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KILL THE BASTARD! (“BAD” HERMIONE AND “GOOD” CREUSA?)

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Are Euripides’ tragic stepmothers named above really “bad” and “good,” respectively,” by any criterion?

In ancient thought stepmothers—with a divine model in *Hera’s* behavior toward her philandering lord Zeus’s offspring by a long catalogue of mortal women and other goddesses—were always dangerous to stepchildren. In a workshop on ancient feminism and exceptional women we examined two Euripidean examples.

“Bastard” in my title denotes a *nōthos*, an illegitimate child, but here more narrowly one engendered out of wedlock by a woman’s husband. In Euripides’ *Andromache* a toddler, in *Ion* an adolescent “bastard” melodramatically escapes death at

the hands of his stepmother, respectively Hermione and Creusa.<sup>1</sup>

Stepmoters had a bad reputation, worse even than mothers-in-law. A stepmother was suspect even when a woman married a man who brought *legitimate* children from a previous lawful marriage. She would certainly want her own, younger children preferred, and might neglect her husband's older ones—or worse. This is why Euripides' Alcestis is so anxious that Admetus not remarry after she dies in his place. Their son Eumelus will have a much better life-chance if he remains his father's *only* child; Medea may well worry about the future of Jason's half-barbarian sons under a jealous Corinthian stepmother who will bear pedigreed Greek ones. Since a father might tend to prefer his children by his current bedfellow because of his involvement with her—wife concubine or adulteress—a married mother might well conceive a deadly hatred for late-born bastards. Older ones, however, could also be a threat to her children. Phaedra in Euripides' surviving second *Hippolytus* is particularly concerned lest the Amazon's son who names the play oust her little sons by Theseus if their mother is suspected of adulterous, not let alone incestuous desires!

Though no other surviving play dramatizes it, this can also have motivated Ino in trying to eliminate her husband Athamas' children Phrixus and Helle by his old flame Nephele, in that form of their story (probably Euripidean) which a scholion to the *Iliad* reports. Otherwise she is just an ordinary Cruel Stepmother, a Stith Thompson S31. (Understandably Stith Thompson did *not* have a category for the rare *niceness* of Andromache: in Euripides' play named after her she boasts that, whenever Aphrodite led Hector astray (imagine “dearest” Hector a ladies' man!), his adoring wife was ready to nurse his *nōthoi* in order to please him (*And.* 222-227).

Besides protective-maternal and sexual motivation—jealousy of a rival for what the old Greeks’ delicately called “bed,” or a wish, like Andromache’s, to re-ingratiate herself with a straying spouse—a wife like royal princess-heiress Creusa in *Ion* must also have dutiful anxiety about dynastic legitimacy. Her husband might beget a proper successor upon her, *but upon no one else*. Not even a *legitimately* born *stepson* must sit on her father’s throne.

Dynastic disruption also may occur when supposititious “sons” of kings succeed them in place of sons of the body, as in a famous case at mythical Iolcus. Son of Tyro *and Poseidon*, Pelias reigns over that city which rightly belongs to Aeson, son of Tyro and *King Cretheus*. Here, too, a stepmother is involved, but a very different sort of “bad” woman, who at the expense of another her husband’s legitimate progeny advances a bastard son by (*she* thinks!) her lover River-god Enipeus (whom Poseidon impersonated). This is exceptional. *Faithful* wives as stepmothers will be our concern, traditional and untraditional at once.

In plays probably written within a short span of years, Euripides creates respectively, in *Andromache* neurotic bitch Hermione, arrogant daughter of an arrogant king, chip off a dastardly block—her father Spartan Menelaus is, as always in Euripides, despicable; and in *Ion* Creusa, pensive heiress-daughter of Athenian king Erechtheus, a sympathetic woman who was raped by the god Apollo—for whom likewise this poet has little regard.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these only-child princesses, childless herself (or so Creusa thinks), faces the challenge of a bastard child born to her husband. Neither wife is very young, and anxiety over her own inability to produce a child for her mate aggravates her reaction to a

bastard stepson, an *only* son. Their circumstances, however, are profoundly different.

*Andromache* is probably the earlier of the two plays. Enslaved Andromache has borne a child, Molossus, to her master Neoptolemus, who had won her, Trojan Hector's still-young widow, as spoils of the Trojan War several years before. In order to persuade Neoptolemus, Achilles' young son, to leave his island birthplace Scyros and join the war that his late father did not live to finish, the Greek leadership at Troy offered a number of incentives. One was the duty to avenge his father's death, on Paris' family if not on the lewd Trojan prince himself. Another (by conjecture) was Odysseus' shrewd offer to yield Achilles' divine armor to his son. The third incentive was promise of (Menelaus' and) Helen's surely very beautiful daughter Hermione in marriage after the war. However, to make that offer, her father voided her betrothal to Cousin Orestes—the matricide who might find it difficult to marry outside the bloody Atreid clan!

As the play opens Andromache has fled for asylum to the on-stage shrine, with a statue, of goddess Thetis, her master's grandmother. After a debate Hermione threatens to burn her to death *there*, by surrounding her, altar, statue and all, with firewood, or even to slay her more coolly on the spot. However, Hermione's perfidious father Menelaus, is in town, having answered her epistolary complaints. He has gotten possession of little Molossus, one of Euripides' numerous pathetic-prop babies. (Although his mother had tried to secure him in a safe place with a friendly co-slave, the Spartan villain discovered and wrested the boy away.)

On the one hand, Menelaus scrupulously leaves Andromache at the protective sanctuary. On the other, if she will not leave it and entrust herself to murder-minded

Hermione he proposes to slaughter her baby before her eyes. She has no choice, yielding her own life. Then, however, Menelaus hands Molossus over to Hermione. Mother *and* child are doomed—or seem to be until decrepit but determined old Peleus, the baby’s great-grandfather, sends the craven Menelaus packing, leaving his daughter suicidally despondent. Hermione rightly anticipates a violent reaction on Neoptolemus’ part if or, rather, when he learns what she and her father nearly wrought.

Born of a concubine and still a baby, Neoptolemus’s only son and potential heir is at once a threat and an affront to the Spartan princess. Hermione’s personality overall, like her outspoken disdain for the relatively poor kingdom of Phthia (Menelaus’heroic-age Sparta was famous for its wealth, as *Odyssey* 4 and 15 make clear) can have hardly endeared her to her husband. A spoiled brat who had neither father nor mother to raise her (since her parents were otherwise occupied, at Troy, while she was growing up!), she has suffered little in comparison with the woman noble enough to have been consort of Priam’s son Hector, theTrojan royal heir-presumptive. Andromache, daughter of a regional king, might have been daughter-in-law, wife, *and mother* of the great kings of Troy had her playboy brother-in-law Paris not committed an offense so grave and consequential that it led to the deaths of her father-in-law, husband, and first child Astyanax (another pathetic prop, Euripides’ most moving of all, in *Trojan Women*).

Hermione likewise expected royal-upon-royal destiny. Thus she could understandably be no happier about her husband’s relationship with his Trojan war-prize Andromache than Aunt Clytemnestra was when Agamemnon brought Cassandra home. Furthermore, Neoptolemus did not assume Phthian kingship when his grandfather Peleus offered to retire. She is therefore no queen-consort. Finally, she will never be mother of

a prince-royal if she cannot get pregnant. Not unreasonably she believes that the *barbarian* concubine has alienated her spouse's affections, by means of spells or secret drugs making her *first* childless, *then* loveless. Hermione need not know stories of Jason-and-Medea or Aegeus-and-Medea to suspect such a thing: all barbarians were likely witches! At the back of her mind, yet never forgotten, is the fact that after she welcomed home the parents who left her as an infant before the war, then took seven years more to make it back to Sparta, they suddenly sent her off to remote Phthia to a strange and (by strong literary and visual arts tradition) a brutal man.<sup>3</sup> Hermione has been traumatized by just about everything that has happened to her—a psychological pathology to be compared in gravity to that of Euripides' Electra in the play named after her. Moreover, if she has been held to the “standard” of Andromache, who gave her breast to Hector's “love children” and who then was a complaisant sex partner to the teen-age son of that husband's slayer (who in some versions of the *Iliupersis* was the very killer of her first child, too!), we may begin to sympathize with the “bad” Spartan. Indeed, perhaps no other play of Euripides more rewards retrospective re-evaluation of—almost everything! The playwright has cleverly set things up, perhaps not for a stark reversal of sympathies, as in the *Medea* composed probably not many years before, but for an revision of thinking about Hermione. All of the men in her life—I include unrehabilitated Neoptolemus—have made that life unbearable. Cousin Orestes is her only hope...

Jilted Orestes, who has in fact rendered Hermione an eligible widow by engineering the assassination of Neoptolemus, is as eager to take Hermione away from Phthia as she is to get away. He and she belong together—and in the treacherous Dorian Peloponnese, not in heroic central Greece.

Before we leave Andromache we must note how *readily* she is passed from man to man. According to one of those strange *ex machina* match-makings of which Euripides was mischievously fond she ends up with her brother-in-law Helenus! She is a “traditional” chattel-women—nice to everyone, as male fantasy would have every female—and subjected, I think, to Euripides’ subversive irony.

Consider in contrast Creusa in *Ion*. This Athenian princess, daughter of King Erechtheus, certainly has been abused as thoroughly as anyone in our poet’s sensational mythography.<sup>4</sup> Before her father and sisters were all violently slain, Creusa was raped—by a god, it is true; but does that make it any better? In some ways that makes it far worse. Then she was married to the non-very bright foreign mercenary chieftain Xuthus. ‘Men will be men’ (as Creusa will discover that that husband had been on a carnival occasion before they were married); but must even the handsomest of gods, the endorser and enforcer of law, be a sexual predator? That is, Apollo!

Childless Xuthus and his royal Athenian spouse have come to Delphi to ask Apollo how to get a child. Mrs. Xuthus must now deal with the shocking new fact that the adolescent fruit of a festive one-night stand of her husband’s from before they married has been given to *him* as son and foisted upon *her* house and dynasty *by the very god who raped her*. The same god seems to have abandoned the child born of his rape, which she exposed on the Acropolis. (The boy’s mother was presumably an anonymous nymphet, whore or victim of a casual rape. Xuthus does not remember clearly exactly how it can have happened!) Of course, as *we* know from the prologue spoken by the god Hermes, the adolescent boy Ion “given” to Xuthus is Creusa’s son, whom Hermes had transported as an infant from Athens to Delphi.)

We might draw an immediate contrast between vital circumstances of the “bad” Spartan princess and of the “good” Athenian one: Hermione has a present rival in the title character Andromache, for whom the playwright induces extraordinary sympathy in the first parts of the play, including that of the chorus, whereas Creusa wins her chorus’ full support. In *Andromache* “They are sympathetic to Andromache but a little condescending to a foreigner (119, 128), and their advice to her is to leave sanctuary and submit to her masters stresses her weakness and isolation” (p. 110). The chorus of Creusa’s Athenian handmaidens in *Ion*, once they know what has happened to her and is now happening, they are firmly on her side. Although under Xuthus’ explicit threat of death if they should do so, *they tell her* about the *to him* good news that Xuthus had—from Apollo—that he was a daddy and had found, in Ion, an unknown child. Like others whom oracles mislead, Xuthus was so happy to have a son that he did not examine the exact wording of the divine utterance; and the chorus simply accept his interpretation of what the god with typical equivocation actually said.<sup>5</sup>

Further aligning the audience with Creusa is her complicit ally in attempting to eliminate the alien intruder into the line of autochthonous Athenian royalty—Athena herself. The poison that the queen’s old slave nearly administers to Ion, like the little golden vessel that contains it, came to Creusa from that goddess. Athena will appear in person later, *ex machina*, confirming to Creusa that Ion does belong in the Erichthonian line after all, thanks/no thanks to Apollo. (One might infer that Apollo, or maybe his twin Artemis, both involved with human procreation, made Creusa and Xuthus childless just so that the demigod bastard would succeed to the kingship.) At the end of this disturbing play the goddess Athena, who never minds using disguise and deception, will



endorse the embarrassing lie by which stupid Xuthus will go on happily supposing that Ion is *his* son. Apollo, keeping his own voice and hands clean in this long story uses thief Hermes and deceiver Athena to run his errands.

We may review before we conclude:

Each of the two women I have discussed understandably tries to effect the death of a stepson interloper, Hermione the love-child of the “barbarian” slave woman who has alienated her husband Neoptolemus’ affections, Creusa a non-Athenian born of who knew what mother! Each also contends with an insuperable blocking person who has prevented her from bearing her husband their desired legitimate son: the Spartan princess competes with an Andromache whom no sensible, unservile woman would emulate, Creusa with a secret plan of Apollo and Olympian allies.

When we consider what these “desperate housewives” become, what they attempt to do, our sympathies begin to falter, by a characteristic Euripidean paradox. A chiasmus of sympathy as well as of approval results.<sup>6</sup>

Creusa *loses* our benevolence when she is just *too* eager to murder the innocent, naïve young minister of Apollo. An excessively enthusiastic ‘Yes’ to her old slave’s suggestion that she somehow kill charming, unoffending Ion is a key moment in the play, after she has rejected proposals to attack *Apollo* by burning down his temple or to kill her *husband*. Both *those* males are guilty and warrant some punishment. The young temple-attendant, on the other hand, is innocent; he even sympathizes with her plight! Nevertheless Creusa turns into an eager would-be murderess of the lad whom a little Apollonian bird saves by tasting the poison before he can. Indeed the horrific death of

that bird, which suffers what Creusa had in mind for Ion, makes clear what was involved.

Hermione, on the other hand, becomes pathetic after failing to eliminate her rival and baby Molossus. Out of unexpected shame she tries to hang herself, because (as we come to understand) she has been set up by her father and her cousin Orestes to panic and to fall into the latter's eager arms after—what she can hardly yet know—Orestes has arranged that Uncle Menelaus' daughter is widowed and eligible!

Judgment of oppressive and amoral male characters in all of these plays is easy, and is clearly adverse. It does not spare Apollo. However, how judge these two very different females? Not so easy! As in the cases of (barbaric and) infanticidal Medea and Hecuba, these two *Greek* women of highest royalty follow dynastic agendas, reacting with deliberate deadly intent, with poison or sword, to the masculinist double standard.

Untraditional both are, by a certain dubious canon. Hermione must compete directly with the hyper-conventional “good woman” Andromache, while Creusa cannot accept the legitimation of sorts that her husband, faithful to her but sexually experienced before their marriage seeks for another, anonymous woman's child. Creusa, moreover, suffers from another convention, too: the implicit “right” of Olympian males to rape or to seduce virgins with impunity. We must, in fact, look to those males—a god included<sup>7</sup>—and at the dire binds into which they have recklessly thrust daughter, wife, or mother of his child.

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<sup>1</sup> The two Oxford editions with commentary remain valuable resources for Anglophones who read Greek: P. T. Stevens, *Euripides: Andromache* (Oxford:

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Clarendon Press, 1971) and A. S. Owen, *Euripides: Ion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939; reprinted). For the Greekless much fine scholarship includes recently Donald Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides. Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) with generous bibliography. For a provocative take on the two plays discussed here see Philip Vellacott, *Ironic Drama. A study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Sophocles' innovations in the late *Philoctetes* must not mislead us about Neoptolemus' character! Traditionally he would be to any woman less what his sire Achilles was to Briseis, a loving *de facto* husband, than what gruff Ajax was to Tecmessa in the earlier *Ajax*.

<sup>4</sup> Euripides does not seem to have written a play about violated *and mutilated* Procne.

<sup>5</sup> The oracle used the perfect infinitive *pephukenai*: literally “to have been born” to Xuthus or merely “to have come to be” for him!

<sup>6</sup> A similar souring of an audience's good will occurs toward Medea and Hecuba in the two shocking plays named after them.

<sup>7</sup>Both plays, in fact, vilify Phoebus—patriotically, in fact, since the god of Delphi had clearly aligned himself with the enemies of Athens in the Archidamian War during which these plays were written and performed.