

Euripides'
"HEKABE"
(Also known as Hecuba)
Written 424BCE

Translated
By
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Dramatis Personae:

Hekabe

(Former Queen of Troy)

Polyxene

(Hekabe's daughter)

Agamemnon

(Chief of the Greek Army)

Odysseus

(A Greek Commander)

Ghost of Polydorus

(Son of Priam and Hekabe)

Polymestor

(King of Thrace)

Talthybius

(Herald of the Greek Army)

An Old Woman Slave

(Attendant to Hekabe)

Chorus

(Of Trojan Women, captives of the Greeks)

Before Agamemnon's tent.

Enter the ghost of Polydorus

Polydorus:

I have come from the lair of the dead and the gates of darkness where Hades lives, far away from the rest of the gods.

I am Polydorus, son of Hekabe and Priam. My mother is Kisseus' daughter.

When the citadel of the Phrygians, Troy, was in imminent danger of falling under the Greek spears, my father, afraid for my safety, had sent me away to Polymestor, his Thracian friend who cultivates this here fertile peninsula of Thrace and with his spear

rules over his horse-loving people.

My father has sent with me a large quantity of gold so that if Troy fell, those of his sons who would survive would not lack the means of livelihood. I was the youngest of Priam's sons and that's why he had sent me away. I could not yet wear the arms of war or carry a spear in my young hand.

So, while Troy's boundaries stood intact, while her walls were impenetrable, my father's Thracian friend brought me up in his home properly and like his own flesh and blood. But I was doomed because the moment Troy was raised to ground, the moment Hektor, my brother was killed, the moment that my father was slain on the holy altar by that murderous sinner, Achilles, the moment my father's palace was destroyed, this Thracian friend of his, Polymestor, slaughtered me and took my gold for himself.

He has slaughtered me, threw me into the sea and kept the gold hidden inside his palace.

Unlamented and unburied, sometimes I lie by the shore and sometimes I am dragged this way and that within the endlessly turbulent waves of the deep. Now, having left my corpse, I hover over my sweet mother, Hekabe. For three days now I'm in the air, the whole time my unfortunate mother has been here, in this peninsula of Thrace, away from Troy. The whole Achaian force is here, sitting idly, its ships anchored around the Thracian shores. This is because Achilles, Peleas' son, appeared above his own tomb and, stopping the whole Greek fleet from sailing on to their home, commanded them to have my sister, Polyxene, sacrificed especially for himself, as a prize of honour and for the glory of his tomb. And so the deed shall be done since the Greeks will not deprive their friend of a gift. This very day, Fate is leading my sister to her death and so my mother will, today, see the corpses of two of her children, mine and that of her unfortunate daughter. So as to find my resting burial, I shall appear at the feet of a slave at the shore. I have begged the leaders of the world below to allow me to be buried by my mother's hands.

Well then, at least all that I wished for shall come to pass. But now, I shall leave this place because my dear, old mother, Hekabe, shall soon come out of Agamemnon's tent. She was startled by a dream she saw, in which I have appeared.

Enter Hekabe walking feebly with the aid of a walking stick and of her Trojan slaves.
Poor, unfortunate mother! How different your life is now to what it was before: from royal palaces to slavery and from the heights of joy to the depths of misery! Some god saw your previous glory and is now showing you its opposite.

Exit the ghost of Polydorus.

59

Hekabe:

Come, my children, guide this old woman to the front of the house. Come, hold me straight, girls. Hold my ageing hands and let me stand upright. I was your queen once but now I'm your fellow slave. Lend me the crook of your arm and I, with the aid of this cane shall quicken my slow pace.

O, light of Zeus, o dark night! Why does my heart tighten so with dreadful phantoms in the middle of the night? Sacred Mother Earth, mother of the black-winged dreams! I drive out of my mind last night's visions for I have dreamt of Polydorus, my son, who was sent here, to Thrace, for safety and of my darling child, Polyxene.

Gods, gods of the underworld, save my son! He is the only anchor my house has now. He lives in the house of his father's friend, at the snowy peaks of Thrace. I'm certain that these nightly visions shall bring some new, insufferable misery. Grief will be cast upon the grieving! My heart has never trembled so much, it has never felt that afraid

before.

My Trojan friends, where, I wonder, may I find the prophet Helenus, or my Cassandra to interpret my dreams? Such dreams! I saw a spotted stag writhing in agony in the bloody paws of a wolf that had torn it pitilessly from my arms. And this other thing frightens me also: There, high, above its tomb, stood Achilles' ghost, commanding as a sacrifice to his honour, one of the much suffering Trojan girls.

My gods! O my gods! I beg you! Save my daughter from such an evil deed!

98

Chorus:

Hekabe I've slipped away from my master's tent and rushed over here to you. After the fall of Troy I was selected by lot to be brought here as a slave, a captive of the Greek spear. I haven't come to lighten any of your misery, my Lady but, on the contrary, I am a messenger carrying an insufferable burden of sad news for you.

Chorus:

They say that the Greeks, in a general assembly, decided to sacrifice for Achilles Polyxene, your daughter,

Chorus:

You remember when he appeared at the top of his tomb, brandishing his golden arms and holding back the homeward ships. They had their sails wide with the wind and he shouted at them, "Where are you off to, Danaans? Will you leave my tomb bare and without its prize of honour?"

Chorus:

It was then when that the furious waves burst all about and a dire division of opinion broke asunder the Greek spearmen. Some agreed to Achilles' demands but others did not. Agamemnon, who honours the bed of his mistress, the prophetic maenad, your daughter. Cassandra, fought on your side. Cassandra and Polyxene are your daughters. But the two sons of Theseas, true sons of Athens, wanted to honour Achilles' tomb with the blood of a young woman. In their speeches to the army they both insisted that the hero's tomb be honoured with youthful blood and that Cassandra's bed should never be held in higher esteem to that of Achilles' spear.

Chorus:

The battle between the opposing views was about even right up until that rascal son of Laertes, Odysseus of the spinning wit and of the sweet, conquering word, convinces the army not to scorn the greatest among the Danaans for the sake of a slave's sacrifice. Nor should it be possible for a fallen Danaan, inhabiting the death-realm of Persephone, to stand before her and announce that the Greeks, homeward bound after their destruction of Troy, have forgotten to honour those who have fallen for their sake.

Chorus:

Hekabe, Odysseus will be here any minute now to tear the young foal out of your aged arms and take her away. But you go down to the temples, Hekabe, go down to the altars and fall at Agamemnon's knees. Plead with him and plead loudly, too, with the gods of Heaven and Hell! Your prayers will either prevent the loss of your luckless daughter, or you'll be forced to look upon her while her deep red blood gushes forth from her gold-adorned throat to cover the tomb.

153

Hekabe:

Ah! What a miserable wretch I am! What sounds can I utter? What sorry lament do I sing in my painful old age and in my dreadful, insufferable slavery?

Ah! Who's there that can help me? What children? What city?

My dear husband has gone and so have all my children. What path shall I take now? This one? That one? Where will I find a haven? Which god? Which mighty power will help me now?

Ah, you Trojan women! Messengers of evil, messengers of suffering, you have finished me! You have destroyed me! I want no more of this life of light!

Come, my poor legs, take this old woman to the tent there.

She shouts into the tent

Child! My darling child! Child of the most wretched mother, come! Come outside and listen to your mother's words. Come and hear the news I was told about your life!

Enter Polyxene, rushing out from a side entrance of the tent.

Polyxene:

Mother, my dear mother! Why the crying? What is this unbearable news you have for me? I ran out of the tent like a frightened bird.

180

Hekabe:

Oh! Oh, my darling child –

Polyxene:

Such hard, ominous words, mother! What evil is ahead?

Hekabe:

I cry for your soul, my daughter.

Polyxene:

Come, mother! Tell me clearly. Hide it no more. You are frightening me, mother!

Why this sorrowful lament?

Hekabe:

Oh, child of a miserable mother!

Polyxene:

Mother what is it? What is this news you must reveal to me?

Hekabe:

My child, the whole army of the Argives has unanimously ordered your sacrifice upon Achilles' tomb.

191

Polyxene:

Mother! What are you saying, mother? Explain this dreadful, contemptible news for me, mother! Tell me clearly what you mean!

Hekabe:

I utter, my daughter, dire news, indeed. I am telling you that the Argives have decided your Fate.

Polyxene:

Ah, my poor mother! How will your unfortunate, painful existence endure this added burden? What power has thrown this insufferable, hateful evil upon you? Poor, poor wretch! You no longer, no more, will have this ill-fated daughter of yours near you, to share the weight of your bonds in your pitiable, old age. You'll see me, mother, being torn harshly from your arms and with my throat cut, like a lion's cub – a calf, sent off to Hades' black world where I, miserable wretch, will be lying alongside the dead. I care not about my death, mother. It has come as something that is better than my present life so I am not crying for my sake but for yours and yours alone, unhappy Lady.

216

Chorus:

Here's Odysseus, Hekabe, rushing to give you some news.

Enter Odysseus with his attendants.

Odysseus: *To Hekabe*

Woman, I believe you know already the vote and the decision of the army. Still, I shall speak.

The Achaians have decided to sacrifice your daughter, Polyxene upon Achilles' tomb and they designated me the man to accompany her there. The sacrifice will be overseen and conducted by Achilles' own son. Of course you know what you must do now: Let us not use force to drag her away from you and don't try to do battle with me! You should know your weakness. Understand the misery that surrounds your life. It is wise to be circumspect even in such moments of misery.

229

Hekabe:

O, what a dreadful struggle awaits me! A huge grief, a torrent of tears. I should have died long ago; Zeus should have destroyed me earlier but he still keeps me here, alive, to witness new, ever more tormenting things.

Odysseus, if slaves are allowed to ask questions of free men, like yourself, questions that do not hurt their soul or heart, then it should be right for us to ask them and for you to answer them. We shall listen.

238

Odysseus:

It is so. Come, ask your questions. I shall not begrudge you the time.

Hekabe:

Do you remember, Odysseus, when you came into Troy as a spy, dressed in torn rags, totally unrecognisable? Blood and gore flowed from your eyes and onto your beard then.

Odysseus:

I remember it well. It shook me to my very soul.

Hekabe:

You remember that Helen recognised you and she had told me only.

Odysseus:

Yes, I remember, I had found myself in terrible danger.

Hekabe:

Yes, and you fell at my knees, pleading with me, most humbly.

Odysseus:

So much so that my hand went dead numb, on your dress.

Hekabe:

And what did you say to me, that moment when you were my slave?

Odysseus:

I've told you many things. All sorts of cunning words, to escape my death.

Hekabe:

And had I not saved you and let you get away?

Odysseus:

Yes and so now I can see the light of this Sun.

251

Hekabe:

But you say you've received all this kindness from me and yet, instead of repaying me with equal kindness, you are resolved to do such awful harm to me.

Ah! All of you lot who are jealous of the honours received by political leaders are an ungrateful lot, the whole generation of you! I wish I had never known any of you.

You don't care how much you hurt your friends so long as you say something to

pacify the masses.

What a flash of wisdom the soldiers must have thought they had, to vote for this girl's death sentence! What Force has made them want to sacrifice a human on a tomb, a place where a bull is the proper offering? And if Achilles seeks justice for his own death by murdering others, why should it be this girl here? What wrong has she done to him? Instead, it is Helen's sacrifice he should be seeking, for it was she who had brought him to Troy and caused his death. And if his wish was to have the fairest of women sacrificed upon his tomb, then this honour too, belongs to Helen, Tyndareus' daughter, who is by far the fairest. It does not belong to my daughter. It was Helen who has caused you more harm than we Trojans ever did.

271

I've made this plea in the name of Justice. And now I demand of you to repay the kindness you've received from me. You have said yourself that you have kneeled before me and clutched my hand and touched my aged cheeks, in supplication.

Look here! I kneel before you now in the same way and beg you for recompense of the favour I showed you back then. Do not tear Polyxene from my arms! Do not kill her! There have been enough killings already. I find enormous joy in her and with her I forget my misfortune. She is the only solace for my many pains: she is my country, my nurse, my support, the guide of my steps.

Odysseus, hear me! Those who are able to exercise power should not exercise it wrongfully and those who are fortunate should not believe that fortune will stay with them for ever. Look at me, Odysseus! Once, I too was someone great but one single day has changed all that. One single day has stripped me of all my happiness.

But now, my friend, I touch your beard and beg you to show pity on me. Have pity on me!

Go back to the army, go back to the Achaians and counsel them not to kill women – the very women that you had not killed when you were dragging them away from their altars, showing them compassion then. The gods will surely show their anger if you do so now. And remember, too that there is a strong law concerning the shedding of blood. One which applies equally for free men and slaves. Go, Odysseus and speak with them and even if your words are not eloquent, your high position among them will help to convince them. Words are not as effective when spoken by a common man as they are when spoken by someone with a strong reputation.

296

Chorus:

Oh, Hekabe! There is no man with heart so cruel that he can hear your groans and pitiful cries and not be moved to tears.

Odysseus:

Hekabe, listen to me and learn from my words. Don't make an enemy in your heart of someone who's speaking to you wisely. You have done me a good deed and so I speak sincerely when I say that I am happy to save your life. However, I will not take my word back when I supported the wish of the rest of the army, which is to sacrifice your daughter for the honour of the first among the fighters who had conquered Troy. The army demands it. Most nations suffer exactly because of this very same reason, that is they give no more honours to their brave as they do to their less so. For us, dear Lady, Achilles is worthy of great honour. He was a man who fell for the great glory of Greece. It would be a disgrace to neglect him in death when we loved him while he was alive.

And then again, let us suppose we do as you say. What would happen if, for some reason, we would need to raise up an army again against another enemy? What would

others say? They will ask themselves, “shall we fight or shall we not? Shall we be cowards and refuse, seeing that we pay no respect to the fallen soldiers?” If it were me, I would not care if, when alive, I lived a poor man’s life but when I die, I would like to see on my tomb evidence of respect and honour. Such a glory measures for much.

321

You say that you’re suffering dreadfully. This is what I say to that: Greece, too, has its share of old men and women who suffer equally. Brides who lost their brave men, men who are now buried beneath Trojan soil. You, too, must, like them, endure it. As for us, if our custom of honouring the glorious dead is wrong then we shall suffer the accusation of being ignorant brutes. You barbarians may continue, if you wish, to refuse to regard your friends as friends and refuse also to honour those men who have fallen honourably. Greece will prosper because of this custom, while you will suffer due to your type of thinking!

Chorus:

How dreadful a thing slavery is! Fallen by violence, they must endure injustice.

334

Hekabe:

My darling daughter, my pleas to save you from murder have gone in vain. They’ve been scattered to the winds but you, if you have greater courage than your old mother try and save your life. Plead with him and, like a nightingale, make use of all the sweet tones of your voice. Kneel at Odysseus’ knees and beg for mercy. Try to make him feel pity for your terrible Fate. He, too, has children, speak of them.

342

Polyxene:

Odysseus, I can see your hand hidden in the folds of your cloak and your face turned away from me so that I won’t touch your beard while I am pleading to you. Fear not, Odysseus. You have escaped from my Lord, Zeus, the protector of all suppliants. Fear not because I shall go with you to the altar, not only because I must but also because I want to die. If I don’t, I shall be regarded as a coward; a weak-hearted woman. Should I live? To what purpose now? My father was the king of the Phrygians. That was the most important thing in my life. Then I was brought up as a true royal bride, one that has provoked many rivalries as to into whose palace and to whose hearth I should go.

I was the lady mistress of the Trojan women then, equal to the gods, if you forget mortality, and I, poor wretch than I am now was much admired among both, the single as well as the married women.

Now I am a slave! This name alone, this name that I cannot get used to, urges me to seek death. Then there’s the thought that some cruel man will buy me with silver, me, Hector’s sister and sister to many others. A man who’ll force me to bake his bread, to sweep the floors and stand at the loom. What a black life that would be! And then there’d be some slave, bought from who knows where, who will defile my bed, a bed that once belonged to kings.

Never!

I cast out the sun’s rays from my eyes while they’re still free and give my body to Hades.

Come then, Odysseus! Take me and lead me to my murder. Come, because I can see nothing to give me hope or belief that Fate will one day give me joy.

And you, too, mother, don’t stop me, either with words or deeds. Share with me, mother, my only wish that I die before I fall upon some shame I do not deserve. If

one is not accustomed to ill luck one must endure it even though it hurts as it hurts the animal in the yoke. Otherwise the pain of living without honour is far greater.

379

Chorus:

Great and wondrous is the stamp of royal blood among mortals. More so among those who are worthy of it.

Hekabe:

You spoke well, my daughter but such speech is attended by sadness.

Still, Odysseus, I beg you: if you are to fulfil Achilles' wishes and escape the blame of murder, then don't kill my daughter but take me, instead and kill me upon his tomb. Don't be at all afraid. It was I, after all, who gave birth to Paris who killed, with his arrow, Thetis' son.

Odysseus:

No, old woman. Achilles' ghost did not ask for your death but for the death of Polyxene.

Hekabe:

Then kill us both. That way earth and he will drink double the blood they want.

Odysseus:

Your daughter's death is enough. It is not proper to pile one body upon another. Far better it would have been if there were no need to sacrifice even this one.

396

Hekabe:

But I have the greatest need to die with my daughter! You must kill us both!

Odysseus:

What's this? I didn't know that I had bosses!

Hekabe:

It's just the same to me. I shall cling to her like the ivy does to the oak tree.

Odysseus:

No, Hekabe. Listen to the words of those wiser than you.

Hekabe:

Odysseus, I shall never let this young woman here go!

Odysseus:

Hekabe, I will not leave without her!

Polyxene:

Mother, listen to me! And you, too, son of Laertes, you must understand the pain and indignation of parents when it is justifiable.

Unfortunate mother, do not engage in battles with your captors. Do you want to fall upon the ground and injure your aged body as they drag it away with force? Do you want to feel the shame of being dragged away by the hands of the young? That will be the outcome. No, you do not deserve such a treatment.

Instead, my darling mother, give me your sweet hand and let me touch your cheek with mine for this is the last time I am seeing the light of the sun. I will never see it again. Now you are hearing my final good bye.

Mother! You who gave me life, I am going down to the world below.

Hekabe:

Pitiable daughter! Miserable mother!

Polyxene:

There, in Hades, I shall be lying, separated from you.

Hekabe:

Ah, dear me. What shall I do? What will be my end?

420

Polyxene:

I shall die a slave though my father was free!

Hekabe:

And I, my darling, will be a slave and alive.

Polyxene:

Unwed, bereft of the wedding songs I deserve.

Hekabe:

And I, bereft of my fifty children.

Polyxene:

Tell me, mother, what would you like me to say to Hektor and your old husband?

Hekabe:

Tell them that I am the most unfortunate woman of them all.

Polyxene:

Oh, mother's breasts that nurtured me so sweetly!

Hekabe:

Unlucky darling. Untimely death!

Polyxene:

Farewell, mother... farewell, Cassandra!

Hekabe:

Others shall fare well, my daughter. For me it's not possible.

Polyxene:

And you, too, my brother Polydorus, living among the horse loving Thracians.

Hekabe:

That is, if he is alive. With such a dreadful fate that I have, I don't believe that he's alive.

430

Polyxene:

He is alive and it will be he who will close down your eyes when you die.

Hekabe:

My grief has killed me even before Hades.

Polyxene:

Come, Odysseus, cover my head with this cloak and take me away. Take me now because, even before I am killed, my heart has melted with my mother's lamentations and I make hers melt with my own tears.

O light! True, I can say your name but I will not enjoy you for any longer than during this journey I am making towards the sword and to Achilles' tomb.

Hekabe:

Ah! I am dead! My limbs are undone. Come, daughter, let me take you into my arms. Let me hold your hand. Don't leave me without a child.

Dear women! I am lost! If only I saw that Spartan woman in the same predicament! That sister of the Dioscouri, Helen! Her, who with her beautiful eyes, destroyed, in the most despicable way, our joyous Troy!

Exit Polyxene and Odysseus with his retinue. Hekabe falls to the ground and covers her head with her cloak.

444

Chorus:

Oh, wind! Breath of the sea that sends away the seafaring ships over the ocean's waves! Where will you take this unfortunate woman? In whose house will I, a bought slave, end up? Will it be in some port of Doris or Phthia where, they say,

Apidanus, father of beautiful streams, nurtures the valleys? Or will you take me with oars that slice the waves to that island where, for Leto's sake, the Palm tree and the Daphne were first grown and which then brought out the sacred branches, those dear gifts for the children of Zeus? Will I, with the young women of Delos, praise in song the golden headband and the bow of Artemis?

Chorus:

Or, will I come to the city of Palas Athena, where I shall weave, with bright threads, on her saffron robe, flowery patterns of the yoking of her lovely mares to her chariot or perhaps I will depict the race of the angry Titans which Zeus, son of Cronos, stopped with the flame of his thunderbolt.

Chorus:

Poor children, poor my parents and poor my city! Poor Troy, taken now by the Argive spear and lying in utter ruin, engulfed in the smoke of its smouldering fire. As for me, I have left Asia and I shall be called a slave in a foreign land, leaving Europe's houses for the chambers of Hades.

Enter Talthybius

484

Talthybius:

Trojan ladies, where may I find Hekabe, once the queen of Troy?

Chorus:

She's there, near you, Talthybius. There, lying on the ground wrapped fully with her garments.

Talthybius:

O Zeus, what shall I say about you? Shall I say that you truly care for the mortals, or shall I tell that you've received this fame undeservedly, that it is a work of trickery only, because mortals believe in the existence of gods whereas, all along it is Fate that determines all human activity?

Was this not the Queen of the gold-rich Phrygians? Was this not the wife of blissful Priam? Look now, her whole city has perished in war and she, a slave, an old woman without children, lies upon the ground, her poor face made dirty by the dust.

Alas! I am an old man yet I'd rather die than be met by some dishonourable calamity. Come, unfortunate woman, raise your body and your snow-white head.

501

Hekabe:

Ah! Who is it that won't let my body lie here in peace? Whoever you are, why disturb me in my hour of pain?

Talthybius:

I am Talthybius and I have come as a messenger of the Danaans. Agamemnon has sent me to you, my Lady.

Hekabe:

My good man, could it be that the Achaians have decided to kill me on Achilles' tomb? Is this why you've come? What a pleasure your words would be to me then.

Come, let us hurry! Lead the way, old man!

Talthybius:

No, my lady. I've come to tell you that your daughter has been sacrificed and that you must now bury her. Atreides' two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaos, as well as the Achaian army have sent me to tell you this.

Hekabe:

Oh, God! What is it that you're telling me? That you're not here to take me to my death but, instead, to give these dreadful news?

Oh, my darling daughter! You're gone! They've torn you from your mother's arms and now I'm left without children! I've lost you, too! Unfortunate me! What was her end like? Was she respected at all? Or did you kill her as if she were one of your enemies? Speak the truth, though the truth is harsh.

518

Talthybius:

Lady, you're asking me to gather a double harvest of tears from the pain of your daughter's death. I shall cry again now, as I tell you of her death. I shall cry as I cried at the tomb while she was being killed.

The whole Achaian army had gathered before the tomb to witness your daughter's sacrifice. Achilles' son took Polyxene by the hand and placed her at the tip of the tomb. I was close by.

Young, specially chosen Achaians joined him to lend a hand in case Polyxene struggled. Achilles' son took a golden cup, filled it to the brim and raised it high as a libation to his dead father. Then he signalled to me to command the army to be silent so I rose among them and called out, "Silence, Achaians! Let there be silence! Hold still all of you!" And so I had made the whole army still and silent. Then Achilles' son said, "My father! Peleas' son! Receive these libations that propitiate the dead and call them to the upper world. Come and drink the pure dark blood of the girl whom the army and I have offered you as a gift. Be kind to us and let us untie our stern cables, raise our anchors and, leaving Troy behind us, make our journey home pleasant."

These were his words and the whole army prayed with him.

Then he grabbed the handle of his golden sword, drew it out of its scabbard and signalled to the chosen Argive youth to take a hold of the girl. Polyxene saw this and immediately said these words: "You who have sacked my city! Argives! I die of my own accord. Let no one touch my body. I shall offer my neck without fear. In the name of all the gods, let me be free when you kill me so that I may die a free woman. I would feel ashamed if down in the halls of Hades the dead call me, a princess, slave."

Then the soldiers shouted their approval and Agamemnon ordered the young men to leave the girl free. Hearing this last word of their leader, the soldiers let the girl go. Polyxene heard Agamemnon's words and taking a hold of her dress, high up from her shoulders, tore it all the way down to her waist, and to her navel, leaving her statuesque breasts naked. Then, with her knees on the ground, she said the saddest and bravest words: "Come, young man. You may hit me where you wish. Here is my breast but if you wish to hit me at the root of my neck, this, too is ready."

Then, Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, at once willing and not, and out of pity for her, cut her breath's passageway. The blood gushed out. Still, though she fell dying, she was careful to fall modestly and in such a way as to keep concealed what should be concealed from the eyes of men.

When her soul left her from the fatal wound, every Argive did some task or other for her: some of them spread leaves all over her body, others brought pine wood for her pyre and if there was someone who had failed to carry anything he'd hear such admonishing words as, "lazy man, are you just standing there? Why aren't you bringing some garments or gems for the young woman? Go! Go and get some tribute for her who is a woman most brave and noble!"

Hekabe, as I'm talking to you like this about your daughter, I feel that you are of all the mothers in the world, both the most blessed in your children, as well as the most unfortunate.

Chorus:

Dreadful is the evil that has flooded the children of Priam and our city by the will of the gods!

585

Hekabe:

O daughter! So many misfortunes surround me that I don't know which one to turn to first. Were I to turn to one of them, another stops me from doing so and yet another drags me away, one that gives birth to a mountain of many more misfortunes.

I can't erase from my heart what you have suffered, yet you have lightened my unbearable grief because you have endured your suffering so nobly.

It's not an odd thing for an infertile soil to give a good harvest of wheat if the gods grant it favourable weather, or for a fertile soil to give no harvest if it has been neglected in all its needs. With mortals, though, an evil man will always be evil and a virtuous one always virtuous, his character remaining steadfastly honourable even through dreadful times.

Is the difference due to parentage or due to upbringing? Of course, the best upbringing teaches the child that which is good and if he learns this well enough, then through it, through this standard, he can learn what is evil.

These thoughts are arrows, Talthybius, arrows shot in vain, but you say this to the Argives: "Let no one touch my daughter's body! Keep the masses away from her. In a huge army the soldiers are undisciplined and this lack of discipline among sailors is worse than fire so that even he who does no evil is thought of as an evildoer.

Exit Talthybius

(Addressing one of the chorus) As for you, my old slave, go and fetch an urn. Dip it into the ocean until it is filled with water and then bring it here to me to give my daughter her last bath. My daughter, the bride who was not wed, the virgin who is no more since now she is married to Achilles. Let me wash her and give her the adornments she deserves. Yet, it is impossible for me! What can I do other than to gather all the adornments I can from these fellow captive women who share this tent with me. Perhaps one of them might have stolen something from her new masters and has it hidden in her house.

You, magnificent palaces! You, once joyful home! And you, Priam, most wealthy in goods and father of the best children and I, their mother! How did we end up having nothing, having lost our former glory? Can any of us now, after this total loss, pride himself for having a grand house or for being known among people as being honourable? But these are merely words of the tongue and not of the mind; the happy man is he who, in his daily life, is met with no misfortune.

Hekabe enters Agamemnon's tent

629

Chorus:

Fate dictated that I should suffer.

Fate dictated that I should be ruined.

Fate dictated this

Chorus:

From the moment Paris cut down the Pine trees

On Mount Ida to make a ship for his

Journey over the sea's waves to

Helen's bed –

Helen, the most beautiful woman beneath the

Sun's golden rays.

Chorus:
Anguish and necessities worse than anguish
Are circling around us.
From the thoughtlessness of one man
Sprung forth a multitude of evil, of torment,
For the land of Simois.

Chorus:
Others now suffer.
The quarrel between three daughters of gods
Was decided on Mount Ida by a shepherd and this decision brought to our home
War, spear, slaughter and destruction.

Chorus:
And in Sparta too, by the flowing waters of Eurotas, some Spartan woman cries
endless tears in her home

Chorus:
And a mother of slaughtered sons beats her grey head with her hands

Chorus:
And rips great gashes into her cheeks, her nails clogged with the blood of her wounds.
Enter a female slave with two attendants (also female) carrying a covered corpse.

Slave:
Women, can you tell me please where the most wretched Hekabe is? She is more
unfortunate than every man and woman! No one could deny her that crown!

661

Chorus:
What is it you want, you miserable woman with your evil tongue? How I detest
dreadful news!

Slave:
I bring sad news to Hekabe.

It isn't easy for mortals to announce happy news to someone in the grips of
misfortune.

Chorus:
Here she is now, coming out of the tent. Just in time to hear your words.

Enter Hekabe

Slave:
Most ill-fated woman, even more so than I can say! You are lost, my lady! You no
longer exist. Though you can see the light of the sun, you are without children,
without husband and without a country. You are utterly destroyed!

670

Hekabe:
There's nothing new in what you're saying. Your pitiful words come to someone who
knows misfortune well. But why are you bringing me the body of my Polyxene? I've
been told that her burial is being prepared by the Achaians with great reverence.

Slave:
Poor woman! She knows only about Polyxene. She knows nothing about her other
troubles.

Hekabe:
Ah! Is this then the body of the Bacchic prophetess, my daughter, Cassandra?

Slave:
Your cries were for someone who's alive but, instead, you should be mourning this

dead man. But uncover the body and look at it carefully, Hekabe. It is the body of someone you know but never thought you'd see.

Hekabe: (*uncovering the body*)

Ah! I see the body of my son, Polydorus! The Thracian was looking after him for me at his house. Ah, it's true! I am thoroughly destroyed. I exist no more!

Oh my son! My son!

Now do I begin my frenzied lament!

O, my son!

Now I have learnt of the torment that some

Evil spirit has delivered me.

Chorus:

Have you truly understood that your son is dead, you poor, unfortunate woman?

689

Hekabe:

I see the body but I cannot believe the death. The vision is intolerable. Unbelievable. One blow follows another and I will never see a day without grief and tears.

Chorus:

Poor woman. We must have the strength to endure insufferable pains.

Hekabe:

O, my child! Child of a most wretched mother! What sort of death has found you?

What ill fate brought you to this state? Who was the man who killed you?

Slave:

I don't know. I found him lying on the shore.

Hekabe:

Had the sea cast him out or was he hit by an enemy spear and fell on the shore's smooth sand?

Slave:

He was cast out by the ocean waves.

Hekabe:

O, my son! Now I understand the vision my eyes saw in my dreams. I was given a message by the black-winged ghost that you, my darling son no longer lived under the sun's rays.

Chorus:

Who killed him, Hekabe? Can you interpret your dream to that extent?

Hekabe:

My own, my own friend the Thracian. Polymestor the horseman. Old man Priam has secretly sent my son to his house.

Chorus:

What do you mean, Hekabe? Did the Thracian kill him so he could steal Polydorus' gold?

714

Hekabe:

Unutterable! Indescribable! Monstrous! An insufferable sacrilege! Where is the honour of friends? Cursed and despicable man! How could you slaughter this youth, pitilessly tearing his flesh to bits, cutting it up with your sword?

Chorus:

Poor, miserable woman! How dreadfully harsh is some god treating you, Hekabe, that you must endure so much suffering.

Enter Agamemnon

But hush now. I can see our master, Agamemnon coming.

Agamemnon:

Hekabe, why are you so slow? Why have you not come to bury your daughter? Talthylus told me of your orders that no Argive should touch her body, so we've left it there, untouched and waiting for you, but I'm shocked to see that you are still here, wasting your time! I've come to take you there. Everything has been well prepared there and waiting for you –that is if anything of such a business can be said to be good.

Ah! Whose corpse is this? Who is this man I see lying dead beside my tent? By the looks of his clothes he must be a Trojan and not an Argive.

Hekabe: *(Aside: Turning her back to Agamemnon.)*

Ah! You poor wretch! And by this *you* I mean me. I speak to myself as I speak to another.

Come, Hekabe, what should I do now? Should I fall before Agamemnon's knees right now or should I endure my suffering silently?

Agamemnon:

You turn your back to me and cry. Why? Tell me what happened. Who is this?

Hekabe: *(continues as above)*

But then again, if he pushes me away from his knees because he considers me a slave and an enemy, my pain will worsen still.

Agamemnon:

Hekabe, I'm not a seer to be able to work out the ways of your thinking if I cannot hear you.

Hekabe: *(continues as above)*

Perhaps I am mistaking his disposition, thinking him to be more hostile than he truly is.

Agamemnon:

If you don't wish me to know anything about this issue, then I agree because I don't want to hear about it either.

Hekabe: *(continues as above)*

Yet without him I won't be able to get justice for my children.

But why overstudy the matter? I must try whether I succeed or not.

(She turn to him)

Agamemnon, I kneel by your knees and beg you. By your beard and by your blessed right arm.

Agamemnon:

What is it? What do you want? To be free? That should be easy for you.

756

Hekabe: *(aside)*

No need for that. If the guilty are punished, I can remain a slave for the rest of my life.

Speaking to Agamemnon

Nothing, my king! None of the things you are thinking.

Agamemnon:

Well then? What help do you want me to give you? Tell me.

Hekabe:

Do you see this man upon whose corpse I am shedding tears?

Agamemnon:

I do, indeed. But what of it? I don't understand.

Hekabe:

I was the one who gave birth to him. It was I who had carried him in my womb.

Agamemnon:

Poor woman. Which of your sons was he?

Hekabe:

He was not one of those children of Priam who died in Troy.

765

Agamemnon:

So, apart from those children, you had given birth to another one?

Hekabe:

Yes, this man you see before you. A birth, it seems, in vain.

Agamemnon:

Where was he when Troy fell?

Hekabe:

His father, Priam, feared for the boy's life so he had sent him far away.

Agamemnon:

And of all his children he had sent away only this one? Where to?

Hekabe:

Here, in this land, where his body was found.

Agamemnon:

To the king of this land, Polymestor?

Hekabe:

Yes, he was sent here to guard some gold, which proved to be his bitter poison.

Agamemnon:

Who killed him and how?

Hekabe:

Who else could it have been but our Thracian friend?

775

Agamemnon:

Poor woman! So Polymestor was after the gold?

Hekabe:

Immediately after he heard the news about Troy's destruction and the tragedy of the Phrygians.

Agamemnon:

Where did you find him? Or did someone bring his body here?

Hekabe: *Indicating the slave*

This woman, here, found him by the shore.

Agamemnon:

Was she looking for him or did she find him by chance?

Hekabe:

She had gone to fetch some water for Polyxene's ablutions.

Agamemnon:

It seems your friend had killed him and threw him into the sea.

Hekabe:

Yes, to be tossed about by the waves, after he had mangled his body in such a pitiful manner.

Agamemnon:

You are an unfortunate woman, indeed, Hekabe. Your torment is endless.

Hekabe:

I am lost, Agamemnon. There is no torment I have not suffered.

Agamemnon:

Poor, wretch! Poor wretch! Which other woman has been born to suffer so much?

Hekabe:

No woman! Not unless you count the goddess Misfortune herself. But listen to the reason I have fallen before your knees, Agamemnon: If you believe that my misfortune is proper and according to the holy laws, then I shall bear it. If not, then, for my sake, punish this man, this ghastly friend, who feared neither the gods below nor those in the Heavens and committed this most sacrilegious act, in spite of the fact that he had often shared my table and was first among my friends. Not only had he taken his share of the gold for looking after my son, but he had also killed him. Then, once he had done the murder, he didn't consider my son worthy of burial. Instead, he had thrown him into the ocean.

I am a slave too and equally weak. But strength is with the gods and with their own, sovereign laws. Our lives are based on these laws and with them we determine what is just and what is unjust. This law is now in your hands and if you disregard it and you do not punish those who kill their friends and dare to plunder the shrines of gods, then there can be no justice for the people. So think of such acts as shameful and show me some pity and respect. Stand back a little, Agamemnon. Be like a painter and look carefully at my misery. I was a Queen once but now I am your slave. Once I had many children but now I am an old woman with none. Childless and without a country, I am the most wretched of all.

Agamemnon turns from her.

812

O, poor me! Why, Agamemnon? Where are you trying to escape from me? It seems I have no luck with you either. What an unfortunate woman I am!

We humans try hard seeking to learn all the other lessons of humanity well but we neglect completely the single most important human skill, the skill of persuasion. We should pay well so that we may learn it perfectly and then we would be able to convince people of the things we need and to succeed in getting them. How then can one expect to live well without this skill? I no longer have the children I used to have and I am now destroyed, a slave, dishonoured and over there –there, I see the smoke of my city rising high.

Perhaps this evocation to Aphrodite might displease but I shall make it anyway: Agamemnon, my daughter, Apollo's prophetic, whom the Trojans call Cassandra, now sleeps by your side. What value then do you place, my king, upon these nights of love? What benefit will my daughter receive from you for those sweet kisses in your bed? And what benefit could I receive because of her? The greatest benefit to humans springs from the night and the delights of love within it. So listen now to me: Do you see the body of this dead man here? If you help him it would be like helping a brother-in-law.

There's only one more thing left for me to say to you: I wish I had Daedalus' art, or some other god's and with it put a voice in my arms, my hands, my hair, the soles of my feet and, with them all, fall at your knees, crying and begging with the most eloquent phrases: Master! You are the great beacon of all the Greeks! Hear me and give your hand to bring justice to this old woman, worthless though she might be, because it the duty of a good man to do good everywhere and always to punish the evil men.

846

Chorus:

It is truly remarkable how all things happen to humans! How the laws of Necessity ordain everything, making friends out of the greatest enemies and enemies out of people who were only recently friends!

Agamemnon:

I pity you, Hekabe. You, your son, your misfortune and your suppliant hand, move me. If it is possible, I would like, for the sake of the gods and Justice, to have this sacrilegious man punished by your hand and for all things to turn out well for you. But I don't want the army to think that I worked out this scheme of killing the king of Thrace simply because of Cassandra. Because there's something that bothers me a great deal here. The army considers the king of Thrace to be its friend and your dead son to be its enemy. The fact that I sympathise with you is something private and is not shared by the army.

Think about all this, Hekabe because you'll find me eager and quick to help you but not if I will be maligned by the Achaians.

Hekabe:

Ah! But there's no such thing as a free man! All men are slaves, Agamemnon! Slaves to money, to Fate, to the cries of the masses, to the written laws! They all stop him from doing what he wants. Well then, since you are afraid and allow the masses to have the upper hand, let me erase this fear of yours. I mean, you, too, may know what I plot against my son's murderer but there is no need for you to help me in its execution. If, however, the Achaians find out and there is a great disturbance among them, or if they come to the Thracian's aid while he is suffering the things he must, prevent them but without making it obvious that you're doing so for my sake.

As for everything else, don't concern yourself. I shall take good care of them myself.

876

Agamemnon:

But how will you do this? Are you thinking of putting a sword in your aged hand to kill the barbarian? Will you use poison or will someone give you a hand? But who? Where will you find such friends?

Hekabe:

These tents hide many Trojan women.

Agamemnon:

Do you mean the captives? Those women captured by the Greeks?

Hekabe:

Yes. With these women I shall punish the murderer of my family.

Agamemnon:

But how will the women be able to overcome the strength of men?

Hekabe:

Numbers, when joined with treachery, can cause great terror.

885

Agamemnon:

Terror, indeed. Still, I have little faith in the strength of women.

Hekabe:

But why? Was it not women who killed all of Aegyptus' sons? Was it not women who left Lemnos totally without men?

But so be it. Talk no further about this but do take this slave safely to the army. After that, you slave, go to our Thracian friend and tell him this: "Hekabe, once the Queen of Troy, wishes your presence and that of your children for things concerning more yourself rather than her. Bring your children because they, too, must hear what she has to say." In the meantime, you, Agamemnon, delay the burial of freshly sacrificed Polyxene so that the two siblings, twin love of their mother, might be buried on the one, single pyre.

Agamemnon:

It shall be done, though had the winds been favourable, the army would have sailed away and I wouldn't be able to fulfil your wishes. But since the god does not give us favourable winds, we are forced to remain idle, waiting to begin our journey home. Let us hope that all turns out well. It is everyone's conviction, individually and collectively as a city, that the evil man suffers and the good man rejoices.

Exit Agamemnon, his retinue and the Slave. Hekabe covers Polydorus' body.

905

Chorus:

Troy, our fatherland! Alas, you will no longer be esteemed as being among the unconquerable cities. The cloud of the Greeks covers you totally. You have fallen under their countless spears. They have brought down your crown of tall towers and the ugly stain of war smoke has besmirched you most dreadfully. My poor city, I shall never be able to walk in your streets.

My own destruction came in the middle of the night. That moment after supper when sweet sleep flows gently over your eyes; when, after the songs, after the dances that call the end of the sacrifices, my husband, not having seen the seaborne armies that have trampled upon Troy's ground, hung his spear at its peg and lay down to sleep in his chamber. And I, looking into the endless gleam of my golden mirror, prepared my hair, tying it high with a headband, preparing myself to fall into my bed. It was at that hour that the great shout reached the city and when, throughout Troy, we've heard that call: "Sons of Greece, when will you take Troy's citadel and go home?"

Putting on a single cloak, like a Spartan girl, I left my beloved marriage bed and, poor wretch, fell, a suppliant, to my knees before the statue of revered Artemis. In vain! And then, after seeing the body of my slaughtered husband, I was dragged away to the ocean. From the ship which was heading back, I, hapless wretch, watched my Troy disappear in the ever growing distance and was overcome by my torment.

I cursed Helen, the sister of the Dioscuri, and Paris, the herdsman of Idis and bringer of the whole catastrophe. It was their marriage that has made me homeless and sent me, a battered soul, away, far from my city. Theirs was not a marriage but some evil calamity visited by some divine vengeance.

Let no salty ocean bring Helen back to the home of her fatherland!

Enter Polymestor with his two sons, Hekabe's Slave and his servants.

951

Polymestor:

Priam, loved by all the men and you, dear Hekabe! I shed tears when I see you, when I think of your city and when I think of your daughter who was only just sacrificed. Alas! There is no certainty in this world. Neither in one's good name nor in one's present fortune. No one can be certain that good fortune will not be replaced by bad. Such things are turned upside-down by the gods, sowing confusion so that we may, in our ignorance worship them. But then, why must we lament upon this if it gets us no further in our misfortunes?

If you have some complaint, though, Hekabe, about my absence, do forget it. It so happens that when you had arrived, I was in the inland precincts of Thrace and then, when I had returned, I was just about ready to get out of my house and come over here when your slave here, arrived and, as soon as she had informed me of this, I came.

Hekabe:

I feel ashamed, Polymestor, when I look at you in the face at a time when I am suffering such misfortune. Shame grips me now that I stand before someone who has seen me in my joyful days but now he sees me in such dire circumstances. I cannot

look at you directly in the eye but do not think this to be a sign of displeasure towards you, Polymestor. In any case, it is caused by the custom that dictates that women must not look directly at men.

Polymestor:

Indeed. There's nothing strange about that. But what do you need me for? Why call me here from my home?

Hekabe:

There is something very private I need to discuss with you and your sons. But first, do me a favour. Tell your servants to move away from us, from this tent.

981

Polymestor: *(to his servants.)*

Go. I am safe here.

You are a friend of mine, Hekabe and the army of the Achaians are also friendly towards me. Tell me, though, how can a fortunate man help those lacking in good fortune? As for me, I am ready to help you.

Hekabe:

First tell me if my son, Polydorus is alive. You've taken him from my own hands and from the hands of his father, Priam. Tell me this and then I shall ask you about other matters.

Polymestor:

But of course he is alive! So far as he is concerned, you are a fortunate woman.

Hekabe:

My dear friend! How well you speak! It is worthy of you.

Polymestor:

Well, then. What other questions do you have for me?

Hekabe:

I would like to ask if he remembers his mother at all.

Polymestor:

Yes. In fact he wanted to come here, to you, in secret.

Hekabe:

And what of the gold he had from Troy. Is it safe?

Polymestor:

It is safe, indeed. It is hidden under lock and key, in my house.

Hekabe:

Well then, keep it safe so that you may never have the need of your neighbour's gold.

Polymestor:

But of course, my Lady. May I enjoy that which is mine!

Hekabe:

So, do you know what I want to say to you and to your sons?

Polymestor:

No idea. Your own words will tell me.

1000

Hekabe:

They are... Oh, Polymestor! I have loved you before as I love you now...

Polymestor:

What is this thing that I and my sons must know?

Hekabe:

There are ancient caves full of gold for Priam's sons.

Polymestor:

Is this what you want to tell your son?

Hekabe:

Exactly, and I want to do it with you as the messenger because you are a god-fearing man.

Polymestor:

But what is the need of my sons here?

Hekabe:

It would be better for them to know, also... in case you were killed.

Polymestor:

Of course. You speak well. It is a wise thought.

Hekabe:

Do you know where the temple of Athena is in Troy?

Polymestor:

Is that where the gold is hidden? What identifies the spot?

Hekabe:

A black rock, standing high above the ground.

Polymestor:

Well then, is there anything else you want to tell me about that place?

Hekabe:

I also want you to keep safe the money I brought with me from Troy.

Polymestor:

Where is it? Do you have it on you or is it hidden somewhere?

Hekabe:

It is hidden in those tents, among all the plunder.

Polymestor:

But where? These are the tents of the Achaian army.

Hekabe:

The captives have their own tents.

Polymestor:

Is it safe in there? Are the men away?

Hekabe:

Yes, it's only us there. There are no Achaians in there. Go in because the Argives are anxious to set homeward their sails and leave Troy behind them. Then, when you have done what you must, go back with your children to where you have lodged my son.

Hekabe, Polymestor, his sons, his servants and Hekabe's slave enter Agamemnon's tent.

1024

Chorus: *(to Polymestor)*

You've yet to receive your proper punishment but you will certainly be punished.

Like someone who slips with a false step and falls sideways into the deep sea, your heart's desire will prove to be a false one too and you will lose your life.

Because when Justice and Heaven are both transgressed, there will be doom. Doom and more doom! Your hopes in this path are also false.

See? It has led you, you poor creature, to Hades and it did so by the hand of someone who's no warrior.

Polymestor: *(screaming from within the tent)*

Ah! They are blinding me! Ah!

Chorus:

Did you hear, friends, the Thracian's screams of pain?

Polymestor: *(as above)*

Ah, again the horrible blows! Ah, my boys! Alas for your dreadful slaughter!

Chorus:

Friends, yet more horrible things are taking place in the tent!

Polymestor: *(as above)*

No! Ah, your fast feet won't save you from my blows! My fists will turn every corner of this tent inside out! Here is my heavy hand!

Chorus:

Ladies should we charge inside? This is a crucial moment for Hekabe and the women of Troy. We should stand by her.

Enter Hekabe from the tent with some Trojan women, their hands dripping blood.

Hekabe: *To Polymestor, who's still inside the tent.*

Go ahead! Strike as hard as you can! Strike everywhere! Leave nothing! Go ahead, smash down the doors! You'll never bring back the sun's bright light to your eyes. Nor will you ever see your sons alive. I have killed them!

Chorus:

Could this be true, my Lady? Have you really defeated the Thracian? Is everything you said true?

1049

Hekabe:

You'll soon see him yourself! A blind man, blindly stumbling and staggering in front of the tent; and you'll also see the corpses of his two sons whom I, with the help of these noble Trojan women, have killed. I am now avenged!

Enter Polymestor, blindly and in agony, crawling about on all fours, his face full of blood.

The corpses of his two sons are brought out on the eccyclema.

Look there! You see him? He's coming out of the tent now. But I'll move away from him and from his Thracian frenzy. It is a frenzy with which no one can fight.

Polymestor:

Ah! Insufferable agony! Where can I go? Where can I stand? Where is there a harbour for my ship? Ah! I am struggling on my hands and feet, scratching footprints on the ground like a wild mountain beast! Which road should I take? This one or that? I need to grab these man-murdering hags of Troy who have destroyed me. Brutal, brutal, cursed women of Phrygia. Where are they hiding? Into which corner have these frightened cowards scurried? They are trying to escape me.

Come, Sun! Come and cure my bleeding eyes! Take away their darkness!

Ah! Now I hear their dull footsteps! Which way should I charge? Which way can I turn to cram my throat to excess with flesh and bones? How can I get a feast like those the wild beasts enjoy? How can I, poor creature that I am, get my share of Justice for the agony and the insults I'm suffering?

But, o! Where am I rushing off? How can I leave my darling sons behind, alone, to be devoured by the Frenzied Maenads of Hades? To be torn to bloody pieces and then pitilessly thrown away into the mountains, a gruesome game for wild dogs?

Ah! Where? Where shall I stay? Where shall I rest? Where should I go?

I gather my linen robe tight about me like a ship anchored at sea and, here, I rush to protect my sons on their bed of death.

1065

Chorus:

Miserable creature! You must endure a suffering most monstrous! Yet, dreadful is the

punishment for the man who had committed dreadful deeds. Some god, weighing heavily upon you, has punished you in this way.

Polymestor:

Help! Thracians! Come armed with your spears and your shining horses! Come lovers of war! You, too Achaians! Sons of Atreus! I'm calling you! Come to my aid. Come, all of you, in the name of all the gods, come!

Can anyone hear me? Will no one come to help me? Why are you so slow? Women have destroyed me. Women, captives of war! I have suffered atrocities. Dreadful dishonour, dreadful torment! Come!

Ah! Where may I turn? Where may I go? Shall I fly off to the high vault of the heavens, where Orion and Sirius cast down from their eyes their bright, fiery rays, or shall I, the aching wretch, plunge headlong into the dark passage to Hades?

Chorus:

It's well understood by all that if a man's suffering is greater than what he can endure he will seek to end his life.

Enter Agamemnon with his retinue.

Agamemnon:

I came here because I've heard shouting. The sound of Echoe's voice, daughter of the mountain crags, was heard throughout the whole army camp, bringing it all into turmoil. Had we not known well that Troy's tall towers had already fallen under the Greek spears, this sound would have caused us great fear.

Polymestor:

Ah, dear Agamemnon! I knew it was you the very moment I heard your voice. Do you see my plight, dear friend?

1116

Agamemnon:

Ah! Polymestor! Poor man! Who has done this dreadful deed to you? Who has blinded your eyes and filled them with blood? Who killed your sons? Whoever it was he bore a great anger for you, indeed and for your children.

Polymestor:

It was Hekabe and her fellow captive women who have destroyed me. No, not just destroyed me but worse!

Agamemnon:

What? What do you mean? You, Hekabe! Did you do this deed as he claims? Did you really have the audacity to do this dreadful deed?

Polymestor:

Ah, what's this? Is she really close by? Show me! Tell me where she is so that I may seize her with my two hands and tear her into bloody pieces!

Agamemnon: *To Polymestor*

Hold it, you! What is the matter with you?

Polymestor:

By the gods, Agamemnon, I beg you: let me give her the fury of my arm!

Agamemnon:

Stop this! Tear out the barbarian from within your heart and speak! Speak so that I may hear you and hear her, in turn, and justly determine the cause of your suffering.

1132

Polymestor:

Let me then speak. Polydorus, Priam's youngest son and Hekabe's was brought to me by his father, for me to take care of in my own house. This he did because Priam was afraid lest Troy fell to the Greeks. I have killed that boy, it's true but hear now the

reason I did this and see what a good deed I performed and by what wise foresight I came to perform it.

I did this because I was afraid that if the child lived and, being your enemy, he might have gathered all the Trojans and once again populate the city. As well, if the Greeks had heard that one of the Trojans was still alive, they might have set off again with a new expedition against the land of the Phrygians and, in the process, devastate the meadows and plains of Thrace, have it plundered and make us, Troy's neighbours, suffer gravely, a thing which, my king, we are experiencing even now.

When Hekabe heard of the bloody fate of her son, she had me brought here in the pretence of revealing to me the whereabouts of the boxes of the gold belonging to Priam's sons, supposedly hidden somewhere in Troy. Then she took me, alone with my sons into the tent so that no one else would suspect anything. Inside the tent, I bent my knees and sat in the middle of the bed. Many Trojan women sat around me, some to the left others by the other side, as if they were sitting by the side of a friend. For a while they checked my clothes in the sun and praised the clever work of the Edonian women upon the loom. Others again, pretending to praise my two spears, took them away from me.

Those women who were mothers took my children and feigning tender, motherly love, passed them around from one woman to the next until they were far away from me, from their father.

1160

Then, what do you think of this? After all the sweet talk, these women suddenly brought out of their clothing their hidden swords and slaughtered my children while, the rest of them, like a single beast with many hands, grabbed me hand and foot and held me hard. If I wanted to help my sons and tried to lift my head, they pulled me back by the hair. Nor could I move my arms, poor wretch, because there were so many women holding them. Finally – o torture upon torture! – they struck me the worst of blows. With their brooches, they tore into the pupils of my poor eyes and had them clogged with blood. After that they escaped my hand, running this way and that, all around the tent while I pounced like a wild beast, throwing myself at the bloodthirsty bitches, searching, like a hunter, every wall and hitting out in all directions, breaking everything in my way.

All this I've suffered, Agamemnon, for your own sake; because I had killed Polydorus, your enemy.

But let me spare you the many words: If any of the men from olden days or if any of them now, or in the future, will utter ill words against women, let me put all those words in one short sentence: Neither land nor sea produces such a race and whoever had any dealings with them knows this very well.

1183

Chorus:

Don't be so arrogant and don't, because of your personal suffering, paint all of us women with the same brush. There are many of us and some of us are hateful while others of us are evil by birth.

Hekabe:

Never, Agamemnon, should words have greater sway for men than do their deeds. When a man does good, his words ought to be good; when he does evil then his words should be unsound. No one should speak well of injustice. About this last thing, there are those clever fellows who have performed it to perfection but they will all, in the end, be destroyed. None of them have escaped so far. These, my opening words were addressed to you, Agamemnon.

Now I shall turn to him and make my reply.

You say that the reason you've killed my son was for the sake of Agamemnon and so as to save the Achaians from a double ordeal. Yet, you evil man, first of all, no barbarian would or could become friends with the Greeks. Secondly, what favour were you hoping to gain from Agamemnon that made you so eager to help him? Was it perhaps that you hoped to become his in-law, by any chance? Were you a relative of his? What other reason did you have? Perhaps you were afraid that if the Greeks were to return they would have destroyed your land's harvest. Whom do you think you can convince with all this? If you really want to tell the truth, then it was my son's gold that had killed him. That and your vulgar greed. Otherwise, explain this to me: Why, if you truly wanted to help this man, you did not kill my son at the time when Troy was at its happiest? When its walls stood tall around the citadel, when Priam was alive and Hector's spear ruled the battlefield? Instead, you cared for my son in your own house then and you did delivered him alive to the Argives. And then, when we Trojans were utterly destroyed and the smoke of the city revealed that it has fallen to its enemy, it was then that you have killed the young friend, the guest of your house.

1217

And further, listen now to the proof that you are a despicable rogue:

If you were truly the friend of the Achaians you should have brought the gold –which by the way, is not yours but this boy's- and given it to them! They've been away from their homeland for so long that they needed it. Yet, even now, your heart still insists upon keeping the gold hidden in your own home rather than be parted from it. Also, if you had taken care of my son the way you should have and if you had kept him safe, you would have gained a good reputation because it is during hard times that one is proven to be a good and trustworthy friend; during good times, it is always easy to find friends.

As well, if you lacked money and my son enjoyed plenty of it then he would have been a great treasure to you. Instead, you not only lost his friendship but the gold is gone, your own sons are gone and you are left in this dreadful state.

As for you, Agamemnon, I say this: You will be seen as being a bad man if you help him because you will be helping an impious friend, one who is untrustworthy to those he should be loyal, unrighteous and unjust and I could then say that you liked base men because you, too, were base. But I shalln't criticise my master.

Chorus:

Did you hear that? See how a good cause gives mortals material for a good argument!

1240

Agamemnon:

It is a heavy thing for me to judge other people's misdeeds but, since I took up this matter, it would be shameful for me if I had just dropped it, so, judge it I must.

My view, Polymestor, is that you did not kill your guest for my own sake or for the sake of the Achaians but so that you could keep the gold for yourself, in your own home. Now that you're in this dire situation you say whatever you think will serve your interests. Perhaps, for you, barbarians, it is easy to kill your guests but for us, Greeks, this is a thing of shame. How, then can I escape blame if I do not judge you guilty? I can't do it. Since you could endure performing such a dishonourable deed, then you must also endure its awful consequences.

Polymestor:

Oh, the shame! It appears I've been beaten by a woman, a slave and I will be punished by my inferiors!

Hekabe:
Is this not just, since you've behaved unjustly?
Polymestor:
Ah! My poor children! My eyes! Poor me!
Hekabe:
So you're in pain? Do you think that I am not hurting for my own son?
Polymestor:
You are enjoying this outrage you've done to me, you despicable creature!
Hekabe:
Should I not enjoy my just recompense?
Polymestor:
Not for long. When the ocean's waves...
Hekabe:
...what? Will they not, perhaps, take me to the Greek shores?
Polymestor:
No. Rather, they will cover you! You will fall from the highest mast!
Hekabe:
Who will force me to jump from up there?
Polymestor:
You, alone, will climb the ship's mast.
Hekabe:
Will I do this with wings grown on my back or by what other means?
Polymestor:
You will turn into a hound with blood-red eyes.
Hekabe:
How do you know that I will change my shape?
Polymestor:
Dionysus told me. Dionysus, the seer of Thrace.
Hekabe:
Yet has he not given you an oracle about the terrible state you're in now?
Polymestor:
No, because then you'd never be able to catch me so treacherously.
1270
Hekabe:
Will I complete my cycle of life by dying now or by staying alive?
Polymestor:
You shall die and your tomb will be named...
Hekabe:
You mean, something relating to my shape?
Polymestor:
... "The Grave of the Evil Dog." It will be a sign for the sailors.
Hekabe:
I'm not at all interested, now that I have been avenged.
Polymestor:
Your daughter, Cassandra, too, must die.
Hekabe: *Spits under her armpits.*
Ftoo, ftoo! I spit under my armpits! God forbid! Let that be your own Fate!
Polymestor:
This man's wife will kill her. She's the poisonous guard of his house.

Hekabe:

May, Klytimestra, Tyndareus' daughter, never become so mad!

Polymestor:

She will also kill him, with a raised axe.

Agamemnon:

Hey, you! Have you gone mad? Are you looking for more trouble?

Polymestor:

Go ahead, kill me. You, too, will suffer the same fate. A murderous bath awaits you in Argos.

Agamemnon:

Slaves, take him away! Take him by force and take him far away from me!

Polymestor:

Do my words give you pain?

Agamemnon:

Shut his mouth!

Polymestor:

By all means, shut it now. I have said all I had to say.

FX: The sound of a rising wind

Agamemnon:

Take him and cast him onto some deserted island, him and his arrogant tongue!

Polymestor is taken away

As for you, hapless Hekabe, go and bury your two dead sons.

You others! Trojan women! You must now go to the tents of your masters because I can feel the wind that will take us all home. Let's hope we all get to our land safely and find our homes all in good order, now that we've rid ourselves of all this hardship.

Exit all but the chorus

Chorus:

Go, my friends! Go to the ports and to the tents, my friends! Go and taste the hardship of slavery!

Exit All
END OF
EURIPIDES'
"HEKABE"

Note: Readers might wish to also read Seneca's "Troades" Translated by F.J. Miller:
<http://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaTroades.html>