

Medea Main Text

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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

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

NURSE

O how I wish that ship the Argo had never sailed off to the land of Colchis, past the Symplegades, those dark dancing rocks which smash boats sailing through the Hellespont.(1) I wish they'd never chopped the pine trees down in those mountain forests up on Pelion, to make oars for the hands of those great men who set off, on Pelias's orders, to fetch the golden fleece.(2) Then my mistress, Medea, never would have sailed away 10 to the towers in the land of Iolcus, her heart passionately in love with Jason. She'd never have convinced those women, Pelias' daughters, to kill their father, and she'd not have come to live in Corinth [10] with her husband and her children—well loved in exile by those whose land she'd moved to. She gave all sorts of help to Jason. That's when life is most secure and safe, when woman and her husband stand as one. 20 But that marriage changed. Now they're enemies. Their fine love's grown sick, diseased, for Jason, leaving his own children and my mistress, is lying on a royal wedding bed. He's married the daughter of king Creon, who rules this country. As for Medea, that poor lady, in her disgrace, cries out, [20] repeating his oaths, recalling the great trust in that right hand with which he pledged his love. She keeps calling to the gods to witness 30 how Jason is repaying her favours. She just lies there. She won't eat—her body she surrenders to the pain, wasting away, always in tears, ever since she found out how her husband has dishonoured her. She's not lifted her eyes up from the ground, or raised her head. She listens to advice, even from friends, as if she were a stone, or the ocean swell, except now and then she twists that white neck of hers and weeps, 40 [30] crying to herself for her dear father, her

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

[Enter Medea's and Jason's CHILDREN with their TUTOR.]

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

Old servant of Jason's children, when a master's lot falls out badly, that's bad for faithful servants, too— it affects their hearts as well. My sorrow 70 was so great, I wanted to come here, to speak to earth and heaven, to tell them about the wrongs inflicted on my mistress.

TUTOR

Unhappy lady! Has she stopped weeping yet?

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

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

TUTOR

Nothing. I'm sorry I said anything.

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

If we must add these brand-new troubles to our old ones, before we've dealt with them, then we're finished.

TUTOR

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

NURSE

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

TUTOR

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

NURSE

Come on, children, get inside the house. Things will be fine.

[To the TUTOR]

You must keep them away— [90] as far as possible—and don't bring them near their mother when she's in this state. I've seen her look at them with savage eyes, as if she means to injure

them somehow. I know this anger of hers will not end, not before she turns it loose on someone. I hope it falls on enemies, not friends! 120

MEDEA [crying from inside the house]

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

NURSE

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

[The TUTOR and CHILDREN enter the house.]

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

MEDEA [from inside the house]

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

NURSE

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

They say a moderate life's the best of all, a far better choice for mortal men. Going for too much brings no benefits. And when the gods get angry with some home, the more wealth it has, the more it is destroyed. [130]

[Enter the CHORUS of Corinthian women.]

CHORUS LEADER

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

NURSE

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

MEDEA [still from inside the house]

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

CHORUS

O Zeus and Earth and Sun— do you hear how this young wife sings out her misery? [150] Thoughtless lady, why long for death's marriage bed which human beings all shun? Death comes soon enough and brings an end to everything. You should not pray for it. 180 And if your husband devotes himself to some new bed, why get angry over that? Zeus will plead for you in this. Don't waste your life away, with too much wailing for your husband.

MEDEA [within]

O great Themis and noble Artemis, [160] do you see what I am having to endure, when I'm the one who bound that cursed man, my husband, with strong promises to me? 190 O how I want to see him and his bride beaten down, destroyed—their whole house as well— for these wrongs they dare inflict on me, when I've done nothing to provoke them! O father and city, I left you behind in my disgrace when I killed my brother.(3)

NURSE

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

NURSE

All right, though I'm afraid I won't persuade my mistress. Still, as a favour to you, I'll see what I can do. Right now she glares at servants when they come close to her to tell her something. She's just like a bull or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks. Those men from long ago—you'd not be wrong [190] to call them fools without much wisdom. They thought up songs for celebrations, feasts and banquets, bringing to human life 220 delightful music. But they found nothing in music or the lyre's many strings to end the bitterness of human life, the pain in living, sorrows bringing on deaths and horrifying calamities that destroy whole families. What a blessing it would be for human beings if music could cure these sorrows. When people feast, [200] why should people sing? It's a waste of time. People who eat well are happy anyway— 230 they've enjoyed the pleasure of the meal.

[NURSE exits into the house.]

CHORUS

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

[Enter MEDEA with the NURSE.]

MEDEA

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

times in battle holding up my shield 290 [250] than give birth once. But your story and mine are not the same. For you have a city, you have your father's house, enjoy your life with friends for company. But I'm alone. I have no city, and I'm being abused by my own husband. I was carried off, a trophy from a barbarian land. I have no mother, brother, or relation to shelter with in this extremity. And so I want to ask something from you. 300 If I find some way to punish Jason [260] for these injustices—his bride, as well, and her father—say nothing. In other things a woman may be timid—in watching battles or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love, her marriage violated, there's no heart more desperate for blood than hers.

CHORUS LEADER

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

[Enter Creon, with armed attendants.]

I see Creon, king of Corinth, coming. He'll be bringing news, announcing some new decision that's been made. [270]

CREON

You there, Medea, scowling in anger against your husband. I'm ordering you out of Corinth. You must go into exile, and take those two children of yours with you. Go quickly. I'm here to make quite sure that this decree is put into effect. I'm not going back into the palace 320 until I've cast you out beyond our borders.

MEDEA

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

CREON

I am afraid of you. I won't conceal the truth. There's a good chance you might well instigate some fatal harm against my daughter. Many things lead me 330 to this conclusion: you're a clever woman, very experienced in evil ways; you're grieving the loss of your husband's bed; and from reports I hear you're making threats to take revenge on Jason, on his bride, and on her father. Before that happens, I'm taking some precautions. Woman, [290] it's better that you hate me than for me to grow soft now and regret it later.

MEDEA

Alas, this is not the first time, Creon, 340 my reputation has badly damaged me. It's happened often. No man with any sense should ever educate his children to know anything beyond what's normal. Quite apart from charges of idleness which other people bring against them, they stir up in their fellow citizens a hostile envy. If you offer fools some brand new wisdom, they'll consider you quite useless, not someone wise. And if, 350 [300] within the city, people think of you as greater than those men who seem quite wise, you'll be a nuisance. So it is with me. I'm a knowledgeable woman. I make some people envious. Others say I'm shy. Some the opposite. Some say I'm hostile. I'm not that clever, but still you fear me. Have I hurt you at all, made you suffer? Don't fear me, Creon. It's not in me to commit crimes against the men in charge. 360 Besides, in what way have you injured me? You've married your daughter to a man, one your heart selected. My husband's [310] the one I hate. In my view, you've acted in this business with good sense. So now, I'll not begrudge you your prosperity. Have your marriage, and good luck to you. But let me remain here, in this country. Although I've suffered an injustice, I'll obey the rulers and stay silent. 370

CREON

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

MEDEA [kneeling in front of Creon]

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

I think events determine if that's true.

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

[Medea seizes Creon's hand.]

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

[Exit Creon with his attendants.]

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

Things have worked out badly in every way. Who can deny the fact? But nonetheless, you should not assume that's how things will stay. 430 The newly wedded pair still face some struggles, and the man who made this marriage happen might have serious problems yet. Do you think I'd prostrate myself before a man like that, if there was no advantage to be gained? If I did not have some plan in mind, I'd not have talked to him or grabbed his hand. [370] But the man's become completely foolish— when he had the power to prevent me from planning anything, by sending me 440 out of his land, he let me stay one day, a day when I'll turn three of my enemies to corpses—father, daughter, and my husband. Now, I can slaughter them in

many ways. I'm not sure which one to try out first. Perhaps I should set the bridal suite on fire or sneak into the house in silence, right up to their marriage bed, and plunge [380] some sharpened steel right through their guts. There's just one problem. If I get caught 450 entering their house meaning to destroy it, I'll be killed, and my enemies will laugh. No. The best method is the most direct, the one at which I have a special skill— I'll murder them with poison. Yes, that's it. But once they're dead, what city will receive me? Who will give me safe shelter as a guest, and offer me physical protection? There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while. If someone shows up who can defend me, 460 [390] I'll set my scheme in motion and kill them without saying a word. But if events force me to act openly, I'll use a sword. Even though it will bring about my death, I'll push my daring to the very limit and slaughter them. By Hecate, goddess I worship more than all the others, the one I choose to help me in this work, who lives with me deep inside my home, these people won't bring pain into my heart 470 and laugh about it. This wedding of theirs, I'll make it hateful for them, a disaster— Creon's marriage ties, my exile from here, [400] he'll find those bitter. So come, Medea, call on all those things you know so well, as you plan this and set it up. Let the work, this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills. You know what you now have to deal with. You must not let Jason's marriage make you a laughing stock among Corinthians, 480 compatriots of Sisyphus, for you trace your family from a noble father and from Helios, the sun. So get to work. Besides, we possess a woman's nature— powerless to perform fine noble deeds, but very skilled in every form of evil.

CHORUS

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

Those songs by ancient poets will stop chanting of our faithlessness. Phoebus, god of song and singing, never put into our minds the gift 500 of making sacred music with the lyre, or else I would have sung a song in response to what the male sex sings. For our lengthy past has much to say about men's lives as well as ours. [430]

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

honour in an oath has gone.

And all throughout wide Hellas [440] there's no shame any more. Shame has flown away to heaven. So to you, unhappy lady, no father's house is open, no haven on your painful voyage. 520 For now a stronger woman rules in your household, queen of Jason's marriage bed.

[Enter Jason.]

JASON

Now is not the first time I've observed how a harsh temper can make all things worse—impossibly so. It's happened often. You could have stayed here in this land and house, if only you'd agreed to the arrangements and showed some patience with those in command. Now you're exiled for your stupid chatter. 530 [450] Not that I care. You don't have to stop calling Jason the worst man in the world, but when you speak against the ruler here, consider yourself very fortunate that exile is your only punishment. I've always tried to mollify the king—he has a vicious temper—and have you stay. But you just would not stop this silly rage, always slandering the royal house. That's why you have got to leave the country. 540 Anyway, I won't neglect my family. I've come here, woman, looking out for you, [460] so you won't be thrown out with the children in total need and lacking everything. Exile brings with it all sorts of hardships. Although you may well despise me now, I could never have bad feelings for you.

MEDEA

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

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

CHORUS

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

JASON

Woman, it seems I'll need to give good reasons, and, like a skillful helmsman on a ship, haul in my sails and run before that storm blowing from your raving tongue. In my view, you overestimate your favours to me. I consider goddess Aphrodite the only one of gods or mortal men who saved my expedition. As for you, well, you've a subtle mind. But if I told how Eros with his unerring arrows 630 [530] forced you to save me, I could injure you. So I won't press the matter very far. However you helped me, you did it well. But by saving me you got in

return more than you gave, as I will demonstrate. First of all, you now live among the Greeks, not in a country of barbarians. You're familiar with justice and the laws, rather than brute force. Besides, all the Greeks know you're clever, so you have earned yourself 640 a fine reputation. If you still lived [540] out there at the boundary of the world, no one would talk about you. And great fame I'd sooner have than houses filled with gold or the power to sing sweet melodies, sweeter than all the songs of Orpheus. That's my response to you about my labours. Remember you started this war of words. As for your complaints about this marriage, I'll show you that in this I'm being wise 650 and moderate and very friendly to you and to my children. You must have patience. [550] When I came here from the land of Iolcus, I brought with me many troubles, hard ones, things impossible for me to deal with. What greater good fortune could I have found than marrying the daughter of the king, me—an exile? On the point that irks you, it's not the case I hate our marriage bed, overcome with lust for some new bride, 660 nor am I keen to rival other men in the number of my many children. We have enough. I'm not complaining. The most important thing for us to do is to live well and not in poverty, knowing that everyone avoids a friend [560] once he's a pauper. As for my children, I want to raise them in the proper way, one worthy of my house, to have brothers for the children born from you, and make them 670 all the same. Thus, with a united family I might prosper. Do you need more children? In my case, there's some benefit to have new children to help those already born. Was this a bad scheme? You'd agree with me, if you weren't so upset about the sex. But you women are so idiotic— you think if everything is fine in bed, you have all you need, but if the sex is bad, [570] then all the very best and finest things 680 you make your enemies. What mortals need is some other way to get our children. We ought to have no female sex and then men would be rid of all their troubles.

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

I'm very different from many others, in all sorts of ways—in my opinion, the unjust man who speaks so plausibly 690 [580] brings on himself the harshest punishment. Since he's sure his tongue can hide injustice, he dares anything. But he's not that clever. So you should not parade before me now your clever words and specious reasoning. One word demolishes your

argument: if you were not corrupt, you'd ask me first, get my consent to undertake this marriage, but you did not even tell your family.

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

Get this straight— this royal bride I have, I did not marry her because of any woman. As I told you, I wanted to save you and have children, royal princes, with the same blood as my sons. That way my house has more security. 710

MEDEA

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

JASON

Do you think [600] you can change that prayer and sound more sensible? You should not consider this advantage painful or pretend to be so wretched when things are going well for you.

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

What did I do? Marry and desert you?

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

[Exit Jason.]

CHORUS

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

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

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

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

[Enter Aegeus, king of Athens.]

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

All happiness to you, too, Aegeus, wise Pandion's son. Where are you coming from? 790

AEGEUS

I've just left Apollo's ancient oracle.

MEDEA

The prophetic centre of the earth?(4) What business took you there?

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

In the gods' name, have you lived so long [670] without ever having any children?

AEGEUS

Not one. Some god is doing this to me.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

So what did Apollo say about it? 800

AEGEUS

Words too wise for human understanding.

MEDEA

It is appropriate for me to learn them?

AEGEUS

Of course. They need a clever mind like yours.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

He told me this: "Don't untie the wineskin's foot. . ."

MEDEA

Until when? Until you do what or reach what country? [680]

AEGEUS

". . . until you come back to your hearth and home."

MEDEA

What were you looking for when you sailed here?

AEGEUS

A man called Pittheus, king of Troezen. 810

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

And the friendliest of all my allies.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

O Aegeus, my husband has been cruel— [690] of all men he has treated me the worst.

AEGEUS

What are you saying? Tell me truly— what things have made you so unhappy? 820

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

What has he done? Give me more details.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

His passion is to marry royalty.

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

Creon, who rules this land of Corinth.

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

He says not. Still, he's planning to accept it. But, Aegeus, I beg you by your beard, and at your knees implore you—have pity. [710] Take pity on me in my misfortune. Don't let me be exiled without a friend. Accept me as a suppliant in your home, your native land. If you will take me in, may the gods then answer your desire to have children. May you die a happy man. You don't know what a lucky one you are 850 to find me here. I'll end your childlessness. I know the sorts of medicines to use, and I can help you have many children.

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

I do trust you. But the house of Pelias dislikes me, and so does Creon's, too. If you bind yourself to a promise now, you'll not hand me over when they come, seeking to remove me from your country. If you use words, and don't swear by the gods, you may become their friend and then comply with their political demands. I'm weak, and they have wealth, a king's resources. [740]

AEGEUS

What you've just said is very shrewd. All right, 880 if it's what you want, I'm not unwilling to do what you require. Your proposal gives me some security. I can show those hostile to you I've a good excuse. And it makes your position more secure. Tell me the gods that I should swear by.

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

Tell me what I must swear to do and not to do. 890

MEDEA

Never to cast me out from your own country. And if some enemy of mine asks you [750] if he can take me off, you'll not agree, not while you're still alive.

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

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

[Exit Aegeus.]

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

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

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

MEDEA

Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason.

CHORUS LEADER

But as a woman it will devastate you. 970

MEDEA

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

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

You in there . . .

[Enter NURSE from the house.]

. . . go and fetch Jason here. [820] When I need to trust someone, I choose you. If you like your mistress and are a woman, tell him nothing of what I mean to do.

[MEDEA goes into the house, and the NURSE moves off stage.]

CHORUS

Since ancient times, Erechtheus' sons have been especially blessed, children of the sacred gods, from a holy country never conquered, 980 never ransacked by its enemies.(5) Fed on glorious fruits of wisdom, they stride lithely through the sunlit air, [830] where, so the story goes, the Muses, nine maidens of Pieria, gave birth to golden-haired Hermione. And people celebrate how Aphrodite, while drawing water from the stream, the flowing river of the lovely Cephissus, breathes down upon the land 990 sweet, temperate winds, [840] while she binds within her hair garlands of sweet-smelling roses, sending Love to sit at Wisdom's side, to foster all fine things. How will this city of sacred streams, this land of strolling lovers, welcome you—a murderess who slaughtered her own children, an unholy woman—among its people? 1000 [850] Consider this—the killing of your children. Consider the murder you are going to do. By your knees we beg you, in every way we know, do not butcher your own children.

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

[Enter MEDEA from the house and, from the side, JASON with the NURSE.]

JASON

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

MEDEA

Jason, I ask you to forgive me for what I said before. My anger [870] you should be able to put up with, since we two have shared many acts of love. I've been debating with myself. I realize I've been in the wrong. I tell myself,

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

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

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

Children, come out here—leave the house.

[Enter the CHILDREN with the TUTOR.]

Come on out. Welcome your father here— talk to him with me. You and your mother will end the bad blood in this family. We've patched things up, and no one's angry now. Take his right hand. O it's harsh to think [900] of what the future hides.

[MEDEA hugs her children.]

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

JASON

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

[MEDEA starts to weep.]

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

But why be so tearful with the boys?

MEDEA

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

A good idea. I think I can persuade her.

MEDEA

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

[MEDEA gestures to a SERVANT.]

You—bring me those presents right away.

[The SERVANT goes into the house.]

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

[The SERVANT returns with the gifts. MEDEA takes them and hands them over to the CHILDREN.]

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

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

[Exit JASON and the CHILDREN, with the NURSE and TUTOR.]

CHORUS

I've no longer any hope that these children stay alive, as they stroll to their own slaughter. The bride will take her diadem, 1150 she'll take her golden ruin. With her own hand she'll fix across her lovely yellow hair [980] the jewelry of death.

The unearthly gleam, the charm will tempt her to put on the robe and ornament of twisted gold. Her marriage bed will lie among the dead. That's the trap she'll fall in. That's how she'll die. 1160 She can't escape destruction.

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

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

[Enter the TUTOR with the CHILDREN.]

TUTOR

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

[MEDEA starts to weep.]

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

MEDEA

Alas . . .

TUTOR

An odd response to the report I bring.

MEDEA

All I can say is that I feel so sad

TUTOR

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

MEDEA

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

TUTOR

Then why avert your eyes? Why are you crying?

MEDEA

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

TUTOR

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

MEDEA

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

TUTOR

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

MEDEA

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

[TUTOR exits into the house. The CHILDREN remain with MEDEA.]

O children, my children, you still have 1200 a city and a home, where you can live, once you have left me to my suffering. You can live on here without your mother. But I'll go to some other country, an exile, before I've had my joy in you, before I've seen you happy, or helped to decorate your marriage beds, your brides, your bridal chambers, or lifted high your wedding torches. How miserable my self-will has made me. I raised you— 1210 and all for nothing. The work I did for you, the cruel hardships, pains of childbirth— [1030] all for nothing. Once, in my foolishness, I had many hopes in you—it's true— that you'd look after me in my old age, that you'd prepare my corpse with your own hands, in the proper way, as all people wish. But now my tender dreams have been destroyed. For I will live my life without you two, in sorrow, and those loving eyes of yours 1220 will never see your mother any more. Your life is changing. O my children, [1040] why are you looking at me in that way? Why smile at me—that last smile of yours? Alas, what shall I do? You women here, my heart gives way when I see those eyes, my children's smiling eyes. I cannot do it. Good bye to those earlier plans of mine. I'll take my children from this country. Why harm them as a way to hurt their father 1230 and have to suffer twice his pain myself? No, I won't do that. And so farewell to what I planned before. But what's going on? What's wrong with me? Do I really want my enemies escaping punishment, [1050] while I become someone they ridicule? I will go through with this. What a coward I am to let my heart even admit such sentimental reasons. Children, you must go in the house.

[The CHILDREN move toward the house but remain at the door.]

Anyone forbidden 1240 to attend my sacrifice, let such a man concern himself about these children. My hand will never lack the strength for this. And yet . . . My heart, don't do this murder. You're made of stone, but leave the boys alone. Spare my children. If they remain alive, with me in Athens, they'll make you happy. No! By those avengers in lower Hell, I'll never deliver up my children, [1060] hand them over to their enemies, 1250 to be humiliated. They must die— that's unavoidable, no matter what. Since that must happen, then their mother, the one who gave them life, will kill them. At all events it's settled. There's no way out. On her

head the royal bride already wears the poisoned crown. That dress is killing her. But I am treading an agonizing path and send my children on one even worse. What I want to do now is say farewell. 1260

[MEDEA moves to the CHILDREN near the door, kneels down and hugs them.]

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

[MEDEA shepherds the CHILDREN into the house, leaving the CHORUS alone on stage.]

CHORUS

Often, before this present time, I've had to make more complex arguments and struggled with issues more serious than those which women ought to wrestle with. But we, too, have an artistic Muse 1280 who lives among us to teach us wisdom. But not all of us—the group of females who can learn anything from her is small— in a crowd of women you might find one. So I can claim that among human beings [1090] those who have no experience of children, who have never given birth to offspring, such people have far more happiness than those who have been parents. With those who have no children, 1290 because they never come to see whether their children grow up to be a blessing or a curse to men, their failure to have offspring shields them from many grievances. But those who in their own homes have a sweet race of children growing, I see them worn down with cares [1100] their whole life long. First, how they can raise their children well. 1300 Next, how they can leave their sons sufficient livelihood. And then, it's by no means clear that all the work produces good or useless children. There's one final problem, the worst for any mortal human being— I'll tell you: suppose those parents have found a satisfactory way of life and seen their children grow into strong, young, virtuous men, 1310 if Fate so wills it, Death arrives, [1110] and carries the children's bodies

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

[Enter MEDEA from the house.] MEDEA

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

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

MESSENGER

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

MEDEA

What's happened that I have to run away?

MESSENGER

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

MEDEA

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

MESSENGER

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

MEDEA

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

MESSENGER

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

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

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

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

“My poor child, what god has been so cruel to destroy you in this way? Who's taken you away from me, an old man near my death? O my child, I wish I could die with you.” [1210]

He ended his lamenting cries. But then, when he tried to raise his old body up, he was entangled in that woven dress, like ivy wrapped around a laurel branch. He struggled dreadfully, trying to get up 1430 onto his knees, but she held him down. If he used force, he tore his ancient flesh clear from his bones. The poor man at last gave up. His breathing stopped—he could not stand the pain a moment longer. So the two of them lie dead— the daughter, her old father, side by side. [1220] It's horrible, something to make one weep. Concerning you there's nothing I will say. For you'll know well enough the punishment that's coming to you. As for human life, 1440 it seems to me, and not for the first time, nothing but shadows. And I might say, without feeling any fear, those mortals who seem wise, who prepare their words with care, are guilty of the greatest foolishness. Among human beings no one is

happy. Wealth may flow in to produce a man more lucky than another, but no man, [1230] is ever happy, no one.

[Exit MESSENGER.]

CHORUS LEADER

This is the day, it seems, 1450 the god tightens troubles around Jason, and justly so. O poor Creon's daughter, how we pity your misfortune. You're gone, down into Hades' home—the price you pay for marrying Jason.

MEDEA

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

[Exit MEDEA into the house.]

CHORUS

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

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

CHILD [from inside the house]

Help me . . . help . . .

CHORUS

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

CHILD [from within]

What do I do? How can I escape my mother's hands?

SECOND CHILD

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

CHORUS [shouting in response]

Should I go in the house? I'm sure I must prevent this murder.

CHILD

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

SECOND CHILD

The sword has almost got us—like a snare!

CHORUS

You hard and wretched woman, just like stone or iron— to kill your children, [1280] ones you bore yourself, 1520 sealing their fate with your own hands. Of all women that ever lived before I know of one, of only one, who laid hands on her dear children— and that was Ino, driven to madness by the gods, when Hera, Zeus's wife, sent her wandering in a fit away from home, that sad lady leapt into the sea, 1530 because she'd killed her sons a most unholy murder. She walked into the surf at the sea's edge, perishing so she could join in death her own two children.(6) But what horror still remains after what's happened here? A woman's marriage bed— [1290] so full of pain—how many evils, 1540 has it brought on humankind?

[Enter JASON with attendants.]

JASON

You women standing there beside the house, where's Medea, who's done these awful things? Is she still inside? Or has she left here? She'll have to hide herself under the earth or else fly up to heaven's overarching vault, if she's going to avoid her punishment from the royal house. Did she really think she could kill the rulers of this country and get away unharmed? But at this point 1550 [1300] she's no concern of mine. I'm worried for my children. Those whom she has wronged will take care of her. I've come for the boys, to save their lives, in case the next of kin try to harm me and mine, retribution for their mother's profane murders.

CHORUS

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

JASON

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

CHORUS

Your boys are dead, killed by their mother's hand. 1560

JASON

No. What are you telling me? Woman, [1310] you have destroyed me.

CHORUS

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

JASON

Where did she do this? Inside or outside?

CHORUS

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

JASON [shouting into the house]

You slaves in there, remove the bar from this door at once, withdraw the bolts, so I may see two things— my dead sons and their murderer, that woman on whom I shall exact revenge.
1570

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

MEDEA

Why are you rattling the doors like that, trying to unbar them so you can find their bodies and me, the one who killed them? Stop trying. If you desire something from me, then say so, if you want to. But you'll never [1320] have me in your grasp, not in this chariot, a gift to me from my grandfather Helios, to protect me from all enemy hands.

JASON

You accursed woman, most abominable to the gods and me and all mankind. You dared to take the sword to your own boys, 1580 you—the one who bore them—and to leave me destroyed and childless. Having done this, after committing this atrocious crime, can you still look upon the earth and sun? May you be destroyed! Now I understand— I must have lost my mind to bring you here, from that savage country, to a Greek home. [1330] You were truly evil then—you betrayed your father and the land that raised you. But the avenging fury meant for you 1590 the gods have sent to me. You slaughtered your brother in your home, then came aboard our fine ship, the Argo. That's how you began. When you married me and bore my children, in your lust for sex and our marriage bed, you killed them. No woman from Greece would dare to do this, but I chose you as my wife [1340] above them all, and that has proved to be a hateful marriage—it has destroyed me. You're not a woman. You're a female lion. 1600 Your nature is more bestial than Scylla, the Tuscan monster. But my insults, multiplied a thousand fold, don't hurt you. Your heart's too hard for that. So be off, you shameful murderer of your children. Let me lament my fate. I'll get no delight from my new bride, nor will I ever speak to my own living children, the two boys I bred and raised. They're lost to me. [1350]

MEDEA

I would reply to your words at length, 1610 if father Zeus did not already know what I did for you and what you did to me. You weren't going to shame my marriage bed and have a pleasant life ridiculing me, nor was that royal bride or Creon, who gave her to you, going to banish me, throw me from here with impunity. So if you want, call me a lioness or Scylla, who lives on Tuscan shores. For I've made contact with your heart at last. 1620 [1360]

JASON

You have your own share of pain and sorrow.

MEDEA

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

JASON

O my children, you had such an evil mother!

MEDEA

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

JASON

At least it was not my hand that killed them.

MEDEA

No. It was an insult—your new marriage.

JASON

Was it right to murder them for that?

MEDEA

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

JASON

Yes, I do, 1630 to a woman with good sense. But to you it is completely evil.

MEDEA

Well, your sons are gone. That should cause you pain. [1370]

JASON

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

MEDEA

The gods are aware who began this fight.

JASON

Yes, they well know your detested heart.

MEDEA

Keep up your hate. How I loathe your voice.

JASON

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

MEDEA

Tell me how. What shall I do? For that's what I want, too. 1640

JASON

Let me bury these dead boys and mourn them.

MEDEA

Never. My own hands will bury them. I'll take them to Hera's sacred lands in Acraia, so no enemy of mine will commit sacrilege against them by tearing up their graves. And in this place, [1380] this land of Sisyphus, I'll initiate a solemn celebration, with mystic rites, future atonement for this profane murder. I'll now go to the land of Erechtheus, 1650 to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion. As for you, you'll have a miserable death, as is fitting for a coward. Now you've seen the bitter ending of your marriage to me, your head will be smashed in, when you are hit by a moldy relic of your ship the Argo.

JASON

May the avenging Fury of our children destroy you—may you find blood justice. [1390]

MEDEA

What god or spirit listens to you, a man who does not keep his promises, 1660 a man who deceives and lies to strangers?

JASON

You polluted wretch! Child killer!

MEDEA

Go home. Bury that wife of yours.

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

JASON

O such loving children!

MEDEA

Their mother loved them. You did not.

JASON

And yet you killed them?

MEDEA

Yes, to injure you.

JASON

Alas, how I long to see my dear boys' faces, to hold them in my arms. [1400]

MEDEA

So now, at this point, you'll talk to them, you'll give them an embrace. 1670 Before this, you shoved them from you.

JASON

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

MEDEA

No. Your words are wasted.

JASON

O Zeus, do you hear how I'm being driven off, what I must endure from this child killer, this she lion, this abomination? But I'll use the strength I have for grieving and praying to the gods to bear witness [1410] how you have killed my children and refuse to let me hold their bodies or bury them. 1680 How I wish I'd never been a father and had to see you kill my children.

[MEDEA'S chariot takes her and the CHILDREN up and away from the scene. Exit JASON.]

CHORUS

Zeus on Olympus, dispenses many things. Gods often contradict our fondest expectations. What we anticipate does not come to pass. What we don't expect some god finds a way 1690 to make it happen. So with this story.