

Euripides
Medea



Translated by Ian Johnston

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Translator's Note

Note that in the following translation the normal numbers refer to this text, while the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text. In numbering the lines, the translator has normally counted a short indented line with the short line immediately above.

Background Note

Jason was born the son of Aeson, in Iolcus. When his father lost the kingship, Jason was secretly put into the care of the famous centaur Chiron, who raised him. As a young man Jason returned to Iolcus. The king, Pelias, who had deprived Aeson of the kingship, persuaded Jason to set off on an expedition to capture the Golden Fleece, the pure gold skin of a ram which was in a sacred grove in Colchis (a barbarian region to the east of the Euxine Sea, the Greek name for the Black Sea), where it was guarded by a dragon.

Jason put together a band of adventurers called the Argonauts. They took their name from the ship they sailed in, the Argo. The heroes had a number of adventures on the way to Colchis. When they arrived in Colchis, king Aeetes set them a number of tasks, including yoking two fire-breathing bulls, ploughing a field with them, sowing the field with teeth from the dragon of Cadmus, and then fighting against the warriors who arose from the sown teeth.

To complete these tasks Jason enlisted the help of Medea, daughter of king Aeetes. She fell in love with Jason and helped him with her magic to complete the tasks set by Aeetes and to steal the Golden Fleece. She then escaped with Jason, killing her brother in order to scatter his body on the sea so that Aeetes would have to hold up his pursuit of Jason and Medea.

Jason and Medea returned to Iolcus, where Medea's magic restored Jason's father, Aeson, to youthful health. Medea also persuaded the daughters of king Pelias to kill their father by giving them ineffective medications and persuading them to try a course of treatment which was fatal. Jason and Medea then moved to Corinth, where Jason married the daughter of king Creon. The story of the play begins immediately after Jason's marriage to his new bride.

Medea Dramatis Personae

NURSE: a servant of Medea
TUTOR: a servant assigned to Jason's children
MEDEA: wife of Jason
CHORUS: a group of Corinthian women
CREON: king of Corinth
JASON: husband of Medea
AEGEUS: king of Athens
MESSENGER: a servant of Jason's
CHILDREN: Medea's and Jason's two young sons
ATTENDANTS on Creon and Jason.

[Outside the home of Jason and Medea in Corinth. The Nurse, a slave who serves Medea, is standing by herself]

NURSE

O how I wish that ship the Argo
had never sailed off to the land of Colchis,
past the Symplegades, those dark dancing rocks
which smash boats sailing through the Hellespont.¹
I wish they'd never chopped the pine trees down
in those mountain forests up on Pelion,
to make oars for the hands of those great men
who set off, on Pelias' orders,
to fetch the golden fleece. Then my mistress,
Medea, never would have sailed away 10
to the towers in the land of Iolcus,
her heart passionately in love with Jason.
She'd never have convinced those women,
Pelias' daughters, to kill their father.
She'd not have come to live in Corinth here, [10]
with her husband and her children—well loved
in exile by those whose land she'd moved to.
She gave all sorts of help to Jason.
That's when life is most secure and safe,
when woman and her husband stand as one. 20
But that marriage changed. Now they're enemies.

¹The Symplegades were two rocks in the Bosphorus, the entrance to the Black Sea, which clashed together and destroyed ships.

Their fine love's grown sick, diseased, for Jason,
 leaving his own children and my mistress,
 is lying on a royal wedding bed.
 He's married the daughter of king Creon,
 who rules this country. As for Medea,
 that poor lady, in her disgrace, cries out, [20]
 repeating his oaths, recalling the great trust
 in that right hand with which he pledged his love.
 She calls out to the gods to witness 30
 how Jason is repaying her favours.
 She just lies there. She won't eat—her body
 she surrenders to the pain, wasting away,
 always in tears, ever since she found out
 how her husband has dishonoured her.
 She's not lifted her eyes up from the ground
 or raised her head. She listens to advice,
 even from friends, as if she were a stone,
 or the ocean swell, except now and then
 she twists that white neck of hers and weeps, 40 [30]
 crying to herself for her dear father, her home,
 her own land, all those things she left behind,
 to come here with the man who now discards her.
 Her suffering has taught her the advantages
 of not being cut off from one's own homeland.
 Now she hates her children. When she sees them,
 there is no joy in her. And I'm afraid
 she may be up to some new mischief.
 Her mind thinks in extremes. I know her well.
 She'll not put up with being treated badly. 50
 I worry she may pick up a sharp sword
 and stab her stomach, or else she'll go [40]
 into the house, in silence, to that bed,
 and kill the king and bridegroom Jason.
 Then she'll face an even worse disaster.
 She's a dangerous woman. It won't be easy
 for any man who picks a fight with her
 to think she's beaten and he's triumphed.

[Enter Medea's and Jason's children with their Tutor]

Here come her children. They've finished playing.
 They've no notion of their mother's troubles. 60

Young minds don't like to dwell on pain.

TUTOR

Old slave from my mistress' household,
why are you here, standing by the gate, [50]
all alone, complaining to yourself
about what's wrong? How come Medea
is willing to stay inside without you?

NURSE

Old servant of Jason's children,
when a master's lot falls out badly,
that's bad for faithful servants, too—
it touches their hearts also. My sorrow 70
was so great, I wanted to come here,
to speak to earth and heaven, to tell them
about the wrongs inflicted on my mistress.

TUTOR

Unhappy lady! Has she stopped weeping yet?

NURSE

Stopped crying? I envy your ignorance. [60]
Her suffering has only just begun—
she's not even half way through it.

TUTOR

Poor fool—
if I can speak that way about my masters—
she knows nothing of her latest troubles.

NURSE

What's that, old man? Don't spare me the news. 80

TUTOR

Nothing. I'm sorry I said anything.

NURSE

Come on, don't hide it from a fellow slave.
I can keep quiet if I have to.

TUTOR

Well, I was passing by those benches
where the old men gamble by Peirene,
at the holy spring, and I heard someone say

(I was pretending I wasn't listening)
that Creon, king of this country, intends
to ship the children away from Corinth, [70]
with their mother, too. I've no idea 90
if the story's true or not. I hope it's not.

NURSE

But surely Jason wouldn't let his children
go into exile, even if he's squabbling
with their mother?

TUTOR

Old devotions fade,
pushed aside by new relationships.
Jason is no friend of people in this house.

NURSE

If we must add these brand-new troubles
to our old ones, before we've dealt with them,
then we're finished.

TUTOR

But listen—the time's not right [80]
to let your mistress know about these things. 100
So keep quiet. Don't mention anything.

NURSE

Children, do you hear what sort of man
your father is to you? My curse on him!
No. He is my master—but a bad man
to his own family. Of that he's guilty.

TUTOR

What mortal man is not? Don't you know yet
all men love themselves more than their neighbours.
And some are right to do that—while others
just want some benefit. But this father,
with his new wife, has no love for his children. 110

NURSE

Come on, children, get inside the house.
Things will be fine.

[To the Tutor]

You must keep them away— [90]
as far as possible—and don't bring them
near their mother when she's in this state.
I've seen her look at them with savage eyes,
as if she means to injure them somehow.
I know this anger of hers will not end,
not before she turns it loose on someone.
I hope it falls on enemies, not on friends!

MEDEA [crying from inside the house]

I can't stand this pain, this misery. 120
What do I do? I wish I could die!

NURSE

My dear children, you hear your mother's cry.
Her heart's upset. Her anger's growing, too.
So quickly now, run off inside the house. [100]
Stay out of sight. Don't try to go and see her.
She's fierce, headstrong by nature. Take care.
So go now—inside as quickly as you can.

[The Tutor and children enter the house]

It's obvious the cloud of bitter grief
rising inside her is only just the start.
As her temper grows even more intense, 130
it will soon catch fire. She's a passionate soul,
hard to restrain. What will she do next,
now her heart's been bitten by these injuries? [110]

MEDEA [from inside the house]

The pain of this suffering—this intense pain.
Am I not right to weep? Oh my children,
cursed children of a hateful mother—
may you die with your father, all his house,
may it all perish, crash down in ruins.

NURSE

O the sorrow of it all. Poor woman!
Why link your children with the nasty things 140
their father's done? Why do you hate them so?
I'm terrified the children will be hurt.
The pride of rulers is something to fear—

they often order men, but seldom listen. [120]
And when their tempers change it's hard to bear.
It's better to get used to living life
as an equal common person. Anyway,
I don't want a grand life for myself—
just to grow old with some security.
They say a moderate life's the best of all, 150
a far better choice for mortal men.
Going for too much brings no benefits.
And when gods get angry with some home,
the more wealth it has, the more it is destroyed. [130]

[Enter the Chorus of Corinthian women]

CHORUS LEADER

I heard her voice, I heard the cries
of that sad lady here from Colchis.
Has she not calmed down yet? Old nurse, tell me.
I heard from some household servant in there
that she's been screaming. I find no pleasure
in this house's suffering. We've been friends. 160

NURSE

This house is finished—already done for.
For Jason's bound by his new marriage tie [140]
to the king's daughter. As for my mistress,
her tears are washing away her life in there,
inside the house. She finds no consolation
in the words of any of her friends.

MEDEA [still from inside the house]

Oh why can't a bolt of lightning strike me?
What point is there in living any more?
I want death to come and sweep me off—
let me escape this life of suffering! 170

CHORUS

O Zeus and Earth and Sun—
do you hear how this young wife
sings out her misery? [150]
Thoughtless lady,
why long for death's marriage bed
which human beings all shun?

Death comes soon enough
and brings and end to everything.
You should not pray for it.
And if your husband 180
devotes himself to some new bed,
why get angry over that?
Zeus will plead for you in this.
Don't waste your life away,
with too much wailing for your husband.

MEDEA [within]

O great Themis and noble Artemis, [160]
do you see what I am having to endure,
when I'm the one who bound that cursed man,
my husband, with strong promises to me?
O how I want to see him and his bride 190
beaten down, destroyed—their whole house as well—
for these wrongs they dare inflict on me,
when I've done nothing to provoke them!
O father and city, I left you behind
in my disgrace when I killed my brother.

NURSE

Do you hear what's she's saying, how she calls
on Zeus' daughter Themis, who hears our prayers,
who guards, they say, the promises men swear. [170]
She's bound to do something quite serious
before this rage of hers comes to an end. 200

CHORUS LEADER

I wish she'd let us see her face to face
and listen to what we have to tell her.
That might calm down her savage temper,
the fury in her heart. I'd like the chance
to show good will to a lady whom I like.
Go now—bring her here outside the house. [180]
Tell her she'll be among some friends of hers.
And hurry, before she harms someone in there—
that power in her grief will make her act.

NURSE

All right, though I'm afraid I won't persuade 210

my mistress. Still, as a favour to you,
 I'll see what I can do. Right now she glares
 at servants when they come close to her
 to tell her something. She's like a bull,
 or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks.
 Those men from long ago—you'd not be wrong [190]
 to call them fools without much wisdom.
 They thought up songs for celebrations,
 feasts and banquets, bringing to human life
 delightful music. But they found nothing 220
 in music or the lyre's many strings
 to end the bitterness of human life,
 the pain in living, sorrows bringing on
 the deaths and horrifying disasters
 which destroy whole families. What a blessing
 it would be for human beings if music
 could cure these sorrows. When people feast, [200]
 why should people sing? It's a waste of time.
 People who eat well are happy anyway—
 they've enjoyed the pleasure of the meal. 230

[Nurse exits into the house]

CHORUS

I have heard Medea's crying,
 full of sorrow, full of tears,
 her shrill accusations against Jason,
 the husband who's betrayed her.
 Suffering such injustice, she cries out,
 calling the gods—calling Themis,
 Zeus' daughter, goddess of those promises
 which carried her across the ocean
 to Hellas, through the black salt seas, [210]
 through the place which few men penetrate, 240
 the strait which guards the Pontic Sea.

[Enter Medea with the Nurse]

MEDEA

Women of Corinth, I'm coming here,
 outside the house, so you won't think ill of me.
 Many men, I know, become too arrogant,

both in the public eye and in their homes.
 Others get a reputation for indifference,
 because they stay at ease within the house.
 There's no justice in the eyes of mortal men.
 Before they know someone's deep character, [220]
 they hate her on sight, though she's not hurt them. 250
 A guest of the city must comply, of course,
 act as the city wants. I don't commend
 a stubborn man, not even a citizen,
 who, thanks to his stupidity, annoys
 his fellow townsmen. But in my case,
 this unexpected blow that's hit me,
 well, it's destroyed my heart. My life is gone,
 dear friends. I've lost all joy. I want to die.
 The man who was everything to me,
 my own husband, has turned out to be 260
 the worst of men. This I know is true.
 Of all things with life and understanding, [230]
 we women are the most unfortunate.
 First, we need a husband, someone we get
 for an excessive price. He then becomes
 the ruler of our bodies. This misfortune
 adds still more troubles to the grief we have.
 Then comes the crucial struggle: this husband
 we've selected, is he good or bad?
 For a divorce loses women all respect, 270
 yet we can't refuse to take a husband.
 Then, when she goes into her husband's home,
 with its new rules and different customs,
 she needs a prophet's skill to sort out the man
 whose bed she shares. She can't learn that at home. [240]
 Once we've worked hard at this, and with success,
 our husband accepts the marriage yoke
 and lives in peace—an enviable life.
 But if the marriage doesn't work, then death
 is much to be preferred. When the man tires 280
 of the company he keeps at home, he leaves,
 seeking relief for his distress elsewhere,
 outside the home. He gets his satisfaction
 with some male friend or someone his own age.
 We women have to look at just one man.

Men tell us we live secure and safe at home,
while they must go to battle with their spears.
How stupid they are! I'd rather stand there
three times in battle holding up my shield [250]
than give birth once. But your story and mine 290
are not the same. For you have a city,
you have your father's house, enjoy your life
with friends for company. But I'm alone.
I have no city, and I'm being abused
by my own husband. I was carried off,
a trophy from a barbarian country.
I have no mother, brother, or relation,
to shelter with in this extremity.
And so I want to ask something from you.
If I find some way to punish Jason 300 [260]
for these injustices, and his bride, as well,
and father, too, say nothing. In other things
a woman may be timid—in watching battles
or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,
her marriage violated, there's no heart
more desperate for blood than hers.

CHORUS LEADER

I'll do what you request. For you are right
to pay your husband back. And, Medea,
I'm not surprised you grieve at these events.

[Enter Creon, with armed attendants]

I see Creon, king of Corinth, coming. 310
He'll be bringing news, announcing
some new decision that's been made. [270]

CREON

You there, Medea, scowling in anger
against your husband. I'm ordering you
out of Corinth. You must go into exile,
and take those two children of yours with you.
Go quickly. I'm here to make quite sure
that this decree is put into effect.
I'll not go back to my own palace
until I've cast you out, beyond our borders. 320

MEDEA

O now my sufferings will kill me. It's over.
My enemies have set full sail against me,
and there's no way I can avert disaster.
But, Creon, let me ask you something— [280]
I'm the one abused, so why banish me?
What have I done?

CREON

I'm afraid of you.
I won't conceal the truth. There's a good chance
you might well instigate some fatal harm
against my daughter. Many things lead me
to this conclusion: you're a clever woman, 330
very experienced in evil ways;
you're grieving the loss of your husband's bed;
and from reports I hear you're making threats
to take revenge on Jason, on his bride,
and on her father. Before that happens,
I'm taking some precautions. Woman, [290]
it's better that you hate me, than for me
to grow soft now and then regret it later.

MEDEA

Alas, this is not the first time, Creon,
my reputation has badly damaged me. 340
It's happened often. No man with any sense
should ever educate his children
to know anything beyond what's normal.
Quite apart from charges of idleness
which other people bring against them,
they stir up in their fellow citizens
a hostile envy. If you offer fools
some brand new wisdom, they'll consider you
quite useless, not someone wise. And if, [300]
within the city, people think of you 350
as greater than those men who seem quite wise,
you'll appear a nuisance. So it is with me.
For I'm a knowledgeable woman. I make
some people envious. Others say I'm shy.
Some the opposite. Some say I'm hostile.
I'm not that clever, but still you fear me.

Have I hurt you at all, made you suffer?
Don't fear me, Creon. It's not in me
to commit crimes against the men in charge.
Besides, in what way have you injured me? 360
You've married your daughter to a man,
one your heart selected. My husband's [310]
the one I hate. In my view, you've acted
with good sense in this business. So now,
I'll not begrudge you your prosperity.
Have your marriage, and good luck to you.
But let me remain here, in this country.
Although I've suffered an injustice,
I'll obey the rulers and stay silent.

CREON

What you say sounds comforting enough, 370
but I'm still afraid that heart of yours
is planning something evil. At this point,
I trust you even less than previously.
Passionate people, women as well as men,
are easier to protect oneself against, [320]
than someone clever who keeps silent.
No. You must leave—and right away.
No more speeches. I've made up my mind.
It's not possible for you to stay here,
not with us, given your hostility to me. 380

MEDEA [kneeling in front of Creon]

No, don't send me away. I'm begging you,
at your knee, in your daughter's name.

CREON

Your words are useless. You won't persuade me.

MEDEA

You'll send me into exile without hearing
my supplication?

CREON

Indeed I will.
I don't love you more than my own family.

MEDEA

O my homeland! How I'm thinking of you now.

CREON

Except for my own children, my country
is what I cherish most by far.

MEDEA

Alas,
love's a miserable thing for mortal men.

390 [330]

CREON

I think events determine if that's true.

MEDEA

O Zeus, don't overlook who bears the blame
for all this evil.

CREON

It's time to leave,
you foolish woman. Time to rid myself
of all this trouble.

MEDEA

We have trouble enough—
there's no need for any more.

CREON

Come on—
or my servants will throw you into exile.

MEDEA

No, don't do that. I beg you, Creon . . .

[Medea seizes Creon's hand]

CREON

Woman, it seems you're trying to provoke me.

MEDEA

All right then. I will go into exile.
I wasn't begging to escape from that.

400

CREON

Then why clutch my hand so hard and not let go?

MEDEA

Let me remain here one day to prepare, [340]
to get ready for my exile, to provide
something for my children, since their father,
as one more insult, does nothing for them.
Have pity on them. You're a parent, too.
You should treat them kindly—that's what's right.
If I go into exile, I don't care,
but I weep for them in their misfortune. 410

CREON

For a tyrant my will is by nature tender,
and by feeling pity I've been hurt before,
more than once. And now, woman, I see
I'm making a mistake, for you can have [350]
your extra day. But let me warn you—
if the sun catches you tomorrow
within the borders of this country,
you or your children, you'll be put to death.
Don't think I'm not telling you the truth.
So, if you must remain, stay one more day. 420
In that time you can't do the harm I fear.

[Exit Creon with his attendants]

CHORUS LEADER

Alas for you, unfortunate woman—
how wretched your distress. Where will you turn?
Where will you find someone to take you in?
What country, what home will you find yourself
to give you shelter from misfortunes? [360]

MEDEA

Things have worked out badly in every way.
Who can deny the fact? But nonetheless,
you should not assume that's how things will stay.
The newly wedded pair still face some struggles, 430
and the man who made this marriage happen
might have serious problems yet. Do you think
I'd prostrate myself before a man like that,
if there was no advantage to be gained?
If I did not have some plan in mind,

I'd not have talked to him or grabbed his hand. [370]
 But the man's become completely foolish—
 when he had the power to prevent me
 from planning anything, by sending me
 out of his land, he let me stay one day, 440
 a day when I'll turn three of my enemies
 to corpses—father, daughter, and my husband.
 Now, I can slaughter them in many ways.
 I'm not sure which one to try out first.
 Perhaps I should set the bridal suite on fire,
 or sneak into the house in silence,
 right up to their marriage bed, and plunge [380]
 some sharpened steel right through their guts.
 There's just one problem. If I get caught
 going in their house, meaning to destroy it, 450
 I'll be killed, and my enemies will laugh.
 No. The best method is the most direct,
 the one at which I have a special skill—
 I'll murder them with poison. Yes, that's it.
 But once they're dead, what city will receive me?
 Who'll give me safe shelter as a guest
 and offer me physical protection?
 There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while.
 If someone shows up who can shield me, [390]
 I'll set my scheme in motion and kill them 460
 without saying a word. But if events
 force me to act openly, I'll use a sword.
 Even though it will bring about my death,
 I'll push my daring to the very limit
 and slaughter them. By Hecate, the goddess
 I worship more than all the others,
 the one I choose to help me in this work,
 who lives with me deep inside my home,
 these people won't bring pain into my heart
 and laugh about it. This wedding of theirs, 470
 I'll make it hateful for them, a disaster—
 Creon's marriage ties, my exile from here, [400]
 he'll find those bitter. So come, Medea,
 call on all those things you know so well,
 as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,
 this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.

You see what you have to put up with.
You must not let Jason's marriage make you
a laughing stock among Corinthians,
compatriots of Sisyphus, for you 480
trace your family from a noble father
and from Helios, the sun.¹ So get to work.
Besides, we have a woman's nature—
powerless to perform fine noble deeds,
but very skilled in all the forms of evil.

CHORUS

The waters in the sacred rivers [410]
are flowing in reverse,
and all well-ordered things
are once more turning on themselves.
Men's plans are now deceitful, 490
their firm trust in the gods is gone.
My life is changing—common talk
is giving me a better reputation.
Honour's coming to the female sex.
Slander will no longer injure women. [420]

Those songs by ancient poets
will stop chanting of our faithlessness.
Phoebus, god of song and singing,
never put into our minds the gift
of making sacred music with the lyre, 500
or else I would have sung a song
in response to what the male sex sings.
For our lengthy past has much to say
about men's lives as well as ours. [430]

You sailed here from your father's house,
your heart on fire, past those two rocks
that stand guard to the Euxine Sea.
You live now in a foreign land.
You've lost your marriage bed,
your husband, too, poor woman. 510
And now you're driven out,

¹Sisyphus: in Greek mythology, the founder and first king of Corinth, famous for his punishment in Hades, as described in Homer's *Odyssey*, where he is condemned to an eternity of rolling a bolder up a hill, only to have it roll down again.

hounded into exile in disgrace.

The honour in an oath has gone.
And all throughout wide Hellas [440]
there's no shame any more.
Shame has flown away to heaven.
So to you, unhappy lady,
no father's house is open,
no haven on your painful voyage.
For now a stronger woman 520
rules in your household,
queen of his marriage bed.

[Enter Jason]

JASON

Right now is not the first time I've observed
how a harsh temper makes all things worse—
impossibly so. It's happened often.
You could've stayed here in this land and house,
if only you'd agreed to the arrangements,
showed some patience with those in command.
Now you're exiled for your stupid chatter. [450]
Not that I care. You don't have to stop 530
calling Jason the worst man in the world.
But when you speak against the ruler here,
consider yourself very fortunate
that exile is your only punishment.
I've always tried to mollify the king—
he has a vicious temper—and have you stay.
But you just wouldn't stop this silly rage,
always slandering the royal house.
That's why you've got to leave the country.
Anyway, I won't neglect my family. 540
I've come here, woman, looking out for you, [460]
so you won't be thrown out with the children
in total need and lacking everything.
Exile brings with it all sorts of hardships.
Although you may well despise me now,
I could never have bad feelings for you.

MEDEA

As a man you're the worst there is—that's all
I'll say about you, no trace of manhood.
You come to me now, you come at this point,
when you've turned into the worst enemy 550
of the gods and me and the whole human race?
It isn't courage or firm resolution
to hurt your family and then confront them, [470]
face to face, but a total lack of shame,
the greatest of all human sicknesses.
But you did well to come, for I will speak.
I'll unload my heart, describe your evil.
You listen. I hope you're hurt by what I say.
I'll begin my story at the very start.
I saved your life—every Greek who sailed with you 560
on board that ship the Argo can confirm it—
when you'd been sent to bring under the yoke
the fire-breathing bulls and then to sow
the fields of death. And I killed the dragon
guarding the Golden Fleece, coiled up there, [480]
staying on watch and never going to sleep.
For you I raised the light which rescued you
from death. I left my father and my home,
on my own, and came with you to Iolcus,
beneath Mount Pelion. My love for you 570
was greater than my wisdom. Then I killed
Pelias in the most agonizing way,
at the hands of his own daughters,
and then destroyed his household, all of it.
Now, after I've done all this to help you,
you brute, you betray me and help yourself
to some new wife. And we have children!
If you'd had no children, I'd understand [490]
why you're so keen on marrying this girl.
And what about the promises you made? 580
I don't know if you think the ancient gods
still govern, or if new regulations
have recently been put in place for men,
but you must know you've broken faith with me.
By this right hand, which you have often held,
and by my knees, at which you've often begged,

it was all for nothing to be touched like that,
by such a worthless man. I've lost all hope.
But come now. I'll sort things out with you,
as if you were a friend. I've no idea 590
what sort of kindness to expect from you. [500]
But let's see. The things I'll ask about
will make you look even more disgraceful.
Where do I now turn? To my father's house?
For your sake I betrayed my country,
to come here with you. Then should I go
to Pelias' daughters in their misery?
They'd surely welcome me with open arms,
since I killed their father. That's how things stand.
To my family I'm now an enemy, 600
and by assisting you I declared war
on those whom I had no need to injure.
For all the ways I've helped you, you made me,
in the eyes of many wives in Greece,
a lucky woman, blessed in many things.
But what a wonderful and trusting husband [510]
I have in you now, in my misfortune,
if I go into exile, leave this land,
with no friends, all alone, abandoned,
with my abandoned children. And for you, 610
what a fine report for a new bridegroom,
his children wandering round like vagabonds
with the very woman who saved his life.
O Zeus, why did you give men certain ways
to recognize false gold, when there's no mark,
no special token on the human body,
to indicate which men are worthless.

CHORUS

When members of a family fight like this, [520]
rage pushes them beyond all compromise.

JASON

Woman, it seems I'll need to give good reasons, 620
and, like a skilled helmsman on a ship,
haul in my sails and run before that storm
blowing from your raving tongue. In my view,
you overestimate your favours to me.

I consider goddess Aphrodite
 the only one of gods or mortal men
 who saved my expedition. As for you,
 well, you've a subtle mind. But if I told
 how Eros with his unerring arrows
 forced you to save me, I could injure you. [530]
 So I won't press the matter very far. 630
 However you helped me, you did it well.
 But by saving me you got in return
 more than you gave, as I will demonstrate.
 First of all, you now live among the Greeks,
 not in a country of barbarians.
 You're familiar with justice and the laws,
 rather than brute force. Besides, all the Greeks
 know you're clever, so you've earned yourself
 a fine reputation. If you still lived 640 [540]
 out there at the boundary of the world,
 no one would talk about you. And great fame
 I'd sooner have than houses filled with gold,
 or the power to sing sweet melodies,
 sweeter than all the songs of Orpheus.
 That's my response to you about my labours.
 Remember you started this war of words.
 As for your complaints about this marriage,
 I'll show you that in this I'm being wise,
 and moderate, and very friendly to you, 650
 and to my children. You must have patience. [550]
 When I came here from the land of Iolcus,
 I brought with me many troubles, hard ones,
 things impossible for me to deal with.
 What greater good fortune could I have found
 than marrying the daughter of the king,
 me—an exile? On the point that irks you,
 it's not the case I hate our marriage bed,
 overcome with lust for some new bride,
 nor am I keen to rival other men 660
 in the number of my many children.
 We have enough. I'm not complaining.
 The most important thing for us to do
 is to live well and not in poverty,
 knowing that everyone avoids a friend [560]

once he's a pauper. As for my children,
I want to raise them in the proper way,
one worthy of my house, to have brothers
for the children born from you, and make them
all the same. Thus, with a united family 670
I might prosper. Do you need more children?
In my case, there's some benefit to have
new children to help those already born.
Was this a bad scheme? You'd agree with me,
if you weren't so upset about the sex.
But you women are so idiotic—
you think if everything is fine in bed,
you have all you need, but if the sex is bad, [570]
then all the very best and finest things
you make your enemies. What mortals need 680
is some other way to get our children.
There should be no female sex. With that,
men would be rid of all their troubles.

CHORUS LEADER

Jason, your reasons here seem logical,
but it strikes me, if I may presume,
you're in the wrong abandoning your wife.

MEDEA

I'm very different from many others,
in all sorts of ways—in my opinion,
the unjust man who speaks so plausibly [580]
brings on himself the harshest punishment. 690
Since he's sure his tongue can hide injustice,
he dares anything. But he's not that clever.
So you should not parade before me now
your clever words and faulty reasoning.
One word demolishes your argument:
if you were not corrupt, you'd ask me first,
get my consent to undertake this marriage,
but you didn't even tell your family.

JASON

Oh yes, if I'd told you of the wedding,
I'm sure you would have lent me fine support. 700
Even now you can't stand to set aside

that huge rage in your heart.

[590]

MEDEA

You're lying.

You thought as you grew old a barbarian wife
would bring you disrespect.

JASON

Get this straight—
this royal bride I have, I didn't marry her
because of any woman. As I told you,
I wanted to save you and have children,
royal princes, with the same blood as my sons.
That way my house has more security.

MEDEA

May I never want a merely prosperous life,
accepting pain or great wealth at the expense
of happiness here in my heart.

710

JASON

Do you think
you can change that prayer and sound more sensible?
You should not consider this advantage
painful, or pretend to be so wretched
when things are going well for you.

[600]

MEDEA

Keep up the insults. You have your refuge.
I'm alone and banished from this country.

JASON

That's what you've chosen. The blame rests with you.

MEDEA

What did I do? Marry and desert you?

720

JASON

You kept making all those bitter curses
against the ruling family here.

MEDEA

And I'm a curse against your family, too.

JASON

I'm not arguing with you any more
about all this. But if you want me
to provide some money, some assistance
for you and the children in your exile,
just ask. I'm prepared to give you some,
and with a generous hand. I'll send my friends
introductory tokens, so they'll treat you well. 730
You'd be mad not to accept this offer.
Woman, stop being so angry. If you do,
things will turn out so much better for you.

MEDEA

I'll accept no assistance from your friends,
nor anything from you. Don't make the offer.
Gifts from a worthless man are without value.

JASON

All right, but I call the gods to witness
I'm willing to help you and the children. [620]
But you reject my goods and stubbornly
push away your friends, and that the reason 740
you suffer still more pain.

MEDEA

Get out of here.
For someone so in love with his new bride
you're spending far too long outside her home.
Go act married. The gods may well see to it
your marriage changes into one of those
which make you howl with sorrow.

[Exit Jason]

CHORUS

Love with too much passion
brings with it no fine reputation,
brings nothing virtuous to men.
But if Aphrodite comes in smaller doses, 750 [630]
no other god is so desirable.
Goddess, I pray you never strike me
with one of those poisoned arrows
shot from that golden bow of yours.

I pray that moderation,
the gods' most beautiful gift,
will always guide me.
I pray that Aphrodite
never packs my heart with jealousy
or angry quarrelling. 760
May she never fill me with desire
for sex in other people's beds.
May she bless peaceful unions,
using her wisdom to select [640]
a woman's marriage bed.

O my country and my home,
I pray I never lack a city,
never face a hopeless life,
one filled with misery and pain.
Before that comes, let death, 770
my death, deliver me,
bring my days to their fatal end.
For there's no affliction worse [650]
than losing one's own country.

I say on this based on what I've seen,
not on what other people say.
For you are here without a city—
you have no friends to pity you,
as you suffer in this misery,
suffer in the harshest way. 780
The man who shames his family, [660]
who doesn't open up his heart
and treat them in all honesty—
may he perish unlamented.
With him I never could be friends.

[Enter Aegeus, King of Athens]

AEGEUS

I wish you all happiness, Medea.
There's no better way to greet one's friends.

MEDEA

All happiness to you, too, Aegeus,
wise Pandion's son. Where are you coming from?

AEGEUS

I've just left Apollo's ancient oracle.

790

MEDEA

The prophetic centre of the earth?

What business took you there?

AEGEUS

To ask a question.

I want to know how I can have some children.

MEDEA

In the gods' name, have you lived so long
without ever having any children?

[670]

AEGEUS

Not one. Some god is doing this to me.

MEDEA

Do you have a wife? Or have you stayed unmarried?

AEGEUS

No, I'm married. My wife shares my bed.

MEDEA

So what did Apollo say about it?

AEGEUS

Words too wise for human understanding.

800

MEDEA

It is appropriate for me to learn them?

AEGEUS

Of course. They need a clever mind like yours.

MEDEA

What was the prophecy? Tell it to me—
if it's all right for me to hear.

AEGEUS

He told me this:

"Don't untie the wineskin's foot. . ."

MEDEA

Until when?

Until you do what or reach what country?

[680]

AEGEUS

“ . . . until you come back to your hearth and home.”

MEDEA

What were you looking for when you sailed here?

AEGEUS

A man called Pittheus, king of Troezen.

MEDEA

He's Pelops' son, a very holy man, they say. 810

AEGEUS

I want to share the god's prophecy with him.

MEDEA

He's a wise man and skilled in things like that.

AEGEUS

And the friendliest of all my allies.

MEDEA

Well, good luck. I hope you find what you desire.

AEGEUS

Why are your eyes so sad, your cheeks so pale?

MEDEA

O Aegeus, my husband has been cruel— [690]
of all men he's treated me the worst.

AEGEUS

What are you saying? Tell me truly—
what things have made you so unhappy?

MEDEA

Jason's abusing me. I've done him no harm. 820

AEGEUS

What has he done? Give me more details.

MEDEA

He's taken a new wife. She now rules his home,
instead of me.

AEGEUS

That's completely shameful.

He hasn't dared something like that, has he?

MEDEA

Indeed, he has. He's dishonored me, the wife
he used to love.

AEGEUS

Is this a new love affair,
or did he get fed up with you in bed?

MEDEA

A new love match—he's betrayed his family.

AEGEUS

Leave him, then, since, as you say, he's worthless.

MEDEA

His passion is to marry royalty.

830 [700]

AEGEUS

Who's giving her to him? Tell me the rest.

MEDEA

Creon, who rules this land of Corinth.

AEGEUS

Then, lady, it's quite understandable
why you're in such distress.

MEDEA

I'm done for, finished.
I'm being banished from this country.

AEGEUS

By whom? You're speaking now of some new trouble.

MEDEA

Creon is driving me out into exile,
shipping me off, away from Corinth.

AEGEUS

With Jason's full consent? I find that disgraceful.

MEDEA

He says not. Still, he's planning to accept it.
But, Aegeus, I beg you by your beard,
and at your knees implore you—have pity.

840

[710]

Take pity on me in my misfortune.
Don't let me be exiled without a friend.
Accept me as a suppliant in your home,
your native land. If you will take me in,
may the gods then answer your desire
to have children. May you die a happy man.
You don't know what a lucky one you are
to find me here. I'll end your childlessness. 850
I know the sorts of medicines to use,
and I can help you have many children.

AEGEUS

Lady, I'd like to grant this favour to you,
for many reasons. First, there's the gods. [720]
Then, for the children you say I'll produce.
For there I've lost all sense of what to try.
Here's what I'll do. If you get to my country,
I'll strive to treat you as a foreign guest—
that's the proper thing for me to do.
But, Medea, I'll give you fair warning: 860
I won't plot to get you out of Corinth.
If you can reach my household on your own,
you may stay there in safety. Rest assured—
I won't surrender you to anyone.
But you must make your own escape from here.
I don't want my hosts finding fault with me. [730]

MEDEA

That's fine with me. If you could promise this,
you'd have done me all the good you can.

AEGEUS

Don't you trust me? What in this still bothers you?

MEDEA

I do trust you. But the house of Pelias 870
dislikes me, and so does Creon's, too.
If you bind yourself to a promise now,
you'll not hand me over when they come,
seeking to remove me from your country.
If you use words, and don't swear by the gods,
you may become their friend and then comply

with their political demands. I'm weak,
and they have wealth, a king's resources. [740]

AEGEUS

What you've just said is very shrewd. All right,
if it's what you want, I'm not unwilling 880
to do what you require. Your proposal
gives me some security. I can show
those hostile to you I've a good excuse.
And it makes your position safer.
Tell me the gods that I should swear by.

MEDEA

Swear by the plain of Earth, by Helios,
my father's father, by the family of gods,
by all of them collectively.

AEGEUS

Tell me
what I must swear to do and not to do.

MEDEA

Never to cast me out from your own country. 890
And if some enemy of mine asks you [750]
if he can take me off, you'll not agree,
not while you're still alive.

AEGEUS

I swear—
by the Earth, by Helios' sacred light,
by all the gods—I'll do what I've just heard.

MEDEA

That's good. And if you betray this promise,
what happens to you then?

AEGEUS

May I then suffer
the punishment that falls on profane men.

MEDEA

All is well. Now, go your way in peace.
I'll come to your city as quickly as I can, 900
once I've completed what I mean to do,

and my plans here have been successful.

[Exit Aegeus]

CHORUS LEADER

May Hermes, noble son of Maia,
go with you on your return, Aegeus. [760]
I hope you'll get what your heart's so set on,
for in my eyes you are a worthy man.

MEDEA

O Zeus, and Justice, child of Zeus,
and flaming Helios—now, my friends,
we'll triumph over all my enemies.
The plans I've made have been set in motion. 910
I'm confident my enemies will pay,
they'll get their punishment. For at the point
when I was most in trouble, this man came
and helped me plan safe harbour for myself.
I'll lash my ship's cable to Aegeus, [770]
once I've made it to Athena's city.
Now I'll tell you all the things I'm planning—
though you'll get little pleasure from my words.
I'm going to send one of my household slaves
to ask Jason to come and visit me. 920
Once he's here, my words will reassure him.
I'll tell him I agree with what he's doing,
that leaving me for this royal alliance
is a fine idea—he's acted properly
and made the right decisions. Then I'll ask [780]
if my children can remain. My purpose
is not to leave them in a hostile land
surrounded by insulting enemies,
but a trick to kill the daughter of the king.
For I'll send the children to her with gifts. 930
They'll carry presents for the bride, as if
requesting to be spared their banishment—
a finely woven robe and a tiara
of twisted gold. If she accepts those gifts
and puts them on, she'll die—and painfully.
And so will anyone touching the girl.
I've smeared strong poisons on those gifts.

So much for that. I'll say no more about her. [790]
But the next thing I'll do fills me with pain—
I'm going to kill my children. There's no one 940
can save them now. And when I've done this,
wiped out Jason's house completely, I'll leave,
evading the punishment I'd receive
for murdering my darling children,
a sacrilegious crime. You see, my friends,
I won't accept my enemies' contempt.
So be it. What good does life hold for me now?
I have no father, no home, no refuge.
I was wrong to leave my father's house, [800]
won over by the words of that Greek man, 950
who now, with the gods' help, will pay the price.
He'll never see his children alive again,
the ones I bore him, nor have more children
with his new bride, for she's been marked to die
an agonizing death, poisoned by my drugs.
Let no one think that I'm a trivial woman,
a feeble one who sits there passively.
No, I'm a different sort—I'm dangerous
to enemies, but well disposed to friends.
Lives like mine achieve the greatest glory. 960 [810]

CHORUS LEADER

Since you've shared your plans with me, I urge you
not to do this. I want to help you,
holding to the standards of human law.

MEDEA

In this matter there's no choice. I forgive
what you just said, because, unlike me,
you don't have to bear this suffering.

CHORUS LEADER

But, lady, can you stand to kill your children?

MEDEA

Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason.

CHORUS LEADER

But as a woman it will devastate you.

MEDEA

That's beside the point. Until that time
it's useless to continue talking. 970

[Medea goes to door of the house and calls inside]

You in there . . .

[Enter Nurse from the house]

. . . go now and fetch Jason here. [820]
When I need to trust someone, I choose you.
Tell him nothing of what I mean to do,
if you like your mistress and are a woman.

[Exit Medea into the house and the Nurse off stage]

CHORUS

Since ancient times, Erechtheus' sons
have been especially blessed,
children of the sacred gods,
from a holy country never conquered,
never ransacked by its enemies.¹ 980
Fed on glorious fruits of wisdom,
they stride lithely through the sunlit air, [830]
where, so the story goes, the Muses,
nine maidens of Pieria, gave birth
to golden-haired Hermione.
And people celebrate how Aphrodite,
while drawing water from the stream,
the flowing river of the lovely Cephissus,
breathes down upon the land
sweet, temperate winds, 990 [840]
while she binds within her hair
garlands of sweet-smelling roses,
sending Love to sit at Wisdom's side,
to foster all fine things.
How will this city of sacred streams,
this land of strolling lovers,
welcome you—a murderer,
who slaughtered her own children,

¹Erechtheus' sons: In Greek mythology Erechtheus was an early king of Athens. The phrase Erechtheus' sons is a common term referring to the Athenians.

an unholy woman—among its people? [850]
Consider this—the killing of your children. 1000
Consider the murders you are going to do.
By your knees we beg you,
in every way we know,
do not butcher your own children.

Where will your hands and heart
find the strength, the courage
to dare this dreadful action?
How will you look at them, [860]
your children, and not weep
for their murderous fate? 1010
When they kneel before you,
and implore your mercy,
you'll find it impossible
to steel your heart,
then soak your hands
in your own children's blood.

[Enter Medea from the house and, from the side, Jason with the Nurse]

JASON

I've come, as you requested. You hate me,
but I'm here, and I'm prepared to listen.
Woman, what it is you now want from me?

MEDEA

Jason, I ask you to forgive me 1020
for what I said before. My anger [870]
you should be able to put up with,
since we two have shared many acts of love.
I've been debating with myself. I realize
I've been in the wrong. I tell myself
I'm a fool. Why am I in such a rage,
resenting those who offer good advice?
Why fight against the rulers of this land
or against my husband, whose actions serve
my own best interests with this royal marriage, 1030
producing brothers for my children?
Why can't I stop being angry? What's wrong with me,
when gods are being so kind? Don't I have children? [880]

Don't I know we're going into exile,
where friends are hard to find? With thoughts like these,
I recognized how foolish I had been,
how senseless it was to be so annoyed.
So now I agree with you. It strikes me
you've been acting prudently, by forging
this marriage link on our behalf. I was mad. 1040
I should have worked with you in this design,
helped you with your plans, stood there beside you
in this marriage, rejoiced along with you
for this union with your bride. But women are,
well, I won't say bad—we are what we are.
You shouldn't copy the bad things we do, [890]
repaying foolishness with foolishness.
So I concede. I admit that I was wrong.
But now I see things in a better light.

[Medea goes to the door of the house and calls inside]

Children, come out here—leave the house. 1050

[Enter the children with the Tutor]

Come on out. Welcome your father here—
talk to him with me. You and your mother
will end the bad blood we've had in this family.
We've patched things up, and no one's angry now.
Take his right hand. O it's harsh to think [900]
of what the future hides.

[Medea hugs her children]

O my children,
will you keep holding your dear arms out like this
through all the many years you have to live?
O dear, I'm just too tearful, too afraid!
My delicate eyes keep filling up with tears, 1060
now I've stopped this quarrel with your father.

CHORUS LEADER

My eyes, too, begin to weep pale tears.
May this bad luck proceed no further.

JASON

Lady, I approve of what you're saying now.
Not that I blame you for what went on before.
For it's quite natural in the female sex
to get angry when their husbands set up
secret schemes to plan another marriage. [910]
But your heart has changed now for the better.
Although it took a while, you understand 1070
the wiser course of action. In doing so,
you're acting like a woman of good sense.
Now, as for you, my children, your father
has not been neglectful. With the gods' help,
I've made secure provision for you.
At some future date, you'll be leaders here,
in Corinth, alongside your new brothers.
But first you must grow up. As for the rest,
your father and the god who smiles on him
will take care of that. I pray I see you 1080 [920]
mature into fine young men, victorious
over all my enemies.

[Medea starts to weep]

Medea,
why turn away? Why weep and fill your eyes
with these pale tears? What I have said,
does that not make you happy?

MEDEA

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

JASON

Cheer up.
I will see that they are well looked after.

MEDEA

I will cheer up. I trust what you have said.
But it's a woman's nature to shed tears.

JASON

But why be so tearful with the boys? 1090

MEDEA

I gave birth to them. When you made that prayer [930]
about them growing up, I felt pity,
wondering how things would turn out for them.
But let's discuss the reasons for your visit.
I've mentioned some. Now I'll let you know the rest.
Since the rulers here are keen to banish me,
I recognize the best thing I can do
is try not to stand in their way or yours,
by staying here. This royal house thinks me
their enemy. So I've made up my mind 1100
to leave this country and go into exile.
But you should beg Creon to spare our boys,
not banish them, so they can grow up here, [940]
under your direction.

JASON

Well, I don't know
if I can convince him. But I should try.

MEDEA

You could tell your wife to ask her father
not to send the children into exile.

JASON

A good idea. I think I can persuade her.

MEDEA

You will, if she's a woman like the rest.
And I'll give you some help. I'll send her gifts, 1110
by far the finest human gifts I know,
a finely woven gown, a diadem
of twisted gold. The boys will take them.
One of my servants must fetch them here— [950]

[Medea gestures to a servant]

You—bring me those presents right away.

[Servant goes into the house]

She's got more than one reason to be happy,
that wife of yours. She's blessed in countless ways.
In you she's found a very worthy man

to share her bed—and now she gets these gifts,
which my grandfather Helios once gave 1120
to his descendants.

[The servant returns with the gifts. Medea takes them and hands them over to her children]

Come, children,
take up these wedding gifts and carry them
as offerings to the happy royal bride.
What she's getting will be worthy of her.

JASON

What are you doing, you foolish woman,
disposing of these things of yours? Do you think
the royal house lacks clothes or gold? Keep them. [960]
Don't give them away. If my wife values me,
she'll set more store on what I want to do
than on rich possessions. I'm sure of that. 1130

MEDEA

Don't say that. Even the gods, they claim,
are won by gifts. And among mortal men,
gold works more wonders than a thousand words.
Her fortune's on the rise. Gods favour her.
She's young, with royal power to command.
But to spare my children banishment,
I'd trade more than gold. I'd give my life.
Now, children, when you get inside the palace,
you must beg this new wife of your father's, [970]
my mistress, not to send you into exile. 1140
When you present these gifts, you must make sure
she takes them from you herself, in her own hands.
Now go and be quick about it. Good luck!
Bring your mother back news of your success,
the happy news she so desires to hear.

[Exit Jason and the children, with the Nurse and Tutor]

CHORUS

I've no longer any hope
that these children stay alive,
as they stroll to their own slaughter.

The bride will take her diadem,
she'll take her golden ruin. 1150
With her own hand she'll fix
across her lovely yellow hair [980]
the jewellery of death.

The unearthly gleam, the charm
will tempt her to put on the robe
and ornament of twisted gold.
Her marriage bed will lie among the dead.
That's the trap she'll fall in.
That's how she will die.
She can't escape destruction. 1160

And you, unlucky man, [990]
married to the daughter of a king—
how ignorant you are right now,
bringing death to both your sons,
to your bride an agonizing end.
You most unfortunate man,
how wrong you were about your destiny.

Next, I mourn your sorrows,
unhappy mother of these children,
intent on slaughtering your sons, 1170
because your lawless husband
left you and your marriage bed [1000]
and now lives with another wife.

[Enter the Tutor with the children]

TUTOR

My lady, your children won't be exiled.
The royal bride was happy to accept,
with own hands, the gifts you sent her.
Now the boys have made their peace with her.

[Medea starts to weep]

What's wrong? Why do you stand there in distress?
Things have worked out well. Why turn away again?
Aren't you happy to hear my splendid news? 1180

MEDEA

Alas . . .

TUTOR

An odd response to the news I bring.

MEDEA

All I can say is how sad I am

TUTOR

Have I mistakenly said something bad?

Am I wrong to think my news is good?

[1010]

MEDEA

You've reported what you had to tell me.

I'm not blaming you.

TUTOR

Then why avert your eyes?

Why are you crying?

MEDEA

Old man, I have my reasons.

The gods and I, with my worst intentions,
have brought about this situation.

TUTOR

Be happy. Your children will one day
bring you back home again.

1190

MEDEA

But before that,

I shall bring others to their homes—alas,
how miserable I feel.

TUTOR

You're not the only mother whose children
have been separated from her. We mortals
must bear our bad times patiently.

MEDEA

I'll do so.

But now go in the house. And carry on.

Give the children their usual routine.

[1020]

[Tutor exits into the house. The children remain with Medea]

O children, my children, you still have
 a city and a home, where you can live, 1200
 once you've left me in wretched suffering.
 You can live on here without your mother.
 But I'll go to some other country,
 an exile, before I've had my joy in you,
 before I've seen you happy, or helped
 to decorate your marriage beds, your brides,
 your bridal chambers, or lifted high
 your wedding torches. How miserable
 my self-will has made me. I raised you—
 and all for nothing. The work I did for you, 1210
 the cruel hardships, pains of childbirth— [1030]
 all for nothing. Once, in my foolishness,
 I had many hopes in you—it's true—
 that you'd look after me in my old age,
 that you'd prepare my corpse with your own hands,
 in the proper way, as all people wish.
 But now my tender dreams have been destroyed.
 For I will live my life without you both,
 in sorrow. And those loving eyes of yours
 will never see your mother any more. 1220
 Your life is changing. O my children, [1040]
 why are you looking at me in that way?
 Why smile at me—that last smile of yours?
 Alas, what shall I do? You women here,
 my heart gives way when I see those eyes,
 my children's smiling eyes. I cannot do it.
 Good bye to those previous plans of mine.
 I'll take my children from this country.
 Why harm them as a way to hurt their father
 and have to suffer twice his pain myself? 1230
 No, I won't do that. And so farewell
 to what I planned before. But what's going on?
 What's wrong with me? Do I really want
 my enemies escaping punishment, [1050]
 while I become someone they ridicule?
 I will go through with this. What a coward
 I am even to let my heart admit
 such sentimental reasons. Children,
 you must go into the house.

[The children move toward the house but remain at the door, looking at Medea]

Anyone forbidden

to attend my sacrifice, let such a man 1240
concern himself about these children.
My hand will never lack the strength for this.
And yet . . . My heart, don't do this murder.
You're made of stone, but leave the boys alone.
Spare my children. If they remain alive,
with me in Athens, they'll make you happy.
No! By those avengers in lower Hell,
I'll never deliver up my children, [1060]
hand them over to their enemies,
to be humiliated. They must die— 1250
that's unavoidable, no matter what.
Since that must happen, then their mother,
the one who gave them life, will kill them.
At all events it's settled. There's no way out.
On her head the royal bride already wears
the poisoned crown. That dress is killing her.
But I'm treading an agonizing path
and send my children on one even worse.
What I want to do now is say farewell.

[Medea moves to the children near the door, kneels down and hugs them]

Give me your right hands, children. Come on. 1260 [1070]
Let your mother kiss them. Oh, these hands—
how I love them—and how I love these mouths,
faces—the bearing of such noble boys.
I wish you happiness—but somewhere else.
Where you live now your father takes away.
O this soft embrace! Their skin's so tender.
My boys' breathing smells so sweet to me.
But you must go inside. Go. I can't stand
to look at you any more like this.
The evil done to me has won the day. 1270
I understand too well the dreadful act
I'm going to commit, but my judgment
can't check my anger, and that incites

the greatest evils human beings do.

[1080]

[Medea shepherds the children into the house, leaving the Chorus alone on stage]

CHORUS

Often, before this present time,
I've gone into more complex arguments,
I've struggled with more serious issues,
than my female sex should try to probe.
But we, too, have an artistic Muse.

She lives with us to teach us wisdom.
But not with all of us—the group of women
able to profit from our Muse is small—
in a crowd of women you might find one.

1280

And I claim that with human beings
those with no experience of children,
those who have never given birth,
such people have far more happiness
than those who have been parents.

[1090]

With those who have no children,
because they never come to see
whether their children have grown up
to be a blessing or a curse to men,
their failure to have offspring
keeps many troubles from them.

1290

But those who in their own homes
have a sweet race of children growing,
I see them worn down with cares
their whole life long. First,
how they can raise their children well.

[1100]

Next, how they can leave their sons
a means of livelihood. And then,
it's by no means clear that all the work
produces good or useless children.

1300

There's one final problem,
the worst for any mortal human—
I'll tell you: suppose those parents
have found a sufficient way of life,
and seen their children grow
into strong, young, virtuous men,
if Fate so wills it, Death comes,

1310 [1110]

carries off the children's bodies,
away to Hades. What profit, then,
is there for us and our love of sons,
if the gods inflict on mortal men,
in addition to their other troubles,
this most painful extra grief.

[Enter Medea from the house]

MEDEA

My friends, I've long been waiting in suspense
to see what's happening in the royal house.
Now I see one of Jason's servants coming.
His hard rapid breathing indicates to me
he's bringing news of some fresh disaster.

1320

[1120]

[Enter the Messenger, coming from the royal palace]

MESSENGER

Medea, you must escape—leave this place.
You've done an awful deed, broken every law.
Take ship and go by sea—or go overland
by chariot. But you must go from here.

MEDEA

What's happened that I have to run away?

MESSENGER

The king's daughter has just been destroyed,
her father, too—Creon. You poisoned them.

MEDEA

What really splendid news you bring.
From now on, I'll consider you a friend,
one of my benefactors.

1330

MESSENGER

What's that?

Are you in your right mind, lady, or insane?
To commit this crime against the royal house,
and then be happy when you hear the news,
without being afraid?

[1130]

MEDEA

I have some remarks to offer in reply.

But, my friend, don't be in such a hurry.
Tell me of their deaths. If you report
they died in pain, you'll double my rejoicing.

MESSENGER

When your two children came with their father 1340
and went in the bride's home, we servants,
who had shared in your misfortune, were glad,
for a rumour spread at once from ear to ear
that you and your husband's previous quarrel [1140]
was now over. Someone kissed the boys' hands,
someone else their golden hair. In my joy,
I went with the children right inside,
into the women's quarters. Our mistress,
whom we now look up to instead of you,
before she caught sight of your two children, 1350
wanted to fix her eyes on Jason only.
But then she veiled her eyes and turned away
her white cheek, disgusted that they'd come.
Your husband tried to change the young bride's mood, [1150]
to soften her anger, with these words,
"Don't be so hard-hearted with your family.
Check your anger, and turn your face this way,
look at us again, and count as friends of yours
those your husband thinks are friends of his.
Now, receive these gifts, and then, for my sake, 1360
beg your father not to exile these two boys."
Once she saw the gifts, she did not hold out,
but agreed in everything with Jason.
And before your children and their father
had gone any distance from the palace,
she took the richly embroidered gown
and put it on, then arranged the golden crown, [1160]
fixing it in her hair at a bright mirror,
smiling at her body's lifeless image there.
Then she stood up from her seat and strolled 1370
across the room, moving delicately
on her pale feet, delighted with the gifts,
with a great many glances to inspect
the straightness of the dress against her legs.
But then it happened—a horrific sight.

She changed colour, staggered back and sideways,
 trembling, then fell into her chair again,
 almost collapsing on the floor. An old woman, [1170]
 one of her servants, thinking it was a fit
 inspired by Pan or by some other god, 1380
 shouted in festive joy, until she saw
 the white spit foaming in her mouth, her eyes
 bulging from their sockets, and her pale skin
 quite drained of blood. The servant screamed again—
 this time, to make up for her former shout,
 she cried out in distress. Another slave
 ran off at once towards her father's palace,
 and another to the girl's new husband
 to tell him the grim fate his bride had met.
 The whole house rang with people's footsteps, 1390 [1180]
 as they hurried back and forth. By the time
 it would take a fast runner to complete
 two hundred yards and reach the finish line,
 her eyes opened—the poor girl woke up,
 breaking her silent fit with a dreadful scream.
 She was suffering a double agony—
 around her head the golden diadem
 shot out amazing molten streams of fire
 burning everything, and the fine woven robe,
 your children's gift, consumed the poor girl's flesh. 1400
 She jumped up from the chair and ran away, [1190]
 all of her on fire, tossing her head, her hair,
 this way and that, trying to shake off
 her golden crown—but it was fixed in place,
 and when she shook her hair, the fire blazed
 twice as high. Then she fell down on the ground,
 overcome by the disaster. No one
 could recognize her, except her father.
 Her eyes had lost their clear expression,
 her face had changed. And there was blood 1410
 on top her head, dripping down, mixed with fire.
 The flesh was peeling from her bones, chewed off
 by the poison's secret jaws, like resin [1200]
 oozing from a pine torch. An appalling sight!
 Everyone was too afraid to touch the corpse—
 what we'd seen had warned us. But her father,

poor wretch, didn't know what she's been through.
 He came unexpectedly into the house
 and stumbled on the corpse. He cried aloud,
 embraced his daughter, and kissed her, saying, 1420
 "My poor child, what god has been so cruel
 to destroy you in this way? Who's taken you
 away from me, an old man near my death?
 O my child, I wish I could die with you." [1210]
 He ended his lamenting cries. But then,
 when he tried to raise his old body up,
 he was entangled in that woven dress,
 like ivy wrapped around a laurel branch.
 He struggled dreadfully, trying to get up
 onto his knees, but she held him down. 1430
 If he used force, he tore his ancient flesh
 clear off his bones. The poor man at last gave up.
 His breathing stopped, for he couldn't stand the pain
 a moment longer. So the two of them lie dead—
 the daughter, her old father, side by side. [1220]
 It's horrible, something to make one weep.
 Concerning you there's nothing I will say.
 For you'll know well enough the punishment
 that's coming to you. As for human life,
 it seems to me, and not for the first time, 1440
 nothing but shadows. And I might say,
 without feeling any fear, those mortals
 who seem wise, who prepare their words with care,
 are guilty of the greatest foolishness.
 Among human beings no one is happy.
 Wealth may flow in to produce a man
 more lucky than another, but no man, [1230]
 is ever happy, no one.

[Exit Messenger]

CHORUS LEADER

This is the day, it seems,
 the god tightens trouble around Jason,
 and justly so. O poor Creon's daughter, 1450
 how we pity your misfortune. You're gone,
 down in Hades' home—the price you pay
 for marrying Jason.

MEDEA

My mind's made up, my friends.
I'll do it—kill my children now, without delay,
and flee this land. I must not hesitate.
That will hand them over to someone else,
to be slaughtered by a hand less loving.
No matter what, the children have to die.
Since that's the case, then I, who gave them life, [1240]
will kill them. Arm yourself for this, my heart. 1460
Why do I put off doing this dreadful act,
since it must be done? Come, pick up the sword,
wretched hand of mine. Pick up the sword,
move to where your life of misery begins.
Don't play the coward. Don't remember now
how much you love them, how you gave them life.
For this short day forget they are your children—
and mourn them later. Although you kill them,
still you loved them. As a woman, I'm so sad. [1250]

[Exit Medea into the house]

CHORUS

Hail to Earth, 1470
Hail to the Sun,
whose rays illuminate all things.
Turn your eyes, look down,
see this destroying woman,
before she sets her bloody hands,
her instruments of murder,
onto her own children,
those offshoots of your golden race.¹
It's a fearful thing for men
to spill the blood of gods. 1480
O light which comes from Zeus,
stop her, take from the house
this blood-thirsty savage Fury
gripped by the spirit of revenge. [1260]

The pain you felt in giving birth
was useless, wasted.

¹Medea claims her descent from Helios, god of the sun. Hence, her children are descendants of the sun.

Those children you so love,
you bore them all in vain.
You who left behind you
the inhospitable passage 1490
where the Symplegades dance,
those deadly, dark-blue rocks,
you unhappy woman,
why does your anger
fall so heavily upon your heart,
and one harsh murder
follow so quickly on another?
The polluting moral stain
that taints all mortal men
who shed their family blood 1500
upon the earth—that's hard to bear.
For the gods send down
onto the houses of the ones who kill
sorrows to match their crimes. [1270]

CHILD [from inside the house]
Help me . . . help . . .

CHORUS

Did you hear that?
Did you hear the children cry?
That wretched, evil woman!

CHILD [from within]
What do I do? How can I escape
my mother's hands?

SECOND CHILD

I don't know, dear brother.
It's over for us . . .

CHORUS

Should I go in the house? 1510
I'm sure I must prevent this murder.

CHILD

Yes—for the love of gods, stop this! And hurry!

SECOND CHILD

The sword has almost got us—like a snare!

CHORUS

You hard and wretched woman,
just like stone or iron—
to kill your children, [1280]
ones you bore yourself,
sealing their fate with your own hands.
Of all women that ever lived before
I know of one, of only one, 1520
who laid hands on her dear children—
and that was Ino,
driven to madness by the gods,
when Hera, Zeus' wife,
sent her wandering in a fit
away from home—
that sad lady leapt into the sea,
because she'd killed her sons
a most unholy murder.
She walked into the surf 1530
at the sea's edge, perishing
so she could join in death
her own two children.
But what horror still remains
after what's happened here?
A woman's marriage bed— [1290]
so full of pain—how many evils,
has it brought on humankind?

[Enter Jason with attendants]

JASON

You women standing there beside the house,
where's Medea, who's done these awful things? 1540
Is she still inside? Or has she left here?
She'll have to hide herself under the earth,
or else fly up to heaven's overarching vault,
if she's going to avoid her punishment
from the royal house. Did she really think
she could kill the rulers of this country
and get away unharmed? But at this point [1300]
she's no concern of mine. I'm worried
for my children. Those whom she has wronged
will take care of her. I've come for the boys, 1550

to save their lives, in case the next of kin
try to harm me and mine, retribution
for their mother's profane murders.

CHORUS

Unhappy man, you don't know the full extent
of your misfortune, or you would not say this.

JASON

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

CHORUS

Your boys are dead, killed by their mother's hand.

JASON

No. What are you saying? Woman, [1310]
you have destroyed me.

CHORUS

The boys are dead.
You must fix your mind on that. They're gone. 1560

JASON

Where did she do this? Inside or outside?

CHORUS

Open the doors and you will see them,
your slaughtered children.

JASON [shouting into the house, as he shakes the doors]

You slaves in there,
remove the bar from this door at once,
withdraw the bolts, so I may see two things—
my dead sons and their murderer, that woman
on whom I shall exact revenge.

[Jason shakes the doors of the house, which remain closed. Medea appears in a winged chariot, rising above the house. The bodies of the two children are visible in the chariot]

MEDEA

Why are you rattling the doors like that,
trying to unbar them so you can find
their bodies and me, the one who killed them? 1570
Stop trying. If you want something from me,

then say so, if you want to. But you'll never
have me in your grasp, not in this chariot,
a gift to me from my grandfather Helios,
to protect me from all hostile hands. [1320]

JASON

You accursed woman, most hateful
to the gods and me and all mankind.
You dared to take the sword to your own boys,
you—the one who bore them—and to leave me
destroyed and childless. Having done this, 1580
after committing this atrocious crime,
can you still look upon the earth and sun?
May you be destroyed! Now I understand—
I must have lost my mind to bring you here,
from that savage country, to a Greek home. [1330]
You were truly evil then—you betrayed
your father and the land that raised you.
But the avenging fury meant for you
the gods have sent to me. You slaughtered
your brother in your home, then came aboard 1590
our fine ship, the Argo. That's how you began.
When you married me and bore my children,
in your lust for sex and our marriage bed,
you killed them. No woman from Greece would dare
to do this, but I chose you as my wife [1340]
above them all, and that has proved to be
a hateful marriage—it has destroyed me.
You're not a woman. You're a she-lion.
Your nature is more bestial than Scylla,
the Tuscan monster. But my insults, 1600
multiplied a thousand fold, don't hurt you.
Your heart's too hard for that. So be off,
you shameful murderer of your children.
Let me lament my fate. I'll get no delight
from my new bride, nor will I ever speak
to my own living children, the two boys
I bred and raised. They're lost to me. [1350]

MEDEA

I would reply to your words at length,
if Father Zeus did not already know

what I did for you and what you did to me. 1610
You weren't going to shame my marriage bed
and have a pleasant life ridiculing me.
Nor was that royal bride or Creon,
who gave her to you, going to banish me,
throw me from here with impunity.
So if you want, call me a lioness
or Scylla, who lives on Tuscan shores.
For I've made contact with your heart at last. [1360]

JASON

You have your own share of pain and sorrow.

MEDEA

That's true. But there's relief in knowing 1620
you cannot laugh at me.

JASON

O my children,
you had such an evil mother!

MEDEA

O my children,
victims of your father's evil actions!

JASON

At least it was not my hand that killed them.

MEDEA

No. It was an insult—your new marriage.

JASON

Was it right to murder them for that?

MEDEA

Do you think that insult to a woman
is something insignificant?

JASON

Yes, I do,
to a woman with good sense. But to you
it's completely evil.

MEDEA

Well, your sons are gone. 1630

That should cause you pain.

[1370]

JASON

I think their spirits live
to take out their revenge on you.

MEDEA

The gods are aware who began this fight.

JASON

Yes, they well know your detested heart.

MEDEA

Keep up your hate. How I loathe your voice.

JASON

And I hate yours. It won't be difficult
for the two of us to part.

MEDEA

Tell me how.
What shall I do? For that's what I want, too.

JASON

Let me bury these dead boys and mourn them.

MEDEA

Never. My own hands will bury them.
I'll take them to Hera's sacred lands
in Acraia, so no enemy of mine
will commit a sacrilege against them
by tearing up their graves. And in this place,
this land of Sisyphus, I'll initiate
a solemn celebration, with mystic rites,
future atonement for this wicked murder.
I'll now go to the land of Erechtheus,
to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion.
As for you, you'll have a miserable death,
as is fitting for a coward. Now you've seen
the bitter ending of your marriage to me,
your head will be smashed in, when you're hit
by a mouldy relic of your ship the Argo.

1640

[1380]

1650

JASON

May the avenging Fury of our children

destroy you—may you find blood justice.

[1390]

MEDEA

What god or spirit listens to you,
a man who doesn't keep his promises,
a man who deceives and lies to strangers?

JASON

You polluted wretch! Child killer!

MEDEA

Go home.

1660

Bury that wife of yours.

JASON

I'll go.

I've lost both my sons.

MEDEA

Your grief's not yet begun.

Wait until you're old.

JASON

Oh such loving children!

MEDEA

Their mother loved them. You did not.

JASON

And yet you killed them?

MEDEA

Yes, to injure you.

JASON

Alas, how I long to see my dear boys' faces,
to hold them in my arms.

[1400]

MEDEA

So now, at this point,
you'll talk to them, you'll give them an embrace.
Before this, you shoved them from you.

JASON

By the gods,

I beg you, let me feel their tender skin.

1670

MEDEA

No. Your words are wasted.

JASON

O Zeus,

do you hear how I'm being driven off,
what I must endure from this child killer,
this she lion, this abomination?

But I'll use the strength I have for grieving
and praying to the gods to bear witness
how you have killed my children and refuse
to let me hold their bodies or bury them.

[1410]

How I wish I'd never been a father
and had to see you kill my children.

1680

[Medea's chariot takes her and the children up and away from the scene. Exit Jason]

CHORUS

Zeus on Olympus,
dispenses many things.
Gods often contradict
our fondest expectations.
What we anticipate
does not come to pass.
What we don't expect
some god finds a way
to make it happen.
So with this story.

1690

[Exit Chorus]

A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston is a retired university teacher and a Research Associate of Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*.

Other translations by Ian Johnston available from Richer Resources Publications include the following:

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<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>.

Euripides Medea

Translated by Ian Johnston

Euripides' *Medea*, first produced in 431 BC, has long been considered one of the great masterpieces of classical Greek drama and has attracted attention in modern times as one of the first great works of feminist drama. The play pits *Medea*, a murderously passionate barbarian princess, against her husband, Jason, the leader of an expedition of Greek heroes who set out to capture the fabled Golden Fleece. Jason was successful on that voyage largely because of *Medea's* help, which required her to turn against her own family. They returned together, became husband and wife, and had two children. Now, however, Jason has married a princess of Corinth, and *Medea* faces an uncertain future in exile. Her response to this threat is the basis for one of the best known and most horrific plots in classical Greek drama.

Ian Johnston's new verse translation stays close to the original Greek text and offers a fluent English version, one which is particularly well suited to stage presentations of this famous work.

About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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