
Euripides

Medea

431 BC

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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]

NURSE

Oh 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.
I wish they'd never chopped the pine trees down
in those mountain forests up on Pelion,
to make oars for the hands of those great men
who set off, on Pelias' orders,
to fetch the golden fleece. Then my mistress,
Medea, never would've sailed away
to the towers in the land of Iolcus,
her heart passionately in love with Jason.
She'd never have convinced those women,
Pelias' daughters, to kill their father.
She'd not have come to live in Corinth here,
with her husband and her children—well loved
in exile by those whose land she'd moved to.

10

[10]

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

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

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

TUTOR

Old slave from my mistress' household,
why are you here, standing by the gate, [50]
all alone, complaining to yourself

about what's wrong? How come Medea
is willing to stay inside without you?

NURSE

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

70

TUTOR

Unhappy lady! Has she stopped weeping yet?

NURSE

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

[60]

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,
with their mother, too. I've no idea
if the story's true or not. I hope it's not.

[70]

90

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

If we must add these brand-new troubles

to our old ones, before we've dealt with them,
then we're finished.

TUTOR

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

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

Come on, children, get inside the house.
Things will be fine. *[To the Tutor]* You must keep them away— 120 [90]
as far as possible—and don't bring them
near their mother when she's in this state.
I've seen her look at them with savage eyes,
as if she means to injure them somehow.
I know this anger of hers will not end,
not before she turns it loose on someone.
I hope it falls on enemies, not on friends! 120

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? Oh my children,
cursed children of a hateful mother—

may you die with your father, all his house,
may it all perish, crash down in ruins.

NURSE

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

[Enter the Chorus of Corinthian women]

CHORUS LEADER

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

NURSE

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

MEDEA *[still from inside the house]*

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

CHORUS

Oh 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,
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
Oh, 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 like a bull,
or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks.
Those men from long ago—you'd not be wrong [190]
to call them fools without much wisdom.
They thought up songs for celebrations,
feasts and banquets, bringing to human life 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
the deaths and horrifying disasters

which destroy whole families. What a blessing
it would be for human beings if music
could cure these sorrows. When people feast, [200]
why should people sing? It's a waste of time.
People who eat well are happy anyway— 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' daughter, goddess of those promises
which carried her across the ocean
to Hellas, through the black salt seas, 240 [210]
through the place which few men penetrate,
the strait which guards the Pontic Sea.

[Enter Medea with the Nurse]

MEDEA

Women of Corinth, I'm coming here,
outside the house, so you won't think ill of me.
Many men, I know, become too arrogant,
both in the public eye and in their homes.
Others get a reputation for indifference,
because they stay at ease within the house.
There's no justice in the eyes of mortal men.
Before they know someone's deep character, 250 [220]
they hate her on sight, 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,
well, it's destroyed my heart. My life is gone,
dear friends. I've lost all joy. I want to die.
The man who was everything to me, 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've 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
three times in battle holding up my shield 290 [250]
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 country.
I have no mother, brother, or relation,
to shelter with in this extremity.
And so I want to ask something from you. 300
If I find some way to punish Jason [260]
for these injustices, and his bride, as well,
and father, too, say nothing. In other things
a woman may be timid—in watching battles
or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,
her marriage violated, there's no heart
more desperate for blood than hers.

CHORUS LEADER

I'll do what you request. For you are right
to pay back your husband. And, Medea,
I'm not surprised you grieve at these events. 310

[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. [270]

CREON

You there, Medea, scowling in anger
against your husband. I'm ordering you
out of Corinth. You must go into exile,

and take those two children of yours with you.
Go quickly. I'm here to make quite sure
that this decree is put into effect.
I'll not go back to my own palace 320
until I've cast you out, beyond our borders.

MEDEA

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

CREON

I'm afraid of you.
I won't conceal the truth. There's a good chance
you might well instigate some fatal harm
against my daughter. Many things lead me 330
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, [290]
it's better that you hate me, than for me
to grow soft now and then regret it later.

MEDEA

Alas, this is not the first time, Creon, 340
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, 350 [300]
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.
For I'm a knowledgeable woman. I make
some people envious. Others say I'm shy.
Some the opposite. Some say I'm hostile.
I'm not that clever, but still you fear me.
Have I hurt you at all, made you suffer?
Don't fear me, Creon. It's not in me
to commit crimes against the men in charge. 360
Besides, in what way have you injured me?
You've married your daughter to a man,

one your heart selected. My husband's [310]
the one I hate. In my view, you've acted
with good sense in this business. So now,
I'll not begrudge you your prosperity.
Have your marriage, and good luck to you.
But let me remain here, in this country.
Although I've suffered an injustice,
I'll obey the rulers and stay silent. 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—and right away.
No more speeches. I've 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?

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 throw you into exile.

MEDEA

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

[Medea seizes Creon's hand]

CREON

Woman, it seems you're trying to provoke me. 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, to provide
something for my children, since their father,
as one more insult, does nothing for them.
Have pity on them. You're a parent, too.
You should treat them kindly—that's what's right.
If I go into exile, I don't care, 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 think 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 find yourself
to save you from misfortunes? [360]

MEDEA

Things have worked out badly in every way.
Who can deny the fact? But nonetheless,
you should not assume that's how things will stay. 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 didn't 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
going in 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'll give me safe shelter as a guest,
and offer me physical protection?
There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while.
If someone shows up who can shield me, 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, the goddess
I worship more than all the others,
the one I choose to help me in this work,
who lives with me deep inside my home,
these people won't bring pain into my heart 470
and laugh about it. This wedding of theirs,
I'll make it hateful for them, a disaster—
Creon's marriage ties, my exile from here, [400]
he'll find those bitter. So come, Medea,
call on all those things you know so well,
as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,
this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.

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

CHORUS [*chanting*]

The waters in the sacred rivers 410
are flowing in reverse.

And all well-ordered things 490
are once more turning on themselves.

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 500
of making sacred music with the lyre,
or else I would have sung a song
in response to what the male sex sings.
For our lengthy past has much to say
about men's lives as well as ours 430

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

The honour in an oath has gone.
And all throughout wide Hellas 440
there's no shame any more.

Shame has flown away to heaven.
So to you, unhappy lady,
no father's house is open,
no haven on your painful voyage. 520
For now a stronger woman
rules in your household,
queen of his marriage bed.

[*Enter Jason*]

JASON

Right now is not the first time I've observed
how a harsh temper makes all things worse—
impossibly so. It's happened often.
You could've stayed here in this land and house,
if only you'd agreed to the arrangements,
showed some patience with those in command.
Now you're exiled for your stupid chatter. 530 [450]
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.
But you just wouldn't stop this silly rage,
always slandering the royal house.
That's why you've 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 then destroyed his household, all of it.
Now, after I've done all this to help you,
you brute, you betray me and help yourself
to some new wife. And we have children!
If you'd had no children, I'd understand [490]
why you're so keen on marrying this girl. 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's see. The things I'll ask about
will make you look even more disgraceful.
Where do I now turn? To my father's house?
For your sake I betrayed my country,
to come here with you. Then should I go
to Pelias' daughters in their misery?
They'd surely welcome me with open arms,
since I killed their father. That's how things stand. 600
To my family I'm now an enemy,
and by assisting you I declared war
on those whom I had no need to injure.
For all the ways I've helped you, you made me,
in the eyes of many wives in Greece,
a lucky woman, blessed in many things.
But what a wonderful and trusting husband [510]
I have in you now, in my misfortune,
if I go into exile, leave this land,
with no friends, all alone, abandoned, 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,
no token on the human body,
to indicate which men are worthless.

CHORUS

When members of a family fight like this, [520]
rage pushes them beyond all compromise. 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
forced you to save me, I could injure you.

630 [530]

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 that you're clever, so you've earned yourself

640

a fine reputation. If you still lived
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.

[540]

That's my response to you about my labours.
Remember you started this war of words.

As for your complaints about this marriage,
I'll show you that in this I'm being wise,
and moderate, and very friendly to you,
and to my children. You must have patience.

650

[550]

When I came here from the land of Iolcus,
I brought with me many troubles, hard ones,
things impossible for me to deal with.

What greater good fortune could I have found
than marrying the daughter of the king,
me—an exile? On the point that irks you,
it's not the case I hate our marriage bed,
overcome with lust for some new bride,
nor am I keen to rival other men
in the number of my many children.

660

We have enough. I'm not complaining.
The most important thing for us to do
is to live well and not in poverty,

[560]

knowing that everyone avoids a friend
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.
There should be no female sex. With that,
men would be rid of all their troubles.

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

I'm very different from many others,
in all sorts of ways—in my opinion,
the unjust man who speaks so plausibly 690 [580]
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 didn't even tell your family.

JASON

Oh yes, if I'd told you of the wedding, 700
I'm sure you would have lent me fine support.
Even now you can't stand to set aside
that huge rage in your heart. [590]

MEDEA

You're lying.

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

JASON

Get this straight—

this royal bride I have, I didn't marry her
because of any woman. As I told you,
I wanted to save you and have children,
royal princes, with the same blood as my sons.
That way my house has more security. 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 [600]
you can change that prayer and sound more sensible?
You should not consider this advantage
painful, or pretend to be so wretched
when things are going well for you.

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 here.

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 that the reason
you suffer still more pain.

MEDEA

Get out of here.
For someone so in love with his new bride
you're spending far too long outside her home.
Go act married. The gods will see to it

your marriage will change into one of those
which makes you wish you'd turned it down.

[Exit Jason]

CHORUS

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

I pray that moderation,
the gods' most beautiful gift,
will always guide me.
I pray that Aphrodite
never packs my heart with jealousy 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 my days to their fatal end.
For there's no affliction worse [650]
than losing one's own country.

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

[Enter Aegeus, King of Athens]

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

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

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

So what did Apollo say about it?

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.

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's 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.

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 out into exile,
shipping me off, 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]
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 850
to find me here. I'll end your childlessness.
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'd 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,
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 safer.
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

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

900

[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're a worthy man.

MEDEA

Oh 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
For I'll send the children to her with gifts.
They'll carry presents for the bride, as if
requesting to be spared their banishment—
a finely woven robe and a tiara
of twisted gold. If she accepts those 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.
Lives like mine achieve the greatest glory.

960

[810]

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason.

CHORUS LEADER

But as a woman it will devastate you.

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 now and fetch Jason here.

[820]

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

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

CHORUS *[chanting]*

Since ancient times, Erechtheus' sons
have been especially blessed,
children of the sacred gods,
from a holy country never conquered,
never ransacked by its enemies.
Fed on glorious fruits of wisdom,
they stride lithely through the sunlit air,
where, so the story goes, the Muses,
nine maidens of Pieria, gave birth
to golden-haired Hermione.

980

[830]

And people celebrate how Aphrodite,
while drawing water from the stream,
the flowing river of the lovely Cephissus,
breathes down upon the land 990
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 killer,
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 slaughter 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.
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 shouldn't 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 we've had in this family.
We've patched things up, and no one's angry now.
Take his right hand. Oh, it's harsh to think [900]
of what the future hides.

[Medea hugs her children]

Oh my children,
will you keep holding your dear arms out like this
through all the many years you have to live?
Oh 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 to plan 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.
At some future date, you'll be leaders here,
in Corinth, alongside your new brothers.
But first you must grow up. As for the rest,
your father and the god who smiles on him
will take care of that. I pray I see you
mature into fine young men, victorious
over all my enemies.

1080

[920]

[Medea starts to weep]

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

1090

JASON

But why be so tearful with the boys?

MEDEA

I gave birth to them. When you made that prayer
about them growing up, I felt pity,
wondering how things would turn out for them.
But let's discuss the reasons for your visit.
I've mentioned some. Now I'll let you know the rest.
Since the rulers here are keen to banish me,
I recognize the best thing I can do
is try not to stand in their way or yours,
by staying here. This royal house thinks me
their enemy. So I've made up my mind
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,
under your direction.

[930]

1100

[940]

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

A good idea. I think I can persuade her.

MEDEA

You will, if she's a woman like the rest. 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 must fetch them here— [950]

[Medea gestures to a servant]

You—bring me those presents right away.

[Servant goes into the house]

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

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.
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
Aren't you happy to hear my splendid news?

MEDEA

Alas . . .

TUTOR

An odd response to the news I bring.

MEDEA

All I can say is I'm 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.

TUTOR

Then why avert your eyes?
Why are you crying?

MEDEA

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

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 miserable I feel.

TUTOR

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

MEDEA

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

[1020]

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

Oh children, my children, you still have
a city and a home, where you can live,
once you've left me in wretched suffering.
You can live on here without your mother.
But I'll go to some other country,
an exile, before I've had my joy in you,
before I've seen you happy, or helped
to decorate your marriage beds, your brides,
your bridal chambers, or lifted high
your wedding torches. How miserable
my self-will has made me. I raised you—
and all for nothing. The work I did for you,
the cruel hardships, pains of childbirth—
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.

1200

1210

[1030]

For I'll live my life without you both,
 in sorrow. And those loving eyes of yours 1220
 will never see your mother any more.
 Your life is changing. Oh, my children, [1040]
 why are you looking at me in that way?
 Why smile at me—that last smile of yours?
 Alas, what shall I do? You women here,
 my heart gives way when I see those eyes,
 my children's smiling eyes. I cannot do it.
 Good bye to those previous plans of mine.
 I'll take my children from this country.
 Why harm them as a way to hurt their father 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 even to let my heart admit
 such sentimental reasons. Children,
 you must go into the house.

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

Anyone forbidden 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, don't do this murder.
 You're made of stone, but leave the boys alone.
 Spare my children. If they remain alive,
 with me in Athens, they'll make you happy.
 No! By those avengers in lower Hell,
 I'll never deliver up my children, [1060]
 hand them over to their enemies, 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'm 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.
 Oh 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
 can't check my anger, and that incites
 the greatest evils human beings do. [1080]

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

CHORUS

Often, before this present time,
 I've gone into more complex arguments,
 I've struggled with more serious issues,
 than my female sex should try to probe.
 But we, too, have an artistic Muse. 1280
 She lives with us to teach us wisdom.
 But not with all of us—the group of women
 able to profit from our Muse is small—
 in a crowd of women you might find one.
 And I claim that with human beings [1090]
 those with no experience of children,
 those who have never given birth,
 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 their children grow up
 to be a blessing or a curse to men,
 their failure to have offspring
 keeps many troubles from them.
 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,
 how they can raise their children well. 1300
 Next, how they can leave their sons
 a means of livelihood. And then,
 it's by no means clear that all the work
 produces good or useless children.
 There's one final problem,
 the worst for any mortal human—
 I'll tell you: suppose those parents
 have found a sufficient way of life,
 and seen their children grow
 into strong, young, virtuous men, 1310
 if Fate so wills it, Death comes, [1110]
 carries off the children's bodies,

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

[Enter Medea from the house]

MEDEA

My friends, I've long been waiting in suspense
to see what's happening in the royal house.
Now I see one of Jason's servants coming. 1320
His hard rapid breathing indicates to me
he's bringing news of some fresh disaster. [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 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 went in the bride's home, we servants,
who had shared in your misfortune, were glad,
for a rumour spread at once from ear to ear
that you and your husband's previous quarrel [1140]
was now over. Someone kissed the boys' hands,
someone else their golden hair. In my joy,
I went with the children right inside,

into the women's quarters. Our mistress,
whom we now look up to instead of you, 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, with these words,
"Don't be so hard-hearted with your family.
Check your anger, and turn your face this way,
look at us again, and count as friends of yours
those your husband thinks are friends of his. 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 with the gifts,
with a great many glances to inspect
the straightness of the dress against her legs.
But then it happened—a horrific sight.
She changed colour, staggered back and sideways,
trembling, then fell into her chair again,
almost collapsing on the floor. An old woman, [1170]
one of her servants, thinking it was a fit 1380
inspired by Pan or by some other god,
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
 on top 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,
 "My poor child, what god has been so cruel
 to destroy you in this way? Who's taken you
 away from me, an old man near my death?
 Oh my child, I wish I could die with you." [1210]
 He ended his lamenting cries. But then,
 when he tried to raise his old body up,
 he was entangled in that woven dress,
 like ivy wrapped around a laurel branch.
 He struggled dreadfully, trying to get up 1430
 onto his knees, but she held him down.
 If he used force, he tore his ancient flesh
 clear off his bones. The poor man at last gave up.
 His breathing stopped, for he couldn't stand the pain
 a moment longer. So the two of them lie dead—
 the daughter, her old father, side by side. [1220]
 It's horrible, something to make one weep.
 Concerning you there's nothing I will say.
 For you'll know well enough the punishment
 that's coming to you. As for human life, 1440
 it seems to me, and not for the first time,
 nothing but shadows. And I might say,
 without feeling any fear, those mortals
 who seem wise, who prepare their words with care,
 are guilty of the greatest foolishness.
 Among human beings no one is happy.
 Wealth may flow in to produce a man
 more lucky than another, but no man, [1230]
 is ever happy, no one.

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!

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' 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.

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?

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

1550 [1300]

she's no concern of mine. I'm worried

for my children. Those whom she has wronged

will take care of her. I've come for the boys,

to save their lives, in case the next of kin

try to harm me and mine, retribution

for their mother's profane murders.

CHORUS

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

JASON

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

CHORUS

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

1560

JASON

No. What are you saying? Woman,

[1310]

you have destroyed me.

CHORUS

The boys are dead.

You must fix your mind on that. They're gone.

JASON

Where did she do this? Inside or outside?

CHORUS

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

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

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

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

[1320]

JASON

You accursed woman, most hateful
to the gods and me and all mankind.
You dared to take the sword to your own boys,
you—the one who bore them—and to leave me
destroyed and childless. Having done this,
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.
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.

1580

[1330]

1590

[1340]

1600

[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's 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

No. It was an insult—your new marriage.

JASON

Was it right to murder them for that?

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

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

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 wicked murder.

[1380]

I'll now go to the land of Erechtheus,
to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion.

1650

As for you, you'll have a miserable death,
as is fitting for a coward. Now you've seen
the bitter ending of your marriage to me,
your head will be smashed in, when you're hit
by a moldy relic of your ship the Argo.

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

Your grief's not yet begun.

Wait until you're old.

JASON

Oh such loving children!

MEDEA

Their mother loved them. You did not.

JASON

And yet you killed them?

MEDEA

Yes, to injure you.

JASON

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

[1400]

MEDEA

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

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

[1410]

1680

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

CHORUS

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

1690

[Exit Chorus]