

Euripides' *Medea*

Int. and Trans. by Marianne McDonald

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Introduction

Euripides was one of the three great tragedians of ancient Athens. The other two were Aeschylus and Sophocles. Euripides was born ca. 480 BC and died in ca. 406 BC. Although in his own lifetime he did not win as many prizes as Aeschylus and Sophocles, he became the most popular in later times.

Euripides has been called the first psychological playwright. His work explores the pathology of human beings. According to Aristotle, Sophocles claimed he showed men as they ought to be, but Euripides showed them as they were (*Poetics* 1460^b33-4).

In the Euripidean universe, chaos and malevolent gods rule. The only help that a man or woman can get comes from a fellow human being. This alliance goes by the name of *philia*, or love, and duty.

Euripides made women and children and slaves into heroes, and tended to present the traditional male heroes in a very bad light. He showed us instead the heroism of the victims. He is also the greatest anti-war playwright of ancient Greece, and perhaps of all time.

He wrote about ninety plays, from which nineteen survive, as compared with the seven from Aeschylus and Sophocles. The dates of performance for eight of his surviving plays are known, and others are tentatively proposed, on the basis of evidence provided by ancient writers, or of his own developing metrical practice:

Alcestis 438 BC

Medea 431 BC

Children of Heracles ca. 430 BC

Hippolytus 428 BC

Andromache ca. 425 BC

Hecuba ca. 424 BC

Suppliant Women ?424-20 BC

Electra ?422-16 BC
Trojan Women 415 BC
Heracles ca. 415 BC
Iphigenia Among the Taurians ca. 414 BC
Ion ca. 413 BC
Helen 412 BC
The Phoenician Women ca. 409 BC
Orestes 408 BC
Iphigenia at Aulis 405 BC (posthumous)
Bacchae 405 BC (posthumous)
Cyclops (uncertain)
Rhesus (possibly post-Euripidean)

Medea is every philandering husband's nightmare. She is a woman who is rejected when her husband has made his fortune. As a foreigner, she is "inconvenient." Jason wants a trophy wife in recognition of his achievements. But Medea strikes back and her vengeance is operatic. Many operas, in fact, are written about her.

The story begins with the nurse telling of Jason's ungrateful desertion of the woman who made him what he was to marry Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. A tutor informs the nurse that now Medea will be exiled. Medea comes out of the house and tries to win over the women of Corinth, who identify with her, in spite of her being a foreigner.

Creon enters, and Medea and bargains with him for a day's respite. Medea confronts Jason, raging at him for breaking his oaths to her. He glibly says that all he had planned with his new marriage was to benefit them both.

Aegeus, the king of Athens, enters and has Medea solve a riddle that Delphi has set him. He wants to have children. She strikes a deal for a place of refuge with him in Athens, if she solves his problem. He accepts, if she can get there on her own. She calls Jason back and wins him over with honeyed words. She sends presents to the princess he is marrying: a beautiful dress and diadem.

A messenger tells how the princess was consumed by the dress that ate into her like acid, while the flaming diadem shed fire over her entire body. Her flesh oozed off her like sap from a tree. Her father also died when he embraced her; he pulled off his flesh as he tried to get away. Medea debates with herself but finally decides she will kill her children. After she exits, their cries are heard offstage.

Jason confronts Medea carrying the bodies of his two sons. Her grandfather has sent her a dragon-drawn chariot to fly her to Athens. She will not let Jason touch his boys. Medea and Jason continue insulting each other. In the end the chorus tells us that the gods can make anything happen, and that was the case here.

The choruses speak of women and how they have been misrepresented by male poets. Now they claim a new song will be, and should be, sung about women.

They also speak of the excesses of passion, an evil to be avoided. They even claim that children are problematic: after one has loved them and raised them with care, death can carry them off. Is it worth it?

Medea would say yes, for various reasons. She sees Creon, Jason and Aegeus all concerned for their children, so she finds the death of Jason's children will provide her with the perfect vengeance. She destroys Jason's past and his future, his former children and the princess who could bear him new ones. She goes on to thrive in Athens, and her continued myth shows her trying to murder Theseus, another of Aegeus' sons, but she escapes with her son by Aegeus, Medus, and founds the country of the Medes (Persia) where she will live happily ever afterwards with her son.

Medea is a Homeric hero. Like Achilles, her honor is paramount. She will not have her enemies laugh at her. But, in spite of possessing magical powers, she is a total woman and mother. She loves her children and will suffer the rest of her life for the loss that she has inflicted on both herself and her husband. Medea loved her husband once. Her love has turned to hate, and she claims that passion is stronger than her reason. She is not insane, but passionately motivated to pay her husband back whatever the cost. She is a woman who loves and hates with her whole being.

Jason uses the language of sophists (philosophers who sold rhetorical skill so that their students could win arguments whether right or wrong: see Aristophanes' play on this subject, *The Clouds*). But Jason is not simply evil. Greek tragedy always presents

two sides to everything. The ancient audience probably believed he sincerely meant to benefit Medea and the children. He does not understand that that “benefit” is not what Medea wants. She totally rejects it on grounds of honor and for emotional reasons. Jason uses his brain; Medea, her heart.

Modern audiences feel little sympathy for Jason at the beginning. Later, after Medea kills the children, one has sympathy for Jason. A divorce would have been SOOO much simpler. But not for Medea. She was out for blood.

Theodorakis in his opera give wonderful poignant arias to Jason to let us understand his suffering at the end. And if we read Euripides closely, he agrees.

Euripides has created one of the greatest portraits of a woman in drama. Medea gets her vengeance and escapes. However, she can escape from everyone but herself. Here lies the tragedy for her. Euripides has truly sung a new song about a woman, and it has never been surpassed.

I capitalize all the lines of the lyric meters, but not those of the normal dialogue in iambic trimeters. The lyric meters are used by the chorus, and the actors either in expressive monologues or in spirited exchanges. Otherwise I have tried to use actor-and-audience-friendly English.

First reading for Grassroots Greeks, 2004

Performance at 6th At Penn, October-November, 2007.

Director Ruff Yaeger

Set design, Costumes and Lighting Ruff Yaeger

Cast

Medea, Daughter of Aeetes, king of Colchis, Jason's first wife,

Monique Gaffney

Jason, Son of Aeson, who ruled Iolcus, John DeCarlo

Creon, King of Corinth, Steven Jenson

Aegeus, King of Athens, John Martin

Nurse, old servant of Medea from her home in Colchis,

Darlene Cleary

Tutor, Joseph Dionisio

Messenger, also servant of Jason, various

Chorus of Corinthian women, Allison Finn

Two boys, Medea's and Jason's children, screen projections

Cast

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Jason, Son of Aeson, who ruled Iolcus,

Creon, King of Corinth

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Tutor

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Chorus of Corinthian women

Two boys, Medea's and Jason's children

Corinth. In front of MEDEA's home. NURSE enters from the house.

NURSE

If only Jason's ship,
had not flashed over dark waters,
past the clashing Symplegades
finally to reach Colchis.
I wish the pines in the groves of Pelion
had never been sent crashing to the ground
to make oars for the hands of heroes
chasing after a golden fleece.
Then my mistress would never have sailed to Iolcus,
following Jason, the man she loved.
If she hadn't tricked the daughters of Pelias 10
into killing their father, she wouldn't
have come here to Corinth
to settle with her husband and children.
By stopping a famine, she benefited the city
that was her new home.
She also helped Jason in every way!
That's how it should be:
a wife standing at her husband's side.
But now it's the opposite: love has turned to hate.
By marrying the daughter of Creon, who rules this country,
Jason has betrayed my mistress and his children.

Now Medea is in despair, dishonored 20
she screams, "What about oaths?
What about your right hand in mine
when you swore you would be faithful to me?"
She calls on the gods to see how Jason has betrayed her.
She won't eat, her body is in agony,
and she spends her time in tears
ever since she realized what Jason has done to her.
She just lies alone and stares at the ground.
She's as deaf as a stone or a wave of the sea
and won't listen to any advice from her friends.
From time to time she raises her head,
cries out to her father, her native land, 30
and her new home, now betrayed
by her husband who has dishonored her.
That poor woman has learned a hard lesson:
what it is to be a foreigner in a foreign country.
She hates to see her children now;
I'm afraid of what she may be planning.

She's a very strange woman. Anyone who tangles with her
should be afraid, very afraid. 40

But here come the children.
They don't know how their mother suffers.
Children don't have a care in the world.

Enter TUTOR with the boys.

TUTOR

So here you are, all alone, complaining away, 50
and you call yourself devoted to our mistress?
I don't think it's a good idea to leave Medea alone.

NURSE

Old man, you take care of Jason's children,
and that's fine, but for me, devoted as I am,
I take Medea's suffering too much to heart.
It hurt so much I had to come out
and shout to the earth below and heavens above
about the pain my mistress feels and which I share.

TUTOR

Is she still crying?

NURSE

Still? She's only just started. There'll be no end to her tears. 60

TUTOR

And the poor woman doesn't know the half of it.

NURSE

What do you mean? Tell me what you've heard.

TUTOR

Nothing. Forget what I said.

NURSE

No, please. Please tell me. I'll keep a secret if I have to.

TUTOR

I eavesdropped
while I was hanging around the Pirene spring
where old men play chess,
when someone said that Creon, our ruler,
was going to drive these children
and their mother out of Corinth.
Now I don't know whether this is true or not.
I hope it isn't.

70

NURSE

Jason would agree to this?
I know he hates their mother, but even so.

TUTOR

That's the way of the world. New loves replace old ones.
Jason doesn't care about our house now.

NURSE

That's terrible. New troubles come tumbling on us
before we can recover from the first ones.

TUTOR

Be quiet about this, and don't tell our mistress.

80

NURSE

Children, do you hear what a father you have?
I'd like him dead...no, no, he's still my master.
But he has shown what a bastard he is to those he once loved.

TUTOR

He's only human. Are you just learning that
everyone puts himself first?
Jason loves his new bride, not his old family.

NURSE

Go inside, children.
And, you, make sure they don't go near
their mother the way she's feeling now. 90
She looks at the world like some mad bull,
out to destroy something.
Her anger is asking for blood,
and I'm afraid it's going to get it.
How I hope she destroys an enemy
rather than someone she loves!

MEDEA

Suffering! Suffering! Suffering!
I want to die.

NURSE

See, children? Just what I said.
Your mother heaps fuel on her sorrow
and is making it blaze even more fiercely.
Run quickly inside the house! Don't let her see you! 100
Don't go near her. Be careful of that wild spirit:
the dangerous nature of a heart
that is used to getting its own way.
Go now! Run quickly inside.
The cloud of her weeping is growing
and there will soon be lightning
lit by her passionate soul
caught in the jaws of suffering.

Exeunt TUTOR and CHILDREN.

MEDEA, *moaning,*

Agony and moaning, 110
Moaning and tears and great cries of pain,
Children of a hateful, hated, and hating mother,
I hope you die along with your father
And the whole house goes up in flames!

NURSE, *also moaning*

What do the children have to do with their father's crime?

Why are *they* your enemies?
O children,
I'm terrified for what might happen to you.
The moods of the powerful are dangerous. 120
They know how to control others,
But seldom take advice:
Their moods change from moment to moment.

For myself, I try to get along with people.
Security's what I want as I grow old.
Having too much or being too great just means trouble.
"Moderation" has a nice sound to it,
And in the end it's best for everyone.
Excess benefits no one.
If a god gets angry,
The higher the house, the greater the fall. 130

Enter chorus.

CHORUS

I heard the voice, I heard the cry
Of the poor woman from Colchis.
Has she found no relief? Tell me.
Her cry reached my house;
It pierced through my double gates.
Her pain brings me no joy
Because I've become friends with her.

NURSE

Her home is no more. Lost to the winds!
Her husband's in bed with a princess, 140
While my lady lies all alone,
Her life wasting away.
The words of her friends are no help.

MEDEA, wailing

I wish a lightning bolt would strike me dead!
Why should I live any longer?
(*More wailing*) I'd like to leave this miserable life
And find peace in death.

CHORUS

Zeus, Earth, and Sun with your blazing light,

Did you hear?
What a song of sorrow
This poor wife wails?
What foolish longing for that fatal sleep? 150
Death comes soon enough
And needs no prayers.
If your husband honors a new bed
Don't torture yourself over it.
Zeus is on *your* side.
Don't waste your life
In sorrow for a wayward husband.

MEDEA

Great Themis and lady Artemis, do you see what I suffer? 160
See how my damnable husband dishonors
The oaths that he swore to me?
How I'd like to see him destroyed along with his bride,
House and all come tumbling down,
For the unjust wrongs they have heaped on me.
O father, and city, which I left in shame
After I killed my brother!

NURSE

Do you hear her?
Her cries to Themis, the daughter of Zeus,
The guardian of oaths that men take? 170
Too late for small measures
To end my mistress' anger.

CHORUS

If only she could come out and see us
And listen to our words.
If only she might shift her anger,
That passion now inflames.
She should put an end to her frantic mood!
I hope I never fail my friends when they need me!
Go and bring her out of the house. 180
Her friends are here with healing words.
Go quickly before she does anything to those inside.
Her grief is raging, and its momentum is growing.

NURSE

I'll do it, but I don't know
If I'll succeed.
I'll try,
No matter what it takes.
If any servant tries to speak with her,
She glares at them
Like a lioness protecting her cubs.
You would be right to say
The men of old were foolish, not wise, 190
Because they added pleasant sounds to our lives
In the songs they sung at parties, banquets,
And festive dinners,
But found no way
To heal the sorrows of men though music
And songs sung to the lyre's sweet chords.
Great grief can be fatal to men.
It destroys homes.
Songs should heal as well as amuse. 200
Why sing at a merry feast?
The rich banquet is joy enough.

NURSE exits.

CHORUS

I have heard her cry, moaning through her tears,
Screaming her wrongs and cursing
That vile husband who betrayed her bed.
She calls on Themis, Zeus's daughter,
Who watches over the sanctity of oaths,
To witness her husband's betrayal.
Because of those oaths, Medea sailed to Greece 210
Over the dark salty depths of the Black Sea,
A strait seldom traversed.

Enter MEDEA with NURSE. She is suppressing her rage to win over the women of Corinth.

MEDEA

Women of Corinth!
Here I am, and I beg you not to blame me.

Many people I know put on airs,

and lord it over others in private
and sometimes even shamelessly in front of everyone.
But if someone is simply quiet and keeps to herself,
she gets a reputation for not caring about others.
People are quick to judge a person on first sight
before they truly get to know her, 220
even if she's done them no wrong. It's not fair.
A newcomer has to learn to fit in.
Nothing is more obnoxious than someone
offending the citizens of her new city
because she refuses to learn their ways.

My friends, I am the victim of a sudden blow
that has devastated me. Ruined me.
Nothing in life gives me pleasure any more; I want to die.
The man who was everything to me – God, how I loved him! –
my husband has shown himself to be the worst of men.

We women are the most unfortunate
of all living creatures. 230
First our fathers have to buy a husband, pay him a dowry,
and then we must make him master of our bodies:
that's even worse than buying him.
Everything hinges on whether
we get a good or a bad husband:
divorce or remaining single is not an option.

It's a new way of life!
A wife has to be a fortune-teller to
know how to satisfy her husband's needs,
things she hasn't learned at home. 240
Life is enviable if we work this out
and our husband doesn't resent being married.
Otherwise life is hell.
It's easy for a man. If he gets restless,
he simply goes out and drowns his sorrows
in the company of some soul mate, male or female.
We don't have that choice. It's him or nothing.
They say that living at home as we do
is a life free from care; no danger at all,
whereas men have to go out and fight.
Wrong! I'd rather go to war three times 250
than go through labour pains to give birth once!

It's different with you. You have your own city;
You can visit your parents; you enjoy life

and the company of friends,
But I'm living in a new city.
After he carted me off, like some foreign souvenir,
my husband has abandoned me.
I don't have a mother, a brother,
or a relative to turn to now that
things have gone wrong.

I must ask a favor from you:
if I find some way to pay my husband back
for what I've suffered, please keep quiet. 260
In most things a woman
is full of fear and no warrior at all,
but if she is wronged in love
there is no mind more bent on bloody revenge.

CHORUS

I swear I'll say nothing.
You are right to avenge yourself on your husband, Medea.
Your suffering does not surprise me
After what you've had to endure.
Here's Creon now, the ruler of our land.
Let's hope he has something to say about all of this. 270

Enter CREON. Exit NURSE into house.

CREON

Medea, scowling at every thing and everyone,
I order you to leave this land immediately with your two children.
That is my decree; I won't go home
until I've seen the last of you.

MEDEA

I am totally destroyed.
My enemies are storming against me
and I have no safe harbor to shelter in.
I know how you feel about me, but I'll still ask: 280
why are you sending me into exile, Creon?

CREON

I'm not afraid to say it straight out:

I fear the harm you could do to my daughter.
It could cost her life. I have many reasons to be afraid:
You are a clever woman and a skilled sorceress.
You are obviously suffering because your husband left you.
I've been told that you are threatening
harm to the bride, her father, and the groom.
So I'm preparing in advance.
It's better that you hate me now, 290
than I later regret having a soft heart.

MEDEA, *wailing*,

It's not the first time, Creon, but many times,
that my reputation has brought disaster on me.
No man, if he has any sense,
should over-educate his children.
They are accused of being aloof:
people resent and dislike them. Try to teach a fool
something new, and you are called both foolish and useless.
You will be especially disliked if you show yourself wiser
than those whom the city consider wise. 300

That's the case with me: I'm clever, so people resent me,
and find me difficult. But I'm really not.

You say you are afraid of me. For what possible reason?
I'm not the type of person to attack my ruler.
You have nothing to fear from me.
What have *you* done to hurt me?
You gave your daughter to the person of your choice. 310
I hate my husband, but you did what you thought best.
I don't hold anything against your happiness.
Yes! Rejoice in this marriage and may you have every success!
Just let me stay here. Even if my husband has wronged me,
I'll keep quiet. I know when to give in to superior force.

CREON

Your words are persuasive, but I'm afraid of what
you are hiding in your heart.
Now I trust you even less than I did before.
A noisy hot-head, whether a woman or a man,
is much easier to deal with than some clever quiet one. 320
So leave right now, and don't say anything more.
You're my enemy! My mind is made up.
You won't be able to talk me out of this.

MEDEA kneels in front of him, grasping CREON's knees and holding his hand, the traditional gestures of a suppliant.

MEDEA

Don't do this to me, I beg you!

CREON

Your words are useless. You will never convince me.

MEDEA

Will you exile me, without hearing the just prayer of a suppliant?

CREON

I love my family more than you, Medea.

MEDEA

My country, only a dream now, but still a treasured memory.

CREON

I also prize my country, next to my children.

MEDEA

Love brings such suffering to mortals!

330

CREON

I suppose that depends on how lucky you are.

MEDEA

Zeus, you know who caused all this suffering.

CREON

Go away and rid me of MY suffering.

MEDEA

I have enough suffering, I don't need any more.

CREON

My men will throw you out of Corinth if you don't leave now.

MEDEA

No! No! I beg you, Creon.

CREON

You really are tedious, you know.

MEDEA

I will go into exile. I'm not asking for that reprieve.

CREON

Then why are you still clutching my hand?

MEDEA

Just give me one day so I can figure out where to go, 340
and provide for my children, since their father
has made no provision for them.
You're a parent too; please have some pity on them.
I don't care about myself and exile;
my concern is all for my children and how they will suffer.

CREON

I'm not a tyrant, and I've paid for that in the past.
I know I'm making a terrible mistake now, 350
but I'll give you what you ask.
I warn you though, if tomorrow's sun
still sees you and your children within this land's borders,
you will die. I mean it. So stay if you must, just this one day.
That's not long enough for you to commit the crimes
which I fear you have in mind.

Exit CREON.

CHORUS

No end to it! Pain and more pain for you!
Where can you turn? What home will take you in?
What country will be a refuge? 360
A god has thrown you into a raging sea of troubles.

MEDEA

Pain waiting for me wherever I turn!
But don't let appearances fool you.
I am not as helpless as I seem.
I can seriously harm the newly-weds and their in-laws.
Do you think I would have crawled
to that miserable man if I didn't have something to gain by it?
I wouldn't have spoken to him or held his hand. 370
He was an idiot to give me this day.
He could have ruined my plans simply by throwing me out.
Now I have time to deal with my three enemies:
father, daughter, and my husband.

Now let's see. What should I try first?
There are so many ways they could die. 380
Should I sneak into the house
and set the bridal bed on fire,
or stick a sword through their bellies?
There's one thing wrong with that:
if I'm caught going into the house armed,
I could be executed for murder.
That would give my enemies a laugh!
Humm....something less dangerous for me.
I think I should use my specialty: poison.
Yes. That's it. But let's suppose they are dead.
Is there a city that would take me in?
Would a friend rescue me after that?
Or welcome me into his country and his home?
No one. I think I'll bide my time 390
and see what chance brings my way.
Then I'll use my craft and kill my enemies in secret;
but, if I am forced out into the open,
I'll take up my sword and kill them,
even if it means I die: in this, I am fearless.
I swear by my patron goddess, my ally Hecate,
whose revered shrine is deep in my house,
that no one will stab *me* in the heart
and live to laugh at it. They will weep

for their bitter marriage, and so will
the one who arranged it and exiled me from this land. 400

Medea, plot, and weave your spells;
Crown your head with crime and wear your courage bravely!
Do you see how you are made a laughing stock?
Unbearable! You are born from brave Helius,
the proud sun that shines in the sky, whereas Jason
skulks off to his marriage based on treachery.
You know what to do. After all, you are a woman.
As men say, women are useless for good deeds,
but expert at any sort of crime.

CHORUS

Holy rivers flow back to their sources; 410
Justice is a thing of the past.
Men lie and break their oaths,
Ones they swore to the gods.
Now stories are told about women's good works,
And women gain fair fame:
No longer harsh rumour indicts them. 420

The songs by poets of old are over now;
No more songs about our faithlessness.
Phoebus, the lord of song
Did not give us the lyre's skill
Or we'd have a song or two to answer these men.
Time tells stories about them
As well as ones about women. 430

Mad with love, you sailed from your father's house
Through the narrow cliffs of the Black Sea.
Now you are a stranger in a new land;
You've lost the love of your husband,
Lost the warmth of your marriage bed;
You poor woman, in dishonor
You are driven from your new land.

Gone from Greece is the promise of oaths;
Gone a reverence for Shame: 440
They have flown off, up to the sky!
Poor woman, you have
No land to shelter you from your troubles;
A princess rules over your house,
A greater match than you could offer.

Enter JASON.

JASON

A wild temper causes no end of harm:
I've seen it before, and I see it now.
You could still live here and keep this house,
if only you'd graciously given in to what the rulers decided.
But no - so now because of your foolish words
you are sent into exile. 450
I don't care what you say about me:
keep on saying that I'm the worst of men,
but for what you've said against the rulers,
you're lucky only to be exiled.
I tried to soothe the king's temper; I wanted you to stay.
But you couldn't keep quiet:
stupidly ranting against the royals.
So exile it is.

But I still care about you and our children,
and I have come to help. 460
I want to see that you don't go away penniless,
or wanting for anything. Exile is a harsh fate.
Even if you hate me, I still am grateful for what you did.
I'd never be able to hate you.

MEDEA

Worst of cowards – I know nothing worse
to call your betrayal of your manhood –
so you have come to speak to me, you, my greatest enemy!
This isn't bravery or boldness to face those you've betrayed, 470
but the greatest disease men know: shamelessness.

I'm glad you came. I want to lighten my heart
of its load of bitterness, and when you hear what I have to say,
you will suffer from my stinging words.

Beginning at the beginning, I saved your life!
The Greeks who sailed with us on the Argo are my witnesses.
I taught you how to harness the fire-breathing bulls,
and how to sow the deadly furrows
from which armed men sprang up.
I killed the sleepless dragon
that coiled around the Golden Fleece: 480
by killing it, I gave you the light of salvation!
Then I, more foolish than wise,

abandoned my father and my own home
to follow you to Iolcus, under Pelion.
I murdered your enemy Pelias, in the worst way:
I made him die at the hands of his daughters.
So I destroyed his house. Then, in return for all this,
you betrayed *me*, who bore your children.
You went to a new bed. If I were childless, 490
at least you would have some sort of reason for another marriage.

You didn't respect the oaths you swore to me.
I don't know if there are new gods,
or perhaps the old ones have set up new rules for men,
but they surely know what oaths you swore.
You took my hand in yours and swore fidelity:
how meaningless is the oath of an evil man!
My hopes are destroyed.

I want to tell you what I think of you,
but I doubt that any good will come of it. 500
Still, I'll do it just to make you feel ashamed
because you can't answer my questions.

Where am I to go now? Back home?
I have no home left, thanks to what I did for you.
High treason, actually. And how about Iolcus?
I'm sure that, after they killed their father by trusting me,
the daughters of Pelias would welcome me.

That's how it is. I have no home because I betrayed
all those close to me, simply for your sake.
I made into enemies those who deserved better.
In return for all that, you made me the happiest
and most respected among Greek women.
What a magnificent and faithful husband I have, 510
I, who now am thrown out of the country
without friends, alone, with only my children for company.
Doesn't this shame the new bridegroom?
That his children and the wife who saved him,
must wander as beggars?

O Zeus,
why did you give clear signs
to distinguish true gold from false,
yet not mark human beings,
so that we might distinguish the good from the bad?

CHORUS

Terrible and hard to heal is the anger
Which turns love to hate! 520

JASON

I have to be a good speaker now:
just like a good helmsman, trim my sail
to run before the raging storm of your stinging tongue.
Since you take all the credit for yourself,
I have to set things straight:
it was Aphrodite alone who saved my expedition.
You're smart enough: I don't have to spell out
how the inescapable power of love forced you to save me. 530

I owe *Love* my gratitude. I won't dwell on that.
You were right to help me. But you got more than you gave.
Let me explain. First of all, you live among Greeks,
not barbarians, and so you enjoy a rule of law,
rather than simply the rule of the powerful.
All the Greeks know how wise you are:
you are well known. If you lived 540
at the world's end, no one would have heard of you.
I prefer glittering fame
to gold in my house,
or even the ability to sing songs sweeter than Orpheus.

That's my reply to you about my labors.
You were the one who wanted to argue.
Now, to answer your charges
about my marriage with the princess,
I shall show first that this was the sensible thing to do;
Secondly, it was moral; and thirdly,
beneficial for you and the children. 550

MEDEA starts to object.

Please, please, let me finish.
When I came here from Iolcus,
encumbered with all kinds of difficulties,
what could be more fortunate for me,
an exile as I was, than to marry the daughter of the king?
I certainly was not tired of marriage with you
—I see that particularly bothers you—nor did I do this
because I was lovestruck with desire for a new bride.
I also didn't need more children. I have enough—no blame there.

But I did it for money—that's it exactly—so we could live well 560
and not need for anything.
I know everyone turns his back on a poor man.
I wanted to bring up my children in a way
that was worthy of my house, and add brothers
to the ones you gave me.
By bringing the whole family together,
I would really be well off. Why do you need children?
For me, I can benefit the children I have by adding more.
What's wrong with this? You would admit it, if you weren't jealous.
All you think of is sex. You women measure everything
by how good things are in bed.
Then, if your marriage goes sour, 570
you can't see what is for your own good.
Men should get children from another source!
Abolish the female sex!
Then you would abolish suffering for man.

CHORUS

Great, Jason! Well argued! But if you allow me to differ,
I don't think that you should have betrayed your wife.

MEDEA

I know people don't always agree with me,
but I think an evil man who speaks well 580
is most deserving of punishment.
He slicks his tongue around his words,
then commits the worst crimes, thinking he'll go free.
But I don't think he is so smart. Like you.
Your glossy words are useless: one point will knock you out.
If you weren't a coward, you would have
told me about this marriage, and not kept it secret.

JASON

Oh, yes. I'm sure you would have agreed
if I had told you about the marriage.
Look at you now: you can't stop fuming at me. 590

MEDEA

I know your real reason for this.
You were ashamed of growing old with a barbarian for a wife.

JASON

Can't you understand? I didn't prefer the princess to you.
As I said before. I only wanted to make you secure and happy.
Then have royal children as brothers to those we had,
and this way preserve our house for all time.

MEDEA

I don't want a "happy" life that makes me miserable,
no wealth that shreds my heart.

JASON

Be sensible. Your attitude is all wrong.
You reject what is good for you,
claiming it makes you miserable.
When you're lucky, you say that you're unlucky.

600

MEDEA

Go on. Insult me.
You have a safe place to stay; I'm a refugee.

JASON

That was your own choice. You have no one to blame but yourself.

MEDEA

Really? Did I betray you and marry someone else?

JASON

You cursed the royal family.

MEDEA

I'm a curse on your house too.

JASON

I'm done arguing. If you'll accept my money
and make exile easier for you and the children,
just say the word. I'll give it freely.
I'll also send letters to my friends

610

who will help you.
You'd be a fool to refuse.
Give up your anger, and you'll be better off.

MEDEA

I won't take help from your friends,
nor take a cent from you. Don't bother offering.
There's nothing to gain from the gifts of an evil man.

JASON

I call on the gods as witnesses that
I stand here ready to help you and the children. 620
You reject what is good for you,
and stubbornly push your friends away.
You'll only suffer the more for it.

MEDEA

Get out of here! You're obviously panting for your new bride;
can't stand to be away from her. Go play the bridegroom.
Now I'll read your future:
this marriage one day will make you mourn.

Exit JASON.

CHORUS

Love in excess brings to men neither fair fame,
Nor virtue. But if Aphrodite comes gently, 630
No other goddess is more delightful.
Lady, do not shoot me with your golden bow,
Loosing that arrow tipped with mad passion,
For no one escapes your arrows!

May moderation love me, most glorious gift of the gods!
From heated disputes and endless quarrels,
May Aphrodite protect me; never inflict me
With lust for a stranger's bed, 640
But prizing a marriage blessed with peace,
May she wisely select a husband for me.

O land of my fathers, my home,
I pray I never be homeless,
Or live a life filled with trouble,

Hopeless obstacles, and suffering.
Death, death I choose, 650
An end to my days
Before this happens to me -
Nothing worse than losing
One's home and one's native land.

We've seen it ourselves,
No secondhand story.
No city, no friend,
Will pity you
Who have suffered the worst of wrongs.
May that man die without love
Who does not honor his friends 660
By opening an honest heart to them.
I loathe that man.

Enter AEGEUS

AEGEUS

Medea! May joy be yours! No better greeting
or wish for friends.

MEDEA

I also wish you joy, son of wise Pandion.
Where are you coming from, and what brings you here?

AEGEUS

I have just come from the ancient oracle of Apollo.

MEDEA

Why did you seek out this oracle?

AEGEUS

To find out how I may have children.

MEDEA

Haven't you had children yet? 670

AEGEUS

I'm childless. That seems to be my fate.

MEDEA

Have you a wife? Or are you still a bachelor?

AEGEUS

I'm not without a wife.

MEDEA

What did Apollo tell you about getting children?

AEGEUS

Wiser words than a man can figure out.

MEDEA

Are you allowed to tell me the oracle?

AEGEUS

Yes. It needs a clever mind to interpret it.

MEDEA

What was the oracle? Tell me, if it is allowed for me to hear it.

AEGEUS

"Do not loose the jutting foot of the wineskin..."

MEDEA, *interrupting*

Before you do what? Before you reach what land?

680

AEGEUS

"...Before you reach your native hearth."

MEDEA

What brought you here in particular?

AEGEUS

There's a man named Pittheus, king of Troezen.

MEDEA

He's a clever man and experienced in these things.

AEGEUS

He's also my closest ally.

MEDEA

I wish you good luck and hope you get what you want.

AEGEUS

Have you been crying? Why?

MEDEA

My husband is the worst of men.

690

AEGEUS

What do you mean? Tell me exactly why you are unhappy.

MEDEA

Jason has betrayed me, although I have done nothing wrong to him.

AEGEUS

What has he done? I still don't understand.

MEDEA

Another woman rules my house.

AEGEUS

How could he do something as terrible as that?

MEDEA

He did. He loved me once, but now he dishonors me.

AEGEUS

Did he fall in love? Or is he simply bored with the marriage?

MEDEA

He's found the love of his life! He wasn't faithful to me!

AEGEUS

So let him go. If it's as you say, he's not worth it.

MEDEA

The love of his life was marriage with a princess.

700

AEGEUS

What king gave his daughter to him? Tell me.

MEDEA

Creon, our ruler, king of Corinth.

AEGEUS

I understand now why you are upset.

MEDEA

I'm devastated. Besides, I've been ordered to leave the country.

AEGEUS

By whom? That on top of everything else?

MEDEA

Creon has exiled me from Corinth.

AEGEUS

Is Jason in favor of this? If so, I think he should be ashamed.

MEDEA

He won't admit it, but he accepts it.

MEDEA kneels in front of AEGEUS.

I beg you as a suppliant, take pity on me. 710
Pity me in my misery.
Do not allow me to be abandoned as a refugee.
Take me into your country and give me a home.
I wish for you that the gods give you children
and that you die a happy man.
You don't know how lucky you are in finding me!
I can cure your childlessness with the treatments I know.
You will have many children.

AEGEUS

I am eager to do what you want, both out of respect for the gods,
and also your promise to me of children. 720
In that respect, I'm at my wit's end.
I have one condition, and then, if you reach my land,
justice will be on my side and I'll try to be a good host to you.
I ask this one thing.
I cannot rightly take you from this land myself,
but if you arrive on my doorstep,
you will be able to stay and be safe.
I shall not give you up.
It's your responsibility to get there on your own.
I cannot afford to offend the rulers of this country. 730

MEDEA

I agree. If you swear to me what you just said,
that would be all that I would want.

AEGEUS

Don't you trust me? What is it that bothers you?

MEDEA

I do trust you. But I have two powerful enemies:
Pelias, and Creon. If you were bound by
an oath to the gods, you would not betray me,
or hand me over to them if they came for me.
Without this oath, diplomatic ties might prevail,
and you would turn me over. I have no resources,
but theirs are royal houses with great wealth.

740

AEGEUS

Always the clever woman, Medea.
If that is what you want, I won't object.
This makes it safer both for me and for you:
I am within my rights to refuse your enemies.
To what gods should I swear?

MEDEA

Swear by the Earth, my grandfather the Sun,
and all the gods together.

AEGEUS

To do what, or not to do what? Tell me.

MEDEA

That you will never exile me from your land,
or, if any of my enemies wants to take me,
that you will not give me up without a fight as long as you live.

750

AEGEUS

I swear by the earth, by the sacred light of the sun,
and by all the gods, I shall do as you say.

MEDEA

Fine. And what punishment will you suffer if you break your oath?

AEGEUS

Whatever happens to those who have no respect for the gods.

MEDEA

Go and enjoy good fortune! Everything is fine now.
I shall come to your city as soon as possible,
after I finish a few things here.

Exit AEGEUS.

CHORUS

May Hermes give you fair escort,
and bring you safely home.
May you soon get all that you wish, 760
because you have shown yourself to be a generous man.

MEDEA

By Zeus, Justice sanctioned by Zeus, and Light of the Sun,
now I shall be victorious over my enemies.
I have begun my journey and
I hope to pay back my enemies.
This man has appeared as my saviour,
when I was at my lowest point.
I'll moor my boat in his harbor 770
when I reach the city of Pallas Athena.

Now I shall tell you my plans, but I know you won't approve.
I shall send a servant to get Jason
to come and see me. I'll use winning words
to tell him that I agree with his decision to
marry into the royal family, even if it meant betraying me.
It's all for the best, and I see how it benefits us.
I shall beg that my children stay. 780
But don't think I'll leave them for my enemies to harm;
I'll only use them to kill the princess by my craft.
I shall send them to her bearing persuasive gifts:
a dress of fine weave and delicate crown of gold.
If she puts these on, she will die a terrible death,
and so will anyone who touches her.
Such are the poisons that I have smeared on these gifts.

[Medea becomes pensive.]

If I do what I have in mind, I will suffer horribly, 790
but I must do it. I shall kill the children, my very own children.
There is no one who can save them.
After I've totally destroyed Jason's house,
I shall leave this land,
escaping from the most unholy of crimes,
the slaughter of my own beloved children.

Friends, I cannot bear the laughter of my enemies.
I have nothing to lose. I'm ready to die.
I have no native land any more, no family,
no escape from my suffering. 800
My first mistake was to leave my father's home,
persuaded by the words of a Greek.
God will help me get my vengeance on him.
From this day, he will have no children by me,
Nor will he have more by his newly-wedded bride
because she will die miserably, killed by my poisons.
No one should think I'm a weak woman,
who will remain quiet. No! Quite the opposite.
I harm my enemies and help my friends!
Such a person leads a life filled with glory. 810

CHORUS

You have told me what you plan to do.
I want to help and at the same time uphold the laws of men:
don't do this.

MEDEA

I won't change my plans. I forgive you for what you say.
You haven't suffered as I have.

CHORUS

How could you think of killing your children?

MEDEA

My knife will go through my children into his heart.

CHORUS

But in doing that you will make yourself

the most miserable of women!

Enter NURSE.

MEDEA

Let it go. This is needless talk.

To NURSE.

Go, get Jason, and bring him here. 820
I know I can trust you.
Don't breathe a word of what I plan.
Then you prove that you love me, and that you are a woman.

Exit NURSE.

CHORUS

From olden times the children of Erechtheus,
Have flourished! Offspring of the blessed gods!
They live in a holy land that has never been ravaged.
They feed on wisdom, bringer of fairest fame,
Walking easily through their clear bright air 830
Where once we are told the nine holy muses
Gave birth to fair-haired Harmony.

From the streams of fair-flowing Cephisus
They say that Aphrodite drew water,
For which she sent over the land
Mild, sweet breezes. 840
Twining fragrant roses in her hair,
She bids Love sit next to Wisdom,
Allies in excellence.

How shall this city of holy streams,
A country whose processions honor the gods,
Receive you,
An unholy child-murderer,
Among its blessed citizens?
Think what it is to stab your children!
Think of their pitiful cries, 850
Their reaching out to you
With hands that you loved?
I beg you on my knees.
I beg you as a suppliant,

Do not kill your children.

How will you steel your heart,
Or find courage within yourself
To lift your hand to your children,
And dare this violent deed?
When you see them,
How can you not weep
As you murder them?
Impossible....your children begging you,
Praying for their lives?
Will you smear your hand in their blood?
Is your heart so cruel?

860

Enter JASON

JASON

You asked me to come, and here I am. I know you hate me,
but I will listen to whatever you have to say.
What do you want from me now?

MEDEA

Jason, I beg you to forgive me for what I said.
But you are right to put up with my anger,
since we have loved each other so much in the past.
I have thought it over, and I blame myself:
stupid, why argue with someone
who only intends good for me? How foolish to
make the rulers my enemies,
and rage against my husband, who benefits me
by marrying a princess and having more children
for the sake of our own? I shouldn't be angry.
Why should I complain when the gods are helping me so much!
Don't I have my children? Aren't we going into exile,
and don't we need friends? I realize now
that I was being very foolish
and had no reason to be angry.
Now I praise your good judgement:
you did well to make this new marriage for us.
I was silly. I should have supported your plans,
been part of the wedding ceremony,
and rejoiced to be related to a princess!
But women are women. I won't say we are bad:
we're just who we are. You shouldn't imitate us,
or pay back our foolishness with foolishness.

870

880

890

I admit I acted stupidly, but now I have come to my senses.

Children, come out here!

Enter CHILDREN with TUTOR

Kiss your father, and talk with him. Join me in
making peace with him who we love.

No anger now; we've made a truce.

Take his right hand (O gods, I think
now of what terrible things the future holds). 900

Children, will you also stretch out your dear arms to me
for all time? I feel terrible.

Tears spring up from my eyes; I'm so afraid.

My eyes fill with tears

because I've settled the quarrel with your father.

CHORUS

Fresh tears also pour out of my eyes;
I hope nothing worse happens.

JASON

Good girl! Of course, I forgive you.

It's natural for a woman to be angry
when her husband marries someone else. 910

You changed your mind for the better,
Even if it took time. Smart woman!

Boys, your father has been busy making plans.

And, with the gods' help, he has set things right.

I think your new brothers will be the rulers of Corinth.

All you need to do now is grow up.

Your father will see to the rest,
with the help of the gods who support him.

I'd like to see you grow into fine men
to lord it over my enemies. 920

To MEDEA.

Hey! Why are you crying?

Why do you turn away from me?

Aren't you happy to hear what I have to say?

MEDEA

It's nothing. I was thinking about the children.

JASON

Don't worry! I'll take good care of them.

MEDEA

Right. I believe you.
A woman's always ready to shed a tear.

JASON

What is it that's bothering you about the children?

MEDEA

I gave birth to them.
When you prayed that they grow into fine men, 930
pity came over me. Some nagging doubt.

I haven't finished telling you all that I had in mind
when I asked you to come here.

The rulers are exiling me. I understand that it's for the best
since I'm inconvenient for the royal family
because they consider me an enemy.
So I'll become a refugee,
but I would like you to raise the children.
Please ask Creon for them to stay. 940

JASON

I don't know if I'll be successful, but I'll try.

MEDEA

Tell your wife to ask him for you,
not to exile the children.

JASON

I'll do it, and I think she will.

MEDEA

I know she will, if she is a woman like the rest of us.
I'll help also. I shall have the children bring her gifts
that I know are more beautiful than humanly possible:
a fine dress and a golden circlet for her hair.

950

To SERVANT

You there, bring out the lovely gifts.

To JASON

She will delight in these in not only one way, but thousands,
first getting such a fine bedmate in you;
and to have such beautiful gifts that the Sun himself
once gave to his own descendants.

To CHILDREN

Here children, take these gifts
and deliver them to the divine princess!
She won't scorn these gifts.

JASON

Silly woman, why give these things up?
Do you think that the royal house needs your dresses?
Or your gold?
Save them. Don't give them away.
I'm sure my wife will love me more than gifts of gold.

960

MEDEA

Don't you be silly now. They say that gifts persuade even the gods,
and gold is worth more to men than a thousand words.
She has the power now.
To save my children from exile,
I'd give my life, not only gold.

Children, go to the royal palace;
Go beg your father's young wife, my ruler,
not to force you into exile.
Give her these glorious gifts, and listen now,
this is very important; put these gifts into her hands alone.
Go now, quickly. I pray you are successful and

970

bring your mother the good news she is dying to hear.

Exit JASON, CHILDREN, and TUTOR

CHORUS

No more hope that the children will live.
No more. They are walking to their death.
The bride will take up the crown,
Take up her own bitter destruction.
A golden crown of death
She will place on her golden hair. 980

Seductive charm and a shining gleam
Persuade her to put on the dress and crown
Her bridal bed will be among the dead.
The unhappy girl will fall into the fatal trap
With no escape
From its deadly embrace.

You, poor man, made a bad marriage 990
when you wed with royals.
You do not see how
You cut short your children's life
And bring your wife to a dreadful death.
From fortune how far you have fallen.

I weep for your pain,
Poor mother of the children,
You who will kill those whom you bore
Because of your marriage bed,
Which your husband unlawfully left 1000
For the bed of another.

Enter TUTOR with CHILDREN.

TUTOR

The children won't go into exile!
The princess happily received your gifts
into her very own hands!
Peace has come for the children.

Why do you weep at the good news?
Why have you turned away?
Aren't you happy to hear this?

MEDEA

Terrible!

TUTOR

That's doesn't harmonize with the joy I've announced.

MEDEA

Terrible! And again terrible!

TUTOR

Have I brought bad news when I thought it was good?

1010

MEDEA

You told me what you had to tell me. I don't blame you.

TUTOR

Why do you look sad? Why are you weeping?

MEDEA

I have many reasons. The gods and my own passion.

TUTOR

Don't despair. Your children will bring you back.

MEDEA

Before then, I'll bring others down.

TUTOR

You are not the only one to lose their children.
People should learn not to take their suffering too seriously.

MEDEA

That's just what I'll do. Go in the house now
and prepare things for the children as usual.

1020

Exit TUTOR.

Children, you have a home now, and a city;
but you are leaving your poor mother behind,
a loss that will last for eternity.

I am forced to go into exile
before I shall ever see you happy,
before I could prepare you for your weddings
and hold high the marriage torch.

I curse my stubborn will.

For nothing, I raised you all those years;
for nothing, I struggled, worked, and made plans for you; 1030
for nothing, the agonizing pains of childbirth.

I had so many hopes:
that you would take care of me when I grew old,
and that you would prepare my body when I died.
It's every parent's dream.
Now that sweet thought flies off.
Without you, I shall lead a grey life filled with sorrow.
You will no longer look on your mother with your dear eyes.
Your life will be entirely different.

Oh, miserable, why do you look at me like that? 1040
Why do you smile a smile that may be
the very last I shall ever see?
What am I to do?

To the CHORUS.

Women, I've lost my courage,
by looking on the shining eyes of my children.
I can't do it. No more plans for revenge!
I'll take the children with me when I leave.
Why should I stab their father when
I'm stabbing myself twice as deeply?
I can't. No more revenge!

[violent shift of mood...fierce]

What am I saying?
Do I want my enemies to laugh at me
and escape their punishment? 1050
I can't bear it. It's cowardly
to let those soft thoughts into my mind.

Go now, children. Go into the house.
Exeunt children.

Let others take care of them,
those who are not part of my sacrifice.
I shall not weaken now.

O heart, don't do this.
Let them go; spare the children.
If I have them with me, I'll be happy.

But by all the avenging Furies of hell,
I'll never leave them for my enemies to hurt. 1060
So if they have to die anyway,
I who gave them birth will kill them.
Now it's settled. There's no escape.

I know the crown is already on her head
And the princess burns alive in the dress I sent.

Since I'm walking the path to misery
and sending my children on a path more miserable still,
I want to speak to them for the last time.

MEDEA calls for the children and they return.

Children, let me kiss your hands. 1070
beloved hands, beloved lips!
What lovely shapes and noble faces!
May you be happy! Happy there, where you're going.
Your father has deprived you of this place.
How I love to hold you, kiss you!
Your skin is so soft and you smell so sweet -
that special fragrance of children.

Go inside; go away.
I can't bear to look at you.

Exeunt children.

Darkness descends! I know what evil I'm about to do,
but my passion is stronger than my reason. 1080
That's the worst cause of pain for mankind.

CHORUS

Many times I've played with subtle thoughts,
And questioned more than
A woman ought to question.
But we have a muse to guide us
And teach us the discourse of reason.
Not all of us, but some,
Some out of many women,
To whom the muses speak clearly.

So I tell you this: 1090
Those who never gave birth
And never know what it is to have children
Surpass in happiness those who do.
Those without children
Do not know whether these offspring bring joy
Or sadness;
So they avoid much suffering.
Those who have
The sweet gift of children,
I see them worn down with care, 1100
Struggling throughout their lives.
First how to raise the children well,
Then how to provide for them.
Have they worked all these years for a worthless child?
Or will their efforts be rewarded by one to prize?

I've saved the worst for the end.
Even if your children were raised well,
To be worthy young men and women,
On the whim of some god,
Death can steal them away from you. 1110
Then gone forever are those children you loved.
Is it really worth it?
To struggle all those years
Merely to suffer the worse pain of all?
All on account of children,
Gifts from gods we call blessed.

MEDEA

Friends, I'm waiting to hear what's happened.
It's been a while.
Oh, I see one of Jason's men coming now!

He's out of breath; that shows he has some urgent news. 1120

Enter servant of Jason, MESSENGER.

MESSENGER

You've committed an enormous crime!
Medea, leave now any way you can. Just leave!
Sail by a boat or take a carriage, whatever you can find.

MEDEA

Why? Has something happened to force me to leave?

MESSENGER

Your poisons have killed the princess and her father.

MEDEA

Most welcome of messages! From this day on,
I consider you my benefactor and a friend.

MESSENGER

What? Are you mad? How can you rejoice
in the news of your crime against the royal house
and not be afraid? 1130

MEDEA

I have a thing or two I could reply,
but I want to hear what you have to say.
Tell me, and take your time in telling it. How did they die?
I'll be twice as happy if they died in terrible pain.

MESSENGER

When Jason came with your two children into the bride's house,
we were happy because this showed us that the rumors were true:
you and your husband had made up. 1140
One servant kissed the children's hands, another their blond heads.
I was happy when I accompanied the children
into the women's quarters. Our new mistress
was looking at Jason with eyes filled with love
before she saw the children. When she saw them,

she covered her eyes and turned away.
They were an unwelcome intrusion.
Your husband tried to cheer her up and said,
“You should not hate your step-children. 1150
Don’t be angry. Learn to love
those whom your husband loves.
Accept these gifts and ask your father
to let these children stay, for my sake.”

When she saw the finery, she didn’t hold back any more,
but agreed to all her husband said.
He and the children then left,
but before they had gone very far from the palace,
she put on the dress with its fine weave
and set the golden crown on her head. 1160

She sat down before her mirror,
arranged her hair around the crown
while smiling with pleasure at her reflection.
Then she stood up from the chair
and danced around the room on her delicate white feet,
admiring the turn of her leg.
She was delighted with the magnificent gifts.
Then we saw something terrible!
Her color changed; she stumbled;
her legs were trembling.

She slumped into the chair to avoid falling on the floor. 1170
An old servant thought some god was possessing her,
perhaps Pan, and she shouted for joy,
but the girl’s eyes started to roll and the blood left her face.
The servant realized her mistake
and began to moan and cry instead.
Another servant went to call her father,
and one to find her new husband
to tell them of the girl’s sudden fit. The rafters
echoed with running footsteps. 1180

In the same time it would take
a quick runner in a race to cross the finish line,
the poor girl opened her eyes and started to scream.
She was tortured in two different ways:
the golden crown circling her head was like a vise.
It shot down a strange stream of blazing fire,
while the dress of delicate weave, the gift your sons brought,
ate like acid into the white flesh of the agonized girl.
On fire, she leapt up from the chair, 1190
tossing her blazing hair in all directions

as she tried to shake off the deadly crown.
But the golden crown clamped down on her head even more tightly,
and when she shook her hair, the fire blazed twice as high.
She fell to the floor, totally defeated and in dire pain.
Only a father could recognize her.
One could not see the shape of her eyes,
vanished her beautiful face.
Blood mixed with fire poured down from her head;
the flesh melted off her bones 1200
like sap from a pine tree, chewed up and digested
by the poison's invisible jaws. Terrible, terrible to see.
Everyone was afraid to touch the body.
Fate had taught us a lesson.

But her father didn't see her on the floor,
and stumbled over her body.
He cried out and threw his arms around her,
kissing her as he spoke:
"Poor child, what god has so unjustly destroyed you?
Who makes me childless at my age, on the threshold of death?
What misery...it makes me want to die with you, child." 1210
He stopped his crying and wailing,
and tried to lift up his old body,
but the fine dress clung to him just like ivy to the laurel.
So began the wrestling match from hell.
He tried to get to his feet, but she clung fast to him
and dragged him down. If he pulled hard,
he ripped his old flesh off his bones.
The old man struggled until he could struggle no more.
and so he breathed his last.
This was a battle he did not win.
Two bodies now lie together,
the old father next to his daughter, 1220
a sight that calls for tears.

About you, nothing to be said.
You must now figure out how to escape punishment.

I've thought about this many times:
man's life is a shadow!
I'm not afraid to say,
that those who seem wise, and who craft words,
are actually the most foolish of all.
No man is happy in a lasting way.
Fortune flows freely, so one man may seem
luckier than another, but no one truly happy. 1230

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS

Fate and Jason clashed today,
And rightly so.
You poor woman, your marriage to Jason
Has set you on the road to hell.

MEDEA

My friends, I must now kill my children
and leave this land as quickly as possible:
any delay would allow
my enemies to kill my children. 1240
Since they are destined to die,
It will be their mother's hand that does it.
Steel yourself, my heart.
Why do I put off the terrible act?
Cursed hand, take up your sword.
Take it and meet your fate, the goal of your life.
Do not be a coward.
For this one day,
forget that they are your children;
forget how you loved them;
afterwards, you can mourn them for eternity.
For even if you kill them,
you loved them with a mother's love.
Oh, I am born to suffer pain. 1250

Exit MEDEA into house.

CHORUS

O Earth and shining ray of Sun,
Look down on her, look down on
This woman of death, a murderess,
Before she lays hands on her children,
Soon to be covered with blood.
They are of a golden race:
A god's blood ought not be shed by men.
Holy light of God, stop her, hold her back,
And drive from the house
This hell-driven fury. 1260

Useless the toil of raising children;

Useless giving birth to those you love!
In vain that you left the cruel straits
Of the blue clashing cliffs, the Symplegades.
What anger drives you mad, wretched woman,
That vicious murder follows on murder?
The curse of killing your kin is a heavy one.
The gods send woe upon woe
To the houses of those who slay their own;
Songs of sorrow harmonize with their crimes.

1270

CHILDREN, *from within*

Help!

CHORUS

Do you hear the children's cry?
O poor woman, you are cursed.

CHILD 1

Help! What can I do? Where can I run to escape mother?

CHILD 2

I don't know, brother; we're lost.

CHORUS

Should I go inside? I've got to do something to prevent this murder.

CHILD 1

Yes! Help us! We need you now!

CHILD 2

She's coming at us with a knife!

[*agonizing screams*]

CHORUS

Woman, you must be made of rock or iron,
If you can kill those you bore from your own womb.

I know only one woman before you

To slay her own children:
Ino driven mad by the gods,
Whom Hera forced out of her house.
She fell into the sea,
Murdering her two boys,
Stepping off a cliff into the salty depths,
She died along with the two of them.
What insanity is yet to come? 1290
Marriage for women is filled with pain:
How much evil it has brought on mankind!

JASON

You women, standing near the house,
is Medea inside?
Or has she fled, hoping to escape her crime?
She'll have to bury herself in the earth
or fly up to heaven to avoid punishment
for killing the royal family.
Does she think she is going to get away
after she kills the rulers of this land? 1300

I'm not concerned about her, but the children.
She will pay for what she has done,
but I want to save my children
so they don't suffer for
their mother's unholy crimes.

CHORUS

Poor Jason. You don't know the half of your sorrow,
or you would not have said what you did.

JASON

What is it? Does she plan to kill me too?

CHORUS

Your children are dead, killed by their mother.

JASON

What are you saying? Woman, you have also killed me. 1310

CHORUS

Yes. Your children are dead.

JASON

Where did she kill them? In the house? Someplace else?

CHORUS

Open the doors, and you will see your murdered children.

JASON

Servants, unbar the doors, and let me see both
my dead children and she who committed this murder:
She will pay for this!

*As the doors open, Medea rises above the house in a
dragon-drawn chariot. She carries the bodies of their children in her arms.*

MEDEA

No need of opening doors to see me and
the bodies of your children. That's useless.
If you have something to say to me, say it!
You'll never touch me again.
My grandfather the Sun has sent me this chariot
To protect me against my enemies.

1320

JASON

I hate you, most loathsome of all women!
You are despised by the gods, me, and all the human race!
You thrust a knife into your own children
and destroyed me at the same time.
After committing this most unholy crime
how can you dare to look on the Sun, breathe the Air,
and walk on the Earth! Go to Hell where you belong!
I am sane now, but I was mad when I brought you
from your barbarian land to a Greek home.
You were evil even then, to betray your father
and the land that nourished you!
The gods sent to *me* the avenging fury
which they intended for you,

1330

because you killed your own brother
before you boarded the beautifully-timbered Argo.

That was how it all started. You married me
And bore me children. Now you killed them
because you were jealous: your bed betrayed.
No Greek woman would have dared this,
but I preferred you to any Greek woman!
I married you, and now see what a disaster that was for me!
You are a lioness, wilder than the monster Scylla
with her groin of many dog heads that ate the men she caught.
I know my insults mean nothing to you—
you are hard as steel.
Get out of here, you bitch,
you who soaked your hands in your children's blood.
I am the one who deserves pity now:
I do not have the new bride I wed
nor can I ever speak again
with my own children that I raised:
they are lost to me forever.

1340

1350

MEDEA

I could answer you at length,
but Zeus knows what I did for you
and how you paid me back.
Did you think you would lead a life of luxury,
laughing at me while in bed with your new bride,
insulting me with the pleasure you took at my expense?
Or did you think the princess and her father who gave her to you
while exiling me from this land would not pay for it?
Call me a lioness if you like, or the cliff-dweller Scylla;
it means nothing as long as I know that
I have stabbed you in the heart where it counts.

1360

JASON

You will not escape the same suffering, the same agony.

MEDEA

It's worth it as long as you can't laugh at me.

JASON

Children, how unlucky you were in the mother you got.

MEDEA

Children, it was your father's madness that killed you.

JASON

My hand didn't kill them.

MEDEA

It was your insulting me by your new marriage.

JASON

Do you really think that you can murder because of a marriage?

MEDEA

Do you think that this means so little to a woman?

JASON

For a sane woman, yes! But you exaggerate everything.

MEDEA

The children are dead. I know that will hurt you.

1370

JASON

They live! As spirits to take vengeance on you!

MEDEA

The gods know who began all this.

JASON

Yes, they know that you have a sick mind.

MEDEA

Hate me all you want. I loathe the sound of your voice.

JASON

And I loathe the sound of yours! Easy to leave you now!

MEDEA

Yes! What's the delay? The sooner the better.

JASON

Please give me my children's bodies to bury.

MEDEA

No. I'll bury them myself. I'll take them to
Hera's temple at the top of the city,
so that my enemies won't defile their bodies 1380
by tearing up their graves. I shall establish
a religious festival and rites for the rest of time
for this city of Sisyphus to atone for their unholy murder.
I shall go to Athens, the land of Erechtheus,
to live with Aegeus, the son of Pandion.
You will die as suits you:
a coward's death for a cowardly man,
struck on the head by a timber of the Argo.
That's how marriage to me ends for you!

JASON

May the avenging furies of these children destroy you,
and may justice send you a bloody death! 1390

MEDEA

What god or power will listen to you now,
You, the oath-breaker and betrayer of your friend?

JASON

You child-killing bitch! You disgust me!

MEDEA

Go home and bury your wife.

JASON

Yes, I go, but without my two sons.

MEDEA

You think you are suffering now? Wait until you grow old!

JASON

O children whom I loved!

MEDEA

Whom their mother loved, not you!

JASON

Oh, how I long to kiss them on the lips,
And wrap my arms around them!

1400

MEDEA

Now you speak to them, now you kiss them,
But before you were all too happy to get rid of them!

JASON

Please let me touch my children's soft skin for the last time?

MEDEA

No. You're wasting my time and your words.

JASON

Zeus, do you hear this?
How I am driven away and what I suffer
at the hands of this vile child-murdering lioness?
With all the strength that I have left
I weep for my children and I call on the gods!
I call the gods to witness how
you murdered my children;
you prevent me now from touching them,
or burying their bodies.

1410

Oh, I wish I had never had children,
To see them corpses in your arms.

CHORUS

Olympian Zeus is the master of many things;
The gods can make the impossible happen.
What you expected did not occur,
The unexpected did: a god found the way.
This is the end of our story.

GLOSSARY

AEGEUS (EE-jee-us), king of Athens.

AEOLUS (EE-oh-lus), god of the wind.

AESON (EE-son), father of Jason, and unfairly deprived of his throne by Pelias.

APOLLO (Ah-POLL-oh), god of the sun, music, and oracle at Delphi.

APHRODITE (APH-row-DIE-tee), goddess of love.

CEPHISUS (KE-fi-sus), river that flows in Athens.

COLCHIS (KOL-kis), country in the far east of the Black Sea, birthplace of Medea.

CREON (CREE-on), king of Corinth.

ERECHTHEUS (eh-RECK-thee-us), born of the earth, founder of the Athenian people.

JASON (JAY-son), son of Aeson, native of Iolchus and descendant of Aeolus. Married to Medea.

HELIUS (HEE-lih-us), god of the sun, grandfather of Medea.

HECATE (HECK-ah-tee), goddess of the crossroads and the underworld, a witch whom witches invoke. Patron goddess of Medea.

HERA (HAIR-ah), queen of the gods, goddess of marriage, married to Zeus, king of the gods.

INO (EYE-no), daughter of Cadmus, king of Thebes, and Harmonia.

IOLCHUS (YOL-kus), Town in northeast Greece, birthplace of Jason.

MEDEA (Meh-DEE-ah), daughter of Aeetes, king of Colchis, granddaughter of Helius (god of the sun), and niece of Circe. Married to Jason.

PANDION (Pan-DEE-on), a king of Athens, eighth king of Attica.

PITTHEUS (PITH-e-us), king of Troezen, son of Pelops and Hippodamia.

PELIAS (PEE-lee-as), former king of Iolcus, slain by his daughters by Medea's tricks. Pelias set Jason the task of bringing him the Golden Fleece.

PELION (PEE-lee-on), mountain in Thessaly, near to the mountain Ossa that the Aloadae threatened to pile on top of each other so that they could attack the gods.

PIRENE (pi-REEN-ee), One of the twelve daughters of Asopus, a river god. She gave her name to the spring at Corinth.

SCYLLA (SILL-ah), a beautiful woman turned into a monster who had dogs at her groin. She killed sea-farers.

SISYPHUS (SIS-ih-phas), trickster, some say father of Odysseus.

SYMPLEGADES (Sim-PLEG-ah-deez), “the clashing rocks,” cliffs that Jason passed on his voyage to and from Colchis.

THEMIS (THEM-is), Daughter of Uranus and Gaia, goddess of law.

TROEZEN (TROY-zen), in Argolis, on the west coast of the Aegean, and southwest of Aegina.

ZEUS (ZOOSE), king of the gods, protector of oaths.

