

Marriage and Strife in Euripides' *Andromache*

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EURIPIDES' *Andromache* is one of the least appreciated Greek tragedies. The play has baffled scholars whose tendency has been to search for dramatic unity by using Aristotelian criteria. Its lack of a central character who dominates the play by his or her constant presence and its division into three distinct parts (1–801, 802–1046, 1047–1288) continue to be considered flaws. Such criticism often disregards Euripides' experimentalism, as well as his wish to put forward his own notion of the tragic. These two goals inevitably influence the structure of his plays. It is highly probable that after his *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, which more or less comply with the tragic norm, Euripides had the intention of creating something that would differentiate him more sharply from the majority of his competitors. By writing a play that lacks a central hero and that falls into three sections, in each of which there is a transition from danger or destruction to salvation, he probably achieved his purpose.

In analyzing the play most critics have tried to discover the person or the theme that ensures its unity. H. Erbse¹ for example holds that Andromache is the central character, as is proved by her presumed reappearance at the end of the play as mute. This reappearance is supported by H. Golder,² but his arguments are not in my view convincing. J. Mossman maintains that the absent Neoptolemus is the figure who unifies the play.³ On the other hand, H. D. F. Kitto suggests that the play

¹ "Euripides' 'Andromache,'" *Hermes* 94 (1966) 276–297.

² "The Mute Andromache," *TAPA* 113 (1983) 123–133.

³ "Waiting for Neoptolemus: The Unity of Euripides' *Andromache*," *G&R* 43 (1996) 143–156.

is an attack on the Spartan mind-set and in particular on the qualities of arrogance, treachery, and ruthlessness.⁴ P. N. Boulter⁵ considers that the tragedy explores definitions of *sophia* and *sophrosyne*, while K. H. Lee⁶ thinks that it investigates the *nomos-physis* antithesis. More persuasive is P. T. Stevens' contention⁷ that the theme of the drama is the tragic aftermath of the Trojan War. On the contrary, W. Allan maintains that the cohesion of the play's design rests on an aesthetic of surprise, with philosophical significance.⁸ By insisting on the interconnection of person, action, and effect he tries to demonstrate how the varied techniques of characterization secure the coherence of the play. Nevertheless, he concludes his extensive study of the tragedy by stating that "the play has no unifying theme: it presents a variety of issues" (268). However, I believe that the interpretations of Storey, Phillippo, and Kyriakou, who examine the familial relationships of the characters of the tragedy, are more to the point.⁹ One of the purposes of this paper is to gain a better understanding of this particular issue by examining two factors that are in my opinion crucial to the play, those of marriage and strife. In a sense this work is complementary to that of Storey who also comments on the several marriages between the characters of the drama.

I would stress that the following observations do not intend to demonstrate the unity of the play as a whole, but rather to show a central concern of it and a *thematic* unity. This distinction reflects my opinion that one or more dominant motifs do not always ensure the unity of a literary work of art. They

⁴ *Greek Tragedy* (London 1961) 230–236.

⁵ "Sophia and *sophrosyne* in Euripides' *Andromache*," *Phoenix* 20 (1966) 51–58.

⁶ "Euripides' *Andromache*: Observations on Form and Meaning," *Antichthon* 9 (1975) 4–16, at 9.

⁷ *Euripides Andromache* (Oxford 1971) 13.

⁸ *The Andromache and Euripidean Tragedy* (Oxford 2000) 84–85.

⁹ I. C. Storey "Domestic Disharmony in Euripides' *Andromache*," in I. McAuslan and P. Walcot (eds.), *Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1993) 180–192; S. Phillippo, "Family Ties: Significant Patronymics in Euripides' *Andromache*," *CQ* 45 (1995) 355–371; P. Kyriakou, "All in the Family: Present and Past in Euripides' *Andromache*," *Mnemosyne* IV 50 (1997) 7–26.

rather reveal the main preoccupations of its writer and underline its cohesion. However, themes can help determine the unity of a drama if they elucidate the internal relation of plot and character conceived as a chain of cause and effect. And it is to this ultimate end that the paper seeks to contribute.

The thematic motifs of marriage and strife are introduced from the first lines of the play. Andromache's marriage to Hector was dissolved because of the Trojan War and the death of their son (1–11). From "enviable" Andromache became "most wretched" (5–6). A similar reversal of fortune awaits Peleus: he was blessed by the gods in his wedding (1218), but after his grandson's death, which was the result of his strife with Orestes and Apollo, he falls into utter ruin (πανώλεθρόν, 1225). After hearing the report of Neoptolemus' death, Peleus exclaims: "Oh marriage, marriage that brought ruin, ruin on this house and my city" (1186–1187). It is at this point that the dramatist makes clear that the play is about a marriage which has destroyed a royal house. In the first section we observe the disharmony of that wedding, in the second the dissolution of the marriage, and in the third the consequences of that dissolution. We can proceed by examining the various marriages or unions between the characters of the play.

Andromache's marriage to Hector is exemplary and constitutes a foil to Hermione's wedding with Neoptolemus. Both the groom and the bride of the first couple come from prosperous families and Andromache fulfils her socially designated role by bearing Hector a son. Her fertility is stressed from the outset (δάμαρ ... παιδοποιός, 4) and is later on contrasted with Hermione's barrenness. On the other side, Hermione's union with Neoptolemus is dysfunctional partly because of the bride's large dowry (147–153), which is antithetical to the groom's relatively poor circumstances.¹⁰ In her present misfortune Andromache does not cease to lament the death of her previous husband and to refer to him (97, 107–108, 112, 399–400, 455–457, 523–525). It is characteristic of her that at the peak of her calamity,

¹⁰ As attested by 209–212 and by the epithet νησιώτη in 14. Stevens, *Euripides* 90, and M. Lloyd, *Euripides Andromache* (Warminster 1994) 109, note that the word signifies poverty by comparison with mainland kingdoms.

whereas her son from Neoptolemus invokes his father (508–509), she calls for dead Hector's aid (523–525), which is a telling indication of her enduring devotion to him. By contrast, Hermione does not hesitate to abandon her own husband at the first difficulty and does not utter a single comment upon the report of his imminent death. In her dispute with Hermione Andromache reveals that she even suckled Hector's bastards in order to please her husband (222–225). Her extreme female submissiveness is contrasted with Hermione's disputing her husband's authority (209–212) and is used as a way of displaying her superiority over her young rival.

Andromache's union with Neoptolemus, on the other hand, is a forced one (36–38, 390–391). She is his booty from the Trojan War, his slave (12–15). But whereas she clearly states that their sexual relationship stopped at the time of his marriage to Hermione (30, 37), the chorus of Phthian women and the people of the palace still believe her to be Neoptolemus' consort, something which is indicated by the application of the word *σύγγαμος* to her (183, 836).¹¹ We may assume that this belief is founded on Andromache's elevated status in Neoptolemus' household. In his confrontation with Peleus, Menelaus claims that she not only lives under the same roof with him, but also shares the same table (657–658), a statement which is not contradicted by Peleus. It appears that Andromache is not treated as a mere slave, but is rather regarded as part of the royal family, which justifies her appellation as mistress by the maidservant (56). Furthermore, Andromache's knowledge of Hermione's behavior towards her husband (209–212) perhaps implies either that there have been many quarrels between this couple, of which the servants have been aware, or that Neoptolemus continues to maintain intimate relations with Andromache, albeit not necessarily of a sexual kind. Nevertheless, Andromache's attitude towards her master is rather contemptuous. This is shown by her epithet *νησιώτη* for Neoptolemus (14) in contrast to her high self-esteem reflected in calling herself *γέρας ... ἐξάριετον* in the same sentence, and by her avoidance of any extensive reference to their relationship.

¹¹ On this issue see also 124–125, 177–180, 465, 907–909.

Her sole concern is the son she bore him. Consequently, her only interest in Neoptolemus is that he is not present to protect her and their son from the peril they are now facing (49–55).

Hermione's marriage to Neoptolemus is a failure. Her barrenness seems to be their major problem, and because of it Hermione risks losing her social status. Fully aware of this, she attempts to confirm her status by displaying the rich attire of her dowry (147–153) and by denigrating her husband through unfavorable comparisons with her father (209–212). In all probability her attachment to her father is meant to reflect difficulties in their marriage. His presence is catalytic for Hermione. With Menelaus on her side she is carried away by her rage and jealousy and is impervious to reason. But when he is gone, she adopts Andromache's logic (compare 192–202 with 938–942) and feels weak; she can now hear the voice of the house which is driving her away and she can feel the hatred of the Phthians (923–925). Hermione is also characterized by her tendency to avoid responsibility for her actions. Instead of admitting that her barrenness is due to her lack of understanding for her husband, she accuses Andromache of using drugs that render her barren and hateful to him (157–158); instead of accepting responsibility for her scheme against Andromache and her son, she puts the blame on the visits of wicked women to her house and implicitly holds Neoptolemus responsible for her predicament because he allowed these women to communicate with her (929–953). Nevertheless, Hermione wishes to secure her place in her husband's *oikos*. Her two appearances from the palace have this particular purpose. In the first she accuses Andromache, in the second she displays her distress. In the latter scene it is obvious that her repentance is theatrical. She is pretending that she wants to commit suicide so that the servants may later inform Neoptolemus of her reaction and his punishment of her will not be severe.¹² That this is histrionics is supported by two items: first, in uncovering her breasts (830–835) Hermione remembers her mother who made the same

¹² Cf. Stevens, *Euripides* 193 ad 825 ff.

gesture when in an analogous precarious position (627–631).¹³ Second, lines 816, 824, and 851 insert a comic and ironic element which undermines the melodramatic tone of the scene and which implies that Hermione's reactions are not to be taken seriously. Her tirade against women is substantially addressed to Neoptolemus. We may presume that she considers the abandonment of his hearth a temporary solution and, not yet knowing of Orestes' plot against her husband, she probably is to be understood as intending to return after Neoptolemus has learned of her wish to commit suicide and of the alleged bad influence exercised upon her by the wicked women.

Hermione's encounter with Orestes is in a sense reminiscent of Andromache's salvation by Peleus. Both the repeated nautical imagery (554–555, 748–749, 891)¹⁴ and the repeated ritual of supplication (572–575, 891–895)¹⁵ underline the similarity of the situations in which Andromache and Hermione are found. This similarity, however, is only superficial: Andromache is brave, while Hermione is hysterical. Peleus has the ethical qualities that earn him the role of savior, while Orestes is canny and vengeful. The danger that Andromache confronts is real and imminent, whereas the danger Hermione faces is imaginary and distant. Andromache merits salvation, Hermione does not. Orestes does not directly ask Hermione to marry him; he implies it by the repetition of the word φίλου (974, 986). He is mainly presented as her savior; it is Hermione who makes this deduction (987–988). And it is precisely because of her attitude, her latent condescension to Orestes' desire to marry her, that Orestes reveals his plot to murder Neoptolemus. Whereas Hermione's marriage to Neoptolemus was not harmonious, she seems to make a fitting partner for

¹³ This resemblance is observed by P. D. Kovacs *The Andromache of Euripides. An Interpretation* (Chico 1980) 71.

¹⁴ Noted by J. C. Kamerbeek, "L'Andromaque d'Euripide," *Mnemosyne* III 11 (1943) 47–67, at 62, and A. P. Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived. Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford 1971) 146.

¹⁵ Pointed out by Lee, *Antichthon* 9 (1975) 7; Lloyd, *Euripides* 148; and Allan, *Andromache* 73.

Orestes.¹⁶ His silence regarding his plot against Neoptolemus (995–998) resembles Hermione’s silence regarding her plot against Andromache (262–265). They also are similar in holding their grudges against their rivals and in waiting for the proper opportunity to act: Orestes waits for Neoptolemus’ visit to Delphi, while Hermione waits for Neoptolemus’ absence. Time does not heal their resentments. Finally, they both use accomplices for their machinations: Hermione her father, Orestes the Delphians.

Peleus’ marriage to Thetis is marked from the prologue on as something extraordinary, for the goddess while dwelling with her mortal consort avoided the crowd and lived apart from the people of Phthia (17–19). The place where she used to live bears her name and Andromache is supplicating her at her altar. In a partial distortion of the truth that aims at enlisting Peleus’ sympathy, Andromache claims that Menelaus has violently detached her from Thetis’ altar (565–567). This is one of the factors that ensure Peleus’ defense of her. In his utter despair Peleus invokes his former wife (1224–1225), who subsequently appears as the *dea ex machina* and restores him by renewing their marriage. As in Menelaus’ case, this marriage will be restored after a long period of time. Whereas Neoptolemus’ marriage to Hermione has destroyed him and has separated him permanently from his son, Peleus’ marriage to Thetis saves him by granting him immortality and reunites him with his dead son Achilles.

Finally, Helen’s marriage to Menelaus and her union with Paris have both proven disastrous to others. According to Peleus, Menelaus’ failure to be a worthy husband caused calamity to many Greek families by the loss of their children (612–613). On the other hand, Helen’s disastrous wedding with

¹⁶ G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 210, observes: “A well-assorted couple. If it was imperative for Orestes to marry in the family because he could not find a bride elsewhere (974–5), we shall also remember Andromache’s argument that no one will marry Hermione if she leaves Neoptolemus (345). No one but the matricide, the murderer of Helen’s sister.” Also D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto 1967) 179, comments that “When he gets Hermione, we are able to feel that like has successfully called to like, and that both have got what they deserve.”

Paris (ἄταν ... εὐναίαν, 103–104), in addition to the destruction of Troy, led to Andromache's "wedding with slavery" (110) under Helen's daughter. Helen's abandoning Menelaus can also be regarded as the ultimate cause of Neoptolemus' death. Had not Helen left Sparta with Paris, Menelaus would not have promised Hermione to Neoptolemus (966–970) and Orestes would not have killed his mother, a murder that made his marriage to Hermione almost imperative (974–976).

Strife in *Andromache* is a result of some of the weddings described above, which proved dysfunctional. In particular, Helen's infidelity was the cause not only of Andromache's concubinage, but also of Neoptolemus' marriage to Hermione, as we have noted. Neoptolemus' wish to accommodate two women under the same roof became a source of trouble, a situation somewhat reminiscent of that developed in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. None of this, however, would have happened, if the three goddesses (Hera, Athena, Aphrodite) had not disputed their beauty before Paris, the lonely shepherd (274–292). The strife of the goddesses (ἔριδι στυγερά ... εὐμορφίας, 279) is analogous to the quarrel between Andromache and Hermione (ἔριδι στυγερά ... ἀμφὶ λέκτρων, 122–123).¹⁷

On one level, the onstage strife between these two women seems gratuitous, since Menelaus is at the same time about to capture Andromache's child and plans to impose on her the dilemma he poses in the next episode in order to detach her from Thetis' altar. The purpose of the first episode then is to show Andromache's defiance of the authority of her mistress, to present the situation in Neoptolemus' household, and to display a women's quarrel on stage—something apparently uncommon in the genre of tragedy. First of all, we must notice that Hermione considers Andromache, and not her child, to be the threat to her social position.¹⁸ She acts primarily out of sexual jealousy. This is proven by the reported words of the wicked women who urged Hermione to devise her scheme

¹⁷ Cf. Allan, *Andromache* 230.

¹⁸ Contrary to E. Fantham, "Andromache's Child in Euripides and Seneca," in M. Cropp et al. (eds.), *Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy: Essays presented to D. J. Conacher* (Calgary 1986) 267–280.

(932–935); the emphasis is on the λέχος, the bridal bed. Nevertheless, Hermione's entrance betrays her insecurity. What she most fears is Andromache's ὄλβια φρονήματα (164). She presumes that rich clothing will help her triumph over Andromache. Andromache's subsequent speech, which does not follow the advice of the chorus in the parodos (126–140), demonstrates that Hermione is right in accusing her of “proud thoughts of royalty.” She defies her mistress' authority not solely by continuing to supplicate Thetis's altar instead of her, but also by claiming her right to defend herself and accusing her mistress of ἄμιλλάν ... φρονήματος towards her husband (214). Andromache is characterized by a heroic temper and high self-esteem. She purposefully does not reassure Hermione that her sexual relationship with her master is now over, which is a way of asserting herself. Andromache is competitive towards Hermione. Instead of trying to appease her, she displays her superiority as a wife by emphasizing her own virtues in her relationship with Hector. Her argument is based on an antithesis between her own attitude to her former husband and Hermione's unaccommodating behavior towards Neoptolemus. According to her, a woman's desirability depends not on her appearance but on her inner qualities (207–208). With this claim she demolishes Hermione's attempt to impose herself by means of her rich attire. Hermione, on the other hand, favors monogamy because in that case there is no competition. She obviously lacks experience and self-confidence, reflecting her youth. Andromache stresses Hermione's youth (184) because she perceives that she lacks tolerance, the virtue that made Andromache a good wife. She also considers Hermione unjust (185) for refusing to accept responsibility for her failure as wife. With Menelaus as her ally Hermione seems to win in her strife with Andromache, but before the arrival of Peleus and the revelation of Menelaus' plot there is an indication that Andromache desires a postmortem vindication by the ousting of Hermione from Neoptolemus' household. This is probably her purpose in instructing her son to tell his father what happened to her (414–418).

In her strife with Menelaus, Andromache is insulting to him at the beginning and at the end of her first speech. In both her point of reference is Troy. She clearly states that he does not

deserve the glory for the conquest of Troy (319–329) and that he destroyed a whole city because of strife over a woman (διὸ γυναικείων ἔριτι, 362). Menelaus is not totally wrong when he points out that she fails to understand that she is a mere slave and should not show insolence to those of free birth (433–434). Andromache indeed displays rather great self-esteem when she maintains that her death will inflict dire consequences on her persecutors (334–337). However, in the middle of her first speech to Menelaus she appears more reasonable in trying to dissuade him from the murders he plans. It seems that in her confrontations with Hermione and her father Andromache reveals certain aspects of the situation that the two Spartans cannot or do not want to perceive: in the first case she indicates the real fault in Hermione's relationship to Neoptolemus (205–212), while in the second she underlines the consequences for Hermione's marital life of her or her son's murder (342–351). Moreover, Menelaus' suggestion that his daughter will decide whether Molossus will live or die strengthens the view, expressed above, that it is Andromache, not her son, who is considered a threat to Hermione. In facing the dilemma of whether she or her son will die, Andromache tries to convince herself that her life is not worth living (394–405). Finally, when the plot is revealed, she addresses to Menelaus a tirade against the Spartans (445–452) that has created the impression that it is the cause for which the whole play was written. Peleus' partial repetition of her accusations (724–726) stresses the similarity of their characters: both are self-asserting and defiant of the Spartan authority, a defiance which springs from the loss of their relatives.

Peleus' confrontation with Menelaus is caused at first sight by the latter's interference in the affairs of Neoptolemus' household (577–584). A problem of κυριότης is posed. Peleus' threat to strike Menelaus with his scepter (588) shows his intention to confirm his authority, which he feels to be threatened. His subsequent extensive attack on Menelaus' manhood (590–631) is caused by the Spartan's disregard for the respect due to his old age (589). In this attack, however, it is revealed that Peleus is hostile to Menelaus and his family primarily because he holds Menelaus responsible for Achilles' death (613–615) and, consequently, disapproved of his grandson's marriage to Hermione

(619–623). The first reason is precisely what renders him hostile to Menelaus (ἐχθρόν, 707) and prompts him to a passionate defense of Andromache and her son by stating that he will raise the son to be a great enemy (ἐχθρόν, 724) of the Spartans. Menelaus perceives the cause of Peleus' hostility and attempts to convince him that Andromache is partly responsible for Achilles' death (652–656). Disregarding Peleus' rejection of their relationship of φιλία (619–620, 639–641), he believes that Peleus' connection with his family automatically imposes on him certain requirements, as the emphatic place of the phrase κῆδος συνάψας (648) makes clear. He thinks that this relationship gives him the right to interfere in order to settle his affairs in a way advantageous to himself. The declaration of his intention to subdue a city that was previously friendly to him (732–739), far from being a sign of covert cowardice, reflects his tendency to impose his will on the affairs of Neoptolemus' house. It is true that Peleus' favoring attitude towards Andromache's son seems to confirm Menelaus' and Hermione's fears. But it is not likely that his grandson shares his views, if we bear in mind his refusal to follow Peleus' advice regarding his marriage with Hermione. Menelaus seems to understand this when he says that he will wait to discuss the whole matter with his son-in-law and when he characterizes Peleus as nothing but a shadow (738–746).

The strife between Neoptolemus and Orestes springs from Menelaus' promise to give Neoptolemus his daughter as a reward for joining in the Trojan War (966–970). We must stress that it would not have been easy for Neoptolemus to give up Hermione to Orestes because she represented for him his victory in that war; she is his booty, his reward.¹⁹ By contrast, Orestes' only achievement was the murder of his own mother (977). In all probability, according to Neoptolemus' thinking, Orestes did not deserve Hermione. On the other hand, in contriving a plot against Neoptolemus, Agamemnon's son acts in accord with the demands of the heroic spirit, since he is avenging an insult. The messenger's speech clearly shows that

¹⁹ Kyriakou, *Mnemosyne* 50 (1997) 17, is right to equate Hermione and Andromache in that both are pawns in the hands of competing men.

he could never have confronted Neoptolemus single-handedly; he had to resort to the aid of the Delphians. The same speech reveals a fundamental difference between these two rivals: whereas Neoptolemus does not conceal what he now considers a sin on his part (1106–1108), Orestes does not hesitate to lie in order to achieve his ends (1092–1095). Furthermore, by not manifesting his wrath immediately at the time of the insult, but waiting for the right time to avenge himself, Orestes resembles his divine accomplice, Apollo. Both the mortal and the god are resentful. This human characteristic of the god is later stressed by the messenger (1164–1165). However, by the murder of Neoptolemus, Apollo *does* give a solution to some serious problems presented in the play: Hermione will be betrothed to a man whose attention is concentrated on her, while Andromache will be married to a compatriot of hers and will regain her regal status (1243–1252). None of this would have been possible without Neoptolemus' death.

In conclusion, the motifs of marriage and strife are dominant in Euripides' *Andromache* and may be considered as elements that ensure the thematic unity of the play. This interpretation does not rule out Stevens' opinion that the drama can be viewed in terms of the aftermath of the Trojan War. In fact, the last stasimon enlarges the perspective of the tragedy by insinuating that the root of all evils lay in that war. Phoebus, Orestes' helper in the murder of Neoptolemus, is somehow held responsible for the outbreak of the woes that are about to beset the house of Peleus because of his failure to protect Troy (1010–1018). He is also responsible for another consequence of the war, Clytaemestra's murder (1031–1036), the event that forced Orestes to persist in his marriage to his cousin Hermione. Nevertheless, I believe that the play can best be analyzed in terms of the family relationships, and hope that this investigation contributes to this question.²⁰

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