Medea

EURIPIDES

c. 480–406 BC

Medea

Μήδεια

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited

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Medea · Euripides (c. 480–406 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Medea, a princess from Colchis at the far end of the Black Sea, helped Jason win the Golden Fleece, betrayed her own family for him, and followed him to Greece. Now they live as exiles in Corinth with their two sons—and Jason has left her to marry the daughter of Creon, the king.

Creon, afraid of what she might do, orders her out of the country. She asks for a single day. What she does with it has made her one of the most famous and frightening figures in literature: a wronged wife, a foreigner, a woman of formidable intelligence who refuses to be laughed at by her enemies.

First staged in Athens in 431 BC, the year the Peloponnesian War began, Medea won only third prize. It contains Medea's great speech on the lot of women ("I would rather stand three times in the battle line than give birth once") and one of the most harrowing monologues in Greek tragedy, as she argues with herself over her children.

Medea

Before Medea's house in Corinth.
Abandoned by Jason, Medea plots her revenge.

PROLOGUE

The Nurse tells how Medea came to Corinth; the Tutor reports a coming exile; Medea cries out inside.

NURSE [1] If only the Argo had never winged its way to the land of the Colchians, through the dark-blue Clashing Rocks! If only the pine had never been cut in the glens of Pelion and fallen, to put oars in the hands of the heroes who went to fetch the golden fleece for Pelias! Then my mistress Medea would never have sailed to the towers of the land of Iolcus, her heart struck senseless with love for Jason. She would never have talked the daughters of Pelias into killing their father, and she wouldn't be living here in this land of Corinth with her husband and children, unnoticed in her exile by the citizens whose country she came to, and going along with Jason in everything herself.[1] [14] And that is the greatest safeguard there is, when a wife is not at odds with her husband. But now everything has turned hostile, and what was dearest is sick. Jason has betrayed his own children and my mistress, and he's bedding down in a royal marriage. He has married the daughter of Creon, who rules this land. And Medea, poor woman, cast off in dishonor, cries out about the oaths, appeals to the pledge of his right hand, the greatest pledge there

1 Pelias, king of Iolcus in Thessaly, sent Jason to bring back the golden fleece from Colchis, at the far end of the Black Sea. The Clashing Rocks guarded the entrance to that sea.

is, and calls on the gods to witness what return she is getting from Jason. [24] She lies there without eating, her body given up to her pain, wasting away in tears all the time, ever since she learned that her husband had wronged her. She doesn't lift her eyes or raise her face from the ground. She listens to her friends' advice the way a rock or a wave of the sea would. Only now and then she turns her pure white neck and, all to herself, weeps aloud for her dear father, her country and her home. She betrayed them to come here with a man who has now cast her off in dishonor. [34] The poor woman has learned from her misfortune what it is worth not to be cut off from your native land. She hates the children and takes no joy in seeing them. I'm afraid she's planning something unheard-of. Hers is a dangerous mind, and she won't put up with being treated badly. I know her, and she frightens me. I'm afraid she'll slip silently into the house where the bed is spread and drive a sharpened sword through the liver, or even kill the king and the bridegroom, and then bring some greater disaster on herself. [44] She's formidable. No one who takes her on as an enemy will carry off the victor's crown easily, I can tell you. But here come the boys, finished with their running. They have no idea of their mother's troubles. Young minds aren't much given to grief.

TUTOR [49] You old fixture of my mistress's household, why are you standing out here at the gates all alone, moaning to yourself about your troubles? How can Medea want to be left without you?

NURSE [53] Old man, you who look after Jason's children: when their masters' affairs go badly, good slaves feel it as their own misfortune, and it grips their hearts. I've come to such a pitch of grief that a longing crept over me to come out here and tell earth and sky what has happened to Medea.

TUTOR [59] You mean the poor woman hasn't stopped weeping yet?

NURSE [60] I envy you. The trouble's only beginning; it isn't even halfway yet.

TUTOR [61] The fool—if one may say that of one's masters. She knows nothing of the latest troubles.

NURSE [63] What is it, old man? Don't begrudge telling me.

TUTOR [64] Nothing. I'm sorry I said even what I did.

NURSE [65] Please, by your beard, don't keep it from a fellow slave. I'll keep quiet about it, if I have to.

TUTOR [67] I heard someone talking—I pretended not to be listening—when I went over to the gaming boards, where the old men sit around the sacred water of Peirene. He was saying that Creon, the ruler of this land, intends to drive these boys out of the land of Corinth together with their mother. Whether the story's true, though, I don't know. I'd rather it weren't.

NURSE [74] And will Jason stand by while his children are treated like that, even if he is quarreling with their mother?

TUTOR [76] Old ties lose out to new ones. He's no friend of this house.

NURSE [78] Then we're finished, if we're to take on a new trouble on top of the old before we've bailed this one out.

TUTOR [80] But you—this isn't the right time for our mistress to know—keep still and don't say a word.

NURSE [82] Children, do you hear what kind of father he is to you? I won't wish him dead—he's my master. But he's been caught out being bad to his own.

TUTOR [85] Who isn't? Are you only now finding out that everyone loves himself more than his neighbor—some with good reason, some for profit too—when their father doesn't love these boys, for the sake of a bed?

NURSE [89] Go inside, children; everything will be all right. And you, keep them as far away as you can, and don't let them near their mother while she's in this dark mood. I've already seen her eyeing them like a bull, as if she meant to do something. She won't let go of her anger, I know it, until she has struck someone

down. Let it be her enemies she does something to, though, not her own!

MEDEA [95] Oh!

[96] Wretched me,
so miserable in my suffering!
Oh, oh, oh—if only I could die!

NURSE

[98] There it is, dear children: your mother
is stirring up her heart, stirring up her anger.
Hurry inside the house, quickly,
don't go where she can see you,
don't go near her. Beware
of her savage temper, the hateful nature
of that stubborn mind.
Go now, get inside as fast as you can.
It's clear this cloud of lament
rising from its first beginnings
will soon catch fire
with greater passion. What will it do,
that proud, unstoppable soul,
stung by its wrongs?

MEDEA

[110] Ah, ah!
I have suffered, wretched, I have suffered things
that call for great lament! You cursed
children of a hateful mother, die,
you and your father, and let the whole house go to ruin!

NURSE

115 Oh, oh, oh! Oh, poor thing!
Why should your children share
their father's wrongdoing? Why do you hate them? Oh,
children, I'm sick with fear that something will happen to
you.
Royal tempers are terrible:
ruled in little, ruling over much,
they're slow to change their moods.
Being used to living among equals
is better. For me, at least, let me grow old
in safety, if not in greatness.
For moderation—even to speak its name
wins the prize, and to live by it is by far
the best for mortals. But excess
brings no good to human beings.
It pays back greater ruin to houses
whenever a god is angered.

PARODOS

Corinthian women gather at the house, and Medea's cries and the Nurse's fears answer them.

CHORUS

132 I heard the voice, I heard the cry
of the unhappy
woman from Colchis. Is she still not calm? Old woman,
tell us. I heard her weeping inside the double-gated house.
I take no pleasure, lady, in the sorrows of this house,
for I've come to love it.

NURSE

There is no house. It's gone,
all of it. He has a royal bed,
and she, my mistress, wastes her life away in her room,
and no word from any friend
brings any warmth to her heart.

MEDEA

Ah, ah!
Let fire from heaven strike
through my head! What good is living to me now?
Oh, oh! Let me find my rest in death
and leave this hateful life behind!

CHORUS

Do you hear, Zeus, Earth and Light,
the cry, the song of grief
the unhappy bride is singing?
What longing, foolish woman,
for that unapproachable bed
will rush you on to death, the end?
Don't pray for that.
If your husband
worships a new bed,
don't let it make you rage at him.
Zeus will take up your cause. Don't
waste away like this, mourning your husband.

MEDEA

Great Themis, lady Artemis,
do you see what I suffer—I who bound
my cursed husband with great oaths?
Oh, to see him and his bride one day
ground to pieces, house and all,
for daring to wrong me first, unprovoked!
Father! My city! I left you
in shame, when I killed my own brother.[2]

NURSE

Do you hear what she says, how she calls
on Themis, who hears prayers, and on Zeus,
whom mortals hold the keeper of oaths?
There's no way my mistress
will let her anger end in something small.

CHORUS

If only she would come where we can see her
and take to heart the sound
of the words we speak—/ maybe she would let go
of her heavy anger, the fury in her mind.
May my goodwill
never fail my friends!
Go, then,
bring her out of the house,
and tell her this: we too are her friends.
Hurry, before she harms those inside.
This grief of hers is surging on with terrible force.

2 Medea killed her brother Apsyrtus during her flight with Jason, to hold up her father's pursuit.

NURSE

I'll do it. But I'm afraid I won't persuade
my mistress.
Still, I'll take on the task as a favor to you.
And yet she glares at her servants
like a bull, like a lioness with cubs, whenever someone
comes near with something to say.
You wouldn't be wrong to call the people of old
clumsy, and not clever at all:
they invented songs for festivals,
for banquets and for dinners,
sweet things for life to listen to.

But no mortal ever found a way
with music and many-stringed songs
to stop the hateful griefs that bring down houses
with deaths and terrible misfortunes.
And yet to heal these things with songs
would be gain for mortals. Where the feasting is rich,
why strain their voices for nothing?
The fullness of the feast itself
gives mortals all the pleasure they need.

CHORUS

I heard a cry thick with groans and weeping;
shrill and piercing she cries out her painful grief
at the traitor to her bed, the faithless husband.
Wronged, she calls the gods to witness,
Themis of oaths, Zeus's Themis,
who brought her over
to Greece across the water,
through the night sea, to the salt
gateway of the endless deep.

FIRST EPISODE

Medea speaks on the lot of women; Creon banishes her but grants one day; she plans murder.

MEDEA [214] Women of Corinth, I've come out of the house so that you won't find fault with me. I know many people who have been thought proud, some because they keep out of sight, others out in public; and those who go about quietly have earned a bad name for indifference. There's no justice in human eyes: before someone has clearly learned what's in a man's heart, he hates him on sight, though he's suffered no wrong from him. A foreigner, of course, must fit in completely with the city. But I don't approve even of a citizen who is self-willed and offends his fellow citizens through lack of sense. [225] But this blow has fallen on me out of nowhere and has destroyed my spirit. I'm finished. I've lost all joy in life, and I want to die, my friends. The man who was everything to me—you know it well—my husband, has turned out to be the worst of men. Of all the creatures that have life and mind, we women are the most wretched breed. First we have to buy a husband at an extravagant price, and take a master for our bodies; and that second evil is more painful than the first. And here's the biggest gamble: whether we get a bad one or a good one. Divorce does a woman's reputation no good, and she can't refuse her husband. [238] She arrives among new ways and customs, and she has to be a prophet, since she hasn't learned it at home, to know how best to manage the man she shares a bed with. If we work this out well and our husband lives with us and doesn't chafe at the yoke, life is enviable. If not, death is better. When a man gets tired of being with the people at home, he goes out and relieves the weariness in his heart, turning to some friend or to men his own age. We have to look to one soul alone. [248] They say we live a life free from danger at home, while they fight with the spear. How wrong they are! I'd rather stand in the battle line three times than give birth once. But the same argument doesn't apply to you and to me. You have a city here and

your father's home, the comforts of life and the company of friends. I'm alone, without a city, and I'm treated with contempt by my husband. I was carried off as plunder from a foreign land, and I have no mother, no brother, no relative to give me a harbor from this disaster. [259] So this is all I'll ask of you. If I find some way, some means, of making my husband pay for these wrongs —and the man who gave him his daughter, and the woman he married—keep silent. In everything else a woman is full of fear, a coward when it comes to fighting or looking at steel. But when she is wronged in her marriage bed, there's no mind more bloodthirsty.

CHORUS [267] Do it. You'll be right to make your husband pay, Medea, and I'm not surprised you grieve over what's happened to you. But I see Creon, too, the lord of this land, coming this way, with news of some new decision.

CREON [271] You there, with your scowling face and your anger at your husband—Medea, I order you to leave this land as an exile, and take your two children with you, and don't delay. I'm here to see this order carried out, and I won't go back home until I've thrown you out beyond the borders of the country.

MEDEA [277] Ah! I'm lost, utterly ruined. My enemies are bearing down on me under full sail, and there's no easy landing to escape this disaster. Still, badly treated as I am, I'll ask you: why are you sending me out of the country, Creon?

CREON [282] I'm afraid of you—there's no need to dress it up—afraid you'll do my daughter some harm that can't be undone. Plenty of things feed this fear. You're clever by nature and skilled in many evil arts, and you're smarting at the loss of your husband's bed. I hear that you're making threats, so I'm told, to do something to the man who gave the bride, the groom and the bride herself. So I'll take precautions before anything happens to me. Better to be hated by you now, lady, than to go soft and groan for it later.

MEDEA [291] Ah, ah. Not for the first time, Creon, but many times, my reputation has hurt me and done me great harm. No man

with any sense should ever have his children taught to be exceptionally clever. Quite apart from being called idle, they earn the hostile envy of their fellow citizens. Bring new cleverness to fools, and you'll seem useless, not clever. And if people think you're superior to those who are supposed to know something subtle, the city will find you offensive. [302] I share this fate myself. Because I'm clever, some envy me, others find me retiring, others the opposite, and others again find me a nuisance. And I'm not all that clever. And you—you're afraid of me? That you might suffer something unpleasant? Don't be afraid of me, Creon. I'm in no position to offend against kings. Besides, what wrong have you done me? You gave your daughter to the man your heart chose. It's my husband I hate. You, I think, acted sensibly in this. [312] And I don't begrudge you your good fortune now. Go ahead with the marriage, and good luck to you all. But let me live in this land. Though I've been wronged, I'll keep quiet, beaten by those who are stronger.

CREON [316] What you say sounds gentle enough, but deep in my mind I dread that you're plotting some harm, and I trust you even less than before. A hot-tempered woman—and the same goes for a man—is easier to guard against than a clever one who keeps quiet. Out, as fast as you can; no speeches. It's settled, and you have no way of staying among us, since you're hostile to me.

MEDEA [324] No, I beg you, by your knees and by your newly married daughter!

CREON [325] You're wasting words. You'll never persuade me.

MEDEA [326] So you'll drive me out, and show no respect for my prayers?

CREON [327] Yes. I don't love you more than my own house.

MEDEA [328] My country, how I think of you now!

CREON [329] Yes—after my children, my city's dearest to me too.

MEDEA [330] Ah, ah—what a curse love is for mortals!

CREON [331] That depends, I imagine, on how fortune goes along with it.

MEDEA [332] Zeus, don't let the man who caused all this escape your notice!

CREON [333] Go, you foolish woman, and spare me the trouble.

MEDEA [334] I'm the one in trouble; I've no shortage of it.

CREON [335] In a moment my men will throw you out by force.

MEDEA [336] No, not that! But I beg you, Creon —

CREON [337] You're going to make a scene, it seems, Medea.

MEDEA [338] I'll go into exile. That isn't what I was begging you for.

CREON [339] Then why are you still pressing me, instead of leaving the country?

MEDEA [340] Let me stay just this one day, to think through where we'll go in exile and how to provide for my children, since their father doesn't care to do anything for them. Pity them. You're a father of children yourself, after all; it's only natural that you should feel kindly toward them. I'm not worried for myself, about going into exile. It's them I weep for, caught up in this disaster.

CREON [348] My temper is anything but a tyrant's, and by giving way to scruples I've ruined a great deal. Even now I can see I'm making a mistake, lady, but you'll have your way all the same. But I warn you: if the god's torch, as it rises tomorrow, sees you and your children inside the borders of this land, you will die. I've said it, and it's no lie. Now, if you must stay, stay for one day. You can't do any of the terrible things I fear in that time.

CHORUS

[357] Unhappy woman,
ah, ah, wretched in your sorrows!
Where will you turn? What welcome,
what house or land will you find
to save you from your troubles?
Medea, into what a surging sea of troubles,
with no way through, a god has driven you!

MEDEA [364] Things have gone badly on every side; who would deny it? But it won't end like this, don't think so yet. There are still ordeals ahead for the newlyweds, and no small troubles for the ones who made the match. Do you think I would ever have fawned on that man if I weren't gaining something by it, or scheming? I wouldn't even have spoken to him, or touched him with my hands. But he has gone so far in his folly that, when he could have wrecked my plans by throwing me out of the country, he has let me stay for this one day. And in it I will make corpses of three of my enemies: the father, the girl and my husband. [376] I have many ways of killing them, and I don't know which to try first, my friends. Shall I set fire to the bridal house? Or slip silently into the house where the bed is spread and drive a sharpened sword through the liver? But there's one thing against me. If I'm caught entering the house and scheming, I'll die and give my enemies something to laugh at. Best to take the straight road, the one we're cleverest at by nature: get them with poison. [385] So. Suppose they're dead. What city will take me in? What host will offer me a land of refuge and a house I can rely on, and protect me? There's none. So I'll wait a little longer. If some tower of safety appears for me, I'll go about this murder by trickery and in silence. But if some hopeless misfortune drives me out, I'll take the sword in my own hand and kill them, even if I'm going to die for it. I'll go to the very limit of daring. [395] For by the mistress I revere above all others and have chosen as my helper, Hecate, who dwells in the inmost recesses of my hearth, not one of them will hurt my heart and get away happy. I'll make their marriage bitter and full of grief for them, bitter the alliance, and bitter my banishment from the land. Come on, Medea: hold back nothing you know as you plan and scheme. On to the terrible deed. Now it's a test of courage.[3] [404] You see what's being done to you. You mustn't become a laughingstock for this marriage of Jason's into the line of Sisyphus—you, a noble father's

3 Hecate, goddess of magic, ghosts and crossroads, was the special patron of sorceresses like Medea.

daughter, descended from the Sun. You have the skill. And besides, we women are born the most helpless at doing good, but the cleverest builders of every kind of evil.[4]

FIRST STASIMON

The Chorus sings that the world is turned around: now men break faith, and women will be honored.

CHORUS

Back to their sources flow the sacred rivers,
and justice and everything is turned around.
It's men whose plans are treacherous; pledges sworn by the gods
hold firm no longer.
Report will turn, and give my life
a good name.
Honor is coming to the race of women;
no more will ugly rumor hold women in its grip.
The Muses of the old poets will stop
singing of my faithlessness.
For it was not on our minds
that Phoebus, leader of songs,
bestowed the lyre's inspired music;
or I would have sung a hymn in answer
to the race of men. The long ages
have much to tell of our lot, and of men's.

4 Sisyphus was a legendary king of Corinth, so the "line of Sisyphus" is Creon's royal house. Medea's father Aeetes was a son of the Sun.

You sailed from your father's house
with a maddened heart, passing between the twin rocks
of the sea. Now you live
in a foreign land; you've lost your marriage,
your bed left without a husband,
poor woman, and you're driven out of the country,
an exile, without honor.
The grace of oaths is gone; shame
no longer stays in great Greece but has flown off into the sky.
You have no father's house,
unhappy woman, to harbor you
from your troubles, and another, a princess,
mightier than you, has risen
over the house in place of your bed.

SECOND EPISODE

Jason offers money for her exile; Medea recalls all she did for him, and they argue.

JASON This isn't the first time—I've seen it many times before: what an impossible evil a fierce temper is. You could have kept this land and this house if you'd taken the decisions of those in power calmly. Instead, for the sake of foolish talk, you'll be thrown out of the country. To me it makes no difference: never stop saying Jason is the worst of men. But for what you've said against the royal family, count yourself lucky that your punishment is only exile. I was always trying to soothe the anger of the royal family when they were furious, and I wanted you to stay. But you wouldn't give up your folly, always speaking ill of the rulers. So you'll be thrown out of the country. Still, even after all this, I haven't given up on my own. I've come looking out for your interests, Medea, so that you won't be thrown out with the children without money, or short of anything. Exile drags many evils along with it. And even if you hate me, I could never wish you harm.

MEDEA [465] You vilest of men! That's the worst word my tongue can find for your lack of manhood. You've come to us? You've come, when you've made yourself the bitterest enemy of the gods and of me and of the whole human race? This isn't boldness, or courage, to look your own people in the face after doing them harm. It's the worst of all the diseases human beings suffer from: shamelessness. But you did well to come. I'll lighten the weight on my soul by telling you what you are, and you'll be hurt to hear it. I'll begin at the very beginning. [476] I saved you, as every Greek who went aboard the Argo with you knows, when you were sent to master the fire-breathing bulls with the yoke and to sow the field of death. And the serpent that guarded the all-golden fleece, wrapped around it in its many twisting coils, never sleeping: I killed it, and held up for you the light of rescue. I myself betrayed my father and my home and came with you to Iolcus under Mount Pelion, more eager than clever. And I killed Pelias in the most painful way there is to die, at the hands of his own daughters, and rid you of every fear.[5] [488] And after all this from me, you worst of men, you betrayed us and got yourself a new bed, though we had children! If you were still childless, falling in love with this marriage would be forgivable. The faith of your oaths is gone. I can't make out whether you think the gods of those days no longer rule, or that new laws have been laid down for people now, since you know you've broken your oath to me. Ah, this right hand, which you clasped so often, and these knees: how pointless it was to be touched by a bad man, and how we were cheated of our hopes! [499] Come, I'll consult you as though you were a friend—not that I expect any good from you, of all people. Still, I will: questioned, you'll look even more shameful. Where am I to turn now? To my father's house, which I betrayed for you, along with my country, when I came here? Or to Pelias' poor daughters? They'd give me a fine welcome in their home, when I killed their father! This is how it stands. To my

5 Medea persuaded Pelias' daughters that she could make their father young again if they cut him up and boiled him.

own people at home I've become an enemy, and those I should never have harmed I've made my enemies as a favor to you. [509] And in return for all this you've made me so blessed in the eyes of so many Greek women! What a marvelous, what a revered husband I have, wretch that I am, if I'm to go into exile, thrown out of the land, with no friends, alone with my children, all alone! A fine reproach for the new bridegroom, that his children wander as beggars, and the woman who saved him too. Zeus, why did you give mankind clear signs to tell which gold is counterfeit, but no mark stamped on the body to show which man is bad?

CHORUS [520] It's a terrible kind of anger, and hard to cure, when people who love each other clash in a quarrel.

JASON [522] It seems I mustn't be a poor speaker. Like a careful helmsman, I'll have to run before the storm of your ranting tongue, lady, with just the edge of my sail. As for me, since you're building your kindness into such a tower, I believe Aphrodite alone, of gods and men, was the captain of my rescue. You have a subtle mind, but it would be an invidious story to tell: how Eros forced you with his inescapable arrows to save my life. Still, I won't make the reckoning too precise. [533] Whatever help you gave, it served well enough. But you've received more from my rescue than you gave, as I'll explain. First, instead of a foreign land you live in Greece, and you know justice and how to live by laws, not by the rule of force. All the Greeks have come to know that you're clever, and you've won a reputation. If you lived at the farthest ends of the earth, no one would talk about you. For my part, I'd want neither gold in my house nor the power to sing a sweeter song than Orpheus if my fortune weren't going to make me famous.[6] [545] That's all I have to say about my own trials; you're the one who set up this contest of words. As for your reproaches about my royal marriage, I'll show that in this I've been, first, clever; second, sensible; and third, a great

6 Greeks called every non-Greek people *barbaroi*, "foreigners"; Jason uses the word with a sense of Greek superiority.

friend to you and to my children. Just hold your peace. When I moved here from the land of Iolcus, dragging a load of hopeless misfortunes behind me, what luckier find could I have found than to marry a king's daughter, exile that I was? It's not, as you're so sore about, that I hated your bed and was struck with longing for a new bride, or that I was eager to compete in having lots of children. [558] The ones we have are enough, and I have no complaint. No, it was so that, first and foremost, we could live well and not be in want, since I know that every friend gets out of a poor man's way. And so that I could bring up the children as my house deserves, father brothers for the children I had by you, put them on the same footing, unite the family, and prosper. What need do you have of more children? While for me it pays to help the children I have through the ones to come. Have I planned badly? Not even you would say so, if the bed weren't rankling you. [569] But you women have come to such a pass that if your bed is going well you think you have everything, and if some misfortune touches your bed, you treat the best and finest things as your worst enemies. Mortals ought to get their children from some other source, and there should be no female race at all. Then mankind would have no trouble at all.

CHORUS [576] Jason, you've dressed up these arguments nicely. But all the same, even if what I say goes against your view, I think that in betraying your wife you're doing wrong.

MEDEA [579] I really do differ from most people in a lot of ways. In my view, the unjust man who happens to be a clever speaker deserves the heaviest penalty. Because he's confident he can wrap injustice up nicely with his tongue, he'll dare any villainy. But he isn't so very clever after all. So don't you put on a fine show with me and make clever speeches. One word will lay you flat. If you weren't a bad man, you should have persuaded me first and then made this marriage, not done it behind your family's back.

JASON [588] And you'd have been such a help with that plan, I suppose, if I'd told you about the marriage, when even now you can't bring yourself to let go of the great rage in your heart.

MEDEA [591] That wasn't what held you back. A foreign wife was turning out to be no credit to you as you got older.

JASON [593] Understand this clearly, then: it wasn't for the sake of a woman that I married into the royal bed I have now. As I said before, I wanted to save you, and to father royal children as brothers to my children, a bulwark for the house.

MEDEA [598] May I never have a prosperous life that brings pain, or wealth that gnaws at my heart!

JASON [600] Do you know how you could change that prayer and look cleverer? Pray that good things never seem painful to you, and that when you're fortunate you never think yourself unfortunate.

MEDEA [603] Go on, insult me, since you have somewhere to turn, and I'll go into exile from this land alone.

JASON [605] You chose this yourself. Don't blame anyone else.

MEDEA [606] By doing what? Marrying and betraying you?

JASON [607] By calling down unholy curses on the royal family.

MEDEA [608] Yes, and I'm a curse on your house too.

JASON [609] I won't argue the rest of this with you any further. But if you want to take some extra help from my money for the children or for your own exile, say so. I'm ready to give with an open hand, and to send tokens to my friends abroad, who'll treat you well. If you refuse this, lady, you'll be a fool. Let go of your anger and you'll be better off.

MEDEA [616] I wouldn't make use of your friends, and I wouldn't accept anything. Don't give us a thing. A bad man's gifts bring no good.

JASON [619] Well then, I call the gods to witness that I'm willing to help you and the children in every way. But what's good doesn't

please you; you're so stubborn you push your own people away. So you'll suffer all the more.

MEDEA [623] Go! You're overcome with longing for the girl you've just broken in, lingering so long away from her house. Play the bridegroom! Perhaps—and a god will stand behind these words—you're making the kind of marriage you'll wish you could disown.

SECOND STASIMON

The Chorus prays for love in moderation and pities anyone who loses their homeland.

CHORUS

627 Loves that come too strongly,
past all measure,
bring men no good name,
no excellence.
But if Aphrodite comes in measure,
no other god is so full of grace.
Never, my lady,
never let fly at me from your golden bow
the arrow no one escapes,
dipped in desire.
May self-control hold me dear,
the finest gift of the gods.
And may dread Aphrodite never
strike my heart with frenzy for another's bed
and hurl on me quarrelsome angers
and strife that is never sated,
but honoring beds at peace,
may she judge women's marriages
with a keen mind.

643 My country, my home,
may I never be without a city,
living a life of helplessness,
so hard to get through,
the most pitiable of griefs.
By death, by death may I be overcome first,
and end my days.
Of all troubles none stands higher
than to be robbed of your native land.
We have seen it; it isn't from others
that I have this story to tell.
For no city, no friend
has pitied you,
who have suffered
the most terrible of sufferings.

659 May he die unthanked
who can fail to honor his friends
by unlocking his heart with an honest key.
He will never be a friend of mine.

THIRD EPISODE

Aegeus of Athens swears to shelter Medea; she reveals she will kill the princess and her own sons.

AEGEUS 663 Medea, I wish you joy! No one knows a finer greeting than that to offer friends.

MEDEA 665 Joy to you too, Aegeus, son of wise Pandion. Where have you come from, to be visiting the soil of this land?[7]

AEGEUS 667 I've just come from Phoebus' ancient oracle.

MEDEA 668 And why were you sent to the prophetic navel of the earth?[8]

AEGEUS 669 To ask how I might have children of my own.

7 Aegeus was king of Athens, son of its earlier king Pandion.
8 Apollo (Phoebus) had his oracle at Delphi, which was believed to be the navel, or center, of the earth.

MEDEA 670 By the gods, have you lived all this time without children?

AEGEUS 671 We have no children, by the fortune of some god.

MEDEA 672 Do you have a wife, or have you never known the marriage bed?

AEGEUS 673 I'm not without a wife to share my bed.

MEDEA 674 Then what did Phoebus tell you about children?

AEGEUS 675 Words too clever for a man to make sense of.

MEDEA 676 Is it permitted for me to know the god's oracle?

AEGEUS 677 Certainly. In fact, it needs a clever mind.

MEDEA 678 Then what was his answer? Tell me, if it's permitted to hear.

AEGEUS 679 That I mustn't loosen the wineskin's jutting foot...[9]

MEDEA 680 Until you do what, or reach what land?

AEGEUS 681 Until I come back to my father's hearth.

MEDEA 682 And what do you want, that you've sailed to this land?

AEGEUS 683 There's a man called Pittheus, king of the land of Troezen.[10]

MEDEA 684 A son of Pelops, they say, and a most devout man.

AEGEUS 685 I want to share the god's oracle with him.

MEDEA 686 Yes, he's a clever man and practiced in such things.

AEGEUS 687 And to me the dearest of all my allies.

MEDEA 688 Well, good luck to you, and may you get all you long for.

AEGEUS 689 But why are your eyes and your skin so wasted?

MEDEA 690 Aegeus, my husband is the worst man in the world.

9 A deliberately riddling oracle, usually taken as a command to abstain from sex until he got home; at Troezen Aegeus would father Theseus.
10 Troezen is a city in the Peloponnese, across the gulf from Athens.

AEGEUS 691 What are you saying? Tell me clearly what's troubling you.

MEDEA 692 Jason is wronging me, though I've never done him any harm.

AEGEUS 693 Doing what? Tell me more clearly.

MEDEA 694 He has a wife in his house as mistress over me.

AEGEUS 695 Surely he hasn't dared to do anything so shameful?

MEDEA 696 Believe me, he has. And we who were dear to him before are thrown aside.

AEGEUS 697 Did he fall in love, or does he hate your bed?

MEDEA 698 Oh, a great love! He's never been true to his own.

AEGEUS 699 Then let him go, if he's as bad as you say.

MEDEA 700 What he fell in love with was marrying into royalty.

AEGEUS 701 And who is giving her to him? Finish your story.

MEDEA 702 Creon, who rules this land of Corinth.

AEGEUS 703 Then your grief was understandable, lady.

MEDEA 704 I'm destroyed. And on top of that I'm being driven out of the land.

AEGEUS 705 By whom? That's yet another new trouble you're telling me.

MEDEA 706 Creon is driving me into exile from the land of Corinth.

AEGEUS 707 And Jason allows it? I don't approve of that either.

MEDEA 708 Not in words, but he's happy to put up with it. But I beg you, by this beard of yours and by your knees, I make myself your suppliant: pity me, pity me in my misery! Don't stand by and watch me thrown out friendless, but take me into your land and your house, to share your hearth. So may your desire for children be fulfilled by the gods, and may you die a happy man. You don't know what a find you've made here. I'll

put an end to your childlessness and make you father children. I know drugs that can do that.

AEGEUS [719] For many reasons I'm eager to grant you this favor, lady: first for the gods' sake, then for the children you promise I'll have, because I've set my whole heart on that. Here's how it stands with me. If you come to my land, I'll try to be your protector, as is just. But I warn you of this much, lady: I won't be willing to take you away from this land, because I want to be blameless toward my hosts too. But if you get to my house yourself, you'll stay there safe from seizure, and I'll never hand you over to anyone. You must get yourself out of this land on your own.

MEDEA [731] So be it. But if I could have a pledge of this, I'd have everything I could want from you.

AEGEUS [733] Don't you trust me? Or what's troubling you?

MEDEA [734] I trust you. But the house of Pelias is my enemy, and so is Creon. If you're bound by oaths, you won't hand me over to them if they come to take me out of your land. But if you've agreed only in words and haven't sworn by the gods, you might become their friend, and perhaps their heralds' demands would win you over. I have no power, while they have wealth and a royal house.

AEGEUS [741] You've shown great foresight in what you say. Well, if you think it right, I won't refuse to do it. It's safest for me too, to have an excuse to show your enemies, and your position is more secure. Name the gods.

MEDEA [746] Swear by the ground of Earth, and by the Sun, my father's father, and add the whole race of gods together—

AEGEUS [748] To do what, or not to do what? Tell me.

MEDEA [750] Never to cast me out of your land yourself, and, if any of my enemies wants to take me away, never willingly to hand me over as long as you live.

AEGEUS [752] I swear by Earth and the Sun's bright light and all the gods to abide by what I hear from you.

MEDEA 754 That's enough. And if you don't abide by this oath, what should you suffer?

AEGEUS 755 What happens to mortals who offend the gods.

MEDEA 756 Go, and fare well. Everything is as it should be. And I'll come to your city as soon as I can, once I've done what I intend and gotten what I want.

CHORUS

759 May Maia's son, the lord who guides travelers,
bring you safe to your home,
and may you achieve the purpose
you hold to so eagerly,
for to me, Aegeus,
you have shown yourself a noble man.[11]

MEDEA 764 Zeus, and Justice, daughter of Zeus, and light of the Sun! Now, my friends, we'll win a glorious victory over my enemies; we're on our way. Now there's hope my enemies will pay the penalty. This man has appeared, just where I was most in trouble, as a harbor for my plans. To him I'll make my stern cable fast, once I reach the town and city of Pallas. Now I'll tell you all my plans. Don't expect to enjoy what you hear.[12] 774 I'll send one of my servants and ask Jason to come and see me. When he comes, I'll speak soft words to him: that I agree with all this and think it's for the best, that this royal marriage he's made by betraying us is to our advantage and well judged. And I'll ask for my children to stay—not so that I can leave them in a hostile land for my enemies to abuse, my own children, but so that I can kill the king's daughter by trickery. 784 I'll send them with gifts in their hands, to take to the bride, asking that they not be banished from this land: a fine-spun robe and a crown of beaten gold. And if she takes the finery and puts it on her skin, she'll die a horrible death, and so will anyone who touches the girl. Such are the drugs I'll smear the gifts with. But I'll leave that subject

11 Maia's son is Hermes, the god who escorts travelers.
12 Pallas Athena was the patron goddess of Athens.

there. I cry aloud at the deed I must do next. I will kill my children—mine. There's no one who can rescue them. [794] And when I've wrecked the whole house of Jason, I'll leave the land, fleeing the murder of my dearest children, having dared the most unholy of deeds. To be laughed at by your enemies is not to be borne, my friends. So be it. What do I gain by living? I have no country, no home, no refuge from my troubles. My mistake was made back when I left my father's house, persuaded by the words of a Greek man—who, with a god's help, will pay me what he owes. [803] He'll never see the children I bore him alive again, and he won't father a child on his newly yoked bride, since she must die horribly, as she deserves, by my drugs. Let no one think me feeble and weak, or meek, but of the other kind: hard on my enemies and kind to my friends. People like that have the most glorious lives.

CHORUS [811] Since you've shared this plan with us, I want to help you, and I want to uphold the laws of humankind: I tell you, don't do it.

MEDEA [814] There's no other way. But it's understandable that you should say so, since you aren't suffering as I am.

CHORUS [816] But will you really bring yourself to kill your two sons, lady?

MEDEA [817] Yes. That would hurt my husband most.

CHORUS [818] And you would become the most miserable of women.

MEDEA [819] So be it. All words in between are wasted. Come now, go and fetch Jason; I use you whenever there's a need for trust. And don't say a word about what I've decided, if you wish your mistress well and are a woman.

THIRD STASIMON

The Chorus praises Athens and begs Medea not to kill her children.

CHORUS

824 The sons of Erechtheus, prosperous from of old,
children of the blessed gods,
feeding on the most glorious wisdom
from a holy land never sacked,
always stepping gracefully
through the brightest air,
where once, they say,
the nine pure Muses of Pieria
gave birth to golden-haired Harmony.
And they tell how Aphrodite
drew water from the streams
of the fair-flowing Cephisus
and breathed over the land
soft breezes, gently blowing,
and always, wreathing her hair
in a fragrant garland of roses,
sends the Loves to sit beside Wisdom,
partners in every kind of excellence.[13]

13 The Athenians traced their descent to Erechtheus, an early king born from the earth; the Cephisus is a river of Athens.

How then will the city of sacred rivers,
or the land that gives safe conduct to friends,
take you in, the child-killer,
the unholy one, to live among others?
Think of the blow that strikes your children,
think what a murder you're taking on.
No—by your knees,
with all we have, in every way, we beg you,
don't murder your children!
Where will you find the daring,
my child, in your mind
or in your hand and heart,
to bring this dreadful boldness to the deed?

How will you cast your eyes
on your children
and play your part without tears?
When your children fall at your feet,
begging, you won't be able
to wet your hand in their blood
with a hardened heart.

FOURTH EPISODE

Medea pretends to make peace with Jason and sends the children to the bride with poisoned gifts.

JASON I've come because you sent for me. Hostile as you are, you won't be refused this much. I'll listen. What new thing do you want from me, lady?

MEDEA Jason, I ask you to forgive what I said. It's only reasonable for you to put up with my temper, since we two have shared so much love in the past. I've had it out with myself, and I scolded myself. Wretch, why am I raving, why am I hostile to those who mean me well, setting myself up as an enemy to the rulers of the land and to my husband, who's doing what's best for us by marrying a princess and fathering brothers for my children? Won't I let go of my anger? What's wrong with me,

when the gods are providing so well? [880] Don't I have children? Don't I know that we're exiles from our country, and short of friends? When I thought about all this, I realized how very foolish I'd been, and how pointless my anger was. So now I approve. I think you're being sensible in taking on this marriage alliance for us, and I was senseless. I should have shared in these plans and helped carry them through, stood beside the bridal bed and taken pleasure in attending your bride. But we are what we are—I won't say anything bad—we're women. So you shouldn't have copied our faults, or matched childishness with childishness. [892] I give in, and I admit I was wrong then; but I've come to a better decision now. Children, children, come here, leave the house, come out, embrace your father and speak to him with me, and be reconciled along with your mother, from the hatred we had before to love. We've made a truce, and the anger has passed. Take his right hand. Oh, the misery of it! The thought of what lies hidden comes over me! Children, will you stretch out your loving arms like this through a long life too? Poor me, how quick I am to cry, how full of fear! [904] At last I'm ending the quarrel with your father, and I've filled these soft eyes with tears.

CHORUS [906] And a fresh tear has started from my eyes too. May the trouble go no further than it is now.

JASON [908] I approve of this, lady, and I don't blame you for the other. It's natural for the female sex to get angry when a husband is slipping in another marriage on the side ... But your heart has changed for the better, and you've recognized the winning plan, even if it took time. That's how a sensible woman acts. As for you, children, your father has not been thoughtless: with the gods' help he has made full provision for you. [916] I believe that one day you'll be among the first men in this land of Corinth, together with your brothers. All you need do is grow. The rest will be taken care of by your father and by whichever of the gods is kind to us. I hope I'll see you well grown, reaching the full bloom of youth, stronger than my enemies. You—why are you wetting your eyes with fresh tears and turning your pale cheek away? Why aren't you glad to hear me say this?

MEDEA 925 It's nothing. I was thinking about the children.

JASON 926 Cheer up, then. I'll see that they're well looked after.

MEDEA 927 I will. I won't doubt your word. But a woman is a soft thing, born for tears.

JASON 929 But why, poor thing, are you grieving so over the children?

MEDEA 930 I gave birth to them. When you prayed for the children to live, pity came over me at the thought: would it really be so? But of the things you came here to talk about, some have been said; I'll bring up the rest. The rulers have decided to send me away from the land, and I recognize that this is best for me too, not to live where I'd be in your way or in the way of the country's rulers, since I'm thought to be an enemy of the royal house. So I'll leave this land in exile. But so that the children can be brought up by your hand, ask Creon not to banish them from this land.

JASON 941 I don't know if I can persuade him, but I have to try.

MEDEA 942 Then at least tell your wife to ask her father not to banish the children from this land.

JASON 944 Certainly. And I expect I'll persuade her.

MEDEA 945 Yes, if she's a woman like the rest. And I'll take my share of this labor with you. I'll send her gifts that are by far the most beautiful to be found among people today, I know: a fine-spun robe and a crown of beaten gold. The children will take them. One of the servants must bring the finery here as quickly as possible. She'll be happy not in one way but in thousands, having won you, the best of men, to share her bed, and owning the finery that the Sun, my father's father, once gave to his descendants. Take these wedding gifts in your hands, children, and carry them to the royal bride, so blessed, and give them to her. They're not gifts she'll find fault with.

JASON 959 Why empty your hands of these, you silly woman? Do you think a royal house is short of robes, or short of gold? Keep

them, don't give them away. If my wife thinks I'm worth anything, she'll put me above possessions, I'm sure of it.

MEDEA 964 Don't say that. Gifts persuade even the gods, they say, and gold counts for more with mortals than a thousand words. Fortune is hers; a god is raising her up now. She's young, and she rules. To save my children from exile I'd give my life, not just gold. Come, children, go into the rich house and beg your father's new wife, my mistress: plead with her not to banish you from the land, and give her the finery. This matters most of all: that she take these gifts into her own hands. Go as quickly as you can. And may you succeed, and bring your mother the good news of what she longs for.

FOURTH STASIMON

The Chorus foresees the bride's death and grieves for Jason and for Medea.

CHORUS

976 Now I have no more hope that the children will live,
no more: already they are walking toward murder.
The bride will take it, she will take
the golden diadem, poor girl, will take her ruin;
around her golden hair she will set
the finery of Hades
with her own two hands.
Its charm and its immortal gleam will persuade her
to put on the robe
and the crown of beaten gold;

she will be dressing as a bride among the dead below.
Into such a snare she will fall,
into such a death, poor girl; and ruin
she will not escape.
And you, poor wretch, ill-starred bridegroom,
marrying into the house of kings:
without knowing it
you are bringing destruction on your sons' lives,
and on your wife a hateful death.
Unhappy man, how far you have fallen from your proper lot!

And I grieve in turn for your pain,
unhappy mother,
you who will murder
your children for the sake of a marriage bed,
the bed your husband lawlessly abandoned
to live with another wife.

FIFTH EPISODE

Medea wavers over killing her children; a messenger describes the deaths of the princess and Creon.

TUTOR My lady, your boys here have been let off from exile, and the royal bride was glad to take the gifts into her hands. From that quarter the children have peace. What's this? Why do you stand there so shaken, when your luck is good?

MEDEA Ah, no.

TUTOR Why have you turned your cheek away? Why aren't you glad to hear me say this?
That doesn't fit with the news I've brought.

MEDEA Ah, no—and again.

TUTOR Have I brought some bad news without knowing it, and been wrong to think it was good?

MEDEA You've told what you've told. I don't blame you.

TUTOR [1012] Then why are you looking down? Why the tears?

MEDEA [1013] I have every reason, old man. The gods have contrived all this—and I, with my evil thinking.

TUTOR [1015] Take heart. One day your sons will bring you home as well.

MEDEA [1016] Before that I'll send others home, poor wretch that I am.

TUTOR [1017] You're not the only woman to be torn from her children. We're mortal; we have to bear our misfortunes lightly.

MEDEA [1019] I will. But go inside and get the boys whatever they need for the day. Children, my children, you have a city now, and a home, where you'll leave me in my misery and live forever, robbed of your mother. And I'll go off to another land, an exile, before I've had any joy of you or seen you happy, before I've adorned your marriages, your brides and your wedding beds, and held up the wedding torches. How wretched my own stubborn pride has made me! [1029] So it was for nothing, children, that I raised you, for nothing that I toiled and wore myself out with hardship, bearing the harsh pains of childbirth. And yet once, poor fool, I had such hopes of you: that you'd look after me in my old age, and when I died, lay me out properly with your own hands—the thing everyone envies. Now that sweet thought is gone. Robbed of you two, I'll live out a life of grief and pain. And you will never again see your mother with loving eyes, once you've gone off into another kind of life. [1040] Ah, ah. Why are you looking at me like that, children? Why are you smiling at me—that last smile of all? Oh, what shall I do? My heart fails me, women, when I see my children's bright faces. I couldn't do it. Goodbye to my earlier plans! I'll take my children out of the country. Why should I hurt their father through their suffering, and win twice as much suffering for myself? No, not I. Goodbye to my plans. And yet—what's happening to me? Do I want to be laughed at, letting my enemies go unpunished? [1051] I must dare it. What cowardice, even to let such soft words out of my mind! Go inside, children. Anyone who has no right to be present at

my sacrifice—that's his concern. My hand will not falter. Ah, ah! No, no, my angry heart, don't you do this! Let them go, poor wretch, spare the children! Living with me there, they'll be my joy. No—by the avenging spirits who dwell below in Hades, it will never happen that I leave my children for my enemies to abuse. 1062 In any case they must die. And since they must, I who gave them birth will kill them. In any case it's fated, and there's no escape. Already the crown is on her head, and in the robes the royal bride is dying—I know it for sure. But since I'm setting out on the most miserable road of all, and will send them on one more miserable still, I want to speak to my children. Give me, children, give your mother your right hand to kiss. Oh, dearest hand, and dearest head, the figure and the noble faces of my children! May you be happy—but there. What was here your father has taken away. Oh, the sweet embrace, the soft skin, the sweetest breath of children! 1076 Go, go. I can't look at you any longer; my sufferings are too much for me. I understand what evil I'm about to do, but my anger is stronger than my plans—anger, the cause of the greatest evils for mortals.

CHORUS

Many times before now
I have made my way through subtler arguments
and entered greater contests
than womankind should search into.
But we too have a Muse,
who keeps us company for the sake of wisdom—
not all of us: a small number
(one among many, perhaps, you might find)
of womankind is not without the Muse.
And I say that those mortals
who have no experience at all, who never
had children, are ahead in happiness
of those who have borne them.
The childless, never having had them,
not knowing whether children
are a sweetness to mortals or a grief,
are spared many troubles.

But those who have in their homes
the sweet young growth of children, I see them
worn down with worry all their days:
first, how to raise them well,
and where to find a living to leave them;
and then, after all that, whether it's for worthless children
or for good ones
that they toil, no one can tell.
And one more thing, the last evil of all
for all mortals, I will tell now:
suppose they've found enough to live on,
and the children's bodies have come to their prime,
and they've turned out good—if fate
falls out this way, Death is gone to Hades,
carrying the children's bodies away.

1112 What good is it, then,
that on top of all the rest
the gods should lay on mortals
this grief, the bitterest of all,
for the sake of children?

MEDEA 1116 My friends, I've been waiting a long while for what fortune brings, watching to see how things will go over there. And now I see one of Jason's attendants coming. His panting breath shows he has some new disaster to report.

MESSENGER 1121 You who have done a terrible, lawless deed, Medea—run, run! Don't pass up any way out, a ship on the sea or a carriage on the road.

MEDEA 1124 What has happened that I should run away?

MESSENGER 1125 The royal princess has just died, and Creon her father too, from your poisons.

MEDEA 1127 That's the finest news you could have brought. From now on I'll count you among my benefactors and friends.

MESSENGER 1129 What are you saying? Are you in your right mind, lady, and not mad? You hear that the royal house has been savaged, and you're glad, and not afraid of such things?

MEDEA 1132 I too have something I could say in answer to your words. But don't rush, my friend. Tell me how they died. You'd give me twice the pleasure if they died horribly.

MESSENGER 1136 When your two sons came with their father and went into the bride's house, we servants, who had been grieved by your troubles, were glad. All through the house there was talk straight away that you and your husband had made peace over your old quarrel. One kissed the boys' hands, another their golden hair. And I myself, out of joy, went along with the children into the women's quarters. The mistress we now look up to in your place, before she noticed your two children, kept her eager eyes on Jason. 1147 But then she veiled her eyes and turned her white cheek away, disgusted that the children had come in. Your husband tried to take away the girl's

anger and bitterness, saying: "Don't be hostile to your own family. Stop being angry, turn your head back, and count as your own the people your husband does. Won't you accept the gifts, and ask your father to let these children off from exile, for my sake?" 1156 When she saw the finery, she couldn't hold out, but agreed to everything her husband asked. Before your sons and their father were far from the house, she took the embroidered robes and put them on, set the golden crown around her curls, and arranged her hair in a bright mirror, smiling at the lifeless image of her body. Then she rose from her chair and walked through the rooms, stepping daintily on her white feet, delighted with the gifts, over and over turning her eyes to look at the back of her outstretched ankle. But after that came a terrible thing to see. 1168 Her color changed. She staggered sideways, her legs trembling, and only just managed to fall into her chair and not onto the ground. One of the old serving women, thinking, I suppose, that a frenzy from Pan or some other god had come over her, raised the cry of worship—until she saw white foam coming from her mouth, her eyes rolling in their sockets, and the blood drained from her skin. Then she let out a great wail, the opposite of that cry. At once one maid rushed to her father's rooms, another to her new husband, to tell them what had happened to the bride, and the whole house rang with people running back and forth.[14] 1181 By now a fast walker, striding out, would have reached the end of a two-hundred-yard track. Then the poor girl, who had lain silent with her eyes closed, woke with a dreadful groan. For a double torment was marching against her. The golden circlet resting on her head was sending out an astonishing stream of all-devouring fire, and the delicate robes, your children's gifts, were eating into the poor wretch's delicate flesh. She leapt up from her chair and fled, on fire, tossing her hair and her head this way and that, trying to throw off the crown. But the gold held its fastenings tight, and whenever she shook her hair, the fire blazed twice as high.

14 The old woman's cry (*ololygē*) was the shrill ritual shout women raised at sacrifices or when a god made himself felt; the wail that follows is a cry of mourning.

1195 She fell to the floor, overcome by the disaster, hard for anyone but her father to recognize. Her eyes had lost their natural shape, her face its beauty. Blood was dripping from the top of her head, mixed with fire, and the flesh was falling from her bones like resin from a pine, torn by the poison's unseen jaws—a horrible sight. Everyone was afraid to touch the body; what had happened had taught us. But her poor father, knowing nothing of the disaster, came suddenly into the room and threw himself on the body. 1206 At once he cried out, put his arms around her, and kissed her, saying: "My poor child, which of the gods has destroyed you so cruelly? Who has robbed this old man, who's little more than a grave, of you? Oh, let me die with you, my child." But when he had finished his laments and his weeping and wanted to raise his old body up, he stuck to the delicate robes as ivy clings to laurel shoots, and it was a terrible wrestling match. He wanted to get up on his knee, and she held him back; and if he pulled hard, he tore his old flesh from his bones. 1218 In the end the unlucky man gave up and breathed out his life; he could no longer rise above the evil. And there they lie, dead, the daughter and her old father, side by side, a disaster to make anyone weep. As for you, let me leave your part out of what I say; you'll know for yourself how to escape punishment. This isn't the first time I've thought human life a shadow, and I'd say without fear that those mortals who seem clever, who fret over fine arguments, are the ones guilty of the greatest folly. 1228 For no mortal man is truly blessed. When wealth flows in, one may be luckier than another—but blessed, no.

CHORUS 1231 It seems some god is fastening many troubles on Jason today, and justly. Poor girl, how we pity your misfortune, daughter of Creon, you who are gone to the gates of Hades because of your marriage to Jason.

MEDEA 1236 My friends, my mind is made up: I'll kill the children as quickly as I can and leave this land. I won't linger and hand them over to be murdered by another, more hostile hand. In any case they must die. And since they must, I who gave them birth will kill them. Come, arm yourself, my heart. Why do I hold

back from doing these terrible, necessary evils? Come, my wretched hand, take the sword, take it, go to the starting line of a life of pain. Don't be a coward. Don't remember the children, how dear they are, how you gave them birth. For this one short day forget your children—and then mourn. For even if you kill them, still they were dear to you. And I am an unhappy woman.

FIFTH STASIMON

The Chorus calls on Earth and Sun as the children cry out inside and are killed.

CHORUS

1251 Ah, Earth, and you, all-shining
ray of the Sun, look down, look
on this ruined woman, before she lays
a bloody, kin-killing hand on her children!
They sprang from your golden race,
and it is a fearful thing for a god's blood
to be spilled by men.
Light born of Zeus, hold her back,
stop her, drive out of the house this wretched,
murderous Fury set on by avenging spirits.
In vain the labor for your children is lost;
in vain, then, you bore your dear sons,
you who left behind the dark Clashing Rocks
and their most inhospitable passage.
Poor wretch, why does heavy anger
fall upon your mind, and godless
murder follow murder?
For hard on mortals are the pollutions of kindred blood:
griefs in tune with the deed
fall from the gods on the houses of those who kill their own.

CHILDREN 1271 Oh, no, what shall I do? Where can I run from Mother's hands? I don't know, my dearest brother. We're dying.

CHORUS

Do you hear the cry, do you hear the children?
Ah, poor woman, ill-fated woman!
Shall I go into the house? I think
we must save the children from murder.

CHILDREN Yes, for the gods' sake, help! Now's the time—we're already caught close in the net of the sword.

CHORUS

Poor wretch, so you were stone, then, or iron,
you who will kill the crop of children you bore
with your own hand.
One woman, only one, I have heard of before
who laid hands on her own dear children:
Ino, driven mad by the gods, when the wife of Zeus
sent her wandering from her house.
The poor woman plunged into the sea for the godless
murder
of her children,
stretching her foot out over the sea-cliff,
and perished, dying together with her two sons.
What could be more terrible now?
Women's marriage bed, so full of pain,
how much harm you have done to mortals already![15]

EXODOS

Jason arrives too late; Medea appears in the Sun's chariot with the bodies and leaves for Athens.

JASON Women standing near this house, is she inside, the woman who has done these terrible things, Medea—or has she gone off and fled? She'll have to hide herself under the earth, or lift her body on wings into the depths of the sky, if she isn't to

15 Ino, daughter of Cadmus and nurse of the infant Dionysus, was driven mad by Hera and leapt into the sea with her son.

pay the price to the royal house. Does she think she can kill the rulers of this land and escape from this house unpunished? But it isn't her I'm worried about so much as the children. Those she wronged will do her harm; I've come to save my sons' lives, so that the king's kin don't do something to them, avenging their mother's unholy murder.

CHORUS 1306 Poor man, you don't know how deep in trouble you've come, Jason, or you wouldn't have said this.

JASON 1308 What is it? Does she want to kill me too?

CHORUS 1309 Your sons are dead, by their mother's hand.

JASON 1310 Oh, no, what are you saying? You've destroyed me, lady.

CHORUS 1311 Think of your children as no longer living.

JASON 1312 Where did she kill them—inside the house or out?

CHORUS 1313 Open the doors and you'll see your children murdered.

JASON 1314 Undo the bolts, servants, as fast as you can, loosen the fastenings, so I can see this double evil—them dead, and her, whom I'll make pay with her death.

MEDEA 1317 Why are you shaking these doors and prying them open, searching for the dead and for me who did it? Stop that work. If you need something from me, say what you want—but you'll never lay a hand on me. Such is the chariot the Sun, my father's father, gives me, a defense against an enemy's hand.

JASON 1323 You hateful thing, woman most loathed by the gods and by me and by the whole human race—you could bring yourself to drive a sword into your own children, you who bore them, and you've destroyed me, left me childless. And having done this you look on the sun and the earth, after daring the most godless deed of all. Death take you! I see clearly now, though I didn't then, when I brought you from your home in a foreign land to a Greek house—a great evil, a traitor to your father and to the land that raised you. 1333 Such is the avenging curse the gods have hurled on me. You killed your own brother

at the hearth, and then boarded the fair-prowed hull of the Argo. That's how you began. Then you married this man and bore me children, and for the sake of a bed and a marriage you've destroyed them. There's no Greek woman who would ever have dared this—and I thought fit to marry you instead of them, a hateful, deadly match for me: a lioness, not a woman, with a nature more savage than Tyrrhenian Scylla.[16] 1344 But I couldn't wound you with ten thousand insults, such is the brazenness born in you. Away with you, you shameless creature, murderer of your children! As for me, all that's left is to mourn my fate: I'll have no joy of my new marriage, and I'll never speak to the sons I fathered and raised while they're alive. I've lost them.

MEDEA 1351 I'd have made a long speech in reply to this, if Father Zeus didn't know what you got from me and what you did. You weren't going to spurn my bed and lead a pleasant life laughing at me—nor was the princess, nor Creon, who offered you the marriage, going to throw me out of this land and go unpunished. So call me a lioness, if you like, and Scylla, who lived on the Tyrrhenian shore. I've struck at your heart, as I had to.

JASON 1361 You're in pain yourself; you share in the suffering.

MEDEA 1362 Be sure of it. But the pain is worth it, as long as you can't laugh at me.

JASON 1363 Children, what a wicked mother you had!

MEDEA 1364 Sons, you died of your father's sickness!

JASON 1365 It wasn't my right hand, you know, that killed them.

MEDEA 1366 No—your arrogance did, and your brand-new marriage.

JASON 1367 You thought it right to kill them over a bed?

MEDEA 1368 Do you think that's a small pain for a woman?

JASON 1369 For a sensible one, yes. But to you everything is evil.

MEDEA 1370 They are no more. That will sting you.

16 Scylla, the man-eating sea-monster of the *Odyssey*, was placed by some on the Tyrrhenian (western Italian) coast.

JASON [1371] Oh, they are—as savage avengers to fall on your head.

MEDEA [1372] The gods know who started the trouble.

JASON [1373] They know, all right—they know your loathsome mind.

MEDEA [1374] Hate me, then. I'm sick of your bitter voice.

JASON [1375] And I of yours. It's easy enough to be rid of each other.

MEDEA [1376] How, then? What should I do? I want that badly too.

JASON [1377] Let me bury these bodies and mourn them.

MEDEA [1378] Never. I'll bury them with this hand, taking them to the sanctuary of Hera of the Heights, so that none of my enemies can outrage them by tearing up their graves. And on this land of Sisyphus I'll lay a solemn festival and rites for all time to come, in return for this unholy murder. As for me, I'm going to the land of Erechtheus, to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion. And you, as is fitting, will die a bad man's bad death, your head struck by a piece of the Argo, after you've seen the bitter end of your marriage to me.[17]

JASON [1389] May the Fury of our children destroy you, / and Justice that avenges blood!

MEDEA [1391] What god or power listens to you, / you oath-breaker, you who cheated a stranger?

JASON [1393] Ah, ah, you vile thing, you child-killer!

MEDEA [1394] Go home and bury your wife.

JASON [1395] I'm going—robbed of my two sons.

MEDEA [1396] You're not mourning yet. Wait till you're old.

JASON [1397] Children, so dearly loved!

MEDEA By their mother, yes—not by you.

17 Hera Akraia ("of the Heights") had a sanctuary near Corinth, the "land of Sisyphus," where yearly rites were held for Medea's children; Erechtheus was a legendary king of Athens.

JASON [1398] And then you killed them?

MEDEA To hurt you.

JASON [1399] Oh, no, how I long, poor wretch, / to kiss my children's dear lips!

MEDEA [1401] Now you speak to them, now you'd embrace them, / when before you pushed them away.

JASON [1402] For the gods' sake, let me / touch my children's soft skin.

MEDEA [1404] No. Your words are thrown away for nothing.

JASON

Zeus, do you hear how I'm driven away,
what I suffer from this vile,
child-murdering lioness?
But as much as I may, as far as I'm able,
I mourn this, and I call on the gods,
and summon the powers to witness
that you killed my children and now keep me
from touching them with my hands and burying the dead.
I wish I had never fathered them,
only to see them destroyed by you!

CHORUS

Zeus on Olympus is steward of many things,
and the gods bring many things to pass beyond our hopes;
what we expected was not fulfilled,
and for the unexpected a god found a way.
So this affair has turned out.