

Women in the work of Euripides Misogynist or Progressive? A Systemic Reading

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to answer certain long-lasting questions about Euripides, the psychographer of Ancient Greek Tragedy, through a systemic reading, but also taking into account the historic and social context of the era in which he lived. Was he a misogynist or was he progressive? How did he portray women? We will refer to three of his main heroines: Medea, Hecuba, and Andromache. We will see their common characteristics and how they stood in the face of adversity, trauma and tragic events. We will investigate what part ancestry, personality and mental resilience played in the survival, change and development of the heroines. Did they have supportive systems or were they faced with cruelty and contempt in the male-dominated society of their time.

Key words: Euripides, Medea, Hecuba, Andromache, systemic reading, ancestry, resilience, supportive systems.

A. Psychographer of Ancient Greek Tragedy. Social and historic context

The landscape of ancient Greek literature is vast; it is a maze of human intellect. Historiography, philosophy, rhetoric, epic poetry, lyric poetry and dramatic poetry. And Ancient Greek tragedy that flourishes in the 5th century B.C. in Athens, holds a prominent place in this cultural wealth.



“An endless line of ancestors, stern, tormented, proud, moved my every muscle... It is not a small thing to have centuries on your side”⁶. Elytis’s poetic writing meets the scientific thought of Carl Jung, who identifies a common psychological layer beneath the unconscious, which he calls “collective unconscious”. Every person carries within himself humanity with its entire long history of experiences⁷. Archetypal ideas, symbols and myths that are passed down from one generation to the next. All myths have a semantic foundation in which our very life is reflected. It is man’s desire to see his finite power extended to omnipotence. It is his longing to see death being overcome by immortal beings. Thus, we need myths in order to communicate with our imaginative dimension, which is beyond reason⁸. Greek mythology, multidimensional and rich in characters, offered a wealth of material to 5th century B.C. dramatic poetry. Ancient Greek theatre was built on the foundation of the charm and omnipotence of those myths, whose therapeutic effect and value have never been disputed.

Euripides was born in 485 B.C. in Salamis and died in 406 B.C. in the city of Pella in Macedonia. This means he lived during the peak of Athenian cultural prosperity, but, unfortunately he also experienced the tragedy of the Peloponnesian War, the struggle between Athens and Sparta that lasted twenty-seven whole years, from 431 B.C. to 404 B.C. His family made sure that he was very well educated and that he would have the opportunities to cultivate his personality and exhibit his literary talent. During this period of the 5th century B.C. the emergence of the Sophistic movement causes a stir in the status quo of education, as it introduces new theories that criticise and question traditional values and ideas. Sophists, as teachers of the rhetoric art, utilise discourse, which in turn gains power and effectiveness. Euripides’ contact with the sophists and philosophers of his time, like Protagoras, Prodicus, Gorgias and of course Socrates, deeply affected his work and ideas.

As a person, he was a loner, an introvert but also a sensitive observer of the social and historic conditions. The Golden Age of Athens is drawing to an end and its decline is approaching. Maybe that is the reason why Euripides left Athens for Macedonia and the court of king Archelaus, in his final years, disappointed from the transformation of the Athenian Democracy into an imperialistic power that dominated over its weak allies through the use of force and terror. The most characteristic example of this is the massacre of the people of Melos in 415 B.C., an act of unprecedented savagery. Euripides does not hesitate to show the other side of Athenian Democracy; its dark side. Athenians, however, do not take kindly to seeing the faults of their politics in plays. Aristophanes does not wait the opportunity to mock Euripides in his comedies. He berates him for his ancestry, for the demystification of his heroes, for his female characters and for all the theatrical innovations that he attempts.

What position do women have in this turbulent and transitional period? Women live in the shadow of men, under their dominance, with no political or legal rights. Education for women is limited to learning reading and writing, and learning to play a musical instrument, either the lyre or the flute. The only opportunity for women to be active outside the household is during big religious celebrations. During these, they have

⁶Odysseas Elytis. Open papers. Modern Greek literature, Textbook High school 3rd Grade

⁷Christiana Nikokavoura. “Elytis and Jung – a dialogue. Ellinika Grammata

⁸see footnote 2.



leading roles, attending sacrifices and rituals, participating in processions, singing and dancing religious dances. They attend theatrical performances but they are not allowed to participate as actors. Women in the work of Euripides, however, are very different to the social reality of the time. They are powerful and fight for their right, they claim the object of their love and they always pay the heaviest price. Tender and vulnerable, betrayed and self-destructive, brave and resilient, innocent or guilty, they all have a common characteristic: they are down-to-earth human beings, with good and evil coexisting within them. There is, however an oxymoron: Although the playwright lets them wonder and be dragged by their passions and be ultimately led to perform extreme acts, he does not accuse them or leave them defenseless. He attempts to discover deeper motives for their actions and to incorporate those to their wider family and social environment. What other people are hidden behind them? Who else is to blame for their painful course? Could the catalyst always be a man, a traitor like Jason in the case of Medea⁹, or a treacherous ally, a supposed friend like in the case of Hecuba? Oftentimes male characters are described disparagingly as petty or conniving like Ulysses and Menelaus, or arrogant like Agamemnon. Euripides dares to strip his characters naked and knock them off their heroic majestic pedestal. He has been unfairly accused by many scholars of being a misogynist. Contrary to that, however, there is an abundance of emblematic female personalities in his work. His most stunning plays are written about them. “Alcestis”, “Medea”, “Andromache”, “Hecuba”, “Iphigenia”, “Helen”. Even if the title of the play is a male name, a woman still steals the show. Love, the most powerful passion of all, mostly concerns women. It becomes the central theme that moves the strings and instigates action. Euripides is considered as the creator of erotic drama.

In “Hippolytus” Phaedra is married to king Theseus and falls madly in love with her husband’s son, the young Hippolytus. The female chorus wonders why Phaedra has not eaten for days and wishes to die.

In line 131 it is described that: “She lies afflicted, they say, in a bed of sickness and keeps indoors, with fine-spun cloths covering her blond head”.¹⁰

Fear, shame, hidden passion, the entire internal struggle are shown through the description of physical pain. The torments of the psyche are crushing the body. This passive element’s realism is one of Euripides’ bold innovations¹¹. There is a battle raging within Phaedra, between two conflicting forces: passion and reason. Passion ultimately prevails and will dictate her actions. It is this torn heart that the French 17th century dramatist Jean Racine draws from when writing his own Phaedra.

“Maddened, where am I! What did I say?

Where have I let my will and spirit go play?

I have lost them: the gods deny me their use.

⁹Zaquelline de Romilly: *The Modernity of Euripides*. Translated to Greek by Aggeliki Stasinopoulou–Skiada. Book Institute – A. Kardamitsa.

¹⁰Euripides, *Hippolytus*. David Kovacs, Ed.

¹¹see footnote 4.



Oenone, blushes cover my face".¹²

In "Electra" the homonymous heroine is waiting for her brother Orestes for years, so that they can avenge the murder of their father Agamemnon. Their mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus must pay. Electra carries a deep genealogic trauma of wounds that have been left unhealed and there is only one way forward; that of punishment, or is it justice? Euripides leaves cracks on all of his characters. Nobody is absolutely guilty or absolutely innocent. Orestes hesitates before the murder.

Line 969: "Ah! How can I kill her when she bore me and brought me up?"¹³

And Electra, who is so vicious and determined, crosses from the feeling of hate to that of unbearable sadness once the murder has been committed.

Line 1181: "Too many tears, my brother, and I am the cause. Unhappy, that I came to fiery rage against this woman, who was my mother!"¹⁴

The poet uncovers the subtlest mood swings and this conversion of emotions at the most crucial moment. One line, or better yet one word, is enough to highlight the tragic antiphase of his heroes. The siblings call their murdered mother "the one loved and not loved" (line 1230)! Euripides shapes a world of people with weaknesses, passions and untamed internal powers, which most of the times are uncontrollable. It is only fair that Aristotle named him the "most tragic of all poets". He sympathizes with his characters even if they commit heinous acts. Centuries later Bertolt Brecht wrote:

"For her sin was black but her pain was great.

Therefore, I beg you, check your wrath and scorn

For man needs help from every creature born."¹⁵

All this does not mean that in the works of Euripides there is a shortage of heroic women who sacrifice themselves for others. There is Iphigeneia, who willingly offers her life for the good of her country, thus protecting her father Agamemnon that is portrayed as a helpless puppet of the military mob, from making the difficult decision. There is Alcestis, the personification of spousal love, who agrees to give her life to save that of her husband Admetus. Here also, the two main male characters, Admetus and his father, are portrayed as cowardly and selfish. The roles have been reversed and it is the woman that boldly faces death and descends to the underworld without hesitation.

In "Helen" Euripides utilises a legend according to which Helen never reached Troy, but instead her image did. "I did not go to Troy; that was a phantom"¹⁶. Instead, she has been transported to Egypt. Euripides intentionally utilises this version of the legend

¹²Racine, Phaedra.

¹³Euripides, *Electra*. E.P. Coleridge, Ed.

¹⁴see footnote 8.

¹⁵Bertolt Brecht, "Concerning the Infanticide, Marie Farrar"

¹⁶Euripides, *Helen*. Line 582. E.P. Coleridge, Ed.



so that Helen is absolved. She is no longer the fateful, unfaithful woman who instigated the Trojan War. Her beauty and the deaths she unwittingly caused are her woe.

“If only I could be rubbed out like a painting and have again in turn a plainer form instead of beauty”.¹⁷

Helen longs to restore her name, to uncover the truth and to show her inner beauty. She wishes for a peaceful world:

“You are fools, who try to win a reputation for virtue through war”.¹⁸

The main theme of the play is the unequivocal condemnation of the futility of war. Helen becomes the symbol of the disproving of ideals and the decline of ideologies. Centuries later Seferis revives the legend in the way it was conceived by Euripides’ intellect, and writes his own Helen.

“... that so much suffering so many lives

went spinning into the abyss

all for an empty tunic, for a Helen”.¹⁹

Ritsos’ Helen moves along the same lines, old and forgotten:

“... How senseless it all was,

without substance, permanence, purpose – wealth, wars, grudges, reputations,

fine jewellery. Even my beauty.”²⁰

Euripides’ poetry, radical for its era, dense and full of meanings, travelled through the centuries, stood the test of time and influenced a very wide scope of thinkers and artists worldwide.

Euripides has been blamed for not being involved with politics and for not holding public office. However, the mere writing of the play “The Trojan Women” was a political act, an act of cultural activism. It is anti-war not just because of its subject, but also because of the historical circumstances during which it was written, amidst the Peloponnesian War in 415 B.C. In “The Trojan Women”, Euripides unequivocally expresses his disgust for the atrocities committed by the victorious Greeks against the Trojan women prisoners of war. He is interested in every single woman’s mental state. How she deals with the horrors of war, being forcefully taken from her country and all the barbarity. He focuses on the personal pain of Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Polyxena and Helen and all their laments transform into a collective ecumenical and timeless trauma. The power of his description of human anguish is a rain of tears, a

¹⁷Euripides, Helen. Line 261. E.P. Coleridge, Ed.

¹⁸Euripides, Helen. Line 1151. E.P. Coleridge, Ed.

¹⁹George Seferis, Helen.

²⁰Yiannis Ritsos, Fourth Dimension. Translated by Peter Green and Beverly Bradley, Princeton University Press.



torrential river of emotions. With the intelligence that characterizes him, in the true sense of the word meaning his powers of perception, his sensitivity and empathy he predicts the defeat of the Athenians in Sicily and the end of their dominion.

“A fool is he who sacks the towns of men,
with shrines and tombs, the dead man's hallowed home,
for at the last he makes a desert round himself and dies”.²¹

He interprets the foreboding signs as if he is predicting the dark times that lie ahead, the future of a mankind tormented by struggles, civil wars, uprooting of peoples and violation of human rights. A tragedy that is shockingly relevant and timeless.

Because as Manolis Anagnostakis writes:

“... the war is not over yet.

Because no war has ever been over”.²²

And as George Seferis pointed out in his Nobel prize banquet speech in 1963: “... [There is] but little difference between modern and Greek dramas. Indeed, the behavior of human beings does not seem to have changed. In our gradually shrinking world, everyone is in need of all the others. We must look for man wherever we can find him”²³

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²¹Euripides, The Trojan Women. Line 95. E. P. Coleridge, Ed.

²²Manolis Anagnostakis, excerpt from the poem “The war”.

²³George Seferis, Nobel prize banquet speech. *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam.



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B. Medea – Hecuba: Does Ancestry, Personality Traits or the Environment Contribute to the Creation of a “Monster”?

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1. Medea



Eugène Delacroix

Etymology: The name Medea comes from the ancient Greek verb “medomai” which means “I am thinking, contemplating, keeping in mind, contriving”. Also, the Latin transcription of the root of the word “med-”, has produced some very interesting words, all relating to medicine: medicus means doctor and medical as well. All these “confirm her role as leader- high priestess, witch –avenger but also witch – healer” (1).

Medea’s Genogram: We will approach Medea through her genogram, a useful tool for studying the family in the systemic approach, to highlight how ancient Greeks considered origin and descent as very important long before systemic therapists did, albeit utilizing mythological elements in the process.

Medea’s ancestors and family members

Helios (the god and personification of the sun): Medea’s grandfather, god. He is the son of Hyperion and Theia. He has two sisters, Selene the goddess of the moon, and Eos the goddess of dawn. Because of his attributes as the Sun who sees everything, he is also the god of vows (2). Helios had four children with the Oceanid Perseis: Aeëtes, Circe, Perses and Pasiphaë. Aeëtes in turn had Medea and thus Helios, as her grandfather, played a role in Euripides’ adaptation. When Medea gives jewelry to Glauce, she says that it was given to her by he grandfather. After she kills Glauce, Creon and her children, Helios gives his granddaughter a chariot drawn by dragons to help her escape Corinth and Jason (4).

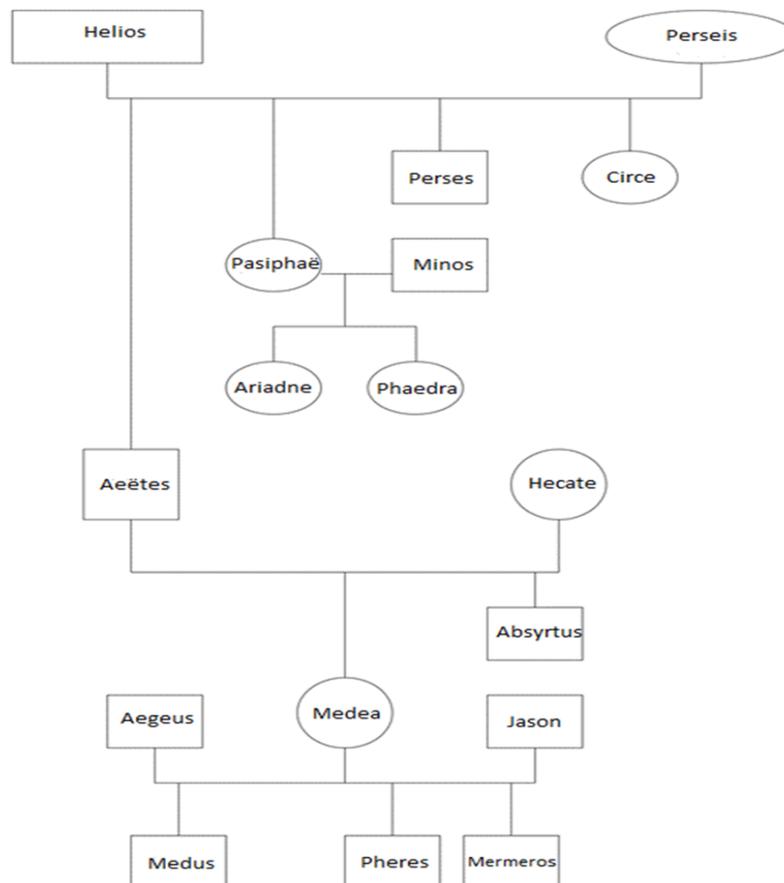
Hecate: Medea's mother. Hecate was a goddess of the art of witchcraft in the underworld. She was the only child of the Titans Perses and Asteria. She was connected in a variety of ways to crossroads, entrances, the light, magic, the knowledge of poisonous herbs, ghosts and necromancy (2), (5), (6).

Circe: Medea's aunt. Circe lived and reigned over the island of Aeaëa and transformed her enemies or those who insulted her into animals, using magic potions, as she knew a lot about herbs and their medicinal properties (2).

Pasiphaë: Medea's aunt. She was also believed to have knowledge of ancient magic with which she would kill any woman she suspected of having an affair with her husband, Minos. She could transform them into snakes, or anything else, so that they would not produce offspring with Minos. Finally, she gave birth to the Minotaur, after mating with the bull that Poseidon (or according to other sources Zeus) sent and made her fall in love with.

Phaedra: Medea's cousin. She killed herself, accusing Hippolytus (her husband's Theseus' son) of having raped her. She did that out of spite because he rejected her, and ultimately led to her lover's death.

We see, therefore, how many of her relatives, albeit in mythology, had similar skills and personality traits to her own.





Historical / Mythological details concerning Medea before the infanticide

Medea had committed horrible murders long before she committed infanticide. After falling in love with Jason, she offered him all the means of her art in order for the hero to obtain the Golden Fleece. She left with him, and in order to delay her father, who was hot on their trail, she dismembered her brother Absyrtus and scattered his body parts in the sea. Later on, in Iolcus Jason begged her to punish Pelias for murdering his father and brother during his campaign with the Argonauts. Medea then convinced Pelias' daughters to dismember his body and boil it, as that would supposedly restore his youth. Pelias' son, Acastus, persecuted Jason and Medea and the couple sought refuge in Corinth (2).

Under what circumstances did she reach the point of committing the monstrous act of infanticide?

1. Medea has abandoned her country, her palace and her family for her love with Jason.
2. She has killed and dismembered her own brother in order to delay her father who was following them on his ship.
3. She has committed more murders for Jason, always faithfully defending his best interest.
4. If she decided to leave, she and her children would no longer have royal privileges and they would possibly be a danger for Creon's royal lineage in the race for his succession.
5. Despite all these, Jason is planning to abandon her in order to marry the princess of Corinth. He looks after his personal interest more than anything else, forgetting all the sacrifices she made for him and also what kind of an enemy she makes. He underestimates her, thinking that as an outsider, away from her family, and also being a woman, she will not dare fight back. Even after she does fight back and commits murder, Jason still underestimates her and belittles her descent saying: "No Greek woman would have dared to do this" (7).

Details of the murders Medea committed after learning of Jason's betrayal, in Euripides' play.

- First, she sends her children to Creon's daughter Glauce, with a beautiful gown that she has drenched in poison as a gift. Glauce, oblivious to this and thinking that Medea has finally pledged allegiance and wants truce, wears the gown and dies a horrible death having caught on fire.
- Glauce's father, who runs to her aid, meets the same fate.
- After an internal struggle, Medea murders her children and buries them with her own hands (not letting Jason even touch their dead bodies) in Hera's sacred land so that no enemy can find and defile them.



Were there any moments when her actions evoked our compassion?

The following is an excerpt from Euripides (7):

“My friends, my resolve is fixed on the deed, to kill
my children with all speed and to flee from this land:

I must not, by lingering,
deliver my children for murder to a less kindly hand.

They must die at all events, and since they must,

I who gave them birth shall kill them. Come, put on your armor, my heart.

Why do I put off doing the terrible deed that must be done?

Come, wretched hand, take the sword, take it
and go to your life's miserable goal. Do not weaken,
do not remember that you love the children,
that you gave them life. Instead, for this brief day
forget them—and mourn hereafter: for even if you kill them,
they were dear to you. Oh, what an unhappy woman I am!”

Are there psychopathological elements in Medea?

We could make a differential diagnosis from the descriptions in Euripides' play. The following are some disorders that seem to fit from a psychiatric perspective:

- **Narcissistic personality disorder:** She is of a royal lineage and is not willing to accept that she and her children can live without privileges. She appears inflexible to alternative solutions and prospects. She has no empathy. She is arrogant. She uses other people (i.e. her children and Aegeus) to achieve her goals.
- **Antisocial personality disorder:** She has committed many murders seemingly feeling no guilt. She does not conform to rules and is characterized by cunningness.
- **Depression with psychotic features:** Like “The Murderess” by Papadiamantis, who killed young girls to save them from the troubles of the world, Medea also kills her children to save them from humiliation. The following excerpt may be connected to the aforementioned disorder.

“O noble form and features of my children, I wish ye joy, but in that other land,
for here your father robs you of your home.

O the sweet embrace,
the soft young cheek, the fragrant breath! my children!



Go, leave me; I cannot bear to longer look upon ye;
my sorrow wins the day.

At last I understand the awful deed I am to do;
but passion, that cause of direst woes to mortal man,
hath triumphed o'er my sober thoughts" (7).

Medea, however, cannot be judged from a psychiatric perspective because she might well be a "murderess", a "queen", a "barbarian", but she still symbolizes the woman in love that seeks revenge when she realizes she is losing the object of her love.

The ultimate act of love towards Jason is to force him to meet her through his pain for his murdered children. The pain for his children is the final, the only device that will subdue him to the most tormenting, the truest (as no other truth remains from their marriage) connection to her (9).

How does the story continue after the murder of her children? Is she punished or rewarded according to the sources?

Medea, after killing her children and confronting her husband with cruelty, rode a chariot drawn by winged dragons and fled to Athens, where she married Aegeus and bore Medus. Then, however, she tried to poison Theseus (Aegeus' son with another woman) and was sent away by Aegeus. She fled to Asia, where her son Medus lived, in a country that was named Media after her. Towards the end of her life, she went to the Elysian Fields where she married Achilles and became immortal (2).

Thus, we notice that despite her heinous actions, Medea was treated with respect and maybe understanding for the motives and the passions that led her there by the ancient Greeks, and not only wasn't she punished but even had a country named after her before ending up in the Elysian Fields. The poet chooses a spectacular scene for her for the ending, giving her what G. Cheimonas calls "her triumph in love".

"Let's close with a phrase that maybe describes her perfectly:

In all other things a woman is full of fear,
incapable of looking on battle or cold steel;
but when she is injured in love,
no mind is more murderous than hers" (8).

2. Hecuba



“Sogno di Ecuba”, (Giulio Romano)

Details that help us understand Hecuba’s personality before her relentless revenge

- Before the siege of Troy, she was a happy mother of 50 children (line 423), a queen of noble descent, a faithful wife.
- She was charitable, as she had hidden Odysseus, who was an enemy, when he had secretly entered Troy to spy in wartime.
- She was hospitable and giving towards friends and strangers (i.e. towards Polymestor).
- In the play, she is a prisoner of war, but she is portrayed as a cultured woman, mature, intelligent. The following excerpt reminds us of the well-known ancient quote “call no man happy until he is dead”:

“It is not right that those in power should use it out of season,
or, when prosperous, suppose they will be always so.

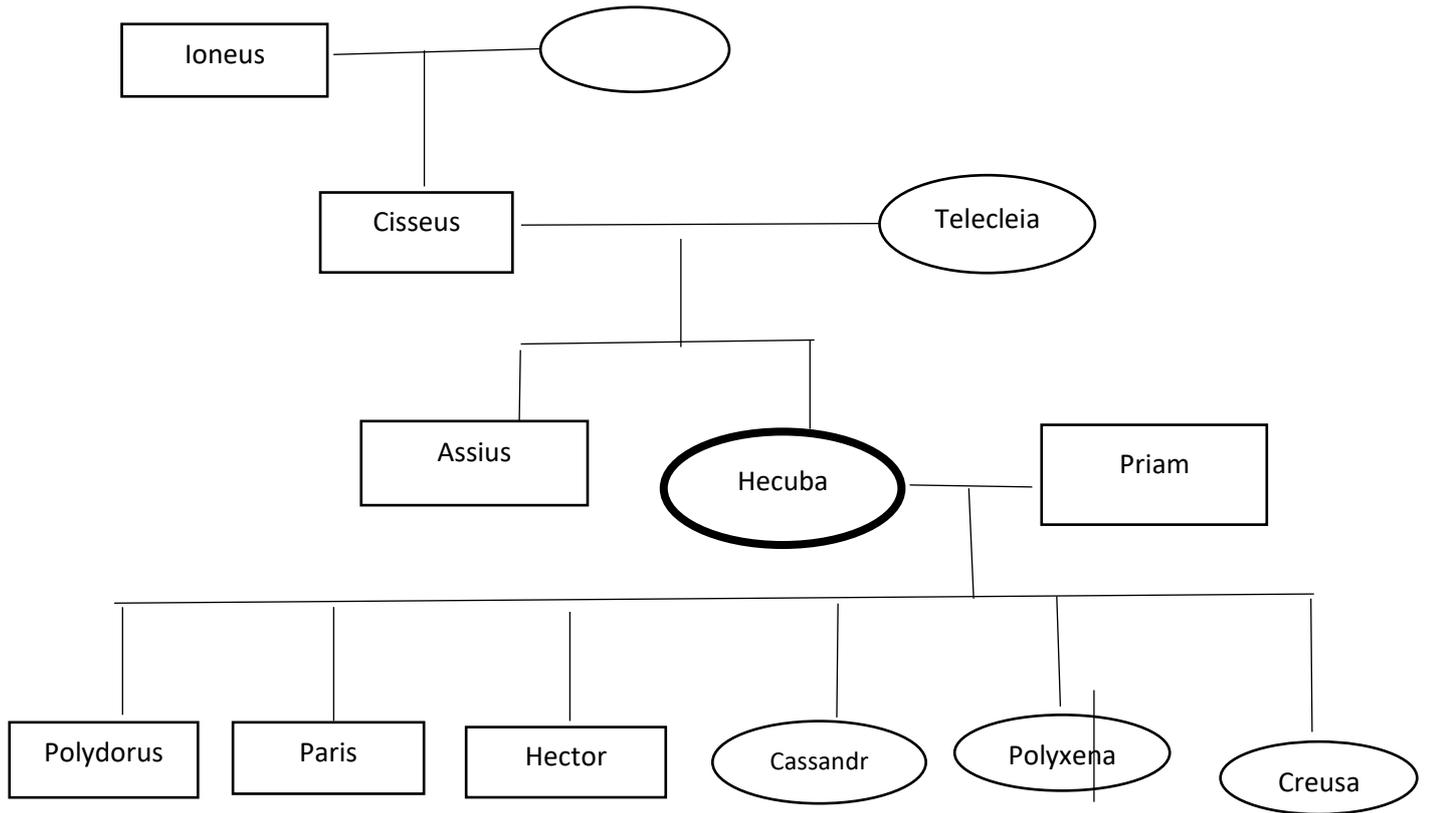
For I also was prosperous once, but now my life is lived,
and one day robbed me of all my bliss” (lines 282-284) (3).

- She apparently accepts the new conditions with decency and dignity, despite being very old:

“Guide these aged steps, my servants, forth before the house;
guide and support your fellow-slave,
once your queen, you maids of Troy” (lines 59-61) (3).

Hecuba’s Genogram

This is Hecuba’s genogram showing her better-known children.





Hecuba was a faithful wife and a doting mother, well known for her many children. She was said to have had another 18 children apart from Hector, with Euripides increasing that number to the unbelievable total of 50. Apollodorus names 14 children (4 daughters and 10 sons). According to different sources (Hecuba's genealogy was a popular theme amongst ancient mythographers) she was the daughter either of the Thracian king Cisseus and Telecleia, or of the river god Sangarius and the nymph Euagora, or of king Dymas (again hailing from the area of Sangarius). She has also been mentioned as the daughter of Glaussippe, Euthythoe or Metope.

Tragic poets like Euripides prefer the Thracian origin of Hecuba, while the Phrygian one comes for the Iliad (2).

How is Hecuba gradually turned into a murderess?

Let's see the sequence of events:

- First, her country, Troy has been pillaged and destroyed.
- Her husband and nearly all her children have been killed.
- All her male compatriots have been killed and all the women are prisoners of war (3).
- She has not only lost her royal status, but she has also become a slave.
- Thus, she has to confront male power figures.

1. Initially with Odysseus, when she still holds hope, which is however shattered by Odysseus when he cruelly and disrespectfully calls her "woman" and announces his decision to sacrifice the only daughter she has left by her side (as Cassandra has already been given as a slave to Agamemnon). Odysseus does not give in to her pleas, her wise words, or even the reminder that she had once saved his life. He concludes by considering himself prudent and respectful of Achilles in an insulting comparison between Greeks and barbarians.

2. She then faces Agamemnon, who is presented as being emotional, and who agrees, for political reasons, to help her get her revenge, after she calmly and determinately persuades him, having lost the last of her children.

3. Finally, she faces her enemy Polymestor, who was once her friend and to whom she had entrusted her son.

- The most significant reason that ultimately leads her to murder is the insurmountable pain for the unjust loss of her remaining children and the subsequent evaporation of all hope.

1. First, her daughter Polyxena, full of politeness and tenderness towards her mother, decides to bid her goodbye, choosing death over life and a royal past over a future as a slave. Even the Argives called her "her that showed such peerless bravery and spirit", admiring her courage. Before she dies, however, she gives her mother hope by telling her that her brother is still alive and he will close their mother's eyes when the time comes.



2. Later, however, fate holds another unpleasant surprise for Hecuba. A maid-servant discovers the dead body of her son Polydorus washed ashore in the place where she had gone to wash Polyxenas' lifeless body. Thus, Hecuba, having lost everything she has ever loved, having nothing left to fight for, faces her enemy Polymestor and pays him back in his own coin.

How did she get her revenge?

After Hecuba realized that the man to whom she had entrusted her son, had not only not protected him but had killed him instead in order to steal his gold, she decided to confront him. She had endured everything, she had stoically lost everything, but she could not tolerate being betrayed by a "friend". It was the only event that would change her, that would transform her from a noble queen and a mother into a "monster"!

She thus utilized all her skills to put her evil plan into action. First, with the aid of her faithful slaves, she got Agamemnon on her side. Then she fought the enemy with his own weapons: lies and deceit. And finally, empty but determined to have her revenge and have justice served, she killed Polymestor's children and blinded him.

Conclusions

- Euripides, according to the analysis of these two plays, could not be characterized as a misogynist. On the contrary he makes us understand two very different women that committed horrible crimes, and to feel for them.
- What was crucial in turning these two heroines into "monsters"? For Medea, it was descent, personality and circumstances. For Hecuba on the other hand it was mainly the experience of all the traumatic events, with the most important being the loss of the last of her many children.
- What is common for both is that neither was Greek, they were both mothers, queens, envied before they were harshly hit by fate, and that they both reacted with exceptional cruelty when they were betrayed by people they trusted.

Could they have reacted differently? Was there another choice?

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C. Andromache and mental resilience

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*Hector, Andromache and Astyanax, Red figure column crater 370-360 B.C.
 Museo Nazionale des Palazzo Jatta in Ruvo di Puglia (Bari).*

Andromache and mental resilience

Mental resilience – a relatively new concept in psychology – refers to the person's ability to adapt to adversities, stressful circumstances and crises and to continue his personal growth. It is a process where the person has to cope with disorganising, stressful or challenging factors, in a manner that provides him or her with additional skills for self-protection and difficult situation management (Richardson, 2017). It is a self-growth process that involves the ability to recover.

The American Psychological Association defines recovery as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” or “bouncing back from these difficult experiences” (APA, 2015). This definition views adaptability or flexibility as a stable personality trait, and implies the person's ability to create and show resilience regardless of socio-economic status, personal experiences or social environment.

Resilience is directly related to self –efficacy and self-correction. The person's perception about their self-efficacy can affect their activity choices, the effort they will invest, and the time they will spend despite difficulties (Bandura, 1996). High self-efficacy can function as an effective shield against adverse and traumatic for the “ego” events and conditions (Chen, et al., 2001).

Masten (2011) presents resilience as a dynamic system's ability to resist or recover from severe threats by regaining its stability, sustainability and development. There are many different sources and courses towards resilience that often interact, including biological and psychological traits, mood traits, social support and social system's characteristics, like family, school, groups of friends, socialising and society in general (Luther, et al., 2000).



Basic characteristics of a resilient individual

An individual's flexibility in managing difficulties is essentially the process of dealing with challenging life events in a manner that provides him with additional skills of protection and coping to those he had before the difficulty arose (Richardson, et al., 1990). Higgins (1994) defines this flexibility as "the process of self-determination or growth", while Wolins (1993) defines it as the ability of overcoming and enduring difficulties and recovering mental equilibrium. Resilience as a personality trait is not only relevant to coping with adverse situations, but also refers to a person's basic adjustment systems' function. When the systems are functioning normally, the person's development is not interrupted by the difficulties he has to face. When they are not functioning the danger of developmental problems is severe, especially when environmental risks are prolonged (Masten, 2001).

Every individual possesses a degree of resilience, which is directly connected to protective factors. These protective factors are specific abilities and skills that are either found within the individual and are thus referred to as individual protective sources, or in the environment and are the external protective factors that cancel out the risk factors. Thus, resilience is the sum of the processes that protect the individuals. They do not lead to the elimination of risks and stress, but they allow the individual to cope with them effectively (Werner, 2000).

Another important characteristic of resilience is autonomy, which is defined by the individual's sense of identity and his ability to function independently and to exercise control over his environment. Masten (1994) states that resilience must be understood as a process and explains that it must be considered as an interaction between certain personality traits and the environment, as a balance between stress and the ability to cope and as a dynamic and developmental process that is important in life transitions.

Risk factors for resilience

Risk factors are the variables that increase the probability of a person experiencing problems in various areas of development and adaptability. These are (1) individual factors and the intrinsic risk characteristics that refer to biological and psychological predisposing traits (i.e. low mental ability, low self-efficacy or low self-control), and (2) environmental risk factors that are manifested in the family, school or community (i.e. poverty, parental psychopathology, marital conflict, problematic relations, lack of social support networks) as well as stressful life events (Fraser & Galinsky, 1997).

Protective factors for resilience

Protective factors are the conditions that mitigate the effects of risks, and reinforce the individual's adjustment after a traumatic event (Masten. 1994). Individual protective factors include social skills, positive self-esteem, autonomy, problem solving ability and self-efficacy (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Rutter, 1987). The main environmental protective factors are family and healthy, safe family relationships, school and positive relations with teachers and classmates, as well as relations in the community (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Wright & Masten, 2005). Another important protective factor for



the individual is adequacy, which is measured on the basis of developmental achievements and changes over time. Thus, a person may show adequacy at a certain point in his life and not at another. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) define adequacy as “the manifested adequacy of an individual to significant challenges, threats and requirements for adjustment and development, posed by the environment”. The more protective factors present in an individual’s life, the greatest the probability that the individual will exhibit mental resilience (Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Masten, 1994).

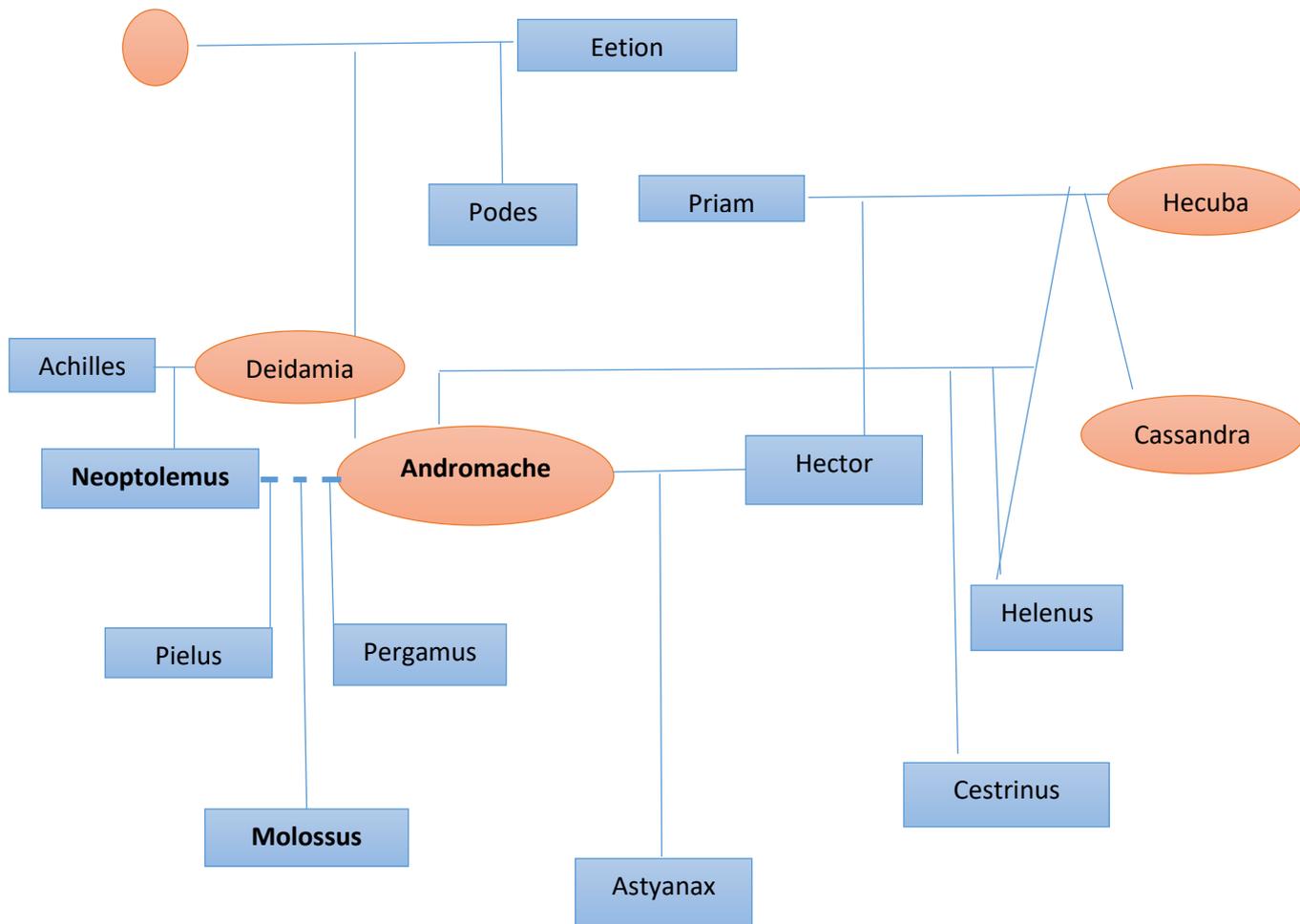
A factor is considered protective if it mitigates an equivalent risk factor. Protective factors can be placed in four categories: (1) those that reduce the effect of risk or reduce the individual’s exposure to risk, (2) those that reduce the negative chain reaction that follows negative events or experiences, (3) self-confidence and self-efficacy, and (4) the processes that reinforce positive relationships and new opportunities that offer the necessary resources or a new direction in life.

Euripides’ Andromache

“Andromache” was first performed in 420 B.C. in the court of the Molossian king Tharrhyas. As a play, it was heavily criticised, but it is widely considered to have been misjudged due to being too multidimensional and progressive for the time. The play is multifaceted, with social, personal, religious, philosophical, political and romantic elements. “Andromache” is an anti-war piece of art, through which Euripides criticises Sparta’s policies and utilises the Trojan war to comment on the Peloponnesian one. Through the hardships that the heroine faces, one can see the detrimental consequences of war: the loss of loved ones, the loss of one’s country, slavery, greed, betrayal, and the injustice and arrogance of the victors. Andromache is mature, brave, and suffers unjustly...

The plot

Andromache is a tormented woman, who has lost her husband and son in the Trojan war, as well as her father and brothers earlier in the same war. Hector’s widow was given as a slave to Achilles’s son Neoptolemus, with which she has a son, Molossus, that is threatened by Hermione’s hate and jealousy. Andromache is torn between the past and the present, as she still feels the need to love and call upon Hector, but also Neoptolemus, who is the only person that can protect her. She is experiencing the tragic antiphase of having essentially married the son of her husband’s and firstborn’s killer, and having to honour him, as her survival and that of her new son depends on this. She is also experiencing the personal antiphase of having started through life as a rich girl that married a prince (Hector), and then being a prisoner and a spoil of war, no longer being respected as the future queen of Troy. Andromache is forced to face another internal struggle. In order to get away from Menelaus and Hermione, who are plotting her murder, she hides her son and then seeks sanctuary at the temple of the goddess Thetis, wife of the elder Thessalian king Peleus. Andromache says that the war came at a heavy cost, it only brought minimal profits, and was brought on by petty motives. She blames Hermione, saying that everything was her mother’s, Helen’s, fault. Peleus saves the woman and her child offering her the prospect of a new life.



Andromache's Genogram

Andromache's traumatic life events

Andromache's lament in the beginning of the play (lines 1-55), her misfortunes, her tragic transition from royal bliss to the woe of slavery, can only produce sad thoughts concerning not only war itself but also those who initiate it.

➤ Loss of loved ones:

"I saw my husband Hector killed by the hand of Achilles" (line 7).

"and I beheld Astyanax, the son I bore my husband, hurled from the high battlements once the Greeks had captured the land of Troy" (line 10).



- Loss of social status and wealth, loss of personal freedom, turned into an immigrant, loss of country. From being the queen of Troy turned into a slave in Greece.
"I myself, a member of a house most free, became a slave and was brought to Greece, given as the choicest of the Trojan spoil to the islander Neoptolemus as his prize of war" (lines 5-17).

- Forced to submit to the will of the most powerful:
"I am afraid that my being your slave will prevent me from speaking, even though my case is strong, afraid that if I win the argument I may for that very reason suffer harm" (lines 185-188).

Andromache's personality traits and mental resilience

Andromache is a heroine that has suffered numerous traumatic life events that she has faced with courage and resilience. She possesses the personality traits that enable her to face repeated traumatic experiences, loss of loved ones, losing her country, slavery, and still go on with her life.

- ✓ Andromache is good at reasoning and at deflecting the accusations from her enemies. She uses her powers of reasoning to disarm Hermione and Menelaus.
- ✓ She exhibits self-efficacy and flexibility in managing difficulties, as well as the ability to bounce back and endure adverse circumstances. When she does not manage to persuade her enemies through reasoning, she attempts to appeal to Menelaus' emotion by begging him, and ultimately humiliates him by revealing his cowardness.
- ✓ Fearless, bold and brave in the face of mortal danger, she uncovers the deeper reasons for the injustice that is committed against her.
- ✓ She exhibits wisdom, intelligence, insight and a realistic view of reality, as a woman who suffered many difficulties and endures her fate stoically. At the same time, however, when circumstances call for it or allow it, she utilises internal and external protective factors to change her fate, hopeful for a better future, so that she may recover.
- ✓ She is spiritual and has a powerful religious sentiment as well as faith in moral values. She seeks sanctuary at the temple when faced by mortal danger from Hermione and Menelaus.
- ✓ She is dignified and utilises every mean at her disposal to save her child and herself.
- ✓ Her descent and her values help her through her difficulties in life.
- ✓ She has the ability to be hopeful and to interpret events in a functional manner that helps her adjust to the new reality and come to terms with it.
- ✓ She has the ability to process things through reason and the skill of problem solving and crises management.
- ✓ She faces the adverse and traumatic events of her past and present stoically and with mental endurance.



- ✓ She possesses a very powerful survival instinct.

She also possesses a strong supportive network that empowers her and aids her in coping with adversity, adjusting and growing. The Chorus that represents popular opinion, justice, morality and reason, supports her psychologically, councils her and consoles her. The chorus characteristically tells Andromache:

- *“I have come to you, scion of Asia, in the hope that I might be able to heal the struggles hard to resolve”* (lines 120-125).
- *“Know your fate, consider the present ill-fortune into which you have come”* (lines 126-127).

Her supportive network includes Peleus, who is imposing and brave, efficient, faithful to the values of justice and fearlessly does what is right when he needs to support the heroine. He offers Andromache and his great grandson affection and safety and delivers them from misfortune: *“My son, take your place below my arm and lead, and you likewise, poor woman. For though you have run into a fierce storm, you have come to a harbor fanned by fair breeze”* (lines 747-749).

Lines of the play indicative of Andromache’s mental resilience

- *“Formerly, though I was sunk in misfortune, the hope always drew me to him that if the child lived my family would find some kind of help and defense”* (lines 26-30).
- *“In fear I have come and taken my seat at this shrine of Thetis near the house on the chance that it may save me from death”* (lines 45-47).
- *“O my! The young are a great bane among mortals, and within that class those of mortals who practice injustice! I am afraid that my being your slave will prevent me from speaking, even though my case is strong, afraid that if I win the argument I may for that very reason suffer harm. For those whose pride and position are great do not take kindly to hearing from their inferiors arguments that defeat them. Nonetheless I shall not be guilty of betraying myself”* (lines 185-190).
- Andromache’s reasoning against Hermione’s irrationality (lines 192 -273):
“Tell me, young woman, what was the reliable argument that persuaded me to deprive you of your lawful due as a wife?Do not seek to surpass your mother in her man-loving ways, woman. All those who have sense must avoid the character of their bad mothers”.
- Andromache’s reasoning against Menelaus (lines 333-363, 409-412):
“How can life be sweet for me? To what shall I look? To my past or my present fate? I had left a single son, the eye of my life: those who have decided these things mean to kill him. But no, not to save my wretched life! If he survives he bears our hopes, while for me not to die on behalf of my child is a reproach. There, I leave the altar and am in your hands, to cut my throat, slay, imprison, or hang me. My child, I, your mother go to the nether world so that you may not die. And if you escape death, remember the sufferings I, your mother, endured”



and the death I died, and kissing your father and weeping and embracing him tell him what I have done”.

- *“Either I would not be born or I would be the offspring of noble sires and sharer in a house of great wealth! For if misfortune hard to deal with comes upon a man, the nobly born have no lack of defense” (lines 765-767).*
- Spirituality, religious faith: *“I have come as suppliant to this statue of the goddess and cast my arms about it” (lines 114-116).*

Afterword

- Andromache, as a heroine of the ancient tragedy is a person of superior morality that commands our respect.
- In Euripides’ work she remains a symbol of an affectionate mother ready to sacrifice herself to save her child.
- She possesses an abundance of mental resources, intelligence, hope, mental resilience and adaptability.
- She has a powerful personality and noble descent that she utilises in order to survive and evolve.
- Through a systemic perspective we see that Andromache does not get trapped in the role of the victim, instead, she assumes the responsibility to shape her reality and create a desirable future.
- She copes with her family history trauma in a reparative manner that allows her to evolve through her ability to recover.
- She fights difficulties, exonerating herself, while being hopeful for the future.
- She has a perspective towards life as she marries again and has children. She makes a new beginning. She goes to Epirus, where she marries Priam’s son Helenus. Molossus will reign over the territory and will perpetuate Peleus’ bloodline. The Trojan bloodline will also live on through Cestrinus.
- Therefore, there is another choice. The choice for the individual to be functional. Euripides’ Andromache proves this with her attitude towards life, her beliefs and her behaviour.

We must remember that resilient people are not those that had a traumatic experience but those that managed to endure it and recover.

Euripides, as an ancient drama psychographer, proves through his work that not only is he not a misogynist but he instead praises woman’s splendour. In Andromache, contrary to what happens in Medea and Hecuba, the narrative changes. The heroine does not have to do something extreme to survive. She has another choice: to save herself and her child by obtaining a better life perspective.

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