

EURIPIDES
MEDEA

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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In the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text (available at Perseus), and the numbers without brackets refer to the English text. Partial lines are normally included with an adjacent partial line in the reckoning. The stage directions and footnotes have been provided by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of words ending in *-s* are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding *'s* (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus's*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound *-iz*). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Pelias* and *Pelias'* are both three-syllable words; whereas, *Pelias's* has four syllables).

BACKGROUND NOTE

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

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

To complete these tasks Jason enlisted the help of Medea, daughter of king Aeetes. She fell in love with Jason and used her magic to help him complete the tasks set by Aeetes and to steal the Golden Fleece. She then escaped with Jason, killing her brother in order to scatter his body on the sea, so that Aeetes would have to hold up his pursuit of Jason and Medea. Jason and Medea returned to Iolcus, where Medea's magic restored Jason's father, Aeson, to youthful health. Medea also tricked the daughters of king Pelias into killing their father by giving them ineffective medications and persuading them to try a course of treatment which was fatal.

Because of their culpability in the death of Pelias, Jason and Medea were forced to leave Iolchus. They moved to Corinth, where, after a few years, Jason decided to leave Medea and marry the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. The story of the play begins immediately after Jason's marriage to his new bride

EURIPIDES
MEDEA

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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

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

MEDEA

NURSE

O how I wish that ship the Argo
had never sailed off to the land of Colchis,
past the Symplegades, those dark dancing rocks
which smash boats sailing through the Hellespont.¹
I wish they'd never chopped the pine trees down
in those mountain forests up on Pelion,
to make oars for the hands of those great men
who set off, on Pelias's orders,
to fetch the golden fleece. Then my mistress,
Medea, never would have sailed away 10
to the towers in the land of Iolcus,
her heart passionately in love with Jason.
She'd never have convinced those women,
Pelias' daughters, to kill their father.
and she'd not have come to live in Corinth [10]
with her husband and her children—well loved
in exile by those whose land she'd moved to.
She gave all sorts of help to Jason.
That's when life is most secure and safe,
when woman and her husband stand as one. 20
But that marriage changed. Now they're enemies.
Their fine love's grown sick, diseased, for Jason,
leaving his own children and my mistress,
is lying on a royal wedding bed.
He's married the daughter of king Creon,
who rules this country. As for Medea,
that poor lady, in her disgrace, cries out, [20]
repeating his oaths, recalling the great trust
in that right hand with which he pledged his love.
She keeps calling to the gods to witness 30
how Jason is repaying her favours.
She just lies there. She won't eat—her body
she surrenders to the pain, wasting away,
always in tears, ever since she found out
how her husband has dishonoured her.
She's not lifted her eyes up from the ground,
or raised her head. She listens to advice,

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

MEDEA

even from friends, as if she were a stone,
or the ocean swell, except now and then
she twists that white neck of hers and weeps, 40 [30]
crying to herself for her dear father, her home,
her own land, all those things she left behind,
to come here with the man who now discards her.
Her suffering has taught her the advantages
of not being cut off from one's homeland.
Now she hates her children. When she sees them,
there is no joy in her. And I'm afraid
she may be up to some new mischief.
Her mind thinks in extremes. I know her well.
She'll not put up with being treated badly. 50
I worry she may pick up a sharp sword
and stab her stomach, or else she'll go [40]
into the house, in silence, to that bed,
and kill the king and bridegroom Jason.
Then she'll face an even worse disaster.
She's a dangerous woman. It won't be easy
for any man who picks a fight with her
to think she's beaten and he's triumphed.

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

Here come her children. They've finished playing.
They've no notion of their mother's troubles. 60
Young minds don't like to dwell on pain.

TUTOR

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

NURSE

Old servant of Jason's children,
when a master's lot falls out badly,
that's bad for faithful servants, too—
it affects their hearts as well. My sorrow 70
was so great, I wanted to come here,

MEDEA

to speak to earth and heaven, to tell them
about the wrongs inflicted on my mistress.

TUTOR

Unhappy lady! Has she stopped weeping yet?

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

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

TUTOR

Nothing. I'm sorry I said anything.

NURSE

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

TUTOR

Well, I was passing by those benches
where the old men gamble by Peirene,
at the holy spring, and I heard someone say
(I was pretending I wasn't listening)
that Creon, king of this country, intends
to ship the children away from Corinth, [70]
with their mother, too. I've no idea
if the story's true or not. I hope it's not. 90

NURSE

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

MEDEA

MEDEA [*crying from inside the house*]

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

NURSE

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

[*The Tutor and children enter the house.*]

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

MEDEA [*from inside the house*]

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

NURSE

O the sorrow of it all. Poor woman! 140
Why link your children with the nasty things
their father's done? Why do you hate them so?
I'm terrified the children will be hurt.
The pride of rulers is something to fear—
they often order men, but seldom listen, [120]
and when their tempers change it's hard to bear.
It's better to get used to living life
as an equal common person. Anyway,
I don't want a grand life for myself—
just to grow old with some security. 150
They say a moderate life's the best of all,

MEDEA

a far better choice for mortal men.
Going for too much brings no benefits.
And when the gods get angry with some home,
the more wealth it has, the more it is destroyed. [130]

[Enter the Chorus of Corinthian women.]

CHORUS LEADER

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

NURSE

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

MEDEA *[still from inside the house]*

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

CHORUS

O Zeus and Earth and Sun—
do you hear how this young wife
sings out her misery? [150]
Thoughtless lady,
why long for death's marriage bed
which human beings all shun?
Death comes soon enough
and brings an end to everything.
You should not pray for it. 180
And if your husband
devotes himself to some new bed,

MEDEA

why get angry over that?
Zeus will plead for you in this.
Don't waste your life away,
with too much wailing for your husband.

MEDEA [*within*]

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

NURSE

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

CHORUS LEADER

I wish she'd let us see her face to face
and listen to what we have to tell her.
That might calm down her savage temper,
the fury in her heart. I'd like the chance
to show good will to a lady whom I like.
Go now—bring her here outside the house. [180]
Tell her she'll be among some friends of hers.
And hurry, before she harms someone in there—
that power in her grief will make her act. 210

NURSE

All right, though I'm afraid I won't persuade
my mistress. Still, as a favour to you,
I'll see what I can do. Right now she glares
at servants when they come close to her
to tell her something. She's just like a bull,

MEDEA

or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks.
Those men from long ago—you'd not be wrong [190]
to call them fools without much wisdom.
They thought up songs for celebrations,
feasts and banquets, bringing to human life 220
delightful music. But they found nothing
in music or the lyre's many strings
to end the bitterness of human life,
the pain in living, sorrows bringing on
deaths and horrifying calamities
that destroy whole families. What a blessing
it would be for human beings if music
could cure these sorrows. When people feast, [200]
why should people sing? It's a waste of time.
People who eat well are happy anyway— 230
they've enjoyed the pleasure of the meal.

[Nurse exits into the house.]

CHORUS

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

[Enter Medea with the Nurse.]

MEDEA

Women of Corinth, I have come out here,
outside the house, so you won't think ill of me.
Many men, I know, become too arrogant,
both in the public eye and in their homes.
Others get a reputation for indifference,
because they stay at ease within the house.

MEDEA

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

MEDEA

three times in battle holding up my shield
than give birth once. But your story and mine
are not the same. For you have a city,
you have your father's house, enjoy your life
with friends for company. But I'm alone.
I have no city, and I'm being abused
by my own husband. I was carried off,
a trophy from a barbarian land.
I have no mother, brother, or relation
to shelter with in this extremity.
And so I want to ask something from you.
If I find some way to punish Jason
for these injustices—his bride, as well,
and her father—say nothing. In other things
a woman may be timid—in watching battles
or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,
her marriage violated, there's no heart
more desperate for blood than hers.

CHORUS LEADER

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

[Enter Creon, with armed attendants.]

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

MEDEA

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

[280]

CREON

I am afraid of you.

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

330

[290]

MEDEA

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

340

350

[300]

MEDEA

I'm not that clever, but still you fear me.
Have I hurt you at all, made you suffer?
Don't fear me, Creon. It's not in me
to commit crimes against the men in charge. 360
Besides, in what way have you injured me?
You have married your daughter to a man,
one your heart selected. My husband's [310]
the one I hate. In my view, you've acted
in this business with good sense. So now,
I'll not begrudge you your prosperity.
Have your marriage, and good luck to you.
But let me remain here, in this country.
Although I've suffered an injustice,
I'll obey the rulers and stay silent. 370

CREON

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

MEDEA [*kneeling in front of Creon*]

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

MEDEA

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

Alas, 390
love's a miserable thing for mortal men. [330]

CREON

I think events determine if that's true.

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

[Medea seizes Creon's hand.]

MEDEA

CREON

Woman, it seems you're trying to provoke me. 400

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

[Exit Creon with his attendants.]

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

MEDEA

Things have worked out badly in every way.
Who can deny the fact? But nonetheless,
you should not assume that's how things will stay. 430
The newly wedded pair still face some struggles,
and the man who made this marriage happen
might have serious problems yet. Do you think
I'd prostrate myself before a man like that,
if there was no advantage to be gained?
If I did not have some plan in mind,
I'd not have talked to him or grabbed his hand. [370]
But the man's become completely foolish—
when he had the power to prevent me
from planning anything, by sending me 440
out of his land, he let me stay one day,
a day when I'll turn three of my enemies
to corpses—father, daughter, and my husband.
Now, I can slaughter them in many ways.
I'm not sure which one to try out first.
Perhaps I should set the bridal suite on fire
or sneak into the house in silence,
right up to their marriage bed, and plunge [380]
some sharpened steel right through their guts.
There's just one problem. If I get caught 450
entering their house meaning to destroy it,
I'll be killed, and my enemies will laugh.
No. The best method is the most direct,
the one at which I have a special skill—
I'll murder them with poison. Yes, that's it.
But once they're dead, what city will receive me?
Who will give me safe shelter as a guest,
and offer me physical protection?
There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while.
If someone shows up who can shield me, 460 [390]
I'll set my scheme in motion and kill them
without saying a word. But if events
force me to act openly, I'll use a sword.
Even though it will bring about my death,
I'll push my daring to the very limit
and slaughter them. By Hecate, goddess
I worship more than all the others,

MEDEA

the one I choose to help me in this work,
who lives with me deep inside my home,
these people won't bring pain into my heart
and laugh about it. This wedding of theirs, 470
I'll make it hateful for them, a disaster—
Creon's marriage ties, my exile from here, [400]
he'll find those bitter. So come, Medea,
call on all those things you know so well,
as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,
this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.
You know what you now have to deal with.
You must not let Jason's marriage make you
a laughing stock among Corinthians, 480
compatriots of Sisyphus, for you
trace your family from a noble father
and from Helios, the sun.¹ So get to work.
Besides, we possess a woman's nature—
powerless to perform fine noble deeds,
but very skilled in every form of evil.

CHORUS [*chanting*]

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

Those songs by ancient poets
will stop chanting of our faithlessness.
Phoebus, god of song and singing,
never put into our minds the gift
of making sacred music with the lyre, 500
or else I would have sung a song

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

MEDEA

in response to what the male sex sings.
For our lengthy past has much to say
about men's lives as well as ours.

[430]

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

510

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

[440]

520

[Enter Jason.]

JASON

Right now is not the first time I've observed
how a harsh temper can make all things worse—
impossibly so. It's happened often.
You could have stayed here in this land and house,
if only you'd agreed to the arrangements
and showed some patience with those in command.
Now you're exiled for your stupid chatter.
Not that I care. You don't have to stop
calling Jason the worst man in the world,
but when you speak against the ruler here,
consider yourself very fortunate
that exile is your only punishment.
I've always tried to mollify the king—
he has a vicious temper—and have you stay.

530

[450]

MEDEA

But you just would not stop this silly rage,
always slandering the royal house.
That's why you have got to leave the country. 540
Anyway, I won't neglect my family.
I've come here, woman, looking out for you, [460]
so you won't be thrown out with the children
in total need and lacking everything.
Exile brings with it all sorts of hardships.
Although you may well despise me now,
I could never have bad feelings for you.

MEDEA

As a man you're the worst there is—that's all
I'll say about you, no trace of manhood.
You come to me now, you come at this point, 550
when you've turned into the worst enemy
of the gods and me and the whole human race?
It isn't courage or firm resolution
to hurt your family and then confront them, [470]
face to face, but a total lack of shame,
the greatest of all human sicknesses.
But you did well to come, for I will speak.
I'll unload my heart, describe your evil.
You listen. I hope you're hurt by what I say.
I'll begin my story at the very start. 560
I saved your life—every Greek who sailed with you
on board that ship the Argo can confirm it—
when you'd been sent to bring under the yoke
the fire-breathing bulls and then to sow
the fields of death. And I killed the dragon
guarding the Golden Fleece, coiled up there, [480]
staying on watch and never going to sleep.
For you I raised the light which rescued you
from death. I left my father and my home,
on my own, and came with you to Iolcus, 570
beneath Mount Pelion. My love for you
was greater than my wisdom. Then I killed
Pelias in the most agonizing way,
at the hands of his own daughters,
and demolished his household, all of it.
Now, after I've done all this to help you,

MEDEA

you brute, you betray me and help yourself
to some new wife. And we have children!
If you'd had no children, I'd understand [490]
why you're so keen on marrying this girl. 580
And what about the promises you made?
I don't know if you think the ancient gods
still govern or if new regulations
have recently been put in place for men,
but you must know you've broken faith with me.
By this right hand, which you have often held,
and by my knees, at which you've often begged,
it was all for nothing to be touched like that,
by such a worthless man. I've lost all hope.
But come now. I'll sort things out with you, 590
as if you were a friend. I've no idea
what sort of kindness to expect from you. [500]
But let us see. The things I'll ask about
will make you look even more disgraceful.
Where do I now turn? To my father's house?
For your sake I betrayed my country,
to come here with you. Then should I go
to Pelias' daughters in their misery?
They'd surely welcome me with open arms,
since I killed their father. That's how things stand. 600
To my family I'm now an enemy,
and by assisting you I declared war
on people I had no need to injure.
For all the ways I've helped you, you made me,
in the eyes of many wives in Greece,
a lucky woman, blessed in many things.
But what a wonderful and trusting husband [510]
I have in you now, in my misfortune,
if I go into exile, leave this land,
with no friends, all alone, abandoned, 610
with my abandoned children. And for you,
what a fine report for a new bridegroom,
his children wandering round like vagabonds
with the very woman who saved his life.
O Zeus, why did you give men certain ways
to recognize false gold, when there's no mark,

MEDEA

no token stamped on the human body,
to indicate which men are worthless.

CHORUS

When members of a family fight like this, [520]
rage pushes them beyond all compromise. 620

JASON

Woman, it seems I'll need to give good reasons,
and, like a skilled helmsman on a ship,
haul in my sails and run before that storm
blowing from your raving tongue. In my view,
you overestimate your favours to me.
I consider goddess Aphrodite
the only one of gods or mortal men
who saved my expedition. As for you,
well, you've a subtle mind. But if I told
how Eros with his unerring arrows 630 [530]
forced you to save me, I could injure you.
So I won't press the matter very far.
However you helped me, you did it well.
But by saving me you got in return
more than you gave, as I will demonstrate.
First of all, you now live among the Greeks,
not in a country of barbarians.
You're familiar with justice and the laws,
rather than brute force. Besides, all the Greeks
know you're clever, so you have earned yourself 640
a fine reputation. If you still lived [540]
out there at the boundary of the world,
no one would talk about you. And great fame
I'd sooner have than houses filled with gold
or the power to sing sweet melodies,
sweeter than all the songs of Orpheus.
That's my response to you about my labours.
Remember you started this war of words.
As for your complaints about this marriage,
I'll show you that in this I'm being wise 650
and moderate and very friendly to you
and to my children. You must have patience. [550]
When I came here from the land of Iolcus,

MEDEA

I brought with me many troubles, hard ones,
things impossible for me to deal with.
What greater good fortune could I have found
than marrying the daughter of the king,
me—an exile? On the point that irks you,
it's not the case I hate our marriage bed,
overcome with lust for some new bride, 660
nor am I keen to rival other men
in the number of my many children.
We have enough. I'm not complaining.
The most important thing for us to do
is to live well and not in poverty,
knowing that everyone avoids a friend [560]
once he's a pauper. As for my children,
I want to raise them in the proper way,
one worthy of my house, to have brothers
for the children born from you, and make them 670
all the same. Thus, with a united family
I might prosper. Do you need more children?
In my case, there's some benefit to have
new children to help those already born.
Was this a bad scheme? You'd agree with me,
if you weren't so upset about the sex.
But you women are so idiotic—
you think if everything is fine in bed,
you have all you need, but if the sex is bad, [570]
then all the very best and finest things 680
you make your enemies. What mortals need
is some other way to get our children.
We ought to have no female sex, and then
men would be rid of all their troubles.

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

I'm very different from many others,
in all sorts of ways—in my opinion,
the unjust man who speaks so plausibly 690 [580]

MEDEA

brings on himself the harshest punishment.
Since he's sure his tongue can hide injustice,
he dares anything. But he's not that clever.
So you should not parade before me now
your clever words and specious reasoning.
One word demolishes your argument:
if you were not corrupt, you'd ask me first,
get my consent to undertake this marriage,
but you did not even tell your family.

JASON

O yes, if I'd told you of the wedding,
I'm sure you would have lent me fine support.
Even now you can't stand to set aside
that immense rage in your heart.

700

[590]

MEDEA

You're lying.

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

JASON

Get this straight—

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

710

MEDEA

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

JASON

Do you think

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

[600]

MEDEA

MEDEA

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

JASON

That's what you've chosen. The blame rests with you. 720

MEDEA

What did I do? Marry and desert you?

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

I'm not arguing with you any more [610]
about all this. But if you want me
to provide some money, some assistance
for you and the children in your exile,
just ask. I'm prepared to give you some,
and with a generous hand. I'll send my friends 730
introductory tokens, so they'll treat you well.
You'd be mad not to accept this offer.
Woman, stop being so angry. If you do,
things will turn out so much better for you.

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

MEDEA

Get out of here.

For someone so in love with his new bride
you're spending far too long outside her home.
Go act married. The gods will see to it
your marriage changes into one of those
that makes you wish you had rejected it.

[Exit Jason.]

CHORUS

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

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

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

MEDEA

I say on this based on what I've seen,
not on what other people say.

For you are here without a city—
you have no friends to pity you,
as you suffer in this misery,
suffer in the harshest way.

780

The man who shames his family,
who does not open up his heart
and treat them in all honesty—
may he perish unlamented.

[660]

With him I never could be friends.

[Enter Aegeus, King of Athens.]

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

790

AEGEUS

I've just left Apollo's ancient oracle.

MEDEA

The prophetic centre of the earth?
What business took you there?

AEGEUS

To ask a question.
I want to know how I can have some children.

MEDEA

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

[670]

AEGEUS

Not one. Some god is doing this to me.

MEDEA

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

No, I am married. My wife shares my bed.

MEDEA

So what did Apollo say about it?

800

AEGEUS

Words too wise for human understanding.

MEDEA

It is appropriate for me to learn them?

AEGEUS

Of course. They need a clever mind like yours.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

He told me this:

“Don't untie the wineskin's foot. . .”

MEDEA

Until when?

Until you do what or reach what country?

[680]

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

What were you looking for when you sailed here?

AEGEUS

A man called Pittheus, king of Troezen.

810

MEDEA

He's Pelops' son. They say he's a very holy man.

MEDEA

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

And the friendliest of all my allies.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

O Aegeus, my husband has been cruel—
of all men he has treated me the worst.

[690]

AEGEUS

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

820

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

What has he done? Give me more details.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

That's completely shameful.
He hasn't dared something like that, has he?

MEDEA

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

MEDEA

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

Leave him, then, since, as you say, he's worthless. 830

MEDEA

His passion is to marry royalty.

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

Creon, who rules this land of Corinth.

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

With Jason's full consent? I find that disgraceful. 840

MEDEA

He says not. Still, he's planning to accept it.
But, Aegeus, I beg you by your beard,
and at your knees implore you—have pity. [710]

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

Don't you trust me? What in this still bothers you? 870

MEDEA

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

MEDEA

you may become their friend and then comply
with their political demands. I'm weak,
and they have wealth, a king's resources.

[740]

AEGEUS

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

880

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

890

MEDEA

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

[750]

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

MEDEA

All is well. Now, go your way in peace. 900
I'll come to your city as quickly as I can,
once I've completed what I mean to do,
and my plans here have been successful.

[Exit Aegeus.]

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

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

MEDEA

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

MEDEA

Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason.

CHORUS LEADER

But as a woman it will devastate you. 970

MEDEA

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

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

You in there . . .

[Enter Nurse from the house.]

. . . go and fetch Jason here. [820]

When I need to trust someone, I choose you.
Tell him nothing of what I mean to do,
if you like your mistress and are a woman.

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

CHORUS

Since ancient times, Erechtheus' sons
have been especially blessed,
children of the sacred gods,
from a holy country never conquered, 980
never ransacked by its enemies.¹

Fed on glorious fruits of wisdom,
they stride lithely through the sunlit air, [830]
where, so the story goes, the Muses,
nine maidens of Pieria, gave birth
to golden-haired Hermione.

And people celebrate how Aphrodite,
while drawing water from the stream,
the flowing river of the lovely Cephissus,
breathes down upon the land 990

¹Erechtheus was an legendary king of Athens. Erechtheus's sons is a common term referring to citizens of Athens

MEDEA

sweet, temperate winds, [840]
while she binds within her hair
garlands of sweet-smelling roses,
sending Love to sit at Wisdom's side,
to foster all fine things.
How will this city of sacred streams,
this land of strolling lovers,
welcome you—a murderess
who slaughtered her own children,
an unholy woman—among its people? 1000 [850]
Consider this—the killing of your children.
Consider the murder you are going to do.
By your knees we beg you,
in every way we know,
do not butcher your own children.

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

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

JASON

I've come, as you requested. You hate me,
but I'm here, and I'm prepared to listen.
Woman, what it is you now want from me? 1020

MEDEA

Jason, I ask you to forgive me
for what I said before. My anger [870]
you should be able to put up with,
since we two have shared many acts of love.

MEDEA

I've been debating with myself. I realize
I've been in the wrong. I tell myself,

“I'm a fool. Why am I in such a rage,
resenting those who offer good advice?
Why fight against the rulers of this land
or against my husband, whose actions serve 1030
my own best interests with this royal marriage,
producing brothers for my children?
Why can't I stop being angry? What's wrong with me,
when gods are being so kind? Don't I have children? [880]
Don't I know we're going into exile,
where friends are hard to find?”

With thoughts like these,
I recognized how foolish I had been,
how senseless it was to be so annoyed.
So now I agree with you. It strikes me
you've been acting prudently, by forging 1040
this marriage link on our behalf. I was mad.
I should have worked with you in this design,
helped you with your plans, stood there beside you
in this marriage, rejoiced along with you
for this union with your bride. But women are,
well, I won't say bad—we are what we are.
You should not copy the bad things we do, [890]
repaying foolishness with foolishness.
So I give in. I admit that I was wrong.
But now I see things in a better light. 1050

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

Children, come out here—leave the house.

[Enter the children with the Tutor.]

Come on out. Welcome your father here—
talk to him with me. You and your mother
will end the bad blood in this family.
We've patched things up, and no one's angry now.

MEDEA

Take his right hand. O it's harsh to think [900]
of what the future hides.

[Medea hugs her children.]

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

JASON

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

[Medea starts to weep.]

Medea,
why turn away? Why weep and fill your eyes

MEDEA

with these pale tears? What I have said,
does that not make you happy?

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

I will cheer up. I trust what you have said.
But it's a woman's nature to shed tears. 1090

JASON

But why be so tearful with the boys?

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

MEDEA

JASON

A good idea. I think I can persuade her.

MEDEA

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

[Medea gestures to a servant.]

You—bring me those presents right away.

[Servant goes into the house.]

She's got more than one reason to be happy,
that wife of yours. She's blessed in countless ways.
In you she's found a very worthy man
to share her bed—and now she gets these gifts, 1120
which my grandfather Helios once gave
to his descendants.

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

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

MEDEA

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

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

CHORUS

I've no longer any hope
that these children stay alive,
as they stroll to their own slaughter.
The bride will take her diadem, 1150
she'll take her golden ruin.
With her own hand she'll fix
across her lovely yellow hair [980]
the jewelry of death.
The unearthly gleam, the charm
will tempt her to put on the robe
and ornament of twisted gold.
Her marriage bed will lie among the dead.
That's the trap she'll fall in.
That's how she'll die. 1160
She can't escape destruction.

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

MEDEA

You most unfortunate man,
how wrong you were about your destiny.

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

[Enter the Tutor with the children.]

TUTOR

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

[Medea starts to weep.]

What's wrong? Why do you stand there in distress?
Things have worked out well. Why turn away again? 1180
Are you not happy with my splendid news?

MEDEA

Alas . . .

TUTOR

An odd response to the report I bring.

MEDEA

All I can say is that I feel so sad

TUTOR

Have I mistakenly said something bad?
Am I wrong to think my news is good? [1010]

MEDEA

You've reported what you had to tell me.
I'm not blaming you.

MEDEA

TUTOR

Then why avert your eyes?
Why are you crying?

MEDEA

Old man, I have my reasons.
The gods and I, with my worst intentions,
have made this situation what it is. 1190

TUTOR

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

MEDEA

But before that,
I shall bring others to their homes—alas,
how much misery I feel.

TUTOR

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

MEDEA

I'll do so.
But now go in the house. And carry on.
Give the children their usual routine. [1020]

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

O children, my children, you still have 1200
a city and a home, where you can live,
once you have left me to my suffering.
You can live on here without your mother.
But I must go to another country,
an exile, before I've had my joy in you,
before I've seen you happy, or helped
to decorate your marriage beds, your brides,
your bridal chambers, or lifted high
your wedding torches. How miserable
my self-will has made me. I raised you— 1210

MEDEA

and all for nothing. The work I did for you,
the cruel hardships, pains of childbirth— [1030]
all for nothing. Once, in my foolishness,
I had many hopes in you—it's true—
that you'd look after me in my old age,
that you'd prepare my corpse with your own hands,
in the proper way, as all people wish.
But now my tender dreams have been destroyed.
For I will live my life without you two,
in sorrow, and those loving eyes of yours 1220
will never see your mother any more.
Your life is changing. O my children, [1040]
why are you looking at me in that way?
Why smile at me—that last smile of yours?
Alas, what shall I do? You women here,
my heart gives way when I see those eyes,
my children's smiling eyes. I cannot do it.
Good bye to those earlier plans of mine.
I'll take my children from this country.
Why harm them as a way to hurt their father 1230
and have to suffer twice his pain myself?
No, I won't do that. And so farewell
to what I planned before. But what's going on?
What's wrong with me? Do I really want
my enemies escaping punishment, [1050]
while I become someone they ridicule?
I will go through with this. What a coward
I am to let my heart even admit
such sentimental reasons. Children,
you must go in the house.

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

Anyone forbidden 1240
to attend my sacrifice, let such a man
concern himself about these children.
My hand will never lack the strength for this.
And yet . . . My heart, do not do this murder.
You're made of stone, but leave the boys alone.
Spare my children. If they remain alive,
with me in Athens, they'll make you happy.

MEDEA

No! By those avengers in lower Hell,
I'll never deliver up my children, [1060]
hand them over to their enemies, 1250
to be humiliated. They must die—
that's unavoidable, no matter what.
Since that must happen, then their mother,
the one who gave them life, will kill them.
At all events it's settled. There's no way out.
On her head the royal bride already wears
the poisoned crown. That dress is killing her.
But I am treading an agonizing path
and send my children on one even worse.
What I want to do now is say farewell. 1260

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

Give me your right hands, children. Come on. [1070]
Let your mother kiss them. Oh, these hands—
how I love them—and how I love these mouths,
faces—the bearing of such noble boys.
I wish you happiness—but somewhere else.
Where you live now your father takes away.
O this soft embrace! Their skin's so tender.
My boys' breathing smells so sweet to me.
But you must go inside. Go. I can't stand
to look at you any more like this. 1270
The evil done to me has won the day.
I understand too well the dreadful act
I'm going to commit, but my judgment
cannot check my anger, and that incites
the greatest evils human beings do. [1080]

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

CHORUS

Often, before this present time,
I've gone into more complex arguments,
I've struggled with issues more serious
than those that women ought to wrestle with.
But we, too, have an artistic Muse 1280
who lives among us to teach us wisdom.

MEDEA

But not all of us—the group of females
who can learn anything from her is small—
in a crowd of women you might find one.
So I can claim that among human beings [1090]
those who have no experience of children,
who have never given birth to offspring,
such people have far more happiness
than those who have been parents.
With those who have no children, 1290
because they never come to see
whether a child of theirs grows up
to be a blessing or a curse to men,
their failure to have offspring
shields them from many grievances.
But those who in their own homes
have a sweet race of children growing,
I see them worn down with cares [1100]
their whole life long. First, 1300
how they can raise their children well.
Next, how they can leave their sons
sufficient livelihood. And then,
it's by no means clear that all the work
produces good or useless children.
There's one final problem,
the worst for any mortal human—
I'll tell you: suppose those parents
have found a satisfactory way of life
and seen their children grow
into strong, young, virtuous men, 1310
if Fate so wills it, Death arrives, [1110]
and carries off the children's bodies,
away to Hades. What profit, then,
is there for us and our love of sons,
if the gods inflict on mortal men,
in addition to their other troubles,
this most agonizing further sorrow.

[Enter Medea from the house.]

MEDEA

My friends, I've long been waiting in suspense

MEDEA

to see what's happening in the royal house.
Now I see one of Jason's servants coming. 1320
His frantic breathing indicates to me
he brings fresh news of some catastrophe. [1120]

[Enter the Messenger, coming from the royal palace.]

MESSENGER

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

MEDEA

What's happened that I have to run away?

MESSENGER

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

MEDEA

What really splendid news you bring. 1330
From now on, I'll consider you a friend,
one of my benefactors.

MESSENGER

What's that?
Are you in your right mind, lady, or insane?
To commit this crime against the royal house, [1130]
and then be happy when you hear the news,
without being terribly afraid?

MEDEA

I have some remarks to offer in reply.
But, my friend, don't be in such a hurry.
Tell me of their deaths. If you report
they died in pain, you'll double my rejoicing. 1340

MESSENGER

When your two children came with their father
and entered the bride's home, we servants,

MEDEA

who had shared in your misfortune, were glad,
for a rumour spread at once from ear to ear
that you and your husband's previous quarrel [1140]
was now over. Someone kissed the boys' hands,
someone else their golden hair. In my joy,
I went with the children right inside,
into the women's quarters. Our mistress,
whom we now look up to instead of you, 1350
before she caught sight of your two children,
wanted to fix her eyes on Jason only.
But then she veiled her eyes and turned away
her white cheek, disgusted that they'd come.
Your husband tried to change the young bride's mood, [1150]
to soften her anger, saying these words,

“Don't be so hard-hearted with your family.
Check your anger, and turn your face this way,
look at us again, and count as friends of yours
those your husband thinks are friends of his. 1360
Now, receive these gifts, and then, for my sake,
beg your father not to exile these two boys.”

Once she saw the gifts, she did not hold out,
but agreed in everything with Jason.
And before your children and their father
had gone any distance from the palace,
she took the richly embroidered gown
and put it on, then arranged the golden crown, [1160]
fixing it in her hair at a bright mirror,
smiling at her body's lifeless image there. 1370
Then she stood up from her seat and strolled
across the room, moving delicately
on her pale feet, delighted at the gifts,
with a great many glances to inspect
the straightness of the dress against her legs.
But then it happened—a horrific sight.
She changed colour, staggered back and sideways,
trembling, then fell into her chair again,
almost collapsing on the floor. An old woman, [1170]
one of her servants, thinking it was a fit 1380
inspired by Pan or by some other god,

MEDEA

shouted in festive joy, until she saw
the white spit foaming in her mouth, her eyes
bulging from their sockets, and her pale skin
quite drained of blood. The servant screamed again—
this time, to make up for her former shout,
she cried out in distress. Another slave
ran off at once towards her father's palace,
and another to the girl's new husband
to tell him the grim fate his bride had met. 1390
The whole house rang with people's footsteps, [1180]
as they hurried back and forth. By the time
it would take a fast runner to complete
two hundred yards and reach the finish line,
her eyes opened—the poor girl woke up,
breaking her silent fit with a dreadful scream.
She was suffering a double agony—
around her head the golden diadem
shot out amazing molten streams of fire
burning everything, and the fine woven robe, 1400
your children's gift, consumed the poor girl's flesh.
She jumped up from the chair and ran away, [1190]
all of her on fire, tossing her head, her hair,
this way and that, trying to shake off
her golden crown—but it was fixed in place,
and when she shook her hair, the fire blazed
twice as high. Then she fell down on the ground,
overcome by the disaster. No one
could recognize her, except her father.
Her eyes had lost their clear expression, 1410
her face had changed. And there was blood
across her head, dripping down, mixed with fire.
The flesh was peeling from her bones, chewed off
by the poison's secret jaws, just like resin [1200]
oozing from a pine tree. An appalling sight!
Everyone was too afraid to touch the corpse—
what we'd seen had warned us. But her father,
poor wretch, didn't know what she's been through.
He came unexpectedly into the house
and stumbled on the corpse. He cried aloud, 1420
embraced his daughter and kissed her, saying,

MEDEA

MEDEA

I've made up my mind, my friends.
I'll do it—kill my children now, without delay,
and flee this land. I must not hesitate.
That would hand them over to someone else
to be slaughtered by a hand less loving. 1460
No matter what, the children have to die.
Since that's the case, then I, who gave them life, [1240]
will kill them. Arm yourself for this, my heart.
Why do I put off doing this dreadful act,
since it must be done? Come, pick up the sword,
wretched hand of mine. Pick up the sword,
move to where your life of misery begins.
Don't play the coward. Don't remember now
how much you love them, how you gave them life.
For this short day forget they are your children— 1470
and mourn them later. Although you kill them,
still you loved them. As a woman, I'm so sad. [1250]

[Exit Medea into the house.]

CHORUS

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

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

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

MEDEA

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

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

CHORUS

Did you hear that?
Did you hear the children cry?
That wretched, evil woman! 1510

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

SECOND CHILD

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

CHORUS [*shouting in response*]
Should I go in the house?
I'm sure I must prevent this murder.

CHILD

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

MEDEA

SECOND CHILD

The sword has almost got us—like a snare!

CHORUS

You hard and wretched woman,
just like stone or iron—
to kill your children, [1280]
ones you bore yourself, 1520
sealing their fate with your own hands.
Of all women that ever lived before
I know of one, of only one,
who laid hands on her dear children—
and that was Ino,
driven to madness by the gods,
when Hera, Zeus's wife,
sent her wandering in a fit
away from home,
that sad lady leapt into the sea, 1530
because she'd killed her sons
a most unholy murder.
She walked into the surf
at the sea's edge, perishing
so she could join in death
her own two children.¹
But what horror still remains
after what's happened here?
A woman's marriage bed— [1290]
so full of pain—how many evils, 1540
has it brought on humankind?

[Enter Jason with attendants.]

JASON

You women standing there beside the house,
where's Medea, who's done these awful things?
Is she still inside? Or has she left here?

¹Ino was a mortal queen of Thebes, daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia. She helped to nurse the infant god Dionysus, Zeus's child born to her sister Semele. Zeus's divine wife, Hera, enraged at the birth of Dionysus, drove Ino and her husband, Athamas, mad, so that they killed their two sons (accounts differ as to how the children died).

MEDEA

She'll have to hide herself under the earth
or else fly up to heaven's overarching vault,
if she's going to avoid her punishment
from the royal house. Did she really think
she could kill the rulers of this country
and get away unharmed? But at this point
she's no concern of mine. I'm worried
for my children. Those whom she has wronged
will take care of her. I've come for the boys,
to save their lives, in case the next of kin
try to harm me and mine, retribution
for their mother's profane murders.

1550 [1300]

CHORUS

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

JASON

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

CHORUS

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

1560

JASON

No. What are you telling me? Woman,
you have destroyed me.

[1310]

CHORUS

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

JASON

Where did she do this? Inside or outside?

CHORUS

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

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

You slaves in there,
remove the bar from this door at once,

MEDEA

withdraw the bolts, so I may see two things—
my dead sons and their murderer, that woman
on whom I shall exact revenge.

1570

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

MEDEA

Why are you rattling the doors like that,
trying to unbar them so you can find
their bodies and me, the one who killed them?
Stop trying. If you desire something from me,
then say so, if you want to. But you'll never
have me in your grasp, not in this chariot,
a gift to me from my grandfather Helios,
to protect me from all enemy hands.

[1320]

JASON

You accursed woman, most abominable
to the gods and me and all mankind.
You dared to take the sword to your own boys,
you—the one who bore them—and to leave me
destroyed and childless. Having done this,
after committing this atrocious crime,
can you still look upon the earth and sun?
May you be destroyed! Now I understand—
I must have lost my mind to bring you here,
from that savage country, to a Greek home.
You were truly evil then—you betrayed
your father and the land that raised you.
But the avenging fury meant for you
the gods have sent to me. You slaughtered
your brother in your home, then came aboard
our fine ship, the Argo. That's how you began.
When you married me and bore my children,
in your lust for sex and our marriage bed,
you killed them. No woman from Greece would dare
to do this, but I chose you as my wife
above them all, and that has proved to be
a hateful marriage—it has destroyed me.
You're not a woman. You're a she-lion.

1580

[1330]

1590

[1340]

1600

MEDEA

Your nature is more bestial than Scylla,
the Tuscan monster. But my insults,
multiplied a thousand fold, don't hurt you.
Your heart's too hard for that. So be off,
you shameful murderer of your children.
Let me lament my fate. I'll get no delight
from my new bride, nor will I ever speak
to my own living children, the two boys
I bred and raised. They're lost to me.

[1350]

MEDEA

I would reply to your words at length,
if father Zeus did not already know
what I did for you and what you did to me.
You weren't going to shame my marriage bed
and have a pleasant life ridiculing me,
nor was that royal bride or Creon,
who gave her to you, going to banish me,
throw me from here with impunity.
So if you want, call me a lioness
or Scylla, who lives on Tuscan shores.
For I've made contact with your heart at last.

1610

1620

[1360]

JASON

You have your own share of pain and sorrow.

MEDEA

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

JASON

O my children,
you had such an evil mother!

MEDEA

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

JASON

At least it was not my hand that killed them.

MEDEA

MEDEA

No. It was an insult—your new marriage.

JASON

Was it right to murder them for that?

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

1630

MEDEA

Well, your sons are gone.
That should cause you pain.

[1370]

JASON

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

MEDEA

The gods are aware who began this fight.

JASON

Yes, they well know your detested heart.

MEDEA

Keep up your hate. How I loathe your voice.

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

1640

MEDEA

JASON

Let me bury these dead boys and mourn them.

MEDEA

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

[1380]

1650

JASON

May the avenging Fury of our children
destroy you—may you find blood justice.

[1390]

MEDEA

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

1660

JASON

You polluted wretch! Child killer!

MEDEA

Go home.
Bury that wife of yours.

JASON

I'll go.
I've lost both my sons.

MEDEA

MEDEA

Your grief's not yet begun.
Wait until you're old.

JASON

O such loving children!

MEDEA

Their mother loved them. You did not.

JASON

And yet you killed them?

MEDEA

Yes, to injure you.

JASON

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

[1400]

MEDEA

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

1670

JASON

By the gods,
I beg you, let me feel their tender skin.

MEDEA

No. Your words are wasted.

JASON

O Zeus,
do you hear how I'm being driven off,
what I must endure from this child killer,
this she lion, this abomination?
But I'll use the strength I have for grieving
and praying to the gods to bear witness
how you have killed my children and refuse
to let me hold their bodies or bury them.

[1410]

1680

MEDEA

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

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

CHORUS

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

1690

[Exit Chorus.]

MEDEA

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is a retired college and university instructor (now a Research Associate) at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. A number of his translations have been published (or soon will be) by Richer Resources Publications, as follows:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*
Aeschylus, *Persians*
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*
Aristophanes, *Birds*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Aristophanes, *Knights*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Aristophanes, *Peace*
Cuvier, *Discourse on Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*
Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Euripides, *Medea*
Euripides, *Orestes*
Homer, *Iliad* (Complete and Abridged)
Homer, *Odyssey* (Complete and Abridged)
Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*
Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*
Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Nietzsche, *Uses and Abuses of History*
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Sophocles, *Ajax*
Sophocles, *Antigone*
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

MEDEA

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

Some of these titles have been published as recordings by Naxos Audio-books. Ian Johnston maintains a website at the following address (where these translated text are freely available):

records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm