

## *List of characters*

GHOST OF POLYDORUS	<i>son of Priam and Hecuba</i>
HECUBA	<i>widow of Priam, king of Troy</i>
CHORUS	<i>captured Trojan women, fellow slaves of Hecuba</i>
POLYXENA	<i>Hecuba's daughter, a captured slave</i>
ODYSSEUS	<i>son of Laertes, lord of Ithaca, a prominent fighter at Troy</i>
TALTHYBIUS	<i>Greek herald</i>
SERVANT	<i>old Trojan woman, now a slave</i>
AGAMEMNON	<i>King of Argos/Mycenae, commander of the Greek army</i>
POLYMESTOR	<i>lord of the Thracian Chersonese</i>

### PROLOGUE (1–92)

The Prologue is the part of a Greek play which preceded the entry of the Chorus. Some plays, especially those by Sophocles, begin with a dialogue. Euripides preferred, as here, to have a single character introduce himself or herself and explain the dramatic situation.

### Setting of the play

The action takes place soon after the end of the Trojan War. See page vi and map, page vii.

**3 Hades ... Polydorus ... Hecuba** Hades is the god of the underworld. In classical ‘theology’, after the overthrow of Cronos and his fellow Titans power was shared between Zeus and his two brothers. Zeus became supreme ruler on Mount Olympus, Poseidon took control of the seas, and Hades ruled over the dead in the underworld.

Polydorus, a ghost (see ‘**Ghosts**’, page 6) tells us (13–15) that he was too young to fight at Troy. In Homer’s *Iliad* (where his mother was Laothoe, not Hecuba), against his father Priam’s (4) wishes he ran impetuously into battle and was killed by Achilles (*Iliad* xx and xxii). Euripides has given him a different story but he is still a much loved son, whom his father tried to shield from battle but who died young.

Hecuba, one of the wives of Priam, king of Troy, was always portrayed as a devoted wife and mother. In the *Iliad* Priam had fifty children (407n), by several wives; Hecuba, the daughter of Dymas, was mother of nineteen. Kisseus (4), her father in *Hecuba*, was a Thracian king in the *Iliad*. This Thracian connection may help to explain why Polydorus was sent to Thrace (6) and why Euripides gave her this ancestry. By making Polydorus one of her children, Euripides heightens the sense of her suffering and grief.

### Guest-friends

In their dangerous world the early Greeks established networks of guest-friends. They formed bonds of trust (*xenia*) around the world, committing themselves to provide one another with hospitality and shelter when travelling. To dishonour this bond, sacred to Zeus, would be for the Greeks a desecration. Paris broke trust with his host Menelaus when he abducted Helen, and the need to avenge this violation drove the Greeks to go to war against Troy. That Polymestor (7) was a guest-friend makes his crime against Polydorus (24) the more atrocious (see 690–5).

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**GHOST OF POLYDORUS** I come from the vaults of the dead and  
the gates

Of darkness, where, apart from the other gods,  
Hades' home is fixed. I am Polydorus, son of Hecuba,  
Kisseus' daughter. My father Priam, in fear  
That Troy might fall to the weapons of the Greeks,  
Sent me secretly from Phrygia to Thrace  
To the home of Polymestor, his guest-friend:

5



*In the production by 6th at Penn Theater (San Diego, 2004)  
the figure of the ghost was played by a dancer and his lines  
spoken off-stage.*

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### Thrace

The play is set between Asia and Europe, in a sort of no-man's-land. **Chersonese** (8) is a spit of land on the European side of the Hellespont, in the territory of Thrace (see map, page vii). Thracian corn (8) was of good quality and exported. Homer mentions the fame of their horses (9). The Thracians, a source of mercenaries and slaves in the ancient world, were generally considered brutal and greedy (see 1060n). They were satirised by Aristophanes as uncivilised (*Acharnians*, *Birds*), but in fact Athens made an alliance with them in the Peloponnesian War.

**11 Ilium** The citadel of Troy, located in the land of Phrygia (6). See map, page vii.

**17 Hector** The oldest of Priam's sons and the greatest of the Trojan warriors, he plays a prominent role in the *Iliad*, finally being killed in single combat by Achilles. The two represent contrasting epic types: Hector, a married man and a father, fights for his family and his country; Achilles is a moody, brilliant individualist. Hector challenged and killed Patroclus, who was wearing the armour of his friend Achilles, stripped the corpse of its armour and wore it himself. Achilles, mad with rage, hounded and killed Hector and dragged his body behind his chariot, around the walls of Troy. Hector's death is pivotal to the story: it made the fall of Troy inevitable (see 105n).

**22 god-built altar** Troy, including its altar, was built by the gods Poseidon and Apollo for its founder Laomedon.

**23 Achilles' blood-crazed son** Priam was butchered by Neoptolemus, also known as Pyrrhus (see page 20), at the altar where he had taken sanctuary during the sack of Troy. This merciless act, not mentioned by Homer, is described by Virgil (*Aeneid* ii) and Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2). Neoptolemus' treatment of Priam contrasts with the mercy Achilles showed to him at the end of the *Iliad*, allowing the old king to ransom the corpse of his son Hector.

### Honours due to the dead

The Greeks felt it important to honour a dead person; this meant having the body washed and dressed by women of the family (50), then burnt or buried, with appropriate libations and formal laments sung by women. To leave a corpse unmourned and unburied (29), as carrion for birds and beasts of prey, was to treat it and the gods of the underworld with dishonour (this is the theme of Sophocles' *Antigone*).

**31 ever since she came** Hecuba, along with other Trojan women, has been taken into slavery by the departing Greeks.

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He cultivates this fertile plain of Chersonese,  
 Ruling a race of horsemen with his spear.  
 And with me my father smuggled out much gold 10  
 So that, should the walls of Ilium fall, his surviving sons  
 Might not lack the means to live.  
 I was the youngest of Priam's sons – that was why  
 He sent me away: with my young frame I could  
 Not carry armour or a sword. 15  
 As long as Troy's boundaries were intact  
 And her walls still stood, and my brother Hector  
 Prospered in fight, I flourished like some plant  
 Tended by my father's Thracian friend – o grief!  
 But when Troy fell and Hector's spirit perished 20  
 And the family hearth was wrecked  
 And my father fell at the god-built altar,  
 Slaughtered by Achilles' blood-crazed son,  
 My father's guest-friend killed me for the gold,  
 Killed me and threw my poor body into the swollen sea, 25  
 To keep the gold for himself.

I lie on the beach, or sometimes in the tossing sea,  
 Borne on the waves' habitual ebb and flow,  
 Unwept, unburied. But for three days now I have left  
 My body and float, a wraith, hovering above 30  
 My dear mother, Hecuba, ever since she came,  
 Poor woman, here to Chersonese from Troy.

The Greeks, with their ships, all sit here idle  
 On the Thracian shore.

**35 Achilles** He was buried at Sigeum on the Trojan side of the Hellespont. His 'tomb' (39, 212) would have consisted of a mound or barrow, with possibly a pillar (*stēlē*) on top. Polydorus does not tell us how the ghost halted the fleet, but later we are told by Agamemnon (871) that there is no wind.

### Human sacrifice 1

Animals were commonly sacrificed, to offer thanks to the gods or to support prayers. To sacrifice a human being would be repugnant to most Greeks. The situation, with the fleet beached and the sailors idle (33), waiting for a human sacrifice, mirrors what happened at Aulis where the Greek expedition against Troy first gathered, but was unable to sail because of adverse winds. The goddess Artemis demanded that Agamemnon sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia – the reason for this, explored in a number of plays (Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*), varies. But Agamemnon did not go unpunished for this: his wife Clytaemnestra killed him on his return home after the war (see '**Human sacrifice 2**', page 24, and '**Agamemnon's homecoming**', page 100).

### Polyxena

Achilles' ghost demands the sacrifice of Hecuba's daughter, Polyxena (38), who is among the captive Trojan women. Polyxena is not mentioned by Homer, but the story of her sacrifice to Achilles after the war existed before Euripides; there was also a romantic legend that Achilles was in love with her and it was while going to a secret meeting with her that he was killed, by Paris (373–4).

### Honours due to heroes

Achilles demands an honour (39 *geras*), a sign that his services are respected. Failure to honour a hero could have terrible consequences: in the *Iliad* Achilles' indignation at being robbed of the girl Briseis, who was the *geras* for his valour, led to his withdrawing from the fighting. The importance of honour and gratitude continued after death: a decent funeral is a *geras*, as is a respected tomb. Odysseus later argues (298–311) that troops will be reluctant to fight if they are not honoured after death.

### Ghosts

The ghost or spirit of a dead person occurs in early literature usually pleading for burial (as Patroclus in the *Iliad* xxiii) or for vengeance for some unrequited wrong: the ghost of Clytaemnestra in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* chides the Furies for allowing her murderer Orestes to go unpunished. Achilles' status will ensure that he gets his wish (40–1); 'the powers below' will satisfy Polydorus (49).

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For Achilles, son of Peleus, appeared above his tomb 35  
 And halted the entire Greek fleet as they  
 Set the steering oar for home.  
 He demands my sister Polyxena  
 As a sacrifice for him to cherish, an honour at his tomb.  
 And he will get it. His friends will not refuse 40  
 The favour: Fate leads my sister  
 To her death this very day.  
 My mother will look upon two corpses,  
 The bodies of two of her children,  
 Myself and my unlucky sister. 45

For I shall reveal myself at the water's edge  
 At the feet of one of her servants,  
 So that my poor body may be buried.  
 For I have pleaded with the powers below  
 To grant me burial, to come into my mother's arms. 50  
 And I shall get my wish.



*The murder of Priam has been a frequent subject for artists. This relief by Antonio Canova (1757–1822) shows the old king about to be cut down by Neoptolemus.*

### The ghost of Polydorus

The ghost is 'hovering above' (30) his mother, suggesting that the actor appeared on the roof of the stage building (*skēnē*). The Greek theatre of Euripides' day used a crane (*mēkhanē*) for entries of gods.

- What is the effect of having a ghost begin the play and relate the crime?
- What impression of Polydorus' character does his speech give?
- Compare the ghosts of Polydorus and Achilles (35–40, 104–10).
- How in staging this scene would you show that Polydorus is a ghost?

**53 Agamemnon's tent** This may imply that Hecuba, like her daughter Cassandra (83–4n), is one of Agamemnon's personal slaves. It is not clear whether the women are housed in tents or huts – the word *skēnē* is used for the stage building and a tent (*Introduction to the Greek Theatre*, page 111).

### Downfall 1

Hecuba's precipitous descent from queen to slave (56–7) is stressed (276, 474, 784). Troy's wealth and prosperity was legendary (482) and its loss suggests the idea that it was excessive, provoking divine displeasure (see 'Downfall 2' and 'Downfall 3', pages 24 and 50).

### Slavery

For the Greeks slavery, the loss of freedom, was the ultimate degradation. Slaves, usually foreigners, were the chattels of their owners and had no rights in law. In Athens in the time of Euripides they made up the bulk of the workforce. Many were skilled and had some privileges, and some domestic slaves were well treated. But the lot of prisoners of war could be terrible; in another play of Euripides, *Trojan Women*, women prisoners also wait in agonised uncertainty, anticipating their future as slaves. (See also 283, 344–53.)

### Lyric passage (59–206)

Greek tragedy contained spoken verse, usually in iambic metre, and lyrical passages (sung or chanted). The Chorus' odes (see *Parodos*, page 12) were sung, as were some of the characters' more intense lines, so that the plays had a strong lyrical texture. (See also '*Kommos*', page 54, and note on Polymestor, page 84.) Lyric passages are centred in this edition.

### Hecuba's entry

Hecuba enters (59), supported by fellow captives. Though a slave, she still has attendants, who lend her status but also emphasise her physical frailty. The metre of her first lines is highly agitated as she reveals her anxieties to her silent companions.



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Now I shall move out of the way of the aged  
 Hecuba. Here she comes, from Agamemnon's tent,  
 Startled by a dream of me.  
 O mother, used to a royal palace, you have now seen 55  
 Life as a slave, your fortunes as low  
 As once they were high. Some god, to balance  
 Your prosperity before, now ruins you.

**HECUBA**            Come, girls, bring the old lady out,  
                           Support her, your fellow slave now, Trojan women, 60  
                           Once your queen.  
                           [Come, take me, hold me, help me on my way,]  
                           Take my aged hand,  
                           And I will rest on the crooked staff  
                           Of your arm, and speed the slow 65  
                           Pace of my feet.