

# ANDROMAQUE

## Racine

**Overview** Racine's *Andromaque*, his most complex and perfect play of passion, intrigue, and tragedy, was first performed at the court of Louis XIV in November 1667, then presented in public a few days later. The play concerns events occurring in the aftermath of the Trojan War—events recorded in classical literature by the *Andromache* of Euripides, and by the Third Book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Andromache has been given to Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, as part of the Greek post-War spoils, and finds herself in a terrible bind: she is at the center of two loyalties, to her husband Hector, the now dead leader of the Trojans, in whose honor she cannot give in to the marital desires of her captor, Pyrrhus; and to her son, Astyanax, whom she can apparently save only by giving in to the amorous advances of her captor Pyrrhus. Around this nucleus of dilemma swirl around a host of moral and amorous complexities at the court of Pyrrhus.

**Story** As the play opens, Orestes, son of Agamemnon, is meeting an old friend, Pylades, at that court. The Greeks are worried; rumor has it, apparently, that Pyrrhus has fallen in love with Andromache, and for her sake he is protecting Astyanax, son of Hector—and a threat to the Greeks from the Trojan line. The Greeks have come to take Astyanax away, but in addition Orestes has deep affection for Hermione, Pyrrhus' neglected fiancée. Orestes makes his demands to Pyrrhus, and is rejected—Astyanax will not be released—contingent upon the love of Andromache.

Hermione, hesitating because of Pyrrhus' indifference to her, tells Orestes she will follow him home to her father. Orestes is delighted until Pyrrhus, sharply hurt by Andromache's refusal to give in to him—thanks to her fidelity to her dead husband, Hector—gives in to Orestes' mission, says the boy can go, and that he, Pyrrhus, will keep Hermione.

Orestes, crazed by the turn of events, decides to kidnap Hermione, while Andromache, at the same time, begs Hermione to intervene and save Astyanax, whom Andromache cannot bear to save at the price of yielding to Pyrrhus.

Andromache goes to the grave of her deceased husband, to ask what she should do, and decides to yield to Pyrrhus—thus saving her son—but to kill herself just after the marriage ceremony. Hermione meanwhile, furious at Pyrrhus for his rejection of her—and choice of Andromache—demands that Orestes should murder Pyrrhus at the marriage altar.

When Hermione learns that Orestes has in fact killed Pyrrhus, at the altar, she is—contradictorily—mad with grief and fury, and stabs herself to death on the body of Pyrrhus. Orestes is toppled by despair, at this sequence of events, and goes mad.

The audience of this, the most dreadful, perfect, and complex tragedy of Racine, is left purged and free—according to Aristotle's formula in the *Poetics*. From the start, the unfolding of the emotionally plausible set of tragic conflicts, at the court of Pyrrhus, sweeps up our attention and leaves us no resting point. Given the passions of each of the central characters—and particularly the unchanging devotion of Andromache to her dead husband Hector—no other outcomes are imaginable.

### Themes.

**Inevitability** One theme is that of the *fateful inevitability of a tragic outcome*, given a certain kind of collision of opposing passions. Pyrrhus ultimately cannot live without Andromache; she cannot betray Hector, or expose her son to danger; Orestes cannot live without Hermione, though at first he seemed able to; Hermione, rejected by Pyrrhus, cannot refrain from taking the ultimate revenge on Pyrrhus.

**Fidelity** A second theme is surely marital fidelity. The absolute refusal of Andromache, to betray the memory of her husband Hector, dominates the play. Her dilemma is absolute; to save Astyanax she would need to yield to Pyrrhus, but this she cannot do. Hence the furious plot to marry but to kill herself on the wedding altar.

## Character

**Andromache** is a passionately emotional woman, thrust into a humiliating position, which forces her to consider betraying either her husband or her young son, both of which are intolerable situations. She is, therefore put into a passive situation, and yet she maintains her control, inside that situation, by her power over Pyrrhus, whose love for her is obsessive. As she puts it, to Pyrrhus who is pressing his case, she herself is '*captive, toujours triste, inportune a moi meme*,' '*captive, forever sad, importunate to herself*.' The complexities of the play revolve entirely around the insoluble dilemma of this emotional woman, whose only failing is her excess of fidelity.

## MAJOR CHARACTER

**ANDROMACHE** (Emotional)

**Character** Andromache is a passionately emotional woman, thrust into a humiliating position, which forces her to consider betraying either her husband or her young son, both of which are intolerable situations. She is, therefore put into a passive situation, and yet she maintains her control, inside that situation, by her power over Pyrrhus, whose love for her is obsessive. As she puts it, to Pyrrhus who is pressing his case, she herself is '*captive, toujours triste, inportune a moi meme*,' '*captive, forever sad, importunate to herself*.' The complexities of the play revolve entirely around the insoluble dilemma of this emotional woman, whose only failing is her excess of fidelity.

**Parallels** The Hebrew Old Testament enshrines testimonies to extraordinarily staunch and faithful women; Ruth and Esther come to mind foremost, the latter of whom was to become the subject of one of Racine's own last plays. Literature as a whole, though, abounds in such portrayals, from Homer's Penelope, who holds out for her husband Odysseus during twenty years of siege from suitors, through Gertrude—Hamlet's mother, who is an innocent victim of royal murder—to, say, an ingénue like Sunny, the young woman prostitute who remains pure of soul, in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.

## Illustrative moments

**Pathetic** We first see Andromache on stage, as she makes her way for the once a day visit to her son, which Pyrrhus permits her. She meets Pyrrhus, her captor, who asks whether she is looking for him, but she replies that she is only looking for a chance to 'cry with her son' over their miserable fate. Her misery is only deepened when Pyrrhus replies that the Greeks are preparing far worse for her, a plan to kill her son, Astyanax, lest he become the harbinger of a new rebellion of the Trojans against Greece.

**Desperation** As Andromache's desperation increases, caught between her fidelity to her husband, and her devotion to her son—it seems impossible that she can respect both demands—she turns to Hermione, who is not only the daughter of Helen, but is the fiancée of Pyrrhus, to request help with taking care of Astyanax. The appeal is from mother to mother, but it is richer than that, for Andromache, the wife of Hector, has during the Trojan War done her best to sway the Trojan leaders toward respect for Helen herself, who is in a sense the cause of the war. Hermione owes her one.

**Implacable** Andromache is confronted by Cephise, her confidante, who urges her to consider the marriage proposal of Pyrrhus, who has fallen hopelessly in love with Andromache, having lost all interest in Hermione, who is pursuing him. But Andromache is implacable and furious, determined to remain true to the memory and commitment of her marriage to Hector. She expatiates on her rage, by recalling the murder of her father by the Greeks, and the destruction of the entire city which was her life. She will marry Pyrrhus only as a 'final sacrifice' on the altar of his violence against her and her people.

**Wishes** Andromache finally realizes the impossibility of reconciling her double commitments—to her dead husband and to her son—and turns to her confidante, Cephise, to help bring a resolution. Andromache will go through the marriage with Pyrrhus, but only after he has promised to take care of her son. Then, married and at ease about her son—for Pyrrhus is the type to be true to his word—Andromache will kill herself, thereby remaining faithful to Hector and Astyanax both. It will be the responsibility of Cephise, to keep Pyrrhus mindful of his commitment to protect the boy.

### **Discussion questions**

Is Pyrrhus presented as an honorable suitor to Andromache? Is he abusing her tragically weak position, or is he genuinely convinced that he is doing his best for her?

Is Andromache to be admired, as a person of honor and strong will power, or is there a hint of criticism, in Racine's treatment of her as impractical and excessively idealistic?

How does Racine portray the Greeks, as a cultural unit? Are they bloodthirsty for further revenge against their defeated foes, the Trojans? Is any character in the play particularly 'sympathetic'?