

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ANDROMACHE 429-425 B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview. Writing from within the full blast of the Peloponnesian War, which was devastating for the thriving late fifth century communities of Athens and Sparta, the Athenian playwright, Euripides, wrote extensively but indirectly on the war itself. His dramaturgy reverted to the classical material of ancient mythology, the very culture that Homer takes for granted—though doubtless he too was archaizing, as he created from more ancient mythical materials—and he, Euripides, expressed the full impact of his time's war in terms of the myth figures that were still, in his time, the common currency of language and belief. We have seen this kind of interpreting of the present with the tools of the past, in classics of French post WW (and *entre deux guerres*) literature: in Giono's *La Nalssance de l'Odyssée* (1930), Giraudoux's *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* (1935), and Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944). The first culture of an archaic age becomes the functional language of a later age, as it comes to express its own version of ancient experience.

Characters

Andromache Wife of Hector in the *Iliad*

Maid. Enslaved Trojan Woman

Chorus. Of Phthian women

Hermione. Spartan princess, wife of Neoptolemos; daughter of Helen and Menelaus

Menelaus. King of Sparta, husband of Helen

Molossos. Son of Andromache

Peleus. Father of Achilles; grandfather of Neoptolemos

Orestes. Nephew of Menelaus

Messenger

Thetis. Goddess of the ocean, once wife of Peleus; mother of Achilles

Synopsis.

The play opens with Andromache seeking refuge and protection at the Temple of the Sea Goddess, Thetis. Andromache mourns for her fate—an enslaved captive of the Greeks, as her husband and child have been killed by those invaders, at the Battle in Troy, and she has been taken captive by Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles. She is seeking refuge from her father-in-law, Menelaus, who she fears wants to kill her son. Andromache then learns that Menelaus is on his way to seize Molossos, her son, and she turns to Peleus, the father of Achilles, to protect her.

Hermione, the new and now first wife of Neoptolemos, arrives, to snatch away Andromache and her child, and to vent her spite on this foreign captive whom her husband has brought back from the war. When Menelaus, father-in-law of Andromache, arrives at Thebes' temple, to announce that he has found Andromache's son, she turns for help to Peleus, the father of Achilles, and grandfather of Neoptolemos. Peleus protects Andromache, and takes her away. At this point Orestes, son of Agamemnon, arrives, announces that he has arranged for the murder of Neoptolemos, and that he has taken Hermione away as his bride. At this point the goddess Thetis, mother of Achilles, arrives, transported in a *deus ex machina* device, and tells what the future holds in store for the corpse of Neoptolemos, for Andromache, Peleus, and for Molossos.

Story

Lament. The play opens with Andromache seeking shelter at the Temple of Thetis. She is seeking protection for her child and also recounting, to the audience, the woes that brought her from Troy, as an

enslaved captive, to Greece. We understand why she is hated by Hermione, the new wife of her captor, Neoptolemos.

Conflict. Hermione accosts Andromache, in her lamentations and temple refuge, and condemns her; accuses her of poisoning her—Hermione herself the new wife—and of preparing potions to make her barren. Menelaus joins in excoriating Andromache as a dirty barbarian from the east, and makes it clear he is searching for Andromache's child, to have him killed. Andromache vents her hatred on all Spartans.

War. Andromache and the chorus expatiate on the sufferings of women, children, and society in war.

Shame. Hermione is brought to see the pain she has caused by persecuting Molossos, the son of her husband and Andromache. She dreads the return of Neoptolemos, who will condemn her having abused this child. Little does she know that Orestes, to whom she was formerly engaged, is approaching; he will arrange for the murder of Neoptolemos and will take Hermione away with him.

Relief. Andromache has sought the help of Peleus, the grandfather of her husband Neoptolemos, and he has saved her and her son from Menelaus. The murder of Neoptolemos is exhaustively described to Peleus by a messenger who has witnessed the scene first hand. The brutal details shock the old man, who feels that his universe is slipping away.

Resolution. The unfinished plot is abruptly clarified by the advent, in a deus ex machina engine, of Thetis, the goddess mother of Achilles. Andromache is promised a new life in the land of the Molossians, and for husband a great hero, Helenus, while Peleus will rejoin his wife of old, Thetis, himself having been transformed into a god.

Themes

War. As often, in Euripidean tragedy, war is addressed as a real fact of history and society, and its ravages are not painted over. Andromache has been enslaved by the Greek forces who took Troy. She was seized by the son of Achilles, Neoptolemos, and taken back as his slave to Phthia, where we find her at the start of the play. As we learn from her initial laments, she has suffered—at the end of the Trojan War—by the loss of her husband Hector, killed by Achilles, and by the loss of her young son Astyanax, whom the Greek soldiers throw to his death off the battlements at Troy, as a precaution against further revenge against the Greeks.

Cowardice. As an Athenian patriot, Euripides is happy to do what he can, to denigrate the behaviors of the Spartans; in the present play Menelaus, husband of Helen and father of Hermione, comes off particularly badly. As father in law to Andromache he is indifferent, while giving all his attention to his own daughter, Hermione. He is a coward, when it comes to confronting the very elderly Peleus, who is able to prevent Menelaus from seizing Andromache. Peleus is able, with impunity, to cover Menelaus with shameful insults, every kind of implication that Menelaus is an impotent coward.

Oppression. Hermione oppresses Andromache; Peleus and Menelaus oppress one another; and the background war oppresses all the figures in (most of) Euripides' plays. The Trojan War, and its scion The Peloponnesian War, permeate much in Euripides' work. Only the intervention of Thetis, at the end of the present play, gives a promise of future to Andromache, while the arrival of Orestes, out of the blue, provides Hermione the only aperture out from a stifling matrimonial setting, which was doomed to destruction.

Metaphor. Euripides is using the figures and characters hallowed in the Great War of Troy, to interpret and prognosticate the events of a current war, the all-enveloping Peloponnesian War. The Trojan War is becoming a metaphor and a hermeneutic key for the war raging around Euripides as he writes. In the course of this writing and thinking through an (already to him) ancient text, Euripides inevitably transforms some of the older argument material—enlarges a figure like Hermione, shrinks the stature of a former warrior like Menelaus, and puts new muscular fiber into a timorous youngster like Orestes.

Character Analysis

Andromache The main character is Andromache, who addresses us from the start of the play, from the steps leading to the temple of Thetis, the wife of Peleus, and mother of Achilles, and thus the key figure for the stage managing of the whole play. Andromache is at that point begging for refuge for herself and her son, and fearing that her father-in-law, Menelaus, will destroy both of them. The remainder of the play is a search for a way out, for Andromache, from her dreadful enslaved captivity at the hands of Neoptolemos, son of Achilles. The threat to her son compels her to the action of calling on the intervention of Peleus, who frees her from immediate threat, helps to expel Menelaus, and protects his grandson, Molossus. The murder of Neoptolemos leads to the last barrier to Andromache's freedom, and the intervention of Thetis, again at the end, gives Andromache a roadmap to a quiet and peaceful future.

Suppliant. When we first see Andromache, she is clutching the knees of the figure of Thetis, at the altar of that goddess. Like the children of Herakles, in another Euripidean play of supplication, Andromache puts all her sufferings into an epic recounting, addressed to the goddess.

Protective. Andromache has taken her son with her, to hide him. Despite the fact that her son's father, Neoptolemos, is the enemy incarnate, Andromache remains true and protective toward her son.

Argumentative. After Andromache turns from her initial appearance at the temple, she confronts Hermione, with whom she enters into a vicious stichomythic insult match, leaving us convinced that only some sharp turn of events—it will be the advent of Orestes—will break the life-death hatred between the two women.

Destined. We learn the destiny of Andromache, at the end of the play. The goddess Thetis informs us that Andromache will be transported to a calm and distant province where she will wed the hero Helenus. Her son, Molossos, will live forever near her, and with his descendants will populate a quiet and gentle part of the earth.

Scorn filled. Though in a suppliant mode, as an enslaved captive wife, Andromache has a bitter tongue, and uses it. In exchanging insulting repartee with Hermione, the new wife to Neoptolemos, Andromache excoriates this impudent newcomer.

Parallels.

Women impacted by war abound in literature. Penelope waits twenty years for Odysseus to return, holding off the suitors, possibly gaming them, possibly teasing them, certainly tricking them. Antigone participates in the Theban-Athenian War by her loyalty to her fallen brother, whom she will not allow to rot in dust, even though her spiritual and protective action is against the law. Cressida, in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, flirts all the more seductively with Troilus, because of the surrounding ambience of military guys prepping for war. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley* suffers the paralysis of her husband's war wound, which drives her to the gamekeeper's cottage for the solace she needs.

Discussion questions

Whose side is Euripides on, in the present play? Andromache is of course on the losing side, but does Euripides pity her? Or does he turn her into a winner, with the turn of events that sets in with the help of Peleus, and finally the prophecy of Thetis? Is Euripides ultimately hostile to the Spartans—like Menelaus—or conspicuously favorable to the Athenians?

What do you see as the role of the Chorus in this play? Do they highlight the view points of the characters?

Euripides is considered a sceptic. How does he deal with the gods, in this play? Does Thetis stand above the mortal perspective of the other players? If so, what do you make of the *deus ex machina* device on which she is transported into a position from which she can make her final prophecy? We are led to

believe that these devices created a massive sense of awe and wonder in the Athenian theater goer. Think, for example, of Medea transported out of the play of her name, on a fiery chariot!