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TO GREEK AND ROMAN TRAGEDY

EURIPIDES: ANDROMACHE

Hanna M. Roisman

BLOOMSBURY

Euripides: *Andromache*

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2023

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3502- 5626-2
ePDF: 978-1-3502-5627-9
eBook: 978-1-3502-5628-6

Series: Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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For
Yossi, Elad and Helaina
and my granddaughters Talia and Yael
and for
Shalev and Diana
and my granddaughters Noa and Esti

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Preface

It is my hope that readers will discover that Euripides' *Andromache*, like many other ancient Greek tragedies, is a fascinating, poignant, action-packed play. Set in the distant mythic past, its timeless themes touch the hearts of all those who meet Andromache, the Trojan princess turned concubine, who has lost everything in the Trojan War. On the one hand, the play dramatizes Andromache's efforts to save her own life and that of the son she bore to her master, Neoptolemus, from the machinations of Hermione, her master's wife, and Menelaus, Hermione's father. On the other hand, the play also traces the emotional upheavals of the childless Hermione, who feels threatened by Andromache, because she fears that the concubine might supplant her in Neoptolemus' heart and in their home. In short, the play is an ancient version of the 'love triangle', although the notion of love as we understand it never comes up in the play, and Neoptolemus, the man at the apex of the triangle, only appears on stage at the end of the play as a corpse.

The aim of this book, written mainly for students and non-professionals, is to help readers with limited familiarity with the classical world and its literature better appreciate and enjoy the play. It discusses multiple aspects of the play, including the practices of ancient performance, the play's mythic background, and its themes and their unifying principle. In-depth analyses of the main characters are provided, while the play's complexities and ambiguities are highlighted as well. The intention was to combine substantial analysis with clarity and accessibility. Hopefully some points will also be of interest to scholars. Each chapter is written in a way that allows it to be read as a standalone chapter, while also conveying the distinctive plot structure and diverse themes Euripides introduced into this particular play. For this reason, some topics including the conflict between Andromache and Hermione, the suffering of both Greeks and Trojans after the War, and the centrality of the characters' legacy to the plot unity re-occur in various chapters. It is my hope that this adds to the quality of the book, rather than detracting from it.

Among the many people to whom I am grateful, my first thanks go to the generations of students who have studied Greek tragedy with me, whether in translations or in ancient Greek, at Tel Aviv University, Colby College, Cornell University, and American University. Their probing questions inspired me to consider not only this play but Greek tragedy as a whole from fresh points of view.

I owe special gratitude to a group of people whose encouragement and support during the writing of this book never wavered. Special thanks are owed to my good friend Dr. Jill Yonassi, who gave me the generous gifts of her patience, encouragement, insights, comments and inspiration over the years, as well as making this book more readable. She has been a constant source of strength and support. To Karen Gillum I owe thanks for her meticulous checking of references and insightful comments, and to Julie Brown for reading and commenting on early drafts. Alice Wright and Lily Mac Mahon helped me every step of the way in the development of this book and have my profound gratitude.

My beloved family was always there for me, even though the last part of this manuscript was written at a very challenging time for me. Thank you Yossi, Elad, Shalev, Helaina and Diana, and my most beautiful granddaughters Talia, Noa, Yael and Esti.

Hanna Roisman
March 2022
Washington, DC

Map Ancient Greece. Copyright: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

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The Play

Plot Structure

Andromache presents a 'love' triangle; however, it is not 'love' in the modern, romantic sense of the word but rather a connection of two women to one man through their social roles. One is a slave, given to the man as a war-prize, who serves as his concubine; the other is his legitimate wife. Although there is no element of romance, the relationships serve as the basis on which future treatments of the play will introduce romantic love and obsession as dominant themes.

The unique structure that Euripides gave the drama, together with the rapid pace and high levels of tension maintained throughout, give it some aspects more in common with a modern-day thriller than with a classical tragedy. At first the audience is kept in suspense as to the fate of Andromache and then of Hermione, although both ultimately survive. Given the cruelty Neoptolemus has displayed in the past, there is perhaps some pleasure in his being overcome by Orestes. The oddest but most dramatically effective feature of the play is that the man over whom the two women fight never appears in the drama until his corpse is brought in at the end.

The uncertainty of the outcomes and the possibility of the characters being wrong-footed, wittingly or unwittingly, by each other increase the sense of tension throughout the play. The Chorus in *Andromache* also play an important role in maintaining the tension as the plot proceeds. As pointed out by Skouroumouni Stavrinou,[1] there is an element of inversion in the play, including role reversals, which will be discussed further below; for example, Andromache, who is now Neoptolemus' slave, is also the mother of his son, while Hermione, his lawfully wedded wife, is barren. However, it is not only with regard to motherhood that the roles of the two women appear to be inverted. Andromache is prepared to defend Neoptolemus' son with her life, while Hermione appears to be determined to kill him; furthermore, as we will see at the end of the play, it is the slave, Andromache, who remains loyal to Neoptolemus, while Hermione betrays him in every way possible.[2]

The play is set in Phthia, the Kingdom of Peleus, Neoptolemus' grandfather. It opens at the shrine of Thetis in the town of Thetideion near the city of

Pharsalus, where Peleus resides. Alongside the shrine is Neoptolemus' palace. Andromache enters from the palace and takes her place as a suppliant at the altar in the *orchēstra*. In a prologue of 116 lines she laments that she beheld her husband Hector being killed and then later saw their son Astyanax being thrown from the ramparts of Troy. After the Greeks took Troy, Andromache was brought to Phthia as the war-prize of Neoptolemus, and bore him a son, whose name is not mentioned in the play, but who is usually referred to as Molossus. After marrying Hermione, Neoptolemus shuns Andromache's bed, but Hermione, who is unable to give him children, blames Andromache for her sterility, saying that Andromache has poisoned her womb and is scheming to cast her out as Neoptolemus' wife. Andromache's declarations that she shared Neoptolemus' bed unwillingly, and now not at all, make no difference to the angry young woman. Hermione wants her dead, and has summoned her father Menelaus from Sparta to help with dispatching Andromache while Neoptolemus is absent. Meanwhile, Neoptolemus has travelled to Delphi to beg forgiveness from Apollo, whom he had angered by demanding satisfaction for the god's role in the death of Achilles.[3]

To save herself, Andromache has taken refuge as a suppliant at the altar in the shrine of Thetis, and fearing that Hermione and her father will also attempt to kill her son, she has hidden Molossus in another house. Andromache's Maidservant, who followed her from Troy, enters and tells Andromache that Menelaus and Hermione have discovered Molossus' hiding place. Andromache has already sent several messengers to Peleus, to inform him of the danger she and her son (i.e. Peleus' great-grandson) are facing, but to no avail. In her despair she tells the Maidservant to rush and bring Peleus at all cost. The prologue ends with Andromache's sung lament (103–16), the only lament in surviving Greek tragedy in the elegiac meter.

The first indication that Euripides is crafting a plot where the audience cannot be certain of anything comes with the brief *parodos* (117–46) by the Chorus of Women of Phthia, addressed to Andromache. Their words almost defy understanding. At this point, Andromache is certain that Hermione and Menelaus are intent on killing her and her son. While admitting that they pity Andromache, in the space of under thirty lines the Chorus instruct Andromache to reconcile herself to her fate: since she is a slave, she has no power over her situation. Then they indicate she shares a husband with Hermione, while technically she is nothing more than a concubine; and then suddenly they suggest that there may be a way of resolving the argument between Andromache and Hermione! In fact, there is no argument, but rather a clear intention of one person to kill another, with the one bent on murder having all the power needed to carry out that threat. After all of that,

the Chorus inform the audience that they fear harm to themselves for wishing Andromache well!

If the audience were not already somewhat confused by the inconsistencies within the Chorus' *parados*, they must have been totally thrown when Hermione appears in the first episode (147–273) gorgeously attired, highlighting the distinction of rank between herself and Andromache. Her speeches reveal her own alternative reality, which has almost no shared ground with the situation Andromache has described. According to Hermione, Andromache has been plotting to throw her out of her own home, poisoning her womb and making her husband hate her. The Chorus, once again, seem to completely misunderstand, or disregard, the danger Andromache is faced with, commenting that women may be jealous of their rivals in love (181–82), making it sound as if two women of equal status, with equal means to defend themselves, were competing for one man's heart. The inner contradictions not only remain unresolved, but are later given a further spin by Menelaus, when he lures Andromache out of the shrine by promising that if she yields, she will indeed be killed but her son will be spared. When Andromache finally does leave the altar, he reveals that the fate of her son will be decided by Hermione (431–32).

Andromache and Hermione engage in a furious battle of wits, in which emotions are intensified due to the high stakes: the life of Andromache and of her son. In what is constructed as a formal debate (*agōn*), a pair of set speeches followed by an angry dialogue mostly in stichomythia, the women exchange their interpretations of their shared situation. In her thirty-three lines (147–80), Hermione replicates the previous bewildering thematic contradictions. She expounds her concocted theory that Andromache has poisoned her womb with drugs, a skill 'Asian woman excel in' (159–60). In Hermione's somewhat deranged universe, Andromache will die for crimes Hermione herself has invented, and furthermore, she will die despite her position as a suppliant at the altar of Thetis.

There is no firm ground for the internal or external audience to stand on in attempting to assess Hermione's true intentions. Hermione's threats to kill her alleged rival (161–62, 245, 254–55) have not only been countered by the Chorus, who advised Andromache to submit, implying that there is room for a more conciliatory approach, but also by Hermione's hint that she might be satisfied with something other than Andromache's death (163–68), when she tells her to cower in humility at her feet and sweep the house, scattering Achelous' water by hand from her gold-wrought vessels.

Despite the apparent confusion, Andromache appears to understand that there are no grounds for conciliation between the two women, and that in order to defend herself, she must attack Hermione, who is clearly her enemy,

despite any confusing smokescreens. In her reply of forty-nine lines (183–231), which shows her predominance in the *agōn* (formal debate), Andromache rejects Hermione's accusations, pointing out that Hermione's barrenness and Neoptolemus' rejection of her bed have nothing to do with her womb being poisoned, but rather due to her being an impossibly difficult wife to live with. Andromache gives examples: Hermione chafes Neoptolemus by claiming that Scyros (Neoptolemus' birthplace) is of no account compared to Sparta (Hermione's birthplace); she claims that Menelaus is a greater man than Achilles, and is unreasonably jealous to boot. In the following stichomythic exchange (234–60), Andromache once again focuses on Hermione's youthful rashness and lack of propriety in discussing her sexual life. Hermione then repeats the threat of death to Andromache.

After Hermione exits the stage, re-entering Neoptolemus' house, the Chorus seem suddenly to wake up to the gravity of the situation. They narrate the background of the Trojan War, starting with the beauty contest between the three goddesses and the judgement of Paris (274–308). As in the *parodos*, they address themselves to Andromache while describing the suffering which would have been avoided if Paris had been killed as an infant.

In the second episode (309–463) Menelaus appears, bizarrely equipped in hoplite armour, ready to face the helpless Andromache. He is leading a young child, the son of Andromache and Neoptolemus. Menelaus boasts that he found the hidden child due to his sharp wit, and claims that he is going to kill him unless Andromache leaves the altar to be killed in place of the boy. Andromache replies with a defiant speech aiming to deter Menelaus from his threat by pointing out the repercussions this would have for Hermione from Neoptolemus. Menelaus' reply fails to justify his actions, but he is unyielding in his intention to kill either Andromache or her son. Andromache's second speech is heart-wrenching. Through a series of simple questions asking what wrong she has done to Menelaus to justify his killing her, she strips Menelaus of any reason to commit this act. She bemoans her lot and leaves the altar. In four lines (421–24) the Chorus again imply that there is still a place for reconciliation between the two women and calls on Menelaus to bring it about. Instead, Menelaus tells his slaves to bind Andromache's hands and announces that he is going to kill her, but says the fate of her son depends upon Hermione's decision, as if the boy has a hope of living. In her third speech in this episode, Andromache tears apart Spartan treachery, greed, and villainy.

In their second stasimon (464–93), in yet another series of *non sequiturs*, the Chorus argue that a man should be content with one wife, giving examples of problems caused by two tyrants in a city, two poets collaborating on a hymn, and two steersmen in a ship. They again ignore Andromache's complete lack of power over her situation. It would only be fair to note that

Hermione also has had no say in whom she married, or whom her husband takes as a concubine, but she does have the freedom to choose to blame Andromache for her situation and to send for her father, the king of another city-state, to come to her husband's home, and to murder not only her husband's concubine, but also her husband's son. By the end of their second stasimon (486–93), the Chorus not only take Hermione's threatened murder of Andromache and the boy as a *fait accompli*, but also warn Hermione that retribution will follow. This latter idea is of utmost importance in the second part of the play, in which Hermione rages in despair and fear that Neoptolemus will punish her, which of course will raise the off-stage audience's anxiety as the plot evolves. The goal of these misleading insinuations is unclear, unless Euripides intends to create tension in the minds of the spectators as to the fate of Andromache and her son as well as to the homicidal intentions of Hermione and her father.

The third episode (494–765) is split in two. A brief anapestic description of the bound Andromache and her son awaiting their deaths (494–500) is followed by Andromache's and her son's lyric laments, which are heartlessly rejected by Menelaus (501–44). The second half opens with Peleus' arrival (545–765). The two men face each other in the second formal debate of the play; each gets two speeches. At the end Peleus actually drives Menelaus off. Peleus serves as a vehicle for criticism not only of the way Spartan women are educated, dress, and behave, the chief example of which is Helen, but also for emphasizing the cowardice of Menelaus.

Unable to control the conduct of his wife and his daughter, Menelaus is even willing to kill because of them. He is responsible for the expedition against Troy that brought about the death of many young men and grief for their parents, and now is preparing to kill Peleus' great-grandson and the boy's mother. He is devoid of any morals. In addition, he proved himself a coward during the Trojan War. Menelaus defends his current decision to act against Andromache by claiming that he is expected to defend his daughter, a claim that is immediately undermined by his hasty retreat and abandonment of Hermione. He also attacks Peleus' defence of Andromache and her son as defending barbarians who caused Achilles' death. Peleus' lack of the Greek chauvinism that Menelaus displays, his promise to his great-grandson that he will raise him 'to be a great enemy to these people' (724, i.e. the Spartans) stands in antithesis to Menelaus' anti-barbarian rhetoric and creates a lack of clarity in identifying who is friend or foe. Peleus' victory over Menelaus is enhanced by the third stasimon (766–801), in which the Chorus sing his praises.

In the fourth episode (802–1008), the plot returns to Hermione, who, abandoned by Menelaus, tries, according to the Nurse, first to hang herself,