



FACULTAD DE
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**Gendered Crimes in Greek Mythology and their Classical Reception
in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

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ABSTRACT

This Final Degree Essay proposes a reading of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* focusing on the female characters of Greek mythology and Euripidean tragedy as a source of inspiration for Shakespearean dramatic receptions. Along the same lines, special emphasis is devoted to gender elements and feminist methodologies are applied together with those regarding the so-called classical receptions.

RESUMEN

En este Trabajo Fin de Grado se propone una lectura del *Hamlet* de William Shakespeare a través de los personajes femeninos de la mitología griega y la tragedia euripídea como fuentes de inspiración de la recepción dramática shakespeariana. En este sentido, se presta un especial énfasis en los elementos de género y se aplican las metodologías feministas así como de las llamadas recepciones clásicas.

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1. Introduction: Justification, aims and methodologies

I chose this subject for my Final Degree Essay as I have always been infatuated by Greek mythology and Shakespearean literature. By the same token, I attended a Classical Tradition course at the university, which also gave me a shove to pursue my research in those studies.

In this Final Degree Essay, I will aim to outline the haunting persistence of the theatre of Ancient Greek tragedy in the Elizabethan Era. In addition to that, I will emphasise the striking dissemination and influence that it had as well as Shakespeare's originality when writing his own plays inspired by these classical masterpieces. In the same vein, I will outline how Shakespeare reworked that material which was believed to be hard to redraft in an original manner. Notwithstanding, this mastermind coped with that degree of difficulty by producing a brand-new creation of revenge tragedy in regards to what contemporary writers did. In parallel, I will spotlight the strength of female characters both in Greek tragedy and in *Hamlet's* tragedy, mostly concerning Hecuba's inspiring figure, with whom the protagonist becomes famously haunted.

This study applies the methodologies of classical receptions studies, since it focuses on the classical tradition of Greek mythology and tragedy until Shakespeare's period. Besides, this study tackles the reception which is seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I must argue that the main insights of this methodology hinge on the difference between tradition and reception studies, as well as in their pertinence regarding Humanities studies. On the one hand, classical tradition studies are centered on the transmission and the spreading of classical culture by emphasising the influence of the classical authors. On the other hand, classical reception studies examine the idea of tradition as an ongoing process in which every response to any classical text modifies the image of its influence. In other words, those receptions are different versions in which classical works have been transmitted.

Nevertheless, the term 'classical tradition' has been replaced by "classical receptions," which was coined in the 90s (De Pourcq 220). De Pourcq argues that the nomenclature 'reception', namely 'classical reception studies,' prompts to "reorganize and to refresh the study of 'the classical tradition' by adopting new intellectual practices from the contemporary humanities" (222).

Furthermore, this Final Degree Essay uses a methodology of sex and gender, whose

main insights are the following ones. According to Stephen Orgel, Shakespeare's works put the stress on male sexuality and power, compared to women's annulment by male characters, mostly when it comes to sexuality and identity. As such, women were associated to weakness, therefore the fear of feminisation was seen as dangerous to the male figure: "Associating with women, falling in love, was inherently dangerous to the masculine self: lust, it was said, effeminates, makes men incapable of manly pursuits" (Orgel 3). On account of female behaviour in Renaissance drama, generally passionate and affective women were perceived as less strong, less intelligent than male characters (Orgel 4). Indeed, to my mind, this attitude reflects the spirit of mind of the time concerning male domination over women. An illustrative example of this misogyny can be detected in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, given the fact that he mistreats both his beloved Ophelia and his mother Gertrude. However, as seen above, the fear of becoming unmannish may be perceived in the character of Hamlet himself. To all intents and purposes, he does not behave precisely as a strong and fearless man, but strikingly postpones his vengeance portraying a feminised image of a procrastinating and dubitative scholar.

2. Shakespeare's theatre in context

There is no doubt that early modern London was the major theatrical city, as Frynes Morrison claimed.¹ The decades between 1567 and 1642 presented an unprecedented and still unparalleled flourishing of theatrical art. In fact, there was more theatre in the city of London than anywhere else, and not only did the quality of its actors blossom, but also the quantity of offered plays in those days. In regards to the variety of theatres in terms of different spaces and companies, the relevant ones were the following: the Boys of St. Paul's, an acting company of youths which accommodated fewer than 100 wealthy citizens, and the Swan Theatre which, on the other hand, accommodated over 3,000 people from all social backgrounds.² Therefore, the theatre was indeed a sign of wealth and variation, being "an art form both elite and popular" (Gossett, Howard, Eisaman Maus, McMullan 93), as it provided entertainment for the royalty. Nonetheless, it was seen as a threat to public health by the government, during plague outbreaks. Regarding Henslowe's work *Diary* (1539-1562), it is noteworthy noting that it provides readers with a sense of

¹ All this section relies heavily on Morrison.

² *Hamlet* is full of metatheatrical references, one of them being a reference precisely to the boys' company, as well as to the Admiral's Men and the Chamberlain's Men. Cf. II.2.308-09.

how the theatrical business worked, plays in general, various clothing, and the relation between playwrights and artisans. Besides, this work happens to be an eye-opener of how many plays disappeared during that period: about 280 titles, of which at most 31 have survived.

When it comes to the playhouses themselves, they were generally open-air facilities. In 1567, theatres should follow the model which consisted of a polygonal structure, although this shape changed throughout the time, as later ones were rectangular and larger than this established model. In truth, there were two generations of playhouses: the Theatre, the Curtain and the Rosa from the first generation (1577-1595); the Swan, the Globe and the Hope, from the second generation (1595-1613), which were more appealing owing to their decoration.

It should be noted that these open-air places had a “common spacial and social logic” (Gossett, Howard, Eisaman Maus, McMullan 95), as they were separated according to how much the audience had paid: a penny for standing in the yard, two for lower levels, three for upper levels, whereas sixpence for the most exclusive seats.

Despite being hierarchically organised, playhouses were rarely inclusive, since wealthy spectators had to share a place of entertainment with inferior social classes. Nevertheless, both the poor and the royalty did not use to visit playhouses.

As per the main aim of inns, not only were they destined for performances but also for hosting acting companies. It is due to being located within the city walls, thus favouring acting sites in winter, where the weather happened to be a threat.

Dealing with the main concerns of this End of Degree Project, namely a gendered perspective over Shakespeare’s theatre world and *Hamlet*, it must be pinpointed that male figures played female roles, although these roles were performed by apprenticed boys aged 12, sometimes even 20 years old. These youngsters were on the threshold of male sexuality: they did not have a beard yet nor their voice had changed to a lower pitch. In my view, these boys could be considered somewhat androgynous, thus offering very interesting possibilities of study and even dramaturgy from the viewpoint of the so-called Queer studies and LGTBQ community researchers.

As per the audience, from a gender perspective, it is worth noting that it was composed by both men and women. According to Mann, women were actively engaged in the theatre world, namely, they did frequently visit playhouses:

The wives of citizens were regular playgoers throughout the whole period (...) Ladies went relatively rarely to the common playhouses before 1600, but were in numbers at the Globe from 1599 to 1614 (Mann 51).

Although women were not allowed to go to indoor playhouses before 1600 (Mann 63), the audience during Shakespeare's career was not completely male (Mann 63). Notwithstanding, "the dominant tone of the public theatre during Shakespeare's professional career was male" (Mann 63).

All in all, on the one level, the female audience did not have proper female representation those days (Mann 51), since female roles were played by young boys characterised by their androgynous appearance. On the other one, it must be noted that the higher proportion of female audience in the theatre would have made women more notable and visible to men, thus fostering what Callaghan denoted as "exemplary spectator" (*apud* Mann 61).

That being said, as the roles were only interpreted by men, the following aspects draw our attention. As I have just mentioned above, the abundance of female characters in the texts were paradoxically played by men or boys whose voice had not changed yet nor had grown facial hair. These beardless boys would be on the threshold of masculine sexuality, finding themselves in an ambiguous status between masculine and feminine, and therefore having an androgynous condition. I would like to emphasise the relevance that this performative tradition may have today for the Queer movement. Although, from a feminist perspective, these roles should certainly be vindicated by actresses, however, from a purely openminded gender perspective, the sexual ambiguity of these young actors or actresses makes them perfectly suitable for the role. In my opinion, Renaissance theatrical conventions may offer interesting performance possibilities for the LGTBQ agenda.

In the particular case of my Final Degree Essay, namely Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, these young boys would have played the compelling roles of Gertrude and Ophelia. Moreover, perhaps the role of Hamlet himself was played by a very young actor, thus portraying his dubious sexuality and character. Interestingly enough, more than performances of *Hamlet* cast a female actress to play the role of Hamlet.³

³ Indeed, in Spain a famous performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* put Blanca Portillo on stage in the role of the protagonist in 2009.

As per the training of actors in Renaissance theatre, their apprenticeship provided them with a sense of freedom when ending their acting career. Moreover, since acting companies were supervised by a landlord, troupes and playhouses owners divided profits regarding incomes, which often led to a loss of revenue.

When referring to repertories, there was a combination of themes and genres, besides combined old and brand-new material, mainly for the sake of variety. In fact, The King's Men, the company for which Shakespeare worked, performed not only "comedies, histories, tragedies", but also "interludes, morals, pastorals" (99). At first glance, it is claimed that audiences desired to see old classic material, although they enjoyed material that had been unseen so far.

Answering why Shakespeare's company was different and consequently successful, it must be highlighted that the theatre, namely the Globe, in which both the Chamberlain's Men and the King's Men performed after 1599, was a unique construction project. De facto, this playhouse was so special as it belonged to the acting company, not to a detached landlord. In addition, the Globe became a second home for their regular audience, as there was a sense of belonging to that spot.

It is considered that the court requested the acting companies' service in order to satisfy their need for entertainment, mostly between Christmas and Twelfth Night. Thus, the Master of the Revels was the person in charge of organising those royal enjoyments, and selecting the proper companies and plays from the ones available in London.

The licensing of new plays was crucial for acting companies those days since the law was concentrated on various concerns: nobody could be attacked, apart from avoiding rebellious themes and language, among others. If an acting company didn't have the license, they were severely punished. Afterwards, playacting was banned by the City authorities, as considering gathering a great amount of people a life-threatening and economic issue. By the same token, it could worsen the spread of lethal plague outbreaks.

With regards to the casting, it was enriched by diversity in terms of age and gender. First and foremost, there was a number of male apprentice youngsters who played female and children roles. Besides, a person who was responsible for maintaining scripts and the backstage organisation during the plays. Finally, there were people, mainly women, who were in charge of cleaning. When it comes to the senior actors, they were indeed the ones

who played the roles of either the fools or clowns, whose scripts were sometimes improvised.

Nevertheless, there was a lack of verisimilitude when the same actor played multiple and different roles in a short period of time: ‘The same actor, then, might have acted the aged King Lear, “old Hieronimo”, and “young Hamlet” within the span of a few days’ (109).

When considering both rehearsals and staging, it must be highlighted that this fact starts in an actor’s home rather than in a theatre itself, since they had to learn by heart their lines. Though the appearance of a character in the balcony does not happen to be as gripping as always, it might indeed enhance the dramatisation of the scene, and thus, enriching its meaning. As a matter of fact, these visual effects also occur with gestures and the *mise-en-scène* in general, as the lighting and clothing used on stage. All in all, it goes without saying that the stage setting shapes the audience’s sensory perceptions, thus drawing attention to every detail on stage in order to gather information about its meaning.

3. Shakespeare’s culture

It is unquestionable that the theory of Shakespeare’s life has been enquired by many scholars on English philology. There is a prevailing belief towards the fact that Shakespeare read everything and nothing at the same time, thus being “polymath and philistine” (De Grazia and Wells 1). However, regardless of his biography, it has been noticed that he seemed to be far more learned than he appeared to be. Thus, his striking wit was an innate gift, naturally acquired. The most plausible explanation for his little knowledge in Latin would be Shakespeare’s attendance at a Grammar School, which enabled him to immerse in Latin books (Martindale 3). Besides, he would have read more than it is asserted (De Grazia and Wells 1). By all means did Shakespeare enhance his knowledge at school. *De facto*, he might have polished his literary knowledge by reading since the “popular art” of reading may have become a trend among schools those days (De Grazia and Wells 1). What is more, the inquiry of Shakespeare’s *latinity* has been proved by showing that students from grammar schools, in this case Plymouth’s, were introduced to passages from Latin literature “at the age of eight” (De Grazia and Wells 2). Furthermore, the methodology used by scholars was memorisation, as seen in the following quotation:

Memorization was paramount, both of rules and texts. That emphasis persisted as the students moved through the forms, learning to keep the commonplace books where they were trained to record (...) any purple passage, archaism, neologism, Graecism, any obscure or verbose expression, any abrupt or confused order, any etymology, derivation, or composition worth knowing, any point of orthography, figure of speech, or rhetorical passages (De Grazia and Wells 3).

As a matter of fact, Shakespeare had shown his knowledge of Latin whilst being schoolmaster in his country. In contrast, Richard Farmer reveals a contrary outlook in terms of Shakespeare's 'small latin', establishing a principle in his *Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare* which disclaims any apparent likeness between a Shakespearean and a Classical passage (Martindale 5). Therefore, it is claimed that Shakespeare did not imitate the Classics since there is no evidence of him reading the Ancient masterpieces: 'if Mr. Shakespeare had not read the ancients, he had likewise not stolen anything from them' (Baldwin, vol.1, p. 19) (Martindale 5). In contrast, Pollard supports Shakespeare's management of Greek by reading translations, yet he had little knowledge. In other words, Shakespeare's wit was colossal in comparison to her concise schooling:

Even if his Greek was not strong enough to read the original without support, Shakespeare could easily have read the bilingual Greek-Latin editions of Euripides's play, especially Erasmus's widely circulating translation, and/or any of the vernacular translations, and his extensive verbal echoes from the play suggest that he almost certainly did (Pollard 1076).

Concerning Shakespeare's acquaintance with mythology, he had wide awareness of the Classical myths, regarding both names and plots: "Shakespeare's relative lack of classical learning makes the extent to which his imagination was fired by Graeco-Roman mythology and history, and the prevalence of Greek and Roman settings among his works, all the more remarkable" (Martindale 9). In other words, Shakespeare did not imitate the Classics directly, yet he learned how to write by imitating the works he had read, mainly from the most praised writers, as Plutarch, Seneca and Ovid (Martindale 11). As we will

see of the remaining part of this Final Degree Essay, *Hamlet* is crowned with references to both Greek and Roman Antiquity, though as I will prove, his main source, and the Classical character that haunts his imagination to the fullest is Euripides' Hecuba and her revenge from the atrocious crimes she suffers.

4. Gendered crimes in Greek mythology and their classical reception in Shakespeare

4. 1. Atrocious crimes committed by friends: The killing of Polydorus

- The atrocious crime:

Broadly speaking, it should be pinpointed that what makes the killing of Polydorus a strikingly atrocious crime is the fact that it is committed by her mother's close friend, named Polymestor. As a matter of fact, the most striking aspect of the crime is the lack of empathy of the murderer towards the victim, who was a defenceless youth. In other words, Polymestor takes the life of an infant who was a guest in his house, plus whose upbringing was entrusted to him by his best friends. Furthermore, not only does he take advantage of the child's vulnerability, but also violates the right of childhood. Apart from exploiting his vulnerable situation, Polymestor disrespects his beloved friend, Hecuba, and his guest (ξένοσ). As such, in this play, an image of tragic *pathos* is strikingly depicted. In fact, this sense of pathos is depicted from the very first passage of the tragedy:

I come
out of the pit that hides the dead,
out of the gate-guarded darkness
where Hades lives separate from other gods.
I come,
Polydorus, Hecuba's son
and Priam's. My father saw danger—
our Troy falling under Greek spears.
Fearful, he smuggled me from Trojan soil
to Polymestor, his friend in Thrace,
who plants these fertile plains
and rules a horse-loving people.
And my father sent me with much secret gold.

Then, if the walls of Troy should fall,
his children— those who lived – would not be poor.
And I was youngest of Priam's sons.
He smuggled me out, for I was a boy,
too young to carry heavy shield and lance. (1-18; 89).

- **The motivation of the crime:**

In regards to the motivation of the crime, it must be highlighted that Polymestor committed such atrocious crime for the sake of economic growth and greed. Thus, the fact of murdering an infant for no logical reason whatsoever, and being the infant's ghost himself who, in the prologue of the play, delivers a soliloquy announcing his murdering, is what provokes a moving reaction in the audience and evokes tragic pathos.

My father's friend killed me as I grieved. For gold
he killed me and threw my body in the sea
so he could keep that gold within his house. (29-31; 89-90)

As a matter of fact, this behaviour moved by pure greediness is strongly linked to other Shakespearean characters who follow Polymestor's steps. For instance, it should be noted that Claudius murders his brother King Hamlet in order to aspire to the Crown, not because of his being in love with King Hamlet's wife, Gertrude. Likewise, the character of Iago in *Othello* is portrayed by wrath and rage towards Othello for having chosen Cassio, who lacks battle practice, instead of him. Similarly, Macbeth also murders King Duncan, his host, because of the former's greedy political ambitions. Consequently, Macbeth's reason for murdering the King shows a likeness to Polymestor as well as to Claudius, as these three male figures are willing to dispose of another person's life, so as they can achieve their own personal goals.

- **Polymestor's betrayal towards Hecuba**

It goes without saying that Polymestor betrayed one of his beloved ones, the Trojan Queen, Hecuba. Thus, it could be argued that Polymestor's betrayal to Hecuba in the form of murder resembles Claudius' betrayal towards both King Hamlet, since poisoning him,

and the mourning character of Prince Hamlet. To the same extent as Hamlet's figure, Hecuba embodies the image of an emotive and fragile monarch at once (Pollard 1072). Nevertheless, unlike Hamlet's grief, defined by Harold Bloom as "hesitant mourning" (406), Hecuba's lament and wrath do represent 'a potent threat to unjust male rulers', in other words, the tyrants, as Pollard asserts in her article (1072). Therefore, this feeling of justice is undoubtedly what inspires Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to plan Hamlet's revenge towards his uncle Claudius, thus embodying tragedy's force over tyranny. (Pollard 1073). The argument regarding Hecuba's lament is maintained throughout Pollard's work:

As a synecdoche for Greek tragedy, then, Hecuba shows that the powerful emotions generated by female lament, especially when authorized by maternity, can lead to justified violence against tyranny. Capable of melting audiences and destroying kings, Hecuba offers a model of tragedy with both emotional and political power (1074).

4.2. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

4.2.1. Hecuba's context in the Shakespearean Era

The sensibilities of audiences change over the years. As such, Hecuba, for instance, was a role model in the Renaissance era, due to her savageness and wild justice. Indeed, this tragedy complied with the canons of the time, which preferred passages filled with desolate mothers and slaughtered daughters (Pollard 1066). As Pollard asserts, Hecuba was acknowledged as a symbol of Greek tragedy in the Early Modern time (1064). In other words, Hecuba becomes the epitome of 'passionate grief and triumphant revenge' (Pollard 1065).

It goes without saying that Greek tradition has visibility in the Elizabethan period, thus evoking in Shakespeare a sense of curiosity. Even if he had a "small Latin and less Greek" (Martindale 2), this scarcity in Greek tragedy did not restrain the author to offer a contemporary male version of Euripides' *Hecuba*: *Hamlet*. Indeed, Shakespeare did examine the effects of tragedy regarding a tragic protagonist, the tragic conventions as crime, the appearance of a ghost, violence, among others, and "a dramatic model for engaging audiences with tragic affect" (Pollard 1077).

When it comes to our contemporary era, readers have empathy towards Hecuba's character throughout the first part of the passage due to her tragic downfall. To be precise, Nussbaum claims the following:

On the one hand, she herself is a very strong case of firm adult good character (...) On the other side, we are presented with circumstances of unusual extremity: in a time of general social upheaval, her deepest and most trusted friend has committed, heedlessly, the worst crime (407-408).

Nevertheless, this compassion fades by the time the elderly woman's behaviour changes, being devoted to foreseeing revenge as justice, and murdering Polymestor's children. Besides, readers tend to wonder about the children's blame regarding their father's act of cruelty (and impiety) by murdering the Queen's son, owing to their lack of guilt. Hence, at first glance, Hecuba's character evokes nobility, although this feature disappears as the play develops. On the contrary, Elizabethan audiences admire Hecuba's resolution to exact her revenge against her enemy. This revenge was actually seen as pure justice, or more appropriately, retributive justice.

As previously mentioned, Greek tragic women represented both the emotional transmissions of drama and the complex process of literary transmission in the Early Modern stages. As a matter of fact, they proposed unnatural and extended forms of literary influence, which challenged the traditional intertextual models (Pollard 3). Women in Greek tragedy appealed to early modern readers and spectators through Latin writers such as Ovid, Seneca, and Virgil, besides other Greek writers as Aristophanes, Heliodorus, and Plutarch. It is undoubtedly declared that Latin literary response to Euripides' lamenting female images played essential roles in conveying their emotional power to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, but the growing field of Greek literacy provided new "intimate forms of access". Thus, as Pollard maintains, Shakespeare's most reachable Greek source was Plutarch, granted a particularly effective channel for transmitting tragic material. This statement is asserted afterwards by Gordon Braden who argued that "Shakespeare was learning from the Greek tragedians whether he realized it or not" (*apud* Pollard 3). As observed in Pollard's work, through his adoption of Greek tragic icons as Hecuba, among others, Shakespeare declares himself as "heir to the Greek dramatic tradition" (4). In the

distinguished realm of tragedy's Greek originals, the vast majority of early modern preferences were focused on women:

80 percent of the Greek tragedies printed in individual or partial editions before 1600 featured female protagonists—strikingly higher than their 51 percent ratio in the full of extant Greek tragedies— and in the more accessible realm of vernacular translations, the number is an even higher 94 percent (Pollard 6).

These female-centred plays focus on fearless women: “especially raging, bereaved mothers, and sacrificial maiden daughters who respond heroically to death” (Pollard 6). Thus, these figures, namely Hecuba and Polyxena, transform their *pathos* into unanticipated forms of vindication by appealing to sympathy. Besides, these heroines earn *kleos* or fame by “drawing on affectively charged rhetorical power to attract allegiances and respond to threats”, as Pollard declares (7).

To be precise, women in this play and other Euripides' plays are the ones who have the most vulnerable position, as they are the ones who are “raped and enslaved in wartime, while their men at least have the chance to die bravely” (Nussbaum 413).

4.2.2. Hamlet as a failed Hecuba

In arguing that Hecuba and Hamlet resemble each other. Both characters go from a noble mindset, as being the Trojan Queen and Prince of Denmark, to absolute dehumanisation of the character, evoking thus to a peripeteia. Notwithstanding, Hamlet differs from Hecuba for several reasons: Hamlet is a male, unmarried, and childless character, whilst Hecuba was a married, female character with offspring. Besides, Hecuba carefully masterminded her revenge, and succeeded as both “triumph and just”, in Pollard's words (1067), unlike Hamlet, who procrastinates and eventually fails in his avenge. Hence, it could be argued that Hamlet represents a failed Hecuba. Yet he opts to use metatheatre, namely a play-within-the-play motivated by his ruminations about Hecuba in order to take revenge, before seeking for his revenge.⁴ This defines Hamlet's inability to play the role of “the traditional figure of lament and revenge represented by Hecuba” (Pollard 1084).

As per Hamlet and Hecuba parallel indicates, Shakespeare's Hamlet resembles the figure of Euripides' raging Hecuba, as the Shakespearean character depicts Hecuba's

⁴ He puts on stage a dumb show about the poisoning of a King (*Hamlet* II. ii.).

capacity to shape audiences in her own image as a “synecdoche for the mysterious workings of the tragic theater” (Pollard 9). It is asserted that Hamlet implicitly competes with Hecuba, the period’s reigning icon of Greek tragedy, underscoring the gap between his own “unpregnant” reticence towards action and the triumphant vindication rooted in her physiological and literary fertility (Pollard 22). By and large, Shakespeare self-consciously constructs his male tragic protagonist, so-called Prince Hamlet, in negotiation with a female-centred Greek tradition, in which the Trojan Queen, Hecuba, quintessentially portrays the genre’s power to move audiences in those days (Pollard 22).

As a matter of fact, *Hamlet* is the only work which has been preserved almost completely in which a Ghost leads the prologue. In both *Hamlet* and *Hecuba*, the prologue is characterised by the presence of a Ghost’s speech. Thus, once Shakespeare wrote his *Hamlet*, there was a poetic convention in which the subgenre of revenge tragedies were required to embrace the idea of the Ghost. Regarding the first passage within *Hecuba*’s tragedy, this appearance of the Ghost is inputted by a murdered child, an infant spectrum, which provokes a moving reaction in the audience and evokes tragic *pathos*. This contrasts with *Hamlet*’s, which is led by the ghost of an elderly man. In this case, Hecuba foresees the misfortune by dreaming, though she is not able to see the ghost of her dead son. Eventually, Polydorus, the Ghost, announces to the surprised audience that he had been murdered pitilessly by Hecuba’s closest friend, Polymestor. As asserted by Martha C. Nussbaum, Polydorus’ entrance to the stage is unusual, namely as a child-ghost revealing a striking fact: “This child, as he soon tells us, has been brutally murdered by his parents’ best friend, to whom they had entrusted him for safe-keeping in wartime. Killed for his money, he has been tossed, unburied, into the waves that break on this Thracian shore” (397). It is claimed that few prologues in the Greek tragedy have been spoken by a ghost or even a child, that is why Polydorus’ entrance is shocking for the audience. Thus, Euripides puts on stage this painful play which is focused on “the nature of good character, its connection with a child’s trusting simplicity, its vulnerability to disease when trust is violated” (Nussbaum 398). This fact undoubtedly maintains the subgenre of revenge tragedy: it is a revenge tragedy within an intra-family circle, besides committed crimes are executed by beloved ones, from unexpected characters. Whilst in *Hamlet*’s murder plot, there is a fraternal crime, as King Hamlet is poisoned by his own brother, and perhaps, his wife Gertrude, who has been committing infidelity with Hamlet’s brother, Claudius. When

it comes to betrayal from *philos*, trust can be destroyed by how others act (Nussbaum 405). In Nussbaum words:

If speeches and oaths no longer look reliable, if I question everything and look for betrayal behind every expression of love, I am, quite simply, no longer a noble person; perhaps no longer a person at all. This, as we shall see, is Euripides' central interest in Hecuba's fate (405).

To the same extent as Hamlet's figure, Hecuba embodies the image of an emotive and fragile monarch at once (Pollard 1072). Nevertheless, unlike Hamlet's mourning, Hecuba's lament and wrath do represent 'a potent threat to unjust male rulers', in other words, the tyrants, as Pollard asserts in her article (1072). Therefore, it goes without saying that this feeling of justice is what inspires Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to plan Hamlet's revenge towards his uncle Claudius, thus embodying tragedy's force over tyranny (Pollard 1073). The argument regarding Hecuba's lament is maintained throughout Pollard's work:

As a synecdoche for Greek tragedy, then, Hecuba shows that the powerful emotions generated by female lament, especially when authorized by maternity, can lead to justified violence against tyranny. Capable of melting audiences and destroying kings, Hecuba offers a model of tragedy with both emotional and political power (1074).

As Hamlet evokes Hecuba in one of the most relevant tragic performances in his own tragedy, he establishes being a male version of the latter, thus identified with her strength and power. In parallel, this fragment alludes to the grieving female's speech: 'Look, wh'er he has not turned his colour, and has tears in's eyes. Prithee no more!'. Despite Hecuba's absence, the fact of evoking her mighty laments is what concludes in moving the audience, thus becoming the epitome.

And all for nothing!
For Hecuba.
What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weep for her? (II.ii. 477-479)

Thereupon, the figure of Hecuba has portrayed the elimination of stereotypes in terms of androcentrism in tragedy, as stated in the following quotation: 'in tragedy the

privileges on the Self are attributed to the masculine hero' and 'the canon of tragic drama concentrates on the experience of male protagonists' (Bamber, 6; Letzler Cole 5).

Yet Hamlet compares his own suffering to the player, who appears to refer to Hecuba's woes. Furthermore, Hamlet alludes to how engaging Hecuba's performance is for the audience, by mentioning 'amaze indeed the very faculty of eyes and ears' (II.ii. 479-485). Hence, his inability to astonish as much as Hecuba does is portrayed in his speech:

What would he do
Had he the motive and that for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appall the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. (II.ii. 479-485)

4.2.3. Obsession for virility in Shakespearean Hamlet

It should be pinpointed that the subject of virility has a strong presence in the Shakespearean *Hamlet*, most notably when reflecting misery. This is what Tony Howard denoted as "the issue of Hamlet's femininity" (Howard 1). That is to say that, it is acknowledged that Shakespeare's interest in Hecuba is correlated to Hamlet's path regarding either widowed mothers or maternal wooing, i.e. his own mother Gertrude. Regarding virility of the genre, it is noteworthy that the reason why tragedy is personified as female is owing to being seen as an inducement of 'overwhelming emotions', namely womanish effects. Henceforth, it alludes to Hamlet's distress about the 'emasculating effects of tears' (Pollard 1071). This identification of female figures with the tragic tragedy merely portrayed the correlation with vulnerability and showing emotions.

Concerning Hamlet's issue with femininity, it is remarkable mentioning the sort of terms he applies with the aim of defining his failure. In fact, his comparisons to terminology such as 'whore' and 'scullion' embody his misogyny, although even his lamenting depicts his inferiority to Hecuba's passionate power.

4.2.4. *Hecuba's allusions to other female figures*

Considering *Hecuba's* relevant female figures, it should be underlined that there are striking allusions to other characters, namely Clytemnestra, whom I will compare with Gertrude in this Final Degree Essay, as well as Hecuba's daughter Polyxena, the latter resembling, in my view, Ophelia's character in *Hamlet*.

In dealing with Clytemnestra's figure, *Hecuba* undoubtedly alludes to Clytemnestra's grieving and revengeful character (Eur. *Hec.* ll. 1276-1281). In Hecuba's case, after having mourned for her dead children, her willingness of punishment for Polymestor emerges as a form of retributive justice. In fact, this statement is alleged by Christian Billing, stating that 'the verbal expression of female lament constitutes as powerful an act of violence as the deed of vengeance itself' (*apud* Pollard 50-51). What was supposed to be depicted as a failure in terms of tragedy, some critics assert that *Hecuba's* ending implied 'some scant relief to her misery' (Pollard 1068), hence being labelled as a 'tragedy of triumph', contrasting with *Hamlet's* 'tragedy of pathos' (Pollard 1068). Thereunder, the maternal figure of Clytemnestra resembles Hecuba's, since they both lament their offspring's murdering, accurately focused on a daughter's sacrificial slaughter. Beforewards, the chorus laments by pronouncing this emotional speech: 'Giving birth carries a strange and terrible [*deinon*] spell, and suffering for their children is shared by all women'.⁵

Not only does Hecuba resemble Clytemnestra, but also Gertrude in *Hamlet*, as being a widow and mother like the Queen of Troy. She is expected to have the role of a primary grieving female character. However, this statement is dismantled by Shakespeare owing to her unexpected behaviour from the audience's outlook, as Gertrude seems to be complicit in her husband's death.⁶

Consequently, raging Hamlet responds to his mother's "inadequate" mourning, plus marrying his passing father's brother:

Must I remember? why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet, within a month

⁵ Euripides, *Iphigenia Aulidensis*, 3: 394 (ll. 917-18): "δεινὸν τὸ τίκτειν καὶ φέρει φίλτρον μέγα / πᾶσιν τε κοινὸν ὥσθ' ὑπερκάμνειν τέκνων".

⁶ Scholars are divided regarding Gertrude's responsibility in the death of King Hamlet. There is no reference in the texts which can be clearly interpreted as her taking part in the murder of her husband.

Let me not think on't -- Frailty, thy name is woman!
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears: why she, even she--
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer! -- married with mine uncle. (I.ii. 142-51)

From a misogynist perspective, the fact of marrying Hamlet's uncle and not grieving was not well perceived. In other words, Hamlet's worrying about his mother's mourning rather than his own lament reflects his misogyny. As a matter of fact, Hamlet ironically compares his mother with Niobe, who mourned her children. Additionally, this correlation depicts Gertrude as 'insufficiently maternal' (Pollard 1080). Nonetheless, this discomfort emerges from the fact of Hamlet remembering his father's passing, and thus, resulting in rage towards his mother and her remarriage:

Yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling damnèd villain. (I.v. 105-109)

Hence, Hamlet's distressed and enraged laments diverge from Hecuba's, full of passion and affection. Perhaps his wrath develops on account of Gertrude not mourning as passionately as Hecuba. In fact, Hamlet reveals the reason why his words reflect the negative side of life and his thoughts of suicide. As Marta Cerezo remarks, his extreme sickness does not come from his father's passing or the fact of losing the Danish throne, but his mother's adultery with his uncle Claudius (213). This fact might reflect a syndrome related to the Classical tradition: the well-known 'Oedipus syndrome', since being attached to his mother after his father's death. Besides, this significant behaviour is characterised by mere melancholy reflected in his irascible acts.

When talking about Gertrude, one might argue that Gertrude is being simultaneously both a Hecuba as well as a failed Hecuba. She is Hecuba since she supports her son endlessly. Such is her support for Hamlet that she drinks from the poisoned glass that Hamlet was supposed to drink, and dies in the end. Consequently, she is also a failed Hecuba because the blindness of love makes her forget about her passing husband, and her

beloved son. In other words, Gertrude is considered as a failed Hecuba, not like her son Hamlet because of being incapable of taking revenge, but because of being incapable of healing her son from his worrying and because of not having properly mourned her husband. Besides, Gertrude is truly concerned about her son, by no means does she try to be careless of him. However, the fact that she is a wife who is madly in love with her husband Claudius is associated to her loving blindness to Claudius' guilt, namely killing King Hamlet and even plotting to murder Prince Hamlet, Gertrude's son.

On the other hand, Hecuba becomes an enraged mother once she realises what has happened with her offspring. In fact, her willingness to protect her children is crucial, as she prefers to be sacrificed rather than witnessing her daughter's sacrifice, and she suffers her husband's death, Priamus, as having witnessed his death: "Cry out, beg the gods—gods in heaven, gods below earth" (Eur. *Hec.* ll. 158-159). From this point onwards, the difference between Hecuba and Gertrude is strikingly noticeable, as Gertrude's behaviour differs from Hecuba's mourning. Gertrude has not been sobbing due to her husband's death, she instead remarries her husband's brother straightaway: "But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two—" (*Hamlet* I. ii. 138). Surprisingly, some critics claim that Hamlet mistreats his mother because he is truly an Oedipus. He seems furious due to his mother's remarriage to his uncle Claudius, and because his mother had not sought refuge in him after his father's passing. Furthermore, Harold Bloom closely analyses Hamlet's psyche asserting the following: "He is a hero who pragmatically can be regarded as a villain: cold, murderous, solipsistic, nihilistic, manipulative" (404).

In dealing with my comparison with Iphigenia, to my mind, there is a certain closeness to Hecuba's tragic *pathos*, chiefly regarding Polyxena. Both Iphigenia and Polyxena were unjustly sacrificed daughters for the sake of Gods, and war. Therefore, concerning Ophelia in *Hamlet's* tragedy, her blind obedience to her father certainly alludes to Iphigenia's sacrifice, whose life was taken by her father "for matters of state negotiated by men" (Pollard 1087). Unlike Hamlet's grief, Ophelia's laments in response to her father's passing prove to be moving for the audience, since Claudius declares of being "like to a murdering piece, in many places" (IV. ii. 94). Despite not taking revenge herself, her emotional power of grief echoes Hecuba's strength, thus representing, as stated by Pollard, "the lyrically lamenting female figure of classical tragedy" (1087). On this basis,

Ophelia chooses to obey his father's love and willingness over fighting for Hamlet's love, and consequently, drowning herself in a lake as a protest for Polonius' death. It is claimed that perhaps the only one who could have saved Prince Hamlet would have been Ophelia, since all the other characters, except for Horatio and the Royal guard, are not reliable and seem to have accepted the new royal couple. Nevertheless, Ophelia takes an opposite direction by refusing Hamlet's love and ignoring his hopes. She sacrifices herself to the noble political policies of both her brother Laertes and her father Polonius, as both pressured her. It must be highlighted that Ophelia considers Hamlet as superior to her, besides she believes that he is going to use her as a toy. Thus, she resembles Polyxena, despite the irony of class difference: Polyxena is a princess, while Ophelia is just the daughter of a person lacking in royal blood.

When referring to Ophelia and Polyxena, there is a resemblance between both deaths, since both of them evoke eroticism. It seems that eroticism in the death of young women was a tendency in Classical literature, written mainly by male authors. It was based on eroticising the young body of the dying maiden. When it comes to the eroticism of Polyxena's death, one can thus perceive a male gaze on Polyxena's body, which becomes a sort of sculpture: "she grasped her robe and tore it wide open/ from shoulder straight down to her navel/ and showed breasts that gleamed like a statue's carved to honor the gods" (Eur. *Hec.* ll. 91-94). Moreover, it is worth noting the "maidenly modesty" of her death, as described by Nussbaum (405), since when she falls down, she covers her breasts, which are the parts that had previously been exposed. In relation to this statement, it is undoubtedly seen that there are women "whose bodies are regarded as part of the spoils of war", as happens with Polyxena's eroticism (Nussbaum 413). Meanwhile, in Ophelia's case, the whole lyrical song that she sings with the flowers she has been collecting and distributing happens to be symbolically structured on an erotic game. She is not aware that the folk songs that she is singing have a strongly erotic tone. This erotic play is located in a *locus amoenus*, an idyllic place where eroticism takes place. What is more, this play is found in seeing the virginal purity of a girl picking flowers. To be precise, picking flowers is a literary topos of poetry (*collige, virgo, rosas*) which alludes to the beauty of the young future bride preparing her bridal bouquet, and also alludes to the transition from adolescence to a married life. Hence, a high-erotic game is created, where we observe an

innocent girl who, on the one hand, evokes desire and, on the other hand, is detached from all desire because she dies as a virgin when she drowns.

Indeed, Ophelia embodies the innocent charm of a maiden who attempts to be faithful and obedient to her father and brother, as well as not understanding why her loving Hamlet has stopped loving her and mistreats her verbally. Furthermore, Ophelia's character is focused on the idea of 'nothing' and the absence (Cerezo 229-230):

Ophelia	I think nothing my lord.
Hamlet	That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
Ophelia	What is, my lord?
Hamlet	Nothing. (III. ii. 104-107)

Besides, the following quotation reinforces the "women's marginality" represented by Ophelia's figure. According to Cerezo:

Since male sexuality, represented by the phallus, is symbol of power, of speech, of authority, Ophelia's sexual organs are nothing, they represent the lack of the phallus, the absence of power, thought, and speech. (230)

As a matter of fact, some critics state that Ophelia's clothing was linked with her behaviour as a virgin. In Cerezo's words: "Ophelia offers us Elizabethan conventions of female insanity traditionally linked with very specific messages about women and sexuality. Her white dress implies that she is a virgin and contrasts with Hamlet's attire" (230).⁷ Nevertheless, Showalter assumes that the flowers on Ophelia's head suggest "the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination" (81), and the act of giving flowers might denote her sexual deflowering. Besides, her messy hair is linked with sexual violence and eroticism at the same time (*apud* Cerezo 231).

⁷ Not to mention that Ophelia's character has been performed by plenty of women for centuries. In fact, Showalter pinpoints a relevant fact when it comes to Ophelia's representations in theatre: Considering Ellen Terry's performance in 1878, Ophelia's role was played from a feminist viewpoint as a character who is a "sexually intimidated and terrified woman". However, Terry played a different role by not wearing white, the colour which Ophelia has always worn, evoking innocence. Instead, the actress wore black, which happens to be Hamlet's colour, as a way of remarking Ophelia's power on stage. Thus, Terry conveyed a message in which Ophelia had a new image, an image of a strong and inspiring woman.

Taking Ophelia's behaviour into account, I must highlight that her way of behaving was seen as following in the Elizabethan period: "Female melancholy was denoted as something biological and emotional, whereas male melancholy was associated with 'intellectual brilliancy'" (231). Consequently, as pointed by Showalter, Ophelia is linked to the role of the madwoman during the romantic period, as she "drowns in feeling" (Showalter 1993: 83), since she is associated with female suffering, madness and mixed emotions (*apud* Cerezo 232).⁸ Furthermore, the image of Ophelia was always related to an artwork (235).

Some critics argue that the way Hamlet treats Ophelia as an object, namely as a prostitute is just "a reflection of his attitude towards women in general after his mother's marriage to Claudius" (Cerezo 258-260). Thus, one might assume that both Ophelia and Gertrude are the reason for Hamlet's mad misogyny. In fact, this lack of empathy is highly perceived by Harold Bloom among others: "He has no remorse for his manslaughter of Polonius, or for his vicious badgering of Ophelia into madness and suicide" (408-9).

Considering Ophelia's lyrical songs, I believe that there is a closeness between her songs and Hecuba's grief chanting. Broadly speaking, both characters are in some way coping with their disappointment in the world. However, Ophelia portrays a more innocent way of expressing her disappointment, whereas Hecuba grieves before moving on to take revenge. According to Nussbaum, Hecuba's song reflects "a new convention (*nomos*) and a new way of ordering the world" (409). As seen in this passage where Hecuba is chanting:

No words for this, no name, it more than stunts,
not godly, not bearable—where are friendship's laws? Damn you! Oh how
you hacked my son's flesh,
your steel blade cutting his arms, his legs,
and you showed him no pity. (Eur. *Hec.* ll. 754-757)

Taking everything into consideration, one might argue that Hamlet's subdued position in his own play certainly emulates a 'typical' femininity, in which he behaves as a

⁸ As Cassandra is also mentioned in *Hecuba*, there could be a correlation with Ophelia, as Cassandra conjured up the image of the madwoman who suffers the violence of men. In the Classical tradition, Cassandra is depicted as a beautiful maiden suffering from insanity. In Euripides' *Hecuba*, she is the lover of Agamemnon, who has picked up from the Trojan women captives to make her his concubine or bed-slave.

passive, observing character, rather than drawing the audience's attention and being more contributing in the play. Henceforth, Hamlet's role is presented as a mirror and active observer to the female figures, without achieving triumphant revenge, unlike Hecuba and, in a certain way, Ophelia. In fact, it has been pinpointed by Leverenz in "The Woman in *Hamlet*" that Hamlet's wrath towards his beloved Ophelia "mirrors the protagonist's rejection of his own womanish inability to act" (*apud* Cerezo 230), referring to the unmannish Prince of Denmark. Thus, making a gender contrast, it is strikingly noted that the fact of Hamlet postponing his vengeance portrays a "feminised" male character, namely not "mannish" enough in terms of the male role model those days, who had to be brave and strong. Much to our surprise, Hamlet behaves unlike Hecuba, who takes revenge instantly, rejecting the fact of postponing her wrath to take revenge for the murdering of her offspring, despite her weakness in terms of gender and politics, besides being in a position of great vulnerability. Moreover, this enraged mother achieved revenge eventually also thanks to the aid of a women's community which empathises with her situation, unifying their strength as a feminine sorority⁹. However, contrasting that point with Hamlet, he undoubtedly has her same reasons to seek revenge, besides the audience waits for him to take action, as being a young male character. Though his unexpected error is to postpone revenge, letting himself go by hesitation, being thus incapable to avenge himself in the end. In Bloom's words, Hamlet is "the man who thinks too much; who could not make up his mind; who was too good for this task, or his world" (406).

Therefore, I must underline that the paradox is that Hecuba gets strength, is "capable of remaining firm in adversity" (Nussbaum 406) and help in spite of her gender vulnerability and she successfully takes revenge. Whereas Hamlet, being in such a position of power as being a scholar male heir, rather delays his vengeance, thus representing his scarcity of manhood. He loses the support of his beloved ones, namely his mother's and lover's, among others.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this research, I have carried out the revision of Greek mythology as well as of Shakespearean theatre from a gendered perspective, focusing both on

⁹ It should be noted that the most touching words pronounced in the whole play are devoted to Ophelia after her demise (V.i. 223-224).

resemblances and polarities regarding the characters in both realms. More specifically, I paid particular attention to female characters. As such, I have vindicated the influence of Euripides' Hecuba as well as other relevant characters from well-known Euripidean tragedies, such as Polyxena or Iphigenia, as a compelling source of inspiration for Shakespeare's *Hamlet's dramatis personae*. These characters have been powerfully evoked in the imagery of Shakespeare's poetic construction. This is especially noticeable concerning the prodigious courage of the afore-mentioned female characters from Antiquity, which, in my view, have been exquisitely appropriated in classical receptions such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Undeniably, Prince Hamlet is beholden to be the reverse version of the unflaggy and invincible Hecuba, reflecting a gender paradox between both characters. This results in his postponing his revenge, in contrast to Hecuba's willingness to avenge her children's unjust murdering. In conclusion, Hamlet's power position as a male scholar and legitimate heir of the Danish throne does not give him a boost, whilst this desolate mother manages to succeed in her 'retributive justice', despite being a slave and having lost everything she had and loved: her kingdom, her husband and her offspring.

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