

Hecuba

by Euripides

“What’s he to Hecuba, or Hecuba to him, that he should weep for her?”

A fair question. Hamlet asks it after listening to the old actor describe the Queen of Troy, running barefoot through the streets, as her beloved city burns and her family is put to the sword. The actor weeps as he speaks and Hamlet wonders why he sheds tears for someone who exists only in a play, in a story?

It’s a fair question for us as well. Why should we become emotionally involved in a play about someone who suffered an overwhelming change of fortune many centuries ago? We have no factual knowledge of Hecuba and her husband, King Priam; we know of them through the stories told by Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides. Other Greek dramatists wrote of the Trojan War and the suffering of Hecuba, but only two works by Euripides, “The Trojan Women” and “Hecuba,” survive. Both concentrate on the hammer blows Fate delivers to Hecuba and her family after the Greeks overwhelm Troy, but there is a different emphasis in each. And both can have a powerful impact on actors and audience.

Someone once described “The Trojan Women” as one long moan. There is no relief from suffering throughout the course of the work. But in “Hecuba,” the aged queen manages to achieve some small degree of justice against a faithless friend and ally.

The play falls into two parts: the first deals with the sacrifice of Hecuba’s youngest daughter, Polyxena. The second might be called Hecuba’s Revenge, as the aged queen, even though a captive, is able to exact retribution for a treasonable act.

That treachery is revealed at the beginning of the tragedy. The ghost of Hecuba’s youngest son appears above the stage, explaining who he is and what happened to him. His name is Polydorus and, at the beginning of the war, Priam and Hecuba sent him, with a quantity of treasure, to live under the protection of King Polymestor of Thrace until the war had ended.

During the ten years of the siege, Polydorus was safe. But once the Greeks had captured Troy, Polymestor killed Polydorus and threw his body into the sea. The ghost tells us that his body has now washed ashore at Thrace where the Greek army has camped. They have paused here, not far from vanquished Troy, to bury Achilles before continuing their voyage home. With the army are the Trojan women who have been taken to be slaves.

Hecuba appears and falls to the ground, terrified by a nightmare in which her daughter Polyxena was killed. A chorus of her fellow slaves enters and tells her that her dream is true.

Polyxena comes on stage, as does Odysseus who has come to take her away to be sacrificed on the grave of Achilles. It seems that Achilles' ghost has appeared, stalking on his tomb, demanding a special sacrifice. Until he receives it, the wind will blow toward the shore, preventing the Greek ships from departing.

This is curious bookend to the Greek war experience. At the beginning of the campaign, they were prevented from sailing to Troy by a contrary wind, which would not subside until Agamemnon had sacrificed his youngest daughter, Iphigenia. Now, there will be an echo of that event.

The Greeks decide in counsel that the sacrifice ought to be Polyxena. As it happens, the suggestion came from Odysseus. Hecuba tries to shame Odysseus by reminding him of the time he slipped into Troy in disguise. Helen recognized him and told Hecuba. At that point, she had the power of life and death over him. Odysseus touched Hecuba's hand and asked for mercy, promising that he would return the favor, and she let him leave the city undetected.

When Hecuba asks for her daughter's life to discharge his promise, Odysseus quibbles. He is ready to save Hecuba's life as she saved his, but not her daughter's. Polyxena, seeing that her life is hopeless anyway, tells her mother that she would prefer to die rather than live as a slave and goes willingly with Odysseus.

Members of the chorus then speculate on their future, wondering where in Greece they will serve and how. They decide that the best fate would be to wind up in Athens; not a surprising decision: after all, Euripides was writing for an Athenian audience.

In the next scene, the Greek Herald, Talthylus, reports to Hecuba, telling how her daughters' courage at the point of death impressed all the Greek host. Hecuba insists that no one touch her daughter's body and sends some of the women to retrieve the corpse and take it to the shore to be bathed.

The chorus then laments the events which led up to the Trojan War, thinking all the way back to the trees which were felled to build the ship that carried Paris to Argos where he met and captivated Helen.

Suddenly, the women return from the seashore, bearing the body of Polydorus. Hecuba realizes immediately what has happened. She begs Agamemnon, to whom she has been allotted as a slave, not to prevent her from seeking revenge. King Polymestor is visiting in the Greek camp and she hopes to entice him to visit her.

Pleading her case before Agamemnon, Hecuba uses every argument she can think of, even suggesting that the king owes her something for making a concubine of her daughter, Cassandra. Agamemnon grants the justice of her case, since Polymestor has violated one of the basic obligations of Greek society, guest-friendship. It also helps that he is a barbarian. Even though he is an ally, Agamemnon sees no compelling

reason for a Greek to defend a barbarian, Hecuba sends a woman to urge Polymestor to visit her and to bring his sons.

As they await Polymestor's arrival, the women recall the night Troy fell; how their joy was cut short by the violence. They also condemn Paris and Helen for bringing all their troubles upon them.

Polymestor enters with his sons. He assures Hecuba that Polydorus is alive and well. He asks why she wanted to see him. She tells him that she has managed to convey some treasure out of Troy and has it in her tent. She wants to give it to him for safe keeping. When he asks why she wanted his sons to come as well, she cautions him that something might happen to him, so it is prudent that his sons know of the treasure as well. Happy at this unexpected stroke of fortune, Polymestor and his sons enter the tent with Hecuba.

The chorus sings of Hecuba's revenge. Then shouts and screams are heard from within. Polymestor blunders onto the stage, his eyes vacant and bleeding. He shrieks that the women have killed his sons and blinded him. Agamemnon, hearing the commotion, returns and judges between Hecuba and Polymestor, deciding that Hecuba has justice on her side.

In his fury, Polymestor prophesies that Agamemnon, Cassandra, and Hecuba will meet a violent death very soon. With that, the women are summoned to the ships and leave to meet their fate.

According to Aristophanes, who loved twitting Euripides in his comedies, Euripides scandalized Athens by showing women in what he called an unflattering light. In fact, what might have offended the audience was the sight of women taking center stage, opposing men, and triumphing over them in brutal fashion.

That is true, not only in "Hecuba," but in "Medea" as well. It must be admitted that he did portray some female characters, such as Helen and Elektra, in a more negative manner, but his women are almost always as striking in their presence as men.

In a society where a woman's life was severely controlled, Euripides's tragedies were deliberately provocative. Which may be one reason why more of his plays survive antiquity than those of either Aeschylus or Sophocles.