Background of Medea by Euripides

By Roger Blackwell Bailey, Ph.D.

Athamas, king of Orchomenus, and his first wife Nephele ("Cloud"), have two children, Helle and Phrixus. Having separated from Nephele by his own choice or hers, Athamas takes a younger wife, Ino, daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia of Thebes and sister of Semele on whom Zeus fathered Dionysus. Athamas and Ino have two other children, Learchus and Melicertes. Ino resents and wants to destroy Phrixus and Helle. Having spoiled the crop by causing the seed to be roasted before it was sown, she arranges for the oracle to report that, in order to avert a famine, Athamas must sacrifice his children (some say only Phrixus) to Zeus. Even though reluctant, Athamas begins to comply but is interrupted when their mother Nephele sends them away on the back of a ram with a golden fleece, a ram she had received upon appeal to Hermes on her children's behalf. The children escape on it to Colchis, Helle having fallen into what later is known as the Hellespont on the way there. Phrixus is well received by Aeëtes the king, who is a son of Helios; brother of Pasiphaë and Circe; and father, by his first wife Asterodea, of a daughter, Chalciope. Aeëtes weds this daughter to Phrixus. By his second wife Idyia Aeëtes has a son named Apsyrtus and a daughter named Medea. Phrixus, for his part, sacrifices the ram to Zeus and gives its golden fleece to his father-in-law, who hangs it over a branch in a sacred grove and sets a sleepless serpent as a guardian. Phrixus and Chalciope have four children. Aeëtes may at some point have killed Phrixus; somehow the four children are later compelled to escape from their grandfather.

In Iolcus, Aeson, Aeolus' grandson and Athamas' nephew, had lost his kingdom to his adopted brother Pelias, a son of Poseidon. Jason's mother places her son under the tutelage of the centaur Chiron until he comes of age and can reclaim his throne from his uncle. However and by whomever motivated, Jason journeys to his uncle and, on the way there, unwittingly befriends Juno, who hates Pelias because of his neglect of her and who becomes a temporary supporter of Jason. When, at length, Jason presents himself before his uncle, the latter knows from certain signs that his own time is short. At any rate, Pelias promises to relinquish the throne to Jason in exchange for the golden fleece which Phrixus had given to Aeëtes. He makes some claim or other to it because of his kinship to Athamas. Jason prepares to go, commissioning the building of a large ship, which he names after Argus, its ingenious builder, and manning it with a stellar crew of specialists like Nestor and Heracles, fifty in all.

Arrived in Colchis, Jason is required by Aeëtes to perform tasks in order to obtain the fleece. The latter has no intention of letting the Argonauts (for so they are called) get away with the fleece, and Aeëtes' daughter Medea knows it. She has fallen in love with Jason but promises her help to him only if he will agree (and swear) to marry her. Jason's task is to hitch ferocious fire breathing bulls to a plow and sow a dragon's teeth.
From these teeth soldiers will sprout up from the ground and turn their weapons on the one who sowed them. Medea's magic herb protects Jason from the bulls (remember that Medea is Circe's niece). Furthermore, when the soldiers spring up, Jason is to throw a stone in their midst. This action causes the soldiers to turn their weapons on one another. Knowing of her father's evil intentions toward Jason and his men, Medea kills the sleepless serpent and helps Jason take the fleece and get away with all hands in the Argo. She takes hostage her brother Aspyrtus, cuts him into several pieces and throws the pieces overboard one by one so that Aeëtes, who can be counted on to want all the pieces of Apsyrtus, will be compelled to make fatal stops in his pursuit.

Finally, back in Iolcus Medea tricks Pelias' daughters into hacking their father to death and boiling him in the belief that they can thereby restore him to health and youth. Medea and Jason are apparently forced to flee from Iolcus, and from there they go to Corinth, where they stay until she begins to be mistrusted by the Corinthians and is ordered into exile by Creon the king.