ALL IN THE FAMILY: PRESENT AND PAST IN EURIPIDES’ ANDROMACHE

BY

POULCHERIA KYRIAKOU

Having been criticized at least since Aristotle’s time for his failure to build “unified” plots\(^1\), Euripides has been particularly attacked for plays like the *Hecuba* and the *Andromache* which combine different, traditionally unrelated stories: wielding them into one piece, Euripides necessarily had to put up with some logical inconsistencies and to leave some loose ends that might not damage the overall effect of the play but are easily detectable by even a casual observer\(^2\). The *Andromache* gives a very hard time to anyone who looks for Aristotelian unity in the conventional sense\(^3\). Not only does the heroine leave the stage fairly early on (765), she does not play any visible role afterwards and is only briefly referred to by Thetis, the *dea ex machina*, at the end (1243-45)\(^4\). Thus the figure


4) Because, though, it has been thought that the female character the chorus addresses at 1041 can only be Andromache and it would be odd if the chorus turned rather abruptly to a character absent for so long, it has been suggested that Andromache and her child reenter with Peleus shortly before 1041 and remain on stage as mute persons until the end of the play; see P.T. Stevens, *Euripides: Andromache* (Oxford 1971), 218-19 and H. Golder, *The Mute Andromache*, TAPA 113 (1983), 123-33, with previous bibliography. Others have rejected the suggestion that Peleus brings with him Andromache and the boy; see W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama* (Munich 1968), 118-21, D.P. Stanley-Porter, *Mute Actors in the Tragedies*
of the eponymous heroine and her fortunes, the most obvious candidates for the title of “unifying theme”, do not definitely provide the thread that runs through the play and a plausible and widely accepted replacement has yet to be suggested despite repeated attempts to that effect\(^5\). In one form or another the question of unity has dominated the critical literature to date and has generally diverted attention from other aspects that could have proven much more conducive to a better appreciation of the play. Thus I do not intend to take up again the hunt for this elusive unity—I believe that it constitutes infringement of Euripides’ artistic individuality to postulate, as has often happened, that he had to have some kind of specific unity, otherwise Andromache would be worthless and unworthy of a playwright of Euripides’ importance. Euripides himself apparently considered it an integrated work, it can very well stand as it is and there is ultimately little point in foisting on it the irrelevant ideal of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and trying to cut it down to size.

My purpose here is to look at the characters’ relationship to their families as well as how third parties perceive this relationship. In a play whose starting point is the quarrel between a wife and a concubine family affairs play a major role. Marital liaisons, past and present, are mentioned frequently as are different generations of families, especially Peleus’ family. In such a context the way the characters relate, and compare, to their close relatives is bound to be an important parameter in the reading of the play. With subtle hints and background information Euripides has managed to tell a story much more complex than the one crystallized in maxims of the sort “children take after their parents” or “history repeats itself”. The legacy of the past turns out much trickier to chart, and deal with, than what the characters in the play believe. Both their utterances and their actions are revealed inadequate and Euripides’ way of presenting this inadequacy is one of the most intriguing aspects of this little appreciated play.

It is interesting that Andromache is the only character whose parents or family of origin are never mentioned in the play, al-

---

\(^5\) For a summary see Aldrich (above, n.3), 10-18 and Stevens (above, n.4), 10-12.