Euripides’ Medea

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SAMPLE ANSWER

"Jason's decisions are based on reason and careful judgement; Medea's decisions are based on passion and selfishness." Discuss.

Jason is portrayed as a man of conventional ambitions. He has been heroic and resourceful in his leadership on the quest for the Golden Fleece, and now has married Glauce, gaining effective rule over Corinth. But, instead of accepting Jason's pragmatic decision, one that could have acted in her children's favour, Medea, still 'transfixed by desire', reacts instinctively and immoderately. The killing of Glauce, Medea's rival for Jason's affection, is understandable, yet her final act goes beyond all reason. She becomes, in Jason's words, an 'abomination' – a 'Tuscan Scylla' – in the eyes of all morally minded Greeks. Medea's actions bespeak unreason, untempered passion: the madness of all-consuming selfishness.

Medea is first encountered plunged into an abyss of hopeless despair: 'Oh, I am wretched, pity me for my sufferings! Oh, if only I could die'. The children's Nurse takes fright, rightly describing Medea's mood as 'savage', and sends the children away. Indeed, Medea's passions do make her savage and will prove dangerous, for the children, for Glauce and Creon, and even for herself. While she acts with little consideration for others' needs or feelings, she recognises in Jason a selfishness which is even more extreme than her own. She sees herself as 'foreign' and powerless to stop Jason, yet her passion strengthens her. As she says quite early to Creon, 'my circumstances at present do not encourage me to offend against kings'. However, Medea can, and does, 'offend' and exact revenge, having nothing to lose in contemplating a dreadful course of action.

Despite acting selfishly and being driven by passion, there is evidence in the text to suggest that Medea is also capable of reason and careful (if misguided) judgement. For example, she makes her plans in great detail, even thinking ahead to potential consequences. She knows she will be unwelcome after committing murders, so she decides to 'delay for just a short while' until she can find a way to ensure her
escape. Before carrying out her crimes of passion, she secures a refuge in Athens with Aegeus. This suggests her decisions are sometimes driven by reasoned judgement, as does Creon's accusation that she is 'clever and controls her tongue' rather than being 'hot-tempered'.

Similarly Jason, while he often seems rational and calm, is also flawed in his behaviour. He does make a great play of reasoned and careful judgement in putting aside Medea in favour of Glaucet, yet there surely were other motives, as the Chorus allude to when they suggest he has acted 'unjustly'. Power is uppermost in his mind and speech. Jason, middle-aged and now quite unadventurous, has seen how he can build upon his fading reputation and ingratiate himself with Creon. For Jason, too, a kind of passion (perhaps for power rather than for the love of others) is a motivating factor in his decisions. So, even as he tries to win over Medea with vague promises for herself and for the boys' future, every word he utters rings false. He is unreasoned and hasty in his judgement, and therefore equally as selfish as the betrayed Medea.

Perhaps Euripides wanted merely to reinforce the importance of stable, established relationships between men and women, between those who are dominant and those who are expected to be submissive or servile. But Euripides effectively undermines all expectations and presents the audience with situations and actions that cause a high degree of discomfort, and even horror. He poses more problems for his audience than can be answered by reference to conventional standards, and in this lies the enduring fascination of the play. The lines between reason and passion, between the rational and the irrational, are blurred.

Of course, one could admire Jason's pragmatism in making Glaucet his wife, but we see what his selfishness costs him, his family and Corinth. On the other hand, we can recognise the justice of Medea's claim, but be appalled by the outcome of her loss of control, her selfishness. Jason's and Medea's quarrels and actions suggest that there is no way in which the ancient Greek values of order and proportion – let alone justice – can be achieved, when human passions stand in the way of good judgement.