

HECUBA

Translated by WILLIAM ARROWSMITH

HECUBA: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

It is not certain when Euripides' *Hecuba* was first produced, but metrical considerations suggest a date of around 424 BCE. Presumably Euripides wrote it for the annual competition at the Great Dionysian Festival in Athens. What the other three plays were in Euripides' tetralogy of that year, and how they fared in the dramatic competition, are unknown.

The Myth

Euripides' *Hecuba* combines two stories from the fall of Troy, both involving the sufferings of its last queen, Hecuba. First her daughter Polyxena is sacrificed by the Greeks to the dead Achilles. Then she learns that her youngest son Polydorus, who had been entrusted for safekeeping to the Thracian king Polymestor, has instead been treacherously murdered by him. Hecuba avenges herself upon Polymestor by blinding him and killing his children; at the end it is foretold that she will be transformed into a dog.

The bloody aftermath of the Trojan War—including the Greeks' sacrifice of Polyxena—was recounted in ancient Greek legend in gruesome detail and was often depicted in ancient Greek art. Euripides himself dramatized these events repeatedly, for example in *Andromache* (written only a year or two before *Hecuba*) and *The Trojan Women* (written less than ten years after *Hecuba*). Of the two stories that make up this play, the one involving Polyxena is likely to have been well known to Euripides' audience from heroic myth and epic poetry, though her willingness to be put to death is a characteristically Euripidean motif and may well have been a surprising innovation. By contrast, there is no trace of anything like Euripides' version of the Polydorus story before this play. In Homer, Polydorus is the youngest son of Priam; however, his mother is not Hecuba

but Laothoe, another wife of Priam, and the boy is killed in battle by Achilles. Polymestor does not appear anywhere in Greek legend or art before this play, and his etymologically transparent name (“much-planning”) suggests that Euripides may well have invented his character and the whole story that centers on him and Polydorus.

Ancient scholars noted that the story of Polyxena was to be found also in a tragedy by Sophocles titled *Polyxena*. While we do not know the date of this play and only very few fragments of it have survived, it seems to have borne a certain degree of resemblance to Euripides’ *Hecuba*. Modern scholars disagree about which play came first and whether, if Sophocles’ play preceded Euripides’, the older playwright might have influenced Euripides’ version of the Polyxena story.

Transmission and Reception

There is plenty of evidence that *Hecuba* was quite popular throughout antiquity, including quotations and allusions by later authors and the survival of at least ten papyri containing fragments of the play. It not only was selected as one of the ten canonical plays most studied and read in antiquity, but together with *Orestes* and *The Phoenician Women* it was included in the so-called Byzantine triad. As a result, it is transmitted by hundreds of medieval manuscripts and is equipped with very full ancient and medieval commentaries. Greek and Latin authors who portrayed Hecuba’s sufferings after the fall of Troy inevitably drew upon this play and upon Euripides’ *Trojan Women*. Narrative poets like Virgil, Ovid, and Quintus of Smyrna (the Greek author of an epic about the events in the Trojan War that occurred after the end of the *Iliad*; probably late fourth century CE) followed the outlines of Euripides’ plot at least in part and presumed their readers’ familiarity with his text. The Latin dramatists Ennius, in his tragedy *Hecuba*, and Pacuvius, in his tragedy *Ilione* (both plays are lost), seem to have taken Euripides’ play as their model; so too Seneca, in his *Trojan Women*, which has been preserved; and Hecuba eventually became a widely recognized figure of the vicissitudes of fortune. In ancient art, the sacrifice of Polyxena is often represented, other scenes that can be connected with Euripides’ *Hecuba* much less so.

The popularity of *Hecuba* in the Greek Middle Ages and the fact that its title is alphabetically the first in the Byzantine triad meant that it was usually the first play of Euripides to be read in medieval Byzantium as well as in the West during the Renaissance. As early as the fourteenth century, the first part of the Greek play was accompanied by an interlinear Latin translation, intended to make the play more accessible, that scholars attribute to Leonzio Pilato, who taught Greek to Petrarch and Boccaccio; and a number of other Latin translations survive, starting in the fifteenth century and culminating in Erasmus' successful metrical version. In the same century, Latin and then vernacular translations began to proliferate; and by the sixteenth century *Hecuba* was the most translated and imitated Greek play of all. Euripides' play was especially admired for its demonstration of the mutability of human circumstances, for its careful dramatic construction, for the polished eloquence of its speeches, and for its excessive violence. For the authors and audiences of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, *Hecuba* was a particularly compelling study of the nature and limits of vengeance. So too, the sacrifice of Polyxena fascinated many European painters starting in the seventeenth century (Pietro da Cortona, before 1625; Nicolas Poussin, ca. 1645–50; Giovanni Francesco Romanelli; Luca Giordano; Giovanni Battista Pittoni).

But by the beginning of the nineteenth century *Hecuba* had entered a period of prolonged disparagement and neglect. August Wilhelm Schlegel's influential Vienna lectures *On Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808) established a view of the play as the worst tragedy by the worst Greek tragedian—indeed as the worst surviving Greek tragedy of all—that dominated for more than a century. The play's portrayal of unrelieved suffering, its lyric excesses, the balanced rhetoric of its speeches, and its claustrophobic focus on Hecuba were regarded as intolerable weaknesses. It required considerable changes in classical scholarship, in modern drama, and not least in our sense of the world as a whole, changes characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century, before *Hecuba* could come back into its own. Only recently has this tragedy begun to recover its prominence, both in the estimation of scholars and as a dramatic force in the theater—and largely because of the very same features that nineteenth-century readers had scorned.

HECUBA

Characters

GHOST OF POLYDORUS, son of Hecuba

HECUBA, queen of Troy

CHORUS of captive Trojan women

POLYXENA, daughter of Hecuba

ODYSSEUS, a Greek leader

TALTHYBIUS, herald of the Greeks

HANDMAID of Hecuba

AGAMEMNON, commander in chief of the Greeks at Troy

POLYMESTOR, king of Thracian Chersonese

SONS of Polymestor (silent characters)

Scene: The shore of the Thracian Chersonese in front of a tent housing the captive Trojan women. The time is just before dawn.

(Enter the Ghost of Polydorus.)

GHOST OF 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,
last son of Cisseus' daughter Hecuba
and Priam, king of Troy.

My father, fearing
5 that Troy might fall to the assembled arms of Hellas,
had me conveyed in secret out of danger
sending me here to Thrace, to Polymestor,
his friend, who rules this plain of Chersonese
and curbs with harsh power a nation of horsemen.

10 With me my father secretly sent much gold,
intending that, if Troy should someday fall,
his living sons might be provided for.
Being the youngest, I was chosen, still too small
15 and slight to carry arms or throw a spear.
As long as Troy's fixed border stones stood proud
and unbreached, so long as our towers held intact
and Hector, my brother, prospered in the fighting,
I flourished like a green shoot under the care
20 of my father's Thracian friend—doomed as I was.
But when Troy fell and Hector died,
and picks and shovels rooted up our hearth,
and there, by the altar that a god once built,
Priam fell, butchered by Achilles' son,
25 then my father's friend killed me heartlessly
for the gold and threw my body to the sea,
so that he'd have the gold himself at home.
Here, pounded by the surf, my corpse still lies,
carried up and down on the heaving swell of the sea,
unburied and unmourned.

Disembodied now,

30 I hover as a wraith over my mother's head,
riding for three long days upon the air,
since she left Troy and came here to Chersonese.
35 Here on the shore of Thrace, in sullen idleness
beside its ships, the whole Greek army sits
and cannot sail. For Achilles' ghost appeared
above his tomb and stopped the Achaean fleet
as they stood out for sea on the journey home.
40 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.

45

And you, poor mother, you must see two corpses,
your two last children, each one dead this day,
my unhappy sister and me—I shall appear,
so that at last my body can be buried,
washed up on shore at the feet of a slave.
These were the favors I asked of the gods below—
50 to find my mother and be buried by her hands—
and they have granted my request.

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

*(Enter Hecuba from the tent, accompanied
by some Trojan serving women.)*

55 —O Mother,
fallen from a royal palace to a slave's life,
as wretched now as formerly you were blessed!
It must be that some god destroys you now,
making you pay for having once been happy.

(Exit Ghost of Polydorus.)

HECUBA [*chanting*]

*O helplessness of age!
Too old, too weak, to stand—
60 Help me, women of Troy.
Give this slave those hands
you offered to her once
when she was queen of Troy.
65 Prop me with your arms
and help these useless
stumbling legs to walk.*

[*singing*]

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

(Enter Chorus of captive Trojan women.)

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*I come to you in haste,
Hecuba.
I left the tent
100 where the lot assigned us.
Slaves, torn from home
when Troy was burnt and sacked
by the conquering Greeks!
105 I bring you painful news.
I cannot lighten your load.
I bring you worse to bear.
Just now, in full assembly,
the Greek decree came down.
They voted your daughter must die ...
to be slaughtered alive for Achilles!
The sails had been unfurled,
and the fleet stood out to sea,
110 when from his tomb Achilles rose,
armor blazing, and held them back,
crying:
“Ho, Argives, where do you sail,
115 leaving my grave unhonored?”
Waves of argument broke loose,
dividing Greek from Greek.
If one man spoke for death,
another spoke against it.
120 On your behalf spoke Agamemnon,
lover of your daughter,*

poor, mad Cassandra.

*Then the two sons of Theseus,
twin shoots of Athens, rose and spoke,
125 two speeches with one intent—
to crown Achilles' grave
with living blood, asking
if Cassandra's love meant more
than the spear of Achilles.*

*130 And so the struggle swayed,
equally poised—*

Until he spoke—

*that hypocrite with honeyed tongue,
that demagogue Odysseus.*

*And in the end he won,
135 asking what any slave was worth
when laid in the balance
with the honor of Achilles.*

*He wouldn't have the dead
descending down to Hades
telling tales of Greeks,
leaving the field of Troy,
ungrateful to Greeks*

140 who fell for Hellas.

*Now Odysseus is coming here
to tear your daughter from your breast
and wrench her from your old arms.
Go to the temples!*

Go to the shrines!

145 Fall at Agamemnon's knees!°

Call on heaven's gods!

*Invoke the gods below!
Unless your prayers prevent her death,
unless your pleas can keep her safe,
150 then you shall see your child,*

*face downward before the tomb,
as the red blood spreads black
from her gold-jeweled throat.*

HECUBA [*singing*]

STROPHE

O grief!

What can I say?

155 *What are the words for loss?*

*O bitterness of age,
slavery not to be borne,
unendurable!*

160 *To whom can I turn?*

*Childless and homeless,
my husband murdered,
my city stained with fire ...*

Where can I go?

Where shall I find safety?

*What god, what power
will help me now?*

165 *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,

170 *poor stumbling feet,
and take me to the tent.*

O my child!

Polyxena,

step from the tent!

Come and hear the news

*your wretched mother brings,
this news of horror^o
175 that touches your life!*

(Enter Polyxena from the tent.)

POLYXENA [*chanting throughout the following interchange with Hecuba, who also chants*]

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

HECUBA

180 *O my child! My baby ...*

POLYXENA

Again that ill-omened cry! Why this evil prelude?

HECUBA

I am afraid for you—

POLYXENA

*Tell me the truth now, Mother.
185 I am afraid, I am afraid.
Why are you groaning?*

HECUBA

O my child! My child—

POLYXENA

You must tell me, Mother.

HECUBA

*The Greeks,
in full assembly,*

190 *have decreed your death,
a living sacrifice
upon Achilles' tomb.*

POLYXENA

*Oh no, Mother, what are you saying?
Tell me this horrible evil,
tell me, Mother.*

HECUBA

*I tell you, child, ill-omened news,
195 the Argives have voted about your fate.*

POLYXENA [*now singing*]

ANTISTROPHE

*O my poor mother!
How I pity you,
this brokenhearted life
of pain!*

What god

*could make you suffer so,
200 impose such pain,
such grief in one poor life?
Alive, at least
I might have shared
your slavery with you,
my unhappy youth
with your miserable age.
But now I die,
and you must see my death—
butchered like a calf,
205 like a wild mountain beast's young,
ripped from your arms,
throat cut, and sinking*

downward into dark
210 with the unconsolable dead.
[now chanting again]
It is you I pity,^o
Mother.

For you I cry.

Not for myself,

not for this life

whose suffering is such
I do not care to live,
215 but call it happiness to die.

CHORUS LEADER [*speaking*]

Look, Hecuba. Odysseus is coming here
quickly. There must be news.

(Enter Odysseus from the side, attended by several soldiers.)

ODYSSEUS

By
now,
woman,

I think you know what decision the
army has taken
and how we voted.

But let
me
review
the
facts.

220 The Greeks have decreed to sacrifice
your daughter
Polyxena at the mound of Achilles'
tomb.
The army has delegated me to act as
escort.
Achilles' son will supervise the rite

and officiate as priest.

There
matters
rest.

225 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.
Under the circumstances,
the logical course is resignation.

HECUBA

O gods,
230 it seems a great ordeal of suffering is here,
one full of groans and tears.

Why do I live?
I should have died, I now see, long ago.
But Zeus kept me alive instead, poor wretch,
only to suffer, each time to suffer worse
than all the grief that went before.

Odysseus,
if a slave may make inquiries of the free—
235 without intent to hurt or give offense—
then let me ask some questions of you now
and hear your answers.

ODYSSEUS

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

HECUBA

Do you remember once
240 how you came to Troy, a spy, in beggar's disguise,
smeared with filth, in rags, and blood was streaming
from your brows down to your chin?

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

245 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 let you go?

ODYSSEUS

250 Because of what you did, I live today.

HECUBA

Then can you say that all these plans of yours are 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?

255 O gods, spare me the sight
of this thankless breed, these politicians
who do not care what harm they do their friends,
providing they can please a crowd!

260 Tell me,
what cleverness can justify their vote
to kill this girl?

Necessity of fate?
But how? What kind of necessity requires
the shedding of human blood upon a grave,
where custom calls for cattle?
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
265 than this poor girl? If death is what he wants,
let Helen die. He went to Troy for her;
for her he died.

Or is it merely looks
that you require, some surpassing beauty in a girl
for this fastidious ghost? Then do not look
for loveliness from us. Look to Helen,
loveliest of lovely women on this earth
270 by far—lovely Helen, who did him harm
far more than we.

So much by way of answer
to the justice of your case.

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 grasped my cheek and begged for life.

But see—

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

275 now I touch you in turn 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
280 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, and don't suppose, because
you're lucky now, that it will last. It won't.
All greatness goes.

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

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,
290 the same women whom they tore from sanctuary

at the altars. But they pitied us, they spared us then.
Plead with them.

Read them your law of murder.
Tell them how
it applies to slave and free without distinction.
But go.

Even if your arguments were
weak,
if you faltered or forgot your words, it would not matter.
That prestige you have will guarantee success.
The same speech has a different effect
295 spoken by a famous man or by a cipher.

CHORUS LEADER

No man could be so callous or so hard of heart
that he could hear your heartbreak and not weep.

ODYSSEUS

Allow me to give you, Hecuba, some good advice,
300 and don't in anger think me your enemy.

I readily admit how much I owe 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:

305 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.
Besides, there is a principle at stake
in whose neglect cities have come to grief,
because their keenest, their most exceptional men
received no greater honor than the common run.
And Achilles deserves our honor far more than most,

310

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
315 to serve? Would we fight or would we save our skins,
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 that gratitude
320 lasts for a lengthy time.

You speak of pity,
but I can talk of pity too. Pity us,
pity our old people, those men and women in Greece
no less miserable than you, the brides and parents
of all those brave young men who found a grave
in the dust of Troy.

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

But what of you,
barbarians who refuse your dead their rights
and break your faith with friends? And then you wonder
330 that Hellas should prosper while your countries suffer
the fate they deserve!

CHORUS LEADER

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
335 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!
340 For 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 chin
and beg for life.
Have no fear. You are safe
from me.
345 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,
350 I prove myself a coward, in love with life.
But why should I live?
I had a father once,
king of all Phrygia. And so I started life,
a princess of the blood, nourished on lovely hopes
to be a bride for kings—that suitors would come
competing for my hand, while over the maidens
and women of Troy, I stood acknowledged mistress,
355 among the girls equal to 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
360 to be sold to some pitiless new master
for cash? Sister of Hector, sister of princes,
at work in the kitchen, standing by the loom,
and scrubbing the floors, compelled to drag out
endless weary days? And the bride of kings,
365 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
370 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.

375 I am a novice
to miseries, whose yoke I might endure,
but with such pain that I prefer to die
than go on living badly.

CHORUS LEADER

Noble birth
380 is a stamp, conspicuous, awesome, among mortals.
And nobility's name grows greater with worthy actions.

HECUBA

I am proud of you, my child, but anguish sticks
in these fine words.

If your Achilles

385 must have his victim, Odysseus, if you
 have any care for your own honor left,
 then let her live. 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

390 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

395 Your daughter's death will do. We should not pile
 one on another. If only we did not need
 this one!

HECUBA

But I must die with her! I must!

ODYSSEUS

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

HECUBA

I shall stick to her
like ivy to the oak.

ODYSSEUS

Take my advice, Hecuba.

For your own good, do not.

HECUBA

400

Never, never
will I let her go.

ODYSSEUS

While I, for my part,
refuse to leave her here.

POLYXENA

Mother,
listen.

And you, Odysseus, be gentle with a
mother's love.
She has reasons for her anger.

Poor
Mother,

do not struggle with those stronger than
you.

405

Is this what you want—to be thrown down
in the dust,
this poor old body torn away from me,
humiliated by younger and stronger arms?
They will do it. No, this is not for you.
O Mother, Mother,

give me
your hand,

410

and put your cheek to mine for one last
time
and then no more. For the last, last time
I look upon this gleaming circle of the sun

and speak the last words I shall
ever say.

O Mother, Mother,

now I go

below!

HECUBA

415 Leaving me to live, a slave in the light!°

POLYXENA

Unmarried to my death, no wedding songs for me!

HECUBA

Pity for you, and wretchedness for me!

POLYXENA

To lie in the dark in Hades, far from you!

HECUBA

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

POLYXENA

420 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 Hector and old Priam?

HECUBA

Tell them this: I am the queen of sorrow.

POLYXENA

O sweet breasts that nourished me!

HECUBA

425 So wrong, so wrong! So young to die!

POLYXENA

Farewell, Cassandra! 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

430 He lives. He will close your dying eyes.

HECUBA

I have died of sorrow while I was still alive.

POLYXENA

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!

435

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

(Exit Odysseus and Polyxena to the side.)

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!

440

My friends,
I've been destroyed. If only I could see
Helen of Sparta, sister of Zeus' sons,

destroyed like me. For she with her fair eyes
made ashes of the happiness of Troy!

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

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

ANTISTROPHE A

*455 Or 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
460 for lovely Leto
in honor of her son?
There shall I sing
with the maidens of Delos,
praising Artemis'
465 bow and fillets of gold?*

STROPHE B

*Or in the city of Pallas,
in Athens, shall I yoke*

*the horses on the goddess' robe,
stitching cloth of saffron
470 with threads of every color,
sewing the Titans there,
who were killed by stabbing fire,
the thunderbolts of Zeus?*

ANTISTROPHE B

*O my children!
O my forefathers!
O city, ruined land,
ashes and smoke, wasted
by the spear of the Argives!
480 I live, but live a slave,
forced to a foreign land,
torn westward out of Asia,
exchanging the chambers of death
for a home in Europe!*

(Enter Talthybius from the side.)

TALTHYBIUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

TALTHYBIUS

O Zeus, what can I say?

That you look on mankind

and care?

Or do we, holding that the gods exist,

490 deceive ourselves with unsubstantial lies

while chance controls the world?

Is this the queen
of Troy once rich in gold? Is this the wife
of Priam the great?

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

Oh horror! I am old,
but I would rather die than sink as low
as this poor woman has fallen now.

Rise,
unhappy lady. Lift your body up,
500 and raise your white-haired head.

HECUBA

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

TALTHYBIUS

I am Talthybius,
servant of the Greeks, lady. I bring you a message
from Agamemnon.

HECUBA

505 Have the Greeks decreed my death?
Tell me that, and you are welcome, dearest man.
No other news could please me better now.
Let's go in haste. You lead the way, old man.

TALTHYBIUS

No, not that.
510 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?

So I cannot die?

You came to tell me this?

O gods, my child!

My poor child! Torn from my arms! Dead!

Dead. Without you, I now am childless.

515 So how did you all put her to death? With honor
and respect, or did you kill her savagely,
as an enemy? Tell me, old man. Let me hear it all,
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,
520 and I will cry again while telling you,
lady. But listen.

The whole army of the Greeks
was present for your daughter's sacrifice,
and Achilles' son took Polyxena's hand
and led her up the tomb. I stood nearby;
525 with them, a troop of soldiers purposely appointed
to prevent her struggles.

Then Achilles' son
lifted a golden beaker to pour the offering
of wine to his dead father and nodded to me
to call for silence.

530 "Quiet, Achaeans!" I shouted,
"Silence in the ranks! Keep quiet!" A hush
fell upon the army and he began to pray:
"Father Achilles, Peleus' son, receive
535 this offering I pour to summon your spirit up.
Rise and drink this gift we give to you,

this virgin's dark blood. Be gracious to us:
set free our ships and loose our mooring ropes.
Grant to us all our day of coming home,
540 grant us all to come home safe from Troy!"
So he prayed, and the army with him.

Then,
grasping the hilt of his gilded sword, he drew it
from the sheath, and nodded to the chosen youths
to seize her. But she spoke first:

545 "Wait, you Greeks
who sacked my city! Of my own free will I die.
Let no man touch me. I offer my throat
bravely to the sword. But by the gods,
550 let me be free for now. Let me die free.
I am of royal blood, and I scorn to be called
a slave among the dead."

"Yes!" the army roared,
and Agamemnon told the young men to let her go.
555 And they, when they had heard the final decree^o
of the man with highest authority, let go.
When she heard the rulers' words she grasped her robes
and ripped them open from the shoulder down
as far as the waist, exposing her naked breasts,
560 bare and lovely like a sculptured goddess.
Then she sank, kneeling on the ground, and gave
this most heroic speech:

"Strike, captain.
Here is my breast. Will you stab me there?
565 Or in the neck? Here is my throat, ready
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
570 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 big logs
575 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.
580 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.

CHORUS LEADER

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

HECUBA

O my child,
585 how shall I deal with this thronging crowd of
blows,
these sufferings, each with its petition,
clamoring
for attention? If I lay my hand on one,
another shoulders in, and then a third
comes on, distracting, each fresh sorrow
breeding new successors in its turn.

590 But now, although I can't forget your
 death, can't stop
 crying—
 yet a kind of
 comfort comes
 in knowing
 how nobly you died.
 And yet how
 strange it
 seems.
 Even worthless ground, given a gentle push
 from heaven, will harvest well, while fertile
 soil,
 595 starved of what it needs, bears badly.
 But human nature never
 seems to change;
 ignoble stays itself, bad to the end;
 and nobility good, its nature uncorrupted
 by any shock or blow, always the same,
 enduring excellence.
 Is it in our
 blood^o
 600 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
 nonsense
 of despair.
 Talthybius, go
 to the Greeks
 and tell them this from me: that not a hand
 605 is to be laid on my child; make them keep

the crowd away.

For in armies
the size of this,
men are prone to violence, sailors
undisciplined
worse than a fire, while the man who stands
apart
is called a coward.

(Exit Talthybius to the side.)

—Take your pitcher, old servant,
610 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 Achilles, and I must bathe the bride
and lay her out—not as she deserves, but as well
as I can.
But how? I've nothing precious left.

What then?
615 I'll gather from my women in the tent
whatever poor trinkets they managed to pilfer
from their own homes.

(Exit Handmaid to the side.)

Where is greatness gone?
Where is it now, that stately house, the home
that was so happy once? King Priam,
620 blessed with children once, in your pride of wealth?
And what am I of all I used to be,
mother of sons, mother of princes?
Gone,
all gone, and nothing left.

Now who
will boast, be proud, or plume his confidence—

the rich man in his insolence of wealth,
625 the public man's conceit of office or success?
For we are nothing; our ambition, greatness, pride,
all vanity.

That man is happiest
who lives from day to day and asks no more,
garnering no evil in his simple life.

(Exit Hecuba into the tent.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*That morning was my fate,
630 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—
635 loveliest of women
the golden sun has seen.*

ANTISTROPHE

*Grief, and worse than grief,
necessity surrounds us.
One man's folly made
640 a doom shared by all,
ruin over Simois.
Paris sat as judge
645 upon three goddesses.
His verdict was war.*

EPODE

*War, slaughter, and the ruin of my house,
while in her house the Spartan girl mourns too,
650 grieving by the wide Eurotas,*

*and mothers mourn for their sons,
and tear out their snowy hair*
655 *and dredge their cheeks with bloody nails.*

(Enter the Handmaid from the side.)

HANDMAID

Where is the queen, women?
Where is Hecuba
whose sufferings outstrip all rival runners?
660 No one shall take that crown away.

CHORUS LEADER

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

(Enter other women, carrying on a bier a shrouded corpse.)

HANDMAID

This is the grief
I bring to Hecuba. Gentle words are hard
to find: the burden I bring is disaster.

(Enter Hecuba from the tent.)

CHORUS LEADER

Look: here she's coming now from out the tent,
665 she's just in time to hear your news.

HANDMAID

My queen,
more wretched, more miserable than I can say.
Now you live no more, the light is gone!
No child, no husband, no city—utterly ruined!

HECUBA

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

HANDMAID

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

HECUBA

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

HANDMAID

Cassandra is alive. Mourn for this dead boy.

(She strips the shroud from the corpse, revealing the dead Polydorus.)

Look at this corpse that I uncover now,
680 this unexpected horror.

HECUBA

It is my son!
Polydorus, warded by my friend in Thrace!
No!

O gods in heaven, let me die!
[singing; the Handmaid and the Chorus Leader speak in reply]
O my son, my son,
685 *now the awful dirge begins,*
the fiend, the fury,
singing, wailing in me now,
shrieking madness!

HANDMAID

So now, poor woman, you've seen your child is dead?

HECUBA

*Horror too sudden to be believed,
unbelievable loss,*

690

blow after blow!

*And this is all my life:
the mourning endless,
the anguish unending.*

CHORUS LEADER

Dreadful, poor woman, the evils that we suffer.

HECUBA

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

HANDMAID

I do not know. I found him on the shore.

HECUBA

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

HANDMAID

The surf had washed his body up.

HECUBA

O gods, my dream!

I see it now,

705 *those black wings beating the dark,
its message has not missed me,
you live no longer in Zeus' light!*

CHORUS LEADER

Who murdered him? Did your dream show you that?

HECUBA

710 *Who but my friend, horseman in Thrace,
 where his father hid him away from harm?*

CHORUS LEADER

Murdered? Murdered by a friend? Killed for gold?

HECUBA

*Unspeakable, unimaginable crime,
unbearable!*

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

CHORUS LEADER

Unhappy Hecuba, most miserable of mortals
upon this earth, how heavily some god
falls on you.

 —But look: I see your master,
725 Agamemnon, coming here. So we'll be silent.

(Enter Agamemnon from the side with attendants.)

AGAMEMNON

Why this delay of yours, Hecuba,
in burying your daughter? I received your message
from Talthybius that none of our men should touch her,
and I gave strict orders to that effect.
730 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?
735 I can see from his clothes that he's not a Greek.

(Hecuba turns away from him.)

HECUBA

(Aside.)

Poor Hecuba—it's I that I mean now,
saying "you"—what shall I do?
Throw myself
at his knees and beg for mercy or hold my tongue
and suffer in silence?

AGAMEMNON

Why do you turn away
in silence? And what's the meaning of these tears?
740 What happened here? Who is this man?

HECUBA

(Aside.)

But suppose he treats me like an enemy slave,
and pushes me away? I could not bear it.

AGAMEMNON

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

HECUBA

(Aside.)

745 And yet I could be wrong. Am I imagining?
He may mean well.

AGAMEMNON

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

HECUBA

(Aside.)

But without his help I lose my only chance
750 of revenging my children. So why should I hesitate?
Win or lose, he is my only hope.

(She turns to Agamemnon and falls at his knees.)

Agamemnon, I implore you, I beg you
by your chin, 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

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

AGAMEMNON

Well, what's the help you're asking me for?

HECUBA

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

AGAMEMNON

I see him—but I don't see what this means.

HECUBA

This was my son. I gave him birth.

AGAMEMNON

Which son,
poor woman?

HECUBA

Not one of Priam's sons who died
in Troy.

AGAMEMNON

765

You mean you had another son?

HECUBA

Another son, in vain. 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

770

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
could it have been? His host, our Thracian friend.

AGAMEMNON

775 Then his motive, you think, was the gold?

HECUBA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

HECUBA

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

AGAMEMNON

What was she doing there?
Searching for him?

HECUBA

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

AGAMEMNON

780 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

785 What woman on this earth was ever cursed
like this?

HECUBA

There is none but goddess Fortune
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,
790 give me my revenge on that treacherous friend
who flouted every god in heaven and in hell
to do this impious murder.

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

Murder may have its reasons, its motives,
but he even refused my son a grave and threw him
to the sea, unburied!

I am a slave, I know,

and slaves are weak. But the gods are strong, and over them
800 there stands the law that governs all. It is
by virtue of this law that we believe
the gods exist, and by this law we live,
distinguishing good from evil.

Apply that law
now. For if you flout it, so that those
who murder their own guests or defy the gods
805 go unpunished, then human justice withers,
corrupted at its source.

Honor my request,
Agamemnon.

Punish this murder.
Pity me.

Be like a painter. Stand back, see me
in perspective,

see me whole, observe
my wretchedness—

once a queen, and now
810 a slave; blessed with children, happy once,
now old, no children, no city, utterly alone,
unhappiest of mortals ...

(Agamemnon turns away.)

O no! You turn away—
what can I do? My only hope is lost.
O this helplessness!

Why, why
815 do we make so much of knowledge, struggle so hard
to get some skill, quite rightly, at many things,
but persuasion, the only art whose power
is absolute, worth any price we pay,
the sole ruler over human minds, by which
we persuade others and gain what we want—persuasion

820 we totally neglect. And so we fail;
we lose our hopes.

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.

It may be futile now
825 to urge the claims of love, but let me urge them
anyway. 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
830 does she receive from you, and I, in turn,
for her?°

Look now at this dead boy,
Cassandra's brother. Help him, and you help
your brother-in-law. Revenge him.

835 One word more.
If by some magic, some gift of the gods,
I could become all speech—tongues in my arms,
hands that talked, voices from my hair and feet—
then, all together, I'd fall and touch your knees,
840 crying, begging, imploring with a thousand tongues—
O master, greatest light of Hellas, hear me,
help an old woman, though she's worth nothing, avenge her!
You must do your duty as a man of honor:
845 see justice done. Punish the murderer.

CHORUS LEADER

How strange in their reversals are our lives!
The laws of harsh necessity° decide,
joining enemies in common cause
and alienating friends.

AGAMEMNON

I pity you deeply,
850 Hecuba, for the terrible death of this poor boy.
And I am moved by your fortunes and suppliant hand.
So far as justice is concerned, the gods know well,
nothing would please me more than to bring
this murderer to book.

But my position
here is delicate. If I give you your revenge,
855 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—if to me^o he's precious,
860 that's irrelevant and no 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 complains, then I must
be slow.

HECUBA

Then no man on earth is truly free.
865 All are slaves of money or necessity.
Or public opinion or fear of prosecution
prevents each one from doing what he thinks
is right.

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

870 Be my confidant,
the silent partner of my plot to kill my son's
murderer. Give me your passive support.
Then if some uproar breaks out or the Greeks
attempt a rescue, obstruct them covertly

without appearing to act for me.

875

For the rest,

have no fear. I shall manage.

AGAMEMNON

How?

Poison? Or do you think your
aged hand

could lift a sword and kill? Who would
help you?

On whom could you count?

HECUBA

880

Remember: Trojan women

are hidden in these tents.

AGAMEMNON

You mean our prisoners?

HECUBA

They will help me get revenge.

AGAMEMNON

But women?

Women overpower men?

HECUBA

There's dreadful power
in numbers, when they are combined with cunning.

AGAMEMNON

True,

885

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: they murdered every one. And so
it shall be here. Let's bandy no more words,
and let this woman here have your safe-conduct
through the army.

(Agamemnon nods. Hecuba turns to the Handmaid.)

Go to our Thracian friend
and give him this message:

890 "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 Handmaid with one or more of
Agamemnon's attendants to the side.)*

One more favor,
Agamemnon.

895 Defer my daughter's funeral
until my son's corpse can be 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,
900 until the god sends us a favoring wind,
we must ride at anchor here and wait to sail.
May things turn out well! The common interests
of states and individuals alike demand
that good men prosper and evil men be punished.

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

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

905 *O Ilium! O my country,
 whose name men speak no more
 among unfallen cities!
 So dense a cloud of Greeks
 came, spear on spear, destroying!*
910 *Your crown of towers shorn away,
 and everywhere the staining smoke,
 most pitiful. O Ilium,
 whose streets I shall not walk again!*

ANTISTROPHE A

*At midnight came my doom,
 midnight when the feast is done*
915 *and sleep falls sweetly on the eyes.
 The songs and sacrifice,
 the dances, all were done.
 My husband lay asleep,*
920 *his spear upon the wall,
 on Ilium's peak,
 no longer seeing the ships
 massed on Ilium's shore.*

STROPHE B

*I was setting my hair
 in the soft folds of the net,
 gazing at the endless light*
925 *deep in the golden mirror,
 preparing myself for bed,
 when tumult broke the air*

*and shouts and cries
shattered the empty streets—
930 “Onward, onward, you Greeks!
Sack the city of Troy
and see your homes once more!”*

ANTISTROPHE B

*Dressed only in one gown
like a girl of Sparta,
I left the bed of love
935 and prayed to Artemis.
But the answer was, “No.”
I saw my husband lying dead,
and they took me away to the sea.
Backward I looked at Troy,
as the ship sped on
940 and Ilium slipped away,
and I was dumb with grief.*

EPODE

*A curse on Helen,
sister of the sons of Zeus,
and my curse on him,
945 disastrous Paris,
whose wedding wasted my Troy
and banished me from my home!
No marriage but a curse, the curse of some demon!
Let the salty sea
never bring her home!
Let there be no return
950 for Helen of Troy!*

*(Enter Polymestor from the side, followed by his two
young sons, the Handmaid, and several attendants.
Hecuba keeps her eyes fixed on the ground.)*

POLYMESTOR

Dearest Hecuba, wife of my dear friend,
poor unhappy Priam!°

How I pity you,
955 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,
fame—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.

960 But how does my sorrow help?
Your loss remains.

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 middle
of Thrace, at the time when you arrived. In fact,
965 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.
970 Forgive it,
and do not think me rude, Polymestor.
In any case, habit and custom excuse me,°
975 forbidding that a woman look directly at a man.

POLYMESTOR

I quite understand.

You sent for me on some business, I believe?

I have a matter to discuss with you and your sons.
But privately, if possible.

POLYMESTOR

You may leave. There is no danger here.

(Exit his attendants to the side.)

985 How can I, your prosperous friend, help you now
in your time of troubles? I am ready.

First

Anything
else can
wait.

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

HECUBA

990

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

995

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.
I hope that what I have myself will stand
me in good stead.

HECUBA

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

POLYMESTOR

Not yet. We are waiting to hear.

HECUBA

1000 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

1005 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 Athena's temple
once stood in Troy?

POLYMESTOR

The gold is there?

Is there a marker?

HECUBA

1010

above the ground.

A black rock jutting up

POLYMESTOR

Is that all?

HECUBA

No:

my money. I smuggled some money away from Troy.
Could you keep it for me?

POLYMESTOR

You have it on you?

Where is it hidden?

HECUBA

There, inside the tent,

beneath a heap of spoils.

POLYMESTOR

1015

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 Greeks; only women.

(Screams and commotion are heard from inside the tent.)

POLYMESTOR

(From within.)

Blind! Blind!

O light!

1035

Light of my eyes!

CHORUS LEADER

That scream of anguish! Did you hear, my friends?

POLYMESTOR

(From within.)

Help!

Look out, children!

Murder!

Run! Murder!

CHORUS LEADER

New murder, fresh horror in the tent!

POLYMESTOR

(From within.)

Run! Will you run? But I'll get you yet!

1040

I'll batter down this tent with my bare fists!

See there, a heavy fist has launched its blow!°

CHORUS LEADER

What should we do?

Break down the door?

Hurry!

Hecuba needs our help!

(Enter Hecuba from the tent.)

HECUBA

Pound away!

Go on, batter down the door!

1045 Nothing can ever give you back the light
of your eyes.

Never shall you see your sons
alive again. For I have killed them both!

CHORUS LEADER

Have you done it? Have you felled your Thracian host
and rule him now? Have you done this thing you say?

HECUBA

Be patient a moment, and then see for yourself.

1050 Watch him as he stumbles and staggers out of the tent—
stone-blind.

See the bodies of his two sons,
killed by my women and me.

His debt is paid
and I have my revenge.

But hush: here he comes,
raging from the tent. Let me keep out of his reach.

1055 In his Thracian fury he will stop at nothing.

*(Enter Polymestor blinded from the tent on all fours. His
sons' bodies are visible in the doorway of the tent.)*

POLYMESTOR [*singing*]

Where?

Where shall I run?

Where shall I stop?

Where?

*Like a raging beast I go,
running on all fours*

on my hands on the track!

Where?

Where?

Here?

1060 *Where?*

*Where can I pounce
on those murderous hags of Troy?*

Where are you, women?

1065 *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!
Shh.*

1070 *The sound of footsteps.*

But where?

Where can I leap?

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

1075 *No, no.*

*Where am I running now?
My children abandoned,
for Bacchantes of hell to claw,
for savage bitches to gorge,
their mangled bodies thrown
pitilessly on the hill!
But where?*

Where shall I run?

1080 *Where can I stand at bay?
Run, run, run,
gather robes and run!
Let me run for my lair,*

*race like a ship,
sails furled, for the shore!
I'll run for my lair
and stand at bay
where my children lie!*

CHORUS LEADER

1085 Tormented man! Tortured past enduring.
 You suffer now as you made others suffer.°

POLYMESTOR [*singing*]

*Help me, you men of Thrace!
Help!*

*Soldiers, horsemen,
1090 help! Come with spears!
 Achaeans, help! Help me,
 sons of Atreus!*

Help!

Help!

*Hear me, help me, help!
Where are you?*

Help me!

1095 *Women have destroyed me.
 Dreadful sufferings!
 Butchery! Horror!
 Help me!*

Help!

*Where can I go?
Where can I run?
You gods in heaven,
1100 give me wings to fly!
 Let me leap to heaven
 where the vaulted stars,
 Sirius and Orion,
 flare out their fire,*

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

AGAMEMNON

You, Hecuba?
1125 Do you admit this hideous, inhuman crime?
Is this atrocity your work?

POLYMESTOR

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

AGAMEMNON

What? Have you lost your mind?

POLYMESTOR

For the gods' sake,
let me at her! Let me rip her limb from limb!

AGAMEMNON

Stop.
No more of this barbarian savagery now.
1130 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,
1135 apprehensive that Troy would one day 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.

1140 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,

as they have done just now.

1145 Hecuba,
however,
somehow hearing that her son was dead,
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, all unattended,
into the tent.

Surrounded
by Trojan
women
1150 on every side, I sat down on a couch.

The atmosphere seemed one of friendliness.
The women fingered my robes, then lifted
the cloth
to inspect it better under the light,
exclaiming
over the quality of our Thracian weaving.
1155 Still others stood admiring my two lances
and before I knew it I was stripped of all
my weaponry.

Meanwhile
the young
mothers
were fussing over my children, jouncing
them in their arms
with hugs and kisses and passing them from
hand to hand
until they were out of reach.

Then,
incredibly,
1160 out of that scene of domestic peace,
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
1165 and holding me down. I tried to leap up
but they caught me by the hair and pulled
me down.
I fought to free my arms, but I was swamped
beneath a flood of women. I could not
move.
And then they crowned their hideous work
with worse,
the most inhuman brutal crime of all.
1170 They took their brooches and stabbed my

hapless eyes
till they poured out blood! Then they ran for
cover,
scattering through the tent. I leaped to my
feet,
1175 like a wounded animal chasing a pack of
hounds,
tracking along every wall, like a hunter
beating and striking everywhere.

This is my
reward,
Agamemnon,
for my efforts in disposing of your enemy.
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
1180 who shall live to hate them yet, I now
declare
my firm conviction:

neither earth
nor ocean
produces a creature as savage and as
monstrous
as woman. Any man who has ever met one
will know that this is true.

CHORUS LEADER

Do not presume,
Polymestor, whatever your provocation,
to include all women in this sweeping curse
1185 without distinction. °

HECUBA

The clear actions of a man,
Agamemnon, should speak louder than any words.
Good words should get their goodness from our lives;
1190 the evil that we do should show in speech
and never make injustice sound attractive.
Some men, I know, make a science of such persuasion,
but in the end their speciousness will show.
The impostors are punished; not one escapes
his downfall.
1195 So much by way of beginning.
Now for him.

(To Polymestor.)

You claim you killed my son
on behalf of Agamemnon, and to spare
the Greeks the horrors of a second war.
You liar!
First, what possible friendship could there be
1200 between civilized Greeks and barbarians
like you?
Clearly none.

Then why this zeal
to serve their cause?

Are you related to them?
Or would you be by marriage?

Then what's your motive?
Fear, you say, that they would sail for Troy
and ravage the harvest of your land again.
Who could believe that preposterous lie?

1205 No,
if you'd speak the truth, it was gold and your greed
that killed my son.

For tell me: why, when Troy

still flourished and its ramparts ringed the city,
1210 when Priam was alive and Hector had his day—
why, if you wanted to be Agamemnon's friend,
did you not then kill my son or hand him over
alive to the Greeks? It would have been so easy—
you were keeping and raising him in your house.

But no.

You waited, biding your time, until our sun
1215 had set, and the smoke announced the sack of Troy.
Then you moved, killing your guest and friend
who sat at your hearth.

And what of this,
which shows your crime for what it was?

Why,
if you loved the Greeks as much as you assert,
1220 did you miss your chance to present them with the gold—
that gold you claim does not belong to you
but to Agamemnon? For 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.
Another point.

If you had done your duty
1225 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 has friends galore.

And then,
if someday you had stood in need of help
and if my son had prospered he'd have been
1230 a mighty treasury for you. Instead,
you've killed your friend, your gold is worthless now,
your sons are dead, and you are as you are.

(To Agamemnon.)

Agamemnon, this is what I say to you:
if you assist 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.

1235 Assist him now
and we shall say the same is true of you.
But you are my master: I criticize no further.

CHORUS LEADER

Ah, true it is: for mortals, a good cause
will always find good arguments to back it.

AGAMEMNON

1240 It does not give me any satisfaction
to sit as judge on the miseries of others.
But I should cut a sorry figure in the world
if I took on this case and then refused
to give a verdict.

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,
1245 but out of simple greed, to get his gold.
You then construed the facts to fit your case.
Perhaps you think it but a trifling matter
to kill a guest.

Well, we Greeks call it murder.
How, therefore, could I acquit you now
without incurring blame among men?

1250 I could not.
You committed a brutal crime; therefore accept

the consequences of your act.

POLYMESTOR

Oh no!

Defeated by a slave woman! I shall be
punished by my inferiors, it seems.

HECUBA

But justly so, since you committed evil.

POLYMESTOR

O my children!

1255

And O light of my eyes!

HECUBA

It hurts, does it? And what of me? I mourn
my child 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 the seawaters ...

HECUBA

1260 Shall carry me on ship across to Greece?

POLYMESTOR

... shall drown you, after you fall from the masthead.

HECUBA

Who will force me to jump?

POLYMESTOR

You shall climb the mast
of your own free will ...

HECUBA

Climb the mast? With wings?

POLYMESTOR

1265 ... changed to a dog, a bitch with blazing eyes.

HECUBA

How do you know of this transformation?

POLYMESTOR

Because our Thracian prophet, Dionysus,
told me so.

HECUBA

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

POLYMESTOR

True: had he told my future then,
I never would have fallen into your trap.

HECUBA

Does the prophecy say I'll live or die?

POLYMESTOR

You'll die.
1270 And when you die your tomb shall then be called ...

HECUBA

In memory of my change, perhaps? Please tell me!

POLYMESTOR

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

HECUBA

What do I care how I die?

I have my revenge.

POLYMESTOR

1275

And your daughter Cassandra

must also die ...

HECUBA

I spit your prophecies back.

Use them on yourself.

POLYMESTOR

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

HECUBA

Clytemnestra? May she never be so crazed!

POLYMESTOR

Yes, she will lift the deadly axe on high
and kill this man, her husband, too.

AGAMEMNON

You're mad!

Are you asking for more trouble?

POLYMESTOR

1280

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

AGAMEMNON

Slaves, carry him off! Drag him away!

POLYMESTOR

Have I touched you now?

AGAMEMNON

Stop him. Gag his mouth.

POLYMESTOR

Gag me. I have spoken.

AGAMEMNON

Take him away

this instant.

1285 Then throw him on some desert island
since his tongue cannot stop its impudence.

(Exit Polymestor to the side escorted by attendants.)

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

You other Trojan women,

1290 go to your masters' tents. For now I see
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 to the side, Hecuba and her women with the corpse of Polydorus into the tent.)

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*File to the tents,
file to the harbor.
There we embark*

on life as slaves.

1295 *Necessity is harsh.*

Fate has no reprieve.