INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

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In recent decades, Classical Studies have seen a steady growth in women's, gender, and feminist studies. Euripides' *Medea* counts among plays on women which have attracted considerable attention. The *Medea* has an evergreen quality as it resonates with and provides insight into spousal experiences, touching on, amongst others, trust, fidelity, commitment, jealousy, divorce, loneliness, domestic violence, interests of children, and power play. This analysis of passages from the play builds upon psychological studies of Euripides' characters that have been undertaken since the 1970s, while also drawing on more recent insights into the dynamics of intimate relationships from a social-psychological perspective.

Key words: Tragedy, Euripides, *Medea,* social psychology, intimate relationships.

Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, Classical Studies have enjoyed healthy growth in women's, gender, and feminist approaches,[1] and the plays of Classical Athenian dramatists featuring female protagonists have attracted deserved attention and stimulated a lively reception. Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Medea*,[2] for example, continue to be intensively studied and performed.[3] Although some psychological studies of Euripides' characters, including those of Erich Segal, have been published since the 1970s, there is as of yet no comprehensive study of the intimate relationship between Medea and Jason from a social-psychological perspective.[4] This perspective reveals Euripides' penetrating insights into social psychology in a way that raises important issues in intimate relationships even today: trust, faithfulness, anger, communication, sexual jealousy, commitment, reciprocity,

[1] The field is indebted to groundbreaking studies by, amongst others, Pomeroy 1975, DuBois 1988, Powell 1990, Pantel 1992, Rabinowitz and Richlin 1993, Rabinowitz 1993, Blundell 1995, and Zeitlin 1996.

[2] The passages from the *Medea* quoted in this paper are either the translations of Luschnig 2005 and Vellacott 1963 or adapted from these translations.

[3] See, *e.g.,* Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin 2000; Dominik 2007.

[4] The social-psychological perspective of this paper is adapted from the work of Sharon Brehm 1992.

interests of children, power relations, divorce, loneliness, gender, spousal abuse, and many others. While each of these issues deserves detailed treatment on its own, they are often organically interwoven. In this article, we shall treat each at it comes into the play in a continuous interpretation.[5]

Context and interpretation

The dramatic texts to be read were originally scripts written for performance. Hence, consideration of the structure of the plays and the playwright's stagecraft as well as the cultural and historical contexts[6] have interpretive value for appreciating the texts. However, not every aspect of the social and cultural context is necessary for understanding the orientation of this paper. For example, although set in Corinth, it is largely irrelevant to this article that the *Medea* was performed only a few months before the Peloponnesian War assumed full-scale, even if Corinth was to play a pivotal role in provoking the war.[7]

What matters here is the extent to which cultural issues concerning intimate relationships around 431 BC Athens relate today to spousal experiences and social-psychological notions such as 'cross-gender communication', 'exchange orientation', 'sexual jealousy', 'commitment', 'reciprocity', 'cognitive dissonance', and so on. The issue relates to the broader, age-old debate about whether or not there are cultural universals – patterns, traits, sentiments, values, or institutions that are common to humanity across all cultures. In recent times, there has been a focus on the emotions: to what extent are they cultural-specific or universal? Historical and cultural specificities do account for the interpretive framework that sees Medea's main motivation as, for example, heroic pride (e.g., Easterling 1977:178; Knox 1977:196–199, 207), or anger (*e.g.*, Konstan 2006:57–59).

There are indeed culturally determined differences in human motivations, emotions, values, and experiences. But even those who note these differences also acknowledge diachronic continuities (*e.g.,* Cairns 2008:43–62; Sanders 2013:41–57). Konstan (2006:219–243), for example, overemphasises the differences when he argues that Classical Greece did not have the emotional experience of sexual jealousy, based on two main considerations: the lack of terminological equivalent of 'sexual jealousy' and the absence of the experiences which give rise to it –

[5] Not all the issues envisaged as arising from the intimate relationship between Jason and Medea will be treated in this paper because some will require more space than is available and others are implied by the larger issues explicitly treated.

[6] Cf. Csapo and Slater 1995:103–121.

[7] Cf. Thucydides 1.66–71.

mainly affection. Some scholars have responded, rightly, that when a society lacks a convenient linguistic label for an emotion, it does not follow that members of that society do not experience that emotion (cf. Elster 1999:412; Kristjánsson 2002:21). Indeed there is textual evidence – in Medea's verbal and bodily conduct and the totality of her situation – that Medea sees Jason's marriage to Glauce as threatening her desire for exclusive sexual ties with him; and this is an indication of sexual jealousy, even if other emotions such as anger (ὀργή), envy (φθόνος) and insolent pride (ὕβρις) are implicated (cf. Parrot and Smith 1991:467-48). Sanders (2013:41-58), relying on findings in psychology, argues forcefully that sexual jealousy did exist in Classical Greece, and that in the *Medea* it is closely tied to Medea's feeling of ἔρως for Jason: a desire not merely to have Jason, but also to enjoy and have an exclusive possession of him *as* husband,[8] and that evidence of sexuality abounds in the unusually numerous references to words for the marriage-bed and for sexual desire. Sanders also shows that sexual jealousy is a complex feeling: it is a blend of simpler affects that may include anger, covetousness, envy, pride, hatred, loss of self-esteem; and that, like envy, it is a taboo emotion – shameful to admit publicly – which means that it may require an observer to penetrate beyond speech and behaviour in order to reveal its presence.[9]

In the light of the foregoing, this paper assumes the following. The continued resonance of the *Medea* (like other Greek tragedies) across time and cultures implies that, despite cultural differences, a common humanity provides the basis for the appeal of its themes and for the diachronic and inter-subjective intelligibility of the motivations, emotions, values, and experiences which constitute the stuff of the play. Even so, the concepts of social psychology in this paper are applied only where they directly follow from a close reading of the dramatic setting, verbal expressions, and actions of the characters in the *Medea*. Thus, whatever the cultural differences in attitudes, motivations, and values between the ancient Greeks and current readerships and audiences, Jason's statement (588–590) that he feared Medea's emotional response if he had disclosed his intention to marry a second wife, reflects not only ancient patriarchy but also a common male presumption about women today. This presumption falls within what social psychologists refer to as the problem of 'cross-gender

[8] As Allan (2002:51) puts it, 'In the heroic world of the play Medea is Jason's legitimate wife and his behaviour cannot be excused as if he were abandoning (in fifth century terms) a mere foreign παλλακή (or "concubine")'.

[9] On the multiple range of emotions associated with Medea's motivations and actions, see Sanders 2013, and 2021:1–7, Allan 2021:1–26 and Cairns 2021:8–26.

communication'.[10] The Jason-Medea relationship is here to be interpreted with such cross-cultural continuities and assumed inter-subjective intelligibility.

The storyline

Euripides' *Medea* is one of several versions of the Medea-Jason myth. According to Euripides' version, Jason's father, Aeson, king of Iolcus, was killed by his own brother, Pelias, who promised to return power to Jason on condition that Jason bring back to Iolcus the Golden Fleece from Colchis, situated in the far eastern end of the Black Sea, hoping that Jason would perish on such a dangerous mission. Medea, princess in Colchis, is infatuated with Jason and reveals family secrets to help him acquire the Golden Fleece. Encouraged by Jason's oaths of commitment to her, she elopes with him back to Greece against the will of her family and by killing her pursuing brother Apsyrtus. To fulfil the goal of marriage, Medea sacrifices everything for Jason, including orchestrating the murder of Pelias in an unsuccessful attempt to reclaim Jason's inheritance of power in Iolcus. Jason is banished from Iolcus because of the succession crisis and he set up home in Corinth, where the couple live happily for many years and are blessed with two boys. Then, without informing his wife, Jason marries Glauce, daughter of his host, king Creon of Corinth. In dire revenge Medea uses poison to kill Jason's new bride, whose father gets infected by the poison as he touches her and dies with her. Medea then kills her own children in order 'to break Jason's heart'.[11] Unable to return to her homeland Colchis because of what she had done to her family, Medea flees to Athens and is granted asylum there by king Aegeus.

Since antiquity, it has been known that mythological material of the kind employed by Greek tragedy tends to contain elements universally shared by humankind.[12] Greek tragedy not only entertained: it was also meant to educate an audience expected to appreciate the practical potential of the moral.

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[10] Athenian society was characterized by 'firm divisions between the sexes and multiple constraints upon the possibilities of female agency and authority' (Allan 2002:45).

[11] Of course, there is the meta-theatrical probability that Euripides, as Allan (2002:23–24, 45) notes, is the first recorded source to present Medea deliberately killing her own children—a creative reconstruction of the original myth in order to critique Athenian male tradition and authority by presenting a powerful and subversive female figure and/or in order to produce a tragedy uniquely shocking and tragic.

[12] See Burkert 1996:73; Brown 2004:47–54; Carroll 2005:103–35; Mackay and Allan 2014:59–86.

A social-psychological reading

The following social-psychological reading divides broadly into three parts: the first part relates to Jason's infidelity and his reaction when Medea discovers the fact and confronts him with it. The second part concerns the impact on Medea of Jason's infidelity, commonly regarded as the ultimate betrayal in intimate relationships (Watkins and Boon 2015:237–256; Fincham and May 2017:23–27). The third part is devoted to Medea's revenge, taken here as resulting from Jason's treatment of her. For easy reference, quoted texts are indexed by the letter 'T' and an ordinal number.

(1) Jason's infidelity and reaction after the exposure

Beginning from the point of Jason's infidelity, the following exchange takes place between the couple:

> T1: *Medea*: ...if you were not κακός ['wicked' or 'cowardly'] you ought first to have made this marriage after persuading me, but not in secret from your loved ones.
> *Jason*: No doubt if I had mentioned it, you would have proved most helpful, when even now you cannot control your raging temper (586–590).

T1 reflects the power dynamics between the couple (cf. Kim, Visserman and Impett 2019:192–224). If the power relationship between Jason and Medea were balanced, such gendered, sarcastic and unapologetic response from Jason would be unlikely. Besides, T1 reflects a problem in cross-gender communication today: women tend to avoid self-disclosure when they believe they will not get a sensitive, sympathetic response; men, on the other hand, tend to avoid self-disclosure when they believe they will get an emotional or an uninformed one (Brehm 1992:209–213). Jason's fear that Medea will respond emotionally to his disclosure reflects a common male presumption. Lack of inter-gender empathy often leads a couple to assume some kind of inherent expertise that makes communication unnecessary – when they resort, like Jason, to mind-reading instead of verbal communication. Established partners are especially guilty of this: because they know so much about each other, they tend to think that they also know what is in the other's mind (Shapiro and Swenson 1969:179–180).

According to a theory of social penetration, more extensive and intimate self-disclosure are associated with more rewarding and satisfying relationships (Miller 2015:161; Willems, Finkenauer and Kerkhof 2020:33–37; cf. Sprecher *et al.* 2023: 860-866). So why did Jason fail to self-disclose? T1 suggests that it is for fear of conflict and its consequences (Fincham 2003:23–27; Bradbury, Rogge, and Lawrence 2016:59–81; Weber and Hülür 2023:2033–2060). Some social scientists

think that conflicts may promote intimacy. They argue that conflict is inevitable in intimate;[13] hence, it is the way it is handled, rather than its absence, which allows relationships to grow and prosper (Holmes and Boon 1990:261–284; Miller 2015:340–344). If the conflict is fought in a civil manner – for example, by arguing more validly and supplying more information or explanation, in a spirit of mutual respect and honesty – both partners win. Such a good fight would provide an opportunity to learn more about oneself and the other person; but a bad fight can produce enduring psychological and sometimes physical harm to the partners (Brehm 1992:226; Miller 2015:360–364). On the other hand, the fear of conflict could lead to a false sense of peace and to superficiality in the relationship; as a consequence, unhealthy sentiments may build up until they explode, as they have between Jason and Medea.

If indeed Jason fears that Medea will react negatively to a second marriage, why marry Glauce anyway? Jason justifies his action thus:

> T2: …I shall show you that my action was wise (σοφός) and showed good sense (σώφρων) and, finally, that I am a great benefactor to you and my children.... When I came here from Iolcus, dogged and thwarted by misfortunes, what luckier chance could I have met than, as an exile, marriage with the King's daughter? It is not, as you resentfully assume, that I found your attractions wearisome, and was smitten with a desire for a new wife; nor did I specially want to raise a large family – the children we have are enough and I am satisfied with them; but I wanted to ensure, first and most important, that we should live well and not be poor; I know how a poor man is shunned by all his friends. Next, that I could bring up my sons in a manner worthy of my descent; have other sons, perhaps, as brothers to your children;[14] give them all an equal place and so build up a closely knit family. *You* need no more children, do you? While *I* thought it worthwhile to ensure advantages for those I have, by means of those I hope to have (548–567; cf. lines 593–597).

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[13] Cf. Mackay and Allan 2014:62: 'Evolutionary psychologists and biologists are in agreement that an inevitable conflict exists between male and female mating strategies. In fact, these strategies conflict in all known species, and in general exist in an uneasy balance of interests.'

[14] Jason may win the sympathy of the upper-class male section of the audience, because Pericles' citizenship law of 450/451 BC rendered a 'foreign' (i.e., non-Athenian) wife a liability, since the offspring of such a marriage were excluded from the descent group of Athenian citizens. Cf. Palmer 1957:51.

The passage raises several issues in intimate relationship, but we will concentrate on three. First, there is an apparent lack of respect on Jason's part for his wife. As Medea tells the Chorus of Corinthian women,[15] Jason knows that she is totally committed to the marriage, that she has incorporated her long-term desires and goals into his, and finds her happiness in some way contingent on Jason's:

T3: For [Jason] was everything to me, and he knows this well (228–229).

But instead of Jason furthering Medea's long-term nuptial goals and recognising her right to dignity he trades on her vulnerability and dependency on him, thereby subjecting her to a kind of blackmail: comply or lose your marriage! He attempts to salve his conscience with paternalistic overtures: that his action is directed by the interests of Medea and the children. Thus, he passes off an action driven by his desire for Glauce as for the benefit of Medea and the children, and as an aristocratic imperative.

Second, T2 affirms the social-psychological observation that conflict participants tend to suffer from egocentric bias. They tend to lack objectivity and impartiality, and they are typically susceptible to actor-observer difference: the tendency for individuals to see their own behaviour as motivated by situational factors and the behaviour of others as motivated by dispositional factors (Fincham and Bradbury 1989:27–35). Alternatively, one party takes a benign view of the motives of his or her own behaviour, believing that his/her motives are good or are a good excuse for his/her less admirable behaviour; the other party's behaviour is seen as motivated by a permanent feature of his/her personality (cf. Yayouk *et al.* 2020:33–37). Recall how in the opening sentence of T2, Jason describes his clandestine marriage to Glauce as 'wise' and implicitly describes Medea's reaction as irrational.

Third, Jason's self-justifying reasons in T2 for his second marriage suggest that marriage with Medea has failed to produce the range of social and economic resources or rewards Jason needs to remain in good standing among the nobility; he thereby suggests that he is not as happy as he wishes to be in the marriage with Medea. Such an attitude to marriage places Jason in one of two personality

[15] The gender of the Chorus is significant: it enables Medea to appeal to the shared misfortune of the Chorus members as women and wives in a patriarchy. Thus, it offers Medea appropriately gendered sympathy, consolation, friendship, and advice. But the Chorus' general attitude is probably too conventional for how Medea takes Jason's infidelity. For example, in lines 155–157, the Chorus take infidelity of men to be normal; consequently, the Chorus does not think that Medea should be as angry as she is with Jason, since, in any event, Zeus will pursue her cause. Such an attitude is in sharp contrast to Medea's radical, anti-patriarchal response.

categories in intimate relationships. There are two types of orientation in intimate relationship: either 'exchange' or 'communal'. Exchange (or transactional) relationships are governed by the desire for, and expectations of, immediate *quid pro quo*, tit-for-tat repayments for benefits given. Communal relationships are governed by the desire for, and expectations of, mutual responsiveness to each other's needs. It has been observed that individuals who have a communal orientation tend to report more satisfaction with their partners (Miller 2015:198–205).

The idea of 'exchange orientation', with its opposite, derives from a social exchange theory based on an economic model of human behaviour. This theory assumes that just as a person's behaviour in the marketplace is motivated by a desire to maximise profits and minimise losses, so a partner's behaviour is motivated by the desire to gain rather than lose. A corollary of this assumption is that relationships that provide more rewards and fewer costs will be more satisfying and will endure longer. In intimate relationship, rewards include companionship, love, consolation in times of distress, and, where applicable, sexual gratification. Anticipated rewards are important as well (Murstein *et al*. 1977:543–548; Levinger and Huesmann 1980:165–188; Miller 2015:176–177, 185–197). 'Costs' include time and effort spent to maintain the relationship, compromises to keep the peace, suffering in times of conflict, and forfeited opportunities. Rewards minus costs yield the outcome of a relationship. In T2 Jason implicitly admits that Medea provides rewards of intimacy – the pleasures of her attractiveness, companionship, and children: 'It was not, as you resentfully assume, that I found your attractions wearisome...the children we have are enough'. However, these rewards do not seem to cover the other things Jason desires: wealth, aristocratic friends, connections with and trappings of royalty and power – rewards which are beyond Medea's ability to provide, as a royal in exile. Does Jason, then, have an exchange rather than a communal orientation towards the marriage?

Medea admits to the visiting King Aegeus that Jason once loved her, but no more (696). This admission might suggest that Jason's attitude to the marriage was once communal, which then degraded to an exchange orientation. But if so, what is wrong with exchange orientation? One reasonable answer is that if a relationship is communal in orientation, then one partner's unilateral shift to exchange orientation is selfish and unfair. However, the tag of 'selfish' and 'unfair' will not easily stick to Jason alone. According to the social exchange theory under consideration, individuals are selfish by nature; and there is apparently nothing altruistic about fairness itself: arguably, unfair actions are avoided not because they hurt other people, but because they make us feel bad. Thus, arguably, concerns about personally experiencing negative consequences of being unfair to others

place an outer limit to selfish acts. This fits exactly into the twist of fate and irony in which Medea encourages herself, just as she prepares to kill her children, to shift attitude from being a loving mother to being the murderer of her own children – apparently for selfish reasons. She soliloquizes: 'Do not be a coward. Do not think of your children – how much you love them, how you gave them birth. For this one short day, forget your children and mourn tomorrow' (1246–1249). Central to Medea's shift, from allowing the children to live, to filicide, is a calculation of which of two options will give *her* less pain than Jason's. The children's innocence, the pain they will suffer before their violent death, and their absolute loss of opportunity for adult life, are inconsequential to her.

Suppose, then, that to be human is to be selfish and, therefore, that an exchange orientation lurks in every potential partner's soul. On such a supposition, Jason's unilateral decision to marry a second wife might be illuminated by the concept of 'reciprocity' (Mueller 2001:471–504). In exchange theory, reciprocity refers to transactions in which we give value for what we have received and expect to receive value for what we have given. The two generic values central to reciprocity are equality and equity. Equality has to do with equal value in exchanges, equity with proportion – which means that if a partner receives more benefits but also contributes more, there is equity, even if the values do not match in quantum or content. In this context, exchangeables or contributions range from tangibles (such as money and food) to intangibles (such as affection and sympathy). Exchangeables can be positive (such as love) or negative (such as abuse), and they may take place at various times (immediate or later). According to equity theory, people are most satisfied with a relationship when the ratio between the benefits received and the contributions made are in balance or are proportional (cf. Tissera *et al.* 2023:900–910). Benefits are positive when rewards received exceed costs, or negative when costs exceed rewards.

If Jason, with his exchange-oriented attitude to the marriage, is seeking to restore equity or equality by marrying Glauce, he could be suffering from another sense of egocentric bias:[16] that of overvaluing his own contributions to the marriage, while undervaluing Medea's. That this is the case in Euripides's text can be gleaned from T5 below, in which Jason provides an unashamedly transactional response to the painful reminiscences (T4) of a traumatised Medea about her sacrifices to sustain the marriage:

[16] In the first sense of egocentric bias earlier mentioned, conflict participants perceive their own behaviour as motivated by situational factors and the behaviour of others as motivated by dispositional factors.

> T4: *Medea*: When you were sent to master the fire-breathing bulls, yoke them and sow the deadly furrow, then I saved your life. Every Greek who sailed with you in the Argo knows. The serpent which kept watch over the Golden Fleece coiled round it fold on fold, sleepless. It was I who killed it and so lit the torch of your success. I willingly deceived my father; and left my home. With you I came to Iolcus...showing more zeal than wisdom. There, I put your uncle King Pelias to the most horrible death, by the hands of his own daughters, and ruined his whole house. And, in return for this, you, most wicked of humans, betrayed me, to get yourself another wife, even when I had borne you sons... (476–490).

> T5: *Jason*: ...I hold that credit for my successful voyage was solely due to Aphrodite, no one else, divine or human... how, with his inescapable arrows, Love (ἔρως) compelled you to save me... *But in return for saving me you got far more than you gave* [our emphasis], as I will demonstrate. First, you left an uncivilised land to live in Greece (cf. 1330–1331). Here you have known justice: you have lived in a society where force yields place to law. Here, all Greeks know that you are clever, and you have fame. Your name would never have been spoken if you had lived at the ends of the earth. Personally, unless life brings me fame, I long neither for gold, nor for a voice sweeter than Orpheus'. Well, *you* began the argument about my voyage; and that's my answer (526–546).

Jason's exchange or transactional attitude to the marriage recalls T2 (lines 548–567), where he adduces as reasons for marrying Glauce the quest for fame and material resources befitting his class. When T2 and T5 are read together, the impression is that Jason married Glauce to restore equity or equality, *i.e.*, to compensate himself for the loss of fame and resources which he is unable to redeem as long as he is married to Medea alone.

To be fair to Jason, heroes tend or expect to live in continuous fame, glory and wealth.[17] So Jason may be under the pressure of this aristocratic imperative to rekindle or reaffirm his dying fame; and he reckons that marriage with Glauce is the way. If this is so, his present conduct – marrying a second wife – can be explained but not justified by his class status and expectations. Applicable here is what social-psychologists call 'Comparison Level for alternatives' (CL_{alt}) – the kind of outcomes one expects to receive in some alternative relationship relative to the existing one. CL_{alt} does affect commitment, which refers to the strength of one's intention to continue the relationship. Persons who perceive rewards in alternative

[17] Cf. Dover 1973:109–112; Donlan 1980:77–111.

relationships to be higher are less committed; but when the alternatives are few, they tend to stay, even if the existing rewards are lower than expected (Berg and McQuinn 1986:945–2; Miller 2015:180–184). And whereas for many ordinary people the expectation of high CL_{alt} could turn out to be a fantasy, Jason's CL_{alt} is high and realistic. In contrast, Medea has a low CL_{alt}. She is painfully aware of the reasons, which she eloquently frames as follows:

> T6: …for women, divorce is not respectable; to repel the man, impossible. Still more, a foreign woman coming among new laws and new customs needs the skill of magic to find out what her home could not teach her: how to treat the man whose bed she shares. 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 (236–246).[18]

As indicated, partners with low CL_{alt} tend to deepen their commitment to the existing relationship by 'investing' heavily in that relationship (Huston 1983:169–219). This may explain the Nurse's claim in the prologue, that:

> T7: [Medea] is all obedience to Jason, and in marriage that is the saving thing: when a woman does not challenge her husband (13–15).

Investment is something an individual puts into a relationship which he/she could not recover should that relationship end. Considerations that would inform an estimation of how much Medea has invested in this relationship must include her royalty and strong personality. To defer to Jason in marriage, a life-long commitment, must be a heavy investment for her: it would entail all sorts of compromises and waivers of her birth and social privileges. Heavy investments would reinforce her commitment to the marriage; and where the investments do not yield the desired results, her options would be to either leave or stay. As her option to leave is limited both by patriarchy and her unique circumstances as an exile, her only option is to stay and invest even more, in an attempt to turn things around and justify the earlier investments. The cycle of investments thus generated may result in entrapment (Katz *et al.* 2012:455–467; Goodfriend and Simcock 2022:1–9). It is in some such predicament that Jason, unprovoked, subjects Medea to the ultimate public humiliation, disrespect, and dishonour. What state of mind could she be in?

[18] Cf. Kerferd 1981:159–162 for discussions on women's status and rights among 5th century BC sophists.

(2) Impact of Jason's infidelity on Medea

To appreciate – not necessarily to justify – Medea's implacable and violent reaction to Jason's infidelity requires understanding the diverse, negative social-psychological impacts which Jason's infidelity had on her. First, a failing intimate relationship tends to generate what social psychologists call 'cognitive dissonance': a discomfiture arising from perceived discrepancies between investment expectations and actual outcomes (Goodfriend and Simcock 2022:9–11). For example, if one thought oneself careful and prudent, but found oneself investing wastefully in a relationship, one's self-image and the realisation that one has been investing irrationally are dissonant. Medea indicates dissonance at T4 when she says, 'I willingly deceived my father, and left my home. With you I came to Iolcus...*showing more zeal than wisdom*' (our emphasis). A more eloquent expression of dissonance occurs at lines 800–802, where Medea indicates how she fell for Jason's deceit:

> T8: I made a mistake when I abandoned my father's house, won over by the eloquence of a Greek.

Dissonance theory predicts that, because dissonance is uncomfortable, the dissonant will be motivated to reduce it. And a basic reduction strategy is self-comforting justification – that one has done one's best to make the relationship work; or that one did what one did out of love. To push to the wall – as by Jason's callous rationalisation after the fact – an entrapped exile reeling from patriarchy and dissonance is to risk an unpredictable reaction.

Jason, however, thinks he knows perfectly well why Medea is upset, namely, that she is sexually jealous:

> T9: Was [the plan to marry Glauce], then, bad? Even you would not say so if your marriage-bed (λέχος) did not gnaw at you. But you women have reached a state where, if all's well with your marriage-bed, you think you have it all; but when *that* goes wrong, at once all that is best and noblest turns to their opposite (568–573; cf. also 1338).[19]

King Creon also makes a similar remark when he confronts Medea to announce his decision to exile her: 'You are aggrieved because your husband has been taken

[19] It is a topos of Greek male ideology to see women as obsessed with sex. Cf. Sanders's (2013) suggestive translation of 568–573: 'Honestly, all you women care about is sex. If sex is going well, you think you have everything; if there is a problem with your sex life, even the finest things are totally wrong'. Sanders plausibly takes λέχος, 'bed', to be a euphemism for sex.

away from your marriage-bed' (286). When Medea resolves to kill her own children and the new bride, the Chorus, too, addresses her thus: '...you, for the sake of your marriage-bed will slaughter your own children..'. (997–999). And in the recriminatory exchanges between Jason and Medea after the murder of the children, Medea seems to admit this:

T10: *Jason*: You thought the marriage-bed was worth your children's lives?
Medea: Do you think this is a trivial wrong for a woman? (1367–1368).

We have already alluded to the fact that sexual jealousy is a complex social-psychological experience. Basically, it is a distressed reaction to a perceived threat[20] to an existing relationship (White 1981:24–30). The distressed reaction involves a desire for exclusive sexual ties with the partner. This is the common experience of adults in societies which promote both individual ownership and intense pair-bonding,[21] although if such societies were also patriarchal, some degree of female adjustment to male infidelity may be expected. Thus, the Chorus tells Medea: 'If your husband is won to a new love, let it be; why fret over it?' (155–157).

The experience of jealousy is caused by a 'primary appraisal' – a first impression about a situation as a threat to an existing relationship. 'Primary appraisal' leads to 'secondary appraisal' – reflection on the situation perceived as a threat. In a secondary appraisal, we try to understand the situation better and begin to think about ways to cope with it. We may review our evidence that there is a threat and counter evidence that explains away the threat. But secondary appraisal is not always rational and constructive; it can also involve catastrophic thinking, where the person rushes to the most extreme and worst possible conclusion: 'the only explanation is that he does not love me anymore'. People experiencing jealousy are usually not aware of the possible lapses in reasoning: as with everybody else, their thoughts seem to them good, their beliefs real, and their (re)actions justified in the moment of execution. In this respect, the Nurse's narrative of Medea's distressed state is compatible with a broad range of emotional experiences Medea may be going through, including an intense degree of sexual jealousy:

[20] The threat is not always social, however. People sometimes report feeling jealous about their partner's deep involvement with official work or hobbies
[21] See also Toohey 2014:221.

T11: She would not eat; she lies collapsed in agony,
dissolving the long hours in tears. Since she first heard
of Jason's wickedness, she has not raised her eyes,
or moved her cheek from the hard ground... (24–27).

The range of emotions in sexual jealousy is diverse: from mild twinges, anxiety about the future, to major or clinical depression. Symptoms of clinical depression include feelings of sadness, emptiness or hopelessness; angry outbursts and anxiety; agitation or restlessness; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; having trouble remembering things, thinking, concentrating, or making decisions; and having suicidal thoughts (cf. Field 2011:382–387). Consider T12 and T13 below:

T12: Oh Zeus, Earth, and Light,
Hurl your fiery bolt of lightning straight through my skull.
What use is life to me?
Let me die and leave this life (143–147; cf. 98–99).

T13: Mighty Themis, Dread Artemis
Do you see how I suffer – though I bound him
with mighty oaths, that perjurer, my husband?
May I see Jason and his bride ground to pieces, palace and all, who have
dared to wrong me unprovoked (160–165; cf. line 692).

Why has Medea become depressive and suicidal? There are multiple reasons, including the following. The first, clearly, is Medea's deep love for Jason and the disappointment at Jason's desertion. Research shows that the more frequently partners are in contact with each other, and the stronger the impact they have on each other's activity, decisions, and plans, the more satisfying the relationship (cf. Rossignac-Milon and Higgins, 2018:66-71). On the other hand, the stronger the shared experience, namely, the closer the relationship between the partners, the greater the emotional distress when conflict arises (Berscheid *et al.* 1989:63–91; Simpson 1987:683–692). As Medea says at T3, Jason was her whole life. And as the Chorus of Corinthian women observes, 'anger is frightening and hardest to cure when loved ones join in strife' (520–521).

A second reason is Medea's feeling of insecurity and her degree of dependency on Jason: she betrayed her father and killed her own brother to be with Jason, so she cannot return home. Here is Medea's agony about her self-alienation:

T14: O my father, my city, you I deserted;
my brother I shamefully murdered! (166–167; cf. 30–34).

When the Chorus attempts to console her, she is quick to distinguish her foreign status[22] and alienation from the socially comfortable Chorus who are home at Corinth:

> T15: The same arguments do not apply to you and me. You have this city, your father's home; and the enjoyment of life and friends' company. But I am alone and without a city, my husband abuses me... I have no mother, brother, no relative to offer me a safe haven from this disaster (252–258; cf. 328; 798–799).

Third, Jason had induced Medea's deep commitment to this relationship by vows and pledges of the kind 'till death do us part'.[23] The Nurse laments this in the prologue:

> T16: … Jason has betrayed his own sons, and my mistress,
> for a royal bed… Poor Medea! Scorned, she raves,
> invoking the oaths he swore, and calls upon the right hand,
> a potent symbol of fidelity, and the gods
> to witness Jason's treatment of her (17–23).

Medea affirms this at T13 and in the following passage:

> T17: *Medea:* My poor right hand, which [Jason] so often clasped!
> My knees, which this evil man falsely supplicated! (496–498).

The fourth reason for Medea's suicidal and depressive state is the sexual nature of the threat she faces. There is some evidence that people experience sexual jealousy and greater anger when they lose to an acquaintance rather than to a complete stranger (Mathes *et al.* 1985:1552–1561). Naturally, we often compare ourselves more readily with those who are close to us, and if we are on the losing end, we suffer more. Medea and Jason probably live in the guest quarters of the palace of King Creon, although Euripides' use of δόμοι (*e.g.*, 379–383) or οἴκοι (1259) could, in context, also have the ordinary sense of 'house'. But if the same residence is referred to as πλουσίους δόμους ('wealthy house') at 969, and Jason is a poor exile, then the δόμοι is likely part of the palace complex. Thus, Glauce is an

[22] Of course, Jason, too, is an exile in Corinth, a condition which puts a great deal of pressure on him as a proud aristocrat. But Jason's situation is better than Medea's. At least, he is Greek in Greece; she is a Colchean in Greece. Euripides, however, intensifies her predicament by presenting her as both a foreigner *and* a recognizably Greek woman interrogating the irrationality of patriarchy and ethnic ideology. These factors are relevant to Medea's experience and to the 5th century audience's response to her.

[23] On the seriousness of oaths, see Burnett 1973:1–24. Cf. Apollonius' *Argonautica* 3:1126–1128.

uncomfortably close neighbour of Medea. Marriage with Jason must be unbearably provocative and a terrible blow to Medea's self-esteem.

Fifth, Medea's dissonance would also contribute to her depressive and suicidal state: the belief that she invested more into the relationship than did Jason (cf. White 1981a) or more than she ought to have, and the perceived fruitlessness of it all. At T4, Medea painfully recounts the sacrifices she made to save Jason's life and win him fame. Indeed Jason's heroic fame throughout Greece is due to his successful Argonautic mission to Colchis. Without Medea's help Jason would probably not have survived or succeeded.

Sixth, the severity of the threat Glauce poses is another probable cause of Medea's deep distress. Glauce's relative youthfulness and greater sexual attractiveness (described as νύμφη, 556; νέα, 967) and, in general, anything about her that makes her a more desirable person for Jason, will increase the pain in Medea. Note that Medea nowhere insinuates that Glauce is less pretty or older.

Seventh, Medea could not imagine Jason abandoning her unprovoked. Thus, the improbability of Jason's second marriage and the unexpectedness of the news could be shocking to Medea, as she indicates:

T18: I accept my place [as a foreigner]....
but this blow that has fallen on me was not to be expected.
It has crushed my heart. Life has no pleasure left. I want to die (223–227).

Eighth, loneliness is a major contributor to Medea's suicidal and depressive state. Medea must have begun to feel lonely from the time of Jason's courtship of Glauce. Loneliness is not the same as physical isolation: people can be lonely even in a crowd or feel happy in complete solitude. Loneliness is experienced as deprivation and dissatisfaction produced by a discrepancy between the kind of social relations we want and our present situation (Perlman and Peplau 1981:31–56). This discrepancy itself may arise from detachment, hurt, guilt or conflict. It is noted that there are two different types of loneliness: 'social isolation', when we lack a social network of friends and acquaintances; and 'emotional isolation', when we lack a single intense relationship (Miller 2015:238–240). On this theory, the Chorus alludes to Medea's emotional isolation when they observe:

T19: And over your bed another queen more powerful stands (444–445).

Jason's courting and then marrying Glauce are bound to take away both the time spent with Medea and the emotional warmth that his presence exudes. But also, socially, Medea has lost her good standing among some of her servants, who, according to the Messenger, have begun to address the new bride as 'mistress' in

place of Medea (1144). To the Chorus' claim of sympathy with and loyalty towards Jason's family, the Nurse quickly responds:

> T20: Jason's household? It no longer exists; all that's finished;
> Jason has left for a princess' bed (138–139).

So Medea is lonely in both of Weiss' terms: socially and emotionally.

As for the emotions which constitute loneliness, they are wide-ranging, and Medea feels most of them: longing for the past, frustration with the present, fears about the future; being desperate, helpless, and hopeless; feeling abandoned, vulnerable, stupid, ashamed, insecure, depressed, and alienated.[24] And of the many causes of loneliness, the ones most relevant to Medea include the breakdown of her relationship with Jason, feeling different, being misunderstood (293–305), being a foreigner and an exile (T4), and not having close or many friends (880–881). We tend to cope with desertion and loneliness in so many ways (Brehm 1992:323–343): we could slump into sad passivity, choose to engage in constructive social or solitary experience,[25] or we could vent our spleen, as Medea chooses to do.

A final reason to note is the impact on Medea of Jason's breach of the principle of reciprocity as a result of his infidelity.[26] According to the ancient Greeks, one has a social or moral obligation to benefit one's φίλοι (relatives and friends) and to harm one's ἐχθροί (enemies). Before Jason's act of infidelity, Medea saw Jason as a φίλος who was indebted to her in numerous ways: She saved his life and won him success in Colchis; she accepted his supplication and has borne him male heirs (cf. 476–482, 488–491); and he has sworn oaths of commitment to her. Indeed, the Chorus expresses the shock and shamelessness of Jason's breach of the trust of friendship: 'The grace of oaths has departed, and

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[24] T10, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23. Cf. lines 358–361, 431–436, 502–508, and 642–651.

[25] For example, to cope with the twenty-year absence of her husband, King Odysseus, Penelope chose to ignore the importuning suitors by occupying herself with weaving. Alternatively, we could also choose to engage socially, for example, by visiting someone and sharing our experience, provided we do not become a burden to them. Arguably, Medea could count on some degree of rewarding interactions with others, even as an exile. According to the Nurse in the prologue (11–12), Medea 'has earned the Corinthian citizens' welcome'. Of course, this does not make them her friends; but it suggests that Medea could earn their sympathy, company, and advice. This is confirmed by the Chorus, who come to console, advise, and sympathise with Medea – in every way except with her decision to kill her own children. Medea, however, remains disconsolate.

[26] On the Greek ethic of reciprocity, see further Blundell 1989:26–59; and Mueller 2021. Although reciprocity in exchange theory is not framed, as in the Greek popular ethics, in terms of reciprocal duties and expectations between friends, and between friends and enemies, both principles of reciprocity share the underlying principle of *quid pro quo* expectations.

shame remains no longer in the great expanse of Greece but has flown to the skies' (439–440).[27]

Thus, in Medea's world, Jason's conduct – the secrecy of his second marriage, his callous justification of it,[28] and his physical and emotional detachment from his wife and children, as he spends more time with his new wife – violates the principle of reciprocity: it amounts to treating his closest φίλοι – wife and children – as if they were ἐχθροί; and Medea feels the pain of this breach and its social implications. After Jason's act of infidelity, the heroic language of 'friends' and 'enemies' defines how Medea sees the world around her.[29] In a society where concern for one's honour (τιμή) is supreme, a retaliatory response from the victim is not surprising.

(3) Medea's revenge

Despite the practice of child exposure in ancient Greece, filicide was viewed as a peculiarly evil and abnormal act (Allan 2002:82, 87). In any event, child-murder is not a relic of ancient societies. Mackay and Allan (2014:66) describe the phenomenon as 'a ubiquitous and universal aspect of human reproductive practice', basically caused by 'uncertainty of the infant's paternity, the infant's disabilities, and scarce or uncertain resources'. Whatever the reasons for the act across time and cultures, it is commonly perceived as horrifying and inhuman. So, what could (a) explain and (b) justify Medea's revenge? Issues (a) and (b) have received so much scholarly attention that Medea's filicide could be taken to sum up the intimate relationship between Jason and Medea. The approaches in attempts to deal with the issues range widely. These include feminist[30] and sociobiological readings.[31]

To deal first with issue (a): Medea's filicidal act will be explained in terms of her state of mind.[32] Jason has been Medea's main, if not the only, support – in material, and social-psychological terms (T4). His betrayal exposed her existential fragility and vulnerability to the full. She, however, has the benefit of some

[27] Lack of αἰδώς (shame or respect) counted as one of the greatest moral failings among the Greeks (Allan 2002:84).

[28] That by introducing Medea to the benefits of Greek civilization he has more than repaid her past services to him (522–575).

[29] Cf. lines 278, 374, 383, 750, 765, 767, 782, 797, 809–810, 1050, 1322, and 1380.

[30] Rabinowitz 1993:12; Blundell 1995:157; Michelini 2002:56.

[31] Cf. Mackay and Allan 2014.

[32] On the complex mental disorders afflicting the filicidal parent, see Borget *et al*. 2007:77, 80. For alternative positions see Bongie 1977:40–41; Segal 1997:176; Foley 2000:11; Mossman 2011:41.

sympathy: except for the beneficiaries of the new marriage (Jason, King Creon, and Glauce), everyone else sees Jason' conduct as wrong, wicked or irresponsible. The Nurse calls Jason's conduct 'betrayal' (προδούς, 17) and sees Medea as 'dishonoured' (ἠτιμασμένη, 20), and 'wronged' (ἠδικημένη, 26). King Aegeus condemns Jason's conduct as 'most shameful' (αἴσχιστον, 695). The Chorus calls Jason's action 'not right' (οὐ δίκαια, 578) to his face; and after Medea has poisoned Glauce and, accidentally, King Creon, the Chorus remarks that 'the god has justly (ἐνδίκως) inflicted many troubles on Jason today' (1231–1232).

As her existential fragility and vulnerability have been fully exposed by Jason's betrayal, Medea is compelled to weigh all the available options for (re)action. She may opt to: (1) maintain the relationship, (2) restore her self-esteem, (3) achieve both (a) and (b), or (4) punish Jason. When she states that she seeks to 'see [her] enemies punished as they deserve' (767), she reveals her intention to pursue option (4), which necessarily excludes the other options. And what does she think her enemies deserve? Death to Glauce and her father, while Jason, the principal enemy, is to be dealt 'the deepest wound' (817) by killing the children – similar to the view that, for a particular offender, life in prison without the possibility of parole is justice better served than the death penalty. Indeed, in the epilogue, Jason admits that losing the children has made him both 'childless and devastated' (1325–1326); and Medea finally tells him: I murdered them 'to break your heart' (1398).

Medea's choice to 'see [her] enemies punished as they deserve' (767) fits into the heroic code of values, which also influences her choice. Jason disrespected, humiliated, and displaced her authority in the only place in a patriarchy that allows her authority: the οἶκος. He violated his own commitments pledged in oath to her (160–163, 208–213). And he ungratefully breached the code of reciprocity (given the sacrifices she had made for his life and reputation). A character so unrelenting ('...made of rock or iron', 1279) and vengeful ('no one shall hurt me and not suffer for it', 398) is now deeply traumatised by Jason's unprovoked and unexpected betrayal ('this blow that has befallen me…has crushed my heart', 225–226). The Nurse, who knows Medea well, confirms this: 'She'll not relax her rage till it has found its victim' (93–94); '[a]nd when her friends reason with her (cf. the Chorus' advice, 811–813), she might be a rock or a wave of the sea for all she hears' (28–29). Hence, her resolution that she 'will not invite laughter from Jason and his new allies' (403–404), 'will not leave the children on enemy soil to be mocked'[33] (781–

[33] Cf. Allan 2021:83: 'In Greek eyes few things were more shameful than when one's enemies rejoiced over one's misfortune, and heroic figures exhibit an exceptionally intense sensitivity to such mockery'.

782) and 'will not leave her sons to be victims of her enemies' rage' (1060–1061, 1236–1239).

On issue (b): Is Medea justified in killing her children? This question may seem misplaced, given the common attitude of abhorrence towards filicide. But objectivity requires that each case be looked at on its merits. In that respect, there is no easy answer to the question if we take all the circumstances into consideration. To avoid a lengthy discussion, we will look at Medea's state of mind at two levels: (bi) when she deliberates on whether or not to kill her children; and (bii) when she implicitly admits to being sexually jealous. On (bi), consider the following passage between the Chorus and Medea:

> T21 *Chorus*: [Now that we know your plans], and since we want to be your friend and also to uphold the laws of human life – we tell you, you must not [kill the children].
> *Medea*: No other thing is possible (οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλως).[34] You have excuse for speaking so; but you have not been treated as I have… This is the way to cause Jason the deepest pain (811–817).

The emphasis in T21 is on Medea's fatalistic expression, 'No other thing is possible'. This seems to be a lapse in reasoning, because other things are, in fact, possible. First, King Aegeus has granted Medea asylum in Athens (708–754). At 1045–1108 and 1056–1059 Medea in soliloquy entertains the possibility that an alternative to killing her own children is to take them with her to Athens where they will grow up and she, with them, will be happy. But she quickly dismisses this alternative because she thinks it is unheroic to break her initial resolve: 'I must steel myself to it. What a coward I am... tempting my own resolution with soft talk' (1049–1052; cf. 1059ff.). One way to look at this violent clash between Medea's maternal drive and the demand of the heroic code of valour is as an effect of her traumatic experience of Jason's unprovoked betrayal. This might make sense of her claim to be aware of the evil nature of her plan to kill her own children, but anger (θυμός) dominates her deliberations (1078–1079).[35] Besides, she also seems to think that she has divine support: 'I must weep', she tells the guardian of the children (παιδαγωγός), 'for the gods and I in my foolishness have devised it so' (1013–1014).

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[34] While about to kill her children, she soliloquizes, 'the thing you are about to do is fearful, yet inevitable' (lines 1239–40).

[35] On the debate on what this passage means, see Rickert 1987:99–101; Foley 1989:63; Allan 2002:92. That frustrated female agency in patriarchies may drive women to both anger and helplessness, see Nussbaum 2016:45.

On (bii): Medea's implicit admission that she is sexually jealous also discloses her state of mind. At T10 Jason accuses her of subverting the patriarchal scale of values – that of paying for the loss of her marriage-bed with the lives of their children. Medea's response is quite revealing: 'Do you think this is a trivial wrong for a woman?' Jealousy is a sign of an intense attachment to another person and a strong desire to continue in that relationship; it is therefore a reflection of one's own desires or self-interest. The first step towards controlling or coping with jealousy is to learn to recognise the *self*-interest that defines it, then to proceed to weaken the connection between the exclusivity of the relationship and one's own personal worth: if our partner loves another, although it can be extremely painful, it cannot mean that we are worthless. To act as though one's self-worth is totally dependent on the relationship, or as though without that relationship one amounts to nothing, could amount to a mental disorder. This appears to be Medea's mental state, when she reveals to the visiting King Aegeus that Jason has fallen in love with the princess of Corinth, and then proceeds to say, 'I am finished' (ὄλωλα, 704). If the loss of a relationship is perceived as an annihilation of the self – as Medea seems to think – it is not surprising that violent, even fatal, reactions can occur. Self-assurance ('am worthy and important'), self-reliance ('I can survive without this relationship'), selective ignoring ('it is not the most important thing in life'), self-bolstering (giving yourself a good treat or good experiences independent of the relationship) or clinical therapy are various strategic means for coping with the breakdown of an intimate relationship (Miller 2015:326).

If we are to be fair to Medea, without justifying her filicide, her fatalistic mindset, and her self-destructive tendencies, these actions might be seen as temporary lapses in reasoning rather than reflecting her irrational character. Generally composed and loving, she has been a perfect wife to Jason for many years – until his betrayal. Thus, the enduring lesson of the *Medea*, often overlooked, is that in intimate relationships the boundaries between acting 'rationally' and 'unreasonably' may be so fragile that the differences between them may easily be dismissed. A single offence, or one mismanaged, may cause the victim – whether real or only self-perceived – to unexpectedly turn to irrational behaviour, no matter how dedicated, loving and generally rational he/she may have been for several years in the past – until one pivotal moment.

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