

F O C U S C L A S S I C A L L I B R A R Y

Euripides

HECUBA

Robin Mitchell-Boyask



EURIPIDES

Hecuba

Introduction, Translation
and Commentary

Robin Mitchell-Boyask
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

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Euripides: *Hecuba*

Scene: An encampment on the shore of Chersonese in Thrace, shortly after the fall of Troy. Dawn is about to break. The skênê is a simple tent, which serves as the living quarters of the slaves of Agamemnon. The right entrance way leads to the soldiers' camps, the left to Thrace and the sea.

Characters and Distribution of Parts Among Three Actors¹

Ghost of Polydorus, the last surviving son of Hecuba and Priam (**tritagonist**)

Hecuba, the old widow of Priam, king of Troy, now a slave to Agamemnon (**protagonist**)

Captive Trojan women, mute actors

Chorus of captive Trojan women

Polyxena, the youngest daughter of Hecuba and Priam, still a virgin (**deuteragonist**)

Odysseus, the greatest surviving Greek warrior, renowned for his intelligence and speech (**tritagonist**)

Talthybius, a minor Greek warrior who serves as a herald for King Agamemnon (**tritagonist**)

Serving maid of Hecuba (**deuteragonist**)

1 We have no records for which of the three actors were assigned to which characters, so we construct the assignments by which characters do not appear at the same time. The most talented actor was the protagonist (literally, the "first" actor), the second, the deuteragonist, and the third the tritagonist. While thematic and structural parallels make assigning the deuteragonist to Odysseus and Polymestor very tempting, the lengthy songs sung by Polyxena and Polymestor suggest those two extremely different characters were performed by a deuteragonist who specialized in such emotional monodies; likely, though by no means certain.

Agamemnon, King of Argos and leader of Greek army at Troy
(**tritagonist**)

Attendants of Agamemnon, mute actors

Polymestor, King of Thracian Chersonese (**deuteronist**)

Sons of Polymestor, mute actors

*The ghost of Polydorus appears above the skênê.*²

GHOST OF POLYDORUS

I am here after leaving the hiding places of corpses and the
gates of shadow

where Hades dwells apart from the gods,³

I, Polydorus, was the child of Cisseus' daughter, Hecuba,
and Priam was my father,⁴ who, when there was danger that
the Phrygians'⁵ city fall by Greek spears,

5

terrified, in secret he sent me from the Trojan land

towards the house of Polymestor, our Trojan guest-friend,⁶

2 He makes reference to being "above" his mother at line 29, and his needs for a tomb seem to parallel and comment upon the desire of Achilles for honor to be given to his tomb, and Achilles is said to have appeared above it. The area above the *skênê* is generally reserved for gods. Among the surviving Greek dramas, the *Hecuba* uniquely begins with a speech by a ghost. Sophocles' lost *Polyxena*, the likely model for this drama, almost certainly commenced with a solo speech by the ghost of Achilles. The ghost here suggests the work of mysterious powers otherwise unvoiced throughout the *Hecuba*, establishes a certainty that highlights the ignorance of the living characters, and symbolizes a problematic past, remembered, and then effaced.

3 Technically one of the Olympian generation of gods, Hades, a name which designates both the lord of the Underworld and the place itself, is kept apart from his peers who inhabit the sky.

4 Priam, as King of Troy, was one of the most powerful and wealthy rulers in Greek myth, who, in the *Iliad*, sees all of his sons save Paris cut down by Achilles.

5 Phrygia was a large, fairly undefined geographical area that encompassed much of west-central Anatolia in Asia Minor. In the *Hecuba* "Phrygian" is used interchangeably with "Trojan."

6 *Xenos*. See Introduction and Interpretive Essay on the importance of the guest-host relationship in Greek ethics. Euripides here immediately stresses that Polymestor violates the fundamental morals of Greek society.

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The Focus Classical Library is dedicated to publishing the best of Classical literature in contemporary translations with notes and introductions, so as to provide modern students access to the thought and context at the roots of contemporary culture.

Euripides' *Hecuba* is one of the few tragedies that evoke a sense of utter desolation and destruction in the audience. The drama focuses on the status of women, those who are out of power and at the margins of society, by enacting the sufferings of Hecuba. With the city of Troy fallen, Hecuba and Polyxena, her daughter, are enslaved to Agamemnon. Hecuba is despondent with the news that Polyxena is chosen to be sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles. After the sacrifice, the body of her son Polydorus, already a ghost at the start of the drama, is discovered. Polymestor, a king in Thrace who Hecuba sent Polydorus to for safety reasons, murdered Polydorus for his gold. With the tacit complicity of Agamemnon, Hecuba plots her revenge against Polymestor. What transpires next has lasting implications for all involved, including a dramatic trial scene and Hecuba's ultimate metamorphosis.

ROBIN MITCHELL-BOYASK is Associate Professor of Classics at Temple University and has been a Junior Fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies and a Visiting Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge University. He has published numerous articles on Greek and Latin literature as well as *Approaches to Teaching the Dramas of Euripides* (MLA 2002). He is currently completing a book on the plague of Athens and Greek drama.

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