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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: *Andromache*-*Iphigenia*,  
*Phaedra*-*Athaliah*

R. C. Knight

Excerpt

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## ANDROMACHE

(1667)

## INTRODUCTION

*Andromache* is, as I tried to show earlier, a clear case of a dramatic situation and action inspired by modern taste and modern sources (very likely a single source, *Pertharite* (1652) by Corneille), but using characters whose names and reputations belong to the story of the Trojan war, or its immediate sequel, bringing with them an atmosphere and constant reminiscences going back to Greek and Latin writers, including Homer, whom Racine's original preface omits to mention. Racine takes over the mourning widow of Hector, in captivity under Pyrrhus, but without recalling that she was quite unable in her position to resist his advances, and bore him a son: he never thought of marrying her, but did marry Hermione, which was the reason why Orestes killed him. Classical writers all made Astyanax perish before the Greeks left Troy; but a late tradition, as the second of Racine's prefaces mentions, does allow him to survive and become the ancestor of the first dynasty of kings of France. But the chain-gang of lovers, each loving one and loved by another, the blackmail exerted on the mother by threats against her son's life, the revenge of the jilted rival which she instantly disavows, are commonplace in seventeenth-century tragedy; none of them appears in any Greek or Latin source.

One of these lovers purports to be Orestes, the figure who recurs more often than any other in the Greek tragedies that remain to us; known there principally as the killer of his mother Clytemnestra in vengeance for her murder of her husband Agamemnon (these two appear in Racine's *Iphigenia*); the Furies persecuted him in punishment of his matricide. Has he killed her yet when he appears in *Andromache*? Racine never breathes a word of her – he must want to keep some sympathy for his character until he commits a different crime, and catches a glimpse of the Furies in his last delirious speech. Orestes speaks much of the injustice of Heaven in our play, but with nothing to justify it objectively beyond his melancholy and a hopeless love; indeed his earliest speeches accuse in turn Fortune, the Gods and Destiny – strictly three independent supernatural agencies – and finally Love. At the same

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time we must not deny that he brings into the tragedy much of the poetry of ancient legend in which it is bathed.

Not only is the play a compound of ancient and modern in plot and characters; it has a wide range of emotion and tone, elegiac, passionate, and often full of elegant but sometimes bitter irony – irony consciously employed by the speakers, or betrayed in the contrast between their professions and actions, even more than the ‘tragic irony’ unknowingly conveyed by their words; so that Racine’s friend Boileau condemned one scene (II 5) as fit only for comedy (but Racine was safely dead when he said this). There are scenes of threat and struggle, and gleams of illusory hope; scenes of what Eugène Vinaver has called tragic error followed by tragic recognition of the truth; scenes of calm despair. *Phèdre* and *Athalie* are both more homogeneous in texture, and yield in a sense a purer tone; but it is wise to accept these contrasts and variations with gratitude, and become as sensitive as we can to the acute observation, subtle wit and cutting sarcasm which are also elements in Racine’s style.

No later play of his has been so thoroughly revised. He pruned weak lines, and removed obscurities, incoherent metaphors and excesses of lovers’ jargon, particularly the figurative use of ‘hearts’ and of ‘eyes’ (signifying feminine beauty). He also deprived his titular heroine of an appearance in the denouement (see note on line 1532). But in its uncorrected form it was the work that first made the poet’s name.

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## [PREFACE OF 1668]

VIRGIL  
IN THE THIRD BOOK  
OF THE AENEID*Aeneas speaks:*

We skimm'd along Epirus' flying shores.  
 On the Chaonian port at length we fall;  
 Thence we ascend to high Buthrotos' wall. . . .  
 By chance, Andromache that moment paid  
 The mournful offerings to her Hector's shade.  
 A tomb, an empty tomb, her hands compose  
 Of living turf, and two fair altars rose.  
 Sad scene! that still provok'd the tears she shed. . . .  
 To this, with lowly voice, the fair replies,  
 While on the ground she fix'd her streaming eyes:  
 Thrice blest Polyxena! condemn'd to fall  
 By vengeful Greece beneath the Trojan wall;  
 Stabb'd at Pelides' tomb the victim bled,  
 To death deliver'd from the victor's bed.  
 Nor lots disgrac'd her with a chain, like me,  
 A wretched captive, drag'd from sea to sea!  
 Doom'd to that hero's haughty heir, I gave  
 A son to Pyrrhus, more than half a slave.  
 From me, to fair Hermione he fled  
 Of Leda's race, and sought a Spartan bed; . . .  
 But fierce Orestes, by the Furies tost  
 And mad with vengeance for the bride he lost,  
 Swift on the monarch from his ambush flew,  
 And at Apollo's hallow'd altar slew.

Here, in a few lines, is the whole story of this tragedy. Here are the scene of the play, the action that takes place there, the four main actors, and even their characters – except that of Hermione, whose raging jealousy is sufficiently shown in the *Andromache* of Euripides.

But in truth my personages are so famous in antiquity that anyone who knows it at all will see quite clearly that I have rendered them as the old poets have shown them. Nor have I felt free to change anything in their dispositions. The sole liberty I have taken is to soften slightly the fierceness of Pyrrhus, which Seneca in his *Troad* and Virgil in Book II of the *Aeneid* have carried much further than I thought it right to do.

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Even so there have been some who complained that he showed anger to Andromache, and endeavoured to marry his captive at all costs. I admit that he is not sufficiently resigned to his mistress's will, and that Celadon understood perfect love better than he does. But what could I do? Pyrrhus had not read our romances. He was violent by nature. And not every hero is cut out to be a Celadon.

However this may be, I have been too well treated by the public to be concerned at the personal ill-humour of two or three people who would like to see all the heroes of antiquity reformed into faultless heroes. I am sure their intention is excellent, to have none but impeccable characters shown on the stage. But I beg them to remember that it is not for me to change the rules of drama. Horace tells us to depict Achilles wild, inexorable, violent, as he was in life, and as his son is depicted. And Aristotle, far from calling for perfect heroes, desires on the contrary that tragic characters, that is, those whose misfortune constitutes the catastrophe of the tragedy, should be neither entirely good nor entirely bad. He does not want them extremely good, because the punishment of a good man would arouse the audience's indignation rather than its pity; nor excessively wicked, because no one pities a villain. Therefore they should have an intermediate kind of goodness, that is, a virtue liable to weakness, and should fall into misfortune through some fault that makes us pity but not detest them.

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## [PREFACE OF 1676]

[Racine's new preface for his first collective edition in 1676 begins with the same quotation from Virgil, and goes on:]

Here, in a few lines, is the whole story of this tragedy. Here are the scene of the play, the action that takes place there, the four main actors, and even their characters – except that of Hermione, whose raging jealousy is sufficiently shown in the *Andromache* of Euripides.

That is about the only thing I borrow from this author here. For, although my tragedy bears the same name, its subject is nevertheless quite different. Andromache in Euripides fears for the life of Molossus, a son of hers by Pyrrhus, whom Hermione wishes to put to death with its mother. But here there is no question of Molossus. Andromache knows no husband but Hector and no son but Astyanax. I felt that by this I was conforming to the idea we have of the princess today. Most of those who have heard of Andromache probably know her only as the widow of Hector and the mother of Astyanax. It is not felt that she should love either another husband or another son. And I doubt if Andromache's tears would have affected my audiences as they have, had they flowed for another son than Hector's.

It is true I have had to let Astyanax live a little longer than he did. But I am writing in a country where this freedom could hardly be taken amiss. For, not to mention Ronsard who took this same Astyanax as the hero of his *Franciade*, who is unaware that our early kings are held to descend from this son of Hector, and that our old chronicles save his life after the devastation of his country, to make him the founder of our monarchy?

How much bolder was Euripides in his tragedy, *Helen!* He goes openly against the common belief of all Greece. In his play Helen never set foot in Troy, and after the city has been burnt Menelaus finds his wife in Egypt where she had been all the time. All this, following a belief accepted only by the Egyptians, as may be read in Herodotus.

I do not think I should need this precedent from Euripides to justify the slight liberty I have taken. For there is a great difference between destroying the principal basis of a legend and altering a few incidents, which change almost entirely in every hand that uses them. Thus Achilles, according to most

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poets, can only be wounded in the heel, though Homer shows him wounded in the arm, and does not consider him invulnerable in any part of his body. Thus too Sophocles makes Clytemnestra die immediately Oedipus discovers his true identity, far from living, as she does in Euripides, to see the duel and death of her two sons. And it is on some conflict of this nature that an ancient commentator of Sophocles\* quite rightly says 'that we should not waste our time cavilling at poets for any changes they may have made in legend, but pause to consider the excellent use they have made of those changes, and their cleverness in adapting legend to their subject'.

\*Sophocles, *Electra*. [Racine's note]

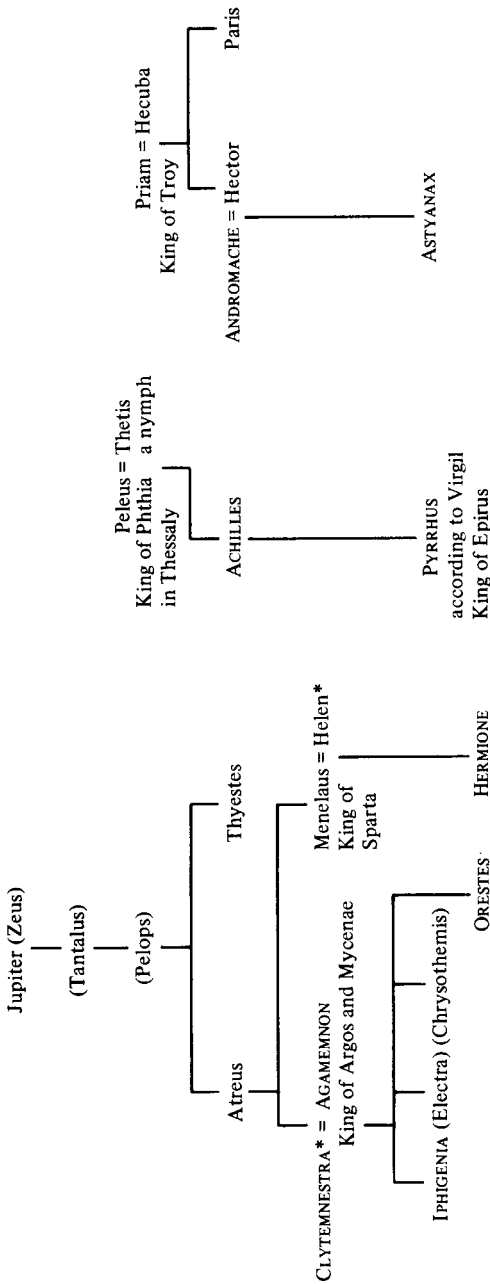
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\* Helen and Clytemnestra were half-sisters, both being born to Leda  
 (Names in parenthesis for characters not named in the plays)

Genealogical table for *Andromache* and *Iphigenia*

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

<i>Andrōmachē</i>	widow of Hector, captive of Pyrrhus
<i>Pyrrhus</i>	son of Achilles, king of Epirus
<i>Orestes</i>	son of Agamemnon, in love with Hermione
<i>Hermionē</i>	daughter of Helen and Menelaus, betrothed to Pyrrhus
<i>Pylades</i>	friend of Orestes
<i>Cleōnē</i>	confidant of Hermione
<i>Cephissa</i>	confidant of Andromache
<i>Phōenix</i>	formerly governor of Achilles, then of Pyrrhus

*Soldiers of Orestes*

*The scene is in Buthrotum, a city of Epirus;  
a room in the palace of Pyrrhus.*



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## ANDROMACHE

## ACT I

## ORESTES, PYLADES

*Orestes* Yes, with the truest of my friends to greet me,  
I must believe my Fortune is relenting;  
For surely her displeasure must be past  
Now she has brought the two of us together.  
How should I guess that on a shore I dreaded  
Pylades would be waiting for Orestes,  
And here, in Pyrrhus' court, would be the man  
I'd lost to sight for six long months and more?

*Pylades* Thanks be to the Gods, that never ceased to  
thwart me,  
And held me off a hundred times from Greece 10  
Since the disastrous day that wind and wave  
Scattered our ships so near Epirus' shore.  
How I feared for you in our separation,  
And wept for all the things I feared you suffered!  
Things that my helpless friendship could not share,  
And most of all, that cloud of melancholy  
That overshadowed you so long before;  
I feared the cruel kindness of some God  
Would give you the death to which your soul aspired.  
But you are here, my lord, and to all seeming 20  
You come to Epirus under luckier omens;  
For the brilliant retinue that follows you  
Does not attend a wretch in search of death.

*Orestes* Ah, but who knows what Fate has brought me  
here?

Love leads me, Love for one who still rejects me.  
And who can prophesy what is to come?  
Is life my goal, or death in spite of all?

*Pylades* What, still, like an abject slave, are you  
prepared  
To take your sentence or reprieve from Love?  
What magic, after all your former woes, 30  
Has brought you back into your cast-off chains --  
As if Hermione, so cold in Sparta,  
Would welcome you with kindness in Epirus?  
You were ashamed to plead in vain; you loathed her:

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At least, you spoke no more of her. I was  
Deceived, my lord.

*Orestes*                    I was the one deceived.  
Friend, have some pity on a helpless friend:  
You cannot say I ever hid my heart,  
You watched this flame, you knew my earliest sighs;  
Then, after Menelaus gave his daughter                    40  
To the avenger of his house, to Pyrrhus,  
You saw me in despair; and you have seen  
Me drag my dreary chain and drag my grief  
From shore to shore. I found you always near me,  
Patiently following me unbidden always  
To calm my rage as often as it rose  
And daily save Orestes from himself.  
Then – for I told myself that while I languished  
Hermione was flinging all her beauty  
At Pyrrhus’ feet – you know I swore revenge,                    50  
Swore to forget if I had been forgotten;  
I said – I thought – that I had won my battle;  
I smarted, but I thought the smart was hatred,  
Cursing her coldness, crying down her charms,  
Daring her eyes to break my peace again.  
And so I thought my passion safely dead,  
And travelled back to Greece in seeming calm.  
But I found the princes of the land had met,  
Just then, in council on some pressing danger.  
I rushed to join them. I hoped that war and glory                    60  
Would fill my thoughts with other, weightier business,  
And if my mind grew strong and keen again  
The last of love would vanish from my heart.  
But look how like a wily hunter fate  
Drove me into the very toils I dreaded:  
These fears, this indignation, was for Pyrrhus,  
Who, as I heard, reckless of faith and blood,  
Had sheltered Hector’s orphan at his court,  
Astyanax, the enemy of Greece,  
The last descendant of so many Kings                    70  
Buried beneath Troy towers. Andromache,  
Cheating the shrewd Ulysses of his blood,  
Had clutched a borrowed infant to her breast,  
A counterfeit that took his master’s name  
And, dying, saved her son. – I learnt there too  
That, tiring of Hermione, my rival  
Is offering his heart and crown elsewhere.  
Her father, unbelieving, yet offended,