

## Murder and Madness: War Trauma, Revenge, and Academic Discomfort with Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Star Wars: Rebels*

Assassinato e Loucura: Trauma de Guerra, Vingança, e Desconforto Acadêmico com *Hécuba* de Eurípides e *Star Wars: Rebels*

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At first glance, the animated television series *Star Wars: Rebels* might seem a poor place to look for echoes of *Hecuba*, but by the third and fourth seasons, the episodes centering on the character of Sabine Wren directly echo the depth of emotion, anger, and desire for vengeance that have both drawn readers to and repulsed them from Euripides' *Hecuba* since she exacted her price in blood from Polymestor for the murder of her son, Polydorus. Granted, *Rebels* is a story for a younger audience and thus stops Sabine short of the fullness (and gruesomeness) of revenge that *Hecuba* reached, but at no point is Sabine's anger shown to be anything other than valid.

The episode *The Trials of the Darksaber* finishes with one of Sabine's mentors, Kanan Jarrus, training her in the use of a lightsaber and accusing her of being a coward and traitor to her people. He does so with the aim of helping her *release* the rage and regret she grapples with; in her youth, Sabine built a weapon for the Galactic Empire that was later used against her people, and she has spent most of her life fighting the Empire to try and make amends. Her dialogue takes center stage, overpowering her teacher, railing against accusations of cowardice before admitting her complicity in enslaving her people. The emotional height reached in this and later scenes — her fears that the weapon she helped create may have exterminated her family and the final moment when she meets her foe, Imperial Governor Tiber Saxon — ultimately center around *how* Sabine grapples with the impulse towards vengeance.

As *Star Wars: Rebels* is aimed at young adults (that nonetheless found favor with older audiences), Sabine eventually makes the “right” choice at the behest of a newly acquired mentor, Bo-Katan Kryze, and does *not* use her weapon to torture Tiber Saxon to death. Instead, she sabotages it, leading to the destruction of the villain’s entire base with him and his contingent of Imperial soldiers still inside, managing to both get her revenge and liberate her home world.

Sabine’s story echoes Hecuba’s in broad strokes: both are dispossessed of home at the mercy of a larger military power, their families dishonored by conquerors, and motivated to avenge a personal offense. Hecuba, the enslaved queen of Troy, sees her last remaining daughter slain because Odysseus claims that the ghost of Achilles demanded it. Sabine narrowly rescues her father from execution by the Empire and, for a moment, rages over the incinerated corpses of warriors from her clan. Hecuba organizes the women of Troy to take revenge on Polymestor, and Sabine nearly tortures Tiber Saxon to death before Bo-Katan stops her. In both instances, the personal nature of the injustices faced by the protagonists drives them to their seemingly unpalatable desire for revenge. Both narratives spend a considerable amount of time asserting that avenging those losses is the driving factor that motivates the protagonists. Similarly, both narratives’ construction invites the audience to identify with the protagonists and validate their anger, focusing less on the morality of action and more on the importance of complexity when listening to their grievances.

Narratives such as those of Hecuba and Sabine, which work to validate anger and the desire for revenge, however, invite questions about the *threshold* at which oppression can or even *should* be met with violence. Such questions, though, fundamentally miss the importance of Sabine, of Hecuba, and of the anger itself, and the importance of why these two women, whose stories are so distantly related in time, can still be so similar.

The response to offense is just as important as offense itself and, in both stories, depends entirely upon the function of the characters, the ways the narrative reflects how an audience sees power, and how that audience defines the uses of violence. The framing of the characters tells us exactly *who* reflects colonizer and colonized, oppressed and oppressor, at any given time, and what becomes acceptable in response to oppression and colonization in wartime. That the focus of both *Hecuba* and selected episodes of *Star Wars: Rebels* rests on vengeful women in wartime is a deliberate choice used to highlight the moral and ethical quandaries that colonized, conquered, and marginalized peoples must grapple with as they respond to violence.

## The Matriarch

The Hecuba of Euripides has enjoyed both great popularity among playwrights and great disrepute among scholars. Grene and Lattimore (2013) note that the nineteenth century was the beginning of *Hecuba*, and by extension Euripides, as *persona non grata*, with critics citing unrelieved suffering, lyric excesses, and claustrophobic focus on Hecuba as intolerable weaknesses of the play (p. 70). More specifically, Grene and Lattimore highlight August Wilhelm Schlegel’s

*On Dramatic Art and Literature* as the origin of the comparatively more recent denigrations of Hecuba as a character and a play (p. 69), a marked contrast from the lengthy period of popularity they trace from antiquity to the Elizabethan era (p. 68-69). In a similar vein, Spranger (1927) argues that the play is simply too disjointed, contending that the tragic sacrifice of Polyxena and the revenge for Polydorus may have been two separate plays, and as such, was responsible for *Hecuba*'s most "glaring defects" (p. 155). Furthermore, Spranger references critics such as Gilbert Norwood and JJ Reiske, who found other reasons to condemn *Hecuba* as a poorly written play (p. 155).

The connecting factor between Spranger's criticisms of Euripides' *Hecuba* and Schlegel's influence on how the character, the play, and the playwright were to be regarded is that they were both commenting on *craft*. Schlegel's lectures were a treatise that aimed to seriously study drama, and Spranger makes plain that his greatest problems with *Hecuba* were how the play itself was crafted. Spranger acknowledges that *Hecuba*, despite all its faults, is full of pathos and tragedy (p. 157). In these cases, the charges laid against *Hecuba* seek to undermine the quality of the writing itself, to consider the play as somehow a weak work despite its memorable tragic climax. Spranger argues that *Hecuba* suffers inconsistencies of "action and scene," (Spranger, p. 155) and Douglas Bauer (2006), though not naming *Hecuba* specifically, rules that sentimentality, loosely defined as an excess of emotion in art, weakens writing no matter how effectively a piece sustains emotional investment from the audience (Bauer, p. 146).

In more contemporary contexts, charges against Hecuba the character tend to focus on her revenge and the ways in which it is exacted. The observation that most of the early criticisms against *Hecuba* were on the basis of craft is not in itself a new one, as Grace Zanotti (2019) notes, writing that many critics consider the first Hecuba, suffering at the hands of the Greek army and giving speeches on human excellence (or a lack thereof in some instances), and the second Hecuba, taking a seemingly uncharacteristically gruesome revenge, to be two completely different characters (Zanotti, p. 2). Zanotti traces, starting from Schlegel and ending with Martha Nussbaum, the historical influence of that debate and points to Helene Foley as a critical outlier in her analysis of Hecuba's revenge (as cited in Zanotti, 2019, p. 3). Rather than concern herself with disgust at Hecuba's vengeance or the fraught ethics therein, Foley instead situates *Hecuba* as a historically popular play, well-suited to the dramatic sensibilities of the Elizabethan playwrights for its unrelenting emotional extremity, tragic horror, and the precariousness of human fortune (as cited in Zanotti, 2019, p. 3). The ethical concerns that an audience may have about the form of Hecuba's revenge are, for Foley and Zanotti, a recent invention, and were rarely a problem for the Elizabethan playwrights who found the figure of Hecuba to be such a fruitful archetype (Zanotti, p. 3). For Zanotti, however, Foley continues the assumption that the Hecuba of the first and second halves of the play are two differently characterized figures, holding that *some* form of transformation of the self must take place for Hecuba to take her revenge on Polymestor while maintaining some form of ethical or moral consistency, yet Foley never characterizes what that transformation might be (Zanotti, p. 3).

Zanotti attempts an answer at this by arguing that Hecuba's ethical core remains consistent throughout the play. In applying Judith Butler's arguments on the particularity of loss, Zanotti locates a generative theoretical framework through which to understand Hecuba's multifaceted role in the play as victim, mourner, avenger, and commander. She charts the transformation of self that takes Hecuba from grieving mother to Fury (p. 9). However, this transition, the experience of such personal loss as conceived by Butler and applied by Zanotti, still assumes that some form of transformation of self takes place, and it is chiefly here that questions arise. Zanotti's analysis, situated in a primarily ethical and legal context, of Hecuba and the shattering of self that Hecuba endures provides valuable insight into the ethical framework of the character. Zanotti extends this to consider how Hecuba the character would have been received by an Athenian audience, particularly an audience of women who would see Hecuba, a captive and a slave, acting more freely than they themselves could under Athenian law (p. 13). It is an inspired analysis focusing on the *ethics* of Hecuba's revenge.

The ultimate verdict is that in losing her kingdom, her children, and her belief in the soundness of guest-friendship, Hecuba is only able to assert to Polymestor the full particularity of what he took from her by taking the equivalent from him, ending his line and blinding him literally the way he had done to her figuratively (Zanotti, p. 17). What's more, Zanotti notes that Euripides' play has rendered fully visible the inherent excess of revenge, that when a loss feels excessive, the way to exact payment for that loss always exceeds the loss itself (p. 16). We find ourselves hearing echoes of Bauer and his caution against exaggeration of emotion, for what is vengeance but an attempt to meet one moral outrage with another?

It is at this point that Tanya Pollard's (2017) intervention in Hecuba scholarship becomes important, particularly with respect to the play's unity and how we receive Hecuba the character as both an image of sufferer and armed avenger (p. 120). Arguments about *Hecuba*, such as those of Schlegel, Spranger, and Reiske, focus on the play's internal disunity but forget that those weaknesses of construction allow for the narrative and moral categories of Hecuba's journey from slave to avenger. Hecuba's sorrows *must* be too much to bear, or even bear witness to, because in many cases, the anger that leads one to seek vengeance *must* be an impossible burden. Hecuba *must* kill Polymestor's sons before blinding him to make him feel, in some way, the very pain she felt when she found Polydorus' body. Hecuba *must* shield her actions behind *nomos* so that she can at least assert the validity of her anger to Agamemnon. Hecuba and *Hecuba* were valuable to the Elizabethan playwrights for the transfer of grand emotion, and Hecuba and *Hecuba* are essential for contemporary audiences so that they may see the grand injustices that motivate the colonized and the marginalized to violence. With the right framing, audiences may see how Hecuba's revenge is, as Pollard says, a dark triumph (p. 120).

And Hecuba's revenge is, for her, a triumph. Euripides makes plain the indirect and direct violence that pushes Hecuba to take such gruesome action; the structure of the play, having Polyxena's sacrifice come first with no hope of

stopping it, legitimizes Hecuba's need to retaliate. Take the scene in which she begs of Odysseus to spare Polyxena:

Let her stay with me.  
 Let her live.  
 Surely there are dead enough  
 Without her death. And everything I lost  
 Lives on in her. This one life  
 Redeems the rest. She is my comfort, my Troy,  
 My staff, my nurse; she guides me on my way.  
 She is all I have. (Euripides, p. 83)

The grandiosity of Hecuba's sorrow signals to the audience that she is to be pitied. Victims are abundant in the world of the play, but for the audience, there is no greater victim than Hecuba in this moment, who can only watch, helpless, as her remaining daughter is taken as a sacrifice to Achilles. The framing of Hecuba as mourner facing excessive indignity is crucial for the play's depiction of scales of violence visited upon one person by a conquering army. The "two halves" of *Hecuba* create a unified moral whole in which Hecuba moves from passively receiving violence to finally meting out violence of her own.

Whether the violence of the Greeks and the violence of Hecuba's revenge can in some way be rendered ethical is aside from the point; the ethics of Hecuba herself are not the goal of the play but instead pose a critical problem for examining the violence within. Academic handwringing over the "two Hecubas," however, reflects a major problem with how the play has been received in more current contexts. The lingering discomfort with the two Hecubas that has seen scholars work to reconcile how Hecuba could be grieving widow in one scene and gory avenger the next echoes modern internet commenters claiming that, for example, Reva of *Kenobi* is "bad writing" without offering any example of what that "bad" writing may be (Jack McBryan, 2022), or claiming that an actor defending themselves from fan racism (since these criticisms only seem to spring up when a show prominently features a woman of color) is "throwing up the race card" (Watkins, 2022). Complaints about the craft of *Hecuba* distract from one's own discomfort with women who grapple with anger, with fear, and with violence. Hecuba's revenge, at the height of her action as her cadre of Trojan women kill Polymestor's sons before blinding him, dares the audience to deny that they would not do the same. Hecuba's vengeance instills within the audience an uncomfortable question that previous critics have forgotten: if we had suffered like Hecuba, seen what she had seen, and had one chance to avenge the wrongs done to us, would we not do the same?

The answer may be what has pushed some scholars to find fault with *Hecuba* on the basis of craft, avoiding the complicated morality of Hecuba herself.

## You Wouldn't Like Me

Martha Nussbaum (1986) notes that Hecuba's fall from grace in scholarship coincided with a dominant moral philosophy that conceived of a fundamen-

tally good will that was separate from the domain of the “moral personality,” understood as a natural goodness that is incorruptible by outside forces (p. 399). In such an environment, a character like Hecuba, who herself argues in favor of an innate goodness that can tolerate the intolerable and still be considered good (Euripides, p. 96) only to disprove her own argument, would be considered as without goodness and, thus, suffering from moral decay. For Nussbaum, the “fall” of Hecuba from innate goodness is the true tragedy of the play (p. 401). She argues that Hecuba’s value system is fragile by nature, based on agreements between humans themselves with no higher ethical tribunal that can render a fundamental judgement of ethical stability (p. 401).

Nussbaum identifies the discovery of Polydorus’ body as *the* betrayal that motivates Hecuba’s revenge, as Polymestor had violated the intimate practice of guest-friendship in a way she previously thought unthinkable (p. 407). The agreements between two households to care for one another by offering hospitality are a series of culturally inviolable exchanges, and seeing Polydorus’ body signals to Hecuba that the ethical model she has applied to the world around her is torn completely asunder (Nussbaum, p. 408). When one’s worldview is so thoroughly destroyed, they might take measures previously considered unthinkable to exact revenge.

However, there is another crucial betrayal: Odysseus ignoring *charis*. Nussbaum does not consider it a betrayal, but it can be argued that Odysseus’ demand for the sacrifice of Polyxena to appease Achilles, as he claims, is a betrayal in Hecuba’s eyes, the first one that begins to shake her moral conception of the world. Kastely (1993) gives special attention to this scene and Odysseus’ response to Hecuba begging for Polyxena’s life serves as an example of the central problem of the play: those with power cannot be reached by words because they are insulated from the pain they cause to others (p. 1036). Kastely goes further, characterizing Odysseus as an annoyed bureaucrat blind to his obvious cruelty and angry that Hecuba does not “respect” his influence (p. 1038).

Hecuba indeed calls upon an earlier instance when Odysseus came to her house, in rags and desperate, and she shielded him and let him live; Odysseus himself acknowledges that he owes her his life (Euripides, pp. 81-83). However, Odysseus ignores this previous exchange and denies her request outright for his own political benefit. Polyxena will be sacrificed, and Hecuba’s faith in guest-friendship as an ethical and moral underpinning begins to unravel. If we take Odysseus’ denial of Hecuba’s assertion of *charis* as a betrayal of Hecuba’s moral world, then her seeking revenge for Polydorus’ murder seems inevitable. The first betrayal unsettles her world sufficiently enough that the second betrayal destroys it.

While Nussbaum does not identify the scene between Odysseus and Hecuba as a betrayal, she does contest the “two plays” hypothesis advanced in the nineteenth century, arguing that the play is unified by the many iniquities around Hecuba *creating* her (and by extension, her actions create the animalistic rage of Polymestor) (p. 417). More recent efforts at revisiting Hecuba the character and *Hecuba* the play continue to argue against the “two plays,” albeit through different means and, more recently, ascribing more legitimacy to her anger.

Examining the relationship between Hecuba and *nomos*, as Conacher (1961) does, hinges on the above-named “two betrayals” structure, considering the sacrifice of Polyxena a betrayal of *nomos* and *charis* in Hecuba’s eyes (p. 17). Conacher devotes much of his analysis to Hecuba’s application of rhetoric to her advantage, paying particular attention to how she manages to appeal to Agamemnon by noting that he owes her a favor since he has claimed Cassandra as a war trophy. For Conacher, Hecuba’s debasement is made clear when put in contrast to Polyxena’s “aristocratic integrity” (p. 18) as the latter goes to her death. Hecuba’s later use of Cassandra as a bargaining chip to assert her right to revenge on Polymestor for murdering Polydorus is the final “moral degradation” of her queenly *aretê* (Conacher, p. 23). Kirkwood (1947) argues that such moral degeneration is the true tragedy of Hecuba (p. 68). While Kirkwood does not spend much time establishing Polyxena as an ideal victim, he does examine Hecuba’s plotting around Cassandra as a bargaining chip. It is a section that has repulsed scholars in the past, and Kirkwood argues that discomfort is the purpose (p. 66). Hecuba dwelling on the sexual implications of Agamemnon’s enslavement of Cassandra is meant to be repulsive — Hecuba is in “complete moral ruin” (Kirkwood, p. 67).

Conacher and Kirkwood were not the only ones to contrast Polyxena as the perfect victim to Hecuba’s “moral degradation” (Conacher, p. 22). Segal (1990) cites Gellie (1980) as a still more recent indictment of Hecuba that names Polyxena as a perfect, uncomplicated victim (p. 114). Segal argues that critics who identify Polyxena’s perfect victim status and contrast it to Hecuba have fallen into Euripides’ trap (Segal, p. 114). Euripides, Segal argues, is framing a story to show the contradictions present in the Greeks’ “civilized life” (p. 116). Hecuba, for all her rhetoric, a power so prized by the Greeks, cannot move Odysseus to spare Polyxena because she has no power to back up her words. Recognizing that everyone around her — Odysseus for the favor of the army, Polymestor to fill his coffers, and Agamemnon to maintain appearances to the other Greeks — will gladly ignore *nomos* to serve their own interests, Hecuba knows that she can only successfully use rhetoric by trading favors, no matter how sordid they are. Segal even notes that Hecuba does not use Cassandra to bargain with Agamemnon lightly; Hecuba knows that she is *using* Cassandra, her only living daughter (p. 124). She forges ahead not because she has become morally bankrupt, but because she must continue living in the morally bankrupt world of war. Polyxena, in death, runs no risk of suffering such gnawing desperation that she will do something previously unthinkable.

Kastely, Segal, and Zanotti see what Gellie, Conacher, Kirkwood (to a lesser extent), Spranger, Schlegel, and others miss: repulsed by Hecuba’s actions, the latter group are quick to critique the play as excessively violent and disunified as a path to criticizing Hecuba herself, calling her morally degraded, morally ruined, and morally repugnant. Kastely, Segal, and Zanotti make the necessary observation that Hecuba is only guilty insofar as she is contending with terrible suffering. Who is more guilty? The enslaved woman who avenges herself on the murderer of her son, or the conquering army that has reduced her to such “moral degradation?”

## Rebuilding a Planet

So what links Sabine Wren to Hecuba?

In *Star Wars: Rebels*, secondary protagonist Sabine Wren is an artistic demolitions expert who helps start a nascent rebellion against the Galactic Empire. By the third season, she has come into possession of a famed weapon, the Darksaber, from her home planet, Mandalore, which is under occupation by the Empire and has historically been unaligned in major galactic conflicts, despite the Mandalorians' reputation as feared warriors. Convinced that they may be able to liberate her home planet and recruit the Mandalorians to their cause, the other protagonists convince a hesitant Sabine to train with the Darksaber as it is seen as a historically significant symbol of leadership to her people.

The season three episode "The Trials of the Darksaber" begins a significant arc of the story centered primarily on Sabine and her history, to this point hidden from other characters and the audience. It is revealed that Sabine chose a self-imposed exile from her family, a tragic, surprising, and complex consequence of her own actions. During a final training session that serves as the emotional climax of the episode, Sabine, after some intentional goading by her mentor, practically shouts:

**Kanan Jarrus:** You did run, didn't you?

**Sabine Wren:** No!

**Kanan:** But that's what your people believe, isn't it? You ran from the Empire. You ran from your family!

**Sabine:** Lies!

**Kanan:** So, what's the truth?

**Sabine:** The truth is that I left to save everyone! My mother! My father! My brother! Everything I did was for family — for Mandalore! I built weapons — terrible weapons, but the Empire used them on Mandalore! On friends! On family! People that I knew! They controlled us through fear. Mandalore! Fear of weapons I helped create. I helped enslave my people! I wanted to stop it — I had to stop it. I spoke out. I spoke out to save them! To save everyone! But when I did, my family didn't stand with me. They chose the Empire. They left me — gave me no choice. The Empire wanted to destroy worlds, and they did. They destroyed mine. (Filoni, 2017)

The dialogue, uttered between sword swings until Sabine finally disarms her teacher thus proving she has achieved both mastery and emotional release, is notable because it frames Sabine as more than complicit in the subjugation of her people. She built weapons for the Empire due to her own arrogance, simply stating that she "liked the challenge" of designing them (Filoni, 2017). It is an important and intentional choice because Sabine's past actions have little to redeem them: she admits her own complicity with the Empire without any thought as to how her work might affect her people.

Worse, she mentions that she designed the worst weapon, "The Duchess," to target the ceremonial armor her people wear, turning their most important cultural symbol against them. Sabine's weapon is revealed in the opening episodes of the fourth and final season, the two-part "Heroes of Mandalore." Continuing the effort to liberate her home planet, Sabine and company rescue her father



from public execution by the Empire. Finally reconciled with her family, Sabine's hopeful reunion is cut short when she hears her mother and brother, having completed a secondary objective, say that something is approaching before their communication abruptly cuts off. There, the first part of the narrative ends, and the framing of the final shot, with Sabine racing to their location, only to find the charred remains of their armor, makes good on the tension begun in "Trials of the Darksaber." The tragic horror at the thought that her own creation killed her family drives home Sabine's complicity in the violence suffered by her people.

Though the opening scenes in the second part of "Heroes of Mandalore" may seem to cleanly undo the previous tragedy (while the dead Mandalorians are members of Sabine's clan, her mother and her brother survive, but barely, being just out of range), these scenes make plain the horror that drove Sabine to leave her home planet in the first place: her people, the Mandalorians, wear their armor constantly as a cultural practice (Sabine notes that her own armor is nearly 500 years old) (Yost, 2017), and the weapon locks onto the special ore used in the armor's construction, incinerating the wearer. The continued connections back to Sabine's revelatory speech in "Trials of the Darksaber" loosely echo Hecuba's own tragic losses, in magnitude and particularity.

As with Hecuba, Sabine has found that her people are at the mercy of a conquering army. Sabine loses kinsmen to the rival army, though the very worst of what Hecuba endured (all her immediate family slain) is narrowly avoided. Finding that she cannot liberate the planet herself, Sabine settles for particular personal vengeance, much like Hecuba could only avenge Polydorus, not Polyxena, and sets herself to achieving that single goal by whatever means available to her.

Believing she had sabotaged the weapon before leaving the planet, Sabine surmises that the Empire can deploy the weapon but cannot repair it. The episode concludes with Sabine and company sneaking onboard the occupying Imperial ship and attempting to destroy the weapon, only to be briefly defeated by the villain of the arc, Tiber Saxon. After torturing Sabine and Bo-Katan into submission, Saxon coerces Sabine into repairing the weapon. However, far from simply repairing it, Sabine modifies it so as to increase its range and lock onto the material used for Imperial armor, rather than the Mandalorian armor she and many of her compatriots wear.

Sabine, both grieving losses in which she is complicit and furious at the Imperial deployment of her creation, echoes Hecuba's own rage but for several key differences: Sabine is acting directly against a conquering army, whereas Hecuba is not. As well, Hecuba had a cadre of Trojan women to aid her in her revenge without question, while Sabine's revenge was both frustrated by and redirected by Bo-Katan Kryze. Sabine asserts her right to revenge as she repays the torture Saxon inflicted on her moments prior, even echoing his speech to her before Bo-Katan intervenes:

**Sabine Wren:** This isn't enough power to kill you! Just to make you suffer. How does it feel?

**Bo-Katan Kryze:** Sabine, stop!

**Sabine:** Mandalore must be free!

**Bo-Katan:** At what cost?

**Sabine:** To beat the Empire, this is the *only* way.

**Bo-Katan:** It's not our way! It's *their* way. You came here to make things right. Will the future of Mandalore be one of honor or cowardice? Hope or fear? The choice is yours. (Yost, 2017)

The inclusion of Bo-Katan as a moral force during the scene of revenge drives home a different point. Sabine, like Hecuba before her, becomes both mourner and avenger. Sabine mourns her past actions and attempts her own revenge as she begins torturing Tiber Saxon (and the rest of the Imperial contingent aboard the ship), with the implication that she means to kill him. However, Bo-Katan's interruption not only confirms the excess of Sabine's revenge but demands that she make a simplified choice: consummate that revenge or complete her military objective.

Bo-Katan's ultimatum, which leads Sabine to destroy the weapon, brings the audience to the disconcerting question Hecuba's own revenge implicitly poses: having endured what she has, and seeing our opportunity for vengeance before us, would we take it?

"Heroes of Mandalore" complicates the question of violence by exploring the validity gap between insurrectionary violence and personal revenge. When Sabine chooses to destroy the weapon, there is the implication that without Bo-Katan there to stop her, she would have tortured Saxon and the rest of the Imperial force to death without hesitation. Hecuba asks us only whether we *would* be willing to take revenge by whatever means available to us, questioning whether our ethics are as strong as we might claim they are.

Sabine's journey, however, offers no purgation of the emotions of tragedy. There is, instead, an implication that we would take our revenge if not for the presence of someone warning against it.

## War Within a Breath

Ultimately, critiques of *Hecuba* naming it as one of Euripides' weaker plays, built from two shorter plays with a third subplot thrown in for good measure, sounds less like an evaluation of the play's craft and more like an attempt to avoid dealing with the morality of Hecuba herself. Arguments like those of Kirkwood or Conacher, which highlight Polyxena's perfect victimhood in contrast to Hecuba's rage and "moral degradation," may betray an unconscious attempt to dismiss the text as poorly constructed because a critic is uncomfortable with Hecuba's bargaining and violence in the morally bankrupt "concentration-camp world" of the play (Segal, p. 123). They stress that Hecuba's revenge was garish, that it was bestial; we are to see Hecuba as a cautionary tale.

Such moral complexity is precisely why Hecuba as a character archetype endures. There is an understanding among audiences that, in some situations, the only language left when faced with overwhelming tragedy is violence. To ask for a perfect victim is to invalidate the right of the marginalized, the colonized, and the oppressed to resist their oppressors. To ask why not just "talk" is to forget that conversations between oppressor and marginalized, between colonizer

and colonized, is, in the words of Ghassan Kanafani (1970) during his interview with Richard Carleton, “a conversation between the sword and the neck.”

Revenge is a language. Violence is a language. What Conacher, along with other of Hecuba’s defenders (or detractors), miss is that what they call “moral degradation,” when she appeals to Agamemnon’s capture and enslavement of Cassandra as mistress, I would call “moral desperation.” It is the last gasp of those who have been deprived of everything: of home, of family, of freedom. Such judgements, no matter how subtle, should remind us of the words of Paolo Freire (1970): “Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons — not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized.” (p. 53)

Violence is initiated by the oppressor, the conqueror, and the colonizer. And yet scholarship had a distinct period in which *Hecuba* and Hecuba were criticized for inconsistencies of “action and scene” (Spranger, p. 155) and “moral degradation” (Conacher, p. 23), respectively. Contemporary reexaminations of both the text and Hecuba prioritize her moral journey over the play’s structure precisely because that structure shows why Hecuba moves from passive sufferer of violence to avenger.

The undue scrutiny Hecuba faced from scholarship forgot that she is not degraded, but desperate. Such critiques broadly echo contemporary conversations around victims of systemic violence because those victims are rarely given room to be complicated. Women who have endured assault and rape are asked what they were wearing or are criticized for drinking (Brown and Michele, 2012, p. 77). When unarmed Black men are killed in traffic stops by armed police, reporters and pundits are quick to say that the victim “was probably no angel,” (Eligon, 2014). Hecuba was too gory and too gruesome. She was no angel.

Sabine marks an important chapter after a character takes or attempts revenge, however simple her narrative is. Sabine’s anger was not born of desperation. She had every opportunity to choose to simply complete the objective, to destroy the weapon she helped create, but instead, she initially chose to torture her enemy. While complicit in the subjugation of her own people, she is given the chance to understand her mistakes and work to correct them. Even in the middle of torturing the Imperial Governor who used the weapon to subjugate the planet, Sabine was treated as someone making a mistake, and who could make amends for that mistake: completing a military/political objective, rather than focusing only on a personal grievance. Even her destruction of the enemy base (which ultimately killed many more thousands than if she’d just electrocuted Saxon to death) is treated as heroic (the episode itself titled “Heroes of Mandalore”), proof that violence and revenge in wartime narratives still must abide by unspoken aesthetic grounds. While Sabine’s revenge ends too neatly (since Saxon dies when his base is destroyed), her moral journey manages to explore how a character can move from being passively complicit in systemic violence to actively avenging the wrongs of systemic violence within the confines of a simplified action narrative. More importantly, Sabine’s narrative validates her personal anger and her anger at the oppressive force she was once part of.

Reactions to narratives and characters who endure violence and respond with rage, like Hecuba and Sabine, betray our actual feelings towards those who suffer such violence. Those narratives are essential, however, because they offer a look at the ways in which such violence engenders feelings of both individual and collective rage and desire for revenge against forces that uphold systemic violence (Speri, 2020), whether that rage manifests as commercial property destruction (Smith and Vives, 2020; Jackson, 2020) or targeted attempts at retaliation (Agren, 2021).

How much are we willing to forgive as someone deals with some of the oppressive, all-consuming grief of war, of systemic violence, of inequality? Critiques of *Hecuba*'s supposed "excesses" reflect discomfort with how people react to oppression and violence — all too eager to judge Hecuba's violence but taking the callousness of the Greek armies as a given.

Sabine's torture of Tiber Saxon, by contrast, is as morally difficult as can be allowed within the confines of an animated show for younger audiences. She and her comrades had successfully infiltrated an enemy base, sabotaged a feared enemy weapon, and had their objective firmly within their grasp. She abandoned the objective for her own satisfaction, and as such, has less claim to her revenge by torture. Bo-Katan's intervention, which reminds Sabine of her goal to destroy the weapon (conveniently killing Tiber Saxon and his Imperial contingent), is an attempt by the narrative to question the validity of an avenger's *methods* while validating the anger itself, something that Hecuba was largely denied by other characters in her own narrative.

In any other medium, in any other story, Sabine and the other Rebels would be the villains. They would be the terrorists, bombing public displays of government force, spraying anti-government graffiti, and inspiring anti-government insurrection. And yet, other characters give Sabine the room to admit mistakes and still offer her forgiveness. When Bo-Katan (herself was once a member of an extremist fundamentalist group aligned against her own late sister, Satine) found out that Sabine named the weapon after Bo-Katan's late sister, she still gave Sabine the chance to make amends and destroy that weapon.

The push and pull between the desire for personal revenge and the desire to apply violence against a conquering force is a complex tangle that defies simple moral definition. Sabine demonstrates a generative application of rage and personal revenge as a motivator to attack a larger oppressive system. Sabine's personal revenge is explicitly problematized by other characters due to its single focus. While having that revenge be validated by the narrative once she shifts focus to her military objectives may be a relatively flat depiction of an avenger's journey, that simplicity of narrative makes the difficulty of her moral journey, from complicity with her people's oppressors to instrumental in their liberation, more apparent.

We, then, have a chance to make amends for the invalidation of *Hecuba* by past scholars. If Hecuba reflects our deeper insecurities with the complexity of trauma survivors, then Sabine is our path forward. Sabine and Hecuba are a blueprint for us to stop asking why marginalized peoples are so angry and ins-

thead examine the forces that anger them. They ask who is the true monster: the gory avenger or the oppressor who created them?

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## Resumo

A história da erudição moderna na caracterização de Hécuba de Eurípedes é uma de fascinação e repugnância simultâneas, empatia e horror, compreensão e rejeição. David Grene e Richard Lattimore citam August Wilhelm Schlegel's na *Arte e Literatura Dramáticas* enquanto a conjuntura em que a opinião dramática e acadêmica de Hécuba ficou amarga, uma tendência que continuou com estudiosos como JA Spranger, Gilbert Norwood e JJ Rieske. Meu projeto, construído a partir das explorações de Hécuba de Grace Zanotti e o estudo de Hécuba de Tonya Pollard como essencial para as mulheres de Shakespeare, afirma que a narrativa moderna, particularmente a personagem de Sabine Wren em *Star Wars: Rebels*, lida com Hécuba mais genuinamente do que os estudiosos pós-Schlegel em grande parte lidaram.

As acusações contra Hécuba são de que a personagem e as ações dela não parecem ser o trabalho de uma personagem e que a peça pode ser uma amalgamação de várias peças mais curtas que Eurípedes achou que não atenderam a duração necessária de um trabalho dramático. Tal como, eles consideram as profundidades da tristeza de Hécuba no assassinato de Polixena e as alturas de sua fúria no assassinato de Polidoro como duas diferentes Hécubas.

Eu aplico o exame de Pollard sobre a centralidade de Hécuba aos trabalhos de Shakespeare para a personagem de Sabine Wren, que tem os ecos mais fortes da Hécuba de Eurípedes, abrangendo a plenitude da emoção a partir de sua gigantesca raiva no Império Galáctico para a profundidade de sua tristeza na quase perda de sua família. Dentro dessa análise, eu argumento que a afirmação dos eruditos de que Hécuba é uma peça fraca é relutante ou incapaz de envolver-se emocionalmente com Hécuba e que até mesmo o projeto de Zanotti, que busca explicar racionalmente como Hécuba pode ser tanto a enlutada quanto a assassina, é indicativo de uma tendência na erudição moderna para não permitir que esses zênites e nadirs existam na própria arte.

## Abstract

The history of modern scholarship on Euripides' characterization of Hecuba is one of simultaneous fascination and revulsion, empathy and horror, understanding and rejection. David Grene and Richard Lattimore cite August Wilhelm Schlegel's *On Dramatic Art and Literature* as the juncture wherein dramatic and scholarly opinion of Hecuba soured, a trend that continued with scholars such as JA Spranger, Gilbert Norwood, and JJ Rieske. My project, building from Grace Zanotti's explorations of Hecuba and Tonya Pollard's study of Hecuba as essential to Shakespeare's women, asserts that modern storytelling, particularly the character of Sabine Wren in *Star Wars: Rebels*, deals with Hecuba more genuinely than post-Schlegel scholars largely have. The charges against Hecuba are that her character and her actions do not seem to be the work of one character, and that the play may be an amalgamation of several shorter plays that Euripides did not feel met the required length of a dramatic work. As such, they consider the depths of Hecuba's sorrow at the murder of Polyxena and the heights of her rage at the murder of Polydorus to be two different Hecubas.

I apply Pollard's examination of Hecuba's centrality to Shakespeare's works to the character of Sabine Wren, who has the strongest echoes of Euripides' Hecuba, encompassing the fullness of emotion from her towering anger at the Galactic Empire to the depth of her sorrow at the

near loss of her family. Within that analysis, I argue that scholarship claiming Hecuba as a weak play is unwilling or unable to engage with Hecuba emotionally, and that even Zanotti's project, which seeks to rationally explain how Hecuba can be both mourner and murderer, is indicative of a trend in modern scholarship to dismiss the validity of those emotional zeniths and nadirs in art.

