

Medea¹ (431 BCE)

By Euripides (city-state of Athens, present-day Greece)

Translated from the Greek by Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish

CHARACTERS

NURSE

TUTOR

MEDEA

KREON, king of Corinth

JASON

AIGEUS, aged king of Athens

SERVANT

MEDEA's and JASON's two CHILDREN

ATTENDANTS, SOLDIERS (silent parts)

CHORUS of Corinthian women

In myth, Medea was an immortal, granddaughter of the Sun, She was a sorceress, a follower of the witch-goddess Hekate. Her father Aietes was guardian of a fabulous golden fleece, and an expedition of Greek heroes, led by Jason in the god-built ship Argo, sailed to Kolchis, Aietes' kingdom, to steal it. Medea, infatuated with Jason, used her magic to help him perform supernatural tasks set by Aietes: yoking fire-breathing bronze bulls, sowing dragon's teeth and fighting the warriors that grew from them. Finally, Medea and Jason killed the Fleece's dragon-guardian and escaped with the Fleece. To delay pursuit, Medea dismembered her brother and threw the pieces overboard, so that the pursuers had to stop and gather them, while she and Jason sailed out of reach. Back in Greece, the lovers first landed in Iolkos, where the daughters of the aged king Peleias asked Medea how they might rejuvenate their father. Perhaps intending to supplant the old man with Jason, she advised cutting Peleias into pieces and boiling him. The outcome was predictable: she and Jason were forced once more to flee. They settled in Corinth, where they lived as visiting foreigners, tolerated but never trusted. They had two children, and Jason became anxious to legitimise his position. With the avowed intention of securing his own and the children's future, he proposed to marry Glauke, daughter of Corinth's king Kreon (not the same Kreon as in the Oedipus/Antigone myth cycle). It is at this point that Euripides' play begins.

Outside JASON's house in Corinth. Enter NURSE.

NURSE:

I wish it had never sailed, the 'good ship *Argo*',
Never winged its way past mist-blue rocks
To Kolchis.² Why did its keel ever feel the axe

¹ [translators' note-- as are all notes that follow] *Medea* was first produced in the Theatre of Dionysos, outside the god's shrine at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens. It was part of a competitive religious and dramatic festival, before a (mainly male) audience of some 14,000 people. Each playwright directed his plays (3 or 4, on a single day), arranged the choreography, and perhaps composed the music; most also acted as protagonist. There were three actors, all male: apart from the fact that the first actor played Medea, there is no information on how the parts in *Medea* were allocated. A Chorus of 15, all male, sang and danced; their leader also took part in the spoken dialogue. There were (silent) attendants, two small children, and an unknown number of musicians, probably playing flute, lyre, drum and cymbal or tambourine.

In the mountain woods? Why was it armed with oars,
 Why crewed with heroes to fetch the Golden Fleece? 5
 My lady, then, Medea, would never have sailed
 With Jason, mad for him. She'd never have tricked
 Peleias³ daughters to kill their own father,
 Never fled here to Corinth,⁴ with Jason
 And her children. A refugee, buying safety. 10
 Fawning. Smile when he smiles, frown when he frowns.
 If she crosses her husband, the woman's lost.

Now my lady is lost. Love's rancid. Sour.
 My lord turns traitor: look!-- betrays
 His children, plays Medea false. He beds 15
 A new princess, plots marriage. Glauke,⁵
 Daughter of Kreon⁶ who rules this land.
 Medea's out. Stripped of her place.
 The oaths he swore! The promises--
 Gods, witness the change in Jason's heart! 20
 She won't be comforted, refuses food.
 Rags. Anguish. Weeps the days away.
 Her husband! Who else could do such wrong?
 She won't look up; she stares at the ground;
 Offer soothing words, she's as cold as stone, 25
 Bitter as the sea. Like a ghost she turns away,
 Cries 'Father, father',⁷ weeps for home,
 The country she betrayed
 For Jason who rapes her pride.
 The tragic lesson learned too late: 30
 She should have held to what she had.

She hates the children. Cold eyes!
 I'm scared. She's planning-- what?
 Know her, fear her, unsmiling heart.

² **KOLCHIS** (KOL-kiss). Mythical northern kingdom, beyond the boundaries of civilisation, ruled by AIETES. It is sometimes identified with the modern region south of the Caucasus mountains, but its magical nature is more important in myth than its precise location.

³ **PELEIAS** (PEE-li-ass, *Greek* pe-LAY-ass, 'bruised'). Usurper of the throne of Iolkos, which rightly belonged to JASON. MEDEA punished him for this by boiling an old ram alive, making it magically appear a lamb, and persuading Peleias' daughters that the same process would rejuvenate their aged father.

⁴ **CORINTH**. Town in the northern Peloponnese. Some authorities think that Euripides deliberately set *Medea* here, and changed the myth slightly to do so, for a specific production in Corinth. The Corinthian connection is certainly not in the original, but there is no other evidence either way.

⁵ **GLAUKE** (GLAW-kee, *Greek* GLAF-kee, 'owl' or 'grey one'). Princess of Corinth. But Glauke is a standard name in Greek tragedy for a young, innocent princess: no specific myth is referred to here.

⁶ **KREON** (KREE-on, *Greek* kre-OHN, 'ruler'). Although dramatists used the word Kreon as if it were a proper name, it is in fact not any particular mythical character but a title similar to 'Pharaoh' or 'Majesty'.

⁷ **AIETES** (eye-EE-tees, *Greek* e-EE-teess, 'mighty'). Son of the Sun and ruler of the magical kingdom of Kolchis. MEDEA's father.

Creep through the palace to that double bed-- 35
A dagger, thrust in their guts?
Or Kreon killed, the father-in-law-to-be?
She'll do such things. D'you think her simple,
Easy? No pliant victim here.

Look: the children. What do they know 40
Of this, their mother's misery?
What child understands grownup despair?

Enter the CHILDREN with their TUTOR.

TUTOR:

Well, nurse? My lady's trusty slave.
What brings you out here? A public place!
What wrongs are you muttering this time? 45
Did Medea ask to be left alone?

NURSE:

You may be Jason's man, his children's tutor,
But you're not a fool. You understand loyalty.
I share my lady's grief. How could I bear it?
I came to cry her sufferings to Earth and Sky. 50

TUTOR:

She still pours out hot tears?

NURSE:

What do you know of tears? You've none-- so far.

TUTOR:

Poor fool-- if a slave may call a lady so.
She hasn't heard what else they have in store.

NURSE:

What else? 55

TUTOR:

I've said too much already.

NURSE:

Sir, please. We're fellow slaves!
I'll keep it secret, if I must.

TUTOR:

I overheard them talking-- no one saw--
By the sacred spring, 60
Where old men play at dice. They said this:
King Kreon, whose word is law,

Means to banish the children and their mother.
Forever. It may not be true. I hope it's not.

NURSE:

And Jason? He's allowing it? 65
Letting go his children, to hurt their mother?

TUTOR:

Old loves are dropped when new ones come.
He's no love left for any who live here.

NURSE:

New misery! New grief before 70
The old is done! New pain!

TUTOR:

Stay calm. And tell your mistress nothing.
She'll find out soon enough. Be quiet.

NURSE:

My darlings, your own father...! May he... live--
My lord. I owe him honour. But this!
He hates what he should love. The guilt of it! 75

TUTOR:

Who isn't guilty, then? It's human;
We all put self-interest first.
Call it what you like, it's commonplace.
So, Jason beds a princess-- goodbye sons.

NURSE:

It's all right, boys. Go in. Take care of them. 80
And keep them from their mother. Frantic eyes--
She'll do such things. Pray God she hurts
Her enemies, not those she loves!

MEDEA (*inside*):

Yoh!⁸
Weep. Grief. Pain. 85
Yoh, mo-ee, mo-ee.⁹

⁸ A feature of this play, as of all Greek tragedy, is a number of short ejaculations: o-ee-mo-ee, fe-oo, a-ee and so on. Each is used in specific circumstances, and seems to have had specific meaning. They were probably not onomatopoeic, but were instructions to the actors to improvise particular kinds of vocal or musical melismas. In most translations these ejaculations are omitted, or replaced with such English anodynes as 'Alas!' or 'Woe!'; here we have simply transliterated, leaving the performers to interpret. **YOH** A vocalisation based on the vowels 'i' (short as in 'tin') and 'O' (long as in 'sore'). The 'i' is hardly sounded, merely the upbeat to the 'o', which carried all the emotional weight. Contexts suggest that it is a kind of groan, of grief or despair: an animal sound.

Die. Let me die.

NURSE (*to the CHILDREN*):

There there, my dears, my little ones.
Pain. Rage. Your mother's tearing herself apart.
Keep away from her. Keep out of sight. 90
She's wild. Hate's in her blood.
She feeds her rage. Go in, quickly...

Exeunt CHILDREN and TUTOR. From inside, MEDEA's keening continues.

Stormclouds of anger.
It sucks her breast. It bites.
What will she do? 95
One wound she is,
Gangrene, beyond all cure.

MEDEA (*inside*):

A-ee, a-ee.¹⁰
Weep. Pity me.
Die, children. Damned. Destroyed. 100
He hates me. Die with him,
Kill all his hopes.

NURSE:

Yoh, mo-ee, mo-ee, yoh.
Their father's guilt-- what part have they in that?
Why hate them so? 105
Poor babies, pray it away, the fear, my fear.
Oh the great, how great their rage--
They rule the world, but not themselves.
They smile, they frown, they change.
Better a humble heart, a lowly life. 110
Untouched by greatness let me live-- and live.
Not too little, not too much: there safety lies.
Over-reach yourself, you'll suffer.
The gods look down and take their toll.

*Enter CHORUS.*¹¹

⁹ **MO-EE** Vocalisation (in Greek) of a short 'o' (as in 'hot') and a long 'i' (like the 'ee' in 'sheep'). Coincidentally, MOI also means 'me' in Greek-- hence the Victorian translation 'Oh me miserable'. It is a kind of whimper or whine, like that of a bewildered child, but can be stretched to operatic length as required.

¹⁰ **A-EE** Exactly as it sounds: a cry of grief. It seems from its contexts to be more open, more abandoned to the emotion, than O-EE.

¹¹ Something like one third of *Medea* was declaimed or sung with instrumental accompaniment and formal movement. Rhythmic organisation was quantitative (not by stress, as in English verse), and the lines fell into patterns of long and short syllables which also determined the rhythms of the music and the dance-steps. The choruses frequently used strophe and antistrophe, the rhythm of one section exactly repeating that of the lines before. (They are indicated in this translation.) The music was in single overlapping lines without harmony, in the manner we now associate with Middle Eastern or Far Eastern

CHORUS:

That voice, that crying! Poor woman! 115
 Is that how they behave in Kolchis?
 Won't she be calm?
 Tell us, nurse. At home, inside,
 We heard her.
 We're not unsympathetic-- 120
 We care for those who share this house.

NURSE:

This house is dead. It's over. Gone.
 He rolls in a royal bed-- and she?
 Inside, alone, she weeps her life away.
 We love her and there's nothing we can say. 125

MEDEA (*inside*):

A-ee! Zeus!¹² Earth!
 Thunder split my skull.
 What use is my life? I spit on it.
 Fe-oo, fe-oo.¹³
 Let me die, be free. Hateful life, be gone! 130

CHORUS:

What's she saying, poor crazy one? [strophe]
 Has she gone mad?
 To flirt with death!
 That kiss comes soon enough,
 Needs no encouragement. 135
 So her husband revels in another's bed--
 Is it worth such frenzy, just for that?
 Leave Zeus to settle it.
 It's over, your marriage.
 No need to break your heart. 140

MEDEA (*inside*):

O Justice, Artemis,¹⁴

music. The verse moves between speech (usually in resolved iambs, analogous to loose English blank verse) and declamation or song (usually in lyric metres).

¹² **ZEUS** (ZYOOSS, 'shining sky'). God of thunder, lightning and the sky; ruler of gods and mortals. His name was a single syllable-- not ZOOS but ZYOOSS.

¹³ **FE-OO** Two syllables, based on a short 'e' (as in 'hen') and a medium-length 'u' (like a shorter version of the 'oo' in 'roof'). The important letter is however the 'f', as the ejaculation is used to brush off a topic or idea, to sweep it out of the conversation or the speaker's mind, and avoid contemplating it. This ejaculation is the only one with no immediate parallel in English-- and it creates a break in thought, a redirection of flow, which is in some contexts quite startling. Medea uses it frequently, and its single appearance in the chorus is an instance of somewhere where, without it, we might miss a vital change of emotional emphasis.

¹⁴ **ARTEMIS** (AR-te-miss, 'high water-spring'). Virgin goddess of hunting, prophecy and childbirth. APOLLO's twin.

Look down and see my pain!
 I swore such oaths, I bound myself
 To him, to Jason. I spit on him.
 I'll see him die, him and that girl-- 145
 I'll see them in pieces on the floor.
 They'll treat me so, and live?
 Was it for this I turned my back
 On my country, my father,
 My own brother cut to bits-- for this? 150

NURSE:

You hear? She cries to Justice
 Who is not called in vain, and Zeus
 Who seals all promises.
 She'll do such things.
 What her anger brews 155
 Will have no easy antidote.

CHORUS:

Why won't she come out? [antistrophe]
 We want to see her, talk to her.
 This anger, burdening her heart--
 Why be too proud to put it off? 160
 Out here, she'd be with friends.
 Nurse, fetch her. Say we wish her well.
 Quick, before it's too late,
 Before someone inside suffers!
 Who can stop grief's avalanche 165
 Once it starts to roll?

NURSE:

I'll do it. But I'm afraid.
 Persuading such a woman...
 Bull-glares, lion-claws,
 She turns and tears. 170
 What use were they,
 Those minstrels of old who sang
 Glad songs for banquets, feasts?
 Happy tunes for happy times!
 What melodies for misery, 175
 To purge our bitterness,
 Lull the Fates that savage us
 When death and malice set their snares?
 Sing those to sleep-- that's a gift indeed!
 Who needs supper-songs and all that row? 180
 When you're eating and drinking
 It's easy to be merry...

Exit. We hear the sound of MEDEA, shockingly louder as the NURSE opens the door.

CHORUS:

Such screams, such shouts!
Such rage at the traitor in her bed!
She calls on gods-- 185
On Zeus, on Justice
Who brought her here to Greece.
At night she slipped past dashing rocks,
Slipped free to the wide, salt sea.

Enter MEDEA. Against expectation, she is calm and self-possessed: no sign of hysteria or grief.

MEDEA:

Ladies, Corinthians, I'm here. 190
Don't think ill of me. Call others proud.
In public, in private, it's hard to get it right.
Tread as carefully as you will,
'She's proud,' they'll say, 'she won't join in.'
What human being looks fairly on another? 195
They'd sooner hate than know you properly,
Even before you've done them any harm.
And when you're a foreigner¹⁵: 'Be like us', they say.
Even Greeks look down on other Greeks,
Too clever to see the good in them. 200
As for me, the blow that struck me down
And eats my heart I least expected.
My lovely life is lost; I want to die.
He was everything to me-- and now
He's the vilest man alive, my husband. 205

Of all Earth's creatures that live and breathe,
Are we women not the wretchedest?
We scratch and save, a dowry to buy a man--
And then he lords it over us: we're his,
Our lives depend on how his lordship feels. 210
For better for worse: we can't divorce him.
However he turns out, he's ours and ours he stays.

¹⁵ *Medea* was produced in the very last year of Athens' 'Golden Age', the fifty years of prosperity which followed the Greeks' defeats of the invading Persians at Marathon (490 BC) and Salamis (480 BC). During that half-century the Parthenon was built, an unexampled form of democracy was established and a huge maritime empire was created; Athenian self-satisfaction reached a level equalled nowhere else in Greece except in Sparta (whose rivalry with Athens erupted, only months after *Medea*'s first staging, into the Peloponnesian War). The Athenians were convinced that they were uniquely favoured by the gods, the acme of Greekness-- and by implication, that non-Greeks were not so much degenerate as on a lower plane of existence, objects less of fear or scorn than of captious curiosity. To the original audience, *Medea* would have seemed an exotic foreign creature, and her emotional unpredictability and apparent instability would have been expected character-traits, remarkable only in degree. This is the attitude which Euripides confronts by making her seem a sympathetic human being.

Women's cunning? We need all of it.
Set down with strangers, with ways and laws
She never knew at home, a wife must learn 215
Every trick she can to please the man
Whose bed she shares. If he's satisfied,
If he lives content, rides not against the yoke--
Congratulations! If not, we're better dead.
A husband, tired of domesticity, 220
Goes out, sees friends, enjoys himself-
But we must always look to him alone.
Our reward? A quiet life they promise us.
They'll grab the spears. They'll take the strain.
I'd three times sooner go to war 225
Than suffer childbirth once.

Oh but things are different for you.
Your city; your parents, your friends are here.
They cushion you. I'm alone. No state,
Despised by my husband, 230
A souvenir from foreign parts.
Where are my mother, brother, family
To harbour me when all goes wrong?
I ask one favour only. If I find
Some way, some plan for paying Jason back-- 235
Oh and that man who gives his daughter to him--
Will you keep the secret? A woman's too weak,
They say, for war, too scared to fight.
But wrong her there, in the marriage-bed,
She'll have your blood. 240

CHORUS:

We'll do it. You're right. To punish him.
You've cause enough to grieve.
But here comes Kreon, his majesty,
Full of new plans for you.

Enter KREON, attended.

KREON:

You. Glowering, swollen with hate 245
Against your husband. Hear my decree.
Your exile is our pleasure. Take your sons and go.
At once. No arguments. I make the law,
I execute it. I'll push you across
Our frontiers, and come back home content. 250

MEDEA:

A-ee, a-ee. I'm alone. Finished.
Fleets of enemies crowd sail against me.
No shelter now, no welcoming land.
All evil is done to me. One question, Kreon:
What have I done that warrants what you do? 255

KREON:

Frankly, you frighten me.
You can do things: destroy my daughter.
I've reasons for my fear:
You're cunning; malice is your trade.
Such a woman, and banned from her husband's bed! 260
I've heard you've threatened us: king, groom, bride.
You'd do such things! I act in self-defence.
Better see you angry now
Than stroke you gentle and later hear you snarl.

MEDEA:

Fe-oo, fe-oo. 265
You're not the first. It crowds on me,
This reputation: the witch, the witch!
Look here at me, and learn:
No one should school their children.
What use is cleverness? 270
You embarrass other people:
Fools call you foolish, not worth knowing;
The clever, trumped by your cleverness,
Find it 'wiser' to put you down.
I'm 'such a woman'. Your words, my lord. 275
Some envy me, some call me arrogant,
Some fear my secret ways... But not you, Kreon.
What, you fear me? A man, a king--
How could I harm you?
You've done me no harm. What have you to fear? 280
You gave your daughter to... the man you chose.
But it's him I hate. Your decision was reasonable--
Go marry your daughter, good luck, good luck!--
But yield me first a scrap of earth to live on.
I'll not complain about my wrongs; 285
You'll be my king and I your slave.

KREON:

Mild words, but still I shrink.
Malice, vengeance, brews within.
Now I trust you even less.
A raging fury-- woman or man-- 290
Is easily policed. But smiles...!

Get out. No further speech. Get out.
The decision's made: no smiles on Earth
Will change it. Be known our enemy.

MEDEA:

As you value your daughter's life.

295

KREON:

I'll not give way.

MEDEA:

No pity?

KREON:

Duty: I put that first.

MEDEA:

Kolchis! Home! I weep for you.

KREON:

I love my child, and next to her, this land.

300

MEDEA:

Fe-oo, fe-oo. Where our hearts are, there most danger lies.

KREON:

Let Fate decide.

MEDEA:

Zeus, see who started this!

KREON:

On your way. I'm sick of this.

MEDEA:

You're sick. I'm dying, lord.

305

KREON:

My men are waiting. You'd like some help?

MEDEA:

Kreon, I'm on my knees.

KREON:

Asking for trouble.

MEDEA:

I'll go. One favour first-- a tiny thing...

KREON:

What is it? And will you then let go? 310

MEDEA:

One day, just today, allow me here.
I've plans to make... where to go,
How to save my children. They're nothing
To Jason now, their portion nothing.
Have pity. You've children of your own. 315
No crime in generosity.
I ask nothing for myself
A second exile! My tears are all
For them, whom Fate has made its sport.

KREON:

It's not my nature to play the tyrant. 320
I've been merciful before-- for good or ill.
Very well. For good or ill,
I'll go this far: if tomorrow's dawn
Sees you or your children still within our lands,
You die. Your exile is decreed. But one more day. 325
If have it you must, then one more day is yours:
Too little time, I'm sure, to work the spells I dread.

Exit.

CHORUS:

Poor lady.
Fe-oo, fe-oo, we pity you.
Where can you go? 330
What land, what people
Will welcome your misery?
The gods cast you adrift, Medea,
Uncharted seas your destiny, your pain.

MEDEA:

Evil, evil on every side. 335
But watch, and see.
Unhappy times await that happy pair,
And all who fawn on them.
D'you think I'd have crawled to him,
Pleaded with him, touched him, 340
If I'd not had secret plans?
The fool could have banished me today
And aborted my revenge. Instead,
I have one whole long day. One day
To make all three cold meat: 345
Father, daughter-- and that man I hate.

My dears, so many roads lead fast
 To death. How can I choose?
 I could roast them in the bridal suite,
 Or steal through sleeping courts to the damask bed 350
 And spike their guts.
 But if I were trapped
 In the palace, caught in the act?
 Slow death, their laughter in my ears.
 Best do what I do best, what skill 355
 And reputation prompt. Poison. I touch, they die.

So.
 They're dead.
 What city will receive me,
 What stranger grant asylum, house-room? 360
 Shh! Less haste.
 First find one sure, safe tower,
 Then, poison come.
 Not another word. They die.
 If chance is not so generous, 365
 I'll take a sword to them, then die myself--
 But kill I shall, and none shall do me down.

Goddess of midnight, Hekate,¹⁶
 Holy of holies in whose name I live,
 Are they to hurt us and skip unscathed? 370
 Bitter and black the wedding I'll contrive,
 Cruel and sharp as my rejection here.
 Come, now, Medea. Be clever now. Dare now.
 What you plan, now do; this is the test.
 Your sufferings are known. 375
 Are Jason and his crew to laugh themselves
 To bed? Medea, grand-daughter of the Sun,
 Do it. You can.
 Aren't women made for this?
 Useless, are we? Good for nothing good? 380
 Then evil be our good and I its queen!

CHORUS:

Now water flows uphill. [strophe]
 Injustice masks itself; betrayal rules.
 A man swears by the gods
 And by the gods he breaks his word. 385
 What women were, they'll never be again.

¹⁶ HEKATE (HEK-a-tee, Greek hek-AH-tee, 'one hundred'). Goddess of darkness and of black magic.

Men must recognise our power. It's now:
They've put us down for long enough.

Old songs, old slanders, [antistrophe] 390
Men singing women's faithlessness-- enough!
If women had a voice,
If Apollo,¹⁷ lord of the lyre,
Had let us sing our songs, we'd steal their theme:
We'd sing of men's outrageousness.

Medea, you sailed from your native land [strophe] 395
Ablaze with love. You dared the straits
For a strange man's sake.
Once here, that man betrayed you,
Broke his wedded word
And threw you out, exile again, 400
Contempt your only friend.

Oaths, out! Promises, farewell. [antistrophe]
Fled like smoke. All honour, fled
From the whole Greek world. Away!
Where can Medea go? The pain! 405
Her father's house is barred.
Another woman queens it in her bed:
Might rules, her power is gone.

Enter JASON.

JASON:

This isn't the first time. I've seen it, often.
Lost temper ruins everything. 410
You could have stayed here, kept your home,
If you'd accepted the decisions of your betters.

It's your own fault they throw you out.
This talk of yours, it's smoke to me, it's straw.
Call me what names you like, the vilest man alive. 415
But rant against the king...

You're lucky exile's your only punishment.
I tried to calm him, to make him let you stay.
But you wouldn't hold your tongue,
You would talk treason. So out you go. 420

Even so, d'you know why I've come?
To do my best for those I love.
I won't see you penniless;

¹⁷ **APOLLO** (a-PO-low, Greek a-po-LOHN, 'destroyer'). God of music, healing and prophecy, whose principal shrines were at Delos and Delphi.

I won't see the children starve.
Banishment's hard enough, God knows. 425
I know. Hate if you must,
I care no less for you because of that.

MEDEA:

Who could be worse than you?
What names can I call you-- a man
Who is no man at all? You've come! 430
How dare you come, you vomit--
D'you think it noble, think it brave
To savage those you love, then visit them?
How did you screw yourself to such a pitch?
Still, here you are-- 435
I'll ease my heart, and watch you wince.

First things first. I saved your life--
They know it, every Greek who sailed with you,
The good ship *Argo's* noble crew,
When you came to yoke fiery bulls 440
In the field of death and sow those dragon's teeth.
The serpent, unsleeping guardian
Coiled round the Fleece, I killed.

I made your reputation,
Betrayed my father, my royal house, 445
Ran after you to Iolkos,¹⁸ Peleias' land--
More passionate than clever then!--
And for your sake procured his death:
Most horribly, at his own daughter's hands.
A second royal house destroyed. 450

So I did. And you, what did you do?
Betrayed me, vileness, snatched another wife.
I gave you children. If not,
I'd have understood your lust-- for sons. 455
But this? Kiss promises goodbye--
The gods are dead you swore them by.
This hand of mine,
The one you held so hard,
And crawled between these knees! I'm foul
With your foul touch and all my hopes destroyed. 460

Well, Jason, you love me. Advise me:
I trust you, rely on you--
To cheat me with every word you say.

¹⁸ **IOLKOS** (YOL-koss). Jason's native town.

Where shall I go? To my father's house,
 The father I betrayed to follow you? 465
 To Peleias' daughters?
 How they'll welcome me, their father's murderer!
 So it stands with me. I made enemies
 Of those I loved, for you, hurt those
 I had no need to hurt, for you-- 470
 And in return, you make me the envy of all Greece.
 Can't you hear them? 'What a husband!
 How lucky she is! I'd trust him anywhere!'
 They have their proof,
 The dazzling wedding-gift you give yourself: 475
 Your sons, their mother who saved your life,
 Banished, made tramps. O Zeus, you give
 Clear signs to mark true gold from dross--
 Why no hallmarks to tell true men from men?

CHORUS:

What anger worse, or slower to abate,
 Than lovers' love when it has turned to hate? 480

JASON:

I see I must steer carefully,
 Must play the skilful captain, trim sail
 And run before your storm of words.
 First, then, your towering services to me. 485
 You overdo it. Aphrodite¹⁹ helped me:
 It was she-- no other-- who saved our ship.
 No one denies your witchery--
 But it was Aphrodite's weapon, passion,
 That made you save my skin. 490

So let's not overestimate your services.
 And you've not done so badly out of them--
 Quite frankly, more than you gave, you've got.
 You came from God knows where to Greece,
 And here you learned what justice is. 495
 The Greeks respect you, appreciate your skills--
 Would you be famous if you'd stayed
 On that hill of yours in the sky's backyard?
 I prefer the glitter to the gold.
 I'd rather be sung about than sing. 500

So much for what you did for me.
 You brought it up and-- there it is.

¹⁹ **APHRODITE** (af-ro-DIE-tee, *Greek* af-ro-DEE-teh, 'foam-born'). Goddess of sexual desire.

Now about my marriage, this royal alliance
 That rubs you raw. I'll show how good it is
 For all of us-- me, you and the children too. 505
 Will you listen? We were on the run, from Iolkos--
 Exiles, outlaws, freighted with disaster--
 What better safeguard could I find than this,
 To marry the king's own daughter? I call it luck!
 I know what grates on you. Bed. You think 510
 I tired of you, I lusted for younger flesh.
 You're wrong. I don't want her;
 I don't want shoals of children.
 Our sons, yours and mine, are enough for me.
 I want security, prosperity-- 515
 Who steps aside, takes time, for beggars?
 I want our sons in peace and harmony
 With new royal brothers,
 One happy family for evermore.
 You don't need more children. I do. 520
 They'll help the ones we had.

Now do you see? The point of it?
 How can you? You're raw with jealousy.
 Oh, women are all alike:
 If they're happy in bed, they're happy everywhere. 525
 If that goes wrong, then offer them the Moon,
 They throw it at your head. Sex!
 We need another way to get us sons. No women then--
 That way all human misery would end.²⁰

CHORUS:

Neat words, Jason, neatly said. 530
 But pardon me, what you do
 Is far from just: deserting her.

MEDEA:

Neat? Neat? Does no one see but me?
 This jailbait plays philosopher.
 Double-dealing, double penalty. 535
 Can he do what he likes if he wraps it up
 In fancy phrases? (*spits*) Ptah! You're not so clever.
 Such a tongue-- and one little point undoes you:

²⁰ The original spectators would not have thought Jason the crass chauvinist or craven and opportunistic male he might appear to us. More probably, they would have regarded him as the embodiment of heroic regality, alert to both dynastic and domestic opportunity. Greek marriage was a matter of prudent alliance with a view to making legitimate heirs; passion was a secondary, sometimes extra-marital (and hence, in some cases, homosexual, non-reproductive) affair. Hence, from his-- and the Athenian audience's-- point of view, Jason's conduct towards Medea had more to do with the finessing of an awkward situation than with emotional or gender-oriented betrayal.

If this marriage was so sensible,
Why not tell me before you started? 540
Why hide it? The one you love-- remember?

JASON:

How well you'd have taken it,
The idea of it. Look at you:
You can't control your fury as it is.

MEDEA:

As it is, you're getting old. 545
Your 'foreigner' embarrasses you.

JASON:

Will you get this straight? I marry
Not for sex, hot for the royal bed,
But as I said: to care for you,
To make royal brothers for our sons, 550
To protect us all.

MEDEA:

Protection that tastes of death!
What security repays a broken heart?

JASON:

Must you take personally what helps us all?
Why greet good luck by calling it the opposite? 555
You'll change. I know you'll change.

MEDEA:

You know so much. Just where you're going.
And I? Exiled, betrayed, alone.

JASON:

You brought it on yourself.

MEDEA:

What did I do? I took a wife and let her down? 560

JASON:

You cursed the royal house.

MEDEA:

And yours.

JASON:

This gets us nowhere.
If you or the children need anything,
Cash for the journey, ask. 565

I'll be generous-- letters to people
Who'll take you in. My dear, be sensible.
No more anger. You've everything to gain.

MEDEA:

I need no friends of yours to take me in.
I'll take none of your favours. 570
They're tainted, foul. I spit on them.

JASON:

Gods, will you witness this?
I've done all I could-- for you, for them--
But what's good for others is no good to you:
You kick our help aside. You're mad. 575
What but worse can come of this?

MEDEA:

Go in. You're hot. Your brand new bride--
Get to her room, don't waste your time out here.
Go marry! With God's good help
Your honeymoon will soon turn sour. 580

Exit JASON.

CHORUS:

Desire that comes and comes too strong [strophe]
Destroys our reputations and our wits.
But when Aphrodite comes
Gentle and just right,
What other goddess brings such joy? 585
Aphrodite, lady, never loose
Your golden bow at me,
Unerring arrows, barbed with desire.

Better a sensible life, [antistrophe]
Gods' loveliest gift: 590
No quarrelling,
No wrangles to snarl the soul.
No thirst for other beds--
Aphrodite be not so,
Sharp guardian of all our sex-- 595
Honour marriage,
A bed that's not a battlefield.

O Corinth, my lovely land, [strophe]
My home, may I never lose you,
Never be driven to despair, penniless, 600
Stabbed through and through.

Better death, better death,
Sunset at day's end.
What misery's like hers--
To lose the land you love?

605

It's clear enough: no myth.
You're friendless, cityless--
The worst of ills,
The worst of pains.
No friends to pity you.
Send suffering, send death
To all who lock their hearts
Against those they ought to love.
They'll be no friends of mine.

[*antistrophe*]

610

Enter AIGEUS²¹, attended.

AIGEUS:

Medea, happiness-- the best greeting
One old friend can give another.

615

MEDEA:

Happiness, Aigeus, wise Pandion's²² son.
What brings the king of Athens here?

AIGEUS:

I've been to Delphi, Apollo's famous oracle.

MEDEA:

The navel of the Earth. What took you there?

620

AIGEUS:

I went to ask how my seed might prosper.

MEDEA:

Still childless after all these years?

AIGEUS:

Some god would have it so.

MEDEA:

You do have a wife? You're not... inexperienced?

AIGEUS:

²¹ **AIGEUS** (EYE-g-yooss, *Greek* e-YEFS, 'goatish'), was aged and childless, afraid that when he died his enemies would divide his kingdom. He wandered the world, asking friends and oracles how he might have children. In this play we meet him on one of his journeys, after hearing a riddling oracle from Apollo's shrine at Delphi. Later, he fathered a child, Theseus-- and years later the oracle came true.

²² **PANDION** (pan-DEE-on, 'all-Zeus'). Mythical king of Athens, father of ERECHTHEUS.

The furrow of wedlock is not unploughed.

625

MEDEA:

What did Apollo say?

AIGEUS:

A riddle, hard to understand.

MEDEA:

Tell me. If it's allowed to speak it.

AIGEUS:

It's allowed. Yours are just the brains we need.

MEDEA:

The oracle. What was it?

630

AIGEUS:

'Forbear to loose the wineskin's dangling end'--

MEDEA:

Till when? Till where?

AIGEUS:

'Till you come back home: your own ancestral hearth.'

MEDEA:

Home. Then what brings your fleet to Corinth?

AIGEUS:

An old lord lives here. Pittheus²³ of Troezen...²⁴

635

MEDEA:

Pelops' son. I'm told, a saint.

AIGEUS:

I'll tell him my oracle.

MEDEA:

He'll explain it. He knows. He has the skill.

AIGEUS:

And he's a friend of mine; we soldiered together.

MEDEA:

I wish you joy of him and of your quest.

640

AIGEUS:

²³ **PITTHEUS** (PIT-thyooss, 'pine-god'). Mythical king of Troezen, renowned for sagacity.

²⁴ **TROEZEN** (TRO-dzen). Town in the Peloponnese; in myth, the birthplace of Theseus son of AIGEUS.

Medea, what's wrong? You're pale.

MEDEA:

My husband's the vilest man alive.

AIGEUS:

What's happened? In simple words.

MEDEA:

I'm betrayed. By Jason. I hurt him not.

AIGEUS:

But what's he done? I still don't understand.

645

MEDEA:

He's taken another wife, here in this house.

AIGEUS:

That's scandalous. You mean he's--

MEDEA:

Betrayed the wife and sons he used to love.

AIGEUS:

Was it... lust? Was he tired of you?

MEDEA:

Lust, yes: for power. He pants for a throne.

650

AIGEUS:

What throne? Whose girl is this he's got?

MEDEA:

Kreon's. The king's.

AIGEUS:

No wonder you're upset.

MEDEA:

I'm banished. Dead. No more life here.

AIGEUS:

It gets worse and worse. Who banished you?

655

MEDEA:

His majesty. Beyond the frontiers. No return.

AIGEUS:

And Jason agrees? I find this incredible.

MEDEA:

Oh so does he. He says. But he agrees all right.
Aigeus, on my knees I beg you, pity me.
Pity my suffering, my wretchedness. 660
Don't let them thrust me into exile.
Take me in, give me shelter, welcome me.
Your home my home. And in return?
This desire of yours, your desire for sons--
The gods will grant it. You'll die fulfilled. 665
You little knew what luck today was yours.
I'll cure your childlessness... I've drugs,
I've ways. You'll spill the seed of sons.

AIGEUS:

Medea, I'll do it--
First for the gods, and next 670
For what you say of sons, of sons.
It's settled.
As soon as you leave Corinth,
I'll help you, protect you. I give my word.
One thing only: I won't, I can't 675
Slip you out of here, steal you away.
Find your own way to Athens.
These people are allies. I won't offend them.

MEDEA:

I understand. Of course.
All I ask is this: 680
Swear an oath; we'll know just where we stand.

AIGEUS:

Don't you trust me?

MEDEA:

You I trust. But my enemies:
The daughters of Peleias, king Kreon here--
I'm weak; they're rich and royal; 685
Their trumpets still might bend your will.
Swear an oath. Words alone are frail;
An oath's protected by the gods and binds us fast.

AIGEUS:

Shrewdly said, Medea. I'll do it.
It suits me, too, to swear an oath: 690
It gives me an excuse, an argument
To show your enemies. Best all round. Name your gods.

MEDEA:

Swear by Mother Earth,
By my father's father the Sun,
By all the generations of the gods--

695

AIGEUS:

Go on. Go on. You must spell it out.

MEDEA:

Never to expel me from Athens' realm;
Never to heed my enemies' demands
Or yield me up, so long as you shall live.

AIGEUS:

I swear by Earth, by his Majesty the Sun, by all the gods
This oath shall be... as I heard you say.

700

MEDEA:

Perfect. And if you break your oath--?

AIGEUS:

May I be damned, like all who scorn the gods.

MEDEA:

Go on your way with joy.
As soon as I come to Athens-- and come I shall--
All will be well, all well.
I've things to do in Corinth first.

705

CHORUS:

My lord, may Hermes,²⁵ Maia's²⁶ son,
Guide of travellers, lead you safely home.
Whatever you desire,
May it be yours, may it be done.
Aigeus has proved himself
A true and noble man today.

710

Exit AIGEUS.

MEDEA:

O Zeus! Justice of Zeus! Light of the Sun!
My enemies are in my power.
The road lies open-- to victory.
We were weak, and then he appeared:
My harbour, my anchorage when the deed is done.
Now my enemies will pay, and pay.

715

²⁵ **HERMES** (HER-meess, 'pillar'). Messenger god, patron of travellers and guide of the souls of the Dead to the Underworld.

²⁶ **MAIA** (MY-a, 'grandmother'). One of the Pleiades, with whom ZEUS mated to produce Hermes.

Listen now. My plan. My dreadful plan. 720
I'll send a slave inside to Jason,
Beg him out here again--
And when he comes, soft words:
I've changed my mind; what he did was right;
His new marriage, his treachery 725
Were brave and right-- good luck.
One favour only: let the children stay.

Oh it's not that I mean to leave them,
Not here, ringed by my enemies.
They're my trap, to spring on her. 730
They'll take her my wedding gifts:
A silken robe, a golden crown.
Soon as the pretties touch her flesh, she dies,
And all who touch her die as well.
I'll poison them. I'll smear them. So. 735

Then... then ...
I can't say it. Do such a thing. I must.
I'll kill the children. My children. Mine!
Then, when all Jason's hopes, his palace hopes,
Are gone, I'll leave this land, 740
I'll run. I'll kill my darling sons, and run.
Vile. Vilest. Yes. I'll do it.
I should bear their mockery? I won't.

It's settled. It's all I have.
No motherland, no home, no resting-place. 745
Oh why did I quit my father's house
And trust a Greek? Soon Jason pays.
The sons he had by me he sees
No more, alive. No sons from her,
His bride: she writhes and dies, when I decide. 750
Who calls me pliant, powerless?
I'm of another kind.
On my friends I smile, my enemies I crush--
'What braver life could any mortal claim?

CHORUS:

Medea, you've told us. The whole plan. 755
We're your friends. We want to help.
Don't do it. Life and death... the law. You can't.

MEDEA:

I must.

I forgive your words.
My suffering, not yours. 760

CHORUS:

How will you bring yourself...?
Your sons! Your sons!

MEDEA:

How else will Jason learn?

CHORUS:

Tears for yourself.
Such bitterness you'll taste-- 765

MEDEA:

On! On! Deeds, not words.
Nurse, go in, fetch Jason. Not a word of what you know.
Be true to your mistress, true to all our sex.

Exit NURSE.

CHORUS:

The people of Athens, [strophe] 770
That happy breed, Erechtheus'²⁷ sons,

Sprung from the blessed gods,
Sturdy growth in healthy soil,
The wisest of the wise--
They breathe the air of freedom
Where the nine Muses 775
Brought golden Harmony to light
By the Pierian Spring--

By the sweet waters of Kephisos²⁸ [antistrophe] 780
Where Aphrodite stoops to drink,
Wafts gentle breezes across the land,
Fragrant roses in her hair--

Her gift is wisdom
That shares the throne with love,
Universal grace and excellence.

How shall such a city [strophe] 785
Of sacred streams, such a kindly land,
Shelter you... child-killer,
Befouled, unclean?
Imagine the wounds,

²⁷ **ERECHTHEUS** (e-REK-thyooss, *Greek* e-rech-THEFS, 'smiter'). Legendary king and founder of Athens.

²⁸ **KEPHISOS** (kef-IS-soss). River-name. The best-known Kephisos flowed from mount Parnassos to Lake Copais, and was beloved by the Muses. Another Kephisos flowed through Athens, and was famed for its placid beauty.

The blood, the blood, 790
The murder that you do.
On our knees we beg you-- think again.
Your children must not die.

How will you dare? [antistrophe] 795
How stiffen yourself,
Hard heart, hard hand,
To do such things?
Your sons! How can you?
Look them in the eye, and murder them?
When they're on their knees, 800
How will you dare
To strike them down?

Enter JASON.

JASON:

Here I am, as asked.
You hate me, and still I'm here.
So tell me, woman, 805
What fresh request have you to ask of me?

MEDEA:

Jason, I beg you, forgive, forget
What I said before. You know my temper;
Bear with it, for the sake of our long love.
I've been thinking and my conclusion is, 805
I've been a fool. Why rant and rave
At those who only want to help? Why heap
Such hatred on the king, and on you, my lord,
Who think only of what is best for us?
Of course our children must have brothers. 810
Of course that's why you're marrying.
The Gods smile down, and I complain!
I too should smile. I should sheathe my rage.
I must think about the boys.
Exile! We need our friends. 815
So, now: I'm grateful for your foresight,
All you've done for us. I was a fool.
I should be party to your enterprise,
Play the bridesmaid, smile.

We women! We are what we are-- 820
Our natures, how can we help them?
Don't bite back, Jason;
Don't pay back snarl with snarl.

I give in. I was wrong.
I know now how I should behave. 825

Enter NURSE and CHILDREN.

Children, come here. Don't hide.
Kiss your father-- see, so do I.
Change hate for love-- see, so do I.
We're friends again, all friends, all anger spent.
That's right. Now hold his hand in yours. 830

Aside, as the CHILDREN embrace JASON.

O-ee,²⁹ mo-ee,
The pain of it! The pain
Of what I have in mind and here must hide!
They'll not stretch out sweet arms to me like that
As long as they live. As long as they live. 835
It breaks my heart. I can't. I must.

Boys, look. My quarrel with your father: done.
My cheeks all wet with tears.

CHORUS:

Our eyes, too, rain tears.
Pray God there's no worse to come. 840

JASON:

Well done, my dear.
Not that I blame you for... before.
It's natural for a woman to be upset.
But now you've learnt; you're sensible.
You took your time, but there we are: 845

I was right, and you admit it. Well done.
Children. Sons. Your father has taken thought,
Taken counsel with the gods,
About your future. One day, with your brothers,
You'll be the leading men in Corinth. 850

Grow big and strong--
Leave the rest to your father and the gods
Who work with him. I want to see you both
Tall in the pride of youth,
Treading down my enemies. 855

Woman, what now? Why tears? Don't turn away.
Does what I say upset you?

MEDEA:

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

²⁹ **O-EE** Exactly as it sounds; cry of grief. More turned in on the private emotion than A-EE.

JASON:

Dry your tears. I'll provide for them.

MEDEA:

As you say. I know you will.

860

But I'm a woman-- I have to cry.

JASON:

There's really no need to fret for them.

MEDEA:

I'm their mother.

When you prayed long life for them,

It hurt. God grant it true!

865

But as for what I wanted you to hear,

Only half is said. There's more.

It pleases his majesty to banish me--

And I accept it, I understand.

If I stayed I'd be in your lordships' way,

870

My exile's not in question--

But the children! They need their father's hand.

Beg Kreon to let them stay with you.

JASON:

I'm not sure I'll succeed. But obviously I'll try.

MEDEA:

Ask your... wife to ask her father to let them stay.

875

JASON:

Good plan. I might get her to do it.

MEDEA:

She'll do it; she's a woman.

I can help you. I'll send her gifts,

The prettiest in the world:

A silken robe, a golden crown.

880

The boys can take them. Nurse, go in:

Bring all that... finery out here.

Exit NURSE.

How lucky she is! I never knew such luck.

She takes the best man in the world to bed,

And gilds her triumph with wedding gifts

885

My father's father, the Sun himself, provides.

Enter NURSE with boxes containing the gifts.

Boys, take these presents, in your hands,

To her highness, the happy bride.
She'll take them, gladly. They're all she wants.

JASON:

What are you doing? Why deprive yourself? 890
D'you think the palace short of silks,
Of gold? Keep them, don't give them away.
If her highness my wife values me at all,
She'll listen. No need for this.

MEDEA:

Po po po!³⁰ Even gods like gifts. 895
Gold's better than a thousand arguments.
Today good luck is hers, God smiles.
She's royal, she's young. For my children's sake
I'd sell my soul, and what is gold to that?
Go in, boys. Inside that rich, rich house. 900
Down on your knees to that young wife,
My queen, and beg her to let you stay.
Give her the gifts. Her own hands. Deliver them,
And bring me the news I long to hear:
That all I want is done. 905

Exeunt CHILDREN, NURSE and JASON.

CHORUS:

No hope for them now, the children. [strophe]
They walk the road of death.
She'll grasp her bridal crown,
And grasping, seal her fate:
Her hands, her golden hair: 910
She'll plait her own bright death.

Such glitter, such softness! [antistrophe]
How will she resist? The robe,
The crown: she'll pretty herself
For marriage, for death. 915
Her fate is fixed:
There's no escape.

Unhappy Jason, royal son-in-law, [strophe]
Bridegroom of pain,
How could you know you bring
Sharp death to your sons, your wife? 920
When you made your plan,

³⁰ **PO PO PO** Used as we use the expression normally written 'tut tut'. Like the first two letters of the word 'pole', said quickly, and as often as you like. The more po's, the more eyebrows raised: cf. 'tut tut tut'.

Was this the plan you made?

We weep no less for you,
Medea, mother, murderess.
Is this the price you claim
For a marriage mocked,
A husband, guilty,
Wallowing in another's bed?

[*antistrophe*]

925

Enter TUTOR with CHILDREN.

TUTOR:

My lady, the children are reprieved.
No banishment. Her highness smiled,
With her own hands received the gifts.
For your sons, no obstacles remain.
What is it?

930

You turn away, you're pale--
Does what I say not please you?

935

MEDEA:

A-ee.

TUTOR:

Why react like this? Incredible.

MEDEA:

A-ee, a-ee.

TUTOR:

Was I mistaken? Was this bad news?

940

MEDEA:

You told what you saw. You're not to blame.

TUTOR:

Then why such downcast eyes? Why tears?

MEDEA:

What else can I do? The gods,
My own despair, have worked such things...

TUTOR:

Take heart. Your sons will look after you. One day.

945

MEDEA:

I've others to look after first. A-ee.

TUTOR:

You're not the first to be unyoked from sons.

Mortal fate is hard. You'd best get used to it.

MEDEA:

I'll bear it. You go in.
Set their things ready, 950
The usual everyday routine.

Exit TUTOR, leaving her alone with the CHILDREN.

Children, children, you have a city now,
A home. You can leave me, all wretched,
And live forever here, motherless.

I must go in exile to a foreign land, 955
Nevermore delight in you,
Never make your marriage bed,
Set torches, sing the happy day.

I chose it so; so it must be.
Was it for this I suckled you? 960

For this the weariness,
Torment of childbirth, for this?

What a fool I was! To have such hopes--
That you would care for me when I was old,
Dress my body for the grave, 965

Sons that everyone would envy me.
Sweet hopes, destroyed. I must lose you,
Stretch out my life alone, in pain.

No more your loving eyes on me--
Our lives diverge, our courses part. 970

Fe-oo, fe-oo.
Why must you gaze with such soft eyes,
Smile me such smiles, the last I'll see?

A-ee! What can I do? My spirit fails.
Their faces shine. It can't be done. 975

Farewell my former plans. I'll take
My children with me. To punish their father,
Must I hurt them too? Destroy myself?
I can't. My former plans, farewell.

What then? My enemies unpunished, 980
How they'll laugh, they'll laugh.

Do it. Dare. You must.
Am I a coward?

Shall sentiment melt me-- am I so weak?
Boys, go inside. If any here 985

Abhor this sacrifice, avert your eyes.
My hand won't falter now.

Ah, ah! Not so.
I can't. My children. Mine.
Spare them. We'll live in happiness, 990
Live in Athens. They'll soothe my pain.

No! Spirits of vengeance,
Dark in the deeps of Hell,
Shall I leave them, my sons, toys for my enemies?
It's done; there's no reprieve. 995

She's crowned, dressed
For her marriage, for death. I see it. I know it.
I walk a cruel road-- and crueller still
Their road, my sons, the road I set them on.
Little ones, come here. Speak to me. 1000

Kiss me. Give me your hands.
Sweet arms, sweet lips... Be happy where you go...
Here happiness is dead. He killed it,
Jason, your father. Let me hold you.
Soft skin, sweet breath, my sons. 1005
Go. Go. How can I look at you?
I'm dead. How can I bear it?

Exeunt CHILDREN.

It's cruel. Wicked. Yes it is, it is.³¹
What else can I do? Hard anger rules,
The cause of all mortal pain. 1010

CHORUS:

There are paths,
Thickets in human thought
Too tangled for women's minds to track.
Men say. I know those roads. I've walked them.
Not that we women are witless: 1015
Reason walks and talks with us--
One or two of us--
Grants us power of thought.

Now what I think is this:
Happy the childless, happy those 1020
Who have never given birth.
They give no hostages to fortune.
They never need to know

³¹ **IT IS** We've translated this into English, as it fits our dialectic here. But it might be useful to know that the phrase is also directly transliterated, and in Greek it is used to vocalise sudden uncontrollable grief-- a kind of controlled wail from the pit of the diaphragm.

If a child is blessing or curse.
Such ignorance spares much pain. 1025

'Sweet little things!'
Have children in your house,
You worry, they wear you down.
Will they grow healthy, strong?
Will they have means to live? 1030
You'll never know.
Will they turn out good or bad,
After all your anguish?
You'll never know.

Another torment, 1035
The worst, remains,
Common to all.

You've enough to eat;
Your children grow
And thrive-- and then, 1040
Chance being lord of ail,
Death spirits them away,
Your children.

Why do they do this, the gods?
Why choose it, send it, 1045
Your children snatched away,
Sharp torment, pain on pain?

MEDEA:

Friends, no more delay.
The news I want is here.
Look: one of Jason's slaves. 1050
Breathless. What a tale he'll tell!

Enter SERVANT.

SERVANT:

Horrible! Inhuman! Vile!
You did it, Medea. Go!
Ship... chariot... just go!

MEDEA:

What's happened? 1055

SERVANT:

They're dead. Her highness,
His majesty her father. Your poison. Dead.

MEDEA:

Good news! Well done!
You're my friend forever.

SERVANT:

You're mad. 1060
You plotted this, you did it--
And now you gloat?

MEDEA:

We come from different worlds.
Take your time. Your story. How did they die?
Was it really so horrible, so vile? 1065
The worse it was, the more I want to hear.

SERVANT:

Your sons came in with their father,
Came into the marriage-house.
We slaves rejoiced: we'd lived your pain.
Now word went round: 1070

'The quarrel, it's over. My lord, my lady, friends.'
Some kissed the children's hands, others
Their fair hair. I was so pleased,
I went with them to the princess' room, her highness,
Our mistress in place of you. 1075

At first she didn't see the boys:
She'd eyes for Jason only. Then she saw them.
She veiled her face and turned away.
'Why are they here?'
Lord Jason charmed her sulkiness. 1080

'Don't frown,' he said. 'Don't be angry.
I love them, your husband. You must love them too.
Take their presents, smile at them--
Then ask his majesty your father, for me,
To lift their banishment.' 1085

She saw the presents. 'No' was 'Yes':
She agreed to all he asked. Quick, then--
They'd hardly gone, the sons, the father--
She took the soft silk dress
And tried it on. She set the crown 1090

Gold in her golden hair, arranged it at a mirror,
Giggling at her own reflection,
Her dead reflection.
She danced from the chair, skipped up and down--
Empty room, bare white feet-- 1095

Thrilled with her gifts, checking again:
'Do the folds fall straight?'

Then-- horrible, before our eyes--
 Her face changed. She reeled, stumbled
 To a chair, shaking, falling. 1100
 One of her women took it for some god,
 Possession, shouted for joy-- until she saw
 White froth on her highness' lips,
 Eyes rolling, blood sucked from her face.
 The old woman's joy-cries changed to howls. 1105
 And the rest of us... one ran for his majesty,
 Another for Jason, to tell him
 How it was with his bride:
 The palace rang with running.

For the time it takes a sprinter 1110
 To run one lap, she lay there:
 Eyes closed, speechless.
 Then she began to shriek and shriek.
 Two agonies, and both at once:
 On her head, that golden crown 1115
 Dripped scorching, liquid fire;
 And the dress, your children's second gift,
 Branded her soft flesh. Poor girl,
 She hurtled up, all fire,
 And bucked her head to fling away the crown. 1120
 But it was welded there, a shackle of gold.
 She fell to the ground in agony;
 None but her father would have known her--
 Eyes, face, oozing.
 Flesh pulped by poison-fangs 1125
 Slid from her bones: gum from a blazing pine.
 Horrible. We cowered. None touched her.
 We'd seen, we knew.

But not her father. Poor man, he didn't know.
 Ran in, fell on the corpse, cradled it, 1130
 Kissed it. 'Sweet child,
 What power has raped you so?
 Who's orphaned me, left me alone and old?
 An empty tomb, bereft. O let me die,'
 He cried, 'Let me die with you.' 1135
 He wept and wept-- and then, all spent,
 He tried to rise, get free of her.
 But her body stuck to him, as ivy clings
 To laurel. A ghastly wrestling-match:
 The father struggling up; dead daughter 1140

Dragging back. He tugged, he fought:
Flesh tore from aged bones.
At last, too weak to fight, he fell,
Gasped, died. They lie there now,
Father and daughter, corpse on corpse. 1145
Who'll not weep for such a sight?

There's no more to say. You know the way,
No doubt, to escape due punishment.
'Life's but a shadow here for mortals'. True.
Our wisdom's a shell, no more. 1150
The cleverest plan most, fall furthest.
Call no one happy; no one is--
Do golden lives mean happiness?

Exit.

CHORUS:

Jason has suffered terribly this day--
As he deserved. But that poor girl-- 1155
We pity her, the cruel chance
That made her Kreon's daughter
And sends her now, for Jason's sake,
To honeymoon at Hell's black gate.

MEDEA:

What's next, my friends, is clear: 1160
I must kill the children quickly and be gone.
Yes, quickly: delay will yield my sons
To hands more savage than my own.
Necessity's their judge; they die.

I gave them life and now I'll give them death-- 1165
My heart all dagger. Do it.

Don't flinch. You must.

Come, hand: the sword.

This course must be run.

No weakness. No... memories. Flesh of your flesh! 1170

Forget you loved them. For one short day, forget.

Then weep, wretch, weep,

Who killed to prove your love.

Exit.

CHORUS:

Mother Earth, hear us; [strophe] 1175
All-dazzling Sun, look down.
She's gripped by fate.
Soon, soon, she'll lift her hands,

Red with her own sons' blood.
From your golden seed she grew,
More than mortal-- 1180
What mortal dare spill her blood?
Lord of light, reach down,
Stop her, snatch up
The Fury that haunts this house.

In vain you toiled for them; [antistrophe] 1185
In vain your labour, your love: in vain.
You braved the stony trap,
The bruising, crashing rocks--
Was it for this you came?
Heart's grief! Rage tears the soul. 1190
Why must you kill them, why?
Blood poisons the ground, kin-blood,
God's curse, god's plague
On all who remain alive.

*The CHILDREN are heard from inside.*³²

CHILDREN:

Ah! Ah! [strophe] 1195

CHORUS:

D'you hear them? Their cries?
Stone heart, cruel fate.

FIRST CHILD:

Mummy! No!

SECOND CHILD:

Don't kill us!

CHORUS:

Should we go inside? 1200
We could save their lives.

FIRST CHILD:

Gods, help!

SECOND CHILD:

³² **CHILDREN'S CRIES** We think that the children are given offstage dialogue in the scene of their murder only because their scene was sung, and without words there would have been no rhythm for the composer to work on. The surviving text is thus libretto without music, about ten per cent of the intended effect. If the scene had not been a music number-- and such scenes are spoken in other Greek tragedies-- the children would probably have had nothing more than screams. (O-ee is often used in such cases.) The convention of the sung offstage murder (which may nowadays remind us of Japanese theatre more than of ancient Greek practice) is a deliberate distancing of the violence, as powerful as putting the deaths offstage in the first place.

The knife. Oh help!

CHORUS:

You're stone, you're iron--
To pluck your own womb's fruit!
You began them. You ended them.

[*antistrophe*]

1205

Remember that other one
Who laid hands on her beloved sons?
Ino³³ her name, by the gods sent mad:
Sent to wander the world, condemned
By Hera³⁴ queen of heaven.
Foul with her children's blood,
She climbed the high cliffs edge
And jumped. And so she died,
As her two sons had died.

1210

1215

What could be worse?
Sex leads death's dance,
In childbirth grief begins.

Enter JASON with SOLDIERS.

JASON:

You, women. Is she there, inside,
That criminal? Or where is she?
She can hide in the holes of Earth,
Take wing to cheat our rage--
The king, the princess, dead--
She'll not escape.
The children now.
She's struck at the royal house;
I'm here to hide my sons,
Before Kreon's family kill them
To avenge their mother's crime.

1220

1225

CHORUS:

Poor man! Don't you know?
The second horror? You haven't heard?

1230

JASON:

Heard what? She means to kill me too?

³³ **INO** (EE-noh, 'she who makes sinewy'). Mortal queen of King Athamas of Thebes. She hated her step-children (born to Kadmos by the goddess Nephele), and planned to kill them. They escaped to Kolchis on a golden-fleeced ram, and the gods punished Ino by making Athamas think she was a lioness, and hunt her. Ino took her children in her arms, jumped over a cliff, and was dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

³⁴ **HERA** (HEE-ra, *Greek* HEE-ree, 'protectress'). ZEUS' consort, queen of the gods, guardian of oaths, promises and the marriage-bond.

CHORUS:

Your sons are dead. Their mother killed them.

JASON:

What did you say? I'm dead.

CHORUS:

Your sons are dead. Believe it.

1235

JASON:

Where did she do it? Here? In there?

CHORUS:

Open the doors. You'll see.

JASON:

Slaves! The doors! Unbar them,
Open them. Let me see. My sons, dead,
And that other one-- the one I mean to kill.

1240

The SOLDIERS go to the doors. MEDEA is revealed overhead, out of reach.³⁵ The CHILDREN's bodies are at her feet.

MEDEA:

Why hammer? Why shake the doors?
You want the bodies, the murderess?
Be still. You've things to tell me?
Speak. We're out of reach.
The Sun, my father's father,
Bears me high in his chariot,
Beyond my enemies.

1245

JASON:

Unholy. Vile. Woman!
Hated by gods, by men despised.
You took a sword to them. Your sons.
Their mother.
You did such things.
You destroyed my sons and still you live,
Face Mother Earth, stare down the Sun?

1250

³⁵ **Note on Medea's Appearance 'Ex Machina'** [i.e., on a theater crane] Although this staging is traditional, there is no evidence for it beyond the text itself. Some scholars think that it dates from at least a century after the original staging of Medea: there is no proof, they say, that the theatre crane was available at the time of the play's first production. (On the other hand, Aristophanes, a younger contemporary of Euripides, constantly mocks his use of stage machinery and in particular of the 'deus ex machina'.) If the use of the crane is authentic here, it is in fact an ironic variation on the 'deus ex machina' ending of some other Greek tragedies (for example Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), in which a god appears, 'on high', to unravel the tangle of mortal actions and motivations on the stage below. Like the interplay between farce and tragedy in the style of *Medea*, this appearance reverses expectation: a major dramatic surprise.

Die! I know you now, 1255
 I knew you not before,
 When I brought you from the ends of the world
 To Greece, my Greece.
 You betrayed your father, your country--
 All guilt you are, all plague. 1260
 Oh but the pain is mine! Your sins, my pain.
 You butchered your brother, there at his hearth,
 That day you stepped aboard my Argo.
 So it began: you married me, bore sons,
 You killed them-- for sex! For jealousy! 1265
 What Greek would have done such things?
 I could have married here. I married you,
 A tigress, no thing of flesh and blood,
 A hound of Hell, you outsnarl them all.
 I'm done. No curse in all the world 1270
 Can bite as I would bite.
 Get out. You did such things--
 You killed your children. Leave me to mourn.
 No marriage now. No sons,
 The seed I sowed and reared. 1275
 All's dead for me. I'm done.

MEDEA:

I could answer these charges.
 But Zeus the father knows
 All I did for you and how you did for me.
 You thought you'd kick me from your bed 1280
 And laugh at me, unpunished. Wrong!
 And she was wrong, your princess,
 Kreon was wrong to crown
 Your marriage with my banishment. All wrong.
 Tigress. Hell-hound. Name me your names,
 I have your heart! 1285

JASON:

Your pain, no less than mine.

MEDEA:

Your pain: my comfort.

JASON:

My sons! Your mother!

MEDEA:

My sons! Your father! 1290

JASON:

Did this hand lift the sword?

MEDEA:

Your vanity: your lust.

JASON:

I left your bed. That gave you the right to kill?

MEDEA:

You think that nothing-- for a woman?

JASON:

For an honest woman. Not for you.

1295

MEDEA:

Your sons are dead. That bites.

JASON:

Their avenging spirits swarm-- on you!

MEDEA:

The gods know who began all this.

JASON:

They know your heart; it sickens them.

MEDEA:

Spit hate. It's all you have.

1300

JASON:

No more. No more.

MEDEA:

What then?

JASON:

Let me bury their bodies. Mourn.

MEDEA:

I'll lay them in Earth myself,

In Hera's shrine: no enemy

1305

Will tear these graves.

Myself, in Athens I'll make my home,

Where Aigeus rules. As for you,

Your life was folly, you'll die

Like the fool you are. A plank from *Argo*,

1310

Your precious *Argo*, will smash your skull.

So ends our sorry story, yours and mine,

My dear.

JASON:

Out of their wounds may Furies swarm
To cut you down, my dear.

1315

MEDEA:

My dear, speak up. The Gods can't hear.

JASON:

Filth, filth, to kill a child.

MEDEA:

Go in. Bury her-- your wife.

JASON:

No child have I to comfort me.

MEDEA:

When you're old you'll feel it.

1320

JASON:

My sons, my darlings.

MEDEA:

Mine, not yours.

JASON:

Love made you murder them?

MEDEA:

That you might die of it.

JASON:

Let me kiss them, kiss their sweet lips.

1325

MEDEA:

You spurned them-- and now
You want their kisses?

JASON:

Let me touch them, hold them,
That sweet flesh, for God's sake, let me--

MEDEA:

No. Request denied.

1330

JASON:

Zeus, do you hear?
She spits on us,

Crushes us, that foulness,
That tigress who killed her sons. 1335
As long as life is left in me
I'll weep for them, remind the gods
Of how you murdered them,
Refused me their touch,
The right to bury them. My sons!
Oh why did I sow that seed, 1340
Why make them-- for you to kill?

CHORUS:

In heaven, Zeus holds the balance.
Expect the unexpected.
What mortals dream, the gods frustrate;
For the impossible they contrive a way. 1345
So it was with what happened here, today.³⁶

³⁶ **Note on the Final Chorus** Euripides often ends plays in this abrupt, unresolved way. Normally, in tragedy, the actors leave the stage and the Chorus sing an exit-ode (some one and a half minutes is required to process from the chorus-area to the theatre 'wings'). If Medea appeared 'above', on the roof of the stage building or flown in on the theatre crane, how and when did she go? And how did Jason leave the stage? It is almost as if the play ends in freeze-frame-- an effect repeated (using the same chorus lines) in *Bacchae* twenty-four years later.