EURIPIDES

MEDEA
AND OTHER PLAYS

MEDEA · HECABE · ELECTRA · HERACLES

Translated with an Introduction by
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PENGUIN BOOKS

NTRODUCTION*

MEDEA (431 B.C.)

OF the four plays in this volume, three have in common a point of special interest for their first audience. *Medea*, *Electra*, and *Heracles* are set respectively in Corinth, Argos, and Thebes; but for the solution of their dilemmas, the cleansing of their guilt, they all look to Athens. This observation perhaps illumines one aspect of the unique greatness of Athens. The hypocrisy of neglected ideals has often been condemned as a major sin; but in the moral world as in the romantic, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved. The Athenians in their actions were certainly as cruel, as dishonest, as greedy, as revengeful, as irreligious, as other Greeks; but in their thoughts and aspirations many of them loved and honoured justice, integrity, and generosity, and loved their city as the shining embodiment of those virtues – which it was not. Faith without works may be dead – but faith is seldom entirely without works; and the works of the tragedians kept alive the faith of Athenians in the beauty of goodness, and in what their city had sometimes tried to be, even if success had been rare: the sanctuary of Hellas.

In *Electra*, Orestes' guilt was incurred wittingly – but at the command of a god; in *Heracles*, the crime was committed in pure innocence. By contrast, Medea's only excuse was her natural passion for revenge; yet she, no less than the others, could rely on sanctuary in Athens. The Chorus of Corinthian women follow their celebrated hymn of praise for Athens with questions voicing the instinctive protest that there are degrees of wickedness which pollute sanctuary – but that cannot change the story. That this principle of the open gate still had significance in historical times is shown by Thucydides' insistence on it in Pericles' Funeral Speech (in Book ii), where it is stated with pride that Athens allowed free coming and going through her city gates. In *Medea* Euripides' compliment to his city in this hymn of praise appears in some measure to compensate for the effect of the preceding scene.

* A general Introduction to the life and work of Euripides is given in *Alcestis and Other Plays* (Penguin Classics).

The king of Athens and his friendly offer to Medea were part of the unalterable legend, and would be accepted as such by the Athenian audience; but the treatment of the episode in this play is not only curiously arbitrary and unrelated to the rest of the action, but more than a little satirical; and the figure of Aegeus provides the one flicker of relief in the otherwise uniform sombreness of the drama.

This, the earliest extant tragedy of Euripides (it is preceded only by *Alcestis*), shows a moral pattern similar to that of his last work, *The Bacchae*. It opens with an oppressed victim claiming the sympathy of Chorus and audience. As the action develops inevitably, and the punishment shows itself twice as wicked as the crime, sympathy changes sides; and we are left with only one comfort, that since the worst has been reached, there can be no worse thing to follow.

To appreciate the balance of this play, we must take care not to prejudge Jason. He was a man of entirely respectable ambitions; and to these ambitions Medea presented two fatal obstacles: she had involved him in murder before ever he came to Corinth; and as a non-Greek she could never be recognized by Greeks as his wife. And the first of these obstacles is of course part of the reason for the second. Marathon and Salamis had made the Athenians vividly conscious that the establishment and growth of civilized values in a barbarous world lay with them alone as the leaders of Hellenic culture. For Greeks, 'civilized' life meant controlled, orderly, proportionate life, τὸ μηδὲν ἄγαν, 'No excess'. As a principle this applied equally to everything – politics, social habits, art. To them it was the only life, and the want of it a living death. Those who had died for it in the great battles or in resistance to tyranny were their most honoured heroes. This is the principle for which Jason stands. If his behaviour strikes us as repellent, that is how the behaviour of Athenians struck many Greeks of other States in the days when Athens claimed to be the champion of the Greek way of life, and the firm opponent of barbarism and all its ways.

In the great world the forces of civilization are a heroic minority, and their course is simple enough: to win or die. In a Greek city, such as the Corinth of this play, the forces of civilization rule, and barbarism appears – here in the person of Medea – as the heroic minority. The play shows a truth which many Greeks must have recognized, though it was seldom acknowledged in so many words: that when a

community or a nation has adopted, in its political and social institutions, the quality of self-control, *sophrosyne*, it soon learns that this quality belongs only in limited measure to its citizens; that the principle of barbarous excess is predominant in most individuals, so that the constant concern of government is to deal with barbarism inside the walls and in the council-chamber, as well as in foreign lands. Just as in the modern world democracy, desperate to resist totalitarianism, resorts to totalitarian methods, weakening its own life in the process, so the fiery Greek temperament made the menace of barbarism the excuse for its own excesses.

In the character of Jason a concern for civilized values is joined with a calculating coldness and an unscrupulous want of feeling. In that of Medea warmth of feeling grows on the same stem as emotional excess and the propensity to violence. Here we see an issue which again is similar to that found in *The Bacchae*. The lesson of both plays is that civilized men ignore at their peril the world of instinct, emotion, and irrational experience; that carefully worked-out notions of right and wrong are dangerous unless they are flexible and allow for constant adjustment. And the ending of *Medea*, with the Sun himself, the source of all life and warmth, vindicating the cause of passion, disorder, violent cruelty, against the cold, orderly, self-protective processes of civilized man, is a reminder that the universe is not on the side of civilization; and that a life combining order with happiness is something men must win for themselves in continual struggle with an unsympathetic environment.

HECABE (425 B.C.)

This play combines two themes, both of which Euripides treated also in other plays. First, the complacent hypocrisy with which men justify cruelty in the name of military or political necessity; second, the tendency of revenge to be more wicked than the crime which provoked it, and thus to forfeit sympathy and the claim of justice. Besides these two themes we have, in the first part, the heroic figure of Polyxena – enough in itself to make the play memorable; and in the second half the vivid interplay of character between Agamemnon and Hecabe. It is a straightforward play for fine actors, offering simple emotion rather than question or conflict.

It has been strongly criticized on the ground that it falls apart into

two scarcely connected episodes, concerned respectively with Polyxena and with Polydorus and Polymestor. The same criticism is often levelled at other plays such as *Hippolytus* and *Andromache*, and in some cases reflects a feature of Greek plays which arose inevitably from the restriction of the number of actors to three. In this play, however, that excuse is hardly needed. The play is about ruthless cruelty, and the different results it may produce for both sufferer and spectator. The cruelty of the sentence on Polyxena is transmuted by the heroism of Polyxena herself to an episode of awe-inspiring beauty. The cruelty of Polymestor to Hecabe's son is matured by the reaction of revenge into something profitless and repellent. Not even Agamemnon's verdict can justify Hecabe; for it is so evidently the result of a bad conscience over Polyxena. The whole point of the play lies in the contrast between its two halves; so that to criticize this division is largely irrelevant.

Throughout the action Hecabe is the central figure. The legend said that the accumulation of her sufferings drove her mad, and that she was transformed into a dog. The promontory called Cynossema, the Dog's Tomb, on the coast of the Thracian Chersonese (Gallipoli) was familiar to Greek sailors as the traditional site of Hecabe's burial. The legend itself is a comment on the effect of prolonged anguish on the mind; and this was a subject which greatly occupied Euripides. In this play Hecabe's depth of grief has almost reached the limit of endurance when the action begins. Polyxena's death is made endurable by Polyxena's own nobility; but a further blow is fatal, and Hecabe is transformed into a raving savage.

It has to be remembered that the annihilation of a city was an act which Athens, like other military powers, was capable of deciding on and carrying out. It had been decided on (and revoked at the very last moment) in the case of Mytilene in 427 B.C., two years before the production of this play; it was carried out in the case of Melos in 416 B.C., a year before the production of *The Women of Troy*.* The Greeks were a cruel race, and at the same time an emotional race capable of deep feeling. How much real influence a dramatic poet might exert (necessarily after the event) on the public actions of his city is impossible to estimate; but two pieces of evidence come to mind. One is the scene in the second half of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, where Aeschylus and

* Included in *The Bacchae and Other Plays* (Penguin Classics).

Euripides are matched against each other for their value to the citizens of Athens. The other is the story of the heavy fine inflicted on Phrynichus (an older contemporary of Aeschylus) for moving his audience to tears with his play about the capture of Miletus. However that may be, the chief interest of this play for modern readers is probably its eloquence and pathos.

ELECTRA (415 B.C.)

Electra has often been a puzzling play for modern readers. This has not prevented if from becoming also one of the most popular in translation, probably because of the striking realism which Euripides here employs both in dialogue and in situation. Many performances, however, must have left English audiences largely in the dark on two points at least: the intended characters of Electra and Orestes, and the significance of the curious recognition-scene. Before examining these in detail we should take a general look at Euripides' treatment of one of the best-known stories in the Troy cycle.

The framework of the story, used also by both Aeschylus and Sophocles, was as follows: before Agamemnon returned from Troy, Electra, fearing that Aegisthus would murder Orestes, had sent him away from Argos to be brought up by Strophius, king of Phocis. Orestes at the time of Agamemnon's murder was about eleven years of age. As soon as he reached manhood he was commanded by the Delphic oracle to go to Argos and avenge his father by killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. He reached Argos in disguise, revealed himself to his sister, and with her help accomplished his mission. As a shedder of kindred blood he was then pursued and tormented by the Furies.

Using this material Aeschylus wrote a drama in which the conflict between divine command and moral instinct is fought out in the person of Orestes. Sophocles wrote a dramatic study of Electra as the daughter who turned against her mother that obsession with revenge which she had inherited from her. In these plays the figures of the protagonists are presented on a heroic scale. Though the horror of matricide is recognized, it is not doubted that such a command might have divine sanction. In Euripides' play both Orestes and Electra are far from heroic; the murder of Aegisthus is shown as, at the best, inglorious; that of Clytemnestra as revolting. Yet then, and only then, when

brother and sister, having achieved their purpose, stand as the trembling victims of a profitless, relentless, and false tradition of glorious revenge, do we, the audience, feel pity for them.

The obligation and indulgence of revenge played a constant and disastrous part in Greek history, and often gave an unpleasant colour to otherwise attractive characters. This feature of Greek life Euripides sometimes (like Aeschylus) regards as an aspect of the search for ideal justice; more often he presents it as sheer folly, as the principle which perpetuates and aggravates evil and produces no good whatever. In this play he was dealing with a revenge-saga in which long and familiar tradition had upheld the principle in spite of every circumstance of horror. Aeschylus had justified and purified Orestes in the end; Sophocles had never questioned the nobility and justice of his act. Euripides here shows the revenge as conceived and executed in fear and weakness. Orestes, faced with his dilemma, trusts the oracle because he has not the strength to trust his own moral instinct; but neither has he the strength to trust in the rightness of what he has done at Apollo's command. For Euripides, the brutality of this command was a challenge to Orestes, just as the command to sacrifice Iphigenia had been a challenge to his father. Both, being weak, preferred sin under authority to the risks of moral independence.

A crucial point in the interpretation of the whole play is the recognition scene (lines 487–581).* Dispute has often turned on the question why Euripides in this scene should make, as it appears, a detailed criticism of Aeschylus' treatment of the recognition in *The Choephori*, and ridicule the use there made of 'signs' such as the lock of hair and the footprints. This question will be considered presently; but it is a secondary one. The prime question is, Why is the recognition so long delayed and so reluctant? To answer this we must look at clues already given in the early scenes to the characters of Electra and Orestes.

Electra in her opening conversation with the Peasant uses several phrases which suggest that her degradation and grief have led to exaggerated self-pity; and that this indulgence is her one luxury in life. The next scene, Electra's conversation with the Chorus, shows clearly

* For ideas contained in this section I am largely indebted to an illuminating article, 'The Anagnorisis in the *Electra* of Euripides' by David Raeburn (not yet published).

that there is no substance in her complaints that she is without friends and cut off from social life; and that the squalor of her personal appearance is a neurotic affectation. Various lines in subsequent scenes suggest further that she exaggerates the dishonour shown to Agamemnon's body; and that Orestes' slowness in appearing to rescue her is one of her favourite grievances.

Next let us turn to Orestes. In Electra's imagination her absent brother is a romantic hero. The suggestion that he might come to Argos secretly makes her indignant. When Orestes himself enters, he soon shows that the notion of matricide is a thing he can hardly bear to put into words. He has not dared to enter the walls of Argos; he is keeping near the frontier, partly to escape quickly if recognized, partly to find his sister and consult with her.

Presently their conversation reaches the point where Orestes asks, 'How would Orestes, if he came, react to your situation?' Electra's answer makes it clear that she expects him to carry out full revenge at once, and that she herself will go to any length in helping him, even to the point of killing Clytemnestra with her own hands. Clearly this is the point where Orestes should reveal himself, so that a plan can be concerted. He does not reveal himself. Why? It can only be because he knows that, once Electra recognizes him, he is irrevocably committed to murdering his mother. Electra will never let him off.

When eventually the Old Man insists on identifying Orestes, Euripides presents us with a scene in which the chief emotion is embarrassment. Orestes is consciously reluctant to be recognized because he sees all too clearly the inevitable consequence; and Electra is unconsciously reluctant to recognize him because, having for so long nursed the grievance of his failure to appear, she cannot bear to see that grievance removed. This tragi-comic situation explains the slowness of the recognition, the nervously foolish remarks of both brother and sister, and the perfunctory exchange of endearments which follows.

A further mystery is solved by this interpretation of Euripides' purpose. The traditional features of this story included not only the Recognition but the 'signs' by which it was effected: the lock of hair, the footprints, and the piece of cloth, woven by Electra, which Orestes wore. These signs might or might not be convincing in themselves: they belonged to an early and unsophisticated period, and were

part of the story. To include them *as the means of recognition* would be incongruous with that realistic treatment of the main characters and situation which was to provide the special interest of the play. What Euripides did, therefore, was to make these signs, not the means of recognition, but an ingenious excuse for that delay of recognition which Electra and Orestes, as he conceived them, desired for their own different reasons. And when Electra has rejected all three in theory, she underlines the ambiguity of her attitude by finally accepting a fourth sign – the scar – which has been plainly visible to her for the last half-hour.

The rest of the play needs little comment. In the account of the killing of Aegisthus no detail is spared which could emphasize that Orestes' exploit is not only unheroic but sacrilegious; and Electra's exalted praises, showing that her mental image of her brother is impervious to sordid fact, add an acutely satirical note. After the Messenger's description of the hearty and hospitable Aegisthus, we are introduced to the quiet, chastened, conciliatory figure of Clytemnestra. Electra is unmoved; she will force Orestes to carry out his undertaking to the end, even in face of this defencelessness. Then, as we learn afterwards, at the crucial moment her nerve fails, and she leaves Orestes to do the actual killing. When the deed has been done, brother and sister, who a little while earlier were trying not to know each other, find themselves alone together in a condemning world; and having discovered that each is the other's only friend, they are forced to part.

HERACLES (420 B.C.?)

The structure of this play is very simple. Neither thecourse of events nor the interplay of characters provides anything dramatically notable, except for the appearance of immortals in the middle of the play, which will be referred to presently. The story is the vehicle for that straightforward eloquence on the theme of human suffering, of which Euripides was a master. The world presented here is the familiar world where neither birth nor wealth, piety nor courage nor innocence, gives any guarantee against the power of wickedness or the malevolence of chance. What the spirit of man can aim at achieving is a dignity which remains when the gods have withdrawn or joined the side of evil, a serene despair which knows that the world contains no

higher hope than the human spirit can find within itself. And in *Heracles* a further encouragement is given: the firmness of human friendship as the one resource available in the depth of suffering. These simple truths are stated with a spacious and satisfying poetic power; and that is the chief interest of the play.

One unusual feature is worth special notice: the sudden and unexpected appearance, half-way through the play, of Iris and Madness. In Euripides supernatural beings, if they appear at all, generally do so at the beginning of a play to explain a situation, or at the end to provide – or offer – a solution. Critics have sometimes censured this appearance in *Heracles* as arbitrary and unmotivated; for Iris simply announces herself as the agent of Hera's jealousy towards Heracles. But the absence of rational motive is surely the dramatist's point. By this visitation he is describing the character, not of any god or human being, but of events themselves, as he observes them occurring in a world which he regards as ruled by Chance – a divinity not only blind but probably malevolent. His description of the world conveys a message entirely different from that of Sophocles. To the questions of a sufferer Sophocles offers one answer: reverence for the unfathomable wisdom and power of Zeus. Euripides wrote for men who had lost that faith, and exhorted them to rely on themselves, and, if they were fortunate, on the loyalty of friends. In this play Amphitryon in particular illustrates what must have been the progress of many religiously-minded Athenians, from belief in divine goodness and a rather smug confidence in divine favour, to a conviction that the whole concept of moral goodness begins, operates, and ends in man alone.

This theme is given an unusual kind of confirmation by a passage in the last scene. Theseus, trying to dissuade Heracles from suicide, drags in the somewhat irrelevant argument that gods have often been guilty of unchastity and yet continue to live in Olympus and are not beyond consolation. Heracles replies that he has never believed such stories. These words of Theseus are a curious echo from the Nurse's speech to Phaedra in *Hippolytus:* 'Yet they live in heaven, and show no haste to quit the company of gods. Events have proved too strong for them; and they, believe me, are content.' In *Hippolytus* this argument is used by the Nurse, whose moral attitude is more than dubious, while here it is Theseus who speaks, the godlike hero. In both plays

the audience is invited to disbelieve these tales; in *Hippolytus* by the character of the Nurse, here by Heracles' reply. In both cases the implied lesson is that an intelligent man should not rely on the gods for an acceptable standard of moral behaviour, any more than for protection in danger. Man must be his own god, and stand or fall by his own decisions.

Yet another aspect of this kind of 'humanism' is suggested in the same scene. Guilt, and the various ways of dealing with it, are a constant theme of tragedy. Guilt may be punished with death, as in the case of Clytemnestra; or expiated by suffering, as in the case of Orestes; or forgiven by a victim, as in the case of Theseus in *Hippolytus*. What of Heracles' guilt? The modern reader will feel that, since the play clearly shows his madness as sent upon him by divine agency, Heracles is not morally guilty. He himself, however, does not take this view; he knows that he is guilty. But his guilt is not something he can disown; it is a part of his life, which from beginning to end has been a life of violence. Heracles looks at the famous bow which has brought him victory in so many struggles, and has now killed his wife and children. Is he to take it with him to Athens? Or must he abandon it? 'Never! This bow is anguish to me, yet I cannot part with it.' He is Heracles, and can never be any other man; even the madness which came on him is a part of his nature which he must recognize and learn to live with. He is himself the only person who has the right to forgive what he has done. He knows himself; he will keep his bow.

The title of this play is given in some MSS. as 'Heracles Mainomenos', 'The Madness of Heracles'. The addition may have been made to distinguish it in reference from 'The Heracleidae', 'The Children of Heracles'. Most modern editors call it 'Hercules Furens', which is an unnecessary Latinism. Latinism in Hellene affairs is almost always to be deplored.

MEDEA

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Characters:

NURSE
TUTOR *to Medea's sons*
MEDEA
CHORUS *of Corinthian women*
CREON, *king of Corinth*
JASON
AEGEUS, *king of Athens*
MESSENGER
MEDEA'S TWO CHILDREN

*

Scene: Before Jason's house in Corinth

NURSE: If only they had never gone! If the Argo's hull
Never had winged out through the grey-blue jaws of rock
And on towards Colchis! If that pine on Pelion's slopes
Had never felt the axe, and fallen, to put oars
Into those heroes' hands, who went at Pelias' bidding
To fetch the golden fleece! Then neither would Medea,
My mistress, ever have set sail for the walled town
Of Iolcus, mad with love for Jason; nor would she,
When Pelias' daughters, at her instance, killed their father,
Have come with Jason and her children to live here
In Corinth; where, coming as an exile, she has earned
The citizens' welcome; while to Jason she is all
Obedience – and in marriage that's the saving thing,
When a wife obediently accepts her husband's will.

But now her world has turned to enmity, and wounds her
Where her affection's deepest. Jason has betrayed

His own sons, and my mistress, for a royal bed,
For alliance with the king of Corinth. He has married
Glauce, Creon's daughter. Poor Medea! Scorned and shamed,
She raves, invoking every vow and solemn pledge
That Jason made her, and calls the gods as witnesses
What thanks she has received for her fidelity.
She will not eat; she lies collapsed in agony,
Dissolving the long hours in tears. Since first she heard
Of Jason's wickedness, she has not raised her eyes,
Or moved her cheek from the hard ground; and when her friends
Reason with her, she might be a rock or wave of the sea,
For all she hears – unless, maybe, she turns away
Her lovely head, speaks to herself alone, and wails
Aloud for her dear father, her own land and home,
Which she betrayed and left, to come here with this man
Who now spurns and insults her. Poor Medea! Now
She learns through pain what blessings they enjoy who are not
Uprooted from their native land. She hates her sons:
To see them is no pleasure to her. I am afraid
Some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind. She is
A frightening woman; no one who makes an enemy
Of her will carry off an easy victory.

Here come the boys, back from their running. They've no thought
Of this cruel blow that's fallen on their mother. Well,
They're young; young heads and painful thoughts don't go together.

Enter the TUTOR *with* MEDEA'S TWO SONS.

TUTOR: Old nurse and servant of my mistress's house, tell me,
What are you doing, standing out here by the door,
All alone, talking to yourself, harping on trouble?
Eh? What does Medea say to being left alone?

NURSE: Old friend, tutor of Jason's sons, an honest slave

Suffers in her own heart the blow that strikes her mistress.
It was too much, I couldn't bear it; I had to come
Out here and tell my mistress's wrongs to earth and heaven.

TUTOR: Poor woman! Has she not stopped crying yet?

NURSE: Stopped crying?
I envy you. Her grief's just born – not yet half-grown.

TUTOR: Poor fool – though she's my mistress and I shouldn't say it –
She had better save her tears. She has not heard the worst.

NURSE: The worst? What now? Don't keep it from me. What has happened?

TUTOR: Why, nothing's happened. I'm sorry I said anything.

NURSE: Look – we're both slaves together: don't keep me in the dark.
Is it so great a secret? I can hold my tongue.

TUTOR: I'd gone along to the benches where the old men play
At dice, next to the holy fountain of Peirene;
They thought I was not listening; and I heard one say
That Creon king of Corinth means to send these boys
Away from here – to banish them, and their mother too.
Whether the story's true I don't know. I hope not.

NURSE: But surely Jason won't stand by and see his sons
Banished, even if he has a quarrel with their mother?

TUTOR: Old love is ousted by new love. Jason's no friend
To this house.

NURSE: Then we're lost, if we must add new trouble
To old, before we're rid of what we had already.

TUTOR: But listen: it's no time to tell Medea this.
Keep quiet, say nothing about it.

NURSE: Children, do you hear
What sort of father Jason is to you? My curse
On – No! No curse; he is my master. All the same,
He is guilty: he has betrayed those near and dear to him.

TUTOR: What man's not guilty? It's taken you a long time to learn

That everybody loves himself more than his neighbour.
These boys are nothing to their father: he's in love.

NURSE: Run into the house, boys. Everything will be all right.

[*The children move away a little.*]

You do your best to keep them by themselves, as long
As she's in this dark mood; don't let them go to her.
I've watched her watching them, her eye like a wild bull's.
There's something that she means to do; and I know this:
She'll not relax her rage till it has found its victim.
God grant she strike her enemies and not her friends!

MEDEA's *voice is heard from inside the house.*

MEDEA: Oh, oh! What misery, what wretchedness!
What shall I do? If only I were dead!

NURSE: There! You can hear; it is your mother
Racking her heart, racking her anger.
Quick, now, children, hurry indoors;
And don't go within sight of her,
Or anywhere near her; keep a safe distance.
Her mood is cruel, her nature dangerous,
Her will fierce and intractable.
Come on, now, in with you both at once.

[*The* CHILDREN *go in, and the* TUTOR *follows.*]

The dark cloud of her lamentations
Is just beginning. Soon, I know,
It will burst aflame as her anger rises.
Deep in passion and unrelenting,
What will she do now, stung with insult?

MEDEA [*indoors*]: Do I not suffer? Am I not wronged? Should I not weep?
Children, your mother is hated, and you are cursed:
Death take you, with your father, and perish his whole house!

NURSE: Oh, the pity of it! Poor Medea!
Your children – why, what have *they* to do

With their father's wickedness? Why hate *them*?
I am sick with fear for you, children, terror
Of what may happen. The mind of a queen
Is a thing to fear. A queen is used
To giving commands, not obeying them;
And her rage once roused is hard to appease.

To have learnt to live on the common level
Is better. No grand life for me,
Just peace and quiet as I grow old.
The middle way, neither great nor mean,
Is best by far, in name and practice.
To be rich and powerful brings no blessing;
Only more utterly
Is the prosperous house destroyed, when the gods are angry.

Enter the CHORUS *of Corinthian women.*

CHORUS:

I heard her voice, I heard
That unhappy woman from Colchis
Still crying, not calm yet.
Old Nurse, tell us about her.
As I stood by the door I heard her
Crying inside the palace.
And my own heart suffers too
When Jason's house is suffering;
For that is where my loyalty lies.

NURSE: Jason's house? It no longer exists; all that is finished.
Jason is a prisoner in a princess's bed;
And Medea is in her room
Melting her life away in tears;
No word from any friend can give her comfort.

MEDEA [*still from indoors*]:

Come, flame of the sky,
Pierce through my head!
What do I gain from living any longer?

Oh, how I hate living! I want
To end my life, leave it behind, and die.

CHORUS:

O Zeus, and Earth, and Light,
Do you hear the chanted prayer
Of a wife in her anguish?
[*turning to the door and addressing* MEDEA]
What madness is this? The bed you long for –
Is it what others shrink from?
Is it death you demand?
Do not pray that prayer, Medea!
If your husband is won to a new love –
The thing is common; why let it anger you?
Zeus will plead your cause.
Check this passionate grief over your husband
Which wastes you away.

MEDEA: Mighty Themis! Dread Artemis!
Do you see how I am used –
In spite of those great oaths I bound him with –
By my accursed husband?
Oh, may I see Jason and his bride
Ground to pieces in their shattered palace
For the wrong they have dared to do to me, unprovoked!
O my father, my city, you I deserted;
My brother I shamefully murdered!

NURSE: Do you hear what my mistress is saying,
Clamouring to Themis, hearer of prayer,
And to Zeus, who is named guardian of men's oaths?
It is no trifling matter
That can end a rage like hers.

CHORUS: I wish she would come out here and let us see her
And talk to her; if she would listen
Perhaps she would drop this fierce resentful spirit,
This passionate indignation.
As a friend I am anxious to do whatever I can.

Go, nurse, persuade her to come out to us.
Tell her we are all on her side.
Hurry, before she does harm – to those in there;
This passion of hers is an irresistible flood.

NURSE: I will. I fear I shall not persuade her;
Still, I am glad to do my best.
Yet as soon as any of us servants
Goes near to her, or tries to speak,
She glares at us like a mad bull
Or a lioness guarding her cubs.
[*The* NURSE *goes to the door, where she turns.*]
The men of old times had little sense;
If you called them fools you wouldn't be far wrong.
They invented songs, and all the sweetness of music,
To perform at feasts, banquets, and celebrations;
But no one thought of using
Songs and stringed instruments
To banish the bitterness and pain of life.
Sorrow is the real cause
Of deaths and disasters and families destroyed.
If music could cure sorrow it would be precious;
But after a good dinner why sing songs?
When people have fed full they're happy already.

The NURSE *goes in.*

CHORUS:

I heard her sobbing and wailing,
Shouting shrill, pitiful accusations
Against her husband who has betrayed her.
She invokes Themis, daughter of Zeus,
Who witnessed those promises which drew her
Across from Asia to Hellas, setting sail at night,
Threading the salt strait,
Key and barrier to the Pontic Sea.

MEDEA *comes out. She is not shaken with weeping, but cool and self-possessed.*

MEDEA: Women of Corinth, I would not have you censure me,
So I have come. Many, I know, are proud at heart,
Indoors or out; but others are ill spoken of
As supercilious, just because their ways are quiet.
There is no justice in the world's censorious eyes.
They will not wait to learn a man's true character;
Though no wrong has been done them, one look – and they hate.
Of course a stranger must conform; even a Greek
Should not annoy his fellows by crass stubbornness.
I accept my place; but this blow that has fallen on me
Was not to be expected. It has crushed my heart.
Life has no pleasure left, dear friends. I want to die.
Jason was my whole life; he knows that well. Now he
Has proved himself the most contemptible of men.

Surely, of all creatures that have life and will, we women
Are the most wretched. When, for an extravagant sum,
We have bought a husband, we must then accept him as
Possessor of our body. This is to aggravate
Wrong with worse wrong. Then the great question: will the man
We get be bad or good? For women, divorce is not
Respectable; to repel the man, not possible.

Still more, a foreign woman, coming among new laws,
New customs, needs the skill of magic, to find out
What her home could not teach her, how to treat the man
Whose bed she shares. And if in this exacting toil
We are successful, and our husband does not struggle
Under the marriage yoke, our life is enviable.
Otherwise, death is better. If a man grows tired
Of the company at home, he can go out, and find
A cure for tediousness. We wives are forced to look
To one man only. And, they tell us, we at home

Live free from danger, they go out to battle: fools!
I'd rather stand three times in the front line than bear
One child.
But the same arguments do not apply
To you and me. You have this city, your father's home,
The enjoyment of your life, and your friends' company.
I am alone; I have no city; now my husband
Insults me. I was taken as plunder from a land
At the earth's edge. I have no mother, brother, nor any
Of my own blood to turn to in this extremity.

So, I make one request. If I can find a way
To work revenge on Jason for his wrongs to me,
Say nothing. A woman's weak and timid in most matters;
The noise of war, the look of steel, makes her a coward.
But touch her right in marriage, and there's no bloodier spirit.

CHORUS: I'll do as you ask. To punish Jason will be just.
I do not wonder that you take such wrongs to heart.
[CREON *approaches.*]
But look, Medea; I see Creon, King of Corinth;
He must have come to tell you of some new decision.

CREON: You there, Medea, scowling rage against your husband!
I order you out of Corinth; take your sons and go
Into exile. Waste no time; I'm here to see this order
Enforced. And I'm not going back into my palace
Until I've put you safe outside my boundaries.

MEDEA: Oh! this is the cruel end of my accursed life!
My enemies have spread full sail; no welcoming shore
Waits to receive and save me. Ill-treated as I am,
Creon, I ask: for what offence do you banish me?

CREON: I fear you. Why wrap up the truth? I fear that you
May do my daughter some irreparable harm.
A number of things contribute to my anxiety.

You're a clever woman, skilled in many evil arts;
You're barred from Jason's bed, and that enrages you.
I learn too from reports, that you have uttered threats
Of revenge on Jason and his bride and his bride's father.
I'll act first, then, in self-defence. I'd rather make you
My enemy now, than weaken, and later pay with tears.

MEDEA: My reputation, yet again! Many times, Creon,
It has been my curse and ruin. A man of any shrewdness
Should never have his children taught to use their brains
More than their fellows. What do you gain by being clever?
You neglect your own affairs; and all your fellow citizens
Hate you. Those who are fools will call you ignorant
And useless, when you offer them unfamiliar knowledge.
As for those thought intelligent, if people rank
You above *them*, that is a thing they will not stand.
I know this from experience: because I am clever,
They are jealous; while the rest dislike me. After all,
I am not so clever as all that.
So you, Creon,
Are afraid – of what? Some harm that I might do to you?
Don't let *me* alarm you, Creon. I'm in no position –
A woman – to wrong a king. You have done me no wrong.
You've given your daughter to the man you chose. I hate
My husband – true; but you had every right to do
As you have done. So now I bear no grudge against
Your happiness: marry your daughter to him, and good luck
To you both. But let me live in Corinth. I will bear
My wrongs in silence, yielding to superior strength.

CREON: Your words are gentle; but my blood runs cold to think
What plots you may be nursing deep within your heart.
In fact, I trust you so much less now than before.
A woman of hot temper – and a man the same –
Is a less dangerous enemy than one quiet and clever.
So out you go, and quickly; no more arguing.

I've made my mind up; you're my enemy. No craft
Of yours will find a way of staying in my city.

MEDEA: I kneel to you, I beseech you by the young bride, your child.

CREON: You're wasting words; you'll never make me change my mind.

MEDEA: I beg you! Will you cast off pity, and banish me?

CREON: I will: I have more love for my family than for you.

MEDEA: My home, my country! How my thoughts turn to you now!

CREON: I love my country too – next only to my daughter.

MEDEA: Oh, what an evil power love has in people's lives!

CREON: That would depend on circumstances, I imagine.

MEDEA: Great Zeus, remember who caused all this suffering!

CREON: Go, you poor wretch, take all my troubles with you! Go!

MEDEA: I know what trouble is; I have no need of more.

CREON: In a moment you'll be thrown out neck and crop. Here, men!

MEDEA: No, no, not that! But, Creon, I have one thing to ask.

CREON: You seem inclined, Medea, to give me trouble still.

MEDEA: I'll go. [*She still clings to him.*] It was not *that* I begged.

CREON: Then why resist?
Why will you not get out?

MEDEA: This one day let me stay,
To settle some plan for my exile, make provision
For my two sons, since their own father is not concerned
To help them. Show some pity: you are a father too,
You should feel kindly towards them. For myself, exile
Is nothing. I weep for them; their fate is very hard.

CREON: I'm no tyrant by nature. My soft heart has often
Betrayed me; and I know it's foolish of me now;
Yet none the less, Medea, you shall have what you ask.
But take this warning: if tomorrow's holy sun
Finds you or them inside my boundaries, you die.

That is my solemn word. Now stay here, if you must,
This one day. You can hardly in one day accomplish
What I am afraid of.

Exit CREON.

CHORUS:

Medea, poor Medea!
Your grief touches our hearts.
A wanderer, where can you turn?
To what welcoming house?
To what protecting land?
How wild with dread and danger
Is the sea where the gods have set your course!

MEDEA: A bad predicament all round – yes, true enough;
But don't imagine things will end as they are now.
Trials are yet to come for this new-wedded pair;
Nor shall those nearest to them get off easily.

Do you think I would ever have fawned so on this man,
Except to gain my purpose, carry out my schemes?
Not one touch, not one word: yet he – oh, what a fool!
By banishing me at once he could have thwarted me
Utterly; instead, he allows me to remain one day.
Today three of my enemies I shall strike dead:
Father and daughter; and *my* husband.

I have in mind so many paths of death for them,
I don't know which to choose. Should I set fire to the house,
And burn the bridal chamber? Or creep up to their bed
And drive a sharp knife through their guts? There is one fear:
If I am caught entering the house, or in the act,
I die, and the last laugh goes to my enemies.
The best is the direct way, which most suits my bent:
To kill by poison.

So – say they are dead: what city will receive me then?
What friend will guarantee my safety, offer land
And home as sanctuary? None. I'll wait a little.
If some strong tower of help appears, I'll carry out
This murder cunningly and quietly. But if Fate
Banishes me without resource, I will myself
Take sword in hand, harden my heart to the uttermost,
And kill them both, even if I am to die for it.

For, by Queen Hecate, whom above all divinities
I venerate, my chosen accomplice, to whose presence
My central hearth is dedicated, no one of them
Shall hurt me and not suffer for it! Let me work:
In bitterness and pain they shall repent this marriage,
Repent their houses joined, repent my banishment.

Come! Lay your plan, Medea; scheme with all your skill.
On to the deadly moment that shall test your nerve!
You see now where you stand. Your father was a king,
His father was the Sun-god: you must not invite
Laughter from Jason and his new allies, the tribe
Of Sisyphus. You know what you must do. Besides –

[*She turns to the Chorus.*]

We were born women – useless for honest purposes,
But in all kinds of evil skilled practitioners.

CHORUS: Streams of the sacred rivers flow uphill;
Tradition, order, all things are reversed:
Deceit is *men*'s device now,
Men's oaths are gods' dishonour.
Legend will now reverse our reputation;
A time comes when the female sex is honoured;
That old discordant slander
Shall no more hold us subject.
Male poets of past ages, with their ballads
Of faithless women, shall go out of fashion;

For Phoebus, Prince of Music,
Never bestowed the lyric inspiration
Through female understanding –
Or we'd find themes for poems,
We'd counter with our epics against man.
Oh, Time is old; and in his store of tales
Men figure no less famous
Or infamous than women.

So you, Medea, wild with love,
Set sail from your father's house,
Threading the Rocky Jaws of the eastern sea;
And here, living in a strange country,
Your marriage lost, your bed solitary,
You are driven beyond the borders,
An exile with no redress.
The grace of sworn oaths is gone;
Honour remains no more
In the wide Greek world, but is flown to the sky.
Where can you turn for shelter?
Your father's door is closed against you;
Another is now mistress of your husband's bed;
A new queen rules in your house.

Enter JASON.

JASON: I have often noticed – this is not the first occasion –
What fatal results follow from ungoverned rage.
You could have stayed in Corinth, still lived in this house,
If you had quietly accepted the decisions
Of those in power. Instead, you talked like a fool; and now
You are banished. Well, your angry words don't upset *me*;
Go on as long as you like reciting Jason's crimes.
But after your abuse of the King and the princess
Think yourself lucky to be let off with banishment.
I have tried all the time to calm them down; but you

Would not give up your ridiculous tirades against
The royal family. So, you're banished. However, I
Will not desert a friend. I have carefully considered
Your problem, and come now, in spite of everything,
To see that you and the children are not sent away
With an empty purse, or unprovided. Exile brings
With it a train of difficulties. You no doubt
Hate me: but I could never bear ill-will to you.

MEDEA: You filthy coward! – if I knew any worse name
For such unmanliness I'd use it – so, you've come!
You, my worst enemy, come to me! Oh, it's not courage,
This looking friends in the face after betraying them.
It is not even audacity; it's a disease,
The worst a man can have, pure shamelessness. However,
It is as well you came; to say what I have to say
Will ease my heart; to hear it said will make you wince.

I will begin at the beginning. When you were sent
To master the fire-breathing bulls, yoke them, and sow
The deadly furrow, then I saved your life; and that
Every Greek who sailed with you in the Argo knows.
The serpent that kept watch over the Golden Fleece,
Coiled round it fold on fold, unsleeping – it was I
Who killed it, and so lit the torch of your success.
I willingly deceived my father; left my home;
With you I came to Iolcus by Mount Pelion,
Showing much love and little wisdom. There I put
King Pelias to the most horrible of deaths
By his own daughters' hands, and ruined his whole house.
And in return for this you have the wickedness
To turn me out, to get yourself another wife,
Even after I had borne you sons! If you had still
Been childless I could have pardoned you for hankering
After this new marriage. But respect for oaths has gone
To the wind. Do you, I wonder, think that the old gods

No longer rule? Or that new laws are now in force?
You must know you are guilty of perjury to me.

My poor right hand, which you so often clasped! My knees
Which you then clung to! How we are besmirched and mocked
By this man's broken vows, and all our hopes deceived!

Come, I'll ask your advice as if you were a friend.
Not that I hope for any help from you; but still,
I'll ask you, and expose your infamy. Where now
Can I turn? Back to my country and my father's house,
Which I betrayed to come with you? Or to Iolcus,
To Pelias's wretched daughters? What a welcome they
Would offer me, who killed their father! Thus it stands:
My friends at home now hate me; and in helping you
I have earned the enmity of those I had no right
To hurt. For my reward, you have made me the envy
Of Hellene women everywhere! A marvellous
Husband I have, and faithful too, in the name of pity;
When I'm banished, thrown out of the country without a friend,
Alone with my forlorn waifs. Yes, a shining shame
It will be to you, the new-made bridegroom, that your own sons,
And I who saved your life, are begging beside the road!

O Zeus! Why have you given us clear signs to tell
True gold from counterfeit; but when we need to know
Bad *men* from good, the flesh bears no revealing mark?
CHORUS: The fiercest anger of all, the most incurable,
Is that which rages in the place of dearest love.
JASON: I have to show myself a clever speaker, it seems.
This hurricane of recrimination and abuse
Calls for good seamanship: I'll furl all but an inch

Of sail, and ride it out. To begin with, since you build
To such a height your services to me, I hold
That credit for my successful voyage was solely due
To Aphrodite, no one else divine or human.
I admit, you have intelligence; but, to recount
How helpless passion drove you then to save my life
Would be invidious; and I will not stress the point.
Your services, so far as they went, were well enough;
But in return for saving me you got far more
Than you gave. Allow me, in the first place, to point out
That you left a barbarous land to become a resident
Of Hellas; here you have known justice; you have lived
In a society where force yields place to law.
Moreover, here your gifts are widely recognized,
You are famous; if you still lived at the ends of the earth
Your name would never be spoken. Personally, unless
Life brings me fame, I long neither for hoards of gold,
Nor for a voice sweeter than Orpheus! – Well, *you* began
The argument about my voyage; and that's my answer.

As for your scurrilous taunts against my marriage with
The royal family, I shall show you that my action
Was wise, not swayed by passion, and directed towards
Your interests and my children's. – No, keep quiet! When I
Came here from Iolcus as a stateless exile, dogged
And thwarted by misfortunes – why, what luckier chance
Could I have met, than marriage with the King's daughter?
It was not, as you resentfully assume, that I
Found your attractions wearisome, and was smitten with
Desire for a new wife; nor did I specially want
To raise a numerous family – the sons we have
Are enough, I'm satisfied; but I wanted to ensure
First – and the most important – that we should live well
And not be poor; I know how a poor man is shunned
By all his friends. Next, that I could bring up my sons

In a manner worthy of my descent; have other sons,
Perhaps, as brothers to your children; give them all
An equal place, and so build up a closely-knit
And prosperous family. *You* need no more children, do you?
While *I* thought it worth while to ensure advantages
For those I have, by means of those I hope to have.

Was such a plan, then, wicked? Even you would approve
If you could govern your sex-jealousy. But you women
Have reached a state where, if all's well with your sex-life,
You've everything you wish for; but when *that* goes wrong,
At once all that is best and noblest turns to gall.
If only children could be got some other way,
Without the female sex! If women didn't exist,
Human life would be rid of all its miseries.

CHORUS: Jason, you have set your case forth very plausibly.
But to my mind – though you may be surprised at this –
You are acting wrongly in thus abandoning your wife.

MEDEA: No doubt I differ from many people in many ways.
To me, a wicked man who is also eloquent
Seems the most guilty of them all. He'll cut your throat
As bold as brass, because he knows he can dress up murder
In handsome words. He's not so clever after all.
You dare outface me now with glib high-mindedness!
One word will throw you: if you were honest, you ought first
To have won me over, not got married behind my back.

JASON: No doubt, if I had mentioned it, you would have proved
Most helpful. Why, even now you will not bring yourself
To calm this raging temper.

MEDEA: That was not the point;
But you're an ageing man, and an Asiatic wife
Was no longer respectable.

JASON: Understand this:

It's not for the sake of any woman that I have made
This royal marriage, but, as I've already said,
To ensure your future, and to give my children brothers
Of royal blood, and build security for us all.

MEDEA: I loathe your prosperous future; I'll have none of it,
Nor none of your security – it galls my heart.

JASON: You know – you'll change your mind and be more sensible.
You'll soon stop thinking good is bad, and striking these
Pathetic poses when in fact you're fortunate.

MEDEA: Go on, insult me: you have a roof over your head.
I am alone, an exile.

JASON: It was your own choice.
Blame no one but yourself.

MEDEA: *My* choice? What did I do?
Did I make you my wife and then abandon you?

JASON: You called down wicked curses on the King and his house.

MEDEA: I did. On your house too Fate sends me as a curse.

JASON: I'll not pursue this further. If there's anything else
I can provide to meet the children's needs or yours,
Tell me; I'll gladly give whatever you want, or send
Letters of introduction, if you like, to friends
Who will help you. – Listen: to refuse such help is mad.
You've everything to gain if you give up this rage.

MEDEA: Nothing would induce me to have dealings with your friends,
Nor to take any gift of yours; so offer none.
A lying traitor's gifts carry no luck.

JASON: Very well.
I call the gods to witness that I have done my best
To help you and the children. You make no response
To kindness; friendly overtures you obstinately
Reject. So much the worse for you.

MEDEA: Go! You have spent
Too long out here. You are consumed with craving for
Your newly-won bride. Go, enjoy her!

[*Exit* JASON.]

It may be –
And God uphold my words – that this your marriage-day
Will end with marriage lost, loathing and horror left.

CHORUS:

Visitations of love that come
Raging and violent on a man
Bring him neither good repute nor goodness.
But if Aphrodite descends in gentleness
No other goddess brings such delight.
Never, Queen Aphrodite,
Loose against me from your golden bow,
Dipped in sweetness of desire,
Your inescapable arrow!

Let Innocence, the gods' loveliest gift,
Choose me for her own;
Never may the dread Cyprian
Craze my heart to leave old love for new,
Sending to assault me
Angry disputes and feuds unending;
But let her judge shrewdly the loves of women
And respect the bed where no war rages.

O my country, my home!
May the gods save me from becoming
A stateless refugee
Dragging out an intolerable life
In desperate helplessness!
That is the most pitiful of all griefs;
Death is better. Should such a day come to me
I pray for death first.

Of all pains and hardships none is worse
Than to be deprived of your native land.

This is no mere reflection derived from hearsay;
It is something we have seen.
You, Medea, have suffered the most shattering of blows;
Yet neither the city of Corinth
Nor any friend has taken pity on you.
May dishonour and ruin fall on the man
Who, having unlocked the secrets
Of a friend's frank heart, can then disown him!
He shall be no friend of mine.

Enter AEGEUS.

AEGEUS: All happiness to you, Medea! Between old friends
There is no better greeting.

MEDEA: All happiness to you,
Aegeus, son of Pandion the wise! Where have you come from?

AEGEUS: From Delphi, from the ancient oracle of Apollo.

MEDEA: The centre of the earth, the home of prophecy:
Why did you go?

AEGEUS: To ask for children; that my seed
May become fertile.

MEDEA: Why, have you lived so many years
Childless?

AEGEUS: Childless I am; so some fate has ordained.

MEDEA: You have a wife, or not?

AEGEUS: I am married.

MEDEA: And what answer
Did Phoebus give you about children?

AEGEUS: His answer was
Too subtle for me or any human interpreter.

MEDEA: Is it lawful for me to hear it?

AEGEUS: Certainly; a brain
Like yours is what is needed.

MEDEA: Tell me, since you may.
AEGEUS: He commanded me 'not to unstop the wineskin's neck' –
MEDEA: Yes – until when?
AEGEUS: Until I came safe home again.
MEDEA: I see. And for what purpose have you sailed to Corinth?
AEGEUS: You know the King of Troezen, Pittheus, son of Pelops?
MEDEA: Yes, a most pious man.
AEGEUS: I want to ask his advice
About this oracle.
MEDEA: He is an expert in such matters.
AEGEUS: Yes, and my closest friend. We went to the wars together.
MEDEA: I hope you will get all you long for, and be happy.
AEGEUS: But you are looking pale and wasted: what is the matter?
MEDEA: Aegeus, my husband's the most evil man alive.
AEGEUS: Why, what's this? Tell me all about your unhappiness.
MEDEA: Jason has betrayed me, though I never did him wrong.
AEGEUS: What has he done? Explain exactly.
MEDEA: He has taken
Another wife, and made her mistress of *my* house.
AEGEUS: But such a thing is shameful! He has never dared –
MEDEA: It is so. Once he loved me; now I am disowned.
AEGEUS: Was he tired of you? Or did he fall in love elsewhere?
MEDEA: Oh, passionately. He's not a man his friends can trust.
AEGEUS: Well, if – as you say – he's a bad lot, let him go.
MEDEA: It's royalty and power he's fallen in love with.
AEGEUS What?
Go on. Who's the girl's father?
MEDEA: Creon, King of Corinth.
AEGEUS: I see. Then you have every reason to be upset.

MEDEA: It is the end of everything! What's more, I'm banished.
AEGEUS: Worse still – extraordinary! Why, who has banished you?
MEDEA: Creon has banished me from Corinth.
AEGEUS: And does Jason
Accept this? How disgraceful!
MEDEA: Oh, no! He protests.
But he's resolved to bear it bravely. – Aegeus, see,
I touch your beard as a suppliant, embrace your knees,
Imploring you to have pity on my wretchedness.
Have pity! I am an exile; let me not be friendless.
Receive me in Athens; give me a welcome in your house.
So may the gods grant you fertility, and bring
Your life to a happy close. You have not realized
What good luck chance has brought you. I know certain drugs
Whose power will put an end to your sterility.
I promise you shall beget children.
AEGEUS: I am anxious,
For many reasons, to help you in this way, Medea;
First, for the gods' sake, then this hope you've given me
Of children – for I've quite despaired of my own powers.
This then is what I'll do: once you can get to Athens
I'll keep my promise and protect you all I can.
But I must make this clear first: I do not intend
To take you with me away from Corinth. If you come
Yourself to Athens, you shall have sanctuary there;
I will not give you up to anyone. But first
Get clear of Corinth without help; the Corinthians too
Are friends of mine, and I don't wish to give offence.
MEDEA: So be it. Now confirm your promise with an oath,
And all is well between us.
AEGEUS: Why? Do you not trust me?
What troubles you?
MEDEA: I trust you; but I have enemies –

Not only Creon, but the house of Pelias.
Once you are bound by oaths you will not give me up
If they should try to take me out of your territory.
But if your promise is verbal, and not sworn to the gods,
Perhaps you will make friends with them, and agree to do
What they demand. I've no power on my side, while they
Have wealth and all the resources of a royal house.

AEGEUS: Your forethought is remarkable; but since you wish it
I've no objection. In fact, the taking of an oath
Safeguards me; since I can confront your enemies
With a clear excuse; while *you* have full security.
So name your gods.

MEDEA: Swear by the Earth under your feet,
By the Sun, my father's father, and the whole race of gods.

AEGEUS: Tell me what I shall swear to do or not to do.

MEDEA: Never yourself to expel me from your territory;
And, if my enemies want to take me away, never
Willingly, while you live, to give me up to them.

AEGEUS: I swear by Earth, and by the burning light of the Sun,
And all the gods, to keep the words you have just spoken.

MEDEA: I am satisfied. And if you break your oath, what then?

AEGEUS: Then may the gods do to me as to all guilty men.

MEDEA: Go now, and joy be with you. Everything is well.
I'll reach your city as quickly as I can, when I
Have carried out my purpose and achieved my wish.

AEGEUS *clasps her hand and hurries off.*

CHORUS: May Hermes, protector of travellers, bring you
Safe to your home, Aegeus; may you accomplish
All that you so earnestly desire;
For your noble heart wins our goodwill.

MEDEA: O Zeus! O Justice, daughter of Zeus! O glorious Sun!
Now I am on the road to victory; now there's hope!

I shall see my enemies punished as they deserve.
Just where my plot was weakest, at that very point
Help has appeared in this man Aegeus; he is a haven
Where I shall find safe mooring, once I reach the walls
Of the city of Athens. Now I'll tell you all my plans:
They'll not make pleasant hearing.

[*Medea's* NURSE *has entered; she listens in silence.*]

First I'll send a slave
To Jason, asking him to come to me; and then
I'll give him soft talk; tell him he has acted well,
Tell him I think this royal marriage which he has bought
With my betrayal is for the best and wisely planned.
But I shall beg that my children be allowed to stay.
Not that I would think of leaving sons of mine behind
On enemy soil for those who hate me to insult;
But in my plot to kill the princess they must help.
I'll send them to the palace bearing gifts, a dress
Of soft weave and a coronet of beaten gold.
If she takes and puts on this finery, both she
And all who touch her will expire in agony;
With such a deadly poison I'll anoint my gifts.

However, enough of that. What makes me cry with pain
Is the next thing I have to do. I will kill my sons.
No one shall take my children from me. When I have made
Jason's whole house a shambles, I will leave Corinth
A murderess, flying from my darling children's blood.
Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible;
The laughter of my enemies I will not endure.

Now let things take their course. What use is life to me?
I have no land, no home, no refuge from despair.
My folly was committed long ago, when I
Was ready to desert my father's house, won over
By eloquence from a Greek, whom with God's help I now

Will punish. He shall never see alive again
The sons he had from me. From his new bride he never
Shall breed a son; she by my poison, wretched girl,
Must die a hideous death. Let no one think of me
As humble or weak or passive; let them understand
I am of a different kind: dangerous to my enemies,
Loyal to my friends. To such a life glory belongs.

CHORUS: Since you have told us everything, and since I want
To be your friend, and also to uphold the laws
Of human life – I tell you, you must not do this!

MEDEA: No other thing is possible. You have excuse
For speaking so: you have not been treated as I have.

CHORUS: But – to kill your own children! Can you steel your heart?

MEDEA: This is the way to deal Jason the deepest wound.

CHORUS: This way will bring you too the deepest misery.

MEDEA: Let be. Until it is done words are unnecessary.
Nurse! You are the one I use for messages of trust.
Go and bring Jason here. As you're a loyal servant,
And a woman, breathe no word about my purposes.

Exit NURSE.

CHORUS: The people of Athens, sons of Erechtheus,
have enjoyed their prosperity
Since ancient times. Children of blessed gods,
They grew from holy soil unscorched by invasion.
Among the glories of knowledge their souls are pastured;
They walk always with grace under the sparkling sky.
There long ago, they say, was born golden-haired Harmony,
Created by the nine virgin Muses of Pieria.

They say that Aphrodite dips her cup
In the clear stream of the lovely Cephisus;
It is she who breathes over the land the breath
Of gentle honey-laden winds; her flowing locks
She crowns with a diadem of sweet-scented roses,

And sends the Loves to be enthroned beside Knowledge,
And with her to create excellence in every art.

Then how will such a city,
Watered by sacred rivers,
A country giving protection to its friends –
How will Athens welcome
You, the child-killer
Whose presence is pollution?
Contemplate the blow struck at a child,
Weigh the blood you take upon you.
Medea, by your knees,
By every pledge or appeal we beseech you,
Do not slaughter your children!

Where will you find hardness of purpose?
How will you build resolution in hand or heart
To face horror without flinching?
When the moment comes, and you look at them –
The moment for you to assume the role of murderess –
How will you do it?
When your sons kneel to you for pity,
Will you stain your fingers with their blood?
Your heart will melt; you will know you cannot.

Enter JASON *from the palace. Two maids come from the house to attend Medea.*

JASON: You sent for me: I have come. Although you hate me, I
Am ready to listen. You have some new request; what is it?

MEDEA: Jason, I ask you to forgive the things I said.
You must bear with my violent temper; you and I
Share many memories of love. I have been taking
Myself to task. 'You are a fool,' I've told myself,
'You're mad, when people try to plan things for the best,
To be resentful, and pick quarrels with the King
And with your husband; what he's doing will help us all.

His wife is royal; her sons will be my sons' brothers.
Why not throw off your anger? What is the matter, since
The gods are making kind provision? After all
I have two children still to care for; and I know
We came as exiles, and our friends are few enough.'
When I considered this, I saw my foolishness;
I saw how useless anger was. So now I welcome
What you have done; I think you are wise to gain for us
This new alliance, and the folly was all mine.
I should have helped you in your plans, made it my pleasure
To get ready your marriage-bed, attend your bride.
But we women – I won't say we are bad by nature,
But we are what we are. You, Jason, should not copy
Our bad example, or match yourself with us, showing
Folly for folly. I give in; I was wrong just now,
I admit. But I have thought more wisely of it since.
Children, children! Are you indoors? Come out here.
[*The* CHILDREN *come out. Their* TUTOR *follows.*]
Children,
Greet your father, as I do, and put your arms round him.
Forget our quarrel, and love him as your mother does.
We have made friends; we are not angry any more.
There, children; take his hand.
[*She turns away in a sudden flood of weeping.*]
Forgive me; I recalled
What pain the future hides from us.
[*After embracing Jason the* CHILDREN *go back to Medea.*]
Oh children! Will you
All your lives long, stretch out your hands to me like this?
Oh, my tormented heart is full of tears and terrors.
After so long, I have ended my quarrel with your father;
And now, see! I have drenched this young face with my tears.

CHORUS: I too feel fresh tears fill my eyes. May the course of evil
Be checked now, go no further!

JASON: I am pleased, Medea,
That you have changed your mind; though indeed I do not blame
Your first resentment. Only naturally a woman
Is angry when her husband marries a second wife.
You have had wiser thoughts; and though it has taken time,
You have recognized the right decision. This is the act
Of a sensible woman. As for you, my boys, your father
Has taken careful thought, and, with the help of the gods,
Ensured a good life for you. Why, in time, I'm sure,
You with your brothers will be leading men in Corinth.
Only grow big and strong. Your father, and those gods
Who are his friends, have all the rest under control.
I want to see you, when you're strong, full-grown young men,
Tread down my enemies.
[*Again* MEDEA *breaks down and weeps.*]
What's this? Why these floods of tears?
Why are you pale? Did you not like what I was saying?
Why do you turn away?

MEDEA: It is nothing. I was thinking
About these children.

JASON: I'll provide for them. Cheer up.

MEDEA: I will. It is not that I mean to doubt your word.
But women – are women; tears come naturally to us.

JASON: Why do you grieve so over the children?

MEDEA: I'm their mother.
When you just now prayed for them to live long, I wondered
Whether it would be so; and grief came over me.
But I've said only part of what I had to say;
Here is the other thing. Since Creon has resolved
To send me out of Corinth, I fully recognize
That for me too this course is best. If I lived here
I should become a trouble both to you and him.
People believe I bear a grudge against you all.

So I must go. But the boys – I would like *them* to be
Brought up in your care. Beg Creon to let them stay.

JASON: I don't know if I can persuade him; but I'll try.

MEDEA: Then – get your wife to ask her father to let them stay.

JASON: Why, certainly; I'm pretty sure she'll win him over.

MEDEA: She will, if she's like other women. But I too
Can help in this. I'll send a present to your wife –
The loveliest things to be found anywhere on earth.
The boys shall take them. – One of you maids, go quickly, bring
The dress and golden coronet. – They will multiply
Her happiness many times, when she can call her own
A royal, noble husband, and these treasures, which
My father's father the Sun bequeathed to his descendants.

[*A slave has brought a casket, which* MEDEA *now hands to her sons.*]

Boys, hold these gifts. Now carry them to the happy bride,
The princess royal; give them into her own hands.
Go! She will find them all that such a gift should be.

JASON: But why deprive yourself of such things, foolish woman?
Do you think a royal palace is in want of dresses?
Or gold, do you suppose? Keep them, don't give them away.
If my wife values me at all she will yield to *me*
More than to costly presents, I am sure of that.

MEDEA: Don't stop me. Gifts, they say, persuade even the gods;
With mortals, gold outweighs a thousand arguments.
The day is hers; from now on *her* prosperity
Will rise to new heights. She is royal and young. To buy
My sons from exile I would give life, not just gold.
Come, children, go both of you into this rich palace;
Kneel down and beg your father's new wife, and my mistress,
That you may not be banished. And above all, see
That she receives my present into her own hands.

Go quickly; be successful, and bring good news back,
That what your mother longs for has been granted you.

Exit JASON *followed by the* CHILDREN *and the* TUTOR.

CHORUS:

Now I have no more hope,
No more hope that the children can live;
They are walking to murder at this moment.
The bride will receive the golden coronet,
Receive her merciless destroyer;
With her own hands she will carefully fit
The adornment of death round her golden hair.

She cannot resist such loveliness, such heavenly gleaming;
She will enfold herself
In the dress and the wreath of wrought gold,
Preparing her bridal beauty
To enter a new home – among the dead.
So fatal is the snare she will fall into,
So inevitable the death that awaits her;
From its cruelty there is no escape.

And you, unhappy Jason, ill-starred in marriage,
You, son-in-law of kings:
Little you know that the favour you ask
Will seal your sons' destruction
And fasten on your wife a hideous fate.
O wretched Jason!
So sure of destiny, and so ignorant!

Your sorrow next I weep for, pitiable mother;
You, for jealousy of your marriage-bed,
Will slaughter your children;
Since, disregarding right and loyalty,
Your husband has abandoned you
And lives with another wife.

The TUTOR *returns from the palace with the two* CHILDREN.

TUTOR: Mistress! These two boys are reprieved from banishment.
The princess took your gifts from them with her own hand,
And was delighted. They have no enemies in the palace.

[MEDEA *is silent.*]

Well, bless my soul!
Isn't that good news? Why do you stand there thunderstruck?

MEAEA [*to herself*]: How cruel, how cruel!

TUTOR: That's out of tune with the news I brought.

MEDEA: How cruel life is!

TUTOR: Have I, without knowing it,
Told something dreadful, then? I thought my news was good.

MEDEA: Your news is what it is. I am not blaming you.

TUTOR: Then why stand staring at the ground, with streaming eyes?

MEDEA: Strong reason forces me to weep, old friend. The gods,
And my own evil-hearted plots, have led to this.

TUTOR: Take heart, mistress; in time your sons will bring you home.

MEDEA: Before then, I have others to send home. – Oh, gods!

She weeps.

TUTOR: You're not the only mother parted from her sons.
We are all mortal; you must not bear grief so hard.

MEDEA: Yes, friend. I'll follow your advice. Now go indoors
And get things ready for them, as on other days.

[*Exit* TUTOR. *The* CHILDREN *come to Medea.*]

O children, children! You have a city, and a home;
And when we have parted, there you both will stay for ever,
You motherless, I miserable. And I must go
To exile in another land, before I have had
My joy of you, before I have seen you growing up,
Becoming prosperous. I shall never see your brides,
Adorn your bridal beds, and hold the torches high.

My misery is my own heart, which will not relent.
All was for nothing, then – these years of rearing you,
My care, my aching weariness, and the wild pains
When you were born. Oh, yes, I once built many hopes
On you; imagined, pitifully, that you would care
For my old age, and would yourselves wrap my dead body
For burial. How people would envy me my sons!
That sweet, sad thought has faded now. Parted from you,
My life will be all pain and anguish. You will not
Look at your mother any more with these dear eyes.
You will have moved into a different sphere of life.

Dear sons, why are you staring at me so? You smile
At me – your last smile: why?

[*She weeps. The* CHILDREN *go from her a little, and she turns to the Chorus.*]

Oh, what am I to do?
Women, my courage is all gone. Their young, bright faces
I can't do it. I'll think no more of it. I'll take them
Away from Corinth. Why should I hurt *them*, to make
Their father suffer, when I shall suffer twice as much
Myself? I won't do it. I won't think of it again.

What is the matter with me? Are my enemies
To laugh at me? Am I to let them off scot free?
I must steel myself to it. What a coward I am,
Even tempting my own resolution with soft talk.
Boys, go indoors.

[*The* CHILDREN *go to the door, but stay there watching her.*]

If there is any here who finds it
Not lawful to be present at my sacrifice,
Let him see to it. My hand shall not weaken.

Oh, my heart, don't, don't do it! Oh, miserable heart,
Let them be! Spare your children! We'll all live together

Safely in Athens; and they will make you happy. . . . No!
No! No! By all the fiends of hate in hell's depths, no!
I'll not leave sons of mine to be the victims of
My enemies' rage. In any case there is no escape,
The thing's done now. Yes, now – the golden coronet
Is on her head, the royal bride is in her dress,
Dying, I know it. So, since I have a sad road
To travel, and send these boys on a still sadder road,
I'll speak to them. Come, children; give me your hand, dear son;
Yours too. Now we must say goodbye. Oh, darling hand,
And darling mouth; your noble, childlike face and body!
Dear sons, my blessing on you both – but there, not here!
All blessing here your father has destroyed. How sweet
To hold you! And children's skin is soft, and their breath pure.
Go! Go away! I can't look at you any longer;
My pain is more than I can bear.

[*The* CHILDREN *go indoors.*]

I understand
The horror of what I am going to do; but anger,
The spring of all life's horror, masters my resolve.

MEDEA *goes to stand looking towards the palace.*

CHORUS:

I have often engaged in arguments,
And become more subtle, and perhaps more heated,
Than is suitable for women;
Though in fact women too have intelligence,
Which forms part of our nature and instructs us –
Not all of us, I admit; but a certain few
You might perhaps find, in a large number of women –
A few not incapable of reflection;

And this is my opinion: those men or women
Who never had children of their own at all

Enjoy the advantage in good fortune
Over those who are parents. Childless people
Have no means of knowing whether children are
A blessing or a burden; but being without them
They live exempt from many troubles.

While those who have growing up in their homes
The sweet gift of children I see always
Burdened and worn with incessant worry,
First, how to rear them in health and safety,
And bequeath them, in time, enough to live on;
And then this further anxiety:
They can never know whether all their toil
Is spent for worthy or worthless children.

And beyond the common ills that attend
All human life there is one still worse:
Suppose at last they are pretty well off,
Their children have grown up, and, what's more,
Are kind and honest: then what happens?
A throw of chance – and there goes Death
Bearing off your child into the unknown.

Then why should mortals thank the gods,
Who add to their load, already grievous,
This one more grief, for their children's sake,
Most grievous of all?

MEDEA: Friends, I have long been waiting for a message from the palace.
What is to happen next? I see a slave of Jason's
Coming, gasping for breath. He must bring fearful news.

Enter a MESSENGER.

MESSENGER: Medea! Get away, escape! Oh, what a thing to do!
What an unholy, horrible thing! Take ship, or chariot,
Any means you can, but escape!

MEDEA: Why should I escape?
MESSENGER: She's dead – the princess, and her father Creon too,
They're both dead, by your poisons.
MEDEA: Your news is excellent.
I count you from today my friend and benefactor.
MESSENGER: What? Are you sane, or raving mad? When you've committed
This hideous crime against the royal house, you're glad
At hearing of it? Do you not tremble at such things?
MEDEA: I could make suitable reply to that, my friend.
But take your time now; tell me, how did they die? You'll give
Me double pleasure if their death was horrible.
MESSENGER: When your two little boys came hand in hand, and entered
The palace with their father, where the wedding was,
We servants were delighted. We had all felt sorry
To hear how you'd been treated; and now the word went round
From one to another, that you and Jason had made it up.
So we were glad to see the boys; one kissed their hand,
Another their fair hair. Myself, I was so pleased,
I followed with them to the princess's room. Our mistress –
The one we now call mistress in your place – before
She saw your pair of boys coming, had eyes only
For Jason; but seeing them she dropped her eyes, and turned
Her lovely cheek away, upset that they should come
Into her room. Your husband then began to soothe
Her sulkiness, her girlish temper. 'You must not,'
He said, 'be unfriendly to our friends. Turn your head round,
And give up feeling angry. Those your husband loves
You must love too. Now take these gifts,' he said, 'and ask
Your father to revoke their exile for my sake.'

So, when she saw those lovely things, she was won over,
And agreed to all that Jason asked. At once, before
He and your sons were well out of the house, she took
The embroidered gown and put it round her. Then she placed
Over her curls the golden coronet, and began
To arrange her hair in a bright mirror, smiling at
Her lifeless form reflected there. Then she stood up,
And to and fro stepped daintily about the room
On white bare feet, and many times she would twist back
To see how the dress fell in clear folds to the heel.

Then suddenly we saw a frightening thing. She changed
Colour; she staggered sideways, shook in every limb.
She was just able to collapse on to a chair,
Or she would have fallen flat. Then one of her attendants,
An old woman, thinking that perhaps the anger of Pan
Or some other god had struck her, chanted the cry of worship.
But then she saw, oozing from the girl's lips, white froth;
The pupils of her eyes were twisted out of sight;
The blood was drained from all her skin. The old woman knew
Her mistake, and changed her chant to a despairing howl.
One maid ran off quickly to fetch the King, another
To look for Jason and tell him what was happening
To his young bride; the whole palace was filled with a clatter
Of people running here and there.
All this took place
In a few moments, perhaps while a fast runner might run
A hundred yards; and she lay speechless, with eyes closed.
Then she came to, poor girl, and gave a frightful scream,
As two torments made war on her together: first
The golden coronet round her head discharged a stream
Of unnatural devouring fire: while the fine dress

Your children gave her – poor miserable girl! – the stuff
Was eating her clear flesh. She leapt up from her chair,
On fire, and ran, shaking her head and her long hair
This way and that, trying to shake off the coronet.
The ring of gold was fitted close and would not move;
The more she shook her head the fiercer the flame burned.
At last, exhausted by agony, she fell to the ground;
Save to her father, she was unrecognizable.
Her eyes, her face, were one grotesque disfigurement;
Down from her head dripped blood mingled with flame; her flesh,
Attacked by the invisible fangs of poison, melted
From the bare bone, like gum-drops from a pine-tree's bark –
A ghastly sight. Not one among us dared to touch
Her body. What we'd seen was lesson enough for us.

But suddenly her father came into the room.
He did not understand, poor man, what kind of death
Had struck his child. He threw himself down at her side,
And sobbed aloud, and kissed her, and took her in his arms,
And cried, 'Poor darling child, what god destroyed your life
So cruelly? Who robs me of my only child,
Old as I am, and near my grave? Oh, let me die
With you, my daughter!' Soon he ceased his tears and cries,
And tried to lift his aged body upright; and then,
As ivy sticks to laurel-branches, so he stuck
Fast to the dress. A ghastly wrestling then began;
He struggled to raise up his knee, she tugged him down.
If he used force, he tore the old flesh off his bones.
At length the King gave up his pitiful attempts;
Weakened with pain, he yielded, and gasped out his life.
Now, joined in death, daughter and father – such a sight
As tears were made for – they lie there.

To you, Medea,
I have no more to say. You will yourself know best
How to evade reprisal. As for human life,
It is a shadow, as I have long believed. And this
I say without hesitation: those whom most would call
Intelligent, the propounders of wise theories –
Their folly is of all men's the most culpable.
Happiness is a thing no man possesses. Fortune
May come now to one man, now to another, as
Prosperity increases; happiness never.

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS: Today we see the will of Heaven, blow after blow,
Bring down on Jason justice and calamity.

MEDEA: Friends, now my course is clear: as quickly as possible
To kill the children and then fly from Corinth; not
Delay and so consign them to another hand
To murder with a better will. For they must die,
In any case; and since they must, then I who gave
Them birth will kill them. Arm yourself, my heart: the thing
That you must do is fearful, yet inevitable.
Why wait, then? My accursed hand, come, take the sword;
Take it, and forward to your frontier of despair.
No cowardice, no tender memories; forget
That you once loved them, that of your body they were born.
For one short day forget your children; afterwards
Weep: though you kill them, they were your beloved sons.
Life has been cruel to me.

MEDEA *goes into the house.*

CHORUS: Earth, awake! Bright arrows of the Sun,
Look! Look down on the accursed woman
Before she lifts up a murderous hand
To pollute it with her children's blood!
For they are of your own golden race;

And for mortals to spill blood that grew
In the veins of gods is a fearful thing.
Heaven-born brightness, hold her, stop her,
Purge the palace of her, this pitiable
Bloody-handed fiend of vengeance!

All your care for them lost! Your love
For the babes you bore, all wasted, wasted!
Why did you come from the blue Symplegades
That hold the gate of the barbarous sea?
Why must this rage devour your heart
To spend itself in slaughter of children?
Where kindred blood pollutes the ground
A curse hangs over human lives;
And murder measures the doom that falls
By Heaven's law on the guilty house.

A child's scream is heard from inside the house.

CHORUS: Do you hear? The children are calling for help.
O cursed, miserable woman!
CHILDREN'S VOICES: Help, help! Mother, let me go!
Mother, don't kill us!
CHORUS: Shall we go in?
I am sure we ought to save the children's lives.
CHILDREN'S VOICES: Help, help, for the gods' sake! She is killing us!
We can't escape from her sword!
CHORUS: O miserable mother, to destroy your own increase,
Murder the babes of your body!
Stone and iron you are, as you resolved to be.

There was but one in time past,
One woman that I have heard of,
Raised hand against her own children.
It was Ino, sent out of her mind by a god,
When Hera, the wife of Zeus,

Drove her from her home to wander over the world.
In her misery she plunged into the sea
Being defiled by the murder of her children;
From the steep cliff's edge she stretched out her foot,
And so ended,
Joined in death with her two sons.

What can be strange or terrible after this?
O bed of women, full of passion and pain,
What wickedness, what sorrow you have caused on the earth!

Enter JASON, *running and breathless.*

JASON: You women standing round the door there! Is Medea
Still in the house? – vile murderess! – or has she gone
And escaped? I swear she must either hide in the deep earth
Or soar on wings into the sky's abyss, to escape
My vengeance for the royal house. – She has killed the King
And the princess! Does she expect to go unpunished?

Well, I am less concerned with her than with the children.
Those who have suffered at her hands will make her suffer;
I've come to save my sons, before Creon's family
Murder them in revenge for this unspeakable
Crime of their mother's.
CHORUS: Jason, you have yet to learn
How great your trouble is; or you would not have spoken so.
JASON: What trouble? Is Medea trying to kill me too?
CHORUS: Your sons are dead. Their mother has killed both your sons.
JASON: What? Killed my sons? That word kills me.
CHORUS: They are both dead.
JASON: Where are they? Did she kill them out here, or indoors?
CHORUS: Open that door, and see them lying in their blood.
JASON: Slaves, there! Unbar the doors! Open, and let me see

Two horrors: my dead sons, and the woman I will kill.

JASON *batters at the doors.* MEDEA *appears above the roof, sitting in a chariot drawn by dragons, with the bodies of the two children beside her.*

MEDEA: Jason! Why are you battering at these doors, seeking
The dead children and me who killed them? Stop! Be quiet.
If you have any business with me, say what you wish,
Touch us you cannot, in this chariot which the Sun
Has sent to save us from the hands of enemies.

JASON: You abomination! Of all women most detested
By every god, by me, by the whole human race!
You could endure – a mother! – to lift sword against
Your own little ones; to leave me childless, my life wrecked.
After such murder do you outface both Sun and Earth –
Guilty of gross pollution? May the gods blast your life!
I am sane now; but I was mad before, when I
Brought you from your palace in a land of savages
Into a Greek home – you, a living curse, already
A traitor both to your father and your native land.
The vengeance due for your sins the gods have cast on me.
You had already murdered your brother at his own hearth
When first you stepped on board my lovely Argo's hull.
That was your beginning. Then you became my wife, and bore
My children; now, out of mere sexual jealousy,
You murder them! In all Hellas there is not one woman
Who could have done it; yet in preference to them
I married you, chose hatred and murder for my wife –
No woman, but a tiger; a Tuscan Scylla – but more savage.
Ah, what's the use? If I cursed you all day, no remorse
Would touch you, for your heart's proof against feeling. Go!
Out of my sight, polluted fiend, child-murderer!
Leave me to mourn over my destiny: I have lost
My young bride; I have lost the two sons I begot
And brought up; I shall never see them alive again.

MEDEA: I would if necessary have answered at full length
Everything you have said; but Zeus the father of all
Knows well what service I once rendered you, and how
You have repaid me. You were mistaken if you thought
You could dishonour my bed and live a pleasant life
And laugh at me. The princess was wrong too, and so
Was Creon, when he took you for his son-in-law
And thought he could exile me with impunity.
So now, am I a tiger, Scylla? – Hurl at me
What names you please! I've reached your heart; and that is right.

JASON: You suffer too; my loss is yours no less.

MEDEA: It is true;
But my pain's a fair price, to take away your smile.

JASON: O children, what a wicked mother Fate gave you!

MEDEA: O sons, your father's treachery cost you your lives.

JASON: It was not my hand that killed my sons.

MEDEA: No, not your hand;
But your insult to me, and your new-wedded wife.

JASON: You thought *that* reason enough to murder them, that I
No longer slept with you?

MEDEA: And is that injury
A slight one, do you imagine, to a woman?

JASON: Yes,
To a modest woman; but to you – the whole world lost.

MEDEA: I can stab too: your sons are dead!

JASON: Dead? No! They live -
To haunt your life with vengeance.

MEDEA: Who began this feud?
The gods know.

JASON: Yes – they know the vileness of your heart.

MEDEA: Loathe on! Your bitter voice – how I abhor the sound!

JASON: As I loathe yours. Let us make terms and part at once.

MEDEA: Most willingly. What terms? What do you bid me do?
JASON: Give me my sons for burial and mourning rites.
MEDEA: Oh, no! I will myself convey them to the temple
Of Hera Acraea; there in the holy precinct I
Will bury them with my own hand, to ensure that none
Of my enemies shall violate or insult their graves.
And I will ordain an annual feast and sacrifice
To be solemnized for ever by the people of Corinth,
To expiate this impious murder. I myself
Will go to Athens, city of Erechtheus, to make my home
With Aegeus son of Pandion. You, as you deserve,
Shall die an unheroic death, your head shattered
By a timber from the Argo's hull. Thus wretchedly
Your fate shall end the story of your love for me.
JASON: The curse of children's blood be on you!
Avenging Justice blast your being!
MEDEA: What god will hear your imprecation,
Oath-breaker, guest-deceiver, liar?
JASON: Unclean, abhorrent child-destroyer!
MEDEA: Go home: your wife waits to be buried.
JASON: I go – a father once; now childless.
MEDEA: You grieve too soon. Old age is coming.
JASON: Children, how dear you were!
MEDEA: To their mother; not to you.
JASON: Dear – and you murdered them?
MEDEA: Yes, Jason, to break your heart.
JASON: I long to fold them in my arms;
To kiss their lips would comfort me.
MEDEA: *Now* you have loving words, now kisses for them:
Then you disowned them, sent them into exile.
JASON: For God's sake, let me touch their gentle flesh.
MEDEA: You shall not. It is waste of breath to ask.
JASON:
Zeus, do you hear how I am mocked,

Rejected, by this savage beast
Polluted with her children's blood?

But now, as time and strength permit,
I will lament this grievous day,
And call the gods to witness, how
You killed my sons, and now refuse
To let me touch or bury them.
Would God I had not bred them,
Or ever lived to see
Them dead, you their destroyer!

During this speech the chariot has moved out of sight.

CHORUS: Many are the Fates which Zeus in Olympus dispenses;
Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
The unexpected God makes possible;
And such is the conclusion of this story.

NOTES

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MEDEA

P. 17 *The Argo*. Jason was the son of Aeson, half-brother of Pelias king of Iolcus in Thessaly. To get rid of Jason, who was a rival for his throne, Pelias persuaded him to go to Colchis, at the Eastern end of the Black Sea, and fetch the Golden Fleece. Jason sailed to Colchis in the ship called Argo, and accomplished his task with the help of Medea, daughter of the king of Colchis. Medea drugged the dragon which guarded the treasure; and Jason promised to marry her. They escaped, and Medea's brother came with them. When the king pursued them, Medea killed her brother, cut him in pieces, and threw him into the sea, so that the king might be delayed by the necessity of recovering his son's body. They eventually reached Iolcus. Here Medea contrived the murder of Pelias in the hope that Jason would succeed him; but the people of Iolcus were indignant and expelled Jason and Medea, who subsequently settled in Corinth.

P. 31 *The fire-breathing bulls*. The king of Colchis had required this task of Jason, in return for his permission to seek the Golden Fleece.

By his own daughters' hands. Medea persuaded the daughters of Pelias that they could renew their father's youth by killing him and boiling his flesh.

P. 41 *I'll anoint my gifts*. When does Medea do this? The action of the play gives her no opportunity. The dress is brought in a casket, and she sends it off without looking at it.

P. 56 *The blue Symplegades*. The 'Clashing Rocks' (already referred to in line 2), near the mouth of the Bosporus, the gateway to the Black Sea.

P. 58 *Battering at these doors*. The Greek apparently means 'battering at these doors and unbarring them'. But the bars were certainly on the inside, and Jason was calling for someone else to move them. The word could also mean 'prizing them open with levers'; but this involves further difficulties. So in the translation the second verb is omitted.

HECABE

P. 63 The more familiar form of the name, *Hecuba*, is a Latinism (perpetuated chiefly by the habit of quoting *Hamlet*) for which there seems to be no sufficient excuse.

P. 73 *No embarrassing appeal*. Literally, 'you have escaped my [appeal to] Zeus God of Suppliants'.

P. 76 The three Choral Odes in this play bear no relation to what happens to the main characters; they concern only the fate of the Chorus themselves, except for the last stanza of the second Ode, which reflects that suffering afflicts also the homes of the conquerors – a thought which occurs elsewhere in Euripides' Choruses, e.g., in *Helen* and *Andromache*.

P. 87 *Persuasion, queen of human arts*. A curious sentence. In Euripides' day many Athenians paid fees to sophists to teach them the art of persuasion. To make Hecabe look forward thus some seven centuries seems somewhat artificial to a modern reader. If Euripides' intention was to suggest the more primitive atmosphere of life in the Homeric age, why does he destroy this effect by the finished technique of Hecabe's speeches?

P. 88 *I still have one more argument*. Euripides probably does not intend by this passage to degrade the character of Hecabe. The revulsion which it would cost her to use such an argument is a measure of the intensity with which she desires her revenge.

P. 101 *The sea waits for you*. The extreme of suffering, especially with blindness added, was in the ancient world sometimes thought to confer the power of foreknowledge.

ELECTRA

P. 107 *The well is not so far away*. The Greek adds, 'from the halls'; and it is impossible to say whether the dignified epic word is used by the Peasant as a sarcastic reference to the meanness of his cottage, or whether such a use seemed to Euripides to be poetically suitable.

Do some harrowing. The Greek says, 'drive oxen to the field
P. 108 and sow my acres.' This sounds unconvincing. The word