IB1 – Essay on Medea

"Euripides is not asking us [the audience] to sympathise with Medea…"

This famous quote delivered by HDF Kitto from *Greek Tragedy* (p. 197), is a powerful and controversial statement. *Medea* audiences from around the world have expressed both similar and contrary opinions, and raised further enigmas regarding the subject. This essay will explore this statement as well as relating topics from different perspectives, and finally conclude with the author's perception.

First of all, when attempting to determine the message that the playwright is trying to convey through his drama, one must take into account the role and importance, which the tragic hero plays in the drama, as this is a direct indication of the playwright's attitude.

According to Aristotle[1], "the tragic hero evokes our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly evil, but possesses an equilibrium of both qualities. The tragic hero suffers a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act, which he performs due to his 'hamartia' – error of judgment. The tragic hero evokes our pity because he is not thoroughly evil and his misfortune is greater than he deserves, and he evokes our fear because we realize we are fallible and could make the same error." An example of this 'hamartia' is excessive pride, also known as the 'hubris', which overwhelms the tragic hero's conscience, hence leading him to violate or ignore a divine warning or moral law.

There are reasons to both believe and deny that Medea fits Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero, or 'heroine'. Medea was a victim of her own emotions in a very difficult situation, and her surroundings/society only deteriorated that situation. One could also argue that it was her society, which put her in such a circumstance in the first place. The Greeks should be held very much responsible for Medea's excesses. "A good legal system will eliminate the need for vengeance." [2] And as we know, The Greek judicial system did not do this.

Euripides presents Medea's sacrifices for Jason in such a way that the audience can see that she truly did love Jason in how she gave up everything for him. We understand her fury with Jason when she says, "…*and in return for this you have the wickedness to turn me out, to get yourself another wife, even after I had borne you sons!*"[3] Euripides seemed to especially demand our sympathy as the very opening of the play consists of the Nurse giving us a history of Medea's sacrifices and Jason's nefariousness. The way in which Medea's sorrows are described so dramatically makes it almost impossible for the audience to not feel strong empathy towards Medea. There is no question – Jason has wronged Medea. And Jason's arguments and retorts to Medea seem so absurd that they only reflect negatively upon him, and thus strengthen our sympathy towards Medea. This is particularly so when Jason says, "*But you women have reached a state where, if all's well with your sex-life, you've everything you wish for; but when*

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[1] Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero from an article relating to tragic playwrights.

[2] Quote from a student in a discussion board on Euripides at gradesaver.com

[3] Line 488-490 from *Medea*

that goes wrong, at once all that is best and noblest turns to gall. If only children could be got some other way, without the female sex! If women didn't exist, human life would be rid of all its miseries."[4] This speech further emphasizes the injustice of the Greek society towards women and confirms the seemingly impossible-to-win situation which Medea is in.

Medea is humanized in the scene where she weeps for her children, and we see that she is not so thoroughly malevolent after all. Her cold, vindictive and vicious demeanor is softened by her maternal instincts and we almost begin to forgive her. When she presents her children to Jason, she even becomes tearful as she thinks about the children's morality. This is the first and only time in the play where Medea weeps not for herself but for someone else. It is in these moments that we are shown that Medea feels remorse for her actions and that she is not without feeling, nor is she insane. She can fully comprehend the difference between right and wrong, however, as typical of the tragic hero, her 'hubris' is too great, *"Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible; the laughter of my enemies I will not endure."*[5] Thus it seems appropriate to say she is compelled by the combination of her 'fatal flaw' and her unfortunate situation to choose the path she did. Euripides would not have chosen to put such an emotional and heart-rending scene if he did not want us to feel some empathy towards the situation.

Throughout the play, Euripides makes sure that the audience sees the tragedy of Medea's life, especially in the way he uses the chorus to repeat and reflect upon Medea's losses and emotions, as the role of the chorus is to remain neutral and to encourage the audience's attitudes and opinions. Since the nurse, tutor, Ageus and the chorus align themselves with Medea and give her (almost) their unconditional support, the audience is also encouraged to do so. The Gods, too, align themselves with Medea, as confirmed in the final scene when Medea says, *"...In this chariot which that Sun has sent to save us from the hands of enemies,"*[6] hence encouraging the audience even further.

However, there are many reasons to argue that Euripides did not intend for Medea to appear the tragic hero. Traditionally, tragic heroes begin as perfectly good characters but undergo some reversal by casting them in difficult situations where their fatal human flaw causes them to make the wrong decisions. In *Medea*, there is no reversal from good to bad as the Medea's history, which the Nurse delivers to the audience in the very prologue, confirms. Medea never was a saint. Traditional tragic heroes also remain generally sympathetic characters stricken by their overwhelming flaw. This causes them to suffer and eventually they repent for their faults, yet they never return to the state of greatness, which they were to begin with. "Medea, while obviously proud, never really apologizes for her excesses, and the play actually concludes with her dramatic escape from any negative consequences to her actions. Rather than move from a state of noble confidence to humble despair, she actually demonstrates the opposite transformation in the play." [7] However pitiful she may appear, her refusal to compromise herself and the sheer extent of her insistence upon revenge inspires some admiration towards her, and as

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[4] Line 569-570 from *Medea*

[5] Line 793 from *Medea*

[6] Line 1323 from *Medea*

[7] Extract from a study-guide on *Medea* at sparksnotes.com

she carries out her both terrifying and mystifying plans to slaughter her own sons, we almost nervously applaud her for it.

Further more, whilst tragic heroes are generally victims of some higher power (such as fate[8]) Medea does not seem to be governed by this as she appears to control her own destiny.

When questioning sympathy, one should bear in mind that whilst tragic heroes are so tragic because they induce our utmost pity for their weakness and hopeless situation, Medea never once strikes us as weak. The times when she is not made out of steel or ice, she is only being human, but never weak. Medea may earn our sympathies in her first speech, however as the play progresses we begin to doubt our empathy for her, as she is revealed to be terrifying, self-absorbed, manipulative and ruthless. We particularly lose sympathy when Medea says, "*She, by my poison, wretched girl, must die a horrible death*,"[9] as this implies that Medea is willing to murder innocents. We also see that the chorus looses support for Medea, which thus encourages us to lose ours. And when Medea murders her own children, any initial or remaining empathy we might have felt for her evaporates. Medea cannot be a hero of any kind in that she never sought justice – what she pursued was revenge, and the latter is far from synonymous to the former.

The complexity of *Medea* is that there is no one 'villain' or 'hero'. It appears that Euripides has refused to hand either Jason or Medea the moral high ground. To try and draw on any conclusions as to who is 'bad' or 'good' is futile, as there are too many complications and exceptions. There is no one label for either Medea or Jason. Hence it would be wiser to view Euripides's purposes for them as symbols of human's nature and flaws. Jason stands for the patriarchal elitism and misogyny in every chauvinistic man, and Medea, in this case, for the victims of men's self-aggrandizement and betrayal.

In conclusion, one can articulate that Euripides takes us, the audience, through a journey of emotions; starting off first by sympathizing with Medea, to losing our empathy and experiencing our own emotions of contempt or even outrage at her actions, to finally leaving the theatre not with a 'cathartic experience' in mind, but the realization that 'such things are.' *Medea* involves us, the audience, as her hatred and fury, despite being extreme, remain both immediately and unnervingly recognizable. What could Euripides have intended by creating a 'heroine' or protagonist so empathetic yet paradoxically terrible? "He knew well that humanity is not an easy thing to define. In *Medea* he pushed the boundaries of human behavior so far that we question the very being of humanity."[16] What could Euripides's purpose for writing *Medea* be then? Perhaps to explain the true nature of mankind, that 'such things are' and to unveil the problems in the world he lived in. *Medea* makes for a timeless classic; she is the symbol of abused and excessive humanity, of abandonment and betrayal, of the slaughter of beauty and innocence, of what happens when nature is mistreated... And despite being written over two thousand years ago, we still see these themes repeat themselves in modern-day literature and every-day life.

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8 (See previous essay on Fate)

9 Line 804 from *Medea*

16 Quote from website about Euripides