

Euripides  
*Medea*



Translated by Ian Johnston

Euripides  
Medea

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by  
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Richer Resources Publications  
Arlington, Virginia  
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Euripides  
Medea

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Richer Resources Publications  
1926 N. Woodrow Street  
Arlington, Virginia 22207  
or via our web site at  
[www.RicherResourcesPublications.com](http://www.RicherResourcesPublications.com)

ISBN 978-0-9818162-4-1  
Library of Congress Control Number 2008931717

Published by Richer Resources Publications  
Arlington, Virginia  
Printed in the United States of America

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Translator's Note

Note that in the following translation the normal numbers refer to this text, while the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text. In numbering the lines, the translator has normally counted a short indented line with the short line immediately above.

Background Note

Jason was born the son of Aeson, in Iolcus. When his father lost the kingship, Jason was secretly put into the care of the famous centaur Chiron, who raised him. As a young man Jason returned to Iolcus. The king, Pelias, who had deprived Aeson of the kingship, persuaded Jason to set off on an expedition to capture the Golden Fleece, the pure gold skin of a ram which was in a sacred grove in Colchis (a barbarian region to the east of the Euxine Sea, the Greek name for the Black Sea), where it was guarded by a dragon.

Jason put together a band of adventurers called the Argonauts. They took their name from the ship they sailed in, the Argo. The heroes had a number of adventures on the way to Colchis. When they arrived in Colchis, king Aeetes set them a number of tasks, including yoking two fire-breathing bulls, ploughing a field with them, sowing the field with teeth from the dragon of Cadmus, and then fighting against the warriors who arose from the sown teeth.

To complete these tasks Jason enlisted the help of Medea, daughter of king Aeetes. She fell in love with Jason and helped him with her magic to complete the tasks set by Aeetes and to steal the Golden Fleece. She then escaped with Jason, killing her brother in order to scatter his body on the sea so that Aeetes would have to hold up his pursuit of Jason and Medea.

Jason and Medea returned to Iolcus, where Medea's magic restored Jason's father, Aeson, to youthful health. Medea also persuaded the daughters of king Pelias to kill their father by giving them ineffective medications and persuading them to try a course of treatment which was fatal. Jason and Medea then moved to Corinth, where Jason married the daughter of king Creon. The story of the play begins immediately after Jason's marriage to his new bride.

## Medea Dramatis Personae

NURSE: a servant of Medea  
TUTOR: a servant assigned to Jason's children  
MEDEA: wife of Jason  
CHORUS: a group of Corinthian women  
CREON: king of Corinth  
JASON: husband of Medea  
AEGEUS: king of Athens  
MESSENGER: a servant of Jason's  
CHILDREN: Medea's and Jason's two young sons  
ATTENDANTS on Creon and Jason.

*[Outside the home of Jason and Medea in Corinth. The Nurse, a slave who serves Medea, is standing by herself]*

NURSE

O how I wish that ship the Argo  
had never sailed off to the land of Colchis,  
past the Symplegades, those dark dancing rocks  
which smash boats sailing through the Hellespont.<sup>1</sup>  
I wish they'd never chopped the pine trees down  
in those mountain forests up on Pelion,  
to make oars for the hands of those great men  
who set off, on Pelias' orders,  
to fetch the golden fleece. Then my mistress,  
Medea, never would have sailed away 10  
to the towers in the land of Iolcus,  
her heart passionately in love with Jason.  
She'd never have convinced those women,  
Pelias' daughters, to kill their father.  
She'd not have come to live in Corinth here, [10]  
with her husband and her children—well loved  
in exile by those whose land she'd moved to.  
She gave all sorts of help to Jason.  
That's when life is most secure and safe,  
when woman and her husband stand as one. 20

<sup>1</sup>The Symplegades were two rocks in the Bosphorus, the entrance to the Black Sea, which clashed together and destroyed ships.

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But that marriage changed. Now they're enemies.  
 Their fine love's grown sick, diseased, for Jason,  
 leaving his own children and my mistress,  
 is lying on a royal wedding bed.  
 He's married the daughter of king Creon,  
 who rules this country. As for Medea,  
 that poor lady, in her disgrace, cries out, [20]  
 repeating his oaths, recalling the great trust  
 in that right hand with which he pledged his love.  
 She calls out to the gods to witness 30  
 how Jason is repaying her favours.  
 She just lies there. She won't eat—her body  
 she surrenders to the pain, wasting away,  
 always in tears, ever since she found out  
 how her husband has dishonoured her.  
 She's not lifted her eyes up from the ground  
 or raised her head. She listens to advice,  
 even from friends, as if she were a stone,  
 or the ocean swell, except now and then  
 she twists that white neck of hers and weeps, 40 [30]  
 crying to herself for her dear father, her home,  
 her own land, all those things she left behind,  
 to come here with the man who now discards her.  
 Her suffering has taught her the advantages  
 of not being cut off from one's own homeland.  
 Now she hates her children. When she sees them,  
 there is no joy in her. And I'm afraid  
 she may be up to some new mischief.  
 Her mind thinks in extremes. I know her well.  
 She'll not put up with being treated badly. 50  
 I worry she may pick up a sharp sword  
 and stab her stomach, or else she'll go [40]  
 into the house, in silence, to that bed,  
 and kill the king and bridegroom Jason.  
 Then she'll face an even worse disaster.  
 She's a dangerous woman. It won't be easy  
 for any man who picks a fight with her  
 to think she's beaten and he's triumphed.

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*[Enter Medea's and Jason's children with their Tutor]*

Here come her children. They've finished playing.  
They've no notion of their mother's troubles. 60  
Young minds don't like to dwell on pain.

TUTOR

Old slave from my mistress' household,  
why are you here, standing by the gate, [50]  
all alone, complaining to yourself  
about what's wrong? How come Medea  
is willing to stay inside without you?

NURSE

Old servant of Jason's children,  
when a master's lot falls out badly,  
that's bad for faithful servants, too—  
it touches their hearts also. My sorrow 70  
was so great, I wanted to come here,  
to speak to earth and heaven, to tell them  
about the wrongs inflicted on my mistress.

TUTOR

Unhappy lady! Has she stopped weeping yet?

NURSE

Stopped crying? I envy your ignorance. [60]  
Her suffering has only just begun—  
she's not even half way through it.

TUTOR

Poor fool—  
if I can speak that way about my masters—  
she knows nothing of her latest troubles.

NURSE

What's that, old man? Don't spare me the news. 80

TUTOR

Nothing. I'm sorry I said anything.

NURSE

Come on, don't hide it from a fellow slave.

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I can keep quiet if I have to.

TUTOR

Well, I was passing by those benches  
where the old men gamble by Peirene,  
at the holy spring, and I heard someone say  
(I was pretending I wasn't listening)  
that Creon, king of this country, intends  
to ship the children away from Corinth,  
with their mother, too. I've no idea  
if the story's true or not. I hope it's not.

[70]

90

NURSE

But surely Jason wouldn't let his children  
go into exile, even if he's squabbling  
with their mother?

TUTOR

Old devotions fade,  
pushed aside by new relationships.  
Jason is no friend of people in this house.

NURSE

If we must add these brand-new troubles  
to our old ones, before we've dealt with them,  
then we're finished.

TUTOR

But listen—the time's not right  
to let your mistress know about these things.  
So keep quiet. Don't mention anything.

[80]

100

NURSE

Children, do you hear what sort of man  
your father is to you? My curse on him!  
No. He is my master—but a bad man  
to his own family. Of that he's guilty.

TUTOR

What mortal man is not? Don't you know yet  
all men love themselves more than their neighbours.  
And some are right to do that—while others

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just want some benefit. But this father,  
with his new wife, has no love for his children. 110

NURSE

Come on, children, get inside the house.  
Things will be fine.

*[To the Tutor]*

You must keep them away— [90]  
as far as possible—and don't bring them  
near their mother when she's in this state.  
I've seen her look at them with savage eyes,  
as if she means to injure them somehow.  
I know this anger of hers will not end,  
not before she turns it loose on someone.  
I hope it falls on enemies, not on friends!

MEDEA *[crying from inside the house]*

I can't stand this pain, this misery. 120  
What do I do? I wish I could die!

NURSE

My dear children, you hear your mother's cry.  
Her heart's upset. Her anger's growing, too.  
So quickly now, run off inside the house. [100]  
Stay out of sight. Don't try to go and see her.  
She's fierce, headstrong by nature. Take care.  
So go now—inside as quickly as you can.

*[The Tutor and children enter the house]*

It's obvious the cloud of bitter grief  
rising inside her is only just the start.  
As her temper grows even more intense, 130  
it will soon catch fire. She's a passionate soul,  
hard to restrain. What will she do next,  
now her heart's been bitten by these injuries? [110]

MEDEA *[from inside the house]*

The pain of this suffering—this intense pain.  
Am I not right to weep? Oh my children,  
cursed children of a hateful mother—

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may you die with your father, all his house,  
may it all perish, crash down in ruins.

NURSE

O the sorrow of it all. Poor woman!  
Why link your children with the nasty things 140  
their father's done? Why do you hate them so?  
I'm terrified the children will be hurt.  
The pride of rulers is something to fear—  
they often order men, but seldom listen. [120]  
And when their tempers change it's hard to bear.  
It's better to get used to living life  
as an equal common person. Anyway,  
I don't want a grand life for myself—  
just to grow old with some security.  
They say a moderate life's the best of all, 150  
a far better choice for mortal men.  
Going for too much brings no benefits.  
And when gods get angry with some home,  
the more wealth it has, the more it is destroyed. [130]

*[Enter the Chorus of Corinthian women]*

CHORUS LEADER

I heard her voice, I heard the cries  
of that sad lady here from Colchis.  
Has she not calmed down yet? Old nurse, tell me.  
I heard from some household servant in there  
that she's been screaming. I find no pleasure  
in this house's suffering. We've been friends. 160

NURSE

This house is finished—already done for.  
For Jason's bound by his new marriage tie 140  
to the king's daughter. As for my mistress,  
her tears are washing away her life in there,  
inside the house. She finds no consolation  
in the words of any of her friends.

MEDEA *[still from inside the house]*

Oh why can't a bolt of lightning strike me?

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What point is there in living any more?  
I want death to come and sweep me off—  
let me escape this life of suffering! 170

CHORUS

O Zeus and Earth and Sun—  
do you hear how this young wife  
sings out her misery? [150]  
Thoughtless lady,  
why long for death's marriage bed  
which human beings all shun?  
Death comes soon enough  
and brings an end to everything.  
You should not pray for it.  
And if your husband 180  
devotes himself to some new bed,  
why get angry over that?  
Zeus will plead for you in this.  
Don't waste your life away,  
with too much wailing for your husband.

MEDEA [*within*]

O great Themis and noble Artemis, [160]  
do you see what I am having to endure,  
when I'm the one who bound that cursed man,  
my husband, with strong promises to me?  
O how I want to see him and his bride 190  
beaten down, destroyed—their whole house as well—  
for these wrongs they dare inflict on me,  
when I've done nothing to provoke them!  
O father and city, I left you behind  
in my disgrace when I killed my brother.

NURSE

Do you hear what she's saying, how she calls  
on Zeus' daughter Themis, who hears our prayers,  
who guards, they say, the promises men swear. [170]  
She's bound to do something quite serious  
before this rage of hers comes to an end. 200

CHORUS LEADER

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I wish she'd let us see her face to face  
and listen to what we have to tell her.  
That might calm down her savage temper,  
the fury in her heart. I'd like the chance  
to show good will to a lady whom I like.  
Go now—bring her here outside the house. [180]  
Tell her she'll be among some friends of hers.  
And hurry, before she harms someone in there—  
that power in her grief will make her act.

#### NURSE

All right, though I'm afraid I won't persuade 210  
my mistress. Still, as a favour to you,  
I'll see what I can do. Right now she glares  
at servants when they come close to her  
to tell her something. She's like a bull,  
or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks.  
Those men from long ago—you'd not be wrong [190]  
to call them fools without much wisdom.  
They thought up songs for celebrations,  
feasts and banquets, bringing to human life  
delightful music. But they found nothing 220  
in music or the lyre's many strings  
to end the bitterness of human life,  
the pain in living, sorrows bringing on  
the deaths and horrifying disasters  
which destroy whole families. What a blessing  
it would be for human beings if music  
could cure these sorrows. When people feast, [200]  
why should people sing? It's a waste of time.  
People who eat well are happy anyway—  
they've enjoyed the pleasure of the meal. 230

*[Nurse exits into the house]*

#### CHORUS

I have heard Medea's crying,  
full of sorrow, full of tears,  
her shrill accusations against Jason,  
the husband who's betrayed her.

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Suffering such injustice, she cries out,  
calling the gods—calling Themis,  
Zeus' daughter, goddess of those promises  
which carried her across the ocean  
to Hellas, through the black salt seas, [210]  
through the place which few men penetrate, 240  
the strait which guards the Pontic Sea.

*[Enter Medea with the Nurse]*

MEDEA

Women of Corinth, I'm coming here,  
outside the house, so you won't think ill of me.  
Many men, I know, become too arrogant,  
both in the public eye and in their homes.  
Others get a reputation for indifference,  
because they stay at ease within the house.  
There's no justice in the eyes of mortal men.  
Before they know someone's deep character, [220]  
they hate her on sight, though she's not hurt them. 250  
A guest of the city must comply, of course,  
act as the city wants. I don't commend  
a stubborn man, not even a citizen,  
who, thanks to his stupidity, annoys  
his fellow townsmen. But in my case,  
this unexpected blow that's hit me,  
well, it's destroyed my heart. My life is gone,  
dear friends. I've lost all joy. I want to die.  
The man who was everything to me,  
my own husband, has turned out to be 260  
the worst of men. This I know is true.  
Of all things with life and understanding, [230]  
we women are the most unfortunate.  
First, we need a husband, someone we get  
for an excessive price. He then becomes  
the ruler of our bodies. This misfortune  
adds still more troubles to the grief we have.  
Then comes the crucial struggle: this husband  
we've selected, is he good or bad?  
For a divorce loses women all respect, 270

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yet we can't refuse to take a husband.  
 Then, when she goes into her husband's home,  
 with its new rules and different customs,  
 she needs a prophet's skill to sort out the man  
 whose bed she shares. She can't learn that at home. [240]  
 Once we've worked hard at this, and with success,  
 our husband accepts the marriage yoke  
 and lives in peace—an enviable life.  
 But if the marriage doesn't work, then death  
 is much to be preferred. When the man tires 280  
 of the company he keeps at home, he leaves,  
 seeking relief for his distress elsewhere,  
 outside the home. He gets his satisfaction  
 with some male friend or someone his own age.  
 We women have to look at just one man.  
 Men tell us we live secure and safe at home,  
 while they must go to battle with their spears.  
 How stupid they are! I'd rather stand there  
 three times in battle holding up my shield [250]  
 than give birth once. But your story and mine 290  
 are not the same. For you have a city,  
 you have your father's house, enjoy your life  
 with friends for company. But I'm alone.  
 I have no city, and I'm being abused  
 by my own husband. I was carried off,  
 a trophy from a barbarian country.  
 I have no mother, brother, or relation,  
 to shelter with in this extremity.  
 And so I want to ask something from you.  
 If I find some way to punish Jason 300 [260]  
 for these injustices, and his bride, as well,  
 and father, too, say nothing. In other things  
 a woman may be timid—in watching battles  
 or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,  
 her marriage violated, there's no heart  
 more desperate for blood than hers.

#### CHORUS LEADER

I'll do what you request. For you are right

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to pay your husband back. And, Medea,  
I'm not surprised you grieve at these events.

*[Enter Creon, with armed attendants]*

I see Creon, king of Corinth, coming. 310  
He'll be bringing news, announcing  
some new decision that's been made. [270]

CREON

You there, Medea, scowling in anger  
against your husband. I'm ordering you  
out of Corinth. You must go into exile,  
and take those two children of yours with you.  
Go quickly. I'm here to make quite sure  
that this decree is put into effect.  
I'll not go back to my own palace  
until I've cast you out, beyond our borders. 320

MEDEA

O now my sufferings will kill me. It's over.  
My enemies have set full sail against me,  
and there's no way I can avert disaster.  
But, Creon, let me ask you something— [280]  
I'm the one abused, so why banish me?  
What have I done?

CREON

I'm afraid of you.  
I won't conceal the truth. There's a good chance  
you might well instigate some fatal harm  
against my daughter. Many things lead me  
to this conclusion: you're a clever woman, 330  
very experienced in evil ways;  
you're grieving the loss of your husband's bed;  
and from reports I hear you're making threats  
to take revenge on Jason, on his bride,  
and on her father. Before that happens,  
I'm taking some precautions. Woman, [290]  
it's better that you hate me, than for me  
to grow soft now and then regret it later.

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## MEDEA

Alas, this is not the first time, Creon,  
my reputation has badly damaged me. 340  
It's happened often. No man with any sense  
should ever educate his children  
to know anything beyond what's normal.  
Quite apart from charges of idleness  
which other people bring against them,  
they stir up in their fellow citizens  
a hostile envy. If you offer fools  
some brand new wisdom, they'll consider you  
quite useless, not someone wise. And if, [300]  
within the city, people think of you 350  
as greater than those men who seem quite wise,  
you'll appear a nuisance. So it is with me.  
For I'm a knowledgeable woman. I make  
some people envious. Others say I'm shy.  
Some the opposite. Some say I'm hostile.  
I'm not that clever, but still you fear me.  
Have I hurt you at all, made you suffer?  
Don't fear me, Creon. It's not in me  
to commit crimes against the men in charge.  
Besides, in what way have you injured me? 360  
You've married your daughter to a man,  
one your heart selected. My husband's [310]  
the one I hate. In my view, you've acted  
with good sense in this business. So now,  
I'll not begrudge you your prosperity.  
Have your marriage, and good luck to you.  
But let me remain here, in this country.  
Although I've suffered an injustice,  
I'll obey the rulers and stay silent.

## CREON

What you say sounds comforting enough, 370  
but I'm still afraid that heart of yours  
is planning something evil. At this point,  
I trust you even less than previously.  
Passionate people, women as well as men,

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are easier to protect oneself against,  
than someone clever who keeps silent.  
No. You must leave—and right away.  
No more speeches. I've made up my mind.  
It's not possible for you to stay here,  
not with us, given your hostility to me.

[320]

380

MEDEA [*kneeling in front of Creon*]

No, don't send me away. I'm begging you,  
at your knee, in your daughter's name.

CREON

Your words are useless. You won't persuade me.

MEDEA

You'll send me into exile without hearing  
my supplication?

CREON

Indeed I will.

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

MEDEA

O my homeland! How I'm thinking of you now.

CREON

Except for my own children, my country  
is what I cherish most by far.

MEDEA

Alas,

love's a miserable thing for mortal men.

390

[330]

CREON

I think events determine if that's true.

MEDEA

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

CREON

It's time to leave,  
you foolish woman. Time to rid myself  
of all this trouble.

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MEDEA

We have trouble enough—  
there's no need for any more.

CREON

Come on—  
or my servants will throw you into exile.

MEDEA

No, don't do that. I beg you, Creon . . .

*[Medea seizes Creon's hand]*

CREON

Woman, it seems you're trying to provoke me.

MEDEA

All right then. I will go into exile. 400  
I wasn't begging to escape from that.

CREON

Then why clutch my hand so hard and not let go?

MEDEA

Let me remain here one day to prepare, [340]  
to get ready for my exile, to provide  
something for my children, since their father,  
as one more insult, does nothing for them.  
Have pity on them. You're a parent, too.  
You should treat them kindly—that's what's right.  
If I go into exile, I don't care,  
but I weep for them in their misfortune. 410

CREON

For a tyrant my will is by nature tender,  
and by feeling pity I've been hurt before,  
more than once. And now, woman, I see  
I'm making a mistake, for you can have [350]  
your extra day. But let me warn you—  
if the sun catches you tomorrow  
within the borders of this country,  
you or your children, you'll be put to death.

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Don't think I'm not telling you the truth.  
So, if you must remain, stay one more day. 420  
In that time you can't do the harm I fear.

*[Exit Creon with his attendants]*

CHORUS LEADER

Alas for you, unfortunate woman—  
how wretched your distress. Where will you turn?  
Where will you find someone to take you in?  
What country, what home will you find yourself  
to give you shelter from misfortunes? [360]

MEDEA

Things have worked out badly in every way.  
Who can deny the fact? But nonetheless,  
you should not assume that's how things will stay.  
The newly wedded pair still face some struggles, 430  
and the man who made this marriage happen  
might have serious problems yet. Do you think  
I'd prostrate myself before a man like that,  
if there was no advantage to be gained?  
If I did not have some plan in mind,  
I'd not have talked to him or grabbed his hand. [370]  
But the man's become completely foolish—  
when he had the power to prevent me  
from planning anything, by sending me  
out of his land, he let me stay one day,  
a day when I'll turn three of my enemies 440  
to corpses—father, daughter, and my husband.  
Now, I can slaughter them in many ways.  
I'm not sure which one to try out first.  
Perhaps I should set the bridal suite on fire,  
or sneak into the house in silence,  
right up to their marriage bed, and plunge [380]  
some sharpened steel right through their guts.  
There's just one problem. If I get caught  
going in their house, meaning to destroy it, 450  
I'll be killed, and my enemies will laugh.  
No. The best method is the most direct,

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the one at which I have a special skill—  
 I'll murder them with poison. Yes, that's it.  
 But once they're dead, what city will receive me?  
 Who'll give me safe shelter as a guest  
 and offer me physical protection?  
 There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while.  
 If someone shows up who can shield me, [390]  
 I'll set my scheme in motion and kill them  
 without saying a word. But if events  
 force me to act openly, I'll use a sword.  
 Even though it will bring about my death,  
 I'll push my daring to the very limit  
 and slaughter them. By Hecate, the goddess  
 I worship more than all the others,  
 the one I choose to help me in this work,  
 who lives with me deep inside my home,  
 these people won't bring pain into my heart  
 and laugh about it. This wedding of theirs, 470  
 I'll make it hateful for them, a disaster—  
 Creon's marriage ties, my exile from here, [400]  
 he'll find those bitter. So come, Medea,  
 call on all those things you know so well,  
 as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,  
 this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.  
 You see what you have to put up with.  
 You must not let Jason's marriage make you  
 a laughing stock among Corinthians,  
 compatriots of Sisyphus, for you 480  
 trace your family from a noble father  
 and from Helios, the sun.<sup>1</sup> So get to work.  
 Besides, we have a woman's nature—  
 powerless to perform fine noble deeds,  
 but very skilled in all the forms of evil.

## CHORUS

The waters in the sacred rivers [410]

<sup>1</sup>*Sisyphus*: in Greek mythology, the founder and first king of Corinth, famous for his punishment in Hades, as described in Homer's *Odyssey*, where he is condemned to an eternity of rolling a bolder up a hill, only to have it roll down again.

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are flowing in reverse,  
and all well-ordered things  
are once more turning on themselves.  
Men's plans are now deceitful, 490  
their firm trust in the gods is gone.  
My life is changing—common talk  
is giving me a better reputation.  
Honour's coming to the female sex.  
Slander will no longer injure women. [420]

Those songs by ancient poets  
will stop chanting of our faithlessness.  
Phoebus, god of song and singing,  
never put into our minds the gift  
of making sacred music with the lyre, 500  
or else I would have sung a song  
in response to what the male sex sings.  
For our lengthy past has much to say  
about men's lives as well as ours. [430]

You sailed here from your father's house,  
your heart on fire, past those two rocks  
that stand guard to the Euxine Sea.  
You live now in a foreign land.  
You've lost your marriage bed,  
your husband, too, poor woman. 510  
And now you're driven out,  
hounded into exile in disgrace.

The honour in an oath has gone.  
And all throughout wide Hellas [440]  
there's no shame any more.  
Shame has flown away to heaven.  
So to you, unhappy lady,  
no father's house is open,  
no haven on your painful voyage.  
For now a stronger woman 520  
rules in your household,  
queen of his marriage bed.

*[Enter Jason]*

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## JASON

Right now is not the first time I've observed  
how a harsh temper makes all things worse—  
impossibly so. It's happened often.  
You could've stayed here in this land and house,  
if only you'd agreed to the arrangements,  
showed some patience with those in command.  
Now you're exiled for your stupid chatter. [450]  
Not that I care. You don't have to stop  
calling Jason the worst man in the world. 530  
But when you speak against the ruler here,  
consider yourself very fortunate  
that exile is your only punishment.  
I've always tried to mollify the king—  
he has a vicious temper—and have you stay.  
But you just wouldn't stop this silly rage,  
always slandering the royal house.  
That's why you've got to leave the country.  
Anyway, I won't neglect my family. 540  
I've come here, woman, looking out for you, [460]  
so you won't be thrown out with the children  
in total need and lacking everything.  
Exile brings with it all sorts of hardships.  
Although you may well despise me now,  
I could never have bad feelings for you.

## MEDEA

As a man you're the worst there is—that's all  
I'll say about you, no trace of manhood.  
You come to me now, you come at this point,  
when you've turned into the worst enemy 550  
of the gods and me and the whole human race?  
It isn't courage or firm resolution  
to hurt your family and then confront them, [470]  
face to face, but a total lack of shame,  
the greatest of all human sicknesses.  
But you did well to come, for I will speak.  
I'll unload my heart, describe your evil.  
You listen. I hope you're hurt by what I say.

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I'll begin my story at the very start.  
 I saved your life—every Greek who sailed with you 560  
 on board that ship the Argo can confirm it—  
 when you'd been sent to bring under the yoke  
 the fire-breathing bulls and then to sow  
 the fields of death. And I killed the dragon  
 guarding the Golden Fleece, coiled up there, [480]  
 staying on watch and never going to sleep.  
 For you I raised the light which rescued you  
 from death. I left my father and my home,  
 on my own, and came with you to Iolcus,  
 beneath Mount Pelion. My love for you 570  
 was greater than my wisdom. Then I killed  
 Pelias in the most agonizing way,  
 at the hands of his own daughters,  
 and then destroyed his household, all of it.  
 Now, after I've done all this to help you,  
 you brute, you betray me and help yourself  
 to some new wife. And we have children!  
 If you'd had no children, I'd understand [490]  
 why you're so keen on marrying this girl.  
 And what about the promises you made? 580  
 I don't know if you think the ancient gods  
 still govern, or if new regulations  
 have recently been put in place for men,  
 but you must know you've broken faith with me.  
 By this right hand, which you have often held,  
 and by my knees, at which you've often begged,  
 it was all for nothing to be touched like that,  
 by such a worthless man. I've lost all hope.  
 But come now. I'll sort things out with you,  
 as if you were a friend. I've no idea 590  
 what sort of kindness to expect from you. [500]  
 But let's see. The things I'll ask about  
 will make you look even more disgraceful.  
 Where do I now turn? To my father's house?  
 For your sake I betrayed my country,  
 to come here with you. Then should I go  
 to Pelias' daughters in their misery?

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They'd surely welcome me with open arms,  
 since I killed their father. That's how things stand.  
 To my family I'm now an enemy, 600  
 and by assisting you I declared war  
 on those whom I had no need to injure.  
 For all the ways I've helped you, you made me,  
 in the eyes of many wives in Greece,  
 a lucky woman, blessed in many things.  
 But what a wonderful and trusting husband [510]  
 I have in you now, in my misfortune,  
 if I go into exile, leave this land,  
 with no friends, all alone, abandoned,  
 with my abandoned children. And for you, 610  
 what a fine report for a new bridegroom,  
 his children wandering round like vagabonds  
 with the very woman who saved his life.  
 O Zeus, why did you give men certain ways  
 to recognize false gold, when there's no mark,  
 no special token on the human body,  
 to indicate which men are worthless.

CHORUS

When members of a family fight like this, [520]  
 rage pushes them beyond all compromise.

JASON

Woman, it seems I'll need to give good reasons, 620  
 and, like a skilled helmsman on a ship,  
 haul in my sails and run before that storm  
 blowing from your raving tongue. In my view,  
 you overestimate your favours to me.  
 I consider goddess Aphrodite  
 the only one of gods or mortal men  
 who saved my expedition. As for you,  
 well, you've a subtle mind. But if I told  
 how Eros with his unerring arrows [530]  
 forced you to save me, I could injure you. 630  
 So I won't press the matter very far.  
 However you helped me, you did it well.  
 But by saving me you got in return

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more than you gave, as I will demonstrate.  
 First of all, you now live among the Greeks,  
 not in a country of barbarians.  
 You're familiar with justice and the laws,  
 rather than brute force. Besides, all the Greeks  
 know you're clever, so you've earned yourself  
 a fine reputation. If you still lived 640 [540]  
 out there at the boundary of the world,  
 no one would talk about you. And great fame  
 I'd sooner have than houses filled with gold,  
 or the power to sing sweet melodies,  
 sweeter than all the songs of Orpheus.  
 That's my response to you about my labours.  
 Remember you started this war of words.  
 As for your complaints about this marriage,  
 I'll show you that in this I'm being wise,  
 and moderate, and very friendly to you, 650 [550]  
 and to my children. You must have patience.  
 When I came here from the land of Iolcus,  
 I brought with me many troubles, hard ones,  
 things impossible for me to deal with.  
 What greater good fortune could I have found  
 than marrying the daughter of the king,  
 me—an exile? On the point that irks you,  
 it's not the case I hate our marriage bed,  
 overcome with lust for some new bride,  
 nor am I keen to rival other men 660  
 in the number of my many children.  
 We have enough. I'm not complaining.  
 The most important thing for us to do  
 is to live well and not in poverty,  
 knowing that everyone avoids a friend 670 [560]  
 once he's a pauper. As for my children,  
 I want to raise them in the proper way,  
 one worthy of my house, to have brothers  
 for the children born from you, and make them  
 all the same. Thus, with a united family  
 I might prosper. Do you need more children?  
 In my case, there's some benefit to have

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new children to help those already born.  
Was this a bad scheme? You'd agree with me,  
if you weren't so upset about the sex.  
But you women are so idiotic—  
you think if everything is fine in bed,  
you have all you need, but if the sex is bad, [570]  
then all the very best and finest things  
you make your enemies. What mortals need 680  
is some other way to get our children.  
There should be no female sex. With that,  
men would be rid of all their troubles.

#### CHORUS LEADER

Jason, your reasons here seem logical,  
but it strikes me, if I may presume,  
you're in the wrong abandoning your wife.

#### MEDEA

I'm very different from many others,  
in all sorts of ways—in my opinion,  
the unjust man who speaks so plausibly [580]  
brings on himself the harshest punishment. 690  
Since he's sure his tongue can hide injustice,  
he dares anything. But he's not that clever.  
So you should not parade before me now  
your clever words and faulty reasoning.  
One word demolishes your argument:  
if you were not corrupt, you'd ask me first,  
get my consent to undertake this marriage,  
but you didn't even tell your family.

#### JASON

Oh yes, if I'd told you of the wedding,  
I'm sure you would have lent me fine support. 700  
Even now you can't stand to set aside  
that huge rage in your heart. [590]

#### MEDEA

You're lying.  
You thought as you grew old a barbarian wife  
would bring you disrespect.

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JASON

Get this straight—  
this royal bride I have, I didn't marry her  
because of any woman. As I told you,  
I wanted to save you and have children,  
royal princes, with the same blood as my sons.  
That way my house has more security.

MEDEA

May I never want a merely prosperous life, 710  
accepting pain or great wealth at the expense  
of happiness here in my heart.

JASON

Do you think [600]  
you can change that prayer and sound more sensible?  
You should not consider this advantage  
painful, or pretend to be so wretched  
when things are going well for you.

MEDEA

Keep up the insults. You have your refuge.  
I'm alone and banished from this country.

JASON

That's what you've chosen. The blame rests with you.

MEDEA

What did I do? Marry and desert you? 720

JASON

You kept making all those bitter curses  
against the ruling family here.

MEDEA

And I'm a curse against your family, too.

JASON

I'm not arguing with you any more [610]  
about all this. But if you want me  
to provide some money, some assistance  
for you and the children in your exile,  
just ask. I'm prepared to give you some,

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and with a generous hand. I'll send my friends  
introductory tokens, so they'll treat you well. 730  
You'd be mad not to accept this offer.  
Woman, stop being so angry. If you do,  
things will turn out so much better for you.

MEDEA

I'll accept no assistance from your friends,  
nor anything from you. Don't make the offer.  
Gifts from a worthless man are without value.

JASON

All right, but I call the gods to witness  
I'm willing to help you and the children. [620]  
But you reject my goods and stubbornly  
push away your friends, and that the reason 740  
you suffer still more pain.

MEDEA

Get out of here.  
For someone so in love with his new bride  
you're spending far too long outside her home.  
Go act married. The gods may well see to it  
your marriage changes into one of those  
which make you howl with sorrow.

*[Exit Jason]*

CHORUS

Love with too much passion  
brings with it no fine reputation,  
brings nothing virtuous to men.  
But if Aphrodite comes in smaller doses, 750 [630]  
no other god is so desirable.  
Goddess, I pray you never strike me  
with one of those poisoned arrows  
shot from that golden bow of yours.

I pray that moderation,  
the gods' most beautiful gift,  
will always guide me.  
I pray that Aphrodite

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never packs my heart with jealousy  
or angry quarrelling. 760  
May she never fill me with desire  
for sex in other people's beds.  
May she bless peaceful unions, [640]  
using her wisdom to select  
a woman's marriage bed.

O my country and my home,  
I pray I never lack a city,  
never face a hopeless life,  
one filled with misery and pain.  
Before that comes, let death, 770  
my death, deliver me,  
bring my days to their fatal end.  
For there's no affliction worse [650]  
than losing one's own country.

I say on this based on what I've seen,  
not on what other people say.  
For you are here without a city—  
you have no friends to pity you,  
as you suffer in this misery,  
suffer in the harshest way. 780  
The man who shames his family, [660]  
who doesn't open up his heart  
and treat them in all honesty—  
may he perish unlamented.  
With him I never could be friends.

*[Enter Aegeus, King of Athens]*

AEGEUS

I wish you all happiness, Medea.  
There's no better way to greet one's friends.

MEDEA

All happiness to you, too, Aegeus,  
wise Pandion's son. Where are you coming from?

AEGEUS

I've just left Apollo's ancient oracle. 790

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MEDEA

The prophetic centre of the earth?  
What business took you there?

AEGEUS

To ask a question.  
I want to know how I can have some children.

MEDEA

In the gods' name, have you lived so long  
without ever having any children? [670]

AEGEUS

Not one. Some god is doing this to me.

MEDEA

Do you have a wife? Or have you stayed unmarried?

AEGEUS

No, I'm married. My wife shares my bed.

MEDEA

So what did Apollo say about it?

AEGEUS

Words too wise for human understanding. 800

MEDEA

It is appropriate for me to learn them?

AEGEUS

Of course. They need a clever mind like yours.

MEDEA

What was the prophecy? Tell it to me—  
if it's all right for me to hear.

AEGEUS

He told me this:  
"Don't untie the wineskin's foot. . ."

MEDEA

Until when?  
Until you do what or reach what country? [680]

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AEGEUS

“ . . . until you come back to your hearth and home.”

MEDEA

What were you looking for when you sailed here?

AEGEUS

A man called Pittheus, king of Troezen.

MEDEA

He's Pelops' son, a very holy man, they say.

810

AEGEUS

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

MEDEA

He's a wise man and skilled in things like that.

AEGEUS

And the friendliest of all my allies.

MEDEA

Well, good luck. I hope you find what you desire.

AEGEUS

Why are your eyes so sad, your cheeks so pale?

MEDEA

O Aegeus, my husband has been cruel—  
of all men he's treated me the worst.

[690]

AEGEUS

What are you saying? Tell me truly—  
what things have made you so unhappy?

MEDEA

Jason's abusing me. I've done him no harm.

820

AEGEUS

What has he done? Give me more details.

MEDEA

He's taken a new wife. She now rules his home,  
instead of me.

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It is easy to see why Professor Johnston's works are increasingly becoming the translations of choice in high schools, colleges and universities in the U.S. here and around the world. Reviews of his work can be found on our website, which is listed below.

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## Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston is a retired university teacher and a Research Associate of Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*.

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# Euripides Medea

Translated by Ian Johnston

Euripides' *Medea*, first produced in 431 BC, has long been considered one of the great masterpieces of classical Greek drama and has attracted attention in modern times as one of the first great works of feminist drama. The play pits *Medea*, a murderously passionate barbarian princess, against her husband, Jason, the leader of an expedition of Greek heroes who set out to capture the fabled Golden Fleece. Jason was successful on that voyage largely because of *Medea's* help, which required her to turn against her own family. They returned together, became husband and wife, and had two children. Now, however, Jason has married a princess of Corinth, and *Medea* faces an uncertain future in exile. Her response to this threat is the basis for one of the best known and most horrific plots in classical Greek drama.

Ian Johnston's new verse translation stays close to the original Greek text and offers a fluent English version, one which is particularly well suited to stage presentations of this famous work.

## About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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