WHY WAS SHAKESPEARE SO FOND OF HECUBA?

Marina Cap-Bun
Ovidius University of Constanţa

ABSTRACT
This article emphasizes the tragic theatrical potential of the mythological story of Hecuba, the Queen of the conquered Troy, who outlived to witness the death of her husband, the mighty King Priam, and all of their numerous children. Her story impressed great dramatists of all times, but the case studies I have chosen to discuss here are Euripides, Shakespeare, and Vişniec. Even if, unlike the other two dramatists, Shakespeare never wrote a play mainly inspired from Hecuba's story, he was obviously impressed with her predicament, which became his favourite comparative element whenever he dramatized cases of women in distress.

KEYWORDS: Hecuba, tragedy, Euripides, Shakespeare, Vişniec

Ancient tragedies dramatize the most spectacular predicaments that human condition can experience, all of them exhaustively illustrated in Greek mythology. Among the most impressive and awful stories of the world, Hecuba's tragedy is somehow unique, as she was given everything that a woman can wish for: the glory of being the Queen of the most magnificent metropolis of the ancient world, and the personal blessing of mothering many sons and daughters for her King. But she was also taken everything: her country, her king, all their children, even her grandson Astyanax, Hector's son. The measure of her happiness is also the measure of her distress. She had so much to lose and she did lose everything. Her destiny thoroughly illustrates the absurdity of our existence and, thus, she has become the most qualified 'philosopher' of the absurd, having good reasons to question the very purpose of human being in the world. Before Hamlet, she is entitled to ask the question "to be or not to be?" or, more specifically, "to give or not to give birth to life?" No wonder that her story has fascinated generations of dramatists, and Shakespeare was no exception.

Euripides, the most intriguing of ancient Greek tragedians, who "speaks more directly to a modern audience" (Walton ix), found in Hecuba's story the perfect illustration of his belief in the universal law of human destiny designed by the gods, that of "suffering for understanding." Hecuba suffers to understand the ephemeral human condition, the unpredictability of destiny (*fortuna labilis*), and the

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

simple fact that no one should be called "happy" if (s)he is still alive, as potential disaster is always menacing to alter a good life:

> Everything I have done in my life has meant nothing
> To the vindictive gods – and Troy of all cities,
> They have persecuted with a particular hatred.
> All our sacrifices, all our offerings
> Have been quite worthless, a waste of time.
>
> (*The Women of Troy*, 98, 1240–1244)

She is the most prominent figure among the *Troades*, whose misfortunes incorporate all the possible case studies of women's losses and suffering, and that is probably why Euripides himself felt like staging her story twice: first in *Hecuba* (performed about 425 BC), a study of bad luck at a personal level, and then in *The Women of Troy* (*Troades*, performed in 415 BC), projecting the multifaceted drama, with its repetitive, tormenting mechanism, into collective consciousness, and being "an unavoidable metaphor for the Peloponnesian War" (xix), as J. Michael Walton (the editor of Methuen's series of classical plays in translation) observed.

Rush Rehm was right to consider this tragedy "one of the greatest anti-war plays ever written" (128) as all these women have lost everything. They were collateral victims of the Trojan War and had to suffer the consequences of the preposterous confrontation and deal with their subsequent anxieties. Their plight was enhanced by the fact that they could not even mourn properly, and fulfil their ritual funerary duties. As Hecuba laments, "Priam, you are dead, but you have no grave, / No friend to weep or keen, / Can you hear my anguished moan?" (Euripides, *The Women of Troy* 101, 1314–1316). The women of Troy were no longer queens and princesses, but slaves or concubines of the conquerors, trophies to be taken back home to the Greek islands. Their predicaments qualified them as archetypal tragic figures, perfect examples of "suffering for understanding," whether they are (grand)mothers, daughters, wives, or sisters.

Since the beginning of times, women have been giving birth to children, while societies (conducted by men) have eventually found brutal ways to sacrifice them. Euripides himself suggested the contrast between Hecuba's womb, giving birth to so many sons and daughters (Shakespeare also emphasized Hecuba's "lank and all-o'er-teemèd loins" in *Hamlet*, 2.2. 1582), and Ulysses' horse with a womb full of weapons. Poseidon describes the horse at the beginning of the *Troades*,

> (…) designed and built
> A horse whose capacious belly was pregnant
> With armed commandos, and managed to get it –
> Together with its murderous payload –
> Inside the walls; so that no one
> In the future will ever forget the stratagem
> That goes by the name of the Wooden Horse,
> Nor the ferocious strike force it concealed.

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

(*The Women of Troy* 49, 13–20)

I think that the long Trojan War is not only a spectacular military confrontation between two mighty armies, checking to see whether the apparently unconquerable Ilium could actually be captured, but also an emblematic clash between the life-producing mechanism (the prolific wombs of the Trojan women, determinedly following the example of their queen) affirming the life-force in its most basic manifestation, and the malignant, ever-growing ingenuity of the warfare-machinery.

Ulysses was the first to understand that muscles and weaponries were not enough to win the war against Hecuba's 'ontologically' resourceful womb, so he tried to counterbalance the process by inventing an 'eschatological,' mischievous womb to death. As a symbolic representation of the obscure, but temporary victory of slaughter over birth-giving, Hecuba becomes his personal slave. Even merciless gods are terrified by the efficiency of his death-machine, so that the King of Ithaca gets an exemplary punishment. Poseidon, the Greek god of the ocean, angrily orchestrates his hardships on his way back home, not only as the wounded father of the cyclops, among whom Polyphemus, but maybe also as a symbolic protector of the womb and its amniotic waters, if we contemplate a possible psychoanalytical interpretation.

The Trojan Queen, not only a very "productive" woman, but also a significantly intelligent one, has learned (through suffering, as gods decided) that getting married and giving birth to children means only to supply death with cannon fodder. Short-cutting this absurd itinerary, many of the Trojan women, Hecuba's maiden daughters included, are destined for an allegorical "marriage to death," a current motif of Greek tragedy, elaborately analysed by Rush Rehm in his eponymous book.

Euripides was sure to emphasize that Hecuba equally suffered for her sons killed in battle, and for her daughters (post-war victims). Polyxena is to be sacrificed on Achilles tomb and Cassandra, the "god-crazed daughter" (*The Women of Troy* 55, 170), is to be killed together with Agamemnon by Clytemnestra. Daughters of their mother, they both bravely assumed their tragic fate. Cassandra jubilantly marries Agamemnon, as she can foresee, in her "visionary ecstasy" (*The Women of Troy* 55, 171), the moment of paying back when the mighty conqueror of Ilium will be cynically slain by his bloody wife and her lover, so she truly celebrates this union, which allows her to witness the moment of retaliation:

> Agamemnon, the world famous leader
> Of the Greeks, will find me more destructive
> As a wife than ever Helen was!
> Because I'll kill him, and destroy his whole family
> In return for my father and brothers destroyed.
>
> (*The Women of Troy* 62, 355–360)

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

As for Polyxena, the Greek dramatist made her contemplate her mother's tragedy, which amplifies, like a giant mirror, her own predicament:

> Poor sufferer; poor broken one;
> Poor luckless life, poor mother.
> What pain, what agony,
> What wild unspeakable revenge
> Some god has raised against you.
> No more shall I. your child, no more,
> Wed young grief to your old grief
> And share your bondage.
> You will watch them take me from your hands
> As if you were a beast and I your cub,
> And you will weep to watch me die.
> They will cut my throat, and send me
> Into the dark below
> To take my place among the mourning dead.
> Mother, you were born to sorrow.
> It is for you my sad tears flow.
> My, life, my ruin, my disgrace
> I do not mourn. This is a lucky chance,
> For me to die.
>
> (*Hecuba* 8–9, 198–217)

Unlike her daughters, brides of death, who neither experienced the happiness of giving birth, nor the misfortune of seeing their children sacrificed, Hecuba was destined to suffer "an ecstasy of pain" (*The Women of Troy* 100, 286), the whole tragic chain of events resulting from the *hubris* of having a perfect life, of being happier than the gods themselves:

> Child, which sorrow shall I look to first?
> I have so many. When I grasp at one
> Another beckons me, some newer grief
> Distracts me and comes treading on my heels.
>
> (*Hecuba* 20, 595–598)

She is not allowed to die before she sees all her twenty sons and her daughters brought to tragic deaths, but she rather looks like a shadow from the underworld, a kind of 'living dead':

> So this must be my hour of reckoning.
> No time for dry eyes, but for tears and mourning.
> I did not die when it was time to die;
> Zeus did not kill me then, but kept me living
> To see more sorrow than the sorrow past.
>
> (*Hecuba* 9 229–234)

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

Shakespeare, as a well-educated graduate of the grammar school, had profoundly learned and deeply admired the technical lesson of the great classics of ancient theatre. He was fascinated with the figure of a mother of twenty sons and the beautiful daughters, who subjugated the hearts of the mightiest heroes of the army of conquerors, which finally proves that beauty and love can be more powerful weapons than the sword and the drive for immortal glory. Whenever he illustrates the utmost misfortune of a woman, Hecuba seems to be the ideal comparative element. In *Troilus and Cressida*, inspired by Homer's *Iliad*, he makes Troilus, one of the sons of Hecuba, the centre of one plot, but also emphasizes the main conflict between Priam and Agamemnon, the leaders in command of the two armies. Hecuba is mentioned for being worried for her sons involved in battle, but primarily for Hector (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.2. 143–144). In *Coriolanus*, Volumnia also refers to Hecuba's distress when her son was killed: "the breasts of Hecuba, / When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier / Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood / At Grecian sword, contemning" (*Coriolanus* 1.3. 41–44).

Other times, Shakespeare allows his characters to be aware of the entire tragedy of the Trojan Queen, which has continued many 'acts' after Hector's death. In the violent play *Titus Andronicus*, young Lucius comments on Hecuba's tragic case of mental disturbance: "I have read that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad through sorrow" (*Titus Andronicus* 4.1. 20–21). The same mad rage is invoked in *Cymbeline*, by Imogen, who adds her curses to those of the most desperate mother of all: "All curses madded Hecuba gave the Greeks" (*Cymbeline* 4.2. 313). In the long poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, a "graver work" inspired by Ovid, the reference to Hecuba is even more sophisticated:

> To this well-painted piece is Lucrece come,
> To find a face where all distress is stell'd.
> Many she sees where cares have carved some,
> But none where all distress and dolour dwell'd,
> Till she despairing Hecuba beheld,
> Staring on Priam's wounds with her old eyes,
> Which bleeding under Pyrrhus' proud foot lies.
> In her the painter had anatomized
> Time's ruin, beauty's wreck, and grim care's reign:
> Her cheeks with chaps and wrinkles were disguised;
> Of what she was no semblance did remain:
> Her blue blood changed to black in every vein,
> Wanting the spring that those shrunk pipes had fed,
> Show'd life imprison'd in a body dead.
>
> (*The Rape of Lucrece* 92, 1447–1460)

Here Hecuba is presented as the most relevant possible case of human grief, mirroring the entire tragedy of the world. The metaphor of her noble, blue blood turning to black suggests not only a mental and psychological change in sensibility, but also a kind of ontological mutation. Like in the cases of Euripides's and

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

Vişniec's treatments of the motif, Hecuba becomes a 'living dead' haunting the world, just to tell the women that they should no longer give birth to children destined to be sacrificed.

But the most fascinating reference is still that from *Hamlet*. Preoccupied with his own current situation (not so different from that of Orestes), Prince Hamlet of Denmark asks the old and experimented First Actor to recite the story of Hecuba's distress at the loss of her husband. The impeccably educated student in philosophy proves to be a real connoisseur of theatre, not only for giving the actors such precise stage directions, but also for remembering a play which "it was never acted; or, if it was, not above once," (2.2. 12-13) for its technical perfection: "it was—as I received it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine—an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning" (2.2. 14–17). And the gifted performer entertains him with the story of "the mobbled queen," (2.2. 1577) which proves to be "a dream of passion" (2.2. 1625).

> 'Run barefoot up and down, threatening 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'er-teemed loins,
> A blanket, in the alarm of fear caught up;
> Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steep'd,
> 'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced:
> But if the gods themselves did see her then
> When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
> In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs,
> 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.'
>
> (2.2. 1579–1592)

Hamlet is genuinely impressed with the real tears of the performer, which give the measure of the authentic tragic potential of the story. The actor's true devotion to his profession becomes a catalyst for the young prince, who struggles to assume his own 'role' on the stage of history, to finally take action and avenge his father. He blames himself of cowardliness:

> O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
> (…) Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
> Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause
> And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
> Upon whose property and most dear life
> A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
>
> (2.2. 1623–1645)

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

But this self-deprecatory cowardice is just in order to self-stimulate his rage and to do what Orestes had done, without any hesitation, for the memory and legacy of his father. He has already learned about theatre's impact over minds from his readings:

> I have heard
> That guilty creatures sitting at a play
> Have by the very cunning of the scene
> Been struck so to the soul that presently
> They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
>
> (2.2. 1663–1667)

Yet, he is testing on himself the theatre's power to influence his mind-set, to remould and reprogram his hesitant consciousness. And he decides that, before applying to his uncle the predictable punishment of death, he has to torment him in a more sophisticated way by making appeal to his own guilty consciousness. Hamlet understands that only theatre can do that.

Hamlet's Renaissance humanistic education makes him question the legitimacy of his revenge—and also the possible hallucinatory nature of his dialogue with the phantom of his father. But it also makes him apprehend the technical lesson of ancient tragedies. The ghost scene recalls Euripides's *Hecuba*, which was itself "a play of ghosts" (xv), as J. Michael Walton explained, referring to the ghosts of Polydorus and Achilles. The scholar also noticed that: "In *Hecuba* the army is divided about whether they should take any notice of Achilles' ghost. The ghosts in *Hecuba* can influence but it is the living who make the decision and invoke the dead to justify what they want to do" (Walton xvi).

Hamlet is suspicious and he is angry with his uncle and mother, but it is not so easy for him to take action, like the 'automate' Orestes, who simply applied the prophecies of Apollo without any moral hesitation. In absence of an oracle and the certitudes of the gods' command, Hamlet needs to take his own decisions. Hegel made their comparison the perfect case study to illustrate the difference between ancient and modern tragedies (*Aesthetics* 228–232). And it is only the theatre that stimulates him to decide what to do next. When he asks the actor to act out Hecuba's despair at the loss of King Priam, he needs to visualize the contrast between the Queen of Troy and his own mother, who hurried to marry the usurper. While contemplating his emotional involvement in the scene he is playing ("What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" 2.2. 556–557), Hamlet realizes what Hecuba is to himself: the ideal mother that he is envisioning in his own *dream of passion*. So he decides to punish his biological mother exemplarily, through the theatre: "Let me be cruel, not unnatural; / I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2. 2271–2272).

The next logical question that I am tempted to ask is: why was Shakespeare himself so fond of Hecuba? What was he trying to tell us by collaterally reiterating her case study in his most famous tragedy? Obviously, he gives us a perfect example

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

of an archetypal mythical story with huge theatrical power. Theatre is, of course, the mirror of the world, as Shakespeare repeatedly pointed out. But I think that, in this case, the mirror proves to have its own memory, which maliciously reveals the absolute models of human conduct that it has previously recorded. Hamlet places his "frail" mother in front of this magical mirror: "Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge; / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (3.4. 2404–2406). But the mirror chooses to reflect the counter-example of Hecuba, as the theatre, like myth, immortalizes archetypes. And the magical therapy of the theatre works for Queen Gertrude, too: "Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul; / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct" (3.4. 2482–2484).

Yet the most spectacular victim of "The Mousetrap" (3.2. 2131) of theatre is King Claudius. Hamlet knows that "murther, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ" (2.2. 1668–1669). After witnessing the imaginary story of Gonzago (highlighted and localized by the lines inserted by Hamlet, after finding the "perfect play" to obtain the needed effect), he sees into the darkness of his guilty soul and desperately asks for light: "Give me some light: away!" (3.2. 2156). In the same way as Hecuba's story helped Hamlet to overcome any trace of the Oedipus complex, hiring the actors to play such a similar murder in front of the usurper activates the repressed guilt of fratricide. So, before physically eliminating his uncle, before the punishment of the body, Claudius's immortal soul is doomed. He has to go to Hell with the full consciousness of his guilt, so that the torment should be endless. Before the blade penetrated the body, the theatre had stabbed the soul with an *imaginary* dagger of guilt, similar to that which haunted Macbeth: "art you but / A dagger of my mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?" (*Macbeth*, 2.1. 37–39). Claudius has to be remembered of his fratricide, an episode that he is trying hard to forget, to bury deeply into his obscure soul. The theatre plunges into his subconscious, revealing his overwhelming guilt, and openly evidencing that regicide (intuitively anticipated by Hamlet's "prophetic soul") is real. It exposes the murder story in the same manner in which Schliemann has discovered and brought to light the ruins of Troy, unveiling the mystery of one of the greatest stories of the world.

Hamlet's option of questioning his own senses when evaluating his talk with the ghost has been frequently discussed. But what I find to be even more captivating is his unwavering belief that the theatre will not fail in making the murderer react. Hamlet has entirely understood the magic of the theatre, which is even stronger than the fantastic apparition of the ghost. We also have to notice what an impeccable theatrical culture Hamlet proves to have, when he asks for the perfect stories, which can generate the most adequate psychic reaction to himself, his mother, and to the usurper. More sophisticated than Orestes, Hamlet torments the soul before annihilating the body. Hecuba's story inspires him and gives him the power to act, to overcome his philosophical *dubito*.

Hecuba was the most magnificent mother and queen, but she was also the most unfortunate woman of the world, so she is entitled to incessantly ask the gods

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

"why?" until the end of time. The Romanian playwright Matei Vişniec, one of the most intriguing dramatists of our times, rewrote Hecuba's tragedy, in 2011, at the request of the Kaze Theatre in Tokyo, naming it *Why Hecuba*. But there is no question mark in the title, as her legitimate question becomes more like a general epithet, like a middle name, a stylistic device. Homer often used this manner of a recurrent attribute for his characters ("the beautiful" Helen, "the clever" Ulysses, "the brave" Achilles, etc.) and Vişniec finds that "why" is the perfect middle name for Hecuba, who questions the gods not only about her own tragic fate, but also about the very principles of existence.



Production of *Why Hecuba* by Matei Vişniec at the Kaze Theatre in Tokyo, 2014, directed by Sayaka Ehara, scenography by Andra Bădulescu, masks by Eric Deniaud. Printed by permission of Kaze Group Company.

What is really fascinating about Vişniec's *Why Hecuba* is the revelation that the Trojan War has never actually ended, it has been going on under various disguises, along the centuries. The "Author's note"[1] confirms "the evolutionary nature" (Vişniec, "Author's note" 275) contained in this play, the fact that he has thought Hecuba's story as an ongoing tragedy, one that fascinates the gods of Mount Olympus, challenging Apollo to become a more and more inventive director, finding ways to continue her tragedy, to confront her with further excruciating losses. The show of death and destruction must go on by the will of ruthless gods, and it does:

> the Grief of Hecuba is the universal grief of mothers who give birth to cannon fodder, boys destined to die early who, despite their youth, become child soldiers at the age of ten, children who at sixteen are already fanatics yet also fascinated by war, youths at nineteen who are already hardened veterans and warlords in the making.
>
> (Vişniec, "Author's note" 276)

Is this tragic greatness, or just absurd, stupid, suicidal violence? Is there any trace of rationality into this, or just the pure self-destructive urge of humankind? Could the collective subconscious ever escape from its obsessional cruel nature? These

[1] Quotations to *Why Hecuba* used here are from the English version, *Why Hecuba*, translated by Nick Awde, "unpublished translation" provided to me by the author. Page numbers refer to the Romanian edition, the only one which was published.

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

are the new questions of Vişniec's war plays, which warn us that there will always be new fascinating horses (which promise to gain the benevolence of various gods), watching at the windows of the new magnificent Troys, ready to kill and destroy, to set the world on fire again and again.

Hecuba's story becomes the favourite "play" of the gods from Mount Olympus, which is a perfect continuation of Shakespeare's vision, in which the Trojan Queen generated "passion in the gods" and "have made milch the burning eyes of heaven" (2.2. 1591–1592). In Vişniec's vision, "The soul of Hecuba bleeds so terribly and she emits cries so loud that this is disturbing the Gods. They look down at Hecuba and start to feel uneasy" (*Why Hecuba* 4, 199). Like Hamlet, the gods themselves need the theatre to become acutely aware of their role in human life, to explore the limits of their cruelty: "Enough's enough, even for a gang of bloodthirsty Gods like us" (*Why Hecuba* 9, 224). And they do find effective means to further torture Hecuba, as "the Gods do not like imperfect tragedies" (*Why Hecuba* 10, 226).

Hecuba enacts her ritual of grief by swallowing the ashes of her nineteen sons killed in battle, while her own heart also turns to dust and ashes. She has turned into a living urn for the ashes of her sons, recalling the myth of Kronos, who devoured his own children. Her loud mourning is reduced to the short, monosyllabic, but obsessively repetitive question "why?" and to the dramatic gesture of ingesting the world that she has created. She modifies the structure of the universe, brings the cosmos back into chaos, as if she is trying to reverse the process of giving birth to all her sons (an inventive form of *regressus ad uterum*). The world must be annihilated as it is too absurd. Happiness is but an illusion destined to enhance suffering; she has suffered enough to understand that. It is absurd to give birth, as she explains to a young priestess to be:

> You will be a priestess one day, my girl. But never allow anyone to tear your hymen. Do not let anyone, be they man or god, penetrate your flesh and not ever your soul. Never give birth so you do not add blood to blood. If you give birth to life you also beget death. And do not submit to the will of men. Remain pure and obey only the Fates, the forces who watch over our destinies.
>
> (*Why Hecuba* 3, 194)

Recalling the grandeur of Roman theatre, in which slave-actors were often sacrificed for the sake of the aesthetic authenticity of the show, Hecuba's last children are sacrificed, as the gods on Mount Olympus want to explore the final frontiers of human suffering that tragedy can enact. Hecuba tries to manage her contingencies of fate by negotiating these boundaries of grief. For a moment, she still has hope for her youngest son Polydorus, who was entrusted to the Thracian King Polymestor, but she soon finds out that he was ignominiously killed by his host for gold and treasure. Yet, she is cynically asked to assume her role, for the sake of the technical perfection of her tragedy:

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

> Hecuba, you have to make the effort to understand, to fully accept your misfortune. Do not seek to step back from total despair, do not ruin the spectacle of the Gods, do not tarnish your reputation as the unhappiest mother in the world.
>
> (*Why Hecuba* 10, 226–227)

The deranged, "madded Hecuba," who "ran mad through sorrow," is now threatening to destroy the perfect architectural structure of classical tragedy, primarily designed for the delight of the gods themselves, as she feels like laughing instead of weeping:

> Come on, weep, tear your hair, rend your dress, claw at your face. Come on, Hecuba, the Gods want to see you weep, make them happy. (…) Hecuba, have you gone mad? You cannot laugh at your own tragedy. You cannot laugh at your endless misfortunes. You are the most unfortunate mother that the spectacle of humans has ever produced. You cannot laugh at all that. (…) Sacrilege! The most unhappy mother in the world laughing instead of crying!
>
> (*Why Hecuba* 10, 227–228)

Soon after that, she learns that her daughter, Polyxena, will be sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles. Hecuba has to accept this new decision of the merciless gods and also to become aware of Euripides' principle of suffering for understanding, which Vişniec choses to put into Zeus' mouth: "I see that even the mortals are beginning to appreciate your theatricals. They are beginning to realize that their suffering is the greatest gift the Gods have given them" (*Why Hecuba* 14, 244).

Euripides's Polymestor prophesizes about Hecuba's future destiny: "You'll turn into a dog with flaming eyes" (*Hecuba* 43, 1265). In Vişniec's vision, the bereaved Hecuba takes a subhuman form, she becomes one of the Erinyes, howling like a wounded animal and haunting the land of her misfortune. Her association with a female dog recalls a metamorphosis myth, which tells the story of the Trojan Queen, who leapt into the sea after the fall of Troy and was transformed by Hecate into her familiar. This association with the Greek goddess of magic, religion, and mythology, with her manifold and mystic nature, often depicted in triplicate with a head of a dog, one of a serpent, and one of a horse, is very rich in significance. As a wife, mother, and grandmother, Hecuba was deprived of everybody she has ever loved; she has experienced the total emptiness that grief can bring about, so she becomes very daring with the merciless gods, as she has nothing else to lose; she no longer fears their revenge as she has consumed all the forms of loss and distress. Her soul is petrified, which reminds me of one of the sacred images of Hecate, one of her statues which comes to life and laughs. Like her goddess, Hecuba laughs instead of weeping. When the tragic chain is ridiculously long, when it looks like a never ending story, the tragedy is no longer majestic, it becomes grotesque, excruciating, and turns into an absurd play. So she keeps howling and questioning the gods: why? And there is nothing they can do to stop her, as Zeus himself learns that "It is written that a mother whose grief is greater than the weight of the world has the right to attack the Gods" (*Why Hecuba* 20, 268).

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)

Vişniec confessed that his Hecuba, after experiencing the whole history of humankind, is still questioning the gods about the very meaning of human existence, about the bloody, violent foundations of human society. Today, tragedies are played on shining screens, on a daily basis, they have turned into breaking news. By going back to the archetypal tragic stories of humankind, the playwright tries to vaccinate us against the constant brainwash performed by the multimedia that attempts to transform us into mutants, into *human trashcans*, almost insensitive to human suffering. Like Euripides and Shakespeare, the Romanian playwright uses Hecuba's powerful story to emphasize the anxieties of his times.

Whenever history is growing mad, the theatre is out there to remind us about fundamental human values. In 1916, in spite of the ongoing World War I, the whole Europe, Germany included, celebrated Shakespeare's tercentennial anniversary as a balancing sign of normality. A century later, in 2016, in a world confronted with numerous problems (wars, terrorist organizations, refugees, the Crimean crisis, the Brexit, the failed coup in Turkey, etc.) president Erdoğan decided to limit productions of foreign plays in Turkey, including Shakespeare's works (B1 TV), recalling Plato's choice of banishing the Poet from his ideal Republic. This makes me think about how important it is for all of us to keep asking ourselves: *why are we so fond of Shakespeare?*

WORKS CITED

B1 TV. "Teatrul din Turcia afectat de tentativa de lovitură de stat: *Romeo și Julieta*, *Hamlet* sau *Visul unei nopți de vară* interzise." 30 August 2016. http://www.b1.ro/stiri/externe/teatrul-din-turcia-afectat-de-tentativa-de-lovitura-de-stat-romeo-si-julieta-hamlet-sau-visul-unei-nopti-de-vara-interzise-video-160484.html. Accessed 28 September 2016.

Euripides, *Plays: Two: Hecuba, The Women of Troy, Iphigenia at Aulis and Cyclops*. Trans. Don Taylor, J. Michael Walton, and Peter D. Arnott. London: Methuen Drama, 1991.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Rehm, Rush. *Marriage to Death,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Shakespeare, William. *The Oxford Library: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

———. *The Rape of Lucrece*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

Vişniec, Matei. *"De ce Hecuba." Omul din care a fost extras răul*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2014.

Walton, Michael J. "Introduction" to Euripides, *Plays: Two.* London: Methuen Drama, 1991. ix–xxxi.

BDD-A26197 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:43:16 UTC)