

EURIPIDES

Medea

Translated by

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and

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MEDEA

CHARACTERS

NURSE of Medea

TUTOR to Jason and Medea's children

MEDEA daughter of Aietes, King of Colchis

CHORUS of Corinthian women with their leader

CREON king of Corinth

JASON leader of the Argonauts

AEGEUS king of Athens

MESSENGER servant in Jason's household

CHILDREN Jason and Medea's two sons

Enter NURSE from the house.

NURSE If only the Argo had not tricked the sea,
had not flown on its wings past the Clashing Rocks
to Colchis! If only the pines of Mount Pelion
had not been hewn for the heroes' oars,
who rowed for Pelias to win the Golden Fleece!
Then my mistress Medea would not have sailed
to the walls of Iolcus, her heart broken
with love for Jason, or have persuaded the daughters
of Pelias to kill their father or be living now
in Corinth with her husband and children,
a refugee who's won respect, admired—stable,
domestic—supporting her husband as she should.

10

But now she hates all things. What love remains
is sick. Jason has left his sons and my mistress
for a royal bed and bride—the daughter
of Creon, the king who rules this land.

Medea,

enraged, recites the list of Jason's vows,
mocks the way he raised his hand as pledge
and demands the gods stand witness to what
her faithful love's produced.

20

Now she starves herself, except from grief
and endless hours of crying since she learned
her husband's wrongs.

She won't look up.

Her eyes fixed to the floor. She is deaf
to friends' advice, like a stone, like a wave.
The only thing she does is turn away
her lovely face to grieve in solitude—
her father, land and home—what she abandoned
to come here with the man who's now dishonored her.
Poor woman, misfortune's taught her what it means
to live without a country.

30

She loathes her children. They bring no pleasure
when she sees them. I'm afraid of what she's
thinking—fueled by her vengeful temper
to some new plot. She is dangerous.
I know how she responds to treachery.
No one who goes against her can win.

But now
her sons return from play unaware of trouble.
Innocence protects itself from grief.

TUTOR Old slave of my mistress' house, why are you 40
alone outside the entrance, filling up
your ears with your own complaints?
Can Medea afford idleness like yours?

NURSE Old tutor to Jason's sons, if servants
are loyal, they take on their master's misfortune
as if it were their own, deep and heartfelt.
So great is my grief I've come outside
to make the earth and sky listen to Medea's troubles.

TUTOR And still she moans and grieves?

NURSE What do you know? Her pain has just begun. 50
Its pitch rising.

TUTOR I shouldn't say this, but she's a fool
and worse for what she doesn't know.

NURSE What's that? What she doesn't know?

TUTOR No, I was wrong to bring it up.

NURSE Surely you can trust me with your secret.
I'm a slave like you.

TUTOR I was passing near the sacred water of Peirene,
where old men throw dice, when I heard one of them
mention Creon. I slowed down, pretending not
to listen, 60

and overheard that the King would soon exile
 these children
 and their mother. Drive them out of Corinth.
 Don't ask if it's true. I don't know.

NURSE Jason will be a party to this? Exile his sons?
 His argument is with Medea.

TUTOR That marriage is finished. He has a new wife.
 He's no longer bound to honor Medea.

NURSE Doom follows evil and the sea rushes in
 to fill a sinking boat.

TUTOR Why talk of doom. Hold your tongue.
 Now is not the time to incite Medea more.

70

NURSE But children, now you know about your father.
 I'd like to see him die! Yes, I would! But he's
 my master.
 And yet his faithlessness is too awful, unheard of.

TUTOR That a man, a hero, abandons his wife and children,
 bestows his love on someone new,
 and at the same time keeps his self-regard—
 unheard of?
 What world have you been living in?

NURSE That's enough!
 Children, go inside. I promise, nothing
 will happen.
 And you, keep them from Medea.
 When they are near, her eyes are fierce, savage like
 a bull
 as if she'd trample them with anger.
 When she breaks out, let's hope the children aren't
 around.
 Let's hope her enemies receive this wrath instead.

80

MEDEA

Sung from within.

My hope is death!
 Death's sorrow my gift!
 My gift . . . my wretchedness!

NURSE Quickly! Didn't I predict this?
 Your mother's fuming anger—
 despair at its boil.
 Hide from her.
 Rage must not find its target.
 She came into the world fierce
 and stubborn and then she learned
 to hate. Go inside,
 don't look back!

90

Exit TUTOR and CHILDREN into house.

Her cries are nothing now.
 But when she learns about her exile?
 We'll see how the sky
 catches fire. We'll see
 how she feeds those flames
 with her implacable hate.

100

MEDEA I suffer!
 Nothing can answer it.

I want my children dead.
 I want his house destroyed,
 to crush my sons
 and their father beneath it.

NURSE She'll make the children pay
 for their father's treachery.
 Reason and moderation is what's needed.
 Time to think. What else can I do?
 Her power makes her dangerous.
 Privilege provides a license
 for her violent moods. If she
 were more like me, more like others,

110

that would tame her.
I aim for dignity in old age
to bring a modest honor
and enough money for my needs.
It's no good if your means
exceed your grasp.
The gods will notice
and then your fortune
pays for ruin.

120

Enter CHORUS.

CHORUS I heard her voice. I heard
the desolate cry of the Colchian.
Her lamentation called me out
from deep inside my house—
a neighbor whom I befriended—
and so the misfortunes
of her house are mine.
Nurse, what will soothe her?

130

NURSE How do you soothe utter desolation?
How do you say, "Climb out
from your abyss, reach up
to your friends. They'll help
you stand among the ruins
of your home?"

Oh, yes,
and that man who's looking on,
the one who married Creon's daughter?
He used to be your husband."

140

MEDEA Zeus's thunderbolts kill!
Cleave my head!
Peace will then
spill out!

That's a cure.

CHORUS Listen, Zeus, and Earth and the Light!
She sings a dark destructive song.

Medea, why lie down with death? 150
 Why let desire have fatal sway?
 Death is always near.
 Don't pray for it.
 Don't kill yourself with grief.
 Trust in Zeus. His justice
 is the way to settle scores.
 Grief is what the newly married Jason
 feeds you. Spit it out!

MEDEA Before I betrayed my father,
 before I butchered my brother at home 160
 then dropped him from the Argo,
 piece by piece, like bait,
 I made Jason swear to love
 and honor me, for after my shameful treason,
 I thought only great oaths would keep
 him bound to me.

Themis and Artemis, brave goddesses,
 enforce those vows—or let me see Jason
 and his princess buried
 beneath the rubble of their house. 170

NURSE Do you hear her terrible prayers?
 How she begs Themis and Zeus
 the guardian of oaths
 to revenge the broken vows?
 All along I've feared she needs
 cruelty to soothe her rage.

CHORUS Then, go, Nurse, tell Medea
 we are outside, faithful friends,
 women who can bear the worst
 of what she feels.
 When she sees us, 180
 our voices will be a song
 that calms her anger.
 Do this quickly, no excuses.
 Time is all she needs

to carry out cruel plans.
Who knows, her cries,
already come too late . . .

NURSE I'll go. I can't refuse orders.
I'll make duty the pleasure
that hides my fears.

She'll growl
and snarl when I approach,
like a lioness shielding
her cubs. She'll snort like a bull.
I doubt I'll lure her out.
But I'll go.

NURSE *starts to leave, then turns back to* CHORUS.

I know a servant shouldn't talk like this, but your singing voices won't heal Medea.

When men invented song,
they had in mind decoration
for festivals and banquets,
pretty tunes.

Think how much better off
we would be if music
like a magic spell could reverse
the bitter histories of our lives
or cure human sorrow.

As it is I wouldn't bother
with the twanging lyre,
let the gorged and drunken
fall asleep happily
in their cups
that's enough satisfaction . . .

CHORUS Again we hear the lamentations,
her fury rehearsing
Jason's grotesque betrayal.
Again she invokes Themis's help,
the goddess of oaths,
who guided Medea

over the haunted sea
and through the impassable maw
that guards the way to Greece.

220

MEDEA Women of Corinth, here I am, as you wish
and not as you might think, uncaring.

All of us

know women who no matter the occasion
remain decorous, or because they stay at home
are thought to be cold and implacable,
indifferent to their neighbors' needs.
All of us judge by sight and not by knowledge.
Because I'm an outsider I know this better than most,
and have worked hard to fit in,
but not, like some, I hope,
in a prideful or aggressive way—
even so I'm a target of suspicion,
especially since Jason, yes, my faithless husband,
tore out the threads I'd stitched to hold
our life together. So quickly and suddenly
was it done, I wasn't given time to console
myself or build alliances with friends.
A brutal man whom I once loved has smashed me
in the face so hard I wear the face of death.

230

240

What other creatures are bred so exquisitely
and purposefully for mistreatment as women are?
Think of how we buy ourselves husbands,
power and alliances for them, slavery
and conquest over us. Bad enough
to have no choice in servitude—
but to pay for it and then celebrate
a wedding feast adds salt to the wound.
Try refusing the arrangement, or later
petition for divorce—the first is impossible
while the second is like admitting
you're a whore.

250

And who ever warned us
of a husband's rough hands,
breath aflame on our neck, or the inscrutable

customs of his house?
 Some of you will say, “It’s not
 that bad”; and with work can learn the rules
 and maybe find a meager happiness.
 But as hard as we try to do the pleasing thing,
 it usually leads to resentment, 260
 complaints about our moods.
 That’s why when they seek out friends
 for entertainment, death looks so good to us,
 much better than our husbands who think
 we adore only them, grateful that they,
 not us, go off to war. But they’re wrong!
 deluded by soldier fantasies.
 If they like pain and danger let them take
 a turn at bearing children and for every birth
 I’ll fight three wars. 270

But I’ve been talking as if our lives
 are the same. They’re not. You are Corinthians
 with ancestral homes, childhood friends,
 while I, stripped of that already,
 am now even more exposed by Jason’s cruelties.
 Remember how I came here, a war bride,
 plundered from my country, an orphan?
 Now who’s obligated to shelter me? Not you,
 I know. As you watch my plans for justice unfold,
 keep them secret, that’s all I ask. I’ve never felt 280
 this threatened nor fearless: men win their battles
 on the field but women are ruthless when the bed
 becomes the battleground. We’ve lain
 in our own blood before . . . and have survived.

CHORUS Medea, now I understand your grief
 and why your husband’s treachery
 must be revenged. Go ahead, I won’t tell.

Enter CREON.

But, look, our king approaches.
 He’s come to listen and advise.

CREON I've decreed your immediate exile
from Corinth, Medea. This includes
your children. Get your things together.
An escort's waiting to take you to the border.
Hurry up!
Later you can twist your face like that
and rage against your husband all you want. 290

MEDEA You, too, will drown me in the storm
unleashed by my husband?
Did he send you to cut away the sails,
and clear the decks of my last hope?
If not, then why this "Hurry Up!,"
this unseemly rush to exile? 300

CREON The truth is I fear you'll harm my daughter.
Why? Because your nature, clever and vindictive,
thrives on evil and because you sting with loss.

A king has many ears,
through them he hears the darkest threats
made against his house.
I've heard yours.
I know about your plans, so why should I wait?
Exiling you now is my best protection.
If I let you stay, a woman like you
will only hate me more for my weakness. 310

MEDEA A woman like me! What am I like
that's different from you or any man,
except I'm a woman who is clever . . .
and that's my reputation? Then no one,
man or woman, should be encouraged
to be clever. Stay dumb!
It's easier to fit in with fools.
Fools, educated or not, will resent
you for what you know. A woman like me
is mistrusted and despised for her cleverness,
feared by you because your fear's misplaced.
Creon, I'm not so clever. Don't fear me. 320

I haven't the power to kill a king.
Besides what harm have you done me?
Like any father you arranged your daughter's
marriage to make the best match.
I respect that.

It's my husband I hate.

Yet I wish your alliance well. 330
From now on I'll be quiet about my wrongs
and respect the judgment of my betters.
That's difficult for me to say. All I want
is for you to let us stay in Corinth!

CREON You'd do better persuading me
with a fit of rage. A woman like you
keeps planning harm no matter
what she says. Meekness
is more dangerous than guile. Even if you
silenced your hate I would never believe it.
I won't be tricked by an enemy.
Exile is what I've decreed.
Immediate! Irrevocable!

MEDEA A woman like me never begs. But look . . .
I beg you.

CREON So don't try. You can't convince me.

MEDEA But you are bound by my plea to listen.

CREON No: I'm bound to protect my family and home first.

MEDEA I need my birthplace more than ever now.

CREON I love my children first and then my home.

MEDEA Yes, but what we love too much is dangerous. 350

CREON That depends, sometimes it's dangerous not to love.

MEDEA Zeus, you won't forget who caused our pain.

CREON Go, the longer you stay the more trouble you bring.

MEDEA No: my trouble starts when I go.

CREON If you don't go, my men will throw you out.

MEDEA Creon, I told you I never beg, but look I'm begging!

CREON I don't call this begging! You're defying my decree!

MEDEA No, I accept exile.

CREON Then let go of my hand, stand up!
What do you want?

360

MEDEA A day's reprieve to prepare for exile
gracefully. And since my husband loves
his new home more than his children
I need to plan their future carefully.
Put yourself in my place. You'll feel differently.
As a father you can see the children
aren't to blame. Exile is not new to me,
but it will crush my sons.

CREON I'm not a rigid tyrant. Mercy
has undermined my resolve before.
I'll regret my wavering. Nevertheless
you can have one day on one condition:
When the sun comes up tomorrow
if you and your children have not crossed
the border, you die.
Stay if you must.
One day won't give you time
to work the wicked plans I fear. Ask no more.

370

377

Exit CREON.

CHORUS Medea, you're doomed!
An exile needs help and protection,
a destination and shelter.

380

Where will you go?
To whom will you turn?

MEDEA You're right! My situation's bad,
exile's made it dire but don't think
there isn't time to settle the score
with the newlyweds and their procurer.
When I kissed Creon's leprous hands,
when I got on my knees and begged,
it was not for pity but for a brief reprieve.
If he had stood his ground I'd have no hope, 390
but foolish as he is, now I have a day,
and a day is long enough to make of him,
his daughter, and the one I used to love
a heap of bones.

So, friends, what method should we use?
Hard to choose. I could torch them
in their love nest or butcher them sleeping
in their fragrant bed. These require stealth,
luck more than nerve and style.
Nothing could be worse if I were caught 400
lurking in their house. They'd mock and laugh
at me intolerably before putting me to death.
Better to reach them directly without detection.
I'll do what I do best. I'll poison them.

See how easy it is to kill!
But when they're dead where will I go?
What country or household will welcome
and protect me? None.
If someone should arrive to rescue me,
though time is short, then I'll use silence 410
and trickery to carry out the murder,
but if no protector comes then I'll attack
directly with an unmistakable sword
and die along with those I kill.

Hecate, dearest of my household gods,
by your dark magic I will repay

the pain and ridicule I've suffered.
 Bitter with grief will be their marriage.
 Bitter will be what Creon tastes
 for his part in this alliance.
 Bitter for me my banishment.

420

Come, I must be Medea, Hecate's servant,
 artist of potions and spells of guile.
 Listen to the voice of her suffering.
 Hear what others hear, that Jason's
 absurd marriage was made by outwitting you,
 daughter of a king, granddaughter of the Sun!
 Remember, you're a woman and it's useless
 to compete with men like Jason.
 Speak courage to yourself!
 Be Medea, invent their grotesque murders.

430

CHORUS Now sacred waters flow uphill
 and the world where men
 once honored oaths is parched.
 Look, at last, women embody truth!

No longer will the ancient songs
 that sing our faithlessness be sung.
 If Apollo allowed us to carry a tune,
 we'd write the epic of men's worst frailties.

We'd sing, Medea, of your inspired love,
 how it guided you through the Black Sea.
 We'd sing of what you lost, your fatherland,
 a husband's love, and now your children's home.

440

The spell of trust is broken, and shame,
 like you, is banished. Past and future hold
 no welcome, while the present is a princess—
 younger, stronger—who sleeps where you once slept.

Enter JASON.

JASON Even before I met you, I knew rage
 and anger were their own worst enemies.
 Generous terms were offered you: the house, 450
 protection, and privileges, but could you bear
 these gifts without complaint? Now exile
 is your reward. Keep railing at me.
 Call me vile and disgusting. It doesn't matter.
 But keep it up about Creon and his family
 and exile will be a kindness.
 And just so you know—I've been your advocate
 with him because I wanted you to stay.
 But could you stop your rant against the king?
 You've bought your exile with your foolish mouth. 460

Still, after all the trouble you've caused
 I won't be accused of neglect. I'm here
 to do the right thing, to insure the children
 and you have the means and money to endure
 the worst exile will bring. For this I'm sure
 you'll hate me, but it's a hate I won't return.

MEDEA How can I say what you are! Curses
 won't answer your vileness and names
 don't exist for your cowardice. In fact,
 I doubt you're real. What real man, 470
 so offensive to everyone, would think it
 courageous to face the family
 he's betrayed, and lie to them again?
 But I'm glad you're here. I'll catalog your sins
 and feel better for it while you feel worse.

I'll start at the beginning, and if you don't
 remember, ask any Argonaut—they
 saw how I saved your life when my father
 challenged you to harness the fire-breathing bulls,
 plough the field of death, and sow the monster seeds. 480
 I killed the insomniac serpent coiled
 inseparably around the Golden Fleece,
 whose light and shimmer raised by me
 brought your success instead of death.

More eager than wise, I abandoned
 my country and father to follow you
 to Iolcus where I engineered your uncle's
 murder, wasting that house, too, with grief
 and death. All this I did for you!
 And in return you honored me
 with contempt, betrayal, a replacement wife.
 I might understand your disappointment
 if I'd been barren but I gave you sons!

490

Now your promises are worthless.
 Or have the gods allowed you
 to make new rules that govern oaths?
 See my right hand, how often you spoke
 in pledge to it, how often you bowed
 your head—an earnest suppliant.
 You lied then as you lie now,
 a thief of all my better hopes.

500

Come then, if you want, I'll speak to you
 as a friend and ask the questions a friend
 would ask. And when you can't respond,
 I'll have shown what kind of friend you are.
 So, as an exile where should I go? Home
 to my father whom I betrayed for you?
 To the cousins who stewed your uncle
 with my recipe? I'm sure they'd set
 an extra place so I could eat with them.
 That's how things stand, friend.
 For you, I became my family's worst enemy.
 For you, I set my fatal traps
 and in return you made a spectacle of me
 for all of Greece to see. What do they imagine
 as I'm sent from my home, alone, except
 with the children you've abandoned? That Jason
 is a faithful, honest husband? Surely
 your new wife is reassured to see
 your sons poor and homeless, and me—
 the *former* wife—who betrayed herself
 to save you, destroyed again.

510

520

Why has Zeus given us the alchemy
that detects true gold from false
and yet withheld the means
to expose evil in men?

CHORUS Stronger than lover's love is lover's hate
Incurable, in each, the wounds they make.

JASON I suppose I should stand here
and ride out the tiresome storm
of your complaint, put on my captain's hat,
reef sail, and drag anchor to your mood.
But I can't bear how you exaggerate
your selfless role in my success.
I know how I was saved. Powerful Aphrodite!
She led me to the Golden Fleece and back.
And you, yes, you have a mind for plots
and treachery, but Cupid had to wound you
with his darts before you moved. Go ahead,
remind me I'm ungrateful.

530

I won't say
your passion wasn't real. I won't say
you didn't help, you did. And for it
you've been paid more than you deserve. Listen,
and I'll prove it.

540

Now, you live in Greece—
the center of the world. Justice, not force,
rules here. Here your cleverness has brought you
fame. Out beyond the Black Sea, no one sings
in praise of you.

To me, fame is the important thing.
I'd give up all I owned for it.
What good is a voice like Orpheus's
if no one knows it belongs to you?
Remember who started this war of words.
That's all I'll say to counter your account.

550

As for my royal marriage, if your reproaches
weren't so blind, you'd see it as a plan—

ingenious, disciplined, farsighted—
to support you and the children.

MEDEA: *furious.*

If you'd just listen, for once, maybe you'd
remember we fled Iolcus and washed up here,
broken refugees. So what better reversal
than to marry the daughter of a king?

560

That I
grew bored with you in bed and wanted
a younger wife? These thoughts drive your anger.
Or that I want to father more sons?
The ones I have—yours and mine—
are more than adequate.

I remarried
so we might prosper and live in the comfort
we deserve, surrounded by true friends.
If I should have more sons, they'll be
brothers to ours, not rivals.
I've forged an alliance that protects
and elevates us all. Children are more important
to fathers than to mothers. My unborn sons
will save our living ones.

570

Is this plan bad?
No, you'd admire what I've done if sex
wasn't your obsession.

It's folly
that women measure their happiness
with the pleasures of the bed, but they do.
And when the pleasure cools or their man goes
missing,
all they once lived for turns dark and hateful.
If I could remake the world, I'd banish women,
send them away with all their trouble.
Then children would come from a purer source.

580

CHORUS Jason, reasonable words make reasonable arguments
and I could believe them but truth lies in deeds
and, I'm sorry to say, you left Medea.

MEDEA A reasonable argument? Am I the only one alive
who hears lies made reasonable by this liar?
Shouldn't truth twisters be punished
instead of listened to? Not, apparently, if they deceive 590
as brazenly as Jason does. Where will he stop?
But he's not so clever. Watch how my words
will pin him to the mat.

If this marriage
was part of such a selfless scheme, why hide it
until now? Why not ask me for help?

JASON Help? If I'd mentioned marriage, divulged my plan,
what part of your hateful, broken heart
would have come to my assistance?

MEDEA The part that knows your shame to live
the rest of your days with a barbarian like me 600
was greater than your honor.

JASON I'll say this one more time! I didn't need
another woman. The marriage was strategic,
a defensive ploy to protect you—to give our sons
brothers connected to the throne.

MEDEA I don't need fortune's gifts if they're made from pain
or wealth derived from the heart's torture.

JASON Wake up, Medea! Good fortune isn't painful.
Be thankful for the chance to prosper.

MEDEA Don't mock me! Fortune sends me wounded 610
into exile, while the palace is your home.

JASON Exile was your choice, don't blame fortune.

MEDEA My choice? Did I abandon you?

JASON No, you chose to curse the king.

MEDEA Of course I did, just as I curse you.

JASON I won't argue with you any longer.
 My offer of help stands: money to ease
 exile for the children and you. Also,
 I have friends who can arrange to take you in.
 Say the word. What's mine is yours. 620
 It does no good to harden yourself
 to charity. Leave behind your destructive anger.

MEDEA I won't take help from you. Besides, your friends
 are now my enemies and gifts from
 a faithless man like you are bribes.

JASON Then let the gods judge me. They see
 my plan for you and the children is good.
 They see this obstinate refusal of my help.
 Remember, the gods can still make life worse for you.

MEDEA Leave me, your impatience stinks of lust 630
 for the new bride. Go and be the groom!
 But listen well, your skill at marrying
 will bring you a dowry of tears.

Exit JASON.

CHORUS See, how strong love overwhelms us.
 See, how it wounds and destroys
 and yet when Aphrodite wants to soothe,
 nothing cures as love cures.
 So, my love, shoot me gently,
 barely break my skin with your terrible arrows.

Then I'll know happiness in life. 640
 Then Aphrodite's urgings will enflame
 my heart, but love will keep me faithful, far
 from the wildness of a stranger's bed.
 Then I'll know that when she chooses lovers,
 it means that love will never fail.

O, and this sweet city, Corinth,
 may I never be its poor exile.

May I never wander in realms
where pity is my name. Kill me
first, spare me life's worst torment
to lose your true home and native land.

650

This is no invented grief.
In Medea I have seen
the friendless suffering exile breeds.
Let those who promise love
and then defile it, die unloved
and never ask to be my friend.

Enter AEGEUS in traveling clothes.

AEGEUS Medea, greetings, happiness!
What better hopes can friends express.

MEDEA Happiness to you Aegeus. Welcome.
What brings you to Corinth?

660

AEGEUS I come from Delphi—Apollo's oracle.

MEDEA The world's most potent seer. Why?

AEGEUS To ask how I might father a child.

MEDEA Childless? How can that be?

AEGEUS I think by a god's curse.

MEDEA Are you married? Do you have a wife?

AEGEUS Yes and we find pleasure in our bed.

MEDEA What advice did Apollo have?

AEGEUS A riddle to confuse the most clever.

670

MEDEA Can you say it? Or have you been forbidden?

AEGEUS No, it begs for cleverness like yours.

MEDEA Then tell me. Don't hold back.

AEGEUS "Choke off the wineskin's spout," he warned.

MEDEA What else? For how long?

AEGEUS Until my journey ends at home.

MEDEA Yet by sailing here you're far from home.

AEGEUS I've come to speak with Pittheus, the Troezen king.

MEDEA Pelops's son, he's known for piety and wisdom.

AEGEUS I'll tell him what the oracle declared.

680

MEDEA He's nimble enough to solve the riddle.

AEGEUS And there's no better friend. A brave man in
the ranks.

MEDEA Good luck and may you obtain all you desire.

AEGEUS But, Medea, I see your face is etched by tears.
Why?

MEDEA Aegeus, my husband is vile. There's no one worse.

AEGEUS How? Tell me what darkness haunts you.

MEDEA It's his fault. He's wronged me. I'm blameless.

AEGEUS Fault? Blame? There's more, I can tell. Go on.

MEDEA He's thrown me out. Installed a new wife.

AEGEUS What's compelled him to act so shamelessly?

690

MEDEA His promises are lies. His love false.

AEGEUS Perhaps he's confused a brief passion for love.

MEDEA His passion is for faithlessness . . .

AEGEUS Then it's your duty to forget him.

MEDEA . . . and ambition. He's married the king's daughter.

AEGEUS What king consents to this?

MEDEA The Corinthian, Creon, who rules this land.

AEGEUS I understand your torment.

MEDEA And my exile? I've been sent away to die.

AEGEUS By whom? I see how trouble overwhelms you.

700

MEDEA Creon. My sentence starts tomorrow.

AEGEUS Where's Jason? He won't allow this.

MEDEA He acts appalled but won't do anything to help.

MEDEA *kneels before* AEGEUS *in supplication.*

By all that's honorable and wise in you,
 you who recognize the shameful wrongs
 I've endured, save me from friendless exile.
 I need refuge in your country, protection in your
 home.

Do this and the gods may give you children.
 Help me and you'll die a happy death.
 Seize this moment that fortune brings.
 I know recipes and spells to quicken men.
 Let Medea end your quest for children.

710

AEGEUS Noble Medea, I'm ready to help.
 I know the gods want justice.
 I trust your magic will produce my sons.
 Already I feel the burden lifting.

Listen and I'll lay out our plan:
 The Corinthians honor me as their guest.
 I won't insult them by stealing you away.
 Instead you must reach Athens on your own. 720
 There you'll be my guest. Do this
 and Creon can't come demanding
 that I give you up. My home will be
 your best protection. I promise.

MEDEA I understand these obligations. Now restate your
 promise
 as an oath. Only then will I feel secure.

AEGEUS Is it the plan or me you don't trust?

MEDEA Aegeus, you I trust but not my many enemies:
 Pelias's sons, Creon . . .

An oath
 Will keep your promises safe against 730
 their powerful inducements to give me up.
 I'm weak and need the gods to help.

AEGEUS Your argument, wise and measured,
 is convincing. An oath provides me cover
 from my enemies and gives you peace of mind.
 Tell me which gods to swear by. I'll do it.

MEDEA Start with Gaia, then Helios, my grandfather,
 and as usual, all the gods no matter where they be.

AEGEUS Yes, but what am I obliged to do? You've left that out.

MEDEA Swear never to exile me from Athens. 740
 Never, on your life, no matter what they say,
 agree to my enemies' demands to hand me over.

AEGEUS Gaia, Helios, and all the gods,
I swear by Medea's spoken oath.

MEDEA Exactly. And if you break this pledge?

AEGEUS May the gods punish me like others who renounce
them.

MEDEA Dear friend, go now, you have your happiness.
Mine follows once I've carried out my plans.
Then I'll come to Athens.

Exit AEGEUS.

CHORUS LEADER May Hermes, protector of travelers, 750
lead you safely home
and may your eager wish for children
be granted. Aegeus, a noble heart
like yours deserves reward.

MEDEA Zeus, your justice shines brightly under
Helios's light. Look into that light, my friends,
and you'll see victory lies ahead. What else
could Aegeus's sudden appearance mean—
his offer of safe harbor, but certain punishment 760
for my enemies. Yes, and afterwards,
I'll ride out the storm my vengeance has caused,
securely docked in Athens.

Listen, now it's time to unfold my plans,
though what I say is certain to displease.

I'll send a servant to summon Jason
and when he comes, I'll tell him
what he wants to hear: yes, his marriage,
my abandonment—two parts of a brilliant plan.

And since this concerns the children's fate,
not mine, I'll suggest they remain with him. 770

But don't think for a moment I'd leave my sons
in this unfriendly land, targets for my enemies.

No,
the children are the bait I'll use to trap
and kill the princess bride.
Each will bear a gift to her—
one a priceless gown,
the other a diadem of supple gold.
She needs only to unwrap and touch
the precious things to die painfully,
and any one who touches her
infected corpse will die as well.

780

That's the easy part, all thought out
and what follows is more than unspeakable.
I must kill my children.
Only their deaths will bring down Jason's house.
Quickly I'll go into exile, guilty
forever of my sons' ungodly murders.
But this is easier to bear than my enemies
who mock me. Why should I care anymore?
And what's the good of living?

I can't restore
my home and country, no spell will release
misfortune's hold. I was wrong to leave
my father, wrong to let a Greek
seduce me with his promises.
But the gods will assist me. Jason
will pay for mistreating me.

790

The next time
he sees his sons, he'll see them dead
and his hideous bride—meant to bear
new sons—destroyed by my fatal potions.
Who then will dare to say I'm weak or timid?
No, they'll say I'm loyal as a friend, ruthless
as a foe, so much like a hero destined for glory.

800

CHORUS LEADER We've listened to you. We want to help.
But the laws of man demand we urge you
not to carry out your plan.

MEDEA The plan is set. Advice like yours lacks nerve
and my experience with grief and suffering.

CHORUS LEADER Suffering so great you'll kill your sons?

MEDEA Yes, anything to make Jason's suffering worse than
mine.

CHORUS LEADER And turn your grief into wretchedness and misery?

810

MEDEA Who can say? The time for talk has ended.

To the NURSE.

Go, find Jason. Invite him here.
There's no one else I'd trust with this mission.
If you are a woman truly loyal to me,
you'll tell him nothing of my plans.

Exit NURSE.

CHORUS Children of the gods, of sacred Earth,
since ancient times, Athenians
have flourished, unconquered, nourished
by the vivid air that brings them
grace and wisdom, a residue
from when the muses once combined
to fashion Harmony, their perfect child.

820

A time, we're told, when Aphrodite
drinking from the sweet Cephisus
would fill the river valley with her breath,
fragrant as roses that bind her hair,
a scent that guides her Loves to wit,
where side by side they invent
beauty and excellence in every art.

How then can Athens
with its sacred river,
its land where gods find refuge
admit a murderer, fouled
by her children's slaughter,
to live among its citizens?
Consider the knife, the innocent throats,
the slit and cry and blood!
By all we know, we beg and plead:
Do not kill your sons!

830

And at that terrible moment
how do you know your heart
won't fail, hand not tremble
when you see the blade flash
in your children's eyes?
When it's your own sons
begging for their lives
then not even you—cold
hearted—will drench your hand
in their warm blood.

840

Enter JASON accompanied by the NURSE.

JASON As you command, I'm here, once more,
ready to listen, though your enmity for me
is clear . . .

Tell me, what's your new demand?

MEDEA I want, Jason, your forgiveness for all I've said, to understand that my anger is the other side of love provoked by years of happy marriage.

I've taken stock,
talked to myself—and it's stubbornness,
fed by rage, that blinds me to these preparations.
Why should I oppose you and Corinth?
You've conspired to make me more secure,
to give our sons princes for brothers.
Why not trade anger for peace? Give up suffering

860

and recognize the gods offer hope.
The truth is, the boys and I are exiles. We need
friends.

I've come to realize calmness and steadiness
are what's required, a partner in your plan,
a proud bridesmaid to the nuptial
you've generously devised.

Women are not dumb and wicked by nature
but we are what we are. Knowing this,
you should avoid treating me the way
I treated you, answering a fool with foolishness.
Now that I've brought myself to this understanding
I can admit how wrong I was. Clear thinking
is all I needed to join your undertaking.

870

Children, come out, it's safe! Greet your father.
Speak to him with love. Our feud is over.
We've called a truce. Our hate has vanished.
Grip his right hand like men . . .

Now the future
lies ahead, its troubles hidden

. . . Children,
promise all life long you'll embrace me too.
Here's wretchedness, fear, foreboding, sorrow
I can't hold back. The quarrel with your father
made up and yet I'm moved to tears.

880

CHORUS LEADER My eyes, too, are soft from crying.
Let misfortune stop here where these tears fall.

JASON Good, you've got the right attitude now.
I'll let pass the earlier tantrums.
Women aren't made to share their husbands.
And though it took awhile for you to change
your mind about my triumphant plan . . .
Well, I'm glad that reason has returned.

890

My sons, your father's careful deliberations,
blessed by the gods, guarantee a better life

for you. Someday with your future brothers
 you'll help to govern Corinth. Only now,
 grow into men. Let your father
 and a favoring god fashion your destiny.
 Once you've reached your prime—strong,
 irrepressible—
 I'll watch with satisfaction as you crush my enemies.

900

MEDEA turns away from the scene weeping.

Why keep crying? Why the downcast face?
 Have my words again disturbed you?

MEDEA I'm fine. My concern is for the children.

JASON Why prolong this torture with your fears for them?

MEDEA I'm their mother! And when you begin to speak
 about their futures, doubt and pity rush in.

JASON Their futures are safe, sealed. Give up your worries!

MEDEA Then I'll submit to what you say. Remember,
 as a woman my nature is to cry.

But there are other reasons I summoned you:
 I won't escape the king's decree of exile.
 It's better that I'm banished. I'd be a hindrance
 if I stayed, a source of suspicion
 for all the threats I've made against his house.
 I've reconciled myself to leaving Corinth,
 and the children. In order for your plan
 to work, you must raise the boys here.
 Go, beg Creon not to send them into exile.

910

JASON He's stubborn and resolute, but I'll try.

MEDEA Start with your wife. Use her to persuade
 her father the boys don't deserve banishment.

920

JASON Yes, with her I'll have success.

MEDEA That's right, if she's like other women,
but let me help. I have a plan to send
the children to her with gifts more beautiful
than mortals know: a seamless gown,
a diadem of supple gold . . .

To the SERVANTS.

Quickly,
one of you go bring the treasures here.

To JASON.

Look how fortune multiplies for her:
first, a brilliant husband fills her bed
and now these adornments, heirlooms that Helios,
my grandfather, bequeathed to his descendants.

930

The SERVANT returns with the gifts.

Boys, take these presents, hold them tightly,
hand them to her highness, your father's radiant bride.
Gifts like these she will more than embrace.

JASON Medea, this is foolish. Keep them for yourself.
The palace has chests filled with fine garments,
vaults of gold. Don't give up your legacy.
If I have any say with my wife, my words
will persuade more than your family's wealth.

940

MEDEA Don't count on it! Even gods like gifts.
And men always prefer gold to promises.
Her youth and status appeal to the gods,
so let's treat her like a goddess. Gold, yes,
but I'd give a life to buy the children freedom.

Now, boys, go to the king's magnificent palace,
get on your knees and beg your father's new wife,

my mistress, to stop your exile. Give her
these rare gifts. Most importantly, put them
only in her hands. Go quickly. Good luck.
I'll wait for your return and the news
that all your mother wishes for is true.

950

*Exit JASON and CHILDREN, accompanied
by the TUTOR and the NURSE.*

CHORUS Abandon hope that the children will survive.
Now they walk the murderous road.
The bride will embrace the lacework of gold,
blind to its enchanting ruin.
She will lace her beautiful hair
with death's poisonous ribbon.
Heavenly charms, Helios's crown of gold
and shimmering gown, glamour
she can't resist, though it makes her
a bride of the dead. The snare is set.
Death waits at the center.
No power can come to her rescue.

960

And you, unfortunate bridegroom
who engineered a royal marriage
to shape his destiny, could you have guessed
your plan would murder your sons
and deliver your bride to a hideous death?
Unlucky man, could you have been more wrong?

970

And Medea, you're wrong too,
in every way, sad and sadder still,
you'll kill your sons, justice too harsh
for Jason's heartless crimes—
your husband who left your marriage bed
to occupy another.

Enter TUTOR with the CHILDREN.

TUTOR My lady, the princess took the gifts into her hands
and happily consented to give your sons reprieve.
In the House of Corinth they'll find happiness.

Medea turns away and weeps.

But why should good fortune make you sad? 980
Why turn away from my report?
Have I displeased you?

MEDEA Sadness everywhere!

TUTOR But the children are happy.

MEDEA Sadness is everywhere!

TUTOR I thought my news was good.
Tell me what I've said to upset you.

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

TUTOR Then why the dark face and tears?

MEDEA Grief is all that's left. My vengeful schemes 990
and the gods' help have made it so.

TUTOR Think of the day your sons will bring you home!

MEDEA But first there are others I must carry home.

TUTOR Women lose their children frequently
so bear this sorrow as best you can.

MEDEA Yes, in time I will. But now go inside.
Get ready for the children's day. They'll follow soon.

Exit TUTOR into the house.

Children, my dear sons, this is your city.
Here is your home where you will start new lives,
bereft of me, your abandoned mother. 1000
I must begin my exile in a land
far from you, without the happiness
of seeing you grow and prosper, unable

to perfume your nuptial baths, arrange
the bridal sheets or light the wedding torches.
My unforgiving self has made me wretched.
And all I've done to raise you, the ceaseless work,
the excruciating pain of childbirth —
all count for nothing.

Foolishly I hoped

you'd care for me in my old age, dress my body
when I died. What better fortune than to have
such sons. 1010

But this sweet dream of life

has ended. Bereft of you I'll spend my days
in heart-broken grief. And you no longer
within sight of me will grow accustomed
to my absence.

Oh, children, I don't understand your looks.
Why smile as if it were your last?
I despair of what to do.

See, my strength

and resolve vanish in the children's
lively faces. It can't be done. 1020
Farewell to my schemes. When I leave, I'll take
my sons with me. Why should I make them
suffer to revenge their father and make
my own suffering so much worse? No, farewell.

And yet what will change? My foes
unpunished mock me.
Should I endure it? The pledges I've made
my heart have weakened me.

The CHILDREN begin to move toward the house.

Boys, go into the house.

Now, only the sacred and pure are allowed
to witness this sacrifice. My hand has strengthened. 1030
Yet, my angry heart resists these urges.

Release the children. Spare them from my
wretchedness.
In Athens they will bring me happiness.

But it's too late. By all of Hell's vengeful
demons I'll not leave my sons
for my enemies to ridicule.

The children
must die. I gave them life and now
I'll take it. No more wavering. It's settled.
There, I see the princess wearing the crown
and know the poisonous robe eats her flesh.
The path before me is filled with grief
but it's nothing like the dark road I'll send
my sons down.

1040

Let me say goodbye to them.

The CHILDREN return to MEDEA.

Children, give me your hands to kiss.
Sweet hands, sweet lips. Strong bodies
and noble faces. May happiness follow you
into that other place. Here your father
has stolen your happiness.

Such tenderness,
my hand caressing your skin, your sweet breath—
My sons.

1050

Leave me, go into the house.
I can bear no longer to look at you.
The horror of my evil overwhelms me.
Horror of what I'll do. Angry passions
have mastered me—emotions of misrule
that destroy men.

Exit the CHILDREN into the house followed by MEDEA.

CHORUS LEADER Many times I've joined in formal arguments
with men whose skill in the subtle art
of rhetoric was greater than my own
and lost. But all women aren't strangers

1060

to Wisdom's muse. Sometimes one of us
 is chosen to be guided by the inspiring daughters.
 And so my thoughts have led me to believe
 that childless men and women lead lives
 more fortunate than those with sons and daughters.
 Although they never know the joy and pain
 that children bring, they avoid
 a much greater sum of trouble.
 Households filled with children
 are slaves to the work and worry of their care. 1070
 The first concern is how to raise them,
 then how they'll manage once they're grown.
 Yet even when they're independent,
 it's still uncertain if their success
 will honor you for all you've done. But heartbreak
 worse than what's produced by all these
 common dangers lurks and waits.
 Let's say the children turn out perfect.
 Does fate care if fate has other plans?
 Death comes to drag our children 1080
 off to the underworld no matter how beloved.
 You'd think the gods might offer inducements
 to men and women for bothering to bring
 children into the world; instead they take it
 as a chance to pile grief on top of grief.

Enter MEDEA from the house.

MEDEA Our long wait for palace news is over.
 One of Jason's servants sprints this way.
 Listen, he gasps from exertion.
 When he arrives expect to hear about disaster.

Enter servant of Jason's as MESSENGER.

MESSENGER Medea, such crimes, heinous—inhuman—
 You must go, now, by any means,
 land or sea. Don't stay, fly!

1090

MEDEA What's happened? Why should I escape?

MESSENGER The princess and her father, Creon,
lie dead, victims of your poison.

MEDEA Splendid news! Let me reward you
with my undying friendship and protection.

MESSENGER Madness speaks through you.
How can you slaughter Creon's family
and then rejoice so fearlessly?

1100

MEDEA There's an answer to your question—but first
calm down, friend, and tell me
about their deaths. Pay special attention
to their agony so I might take some pleasure.

MESSENGER The moment your sons with their father
entered his bride's house, all of us,
who once served you and who mourned
your fate, were heartened. A shout went up
that you and Jason had called a truce.
This was like music to our ears. Suddenly,
we wanted to kiss the children, touch their
lovely hair. Overwhelmed by happiness
I followed them inside the princess's chambers.
Understand, she's the woman we must serve
instead of you.

1110

At first she saw only Jason,
but when the children came into view,
she veiled her eyes, and turned away.
Impatient with this display,
your husband scolded her, saying:
"Look at us. Don't revile your friends.
Your job is to love those your husband loves.
They've brought gifts. Accept them graciously
and for my sake ask your father to release
these children from their exile."

1120

The gifts astonished her with their beauty.
She agreed to what her husband asked.
So eager was she to wear the treasures,

even before Jason and the boys had reached
the road, she put on the colorful dress,
set the gold crown on her head, 1130
and in a bright mirror arranged her hair.
She laughed with pleasure at the beautiful
but lifeless image. Then as if the gifts
had cast a spell, she stood up, dancing
through her rooms, giddy with the feel of the gown
twirling so she could see repeatedly
her shapely feet and pointed toes.

But soon her face changed color. She staggered,
legs trembling, almost collapsing
before she reached a chair. One of the older, wiser 1140
servants believed some wrathful god possessed her
and so cried out in prayer to Pan,
until she saw the mouth foaming,
eyes wild and rolling, and skin leached of blood.
Then the prayers turned shrill with horror
and we servants raced to find Creon
and Jason to tell them the piteous news,
filling the house with the sound
of our panicked feet.

All of this happened in less time 1150
than a sprinter takes to run the dash
and quicker still was the way the princess
from her terrible trance woke, eyes
wider than before, screaming
in anguish. For now a second torture
wracked her. The gold crown exploded
in a fiery ring about her head, while
the delicate gown, brought by your sons,
ate into her sweet flesh. Consumed by flames,
she stood and ran, shaking her head 1160
as if to throw the fire off, but the crown tangled
tighter in her hair and the blaze roared higher
as she fell to the floor and rolled
in the unquenchable flames.

Only her father could have known
 who she was. The eyes had melted.
 The face no more a face, while flaming blood
 leaking from her head fueled the blaze.
 But worse was how the flesh like tallow
 or pitch sloughed off her bones. 1170
 All of this because the viperous poison
 had locked her in its invisible jaws.

Schooled by what we'd witnessed, none of us
 would touch the body, but her father,
 rushed to her side, not knowing what he'd find.
 Nothing could prepare him for his daughter's
 corpse. Misery broke from his voice.
 He embraced and kissed her, lamenting,
 "Unhappy child, murdered so shamefully,
 why do the gods torture an old man like me? 1180
 Daughter, let me die with you."
 But when his sobbing ceased
 and old Creon wanted to rise, he found
 he was woven to the fatal dress, stitched
 to it like ivy to laurel, unable
 even as he wrestled furiously
 to free himself. The living father,
 who felt his flesh ripping from his bones,
 could not match the strength of his dead daughter
 and so he gave up and died, a victim 1190
 of her hideous fortune. Together now they lie,
 an old man and his daughter. Who wouldn't weep?

As for you, Medea, and your fate,
 hear my silence. From it will come your punishment,
 swift and sure. As for our brief lives, I've learned
 once more we are mere shadows. No longer
 do I fear to say the truth: Fine words
 and clever plans breed folly.
 No man can count on his happiness.
 Some have luck and fortune on their side 1200
 but never happiness.

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS Today the gods delivered the justice
 Jason deserved and seized him with calamity.
 But the princess, a victim of marriage,
 now passing through the halls of death,
 we lament her terrible misfortune.

MEDEA Nothing will undo my resolve
 to kill my children and escape
 —but it must be quick.
 If I hesitate now someone else 1210
 will murder them more cruelly.
 There's no way out. They must die.
 And I who gave them life will take it.
 Come, heart, shield yourself.
 Why doubt what must be done?
 Come, unlucky hand,
 grip the sword, carry it to where
 unhappiness begins and ends.
 Do not weaken.
 Forget you love your sons. 1220
 Forget you gave them life.
 Today, remember nothing.
 Tomorrow, mourn them.
 For even if you kill your sons,
 you once loved them dearly.
 My life has been all grief!

Exit MEDEA into the house.

CHORUS Earth, hear us! Bright sun, Helios,
 look down, expose Medea,
 before her sons are murdered
 by her bloody hands. Remember, 1230
 they are your radiant children. Remember,
 when men wound gods, fear and darkness rule
 over us.

Brilliant, heavenly light, burn up
 this murdering Fury. Banish her
 from the house, cast out
 this servant of vengeance!

Wasted, the pain of bearing sons.
 Futile, their brief dear lives.
 Better not to have sailed the Black Sea,
 escaped the Clashing Rocks. Why, Medea,
 does rage cloud your mind?
 Why must murder follow murder?

1240

When families kill their own, they spill
 no darker blood, leave no fouler stain.
 And the gods drawn to its stench
 punish all who bear the family name.

CHILDREN

Cries for help from within the house.

CHORUS The children! Do you hear their awful pleas?
 Oh, wretched and afflicted woman!

FIRST CHILD Mother, no!
 Brother, help me!

1250

SECOND CHILD There's nothing I can do. We're trapped.

CHORUS If we went inside now we might stop the murder.

FIRST CHILD Yes, with the gods' help, save us!

SECOND CHILD Look, a knife!

CHORUS Only a stone or iron forged from ore
 is harder than your heart. If it weren't their fate
 could you bear to murder the children
 you brought into the world?

Only Ino before you—of all women—
 killed her sons with her own hands.

1260

And she, deranged by Hera, was sent to wander
the ends of the earth in madness.
That's why she leapt into the sea.
That's why in her unholy plunge
she carried her murdered sons—and all perished.
What worse horror will we face
now that a woman's marriage bed
has bred again mortal pain and evil?

Enter JASON.

JASON You women, gathered near the door, tell me,
is Medea inside—such unspeakable crimes!
—or has she fled? 1270
She'll have to use the underworld to hide
or fly on wings to heaven to avoid what she deserves.
Murderess of the rulers of this land!
Does she think she'll leave this house alive?

But why should I care for her? It's the children
I'm looking for. She'll be punished.
Others will see to it, but I must protect my sons
from the revenge Creon's survivors are sworn
to make them suffer for their mother's crime.

CHORUS LEADER Jason, ignorant beyond pity, if you knew
what lay ahead you'd never speak again. 1280

JASON More treachery? Plans to murder me?

CHORUS LEADER With her own hands Medea killed your sons.

JASON What are you saying? This woman has destroyed
my life!

CHORUS LEADER I'm saying that your children are dead.

JASON Where did she do it? In the house? On the street?

CHORUS LEADER Behind these doors you'll find her slaughter.

JASON Call out the servants! Unlock the gates!
 First, I must see the murdered. Then I'll find Medea,
 the source of my disaster—
 and seek revenge. 1290

*JASON tries to open the doors of the home. MEDEA
 appears aloft in a chariot drawn by dragons.*

MEDEA Why rattle the gates? Why open the house?
 You want the corpses? The murderer?
 Stop that banging! If it's me you're after, speak.
 Tell me what you want. Only words can reach me.
 Helios has sent his chariot to keep me from my
 enemies.

JASON Vilest woman! Condemned, hated by the gods,
 by me, and every human creature. No one
 but you raised the knife that butchered
 your children. No one but you destroyed
 my life. How can you stand there
 and speak about the sacred Sun?
 Guilty!
 Sentenced to die! 1300

Now my mind is clear.
 How wrong I was to bring a barbarian home
 to Greece, already a dangerous betrayer
 of family and country. For this the gods have sent
 their Fury to torment me, though it was you
 who was cruel enough to kill your trusting brother,
 then leave with me aboard the noble Argo.
 That's how it started. Then we married.
 Then you bore me children. The ones you've killed!
 All of this because of jealousy.
 Barbarians act like this, not Greeks.
 Yet I married a barbarian and yoked myself
 to hate and destruction.
 Compared to your brutal nature Scylla,
 with her heads and massive teeth,
 her many feet, is tame. Nothing hurts you.
 Insults and curses are praise. 1310

Leave me, nothing worse than these murders
can be done by you. My sorrowful fate
is my own: a bride's widower,
a childless father—all that I've worked
and planned for—lost. 1320

MEDEA Why should I waste time replying to your words?
Zeus knows how I saved you and how
you repaid me with ingratitude.
Did you think that after you betrayed
our marriage you'd live a life of ease,
mocking me with Creon and his daughter, 1330
the princess he promised you before condemning me
to exile? Yes, call me fierce and vicious.
Say I'm a water fiend like Scylla—tell me,
how does it feel with my teeth in your heart!

JASON If you eat my heart, you swallow my pain.

MEDEA Pain without mockery is pleasure.

JASON My sons, you died at the hands of an evil mother.

MEDEA My sons, you died because of broken promises.

JASON My hand was not the one that raised the knife.

MEDEA No, the knife was whetted on your pride
and the rails of your marriage bed. 1340

JASON For pride and marriage you murdered sons?

MEDEA What woman would find your crime forgivable?

JASON A woman of sense, not a vengeful woman like you.

MEDEA Well, our sons are dead and that pain pierces your
heart.

JASON No, they live on as Furies who will punish you.

MEDEA The gods understand the source of this violence.

JASON That means they fathom your gruesome heart.

MEDEA Go on, keep hating me, I detest your voice!

JASON And yours is worse. But I can end our argument. 1350

MEDEA How? Show me. I wish it too.

JASON Let me bury our sons. Let me mourn them properly.

MEDEA Impossible! My sons will be interred by me
in the sacred ground of Hera Akraia, safe
from my enemies who'd want to dig them up.
And to expiate their murders, a solemn festival
will be performed. Once these things are done,
I'll go to Athens and live with Aegeus,
my protector. But for you, justice is approaching.
More miserable than now you'll die a coward, 1360
your head crushed beneath a beam of the great Argo.
Only then does the bitter story of our love end.

JASON May Fury and Justice, vengeful
and murderous, tear you apart.

MEDEA Don't you know, gods are deaf to oath breakers
and to those who deceive their guests.

JASON Defiled forever. Executioner!

MEDEA Go home to your wife. Go bury her.

JASON Yes, I'll go, grieving my sons.

MEDEA When you're old, grief that worsens day by day. 1370

JASON They were my beautiful boys!

MEDEA More beautiful to me, their mother.

JASON And so you murdered beauty?

MEDEA To give birth to your unending grief.

JASON If I could see them once more,
I'd take them in my arms and kiss their mouths.

MEDEA Speak to them now?
But you sent them away.

JASON Only to touch their soft skin, please . . .
to hold my innocent children.

1380

MEDEA Impossible! Save your breath.

JASON Zeus, do you hear how I'm treated
by this monster of filth and pollution
who keeps me away from the children she murdered?
All my life I will honor them with grief.
I will call upon the mighty gods
to remember how their killer denied
my wish to lift them in my arms
and place them in the earth. Now
I regret their lives, for when I fathered them
I delivered them to a butcher's hands!

1390

MEDEA *with the corpses of her children is borne aloft
away from Corinth. Exit JASON.*

CHORUS LEADER The gods love surprise, so what men want
is often denied, and yet the gods prevail
for us. Think of the story we've just listened to:
Who won? Who lost?
Zeus stores our destinies in his great house,
some glitter brightly, but most are hidden.

1397

Exit Chorus.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

1–126 / 1–130 **Prologue.** Unusually, in this play the prologue proper—the Nurse’s introductory speech, followed by spoken dialogue between the Nurse and her fellow slave, the Tutor—ends with a duet between Medea offstage and the Nurse onstage, which begins at line 86/96. Into this duet the Chorus of Corinthian matrons intrudes itself as a third voice at line 127/131 (see notes, lines 86–221/96–212 and 127–221/131–212).

1–39 / 1–48 Euripides’ surviving plays usually begin with a long introductory speech by a leading character or god, designed to situate the audience in the action about to unfold. Only in *Medea* is this introductory speaker a solitary servant. The Nurse’s age and affiliation with Medea’s household and her knowledge of the past suggest that, in accordance with ancient practice, she may have been Medea’s wet nurse and personal possession (see notes, lines 40/49 and 926–27/949 [=786]).

1 / 1 The opening of the play must have caught the ear and imagination of the Greeks, for twenty-five years later its first line appeared as Euripides’ first entry in the verse weighing contest between himself and Aeschylus in Aristophanes’ comedy *Frogs* (line 1382) and was ever afterwards cemented in the ancient poetic memory (cf., e.g., Catullus 64.171 ff.).

2 / 1 *wings* In ancient poetry flying metaphors were frequently used of beaked warships speeding like birds over the surface of the sea. Sometimes the billowing square-cut sails are envisioned as wings; at other times the rising and falling of the oars on either side of the hull as it cut through the water.

3 / 3–4 *the pines of Mt. Pelion* The Greek refers to a pine (*peukê*)—not pines—that turned heroes into oarsmen (literally “put oars in the hands of the best

men"). Since oars were not regularly made from pine—in Homer they are of silver fir (*Iliad* 7.5. *Odyssey* 12.172; cf. Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 5.1.7), in Virgil of oak (e.g., *Aeneid* 4.399–400)—but ships' hulls were (cf. Aristophanes, *Knights*, 1300–1310 and Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 5.7.1–2), it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Euripides' seafaring audience would have imagined either that the hull of the Argo was made from one huge primeval pine or several pines, or that a single pine became her mast (cf. Lucan, *Pharsalia* 2.695). Legend had it that Athena herself had come to lofty Mount Pelion, above Iolcus, and with her own bronze ax had cut Argo's timbers. Indeed, the construction of this remarkable warship was a tale so well-known that Apollonius of Rhodes, the third-century BC author of the *Argonautica*, an epic in four books recounting the adventures of the Argonauts (Introduction, "Legendary Background"; notes, lines 481–82/480–82; Glossary, "Orpheus"), decided to skip it (*Argonautica* 1.18–19).

4 / 5 *heroes* Greek *aristoi andres*, or "best men." One of the extraordinary things about the Argo was that it was manned entirely by ancestral *aristoi*, who now, from the point of view of Euripides' audience, were each and every one a hero, a son or grandson of immortal gods. The heroic Argonauts contrasted sharply with fifth-century Athenian rowers, who were drawn from the lowest class of citizens, the "thêtes" or hired hands. As the "Old Oligarch" (a fifth-century BC political tract preserved among Xenophon's works and considered roughly contemporary with the composition of the *Medea*) confessed, it was their contribution to Athenian power that entitled this traditionally subject working class to the new political rights and power they now enjoyed under Athens' radical democracy. Is there, then, a trace of sarcasm in the Nurse's "heroes' oars"? See the Introduction, Historical Background.

8–9 / 9–10 *persuaded the daughters of Pelias to kill their father* Different literary sources give conflicting reasons as to why Jason was justified in killing Pelias; none explain why he and Medea must go into exile from Iolcus. The murder is a startling proof of Medea's frightening proficiency in sorcery. In order to convince the daughters of Pelias that she knows how to make their father young again, she puts the pieces of a dismembered old ram into a bubbling cauldron and then resurrects it whole and rejuvenated out of her potent stew. Eagerly Pelias's daughters try the same treatment on their beloved father, who, alas, fails to respond.

9–10 / 10 *living now in Corinth* The play tells us nothing about why Jason and Medea sought refuge with Creon in Corinth. Their exile status, which Euripides makes so much of, nevertheless contradicts earlier legends that connect both of them to the town. Jason's great Uncle Sisyphus was its legendary founder, but, according to Eumelus, a Corinthian poet of the eighth century BC, who wrote an epic history of the kings of Corinth, he succeeded to the throne only after Medea had held it in her own right. It seems Helios (the Sun) first gave Corinth to his son Aeëtes (Medea's father), who, before leaving for Colchis, entrusted its rule to Bounus (whoever he might be), until he himself or one of his descendants should return. When one of Bounus's heirs died childless, the Corinthians bestowed the town's rule upon Medea, and it was through her that Jason became king. Clearly Euripides ignores this genealogy to produce a new dramatic situation, perhaps more indicative of the political turmoil of his times. What happened to cause the death of their children is variously reported by different sources: out of hatred of her rule the Corinthians slaughter them, Medea kills them unintentionally, or she leaves them behind when she leaves Corinth and Creon's faction kills them, and so on. Common to all accounts is the fact that the children are remembered in an actual Corinthian cult. Thus, the cult of the children, also of importance to Euripides (lines 1353–57/1378–88), seems to be a fixed element in this otherwise fluid Corinthian myth.

15–16 / 19 *the daughter of Creon* Although unnamed in the play itself, the plot summary (*hypothesis*) affixed to the beginning of the *Medea* calls Creon's daughter Glauke (blue-eyed), a name apparently memorialized by the name of a sacred spring in Corinth into which she was said to have thrown herself to quench the malignant fire that was ravaging her body (see lines 1138 ff./1167 ff.). The name Creon simply means ruler and is used to designate place holders in a royal succession, such as Oedipus's successor in Sophocles' Theban plays.

40 / 49 The Nurse's interlocutor in the ensuing dialogue is another trusted servant whose primary duty, like that of the Nurse, concerned the care of Jason's and Medea's boys. This Tutor or, literally, "Escorter of Children" (*paedagogos*) accompanied his charges to and from school and had general oversight of them outside the house. Just as the main characters represent the noblest of the noble, so these household servants represent servile nobility. Their power in the house among their fellow slaves and their importance to and intimacy with their masters and their children are suggested by Plutarch (*Life of Alcibiades*, c. 1)

when he attests that the names of the Nurse and Tutor of the infamous Alcibiades were known to posterity.

44 / 53 *Old tutor* Drawing attention to old age here and in the preceding greeting may be intended not so much to enliven the servants' repartee as to flesh out what is seen. In a huge outdoor theater in which the performers are lit by the sun, the details of a mask would be less visible than the stance and gestures of the actor, and the visuals overall are less individualizing than the clear auditory signals lodged in the dialogue.

47-48 / 56-58 The sentiment is found repeatedly in ancient drama in the mouths of characters who like the Nurse have to justify their uncusomary and often improper public appearances (before the Chorus) outside the palace.

61 / 70 *exile* Among the ancient Greeks, exile was considered almost as bad as decapitation, for an exile cut off from his family and city became almost a nonperson. Like a beggar, he was reduced to living off the benevolence of others.

68-69 / 78-79 Among these maritime peoples, the metaphor of the ship of state or, in this case, of the great household is traditional, and, not surprisingly, it is prominent in this play about the shipwreck of the Argo's commander.

86-221 / 96-212 At this point the Greek meter changes from iambic (spoken) to anapestic (sung and declaimed or chanted) verse, as Medea offstage sings of her woe and Jason's treachery, and the Nurse in response comments upon what she hears, using a more elevated vocalization to match the musicality and more insistent tempo of the anapestic meter. Later, when the Chorus adds its voice to their exchange, what seemed to be a duet is transformed into a regular antiphonal *kommós*, a lyrical interchange between the actors and chorus. It is probable, based on Medea's use of rounded *ah*'s (Doric dialect) instead of the Nurse's flat *ay*'s (Athenian or Attic dialect, regularly used in the spoken iambs of Attic tragedy) that Medea sings and the Nurse declaims. The anapestic meter sets up a marching rhythm and so is a natural accompaniment to the Chorus's entrance song or *parodos* (see notes, lines 127-221/131-212).

This passage and the other lyric passages of this play were accom-

panied by a single piper playing on *auloi*, that is, twin reed pipes (like oboes or clarinets), which were played as a pair, each of the *aulete*'s hands fingering one of the two pipes.

127–221 / 131–212 Parodos. Fifteen high-born Corinthian matrons now add their voices to those of the Nurse and Medea, first with sung anapests as they march into the orchestra (the theater's large circular dancing floor at the foot of the South slope of the Acropolis upon which the audience is sitting), and then with two matching stanzas (see notes, lines 148–58/148–59) in the mixed lyric meters characteristic of choral odes. After the Nurse leaves the stage to fetch Medea, they sing a third stanza to mark the end of the play's preparatory action and the beginning of the first episode.

Choruses sang a single melodic line—polyphony and harmony in our sense of these words were as yet unknown—in a one-to-one ratio between notes and syllables of text, and their range did not exceed an octave. Thus, their lyrics would have been more readily understood by the audience than those of modern choruses. Whether the male choristers sang in a falsetto when impersonating females, we have no idea. Choral song was accompanied by mimetic dancing, whose movements are unrecoverable.

127 / 131, *I heard her voice* Despite the use of the first person singular, the Chorus is singing collectively as it enters from the wings. “I” and “we” seem to be used interchangeably in choral lyrics.

131–33 / 138 Lyrical lamentations, sung by a distraught main character are an essential, almost ritualized feature of Attic tragedy. When the tragic chorus participates in them and they occur at the beginning of the action, the collective chorus often acts conventionally as comforters to the soloist. To make their exchange dramatically convincing, the playwright often highlights some plausible prior ground of allegiance between them. Here, because Medea is a foreigner and the Chorus are natives and, consequently, their friendship cannot be taken for granted, they explain their friendly visit by referring to the goodwill they owe her in return for previous benefactions to them. Friendship, especially between strangers, is not so much a matter of affection as of a network of obligations. Medea was useful to Jason because she could perform favors for the Corinthians that made them obliged to him. Presumably the women represent their husbands' or fathers' houses in a kind of parallel “female polis”; they need not like Medea.

- 144 / 144 *Zeus's thunderbolts kill* An expansion of the Greek *phlox ourania* (heavenly flame or lightning), the invincible weapon by which Zeus, the king of the gods, rules the universe. The chorus picks up this theme in its response, "O Zeus, and Earth and Light . . ." (line 148/148)
- 148–58 / 148–59 Choral odes in Attic tragedy commonly consist of one or more paired strophes and antistrophes. Each strophe (or "turn," a dance term in origin?) is answered by an antistrophe (counterturn), which is rhythmically—and presumably melodically—the same. Thus, the chorus dances and sings a turn, then a matching counterturn, usually following immediately upon the turn but in this case postponed until after the Nurse's and Medea's anapests.
- 148 / 148 Zeus guarantees justice (see notes, lines 155–56/157 and 344 ff./324 ff.), Earth sends forth her avengers against the forsworn, and the Light of Day (or the Sun) sees all wrongdoing. This divine triad is often called upon to witness oath taking.
- 155–56 / 157 *Trust in Zeus* Zeus is preeminently the god of Justice (*Dikê*, see the Glossary, "Themis" and "Zeus") who keeps watch over the right ordering of the universe, secures equitable distributions and alliances among gods and men, and punishes wrongdoers. The Greek implies that Zeus will be Medea's advocate in her just cause against Jason.
- 160–62 / 166–67 The Greek says simply "I departed in shame, having killed my brother." However, the story of Medea's strewing the fleeing Argo's wake with bits of her slaughtered brother Apsyrtus in order to delay her father, who piously stopped to collect each precious limb, presents such a compelling image that commentators often assume that Medea alludes to it here. This gruesome version is generally attributed to Phercydes, a mid-fifth-century BC Athenian genealogist, but may actually have originated with Sophocles in a lost play *Scythians*, which recounts the return voyage of the Argo (see H. Lloyd-Jones comments in his 1996 Loeb Sophocles III, pp. 274–77). We do not know, however, whether this undatable version was already circulating when Euripides wrote the *Medea*; he, in any case, seems to have another version in mind (see lines 1307–9/1334–35, with note).
- 163–70 / 160–65 Medea takes up the theme, suggested by the Chorus, of the mighty oath that Jason once swore and now has broken. She invokes Themis, an archaic personification whose name, "Law" or "Custom" (literally, "That which has been established"), implies that she is a guardian of

the prohibitions and prescriptions that regulate the affairs of men (and gods), especially those of divine or primordial origin.

Artemis, the virgin huntress leading her train of dancing nymphs through the wilds, is often depicted in myth as the slayer of young women, a reminder of the risks girls face when they become brides and new mothers. Perhaps she is called upon here to be Medea's savior, both in memory of what she once was when she first bound Jason to herself and entered upon motherhood and as the destroyer of his new wife. It may be that Artemis is also invoked here because of her association with the goddess Hecate (see note, line 415/395–97)

198–212 / 190–203 To Greeks, music as a way of forgetting cares was proverbial.

220–21 / 210–13 *through the impassable maw that guards the way to Greece* The Bosphorus.

222–447 / 214–409 **First Episode.**

222–84 / 214–266 In sharp contrast to her previous wailing, when Medea now comes through the palace doors of the temporary scene building, her polite and politic words give to modern readers the impression of calm self-control. This sudden change from fire to ice has been rationalized in many ways, sometimes in terms of Medea's character, psyche, or personality (she is the kind of woman who under these circumstances is able with great effort to rein in her emotions), sometimes according to formal variations between impassioned lyrics and supposedly rational deliberations. Still others have called attention to the sophisticated quality of her rhetoric with its indirect generalities.

285–89 / 267–70 The Chorus is now speaking (in iambs), not singing. Whenever this occurs, it is thought that only the Chorus Leader speaks.

288–89 / 269–70 Creon appears with a small retinue (cf. line 355/335). Both Aegeus and Jason may also have retinues.

344–60 / 324–39 Formal line by line interchanges between two characters are typical of Greek tragedy, particularly in contexts of debate and cross-examination.

344 ff. / 324 ff. *I beg you* At this point, or, as some critics maintain, at line 356/336, Medea kneels in a formal act of supplication and grasps Creon's knees (in the Greek) and right hand. By following these rituals, she puts

herself and her claim to Creon's favor under the protection of Zeus as god of suppliants (*Hikesios/Hiketesios*). This is another way in which Zeus secures justice for the weak in the face of brute force.

377 / 356 This play, contrary to contemporary fashion and Euripides' usual practice, does not require the usual three actors, but like earlier tragedies could be performed throughout by just two actors. If indeed it was so performed, the actor playing Creon would exit at this point to change into the Jason mask and costume. (Only in the prologue, when Medea sings from within, is a third voice required, and that voice need not have belonged to a third actor. Any good singer would do—the poet himself, for example—and, since Medea does not sing on stage, the audience need not have noticed the difference between the unseen singer's third voice and the voice of the actor on stage intoning Medea's spoken lines.)

401-2 / 383 *They'd mock and laugh at me intolerably* It is not death per se she fears, but their gloating laughter and her degradation. See also lines 772/781-82, 787-88/797, 1026-27/1049-50, and 1330/1355, and Introduction, "Medea's honor."

407-9 / 386-90 These lines prepare us for the arrival of Aegeus later in the play.

415 / 395-97 *Hecate* Euripides' *Medea* is our earliest evidence for Hecate in her classic role as the sinister goddess of magic and sorcery, by whose secret nocturnal rites a privileged few, her priests and priestesses, gained access to the Underworld with its disembodied souls and hidden lore. Like other purveyors of novel mysteries who were then flocking to Periclean Athens, Medea keeps a shrine to her special goddess in the innermost reaches of her home, presumably as a repository for the rare and potent drugs (*pharmaka*) that, with the goddess's help, she has harvested at times and places suitable for contact with dangerously polluting demonic powers (see Introduction, "Medea's character").

The exclusivity of Medea's mysteries contrasts with popular cult, in which both public and private shrines were placed at the entrances to cities and houses, along roadways near graves, and especially at crossroads, those dangerous points of contact between lower- and upper-world forces where triformed Hecate of the Crossroads (*Enodia, Trioditis*) was thought to dwell. Here, when the moon was full, her devotees would make offerings of shiny cakes. Conversely, at midnight on starlit new moon nights they would set out strange prophylactic sacrifices,

called “Hecate’s dinners,” whose contents seem to have included kneaded cakes and puppies or fish.

Hecate appears in two forms in Greek art, as single-faced and Artemis-like with torches and hounds and, when her nature as Mistress of the Crossroads is being emphasized, in triplicate, sometimes with three heads on one body but more often with three full images facing outward from a central pole, a type immortalized in a famous statue of Alcamenes, set up in Athens about the time of the *Medea*’s first performance.

432–47 / 410–45 **First Stasimon.** This is the first of five choral odes sung and danced by the Chorus in front of the scene building. They are called stasima or “standing” odes, presumably because the Chorus begins and ends its movements in a standing position, possibly a squared military formation three files deep.

432 / 410 The Chorus mentions a reversal of nature that ancient magicians (like Medea) claimed to be able to effect (cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.489; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7.199–200).

436–37 / 421–23 *ancient songs that sing our faithlessness* Commentators usually cite lines from Hesiod or the invective of Semonides as illustrations of the contumely heaped upon women, but I think the reference here is most probably to epic tales. The queen of faithlessness is Helen, but there are others, like Phaedra or Clytemnestra, and Aphrodite herself, the teacher of untrustworthy seduction. Not to be forgotten among treacherous women is, ironically, Medea.

438–39 / 424–26 *Apollo* As Lord of the Lyre, the shining god (Phoebus) Apollo leads the Chorus of the Muses, daughters of Memory (the oral tradition) and goddesses of song and choral dance. *Mousikê*, his province, embraces more than the knowledge of the tunings of the lyre, melodies, or rhythms; it embraces the winged words themselves, messengers of the divine knowledge of the past, present, and future that epic bards dispensed. That Apollo does not let this Chorus “carry a tune” (Collier, line 438, in Greek “did not grant the inspired song of the lyre,” lines 424–425) indicates that they have not gone to school.

448–633 / 446–626 **Second Episode.** The real world analog of the explosive *agon* (“contest” of paired antagonistic set speeches) with which this episode begins is to be found in the formalities and vitriolic, highly personal

atmosphere of the Athenian law courts—a speech of prosecution (Medea) spoken by or on behalf of the victim, answered by the accused’s own defense (Jason)—with two notable concessions to the dramatic milieu: overwrought women did not appear in courts on their own behalf and the introductory remarks designed to elicit the jury’s sympathy and goodwill are lacking.

448–66 / 446–64 The tone of these lines is hard to fix. One can imagine them as conveying officiousness, “nauseating self-righteousness” (Elliott), or “ineffable smugness” (Morwood). One can even imagine a sympathetic rendering in which a sorrowful and frustrated husband tries to deal with an hysterical and intractable woman. Contemporary audiences, persuaded by the affecting directness of Medea’s first speech whose justice they feel, find her a sympathetic character and Jason incomprehensible, if not downright reprehensible. But ancient Greeks would not have been so repelled. The citizenship law of 451 BC, which decreed that Athenians had to prove that both their parents were citizens, made the disadvantages of a foreign marriage for one’s children keenly felt. As heads of households, men legally ruled their wives and believed that a woman’s greatest assets were temperance and submissiveness, virtues Medea clearly lacks. It was considered dangerous for a man to contract an alliance with a wealthier, higher class, smarter woman, since she was more likely to rule him than to be ruled. Thus, though Jason was clearly in the wrong for having broken his oath, the men in the audience would not have been as unreceptive as moderns to his excuses.

477–78 / 476 The Greek of line 476—“*esôsa s’ hôs isasin Hellênôn hosoi.*” (I saved you, as all the Greeks know who . . .)—was famous for its (snaky, hissing) sibilants, which were designed to grate on the ear. Medea is spitting mad.

481–82 / 480–82 *I killed the . . . serpent* In Pindar’s Fourth Pythian Ode, an earlier account of the legend of the Argo, Jason, not Medea, kills the dragon (line 249). Apollonius of Rhodes, writing a century and a half later, has Medea put the dragon to sleep. Such variants are typical of the fluidity of ancient myth.

481 ff. / 480 ff. Medea omits her brother’s murder (see line 160/167) from this catalogue of the benefits she has conferred upon Jason. A good lawyer never

brings forward facts that can have negative implications for his client, and Medea, as the audience already knows, speaks like a well-trained and effective advocate.

497–99 / 496–98 Breaking his oath is Jason’s greatest offense against the gods. In the Greek, without mentioning supplication *per se*, Medea refers to her right hand and knees, thus immediately reminding her audience (and Jason) that Jason had knelt to her in formal supplication, just as she has just knelt to Creon. Because this custom with its symbolic gesture of submission, whereby the kneeling petitioner clasps the right hand (of honor and power) and knees of the one being petitioned, is foreign to modern English speakers, Collier substitutes another familiar act of submission, bowing the head, for “knees,” and overtly names Jason as a “suppliant.”

Interestingly, Apollonius makes Medea, not Jason, the suppliant; she begs that he take her away with him.

527–28 / 520–21 In formalized debates, choruses often offer neutral comment to mark the transition from one speech to the next.

533–39 / 526–31 The idea, first exemplified here, that love, not the perpetrator, is the true cause of an action was a rhetorical commonplace favored by sophists in practice or display speeches, most notably in defenses of Helen of Troy. Euripides has Helen herself use it in the *Trojan Women* (lines 940 ff.) of 415 BC, and it is also found in a famous “Encomium (Praise) of Helen” by the brilliant and influential sophist Gorgias of Leontini (in Sicily) who, we are told, came as an ambassador to Athens in 427 BC, soon after the production of the *Medea*.

545–46 / 537–38 *Justice, not force, rules here* Barbarians who are the slaves of the Great King must serve his pleasure (cf. Herodotus 7.79 where the Colchians are part of the invading Persian army), but free Greeks obey only their city’s laws. On the other hand, at the time of this play, recent decrees promulgated by a sovereign Athenian assembly were seen by many to be blatantly unjust, an irony that may extend to Jason’s own claims and actions with regard to Medea. He broke his oath, and she can find no Greek law to protect her.

550 / 543 Orpheus is mentioned by Jason here not only as a fellow Argonaut, but because he, like Medea, was the proud possessor of powerful occult

wisdom—knowledge of Underworld mysteries, incantation, and, indeed, the entire nature of things both human and divine. This wisdom, the know-how to make things happen, not just to entertain with delightful sounds, made Orpheus's voice worth coveting. By the fifth century BC there was in Greece a body of oracular hexameter poetry—cosmogonies, revelations, healing spells, purifications, and so on—circulating under his name, promulgated by secret "Pythagorean" societies that practiced various forms of abstinence and held out the promise of a blessed life after death to those who had been initiated into the highest level of divine science.

569–70 / 563–64 *sons . . . brothers to ours, not rivals* Jason is assuring Medea that her sons will not be disinherited. Under the new Athenian marriage law (see notes, lines 448–66/446–64, and Introduction, "Medea's honor") their legitimacy might have been questioned; but clearly under ancestral law they would have kept their rights as *his* sons and heirs to *his* lands (in Iolcus and elsewhere), though, to be sure, they would not be eligible to inherit Creon's estate and power, as would Jason's sons by the princess.

572–73 / 565 *Children are more important to fathers than to mothers* (in Greek, "Why do you need [more] children?") Since mothers were technically outsiders (*thuraioi*) to their husbands' and children's houses and could themselves own no property or be heads of households, a woman could not enlarge her own wealth or her husband's family's prosperity by marrying a second spouse and adding his sons to sons she might already have. Once a woman had borne two sons—one to care for her in her old age and to guarantee her status as a mother in his household, and one to serve as a spare, in case the first son died—then she had as many as she needed. More than two would diminish the wealth of the house in which she would eventually reside once her husband was dead. For Jason and most ancient Greeks the importance of children derived not from parental affection but from the fact that, even more than fame and glory, they (especially the males) were tangible sureties of their father's own immortality and of the enduring power and prestige of his house. Though Medea once was the cause of the success of Jason's house, she is now irrelevant to its prosperity (or so Jason supposes), since he has found a more materially rewarding alliance elsewhere.

575–83 / 568–75 That women are slaves to the pleasures of sex is a commonplace of classical literature. The protagonist of Euripides' *Hippolytus* makes

a similar protest against the need for women in order to beget children (*Hipp.* 616 ff.).

584–86 / 576–78 The Chorus, like the disinterested Aegeus later on, finds Jason’s deeds blameworthy, representing perhaps a naive but normative rejection of Jason’s rhetoric.

600 / 591 *barbarian* The Greek “*barbaros*” means anyone who was not a Greek by language or race. Since the Persian wars, barbarian slaves, whose presence in Athens was quite noticeable—for instance, the police were Scythians—had been deemed slavish, not just in their submission to their masters but also in their lack of self-control. Without the benefit of a true Hellenic education, they could be neither good nor beautiful. Their dress, their strange manners, even their attempts to speak Greek were mocked on the comic stage.

618–19 / 612–13 These lines remind the audience of the power and high status of Jason’s house throughout the Greek world and beyond. A literal translation of the Greek—“. . . I am ready . . . to send tokens (*symbola*) to my guest-friends elsewhere in Greece, who will treat you well”—reveals a reference to a specific Greek custom: upon the completion of an agreement or contract, either unique (or rare) objects were exchanged or, more commonly, an object was broken into two (or more) dovetailing pieces and each party was given one of these unique pieces, as proof of the holder’s legitimate interest in the deal. In this instance, the agreement was one of “guest-friendship” (*xenia*), a pact of mutual assistance or an alliance between two noble houses of different cities. Through such an agreement, influential exiles, though parted from their friends and denied their accumulated honors and political rights at home, could rely upon family guest-friendships to provide refuge and a base of operations.

634–57 / 627–62 **Second Stasimon.** The Chorus picks up the thematic thread of excessive passion from Medea’s closing statement and gives it general application. By doing so, it evokes her earlier intemperate love for Jason. The first system of strophe and antistrophe (see notes, lines 148–58/148–59) uses one complex metrical pattern, the second system another. The second strophe and antistrophe turn from intemperate Love as the cause of Medea’s betrayal of her father and city to her present situation, as one bereft of city and friends. As usual, the Chorus provides supplemental generalizing comment on the action, rather than

contributing to it. With the appearance of Aegeus and his grant of asylum, we soon discover, however, that this picture of an abject Medea is false. A person with her extraordinary powers can always buy another friendship.

658–815 / 663–823 Third Episode.

This scene is famously condemned by Aristotle: “It is right, however, to censure both improbability and depravity where there is no necessity and no use is made of the improbability. An example is Euripides’ introduction of Aegeus or (of depravity) the character of Menelaus in the *Orestes*” (*Poetics* xxv 1461b 19–21, tr. W. Hamilton Fyfe [Loeb]). If Aristotle is actually referring to our play and not some other lost play—we know of one called *Aegeus*—he seems to have in mind the accidental, unmotivated way in which (a less than heroic) Aegeus and Medea meet halfway through the action. The Athenian king just happens to be passing through Corinth on his way from Delphi to Troezen; she just happens to be standing there for no particular reason, a happenstance with no justification in the received tradition (*Poetics* 1461b 14–15 and cf. 60b 35–61a 3). Indeed, the received tradition seems to be altogether against it, since Theseus, not Aegeus, was considered an Argonaut and Jason’s contemporary. Furthermore, the meeting might be thought to serve no vital purpose: a heroine with Medea’s talents and supernatural connections hardly needs a rescuer, and her intractable anger guarantees that she will punish Jason and Creon regardless of the aftermath.

In Euripides’ defense, moderns have offered compensating dramatic reasons for bringing the clueless Aegeus so unexpectedly onto the stage: His dialogue with Medea provides a sharp contrast to the preceding agon. Unlike Jason, he respects her, recognizes her wisdom, confirms her judgment of Jason’s wickedness, and swears an honorable oath to provide her with sanctuary. She, on the other hand, is shown, less sympathetically than before, to be a woman as willing to manipulate this honest, unsuspecting man for her own ulterior devices as she is her enemies. All of these dramatic justifications are quite reasonable, especially if one takes into account the dramatic force of surprise. More provocative and anti-Aristotelian is the argument that the Aegeus scene is actually essential to the plot, on the grounds that, since Medea announces that she will kill her children only after the Aegeus scene, her decision must have been prompted by Aegeus’s desire to remedy his childlessness. Before this scene she is still uncertain of her methods, and even asserts that she will kill Jason (lines 393–94/375); after it her plans are set. She will kill her own children, not Jason, since killing

them will accomplish more than killing him: it will destroy his whole house. This logical connection between Aegeus's childlessness and Jason's is, however, completely absent from Medea's dialogue, which is the only sure evidence of her reasoning process. All that Medea says—and the Chorus offers no contrary evidence—is that Aegeus has provided her, not the children (cf. line 793), with a "safe harbor." She will kill them not just to destroy Jason's house, but because she will not leave them behind in the hands of her enemies.

Aristotelian probabilities and plot construction aside, there is another obvious reason for Aegeus's appearance: the Athens connection. Aegeus was a founding king of Athens and the father of Athens' greatest hero, Theseus. The bargain that Medea strikes with him, to the detriment of the Corinthians, has aetiological value. It explains why Corinth becomes Athens' enemy. Perhaps the generous, righteous, yet ultimately gullible Aegeus is a convenient precursor of the timely, patriotic, and cautionary "Athens Ode" (Third Stasimon, 816–49/824–65). In other words, the patriotic value of the Aegeus scene provided Euripides with sufficient motivation and his audience with sufficient delight to overcome its inherent improbabilities.

662 / 667 *Delphi—Apollo's oracle* Apollo alone understood the mind of Zeus and, when inquiries were made at his temple at Delphi, a sanctuary centrally located in a steep mountain pass above the north shore of the Gulf of Corinth, he transmitted bits of this complete knowledge to the Pythia, a ritually pure prophetess who in an ecstatic trance intoned messages from the beyond.

674 / 679 *Choke off the wineskin's spout* The plain meaning of the oracle, that Aegeus is not to get drunk or have sex before reaching home, seems not to accord with the legend of Theseus's birth as we know it. See next note.

677 / 682 Not necessarily on his way home to Athens from Delphi, but certainly on his way to Troezen, Aegeus would have passed through Corinth. If we can trust Medea's wishes for his success (683/688; 747/756) and the absence of any obvious clues to the contrary, undeterred by his profitable encounter with Medea, he will continue his journey to Troezen, where Pittheus, wise to the intent of the oracle, will see to it that Aegeus becomes drunk (unchokes the wineskin's spout) and, as a result, sleeps with (unchokes the wineskin's spout) Pittheus's daughter Aethra *before* he returns to Athens. Theseus, the greatest of Athens' heroic forebears, is the offspring of this union.

How is it possible, moderns ask, for Aegeus to beget an heir in Troezen when the oracle expressly forbids his having intercourse before reaching Athens? Since Euripides seems not to have invented the oracle—a presumably earlier epic version is preserved in Plutarch’s *Life of Theseus*—it is likely that the Greeks did not read it as a prohibition, but as indicating that the next time Aegeus had intercourse he would beget an heir. Pittheus’s wisdom lay not just in understanding this but in ensuring that Medea would not be the mother of the prophesied heir. The story of Medea in Athens and her attempt to murder Theseus was the subject of two undatable plays called *Aegeus*, one by Sophocles, the other by Euripides himself. Aethra, Theseus’s mother, is a main character in Euripides’ *Suppliants*.

684 / 689 *tears* By her verbal delivery or by some gesture or altered posture, Medea elicited this response. Tears would not have been visible through a mask or even on a naked face, considering the distance between the ancient audience and the actor. They were made evident by Aegeus’s words.

717–24 / 725–30 If Medea comes freely as a suppliant to Aegeus, he can honor Zeus Hikesios (protector of suppliants), like the righteous man he is, and protect her, without violating his guest-friendships with Creon and Jason and the house of Pelias. But if he were to help her flee Corinth, he would be transgressing these older alliances that, like all foreign alliances, were protected by the enforcing might of Zeus Xenios (protector of hospitality). As one who had broken faith with his Corinthian hosts, he would have merited their revenge.

725–26 / 731–32 Medea says, in effect, that it’s time to bring on the lawyers. The language of oath is the ancient Greek equivalent of our written contract law, a protection for all parties concerned. Since for the Greeks the enforcement of law was ultimately the responsibility of the gods, an oath, calling upon the gods as sureties, added real binding force to the proceedings. The ensuing oath taking suggests the original oath taking between Jason and Medea. As in that earlier contract, she now promises Aegeus the effective use of her drugs if he will accept her into his house as her protector (*kyrios*). Aegeus’s promise to Medea (deliberately, out of politeness?) obscures what legend supplied, namely, that she would become his concubine—not marry her surely, as he already has a wife (line 668/673). See Introduction, “Medea’s honor.”

- 729 / 734 *Pelias's sons* In Greek "the house of Pelias," which would include Pelias's sons-in-law (see note on lines 8–9/9–10 and Introduction, "Legendary background") and grandsons, as well as his celebrated son Acastus.
- 737–38 / 746–47 In his daily passage across the sky, Helios, the sun, the all-seeing eye of Zeus, spies evildoers and reports their activities to his master. The whole race of gods is a conventional fail-safe in oath taking, in case whoever swears later alleges that his oath was not binding because some other god, by whom he should have been sworn, was overlooked. Such procedural mistakes could be used to invalidate an agreement, sometimes long after the fact.
- 740–46 / 749–55 Oaths must be specific; the vaguer they are, the more easily they are abrogated. Curses were routinely added to oaths to strengthen them.
- 746 / 755 *others who renounce them* Those who failed to respect the gods properly, the *dus-seboi*, were liable to prosecution for impiety under Attic law (this is what happened to Socrates), and, if convicted, they suffered severe punishments (divine and human) that had serious consequences, often beyond a single generation. Pericles' mother's family, the Alcmaeonidae (called the Accursed), were under a curse two centuries old, because an ancestor had wrongfully killed certain suppliants. (See Herodotus 5.71 and Thucydides 1.126.)
- 772 / 782 *targets for my enemies* The Greek for targets, *kathybrisai*, refers to the ways her enemies in Corinth will insult and degrade, even harm, her defenseless children, who are their enemies, by virtue of their kinship with her. On the ancient honor code and the power of *hybris*, see Introduction, "Medea's honor" (cf. the passages listed with the note on 401–2/383).
- 775 / 786 *one priceless gown* The Doric *peplos* was a simple overgarment, a rectangular piece of woolen cloth draped like a tunic and secured at the shoulders. The adjective *leptos*, here "priceless," indicates the fineness of the thread and the overall delicacy of the cloth.
- 784 / 794 *bring down Jason's house* This formula was common to curses. Medea will be the instrument of the curse that would have been placed on Jason at the time of their oath taking. Annihilation of a man's house entailed erasing its wealth, honor, and male progeny. Thus, to kill an

enemy's male children was the right of an avenger. What is unusual here is that the enemy's children are the avenger's own.

787–88 / 797 *easier to bear than my enemies who mock me* We may find it incredible that Medea would kill her children to forestall her enemies' laughter at her expense, but our sensibilities are not attuned, as the Greeks' were, to the demands of a militant shame-culture in which Achilles destroys many sturdy Greek souls just to make Agamemnon pay for his bullying and Ajax kills himself because he cannot endure the disgrace of his comrades' gloating. (Cf. the passages listed in the note on 401–2/383.)

803–5 / 811–13 Medea finally loses the Chorus's goodwill when she announces her decision to kill her own children (line 783/792–93).

812–15 / 820–23 The Nurse, who is addressed here, must have been a silent figure by Medea's side during the preceding action, perhaps having come out of the house with her before her first speech. It is possible that, while the Nurse goes off in another direction to look for Jason, Medea exits through the center door. Possible, but unlikely, since the second system of the next choral ode is addressed to her. Still, an exit at this point would give Medea the opportunity to ready her poisonous gifts, and she could reenter in time for the Chorus to address her in their lyrics. But if she misses the first system, how can she make sense of the second, which begins with a conclusion based on the first?

816–49 / 824–65 **Third Stasimon**, referred to as the "Athens Ode" (see note on the Third Episode, lines 658–815/663–823, and the Introduction, "Historical background"). Serious ideas about Athens and the nature of things lie behind the conceits of the first two stanzas (first strophe and antistrophe).

816–18 / 824–26 *Children of the gods, of sacred Earth, since ancient times, Athenians have flourished, unconquered* Erechtheus, from whom all Athenians claimed descent, was born from the Earth, begotten by Hephaestus (god of fire, metalworking, and other crafts), and raised by Athens' patron goddess Athena (bestower of prowess in war, wisdom, and weaving). He married the granddaughter of the River Cephissus, who like all rivers is a deity. The Athenians were proud of the fact that they were born from the earth (*autochthonoi*); that is, not immigrants. The notion was emphasized by sponsors of the democracy, because it

made even lower-class citizens somehow landed nobility and worthy of rule.

818–20 / 826–30 *nourished by the vivid air that brings them grace and wisdom* The image is more concrete than we might realize, for progressive thinkers of the day believed that human intelligence comes from a tangible divine nature manifest in the air and light around us. Even in later Greek thought, *pneuma* (breath, wind, spirit) at its finest is not to be differentiated from light or intelligible fire (*aether*). The theme of purified and intelligent air is taken up in a different way in the antistrophe (see next note).

823–29 / 835–45 Since the River Cephissus, unlike the Illissus, did not dry up in summer, even at the hottest time of year it could be the source of air-tempering moisture. A climate most favorable to the good health and moral perfection of living beings was thought to depend upon the proper mixture of purifying sunlight, air, and moisture. Thus, here Aphrodite, fashioner of living things and goddess of all mixing, wreathed in roses (her signature flowers), blends air and Cephissan water, the dry and the moist, to concoct a perpetual life-giving, soul-enhancing, creativity-sustaining springtime. She does this in her cosmic breathing, which mimics human respiration.

850–952 / 866–975 **Fourth Episode.**

926–27 / 949 [=786] A woman's clothing and jewelry—possibly also her personal slaves—were hers to dispose of as she wished, unlike the rest of her dowry, which was controlled by her husband (Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Athens*, pp. 26–27).

931–32 / 954–55, *heirlooms that Helios . . . bequeathed* Yet another allusion to Medea's kinship with Helios, a sign of her portentous access to potent Underworld magic. Gold, a solidified liquid (cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 59B), retains the fiery qualities of its original molten state and is emblematic of Helios's original nature.

953–76 / 976–1001 **Fourth Stasimon.** This song notably lacks the general utterances that predominate in the first strophic pairs of the first three Choruses. Close linkage to the action at hand complements the heightened pace and helps alter the tonal register of the proceedings as Medea implements her vengeance.

977–1056 / 1002–80 **Fifth Episode.**

1003–05 / 1026–27 A child's marriage was the final maternal duty, and ancient mothers exulted in the part they played in the wedding ceremonies. As heads of housekeeping, they would have had oversight of the ritual bath taken by the bride and groom before dressing for their nuptials, and, in the case of the mothers of the bride, of the smooth running of the banquet at the bride's father's house, where the formal unveiling of the bride before the groom took place. The climax of the nuptials came when the groom took his bride from her father's house and here, after the young couple, the bride's mother held pride of place. Raising torches aloft, she led the procession of well-wishers who, with song and dance and shouts of congratulations, escorted the newlyweds to the groom's house. There, at the door, she ceded her honors to the groom's mother, who with torches newly lit from her son's hearth, greeted him and welcomed her daughter-in-law to her new home. A mother's lamentations, like Medea's here, that she will not participate in this blessed event because of her or her children's death are common to tragedy.

1006 / 1028 *My unforgiving self has made me wretched* Medea here finally confesses the fault of which she has been accused by all others in the play (save Aegeus), her *authadeia*, her unshakeable determination to carry out her will and satisfy her implacable anger. See Introduction, "Medea's character."

1026–27 / 1049–50 Medea's dread of being laughed at by her enemies again; cf. the passages listed in the note for lines 401–2/383.

1029–31 / 1053–55 Medea is sending her children into the house as sacrificial animals. The language reflects the often-heard formula warning the profane or impure to keep away from sacred rites, whose performance their presence would invalidate or corrupt.

1032–56 / 1056–80 Some critics have regarded these lines as an interpolated doublet of lines 1040–55, ill-adjusted to the context. Others have disputed this radical surgery and bracketed some lines, but not others. This translation assumes the lines are genuine and makes them dramatically plausible.

1035–36 / 1059 *Hell's vengeful demons* In Greek "the netherworld avengers (*alastores*) in Hades," that is, the Furies.

1054–56 / 1078–80 *Angry passions have mastered me—emotions of misrule that destroy men* The Greek reads “I understand the kind of evil I shall bring myself to perpetrate, but my anger (*thumos*), which is the cause of the greatest evils for mortals, is stronger than my counsels (*bouleumata*).” Stoics used these lines to illustrate their belief that the rational soul acts as a unit in coming to all decisions. By their account, Medea, fully conscious of which path she is about to take and even that it is the wrong one, nevertheless deliberately chooses vengeance on Jason over saving the children. In rebuttal, Platonists, who believed the passionate part of the soul to be in conflict with the rational part, took the lines to mean that Medea’s anger is stronger than her right reasoning (John M. Dillon in Clauss/Iles Johnson, 1997, pp. 211–18). Either way, the ancient debate proves that these lines were established in the Greek text by the third century BC and shows that the word “counsels” was taken to refer not to her plotting throughout the play (as some scholars think), but to her present advice to herself that she ought not kill her children.

1057–85 / 1081–1115 If Medea exited with the children at 1056/1080, then the Chorus Leader speaks to an empty stage. These comments in declaimed anapests, similar to those uttered by the Nurse (lines 86–221/96–212 ff.), mark an interlude during which neither Chorus nor audience knows what is happening inside. But the mention of the premature death of children, though all too frequent in times past, might suggest that Medea is now preparing to carry out her threat to kill hers. Against such consonance of theme and dramatic expectation, the philosophic quality of the discourse acts like counterpoint, thus heightening the suspense.

1086–1226 / 1116–1250 **Sixth Episode.**

1105–1201 / 1136–1230 Euripides was known for his vivid messenger speeches, conventionally used by tragedians to dramatize violent offstage action that could not be shown in the theater to such great effect. This one is among the best.

1113 / 1143 *princess’s chambers* Wives and daughters in great houses occupied separate quarters, where they worked and tended the younger children. Only certain men—primarily family members—were permitted access. Others, like this messenger, were deliberately kept out.

1117 / 1147 The veil is a sign of her status as a newlywed.

1118–24 / 1149–55: It was normal for husbands to be many years older than their teenage brides. Part of a husband's duty as her new governor (*kyrios*) was to train his young bride in how to behave as the mistress of her new household.

1195–1201 / 1224–30 Another piece of proverbial wisdom from a servant; messenger speeches regularly end with them.

1199–1201 / 1228–30 A striking version of the sentiment expressed here can be found in Herodotus's tale about the reply Athenian lawgiver Solon gave to Lydian King Croesus, when he asked him whom he counted the happiest of men, thinking his own wealth and power so great that he himself would be deemed happiest. But Solon disappointed him by naming others, not nearly as rich or powerful, who had led honorable lives and then ended them in the most honorable way imaginable. According to Solon, happiness cannot be determined until a man has lived the whole of his life and cannot be equated with wealth and power. Even if a man is as rich as Croesus, he is only happy in conformity with his good luck, because at any moment his happiness can be taken away.

1227–68 / 1251–92 **Fifth Stasimon.** Throughout this ode, the agitated meter (“dochmiac”) indicates an increase in the emotional intensity of the music as the play reaches its dramatic and rhetorical climax.

1227–46 / 1251–70 As witnesses to all oaths and omnipresent observers of all misdeeds, Earth and Sun are summoned to prevent an act that will activate the ineluctable Furies. In her pursuit of Jason, Medea is here depicted as one of these demonic avengers, the materialization of her own wrath which will not be appeased until she destroys his whole house, root and branch, a punishment warranted by the oath-protecting curse sworn at the time of their marriage, but one that will have grievous consequences for her, since, if she kills her children to gain the fear-some justice she seeks, she ought in turn to become the target of the new Furies awakened by the scent of her children's contaminating blood as it spreads over her hands and seeps into the ground. Indeed, among human crimes and pollutions, the shedding of kindred blood is the worst and demands compensation, no matter how long delayed, and the grace of grave purifications. Much worse than spilling an ordinary human's blood, however, is the spilling of the divinely infused blood of the gods' descendants, who have the gods themselves, not mere mortals, as their swift and sure avengers. With the words *your*

radiant children (1231/1255), Euripides reminds us not only of Medea's and therefore her children's descent from Helios, but also of the fearfulness of her act and its consequences. Had Medea just avenged herself on Creon and his daughter and Jason himself, she would only have shed the foreign blood of enemies, a justifiable, though dangerous, act; but by killing her own offspring she ought to incur unspeakable cosmic retribution. Yet, in the mythical record she never does, a problem Euripides appears to dispose of at the end of the play by having Medea declare her intention of establishing a festival and expiatory rites in Corinth for her children's murder (lines 1356–1357/1381–83).

1240 / 1263 *Clashing Rocks* The Symplegades (see line 2/2).

1247–68 / 1270a–92 An offstage scream inaugurates the second system (second strophe and antistrophe) of this last choral ode, unique in that the cries of the children issuing from behind the scene building in spoken iambic verses are mixed with the singing voices of the Chorus in the orchestra. This contrast between singing and terrified shouting further heightens the agitation of the musical lines. The alternation is continued in the antistrophe, but this time the Chorus utters the unusual spoken iambic lines, which, though not screams, are nevertheless rhetorically intense.

1247 / 1273, 1252 / 1275 No matter how absurd we may find a do-nothing Chorus reacting ineffectually in song to murder and mayhem within, we must remember that this is a script for a musical and that song and dance numbers, even in our own theaters, tend to override absurdities in the action (or inaction). It is also possible that the choral dancers rendered the action more plausible through mime, for instance, by trying in vain to open the barred palace doors. Regardless of the original staging, however, standards of realism are relative, and ancient audiences who accepted rigid conventions of masks, three actors, and formal speeches in verse would not have been discomposed by passive choruses.

1259–65 / 1282–89 Ino's story is bound up in Medea's in two ways: She was the stepmother who, by persuading her husband Athamas (Jason's great uncle) to sacrifice his two children by his first wife, was the instigator of the whole saga of the Golden Fleece and its return to Greece (see Introduction, "Legendary background"). More important, her murdered son Melicertes (Palaemon), like Medea's sons at the end of the play (lines 1353–57/1378–83), became the center of a Corinthian cult. This famous "boy on a dolphin" was venerated just outside Corinth,

on the shore of the isthmus, at a tomb-temple that stood within the sanctuary of Poseidon, near the race track where every fourth year the Isthmian Games were held in his honor.

After Ino's sister Semele was killed by Zeus's thunderbolt while giving birth to his son Dionysus, Ino became the infant Dionysus's wet-nurse, raising him alongside her two sons by Athamas. In so doing, she incurred the anger of Hera, who drove her mad and caused her to murder her sons. After her leap into the sea, not only was Melicertes's body rescued by Poseidon's dolphin, but Ino herself was transformed into the sea nymph Leucothea, the white goddess, worshipped all over the Mediterranean basin.

Euripides wrote a tragedy called *Ino*, which recounted her persecution and transformation and was performed prior to 425 BC (cf. Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 434).

1267–68 / 1290–92, a woman's marriage bed The image is ambiguous in that it refers both to a woman's cravings and need for a man and a man's cravings and need for a woman. Either way, it is a fitting image to introduce Jason, who has won evils because he used the bed and a woman's lust for his own ends.

1269–end / 1293–end Seventh Episode.

1272 / 1297–98 or fly on wings to heaven Foreshadows Medea's final appearance.

1292 / 1317 To the surprise of the audience, who were probably expecting Medea and the children to be rolled out of the center door on the *eccyclema*, a platform on wheels regularly used in tragedies to display interior carnage, Medea appears above the roof of the scene building riding aloft on (or suspended from) the crane in a chariot drawn, as ancient comment and a number of vase paintings attest, by a pair of winged dragons (her own sorcerer's steeds), instead of the traditional horses of the Sun. The children's corpses must have been visibly draped on the chariot rail. The crane was a standard piece of stage equipment, the *machina* of *deus ex machina* fame from which high-flying gods often appeared abruptly at the end of Euripides' plays.

Medea's flight to Athens was enduringly etched on the ancient imagination. Eight centuries later, St. Augustine confesses (*Confessions*, 3.6) that in his pagan youth he used to sing a popular song called *Flying Medea*. (See Edith Hall, "The Singing Actors of Antiquity," in *Greek and Roman Actors*, ed. Easterling and Hall.)

1296 / 1321–22 *Helios has sent his chariot* A reminder of how well this rescue comports with Medea's dark nature as mistress of Underworld magic. After setting, the Day Star is borne on the streams of Ocean in a golden cup from west to east, where he dwells in the domain of Night with his family (Stesichorus, fr. S17=185 PMG [*ap.* Ath. 469e-f]; Parmenides DK1.9) and keeps his winged car (Minnermus, fr. 12W [*ap.* Ath. 469f–470b]) ready to carry him aloft again at dawn through the gates of the Underworld (cf., e.g., Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 469c–470d on the “cup of Heracles”). How, after a day's drive, his chariot and its steeds (whether they be horses or dragons) get back to their stalls and garage must have bothered the Greeks as well as us, for in addition to quoting earlier poets, Athenaeus cites the fifth-century Pherecydes (see note, lines 160–62/166–67) as saying that the cup carried the god *with his horses* (*ap.* Ath. 469c-d). Be that as it may, the notion of the subterranean Sun as an occult power, known to us from post-Classical Greek sources, appears to have had a firm place in fifth-century Greek thought (e.g., Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, Oxford, 1995 pp. 49 ff.). See the Introduction, “Medea's character,” and notes, line 415/395–97.

1307 / 1333 *Fury* Jason says that the gods have let Medea's *alastôr* (literally, the forgetter) fall on him by association only, thereby indicating that his children's death is really the handiwork of a demonic pursuer wreaking vengeance on Medea for her murder of her brother Apsyrtus. His own punishment, being purely accidental, is thus undeserved.

1307–9 / 1334–35 The Greek says that she killed her baby brother at her father's hearth before boarding the *Argo*, a version of the myth, attributed to the *Colchians*, a lost play of Sophocles. It should not be confused with the more gruesomely picturesque one attributed to Pherecydes (see note, lines 160–62/166–67). Modern readers must remind themselves of the fluidity of ancient myths, which were constantly being altered to meet the varying demands of the uses to which they were put. From her father's point of view—and from the point of view of Athenian law—this is the worst charge against Medea, that she killed her baby brother, her father's seed and heir.

1330 / 1355 *mocking me* Cf. the passages listed in the note on 401–2/383.

1350 / 1375 In the Greek, which literally says, “The terms of divorce (*apallagai*, cf. line 250/236) are easy,” Jason ends more than his and Medea's shouting match.

- 1353–57 / 1378–83 Much like gods at the ends of other Euripidean tragedies, semi-divine Medea now sets up a causal connection between the action of the play and a real cult, in this case one established at Corinth, as expiation for her children's murder (see notes, lines 9–10/10, 1227–46/1251–70, and 1259–65/1282–89). Inasmuch as Hera was the guiding goddess of the Argo adventure, it is fitting that in death Jason's children find sanctuary in her precinct, whose location "on the heights" is perhaps to be linked to Ino's mad plunge into the sea (lines 1259–65/1282–89). Upon what heights the historical temple was founded, however, is disputed. Earlier scholars assumed it was upon Acrocorinth, the mountain above the city: archaeologists now prefer the bluffs at Perachora overlooking the Corinthian gulf. Unfortunately Pausanias, the intrepid cataloguer of the monuments of Roman Greece, saw the sacred tomb of Medea's children not in the sanctuary of Hera Akraia but near the local Music Hall, where he tells us annual rites of mourning were observed until Corinth was laid waste by the Romans (2.3.6–7).
- 1359–62 / 1386–88 In addition to making Jason's humiliation complete, Medea's prophecy of his death ensures that he will never beget other sons to replace the ones he has lost. In case they had forgotten, the spectators are reminded that Jason's saga ends here.
- 1363–end / 1389–end The Greek meter switches from spoken iambic trimeters to declaimed (i.e., Attic) anapests, a fact reflected in this translation by shorter lines. See notes, lines 86–221/96–212, 127–221/131–212.
- 1366 / 1392 *those who deceive their guests* Does this refer to Jason's treatment of Medea, who is a stranger and therefore a guest-friend to his house and to Greece, or to his abortive guest-friendship with Creon, or to his stealing of Aëtes's fleece? Since Medea has just mentioned the Argo, she and the audience likely assume the last.
- 1370 / 1396 In Greek Medea says "Wait for old age," a statement that is not sentimental but practical. In a world without old-age pensions, children were the only means of obtaining a respectable retirement and were therefore required by Athenian law to care for their aged parents.
- 1392–end / 1415–end This is a stock choral tag found with slight variation at the end of four other Euripidean plays. It served to close the action but had little or no bearing on the particular play. Editors often feel compelled to bracket it to show that it is a later addition.

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AEGEUS: An ancient king of Athens, primarily known as the father of Athens' founding hero, Theseus, whom, unbeknownst to him, he will soon beget in Troezen upon Pittheus's daughter Aethra. After her escape from Corinth, Medea does indeed become Aegeus's concubine and, according to one fifth-century version of her life, the mother of another son by him, Medus. When Aegeus's first son Theseus arrives in Athens to claim his birthright, she tries to do him in; but just as he is about to drink the poisoned cup, he is recognized by his father, and Medea and her son are forced to flee Athens and Greece for good.

APHRODITE: Goddess of sexual concourse, fertility, and all unions among living creatures, she was invoked primarily by brides, married women, and prostitutes, who sought from her the power to seduce men. Her literary persona, embodying beauty and feminine wiles, reflects this fact.

APOLLO: Son of Zeus and Leto, Artemis's twin brother, the multifaceted god of prophecy, music (poetry), healing, purifications, and of warrior and philosophic virtue. He is regularly depicted as a beardless youth armed with bow and arrows, the ideal of youthful male beauty. From his temple at Delphi his prophetess, the Pythia, disseminated his oracles to the Greek-speaking world.

ARGO: Jason's marvel of a ship, the world's first. Built with the goddess Athena's help and manned by intrepid pre-Trojan War heroes, it went where no Greek had gone before, from Thessaly

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to Colchis and home again on the quest for the Golden Fleece.

ARGONAUTS: The crew of the Argo.

ARTEMIS: A virgin huntress and mistress of wild creatures, this mighty goddess, daughter of Zeus and Leto and twin sister of Apollo, honored virginity above all other virtues and throughout Greece oversaw numerous rites of passage (sometimes bloody and cruel) from childhood to adulthood of both maidens and teenage boys. In this capacity her duties extended to aiding brides the first time they gave birth. See Hecate.

BLACK SEA (or Pontus): Lying beyond the straits that pierce the north-east corner of the Aegean Sea, that “most wondrous of all seas” (Herodotus 4.85) was of great strategic and commercial importance for Athens, which derived a portion of its vital grain supply from its fertile hinterlands.

CEPHISUS: One of two rivers that flow around Athens, the other being the less copious Illissus.

CLASHING ROCKS: “Symplegades” in Greek, first used in this play as a name for the Cyanæan (“Blue-black”) Islands at the east end of the Bosphorus, which like boundary stones marked not only the entrance to the Black Sea and the western limit of contemporary Persian naval power but also, on either side of the strait, the very ends of Europe and Asia. Thus, north-south and east-west they stood between barbarians (non-Greek speakers) and Hellenes. In legend they moved together (hence “clashing”), a threat to passing ships, but became fixed after the Argo successfully sailed between them on her maiden voyage.

COLCHIS: The well-watered plain lying beneath the Caucasus Mountains at the eastern end of the Black Sea. Though Greek traders lived there in the late fifth century BC, it had a largely non-Greek population and paid tribute to the Persians. For the Greeks of that time, it still represented an eastern limit of the traveled world. Medea is referred to as “the Colchian.”

CORINTH: A prosperous Greek trading city and maritime power situated on the narrow isthmus that joins the Peloponnesus to

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mainland Greece. Rivalry between Corinth, a Spartan ally, and Athens had often in the past led to open hostilities, which, recently reignited, had finally led to the coming war with Sparta.

CUPID: A popular Latin rendering of the Greek god Eros, a winged prepubescent boy who personified sexual desire (or *erôs*) and regularly accompanied Aphrodite. With his cruel arrows, he would strike unsuspecting victims. (See also Loves, below.)

DELPHI: Seat of Apollo's oracle on the slopes of Mount Parnassus.

EARTH: A primeval deity (Greek *Gê*, *Gâ*, *Gaia*), ancestral mother of the races of gods and men and of all living things, the firm foundation of the universe.

FURY (*erinyes*: 1234/1260 and 1363/1389; *alastor*: 1307/1333)/ **FURIES** (*mias-totes*: 1346/1371): Tireless demonic avengers, embodiments of the bloody curses and unappeasable wrath of the grievously wronged, who, engorged upon the enabling, polluting blood of victims, issue from the Underworld to torture transgressors, their families, and even their cities with terrible house-destroying afflictions—disease, madness, barrenness, crop failure, and so on. Highest on their list of deserving offenders are perjurers and the slayers of kin.

GAIA: See Earth.

GOLDEN FLEECE: The fleece of a magical golden ram on whose back Phrixus escaped from death at the hands of his wicked step-mother and was carried to safety in Colchis. In gratitude to the gods, Phrixus sacrificed the ram and gave its fleece to Aeëtes, king of Aia and Medea's father. It was the mission of Jason and the Argonauts to bring the Golden Fleece back to Greece.

HARMONY: Harmonia ("fitting together") was the daughter of Aphrodite (Love) and Ares (War). As the wife of Cadmus, the mortal founder of Thebes, she became the mother of Ino (see below) and the grandmother of the wine god Dionysus.

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- HECATE:** The menacing, nocturnal goddess associated with Artemis, Persephone, and the Moon. Accompanied by ghosts and hellhounds and holding torches aloft, Hecate guarded the sacred entrances to the Underworld, especially at crossroads (the three ways). Through her, witches and sorcerers gained possession of their infernal, arcane knowledge.
- HELIOS:** The Greek word for sun, but also personified as the most powerful of the planetary deities, who daily drives his chariot westward across the sky, and during the night travels back through the Underworld to the place of his rising. When he travels the sky, he becomes the all-seeing eye of Zeus; but as a nocturnal sojourner, he is associated with the occult, and it is this dimension of his divine personality that makes him the father of Circe and Aeëtes and grandfather of Medea.
- HERA:** As daughter of Cronus and wife of Zeus, she was queen of the gods and goddess of marriage. Hera Akraia was the Hera who dwelled (has a cult statue) in a temple “on the heights” (*akraia*), either on Acrocorinth, the mountain above the city, or (as most archaeologists now believe) a short distance down the coast at Perachora (ancient Peraion) on bluffs overlooking the Corinthian Gulf.
- HERMES:** Zeus’s herald, characteristically seen with a snake-wound staff (the caduceus), cap, and winged sandals. He protected travelers and children, and also guided the souls of the dead to Hades. An ingenious inventor and trickster, he made business enterprises prosper and livestock fertile. His image in the form of a talisman pillar with a head and an erect penis stood at doors throughout Athens.
- INO:** Daughter of Cadmus and Harmony, stepmother of Phrixus, aunt and nurse of the wine god Dionysus, she, finally, becomes the sea nymph Leukothea, who in Homer’s *Odyssey* rescues raft-wrecked Odysseus off the shores of Phaeacia.
- IOLCUS:** A Thessalian port on the Bay of Volos at the foot of Mount Pelion, from which the legendary Argo set sail. It is Jason’s hometown, ruled by his Uncle Pelias at the time of the Argo’s voyage but in the action of the *Medea*, by Pelias’s son Acastus.

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- LOVES: English for *erôtes*, the plural of Eros. Often the ardor that attends sex (*Aphrodite*) is conceptualized as a plurality.
- MOUNT PELION: A mountain on the northeast border of Thessaly, at the foot of whose southwest slope lies the harbor town of Iolcus. In a cave near the mountain's peak, the mythical Centaur Chiron, tutor of heroes (including Jason), lived and taught. From its slopes the timbers of the Argo were cut.
- MUSES: The daughters of Zeus and Memory who were the divine patronesses of poetry and music, learning, and the transmission of wisdom from one generation to the next.
- ORPHEUS: The heroic bard was a member of Jason's crew and, according to Apollonius of Rhodes, sang at Jason's and Medea's wedding.
- PAN: A wild, ithyphallic, Arcadian shepherd god, half-goat, half-man-shaped, who played the syrinx (panpipes), presided over flocks and the hunting of small game, and was also credited with striking animals and men—herds, armies, and individuals—with PANics, sudden, inexplicable fears that propelled them into flight or other uncontrollable movement.
- PEIRENE: A copious spring whose waters flowed into an open well in the center of Corinth, from which citizens drew their water.
- PELIAS: Jason's devious uncle, ruler of Iolcus, who had sent Jason on his mission to retrieve the Golden Fleece. After the Argonauts' return, he was murdered by his daughters, who had been tricked by Medea into thinking they could rejuvenate him by adding his butchered limbs to a magical stew.
- PELOPS: Eponymous hero of the Peloponnese, buried and worshipped at Olympia, he was the father of six sons, including Atreus, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, the men who led the Greeks to Troy.
- PITTHEUS: The clever ancient king of Troezen and Theseus's maternal grandfather.

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- SCYLLA: A terrifying, sea-dwelling she-monster first described in Homer's *Odyssey*. As Odysseus's ship passed by, each of her six doglike heads snatched one of his crew. In some later accounts she is the daughter of Hecate. By Classical times her watery lair was located in the Straits of Messina at the entrance to the Tyrrhenian (Etruscan) sea.
- THEMIS: Closely associated in myth with Zeus, Themis is the divine personification of what is laid down as naturally right and holy to do, hence good order.
- TROEZEN: A city in the northeast corner of the Peloponnese, overlooking the Saronic Gulf toward Athens. The two cities shared ancient ties of kinship and friendship, and it was to this place that fifty years before the *Medea* was produced the Athenians sent their wives and children when they abandoned their city to the Persians.
- ZEUS: Most powerful of all the gods in the Greek pantheon, Zeus was the wise and stern king and father of the Olympian gods, ruler of the universe, and dispenser of justice. It is in his capacity as the god of justice that he is particularly invoked in this play—as the protector of suppliants and strangers, the arbiter of oaths, and the terror of wrongdoers. His thunderbolts are the invincible weapons he deploys against mortals and immortals alike who defy his will or violate divine law.