

EURIPIDES**THE MEDEA**

SETTING - CORINTH. Jason recovered the Golden Fleece at COLCHIS, having sailed there with his crew, the ARGONAUTS, on board the ARGO. He succeeded in his task with the help of the King of Colchis' daughter, MEDEA (who was also a witch). Medea fell in love with Jason and helped him to deceive her father and then, when fleeing with the fleece, she murdered her brother ABSYRTUS to hinder her father's pursuit. They were married and came to live in Corinth.

THE BASIC PLOT OF THE PLAY

The problem set at the beginning of the play is that Jason has decided to marry another wife, GLAUCE, the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Medea is angered and will not let Jason off without punishment. She plans to kill both GLAUCE and Creon and also her children by Jason. The horror of this causes a dilemma in her mind. Can she be so savage to go through with it? VELLACOTT sees the conflict in the play as between CIVILISATION and UNCIVILISED PASSION (i.e. Jason and Medea). "To appreciate the balance of this play, we must take care not to prejudge Jason. He was a man of entirely respectable ambitions; and to these ambitions Medea presented two fatal obstacles: she had involved him in murder before ever he came to Corinth; and as a non-Greek she could never be recognised by Greeks as his wife". Therefore it is a struggle between REASON and VIOLENCE. "In the character of Jason a concern for civilised values is joined with a calculating coldness and an unscrupulous want of feeling. In that of Medea warmth of feeling grows on the same stem as emotional excess and the propensity to violence. The lesson is that civilised men ignore at their peril the world of instinct, emotion and irrational experience; that carefully worked-out notions of right and wrong are dangerous unless they are flexible and allow for constant adjustment." Aegeus' promise of refuge for the murderess Medea vindicates her case - the universe is not always on the side of civilisation.

KITTO sees Medea deliberately portrayed as not a 'normal woman' but excessive in her passions. "Medea is not all villainy; she loves her children, loved Jason, and was popular in Corinth; but it is the essential part of his tragedy that she was never really different from what we see her to be.. Euripides could easily have represented her as a good but passionate woman who plunges into horrors only when stung by deadly insult and injury. There was no need for him to rake up her past as he does - except that this is his whole point. "She is tragic in that her passions are stronger than her reason She is bound to be a torment to herself and to others; that is why Euripides shows her blazing her way through life leaving wreckage behind her; that she suffers herself is a great and no doubt a necessary part of the drama, but it is not the point of the tragedy. Passion is stronger than reason, and so can be a most destructive agent. Destructive to whom? Here, to the children, Glauce, Creon, Jason, and to Medea's peace - but not to her life; in short, destructive to society at large".

"Balance of character is necessarily denied her, and this means that we cannot lose ourselves in sympathy with her as we do with Oedipus. Euripides is not asking us to sympathise with

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her in this way, but to understand her (and to understand that people like her exist - victims of a primitive force). Euripides, like most Greeks, is a rationalist in that he believes reason, not belief or formula or magic, to be the guide to life; but he sees too, that we have is us, besides reason, non-rational emotions which are necessary but may run wild, thwarting our reason and bringing calamity. In the last analysis Euripides' tragic hero is mankind. Some natural passion breaks its bounds, and the penalty has to be paid, either by the sinner or by those around him or by both his tragic conception that the passions and unreason to which humanity is subject are its greatest scourge We see Medea not merely as the betrayed and vindictive wife but as the impersonation of one of the blind and irrational forces in human nature. (There is more in the Medea than the lesson that 'barbarian magicians who are passionate and are villainously treated do villainous things'.)

MEDEA'S CASE

- NURSE** - "coming as an exile, she has earned the citizens' welcome; while to Jason she is all obedience - and in marriage that's the saving thing, when a wife obediently accepts her husband's will. Jason has betrayed his own sons, and my mistress, for a royal bed".
- TUTOR** - "Old love is ousted by new love. Jason's no friend to this house".
"It's taken you a long time to learn that everybody loves himself more than his neighbour. These boys are nothing to their father: he's in love".
Euripides seems not to be the misogynist that he is accused of being.
- MEDEA** - "For women, divorce is not respectful; to repel the man, not possible. Still more, a foreign woman, coming among new laws, new customs, needs the skill of magic. If a man grows tired of the company at home, he can go out, and find a cure for tediousness. We wives are forced to look to one man only. And, they tell us, we at home live free from danger, they go out to battle: fools! I'd rather stand three times in the front line than bear one child.

Creon banishes Medea out of fear for his and his daughter's life.

- CREON** - "I love my country too - next only to my daughter.
MEDEA - "Oh, what an evil power love has in people's lives!
(Creon's love for his daughter causes hurt to Medea)

MEDEA (to Jason) - "You filthy coward! it's not courage, this looking friends in the face after betraying them. It is not even audacity; it's a disease pure shamelessness"

"You must know you are guilty of perjury to me"

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JASON'S CASE

JASON

- "I have often noticed what fatal results follow from uncontrolled rage".

"You would not give up your ridiculous tirades against the royal family. So, you're banished. However, I will not desert a friend. I have carefully considered your problem, and come now, in spite of everything, to see that you and the children are not sent away with an empty purse, or unprovided". (Is this really sympathy? Acceptable from one's husband)? "But in return for saving me you got far more than you gave. You left a barbarous land to become a resident of Hellas; here you have known justice; you have lived in a society where force yields place to law. - here your gifts are widely recognised, you are famous". [Fair enough - but has Medea known justice from Jason? Is she the type to be persuaded by an argument that 'force yields to law'?] Jason's reason for marrying the King's daughter - !I wanted to ensure that we should live well and not be poor". (is this acceptable?). "Was such a plan, then, wicked? Even you women have reached a state where, if all's well with your sex-life, you've everything you wish for; but when that goes wrong, at once all that is best and noblest turns to gall. If only children could be got some other way, without the female sex! (Surely this is more likely to antagonise?)

MEDEA'S REPLY -

"If you were honest, you ought to have won me over, not got married behind my back But you're an ageing man and an Asiatic wife was no longer respectable".

AGAINST MEDEA -

So Jason's case appears very weak indeed, but Medea has always been suspected of being capable of going too far in her revenge.

NURSE

- "I am afraid some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind. She is a frightening woman; no one who makes an enemy of her will carry off an easy victory".

MEDEA

- "Children, your mother is hated, and you are cursed: Death take you, with your father, and perish his whole house!"

"Oh, may I see Jason and his bride ground to pieces in their shattered palace for the wrong that have dared to do to me, unprovoked! O my father, my city, you and I deserted; my brother I shamefully murdered!"

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Creon allows Medea to remain for another day “Now stay here, if you must, this one day. You can hardly in one day accomplish what I am afraid of”.

“By banishing me at once he could have wanted me utterly; instead, he allows me to remain one day. Today three of my enemies I shall strike dead: Father and daughter; and my husband”.

“I willingly deceived my father; left my house; There I put King Pelias to the most horrible of deaths by his own daughter’s hands, and ruined his whole house”.

CHORUS (about Medea) “The fiercest anger of all, the most incurable, is that which rages in the place of dearest love”. Her rage goes too far - “I will kill my sons. I will leave Corinth a murderess, flying from my darling children’s blood. Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible; the laughter of my enemies I will not endure”.

The CHORUS are Medea’s conscience. “By every pledge or appeal we beseech you, do not slaughter your children!When your sons kneel to you for pity, will you stain your fingers with their blood? Your heart will melt; you will know you cannot. (When an apparent patch-up of the quarrel is made the Chorus hope for the best) May the course of evil be checked now, go no further!”.

MEDEA’S DILEMMA

JASON “I want to see you, when you’re strong, full-grown young men tread down my enemies. (Medea breaks down and weeps) What’s this? Why these floods of tears?”

MEDEA It is nothing. I was thinking about these children”

Medea sends the poisonous gifts “The gods, and my own evil-hearted plots, have led to this”.

“Dear sons, why are you staring at me so? You smile at me - your last smile: Why? Oh, what am I to do? My courage is all gone..... I can’t do it. I must steel myself to it”.

JASON arrives - “I’ve come to save my sons, before Creon’s family murder them in revenge”. (He is too late).

I was mad before, when I brought you from your palace in a land of savages into a Greek home”.