

Review – Vittoria Longoni, *L'urlo di Ecuba*, Milan, Ledizioni Ledi, 2026

By Maria Arpaia¹

The book *L'Urlo di Ecuba* (*Hecuba's Cry*) is a publication designed to reach a wider audience, aimed at establishing a continuity between ancient and modern suffering in the face of the universally shared horror of war.

Starting from the assumption that there is a substantial overlap between the past and the present in terms of the methods and strategies of warfare – starvation, slavery, and human rights abuses are common denominators of all wars – the book examines female figures from mythology in search of a consistent parallel with the contemporary world. The analysis focuses entirely on women, who have always been the primary victims of war: objectified, oppressed, and raped, yet at times also leading figures in movements to raise awareness and speak against injustice.

This book is intended as a tribute to women's resilience: even in war zones where their role is socially marginalised, women journalists and activists manage to make their voices heard in denouncing injustices and to awaken public conscience.

The structure of the book is repetitive and methodical: each chapter examines a different female figure from ancient mythology (Andromache, Antigone, Hecuba, Iphigenia, Cassandra, Polyxena, etc.), whose story is recounted using literary sources – from epic poetry (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Epic Cycle*) to the tragic and comic theatre of 5th-century BC Athens, with some reference to historians.

¹ Maria Arpaia is a teacher and a postdoc fellow at University of Naples "L'Orientale". Her research areas include the performative aspects of Greek tragedy; the relationship between orality and staging in the ancient Greek theatre and the rewriting/reception of classics in modern culture. She co-authored a High School Greek Literature Handbook (*La parola e il canto*, Mondadori, 2022). Among her recent interests are the audience emotional response to ancient Greek tragedy. In particular, she worked on a lexical, rhetorical, and narratological catalogue of the emotion of joy on the tragic stage. In her book-in-progress, she provides textual analyses from the perspective of audience reception aesthetics in Greek tragedy.

The link to the current situation, on the other hand, is explored in several information boxes, which seek points of connection to bring the mythological stories up to modern times. The Amazons are juxtaposed with examples of female fighters who have chosen to take up arms to defend an ideal, such as the Italian partisans who played an active role in the wars of liberation against the Nazi-Fascists, or the Kurdish female combatants who defended the Rojava region against the Islamic State and supported various women's liberation movements (Longoni: 99-100).

Jocasta – the mother who, in Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*, tried unsuccessfully to mediate the hostilities between her sons and was unable to prevent a fratricidal war – serves as a starting point for remembering the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo or the Women in Black in Israel, who have been protesting in the public square since the first Intifada to protect their children from a fate of violence and attacks (109). To add to this historical picture, the author includes summaries of the historical and cultural context that forms the backdrop to the literary works used as sources in the book.

Although this is a non-specialist book, the use of ancient sources is almost always explicitly stated: well-known and lesser-known sources are collated to reconstruct a coherent picture of the events narrated.

However, these women's relationship with the corresponding literary genre is completely overlooked. The figures analysed belong to that heritage of traditional stories linked to the mythological tradition: they do not exist unless set within a literary narrative. In the ancient world, every literary genre adhered to very specific compositional and performative guidelines, which influenced both the composition of the work itself and the audience's reception of it. Hecuba's female voice in the *Iliad*, the portrayal of her character, and the expression of her grief at the fall of Troy cannot be placed on the same level as the behaviour of Euripides' Hecuba, whose grief turns into blind rage and culminates in a violent desire for revenge for the murder of her youngest son (49-52).

Almost five centuries have passed since the composition of the Homeric poems to the staging of Euripides' plays, during which time narrative techniques were influenced not only by the emergence of a new literary genre – that of theatre – but also by significant developments in philosophy and rhetoric.

In the *Iliad*, the Queen of Troy serves as the model of behaviour for mourning a son who has died before her very eyes, moving from an outburst of private

grief – as she watches the scene from the walls of Troy, giving in to loud cries and uncontrollable weeping – to the expression of public grief, composed – in her delivery of the funeral lament in Book XXIV, in which individual grief takes shape and finds consolation in a collective rite of farewell. In Euripides' drama, however, his character is shaped by the complexity and contradictions of a tormented soul, in line with the controversial portrayal of emotions typical of tragic storytelling (Hom. *Il.* 24. 748-759).

The year in which Euripides' *Hecuba* was staged, 424 BC, was marked by the resumption of hostilities in the Peloponnesian War following the Peace of Nicias. Euripides aims to make a passionate plea for peace, depicting the heart-rending emotional consequences of the mythical conflict of the Trojan War, whilst not failing to level a corrosive criticism at the abuses of power and arrogance.

Similarly, Cassandra's speech in *The Trojan Women*, in which she proposes a new moral code for the defeated ("The fate of the vanquished is preferable to that of the victors, for they died in defence of their homeland, surrounded by their loved ones, and attained the finest glory", lines 365-402), cannot fail to make a latent reference to the immediate situation of Athens, which is on the verge of defeat by Sparta and needs to adopt the same perspective as the Trojans as they gaze upon the ruins of their homeland.

Failing to take account of the historical and cultural contexts in which literary figures come to life runs the risk of the author uncritically blurring the historical distance – not only between the past and the present, but also between the various historical periods of Greek culture – and of misrepresenting ancient sources.

Furthermore, it is never entirely clear how these literary figures may have inspired the actions of real women who lived in the modern era. Sometimes it seems as though the mythical story serves as an introductory prelude to a list of female figures who, in some way – whether more or less clearly indicated – behaved like the heroines of literature.

The lack of argumentation in the dialogue with contemporary issues does, in fact, constitute a serious methodological problem and is the book's greatest weakness. The parallels between past and present are not woven harmoniously and contextually into the narrative of the mythical tales but are relegated to a summary box placed at the end of each text. Consequently, the comparison with current events – often forced or oversimplified in the pursuit of a methodological uniformity that is not always coherent with the stories of the

characters being recounted – is not placed in a constructive dialogue with the past, but is simply juxtaposed, detached from the argumentative framework.

Comparing the destruction of Troy – which, according to the sources, is portrayed as a woman who has been raped and abused – to the devastation of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Gaza makes no sense unless the criteria for this parallel are made explicit (Longoni: 23-25). It would have been more appropriate if the author had cited some modern literary examples in which these cities were portrayed in a manner comparable to that of a woman reduced to slavery. In that case, the point would have been of a literary nature and would have demonstrated a sort of continuity in a narrative *topos* corresponding to a form of metaphorical thought.

Similarly, it is not appropriate to draw a comparison between Clytemnestra's murder and that of Charlotte Corday, who killed Marat in 1793 in defence of the ideals of the French Revolution, which she believed the leader of the Jacobins was betraying (68). The murder of Agamemnon was not motivated by reasons of state, but by family matters: Clytemnestra seeks vengeance for the untimely death of her young daughter Iphigenia, who was sacrificed to enable the expedition to Troy to set sail. Placing these women on the same level betrays the political significance underlying the young Girondist's act, overlooking the patriotic significance of her action and the freedom of action she claimed for herself.

The lack of a critical approach leads to another naive aspect of this book: a certain rhetorical tendency to identify in the past a form of latent and nascent feminism, which is historically inaccurate.

Ancient literary works do not give women a voice in order to compensate in any way for their exclusion from the political and social sphere, as the author states in the introduction (14), but rather depict them according to the role they play within society. By virtue of its essentially paradigmatic and educational nature, Greek poetry assigned women spheres of expression – such as the emotional sphere – and family roles – such as that of wife and mother – which faithfully reflect the areas to which they are already confined within the social order.

Almost all the female figures analysed are protagonists of tragic performances, in which the intensified expression of emotional impulses plays a central role. Culturally, the dramatic and collective expression of emotions is relegated to the female gender. It is no coincidence that the choruses in tragedies – which serve as a sort of emotional guide for the audience regarding

how to react to the events unfolding on stage – are often composed of women or members of social classes of lower rank than that of adult Athenian male citizens: slaves, sailors, the elderly – all social categories outside the political system, which, by contrast, prescribed more rational and restrained codes of behaviour.²

In particular, the Euripidean dramaturgy composed during the long and troubled Peloponnesian War was characterised by a predominance of female portrayals of women who are victims of the fall of Troy – Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Polyxena – lamenting the pain of losing loved ones, their homeland and their freedom (Di Benedetto 1992: 47-72).

Thus, the female perspective in these tragedies does not express a desire for social revenge, which would be out of place in ancient Greek society; rather, it fulfils a performative need consistent with women's role as voices of collective grief. Stage lament becomes a catharsis for the pain of an on-going war, drawing the audience into shared mourning and prompting reflection on its social and emotional consequences (130-144).

Moreover, the idea that Greek authors – by giving prominence to female characters in their literary works – intended to engage the female half of their audience (Longoni: 15) is an arbitrary statement with no historical or philological foundation. Whether or not women attended the theatre is a vexed issue for which there are still insufficient and inadequate historical and literary sources. The matter is under scrutiny by many scholars, and it is not methodologically correct to take it for granted without mentioning the scholarly debate.

In any case, no stage decisions were made with social groups in mind other than those who were politically active: even when women made their voices heard from the stage, it was always a voice filtered through a male perspective and aimed at political communication addressed to men.

Even the portrayal of Lysistrata in the homonymous Aristophanes' play is entirely filtered through a male and conservative viewpoint. The comic mechanisms of Athenian theatre depicted contemporary reality through the prism of distortion and utopia.³

² For further insight into the emotional role of the chorus as the voice of community, see, among others, Visvardi (2015).

³ For the relationship between Aristophanes' comedies and Athenian politics, see Heath (1987); Sommerstein (1993); Taaffe (1993); and Konstan (1995).

The portrayal of women in power brings to the stage the “world turned upside down” motif, which is one of the hallmarks of comic theatre, but also a highly potent political weapon. By exaggerating the events on stage, the playwright can highlight the contradictions and dangers facing contemporary society. No one in the audience, not even Aristophanes, ever gave the slightest credit to the hypothesis that women’s wisdom and their common sense could truly be the salvation of Hellas (lines 525-526).

It is precisely in the paradox of this scenario that the conservative and male-centred values of the Greek mindset are reaffirmed. Unless one begins with these cultural and literary considerations, it is impossible to gain a deep understanding of the development and symbolic reinterpretation – merely alluded to in the book – of the figure of Lysistrata in the modern era, who is often counted amongst the inspirations of the modern feminist movement. It would have been far more interesting to reflect on what, in the modern era, were the significant stages in the cultural repossession of the ancient model and how this facilitated women’s engagement with politics and their demand for the right to have a voice in decision-making contexts. Here too, the contemporary context box proves ineffective, amounting to nothing more than a series of brief, superficial points lacking adequate historical and political context.

The use of images in this text is also a missed opportunity for in-depth analysis: they are all without captions and do not engage adequately with the text. Depictions drawn from ancient ceramography appear alongside 18th- and 19th-century reinterpretations of myths, mixed with photographs of more or less contemporary events, without adequate description or explanation, running the risk of reducing the visual material to a purely decorative function that is often difficult for the reader to interpret.

Drawing a comparison between the past and the present is a legitimate – and culturally valid – endeavour only if it is carried out with the necessary precautions; otherwise, there is a risk of falling into facile generalisations.

Engaging with the past, therefore, is a way to teach modern audiences to contextualise behaviours and ways of thinking according to the historical context in which they were formed, and to interpret the present without uncritically superimposing it onto the past, but rather by taking into account the historical depth that lies between the two temporal dimensions.

For this reason, the attempt to juxtapose literary figures from the classical world with real-life figures from the modern world in a discussion that is

essentially expository and lacks sufficient argumentation fails to do justice to the complex dynamics of how ancient culture influences and shapes modern culture, and risks oversimplifying the long and arduous journey of women's emancipation from a patriarchal and dominant society.

References

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