

Jason behaves so badly that it is impossible for us to sympathise with his fate at Medea's hands. How far do you agree with this statement?

'Medea' by Euripides is a tragedy centred around the characters of Medea, the cunning, revengeful and manipulative woman with sorcerous abilities, and Jason, the heroic, royal yet selfish and ignorant man who leaves his wife and two young children for the daughter of the King of Corinth. Already you are left wondering where your sympathies lie; with the vindictive wife or the conceited husband? How far do we as the audience sympathise with Jason?

From the start we are aware that when fleeing for Corinth, Medea is 'mad with love for Jason' and that 'to Jason she is all obedience' from the Chorus, showing us that apparently Medea's love for her husband was truly blinding for her; she ruthlessly murdered her brother in order to get a head start away from Colchis, and brutally influenced the murder of Jason's evil uncle Pelias by his very own daughters. All this may be seen as merciless, cruel and evil, but that fact that she did this all for Jason does show just how far she went in hope of a happy life with her husband, not knowing the pitiless act he would commit when he left her for Glauce, daughter of Creon (the King of Corinth). This puts Jason down on the sympathy scale for the reason of him leaving Medea despite all she had sacrificed for him. However, it can indeed be argued that these horrific acts were disgusting and inhuman; although they were *for* Jason, Medea did carry them out on her own accord and Jason did not *want* her to murder either her brother or his uncle, so in some aspects Medea put herself in this situation in the first place, giving Jason a slight reason for leaving her.

The fact that the tutor does not seem to believe that Jason would ever abandon his sons and the audience know Jason *did*, also reduces our sympathy for him as we know that he is in fact as unfeeling as 'to send these boys / Away from here – to banish them, and their mother too.' The shock of just how traumatised Medea is for this reason also gives us reason not to sympathise with him at this point, seeing as we are only aware of the suffering Jason has caused for Medea – 'She lies collapsed in agony, / Dissolving the long hours in tears'. This one-sided point of view at the start of the play would certainly encourage the audience in believing and understanding Medea's distress, all rooted from Jason leaving her, leaving not much room for sympathy towards Jason.

In addition, the chorus are very much on Medea's side at the start of the play, which also influences the audience to sympathise with her accordingly as opposed to sympathising with the antagonistic Jason – 'Poor

Medea! Scorned and shamed'. The chorus is almost the audience's indicator for knowing where their sympathy lies; although mostly towards Medea, at one point of the play, when Medea's mind is set on killing her children, the chorus directs their sympathy more towards the children as they beg Medea not to murder them, the sympathy for Jason being more ambiguous – 'Medea, by your knees, / By every pledge or appeal we beseech you, / Do not slaughter you children!'. Now the audience is forced to weigh up their sympathy for Medea and consider Jason's side of the story; is the right course of action to kill your children, simply for the revenge of your husband leaving you for another woman?

Due to Medea's manipulative character, she easily manages to wrap men around her finger; first Creon to allow her to stay in Corinth for another day, then Aegeus in his oath to allow her refuge in Athens if it is needed, and finally Jason in convincing him that he has won the fight and she is on his side, cunningly persuading him to give Glauce the gifts immersed in poison in order to kill her. The manipulation of Jason in this way could put him up on the sympathy scale in some aspects, such as the fact that he is being lied to and that Medea knows 'What pain the future hides' for them whereas Jason is entirely clueless. On the other hand, in some aspects his gullibility could reduce the sympathy for him seeing as he should have been at least the slightest bit suspicious of Medea's behaviour, especially seeing as the gifts for Glauce were by her 'father's father the Sun bequeaved to his descendants', meaning that they were only meant to be passed onto *Medea's* children and *her* descendants. The fact that Jason did not see anything wrong with this does show his ignorance, therefore decreases our sympathy for him the sense that he is foolish enough to fall for Medea's trickery.

However, Medea's manipulative and quite sardonic character and attitude towards Jason before she kills the sons could give us a reason to pity Jason's position, yet does not increase our sympathy for him at this point seeing as *he* is the one who is failing to see through Medea's false compliance. He says 'Only naturally a woman / is angry when her husband marries a second wife', Medea later saying 'But women – are women; tears come naturally to us' almost in spite as she paraphrases Jason to convince him that she is on his side. For this reason we pity him, but do not sympathise with him to much extent.

Jason's pride and conceitedness also put him down on our sympathy scale a great deal – 'Well your angry words don't upset *me*; / Go on as long as you like reciting Jason's crimes...Think yourself lucky to be let off with banishment.' He is extremely dismissive of Medea, not wanting to hear of how much she has suffered for him, simply coming to the conclusion that she is 'banished' in hope of driving her away, seemingly

unknowing of just how proud and powerful she really is. He is extremely sexist also, believing that as a woman she is inferior to him and cannot do much harm to him, which is why when she lies to him and persuades him to believe she is on his side he says – ‘This is the act / Of a sensible woman.’ This proves his belief that a ‘sensible’ woman should obey everything a man asks of her and should accept everything a man says or does to them. His sexist and extremely black and white approach to how women should behave gives us less of a reason to sympathise with his fate at Medea’s hands.

Moreover, when Jason addresses the children during the time when he is convinced Medea has changed her mind and has made peace with him, he says ‘Only grow big and strong... I want to see you when you’re strong... Tread down my enemies’, implying that he only needs his sons for his own personal gain in reputation, power and carrying on the blood line, not much love or affection being shown for them at all. It is for this reason Medea decides to kill them, as she knows this is all Jason really cares about, as he is extremely power-hungry and selfish in this sense, whereas in contrast Medea is torn between revenge for Jason and tremendous love for her sons – ‘Their young, bright faces - / I can’t do it.’, ‘What is the matter with me? Are my enemies / To laugh at me?’. Jason’s selfish ‘use’ of his children also reduces our sympathy for him a great deal; we are left with the impression that he should not deserve the right of having heirs from Medea, as he left her in exile for another royal woman only for his own benefit.

Although Medea’s extreme battle between her head and heart before ultimately killing her children does increase our sympathy for *her* – ‘Oh, my heart, don’t, don’t do it!’, her delight in response to the news of Jason’s second wife being poisoned at her hand is chilling and disturbing – ‘You’ll give / Me double pleasure if their death was horrible.’ As the messenger recounts the scene, he mentions Jason saying to his wife when Medea’s sons come to deliver the gift, ‘You must not... be unfriendly to our friends.’ This does in fact increase our sympathy for him seeing as he believes they are all on good terms, and has no inkling of what these gifts will do to his wife. Ironically the gifts which are (to Jason) gifts of peace, will in fact rage a war and be the start of destruction for Jason, Euripedes using dramatic irony so that it seems as though everybody knows Jason’s fate apart from Jason himself; perhaps putting him up on our sympathy scale for the fact that he is so clueless of what will become of him.

The fact that the Chorus loses sympathy for Medea almost entirely as she kills her children would also bring our sympathies for Jason up, seeing as it is the Chorus who seem to mark roughly where the audience’s sympathy should lie – ‘Look down on the accursed woman’, ‘...this pitiable / Bloody-handed fiend of

vengeance!’ This speech about Medea brings about the thought that although if you were simply told of Medea’s situation without knowing the story, you’d think she’d be the *victim* of vengeance because of everything she has done, but she is in fact avenging Jason herself. Euripedes manages to make us sympathise a great deal with the actual victim of vengeance (who is Jason) by depicting Medea as this ruthless and malevolent avenger, who will do anything, including killing her own children, to get her revenge on him.

Just after Jason finds out about his wife (and in turn Creon) being murdered and just before he finds out about his sons being murdered, he is not shattered or overwhelmed with grief, but fuming and indignant – ‘Does she expect to go unpunished?’. This may reduce our sympathy for him seeing as it reveals his unloving and vengeful character, although it can be certainly be argued that Jason leaving Medea is not as tragic as Medea killing both his wife and children, therefore eradicating most chance of him carrying on the family name, as was very important to the Ancient Greeks – ‘I have lost / My young bride; I have lost the two sons I begot / And brought up’. This fate would have been devastating for Jason, unquestionably raising our sympathies for him. In addition the way he also says ‘I shall never see them alive again’ also shows his loving and fatherly side, as this speech portrays his shock at never being able to see his sons again, in turn raising our rate of sympathy towards him.

Additionally, the only terms he asks of Medea at the very end of the play, when all is lost for Jason, is he may have his sons to perform the proper ‘burial and mourning rites’. Although previously being conveyed as this selfish and uncaring character, this surely shows Jason’s compassionate side, and the audience is left feeling extremely sympathetic towards his loss seeing as he asks nothing else of Medea. The way in which Medea refuses for this to happen would also make us feel extremely sorry for Jason, and the way in which he talks of his dead sons also gives us reason to sympathise with his fate – ‘I long to fold them in my arms; / To kiss their lips would comfort me’. His true love for his children, which he seemed to hide earlier on in the play, is revealed at the very end when there seems to be no hope for him.

In conclusion, it is not impossible for the audience to sympathise with the Jason’s fate at Medea’s hands, but how bad his behaviour towards Medea is, is arguable, seeing as there are many points of the play in which our sympathy for him increases and decreases as we get to know him more as a character. Euripedes plays with where our sympathy lays a great deal to give us a chance to sympathise with both Medea and Jason at different points and judge for ourselves whether Jason’s fate was deserved.