Medea: Cast of Characters

NURSE of Medea
TUTOR of Medea and Jason's children
MEDEA women of Corinth
CHORUS king of Corinth
CREON JASON
AEGEUS AEGEUS
MESSANGER king of Athens
CHILDREN of Medea and Jason

Medea

SCENE: A normal house on a street in Corinth. The elderly Nurse steps out of its front door.

NURSE:
I wish the Argo never had set sail, had never flown to Colchis through the dark Clashing Rocks;¹ I wish the pines had never been felled along the hollows on the slopes of Pelion,² to fit their hands with oars—those heroes who went off to seek the golden pelt for Pelias. My mistress then, Medea, never would have sailed away to reach the towers of Iolcus' land;³ the sight of Jason never would have stunned her spirit with desire. She would have never persuaded Pelias' daughters to kill their father, never had to come to this land—Corinth.⁴

¹ The Argo was the ship Jason had constructed with the help of Athena for his voyage to the Black Sea in order to obtain the Golden Fleece, which he needed to regain his place as rightful heir to the throne of Iolcus. King Pelias, who had seized the throne from Jason's father, sent him on this quest in order to rid himself of Jason when the latter returned from exile. To reach Colchis, a kingdom on the shore of the Black Sea, the Argo had to sail through the Clashing Rocks, located near the mouth of the Bosporus. Colchis was the home of Medea.
² Pelion is a tall mountain in Thessaly, home of the centaur Chiron who raised Jason during his exile as a baby and youth.
³ Iolcus is a town on the southern coast of Thessaly. Its modern name is Volo.
⁴ After Jason returned with the Golden Fleece, Pelias still refused to give up the throne, so Medea demonstrated to his daughters a spell for restoring their father's youth: she took an old ram, disembodied it, and cooked its parts in a pot. Out jumped a young ram. Their attempt to perform the same trick with their father resulted in his death. Euripides' debut in 455 was with a play based on this legend. Jason and Medea then went into exile,
Here she's lived in exile with her husband and children, and Medea's presence pleased the citizens. For her part, she complied with Jason in all things. There is no greater security than this in all the world: when a wife does not oppose her husband.

But now, there's only hatred. What should be most loved has been contaminated, stricken since Jason has betrayed them—his own children, and my lady, for a royal bed. He's married into power: Creon's daughter.5

Poor Medea, mournful and dishonored, shrieks at his broken oaths, the promise sealed with his right hand (the greatest pledge there is)—she calls the gods to witness just how well Jason has repaid her. She won't touch food; surrendering to pain, she melts away her days in tears, ever since she learned of this injustice. She won't raise her face; her eyes are glued to the ground. Friends talk to her, try to give her good advice; she listens the way a rock does, or an ocean wave.

At most, she'll turn her pale neck aside, sobbing to herself for her dear father, her land, her home, and all that she betrayed for Jason, who now holds her in dishonor.

This disaster made her realize:
a fatherland is no small thing to lose.
She hates her children, feels no joy in seeing them. I'm afraid she might be plotting something.6

(eventually reaching Corinth, a prominent city in the northern Peloponnese near the Isthmus. During the year before the production of Euripides’ Medea, tensions ran high between Athens and Corinth, which then fought against Athens during the Peloponnesian War.

5. This Creon should not be confused with the character in the Oedipus legends. His daughter remains unnamed in this drama.

6. Euripides plants here the germ of the possibility that Medea might harm the children, but it is important to stress that the Nurse fears what Medea might do to others, not to the children. She develops this possibility at 103, but briefly. Medea's later filicidal intentions must come as a relative surprise.

HERMIONE:
Farewell to the world that bore me! Farewell to all things I have loved, farewell to my dear Jason, farewell to Medea, farewell to Corinth, farewell to Creon, farewell to my beloved Jason!

TUTOR:
Timeworn stalwart of my mistress' household, why do you stand here by the gates, alone, crying out your sorrows to yourself? You've left Medea alone. Doesn't she need you?

NURSE:
Senior attendant to the sons of Jason, decent servants feel their masters' griefs in their own minds, when things fall out all wrong. As for me, my pain was so intense that a desire crept over me to come out here and tell the earth and sky my mistress' troubles.

TUTOR:
Poor thing. Is she not done with weeping yet?

NURSE:
What blissful ignorance! She's barely started.

TUTOR:
The fool—if one may say such things of masters—she doesn't even know the latest outrage.
NURSE: What is it, old man? Don't begrudge me that.

TUTOR: Nothing. I'm sorry that I spoke at all.

NURSE: By your beard, don't hide this thing from me, your fellow-servant. I can keep it quiet.

TUTOR: As I approached the place where the old men sit and play dice, beside the sacred spring Peirene,7 I heard someone say—he didn't notice I was listening—that Creon, the ruler of this land, intends to drive these children and their mother out of Corinth. I don't know if it's true. I hope it isn't.

NURSE: Will Jason let his sons be so abused, even if he's fighting with their mother?

TUTOR: He has a new bride; he's forgotten them. He's no friend to this household anymore.

NURSE: We are destroyed, then. Before we've bailed our boat from the first wave of sorrow, here's a new one.

TUTOR: But please, don't tell your mistress. Keep it quiet. It's not the time for her to know of this.

NURSE: Children, do you hear the way your father is treating you? I won't say, May he die!

---he is my master—but it's obvious he's harming those whom he should love. He's guilty.

TUTOR: Who isn't? Are you just now learning this, that each man loves himself more than his neighbor? If their father doesn't cherish them, because he's more preoccupied with his own bed—

NURSE: Go inside now, children. Everything will be all right.

(The Tutor turns the children toward the house.) And you, keep them away—don't let them near their mother when she's like this. I've seen her: she looks fiercer than a bull; she's giving them the eye, as if she means to do something. Her rage will not let up, I know, until she lashes out at someone. May it be enemies she strikes, and not her loved ones!

(In the following passage, Medea sings and the Nurse chants.)

MEDEA: (From within the house, crying out in rage.) Aaaah! Oh, horrible, horrible, all that I suffer, my unhappy struggles. I wish I could die.

NURSE: You see, this is it. Dear children, your mother has stirred up her heart, she has stirred up her rage. Hurry up now and get yourselves inside the house—but don't get too close to her, don't let her see you: her ways are too wild, her nature is hateful, her mind is too willful.

Go in. Hurry up!

7. Peirene, Corinth's sacred spring, ran down from its acropolis.
(Exit the Tutor and children into the house.)

It's clear now, it's starting: a thunderhead rising,
swollen with groaning, and soon it will flash
as her spirit ignites it—then what will she do?
Her heart is so proud, there is no way to stop her;
hersoul has been pierced by these sorrows.

MEDEA:
Aaaah!
The pain that I've suffered, I've suffered so much,
worth oceans of weeping. O children, accursed,
may you die—with your father! Your mother is hateful.
Go to hell, the whole household! Every last one.

NURSE:
Oh, lord. Here we go. What have they done—the children?
Their father's done wrong—why should you hate them?
Oh, children, my heart is so sore, I'm afraid
you will come to some harm.

Rulers are fierce
in their temperament; somehow, they will not be governed;
they like to have power, always, over others.
They're harsh, and they're stubborn. It's better to live
as an equal with equals. I never would want
to be grand and majestic—just let me grow old
in simple security. Even the word
"moderation" sounds good when you say it. For mortals
the middle is safest, in word and in deed.
Too much is too much, and there's always a danger
a god may get angry and ruin your household.

(Enter the Chorus of Corinthian women from the
right, singing.)

CHORUS:
I heard someone's voice, I heard someone shout:
The woman from Colchis: poor thing, so unhappy.
Is her grief still unsoftened? Old woman, please tell us—
I heard her lament through the gates of my hall.
Believe me, old woman, I take no delight
when this house is in pain. I have pledged it my friendship.

[139–164] MEDEA

NURSE:
This house? It no longer exists. It's all gone.
He's taken up with his new royal marriage.
She's in her bedroom, my mistress, she's melting
her life all away, and her mind can't be eased
by a single kind word from a single dear friend.

MEDEA:
Aaaah!
May a fire-bolt from heaven come shoot through my skull!
What do I gain by being alive?
Oh, god. How I long for the comfort of death.
I hate this life. How I wish I could leave it.

[Strophe]

CHORUS:
Do you hear, O Zeus, O sunlight and earth,
this terrible song, the cry
of this unhappy bride?
Poor fool, what a dreadful longing,
this craving for final darkness.
You'll hasten your death. Why do it?
Don't pray for this ending.
If your husband reveres a new bed, a new bride,
don't sharpen your mind against him.
You'll have Zeus himself supporting
your case. Don't dissolve in weeping
for the sake of your bedmate.

MEDEA:
Great goddess Themis and Artemis, holy one:8
do you see what I suffer, although I have bound
my detestable husband with every great oath?
May I see him, along with his bride and the palace

8. The goddess Themis is a Titan (a member of the first generation of gods born to Gaia and Ouranos, whose names mean "earth" and "sky") and is closely associated with Zeus' order and hence with justice and law. The virgin huntress Artemis, daughter of Zeus, presided over important matters such as childbirth and life transitions for women.
scared down to nothing, crushed into splinters.
He started it. He was the one with the nerve
to commit this injustice. Oh father, oh city,
I left you in horror—I killed my own brother.9

NURSE:
170    You hear what she says, and the gods that she prays to:
    Themis, and Zeus, the enforcer of oaths?
    There's no way my mistress's rage will die down
    into anything small.

[Attistrophe]

CHORUS:
    How I wish she'd come outside, let us see
her face, let her hear our words
and the sound of our voice.
If only she'd drop her anger,
unburden her burning spirit,
let go of this weight of madness.
180    I'll stand by our friendship.
Hurry up, bring her here, get her out, go inside,
and bring her to us. Go tell her
that we are her friends. Please hurry!
She's raging—the ones inside may
feel the sting of her sorrow.

NURSE:
    I'll do as you ask, but I fear that my mistress
won't listen to me.
    I will make the effort—what's one more attempt?
But her glare is as fierce as a bull's, let me tell you—
she's wild like a lion who's just given birth
whenever a servant tries telling her anything.
    You wouldn't go wrong, you'd be right on the mark,
if you called them all half-wits, the people of old:

they made lovely songs for banquers and parties,
but no one took time to discover the music
that might do some good, the chords or the harmony
people could use to relieve all the hateful
pain and distress that leads to the downfall
of houses, the deaths and the dreadful misfortunes.
Let me tell you, there would be some gain in that—music
with the power to heal. When you're having a sumptuous feast,
what's the point of a voice raised in song?
Why bother with singing? The feast is enough
to make people happy. That's all that they need.

(EXIT the Nurse into the house.)

CHORUS:
    I heard a wail, a clear cry of pain;
she rails at the betrayer of her bed,
    the bitter bridegroom.
    For the injustice she suffers, she calls on the gods:
    Themis of Zeus, protectress of oaths,
    who brought her to Hellas, over the salt water dark as night,
    through the waves of Pontus' forbidding gate.10

    (Enter Medea from the house, attended by the
    Nurse and other female servants. Here spoken
dialogue resumes.)

MEDEA:
    Women of Corinth, I have stepped outside
so you will not condemn me. Many people
act superior—I'm well aware of this.
Some keep it private; some are arrogant
in public view. Yet there are other people
who, just because they lead a quiet life,
are thought to be aloof. There is no justice
in human eyesight: people take one look
and hate a man, before they know his heart,
though no injustice has been done to them.

9. To slow down the Colchians who were pursuing Medea and Jason after
the theft of the Golden Fleece, Medea killed her younger brother Apsyrtus
and threw his body parts either around the palace at Colchis or at Tomis
on the shore of the Black Sea.

10. Pontus, literally "The Sea," refers to the Black Sea. As the Chorus sing
of the passage through the Bosporus toward Greece, away from her home-
land, Medea passes through the doors of the house.
A foreigner must adapt to a new city, certainly. Nor can I praise a citizen who's willful, and who treats his fellow townsmen harshly, out of narrow-mindedness.

My case is different. Unexpected trouble has crushed my soul. It's over now; I take no joy in life. My friends, I want to die. My husband, who was everything to me—how well I know it—is the worst of men.

Of all the living creatures with a soul and mind, we women are the most pathetic. First of all, we have to buy a husband: spend vast amounts of money, just to get a master for our body—to add insult to injury. And the stakes could not be higher: will you get a decent husband, or a bad one? If a woman leaves her husband, then she loses her virtuous reputation. To refuse him is just not possible. When a girl leaves home and comes to live with new ways, different rules, she has to be a prophet—learn somehow the art of dealing smoothly with her bedmate. If we do well, and if our husbands bear the yoke without discomfort or complaint, our lives are admired. If not, it's best to die. A man, when he gets fed up with the people at home, can go elsewhere to ease his heart.

11. This presentation of the problems of women in marriage is surprising but not unique in Greek tragedy; a surviving fragment of a lost tragedy by Sophocles, *Tereus*, presents a similar lament by Procris, wife of Tereus. After discovering her husband has raped her sister and cut out her tongue, Procris kills their son and serves his flesh to Tereus as a meal. It is unclear which of these two dramas was produced first.

12. Medea here refers to the dowry that the bride's family had to pay to the groom. Divorce, to which she alludes in the succeeding lines, was a relatively easy procedure for men by filing some papers in court, but almost impossibly complicated for women. On the dowry, see Hippolytus' very different complaint at *Hippolytus* 627–29 (688–91 in Aronson Svarlien's translation, hereafter abbreviated AS).

—he has friends, companions his own age. We must rely on just one single soul. They say that we lead safe, untroubled lives at home while they do battle with the spear. They're wrong. I'd rather take my stand behind a shield three times than go through childbirth once.

Still, my account is quite distinct from yours. This is your city. You have your fathers' homes, your lives bring joy and profit. You have friends. But I have been deserted and outraged—left without a city by my husband, who stole me as his plunder from the land of the barbarians. Here I have no mother, no brother, no blood relative to help unmoor me from this terrible disaster. So, I will need to ask you one small favor. If I should find some way, some strategy to pay my husband back, bring him to justice, keep silent. Most of the time, I know, a woman is filled with fear. She's worthless in a battle and flinches at the sight of steel. But when she's faced with an injustice in the bedroom, there is no other mind more murderous.

CHORUS:
I'll do as you ask. You're justified, Medea, in paying your husband back. I'm not surprised you grieve at your misfortunes. Look! I see Creon, the lord of this land, coming toward us now. He has some new decision to announce.

13. The most prominent military tactic in the fifth century BCE was the hoplite formation whereby heavily armed soldiers would stand closely together, moving in a tight formation with shields locked together and spears pointed forward. Athenian adolescents had to swear an oath to the city in which they promised, among other things, never to leave their position in the line.

14. A promise by the Chorus not to reveal a protagonist's plan was a frequently used device in order to deal with the awkward situation of having fifteen people present who could divulge to another character what will happen. Compare *Hippolytus* 710–12 (786–91 AS).
(Enter Creon from the right, with attendants.)

CREON:
You with the grim face, fuming at your husband, Medea, I hereby announce that you must leave this land, an exile, taking with you your two children. You must not delay. This is my decision. I won't leave until I've thrown you out, across the border.

MEDEA:
Oh, god. I'm crushed; I'm utterly destroyed. My enemies, their sails unfurled, attack me and there's no land in sight, there's no escape from ruin. Although I suffer, I must ask: Creon, why do you send me from this land?

CREON:
I'll speak plainly: I'm afraid of you. You could hurt my daughter, even kill her. Every indication points that way. You're wise by nature, you know evil arts, and you're upset because your husband's gone away from your bedroom. I have heard reports that you've made threats, that you've devised a plan to harm the bride, her father, and the bridegroom. I want to guard against that. I would rather have you hate me, woman, here and now, than treat you gently and regret it later.

MEDEA:
Oh, god. Creon, this is not the first time: often I've been injured by my reputation. Any man who's sensible by nature will set a limit on his children's schooling.

to make sure that they never grow too wise. The wise are seen as lazy, and they're envied and hated. If you offer some new wisdom to half-wits, they will only think you're useless. And those who are considered experts hate you when the city thinks you're cleverer than they are. I myself have met with this reaction. Since I am wise, some people envy me, some think I'm idle, some the opposite, and some feel threatened. Yet I'm not all that wise.

And you're afraid of me. What do you fear? Don't worry, Creon. I don't have it in me to do wrong to a man with royal power. What injustice have you done to me? Your spirit moved you, and you gave your daughter as you saw fit. My husband is the one I hate. You acted well, with wise restraint. And now, I don't begrudge your happiness. My best to all of you—celebrate the wedding. Just let me stay here. I know when I'm beaten. I'll yield to this injustice. I'll submit in silence to those greater than myself.

CREON:
Your words are soothing, but I'm terrified of what's in your mind. I trust you less than ever. It's easier to guard against a woman (or man, for that matter) with a fiery spirit than one who's wise and silent. You must leave at once—don't waste my time with talk. It's settled. Since you are my enemy, and hate me, no ruse of yours can keep you here among us.

(Medea kneels before Creon and grasps his hand and knees in supplication.)

15. The Greek adjective sophē can mean either "wise" or "clever," and Greek texts, including this one, often play off of this ambiguity. But whether the word's connotation here is closer to wise or clever, Euripides does seem to downplay the traditional representation of Medea as a witch.

16. Supplication was a ritual act through which an individual abased himself or herself before a more powerful individual by kneeling and grabbing the latter's knees, often touching his beard as well. Especially in claiming the protection of the gods, the supplicant's wish should be granted. Medea makes little headway here until she calls upon Zeus (341), thus raising the stakes.
MEDEA:
No, by your knees! By your new-married daughter!

CREON:
You’re wasting words. There’s no way you’ll persuade me.

MEDEA:
You’ll drive me out, with no reverence for my prayers?

CREON:
I care more for my family than for you.

MEDEA:
How clearly I recall my fatherland.

CREON:
Yes, that’s what I love most—after my children.

MEDEA:
Oh, god—the harm Desire does to mortals!

CREON:
Depending on one’s fortunes, I suppose.

MEDEA:
Zeus, do not forget who caused these troubles.

CREON:
Just leave, you fool. I’m tired of struggling with you.

MEDEA:
Struggles. Yes. I’ve had enough myself.

CREON:
My guards will force you out in just a moment.

MEDEA:
Oh please, not that! Creon, I entreat you!

CREON:
You intend to make a scene, I gather.

MEDEA:
I’ll leave, don’t worry. That’s not what I’m asking.

CREON:
Why are you forcing me? Let go of my hand!

MEDEA:
Please, let me stay just one more day, that’s all.
I need to make arrangements for my exile,
find safe asylum for my children, since
their father doesn’t give them any thought.
Take pity on them. You yourself have children.
It’s only right for you to treat them kindly.
If we go into exile, I’m not worried
about myself—I weep for their disaster.

CREON:
I haven’t got a ruler’s temperament;
reverence has often led me into ruin.
Woman, I realize this is all wrong,
but you shall have your wish. I warn you, though:
if the sun god’s lamp 17 should find you and your children
still within our borders at first rising,
it means your death. I’ve spoken; it’s decided.
Stay for one day only, if you must.
You won’t have time to do the things I fear.

(Exit Creon and attendants to the right. Medea
rises to her feet.)

CHORUS:
Oh, god! This is horrible, unhappy woman,
the grief that you suffer. Where will you turn?
Where will you find shelter? What country, what home
will save you from sorrow? A god has engulfed you,
Medea—this wave is now breaking upon you,
there is no way out.

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17. Creon’s threat inadvertently includes Helios, Medea’s paternal grand-
father, who will help her escape at the end of this drama.
MEDEA:
Yes, things are all amiss. Who could deny it?
Believe me, though, that's not how it will end.
The newlyweds have everything at stake,
and struggles await the one who made this match.
Do you think I ever could have fawned
on him like that without some gain in mind,
some ruse? I never would have spoken to him,
or touched him with my hands. He's such an idiot.
He could have thrown me out, destroyed my plans;
instead he's granted me a single day
to turn three enemies to three dead bodies:
the father, and the bride, and my own husband.\(^{18}\)
I know so many pathways to their deaths,
I don't know which to turn to first, my friends.
Shall I set the bridal home on fire,\(^{19}\)
creeping silently into their bedroom?
There's just one threat. If I am apprehended
entering the house, my ruse discovered,
I'll be put to death; my enemies
will laugh at me.\(^{20}\) The best way is the most
direct, to use the skills I have by nature
and poison them, destroy them with my drugs.

Ah, well.

All right, they die. What city will receive me?
What host will offer me immunity,
what land will take me in and give me refuge?
There's no one. I must wait just long enough
to see if any sheltering tower appears.
Then I will kill in silence, by deceit.

But if I have no recourse from disaster,
I'll take the sword and kill them, even if

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\(^{18}\) Again, the violence would be directed against Jason, not the children,
and the Chorus do not object to actions taken in vengeance against him,
Creon, and the bride.

\(^{19}\) Here Medea begins to talk most overtly like a Homeric warrior, obsessed
with fame and status, especially in the eyes of "enemies." See Knox, "The

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[Strophe 1]
The streams of the holy rivers are flowing backward.
Everything runs in reverse—justice is upside down.
Men's minds are deceitful, and nothing is settled,
not even oaths that are sworn by the gods.
The tidings will change, and a virtuous reputation
will grace my name. The race of women will reap
honor, no longer the shame of disgraceful rumor.

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\(^{20}\) The dark goddess Hecate became especially prominent during the fifth
century and was associated with witchcraft and magic.

\(^{21}\) Medea talks to herself, an unprecedented event on the Athenian stage
(at least in the texts that have survived). This device prepares the audience
for her later monologue in which she agonizes over killing her children.

\(^{22}\) Sisyphus of Corinth was notorious for his trickery and deceptiveness,
for which Zeus punished him in Hades by making him push a boulder up
a hill for eternity (Odyssey 11.593–600).
EURIPIDES

[421–448]

[Antistrophe 1]
The songs of the poets of old will no longer linger
on my untrustworthiness. Women were never sent
the gift of divine inspiration by Phoebus
Apollo, lord of the elegant lyre,23
the master of music—or I could have sung my own song
against the race of men. The fullness of time
holds many tales: it can speak of both men and women.

[Strophe 2]
You sailed away from home and father,
driven insane in your heart; you traced a path
between the twin cliffs of Pontus.
The land you live in is foreign.
Your bed is empty, your husband
gone. Poor woman, dishonored,
sent into exile.

[Antistrophe 2]
The Grace of oaths is gone, and Reverence
flies away into the sky, abandoning
great Hellas. No father’s dwelling
unmoors you now from this heartache.
Your bed now yields to another:
now a princess prevails,
greater than you are.

(Enter Jason from the right.)

JASON:
This is not the first time—I have often
observed that a fierce temper is an evil
that leaves you no recourse. You could have stayed
here in this land, you could have kept your home
by simply acquiescing in the plans
of those who are greater. You are now an exile
because of your own foolish words. To me
it makes no difference. You can keep on calling
Jason the very worst of men.24 However,
the words you spoke against the royal family—
well, consider it a gain that nothing worse
than exile is your punishment. As for me,
I wanted you to stay. I always tried
to calm the king, to soothe his fuming rage.
But you, you idiot, would not let up
your words against the royal family. That’s why
you are now an exile. All the same,
I won’t let down my loved ones. I have come here
looking out for your best interests, woman,
so you won’t be without the things you need
when you go into exile with the children.
You’ll need money—banishment means hardship.
However much you hate me, I could never
wish you any harm.

MEDEA:
You are the worst!
You’re loathsome—that’s the worst word I can utter.
You’re not a man. You’ve come here—most detested
by the gods, by me, by all mankind. That isn’t courage, when you have the nerve
to harm your friends, then look them in the face.
No, that’s the worst affliction known to man:
shamelessness.

And yet, I’m glad you’ve come.
Speaking ill to you will ease my soul,
and listening will cause you pain. I’ll start
at the beginning. First, I saved your life—as every single man who sailed from Hellas
aboard the Argo knows—when you were sent

23. The epithet Phoebus means “shining.” Apollo is the leader of the
Muses, the goddesses of music and poetry. The Chorus, of course, ignore
Sappho, a real poetess who would have been unknown to a fictional group
in a story set in the heroic age.

24. Variations on “worst of men” recur throughout this scene. It inverts
the hero’s traditional desire to be called “the best.” In the epics of the Trojan
War, all heroes vied for this title, often, as in the case of Ajax, at the
cost of their lives.
to yoke the fire-breathing bulls, and sow
the deadly crop. I killed the dragon, too:
the sleepless one, who kept the Golden Fleece
enfolded in his convoluted coils;25
I was your light, the beacon of your safety.
For my part, I betrayed my home, my father,
and went with you to Pelion’s slopes, Iolcus—
with more good will than wisdom—and I killed
Pelasgus, in the cruellest possible way:
at his own children’s hands. I ruined their household.

And you—you are the very worst of men—
betrayed me, after all of that. You wanted
a new bed, even though I’d borne you children.
If you had still been childless, anyone
could understand your lust for this new marriage.

All trust in oaths is gone. What puzzles me
is whether you believe those gods (the ones
who heard you swear) no longer are in power,
or that the old commandments have been changed?
You realize full well you broke your oath.

Ah, my right hand, which you took so often,
clinging to my knees. What was the point
of touching me?26 You are despicable.
My hopes have all gone wrong. Well, then! You’re here:
I have a question for you, friend to friend.
(What good do I imagine it will do?
Still, I’ll ask, since it makes you look worse.)
Where do I turn now? To my father’s household

and fatherland, which I betrayed for you?
Or Pelias’ poor daughters? Naturally
they’ll welcome me—the one who killed their father!

Here is my situation. I’ve become
an enemy to my own family, those
whom I should love, and I have gone to war
with those whom I had no reason at all
to hurt, and all for your sake. In exchange,
you’ve made me the happiest girl in all of Hellas.
I have you, the perfect spouse, a marvel,
so trustworthy—though I must leave the country
friendless and deserted, taking with me
my friendless children! What a charming scandal
for a newlywed: your children roam
as beggars, with the one who saved your life.27

Zeus! For brass disguised as gold, you sent us
reliable criteria to judge.
But when a man is base, how can we know?
Why is there no sign stamped upon his body?28

CHORUS:
This anger is a terror, hard to heal,
when loved ones clash with loved ones in dispute.

JASON:
It seems that I must have a way with words
and, like a skillful captain, reef my sails
in order to escape this gale that blows
without a break—your endless, tired harangue.
The way I see it, woman (since you seem
to feel that I must owe you some huge favor),
it was Cypris,28 no other god or mortal,
who saved me on my voyage. Yes, your mind
is subtle. But I must say—at the risk

25. When Jason asked Medea’s father, King Aeëtes, for the fleece, he was required to yoke these bulls (Medea gave Jason a magic lotion to protect him from the fire) and sow the ground with the teeth of the serpent Cadmus had killed at the foundation of Thebes. From these teeth sprang armed men. It is unclear how Medea killed the dragon, and other versions of the story do not credit her with the actual killing. A vase painting in the Vatican collection shows Jason half-swallowed by the dragon, with Athena, protector of heroes, standing by watching.

26. In other words, Jason claimed supplication but then ignored his part of the reciprocal relationship. Oaths were sworn to the gods. To disregard oaths was thus to commit an offense against the gods.

27. The fifth century BCE saw an increasing concern with the discrepancy between external appearance and internal human nature. See, e.g., similar concerns at Hippolytus 925–31 (1028–37 AS).

28. Aphrodite is called Cypris because, after her birth in the sea, she came ashore on the island of Cyprus.
of stirring up your envy and your grudges—
Eros was the one who forced your hand:
his arrows, which are inescapable,
compelled you to rescue me. But I won’t put
too fine a point on that. You did support me.
You saved my life, in fact. However, you
received more than you gave, as I shall prove. 29
First of all, you live in Hellas now
instead of your barbarian land. With us,
you know what justice is, and civil law: 30
not mere brute force. And every single person
in Hellas knows that you are wise. You’re famous.
You’d never have that kind of reputation
if you were living at the edge of nowhere.
As for me, I wouldn’t wish for gold
or for a sweeter song than Orpheus
unless I had the fame to match my fortune.

Enough about my struggles—you’re the one
who started this debate. As for my marriage
to the princess, which you hold against me,
I shall show you how I acted wisely
and with restraint, and with the greatest love
toward you and toward our children—Wait! Just listen. 31

When I moved here from Iolcus, bringing with me

29. The self-consciously rhetorical style of Jason here would have reminded the audience of the Sophists, the teachers of rhetoric who were prevalent in Athens during these decades. The association would not have been a positive one.
30. Jason ignores that oaths are foundational to a society bound by law. His linkage of lawfulness to Hellenism thus raises the question of who the real “barbarian” is.
31. The son of Apollo and a Muse, Orpheus was a singer with almost miraculous powers. He served as one of Jason’s Argonauts. Orpheus was also willing to travel to Hades to ask Hades and Persephone (Demeter’s daughter) for the return of his wife Eurydice, who had been killed by a snake bite. Charmed by his songs, they agreed, on the condition that Orpheus not look back at Eurydice until he and his wife reached the surface of the earth. He could not resist looking back, and she returned to the dead.
32. This interjection indicates that Medea must react physically to this outlandish claim.

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disaster in abundance, with no recourse,
what more lucky windfall could I find
(exile that I was) than marrying
the king’s own child? It’s not that I despised
your bed—the thought that irritates you most—
nor was I mad with longing for a new bride,
or trying to compete with anyone—
to win the prize for having the most children.
I have enough—no reason to complain.
My motive was the best: so we’d live well
and not be poor. I know that everyone
avoids a needy friend. I wanted to raise
sons in a style that fits my family background,
give brothers to the ones I had with you,
and treat them all as equals. This would strengthen
the family, and I’d be blessed with fortune.
What do you need children for? For me, though,
it’s good if I can use my future children
to benefit my present ones. Is that
bad planning? If you weren’t so irritated
about your bed, you’d never say it was.
But you’re a woman—and you’re all the same!
If everything goes well between the sheets
you think you have it all. But let there be
some setback or disaster in the bedroom
and suddenly you go to war against
the things that you should value most. I mean it—
men should really have some other method
for getting children. The whole female race
should not exist. It’s nothing but a nuisance. 33

CHORUS:
Jason, you’ve composed a lovely speech.
But I must say, though you may disagree:
you have betrayed your wife. You’ve been unjust.

33. Compare Hippolytus 618–24 (680–87 AS). While the ideology of Greek society was patriarchal and in many senses misogynistic, it is interesting that, at least in Athenian tragic drama, men who make such statements wind up destroyed. On the capacity of the “multivocal” form of Greek tragedy to overcome the limitations of its society, see Edith Hall, “The Sociology of Greek Tragedy,” in Easterling (1997), pp. 93–126.
MEDEA: Now, this is where I differ from most people. In my view, someone who is both unjust and has a gift for speaking—such a man incurs the greatest penalty. He uses his tongue to cover up his unjust actions, and this gives him the nerve to stop at nothing no matter how outrageous. Yet he’s not all that wise. Take your case, for example. Spare me this display of cleverness; a single word will pin you to the mat. If you weren’t in the wrong, you would have told me your marriage plans, not kept us in the dark—your loved ones, your own family!

JASON: Yes, of course you would have been all for it! Even now you can’t control your rage against the marriage.

MEDEA: That’s not what you were thinking. You imagined that for an older man, a barbarian wife was lacking in prestige.

JASON: No! Please believe me: It wasn’t for the woman’s sake I married into the king’s family. As I have said, I wanted to save you, and give our children royal brothers, a safeguard for our household.

MEDEA: May I not have a life that’s blessed with fortune so painful, or prosperity so irritating.

JASON: Your prayer could be much wiser: don’t consider what’s useful painful. When you have good fortune, don’t see it as a hardship.

MEDEA: Go ahead— you have somewhere to turn!—commit this outrage. I am deserted, exiled from this land.

JASON: You brought that on yourself. Don’t blame another.

MEDEA: Did I remarry? How did I betray you?

JASON: You blasphemously cursed the royal family.

MEDEA: And I’m a curse to your family as well.

JASON: I won’t discuss this with you any further. If you’d like me to help you and the children with money for your exile, then just say so. I’m prepared to give with an open hand, and make arrangements with my friends to show you hospitality. They’ll treat you well. You’d be an idiot to refuse this offer. You’ll gain a lot by giving up your anger.

MEDEA: I wouldn’t stay with your friends, and I would never accept a thing from you. Don’t even offer. There is no profit in a bad man’s gift.

JASON: All the same, I call the gods to witness: I only want to help you and the children. But you don’t want what’s good; you push away your friends; you’re willful. And you’ll suffer for it.

MEDEA: Get out of here. A craving for your new bride has overcome you—you’ve been away so long.
Go, celebrate your wedding. It may be
(the gods will tell) a marriage you'll regret.

(Exit Jason to the right.)

CHORUS:

[Strophe 1]
Desire, when it comes on too forcefully, never bestows excellence, never makes anyone prestigious.
When she comes with just the right touch, there's no goddess more gracious than Cypris.
Mistress, never release from your golden bow an inescapable arrow, smeared with desire and aimed at my heart.

[Antistrophe 1]
Please, let me be cherished by Wisdom, be loved by Restraint, loveliest gift of the gods. May dreadful Cypris never stun my spirit with love for the bed of another and bring on anger, battles of words, endless fighting, strife.
Let her be shrewd in her judgment; let her revere the bedroom at peace.

[Strophe 2]
O fatherland, O home, never allow me to be without a city:
a grief without recourse, life that's hard to live through, most distressing of all fates.
May I go to my death, my death
before I endure that; I'd rather face my final day. There's no worse heartache than to be cut off from your fatherland.

[Antistrophe 2]
We've seen it for ourselves; nobody else gave me this tale to consider.
No city, no friend will treat you with compassion

in your dreadful suffering.
May he die, the ungracious man who won't honor friends, who will not unlock his mind to clear, calm thoughts of kindness.
I will never call such a man my friend.

(Enter Aegeus from the left.)

AEGEUS:
Medea, I wish all the best to you. There is no finer way to greet a friend.

MEDEA:
All the best to you, Aegeus, son of wise Pandion. Where are you traveling from?

AEGEUS:
I've come from Phoebus' ancient oracle.

MEDEA:
What brought you to the earth's prophetic navel?

AEGEUS:
Seeking how I might beget a child.

MEDEA:
By the gods, are you still childless?

34. Aegeus' is the only entrance from the left in the entire play, which underscores the unexpectedness of his arrival. Aegeus, son of Pandion, is one of the early kings of Athens. He has been visiting the oracle at Delphi in order to learn the cause of his childlessness. A vase painting now in Berlin depicts Aegeus consulting the goddess Themis at Delphi. The son promised at this visit will turn out to be Theseus. In a tragedy that did not survive antiquity, Theseus, Euripides dramatized the story of Theseus' arrival at Athens and the attempt by Medea to kill him because she believed him to be a threat to her position.

35. Apollo's mountainside oracle at Delphi was the most prominent center of prophecy in the Greek world. Sterility was a frequent cause for inquiries by pilgrims there. The "navel" mentioned by Medea is the omphalos, the "navel stone," believed to mark the center of the earth, which was kept on display at Delphi.
AEGEUS:
Still childless. Some god must be to blame.

MEDEA:
Do you have a wife, or do you sleep alone?

AEGEUS:
I'm married, and we share a marriage bed.

MEDEA:
Well, what did Phoebus say concerning children?

AEGEUS:
His words were too profound for human wisdom.

MEDEA:
May I hear the oracle? Is it permitted?

AEGEUS:
Yes, why not? This calls for a wise mind.

MEDEA:
Then tell me, if indeed it is permitted.

AEGEUS:
He said, "Don't loose the wineskin's hanging foot . . ." 36

MEDEA:
Before you do what thing? Or reach what place?

AEGEUS:
Before returning to my paternal hearth.

MEDEA:
And why have you sailed here? What do you need?

AEGEUS:
There is a man named Pittheus, lord of Troezen . . . 37

MEDEA:
Pelops' son. They say he's very pious. 38

AEGEUS:
I want to bring this prophecy to him.

MEDEA:
Yes. He's wise, and well-versed in such things.

AEGEUS:
And most beloved of my war companions.

MEDEA:
Good luck to you. May you get what you desire.

AEGEUS:
But you—your eyes are melting. What's the matter?

MEDEA:
My husband is the very worst of men.

AEGEUS:
What are you saying? Why the low spirits? Tell me.

MEDEA:
Jason treats me unjustly. I've done him no harm.

AEGEUS:
What has he done? Explain to me more clearly.

36. The leg of the animal-skin wine bag was tied up and then loosened as a spigot for dispensing wine. This phallic image lends itself to a prophecy of the appropriate time for successful intercourse.

37. Pittheus, who understands the prophecy, gives his daughter Aethra to Aegeus after getting him drunk. After Theseus is born at Troezen, he is raised by his mother and Pittheus, who later also raises Theseus' son Hippolytus.

38. Pelops was the son of Tantalus, served by his father as a meal to the gods. After his life was restored, he became the heroic founder of the southern peninsula of Greece, which was then named the Peloponnese, "the island of Pelops," after him.
MEDEA:
He has another wife, who takes my place.

AEGEUS:
No. He wouldn't dare. It's much too shameful.

MEDEA:
It's true. His former loved ones are dishonored.

AEGEUS:
Did he desire another? Or tire of you?

MEDEA:
Oh yes, he felt desire. We cannot trust him.

AEGEUS:
Let him go, if he's as bad as you say.

MEDEA:
He desired a royal marriage-bond.

AEGEUS:
Who's giving away the bride? Go on, continue.

MEDEA:
Creon, the ruler of this land of Corinth.

AEGEUS:
Woman, your pain is understandable.

MEDEA:
I am destroyed. And that's not all—I'm exiled.

AEGEUS:
By whom? This is new trouble on top of trouble.

MEDEA:
By Creon. He is driving me from Corinth.

AEGEUS:
And Jason is allowing it? Shame on him.

MEDEA:
He claims to be against it, but he'll manage to endure it somehow.

(Medea again assumes the supplicant position.)

Listen, I entreat you; by your beard and by your knees, I beg you: Have pity on me; pity my misfortune. Don't let me go deserted into exile; receive me in your home and at your hearth. If you do it, may the gods grant your desire for children; may you die a prosperous man. You don't know what a windfall you have found! I'll cure your childlessness, make you a father. I know the drugs required for such things.

AEGEUS:
For many reasons, woman, I am eager to grant this favor to you: first, the gods; and secondly, the children that you promise. I'm at a total loss where that's concerned. But this is how it is. When you arrive, I'll treat you justly, try to shelter you. However, you must know this in advance: I'm not willing to escort you from this land. If you can come to my house on your own, I'll let you stay there—it will be your refuge. I will not give you up to anyone. But you must leave this land all by yourself. My hosts here must have no complaint with me.

MEDEA:
So be it. But if I had some assurance that I could trust you, I'd have all I need.

AEGEUS:
You don't believe me? Tell me, what's the problem?

MEDEA:
Oh, I believe you. But I have enemies:
Creon, and the house of Pelias.

AEGEUS:

Your words show forethought. If you think it's best,
I'll do it without any hesitation.
In fact, this is the safest course for me:

MEDEA:

Swear by the Earth we stand on, and by Helios—
my father's father—and the whole race of gods.

AEGEUS:

To do or not do what? Just say the word.

MEDEA:

Never to expel me from your land yourself,
and never, as long as you live, to give me up
willingly to any enemy.

AEGEUS:

I swear by Earth, by Helios' sacred light,
by all the gods: I'll do just as you say.

MEDEA:

Fine. And if you don't? What would you suffer?

AEGEUS:

Whatever an unholy man deserves.

(Medea rises.)

MEDEA:

Fare well, then, on your voyage. This is good.
I'll find you in your city very soon,
and once I've done my will, and had my way.

(Exit Aegaeus to the left. The Chorus address him
as he leaves.)

CHORUS:

May lord Hermes, the child of Maia, escort you
and bring you back home. May you do as you please,
and have all you want. In my judgment, Aegaeus,
you're a good, noble man.

MEDEA:

O Zeus, and Zeus's Justice, and the light
of Helios, I now shall be the victor
over my enemies. My friends, I've set my foot
upon the path. My enemies will pay
what justice demands—I now have hope of this.
This man, when I was at my lowest point,
appeared, the perfect harbor for my plans.
When I reach Pallas' city, I shall have
a steady place to tie my ship. And now
I'll tell you what my plans are. Hear my words;
they will not bring you pleasure. I will send
a servant to bring Jason here to see me.
When he comes, I'll soothe him with my words:
I'll say that I agree with him, that he
was right to marry into the royal family,
betraying me—well done, and well thought out!
"But let my children stay here!" I will plead—not
that I would leave them in this land
for my enemies to outrage—my own children.
No: this is my deceit, to kill the princess.
I'll send them to her, bearing gifts in hand—a
delicate robe, and a garland worked in gold.

40. Medea refers to Athens here. Pallas is one of Athena's epithets.
If she takes these fine things and puts them on, she, and anyone who touches her, will die a painful death. Such are the drugs with which I will smear them.

But enough of that. Once that’s done, the next thing I must do chokes me with sorrow. I will kill the children—my children. No one on this earth can save them. I’ll ruin Jason’s household, then I’ll leave this land, I’ll flee the slaughter of the children I love so dearly. I will have the nerve for this unholy deed. You see, my friends, I will not let my enemies laugh at me.

Let it go. What do I gain by being alive? I have no fatherland, no home, no place to turn from troubles. The moment I went wrong was when I left my father’s house, persuaded by the words of that Greek man. If the gods will help me, he’ll pay what justice demands. He’ll never see them alive again, the children that I bore him. Nor will he ever father another child: his new bride, evil woman, she must die an evil death, extinguished by my drugs. Let no one think that I’m a simpleton, or weak, or idle—I am the opposite. I treat my friends with kindness, and come down hard on the heads of my enemies. This is the way to live, the way to win a glorious reputation.

CHORUS:
Since you have brought this plan to us, and since I want to help you, and since I support the laws of mankind, I ask you not to do this.

MEDEA:
There is no other way. It’s understandable that you would say this—you’re not the one who’s suffered.

41. Jason has destroyed Medea’s identity as a wife. She now in return cancels her maternity, and as part of this process the shift to the language of the male warrior has begun to accelerate over the course of this speech.

840

CHORUS:
Will you have the nerve to kill your children?

MEDEA:
Yes: to wound my husband the most deeply.

CHORUS:
And to make yourself the most miserable of women.

MEDEA:
Let it go. Let there be no more words until it’s done.

(To her attendant.)

You: go now, and bring Jason. When I need to trust someone, I turn to you. If you’re a woman and mean well to your mistress, do not speak of the things I have resolved.

(Exit the attendant to the right.)

CHORUS:

[Strophe 1]
The children of Erechtheus have always prospered, descended from blessed gods. They graze, in their sacred stronghold, on glorious wisdom, with a delicate step through the clear and brilliant air. They say that there the nine Pierian Muses once gave birth to Harmony with golden hair.

42. Athenians. Erechtheus was a legendary early king of Athens. His temple, the Erechtheum, was one of the two most prominent buildings on the Acropolis.

43. The Muses are the children of Zeus and Mnemosyne. Pieria, an important center of worship to the Muses, was often said to be their birthplace.
They sing that Cypris dipped her pitcher in the waters
of beautiful Cephisus; she sighed, and her breaths were fragrant and temperate breezes.
With a garland of sweet-smelling roses in her hair
she sends Desires
to take their places alongside Wisdom's throne
and nurture excellence with her.

How can this city
of holy rivers,
receiver of friends and loved ones,
receive you—when you've murdered your own children,
most unholy woman—among them?
Just think of this deathblow aimed at the helpless,
think of the slaughter you'll have on your hands.
Oh no, by your knees, we beg you,
we beg you, with every plea
we can plead: do not kill your children.

Where will you find it,
the awful courage?
The terrible nerve—how can you?
How can your hand, your heart, your mind go through with
this slaughter? How will you be able
to look at your children, keep your eyes steady,
see them beseech you, and not fall apart?
Your tears will not let you kill them;
your spirit, your nerve will fail:
you will not soak your hands in their blood.

(Enter Jason from the right.)

I've come because you summoned me. Despite

44. Cephisus is one of the two main rivers in Athens.

the hate between us, I will hear you out.
What is it this time, woman? What do you want?

Jason, I beg you, please forgive the things
I said. Your heart should be prepared, receptive
like a seed bed. We used to love each other.
It's only right for you to excuse my anger.
I've thought it over, and I blame myself.
Pathetic! Really, I must have been insane
to stand opposed to those who plan so well,
to be an enemy to those in power
and to my husband, who's done so well by me:
marrying the royal princess, to beget
brothers for my children. Isn't it time
to drop my angry spirit, since the gods
have been so bountiful? What's wrong with me?
Don't I have children? Aren't we exiles? Don't we
need whatever friendship we can get?
That's what I said to myself. I realize
that I've been foolish, that there is no point
to all my fuming rage. I give you credit
for wise restraint, for making this connection,
this marriage that's in all our interests. Now
I understand that you deserve my praise.
I was such a moron. I should have supported
your plans, I should have made arrangements with you,
I should have stood beside the bridal bed,
rejoiced in taking care of your new bride,
We women—oh, I won't say that we're bad,
but we are what we are. You shouldn't sink
down to our level, trading childish insults.
I ask for your indulgence. I admit
I wasn't thinking straight, but now my plans
are much improved where these things are concerned.

(Medea turns toward the house to call the children.)

Oh, children! Come out of the house, come here,
come out and greet your father, speak to him.
Come set aside, together with your mother,
the hatred that we felt toward one we love.

(The children come out from the house, escorted
by the Tutor and attendants.)

We've made a treaty. My rage has gone away.
Take his right hand.

920 Oh, god, my mind is filled
with bad things, hidden things. Oh, children, look—
your lovely arms, the way you stretch them out.
Will you look this way your whole long lives?
I think I'm going to cry. I'm filled with fear.

925 After all this time, I'm making up
my quarrel with your father. This tender sight
is washed with tears; my eyes are overflowing.

CHORUS:
In my eyes too fresh tears are welling up.
May this evil not go any further.

JASON:
Woman, I approve your new approach—
not that I blame you for the way you felt.
It's only right for a female to get angry
if her husband smuggles in another wife.
But this new change of heart is for the best.

930 After all this time, you've recognized
the winning plan. You're showing wise restraint.
And as for you, my children, you will see
your father is no fool. I have provided
for your security, if the gods will help me.

935 Yes, I believe that you will be the leaders
here in Corinth, with your future brothers.
Grow up strong and healthy. All the rest
your father, with the favor of the gods,
will take care of. I pray that I may see you
grown up and thriving, holding sway above
my enemies.

(Jason turns to Medea.)

922-943 MEDEA

[922-943]

You! Why have you turned
your face away, so pale? Why are fresh tears
pouring from your eyes? Why aren't you happy
to hear what I have had to say?

MEDEA:
It's nothing.
I was only thinking of the children.

JASON:
Don't worry now. I'll take good care of them.

MEDEA:
I'll do as you ask. I'll trust in what you say.
I'm female, that's all. Tears are in my nature.

JASON:
So—why go on? Why moan over the children?

MEDEA:
They're mine. And when you prayed that they would live,
pity crept over me. I wondered: would they?
As for the things you came here to discuss,
we've covered one. I'll move on to the next.
Since the royal family has seen fit
to exile me (and yes, I realize
it's for the best—I wouldn't want to stay
to inconvenience you, or this land's rulers,
who see me as an enemy of the family),
I will leave this land, go into exile,
but you must raise your children with your own hand:
ask Creon that they be exempt from exile.

JASON:
Though I may not persuade him, I must try.

MEDEA:
And ask your wife to ask her father: please
let the children be exempt from exile.
JASON:
Certainly. I think I will persuade her.

MEDEA:
No doubt, if she’s a woman like all others.
And for this work, I’ll lend you my support.
I’ll send her gifts, much lovelier, I know,
than any living person has laid eyes on:
a delicate robe, and a garland worked in gold. 45
The children will bear them. Now, this very minute,
let one of the servants bring these fine things here.

(An attendant goes into the house to carry out this request. She, or another servant, returns with the finery.)

She will be blessed a thousandfold with fortune:
with you, an excellent man to share her bed,
and these possessions, these fine things that once
my father’s father, Helios, passed down
to his descendants. Take these wedding gifts
in your arms, my children; go and give them
to the lucky bride, the royal princess.
These are gifts that no one could find fault with.

(The attendant puts the gifts in the children’s arms.)

JASON:
You fool! Why let these things out of your hands?
Do you think the royal household needs more robes,
more gold? Hold onto these. Don’t give them up.
If my wife thinks anything of me,
I’m sure that I mean more to her than wealth.

45. Gold here evokes the Golden Fleece. Medea would destroy her rival
with a token that reminds all of how Jason first won Medea. Spinning and
weaving were, moreover, the activities of the good wife, and Medea here,
like Clytemnestra, uses fabric as the lethal symbol of the dissolution of her
marriage. In Aeschylus’ Oresteia (Agamennon 905–57), Clytemnestra
spreads out a rich tapestry before Agamemnon and convinces him to walk
on it. She thus proves, among other things, his arrogance.

[Strophe 1]
Now I no longer have hope that the children will live,
no longer. They walk to the slaughter already.
The bride will receive the crown of gold;
she’ll receive her horrible ruin.
Upon her golden hair, with her very own hands,
she’ll place the fine circlet of Hades.

[Antistrophe 1]
She’ll be persuaded; the grace and the heavenly gleam
will move her to try on the robe and the garland.
The bride will adorn herself for death,
for the shades below. She will fall
into this net; her death will be horrible. Ruin
will be inescapable, fated.

[Strophe 2]
And you, poor thing, bitter bridegroom, in-law to royalty:
you don’t know you’re killing your children,
bringing hateful death to your bride.
How horrible: how unaware you are of your fate.
[Antistrophe 2]

1020 I cry for your pain in turn, poor thing; you’re a mother, yet you will slaughter them, your own children, for the sake of your bridal bed, the bed that your husband now shares with somebody else.

(The Tutor returns, at the right, from the palace with the children.)

TUTOR: Mistress, your children are released from exile. The princess happily received the gifts with her own hands. As far as she’s concerned, the children’s case is settled; they’re at peace.

Ah!
Why are you upset by your good fortune?26

' MEDEA: Oh, god.

TUTOR: Your cry is out of tune. This is good news!

' MEDEA: Oh god, oh god.

TUTOR: Have I made some mistake? Is what I’ve said bad news, and I don’t know it?

MEDEA: You’ve said what you have said. I don’t blame you.

TUTOR: So—why are you crying? Why are your eyes cast down?

MEDEA: Old man, I am compelled. The gods and I46 devised this strategy. What was I thinking?

46. Medea here begins to speak of herself as doing the work of the gods. The ending of the drama suggests that the gods are in agreement.

1040 MEDEA: I’ll do as you ask. Now, go inside the house and see to the children’s needs, as usual.

(Exit Tutor into the house.)

Oh, children, children, you two have a city and home, in which you’ll live forever parted from your mother. You’ll leave poor me behind. I’ll travel to another land, an exile, before I ever have the joy of seeing you blessed with fortune—before your wedding days, before I prepare your beds and hold the torches.47 My willfulness has cost me all this grief. I raised you, children, but it was no use; no use, the way I toiled, how much it hurt, the pain of childbirth, piercing like a thorn. And I had so much hope when you were born: you’d tend to my old age, and when I died, you’d wrap me in my shroud with your own hands: an admirable fate for anyone. That sweet thought has now been crushed. I’ll be parted from both of you, and I will spend my years in sorrow and in pain. Your eyes no longer will look upon your mother. You’ll move on to a different life.

Oh god, your eyes, the way

47. The main event of the Greek wedding ceremony was a nocturnal procession from the house of the bride’s family to the groom’s. The groom’s mother would greet them bearing a torch.
you look at me. Why do you smile, my children, your very last smile? Aah, what will I do? The heart goes out of me, women, when I look at my children's shining eyes. I couldn't do this. Farewell to the plans I had before. I'll take my children with me when I leave. Why should I, just to cause their father pain, feel twice the pain myself by harming them? I will not do it. Farewell to my plans. But wait—what's wrong with me? What do I want? To allow my enemies to laugh at me? To let them go unpunished? What I need is the nerve to do it. I was such a weakling, to let a soothing word enter my mind. Children, go inside the house.

(The children start to go toward the house, but, as Medea continues to speak, they continue to watch and listen to her, delaying their entry inside.)

Whoever is not permitted to attend these rites, my sacrifice, let that be his concern. I won't hold back the force that's in my hand. Aah!

Oh no, my spirit, please, not that! Don't do it. Spare the children. Leave them alone, poor thing. They'll live with me there. They will bring you joy.

By the avenging ones 48 who live below in Hades, no, I will not leave my children 49 at the mercy of my enemies' outrage. xii Anyway, the thing's already done. She won't escape. The crown is on her head.

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48. The Furies, the primordial spirits of vengeance. See the note at line 1289 below.
49. Medea assumes here that Creon's family will kill her children as would be required by the laws of vengeance. Jason's first words at his final arrival indicate that she is correct here.
But those who have children, a household's sweet offshoot—
I see them consumed their whole lives with concern.

They fret from the start: are they raising them well?
And then: will they manage to leave them enough?
Then finally: all of this toil and heartache,
is it for children who'll turn out to be
worthless or decent? That much is unclear.

There's one final grief that I'll mention. Supposing
your children have grown up with plenty to live on,
they're healthy, they're decent—if fortune decrees it,
Death comes and spirits their bodies away
down to the Underworld. What is the point, then,
if the gods, adding on to the pains that we mortals
endure for the sake of our children, send death,
most distressing of all? Tell me, where does that leave us?

**MEDEA:**
My friends, I have been waiting for some time,
keeping watch to see where this will lead.

**MESSENGER:**
Medea, run away! Take any ship or wagon that will carry you. Leave now!

**MEDEA:**
Why should I flee? What makes it necessary?

**MESSENGER:**
The royal princess and her father Creon
have just now died—the victims of your poison.

50. The speech by a messenger late in a drama was a convention in Greek tragedy. Such narratives allowed the dramatist to depict spectacular deaths that could not be staged and to include alternative spaces that could not be accommodated within the Greek theater.

51. Medea's earlier fears about the welfare of her children under a stepmother are confirmed by the new wife's behavior.
to everything the man said. They had barely
set foot outside the door—your children and
their father—when she took the intricate
embroidered robe and wrapped it round her body,
and set the golden crown upon her curls,
and smiled at her bright image—her lifeless double—
in a mirror, as she arranged her hair.
She rose, and with a delicate step her lovely
white feet traversed the quarters. She rejoiced
beyond all measure in the gifts. Quite often
she extended her ankle, admiring the effect.

What happened next was terrible to see.
Her skin changed color, and her legs were shaking;
she reeled sideways, and she would have fallen
straight to the ground if she hadn't collapsed in her chair.
Then one of her servants, an old woman,
thinking that the girl must be possessed
by Pan52 or by some other god, cried out—
a shriek of awe and reverence—but when
she saw the white foam at her mouth, her eyes
popping out, the blood drained from her face,
she changed her cry to one of bitter mourning.
A maid ran off to get the princess’ father;
another went to tell the bride's new husband
of her disaster. Everywhere the sound
of running footsteps echoed through the house.
And then, in less time than it takes a sprinter
to cover one leg of a stadium race,
the girl, whose eyes had been shut tight, awoke,
poor thing, and she let out a terrible groan,
for she was being assaulted on two fronts:
the golden garland resting on her head
sent forth a marvelous stream of all-consuming
fire, and the delicate robe, the gift
your children brought, was starting to corrode

52. Pan, half man and half goat, was primarily a pastoral god but also
had associations with violent divine possession and was believed to intervene in battles, causing a terror in enemies that acquired the name “panic.” See also Hippolytus 142 (158 AS).
I wouldn’t hesitate to say that those
who seem so wise, who deal in subtleties—
they earn the prize for being the greatest fools.
For really, there is no man blessed with fortune.
One man might be luckier, more prosperous
than someone else, but no man’s ever blessed.

(Exit the Messenger to the right.)

CHORUS:

1250 On this day fortune has bestowed on Jason
much grief, it seems, as justice has demanded.
Poor thing, we pity you; for this disaster,
daughter of Creon, you who have descended
to Hades’ halls because of your marriage to Jason.

MEDEA:

1260 My friends, it is decided; as soon as possible
I must kill my children and leave this land
before I give my enemies a chance
to slaughter them with a hand that’s moved by hatred.
They must die anyway, and since they must,

1265 I will kill them. I’m the one who bore them.

Arm yourself, my heart. Why am I waiting
to do this terrible, necessary crime?

Unhappy hand, act now. Take up the sword,
just take it; approach the starting post of pain
to last a lifetime; do not weaken, don’t
remember that you love your children dearly,
that you gave them life. For one short day
forget your children. Afterward, you’ll grieve.

For even if you kill them, they were yours;
you loved them. I’m a woman cursed by fortune.

(Medea enters the house.)

[Strophe 1]

O Earth, O radiant beam
of Helios, look down and see her—
this woman, destroyer, before she can lay
her hand stained with blood,
her kin-killing hand
upon her own children
descended from you.
the gods’ golden race;
for such blood to spill
at the hands of a mortal
fills us with fear.
Light born from Zeus,
stop her, remove
this bloodstained Eriny,54
take her away
from this house cursed with vengeance.

[Antistrophe 1]

Your toil has all been in vain,
in vain, all the heartache of raising
your children, your dearest, O sorrowful one
who once left behind
the dark Clashing Rocks
most hostile to strangers.
What burden of rage
descended upon
your mind? Why does wild
slaughter follow on slaughter?
Blood-spatter, stain,
slaughter of kin,
murder within
the family brings grief

53. Medea has been onstage since her first entrance; she has remained
through all of the negotiations, meetings, supplications, and choral odes.
She finally leaves to commit the horrific murders of her children, and the
impact of her departure is intensified by its long delay.

54. Eriny was a Fury, one of the primordial beings born from the castra-
tion of the first king of the gods, Ouranos (Sky). The Furies were believed
to punish those who spill kindred blood; hence, in Aeschylus’ Oresteia,
they pursue Orestes after he kills his mother, Clytemnestra.
tuned to the crime
from the gods to the household.

CHILD:

(From within the house.)

Oh no!

CHORUS:

[Strophe 2]

Do you hear the shouts, the shouts of her children?
Poor woman: she's cursed, undone by her fortune.

CHILD 1:

Oh, how can I escape my mother's hand?

CHILD 2:

Dear brother, I don't know. We are destroyed.

CHORUS:

Shall I go inside?
I ought to prevent this,
the slaughter of children.

CHILD 1:

Yes, come and stop her! That is what we need.

CHILD 2:

We're trapped; we're caught! The sword is at our throats.

CHORUS:

Poor thing: after all
you were rock, you were iron:
to reap with your own hand
the crop that you bore;
to cut down your kin
with a fate-dealing hand.

55. Both of the actors are offstage and thus their voices are available to take the parts of the boys.

56. Ino was one of the daughters of Cadmus who participated in the dismemberment of Pentheus while under the spell of Dionysus. She then became the second wife of King Athamas of Iolcus and almost had his sons by his first wife killed (the "evil stepmother" motif again). Hera drove Ino and Athamas mad so that Athamas killed one of the sons Ino had borne to him and Ino leapt into the sea with the other. The Chorus here elide other myths of Greek mothers who kill their children, including Agave (Ino's sister and Pentheus' mother), Althaea (the mother of the Calydonian hero Meleager), and Procris (see the note at line 232 above). Perhaps this elision is meant to stress the supreme horror of the deed by imagining that only one other could perform it.
then simply flee this house, with no requital?
I'm worried about the children more than her—
the ones she's hurt will pay her back in kind.
I've come to save my children, save their lives.
The family might retaliate, might strike
the children for their mother's unholy slaughter.

CHORUS:
Poor man. Jason, if you realized
how bad it was, you wouldn't have said that.

JASON:
What is it? Does she want to kill me now?

CHORUS:
Your children are dead, killed by their mother's hand.

JASON:
What are you saying, women? You have destroyed me.

CHORUS:
Please understand: your children no longer exist.

JASON:
Where did she kill them? Inside the house, or outside?

CHORUS:
Open the gates; you'll see your children's slaughter.

JASON:
Servants, quick, open the door, unbar it;
undo the bolts, and let me see this double
evil: their dead bodies, and the one
whom I will bring to justice.

(Medea appears above the roof in a flying chariot,
with the bodies of the children.)

MEDEA:
Why are you trying
to pry those gates? Is it their corpses you seek,
and me, the perpetrator? Stop your struggle.
If you need something, ask me. Speak your mind.
But you will never touch us with your hand.
My father's father, Helios, gives me safety
from hostile hands. This chariot protects me.

JASON:
You hateful thing, O woman most detested
by the gods, by me, by all mankind—
you dared to strike your children with a sword,
children you bore yourself. You have destroyed me,
left me childless. And yet you live, you look
upon the sun and earth, you who had the nerve
to do this most unholy deed. I wish
you would die. I have more sense now than I had
the day I took you from your barbarian land
and brought you to a Greek home—you're a plague,
betrayed of your father and the land
that raised you. But the gods have sent the vengeance
that you deserve to crash down on my head.
You killed your brother right at home, then climbed
aboard the Argo with its lovely prow.
That's how your career began. You married
me, and bore me children. For the sake
of passion, of your bed, you have destroyed them.
No Greek woman—would have had the nerve
to do this, but I married you instead:

usually to solve crises, tie up loose ends, or denounce humans; we use the
Latin translation of this phenomenon, deus ex machina, to designate such interventions. Euripides was criticized by Aristotle for his reliance on this
device, which he also deploys in, among other plays, Electra, Ion, Iphigenia
among the Taurians, and the Bacchae. Medea's violent denunciation of
Jason anticipates the similar language of Dionysus toward the Theban
royal family at the end of the Bacchae.

58. As the Chorus have mentioned (1323-31), there is at least one earlier
story of a Greek woman guilty of filicide—and Euripides' audience would
have known of others.
a hateful bond. You ruined me. You’re not
a woman; you’re a lion, with a nature
more wild than Scylla’s, the Etruscan freak.59
I couldn’t wound you with ten thousand insults;
there’s nothing you can’t take. Get out of here,
you filth, you child-murderer. For me,
all that’s left is tears for my misfortune.
I’ll never have the joy of my bride’s bed,
nor will I ever again speak to my children,
my children, whom I raised. And now I’ve lost them.xx

MEDEA:
I would have made a long speech in reply
to yours, if father Zeus were unaware
of what I’ve done for you, and how you’ve acted.
You dishonored my bed. There was no way
you could go on to lead a pleasant life,
to laugh at me—not you, and not the princess;
nor could Creon, who arranged your marriage,
exile me and walk away unpunished.
So go ahead, call me a lion, call me
a Scylla, skulking in her Etruscan cave.
I’ve done what I had to do. I’ve jabbed your heart.

JASON:
You feel the pain yourself. This hurts you, too.

MEDEA:
The pain is good, as long as you’re not laughing.

JASON:
O children, you were cursed with an evil mother.

MEDEA:
O sons, you were destroyed by your father’s sickness.

JASON:
My right hand is not the one that killed them.

MEDEA:
Your outrage, and your newfound bride, destroyed them.

JASON:
The bedroom was enough to make you kill?

MEDEA:
Does that pain mean so little to a woman?

JASON:
Yes,
to one with wise restraint. To you, it’s everything.

MEDEA:
They exist no longer. That will sting you.

JASON:
They exist. They live to avenge your crime.

MEDEA:
The gods know who was first to cause this pain.

JASON:
Oh yes. They know your mind. They spit on it.

MEDEA:
Go on and hate me. I detest your voice.

JASON:
I feel the same. That makes it easy to leave you.

MEDEA:
What shall I do, then? I’d like nothing better.

JASON:
Let me bury their bodies. Let me grieve.
MEDEA:
For get it. I will take them away myself
and bury them with this hand, in the precinct
sacred to Hera of the rocky heights.

No enemy will treat their graves with outrage.
To this land of Sisyphus I bequeath
a holy festival, a ritual
to expiate in times to come this most
unholy slaughter. I myself will go
to live together with Pandion’s son
Aegeus, in Erechtheus’s city.
And you, an evil man, as you deserve,
will die an evil death, struck on the head
by a fragment of the Argo. You will see
how bitter was the outcome of my marriage.

(Here the meter changes from spoken dialogue to
chanted anapests.)

JASON:
May you be destroyed by the children’s Erinys
and bloodthirsty Justice!

MEDEA:
What spirit, what god
listens to you, you liar, you breaker
of oaths, you deceiver of guests?

[1393–1404]

MEDEA

JASON: You are loathsome.
You murdered your children.

MEDEA: Get out of here, go—
go bury your wife.

JASON: I’m leaving, bereft
of my sons.

MEDEA: Do you think that you’re mourning them now?
Just wait till you’re old.

JASON: Oh, dearest children.

MEDEA: To me, not to you.

JASON: And yet you still did this?

MEDEA: To make you feel pain.

JASON: I wish I could hold them and kiss them, my children.

MEDEA: You long for them now and you want to embrace them,
but you are the one who pushed them away.

JASON: By the gods, let me touch the soft skin of my children.

MEDEA: No. What’s the point? You are wasting your words.
JASON:
Zeus, do you hear how I'm driven away,
do you see what I suffer at her loathsome hands,
this lion, this child-killer!

With all my strength
I mourn for them now and I call on the gods
and spirits to witness that you killed my children
and now won't allow me to touch them or bury them.
I wish now that I'd never fathered them, only
to see them extinguished, to see what you've done.

(Exit Jason to the right, accompanied by the Chorus.)

CHORUS:
Zeus on Olympus enforces all things;
the gods can accomplish what no one would hope for.
What we expect may not happen at all,
while the gods find a way, against all expectation,
to do what they want, however surprising.
And that is exactly how this case turned out.

Endnotes and Comments on the Text

In the notes below I have translated, for the sake of completeness, lines that appear in the manuscripts of Euripides but are not considered genuine by modern editors, who mark such lines as probable interpolations by putting them in square brackets. Additions to the text after Euripides’ lifetime may have been made by actors (Euripides’ plays were performed often in the centuries following his death) or by scribes copying the texts; the earliest manuscripts we have of Euripides’ plays are from the Middle Ages and reflect many stages of copying and recopying. An actor might insert a line or passage from another play to please the audience; similarly, a scribe might copy a “parallel passage” into the margin of his text, which a later copyist might insert into the text itself. On the history of the texts, see Page (1971), pp. xxxvii–lxxvii and Csapo and Slater (1995), pp. 1–38.

I have also noted lines that I have kept in the text in spite of editors’ objections (it seems to me not impossible that Euripides himself would repeat a line or phrase), and pointed out some patterns of language in the Greek (see notes ix, xv, and xvi).

—DAS

i. I have omitted the following line (41 in the Greek text): “creeping silently into their bedroom.” See Willink (1988) for the deletion of this line and a defense of the surrounding lines. Compare line 387 (379 in the Greek) and note vii below.

ii. The following line (87 in the Greek text) was condemned by ancient commentators, and modern editors continue to reject it as intrusive:

Some with good reason, some for the sake of gain.

iii. I retain this line, 246 in the Greek (reading Porson’s hēlikas to solve the metrical problem), though most editors, following Wilamowitz, reject it as an interpolation. See Podlecki (1989) and Mastronarde (2002), ad loc.

iv. I omit the following line, 262 in the Greek:

the daughter whom he married, and her father.

Most editors follow Lenting (1820) in deleting this as an interpolation based on line 288 (295 AS). The Greek is unidiomatic, and the line is distracting and ineffective.