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**WHEN NATURE BECOMES NATURAL:
SPIRITUAL CATASTROPHE IN PASOLINI'S *MEDEA***

Jonathan Rosenbaum, film critic for the *Chicago Reader*, in his review of Pasolini's *Medea* stated: "Pier Paolo Pasolini's disappointing 1970 version of the Greek tragedy – shot in Syria, Turkey, and Italy – offers soprano Maria Callas in her only film role, playing the lead part but not singing it. Pasolini's Marxist, Catholic, and pagan impulses infuse the film with some life, but it's a step backward after *Oedipus Rex* (1967). It's worth seeing nevertheless."

I remember the first time I saw Pasolini's *Medea*. I hated it. I hated it because of its poor production (the subtitles are often impossible to read), the gory sacrificial scene in Colchis, and what appeared to me at the time as its fundamental weirdness, such as the unrealistic combination of disturbing folk music, an Argo cast as a raft more suited to Huckleberry Finn than to one of the most famous heroic expeditions in Greek mythology, the confusing doublets, not to mention its esoteric dialogue. Despite my initial loathing of the film, I continued to show it in my "Myth in Film" class out of perversity and primarily for its shock value. After numerous viewings, however, I began to realize why I hated it initially: First, I did not understand critical points and so I blamed my inability to penetrate the film on the director; secondly, it pushed buttons below the surface of my consciousness, making me unwittingly uncomfortable, much as Pasolini's *Edipo Re* succeeded in doing. So it was the viewer, and not the director, who was the problem here! *Medea* is not a feel good film. But once the various points Pasolini explores in the movie emerge from his aggressively impressionistic and in-your-face cinematic narrative, you can at least feel good that you were able to come to terms with one of the most remarkable takes on the Medea story of all times.

I would like to begin with the role of the Centaur, Chiron, a liminal figure situated somewhere between animal and human, savage and civilized, and in Pasolini's version, between myth and science, religion and atheism. Chiron guides Jason on a journey even before he meets his uncle Pelias and agrees to go in search of the Golden Fleece, an educational journey that brilliantly recapitulates Greek intellectual history.

When we first see Jason, he is a baby, listening to an afternoon bedtime story told by his bearded and seemingly equine guardian. Chiron's story, an introduction to the Argonautic myth, mentions Ino's plot, the golden fleeced ram, the family of the god of the winds to which Jason belongs; in short, "una storia complicata." Jason's introduction to his family and the world is expressed in folkloric and mythic terms, with talking rams, jealous step-mothers, wicked uncles, and usurped thrones. In this case, however, Chiron's grim fairytale has specific application to Jason.

As Jason grows older, the centaur adds a new dimension to his tutorial: "Tutto è santo, Tutto è santo, Tutto è santo!" "Everything is holy. There is nothing natural in nature. When nature seems natural, everything is finished ... Everywhere you look gods are hidden. But the gods that love at the same time hate." At this point in Jason's education, the mythic explanation of life has evolved more fully into a supernatural view of reality, wherein the uncertainties present in nature are viewed as the work of protecting and malevolent gods. With regard to the human response to this religious interpretation of the world, Chiron goes on to say, "For ancient man, the myths and rituals are concrete experiences which include him even in his bodily and daily existence. For him, reality is a unity so perfect that the emotion he experiences before the silence of a summer sky is equivalent to the most intimate personal experience of a modern man." Myth and ritual, then, are an essential part of human existence for the ancient man who cherishes a view that nature is not natural but rather infused with the presence of the divine.

As the lesson continues, the older Jason is informed that he will go on a journey far from his home, where, paradoxically, life is more realistic because the people there are more mythic. At this point, we must ask ourselves: if the Colchians are more realistic because they are mythic, what are the Greeks? And what is Jason? Less realistic because less mythic? For Pasolini, the answer is, paradoxically, yes.

For Chiron, the definitive lesson comes from the observation of agriculture and how seeds lose their form below the earth in order to be reborn: "La resurrezione, mio caro." But, he goes on to say, this definitive lesson no longer obtains for Jason. "That which you see in the grains, that which you understand from the rebirth of the seeds lacks significance for you,

like an old memory that no longer concerns you. In fact, there is no God." At this point Chiron is no longer a centaur, but a beardless man. And the audience seeing this film for the first time wonders at this point: what is real? Is Chiron a centaur or a man? This question is precisely the point, as becomes clearer later in the film.

Jason's education took him from myth to religion and ultimately to what we might loosely describe as science: the understanding that after all nature is natural, that nothing is holy, that man is the measure of all things, and, for Jason, that he is the measure of all things pertaining to his success. As F. M. Cornford stated in his slender but insightful book *Before and After Socrates*, the birth of science in Greece arises from the assumption that "the whole universe is natural and potentially within the reach of knowledge as ordinary and rational as our knowledge that fire burns and water drowns ... The conception of Nature is extended to incorporate what had been the domain of the supernatural. The supernatural, as fashioned by mythology, simply disappears; all that really exists is natural." This is precisely the point that Chiron makes when he says "When nature seems natural, everything is finished." And it is the devastating realization of this lesson, particularly in the mind of Medea, that Pasolini explores in the rest of the film.

The transition from Greece to Colchis in the film is sudden, even jarring, but also stunningly germane. As soon as Chiron tells Jason that the rebirth of the seeds has no meaning for him, we encounter Medea in Colchis, who, at the beginning of a rather disturbing fertility rite, prays "Grant life to the seeds and be reborn with the seeds." The contrast between Greece and Colchis, East and West, Myth and Nature, religion and atheism, male and female could not be more striking. The interaction between these oppositions, as we already know from the myth, will prove to be destructive. But in the terms established by the film, they can also be annihilating.

Pasolini's representation of the great Argonautic expedition is, in a word, underwhelming. The Argo is a rickety raft, the crew reduced to a handful, and the mission depicted more as a piratical raid than a heroic quest. There is no sleepless dragon, only an animal relic propped on a cross set within an ancient Christian chapel. Medea, without ever seeing the Greek hero face to face (although she has a vision of him) and with the aid of her brother Apsyrtus, gives the fleece to Jason, kills her brother, and accompanies Jason home. Pasolini foregoes the representation of Medea falling in love, so elegantly depicted by Apollonius. Budding love is not the point of this version.

When Medea arrives in Greece, she provides us with a first glimpse of her spiritual catastrophe when she expresses her feeling of complete alienation from the new world she has come to. "Speak to me Earth, let me hear your voice. I don't remember your voice. Speak to me Sun. I can't hear you. I touch

the earth and I don't recognize it; I look for the sun, but I don't recognize it." The complete – or almost complete – divorce between Medea and her mythic, supernatural, and religious core occurs when she is stripped of her dark, priestly vestments and dressed by the daughters of Pelias in the lighter secular clothes associated with Greece. A nice touch, particularly as the donning of Medea's clothing will in time have such disastrous results. That Pelias' daughters should take the initiative in making this transformation is particularly ironic, given that among the ancient stories, it was Medea who tricked them into killing their own father. If you watch Jason's reactions during this portion of the film, Medea's critical condition is not totally lost on him, though he lacks the ability to understand its full ramifications, particularly as it applies to himself. But this will become painfully clear in the years ahead.

Pasolini veers sharply from the ancient myth by having Jason cede his throne to Pelias and by not having Medea orchestrate his foul murder. Jason states "To tell you the truth, this goat skin has no meaning outside of its country." Pelias had said that the fleece was the sign of the eternity of power and order. But this can only be the case for those who would grant it that significance; that is, those who inhabit a world of myth and religion, which Jason had abandoned long ago.

At this point, the film leaves the Argonautic tale as Jason dismisses the Argonauts. He and Medea leave Iolcus and the two head to Corinth, staged partly at the base of the ancient acropolis at Aleppo, reminiscent of Acrocorinth, and partly at the famous Renaissance cathedral in Pisa, a fascinating study of contrasting architecture and time. The director now turns to Euripides' *Medea*. Before the play begins, however, Jason encounters Chiron once again, or rather the Chirons: one an unspeaking centaur as we first saw him, and the other a beardless man as we last saw him.

In his vision, the beardless Chiron identifies the two of them as "the holy one you knew as a baby, the unholy one you knew as an adult." But he goes on to state: "We are still both a part of your understanding." In response to Jason's request for clarification, Chiron states: "He does not speak because his logic is different from ours. I speak for him. It is under his influence that you, beyond your calculations and interpretation, really love Medea. ... Moreover, you pity her and understand her spiritual catastrophe, the disorientation of an ancient woman in a world that does not understand what she believes in. The poor woman was converted to destruction and she never got over it. Why have I told you this? Nothing can stop the old centaur from inspiring sentiments and nothing can stop me, the new centaur, from expressing them."

Once we come to see, and for Pasolini seeing here is literal, this dichotomy in Jason – that there resides in him the dim memory of a

mythic/religious and sentimental understanding of the world which has been replaced by a logical non-mythic conception of life – we can understand much better the duplication of the scenes wherein Glauce and Creon die.

The first scene represents Medea's mythic understanding of what should happen; her power and the dark priestly clothing she wore in Colchis are momentarily restored. She gives Jason poisoned garments to present to Glauce, who, after putting them on, bursts into flames which consume her father Creon as well. The second scene provides the "natural" explanation for Glauce's and Creon's deaths: Glauce felt intense pangs of guilt and remorse for stealing Medea's husband, as a result of which she commits suicide by throwing herself over a cliff, and Creon, overwhelmed at the death of his only child, does the same. Should we ask which explanation is the correct one, our knowledge of ancient myths will tell us the first; our need for a natural explanation will opt for the second. Yet, whether we privilege our mythic or our scientific modes of thinking, we are left with the same awful results. From this vantage point, we might ask, does it really matter? What I find brilliant in the choice to portray two death scenes is that Pasolini has not only represented visually the two modes of thinking that lie at the heart of the film, but he also prompts the audience in their confusion at seeing two contradictory versions of the same scene to wonder: what is real?

Jason's conversion from a mythic to a natural understanding of human existence might appear to be merely a preface to Medea's tragic conversion, his two centaurs prefiguring the two death scenes. There is more to it, however, much more. In addition to offering a succinct account of Greek intellectual history, Pasolini leads us into a part of Jason's soul previously unexplored by writers of any age. Buried inside the pragmatist, the man of nature, there still lurks the old centaur who has a vague sense of what was happening to Medea because he himself had long ago experienced spiritual catastrophe. Though suppressed and silent, its continued presence generates residual understanding, pity, and even love, albeit expressed, in the film as in Euripides' play, superficially. Regardless of the continued presence of the sentimental part, however, the pragmatist, the man of nature, wants control over understanding, pity, and even love, a situation that has long been his normal state.

Medea, on the other hand, is fully committed to, and emotionally invested in, her alienation and spiritual catastrophe. Although she made one last futile attempt to resurrect her mythic view of life as seen in her mental projection of Glauce's death – a way of thinking we first saw in the human sacrifice celebrated to bring forward new crops that was later perverted into the sacrifice of her brother to secure a husband and ultimately children – she ultimately relinquishes any hope of return to her past by way of a horrifying

act of self-destruction as a way of taking vengeance on that husband. Medea could never succeed in going back, just as Jason could not, even if he wanted. We are left, then, with the sad, but necessary, conclusion that the loss of myth and the loss of connection with the supernatural is final and any attempt to recapture it is, as Medea states at the very end of the film, "useless", concluding that "Nothing is possible any more". Medea's spiritual catastrophe happens, as Pasolini demonstrates through his profoundly creative interpretation of the Medea myth, when nature becomes natural. As the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum noted, this film is worth seeing.