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Achilles and the Feminine: Achilles and Andromache as Tragic Foils

In her article “Reverse Similes’ and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*,” Helene Foley examines gender fluidity and role reversal in Homer – in particular how Odysseus often functions in characteristically feminine spheres and empathizes with women. I use a similar lens in my analysis of Achilles, arguing that female figures have the greatest influence on his decisions and on how he articulates his role in the *Iliad*. I then compare his more “feminized” behavior to Andromache, whose function and fate in the *Iliad* make her a natural foil to Achilles.

The focal point of connection between Achilles and Andromache is their mutual concern for family. Achilles often casts himself in a maternal role when reflecting upon his responsibilities and his bond with Patroclus, especially in his similes (i.e.: the mother bird simile in Book IX, and the mother-daughter simile in Book XVI); this emphasis on mortal mothers and their young offspring builds on Andromache’s first appearance in Book VI, where she awaits her husband on the wall with Astyanax. Moreover, Achilles’ relationship with Patroclus and the grief he experiences at his friend’s death find their greatest thematic equivalent in Andromache’s mourning for her husband and her anticipated grief at the loss of her son.

The complex interrelationships tying Achilles and Andromache together, the similarities between their actions throughout the *Iliad*, and the emotional crises that befall them help expand our understanding of Achilles’ character. His connection to Andromache through these narrative parallels, and the continued emphasis on familial values, suggest a latent desire in Achilles to have a family of his own (seen especially in *Il.* IX.395-400). And his identification with motherhood shows that Achilles is capable of the emotional depth typically attributed to Homeric heroines, and to Andromache in particular.