

## **Adapting *Hecuba* -- Where Do Problems Begin?**

~ a script composed for studying Euripides' *Hecuba* in the college classroom ~

For the "Ancient Drama in Performance: Theory and Practice" conference at Randolph College, in Lynchburg, Virginia, on October 9, 2010.

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### The Cast (*Students may read more than one role.*)

The Professor

Student #1 (*expressive and inquisitive*)

Student #2 (*fair minded and empathetic*)

Student #3 (*practical and well informed*)

The Ghost of Polydorus

Hecuba

The Chorus (of captive Trojan women)

The Chorus Leader

Polyxena

Odysseus

Talthybius

The Greek Soldiers

Note: The Professor and Students #1, #2, and #3 speak, as indicated, all the lines that are neither capitalized nor underlined in the script. The lines spoken by characters drawn from Euripides' *Hecuba* are ALL CAPITALIZED AND UNDERLINED; these characters' lines follow upon the Professor's introductory phrase (**written in bold print**).

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*(The Professor begins the presentation.)*

PROFESSOR: *(Addressing the audience)* Hello, everyone. As a prelude to today's discussion of Euripides' *Hecuba*, I'd like to note some ethical issues encountered in the play. To do so, I've elicited the cooperation of several fine actors. Also, in viewing *Hecuba* in its own time and ours, I'm going to take a few liberties, as a play director or filmmaker might do.

*(Speaking to the actors positioned near the Professor.)* Imagine we've gathered here for a prerehearsal meeting so we can begin to explore the dialogue, action, and possible adaptations of the script. Much of what you'll read is invented and not taken directly from the original play.

*(Gesturing to three of the actors)* The actors reading the student roles should feel free to ask questions and make comments along the way. After the reading, we'll discuss these matters further at the Socrates Café.

*(Addressing the audience and the actors)* As we know, *Hecuba* is set in Thrace, in the aftermath of the fall of Troy, in the encampment of the Greek army. Having slain the Trojan men, the Greek army has enslaved the fallen city's women, including the former queen, Hecuba. All of this occurred because Hecuba's son, Paris, abducted the beautiful Helen from Greece . . .

STUDENT #1 *(Interjects)*: Excuse me, Professor, this protocol puzzles me. An army is defeated—so shouldn't a treaty be signed, prisoners taken, reparations demanded, an occupying army instructed to edify the public morally regarding the issue of abduction—you know, these sorts of things, rather than mass slaughter and enslavement?

PROFESSOR: Interesting point. **However, the commander Odysseus simply told his troops:**

ODYSSEUS: KILL ALL THE MEN! ENSLAVE ALL THE WOMEN! BURN THE CITY!  
WE'RE GOING HOME! I'M TIRED OF THIS TEN-YEAR WAR! I NEVER WANT TO  
HEAR THE WORD TROY AGAIN!

STUDENT #2: (*Sadly*) So many women are the victims of war.

STUDENT #3: Well, being enslaved is better than being dead.

PROFESSOR: Or is it? For the free-spirited Trojan women—as for anyone—it's hard to find dignity and a good life in enslavement.

STUDENT #1: As for Hecuba being a victim, her former position as queen complicates matters. Does she, along with her attendants, represent female victimization—or simply fallen power?

STUDENT #3: And from today's perspective, aren't women, as part of the feat of liberation, often serving alongside men wherever troops are sent? Perhaps women can now be more easily envisioned as soldiers and officers rather than vulnerable ladies left behind.

STUDENT #2: Since the Trojan War took ten years to settle, were there no peace protests or negotiators along the way?

STUDENT #1: Granted this is a play, but did the Trojan War ever actually happen?

PROFESSOR: Good questions, but for now, let's consider the ghost's appearance in the opening scene: Hecuba's young son, Polydorus, tells us he's been killed by his war-time guardian, Polymestor, the King of Thrace. **The murdered lad will rest in peace once he's given burial:**

POLYDORUS: MOMMY, PLEASE BURY ME AS BEFITS A PRINCE OF TROY!

STUDENT #2: This isn't an angry ghost, seeking vengeance.

STUDENT #3: The play is a revenge tragedy, but it's Hecuba's revenge, not her son's.

STUDENT #1: Why is that?

PROFESSOR: "Why?" indeed. Meanwhile, the Greeks are stalled in Thrace, for there is another ghost that does seek revenge: Achilles' ghost tells his comrades he cannot die peacefully unless Polyxena, the young virgin daughter of Hecuba, is sacrificed.

STUDENT #3: Not a minor request. For the most part, the Greeks have given up the practice of human sacrifice.

STUDENT #2: And, Greece being a democracy, the decision is left to the soldiers themselves.

STUDENT #1: The Greek commanders try to influence the demos; Odysseus is most persuasive.

PROFESSOR: **The Greek soldiers cast their vote and exclaim:**

THE GREEK SOLDIERS: KILL HER! KILL POLYXENA. HECUBA'S VIRGIN DAUGHTER BELONGS TO ACHILLES. SATISFY OUR GREEK HERO'S LAST REQUEST!

STUDENT #2: Citizens go far in honoring their heroes, but meanwhile whose suffering might be ignored?

PROFESSOR: Does Euripides distrust “the demos”? Are the Greek troops a “mob” persuaded by clever-tongued leaders to make unethical choices?

STUDENT #1: How do we recover democratic ideals in the face of ill-conceived majority choices?

PROFESSOR: **Hecuba begs Odysseus to save Polyxena, but he remains unmoved:**

ODYSSEUS: I WOULD REPAY MY DEBT TO YOU, HECUBA, BUT NOT TO YOUR DAUGHTER. WE GREEKS MUST HONOR OUR HEROES OR THE TROOPS WON'T FIGHT THE NEXT TIME. GREEKS SUFFERED AND DIED IN THIS WAR, TOO.

STUDENT #2: Is Odysseus's military rationale justified?

PROFESSOR: Polyxena tries to resolve matters by voicing her own willingness to die.

STUDENT #3: Her stance is existential. When all else fails, she can at least control her own “attitude.”

PROFESSOR: **What is it you really care about, Polyxena?**

POLYXENA: FREEDOM! I CARE ABOUT FREEDOM! LIFE WITHOUT MORAL BEAUTY INFLICTS ENDLESS PAIN!

STUDENT #1: Is this link between morality and beauty necessary or optional for experiencing a good life?

PROFESSOR: Ultimately, Hecuba feels it’s Helen who should be sacrificed, but in the past, when Helen arrived in Troy on Paris’s arm, did anyone insist that Paris relinquish his prize? **Did Hecuba express concern about Menelaus, Helen’s lonely spouse?**

HECUBA: OH, HELEN DEAR, YOU ARE SO LOVELY. OUR TROJAN PEOPLE SURELY WANT YOU HERE, AS DO PRIAM AND I.

STUDENT #1: So, everyone was dazzled by Helen. Was this Helen’s fault? Should Helen be sacrificed?

STUDENT #3: The suggestion weakens Hecuba’s moral stance.

PROFESSOR: Then the Greek messenger, Talthybius, announces Polyxena’s death and asks Hecuba to bury her. **A sensitive fellow, Talthybius calls into question the justice—and existence—of the gods:**

TALTHYBIUS: MY GOD! ZEUS, DO YOU WATCH OVER HUMAN LIVES? OR DO WE CLING TO SUCH A BELIEF IN VAIN, WHEN CHANCE, BLIND CHANCE, RULES US TILL WE DIE?

STUDENT #1: The age-old question: with so much injustice and suffering on earth—if the gods or God exists, does it matter?

STUDENT #3: Hecuba, in her grief, struggles over the nurture vs. nature issue.

STUDENT #2: Is the morality we espouse dependent on our upbringing or genes?

PROFESSOR: Can a play, such as *Hecuba*, yield moral instruction?

STUDENT #1: How should we interpret a play?

PROFESSOR: **The Chorus Leader asks:**

THE CHORUS LEADER: WHAT DOES IT MEAN—THESE BLOWS THAT KEEP STRIKING?

STUDENT #2: Is pain the basis of ethics or just a disruption?

PROFESSOR: Discovering Polydorus dead and convinced Polymestor killed him for his gold, Hecuba shifts from the passivity of grief to the passion of vengeance. **But the Chorus Leader cautions Hecuba:**

THE CHORUS LEADER: HEAVEN INSISTS THAT YOU BEAR WHATEVER BURDENS YOU MOST!

STUDENT #1: However, if heaven—or society—expects people to endure burdens that are more than they can bear, can this be a just heaven or society? Pushed beyond the limits, people will rebel!

PROFESSOR: **Relying on the art of persuasion and forsaking truth for rhetoric, Hecuba appeals to Agamemnon:**

HECUBA: AGAMEMNON, YOU CAN SLEEP WITH CASSIE, MY WONDROUS FORTUNE-TELLING DAUGHTER. YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE TO MARRY HER OR HAVE HER CONSENT. BUT IT IS NOT FREEDOM I SEEK. IT IS PURE AND SIMPLE REVENGE! BRING POLYMESTOR AND HIS TWO SONS HERE! YOUR COMPLICITY WILL REMAIN SECRET. MY ACCOMPLICES AND I WILL DO EVERYTHING TO WREAK VENGEANCE ON POLYMESTOR, FOR WOMEN, LIKE MEN, HAVE AWFUL POWERS TO UNLEASH, AND IT WILL BE BEAUTIFUL!

STUDENT #3: Is this true gender equality—or the playwright's fear of women?

STUDENT #2: Has the play moved beyond communitarian ethics and pragmatism to the errantly psychological and personal?

STUDENT #3: Is it any wonder the chorus finds no consistency in the world?

STUDENT #1: Hecuba concludes that everyone is enslaved by a set of circumstances; even so, who doesn't seek an escape route? Can Hecuba's be defended?

PROFESSOR: Agamemnon agrees to Hecuba's request. An unaware Polymestor arrives with his two sons. Enticed into Hecuba's tent to view precious heirlooms, he witnesses instead the murder of his precious sons. He is then savagely blinded. Such sheer violence by Hecuba and the other Trojan women . . .

STUDENT #2: (*Interjects*) These accomplices, too, should be judged in our moral critique.

PROFESSOR: The mock trial follows. A defeated Polymestor denounces the others and prophetically foretells their doom.

STUDENT #3: So, do we agree that justice has been fully served?

STUDENT #2: Do Hecuba and the other Trojan women have a right to kill Polymestor's sons? Who speaks for these children?

STUDENT #1: Can we add the young boys' voices to the script? Can these Thracian lads also return as ghosts?

STUDENT #3: Are there any limits to adapting a play?

PROFESSOR: Has the fact that Hecuba has been OVERBURDENED by pain caused her rejection of all ethical frameworks?

STUDENT #3: Agamemnon gave her the option of freedom. She chose revenge.

STUDENT #2: A choice made with forethought or an irresistible impulse?

STUDENT #3: Should despair have driven her to end her own life before killing others?

STUDENT #2: Is suicide an ethical choice?

PROFESSOR: Before we answer these questions and others, we need to view one more flashback and consider an issue only obliquely referred to in the play. **After Talthybius's summons, the chorus chant and dance:**

THE CHORUS: MY FATE GAVE ME TO DISASTER,  
MY FATE GAVE ME OVER TO SORROW

THE MOMENT THE PINES ON MT. IDA  
WERE CUT DOWN BY PARIS

TO BUILD THE SHIP HE WOULD STEER THROUGH HIGH WAVES  
TO THE BED OF HELEN

STUDENT #1: Why was the son of a king and queen simply a herdsman on a mountain top?

PROFESSOR: When Paris was born, Priam responded to a prophecy that his new son would grow up to cause the destruction of Troy. In agreement with Priam, Hecuba, then a young mother, said:

HECUBA: PARIS IS SUCH A CUTE BABY, BUT THE PROPHECY IS CLEAR. I DREAMT OF FIRE WHEN PARIS WAS IN MY WOMB. LOYALTY MUST BE TO TROY ABOVE ALL ELSE. WE MUST SEND OUR DARLING BABY INTO THE WOODS TO DIE. GOODBYE, SWEET PARIS, GOODBYE.

PROFESSOR: Although left on Mt. Ida to perish, the infant was saved by a shepherd and grew up to be a herdsman himself.

STUDENT #2: How does Paris learn of his Trojan family? How do they know it's really Paris who returns years later?

STUDENT #3: Had Priam and Hecuba forgotten the prophecy or considered it defunct?

PROFESSOR: These details could be worked out for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience. Perhaps the ancient Greeks already knew how to unravel this part of the story.

STUDENT #1: How can one believe in prophecies, especially a prophecy that tempts infanticide?

STUDENT #3: Ethics must evolve and challenge outdated, engrained beliefs.

STUDENT #2: Or are some truths eternal?

PROFESSOR: If we are to judge Hecuba, is her abandonment of Baby Paris where problems begin? If Hecuba were here in our midst, what would you say to her? And now I throw the discussion open to the demos.

*(The End)*