THE VIRTUOUS EMOTIONS OF EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

Introduction

The topic of 'virtuous emotions' might not seem the most obvious choice for a play featuring an unfaithful husband and a child-killing mother. Nonetheless, what I intend to consider here is how the emotional responses of various characters in the *Medea* shape our view of their moral character. The moral role of the emotions was clear to the ancient Greeks and, after a long interlude largely dominated by the idea that, as Kant claimed in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 'no moral principle is based … on any *feeling* whatsoever',[1] moral philosophy of the past half century or so has returned to seeing the emotions as a central part of human experience and ethical evaluation.

The emergence of 'virtue ethics' in particular has promoted the superiority of ancient, especially Aristotelian, views of the emotions over Kant's account of them as non-rational impulses. As Rosalind Hursthouse argues, the Aristotelian acknowledgement of the moral importance of the emotions relies on three basic claims:

(1) The virtues (and vices) are morally significant.

(2) The virtues (and vices) are all dispositions not only to act, but to feel emotions, as *re*actions as well as impulses to action. (Aristotle says again and again that the virtues are concerned with actions *and* feelings.)

[1] I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge, 2017), 152.

(3) In the person with the virtues, these emotions will be felt on the *right* occasions, towards the *right* people or objects, for the *right* reasons.[2]

To similar effect, the influential work of Bernard Williams has not only demonstrated the ethical implications of the fact that people are often subject to the power of their emotions, but has also championed the enduring relevance of Greek tragedy in particular for its portrayal of human psychology, emotion, and moral evaluation.[3]

The first word of Greek literature that survives is *mēnis* ('anger'), and as the *Iliad* amply illustrates, the proper handling of emotion is central to a good and happy life. Like epic, tragedy's representation of, and appeal to, the emotions was central to its impact and popularity. Plato's exclusion of these prestigious and popular genres (epic and tragedy) from his ideal state was partly due to their depiction and arousal of emotion (*Rep.* 2.376d-3.400c), whereas Aristotle famously argued that their emotional impact was both beneficial and an essential part of their appeal (see, for example, *Poet.* 1449b24-8, 1453a1-13 on pity, fear, and catharsis). What I want to do here is to show that tragedy prefigures Aristotle in the sense that emotions are shown to be universal and intrinsic to us as humans, but not *per se* good or bad: it all depends on who feels them, and for what reasons. The problematic emotions of the *Medea* are expressions of broken human relationships – a breakdown which is the hallmark of tragedy and the source of its capacity both to horrify and to educate the audience.

What is an emotion in ancient Greek terms? Despite their many differences, Plato and Aristotle agreed that emotions involve beliefs as well as feelings – thus anger, for example, is

[2] R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1999), 108. For a recent attempt to develop an Aristotelian account of virtuous emotions, see K. Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions* (Oxford, 2018).

[3] See especially B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993).

a combination of a painful feeling and a belief that one has been wronged.[4] They also saw emotions as responses to external, especially social, situations and stimuli. Here too, ancient ideas have resurfaced in modern studies of emotion by philosophers and psychologists, most of whom now avoid purely behavioural accounts and instead see emotions as forms of intelligent, cognitive engagement with the world.[5] It is also widely accepted that emotions are simultaneously both neurophysiological processes and cultural constructs, since we and our brains are shaped by experience and have genes that are switched on or off by our environment. And just as the extent to which our emotions are shaped by our socio-cultural environment is now much better recognized by psychologists and philosophers, so too in moral philosophy and the history of ethical theory there is a parallel movement towards the idea that morality is best understood as part of the values and beliefs of specific communities rather than as an abstract, universal system of evaluation.[6] In short, the emotions are for us, as for the Greeks, 'evaluative responses to external, typically social, states of affairs'.[7]

What role, then, do the emotions play in our ethical judgements? What makes a particular emotion virtuous or not? For Aristotle, as we'll see in a moment, the right emotional

[4] Cf. M. C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1986), 383 'Aristotle, like Plato, believes that emotions are individuated not simply by the way they feel, but, more importantly, by the kinds of judgments or beliefs that are internal to each.'

[5] For a detailed survey of current emotion research, see A. S. Fox, R. C. Lapate, A. J. Shackman, and R. J. Davidson (eds.), *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2018). On the importance of maintaining 'a focus on the cognitive and evaluative ("input") side of emotion', see D. Cairns and L. Fulkerson, 'Introduction', in D. Cairns and L. Fulkerson (eds.), *Emotions between Greece and Rome* (London, 2015), 3.

[6] See C. Gill, *Greek Thought* (Oxford, 1995), 26-7, discussing in particular the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams.

[7] D. Cairns, 'Review of D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto, 2006)', *JHS* 127 (2007), 249.

reactions are an essential part of the virtues. In that case, when we come to interpret the behaviour of characters in tragedy, their emotional reactions will act as a guide for how we should perceive and judge them. What emotions, then, do the various characters, especially Medea and Jason, display in the course of the play? And how do these emotions influence our evaluation of their character and conduct?

Perhaps the first thing to note is the pattern of emotional crisis and excess which is typical of the genre: tragedy deals with fraught situations and unbalanced emotions, and its monarcho-aristocratic protagonists are prone to excesses of all kinds, including their emotions. As the Nurse says in the opening scene of the *Medea* (119-21):

> δεινὰ τυράννων λήματα καί πως
> ὀλίγ' ἀρχόμενοι, πολλὰ κρατοῦντες
> χαλεπῶς ὀργὰς μεταβάλλουσιν.
>
> *Royalty's temper is awesome in spirit;*
> *rarely submissive, used to commanding;*
> *they don't abandon anger with ease.*[8]

For Aristotle, the virtuous person has attained balance and appropriateness in her emotions. Indeed, his famous doctrine of the mean embraces the emotions (*NE* 2.6.1106b16-23):

By virtue I mean moral virtue since it is this that is concerned with feelings and actions, and these involve excess, deficiency and a mean. It is possible, for example, to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain generally, too much or too little; and both of these are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right

[8] Trans. R. Blondell, *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides* (London, 1999).

people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue.[9]

So, for example, a person who did not get angry if she or her loved ones were insulted would be culpably deficient; but excessive anger is equally bad, and the ideal condition is 'mildness' (or *praotēs*; cf. Arist. *NE* 2.7.1108a4-9). However, median or virtuous emotions, where a person's reactions are entirely appropriate to the situation, would probably lead to some pretty dull plays, since tragic drama is powered by conflict, excess, and mistakes. The protagonists of tragedy display many virtuous character traits, including justified anger, but typically their intense and excessive emotions lead to catastrophe and suffering for themselves and their loved ones.

My aim here is to look at a defined range of the most prominent emotions in the *Medea*. As we'll see, the emotions discussed - jealousy, love, gratitude, anger, grief, and pity – all have a doubly evaluative significance: for they are, as emotions, evaluative reactions to the evolving state of affairs in the (dramatic) world, and they also guide us (the audience) in judging the actions and character of the figures onstage. But before we turn to specific emotions, it's important to acknowledge the challenges of studying emotion in other societies and other languages. Thus Greek terms like *philia* and *charis* have a semantic range that differs from the English words typically used to translate them (e.g. 'love' or 'gratitude'), yet the lack of exact correspondence does not make comparison impossible, since there is enough overlap between Greek and English emotion terms to make analysis possible. In any case, we have no choice but to use our own language to analyse and interpret the terms used by other cultures. The best

[9] Trans. J. A. K. Thomson, *Aristotle: Ethics* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

we can do is to be sensitive to the cultural differences, bearing in mind that different societies divide up the spectrum of emotions in slightly different (though largely overlapping) ways.[10]

Jealousy

So let us start by considering in more detail one of the most important emotions in the play, namely jealousy. Right away we are confronted by the importance of language. In his seminal book on the emotions in ancient Greece, David Konstan not only argues for the absence of an equivalent term for our 'jealousy' in classical Greek, but also claims that 'The very concept … may have been lacking.'[11] Although the closely equivalent term *zēlotypia* is not attested until the fourth century BC, this does not entail that the concept of jealousy was unknown in Greek culture before then. Such a prescriptive focus on a single Greek term is misleading and lies behind Konstan's implausible claim that jealousy plays no significant role in tragedy and

[10] Cf. D. Cairns, 'Look Both Ways: Studying Emotion in Ancient Greek', *Critical Quarterly* 50 (2008), 58 'It matters that we can recognise the scenarios with which ancient Greek terms are associated, just as it matters that the semantic range of many Greek terms differs from that of any English term that we might use to translate them; but no matter how well we understand the usage of the Greek term and the phenomena that it describes, we can never "get inside" the experience of the ancient emotion as such. The best we can do is to use our language to interpret theirs, with the fullest possible attention to the diversity of the data regarding the scenarios to which the terms of both languages refer.' See also Cairns and Fulkerson (n. 5), 19 on 'the understanding of multivalence, usage, and contextual significance that is the basis of good translation'.

[11] D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto, 2006), 220.

women are not portrayed as jealous in this genre.[12] What about Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and Sophocles' Deianeira, let alone Medea? Konstan argues that 'The motive of Euripides' Medea … is not so much jealousy as anger at Jason's violation of his oaths and his want of gratitude for her services.'[13] He adds, 'Medea's [concern] is focused throughout on the threat to her welfare, not on her amorous sensibilities.'[14] Unfortunately, the absence of the term *zēlotypia* has blinded Konstan to the fundamental role played by jealousy in Medea's decision to seek revenge.

This is made clear by the Chorus and Aegeus as well as by Jason and Medea. The Chorus try to comfort the wailing Medea (155-9):

> εἰ δὲ σὸς πόσις καινὰ λέχη σεβίζει,
> κείνωι τόδε μὴ χαράσσου·
> Ζεύς σοι τάδε συνδικήσει.
> μὴ λίαν τάκου δυρομένα σὸν εὐνέταν.
>
> *If your husband reveres a new marriage-bed,*
>
> *don't be provoked at him;*
>
> *Zeus will plead the justice of your cause.*
>
> *Don't waste away, lamenting your bedmate to excess.*

[12] Konstan (n. 11), 233 'Jealousy is equally absent in archaic lyric poetry … Nor does it play a significant role in tragedy: no Othello ever stalked the ancient Greek stage.' For a detailed critique of Konstan's view of jealousy, see E. Sanders, 'Sexual Jealousy and *Erôs* in Euripides' *Medea*', in E. Sanders, C. Thumiger, C. Carey and N. J. Lowe (eds.), *Erôs in Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 2013), 41-57.

[13] Konstan (n. 11), 233.

[14] Konstan (n. 11), 234.

They describe Jason as ‘her evil-wedded husband, traitor to her bed’ (207), and sympathize with Medea: ‘you’ve lost your marriage bed, your bed’s unmanned . . . another queen rules in your marriage-bed, another is the mistress of your house.’ (436-8, 443-5) Aegeus too condemns Jason’s decision to leave Medea for another woman (692-5):

Μη. ἀδικεῖ μ’ Ἰάσων οὐδὲν ἐξ ἐμοῦ παθών.
Αι. τί χρῆμα δράσας; φράζε μοι σαφέστερον.
Μη. γυναῖκ’ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν δεσπότιν δόμων ἔχει.
Αι. οὔ που τετόλμηκ’ ἔργον αἴσχιστον τόδε;

Medea: Jason’s unjust to me, though I’ve done him no harm.

Aegeus: What has he done? Tell me more clearly what occurred.

Medea: A woman over me is mistress in his house.

Aegeus: No! Has he really dared this shamefullest of deeds?

And Medea herself ends her first speech to the Chorus, in which she wins them over to her side, by saying (263-6):

γυνὴ γὰρ τἄλλα μὲν φόβου πλέα
κακή τ’ ἐς ἀλκὴν καὶ σίδηρον εἰσορᾶν·
ὅταν δ’ ἐς εὐνὴν ἠδικημένη κυρῆι,
οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη φρὴν μιαιφονωτέρα.

Elsewhere womankind is full of fear,

a coward both in self-defence and at the sight

of steel; but when she meets injustice in the marriage-

bed, no mind exists that is more bloodthirsty.

Jason, meanwhile, tries to present Medea's jealousy as a typically female obsession with sex (555-6, 569-73):

> οὐχ, ἥι σὺ κνίζηι, σὸν μὲν ἐχθαίρων λέχος
> καινῆς δὲ νύμφης ἱμέρωι πεπληγμένος
> …
> ἀλλ' ἐς τοσοῦτον ἥκεθ' ὥστ' ὀρθουμένης
> εὐνῆς γυναῖκες πάντ' ἔχειν νομίζετε,
> ἢν δ' αὖ γένηται ξυμφορά τις ἐς λέχος,
> τὰ λῷιστα καὶ κάλλιστα πολεμιώτατα
> τίθεσθε.
>
> *I did not do it – as you fret – from hatred for*
>
> *your bed, or stricken with desire for a new bride*
>
> *…*
>
> *You're so far gone, you women, that if things*
>
> *in bed go right, you think that you have everything;*
>
> *but if disaster strikes you in the marriage-bed,*
>
> *you treat the finest and most beautiful of things*
>
> *as acts of war.*

The charge of 'merely sexual' jealousy is directly rebutted by Medea (1367-8):

> Ια. λέχους σφε κἠξίωσας οὕνεκα κτανεῖν;
> Μη. σμικρὸν γυναικὶ πῆμα τοῦτ' εἶναι δοκεῖς;
>
> *Jason: And you saw fit to kill them [the children] for a marriage-bed?*
>
> *Medea: You think a woman finds this torment trivial?*

These statements concerning sexual insult and sexual jealousy are important (cf. also 998-1001), because they show that although both the Chorus and Medea are no less focused on the dishonour done to Medea's social status as wife and mother by Jason's decision to leave her (e.g. 208-9, 659-62), they are relentless in insisting on the genuine importance and legitimacy of sexual jealousy as grounds for outrage and complaint. The Chorus' final lines of lyric in the play are significant in this respect too (1290-2):

> τί δῆτ' οὐ γένοιτ' ἂν ἔτι δεινόν; ὦ
> γυναικῶν λέχος
> πολύπονον, ὅσα βροτοῖς ἔρε-
> ξας ἤδη κακά.
>
> *Oh women's marriage-bed, full of troubles,*
>
> *how many evils you have done to mortals!*

These lines are delivered just after we hear the children's screams as they are murdered inside the house. The focus on the bed, at this horrific climax, underlines its importance, while Jason's immediate entry at line 1293 reminds us that his infidelity was the catalyst for the children's death.

A recent book on 'virtuous emotions' displays a blindness to sexual jealousy that recalls that of David Konstan. Kristján Kristjánsson remarks that 'discussions of jealousy within psychology seem to have become more nuanced of late than they were for most of the twentieth century when the prevailing discourse was preoccupied with *sexual* jealousy, arguably the least philosophically complex and morally interesting form of jealousy.'[15] As the *Medea* shows, however, sexual jealousy does not have to be philosophically complex to be morally

[15] Kristjánsson (n. 2), 102.

interesting.[16] To deny the role of jealousy in the *Medea* (as does Konstan), or to dismiss the emotion as 'merely sexual' (as do Jason and Kristjánsson in their different ways), is to miss a fundamental aspect of Medea's motivation. It also obscures the basic appropriateness of Medea's emotional reaction to being replaced by another woman. Medea's erotic desire for Jason is, to be sure, problematic: as the Nurse makes clear at the very start of the play, Medea's state of being 'heart-struck with passionate desire for Jason' (8) has proved to be a mistake. Nonetheless, her feelings of jealousy are shown to be both legitimate and admirable. In contrast to Kristjánsson, Peter Toohey's study of jealousy rejects the view that 'the emotion is utterly abhorrent – a product of a warped character, unhinged fury or actual mental illness',[17] and he notes jealousy's role in 'protecting relationships [and] … maintaining fair treatment'.[18] As Euripides makes clear, Medea's sexual jealousy may be (in Greek terms) stereotypically female, but it is also motivated by a desire to protect her closest relationships, and her demand for 'fair treatment' (that is, to be respected as both wife and mother and not to be supplanted in either role) is fully justified.

[16] As it happens, Kristjánsson (n. 2), 106 also endorses the surprising idea of Konstan that 'the concept of jealousy [entered] people's consciousness in the classical world at a distinct point in history, namely during the reign of Augustus'. This stems from Konstan's claim (n. 11), 243 that in *Odes* 1.13 'Horace created a model case of a three-party passion that comes very close to what a later epoch would come to think of as erotic jealousy. We might even credit him with being its inventor.' However, as Douglas Cairns has shown (n. 10), 56, 'This is neither an accurate reflection of the data nor a plausible account of the genesis of psychological concepts.'

[17] P. Toohey, *Jealousy* (New Haven, 2014), 81.

[18] Toohey (n. 17), 221.

Love

Turning now to the feelings of love or affection (*philia*) that are supposed to unite husband and wife, and parents and children, it is clear that Jason is emotionally deficient in both relationships. In the opening scene the Nurse condemns Jason (16-18):

> νῦν δ' ἐχθρὰ πάντα καὶ νοσεῖ τὰ φίλτατα.
> προδοὺς γὰρ αὐτοῦ τέκνα δεσπότιν τ' ἐμὴν
> γάμοις Ἰάσων βασιλικοῖς εὐνάζεται
>
> *But now all's enmity; the dearest ties of friendship*
> *have grown sick. Jason's betrayed his own sons and*
> *my mistress, sleeping in a royal marriage bed*

And again (82-4):

> ὦ τέκν', ἀκούεθ' οἷος εἰς ὑμᾶς πατήρ;
> ὄλοιτο μὲν μή· δεσπότης γάρ ἐστ' ἐμός·
> ἀτὰρ κακός γ' ὢν ἐς φίλους ἁλίσκεται.
>
> *Oh children! Do you hear what your own father is*
> *to you? May he not perish – he's my master still –*
> *but he is guilty of bad treatment of his friends.*

The Chorus too condemn Jason's breach of *philia* in language that evokes Hesiod's picture of the corrupt Iron Age (439-41; cf. Hes. *WD* 190-4, 197-200):

βέβακε δ' ὅρκων χάρις, οὐδ' ἔτ' αἰδὼς
Ἑλλάδι τᾶι μεγάλαι μένει, αἰθερία δ' ἀνέπτα.

The graceful favour of oaths has fled,

respect for others stays no more in mighty Greece –

it has flown into bright air.

And when the Chorus curse the man who fails to honour his *philoi* (659-62) -

ἀχάριστος ὄλοιθ' ὅτωι πάρεστιν
μὴ φίλους τιμᾶν καθαρᾶν
ἀνοίξαντα κλῆιδα φρενῶν·
ἐμοὶ μὲν φίλος οὔποτ' ἔσται.

May that man perish, joyless, unavenged,

who does not honour friends,

unlocking a clear, transparent mind.

He'll be no friend of mine.

- they do so just as Aegeus enters the stage, providing Medea with a refuge, a crucial element in her developing revenge plan.

According to Aristotle, 'parents love their children as part of themselves' (*NE* 8.12.1161b18) and 'Children . . . are a bond between parents … For the children are an asset common to them both, and common possession is cohesive' (*NE* 8.12.1162a.27-9). The contrasting emotions displayed by Medea and Jason towards their sons are indicative of their moral character. When the Tutor reports that Creon has decided to banish both Medea and the children from Corinth, the Nurse asks in disbelief (74-7):

Τρ. καὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἰάσων παῖδας ἐξανέξεται
πάσχοντας, εἰ καὶ μητρὶ διαφορὰν ἔχει;
Πα. παλαιὰ καινῶν λείπεται κηδευμάτων,
κοὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἐκεῖνος τοῖσδε δώμασιν φίλος.

Nurse: Even if Jason's quarrelled with their mother, will
he stand by while his children suffer in this way?
Tutor: New family ties have taken over from the old;
that man is not a friend toward this house of ours.

And indeed Jason seems quite content to be separated from his children and makes no attempt whatsoever to change Creon's mind. By contrast, Medea's love for her children is intense: it makes her choice of revenge especially harrowing, and the suppression of maternal love gives her famous monologue (1021-80) its overwhelming emotional power. As Bernard Williams observed, 'For some scholars, the famous final speech does not belong to the play. Their proposals offer a striking example of the pretensions of textual criticism when it is not controlled by a sense of its function.'[19] Medea's vacillation between decisiveness and despair (she changes her mind on whether to kill or spare the children several times – yes/no/yes/no/yes) is emotionally credible and appropriate to the enormity of her act, which violates the most fundamental bonds of *philia* – as Aristotle says, 'Friendship between relations appears to be of several different kinds, but they all seem to be ultimately derived from parental affection' (*NE* 8.12.1161b16-17). However, although Medea claims to live by the traditional ethics of helping friends and harming enemies, she fails to live up to her own morality, murdering her closest *philoi.*

[19] Williams (n. 3), 205.

Gratitude

Let us now turn to the feeling of gratitude, an emotion whose deficiency further demonstrates Jason's injustice to his dependents. In his discussion of gratitude Aristotle describes a scenario which works well as a description of Medea's crucial role at Colchis in helping Jason retrieve the Golden Fleece, which was guarded by a great serpent (*Rhet.* 2.7.1385a19-21; cf. *Medea* 480-2):

The favour is great if the recipient is in urgent need, or if what he needs is important and difficult, or if the conditions in which the favour is bestowed are important and difficult, or if the benefactor is the only one to help, or the first to do so, or the driving force.[20]

In addition to her role as Jason's saviour and helper, Medea has borne him sons, fulfulling a wife's most important familial and social role, so is owed all due consideration by him. However, a notable characteristic of Jason is his materialistic approach to his duties as husband and father. In each of his major exchanges with Medea he offers her and his sons money (see 461-2, 559-61, 610-12) rather than the reciprocity of *charis*. Aristotle argues that what holds people and communities together is 'proportionate reciprocity' (*NE* 5.5.1132b33-33a5):

It is proportionate reciprocity that holds the state together … this is the distinguishing mark of gratitude, because it is right both to repay a service to a benefactor and at another time to take the initiative in benefaction.

[20] Trans. R. Waterfield, *Aristotle: The Art of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 2018).

In other words, gratitude involves the return of good for good,[21] but Jason has no feeling for this essential emotion of justice. In place of genuine good, he offers a material substitute, as if this could compensate Medea, who sacrificed so much for him (her native land, her parental home, her own brother). As it happens, Jason's interest in money is matched by his new bride: she cannot resist the gifts (an embroidered robe and golden crown) brought by Jason's sons and switches in an instant from hating the children to accepting them (1156-7):

> ἡ δ', ὡς ἐσεῖδε κόσμον, οὐκ ἠνέσχετο,
> ἀλλ' ἤινεσ' ἀνδρὶ πάντα
>
> *Messenger: And when she saw the finery, she yielded and*
> *praised everything her husband said.*

Jason's materialism is also expressed in his passion (*erōs*) for social advancement (697-700):

> Αι. πότερον ἐρασθεὶς ἢ σὸν ἐχθαίρων λέχος;
> Μη. μέγαν γ' ἔρωτα· πιστὸς οὐκ ἔφυ φίλοις.
> Αι. ἴτω νυν, εἴπερ, ὡς λέγεις, ἐστὶν κακός.
> Μη. ἀνδρῶν τυράννων κῆδος ἠράσθη λαβεῖν.
>
> *Aegeus: Was it from passion, or from hatred of your bed [that he has taken another wife]?*
> *Medea: A mighty passion; he's unfaithful to his friends.*
> *Aegeus: Forget him, if he is as evil as you say.*

[21] On *charis* as both 'favour' and 'gratitude', see D. Konstan, *In the Orbit of Love: Affection in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 2018), 109.

Medea: His passion was to tie his family to the king's.

Obsessed with his own personal advancement, Jason ignores the extent to which his success depends on Medea and on his luck in meeting her in the first place. The moral relevance of external luck was recognized by Aristotle. For Plato (and the Stoics), virtue is necessary and sufficient for flourishing or happiness (*eudaimonia*). For Aristotle, by contrast, virtue is necessary but not sufficient for *eudaimonia* – one also needs external goods (wealth, power, family, friends, abilities, etc.) which are a matter of luck (see, for example, *NE* 4.3.1124a21-4).[22] As usual, Aristotle is closer to the truth, and what makes Jason's attitude so infuriating is his inability to realize how lucky he has been. His flourishing has been secured by Medea (cf. 475-98), hence the particular outrage of his ingratitude.

Anger

One of the most important and pervasive emotions in the play (as indeed in many tragedies) is anger.[23] Jason tries to dismiss Medea's anger as merely the overreaction of a typically emotional woman (446-7; cf. 589-90):

[22] On the role of 'moral luck' in modern philosophical debates, see B. Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), 20-39; for its importance in ancient thought, see Nussbaum (n. 4).

[23] In Greek patriarchal culture, where women depend upon men for so much, female anger is often linked to helplessness, as M. C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford, 2016), 45 observes: 'One reason why women so often turn out to be the angry ones is that they are disproportionately unable to control the things they need and want to control … Medea is a paradigm of helplessness run amok. Alien, jilted wife, with no rights over her children, she loses everything in one betrayal. Her outsize zeal for payback is related

οὐ νῦν κατεῖδον πρῶτον ἀλλὰ πολλάκις
τραχεῖαν ὀργὴν ὡς ἀμήχανον κακόν.

It's not the first time. I have often seen how savage

anger is an evil that's intractable.

and again (614-15):

καὶ ταῦτα μὴ θέλουσα μωρανεῖς, γύναι·
λήξασα δ' ὀργῆς κερδανεῖς ἀμείνονα.

If you reject this [offer of help], woman, you're a fool;

you'll gain a better profit if you cease from anger.

But it is made clear that Medea's anger is the right response to being humiliated and dishonoured. As Aristotle notes, 'to put up with insults to oneself, and overlook those done to one's friends, is servile' (*NE* 4.5.1126a7-8). Medea's right to feel angry is underlined by the heroic language of injured honour used to describe her condition (20, 33, 438, etc.); and her response, in line with the heroic code of retaliation, is to return harm for harm (807-10):

μηδείς με φαύλην κἀσθενῆ νομιζέτω
μηδ' ἡσυχαίαν ἀλλὰ θατέρου τρόπου,
βαρεῖαν ἐχθροῖς καὶ φίλοισιν εὐμενῆ·
τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων εὐκλεέστατος βίος.

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to the size of her loss … Her story tells us that even where norms do not encourage female anger, asymmetrical female helplessness may breed it.'

Let no one think me insignificant and weak
or quiet-tempered; I am just the opposite –
harsh to my enemies, and well-disposed to friends;
this is the life that wins most glorious renown.

However, the risks and problems inherent in the heroic code of retaliation are clear from the very start of the Greek literary tradition. The anger that propels an individual to seek revenge may be, as Achilles puts it, 'far sweeter than trickling honey, swelling like smoke in the breasts of men' (*Il.* 18.109-10), but as the *Iliad* itself shows, such wrathful vengeance has the potential to create as many problems as it solves. In tragedy the fifth-century Athenian audience repeatedly observe the disastrous consequences of heroic revenge and are encouraged to appreciate the benefits of their own social and legal processes.[24] The futility and dangers of private revenge are clearest in cases of kin murder, which is the most extreme version of killing within a *polis* community since it violates the closest bonds of allegiance. Crimes against kin are prominent in tragedy precisely because extreme cases offer a good testing-ground in which to explore ideas of vengeance, punishment, and justice, and because they evoke the strongest emotional and moral responses from the audience. Killing innocent children is the ultimate horror, whether one's own (as in *Medea*) or those of an unrelated enemy (as with the murder of Polymestor's children in *Hecuba*).

The opening scene raises several times the possibility that Medea's anger could be unfairly transferred to the children (91-5; cf. 36-7, 116-18):

καὶ μὴ πέλαζε μητρὶ δυσθυμουμένηι.
ἤδη γὰρ εἶδον ὄμμα νιν ταυρουμένην
τοῖσδ', ὡς τι δρασείουσαν· οὐδὲ παύσεται

[24] Cf. W. Allan, 'The Ethics of Retaliatory Violence in Athenian Tragedy', *Mnemosyne* 66 (2013), 593-615.

χόλου, σάφ' οἶδα, πρὶν κατασκῆψαί τινι.
ἐχθρούς γε μέντοι, μὴ φίλους, δράσειέ τι.

Nurse: Don't take them near their mother while she's in despair.
I've sometimes seen her eye them like a raging bull,
as if she wants to act; she will not cease from rage,
I know, until she's crushed someone. Oh may it be
an enemy she acts against, and not a friend!

The Nurse's reaction to Medea's opening cry of lamentation is even more ominous (98-100):

τόδ' ἐκεῖνο, φίλοι παῖδες· μήτηρ
κινεῖ κραδίαν, κινεῖ δὲ χόλον.
σπεύδετε θᾶσσον δώματος εἴσω

It's just as I said, dear children. Your mother
stirs up her heart; she stirs up her rage.
Hurry now quickly, into the house.

The repetition of *kinei*, 'she stirs up', in line 99 foreshadows the extreme ends to which Medea's anger will take her, but also emphasizes her own efforts in (as we might say) psyching herself up to commit such a horrific crime. Later in the play, in Medea's great monologue, her blunt observation 'my anger is in charge of my plans' (1079) shows her own awareness that extreme emotion is leading her to a self-destructive form of revenge.[25] As Stuart Lawrence puts it:

[25] This rendering of θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων (1079) is preferable to 'my anger is stronger than my reasonings', since *bouleumata* so far has always referred to her revenge plans, and it avoids introducing a

The full emotional implications of the filicide dawn on her during the Great Monologue, but she proceeds anyway because by now she is absolutely under the control of her angry *thumos*. She fails therefore to integrate her emotions into her moral stance, since her maternal feelings disrupt her "moral" commitment to Jason's destruction.[26]

To overcome her instinctive revulsion Medea deploys a perverse rationalization, telling herself that her infanticide is the lesser of two evils (1238-41):

> καὶ μὴ σχολὴν ἄγουσαν ἐκδοῦναι τέκνα
> ἄλλῃ φονεῦσαι δυσμενεστέραι χερί.
> πάντως σφ᾽ ἀνάγκη κατθανεῖν· ἐπεὶ δὲ χρή,
> ἡμεῖς κτενοῦμεν οἵπερ ἐξεφύσαμεν.
>
> *I shall not dally and give up my sons*
> *for some more hostile hand to slaughter bloodily.*
> *In any case they must die, by necessity,*
> *and since they must, I'll kill them – I who gave them life.*

Medea's initial plan was to kill Jason, Creon, and Creon's daughter (374-5), so why does she kill the children rather than Jason? Because killing him would not be enough for Medea; the point is to see him feel the kind of humiliation and despair that he has inflicted upon her, and

simplistic contest between 'reason' and 'passion': see Williams (n. 3), 205, Gill (n. 6), 10, D. J. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea* (Cambridge, 2002), 22, 393.

[26] S. Lawrence, *Moral Awareness in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 2013), 211.

for him to see his *oikos*, present and future, completely destroyed.[27] But while her desire for revenge is fully in line with the Greek ethic of returning harm for harm, the problem lies in Medea's means of retaliation. Many Greek tragedies have revenge plots and most portray the futility of personalized vengeance, of counter-killing, and Medea's hyper-personalized revenge, killing her own children to punish her estranged husband, is the ultimate example of this tragic pattern. Medea's desperation evokes our sympathy, but her means of returning harm for harm are repulsive. So too with her pleasure at Jason's suffering, which ends the play. As Aristotle observed, 'every instance of anger is accompanied by a certain feeling of pleasure based on the expectation of achieving retaliation' (*Rhet.* 2.2.1378b1-2). Yet Medea's form of revenge, her infanticide, makes her pleasure in the final scene, as she gloats over Jason's misery, grotesque and unsettling.

Grief

The death of the children is naturally cause for grief, but the broken relationships on stage mean that grief itself becomes problematic. As the killer of her own children, Medea's grief is mixed with guilt, which she attempts to assuage by establishing a festival in their honour (1381-3):

> γῆι δὲ τῆιδε Σισύφου
> σεμνὴν ἑορτὴν καὶ τέλη προσάψομεν
> τὸ λοιπὸν ἀντὶ τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου.
>
> *And in this land*

[27] On Medea's decision to kill her children, see most recently R. Kamtekar, 'Explaining Evil in Plato, Euripides, and Seneca', in A. P. Chignell (ed.), *Evil: A History* (Oxford, 2019), 104-19.

of Sisyphus I'll found a sacred festival

with rites in payment for this impious deed of blood.

Medea even uses grief, or rather the denial of grief, as a further weapon against Jason, as she denies his request to bury and weep for the children (1377-8). As with Medea, so too with Jason our reaction to his grief is coloured by his actions – a point made by Medea herself (1399-1402):

Ια. ὤμοι, φιλίου χρήιζω στόματος
παίδων ὁ τάλας προσπτύξασθαι.
Μη. νῦν σφε προσαυδᾶις, νῦν ἀσπάζηι,
τότ' ἀπωσάμενος.

Jason: Oh! How I long to embrace the beloved

face of my children, wretch that I am!

Medea: Now you address them. Now you embrace them.

Then you rejected them.

Thus Jason's grief rings hollow, since his behaviour has violated the relationship of strong and irreplaceable attachment that underpins that emotion.

Pity

Finally, if we consider our own emotional reaction to the play, we can see the complexities involved in the archetypal tragic emotion of pity (*eleos*) itself. Unlike the children, who have suffered undeserved harm and are unquestionably objects of our pity, Jason and Medea are

more problematic. In Medea's case, her predicament and reaction reveal that Aristotle's definition of pity is too narrow and schematic (*Rhet.* 2.8.1385b13-16):

Let us take pity to be a feeling of pain aroused in oneself when someone is perceived as meeting undeservedly with trouble of a life-threatening or painful kind, which one might expect oneself or people dear to one to meet with, and which seems close at hand.

However, as Medea's infanticide shows, pity is elicited not only by undeserved misfortune: we can also feel pity at misfortunes that people have brought upon themselves. As Douglas Cairns has argued, Greek *eleos* or pity involves putting oneself in the position of another person, and so *eleos* overlaps with what we call 'sympathy'.[28] Thus we can (and do) sympathize with and pity Medea's ordeal, even as we condemn her actions.

In Jason's case, he has broken his oaths (a recurring theme: 21-2, 160-3, 169-70, 209, 412-13, 422, 439, 492, 495, 698, 1352, 1364, 1391-2) and has met with the consequences laid down for such behaviour in Athenian thought – *exōleia*, or the destruction of his household (cf. Hom. *Il.* 3.298-301, 4.155-68). It is clear, then, that he has brought about his own misfortunes (like Medea), but (unlike Medea) various factors guide us *not* to feel much (if indeed any) sympathy for him: firstly, he showed no pity for his wife and sons earlier in the play (unlike Aegeus and the Chorus), and secondly, our overriding emotion at Jason's downfall is (I would argue) not pity but *Schadenfreude* (ἐπιχαιρεκακία), which, as Aristotle notes, works against pity (*Rhet.* 2.9.1386b34-87a5):

[28] Cairns (n. 10), 52 '"putting oneself in the position of another" is a regular feature of ancient Greek *eleos*' (with examples in his n. 41).

It is the same man who displays *Schadenfreude* (*epichairekakos*) and envy (*phthoneros*), since a man who feels pain if someone gains and has good fortune is bound to be pleased by its loss and destruction. Hence, although these emotions differ from one another in the ways I have said, they all tend to obstruct pity, and this means that they are all equally useful for counteracting feelings of pity.[29]

In other words, the play's ending leaves the audience feeling a complex and invigorating mixture of emotions: sympathy for Medea despite her decision to murder her own children, terror at the thought of her imminent arrival in Athens, and pleasure at the ruin of the unfaithful Jason.

Conclusion: learning from emotions

In conclusion, literary forms such as tragedy give us valuable examples of well-formed and malformed emotions, and we can learn from both. Drawing on Aristotle's definition of virtue, we can consider virtuous emotions to be those that are felt 'at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way'. The characters of the *Medea* display a variety of emotions, with varying degrees of appropriateness: Medea is right to be jealous and angry, for example, but her anger is misdirected against her children, while Jason displays no genuine feelings of *philia* or *charis*, alienating us and our pity. As Julia Annas observes in her discussion of the role of the emotions in the virtuous person's moral psychology:

[29] Within Aristotle's system *nemesis* ('righteous indignation') is favoured as the virtuous mid-point between envy (*phthonos*) and *Schadenfreude* (*epicharekakia*): cf. *NE* 2.7.1108b1-6.

We find a basic difference between 'Aristotelian' theories, which think that our feelings and emotions can be so educated by our developing reason that they become wholly transformed, and 'Kantian' theories, which think of our feelings and emotions as never wholly educable and transformable, and thus always representing a potential threat to our acting as we reason to be best.[30]

Tragedy was recognized by Aristotle (I think rightly) as an especially valuable artistic medium for the education of the emotions. By observing tragic figures as they manage their emotions well or badly, the audience are not only guided to make judgements about the characters on stage, but are also given a source of emotional and moral guidance for their own lives outside the theatre.

[30] J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford, 2011), 68 n. 4.