

MEDEA

Seneca

CHARACTERS

MEDEA, daughter of Aetes, king of Colchis, and wife of Jason
NURSE of Medea

CREON, king of Corinth who had received Medea and Jason as
fugitives from Thessaly

JASON, usurping king of Thessaly, and former captain of the Argo
on the quest for the Golden Fleece

MESSENGER

TWO SONS of Jason and Medea (mute parts)

CHORUS of Corinthians

SOLDIERS (mute parts)

SCENE: *Corinth, in the courtyard of Creon's palace.*

(*MEDEA is revealed, downstage. Upstage, her NURSE attends her.*)

MEDEA: O gods! Vengeance! Come to me now, I beg,
and help me, you who protect the nuptial bed.

Rise up, sharing my anger at this insult
to me and you as well. Serious gods,
watch over the lives of men and women, reward
good and punish evil. Hecate, queen,
I charge you, in whose name Jason once swore,
punish that faithless man whose oath is broken,
who is forsworn, and offers again his empty
promises. Or else, in the absence of gods,

I pray to Chaos itself, to endless night,
to the dark lord and lady of death, and you,
the Furies, nightmare doyennes of writhing hair
and smoking torches, be present now and hear me.
You stood in awesome array at our wedding rite
and marriage bed. Attend him now again,
as he takes a new wife to bed. Shower on them
the catastrophe they deserve, an utter ruin
I hardly dare imagine. I call down curses
upon his head—not death, but worse than that.
Let him live. Through unknown cities, let him
wander, hungry, friendless, in fear for his life,
hated, homeless, and let him knock at the doors
of strangers, plead, and rudely be turned away.

Let him, at such moments, remember me
and how it was when we were still married, and grieve
at his folly—madness to throw a life away.
Worst, I pray his children resemble him,
know the same incomprehensible grief,
while he reads in their glistening eyes the complaint
they need not pronounce in words. I have delivered
children, by whom I swear I shall be avenged.
The Sun, who is mighty father of my race,
rises still in the east and sets in the west,
but he must pause, look down, amazed, appalled,
depart from his usual course, and bring to Corinth
death and destruction. No more will ships be required
to sail south and around the Peloponnese,
but will cross directly by roads that cover over
with salt water the land where Jason lived.

I wish I believed but I don't. What retribution
there is, I shall have to contrive myself, devise
with my own two hands. My womanly hesitations
I must suppress, and civilization's restraints
in which I no longer believe. Did I ever? Do you?
Horror, we know, is real. The rest is a dream,
pretense, or a children's story we cannot
quite abandon. Heaven and earth recoil,

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40

and we admit the truth of the cataclysm—
that, yes, this happens. This is the way things are.
Wounds, blood, the last death rattle of victims,
no one has trouble believing in them. I trust
in grief and rage. The labor of childbirth pales
compared to the bringing forth of the bloody truth
of what life is. Having been shamed already,
shameless I shall repay a wound with a wound.
His sin cries out for expiation—now!

(*They retreat to one side as CHORUS enters in procession*)

CHORUS: (*Celebrating the wedding of Jason and Creusa*)

May the gods of the sky and sea attend
and bless the marriage of Jason, our prince.
Be kind to them, and grant they may have
the full measure of happiness man
and woman can find together. We pray,
knowing the perils, knowing the odds,
that they may look forward eagerly every
time that the evening star appears
with its sure promise of night's encounter.

60

FIRST CHORISTER: How lovely the bride, the envy of any
Athenian maiden or Spartan girl.

No Boeotian can match her in beauty.

We, his subjects, may take some pride
in his good fortune.

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SECOND CHORISTER: To find a match for this matchless creature,
one must raise one's eyes to the heavens,
and think of the great gods' rare passions
for special mortals.

FIRST CHORISTER: Only a hero like Jason could merit
such a prize, or even aspire
to joys one would think the gods might keep
all to themselves.

SECOND CHORISTER: As in the constellations above,
where one star will gleam, outshining the others,
so her beauty and his deserving
glitter and shine.

80

FIRST CHORISTER: As the bride surpasses all other brides,
so does this husband surpass all other
husbands. We wish them well as we take
joy in their joy.

SECOND CHORISTER: See how his loving gaze on her cheek
causes a gentle blush as the sun,
when the shepherd beholds it at dawn, rouges
the dewy meadow.

90

FIRST CHORISTER: New vows mark a new day,
and what has gone before is ended.
The place of the mad woman of Colchis
is filled by the fairer

Aeolian maiden. Let us rejoice,
as he must rejoice, and sing the praises
of her whom he takes in his arms and wish them
joy and long life.

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CHORUS: Come, Hymen, with burning torches,
light the way along the dark hall,
sing your suggestive songs, and rejoice.
Raise the pinewood flambeaux higher,
and sing as we drive away all shadows.
Life and brightness grace the occasion
in which each one of us shares the joy,
raising our glasses to drink their health.

FIRST CHORISTER: (*Sees MEDEA*)
There is one, of course, who steals away unhappy,
who scuttles into the gloom, stopping her ears

against our songs and laughter that insult
and assault her spirit. I say let her begone.

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SECOND CHORISTER: A foreign woman, let her go back to her own
people, the land of her birth. Our ways were never
her ways. She was never comfortable here.
It's better for us, and better for her as well.

(*CHORUS takes seats at the sides. MEDEA returns to center stage.*)

MEDEA: (*To NURSE*) A nightmare—as if I were dead but forced to
watch

as the people I loved dearly and thought loved me
don't mourn, but rejoice, dance at my wake. My corpse,
off in a corner, hardly attracts their notice.
I've nothing. Jason took all, my country, my father.
Foolish, I followed him here, and now I'm abandoned,
alone, a stranger among strangers. Or, worse,

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they all hate me. I deserved better than this,
and those crimes I committed in love's name, for his sake,
using my dark powers. But I'm set aside,
tossed away as if I were nothing. . . . He cannot!
My own brother, I killed for his sake, hacked
in grisly bits and spread on the beach . . . and now,
I wish he had a brother.

I have done evil,

and may again! What love could accomplish, hate
can also accomplish. The blood I've shed commands

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his fear if not his gratitude and respect.
They say he had no choice, but that's never true.
There's always death's way out. A sword point cuts
through all the compulsions and threats. If he loved me,
as I loved him, he would have refused, defied
King Creon's whim, or fled for love and honor.
Unloved, dishonored, I shall contrive such mischief
as may remind the groom and bride and her father
that sacred vows are not mere playthings, even
of fatuous pompous kings. The torches blaze,

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but my heart's flames will not be contained. His house will be smashed, rubble, ashes, in which he shall lie, sobbing among the ruins with even sharper griefs than my own. I gave up a life for him! I gave him the gift of his own life. He repays me thus? His pledges broken, his words of love all unsaid. It's Creon who did this, as if Medea didn't exist. But I do. And the city will know, for the world will mark its towering flames.

NURSE: Hush, I pray you. Keep your thoughts and threats to yourself. In shrewdness plot what you will, but patient and silent, biding your time, ready to strike when your victim is unwarned and unprepared. Bluster is nothing, but real hurt demands real hurt in return.

MEDEA: Trivial grief
is easy to hide, but mine cries out for redress.

NURSE: Think what you need to do! It isn't shouting and empty threats you want but real revenge.

MEDEA: Fortune favors the bold; cowards are silent.

NURSE: So are the crafty—conspirators, spies, and assassins. 160

MEDEA: I'd rather be a mighty host advancing relentlessly . . .

NURSE: But you're only a woman, hopeless . . .

MEDEA: Nothing to hope is freedom, is nothing to fear.

NURSE: Colchis is far away. You've no resources. Your wealth is gone. What can you do alone?

MEDEA: Medea is still alive. In her you behold rage, frenzy, fury, fire, and venom.

NURSE: I fear the king.

MEDEA: I don't. Our line is royal.

NURSE: They're armed men.

MEDEA: There are always dragon's teeth.

NURSE: You'll die!

MEDEA: Good.

NURSE: Flee!

MEDEA: Not any more. 170

NURSE: Medea!

MEDEA: I am Medea!

NURSE: You are a mother!

MEDEA: I know and am thinking of that at every moment.

NURSE: Then flee, for your children's sake and your own as well.

MEDEA: But first, revenge!

NURSE: They'll be after you.

MEDEA: Perhaps,
but I might devise something to slow them down.

NURSE: Your threats will undo you. Humble yourself. Remember who you are, a woman and all alone.

MEDEA: The little that's left to me, no one can take—
my spirit, my rage. But the king's gate swings open.
His majesty, himself, in a grand appearance!

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(*Trumpets sound. NURSE exits. MEDEA retreats to the side of the stage. CREON enters.*)

CREON: Medea? Still here? She is plotting mischief,
I have no doubt. She wants revenge, will stop
at nothing. These Orientals don't understand
the value of human life the way we do.
I wanted her killed, but, no, they wouldn't listen.
My daughter and her new husband wanted her life
spared, and I gave in. We settled on exile.
But it wasn't wise or prudent. And I'm not happy.
Let her begone at once and leave us in peace.

(*MEDEA approaches CREON*)

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See how she comes forward, bold as brass!
Keep her away. I don't want to see her or hear her.
Let her obey a royal command. Exile
doesn't allow her access at court.
(*To MEDEA*)

Away!

Keep your distance. You are an outlaw. Go!
It's not permitted. This is disgraceful, awful . . .

MEDEA: But what have I done? Why have I been exiled?

CREON: It can't be a serious question.

MEDEA:

I ask for justice.

CREON: I am a king. My word is law. That's it,
right or wrong. Like it or not, obey.

MEDEA: Injustice cannot endure.

CREON:

Complain to Colchis.

200

MEDEA

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MEDEA: Let him take me back who brought me hither.

CREON: Don't be absurd! It's too late. He's remarried.

MEDEA: Divorced, exiled, but I was never heard.

CREON: Very well. I'm listening. Speak your piece.

MEDEA: Not with your ears only but with your heart,
listen. I know what pride can do. Decisions
that wavered once in the mind harden in air
as the words congeal to royal commands. I know,
for though I am now an object of pity, forsaken,
an exile, among strangers, I lived in a palace
and claim descent from a noble and godly line.
My father rules the steppes of Asia, the marshes
that flow into the Pontus, Scythian wilds,
and the crescent-shielded Amazons' home on the swift
Thermodon's banks. I drank from golden goblets
and listened to princes sue for my hand. Now I
bow my head and sue. Thus fortune toys
even with us who are royal. Power and glory
time can snatch away, and nothing remains
but memory to soothe or else torment,
according to what we remember, good or evil.
This only have I carried with me from Colchis,
the bitter wisdom—that one must learn to live
as if in the face of death, for each of us always
lives that way. Deeds, kindly or cruel,
are what we carry with us. I saved the *Argo*,
the flower of Greece, the heroes, demigods . . .

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I did that. Of Jason and all the others,
his brave companions whose lives I held in my hands,
I am proud, and hold my head high even now,
bereft as I am, impoverished, outcast, and yet
the richest woman in Corinth. Castor and Pollux,
I saved, and Zetes and Calais. Lynceus, too.
Allies now, and kings, they owe their lives

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to me. But disregard Jason. Him, I saved only for myself. The others, I claim, and for their sakes I appeal to you now for justice or clemency, on the ground of the good service I have done the state.

On the other side, my crime. . . . 240
But what crime am I said to have done, what law broken? Shameful acts, I do confess

freely. But crimes? What charge is made against me? Whom have I injured? Where are my evil gains? If I'm to be punished, at least let me have my booty; give me Jason, for whom I admit I have sinned.

On my knees, I beg you, a suppliant, let me stay, find some obscure retreat for me, some hovel, modest, even mean, where I can live outside the city walls. Show me some mercy and do not drive me away, alone, into exile. 250

CREON: I'm not a violent man. I wield the scepter gently and with compassion—I do what I can for the poor and helpless everywhere. I try, and I think I'm known as a philanthropic man throughout the region. I've picked as a son-in-law an exile, after all. A fugitive, really— for King Acastus has a warrant out for Jason on account of what you two are said to have done to his father in Thessaly. But let that go. I'm sure if what Jason did were considered in isolation, he'd come out well enough. You were the one to beguile Peleas' daughters and teach—or mislead— so they cut their father into little pieces and boiled his body, and all to rejuvenate that weak old man! You are a ruthless woman, and dangerous. Jason, by himself, is benign, but you, alone . . . I hardly dare imagine what you might do, a woman in recklessness but a man in strength of will. I must purge my kingdom from the deadly poison I think you are. I'm sorry, 270

but there it is. For the sake of civil order and my own peace of mind, you must go away.

MEDEA: You drive me hence? Then give me back my ship, and its captain, too. Why should I flee alone? We arrived together and share in our guilt: for him, I killed King Peleas, not for myself. We fled together, killed my brother together. For him, I deserted my father. You have it the wrong way round. Taking my case on its own merits, I'm blameless. 280

CREON: You waste your words and, more to the point, my time.

MEDEA: Allow me one last request. My sons are guiltless. Do not allow my taint to attach to them.

CREON: I shall be as a doting father to them, I promise.

MEDEA: I thank you, sir. And . . . I ask you one thing more. By all that you hold holy, by this marriage day, by the kindness of Fortune that blesses the city, I beg you, stay my departure one more day. Allow me a mother's farewell to her children, and one last kiss. 290

CREON: I don't trust you. You'll use the time for mischief.

MEDEA: What can I do in a day?

CREON: What can you not?

MEDEA: Would you deny me even a time for weeping?

CREON: I should. But I cannot. Very well, one day to prepare for your exile and bid your sons farewell.

MEDEA: I am deeply grateful.

CREON:

You are wasting time. One day!
Then, if you're found on this side of the Isthmus,
you die. And no extensions and no appeals.
You understand?

(CREON stares at MEDEA for a moment)

This interview is ended.

You will excuse me now. I bid you adieu.

I'm late as it is for my daughter's wedding feast.

300

(CREON exits left; MEDEA exits right)

CHORUS: How frail the little ships
with which we venture forth
on the huge sea!

The winds are fickle. The shore
dwindles away to nothing.

We hide our fear,

but only a fool would deny

that doubt he must feel, rocking

on dark waves,

any of which could upset

those fragile planks he assembled

in tranquil weather.

We long for the days gone by

when no one ventured far

from his own hearth.

Nobody knew the craft

the navigators use

reading the heavens

and nobody went to sea.

We made do with our farms

and what they yielded,

and lived to a ripe old age.

Now we have tastes for exotic

treasures and spices.

From distant shores come unruly

passions and even crimes we

could not have imagined.

320

There are monsters also, whose terror
comes only in part from their strangeness,
new pests and diseases,

but worst of all, by far,

is she, the lawless Medea,

wild as the ocean

that brought her into our haven,

relentless as any tornado

or waterspout,

but even more vindictive,

with harm that is hardly at random,

but fully intended.

330

FIRST CHORISTER: It seems to be an exaction

the gods are imposing upon us

for having undone

the clear commands of Nature.

Islands are separated

one from another

in accordance with some great purpose,

which we have contrived to frustrate,

and punishment follows.

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SECOND CHORISTER: We admired the courage of Tiphys,

who piloted Jason's Argo,

but Tiphys is dead.

Is it coincidence merely?

Or is there a meaning, a message,

or even a warning?

350

FIRST CHORISTER: The ocean is hardly subtle

when winds howl and the water

pours over gunwales

of even the sturdiest vessels,

and sailors, clinging to wreckage,

swear solemn oaths

never again to set foot on

the deck of a ship, or to venture

360

across a cove.
 But assume the sailor is rescued.
 He forgets his fear and his promise.
 A new day dawns,
 with the sea looking smooth and tranquil,
 its blue shot with the sunlight,
 and beckons again.

370

SECOND CHORISTER: Harbors are busy, and cargo
 from the Indian Ocean piles up
 next to that of the Rhine.
 We learn to enjoy these trifles
 and tell one another it's progress,
 but think of the cost.
 The woman we welcomed among us
 is bearer of terrors more ghastly
 than those sailors live through.
 Resentment is boiling, and vengeance
 sighs as each breaker recedes on
 the darkening shingle.
 Its menace is hard to ignore, as
 is hers. She intends to do ill to
 our lives here in Corinth.

380

FIRST CHORISTER: It is said that the figurehead
 of the *Argo* was carved from the wood
 of Dodona's trees,
 oaks that were able to speak,
 and the figurehead retained
 its godly magic.
 They say it could warn the crew
 of the dangers that lay ahead.
 Why was it silent
 when the ship made fast in our harbor
 and she disembarked with her baggage
 of hurt and revenge?

390

SECOND CHORISTER: In its bed, the deep sea tosses,
 as if, in its sleep, it were dreaming
 terrible nightmares
 and trying to wake, to escape from
 grotesque unendurable horrors.
 We are awake and have no
 such hope of relief: we are forced to
 witness the ending.

400

(MEDEA enters, hurrying out of the house. She is pursued by NURSE.)

NURSE: Wait, child! Restrain your passion. Think!
 Get hold of yourself. For pity's sake! Listen!
 Listen to me, I beg you . . .
 (MEDEA continues to wander about the stage, not paying
 attention)

Mad as a Maenad,
 and just as frenzied, as if the god were coming
 to take possession. She is possessed. Her cheeks
 burn, and her eyes blaze with a holy fire
 I've never seen before and am terrified now
 to behold in the poor woman. She pants, she sobs,
 she screams, and then falls silent and picks at the hem
 of her garment. And then the fury begins again
 and stronger. I fear it will end in something dreadful.
 (MEDEA approaches NURSE and stops, glaring)
 I hope I'm wrong, but fear she's totally mad.

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MEDEA: (Aside) There are no limits to love, nor should there be

to hatred, for they are two aspects of the same
 passion. Life matters, or else it does not.
 If it does, then one must fight, risk everything,
 even disturb the balance and order we see
 in the cold heavens. And if not, then we risk
 nothing. The bear will continue to spin on its tail,
 and the waters of rivers will still pour into the sea,
 on and on, in a meaningless repetition.
 We look to these things for pattern, for purpose, believe

420

that our lives too must have some design, some plan. . . .
Who planned these things for me? What divine order

decreed that I should suffer so? I defy

430

the heavens themselves. Fierce as a wounded beast
I turn on my attacker to lunge and slash,

eager to bring him down to share my dying.

No fire can match the burning within my soul,

nor waterspout the gushing of hatred the gales

of my fury whip into spume. I shall devastate,

wreak such havoc as men and women shall speak of—

or whisper—in horrified awe for a thousand years.

What was Jason thinking? Was it Creon he feared?

But what should a hero fear? How can a lover's

440

passion pale that way? A heart full of love

has no room left for cowardice. Compulsion

has nothing to say to love, can't speak a language

love would understand. But suppose he heard

Creon's threats and yielded? He still could have come

to speak to me, to explain, to bid farewell.

But not a word, as if he feared me, too.

The son-in-law of the king, he could have pleaded

in my behalf, for my children's sake, for mine,

that my banishment be postponed. But nothing, nothing.

450

I have but the single day I bargained for,

and that shall stretch out, for I shall make do,

will do such things in this one day that all other

days shall shrink, marvel, and mourn.

NURSE:

Calm yourself.

MEDEA: The only calm for me is in death and ruin.

As I go down, I shall also bring them down.

*(Exit MEDEA)*NURSE: *(Calling after MEDEA)*

What can you do, a woman alone? Your strength
is nothing to theirs. You can only hurt yourself!

MEDEA

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(Enter JASON)

JASON: How cruel a fate—hard in adversity, harder

when it finds a cure for our ills. The medicine's bitter.

460

Faithful to my wife, I die. Alive,

for the children's sake, I must betray the mother.

It's dreadful either way, but I choose the lesser

evil, for the children, innocent, weak—

but that's their strength, which is far greater than mine.

One does those things one hates. But how to explain?

What words will serve to beg her pardon?

(Enter MEDEA)

Look

at the terrible anguish. Passion. Fury. Love.

MEDEA: *(Surprisingly gently, at least at first)*

We flee again, Jason. We flee—this time

from each other. That other time it was for you, with you; 470

this time it's you who are forcing me to leave

our home. And where am I to go? To Colchis

and the beach drenched with my brother's blood? What seas

shall offer a safe haven? The Pontus? Hardly.

Those places are closed, hostile to us, to me. . . .

I am exiled here but, tell me, where can I go?

I go, I go. The son-in-law of the king

commands, and I yield, can hardly refuse. I go

uncomplaining. I agree, I deserve to be punished—

for folly. For excess! The king is right to be angry. 480

He ought to impose worse penalties—a dungeon,

an obelisk, where I'd starve to death in darkness

and heavy chains—for having been such a fool.

Ungrateful man, remember the dragon's teeth

and the armed men who sprang to life on the plain!

Had it not been for me, you would have suffered

a hideous ending then—but I bade you throw

a stone in their midst, and they fell on each other and hacked

each other to bits in a frenzied slaughter. Or think

of my poor brother, dead, dismembered, scattered. . . . 490

Each gobbet of flesh a crime upon my head
for which I suffer now. Think of Peleas, too,
whom his daughters cut up. More butchery, and I
am guilty, guilty, guilty—I admit, insist.
And yet I ask, I beg, by the heads of our children;
by the monsters we conquered, the perils we survived;
by heaven and earth and sea; by Hecate, witness
to our wedding rites, I plead for mercy.

Happy and safe as you are, have pity on me,
who asks, as a suppliant asks, for a measure of peace. . . . 500

Think what I gave away, was happy to give
for your sake—father, brother, native land,
my maidenhead, as well as the wealth of the Indies
and Scythian gold piled high . . . all of it gone,
spent, abandoned, squandered for you, for you.
This was the dower I brought. I ask for it back.

JASON: I tell you, Creon wanted you killed. I pleaded,
begged for your life. By my tears he was moved
to mercy, so that you are merely banished.

MEDEA: That is a punishment less severe? A blessing? 510

JASON: Go while you can. The anger of kings is dreadful.

MEDEA: The anger of kings? Or is it your new wife, Creusa,
whose anger you fear? Is it for love you do this?

JASON: Love? Of her?

MEDEA: Or guilt!

JASON: Of what am I guilty?

MEDEA: Of what I have done, you, too, are guilty.

JASON: Why?

MEDEA

MEDEA: Whoever stands to profit from crime is guilty.
My sins are therefore yours, for whose sake I sinned.
Let all the world accuse me, then, but you
must maintain that I am guiltless, as you are guiltless.
Nobody dares to say what everyone thinks,
but you know what they think. 520

JASON: That would be shameful.

MEDEA: And will you cling to a life you know to be shameful?

JASON: Medea, calm yourself. Think of our children.
What I do is for their sake.

MEDEA: I disown them,
reject, forswear, deny them. Shall Creusa inflict
brothers and sisters on our children?

JASON: Yes.

A queen to the sons of exiles, and foster mother
to those who are helpless. Your quarrel is not with her.

MEDEA: Never! Mine is the line of Phoebus, but she
is Sisyphus' infamous get, disgraced, dishonored! 530

JASON: Why do you want to ruin us both? I've done
the best I could. And you should go now.

MEDEA: Creon
has heard my modest prayer!

JASON: What do you want?
Tell me what you would have of me.

MEDEA: (*Sarcastic*) Of you?

JASON: I am hemmed in: on one side a king, on the other . . .

MEDEA: Medea! And I'm the worse by far. Let the king
and me contend with each other, with you as trophy.

JASON: I cannot bear it! Say what you want me to do,
I shall obey. But do not tempt the fates!

MEDEA: Till now, the fates have always been kind to me. 540

JASON: King Acastus is sworn to kill you.

MEDEA: Creon
is the nearer foe. Let us flee from them both,
for the one is a cousin, the other a father-in-law.
You may avoid the stain of kindred blood.

JASON: And if they unite, what can we do against both?

MEDEA: *(Laughing)* Those two, and Colchis, and Aeetes also.
And the Scythians, too. The Pelasgians as well.
Together, we will destroy them all.

JASON: You jest.

MEDEA: You think so? But you would. You are not desperate,
as I am.

JASON: We have taken too long already.
You must go now. 550

MEDEA: Jupiter, hear me! Lord
of the thunderbolts, hear and stretch forth your hand with
avenging
fire to shake the dull rock of the world.
In a pure, blind rage, strike, and let guilt
consume itself and destroy him, me, and all—
all of us together.

MEDEA

JASON: For this display
of histrionics, there is no time left. Consider
what you need for your flight: I shall supply
whatever you want. You have only to ask.

MEDEA: I ask
for my children. Give me my children. You can have new
sons and daughters. I cannot. Let me have
these as companions, comforters in my grief,
and as protectors. 560

JASON: I wish I could do that,
for your sake. But as a father, I have to think
what's best for them. Creon would not permit it
in any case, for, if they went with you,
he would always fear them. Remember, I love them.
Sooner would I part with life itself
than with my sons.

MEDEA: *(Aside)* Thus, he loves his sons!
How good to know—for this is the tender place
where I shall wound him, the perfect spot to strike.
I'll beg him for this one, quite modest favor.
(To JASON) 570

Very well. But you'll let me say good-bye?
Yes? A last embrace? A mother's kiss?
You cannot deny me so little. Let my distracted
words float away on the wind, like the smoke of fires
that stings the eyes. My anger now is spent.

JASON: And is gone from my mind. Of course, you shall see the
boys.
I only ask that you keep control of yourself
and try to stay calm for their sakes and your own. 580

(JASON exits)

MEDEA

You cannot reason with Nature's rages.
You cannot argue with women, either,
when the fit is upon them. They seem to enjoy
destroying themselves,

as if for the judgment of somebody watching,
spectators or jury, humans or gods,
as if the real blood that were spilled
were merely stagecraft.

We pray that Jason may live in safety,
having already survived the perils
of raging ocean, of mortal battle.
This danger is greater.

620

FIRST CHORISTER: It's better not to be one of the major
dramatis personae. Our lives in the chorus
are troubled enough. To witness this business
is all we can bear.

SECOND CHORISTER: What is the point of those marvelous
exploits?

You come back home to enjoy the glory
and wealth you have earned, but only find worse
and more sordid troubles.

630

FIRST CHORISTER: Phæthon dared what none of us would have,
destroying himself and bringing ruin
across the Sahara. The risks of failure
are truly dreadful,

but look at Jason. He succeeded,
and the lord of the ocean cannot forgive him.
Tiphys, the dead helmsman, is waiting
to welcome his captain.

SENECA: THE TRAGEDIES, I

154

MEDEA: Gone? Like that? He's forgotten who I am
and what I've done! It's all fallen away,
as if it had never happened. But I shall remind him.

(To herself)
Remember what you were and what you have done,
how bloody your hands already, that cannot be further
stained. There is a gift of shamelessness
that few enjoy, but I am shameless, fearless,
and, if I have to be, absolutely heartless.

(To NURSE)
Friend to my grief and misery, help me now!

There is a robe, a treasure of our house,
a gift of the Sun to his son, to King Aëtes.
There is also a necklace fashioned of gleaming gold
and a gold tiara set with precious gems.
Let my sons bring these precious objects
as gifts for the bride. . . . But let me first prepare them

590

with exquisite poisons. Call on Hecate. Pray
at awesome altars where smoky fires rise
for the old magic, the powers of darkness and death.

(MEDEA and NURSE exit)

CHORUS: Nothing in nature, fire or gale,
nothing in war, sharp sword edge
Or glittering spearpoint, terrifies
as a woman's hatred.

600

The raging torrents in springtime destroy
houses, villages, tear down towns
in blind fury, but hers is the greater
and more destructive.

The fire of passion burns in a hearth
to sustain a household, but out of control
it turns to conflagration and ruins
the house and the city.

610

SECOND CHORISTER: Orpheus, venturing down to Pluto's
dismal kingdom, contrived a return,
but was he then happy? A frenzy of women
tore him apart.

640

A second time he crossed over the Styx,
this time for good, and relieved to be where
there may not be pleasure, but cannot be much
occasion for fear.

FIRST CHORISTER: Some men venture for gold or glory,
but others only reluctantly go
to do the bidding of fate, to perform
arduous tasks

650

they cannot evade. Such was Jason,
but not even this can excuse him from
the ocean's resentment. The payment demanded
is heavy indeed—

for the waves fling up on the beaches glitter,
polished stones that look to be gems,
but then they take the treasure back.
What little is left

fades, turns dull, is revealed as worthless,
as children who play in the surf soon learn.
One might expect that the difficult lesson
would last for a lifetime.

660

SECOND CHORISTER: The exploits of heroes are like that—
splendid,
but then, at the end, there's a dreadful reversal.
Even a Hercules, striding the earth,
is constrained and reduced

by the poisoned shirt, clinging, on fire.
What is the point of it? Virtue and strength,
honor and cleverness, come to the same
deplorable ending

670

or even a worse than wickedness ever
is made to suffer. The soul cries out,
pities the pain, but feels more deeply
the gross injustice.

And nobody learns, not even Idmon,
one who could read the future of others,
and perhaps even his own, but could not
alter a thing.

He couldn't avoid the viper that waited
as if for thousands of years, fated
to hatch and bite the Argonaut, hunting
on Libyan sands.

680

FIRST CHORISTER: What good is the gift then? How can we tell
which are the blessings and which the curses?
Better therefore not to be noticed.
Keep your head down,

live simply, a day at a time, and
never adventure. The roads have dangers,
the woods are worse, and the sea is the worst,
cruel and vindictive.

690

(CHORUS turns to look as NURSE enters)

NURSE: My soul shakes at the terrible trouble brewing
in her heart's cauldron. The fire crackles, the broth
bubbles and seethes. Sun and moon grow pale
at the monstrous thing she prepares. At her private shrine
she recites her spells and performs the ghastly rites
to marshal her old powers and summon the strength

into her loathsome pot. God knows what else. . . .

You don't believe in these things? Civilized, Greeks, you dismiss these primitive practices, superstitions from far away. . . . It can't happen here, you say? It's not that simple. The question she faces is whether it feels worse to be evil in a good

and orderly universe, or admit the darker and likelier choice—that there is no order. That chaos whirls our meaningless lives this way and that way, to make a pattern perhaps, as the soot that swirls from the fire makes a smudge on the ceiling, but meaning nothing at all, nothing, teasing, but nothing. It is to that void she appeals, giving up what you, and you, and you rely on.

Plants that are clipped by the fingernails of a killer may have a power.

The way she disposes the nasty objects, the songs she croons, may have an effect, or her rage alone may be enough—the reckless rage of despair. To hear her words is to feel the marrow chill, and the muscles of the legs go slack in a dizzy feeling of disconnection with the earth.

Agony has its own laws. Ice can burn, as horses dying of thirst can try to drink fire. To such extremes is she driven, and from her wrongs only worse and larger evils can come.

But I hear her crooning. Listen, if you can bear it.

(Enter MEDEA)

MEDEA: I invoke the dead, demand they rouse themselves from their grand indifference. Gods of the underworld, and you, the suffering ghosts of Tartarus, hear me as I call from my abyss to yours. Rise up and come to my aid. Let Tantalus drink a toast to the bride and groom! Let Ixion's wheel cease to spin, and let him stand on the firm ground to bless the nuptial rites. Let the endless

from darknesses of the world to do such things as I dare not imagine. The burning sands of the desert and the frozen wastes of the far north come together to conspire against mankind and the moderation we take for granted. Serpents writhe into the light, knotting with other serpents to form a swollen and poisonous coil she shrieks with delight to behold. Whatever is vile is lovely; whatever is darkest causes her eyes to glitter. She prays to Horror to accept her worship, bless her, inspire. Smoke and sulphur rise up from the ground: she breathes them in as if they were purest mountain breezes in Spring, and her exhalations are dreadful. Curses and coughs punctuate one another, and yet she thrives, blossoms, looks much younger, and shines with a beauty that terrifies more than it pleases.

I watched those serpents

call out to their brothers and sisters—adders, constrictors, and vipers—and lizards and newts assembled in cold-blooded congregation. Meanwhile, from her chest she produced the herbs of Eryx, the Caucasus' plants spattered with gore from Prometheus' agony, poisons the Arabs dip their arrows into, the juice of forbidden roots the Sueban women gather at night in their secret groves. The deadliest flowers that bloom only at night, and the sickening galls of dying trees she mixed together, the rarest, most dangerous mosses, terrible molds, and powders she'd made from the dried saps of noxious vines cut from their roots with a bloodied sickle. . . .

All these she stirred together and boiled, chanting and moaning as if in pain or ecstasy. These rites

I have seen in part before, but never these new and hideous variations. She milks the serpents' venom for poisons to add to the stew. And birds, unclean carrion birds, she submerges alive. The heart of a screech owl, still beating, she flings

700

710

720

730

740

750

760

toil of the Danaids be interrupted, their leaky
urns put aside for the time. I need your hands
to help me now. I call for a general pardon—
except for Sisyphus, father to King Creon.

770

Let his stone weigh heavier, let his slope
be steeper, slipperier, sliding the boulder backward.
But the rest I summon, and call on Hecate first,
the moon goddess, ghastly queen of the night.
Be with me now, in your most dreadful aspect.

For you I unbind my hair,
for you I take off my shoes,
and walk in a circle barefoot,
as we did in the secret groves,
around the sacred trees,
calling on heaven to open
and bring us rain.

780

The round of the sun and moon,
the round of the sea and land,
of seasons of earth and heaven,
of men's lives and of cities,
around the sacred trees,
call on heaven to open
and bring us relief.

790

(She offers gifts to Hecate)

Hecate, hear me! I offer
these wreaths that bloodied hands
have fashioned of serpent coils
that Typhoeus wore when he struggled
against mighty Jupiter's throne.

I offer the blood of Nessus,
and feathers the Harpy left
when she fled from the Argonaut Zetes.
Their power is your power,

their honor is yours, and the passion.
Accept my gifts, O queen!

800

Come to us now, with terror,
shedding your ghastly light
that makes strange the familiar
and shows us the other side,
which is also a part of the truth.

At the moon's eclipse, we have beaten
the bronze gongs to restore you
to your rightful place in the heavens.
To you, on the bloody altars
we have made our sacrifice, bowing
heads, with our hair in the ashes,
and chanting the magical words,
waving the yew and the cypress
that grow by the Stygian river.

810

I offer blood for blood,
cutting myself like a Maenad,
letting the drops flow forth.
The hand that holds the dagger
is yours, as the arm that receives
the wound is yours also.
Accept the gift of my life
and lend me your dismal powers.

820

*(She cuts her arm and lets the blood flow upon the altar. She
waits for a moment, looks up, and then speaks as if to a friend.)*

Yes, my lady, I know. I have come to you often before. Too often,
I'm afraid. And you have always been kind to me. And I am
grateful. And I have been stupid. It's Jason again, still, always. But
you have helped me before, and I swear this is the last time.
Indulge me and grant my prayer.

(*She takes a phial and pours its contents onto the robe she has set out*)

Poison Creusa's garment,
and let the flames consume her,
burning her flesh and her marrow,
and making her vile blood boil.

Within this gold is fire
Prometheus gave me—its pain
is what he feels as the bird
slashes and pecks at his liver.
Mулciber's sulphurous fire,
and Phaëthon's fire I add,
to flames the great Chimaera
vomited forth, and Medusa's
terrible gall. Give sting
to these pretty poisons, my lady;
let them deceive the eye
and even at first the touch.
But then, and then, and then,
let them begin their magic,
penetrating the skin and
veins and the bones with their burning.
Let smoke arise from her body
as if, on a spit, she were roasting
alive, her hair incandescent,
and let her howls float on the air like
the world's loveliest music.

(*She repeats the dance step of the opening of her prayer*)

The round of the sun and moon,
the round of the sea and land,
of seasons of earth and heaven,
of men's lives and of cities,
around the sacred trees,

830

840

850

call on heaven to open
and bring us relief.

(*The fire on the altar blazes up. A bell rings three times.*)

My prayers are heard. The fire has blazed, and the bell
rings true. Now are my powers summoned. 860
Let my sons be brought that they may take these
gifts of mine to the bride.

(*The TWO SONS are brought in*)

Go, my children,
born to a most unfortunate mother. These
nice gifts may help you to win the love
of your new stepmother. Take these presents to Creusa,
and then return for a last embrace from your mother.

(*The TWO SONS exit toward the palace. MEDEA exits the other way.*)

FIRST CHORISTER: What was that all about?

Some odd and primitive rite,
but nothing for us to fear 870
who don't share her superstitions.

SECOND CHORISTER: Still, she is not unimpressive.

Emotion like that is alarming.
Her cheeks flush and then pale,
she tosses her hair in anger,
and sets her jaw in a fury
that even threatens our king.
One would hardly think an exile,
a single, powerless woman,
could even pretend to such menace. 880

FIRST CHORISTER: She ought to control her emotions,
but she paces, mutters, and mumbles,
as if she were crazy, as if she
weren't a human, but rather
a tigress whose cubs have been taken.

It's not superstition to fear her,
but prudent. Who knows what she's thinking
or what she feels driven to do?
I wish that this day were ended,
and fear what the daylight remaining
may offer our unwilling witness.
We're relieved at each moment that passes,
but dread those before us—each one
tremulous with a disaster
we can feel in the air and our bones.

890

(Enter MESSENGER, running, from the direction of the palace)

MESSENGER: Disaster! Catastrophel Ruin! Complete devastation!
The props of the kingdom are fallen, our city is toppled,
and father and daughter are dead. They are nothing but ashes.

FIRST CHORISTER: Tell what has happened.

MESSENGER:

A trick.

FIRST CHORISTER:

Explain
yourself.

MESSENGER: The trick that can take a king: treacherous gifts. 900

SECOND CHORISTER: Treacherous, how? You aren't telling us
much!

MESSENGER: What is there to tell of such absolute ruin?
The fire rages, the house is fallen, the city
burns and quakes with terror.

FIRST CHORISTER: Let water be brought!

MESSENGER: But that is the trouble! Water feeds these flames,
and they only burn the brighter. Nature's undone . . .

(Enter MEDEA and NURSE, in time to hear this last speech)

NURSE: *(To MEDEA)* My lady, flee. At once. You can still get away.
Go at once, wherever you will, but go!

MEDEA: Me? Go? But surely not! Had I gone
before this, I would come back to look and listen.
To savor every instant. 910

But it's not done.

Started only. There's more, and better and better.
I feel merely the skin's initial tingle
of those first steps of a long journey. My stride
is not yet reached. There is much to dare and endure.
The vengeance is only started. That love I felt
for Jason is not yet spent. It has turned to hatred
and seethes like lava. I must be stronger than rock.
Honor is gone, and all proportion. Nothing
can touch my pure purpose, or fame my spirit.

920

The strength I have summoned is great, and my only duty
now is to use it, to wring the last cry of pain
from that man's throat! What I have done thus far,
was nothing, a preface, a light-hearted overture.
The serious business that follows will make my famous
dark deeds seem parlor tricks for children,
or a girl's pranks. Now, I am an angry woman,
I am Medea. My apprentice term completed,
I shall address myself to a masterpiece.
Anyone can cut a brother's head off—
that happens every day. And people steal
their father's treasure and run away—that's common,
hardly enough to arouse particular comment
at the village well. To arrange that an old man's daughters
should inflict on their father a horrible death shows promise,
but in relative terms is nothing, for I shall do now
such dreadful, such astonishing things. . . .

930

The children
are the way to reach him. Had he and Creusa offspring,
anyone could make a respectable plan.

What I must do is acknowledge the bitter truth
of what he did, taking my two sons from me
and claiming them as his own, their own. No longer
my children? Very well! It's hard,
but they shall pay for their father's crimes—as happens
often in this vile world.

My brain's cold logic

chills my heart. My limbs flutter. The rage
gives way, and a mother's concern returns, unbidden,
and altogether wrong. You heard him say it!
He would keep them for himself. They are not mine!
Their blood is not my blood. I will abide

950

by my lord's decree, and we'll see if he can stand it.
They'll be better off—who would endure with a father
like that, with a mother like this? Better be rid
of such an unspeakable past and future. They'll die,
innocent.

That happens, too, in the world.

My brother was innocent, too. Much good did that do him.
My tears are a nonsense, not for him, or for them,
but only myself. An indulgence. They will not deter
or delay me for more than the instant it takes to wipe
my face with a fist already clenched.

960

I have. I do. And will, after they're dead.

Much good will that do them or me. It's hard,
but either way, I lose them. I have lost
all, have nowhere to turn, must strike back, piling
grievs upon griev's as exaction for mine.

Love them?

They would have been my solace, their hands soothing
my troubled brow, their kisses healing my wounds.
He took them from me; now I will take them, tear them
from him, and his tears will gush hotter than mine.
Children, come here!

I wept Niobe's tears

970

for sons. . . . Not seven but two, only the two.
But now they shall have at last a younger brother,

as I tear from my womb a monstrous vengeance, kin
of my dead father and dead brother. Our blood
shows itself in awful profusion.

The Furies

assemble, waving their torches: the garish light
stains all the world with blood. A hellish host
dances, cavorts, while serpents writhe and coil,
lashing their tails. Whom does Megæra seek?
These children? Jason? Me? Does it matter? My brother,
my poor brother, Absyrtus, calls out for justice,
with each of his scattered limbs, as if they had mouths,
a whole chorus, complaining.

980

And they shall be paid,
abundantly. Thrust the burning brands here,
here to my breast. Tear, burn, and hurt
however they will. There's nothing I cannot endure.

(The TWO SONS enter)

Yes, my children, come here!

(To the ELDER SON)

You will go to your uncle,
who asks for you, a solution to all our problems.

(Kills him)

Accept this victim, ghost, and be appeased.

(Noises off)

What is that sound? Armed men coming to kill me?

990

It won't be so easy.

(To the YOUNGER SON)

Come, we'll go to the roof.

Don't be afraid. We'll stay together.

(To the corpse)

And you,

you'll come with us, too.

(To herself)

O my soul, be strong!
This isn't some piece of secret business, but grand
and public, and I must do it with proper flair.

(Exit MEDEA, carrying the corpse of one son and leading the other. JASON enters, armed, and leading SOLDIERS. He addresses the citizens.)

JASON: Citizens, hear me! You who are faithful and mourn the sad fate of your prince! Lead me to her! Show me where she is, the butcher, the witch, and I shall make her answer for this and pay for what she has done. She is inside the house? Then burn it, with her inside. Raze it, down to the ground.

1000

MEDEA: (Appearing on the roof)

A queen again, mistress of all that I see. . . . Everything's back, restored to me now. My father, my poor brother, Colchis, the Golden Fleece. I am a virgin again, newborn, unsullied. This is the first moment of my new life. The deed is done, but the vengeance only begins, and cool, cool. . . . For my anger is gone. I'm sad, deeply sorry for what I have done. But it's done, and nothing can change it now. I have reached a truth, a terrible and incontrovertible truth, from which—I confess—I take a kind of joy. (She looks down and sees JASON) There he is, the necessary man—for nothing I have done has any meaning unless he sees it, feels it, and cries out.

1010

JASON: Up there! She's there. Somebody, bring torches. We'll set the roof ablaze. She'll jump or burn. But either way. . . .

MEDEA:

No, Jason. No. I'm not the point. It's a funeral pyre, yes, but for your sons. Poor Jason! Your wife is dead, and your father-in-law, too? A horrible death

1020

I arranged for them. This son of yours also is dead. See? And this is about to die.

JASON: No! By the gods, you cannot! I beg you, don't. In the name of all we've been through together. . . . Guilt is mine, and I should die. But spare the boy.

MEDEA: The guilt is yours, yes. And I will strike you where you will feel it. . . . Here! (She indicates the living son)

The sword goes here.

To see if a man who abandons wife and mother is capable of feelings.

JASON: The one is enough.

1030

MEDEA: One? You don't understand. I reject such business as measure, limit, proportion, counting. Two is not enough. A thousand would not be enough. If, in my ovaries, children of yours were lurking, I'd stab each one to death with a pin.

JASON:

You're mad.

You're altogether mad, utterly crazy! But I won't plead any more. Do what you will. . . . but get it over with.

MEDEA:

I'll take my time.

Creon gave me a whole day! What's the hurry?

JASON: Have pity, Medea! Kill me instead.

MEDEA:

Diel

1040

(She slays the second son) It's done! You see? You see? You recognize the wife you loved, ungrateful man? Remember who I was and who I am. I go now.

(She gestures with her arms. A huge chariot drawn by two dragons descends from the sky.)
The air is my highway. Dragons will carry me off.
Your sons, I leave to you as I ascend
into the air, on my wonderful winged car.

(She throws down the bodies of the two dead sons. She gets into the chariot and is borne away.)

JASON: What in the name of hell. . . ? A winged car?
But there are no gods. No gods! There are no gods.