Andromachē in the *Iliad*: The Gendered Implications of Wartime Kleos

Countless descriptions of war, violence, and arduous struggle form the backbone of the *Iliad*. Homer’s famed epic poem, composed almost two millennia ago, provides a window into Ancient Greek culture and values that influenced later literary works in the Western canon, central amongst them the desire for *kleos*: glory in life earned through great deeds. However, against the male posturing of Greeks and Trojans alike, Andromachē, the wife of the great Trojan warrior Hektor, stands out in stark contrast with her overt emotional vulnerability. Her background as an orphan and her pleas to Hektor to prioritize his immediate family over military *kleos* both contradict the heavy emphasis that the *Iliad's* moral universe places on immortalizing oneself on the battlefield.

Upon close reading, Andromachē's characterization and dialogue lamenting the war reveal that for the Trojans, the attainment of *kleos* is not intended to be universal. Rather, it represents a gendered aspiration reserved for men seeking wartime heroism, and it leaves women to fend for their own legacy through husbands, fathers, and other male relationships. Thus, Andromachē's female identity allows her to reject the *Iliad's* overarching military narrative without facing attacks on her moral character—a double standard that contradicts Hektor’s treatment of Trojan warriors such as Poulydamas. Throughout the epic, her dissent of *kleos* provides a rare window into male warriors’ unspoken awareness and intentional ignorance of the harmful consequences of *kleos*, especially on their wives and children.

Throughout the text, Andromachē's characterization elevates her social status by embodying her as an ideal wife and mother. Homer introduces her into the epic as "Andromachē of the white arms" (6.371). This epithet—typically shorthand for a character's defining trait—immediately links Andromachē with purity, symbolized by the color white. Homer further
contextualizes Andromachē in relation to male figures, naming her as the "perfect wife of Hektor" (6.374) and "the daughter of high-hearted Eëtion" (6.395). In doing so, he implies that Andromachē's status stems from her relationships with the most important men in her life: her husband and her father. Thus, the murder of her father and brother by the Achaian warrior Achilleus—Hektor’s prime opponent—earlier in the Trojan War has placed Andromachē’s legacy on a knife’s edge by the *Iliad*’s beginning (6:414-428). Andromachē’s cognizance of this peril causes her to plea: “Hektor, thus you are father to me, and my honored mother, / you are my brother, and it is you who are my young husband” (6:429-430). The allusion to Hera, “the goddess of white arms” who reigns over marriage and the home (1.55), in Andromachē’s epithet, further affirms how she depends on Hera’s sphere of domesticity for her own claim to legacy.

Within the safety net of this domestic sphere, Andromachē’s emotional vulnerability becomes focal in her dissent of the war as a female iconoclast. Themes of "crying" (6.465) and "fresh grief" (6.462) extend throughout Andromachē’s characterization and connote her emotional vulnerability. Homer notes that while first speaking to Hektor, Andromachē "[lets] her tears fall" (6.405); Hektor subsequently describes his "deep shame" at the fearful thought of losing the war and subjecting his wife to the Achaians (6.441). Homer uses the raw vulnerability implied in her open tears to emblemize the sorrow and familial harm that Hektor wreaks on a larger scale through his pursuit of *kleos*. Here, Andromachē’s interiority shines through in a way that remains rare in the rest of the *Iliad*, where a focus on darker, impersonal moments of war, battle, and death eclipses the emotions of individual male warriors.

Andromachē’s lack of familial lineage helps her expose the self-destructive elements of legacy that male Trojan warriors often ignore in their own conversations. In her introductory passage, she implores Hektor to stay out of the war with impassioned dialogue:
"[Y]our own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity on your little son, nor on me ill-starred who soon must be your widow; for presently the Achains, gathering together, will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny—only grief; since I have no father, no honored mother." (Homer 6.407-413)

Most of the Iliad shows Hektor posturing as "the bravest fighter of the Trojans, breaker of horses" that he claims to his wife to be (6.460-461). Countless other warriors, Achaian and Trojan alike, praise Hektor for his military prowess. In contrast, Andromachē foreshadows that Hektor's "own great strength will be [his] death." The use of antithesis to juxtapose strength, which connotes glory and livelihood, with death and downfall forces the reader to confront the consequences that a warrior's desire for battle has on their wives and children who remain at home, isolated from much of the Iliad's action. Andromachē's figurative language of "[sinking] into the earth" reveals how Hektor's death in battle metaphorically destroys the lineage of her and their son Astyanax by foreshadowing their graves if he and the Trojans fail. When she specifies that she has "no honored mother," she reinforces her dependence on male figures for her legacy. Andromachē reminds readers that the quest for kleos places a burden on the family of warriors, who must confront the looming threat of becoming a widow and orphan (or in her case, both).

Andromachē's female identity also allows her to insightfully refute the construct of kleos without attacks on her moral character by Hektor. Recall Poulydamas, Hektor's friend and lieutenant whose cool-headed "counsel of safety" often counterbalances Hektor's violence (12.80). In several battle scenes, Poulydamas voices similar ideas to Andromachē's about valuing Trojan
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lives over an aggressive war strategy. Hektor attacks his morality due to these iconoclastic views, accusing him of having a "heart…not enduring in battle nor a fighter's" and claiming that "the very goes…ruined the brain within you" (12.247). In contrast, Hektor affirms rather than challenges Andromachē's sanity, telling her that "[a]ll these / things are in [his] mind also" (6.440-441). Interpreting Andromachē and Poulydamas as foils for two separate parts of Hektor's identity—as a father and warrior, respectively—explains the contrast between Hektor's response to the two characters. Deep down, Hektor harbors an awareness of both Poulydamas and Andromachē’s concerns. Despite Hektor’s harsh words, Poulydamas does not lose face for his actions entirely; his epithets still brand him as "courtly" (13.757) and "blameless" (12.790). Additionally, in a moment of clarity before his death near the end of the epic, Hektor contemplates whether to order a retreat in his final monologue and laments that he did not "obey Poulydamas, but that would have been far better" (22.103). He had shunned Poulydamas earlier not due to the content of his dissent but rather his decision to voice his opinions aloud despite being a male warrior expected to crave the solidification of his legacy through battle. On the other hand, Andromachē's role as an archetypal wife of Ancient Greek society, who subsumes kleos from her male relationships rather than claiming it directly, leads Hektor to avoid passing any moral judgment on her for her disapproval.

As a foil for Hektor, Andromachē morphs into a microcosmic example of how the pursuit of masculine kleos clashes with the best interests of the family. While attempting to cement his legacy on the battlefield, Hektor leaves Andromachē and Astyanax behind in their home, grappling with the possibility of losing their legacy through Hektor’s demise at any moment. Given Hektor’s death at the hands of Achilleus in their final duel, Andromachē’s looming fears materialize as
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reality. Upon first learning of his death, Andromachē reprises her lament over Hektor's "bitter pride of courage" (22.457):

"…the writhing worms will feed, when the dogs have had enough of you, on your naked corpse, though in your house there is clothing laid up that is fine-textured and pleasant, wrought by the hands of women. But all of this I will burn up in the fire's blazing, no use to you, since you will never be laid away in them; but in your honor, from the men of Troy and the Trojan women." (Homer 22.509-514)

In Homer’s epics, weaving often symbolizes female resistance within the domestic sphere. Thus, in this passage, "clothing…wrought by the hands of women" transforms into a broader metonym for the efforts that military wives such as Andromachē invest into maintaining familial order in their husband's absence. Andromachē contrasts this fantasy of "fine-textured and pleasant" clothing—maintained through her and her handmaidens’ arduous labor—with the reality she witnesses as she speaks: Hektor's lifeless body, dragged around the battlefield by Achilleus, his killer. This juxtaposition shows how Hektor forgoes his family, choosing instead to lay figuratively in the *kleos* ascribed to him by "the men of Troy and the Trojan women" because he died valiantly in battle. Although his "naked corpse" is now lifeless, associated with cold and morbid images of "writhing worms" and dogs," Hektor has achieved his goal of living on through his legacy. The conflict in this moment—between Hektor's permanent *kleos* and Andromachē's confrontation of the direct fallout from Hektor's choices—illustrates how the Trojan War has severed ties between legacy and family and forced women to shoulder the consequences.

As Andromachē loses all ties to both her past lineage and her future legacy due to the Trojan War, she exemplifies the destruction of family that stems from the exclusionary, gendered
nature of *kleos*. She resigns herself to her self-declared "ill-starred" fate (22.481) as a soon-to-be widow with an orphaned child, but yet faces her fate and moves onwards:

"And about her stood thronging her husband's sisters and the wives of his brothers and these, in her despair for death, held her up among them. Bud she, when she breathed again and the life was gathered back into her, lifted her voice among the women of Troy in mourning..." (Homer 22.473-476).

Andromachē falls back, both literally and metaphorically, on her remaining sources of community as her lineage is repeatedly ravaged and razed down by battle. Her ability to persevere in spite of these devastating hardships contributes to Homer's praise of her as a goddess-like wife; however, her revelations about the dark side of *kleos* also remain sectioned off within the home, while male heroes fight on in the battlefield unchallenged.

This final contradiction between Andromachē’s elevated social status and her ultimate tragic fate, sold into sexual slavery as enemy soldiers murder her son, delineates Homer’s limited willingness to detour from the *Iliad*’s overarching narrative around *kleos*. Andromachē serves as an incisive lens into the moral ambiguity of war and its toxic marginalization of women and children in Ancient Greek society—themes that reverberate into representations of gendered oppression in the thousands of years of Western literature and culture since. Yet by confining Andromachē dissents to the domestic sphere, the *Iliad* does little to challenge the misogynistic social norms of *kleos* beyond simply pointing out their existence. In the end, sharp-witted Andromachē winds up an unfortunate martyr, joining the ranks of other iconoclasts pushed aside by the epic poem’s unrelenting arc toward the monolith of hypermasculine war.
Works Cited