

Euripides

Medea

Characters of the play

MEDEA, daughter of Aietes, King of Colchis.

JASON, chief of the Argonauts; nephew of Pelias, King of Iolcos in Thessaly.

CREON, ruler of Corinth.

AEGEUS, King of Athens.

NURSE of Medea.

TWO CHILDREN of Jason and Medea.

ATTENDANT on the children.

A MESSENGER.

CHORUS of Corinthian Women, with their LEADER.

Soldiers and Attendants.

The scene is laid in Corinth. The play was first acted when Pythodorus was Archon, Olympiad 87, year 1 (B.C. 431). Euphorion was first, Sophocles second, Euripides third, with Medea, Philoctetes, Dictys, and the Harvesters, a Satyr-play.

MEDEA

The Scene represents the front of MEDEA'S House in Corinth. A road to the right leads towards the royal castle, one on the left to the harbour. The NURSE is discovered alone.



NURSE

Would God no Argo e'er had winged the seas
To Colchis through the blue Symplegades¹:

¹ The Symplegades (“Clashing”) or Kuaneai (“Dark blue”)

No shaft of riven pine in Pelion's² glen
Shaped that first oar-blade in the hands of men
Valiant, who won, to save King Pelias' vow,
The fleece All-golden! Never then, I trow,
Mine own princess, her spirit wounded sore
With love of Jason, to the encastled shore
Had sailed of old Iolcos: never wrought
The daughters of King Pelias, knowing not,
To spill their father's life: nor fled in fear,
Hunted for that fierce sin, to Corinth here
With Jason and her babes. This folk at need
Stood friend to her, and she in word and deed
Served alway Jason. Surely this doth bind,
Through all ill days, the hurts of humankind,
When man and woman in one music move.
But now, the world is angry, and true love
Sick as with poison. Jason doth forsake
My mistress and his own two sons, to make

were two rocks in the sea which used to clash together and crush anything that was between them. They stood above the north end of the Bosphorus and formed the Gate (l. 1264, p. 70) to the Aëinos Pontos, or "Stranger-less Sea," where all Greeks were murdered. At the farthest eastern end of that sea was the land of Colchis.

² The great mountain in Thessaly. Iolcos, a little kingdom between Pelion and the sea, ruled originally by Aeson, Jason's father, then by the usurping Pelias.

His couch in a king's chamber. He must wed:
Wed³ with this Creon's child, who now is head
And chief of Corinth⁴. Wherefore sore betrayed
Medea calleth up the oath they made,
They two, and wakes the clasped hands again,
The troth surpassing speech, and cries amain
On God in heaven to mark the end, and how
Jason hath paid his debt.

All fasting now
And cold, her body yielded up to pain,
Her days a waste of weeping, she hath lain,
Since first she knew that he was false. Her eyes
Are lifted not; and all her visage lies
In the dust. If friends will speak, she hears no
more
Than some dead rock or wave that beats the

³ Medea was not legally married to Jason, and could not be, though in common parlance he is sometimes called her husband. Intermarriage between the subjects of two separate states was not possible in antiquity without a special treaty. And naturally there was no such treaty with Colchis. This is, I think, the view of the play, and corresponds to the normal Athenian conceptions of society. In the original legend it is likely enough that Medea belongs to “matriarchal” times before the institution of marriage.

⁴ A peculiar word (Greek: aismnan) afterwards used to translate the Roman dictator. Creon is, however, apparently descended from the ancient king Sisyphus.

shore:

Only the white throat in a sudden shame
May writhe, and all alone she moans the name
Of father, and land, and home, forsook that day
For this man's sake, who casteth her away.
Not to be quite shut out from home... alas,
She knoweth now how rare a thing that was!
Methinks she hath a dread, not joy, to see
Her children near. 'Tis this that maketh me
Most tremble, lest she do I know not what.
Her heart is no light thing, and useth not
To brook much wrong. I know that woman, aye,
And dread her! Will she creep alone to die
Bleeding in that old room, where still is laid
Lord Jason's bed? She hath for that a blade
Made keen⁵. Or slay the bridegroom and the
king,
And win herself God knows what direr thing?
'Tis a fell spirit. Few, I ween, shall stir
Her hate unscathed, or lightly humble her.
Ha! 'Tis the children from their games again,
Rested and gay; and all their mother's pain

⁵ These lines are repeated in a different context later. The sword which to the Nurse suggested suicide was really meant for murder. There is a similar and equally dramatic repetition of the lines about the crown and wreath, and of those about the various characters popularly attributed to Medea.

Forgotten! Young lives ever turn from gloom!

The CHILDREN and their ATTENDANT come in.

ATTENDANT ⁶

Thou ancient treasure of my lady's room,
What mak'st thou here before the gates alone,
And alway turning on thy lips some moan
Of old mischances? Will our mistress be
Content, this long time to be left by thee?

NURSE

Grey guard of Jason's children, a good thrall
Hath his own grief, if any hurt befall
His masters. Aye, it holds one's heart!...

Meseems

I have strayed out so deep in evil dreams,
I longed to rest me here alone, and cry
Medea's wrongs to this still Earth and Sky⁷.

⁶ Greek Paidagogos, or “pedagogue”; a confidential servant who escorted the boys to and from school, and in similar ways looked after them. Notice the rather light and cynical character of this man, compared with the tenderness of the Nurse.

ATTENDANT

How? Are the tears yet running in her eyes?

NURSE

'Twere good to be like thee!... Her sorrow lies
Scarce wakened yet, not half its perils wrought.

ATTENDANT

Mad spirit!.. if a man may speak his thought
Of masters mad. — And nothing in her ears
Hath sounded yet of her last cause for tears!

*He moves towards the house, but the
NURSE checks him.*

NURSE

What cause, old man?... Nay, grudge me not one
word.

⁷ Not a mere stage explanation. It was the ancient practice, if you had bad dreams or terrors of the night, to “show” them to the Sun in the morning, that he might clear them away.

ATTENDANT

'Tis nothing. Best forget what thou hast heard.

NURSE

Nay, housemate, by thy beard! Hold it not hid
From me... I will keep silence if thou bid.

ATTENDANT

I heard an old man talking, where he sate
At draughts in the sun, beside the fountain gate,
And never thought of me, there standing still
Beside him. And he said, 'Twas Creon's will,
Being lord of all this land, that she be sent,
And with her her two sons, to banishment.
Maybe 'tis all false. For myself, I know
No further, and I would it were not so.

NURSE

Jason will never bear it-his own sons
Banished, — however hot his anger runs
Against their mother!

ATTENDANT

Old love burneth low
When new love wakes, men say. He is not now
Husband nor father here, nor any kin.

NURSE

But this is ruin! New waves breaking in
To wreck us, ere we are righted from the old!

ATTENDANT

Well, hold thy peace. Our mistress will be told
All in good time. Speak thou no word hereof.

NURSE

My babes! What think ye of your father's love?
God curse him not, he is my master still:
But, oh, to them that loved him, 'tis an ill
Friend...

ATTENDANT

And what man on earth is different? How?
Hast thou lived all these years, and learned but
now

That every man more loveth his own head
Than other men's? He dreameth of the bed
Of this new bride, and thinks not of his sons.

NURSE

Go: run into the house, my little ones:
All will end happily!.. Keep them apart:
Let not their mother meet them while her heart
Is darkened. Yester night I saw a flame
Stand in her eye, as though she hated them,
And would I know not what. For sure her wrath
Will never turn nor slumber, till she hath...
Go: and if some must suffer, may it be
Not we who love her, but some enemy!

VOICE (*within*).

Oh shame and pain: O woe is me!
Would I could die in my misery!

The CHILDREN and the ATTENDANT go in.

NURSE

Ah, children, hark! She moves again
Her frozen heart, her sleeping wrath.

In, quick! And never cross her path,
Nor rouse that dark eye in its pain;
That fell sea-spirit, and the dire
Spring of a will untaught, unbowed.
Quick, now! — Methinks this weeping
cloud
Hath in its heart some thunder-fire,
Slow gathering, that must flash ere long.
I know not how, for ill or well,
It turns, this uncontrollable
Tempestuous spirit, blind with wrong.

VOICE (*within*)

Have I not suffered⁸? Doth it call
No tears?.. Ha, ye beside the wall
Unfathered children, God hate you
As I am hated, and him, too,
That gat you, and this house and all!

NURSE

For pity! What have they to do,
Babes, with their father's sin? Why call
Thy curse on these?... Ah, children, all

⁸ Medea is apparently answering some would-be comforter. Cf. p. 4. ("If friends will speak").

These days my bosom bleeds for you.
Rude are the wills of princes: yea,
 Prevailing alway, seldom crossed,
 On fitful winds their moods are tossed:
'Tis best men tread the equal way.
Aye, not with glory but with peace
 May the long summers find me crowned:
 For gentleness-her very sound
Is magic, and her usages.
All wholesome: but the fiercely great
 Hath little music on his road,
 And falleth, when the hand of God
Shall move, most deep and desolate.

During the last words the LEADER of the Chorus⁹ has entered. Other women follow her.

⁹ As Dr. Verrall has remarked, the presence of the Chorus is in this play unusually awkward from the dramatic point of view. Medea's plot demands most absolute secrecy; and it is incredible that fifteen Corinthian women, simply because they were women, should allow a half-mad foreigner to murder several people, including their own Corinthian king and princess — who was a woman also — rather than reveal her plot. We must remember in palliation (1) that these women belong to the faction in Corinth which was friendly to Medea and hostile to Creon; (2) that the appeal to them as women had more force in antiquity than it would now, and the princess had really turned traitor to her sex. (See note on this subject at the end of the present writer's translation of the *Electra*.) (3) The non-interference of the Chorus seems monstrous:



LEADER

I heard a voice and a moan,
A voice of the eastern seas:
Hath she found not yet her ease?
Speak, O aged one.
For I stood afar at the gate,

yet in ancient times, when law was weak and punishment was chiefly the concern of the injured persons, and of no one else, the reluctance of bystanders to interfere was much greater than it is now in an ordered society. Some oriental countries, and perhaps even California or Texas, could afford us some startling instances of impassiveness among bystanders.

And there came from within a cry,
And wailing desolate.

Ah, no more joy have I,
For the griefs this house doth see,
And the love it hath wrought in me.

NURSE

There is no house! 'Tis gone. The lord
Seeketh a prouder bed: and she
Wastes in her chamber, not one word
Will hear of care or charity.

VOICE (*within*)

O Zeus, O Earth, O Light,
Will the fire not stab my brain?
What profiteth living? Oh,
Shall I not lift the slow
Yoke, and let Life go,
As a beast out in the night,
To lie, and be rid of pain?

CHORUS

Some Women

A.

"O Zeus, O Earth, O Light:"
The cry of a bride forlorn
Heard ye, and wailing born
Of lost delight?

B.

Why weariest thou this day,
Wild heart, for the bed abhorred,
The cold bed in the clay?
Death cometh though no man pray,
Ungarlanded, un-adored.
Call him not thou.

C.

If another's arms be now
Where thine have been,
On his head be the sin:
Rend not thy brow!

D.

All that thou sufferest,
God seeth: Oh, not so sore
Waste nor weep for the breast
That was thine of yore.

VOICE (*within*).

Virgin of Righteousness,
Virgin of hallowed Troth,
Ye marked me when with an oath
I bound him; mark no less
That oath's end. Give me to see
Him and his bride, who sought
My grief when I wronged her not,
Broken in misery,
And all her house... O God,
My mother's home, and the dim
Shore that I left for him,
And the voice of my brother's blood.

NURSE

Oh, wild words¹⁰! Did ye hear her cry

¹⁰ The Nurse breaks in, hoping to drown her mistress's dangerous self-betrayal. Medea's murder of her brother was by

To them that guard man's faith forsworn,
Themis and Zeus?... This wrath new-born
Shall make mad workings ere it die.

CHORUS

Other Women.

A.

Would she but come to seek
Our faces, that love her well,
And take to her heart the spell
Of words that speak?

B.

Alas for the heavy hate
And anger that burneth ever!
Would it but now abate,
Ah God, I love her yet.
And surely my love's endeavour
Shall fail not here.

ordinary standards her worst act, and seems not to have been known in Corinth. It forms the climax of Jason's denunciation.

C.

Go: from that chamber drear
Forth to the day
Lead her, and say, Oh, say
That we love her dear.

D.

Go, lest her hand be hard
On the innocent: Ah, let be!
For her grief moves hitherward,
Like an angry sea.

NURSE

That will I: though what words of mine
Or love shall move her? Let them lie
With the old lost labours!... Yet her eye-
Know ye the eyes of the wild kine,
The lion flash that guards their brood?
So looks she now if any thrall
Speak comfort, or draw near at all
My mistress in her evil mood.

The NURSE goes into the house.

CHORUS

A Woman.

Alas, the bold blithe bards¹¹ of old
That all for joy their music made,
For feasts and dancing manifold,
That Life might listen and be glad.
But all the darkness and the wrong,
Quick deaths and dim heart-aching things,
Would no man ease them with a song
Or music of a thousand strings?
Then song had served us in our need.
What profit, o'er the banquet's swell
That lingering cry that none may heed?
The feast hath filled them: all is well!

¹¹ Who is the speaker?

According to the MSS. the Nurse, and there is some difficulty in taking the lines from her. Yet (1) she has no reason to sing a song outside after saying that she is going in; and (2) it is quite necessary that she should take a little time indoors persuading Medea to come out. The words seem to suit the lips of an impersonal Chorus.

The general sense of the poem is interesting. It is an apology for tragedy. It gives the tragic poet's conception of the place of his art in the service of humanity, as against the usual feeling of the public, whose serious work is devoted to something else, and who "go to a play to be amused."

Others.

I heard a song, but it comes no more.
Where the tears ran over:
A keen cry but tired, tired:
A woman's cry for her heart's desired,
For a traitor's kiss and a lost lover.
But a prayer, methinks, yet riseth sore
To God, to Faith, God's ancient daughter-
The Faith that over sundering seas
Drew her to Hellas, and the breeze
Of midnight shivered, and the door
Closed of the salt unsounded water.

*During the last words MEDEA has come out
from the house.*

MEDEA

Women of Corinth¹², I am come to show

¹² These opening lines are a well-known crux interpretum. It is interesting to note, (1) that the Roman poet Ennius (ca. 200 B.C.) who translated the Medea, did not understand them in the least; while, on the other hand, the earliest Greek commentators seem not to have noticed that there was any difficulty in them worth commenting upon. That implies that while the acting tradition was alive and unbroken, the lines were easily understood; but when once the tradition failed, the meaning was lost.

My face, lest ye despise me. For I know
Some heads stand high and fail not, even at
night

Alone-far less like this, in all men's sight:
And we, who study not our wayfarings
But feel and cry-Oh we are drifting things,
And evil! For what truth is in men's eyes,
Which search no heart, but in a flash despise
A strange face, shuddering back from one that
ne'er

Hath wronged them?... Sure, far-comers
anywhere,

I know, must bow them and be gentle. Nay,
A Greek himself men praise not, who always
Should seek his own will recking not... But I-
This thing undreamed of, sudden from on high,
Hath sapped my soul: I dazzle where I stand,
The cup of all life shattered in my hand,
Longing to die-O friends! He, even he,
Whom to know well was all the world to me,
The man I loved, hath proved most evil. — Oh,
Of all things upon earth that bleed and grow,
A herb most bruised is woman¹³. We must pay

(The first commentator who deals with the passage is Irenaeus, a scholar of the Augustan time.)

¹³ This fine statement of the wrongs of women in Athens

Our store of gold, hoarded for that one day,
To buy us some man's love; and lo, they bring
A master of our flesh! There comes the sting
Of the whole shame. And then the jeopardy,
For good or ill, what shall that master be;
Reject she cannot: and if he but stays
His suit, 'tis shame on all that woman's days.
So thrown amid new laws, new places, why,
'Tis magic she must have, or prophecy-
Home never taught her that-how best to guide
Toward peace this thing that sleepeth at her
side.

And she who, labouring long, shall find some
way

Whereby her lord may bear with her, nor fray

doubtless contains a great deal of the poet's own mind; but from the dramatic point of view it is justified in several ways. (1) Medea is seeking for a common ground on which to appeal to the Corinthian women. (2) She herself is now in the position of all others in which a woman is most hardly treated as compared with a man. (3) Besides this, one can see that, being a person of great powers and vehement will, she feels keenly her lack of outlet. If she had men's work to do, she could be a hero: debarred from proper action (from [Greek: to prassein], Hip. 1019) she is bound to make mischief. Cf. p. 24, ll. 408, 409. "Things most vain". There is a slight anachronism in applying the Attic system of doweries to primitive times. Medea's contemporaries either lived in a "matriarchal" system without any marriage, or else were bought by their husbands for so many cows.

His yoke too fiercely, blessed is the breath
That woman draws! Else, let her pray for death.
Her lord, if he be wearied of the face
Withindoors, gets him forth; some merrier place
Will ease his heart: but she waits on, her whole
Vision enchained on a single soul.
And then, forsooth, 'tis they that face the call
Of war, while we sit sheltered, hid from all
Peril! — False mocking! Sooner would I stand
Three times to face their battles, shield in hand,
Than bear one child.
But peace! There cannot be
Ever the same tale told of thee and me.
Thou hast this city, and thy father's home,
And joy of friends, and hope in days to come:
But I, being citiless, am cast aside
By him that wedded me, a savage bride
Won in far seas and left-no mother near,
No brother, not one kinsman anywhere
For harbour in this storm. Therefore of thee
I ask one thing. If chance yet ope to me
Some path, if even now my hand can win
Strength to requite this Jason for his sin,
Betray me not! Oh, in all things but this,
I know how full of fears a woman is,
And faint at need, and shrinking from the light
Of battle: but once spoil her of her right
In man's love, and there moves, I warn thee

well,
No bloodier spirit between heaven and hell.

LEADER

I will betray thee not. It is but just,
Thou smite him. — And that weeping in the
dust
And stormy tears, how should I blame them?..

Stay:

'Tis Creon, lord of Corinth, makes his way
Hither, and bears, methinks, some word of
weight.

*Enter from the right CREON¹⁴, the King, with
armed Attendants.*

CREON

Thou woman sullen-eyed and hot with hate
Against thy lord, Medea, I here command
That thou and thy two children from this land
Go forth to banishment. Make no delay:

¹⁴ Observe the somewhat archaic abruptness of this scene, a sign of the early date of the play.

Seeing ourselves, the King, are come this day
To see our charge fulfilled; nor shall again
Look homeward ere we have led thy children
twain
And thee beyond our realm's last boundary.



MEDEA

Lost! Lost!
Mine haters at the helm with sail flung free
Pursuing; and for us no beach nor shore

In the endless waters!... Yet, though stricken
sore,

I still will ask thee, for what crime, what thing
Unlawful, wilt thou cast me out, O King?

CREON

What crime? I fear thee, woman-little need
To cloak my reasons-lest thou work some deed
Of darkness on my child. And in that fear
Reasons enough have part. Thou comest here
A wise-woman confessed, and full of lore
In unknown ways of evil. Thou art sore
In heart, being parted from thy lover's arms.
And more, thou hast made menace... so the
alarms

But now have reached mine ear... on bride and
groom,

And him who gave the bride, to work thy doom
Of vengeance. Which, ere yet it be too late,
I sweep aside. I choose to earn thine hate
Of set will now, not palter with the mood
Of mercy, and hereafter weep in blood.

MEDEA

'Tis not the first nor second time, O King,
That fame hath hurt me, and come nigh to bring

My ruin... How can any man, whose eyes
Are wholesome, seek to rear his children wise
Beyond men's wont¹⁵? Much helplessness in
arts

Of common life, and in their townsmen's hearts
Envy deep-set... so much their learning brings!
Come unto fools with knowledge of new things,
They deem it vanity, not knowledge. Aye,
And men that erst for wisdom were held high,
Feel thee a thorn to fret them, privily
Held higher than they. So hath it been with me.
A wise-woman I am; and for that sin
To divers ill names men would pen me in;
A seed of strife; an eastern dreamer¹⁶; one
Of brand not theirs; one hard to play upon...
Ah, I am not so wondrous wise! — And now,
To thee, I am terrible! What fearest thou?
What dire deed? Do I tread so proud a path-

¹⁵ Medea was a “wise woman” which in her time meant much the same as a witch or enchantress. She did really know more than other women; but most of this extra knowledge consisted — or was supposed to consist — either in lore of poisons and charms, or in useless learning and speculation.

¹⁶ The meaning of these various “ill names” is not certain. Most scholars take [Greek: thaterou tropou] (“of the other sort”) to mean “the opposite of a dreamer.”

Fear me not thou! — that I should brave the
wrath

Of princes? Thou: what has thou ever done
To wrong me? Granted thine own child to one
Whom thy soul chose. — Ah, him out of my
heart

I hate; but thou, meseems, hast done thy part
Not ill. And for thine houses' happiness
I hold no grudge. Go: marry, and God bless
Your issues. Only suffer me to rest
Somewhere within this land. Though sore
oppressed,
I will be still, knowing mine own defeat.

CREON

Thy words be gentle: but I fear me yet
Lest even now there creep some wickedness
Deep hid within thee. And for that the less
I trust thee now than ere these words began.
A woman quick of wrath, aye, or a man,
Is easier watching than the cold and still.
Up, straight, and find thy road! Mock not my
will

With words. This doom is passed beyond recall;
Nor all thy crafts shall help thee, being withal
My manifest foe, to linger at my side.