

Hecuba Cast List Improbable Fictions reading

Sept. 22, 2011, Bama Theatre

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HECUBA

SCENE: *The shore of Thrace. Pavilioned tents, the quarters of the Trojan women, stand in the background. The time is just before dawn. Enter above, ex machina, the ghost of Polydorus.*

Polydorus

Back from the pit of the dead, from the somber door
that opens into hell, where no god goes,

I have come,

 the ghost of Polydorus,
son and last surviving heir of Hecuba
and Priam, king of Troy.

 My father, fearing
that Troy might fall,
had me conveyed in secret out of danger
sending me here to Thrace, to Polymestor,
who rules this fertile plain
and curbs with harsh power a nation of horsemen.

With me my father sent a sum of gold,
intending that, if Troy should someday fall,
his living sons might be provided for.

Being the youngest, I was chosen, still too small
and slight to carry arms or throw a spear.

But as long as Troy's great ramparts stood proud
and unbreached, so long as our towers held intact
and Hector, my brother, prospered in the fighting,
I flourished under the care of my father's friend.

But when Troy fell and Hector died, and
Priam fell, butchered by Achilles' son,
then my father's friend took off his mask,
and moved by nothing more than simple greed,
murdered me and threw my body to the sea.

Here, pounded by the surf, my corpse still lies,
unburied and unmourned.

 Disembodied now,
I hover as a wraith over my mother's head,
three hopeless days of suffering and fear
since she left Troy and came here.

Here on the shore of Thrace, in sullen idleness
 beside its ships, the whole Greek army waits
 and cannot sail. For Achilles' ghost appeared,
 stalking on his tomb, wailing, and stopped the ships
 as they stood out for sea on the tourney home.
 He demanded my sister Polyxena as prize,
 the blood of the living to sweeten a dead man's grave.
 And he shall have her, a prize of honor and a gift
 Bestowed upon him by his friends. On this day
 destiny shall take my sister down to death.
 And you, poor Mother, you must see
 your two last children dead this day,
 my sister slaughtered and my unburied body
 washed up on shore at the feet of a slave.
 These were the favors I asked of the gods below
 to find my mother and be buried by her hands-
 and they have granted my request.

Now I go,
 for there below I see my mother coming,
 stumbling from a slave's tent, still shaken
 by that dream in which she saw my ghost.

*(Enter Hecuba and Coryphaeus from the tent. At the entrance
 Hecuba crumples to the ground.)*

--O Mother,
 poor majesty, old fallen queen,
 shorn of greatness, pride, and everything but life,
 and lonely age.

Some god destroys you now,
 exacting in your suffering the cost
 for having once been happy in this life.

Hecuba

O helplessness of age!
 Too old, too weak, to stand-
 Help me; women of Troy.
 Give this slave those hands
 you offered to her once
 when she was queen of Troy.

Prop me with your arms
and help these useless
stumbling legs to walk.

O goddess Earth,
womb of dreams
whose dusky wings
trouble, like bats, the flickering air!

Beat back that dream I dreamed,
that horror that rose in the night, those phantoms of children,
my son Polydorus in Thrace, Polyxena, my daughter!
Call back that vision of horror!

O gods who protect this land,
preserve my son, save him,
the last surviving anchor of my house,
still holding in the snows of Thrace,
still warded by his father's friend!

Disaster I dreamed,
terror on terror!
Never has my heart
so shivered with fear!

O daughter, I need you now,
interpreter of dreams!
Help me, Cassandra,
help me read my dreams!

I saw a little doe, a dappled doe, tom from between my knees,
cruelly ripped away, mangled by a wolf with blood-red nails!

And then fresh terror rose :
I saw Achilles' ghost
stalk upon his tomb, howling,
demanding a prize

from the wretched women of Troy.

O gods, I implore you,
beat back this dream,
preserve my children!

(Enter chorus of captive Troianwomen. They speak individually.)

Chorus #1

-We come to you in haste, Hecuba.

Chorus #2

-We left the tents ...
-where the lost assigned us.

Chorus #3

-Slaves, torn from home
when Troy was burnt and sacked
by the conquering Greeks!

Chorus #1

-We bring you painful news.

Chorus #2

-We cannot lighten your load.

Chorus #3

-We bring you worse to bear.

Chorus #4

-Just now, in full assembly,
the Greek decree came down.

Chorus #1

-They voted your daughter must die. ...
-to be slaughtered alive
-on the tomb of Achilles!

Chorus #2

-The sails had been unfurled,
and the fleet stood out to sea,
when from his tomb Achilles rose,
armor blazing, and held them back,
crying:

"Ho, Greeks, where do you sail,
leaving my grave unhonored?"

-Waves of argument broke loose,
dividing Greek from-Greek.
If one man spoke for death,
another spoke against it.

Chorus #3

-On your behalf spoke Agamemnon,
lover of your daughter,
poor, mad Cassandra.

Chorus #4

-Then the two sons of Theseus,
twin shoots of Athens, rose and spoke,
but both with one intent-
to crown Achilles' grave
with living blood, asking
if Cassandra's love meant more
than the courage of Achilles.

Chorus #1

-And so the struggle swayed,
equally poised-
- Until he spoke-
that hypocrite with honeyed tongue,
that demagogue Odysseus.

Chorus #2

And in the end he won,
asking what one slave was worth
when laid in the balance

with the honor of Achilles.

Chorus #3

-He wouldn't have the dead
descending down to Hades
telling tales of Greek
ingratitude to Greeks
who fell for Hellas
on the foreign field of Troy.

Chorus #4

-And he is coming here
to tear your daughter from your breast
and wrench her from your arms.

Chorus #1

-Go to the temples!

Chorus #2

-Go to the shrines!

Chorus #3

-Fall at Agamemnon's knees!

Chorus #4

-Call on Heaven's gods!

Chorus #1

-Invoke the gods below!

Chorus #2

-Unless your prayers prevent her death,
Unless your pleas can keep her safe,
then you shall see your child,
face downward on the earth
and the stain in the black earth spread
as the red blood drops

from the gleaming golden chain
that lies broken at her throat.

Hecuba

O grief!

What can I say?
What are the words for loss?
O bitterness of age,
slavery not to be borne,
unendurable pain!
To whom can I turn?
Childless and homeless,
my husband murdered,
my city stained with fire. ...
Where can I go?
What god in heaven,
what power below
will help me now?
O women of Troy,
heralds of evil,
bringers of loss,
this news you bring is my sentence of death.
Why should I live? How live in the light
when its goodness is gone,
when all I have is grief?
Bear me up,
poor stumbling feet,
and take me to the tent.

(She stumbles painfully to Agamemnon's tent and then cries out in
terror to Polyxena within.)

O my child!

Polyxena,
step from the tent!
Come and hear the news
your wretched mother brings,
this news of horror
that touches your life!

(Enter from the tent Polyxena)

Polyxena

That terror in your voice!
 That cry of fear
 flushing me forth
 like a bird in terror!

Hecuba

O my child! My baby.

Polyxena

Again that cry! Why?
 Hecuba
 I am afraid for You-

Polyxena

Tell me the truth, Mother.
 No, I am afraid. Something
 in your face frightens me.

Hecuba

O my child! My child-

Polyxena

You must tell me, Mother.

Hecuba

A dreadful rumor came.
 Some Greek decree
 that touches your life-

Polyxena

Touches my life how?
 For god's sake, Mother,
 speak!

Hecuba

-The Greeks,
 in full assembly,
 have decreed your death,
 a living sacrifice

upon Achilles' tomb.

Polyxena

O my poor mother!
How I pity you,
this broken-hearted life
of pain!

 What god
could make you suffer so,
impose such pain,
such grief in one poor life?
Alive, at least
I might have shared
your slavery with you.
But now I die,
and you must see my death:-
butchered like a lamb
squalling with fright,
and the throat held taut
for the gashing knife,
and the gaping hole
where the breath of life
goes out,
 and sinks
downward into dark
with the unconsolable dead.

It is you I pity,
Mother.

 For you I cry.
Not for myself,
 not for this life
whose suffering is such
I do not care to live,
but call it happiness to die.

Coryphaeus

Look, Hecuba. Odysseus is coming here

himself. There must be news-

(Enter Odysseus, attended by several soldiers.)

Odysseus

By now, Hecuba,
I think you know what decision the army has taken
and how we voted.

But let me review the facts.
By majority vote the Greeks have decreed as follows :
your daughter, Polyxena, must die as a victim
and prize of honor for the grave of Achilles.
The army has delegated me to act as escort.
Achilles' son will supervise the rite
and officiate as priest.

There matters rest.
You understand your position? You must not attempt
to hold your daughter here by force, nor,
I might add, presume to match your strength with mine.
Remember your weakness and accept this tragic loss
as best you can.

Nothing you do or say
can change the facts. Under the circumstances,
the logical course is resignation.

Hecuba

O gods,
is there no end to this ordeal of suffering,
this struggle with despair?

Why do I live?
I should have died, died long ago.
But Zeus preserved me, saved me, kept me alive
to suffer, each time to suffer worse
than all the grief that went before

Odysseus,
if a slave may put her question to the free-
without intent to hurt or give offense-
then let me ask you one brief question now
and hear your answer.

Odysseus

Ask me your question.
I can spare you the time.

Hecuba

Do you remember once
how you came to Troy, a spy, in beggar's disguise,
smeared with filth, in rags, and tears of blood
were streaming down your beard?

Odysseus

I remember
the incident. It left its mark on me.

Hecuba

But Helen penetrated your disguise
and told me who you were? Told me alone?

Odysseus

I stood, I remember, in danger of death.

Hecuba

And how humble you were? How you fell at my knees
and begged for life?

Odysseus

And my hand almost froze on your
dress.

Hecuba

And you were at my mercy, my slave then.
Do you remember what you said?

Odysseus

Said?
Anything I could. Anything to live.

Hecuba

And I let you have your life? I set you free?

Odysseus

Because of what you did, I live today.

Hecuba

Then can you say your treatment now of me
is not contemptible? To take from me
what you confess you took, and in return
do everything you can to do me wrong
and ruin me?

O gods, spare me the sight
of this thankless breed, these politicians
who cringe for favors from a screaming mob
and do not care what harm they do their friends,
providing they can please a crowd!

Tell me,
on what feeble grounds can you justify
your vote of death?

Political necessity?

Or is it vengeance
that Achilles' ghost demands, death for his death,
and exacts of her? But what has she to do
with his revenge? Who ever hurt him less
than this poor girl? If death is what he wants,
let Helen die. He went to Troy for her;
for her he died.

Now, Odysseus,
I present my claim for your consideration,
my just demand for payment of your debt
of life.

You admit yourself you took my hand;
you knelt at my feet and begged for life.

But see-

(Hecuba kneels at the feet of Odysseus and takes his hand.)

now I touch you back as you touched me.
I kneel before you on the ground and beg
for mercy back:

Let her stay with me.
Let her live.

Surely there are dead enough
without her death. And everything I lost
lives on in her. This one life
redeems the rest. She is my comfort, my Troy,
my staff, my nurse; she guides me on my way.
She is all I have.

And you have power,
Odysseus, greatness and power. But clutch them gently,
use them kindly, for power gives no purchase
to the hand.

I know. I too was great
but I am nothing now. One day
cut down my greatness and my pride.

But I implore you,
Odysseus, be merciful, take pity on me!
Go to the Greeks. Argue, coax them, convince them
that what they do is wrong. Accuse them of murder!
Tell them we are helpless, we are women,
the same women whom they tore from sanctuary
at the altars. But they pitied us, they spared us then.
Plead with them.

Even if your arguments were weak,
if you faltered or forgot your words, it would not matter.
Of themselves that power, that prestige you have
would guarantee success, swelling in your words,
and borrowing from what you are a resonance and force
denied to less important men.

Coryphaeus

Surely
no man could be so callous or so hard of heart
he could hear this mother's heartbroken cry
and not be touched.

Odysseus

Allow me to observe, Hecuba,
that in your hysterics you twist the facts.
First,

I am not, as you fondly suppose, your enemy,
and my advice, believe me, was sincerely and kindly
meant.

I readily admit, moreover, the extent of my debt-
everything I am today I owe to you.
And in return I stand ready and willing
to honor my debt by saving your life. Indeed,
I have never suggested otherwise.

But note:

I said your life, not your daughter's life,
a very different matter altogether.
I gave my word that when we captured Troy
your daughter should be given to our best soldier
as a prize upon request. That was my promise,
a solemn public commitment which I intend to keep.
And Achilles deserves our honor far more than most,
a great man and a great soldier who died greatly
for his country.

Tell me, what conduct could be worse
than to give your friend a lifetime of honor and respect
but neglect him when he dies?

And what then,
if war should come again and we enlist our citizens
to serve? Would we fight or would we look to our lives,
seeing that dead men get no honor?

No:

for my lifetime give me nothing more than what I need;
I ask no more. But as regards my grave,
I hope for honor, since honor in the grave
has eternity to run.

Endure; bear your losses,
and if you think me wrong to honor courage
in a man, then call me callous!

Coryphaeus

This is what it means
to be a slave: to be abused and bear it,
compelled by violence to suffer wrong.

Hecuba

O my child,
all my prayers are lost, thrown away
on the empty air!

So try your powers now.
Implore him, use every skill that pity has,
every voice. Be like the nightingale,
touch him, move him! Fall at his knees,
beg him for life!

Even he has children too
and may pity them in you.

Polyxena

I see your hand,
Odysseus, hidden in the folds of your robes and your face
averted, lest I try to touch your hand or beard
and beg for life.

Have no fear. You are safe
from me.

I shall not call on Zeus who helps
the helpless.

I shall not beg for life.

No:

I go with you because I must, but most
because I wish to die. If I refuse,
I prove myself a coward, in love with life.
But why should I live?

I had a father once,
king of Phrygia. And so I started life,
a princess of the blood, nourished on lovely hopes
to be a bride for kings. And suitors came
competing for the honor of my hand, while over the girls
and women of Troy, I stood acknowledged mistress,
courted and envied by all, all but a goddess,
though bound by death.

And now I am a slave.
It is that name of slave, so ugly, so strange,
that makes me want to die. Or should I live

to be knocked down to a bidder, sold to a master for cash? Sister of Hector, sister of princes—doing the work of a drudge, kneading the bread and scrubbing the floors, compelled to drag out endless weary days? And the bride of kings, forced by some low slave from god knows where to share his filthy bed?

Never.

With eyes still free, I now renounce the light and dedicate myself to death.

Odysseus,
lead me off. For I see nothing in this life to give me hope, and nothing here at all worth living for.

As for you, Mother,
do nothing, say nothing now to hinder me. Help me instead; help me to die, now, before I live disgraced.

I am a novice
to this life of shame, whose yoke I might endure, but with such pain that I prefer to die than go on living.

Coryphaeus

Nobility of birth
is a stamp and seal, conspicuous and sharp.
But true nobility allied to birth
is a greatness and a glory.

Hecuba

If your Achilles
must have his victim, Odysseus, if you
have any care for your own honor left,
then Jet her Jive. Let me take her place
upon the tomb; kill me, be merciless
to me, not her. For I gave birth to Paris
whose arrows brought Achilles down.

Odysseus

The ghost
demanded this girl's blood, not yours,
old woman.

Hecuba

Then let me die with her at least,
and we shall be a double drink of blood
for earth and this demanding ghost below.

Odysseus

Her death will do. One victim is required,
no more.

Hecuba

I must die with her! I must!

Odysseus

Must? A strong word, Hecuba. It was my impression
I was the master here.

Hecuba

Never, never
will I let her go.

Polyxena

Mother, listen.
And you, Odysseus, be gentle with a mother's love.
She has reasons for despair.
Poor Mother,
do not struggle with those stronger than you.
Is this what you want – to be thrown down in the dust,
this poor old body bruised, shouldered away;
hustled off by younger and stronger arms?
They will do it. No, this is not for you.
O Mother, Mother,
give me your hand,
and put your cheek to mine for one last kiss
and then no more.

O Mother, Mother,
now I go below-

Hecuba

Leaving me to live, a slave in the light-

Polyxena

Unmarried to my death, no wedding-songs for me-

Hecuba

The song of mourning for you, wretchedness for me-

Polyxena

To lie in the dark with Hades, far from you-

Hecuba

O gods, where can I go? Where shall I die?

Polyxena

I was born to freedom and I die a slave.

Hecuba

Fifty children I once had, and all are dead.

Polyxena

What message shall I take to Priam and Hector?

Hecuba

Tell them this: I am the queen of sorrow.

Polyxena

O sweet breasts that nourished me!

Hecuba

So wrong, so wrong! So young to die!

Polyxena

Mother, farewell-

Hecuba

Let others fare well. I never shall.

Polyxena

Goodbye, Polydorus, my brother in Thrace--

Hecuba

If he lives at all-for all I have is loss.

Polyxena

He lives. He shall close your dying eyes.
Shroud my head, Odysseus, and lead me out.
Even before I die, my cries have broken
my mother's heart, and she has broken mine.
O light of day!

I still can cry the light
in that little space of life I have to live
before I die upon Achilles' tomb!

*(Odysseus shrouds Polyxena and leads her out. Hecuba collapses to
the ground.)*

Hecuba

I am faint-my legs give way beneath me--
Polyxena!

Touch ,your mother, give me your hand,
reach me! Do not leave me childless!

O gods,
to see there, in her place, Helen of Sparta,
sister of the sons of Zeus, whose lovely eyes
made ashes of the happiness of Troy!

Chorus #1

O wind of ocean,
wind that blows on the sea
and drives the scudding ships,
where are you blowing me?
Where shall I be slave?
Where is there home for me?
There in distant Doris,
in Phthia far away
where men say Apidanus runs,
father of waters,

river whose lovely flowing
fattens the fields?

Chorus #2

There in the islands?
The salt sea churning, borne on by oars,
to days of mourning in the house,
there where the primal palm
and the bay broke out their leaves
for lovely Leto
in honor of her son?
There shall I sing
With the maidens of Delos,
praising Artemis,
the bow and fillets of gold?

Chorus #3

Or there where Athene drives
her chariot of burnished gold?
There in Athens, yoking
the horses on the goddess' robe,
stitching cloth of saffron
with threads of every color,
sewing the Titans there,
killed by stabbing fire,
the thunderbolts of Zeus?

Chorus #4

O my children!
My father, my mother!
O city, ruined land,
ashes and smoke, wasted,
wilderness of war!
I live, but live a slave,
forced to a foreign land,
torn westward out of Asia
to a marriage that is death!

(Enter *Talthybius*.)

Talthybius

Women of Troy, where can I find Hecuba,
your onetime queen?

Coryphaeus

There she lies, *Talthybius*,
in the dust at your feet, her head buried in her ropes.

Talthybius

O Zeus, what can I say?

That you look on man
and care?

Or do we, holding that the gods exist,
deceive ourselves with unsubstantial dreams
and lies, while random careless chance and change
alone control the world?

This was the queen
of fabulous Troy. This was once the wife
of Priam the great.

And now, childless, old,
enslaved, her home and city wrecked by war,
she lies there on the ground, her proud head
fouled in the dust.

Life is precious now,
but I would rather die than sink as low
as this poor woman has fallen now.

Rise,
lady. Lift your head to the light; raise
that body blanched with age.

Hecuba

Who are you
who will not let me lie? Who disturbs
my wretchedness? Why?

Talthybius

I am *Talthybius*,

herald of the Greeks, lady. I bring you a message from Agamemnon.

Hecuba

Have the Greeks decreed my death?
Tell me that, and you are welcome, herald.
No other news could please me now.

Talthybius

No, not that.
I come on behalf of the army and the sons of Atreus to bid you bury your daughter. She is dead.

Hecuba

Is that your news, herald?
I cannot die?
You came to tell me this?
O gods, my child!
Dead. All my children died with you.
How did you put her to death? With honor and respect,
or did you kill her savagely, with cold brutality?
Tell me. Let me hear it all, everything,
No matter how it hurts.

Talthybius

There is a cost
in telling too, a double price of tears,
for I was crying when your daughter died,
and I will cry again while telling you,
lady. But listen.

The whole army of the Greeks,
drawn up in ranks, was present at the execution,
waiting and watching while Polyxena was led
by Achilles' son slowly through the center of the camp
and up the tomb. I stood nearby, while behind her
came a troop of soldiers purposely appointed
to prevent her struggles.

"Quiet, Greeks!" I shouted,
"Silence in the ranks!" and instantly a hush

fell upon the army and Achilles' son began to pray:

"Great ghost of my father Achilles, receive
this offering I pour to charm your spirit up.
Grant to us all our day of coming home,
grant us all to come home safe from Troy!"
So he prayed, and the army with him.

Then,

grasping his sword by its golden hilt, he slipped it
from the sheath, and made a sign to the soldiers
to seize her. But she spoke first:

"Wait, you Greeks
who sacked my city! Of my own free will I die.
Let no man touch me. I offer my throat
willingly to the sword. I will not flinch.
But let me be free for now. Let me die free.
I am of royal blood, and I scorn to die
the death of a slave."

"Free her!" the army roared,
and Agamemnon ordered his men to let her go.
The instant they released their hold, she grasped her robes
at the shoulder and ripped them open down the sides
as far as the waist, exposing her naked breasts,
bare and lovely like a sculptured goddess.
Then she sank, kneeling on the ground, and spoke
her most heroic words :

"Strike, captain.
Here is my breast. Will you stab me there?
Or in the neck? Here is my throat, bared
for your blow ."

Torn between pity and duty,
Achilles' son stood hesitating, and then
slashed her throat with the edge of his sword. The blood
gushed out, and she fell, dying, to the ground,
but even as she dropped, managed to fall somehow
with grace, modestly hiding what should be hidden
from men's eyes.

The execution finished,

the soldiers set to work. Some scattered leaves upon her corpse, while others brought branches of pine and heaped her pyre. Those who shirked found themselves abused by the rest.

"You loafers," they shouted, "how can you stand there empty-handed, doing nothing? Where's your present for the girl? When did you ever see greater courage than that?"

And now you know it all.

For my part, having seen your daughter die, I count you of all women the one most blessed in her children and also the unhappiest.

Coryphaeus

Blow after blow disaster drops from heaven; suffering shakes my city and the house of Priam.

Hecuba

O my child, how shall I deal with this thronging crowd of blows, these terrors, each with its petition, clamoring for attention? If I try to cope with one, another shoulders in, and then a third comes on, distracting, each fresh wave breeding new successors as it breaks.

But now, with this last blow I cannot cope at all, cannot forget your death, cannot stop crying-

And yet a kind of comfort comes in knowing how well you died.

Is it in our blood or something we acquire? But goodness can be taught, and any man who knows what goodness is knows evil too, because he judges

from the good.

But all this is the rambling nothing
of despair.

Talthybius, go to the Greeks
and tell them this from me: not a hand
is to be laid on my child; make them keep
the crowd away.

(Exit Talthybius. Hecuba turns to Coryphaeus.)

-Take your pitcher,
fill it with water from the sea and then return.
I must give my daughter's body its last bath
before her burial, this wedding which is death.
For she marries Hades, and I must bathe the bride
and lay her out as she deserves.

But how?

I have nothing of my own, nothing precious left.
What then?

(Exit Coryphaeus.)

Where is greatness gone?
Where is it now, that stately house, home
where I was happy once?
And what am I of all I used to be,
mother of sons, mother of princes?

Gone,
all gone, and nothing left.

And yet
we boast, are proud~ we plume our confidence-
the rich man in his insolence of wealth,
the public man's conceit of office or success-
and we are nothing; our ambition, greatness, pride,
all vanity.

That man is happiest
who lives from day to day and asks no more,
garnering the simple goodness of a life.

(Hecuba enters the tent.)

Chorus #1

That morning was my fate,

that hour doom was done,
 when Paris felled the tree
 that grew on Ida's height
 and made a ship for sea
 and sailed to Helen's bed-
 loveliest of women
 the golden sun has seen.

Chorus #2

Grief, and worse than grief,
 necessity surrounds us.
 One man's folly made
 a universal curse,
 ruin over Simois.
 Paris sat as judge
 upon three goddesses.
 His verdict was war.

Chorus #3

War, slaughter, and the ruin of my house,
 while in her house the Spartan woman mourns,
 grieving by the wide Eurotas,
 and mothers mourn for their sons,
 and tear out their snowy hair
 and dredge their cheeks with bloody nails.
 (*Coryphaeus rushes in.*)

Coryphaeus

Where is the queen, women?
 (*Chorus rushes out.*)

Where is Hecuba
 whose sufferings outstrip all rival runners?
 No one shall take that crown away.

(*Hecuba enters.*)

Hecuba

Speak.

What new sorrow do you bring her? Will this news
of anguish never sleep?

(Enter other women, carrying the shrouded corpse of Polydorus.)

Coryphaeus

This is the grief
I bring: the burden I bring is disaster.

O my queen,
more wretched, more miserable than I can say.
Now you live no more, the light is gone!

Hecuba

This is mockery, not news. I know it all.
But why have you brought Polyxena's body here?
I heard the Greeks were helping with her funeral.

Coryphaeus

Poor woman, she thinks it is Polyxena.
She does not know the worst.

Hecuba

O gods, no!
Not my poor mad daughter, Cassandra?

Coryphaeus

Cassandra is alive. Mourn for this dead boy.
(She strips the shroud from the corpse.)
Look at this naked corpse we' found,
this unexpected horror.

Hecuba

No!
O gods in heaven, let me die!
O my son, my son,
the fiend, the fury,
shrieking madness!
Blow after blow!
And this is all my life:
the mourning endless,

the anguish unending.

Coryphaeus

In loss and suffering we live your lives.

Hecuba

O my son, my child,
how were you killed?
What fate, what hand
could take your life?

Coryphaeus

I do not know. I found his body lying
on the shore.

Hecuba

Drowned, his body washed on the sand?
Or was he murdered?

Coryphaeus

The surf had washed his body up.

Hecuba

O gods, my dream!
I see it now,
those black wings beating the dark,
brushing over him, touching him,
dead already, even in my dreams!

Coryphaeus

Who murdered him? Did your dream show you that?

Hecuba

Who but our noble friend in Thrace,
where Priam sent him out of harm,
to be safe with our friend in Thrace?

Coryphaeus

Murdered? Murdered by a friend? Killed for gold?

Hecuba

Unspeakable,
unbearable!

Where is friendship now?
a fiend, monster, so pitiless,
to mangle him so, to hack
his sweet flesh with the sword!

Coryphaeus

Unhappy Hecuba, most miserable of women
on this earth, how heavily god's anger
falls on you.

-But look: I see our master,
Agamemnon, coming here.

Quickly, friends,
withdraw.

(Enter Agamemnon with attendants.)

Agamemnon

Why this delay of yours, Hecuba,
in burying your daughter? I received your message
from Talthymbius that none of our men should touch her,
and I gave strict orders 'to that effect.
Hence I found your delay all the more surprising
and came to fetch you myself. In any case,
I can report that matters there are well in hand
and proceeding nicely-if a word like "nicely"
has any meaning in this connection.

(He sees the corpse of Polydorus.)

Here,
what's that Trojan corpse beside the tents?
I can see from his shroud that he's not a Greek.

Hecuba (aside)

O gods, what shall I do?

Agamemnon

Why do you turn away,
Hecuba? And what's the meaning of these tears?

What happened here? Who is this man?

(Silence.)

I am not a prophet, Hecuba. Unless you speak,
you make it quite impossible for me to help you.

(Silence.)

If you have nothing to say,
Hecuba, very well. I have no wish to hear.

Hecuba

(She falls at Agamemnon's knees.)

Agamemnon, I implore you, I beg you
by your beard, your knees, by this conquering hand,
help me!

Agamemnon

What can I do to help you, Hecuba? Your freedom
is yours for the asking.

Hecuba

No, not freedom.
Revenge. Only give me my revenge
and I'll gladly stay a slave the rest of my life.

Agamemnon

Revenge? Revenge on whom, Hecuba? ,

Hecuba

My lord,
not the revenge you think, not that at all.
Do you see this body here, this naked corpse
for which I mourn?

Agamemnon

I see him very well,
though no one yet has told me who he is.

Hecuba

This was my son. I gave him birth.

Agamemnon

Which son,
poor woman?

Hecuba

Not one of those who died for Troy.

Agamemnon

You mean you had another son?

Hecuba

Another son to die. This was he.

Agamemnon

But where was he living when Troy was taken?

Hecuba

His father sent him away to save his life.

Agamemnon

This was the only son he sent away?

Where did he send him?

Hecuba

Here. To this country
where his body was found.

Agamemnon

He sent him to Polymestor,
the king of Thrace?

Hecuba

And with his son he also sent
a sum of fatal gold.

Agamemnon

But how did he die? Who killed him?

Hecuba

Who else?
His loving host, our loyal friend in Thrace.

Agamemnon

Then his motive, you think, was the gold?

Hecuba

The instant he heard that Troy had fallen, he killed.

Agamemnon

But where was the body found? Who brought him here?

Hecuba

This servant here. She found his body lying on the beach.

Agamemnon

What was she doing there?
Searching?

Hecuba

No. She went to fetch water for Polyxena's burial.

Agamemnon

He must have killed him first, then thrown his body in the sea.

Hecuba

Hacked him, tossed him to the pounding surf.

Agamemnon

I pity you, Hecuba.
Your suffering has no end.

Hecuba

I died long ago. Nothing can touch me now.

Agamemnon

What woman on this earth was ever cursed like this?

Hecuba

There is none but goddess Suffering .
herself.

But let me tell you why I kneel
at your feet. And if my sufferings seem just
then I must be content. But if otherwise,
give me my revenge on that treacherous friend
who, flouted every god in heaven and in hell
to do this brutal murder.

At our table
he was our frequent guest; was counted first
among our friends, respected, honored by me,
receiving every kindness that a man could meet-
and then, in cold deliberation, killed
my son.

Murder may have its reasons, its motives,
but this-to refuse my son a grave, to throw him
to the sea, unburied!

I am a slave, I know,
and slaves are weak. But the gods are strong, and over them
there stands some absolute, some moral order
or principle of law more final still.
Upon this moral law the world depends;
through it the gods exist; by it we live,
defining good and evil.

Apply that law
to me. For if you flout it now, and those
who murder in cold blood or defy the gods
go unpunished, then human justice withers,
corrupted at its source.

Honor my request,
Agamemnon.

Punish this murder.

Pity me.

Once a queen, and now
a slave; blessed with children, happy once,
now old, childless, utterly alone,

homeless! lost, unhappiest of women
on this earth. ...

(Agamemnon turns away.)

O gods, you turn away-
what can I do?

I have seen my children die,
and bound to shame I walk this homeless earth,
a slave, and see the smoke that leaps up
over Troy.

At your side sleeps my daughter
Cassandra, once the priestess of Apollo.
What will you give, my lord, for those nights of love?
What thanks for all her tenderness in bed
does she receive from you, and I, in turn, 8
from her?

Look now at this dead boy,
Cassandra's brother. Revenge him. Be kind to her
by being kind to him.

O master,
hear me,

help an old woman,
avenge her!

She is nothing at all, but hear her, help her
even so. Do your duty as a man of honor:
see justice done. Punish this murder.

Coryphaeus

How strange in their reversals are our lives.
Necessities define us all, as now,
joining enemies in common cause
and alienating friends.

Agamemnon

I pity you deeply,
Hecuba, for the tragic death of this poor boy.
And I am touched and stirred by your request.
So far as justice is concerned, god knows,
nothing would please me more than to bring

this murderer to book.

But my position
here is delicate. If I give you your revenge,
the army is sure to charge that I connived
at the death of the king of Thrace because of my love
for Cassandra. This is my dilemma. The army
thinks of Polymestor as its friend,
this boy as its enemy. You love your son,
but what do your affections matter to the Greeks?
Put yourself in my position.

Believe me,
Hecuba, I should like to act on your behalf
and would come instantly to your defense.
But if the army mutters, then I must
be slow.

Hecuba

Then no man on earth is truly free.
All are slaves of money or necessity.
Public opinion or fear of prosecution
forces each one, against his conscience,
to conform..

But since your fears make you defer
to the mob, let a slave set you free
from what you fear.

Be my confidant,
the silent partner of my plot to kill my son's
murderer. Give me your passive support.
Then if violence breaks out or the Greeks
attempt a rescue, obstruct them covertly
without appearing to act for me.

For the rest,
have no fear. I shall manage.

Agamemnon

How?
Poison? Or do you think that shaking hand
Gould lift a sword and kill? Who would help you?

On whom could you count?

Hecuba

Remember: there are women
hidden in these tents.

Agamemnon

You mean our prisoners?

Hecuba

They will help me get revenge.

Agamemnon

But women?
Women overpower men?

Hecuba

There is power
in numbers, and cunning makes us strong.

Agamemnon

True,
though I admit to being skeptical of women
in a matter like this.

Hecuba

Why?
Women killed
Aegyptus' sons. Women emptied Lemnos
of its males: we murdered every one. And so
it shall be here.

But of that I say no more.
Let this woman have your safe-conduct
through the army.

(Agamemnon nods. Hecuba turns to Coryphaeus.)

Go to Polymestor
and give him this message:
"Hecuba, once queen of Troy,
summons you on business that concerns you both
and requests you bring your sons. They also share

in what she has to say."

(Exit Coryphaeus.)

One more favor,

Agamemnon.

Defer my daughter's funeral
until my son's body is placed beside her
on the pyre. Let them burn together,
brother and sister joined in a single flame,
their mother's double grief.

Agamemnon

As you wish.

If we could sail, I could not grant this. But now,
until heaven sends us a favoring wind,
we must ride at anchor here.

I wish you luck
in your attempt.

The common interests
of states and individuals alike demand
that good and evil receive their just rewards.

*(Exit Agamemnon, followed by attendants. Hecuba and her women
withdraw into the tent with the body of Polydorus.)*

Chorus #1

O Ilium! O my country,
whose name men speak no more
among unfallen cities!

Chorus #2

So dense a cloud of Greeks
came, spear on spear, destroying!

Chorus #3

Your crown of towers shorn away,
and everywhere the staining fire,
most pitiful.

Chorus #4

O Ilium,
whose ways I shall not walk again!

Chorus #1

At midnight came my doom.
Midnight when the feast is done
and sleep falls sweetly on the eyes.
The songs and sacrifice,
the dances, all were done.
My husband lay asleep,
his spear upon the wall,
forgetting for a while
the ships drawn up on Ilium's shore.

Chorus #2

I was setting my hair
in the soft folds of the net,
gazing at the endless light
deep in the golden mirror,
preparing myself for bed,
when tumult broke the air
and shouts and cries
shattered the empty streets:-
Onward, onward, you Greeks!
Sack the city of Troy
and see your homes once more!

Chorus #3

Dressed only in a gown
like a girl of Sparta,
I left the bed of love
and prayed to Artemis.
But no answer came.
I saw my husband lying dead,
and they took me over sea.
Backward I looked at Troy,
but the ship sped on

and Ilium slipped away,
and I was dumb with grief.

Chorus #4

A curse on Helen,
sister of the sons of Zeus,
and my curse on him,
disastrous Paris
whose wedding wasted Troy!
O adulterous marriage!
Helen, fury of ruin!
Let the wind blow
and never bring her home!
Let there be no landing
for Helen of Troy!

(At Hecuba's signal the Chorus removes the body of Polydorus and remains offstage. Enter Polymestor, followed by his two young sons, and several attendants, and Coryphaeus. Throughout his speech, Hecuba refuses to recognize him, keeping her back turned and her eyes fixed on the ground.)

Polymestor

Dearest Hecuba, wife of my dear friend,
poor unhappy Priam!
How I pity you,
you and your ruined Troy. And now this latest blow,
your daughter's death. ...

What can we take on trust
in this uncertain life? Happiness, greatness,
pride -- nothing is secure, nothing keeps.
The inconsistent gods make chaos of our lives,
pitching us about with such savagery of change
that we, out of our anguish and uncertainty,
may turn to them.

But how does my sorrow help?
Your loss remains.

(A short silence, while Polymestor waits for Hecuba to recognize him. When she does not, he continues with mounting embarrassment.)

But perhaps you are angry with me, Hecuba,
for not coming to you earlier. If so, forgive me.
It just so happened that I was inland, in the mountains
of Thrace, at the time when you arrived. In fact,
I was on the point of coming here myself
when your servant arrived and gave me your message.
Needless to say, I lost no time.

Hecuba

Polymestor,
I am so embarrassed by the state in which you see me,
fallen so low since when you saw me last,
I cannot look you in the face.

Forgive it,
and do not think me rude, Polymestor.
In any case, habit and custom excuse me,
forbidding that a woman look directly at a man.

Polymestor

I quite understand.
Now, how can I help you?
You sent for me on some business, I believe?

Hecuba

I have a matter to discuss with you and your sons.
But privately, if possible.
Could you ask your men
to withdraw?

Polymestor (To his bodyguard.)

You may leave. There is no danger here.
This woman is my friend and the army of the Greeks
is well disposed;

Now, Hecuba, to business.
How can I, your prosperous friend, help you
in your time of troubles?

Hecuba

One question first.

How is my son Polydorus, your ward?
Is he alive?

Anything else can wait.

Polymestor

Alive and well. In this respect at least,
you may put your mind at rest.

Hecuba

My dearest friend,
how like you your kindness is!

Polymestor

What else
would give you comfort?

Hecuba

Does he still remember his mother?

Polymestor

So much that he wanted to run away
and visit you in secret.

Hecuba

And the gold from Troy?
Is it safe?

Polymestor

Quite safe. Locked in my palace
under strong guard.

Hecuba

Guard it well, my friend.
Do not let it tempt you.

Polymestor

Have no fears.
What I have of my own is quite enough
to last my life.

Hecuba

Do you know why I sent for you
and your sons?

Polymestor

Not yet. We are waiting to hear.

Hecuba

You are my friend, a friend for whom I feel
no less love than you have shown to me.
And my business concerns-

Polymestor

Yes? Yes? Go on.

Hecuba

--the ancient vaults, the gold of Priam's house.

Polymestor

I am to pass this information to your son?

Hecuba

In person. I know you for a man of honor.

Polymestor

But why did you ask that my sons be present?

Hecuba

I thought they should know. Something, for instance,
might happen to you.

Polymestor

A prudent precaution.
I quite agree.

Hecuba

Do you know where Athene's temple
once stood in Troy?

Polymestor

The gold is there?

Is there a marker?

Hecuba

A black rock jutting up
above the ground.

Polymestor

Is that all?

Hecuba

No:
my jewels. I smuggled some jewels away from Troy.
Could you keep them for me?

Polymestor

You have them with you?
Where are they hidden?

Hecuba

There, inside the tent,
beneath a heap of spoils.

Polymestor

Inside the tent?
Here, in the Greek camp?

Hecuba

The Women's quarters
are separate from the main camp.

Polymestor

Is it safe?
Are there men around?

Hecuba

No men; only women.
But come inside. We have no time to lose.
Quick.
The Greek army is waiting and eager
to raise their anchors and sail for home.

Then,
when our business here is done, you may go
and take your children where you left my son.

(Polymestor and his sons, followed by Hecuba, enter the tent.)

Coryphaeus

Death is the debt of life. Now your debt falls due

(Sudden screams and commotion from inside the tent.)

Polymestor *(from within)*

Blind! Blind!

O light!

Light of my eyes!

Coryphaeus

That scream of anguish! Did you hear that scream?

Polymestor *(from within)*

Help!

Murder!

Run! Murder!

Coryphaeus

New murder, fresh horror in the tent!

(More screams and uproar; then a sudden furious battering on the walls of the tent.)

(Hecuba emerges from the tent.)

Hecuba

Never again
shall you see your sons, see them alive.
I have killed your sons, and you are blind!

Coryphaeus

Have you done it? Have you done this thing you say?

(Polymestor, blood pouring from his eyes, emerges from the tent on all fours. Wildly and blindly he scrambles about like an animal, searching for the women with his hands.)

Polymestor

Where?

Where shall I run?

Where shall I stop?

Where?

Where?

Where are you murderous hags of Troy?

Where are they hiding,
those bitches of Troy?

O god of the sun,
heal these bleeding eyes!
Give me back the light of my eyes!

Gods, to gorge their blood,
to rip the living flesh,
feed like a starving beast,
blood for blood!

My children abandoned,
left for Furies to claw,
for savage bitches to gorge,
their mangled bodies thrown
to whiten on the hill!

Coryphaeus

Tormented Man! Tortured past enduring.
You suffer now as you made others suffer.

Polymestor

Help me, you men of Thrace!
Help!

Soldiers, horsemen,
help! Come with spears!
Achaean, help! Help me,

sons of Atreus!

Help!

Help!

Hear me, help me, help!

Where are you?

Help me.

Women have killed my sons.

Murder, dreadful murder!

Butchery! Horror!

Help me!

Help!

O gods,

where can I go?

Coryphaeus

Who could reproach this man for wanting to die?

Death is what men want when the anguish of living

is more than they can bear.

(Enter Agamemnon, attended by soldiers.)

Agamemnon

Shouting and screams

of terror brought me here.

Polymestor

That voice! I know it.

-Agamemnon!

Look, look at me now-

Agamemnon

-Oh. Awful sight!

Poor Polymestor! Those blind bleeding eyes,

those dead children. ...Who did this, Polymestor?

Who killed these boys? Who put out your eyes?

Whoever it was, he must have hated you and your sons

With a savage, ruthless hate.

Polymestor

Hecuba. She did it,
she and the other women. They destroyed me,
they worse than destroyed me.

Agamemnon

You, Hecuba?
Do you admit this hideous, inhuman crime?
Is this atrocity your work?

Polymestor

Hecuba?
Is she here?
Where? Tell me where she is,
and I'll claw her to pieces with these bare hands!

Agamemnon (*Forcibly restraining him.*)

What? Have you lost your mind?

Polymestor

For god's sake,
let me go! Let me rip her limb from limb!

Agamemnon

Stop.
No more of this inhuman savagery now.
Each of you will give his version of the case
and I shall try to judge you both impartially.

Polymestor

Then listen, Agamemnon.
Hecuba had a son
called Polydorus.. her youngest. His father Priam,
apprehensive that Troy would shortly be taken,
sent the boy to me to be raised in my own house.
I killed him, and I admit it.

My action, however,
was dictated, as you shall see, by a policy
of wise precaution.

My primary motive was fear,

fear that if this boy, your enemy, survived,
he might someday found a second and resurgent Troy.
Further, when the Greeks heard that Priam's son
was still alive, I feared that they would raise
a second expedition against this new Troy,
in which case these fertile plains of Thrace
would once again be ravaged by war; once again
Troy and her troubles would work her neighbors harm-
those same hardships, my lord, which we in Thrace
have suffered in this war.

Hecuba, however,
somehow hearing that her son was dead or murdered,
lured me here on the pretext of revealing
the secret hiding-place of Priam's gold
in Troy. Then, alleging that we might be overheard,
she led my sons and me, unattended,
into the tent.

Surrounded by Trojan women
on every side!, I took my seat on a couch.

Meanwhile the young mothers
were fussing over my children,
passing them from hand to hand
until they were out of reach.

Then, incredibly,
they suddenly pulled daggers from their robes
and butchered both my sons, while troops of Women
rushed to tackle me, seizing my arms and legs
and holding me down. I tried to leap up
but they caught me and pulled me down.
I fought to free my arms, but they swamped me
and I went down beneath a flood of women,
unable to move a muscle.

And then-O gods!
they crowned their hideous work with worse outrage,
the most inhuman brutal crime of all.
They lifted their brooches and stabbed these bleeding eyes
through and through!

I leaped to my feet,
like a wounded animal hunting a pack of hounds,
staggering blind on all fours, battering
at the wall.

This is my reward, Agamemnon,
for my efforts in disposing of your enemies.
What I suffer now I suffer for you.
One word more.

On behalf of all those dead
who learned their hatred of women long ago,
for those who hate them now, for those unborn
who shall live to hate them yet, I now declare
my firm conviction :

neither earth nor ocean
produces a creature as savage and monstrous
as this woman.

This is my experience.
I know that this is true.

Coryphaeus

Do not presume,
Polymestor, whatever your provocation,
to include all women in this sweeping curse
without distinction.

Hecuba

The clear actions of a man,
Agamemnon, should speak louder than any words.

He claims he killed my son
on your behalf, Agamemnon, to spare
you Greeks the horrors of a second war.

(She turns to Polymestor.)

You liar!
First, what possible friendship could there be
between civilized Greeks and half-savages
like you?

Clearly none.

Then why this zeal

to serve their cause?

Are you related to them
or bound by marriage?

What is your motive then?

Fear, you say, that they might sail for Troy
and burn your crops or ravage your kingdom in passing.
Who could believe that preposterous lie?

No,
if you want the truth, let me tell you why:
it was your greed for gold that killed my son,
sheer greed and nothing more.

If not,
what explains your conduct then and now?
Answer me this.

Why, when Troy still flourished,
when the ramparts ran unbroken about the city,
when Priam was alive and Hector had his day--
why, if you were then so friendly to the Greeks,
did you fail to kill my son or take him prisoner
at least, when you had him at your mercy?

But no.
You waited, biding your time, until our sun
had set, and the smoke announced the sack of Troy.
Then you moved, killing your guest who sat
helpless at your hearth.

Why,
if you loved the Greeks as much as you assert,
did you miss your chance to present them with the gold--
that gold you claim does not belong to you
but to Agamemnon? But they were desperate then,
long years away from home.

But no. Even now
you cannot bear the thought of giving up
the gold, but hoard it for yourself at home.
One point more.

If you had done your duty
by my son, raised him and kept him safe,

men would honor and respect you as a noble friend.
For real friendship is shown in times of trouble;
prosperity is full of friends.

And then,
if someday you had stood in need of help,
my son would have been your friend and treasury .
But killing him you killed your loyal friend;
your gold is worthless now, your sons are dead,
and you are as you are.

(She turns back to Agamemnon.)

Agamemnon,
if you acquit this man, you prove yourself
unjust.

This is a man who betrayed his trust,
who killed against the laws of man and god,
faithless, evil, corrupt.

Acquit him now
and we shall say the same is true of you.
I say no more.

Coryphaeus

Well spoken, Hecuba.
Those whose cause is just will never lack
good arguments.

Agamemnon

It gives me no pleasure
to sit as judge on the miseries of others.
But I should cut a sorry figure in the world
if I allowed this case to come to court
and then refused or failed to give a verdict.
I have no choice.

Know then, Polymestor,
I find you guilty of murder as charged.
You murdered your ward, killed him in cold blood,
and not, as you assert, for the Greeks or me,
but out of simple greed, to get his gold.
You then construed the facts to fit your case

in court.

Perhaps you think it a trifling matter
to kill a guest.

We Greeks call it murder.

How, therefore, could I acquit you now
without losing face among men?

I could not do it.

You committed a brutal crime; therefore accept
the consequences of your act.

Hecuba

Condemned for what you did. Justly condemned.

Polymestor

O my children!

O light, light of my eyes!

Hecuba

It hurts, does it? And what of me? I mourn
my children too. "

Polymestor

Does it give you pleasure
to mock at me?

Hecuba

I rejoice in my revenge.

Polymestor

Enjoy it now. You shall not enjoy it long.
Hear my prediction.

I foretell that you-

Hecuba

Shall be carried on ship across the sea to Hellas?

Polymestor

-shall drown at sea. You shall climb to the masthead
and fall-

Hecuba

Pushed by force?

Polymestor

You shall climb the mast
of your own free will-

Hecuba

Climb the mast? With wings?

Polymestor

-changed to a dog, a bitch with blazing ey~s.

Hecuba

How could you know of this transformation?

Polymestor

Because our Thracian prophet, Dionysus,
told me so.

Hecuba

He neglected, I see, to foretell
your own fate.

Polymestor

Had he told my future then,
I never would have stumbled in your trap.

Hecuba

Shall I live or die?

Polymestor

Die. And when you die
your tomb shall be called-

Hecuba

In memory of my change?

Polymestor

-Cynossema, the bitch's grave, a landmark
to sailors.

Hecuba

What do I care how I die?
I have my revenge.

Polymestor

And your daughter Cassandra
must also die-

Hecuba

I spit your prophecies back.
Use them on yourself.

Polymestor

(Pointing to Agamemnon.)

-killed by this man's wife,
cut down by the bitter keeper of his house.

Hecuba

Clytemnestra? She would never do it.

Polymestor

Then she shall lift the dripping axe once more
and kill her husband too.

Agamemnon

Are you out of your head?
Are you asking for more trouble?

Polymestor

Kill me,
but a bath of blood waits for you in Argos.

Agamemnon

Carry him off! Drag him away!
(Soldiers seize Polymestor.)

Polymestor

Have I touched you now?

Agamemnon

Stop him. Gag his mouth.

Polymestor

Gag me. I have spoken.

Agamemnon

Take him away
this instant.

Then throw him on some desert island
since his tongue cannot stop its impudence.

(Soldiers leave with Polymestor.)

As for you, Hecuba, go now and bury
your two dead children.

The rest of you women,
go and report at once to your masters' tents.
For now the sudden wind sits freshly in our sails.
May heaven grant that our ordeal is done
at last!

May all be well at home in Argos!

(Exit Agamemnon with remaining attendants. Hecuba and her women go slowly to the tent, leaving the stage empty except for the abandoned bodies of Polymestor's sons. The Chorus files slowly out.)

Chorus #2

Files to the tents,
file to the harbor.

Chorus #3

There we embark
on life as slaves.

Chorus #4

Necessity is harsh.
Fate has no reprieve.

(Exit.)