

Euripides: from *Medea*

Medea, daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis, married the hero Jason and returned with him to Corinth to bear two children—only to have Jason leave Medea when Creon, king of Corinth, offers him his daughter, Glauce. Her allure and exotic origin caused her to be suspected of being a sorceress, representing the mysterious old ways of pre-Greek civilizations encountered by the newly arrived Greeks of the Bronze Age.¹

[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, [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,
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?
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

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 [250]
three times in battle holding up my shield
than give birth once. But your story and mine
are not the same. For you have a city,
you have your father's house, enjoy your life
with friends for company. But I'm alone.
I have no city, and I'm being abused
by my own husband. I was carried off,
a trophy from a barbarian land.
I have no mother, brother, or relation
to shelter with in this extremity.
And so I want to ask something from you.
If I find some way to punish Jason [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.

[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

¹ Source: Translation by Ian Johnston, 2008. <https://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/euripides/medeahtml.html>

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

MEDEA

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

CREON

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

MEDEA

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

I'm a knowledgeable woman. I make
some people envious. Others say I'm shy.
Some the opposite. Some say I'm hostile.
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.
Besides, in what way have you injured me?

You have married your daughter to a man,
one your heart selected. My husband's
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.

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,
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,
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,
love's a miserable thing for mortal men.

CREON

I think events determine if that's true.

MEDEA

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

[310]

[280]

[320]

[290]

[300]

[330]

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.

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,
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.
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.
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, [370]
I'd not have talked to him or grabbed his hand.
But the man's become completely foolish—
when he had the power to prevent me
from planning anything, by sending me
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, [380]
right up to their marriage bed, and plunge
some sharpened steel right through their guts.
There's just one problem. If I get caught
entering their house meaning to destroy it,
I'll be killed, and my enemies will laugh.
No. The best method is the most direct,
the one at which I have a special skill—
I'll murder them with poison. Yes, that's it.
But once they're dead, what city will receive me?
Who will give me safe shelter as a guest,
and offer me physical protection?
There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while.
If someone shows up who can shield me, [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,²
the one I choose to help me in this work,
who lives with me deep inside my home,

² Hecate, among her many functions, is connected with magic arts.

these people won't bring pain into my heart
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,
compatriots of Sisyphus, for you
trace your family from a noble father
and from Helios, the sun.³ 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.

. . .

JASON

Woman, it seems I'll need to give good reasons,
and, like a skilled helmsman on a ship,
haul in my sails and run before that storm
blowing from your raving tongue. In my view,
you overestimate your favours to me.
I consider goddess Aphrodite
the only one of gods or mortal men
who saved my expedition. As for you,
well, you've a subtle mind. But if I told
how Eros with his unerring arrows [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
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
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,
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
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, [570]
you have all you need, but if the sex is bad,
then all the very best and finest things
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 [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

³ Sisyphus in Greek mythology was the founder and first king of Corinth, a man famous for his punishment in Hades, as described in Homer's *Odyssey*, where he is condemned to an

eternity of rolling a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again.

your clever words and specious reasoning.
One word demolishes your argument:
if you were not corrupt, you'd ask me first,
get my consent to undertake this marriage,
but you did not even tell your family.

JASON

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

[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.

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 so 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.

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
about all this. But if you want me
to provide some money, some assistance
for you and the children in your exile,
just ask. I'm prepared to give you some,
and with a generous hand. I'll send my friends
introductory tokens, so they'll treat you well.⁴
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.

[610]

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.
But you reject my goods and stubbornly
push away your friends, and for that reason
you'll suffer still more pain.

[620]

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.]

. . .

MEDEA

O Zeus, and Justice, child of Zeus,
and flaming Helios—now, my friends,
we'll triumph over all my enemies.
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,
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
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,

[770]

⁴ The sumbolon is a knuckle-bone sawed in half and used to serve as a letter of introduction. The host can recognize

someone sent to enjoy his hospitality by fitting the half he has with the guest's half.

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.
I’ll send the children to her with gifts.
They’ll carry presents for the bride, as if
requesting to be spared their banishment—
a finely woven robe and a tiara
of twisted gold. If she accepts those presents
and puts them on, she’ll die—and painfully.
And so will anyone touching the girl.
I’ve smeared strong poisons on those gifts.

So much for that. I’ll say no more about her. [790]
But the next thing I’ll do fills me with pain—
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, [800]
won over by the words of that Greek man,
who now, with the gods’ help, will pay the price.
He’ll never see his children alive again,
the ones I bore him, nor have more children
with his new bride, for she’s been marked to die
an agonizing death, poisoned by my drugs.
Let no one think that I’m a trivial woman,
a feeble one who sits there passively.
No, I’m a different sort—dangerous
to enemies, but well disposed to friends.
Lives like mine achieve the greatest glory. [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.

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

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

You in there . . .

[Enter Nurse from the house.]

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

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

.

[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?

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
my own best interests with this royal marriage,
producing brothers for my children?
Why can’t I stop being angry? What’s wrong with me,
when gods are being so kind? Don’t I have children?
[880]

Don’t I know we’re going into exile,
where friends are hard to find?”

With thoughts like these,
I recognized how foolish I had been,
how senseless it was to be so annoyed.
So now I agree with you. It strikes me
you’ve been acting prudently, by forging
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.

[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!
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.
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
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.

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

[Medea gestures to a servant.]

You—bring me those presents right away.

[Servant goes into the house.]

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

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

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

JASON

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

• • •

[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?
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.

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.⁵

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]

⁵ The grim word-play is untranslatable: κατὰ γῶ means both 'bring home (from exile)' and 'bring down.'

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

O children, my children, you still have
a city and a home, where you can live,⁶
once you have left me to my suffering.
You can live on here without your mother.
But I must go to another country,
an exile, before I've had my joy in you,
before I've seen you happy, or helped
to decorate your marriage beds, your brides,
your bridal chambers, or lifted high
your wedding torches.⁷ How miserable
my self-will has made me. I raised you—
and all for nothing. The work I did for you,
the cruel hardships, pains of childbirth— [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
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
and have to suffer twice his pain myself?
No, I won't do that. And so farewell
to what I planned before. But what's going on?
What's wrong with me? Do I really want
my enemies escaping punishment, [1050]
while I become someone they ridicule?
I will go through with this. What a coward
I am to let my heart even admit
such sentimental reasons. Children,
you must go in the house.

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

Anyone forbidden
to attend my sacrifice, let such a man
concern himself about these children.

My hand will never lack the strength for this.
And yet . . . My heart, do not do this murder.
You're made of stone, but leave the boys alone.
Spare my children. If they remain alive,
with me in Athens, they'll make you happy.
No! By those avengers in lower Hell,
I'll never deliver up my children, [1060]
hand them over to their enemies,
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.

[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.
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.]

. . .

[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.

⁶ To the children this means Corinth, to Medea it means the nether world. Such veiled discourse is characteristic of this speech, with the exception of the bracketed section below.

⁷ A special bath for the bride and the groom preceded the wedding.

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.
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.

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 [1140]
that you and your husband's previous quarrel
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,
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.
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.
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
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. [1180]
The whole house rang with people's footsteps,
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,⁸
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,
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,
her face had changed. And there was blood

⁸ I.e., about twenty seconds elapsed. The reference is to the Olympic stade-race, whose winner gave his name to the Olympiad.

across her head, dripping down, mixed with fire.
The flesh was peeling from her bones, chewed off
by the poison's secret jaws, just like resin [1200]
oozing from a pine tree. An appalling sight!
Everyone was too afraid to touch the corpse—
what we'd seen had warned us. But her father,
poor wretch, didn't know what she's been through.
He came unexpectedly into the house
and stumbled on the corpse. He cried aloud,
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
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,
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,
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.
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—
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.]

. . .

JASON

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

MEDEA

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

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,⁹ 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.¹⁰
I'll now go to the land of Erechtheus,
to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion.
As for you, you'll have a miserable death,
as is fitting for a coward. Now you've seen
the bitter ending of your marriage to me,
your head will be smashed in, when you are hit
by a moldy relic of your ship the Argo.

JASON

May the avenging Fury of our children
destroy you—may you find blood justice.¹¹ [1390]

MEDEA

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

JASON

You polluted wretch! Child killer!

⁹ Hera as worshiped on the Acrocorinth.

¹⁰ In historical times, there appears to have been such a festival, in which young boys and girls of noble family spent a year in the temple precinct.

¹¹ Both the Erinys (Fury) and Diké (Justice) are agents of Zeus.

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.
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
how you have killed my children and refuse
to let me hold their bodies or bury them.
How I wish I'd never been a father
and had to see you kill my children.

[1410]

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

CHORUS

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

[Exit Chorus.]