

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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DIDASKALIA
VOLUME 8 (2011)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

8.01	Introducing Volume 8 and Remembering Douglass Parker Amy R. Cohen	1
8.02	Review: 45th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse Caterina Barone	4
8.03	Review: <i>The Brothers Menaechmus</i> at East Carolina University Amy R. Cohen	6
8.04	Review: <i>A Man Who Hates People</i> at Trent University and the University of Toronto Donald Sells	10
8.05	Review: <i>Hecuba</i> at Randolph College Jaclyn Dudek	13
8.06	Interview: Satyrs in L.A. Mary Hart	16
8.07	KOSKY - <i>The Women of Troy</i>: Barrie Kosky, The Sydney Theatre Company, and Classical Theatre in Australia Elizabeth Hale, guest editor	26
8.08	KOSKY - Delivering the Message in Kosky's <i>The Women of Troy</i> Helen Slaney	33
8.09	KOSKY - <i>The Women of Troy</i>: Barrie Kosky's "operatic" version of Euripides Michael Halliwell	48
8.10	KOSKY - <i>The Women of Troy</i>—New and Old Michael Ewans	58
8.11	KOSKY - "Toothless intellectuals," "the misery of the poor," "poetry after Auschwitz," and the White, Middle-class Audience: the Moral Perils of Kosky and Wright's <i>The Women of Troy</i> (or, how do we regard the pain of others?) Marguerite Johnson	65
8.12	Masks in the Oxford Greek Play 2008: Theory and Practice Claire Catenaccio	75
8.13	The Masked Chorus in Action—Staging Euripides' <i>Bacchae</i> Chris Vervain	85
8.14	Review: <i>Orestes Terrorist</i> at the University of California, Santa Cruz Fiona Macintosh	98
8.15	Review: 47th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse Caterina Barone	101
8.16	Review: <i>Medea</i> at the Long Beach Opera Yoko Kurahashi	104
8.17	Interview: <i>Theater of War</i> Amy R. Cohen and Brett M. Rogers	109

8.18	Storm in a Teacup: an Exercise in Performance Reception in Twenty-First-Century Israel Lisa Maurice	112
8.19	Review: Seneca's <i>Oedipus</i> at the Stanford Summer Theater David J. Jacobson	129
8.20	Review: <i>Sophocles: Seven Sicknesses</i> at the Chopin Theater Teresa M. Danze Lemieux	133
8.21	ADIP I - Ancient Drama in Performance: Theory and Practice Amy R. Cohen	140
8.22	ADIP I - Play in the Sunshine Jennifer S. Starkey	142
8.23	ADIP I - Adapting <i>Hecuba</i>: Where Do Problems Begin? Nancy Nanney ¹	157
8.24	ADIP I - The Twice Born and One More: Portraying Dionysus in the <i>Bacchae</i> Jaclyn Dudek	170
8.25	ADIP I - A Gestural Phallacy David J. Jacobson	173
8.26	ADIP I - Double the Message Diane J. Rayor	177
8.27	ADIP I - Performing the "Unperformable" Extispicy Scene in Seneca's <i>Oedipus Rex</i> Eric Dodson-Robinson	179
8.28	ADIP I - Compassion in Chorus and Audience Paul Woodruff	185
8.29	ADIP I - Staging the Reconciliation Scene of Aristophanes' <i>Lysistrata</i> John Given	189
8.30	ADIP I - The Delayed Feast: the Festival Context of Plautus' <i>Pseudolus</i> Laura Banducci	198
8.31	ADIP I - Euripides' <i>Hecuba</i>: the Text and the Event Kenneth Reckford	207
8.32	ADIP I - <i>Hecuba</i> in a New Translation Jay Kardan and Laura-Gray Street	208
8.33	ADIP I - Talkback: <i>Hecuba</i> Mary-Kay Gamel	299

Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Adapting *Hecuba*: Where Do Problems Begin?

Nancy Nanney

West Virginia University at Parkersburg

For the 2001 NEH summer seminar on “Literature and Values,” which I attended at the University of North Carolina, one of the selected readings was Euripides’ *Hecuba* (425 or 424 BCE), translated by Janet Lembke and Kenneth J. Reckford. As group leader for the *Hecuba* discussion, I created a short script that brings the original play into focus from modern, ethical points of view. The seminar participants were all assigned character roles and read their parts as if we were at a prerehearsal meeting. In this way, the “companion” script served as a prelude to a fuller examination of the ethical issues encountered in the play. In devising the dialogue, I took some liberties in considering *Hecuba* in both its own time (when staged in ancient Greece) and the present. Since the seminar, I have regularly taught Euripides’ *Hecuba* in my university courses. After students read the original play, I use the teaching script (revised over the years) in class as a discussion motivator. An updated version, akin to what was presented at the 2010 Ancient Drama in Performance Conference at Randolph College, is included here and may be further adapted at any reader’s discretion.



Conference Presentation
video: Randolph College
[youtube.com/watch?v=2a2r9NVP1nA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a2r9NVP1nA)

In particular, the teaching script for *Hecuba*, though brief, brings to light certain less-frequently discussed aspects of the original play. One especially highlighted sequence of events occurs farther back in time than those usually addressed in relation to *Hecuba*: that is, how King Priam and Queen Hecuba treat their infant son Paris. As the legend (but not the play) tells the story, the pregnant Hecuba has a disturbing dream of a firebrand that sets fire to all of Troy. A seer interprets the dream as foretelling that the royal infant will, in time, bring about the city’s ruin. This devastating prospect prompts the king to give his newborn son to a shepherd, Agelaus, with instructions to kill the child. However, rather than kill Paris outright, Agelaus leaves him to die on Mt. Ida. Yet Paris does not die, and, amazed to see the infant still alive after lying alone for several days, Agelaus decides instead to raise the boy himself, as a shepherd.

Not surprisingly, this legendary tale has generated different versions. In one, Paris later comes to Troy and is allowed to compete in a sporting event, organized coincidentally in memory of his own presumed death. At this time, Paris’s true identity is revealed. Thus, the youthful herdsman wins not just the match but also his place back in the royal family, since Priam accepts his return.¹ Perhaps the king is so impressed by his son’s youthful prowess that he ignores the dire prophecy, or perhaps parental guilt finally enters the picture. In this version of the tale, it is apparently from Troy that Paris (perhaps still identified as a “herdsman”) returns to Mt. Ida to judge a beauty contest at Zeus’s request. Among the three contestants, each a goddess with a “bribe,” Paris chooses Aphrodite as the winner. Aphrodite in turn grants Paris her own special prize: the opportunity to bring the captivating but already-married Helen back to Troy² (with accounts varying as to whether she comes as an abducted woman or consensually). Of course, Menelaus is angered that his wife has been taken from Sparta and, along with his brother Agamemnon, amasses a Greek military force to punish Troy and reclaim Helen. Indeed, by most versions, it is “The Judgment of Paris” that is deemed the cause of the Trojan War, leading to the defeat of Troy after ten years of battle.

In Euripides’ *Hecuba*, there is no clear mention of the queen’s frightening firebrand dream, her newborn’s prophesied role in Troy’s demise, or her and Priam’s decision that their infant son should die. Euripides’ preference not to add further complexity to his multiplot tragedy suggests that the playwright may have

wanted to avoid dealing with the issue of a far-reaching fate. After all, Euripides portrays Hecuba, at least at first, as a sympathetic character unburdened by the parental decision she and Priam made about Paris many years before. Hecuba's present burdens—the loss of her husband and sons in the Trojan war, the total destruction of their kingdom, and her own current enslavement, along with that of her daughters and other Trojan women, by the Greeks—are overwhelming enough. To question her earlier actions—or even lay partial blame on her for how she and Priam reacted to the seer's interpretation of her dream—might detract from the more immediate postwar concerns in the play. Curiously, however, when we first meet Hecuba, she is still disturbed by menacing dreams, although their interpretation appears connected to other miseries: the sacrifice of her virgin daughter Polyxena to Achilles' ghost and the murder of her young son Polydorus by his deceitful Thracian protector, King Polymestor.

Even though Paris is not a stage character in Euripides' play, there is still mention of him by the Chorus and Hecuba. According to the Chorus of enslaved Trojan women, their disastrous fate was sealed "The moment the pines on Mt. Ida / Were cut down by Paris / To build the ship he would steer through high waves / To the bed of Helen."³ The Chorus then explains that this plan came about "when Paris, a herdsman on Ida, / Judges three daughters of gods."⁴ Thus, it is clear that in Euripides' *Hecuba*, Paris is still a "herdsman" when he makes his fateful judgment; most likely he had not yet returned to Troy to assume his role as a royal prince. In this case, other questions might come to mind: what compels Paris to bring Helen to Troy and how do his parents react to his "homecoming"? Do they welcome Helen? Are they pleased to possess in their midst the pride of Greece? Have Priam and Hecuba grown so confident in their long-term reign that they no longer fear their son? Over the centuries, the answers—and questions—may change, but the curiosity this play inspires is ever present.

For example, there is a section in which Hecuba acknowledges some role in the disasters at hand. When pleading with Odysseus to reverse the army's decision to sacrifice Polyxena, Hecuba tells the Greek leader that she, rather than her daughter, should be sacrificed: "Kill me without a qualm. / I gave birth to Paris / Whose arrows shot down Achilles."⁵ One assumes, however, that she does not really blame Paris for killing Achilles during the course of the war—although one may wonder how she feels at this point about having given birth to Paris in the first place. If so, this is indeed a subtle reference to the prophecy; more likely, she simply wants to save Polyxena and is willing to die in her place. In fact, later in the play we hear Hecuba praising all of her sons and showing pride in her role as their mother: "O Priam, you owned wealth and beauty, you fathered / strong sons, and I, gone grey, was their mother."⁶

Regardless, however, of the fact that Euripides does not specifically mention the fearful episode surrounding Paris's birth, a modern interpreter may be reluctant to dispense with Priam and Hecuba's quick choice of infanticide (even though Paris survives). Today a critic might probe Priam and Hecuba's drastic parental decision for its ethical implications in subsequent dramatic events, including the eventual destruction of Troy. In addition, the foretelling of the infant Paris's destructive future is obviously reminiscent of the prophecy that sets the Oedipus tale in motion. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (429 BCE) was staged in Athens only four or five years before *Hecuba*. In both plots, the young men—Oedipus and Paris—are recognized for forming inappropriate relationships with women. As is easily recalled, Oedipus, after killing his father, marries his mother and fathers four children incestuously; Paris steals—or entices—Menelaus's wife. Of course, Oedipus does not know until much later that Jocasta is his mother (the marriage having been "won" once he solves the riddle of the Sphinx). In the Trojan case, Paris apparently feels compulsively drawn to Helen after "winning" her with Aphrodite's assistance.

There is, however, a kind of "payback" for both Oedipus and Paris in terms of the misfortunes that strike their families and states. That is, the infanticide prescribed by their parents in response to a prophecy (troubling as the prophecy was) may be seen to undermine the ethos of family loyalty and the state as protector. If choosing to kill one's own child can be considered "acceptable," what does this say about the

ethical underpinnings of a society? Is this where problems begin for both Thebes and Troy? On the other hand, allowing for a residual culture of prophecy in 5th-century Greece, an ancient might argue that it is better to let a single person (especially an infant that has not yet substantially invested in life) die than to risk a multitude of deaths, that fate is unstoppable in any case (ergo, Oedipus and Paris were not yet destined to die no matter what actions their parents took), or that safeguarding the family and state overrides any presumed rights due an individual. This then is the point: whether Priam and Hecuba have, in this case, the parental—or royal—prerogative to decide and arrange for their son's death is an arguable matter (from both ancient and modern perspectives) and not a simple, "understandable under the circumstances" fait accompli that can be relegated to old news. So, upon review, was it the couple's treatment of Paris that contributed to the fall of Troy and the ashen aftermath—rather than an inflamed dream?

Indeed, whatever Euripides' reason for leaving direct reference to Paris's "death sentence" out of the script, Priam and Hecuba's actions—their "solution"—still raises questions centuries later regarding the consequences for both individuals and groups. For example, in Michael Tippett's 1962 modern opera *King Priam*, Priam expresses sincere regret for making the decision that his son must die; in this version of the tale, Priam clearly experiences fatherly compassion for Paris as well as a troubled conscience about authorizing the infant's murder;⁷ Priam is not put fully at ease by the justification that murdering one for the sake of many is acceptable. In contrast, after hearing the seer's interpretation of her distressing dream, Hecuba (in Tippett's version) quickly disowns her newborn baby in an effort to ensure the safety of her husband and city. Later in the opera, Priam and his eldest son Hector are on a hunting trip when they meet the herdsman Paris, whose true identity is revealed. Priam is overjoyed that the young man has survived after all and decides to bring him back into the family fold, whatever the consequences. Later in the final act, Priam acknowledges that he *chose* fate, highlighting the issue of "choice" in life. While acknowledging the troubling nature of Priam and Hecuba's initial decision to have Paris killed, the opera also recognizes the endurance of the father-son relationship, in this case apparently overshadowing that of mother and son.

Even a staging that remains close to Euripides' script can have extended significance for contemporary communities. In 1995, the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco staged *Hecuba*, under Carey Perloff's direction, with a clear reference to the Bosnian War. The chorus was performed by the KITKA vocal ensemble, an established female acappella group that draws inspiration from the music of Eastern Europe. Tippett's interpretation, with its focus on individual choice, and the American Conservatory Theatre's production, with its relevance to communal conflict, are just two examples of the legend's adaptability across time, place, and genre.

In the teaching script (PDF), this underlying issue of child neglect (call it endangerment or abandonment), among the many other questions raised in Euripides' play, is left purposely—and perhaps provocatively—unanswered. What might people do today if confronted by a prophetic vision that their child will cause them, their family, and their community irreparable harm? For a modern viewer it might be simple to say: "I don't believe in seers." In reply, one might argue that people still need to know how to deal with potential troublemakers—who are often themselves deeply troubled. Some individuals may be marginalized or go unrecognized for the threat they present until, in very unfortunate cases, they resort to extreme measures to address their personal/societal frustrations, as seen in the Oklahoma City, Columbine, Virginia Tech, Tucson, and Norway attacks. What can help alleviate an individual's mounting fears, frustrations, and compulsions? In fact, one lesson to be drawn from *Hecuba* is that "avoidance" is not the solution. Was Paris intent on "stealing" Helen because his mother had been "stolen" from him early in life? Did he need to find a woman he could possess without fear of abandonment, despite the cost? Was knowingly endangering others a way of "paying back" for his own endangerment as an infant? Perhaps not. Still, considering what happened to Paris before he was even

born and soon thereafter need not be avoided in an analysis of Euripides' thought-provoking drama.⁸

We continue to study, perform, and critique Greek tragedy as script and performance not only because its actions are so intense and unnerving but also because its motivations are so deeply human and the ethical concerns it raises remain strikingly relevant. Still, from a 21st-century perspective, with multiple psychosocial theories at hand, the answers are not always clear cut. The use of a teaching script, even one written in a somewhat "over-the-top" manner, may assist students in thinking through a play's spectrum of issues. As evidenced in *Hecuba*, Greek drama continues to challenge our own concepts of "being human" as we deal with the psychological and social complexities of contemporary life.

notes

¹ Greek Mythology Index, s.v. "Paris," <http://www.mythindex.com/greek-mythology/P/Paris.html> (accessed August 3, 2011).

² Andrew Brown, *A New Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), 144.

³ Euripides, *Hecuba*, trans. Janet Lembke and Kenneth J. Reckford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), lines 669–672.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 681–682.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 415–416.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 658–659

⁷ Synopses (English National Opera), s.v. "King Priam Synopsis," <http://www.eno.org/explore/knowledge-bank/synopses.php?id=319> (accessed August 3, 2011).

⁸ Related issues come to the fore in Lucy Thurber's new play *The Insurgents*, which had its world premiere at the 2011 Contemporary American Theatre Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. In this play, a young woman is forced to leave college when, because of an injury, she loses her athletic scholarship. Returning to a dysfunctional family and feeling not only her own loss but the loss of a civilization, she grows increasingly fearful and frustrated in her isolation and, in her mind, identifies with a broad spectrum of insurgents. A reunited family and renewed sense of social engagement may, in time, turn this potential, gun-toting "troublemaker" into a constructive, non-violent citizen.

Adapting *Hecuba* -- Where Do Problems Begin?

~ a script composed for studying Euripides' *Hecuba* in the college classroom ~

For the "Ancient Drama in Performance: Theory and Practice" conference at Randolph College, in Lynchburg, Virginia, on October 9, 2010.

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The Cast (*Students may read more than one role.*)

The Professor

Student #1 (*expressive and inquisitive*)

Student #2 (*fair minded and empathetic*)

Student #3 (*practical and well informed*)

The Ghost of Polydorus

Hecuba

The Chorus (of captive Trojan women)

The Chorus Leader

Polyxena

Odysseus

Talthybius

The Greek Soldiers

Note: The Professor and Students #1, #2, and #3 speak, as indicated, all the lines that are neither capitalized nor underlined in the script. The lines spoken by characters drawn from Euripides' *Hecuba* are ALL CAPITALIZED AND UNDERLINED; these characters' lines follow upon the Professor's introductory phrase (**written in bold print**).

(The Professor begins the presentation.)

PROFESSOR: *(Addressing the audience)* Hello, everyone. As a prelude to today's discussion of Euripides' *Hecuba*, I'd like to note some ethical issues encountered in the play. To do so, I've elicited the cooperation of several fine actors. Also, in viewing *Hecuba* in its own time and ours, I'm going to take a few liberties, as a play director or filmmaker might do.

(Speaking to the actors positioned near the Professor.) Imagine we've gathered here for a prerehearsal meeting so we can begin to explore the dialogue, action, and possible adaptations of the script. Much of what you'll read is invented and not taken directly from the original play.

(Gesturing to three of the actors) The actors reading the student roles should feel free to ask questions and make comments along the way. After the reading, we'll discuss these matters further at the Socrates Café.

(Addressing the audience and the actors) As we know, *Hecuba* is set in Thrace, in the aftermath of the fall of Troy, in the encampment of the Greek army. Having slain the Trojan men, the Greek army has enslaved the fallen city's women, including the former queen, Hecuba. All of this occurred because Hecuba's son, Paris, abducted the beautiful Helen from Greece . . .

STUDENT #1 *(Interjects)*: Excuse me, Professor, this protocol puzzles me. An army is defeated—so shouldn't a treaty be signed, prisoners taken, reparations demanded, an occupying army instructed to edify the public morally regarding the issue of abduction—you know, these sorts of things, rather than mass slaughter and enslavement?

PROFESSOR: Interesting point. **However, the commander Odysseus simply told his troops:**

ODYSSEUS: KILL ALL THE MEN! ENSLAVE ALL THE WOMEN! BURN THE CITY!
WE'RE GOING HOME! I'M TIRED OF THIS TEN-YEAR WAR! I NEVER WANT TO
HEAR THE WORD TROY AGAIN!

STUDENT #2: (*Sadly*) So many women are the victims of war.

STUDENT #3: Well, being enslaved is better than being dead.

PROFESSOR: Or is it? For the free-spirited Trojan women—as for anyone—it's hard to find dignity and a good life in enslavement.

STUDENT #1: As for Hecuba being a victim, her former position as queen complicates matters. Does she, along with her attendants, represent female victimization—or simply fallen power?

STUDENT #3: And from today's perspective, aren't women, as part of the feat of liberation, often serving alongside men wherever troops are sent? Perhaps women can now be more easily envisioned as soldiers and officers rather than vulnerable ladies left behind.

STUDENT #2: Since the Trojan War took ten years to settle, were there no peace protests or negotiators along the way?

STUDENT #1: Granted this is a play, but did the Trojan War ever actually happen?

PROFESSOR: Good questions, but for now, let's consider the ghost's appearance in the opening scene: Hecuba's young son, Polydorus, tells us he's been killed by his war-time guardian, Polymestor, the King of Thrace. **The murdered lad will rest in peace once he's given burial:**

POLYDORUS: MOMMY, PLEASE BURY ME AS BEFITS A PRINCE OF TROY!

STUDENT #2: This isn't an angry ghost, seeking vengeance.

STUDENT #3: The play is a revenge tragedy, but it's Hecuba's revenge, not her son's.

STUDENT #1: Why is that?

PROFESSOR: "Why?" indeed. Meanwhile, the Greeks are stalled in Thrace, for there is another ghost that does seek revenge: Achilles' ghost tells his comrades he cannot die peacefully unless Polyxena, the young virgin daughter of Hecuba, is sacrificed.

STUDENT #3: Not a minor request. For the most part, the Greeks have given up the practice of human sacrifice.

STUDENT #2: And, Greece being a democracy, the decision is left to the soldiers themselves.

STUDENT #1: The Greek commanders try to influence the demos; Odysseus is most persuasive.

PROFESSOR: **The Greek soldiers cast their vote and exclaim:**

THE GREEK SOLDIERS: KILL HER! KILL POLYXENA. HECUBA'S VIRGIN DAUGHTER BELONGS TO ACHILLES. SATISFY OUR GREEK HERO'S LAST REQUEST!

STUDENT #2: Citizens go far in honoring their heroes, but meanwhile whose suffering might be ignored?

PROFESSOR: Does Euripides distrust “the demos”? Are the Greek troops a “mob” persuaded by clever-tongued leaders to make unethical choices?

STUDENT #1: How do we recover democratic ideals in the face of ill-conceived majority choices?

PROFESSOR: **Hecuba begs Odysseus to save Polyxena, but he remains unmoved:**

ODYSSEUS: I WOULD REPAY MY DEBT TO YOU, HECUBA, BUT NOT TO YOUR DAUGHTER. WE GREEKS MUST HONOR OUR HEROES OR THE TROOPS WON'T FIGHT THE NEXT TIME. GREEKS SUFFERED AND DIED IN THIS WAR, TOO.

STUDENT #2: Is Odysseus’s military rationale justified?

PROFESSOR: Polyxena tries to resolve matters by voicing her own willingness to die.

STUDENT #3: Her stance is existential. When all else fails, she can at least control her own “attitude.”

PROFESSOR: **What is it you really care about, Polyxena?**

POLYXENA: FREEDOM! I CARE ABOUT FREEDOM! LIFE WITHOUT MORAL BEAUTY INFLICTS ENDLESS PAIN!

STUDENT #1: Is this link between morality and beauty necessary or optional for experiencing a good life?

PROFESSOR: Ultimately, Hecuba feels it’s Helen who should be sacrificed, but in the past, when Helen arrived in Troy on Paris’s arm, did anyone insist that Paris relinquish his prize? **Did Hecuba express concern about Menelaus, Helen’s lonely spouse?**

HECUBA: OH, HELEN DEAR, YOU ARE SO LOVELY. OUR TROJAN PEOPLE SURELY WANT YOU HERE, AS DO PRIAM AND I.

STUDENT #1: So, everyone was dazzled by Helen. Was this Helen's fault? Should Helen be sacrificed?

STUDENT #3: The suggestion weakens Hecuba's moral stance.

PROFESSOR: Then the Greek messenger, Talthybius, announces Polyxena's death and asks Hecuba to bury her. **A sensitive fellow, Talthybius calls into question the justice—and existence—of the gods:**

TALTHYBIUS: MY GOD! ZEUS, DO YOU WATCH OVER HUMAN LIVES? OR DO WE CLING TO SUCH A BELIEF IN VAIN, WHEN CHANCE, BLIND CHANCE, RULES US TILL WE DIE?

STUDENT #1: The age-old question: with so much injustice and suffering on earth—if the gods or God exists, does it matter?

STUDENT #3: Hecuba, in her grief, struggles over the nurture vs. nature issue.

STUDENT #2: Is the morality we espouse dependent on our upbringing or genes?

PROFESSOR: Can a play, such as *Hecuba*, yield moral instruction?

STUDENT #1: How should we interpret a play?

PROFESSOR: **The Chorus Leader asks:**

THE CHORUS LEADER: WHAT DOES IT MEAN—THESE BLOWS THAT KEEP STRIKING?

STUDENT #2: Is pain the basis of ethics or just a disruption?

PROFESSOR: Discovering Polydorus dead and convinced Polymestor killed him for his gold, Hecuba shifts from the passivity of grief to the passion of vengeance. **But the Chorus Leader cautions Hecuba:**

THE CHORUS LEADER: HEAVEN INSISTS THAT YOU BEAR WHATEVER BURDENS YOU MOST!

STUDENT #1: However, if heaven—or society—expects people to endure burdens that are

more than they can bear, can this be a just heaven or society? Pushed beyond the limits, people will rebel!

PROFESSOR: Relying on the art of persuasion and forsaking truth for rhetoric, Hecuba appeals to Agamemnon:

HECUBA: AGAMEMNON, YOU CAN SLEEP WITH CASSIE, MY WONDROUS FORTUNE-TELLING DAUGHTER. YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE TO MARRY HER OR HAVE HER CONSENT. BUT IT IS NOT FREEDOM I SEEK. IT IS PURE AND SIMPLE REVENGE! BRING POLYMESTOR AND HIS TWO SONS HERE! YOUR COMPLICITY WILL REMAIN SECRET. MY ACCOMPLICES AND I WILL DO EVERYTHING TO WREAK VENGEANCE ON POLYMESTOR, FOR WOMEN, LIKE MEN, HAVE AWFUL POWERS TO UNLEASH, AND IT WILL BE BEAUTIFUL!

STUDENT #3: Is this true gender equality—or the playwright's fear of women?

STUDENT #2: Has the play moved beyond communitarian ethics and pragmatism to the errantly psychological and personal?

STUDENT #3: Is it any wonder the chorus finds no consistency in the world?

STUDENT #1: Hecuba concludes that everyone is enslaved by a set of circumstances; even so, who doesn't seek an escape route? Can Hecuba's be defended?

PROFESSOR: Agamemnon agrees to Hecuba's request. An unaware Polymestor arrives with his two sons. Enticed into Hecuba's tent to view precious heirlooms, he witnesses instead the murder of his precious sons. He is then savagely blinded. Such sheer violence by Hecuba and the other Trojan women . . .

STUDENT #2: (*Interjects*) These accomplices, too, should be judged in our moral critique.

PROFESSOR: The mock trial follows. A defeated Polymestor denounces the others and prophetically foretells their doom.

STUDENT #3: So, do we agree that justice has been fully served?

STUDENT #2: Do Hecuba and the other Trojan women have a right to kill Polymestor's sons? Who speaks for these children?

STUDENT #1: Can we add the young boys' voices to the script? Can these Thracian lads also return as ghosts?

STUDENT #3: Are there any limits to adapting a play?

PROFESSOR: Has the fact that Hecuba has been OVERBURDENED by pain caused her rejection of all ethical frameworks?

SSTUDENT #3: Agamemnon gave her the option of freedom. She chose revenge.

STUDENT #2: A choice made with forethought or an irresistible impulse?

STUDENT #3: Should despair have driven her to end her own life before killing others?

STUDENT #2: Is suicide an ethical choice?

PROFESSOR: Before we answer these questions and others, we need to view one more flashback and consider an issue only obliquely referred to in the play. **After Talthybius's summons, the chorus chant and dance:**

THE CHORUS: MY FATE GAVE ME TO DISASTER,
MY FATE GAVE ME OVER TO SORROW

THE MOMENT THE PINES ON MT. IDA
WERE CUT DOWN BY PARIS

TO BUILD THE SHIP HE WOULD STEER THROUGH HIGH WAVES
TO THE BED OF HELEN

STUDENT #1: Why was the son of a king and queen simply a herdsman on a mountain top?

PROFESSOR: When Paris was born, Priam responded to a prophecy that his new son would grow up to cause the destruction of Troy. In agreement with Priam, Hecuba, then a young mother, said:

HECUBA: PARIS IS SUCH A CUTE BABY, BUT THE PROPHECY IS CLEAR. I DREAMT OF FIRE WHEN PARIS WAS IN MY WOMB. LOYALTY MUST BE TO TROY ABOVE ALL ELSE. WE MUST SEND OUR DARLING BABY INTO THE WOODS TO DIE. GOODBYE, SWEET PARIS, GOODBYE.

PROFESSOR: Although left on Mt. Ida to perish, the infant was saved by a shepherd and grew up to be a herdsman himself.

STUDENT #2: How does Paris learn of his Trojan family? How do they know it's really Paris who returns years later?

STUDENT #3: Had Priam and Hecuba forgotten the prophecy or considered it defunct?

PROFESSOR: These details could be worked out for a 21st-century audience. Perhaps the ancient Greeks already knew how to unravel this part of the story.

STUDENT #1: How can one believe in prophecies, especially a prophecy that tempts infanticide?

STUDENT #3: Ethics must evolve and challenge outdated, engrained beliefs.

STUDENT #2: Or are some truths eternal?

PROFESSOR: If we are to judge Hecuba, is her abandonment of Baby Paris where problems begin? If Hecuba were here in our midst, what would you say to her? And now I throw the discussion open to the demos.

(The End)