

The role of family dysfunctions and violence in the perception of marriage



Medea, as introduced by Euripides, is known for her violent actions and domestic violations. Motivated by Jason's unfaithfulness and wavering heart, Medea loses her sanity and eventually commits infanticide. Medea's story is representative of many Greek works in which dysfunction and violence is used as a mechanism of illustrating different views on family and marriage. Euripides contrasts the female and male perceptions of marriage through Medea's decision to kill her family and Jason's actions as an unfaithful husband. While Medea sees marriage as a sacred vow, Jason dismisses the importance of marriage and cuts it down to a means of rising up in society.

In the beginning of the play, Medea falls in love with Jason, a man not of her own kind. In order to be with Jason, Medea betrays her father, abandons her home, murders Pelias, and in kindness to Jason, makes enemies of others whom there was no need to have injured (lines 483-508). She then flees with Jason and lives as refugees for the rest of her life. Medea is willing to sacrifice her own family and fortune because her heart was "on fire with passionate love for Jason" (line 7) and she commits to the "vows they made to each other, the right hands clasped in eternal promise" (lines 21-22). Medea puts marriage on the highest pedestal and sees it as the ultimate promise between two individuals. Thus, when she discovers Jason has left her for another woman, Medea is devastated.

Once exposed to Jason's unfaithfulness, Medea realizes how senselessly she has been treated by Jason and decides that the only way she can punish him for breaking his promise to her is murder with her own hands, the fruit of her womb (line 1282). Though the pain of killing her children is no small task, Medea refuses to succumb to her motherly love. Motivated by Jason's "

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insolence, and [his] virgin wedding” (line 1367), Medea willingly to take on twice the pain just to take revenge on Jason for leaving her (lines 1046-1047). Euripides uses Medea’s rash actions as a way of showing that in the female eye, marriage is seen with great importance. Moreover, marriage is not only perceived as an oath between two mortals, but it is also seen as an oath to the gods. When Medea kills her children, Jason threatens her that “the children...will bring down curses” onto Medea. However, instead of being “loathed by the gods and...by all the race of mankind” (line 1323), Medea “appears above the house in a chariot drawn by dragons” (lines 1317-1318). Though she commits a sinful act against her own family, the “gods know who was the author of [the] sorrow” (line 1372). Instead of punishing Medea, the gods pardon her for her sins and she ascends to the heavens. Through Medea’s actions and fate, it is clear that in the eyes of women and the gods, marriage is seen as a sacred vow. Moreover, breaking the promise of marriage is the worst of sins, more punishable than the murder of one’s own blood.

Though Medea and the gods put great importance on marriage, marriage is trivialized by Jason’s actions. From the beginning, it is clear that in Jason’s eyes, marriage is more of a business transaction than an emotional commitment. Jason marries Medea for his own gain and pleasure, companionship, and most importantly, success in his missions. Moreover, Jason never explicitly declares that he married Medea out of love. Instead, Jason only marries Medea because it is “the fate that made [him] a distinguished man” (line 544). In return, instead of living among barbarians, Medea inhabits a Greek land, understands its ways, and all the Greeks think

of her as a clever woman (lines 539-540). Thus, Jason does not perceive his marriage to Medea as an emotional vow. Rather, to him, their marriage was merely a transaction that left both of them better off. Jason further trivializes his marriage to Medea by leaving her once he realizes she is of no use anymore. When Medea is seen as disposable, Jason “grew tired of [her] bed and felt the need of a new bride” (line 556). As a result, he is quick to abandon her for a better, more resourceful marriage. Once again, Jason explains that he only marries Creon’s daughter because with Creon’s wealth, Jason can “live well and not be short of anything” (line 560). He can bring [his] children up worthily of [his] position, and, by producing more of them to be brothers...[he] would draw the families together and all be happy” (lines 562-565). Thus, Jason marries both Medea and Creon’s daughter out of greed rather than love and he seeks a prosperous future supported by wealth. Though Jason’s views of marriage can be seen as immoral, they are by no means unique.

In many Greek works, men dismiss the concept of marriage and reduce it to a mere business transaction. For example, in Homer’s *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, marriage is much more about winning the woman than having a real relationship. In *The Odyssey*, suitors compete for Penelope’s hand in marriage not purely because they love her, but rather because they seek to take over Odysseus’s land and wealth. A man’s *oikos*, or household, is a central part of his social standing. Thus, the suitors seek to strengthen their role in society by taking Odysseus’s *oikos* through marriage. Similarly, in *The Iliad*, women are objectified rather than human beings. For example, the two beautiful maidens Chryseis and Briseis are nothing more than war prizes for

Agamemnon and Achilles to show off. Neither of the two men truly love their respective women. Instead, they use women as a way of proving their success on the battlefield and glory as fighters.

From Medea's and Jason's actions along with the actions of many Greek warriors, it is clear that there are contrasting perceptions of marriage between Greek women and men. Medea's views on marriage represent a common misconception of marriage that Greek women had. In her eyes, marriage is the ultimate promise between two individuals and should be treated as such. Violating a marriage is the worst of sins, even more so than killing one's own family. Medea's views on marriage is shared by the Gods in that they too believe that marriage between two people is a sacred bond that should not be broken. Thus, though Medea is wrong in killing her own children, the gods justify her actions because Jason broke his promise to Medea. In contrast to Medea's idea of marriage, Jason views marriage with much less importance. He sees marriage as a way of acquiring wealth and moving up in society rather than the result of true love. Jason's perception of marriage is representative of the views of Greek men in general as seen in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. Thus, through Medea's rash decisions and Jason's wavering actions, Euripides represents two contrasting ideas of marriage that extend into Greek society as a whole.