



Euripides' Medea

a new translation
by c. john holcombe

ocaso press 2010

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Colin John Holcombe

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Medea by Euripides

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1. INTRODUCTION

Euripides did not hold public office more than was obligatory in the Athenian state, and our certain knowledge of him is very slight.¹ He was born around 480 BC into a relatively wealthy family, wrote some ninety-two plays, won first prize on four occasions, and died in Macedonia in 406 BC. Scholars are divided on how Euripides appeared to his contemporaries, as the upholder or scourge of orthodox morality,² but his plays certainly became more popular in later centuries.

Medea was put on in 431 BC, together with his *Philoctetes*, *Dictys* and *The Reapers*, but won only third prize, losing out to work by Euphorion and Sophocles. There are several manuscripts, each with their textural issues, but all descend from a compilation of Euripides' plays made by Alexandrian scholars around 200 BC.

The *Medea* legend was well known to Greek audiences. After the voyage of the Argonauts, and dangers that the love-smitten princess helped him escape, Jason married Medea and brought her to Iolchus, fleeing to Corinth when Medea contrived to have King Peleas murdered by his own daughters. In Corinth, however, though she had borne him two sons, Jason threw Medea over for Glauce, the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth, and the outraged wife looked to revenge. When the play opens, Medea faces exile for speaking against the royal house, but manages to extract a stay of execution from Creon, and obtain the promise of sanctuary from the visiting Aegeus, King of Athens. Ostensibly to win over Glauce, who would persuade Creon not to exile her sons, Medea then sends the princess a robe and a golden chaplet, which the gullible woman dons and dies from in great pain. Creon tries to save his daughter, but he too perishes. In a final revenge, Medea kills her own children, and escapes to Athens in a winged chariot provided by her ancestor, Helios, the sun god.

The themes of *Medea* are clear enough: the destructiveness of revenge, the unfair treatment of women in Greek society, the threat posed by barbarian peoples and attitudes, the constant prospect of exile, the guile and cunning underlying Greek city politics, and the less attractive aspects of the Greek hero, whom Medea comes to resemble.³ Events are prefigured by the nurse's fears in the opening scene, and the plot unwinds swiftly.

One by one, playing on their weaknesses, Medea outwits Creon, Aegeus, Jason and Glauce. The denouement is inevitable, and ends in unmitigated horror, the purging of which through art Aristotle saw as tragedy.

But Euripides went further than portraying a barbarian sorceress who escapes punishment. He made her murder her own children, which was not in the original legend. Revenge can be a reckless emotion, and Medea's actions sweep up the innocent with the guilty. She sacrifices not only those whose murder will hurt Jason most, but her own happiness thereafter. A woman who lacked husband, children or homeland was to Greek eyes someone who barely existed, and Medea is an exile in many ways: by leaving her native Colchis, by being banished from Iolchus and then Corinth, and by possessing barbarian blood and passion in the Greek lands of reason and moderation. Moreover, if Medea becomes the personification of the Greek hero, she is denied a cause beyond her own passions. Her intelligence, political skill and strength of purpose would have equipped her superbly to serve as the dictator Greek city states sometimes installed in periods of extreme danger, but her sex would have equally disbarred her from the role, as would the consuming passion that wreaks destruction on all it touches.⁴ How many of our cherished ideals — democracy, freedom from terror, equal opportunity — also lead to disaster if pursued to the exclusion of everything else. *Medea* is an unsettling play, and still relevant to our times.

Though one of Euripides' masterpieces, the piece is not without its problems: a key section that may not be by Euripides, Medea's disclosures to the Chorus when secrecy was essential, and the savage triumph of Medea that closes the play. No modern piece would flout naturalism like this, but few perhaps look on life as did the Greeks: inescapably tragic but made tolerable to us by its beauty. It was Euripides' craft that brought Greek audiences to accept and be reconciled to the brutal and uncertain world around them, and it is essentially that poetry I have tried to echo in this fully rhymed translation.

2. TRANSLATION

CHARACTERS

Nurse

Tutor

Medea

Chorus of Corinthian Women

Creon

Jason

Aegeus

Messenger

SCENE

The vestibule of the palace of Jason at Corinth.

PROLOGOS (Opening of Play)

Enter Nurse from the house.

NURSE

Would the Argo at the Simplegadès' jaws
had never journeyed on to Colchis shores,
nor ever trees cut down from Pelion's glen
had made fit oars for heroes, those first men
who sought for Peleas the Golden Fleece.
For then Medea, on her wild caprice,
would not have travelled to Iolcus towers,
nor shown, for love of Jason, those fierce powers
that made the Peleas daughters parricides —
10. from which, in quiet Corinth here, she hides.

When settled, true, she led a peaceful life,
was popular with all as Jason's wife.
Throughout she gave him counsel and support
and he, of course, behaved as husbands ought,
for lives that would be blessed and trouble free
need marriage partners bound in harmony.

Now everything's disrupted. Jason's spurned
his wife — my mistress — and their sons, upturned
the debt he owed to take the daughter's hand
20. of Creon, ruler of this Corinth land.
Medea, furious and nothing loath
to raise up Gods, reviles that wedding oath.

She will not eat but wanders round in pain,
retires to weeping, has that grief sustain
a deadly fury at her husband's ways,

though to the ground she turns her vengeful gaze,
as deaf to friends as is the sea-bound stone
except to bend her snowy neck and groan
for father, country and ancestral house
30. she lost eloping here with her false spouse.
How bitterly she's come to understand
the sense in staying in one's native land.

She shows more hate for sons than any should,
and nurtures plans in which there's nothing good.
I know her ways, and that tempestuous heart
will not put up with her low husband's part.
She's much more likely to thrust home the sword
in her own vitals than live on ignored.
Or she will creep up when they sleep alone
40. to strike at Jason, or at Creon's throne,
and kill the princess and her family.
Much, much more she'll do, and no calamity
should make her challenger suppose he's won
before her dangerous enmity is done.

Enter Tutor from Eisodos A accompanied by the two sons of Jason and Medea.

But see, her boys are coming home from games:
unknown to them who hurts her, whom she blames:
still young, they're simply led in their beliefs,
and do not dwell too much on other's griefs.

TUTOR

You take advantage of an old slave's state
50. to stand here idly chatting at this gate.
Recounting troubles to your own tired ears
has left Medea's service in arrears.

NURSE

Well, you, attending Jason's children, know
as trusted servant how disasters flow
from merest chance, and that they hurt us too,
compelled to follow what our masters do.
In me Medea's grief has given birth
to troubles petitioning both heaven and earth.

TUTOR

Her grievances have yet to reach their end?

NURSE

60. Better not to know they cannot mend.

TUTOR

Nor can she know, poor fool, if we can speak
so of our masters, what there's still to seek.

NURSE

You've heard of more unhappiness in store?

TUTOR

I've said too much already. Nothing more.

NURSE

Tell me, fellow slave, as one you'd trust;
I'll keep such matters secret if I must.

TUTOR

Well, at the gaming boards where old men sit,
Peirene's fountain, one referred to it.
Medea and her children would be sent
70. by Creon into exile. On I went,
of course, pretending that I hadn't heard
and do not know if what the man averred
be true or false, but hope it is not so.

NURSE

Would Jason let his children simply go
for all he's broken with his wife, you think?

TUTOR

New ways sweep out the old, and Jason's link
to this old house of ours was never strong.

NURSE

How dangerous it would be if this wrong
should add still further to the wrongs before.

TUTOR

80. Let's keep this to ourselves, and say no more.
It's not the time to let our mistress know.

NURSE

Your father, children, as events must show.
But let me not reproach the man I serve
with want of loyalty his sons deserve.

TUTOR

Perhaps new joys, especially nuptial ones,
have stemmed that prior affection for his sons,
but all men put themselves above the rest,
with justice sometimes, or to seize what's best.

NURSE

Take no notice, children. Go from here,
90. and you, make sure they never come too near
their mother's vengeful and unhappy state.
I've seen her throw a glance so filled with hate
that she would doubtless thrust some ill on them.
I pray that held-in anger will condemn
her foes, not make those closest bear the cost.

MEDEA

(Sung from within) How miserable I am, in sorrows lost.
Consumed by pain, I would be happier dead.

NURSE

(Chanted) Go in quickly, children. As I've said,
the anger stirs again, but you may find
100. your absence shields you from her darting mind.
Make sure she doesn't see you, lest the sight
rekindle fury in her, and, in spite
of who you are, create a sudden blaze.
Now go in quickly, children: no delays.

Exit Tutor and children into the house.

Soon flashes of that passion will excite
the rising cloud of sorrow, and ignite
a searing anger at its source. Her soul,
so proud and elemental, makes its goal

a dreadful retribution she'll prolong
110. still more on hearing of this added wrong.

MEDEA

(Sung from within) Such sufferings I have that tears can't smother
that you, my children of a hated mother,
must perish forthwith with my perjured spouse
when I expunge his false and odious house.

NURSE

(Chanted) Dear god, the children too? They played no part
in how that treacherous husband served your heart.
How tyrannous to put them down, and make
them pay for Jason's ill-conceived mistake.

How fierce are royal minds: we often find
120. them issuing orders of a haughty kind
which doubtless they themselves would not obey.
Nor will they check their temper, still less stay
within the bounds of constancy. My fate,
if I could chose, would be a modest state,
one made for quiet and safety, and indeed
for mortals this is often best. Exceed
the modicum, and our possessions bring
the enmity of gods, and suffering
to make the devastation more complete
130. than any house on earth has strength to meet.

PARADOS

(Choral dialogue spoken or sung as chorus enters)

Enter by Eisodos B a group of Corinthian women who act as the Chorus.

CHORUS

We heard the voice, we heard the cry.
So tell us, is the Colchis spouse
not to her grief yet reconciled?
In our double-gated house
135. we have heard her lineage sigh.
No joy to us who've often whiled
the time away with such a friend.

NURSE

(Chanted) I see the whole house threatened, overthrown
140. by husband coveting another's throne,
while wife, my mistress, has a lonely bed,
uncomforted by kindness friends have said.

MEDEA

(Sung from within) Would some flash of lightning strike my thoughts,
and purge my presence from the daylight's courts.
How gladly I'd assume the couch of death
and not be haunted by this empty breath.
Ah, what a hateful life I'd leave by this.

CHORUS

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Can great Zeus, and earth and sun,
attend this harrowed woman's grief
150. here pleading that her course be done,
and that her only bed is death?
Pray this foolishness be brief
and hold her from her dangerous sighs.
Counsel her to make no threat
if husband seek another wife
but to accept it and be wise.

Mighty Zeus be in her breath,
and act for her, that she forget
her husband and a former life.

MEDEA

160. (*Sung from within*) Almighty Zeus and lady Artemis:
what pain a scoundrel's cruelty allows
when we are yoked to him by marriage vows.
Yet I will have him with his bride brought down,
and equally that house's great renown.
Unprovoked the wrong that they have dared,
though, true, I killed my brother and have fared
not well in leaving home, and father there.

NURSE

(*Chanted*) You hear then what her tearful words will dare?
She calls on Zeus' daughter, Themis, who
170. will bind to promises what men shall do.
It's scarcely possible her rage will bring
an end to matters in some trifling thing.

CHORUS

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Would she meet us face to face
and listen to these words of ours,
perhaps she'd pass that temper by,
and take advantage of our powers
to cool her anger, make amends.
Go to the house, in any case,
and importune her that she try
180. to recognize us as her friends.
At once, moreover, lest she hurt
inhabitants by that great rage

past hope of any to divert.

NURSE

(Chanted) I straightway will, but doubt I can assuage
her griefs. Yet you shall have my labour still
for all she glower at servants, such to kill
the speaker of some luckless subject broached,
as will a lioness with cubs approached.

Perhaps the men of old were none too wise:

190. to have their compositions eulogize
our banquets, dinners and festivities,
add song to sweeten what the daylight sees,
when clearly they could never quell the fire
of pain with dance and music of the lyre.

Deaths and fierce disasters come from these
and overthrow the greatest families.

Ah, would that mortals could be cured by song,
but, be the banquets lavish, loud and long,
their accompanying music serves no end:

200. the ills and wrongs that grieve men do not mend.

It is the feast's abundance fills their thoughts,
and that forgetfulness which pleasure courts
until the very sense of it is lost.

Exit Nurse into the house.

CHORUS

We have heard what's said of late
against the one who wronged her bed,
heard the outrage that has sped
to Themis, one of Zeus's daughters
over what her husband swore —
he who brought her to this shore
210. to Hellas lands through gloomy waters
across the Black Sea's narrow gate,

that distant threshold few have crossed.

FIRST EPISODE

Enter Medea with Nurse from the house.

MEDEA

Women of Corinth, I've come out to you
lest I appear too haughty. Men we view
as too retired from life will earn the same
as those whose manners well deserve the name.
In lacking justice to our fellow man
we mortals draw conclusions as we can.
We fear the stranger's look or weighty arm
220. although he's never threatened us with harm.
So must the foreigner observe the ways
of city he adopts. Nor can I praise
the self-willed citizen who won't respect
the courtesy his city will expect.

But, friends, remember that this severing blow
has killed the happiness I used to know.
So grieved my spirit, it would follow on
to where my innocence in life has gone.
However be my world, it's not as then:
230. I know my husband as the worst of men.

Of mortals here, with breath and body cursed,
it is the womenfolk who suffer worst.
And we who buy our man at great expense
to offer our good body's wealth and sense
must show, with some belated service blest,
a gratitude more galling than the rest.
The crown of life's success comes down to this:
to choose a husband wisely or amiss.
If of divorce's blame we bear the weight,

240. no woman can refuse the married state.
Though new to customs in her husband's house,
a wife at once must prove the ideal spouse,
and only through such efforts lives in peace:
fail here, it's best to seek the grave's release.
A man who's vexed with company at home
immediately can find new haunts to roam,
but we at home must keep our lord in sight.
How wrong are men to say we do not fight.
I'd rather three times cross the spear with foe
250. than one time suffer birth-pains women know.

But then our situations aren't the same:
you have your city and your father's name,
a pleasant life and company of friends
where I'm, by husband, brought to sadder ends.
What am I? Booty from a foreign land.
Where is the helping mother close to hand?
What strong and kindly brother can you see,
or kinsman aiding in adversity?
And so I ask you keep your counsel: should
260 I find some means in this new spinsterhood
to be revenged on husband, right the wrongs,
and punish those to whom he now belongs,
I ask for silence from you. Woman's weak,
no doubt, and can't of arduous battles speak,
but when she's injured in her bed, no kind
of murderous vengeance more directs her mind.

LEADER OF CHORUS

We'll keep our peace as you decide,
for some chastisement's justified.
It's well you grieve, but here at hand
270. comes Creon, king of Corinth's land.

Enter Creon by Eisodos B.

CREON

You, Medea, with the scowling face
that spites your husband, you will leave this place.
Both you and children and immediately,
for, as executor of this decree,
I will not to my home return before
the last of you have left our Corinth shore.

MEDEA

At this I'm wholly lost, and enemies
have rigged full sails to make an end of me:
no place for sanctuary. I ask you, king,
280. why would you want to do this dreadful thing,
and add, to where you've wronged me, what is worse.

CREON

Why hide that I'm afraid of you? You nurse
a dark intent against my daughter. You
are known to be intelligent, and could well do
some grievous mischief with your famous art.
You've lost your husband's bed, and now you smart,
and grow more angry, even threatening —
of course I have the words my people bring —
to punish your own husband, bride and me.
290. I need to take precautions, naturally.
To risk your hatred now is common sense
than rue a clemency on some date hence.

MEDEA

It's reputation, Creon, harms me most;
again it goes before me like a ghost.
I say no man can have his children taught
beyond the bounds of usefulness, nor ought,

for cleverness undoes the common yoke,
and earns hostility from other folk.
To show a novelty to mundane eyes,
300. will make you thought more dangerous than wise,
and if you're clearly better than the rest,
then that's vexatious to the city's best.
I know this well enough, and share the lot
of those thought clever who are really not.
Some think me devious, and some too bold,
and you are anxious, as your words have told.
What evil could my stay in Corinth bring
when I would never disobey its king?
What hurt is there in how your custom goes
310. to wed a daughter to the man you chose.
It is my husband who's at fault, not you
who have the wide and sanest point of view.
Go make your marriage: I shall hope to see
its offspring bless this land's prosperity.
The many wrongs I've suffered I embrace,
as, with superiors, I know my place.
Can I not stay here if I hold my peace?

CREON

Soft, clever words, but in the hidden lease
of your affections you'll be plotting more,
and I more fear than trust your words before.
Ill tempers, man or woman's, all the while
320. are manageable, but not a silent guile
that plots in secret. No, you have to go.
My mind's made up, and it can scarcely show
commiseration when there's so much hate.

Medea kneels before Creon and grasps his hand.

MEDEA

I beg by knees and daughter's married state.

CREON

No words will ever make me yield to you.

MEDEA

You'll not accord a suppliant her due?

CREON

I cannot love you more than my own line.

MEDEA

How dear the country, too, that once was mine.

CREON

Yes, after children it's my dearest thing.

MEDEA

330. But see the tribulations love can bring.

CREON

Or how our rash presumptions make it be.

MEDEA

Let Zeus record who made this misery.

CREON

Why struggle with me, woman? Quit this shore.

MEDEA

Such struggles I have, none could ask for more.

CREON

Or soon my men will help you to that end.

MEDEA

But not to exile, Creon: think, unbend.

CREON

Would still you venture on, without my leave?

MEDEA

It's not from exile that I beg reprieve.

CREON

Then why this violent clasping of my hand?

MEDEA

340. For one more day before I leave this land,
that's all I beg for: help my sons who'll live
now fatherless, without what fathers give.
I need to plan for that, provide for them.
That is the want from which my pleadings stem.
You know this as a parent too. I ask
of your own kindness to complete the task,

if for their coming troubles I still weep.

CREON

No ruler's streak of cruelty runs so deep
in me that I would turn away a prayer
350. that comes unprompted from a mother's care.
I often suffer for it, I confess,
but still, your plea is granted. Nonetheless
be warned that if tomorrow's sun alight
on you or sons still here, it's death at sight.
But happily, one day is nowhere near
the time to work the mischief one might fear.

Exit Creon by Eisodos B. Medea gets to her feet.

CHORUS LEADER

A woman crushed by fate and most
unfortunate, where will you turn?
What country gives you sanctuary,
360. what house or guardian shows concern
and saves you from calamity?
A god has thrown you to a host
of troubles angry as the sea.

MEDEA

364. That all seems lost I'll not deny, but be
more provident, for, tell me, what is there
but peril for this newly wedded pair,
and worse than he who made this match can guess?

You think I fawned upon that man unless
I saw the profit in it, stood to gain?
370. Would I have let my royal hand know stain
by base transactions with a worthless man?
But showing pride as only folly can,

he did not block my plans as wisdom should,
and my prompt banishment most surely would,
but gave a day of corpses, when falls due
the death of father, bride and husband too.

Here in my studied arts they stand accursed,
but of the ways to kill them which comes first?
I'll set, my friends, the bridal room alight
380. or thrust a sharp sword through the shadowed night
where these two hated lovers lie abed.
But if my stratagems are seen ahead
and I'm discovered in the house, it goes
to instant death for me, and joy for foes.
So let me win through methods where I'm skilled:
by silent poisons I will have them killed.

Suppose that's done. Yes, let that be,
what city then, I ask you, welcomes me?
And though I need safe passage, where's the friend
390. that gives me peace and safety at the end?
No one I know of now, and so must wait
a while yet in this undecided state
until there's refuge for my hateful self,
when I will swiftly murder them by stealth.
But if the situation forces me to show
my hand, I'll take my ready sword and, though
I die for it, will strike them with its blade
that won't by cowardice of mine be stayed.
I swear by chosen goddess, Hecate,
400. who's worshipped in the chamber near to me:
your murderous arts have not been learnt in vain,
and none shall mock me or make light of pain.
For I will break that union, make him pay
who so insultingly sends me away.
Take heart, Medea: scheme, expunge that stock
lest Jason's Sisyphean marriage mock
that first of Helios who fathered me.
If women cannot reach nobility

they can be architects of dreadful ill.

FIRST CHORAL ODE

CHORUS

Strophe 1 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

410. Back to sources flow the streams
of holy rivers and the course
of all things natural is reversed.
Men become deceitful, vows
to gods not held to but dispersed.
A woman's wiles, that gossip's got
its words for, makes for good repute.
But all are honourable, and schemes
that one time slandered them are mute.

Antistrophe 1 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Bards' licences that time allows
420. will no more hymn our faithlessness.
For Phoebus never filled our mind
with matter of that glorious kind,
or else we'd long ago have sung
our own reply to manhood's tongue.
So time shall bring true openness
and speak of both the sexes' lot.

Strophe 2 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

But you who left your father's halls
following how Eros calls
across the gloomy breadth of sea
430. and through the Black Sea's rocky gate
have now on foreign soil to live.
Evicted from your husband's bed,
despised, dishonoured, you instead

must taste the worst of woman's fate.

Antistrophe 2 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

The steadfastness of oath is gone
and shame has fled these Hellas lands:
if flown to heaven it comes not here
where all descends to anarchy.
You have no father's home to give
440. you sanctuary, and all too clear
is how your darkening future stands
throughout your once-adopted lands.
How winningly her charms have shone,
this new one, on your former spouse,
that she is mistress of your house.

SECOND EPISODE

Enter Jason by Eisodos B.

JASON

What, more of that fierce temper? Must you still
make talk impossible by that foul tongue?
You could have stayed in amity among
the folk inhabiting this land and house,
450. in quiet deferment to your king and spouse,
but no, your threats must earn this banishment.
So go on, then, and let your rage be spent
becalling Jason as the worst of men.
Why should I care? But don't attack again
the house that rules here, when your being sent
to exile is the least of punishment.
In truth I've tried to soothe the king, allay
the fears you've kindled, plead he let you stay.
But still you rage and castigate the state

460. to earn an exile you pretend to hate.

Yet I came here in your interests
and would not have you penniless sent hence.
Hate me if you will, but honest care
for you, and for our children, I still bear.

MEDEA

I count you worst of men alive, and find
unmanliness to match a coward's mind.
You come to see me off with specious gifts
but make an enemy by desperate shifts,
offending man and gods and me. I ask
470. whence came that seeming gallantry to mask
the wrong you show your loved ones to their face?
It's shamelessness, the worst disgrace.
I'm glad you've come, though: it will ease my heart
to have you hurt by what you've wrenched apart.

Beginning from the first, as this is best,
I saved your life, as comrades will attest
who manned the Argo with you, being sent
to sow the field of death, and have the halter bent
on fiery bulls. And then the dragon too
480. that guards the Golden Fleece I killed for you,
subdued its sleepless sinuous coiling shape
and then I raised it, lighting your escape
from certain death. On my accord, and reft
from all I held most dear to me, I left
my home and father, and have undergone
the journey to Iolcus under Pelion,
brought death to Peleas and all his house.
And at those benefits, my treacherous spouse,
what did you do so generously, but, led
490. by baseness, sought some other woman's bed
although not childless, which is one excuse.

Respect for vows is gone, and it's no use

to wonder if you think the gods be gone
or mortals have new laws worth brooding on.
You know full well you broke your oath to me
or grasped my hand and knees but cynically —
how profitless was that wild sacrament
of all my hopes upon a scoundrel spent!

In friendship, let me tell you how I view
500. these matters, profiting not much from you,
but still to tell you, so you'll know with shame
how closed to me is all in whence I came.
For I, who wronged my father, native lands,
caused Peleas' death at daughters' hands,
must well imagine how my pleas would go.
To my own country I've become the foe
by injuring those good sense would not have harmed.
No doubt that's why you've given me a charmed
existence in the eyes of women here.
510. A fine and faithful husband makes it clear
that, for her loving, a submissive wife,
who saved her helpmate, earns an exile's life.
That's what I look at, far from home, bereft
of friends, with needy offspring you have left
to forage for themselves as best they can.
How proud must be a newly married man
with wife and sons reduced to beggary!
Great Zeus, if gold's so marked, why can't we see
the glint of counterfeit in husbands too?

CHORUS

520. How hard to heal that grievous sin
that pits in battle kin with kin.

JASON

I'll not respond with like. What can one do
but lighten sails, before the tempest sent,

until the angry, prattling wind be spent?

And since you make so much of what you've paid,
I'd judge it more to Aphrodite's aid
I owe the safety in my venturing on
where fortune otherwise would not have shone.
True, you have an agile mind, but more
530. were Eros' shafts that struck you at the core,
but still, that's not for me to emphasize
and maybe show me ill in other's eyes,
a point, indeed, on which I need not dwell.
But in as far as you intended well,
you gained the more by giving, as I'll show.

You have what Greeks and not barbarians know,
a land where justice takes its proper course,
propelled by even-handedness, not force.
Remember: if you're clever, that acclaim
540. is here, not foreign shores without a name.
No gold I'd have, nor Orpheus's voice,
if fame at home's no feature in my choice.

Thus far the facts, my labours borne and won,
and not the wordy arguments that you've begun.
Here at your tantrums when I change my bed,
I show I'm wise, controlled, and friend instead,
and one my wife and children cannot blame.

Medea tries to interrupt.

No, that's enough. Now listen: when I came
journeying from Iolcus I had brought
550. a host of troubles with me, but had thought
by marrying the daughter of a king
my exile would become another thing.
Not, you note, to meet your chief complaint,
that I was weary of a wife's constraint
consumed by longing for another's bed.
A strengthening of ties it was, and led
by forethought only. I won't rival those

who bask in what abundant children shows.
We have sufficient, and I don't complain,
560. but still there's duty to ensure they gain
a proper confidence, by living well.
Not live in want, in short, which starts to tell
on noble bearing — don't we shun a friend
who's penniless? — and so I bend
the fortunes of our family before
to princes equal to the ones you bore.
You have no need of further children: I
would be remiss to pass the venture by.
Is that unreasonable? Why should it vex
570. you women always trumpeting your sex?
You think the short contentment of the bed
should be sufficient reason why we wed,
and worst of all misfortunes rise from there?
For me, I'd have some other nuisance bear
our sons that did not make our women mad.

LEADER OF CHORUS

So Jason's points are brought to light,
but, though imprudent, I should add
to leave your spouse cannot be right.

MEDEA

I see things differently from others here
580. I do admit that, obviously, and fear
the one most plausible, who wins consent,
may well be worst and bring on punishment.
He weaves such telling words to frame with force
what only baseless folly could endorse.
One thought destroys it: why such urgency
for marriage, then, without consulting me
or family: in truth behind our backs?

JASON

What consultation would survive attacks
and draw from you a grudging, slow assent
590. when even now your anger's far from spent?

MEDEA

That is not true. You thought a barbarous wife
would come in time to shame a regal life.

JASON

Indeed it was a royal bride I chose,
not for the woman but to nurture those
who still and always will be family.
If brother princes guard our progeny
they will be bulwark to our name and line.

MEDEA

A prosperous life was never wish of mine;
I want no wealth that battens on the heart.

JASON

600. Then pray you change your attitude, and start
to see advantage in your so-called pain:
do not belittle what your sons will gain.

MEDEA

How fine! You talk from countries you will own
when I am exiled, burdened and alone.

JASON

Is that my fault? You brought this on your head.

MEDEA

Did I forsake you for another's bed?

JASON

You cursed our ruler and his family.

MEDEA

And will curse yours as well, most thoroughly.

JASON

A waste of breath it is to treat with you.
610. Yet still I'll ask you what you'd have me do —
to help our family, and ease its wants
by money, or ensure the right response
is made by friends of mine to treat you well.
Accept the offer: that is what I tell
you, woman: dowse that temper, have some sense.

MEDEA

No gifts or friends of yours will tempt me hence.
so do not offer, but be done with it.
A base man's gifts can bring no benefit.

JASON

I call on gods to witness I have tried
620. to act in all ways proper from my side.
If you rebuff my friends and aid, you'll find

that only yet more grief will goad your mind

MEDEA

Be off, and with your wheedling ways: it's clear
you miss your new-found bride by lingering here.
Go, play the bridegroom as the prospect clears:
I prophesy your joys bring future tears.

Exit Jason by Eisodos B.

SECOND CHORAL ODE

CHORUS

Strophe 1 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Love that makes intemperate claim
630. brings no wealth to heart or fame.
Sufficiency, with no excess,
Aphrodite's happiness.
Let the golden bow impart
635. no hurtful arrows to my heart.

Antistrophe 1 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Far from Aphrodite's wrath
show me how good sense may start.
640. Never from a foreign hearth
be plucked the stranger we shall wed.
Desire and reverence play their part
that peaceful be the marriage bed.

Strophe 2 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Never house and fatherland
be taken from me as to make
me pitiable and city-less.

Better daylight have its end
than I should meet with that distress
650. of cruelty and helplessness.
Of all the griefs that life may send,
there's none so hard as we must take
in giving up our native land.

Antistrophe 2 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

We have seen the city force
the exile on with all his woes.
We have seen it, our own eyes
have felt it hateful and unkind
to know how comfortless he goes.
I'll have no friend who is not wise
660. enough to know what friendship brings,
who does not honour that sweet course
of kindness through an honest mind.

THIRD EPISODE

Enter Aegeus in travelling costume by Eisdodos A.

AEGEUS

All joys to you, Medea, I extend.
Who knows a better way to greet a friend?

MEDEA

And joy to you, Aegeus, son of Pandion,
who comes with some such journey undergone.

AEGEUS

I come from Phoebus' ancient oracle.

MEDEA

Why have such prophecies exert their pull?

AEGEUS

For child begetting I must ask again.

MEDEA

670. How long is it that you've been childless then?

AEGEUS

It sometimes seems to me high heaven's will.

MEDEA

But something wife or marriage can't fulfil?

AEGEUS

I have a loving wife to share my bed.

MEDEA

So tell me what the oracle has said.

AEGEUS

They're words too deep for human minds to seize.

MEDEA

Unlawful, too, to share such words as these?

AEGEUS

No, I'd like to have your depth of mind.

MEDEA

So tell me, if you can to humankind.

AEGEUS

'Let not the wineskin's hanging foot be loosed. . . .'

MEDEA

680. Until some act or country be produced?

AEGEUS

' . . . until you reach again your native shore.'

MEDEA

So what is it you come here looking for?

AEGEUS

I've come for Pittheus, who's Troezen's king.

MEDEA

The son of Pelops, wise in everything.

AEGEUS

To share with him what riddling words convey.

MEDEA

He's versed in prophecies, or so they say.

AEGEUS

In warfare also closest to my side.

MEDEA

I pray your every need be satisfied.

AEGEUS

Then why so sad a face, and stained with tears?

MEDEA

690. Aegeus, so my husband's wrong appears.

AEGEUS

What wrongs exactly must I strive to see?

MEDEA

All by Jason: unprovoked by me.

AEGEUS

Yes, but what? You'll have to tell me more.

MEDEA

He's set a mistress over wife before.

AEGEUS

Such shabby treatment takes some crediting.

MEDEA

The once-loved wife's become a cast-off thing.

AEGEUS

A new-found passion, or was he tired of spouse?

MEDEA

A passion, but unfaithful to his house.

AEGEUS

Such men are scarcely worth admonishing.

MEDEA

700. He thought to wed the daughter of a king.

AEGEUS

What king has offered him his daughter's hand?

MEDEA

Creon, ruler of this Corinth land.

AEGEUS

I see that anyone would be distressed.

MEDEA

And even of my home am dispossessed.

AEGEUS

705. But why, or who's this measure taken for?

MEDEA

It's Creon drives me from this Corinth's shore.

AEGEUS

At Jason's wish? I see no benefit.

MEDEA

There's none, of course, but he agrees to it.

And so I beg you by your beard and knees,
710. to hear the suppliant your kindness sees:
do not allow me to be exile sent
without a friend, but to your country lent,
to live, and modestly, within your walls.
Accede to me, and heavenly justice falls
to give you children, end a happy man.
So think: in me you have a certain plan
and in this fortune's windfall you are blessed.
My skill and medicines will do the rest.

AEGEUS

For the gods, dear woman, I would show
720. you gladly every favour that I know.
Both gods and reasons urge that I accede,
not least of which the children I still need —

indeed, without them I seem half a man —
but let me be as honest as I can.

If, unaided, you should reach my shores,
the fact of your arriving gives me cause
to welcome and protect you. All the same,
I must appear to hosts here free of blame.
So go there on your own, that I may say
730. I've not encouraged you in any way.

MEDEA

It shall be so, but you must promise me
I have my wishes with security.

AEGEUS

Why doubt me? Can't you take my words on trust?

MEDEA

Peleas's hate me, and I must
take all precautions, and from Creon too.
So make an oath securing me to you,
whose very nature means it must be kept
when changing fortunes urge you to accept
their delegations. I am weak, but they
740 plead wealth and royalty to have their way.

AEGEUS

Given the forthright prudence that you show
I have no obvious cause for saying no.
To block their stratagems I could refuse
without it seeming then some clever ruse.
So name the gods to me I dare not cross.

MEDEA

Swear by earth's wide plains and Helios,
my grandfather, and all the heavenly race.

AEGEUS

Tell me what the solemn words must trace.

MEDEA

That I shall never suffer banishment
750. from lands of yours, nor, while you live, be sent
as enemies may wish to certain loss.

AEGEUS

By earth and holy light of Helios
I swear to those same words I've heard you speak.

MEDEA

If not, then say the thing that oath may wreak.

AEGEUS

The punishment of those who know no gods.

(Medea gets up.)

MEDEA

My happiness is safe beyond all odds.
Now fare you well, for shortly you will see
me when I've gained my ends and destiny.

Exit Aegeus by Eisodos A.

CHORUS

So may Hermes, Maia's son,
760. accomplish what is here begun,
that he who cares for travellers
will guide you safely on your plan.
Aegeus is a generous man.

MEDEA

By Zeus's justice and the mighty sun
so is my victory over foes begun.
Now plainly is the way set out for me
that I can hope they'll feel my enmity.
This man, and at the nadir of my woes,
affords me harbour for my plans. He goes
770. in front and, as a sturdy cable, hauls
me safe into Athena's circling walls.

So let me make my final purpose clear
although in words you may not wish to hear.
I'll ask that Jason come, when he will find
me more conciliatory, of quiet mind.
I'll claim I've thought it over, now agree
his royal marriage must abandon me,
but still to good effect, I'm forced to say.
I'll ask our children be allowed to stay,
be shielded from our foes, when all the while
780. I'll plot to kill the princess with my guile.

My sons shall bring to her my royal gifts,
by which she'll have her finely woven shifts
of dress, and diadem of beaten gold.
Such things will win her over, be cajoled
to take them up, and wear, and walk around
when, inescapably, with chaplet crowned,
she'll meet a terrible and painful end.
Indeed the smeared-on poison that I'll send

kills all who come in contact with her too.

790. Enough of that, but from the coming view
of murder I must shield my sons, and shape
an ending for them that they'll not escape.

I'll be revenged on Jason and his own,
and in the killing of our children will have sown
a final ruin on his house, attacked
what is most holy in a hideous act.

By this I'll silence scorn and ridicule
and quit the kingdom that would call me fool.

I have no strength or country to repel
what's coming to me, and I know too well
the error made in casting off my house,
beguiled by pledges of my would-be spouse.

But this foul Greek, if gods will give assent,
at such atrocities has punishment.

Again he'll never see his sons alive
nor think his second princess shall contrive
to bear him others when she meets her death.

Let no one count me weak in arm or breath,
but one to care for friends and kill my foes,

810. for in such glory a true hero goes.

CHORUS LEADER

At such a plan, because I should
both like to help and hold to good,
I say this course you should not choose.

MEDEA

It can't be otherwise, though I excuse
the words of one who does not know my pain.

CHORUS LEADER

What can the death of children gain?

MEDEA

It is the way to hurt my husband most.

CHORUS LEADER

What dangers then your name will host.

MEDEA

All words are idle till the future's clear.

820. You are my messenger: bring Jason here,
but tell him nothing if you'd keep my trust
as both a servant and a woman must.

Exit Nurse by Eisodos B. Medea goes into the house.

THIRD CHORAL ODE

CHORUS

Strophe 1 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Long has Erechtheus' race
been of gods who favoured those
who sprung from them and holy earth
that's never pillaged by our foes.
830. Fed by wisdom, in the air
a grace of movement, where, it's said,
of the nine Pierian Muses
fair Harmonia had her birth

Antistrophe 1 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

The Cypris draws on Cephisus
and fills the land with temperate air.
840. And she, as ever shown to us,
her hair with roses, has now led
mute Love to sit as Wisdom chooses:
goodness joined with joyful grace.

Strophe 2 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

How can this State of holy streams,
a land where gods may walk at ease
(and proudly their procession wends)
accept the killer of her sons?
850. We ask you how this slaughter seems
to these her pious citizens?
A deed of horror, bringing grief,
an act that stains you, and in brief,
we say desist and by your knees
must urge you not to kill your sons.

Antistrophe 2 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Who has such a hand or heart,
or indeed unwanted strength
to perpetrate so vile an act?
You who bore them, and have lacked
no tenderness towards each face,
860. resolve to do this, and at length
play out the callous murderer's part?
Not with the children at your feet,
who, weeping, beg you stem the flood
of retribution should you meet
the pain of shedding kindred blood.

FOURTH EPISODE

Enter Medea from the house, and then Jason by Eisodes B accompanied by the Nurse.

JASON

I have come as you have asked: you'll get a proper hearing, though I don't neglect your earlier hate of me and disrespect.

MEDEA

I beg you to forgive the words I said,
870. and understand my love for you had bred
a deep despair on thinking what is past
and gone from us, the many acts that cast
us lovingly together, man and wife.
I've thought on that, and cannot for the life
of me discover why these two of late,
my husband, and the ruler of the State,
should be the object of such threats. For you
are simply offering what is best. I view
it only wise to seek a royal mate
880. whose sons protect our sons some future date.
Of course, and then the gods have been so kind
it is a madness not to think and find
a friend's protection for our exile years,
to rage like this, and choke on tears.

For you it is who acts the sober man
and I the fool to not accept your plan
and see it carried out. Yes, by your side
or bed I should be joyful for your bride.
That's how we are, no doubt, we women, weak
890. and childless often, though you should not seek
too much indulgence of our natures. So
forgive me, husband, for that silly show,

and children, come and leave your sanctuary
to greet your father.

Children enter from the house, accompanied by the Tutor.

Speak to him with me.

Forgive your mother and forego her ways
of past hostility and tearful days.

Take his right hand, both of you, repent
of questioning the thoughtful goodness sent
to us, the which I could not see, or did
900. not want to, yes, or maybe left there hid.
But now stretch out to him your loving hands,
and promise gladness through whatever lands
the future holds for us. How full of tears
I am, and stupidly undone by fears:
the hot tears prick me and I burn with shame.

CHORUS LEADER

The tears are spilling from my eyes.
I pray it ends here, she be wise.

JASON

I'm gratified to hear this, do not blame
your earlier manner, since it's woman's fate
910. to fight all changes to her married state.
But now you're to these obvious needs inclined,
which speaks of prudence in a woman's mind.

So here I tell you how your futures stand.
By governance of thought and gods I've planned,
for you, my sons, a long indemnity.
Some day, with your new brothers, I foresee
your holding kinship with the Corinth throne,
and all quite naturally, to manhood grown.
The rest your father will arrange the while
920. the gods bestow on us a kindly smile,

when, brought up properly, with princely ease
you'll move and lord it over enemies.

Medea turns away, weeping.

Why do you weep and turn your face away,
is this not pleasing to you, what I say?

MEDEA

925. It is our children whom your words condemn.

JASON

929. I said there is a future planned for them.

MEDEA

930. I gave them birth, and prayed for them, but know
931. not fully if your promise keeps it so.

JASON

926. Your fears are groundless, and you have my word.

MEDEA

True: as you have said and I have heard,
928. but weak are women and more prone to tears,
932. and what we spoke of has not stilled my fears.
I'm bound for exile, which our king declares
as best for me. It is, however fares
935. my future now. Of course. I'm in the way,
his house's enemy, but know that they,
our sons, receive no training from their father's hand
when he is distant, in a foreign land.
Beg Creon not to give them banishment.

940. If you, their father, asked him, he'd relent.

JASON

I'm not so sure of that, but I could try.

MEDEA

Your wife could ask her father to comply,
and of the ills of banishment take heed.

JASON

I think I might persuade her to succeed.

MEDEA

945. She is a woman like the rest. But I
to help this matter on, could also try
to offer gifts, rich gifts, my sons would bear,
and such as mortals could not hope to wear:
a gown, fine-woven, golden diadem,
950. true marvels: anyone must covet them.
Let one of my good servants bring them here.

A servant is dispatched into the house.

Now, not one happiness she has, it's clear,
but countless, come from an illustrious spouse.
And now your ornament of bed and house
955. with all the finery of Helios stands.

The servant returns with the gifts.

So take this dowry, children, in your hands,
and bear it to the royal bride, who'll see
how generous her friend intends to be.

JASON

You foolish woman: does her house of old
960. have need of finery or things of gold?
My wife respects my wishes, and will do
the more to please me than with gifts from you.
You give too much away that should be kept.

MEDEA

Not so: by gifts the gods are driven to accept,
and gold with men speaks more than arguments.
She has the power, the youth and confidence
of heaven to decorate a royal throne.
It's her I must propitiate, and own
to free my sons I'd give up life itself.

970. Children: at the palace, great in wealth,
you'll beg my mistress there, your father's bride,
to have your threatened exile put aside.
You'll give into her hands this finery,
and to her hands directly, personally.
Go, return and tell me: don't delay.

Exit Jason, children, Tutor and Nurse by Eisodos B.

FOURTH CHORAL ODE

CHORUS

Strophe 1 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

No more we hope the children live;
a road to death they're set upon.
We fear the bride will not forbear
to grasp at ornaments they give,
980. but by that gold to death be gone,

and by that draping round her hair.

Antistrophe 1 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

So will the charm of them, the shape
of gown and finely fashioned gold,
become a snare, an end foretold:
destruction that she can't escape.

Strophe 2 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

990. And you, unlucky bridegroom, you
who take Medea's words as true,
will wed into a house of kings,
and suffer what ambition brings:
a fearful death for your new bride,
and all that progeny denied.

Antistrophe 2 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Beside those sorrows I regret
the grief of mother, cast-off wife,
who'd sooner kill her sons than let
another take her married life.
How cruelly husband had his say
1000. and yielded to another's sway
in coveting these Corinth lands.

FIFTH EPISODE

Enter Tutor with the children by Eisodos B.

TUTOR

Your gifts were put into the bride's glad hands,
and so the king, my lady, will repent:
your sons are not to suffer banishment.

Medea turns away.

What distressing secret could you keep
that hearing this good fortune you must weep?
Is there is no pleasure in the words I bring?

MEDEA

Ah!

TUTOR

These tidings have a doubtful ring?

MEDEA

Worse, far worse.

TUTOR

Then how am I misled?

1010. Where is the mischief in the things I've said?

MEDEA

None. Plain truth has never much to pay.

TUTOR

Why do you sorrow so and turn away?

MEDEA

Old man, I've every reason to regret
when gods and my own fatal plans are met.

TUTOR

Your sons will live to bring you home some day.

MEDEA

I think they go upon a shorter way.

TUTOR

Many a mother, separated from her sons,
accepts that this is how her fortune runs.

MEDEA

No doubt. But go into the house, prepare
1020. as usual for my children's daily care.

Exit Tutor into the house.

You have a city, children, home and space
for kin and comrades, where there's no such place
to welcome your poor mother as she goes
to exile, torment and to endless woes.
She'll have no pleasure in your joys, nor will,
on blessed occasion of your marriage, fill
the wedding bath, or make the bridal bed,
by flaming torches have the couples led.
My wilfulness has brought this bitter cup.
1030. I see how hard has been your bringing up,
the fears I laboured under, pain and sweat
that must accompany each childbirth yet.
How many were my hopes as, year by year,
you passed to manhood, and my end drew near
when you would care for me, and have me dressed
with your own hands at death, with tributes blessed.
But that imagining has been too brief
for one who sees her ending but in grief.

On me your loving eyes will not now wait
1040. but go on weeping to that other state.

But then you smile, my sons; how tenderly
you give your last of trusting looks to me,
I cannot do it, no, I cannot face
the looks of innocence, each shared embrace.
I'll give up all the retribution planned,
and take my children with me, flee this land.
Farewell this scheming: there's no peace in store
when what would hurt the father harms me more.

Has fear then smitten me, that I must shrink
1050. from those who'd laugh at me, and have them think
that they discard me with impunity?
And then what weakness makes these words in me?

Children: to the house. And do not stay
who at this sacrifice would look away.

----- start of possible interpolated section -----

Why should I weaken or withhold the blade
for all that horror here makes me afraid
of my own heartlessness. I see my wrath
bears all before it down a reckless path.
Could not my sons be spared, and therefore grace
my hopes hereafter in some other place?

1060. But then the Furies ruling everything
through fearful outrage that my foes could bring
would end their lives in blood and pain — ah, no:
that cannot be how blameless lives should go.

Children begin to move towards the house.

Besides, by now the crown is on her head,
and in the murdering gown her life is sped,
and so this soul, on wretched courses set,
will send her sons down roads more wretched yet.

But let me speak with them before they go.

Children return to Medea.

1070. Children, let me kiss the hands I know.
The noble bearing, hands, dear lips and face
must find their happiness some other place.
How sweet the touch is, and how soft the skin,
how fragrantly the breath wells up within.
Go in, my children, yes, now go away.
I cannot bear to look at you, but pay
the first instalment I shall undergo
of endless sorrows that my actions sow.
Yet still my anger overwhelms them all:
1080. mankind's great failing that foretells his fall.

----- end of possible interpolated section -----

Exit children into the house

CHORAL INTERLUDE

CHORUS LEADER

Discourse at times becomes too deep
or subtle to be said aright,
and women then will tread a steep
descent to thought uncertainly.
The contest is too hard for them,
1090. and argument obscures their sight.
It is the Muse consorts with men,
not all of them, but some small clan,
among the multitudes we see.
But in the few we can't condemn
some women too escape the ban,
and of our Muse will take their share.

Nonetheless I will assert

the childless are the truest blest,
and by this kept from coming hurt.
1100. There is no trial of shall with should,
nor life that's ever filled with care
of how to raise and educate,
provide for them a livelihood,
and all the while to never know
if efforts be but mocking show
and build them to a worthless state.

And now I tell what's worst to fall.
When they are come to manhood's state,
and large with prospects, justly blest
1110 with strength of character, and all
that's truly noble in the great,
comes death to promptly bear them hence.
How profitless is our belief
that fashioning heirs must make good sense
when gods reward us with such grief.

SIXTH EPISODE

MEDEA

Some while I've wondered, friends, what would befall
my plans, but soon we'll know how matters went.
And here he is, this man of Jason's, sent
to give me news of fresh disasters: quite
1120. out of breath he seems: a hopeful sight.

Enter Jason's servant as messenger by Eisodos B.

MESSENGER

That you're to blame, Medea, all can see.
To save your life you'll leave immediately:

by ship or chariot be gone from here.

MEDEA

What incident commands I disappear?

MESSENGER

You cruelly poisoned them, and life is fled
from princess and her father: both are dead.

MEDEA

How pleurably I find these matters end,
and you are benefactor and a friend.

MESSENGER

You stand there smiling at me. Are you mad
1130. when all the punishments that can be had
will tax you on the murder of a king?

MEDEA

I'd add perspective to the news you bring,
but first take breath and tell me how they died.
Let's hope in agony, when, gratified,
I'll take the details as a compliment.

MESSENGER

Well, when your children with their father went
into the bride's own house, we servants felt
much comforted. We'd heard the mission spelt
an end to your misfortunes, kind release
1140. from public quarrels keeping both from peace.
First someone kissed the children's hands, then some

one else their soft blond heads, and I, become quite joyful at the prospect, took them through into the quarters one time graced by you but honoured by another mistress now.

The princess gazed at Jason. All saw how she kept from looking at the children, turned her cheek away, averted eyes, and spurned this issue from that earlier marriage bed.

1150. But then your husband chided her and said his princess should be kinder, and should more respect the family he had before.

'Return your comely face to us', he said, 'and be by your own husband's feelings led. Receive their gifts, and bid your father make an end to my sons' exile, for my sake.'

And when she saw the finery she had not strength to long resist him, and was glad to sanction all he asked. And then, with party barely 1160. from the house, she gazed the more and fairly laughed at things there given her. She took the many-coloured gown, and, at its look against her person, put it on. She placed the crown on top, and saw its beauty graced the beauty of the hair she had arranged before the smiling mirror. With these she changed from lifeless image to a deity.

She got up, skipped about the room, to be a queen delighting that her white feet made 1170. an embassy for what the clothes displayed. But as again the mirror turned to show the long smooth tendons of the legs below there came a change, a sudden change, and she could feel her skin discolouring, and see her legs begin to shake. She grasped a chair to save herself from falling. A servant there, that Pan or god possessed her, gave a shout of joy at first, but with the white foam coming out

the mouth, the eyes protruding and the skin
1180. now pale and bloodless and half turning in,
changed this at once to wail — when servants went
to king and Jason, in their horror sent
in haste down passages with stumbling feet.

Speedily as athlete in his heat
returned from his six-plethra sprint, they came
and found the woman with her anguished frame
on two sides hung with pain. She groaned, a sound
quite horrible, and from the circlet round
her head shot out a strange, devouring flame,
1190. and from the garment given her the same,
but inward, eating up the whitened flesh.
In vain she tossed and tried and tried afresh
to throw it off, or even from her chair
leap up and shake the circlet from her hair,
but still it held. The more she shook the more
the fire roared up in fierceness than before.
She fell, rolled on the floor, but in a guise
that only father still might recognize.
Her eyes and handsome face did not aspire
1200. to shape, and from her head the blood caught fire,
and bones shed flesh as will a pine-torch sweat
its resin: poison bit her deeper yet.
A scene of horror, with the poison such
that all, and wisely, were afraid to touch.

Except her father, who had stumbled last
and ignorant into the room. Aghast,
he stooped, embraced his daughter, groaned and said,
'Ah, wretched creature,' as he kissed her head,
'what god could wreak such frenzy, to consume
1210. the hopes of this old man beside his tomb?
Without my daughter, and so shamefully too,
I would not now be left, but go with you.'

But when he came to rise, lamentings past,
he found his body to the dress bound fast

as ivy with the laurel shoots is intertwined,
and all he did thereafter seemed designed
to hold him tighter: all his heaves and groans
but pulled the aged flesh more off his bones.
Fiercely he struggled, but as fast grew tired:
1220. his body gave its breath up, and expired.
The two then lay there in their dreadful sleep,
old man and daughter, making all to weep.

What happens now is not for me to say
except that punishment will not delay.
But of the larger issues, life itself:
that seems a spectacle of miraged wealth,
and those who craft their speeches only pay
respect to foolishness and empty sway.
In wealth one may be luckier than the rest
1230. but not in blessings: none is truly blest.

Exit Messenger by Eisosdos B.

CHORUS

So gather fates, and show in what
calamities ends Jason's day.
In pitying her we also plead
that woman too be not forgot
whose wedding speeds her Hades way.

MEDEA

My friends, I am resolved upon the deed:
to kill my children and to flee this land.
Since death must come, if by a crueller hand,
let she who gave them nurture and their breath
1240. become the one who sends them on to death.
For this I clasp hard armour round the heart
but still put off where all my terrors start.
But come my sword: be strong: you cannot mend

a step in going to this wretched end.
You love your children: true, they are your own,
and dear that breath you gave them now has grown,
but do not think of it, but for a day
forget, however afterwards you pay
in endless mourning for them. Hard is what
1250. must fall to this unhappy woman's lot.

Medea enters the house.

FIFTH CHORAL ODE

CHORUS

Strophe 1 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Earth, and you the sun, whose rays
can soften all, now at this hour
upon this woman turn your gaze.
Enlighten her before she spill
impiously the blood of sons,
which comes from Zeus, a race of gold.
Not blood of gods, which must and will
be what the mindful mortal shuns.
Have the light that comes from old
1260. restrain the murderous Furies power.

Antistrophe 1 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

The doubt conveyed by dark seas hence,
and hardships that your children brought
are turned by fury into naught.
Unhappy woman, why not heed
how recklessly your thoughts incline
to horror adding more to pain.
Worse than blood itself the stain
of kindred blood, for with that deed

comes vengeance which the gods dispense
1270. in endless slaughter of your line.

CHILDREN

(within) Help!

CHORUS

Strophe 2 (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Did I hear an infant's cry?
Some monster makes her children die.

FIRST CHILD

(within) What fiend attacks us in a mother's shape?

SECOND CHILD

(within) I only know from her there's no escape.

CHORUS

It's right that I forestall their fate.

FIRST CHILD

(within) By heavens, now, or you'll arrive too late.

SECOND CHILD

(within) How close she comes. The frightful blade draws near.

CHORUS

Antistrophe 2 (chorus reverses direction of dance)

1280. Is there woman born that harms
the very children she has raised?
Only one, I hear it said,
had her children brought to ill.
Ino, whom the gods had dazed
was sent by Hera wandering till
by the ocean's edge she drowned
herself and children in her arms.
What further horror can be found?
1290. How women, pain and marriage bed
can breed the madness men should fear!

EXODOS

Enter Jason by Eisodos B.

JASON

Women, you who stand outside the house,
now tell me: is she here, or has my spouse,
my former wife, Medea, quit her lair?
But, let her hide herself in earth or air,
it's still the family will hunt her down.
She cannot murder one who wears the crown
and hope to leave his territories unscathed.

1300. Yet more it is my sons who should be saved
from retribution that I care about.
Medea meets her end, which none can doubt
when next of kin arrive, on vengeance bent.
But of that dreadful crime they're innocent,
and I must shield them from their mother's deeds.

CHORUS LEADER

Speak as you will, no thought succeeds,
for, Jason, I've more things to tell.

JASON

She means, you think, to murder me as well?

CHORUS LEADER

It is your children: both are dead.

JASON

1310. As I, if this be where her rage has led.

CHORUS LEADER

Be of their ending satisfied.

JASON

Where did she kill them? In the house? Outside?

CHORUS LEADER

Inside you'll see your slaughtered ones.

JASON

Servants, undo the gates, and if my sons
lie dead within the house, my life will take
1316. on darker outlines but be such to make
1316a. Medea's punishment more swift and sure.

As Jason tries to open the gate, Medea appears aloft on a winged chariot

raised behind the skene.

MEDEA

Why draw the bolts and clamour at my door,
raise talk of corpses you are searching for?
That I'm the perpetrator must be clear.
1320. Go, say your words: you cannot touch me here.
I ride above mere mortal's ill intent
in this my chariot, which Helios sent.

JASON

How vile, detestable and foul you find
yourself before the gods and humankind.
Your sword has killed your very own, to press
on me a grief and then such loneliness.
So abominable the things you've done
how dare you even look on earth and sun?
Yet now I notice what was closed to me
1330. the day I brought you over land and sea
to give you home here with my fellow Greeks.
A vile outlandishness in you still speaks
barbarian, enabling you to do
much evil in the land that nourished you.
You, killing brother, to the Argo came
and made avenging gods hold me to blame.

Such were the acts with which our life began,
and after marriage to a mortal man
you gave him sons for which the marriage bed
1340. has proved not nurturing but death instead.
What Hellene woman would have sunk so low
but yet I married you and have for show
a monster, Scylla, she-wolf, fierce and mean.
How hateful has my sheer existence been,
and yet ten thousand jibes cannot insult
sufficiently or alter this result.
Be gone, a murderer, and more beside,
and leave me broken, thinking of my bride,

and of the children which, at any cost,
1350. I should have loved and nurtured, but have lost.

MEDEA

How long-drawn-out the speech I should have made
if Zeus did not concede that you repaid
me vilely for the love I gave: a life
in which I was a full and loving wife.

What did you think? You could renounce my bed,
and have by that your solemn vows unsaid?
Or that the princess, Creon and his court
could banish me without a second thought?
Maybe I'm Scylla, she-wolf, maybe not,
1360. but I have touched you in a vital spot.

JASON

But you are hurt by it as much as me.

MEDEA

Yes, but also spared the mockery.

JASON

In evil, sons, you see yourselves conceived.

MEDEA

It was the father, children, who deceived.

JASON

Your hand, not mine, which killed them: that's cold fact.

MEDEA

An outraged marriage would be more exact.

JASON

Does bed condone the course you took?

MEDEA

Is this some trifle women overlook?

JASON

Of bloodied madness only you have need.

MEDEA

1370. The loss of children was the thing you'd heed.

JASON

Then may their spirits haunt you through the air.

MEDEA

The gods know well who started this affair.

JASON

And well the loathsome purpose in your choice.

MEDEA

With that same loathing now I hate your voice.

JASON

As I do yours. We need not meet again.

MEDEA

Be very sure of that I shan't complain.

JASON

Release my children though, for funeral rites.

MEDEA

No, I shall not do so. By my lights
they're mine to bury where they cannot stir.
1380. In Hera Akraia's sepulchre
no enemy can disinter remains.
The land of Sisyphus about ordains
a solemn festival be held, that best
conveys perpetually their souls to rest.
Myself, I go to that Erechthean seat
where Aegeus of Pelion will greet
and give me sanctuary — when all you sought
in me and voyaging has come to naught.

(From here on the dialogue is chanted.)

JASON

May Furies follow on your children's death,
and Justice hound you to your final breath.

MEDEA

What deity will punish someone who
was tricked by vows, and by a stranger too.

JASON

Unclean, child murderer, and self-confessed.

MEDEA

Be sensible: go lay your wife to rest.

JASON

I will. Bereft of sons and everything.

MEDEA

Much greater mourning will the long years bring.

JASON

My sons most dear. . .

MEDEA

. . . to mother, never you.

JASON

But you who killed them.

MEDEA

That I had to do.

JASON

I see their faces when they knew no harms,
1400. and long to hold them in my loving arms

MEDEA

So now you speak and greet them when before
you thrust them out.

JASON

I beg you, one thing more:
for a last time touch those gentle limbs again.

MEDEA

From now on all you ask shall be in vain.

JASON

Let Zeus now hear me. He will see
what pain I'm in, and how abominably
the one who mothered them has murderess turned.
And more: by this you heavenly powers have learned
how innocent I am of all offence,
1410. that, though she killed them, I am driven hence,
and punished, grievously, and cannot grace
with obsequies their last, quiet resting place.
Would, gods, I'd not begotten them, nor knew
the ending of their lives would be by you.

CHORUS LEADER

Zeus on Olympus has his ways
inscrutable to mortal gaze.
Expectations go awry,
and in denouements gods dispose
1419. most strangely, as this story shows.

(End of Play)

3. GLOSSARY

1. *Argo*: marvellous ship bearing Jason and the heroes on their search for the Golden Fleece. *Simplegadès*: the clashing rocks that guarded the entrance to the Black Sea, safely navigated by sending a dove ahead to test the way.
2. *Colchis*: region on the east coast of the Black Sea, surrounded by the Caucasus range.
3. *Pelion*: mountain near Iolchus.
5. *Peleas*: King of Iolchus, who sent Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece to rid himself of the threat represented by Jason's legitimate claim to the throne.
7. *Iolcus*: town on the bay of Volos in Thessaly, where Jason and Medea first lived on their return from Colchis. From here, banished for the murder of Peleas, they moved to Corinth.
9. *parricides*: Medea tricked the daughters of King Peleas into murdering their father.
45. *Eisodos*: one of two passages leading into the orchestra.
160. *Artemis*: the huntress daughter of Zeus and Leto.
339. *violent clasping*: emphasizing the religious obligations of a vow.
399. *Hecate*: sinister goddess of magic and the black arts.
406. *Jason's Sisyphean*: Sisyphus, founder of Corinth, was compelled in Hades to forever roll uphill a heavy boulder as punishment for his dissolute life on earth.
407. *Helios*: sun god and grandfather of Medea.
421. *Phoebus*: radiant Apollo.
- 478-86. Challenges set Jason by King Aeëtes of Colchis. *field of death*: Jason must sow the ground with dragon's teeth and kill the men who spring up. *Halter bent on fiery bulls*: Jason has to plough with fire-breathing bulls. *dragon*: animal guarding the Golden Fleece.
665. *Aegeus*: ruler of Athens, descended from Erechtheus.
683. *Pittheus*: founder of Troezen, Peloponnesian city facing Athens.
759. *Hermes*: messenger of the gods and patron of travellers.
823. *Erechtheus*: cult figure worshipped on the Athenian Acropolis.
832. *Harmonia*: goddess of harmony and concord.
834. *Cephisus*: river of Attica not running dry in summer.
838. *Cypris*: one from Cyprus, i.e. Aphrodite

1027. *wedding bath*: a bath for the bride and groom preceded the formal wedding.

1055-80. Text repetitions, and uncertainties in Medea's actions make many scholars think this section is a later interpolation. It adds some emotional shading to Medea, but weakens the general shape of the play.

1284. *Ino*: daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia: Hera turned her husband mad, and to escape him, Ino jumped off the Molurian Rock, drowning herself and son Melicertes.

1317. *skene*: two-story building behind the stage.

1343. *Scylla*: monster of twelve feet and six heads who occupied a cave opposite Charybdis and preyed on sailors passing through the Straits of Messina.

1380. *Hera Akraia*: temple to the goddess Hera at Perachora near Corinth.

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13. The Greek text does not always have a clear, unambiguous meaning. 'If conjecture were eliminated, these plays over long stretches would hover tantalizingly on the edge of intelligibility, or be simply unreadable.' Kovacs 1994, p. 39.

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