

# Remembering Hecuba – Expectations of Vengeance in Hamlet

Sophie Raudnitz reveals how very important Euripedes' character Hecuba is to the whole idea of Shakespeare's play, giving us a model of vengeance that Shakespeare sabotages, ironically adopting a very Euripedean move in doing so.

When the ghost of Hamlet's father charges Hamlet to 'Remember me!' and in so doing, avenge his murder, he not only brings a sense of obligation to his son but also brings a set of expectations to the theatre. Hamlet's story was well known in Elizabethan England: Belleforest's translation of Saxo's *Danorum Regum heroumque Historiae* had already given rise to a play called *Hamlet* – its authorship unknown – and had inspired the most celebrated play of the age, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. In these plays, as in the wealth of other revenge plays in performance at the time, the figure of the grieving protagonist, inspired by a supernatural agent to avenge an unnatural act, was a given. So, the ghost's injunction to Hamlet would immediately have triggered the memory of such plays and elicited a set of suppositions about the form the play would take.

## Haunted by Traumatic Memories

Memory itself could be described as a kind of haunting: just as a ghost brings the past, physically, into the present, so memory brings the past into the present moment, often

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with a destabilising effect on the rememberer. This is particularly the case with a traumatic memory such as is found in grief, which can be all-consuming. Hamlet's response to the ghost's injunction at first, appears to bear this out. In the soliloquy which follows it, Hamlet says that he will

*from the table of my memory  
... wipe away all trivial fond records*

so that

*thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain.  
Hamlet, 1.5.98-103*

In this way, he uses the metaphor of a tablet or slate to represent his memory, saying that he will 'wipe' everything from it except the memory of his father and his purpose of revenge. (For the origins of this image, see Plato's *Theatetus*, 191c-d.)

## A Theatrical Archetype of Vengeance

The theatrical archetype for this figure of vengeful grief was, at the time, Hecuba, the dispossessed queen of Troy, whose husband and many children were slaughtered by the Greeks. She would have been well known to audiences, not only through Virgil, Ovid and Seneca, but through early

Greek sources and their adaptations. The play *Hecuba* by Euripides, in which she exacts righteous revenge on the man who killed her son by blinding him and killing his children, was the most printed, translated and performed ancient Greek play of the period and was adapted many times too. In Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* – another Elizabethan revenge tragedy, thought to be one of Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet*, she is described as

*the wofullest wretch  
That euer liued  
3.1.14-15*

*This quotation and a discussion of why  
Hecuba was so popular at the time in Tanya  
Pollard, 'What's Hecuba to Shakespeare?' in  
Renaissance Quarterly, Vol 65, No. 4  
(Cambridge University press, Winter 2012),  
pp. 1065-66. Accessed on 26/07/2020 at  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669345>*

In Euripides' play, Hecuba mobilises her grief, using it as a potent political force: her laments elicit sympathy from those who hear them and through this, she is able to convince them, that her vengeance is not personal and vindictive, but a form of retributive justice. Her 'combination of passionate grief and triumphant revenge' made her the definitive tragic figure of the era (Tanya Pollard, 'What's Hecuba to Shakespeare?' in *Renaissance Quarterly*). The audience would, therefore, have recognised, that when Hamlet wipes his memory of all but his grief and his vengeance, he is allying himself with iconic tragic revengers like Hecuba.

# Hamlet – Straying from Expectations

It is when Hamlet feels that he is straying from his vengeful purpose that his contrast to ancient Greek tragic heroism, and Hecuba in particular, is made explicit. In 2.2, the speech the player performs at Hamlet's request focuses first on Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, who wreaks decisive vengeance on the Trojans for the death of his father. It then turns (at Hamlet's call) to Hecuba and this section elicits such strong emotion, even in the player himself, that Polonius pleads with him to stop. In the speech, the player says that those who had seen her

*with tongue in venom steeped  
'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have  
pronounced*

and that her 'clamour' of grief

*Would have made milch the burning eyes of  
heaven*

– would have caused the stars to weep milky tears – and would have induced 'passion', or violent sorrow, even in the gods (Hamlet, 2.2.468-475).

Hamlet's soliloquy which follows is one of the most moving of the play, but his lament is not, like Hecuba's, for his murdered loved one, but rather for his own inability to

express and mobilise his grief as Hecuba does and to translate it into vengeful action. He compares himself both to Hecuba and to the player, saying that had the player his own 'cue for passion', his words would be so potent that he would not only flood the stage with his own grief but would madden, 'appal', 'confound' and 'amaze' those who heard him, surpassing even the affective power of Hecuba.

Therefore, although he sees his motivation as even stronger than Hecuba's, he 'can say nothing' and in the fact that he is 'unpregnant', he also cannot act on his grief. (Hamlet, 2.2.511-40. See also note on 'unpregnant' where 'pregnant' means quick or ready to act.) In this way, Hamlet measures himself against Hecuba and finds himself wanting.

## Hamlet in A World 'Out of Joint'

This is borne out in the dénouement of the play, as the chief difference between Hamlet and its sources is the 'accidental' nature of Hamlet's eventual revenge. The revengers before him, however much they may, like Kyd's Hieronimo, have agonised over the morality of their vengeance, all committed themselves to their actions and at the last, acted decisively. Hamlet, meanwhile,

*spends almost the entire play spectacularly failing to keep his oath' and when he does, finally, kill Claudio, it is 'suddenly, without forethought*

*Kiernan Ryan, 'Hamlet and Revenge', from Discovering Literature: Shakespeare and the Renaissance, British Library Discovering Literature*

Much of the body of criticism on Hamlet has sought to account for this, but for me, Kiernan Ryan does so most convincingly. According to his reading, psychological and religious explanations for Hamlet's delaying tactics do not account for those moments when he does act decisively, such as when he kills Polonius. Rather,

*Hamlet's tormented resistance to performing the role of revenger expresses a justified rejection of a whole way of life, whose corruption, injustice and inhumanity he ... rightly finds intolerable.*

For Ryan, it is 'the time' that is 'out of joint', not Hamlet and for this reason, Shakespeare creates

*a tragic protagonist who refuses ... to play the stock role in which he's been miscast by the world he happens to inhabit.*  
*Kiernan Ryan, 'Hamlet and Revenge'*

There is no satisfaction for the audience in Hamlet's revenge because Claudius is merely a product of his time and his death cannot set this right. Meanwhile, in Hamlet's death, we see the potential for an ideal vision or version of the world extinguished by the corruption that dominates.

## A Critique of the Whole Genre?

What is most interesting for me, though, is Ryan's comment that in creating Hamlet,

*Shakespeare deliberately sabotages the whole genre of revenge tragedy*

in order to cast light on the corruption of the age. This is, in itself, a typically Euripidean move. What Shakespeare does in Hamlet is what Euripides is known for in Greek tragedy: although neither can change the outcome of their plot – it is, after all, laid down in numerous sources – they stretch it almost to breaking point. In Euripides' *Electra*, for example (another revenge tragedy), the hero, Orestes, kills his adulterous mother and her lover, who had previously killed his father. In other versions of this story, Orestes was vindicated in his revenge because he acted according to the god, Apollo's, wishes. In the Euripidean story, however, we are told that Apollo's oracles gave bad advice! (Euripides, *Electra*, l. 1245) In the *Hecuba*, though we do not know how far Euripides strayed from earlier sources, what is remarkable is that the gods are notably absent at the end of the play, abandoning the mortals to their barbarism and forcing the audience to judge for

themselves. While Hecuba may have seemed like the gold standard of tragic revengers, Euripides' play was horrifying for the audience precisely because their sympathy for her grief leads them to be complicit in her atrocity against her enemy and his innocent children. So too with Hamlet, Shakespeare 'sabotages' the revenge tragedy genre to draw attention to the outrage of what the ghost asks of Hamlet and to the horror of an age which, as Ryan argues, holds such barbaric values dear.

If one also considers, as Emma Smith has, the role of the players and 'The Murder of Gonzago' as representing a past theatrical age with its revenge plot and its stilted language, displaying a nostalgia for a bygone age, we might begin to see a light emerging in the darkness. (Emma Smith, 'Hamlet' from *Approaching Shakespeare*. <https://www.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/approaching-shakespeare>) Hamlet's unwillingness to play a stock character, to live up to the expectations of the ghost and the audience, reflects Shakespeare's own unwillingness to rehash a play which had already found its apogee for the age in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Paradoxically then, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the memory of Euripidean tragedy to usher in a new form of tragedy, freed from the constraints imposed by the ghost of Hecuba.