THE AEGEUS EPISODE AND THE THEME OF EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

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The problem of the Aegeus episode has had the advantage or, perhaps better, the disadvantage of so much scholarly comment from Aristotle to the present that another attempt to deal with the question might seem superfluous. But, in the opinion of this writer, the answers to this problem presented thus far have been unsatisfactory in varying degrees and, therefore, still further analysis of a problem which is essential to the interpretation of one of Euripides' masterpieces will not be wasted effort.

Along with Aristotle, who uses Aegeus' entrance as an example of τὸ ἄλογον, "the irrational" (*Poet.* 1461B), one finds it impossible to discover any necessity or probability which can explain Aegeus' appearance in the play and his meeting with Medea. Yet the Aegeus scene occupies a central position in the formal design of the play, being preceded by the Medea-Creon and Medea-Jason episodes and followed by the Medea-Jason and Medea-Messenger episodes.[1] Its central position is further emphasized by its location in the almost exact center of the play in terms of numbers of lines. When the Athenian king arrives, 662 lines have gone by; when he leaves, 656 lines remain. To highlight by structural emphasis such a character whose appearance is unexplainable by any logic at first might seem a serious dramatic mistake on the part of the author. However, the critic of this play should be willing to entertain at least the possibility that Euripides is employing an unusual dramatic device which can be justified if the unmotivated entrance of Aegeus and the whole scene can be shown to contribute substantially to the meaning of the play.

[1] See T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London 1967) 56, and T. V. Buttrey, "Accident and Design in Euripides' 'Medea,'" *AJP* 79 (1958) 5–6.

T. V. Buttrey in an excellent article[2] has taken probably the most significant step in answering Aristotle's objection. He points out that the Aegeus scene is a turning point in the play, a point of division between the injury which Medea suffers and the injury which she inflicts. Buttrey concludes that Aegeus' entrance was purposefully left unmotivated by Euripides to foreshadow the chaotic irrationality which holds sway at Corinth after Aegeus departs. I find Buttrey's conclusions quite acceptable but in need of further development in order to clarify even more the importance of this central episode and its relationship to the meaning of the play. In this study the first step will be to determine the meaning of the episode and then relate it to the theme of the play.

The Aegeus scene presents to us two human beings in need of help. Medea needs a place of refuge; Aegeus needs a cure for his childlessness. They discover that they can help each other. They strike a mutually satisfying bargain. What is most noteworthy about this bargain is the attitude with which each of the participants enters into agreement. Aegeus is willing to receive Medea at Athens but is unwilling to provide escort for her from Corinth to Athens. His reason is that he wishes to avoid offending Corinth (730). His reason is plausible but does somewhat undermine our admiration for Aegeus as a rescuer. Our respect for him is further weakened when he welcomes the oath which Medea requires of him as an excuse which he can offer to Medea's enemies for protecting her (744). Presumably the law of hospitality would not be sufficient to insure the protection which he has offered to Medea. Self-interest is Aegeus' motivation here.[3] He wants Medea's help but gives as little as possible in return. He prizes his security above all (743):

ἐμοί τε γὰρ τάδ' ἐστὶν ἀσφαλέστατα.

Medea recognizes and understands Aegeus' concern for his self-interest, and, although she denies it (734), her distrust of him is one reason why she asks him to take an oath. But her motivation in this regard goes deeper than her immediate distrust of Aegeus. She

[2] See above, note 1.

[3] See D. L. Page's edition of the *Medea* (Oxford 1961) xiii–xiv.

characteristically binds men to herself with oaths. This was her technique with Jason (161–63):

> λεύσσεθ' ἃ πάσχω, μεγάλοις ὅρκοις
> ἐνδησαμένα τὸν κατάρατον
> πόσιν;

Jason's violation of these oaths is the cause of much complaint by Medea during the first half of the play (21, 160–63, 169–70, 209, 492). In this way Medea displays a self-interest comparable to that of Aegeus. In trying to get others to fulfill her desires she cannot be satisfied with verbal promises unaccompanied by the divine surety of an oath. Medea's concern for her self-interest causes her to pursue her own ends so singlemindedly that she must obtain the greatest possible assurance from those who have promised her something that they will keep their word.

The similarity between the Aegeus-Medea and the Jason-Medea relationships in the matter of oaths can be extended and enlarged to encompass a more striking resemblance between the two partnerships. As with Aegeus and Medea, who demonstrate a lively self-interest in using each other for their own objectives, Jason and Medea had the mutual satisfaction of self-interest as the *raison d'être* of their relationship.

Jason profited much both in Colchis and back in Greece from the help which Medea gave him. She removed all the dangerous obstacles preventing him from obtaining the golden fleece (476–82) and caused the death of Pelias, the usurper of the throne of Jason's father (486–87). Medea was no doubt disposed to provide this help because she had fallen in love with the hero, but it would be a mistake to see Medea's passion for Jason as a self-sacrificing love or to conclude that Jason returned Medea's love. This becomes evident when the facts with which Euripides provides us about their first meeting are carefully examined.

Jason and Medea recall this meeting in their first confrontation after Jason's desertion. Here Euripides has employed an appropriate bit of realism. Jason and Medea, as when any married couple have a serious quarrel, bring out into the open stinging truths which are usually left unmentioned in quieter moments, and use them in an exchange of insults. Medea in her tirade against Jason enumerates what she did for him (475–87) and complains of the suppliancy by

means of which Jason gained her aid (496–98). Jason answers this tirade by saying that Aphrodite and Eros, i.e. her passion for him, motivated Medea to save him (527–31).[4] Jason goes on to speak of their relationship almost in terms of a business agreement. He says that Medea received more than she gave, in return for his safety (534–35), e.g. the benefits of Greek civilization and a fame which she would never have attained in her backwater birthplace (536–41). The latter advantage Medea certainly enjoyed in that her cleverness had become notorious and was a frequent topic of conversation in Greece (293–305).

The motif of suppliancy present in the first meeting between Jason and Medea is repeated in the Aegeus episode. Just as Jason in the attitude of a suppliant embraced Medea's knees to secure her help (496–97), Medea condemned to exile embraces Aegeus' knees to obtain her request (709–10). By repeating this motif Euripides suggests a similarity between the two situations. Medea and Aegeus need each other and use each other. Jason and Medea do likewise. Jason cannot gain his objective without the sorceress' help. Medea having conceived a great passion for the hero wants desperately to become his wife and also sees the opportunity to escape the barbarism of Colchis and enjoy fame in the civilized world of Greece.[5] It seems possible to reconstruct the events of this first meeting and their sequence on the model of the Aegeus scene: the mutual revelation of needs, the suppliancy of Jason (who, like Medea in the Aegeus episode, is the weaker partner because he can only obtain the golden fleece through Medea's power), and finally the agreement fortified by oaths taken by Jason (who, like Aegeus, represents the male partner whom Medea characteristically binds to herself with oaths). The Aegeus episode, with its similarity to the first meeting between Jason and Medea, clarifies and reinforces the motivation involved in the latter by demonstrating to the audience in a dramatic fashion (before the Aegeus scene all we know of the first meeting in Colchis is what Medea and

[4] The nurse also says that ἔρως was the cause of Medea's leaving Colchis with Jason (8).

[5] Ovid, whose treatnent of the Medea-Jason story seems often to be influenced by Euripides' play (cf. B. Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* [Cambridge 1966] 213, 216), has Medea reveal this very same motivation (*Met.* 7.9, 53–61).

Jason recollect in their quarrel) how such a relationship based on self-interest came into being.

Self-interest dominates the play as a recurrent theme. The Paidagogos sets the tone for the rest of the play when he proclaims the universality of selfishness (85–86):

ἄρτι γιγνώσκεις τόδε,
ὡς πᾶς τις αὑτὸν τοῦ πέλας μᾶλλον φιλεῖ.

This self-love is not simply a normal concern for one's own well-being, but a selfishness which hinders man from ever putting the interest of his fellow man before his own. Because of narrow self-interest Jason and Medea are so completely obsessed with their own desires that they cannot love one another or anyone else. Love in any real sense of the word is totally absent from their marriage. No doubt Jason's only reason for marrying Medea was the furthering of his interests in the matter of the golden fleece. He proves this to be true by the cavalier way in which he deserts Medea as soon as he finds a more profitable match. On the other hand, Medea seems to be primarily concerned with the fulfilment of her passion for Jason (cf. 8, 568–71, 1338, 1367–68) and the other advantages (cf. 536–41) of marrying a Greek hero.

In Jason and Medea self-interest is so pronounced that they are capable only of acts of hate rather than of love. Thus, they treat even those to whom they owe love as they would an enemy. The nurse recognizes that Medea has difficulty in making a distinction between loved ones and enemies when she prays (95):

ἐχθρούς γε μέντοι, μὴ φίλους, δράσειέ τι.

This prayer is inspired by Medea's evident displeasure with the children (36, 92–93, 112–14). Medea's desire to satisfy her lust for revenge will eventually enable her to kill these innocent children. This act reveals Medea as one so obsessed with self-interest that she must view anyone who stands in the way of the fulfilment of her desires, even her own children, as an enemy who must be destroyed. Jason's self-interest also causes him to mistreat those whom he supposedly loves (84):

ἀτὰρ κακός γ' ὢν ἐς φίλους ἁλίσκεται.

Self-interest has distorted Medea's view of marriage and made it quite cynical. She can only see one side of marriage from her point of view as a wife. Although her description of the marriage contract is technically accurate in emphasizing the power of the Greek husband, it completely ignores the possibility of mutual love making such a relationship at least tolerable, and thus she dehumanizes it (232–34):

> ἅς πρῶτα μὲν δεῖ χρημάτων ὑπερβολῇ
> πόσιν πρίασθαι, δεσπότην τε σώματος
> λαβεῖν.

As far as she is concerned the only possible cause of an unhappy marriage is the husband (235–43). This kind of self-obsession cannot know love even in the case of offspring. Nowhere in the play does Medea display any real affection for her children, unless her two expressions of reluctance to kill them (1040–48, 1056–58) can be called affection. The only real concern that Medea has for these children lies in how their lives and deaths affect her. Medea twice complains bitterly about the pains of childbirth (250–51, 1030–31). One senses in Medea a lack of a love which would make a mother forget this discomfort in the joy of childbirth. Her anticipation of the children's deaths are filled with references, not to the suffering to which they will be subjected by the brutal act of murder, but to how she will suffer because of their death. Their death will leave Medea wretched (1022, 1036–37). She will not be able to obtain that vicarious delight which mothers take in the lives of their children (1025–27). Medea also laments that there will be no children to take care of her in her old age and finally to bury her (1033–34). In the midst of these complaints Medea says something very characteristic of her when she mentions the "many hopes" which she had with regard to her children (1032–33). This lament recalls her earlier mention of her hopes which had been disappointed by Jason's treachery (498). She had granted his request for help in obtaining the golden fleece, but not without expecting something in return. Since she can only view others in the cynical light of her self-interest, expectations with regard to how others can further her interests regularly develop in her mind.

Jason is the archetype of the egotistical male. It is impossible for him to love a woman. He can only use them as he used Medea and is

using Creon's daughter. Jason has only contempt for the female sex: it would be better if women did not exist and children were born in another way; then men would be carefree (573–75). This contempt is also evident when he expresses a disdainful confidence that he will be able to persuade his new wife to obtain permission from her father for Medea's children to remain at Corinth (944). Medea cunningly confirms him in this confidence (945). Jason believes that he can handle any woman. Like Medea he sees his own children only in the light of his self-interest. Just as Medea is capable of killing them to satisfy her lust for revenge, Jason is capable of deserting them for his own purposes.[6]

There is one essential difference between the self-interest of Jason and that of Medea: Jason's selfishness is petty compared with Medea's. He primarily aims at material advantage and security, as in the case of his marriage to Creon's daughter. His desertion of Medea and the children is probably the greatest crime of which he is capable in the pursuit of his self-interest. Medea's self-interest exists on a more elemental plane. She possesses passions which cry out for satisfaction. The sexual frustration which she experiences because of Jason's desertion leads to an overriding lust for revenge (cf. 568–71, 1338, 1367–68). Medea's forceful passions enable her to go as far as the murder of her own children in quest of their fulfilment.

The self-interest which pervades this play vitiates two relationships which man holds most dear, that between husband and wife and that between parents and children. The human relationships which Euripides creates in this play are barren, sterile, devoid of love—except in one instance, the relationship between Creon and his daughter. No doubt as a contrast to emphasize the sterility of the other characters, Euripides has made Creon capable of real love and unconcerned with his self-interest. He knowingly acts contrary to his own interests when he grants Medea one day of grace (348–51). Medea wins this favor from him by playing upon his love for his children (344–45). Creon admits that his children are even dearer to him than his country

[6] The choral lyric which tells of the troubles which children cause parents (1081–1115) must be understood as ironical, especially since it comes immediately after Medea makes her final decision to kill the children. In this play parents are a plague to their children.

is (329). His selflessness and love for his daughter are most tragically evident when he chooses to die with her (1209–10):

τίς τὸν γέροντα τύμβον ὀρφανὸν σέθεν
τίθησιν; οἴμοι, συνθάνοιμί σοι, τέκνον.

These two deaths and the murder of the children which follows immediately form the tragic climax of the play. Three innocent children[7] and the selfless Creon are the tragic victims. The human tragedy which we see exemplified in these deaths is the vulnerability of innocence, selflessness, and love to the forces of self-interest and hate. Innocence and selflessness cannot long survive in the face of the self-interest involved in the schemes of a Jason and Medea. Self-interest seems the only condition of survival.

After having examined the thematic link between the Aegeus episode and the rest of the play, we will now deal with the problem of the irrationality of Aegeus' entrance. As we have seen above, Buttrey saw this irrationality as a purposeful part of Euripides' dramatic design. It will be the purpose of the following discussion to defend and expand this thesis.

It is impossible to see any other reason for Aegeus' entrance than pure chance. But this is just the point. In the self-interested and opportunistic world of this play chance provides opportunities which are used for one's advantage. Aegeus' chance meeting with Medea dramatically represents the way in which characters in this play form relationships with each other. Jason and Medea and Jason and Creon's daughter came together just like Aegeus and Medea, by pure chance. Jason and Medea met unexpectedly in Colchis to the benefit of their mutual desires. Jason described his marriage with Creon's daughter as an unexpected piece of good luck (553–54):

τί τοῦδ' ἂν εὕρημ' ἦῦρον εὐτυχέστερον
ἢ παῖδα γῆμαι βασιλέως φυγὰς γεγώς;

Medea uses the same word εὕρημα in trying to point out to Aegeus what a windfall he has found in her power to cure his childlessness

[7] The same words which are used to designate Medea's children, παῖς and τέκνον, are also used to describe Creon's daughter (554, 1210) although she is old enough to marry Jason.

(716). The opportunistic Medea is the first to recognize the mutual benefit which can be derived from this chance meeting. Once the somewhat slow-witted Aegeus recognizes the opportunity offered him, he then agrees to the proposed bargain.

Along with the element of chance, the element of surprise dominates this play. Aegeus' entrance is just one of the many examples of the unexpected in this tragedy. The characters do not behave in a predictable manner. A husband deserts his wife and children; a mother kills her children. Such relationships in which we expect to find love are filled instead with hatred. Euripides has further emphasized unpredictability by playing his characters off against the traditional rôles which they at first seem to be playing. In the beginning Medea seems to be cast in the rôle of the oppressed heroine. Her opposite in this regard is Creon, who seems to be the typical tyrant of tragedy. No doubt at first Medea and Creon might remind the audience of Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. But events quickly prove these first impressions false. The nurse early in the play gives us the first hint that Medea is more a cruel tyrant than a persecuted heroine (117–21):

οἴμοι,
τέκνα, μή τι πάθηθ' ὡς ὑπεραλγῶ.
δεινὰ τυράννων λήματα καί πως
ὀλίγ' ἀρχόμενοι, πολλὰ κρατοῦντες
χαλεπῶς ὀργὰς μεταβάλλουσιν.[8]

Creon himself renounces the tyrant's rôle (348),

ἥκιστα τοὐμὸν λῆμ' ἔφυ τυραννικόν,

and backs up this disclaimer by being merciful to Medea.

The character of Jason does not clearly correspond to any specific typical rôle in tragedy, but it can be said that his behavior is not what we expect of the noble hero of legend. In Aegeus we have a better example. He represents the type of the savior king[9] personified elsewhere in Attic Tragedy, by Pelasgus in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Maidens*, Theseus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Demophon in

[8] See Page's note on these lines, p. 76.

[9] See G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 157.

Euripides' *Heracleidae*. The savior king typically displays great generosity in defending exiles from their oppressors no matter what the risk. But, as we have seen, Aegeus, although he is willing to give Medea refuge at Athens, falls far below the standard of generosity of the savior king because of his reluctance to risk any danger in his defense of Medea. The Athenian audience must have been especially surprised to see such behavior on the part of an Athenian king. Here, as in the cases of Medea, Jason, and Creon, self-interest lies at the heart of these rôle-reversals. Jason, Medea, and Aegeus behave unexpectedly because of their self-interest, while Creon does so because of his lack of self-interest.[10]

The Aegeus scene also represents symbolically the disaster which self-interested opportunism causes, primarily in the case of children who are defenseless against the selfishness of their parents. All the main characters are concerned somehow with children, both existent and non-existent. Besides Medea's children and Creon's daughter, there are the children Aegeus hopes to have and those which Jason desires from his new marriage (562–63). By the end of the play Medea's children and Creon's daughter are dead. Because of this latter death the birth of children to Jason and the princess is prevented. Aegeus' arrival on the scene seems to lead directly to the destruction of the existent children and the elimination of the possibility of more children. Some commentators have seen the Aegeus episode as designed to suggest to Medea the murder of Jason's children as the most effective revenge against him.[11] However, as Conacher has pointed out,[12] this is not necessarily true. Medea's malevolent attitude toward the children foreshadows disaster for them from the beginning of the play.[13] The most that the Aegeus scene accomplishes in this regard is to confirm in Medea the belief that childlessness causes great suffering for a Greek nobleman and to direct the audience's attention to this fact. The purpose of the Aegeus scene in the matter of childlessness exists more

[10] Cf. Euripides' emphasis on the unexpected in the formulaic last five lines of the play.

[11] E.g. H. Darnley Naylor, "The Aegeus Episode, *Medea* 663–773," *CR* 23 (1909) 189–90.

[12] *Euripidean Drama* (London 1967) 190 note 11.

[13] See D. Ebener, "Zum Motiv des Kindermordes in der *Medeia*," *RhM* 104 (1961) 216.

on a symbolic than literal level. Self-interest and childlessness are symbolically linked by their presence in one character, Aegeus, almost as is in a cause-and-effect relationship. Since three children die at the end of the play because of self-interest, Aegeus through his character and condition foreshadows such a disaster. His childlessness seems to infect the air of Corinth like a pestilence, bringing about the death of three children.

As a structural centerpiece the Aegeus episode looks both backwards and forwards. In its representation of a man and woman using each other to further their self-interest, the episode looks back and reflects the typical behavior of Jason and Medea as revealed in the first half of the play. On the other hand, Aegeus' childlessness symbolically anticipates the terrible extermination of children which takes place in the second half. As a microcosm of the whole play, the Aegeus scene with the king's surprising arrival at Corinth out of nowhere and subsequent bargain with Medea mirrors the self-interested opportunism and chaotic irrationality which dominate the play. Thus the Aegeus episode is revealed as an essential part of the play's structure directly related to the theme of the *Medea*.