

Repurposing Orestes in Euripides's *Andromache*

Homer and the Epic Cycle poets developed the concept of the hero, the individual warrior whose *arete* (goodness, excellence, prowess) set him apart from other men and whose *aristeia* (battlefield valor) earned him a place in the poems of the Greeks. The epic depiction of the hero set the standard for much of Archaic and early Classical poetry. However, writing in the second half of the fifth century, Euripides took the heroes and the heroic tradition and, while maintaining the broad parameters of the early myths, repurposed them so as to examine and question the received tradition. My on-going project has been to survey all ten of the extant Euripidean plays (and relevant fragments) that deal with the Trojan and Mycenaean cycle of myths, considering in particular where and how and why Euripides challenged the epic portrayal of the heroes and heroines. This essay focuses on *Andromache* and Euripides's repurposing of Homeric and Epic Cycle characters, in particular Orestes.

In the ten extant Trojan and Mycenaean plays of Euripides, one discerns several recurring traits in the main characters. Women characters like Andromache are typical of those Euripidean heroines who are memorable for the *arete* that they show faced with conflict and adversity, an *arete* that makes them comparable to the greatest of the Homeric male heroes. Conversely, male characters drawn favorably in Homer are redrawn by Euripides in a negative way (Menelaus in *Andromache* and in *Iphigenia in Aulis*; Orestes in *Andromache*, *Electra*, and *Orestes*.) Moreover, in Euripides clandestine operations are *de rigeur* for young, would-be heroes such as Orestes, in contrast to the standard of open conflict on the battlefield espoused by Achilles in the *Iliad*. As for divine characters, especially Apollo, they are too remote to be moved by human suffering or

entreaty, and the picture emerges of a universe where chance (ἡ τύχη) reigns and where one can count on nothing being predictable.

Scholarship on *Andromache* has tended to deal with either family relationships in the play (Kyriakou 1997, Phillippo 1995, Stavrinou 2014) or the structure of the play itself (Mossman 1996, Sorum 1995), with some scholars (such as Kraus 1992 or Shipton in the related play *Orestes*) examining possible historical references. In this essay I will build on the work of these scholars, following especially the reminder in Kyriakou that “the dispute of Orestes and Neoptolemus over Hermione is reminiscent not only of the enmity of Paris and Menelaus but also and primarily of the disastrous quarrel their fathers had years ago at Troy over a spear-won slave woman” (Kyriakou 1997: 16 – 17) and the comments of Ian Storey, who writes of *Andromache* as “an early example of Euripides’ forays into the world of the anti-hero” where “Orestes can easily be seen as the predecessor of the brilliantly anti-heroic character that appears in *Electra* and the tormented soul in *Orestes*” (Storey 130). Adding to my own on-going research on the Trojan and Mycenaean plays by Euripides, I will explore ways in which Euripides repurposes the Homeric Orestes as an anti-Achilles, not the best, but the worst of the Achaeans, and yet the one whose actions make possible the freedom of Andromache and the apotheosis of Peleus. The fact that Euripides has changed the value of the Homeric character held up as a model as early as *Odyssey* 1.28 – 41 and repeated elsewhere is widely acknowledged; speculation as to *why* he chose to rewrite or repurpose these characters will be the goal of this essay. The path leads to connections with several of Aristophanes’s women characters and the ethical reevaluations of Plato’s Socrates in passages from *Republic* and *Symposium*. I will argue that like Aristophanes and Socrates/Plato, Euripides was a late-fifth

century thinker whose love of Athens and sense of moral goodness compelled him to reexamine received tradition.

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