An Apology for Jason: A Study of Euripides' Medea

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Critics of Greek tragedy, and of Euripidean tragedy in particular, have always shown a surprising unanimity of opinion in their treatment of Jason, the fallen hero of Euripides' Medea. Despite the fact that most of the other Euripidean heroes have created a storm of controversy,1 Jason seems to be perfectly understood by anyone who has the wit to read Medea. Is he not, after all, a clear-cut example of a crass and boundless egotist (see Bethe, Pohlenz, Wilamowitz),2 a selfish ass who pleads a case to which no gentleman would care to listen (so Allen, Earle, Gilbert Murray, Page),3 and yet calloused (Blaiklock)4 and stupid enough to believe his defense a good one (Page, again)?5 In short, is he not utterly detestable (Norwood)6 and contemptible (Bates, Kitto)?7

Both Bates and Norwood, however, feel a little uneasy about the type of drama they have made out of Medea by such a characterization of Jason. Norwood, for example, with his fine instinct for literature, sees immediately that Euripides is writing a play which is most un-Sophoclean in tone, since Sophocles would have created the soul of his drama out of "the collision of wills and emotions" which arise "from the confrontation of two persons."8 In fact, "Sophocles," as Norwood goes on to say, "would probably have given us a Jason whose claim upon our sympathy was hardly less than that of Medea."

Instead, it would seem that Euripides wrote in Medea a rather strange play which is completely dominated by the protagonist, Medea, even though the actual pathos or scene of suffering seems to belong primarily to Jason. The conflict, which is so essential to all good drama, becomes then not a conflict between two philosophies of life, two prevailing attitudes, both essentially right, but, rather, a conflict between two Medeas, the one the demon witch who

A Second Century A.D. Jason-Medea Sarcophagus: a typical example of the influence Euripides' Medea had on Greco-Roman art. Note the dominant position of the hero. (Reproduced, by permission, from G. Rodenwaldt, Die Kunst der Antike, p. 640.)
thirsts for blood and vengeance, the other the tender mother whose children have become flesh of her flesh through the mystery and pain of childbirth.] Such is the mastery (or perversity) of a Euripides.

Bates even goes so far as to wonder where, if anywhere, there lurks in the play the “pity” and “fear” which Aristotle suggests should be basic ingredients of Greek tragedy. These emotions cannot be nurtured by the characterization of Medea, to be sure. She is too ruthless and cold-blooded a murderess. Nor can they be bred by the characterization of the “cold and calculating Jason.” Instead, this pity and fear so essential to drama can only be aroused by the children. “It is fear for them and pity for their fate that the poet stirs up.”

With this statement Bates finds himself in the awkward position of placing the entire emphasis of the play on what he admits to be the fate of two characters “who are silent except for a word or two uttered behind the scenes.” Such a conclusion does not distress him, however. On the contrary, he goes on to say that “this is a good example of the importance of the silent character in Greek tragedy, particularly in the tragedy of Euripides!” [exclamation mark mine]

It is difficult to concur with Bates’ estimate of the importance of the children, but there is something in his starting point (the elements of pity and fear) that rings true. Euripides did write a play which stirred up strong emotions of pity and fear in his Athenian audience. There were few Greek dramas which could perform the function of catalytic agent as well. That the presence of the children had something to do with this flow of pity and fear seems obvious. But I must insist that the fate of the children was important only because of the effect it had on the audience as it experienced vicariously the horror of Jason’s fate. [It is pity and fear for Jason, not Medea, which Euripides’ audience felt as the play drew to its disastrous close, a pity and fear triggered by the dilemma of a Jason who was far different from the Jason experienced by a 19th-or 20th-century audience.]

It has long been known that Euripides introduced current political and social problems into the mythology he used as the raw material for his plots. These conscious anachronisms, if they can be called that, have much to do with the basic tensions with which Euripidean plays concern themselves. And yet it is these anachronisms which are often lost in the passage of time as 5th-century b.c. standards of morality become 4th-or 3rd-century b.c. standards, or those even of the 19th or 20th century A.D. The recent sociological and political studies of Little, Thompson, Webster, Delebecque, and Zuntz make this quite clear, even though they may overemphasize the topological aspects of Greek drama. Certainly these studies should help us understand that the Jason and Medea we meet in Euripides are not the Jason and Medea of an earlier epic society but that their counterparts are to be found, instead, in 5th-century Athens.

Medea has always been understood in this light. Her speeches make this quite clear. She is, after all, a 5th-century woman in revolt—not, to be sure, a 5th-century Athenian asté or citizeness, but a xene, a foreigner, who carries with her the added taint of being a barbaros, a non-Greek. As a non-Greek and foreigner, she is subject to all of the stringent laws, written and unwritten, which Greek society in the form of the polis, the clan, the family, has established to exclude her. Her position is a lonely one and her speeches, filled as they are with the new intellectual outlook (dare we say, the new individualistic outlook?) must have made a deep impression on a 5th-century Athenian audience.

But if 5th-century concepts apply to Medea, they must apply with equal force to Jason, who, though an exile, is still a Greek of noble birth with a deep-rooted relationship to the family, the clan and the phratry, and, through
them, to the city state. It is as a Greek, moreover, and not, incidentally, as a hero, that Jason's problem or dilemma arises. For Jason in Medea is no longer a great hero with the areté which makes the hero heroic, unique, alone, "above the law" as it were. Instead, he is characterized more as a fallen hero, "the hero that was," to use Blaklock's fine term for him. He who once was a great individual who could lead the Argonauts, who could make Medea fall in love with him and desert her fatherland is now "an ordinary Greek," a graeculus who wants little more than to crawl back into the sheltering anonymity of the Greek patriarchal system. Jason wants to be epistemos: "stamped," "marked," "accepted in the coinage of the realm." Yet to be completely eligible for the anonymous immortality which the phratry can give him, he must qualify not only himself but his progeny. For, as every 5th-century Athenian citizen knew, whatever immortality a man had, he got through his children who carried on the all-important rites to the dead which perpetuated the family and preserved for each member of that family his future identity.

Still, Jason had two children, the children of Medea. Why could they not be admitted to the hiera kai hòsia of the phratry and carry on the family name? The truth seems to be that Jason's children were nóthoi or bastards.

Under the Periclean law of 451/450 B.C., not only was Athenian citizenship limited to children of Athenian citizens, but children of a mixed marriage (i.e. a marriage between an Athenian citizen and a xéne) were illegitimate (nóthoi) unless the right of marriage had been extended to the city state from which the xéne came. That the children of Jason, a Greek, and of Medea, a xéne and a barbarian to boot, could not become citizens is tragic enough, but that they were nóthoi is what lies at the heart of the matter. Pollux' definition of nóthos (3. 21) is clear enough: "a bastard is a child born of a xéne or of a concubine."

There are, however, other reasons why Jason's children qualify as bastards. Kurt Latte, in his article in RE on bastardy, establishes three qualifications under which children became stigmatized as bastards: (1) they are children born out of wedlock or children born to parents one of whom is not free; (2) they are the offspring of a citizen and a non-citizen; (3) they are the fruit of an adulterous union. Jason's children by Medea therefore could be bastards for two reasons: (1) they are the offspring of a "citizen" and a xéne; their mother's marriage does not fulfill the qualifications set up for a legal marriage, i.e. a marriage carried out with engué or ékdosis. Medea, in short, is not a gunè gameté or engueté "a solemnly married wife."

For the legitimate acts of engué and ékdosis, a kúrios (father or guardian) was needed. Medea had eliminated any guardian she might have had when she proved to be the cause of the death of her father and brother. She is not unaware of this lack of kinship ties when she mentions in lines 257-58 her lack of mother or brother or any relative with whom she can take refuge in "this sea of woe." Finally, there is good reason to believe that there was no formal dowry, no pherné or proiz, which came with Medea. In short, legally speaking, Medea could only have been a pallaké, a term used to denote any woman who lived with a man without being his wife through engué and ékdosis or through epidikasia. We would call her today a common-law wife—the product of an unwritten marriage which had legal force, to be sure, but had tragic implications for Jason, once he had lost his nerve.

This does not mean Medea accepts her position. In fact, one could almost say that much of the play concerns itself with her fight to maintain herself as the only mate Jason shall ever have. Here a study of the terminology used by the pro- and anti-Medea factions proves helpful. Significantly
enough, everyone on Medea's side, save
for one interesting exception, belongs
to one of the oppressed classes: the
nurse, the paidagogós (both slaves),
the chorus (Corinthian women). The
exception, of course, is the supposedly
neutral Aegeus, who is cast as a kalós
k'agathós, an Athenian gentleman,
surprisingly free from the normal preju-
dices which beset most rulers, or most
humans, in fact. The anti-Medea fac-
tion contains Creon, his daughter, and,
in varying degrees, Jason.

From the very first, the pro-Medea
faction employs terms which point up
what it believes to be a husband-wife
relationship between Jason and Medea.
The terms álochos, guné, eumé, léchos,
númpe, pósis, all allude to this. Most
stressed by Medea, however, is the
oath Jason gave to her when he
took her from her native land—that he
would remain true to her. In her fa-
mous speech on the fate of the guné
(230-66), Medea even conjures up the
word apallagé (236) "divorce," and
the concept of the dowry or pherné
when she talks of buying a husband
(233).

Yet for all of this, it is Medea, too,
who at times gives us a hint of what
her true position is in Greek society.
In line 256 she mentions that she was
carried off as booty from a barbarian
land (something which could only hap-
pen to someone now a pallaké or con-
cubine) while in line 591 she mentions
that Jason seems to look upon her as
a barbarian léchos who will bring him
little respectability in his present posi-
tion. But most striking of all is Medea’s
terminology when she speaks of Jason’s
new marriage. It is she who points up
the fact that Creon gave his daughter
to Jason through élidosis. It is she
who bewails the fact that she has no
family and has therefore entered into
a relationship from which there is no
escape (255-58).

Jason, on the other hand, admits he
is bound to her (1336), admits her
children are his children (1337), but
adds also that this was a marriage with
no Greek woman but a barbarian—a
barbarian who acts as no Greek woman
could (1329-32; 1339-40). As for Creon,
all the terms he uses for Medea (calling
her guné [290, 337], talking of Jason as
her pósis [271] and mentioning her
léktron [286]) are those which could be
applied to any common-law wife or con-
cubine. Certainly there seems to be
no question in his mind that what Ja-
son is doing is perfectly legal—perfectly
within the rights of any Greek who has
lived out the years of his youth with a
barbarian. Perhaps because Medea is a
stranger and a non-Greek, Creon fears
her, knowing instinctively that her re-
actions will hardly be those of the Greek
common-law wife who must suffer in
silence. And so he must banish her.

To argue ex silentio that no one calls
Medea dámara (the one term for “legally
wedded wife” Euripides seems to use
with any consistency) is probably
reading too much into the text, but
it is, nevertheless, interesting to note
that the terms used for Medea through-
out the play never argue conclusively
for her position as a guné gameté:
a woman given to her husband by her
kúrios, a woman who comes to her mar-
riage accompanied by the safeguards
of the pherné and the written and un-
written laws of the phratry and the
póleis.

If then Jason’s children are bastards,
they cannot be admitted to the heirá
kai hósia nor can they be enrolled in
the phraty by their father as he swears
his solemn oath before the altar of
Zeus. Without this formal ceremony
the children cannot inherit, nor, worse
still for Jason, can they carry out the
sacred rites of the family religion—
those rites which perpetuate the con-
tinuity of the family. Jason’s immortality
—his anonymous immortality which
only the kinship group can grant him—is
imperiled unless he can formally marry a Greek citizen, an asté from
whom he can father a legitimate son,
a son born ex astés kal enqueûtés. Only
such a son can perpetuate the family name, the family immortality.

Is it then so strange to find Jason
doing what Isaeus (7, 30) suggests each
man should do when he reaches the end of the family line, i.e. "to take measures of precaution on (his) own behalf to preserve (his) family from becoming extinct and to secure that there should be someone to perform sacrifices and carry out the customary rites over him"?  And should we not take Jason's speech (547 ff.) on the advantages to be gained from a marriage with Creon's daughter quite seriously as an honest expression of what any beleaguered Greek male would say in his place? 

An awareness of Jason's dilemma, moreover, helps resolve some of the vexing problems which have harassed past editors of Medea. Allen, for example, has asked, logically enough, why Jason is so indifferent to the children in the beginning of the play (76 ff.), why he allows them to go with Medea at first, and why later (562 ff.; 914 ff.) he becomes so involved in their fate. Yet, as we have seen, in the beginning Jason is concerned primarily with the problem of a legitimate son, and we know from a study of Athenian law that illegitimate children are not the responsibility of the father but go with the mother wherever she goes. Actually, from a legal standpoint there are no demands the father can make of such children. They are the children of the mother since, as Erdmann says, no child can be a bastard of his mother. It was only natural, therefore, that the children go with Medea.

Yet Medea knows her husband well. Plotting carefully, she decides to strip Jason of any chance of ever having a child legally again. So she brings about the holocaust in Creon's palace to which Creon and his daughter fall victim. As long as the memory of this terrible act remains, it is doubtful that Jason will ever be able to contract another marriage legally—certainly not as long as Medea is alive to remind any prospective kúrios of the fate of his predecessor, Creon. In fact, this may be one reason why she must escape to Athens and stay alive. With her murder of Creon and his daughter, Medea has stripped Jason of his only hope for immortality in Greek society.

But there is one other immortality he has—the immortality which lives on in his own children. Illegitimate though they are, there is something of Jason in both of them—something which will live on unless it is killed. It is here that Medea administers her master stroke. Knowing that Jason has one last hope of preserving his identity, his own children, she decides to kill them, too.

The tragedy has come full circle. Not only has Jason been stripped of his last opportunity to preserve his name but now he has been stripped of his last ties with the race of men to come. Small wonder he is at the end of the play a broken man who is to dream out his last days under the prow of the Argo which is to bring him oblivion (1386-88).

With Jason's tragedy a little better understood, he becomes a character a little less contemptible, while his speeches, despicable though they are in many respects, become more tragic and less shallow in their import. To Jason, we must remember, Greece is an enlightened haven of security, the marriage he contemplated would have brought help to his illegitimate children and, incidentally, some help to Medea. His "selfishness" now becomes a little less incomprehensible. True, there is little excuse for the way he treats Medea personally. But in everything he says about his children he is sincere. He is not marrying Creon's daughter because she is young, he rightfully rejects Medea's attempts to reduce the whole incident to a sexual level. It may, in fact, be this very attitude of hers in the past which brings on his brutal statements about physical love and its electricity. Exhausted as he is by his strenuous life with its attendant dangers, he has been cast by Euripides as a bourgeois hero with a bourgeois sense of morality. That he is no real match for Medea is true. But that his tragedy, his impossible position in society have made him into a
fellow human being who can arouse pity and fear in a 5th-century Athenian, I do not doubt. As such a character he raises the drama Medea to a level much closer to that of another of the earlier plays of Euripides, Hippolytus, in which the action line comes from a strong conflict between two strong individuals.

The innovation made in plot by Euripides is then not so drastic, after all. Instead of a play which develops its conflict within the soul of the protagonist alone, we have a social drama of harsh realism in which the revenge motif is carried to its grim conclusion in a turbulent atmosphere of middle-aged frustration and despair. Is this not innovation enough?

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NOTES

1 Interestingly enough, the heroes are often less well understood than the heroines. Consider the controversy which rages over Herakles, Hippolytus, even Pentheus. E. M. Blaiklock, The Male Characters of Euripides (Wellington, 1950) p. xv would probably attribute this confusion to the failure of many critics to realize that Euripides' male characters are treated more realistically than romantically.


4 Blaiklock (see note 1) p. 28.

5 Page (see note 3).

6 G. Norwood, Greek Tragedy (Boston, 1920) p. 196.

7 W. N. Bates, Euripides, A Student of Human Nature (Philadelphia, 1930) p. 165; H. D. F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study (Anchor Book A65, Garden City, 1954) pp. 190, 206. Kitto actually calls him an "unrelieved villain," a man in whom "it is impossible to find anything that is not mean." G. M. A. Grube, The Drama of Euripides (London, 1941) p. 134 is a little more kind when he points out that Jason is brought on stage after our sympathy for Medea is somewhat shaken.

8 Norwood (see note 6) p. 196.

9 For this concept of conflict, see M. Pohlenz (note 2) p. 298: "Hier erwächst die ganze Handlung aus dem innersten Wesen Medeas." See also Schmid-Stählin, Gesch. d. griech. Lit., part 1, vol. 3 (Munich, 1940) p. 369; A. Lesky, Die Griechische Tragödie (Stuttgart, 1938) p. 140.

10 Bates (see note 7) p. 166; the following quotations are also to be found here. Apparently to Bates, Greek tragedy must produce pity and fear if it is to be good Greek tragedy. That good Greek tragedy can and does arouse other emotions, and that it sometimes arouses these emotions without purging them is never discussed. I feel sure Medea is such a play.

11 This is not to say that Medea is not in the beginning of the play an object of pity and fear. But her revenge is so diabolically perfect, her metamorphosis into a demon so complete by the end of the play that the audience is left with a feeling of utter frustration mingled with horror and disgust. Unlike Hecuba in Hécube, Medea is not touched with the saving grace of insanity.

12 It must be obvious to anyone who gives any thought to the problem that the concepts of morality which modern critics bring to the play are, of necessity, quite different from the concepts brought to the play by a 5th-century B.C. Athenian audience. Fifth-century B.C. society is not 20th-century society—far from it. It is for this reason that a sociological study of Jason's dilemma must be made before we can appreciate fully the play Euripides wrote.

13 To call them anachronisms is somehow to miss the point. An anachronism is usually thought of as an error in time. Greek tragedians knew exactly what they were doing when they re-wrote their mythology in 5th-century terms. See their choice of myth was obviously affected by the reaction the playwrights knew they could get out of their audience. What better example is there of this than Aeschylus' Oresteia in which 5th-century kinship problems in evolution are given concrete form through the Orestes myth?


17 Blaiklock (see note 1) pp. 21-35.

18 So Grube (see note 7) p. 147.

19 Medea 544; the term is usually translated as "distinguishing." See, for example, Rex Warner, The Medea in Euripides, ed. D. Greene and R. Lattimore (Chicago, 1955) p. 76. Yet Jason is suggesting that he would rather give up wealth and the power to sing sweet songs like Orpheus for a τιμή επισήμος. Can this not mean, as Liddell and Scott suggest, "stamped," or "coined," i.e. "having a mint mark on it"? See M. L. Earle (note 3) p. 147.


21 The legal discussion which follows is based for the most part on the following accounts: J. H. Lipsius, Das Attische Recht und Rechtsverfahren,
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23 I think it is fair to say a 5th-century Athenian might well identify Jason with his own position in society. Surely it is this type of projection which Euripides uses constantly in his characterization of Medea.

24 By engue- is meant, of course, the betrothal, the solemn moment when the kúrios (the father or guardian) or "entrusts" (enquán) the bride to the groom, who accepts the trust. It was "a preliminary act to a future marriage." See Wolff (note 21) pp. 51-53.

25 By ékadosis is meant the formal conveyance of the bride to the home of the husband, similar to the Roman in domum deductio. This followed immediately or some time after engue-sis. For the interesting legal relationship between engue- and ékadosis, see Wolff (note 21) pp. 48-53.

26 For this equation gune- = gunê- (see Wolff (note 21) p. 68. G. Murray has suggested that Medea and Jason were not legally married; see Five Plays by Euripides (New York, 1904) pp. vii, viii, 81.

27 I have adapted Rex Warner's translation (see note 19) p. 67.

28 Whether the fatal gifts to Creon's daughter could be considered part of Medea's proîa is hard to determine. She does suggest them as tásde pherma (596), but it would seem she means by this Creon's daughter's phérnê, not hers.

29 The definition is Wolff's (see note 21) p. 73.

30 It is interesting to note that the chorus pleads always as women qua women rather than as Corinthian women or as Greek women. If one keeps this fact in mind, it is easier to understand why the chorus does little to stand in the way of Medea's revenge.

31 This does not keep him from being perfect ginst for Medea's mill, however. She uses him the way she does every male in the play.

32 The terminology used of Tecmessa, the concubine in Sophocles' Ajax, points up the fact that lêchos (A.J. 211, 401); nûmphê (894); gune- (492); gunê- (1169 et passim) are all terms which can be used of a close but non-legal bond between a man and his mistress. So, too, dîchos (cf. Il. 9. 336; Od. 4. 623, and the article by W. F. Clark, "Hlads 9. 336 and the Meaning of dîchos in Homer," CP 35 [1940] 188-90); and pósis (cf. Il. 24. 725; Orestes 561).

33 Not the legal term (but cf. Andr. 592) which is apoîeipsia (i.e. a divorce where the woman leaves of her own accord). See Erdmann (note 21) p. 396.

34 See Medea 262, 309-10. In the second case the word evkaidonai, i.e. the technical term for "to give in marriage" is used. Is it not significant, moreover, that Euripides never has Medea, or the chorus, or the nurse allude to the element in the myth which talks of a marriage in the cave of Macris? See Ap. Rh. 4. 1128-98.

35 Jason even admits he has enough children and that he finds no fault with those he has (558). This is true as far as it goes, for another child by Medea will solve nothing nor can anything be done to improve the status of the children he and Medea already have. Jason's only solution can come from another marriage which can bring him a different kind of child—a legitimate son who can help the children he already has.

36 See note 31.

37 The term is used once in the play when Medea speaks of Aegaeus' wife (672). Even the most casual reader of Alcestis is impressed by the force of dâmar, the word most often used for Alcestis' solemn relationship to her husband. See the list of citations in J. T. Allen and G. Italie, A Concordance to Euripides (Berkeley, 1954) p. 136.

38 There is a strange line in the Aegaeus episode which seems to point to Medea's preoccupation with legitimate and illegitimate children. Why does she ask Aegaeus in 672, after she has asked him about his childlessness: "This with a wife or knowing not the couch?" i.e. married legally or not married? Does this mean, "Are you childless because your legitimate wife produces no children for you, or are you childless because you are sterile and can produce no children, wife or no?" Let us remember, too, Aegaeus' child proved to be Theseus, an illegitimate child, illegitimate because Aegaeus "loosed the hanging foot of the wine skin" (679) before he returned to Athens.

39 The ceremony is described in detail by Erdmann (see note 21) pp. 347-48.

40 Is. 8. 19.

41 The translation is slightly adapted from F. S. Forster's in the Loeb Library (London, 1927).

42 I do not wish to deprive here the feeling of disgust which anyone experiencing Medea feels when Jason argues in his maddeningly logical and sophisticated way against the normal decencies he owes Medea as a woman, or even as a member of the human sex. I do not want the reader to jump too quickly to the different reaction an Athenian male, a product of the 5th-century patriarchal system of kinship, would have had to this speech and Jason's character in general.

43 Allen (see note 3) p. xxv. The question has been asked before; see Bethe (note 2) p. 14.

44 Erdmann (see note 21) pp. 371-75.

45 May this not be one reason, too, why Creon must die? Allen (see note 3) p. xxv, had asked why Jason did not marry again and have other children. I think my suggestion answers the question. It also helps explain the Aegaeus scene and Medea's need for a haven. Does it not solve Bethe's dilemma (see note 2) p. 77?

46 I am always struck by the fact that one thinks inevitably of Ibsen and Strindberg when one reads Medea rather than of even so Euripidean a drama as Sophocles' Trachiniae. In short, the line of cleavage between the Sophoclean and Euripidean approaches to psychology and sociology is greater than one would like to think, but in dramatic technique (at least in the cases of the earlier Euripidean dramas) the two dramatists do not differ as much as one might expect.