Hecuba's Lamentation in Euripides

In both Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, Hecuba questions what lamentation means

for her and her community. In *Trojan Women*, Hecuba outrightly questions the purpose of

lamentation:

τί με χρὴ σιγᾶν, τί δὲ μὴ σιγᾶν;

[τί δὲ θρηνῆσαι;] (110-11)

Why is it necessary for me to be silent? Or to not be silent?

Why is it necessary to lament?

As a female-centered genre, lamentation is an important representation of women's voices in

Greek literature. Scholars such as Sheila Murnaghan, Helene Foley, and Casey Due have noted

the political significance of lamentation within the context of tragedy, both within and outside of

a tragic performance. At the same time, artifacts such as the Polyxena Sarcophagus demonstrate

the deep connection between representations of lamentation and the figure of Hecuba.

Nonetheless, despite how intertwined the two ideas – lamentation and Hecuba – are, their actual

connection is not always clear cut. In these two Euripidean plays, Hecuba must decide for herself

what lamentation means to her and to her community. In *Trojan Women*, she does this through

her conversations and relationships with the other members of her community – particularly with

Andromache and Astyanax, and through them, Hector. In *Hecuba*, a play that revolves around

two of her children, Polyxena and Polydorus, Hecuba changes what lamentation means by

turning lament for her daughter Polyxena into revenge for her son Polydorus.

These questions acknowledge the weight of Hecuba's losses and the fact that no matter

how she grieves and laments, she will never regain either her former place in life or what she had

lost. Nonetheless, the conclusions of both *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* suggest that Hecuba does ultimately find answers to these questions, and, as the divergent endings demonstrate, she plays a part in shaping lamentation to her own goals and purposes, both for herself and for her community. As Foley (2001) notes,

> Above all, these plays demonstrate that lamentation, a ritual form that may well have played a central role in the origins of tragedy, as often divides as unites the stage world in which it is performed. A mourning woman is not simply a producer of pity, but dangerous. Yet the message her lament carries is never fully suppressed. (55)

Since Hecuba and the Trojan women may have lost everything, including their husbands, children, and their homes, she must make use of lamentation in order to redefine what her community means and ensure their survival, in whatever limited means she has available to her.

As a ritual that is both personal and communal, lamentation provides powerful ways for the Trojan women to communicate. Hecuba, as the leader and representative of the Trojan women, makes use of lamentation and revenge to strengthen the bonds between her and the women and demonstrate how they should act in their new and scarily uncertain circumstances. Though two different ways of managing grief – sustained lamentation and revenge – both are important for our understanding of Hecuba. As a way of examining how lamentation functions in Greek tragedy, focusing on Hecuba's relationship to lamentation in Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, I examine how Hecuba uses lamentation to redefine her community of Trojan women and her place within that community in the aftermath of the Trojan War.

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