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**Ambrose Philips' *The Distrest Mother*:  
The myth of Andromache  
in English (Neo)classicism**

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**Abstract**

The focus of this paper is an analysis of the Ambrose Philips (1674-1749) neoclassical tragedy *The Distrest Mother* (1712). This play is an adaptation of Jean Racine's (1639-1699) *Andromaque* (1667), which is, in turn, an adaptation of the Euripides' ancient Greek tragedy *Andromache* (ca. 426 BC). Philips' tragedy is an example of an early English adaptation from Racine. Philip took Racine's play and moulded it to appeal to English taste. Therefore, this study shall analyse Philips' play focusing on his innovations, mainly in comparison with the Racine version, but also with the ancient Greek myth.

**Key words**

Ambrose Philips, *Andromaque*, neoclassical tragedy, Racine, moral plays

***The Distrest Mother* Ambrose'a Philipsa:  
mit *Andromachy* w angielskim (neo)klasycyzmie**

**Abstrakt**

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest analizie neoklasycystycznej tragedii Ambrose'a Philipsa (1674-1749) pt. *The Distrest Mother* (1712), będącej adaptacją *Andromachy* Jeana Racine'a, która jest z kolei adaptacją starożytnej tragedii Eurypidesa zatytułowanej *Andromacha* (ok. 426 BC). Tragedia autorstwa Philipsa stanowi przykład angielskiej adaptacji Racine'a, bowiem Philips wykorzystał sztukę Racine'a i dopasował ją do angielskich gustów. W niniejszym artykule analiza skupia się na nowatorstwie Philipsa, szczególnie w zestawieniu jego sztuki nie tylko z wersją Racine'a, lecz także ze starożytnym, greckim mitem.

**Słowa kluczowe**

Ambrose Philips, *Andromacha*, tragedia neoklasycystyczna, Racine, moralitet

The focus of this paper is an analysis of the Ambrose Philips' (1674-1749) neoclassical tragedy *The Distrest Mother* (1712). This play is an adaptation of Jean Racine's (1639-1699) *Andromaque* (1667), which was, in fact, an adaptation of the Euripides' ancient Greek tragedy *Andromache* (ca. 426 BCE) (Euripides 1913 and 2006).

Philips' tragedy is an example of an early English adaptation from Racine (Bredvold 1950). Philips is well-known for his *pastoral literature*; in this sense, he also writes *The Distrest Mother* as a *moral tragedy*. It is considered that Racine's *Andromaque* was his first great tragedy and, consequently, the first great French tragedy. For this reason, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Racine became the main model for tragedians around Europe and his *Andromaque*, in addition to his *Iphigénie*, became the paradigm of moral tragedies.

Philips took Racine's play and simplified the characterization, increased the emotionalism and sharpened the didactic emphasis, making it appeal more to English taste: more restrained and voluptuous than the French drama style, more moral and less aesthetic. Therefore, this study shall analyse Philips' play focusing on his innovations, mainly in comparison with Racine's version, but also with the ancient Greek myth. Consequently, this work shall begin by addressing some questions: Why *Andromache*? What is the reason for this classical myth being revisited by an English author in the 18<sup>th</sup> century? What is the context for Ambrose Philips wanting to translate as great a French author as Racine?

There are limited studies on Euripides' *Andromache*, as well as his *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and neither have been popular tragedies, either in the 20<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, compared to, for instance, Euripides' *Medea* or Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Thus, it could be said that traditionally classicist literary critics have neglected them. Nevertheless, with the success of Racine's *Andromache* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *Andromache* and *Iphigenia* myths achieved substantial popularity in the dramatic arts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in western Europe: theatre, opera, as well as other subgenres.

Racine's *Andromache* is considered to be the first great tragedy of the French author, and consequently, the first great tragedy of the French *Grand Siècle*.<sup>1</sup> Despite the *Andromache* myth having been unsung, it finds its *floruit* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the French dramatist's work. The reason for this is that the masterpiece fits perfectly with the social and cultural context of this period. Racine recoups ancient classicism and brings it into the modern era, thus becoming the principal model – even more so than Euripides – for 18<sup>th</sup> century authors.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that Rotrou (1640) as well as Leclerc and Coras (1675) wrote different versions of *Iphigenia* (Mahaffy 1895: 147).

In his tragedy, the French tragedian shows the predominant moral code existing in the court of France, in this way fulfilling the wishes of the monarch Louis XIV of France. He also makes it a *didactic* work – with this aspect of the tragedy being accentuated even more by Ambrose Philips in his *The Distrest Mother* – in accordance with court directives. In order to accomplish this, Racine endows the character of his tragedy with great dignity, noble goals and magnanimous passions (Pujol 1982: ix-xiii).

Why the English dramatist created his early adaptations from Racine has been a controversial subject for experts since the beginning of the last century (Wheatley 1956 and Macintire 1911). Therefore, this paper shall attempt to show how the author, Ambrose Philips, became linked, in the England of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the French tragedy from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Naturally, this must be attributed to the general European literary panorama, without which this question cannot be understood.

As previously mentioned, Philips is well known for his *pastoral poems*. Indeed, he wrote six *Pastorals* and recreated ancient Arcadian scenes, which were surely a pleasing lecture for his contemporary readers.<sup>2</sup> The *bucolic poetry tradition* has a heritage leading from the Alexandrine poet Theocritus, whose *rustic poems* were “highly valued by the Greeks and the Romans” (Johnson 1817: ix),<sup>3</sup> while the literary genre was successfully followed by Virgil with his *Eclogae/Bucolica* (‘Eclogues’/‘Bucolics’). Later, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there was a revival in *bucolic poetry* in Italy, where Petrarch composed his *modern pastorals* in Latin, titled *Aeglogues*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is known that he maintained a literary argument with Pope concerning this poetical genre (Johnson 1817: xi).

<sup>3</sup> Note the difference between Theocritus’ alexandrine lyric and Hesiodus’ Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι (‘Works and Days’).

<sup>4</sup> Petrarch, not being ignorant of Greek supposed that the word “Eclogue” was corrupted by the copiers and that the correct word might be “Aeglogues” (‘talk of the goats’), this new name was adopted by subsequent writers (Johnson 1817: ix).

From this perspective, it could be said that Philips had a deep knowledge of the classical literary tradition. Furthermore, he had great knowledge of the ancient Greek language as well as, and especially, the Latin language. He translated the ancient Greek lyric poets Sappho<sup>5</sup> and Pindar.<sup>6</sup> As a dramatist, Ambrose Philips wrote three plays, all of them tragedies: *The Distrest Mother* (1712), *The Briton* (1722) and *Humphry Duke of Gloucester* (1723).

*The Distrest Mother* is the most well-known and also the most popular and successful of all of them. Concerning *The Briton*, it is not known how it was received when it was performed on stage, as previous literary studies have overlooked this problem.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the story of *Humphry Duke of Gloucester* is only remembered by its title (Johnson 1817: xii-xiv).<sup>8</sup> Thus, in keeping with the dominating literary tendencies of the Augustan period, the most celebrated of his tragedies, as well as his most famous poems, are neoclassical. Philips wrote in an Era, the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>9</sup> which is often considered to be a bridge between the two worlds.

The transition from neoclassicism, a movement beginning in the 17th century and aiming to return to ancient principles, finished with Romanticism.<sup>10</sup> In the last decades of the 17th century, court writers gave way to professional writers or “hacks”, who wrote purely for financial gain and consequently

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<sup>5</sup> In 1711 his translations from Sappho were published in *The Spectator* 233 (Clark 1806: 211 and Prins 1996: 57-60).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, translating Pindar, he found the art of reaching the obscurity in his poems (Johnson 1817: xiv).

<sup>7</sup> Though one of its scenes, between Vanoc, the British prince, and Valens, the Roman general, is regarded to be written with great dramatic skill, animated by spirit truly poetical (Johnson 1817: xii).

<sup>8</sup> His happiest undertaking was of a paper called *The Freethinker*. At that point, it must be remembered that politically he was a Whig (Johnson 1817: vi-xii).

<sup>9</sup> We do not know when or where he was born nor do we know about his childhood. Concerning his education, it is known that he studied at St. John's College, in Cambridge, where he wrote some English verses in the *Collection* of poems published by the University of Cambridge on the death of Queen Mary (Johnson 1817: vii).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, there was a step prior to this: *Proto-Romanticism*.

for the market.<sup>11</sup> They heralded a different kind of literary culture to the older aristocratic one based on patronage, the one to which Philips belonged (Widdowson 2004: 60). He ended a period, the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when imagination and *geniality* ruled culture and literature and started another, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when *judgement* and *reason* became increasingly empowered. He was one of the last keepers of the final phase of *Renaissance humanism* who entered the Enlightenment.

The intellectual movement of the Enlightenment shocked the traditional European beliefs. France led the movement with Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert – and other contributors – with their *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (35 vols; 1751-76). In Germany, this movement was represented by Gotthold Lessing.<sup>12</sup> In Britain, it was represented by the philosopher John Locke, the scientist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton, the Scottish atheist and sceptical philosopher David Hume, the historian Edward Gibbon, and later, by the philosophers Adam Smith, William Godwin and Thomas Paine, and the feminist activist Mary Wollstonecraft.

As France was a reference point for all Europe and since Racine provided a *modern* tragedian model, it is hardly surprising that Ambrose Philips chose to transform one of Racine's great tragedies and create his own version. Racine's *Andromache* became a paradigm of moral and didactic theatre.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Philips had to adapt it to the Augustan taste, recovering the classical precepts: the English neoclassical *de-*

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<sup>11</sup> It is remarkable that Philips still wrote under the patronage system. One of his patrons was Dr. Bouytler, who started his career as a minister of a parish in Southwark and became first Bishop of Bristol, secretary to the Lord Chancellor (1726) and judge of the Prerogative Court (1733). Dr. Bouytler was Philips' patron until his death in 1748, Philips died only a year later, in 1749 (Johnson 1817: vii-xiii).

<sup>12</sup> In Germany after the Enlightenment, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new literary movement appeared: *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Stress'). This movement, the predecessor of Romanticism, contravened the Neoclassical style (Brugger 2014).

<sup>13</sup> *Andromache* also became a paradigm of *politic tragedy* (Collognat-Barès 1993 and Menéndez Peláez 2007).

*corum, moderation and elegantia*<sup>14</sup> versus the precious French exuberance.<sup>15</sup>

Like Racine, Philips dedicated his tragedy to a court lady. In the case of Racine, it was Henriette-Anne Stuart, *Votre Altesse Royale*, “Henriette of England”, Duchess of Orleans (1644-1670), daughter of Charles I of England.<sup>16</sup> In the case of Ambrose Philips, it was the Duchess of Montague, daughter of the Duke of Marlborough. The reason for dedicating these kinds of plays to these ladies, and consequently obtaining their patronage, is well explained in Philips’ dedication to the tragedy: “The principal action and main distress of the play is such a nature, as seems more immediately to claim the patronage of a lady: and when I consider the great and shining characters of antiquity are celebrated in it” (Philips 1817: iii). He also dedicated the tragedy to her father, linking him with the ancient world: “The name of Hector could not be more terrible among the Greeks, than that of the Duke of Marlborough has been to the French” (Philips 1817: iii).

The dramatists needed patronage, and the myth and character of Andromache – as well as, incidentally, the character of Iphigenia – fitted perfectly with the model of “proper” Christian women of the Court. However, the archetype of Andromache had to be changed from the classical one to the seventeenth-century one, and that was Racine’s task.

It is important here to study Euripides’ ancient Greek tragedy. The focus of this tragedy is the *love triangle* between Hermione – Neoptolemus – Andromache (Morenilla Talens 2013: 144-145). Andromache, a Trojan princess, is the widow of Hector, leader of the Trojans. After the Trojan War, Andromache is taken as a slave to become the concubine of the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus (Harrauer and Hunger 2008). Under these conditions, she has to compete for the love of her captor with

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding the subsequent *properties*: regularity and simplicity of form, order and proportion.

<sup>15</sup> This equilibrium allowed him to pass the censorship.

<sup>16</sup> It was she who suggested her mother present *Andromache* for the first time, in her apartment (Collognat-Barès 1992: 23).

the infertile spouse of Hector, Hermione, daughter of Menelaus:

**Χορός**

οὐδέποτε δίδυμα λέκτρ' ἐπαινέσω βροτῶν  
οὐδ' ἀμφιμάτορας κόρους,  
ἔριν μελάθρων δυσμενεῖς τε λύπας.  
μίαν μοι στεργέτω πόσις γάμοις  
ἀκοινώνητον ἀμὸς εὐνάν.

(vv. 465-470)

[‘Chorus: Never shall I laud a double marriage among mortals nor children with two mothers, quarrel for a house and hostile pain. May my spouse be content with a marriage with no shared bed.’]<sup>17</sup>

Euripides also emphasises the ravages of the war, how a Trojan princess, King Eetion’s daughter, had to suffer the humiliation of being part of the *spoils of war*, while she is waiting for the terrible and irrevocable murder of her son Molossus by the Greeks:

**Χορός**

ἔδειξενή Λάκαινα τοῦ στρατηλάτα  
Μενέλα: διὰ γὰρ πυρὸς ἦλθ' ἐτέρωλέχει,  
κτεῖν εἰ δὲ τὰν τάλαιναν Ἰλιάδα κόραν  
παῖδά τε δύσφρονος ἔριδο ζῦπερ.

(vv. 487-490)

[‘Chorus: This was shown by the Lacanian woman, daughter of the commander Menelaus: so, she came with her heart aflame against the other wife and she put to death the wretched Trojan girl and her son because of an odious strife.’]

For his part, Racine shows Andromache mainly as the widow of Hector and her role of the lover of Neoptolemus is no longer relevant. Therefore, Racine, obviates the lover role of Andromache and shows her as a vivid representation of *Mater dolo-*

<sup>17</sup> All the translations from Ancient Greek into English by Maria Sebastián-Sáez.



*rosa et amantissima*. She will always be the widow of Hector and appears in front of the audience broken by the depth of sorrow for his deceased son, Molossus.

In addition, Racine restructured the play and changed some characters in it. He divided the play into acts and different scenes,<sup>18</sup> omitting the Chorus as a classical character. He also took out supporting characters like the Slave, the Nursemaid, and the Messenger. In addition, other characters were eliminated: Menelaus, Peleus, Thetis and Andromache's son, who is a *silent character* in Euripides' play. Racine kept, of course, the main character, Andromache, and her antagonist, Hermione, as well as Orestes. On the other hand, he added Pylade and Pyrrhus. Finally, he added the new supporting characters Cléone – the confidant of Hermione, Cephisa – the confidant of Andromache, Phoenix – a senior official of Achilles and Pyrrhus' confidant, and the Attendants of Orestes.

For some authors (Cumberland 1817: xi), Ambrose Philips' *The Distrest Mother* is a translation, not a different version, although this work argues that this is not true: it is, in fact, a distinct version of Racine's play. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the conception of "translation" in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, was not the same as today: the translator was free to change some parts of the work and add or remove other parts (Sala 2005 and Rios 1997). However, even if we take into account this meaning of "translation", Philips' *The Distrest Mother* is not a translation of Racine's *Andromache*.

However, Philips did follow Racine in one particular point: he remarked in his work that the main character of Andromache is the paradigm of a devoted and pious mother – which is shown in the title of the play:

Andromache: That were to wrong thee.  
Oh, my Cephisa! this gay, borrow'd air,  
This blaze of jewels, and this bridal dress,

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<sup>18</sup> The play is divided into five acts, while each act is divided into between five and eleven scenes.

Are but mock trappings to conceal my woe:  
*My heart still mourns; I still am Hector's widow.*  
 (Act IV, p. 39)

In terms of the structure, Philips's play respected Racine's division into five acts, but restructured the division of scenes for each act. Each of Racine's acts was divided into between five and eleven scenes, meanwhile Philips' play was divided into five acts, but there is only one scene per act. The purpose of this new division is to concentrate the dramatic action and have a more powerful emotional impact on the audience. This was common practice in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with new versions of classical tragedies. Some authors even condensed plays into one single lyric act (Metastasio 1754 and Lassala 1783), while it could be suggested that this "condensing" results in the monologues becoming even more relevant.

	PLAY STRUCTURE		
	Euripides	Racine	Philips
Prologue	1	—	—
Parodos <sup>19</sup>	1	—	—
Episode	4	—	—
Stasimon <sup>20</sup>	4	—	—
Exodos <sup>21</sup>	1	—	—
Acts	—	5	5
Scenes per Act	—	5-11	1

In relation to the characters, Philips does not change anything compared to the protagonists in Racine's play. All the main and supporting characters are the same:

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<sup>19</sup> Entrance Ode.

<sup>20</sup> Stationary Song.

<sup>21</sup> Exit Song.

CHARACTERS			
	Euripides	Racine	Philips
Main characters	Andromache	Andromache	Andromache
	Hermione	Hermione	Hermione
	Orestes	Orestes	Orestes
	Menelaus	—	—
	Peleus	—	—
	Thetis	—	—
	—	Pylade	Pylades
	—	Pyrrhus	Pyrrhus
	Supporting characters	Chorus	—
The Slave		—	—
The Nursemaid		—	—
The Messenger		—	—
Andromache's Son		—	—
—		Cléone	Cléone
—		Cephisa	Cephisa
—		Phoenix	Phoenix
—		Attendants on Orestes	Attendants on Pyrrus and Orestes

However, Andromache is performed even more like a great heroine, with Philips awarding her increased relevance in the play. Adapting the character of Andromache was the most enticing challenge for the English writer. She was equally admirable as mother, wife and widow, so Philips attempted to evoke the audience's admiration. She was *virtuous*, in distress and therefore sympathetic. She represented the *uncorrupted English woman*, an *English heroine*, suddenly becoming as vigorous as an "Old testament profetesse" (Parnell 1959: 16):

Andromache: With open arms I'll meet him!—Oh, Cephisa!  
 A springing joy, mixt with a soft concern,  
 A pleasure which no language can express,  
 An ecstasy that mothers only feel,

Plays round my heart, and brightens up my sorrow,  
Like gleams of sunshine in a low'ring sky.

Though plung'd in ills, and exercis'd in care,  
Yet never let the noble mind despair:  
When prest by dangers, and beset with foes,  
The gods their timely succor interpose;  
And when our virtue sinks, o'erwhelm'd with grief,  
by unforessen expedients bring relief.

(Act V, p. 51)

This Christianized image of Andromache differs from Racine's Andromache, who is more combative and powerful, the paradigm of a strong classical heroine. Racine's heroine uses more direct speech with words that evoke increased violence than Philips' Andromache. She is as strong and noble as a man and she is proud to show it:<sup>22</sup>

Andromache : [...]

Je n'ai que trop, Madame, éprouve son courroux :  
J'aurais plus de sujet de m'en plaindre que vous.  
Pour dernière rigueur ton amitié cruelle,  
Pyrrhus, à mon époux me rendait infidèle.  
Je t'en allais punir. Mais le ciel m'est témoin  
Que je ne pouvais pas ma vengeance si loin,  
Et sans verser ton sang ni causer tant d'alarmes,  
Il ne t'en eût coûté peut-être que des larmes.

(Act V, Scene 3 [First version])

[I have just experienced your wrath, Madam, more than enough: I would have more reasons to complain than you. Because of your final rigour, your cruel friendship, Pyrrhus, I was unfaithful to my husband. I was going to punish you, but as the heavens are my witness, I would not avenge so greatly and without shedding your

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<sup>22</sup> It should be remarked that this fragment is from the first version of Racine's *Andromache* (1668), with an ending that was removed from the final version, which was set in 1697. In this final version, Andromache does not even appear in the last scene. It seems that Philips solves the problem of the ending with a speech by Andromache, who becomes an active protagonist.

blood or causing too many worries, that has only cost you your tears.]<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, Hermione, Andromache's antagonist, is the character that was best preserved in its classical essence. She represented a wronged woman with strong passions and a lack of self-control. With no father to guide her, and rejected by the man she loves, her lack of discipline could be excused, and yet in the end she was shown as the antithesis of virtue, as *the hysterical woman*, in a very pejorative sense:

Hermione : C'est cet amour payé de trop d'ingratitude  
 Qui me rend en ces lieux sa présence si rude.  
 Quelle honte pour moi, quel triomphe pour lui  
 De voir mon infortune égaler son ennui !  
 Est-ce là, dirá-t-il, cette **fière** Hermione ?  
 Elle me dédaignait ; un autre l'abandonne.  
 L'ingrate, qui mettait son cœur à si haut prix,  
 Apprend donc à son tour à souffrir des mépris ?  
 Ah ! Dieux !

(Act II, Scene I, vv. 393-401, emphasis added)

[‘This is love paid with too much ingratitude that returns me to this place with his rude presence. What a disgrace for me, what a triumph for him, to see my misfortune equal his worries! He would say: is this the proud Hermione? She has disdained me, others abandon her. The ingrate, who put his heart at a high price, learns so in her return to suffer disregard. Oh! Gods!']

Hermione: That love, that constancy, so ill requited,  
 Upbraids me to myself! I blush to think  
 How I have us'd him; and would shun his presence.  
 What will be my confusion when he sees me  
 Neglected and forsaken, like himself?  
 Will he not say, is this the scornful maid,  
 The **proud** Hermione, that tyranniz'd  
 In Spata's court, and triumph'd in her charms?

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<sup>23</sup> All the translations from French into English by María Sebastià-Sáez.

Her insolence at least is well repaid.—  
 I cannot bear the thought!  
 (Act II, p. 13, emphasis added)

In this scene it is shown that not only the main heroine, but also her antagonist is a strong and charismatic character. This feature is noticeable in both, Racine and Philips' versions. Note that in both cases, Hermione uses the same adjective to describe herself: 'proud' (*fière* in French).

Finally, and as previously noted, another important issue in Philips' version is the writing style. The style of verse was also modified, Philips leaves the *over-elaborated baroque* French style and recovers the classical *decorum*: regularity and simplicity of firm, order and proportion, elegance and polished wit, by encouraging emotional restraint.

While there is much left to be said on this subject, this work has sought to offer some insight into plays based on the Andromache myth and, as such, can draw some conclusions. There was a transfiguration of the Andromache myth, which was originally about war, jealousy, passionate love and power. Andromache turned into a loving mother, wife and widow, a moral archetype. It started with Racine, who Christianized the myth and transformed it into a didactic myth. Subsequent writers followed this trend and Ambrose Philips was not an exception. It is because of this transformation, and also, because of its classical background that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Andromache*, *The Distrest Mother*, became a moral, even *political*, ethical and didactic tragedy.

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