

Hecuba – Actors' Preparation – Questions of Character

Notes to the company concerning Hecuba

Written to the company before rehearsals began

1. Thoughts and questions about the character of Hecuba

1. What 'facts', and clues, about Hecuba are contained in the text? And what are the questions that arise from those clues?

For example:

In the Prologue

- i) Hecuba is loved by Polydorus, her son. He calls Hecuba his 'dear mother' (32) and wishes to be embraced by her (51).
- ii) Although Hecuba was once Queen of Troy, she now refers to herself as a 'slave' (61).
- iii) She also speaks of herself as 'aged' (64).
- iv) She does not know that Polydorus is already dead (76-79), although she has a presentiment that something dreadful has happened (83-85).
- v) She is troubled by terrible dreams about her son. In her dreams, he has appeared to her in the image of a 'dappled hind' slaughtered by a wolf (86, 87).
- vi) She fears for her daughter Polyxena, and prays that her fears are not fulfilled (92, 93).

In the Parodos

- i) Hecuba's suffering is recognised by the Chorus (99).
- ii) She learns that her daughter Polyxena will be sacrificed to Achilles (102-104).
- iii) She is told that Agamemnon argued on behalf of saving Polyxena's life (116, 117).
- iv) She is warned that Odysseus will arrive soon to take Polyxena away (135-137).
- v) The Chorus urge her to beg Agamemnon for his help, and for her to pray to the gods (138-147).

In Episode 1

- i) Hecuba laments her position. She is in despair when she first hears of her daughter's impending fate (159-161).
- ii) She feels utterly helpless (148-158).
- iii) She feels that the Trojan women have destroyed her with their news. Is she blaming them (159-161)?
- iv) Despite the Chorus's pragmatic advice, there is not a glimmer of hope in her immediate response to their suggestion that she begs Agamemnon for help. Is this because she knows deep down that Agamemnon will not help her? Does the immediate shock of the news overwhelm her (148ff.)? Is it also because she feels utterly helpless, and the news that the Chorus bring confirms her helplessness?
- v) Hecuba calls her daughter who is inside the tents (164, 165).
- vi) Hecuba is crying (176, 177).

- vii) Again, Hecuba seems to forget the possibility that Agamemnon might help her when she says that the Greek army was unanimous in their decision to sacrifice Polyxena (180-182). Why do you think this is?
- viii) What is the emotional state behind Hecuba's exclamation in line 188? After it, Polyxena seems more concerned about her mother than she is about herself (189-207). Perhaps her feeling is so extreme that Polyxena's own sense of horror at her impending fate (183, 184) is overwhelmed?
- ix) Odysseus threatens to take Polyxena by force and reminds Hecuba of her own physical weakness and the weakness of her position (217-220).
- x) Hecuba consciously recognises that, despite her grief, the great 'test' of arguing for Polyxena's life lies ahead of her (221).
- xi) She begins by addressing Odysseus 'politely' (227, 228).
- xii) She reminds Odysseus of how she saved his life (232-243). Why would a queen save the life of an enemy spy? Was it pity? Odysseus's arguments would need to be very good indeed for him to talk his way out of such a situation. Any other thoughts?
- xiii) In spite of Hecuba's previous sense of helplessness she reproaches Odysseus (244-250).
- xiv) She points to Polyxena's innocence (257).
- xv) She argues that Helen should be taken in sacrifice instead (258-264). (Her hatred of Helen is again evident at the end of the episode (431-433).)
- xvi) She begs Odysseus to have pity (278) and is prepared to flatter him to try to save her daughter (286-288).
- xvii) Hecuba begs Polyxena to plead for her own life, but her daughter does not obey her (335, 345).
- xviii) Does Polyxena refuse to obey her mother partly because she is trying to spare her mother more grief than she can bear (392-395)?
- xix) The relationship between Hecuba and Polyxena is a tender and all-embracing one. She calls her daughter 'my country, my nurse, my staff and my guide' (271-273). She does not want to live without her (378, 383). She says she will cling to her 'like ivy to oak' (385).
- vii) Polyxena's intimate and tender love for her mother is evident in the last words she speaks to her (401ff.) Perhaps these words, alternating with those of her mother's, could be sung, or underscored by singing?
- viii) When Polyxena is led away, Hecuba faints with grief (437).

In Ode 1

- i) At the beginning of Episode 2 (479) Hecuba is wrapped in her robe. Perhaps, during the ode, the women are wrapping her to keep her warm and safe whilst she has collapsed?

In Episode 2

- i) Hecuba is lying on the ground wrapped in her robe (478, 479). Her head is in the dust (487). Talthybius remembers when she was 'queen of the Phrygians, rich in gold' and wife of 'Priam the Great' (483, 484).
- ii) She seems paralysed by grief and does not want to move (492).
- iii) She wants to die (496-498).
- iv) When Hecuba hears that her daughter is dead she *needs* to know *how* Polyxena's life was taken (503-509).

- v) After Talthybius has given his account of Polyxena's death, Hecuba seems calmer and even comforted by the image of her daughter's behaviour in the face of death (578, 579). Perhaps, paradoxically, she becomes calmer and more objective *as* she is hearing the account?
- vi) After Talthybius has given his account, Hecuba seems to treat Talthybius like a servant, ordering him to keep everyone away from her daughter's body (589-593). This contrasts strongly with the way she addressed him to begin with (496).
- vii) Why do you think Hecuba changes her tone? Perhaps at the end of this episode, there is a shift in Hecuba from a feeling of helplessness and dependence towards one of control and action?
- viii) Hecuba asks her old servant to bring water from the sea so that she might wash the body of her dead daughter Polyxena (594-598).
- ix) She herself then goes into the tents to collect what she can in order to ornament her daughter's grave (600-604).

In Episode 3

- i) Hecuba learns that her son Polydorus is dead when a servant brings his body to her (642ff.).
- ii) She mistakes the body of her dead son for that of her daughter Polyxena (654).
- iii) The old servant uncovers the body of Polydorus (663). When Hecuba *sees* her dead son, she is deeply shocked by this. Perhaps the actual *sight* of her beloved son dead (as in the identification of the dead by a living relative) makes the shock of his death all the greater (664ff.)?
- iv) The first thing that Hecuba says when she sees Polydorus is that 'The Thracian [Polymestor] was keeping him safe in his home' (666). This suggests that Hecuba does not think that Polymestor has murdered her son *as soon as she sees him*. Perhaps her immediate reaction is one of bewilderment and disbelief that her child should come to harm whilst he was in the safe keeping of Polymestor, a trusted guest-friend?
- v) Immediately after she recognises her dead son, Hecuba begins her lamentation 'Aiai'. This lamentation she says, is 'inspired by some avenging fiend' (669, 670).
- vi) After the avenging fiend has entered into her, what does Hecuba see freshly (673, 674)? Perhaps her sense of clarity refers to an earlier presentiment of dreadful news to come (80-83)? Perhaps now she understands that her son has indeed been murdered?
- vii) Lines 679-682, however, clearly indicate that Hecuba still does not understand *who* has killed her son.
- viii) What precipitates Hecuba's exclamation in line 687? What gives her the power then to interpret her dreams?
- ix) Perhaps Polydorus's *body* is further uncovered - to show the spear wounds - in silent answer to Hecuba's question in lines 684 and 685; and it is only when she is shown her son's spear wounds that Hecuba realises *who* it is that has killed her son?
- x) The flesh of Polydorus's body is torn and his limbs are lacerated (699, 700).
- xi) After seeing the wounds, Hecuba seems to understand completely *everything* that has happened. But who is the 'black-winged ghost' of Hecuba's dreams (688)? Is it an image of the spirit of her dead son, or a manifestation of the 'avenging fiend'?
- xii) Hecuba begs Agamemnon for help but seems to doubt that it will do any good (718, 719). Is she reluctant because of her position as a slave, or does her reluctance indicate something more about Agamemnon's character than her own?
- xiii) Hecuba thinks she *needs* Agamemnon to avenge her children (725). However, in the Exodos, it is the women prisoners who actively help her (1095).

- xiv) In line 736, Hecuba speaks of her tears over her son's body.
- xv) Her closeness to her murdered son is evident when she says that she remembers carrying him in her womb (738).
- xvi) Polydorus's body appears mutilated. The fact that Hecuba says to Agamemnon 'see', implies that perhaps she uncovers her son's body once more to show him the spear wounds (758).
- xvii) Hecuba sees Polymestor's crime as 'unholy' and says that he is without fear of the gods or of the dead (765-768). Polymestor was an old friend who received hospitality from Hecuba and Priam many times. He killed Polydorus with deliberate intent; and allowed no burial for the body (769-774).
- xviii) Though Hecuba wishes to avenge *both* her children (725), her will for revenge is sparked only after the realisation of her son's murder (732). It is in this episode that Hecuba conceives of her plan to murder Polymestor's children and to blind him (844, 845).
- xix) How does Hecuba's relationship with her daughter Polyxena differ from that with her son Polydorus?
- xx) When Agamemnon takes Hecuba's hand and says that it *is* his wish that Polymestor pays for what he has done, could he be speaking the truth (826-831)?
- xxi) Hecuba's response to Agamemnon's reasoning is, at the very least, disdainful (839ff.). She sees his reaction as fearful (842). Is she right?
- xxii) Does Agamemnon refuse to help Hecuba *directly* in spite of being persuaded by her - because he is afraid of what the army will think? Could Agamemnon, be 'helping' Hecuba *indirectly* by turning a blind eye and leaving her to get on with retribution in her own way?
- xxiii) When Hecuba suggests that Agamemnon should 'be in the know' about her plot to punish Polymestor but 'take no part' he does not object (844, 845). He merely questions, incredulously, it seems, *how* Hecuba will take her revenge and *who* will help her - not *whether or not* it is the right thing to do (850ff.).
- xxiv) Hecuba commands one of the other women prisoners of war to go and summon Polymestor and his sons (864-867).
- xxv) She commands Agamemnon to delay the burial of Polyxena (868-872).
- xxvi) She speaks of herself as 'Hecuba, once queen of Troy' (865).

In Ode 3

- i) What is Hecuba doing during this ode?
- ii) Does she have the treasures with her that she went inside the tents to fetch (600-604)? These treasures belong to the Trojan women. Is she perhaps hiding them in anticipation of Polymestor's arrival? Any other thoughts?

In Episode 4

- i) Hecuba greets Polymestor hypocritically (944ff.). She knows that Polymestor has murdered her son and yet, in the moment of meeting him, she chooses to seem ashamed of her own miserable position.
- ii) As with Polymestor, the audience would recognise Hecuba's duplicity, so perhaps her words could be played 'sincerely'? Certainly, Polymestor is taken in by her tone (952, 953). She responds to his 'fond' greeting by calling him her 'dearest friend' (966).
- iii) Hecuba draws Polymestor into her trap step by step. Firstly, she asks Polymestor about her son and pretends to believe his reassurances (961-966). Then she asks Polymestor if her son remembers her and makes no comment in response to his

embroidered reply (968, 967). Then she asks Polymestor about the gold, and again he lies (970-973). Finally, after asking all the questions that Polymestor would expect her to ask, she tells him her 'secret', knowing that he will take the bait (974ff.).

- iv) In trapping Polymestor, is Hecuba also, to an extent, publicly demonstrating his mendacity to the Chorus, and to the audience, so that they understand the level of his 'wickedness'? Is it a way of justifying her planned revenge to them? Or is she primarily seeking to satisfy *herself* as to his guilt and lack of remorse?

In the Lyric Interlude

- i) It is clear from the Lyric Interlude that the Chorus anticipate that Hecuba will *kill* Polymestor in punishment for what he has done (1005, 1012), not blind him. They, like Agamemnon seem to have no detailed knowledge of what she plans to do to Polymestor or his sons. They just know that he must pay for what he has done.

In the Exodos

- i) We learn from Polymestor that Hecuba and the women in the tents have blinded him (1113) and murdered his children (1115).
- ii) Hecuba enters the stage alone and to begin with she seems to claim the blinding of Polymestor and the murder of his children for herself (1026). Later she says that she has been helped by the 'heroic' Trojans (1052).
- iii) Hecuba and the Unseen Women blinded Polymestor *before* they murdered his children (1113-1115). Polymestor later claims that they blinded him *after* they murdered his children (1122ff.). Presumably he is lying in order to make their actions against his children seem pre-meditated and all the more cruel?
- iv) What significance is there to Hecuba's choice of retribution (the blinding of Polymestor and the murder of his two sons)? Why the blinding of the father? Why the murder of the sons? Is one more justified than the other? Are both equally inexcusable? Were both pre-planned or was one an afterthought? Perhaps the murder of the children *MAY* have been committed in rage and passion rather than as part of a premeditated plan.
- v) Could both be seen as terrorist acts? In seeking revenge on the man by whom she has suffered a genuine injustice, she and the Unseen Women are clearly guilty of the murder of innocents.
- vi) In his notes to the play, John Harrison offers an analysis of Hecuba's plea to Agamemnon. Do you agree with all of the points he is making?
- vii) Could, for example, Agamemnon have already understood Polymestor's motives and guilt (in Episode 3), rather than being persuaded of them (in the Exodos) by Hecuba? Perhaps Hecuba didn't realize how Agamemnon might have 'helped' her, albeit out of self-interested motives?

2. *What are the key questions in relation to Hecuba that the text leaves open for us to decide?*

For example:

In Episode 3 Hecuba's 'character' changes markedly. What might account for this transformation from a sense of utter helplessness to a sense of total empowerment?

In line 701, the Chorus speak of a spirit that bears down on Hecuba heavily. They say that the spirit has made her the most 'afflicted of mortals' suggesting that she is *the victim* of the spirit.

Are the Chorus referring here to the same 'avenging fiend' that enters Hecuba that is mentioned in line 670? The term 'avenging fiend' suggests that Hecuba will also be *the perpetrator* of violence.

If the two spirits are one and the same, they encapsulate the paradox and truth at the heart of the play, which is that those who are the greatest victims may also become the greatest perpetrators of violence. The contemporary resonance of this truth is one of the greatest social and political problematics of our time.

Is it possible to trace Hecuba's inner emotional journey? Are there conflicts inside her? To what extent does she try to hide them? To what extent do we want to make her inner journey clear to an audience?

What responsibility does Hecuba bear for the fate of Polymestor and his sons? Is she no longer 'herself' once the 'avenging spirit' has entered into her?

Is her act of vengeance against Polymestor and his sons also an act of vengeance against all men - on behalf of all the Unseen Women throughout history who have suffered at the hands of men?

2. Movement, Voice and Image in relation to Hecuba

Some of the important areas to think about are:

1. Eye focus and direct address

Are there moments when Hecuba might address the audience directly? There are moments, for example, when she speaks almost in an aside (221-226).

2. Individual character movements and voice

Hecuba was once a queen and 'rich in gold' (483). She is now a prisoner of war and dispossessed.

At the start of the play, she feels utterly helpless. As the play progresses her will to avenge her children's fate enters and overpowers/empowers her making her perhaps both a victim and an agent of vengeance.

How do you think these factors might affect her movements and voice over the course of the play?

3. Body mask

Hecuba is 'aged' (64) and has white hair (491). There is also the suggestion that she is physically weak (219).

4. Telling her individual story

What is the story of Hecuba in the play? What are her intentions/objectives/motivations and when do the significant changes occur?

5. Relationships and 'emotional subtext', Hecuba in relation to each of the other characters

A sense of the 'inner emotional journey' of Hecuba can perhaps be guided by her relationships with each of the other characters. What are the defining features of each relationship? How does each character feel about her, as well as how does she feel about each of them? Select three possibilities for each relationship.

For example:

Polydorus - 'I love you as my mother, I need you to hold me and bury my body, I respect and pity you'

Hecuba - 'I love you as my baby son, I grieve for you as my only remaining son who was yet to become a man, I am appalled by your mutilated body'

Chorus - 'I sympathise with you, I blame you, I admire you'

Hecuba - 'I need you for physical support, I need you for emotional support, I still regard myself as your former Queen'

Polyxena - 'I fear for you, I want to protect you, I love you'

Hecuba - 'I fear for you, I want to protect you, I love you'

Odysseus - 'I patronise you, I am indebted to you, I outwit you'

Hecuba - 'I beseech you, I reason with you, I despair of you'

Talthybius - 'I pity you, I respect you, I forget you in remembering my own importance'

Hecuba - 'I need you, I need to hear your news, I use you'

Agamemnon - 'I am outraged by what has happened to you, I am afraid to help you openly, I admire you'

Hecuba 'I reason with you, I grovel before you, I misunderstand you'

Polymestor - 'I am innocent of your knowledge, I trust you, I want to destroy you for what you have done'

Hecuba - 'I want to destroy you for what you have done, I trusted you, I despise you'

These possibilities (or any other selected ones) may be used as points of inner focus for each of the characters in relation to each other (within a naturalistic style of acting); and/or they may be used as a springboard for physicalisation in terms of body posture, distance from each other and etc. This idea of 'emotional subtext' is distinct from the Stanislavsky's idea of subtext - which encompasses both thoughts, as much as feelings, and is normally understood to run counter to the text. 'Emotional subtext' may run counter to, or in parallel with, the text.

6. *Physicalising ideas and themes within the play* In relation to acting style (as well as naturalism), we want to experiment with ways of physicalising ideas and themes within the play, including feelings between characters. Ideas for motifs/emblems/images that could be physicalised - through repetition, freeze frame or whatever - by Hecuba would be exciting. What are the key moments that we might want to experiment with in this way? What are the key lines of text? We may, in the end, cut back to a careful selection of movements, but, as with all the characters, certainly to begin with we need to brainstorm.