

Andromache and Astyanax

by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon and Charles Boulanger de Boisfremont

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PRUD'HON'S *Andromache and Astyanax* (Figure 1) has been the subject of a mild critical controversy since he failed to complete it for exhibition at the Salon of 1817 in Paris.¹ Retained by the artist, it appeared at the posthumous sale of his estate (May 13, 1823, lot 1) with the notice that some accessories and a few draperies were left unfinished. It was bought by Prud'hon's pupil and friend Charles Boulanger de Boisfremont, who undertook to supply the missing passages of paint and exhibited the "completed" picture in the Salon of 1824.² The picture's reception was mixed; critics were divided between those who found it feeble and those who, even with specific reservations, thought it a masterpiece.³

One particularly outspoken criticism of the picture was leveled not at Prud'hon but at Boisfremont's efforts to complete it: "Il est fâcheux que le possesseur actuel de l'ouvrage ait cru devoir terminer deux figures laissées imparfaites; ces figures nuisent à l'ensemble et trahissent les tâtonnements d'une main plus officieuse qu'exercée."⁴ The remark implies that more than a few draperies and accessories were retouched. Two full figures must have been finished by Boisfremont, and Edmond de Goncourt later specified that these were Pyrrhus and his companion: "Pyrrhus et son confident ont été seulement ébauchés par Prud'hon, supprimés d'abord, puis réintégrés, puis terminés par M. de Boisfremont; ils sont très-inférieurs au reste de la composition."⁵ But beyond these fairly summary observations, surprisingly little attention has been paid to Boisfremont's role in this painting. The most comprehensive discussion of it to date com-

ments only that the two male figures at the right are "of much cruder workmanship than the rest of the painting."⁶

Possibly this unconcern is to be attributed to a general lack of interest in the problems of Prud'hon's stylistic development. But as one of the few paintings brought even close to a state of completion in Prud'hon's last years, the *Andromache and Astyanax* is a crucial document for the study of the artist's highly refined late style, and it is a matter of some importance to determine how much of its paint surface is actually his. From an iconographic point of view, any discussion of Prud'hon's understanding and treatment of his literary sources, and especially of his much

1. *Explication des ouvrages de peinture . . . exposés au Musée Royal des Arts le 24 avril, 1817* (Paris, 1817) no. 623; E. F. Miel, *Essai sur les Beaux-Arts et particulièrement sur le Salon de 1817* (Paris, 1817–18) p. 209n.

2. *Explication des ouvrages de peinture . . . exposés au Musée Royal des Arts le 25 août, 1824* (Paris, 1824) no. 1384. According to M. Chauvin, *Salon de mil huit cent vingt-quatre* (Paris, 1825) p. 89n., the picture was taken off exhibition shortly after the opening of the Salon.

3. For a summary of the critical reviews of this picture, and a selection of excerpts from them, see the entry by J. Lacambre in *De David à Delacroix/French Painting 1774–1830: The Age of Revolution*, exh. cat. (Paris, 1974/Detroit and New York, 1975) no. 145.

4. M. Chauvin, *Salon* (Paris, 1825) p. 89.

5. E. de Goncourt, *Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint, dessiné et gravé de P.-P. Prud'hon* (Paris, 1876) p. 117n.

6. C. Sterling, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Catalogue of French Paintings XV–XVIII Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955) p. 202.

vaunted sympathies for Racine,⁷ must ascertain whether the final composition of this painting actually reflects Prud'hon's intentions. Is it safe to assume that Boisfremont restricted his intervention to draperies? Are the passages he completed faithful to Prud'hon's models? Are the two male figures the only ones to which he lent his hand?

Andromache and Astyanax ostensibly represents a moment from act II, scene v, of Racine's *Andromaque*. Pyrrhus, son of Achilles and king of Epirus, has taken as his spoils from Troy Hector's widow Andromache, whom he loves to distraction, and her infant son As-

tyanax. Pyrrhus hopes to win Andromache's affection by protecting Astyanax from the wrath of the Greeks, who demand his death. Andromache instead reviles Pyrrhus as the son of her husband's murderer. In the painting, Andromache is attended by her confidant Cephise, standing behind her chair at the left. Astyanax rushes out of the arms of his nurse to embrace his mother, while Pyrrhus and his tutor Phoenix regard this scene from the background.

The genesis of this composition can be traced through four stages. The first of these is recorded in a drawing described by Edmond de Goncourt in the

1. Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758–1823) and Charles Boulanger de Boisfremont (1773–1838), *Andromache and Astyanax*, 1814–19, signed (lower left, pedestal base): *P. P. Prud'hon*. Oil on canvas, 52 × 67½ in. (132.1 × 170.5 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Collis P. Huntington, 1900, 25.110.14

7. See especially H. Focillon, *La Peinture au XIXe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1927) I, p. 70, and J. Seznec, "Racine et Prud'hon," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 6th ser., 26 (1944) pp. 349–364. For more penetrating remarks on Racine's importance for French painters of the early 19th century, see J. H. Rubin, "Guérin's Painting of Phèdre and the Post-Revolutionary Revival of Racine," *Art Bulletin* 59 (1977) pp. 601–618.



collection of Eudoxe Marcille: "Croquis sur papier bleu, où se débrouille encore confusément la composition cherchée dans son ensemble, dans sa lumière. Andromaque, au lieu d'être assise, serre son fils dans ses bras, agenouillée à terre."⁸ Jean Guiffrey later clarified this description somewhat, adding that a young woman seems to be trying to separate Astyanax from his mother, thus identifying the moment as that in which Hector's son is being taken away as a prisoner:

Andromaque n'est pas assise, mais agenouillée à terre à droite, de profil à gauche, près d'Astyanax, debout devant elle, qu'une jeune femme paraît vouloir séparer de sa mère. Deux autres, à gauche, s'éloignent déjà tout en regardant derrière elles Andromaque et son fils. C'est donc le moment où, sur l'ordre de Pyrrhus, le fils d'Hector va être emmené prisonnier.⁹

Evidently the sketch, whose present whereabouts are unknown, bears so little relationship to the final composition that it was entitled, at the Prud'hon exhibition of 1922 in Paris, "Andromaque pleurant sur le corps d'Astyanax."¹⁰

The existence of this alternate first idea for the *Andromache and Astyanax* may justify the assumption that the painting was originally conceived as an allusion to the unhappy fate of Empress Marie-Louise and her son, the young King of Rome, after Napoleon's abdication in 1814. Napoleon himself is quoted in the spring of that year as claiming that "the fate of Astyanax, prisoner of the Greeks, always seemed to me the saddest in history."¹¹ On December 8, 1814, Marie-Louise, through her chargé d'affaires, approved the subject for this painting which she had commissioned from Prud'hon,¹² and it is at least likely that it was this first idea rather than the ultimate design which she saw or had described to her. In the end she did not become the owner of the painting, and it may be that Prud'hon changed his subject to a more literary, less topical aspect of the story only when he realized he no longer had a patron for it. All this is speculation, but is more plausible than the romantic tale that Prud'hon, piqued at the unheroic behavior of Marie-Louise, withheld the canvas from her once it was near completion.¹³

The second stage in the evolution of the composition is recorded in a drawing in black and white chalk on blue prepared paper in the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre (Figure 2).¹⁴ The disposition of the fig-

ures in this drawing corresponds broadly with that in the painting. Drapery forms vary somewhat, and the architecture in the background opens onto a landscape prospect with sunlight streaming in from the left. The nurse leans forward in the sketch with her feet coiled beneath her and one hand well above the other, whereas in the painting she extends her legs for a more stabilized, pyramidal effect, and both arms are aligned parallel to the ground. Pyrrhus extends both arms towards the scene unfolding before him, and Phoenix, in shadow behind, stands with his left hand on his hip and his left knee bent. He wears a short robe without a heavy cloak and gestures admonishingly "offstage" with his right hand.

The next step in the elaboration of this composition differs very little from the preceding one, and is recorded in an oil sketch which passed through the Laurent-Richard sales in 1873 and 1878, illustrated by a line engraving in both catalogues (Figure 3).¹⁵ This sketch introduces a different architectural backdrop, closer to that in the final painting; the nurse's arms have been realigned; and Cephise's tunic appears as it does in the final painting, with a thin strap

8. Goncourt, *Catalogue raisonné* (Paris, 1876) p. 117.

9. J. Guiffrey, "L'Oeuvre de Pierre-Paul Prud'hon," *Archives de l'Art Français* n.s. 13 (1924) no. 251, p. 91.

10. Paris, Petit Palais, *Exposition P.-P. Prud'hon* (1922) cat. no. 118, p. 24.

11. See F. Antommarchi, *Derniers Momens de Napoléon, ou complément du Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1825) I, pp. 162–163.

12. Letter to Prud'hon from Jean-Claude Ballouhey, chargé d'affaires of Empress Marie-Louise, quoted in C. Clément, *Prud'hon* (Paris, 1872) p. 402.

13. This story seems to have originated with Guiffrey ("L'Oeuvre de Prud'hon," p. 90), and has become the principal point of discussion in all subsequent literature concerned with the *Andromache and Astyanax*.

14. J. Guiffrey, *Musée du Louvre, P.-P. Prud'hon: Peintures, pastels et dessins* (Paris, 1924) no. 44, p. 46, pl. 40.

15. Paris, Hôtel Drouot, *Catalogue des tableaux composant la collection Laurent-Richard*, April 7, 1873, lot 43. It also appeared in the Laurent-Richard sale of 1878 (Hôtel Drouot, May 23–25, lot 106), accompanied in the catalogue by the same line engraving. Guiffrey, "L'Oeuvre de Prud'hon," p. 91, records the drawing (actually on canvas) in the collection of Baron Gérard in 1924, giving its dimensions as 19 × 25 cm. The Laurent-Richard catalogues report its dimensions as 22 × 27 cm. Guiffrey also quotes Eudoxe Marcille as claiming that this drawing was given by Prud'hon to the poet Samuel Rogers. At the sale of Rogers's collection in London (Christie's, May 2, 1856), lot 552 was described as "Prud'hon. A subject from Roman history: a child rushing into its mother's arms. A finished study."

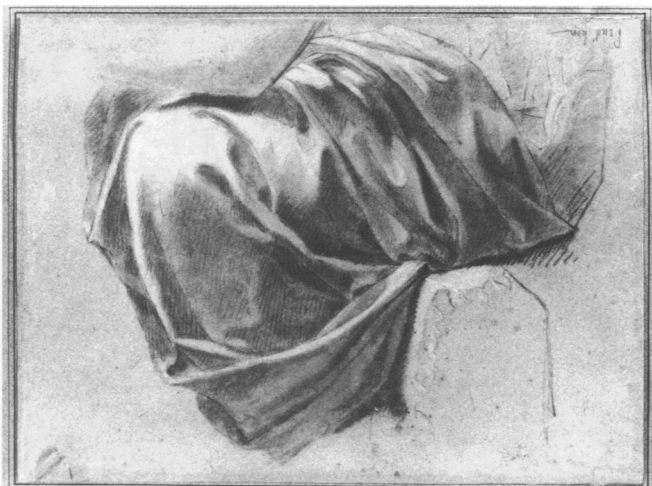


2. Prud'hon, *Andromache and Astyanax*. Black chalk heightened with white on blue prepared paper, $14\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{7}{8}$ in. (37.5 × 45.5 cm.). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins (photo: Musées Nationaux)



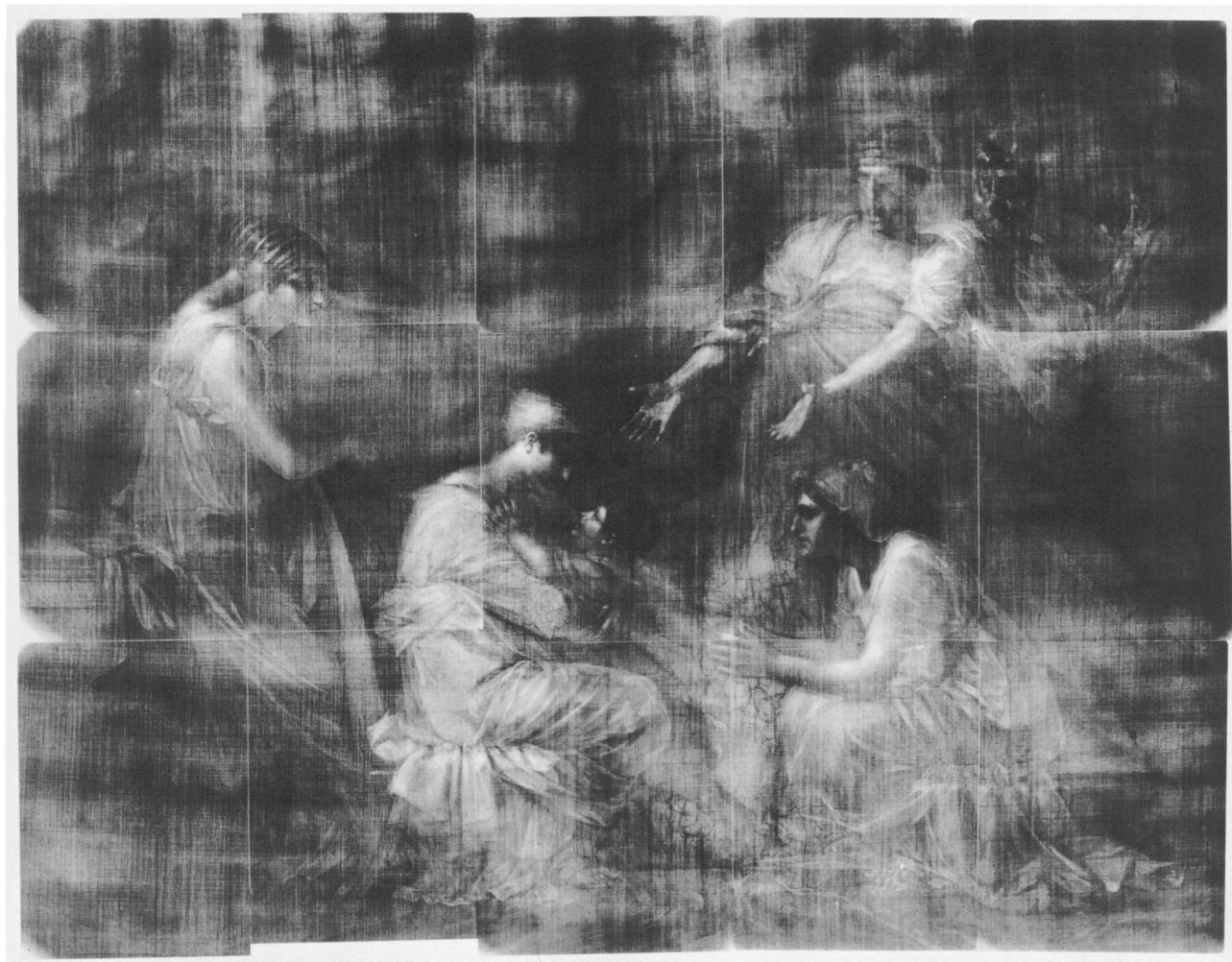
3. After Prud'hon, *Andromaque*, engraving of a compositional study for *Andromache and Astyanax*, from *Catalogue . . . collection Laurent-Richard* (Paris, 1878) facing p. 109. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library

4. Prud'hon, drapery study, inscribed (upside down, upper right) with the artist's name. Black chalk heightened with white on blue prepared paper, $10\frac{3}{8} \times 14$ in. (26.5 × 35.5 cm.). Paris, art market (photo: Jean Dubout)



5. Prud'hon(?), *Andromache and Astyanax*. Oil on canvas, $7\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$ in. (18.3 × 23.5 cm.). Versailles, private collection (photo: Henri Leroux)





6. Prud'hon and Boisfremont, *Andromache and Astyanax*, X-ray photograph

over the shoulder rather than a twist of fabric falling across the arm. Andromache, Astyanax, and Pyrrhus remain substantially as they were in the Louvre drawing. Phoenix is not clearly visible: his left hand, indistinctly rendered, seems still to rest on his hip; his right hand cannot be seen at all.

The Laurent-Richard study is usually thought to have preceded the Louvre sketch, but the introduction of changes in the figures of Cephise and the nurse that bring them closer to the way they appear in the final painting argues the reverse. Guiffrey and Goncourt further list a number of studies for individual figures, for arms, and for draperies connected with the *Andromache and Astyanax* which would have fol-

lowed the oil sketch before work on the final canvas began. Only one of these is known today (Figure 4),¹⁶ a detail study for the draperies of the nurse still positioned with her legs tucked beneath her. A small sketch on canvas (Figure 5) in a private collection, not listed by Guiffrey or Goncourt, corresponds in all essentials to the chalk drawing in the Louvre, but it gives the impression of being a copy after the Louvre drawing rather than a preparatory study for the final

16. Exhibited at Heim Gallery, London, Feb. 20–Mar. 27, 1975 ("French Drawings, Neo-Classicism," no. 106), and at Paul Prouté, Paris, 1984 (Catalogue "Watteau," no. 28). Probably this is one of five drawings listed by Goncourt (*Catalogue raisonné*, p. 118, "Cinq études des draperies"). Guiffrey ("L'Oeuvre de Prud'hon," p. 93) cites Goncourt but corrects the number of studies to six. In addition, he records a drapery study exhibited in Paris in 1874 and one sold at the Hourlier sale in 1872, which were

work.¹⁷ Guiffrey records another sketch on canvas corresponding to the Laurent-Richard study,¹⁸ but in the absence of the sketch itself we cannot tell whether it was perhaps also a copy or whether it was the final, enlarged study or cartoon for the Salon painting.

The final stage preparatory to the completed work of art comprises Prud'hon's initial laying-in work on the canvas itself. This is partially visible in an X-ray photograph recently taken of the painting (Figure 6), but is confused by the existence of three superimposed layers of paint: Prud'hon's initial work on the canvas, his final polishing, and Boisfremont's "corrections." A case in point is the change in the position of the nurse's legs visible in the X-ray photograph. Originally they were tucked beneath her as they were in the Laurent-Richard and Louvre studies. The draperies correspond exactly to those in the detail study reproduced in Figure 4, with the addition of a cascade of fabric trailing on the ground behind. The artist then experimented with an alternative position for the nurse's right foot very slightly below the first position before striking upon the solution of moving it forward. At the same time, the ample train of draperies was reduced to reveal the form of the stool, the kerchief binding the nurse's hair was transformed into a Phrygian cap, and the shawl covering her arms became a sleeveless tunic buttoned on the shoulder. Were these changes decided upon by Prud'hon or by Boisfremont?

Similarly, the figure of Cephise was altered slightly from a pronounced forward-leaning position, her weight supported on her right arm resting on the back of Andromache's chair, to a more erect posture with a less exaggerated twist to the head. In the final layer of paint she was provided with a left arm not visible in the X-ray photograph, and the folds of drapery across her hip and thigh were changed completely. An additional length of cloth was draped over the back of the chair to fill the void created by the repositioning of her arm. Finally, the architectural ornament visible on the stone block against which she sits and the amphora dimly visible behind her in the underpainting, as in the Louvre drawing, have been painted out.

Andromache has been treated in much the same way, losing a particularly attractive spray of draperies beneath her chair and behind her, and acquiring a left leg and diminutive left foot she seems never to have been intended to have. Astyanax alone remains

undisturbed through these various mutations of design, being provided only with a stool to justify his elevation relative to the new position of his nurse's foot. Formerly, his height in the picture field increased the illusion of depth and allowed for a proper transition between foreground and background space. The introduction of the stool creates a more rigidly planar impression for the foreground figures.

It is with the two figures in the background that the changes are most dramatic. As can be seen in the X-ray photograph, Pyrrhus originally followed exactly the design of the Louvre and Laurent-Richard studies, with both arms extended towards Andromache. Perhaps unexpectedly, his arms, hands, and draperies appear to have been fully modeled, not "seulement ébauchés" as Goncourt had suggested. Only the change in the position of Pyrrhus's head betrays any slight indecision in the rendering. Phoenix is less clearly visible, but what can be seen of his expressive head and well-modeled hand implies that he, too, was worked up to a highly finished state. His attitude differs from that in the Louvre drawing, perhaps explaining the uncertainties of the Laurent-Richard study. He raises his left arm, not his right, and his gesture is no longer directed "offstage" but appears to be one of haranguing Pyrrhus.

In the final painting, the forceful diagonals of both figures' gestures are eliminated. Though Pyrrhus may seem to differ only in the altered position of his left arm, in reality the entire figure was repainted, not just those passages divergent from the underpainting. The bulky, unmodeled red draperies that cover the original left arm and that pass unconvincingly around the shoulders to cover the original white sleeve are so poorly rendered as to preclude the possibility of Prud'hon's authorship. But inexplicably, Pyrrhus's head and right hand were also repainted to their present

undoubtedly part of the original group of six. None of these drawings can be positively identified today. J. H. Slayman, "The Drawings of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon: A Critical Study," Ph.D. diss. (University of Wisconsin, 1970) pp. 77–80, 198–199, summarizes the information to be found in Goncourt and Guiffrey regarding the drawings related to the *Andromache and Astyanax*.

17. This sketch is perhaps to be attributed to Prud'hon's assistant, Constance Mayer, whose oily drawing technique it strongly resembles. See Helen Weston, "The Case for Constance Mayer," *Oxford Art Journal* 3:1 (1980) pp. 14–19.

18. Guiffrey, "L'Oeuvre de Prud'hon," no. 253, p. 92, as collection Louis Bourdon, 76 × 90 cm.

characterless, inexpressive form, though they follow exactly Prud'hon's design beneath. Phoenix was reconstructed entirely. The original figure was canceled and repainted several inches to the right. The black cape drawn across the mouth is intended primarily to cover the shoulders and raised left hand of the figure beneath (the noble gesture is now visible as a pentimento). The sloppily drawn vase between the heads of Pyrrhus and Phoenix was introduced to cover Phoenix's original head, and the other two vases, meaningless if not distracting from the composition, were added for reasons of symmetry. All these changes may be imputed to Boisfremont.

Attention to the poor quality of the paint surface in these areas worked over by Boisfremont helps to clarify the part he played in the other changes noted above. Thus, the orange-brown pigment scumbled over the draperies of Cephise, which effectively hides the forms beneath rather than modeling new ones, must be attributed to Boisfremont. Cephise's left arm, painted in a coarse, thick pigment which has dried and crackled atop an earlier layer of already crackled paint, is a Boisfremont invention. Andromache is virtually intact as Prud'hon conceived and painted her, though the impetuosity of his technique has resulted in an unusually broad and disfiguring traction crackle, particularly in the yellow of her chemise, which has been rather heavily inpainted, partly it would seem by Boisfremont and partly in more modern times. Andromache's left foot seems to be another of Boisfremont's inventions, but the entire shadowed area between Andromache and the nurse is too unevenly preserved to allow more specific observations. The figure of the nurse herself gives the impression of being entirely by Prud'hon, one of the noblest creations of his late career.

Thus it can no longer be maintained that Boisfremont's additions to the *Andromache and Astyanax* were restricted to a few accessories left incomplete by Prud'hon or to finishing touches on the figures of Pyrrhus and Phoenix. The picture must have appeared at the sale of Prud'hon's estate in 1823 just short of that final degree of polished perfection which was expected of history pictures at the time, and Boisfremont's work on it must be viewed more as corrections than as completions. Some of these corrections may have been purely technical, compensating for the rapid deterioration of Prud'hon's paint surface. Some may be seen as formal, such as the introduction of Ce-

phise's left arm to lessen the torsion of her pose and bring her more into conformity with the attitudes of the other two women in the foreground. Changes like the latter are indices of Boisfremont's more academic mentality but do not seriously hamper the beauty of Prud'hon's conception. The corrections imposed upon the figures of Pyrrhus and Phoenix, however, are another matter, and must have been intended not only to amend the composition but also to shift the emphasis of the narrative.

As envisioned by Prud'hon, *Andromache and Astyanax* illustrates no single scene from Racine's *Andromaque* as it might have been performed on stage, but expands upon the dialogue between Pyrrhus and Phoenix in act II, scene v. Pyrrhus, resolved to overcome his love for Andromache and to deliver Astyanax to the Greeks, expresses the cause of his anger and change of heart to Phoenix by describing to him the scene of Andromache's ingratitude, shown in the foreground of the painting, in which she responded to his every assurance of protection for Astyanax only by asserting her grief for her dead husband, and recalling his very appearance in that of her son:

J'allais voir le succès de ses embrassements:
Je n'ai trouvé que pleurs mêlés d'emporements.
Sa misère l'aigrit; et toujours plus farouche,
Cent fois le nom d'Hector est sorti de sa bouche.
Vainement à son fils, j'assurais mon secours:
"C'est Hector, disait-elle en l'embrassant toujours;
Voilà ses yeux, sa bouche, et déjà son audace;
C'est lui-même, c'est toi, cher époux, que j'embrasse."

As he was initially conceived in the Louvre composition study (Figure 2), Phoenix shows his approval of Pyrrhus's resolution, urging him to forget Andromache in the arms of Hermione, daughter of Helen, to whom he is betrothed:

Commencez donc, Seigneur, à ne m'en parler plus.
Allez voir Hermione; et content de lui plaire,
Oubliez à ses pieds jusqu'à votre colère.

The change in Phoenix's gesture, visible in the X-ray photograph, from one leading Pyrrhus away to that of opposing him effectively recasts the dialogue between the two figures to a later moment in the scene. Pyrrhus asks if jealousy of Hermione might not make Andromache love him. Realizing the duplicity of Pyrrhus's anger, Phoenix rebukes him:

Quoi? toujours Andromaque occupe votre esprit?
Que vous importe, ô Dieux! sa joie ou son dépit?
Quel charme, malgré vous, vers elle vous attire?

.
... Allez, Seigneur, vous jeter à ses pieds.
Allez, en lui jurant que votre âme l'adore,
A de nouveaux mépris l'encourager encore.

If Edmond de Goncourt was correct in asserting that the figures of Pyrrhus and Phoenix were at one point suppressed entirely before being reintegrated in their present form, it can only have been in order to eliminate these complications in dramatic structure, to refocus the narrative on the three verses addressed by Andromache to her son (though spoken in the play by Pyrrhus), as she sees in him the features of his father:

“C’est Hector, disait-elle en l’embrassant toujours;
Voilà ses yeux, sa bouche, et déjà son audace;
C’est lui-même, c’est toi, cher époux, que j’embrasse.”

Whether such editing is to be imputed to Prud’hon or to Boisfremont cannot be determined. It is certain, however, that Pyrrhus and Phoenix as finally painted by Boisfremont must refer to the first of the two dialogues cited above, returning the dramatic moment of the picture to that worked up by Prud’hon in his earlier compositional studies.

Boisfremont’s changes and additions to Prud’hon’s *Andromache and Astyanax* have resulted in more than just a paint surface of uneven quality. They have concealed an important stage in the artist’s creative processes and compromised our appreciation of his literary and dramatic intelligence. Only with the aid of Prud’hon’s preliminary sketches and the evidence of scientific investigation uncovering painted images otherwise lost to us can these misimpressions be partially rectified.