

Medea

by Euripides



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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Medea has meaning in our time because it raises such difficult and disturbing issues. As a barbarian, woman, and witch, Medea is instantly set apart from her community; she is isolated in almost every possible way. Surprisingly, this helps to make her a heroic figure; alone and without aid, she must do everything for herself, in spite of the challenges set against her. She defies the odds and is victorious over her enemies—yet at the end of the play, the audience is far from unanimously on her side. Medea's single-minded devotion to revenge and the horrible things she does to achieve it vitiate the sympathy she would receive. She has just grievances against Jason and Creon, who have been unjust to her. Her actions, however, are shocking and defy the most basic laws and assumptions of human society. Thus, Euripides questions what it means to be a hero, as well as what it means to be a good person and part of a community.

After reading this play, look at the motives and actions of all its characters and see if you can find any truly sympathetic figures. Does anyone deserve what they get? And, if Medea's actions are so truly heinous, why does Euripides elevate her so much at the end of the play, when she is almost a goddess? These are not easy questions to answer, and they point to why Euripides has been one of the most successful psychological dramatists of all time, a poet whose works continue to shock and confound audiences and readers almost 2,500 years after they were written.

Translator's note

In preparing this edition, I have for the most part followed the Oxford text of Diggle. Like most Greek texts, there are many areas of confusion in the manuscripts of *Medea*; I have tried to stay as close to the Greek as possible, but my primary concern was to produce a coherent English text for a young audience uninterested in the cruces of palaeography and papyrology. I also used the Cambridge commentary of Donald Mastronarde and followed many of his emendations to aid in producing a smooth final product.

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Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Medea*, be aware of the following themes and elements:

- **Greeks vs. Barbarians:** In the 5th century, the area of modern Greece was occupied by dozens of small city-states and islands, each with its own peculiar legal and cultural institutions. Although these peoples were tied together by similar religious practices and often made alliances with one another, there was no unified Greek organization—no country of Greece. Hence, the Greeks viewed the world through a linguistic distinction: Greek-speakers, despite all their differences, were viewed as civilized, rational people, while anyone who did not speak Greek was termed a barbarian. The word *barbaros* had fewer negative connotations for the Greeks than it does for us, but they still viewed Greeks of any sort as culturally superior and more enlightened than even the best of barbarians. They applied this designation without exception; all non-Greek speakers—the nomadic Scythians of modern Ukraine, the inhabitants of the powerful, cosmopolitan Persian Empire, even the Romans—were ultimately, in Greek eyes, just barbarians.

This distinction is very important in the play, because Medea is a barbarian and all the other characters are Greek. This makes Medea instantly an outsider, and for the Greeks, ties to homeland and community were very, very strong.

- **Gender:** A second important distinction is obvious: Medea is a woman. In ancient Athens, women of well-born families were expected to stay at home in specially designated women's quarters *all the time*, except for certain religious festivals. Marriages were arranged by a girl's father or guardian. Women were not true citizens of the democracy and could not speak or vote in the assembly. They were not even allowed to speak in court, a basic right for Athenian men. As a woman and barbarian, Medea is very alienated. She, however, thinks of herself as Jason's equal; she refuses to be a submissive wife, which has disastrous results for her entire family and herself. Her manipulation of rhetoric is an especially masculine characteristic for the Greeks; by the play's end, she has essentially manipulated herself—her revenge destroys her as well as her enemies. Note throughout the play the emphasis Medea puts on her marriage with Jason, in which her father was completely uninvolved. She herself contracted the marriage and views her relationship with Jason as a friendship, one which he consistently violates by refusing to see her as his equal. Euripides was sometimes considered a misogynist by the Athenians because he wrote female characters like Medea, who defy everything the (male) Athenians thought a woman should be. Do you agree? Is Medea a good role model for women?
- **Witchcraft:** Finally, Medea is a witch. While Euripides downplays this aspect of her life, the Athenian audience would know it already, and the poisoned clothing Medea uses to kill Creon and the princess have strong overtones of witchcraft. Witches, according to Greek thought, operated mainly via poison and drugs—just think of our concept of the witch's brew. They could also turn to specific deities for help. Certain gods in the Greek pantheon, like Hecate, goddess of the crossroads, were considered dark and evil and more suited to witchcraft and sorcery than proper religion; such gods were usually invoked by people plotting wicked deeds.

Keep in mind that normal Greek religion included many aspects that seem similar to witchcraft to us—curses, prophecy and fortune-telling, animal sacrifice and rites involving the blood and entrails of the sacrificed victim. Greek witchcraft differed from this religion in the types and uses of ceremonies it employed.

Setting

In front of Medea's house in Corinth. There is an entrance onto the stage from the house, as well as two side entrances leading toward the palace and toward the main road away from the city.

Dramatis Personae

(in order of appearance)

- Nurse, *aged servant of Medea*
- Tutor, *to the children of Jason and Medea*
- Medea, *formerly princess of Colchis, now wife of Jason*
- Chorus *of the women of Corinth*
- Creon, *king of Corinth*
- Jason, *hero and captain of the Argo, husband of Medea*
- Aegeus, *king of Athens*
- Messenger
- Children of Medea
- various unnamed attendants, servants, and guards

Medea

[Enter Nurse from the house.]

Nurse

If only the ship Argo had never flown
through the dark Symplegades into the land
of Colchis, and the felled pine had never
fallen in the glens of Pelion,
and the hands of heroes never manned its oars,⁽⁵⁾
never sought the Golden Fleece for Pelias!
Then my mistress Medea would not have sailed
to the towers of Iolcus, her heart smitten
by love for Jason. Then she would never
have persuaded the daughters of Pelias⁽¹⁰⁾
to kill their father, and been forced to live
in this land of Corinth with her husband
and children, an exile who pleased the citizens
of her new home, a help to Jason himself
in all matters. This is the greatest salvation,⁽¹⁵⁾
when a wife stands together with her husband.
But, now it's all hate, what was dearest is sick,
for Jason betrayed his children and my mistress
and goes to bed with a royal marriage:
he's married the child of Creon who rules this land.⁽²⁰⁾
Poor, dishonored Medea shouts oaths
and recalls the great faith of their right hands
and calls the gods to witness the sort of return
she gets from Jason. She lies, fasting,
surrendering her body to pain,⁽²⁵⁾
wasting away in tears ever since she perceived
herself mistreated by her husband,
neither lifting her eyes nor moving her face
from the ground; when she hears her friends rebuke her,
she listens like a rock or the sea's wave,⁽³⁰⁾
except when she turns her white face away
and groans to herself for her dear father
and her land and the home she betrayed and left
with a husband who now dishonors her.
The poor thing has been taught by misfortune⁽³⁵⁾
the importance of not losing your homeland.
She hates her children and hates the sight of them,
and I fear that she's plotting something new.
It'll only bring her greater suffering,
for she is terrible; no one takes her on⁽⁴⁰⁾
as an enemy and emerges the victor.
The children are coming! They've stopped
exercising—
they don't understand their mother's trouble,
for a young mind doesn't like to worry.⁽⁴⁵⁾

[Enter Tutor with Children from offstage.]

Tutor

Long-time possession of my mistress,
why do you stand by the gates, in solitude,
bewailing your troubles to yourself?
Does Medea wish to be alone without you?

Nurse

Old attendant of the children of Jason,⁽⁵⁰⁾
for the best slaves, the affairs of their masters,
going badly, affect even their own wits.
I have gone so far into pain that desire
took me to come here and tell the sky
and the earth of my mistress' affairs.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Tutor

So the poor woman has not stopped groaning?

Nurse

I envy you: her suffering's only started.

Tutor

Fool—if one may say this of one's master.
How little she knows of her new troubles.

Nurse

What is it, old man? Don't keep it from me.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Tutor

No, I regret even what I've just said.

Nurse

Please, don't conceal it from your fellow slave,
for I'll be silent around here, if I must.

Tutor

I was near the dice games, where the old men
sit, around the holy spring of Pirene,⁽⁶⁵⁾
and I heard someone say, when I didn't
seem to be listening, that Creon,
the ruler of this land, intends to drive
these children from Corinthian earth
with their mother. I don't know if the story⁽⁷⁰⁾
is sound, although I hope it isn't.

Nurse

And Jason will allow his children to suffer,
even if he quarrels with their mother?

Tutor

Medea

Old things are abandoned for the new in-laws,
and that man is not a friend to this house.(75)

Nurse

We're done for, if we add this new trouble
to the old one, before we've suffered it.

Tutor

But, you, since it's not the right time for our mistress
to know this, keep quiet and tell no one.

Nurse

Children, do you hear how your father acts towards(80)
you?
I won't wish him death, for he's still my master,
but he has proven bad to his friends.

Tutor

What mortal isn't? Do you learn this now?
Every single person loves himself(85)
more than his fellow man, if a father
does not love his children because of his bed.

Nurse

Go inside now, children, it will be all right—
but you, isolate them as much as you can,
keep them away from their mother while she's angry.(90)
I've already seen her looking at them
like a bull, like she was about to do
something; and she won't stop her anger,
I know for certain, before she has fallen
on someone. I just hope she does it to(95)
enemies, at least, and not to friends.

Medea

[from within the house]

Oh!
I am miserable, unhappy in my labors!
Oh me, I wish I were dead.

Nurse

This is it, dear children; your mother
stirs her heart, stirs her anger.(100)
Hurry quickly inside the house,
and don't go within her sight.
Don't go near her, but watch out
for her fierce heart and the hateful nature
of her contumacious mind.(105)
Go now, get inside quickly!
It is clear she will soon light

Medea

with greater spirit the cloud
of lamentation now rising
in its beginning. Whatever will⁽¹¹⁰⁾
her heart, bitten by troubles,
high-spirited, hard to check, do?

Medea

Alas!
I have suffered, oh, dreadfully
have I suffered things⁽¹¹⁵⁾
worthy of lamentation.
Oh, let them die, the accursed children
of a hateful mother, with their father,
and let the whole house disappear!

Nurse

Oh my, the poor woman!⁽¹²⁰⁾
Why do you give the boys a share
of their father's embraces? Why do you hate them?
Alas, children, how I fear you will suffer!
Royal tempers are terrible—it seems that
they rule much, but are themselves rarely ruled,⁽¹²⁵⁾
and with difficulty do they control their anger.
It is better to live always among equals;
for myself, at any rate, I hope
to grow old securely in modest circumstances.
First of all, the very idea of moderation⁽¹³⁰⁾
wins first prize in speaking, and in action,
is by far the best way for mortals, but excessive power
can produce no proper return for human beings,
instead giving back greater madness
whenever God is angry at the house.⁽¹³⁵⁾

[The Chorus marches in from offstage, chanting.]

Chorus

I heard the voice, and I heard the cry
of the unhappy woman of Colchis.
Is she not yet calm? Tell me, old woman.
For I heard her moaning within the
double-gated hall, nor am I pleased, lady,⁽¹⁴⁰⁾
by the woes of the house,
since friendship has been mixed for me.

Nurse

The house is undone; all this is ruined;
for a royal marriage has taken the master,
and the mistress wastes away her life in⁽¹⁴⁵⁾
her chamber, allowing no friends to speak
words of comfort to her mind.

Medea

Alas!
If only a lightning bolt from heaven would go
through my head! What good does it do me to remain⁽¹⁵⁰⁾
alive?
Oh, oh! I wish I could cast off
this hateful life and take my rest in death!

Chorus

Strophe

O Zeus and Earth and Light,
did you hear the cry⁽¹⁵⁵⁾
the unhappy woman utters?
What is this desire for the terrible
bed of rest, foolish woman?
You would hasten the end of death?
Do not pray for this!⁽¹⁶⁰⁾
If your husband gives himself to a new bed,
do not be angry at him for this;
Zeus will be your advocate in it.
Do not pine excessively, mourning your husband.

Medea

O great Themis and lady Artemis,
do you see what I suffer, having bound⁽¹⁶⁵⁾
my cursed husband with holy
oaths? I wish I could see him and his bride
and the whole house violently destroyed!
What injustices they dared to commit, unprovoked,
against me!⁽¹⁷⁰⁾
O father, O city, from whom I was parted,
after I shamefully killed my own brother!

Nurse

Do you hear how she speaks and calls upon
Themis of Prayers and Zeus, who
dispenses and rules mortal oaths?⁽¹⁷⁵⁾
There is no way my mistress will stop
her anger in some small act.

Chorus

Antistrophe

I wish she would come out
into our sight and accept
the sound of spoken words,⁽¹⁸⁰⁾
if somehow she might put aside her deep-hearted
anger and the passion of her mind.
Let my eager goodwill not be
absent for my friends.

But go inside now and bring her out⁽¹⁸⁵⁾
of the house Tell her we come as friends,
make haste before she does something bad
to those within, for this sorrow will set something
great in motion.

Nurse

I will do this, but I fear I won't persuade⁽¹⁹⁰⁾
my mistress.
Still, I will do it as a favor to you.
Although to her maids, her gaze
is like a bull's, like a lioness guarding her young,
whenever one draws near, bringing some report.⁽¹⁹⁵⁾
You wouldn't be mistaken if you said
the men of the past were unlucky and completely stupid
who invented songs for good times,
for banquets and dinner parties,
as delightful things to hear,⁽²⁰⁰⁾
but no human being has found a way to
stop with music and many-toned songs
hateful grief, from which death
and terrible chance overthrow houses.
It would be a real benefit for humanity⁽²⁰⁵⁾
to cure these things with songs, but at
banquets with good meals, why make your voice shrill
in vain?
The fullness of the feast at hand
holds joy for mortals in and of itself.⁽²¹⁰⁾

[Exit Nurse into the house.]

Chorus

Epode

I hear her voice groaning and moaning,
shouting shrill cries of grief
at the evil bridegroom who betrayed her bed.
Having suffered injustice she calls on the gods,
on Zeus's Themis, guardian of oaths,⁽²¹⁵⁾
who made her come to Greece
across the strait,
through the sea at night
near the salt-enclosure of impenetrable Pontus.

[Enter Medea from the house.]

Medea

Women of Corinth, I came out of the house⁽²²⁰⁾
so that you would not reproach me. I know
that many people are seen as haughty,
some in private, others among people.

Others, however, from living quietly
 get a bad reputation for laziness.(225)
 It's not justice in men's eyes, when they hate a man
 before learning his true character clearly,
 when they've only seen him and suffered
 no injustice from him. A foreigner,
 especially, ought to make concessions(230)
 to the city, and I would not praise even
 one native-born who is conceited and
 bitter to his fellow citizens because
 of ignorance. This unexpected problem
 that falls on me has destroyed my soul;(235)
 I am ruined; I have lost the pleasure of life—
 I want to die, friends, for the one who was
 everything to me (I've learned it well enough),
 my husband, has turned out to be the worst of men.
 Of all things that live and have intelligence,(240)
 we women are the most wretched creatures.
 First, we must buy a husband at a high price
 and take a master over our bodies,
 an even more painful evil than the other.
 Here the stakes are highest: do we take(245)
 a bad man or a good one? A woman can't
 get divorced and keep her good reputation,
 and she has no right to refuse her husband.
 After arriving among new customs and rules,
 she must be a prophet, since she was not(250)
 taught at home how to deal with her husband.
 If we work hard at this, and our husband
 bears the yoke of marriage without violence,
 life is enviable; but, if not,
 better to die. A man, when he is annoyed(255)
 with those inside, goes out and stops the nausea
 in his heart, but we must look to just one person.
 They say that we live lives free from danger,
 while they go out to fight wars with spears,
 but their logic is flawed. I would rather(260)
 stand shield to shield three times than give birth just
 once.
 But here is the real point for you and me:
 This is your city, here you have your father's
 home and your life's enjoyment and your friends,(265)
 but I have been outraged by my husband
 and am alone, without city, carried off
 from a barbarian land, with no mother,
 no brother, no relative to whom I could sail,
 away from this disaster. Therefore,(270)
 I would ask of you only this: if I
 can find some way or method to make
 my husband pay the price for these evils,
 keep silent, for although a woman is

in other ways fearful and afraid to fight,⁽²⁷⁵⁾
unable even to look at weapons,
when she finds herself wronged by her husband,
there is no heart more eager for blood.

Chorus

I will do it, for you punish your husband
justly, Medea, and I do not wonder⁽²⁸⁰⁾
that you are pained by this misfortune.
But, I see Creon, lord of this land,
coming, to announce some new tidings.

[Enter Creon with guards from offstage.]

Creon

You, sullen and angry at your husband,
Medea, I declare that you must leave⁽²⁸⁵⁾
this land in exile, taking your two children
with you, and don't delay at all. As I
am the enforcer of this decree,
I will not return home before I've tossed
you beyond the borders of my land.⁽²⁹⁰⁾

Medea

Alas! I am woefully, utterly destroyed!
My enemies have opened my sails to the wind,
and there is no haven to escape ruin.
Still, though I have suffered badly, I will ask:
Why do you send me from this land, Creon?⁽²⁹⁵⁾

Creon

I'm afraid of you—no need to mince words—
afraid you'll hurt my child irreparably.
I have many reasons to suspect this:
you are by nature clever and skilled in evil,
and you are tormented by the loss⁽³⁰⁰⁾
of your husband's bed. Also, I've heard that
you are threatening to do something to
every party of the wedding – him who gave,
him who received, and her who was given.
So I'm on my guard before I suffer.⁽³⁰⁵⁾
Better I incur your wrath now, lady,
than be soft and regret it later.

Medea

Oh, oh!
This is not the first time, Creon; no, often
before, my reputation has done me harm.⁽³¹⁰⁾
No sensible man ought to have his children
taught to be exceedingly clever; for,
besides the other disadvantage, sloth,

they will earn malicious ill-will. When you put something clever before stupid people,⁽³¹⁵⁾ you will seem useless and not really smart; but when the city thinks you superior to those who seem to have abstruse knowledge, you will annoy them. I myself share this fate, for, since I am clever, some envy me,⁽³²⁰⁾ others hate me; and I am not even so very clever. Do you, then, fear that you will suffer something unpleasant from me? This is unnecessary. Do not worry, Creon, that I would do harm to a king.⁽³²⁵⁾ Furthermore, what wrong have you done to me? You gave your daughter to the one your heart chose for you. Rather, it is my husband whom I hate, but you, I think, acted sensibly. I do not begrudge you that your affairs⁽³³⁰⁾ turn out fairly. Get married, and good luck to you all! Just let me dwell in this land; for even though I am dishonored, I will be silent, defeated by greater beings.

creon

Your words are soothing to hear; but in my heart⁽³³⁵⁾ I fear that even now you are plotting something wicked, and so I am even less inclined to yield to you. A woman with a hot temper, and even more so a man, is easier to guard against than one⁽³⁴⁰⁾ silent and clever. Go as soon as you can; do not argue, for these matters are fixed. Not even you have the skill to remain near us while you are hateful to me.

[Medea bows before him and embraces his knees.]

Medea

No, by your knees and newly married daughter!⁽³⁴⁵⁾

Creon

You can stop arguing; you'll never persuade me.

Medea

You would expel me and dishonor my prayers?

Creon

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

Medea

O fatherland, now I hold only your memory!⁽³⁵⁰⁾

Creon

Besides my children, I love my country most.

Medea

Oh, oh, love is such a great evil for mortals!

Creon

It goes as circumstances direct, I think.

Medea

Zeus, may he who deserves this pain not escape you!

Creon

Go, foolish woman, and save me the trouble.(355)

Medea

Trouble is what I have; I don't need more.

creon

You'll soon be pushed out by my guards' hands.

Medea

Surely not that, I entreat you, Creon!

creon

You, it seems, will be a nuisance, lady.

Medea

We will leave; I have not begged you to gain this.(360)

creon

Then why do you continue to press my hand?

Medea

Suffer me to remain this one single day
to consider where to make my exile
and to plan for my boys, since their father
does not care enough to make an effort(365)
for his children. Pity them, for you also
are a father and should be kind to them.
I don't care about myself, but if we
must go into exile, I lament
that they must endure this misfortune.(370)

creon

I don't have a dictatorial nature,
and I've often lost by being considerate—
even now I see that I am making
a mistake, lady. Nevertheless,(375)
you shall have your request. But, mark my words,
if the next sunrise sees you and your sons

Medea

within the bounds of my kingdom, you will die.
This is no idle threat. Now, if you must stay,
stay one day, for you will not do any⁽³⁸⁰⁾
of the terrible things I so fear.

[Exit Creon with guards offstage.]

Chorus

Alas, alas,
unfortunate in your troubles, poor woman,
wherever will you turn to? What friendship
or house or land will save you?⁽³⁸⁵⁾
Oh, God has carried you, Medea,
into a pathless wave of troubles!

Medea

It's turned out badly all around—who'd deny it?
But not these things in this way—don't think that yet.
Those newlyweds still have struggles to come⁽³⁹⁰⁾
and those making the match no small labors.
Do you think I would flatter that man
if I had no plan or profit in it?
I wouldn't even have spoken to him
or touched him with my hands, but he's become⁽³⁹⁵⁾
so foolish that, although he could have ruined
my plans and cast me from this land, he allowed
me to stay this day, in which I shall display
the corpses of three of my enemies:
the father, the daughter, and my husband.⁽⁴⁰⁰⁾
Though there are many roads to death I might
send them down, I don't yet know which I shall
choose,
friends. Will I set fire to the bridal house
or drive a sharp sword through their hearts, after⁽⁴⁰⁵⁾
I've sneaked through the house to where they sleep?
There's just one little thing hindering me—
if I am caught entering the house, scheming,
I will die and become a source of laughter
for my enemies. Better to take the straight road,⁽⁴¹⁰⁾
in which I am so naturally skilled,
and kill them with poison.
So be it.
And with them dead, what city will receive me?
What stranger will provide an asylum and⁽⁴¹⁵⁾
a secure home and protect my person?
There is no one. So, I'll stay here a bit longer.
If some safe tower shows itself to me,
then I'll pursue this murder by trick and stealth;
but if circumstance leaves me hanging here,⁽⁴²⁰⁾
I'll take the sword myself, though it means death,
and kill them, and I'll go boldly into crime.

I swear by my mistress whom I worship
most of all and took as my ally long ago,
Hecate, dwelling deep within my hearth,(425)
none of them will hurt my heart and rejoice.
I will make these marriages bitter and
mournful for them, bitter my sorrow and
my exile from the land. Come on, Medea,
spare nothing of what you know, planning and craft.(430)
Go into the horror; it's a question
of endurance. Do you see what you suffer?
You must not incur mockery through these
Corinthian marriages of Jason's,
you who are born from a good father and(435)
from the Sun. You know how to do this.
In addition, you were born a woman,
unable to do anything noble,
but so clever at everything evil.

Chorus

Str. /The streams run up the holy rivers(440)
and justice and everything else is reversed:
Men have tricky counsels, and
their faith does not stand firm in oaths,
whereas my reputation will turn and
have good fame.(445)

Honor is coming to the race of women.
No more will ill-sounding fame hold women.

Ant. /The Muses will stop hymning my
faithlessness in their old songs,
for Phoebus, leader of songs, did not give(450)
to my comprehension the inspired song
of the lyre; since I would have sung a hymn
against the male race.

There is a great song with
much to say of my fate and that of men.(455)

Str. 2You sailed from the home of your fathers
with a raging heart,
traveling through the twin rocks of Pontus, and now
you live in a foreign land, having lost(460)
the bed of your husbandless marriage,
poor woman, and dishonored you must
flee this land.

Ant. 2The grace of oaths has gone; nor does shame
remain still in great Greece,(465)
but has flown up to heaven. You have no father's
house, unhappy woman, to shift your
anchorage towards, and another woman,
a princess, superior to your bed,
took over your house.(470)

[Enter Jason from offstage.]

Jason

This is not the first time that I've said it,
but harsh anger is an unbearable evil.
You could have remained in this land and house,
if you had meekly obeyed the ruler's will;
but, because of rash words, you are thrown out⁽⁴⁷⁵⁾
of the country. I have no problem with this;
keep on saying that Jason is the worst of men.
As for what you have said against the king,
think it a blessing that you are punished
only with exile. For my part, I always⁽⁴⁸⁰⁾
tried to calm the king when he was angry;
I wanted you to stay; but you did not
let up your foolishness, always cursing
the king. Therefore, you are thrown out of this
country.⁽⁴⁸⁵⁾
Still, after all this, I do not come here to fail
my friends, but to look after your lot, lady,
so that you and the children are not exiled
penniless or lacking anything.
Exile brings many evils with itself.⁽⁴⁹⁰⁾
After all, even if you hate me,
I could never think badly of you.

Medea

You entirely vile man—that's the greatest insult
my tongue can wield against your cowardice—
you come to us? You, the most hateful man alive?⁽⁴⁹⁵⁾
This is neither boldness nor courage,
your looking friends in the face while hurting them,
but rather the greatest of all human
diseases: shamelessness. Still, you did well to come,
for I will speak and unburden my soul⁽⁵⁰⁰⁾
in abusing you, and you will grieve to hear it.
I will start with the very beginning:
I saved you, as all the Greeks know who sailed
with you on your ship, the Argo. You were
sent to master the fire-breathing bulls with yokes⁽⁵⁰⁵⁾
and sow the deadly field. And the dragon
who was guarding the Golden Fleece, wrapped around it
with all those coils in eternal vigilance—
I killed it and gave you the light of salvation.
After betraying my father and my home,⁽⁵¹⁰⁾
I came to Iolcus with you, more eager than wise.
I killed Pelias in the worst way
for a man to die—by his own children's hands,
and I destroyed his whole house. You got
all this from me, you worst of men, and then⁽⁵¹⁵⁾
you betrayed me and got yourself a new bed,
even though you already had children.
If you were still childless, it would at least

be understandable for you to leave my bed.
 The faith of oaths is over and gone—I wonder,⁽⁵²⁰⁾
 do you think that the gods of that time are
 no longer in power, or that now men
 have some new rules for what is just? Because
 you know that you are not being faithful to me.
 Oh, this right hand, which you touched often,⁽⁵²⁵⁾
 and these knees—how uselessly I was touched
 by this bad man, and how I was mistaken!
 Come, I'll share with you as if you were my friend.
 (Thinking to get something good from you?
 No, but being questioned, you'll be proven base.)⁽⁵³⁰⁾
 Now where do I turn? To my homeland and
 my father's house, which I betrayed for you?
 Or to those poor daughters of Pelias?
 Wouldn't they receive me nicely in the house
 where I killed their father? Because that's how it⁽⁵³⁵⁾
 stands!
 I've made myself hateful to my friends at home,
 whom I would never hurt for my own sake;
 but for you I hold them as enemies.
 Accordingly, in return for these things,⁽⁵⁴⁰⁾
 you've made me blessed among Greek women:
 I have you as my wonderful, faithful husband—
 poor me! I will go into exile from this,
 bereft of friends, alone with only my children.
 A pretty disgrace for a new bridegroom:⁽⁵⁴⁵⁾
 beggar children banished with me who saved you!
 O Zeus, why did you grant men clear signs to tell
 the purity of gold, when no stamp appears
 on the body of men by which one can
 know the good man from the evil-doer?⁽⁵⁵⁰⁾

Chorus

Anger is terrible and hard to heal,
 when friends engage in strife against friends.

Jason

It seems I must argue that I'm not a bad man,
 and, like the wise pilot of a ship, run out
 from under the storm of your tongue-lashing⁽⁵⁵⁵⁾
 with only the tips of the sails, my lady.
 Although you exalt yourself exceedingly,
 I know that alone of gods and men
 Aphrodite was the savior of my sailing.
 It's true you have a subtle mind, but it⁽⁵⁶⁰⁾
 would be in poor taste to tell how Love with his
 unavoidable arrows made you save my skin.
 I'll not put matters so precisely.
 Of course, you didn't do badly when you⁽⁵⁶⁵⁾
 helped me. In fact, you took greater than you gave

from my salvation, as I shall explain.
First of all, you live in Greece instead of
a barbarian land, and you know justice
and how to use laws instead of force.⁽⁵⁷⁰⁾
All the Greeks know that you are clever,
and you are famous; but if you lived at
the ends of the earth, there'd be no account of you.
For me I'd rather not have gold at home,
nor would I sing sweeter than Orpheus,⁽⁵⁷⁵⁾
if no one would know about me. I've said
so much to you about my adventures,
since you started this competition of words.
As for your reproaches against my royal
marriage, first I'll show you that I was wise⁽⁵⁸⁰⁾
in this matter, and, second, restrained; and
third, a great friend to you and my children.
Keep quiet!
When I arrived here from Iolcus, besieged
by many impossible disasters,⁽⁵⁸⁵⁾
what luckier windfall could I find than this:
though an exile, to marry the king's daughter?
It's not what worries you so much—that I hate
your bed and am struck by desire of a new bride,
or am making an effort to outdo the number⁽⁵⁹⁰⁾
of your children. Those who are born are enough;
I don't hate them. But how—and this is the
biggest thing—could we live happily and not
in poverty, knowing that every friend
he meets flees a poor man, when I could raise⁽⁵⁹⁵⁾
children in a way worthy of my house,
beget brothers to those children from you
and join the houses together and be happy?
What need of children do you have? As for me,
there's profit in helping the living children⁽⁶⁰⁰⁾
with those to come. Surely I've not reasoned badly?
You wouldn't say so, if your empty bed
didn't annoy you. It's gotten so you
women think you have everything when
it's good in your bedroom, but if some misfortune⁽⁶⁰⁵⁾
strikes your chamber, you think even the best
and fairest things are the most adverse.
It would be better if men could get children
some other way, and there were no female race.
That way there would be no trouble for men.⁽⁶¹⁰⁾

Chorus

Jason, you arranged your words well, but, still,
to me, if I may speak frankly, I think
that you've unjustly betrayed your wife.

Medea

Medea

Well, I'm different from many people
in that I think whoever is unjust,⁽⁶¹⁵⁾
but clever at speaking deserves the greatest
punishment of all. When someone is overbold
in sugar-coating injustice with his tongue,
there's nothing he won't dare. Still, he's not so smart.
The same with you: to me now you don't seem suave⁽⁶²⁰⁾
or clever at speaking—one word will catch you.
If you really weren't ashamed, you should have
persuaded me and then gotten married,
but you kept quiet about this to your friends.

Jason

You would have been very supportive indeed,⁽⁶²⁵⁾
if I'd told you about the marriage, when
even now you can't check the bile from your heart.

Medea

That wasn't your concern, but rather how
proper old men don't have barbarian wives.

Jason

Know this well: it was not for a wife⁽⁶³⁰⁾
that I made this royal marriage; but,
just as I said before, wishing to save
you and to sow princes of the same blood
as my children, a safeguard for the house.

Medea

May I never have a happy life that⁽⁶³⁵⁾
gives me pain, or wealth that annoys my mind!

Jason

You could change your prayer and seem wiser:
Pray never to say that good things give you pain
and not to seem unhappy when you're doing well.

Medea

You insult me, because you have an escape⁽⁶⁴⁰⁾
route, while I will flee this land alone.

Jason

You chose this course; don't blame anyone else.

Medea

What did I do? Get married and betray you?

Jason

You cursed the royal house with unholy words.

Medea

Medea

And in your house, too, I am accursed.

Jason

Well, I won't debate this matter further with you.
Rather, if you want to take some of my money
for the children or yourself, to help you
in your exile, tell me, as I'm ready
to give with an ungrudging hand and to send⁽⁶⁵⁰⁾
a token to my foreign friends, so they'll help you.
Don't be willfully foolish in this, too, lady,
but let your anger go and reap the reward.

Medea

We wouldn't make use of your foreign friends
or accept anything; don't give to us,⁽⁶⁵⁵⁾
for the gifts of a wicked man are no help.

Jason

Then I call the gods to witness how I
would do anything to help you and the children,
but good things don't please you. You just stubbornly⁽⁶⁶⁰⁾
push your friends away. And so you'll suffer more.

[Exit Jason offstage.]

Chorus

Str. 1 Excessive Love gives men
neither glory nor virtue,
but if Aphrodite comes in moderation,
no other god is so gracious.⁽⁶⁶⁵⁾
Mistress, may you never release at me
an irresistible arrow
anointed with desire from your golden bow.
Ant. 1 Moderation nurtures me,
the fairest gift of the gods.⁽⁶⁷⁰⁾
May terrible Aphrodite never strike me
with disputed anger and insatiate strife
and send my heart towards other beds,
but revere harmonious marriages
and intelligently decide where women sleep.⁽⁶⁷⁵⁾
Str. 2 O fatherland, O home, never let me be
without my city,
leading a life of impossibility, difficult
to endure, the most pitiful of pains.
Let me die, let me die instead,⁽⁶⁸⁰⁾
finishing my day of life!
No other hardship exceeds
losing one's native land.
Ant. 2 We saw it ourselves, I can tell the story
not learned from others.⁽⁶⁸⁵⁾
No city, no friend pities you who have

suffered the most terrible of sufferings.
May he perish without grace
whoever does not open a clean mind
and honor his friends.(690)
He certainly will never be a friend of mine.

[Enter Aegeus from offstage.]

Aegeus

Hello, Medea! No one knows a better
salutation to greet friends than this!

Medea

Hello to you, too, son of wise Pandion,
Aegeus. What brings you to this part of earth?(695)

Aegeus

I've just left Apollo's ancient oracle.

Medea

Why did you seek the prophetic world-navel?

Aegeus

I asked how children might be born to me.

Medea

By the gods, you are still childless at your age?

Aegeus

By some divine will I still have no children.(700)

Medea

Do you have a wife, or is your bed empty?

Aegeus

I do not lack a nuptial couch.

Medea

What did Phoebus say to you about children?

Aegeus

Words wiser than a man can understand.

Medea

Is it right for me to know the god's reply.(705)

Aegeus

Certainly, for it requires a wise mind.

Medea

What did he say? Tell me, if I may listen.

Medea

Aegeus

That I not loosen the wineskin's protruding foot.

Medea

Before doing something or arriving somewhere?

Aegeus

Before I arrive at my ancestral hearth.(710)

Medea

Then why are you making a sea journey by land?

Aegeus

A man called Pittheus, lord of Troezen.

Medea

Son of Pelops, they say, a very pious man.

Aegeus

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

Medea

He's a wise man and skilled in such matters.(715)

Aegeus

And dearest to me of all my close friends.

Medea

Then good luck and may you find all you desire.

Aegeus

But why is your face so pale and sad?

Medea

Aegeus, my husband is the worst of men.

Aegeus

What's this? Tell me clearly of your trouble.(720)

Medea

Jason injures me, though he's suffered nothing.

Aegeus

What did he do? Tell me more clearly.

Medea

He has taken a wife in my place.

Aegeus

Has he really dared this most shameful deed?

Medea

Medea

You know it. We, his old friends, are dishonored.(725)

Aegeus

Was he in love, or did he hate your bed?

Medea

Deeply in love. He wasn't born faithful to friends.

Aegeus

Well, if this is true, he is a bad man.

Medea

Deeply in love with a tie to the royal house.

Aegeus

Who gave him the bride? Finish the story for me.(730)

Medea

Creon, who rules this land of Corinth.

Aegeus

I can certainly see why you are grieved, lady.

Medea

I'm done for—I'm also being banished from the land.

Aegeus

By whom? Tell me of this new problem.

Medea

Creon drives me as an exile from Corinth.(735)

Aegeus

Jason allows it? I don't approve of that!

Medea

Not in word, but he's eager to endure it.
Please, I beseech you by your beard and your knees!
I am your suppliant. Pity me,
pity this poor woman! Don't watch me go
into exile alone, but accept me(740)
as a guest into your land and home.
Thus may the gods grant your desire with children,
and may you die blessed! You don't know the windfall
you've found. I will stop your childlessness and make
you able to beget sons; I know the right drugs.(745)

Aegeus

I am eager to grant you this grace for
many reasons—first, because of the gods;

Medea

second, because of the children whose births
you announce, for in this I am entirely lost.
This is how it is with me: When you come⁽⁷⁵⁰⁾
to my land, I will try to help you with
justice on my side. You yourself must find
a way from this land; but if you come to my house,
you will stay safely and I will surrender
you to no one, though I wish to be⁽⁷⁵⁵⁾
blameless to my foreign friends as well.

Medea

So be it! But, if I had a pledge of these things
from you, I would be satisfied with your end.

Aegeus

Don't you trust me? Or is something bothering you?

Medea

I do, but the house of Pelias is⁽⁷⁶⁰⁾
hostile to me, and Creon, too. If you
are bound by oath, you won't give me up
when they come for me; but if we go only
by words, and not oaths to the gods, you might
be their friend and heed their demands, perhaps,
for I am weak, while they have wealth and power.⁽⁷⁶⁵⁾

Aegeus

You have shown much forethought with your words;
if you think it best, I won't refuse it.
It is safer for me also to have
some excuse to give your enemies,
and you'll be surer of yourself. Choose the gods.⁽⁷⁷⁰⁾

Medea

Swear by the Earth and the Sun, father of
my father, and the whole race of gods together.

Aegeus

To do what? Or not to do something? Tell me.

Medea

That you will never expel me from your land,
and, if one of my enemies comes for me,⁽⁷⁷⁵⁾
that you'll not give me up willingly while you live.

Aegeus

I swear by the Earth and the bright light of the Sun
and all the gods to abide by what you've said.

Medea

Good. What will you suffer if you break the oath?

Medea

Aegeus

That which comes to impious mortals.(780)

Medea

Then go on your way rejoicing, for all is well!
I'll come to your city as soon as I can,
when I've taken care of my affairs here.

[Exit Aegeus offstage.]

Chorus

May Lord Hermes walk with you
as your guide home, and may you accomplish(785)
that which you eagerly work for, since
you are a noble man, Aegeus,
in my opinion.

Medea

By Zeus and divine Justice and light of the Sun,
now, friends, I have glorious victory(790)
over my enemies, my foot is on the road!
Now I know my enemies will pay the price.
This man is like a harbor for the plans
I've been striving towards. I can tack my sails
on him and steer for the city and(795)
bastion of Athena. Now I shall tell you
all my plans, no leisurely conversation.
I will send one of my servants to ask
Jason to come and see me. When he comes,
I will speak soothing words to him, how I think(800)
he's right, he made a good marriage with the king—
the marriage he has now that he's betrayed us—
that it's prudent, he knew what he was doing.
But I'll ask that my sons be allowed to stay—
not that I would leave them in a hostile land,(805)
but so that I can trick and kill the princess.
I shall send them bearing gifts to her,
a delicate dress and golden crown.
When she takes them and puts them on her skin,
she will die horribly—and so will(810)
anyone who touches her! I will
anoint the gifts with powerful poisons.
Now, however, I dismiss the subject.
I mourn the deed that I must do then,
for I will kill my own children. There is(815)
no one who will save them; and when I have
obliterated the whole house of Jason,
I will leave the land, fleeing the murder
of my dearest children, having dared the most
unholy deed, for I will not suffer(820)
my enemies to mock me, my friends.

It was a mistake to leave my father's house,
trusting the words of a Greek man, who,
with God's help, will pay the penalty to me.
He'll never see the children born from me⁽⁸²⁵⁾
grow up, nor will he sire a child from his
newly-yoked bride, since she must die a horrible
death from my poisons. Let no one think me
weak or helpless or calm, but the other sort,
hard on enemies and kind to friends.⁽⁸³⁰⁾
People like this live the most famous lives.

Chorus

Since you shared your plan with us, I want to
help you and aid the laws of humanity:
please don't do this.

Medea

It cannot be otherwise. I understand⁽⁸³⁵⁾
why you speak this way—you've not suffered like me.

Chorus

Do you dare to kill your children, woman?

Medea

Because it will hurt my husband most of all.

Chorus

But you would become the most wretched of women!

Medea

So be it. Everything else is details. *[to one of her attendants]*⁽⁸⁴⁰⁾
Go and fetch Jason. I use you in all
my confidential affairs. Please say nothing
of my decisions, if you think well
of your mistress and were born a woman.

[Exit attendant offstage.]

Chorus

Str. /The children of Erechtheus have long been happy,⁽⁸⁴⁵⁾
children of the blessed gods, from
a holy, unconquered land, enjoying
the most famous wisdom, always walking
luxuriously through the clearest air, where
once, they say, the nine holy Muses of Pieria⁽⁸⁵⁰⁾
gave birth to golden Harmony;
Ant. /where, they boast, Aphrodite draws water
from the beautiful-flowing streams of Cephissus
and breathes down over the land
measured, sweet-smelling breezes, and her hair⁽⁸⁵⁵⁾
is crowned with a fragrant garland of flowers

by the Cupids, companions of Wisdom,
helpers in every kind of excellence.

Str. 2How, therefore, will this city
of holy rivers, this land⁽⁸⁶⁰⁾
that receives and helps its friends,
accept you, the child murderer,
unholy in the sight of others?
Consider the blow against your children!
Consider the murder you undertake!⁽⁸⁶⁵⁾
Don't—we are, all of us, all
together, suppliants at your knees—
don't kill your children!

Ant. 2Where will you take the courage of heart
and hand to pursue this terrible daring⁽⁸⁷⁰⁾
against the children?
How will you keep the tears
from your eyes when you look at them,
how will you keep your resolve
to kill them? You won't be able,⁽⁸⁷⁵⁾
when your sons fall down and plead,
to soak your hand in their blood
with your daring heart.

[Enter Jason with attendants.]

Jason

I am here as requested. Even though
you are angry, you won't lack this: I'll listen.⁽⁸⁸⁰⁾
What new thing do you want from me, lady?

Medea

Jason, I ask you to forgive what I said
before; it is logical for you to bear
my anger, since we two have done many acts
of kindness for each other in the past.⁽⁸⁸⁵⁾
I had a conversation with myself
and scolded myself, “Madwoman, why do I rave
and hate those wishing to help me? Why do I
make myself an enemy to the rulers
of this land and my husband, who is doing⁽⁸⁹⁰⁾
everything to help us, marrying
the princess and siring brothers to my children?
Why don't I stop being angry? Why do
I suffer, when the gods are treating me well?
Don't I have children? And don't I know⁽⁸⁹⁵⁾
that we are exiled and lacking friends?”
After these thoughts I perceived that I've been
very foolish and overly emotional.
Now, therefore, I applaud you and think you quite
restrained⁽⁹⁰⁰⁾
to take up my problem when I was foolish,

who ought to have embraced these plans
and helped see them through, standing by your bed
and taking delight in caring for your bride.
But, we are what we are—I won't say wicked,(905)
just women, so you must not conform to
my bad conduct, nor answer foolish words
with foolish words. I seek pardon and agree that
I spoke badly then, but I've rethought it all now.
O children, children, come here, leave the house.(910)

[The Children and Tutor enter from the house.]

Come out—embrace and greet your father with me,
and with Mother end our feud with a friend.
We have made peace, all the anger is gone!
Take his right hand—oh! I'm thinking of evils
hidden in the future. O children, will you,(915)
after living a long life, stretch out your
loving arms to me like that when I'm dead?
Poor me, how close to tears I am and full of fear!
After ending this long quarrel with your
father, my tender eyes have filled with tears.(920)

Chorus

My eyes also are taken by wet tears;
may this evil not grow greater than it is now!

Jason

My lady, I applaud your new words and
do not blame the earlier ones! It is
natural for the female race to be angry(925)
at a husband when he smuggles in a new wife.
But, your heart has changed for the better,
and you learned, albeit with time, that you were
defeated—that's the sign of a prudent woman.
For you, boys, your father has not unwisely(930)
gained great security, with God's help,
for I think you'll be the first men of
Corinth together with your brothers.
Just grow up; everything else your father
has achieved—and whichever god loves him.(935)
I want to see you solidly built when you
reach the end of youth, stronger than my enemies.
You there, why are your eyes wet with tears?
Why have you turned your white cheek away?
Did I say something to displease you?(940)

Medea

It's nothing. I was thinking about these children.

Jason

Medea

Cheer up! I will see it turns out well for them.

Medea

I will do as you say; certainly I
will not reproach your words, but women are
naturally delicate and close to tears.(945)

Jason

Why do you moan so much over the children?

Medea

I bore them: when you prayed for them to live,
worry came to me that it might not happen.
But, you came here to discuss certain matters—
some I've said, but I will now relate the rest.(950)
Since the king banishes me (to me, also,
this is a good idea: I know now
I should not be in your way, nor dwell in
the king's land, since I seem hostile to their house),
I, then, will depart this land in exile, but(955)
for the children, ask Creon to let them stay,
so that they may grow up under your care.

Jason

I don't know if I can sway him, but I'll try.

Medea

Then ask your wife to entreat her father
not to expel the children from the country.(960)

Jason

Yes, certainly, and I think I'll persuade her,
if she is like other women, anyway.

Medea

I will help you in this task, for I will
send her gifts far fairer than any
in existence now, I know it, a fine dress(965)
and a golden crown that the children will bear.

[to her attendants]

One of you, quickly, fetch here the costume.
She will be happy not in one way only,
but ten thousand, finding a peerless husband
like you for her bed and acquiring a costume(970)
that the Sun, my grandfather, once gave to his
offspring. Take it for her dowry, boys,
in your hands, and give it to the princess,
the blessed bride; she will not despise these gifts.

Jason

Why, silly woman, are you emptying your hands⁽⁹⁷⁵⁾
of these things? Do you think the royal house
lacks dresses? Or gold? Keep them, don't give them away.
If my wife thinks anything of me, she will
put my words before money, I'm sure of it.

Medea

Don't be like this with me. Gifts persuade even⁽⁹⁸⁰⁾
the gods, as the saying goes; for mortals,
gold is better than ten thousand words.
God watches over her, God increases
her power. As a young woman she already
rules; but I would give up my life to save⁽⁹⁸⁵⁾
my sons from exile, not only my gold.
Now, children, go into the wealthy house
and supplicate your father's new wife,
my mistress; when you give her the costume,
ask not to be exiled. It is crucial⁽⁹⁹⁰⁾
that she take the gifts with her own hand.
Go as quick as you can, and then be the
messengers of good news to your mother
when you come back to tell her that you have
made all her wishes come true.⁽⁹⁹⁵⁾

[Exit Jason with the Children, Tutor, and his attendants offstage.]

Chorus

Str. /Now my hope is gone that the boys will live,
gone—for they are already going into death.
The bride will accept the golden headband;
poor thing, she will accept her ruin.
She will put around her golden hair⁽¹⁰⁰⁰⁾
the costume of Death—
she with her own hands.

Ant. /The charm will persuade her, and the
heavenly gleam to put on
the dress and the crown wrought of gold.⁽¹⁰⁰⁵⁾
She'll wear her bridal garb among the dead.
Thus she'll be lured into the net,
poor thing, into her fate.
She will not escape her ruin.

Str. 2And you, wretched man, disastrously⁽¹⁰¹⁰⁾
married to royal kin,
unknowingly, you are bringing
mortal destruction to your sons and
hateful death to your wife.
Poor man, how much you misunderstand your destiny.⁽¹⁰¹⁵⁾

Ant. 2And I groan with your pains, O
wretched mother of these boys,
who will murder her children

because of a bridal bed that your husband
left behind along with you⁽¹⁰²⁰⁾
unlawfully to live with another consort.

[Enter the Tutor with the Children from offstage.]

Tutor

Mistress, the children are released from exile,
and the princess bride gladly took the gifts into
her hands. The palace sees the children in peace.
Hey—⁽¹⁰²⁵⁾
why are you troubled when things are going well?

Medea

Alas!

Tutor

I don't understand your reaction to this news.

Medea

Again, alas!

Tutor

I certainly don't know
what misfortune is in these tidings; am⁽¹⁰³⁰⁾
I mistaken by their pleasant appearance?

Medea

You announced what you announced. I don't blame
you.

Tutor

Why do you lower your eyes and weep?

Medea

I have reason to do so, old man, for the gods—⁽¹⁰³⁵⁾
and I in my madness—have devised these things.

Tutor

Cheer up! You'll return soon, through your sons'
influence.

Medea

I'll bring back others before this poor woman.

Tutor

You're not the first woman to be separated⁽¹⁰⁴⁰⁾
from her children. To bear misfortune lightly
is the duty of every mortal.

Medea

Medea

I will, but you, go inside the house and
prepare what the children need for the day.

[Exit Tutor into the house.]

O children, children, this is your city⁽¹⁰⁴⁵⁾
and home, where, after you have left poor me,
you will dwell, forever without your mother.
I am exiled to another land,
before I could enjoy you or see you happy,
before I could decorate your brides'⁽¹⁰⁵⁰⁾
chamber and lift high the wedding torch.
Oh, a wretched woman for my boldness!
In vain, children, did I give you birth,
in vain I suffered and was torn by labors,
bringing forth hard woes among my offspring.⁽¹⁰⁵⁵⁾
Once, this poor woman had many hopes in you,
to take care of me in my old age and
throw your loving arms around me when I'm dead,
an enviable thing for men. Now, that
sweet thought is destroyed, for, bereft of you,⁽¹⁰⁶⁰⁾
I will always lead a sad and painful life.
You will no longer see your mother with your
dear eyes, heading into another type of life.
Oh, oh—why do you look at me with those eyes,
children? Why do you smile this final smile?⁽¹⁰⁶⁵⁾
Alas! What will I do? My heart is gone,
ladies, seeing the beaming eye of my sons.
I could not—enough of those former plans!
I will take my children out of the country.
Why must I hurt their father with evils⁽¹⁰⁷⁰⁾
that will hurt me twice as badly? I won't!
Enough of those plans!
Although, why should I suffer? Will I
endure the mockery of my enemies
when I've let them get off unpunished?⁽¹⁰⁷⁵⁾
It must be dared. This is just weakness,
to keep admitting soft words to my mind.
Go inside, children. To anyone who is
not allowed to be present at my sacrifice,
that is your concern! I will not hold back my hand!⁽¹⁰⁸⁰⁾
Ah, ah!
Don't do it, heart, don't do these things yourself.
Let them go, poor woman, spare the children.
Living there with you they will make you happy.
No, by the avenging demons of Hell,⁽¹⁰⁸⁵⁾
it can never be that I provide a way
for my enemies to mistreat my children.
It's already been done; there is no escape.
The crown is surely on her head, and the
princess bride is dying in the dress, I know.⁽¹⁰⁹⁰⁾

But, since I am going down the most daring road
and will send them down one still more daring,
I wish to look at my sons. Children, give
your right hand to your mother to caress!
O dearest hands! and dearest mouths and shape⁽¹⁰⁹⁵⁾
and beautiful face of my children!
May you be happy...just there. Your father has
taken it all here. O honey-sweet embrace,
O softest skin and most delightful breath of my sons!
Go, go! I can no longer look at you,⁽¹¹⁰⁰⁾
but am overcome by weakness. I am
learning what evils I am about to commit,
but my heart is greater than my mind,
the cause of the greatest griefs for mortals.

[Exit the Children into the house.]

Chorus

Often before now, I have pondered⁽¹¹⁰⁵⁾
thought more subtle, and I have gone
into debates greater than the race of
women ought to examine.
But, we also have a muse, who teaches
us to make us wise, not all of us,⁽¹¹¹⁰⁾
but a small group (you might find one
among many) of women are
uninspired.
And I say that of mortals, those
who have no experience at all⁽¹¹¹⁵⁾
with children are luckier than those
who have them.
Childless people, who never learn
whether children are a blessing
or a pain, avoid many⁽¹¹²⁰⁾
troubles.
Parents with sweet children at home,
I see their time used up in care:
how to nurture them well and
give them a good livelihood;⁽¹¹²⁵⁾
and whether they are laboring
for noble men or wicked
is unclear.
One thing I denounce as the worst
evil of all for humanity:⁽¹¹³⁰⁾
even after you've found means enough
and the children grow into youth
and become noble, if God wills,
Death goes off to Hades carrying
the bodies of your children.⁽¹¹³⁵⁾
How, then, is it worthwhile
if, in addition to the other

labors for the sake of children,
God adds this most heartrending pain?

Medea

My friends, I've been standing here all this time⁽¹¹⁴⁰⁾
eagerly awaiting the news from the palace.
And indeed, I see this man, one of Jason's
attendants, approaching. His strained breath
shows that he will announce some new evil.

[Enter Messenger from offstage.]

Messenger

Medea, flee, flee! Neglect passage
neither by land nor by sea, by ship or road.

Medea

What has happened that I must fly like this?

Messenger

The young princess has just perished, and Creon
her father, at the hands of your poisons.

Medea

A most beautiful tale you've told, and I will count⁽¹¹⁵⁰⁾
you as a friend and benefactor forever!

Messenger

What? Do you understand rightly, or are you
mad, my lady? You've outrageously damaged
the royal hearth, and you're happy, unafraid?

Medea

I could reply to these words of yours,⁽¹¹⁵⁵⁾
but don't be hasty, my friend; just tell me:
how did they die? You will delight me
twice as much, if they died really terribly.

Messenger

When your sons came with their father and entered
the bridal house, we slaves who were distressed⁽¹¹⁶⁰⁾
by your troubles were delighted; quickly
the gossip passed through our ears that you and
your husband had ceased your previous quarrel.
One slave kissed the children's hands, while another
tussled their blond heads. I myself with happiness⁽¹¹⁶⁵⁾
followed the boys to the women's quarters.
The mistress whom we honor now instead of you,
before she saw the pair of your children,
cast an eager eye at Jason; then,
however, she cast down her eyes and turned⁽¹¹⁷⁰⁾

away her white cheek, in disgust at
the children's entrance. But your husband
took away the young lady's anger and bile,
saying, "Please don't be bitter towards friends,
but cease being proud and turn back your head,(1175)
recognizing your husband's friends as your own,
and accept these gifts and ask your father
to release these children from exile,
as a favor to me." When she saw the costume,
she did not hold back, but granted it all(1180)
to her man, and before the father and
your sons had gone far from the house, she took
the colorful dress and put it on;
placing the golden crown around her curls,
she arranged her hair with a shining mirror,(1185)
smiling at the lifeless image of her body.
Then she rose from her chair and left the room,
walking luxuriously with her white foot,
over-exulting in the gifts, and many,
many times stretching back her leg to better(1190)
admire her gown. Then, however, it was
a terrible sight to behold, for,
her complexion altered, she went back slantwise,
her limbs shaking, and she almost fell
onto the chair to avoid hitting the ground.(1195)
Some old woman, a servant, thinking, I suppose,
that she was possessed by Pan or some other god,
shouted, "Eleleu!" before she could see
white foam coming from her mouth and the girl's eyes
twisting in their sockets, the blood gone from her face.(1200)
Then instead of singing hallelujah
came a great shriek. One maid rushed off at once
into the father's house, and the maid
to the new husband, to tell him of his bride's
misfortune. The whole house was quaking with(1205)
heavy running. A fast sprinter would
already have reached the tape—that's how fast
the princess moved—breaking her silence and
opening her eyes to groan terribly,
for a second pain had attacked her:(1210)
The golden crown lying on her head sent
out a stream of all-devouring fire,
and the fine dress, gifts of your children,
devoured the ill-starred girl's white flesh.
She stood up from the chair and fled, burning,(1215)
trying to tear off the crown; but the gold
chain held her tightly in its clutch, and the fire,
when she shook her head, burned twice as brightly.
Defeated by her suffering, she fell
to the ground, difficult to recognize(1220)
except by a parent, for the form of her eyes

was not clear, nor her beautiful face,
and blood was dripping from the top of her head,
burning with fire, her flesh flowing off the bone
like pine sap from the poison's hidden teeth,(1225)
a terrible sight. Everyone was
afraid to touch the corpse, for we had
her misfortune as our teacher. Her father,
however—poor man, in ignorance
of the disaster, he came suddenly(1230)
into the house and fell on the corpse.
He groaned and embraced her, kissing her hands,
crying, “My poor child, what god has destroyed
you so pitifully? Who makes this old man,
one foot in the grave, bereft of you?(1235)
Oh, would that I could die with you, child!”
When he stopped wailing and groaning, the old man
tried to stand up, but the fine dress, like ivy
on the branches of a laurel, clung to his skin,
the struggling was terrible. The more he tried(1240)
to rise to his knees, the more she held on.
If he used force, he was just tearing the flesh
off his own old bones. In time he gave up
and, unfortunate man, let go his soul,
for he could no longer fight the evil,(1245)
The corpses lay there, the young girl with her
old father close by, a disaster regretted
with tears. Your side of it I will leave out
of the story, for yourself will know the return
of punishment. Humanity is, I think—(1250)
and not for the first time now—a shadow,
nor would I hesitate to say that those
who seem wise and are anxious about words,
those men pay the greatest penalty for
stupidity. No human being is(1255)
a happy man; when wealth is flowing towards him,
he might be luckier than another man,
but not truly happy.

[Exit Messenger offstage.]

Chorus

God seems to have cast many evils at
Jason on this day—justly. How we pity(1260)
your misfortune, poor daughter of Creon,
dying for your marriage to Jason.

Medea

Friends, I have decided to kill my sons
and set out from this land as soon as possible,
and not to allow with my delay some(1265)
more hostile hand to slay my children.

It is absolutely necessary
for them to die, but since it must be,
then I who gave them life will take it.
But, arm yourself for this, heart. Why do I⁽¹²⁷⁰⁾
delay these terrible, evil necessities?
Come, wretched hand of mine, take the sword.
Take it, and head for the sad starting block
of the rest of your life. Don't be a coward,
don't remember your children as your dearest ones,⁽¹²⁷⁵⁾
how you bore them, but for this one short day,
forget your sons. Mourn them later. Even
if you kill them, still, they are dear. I am
an unlucky woman.

[Exit Medea into the house.]

Chorus

Str. IO Earth and brilliant⁽¹²⁸⁰⁾
ray of the Sun, look down, look at this
lost woman, before she puts her
bloody, murderous hand to her children.
For she is sprung from your golden
seed, and it is fearful for the blood⁽¹²⁸⁵⁾
of a god to be spilled by men.
But, O heaven-born light, hinder her,
stop her, take from this home that
poor, murderous Fury, driven by revenge.⁽¹²⁹⁰⁾
Ant. 2In vain the labor of children is lost,
in vain, indeed, you bore that dear race,
O you who left the dark-blue rock of the
Symplegades, that most inhospitable passage.
Wretched woman, why does heart-oppressing wrath⁽¹²⁹⁵⁾
fall on you, and why does terrible
murder answer murder?
Pollution from relatives is difficult for mortals,
and it brings grief to kinslayers in tune with
their crime, falling on their house by god's will.⁽¹³⁰⁰⁾

Child

[from within the house]

Oh, no!

Chorus

Str. 2Do you hear the cry? Do you hear the child?
Oh, poor thing, O unlucky woman!

First Child

What do I do? Where can I escape Mother's hands?

Second Child

Medea

I don't know, dearest brother; we're done for!(1305)

Chorus

Should I go into the house? I think I should stop
the murder for the children.

First Child

Yes, by the gods, stop it! The time is critical!

Second Child

We are almost in the clutches of her sword!

Chorus

Wretched woman, truly you were always made(1310)
of stone or iron, if you can kill
with murderous fate
the children that you bore.
Ant. /One other, I've heard of one other woman of
all before us who attacked her dear children.(1315)
Ino, driven mad by the gods, when the wife
of Zeus sent her wandering from her home.
She fell, poor woman, into the sea, in an
impious murder of her children,
stepping too far on the promontory,(1320)
and she perished, dying with her two sons.
After this, is anything too horrible to happen?
O bed of women, site of many labors,
how many evils you have already
brought to humanity.(1325)

[Enter Jason with attendants from offstage.]

Jason

Ladies who stand by this house, is the one
who has created this horror, Medea—
is she at home or already fled?
Truly, she must either hide under the earth
or lift her body on wings into the sky(1330)
if she does not wish to pay the penalty
to the king's house. Does she believe that
after she's killed this land's royalty
she will escape this house without punishment?
Really, though, I care not so much for her
as for the children. Those whom she has harmed(1335)
will harm her, but I came to save the lives
of my sons, lest the family do something
to them I will regret in vengeance
for their mother's unholy murder.

Chorus

Medea

Poor man, you don't know the evil you've come into,(1340)
Jason, or you would not have said those words.

Jason

Why? Or does she want to kill me, too?

Chorus

Your children have died at their mother's hands.

Jason

What do you mean? You've destroyed me, lady!

Chorus

I mean you shouldn't think your children still live.(1345)

Jason

Loose the bolts as quickly as you can, servants,
open the doors, let me see this double evil,
them dead and her...I'll make her pay for it.

[Medea appears above the house in a chariot drawn by dragons.]

Medea

Why are you trying to force these doors,
seeking the corpses and me, who made them?(1350)
Save your efforts. If you have need of me,
if you want something, say it, but your hand
will never touch me. My grandfather
the Sun is giving me this chariot,
for protection against hostile hands.(1355)

Jason

O hate! O most utterly hateful woman—
to me and the gods and the whole race of man,
who dared to put to the sword your children,
that you bore, destroying me and leaving me
childless. How can you still look on the sun(1360)
and earth after you've done this, dared this most
impious deed? You should die! I know now
what I didn't know then, when I brought you
from your home and barbarian land
to a Greek home, a great evil, betrayer
of your father and the land that nurtured you.(1365)
The gods sent your avenging demon against me,
for you killed your own brother at the hearth
and then you boarded my beautiful ship,
the Argo. You started like this, but then,
after becoming this man's bride and bearing(1370)
his children, for the sake of your empty bed,
you killed them! No Greek woman would dare to do this,
but I didn't choose them; I decided

to marry you, a hateful and destructive
cause of sorrow to me, a lioness,⁽¹³⁷⁵⁾
not a woman, like Etruscan Scylla!
Oh—I could not sting you with ten thousand
reproaches, you were born with such confidence.
Go, evildoer, polluted with our sons' blood;
all I can do is bewail my fate.⁽¹³⁸⁰⁾
I will get no benefit from my new
marriage; I won't ever address the sons
I begot and brought up—I'm ruined.

Medea

I could answer you with a long reply,
but Father Zeus already knows what you've⁽¹³⁸⁵⁾
suffered from me and what I have done.
After dishonoring my bed, you weren't
about to live a happy life, laughing at me,
nor the princess; nor would he who made the match,
Creon, exile me from his land unpunished.⁽¹³⁹⁰⁾
For this, if you wish, call me a lioness,
or Scylla who lives on the Etruscan land.
I've snatched your heart as was necessary.

Jason

You also should grieve and share these evils.

Medea

True; but pain is profit, if it you're not the source.⁽¹³⁹⁵⁾

Jason

O children, what an evil mother you got!

Medea

O sons, you perished for your father's disease!

Jason

It wasn't my right hand that destroyed them!

Medea

But it was your insult and new marriage.

Jason

You really thought they should die for your bed?⁽¹⁴⁰⁰⁾

Medea

Do you think this is a small pain for a woman?

Jason

If she's sensible, but nothing is good for you.

Medea

Medea

They are dead, because it will hurt you.

Jason

They are, alas, pollution on your head.

Medea

The gods know who began the sorrow.(1405)

Jason

They also know your disgusting mind.

Medea

Hate me! I hate your bitter speechifying.

Jason

And I yours! But ending it is easy!

Medea

How then? What should I do? I certainly want that.

Jason

Allow me to bury and mourn these corpses.(1410)

Medea

Never! I myself will bury them with this
very hand. I will take them to the temple
of Hera on the mountain, so that none
of my enemies can dig up the tomb
and insult them; and I enjoin upon this(1415)
land of Sisyphus a solemn festival
and rites for all time in expiation
of this impious murder. I myself
am going to the land of Erechtheus,
to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion;(1420)
while you are going to die a bad death,
a fitting end for a wicked man,
struck on your head by a piece of the Argo,
having seen the bitter end of my marriage.

Jason

The may our children's Fury destroy you—(1425)
and murderous Justice!

Medea

What god or spirit listens to you,
the oath-breaker and deceiver of friends?

Jason

Oh, oh, foul, child-murdering woman!

Medea

Medea

Go home and bury your wife.(1430)

Jason

I will, unlucky in both my children.

Medea

Don't mourn yet; wait for your lonely old age.

Jason

O dearest children!

Medea

To their mother, yes, but not to you.

Jason

And still you slew them?(1435)

Medea

To cause you pain.

Jason

Alas, this poor man longs to kiss
the dear mouths of his children!

Medea

Now you would address them, now you would kiss
them,(1440)
but then you pushed them away.

Jason

By the gods, let me
touch the soft skin of my children!

Medea

Impossible; your words are spent in vain.

[Exit Medea in the chariot.]

Jason

Zeus, do you hear how I am driven away(1445)
and what I suffer at the hands of this accursed woman,
this child-slaying lioness?
Only this much is possible: I can
mourn and call upon the gods,
calling heaven to witness how(1450)
you killed my children and then prevented me
from touching them and burying their corpses,
whom I would never have sired
to see them dead by your hands.

Chorus

Medea

Zeus dispenses many things from Olympus,⁽¹⁴⁵⁵⁾
and the gods bring to pass much that is unexpected.
What was believed is not borne out,
while God finds a way for the unforeseen.
So it was in what has just passed.

Mythology

Greek tragedies were almost always based on well-known stories, so that just by hearing the names of the characters, the audience would already know a good deal about the play they were about to see. The story of Jason's adventures with the Argonauts was one of the most well-known myths of ancient Greece, even though it was not written as an epic until centuries after Euripides, in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes.

The tale is set two generations before the Trojan War, the setting of Homer's *Iliad* and the most famous epic of ancient Greece. Jason was a prince and rightful heir to the kingdom of Iolcus, but he was raised in ignorance of his royal roots and had to battle with his uncle Pelias, who had seized the throne. Pelias sent Jason on a quest to recapture the Golden Fleece, a solid gold sheep skin from a mythical golden ram. The Fleece was in the faraway kingdom of Colchis, a barbarian land on the Black Sea. To reach this distant land, Jason was aided by his patron goddesses Hera, the queen of the gods, and Athena, goddess of wisdom and crafts, who helped Jason build the first ship, the Argo.

Jason assembled a group of heroes from all over Greece to sail with him in the Argo. The Argonauts (which combines the name of the ship with the Greek word for "sailor") included Heracles, the greatest hero of Greece, and Castor and Pollux, the sons of Zeus and brother of Helen of Troy. They had many adventures on their way there; the most perilous was the voyage through the Symplegades. At the entrance to the Black Sea (the modern Dardanelles in Turkey), according to this myth, there were two rocks which crashed together whenever anything passed through them. Athena, however, helped the Argo to sail through, and the rocks never crashed together again, thus opening the Black Sea and the barbarian lands beyond to the Greeks.

Upon arrival in Colchis, the king assigned a number of tasks to Jason, such as yoking fire-breathing bulls and sowing a field with dragon's teeth, which instantly grew into armed and angry soldiers. Jason was at a loss, until the king's daughter, the skilled witch Medea, fell in love with him and came to his aid.

Medea then helped Jason to lure the Golden Fleece from the dragon who guarded it; in most versions, she drugged the dragon so that it fell asleep. In order to escape from Colchis, Medea murdered her brother and chopped his body to pieces, which she scattered from the Argo. Because a corpse had to be buried for that soul to find peace in the afterlife, Medea's father gave up the pursuit of Jason so that he could gather the parts of his son and bury them. Medea fled with Jason and married him.

Even though Jason brought the Golden Fleece back to Iolcus, Pelias refused to give him the kingship. Medea used her witchcraft to trick Pelias' daughters. She cut up an old ram, threw it into her cauldron, and produced a living lamb in its place. She told Pelias' daughters that they could rejuvenate their old father in the same way, but, of course, all they did was butcher and boil him. Forced to flee Iolcus, Jason, Medea, and their children eventually came to Corinth, which is where Euripides' play takes place.

As for the events that occur at the end of the play, there actually was a ritual in Corinth relating to the murdered children of Medea, though the standard explanation was that the Corinthians had murdered them in revenge after Medea killed the king and princess. It makes much more sense for the Corinthians to perform rituals to rid themselves of their own guilt—one reason why scholars suspect that Medea's murder of the children herself is a Euripidean invention, with these instructions by the now semi-divine woman as an explanation to link the two stories together.

Greek Tragedy: an Overview

The Genre of Greek Tragedy

The Greek tragedies that survive for us today were written and performed in a specific setting: the democratic city of Athens in the 5th century. They owe their literary background to the epic poems of Homer, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as lyric poems performed by large choruses, often on mythological subjects.

Greek legend attributed to Thespis the invention of acting (hence we call actors “thespians”). Drama was born when, instead of just narrating events, an actor assumed a character and interacted accordingly with the chorus, which consisted of a group of people specific to the drama (hence, in *Medea* the chorus is made up of women of Corinth). Both actor and chorus performed wearing elaborate costumes and masks. According to Aristotle, the great playwright Aeschylus added the second actor and Sophocles the third. With these three actors playing multiple roles (by changing their masks backstage!), a complete story could be acted out, and gradually the role of the chorus diminished. In the plays of Euripides, the chorus rarely achieves the role of a real character as it so often does, for instance, in the plays of Aeschylus.

The plays followed a fairly strict structure, with a prologue, the entrance of the chorus, and then several episodes separated by choral odes. The dialogue of the plays is written in meter, but was spoken, like the plays of Shakespeare, whereas the choral odes were written in a more complicated meter for the chorus to sing and dance. The plays also include a *kommos*, in which the main character(s) lament in song with the chorus. All in all, the form of Greek tragedy occupies a place somewhere between Shakespeare and opera. It is important, all the same, for modern readers to remember that they are getting a small portion of what the original audience received, for they are reading a *libretto* without the benefit of any music or the often elaborate costumes and scenery.

Tragedy and the City

The genre of tragedy is the particular product of the Athenian democracy. In the late 6th century BCE, the Athenians drove out the family of tyrants who had ruled the city for decades and established the only true democracy in western history. Almost all political offices were chosen by lot, and the assembly of all Athenian citizens voted directly on all important issues. It was during the 5th century that Athens became the most powerful city of Greece. After joining with other Greek cities to repel an invasion by the Persian Empire, the largest empire in the world at the time, Athens became an imperial power herself, conquering other Greek cities and eventually stretching their power too far and collapsing. Sparta and her allies conquered Athens in 404, and, although the democracy was restored and continued throughout the 4th century, Athens would never regain the glory she had achieved a century earlier.

Fifth-century Athens was an almost unparalleled area of cultural achievement, an enlightenment extending from philosophy and science through architecture and the visual arts. Tragedy was the premiere literary genre of this period, and it is fitting that the apex of the democracy should be symbolized by a genre of poetry that involves the entire citizen body. Performed at one of the major festivals of the city, the Great Dionysia, each tragedy was part of a contest. Three playwrights would be chosen by a city official, and each playwright would produce three tragedies and a satyr-play (a kind of farce intended to lighten the mood after three tragedies), all four plays being performed in a single day. The audience consisted of about 15,000 citizens, and the festival itself became a pageant of Athenian power and glory.

We know of many playwrights from this century, but the works of only three survived the end of antiquity and the Middle Ages, in which so much of ancient literature was lost. Fortunately, the three poets we have were universally considered to be the best: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Of these three, Euripides won

many fewer victories than the other two; he won the first prize only four times, compared to the thirteen victories of Aeschylus and the twenty of Sophocles. Nevertheless, Euripides was considered during his life to be one of the greatest playwrights; he was also extraordinarily popular after his death, both in Athens and beyond. As a result, more of his plays than those by Aeschylus and Sophocles have survived. The major surviving plays of Euripides besides *Medea* include *The Bacchae*, *The Trojan Women*, *Hippolytus*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. *Medea* was part of a tetralogy (group of four plays) that came in third at the festival. Does this tell us that the Athenians did not like the play? Remember that prizes were awarded for all four plays as a group. Without knowing the quality of the plays that accompanied *Medea*, we cannot know exactly why it came in third, although the play's dark, controversial nature has led many scholars to believe that it may have offended the conventional sensibilities of the judges.

Medea was first performed in 431 BC, a time when Athens was at the height of her power, and although plague would wreak havoc on the city, Athenians could view their empire and the war with Sparta with confidence. It was also a period when Sophocles was the dominant figure of tragedy and had already produced classic plays like *Antigone*. Euripides was well established as well, however, and had won his first victory in 441.

Conventions of Greek Drama

The most important convention of the Greek stage was the wearing of masks with attached wigs by all performers. As such, facial expression, which plays so large a role in modern theater, was not a factor. Additionally, the elaborate costumes worn by the actors and chorus members were often the most striking visual element. Staging was usually limited to the painted background behind the stage. Greek tragedies are all set outside, so this background usually depicted the exterior of the main characters' residence—in *Medea's* case, the house of Medea in Corinth. Changes of scene are rare in Greek tragedy, and props are kept to a minimum. The action of the drama takes place over a single day. In addition to the chorus and the three actors, mute characters could also appear on stage as needed, and important people like Jason and Medea would almost always appear with attendants. In front of the stage proper, which was not raised from the ground as in modern theaters, was a circular area called the *orchestra*, in which the chorus performed its dances. These would have musical accompaniment provided by an *aulos*, a double pipe like a modern oboe.

While ancient technology did not allow much in the way of special effects, there were two devices that Athenian playwrights could use to add great spectacle to their staging. One was a device called the *ekkyklema*. Since the action of the play takes place outside, the *ekkyklema* revealed the inside of the house. The stage doors would be thrust open and the *ekkyklema* would roll out, almost always carrying the corpses of characters who had just been killed inside. This happened so often in Greek tragedy that it would be expected by the audience; watch carefully to see how Euripides plays with this expectation in *Medea*.

The other stage effect was a crane known simply as the machine, which allowed characters to fly above the house and which usually provided striking entrances for gods. Mortal characters almost never appeared with the machine, and Euripides in particular often ended his plays by having a god or other divine character appear via the machine and straighten out a situation that was too confused or terrible for mortals to solve themselves, hence our phrase *deus ex machina*, "the god from the machine," referring to a plot device solving a story's problems with an element from outside the text itself.