those values is necessary.\(^{17}\) There are currently two main schools of thought regarding what constitutes the value system of Homeric heroes; both are worthy of consideration and may be parallel to some extent. On the one hand is the compelling analysis offered by Van Wees (1992). He sees Homer’s kings and princes as hyper-competitive, obsessively on guard to protect their honor and given free rein by the rest of their society to defend that honor—violently if they so choose—against any insult, real or imagined (1992:63-66). This is a world where physical prowess is more important than intellect, eloquence or even wealth and where being the best man really means the best fighter (Van Wees 1992:71-72). It is not hard to see how accurate a description this is of life in the Achaean camp and on the battlefield, even though it does not account for every contingency, even within those two spheres (*e.g.*, the fact that Agamemnon surpasses Achilles in status, even though the latter is acknowledged as the better warrior [Van Wees 1992:73-74]).

But the *Iliad* portrays more than fighting on the field and warriors at rest by the Greek ships contending for greater respect among themselves: there is the city that all the fighting is centered on, where life proceeds with some degree of

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\(^{17}\) Finley set the stage for the study of Homeric values with his book *The World of Odysseus* (1954) in which his thesis is that “a simple and uncontested ‘heroic’ value system is embodied in the poems” (Osborne 2009:349) which can be dated to a specific time period. Reactions against this thesis are based on two objections: that there is no single value system at work in the poems and that the world of the poems does not, in fact, represent a particular moment in history. See Osborne (*ibid.*) for an overview of which scholars raise each objection.
normalcy, even under the siege. It is in this more peaceful side of the *Iliad* that the other perspective—the possibility that there are multiple and potentially conflicting value systems—comes into play.\(^{18}\) Looking at Hector and his impossible situation as Troy’s primary defender and heir to its throne brings this into focus. He must put his life at risk in order to protect his people, but the risk he runs might also expose them to greater harm.\(^{19}\) Hector seems to realize his own predicament but can do nothing to extricate himself from it. This facet of the *Iliad* is concerned, as Taplin describes, with the general problems of people living in groups, trying to arrange compromises between conflicting demands on their expected behavior (1992:7). As he points out, in the *Iliad*, “characters spend so much time and energy on disagreeing about ethics and values” (1992:6) that it seems evident that the question of what exactly was the right way to behave was not completely clear to Homer or at least not to some of his characters.\(^{20}\) In many cases, he presents options and his audience has to draw its own conclusions.

Although there may not be a universal value system in the *Iliad*, there are certain generally agreed upon principles that govern behavior, and there are

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\(^{18}\) Schein gives a very poignant example of the clash of these value systems when Hector’s helmet frightens Astyanax at *Iliad* 6.467-70: “Hektor’s heroism, symbolized by his helmet [has] on the baby he loves an effect like it has on his enemies” (1984:175). Although “he and Andromache laugh at Astyanax’s reaction, their laughter in no way mitigates the contradiction inherent in Hektor’s combination of conflicting familial and heroic loyalties” (*ibid*.).

\(^{19}\) Redfield 1975:126: “Hector is caught between household and city, between youth and age. He is both king and warrior; he is son and brother and also father and husband.”

\(^{20}\) For example, Agamemnon tries to preserve his own status (which would be consistent with the demands discussed by Van Wees) by taking Briseis from Achilles, but in so doing causes tremendous damage to the Greek side. He “has violated the ‘heroic code,’ which relates high status and honors bestowed by the community to the obligation to protect its interests and needs” (Raaflaub 2005:62). Agamemnon acted from an impulse to maintain his status but, because of consequences he did not predict, he temporarily lowered his status. “His act disrupts the hierarchies of the Greek camp and opens questions about status, leadership, and service among his followers” (Foley 2005:110).
different subsets of these principles for specific environments. Homeric society (to use a phrase that is itself much debated) needs the violence of warriors to defend the larger group, but the larger group may demand behaviors that are not consistent with a warrior way of life (Redfield 1975:101). Before leaving the topic of values and principles, a word should be added about Homeric society as a shame-culture. The world of the *Iliad* is a striking example of a society in which being criticized or even imagining being criticized causes an acute feeling of shame, and where self-worth and self-definition are largely determined by the opinions of others (Cairns 1993:81-82). Shame—αἰδώς—is a primary motivator for much of the action; specifically of importance to this study, it is what Hecuba will plead for Hector to feel when she supplicates him in Book 22 (‘Ἕκτορ τέκνον ἐμὸν τάδε τ᾽ αἴδεο line 82). But although there seems to be agreement that “aidos should be felt and heeded in appropriate circumstances” (Taplin 1992:53), the understanding of what those appropriate circumstances are varies from character to character.

### 2.6 Larger context of the supplication scene

It will be helpful at this point to provide context for Hecuba’s supplication by briefly summarizing the plot of the poem in the first twenty-one books and the

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21 Dodds specifies that Homeric society is a shame culture, not a guilt culture, evidenced by the fact that “Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of τιμῆ, public esteem” (1951:17). Cairns, on the other hand, writes that “the designation of Homeric society as a ‘shame-culture’ is misleading; but the importance of honour in that society can hardly be overstressed” (1993:140).
connections among the individual characters involved in the beginning of Book 22, also giving consideration of Andromache who is highly significant even in her absence. In the action of the poem up to this point, Achilles, chafing from the insult he received from Agamemnon (the demanding of Achilles’ prize woman Briseis Il. 1.135-38), has retired to his tent (Il. 1.306-07) for a seventeen-book-long absence that will turn the tide of the battle, with a devastating effect on the Greek forces. When the Trojans, empowered by Zeus (Il. 11.192-94), push the Greeks closer and closer to their ships, Nestor urges Patroclus not to wait any longer and watch his people being sacrificed on the altar of his friend’s pride (Il. 11.795-800). After four more books in which the Trojans keep the Greeks pinned on the beach, Patroclus dons Achilles’ armor and takes on the role of his Doppelgänger (Il. 16.130-44). After an ἀριστεία befitting the best of the Achaeans’ alter ego (Il. 16.284-709), Patroclus is killed by Hector with the help of Apollo (Il. 16.783-829).

Patroclus’ death propels Achilles into a berserker fury22 in which he cuts down everyone in his path (Il. 20.75ff)—even wrestling with a river god (Il. 21.233-83)—and he is only slowed by Apollo’s leading him astray (Il. 21.600-11) so that the Trojans can escape within the walls of the city. All the Trojans retire except for Hector. He remains on the battlefield, bound by “deadly fate” (Ἑκτορα δ’ αὐτοῦ μεῖναι ὀλοίη μοῖρα πέδησεν Il. 22.5) and trapped by the sense of αἰδώς that he would feel if

22 Clarke 2004:83: “Achilles is transfigured, superhuman, blazing; his voice alone when he cries out is enough to make twelve men fall dead.” Iliad Book 18.228-31: “Three times across the ditch brilliant Achilleus gave his great cry/and three times the Trojans and their renowned companions were routed./There at that time twelve of the best men among them perished/upon their own chariots and spears” (trans. Lattimore).
he returned to the city and had to face his people (αἰδέομαι Τρώας καὶ Τρῳάδας ἐλκεσπέπλους Il. 22.99) after advocating for going on the offensive (Il. 22.99-107).23 After rejecting the pleas of his parents to return to the safety of the walls (Il. 22.37-89), Hector clings to the hope that he may still best Achilles or at least plead for mercy (Il. 22.108-130), but his terrified flight from his enemy’s advance (Il. 22.136-37) shows that he understands that he is unequal to his opponent.

Within the supplication scene, the three family members involved are linked to each other through all of the usual bonds of parents and children, but layered over those bonds is the heightened dependency that Priam and Hecuba have on their son. Throughout the poem, old king Priam seems largely ineffectual. Although he is still the king and needed as such to approve the terms of the duel between Menelaus and Paris (Il. 3.250-58) he can no longer fight (Il. 3.146-52) and seems to envy Agamemnon who still leads his men into battle (Il. 3.166-90). He cannot influence the actions of his sons (i.e., force Paris to return Helen24 or prevent Hector from facing Achilles) by whom he is therefore ready to be replaced. Priam’s one major action, the retrieval of Hector’s body (Il. 24.322ff), actually hinges on his helplessness (although it requires great courage of him to undertake it). Because he appears before Achilles as a defenseless old man, this prompts Achilles’ imagining of his own father, defenseless without him (Il. 24.507-12), and triggers his release of

23 Hector used this same phrase earlier (6.441) when explaining to Andromache why he could not hang back from the fighting against her argument that his death would leave her a widow and their son an orphan (6.429-32).

24 Kakridis 1971:69: “The inertness of the Trojan king is clearly depicted in [Bk. 7] 357ff., where Paris insists on keeping Helen despite Antenor’s counsel, and particularly despite the oaths sworn in [Bk. 3], even though it was Priam himself who had sworn the oaths.”
the corpse. Likewise, Hecuba in the *Iliad* seems to be an old woman with no power, unlike her role in Euripides’ *Hecuba* in which she kills the sons of Polymnestor and then blinds Polymnestor himself with a tent peg (*Hec*. 1018-35). All that Priam and Hecuba can do to attempt to move their son is to remind him of their dependence.26

This weight of obligations is enough to crush Hector in the end: he is not only the adult child of aging parents who would be expected to care for them, he is also the oldest son in a royal family, the heir to Priam’s power.27 To add to these complexities, he is also the chief defender of Troy, whose prowess on the battle field is in fact keeping his parents and his people alive. The first two responsibilities make it essential that Hector do whatever he can to stay alive, while the third requires him to constantly endanger his life (Redfield 1975:123-24). He struggles to find a way to be an integrated member of society while simultaneously being outside of society as a warrior (Redfield 1975:101). Neither Hector nor any man could fulfill these antithetical roles.

Besides his relationships with his parents, the personal connections most highlighted by the poet are Hector’s bonds with his wife and, of a very different kind, with his killer, Achilles. Hector’s relationship with Andromache as we see it in

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25 Although she does show “a certain ferocity” (Beye 1974:91) when she declares at 24.212 that she would like to eat Achilles’ liver. Beye wonders if such a statement is “the fantasy ferocity of physically inferior persons who cannot win their way with strength” and proposes that “[r]evenge [is] the emotion of repressed or inadequate persons” (*ibid*).

26 Kakridis 1971:68: “Thus, in the *Iliad*, we have not to expect of old men and women anything but a passive acceptance of the consequences of the fighting activity of men.”

27 Redfield 1975:113: “Hector’s primary social role is that of the worthy son.”
Book 6 centers once again on his importance as the support and bulwark of those he loves. Andromache details her dependence on him, reminding him of her status as an orphan which, in her mind, makes Hector her entire family (II. 6.410-30). She returns to this theme of dependency when she begins to mourn her husband in Book 22, this time focusing on the fate of Astyanax who, without a father, is destined to be scorned and abused (II. 22.482-507). The repeated emphasis on Hector as the sole support of his city and his family is crucial in making the tragedy of his death, the culmination of the poem, as moving as possible. The poet clearly demonstrates that Hector’s family and his people simply cannot maintain themselves without his help. He is irreplaceable in a way that no single member of the Greek force is.

The dynamic between Hector and Achilles is certainly no less lacking in passion and even possesses a strange intimacy although, necessarily, more imagined than actual. After Hector slays Patroclus, Achilles’ single-minded concentration on taking revenge by killing Hector sweeps aside all the other concerns that have plagued him for the previous books of the poem. His need for

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28 Buchan 2012:118: “There is pathos to the episode, the tragic suffering of the isolated Andromache and the way her discourse invokes her helplessness and dependence.”
29 Ibid., “she is in an anomalous position in terms of her kin, because she is socially embedded entirely by way of her husband and not in a broader set of family relations”.
30 Tsagalis discusses how this connects Priam’s speech at the beginning of the book to Andromache’s lament: “In Priam’s γόος, father and mother were ill-fated for losing their son, but here it is the son (Astyanax) who links the fates of both mourner and deceased forever” (2004:130). This anticipation of future grief in Priam’s plea (the first of the three speeches that begin the book) creates a bridge to Andromache’s related fear at the end of it (where her speech is the last of three).
31 Nagy 1998:145-46: “Another of Hektor’s traditional attributes is his reputation for protecting the city and its people...In fact, Astúanax, his son’s name, comes directly from the father’s function of protecting the ástu ‘city’...What is more, the name of Héktoù himself is an agent noun derived from the verb ékhō in the sense of “protect”’. See II. 4.402-03 and II. 24.729-30.
32 An example of this intimacy is provided by Buchan: “Hector and Achilles will meet ‘apart from others’ (οἶος ἄνευθ᾽ ἄλλων, as Priam fears at II. 22.39) in an isolated togetherness that mirrors the intimacy of lovers” (2012:113). For more on this intimate moment, see the discussion below.
vengeance replaces his need for honor (Clarke 2004:82) and his grief for his dead friend and his hatred for his foe consume all of his energies. On Hector’s side of the relationship, his growing realization that death before the fall of the city will be his fate is an undercurrent even as he enjoys success on the battlefield.

Andromache’s entreaty in Book 6, although she does not specify a particular Greek who will kill Hector (τάχα γάρ σε κατακτανέουσιν Ἀχαιοί/πάντες ἐφορμηθέντες, “for presently the Achaians, gathering together, will set upon you and kill you” Il. 6.409-10 trans. Lattimore), pushes Achilles’ prowess and efficacy as a warrior to the fore, suggesting that he is the one that Hector should be most concerned with. By the time that his parents try to stop him from dueling with Achilles in Book 22, the outcome of that duel is a foregone conclusion. Hector may not admit to himself until his monologue in that same book that he cannot avoid fighting Achilles and that he is outmatched, but the poet has made this apparent to the audience long before.

### 2.7 Summary of Book 22

In Book 22, the confrontation that has been promised and delayed for so long by the poet is finally presented: Hector and Achilles clash before the walls of Troy.

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34 Hector predicts his own death at Il. 6.464-65 and Andromache mourns for him already at 6.497-502. “As a result, Homer’s audience and readers are absorbed in Hektor’s impending doom throughout the subsequent sixteen books (7-22), a doom explicitly prophesied by Zeus at 15.68 and 17.201-8 and referred to by Homer at 15.612-14” (Schein 1984:182).  
35 Since she reminds him that Achilles was the one who killed her father and brothers (Il. 6.414-24).  
36 Schein 1984:182-83: “[Hektor] never consciously foresees, chooses, or prepares himself for his death until it is inescapably upon him.”  
37 All lines cited in this section are from Book 22 unless otherwise noted.
After Hector is slain, the poem is mostly concerned with the funeral games of Patroclus and mourning for Hector. The only drama that remains is Priam’s pitiful supplication of his son’s killer in Book 24 and the uncertainty of whether or not he’ll gain his request to bring back Hector’s body for burial. But Homer certainly does not rush through the duel once the groundwork for it has been so carefully laid: he lingers over Hector’s impending destruction (Willcock 1976:240). There are similes, impassioned speeches, and then more similes. When the hero finally falls, the action of the story is ready to fall with him, having been brought to what seemed to be a death-defying height.

The theme of running/racing is introduced early as Achilles charges across the plain towards the city like a swift horse (lines 21-24), murderously intent on his confrontation with Hector. Priam catches sight of him shining like a star of ill-omen in his armor (lines 26-32). Of the Trojans, only Hector remains on the field to await him, in part overconfident because of the ἀριστεία that he has enjoyed due to the favor of Zeus in Book 17, and in part unwilling to admit that Poulydamas was right to suggest retreat. Priam at line 37 begins a piteous and lengthy (lines 37-76) supplication of his son, describing in detail the terrible fate that awaits him and his family if Hector is no longer there to protect them. He begins by reviewing some of

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38 Willcock 1976:240: “The death of Hektor at the hands of Achilleus is the climax of the Iliad, the culmination of the Wrath theme.”
39 The reason for this uncertainty has been established earlier in the poem when Achilles is unwilling to accept gifts in exchange for returning to battle (II. 9.379-87) and when he tells Hector that no amount of ransom is sufficient to motivate him to return Hector’s body (II. 22.348-54). As Seaford discusses, Achilles has rejected the principle of reciprocity up until Book 24 (1994:70).
40 This “active, terrifying radiance of the live warrior” (Vernant 2001:327) that Achilles in particular possesses, has already frightened the Trojans in Il. 20.46 and will frighten Hector himself at Il. 22.134-37.
the sons he has already lost in death or slavery at Achilles’ hand; he then imagines his daughters and grandchildren dragged off into bondage or murdered by the Greeks at the sack of the city. Priam finishes his series of horrifying visions with himself being killed and then—described in gruesome detail—torn to bits by his own dogs. Overwhelmed by his grief at what he has already suffered and the suffering which he anticipates, Priam tears at his hair (lines 77-78).

When this attempt to sway Hector does not move his spirit, his mother, Hecuba, tries a different tactic: she bares her chest, holds out her breast, and begs her child to have pity on her based on the soothing nurture she gave him. She pleads with Hector to return within the walls and not to face Achilles alone, arguing that if he dies in a duel, she and his wife Andromache will not be able to mourn him, and his corpse will be left for the dogs to eat (lines 79-89). The plea of Hecuba is much more succinct than Priam’s, but both are structured around the same points: the needlessness of Hector facing Achilles alone, the pity he should feel for his parents, and the terrible effect that his death will have on them. Sadly,

De Jong (2012:79 n.56-76) notes that Priam “has changed what may be considered the stock elements of the description of a captured city (the victors kill the men, set the city on fire, and drag away the children and women) into a family version”. Using a strategy similar to Andromache’s in Book 6, Priam tries to force Hector to envision what his death will mean to his own loved ones (De Jong 2012:79).

Priam (lines 71-76) strongly contrasts the decorous death of a young warrior in battle versus an old man cut down in a similar way. “The repulsive picture painted by the aged king strikingly explains how unnatural and scandalous it is when a warrior’s death, a ‘red’ death, befalls an old man; the latter’s dignity calls for an end that is tranquil, almost solemn, surrounded by the quiet of his home and family” (Vernant 2001:328). Tyrtaeus makes this same point (10.21-25): when an old man falls on the battlefield, it is “a shameful sight/ and scandalous.” It is Hector’s duty to protect his father from such a fate.

The dramatic effect of Priam’s gesture and words are intense; as De Jong notes, “[t]here are many indications of the old man pulling out all rhetorical stops” (2012:75 n.71-6).

De Jong 2012:77-78 n.79-89: “In order to underscore the pathos of the situation and to prepare for the approach which Hecuba is to follow in her supplication speech, the narrator does not mention her name but refers to her as ‘his mother’.”
Hecuba’s supplication fails as well, and Hector waits for Achilles much as a snake, engorged with venom, lies in wait for its victim (lines 93-95).

As Achilles draws near, Hector considers flight but is held back by the humiliation that he would feel at having to face the reproaches of Poulydamas (lines 96-103) who had counseled the Trojans to fight a defensive war and whose plan Hector rejected. Retreating from this confrontation would be admitting his own error. Hector next imagines his shame before the men and women of Troy for having ruined his people (lines 104-110). Desperate, he thinks over another possibility: putting down his arms, offering to return Helen and her possessions and throwing himself upon Achilles’ mercy, an alternative which he concludes would be suicidal (lines 111-122).

The manner in which Hector imagines this private conversation with Achilles is interesting because of its intimate overtones (Buchan sees the overtones not just as intimate, but as erotic 2012:115). Hector first suggests, quite probably, that if he tried to negotiate with Achilles “naked” (without his weapons), Achilles would kill

45 De Jong 2012:79 n.90-91: “τώ γε κλαίοντε προσαυδήτην... λισσομένω: capping the double supplication scene with dual forms, the narrator stresses that the parents work together and increases the effect of Hector not heeding their combined plea.”
46 O’Neill sees this simile as part of the inspiration for Aeschylus’ representation of Orestes as a snake (1998:223-27).
47 Poulydamas had in fact been urging this strategy since 12.223-27 and he puts it forward again at 18.267-72. “Poulydamas is mentioned in the Iliad only in Books 11-18, which describe the long day of Hektor’s triumph and delusion, and at 22.100” (Schein 1984:184-85). He is there to provide a contrast of his sensible course of action with what the narrator makes clear is Hector’s recklessness (ibid.).
48 Cairns 1993:81: “[Hector] sees his choice to remain in the field in terms of aidos,” he wishes to avoid “the charge that he has failed in his duty to protect Troy and its people.”
49 He also includes half of the Trojans’ own possessions (Willcock 1976:242 n.117-20).
him as though he were a woman (lines 123-25). Abandoning hope of any sort of discourse with Achilles, Hector decides to stand his ground and let Zeus determine who will win the day, but his nerve fails him and he flees as a dove flees an eagle (lines 136-144).

The flight of Hector from Achilles is a drawn-out affair; they circle the city three times, with the poet making the chilling observation that the prize that they were running for was Hector’s life (lines 157-161). The men are described as running like race horses (lines 162-166), then Achilles becomes a dog which has flushed out a fawn (lines 188-193), and, finally, they are likened to a chase in a dream where the chaser can’t overtake his prey and the chased can’t escape (lines 199-201). Their humanity and their bestiality are emphasized in turn, stressing how in this moment there is little difference between the two. When Zeus’ balance shows that Hector will be dragged down to the underworld by his fate (lines 208-213), Apollo abandons him and Athena impersonates Deiphobos and tricks Hector into taking a stand (lines 224-231).

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50 Crotty 1994:86: “Hector’s inner soliloquy catches the ambiguity of feminine helplessness in the Iliad. Women are powerless before the onslaughts of war, but their very powerlessness seems to open the possibility of an intimacy with the warrior that other males cannot enjoy.”

51 Willcock 1976:243 n.167-87: “The idea of a race raises the suggestion of spectators; and among them are the gods” (original emphasis). This emphasizes the importance of the moment: not only is the reader observing the action, but all of the Greeks, Trojans and their gods are waiting on the outcome. Redfield 1975:159: “These themes of fantasy, dreaming, games, and theater are appropriate to the death of Hector, for Hector’s reality lay in his relation to others.”

52 Schein 1984:180: “Achilles, more often than any other hero, is compared to a predatory animal on the attack...Hektor never is compared to a predator, but instead several times is a predator’s potential victim.”


54 Willcock notes that “[t]his is the most extreme case of divine assistance to a warrior in the Iliad” (1976:244 n. 214-77) and, although it strikes modern readers as unfair, “to an ancient reader...it would add to the glory of Achilleus that Athene is so demonstrably on his side” (ibid.).
Once the race for his life is over, Hector is as good as dead, and the focus turns, even before the duel is fought, to the next conflict: the ransom of Hector’s corpse. When Achilles catches up to him, Hector’s first concern is to try to reach an agreement with him that the loser’s body will be returned for burial (lines 247-259). Achilles refuses to negotiate with him and, after both warriors throw their spears, Hector is impaled by Achilles’ second toss when Athena retrieves his spear for him (lines 260-327). Even as he gasps out his life, Hector pleads again for the return of his body (lines 337-343) and again Achilles refuses. Disturbingly, Achilles even adds that he wishes that his rage was so great that he himself could eat Hector’s corpse raw (lines 344-354).

Now that Hector is dead, the rest of the Greeks come running up to stab his corpse and taunt it. Even as they do so, they marvel at Hector’s size and beauty (lines 367-375). His fury still not slaked, Achilles then decides to savage the body further by dragging it around the city (lines 395-404). Priam and Hecuba witness this terrible deed and begin to mourn; Priam is completely overwrought and is

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55 Again, Willcock asserts that Athena’s interference adds distinction to the death of Hector just as Apollo’s interference does to the death of Patroclus (1976:245 n.273-327).
56 Willcock 1976:246 n.335-54: “The concern for burial, and the enemy’s threat that the body will be made the prey of dogs and birds, has been steadily increasing throughout the second half of the Iliad” (also Schein 1984:188).
57 Hecuba will similarly wish that she could eat Achilles’ liver at 24.21-13 and at 4.34-36 Zeus suggests that Hera hates the Trojans so much that she wishes she could eat the flesh of Priam and his children.
58 Vernant (2001:327-28): “We might be surprised at this reaction if old Priam had not already illuminated the difference between the pitiable and frightful death of an old man and the beautiful death of a warrior cut down in his prime.”
covering himself with dirt,\textsuperscript{59} begging to be given passage from the city in order to plead with Achilles for his son’s body (lines 412-429).

The scene shifts to Andromache who, still at home, hears Hecuba’s lament and becomes terrified that Hector has been killed (lines 437-459). She runs from the house to the city wall and sees Hector’s body being dragged toward the Greek camp (lines 460-466). Even as she begins to lose consciousness from her grief, Andromache throws off her elaborate headgear, including the circlet that Aphrodite had given her on her wedding day (lines 467-474).\textsuperscript{60} When she regains consciousness, she begins to lament for her own fate and that of her husband, but she soon focuses at length on the sad life that awaits their son Astyanax without a father to protect him. The child, now so honored and pampered, will be pushed aside by his peers and abused and have to take refuge with his widowed mother (lines 482-507).\textsuperscript{61}

Even though Book 22 contains the duel that the poem has been leading up to—the death match between the best warriors from either side—it might be seen as surprisingly anti-climactic. After all, the reader certainly knows who is going to win, and the characters seem to know as well: Priam says that Achilles is stronger at line 22.40 and Andromache’s immediate assumption that Hector is dead when she hears the mourning (22.447-459) indicates that she too knew this would be the

\textsuperscript{59} Crotty suggests that this reaction, which is similar to Achilles’ when he first learns of Patroclus’ death (18.23-35), is so powerful and vehement because it is functioning as a way for the mourner to “repress the thought of his own impotence—that is, his inability to revive the one he loves” (1994:74).

\textsuperscript{60} Schein 1984:176: “This is a gesture which symbolizes both the end of her marriage and, to the extent that her identity is bound up with that of Hektor, the end of her life.”

\textsuperscript{61} Willcock 1976:248 n.484-507: “She always mentions the child in her speeches to Hektor (cf. 6.432, 24.732-38); he is the strong bond between them.”

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outcome. Even Hector, although he is determined to try his fate in combat, doesn’t hold out much hope for his own victory. The presentation of the duel is not hurried through, but the focus, even from the first lines of the book, is on mourning, specifically the predicted inability of Hector’s family to properly tend to and mourn over his body (Jones 2003:287). As a warrior, Hector has had to stand apart from his family in order to protect it; in the face of his death, his family is desperate to reintegrate him into their midst, first by supplicating him to return to the safety of the walls and then, when that fails, to bury him.62 His parents have been unable to protect him while he was alive, so now they become nearly obsessed with protecting him in death.

2.8 Translation of the supplication scene

Hecuba’s plea is the second half of the two-part supplication by Hector’s parents from the wall of the city.63 De Jong notes that “[a]t 21.526-7 only Priam had been mentioned as standing on the walls, but it now turns out that…the urgency of the situation has brought the women there too” (2012:77 n.78-89). It is this same urgency that will prompt Hecuba’s use of this unusual form of supplication.64 In a moral typical scenario, “[t]he suppliant takes hold of his protector’s chin and knees

62 Schein 1984:188: “Achilles’ real offense in venting his hatred and sorrow on Hektor’s corpse is not against Hektor but against the family and community who wish to mourn and bury him.”
63 De Jong 2012:77 n.78: “It is the failure of Priam’s appeal which will lead to a second supplication by Hecuba.”
64 Gould (1973:76) describes the physical components of a typical supplication in this way: “The significant elements in this sequence of actions are those of lowering the body and crouching (sitting or kneeling), of physical contact with knees and chin [of the supplicandus], and of kissing [the supplicandus].”
and beseeches him by these parts of his body,” whereas Hecuba “displays and lifts up her own breast and appeals to it” (Devereux 1976:205, original emphasis). Her distance from Hector rules out a more typical act of appeal, but Homer’s decision to include her nudity and increase her vulnerability are what make the gesture worthy of note to future writers of both fiction and analysis.

*Iliad* 22.77-92

So said the old man, and he tore his grey hair with his hands pulling it from his head; but he did not persuade Hector’s heart and his mother there from the other side pouring a tear was lamenting loosening the fold of her dress with one hand, she lifted up her breast with the other and pouring a tear she addressed him with winged words “Hector, my child, both respect these and have pity on me myself, if ever I gave you the care-banishing breast

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65 This phrase is sometimes translated as “laid the fold of her bosom bare” (trans. Lattimore), but I have preferred to the focus on the action of disrobing with one hand and lifting her breast with the other, emphasizing her intentional act. This reading is supported by the entry for κόλπος in the LSJ which gives this very line as the example “letting down the bosom of her robe” (original emphasis).
be mindful of these, dear child, and ward off the dreadful man staying within the walls, but do not stand up to him as a champion cruel one, for if you will be killed, I will no longer bewail you on your deathbed, my sweet sprout, whom I myself bore, nor will your richly dowered wife: but completely without us beside the ships of the Argives the swift dogs will devour you.” Thus, crying so, they addressed their beloved son begging him much; but they did not persuade Hector’s heart.

2.9 The Breast-baring gesture

In this scene, Hecuba’s action of loosening her πέπλος is apparently accomplished quickly and easily; it probably only involved the removal of a single pin from where the dress was fastened at her shoulder. Presuming that she is right-handed, she would simply reach over to the front of her left shoulder and undo the pin, allowing the top of the πέπλος to hang down at an angle, revealing her left breast which she then cupped with her left hand as she entreated her son. Of course, this action would be the same action that a nursing mother would have employed when getting ready to nurse her baby, and in this context Hector might have seen it performed very recently as Andromache or a nurse breastfed their son. If envisioned this way, Hecuba was exposing a large portion of her upper body since, once the πέπλος was unpinned on the front side, the fabric would have fallen

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66 This imagining of her garment is based on Leaf’s Appendix G (1902:595-98) in which he references Hecuba’s breast-baring in his discussion of women’s clothing, arriving at the conclusion that the style of dress described by Homer is what was typical in the archaic period.

67 Bonfante asserts that in reality “aristocratic...[Greek] ladies rarely nursed their babies” (1997:184), but Cohen (1997:69) and Salzman-Mitchell (2012:147) add that literary queens and noblewomen are often represented as doing so as a way to evoke a heroic past with different customs.
down in both the front and the back, leaving her left arm, her left breast and her 
back on the upper left side uncovered. This public nakedness—especially of an 
older, respected woman—would dramatically violate cultural norms.68

2.10 Remarks on the diction

The language that Hecuba uses in this speech is almost equally as striking as 
hers gesture. In the course of eight lines, she calls him her “dear child” (variations of 
φίλε τέκνον) twice69 as well as her φίλον θάλος,70 71 keeping the nature of their 
relationship in the fore. Reinforcing this, the narrator will refer to Hector as a φίλον 
υἱὸν just after her speech. Richardson points out that “the rush of imperatives in 82- 
5” along with these “repeated vocatives of endearment” (1993:115)72 have the dual 
effect of ordering Hector to do what his mother wants even as she is keeping his

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68 Salzman-Mitchell 2012:145: “generally nudity in old women was an object of ridicule and contempt in Greek culture.”
69 This mirrors Priam’s use of φίλον τέκος at line 38 and ἐμὸν τέκος at line 56 (De Jong 2012:72 n.56- 
76); it is another way in which the two speeches reinforce one another.
70 I have rather loosely rendered this as “sweet sprout” to approximate the way in which a parent 
might call a child “sweet pea” or “pumpkin;” the child as the tender, little plant that the parent must 
cultivate.
71 De Jong notes that θάλος is always used “with affective connotation and focalised by parents” 
(2012:79 n.87) and Richardson adds that “the metaphorical θάλος is more effective as a term of 
endearment than the variant τέκος” (1993:115 n.87).
72 De Jong notes the vocatives as well, adding that Hecuba also repeats σε three times in lines 86 and 
88 (2012:78 n.79-89), increasing the urgency of her plea and as a strategy to keep Hector’s focus on 
her.
attention on her and their relationship. It is critical to Hecuba’s case that he has firmly in mind that he is her son and owes her obedience.73

Even before stating what course of action it is that she wishes her son to take, Hecuba tells him very clearly how she wants him to feel: Hector should feel αἰδώς at the sight of her breasts74 and he should feel ἔλεος towards her. Besides being the typical feelings that a supplicandus is hoped to feel towards a supplicant, “αἰδώς and ἔλεος are crucial concepts in these closing books of the poem” (Richardson 1993:115) in general and will be discussed in detail below. Immediately following her statement of what Hector should be feeling, Hecuba gives her reason for why he should be feeling those emotions: she nursed him.75 This claim that he owes her a favor is a standard feature of supplication (Richardson 1993:115) and in fact, reciprocity is seen as one of the more compelling arguments that a supplicant can make (Naiden 2006:79). Then, as she prepares to order Hector to stay inside the walls, Hecuba carefully lays the groundwork by insisting that he “be mindful of these (breasts)” and calls him “dear child” once again (line 83). Her next word, ἄμυνε, is her command; she has placed the imperative as near as possible to four words (τῶν μνῆσαι φίλε τέκνον) which define Hector irrefutably as her beloved, obedient child.

73 Devereux asserts that “there is ample evidence that the holding or displaying of various parts of one’s own body is not so much a supplicating as an aggressive, commanding...gesture” (1976:205).
74 Here αἰδώς is not so much a consideration of what other people will say, but “a spontaneous response to some claim to consideration presented by another person” (Cairns 1993:140-41).
75 Devereux (ibid.) explains that Hecuba’s gesture “exploits the very widespread belief that, by being nursed, the child contracts a lifelong debt.”
In line 87, after she has told Hector to stay inside the walls and to give up his role as a champion (πρόμος), Hecuba switches rhetorical gears while still retaining language that is filled with reminders of their mother-child relationship. Now, instead of urging him to reflect back on his childhood and the debt of obedience that he owes her because of his nurture, she asks him to think ahead to what will happen if he is killed. This juxtaposition of infancy and death is meant to be a poignant yet forceful incentive for Hector. As she imagines him slain at the hands of Achilles, lying on his deathbed, she refers to her son as her φίλον θάλος and adds further emphasis by saying ὅν τέκον αὐτή. When Hecuba supplicates him, she refers to the two main roles of women in war: “the rearing of babies and the tending of the dead” (Taplin 1992:233). These are two times when men rely on women to tend to their washing and dressing, two times when they are completely helpless. These times are highlighted to show how dutiful Hecuba has been to her son in the past and how sorrowful she is at the thought of not being able to carry out a similar duty in the future. She completes the picture of what a terrible fate awaits them both by predicting that he will be eaten by dogs, the same horrible end that Priam has just predicted for himself (line 75).

2.11 The Elements of Hecuba’s plea: τροφή, ἔλεος and αἰδώς

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76 De Jong 2012:78 n.79-89: “Like Priam, she ends with a horrifying picture of what will happen in the future if Hector does not listen to her.”
When Hecuba addresses her son from the wall of Troy, she is trying to influence Hector to follow her advice in making what is, literally, a life or death decision. Priam, summoning up images of his own death and the destruction of their city, the very height of pathos, has failed to persuade their son, so now Hecuba must make a last, desperate effort. She has to use the strongest weapon in her arsenal, the situation demands nothing less, and she decides to call in Hector’s debt to her based on her motherly τροφή.77 What turns out to be a completely misguided choice for the character of Hecuba is, of course, the best possible choice for the emotional effect of the poem. She adds to the pathos of Priam’s appeal while using a plea that is wholly inconsistent with Hector’s warrior code and therefore doomed to rejection. Because of the gesture she employs, her supplication is at the same moment bold and pathetic and inadvertently contributes to the forces already driving Hector to his death.

According to F.S. Naiden, “the most compelling argument” that can be made when attempting a supplication “is reciprocity, a statement that the supplicandus owes the suppliant a favor” (2006:79), so it would appear that Hecuba is wise to choose this strategy and propose to Hector that he owes her obedience now because of the nurture she gave him. Moreover, appeals to pity for a child, that is, “pity for those whose innocence is unquestionable” (Naiden 2006:98), carry weight, even though the child in this case is the now-grown Hector. It is common and commonly persuasive for a suppliant to use a child as a symbol of innocence that he wants to

77 De Jong 2012:78 n.79-89: “The underlying thought is that his death would rob her of the θέρπη, ‘repayment for the care of rearing’, which Hector owes her.”
be associated with (*ibid*.), but here the aim is different. By mentioning the child he once was, Hecuba hopes to force Hector to see himself in a different light: not as a warrior who must fight to the death, but as a defenseless baby who must be protected by his mother or, in this moment, by the walls of his mother’s city. As mentioned above, Hecuba is explicit in her intention to prompt her son to feel ἔλεος and αἰδώς. She believes that his pity for her as a suppliant and his reverence for her as a parent will compel him to act as she wishes. The specific request for ἔλεος, besides being the typical response a suppliant wants from the supplicandus, also conforms to larger patterns in the poem. Since ἔλεος in the *Iliad* is markedly similar to mourning (Crotty 1994:48), Hecuba’s next step of associating pity and grief makes eminent sense. She asks her son to imagine what it will be like for her when he dies, and she ties that imagining of a tragic future with a recollection of a rosy past along with her plea for pity. By referring to her bearing and nursing of him, she seeks to invoke the closest possible bond, since this will cause, she hopes, an emotional identification on Hector’s part with her situation and elicit his ἔλεος for her (Crotty 1994:74-5). If she can succeed in securing his pity, he may act on it and grant her request.

Besides begging for him to show her ἔλεος, Hecuba is prompting Hector to act on a sense of αἰδώς in its sense of reverence or respect for her as his mother and to

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78 Cf. De Jong who asserts that “suppliants do not ask for pity as a rule,” although she does allow that it is something that the old (as in this instance), the young and inexperienced and lesser heroes request (2012:74 n.59).

79 Interestingly, De Jong comments that in this scene Hecuba “uses the (body) language of lament in order to persuade Hector” (2012:78 n.79-89), implying that breast-baring does have a mournful connotation.
take shelter behind the city walls. Undermining her case though is that he is already responding to αἰδώς—this time as shame—stemming from the imagined reactions of the Trojans, especially the other Trojan women, if he were to leave the battlefield (Louden 2006:34). It is this second form of αἰδώς, the one which conforms with Hector’s self-image as a warrior, that will trump the αἰδώς that motivates him to be a good son.80 Redfield describes αἰδώς as “the most pervasive ethical emotion in Homeric society; it is basically a responsiveness to social situations and to the judgments of others” (1975:116) and Hector is Redfield’s “hero of aidos” (1975:119) who will do anything to avoid νέμεσις, the moral disapproval of others.

Unfortunately for Hector, αἰδώς can sometimes be provoked by parties on both sides of an argument, making him unable to satisfy everyone, and leaving him to suffer the dismissed party’s νέμεσις. He is motivated by αἰδώς to go out and fight, but both his mother and his wife try to restrain him from this course. Kakridis sums up the regrettable position Hector finds himself in: “It is the main poetic function of women in the Iliad to exercise consciously this restraining power over men...and by keeping alive the agonizing conflict in their souls” (1971:71, original emphasis). This “agonizing conflict” is certainly apparent in Hector’s actions as he first heeds the one pull by staying outside the city to fight and then the other when he turns tail and flees from Achilles.

80 Schein 1984:179: “Hektor is forced to choose between the direct, familial plea for aidos by those who are dearest to him and his sense of the aidos he owes to his city and his people. These obligations are mutually contradictory, and the contradiction is never resolved; it is built into the nature and conditions of Hektor’s and Troy’s existence.”
The primal emotions of ἕλεος and αἰδώς that Hecuba and Priam are trying to stir up within their child are complemented by the physicality of their supplication. They are not reasoning with him; they are playing on his emotions with their words and, in Priam’s case, with his self-injurious actions. Even before he speaks, Priam lifts his hands as though in prayer, but then beats his own head (II. 22.33-4) and then stretches out his arms towards his son in the typical gesture of supplication (line 37). Once his spoken prayer is ended, he tears at his hair, seeming to mourn his son already (lines 77-78).\(^8\) Having endured the sight and sound of his father hurting himself and pleading piteously, Hector now is confronted by the equally piteous, yet far more ambiguous gesture of Hecuba as she uncovers her breasts and begs him to look at them.

This gesture of breast-baring by a mother, especially if we imagine Hecuba as an older woman as she is usually conceived, is likely to be shocking to the grown child and something that might cause feelings of acute embarrassment. She is trying to make him recall “mother-infant early love, yet exposing one’s breasts to a grown son, long after the lactation period has finished, conveys ambiguous, and possible sexual, overtones” (Salzman-Mitchell 2012:145) which would hardly be to her advantage. Although Hecuba is attempting to use her own exposure and humiliation as a form of persuasion on a powerful, pre-social level, her attempt is compromised in part by the humiliation that she causes her son in the process. The filial duty that she wants to call upon is overcome by Hector’s keen awareness of

\(^8\) Postlethwaite 2000:268 n.33-4: “Priam is lamenting the death of Hektor while he is still alive, just as Andromache and the women of Troy did when Hektor left the city for the last time to return to battle (6.500).”
himself as a defender of the city and the sense of duty that entails, which for him is far greater.

The difficulties of Hecuba’s gesture are compounded by a tendency in Greek culture to see the nakedness of an old woman as “ridiculous and contemptible” (Salzman-Mitchell 2012:145), not merely awkward. Although Devereux is willing to discount any sexual aspect of her action with the rather ungenerous assessment that Hecuba’s breasts “are too flaccid to arouse erotic responses” (1976:207),82 I would agree with Salzman-Mitchell’s opinion that there is no way for a woman to bare her breasts in a strictly maternal way, so some ambiguity remains (2012:146). That is, there is no way for her to invoke the connection that existed between the nursing couple, however deep and real that connection might have been, once her child has weaned; after that, there is at least the possibility of a sexual element and, I would argue, in this context, a mournful one as well.

Hecuba’s gesture, although identical in form, is not the same in its implications as the primarily erotic breast-baring of the German women in Tacitus (Ger. 8) which is designed to arouse their husbands and inspire them to protect those desirable breasts and their possessors. Instead, seeing a mother disrobe publicly would violate many social norms while forcefully suggesting that she still sees her child as someone who needs her active nurture. In a sense, Hecuba with her supplication is asking Hector to regress to a childish or even infantile state and

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82 Although he writes earlier on the same page, “I confidently state that αἰδώξ always has a nuance of sexuality” (1976:207) which seems contradictory.
accept her advice and protection. Her gesture indirectly communicates that he is not strong enough to fight and needs to back down. This is not to say that if it were Andromache baring her breasts that Hector would have been sufficiently inspired to defeat Achilles (the poet has made it clear that he is outclassed). Rather, it is just one more factor in his failure. Unlike Achilles who can commit himself to battle without reservations, Hector is fatally weakened by his family connections: he wishes to protect them, and they inadvertently undermine his battle readiness.

The conflict that Hecuba’s request causes for Hector because of his competing loyalties—to his parents and to the warrior code—is a difficult one. His desire and duty to be an obedient son is here completely at odds with his duty to be a stalwart defender of his city and his desire to be a bold pursuer of martial glory. His dilemma is neatly summed up by Redfield who says that “in defending everyone the warrior must set aside his special obligations to those who are most truly his own” (1975:123). As the head of his household, Hector must abandon his family in order to protect them and, as Troy’s foremost fighter, he must privilege the needs of the city over those of his kin. “In Hector’s story we see that “the heroic” is not a single thing but a set of virtues and obligations—diverse relations sometimes in conflict with one another” (Redfield 1975:109).

Although Hector is torn about whether to fight Achilles, as his internal monologue (II. 22.98-130) makes clear, his rejection of his parents’ pleas and his adherence to his role as a fighter comes as no surprise in Book 22 since he has

83 Devereux (1976:207): “The display of the maternal breast is also expected to elicit a psycho-sexual regression to the outlook of infancy—to the time when the maternal breast represented nourishing love.”
already dismissed Andromache’s very similar pleas in Book 6. In fact, the supplications of Priam and Andromache match up in many structural details: both list the male relatives that Achilles has already slain, both ask him to remain within the walls and pity them, and both conclude with the grim prospects that await them after Hector’s death (Louden 2006:33). In his discussion of Andromache’s supplication and Hector’s rejection of it, Crotty remarks that “To act on the prompting of eleos and do as Andromache asks would flout the codes of behavior that Hector has been taught and of whose goodness he is deeply convinced” (1994:50). Further, a warrior must resist the impulse to give in to powerful emotions, even when they are honorable ones such as pity for a suppliant (1994:51). So Hector cannot give in to Andromache’s and his parents’ pleas; his status and his self-identification as a fighter do not allow it.

Another factor weighing against Hecuba’s gaining her request is that action as a warrior must, in the Homeric world, occur completely separately from the womanly, domestic sphere. For example, Hector must carefully protect himself from too close a connection to the women of Troy in Book 6 when he returns to the city. He rejects his mother’s offer of wine which he fears will take away strength from his limbs and make him lose his courage (Il. 6.265) and he makes it clear that even though he is home at the moment, “he still belongs to the battlefield” and “[i]f he forgets and allows her to care for him, he will lose his alke” (Redfield 1975:121). He then goes on to refuse Helen’s invitation to rest (Il. 6.360) and Andromache’s pleas

84 Schein 1984:173: “Hektor, like all men [in the poem], feels a primary loyalty to the community at large that he preserves by his heroic prowess.”
that he leave the fighting all together (II. 6.406-39).\textsuperscript{85} In addition, since women are shown as wanting to pull men away from battle, there is guilt by association when the poet shows an inferior fighter such as Paris often in the company of women. With this background, Hector’s rejecting his mother’s supplication seems more expectable: he cannot allow such feminine intrusion in the martial realm (Naiden 2006:80). For a hero to listen to his mother is for him to accept an obscurity that might as well be death (Murnaghan 1992:250). It also illuminates his refusal to listen to his father; Priam, as an older man who no longer takes his place on the battlefield, is now too closely linked to the domestic by virtue of his social role and his actual, physical position next to his wife on the wall.\textsuperscript{86}

Finally, the very fact that Hecuba is insisting on connecting Hector to her nourishment of him\textsuperscript{87} is to insist on his mortality (Murnaghan 1992:244), a fact that he—with good reason—wishes to suppress at this moment as he is facing down the semi-divine Achilles.\textsuperscript{88} He does not want to be reminded that a mortal woman

\textsuperscript{85} Foley (2005:111) and Buchan (2012:118-20) discuss in some detail how “Hektor’s role as a masculine warrior prevents him from taking his wife’s suggestion seriously” (Foley 2005:111). Andromache’s proposal of battle strategy is ignored by Hector and, in fact, prompts him to firmly remind her of her place at home overseeing domestic chores and to leave military matters to men (II. 6.490-93) (Buchan 2012:118-19).

\textsuperscript{86} But even Priam, powerless as he is to persuade his son, will not give in to Hecuba when she tries to keep him from going to Achilles’ camp: her failure with her husband providing a parallel to the failure with her son. In this way, although “Homeric women represent a major obstacle to Homeric man’s will” (Beye 1974:98), the obstacle can usually be overcome.

\textsuperscript{87} It would have been unusual for an aristocratic woman to nurse her child (cf. n.67); although Homer, unlike Aeschylus in his representation of the parallel supplication in the Choephori, gives us no reason to think Hecuba did not. Perhaps this would make it a reason for, in her view, greater indebtedness.

\textsuperscript{88} Schein 1984:180: “Perhaps the main difference between the two heroes is that Hektor is represented as quintessentially social and human, while Achilles is inhumanly isolated and daemonic in his greatness.”
nursed him, and he even goes so far in his resistance to accepting sustenance from his mother that he has already refused wine from her, fearing it would rob him of his strength (Murnaghan 1992:251). The nursing relationship implies a connection and affection between the mother and child, and this is what Hecuba is trying to leverage, but in Greek literature it also “conveys ominous connotations or a sorrowful fate” (Salzman-Mitchell 2012:147), and this is what Hector is trying to escape.

2.12 Conclusion

Ultimately, Hecuba’s supplication of her son must fail simply to maintain the tragic tone of the poem. Since this is, as Pietro Pucci once remarked, a poem that “weeps over war,” it is more thematically consistent to have failed supplications. If people are begging for a life to be spared, it would be contrary to the purpose of the author to provide the reader with the relief of their succeeding. The relentless grinding down of humanity under the heel of brutal circumstance is the desired artistic effect. There is, after all, a reason that the poem ends with the funeral laments for Hector rather than the storming of the city: the last image in the mind

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89 This point will be emphasized by Hera in Book 24 when she argues that the gods should not protect Hector’s corpse: Ἐκτωρ μὲν θνητός τε γυναῖκα τε θήσατο μαζόν/αὐτάρ Αχιλλεύς ἐστι θεᾶς γόνος, “But Hektor was mortal, and suckled at the breast of a woman, while Achilles is the child of a goddess” (Il. 24 58-59 trans. Lattimore).
91 Rutherford 2001:287: “It has been observed that no human supplication represented in the action of the Iliad proves successful before Priam’s to Achilles.
92 Schein 1984:186: “Furthermore, the laments and burial of Hektor are a ritually appropriate conclusion to all of the poem’s killing and dying, which culminates in Hektor’s death. They even
of the reader is not the success of the Greeks but the mournfulness and the inadequacy of the possible responses in the face of the death of Troy’s greatest defender and favorite son. As Holway states, “[t]he Iliad does not deny but rather emphasizes that being a hero entails sacrifice—and being preeminent among heroes entails absolute sacrifice” (2002:110). Therefore, as much as it is culturally important for children to be obedient, it is more important for the hero of the poem to disregard the wishes of his parents for the effect of this epic to be consistently painful.

After Hecuba has failed to sway her son with her extreme tactics during her supplication, the door is closed on any chance for later literary mothers in the Classical tradition to succeed with a similar attempt. Even an innovator such as Euripides will not change the result of this formula in his Phoenissae. The weight of Homeric precedent is such that it would be nearly impossible for a reversal of outcome to occur, and since Books 22 is one of the two most imitated/alluded to books of the Iliad (Garner 1990:179), there is soon a list of similar supplications and identical failures.

constitute a triumph, not of Hektor himself, of course, but of the civilized values of Troy: though defeated and destroyed militarily, they have the last work poetically.”
Chapter 3: Aeschylus, *Choephori*: Supplication by the Breast Takes Center Stage

3.1 Introduction

The intent of this chapter is to show how the breast-baring gesture was transformed by Aeschylus from Hecuba’s pitiful plea into a strong argument that nearly wins the day. Instead of being an attempt by a parent to dissuade a grown son who is a proven warrior to change his course and save himself (and his family), it becomes part of a complex argument to spare the mother. Aeschylus positions the action in this very different context to achieve a dramatic effect and to engage issues beyond the filial duty or debt which Homer presented. The effect of this change and the chord that it struck can be seen in the frequent imitations that follow Aeschylus’ employment of the scene. The Homeric precedent was important, but the Aeschylean innovation was critical to the continued use of the breast-baring supplication topos in subsequent literature.

After seeing a breast-baring supplication played out on the “epic stage,” a comparison can be made with how it functions on an actual theatrical stage. Although in writing this scene Aeschylus was taking Homer as his model in some

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93 Garner explains that by alluding to earlier works, tragedy emphasizes its own creativity while at the same time reminding the audience of the artistic tradition of which it is a part (1990:179).
ways, his version of a mother pleading with her son assumes a centrality in the
dramatic plot of the *Choephori* which the Hector-Hecuba scene cannot claim. The
duel between Achilles and Hector is the pinnacle of the action of the *Iliad*, so the
close association of Hecuba’s supplication with that event gives it great importance.
On the other hand, Orestes’ matricide is the climax of the *Choephori*, and
Clytemnestra is, of course, the focus of that action. Aeschylus has made the mother-
child interaction the culmination of the action instead of being one of the steps
towards it. Of the works that will be examined in this study, a breast-baring plea
receives the greatest emphasis in the *Choephori*.

As in the chapter on Homer, the context for the breast-baring scene will be
established and then the diction of the supplication will be examined in detail.
Following that, consideration will be given to issues specific to the case of
Clytemnestra and Orestes, especially the veracity of her claim to have nursed her
son and how that impacts on the tension of the conflict. Orestes’ position as a child
acting violently against a parent – and therefore, in many ways, against nature and
society – makes him a crucible for testing the limits of filial loyalty. The elements of
Greek culture that comprise those limits—the debt that a child owes his parents for
rearing him and the impossibility of honoring all family ties equally (and whether
this was even desirable)—will be examined through Aeschylus’ lens. Then it will be
clear how the playwright expanded on the meanings of his Homeric exemplar.
3.2 The Staging of the supplication

Although the famous breast-baring of Clytemnestra is referred to in many later plays, this instance in the *Choephoroi* is the only one in which it appears to have been staged rather than reported. Since the specifics on ancient stagecraft are so unclear, questions such as “How was this done?” and “Was it done at all?” are hotly contested. Unlike the scene in Homer where the poet specifies that Hecuba loosens her robe, there is nothing in the dialogue to suggest that Clytemnestra does anything other than indicate her breast as she says τόνδε ... μαστόν (lines 896-97).

This leaves three reasonable possibilities for how the scene was handled: Clytemnestra turns her back to the audience while making the gesture (Briggs 1997:19); she reveals a “naked,” costume breast (Sommerstein 1980:74 n.32); or she points to her breast with “some histrionic gesture” (Taplin 2007:57).

Against Briggs, I would argue that it would be counter-productive, theatrically speaking, to have such a striking gesture performed by an actor with his back to the audience. It would have been harder to hear the actor and the visual impact would be lost because the audience cannot see what Clytemnestra is doing. Besides losing some of the drama of the moment, there would be awkwardness in having Clytemnestra turn her back, reveal herself, cover herself up again, and turn back to the audience and resume the dialogue. As for a costume breast, Sommerstein argues that “male actors impersonated nude women in comedy” (1980:74), so a similar costuming arrangement could have easily been employed.
here. Even if he is correct about female impersonators of this type in comedy,\textsuperscript{94} this does not mean that such a convention would transfer seamlessly into tragedy. A naked woman portrayed by a man in a padded costume might work perfectly in comedy where the ridiculous appearance of such a character would be a well-suited complement to the phalli worn by some of the other actors, but an artificial breast might just be a distraction in tragedy, especially if it carried comic associations.\textsuperscript{95}

Following Taplin, I agree that Clytemnestra does not disrobe in Aeschylus, although the descriptions of her supplication in later plays and the depiction of it in vase-paintings make it clear that nudity was the common conception of that moment (Taplin 2007:56). However, his argument for decorum seems secondary compared to the issues noted above. The act of clutching her own breast through her dress without revealing it would convey the point without the costuming awkwardness; even though it is less blatantly sexual than an exposed breast, such a gesture might be more sexual than an exposed, false breast. There are certainly moments from television or film where breasts that are gestured to or even simply looked at meaningfully leave almost as little to the imagination as nudity. By presenting the supplication in this way, Aeschylus could evoke the tradition of a bare-breasted plea without potentially ruining the tension of the moment; therefore, I am including this important instance of maternal supplication by the breast.

\textsuperscript{94} Given 2011:n.p.: “It is uncertain whether Reconciliation (and the other nude female characters in Old Comedy) was played by a real woman or a man in a padded costume.” For specific references to scholarship on the issue, see Given 2011:np.

\textsuperscript{95} Devereux goes so far as to say, “[h]ad the actor displayed artificial, flaccid breasts, the comic poets would probably have had a field day with it—either when the play was first produced, or when it was revived—mocking the scene as they mocked the Euripidean Telephos’ realistic rags” (1976:206).
3.3 The Play in its time

Although not the focus of this study, it is worth noting how the trilogy might reflect the political developments of the time in which it was written. In fact, Herington insists that the fifth century BCE rise of Athens to prominence in the region and the large-scale political changes within the city that accompanied that rise are essential background to the consideration of Aeschylus’ works, especially when dealing with the plays of the *Oresteia* (1986:27). When the *Oresteia* was originally performed in Athens at the Great Dionysia in 458 BCE, it won first prize (Goldhill 1992:xi). At almost the same time, Pericles passed legislation lowering the property requirements for almost all public offices; this, along with other reforms was ushering in radical democracy (Forrest 1966:216).

Within the world of the trilogy, the action culminates in “a resolution that is both political and cosmological” (Seaford 2004:xvii): the reconciliation of the Furies (feminine, chthonic powers), with the new divine order, represented by Apollo and Athena (entities who favor the male), and the establishment of the Council of the Areopagus (Thomson 1968:272-75). Although the actual Areopagus would lose power during Aeschylus’ lifetime (Saïd 2005:217), an analogy between historical events in Athens since the late sixth century and the trilogy holds true: both Athens and the plays of the *Oresteia* move from rule by tyrants (the Peisistratids/
Agamemnon) to more inclusive forms of government.\textsuperscript{96} In both cases, the transition was marked by violence and power struggles, leading to moments in which it looked as if the whole system would fall apart (Spatz 1982:2-3).

In the middle of this shift we have the \textit{Choephori}, in which rule by a woman is explicitly disallowed by the gods.\textsuperscript{97} The \textit{κράτος} (“strength,” “authority”) of Clytemnestra is established early on in the Agamemnon (lines 10 and 255), using a noun which “in Greek is associated in particular with male power” (Goldhill 1992:37). She dominates the first play of the trilogy (Goldhill 1992:38) as she “is firmly in charge during Agamemnon’s absence, and after killing him on his return, she rules with her new man, but as the dominant partner” (Burian 2003:23). A woman in charge was certainly not the accepted social order of the time, and as Clytemnestra’s supremacy continues into the \textit{Choephori}, its transgressive nature becomes more obvious. The terrible result of such transgressions is “summed up nowhere more clearly than…where the chorus, singing of the monstrous desires of women, pronounce (Cho. 599-601):

\begin{quote}
Desire, corrupt desire, female in power,  
Perverts and conquers the yoked society  
Of beast and men” (Goldhill 1992:39).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} This analogy is complicated by the fact that it is Athens, not Argos that finishes the trilogy with more people involved in governing. Presumably Orestes returns and rules as king of his city. I would argue that the transition (tyranny to more inclusion) is more the focal point than the actual locations.

\textsuperscript{97} Clytemnestra’s murder is mandated because of her involvement in the killing of Agamemnon; the effect is both matricide and, I would suggest, tyrannicide.
It seems that, according to Aeschylus, the divinities who favor Athens prefer female influence, whether it is mortal or divine (Clytemnestra or the Eumenides), to be kept under closer control;98 this will certainly prove important in considering Clytemnestra’s murder.

3.4 Summary of the Choephoroi

The Choephoroi is the second play of the Oresteia, the only trilogy which has come down to us intact, making these three plays an intense focus of scholarly study and speculation. One element of this speculation is whether the three tragedies of most trilogies dealt with the same subjects. Garvie proposes that unlike later playwrights, “[it] is highly likely that Aeschylus often, though not always...composed trilogies consisting of tragedies connected in their subject-matter” (1986:xxvi). This is certainly the case with the tragedies of the Oresteia, which are so closely linked to one another that David Grene writes: “[these] three plays are three acts of a single play” (1989:1). In order to analyze the Choephoroi, the actions of the Agamemnon and the consequences of the Eumenides must also be considered.

98 The exception to this is Athena whose influence is acceptable because of her clearly stated “support for ‘the male in all things’ (Eum. 737)” (Goldhill 1992:41) which is a “female endorsement...of a universal asymmetrical relationship between male and female” (Seaford 2004:xxiii).
When scholars have considered the plot of the Oresteia which “[produces] a new cosmology...so as to transcend—in the establishment of polis institutions—the reciprocal violence of a powerful household” (Seaford 2004:xvi), a wide array of interpretations have emerged. Seaford traces the history of this interpretation back to the late eighteenth century when Greek tragedy “began to be understood historically” (2004:ix) as part of “the attempt to understand Greek culture as a whole” (2004:x). Around the same time, “Greek tragedy became an aesthetic and even a spiritual ideal” (ibid.) for artists such as Shelley and Wagner. As the object of more recent, scholarly analysis, the Oresteia has been discussed as a work that is “obsessed” with δίκη (Goldhill 1992:31-36), a work that is centered on male-female conflict (Zeitlin 1984:159) and a work that allows Aeschylus to express “his politico-religious credo, the Solonic faith in world order, the perfectability of man and his institutions” (Segal 1979:n.p.). Although interpretive perspectives differ, the Oresteia is generally viewed as a trilogy which grapples with oppositions: youth and age, chthonic and Olympian gods, male and female, and family- and state-based justice.

After the Agamemnon’s contest of wills between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, the frenzied speeches of Cassandra and the double homicide which finishes the play, the Choephori seems at some level quite calm in comparison. Even the murders in the Choephori are committed in a rather expeditious fashion.99 The slaying of Aegisthus, in fact, is almost perfunctory; Orestes is absolutely certain

99 “One of the most interesting things about the play is its de-emphasis on the killing of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. It is certain that they must and will die” (Otis 1981:82).
about the correctness of killing him and does it without hesitation. He does waver when it comes to matricide, but “Orestes is not really involved in deliberation between two alternatives, rather a decision already made is in danger of being unmade in the face of his recognition of the full horror of its consequences” (Cairns 1993:200-01). When Pylades reminds him of the peril of having the gods as your enemies, Orestes stays on the course that Apollo has mandated, despite his mother’s pleas (Otis 1981:78). Most of the tragedy’s energy in the first half of the play is focused on Electra’s and Orestes’ efforts to gain the supernatural backing of their father in their endeavor (Conacher 1987:102-03). This gives the play a sense of rising intensity created by the prayer and planning and then, generally, a falling energy as the plan is carried out.

The play begins with Orestes at the tomb of Agamemnon, making an offering of a lock of hair. With this simple act, Aeschylus introduces the conflict that drives the play: the debt of nurture versus the debt of mourning and vengeance (cf. lines 18-19). In lines 6-7 Orestes explicitly states that the offering of his hair has a dual purpose: it is a θρεπτήριον (thank-offering for nourishment received) and a πενθητήριον (a sign of mourning). He attributes his nurture to Inachus as a symbol

100 “As in some places today, so in Athens, the killing of an adulterer is not held to be a criminal act” (Hogan 1984:143 n.990).
101 As Conacher notes, the planning and execution of Aegisthus’ killing is “simplicity itself; for the murder of Clytemnestra, the main and the only dreadful event, there is, significantly, no plan at all” (1987:115).
102 “The textual tradition of the Choephoroi depends upon a single manuscript” which had, prior to 1423, lost six folios of the “quire which contained Agamemnon 1160-the end and the opening lines of Choephoroi” (Garvie 1986:liv). There may have been as many as thirty lines lost. The first nine lines of the text as we now have it “were preserved through quotations by other authors” (Lloyd-Jones 1970:9 n.1).
of his native land, since “[it] was customary for young men to offer a lock of hair to their country’s rivers in return for the nurture the rivers were supposed to provide” (Lloyd-Jones 1970:10 n.7). Given that Orestes is about to commit matricide, it makes sense that he positions Inachus as his nurturer rather than his mother, but the juxtaposition of child rearing and death remains (Lebeck 1971:97).

Orestes and Pylades quickly retreat when they see Electra approaching with a chorus of enslaved women (lines 1-21). The chorus has been sent by Clytemnestra to Agamemnon’s tomb to make a libation to placate the spirit of her murdered husband (lines 22-83). We learn that Clytemnestra has had a nightmare (the dream of the snake which will be discussed in detail below) which was interpreted by κριταί (usually “judges,” but here “interpreters”) to mean that the dead are wrathful because of the crime (lines 37-41). Electra is uncertain how to frame her prayer to her father’s spirit, so she asks the chorus their opinion; they do not hesitate: she must pray for vengeance (line 121), for the killers of her father are her enemies (line 123). Electra calls upon Agamemnon, asking for his pity since she and Orestes have become wanderers, sold by the one who bore them (πεπραμένοι γὰρ νῦν γέ πως ἀλώμεθα πρὸς τῆς τεκούσης) for a new husband (lines 132-33).

After making the offering as the chorus has directed, Electra sees Orestes’ lock of hair and his footprint and the famous recognition scene ensues (lines 164-

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103 At line 67 the earth will be named as another nurturer (χθονὸς τροφοῦ).
104 Electra will complain again about the pains they have suffered at Clytemnestra’s hand at lines 418-19 using another form of τίκτω (τεκομένων).
245), uniting the two siblings who together make impassioned prayers to Zeus and their father for help in avenging him (lines 246-513, the “great kommos” is the lyric part of this scene, lines 306-478). Before leaving the tomb, Orestes asks the chorus why Clytemnestra has sent the offering, suggesting that the libation is insufficient to expiate her crime, so there must be another reason (lines 514-22). The chorus tells him about her dream: she dreamt that she gave birth to and suckled a snake which then bit her breast as it nursed, and he interprets it to mean that he is the serpent (lines 523-50), saying in part:

καὶ μαστόν ἀμφέχασκ’ ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον, 
θρόμβῳ  δ’ ἐμειζεν οὖθαρ τὸν γάλα, 
ή δ’ ἀμφί τάρμει τῶδ’ ἐπώμωξεν πάθει, 
δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἐθρεψεν ἐκπαγλὸν τέρας, 
θανεῖν βιαιώς: ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ’ ἐγὼ 
κτείνω νιν, ὡς τούνειρον ἐννέπει τόδε.

“And opened its mouth about the breast that fed me, and mingled the kindly milk with a curd of blood, and in terror cried out at the event, it must come about, I say, that even as she fed the monstrous portent, so she must die by violence, and it is I that turn into a snake and slay her, as this dream announces.” (lines 545-50, trans. Lloyd-Jones 1970)

105 Famous in part because of the parody of it by Euripides in his Electra (518ff). Interestingly, Garner interprets this Euripidean re-working of the scene as “a tactical move” (1990:159) which plays with audience expectations.
106 This “great kommos” used to be seen primarily as a necessary step in Orestes’ convincing himself to proceed with the matricide. More recent opinion has taken it as the siblings’ long-delayed mourning for their father as well as conjuration of his power to help them (Conacher 1987:108-10 and Lloyd-Jones 1970:26) in addition to being a way to motivate Orestes to commit the murder (Conacher 1987:113).
107 The word for breast here is οὖθαρ (rather than μαστός), a word which “is usually said of animals in Greek” (Bowen 1986:100 n. 532), perhaps making Clytemnestra seem less human.
108 The line initial position of θρόμβῳ creates alliteration with the preceding θρεπτήριον and both devices highlight the unnatural situation in which breastmilk has any sort of lump in it, thus adding to the already unnatural circumstance of nursing a snake.
Orestes and Electra finalize the details of their plan (lines 551-84) and the chorus sings odes (lines 585-651) about Althaea (who caused the death of her son Meleager, cf. Ovid *Met.* 8.511-14), Scylla (who cut off the purple lock of hair that made her father invulnerable, cf. Ovid *Met.* 8.84-86) and the Lemnian women (who kill all the men on their island out of jealousy, cf. Quintus Smyrnaeus *Posthomerica* 9.368-82) in order to place Clytemnestra’s deed within mythological “paradigms of horror crying for retribution” (Conacher 1987:116).

Orestes and Pylades present themselves to Clytemnestra at the palace as strangers who have been entrusted with delivering the news of Orestes’ death in Phocis (lines 652-90). Clytemnestra’s reaction (lines 691-99) seems to be grief, but “her sorrow at the report of his death is greatly lessened by the thought that now she and Aegisthus are safe” (Lloyd-Jones 1970:48 n.691). As the news spreads through the palace, Orestes’ nurse, Cilissa, emerges crying (line 731) and gives her long and detailed speech (lines 731-65) about how she cared for the infant Orestes (lines 749-50: φίλον δ’ Ὀρέστην, τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς τριβήν / ὃν ἐξέθρεψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη, “but my dear Orestes, for whom I wore away my life/whom I reared up after I received him from his mother,” trans. Lloyd-Jones 1970) along with her opinion that Clytemnestra’s grief is feigned (lines 737-40). The nurse then leaves to recall Aegisthus on his own to the palace, while the chorus supplicates Zeus, Apollo and Hermes for the restoration of justice, order and freedom in the house (lines 783-826). The ode concludes “with an exhortation to Orestes himself, the third and most essential element in this vengeance shared by Olympian, chthonic, and living

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human power” (Conacher 1987:121). On his arrival, Aegisthus has a brief exchange with the chorus, then enters the palace where he is summarily dispatched by Orestes (lines 838-69).

Clytemnestra and Orestes confront one another openly at last and, following Homeric precedent, she supplicates him, baring her breast and asking him to αἰδεῖσαι the breast that provided him with nourishing milk (lines 885-98). She does manage to give him pause, and Orestes turns to Pylades and asks if he should kill his own mother. Pylades, in his only lines of the tragedy, assures his friend that he needs to follow the command of Apollo (lines 899-902). Clytemnestra tries a few more tactics to steer her son from his course, reminding him of his nurture (line 908), urging him to think about his father’s misconduct (line 918) and warning him of the curse he will bring on himself (lines 912 and 924). When these fail, she comes to the conclusion that it was Orestes, not Agamemnon, who was the snake-baby that haunted her dreams, whereupon he drags her into the house to be killed alongside Aegisthus (lines 928-30).

As the tragedy concludes, Orestes reveals the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus along with the robe in which Clytemnestra ensnared Agamemnon and he reviles his mother’s deeds (lines 931-1020). Orestes asserts again the justice of his actions while admitting that he will pay a heavy price for them; he tells the chorus that he must seek refuge at Delphi and then begins to panic as the Furies appear to 109 Cairns 1993:201: “Orestes’ hesitation, his susceptibility to aidōs, is obviously a considerable theatrical effect, threatening the purpose which has been so consistently expressed in the previous action of the play, and it acts as a foil for the even more dramatic effect of the sudden speech of Pylades, the hitherto silent third actor.”
him, demanding their own vengeance (lines 1021-62). After Orestes exits, the chorus outlines the generational guilt of the house of Atreus, and prepares the audience for the concluding play of the trilogy by asking what end there will be to all the destruction (lines 1063-76).

3.5 Translation of the supplication scene

As described in the summary above, Clytemnestra’s first strategy when she attempts to persuade Orestes to spare her is to beg him to have reverence for her breast which nourished him as a baby. Appropriate to the form of tragedy, Clytemnestra does not, as Hecuba does, lay out her entire argument in a single speech, instead she engages her son in a dialogue, trying different rationalizations for her actions over the course of thirty-five lines. The form of her supplication is a minor change from the Homeric exemplar compared to the new purpose to which she is putting breast-baring: self-preservation by means of arousning pity rather than preserving the life of her child. Despite the radically different form, context and purpose, Clytemnestra still judges breast-baring to be her best option for persuasion and uses it as her leading tactic. Below I will analyze in detail how Aeschylus has her build on and change the Homeric original to suit her aims.

*Choephoroi* lines 896-902
Clytemnestra: Stop, oh my son, and reverence, child, this breast, from which you very often, drowsing at the same time, sucked out the nourishing milk with your gums.

Orestes: Pylades, what will I do? Should I scruple to kill my mother?

Pylades: Where then will the rest of the oracles of Loxias delivered by the Pythia be, or the trusted oaths?

Regard all to be your enemies rather than the gods.

Lines 903-925: in these lines Clytemnestra puts forward a number of arguments why Orestes should spare her life: she reared him (line 908); fate is to blame (line 910); he should fear the curse she can bring down on him (lines 912 and 924); he should consider his father’s misconduct (line 918) and the loneliness of a wife who is separated from her husband (line 920).

Choephoroi lines 926-30

110 Both Clytemnestra and Orestes use the verb αἰδέομαι in this exchange (lines 896 and 899); I have translated it “reverence” in her case because she wants her son to feel respect for her position as a parent and for the nurture that she has given him, but “scruple” in his case because Orestes is held back by his sense of propriety. For more on the difficulties of translating this verb, see n.115.
Cl.: Living, I seem to lament before a tomb in vain.  
Or.: The destiny of my father determines this fate.  
Cl.: Alas for me! This is the snake I gave birth to and raised.  
Or.: I am the very prophet, the terror from your dreams.  
You killed him whom you should not have attacked, and you suffer the thing that must not be.

3.6 Remarks on the diction

Clytemnestra begins her plea—as does Hecuba—with the words τέκνον and an imperative form of αἰδέομαι (Clytemnestra uses the aorist αἰδέσαμαι, Hecuba uses the present αἰδέο) begging her son to show reverence for her breast and emphasizing their relationship\footnote{Cairns 1993:200: Clytemnestra is “invoking the imperatives of loyalty to one’s philoi and gratitude to one’s parents for the nurture one has received, and constructing a scenario which appeals to traditional norms of honour and obligation and stresses the gravity of their disruption.”} by also including ὦ παῖ.\footnote{This is a formal phrase to mark the beginning of a proper supplication (Bowen 1986:147 n.896).} She places μαστόν in line-initial position to give it greater emphasis as the key word of her plea (Bowen 1986:147 n.897).\footnote{Čeú Fialho 2010:113: “Thus the queen wishes to make the ancient force of paidotrophia prevail over the justice of imminent bloodshed. And Orestes hesitates.”} Like Hecuba, she also focuses on the soothing aspect of breastfeeding, describing baby Orestes as βρίζων, “drowsing,” as he nursed.\footnote{Bowen refers to βρίζων as “a lovely word,” adding “[you] can almost hear in it the bubbles between the baby’s lips” (1986:147 n.897).} By combining the forceful concept of αἰδώς with this idyllic image of a contented infant drifting off to sleep in its mother’s arms, she hopes to make him feel filial affection,
or at least obligation, to calm him down with a reminder of how she did so in the past, and prevent his murderous onslaught.

In his line immediately after this, Orestes reflects the fact that her words do cause his resolution to fail him (Garvie 1986:293 n.899) when he repeats a form of αἰδέομαι (the aorist subjunctive αἰδεσθῶ) in his question to Pylades and refers to her specifically as his mother (not just “her” or something less flattering; Goldhill calls this use of μητέρ’ “highly emotive,” 1984:180). His hesitation at this critical moment when he faces the reality of matricide shows that “for the first time he realizes what is involved” (Garvie: 1986:293 n.899), despite his earlier confidence and the encouragement of Electra and the vengeful chorus. This seems to prove that Clytemnestra was shrewd to base her plea on reverence because, as Lefkowitz notes, the “aidos, or respect, that [he] owes to the mother who bore him” (2007:33, referring to Hector),\(^{115}\) is a powerful cultural and emotional force even when that same mother is guilty of murder and adultery.

When Orestes, faltering at the piteous spectacle of his mother pleading for her life and shaken by her appeal to his filial sense of αἰδώς, turns to his friend, Pylades steels him by mentioning the orders (which are backed up by terrible threats should he fail) of Apollo. This moment in which Pylades breaks his silence makes the scene all the more startling. He has been following Orestes through the

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\(^{115}\) Lloyd-Jones adds that αἰδώς, “is especially applicable to the respect owed to parents” and “is often used of those who give in to the entreaties of a suppliant, and hence in some contexts it is not far from meaning “pity” (1970:60 n.896). Hogan on this line mentions that αἰδώς “is regard for normal usage and public opinion, not so much conscience as a sense of propriety” (139) and, according to Plato’s Euthyphro, αἰδώς has a “negative, inhibitory nature” (ibid.) which Clytemnestra hoped would restrain her son. Bowen even goes so far as to say that “there is nothing in English that seems to carry all the power and overtones and breadth of the Greek word” (1986:147 n.896).
play like a shadow, always there but not really engaged, and he will not be referred to again after the murder (Taplin 1978:105-06; Bowen 1986:147 n.900). His “dramatic point” (Taplin 1978:106) is to deliver these three lines. But even in these lines that prove so persuasive, there is a glaring contradiction: in order to obey Apollo’s commands, Orestes must consider his mother ἐχθρός instead of φίλος. As Goldhill describes it, “there is a sense of opposition between following Apollo’s words and respecting the normal bonds of society” (1984:180). To become a matricide, Orestes has to move Clytemnestra from the category of people whom he should love, to the category of people he hates and then he has to push aside any remaining sense of αἰδώς towards his mother. It is only the direct command of a god that is strong enough to overcome the societal taboo and inherent horror of turning on a parent.116

In the nine lines that Clytemnestra speaks between 900 and 925, she includes τέκνον four more times (lines 910, 912, 920, 922)117, keeping her and Orestes’ roles as mother and child in the forefront of the debate, doubtless hoping to play upon both the bond of affection that this implies and the typical hierarchy of a parent dictating the actions of a child. The language of childbirth and childrearing/care is pervasive in their exchange: she uses ἑθρεψα (“I nurtured you and with you I want to grow old,” 908) and he uses τρέφει (“But the toil of the man

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116 The strongest possible claim is that of a father murdered; the most horrible act a Greek could conceive was for a man to slay his mother” (Murray 1918:76). Thus Orestes is trapped in a situation that only divine intervention can remedy.

117 This word is “more tender” than παῖς and helps create the most persuasive effect on Orestes that his mother can manage (Garvie 1986:292 n.896-98).
nurtures you sitting inside,” 921); and Orestes even uses τεκοῦσα to reproach his mother (“For after bearing me, you tossed me out to misfortune,” 913). Her words position her again as a parent to whom he is indebted, while his show that she has no true respect for nurture (she accepted it from Agamemnon and then killed him) and that giving birth to a child certainly does not guarantee that the parent will treat it well. Clytemnestra is unable to gain the upper hand in the stichomythia; as Conacher observes, “pleas, defenses, and threats are all alike precisely parried by Orestes: Moira for Moira, gain for gain, betrayal for betrayal, death for death” (1987:123). The only threat he can counter but not overcome is Clytemnestra’s promise that the furies will hound him.118

3.7 The Issues: Scheming, Self-centered Supplication and Sexual Intimations

When he has Clytemnestra make her appeal to her son, Aeschylus is drawing, not for the first time,119 on the well-known Iliadic scene. The differences in context reveal that the dramatist is not merely repeating literary stock, but employs the traditional scene in order to illuminate the contrast between the two queens.

118 Supplicants only rarely threaten their supplicandi with harm if their request is denied (Naiden 2006:85). This makes it surprising behavior for a supplicant, but completely expectable behavior for Clytemnestra.

119 Garner (1990:39) writes, “Aeschylus had probably used this pathetic scene as a model in the Persians (286-9), almost certainly in the Suppliants (223-4), and perhaps even in the Agamemnon (1304-5).”
Because the audience is familiar with this scenario playing out between Hecuba and Hector in the *Iliad*, “the horror of the primary tragic moment” (Garner 1990:40) would be intensified.

Sommerstein suggests that, in addition to his Homeric model, Aeschylus may have been alluding to a non-literary antecedent (1980:71). Plutarch (in *Roman Questions* 264f-265a) discusses a Greek custom whereby those who are mistakenly thought to have died while traveling and then return home, are considered ritually impure until they have been washed, wrapped in swaddling clothes and put to the breast. As Sommerstein writes, “[i]t is hardly necessary to expand on the relevance of all this both to Klytaimestra’s dream (529, 531) and to subsequent events up to this point, when Orestes, falsely reported to have died abroad, is offered his mother’s breast” (1980:71). Unlike those in the ritual context that Plutarch is describing, Orestes does not accept the proffered breast and the cleansing power that it provides. Instead, he commits himself to defilement by refusing it and even further by killing his mother (Sommerstein 1980:71). For an audience that had some familiarity with this custom,¹²⁰ Clytemnestra’s supplication would have had an additional layer of meaning.

Whether or not there was non-literary precedent, the case of Clytemnestra supplicating Orestes is more complicated than its Homeric antecedent: Clytemnestra’s character and her relationship with her son are entirely different.

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¹²⁰ Since Plutarch, writing nearly six hundred years after Aeschylus, is the only source for this, it is not at all clear when the custom was in use, when it ceased to be practiced and how widespread it was at any time.
from Hecuba’s. To begin with, because Orestes’ nurse, Cilissa, delivers a lengthy monologue (734-65) detailing her care of him as a baby, many scholars believe that she, not his mother, breastfed him (Vickers 1973:404-05, Devereux 1976:183, Conacher 1987:123). This would make Clytemnestra’s dunning of him on that basis predicated on a lie and a rather transparent one at that. Clytemnestra’s entreaty is also less compelling than Hecuba’s because of its selfishness: she is directly begging for her own life, not trying to protect her child’s. Finally, as Devereux (1976:206) and Zeitlin (1984:167) have noted, there might have been a sexual element present in her appeal which is generally assumed to be lacking in the Homeric scene. These issues will now be considered in greater detail.

3.7.1 Scheming: who nursed Orestes?

The question of who nursed baby Orestes is pushed to the fore in the Choephoroi because of the competing claims of the endearing nurse Cilissa and the decidedly un-motherly Clytemnestra. Apart from the literary context and the hints provided by the dramatist in his text, the question is further complicated by the historical and cultural context of 5th century Greece. Specifically, would the audience have expected Clytemnestra to be the only one to have nursed her son because of her social status? The audience’s horizon of expectations is difficult to reconstruct because the action of the play does not refer to their own socio-cultural
context, but to the heroic age of many centuries ago. Therefore, the question can be
framed as follows: would a 5th century Athenian (probably all-male) audience have
expected Clytemnestra, the legendary queen of Argos, to have nursed her child
herself? Clarification of these issues may be used to introduce another question: to
what extent is the rejection of maternal prerogative within the breast-bearing scene
in this play based on the lack of validity of the claim in terms of both literary and
socio-cultural factors?121

For a modern reader who does not closely examine the statements of each
colorature and consider the context, it would be much easier to believe that the
nurse fulfilled the tender role of feeding Orestes rather than Clytemnestra: she
suits the part better. While Clytemnestra expresses her grief only with words (lines
691-99), Cilissa is reduced to tears (line 731) when she learns of Orestes’ “death,”
and she also shows her devotion to him by taking his part against Aegisthus when
the chorus reveals that Orestes still is alive (lines 774-81). Further, to make her a
more fleshed-out character to whom the audience can relate, Aeschylus even gives
her a name, making her the only slave in Greek tragedy with that distinction
(Taplin 1978:145).

Unlike the case of Hecuba and Hector where there is no reason given within
the text to doubt the maternal claim of breastfeeding, we have a speech thirty-one
lines long which goes into all the unrewarding day-to-day chores that Cilissa
performed, including changing and washing the ancient equivalent of diapers and

121 In this paragraph I owe particular thanks to Prof. Bosman for helping clarify the many strands
involved in this issue.
caring for the baby when he awoke at night.\textsuperscript{122} For a modern reader, and probably for an ancient audience as well, the logical assumption would be that she also breastfed the baby. How, for instance, could she have comforted him at night otherwise?\textsuperscript{123} Crucially, however, there is no explicit claim in that speech that Cilissa breastfed the infant Orestes. It may be assumed that the dramatist left this issue open in order to retain the potential persuasiveness of Clytemnestra’s gesture rather than to use it to expose the fraudulence of her character.

Cilissa’s speech has a more important function than simply establishing the truth or falsehood of Clytemnestra’s assertion later in the play: it demonstrates that no matter who fed the baby, it was Cilissa who was his primary caregiver. In what would have been a typical arrangement for an upper-class woman (Vellacott 1984:154, Fildes 1995:102), Clytemnestra handed off the drudgery of childrearing to the help. Furthermore, Cilissa’s claim that Clytemnestra is happy to hear about Orestes’ death, despite her façade of grief, is meant to alienate the audience from the queen (Conacher 1987:120). Not only was his mother glad to be rid of him as a responsibility as a baby, she is now glad to be rid of him altogether. Of course, the nurse’s interpretation of Clytemnestra’s response is her personal perspective; but when juxtaposed with the queen’s lack of sorrow in her exchange with the

\textsuperscript{122} Bowen teases out some interesting points from Cilissa’s description of Orestes and the care she gave him, including an insight on her use of the phrase “τὸ μὴ φρονοῦν,” the “thing that doesn’t think” (1986:131 n.753). He reads this as making baby Orestes like an animal, in which case he is another of the baby animals in the trilogy (the lion in \textit{Ag}. and the snake in \textit{Ch}. ) which are reared in the house by humans until they show their deadly nature.

\textsuperscript{123} Regarding Cilissa’s interrupted sleep, Karydas writes that it is “[a]n echo of 524, Klytaimnestra’s terror at the snake dream. Orestes makes both women wake up for him but for different reasons: his nurse on account of sincere care, his mother on account of guilty fear” (1998:68 n.11).
“stranger” from Phocis, there is room for doubt about her feelings. As Taplin puts it, “[Cilissa’s] realistic detail reflects back on and detracts from Clytemnestra’s claims as a mother” (1978:145). It is significant, too, that Orestes does not hear the remarks of his nurse (Conacher 1987:123); it is dramatically necessary for him to remain more attached to the idea of his mother.

On the issue of who—from a socio-cultural perspective—Aeschylus’ audience would have expected to be responsible for breastfeeding the baby Orestes, evidence is difficult to come by. An example of a shared responsibility between mother and nurse may be gleaned from in Plato’s description of childrearing in his ideal state (Resp. 5, 460d). His plan, modeled on the system used by the Spartans, has the Guardians’ wives leaving their children in a communal nursery and then visiting them periodically during the day to breastfeed them. He specifies that the mothers will “hand over all the sitting up at night and hard work to nurses and attendants” (trans. Lee 2003:172). Plato’s view is intended for a utopian setting and cannot be used as an indication of current practice in 5th century Athens, or of what the Athenians would have thought would be the case in the royal court of heroic Argos. Nevertheless, Vellacott supports a reading along these lines, saying “[i]n most kinds of society in any age the normal pattern for a royal or wealthy mother would be to nurse her infant herself until she felt disinclined to do so; then she would send for a wet-nurse” (1984:154).

Scholarly interpretations of Clytemnestra’s state of mind have run the gamut from Vickers who says that “she drops a few crocodile tears” (1973:403) to Margon who argues that “an extravagant display of grief would not be in keeping with her characterization as a woman of enormous strength and self-control” (1983:297).
So the truth of Clytemnestra’s claim is difficult to determine, but would she have been likely to lie to Orestes about his nurture? One possible explanation, according to Whallon, is that the queen is an inveterate liar, a characterization which certainly fits her in the *Agamemnon*. He asserts that her supplication of Orestes by her breast “may therefore with complete conformity to her character be an ingenious fabrication” (1958:274).\textsuperscript{125} But lying at that crucial moment would have been risky, especially since Orestes himself might remember who breastfed him, since he could have been as old as three or four when he weaned. In fact, when first interpreting Clytemnestra’s dream, he refers to the snake clutching μαστὸν ... ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον (“the breast that nourished me,” 545), a description which clearly shows at least Orestes’ belief, if not his memory, that his mother nursed him. And, even if she managed to trick him at this crucial moment, the deceit could later be disproven by Cilissa who is still part of the household.

Due to the risks involved in lying, it would have been a safer strategy for Clytemnestra to confine her attempt to shame Orestes into pitying her by simply stating, “I bore you” as she does at line 908; that is an unarguable truth and certainly no lesser a basis for a demand for filial obedience than breastfeeding (indeed, the labor of childbirth was seen as so impressive that it was sometimes equated with the labor of a warrior; see Loraux 1995:23). Finally, although it might have made sense to lie to Orestes in a moment of crisis, why would Clytemnestra

\textsuperscript{125} Whallon, when he reconsiders the play and especially Clytemnestra’s dream (1980), does mitigate his stance on this issue, saying that “we are reluctant to say Clytemnestra did not suckle Orestes, in spite of all” (148, n.16). So the break-down of scholarly opinion is as follows: Vellacott (1984), Bowen (1986), Garvie (1986) and Karydas (1998) believe that Clytemnestra nursed her son. Whallon (1980) is uncertain, Golden (1966), Ferguson (1972), Vickers (1973) and Devereux (1976) think she is lying.
have lied to herself in her dream? She dreams very explicitly of nursing the snake-baby and at line 928 repeats that she gave birth and suck to it (οἷ́γὼ τεκοῦσα τόνδ᾽ ὄφιν ἐθρεψάμην); this would seem even stranger if it did not parallel the real life experience of nursing her own child. Taplin suggests that, although it cannot be proven, the breast-baring scene was Aeschylus’ innovation which was specifically designed to provide a link to the snake dream (2007:56). It may therefore be concluded that the dramatist does not intentionally or explicitly lead his audience to perceive Clytemnestra’s breast-bearing gesture as fraudulent on the basis that indications elsewhere in the drama contradict this claim. Although the audience would have considered Cilissa as the baby’s caregiver in the real sense (see Garvie 1986:246-51), they would not have had reason to doubt the truth of Clytemnestra’s claim either on socio-historical or on dramatic-textual grounds.

3.7.2 Self-centered supplication

There are, however, other aspects of the scene in Aeschylus’ drama that highlight the differences between the character of Clytemnestra and her Homeric precursor. A critical distinction between the Aeschylean and Homeric scenes is the motivation of the suppliant. Hecuba is trying to save her son’s life and to save herself the grief of his loss while Clytemnestra is fighting for her own life. Asking for one’s own life to be spared is a common cause for supplication in drama and epic
(e.g., Andromache in the play of the same name supplicates Peleus, Eur. *Andr.* 559-576; Lycaon supplicates Achilles in *Il.* 21, 34-135) and a very natural request in and of itself. The difference in motivation is nonetheless significant when Clytemnestra’s self-directed plea is set in contrast with that of her Homeric precedent, making Clytemnestra seem at least less noble than Hecuba. In addition, Whallon contends that the very fact that Clytemnestra is obviously imitating a well-known scene makes her appeal “[sound] specious as imitations do” (1980:137) and insincere, “as if life were imitating art” (1980:147 n.16). Although it could be argued that an ancient audience would be less inclined to judge imitation negatively, his point remains that Clytemnestra suffers by comparison with Hecuba.

### 3.7.3 Sexual intimations

This leads to another significant issue raised by Zeitlin (1984:167) and Devereux (1976:206), namely the possible sexual intent behind Clytemnestra’s exposure of her bared breasts. According to these scholars, Clytemnestra is depicted in the *Oresteia* as a sexually potent woman, and revealing her breasts—even though she does so ostensibly in a maternal context—remains a sexually charged act. This could be true for any mother and son of comparable ages, but it is pushed further towards the sexual in the dramatic context because of the lack of familiarity between the two. Because Orestes has been raised abroad, he might be less likely to see her breasts as maternal than would a man with a more normal relationship to his mother. As Zeitlin observes, “[t]he confrontation between
Clytemnestra and Orestes is remarkable for the queen’s mingled appeal of maternity and sexual seductiveness; the breast she bares to him (Cho. 894-98) has both erotic and nurturant significance” (1984:167).

The latent sexuality that Zeitlin and Devereux see in the gesture would have been dramatically increased by a display of nudity on stage: in ancient Greece, just as today, the primary interpretation of naked breasts was sexual (Salzman-Mitchell 2012:142). Bared breasts on stage would certainly have blurred the line between the character’s maternal and sexual roles, and this confusing and disturbing combination would be enough to make anyone pause. Since it was Clytemnestra’s intent to gain control of the situation, breast-baring could be effective because of the surprise or dismay it would provoke as much as the pity it might elicit. However, it seems dubious that nudity (i.e.: exposing of a false breast by the male actor) was in fact involved in the staging of the scene in the Choephoroi, as Taplin (2007:57) argues, in my view persuasively.

The sexual potential of the scene is further diminished when called into question by Lefkowitz (2007:174-76) who regards it as overstated. Lefkowitz wonders why Clytemnestra’s act would be viewed in this way when the Homeric precedent never was. Indeed, the opinion that Clytemnestra is sexual while Hecuba is pathetic is the predominant one among scholars (Devereux 1976, Taplin 1978, Zeitlin 1984, et al.), and it seems largely based on assumptions about the two women’s ages and the perception that Clytemnestra is wicked and therefore
menacingly sexual. Her adultery with Aegisthus would have reinforced this aura of illicit sexuality, certainly for the original audience and even for generations of readers. Taplin calls her affair “the most obtrusive flaw in her moral case” (1978:145), adding that it “makes her defense impossible to sustain” (ibid.) He views Clytemnestra as “almost forgivable” when she has her first encounter with Orestes in the play and learns of his death, but the brief scenes with the nurse and Aegisthus that come before their second and final meeting undermine her case completely (ibid.)

The fact that most scholars just do not like Clytemnestra may explain why they are willing to consider her behavior as manipulative and twisted, whereas the behavior of well-mannered Hecuba (of the Iliad, not her Euripidean manifestations) is taken at face value. The belief seems to be that when Clytemnestra bares her breast and declares that it is a reminder of maternal nurture, that is a façade; when Hecuba does it, that is an authentic act. This point of view may be valid, but it seems to me simplistic; the two queens both possess the potential to make a sexual and a maternal gesture.

Lefkowitz asserts that modern scholars go too far in their arguments that Clytemnestra’s sexuality is her central character trait in Aeschylus’ portrayal and that this diminishes the importance of her ability to plan and think (2007:176). She

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126 Although Hecuba is almost certainly older than Clytemnestra, it could be argued that they would not necessarily be that far apart. Interestingly, in the graphic novel Age of Bronze: A Thousand Ships by Eric Shanower, Hecuba is depicted as pregnant at the time of Helen’s abduction (2001:55-56).

127 It is the rare voice such as Joseph Margon (1983:296-97) who tries to make the argument that Clytemnestra has any maternal feelings at all towards Orestes; most people see her as loving Iphigenia to excess and disregarding her other children.
wants to give more weight to Clytemnestra’s intellect and in this she is certainly supported by the text, particularly in the Agamemnon where there are many references to Clytemnestra’s mental abilities.\textsuperscript{128} I would suggest, however, that what makes Clytemnestra such a force to be reckoned with is being able to wield all the tools in her arsenal with lethal effect: she can use her sexuality to her advantage precisely because she can use her intellect to determine the possible advantage of such a strategy.

While drawing on Homer as his inspiration for this scene of breast-baring supplication, Aeschylus brings in many elements not present in the Iliadic exemplar that add complexity and make it a worthy companion to the original. He presents a mother whose love may be called into question, begging, essentially, for forgiveness from her child in an attempt to save her own life rather than his. When Clytemnestra makes her appeal to Orestes, it is possible to imagine that a sexual element is present which would add another layer of meaning absent from the parallel in Homer. However, given the queen’s character and intellect, this was probably not the primary intent behind the gesture as depicted by Aeschylus and staged before an Attic audience.

3.8 Snake imagery and associations

\textsuperscript{128} It is significant too that Aeschylus has followed Stesichorus’ lead in making “Clytemnestra alone responsible for the death of Agamemnon (a treatment of the myth which similarly contrasts with the Homeric exoneration of Clytemnestra)” Arthur 1984:49; Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra is capable of mental and physical daring.
The snake imagery of the *Choephori* deserves another mention because of its prevalence and close connections with the matricide scene (O’Neill 1998:216). Snakes are alluded to many times in the *Agamemnon*, including line 1233, in which Clytemnestra is famously compared to an ἀμφίσβαινα by Cassandra, but this imagery becomes central in the *Choephori*. O’Neill (1998:223-27) argues that references to snakes are another point of similarity between the *Choephori* and the *Iliad* Book 22. He asserts that the image of Hector as a snake ready to strike as he waits for Achilles (Il. 22.93-95) and its proximity to Hecuba’s breast-baring are the inspiration for the abundance of snake imagery found in the *Choephori*. Aeschylus elaborates and complicates this Homeric precedent and is not content to let the imagery simply represent one character. There are shifts within the play regarding whom the snake represents just as there is a shift from earlier renditions of the snake element in Homer and Stesichorus and the use that Aeschylus makes of it.

In Stesichorus’ version of Clytemnestra’s dream, a snake appears to her and this is closely followed by a vision of Agamemnon, clearly linking the two (Lloyd-Jones 1970:2). It would seem that Clytemnestra herself is initially following this interpretation of her dream in the *Choephori*—even though it varies significantly in content—since her response is to send propitiatory offerings to her husband’s tomb.

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129 As Bowen comments on line 527 of *Choe.*, “[o]n Cassandra’s lips at A. 1232-3 it was Clytemnestra herself who was δυσφιλές δάκος and ἀμφίσβαινα: now she breeds them” (1986:99). The role of the snake goes to the character who is acting to move the curse forward at that moment: Clytemnestra when she is a killer, Agamemnon when he (in Clytemnestra’s view) prompts the dream that will reunite the siblings, Orestes when he turns killer and the Furies when they pursue him.
(O’Neill 1998:221). It is not until just before her death that she finally links Orestes and the dream snake (line 928). Orestes and Electra, on the other hand, start out the play as the victims of the snake as they pray to their father for help (lines 247ff), but as soon as Orestes learns of his mother’s dream, he immediately associates himself with the snake-baby (lines 540ff.). In this way, Aeschylus has Clytemnestra follow the old, outdated interpretation which leads her to be off guard, while Orestes is on the right track from the beginning.

Although snakes may be monstrous or at least wicked creatures in the trilogy,\(^{130}\) they are also powerful figures associated with swift, if negative, action. Conacher notes that it is hearing the snake dream that prompts Orestes to take action (1987:114) when he realizes that it is now he, not his mother, who is the destructive snake in the family: “[the] serpentine roles have shifted from one side to the other side” (Otis 1981:81). Orestes had to free himself from the role he shared with his sister as powerless and terrorized by the snake, to become the snake himself. And just as the dream snake goes from being a helpless baby which relies on mother’s milk to a terror which drains its mother’s blood, so will Orestes transform and up-end the power dynamic in his relationship with his mother.\(^{131}\)

This then, is the final reason for Clytemnestra to begin the supplication of Orestes with breast-baring: images of nursing have been in her thoughts since

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\(^{130}\) Hogan says that they are associated “with death, the underworld, and the cult of heroes” (1984:126). Ogden adds that “[s]nakes were associated with other denizens of the underworld that were also ready to leave it on occasion to intervene in the world of the living: the Erinyes” (2013:254).

\(^{131}\) Although, as we know, the snake’s work is not done there, since snake monsters (the Eumenides) will soon arrive to avenge Clytemnestra (Hogan 1984:126)
before the beginning of the play. Whether her dream is viewed as an omen sent by
the gods or the workings of a guilty conscience, the connection between the queen’s
maternity and her own destruction has been clearly drawn in the minds of the
audience and, significantly for this scene, in her own mind. This culminates in a
supplication where Clytemnestra first pushes her maternal status to the fore with
Orestes and then, too late, realizes that she is confronting the vicious child of whom
she dreamed, at some level enacting the dream narrative.

3.9 Conclusion

If we accept that Aeschylus was indeed the first author who added
Clytemnestra’s breast-baring to the story of the House of Atreus and, further, was
the only playwright bold enough to present it onstage, that was quite a coup. The
scores of imitations that followed must have been a result of this stunning moment
in theater as much as they are a result of the Homeric antecedent. In addition, his
reworking of Stesichorus’ snake nightmare to include the breastfeeding element
makes it even more sensational; it pushes to the brink the view of Clytemnestra as
a woman who is so beastly that she is not only compared to a snake by her enemies,
but even, at a metaphorical/oneiric level, gives birth to them.

The combination of nursing an animal in her dream\textsuperscript{132} followed by the
rejection of a debt of τροφή by her biological child, positions Clytemnestra as a

\textsuperscript{132} Which is meant to be seen as an omen, but it is an omen that comments on the character of the
dreamer.
woman who does not understand proper nurture or whose nurture is toxic. Whallon wants to take the first element even further and proposes that any woman who was portrayed as suckling an animal would be seen as a maenad by the audience (1980:140-41), but I do not see this as a primary connotation to Clytemnestra’s dream: framing Clytemnestra as a wild woman after the fashion of the bacchants is at most a secondary motif gained by her snake nursing, and Whallon seems more accurate in his earlier description of the serpent imagery as “a multivalent representation of love replaced by cruelty in the relationship between a mother and her child” (1958:271). The serpent at the breast is too powerful an image to be constrained to one meaning or one character.

In the end, Clytemnestra’s dangerous sexuality, maenadic tendencies or “manly” intellect are not the factors that push her son away as she pleads for her life, and even the vexed question of who really nursed Orestes does not tip the balance. These matters are not insignificant, however, and they add richness to our experience of the play. It is the cycle of revenge that entraps Orestes as an Atreid; it is still moving forward in the Choephori and it will remain in motion until the conclusion of the trilogy. Even if Clytemnestra had been as sweet and respectable as Hecuba, Orestes would have still been bound—by Homeric precedent and by his fated need to avenge his father—to kill her.
4.1 Introduction

Euripides’ addition of a breast-baring supplication to the account of the seven against Thebes functions as a method of taking the emphasis away from the martial elements of the story as it is told by Aeschylus and refocusing it on the individual characters involved in the struggle, with Jocasta at the center. She is a maternal and mournful figure, whose actions expand on the meaning of the breast-baring gesture as a sorrowful one. Her failure to prevent her Eteocles and Polyneices from fighting and her failure even to arrive on the battlefield at a time when such pleading would have made sense is consistent with the failures of communication which contribute to the Labdacid family curse. Hecuba and Clytemnestra are able to beg their sons to change their courses, but Jocasta is deprived even of that opportunity. By not allowing her a proper supplication, the personal debt of τροφή— which is part of all three women’s exchanges with their sons—becomes secondary, and the naked breast as a symbol of mourning is brought to the fore.

Whereas much of the complexity of Clytemnestra’s supplication derives from questions about her feelings towards her son, Jocasta’s motivation—protecting her sons and her city—are never in doubt. So although Jocasta and Clytemnestra share the theme of a family curse, the breast-baring supplication in the Phoenissae is modelled much more closely on the passage from the Iliad than on Clytemnestra’s
plea. This is true largely because the context for Jocasta’s appeal to her sons is more parallel to that of Hecuba’s. Many of the same plot elements are present: a city under siege, a mother trying to protect her child/ren and also to spare herself further sorrow. In the Phoenissae, the connection between exposed breasts and death/mourning which was made clear in the Iliad (εἴ περ γάρ σε κατακτάνῃ, οὔ σ’ ἔτ’ ἔγωγε/ κλαύσομαι ἐν λεχέεσσι Il. 22, 86-87) and to some extent in the Choephoroi (ἔοικα θρηνεῖν ζῶσα πρὸς τύμβον μάτην Ch. 296), becomes a greater focal point.

After an overview of how Euripides was regarded in his time, including a discussion of Aristophanes’ oft-repeated charges of misogyny, a brief analysis will be provided of the play’s correlation to the historical events of the period. The context for the breast-baring supplication will be established through a summary of the plot and a look at the structure of the drama. The diction of the messenger’s speech (1431-35) and Antigone’s lament (1566-78) will be examined in order to discern any verbal links to the Homeric or Aeschylean scenes, Euripides’ use of rhetorical devices will be detailed, and the motivation for having two reports of the same scene of supplication will be studied. The final sections will look at issues raised by the other instances of the use of the word μαστός in the play and at Jocasta’s role in carrying on the family curse. The transgressive behavior of the family will be discussed as the possible cause of the supplication’s failure.
4.2 Euripides’ life and reception

Despite the charming tradition that has the lives of the three great tragedians intersecting at the battle of Salamis in 480 BCE (Aeschylus fighting, Sophocles dancing in the victory chorus and Euripides being born, cf. Rabinowitz 2008:39), there is no reason to disbelieve the Parian Marble which gives 484 BCE as the year of Euripides’ birth (Meagher 1989:9). As is the case with Aeschylus, an abundance of popular traditions takes the place of hard facts about Euripides’ life. Among these, we have the image of the playwright as a recluse, living a hermit’s life in a cave overlooking the Bay of Salamis (Murray 1918:12), and later going into a self-imposed exile at the court of King Archelaus of Macedon (Ferguson 1972:245). Counterbalancing these stories of Euripides the outcast, there are tales of his enormous popularity: Plutarch recounts that Athenian captives in Sicily bought their freedom by reciting his work:

In the present case, at any rate, they say that many Athenians who reached home in safety greeted Euripides with affectionate hearts, and recounted to him, some that they had been set free from slavery for rehearsing what they remembered of his works; and some that when they were roaming about after the final battle they had received food and drink for singing some of his choral hymns. Surely, then, one need not wonder at the story that the Caunians, when a vessel of theirs would have put in at the harbour of Syracuse to escape pursuit by pirates, were not admitted at first, but kept outside, until, on being asked if they knew any songs of Euripides, they declared that they did indeed, and were for this reason suffered to bring their vessel safely in. (Plut. Nic. 29.3, trans. Perrin)
Other sources say that the Athenians begged the Macedonians to return his bones (Meagher 1989:10-11). All told, such stories speak volumes about his popularity, especially after his death, and such popularity demanded a biography fantastic enough to suit the author of dramas which broke all the rules and laid down the pattern for New Comedy (Nikulin 2014:16).

It is Aristophanes’ portrayals of Euripides which give us a fleshed-out persona that biographers, both ancient and relatively modern, have eagerly latched on to. The desire to know the playwright better has overcome the contradictory characteristics attributed to him in different plays of Aristophanes and even the contradictions between these characteristics and what can be discerned of Euripides through his own works (Murray 1918:10-12). Aristophanes presents him, among other things, as “something of a radical and a religious sceptic, in contrast to the lofty and devout Aeschylus” (Klinck 2008:212) in the Frogs (892-93; cf. also Thes. 443-56) and as a misogynist, most famously in the Thesmophoriazusae (lines 383-413). But using parody as a basis for biography is a dubious proposition. When Euripides’ plays are examined on their own, we can see that “[the] divine order is often inscrutable or even repellent - as it is in Sophocles as well - but its reality is arguably affirmed rather than denied” (Kovacs “Euripides”). The fact remains that however it may strike us now, his presentation of the divine was different enough from that of his contemporaries to fuel the derision of Aristophanes and probably the suspicion of others.133

133 A third century CE Oxyrhynchus papyrus claims that Euripides was prosecuted for impiety because he portrayed Hercules being driven mad by Hera and that “[this] recalls the statement in
The charge of misogyny that Aristophanes has his characters level at Euripides is difficult to understand for a modern reader, given his many strong female characters (Murray 1918:14). Murray suggests that having nuanced, sympathetic portrayals of women might have been offensive to his contemporaries who went along with the Periclean idea that it was shameful for a woman to be mentioned for good or ill.134 He argues that presenting assertive and complex female characters could have been seen as a shockingly inappropriate way to treat women and therefore would be assumed to arise from antipathy (Murray 1918:14-15). On the other hand, it seems more likely that the humorous effect of parodying Euripides as a misogynist was because he clearly was not one (Pomeroy 1975:105). He created interesting female characters along with misogynist ones such as Hippolytus to examine popular beliefs about women (Pomeroy 1975:105-07). His women commit crimes not to demonstrate that the female sex is wicked, but to invite reflection on the myths and traditional interpretations that judge them as such (Pomeroy 1975:108).

Thus, the significance of Euripides as a common target for parody is twofold:135 it demonstrates his prominent place in the public eye and his reputation as an innovator (Segal 1968:2 refers to him as “an iconoclast from the beginning”).

Satyrus’ Life of Euripides that Cleon prosecuted Euripides for impiety, but neither of these can be taken as reliable evidence” (Papadopoulou 2005:71). Even if these sources do not reflect an actual trial or one that was politically rather than religiously motivated (Lucas 1959:173), Euripides was clearly not a traditionalist in his beliefs.

134 Although if having nuanced, sympathetic portrayals of women was offensive, it is not clear why such a “charge” would not have been leveled against Sophocles as well.

135 Murray 1918:13: “Of the eleven comedies of Aristophanes which have come down to us three are largely devoted to Euripides, and not one has managed altogether to avoid touching him. I know of no parallel to it in all the history of literature.”
Whether or not his prominence was based on widespread popularity is a vexed question. There is the unarguable fact that he only won four times during his life (although he was once victorious posthumously) out of twenty-one entries at the tragic competitions (Segal 1968:9) but, on the other hand, he was never denied a chorus (Lefkowitz 1981:103). Segal argues that his lack of success might have been due more to the judges’ poor taste or corruption (since they also failed to award Sophocles best-in-festival for *Oedipus Rex*), than the general public’s dislike of Euripides’ work (1968:11). He also cites the Plutarch passage quoted above, saying, “[to] be singing his odes is *ipso facto* to be singing his praises” (Segal 1968:11). Whether or not he was popular while alive, it is clear that Euripides’ plays were very well-known in his day and certainly well-liked after his death.136

### 4.3 The Play in its time

Euripides’ *Phoenissae* was mostly likely first produced between 411-407 BCE137, but was then added to substantially by producers in the fourth century (Wyckoff 1968:68; Burian 1981:15). Although the play in its original form (as best as can be discerned) already gives the impression that “Euripides is at pains to include as much as he can fit in” (Burian 1981:4) from the story of the Labdacid dynasty,

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136 Lucas 1959:174: “After his death he came into his own, and in the fourth century he was read and acted far more than the rest of the tragic poets put together.” From 341-339 BCE there are documented performances of the *Orestes*, one of the *Iphigenias* and another Euripides play at the Great Dionysia in addition to other revivals at smaller festivals (Scharffenberger 2012:170).

137 Mastronarde prefers 409 BCE, but hedges, adding: “[given] the state of our evidence, I see no reason to place confidence in assignment to any particular year” (1994:14).
later additions went even further, including material from Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* (Wyckoff 1968:68). Scholars disagree widely in trying to determine which parts of the play are Euripidean and which are the work of other authors, with the only consensus being that the end of the play is certainly corrupt.\(^{138}\)

At the time of its first production the Athenians, like the fictional Thebans they were watching, were people under siege from a well-known enemy (Vellacott 1972:56-57) and undoubtedly, like Antigone (lines 103-201), they had climbed up on walls and rooftops to survey that enemy. The war with Sparta had been dragging on since 431 BCE; the Athenians had suffered the plague (430 BCE), more recently the devastation of the Sicilian expedition (415-13 BCE) and, exhausted, they might have guessed that defeat was not far away (404 BCE; Vellacott 1972:56). Jocasta’s extraordinary efforts to create a truce between her sons and her sorrow at her failure to achieve that goal would have been easy for the audience to identify with. The idea of reconciliation was a recurrent one in theater at the end of the fifth century (Papadopoulou 2008:53), as much of the population must have longed for peace. Sadly, the Athenians were all too familiar with what transpires when negotiations break down.

### 4.4 Plot summary and structure

The prologue of the *Phoenissae* of Euripides is delivered by Jocasta (lines 1-87) and summarizes the plot of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (with the exception of the suicide of Jocasta, of course), leaving room for much Euripidean innovation. The action of the play begins with Jocasta trying to arrange a truce between Eteocles and Polyneices (lines 303-637); she fails, and they fight to the death, precipitating her own suicide (lines 1427-1459). Meanwhile, Jocasta’s nephew, Menoeceus, has killed himself in order to fulfill the prophecy of the ever-gloomy Tiresias who predicted that the boy must die if Thebes was to remain safe (lines 896-1018). The play ends with Antigone refusing to marry Haemon, leading Oedipus off to Colonus and vowing to come back and bury the body of Polyneices (lines 1646-1725).

Because the *Phoenissae* is so action-packed and does not seem to conform to the Aristotelian model of a proper tragedy, it “is largely despised or neglected today” although it was “esteemed in antiquity” (Burian 1981:3). Instead of presenting the concentrated and self-contained world that is found in its predecessor *Oedipus Rex*, where the drama becomes more intense because of a feeling of closed-in inescapability, the *Phoenissae* develops parallels and contrasts by juxtaposing a variety of scenes and characters (Mastronarde 1994:3). The

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139 Although, as Burian reminds us, as much as the play is a reworking of the Oedipus story, it is equally a response to Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* (2009:17).

140 Unlike *Oedipus Rex*, Aristotle’s model for the ideal tragedy, the *Phoenissae* consists of many episodes which are almost self-contained (e.g., the negotiation between the brothers [lines 446-637], the Menoeceus scene [lines 896-1018], and Oedipus’ appearance [lines 1539-1763] at the end of the play). Each one contributes to the story, but not in a direct, cause-and-effect manner.

141 For example, the scene with Antigone looking out over the massing armies and girlishly discussing it with the pedagogue (lines 103-201) contrasts strongly with the sophisticated (and
result of this different strategy is that the play jumps quickly between subplots, but still builds towards a unified conclusion. Unfortunately, the relatively large cast (eleven characters, only three of whom—not counting the chorus—appear in more than one scene) and the many plot strands have tended to obscure the fact that there is a very balanced structure to the drama with the suicide of Menoeceus being the centerpiece. But although the self-sacrifice may be the structural center, Jocasta emerges as the main character, linking almost all of the other characters together by their relationship to her, and directing much of the action or highlighting it by her response.

4.5 Context of the breast-baring scene

sophistic) debate that follows between her mother and brothers (lines 446-637); for scenes which balance each other, see next note.

142 Burian and Swann (1981:4) outline the structure as follows: Jocasta’s prologue (lines 1-87) in which she traces the family history is balanced with the final scene in which Oedipus, Antigone and Creon contemplate how events will turn out (1625-1682); Antigone’s τειχοσκοπία (lines 103-201) is balanced with her lament for Jocasta (lines 1485-1581); Jocasta’s attempt to reconcile her sons (lines 303-637) is balanced with the messenger’s report of their duel (lines 1356-1479); Creon and Eteocles planning the battle (lines 690-783) is balanced with the other messenger’s report of the battle’s results (lines 1217-1264); and the Menoeceus episode (lines 896-1018) is at the center of it all (Burian 1981:4). They do not describe this as an example of ring structure, but say that “the other scenes are ranged in axial symmetry” around Menoeceus’ suicide.

143 As Hall (2009:xxv) states it: “this eloquent, ageing queen certainly provides the central focus of the tragedy. Her physical body is the key symbol of the drama”.

144 Luschnig 1995:163: “Everything is colored from the start by Jocasta’s perspective: what she chooses to tell and what leave out, where she chooses to give a little more or less detail.”
The placement of the breast-baring scene in the *Phoenissae* is similar to that of the parallel scenes in the *Iliad* and the *Choephoroi*: near the end of the work at a stage when the course of action for the hero is already firmly set. This is significant in establishing the gesture as a strategy of last resort while also setting it up for almost certain failure (Papadopoulou 2008:56), giving it a desperate and pathetic character. Further analysis of the play will also indicate that it was a grand gesture that had to be built up to, not something that could be done in the first act and then forgotten.

Jocasta’s breast-baring supplication is also positioned between the deaths of three (out of four) of her male nurslings. Creon’s son Menoeceus learns that only his death can win the favor of Ares and thereby save the city from the attacking forces (lines 911-959). Creon is ready to orchestrate his son’s escape (lines 962-85), but the boy confounds his father’s plan by pretending to go along with it and then slipping away to sacrifice himself (lines 986-1018). Significantly, Menoeceus’ pretext for not leaving with his father immediately is that he wishes to say goodbye to his aunt Jocasta who nursed him (lines 986-89). The chorus sings an ode in praise of the boy (lines 1019-66) and then a messenger enters looking for Jocasta to report that the armies are marshalling outside the city and that Eteocles and Polyneices intend to fight in single combat (lines 1090-1263). Upon hearing this,

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145 Menoeceus’ death which is described with amazing brevity by the messenger at lines 1090-92 and the deaths of Polyneices and Eteocles which are reported by another messenger at lines 1356-1479.
146 Unlike his character in Sophocles, Creon is not the “advocate par excellence of the claims of the state over those of the family” (Burian 2009:18) in this play. He is ready to let the city suffer in order to save his son.
147 Cairns 1993:267 remarks that Menoeceus “undertakes the ultimate subjection of self to community out of concern for his own reputation”—making it an act which is motivated by ἀϊδώς—in contrast to his cousins Eteocles and Polyneices who are motivated by selfishness.
Jocasta calls Antigone out of the house and the two hurry to the battlefield to try to stop the duel (lines 1264-82).

Jocasta’s final encounter with her sons takes place offstage and, strikingly, is reported twice: first by a messenger who delivers a lengthy account of the brothers’ fight, Jocasta’s arrival, the brothers’ deaths and the queen’s suicide (lines 1356-1479) and then in Antigone’s lament which covers the same ground (lines 1566-81). The two versions, naturally, align in most regards, but are curiously different in detailing Jocasta’s exact behavior; specifically, only Antigone mentions her mother’s act of breast-baring.\(^{148}\) This omission by the messenger would seem like tactful restraint (αἰδώς) on his part, but he still does make reference to Jocasta’s breasts, just as other characters in the play repeatedly do.\(^{149}\) He does not say that she revealed them, but that she was “groaning over the great toil of her breasts” (1434-35).

At first glance, the phrase “τὸν πολὺν μαστῶν πόνον” seems to be a truly unusual way to refer to the labor of childrearing but, as Mastronarde points out, in tragedy and especially in Euripides, “it is customary to evoke the emotional bond between mother and child by referring to the pain of childbirth and the act of nursing”.\(^{150}\) This phrase also evokes the idea (made more apparent in the supplications of Hecuba and Clytemnestra) of reciprocity: a mother endures the toil

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\(^{148}\) Papadopoulou 2008:57: “Overall, Antigone’s account complements the Messenger’s report, provides the audience with additional information, exploits the dynamic of the metaphor of supplication and gives lyric reworking of Jocasta’s suicide over her dead sons.”

\(^{149}\) She mentions her own breast at lines 30 and 306, Menoeceus mentions it at line 987, the messenger at line 1434, Antigone at lines 1527 and 1568 and Oedipus calls himself a breast-loving baby at line 1603.

of childrearing (τροφή) with the expectation that her children will care for her in turn in her old age. The physicality of the description is particularly fitting in this play which never loses sight of Jocasta’s close connection to her children.\footnote{E.g., she embraces Polyneices when they reunite (line 306), she throws herself on them in turn when she finds them on the battlefield (line 1433) and she falls between her sons in death (line 1459 θανοῦσα κεῖται περιβαλοῦσ’ ἀμφοῖν χέρας “dying she lies throwing her arms around both”).}

Euripides emphasizes the importance of Jocasta’s reaction to her sons’ deaths by reporting it twice; he draws attention to it with the speech of the messenger and then expands on it in a more emotional way with Antigone’s song. It is worthwhile then examining both as they complement and contrast with one another. The messenger’s more straightforward telling still includes many references to Jocasta’s grief alongside the quoted speeches of herself and Polyneices which “are meant to arouse the emotions of the audience” (Papadopoulou 2008:55). When she enters with the bodies, “Antigone’s account repeats as well as adds emotive details” (Papadopoulou 2008:56), bringing a perspective which is both more personal and more poetic; an effect which is very appropriate for a kinswoman who would be expected to sing a dirge for her family members (Alexiou 1974:102-03).

4.6 Translation of Antigone’s lament

_Phoenissae_ lines 1566-1578

δάκρυα γοερά
фанερά πάσι τιθεμένα,
tέκεσι μαστόν ἐφερεν ἐφερεν
ικέτις ἰκέτιν ὀρομένα.
ηὗρε δ’ ἐν Ἡλέκτραισι πύλαις τέκνα

1570

151
Her groaning tears
making them plain to all,
she lifted, she lifted her breast to her children
a suppliant bringing forth a suppliant (breast)
but she found her children at the Electran gates
down by the lotus-bearing meadow with their spears
a shared hostility,
their mother (found them), battling like lions in their lairs,
a cold, murderous libation of their blood,
which Hades obtained, which Ares sent,
already upon their wounds:
seizing the sword of bronze from the dead into
her flesh she sank it, in sorrow for her children she fell near (both) her children.

The scene described by Antigone and the messenger differs greatly from the
Homeric and Aeschylean predecessors in that there is no opportunity for a formal
supplication (although the word ἱκέτις is used twice in Antigone’s speech) since
Jocasta arrives at the battlefield too late. When Jocasta is grieving that she has
missed her chance to stop the fight, she exclaims “ὦ τέκν’, ὑστέρα βοηδρόμος πάρεμι”
(lines 1432-33). This is the only direct quotation from her and the word τέκν’ (line
1432) in it brings to mind the scenes in Homer and Aeschylus, but this is not a
surprising or a marked piece of diction. She does not demand that they feel ἀιδος at
the sight of her breasts and she does not ask for their pity as the other mothers did.

152 Mastronarde comments on this line as “a bold use of the feminine-suffix agent noun ἱκέτων as an
adj. of common gender modifying masc. noun μαστόν” (1994:585 n.1569). The uncommon usage
further emphasizes the repetition.
It is tempting, based on the messenger’s speech, to interpret the breast-baring gesture in this instance as an act of mourning, but that reading is contradicted by the very clear language of Antigone’s description, labeling it as a supplication and by Jocasta’s own words at line 1278 where she tells her daughter she must “fall upon” or “supplicate” (προσπίτνουσ’) the brothers with her. Jocasta was intending to beg her sons to stop their duel, but the timing of her arrival made that impossible.

In the portion of Antigone’s lament translated above (the first part of her dirge runs from lines 1485-1539), the word τέκνον, in various forms, occurs three times. In regards to the messenger’s speech, this word is perfectly natural and expected in context, but its repeated occurrence in such a short and carefully wrought passage does make it stand out. The word τέκεσι, which is related in terms of meaning and etymology (both τέκνον and τέκος are from the verb τίκτω), appears at line 1568, and μάτηρ is found at line 1573, completing the mother-child dyad. The effect of these repetitions and use of related words is to keep the idea of Jocasta as a mother of the combatants in the forefront.

153 In her discussion of the messenger’s use of the word προσπίτνουσ’ and the phrase τόν πολύν μαστῶν πόνον, Papadopoulou suggests that his words are appropriate for “both the seeming supplication and the actual maternal supplication that Jocasta intended to carry out” (2008:57).
154 See Papadopoulou’s discussion at 2008:56 where she argues that Antigone is describing her mother’s intention, but that the case could be made that “Euripides tolerates the discrepancy of the two accounts for pathetic effect.”
155 Commenting on the frequent use of τέκνον and related terms throughout the play, Craik says: “Iokaste’s maternal role is stressed by the repeated forms of address to Antigone, 1265, 1272, 1280, cf. 1269, as earlier to Eteokles and Polyneikes; and by Antigone’s form of reply, 1270, 1274, 1278” (1988:240 n.1264).
Interestingly, Euripides uses the words τέκνον and τέκος which can mean the young of animals as well as humans.\footnote{The LSJ also notes that τέκος can also be a term of endearment.} In a different context with a different family, this might not be significant, but in the Labdacid house within this play it seems to imply that Jocasta has produced animal offspring rather than children from her incestuous marriage. As Podlecki discusses, animal imagery abounds in the *Phoenissae*, especially surrounding the brothers and “[reaching] its highest pitch when their single combat and mutual slaughter assume the center of the audience’s interest” (Podlecki 1962:366). The chorus refers to them as “twin beasts” (δίδυμοι θήρες, 1296), the messenger describes them as wild boars (κάπροι, 1380) and, in this scene, Antigone calls them “lions in their lairs” (λέοντας ἐναύλους, 1573). There are additional instances throughout the play (Podlecki 1962:365-66).\footnote{In addition to the instances Podlecki mentions, when Jocasta is described by the messenger as coming upon her dying sons, their wounds are called σφαγὰς, the word used in connection with the sacrificial slaughter of animals (Craik 1988:255 n.1431).} Taken in this context, the ambivalent τέκνον and τέκος seem to lean towards the bestial interpretation. Jocasta bore children from a union which was outside what is acceptable to civilized people so naturally (if we follow the play’s logic), they do not behave like human beings.

More than a reliance on unusual diction, Euripides employs a multitude of rhetorical flourishes to make Antigone’s lament catch and keep the spectators’ attention. He begins with two short lines in which four of the five words rhyme (δάκρυα γοερὰ/φανερὰ…τιθεμένα)\footnote{Mastronarde says that here “Eur. plays with sound for pathetic effect” (1994:585 n.1567).} and then follows it with two lines containing the repetition of ἔφερεν and then polyptoton with ἰκέτις (ἰκέτις ἰκέτιν), making the
introduction to her song instantly appealing and memorable.\textsuperscript{159} In line 1571 there is the consonance of three (out of four) words in “\(\lambda\),” with the first word of the line being the unusual λωτοτρόφον (lotus-bearing).\textsuperscript{160} Line 1573 contains the previously mentioned “like lions in their lairs”, which simile also provides consonance in “\(\lambda\),” “\(\nu\)” and “\(\sigma\).” Lines 1571 and 1573, which contain more consonance, frame the short phrase κοινὸν ἐνυάλιον (“a shared hostility”, 1572) which is itself antithetical as well as having consonance in “\(\nu\)”. And finally, in almost the last line of the threnody, there is another instance of polyptoton (τέκνων... τέκνοισι) framing the verb ἐπεσ᾽ and creating a visual/aural representation of Jocasta falling between her children.\textsuperscript{161}

The intensity of the alliteration in lines 1571-73, especially in “\(\lambda\),” not only draws attention to the lines, but might also be suggestive of ululation (which is usually associated with a rapid lu-lu-lu or la-la-la sound) given the mournful nature of the song. This would be a fitting complement to the sound play in the earlier section of her lament in which she employs “words which are full of the lugubrious \textit{ai} sound reminiscent of \textit{aiai}, “alas” (1512, 1514, 1519, 1520, 1521, 1524, 1529, 1532, 1533, 1537)” (Craik 1988:244). All together, the focus on specific sounds, the rhymes and the repetitions which occur in the song push it towards what some commentators term “Euripidean stylistic affectation” (Craik 1988:260 n.1569).

\textsuperscript{159} Although it was not like trying to write an advertising jingle, the tragedians certainly trained their ears for phrases that would stay in listeners’ heads, and we know (as mentioned above in Plutarch) that popular odes were sung by the Attic viewing public.

\textsuperscript{160} In addition to adding a rhetorical figure, the word λωτοτρόφον adds to the meaning of the passage as both the lotus and meadows are also associated with death (Craik 1988:260 n.1571).

\textsuperscript{161} Luschnig 1995:233: “Jocasta...links the two brothers in her embrace and her motherhood.”
lament is undeniably very striking and perhaps it is a matter of taste whether the
effect is to be considered moving or melodramatic.

4.7 Translation of the messenger’s speech

_Phœnissae_ lines 1431-1435

τετρωμένους δ’ ἱδοῦσα καιρίους σφαγὰς
ψυμωξέν: ὦ τέκν’, ύστέρα βοηδρόμος
πάρειμι. προσπίτνουσα δ’ ἐν μέρει τέκνα
ἔκλαι’, ἑθρήνει, τὸν πολὺν μαστῶν πόνον
στένουσ’, ἀδελφή θ’ ἢ παρασπίζουσ’ ὄμοι:

But seeing them wounded with mortal gashes
she lamented: “Oh children, (too) late as a helper
I am here.” Throwing herself (on them) in turn, for her children
she wept, she wailed, groaning over the great toil of her breasts
and their sister was standing beside her in the same place.

In the messenger’s speech, an interesting point of diction is the accumulation
of verbs denoting weeping/wailing/mourning (ψυμωξέν, ἔκλαι’, ἑθρήνει and στένουσ’). In
contrast to the multiple uses of τέκνον in Antigone’s song where emphasis is created
by repeating the same word, here Euripides draws the audience’s attention by using
many synonyms. The simple fact that there are four different words for crying in a
passage describing a mother coming upon her two dying sons is hardly remarkable
in and of itself, but the concentration of those words is remarkable: four words (from
a total of twenty-three) in four lines and two of those are next to each other in line-
initial position. This usage is clearly meant to be noticed.

Just as the vocabulary of mother and child is utilized by Euripides in this
portion of the play to emphasize one aspect of her identity, the vocabulary of
mourning highlights another aspect. Jocasta must be seen, not just as a mother, but as a mother whose maternity has brought her immense grief. She has for the entire drama been dressed in rags with shorn hair (lines 322-26)—which she points out was prompted by Polyneices’ exile—and she has enough reason to mourn even before two of her sons fight to the death. Based on her appearance it may seem as if she has been waiting for the next installment of misery that fate is going to bring her and, when it arrives, she is properly dressed and has a panoply of mourning tactics at her disposal. With the cumulative force of the messenger’s and Antigone’s speeches, Jocasta appears for the last time in the imagination of the audience as the paradigm of mournful motherhood.162

4.8 Other instances of μαστός in the play

Nicole Loraux notes that “the breast of Jocasta is evoked obsessively” in the Phoenissae, a drama of what she calls “maternal love” (1995:135). Undeniably, this play is very concerned with Jocasta’s love for her sons, but it is important to keep sight of the fact that two of these are the children of an incestuous union and the other is a child whose conception was warned against by the gods (lines 19-20, 1598-99). This is maternal love, but her maternity and associated breastfeeding is anything but typical or natural. In the Phoenissae, by repeatedly evoking the breast of Jocasta (see note 149 above), Euripides uses it as one of the symbols of the

162 This would be, according to Wyckoff (1968:68 and Hall 2009:xxvi), the last reference to Jocasta that Euripides intended. Oedipus’ request to touch her body at line 1693 is part of what many consider to be the lengthy interpolation that ends the play.
abominations of the house of Oedipus, an ostensibly positive thing which is tainted with perversion and disaster. Nearly all of the characters can be linked to Jocasta through her breasts and all of them will suffer on account of this association.

The unusual and unlucky nature of Jocasta’s nurture of her children is emphasized by the settings in which the references to her breasts are found. There are seven instances of the word μαστός in the Phoenissae, six of which refer specifically to Jocasta’s breast/s (the other, at line 30, refers to Oedipus’ adoptive mother—either Merope or Periboea—nursing the foundling baby). Four of the references to Jocasta’s breasts are also specifically in connection to lactation, and Euripides sets all four of these in a context of grief and suffering: the death of Menoeceus’ mother which necessitates Jocasta’s acting as a wet nurse (line 987); the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices (line 1434); Antigone’s viewing of her mother’s corpse (line 1527); and Oedipus describing his exposure (line 1603). By juxtaposing what should be a positive thing—the breastfeeding of healthy children—with such mournful circumstances, Euripides heightens the general pathos of the drama. Evoking breastfeeding focuses the attention on how tenderly Jocasta has cared for her children and raised them up only to have them face premature deaths.163

This personal quality of Jocasta’s care for her children deserves to be highlighted. Jocasta’s insistence on nursing her own children and even taking on the additional responsibility of nursing her nephew is notable and puts her in a

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163 Zeitlin even goes so far as to refer to Jocasta as being “hypermaternal” in this play (2008:32), saying that “Euripides’ emphasis on the maternal qualities of Jocasta and the tragic consequences of her passionate devotion” (2008:329) are an innovation that the playwright created just for this effect.
positive light. Euripides connected her as intimately as possible to her children and others in the play, and a natural way to do this was through the bond of the nursing couple. He showed that she was not content to farm them out to another woman for their nurture; there is no character parallel to Cilissa in this play to cast doubt on the truth of Jocasta’s claim to be the person who suckled her children. In fact, quite the opposite is true: all the characters acknowledge her care.

4.8.1 The Use of μαστός in connection with Oedipus

Although she is presented as a nurturer par excellence, the first occurrence of μαστός in the play comes in the prologue (line 30) when Jocasta refers to Oedipus, the only child whom she bore and probably did not nurse. She calls him τὸν ἐμὸν ὁδίνων πόνον (“my fruit [literally, my labor] of travails”), which another woman, Oedipus’ foster mother, put to her breast (μαστοῖς ὑφεῖτο). The similarity between the phrase τὸν ἐμὸν ὁδίνων πόνον, and τὸν πολὺν μαστῶν πόνον (line 1434) from the messenger’s speech discussed above is obvious and probably not a matter of chance. Jocasta’s children are defined as products of her labor and suffering of one kind or another. They are her πόνοι.
4.8.2 The Use of μαστός in connection with Menoeceus

The first mention of Jocasta’s nursing a child is in reference to Menoeceus, her brother Creon’s son.167 It is Menoeceus himself who brings up his nurture, telling Creon that he is going to say goodbye to his aunt, ἥς πρῶτα μαστόν εἵλκυσ’ (“on whose breast I first drew”, line 987), as a device to distract his father while he commits suicide in order to save the city. The reference here is striking because it is unexpected: Creon has only one sister, so it is not necessary to distinguish her for that reason, and Menoeceus is supposed to be fleeing for his life, so it would be a poorly chosen time to reminisce. However, this close connection which Euripides has created between the characters does provide a better excuse for Menoeceus’ desire to see his aunt one last time before leaving the city.

In her commentary, Elizabeth Craik proposes a number of interesting reasons as to why Euripides would have included this innovation. She begins by noting that Jocasta’s nursing of Menoeceus brings Creon and Jocasta into a closer relationship—that of raising a child together—one with incestuous overtones (Craik 1988:225). Given Jocasta’s sexual history, such a hint at incest carries far more weight than it would for most other people, and it might make her seem a more

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167 Burian says that “[precisely] why Euripides introduces this singularly intimate bond between Jocasta and her nephew is uncertain” (2009:32), although he admits that it does make sense in light of the “involved” nature of relations within the family. Given her intimacy with almost every member of the cast of characters, this detail does not seem out of place to me.
deserving victim of all the misfortune which befalls her in the play. Craik notes that another link created by Jocasta’s wet-nursing of Menoeceus is between Oedipus and Menoeceus as infants who are both deprived of their mothers and put out to nurse with other women (1988:225). Finally, and most compellingly, Craik suggests that Menoeceus specifically identifies himself as Jocasta’s nursling in order to “[add] another dimension to Jocasta’s suffering” (1988:225). More than being a play concerned with maternal love, the Phoenissae seems to be about maternal suffering. In mentioning his nursing at the breast of Jocasta, Menoeceus at once evokes the death of his mother and the unfortunate group of nurslings to which he belongs and whose deaths will soon be played out.

I would add to Craik’s observations that the position of this reference to breastfeeding just before Menoeceus’ announcement of his intention to commit suicide also fits the pattern set by Hector and Hecuba. A man is reminded that he was breastfed by a mortal woman and he is cut down directly after this. Euripides adds the twist of giving Menoeceus much more agency in the whole process: he reminds himself of his nurture and then sacrifices himself. Thus, without directly imitating Homer, Euripides manages to have two scenes (the Menoeceus scene and the scene with Jocasta and her sons on the battlefield) in which breastfeeding is evoked immediately before the death of the characters who received it. It may consequently be concluded that, in tragedy at least, a reference to nurture is almost always a precursor to imminent death; the juxtaposition of the two extremes of life (if not exactly birth and death, then infancy and death) constitutes a literary device
to increase the poignancy of the moment. It is a device with a distinguished pedigree and presumably a predictable, emotional effect; Euripides includes it even in Menoeceus’ case where it is arguably gratuitous.\(^{168}\)

### 4.8.3 Jocasta’s “milky breasts”

After her death, Euripides gives us a different perspective on Jocasta and her children when Antigone enters with the corpses of her mother and brothers. She sings a lament for them in which she ponders whether to leave a hair offering first on the ματρὸς ἐμᾶς ἢ διδύμοι-/σι γάλακτος παρὰ μαστοῖς (“on my mother’s twin breasts [full] of milk”, lines 1526-27) or on her brothers’ bodies. Although this phrase has struck some commentators as tasteless and has prompted emendation because of the sense,\(^{169}\) the numerous previous mentions of Jocasta’s breasts make it not unexpected. Instead of seeing this as a problematic phrase because of its implication that Jocasta is still lactating, we should bear in mind that, just as Jocasta defines other characters in the play in terms of breastfeeding, she herself is defined in these same terms. Antigone is most likely referring to a time when her mother’s breasts were actually “(full) of milk”\(^{170}\). Jocasta in the *Phoenissae* is a

\(^{168}\) Zeitlin 2008:321: “I remark here only that no reason intrinsic to the plot requires Jocasta to have taken on this role”

\(^{169}\) Craik 1988:259 cites Pearson and Méridier as finding the phrase objectionable and Mastronarde 1994:575 cites Headlam’s and Diggle’s emendation of ἀγαλάκτοις which removes the lactation problem, but seems to me to open up a question of why Euripides would have chosen that adjective.

\(^{170}\) The exact translation of this phrase is difficult. Craik gives “twin milky breasts” (1988:259 n.1526-27), but the use of the noun γάλα as an adjective with this sense is not mentioned by the LSJ. Translators generally tend to emphasize the act of nursing rather than the milk itself, e.g., “On the breasts of the woman who nursed me” (Euripides 1981:75), “On my mother’s breasts where I drew
woman whose primary association is with producing and nursing children, therefore it is appropriate for her daughter to identify her in those terms.

4.8.4 Baby as food

The last allusion to breastfeeding using μαστός occurs at 1603 in the speech of Oedipus in which he describes his exposure as an infant, saying that his father Laius sent him, μαστόν ποθοῦντα θηρσίν ἄθλιον βοράν ("yearning for the breast, as wretched food for the beasts"). The contrast between the infant Oedipus desiring nourishment and the possibility of himself becoming food for animals is an effective one. Euripides is making two connections here. The first is the connection between nursing and apparently imminent death, a theme which is discussed above in regards to Menoeceus. At the same time, he is maintaining the emphasis on the destructive role that Jocasta plays, however unwittingly or unwillingly, simply by producing more members of the Labdacid house. Through the birth and nurture of her children, she continues the curse.

4.9 How Jocasta carries the family curse onward

my milk” (Wyckoff 1968:129) and “On the two breasts of my mother where once I was fed” (Vellacott 1972:287).

171 Luschnig 1995:232-33: “In this incestuous family the troubles are indiscriminate; no one can say that the ills of one are separate from those of the others. That may be true of any family, but it is exaggerated here.”
Euripides has introduced a major innovation in keeping Jocasta alive past the discovery of her incest with Oedipus (Mastronarde 1994:25), and therefore all her actions in the play are probably his inventions as well. Although this is the case, the mythological background that is presented in the play conforms in many significant ways with older versions. Jocasta is the wife of two men who have received oracular pronouncements which should have precluded that possibility: Laius was specifically warned not to father children and Oedipus was told that he would marry his mother, an outcome which could have easily been prevented by marrying a younger woman. She follows these unions by failing to nurse the baby produced by the first marriage and then nursing the babies produced by the (unknowingly) incestuous one. In both cases she is acting in what appears to be a reasonable manner: she presumes that baby Oedipus will die, fixing the problem caused by Laius’ drunken lust and, not knowing the Delphic decree which adult Oedipus has received, she has no reason not to conceive and nurture his children. By doing exactly what a well-behaved Greek woman was supposed to do—marry, have children, raise them carefully—Jocasta is contributing to the Labdacid curse (Swift 2009:60).

4.9.1 Interfering in masculine spheres

172 Luschnig 1995:230: “Jocasta at this time and place ought to be dead, but without her nothing would unify the stage characters.”
Led by her care for her children, Jocasta’s first action in the play has her playing a part that moves the terrible destiny of her family forward. She arranges what she hopes will be peace talks between her sons, but only succeeds in providing a forum for them to become more entrenched in their positions and to vow that they will settle their argument in single combat (line 622). Jocasta’s “honest counsel and kindly gestures” are “insufficient to overcome the potent and unchecked desire for power and property” (Scharffenberger 1995:333) that drives her sons.

Unlike her marriage and childbearing, this failed attempt at peacemaking takes Jocasta out of the typical and approved role for a woman and inserts her into the masculine sphere. As Helene Foley sums it up: “by the standards of popular morality, however, a Greek woman should not normally...take autonomous action” (2001:272) outside of the domestic sphere, let alone participate in politics. Women are expected to persuade men to act on their behalf. In setting up the negotiation herself, Jocasta is prompted to act by her maternal instinct to protect her children but—because of who her children are—settling a family fight means engaging in politics (Papadopoulou 2008:51). When she undertakes such an active role in negotiations, a role that typically would be reserved for men (Papadopoulou 2008:50), Jocasta ventures beyond a woman’s usual sphere and perhaps outside the bounds of acceptability.

Likewise, when she rushes to the battlefield to stop the duel, Jocasta is going even deeper into masculine territory, allowing her socially acceptable impulse to

174 Papadopoulou 2008:50: “Her initiative to invite Polynices to come uses the technical term hypospondos (‘under truce’, 81), which refers to an agreement proposed by a political or military leader.”
keep her boys from harm to push her into unusual, and likely unacceptable, behavior. She has left the domestic sphere far behind and Mastronarde notes that the word βοηδρόμος emphasizes that she is acting in a quasi-military fashion (1994:547 n.1432). As with Hecuba and Clytemnestra, Jocasta will find that motherly advice given to grown sons is not heeded, especially when that advice has to do with military affairs. She then complicates the situation further, dragging Antigone along with her and telling her to forget about her maidenly fearfulness of being in a crowd (lines 1264-76). Antigone “obeys speedily when she knows her brothers are in danger, overcoming...her societal mores” (Luschnig 1995:186 n.69). Jocasta is teaching her daughter that desperate situations call for disregard of conventional conduct, which was perhaps a commonplace for tragic heroines, but not an approved lesson for Athenian girls.

### 4.9.2 Jocasta’s influence on Antigone

Euripides deliberately depicts Antigone behaving properly in the opening scenes in order to highlight how she will transform from a shy girl, only willing to gaze from afar at the warriors under proper chaperonage (lines 110-91), into the bold and defiant heroine of the Sophocles’ play by the end of this tragedy (Swift 2009:63). Unlike a modern reader who might see this transformation as positive, audiences of the time were likely to view it as yet another example of how the

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175 When summoning her daughter from the house, Jocasta even details some of the occasions that might conventionally require a girl to go out in public, but then emphasizes that these sorts of things are not what the gods have in mind for Antigone (lines 1264-82); cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:382.  
176 She has her mother’s permission to leave the maidens’ apartments (παρθενών line 89) and she is preceded by the pedagogue to make sure that she does not encounter any other citizen (lines 92-93).
Labdacid family disturbs sexual norms (Swift 2009:61). The audience might admire Antigone’s courage at the safe distance of the tragic stage, but the womanly ideal of the time did not include independent action. Women were kept under the direction of various male relatives, a circumstance which Antigone rejects when she refuses to obey her uncle Creon and wed Haemon, even threatening, indirectly, to kill him (Swift 2009:67). When Antigone spurns her kurios and her arranged marriage, she becomes a destructive, “Sphinx-like figure” who is dangerous to men and the community as a whole (Swift 2009:78). With the seemingly innocuous act of having Antigone accompany her, Jocasta draws her daughter further into the family curse.

4.10 Conclusions regarding Jocasta’s supplication of her sons

In the *Phoenissae*, Euripides manipulates the common tragic version of the Oedipus story for his own dramatic purposes in many ways, most importantly in keeping Jocasta alive past the discovery of the incest.\(^{177}\) It is likely that there were variations of the story which had Oedipus marrying a second time and only fathering children with this second wife who then becomes the mother who

\(^{177}\)There is little literary evidence for the Thebaid myth before the tragedians and what does exist is construed in many ways (Mastronarde 1994:17-8).
supplicates the warring sons. Euripides chose to condense and intensify the pathos (Mastronarde 1994:21) by eliminating this second marriage (as Sophocles did) but, since he also wanted to keep the supplication, it now must be Jocasta who pleads with her children. But even with this scene, Euripides decides to vary the tragic formula.

As discussed earlier, the accounts of Jocasta’s actions at the battlefield which are given by Antigone and the messenger differ in that the messenger’s omits any breast-baring while Antigone’s gives it prominence. This is likely because having two versions of this pivotal moment would have weakened the emotional impact. Antigone, as a family member, is the more appropriate character to report this public yet intimate attempt at persuasion. That seeming discrepancy aside, Euripides’ innovative treatment of this type of supplication deserves comment.

In contrast to his literary predecessors (and to similar scenes in his own work such as the Electra lines 1206-9), Euripides’ mother in distress is using an act of breast-baring at a point when she has no chance of changing her children’s course of action. Since Eteocles and Polyneices are already dying when she comes to them, Jocasta certainly cannot be hoping to persuade them to put down their swords. Instead, what she had intended to be a supplication is transformed into an act of mourning or a reproach which carries the implication that her sons owed her their support in old age as she supported them in infancy. Jocasta, cheated of the right of a mother to have her children provide for her in their turn, is also cheated of her

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178 Families who claimed descent from Polyneices’ son Thesandros would certainly have been invested in such a version (Mastronarde 1994:21).
179 For the wide acceptance of this ideal of reciprocity in the Greek poets, see Céu Fialho 2010:108-10.
opportunity to make a dramatic supplication like Hecuba or Clytemnestra; she still
goes through the motions, even though the gesture now conveys a futile, pathetic
and muddled meaning.\textsuperscript{180}

This confusion of meanings and failure to proceed in the conventional way is
all too appropriate for the Thebes of the tragic stage, particularly as portrayed by
Euripides in this play. That city, “whose royalty specialized in making both love and
war within their immediate family” (Hall 2009:xxiii), becomes in the \textit{Phoenissae} a
funhouse-mirror image of Athens. There are enough features there to make it
recognizable—a city under siege where the longing for reconciliation and peace is
obstructed by the intransigence of those in power (Scharffenberger 1995:316-17)—
but the well-known mythic trappings keep things at a safe distance. The dystopic
vision is twisted even further when plotline and the nature of the characters does
not match up with earlier presentations.\textsuperscript{181} Not only do characters in the \textit{Phoenissae}
not know how to behave in accordance with social norms, they also do not know how
to behave with respect to the roles the audience anticipates for them.\textsuperscript{182}

Seen in this context, Jocasta’s fumbled attempt at a breast-baring
supplication makes more sense: her sons are not heroes trying to defend their city
or seeking retribution for blood-guilt, they are power-hungry squabblers on whom

\textsuperscript{180} Salzman-Mitchell adds that since Jocasta’s breasts, which she exposes to her sons Eteocles and
Polyneices, are the same breasts she offered her son and husband Oedipus in a sexual context and
possibly also in a maternal one, Jocasta is confusing and juxtaposing the sexual and the motherly
even further than the supplications of Hecuba and Clytemnestra (2012:149).
\textsuperscript{181} As Burian and Swann describe it (1981:5), Euripides makes Creon, Polyneices and Eteocles
behave contrary to their roles in Sophocles, i.e. Creon is not advocating for the state, Polyneices is
not bold and rebellious, Eteocles is not defending his city’s freedom.
\textsuperscript{182} Garner notes that Euripides frequently makes use of this tactic of disappointing audience
expectations by deviating from the usual form of the myth in order to intrigue them about what
would happen instead (1990:159).
such a dramatic gesture would be wasted, even if delivered on time. In the
*Phoenissae*, scenes in which the characters are parents and children are frequent; in
fact, “most of the scenes are between old and young throughout the play” (Luschnig
1995:200). Euripides heightens the pathos in this critical parent-child scene by
focusing on the sorrow of a mother losing the child who was supposed to be her
support in later life and by evoking infancy just before the moment of death. He has
laid the groundwork for this type of supplication with regular references to Jocasta’s
breasts, so that the gesture seems to be motivated by the play’s internal logic in
addition to literary precedent.

Chapter 5: Other Instances of Breast-baring: Imitation, Motivation and
Lamentation

5.1 Introduction

The supplications by the breast performed by Hecuba and Jocasta contain a
distinctly mournful element (Clytemnestra’s does to a lesser degree), but their
primary significance is the attempted persuasion of a child based on a debt of
nurture. It remains then to examine the other uses to which Classical writers put
breast-baring and references to breast feeding. The erotic display of breasts in the
course of a supplication will be discussed; the meaning in these cases is partly seductive, but there is also a religious component (Bonfante 1997:187). Outside of supplications, there are many examples of the breast-baring gesture which presage the death of the woman exposing herself; this is related to the convention in visual art where bared breasts “denote female victims of physical violence” (Cohen 1997:77). Interpreting this mournful application of the gesture will be an important goal of this chapter.

Having examined in detail the Homeric presentation of Hecuba’s entreaty her son and the two tragic supplications that it inspired (Clytemnestra’s and Jocasta’s), we are left with only one other unique instance where a mother bares her breast as part of a plea: Callirhoe in Stesichorus’ Geryoneis (frag. 12 and 13 Greek Lyric Vol. III, 70-73). From the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, all other references to the use of the gesture as supplication are simply different iterations (all in Euripides) of Clytemnestra’s act. The remaining instances of women revealing their breasts in drama during that time occur when death is or seems to be imminent. There are also references to breasts and breastfeeding without any nudity, but still in similarly life-threatening situations. The connection between

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183 Eur. El. 1206-09 (Orestes describes how Clytemnestra begged him not to kill her); Or. 526-29 (Tyndareus asks Orestes how he could have killed his mother as she bared her breast); Or. 566-70 (Orestes asserts that many women will kill their husbands if all they have to do to escape punishment is show their breasts to their child); Or. 839-43 (the chorus sings about how Orestes killed his mother even though she exposed her breast). There are two other instances where authors imagined Clytemnestra’s final words to her son: Euphorion (frag. 92 Powell) and an unknown author (9.126 in the Greek Anthology); Euphorion dates from the third century BCE and the other fragment is of an unknown date.
exposure of or references to breasts and death in tragedy, especially in Euripides, is strong.

The occurrences of breast-baring will be categorized in the following way: supplications which are modeled on Homer; supplications which include a definite erotic element; and divestment of the breasts before death. A fourth category—which does not involve nudity—is that of characters in tragedy mournfully recollecting breast-feeding or maternal breasts when facing death. Except for the first category, the debt of τροφή does not pertain in these instances, making it easier to isolate and analyze how the gesture functions as an expression of grief or other suffering. It will be argued that mournful breast-baring, although it was an actual practice for some ancient people, was, for the Greeks, a literary and artistic symbol for a woman in acute distress. It gives physical expression to the vulnerability of a woman in a dangerous situation. The naked breast creates a dramatic effect because it violates a social taboo as well as being a powerful symbol of life and death (Bonfante 1997:188).

5.2 Supplications inspired by Homer

The importance of Homer as an inspiration for literary creation was great in terms of number of imitators and in the timespan over which his influence was felt. It is not surprising then that Stesichorus, whose works provide the first long
passages of narrative after Homer (Krummen 2009:195), would look back to him, or that later authors in both Greek and Latin would continue to do so. Like the tragedians, the uses to which other writers put their breast-baring supplications varied from those which closely mirrored the Homeric original to some which were a real departure from their source.

In his telling of Hercules’ tenth labor, the theft of the cattle of Geryon, the three-bodied giant, Stesichorus (ca. 640-555 BCE) not only emphasizes the hero’s courage and feats of strength, but also devotes some time to the characterization of Hercules’ opponent and to an exchange between the soon-to-be-slaughtered Geryon and his mother, Callirhoe (notable in her own right as the daughter of two Titans). The poem is similar to Homeric epic in terms of subject matter—battles and valor—but closer to elegy in its changes of narrative perspective and descriptions of intimate emotions (Krummen 2009:195). Much of the poem, in fact, seems to be from the perspective of Geryon (Schmidt 2004:209).

Because of the very fragmentary state of the text, it is difficult to gauge how long the original supplication passage was, but the remains of over twenty-five lines suggest that it must have been rather substantial. In Frag. 12 Callirhoe begins her address, asking her son to obey her (πείθευ, τέκνον, “obey [me], child”) and then, in Frag. 13, she calls upon him by name and begs him to avoid the fight in terms that clearly echo Hecuba’s at Il. 22.83 (Callirhoe says: αἰ ποικ ἐμόν τιν μαξίν ἐπέσχεθον, “if

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184 Schmidt 2004:207: “[Stesichorus] scaled down the individual heroisms into compelling and dramatic narratives” in which he gives dramatic voices to the various characters. Schmidt also remarks that four of the poems of Stesichorus from which we have fragments deal with the exploits of Hercules, a mythological figure popular in Magna Graecia where Stesichorus lived (ibid).
ever I gave you my breast,” and Hecuba: εἰ ποτέ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον, “if ever I gave you the care-banishing breast”). Having made her verbal plea, she opens her πέπλος to complete the gesture. The manner of her supplication combined with the verbal similarity suggests a Homeric model, and Callirhoe herself is following in the tradition of Thetis and Hecuba as lamenting mothers in epic (Krummen 2009:196).

Krummen writes that “the narrative pattern [of the Geryoneis] is a common one: the hero has to go on a quest for a certain object,...fight the owner in order to obtain it and bring it back (2009:195). Likewise, the supplication in the poem fits the pattern set by Homeric precedent in general terms. A noble (in this case, divine) mother tries to intervene with her heroic (in this case, more notable because of his monstrosity than his deeds) son in a martial matter; her advice is rejected and the son is slain. Maternal authority based on a debt of τροφή proves insufficiently persuasive, and a reminder of nurture, even nurture provided by a goddess, is a harbinger of death.

Two other, much later, passages inspired by Homer deserve brief mention, if only to show how popular the original was, no matter what the genre of the imitator. In the final book of the Aeneid (12.54-63), Vergil has Latinus and Amata

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185 Although the heavily restored condition of the text and the fact that the restoration was based in part on the assumption of a Homeric model make the issue complicated.
186 Callirhoe is also similar to Thetis in their shared role of sea nymph mother to a mortal son.
187 Another piece of evidence for Homer as a model for Stesichorus in the Geryoneis is the simile comparing the dying Geryon to a wilting poppy which closely resembles Il. 8.306-08.
188 Foley notes that goddess mothers are unable to confer immortality on their children, even though Zeus is able to (eventually) grant immortality to Hercules and even his lover Ganymede (2005:109). However, Zeus’ power also has him limits: he is unable to save his son Sarpedon (ll. 16.431-61).
beg Turnus not to commit to a duel with Aeneas. Because she is not Turnus’
mother, of course there is no appeal to τροφή, but the structure of the supplication is
clearly modeled on Homer. Finally, an almost comic (because of its melodramatic
excess) instance of the motif is found in the Greek novel Callirhoe (3.5.6), by the
first century CE author Chariton. When the hero, Chaereas, is about to undertake a
rescue of the heroine under bad sailing conditions, his mother comes to the harbor
(with his father and a crowd of other people) and performs a breast-baring
supplication to persuade him to give up the journey, quoting Hecuba directly (Il.
22.82-83 τάδ’ αἰδέο καὶ μ’ ἐλέησον αὐτήν/ εἰ ποτὲ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον, “both
respect these and have pity on me/myself, if ever I gave you the care-banishing
breast”). Her son, apparently overwhelmed by the situation and her gesture,
responds by throwing himself into the sea in an attempted suicide. He is rescued.

The last instance of a breast-baring supplication that seems connected to
Homer which I will discuss is found in Caesar’s Bellum Gallicum (7.47):

Married women were throwing their clothing and silver from the wall
and, baring their breasts, they were leaning forward with outstretched

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189 Tarrant remarks that Amata’s use of multiple anaphora in te and tu “may suggest the extremity of
her dependence on him” (2012:103 n.56-59), parallel to Hecuba’s on Hector. Page adds that Amata
sees Turnus as “the sole prop or pillar that can save [her house] from falling” ((1894) 1967:419 n.57-
59) in the same way that Hector sustains Troy.
190 MacDonald presents a side-by-side analysis of the two passages and, based on their similar
structure and diction, concludes that Vergil was imitating Homer (2005:247).
191 Tilg (2010:141): “Chariton quotes Homer far more frequently than any other novelist does—about
thirty to forty times depending on the definition of a quotation.” This extensive use of quotations was
due to the fact that Chariton was writing in the Menippean style in which combined prose and verse.
The style was popular in late antiquity, especially after Petronius composed his Satyricon in that
manner (Schmeling 1974:22). The quotes from Homer also lent a certain authority to Chariton’s
work and allowed him to “evolve neat parallelisms between the heroic and the romantic works” (Tilg
2010:143).
hands and begging the Romans to spare them and not to do as they had done in Avaricum where they had not even held back from [killing] the women and children.

Since he is describing a historical event—the siege of the Gallic town of Gergovia—the circumstances are not an imitation of Homer, but Caesar certainly seems inspired by the *urbs capta* trope in general.\textsuperscript{192} The typical description of a city which has been sacked would include, among other elements, “the wailing of women and children…and mothers defending their children” as are found in the passage above (Kraus 2010:172). By including an elaborated description of an episode such as this, Caesar is building tension and suspense into his narrative and evoking a host of literary exemplars in what is strictly a historical account (ibid.). Further, it seems likely that women pleading from the wall of a city which is in danger of capture, who reinforce their entreaties by taking off the tops of their garments, would have reminded Caesar of the scene from the *Iliad* and he would have wanted to share that connection with his own readers.

However, the motivations for actions of the mothers of Gergovia in this passage are hard to interpret: they want the Romans to spare them if the city is taken, but why do they combine bribery (throwing money and clothing to the Roman soldiers) with showing their breasts? Caesar is very specific in describing the women as *matres familiae*, placing them in a context of respectable maternity, but

\textsuperscript{192} Kraus 2010:172: “The *urbs capta* is familiar both from epic and from rhetorical theory: it is one of Quintilian’s primary examples of an embellished description that can make an orator’s speech emotionally persuasive.”
they are the mothers of the children who are within the walls, not the men outside them. Although the women may be revealing themselves in a way that they believe emphasizes their maternity, their naked breasts would most likely have been seen by the Roman soldiers as sexualized. Unlike their fictional counterparts, the mothers in Caesar cannot be insisting on a debt of τροφή. Finally, breast-baring as an act of mourning, if it was part of Gallic tradition, was not practiced by the Romans and therefore would not be perceived as such.

The unanswerable question then becomes: do the mothers of Gergovia intend their nakedness to incite pity or lust or both—anything to save themselves and their children? In the end, Caesar fails to take the city because of the disobedience of his troops (Goldsworthy 2006:333), so how those troops would have treated the women is, happily, unknowable. Use of this gesture, as the women attempted to negotiate for their own lives and their children’s, certainly emphasized their vulnerability, but the scene Caesar created from their supplication was dramatic, combining exotic or barbaric, sexual and pathetic elements in one. I would argue that this is evidence that as late as the first century CE, authors of works across a wide range of genres could depend on using a reference, whether allusive or obvious, to the scene in Homer to deepen the emotional resonance and add to their literary luster.

193 Some of the women of Gergovia had even gone so far as to lower themselves from the wall to the soldiers below; one imagines that their fate was slavery.
5.3 Supplication based on erotic appeal

The only instances when women succeed in obtaining their request through a breast-baring supplication are those in which there is an erotic connotation. Gerber notes that “[t]he breasts are often depicted as the greatest source of a woman’s beauty” (1978:207), so trying to employ them as an asset during a supplication of this kind makes good sense. Although there can be other implications to the gesture as will be discussed regarding the Tacitus passage below, a primarily sexual context seems to be required for the tactic to work. There must be the implicit promise that the man for whom the breasts are exposed will soon be enjoying more than just a visual display of beauty. Breasts when explicitly revealed for male pleasure become just that—pleasing—rather than a cause of internal conflict for the viewer between mature independence and filial duty or a symbol of imminent death.

The best known instance of breast-baring where an erotic element is present occurs in depictions of Helen supplicating Menelaus at the fall of Troy. We have two authors who utilize the incident: Euripides in the Andromache (lines 629-31) and Aristophanes in the Lysistrata (lines 155-56). Other authors mention the encounter without the detail of the breast-baring, which seems to be a Euripidean innovation (Henderson 1987:86 n.155-56). In her reference to this moment, Bonfante

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194 Lesches the Pyrrhaean (seventh century BCE) in the Little Iliad (fr. 28 West), Ibycus (fr. 296 PMG) and Stesichorus (fr. 201 PMG) provide the earliest attestations (Lloyd 1994:144 n.627-31). Menelaus’ reaction was also portrayed in art (Henderson 1987:86 n.155-56). In her book Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood, Laurie Maguire devotes five pages to Helen’s breasts (52-56), detailing the loci classici of the supplication and continuing with later instances (all the way through

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downplays any sexual element, stating that “In mythological scenes...women appear with bared breasts in moments of great danger, to indicate their weakness and vulnerability” (1997:175). McClure on the other hand, discussing breast-baring as a part of female supplication tactics, places Helen into the category of supplicants who are relying on a sexual interpretation of the gesture, and frames it as “Helen’s seduction of Menelaus after the fall of Troy” (2003:134-35). However it is interesting in these passages that the focus is as much on Menelaus’ reaction as it is on Helen, and specify that he throws down his sword at the sight of her naked body.

The strength of Menelaus’ masculinity is already questionable—he is overshadowed by his brother Agamemnon and he is best known as a cuckhold—so being overwhelmed by his wife’s beauty at such a moment does nothing to add to his warrior status. Although he is portrayed as a good fighter in the Iliad when he faces Paris (Il. 3.340-80) and he offers to face Hector in a duel (Il. 7.101-02), he is only at Troy fighting them because he was unable to control his wife in the first place and he needs an army’s help in retrieving her. When he is confronted by Peleus in the Andromache, the old man heaps scorn on Menelaus, saying that sparing Helen proved him to be a slave to Aphrodite.196 Menelaus tries to defend himself in a

Tennyson, Stephen Vincent Benét and even Margaret Atwood), concluding that perhaps it was not so much a case of the face that launched a thousand ships (Maguire 2009:54).  
195 Gregory (1999:113 n.560-61) agrees that Helen’s supplication is erotic.  
196 “And then, all right, let us agree on this, and then, after you’ve captured Troy, did you kill her? Did you kill that horrible woman of yours? No! The moment you saw her naked breasts, you dropped your sword to the ground and ran into her arms! You kissed that evil, traitorous slut and uttered sweet, fawning words to her! That’s how much of a match you are to the calls of lust! There, too, you are found to be nothing but a coward, a slave to Aphrodite!” (Andr. 627-31, trans. Theodoridis)
lengthy and rather sophistic reply (lines 645-90), ultimately claiming that sparing her was proof of his self-restraint (lines 685-86). Peleus’ aggression and Menelaus’ defensive posture indicate that to be won over so easily by Helen and in a manner which is so suggestive of emasculation is a shameful response (Lloyd 1994:144 n.630). Bared breasts are persuasive, combining a vulnerable appeal for masculine protection with an element of seduction, but only a weak man would succumb to them.

Athenaeus, in his *Deipnosophysistae* Book 13.59, describes another famous example of the persuasiveness of bare breasts and also the mixed meanings that can be assigned to them. An Athenian hetaera, Phryne, the model for the Aphrodite of Knidos, was on trial for impiety some time after 350 BCE (McClure 2003:132) and her case appeared hopeless. Her defender, Hyperides, who was possibly also her lover, “brought her into view, removed her clothes, and exposed her breasts” (Naiden 2006:102) in a desperate effort to win over the jurors.\(^{197}\) What could have been an erotic sight, however, was apparently not received as one since Hyperides “made the judges dread this servant and devotee of Aphrodite” (*ibid.*). It seemed reasonable—from an ancient perspective, if not from a modern, feminist one—to associate Phryne, a hetaera, with Aphrodite.\(^{198}\) Her remarkable beauty, which made her a fitting model for the Knidian Aphrodite and for a painting of Aphrodite by

\(^{197}\) The verb used by Athenaeus for the disrobing—περιρρήξας—“suggests debasement and supplication rather than erotic titillation” (McClure 2003:134).

\(^{198}\) Gerber 1978:211 n.18: “Aphrodite’s bearing of her breasts appears in Greek art as early as the fifth century B.C....The earliest reference in literature to Aphrodite’s breasts appears in *Il.* 3.397.” The Greek tradition of representing Aphrodite naked was probably due to influence from the Near East where the fertility goddess Inanna/Ishtar was represented in that way (McClure 2003:129).
Apelles (McClure 2003:127), strengthened her ties with the goddess. McClure argues further that “the naked body of the courtesan incarnated the erotic power of Aphrodite” and “typically aroused feelings of fear and vulnerability in the male spectator” as though he were looking at the goddess herself (2003:129).

It is unfortunate that the sources that recount Phryne’s trial were written centuries after the fact and are therefore suspect as history (Braund 2000:214). But it is fascinating to note, even if the entire incident is apocryphal, that the jurors are described as being influenced by religious awe: they view Phryne as favored by the goddess and therefore deserving of pardon (Naiden 2006:102). For a modern reader, the most obvious interpretation of her naked body, and the one underscored by her status as a sex worker, would be an erotic one, but that interpretation is made subordinate to one that “convert[s] the nude hetaera into an embodiment of Aphrodite” (McClure 2003:135). In order to cast the jurors in a light where sexual attraction is not the determining factor, another impetus is introduced. Phryne’s judges feel pity for her as she is made vulnerable by her nudity and they feel reverence because of her association with Aphrodite. Men who are persuaded by naked breasts have their acquiescence dignified by adding other motivations: Menelaus claims “self-control” and the jurors are assigned religious awe.

In addition, in Athenaeus’ time, there was an association of hetaeras with oversized images of Aphrodite (McClure 2003:126); this might have influenced his linking Phryne with the goddess. Athenaeus, who gives the fullest account, wrote in the early third century CE. It is also reported by Pseudo-Plutarch (3rd to 4th century CE), but Cooper (1995:304) argues that these versions might derive from other sources which were as early as 300 BCE.

Reverence for or fear of Aphrodite as a deity who might be vengeful (as she is in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, a work which predates Athenaeus’ writing by about fifty years or in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*) is possible, but the dominant aspect of the goddess—her sexuality—was always present.
Another later source serves to highlight how sexual desire joined with a
desire to protect one’s wife could even be an inspiration for martial bravery. In
Tacitus’ *Germania*, he cites a tradition that German women had on some occasions
rallied their men by baring their breasts and in this way reminded them what they
were fighting to defend.\(^\text{202}\) He specifies that the naked breasts were supposed to
represent the misfortunes that would befall the women if they were taken
captive.\(^\text{203}\) Defending home and family is a praiseworthy act, but it is difficult to
determine from the text whether Tacitus believes that being inspired to do so by an
unusually high (by Roman standards) regard for women is praiseworthy or
barbaric.\(^\text{204}\)

Unlike Helen’s gesture which functions primarily as an offer of erotic
pleasure to come, the German women are presenting something which is more
complex: there is the suggestion of future pleasure, certainly, but also the threat
that the pleasure may be another man’s.\(^\text{205}\) Here again nakedness is a reminder of
female vulnerability and the need for male protection. Thus the women are tapping

\(^\text{202}\) Benario 1999:73: “Among the Germans and the Celts, not just the men went off to war on all
occasions. Sometimes entire households accompanied the army, the women and children, wagons
and animals.” This can be seen in Tacitus *Hist.* 4.18 and *Ann.* 14.34.
\(^\text{203}\) Tac. *Germ.* 8 (trans. Church): “Tradition says that armies already wavering and giving way have
been rallied by women who, with earnest entreaties and bosoms laid bare, have vividly represented
the horrors of captivity, which the Germans fear with such extreme dread on behalf of their women,
that the strongest tie by which a state can be bound is the being required to give, among the number
of hostages, maidens of noble birth. They even believe that the sex has a certain sanctity and
prescience, and they do not despise their counsels, or make light of their answers.”
\(^\text{204}\) In the *Germania*, Tacitus contrast the virility of the Germans and the decadence of the Romans,
but he also portrays the Germans as lacking intelligence, so it is by no means an entirely positive
portrait. He is creating a “textual country” where he can present Germans defined by his own agenda
(O’Gorman 2012:95-96).
\(^\text{205}\) Benario 1999:73: “Since purity of body and a single marriage (18-20) are the norm among the
Germans, such a prospect was terrifying to both man and woman.”

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into two powerful and selfish drives: the desire for sexual gratification and the urge to protect and keep what is one’s own. The passage also details the respect that Germans have for women in general: they take women’s opinions and advice seriously and even assign women a degree of sanctity (Benario 1999:74). The sexual aspect of the motivation may be foremost, but there is also the esteem that the men have for the women as valuable members of their society.\textsuperscript{206} Tacitus makes clear the belief of the German men that women have worth beyond their role as sex partners or useful chattel, but he does not make clear if this is admirable or an example of their barbaric excess. Whatever Tacitus’ opinion might have been regarding it, the reaction of the German men to their wives’ breast-baring is an interesting contrast to Menelaus’ reaction to Helen: it causes them to fight on rather than drop their swords.

5.4 Breast-baring before death

Although scenes in which breast-baring is used as a bargaining tool in moments of life and death decision-making is the main focus of this study, another category needs to be mentioned: scenes in which women bare their breasts when

\textsuperscript{206} In discussing this passage, Bonfante writes: “Nudity always has a magic power, a power that can destroy, or else protect from evil in case of danger...[the German women] hoped to give [the German men] courage and strength with the magic sight of their nudity” (1997:187).
there is no supplication, just a context of imminent death. We have two such scenes preserved in tragedy—both of which precede the violent death of the woman performing the gesture—one in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* and the other in Euripides’ *Hecuba*. Additionally, Taplin (2007:168-69), on the basis of a vase-painting, postulates that another might have existed in Euripides’ *Aeolus*, which came down to us only in fragments. In Greek art, when naked breasts are not a reminder of τροφή or a suggestion of sexual pleasure to come, they are a way to underscore the vulnerability and pathos of a woman in a terrible situation (Steiner 2001:247). As described by Bonfante, “Women exposing their breasts regularly bring up feelings of a world awry, of anxiety and nightmarish danger” (1997:175) Based on a survey of literature including the two scenes referenced above, Dennis MacDonald comes to the conclusion that “[n]aked breasts became a cliché for grief in ancient fiction” (2005:246).

In Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, Heracles’ wife, Deianeira, is desperate to win back his faltering affections. She dyes a shirt of his with what she believes to be a love charm, only to realize too late that it is a deadly poison. Consumed by her grief and guilt, she removes the brooch from her πέπλος to reveal her left side and arm and

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207 Cohen 1997:79: “…the earliest and broadest context for divesting the breast of clothes in Classical Greek art consists of representations of female victims of physical violence.”

208 Taplin identifies a vase featuring a young woman who has just committed suicide by stabbing herself with Kanake from the *Aiolos* of Euripides (2007:168-69). On the vase, the woman is shown with one breast bared. Even if the scene does indeed represent that myth (and the case is strong, but not certain), this would not necessarily mean that it faithfully reproduces in every detail what occurs in the play.
then plunges a sword into her heart (reported by her nurse in lines 923-31). In practical terms, the nudity is entirely superfluous: the dress would not have made it more difficult for Deianeira to stab herself and, since the action takes place offstage, nothing is gained visually. The dramatic effect of the speech, though, is increased by the image of Deianeira being so distraught that she tears off her clothes, perhaps as an extension of the usual beating and tearing at the breast, and certainly as an expression of her vulnerability (Bonfante 1997:175). Also, she performs her suicide in their marriage bed with a sword (unlike the tragic heroines who hang themselves), adding a layer of *Liebestod* to the whole situation.

Unlike Sophocles’ Deianeira’s who kills herself in the privacy of her own bedroom, the sacrifice of Polyxena as presented in Euripides’ *Hecuba* (lines 547-72) is a public spectacle and the focus of the first half of that play (Conacher 1961:1). Doomed to be offered up to the spirit of Achilles, Polyxena refuses to play the part of a mute and passive victim; she declares that she is going to her death willingly and wants to be free of any bonds as befits a princess (lines 547-52). She then takes hold of her πέπλος and rips it open down to her navel, revealing her breasts and

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209 Cohen discusses the possibility that—although there is no hard and fast rule—the right breast carried an erotic significance while the left breast was more associated with motherhood (1997:79).
210 Loraux 1995:41: “men’s suicides are distinct from those of women: the sword is suitable for the male, the rope for the female.” But although women like Deianeira and Jocasta kill themselves in a manly way—with swords—they are driven to suicide by their roles as mothers (Loraux 1995:41-42).
211 Segal 1975:613: “The bed which, as in the Odyssey, should seal the return of the long-separated couple, becomes the death-bed of final separation (cf. 901f, 915-18, 922). Deianeira's suicide, like Haemon's in the *Antigone* and Dido's in the *Aeneid*, is a grim parody of the act of sexual union (cf. 915f, 924-26).”
212 The episode in Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica* in which Hecuba has a dream that her breasts drip blood onto the tomb of Achilles might have been inspired to some extent by the scene in the *Hecuba* and by the theme of wasted nursing discussed below.
213 Conacher 1961:3: “this scene...belongs almost wholly to Polyxena, who succeeds in reducing her captors to the role of mere executors of a fate which she herself has willingly accepted.”
torso (which the messenger delivering the speech describes as “κάλλιστα” line 561) and offering Neoptolemus the choice of piercing her chest (στέρνον) or throat (λαιμὸς). He decides to slit her throat as he would a sacrificial animal, and as she bleeds to death she still manages to fall in a way that discreetly covers “what should be hidden” from view (line 570).

Polyxena’s choice to lay her body bare in front of the assembled Greek troops at first seems like an even less likely decision than Deianeira removing part of her dress in her room. A young Greek woman, particularly a princess, would have a strong sense of modesty that would dictate that she remain covered—including a veil—in the presence of men, whose very presence decorum would have urged her to avoid in any case (Cohen 1997:67). By insisting on nakedness, Polyxena is violating cultural norms almost as greatly as her murderers do. But the nudity is purposeful: if she had gone to her death shrouded in her πέπλος and veil, she would have remained less distinct, less individual. When Polyxena strips to the waist, she is creating a parallel between herself and the unclad animal that she is a substitute for, while at the same time confronting her sacrificers with her humanity.

The breast-baring gesture performed by Polyxena has occasioned a large amount of scholarly discussion and diverse interpretations (see Gregory 1999:112-)

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214 Collard 1991:160 n.568-60: “In offering Neoptolemus alternate places for his knife....Polyx. will die either like an unflinching warrior...struck forcibly in the breast, στέρνον 563, or like a sacrificial victim, with throat cut, 567.”
215 There is some evidence for a statue or a painting dating from the 5th century BCE which shows this particular moment (Collard 1991:160-61 n.569-70). Gregory sees this detailing of Polyxena’s modesty as reflecting “a cultural preoccupation with decency in death” which is “shared by Priam in the Iliad (22.66-76)” (1999:114-15 n.568-69).
One view of her killing which finds much support is presented by Segal who sees it as highly eroticized and having its emphasis on the male gaze rather than Polyxena’s agency (1993:172-73). Other scholars agree (Loraux 1987:32 and Michelini 1987:165). Mossman on the other hand, interprets the primary effect of the sacrifice scene as pathos: Polyxena as a beautiful young person dying before her time would be likely to evoke feelings of sympathy from her viewers within the play and outside it in the audience. This claim, that the gesture is pathetic, is supported by the messenger’s likening of Polyxena to a statue, since statues of partially naked women often represented women in tragic and dangerous situations (Steiner 2001:247). Such situations would evoke pity most of all, even if an erotic element was present at some level (McClure 2003:134-35 and Mossman 1995:144-45). By describing Polyxena in this manner, Euripides gives his audience a way to think about her naked body and yet distance themselves from the sexual associations. The pathos of the scene remains primary as art imitates art.

Outside the genre of tragedy, an example of breast-baring in a context of mourning occurs in Herodotus when he describes how Egyptian women send off the dead in their family. As part of their ritual lamentation, women in the household

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216 Mossman 1995:144-45: Her youth would provoke pathos because it creates a reversal of the natural order (i.e., it is sadder when a young person dies than an old one) and her beauty would incite pathos because “beauty is seen by [the Greeks] not only as a piece of good fortune but also as something very close to a virtue, and it is natural to be more moved by the death of a fortunate and virtuous person” (Mossman 1995:145).

217 μαστούς τ᾽ ἔδειξε στέρνα θ’ ὡς ἀγάλματος/ κάλλιστα, “and she revealed her breasts and bosom as as a statue’s, most fair” (lines 560-61)

218 Segal 1993:177: “the image of artistic beauty, tinged perhaps by the religiosity also associated with the statue or agalma, keeps the scene at a certain aesthetic distance.”

219 Hdt. Hist. 2.85 (trans. Godley) “They mourn and bury the dead like this: whenever a man of note is lost to his house by death, all the women of the house daub their faces or heads with mud; then
of the deceased smear themselves with mud and wander around the city, naked to the waist.\textsuperscript{220} Besides the account of Herodotus, there is archaeological evidence that Egyptian women bared themselves to the waist as part of mourning (How 1912: 208 n.85.1; Asheri 2007:298 n.85,1) and, like the Greeks, struck themselves on the head (Fletcher n.d.:n.p.).\textsuperscript{221} In 10\textsuperscript{th} century BCE Phoenicia, the sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Byblos has a carving of four bare-breasted women, two of whom have their hands above their heads and two of whom are beating their sides. In other regions, “[pre-Islamic] Arab women bared their breasts and beat on them, tore their hair and their flesh and mourned for the dead for a week” (“Ancient Tombs”).

Like the later ethnographic descriptions of Caesar and Tacitus, the passage from Herodotus is meant to intrigue the reader with the “curious customs” of barbarians and display how such customs deviate from the norms of the author’s audience. Although Athenian women were allowed and indeed expected to participate in funeral rites outside the home, any parallel ends abruptly with the nudity practiced by the Egyptians. By highlighting a foreign custom, Herodotus reinforces the connection between bared breasts and death which was being presented at this same time on the Attic stage and in visual art.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[220] How remarks that the custom of mourners smearing themselves with mud was still current in Egypt in his day (1912:208 n.85,1) and Asheri confirms that women in Egypt still engage in it today (2007:298 n.85,1). The practice of uncovering the upper part of the body when mourning is portrayed on monuments (How 1912: 208 n.85,1) and Asheri more generally refers to it as a “common practice in mourning contexts” (\textit{ibid.}).
\item[221] On this webpage, the photo of the Egyptian tomb carving and much of the information were taken from Cornfeld 1964:345.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
5.5 The “Wasted work” of nursing

A mother referring sorrowfully to the effort she spent in nursing her child was not an uncommon way\(^{222}\) to heighten the pathos as she mourned for that child or anticipated his death. Juxtaposing the extremes of life—as was typical in laments (Dué 2006:122)—and spotlighting the innocence of infancy adds more poignancy to the situation. This sorrowful effect is supported by the convention in tragedy which makes children “pathetic victims, whose role is to be threatened, killed or orphaned” (Lloyd 1994:138 n.501-44). In the scenes below from the *Trojan Women* and *Andromache*, Euripides brings together these pathetic elements related to children along with many elements from similar scenes in other plays\(^ {223}\) and achieves a uniquely mournful moment (Allan 2000:62 n.309-493). As a woman who has lost her family and her husband and has been taken into slavery, Andromache is already a pitiable figure; Euripides then presents a scene with each of her sons that links her grief and their breastfeeding.

First (in terms of the mythological storyline, not actual chronology)\(^ {224}\) in the *Trojan Women*, Andromache has a long lament before she must hand Astyanax over to the Greek messenger (lines 740-79). Naturally, it is a sad speech which lingers

\(^{222}\) Mentioned above in the messenger's speech describing Jocasta’s death (*Ph*. 1431-35).


\(^{224}\) The *Andromache* was produced between 428-424 BCE and the *Trojan Women* in 415.
over the image of her son as a baby bird seeking shelter and recounts how she
nursed him in his swaddling clothes (ἐν σπαργάνοις σε μαστός ἐξέθρεψ᾽ ὁδε, 759). She grieves over all the work she put into her son’s upbringing—which now seems useless—in a line which Lee (1976:206 n.760) likens to the complaints of Cilissa when she learns of Orestes’ “death.”

After she has lost Astyanax and been led into slavery, Andromache (in the eponymous play) has a son by Neoptolemus whom she fears will also be killed along with her through the machinations of Hermione and Menelaus. Fortunately, she is mistaken and they are saved, but in a moment of despair she clings to her son, Molossus, who says he is sheltering beneath her wing (πτέρυγι συγκαταβαίνω, 505) and she grieves that he will soon lie beneath the earth near his mother’s breasts (μαστοῖς ματέρος ἀμφὶ σᾶς, 510-12). Even though there is no direct reference to nursing here, the word μαστός is used, so I would argue that the implication of wasted nurture remains. Also, by including the imagery of the child as a baby bird, Euripides seems to be using an idea here that he will develop more fully in the parallel scene in the Trojan Women.

Finally, before she is led off to her own death and so memorably reveals her own breasts, Polyxena calls out to the bosom and breasts that sweetly nurtured her
(ὦ στέρνα μαστοί θ’, οἰ μ᾽ ἑθρέψαθ’ ἡδέως, Hec. 424) in her last conversation with Hecuba. Not content to use only the language of breastfeeding, Euripides has her call Hecuba ὡ τεκοῦσα in her next line (426), bringing in the language of childbearing as well. This scene is striking in its reversal of the usual roles: the adult child longs to be a baby again, protected by her mother,228 instead of the mother trying to reassert her maternal authority over a son who must act independently. Like Antigone in the Phoenissae (line 1527), it is acceptable for Polyxena to succumb to nostalgia over her nurture and even to be the one (rather than her mother) to create the connection between breastfeeding and impending death.

5.6 Conclusion

It is possible for the naked breast to have a wide range of connotations: vulnerability, womanhood, motherhood, and voluntary humiliation. However, when the connotation is maternal, the response to that breast depends on the gender of the respondent. Grown sons in epic, lyric and tragedy present a unified front when their masculine identity is threatened by the suggestion that they are indebted to maternal nurture. However, daughters, like mothers, can bring up nurture in nostalgic terms and can wish to be safe and dependent once more. Instead of

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228 Collard 1991:151 n.424: “The lament for useless suckling is usually the mother’s e.g. Tro. 759f, Supp. 1136.”
clinging ever more firmly to the code of conduct for their gender as they face death, women can cast aside their usual ways of behaving along with the clothes that shroud their bodies. It is this violation of social norms that becomes an artistic shorthand indicating the extremity of their situations. That they choose to depart from their usual roles by using nakedness, which is potentially gratifying to the male view or imagination, is hardly coincidental given the male authorship and intended audience (Cohen 1997:66), but I would argue that any voyeuristic pleasure derived from breast-baring in tragic circumstances was secondary to the reading of the gesture as an act of despair.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary of chapters

6.1.1 Homer, Iliad Book 22

This study began with Hecuba’s pleas to Hector as the earliest example of breast-baring supplication chronologically and the most influential artistically. In the Iliad, the conflicting demands of familial and social obligations pull Hector in opposite directions as he tries to be an obedient son and the preeminent Trojan warrior. The emotion of αἰδώς is central to the conflict that Hector experiences
because of his deep sensitivity to it: unfortunately for him, both his parents and his peers can induce this reaction. The supplication in the *Iliad* Book 22 introduces many other themes which will continue to be important in the references to this scene by later authors: female vulnerability, self-humiliation, and shaming as negotiating tactics. Finally, the Homeric exemplar fixes the outcome for future entreaties of mothers to sons; all of them will end in failure despite other significant differences.

### 6.1.2 Aeschylus, *Choephori*

When the supplication by the breast is adapted by Aeschylus, it is given a centrality that it lacked in Homer. Along with the murder of Clytemnestra which immediately follows, it constitutes the climax of the play. Although the gesture used by Clytemnestra is the same as that used by Hecuba, the context and the motivation are radically different. Clytemnestra is attempting to save her own life based on her claims to a relationship with her son which are tenuous at best. The knowledge that the audience has of her character from the previous play in the trilogy as well as matters described in the *Choephori* itself further complicates the issue. In this play, Aeschylus also brings a sexual element into the range of possible
interpretations which was not part of the Homeric scene but which will reappear in later references.

6.1.3 Euripides, Phoenissae

Following the intensely dramatic staging of a supplication by the breast in the Choephoroi, Euripides chooses to have Jocasta’s pleas to her sons take place off stage. However, he maintains the emotional intensity that the gesture provides by having the moment of supplication reported twice—once by the messenger and then again by Antigone—and by building in repeated references to Jocasta’s breasts throughout the play. Although the entreaties of Jocasta and Hecuba to their sons are similar in terms of their settings within the works, Jocasta’s role as a member of the Labdacid family brings in elements of sexual perversion and ill-fated lives. It is in the Phoenissae and in Euripides’ other works that the action of breast-baring becomes increasingly associated with mourning.

6.1.4 Other instances of breast-baring

The full range of connotations—vulnerability, sexuality, motherhood, mourning, and voluntary humiliation—which breast-baring can involve are studied
in this chapter which covers many different authors and time periods. The erotic display of breasts is a gesture that is easily understood by a modern reader, but the religious component (see the discussion of Phryne at 5.3 above) which was present for the ancients must be considered as well. When a woman in fiction revealed her breasts before her own death, the author of the work was participating in the artistic convention which associated naked breasts with violence against women. On the other hand, when a woman in a non-fiction work chose to expose herself, she would be using her physical vulnerability to ask for protection and/or to express grief. The breast as a symbol of life and how it also came to be associated with death was explored via drama, history and other genres.

6.2 Why use breast-baring during supplication?

Common sense and the diction of the passages themselves make it clear that maternal breast-baring as an act of supplication arises out of the desire to create a feeling of αἰδώς in the child. Beginning with the prototype of the gesture in Homer, mothers attempt to exploit the “vulnerability to the expressed ideal norm of society” (Redfield 1975:116) whereby a child owes a parent a debt of gratitude because of their nurture. Because of its pervasive influence in Homeric society (which is then carried over into the tragic works that represent a similar, heroic/mythological society), αἰδώς is the emotion which should prompt the supplicated child to grant
the mother’s request. The child should comply with his mother’s request—as society dictates—in order to avoid the judgment by others that he does not respect her. Unfortunately for Hecuba and the mothers who follow her, respect for a parent is not the only factor involved in the equation, and it turns out that it is not the strongest factor either.

Although in each case, the motivation for the breast-baring gesture is easy enough to discern, the question remains as to why a Greek woman would be willing to violate social norms so forcefully. A partial answer lies in the life-or-death circumstances in which the gesture is employed. As the examples of breast-baring analyzed here indicate, there is no use in being scrupulous when your child is going to his death; the usual conventions do not pertain. Another part of the answer is simply that the action of revealing the breasts is a natural extension of referring to them, an extension that undeniably makes the reference harder to ignore. Additionally, since this study is concerned with theatrical works first and foremost, there is the element of drama that the boldness of the deed carries with it. It might not be a realistic portrayal of what a mother would do to persuade her child, but for a fictional mother it is a possibility and, moreover, it is an act of desperation that demands the full attention of characters and audiences alike.

6.3 Why use breast-baring during mourning?
It is equally complex to analyze the motivation for breast-baring as an act of mourning. As mentioned earlier, it would seem to be a natural result of beating the breast and tearing at the clothes during the ritual mourning that was carried out during the πρόθεσις since that could become quite wild (Alexiou 1974:6). If we look beyond Greece, there is no difficulty in finding archaeological and textual evidence for the practice around the ancient Mediterranean (see the examples in 5.4 above). In short, although the Greeks themselves most likely did not practice nudity as part of mourning, it was a widespread custom (both in terms of time and geography) with which they could have been familiar.

Given this evidence, perhaps mournful breast-baring was seized upon by authors as something their characters might do because they were foreigners (in the case of Hecuba and Polyxena) or because they occupied a similar class of others since they inhabit a fictional world which was perceived as foreign by virtue of its antiquity or mythological nature. People from the heroic past (e.g., the Iliad) or whose lives were tinged with magic (e.g., the Trachiniae) would not be held to the social standards of 5th century Athens. These literary characters were also following the convention which existed in visual art where a connection was established between women in distress and the exposure of breasts (Bonfante 1997:175, Cohen 1997:79, Steiner 2001:246).

Finally, the gesture might be understandable to a Greek audience as akin to their process of ritual mourning that sought to give external expression to the internal despair of the bereaved. As Alexiou notes, “the violent tearing of the hair,
face and clothes were not just acts of uncontrolled grief, but part of the ritual indispensable to lamentation throughout antiquity” (1974:6). Mourners mark themselves as such by violating norms of behavior;\textsuperscript{229} breast-baring in a fictional work could easily be accepted as one of these violations.

6.4 What does breast-baring in tragedy tell us about Greek cultural mores?

Breast-baring occurs in a range of contexts within Attic drama and other literature of the Classical period. When it is used as a tactic of persuasion from a mother to a son, it always fails because of cultural norms which make it impossible for a grown son to accept the directives of his mother. In addition to these cultural norms, the son rejects the mother’s pleas because of the artistic tradition surrounding the breast-baring gesture which stems from its use in Homer’s \textit{Iliad}. However, when a woman reveals her breasts as part of a supplication outside of the parent-child relationship, she may gain her request because different socio-cultural forces are involved. Finally, breast-baring is a well-established symbol of grief and terror in Greek visual arts of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century which is also recognized as such in literature.

\textsuperscript{229} For another example, both Priam and Achilles engage in extremely unusual behavior by groveling in dirt and pouring dust on themselves while mourning (Dillon 2001:268-69).
As a consistent failure, breast-baring during supplication reinforces the idea, commonly held in the society of the time, that female power is inferior to male power. It is significant that the supplicandi are all sons who reject their mothers’ advice in favour of more violent, stereotypically masculine, courses of action. It would be simplistic, however, to see the rejection strictly in terms of the sexism that was so ingrained in ancient Greek culture; the sons push their mothers away as an action that demonstrates their independence and maturity as much as it does their dismissal of feminine counsel in general. They reaffirm the patriarchal structure since they are (e.g., Hector) or want to become (e.g., Orestes) full sharers in the power that it grants to adult males.

As an act of mourning, breast-baring in tragedy further relegates women to the role of the other. Just like most bacchantes who are female and often naked, the mourning women who reveal their breasts in tragedy are outside of societal boundaries, associated with a lack of restraint that is uncivilized to the point of being almost animal. Their apparent lack of shame shows that they are under the sway of the strong emotions that grip them; reason and propriety have been abandoned. In this move from inside to outside social boundaries, they demonstrate the freedom and the peril that accompanies stripping off convention along with their clothes.
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