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*What's Hecuba to Shakespeare?**

by TANYA POLLARD

When Hamlet reflects on the charged power of the tragic theater, the figure who haunts his imagination is Hecuba, Queen of Troy, whose tragedy came to define the genre in sixteenth-century Europe. As a bereaved mourner who seeks revenge, Hecuba offers a female version of Hamlet. Yet even while underscoring her tragic power, Shakespeare simultaneously establishes a new model of tragic protagonist, challenging the period's longstanding identification of tragedy with women. In exploring why both Hamlet and Shakespeare are preoccupied with Hecuba, this article argues that ignoring the impact of Greek plays in sixteenth-century England has left a gap in our understanding of early modern tragedy. Attending to Hecuba highlights Shakespeare's innovations to a genre conventionally centered on female grief. In invoking Hecuba as an icon of tragedy, Shakespeare both reflects on and transforms women's place in the genre.

1. INTRODUCTION

When Hamlet reflects on the power of tragic performance, he turns to Hecuba: "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?"[1] Of all Shakespeare's characters, Hamlet is the most self-consciously preoccupied with the theater: he accordingly has a privileged position as a tragic commentator. Yet critics have paid little attention to his fascination with the protagonist of the period's most popular Greek tragedy. Hamlet's metatheatrical reflections have typically been situated in the context of Shakespeare's competition with contemporary playwrights. Shakespeare, we understand, vied for the Senecan legacy of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1587) and his *Hamlet* (1588–89), while the "little eyases" of the boys' companies offered a particular catalyst for reconceiving the shape and function of tragedy.[2] Yet this picture of England's dramatic landscape has overshadowed another genealogy of tragedy, pervasive during Shakespeare's time, for which Hecuba served as icon. This genealogy has become almost invisible to critics, who have largely accepted the maxims that "in tragedy the privileges of the Self are attributed to the masculine hero," and that "the

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[1]Shakespeare, 1997, 1703 (2.2.536–37).

[2]See, for instance, Farley-Hills, esp. 7–40; Foakes, 1970, 37–59. On Kyd's probable authorship of the earlier *Hamlet*, and its likely dating, see especially Erne, 146–56.

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canon of tragic drama, on the whole, concentrates on the experience of male protagonists."[3] Although recent criticism has attended more fully to female experience in early modern tragedy, we have not yet acknowledged or understood the significance of the period's engagement with a predominantly female-centered canon of Greek tragedy.[4] If Hamlet has become the icon of tragedy, then tracing his responses to Hecuba illuminates how he came to replace her in this role.

2. What's Hecuba to Hamlet?

When Hamlet meets the players, he asks them for "a passionate speech," and quickly identifies a particular one: "Aeneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter." This apparent invocation of Virgil, however, obscures an unexpected swerve toward a different literary focus. Although Hamlet refers to Priam, and the player begins with Pyrrhus, the speech meets with a lackluster response ("This is too long") until Hamlet hurries it towards its true center: "Say on; come to Hecuba." As his eagerness suggests, the scene finds its climactic force in Hecuba's passions:

> But who, O who, had seen the mobled queen . . .
> Run barefoot up and down, threat'ning the flames
> With bisson rheum; a clout upon that head
> Where late the diadem stood, and for a robe,
> About her lank and all o'erteemed loins,
> A blanket, in th'alarm of fear caught up —
> Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steeped
> 'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced.
> But if the gods themselves did see her then . . .
> The instant burst of clamour that she made —
> Unless things mortal move them not at all —
> Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
> And passion in the gods.[5]

Hecuba's wretched state — bereaved, barefoot, and clothed only in rags — suggests powerlessness, but paradoxically intensifies her power. Threatening Troy's flames with her "bisson rheum," she both embodies tears and incites

[3]Bamber, 6; Letzler Cole, 5.

[4]See especially *The Female Tragic Hero*.

[5]Shakespeare, 1997, 1701–02 (*Hamlet* 2.2.414, 426–28), 1702 (2.2.478, 481), 1702 (2.2.482–98).

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them in others, making "milch the burning eyes of heaven." As these examples suggest, the passage's insistently Anglo-Saxon vocabulary implicitly translates Hecuba's foreign and classical origins to an intimate, local setting, just as "milch" and "o'erteemed loins" emphasize her maternity. In evoking her, the player brings classical tragedy to Elsinore, to England, and to the domestic sphere, with a promise of powerful consequences for audiences. Other moments in the play, such as the ghost's account of how his terrible story would affect "ears of flesh and blood," also dramatize the affective and physiological consequences of tragic performances on their audiences, evoking the period's discussions about the effects of tragic pathos on audiences.[6] Yet while the ghost warns that his tragedy will freeze and stiffen its audiences, Hecuba's tragedy promises the opposite effect: it will melt, liquefy, even douse flames. The performance of female grief, the player suggests, offers a distinctive model of tragic impact, one that shadows, complements, and competes with that produced by men.

Beyond Hecuba's reported effects on her mortal and immortal audiences, her most obvious immediate impact is on the player, whose passionate performance Polonius breaks off in concern: "Look, whe'er he has not turned his colour, and has tears in's eyes. Prithee no more!" Yet her deeper impact is on Hamlet himself. Disconcerted by the player's tears and broken voice, Hamlet famously condemns his display of grief as "monstrous":

> And all for nothing!
> For Hecuba.
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her?[7]

Although it is the player whose reaction Hamlet attacks, it is Hecuba who occupies his thoughts. He tries to reduce her to "nothing," but she proves a substantial presence. He harps insistently on her name, three times in two lines, as he puzzles over her apparently inexplicable effect on a man lacking any direct ties to her. Hecuba is a distant figure, who has neither appeared nor even been given a direct voice. Nonetheless, the mere evocation of her suffering is enough to produce tears in audiences both within and beyond the player's speech.

The moving power of Hecuba's laments directly highlights Hamlet's sense of his own failings. "Yet I," he complains, "A dull and muddy-mettled

[6]Ibid., 1684 (*Hamlet* 1.5.22). On the ghost's account of his story's effects, see Gross, 10–32; Hillman, 81–116; Pollard, 2005, 123–41.

[7]Shakespeare, 1997, 1702 (*Hamlet* 2.2.499–500), 1703 (2.2.534–37).

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rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, / And can say nothing."[8] Technically he is comparing himself with the player, but Hamlet's curious indictment of himself as "unpregnant" suggests that it is Hecuba herself against whom he fails to measure up. Although editors and critics have taken pains to distance the word from its maternal connotations, its literal sense was known and used in Shakespeare's time.[9] More compellingly, its appearance here resonates with later passages linking Hamlet with pregnancy: Claudius meditates on "the hatch and the disclose" of "something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood," and later imagines him as "the female dove / When that her golden couplets are disclosed."[10] The play's insistent interest in Hamlet's potential maternity highlights the player's identification of Hecuba with milk and teeming loins: identified by Euripides as a mother of fifty, she was also a strikingly fertile literary figure, widely cited and imitated. Although her grief most conspicuously indicts Gertrude, the play's other widowed mother, for her failure to mourn, at a deeper level it calls attention to Hamlet's unlikely status as tragic protagonist. Hamlet, in contrast with Hecuba, is incapable of fertility: male rather than female, child rather than parent, belated literary imitator rather than origin.[11] These recurring allusions to female fertility, combined with Hamlet's powerful response to the player's depiction of Hecuba, suggest that there is more than one ghostly parent haunting this play.

3. Hecuba in Sixteenth-Century Europe

Hamlet acquires different meanings if one takes seriously the play's preoccupation with Hecuba as a symbol of the moving power of tragedy. Critics who have discussed the player's speech have not generally commented on Hecuba; when they have, they have typically identified her with Virgil

[8]Ibid., 1703 (*Hamlet* 2.2.543–46).

[9]See the OED's definition for the term. Its sense here has been glossed by Wells and Taylor as "unapt" (Shakespeare, 1986, 1429), by Braunmuller as "barren of realization" (Shakespeare, 2001, 61), and by Jervis as "insensible, unmindful, unready" (Jervis, 349); Edwards claims that "'pregnant' is not used by Shakespeare to mean 'with child'" (Shakespeare, 2003, 153). M. T. Crane, 275–85, similarly argues that Shakespeare did not use the term to refer to child-bearing, though she notes that Shakespeare would have been aware of this definition.

[10]Shakespeare, 1997, 1707 (*Hamlet* 3.1.163–65), 1746 (5.1.271–72).

[11]Most immediately, though not exclusively, he imitates an earlier *Hamlet*, which itself imitates two European sources. On pregnancy imagery as representing literary fecundity in the period, see Maus, 266–88.

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and/or Ovid.[12] Yet in the early modern period, Hecuba was the established icon of Greek tragedy, the literary tradition widely recognized as the genre's origin.[13] Continuing a tradition rooted in late antiquity, Euripides's *Hecuba* was by far the most popular of the Greek plays printed, translated, and performed in sixteenth-century Europe. It was the first Greek play to be translated into Latin, by Erasmus, who published it with *Iphigenia in Aulis* in 1506 — only three years after the Greek editio princeps was published by Venice's Aldine Press — in an edition that went on to be frequently reprinted.[14] Beyond its inclusion in complete editions of Euripides, the play appeared in thirty-seven individual or partial editions during the century, far more than the runner-up, *Iphigenia*, with twenty-two, and one of only a few plays to appear in more than four.[15] It was translated into Spanish in 1533; French in 1544; and Italian in 1543, 1550, 1563, and 1592, for a total of seven vernacular editions — again, far more than any other Greek play.[16] It is also the first Greek tragedy with documented postclassical performances, directed by Melanchthon in the Low Countries between 1506 and 1514, and again in 1525 in Wittenberg — where Shakespeare sent Hamlet to study — as well as in numerous adaptations.[17] Gasparus Stiblinus, the

[12]James, 1997, 40 discusses this episode's Trojan and Virgilian contexts, but dismisses Hecuba's significance: "Any interest that Shakespeare may have had in Hecuba . . . is subordinate to Hamlet's troubled fascination with mimicry and widowed mothers." On the episode's Virgilian roots, see also Miola, 1988, 281–86; on the influence of Ovid's Hecuba, see Bate, 20; Enterline, 166–67; Kietzman. Westney surveys the period's allusions to Hecuba. The richest account of Hamlet's uses of Hecuba is that of Goodland, 71–199. This article is indebted to Goodland's sensitive exploration of Hecuba's associations with female grief and tragedy, though the emphasis here on the reception and adaptation of classical tragedy diverges from her focus on Protestant England's nostalgia for the Virgin Mary.

[13]On Hecuba's exceptional status, see Heath, 40–68; Mossman.

[14]Erasmus's translation was especially influential in England, where he shaped humanist study; he dedicated it to William Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury. *Hecuba* had also been the subject of the first partial Latin translations of Greek drama: the Calabrian Greek scholar Leontius Pilatus translated the first 146 lines in 1362, followed by similar work by Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481) and Pietro da Montagnana (fl. 1432–78); see Garland, 96–97.

[15]After *Medea*, *Alcestis*, and *The Phoenician Women*, which appeared in eighteen, eleven, and eight editions respectively, no other Greek play appeared in more than four individual or partial editions in the sixteenth century. For details on these numbers and the early printing of Greek plays, see Saladin, 164; Hirsch, 138–46.

[16]See Bolgar, 512–15. Very few Greek plays were translated into vernacular languages in the sixteenth century: again, *Iphigenia* came second with four, with very little competition.

[17]See Heath, 43; Waszink, 1.1:207. Adaptations staged in the century include Robert Garnier's *La Troade* (France, 1579), *Polyxène* (France, 1584), and three versions of Seneca's *Troas* — one under the title *Hecuba* — staged at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1551, 1559, and 1560. On these performances, see the APGRD Database.

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translator and editor of the first Greek-Latin volume of Euripides's complete works (1562), pronounced Euripides the prince of tragedy and claimed that *Hecuba* held the first place among the tragedies.[18] Philip Sidney used the play as an example of the power of well-made tragedy, and Joseph Scaliger and Antonio Minturno similarly used it to illustrate proper tragic structure — compact, but with a complex variety of incidents in the plot — in their discussions of the genre.[19]

Scholars have explained *Hecuba*'s remarkable popularity in the Renaissance in a number of ways, including the play's earlier prestige, its violence, its visibility in a standard composition textbook, European fascination with Troy, and Hecuba's familiarity from other sources.[20] Yet each of these suggestions falls short of accounting for the play's extraordinary appeal. In particular, early modern English responses to Hecuba suggest that the play's popularity derived especially from its combination of passionate grief and triumphant revenge, each of which embodied a crucial aspect of what the period's writers found compelling in tragedy.

Later versions of Hecuba consistently emphasize her overwhelming grief. She appears weeping in texts by Ovid, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Ariosto, and Rabelais, among others.[21] In the first English revenge tragedy, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1561), she is described as "the wofullest wretch / That euer liued to make a myrour of."[22] As an epitome of female grief, in particular, Hecuba offers a synecdoche for her genre. The most frequently published and translated Greek tragedies in the sixteenth century all featured female protagonists, suggesting that the genre's attractions were identified especially with the emotional intensity generated

[18]Stiblinus, 38.

[19]Complaining about contemporary approaches to dramatic structure, Sidney, 160 (K2^r), describes the plot of *Hecuba* and asks "Where now would one of our tragedy writers begin, but with the delivery of the child? Then should he sail over into Thrace, and so spend I know not how many years, and travel numbers of places. But where doth Euripides? Even with the finding of the body, the rest leaving to be told by the spirit of Polydorus. This needs no further to be enlarged; the dullest wit may conceive it." See also Scaliger, 60; Minturno, 85–88. On Renaissance interest in the play's structure, see Jones, 95.

[20]On the play's status as first in the Byzantine triad of Euripides's plays established around 500 CE, which both reflected and furthered its visibility, see Heath, 43. On violence, see Lucas, 93; Weil, 51–69, although the latter does not discuss routes of reception or specific references to the figure of Hecuba. On Hecuba in Aphthonius's *Progymnasmata*, see McDonald, 107; on fascination with Troy, see Jones, 94.

[21]On this catalogue of examples, see Mossman, 226–29; ibid., 219–20, argues that Euripides deliberately solicited such imitations by presenting Hecuba as an archetype.

[22]Norton and Sackville, 33 (3.1.14–15).

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by suffering women.[23] After *Hecuba*, the Euripidean plays that appeared most frequently in individual or partial editions during the sixteenth century were *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Medea*, *Alcestis*, and *The Phoenician Women* (in that order); those with the next largest number of vernacular translations were *The Phoenician Women*, *The Trojan Women*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Medea*, and *Electra*.[24] Similarly, the most frequently printed and translated plays by Sophocles were *Antigone* and *Electra*.[25] Performance records tell a similar story: of the sixteen documented European stagings of plays by Euripides before 1600, thirteen featured female protagonists (and if we see *Hippolytus* as centering on Phaedra, the number rises to fourteen).[26] The canon of preferred plays, and in particular the exceptionally popular pairing of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, suggests the period's particular interest in the tragic potential of bereaved mothers and sacrificial daughters, a juxtaposition whose significance for *Hamlet* we will explore later.

Yet as with the similar figure of Clytemnestra, allusions to Hecuba emphasized not only her grief, but also its consequences for her revenge. Unlike Seneca's Hecuba, Euripides's Hecuba uses lament, the ritual voicing of mourning for the dead, to transform her grief into violence that is depicted as both successful and justified. After passionately lamenting, first her sacrificed daughter and then her newly discovered, murdered son, she earns the moral authority to persuade not only her sympathetic chorus, but also the ruler Agamemnon, that she must punish the murderer Polymestor. Ultimately, with the help of her female attendants, she kills Polymestor's children in front of him, and then blinds him. Recent scholarship has called attention to anxiety about female lament in ancient Greece, rooted in the perceived threat of its power to mobilize violence and political upheaval.[27] Christian Billing has argued that "the verbal expression of female lament constitutes as powerful an act of violence as the deed of vengeance itself," and that *Hecuba* in particular shows it to be "a powerfully affective force"

[23]Early modern preferences intensified the centrality of women in Greek tragedy, but did not create it: see Gomme; Foley. For a recent overview of critical approaches to women's roles on the ancient stage, see Wohl.

[24]On editions, see Saladin, 164; Hirsch, 141–43. For a full list of vernacular translations of Greek texts before 1600, see Bolgar, 508–25.

[25]See Hirsch, 141–43; Bolgar, 512–25. Aeschylus's plays received considerably less attention in the period because textual corruption and linguistic complexity limited their accessibility.

[26]For details of these performances, see the APGRD Database.

[27]See Alexiou; Billing; Foley, esp. 21–55, 145–71; Holst-Warhaft, esp. 104–70; Loraux.

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that catalyzes violent action.[28] Although most of the play depicts Hecuba's grief, her final turn to vengeful action — unlike that of Hamlet — is carefully planned, successfully orchestrated, and publicly upheld as both triumphant and just.[29] It is even a civic duty: in agreeing that she has the right to carry out her revenge, Agamemnon tells her that "this is for the common good, for both the individual and the state [*polis*], that the bad person should be punished and the good one succeed."[30] And despite her widespread association with sorrow, Hecuba takes satisfaction in achieving what she sees as justice: when Polymestor asks her "Do you take pleasure in insulting me, you evil-doer?," she replies, "Why should I not take pleasure in taking revenge on you?"[31]

Although for much of the play Hecuba evokes tragic pathos, here she points to another model of tragedy: the triumph of action, and in particular, of revenge. Her delight in her victim's suffering evokes Euripides's Medea — a figure identified more widely with scheming cruelty than sympathetic grief — and the charismatic monstrosity of Seneca's hero-villains, especially Medea and Atreus, who played a crucial role in mediating Greek tragic material to Renaissance readers and audiences.[32] Perhaps more surprisingly, her blinding of Polymestor, as Froma Zeitlin has noted, echoes Odysseus's blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus, an action widely identified by Renaissance writers not only with cleverness, but also with the origins of

[28]Billing, 50, 51, who argues that "the audience is led to understand that the pain of bereaved mothers is capable of creating an emotional context within which impassioned calls for revenge may easily be accommodated." Holst-Warhaft, 161, similarly examines (though not in *Hecuba*) "the threat of female mourning to the state and to male authority" in Greek literature.

[29]Billing, 54, 55, describes the blinded Polymestor as "a spectacular warning to those who consider female lament to be inconsequential," and adds that Hecuba "rests safe in the knowledge that Agamemnon's quasi-juridical process sanctioned her actions entirely." On the traditional understanding in Greek tragedy of revenge as an obligation to help friends and harm enemies, see Blundell; Burnett.

[30]Euripides, *Hecuba*, 1:380 (ll. 902–04): "πᾶσι γὰρ κοινὸν τόδε, / ἰδίᾳ θ᾽ ἑκάστῳ καὶ πόλει, τὸν μὲν κακὸν / κακόν τι πάσχειν, τὸν δὲ χρηστὸν εὐτυχεῖν."

[31]Ibid., 1:396 (ll. 1257–58): "χαίρεις ὑβρίζουσ᾽ εἰς ἔμ᾽, ὦ πανοῦργε σύ. / οὐ γάρ με χαίρειν χρή σε τιμωρουμένην."

[32]When Jason learns of her murder of his children, Euripides's Medea flaunts her successful punishment of him: "For I, as necessary, have attacked your heart in return" ("τῆς σῆς γὰρ ὡς χρῆν καρδίας ἀνθηψάμην": *Medea*, 1:153 [l. 1360]). Discussing Hieronimo's account of his revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Braden, 211, identifies his pride with "the recognition to which Seneca's Medea and Atreus aspire in their last scenes"; I suggest that Seneca's model has Euripidean roots. On Seneca's debts to Euripides, see Tarrant, 213–63.

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tragicomedy.[33] For some sixteenth-century theorists of tragedy, Hecuba's triumph represented an aesthetic failing, because it jarred with their conceptions of the genre. Despite his praise for the play's structure, Scaliger objected that her revenge provided too upbeat an ending, "since the issue of tragedy should be unhappy, and *Hecuba* is a tragedy, Hecuba ought to have been made more miserable at the end than at the beginning; this is certainly not done, for the end furnishes some scant relief to her misery."[34] Yet Seneca's tragedies of atrocity were strikingly popular in the sixteenth century, and other contemporary critics relished the triumphant endings that audiences clearly enjoyed. Cinthio contributed to the rise of tragicomedy when he justified writing "tragedies with happy endings" by explaining that he found it wrong "to displease those for whose pleasure the play is put on the stage," and in this he followed not only Castelvetro — who argued that "poetry was invented for the sole purpose of providing pleasure" — but arguably Aristotle himself.[35] If the tragedy of pathos competed with the tragedy of triumph in the early modern period, Hecuba had the unusual distinction of embodying both. In doing so, she created — crucially, for *Hamlet* — a template for the exceptionally popular genre of revenge drama, which mitigated the grief of loss with the pleasure of retribution.[36]

Yet Hamlet cannot precisely re-create Hecuba's particular pathos or triumph, and not simply because intervening Christian beliefs problematized the idea of pleasurable and justified revenge.[37] Although Judith Mossman has argued that Renaissance audiences admired Hecuba despite her gender, accepting her as "an honorary man," contemporary responses to other Greek plays suggest that her appeal lay especially in the emotional intensity identified with her femininity.[38] Even her violent efficacy is depicted as having roots in her gender, and especially in her maternity. In the ancient Greek world, mothers were accorded special rights and obligations

[33]See Zeitlin, 194–98. I am grateful to David Quint for calling this to my attention. On Renaissance identification of Homer's *Odyssey* with the origins of tragicomedy, see Dewar-Watson, 2005, esp. 24–28; on Euripides's *Cyclops* in particular as an important model for tragicomedy in the period, see Herrick, 7–13.

[34]Scaliger, 61.

[35]Cinthio, 256; Castelvetro, 1984, 19.

[36]On Renaissance interest in tragic affect as a response to Aristotle's *Poetics*, see Cronk; Reiss; Orgel.

[37]Bacon, 740, famously criticized revenge as "a kind of wild justice," and insists "This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well."

[38]Mossman, 243.

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as mourners: the physiological consequences of their labor pains were understood to give them both a distinctive access to intense grief, and the right to enact this grief publicly.[39] Early modern English translations of Greek drama not only recognized this link, but actively intensified it.[40] In their *Jocasta* (1566), George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh follow Lodovico Dolce's *Giocasta* (1549), an Italian translation of Euripides's *The Phoenician Women*, in heightening both the centrality of its female protagonist, and the significance of her motherhood.[41] "There is no love," the play's Chorus insists,

> may be comparde to that,
> The tender mother beares unto hir chyld:
> For even so muche the more it doth encrease,
> As their griefe growes, or contentations cease."[42]

This choral passage, which commonplace marks show was singled out as a *sententia*, follows Dolce's translation closely in expanding the two lines of Euripides that it re-creates.[43] Euripides's text reads, "The children of their labor pangs are wondrous and terrible [*deinon*] to women, and the whole female race is somehow attached to their children,"[44] and the translators' Latin edition renders these lines (also in commonplace marks)

[39]On the centrality of maternal lament to tragedy, and on Hecuba as "paradigm of mourning motherhood," see Loraux, 27–28, 40.

[40]Recent work on classical reception has emphasized the ways in which later periods actively rewrite the past: see Martindale. B. Smith, 6, has suggested that the term *confluence* might be more apt than influence for describing the reciprocity by which early moderns shaped what they read.

[41]See Miola, 2002. Challenging received opinion that the translators adhered strictly to Dolce's version, Norland, 83–89, points out that they amplify the emotional intensity of the queen's suffering through expanding her lines and accounts of her sorrows, and cutting material not directly relevant to her.

[42]Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh, 89 (2.1.92–95).

[43]Dolce, 14[v], is a very close translation: "Amor non è, che s'appareggi a quello, / Che la pietosa madre a i figli porta: / Ilqual tanto piu cresce, quanti in essi / Scema il contento, & crescono gi affanni."

[44]Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 3:102 (ll. 355–56): "δεινὸν γυναιξὶν αἱ δι᾽ ὠδίνων γοναί, / καὶ φιλότεκνόν πως πᾶν γυναικεῖον γένος." Loraux, 35–36, writes of this and other references that "a mother owes her pre-eminent position alongside the dead to the unconditional privilege given once and for all by the bond of childbirth. A bond that is without mediation, exacting, painful, and that Euripides's choruses sometimes describe as 'terrible': terribly tender, terribly strong, simply *terrible* . . . in order to designate the child as what is both the most precious and the most heartrending possession of a mother, Euripidean tragedy readily calls it the *lókheuma*, the product of childbirth."

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as "To give birth through pains is a precious thing to women, and the female race is somehow affectionate to their children."[45] Intriguingly, and contrary to typical claims, the vernacular versions are closer here to the emotional spirit of the Greek original than is the more academic, and technically correct, Latin. Their suggestion that grief is inherent in maternity acknowledges the ambivalent overtones of the Greek *deinon* — terrible, dangerous, marvelous — in stark contrast to the straightforwardly positive *preciosa* as a modifier for the effects of giving birth. The expansion of these and other lines on motherhood suggests that, to these translators, maternal suffering was central to the tragedy's power, offering a suggestive background for *Hamlet*'s pervasive pregnancy references.

Meditations on the intensity of maternal emotions are similarly pervasive in the other extant early English translation of a Greek play, *Iphigenia in Aulis* (ca. 1550–53) by Jane, Lady Lumley. Despite the play's apparent focus on a daughter, Euripides gave Clytemnestra almost as many lines (205) as Iphigenia (207), and Lumley amplified the maternal emphasis by giving Clytemnestra 280 lines to Iphigenia's 192. After Clytemnestra learns that Iphigenia will be sacrificed, the chorus laments the suffering that her death will bring. "Truly," they note, "it is a uerie troblesome thinge to haue children: for we are euen by nature compelled to be sorie for their mishappes."[46] Like Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh, Lumley emphasizes the negative aspects of ambiguous Greek terms, and in this respect is closer to Euripides than to Erasmus's translation, which she owned.[47] Euripides's chorus says "Giving birth carries a strange and terrible [*deinon*] spell, and suffering for their children is shared by all women."[48] In the Greek, this line, like the early chorus from *Jocasta*, uses the word *deinon* — strange, terrible, marvelous, dangerous — to frame the emotional impact of maternity as ambivalent, and *hyperkamnein* denotes excessive suffering. Erasmus, on the

[45] *Euripidis . . . Tragoediae XVIII*, 140: "Preciosa res mulieribus per dolores fiunt geni / Et amans liberorum est quodammodo muliebre genus." Although Gascoigne and Kinwelmershe have been seen as drawing exclusively on Dolce's translation, Dewar-Watson, 2010, notes that *Jocasta* draws on information about Theban gates and stage directions found in Rudolph Collinus's translation that does not appear in Dolce's.

[46] Lumley, 84^{v} (ll. 831–33). On Lumley's experimental approach to translation, see Demers; Straznicky, 19–47.

[47] Lumley had access to Erasmus's dual-language Greek-Latin edition, as well as a Greek edition of Euripides: see Jayne and Johnson, nos. 1736 and 1591a, cited in Straznicky, 33. I challenge here the longstanding claim that Lumley worked directly from the Latin version and "shows no knowledge of Greek": see F. Crane, 228.

[48] Euripides, *Iphigenia Aulidensis*, 3:394 (ll. 917–18): "δεινὸν τὸ τίκτειν καὶ φέρει φίλτρον μέγα / πᾶσίν τε κοινὸν ὥσθ' ὑπερκάμνειν τέκνων."

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other hand, omits the metaphor of a drug or spell (*philtron*) with its implications of powerlessness, and instead emphasizes strength: "It is a powerful thing to have given birth, and it brings the greatest force of love to all women in common, so that they expend the greatest amount of effort for their children."[49] Erasmus's Latin words "Efficax," "vim," and "adlaborent" suggest power, force, and effort, rather than the strange marvels and suffering of the Greek and English versions. And although Lumley's choices are in keeping with other vernacular translators' approaches to Euripides's plays, in the light of her emphasis it is poignant to note that her own three children all died in infancy.[50]

Whether or not Lumley's interest in Euripides was directly linked to the play's emphasis on maternal experience, Euripides's plays clearly attracted female attention in early modern England. Queen Elizabeth herself translated a play by Euripides — we do not know which — in keeping with women's substantial contributions to translation and closet drama more broadly.[51] In a brief afterword to *Jocasta*, Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh suggest that explanatory notes resulted from a woman's curiosity: "I did begin these notes at request of a gentlewoman who vnderstode not poetycall words or termes."[52] These various signs of female interest in Euripides suggest that his works served as a particular magnet for the period's pervasive identification of tragedy with women. Because tragedy was seen as inducing overwhelming emotions, women were often identified as the paradigmatic tragic audience: Plato described surrendering to the emotional intensity of tragedy as a woman's response, and in 1582 Stephen Gosson similarly complained that "The beholding of troubles and miserable slaughters that are in tragedies drive us to immoderate sorrow, heaviness, womanish weeping and mourning," anticipating *Hamlet*'s anxieties about the emasculating effects of tears.[53] Tragedy itself was typically personified as female, in a range of texts including *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599) and Heywood's

[49]See Εὐριπδου Τρα Ὑωδίαι . . . *Evripidis tragoediae dvae, Hercuba & Iphigenia in Aulide*, n6^{r}: "Res efficax peperisse, uimque maximam / Amoris adfert omnibus communiter, / Vti pro suis summe adlaborent liberis."

[50]Although precisely when Lumley translated the play is not known, it is typically dated to the early years of her marriage: see Child, vi; Demers, 25–26.

[51]Elizabeth studied under the Hellenist Roger Ascham; on her translation, which is not extant, see Baldwin, 1:282. On women's affinity for closet drama and translation, see Straznicky.

[52]Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh, 159.

[53]Plato, 2:458–60 (605c–e): "ἐκεῖνο δὲ γυναικός"; Gosson, 95 (C5^{v}–C6^{r}); see also Greenberg; Rackin.

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Apology for Actors (1612).[54] Hamlet's attention to Hecuba, then, hints not only at the impact of Greek tragedy, but at the centrality of women, and especially maternal lament, in English and European conceptions of the genre.

Women's identification with tragedy reflected the genre's association with vulnerability. Hecuba's status as a fallen queen embodied tragedy's emphasis on the instability of fortune, and gave her a particular cautionary power in an England ruled by a female monarch. Jessica Winston has pointed out that in the first English translation of Seneca's *Troas* (1559), Jasper Heywood added and reassigned lines in order to accentuate Hecuba's status as victim of fortune, and offered the translation to the newly crowned Elizabeth as "a salutary gift of cautionary advice."[55] The hints in Heywood's added lines were hardly subtle:

> Hecuba that wayleth now in care,
> That was so late, of high estate a queene
> A Mirrour is, to teache you what you are
> Your wavering welth, O princes, here is seene."[56]

Hecuba may have embodied certain kinds of emotional and political power, but she also represented their fragility.

Yet beyond its consequences for other queens, Hecuba's suffering was also perceived as a potent threat to unjust male rulers. In representing the power of grief and rage to bring about the deserved punishment of wrongdoers, *Hecuba* offered rich material for theories about the power of tragedy to combat tyranny.[57] When Sidney wrote that "Tragedy maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors," he turned to the figure of Hecuba, albeit indirectly. "But how much it [tragedy] can move," he wrote, "Plutarch yieldeth a notable testimony of the abominable tyrant Alexander Pheraeus, from whose eyes a tragedy well made and represented drew abundance of tears, who without all pity had murdered infinite numbers, and some of his own blood: so as he that was not ashamed to make matters for tragedies, yet could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy. And if it wrought no further good in him, it was that

[54]See *A Warning for Fair Women*, 97–100 (Induction); Heywood's depiction of the tragic muse Melpomene, Thomas Heywood, 216–18. Rackin, 6, discusses *A Warning*; Goodland, esp. 175–76, discusses the identification of tragedy with tears and the feminine.

[55]See Winston, 43.

[56]J. Heywood, B3^{v}; Winston, 41.

[57]On tragedy and tyranny, see Bushnell. James, 2001, explores the relationship among tragic sympathy, rebellion against authority, and ultimately regicide.

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he in despite of himself withdrew himself from hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart."[58] This story — which critics have routinely linked with Hamlet's play-within-the-play — in fact appears twice in Plutarch's writings, in his *Life of Pelopidas* and *On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander the Great*, both of which mention Hecuba. In *Pelopidas*, Plutarch refers to the play in question as Euripides's *Trojan Women* — a tragedy of pathos — but in *Alexander* he points to the revenge drama of Euripides's *Hecuba*.[59] Sidney had access to modern translations of both, but a specific verbal echo points to *Alexander* as his source.[60] The phrase "mollify his hardened heart," which anticipates the melting effect attributed to Hecuba in *Hamlet*, closely resembles "qu'il l'avoit amolly comme du fer" in Amyot's translation of the *Alexander*. [61] This echo suggests that it is *Hecuba*, not *The Trojan Women*, that Sidney highlights as a model for tragedy's impact on tyrants, a conclusion supported by Sidney's earlier citation of *Hecuba* as an example of the well-made play. Given the play's depiction of successful revenge against an unjust male ruler, we might ask whether Pheraeus's mollification — a term that in English could also mean weakening — perhaps indicated not only pity, but also fear: a possibility that resonates with Claudius's reaction to a performance featuring regicide and a grieving widow.[62]

Sidney's account of tragedy's affective power points to the threat for rulers in the violence unleashed by female suffering, suggesting why the player's performance of Hecuba inspires Hamlet with a plan for attacking Claudius. And while Sidney's discussion focuses on the emotional impact of witnessing female grief, it also evokes the importance of the genre's political contexts. In the early modern imagination, tragedy's power over tyranny was firmly identified with its Greek roots. When George Puttenham

[58]Sidney, 151 (F3^{v}, F4^{r}).

[59]In *Alexander* Plutarch refers to Hecuba's daughter Polyxena, who appears in *Hecuba* but not in The *Trojan Women*: see Mossman, 218. Critics typically identify Sidney's passage with *Pelopidas* and *The Trojan Women*. For identification of the passage in *Pelopidas* as an influence on *Hamlet*, because of its emphasis on the tyrant's guilt, see Freeman; Gourlay. However, Gourlay suggests that the *Alexander* passage more directly influenced Sidney.

[60]*Pelopidas* appears in translations of the *Lives* by both North (1579) and Jacques Amyot (1559), and *Alexander* in Amyot's translation of the *Moralia* (1572).

[61]Plutarch, 1572, 312^{r}. In his 1603 English translation, Philemon Holland similarly has "mollified his hard heart and made it melt like a peece of iron in the furnace," taken from Plutarch's own ἐμαλαξεν (*emalaxen*), from μαλασσω (*malasso*), "soften": Plutarch, 1936, 4:424. Gaunt identifies the *Alexander* as a source for the Hecuba episode in *Hamlet* by suggesting that Hamlet's reference to being "muddy-mettled" alludes to the imagery of melting iron.

[62]On "mollify," see OED, "mollify, v." definition 3.

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identifies tragedy with levelling tyranny, he names its origins as "Euripides and Sophocles with the Greeks, Seneca with the Latins."[63] The genre's interest in the fall of kings was widely attributed to its close association with the institutions of Athenian democracy.[64] In his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Castelvetro goes so far as to assert that tragedies and monarchies cannot coexist: "for a king is very jealous of his royal condition, and is careful about putting before the humble and before individuals examples that may arouse and direct their spirits toward innovations and a change of rulers. On the contrary, because the king knows that the common people delight in and enjoy the evil fortunes of the great, they do not ever have tragedies produced in public. Tragedies never appear on the stage except among people who are subject to no individual ruler."[65] According to Castelvetro, the genre is fundamentally inimical to maintaining stable royalty, an idea in keeping with Nicole Loraux's account of the challenges that bereaved mothers pose for civic authority. The female figures whose grief induces sympathetic anger toward rulers' wrongs play a crucial role in undermining tyrannical power. As a synecdoche for Greek tragedy, then, Hecuba shows that the powerful emotions generated by female lament, especially when authorized by maternity, can lead to justified violence against tyranny. Capable of melting audiences and destroying kings, Hecuba offers a model of tragedy with both emotional and political power.

4. Shakespeare's Hecuba

This array of Hecuba's early modern meanings offers a useful background from which to revisit this essay's central question: what is Hecuba to Shakespeare? Clearly she was a figure of some fascination: he alludes to her fifteen times by name, and additionally by status ("the queen of Troy"), throughout his works.[66] In *Titus Andronicus* (ca. 1592), which Emrys Jones

[63]Puttenham, 138.

[64]Bushnell, esp. 5–7, notes that the historical relationship between playwrights and tyrants was in fact far more complicated than typically imagined by early modern writers.

[65]Castelvetro, 1940, 331.

[66]Shakespeare mentions Dido, to whom he has been described as "mysteriously attracted," thirteen times (James, 2001, 364); Hippolyta six times (plus four in stage directions, all in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); and Medea once; Iphigenia, Clytemnestra, and Antigone do not feature at all, nor do Oedipus, Orestes, Hippolytus, Thyestes, or Atreus. The only classical literary characters who appear more frequently are those with active roles in *Troilus and Cressida*, such as Achilles, Hector, Priam, Agamemnon, and Aeneas, and demigods such as Hercules.

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has argued uses Euripides's *Hecuba* as a structural model, Tamora's son Demetrius calls upon her as a symbol for his mother's hopes of vengeance — "The self-same gods that armed the Queen of Troy / With opportunity of sharp revenge / Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent, / May favor Tamora, the Queen of Goths"— and young Lucius invokes her as a parallel for the maddened Lavinia.[67] In *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), Lucrece's ekphrastic meditation on "despairing Hecuba" enables her to see herself as a classical tragic heroine, one who "shapes her sorrow to the beldame's woes" and transforms it into a plan for taking action against her wrongdoer.[68] In *Coriolanus* (1608–09), Volumnia uses Hecuba's associations with maternal tenderness to chide her daughter-in-law's concern for Coriolanus's safety over his honor: "The breasts of Hecuba, / When she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier / Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood / At Grecian sword."[69] And in *Cymbeline* (1610–11), upon mistaking Cloten's corpse for that of Posthumus, Imogen invokes her as a kindred spirit of bereaved vindictive fury: "Pisanio, / All curses madded Hecuba gave the Greeks, / And mine to boot, be darted on thee!"[70] Throughout these examples, Shakespeare's Hecuba represents not the passive suffering we see in Seneca, but active responses to wrongdoers, the possibility of transforming grief into the satisfaction of revenge.[71] She has, in short, Euripides's fingerprints all over her.

Hecuba and the model of tragedy she embodies form as haunting a presence to Shakespeare as the ghost to Hamlet. Strangely, however, critics have failed to see this. Feminist criticism has excavated underexplored female figures in Shakespeare's writings, but Hecuba has also suffered from her Greek literary origins. It is a longstanding critical commonplace that Shakespeare, along with other early modern commercial playwrights, could

[67]Shakespeare, 1997, 382–83 (1.1.136–39); ibid., 410 (4.1.18–21): "I have heard my grandsire say full oft, / Extremity of griefs would make men mad; / And I have read that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad through sorrow."

[68]Ibid., 673–74 (1447, 1458).

[69]Ibid., 2801 (1.3.37–40). Intriguingly, this quotation suggests a possible verbal echo from Euripides's *Hecuba* (359, l. 424), in which Hecuba's daughter Polyxena, facing her upcoming sacrifice by Pyrrhus, laments to her mother, "O chest and breasts, that suckled me sweetly" ("ὦ στέρνα μαστοί θ', οἵ μ' ἐθρέψαθ' ἡδέως").

[70]Shakespeare, 1997, 3020 (4.2.314–16). References to Hecuba also feature in *Troilus and Cressida* (ca. 1602), but as the events take place before the Fall of Troy, they do not illustrate her tragic grief.

[71]For numerous examples of the more typical images of Hecuba linked with woe, see Westney.

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not have been familiar with Greek tragedy, and recent preferences for situating the plays in contemporary, rather than diachronic, contexts have discouraged challenges to this assumption.[72] Even the recurring wistful musings on Shakespeare's affinity with the Greeks have typically conceded a lack of historic grounding for this apparent kinship.[73] Yet scholars have begun to identify specific links between Shakespeare and Greek plays, and to take seriously the forms of mediation that made both the plays themselves and their subject matter widely accessible in the period.[74] Shakespeare's intimate engagement with Hecuba offers a particularly vivid demonstration of the broad visibility of material drawing on the Greek dramatic tradition in the period.[75] Even if his Greek was not strong enough to read the original without support, Shakespeare could easily have read the bilingual Greek-Latin editions of Euripides's play, especially Erasmus's widely circulating translation, and/or any of the vernacular translations, and his extensive verbal echoes from the play suggest that he almost certainly did.[76] Yet, perhaps more importantly, he did not need to. His exposure to the late classical, medieval, and Renaissance texts inspired by Euripides's play, as well as to accounts of the play in contemporary writings, would have

[72]In 1985, for example, Braden, 1, held that "the generally insufficient knowledge of or even interest in Greek tragedy on the part of Renaissance dramatists is hard to deny."

[73]Cooper, 134, writes that Shakespeare, "though more Roman than Greek in his dramatic origins, is nearer . . . to Aristotle and the spirit of Greek tragedy"; and recently Silk, 241, has similarly argued that "Against all the odds, perhaps, there is a real affinity between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. What there is not is any 'reception' in the ordinary sense."

[74]See Jones; Wilson; Schleiner, 29–48; Maguire, 97–104; Dewar-Watson, 2009. On Greek romances as transmitting Greek dramatic conventions, see Pollard, 2007, 34–53.

[75]At a structural level, revenge tragedy in England had many links with Greek models: Shakespeare's well-documented use of contemporary European plays and *novelle* as sources demonstrates that he was familiar with the Continental writers who developed their plays and dramatic theory in dialogue with classical plays and Aristotle's *Poetics*. *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), to which he was deeply indebted, was heavily shaped by classical study: Kyd quoted Seneca, translated a play by the French neoclassical playwright Robert Garnier, appears to have been influenced by Italian neoclassicists such as Cinthio, and was close friends with Thomas Watson, who translated *Antigone* in 1581.

[76]Scholars generally agree that Shakespeare had a standard grammar-school education, which typically included some Greek: see Baldwin. Beyond Volumnia's evocation of Polyxena's lines apostrophizing Hecuba's breasts, the player's account of Pyrrhus's pause before slaying Priam in *Hamlet* — "neutral to his will and matter" (2.2.484) — closely resembles Pyrrhus's pause before slaying Polyxena in *Hecuba*, where he is "not willing and willing" ("οὐ θέλων τε καὶ θέλων": 356, l. 566); see Mueller, 38. In *Titus Andronicus*, Demetrius identifies Hecuba's violent revenge as having taken place in a tent, a detail that appears in Euripides's play but not in Ovid: see Thomson, 57–58.

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ensured his awareness of the play and its reputation, and shaped his engagement with the figure of Hecuba.

In arguing that Hecuba's association with Euripidean tragedy is crucial to understanding her meanings for Shakespeare, this essay does not exclude other depictions of Hecuba from the play's web of literary engagement. Shakespeare's compounding and confounding of literary models have been widely acknowledged, and critics have persuasively demonstrated his engagement with Virgil and Ovid, among other classical sources.[77] Yet identifying Euripides's role in this intertextual web points to Shakespeare's engagement with the power of theatrical performance. As Jones has pointed out, *Hecuba* offered Shakespeare a classical model for a highly successful, publicly performed tragedy, something he could not find elsewhere.[78] For Shakespeare's evocations of Hecuba do not only explore grief: they also, especially in *Hamlet*, explicitly explore the effects of tragedy, and especially of a tragic protagonist, upon audiences. Euripides's play offered Shakespeare not only the generic conventions he exploits in *Hamlet* — a preexisting crime, ghost, delay, deceit, and violence — but also a dramatic model for engaging audiences with tragic affect. In particular, it offered him a tradition of emotionally affecting tragedy that was female-centered, rooted in lament, and culminating in triumphant action: a tradition that he translated, in subtle and complex ways, into a new model of tragedy.

5. *HAMLET*'S FAILED HECUBAS

In the context of Hecuba's contemporary association with female, and especially maternal, lament, it is not surprising that Shakespeare most frequently evokes Hecuba in the context of suffering women. As noted, Tamora, Lavinia, Lucrece, Virgilia, and Imogen are all linked with Hecuba in ways that suggest active responses to tragic grief. Oddly, however, it is Hamlet — male, unmarried, childless — through whom Shakespeare most fully explores Hecuba's dramatic possibilities. At least at first glance, the play's central drama moves its mothers and daughters to the sidelines in order to focus on a son's commemoration of his father, apparently bearing

[77]See, for instance, Bate; James, 1997; Enterline. Jones, 102, rightly notes that "we are not faced with a choice between Euripides and Ovid, since no one denies Ovidian influence. The choice is between Ovid alone and Ovid together with Euripides." Latin poets' considerable debts to Euripides point to overlapping forms of influence: see Garland, 60; Bate, 239, who suggests that Shakespeare "derived a Euripidean spirit from Ovid."

[78]Jones, 102–03.

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out the critical truism that Shakespeare's tragedies primarily attend to men.[79] Yet Hecuba's name occurs four times in *Hamlet*, more often than in any Shakespeare text beyond *Troilus and Cressida*, in which she has a background (though not speaking) role.[80] The fact that *Hamlet* provides a focal point for Shakespeare's fascination with Hecuba raises questions about how the play responds to the tragic tradition she represents.

As Shakespeare's most self-conscious exploration of tragedy and its effects, *Hamlet* in fact offers an ideal site for rewriting Hecuba's dramatic legacy, and recovering this legacy illuminates the play's challenges to it. Perhaps most conspicuously, evoking Hecuba's model of tragedy directs audiences to expect that Gertrude, a widow and mother, will be the play's primary grieving figure.[81] Despite the prominence of their father-son relationships, the most visible English revenge tragedies before *Hamlet* — *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* — had both continued a tradition of dramatizing maternal grief as a catalyst to revenge. Shakespeare's decision to withhold this convention in *Hamlet* is striking. As Katharine Goodland has observed, acts of female mourning in the play are consistently dismissed, interrupted, or otherwise contained.[82] In particular, whatever mourning Gertrude may have done is blocked from the audience's view. Both she and Ophelia offer versions of Hecuba, but fall short of re-creating her role. Perhaps more surprisingly, their failures highlight Hamlet's own inability to match Hecuba, and his resulting evolution into a new model of tragic protagonist. By moving tragic female characters to the margins of the play, and centering our attention on a protagonist who observes and comments on them, Shakespeare self-consciously reflects on a male character's experience of watching traditional — that is, female — tragic protagonists. *Hamlet*

[79]See Bamber. Although Shakespeare markedly intensified this trend, he was hardly the first to focus tragedies predominantly on male protagonists. Responding in part to the all-male acting tradition in the schools and universities where classical dramatic genres began to take hold, as well as in the commercial theaters where they eventually took root, male revengers had dominated English tragedies from both their academic origins in *Gorbuduc* and their commercial origins in *The Spanish Tragedy*. On the apparent erasure of mothers, in particular, in Shakespeare's plays, see Rose; Adelman.

[80]The proliferation of Hecuba references in *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* suggests the possible influence of George Chapman, who had just published his translation of seven books of Homer's *Iliad* in 1598: I am grateful to Tania Demetriou for this observation. On literary responses to Chapman's Homer, see Demetriou.

[81]On Hecuba as an affront to Gertrude's own failure to mourn properly, see Miola, 1988, 284; James, 1997, 40.

[82]Goodland, esp. 171–72.

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constructs, scrutinizes, and critiques an emerging English model of tragedy, through conversation with its earlier counterpart.

Situating the play in this tragic genealogy sheds a new light on one of Hamlet's most vehement fixations, Gertrude's insufficient mourning. "Heaven and earth!," he exclaims,

> Must I remember? why, she would hang on him,
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on: and yet, within a month—
> Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman!—
> A little month, or ere those shoes were old
> With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears: why she, even she—
> O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
> Would have mourned longer!—married with mine uncle.[83]

As this passage suggests, Hamlet has more to say about his mother's failure to grieve than about his own grief. His preoccupation with Gertrude has been widely read as a sign of his misogyny, and his Oedipal fixation on her sexuality.[84] But in the context of Shakespeare's interest in Hecuba, it might be more fruitfully understood as representing a confrontation with the genre's conventions. Although Hamlet depicts Gertrude as passionately attached to his father, and as having mourned him "like Niobe, all tears," he insists that her grief is not substantial enough to merit its traditional place at the genre's emotional center. Like Hecuba, with whom Achilles indirectly links her in the *Iliad*, Niobe was primarily known for mourning her numerous children, of whom she was so excessively proud that the gods punished her with their deaths.[85] Yet Niobe is a fallen Hecuba, sporting her tears without either her innocence or her heroic response. The identification both insinuates Gertrude's guilt and underlines her continuing maternal responsibility: unlike Niobe, she has not lost any children. The rapid truncation of her tears, furthermore, suggests that Gertrude cannot match even Niobe's tainted grief.

[83]Shakespeare, 1997, 1676 (1.2.142–51).

[84]On critical responses to this preoccupation, and on Gertrude as evoking ambivalence toward the aging Elizabeth, see Mullaney, esp. 150–54.

[85]Achilles cites Niobe as an analogy for Priam's grief over his (and Hecuba's) son Hector's death: Homer, 2:606–08 (24:602–14). Curiously, Sophocles's Antigone — who dies a virgin — likens her tearful death to Niobe's, though the chorus reminds her that, as a mortal, she is not comparable to the goddess-born Niobe. Thomas Watson rendered the exchange faithfully in his 1581 Latin translation of the play, which would have been easily available to Shakespeare.

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The comparison with Niobe, who lived for her children, also paints Gertrude as insufficiently maternal, an indictment supported by Gertrude's apparent indifference to Hamlet's grief.[86] But if the implicit corollary to Hamlet's accusation of Gertrude is that his own grief, by contrast, constitutes the rightful heart of the tragedy, he seems to protest too much. For Hamlet's quickness to attack Gertrude masks his own discomfort with confronting his father's death. Whenever he begins to remember his father, he immediately reverts to outrage about his mother and her remarriage. "Remember thee?," he addresses the ghost, "Yes, yes, by heaven. / O most pernicious woman!"[87] As his frequent slippage from his father's memory to his mother's marriage shows, it is not only acts of female mourning that are interrupted, preempted, or otherwise prevented in the play. Hamlet's relationship to his grief is vexed: unlike Hecuba's passionate and lyrical laments, his are fraught with ambivalence, uncertainty, and anxiety.

It is not simply that, as has been widely observed, Hamlet cannot bring himself to act — or, at least, act in accordance with the ghost's mandate. More surprisingly, and in contrast to the critical consensus on the play, he cannot actually speak: at least not "to the purpose" of his grief.[88] Hamlet's preoccupation with Gertrude masks his anxiety that he, like she, is no Hecuba. If Hecuba, to early modern readers in general and to Shakespeare in particular, represents the power of passionate lament both as a speech act in itself and as a catalyst to righteous action, Hamlet is striking precisely for his struggle to fulfill these ends. On a broader level, if *Hecuba* embodies both the tragedy of pathos and the tragedy of triumph, *Hamlet* is caught uneasily between the two: it cannot fully provide the cathartic pleasures of unfettered grief, nor the satisfaction of seeing a victim heroically bring down a wrongdoer. Instead, Shakespeare must rewrite *Hecuba*'s model of tragedy to demonstrate an alternative approach to conjuring emotional intensity. In fact, it is precisely through exploring Hamlet's failure to match Hecuba that Shakespeare succeeds in creating his own form of tragic power.

Hamlet confronts this failure most fully in his meditation on the player's reaction to Hecuba. "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" he castigates himself. Comparing himself with the tragic passion that she has inspired in the player, he asks:

[86]In keeping with Claudius's complaints about Hamlet's "unmanly grief," Gertrude similarly advises him to "cast [his] nightly colour off": Shakespeare, 1997, 1675, 1674 (1.2.94, 68).

[87]Ibid., 1686 (1.5.95, 104–05).

[88]Ibid, 1697 (2.2.271).

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What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears. Yet I,
The dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing.[89]

Technically Hamlet compares himself here with the player, and proclaims the superiority of his own "motive and cue for passion." Yet although he criticizes the player's response, he also compares Hecuba's pain to his own, suggesting that the player would conjure even more tragic power if inspired by Hamlet's woes. At the same time, he implicitly competes with Hecuba's performance, which includes drowning the stage with tears, maddening the guilty murderer of her son, and amazing her audiences, both onstage and off. Despite his claim to possess a stronger motive for passion, he sees himself as unable to match either the moving power of a theatrical fiction or Hecuba's ability to speak and act on her passion.

Yet Hamlet revises his indictment of his inability to speak when he considers the even greater problem of his inability to demonstrate filial loyalty through revenge. "Why, what an ass am I?" he reflects:

Ay, sure, this is most brave,
That I, the son of the dear murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion![90]

Although Hamlet at first sees himself as insufficiently female to match Hecuba's pregnant capacity for emotion-laden speech, here he worries that his predilection for words over action makes him excessively feminine. He is not alone in this interpretation: critics, directors, and the many actresses who have played his role have emphasized what Tony Howard has called "the issue of Hamlet's 'femininity.'"[91] Nor does he see his feminine verbal

[89]Ibid, 1703 (2.2.527, 536–45).
[90]Ibid, (2.2.560–65).
[91]See Howard, 1.

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facility as an asset: his comparisons of himself to a "whore," a "very drab," and a "scullion" suggest that his failure to act makes him both subservient and unfaithful to his father's memory, closer to Gertrude's "wicked speed . . . to incestuous sheets" than to Hecuba's passionate commemoration of her husband and children.

Paradoxically, it is in the act of lamenting his inferiority to Hecuba's emotional power that Hamlet speaks some of his most moving lines. Ultimately, however, he refuses to follow the genre's conventions, modeled on Hecuba, of transforming lament into revenge. Instead, his reflections on Hecuba lead him to unearth and rewrite an alternative role from classical tragedy, predicated more on watching and reflecting than on action. Hamlet is no Hecuba, but the role that he constructs for himself, and in many ways for a generation of English stage revengers, grows directly out of his confrontation and negotiation with her iconic power.

6. "AS GOOD AS A CHORUS"? STAGING AND WATCHING TRAGEDY IN *HAMLET*

If the player's evocation of Hecuba's tragic power makes Hamlet question his status as a tragic protagonist, it simultaneously inspires him to stage a performance of a tragedy. In confronting an unjust ruler with a theatrical version of Hecuba's story — a newly widowed queen who "makes passionate action" upon discovering her dead husband — he gestures to the tyrant-melting powers attributed to Euripides's play.[92] If he cannot play Hecuba's role himself, he will find another way to exploit her tragic formula for his purposes.

Hamlet's idea of using a play as part of his revenge strategy is hardly original. After its extraordinarily popular debut in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the play-within-the-play became not only a central convention of early modern English revenge tragedy, but the most common vehicle for revenge itself.[93] Yet curiously, despite considerable critical interest in Renaissance metatheater, no one has asked how the play-within-the-play originated. There are clues in its links with the dumb-show, a device also featured in *The Spanish Tragedy*.[94]

[92]Shakespeare, 1997, 1711 (s.d. 3.2.122). Shakespeare was familiar with both Sidney and Plutarch: see Gaunt; Gourlay; Freeman; Goodland, 173–74.

[93]The play becomes the means for Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia to murder Lorenzo and Balthazar; Vindice's opportunity to kill Lussurioso and his nobles in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606); Ferdinand's means to torture his sister in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614); and, perhaps most strikingly, Domitian's stabbing of Paris in Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626), to name only a few examples.

[94]See Mehl.

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The English dumb-show had its roots in neoclassical plays and translations — including *Gorbuduc* and *Jocasta* — and through them, in the *intermedii* that appeared as spectacles staged between the acts in Italian neoclassical plays.[95] In light of this history, and the period's broader engagement with classical models of tragedy, the early modern development of these theatrical devices — *intermedii*, dumb-show, and play-within-the-play — can be seen to respond to the Greek chorus, which they first complement and eventually replace.[96]

Structuralist critics have seen the Greek chorus as gesturing toward the civic and democratic context of the Athenian theater by representing the communal body of the audience onstage, where they both observe and respond to the events of the play.[97] The chorus's liminal position — outside the center of the action, and typically composed of marginal social groups — both mirrors the audience's relation to the play, and mediates between play and audience.[98] Similarly, the early modern chorus, dumb-show, and play-within-a-play each offer a position between the play and the audience, as well as an opportunity to pause the action temporarily in order to reflect on it. In presenting onstage audiences, the play-within-a-play also represents observers' responses to onstage action, implicitly providing models for the external audiences' responses and identifying those responses as a central, crucial aspect of the drama.

In *Hamlet*, the performance that introduces Hecuba prompts not only a revival of Kyd's play-within-the-play, but a preceding dumb-show, often seen by critics as unnecessarily repetitive. As the performance begins, moreover, Hamlet accompanies it with such a steady explanatory commentary that Ophelia identifies him as the missing element of this classicizing trio: "You are as good as a chorus, my lord."[99] Although Ophelia is not technically referring to a Greek tragic chorus, her observation highlights the strangeness of Hamlet's relationship to the performance he has arranged. Unlike his predecessor Hieronimo, who plays the vengeful lead character in his play-within-the-play, Hamlet has no part in the play's action, but neither is he a conventional spectator. Armed with a privileged knowledge of the

[95]See Cunliffe, 1907a and 1907b.

[96]In early neoclassical plays, the dumb-show is both structurally and thematically linked with the chorus: the choral odes that close each act immediately precede the dumb-shows that open the next act, so that the two devices frame the action, and typically treat related topics.

[97]See Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 23–24; Longo. For a critique of this argument, see Gould.

[98]Padel, 339; and Goldhill, 271, both emphasize the liminal status of the chorus as mediator between actors and audiences.

[99]Shakespeare, 1997, 1714 (3.2.224).

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plot, he hovers in a liminal position between the play and its audience, meting out information to the other audience members at intervals. "Marry, this is miching *malhecho*," he tells Ophelia of the dumb-show; "That means mischief." "We shall know all by this fellow," he announces of the Prologue. When Ophelia identifies him as a chorus, he tacitly agrees: "I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying."[100]

Hamlet's choric position towards the play he stages offers a model for his role within his own drama. It is not simply that he finds himself unable to embody the traditional figure of lament and revenge represented by Hecuba: he cannot find any way to undertake the action that the ghost has required of him. When Hamlet is served up a chance to play a conventional active role in his own drama, he balks. Just after the performance, he stumbles upon the opportunity to kill Claudius — "Now might I do it pat, now a is praying, / And now I'll do't"— but stops short of action.[101] In considering but refusing to play a part in revenge, he evokes Hecuba's own chorus of Trojan women, who wonder whether they should help Hecuba attack Polymestor, but hold back from taking action.[102] In place of accepting the revenger's role, Hamlet instead reverts to observing and interpreting his mother. "You go not till I set you up a glass," he tells her upon subsequently finding her in her closet, "Where you may see the inmost part of you."[103] As in his famous claim that "the purpose of playing . . . is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature," Hamlet uses the vocabulary of mirroring to describe his metatheatrical reflections on the tragic characters and events that he observes and discusses.[104]

[100]Ibid., 1711 (3.2.125–28), 1714 (3.2.225–26).

[101]Ibid., 1719 (3.3.73–74).

[102]Euripides, *Hecuba*, 1:387 (ll. 1042–43): "Should we burst in on them? The moment requires us to stand with Hecuba and the Trojan women as allies" ("βούλεσθ' ἐπεσπέσωμεν; ὡς ἀκμὴ καλεῖ / Ἑκάβῃ παρεῖναι Τρῳάσιν τε συμμάχους"). This pattern of considering but refusing action is common in Euripides's choruses. In response to Medea's children's offstage cries for help while their mother attempts to murder them, the chorus of Corinthian women wonders, "Shall I go into the house? I must prevent the children's death" ("παρέλθω δόμους; ἀρῆξαι φόνον/ δοκεῖ μοι τέκνοις"). Although the children, breaking tragic convention, hear this from off-stage and reply, "Yes, by the gods, help, for it must be done now!" ("ναί, πρὸς θεῶν, ἀρήξατ': ἐν δέοντι γάρ"), the chorus does nothing but lament: Euripides, *Medea*, 1:149 (ll. 1275–77). On the varieties of the Euripidean chorus, see Rehm; Mastronarde, 88–152.

[103]Shakespeare, 1997, 1708 (3.4.19–20). Like Hecuba, Hamlet is frequently depicted as a mirror in which others see themselves. Ophelia describes him as "The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / Th'observ'd of all observers": ibid., 1707 (3.1.152–53).

[104]Ibid, 1708 (3.2.18–22). On early modern ideas about mirrors and their audiences, see Grabes, 131–44.

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Hamlet's choric role establishes parameters for the melancholy malcontent revengers who follow him on the early modern stage, who also frequently step outside of the tragic events they contemplate and engineer. Certainly the role offers Hamlet a position from which to reflect on the play he inhabits. Robert Miola has observed that Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech echoes a choral ode from Seneca's *Troas*, and suggested that Hamlet follows the Senecan chorus in voicing "an ancient and profound world-weariness, infusing the choral perspective with anguished awareness of his own situation."[105] Stepping outside of the tragedy's conventional center also allows Hamlet to reflect on the female characters who represent the more paradigmatic tragic protagonists. His choric status on one hand puts him in a position more typically feminine than theirs — marginal, passive, and observing, rather than central, active, and defining — and yet paradoxically strengthens him by giving him the leverage of an external vantage point on their drama.[106] As a male figure reflecting on female characters, he also finds himself in the relatively unusual position of a cross-sex chorus: a situation usually unfavorable to the protagonist.[107] Perhaps most strikingly, reducing the typically collective choral voice to a singular one emphasizes the painful isolation of Hamlet's reflections while intensifying his own particular importance, and converting the typically sung choral odes to speech removes him further from the distinctive affective impact of lyric performance.[108]

As a quasi-choral figure, Hamlet mediates between the audience and the play's female figures, framing and shaping our perspectives on them. One primary focus of his observations is the widowed queen, the play's most obvious counterpart to Hecuba, whom he attacks with a ferocity unwarranted by the play's presentation of her.[109] He is similarly caustic in his assessment of the player queen, when she declares her love for her husband and her refusal to marry a second time. Perhaps more surprisingly, he also implicitly identifies Ophelia with a Greek tragic model. Between Polonius's announcement of the players and their entrance, Hamlet announces,

[105]Miola, 1992, 38–39.

[106]Noting that most tragic choruses are female, Taplin, 193, suggests that "Women and weak old men seem to be favoured for choruses partly because of their ineffectuality in action."

[107]Female tragic figures who succeed in their undertakings, such as Medea and Hecuba, benefit from the sympathetic support of their female choral figures; those without such support, such as Clytemnestra and Antigone, are more likely to be destroyed.

[108]On the importance of the chorus's collective nature, see Gould.

[109]On the text's relative silence on Gertrude's moral status, and critical tendencies to follow Hamlet's disapproval despite this lack of evidence, see R. Smith; Levin.

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"O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!" After some puzzlement, Polonius concedes that "If you call me Jephthah, my lord, I have a daughter that I love passing well," to which Hamlet in turn cryptically replies with lines of verse.[110]

Editors and critics have glossed this exchange through reference to the story of Jephthah, a biblical figure from Judges 11 who vowed to sacrifice the first living thing he met if he returned successfully from war, and subsequently met his daughter coming out of his door.[111] Yet although Hamlet quotes from a ballad about Jephthah, his allusion implicitly links biblical and popular sources with the specter of Greek tragedy. Jephthah was famous in the period as the subject of neoclassical drama modeled on Euripides: the *Jephthes sive votum tragoedia* (1540–47, published 1554) of George Buchanan, a humanist, poet, and translator of Greek plays, and John Christopherson's *Jephthah* (ca. 1544), the first English play composed in Greek.[112] Both plays self-consciously imitated *Iphigenia in Aulis*, another story of a father sacrificing a daughter for the sake of a war, and the second-most popular Greek play in the period, after *Hecuba*. Buchanan's exceptionally well-received play, which was widely reprinted and translated, and praised by Roger Ascham and Philip Sidney, among others, forged a link between classical drama and the English stage: a Jephthah play was performed at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1566–67, and a commercial play about Jephthah, written by Dekker and Munday, was performed by the Admiral's Men in 1602.[113] With their focus on a sacrificial daughter, moreover, these plays implicitly evoke not only *Iphigenia* but also *Hecuba*, which similarly dramatizes a daughter's sacrifice as preamble (though not as direct catalyst) to a mother's revenge.[114]

[110]Shakespeare, 1997, 1700 (2.2.385–94).

[111]See Fienberg; Goodland, 188–89.

[112]Just prior to writing his play, Buchanan had translated Euripides's *Alcestis* and *Medea* from Greek into Latin. See Sypherd; Shuger; Streufert.

[113]Ascham, 174, describes the play as one of only two modern tragedies "able to abide the true touch of Aristotle's precepts and Euripides' examples"; Sidney, K3^{v}, claimes that "the tragedies of Buchanan do justly bring forth a divine admiration." The Cambridge performance could have been either Buchanan's or Christopherson's play: see Sypherd, 15. On Dekker and Munday's play, see Foakes, 2002, 200–03, 296.

[114]Although it is the murder of her son Polydorus that ultimately catalyzes Hecuba's revenge on his killer, Polymestor, the sacrifice of her daughter Polyxena lays a foundation for the grief that eventually turns into murderous rage. Shuger, 129, notes that "With the partial exceptions of *Medea* and *Electra*, all translations of Greek tragedy (including both Latin and vernacular) printed before 1560 concern human sacrifice, especially female sacrifice: Euripides's *Hecuba* (1506), *Iphigenia in Aulis* (1506), *Alcestis* (1554), and *Phoenissae* (1560) and Sophocles's *Antigone* (1533)."

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Between hearing of the players and watching them represent Hecuba, then, Hamlet is already thinking about a female sacrifice linked to classical tragedy: his meditation on Jephthah's daughter implicitly frames the speech he requests a few dozen lines later. The allusion foreshadows that Ophelia — who, like Iphigenia, is sacrificed by her father for matters of state negotiated between men — will both mirror Hamlet and compete with him for the play's tragic center. Like Hamlet, Ophelia responds to a father's death by staging spectacles — whether intentionally or inadvertently — for audiences. And, like Hecuba, she seems to outdo Hamlet in her ability to produce an emotional impact with her lyrical performances. Just as the player reports that Hecuba's grief would melt her audiences, Claudius says of Ophelia's singing that "this, / Like to a murd'ring-piece, in many places / Gives me superfluous death." Laertes identifies her performance as a catalyst to revenge: "Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus."[115] Although Ophelia cannot match Hecuba by directly carrying out revenge, the affective power of both her grief and her death nonetheless threatens to melt and mobilize her audiences as Hecuba did hers.

With her songs of grief, Ophelia is the play's closest approximation to the lyrically lamenting female figures of classical tragedy.[116] Like Hecuba, she both represents and elicits pathos. Yet with limited appearances and even more limited agency, Ophelia cannot fully re-create Greek tragic daughters such as Iphigenia, Polyxena, and Antigone, who make active decisions to accept their fated deaths with pride in their honor. Directed by her brother, her father, and Hamlet, Ophelia breaks away from their control only to surrender to the equally incapacitating force of madness. Despite her emotional impact, she is not a conventional tragic protagonist; instead, she forges a combination of female grief, madness, and sexuality that melds Hecuba and Iphigenia with the passionate performances of Renaissance Italian actresses, through what Eric Nicholson has described as "the process of transnational *contaminatio*."[117]

Between them, Gertrude and Ophelia encompass the primary attributes of the period's favorite Greek tragic protagonists: bereaved mother and widow, sacrificed daughter, grief, madness, violence, and revenge. Yet Shakespeare implicitly confirms Hamlet's critique of their claims to centrality by giving him the play's title, and its overwhelmingly dominant voice. Presented as audience and mirror to the play's female figures, Hamlet takes

[115]Shakespeare, 1997, 1732 (4.5.90–92), 1734 (4.5.167–68).

[116]On the significance of song in shaping her meaning in the play, see Dunn; Fox-Good.

[117]Nicholson, 93; see also Brown.

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the choral role from its characteristic position on the play's margins and moves it to the center, reversing its relationship with the grieving women to whom it responds. If Hamlet is primarily an observer and critic of tragedy, Shakespeare accordingly refocuses the genre on the experience of the audiences who watch and respond to it.

Hamlet is, of course, not a passive observer, nor does he abide by the restrictions typically imposed on the classical chorus. Along with actively overseeing the staging of a play, he kills Polonius, arranges the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and toward the end of the play announces his readiness to take on a more typically masculine heroic role. "Why, I will fight with him upon this theme," he says of Laertes, "Until my eyelids will no longer wag."[118] Yet unlike Hieronimo, Titus, or Hecuba, he never actually achieves the satisfaction of a triumphant revenge. Even when he finally succeeds in killing Claudius, the act is almost accidental, and essentially posthumous. The audience, like Hamlet, can neither luxuriate in passionate grief nor revel in the achievement of revenge. Instead, they join Hamlet in watching others' grief and violence, and reflecting on the distinctive affective and ethical challenges of participating vicariously in someone else's experience of tragedy: of weeping for nothing, or rather, for Hecuba.

Male, childless, reticent of passionate speech and action, Hamlet is no Hecuba. Our icon of grief and revenge tragedy struggles both to grieve and to revenge. Yet Shakespeare constructs Hamlet's distinctive innovation to the genre — a new focus on audiences' relationship with the moving spectacles they watch, at a moment when theaters were rapidly rising in prominence — in intimate conversation with paradigmatic elements of Greek tragedy, Hecuba's passionate grief and the reflections of an onlooking chorus. Just as it is in confronting his failure to be Hecuba that Hamlet most forcefully conjures her emotional intensity, it is similarly in Shakespeare's challenges to Greek tragic conventions that he most explicitly engages with them, producing a very different but no less powerful solicitation of audiences' emotions. Although contemporary accounts of the genre have lost sight of it, Hecuba's passionate, mobilizing grief was for two millennia the primary prototype for tragic possibilities. Appreciating the literary genealogy she spawned offers a deeper understanding, not only of the nature of Shakespeare's innovations, but of the broader transformation of a Greek genre into one of the most influential legacies of the early modern stage.

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[118]Shakespeare, 1997, 1746 (5.1.251–52).

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