The Pitiless March to Murder in Euripides' *Medea*

Euripides drags his audience relentlessly to the horrifying conclusion of his *Medea*, and this road to perdition is marked by the failure of pity. This paper will explore the function of pity within the text of the play. Although scholars purport to find Aristotelian *catharsis* in the audience's emotional response to this drama (Pucci 1980:135; Sezer 2015:228-33), pity for Medea is undermined by her murderous revenge, pity for Medea's victims remains unanswered by the text, and a possibility of pity for Jason (March 1990:43), who has deserved no such sympathy, confounds the audience's expectations. Pucci does not resolve this problem of pity as he neither defines his terms nor considers those passages in which characters explicitly invoke pity (*oiktos*). Munteanu provides a clearer way forward with her careful distinction between internal and external responses, between characters and audience (2012:141-3). This paper will concentrate on the play's characters, characters who fail to offer a compassionate response to human suffering.

The text of *Medea* explicitly mentions pity five times. Three times a form of the root *oikt-* emerges from the mouth of Medea herself, twice from the Chorus. Medea begs for pity, first for her children from Creon (344) and then for herself from Aegeus (711). Johnson reminds us that, in both cases, Medea acts disingenuously and so abuses the pity of her benefactors (2016:129-130). Neither king, however, is an innocent victim and neither king offers Medea and her children real compassion to alleviate their suffering. Creon's motivation is complex and his grant of a single day's reprieve does not materially change the hardship faced by Medea and her sons. Aegeus, although sympathetic to Medea's plight, also acts on behalf of the future offspring promised by Medea and so reaches "a mutually satisfying bargain" (Dunkle 1969:98). A

manipulative request resulting in a transaction, whether reluctant like Creon's or enthusiastic like that of Aegeus, is not pity.

Nor does the Chorus succeed in demonstrating compassion, even though they, like Aegeus, take Medea's part. In the second stasimon, after Jason's departure, the Chorus wish to avoid Medea's fate of exile, 'the most pitiable of griefs' (649). Although this suits Aristotle's insistence that a pitier fear the fate of the pitied (Konstan 2005:13), the Chorus are concerned with their own lot, not Medea's. When the Chorus then declare that no city or friend has shown (Page l. 656) or will show (Mastronarde l. 657) pity for Medea, they implicate themselves. The Chorus do work to dissuade Medea from killing her children, for whom they weep (906), but Mills has found the Chorus wanting in its failure to act on behalf of Medea's children (2014:105). Pity presumes action (Munteanu 2012:144).

Medea does tell Jason that a pity for their children has entered her (931). Even as she advances her plot with her children as pawns, her divided self struggles with tears. Compassion, however, actually requires distance (Konstan 2005:14-15). Pain, not pity, results from sharing the suffering of those who are dearest. Granting Medea her sincerity, her language distances her from her children. Neither Medea nor anyone else on stage finds the compassion to act for those children.

Off stage, Creon's daughter does, allowing the children to stay in Cornith after receiving their fatal gifts. The textual tradition of the Chorus's response to the macabre account of her subsequent destruction vividly demonstrates what is missing from the play. After the Chorus utter a couplet affirming the justice of Jason's suffering (1231-2), they continue: "how we pity your misfortune!" Editors consider these lines spurious (1233-1235). Pity does not have a place in Euripides' play.

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