

HECUBA
by Euripides

translated by
Jay Kardan and Laura-Gray Street

POLYDORUS
HECUBA
CHORUS
POLYXENA
ODYSSEUS
TALTHYBIUS
THERAPAINA
AGAMEMNON
POLYMESTOR

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POLYDORUS I come from bleakest darkness, where corpses lurk
and Hades lives apart from other gods. I am
Polydorus, youngest son of Hecuba and Priam.
My father, worried Troy might fall to Greek offensives,
sent me here, to Thrace, my mother's father's home
and land of his friend Polymestor, who controls
this rich plain of the Chersonese and its people
with his spear. My father sent a large stash of gold
with me, to insure that, if Ilium's walls indeed (10)
were toppled, I'd be provided for. He did all this
because I was too young to wear armor, my arms
too gangly to carry a lance. As long as the towers
of Troy remained intact, and the stones that marked
our boundaries stood upright, and my brother Hector
was lucky with his spear, I thrived living here
with my father's Thracian friend, like some hapless sapling. (20)
But once Troy was shattered—Hector dead, our home
eviscerated, and my father himself slaughtered
on Apollo's altar by Achilles' murderous son—
then Polymester killed me. This "friend" tossed me dead
into the ocean for the sake of gold, so he could keep
Priam's wealth for himself. My lifeless body washes
ashore and washes back to sea with the waves' endless
ebb and flow, and remains unmourned, unburied.
Disembodied, I hover now above Hecuba, my dear mother, (30)
as I have for the three days since she and the other women
were brought here, captives on their way to Greece.
But however eager for home, the Greeks must wait here
on the coast of Thrace, sails slack because Achilles stilled
the winds. Appearing above his tomb, he demands my sister
Polyxena as a sacrifice to appease his wounded honor. (40)
He'll get it, too. His men won't dare refuse him. So fate
leads my sister to her death today. And my mother
will see two corpses of two children: mine and Polyxena's.
My body will wash up in the surf so she can bury me
properly. I begged this crumb of Hades, and it was granted. (50)
But for now I'll get out of the way. See how Hecuba
stumbles from the doorway of Agamemnon's tent,
upset by nightmares and visions of my ghost.
Alas!

Old mother, your royal palaces are reduced to meager
corners in another ruler's tents. How poorly you fare
—as poorly as you once fared well. To balance out
your past prosperity, some god has ruined you.

HECUBA

I am old. I am plagued
by bad dreams. Once your queen, (60)

I am frail, a worn hag
you must lead from the huts.
My dear friends, sister slaves,
help me walk, hold my hand,
let me lean on your arms
like a staff. Bear me up.

My own legs are too weak
to support me. O lightning
of Zeus, tell me why

I am snatched from my sleep
by these specters of dread.

Goddess Earth, from whose womb (70)
these nocturnal invasions
emerge like the stirring
of bats, I recoil

from these nightmares
O you underworld gods,
please protect Polydorus,
my anchor and last

of my house, who abides (80)
in this Thracian domain,
in the home of a friend.

Oh the horrors I dreamed—

I still shudder with fear!

Find Cassandra or Helenus—

Ask them to read

these phantasms and explain
the young doe that was torn
from my lap and destroyed
by a wolf with bloody jaws. (90)

CHORUS

I am here—I arrived—
Hecuba— just as fast

as I could—from the tent
of my master—where my lot (100)
is now cast—where command
made me slave—I was caught
like an animal, marched
out of Troy at the point
of a spear. —I bring news
—It’s not good—I regret
I must say—I’ve been told—
the Greek army convened—
they have voted—your daughter,
Polyxena—she
is the one—it’s decided—
that she will be sacrificed.

—To Achilles.

—His ghost,
reappeared at his tomb,
as you know, in a blaze
of gold armor and rage. (110)
—The Greek sails were unfurled,
all aboard for the launch,
when the warrior’s ghost
intervened. — “Do you think
you can leave,” the wraith howled,
“without honoring me?”

—Then rough waves of dispute
overran the composure
of captain and crew—
—and the Greeks were now split
between those who would kill
a young girl—your daughter—
to appease fierce Achilles
and those who disagreed

—To your cause spoke that chief (120)
in command, Agamemnon,
—proprietor of Cassandra.

—The sons of Theseus
rebutted, —exclaiming
the tomb of Achilles
deserved the girl’s blood;
—that Cassandra’s lush bed
must kneel down and defer
to the warrior’s brave spear.

—There things stood, at a stand-
off, —an intractable draw.

—Then that wily Odysseus
spoke. —He festooned
and perfumed his appeal
—the air thick with his words—
—till his audience swooned
at his feet as he crooned,
“Who could suffer the dead
telling tales down in Hades
about Greeks who deserted
the soldiers who died
for Hellas on the fields
of war?”

(130)

—Every soldier
agreed that to slight
brave Achilles was
sacrilege.

—Sacrifice
carried the day,
I’m afraid.

(140)

—And Odysseus is coming—
—At any moment—
—He will tear the sweet foal from your breast—
—You must go—
—He will wrench your Polyxena out of your hands—
—To the ships—
—To the altars—
—At the knees of Agamemnon—
—Pray—

—Ask the gods of heaven—
—And Hades—
—If your prayers convey—
—Then your daughter is saved—
—If they fail, you must see your own child put to death—
—Her throat cut—
—And the flow of her blood from her gold-bearing neck— (150)

HECUBA

*Woe-dazed, what to say,
what howl, what lament?
Forlorn and now old.
Enslaved. It's too hard,
too much to be borne.
No one to protect me.
No house. No estate.
Alas, all is gone—
my husband, my lambs.
Which way should I go?
What road should I take?
What god can I trust?
What guide can avail?
O bearers of grief,
I no longer care
for life in the light.*

Feet, lead me—step right,
left—lead this old crone
to the tent. (170)

My child! O Polyxena!
Come out and attend
your mother. Come out,
hear me!

POLYXENA

The distress in your voice,
your sharp cries of dismay,
dearest mother, have flushed me
from the tent like a bird
What on earth is your news?

ODYSSEUS My hands grew numb holding your robes in that death grip.

HECUBA And I spared you, *freed* you.

ODYSSEUS I see the sun today because of you.

HECUBA When you were *my* slave, remember how you said—

ODYSSEUS Hecuba, I *said* whatever it took to stay alive. (250)

HECUBA Aren't you shameless in this conduct of yours?
You yourself just admitted the mercy you got from me
and now you do me such evil in return?
O gods save us from politicians and demagogues like you
who don't care what harm you do as long as the multitudes
are pleased and the applause is loud. But tell me, what counseled
expediency led them to cast their ballots in favor
of killing my child? What in your so-called necessity (260)
requires this brutal murder at a tomb where, by custom,
oxen ought to die? Does the ghost's thirst for revenge
justify his demand for human slaughter? Polyxena
has done no harm to Achilles. Rather, he should've asked
for Helen's sacrifice, since *she* destroyed him
by steering him to Troy. Or if beauty is prerequisite
in this tribute, logic still exempts *us*
and points to Helen: she's the epitome, after all,
the absolute knockout, the stunner, the dazzling mantrap
who wronged Achilles far more than we.

And thus, (270)
my case for justice against the ghost's. Now hear my claim
on your gratitude. As you yourself have readily confirmed,
when our positions were reversed in Troy, you fell
at my feet, begging for your life. You clasped my hand
and touched my aging cheek, here. But now it's *my* turn
to fall, clasping *your* hand, touching your cheek, just so.
To ask that you return the favor and spare my child.
Please, I beg you. Don't take my daughter from me.
Let her live. Haven't enough died already?
All I've lost lives on in her. She is my solace. (280)

She is my staff, my nurse, my guide. She is my Troy.
Those with power should use that power carefully.
Those in luck should not assume that luck will hold,
as I well know. Once, I was powerful and lucky,
a queen—but no more. A day obliterated all.
Odysseus, I implore you, by your bearded chin,
have pity on me. Reconvene the army, persuade them
it's wrong to kill the very women you spared—because
you pitied them—in Troy. Remind your men that Greek
laws pertaining to murder protect enslaved and free (290)
alike, without distinction. You have the power—the authority
and the lucky eloquence. But even if you babble
or stutter, your esteemed reputation, like a steady
wind, will swell the sail of your words, carrying them
farther than those of blowhards and other lesser men.

CHORUS Who could be so calloused as to remain unmoved, hearing
your sad complaints and mournful refrains of abundant woe?

ODYSSEUS A prefatory caveat, Hecuba: Just because
I make political speeches doesn't mean that I
must therefore be your enemy, so don't in anger (300)
misconstrue me so.

 First off, I acknowledge,
unconditionally, your claim on my gratitude.
You saved my life, and, by the gods, I owe you. I stand
ready to honor my debt by saving *your* life. But
my public vow to the Greek troops I must also
stand by, and that is to reward our best warrior
with Polyxena, your daughter. It's an invalid premise,
you see, to think that these two lives—yours; hers—
can be interchanged.

 Furthermore, our cities
will fail if noble and devoted soldiers earn
no greater returns than do lesser men. Achilles
deserves honor and tribute more than anyone:
He died for Greece, and by the gods we owe him. (310)
What conduct is more shameless than enlisting
a man's good and faithful service while he lives,
only to throw him to the dogs when he's dead?

Well, then. And if we had to go to war again,
would we have troops ready and willing to deploy
Or would men think, *Why bother? Better to lie
low and save my own skin.* Imagine what
adverse effects dishonoring the dead would have on
recruiting efforts, on public perception, on morale.
For me, a few essential crumbs will suffice
while I'm alive. But I want the full-out display (320)
of honors and commemorations when I die,
a worthy tomb to make this life worthwhile. That's
the thing that lasts.

Third, you complain how you've suffered.
Well, we Greeks have suffered, too. Our old women
and our old men are no less wretched than yours.
Our young brides are likewise widowed of fine grooms
who sleep in Trojan dust instead their marriage beds.
Just as *we* endure these hardships, so can you.
And if you think I'm wrong to honor the legacy
of a great warrior like Achilles, then go ahead
and call me callous. The barbaric way you foreigners
use your friends and disrespect the dead—I say
keep it up. That way Greece stays on top, (330)
and you people get the fate that you deserve.

CHORUS Witness here how the violence of war enslaves,
forcing its captives to endure the unendurable.

HECUBA O daughter, all my arguments against your murder
were useless, feeble puffs of air accomplishing nothing.
If you have more skill than your mother, use it now.
Like the nightingale, sing out all your notes, or you
will lose your life. Fall prostrate at this man's knee
and persuade him. He has children, too, I know. (340)
You may yet move him to pity.

POLYXENA I see you, Odysseus, how you've hidden your right
hand in your cloak and turned your face away so I
can't touch your hand or beard in supplication.
But you have nothing to worry about. I'll follow you
to Achilles' tomb, both out of necessity and

*where are you now carrying me?
In what home will I be slave?*

*Will I be goods for Argos or Sparta?
Phthia, maybe?—where
they say the full Apidanus
departs the fertile plains?*

[Antistrophe A]

*Or in Delos, sent by sea-oar
to suffer life in the temple
where palm and laurel sprang up
at Leto's twinned birth-pangs?*

*Shall I, there with Delian maidens,
praise the goddess Artemis,
her golden garment, and her bow,
as I did in Troy?*

[Strophe B]

*Or in Athens? There, shall I sew
brightly threaded ponies
and yoke them cunningly to chariots
on fair Athena's robe?*

*Or perhaps embroider Titans,
which Zeus, son of Kronos,
with fists of double-edged lightening
laid quite low?*

[Antistrophe B]

*Alas for my children, alas for the fathers,
and for our native land
now leveled, slashed by Argive spears
to ash-heaps and shreds of smoke,*

*while I am taken far from Asia,
to Europe, to be a slave.
This is what I'll call home now:
the bed-chamber of Hades.*

TALTHYBIUS Women of Troy, I'd thank you to tell me where I may find
Hecuba, she who once was Queen of Ilium Troy.

CHORUS She's sitting over there, Talthybius. She's the one
wrapped in her robes with her head down.

Tell me the truth, old man, however shocking or painful.

TALTHYBIUS You're doubling the steep cost of sorrow, woman,
by asking me to retell these troubles. My eyes are wet
a second time. I paid in tears once already
at the grave when she died. But you will hear. In full (520)
force the Greeks gathered at the tomb for your girl's death.
Achilles' son led your daughter by the hand to the top
of the mound. I was standing nearby. A designated corps
of young guards followed, on hand to restrain any bucking
or bolting of your calf. Neoptolemus took a gold cup,
filled it with wine, and lifted it in honor of his dead father.
He nodded to me, and on that cue, I raised my voice
over the chatter gusting around me and said, "Silence (530)
in the ranks. All soldiers hereby stand at attention
until further orders." Thus I becalmed the entire army.
They stood hushed and breathless as Neoptolemus prayed,
"O Achilles, greatest of warriors, accept this cup
that the army and I offer you as a gift. Let this libation
entice your ghost to appear and drink the maiden's blood,
dark and pure. In return, grant us winds, (540)
strong and favorable. Free the prows and bridling ropes
of our ships, and fill our sails for safe passage home."
Then, seizing his double-gilt sword by the hilt, he drew it
from its sheath and motioned to the guards to seize Polyxena.
Your daughter, when she saw this, gave this proud speech:
"O Greeks who sacked my city, know that I die willingly,
so keep your hands off me. I will bare the nape
of my own neck to the sword. For the gods' sakes, let me
be free of fetters when you kill me so that I may die free, (550)
and among the dead I won't have to be ashamed,
being a queen, to be called a slave." The troops roared
their approval, and, when Agamemnon ordered the guards
to release the maiden, they did so immediately. And immediately
Polyxena grabbed the fabric at her neckline with both hands
and ripped her dress open, exposing her breasts, her torso
smooth and perfect as a statue's. Nude to the waist, (560)
she dropped on one knee before her executioner
and said, "Behold, young man—if it's my breast you want
to strike, strike here; if here beneath the neck, my throat

is ready.” Neoptolemus both unwillingly and willingly
cut her throat at the windpipe. His steel sword
sliced deep, and her blood gushed out. Even as she died,
your courageous daughter took care to fall decently,
modestly covering what must be hid from men’s eyes. (570)
When she was fully dead, the soldiers busied themselves
with the tasks of death. Some scattered leaves over the body,
while others piled the pyre with pine logs. Those working
reprimanded anyone idle: “Do you stand there,
cur, doing nothing, holding neither gown
nor ornament? Won’t you go find something to give
to the bravest and most noble of maidens?” That’s how the soldiers
spoke of your dead daughter, Hecuba. Now you’ve heard (580)
the whole story. Having witnessed it myself,
I see you are the luckiest—and most unlucky—of mothers.

CHORUS This sorrow boils up and overruns the house of Priam
and Troy, my city, so the gods want it to.

HECUBA Polyxena, dear, I don’t know which ordeal to manage
first with so many rolling in. There is a vast
sea of pain out there. If I brace against one, another
upends me, then another again. Wave upon wave
of pain. And now I can’t sponge away all you suffered
in dying or keep myself from groaning. But I’m glad (590)
to know you died well, to have at least that bleak
comfort.

 Strange to think how barren ground can,
with care—or chance, perhaps—bear fruit; while fertile land
neglected goes to seed, or worse. With people, though,
the worthless are never anything but. The noble,
likewise. Character doesn’t change with life’s conditions,
But what am I saying? These thoughts are arrows shot in vain.

—A moment, Talthybius. Go tell Agammenmon
something for me. Tell him: No one touches my daughter.
Ask him to keep everyone away until
I get there.

 Armies—any large crowd of men—can’t be
predicted. Big fields like that are always full of weeds.

Inflamed sailors, like fires, run wild. Things spin out
of control: even good men get singed with badness.

—Old woman, take this pitcher to the beach. Fill it
with sea water. Carry it back to me without
spilling any. I need it all to give my child
her last washing. A bride unwedded; a virgin
bedded by death. I must bathe and lay her out
as she deserves—But how? With what treasures? —I
have nothing left. —So now what? Think, Hecuba.

—My women,
captives like me, but maybe they smuggled out a few
pretty trinkets. I'll go see.

Oh, how much
greatness gone! My home, my Priam, our palace and fortune,
our children—gone now, stripped to the bone. How pointless, all
that boasting of wealth and fame. The richest are those who live
uneventfully, day after day after day.

CHORUS

[Strophe]

*I was tied to this fate, this sorrow,
when Paris cut the first pine
on Mt. Ida to carve a mast*

*to sail the ocean's surge
to anchor in the bed of Helen,
that sun-kissed, golden girl.*

[Antistrophe]

*Suffering encircled by worse
necessity, all entangled—
One man's folly launched*

*a host of woes on Ilium
when the Idean herdsman judged
three bickering goddesses,*

[Epode]

*legislating strife
by spear and slaughter, and shame
of my bedchamber. A widowed bride*

*is groaning in Sparta. A mother
now childless tears gray hair
and claws her cheeks red.* (650)

THERAPAINA Where is the queen? Hecuba, who wears so many
woes no one will ever take that crown from her? (660)

CHORUS What is it now? Does it never end?

THERAPAINA I bring this pain
for Hecuba. It's hard to speak, and hard to keep silent.

CHORUS Here comes Hecuba now, in time for your announcement.

THERAPAINA O queen of woes—more wretched than you imagine—
I bring you news—you're dead and gone from light to darkness,
childless, widowed, exiled, quite destroyed.

HECUBA But how (670)
is this called news? You tell me what I already know.
But what is this? Why do you bring Polyxena's corpse
here? I'd made burial arrangements with the Greeks.

THERAPAINA She doesn't see, so caught up in mourning Polyxena
she doesn't recognize the new pain set before her.

HECUBA O gods, don't tell me it's Cassandra you've brought?

THERAPAINA It's not Cassandra; she's alive. Prepare yourself.
I'll unwrap the corpse so you see the one you mourn. (680)

HECUBA Aah! It's my son! My youngest son, dead!
He was supposed to be safe with the Thracian king. O Polydorus!
I'm truly dead. This sight annihilates me utterly.

*O child, child—
I start the song—
The song of death—
Sung from the heart—*

THERAPAINA You recognize your son now.

*His broken limbs—
His mangled flesh—
The traitor's sword—
No pity—None—* (720)

CHORUS I've never seen you in a state like this, Hecuba.
The gods have loaded you with more pain than you
can bear.
—But look, I see Lord Agamemnon coming.
—Let's be quiet now.

AGAMEMNON Hecuba, why on earth haven't you buried your daughter?
I got your message from Talthybius. You said none
of us should touch her, and so, as you directed, we've
left her alone, not laying a hand on her. But you,
you take your time in a way that makes me wonder. (730)
I've come to hurry you along. We Greeks take pride
in doing things well, if such things be worth doing.
—Hold on, what corpse is this I see before the tents?
A Trojan? Those are no familiar Greek wrappings.

HECUBA O you unfortunate (and I mean me by saying
“you”), Hecuba! What should I do? Do I
beg at his knees for mercy, or bite my tongue in silence?

AGAMEMNON Why are you turning your back to me, Hecuba?
What has happened here? Tell me about this body. (740)

HECUBA If to him I'm nothing but a contemptible enemy and slave,
he'll push me from his knees. I couldn't bear that.

AGAMEMNON I can't read minds, you know. I can't help unless
you speak.

HECUBA But maybe I'm seeing him as an enemy,
when, really, he isn't?

AGAMEMNON Still nothing? Suit yourself then.
If you don't want me to know, I don't want to hear.

HECUBA I can't do what I need to do without his help.
Why do I waste time debating? Win or lose,
he's my only hope of avenging my children. (750)

Agamemnon, hear my supplication. I beg you
by your knees, your chin, and your happy right hand.

AGAMEMNON What are you asking for, Hecuba? For your freedom?
That's easy enough.

HECUBA Sir, not what you expect. Do you see this corpse
I'm crying over? (760)

AGAMEMNON Of course I see it. I've been trying
to get you to tell me about it.

HECUBA This is the body of my son.
I carried him in my womb. I gave birth to him.

AGAMEMNON I see. Which son, poor woman?

HECUBA Not one of those who died
defending Troy.

AGAMEMNON You had another?

HECUBA I did, in vain.
You see him here.

AGAMEMNON But where was he when Troy fell?

HECUBA To save his young life, his father sent him away.

AGAMEMNON Sent him where?

HECUBA To this very country in which
he now lies dead. (770)

AGAMEMNON He sent his son to Polymestor?

HECUBA Yes, and sent with him a sum of bitter gold.

AGAMEMNON But how did your son die? Who killed him?

HECUBA Who else?
Our dear, loving, loyal Thracian friend.

AGAMEMNON How shameful!
Was it lust for gold?

HECUBA Yes, Polymestor
killed for it the minute he learned Troy had fallen.

AGAMEMNON Where was your son found? Who brought him here?

HECUBA This old servant. She found his body tumbling in the surf.

AGAMEMNON Was she looking for him?

HECUBA No, she went to fetch
sea water to wash Polyxena's body. (780)

AGAMEMNON Polymestor
must have killed him and then thrown him in the sea.

HECUBA Hacked up, pounded by waves. Look at the lacerations
on his skin.

AGAMEMNON You are indeed a wretched woman.

HECUBA I'm already dead, Agamemnon. I'm past suffering.

AGAMEMNON Alas! Is there a woman more unfortunate?

HECUBA None, except Misfortune herself.
But listen
to my request, my supplication. See if you think
my hardships are justified. If so, that's it; I won't
bother you further. But if not, then please help me.
Help me get revenge on that deceitful friend, (790)

that fiendish and malignant host.

I can't count
the number of times he sat at my table, an honored guest.
In thanks, he kills my son? He's a calculated, cold-blooded
murderer.

I know I'm nothing but a powerless slave, but the gods
have power—as does the underlying law that governs
them. It is by virtue of this law—this basic
moral code—that the gods and our belief in them
exists, and we know right from wrong, good from evil. (800)
If you defy this law, allowing those who murder
guests and violate the gods to go unpunished,
you poison the root of our humanity. Justice
withers and dies.

Preserve us, then, and pity me.
Step back like an artist and see the whole picture of me.
Behold a woman royal once upon a time
but now your slave; once rich in children but now (810)
impoverished and childless; exiled, deserted, a prisoner
of war, the most wretched of humans—

No, don't go,
Agamemnon! Why do you turn away? O gods,
can I accomplish nothing? Why do we work so hard
to learn unnecessary things, when what we need
to know is how to persuade. Without the polished
art of persuasion, we can't get what we want.

It's hopeless. (820)

I've watched my husband and all my children die; I'm now
a slave; on the horizon, smoke still spirals up
from Troy's smoldering ashes, haunting me.

All but
Cassandra.

No point invoking bonds of love, as if
caresses could be called to testify—but still,
why not?

—My lord, Agamemnon, hear me!
My daughter shares your bed. She sleeps beside you, and you
enjoy her favors. What are they worth to you, these nights

for me, but don't act quickly if the Greeks respond to Polymestor's distress. Just look the other way. That's all you need to do. I'll take care of the rest.

AGAMEMNON But how? With what? Do you believe your shaking hands can lift a heavy sword? Or do you plan to use poison? And who will be your accomplice in all this?

HECUBA Remember, there are women hidden in these tents. (880)

AGAMEMNON The women we took captive? The Greek prisoners?

HECUBA Yes, they will help me get revenge.

AGAMEMNON But how?
You are women. How will women defeat men?

HECUBA There is unnerving strength in numbers, especially when you add deceit.

AGAMEMNON Unnerving maybe. But still, you can't expect women to have the strength.

HECUBA Why not? Didn't women kill Aegyptus's sons? Didn't women murder the men of Lemnos, every last one?

We're wasting time talking. Give this woman leave to run an errand for me. Guarantee her safe passage through the Greek encampments.

You, woman, take (890)
this message to Polymestor: "Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, invites your presence, and that of your sons, to speak of pressing matters that touch us all."

One last thing, Agamemnon. Delay Polyxena's funeral. I want her and Polydorus cremated and buried together, joining in one flame my doubled woes.

AGAMEMNON

If that's what you want, lady, so be it.
If we had wind to sail, I couldn't grant this. But
we're still becalmed, with nothing to do but stand by
until the god sends fair weather. (900)

Best of luck.

I hope it all turns out. It's in the interests of both
states and individuals that evil suffers evil
and good fares well.

CHORUS

[Strophe A]

*You, my hometown Ilium, no longer
can you be called unravished, unspoiled.
Such a fog of Greeks enveloped you
with honed swords, so many swords!*

*Your towers are crownless, shaved bare,
Bruised with black ash and smoke.
Wounded Ilium, torn from your shores;
I can no longer call you home.*

(910)

[Antistrophe A]

*My ruin struck after midnight.
Our bellies were full of rich foods.
Mists of sleep soothed our eyes
after thanksgiving sacrifice and dance.*

*In our bed, my husband slept soundly—
his spear at last retired to its peg—
unaware of ships at our shores
the Greeks disgorging on Ilium Troy.*

(920)

[Strophe B]

*I was braiding my hair, absorbed
in my sea-deep mirror, ready to sink
into bed and join my love
in woolen fleeces. But then —shouts,*

battle orders, Troy impaled
by war cries: Ooh-rah, Greeks! (930)
Will you storm these hills with fire,
secure your target, and get home?

[Antistrophe B]

Wearing only a thin nightgown
like a simple girl, I left my love
to plead in vain at Artemis' shrine—
My husband dead, I was bound

in chains and yanked to sea.
my city recedes as the Greeks set sail
Severing me forever from home,
I sank into fathomless grief. (940)

[Epode]

Helen, lovely but two-faced,
and her vile cowhand Paris.
Damn them both to hell!

I am ruined, wrenched
from my own native land
by their foul marriage-defiling bed.

O headwinds, over the black waves
shackle the whore at sea. (950)
May she never see home.

POLYMESTOR My dearest Hecuba, wife of my late friend
Priam! How I pity you and your ruined Troy.
And now your precious Polyxena—dead—it's just too much.
Oh, what can we count on in this life? Nothing, I say!
Not reputation or good fortune. The gods make it all
pitch and yaw, back and forth, until we're seasick
and confused enough to worship them.
But what help (960)
is any of this with your loss?

Are you bothered I haven't
been to visit you before now? I came here as fast
as I could, Hecuba. It just so happened that I was inland,
seeing about Thracian business, when you arrived here.
As a matter of fact, I was just setting out to see you
when your servant arrived and gave me your message

HECUBA I'm mortified for you to see me in this state, Polymestor.
I've fallen so low since we last met. I'm too ashamed now
to look you in the eye. So don't think of it as hostility toward you,
Polymestor. Besides, it's not customary for a woman to meet
a man's gaze. (970)

POLYMESTOR Indeed. No offense taken, my dear. Now how can I be of service?
What are the "pressing matters" your message spoke of?

HECUBA I have some information to share with you
and your sons, but it's private. Would you ask
your attendants to leave us for a while? (980)

POLYMESTOR Go away. I'm safe here.
Hecuba is my friend, and the Greek army
is well disposed to me.

But tell me:
How may a fortunate man such as I help
an unfortunate friend?

HECUBA First things first: tell me about the child Priam
and I gave to you for safekeeping. How is he? Does he live?

POLYMESTOR Alive and well, I assure you. In his case anyway, you're in luck.

HECUBA O dearest friend! Your words speak to your worth! (990)

POLYMESTOR Is there anything else you wish to know?

HECUBA Does he still remember me, his mother?

POLYMESTOR Does he! He even tried to come here secretly to see you.

POLYMESTOR *Help me! Aid! Hear me,
you Thracians! Soldiers,
bring your spears! Horsemen,
use your spurs!
Come to me, sons of Atreus!
Help, help, I cry, help!
For the gods' sake,
where are you? Do you hear?
I need help. These
women, they've—won't someone
help me?—these woman
have destroyed me!
They have weapons!
My sons! Murder! Butchery!
Help! I need help!
Oh gods, the horrors.
Where can I run?
Where can I go?—Wings,
gods give me wings—
let me fly to the heavens,
into the light of Orion
or Sirius—or in my wretchedness
I must plunge into the frothing
black chasms of Hades!*

(1090)

(1100)

CHORUS Who can blame this man for wanting to die,
for thinking death the cure for so much pain?

AGAMEMNON I came when I heard shouts. Echo ricocheted off
the rock, spreading uproar through the army.
If we didn't know firsthand that Troy's towers
had fallen to Greek spears, the commotion
would have caused some concern.

(1110)

POLYMESTOR I know that voice! O my dear friend, Agamemnon!
See what I suffer!

AGAMEMNON Dear gods! O wretched man, who has ruined you?
Who gouged your eyes and blinded you? Who killed
your sons? Whoever it was truly hated all of you.

in their arms, passing them from hand to hand until
my boys were out of reach. Then, out of the blue,
these placid women, these mothers, pulled daggers from (1160)
their robes and stabbed my sons to death, while other women
pinned me down so that I couldn't move. I tried
to raise my head, but they pulled me down by my hair.
I couldn't free my arms because so many of them
pressed against me. And then—o agony!—they pulled (1170)
off their brooches and pierced my eyes until the blood
ran thick. Then they ran away. I sprang up after them
like a raging animal, bashing and banging my way
along the walls, searching for them; hunting them.

These are the things I've suffered in looking out for your
interests, Agamemnon; killing your enemy.
Let me tell you, if anyone in the past has spoken
ill of women, or speaks so now or will speak so (1180)
in the future, I'll sum it up for him: Neither sea
nor land has ever produced a more monstrous
creature than woman. I say this for a fact.

CHORUS Don't blame us all solely on the basis of your woes!

HECUBA Agamemnon, never in the affairs of men
Should the tongue have more power than facts,
Rather, when someone acts well, he should speak well,
And if the opposite, his words should be rotten. (1190)
Glib rhetoric may win us over for a while,
but in the end the smooth talkers die foully.
So much for my prologue to you, Agamemnon.
Now to deal with him.

You claim that by killing my son
you saved the Greeks from another quagmire of war.
What a lie. Tell me, you scum, what possible help
could a barbarian like you be to the Greeks? Whose
favor were you currying in your eager zeal? Trying
to marry into a family? To help a relative? I remember: (1200)
you said the Greeks were going to trample all over
your country's crops. Who in earth do you think
will believe that? I'll tell you the real reason:

It was the gold. You killed my son so you could
get your hands on his gold. If not, then why is it that
while Troy still flourished, while its towers remained
intact, while Priam lived, and while Hector's spear (1210)

thrived—and you really wanted to help out Agamemnon—
how come you didn't kill Polydorus then or at least
turned him over as a threat? Instead, you waited until
you saw the smoke rising from the city that told
you our fortunes had turned for the worse. Only then
did you kill the guest you had taken into your home,
who sat helpless at your hearth. Here's more proof
of your evil: If you really had the interests of the Greeks
at heart as you claim, why didn't you give them the gold (1220)

right away—that gold you say isn't yours but Agamemnon's?
They were in desperate need then, exhausted from battle,
just barely scraping by in a foreign land. But no, even now
you're hoarding that treasure. It's locked up and well
guarded in your house, as you told me yourself. And
another thing: If you had taken care of my child,
as you ought to have, and kept him safe, you'd earn
respect and honor and worthy fame. Hard times
prove the honest friendship of good men, while
prosperity always has friends. If at some point you
were in need and Polydorus was doing well,
my child would have been a great treasury for you.
As it is, you have no friend in Agamemnon there. (1230)

Your gold is gone, as are your children,
And you must live on as you are.

Agamemnon,
if you side with Polymestor, you endorse evil.
This man has betrayed all trust. He has broken
the laws of man and god. He is faithless, irreverent,
and thoroughly corrupt. If you acquit him, what
then do your actions say about you?

CHORUS Just causes make fertile soil for strong arguments!

AGAMEMNON It pains me to sit in judgment of others' troubles, (1240)
but I must. What kind of leader would I be if I pushed
this case aside, having agreed to take it up? So here's

my verdict: Polymestor, you are guilty of murder.
Clearly, it wasn't for my sake or the Greeks' that you
killed Polydorus when he was a guest in your home,
but for the sake of getting his gold. Your rhetoric
exudes the oily panic of a guilty man uncovered.
You've misconstrued facts to put yourself
in a more favorable light. Maybe you think
killing a guest—in this case a child who'd been
put in your care—is a small matter in the larger
scheme of things. But we Greeks think of it
as heinous murder. How could I rule you innocent
and maintain a shred of credibility? I can't.
You committed a brutal crime; be prepared, (1250)
therefore, for a justly brutal punishment.

POLYMESTOR Argh! How can it be? I'm defeated by a woman,
a slave! Condemned and punished by my inferior.

HECUBA But isn't that just, since you committed crimes?

POLYMESTOR Oh my children! Oh my eyes!

HECUBA You're suffering? What of it? I, too, lost a child.

POLYMESTOR Do you enjoy abusing me, you monster?

HECUBA Shouldn't I be enjoying my revenge on you?

POLYMESTOR But you won't be soon, when the sea spray—

HECUBA Takes me on a one-way trip to Greece? (1260)

POLYMESTOR —swallows you up as you fall from the masthead.

HECUBA And who does the honors of pushing me into the salty brink?

POLYMESTOR You yourself will climb the ship's mast.

HECUBA Will I grow wings on my back, or what?

- POLYMESTOR You'll be transformed—into a dog, a bitch with fiery eyes.
- HECUBA How do you know of this metamorphosis of mine?
- POLYMESTOR Our Thracian prophet, Dionysus, told me.
- HECUBA Well, he failed to warn you of your own fate.
- POLYMESTOR If he had, you'd never have tricked me.
- HECUBA So, will I live or will I die? (1270)
- POLYMESTOR You'll die, and when you do your tomb will be called . . .
- HECUBA What? Hecuba's doghouse?
- POLYMESTOR . . . Cynossema, the Sign of the Wretched Bitch.
A bitch's grave for a landmark and warning for sailors.
- HECUBA It makes no difference to me. I've had my revenge.
- POLYMESTOR Your child Cassandra will also die.
- HECUBA That prophecy I spit back in your face! Keep it for yourself.
- POLYMESTOR This man's wife, his bitter housekeeper, will kill her.
- HECUBA May Clytemnestra never be so insane!
- POLYMESTOR She'll kill him, too, lifting her bloody axe again—
- AGAMEMNON Are you out of your mind? Or just asking for trouble? (1280)
- POLYMESTOR Kill me if you like, but a bloody bath still awaits you in Argos.
- AGAMEMNON You, get this man out of my sight!
- POLYMESTOR Did I hit close to home?
- AGAMEMNON And gag him, too.

POLYMESTOR Go ahead, gag me; I've already spoken.

AGAMEMNON Remove him immediately. Toss him
on a desert island where no one has to listen
to his insolence.

Hecuba, you go and bury your
two dead children.

The rest of you return
to the tents of your masters. It's time to cast off.
See how the ships' sails flap and billow? The wind
is finally blowing.

(1290)

Let us pray for fair weather
and safe passage on our voyage. May this be
the end of our ordeal. May we find all things
well at home. In all our homes.

CHORUS —To the harbor now. —To the tents.
—It is time to embark. —It is time to board
our new lives as slaves. —But the taste
is bitter. —Necessity is hard.