

HECUBA

Ghost of Polydorus:

I've left the charnel-house and gates of gloom,
Behind which Hades dwells, the god of doom.
My name is Polydorus, progeny
Of Hecuba and Priam. Formerly,
When Troy was threatened by the Grecian spear,
He took me secretly, prompted by fear,
Out of my land and housed me at the place
Where his guest-friend Polymestor dwelt in Thrace
And on its fruitful plains broadcast the seeds
And powerfully tamed his nation's steeds. 10
With me he sent much gold so that, if ever
Troy's walls should fall, his progeny would never
Lack sustenance. I could not wield a spear,
Being the youngest son, so it was clear
That I should be removed from Trojan land.
As long, then, as our walls could firmly stand
And brother Hector prospered in the fight,
I flourished as a vigorous offspring might.
But when Troy fell, with Hector slain as well,
The palace rooted up, and Priam fell 20
Before the shrine, killed by the progeny
Of Achilles, then my father's friend killed me,
Because he hankered for the gold, and hurled
My corpse into the sea. The nether world
Now holds me, ever drifting here and there,
Unwept, unburied. Now above the hair

Of my dear mother, I am hovering,
A disembodied spirit, lingering
These past three days since she came to this land.
Meanwhile the Greeks sit idly by the strand 30
Of Thrace aboard their ships, and that was when
Achilles stood above his tomb and then
Stopped the Greek army as across the foam
They were about to make their journey home:
He wants Polyxena, my sister, slain
Upon his tomb so that he may obtain
His prize. He will – his friends will not deny
Him this, because his hour of doom is nigh
This very day. My mother, too, will see
Two of her children died concurrently. 40
And I myself, ill-fated too, will loom
Above the rippling waves to win a tomb:
Before her serving-maid I plan to go.
Yes, I have begged this from the powers below –
To fall into my mother's hands, thereby
Obtaining my heart's wishes. But now I
Will dodge my mother as upon her way
She goes from Agamemnon's tent, dismay
Upon her features as she looks at me.
O my poor mother, doomed to slavery 50
From being queen, with which you once were blessed.
It's through some god that you are thus distressed –
He sets the balance that he may outweigh
Your former bliss. [exit Ghost] [enter Hecuba]
Hecuba:

Guide me upon my way,

You maids of Troy! Aid me, your former queen

Though now your fellow-servant! Let me lean

On you! Quicken my feet! O dazzling light

Of Zeus! O gloom of night, why do you fright

Me so? O Earth, the mother of dreams that soar

On sable wings, I'm seeking to ignore 60

The night, the horrid sight I had to face

While dreaming of my son, who's safe in Thrace,

And dear Polyxena. You gods, I pray,

Preserve my son, our house's last mainstay,

Who's settled now in Thrace, the land of snow,

With Priam's friend. And yet there is more woe

And grief, augmenting still our present store.

Such terror never wrung my heart before.

When will it end? Where can I find a seer?

Cassandra? Helenus? Would you were here 70

To read my dream! For recently I saw

A dappled deer torn by the bloody maw

Of a wolf, thus taken from me forcefully.

This, too, filled me with great timidity.

Achilles' phantom rose above the peak

Of his own tomb, for he had come to seek

A luckless Trojan maiden as his prize.

Therefore, you heavenly powers above, devise

Some way to avert the horror from my dear

Polyxena.

Chorus:

Hecuba, I have rushed here 80

Straight from my master's tent, where I was made
His slave when driven by the Grecian blade
From Troy. Your sufferings I cannot ease
Since I have to report more miseries.
The Grecians have decided, so it's said,
That your Polyxena is to be led
As sacrifice to Achilles, for one day
Upon his tomb he stood in fine array
Of golden arms and stayed the ship, although
The sails were hoisted, and to the troops yelled, "Ho! 90
Why all this haste? I've yet to gain my prize!"
A stormy altercation to the skies
Arose, some men espousing the decree
While others argued to the contrary.
There Agamemnon was, all eagerness,
Due to his love for the mad prophetess,
On your behalf. But the twin progeny
Of Theseus acquiesced to the decree
To crown Achilles' tomb with blood – they said
That they would never set Cassandra's bed 100
Above Achilles' valour. And now, when
The opposite beliefs among the men
Seemed equal, old Laertes' shifty son,
Whose tongue could change the mob's opinion,
Convinced the army not to cast aside
Their bravest man and cause the dead beside
Persephone to say that on Troy's plain
Their friends who died for Greece would not obtain
Our thanks. Odysseus soon will come to tear

The maiden from your aged arms. Repair 110

To the temples! Sit at Agamemnon's knees

And be a suppliant! Either your pleas

To those in Heaven's vaults or those who live

Beneath the earth will succour you and give

Your daughter back to you or she must fall

Before the tomb, her blood erupting all

Around her gold-encrusted neck.

Hecuba:

Oh how

Am I to cry my lamentations now

In my old age? O gods, this slavery

Of mine is much too terrible for me 120

To bear. What champion, city or kin have I?

My aged spouse, King Priam, I saw die,

My children, too. Which way am I to go?

What god is there to aid me in my woe?

You Trojan maids, what tidings you have brought!

You messengers of sorrow, you have wrought

The end of me, for there is no more joy

For her who is the former queen of Troy.

I must go to my tent: my child, I pray,

Come out and hear your mother's great dismay 130

At what she's heard about you! [enter Polyxena]

Polyxena:

Ah, why shout

So loud, mother, and bid me to come out?

I cowered like a bird while coming here

From my bedchamber.

Hecuba:

Ah, alas, my dear!

Polyxena:

A piteous word!

Hecuba:

Your life –

Polyxena:

Ah, don't conceal

What you have got to say! The dread I feel!

Hecuba:

You have a luckless mother.

Polyxena

But why say

Such things to me?

Hecuba:

The Argives wish to slay

You at Achilles' tomb.

Polyxena:

Ah, mother, how

Can you speak of such horror? Tell me *now*! 140

Hecuba:

The rumour that I've heard cuts like a knife -

The Argives have passed sentence on your life.

Polyxena:

I grieve, dear mother, for your suffering.

This fiend-sent ill is dreadful, harrowing.

No more shall I share in your slavery,

Sad youth attending sad senility.

Like a calf that's taken from the hills, I too,

Your hapless daughter, will be torn from you,
And then, with severed throat, I will be laid
Among the dead in Hell, unhappy maid. 150

Mother, I weep for your own desolation,
But I will never mourn the devastation
In my own life – no teardrops will I shed,
Mother, for I'll be happier when dead.

Chorus:

I see Odysseus with a fresh command,
Lady, for you. [enter Odysseus]

Odysseus:

 You know the troops demand
I think, already, yet I will proclaim
To you the details of it all the same:
Your daughter must be offered at the famed
Achilles' grave, and I myself am named 160
To take her there, and Neoptolemus
Will supervise and be the priest for us.
Don't fight against me, do not match your might
Against my own, and realize your plight
Would limit you. In hardship one must cede
To reason.

Hecuba:

 Ah, a dreadful trial indeed
Is nearby. I averted death when I
Had been marked out to die: I did not die
For Zeus preserved my life that I might see
Fresh woes surpassing every misery 170
I've ever felt before. I'd ask you, then,

If slaves may pose a question to free men

That does not harm them: something I would know.

I'll listen to your answer.

Odysseus:

It is so,

So ask away!

Hecuba:

You came – do you recall? –

To Troy as an informant: you were all

Dressed in torn rags, for that was your disguise,

And drops of blood were flowing from your eyes

Onto your beard.

Odysseus:

It shook me dreadfully.

Hecuba:

Did Helen recognize you, telling me, 180

And me alone?

Odysseus:

The risk I ran I do

Remember very well.

Hecuba:

Tell me – did you

Humbly embrace my knees upon that day?

Odysseus:

I did indeed, so that my hand which lay

Upon your robe grew cold and dead.

Hecuba:

And then

Did I save you and send you off again?

Odysseus:

Yes, so that I still see the light of day.

Hecuba:

While you were in my power what did you say?

Odysseus:

I would have said just anything, I'm sure,

And used my cunning that I might secure 190

My safety.

Hecuba:

Hah! And now you treat me thus

After I've been so kind and courteous

To you, as you admit? No thanks from you

At all but every wrong that you can do!

You covet fame with demagoguery.

Oh, would that you had been unknown to me!

You thoughtlessly abuse your comrades when

With one word you can win the mob. Well then,

Did they believe it cleverness when they

In their court of assembly chose to slay 200

My child? Did they believe that it was right

To sacrifice a human at a site

More suitable for oxen? Or maybe

Achilles, out to gain indemnity,

From those who slew him, thinks that it's fair play

To mark her out for death? But in no way

Did she offend him. He should have picked out

Helen for slaughter, for there is no doubt

She proved his ruin. If some beautiful

Maiden he'd choose, it would not point to us, 210

For Helen is the fairest of them all
And was the reason for that man's downfall
As much as ours. Hear the amends you owe
To me! You fell before me (this was so,
For you confessed it) and embraced me, too,
And touched my cheek. I do the same to you
And claim that favour. Do not take away
My daughter from my firm embrace! Don't slay
My child! There are too many dead already.
With her I lose my sadness, such a steady 220
Comfort is she, my staff, my nurse, my guide,
My city. People whom the Fates provide
With power should not misuse it or, when they
Flourish, should not believe that that will stay
Forever thus. I flourished once – however,
The life I lived is over now forever.

I beg you, friend, to pity me and bring
Your army round – say it's a hateful thing
To butcher women whom you had one day
Spared out of pity, dragging them away 230
From the altars, for you have the same decree
Respecting bloodshed for both bond and free.
A man like you will easily prevail
With them, even though the words you speak seem frail;
A lesser man would fail, with not the same
Intensity as someone of great fame.

Odysseus:

Be patient, Hecuba! Be schooled by me!
My words are wise and I'm no enemy.

I'll save your life to pay your kindness –
 I don't say otherwise. Nevertheless, 240
 I don't deny what I to everyone
 Have said – that, after all our work was done
 And we had captured Troy, I would agree
 To give your daughter to our primary
 Fighter, an army rule. It is the same
 With other nations that one of great fame
 Receives esteem no greater than the prize
 A lesser man obtains. And in our eyes
 Achilles in his death has earned esteem
 From us. Does not this foul reproach then seem 250
 Uncalled-for, treating him as a good friend,
 Ignoring him once he has met his end?
 If there's another war, what will be said?:
 "We'd rather choose to live because the dead
 Receive no honours." In my case I would
 Be happy with a poor man's livelihood
 If on the tomb where I shall lie there'll be
 Respect for me for all eternity.
 You speak of cruel sufferings, but heed
 My answer – there are many old folk in need, 260
 And widows of brave soldiers over whom
 The dust has closed and we have built a tomb.
 Endure these woes; for us, if we are wrong
 To honour the dead, we'll place ourselves among
 The ignorant. You aliens, as for you,
 Respect your friends and pay the honour due
 The brave that Greece may thrive and you might glean

Its fruits.

Chorus:

Indeed, all slaves are always seen
As cursed, forced by a stronger person's might
To suffer much.

Hecuba:

Daughter, I could not right 270
The wrong, unable to avert your death:
My pleading for you has been wasted breath.
But if you're able, sing a tuneful theme
Just like the nightingale and thus redeem
Your soul from death. Before Odysseus' knees
Fall down and try to move him with your pleas,
For he has children, too.

Polyxena:

I see you place
Your hand beneath your robe and hide your face,
Odysseus, from my touch. But have no fear,
For you've escaped my suppliant god, who's here 280
To guard me. To the shrine I'll go with you,
Not just because it's what I have to do –
No, I desire to die. For folks will say
That I'm a weakling coward if I stay
Alive. My father was the king of Troy
And Phrygia, my chiefest pride and joy.
Then was I nursed with hopes that I might be
A queen, the centre of keen jealousy
Among my suitors. I was a princess,
Admired by maidens, almost a goddess, 290

Although I'm mortal; and yet slavery
Is now my lot, which makes me eagerly
Seek death, though that may come as a surprise,
But think if I'd determined otherwise
And chose to live: by chance I could be caught
By some ferocious master and be bought,
The sister of brave Hector, who lies dead,
And many more – he'll make me knead his bread
Or sweep or spin, a life of misery;
My bed, once deemed worthy of royalty, 300
Some unknown slave shall taint. Upon the light
I'll close my eyes, and to eternal night
I turn. So do your worst, lead me away:
Here's nothing for which I may hope or pray.
Mother, by word or deed don't hinder me
But hope that I may die before I see
More unearned shameful treatment. For the man
Who is not used to sorrow, though he can
And does bear them, is irritated when
His neck is in the yoke. Happier, then, 310
Is death than life. When there's no righteousness,
One's life is full of trouble and distress.

Chorus:

How wondrous is the stamp of royalty,
More so in those who gain it worthily.

Hecuba:

Well spoken, but with sadness, daughter! Still,
Odysseus, if you're planning to fulfil
Achilles' hopes, your culpability

For murder gone, don't kill my child! – kill me
Upon his tomb! For I am, after all,
Paris's mother – he caused the downfall
Of Thetis' son.

Odysseus:

His ghost asked for the slaughter,
Not of yourself, old woman, but your daughter.

Hecuba:

Then kill us both! That way the earth will feed
On twice the blood she wants.

Odysseus:

There is no need –
Your daughter's death's enough. It is not fit
To pile one body on another. It
Would be better to kill not even one.

Hecuba:

I need to die with her! It must be done!

Odysseus:

You order me??

Hecuba:

It's all the same to me –
I'll cling to her as ivy to a tree. 330

Odysseus:

Listen to wiser words!

Hecuba:

Be sure I'll never
Relinquish her!

Odysseus:

Be sure that I won't ever

Leave!

Hecuba:

Mother, hear me! You, Odysseus, be
More patient with the irritability
That's natural in a parent! Do not fight,
Mother, with him who rules us, for he might
Strike you or knock you to the ground or take
You from my youthful arms! All this will make
You suffer. Take my hand and let me place
My cheek on yours and look upon your face 340
One final time, for I shall never see
The dazzling sun again. So, finally,
Farewell!

Hecuba:

And I will still live on, although
I'll be a slave.

Polyxena:

Unwedded, now I go
Beneath the earth, not garnering my due.

Hecuba:

Your lot is piteous, and mine is, too.

Polyxena:

We'll lie in Hades' mansions separately.

Hecuba:

Alas, where shall I meet eternity?

Polyxena:

I was free-born, but as a slave I'll die.

Hecuba:

My fifty children dead!

Polyxena:

But what can I 350

Tell Hector or your husband, Priam?

Hecuba:

Tell

Them I exist within a living Hell.

Polyxena:

You breasts, you gave to me sweet nourishment.

Hecuba:

Ah, an untimely fate have you been sent!

Polyxena:

Farewell, mother and sister!

Hecuba:

That is so,

Maybe, for others but your mother? – no!

I don't "fare well".

Polyxena:

Ah, Polydorus, too,

In Thrace, the home of steeds, farewell to you!

Hecuba:

If he lives, which I doubt, so doomed am I

In every way.

Polyxena:

He lives, and when you die, 360

He'll close your eyes.

Hecuba:

I am already dead –

My sorrow has confirmed it.

Polyxena:

Veil my head,
Odysseus; now, before the fatal blow,
My heart is melted by my mother's woe,
And hers by mine. Daylight, I call on you
(For I still name you thus, although I'm due
To die and leave your presence very soon
Before Achilles' tomb).

Hecuba:

Alas, I swoon!
Daughter, my limbs are sinking under me.
Embrace me, now bereft of progeny! 370
Stretch out your hand! This is the final blow.
Would I could see that Spartan in such woe,
That Helen! For it was her beauteous face
That to once-prosperous Troy brought such disgrace
And conquered her.

Chorus:

I call upon you, breeze,
Who waft swift ships across the surging seas!
Where will you take me in my misery?
To whose house shall I go, destined to be
A slave and chattel in some Dorian land
Or Phthia, where we are to understand 380
The fair Apidanus makes fat the ground,
Enriching it? Maybe I'll cross the sound
And have an island home in misery.
I'll labour somewhere where originally
The sacred shoots shot from the palm and bay
For dear Latona, honouring the day

Of her birth-pangs; with Delian maids I'll sing,
 Perhaps, the golden headband covering
 Queen Artemis and glorify her bow.
 Or maybe to Pallas's seat I'll go 390
 And on her saffron robe with golden thread
 I'll weave her yoked mares or, perhaps, instead
 Depict the angry Titan race, whom Zeus
 Killed with his thunderbolt. Ah, what's the use?
 Poor children, poor forebears, poor, wretched land,
 That's smouldering, sacked by the Argive band!
 I'm now a foreigner, and they shall call
 Me chattel, as I go to my downfall. [enter Talthybius]
 Talthybius:
 Where's Hecuba, who once was queen of Troy?
 Chorus:
 Here, lying on the ground, starved of all joy, 400
 Wrapped in her robe.
 Talthybius:
 What can I say of you,
 O Zeus? Am I to say that it is true
 You care for mortals? Or am I to say
 That you're a trickster and in every way
 It's Fate, not gods, that rules us? She was queen
 Of gold-rich Phrygia, and she has been
 King Priam's wife. Now there's nothing but woe
 In Troy, wholly defeated by the foe.
 An aged slave, her children gone, she's there
 Upon the ground, dust sullyng her hair. 410
 Old as I am, I hope to reach my end

Before I suffer thus. Get up, my friend!

Raise your white head!

Hecuba:

Oh, let me languish! Why

Disturb my misery! Who are you?

Talthybius:

I

Am called Talthybius. Our king has sent

Me hither.

Hecuba:

Then are all the Greeks intent

On slaying me as well, my friend? The news

Is welcome. Come, there is no time to lose!

Lead me!

Talthybius:

You must inter your child, for they

Who order this are those two who hold sway 420

In Greece and their subjects.

Hecuba:

What's to be said?

Are you here not to see that I am led

To slaughter but to give ill news? She's taken

From me and left me lying here, forsaken.

In her death did you show humanity

Or, as her foe, did you act ruthlessly?

Speak – I'll endure it.

Talthybius:

Lady, as I tell

My tragic tale, I'll grieve your lot as well

As hers, for there'll be moisture in my eyes
As there was at the tomb where now she lies. 430
In full array our troops were there to see
Your daughter sacrificed. The progeny
Of Achilles took your daughter by the hand
And set her on the mound, and then a band
Of chosen Greek young men followed to be
At hand lest she should struggle, and then he
Picked up a brimming cup of gold to raise
Up high to offer up some words of praise
To his dead father, signalling to me
To order silence to the company 440
Of warriors, and so "Silence!" I cried
To all the troops while standing by his side.
"Father," he said, "accept this offering
I pour for you, for it is sure to bring
Appeasement to you, raising up the dead.
Come, drink a virgin girl's black blood that's shed
For you, and be propitious so that we
May leave this land and sail across the sea
And reach our home once more." And so his prayer
Re-echoed through the army. Then and there
He drew his golden sword and bade the men
He'd picked to hold the maiden fast. But when
She saw it, she said, "I die willingly,
You Greeks. So let no-one lay hand on me,
For I will yield my neck. Then, when we part,
I will be free, because my royal heart
Among the dead below would fill with shame

If I were still polluted with the name
Of slave." Applause resounded from the men
Assembled there. King Agamemnon then 460
Bade the young men to set the maiden free.
After she heard her master's orders, she
Tore off the robe she wore that she might bare
For all of them to see a breast as fair
As any statue's. Sinking to one knee,
She spoke to the young prince more piteously
Than ever before: "Young man, if you would strike
My breast, it's here for you. Or, if you like,
My neck I offer. Aim at either, sir!"
He felt half-glad, half-pitiful for her, 470
And then he sliced the channels of her breath:
The blood gushed out and, even in her death,
She yet was able to make sure her fall
Was graceful, hiding from the gaze of all
The men what should be kept from sight. Then, when
She'd breathed her last breath, each one of the men
Assigned himself a task – some men would fling
Leaves on her corpse while other men would bring
Pine-logs to make a pyre. But anyone who
Did nothing for the maiden would hear "You 480
Ignoble wretch, have you no decoration,
No robe, to hail this maid's determination?"
My tale has told you, lady, to be blessed
In your most noble child, though more distressed
Than all.

Chorus:

The race of Priam has been cursed,
His city, too – sent by some god, it burst
Upon us and it must be undergone.

Hecuba:

My child, of all these woes that came upon
Our race I don't know where to look – if I
Should look on one, another one will try 490

My temperament, and when another grief
Calls me from this, once more there's no relief.

I can't take from my mind the memory
Of all your sufferings sufficiently
To stay my tears. You've lessened, nonetheless,
My agony with the illustriousness

With which you died. It isn't very odd
That barren soil, when favoured by some god
With beneficial weather, should then yield
A splendid harvest, while a fertile field 500

Neglected won't produce a crop. With us,
However, one is always virtuous

Or evil. We have learned how to be good
By decent training. If one's understood
Such lessons, one knows what creates our shame.

They're all in vain, these random thoughts that came
Into my mind. [to Talthybius] Go to your troops and say
"Don't touch her corpse", and keep the crowd away.

In countless troops there is unruliness,
And on a ship a fire is dreaded less 510

Than rowdy tars, where one who's innocent
Can still be thought to be malevolent. [to a servant]

Maidservant, dip a pitcher in the sea
 And bring it here that I now finally
 May wash my darling child, a bride unwed,
 A maid, yet not a maid, among the dead,
 And duly lay her out. But how can I
 Do that? Impossible! And yet I'll try.
 I from my fellow-captives shall collect
 Adornments (for some of them, I suspect, 520
 Dodging their captor, have clandestinely
 Performed a daring act of thievery). [exit Servant]
 O lofty halls, once happy! Priam, too,
 Wealthy and blessed father, hail to you!
 I was the grey-haired mother of your race.
 How we are brought to nothing, stripped of grace
 And pride! And yet despite our misery
 We try to boast of past prosperity
 And influence: but every thoughtful scheme
 Is fruitless now, for all is but a dream. 530
 It's best to meet one's sorrows day to day.
 Chorus:
 My lot in life is trouble and dismay,
 When Paris cut down Ida's pines that he
 Might build a ship and sail across the sea
 In quest of Helen, the most beauteous
 Woman on earth. Anguish is circling us,
 As is relentless fate, which is much worse.
 For one man's folly spawned a global curse,
 Which was destructive for Simois' land
 And brought much trouble from an alien strand. 540

The strife the shepherd started was between
Three daughters of the gods, and it has been
The cause of bloodshed, ruining our race,
And many a Spartan maid, tears on her face,
Grieved by Eurotas; many a son is dead,
Causing his mother to strike her grey-haired head
And tear her cheeks. [enter a maidservant]

Maidservant:

Ladies, where may I find
Sad Hecuba, who conquers all mankind
In tribulation? No-one will gainsay
She owns the crown.

Chorus:

A cry of great dismay! 550
Your evil tidings never seem to quit.

Maidservant:

My bitter news is for the queen; but it
Is hard to tell sad news eloquently.

Chorus:

She's coming from the tent propitiously
To hear your words. [enter Hecuba]

Maidservant:

Mistress, my tale of woe
I barely can express to you – although
You're yet alive, you don't exist; undone,
Bereft, you have no husband, daughter, son.

Hecuba:

This news I've heard before – discourtesy
Is what it is. Why do you bring to me 560

The body of Polyxena? I've heard
That she is just about to be interred
With honour by the Greeks.

Maidservant:

She only shows
Her sorrow for Polyxena and knows
Nothing of her new sadness.

Hecuba:

Surely, though,
You are not bringing mad Cassandra?

Maidservant:

No,
You speak of one who lives, but this man's dead,
And you should be lamenting him instead.

Maidservant:

Mark well his body – is this not a sight
To fill you with amazement at your plight? 570

Hecuba:

Oh, Polydorus! But you were in Thrace
And being cared for. So it's true – I face
Destruction. Here I meet my end, undone.
Now I begin lamenting, my dear son,
A frantic melody I learned just now
From some avenging fiend.

Maidservant:

So, then, somehow
You knew of your son's fate?

Hecuba:

It cannot be!

No, I cannot believe the sight I see.

No day will ever pass that brings relief

From groanings and laments – grief follows grief. 580

Chorus:

We suffer cruelly!

Hecuba:

My son, how I

Am hounded by ill luck! How did you die?

Maidservant:

It is unknown. I found him on the strand.

Hecuba:

Killed by a blow or cast up on the sand?

Maidservant:

He had been washed ashore.

Hecuba:

Ah, as I slept

I saw a dark-winged phantom that was kept

Within my vision – it was you, my son,

Who now lie dead, your life barely begun.

Chorus:

Who slew him in your dream?

Hecuba:

It was that knight

Of Thrace, my friend who kept him out of sight. 590

Chorus:

Oh no! Did he, then, slay him for the gold?

Hecuba:

It's of a dreadful crime that you've been told,

Beyond belief, a deed without a name,

Unbearable, ungodly, full of shame.

So much, therefore, for hospitality!

You hacked my poor child's flesh pitilessly.

Chorus:

Some god has laid his heavy hand on you,

Harming you past all other mortals' due.

There's Agamemnon, and he comes this way.

Peace! [enter Agamemnon]

Agamemnon:

Hecuba, why is it you delay 600

Your daughter's burial? Talthybius,

My herald, has conveyed your plea to us

That no-one touch your daughter, and so we

Agree, but your delay is filling me

With wonder. Go with me! For all's been done

Well by the Grecian troops – if anyone

May say "Well" in this case. Who's this I see?

A Trojan, not a Greek! His clothes tell me

That's true.

Hecuba [aside]:

What shall I do? Am I to throw

Myself at the king's knees or bear my woe 610

Mutely?

Agamemnon:

Why turn your back and weep? Do you

Refuse to say what has occurred? And who

Is this?

Hecuba [aside]:

But if he spurns me from his knees

As foe and chattel, all my miseries

Will be enlarged.

Agamemnon:

No seer, if I'm not told

What's in your thoughts, I will not know. Unfold!

Hecuba [aside]:

Do I assess him wrongly? For he may

Be well-disposed.

Agamemnon:

If you would have me stay

I ignorance, we think identically,

For I won't listen!

Hecuba [aside]:

If he won't aid me, 620

Can't avenge my children. I must stay

The course regardless. [to Agamemnon] By your knees, I pray,

Great king –

Agamemnon:

What is your will? To be set free?

If so, it can be done most easily.

Hecuba:

Not that, sir! Give me vengeance, and then I

Will gladly be a slave henceforth.

Agamemnon:

But why

Ask me for help?

Hecuba:

I will inform you, king.

This corpse, for which my tears are tumbling –

You see it?

Agamemnon:

Yes, I do, but for the rest

I'm in the dark.

Hecuba:

I nursed him at my breast - 630

He was my son.

Agamemnon:

Which son was he? Pray tell!

Hecuba:

Not one of those who in the battle fell.

Agamemnon:

Then you had others?

Hecuba:

Yes, although in vain

I bore him, for from him I had small gain.

Agamemnon:

Where was he when Troy fell?

Hecuba:

He was conveyed

Abroad by Priam, who'd become afraid

That he might die in Troy.

Agamemnon:

Where did he place

His son?

Hecuba:

Where he was found – the land of Thrace.

Agamemnon:

With King Polymestor?

Hecuba:

Yes, he was to take

Chage of some gold – a terrible mistake! 640

Agamemnon:

Who murdered him?

Hecuba:

His host, the very one

Who promised to look after my young son.

Agamemnon:

The wretch! Was he so eager for the gold?

Hecuba:

He was most certainly, once he'd been told
Of Troy's defeat.

Agamemnon:

Where was he found?

Hecuba:

Beside

The sea, where this young slave saw where the tide
Had washed him up.

Agamemnon:

What – accidentally?

Or was she seeking him deliberately?

Hecuba:

To fetch sea-water, she went to the strand
To wash Polyxena.

Agamemnon:

Then, as he'd planned, 650

His host slew him and cast his body out
To sea?

Hecuba:

Yes, for the waves to toss about
And mangle him this way.

Agamemnon:

I pity you
For all your woes.

Hecuba:

I'm ruined, lord, it's true.
All evil now is gone.

Agamemnon:

What woman bore
Misfortune such as this ever before?

Hecuba:

No-one but Chance, maybe. But hear me why
I'm begging at your knee! If you think I
Deserve my sorrow due to the decrees
Of Heaven, I'll endure it all. But, please, 660
If I'm thought innocent, punish, for me,
That ghastly friend, who feels no fealty
To all the gods above and those below
And acted sacrilegiously, although
He was a frequent guest of mine. His share
Of all the gold he took for taking care
Of Polydorus but slew him as well
And then cast him into the ocean's swell,
Unburied. I've been cast in slavery,
And I am weak, but there is potency 670
Among the gods and Custom, who holds might
Above them, setting boundaries of right

And wrong. Now if this rule, referred to you,
Is set at nothing and those people who
Kill guests and plunder temples don't receive
Their just deserts, fairness is dead. Conceive
This as disgrace. I pray you, pity me
And, like an artist scanning carefully
His picture, look at how I'm suffering!
I once was queen but now I'm labouring 680
In bondage. Once a mother, now well-struck
In years and childless, vanquished by ill luck,
I have no city. Ah, you're leaving me!
Then have I pleaded with you fruitlessly.
Why must mankind seek knowledge but ignore
Persuasion, though she's knocking at our door
So that we may convince our fellow-man
Of anything immediately? How can
We hope for riches? All my sons are gone,
Cassandra is a slave and looked upon 690
With scorn. Troy is in flames. Now, furthermore –
Though this may be in vain, yet I'll implore –
Cassandra lies with you, a prophetess,
So Trojans say – how will you acquiesce
To those ecstatic nights when you have lain
With her, and shall the two of us not gain
Return for all her love. For rapturous nights
Bring to all of mankind such great delights.
Now, do you see this man? If you inter
His corpse, you will be benefitting her 700
Who's now your bride. There is but one thing more –

That I may have, through Daedalus's lore,
Or else another god, within my hair,
Arms, hands and feet, a voice to aid my prayer
With eloquence as at your knees I fall.
Master, you are the guiding light for all
Of Greece, so aid this aged woman: though
She is a thing of nothing, yet do so!
A good man's duty is to do what's fair
And punish evil-doers everywhere.

710

Chorus:

It's very strange that in humanity
Extremes can coincide. Necessity
Has laws that govern everything, and so
A foe becomes a friend, a friend a foe.

Agamemnon:

I pity you for your adversity,
Your son and for your suppliant plea to me.
I'd gladly see that impious host pay you
The forfeit for the sake of Heaven's due
And Justice, if it doesn't mean that I
Have planned to have the Thracian monarch die
For your Cassandra's sake. There's one thing, though,
Perplexing me – your son was Greece's foe
And yet my host's a friend with Thrace's king
(My pity for you is a separate thing).
I'm anxious to assist you, you will find,
But not if by the Greeks I am maligned.

Hecuba:

There is no mortal in the world who's free,

For he's a slave to either property
Or fate, or else the multitude or fear
Of public prosecution tend to steer 730
Him from his heart's desire. But since you're too
Afraid of what the mob may say or do,
I will allay your fear. So be aware
Of vengeance I may plot, but do not share
In it. And if there is a great affray
Among the Grecian army, or if they
Attempt to rescue him, stop them, although
Hiding the fact that you are doing so
For me. The rest I'll deal with.

Agamemnon:

Have you planned
To put a sword into your aged hand 740
To kill him? Will you poison him? Or do
You hope that someone lends a hand? But who?
Where will you find such friends?

Hecuba:

These tents can screen
A lot of Trojan women.

Agamemnon:

Do you mean
The captives?

Hecuba:

Yes, I do, for with their aid
I'll punish him.

Agamemnon:

Is it a man or maid

Who is the stronger?

Hecuba:

With a multitude

A desperate foe is easily subdued.

Agamemnon:

But I don't think much of the distaff side.

Hecuba:

How do you think the sons of Aegyptus died? 750

Who cleared the isle of Lemnos utterly

Of men? Women! Let's leave this colloquy

And send this woman through the troops! [to a servant] Draw near

My Thracian friend and say, "I have come here

To usher you to Hecuba, formerly

The queen of Ilium, and you may see

It's for your interest, and for hers as well,

Your children, too. Hear what she has to tell." [exit Servant]

My lord, delay the burial, I pray,

Of my Polyxena that I may lay 760

My children side by side, a misery

Redoubled for their mother.

Agamemnon:

It shall be

As you request. But if we still could leave,

You would not have been able to receive

This favour at my hands. But, as things stand,

The gods won't let us leave this foreign land -

The winds are inauspicious. We must wait.

Good luck to you! Both citizens and state

Want vengeance for the wicked and success

For those who have been blessed with righteousness. 770

Chorus:

My Troy, you shan't be counted anymore

Among those happy towns which never wore

The cloak of devastation. A thick cloud

Of Grecian troops has settled here to crowd

Around you with their spears. You are bereft

Of towers and the enemy has left

You fouled with filthy soot. Your streets no more

I'll tread! I was destroyed in this dread war

At darkest night, when, once the feast is done,

Sweet sleep closes our eyes after the fun 780

Of dancing. Once my husband's offering

Had been performed, he then was languishing

Upon our bed, his spear hung up, no thought

About the sailor-throng the seas had brought

Onto our shores. Beneath a tight-drawn band

I sat to braid my tresses which I scanned

In the mirror's countless glimmers so that I

Might take a rest. An uproar rose up high

Above the town of Troy, and then throughout

The streets there rang a resonating shout: 790

"You sons of Greece, whenever will you sack

The citadel of Troy and then go back

To Greece?" Half-dressed, I rose and sought in vain

Artemis' hearth – I'd seen my husband slain

But now was led away across the sea,

With many a backward look regrettably.

The ship began her homeward voyage and

I thus was parted from my country's strand
Until I swooned for grief. Let misery
Light on the sister of the Dioscuri 800
And Paris, Ida's shepherd, for when they
Were wed, some devil unleashed great dismay
And drove me from my home and native land.
O may she never eave the Trojan strand! [enter Hecuba and Polymestor]

Polymestor:

Ah, Priam! Hecuba, I weep to see
Your city thus and you in misery,
Your daughter slain. There's nothing left that's sure
And pleasant prominence is insecure
While opulence may soon to turned to woe.
The gods confound our fortunes – to and fro 810
They toss them s that our bewilderment
May make us worship them. But why lament
These things? Don't blame my absence. Stop, I pray,
And think awhile – I chanced to be away
In Thrace when you arrived. However, when
I came back home and set out once again
To see you, your maidservant here told me
Your news, and so I came here instantly.

Hecuba:

I blush to meet you in my wretchedness,
My friend, for I feel such shamefacedness, 820
For you have seen me in much happier days
And I can't look on you with steady gaze.
Don't think that this is ill will towards you,
For there is yet another reason, too,

For women should not gaze at men.

Polymestor:

Indeed,

That is the case. But why do you have need
Of me?

Hecuba:

A private matter I desire

To tell you and your children. Please require
Your slaves to leave.

Polymestor:

[to his attendants] Withdraw, for you will be
Quite safe in this desert locality.

830

The Grecian army's well-disposed, my friend,
To me. But tell me how one's wealth may lend
Assistance to those who are suffering
Ill luck.

Hecuba:

The lad whom you are quartering
In Thrace, sent by my father and by me
To you – my Polydorus, how is he?
Is he alive? Tell me – I'll ask the rest
Later.

Polymestor:

He is – in his fortune you're blessed.

Hecuba:

Well said!

Polymestor:

What next?

Hecuba:

Has he some memory
Of her who bore him?

Polymestor:

Oh, yes, certainly! 840

He's missed you very much.

Hecuba:

And what about
The gold he brought from Troy? I have no doubt
It's safe enough.

Polymestor:

Yes, under lock and key.

Hecuba:

Yet don't desire your neighbour's property,
But save that gold!

Polymestor:

I will indeed, and may
I profit from my gains!

Hecuba:

A word I'd say
To you and to your brood. Are you aware
Of what it is?

Polymestor:

No, but you will declare
It now, I think.

Hecuba:

You're dear to me, and so –

Polymestor:

What do I and my children need to know? 850

Hecuba:

A vault filled with Priam's ancestral gold.

Polymestor:

Of this you wish your son, then, to be told?

Hecuba:

Through you, yes for you're righteous.

Polymestor:

But why need

These children be here?

Hecuba:

Better it is indeed,

Lest you should die.

Polymestor:

That's wise.

Hecuba:

Do you know where

Trojan Athena's shrine is?

Polymestor:

Is it there –

The gold? What marks the spot?

Hecuba:

Above the ground

There is a black rock - thus it may be found.

Polymestor:

And is there more that you desire to say

About the place?

Hecuba:

I'm hoping that I may

860

Keep safe the Trojan gold.

Polymestor:

Where could it be?

Inside your dress, or did you possibly

Hide it elsewhere?

Hecuba:

Yes, it's quite safe amid

The spoils within the tents. That's where it's hid.

Polymestor:

What – where the ships are moored upon the shore?

Hecuba:

Oh, no, not there. For there are lodgings for

The captives only.

Polymestor:

Can we enter, though?

Are there no men about?

Hecuba:

No Grecians, no.

We women are alone. Go in, for they

Are eager to embark and sail away. 870

When you've accomplished what you have to do,

You all shall go back to the place where you

Have lodged my Polydorus. [exeunt Hecuba, Polydorus and his children]

Chorus:

You must pay

The final penalty – now is the day

When, like a ship that sinks into the sea

Far from the shore, you'll die for cruelly

Taking a life yourself. Look for downfall

When gods and Justice both are wronged. Now all

Your hopes in coming here have flown away

And you, unhappy wretch, are now to pay 880

The price, and at no warrior's hand.

Polymestor:

My eyes!

You've blinded me!

Chorus:

Friends, do you recognize

That sound? It is the Thracian's cry of woe.

Polymestor:

Ah, my poor children! Such a cruel blow!

Chorus:

The tent contains a dreadful tragedy.

Polymestor:

Despite your speed you'll not escape from me.

I'll tear this tent apart! You'll feel my hand!

Chorus:

Should we rush in to help her? We should stand

By all these Trojan women. [enter Hecuba]

Hecuba:

Do your worst!

Don't spare your hands! Lash out at us and burst 890

The doors! Your children you will never see

Again! Besides, they have been slain – by me!

Chorus:

Have you subdued, him, mistress? Has your threat

Been brought to pass?

Hecuba:

Tarry a moment yet

And you will see him here, robbed of his sight,

And his two children, slaughtered by the might
Of my brave women. Now the penalty
Is paid, and here he comes, as you may see.
I'll step aside from my sore Thracian foe
And his ferocity. [enter Polymestor]

Polymestor:

Where can I go 900

As I crawl like a beast? Which path to take?
This one? That one? I'm desperate to make
These murderesses pay for blinding me.
Where are you hiding, cursèd progeny
Of Phrygia? Sea-god, would you could heal
My bleeding eyes! Their stealthy steps I feel
Are near. Where can I rush at them and feed
Upon their flesh and bones, a bestial deed?
I'll mutilate them all for what they've done.

But wait a minute! Whither do I run 910

When my two children may be mangled by
Maenads of Hell, then grimly cast forth high
In the hills, a feast for dogs. Where shall I stay?
I'm like a ship that's anchored in the bay
As I hold tight my linen robe to guard
My sons upon their bed of death.

Chorus:

You hard

And cruel man, you pay the penalty
For what you did, the price a deity
Imposes on you.

Polymestor:

Ah, my men of Thrace,
Armed with your warlike spears, a warrior race 920

Of knights! You Greeks, I loudly call to you.

Come hither! Is there anybody who
Will listen to me? Will no-one pay heed
To me? A fearful fate is mine indeed!

Shall I take wing and soar up to the sky,
Where Sirius and Orion dart on high,
Eyes flashing fire, or in my tribulation
Descend into the murky desolation
Of Hades?

Chorus:

When life is too harsh, a man
Is justified in doing what he can 930

To rid himself of it. [enter Agamemnon]

Agamemnon:

I heard a shout,
For Echo, on her mountain-rock, cried out
To all my troops, causing an uproar.
Had we not known Troy's towers heretofore
Were levelled, we would all be filled with fear.

Polymestor:

O best of friends, it is your voice I hear.
I know you. Do you see my piteous state?

Agamemnon:

Ah, Polymestor, what a hapless fate
Has overtaken you! Who blinded you?
Your eyes are stained with blood. These children, too – 940
Who slew them? For his anger doubtlessly

Was fierce against you and your progeny.

Polymestor:

Helped by her captive maids, the former queen

Has more than ruined me. It's her I mean –

Yon Hecuba.

Agamemnon [to Hecuba]:

You own, then, what I hear?

How inconceivable!

Polymestor:

Ha! Is she near?

Say where that I may grip her hard and tear

Her limb from limb!

Agamemnon:

You beast, how could you dare

A thing like that?

Polymestor:

Just let me at her!

Agamemnon:

Hold!

Now plead your case and do not be so bold! 950

I'll listen to you both, then honestly

Decide the reason for this tragedy.

Polymestor:

I'll tell my tale. King Priam had a son,

Polydorus, and he was the youngest one.

King Priam sent him to be reared by me,

Suspecting, I've no doubt, that Troy would be

Destroyed. I killed him. Hear my reason, though –

My fear was that, if he became your foe,

He'd people Troy and settle it again;
Knowing he had survived, the Grecians then 960
Would mount another conflict to oppress
The land of Phrygia and cause distress
To her. Learning what happened to her boy,
Then Hecuba asked me to come to Troy,
Her pretext being that she would tell me
Of hidden gold stored by the family
Of Priam. Me and my two sons she led
Into her tent lest no-one else be fed
Her news. I rested there within the sight
Of Trojan maids, who sat there left and right 970
Of me, as if beside a friend. They praised
My garment's handiwork – they even raised
It to the light. Some took my weapon, thus
Depriving me yet more. Solicitous,
Some mothers played with my two boys and passed
Them hand to hand, and thereby they were cast
Further from me. Now, unbelievably,
After such sweet talk they immediately
Produced some daggers that secreted lay
Beneath the dresses that they wore, then they 980
Stabbed both my children; others grabbed at me
And, if I tried to rise up, desperately
Anxious to aid my sons, they clutched my hair
And, if I stirred in my paternal care,
Their numbers hampered me, poor wretch. At last,
Taking their brooches out, they stuck them fast
Into my eyes, which gushed with blood, then fled,

And, like a wild beast, up I sprang and sped
In hot pursuit, feeling the walls with care
And spreading fearful ruin everywhere. 990

And I have suffered all this misery,
My lord, because I slew an enemy
Of yours. If any men of olden days,
Or now or in the future, should dispraise
Women, let me say just this – no place
On land or sea produces such a race.

Chorus:

Enough! Because you've suffered, don't embrace
In one reproach the entire female race

Hecuba:

In this world never ought our words outweigh
Our deeds. If you do good, the words you say 1000
Should be as good. But if, contrarily,
You've acted evilly, your words should be
Unsound, in harmony with what you do.
One should not speak injustice well. It's true
That some can do this, but their cleverness
Cannot go on forever with success.
To you now, Polymestor, you who say
That for Achaea's sake you had to slay
My son, I tell you that, in the first place,
Greece can't be friendly with a foreign race. 1010

And what concern do you have, furthermore,
To make you act this way? Could it be for
Some marriage, some kinship, or possibly
The thought that once again your enemy

Might raze your country's crops? Preposterous!
No – tell the truth! You were solicitous
For gold, and that is why you slew my boy.
Now tell to me just one more thing! When Troy
Still stood and flourished, when Priam, our king,
Yet lived and Hector thrived in battling, 1020
Why did you not, if in all truthfulness
You had in mind to offer kindness
To Agamemnon, slay my child? For there
He was within your halls and in your care.
You had another possibility –
You could have brought him to the Greeks while he
Was living still. But then, when we were taken
Out of the light, our city, too, forsaken,
Smoke rising from her fallen walls, you slew
A guest who had been sent in trust to you. 1030
And furthermore, to prove your villainy,
Hear this: if you had unreservedly
Been friendly to the Greeks, you should have brought
The gold to them, because they long had fought
In exile and in need. But you can't bring
Yourself to part with it, continuing
To keep it in your palace. And if you
Had kept my son secure, as was his due,
You'd have received a splendid reputation
Because the virtuous, when tribulation 1040
Appears, most clearly show their friendliness,
Though friends are always found through prosperousness.
Had you been poor and my son rich, then he

Would have been as a mighty treasury
For you to draw upon, but he's no more
Your friend, and now gone from you is that store
Of gold, your children, too. A sorry mess
You're in! You will display your worthlessness,
Agamemnon, if you should assist this man,
For you would aid a guest who never can 1050
Be trusted, wicked, lacking piety.
I'd say you like men full of villainy,
For you're a villain, too. But I'll forbear
From railing at my masters.

Chorus:

Ah, when there
Is a good cause, there is an opening
For a good speech.

Agamemnon:

It's somewhat troubling
To judge a stranger, yet I must. To take
It up and then dismiss the case would make
Me shameful. And so it is my belief
Your murderous act was not to bring relief 1060
To our Achaean troops but to keep hold
Within your house of that supply of gold.
You thought but of yourself. Perhaps for you
To kill a guest's a trivial thing to do,
But we in Greece esteem it infamy:
If I judged you not guilty, I would be
Reproached. No, there will be a painful cost
For you to undergo.

Polymestor:

Ah, I am lost!

A woman (and a slave!) has beaten me.

Agamemnon:

Is it not just for your foul infamy? 1070

Polymestor:

Oh, my poor children, Ah, my eyes!

Hecuba:

You grieve,

But what of me? Will you not give me leave

To mourn my sons?

Polymestor:

Do you think that it's fine

To mock me?

Hecuba:

Yes, why not? Vengeance is mine!

Polymestor:

But not for long, because the ocean's foam –

Hecuba:

Shall carry me to Greece, far from my home?

Polymestor:

Oh, no! When from the masthead you fall down,

The sea will overwhelm you and you'll drown.

Hecuba:

Who'll make me jump?

Polymestor:

You'll climb up willingly.

Hecuba:

With wings upon my back??

Polymestor:

No, you will be 1080

A dog with bloodshot eyes.

Hecuba:

How did you know

Of that?

Polymestor:

The Thracian prophet told me so –

Dionysus.

Hecuba:

But did he not prophesy

Your present woes?

Polymestor:

No, for in that case I

Would not escape your treachery.

Hecuba:

Then say

If death will finish me, or will I stay

Alive?

Polymestor:

You'll die. They'll call your tomb –

Hecuba:

A name

Relating to my shape?

Polymestor:

The very same –

“The Wretched Hound Dog's Tomb”, a sign for those

Who sail the seas.

Hecuba:

I have no care for woes 1090

At all now that you've paid the penalty.

Polymestor:

Cassandra, too, must die.

Hecuba:

Your prophecy

I scorn!

Polymestor:

The wife of Agamemnon, too,
Grim keeper of the palace halls, is due
To be her executioner.

Hecuba:

Ah, may

She never be so vicious!

Polymestor:

She shall slay

This man, too, with an axe.

Agamemnon:

Ae you insane,

So keen to find out misery and pain?

Polymestor:

Go on, then, slaughter me, for over there
A murderous bath awaits you.

Agamemnon:

Servants, bear 1100

Him off!

Polymestor:

Are you upset?

Agamemnon:

Stop him!

Polymestor:

You may –

I've finished speaking.

Agamemnon:

Take the man away!

Cast him upon some desert isle that he

May rant away alone disdainfully! [exit Polymestor]

[to Hecuba] Inter your sons! You Trojan women, seek

Your masters' tents, for even as I speak

I feel the wind that's set to take us home.

Let's hope that we may safely brave the foam

And find that all is well when we get there.

Down to the port and tents, my comrades, where 1110

You'll prove the toils of endless slavery!

For such is their relentless destiny.

