

Paul Bradshaw

Pity Poor Jason?

Euripides' play Medea opens with Medea's nurse lamenting that, had Jason never sailed in pursuit of the golden fleece, had Medea never met him and come to Corinth, this tragic tale would not have unfolded. Medea is a horrific tale of betrayal, spurned love, and murderous revenge. Though Medea is the lead character in the play, Jason, the father of her children who has left her bed to marry Glauce, the daughter of king Creon, plays a central role as the catalyst for all of the mayhem perpetrated by Medea. In the beginning of the play Jason is portrayed as callous and unrepentant for his actions towards Medea and it is impossible to find sympathy for him. By the end of the play, after Jason's foolish and childish behavior has cost him all that is dear to him, it might seem that Jason would incite the audience's pity or deserve sympathy. Yet, he still represents a character we feel little sympathy for as he obstinately refuses to acknowledge his role in these tragic events. We feel that had Jason acted more honorably, he would not have brought this tragedy upon himself.

From the play's opening scenes, Medea is emotionally shattered and angry at Jason's betrayal. She wishes for death to release her from her profound anguish and suffering, telling the chorus, "life has no pleasure left dear friends. I want to die" (line 210). She beseeches the chorus, "if I can find a way to work revenge on Jason for his wrongs to me, say nothing" (line 239). The chorus gives their assent to this request but Creon still learns of her plot for revenge. Aware of Medea's anger, Creon comes to her, telling her, "I fear you" (line 257). "You're a clever woman, skilled in the evil arts" (line 261). He suspects, correctly, that in her anger Medea plots against him and his daughter, and he exiles her. After they part, Medea affirms to the chorus that she is scheming against them all, stating, "Today, three of my enemies I shall strike

dead; father and daughter; and my husband” (line 340). Having revealed her evil intentions, the audience's initial response should be one of sympathy for Jason, but Jason's subsequent actions remove us from this inclination.

Upon hearing of Medea's banishment, Jason appears before her and a heated discussion ensues. Arrogantly ignoring the fact he has abandoned Medea and his two children and that Medea's anger is justified, he squarely lays the blame for Medea's exile at her own feet. He reprimands her, stating, “Think yourself lucky to be let off with banishment, after your abuse of the king and the princess” (line 411). He continues in this vein, uttering perhaps the most telling line in the play, “I have noticed - this is not the first occasion – what fatal results follow from ungoverned rage” (lines 404). This statement is remarkable as it portends the grief the raging Medea will visit upon Jason and all those he loves. Jason has acknowledged Medea's rage and, like Creon, knows how dangerous she is, and yet he does nothing to console her. Instead, he further enflames her rage by claiming he comes in friendship, that he wishes to provide for her purse in exile, that she and the children will be taken care of. He patronizingly asserts, “you no doubt hate me: but I could never bear you ill will” (line 420).

Medea explodes at this affront, calling Jason a “filthy coward,” (line 422) and furiously reminds him of all she has done for him, how she has employed her skills to further his goals. She recounts how she helped him gain the golden fleece; how she saved his life; betrayed her father and Colchis, the land of her birth; how she killed her own brother to facilitate Jason's escape from Colchis; and how now she finds herself alone, a woman with two young sons, forced into exile with nowhere to go. Jason shamelessly dismisses her claims, declaring, “helpless passion drove you to save my life” (line 482). He continues, “your services, so far as they went, were well enough: but in return for saving me you got far more than you gave,” (line

484) adding that the reason he was successful was not because of her, but because of the help of the Goddess Aphrodite. He argues, “As for your scurrilous taunts against my marriage with the royal family, I shall show you that my action was wise, not swayed by passion, and directed towards your interests and my children's” (line 496). He then proceeds to tell her she “would approve if you could govern your sex jealousy. But 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” (line 518). His condescending tone and disavowal of the significant help provided to him by Medea cast Jason in a less than flattering light.

Medea refuses his offer of assistance, raging, “I loathe your prosperous future; I'll have none of it, nor none of your security – it galls my heart” (line 545). She then gives Jason the first of two ominous warnings, savagely telling him she is his enemy and that “fate sends me as a curse” on his house (line 555). And then, after having just been reminded of Medea's treacherous and murderous ways, Jason almost nonchalantly concludes, “very well. I call the Gods to witness that I have done my best to help you and the children. You make no response to kindness; friendly overtures you obstinately reject. So much the worse for you” (line 565). Jason's indignant and abusive attitude towards Medea gives one pause to consider whether he fully comprehends the implications of this exchange. It is obvious Jason is so focused on his self righteous claims that he has literally not heard a word Medea said. He is aware of Medea's history, knows how evil she can be, understands the fatal consequences of ungoverned rage, and she has clearly stated how abused she feels. He thinks his offer of friendship and money, his explanation of why he married Glauce, his cruel assumption that Medea would understand that it was in the best interests of her and the children, will soothe her. Instead, he has demeaned her, accused her of causing her own exile, exhibited a complete disregard for her feelings and all she

has done for him, ignored her warnings, and done nothing but fuel her anger and seal his fate. Jason has demonstrated a complete insensitivity towards Medea and, even though we know how vindictive Medea can be, our sympathies lie with her, not with the doomed Jason.

After this passionate exchange with Jason, Medea is given an opportunity to further her sinister goals. She alters her plans to exact revenge on Jason, deciding she will kill Creon, Glauce, and her children, sparing Jason to suffer this loss. She encounters an old friend from Athens, Aegeus, tells him she has been exiled, and asks if he will allow her to live in his house and protect her. Aegeus takes pity on Medea and her situation and grants her sanctuary. Having secured safe haven, Medea implements her evil plot. Ignoring pleas from the chorus to abandon her dastardly scheme and spare her children, Medea prepares a beautiful dress and head dress as a gift for Glauce, which she treats with poison that will kill her. She will execute this monstrous act by coldly using her own children to deliver the gift and summons Jason to this end. Indeed, Medea demonstrates just how deeply depraved she is and these actions should spur audience sympathy for Jason, yet he again presents himself as unsympathetic.

Jason arrives and, feeling noble and generous says, “you sent for me: I have come. Although you hate me, I am ready to listen. You have some request; what is it” (line 786). Jason deludedly believes Medea has listened to his reasoning and is no longer angry. Medea spins a web of deceit telling Jason she has acted foolishly, like all women, and that she was wrong to be angry with him. She asks him to plead with Creon that the children not be exiled with her, that they stay with Jason in Corinth. She tells him she has gifts for Glauce to help sway Creon's mind. Then, as if oblivious to Medea's history of deceit and betrayal, Jason takes her at her word, declaring, “I am pleased, Medea, that you have changed your mind; though indeed I do not blame your first resentment. Only naturally a woman is angry when her husband marries a

second wife” (line 823). Jason, as if partially remembering Medea's insidious nature, prudently says the gifts are not necessary. Medea insists that Jason and the children take them and, to remain on good terms with her, he foolishly agrees. Ominously, she then tells Jason she wishes to hear news from the palace that will please her.

Again, Jason has acknowledged Medea's hatred of him, has heard her threats, and still agrees to take her gifts to the palace. He conceitedly believes Medea has accepted his reasoning for his marriage, gallantly forgives her anger, and assumes she will peacefully enter into exile and the children will stay with him. It is almost beyond comprehension that the great Jason could be so clueless. The chorus further undermines any sympathy the audience might harbor for Jason, asserting, “oh wretched Jason! So sure of destiny, and so ignorant” (line 902). He projects the same offensive attitude towards Medea as he did before and, even though he acts as an agent for his own fall, it is easier to dislike him than it is to have sympathy for him.

After completing their deadly errand, the children are returned from the palace with the news that they will not be banished. Interestingly, this was news Medea expected but, for some reason, the idea of losing her children incites her rage. Shortly thereafter, the news Medea wished to hear from the palace is delivered, that of the agonizing deaths of Glauce and Creon. Medea momentarily has second thoughts about killing her children, but her anger toward Jason drives her to complete her evil scheme. Medea then takes a sword, and to spite Jason, slays her two children. Surely this vile act should prompt the audience's pity and sympathy for Jason but, never one to disappoint, he again portrays himself as shallow and abrasive, and the audience questions whether Jason is deserving of their sympathy.

Jason rushes to the house to confront Medea and announces he is there to save his children from certain death at the hands of the late Creon's relatives. He queries the whereabouts

of Medea and before the house slave can answer, he says, “well, I am less concerned with her than with the children” (line 1185). He is then told his children have been slain by the hand of Medea. Jason searches for Medea and finds her atop the house, ensconced in a chariot pulled by dragons, sent by Helios, God of the sun, the bodies of her dead children at her feet. At that moment, the full weight of Medea's actions lands on Jason and he yells at her, “you abomination,” (line 1203) “a mother! To lift sword against your own little ones; to leave me childless, my life a wreck” (line 1205). Our hearts go out for the children, Creon, and Glauce as the innocent victims of Medea's unbridled rage. We take pity on them and, for the first time, feel pity and sympathy for Jason in light of Medea's unspeakable deeds.

Then, still not recognizing his part in all of this, still not acknowledging the suffering his actions caused Medea, still gripped by his self serving desires, he again blames her for all his troubles screaming to her, “my children now, out of mere sexual jealousy, you murder them” (line 1219). Jason tells her she too will suffer the loss of the children. Medea triumphantly glowers down at Jason, affirming this, stating, “it is true; but my pain's a fair price, to take away your smile” (line 1238). She tells him she is avenged, that his treachery, his taking a new wife, is the reason he is now childless and alone, just as she is. Jason answers almost disbelievingly, “you thought *that* reason enough to murder them, that I no longer slept with you?” (line 1245). Medea incredulously responds, “and is that injury a slight one, do you imagine, to a woman?” (line 1247). She then reaffirms she killed the children to crush Jason. In his defeat, the audience feels pitiful and sympathetic toward Jason as he asks Medea for the bodies of his sons so he might properly bury them. He cries, “for God's sake, let me touch their gentle flesh” (line 1283). As her last insult to Jason, she refuses him. Still, we cannot get past Jason's poor behavior toward and shabby treatment of Medea, and the audience has difficulty feeling sympathy for him

as Medea disappears into the heavens, leaving a broken, shattered Jason behind, alone.

Jason now finds himself reduced to the same circumstances as Medea at the beginning of the play. She was rejected by her husband and left alone in unbelievable anguish. Her revenge has been brutal and complete. Jason has lost his children, lost Glauce, lost Creon, and lost Medea, who truly loved him. Yet one wonders if Jason even understands that his opprobrious behavior is the reason he finds himself in these circumstances. Medea reminds Jason of all she has done for him, all the underhanded deeds she has committed in his favor, and Jason, as if hearing a different conversation, ignores every warning sign Medea presents. He has proven that his marriage to Glauce was anything but wise and that indeed, his observation that ungoverned rage can often result in fatal tragedy was prescient. Jason knew a wary Creon, fearful of Medea's reputation, had banished her yet he, underestimating the intensity of her rage, walks casually into this hornet's nest thinking he can soothe Medea's feelings, and does nothing but stoke her rage. Even with this heavy loss and the bleak future Jason faces, it is difficult for the audience to entertain the notion of sympathy for a man who is so self absorbed, who aloofly believes only his honor counts, who foolishly disregards how dangerous his antagonist Medea is, and who has little or no compassion for those he purportedly loves.

Work Cited

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