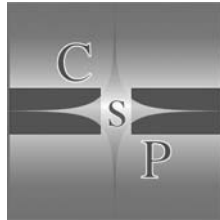


Introductions and Translations to the Plays of
Sophocles and Euripides

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Sophocles and Euripides
Vol. II

Introduced and translated by

Harry Love



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Line numbers in all the play-texts refer to the corresponding lines in the Greek texts.

INTRODUCTION: THE MASKS OF MEDEA

I

The story of Medea as presented by Euripides is, on the face of it, quite straightforward: a young lady (a princess) in a faraway country falls passionately in love with a good looking sailor from the old country. She, being a person from a faraway country, so possibly not very well brought up, elopes with the sailor and demonstrates her feelings for him by helping him to achieve his mercantile goal (the golden fleece) and murdering numerous members of her own family. Back in the old country and with a couple of children, she finds that her sailor has abandoned her for another woman, rather younger and better connected socially. She is to be thrown out of town with her two sons and left to her own devices. In an excess of pique she murders her rival and her rival's father, using unorthodox methods learned in her faraway homeland. She then murders her two children, an act which, though regrettable, even painful, succeeds in wiping the smile off her husband's face. Finally she leaves, triumphant, using an unorthodox means of locomotion provided by her rather unorthodox and foreign family.

It sounds an unlikely story, but its essential ingredients and the character who embodies them refuse to go away. Medea keeps coming back, assuming all sorts of shapes, wearing any number of masks, and giving off more 'meanings' than a post-modernist could shake a stick at. Even in this brief summary of the story there is apparent a number of situations, actions and character traits that have gripped writers and performers for a couple of millennia.

1. She is an alien in a 'civilised' country.
2. She is perceived by her hosts to have special, even supernatural, powers.
3. Her passions, of love or hate, and her revenge are extreme – she lacks control or moderation.

4. She betrays her own family as a consequence of her passion.
5. *She* is betrayed by her husband.
6. She murders her own children.
7. Unusually for a tragic heroine, she gets off, rescued by her divine relations. In spite of all her lamentation and suffering, her cries of “Teach me how to die!” (96) in the beginning of the play, she never looks like doing the decent thing as, say, Phaedra does in the *Hippolytus*.

The point is, of course, that these very characteristics and situations, while always emotionally gripping and essentially theatrical, can be evaluated in a variety of ways and made to fit a variety of archetypal situations that are significant for different historical periods. Medea can be witch-like and evil; passionate and sympathetic; the alien in our midst (the ‘other’); the champion of the oppressed and betrayed. It all depends what you think is important and, perhaps, what you think ‘tragedy’ is. We will look at a few moments of this history, at some of the masks she has worn over time, and then at the face, or faces, we might yet see. And we should begin with the observation that Euripides’ play, though presented as a translation into Latin by George Buchanan in Scotland in the 1540s, was not actually *translated* again for performance until Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in Germany (1904) and Gilbert Murray in England (1907). The story is adapted into dramatic, operatic and balletic forms that reflect the aesthetic and moral priorities of their times. It is only through the twentieth century that more or less faithful translations of Euripides’ text begin to catch up with adaptations and amalgams of the Medea legend.¹

II

Historically, then, Medea has appeared in many guises according to whether this or that aspect of her story has been emphasised or suppressed. We will step lightly over other ancient versions of the story, such as Seneca’s or the fourth century AD *Medea Volans* (*The Flying Medea*), a kind of cantata in which St Augustine himself was reputed to have performed, and settle upon the sixteenth century. It is from this point that Medea regularly arises as either the front person or scapegoat for a moral/political cause.

¹ The historical section of this introduction is based largely on essays by Fiona Macintosh, Diane Purkiss and Edith Hall in, E.Hall, F.Macintosh and O.Taplin (eds), *Medea in Performance 1500 – 2000*, Oxford: OUP, 2000.

The Renaissance focus was on her witch-like qualities, wherein the supernatural inclines toward the *unnatural*, with all that that implies. Her ‘charms’ – both erotic and chemical – corrupt fine, upstanding men and make them effeminate, as Spenser tells us in the *Fairie Queen*. Or, according to Michael Drayton, as innocent as she may have been before she met Jason, her unbridled passions rush headlong toward elemental chaos:

Medea pitifull in tender yeares,
Untill with Jason she would take her flight,
Then mercilesse her brother’s lymmes she teares,
Betrays her father, flyes away by night,
Nor nations, seas, nor daungers could affright;
Who dyed with hate, nor could abate the wind,
Now like a tiger falls into her kind.
(From ‘Mortimeriades’)

And Medea’s most famous Renaissance descendant, Lady Macbeth, is as determined as her grand-dam to subordinate duties of childcare to other priorities:

I have given suck, and know,
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

III

By the eighteenth century Medea is a different person. Euripides in general has become assimilated into the cult of ‘sensibility’ – his pathetic situations and tragic passions (though never undiluted or unimproved) make him the most popular ancient model for an affecting and improving evening at the theatre. Medea, therefore, is transmogrified into an eighteenth century heroine; as Edith Hall puts it, [by the 1780s] “Greek tragic heroines had been transformed into the theatrical equivalents of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa.” She is the abandoned wife, who, overwhelmed by her love and neglected by her husband, struggles to maintain her virtue as a wife and mother. If she kills the children, she is allowed to plead temporary insanity, and she may even kill herself when she realises what has happened. The theatrical focus is on the passions and their affective power; not only do you see and empathise with virtuous passions, but, just as Wordsworth was a better man for spotting how

decrepit but still virtuous his Leech Gatherer was, you see the suffering and leave the theatre a much improved person.

Richard Glover's 1767 adaptation is perhaps the most characteristic and popular English version. The focus is on Medea's overwhelming love for Jason, and the dramatic climax is a study of madness brought about by suffering. In Act V we witness a sequence of emotional vignettes that takes us stage by stage through Medea's journey out of the madness which has driven her to infanticide. First, the avenging warrior queen – the height of her madness, and furthest in character from her real feminine self; then pathetic and distracted (shades of Ophelia); third, the crisis of despair; lastly, awareness and guilt.

MEDEA [*as she rises from a swoon of despair*]
 Not the disburthen'd sluices of the skies,
 The wat'ry Nereids with the ocean's store,
 Nor all the tears, which misery has shed,
 Can from their mother wash her children's blood.
 Where shall I hide from the piercing day?
 What man will grant protection to my guilt,
 What god afford me safeguard at his altar?
 Thou must alone receive me, thou, O earth.
 Then, while I crush my bosom on thy surface,
 And grasp the dust within my struggling hands,
 Distain my limbs, and strike my head against thee.
 At length in pity my suff'rings sue
 The loit'ring gods to rear the friendly bolt,
 And close my sorrows on thy peaceful breast.
 [Glover, *Medea* – Act V Sc 2]

The play ends with the intervention of Juno to prevent Medea's suicide and her departure in the divine chariot, after a touching dialogue with Jason whom she still adores; wifely and motherly virtues emerge intact.

IV

The nineteenth century lost interest in Medea the Mad Mother, but not in her other possible roles. She strikes more recognisably modern social and political attitudes: as the outsider, the colonial victim, or the torchbearer for a developing women's movement. In the German-speaking world Franz Grillparzer's *Medea* (1821), the third part of an Aeschylean-like trilogy, focussed on the racial and psychological undercurrents of her mistreatment in a foreign land. This is a sympathetic and victimised Medea, and she is the foundation for most interpretations through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Victorian burlesque, through the long-standing popularity of Murray's translation of

Euripides in 1907, to innumerable campaigns against sexual, racial and psychological oppression up to the present day.

In London on 14 July 1856, at the Olympic and Adelphi theatres, two plays opened: Robert Brough's *Medea, or the Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband*, and Mark Lemon's *Medea, or a Libel on the Lady of Colchis*. Though comic, Brough's version in particular had a contemporary political edge, contributing to the divorce law debate by extending the figure of Medea from a victim in need of protection to that of an individual who asserts her rights to freedom and self-fulfilment. The comedy is no send-up of the 'new woman' (even if she is played by a man) but of the absurdity of her situation. As the play nears its end Creon threatens to seize the boys, but, "*Medea is seen standing...quivering with emotion – reeking knife in her hand.*" And just as more slaughter is about to happen, the knife turns into a jester's bauble and the dead are revived. Medea turns to the audience with this speech:

What can a poor, lone, helpless woman do –
Battled on all sides – but appeal to you?
My plot destroyed – my damages made good.
They'd change my very nature if they could.
Don't let them – rather aid me to pursue
My murderous career the season through;
Repentance is a thought that I abhor,
What I have done don't make me sorry for.

Nora, the heroine of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, who similarly refuses to allow 'them' to 'change her nature,' is Medea's direct descendant.

Gilbert Murray's 1907 rendition of Euripides' text (Euripides dressed in Swinburne's verse, as T.S. Eliot snottily put it) was a significant departure from previous practice; for the first time *Euripides'* play is put successfully before a popular audience. While any translation is necessarily an adaptation, both linguistically and theatrically, the preservation of the original's plot and structure is a risky venture because it is likely to require from an audience an unusual degree of knowledge and effort to be able to respond to what they see. The fact that the modern Medea, she who has dominated twentieth century interpretations of her story, coincides with an interest in Euripides' text, is significant. In particular, the famous 'Women of Corinth' speech, which had been omitted from all known earlier adaptations of the play, becomes a focus of interpretation. Murray's translation was easily the most influential presentation of Medea in the English speaking world in the early twentieth century, being performed in Britain, the USA and South Africa for almost 40 years.

Sybil Thorndike was the actress who made this Medea famous. For her this was a thoroughly feminist play, as it was for Gilbert Murray. "Medea," she is recorded as saying, "was in a way justified. As I studied the part I thought about the position of women in the world, the position of the underdog." But the possibilities of Euripides' text go further than this, and during the 1928-9 tour of South Africa, the parallels of race and gender become apparent, so bringing together the English Medea with the German tradition established by Grillparzer's adaptation. In South Africa a Johannesburg theatre management relented to allow Africans into the audience, though segregated in the dress-circle. Sybil Thorndike commented:

Until now it had been for me a war cry for all oppressed people – now it was the blacks, as Medea, crying out against the civilised whites in the person of Jason, the Greek. You heard sort of deep-breathing sounds from the dress-circle, and it was absolutely thrilling.

V

The Medea legend, perhaps even more than that of Oedipus, is among the most powerful and enduring of ancient stories to excite the imagination of post-Renaissance Europe. Among Euripidean dramas *Hippolytus* (though more accurately, Phaedra) has had a similarly long, but less widespread and consistent history, and latterly *The Women of Troy* and the *Bacchae* have struck historical harmonies.

Euripides appealed to the eighteenth century through his 'pathetic situations and tragic passions,' which appeared to reinforce conventional understanding and evaluation of emotion, especially with regard to women. He appealed to the twentieth century because these same situations and passions, in the context of the evolution of European thought, reflected a more intense interest in the emotional lives of individuals and the variety of social or moral constraints imposed on them. If Medea becomes the standard-bearer for oppressed women or racial minorities, it is because an imaginative understanding of the experience of individuals, of the constraints to self-fulfilment or self-realisation, have become a focus of value or attention. Perhaps the most revolutionary effect of Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics, through their focus on the significance of emotions and insistence on empathy as the means of communicating them, is to have elevated the emotional experience of an individual as a locus of value in the context of other values (systems of morals, social organisation and occasionally metaphysics).

However, Euripides was no Romantic. If emotions have a special significance in Greek tragedy (and they have) it is not merely as a measure of

the authenticity of ‘character’ according to a scale of intensity, but as natural phenomena that include but go beyond human experience and values. The ‘Masks of Medea’ referred to in the title are not intimations of inauthenticity, of spurious identities that cover up, even smother, an inner self that craves emotional release, but are aspects of the whole person, each one as ‘real’ as the others. It is not, therefore, a case of the kind of moral and psychological striptease that characterises, say, Nora in Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*, who leaves behind her inauthentic roles of wife, mother and daughter, to reveal something more authentic and personal within. The situation that Medea is in, on the other hand, releases through her a force that annihilates the role of mother, her last remaining social role, after other equally important roles, as wife and citizen, have been stripped away by Jason. It all comes down to what is meant by ‘mask’.

The word for ‘mask’ (*prosopon*) in ancient Greek has none of its connotations in modern English of concealment or dissimulation. It was the regular word for ‘face’ or ‘countenance’, with particular emphasis on the features, especially the eyes. The *prosopon* marked the identity of an individual as he or she existed in relation to others, not something which hid a private and inalienable self from view.²

There is, however, an essential Medea who is different from the other characters on the stage. The difference is her divinity, that force which is let loose so devastatingly by the mistakes and misunderstandings of ordinary human beings. We are given intimations of this further dimension to Medea’s character early in the play by the Nurse [“She can be frightening, a dangerous enemy” (45); “Yes, dark clouds groan and then / There’s lightning. What will she do? / Insulted, her rage is unstoppable” (106-10)] and later by Medea herself (806-10). This is what Jason, with his cool, rational view of the world, has failed to see, and what Creon overlooks, in spite of his natural fears, when he grants her one more day to set her affairs in order. On the stage only the Chorus know the reality, even if they fail to understand it. They are drawn in by their initial sympathy for injustice done to Medea as a wife and a mother to be accomplices to the exaction of a ‘justice’ that is beyond their merely human comprehension. The nature of such justice perhaps requires further explanation.

Euripides was always a controversial playwright, and even his contemporaries, though they acknowledged his talent, never warmed to him as they did to Aeschylus and Sophocles. One can only speculate why, but perhaps his combination of a relentless dissection of the power of emotion and an equally relentless determination to maintain an ironic perspective on it, could

² Edith Hall, programme note for the National Theatre production of the *Bacchae*. London, 2002.

provide some explanation. This was not Sophocles' method – in *Oedipus the King*, for example, dramatic irony is resolved when the truth is revealed, and the exodos elaborates on that emotional moment and its possible meanings with no irony whatsoever. There is no opportunity to question the role of Apollo in creating the circumstances that give rise to the tragedy. The real resolution of the play is to allow the audience to penetrate, emotionally, the barrier of irony that previously distanced them. That is what audiences really like – ancient, modern, and most in between. Sophocles was always careful to keep his gods in the background, and so avoid contaminating them with irony.

Euripides allows no such resolution and keeps his gods firmly in the frame. At the conclusion of the *Hippolytus*, for example, Artemis coolly observes the carnage, and a dying Hippolytus muses: “Oh, if the race of men could curse gods.” “Enough,” says Artemis, and proceeds to put an end to this distasteful episode:

Not even in that darkness
 Below the earth will Aphrodite's
 Rage against your body and your
 Good and pure soul be unavenged.
 I will exact justice on another;
 One of hers will feel my dart. (1415-20)

And so it will go on. Hate and revenge are here presented with a cool matter-of-factness that ironically underscores the passionate agonies the human characters have endured and have acted out on behalf of their divine patrons. Artemis is the pure embodiment of her sector of Nature, as Aphrodite is of hers. As gods they are impersonal, able only to react to whatever acknowledges or refuses to acknowledge their reality; ie, to ‘justice’ or ‘injustice’. The gods have no masks and have no need to protect themselves from the pain of existence inside the trappings of human reason or institutions. As the messenger in *Medea* remarks at the end of his grisly account of the deaths of Creusa and Creon:

Man is a mere shadow, and I can say,
 Quite confidently, the clever men, those who
 Find *reasons* for things, deserve to be whipped.
 None of us can be happy – you may be rich,
 You may be lucky, but never, never happy. (1225-30)

What the Messenger has seen is inhuman, naked emotion, or that force which we call emotion in a human context, scorch its way through human lives. The victims have been stripped of their masks – in this case of everything, of their language, their familial bonds, their customs, everything, including their flesh.

It has long been considered a problem with this play that Euripides concludes it by transforming Medea into a god who conveniently embarks on an Air Colchis flight out of it all. It is a problem, especially for we moderns with our less metaphysical understanding of theatre, to know how to maintain a credible transition from victim to divine victor. Most often it is presented as a *symbolic* event, or a metaphor for her escape from persecution and betrayal into a more authentic existence. At least in the *Bacchae* we knew from the start that Dionysus was a god, so that his appearance, unmasked, at the end was not altogether a surprise. And the ‘justice’ he dispenses there is no different from that dealt out by Medea.

Formally *Medea* falls between the two other plays I have mentioned. She shares her human suffering with Phaedra; ie, the loss of society, self-respect, human communion; and her divine anger she shares with Aphrodite. Aphrodite, and whatever it is she represents, acts through her human surrogate who must, in the scheme of things, be destroyed. In effect, the apotheosis of Medea is a death – her human attributes have been destroyed. There are many hints throughout the play that there is more to this woman than meets the eye (the Nurse’s continual expressions of fear that no-one is safe in the face of her mistress’s anger, and Medea’s own assurance to the Chorus that, “In hate or love [or to enemies or friends] I am of a different breed” 809).

We can see the last mask slip when she says goodbye to her children, and she experiences much the same dilemma that confronts Phaedra in the *Hippolytus*. And like Phaedra she is caught by time, by the fact that things have happened and cannot be revoked. The pendulum swings between maternal feeling and the rage inspired by Jason’s insult, until she remembers that events have overtaken her:

Oh, no. No! My heart. You can’t do this!
Leave them. Spare your own children.
In Athens they’ll make you happy.
No! No! By all the horrors of hell
I can never, never leave my children
To be insulted by my enemies.
But it’s done now – I can’t avoid it.
Yes, I’m quite sure. She’ll have put on
The crown, the gown. The girl is dead.
Well. It is a hard, hard road for me,
And I will send them down a harder one. (1056-68)

From this point on she isn’t human any more; she is unmasked, a raw thing of nature. What Jason’s betrayal has done is to have deprived Medea of the attributes and relationships that make her human; he has betrayed the very ‘civilisation’ he claims to have conferred on her.

Euripides' masks are humanising attributes, those things like reason, language, conventions, the multitude of modes of communication that distinguish us from gods and the non-human. They are the things that prevent individuals from merely devouring whatever is in the way, and being, like the gods, blindly self-regarding. And it is important to remember that in this context masks are not things that cover, obscure or falsify; they are themselves real and significant, like Medea's mother-mask in that last speech. It is just as real as the anger that throws it off. And this, I think, is where Euripides differs from the moderns who have used his play as a model for the manipulation of social and moral masks. The notion of authenticity, of something under the mask that is *more* real than the appearance, is a relatively modern one. What is authentically human in the post-Romantic world, an inner life of self-affirmation which is expressed largely through emotional states, is exactly what characterises the gods, or the natural world, for Euripides. And what is essentially human for him has been translated into the inauthentic, the unreality of roles and stereotypes.

Note on the translation

The translation of *Medea* that follows was done for a specific production of the play. Given the setting of that production, in a more or less modern, eastern European peasant community, references to royalty (principally variations of *tyrannos*, and occasional uses of *anax* and *basileus*) have been modified to 'master,' 'chief,' 'first family,' etc.

In other respects the translation is an attempt, as far as is possible, to marry speakability with a clear rendition of the Greek.

EURIPIDES'

MEDEA

The Characters

Medea

Nurse attendant to Medea

Tutor to Medea's two sons

Creon King of Corinth

Aegeus King of Athens

Messenger

Medea's two Sons

Chorus of Corinthian Women

Scene: Corinth

NURSE

If they'd never gone; if that ship had
 Never slipped the dark Symplegades
 For Colchis; if the pines of Pelion were
 Never cut for oars for the hands of heroes 5
 Swayed by Pelias' word on a golden fleece;
 Medea would not have sailed to
 Iolchos, heartstruck for Jason. She
 Would not have pressed Pelias' daughters
 To kill him, nor fled to Corinth with her 10
 Man and her children, a stranger, but welcome,
 And all obedience to her husband –
 Compliance in a wife is a great thing. 15
 But now, what she most loved, she hates;
 She and her children are betrayed by
 Jason, who beds, for political purposes,
 The daughter of Creon, our King.
 She howls through the house, miserable, 20
 Dishonoured, vowing this and that, calling
 The gods to witness what sort of
 Promises he made. She eats nothing,
 Collapses in pain, tears never stop ever since 25
 She found him out. She can neither raise
 Her eyes nor lift her face from the floor.
 For her friends, it's like talking to stone, or
 The tide; or she'll bend her lovely neck and 30
 Moan for the father and the home she betrayed
 For the man who holds her in such contempt.
 Now the poor thing knows what it means
 Not to forsake your homeland. 35
 She hates her babies – can't look at them.
 I'm scared of what she might be thinking.
*
 She can be frightening, a dangerous enemy. 45
 But that's enough. The boys have finished their
 Exercise. They know nothing of this –
 Young minds know nothing of pain.

TUTOR

Old lady, what are you doing out here,
Wailing so horribly to yourself? How
Will Medea take being left alone? 50

NURSE

O, venerable tutor, this honest slave
Suffers in sympathy for her mistress. 55
I had to come out, just to tell what
She suffers to the earth or to heaven.

TUTOR

So the poor woman still weeps?

NURSE

You're fortunate – *her* grief's newborn, not half grown. 60

TUTOR

Poor wretch – if I can say so of a mistress.
She knows nothing of what's to come.

NURSE

What? Well, old man. Don't stop there.

TUTOR

Nothing. I wish I hadn't spoken.

NURSE

By your beard, don't hide this from *me*. 65
I can keep my mouth shut, if I must.

TUTOR

Near the holy spring of Peirene some
Old men sat at draughts. I heard one say
That Creon intends to drive these children 70
Out of Corinth, along with their mother.
It may be true. I don't know. I hope not.

NURSE

Will Jason let the children suffer because
He has a difference of opinion with their mother? 75

TUTOR

Old ties die and are left behind –
He's no friend to this house.

NURSE

O god, then we're lost, if there's yet a new
Disaster before we've solved the old one.

TUTOR

This is not the time to tell her. 80
Hold your tongue.

NURSE

Oh, my children. Do you hear what your father is?
No. No, I must not curse. He's my master.
But he's guilty. He hurts those he loves.

TUTOR

Who isn't? Have you just discovered that? 85
We all put ourselves first, sometimes
Rightly, sometimes just for what we can get.
He's lovestruck. He doesn't care about them.

NURSE

Go inside my dears. It's all right, really. 90
Keep them away, don't let them
Near her while she's like this.
I've seen her watch them, bull-eyed.
She'll do something. She won't let go,
I know it, not before she's crushed somebody.
Let it be her enemies, not her friends. 95

MEDEA

A cry from inside. Please, teach me how to die.

NURSE

There she is. Oh, my dear boys, her
Heart is moved, and so is her anger. 100
So inside, quickly, don't go near,
Don't let her see you, stay away from
Her rage – she's dangerous and she's determined.

Go now! Inside now! 105
Yes, dark clouds groan and then
There's lightning. What will she do?
Insulted, her rage is unstoppable. 110

MEDEA

Oh, and I should weep for what I bear.
Children, your mother is hated and you
Are cursed. May you, your father
And all this house be crushed.

NURSE

My lady, yes, yes you suffer, but must 115
Your children suffer for their father's sin?
Why hate them? I'm sick to think what
Might happen to them. There's a strange temper
In princes – they make, they don't take commands. 120
Their anger can't be moved. I've learned to
Live humbly – oh, let me grow old in peace.
Moderation is better, whether you say it or do it.
Power brings nothing, only greater pain
When the gods are angry against a house. 130

CHORUS

I heard her voice. I heard this unhappy woman
From Colchis cry out. Still she frets.
Old woman, tell me. I heard her cry
From outside the door. I get no pleasure 135
When this house suffers. It is dear to me.

NURSE

This is no 'house.' It's gone, finished.
The man is held in a princess' bed; 140
The woman's life melts away in her
Chamber, and not a word
Of comfort from anyone.

MEDEA

Oh, let heaven's fire strike my head!
What do I gain by living? 145
No, no, let me leave behind

The life I hate.

CHORUS

Zeus and Earth and Light,
Do you hear the song
Of a suffering wife?

strophe

150

Why, lady, lie in that
Fearful bed? Why
Do you want to die?

Don't pray for that.

If your man's desire is
Another bed – so it will
Be. Don't scar yourself.

155

Zeus is your advocate,
Don't pine and waste
For a bedmate.

MEDEA

O Themis, Artemis, see
What I suffer, in spite of
Magnificent oaths that
Bound the cursed man. If
I could see him, his girl, his
Whole house ground to a pulp
For this unprovoked crime.
Oh, my father, my city, I left
You in shame and a brother dead.

160

165

NURSE

Do you hear what she says, how
She cries out to Themis, to
Zeus, keeper of oaths?
Anger like this comes
To no small end.

170

CHORUS

Will she come out

antistrophe

To speak, to hear us? 175
If she could leave this
Apalling anger, this
Pride, I'll be her friend.

But you, go in,
Bring her out, quick 180
Before she hurts someone there.
This grief is too powerful.

NURSE

I will, yes. But she won't be moved.
It's a hard favour. If one of us 185
Goes near she glares like a
Mothering lion or a crazed bull.

You'd not be wrong to say men of
Old were less than wise, were stupid 190
To find songs for feasts, for
Banquets, for festivals, but

Nothing in their songs and strings
For the bitterness and pain that 195
Bring death and disaster down on us.

Ah, if men could heal with singing –
But why sing when you're 200
Content and filled with food.

CHORUS

She mourns and moans in
Shrilled-voiced grief against 205
The betrayer of her bed.

She calls to Themis, daughter
Of Zeus and witness to her
Injustice and the promise
That drew her to Greece from 210
A foreign shore, at night through
Narrow straits to the open sea.

MEDEA

My ladies of Corinth – I have
Come out, lest you grow censorious.
People can be, I know, proud, inside 215
Or out, while those who tread quietly

Are defamed for indifference. But
 They are wrong, those eyes that,
 Not seeing the inner man, condemn 220
 At a glance. Quite wrong.
 A foreigner must, of course, conform,
 As should the citizen whose stupidity
 Is an irritant to others.
 Events, however, have taken me 225
 By surprise. They destroy me.
 Life has no more pleasure, my friends.
 I wish to die. He well knows he
 Was all things to me – this husband
 Who has turned out so evil.
 Of all living and sentient things 230
 We women are most wretched.
 We must first buy, at great cost,
 A husband, then enslave our bodies
 To him. From one wrong to another
 More painful. It's a question –
 Will he be good or will he be bad? 235
 Divorce is frowned upon for
 Women; denial impossible.
 And a newcomer must have
 Second sight, being unschooled,
 How best to behave to this bedmate. 240
 Should we succeed in this exacting
 Task, and he quietly bears the yoke, we
 Are envied. If not, we're better dead.
 A man, bored within, will find
 Satisfaction without. 245
 We must look to one only.
 They tell us we're safe and snug at
 Home – *they* must endure in battle.
 Oh no. I'd stand three times before the 250
 Line, rather than bear one child.
 But you and I are in a different case –
 You have your city, your father's
 House and the comfort of friends.
 I am alone, stateless, insulted by 255
 My husband, snatched from a
 Foreign land, motherless, brotherless,

No kin to turn to. So –
I ask this of you. Should I find
Some means of justice against 260
His wrongs, you will remain silent.
In the face of violence and war
A woman is fearful; but touch her
Marriage, nothing is more deadly. 265

CHORUS

Yes, I will. He deserves your revenge –
Hardly surprising after your suffering.
But I see Creon, our king. He'll be
Here with yet another decision. 270

CREON

You. Still sulky and bad-tempered,
Medea? I'm to tell you, you must
Go, and take your children with you.
Without delay. It's up to me to
Enforce this, and I'll not go home again 275
Until you're well beyond our border.

MEDEA

Oh. Am I so utterly abandoned in my
Suffering? The enemy's in full sail
And I've nowhere to land. Can 280
I ask you, Creon, as ill-used as I am,
Why you banish me?

CREON

I'm afraid of you. One shouldn't hide the truth.
I fear the harm, the terrible harm you'll do
My daughter. I've reasons enough. You're
Clever, skilled in evil; you're banished 285
From the marriage bed and enraged; and
So I hear, you threaten your husband, his bride
And her father. But I'll pre-empt you.
Better to put you down now, woman, 290
Than go soft and regret it later.

MEDEA

As ever, Creon, my unfortunate reputation
 Catches up with me. A smart man should
 Never teach his children to be too clever; 295
 You neglect your own business and your
 Neighbours hate you. Show them something
 New and the stupid ones think you're useless
 And a fool; the bright ones, or those who think
 They are, get angry if you're thought to be 300
 Better than them. Don't I know it.
 I'm clever, so some hate me, the rest
 Just resent me. I'm not, after all, that bright. 305
 You're afraid of me, then. What can I do
 To you? How could I – and I'm only
 A woman – harm a king? But then,
 Have *you* done me any harm? You gave
 Your daughter to the man you wanted. Yes,
 I hate my husband. But you, I think, 310
 Behave prudently. I bear no ill will for that.
 Let them marry and let them prosper – and
 Let me stay. I'll be quiet. I'll accept defeat. 315

CREON

I hear your kind words, but dread to
 Think what you're really plotting.
 I trust you even less than I did. Your
 Quick-tempered woman, or man, is easier
 To deal with than your quiet, clever one. 320
 So you're out, as soon as possible, and
 No more speeches. I'm adamant. No scheme
 Of yours will keep you here nor
 Make you other than a liability to me.

MEDEA

Please, in the name of the bride, of your daughter.

CREON

You waste your breath – there's no turning me. 325

MEDEA

You cast me off – feel nothing?

CREON

I feel for my house, not for you.

MEDEA

Oh, now how I think of my homeland.

CREON

As do I, but my daughter comes first.

MEDEA

Yes. Yes, love is the downfall of us all.

330

CREON

I suppose, depending on the circumstances.

MEDEA

O Zeus! And you won't forget who caused all this.

CREON

Will you leave, and take my troubles with you.

MEDEA

I have troubles enough of my own.

CREON

Very shortly I will have you forcibly removed.

335

MEDEA

No, no, please. I only ask you...

CREON

You continue to annoy me, woman.

MEDEA

I'll go. I'll go. It's not that I want.

CREON

Then why resist? Why do you not move?

MEDEA

One day – just one day. To think, to

340

Plan this exile – for my sons, since their
 Father makes no provision for them.
 Have *some* pity. You're a father,
 You have a father's feelings. 345
 For me, I don't care if I'm exiled, but
 I weep for them, for what they will bear.

CREON

It's not in me to play the tyrant –
 I've been tripped by conscience before.
 Though I can see it's a mistake, lady, 350
 All the same, you shall have it. But I tell you,
 If tomorrow the holy light of the sun touches
 You or your sons in our territory, you will die.
 This word you can rely on. So –
 You may stay for this one day. There's 355
 Nothing for me to fear in that.

CHORUS

Oh, this is piteous.
 Where do you turn? A foreigner?
 What house, what country can you find? 360
 It's a wild sea the gods set you on, Medea.

MEDEA

Yes, it's all bad. Who would deny it?
 But you mustn't think it will remain so. 365
 There are trials yet for these newlyweds,
 And no small pain for their nearest.
 Do you think I'd fawn on that fellow
 For nothing, for no purpose?
 Not a word, not a finger's touch – he's 370
 A fool. He should have got rid of me,
 But he lets me stay one day, and
 I'll destroy all three of them –
 Father, daughter and my man. 375
 Yes, death has many roads – I
 Don't know, my dears, what to choose.
 Will I torch the house and bride-bed?
 Will I tiptoe to the bedside and
 Gut them with a blade? Mmm. 380

There's one thing. If I'm caught,
In the house or in the act, I'm dead,
And they will have the last laugh.
The straight way is best, my way –
I'll poison them. 385

So, they're dead. But who will have me?
What place is safe, what house secure,
Who would take me in? No-one.
I'll wait, and should some bastion of support 390
Appear, I'll box cunning and kill them quietly.

But if fate deprives me of all else,
I'll take the knife, I'll steel myself,
And I'll kill them, though I die too.
O mistress, my most revered, my chosen one,
Hecate, my hearth-dweller, none 395
Will rejoice in my pain. A marriage

Bitter and baneful I'll give them,
And they will rue my exile. 400

Come, then. Spare nothing, Medea,
No plot, no craft, move to
The moment and try your mettle.

You see the situation. You can't be
Laughed at by the sons of Sisyphus, you, 405
Daughter of a king and grandchild of the Sun.
You know, don't you. We are women,
Not much good for good, but
Oh so clever at all things else.

CHORUS

Now streams will flow up to their sacred source *strophe a* 410
And all we have known is turned about
As men deceive in the name of the gods 415
And the stories of our lives reverse –
So will the honour of women rise up
And the shrill of their slanders cease. 420

Now all the old tales of faithless girls *antistrophe a*
Will fade forever from our songs –
Yet the god of song never gave to us 425
That lyric inspiration
Or we'd echo back the songs of men

For time speaks even-handedly. 430

Fevered with love *strophe b*
 You sailed from your home
 Through the double rocks
 To the open sea –
 But now from this foreign place
 With no husband, no bed 435
 You are driven out
 With no redress.

Oaths are hollow *antistrophe b*
 From all Greece shame has flown – 440
 And you've nowhere to go
 Not your father's house
 While another queen rules
 In your bed
 And your home. 445

JASON

I've seen your rages before, lady, and know
 What they lead to. You might have stayed
 Here, in this house, had you been
 Reasonable and accepted good counsel.
 But no. You rant, so you're expelled. 450
 This does not move me. You can abuse
 Me as long as you like, but after what
 You've said of the royal family, you're
 Fortunate to get off with exile.
 God knows, I tried to cool their 455
 Anger, but you will not let up with
 This foolish abuse. So you're expelled.
 Even so, I can't deny my own.
 I've thought about you, my dear, 460
 And conclude that you and the children
 Shall not leave penniless or in need.
 Exile is hard. You hate me, I know,
 But really, I bear you no grudge.

MEDEA

You...excrescence! I'm at a loss 465