

Study Guide for *Hecuba*, Fall 2010

by Amy R. Cohen

Associate Professor of Classics

Director of the Greek Play

There is almost no wrong way to approach the play. My way is traditionalist in that I try to understand the plays with the traditional conventions for which they were written, but people have been finding new ideas and new things to do with the Greek tragedies for 2500 years, and I encourage you to do the same.



What follows is background information of various sorts to get you oriented, and some ideas about the play. In most cases, I'll use the Latinized versions of Greek names, which are usually the more familiar forms to Americans, but I'll put alternate names in parentheses after the first occurrence of a name.

Much of this information is also available at <http://www.randolphcollege.edu/greekplay>

I. Basics of the Organization of Fifth-Century Athenian Tragedy

How the Greeks put on the plays along with some basic terms.

II. Euripides

Who he was and what he did.

III. *Hecuba*

What's this play all about anyway?

- a. Characters and plot summary
- b. Themes and dynamics
- c. Staging it—my thoughts

IV. Approaches and Classroom Activities

A few suggestions on ways into the play and Greek drama.

V. The R(-MW)C Greek Plays

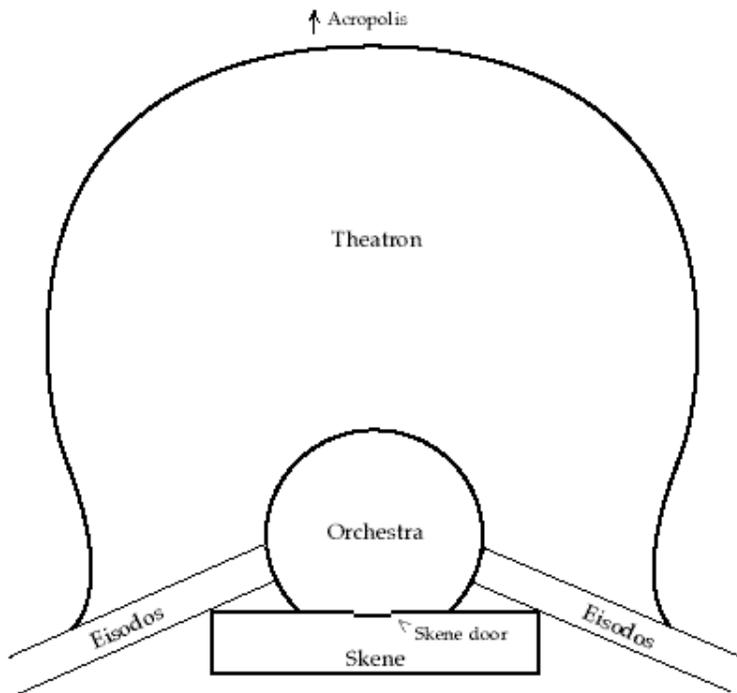
What Miss Mabel did, and what we do now.

I. Basics of the Organization of Fifth-Century Athenian Tragedy

Aeschylus, Sophocles (Sophokles), and Euripides wrote their plays in verse for an annual five- or six-day spring festival of dramatic competition dedicated to Dionysus called the Great (or City) Dionysia, which began with a procession and a ceremony called a *proagôn*—a before-the-contest—which was a preview of the plays to come. Three playwrights competed at the festival, each presenting three tragedies and a satyr play (a tetralogy) over the course of a day.

An official (*archon*) of the city presided over the festival and chose the playwrights who would compete. Although it is not entirely clear who financed the productions, we do know that wealthy citizens, known in this capacity as *choregoi*, paid for and were responsible for the training of the choruses of the plays and received the prizes for the winning tetralogies. The chosen playwrights not only wrote and acted in their plays, they also directed and rehearsed the other actors. This involvement in all aspects of production earned them the name *didaskaloi*—teachers—since they taught the plays to the rest of their companies.

The plays and later the actors (one from each tetralogy from around 449) were judged by ten men, one chosen by lot from each of the administrative districts of Athens and sworn to impartiality. The winning playwright and actor each earned a place in the following year's festival.



This is a schematic of the **Theater of Dionysus**. The orchêstra was probably not so regularly round in the first hundred or so years of the dramatic festivals. The *theatron* is where the seats are, and it was also probably not so perfectly round, but it was very large, and as many as 15,000 spectators attended the plays. The Dell at Randolph College is really much like the Theater of Dionysus, except that our theatron is smaller (although we've played for an audience of 1100), and the surface of our orchêstra is grass, not dirt.

The productions took place in the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis. In the fifth century the natural curve of the land was enhanced to accommodate wooden seats that formed an irregular semicircle (known as the *theatron* or watching space) around the acting area they looked down on. That area—the *orchêstra* or dancing place—was a flat, generally round space with a diameter of at least sixty-five feet. Behind it was the *skênê*, which in the fifth century was probably a temporary wooden structure with one central door. The *skênê* provided the door as an entrance and exit, a “backstage” in which to change costume and store props, a simple backdrop for the action, and a roof-level surface for the occasional appearance above. By 431 some sort of crane allowed actors to

appear *apo tês mêchanês*—from the machine or *ex machina*—flying in above the *skênê*. In addition to the *skênê* door, two pathways to the left and the right of the *skênê* and just in front of the forward edge of the *theatron*—the *eisodoi*—provided ways to reach and retreat from the *orchêstra* (when I say “to come on stage” and “to go off stage” I will mean entering and exiting the *orchêstra*

with no implication of a raised platform). Part of the audience could see performers for much of the length of their entrances on these two paths.

Men performed the tragedies. Actors played the named roles and twelve or fifteen men sang and danced the part of the chorus; all wore costumes and masks (*prosôpa*), which covered their whole faces and head. The playwright was also probably the first and, at first, the only actor, in dialogue with his chorus. At some point someone added a second actor (Aristotle gives Aeschylus the credit), and then, by 458, a third (the addition of which is traditionally said to be an innovation of Sophocles).

Things you may have been taught about Greek Drama that Are Not True:

- 1) Tragic flaw. It doesn't exist.
- 2) Aristotelian Unities. They don't exist. (The last play of *The Oresteia* changes scenes from Delphi to Athens, just to give one example.)
- 3) Chorus is a) Everyman or b) the playwright. Nope and Nope. The Chorus was the one element of a story that didn't come from the myth. The playwrights exploited that freedom to do all kinds of things with their choruses.
- 4) Absolutely only three actors. Close, but not quite. More than one extant tragedy, and many comedies, require at least four actors.
- 5) No one dies on stage. Well, Ajax does in his play. Just to name one we know about.

II. Euripides

The youngest of the three great tragedians, Euripides was born in the 480s b.c.e. He first competed in the Great Dionysia in 455. He competed twenty-one more times, but won only four times, including with the tetralogy that included *Bacchae* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, produced after his death in 406.

Most of what has come down to us as Euripides' biography is pieced together from jokes made about him in comedies, and thus is not particularly reliable. He seems not to have taken part in public life; he may have had a bad marriage; and one of his sons (or a nephew) was a tragic poet, too. There is also some evidence that he may have been an intellectual recluse, and he perhaps had a large library. We know he died in 406, perhaps in Macedonia, and that Sophocles honored him at the next festival of Dionysus.

The ancients criticized his plays for being too pedestrian and too easily resolved. Euripides also had a reputation for literary misogyny, but modern audiences might wonder at such a charge leveled against the creator of the heroines of *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, and *Hecuba*.

We are fortunate still to have nineteen plays by Euripides. (with date of production, if known):

<i>Alcestis</i> , 438 b.c.e. (The Centennial Greek Play)	<i>Trojan Women</i> , 415
<i>Medea</i> , 431	<i>Iphigeneia in Tauris</i>
<i>Heraclidae</i> [<i>The Children of Heracles</i>]	<i>Helen</i> , 412
<i>Hippolytus</i> , 428	<i>Phoenician Women</i>
<i>Andromache</i>	<i>Orestes</i> , 408
<i>Hecuba</i> (The 2010 RC Greek Play)	<i>Bacchae</i> , 406 (The 2004 R-MWC Greek Play)
<i>Suppliants</i>	<i>Iphigeneia at Aulis</i> , 406 (The 2001 R-MWC Greek Play)
<i>Ion</i>	<i>Rhesus</i>
<i>Electra</i> , 417 or 413?	<i>Cyclops</i> (a satyr play produced at R-MWC in 1998)
<i>Hercules furens</i> [<i>Mad Heracles</i>]	

III. *Hecuba* [*Hekabe*]

Performed first in Athens in the 420s bce, *Hecuba* examines the aftermath of war, the breakdown of civil behavior, and the imperative for revenge. We are using a new translation written for us by Jay Kardan and Laura-Gray Street, but any translation would do, as long as it's in clear, modern English (the University of Chicago translation, by Richmond Lattimore, is widely available).

a) Characters and plot summary

The Characters (in order of appearance)

Ghost of Polydorus: the youngest son of Hecuba and Priam, he was sent for safekeeping to Polymestor during the Trojan war

Hecuba: the former queen of Troy, and the mother of nineteen children, including the hero Hector and the prophetess Cassandra

Chorus of Trojan Women: women of Troy, both noble and lowly, who are now slaves to the Greeks as a result of the war

Polyxena: the youngest daughter of Hecuba and Priam

Odysseus: the great general of the Greeks: the quick-witted, slick-tongued inventor of the Trojan horse

Talthybius: respected soldier and herald of the Greeks

Therapaina: a trusted maid to Hecuba

Agamemnon: the chief general of the Greeks, and new master of Hecuba's daughter Cassandra

Polymestor: the Thracian man who was supposed to keep Polydorus safe until the Trojan War was over

Phineas & Olynthus: Polymestor's young sons

...and more... Trojan maids, Greek soldiers, Thracians guards

The Plot of the Play

Before the play begins . . .

The Trojan prince Paris judges Aphrodite to be the fairest of the goddesses, and he takes as his reward the Spartan Helen. The Greeks honor an oath and sail to Troy to get her back, but only after their general Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to get a sailing wind.

Troy was ruled by Priam, among whose fifty children were Paris and his brother Hector, the great hero. Hector has died at the hands of Achilles, who in turn has died by an arrow shot by Paris. Priam's queen, and mother of nineteen of his children, was Hecuba.

They have sent Polydorus, their youngest son and not yet able to fight, to stay with the Thracian Polymestor, along with gold enough to sustain the boy no matter what happens in the war.

After a ten-year siege, the Greeks have destroyed the city by the Odysseus' stratagem of a hollow wooden horse. Nearly all the Trojan men are dead, and all the Trojan women and children, no matter their status, are now slaves to the Greeks.

The Greeks have taken their booty to the nearby Chersonese to organize the distribution of slaves and prepare to sail for home.

In the play . . .

Polydorus appears as a ghost above the tent of Agamemnon and tells us that he's been murdered by Polymestor for the gold. He also tells us that his sister Polyxena has been demanded as a sacrifice by the dead Achilles.

Hecuba emerges supported by attendants and talking about her terrible dreams.

The Chorus enter and report to Hecuba and then to Polyxena about the girl's fate. Odysseus comes to take her away. Hecuba tries to convince him to spare her, but Polyxena decides to go willingly.

After a song in which the Chorus of Trojan women wonder about where in the world they will live as slaves, the Greek herald Talthybius reports to them and to Hecuba about Polyxena's sacrifice, presided over by Achilles' son Neoptolemus. Hecuba sends a maid to fetch water to prepare her daughter's body for burial. The Chorus trace their misery--and the misery of the Greeks--to the judgment of Paris.

The maid returns instead with the drowned body of Polydorus, and Hecuba grieves the loss of another child. When Agamemnon arrives to ask why Hecuba hasn't claimed Polyxena's body, she begs him for revenge against Polymestor. Agamemnon won't help, but he won't get in the way either.

The Chorus sing about the night Troy fell, and then Polymestor arrives with his two young sons. Unaware that Hecuba knows what he has done, he assures her that her son and the Trojan gold is safe. Using the pretext of more treasure that needs to be protected, Hecuba lures them into the tent, where she and the other women kill the boys and blind Polymestor.

Polymestor desperately seeks help. Hecuba and Polymestor make their cases to Agamemnon, and we learn of their fates.

b) Themes and Dynamics

Hecuba has divided scholars over the last two centuries. Many see a play that falls apart into two pieces (the sacrifice of Polyxena and then Hecuba's revenge), and that depicts a queen who becomes less and less human even before the prophecy that predicts her transformation into a dog. Others (and here I include myself) see a tightly-composed, non-stop drama in which Hecuba, in fact, regains her nobility by taking her revenge. We may not like the way that nobility looks, and we may not want to emulate it, but Euripides shows us a queen who is satisfied in her revenge, and whose revenge is approved by none other than the great general Agamemnon.

Justice, Nobility, Revenge

The world we see in *Hecuba* is straddling two eras, two worldviews: one is the heroic, aristocratic world Hecuba and her family know. In that world, the relationship between a guest and a host is sacred, and murdering a guest is one of the worst sins imaginable. In that world, supplication (kneeling and touching the knee and chin of someone) is a final, unrefusable appeal, shocking to reject.

The other world is the one of public opinion, national interests, and politics writ large. In that world, a personal obligation is trumped by public duty, and the most persuasive words, rather than the most reverent action, have sway.

Hecuba struggles to bridge that divide, to satisfy the noblewoman's imperative to avenge her children in a world that sees less and less the necessity for that revenge. To her, killing the children of the man who treacherously killed her child is the obvious, necessary course. Agamemnon agrees (he, too, is of the heroic world), but he is bound by the new world in which his men's opinions of him matter.

We can't easily accept the killing of children under any circumstances. How, then, do we react to Hecuba's actions, when we've been sympathetic to her for the whole play? Are we the wrong audience for Euripides' play? Or does it simply speak to us in a new way?

War and its Aftermath

In this post-war play, we see clearly how war upends lives and turns dreams into nightmares. Hecuba, once a queen, emerges broken and enslaved. Polyxena chooses to die rather than live a life other than the noble one she was born to. The Trojan women in the Chorus sing in poignant terms of the uncertainty of their fates, and their account of the night Troy fell is one of the most moving in literature.

But the play also contains clear expressions of military necessity and the comradery of the troops. Odysseus's speech, in particular, is eloquent about the role of a commander among his troops and the respect due to a soldier. And, even as we sympathize with Hecuba, so do Talthybius and Agamemnon, two Greek soldiers who ought to be her enemy.

Euripides shows us no easy answers, no right paths.

Rhetoric

Over and over again in the play, we are asked to think about the power of words. Hecuba tries and fails to persuade Odysseus to spare Polyxena, and then she goes through several different sorts of argument to appeal to Agamemnon, until at last resorting to reference to his relationship with her daughter. And at the end of the play, part of the way we know that Hecuba's revenge is not entirely to be condemned is because Euripides gives her a very good defense speech and gives Polymestor a completely ineffective speech defending himself and accusing the queen.

c) Staging it—my thoughts

The questions I ask of a play are usually how do we practically stage it and how do we make it clear to an audience? The tools I try to use to answer those questions are the things we know about how the Greeks staged their plays and the clues I can find in the text—the very best evidence we have. I hope this study guide gives you some grounding in the things we know about fifth-century theater. The text of the play is available to you, too, and, as I always tell my students, your reading is as valid as anyone's. Keep in mind that the stage directions are the translator's additions and, of course, that you might translate the Greek differently if you get the chance.

That's how I, as a classicist with theater leanings, approach *Hecuba*. You, with your own background and expertise, will have quite different questions to ask.

IV. Classroom Activities

Move the chairs around in your classroom so that you make a playing space where the audience curves around the players. Do a scene from a play there and think about what the players have to do differently than they would on a raised stage with the “fourth wall” removed. If you have a proscenium stage (“fourth wall” stage) in your school, try doing the scene there, too. What different concerns does a player have? How is the experience different for the audience? What changes when you turn off the lights over the audience? What was it like for the Greeks, who couldn’t turn off the sun?

Make masks! Even paper bags will do, but this website has links to many different sorts of masks to make in the classroom: <http://www.xanga.com/DEXTR/600776726/making-masks-in-the-classroom.html>. How does your acting have to change when you’re wearing a mask? How do masks help you put on a play when you only have a few actors?

Make Greek outfits! Simple rectangles of fabric, twice the width from elbow to elbow, pinned at the shoulders and sashed, are genuine Greek costumes. Boys would usually have knee-length garments and girls would have longer ones. If you make them, wear them to the play!

V. The Randolph (-Macon Woman’s) College Greek Plays

Mabel K. Whiteside, professor of Greek, led her students in an annual production of a Greek play from 1909 until 1954. She was an innovator in teaching Greek conversationally, and she and her Greek students produced the plays in their original language. She presented her first full-length tragedy in 1910.

Over the years Miss Mabel (as she was affectionately known) led productions of tragedies and comedies by all of the great Greek playwrights, culminating in 1954 with Aeschylus's trilogy *The Oresteia*—it was the first time the trilogy had been staged as a whole in Greek in the new world. Although there were a few interruptions in the annual schedule, R-MWC saw 40 Greek plays in 45 years. It rained only once.

The Dell was built in honor of Miss Mabel and this unparalleled series of productions. The Greek Plays inspired so much interest in the ancient world that by the end of her tenure, Miss Mabel taught Greek to a full ten percent of the R-MWC student body.

The revived tradition began in 2000 with *Antigone*, and continued in 2001 with *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. The Play is now a bi-annual in the fall. The renewed series produces the plays mostly in English. We adhere to most of the original conventions that governed theater in the time of the great tragedians (I believe that the best plays will emerge from the conditions for which they were written): we perform in the Dell, an outdoor Greek theater, which allows the plays to be performed in daylight for an audience seated in a semi-circle around the performers. We adhere to other ancient conventions as well: three or four actors play all the roles; the chorus--who sing and dance--remain on stage for most of the play; the performers all wear masks; and our players often have to impersonate the opposite sex.

Dates and stats since 2000:

Antigone by Sophocles: April 7–9, 2000; 3 actors, 8 in the chorus

Iphigeneia at Aulis by Euripides: April 20–22, 2001; 3 actors, 10 in the chorus

The Libation Bearers by Aeschylus: October 11–13, 2002; 4 actors, 12 in the chorus

The Bacchae by Euripides: October 8–10, 2004; 3 actors, 12 in the chorus

The Clouds by Aristophanes: October 6–8, 2006; 4 actors, 12 in the chorus

Elektra by Sophocles: October 10–12, 2008; 3 actors, 12 in the chorus

Alcestis by Euripides: June 11, 2009; 15 students in all the roles on a study tour in Greece

Naomi Amos collaborated on the first four plays: she wrote all the music and served as music director. Randall Speer has served as music director since 2006, with Chris Cohen as composer.

I am always happy to answer questions: acohen@randolphcollege.edu, 434/947-8306.