Medea

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EURIPIDES

Euripides was one of the three great Greek tragedians. The others are Aeschylus and Sophocles. Because he lived more than 2300 years ago, it is difficult to say which details of his biography are factual and which have been colored with mythical elements. According to existing sources, Euripides had two failed marriages after which he lived out much of his life on the island of Salamis. He was the favorite playwright of the philosopher Plato; and, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle calls him the "most tragic" of all the poets. He may have retired to the court of King Archelaus north of Greece in Macedonia, where he died in 406 B.C.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Medea was composed in the golden age of Athens. The dates of Athenian ascendancy correspond with the victory of Athens and its allies (the Delian league) over the advancing Persian empire in 478 B.C. and Athens defeat at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C. Medea was staged in the first year of that war (431 B.C.), a conflict with the rival city-state, Sparta, which lasted more than twenty years and would prove to be Athens' undoing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Euripides was one of the three great dramatists of Athens golden age, along with Sophocles and Aeschylus. The three men wrote many plays with related themes or other similarities. Euripedes' *The Bacchae* is the story of Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry, causing a group of Theban women to rip a man, Pentheus, limb from limb for failing to acknowledge Bacchus as a god. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* are tragedies that, like *Medea*, grapple with intense situations of familial strife. *Oedipus Rex* deals with the aftermath of Oedipus's terrible fate to kill his own father and to marry his mother. In *Antigone* (a kind of sequel to Oedipus Rex) the king, Creon, prohibits Antigone (Oedipus's daughter) from burying her brother as is necessitated by divine law. Aeschylus' trilogy, *The Orestia*, concerns the return of Agamemnon from the Trojan War, his murder by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, and the subsequent aftermath as Agamemnon's children seek revenge against their own mother. As such, it too examines agonizing grief after the pain of marital infidelities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Medea*
- **When Written:** Unknown, before 431 B.C.
- **Where Written:** Unknown, likely the island of Salamis
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek Drama
- **Genre:** Tragic Drama
- **Setting:** The courtyard outside Medea's house in the Greek city-state of Corinth.
- **Climax:** Medea murders her two sons offstage and ascends over the stage in a flying chariot sent by her grandfather, the sun god, Helios.
- **Antagonist:** Medea's husband, Jason

EXTRA CREDIT

Prolific Euripides. According to some sources Euripides produced more than 90 plays. Unfortunately only 18 of them survive into the present day.

Euripides' innovation to the already existing Greek story of Medea and Jason. In previous versions of the story, the Corinthians killed Medea's children in retaliation for her murdering their ruler, Creon. In Euripides' version, Medea kills her children herself.

PLOT SUMMARY

The tragedy of *Medea* begins *in medias res* (in the middle of things). Medea's Nurse bemoans Medea's fate—she has been abandoned with her two young children by her husband, Jason, who has married the Princess, daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. In the midst of her lamentations, the Nurse recounts how Jason left his homeland, Iolocus, in a ship called the Argo to find a treasure called the Golden Fleece. The Golden Fleece was guarded by a dragon in Medea's homeland, the Island of Clochis. Aphrodite, goddess of love, made Medea fall in love with Jason and then help him to steal the Golden Fleece. While she and Jason were fleeing Clochis by boat, Medea killed her brother so that those pursuing them would have to stop and bury his body. In Iolocus, she and Jason hatched a plot to steal rulership from the king, Pelias. Medea managed to trick Pelias' daughters into killing him by promising that, if they did, she could restore him to his youth. She did not restore him, and Jason and Medea were chased from Iolocus to Corinth, where they lived as exiles.

Medea is infuriated by Jason's abandoning her and their children, and makes threats to kill Creon and the Princess. These threats reach Creon at the palace where the children's Tutor overhears that Creon intends to exile Medea from Corinth. He tells the Nurse what he heard outside Medea's

house. The two promise not to tell Medea. The Nurse says she fears for the children and doesn't like the way Medea has been looking at them. She sends the children inside where, from offstage, Medea addresses them, saying she wishes they were dead and cries aloud in her grief. The Nurse and Tutor leave and the Chorus of Corinthian women assemble outside Medea's house, saying that it heard Medea cry. Medea comes out to speak to the Chorus of her troubles. Soon, the king, Creon, arrives to give Medea her sentence of banishment. He tells her he fears she will cause him and his daughter harm. She tries to convince him she is harmless, but he will not relent. Eventually she manages to get him to agree to give her a single day in which to plan where she and the children will go in their exile. When Creon is gone, Medea laughs at him and calls him a fool for allowing her to stay. She intends to punish Creon, the Princess, and Jason for the way they have mistreated her.

Next Jason comes to offer Medea money and letters of recommendation to ease the burdens of her exile. The two of them argue about Jason's behavior, and Jason contends, somewhat ridiculously, that he is acting in Medea and the children's best interest. Medea calls him a coward and refuses any help. Jason leaves. When he is gone Medea reveals her plot to kill the princess with a poisoned dress and **crown**, and then, in order to hurt Jason most, to also kill her own (and Jason's) children. But first she must find a place of refuge for after she leaves Corinth. Her friend, Aegeus, the king of Athens, soon arrives on his way from the oracle of Phoebus whom he has consulted concerning his inability to have children. Medea promises him that she will help him to have children if he promises to shelter her from her enemies. He agrees and exits.

Medea sends a member of the Chorus to fetch Jason back. When he comes, she tells him he was right and she is only a foolish woman and begs him to find some way to let the children stay. She sends the children with Jason to the palace to give the Princess the dress and crown as gifts. They go.

The Tutor soon comes from the palace with the children and with the good news that the children are allowed to stay. Medea grieves because, for her, it means the Princess is dead or dying and she must complete her plan by killing the children. A Messenger arrives from the palace and recounts the Princess and Creon's death in vivid detail. The Princess died putting on the gifts, and Creon died by becoming entangled in the poisoned dress after embracing his daughter's corpse. Medea relishes the news and steels herself to murder her children. She takes them offstage (inside) and we hear them struggle. Jason comes to the house and commands his men to undo the bolts of the **door**. Before he can manage, Medea appears over the stage in a chariot drawn by **chimeras** sent by the sun god, Helios, her grandfather. She has with her the dead bodies of her children. She and Jason exchange cutting remarks about the tragic events, and the Chorus concludes the play by saying that sometimes, rather than expected events, the gods bring unexpected things to pass.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Medea – Medea is the daughter of king Aeetes of the island of Clochis and granddaughter of Helios, the sun god. When Jason arrived at Clochis on his ship the Argo in search of the Golden Fleece, Aphrodite made Medea fall in love with him. Medea used her almost magical, witch-like powers to help him harness fire breathing oxen and steal the Golden Fleece from where it was guarded by a dragon. As she and Jason escaped with the Fleece she then killed her own brother and tipped him overboard so those chasing her would have to stop to retrieve the body. In other words, Medea gave up her entire past and home to help and be with Jason. At the same time, Medea is a powerful woman who challenges the prejudices of the male-dominated societies that seem to have no place for her or her powers. She is passionate, vengeful, and unrelenting in her pursuit of justice. By the Greeks, she is considered wild, almost animal, and this opinion is substantiated (or, perhaps, forced upon her) when Jason's betrayal of her incites her to kill her own children to punish her cheating husband.

Jason – Jason is the son of Aeson. As a child he is given to the centaur, Chiron, to be raised, educated, and protected from his greedy half-uncle, Pelias, king of Iolocus. In an effort to get rid of Jason, Pelias sends him in quest of the Golden Fleece, but, with Medea's help, Jason succeeds in obtaining it. Until the cowardly and greedy behavior elaborated in *Medea*, Jason conducts himself more or less heroically. Within the play, he is a shortsighted representative of the ruling class of advantaged men. He is a cunning rhetorician (arguer), but, as we see in *Medea*, is arguments are not always in the service of truth. He is more concerned with making himself look good and defending his indefensible actions.

Creon – Creon, son of Lycaethus, is the king of Corinth, the city-state where the events of *Medea* take place. He is a discerning judge of character, and accurately determines Medea's intentions, yet he does a poor job of applying his insight in service of justice. He enables Jason's crimes against his wife and then banishes Medea to protect Jason and himself from Medea's possible retribution for those crimes. He eventually dies entangled in the poisoned gown Medea gives to his daughter, the Princess.

Aegeus – Aegeus is the king of Athens and, apparently, an old friend of Medea's. He is childless and eagerly desires the children Medea promises to help him and his wife to have. He serves little purpose in the play other than to provide Medea with a place of refuge in Athens, though his desire for children serves as a powerful contrast to Medea's ultimate choice to kill her own children.

The Chorus – The Chorus is composed of a group of Corinthian women who have assembled outside of 's house because of the loud wailing and lamentation they have overheard coming from it. In many cases the Chorus can be taken as standing in for the audience of the play—reacting as the audience would (and in doing so subtly guiding the audience in its own reactions). The chief difference, of course, is that the Chorus participates in the action and dialogue.

The Messenger – The Messenger is one of Jason's men and so formerly of Medea's household. He is, therefore, somewhat sympathetic to her wishes and needs. His main function is to relate the gruesome events that took place at the palace in vivid detail after Medea's plot to kill the Princess and Creon is successful.

The Children – The children, the two sons of Medea and Jason, each speak only once during the play. They are undifferentiated and, in some ways, more like set pieces than active characters. They, or, rather, their deaths are a means for Medea to express her rage at Jason and for the play to depict the all-consuming rage and barbarity of Medea, who is willing to kill her own children to revenge herself upon her betraying husband.

The Princess – As the Princess never speaks or physically appears in the play, she is less a character than a significant figure. She is Creon's daughter and Jason's new bride. We learn any subtleties of her character through the Messenger's report. She seems to behave as one would expect a young, privileged, and beautiful wife to behave. She dies when she puts on the poisoned dress and **crown** Medea gives her as gifts.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Nurse – The Nurse is one of Medea's servants. She is greatly grieved by Medea's misfortunes and, at the same time, fears for the children's lives because of Medea's all-consuming rage. She provides Jason and Medea's backstory and foreshadows the gruesome murders that take place in the play.

The Tutor – The Tutor is responsible for the children's education. He is something of a gossip and twice comes to share news he overhears while loitering at the palace. Like the Nurse he is an obedient servant who wishes the best for Medea.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

EXILE

In Euripides' *Medea*, exile is a past reality, an impending threat, and an internal state. Medea and Jason are exiles before the action of Euripides' play begins. In the play's backstory, Medea was forced to flee from her homeland of Clochis for helping Jason to secure the Golden Fleece. Then Jason and she together were exiled as murderers from Jason's homeland of Iolcus because of Medea's attempt to wrest ruling power for her and Jason from the corrupt king, Pelias.

Euripides' *Medea* begins with Medea's Nurse lamenting that Jason ever came to Clochis. The threat of the sentence of a third exile for Medea is quickly presented by the children's Tutor, who has just come from the castle where he has overheard "That Creon, the ruler of the land, intends to drive/ These children and their mother in exile from Corinth." Exile, or Medea's impending exile, is one of the main driver's of the play's plot. Medea begs Creon to give her one day in which to consider where she should go with her children, and, though Creon grants Medea her request, he recognizes, "Even now I know I am making some mistake." Later, Medea's pretended attempt to relieve the sentence of exile from her children allows her to poison the Princess and results in the Princess and Creon's deaths.

But exile, beyond being a physical condition for Medea, Jason, and their household, is also an emotional and spiritual state. We see this in various lamentations, like the Nurse's, "There is no home. It's over and done with," and Medea's "Oh, my father! Oh, my country! In what dishonor/ I left you..." and "I have no land, no home, no refuge from my pain." Both Medea and Jason invoke their exiled status in their arguments, and Jason even tries to convince Medea that she should "consider/ [Herself] most lucky that exile is [her] punishment" rather than death. For both Jason and Medea the pain of present exile coupled with the fear of future ones serve as motivations and justifications for their actions in the play.

TRUTH VS. RHETORIC

The tragedy of *Medea* is woven out of a series of deceitful, true-seeming monologues. After acknowledging to the chorus (and the audience) her desire to kill Creon and destroy his house, Medea convinces him that she should be allowed to remain for just one day to make provisions for her children. Medea actually plans to kill her children, so the statement is ironic. Even if the audience didn't know this at the outset of the play, Euripides has already done much to foreshadow it. "For myself I do not mind if I go into exile," Medea lies. "It is the children being in trouble that I mind." We soon see that Medea's rhetorical stretches are her way of besting Jason at his own game. When he first appears shortly after Medea submits her plea to Creon,

he attempts to argue that his decision to abandon his wife and two young children was, first, "a clever move,/ Secondly, a wise one, and, finally, that [he] made it in [Medea's] best interests and the children's." The chorus is quick to point out the gap between the truth of the situation and Jason's rhetoric: "Jason, though you have made this speech of yours look well,/ Still I think, even though others do not agree,/ You have betrayed your wife and are acting badly."

Medea, though arguably working in the service of truth—a truth she invokes from her chariot at the plays conclusion when she tells Jason, "The gods know who was the author of this sorrow"—is often all too ready to use deceitful rhetoric herself. Her deceit serves, first and foremost, to reveal Jason's deceit and, secondarily, to give her an opportunity to exact her revenge. "Certainly," Medea says, "I hold different views/ From others, for I think that the probable speaker/ Who is a villain deserves the greatest punishment." She decides, as we see, to take that punishment into her own hands, exposing, meanwhile, the hypocrisy of Jason and Creon, two men who speak well despite the villainy of their actions. "There is no need to put on the airs/ Of a clever speaker," she informs Jason, "for one word will lay you flat." After her first conversation with Jason, she manages to call him back to their former house and convinces him to let their children beg the Princess to be allowed to stay in Corinth, a privilege Medea never intends to give them. The audience's knowledge of Medea's deeper, true intentions allows it to better grasp the full scope and intensity of her character, both righteous and vengeful. Conversely, Jason's refusal, throughout, to acknowledge the true motivations for his actions, diminishes his.

THE ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN

The events of *Medea* take place in a male-dominated society, a society that allows Jason and Creon to casually and brutally shunt Medea aside. The play is an exploration of the roles of men and women, both actual and ideal, but it is not necessarily an argument for sexual equality. Creon and Jason find Medea's cleverness more dangerous and frightening because she is woman. "A sharp tempered woman..." Creon says, "Is easier to deal with than the clever type who holds her tongue." The chorus, too, feels it can offer Medea advice on what behavior best suits a woman. "Suppose your man gives honor to another woman's bed," it says. "It often happens. Don't be hurt./ God will be your friend in this."

Everyone, it seems, has a different opinion on what a good woman or a good man is and does. Jason says it would be better if men "got their children in some other way" and women didn't exist at all. "Then," he says, "life would have been good." Medea herself frequently weighs in on the subject, "We women are the most unfortunate creatures." Despite the plethora of opinions, many of them contradictory, the question isn't necessarily resolved in the play. Jason insists Medea is "free to keep telling everyone [he is] a worthless man"—not a difficult opinion for him to hold, given the comfort of his new position as Creon's son-in-law and member of the royal household. Medea promptly assures him that he is a "coward." She names him such in "bitterest reproach for [his] lack of manliness." The play is imbued with a sense that neither men nor women are doing as they should, neither are behaving as they ought, and, perhaps more importantly, that if they were, the tragedy might have been averted.

JUSTICE AND NATURAL LAW

Natural Law—the idea of a moral code integral to and inseparable from whatever it is that makes us human—is tested in the events of *Medea* when characters make decisions contrary to their nature, when Jason, a husband, abandons his wife or when Medea, a mother, murders her children. Medea's decision to kill her children, even as a form of retribution, was as shocking to the ancient Athenians as it is to us today. It was then, as it is now, considered a violation of Natural Law. What is less intuitive for the modern reader is that Medea's being a "wild" woman from an uncivilized (i.e. non-Greek) country, rather than a Greek citizen of a city-state, suggests, at least for the other characters in the play, that she is volatile and poised to do something "unnatural." It is Natural Law as well that governs The Roles of Men and Women.

The purpose of justice in the play is to restore the natural balance disrupted by Jason's violation of Natural Law, his "unmanliness," in betraying his marriage vows to Medea. Creon, too, is guilty of injustice. His decision to exile Medea is doubly, perhaps even trebly, unjust. First, it is unjust for him to disrupt Natural Law by ignoring, when giving his daughter to Jason in marriage, the simple fact that Jason is already married. Second, he punishes Medea for his own violation of the natural order. Then based on hearsay and fear, he rhetorically justifies his unjust action by suggesting that Medea might harm his daughter: the crime he fears has not been committed. His ultimately being right (correct) does not make the original decision just (fair). There is an overarching sense in the play that Medea isn't seeking justice in response to Jason and Creon's crimes alone, but, rather, is seeking to correct one of Nature's fundamental injustices—the unequal suffering allotted to women and men. And yet, in seeking this justice, Medea commits the most violent act against Natural Law: she kills her own children. And in that action the entire idea of Natural Law becomes more complicated, as Medea's effort to seek justice leads to the deepest injustice, the inconsistencies of Natural Law and the justice required to maintain is revealed as problematic and irresolvable.

DUTY

The fundamental conflict between Medea and Jason is that she believes she has been faithfully devoted to him while he has not fulfilled his duties as a husband or as a man. "Why is there no mark on men's bodies," Medea says, "By which we could know the true ones from the false ones?" But Jason isn't the only one with duties—the servants have a duty to their masters, Creon is obliged to faithfully steward his city despite personal interests, Aegeus has an obligation to Medea as a friend, an obligation which Medea makes him solidify into duty via oath. We can even feel the Nurse struggle between her obligations to her mistress and to her mistress's children. Medea's grandfather is the god Helios, so she bears both the obligation (common to all people) to serve the gods as well as the obligation to sanctify and assert her own divinity. Nearly all the characters have a duty—to master, spouse, country, law, Nature, or the gods—and their various failures to uphold their duties spiral into tragedy. These obligations are sometimes conflicting. Medea, after all, shirks the responsibilities of motherhood and the requirements of Natural Law in order to exact divine vengeance and fulfill her duty to the gods.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DOOR

The door to Medea's house remains closed for the entirety of the play and all of the events and speeches are delivered outside of the house. The door represents more than one metaphorical "barrier" in the play, perhaps most significantly the insurmountable divide that has developed between Medea and Jason, but it may also be seen to represent the divide between the foreigner (Medea) and the Greeks (everyone else), between Creon's rulership and true justice, or between truth and true-seeming rhetoric. When Jason commands his men to remove the bolts and open the door they never get a chance to do so: Medea appears above the stage in a flying chariot, carrying her dead children—the barriers will not, will never, be breached.

THE POISONED CROWN

A crown is a metonym (a kind of metaphor) for rulership. Medea chooses to exact her revenge on Creon and the Princess with a poisoned crown, a crown that represents Creon and Jason's having polluted the royal line with unjust rulership. Creon has earned his death and the loss of his authority by punishing the innocent Medea, who he himself has wronged by encouraging Medea's husband to abandon her and marry Creon's own daughter. Jason has earned his grief by violating his marriage oaths and abandoning his wife and children for the promise of future ruling power.

CHIMERAS

Chimeras are mythical creatures, like griffins and centaurs, that are composed of different animal parts joined together in one body. These parts are sometimes depicted as being in conflict with each other, meaning the animal would be at war with itself. The figure is significant for Medea because she herself is, figuratively, a kind of chimera. She is part human, part divine; part Greek, part barbarian; part mother, part murderer. It is fitting then that chimeras should bear the chariot that will take her to safety in Athens.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Medea* published in 1999.

Lines 1-100 Quotes

The people here are well disposed to [Medea],
An exile and Jasons's all obedient wife:
That's the best way for a woman to keep safe –
Not to cross her husband.
But now her deepest love is sick, all turns to hate.

Related Characters: The Nurse (speaker), Medea, Jason

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11-15

Explanation and Analysis

The Nurse provides the important expository information about Medea that we need to understand and enjoy the play. Medea was a princess in her native land, but when the hero Jason came to her kingdom, she betrayed her own family due to her mad love for Jason. Medea used her magic to help Jason succeed in his quest--then, she traveled back to Jason's homeland to be his wife.

But now, the Nurse confirms, there's trouble in paradise. Medea has no friends or well-wishers in her new home--on the contrary, everybody hates her for being a foreigner (the Greeks considered anyone non-Greek to basically be a barbarian). Medea has essentially thrown all her eggs in one basket--Jason. And now, Jason (supposedly a great hero)

has betrayed Medea. The Nurse's lines set in motion the events of the plot--furious with Jason, Medea will enact a savage revenge.

> Good servants share their masters' sufferings –
> They touch our hearts. I find it so distressing,
> I had to come out her to tell my mistress' woes
> To the earth and sky.

Related Characters: The Nurse (speaker), Medea

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47-50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Nurse explains *why* she's explaining Medea's history with Jason so thoroughly. On the surface, her explanation could be interpreted as purely expository--she's telling *us*(the audience) about Medea so that we're up to speed for Euripides' play.

But there's another, more profound reason why the Nurse needs to talk about Medea. As the Nurse says, she feels a powerful connection with Medea--Medea is her mistress, and therefore she feels a strong sense of loyalty to her. The Nurse's feelings for Medea are notable since they clearly clash with the attitude of the rest of the kingdom. Medea doesn't have many friends in her new homeland--it's possible that the Nurse is her *only* friend. The fact that Euripides portrays the Nurse as a kindly, sympathetic, and overall trustworthy person reinforces the fact that Medea is worthy of our sympathy, while Jason, despite his status as a hero, is more worthy of contempt.

> I hear the first danger sign,
> Her wailing. It is a cloud she will ignite
> To flame as her fury grows.

Related Characters: The Nurse (speaker), Medea

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 97-99

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Nurse describes the cry that Medea gives from offstage. Medea is furious with the way Jason has been treating her--he doesn't love her anymore, and plans to exile her from the kingdom, effectively turning her into a wandering beggar for the rest of her life (and all this after she has given up everything for him, and basically achieved his "quest" for him). Strangely, the fact that we can't see Medea, only hear her, makes her more frightening and intimidating--Medea's grief, one could say, is bigger and scarier than Medea herself.

The Nurse uses an interesting metaphor to describe Medea's anger--she compares it to flame. Flame is one of the key images of the play, and as the Nurse suggests, it here symbolizes Medea's anger and hatred for Jason. Firee, we should bear in mind, is hot, lethal, and--crucially-difficult to control. Thus, the Nurse's speech foreshadows the way Medea's plot for revenge will slowly engulf everyone in the play, whether guilty or innocent.

Lines 101-200 Quotes

> The middle course is best in name
> And practice, the best policy by far.
> Excess brings no benefit to us,
> Only greater disasters on a house,
> When God is angry.

Related Characters: The Nurse (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 116-120

Explanation and Analysis

Medea angrily tells the Nurse that she wishes she could murder her children to enact revenge on her husband, Jason. The Nurse, frightened by Medea's irrational fury, tells Medea that she shouldn't be so extreme in her thinking--the "middle course," as she insists here, is always the best way.

The Nurse is, in essence, telling Medea to be calm, collected, and self-controlled in her behavior and thinking. There is a long tradition in classical Greek philosophy of celebrating balance and moderation in one's behavior--one thinks of Aristotle's famous "doctrine of the mean," which argues that the "average" behavior is nearly always the best. In such a way, Medea's inability to be moderate--to control her behavior and thought--is the surest mark of her status as a foreigner in a Greek kingdom.

Tell us, Nurse. At the gate I heard [Medea]
Crying inside the house.
I don't like to see the family suffering.
I sympathize with them.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Medea, The Nurse

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 123-126

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the Nurse interacts with one of the key "characters" in the play, the Chorus. The Chorus, a traditional Greek theatrical device, is usually a group of singers and actors who interact with the characters in the play and provide commentary and emotional feedback for the action. Here, for example, the Chorus (which is described as a group of women from Corinth) shares the Nurse's sympathy for Medea, as well as the Nurse's fear for Medea's state of mind.

It's interesting that the characters we meet onstage are, for the most part, sympathetic to Medea, considering that they *say* that the entire kingdom hates Medea. The key word in this passage is "sympathize." In spite of Medea's foreignness and exotic status in the kingdom, it's possible to feel for her suffering--to understand her sadness. In no small part, it's suggested, the characters feel for Medea because they're women--they know what it's like to be abandoned by an arrogant man, and to be generally subdued by a patriarchal, oppressive society.

Lines 201-300 Quotes

There is no justice in the judgments that men make:
Before they know a man's inner self,
They hate at sight, though they've never been wronged.
A foreigner must take special care to conform to the state –
Even a citizen who is fool enough
To let his stubborn pride offend his fellow-citizens
Wins no praise from me.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker)

Page Number: 207-213

Explanation and Analysis

Medea has finally arrived on the stage, after 200 lines of description, and despite the tales (and noises) of her rage, she's eerily calm. Here, she tells us that she's been under a lot of pressure. As a foreigner in a strange land, Medea has been forced to conform to her new home's culture. There's an unwritten code of behavior that she must emulate, or else be judged for her "otherness."

In short, Medea has become deeply disillusioned with her new home. She finds it absurd that people judge her for being different in such superficial ways--without knowing her personality or character, the people dismiss Medea as a foreigner.

The passage also suggests that Medea has become an expert at thinking one thing and saying another. She knows how to conform to the state's culture, but in secret, she continues with her plotting and conniving.

My husband has turned out to be the most despicable of men.
Of all the creatures that have life and reason
We women have the worst lot.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker), Jason

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218-220

Explanation and Analysis

Medea has often been interpreted as an early feminist hero, and this passage goes a long way toward explaining why. Medea knows full-well that she has a bad lot in life: she was born a woman, meaning that she can't vote, own property, or control her own marriages. She's seen as property by most of the world. Jason, for instance, has no qualms about dumping her overnight, because he doesn't respect her as a human being--despite the fact that she's a powerful, semi-divine figure, and has given up everything for his sake.In short, Medea recognizes that through no fault of her own, she's been mistreated all her life.(Notice also that Medea is addressing the Chorus of women--she's commiserating with other females.)

But does the passage necessarily mean that Euripides *shares*Medea's point of view? While it's common for modern critics to interpret *Medea* through a feminist lens, it's likely that Euripides wasn't really critiquing his culture's idea that women are inferior to men. The play certainly seems to believe that Jason behaves unfairly toward his wife, thus justifying her disrespect--but it doesn't follow that women are *equal* to men.

> A woman, coming to new ways and laws,
> Needs to be a clairvoyant – she can't find out at home,
> What sort of man will share her bed.
> If we work at it, and our husband is content
> Beneath the marriage yoke,
> Life can be enviable. If not, better to be dead.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228-233

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Medea paints a dark picture of marriage. A woman, she explains, must necessarily get married to a man when she's of the right age (i.e., really young by modern standards). A woman doesn't have much say in what kind of man she's marrying; usually, the decision is made by the woman's family. In other words, the woman needs to be "clairvoyant" about what kind of man she's going to spend her life with.

Whether the marriage is good or bad, a woman has the wearying task of pleasing her husband at all times. Her only hope is to make her husband happy--otherwise, he'll make her life hell (since he essentially "owns" her). And even if the husband is a good, just man, he still exercises total power over his wife, according to Greek law. In short, marriage is a frightening, unjust institution that punishes women simply for being women. Medea, as a foreigner in Greece, is uniquely capable of seeing marriage for what it really is.

> The fools! I would rather fight three times
> In war, than go through childbirth once!

Related Characters: Medea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 240-241

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Medea makes a rather persuasive argument for why women are braver and stronger than men. Men like to believe that they're tougher than women because they know how to fight and go to battle. But battle, Medea claims, is actually *easier* and safer than giving birth to a child--something that almost all women (of the time) go through.

Medea has a point, especially when one considers the time when Euripides was writing. Women faced the very real possibility of dying in childbirth, and didn't have access to strong painkillers--giving birth to a child was tremendously dangerous and painful, and the odds of surviving may have even been worse than the odds of surviving a battle.

Medea's monologue reinforces the injustice of Jason's society--a society that belittles women and treats them disrespectfully. All woman, Medea insists, are worthy of respect on account of their biological power (i.e., the power to give birth to life). Ironically, though, Medea *also* confirms herstatus as an anomaly among women--perhaps because she's a foreigner, she's uniquely capable of seeing the plain truth about women in Greek society. Furthermore, she's a woman who wields powerful magic, and also has experience with fighting herself--she killed her own brother for Jason's sake. Thus she can speak as both a mother and a warrior, and can offer a unique perspective on which role requires more bravery.

> Medea, scowling there with fury at your husband!
> I have given orders that you should leave the country:
> Take your two sons and go, into exile. No delay!

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Medea, Jason

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259-261

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to Creon, who tells Medea that she's henceforth banished from the kingdom. It's interesting that Creon allows Medea to leave the kingdom with her children (the children she had with Jason). Jason seems to feel no love or affection for his own offspring--since he's divorcing Medea, he apparently believes that he has to say goodbye to his kids, as well.

Creon is an important character in the novel, because he embodies the corrupt authority of Corinthian (Greek) society. Creon shows no sympathy for Medea, despite the fact that he's destroying her life by banishing her, and through no fault of her own. In short, Creon's actions in this passage reinforce the harsh, selfish nature of patriarchal Corinthian society when it comes to foreigners and women--Creon is utterly unsympathetic to Medea or her children's feelings.

Lines 301-400 Quotes

You sound harmless, but in your heart
I'm terrified you're plotting some evil.
I trust you know even less than before.
A passionate woman—or a man, for that matter—
Is easier to guard against, than one who's clever,
And holds her tongue.

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Medea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 303-309

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Creon shows himself to be a good judge of character, but not good enough. Creon knows full-well that Medea is dangerous: he's heard rumors that she's capable of magic and murder. Creon even recognizes that Medea is particularly dangerous because she's so adept at concealing her true feelings. As he says here, a subtle villain is much more dangerous than a passionate, angry one, because he or she is harder to spot.

Creon is smart enough to know that Medea is dangerous, and yet he doesn't understand the greater truth: Medea has been *provoked* into anger, thanks to Creon and Jason's actions. In other words, Creon is banishing Medea because he thinks she's a threat--but Medea wouldn't *be* a threat if Creon didn't banish her.

It's not my nature to be a tyrant.
My concern for others has often cost me dearly.
Now too, madam, I see I'm making a mistake,
But, still, I grant your request...

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Medea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 335-338

Explanation and Analysis

Creon knows full-well that Medea is dangerous to him: he's heard rumors of what she's capable of, and recognizes that she could kill him without the slightest guilt. But even though Creon knows Medea is dangerous, he lets his sympathy (or perhaps fate itself) get in the way of politics: because he feels sorry for her, and she uses skillful, convincing language to sway him, her lets her stay in the kingdom for a little longer.

Setting aside the poetry and drama for a moment, Creon makes a huge tactical error: he provokes Medea, and then lets her stay close enough to hurt him. He effectively *creates* a dangerous enemy in Medea, then gives her help. Creon knows he's making a mistake, but he doesn't have the strength or willpower to do what must be done with Medea. In the end, as we'll see, his willpower is far weaker than that of Medea herself. Ironically, Euripides shows us that Medea, a woman, is far stronger and more forceful than a male king.

Do you think I would have fawned on Creon
Except to win some profit by my schemes?
I would not have spoken to him – nor touched him.
But he is such a fool that,
When he could have arrested all my plans
By banishing me, he has allowed me
To stay this one day, in which three of my enemies
I'll send to their death...

Related Characters: Medea (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 355-362

Explanation and Analysis

Medea has just been granted the right to stay in Corinth for one more day. Creon had previously banished her, but he's reconsidered and allowed Medea to stick around a little longer.As Medea acknowledges here, Creon has made a colossal mistake. Creon has provoked Medea, then given Medea access to the resources of his kingdom.

The scene is darkly funny: Medea has just succeeded in convincing Creon to give her some more time in Corinth, and in response she makes fun of Creon for giving her more time in Corinth. Medea proves herself to be a far better strategist and politician than Creon. She knows how to deceive other people, giving herself the greatest advantage possible.

The direct way is best, the one at which
I am most skilled: I'll poison them.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 372-373

Explanation and Analysis

Medea here gets the idea to kill Jason's new wife using poison. Interestingly, Medea claims that poison is the appropriate weapon to use to enact her revenge--it's the weapon that she's most adept at using.

Poison isn't just Medea's favorite weapon--it's the weapon that mirrors her personality most closely (and is often portrayed as a "female" way of killing someone). Poison must be used skillfully and subtly, and if she's smart, a murderer can use poison to avoid detection altogether. Furthermore, poisoning is often a slow, painful way to die--a reminder of Medea's wrath and cruelty. Finally, poison is a pretty accurate symbol for Medea's own fury. Like a poison victim, Medea suffers from a constant, burning rage: a rage that causes pain both to the people around her and to Medea herself.

> ...But we are women too:
> We may not have the means to achieve nobility;
> Our cleverness lies in crafting evil.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 396-398

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Medea makes a proto-feminist point. She argues that women (she's speaking to the all-female Chorus) are capable of achieving greatness through evil and evil alone. Women, we've already been told, are stronger and tougher than men. Here, Medea adds that women should use their strength and toughness to enact revenge and hurt the men who have wronged them.

Medea's point isn't exactly PC by modern standards--she's essentially saying that women are just as dangerous and evil as certain sexists like to claim that they are. Medea, we could say, just echoes sexist tropes instead of challenging them: she lives up to the stereotype that all women are clever and powerful only when it comes to undermining and destroying men.

> Sacred rivers flow uphill:
> Justice and all things are reversed.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 399-400

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Chorus of women cries out that the natural order of the universe is being reversed. The Chorus is referring to Medea's plot to enact revenge on Jason and Creon--by acting with strength and furor, Medea is challenging the expectation that all women should be passive and demure.

The Chorus's speech suggests the play's assumptions about women's nature. Euripides implies that women's inferiority to men is a law of nature, as basic as the laws of gravity. Medea is thus violating natural law by meddling with Creon and Jason's lives.

There's another, more radical interpretation of the Chorus's speech. Some critics have argued that Medea is only *reacting* to Jason and Creon's behavior--behavior that is itself cruel, immoral, and a violation of natural law. So in this way, Medea is balancing out Jason's injustice with injustice of her own, punishing her husband for reversing injustice and ultimately *restoring* the natural order of things.

Lines 401-500 Quotes

> Consider yourself lucky that your punishment
> Is merely exile...

Related Characters: Jason (speaker), Medea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 433-434

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to Jason, Medea's ex-husband. Jason, though a famous hero of mythology, is a callous, hypocritical man, who clearly feels no love or affection for Medea whatsoever. Jason even has the nerve to scold Medea for not being more grateful that she's been "rewarded" with exile instead of being executed. In other words, Jason wants Medea to accept her fate quietly and demurely.

Jason is the very embodiment of the sexism and hypocrisy

that Medea intends to punish. He seems to be speaking un-ironically--i.e., he genuinely believes that Medea should consider herself lucky for being banished. Jason's insensitivity to women is so great that he treats them like animals or disobedient children. He is, in short, begging for a nasty comeuppance.

> You vile coward! Yes, I can call you that,
> The worst name that I know for your unmanliness!

Related Characters: Medea (speaker), Jason

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 444-445

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Medea says everything she's been wanting to say to Jason. She accuses him of being a coward and "unmanly"--quite the accusation to level against a legendary Greek hero.

It's hard to deny that Medea has a point. Jason only succeeded in obtaining the legendary Golden Fleece because Medea did almost all the hard work for him. She used magic to help him fight off his enemies and lead him to victory. Now, Jason--always ungrateful--is banishing Medea, almost as if he's forgotten the help she gave him.

Jason's "unmanliness," then, doesn't consist of his weakness or his dependence on Medea. Medea doesn't have a problem with helping Jason become a hero--as long as he shows his gratitude to her. Jason becomes "unmanly" in the instant that he betrays and turns his back on Medea--effectively denying that she helped him become great.

> Zeus, you granted men sure signs to tell
> When gold is counterfeit. But when we need to tell
> Which men are false, why do our bodies bear no stamp
> To show our worth?

Related Characters: Medea (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 495-498

Explanation and Analysis

Medea prays to Zeus, wondering why Zeus doesn't create human beings with a visible sign of whether or not they're good, trustworthy people. Medea has just been fully rejected by Jason, her former husband. At one point, Medea thought of Jason as a hero, a good man, and a loving husband--but now she sees him for the lying hypocrite he really is.

In other words, the passage sums up Medea's frustration with the challenges of love and courtship. Medea fell in love with Jason during the course of his quest to find the Golden Fleece, and it wasn't until much later that Medea saw Jason's "true colors." By the same token, Medea's speech reflects the challenges of the marriage process in ancient Greece. Women married men after knowing them for a very short amount of time; sometimes, their marriages turned nasty long after it was too late to find someone else.

Lines 501-600 Quotes

> As for your spiteful words about my marriage with the princess,
> I'll show that what I've done is wise and prudent;
> And I've acted out of love for you
> And for my sons...

Related Characters: Jason (speaker), Medea, The Princess

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 524-527

Explanation and Analysis

Here Jason shows himself to be a smooth operator and a generally slimy, hypocritical person. He argues to Medea that he's divorced her and married a new woman because he *loves* Medea and wants her to be happy. Jason goes on to argue that he's remarried because his new bride is a princess. By marrying the princess, Jason suggests, he'll be able to provide for Medea and their two children, improving everyone's life.

Jason's argument is laughable and contradictory (he's obviously left Medea because he's looking out for his own happiness and prosperity, not his family's). It's even possible that Jason himself believes his own lies--he's so self-centered and confident in himself that he doesn't have any real respect for Medea or their children.

> Jason, you have put a fine gloss on your words.
> But – I may not be wise to say this – I think
> You've acted wrongly: you have betrayed your wife.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Jason, Medea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 553-555

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Chorus accuses Jason of being a good public speaker but a bad husband. Jason has just finished a long speech in which he argues that he's abandoned Medea for her own good. The speech is well-delivered, but hypocritical and full of contradictions. The Chorus's interpretation of Jason's monologue, then, is spot-on: Jason speaks well but behaves poorly. The Chorus arrives at a blunt point: Jason has betrayed his wife, end of story.

It's interesting that the Chorus makes a distinction between words and actions, between appearance and reality. Jason, it's suggested, is better at "seeming" to do the right thing than he is at actually doing the right thing. More subtly, the Chorus implies that Jason isn't really much of a warrior or a hero--he's succeeded thanks to his ability to woo and seduce other people. In this sense, the Chorus's speech belittles Jason and mocks him for his delusions of machismo and heroism.

Lines 901-1000 Quotes

I'll send her gifts, the finest in the world:
A finely woven dress and crown of beaten gold.
The boys will take them.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker), The Children, The Princess

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 916-918

Explanation and Analysis

Even while she's still speaking to Jason, Medea begins to plan her revenge. She decides to send the Princess (Jason's new wife) a beautiful set of gifts, including a dress and a crown, delivered by her own children--presumably so that the gifts will seem innocent, and the Princess will accept them. But the crown, little does the Princess (or Jason) know, will be enchanted to burst into flames as soon as the Princess puts it on her head, and the dress will likewise be poisoned.

In all, the passage is interesting because it shows that Medea is aware that her revenge on Jason will hurt other people who aren't necessarily guilty at all. Indeed, Medea has already planned to kill pretty much everyone *except* Jason--the best revenge, she seems to feel, is for him to survive amidst devastation, rather than to enjoy the "peace" of death.In her excessive fury and longing to get revenge on Jason, Medea is going to kill innocent people. Medea's fury is like a fire--once it breaks out, it's impossible to control or focus.

Lines 1001-1100 Quotes

All for nothing tortured myself with toil and care,
And bore the cruel pains when you were born.
Once I placed great hopes in you, that you
Would care for my old age and yourselves
Shroud my corpse. That would make me envied.
Now that sweet thought is no more. Parted from you
I shall lead a grim and painful life.

Related Characters: Medea (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1000-1006

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, Medea has some second thoughts about killing her children. Medea sincerely loves her children: she's hoped that when she's an old woman, they'll care for her and continue to show love for her. But now, Medea's fury with Jason has led her to plot her children's deaths--she knows that killing her offspring is the best way to infuriate Jason.

Ironically, although the play begins with Jason "breaking up the family," it ends with *Medea* further destroying her family, murdering two innocent children. Medea's evident love and affection for her children reinforces her hatred for Jason--any mother who's willing to kill her own kids must really hate her ex-husband. At the same time, the passage conveys both Medea's monstrousness and her humanity. Even though she's planning to kill her kids (who are totally innocent of Jason's crimes), she actually loves them *more* than Jason does, and thus is arguably hurting herself more than she's hurting Jason.

Lines 1301-1400 Quotes

Hateful creature! O most detestable of women
To the gods and me and all the human race!
You could bring yourself to put to the sword
The children of your womb. You have taken my sons
and destroyed me.

Related Characters: Jason (speaker), Medea, The Children

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1302-1306

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jason condemns Medea for killing their two children. Medea has personally murdered her children with a sword, even as they cry out for help, and she's also killed both Jason's new wife and his father-in-law. Even more sadistically, she's arranged for Jason to *survive* her revenge plot. Instead of killing Jason, Medea forces him to face the crushing truth: his entire family and life is in ruins.

Medea's revenge balances out Jason's cruelty to Medea, and yet it also exceeds Jason's cruelty by a mile. (This reflects a common idea in Greek tragedy, in which the vengeance often outweighs the original crime, leading to an endless cycle of violence.) As the play began, Medea was going through the agony of leaving her family behind forever--now, Jason is going through the same agony. And yet Medea *also* eliminates Jason's chances for a glorious future: without sons or a wife, Jason will be unable to produce heirs, meaning that his lineage and his reputation end with his own life. Jason's humiliation is complete, all thanks to Medea.

No Greek woman
Could ever have brought herself to do that.
Yet I rejected them to marry you, a wife
Who brought me enmity and death,
A lioness, not human...

Related Characters: Jason (speaker), Medea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1318-1322

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jason--who's gotten the news that his wife has been burned alive and his children have been murdered, too--condemns Medea. Interestingly, Jason accuses Medea of being wicked *because* she's not a Greek woman. Jason assumes that Greeks are calm, controlled, and peaceful; only foreigners like Medea would be capable of such savage acts of revenge.

It's hard to tell if Euripides agrees with Jason or not. Throughout the play, Medea has been portrayed as an exotic, mysterious woman, full of magic, confidence, and rage. Furthermore, her decision to kill her own children seems to reflect her outsider status in Greece: she uses her foreign magic to achieve her ends.

And yet Jason misses the point. Medea didn't kill her children because she's from another country--she killed the children because she was provoked and humiliated into revenge. Jason, hypocritical as always, condemns Medea but refuses to acknowledge his own cruelty and insensitivity. The play certainly doesn't excuse Medea for her acts of murder, but it does encourage us to question Jason's shallow monologue. Medea was a stranger in a strange land, but if Jason had been kinder to her, she would never have lashed out against Jason and his country. (Furthermore, it's important to remember other, even more monstrous acts committed by "true" Greeks--like Atreus killing his brother's children and serving them to him as food, for example.)

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-100

Outside the **door** to Medea's house in the city-state of Corinth, the Nurse laments that Jason's ship, the Argo, ever sailed to Clochis, Medea's non-Grecian homeland, in search for the Golden Fleece. If the Argo had not sailed for Clochis, the Nurse says, then Medea would never have fallen in love with Jason and sailed with him to his homeland in Greece, Iolcus. And, in Iolcus, Medea never would have tricked king Pelias' daughters into killing Pelias.

Euripides' ancient audience was familiar with the story of Medea. Having the Nurse recount Medea and Jason's past exploits and exiles in her complaints was a deft way for Euripides to situate his audience in the particular moment in the story at which the play begins, in medias res *(in the middle of things).*

If the Argo had not sailed and Medea had not tricked Pelias' daughters, then, the Nurse says, Medea would never have come to live in Corinth with Jason. Where, the Nurse claims, Medea is hated and Jason has betrayed her and his children by marrying the Princess, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. Medea, meanwhile, according to the Nurse, has been possessed by powerful grief and blinding rage that prohibits her from listening to the wise words of her friends.

The Nurse, as if by accident, lets the audience know the current location (Corinth) and provides us with vital information about the ongoing action—Medea's growing rage over Jason's abuses and over his decision to neglect his familial duties. Euripides characterizes Medea as extremely bold and stubborn, hard-headed and difficult to reason with.

The Nurse describes how Medea weeps for her homeland and everything she left behind to come with Jason who has abandoned her. Furthermore, the Nurse says that Medea now seems to hate her two sons, and that she is dangerous. The Nurse fears Medea is dreaming up a dreadful plan. Just as she says this, the children return home with their Tutor. The Tutor asks the Nurse why she is standing alone by the **door** talking to herself. She explains that she is so distressed she had to tell Medea's woes to the earth and sky.

We are now fully informed of Medea and Jason's status as exiles and begin to get a sense of the emotional turmoil this status has wrought on Medea. We see how Jason has escaped the anxieties of exile by abandoning his family and marrying into the royal family of Corinth. Euripides begins foreshadowing the innovation he has added to the story of Medea—Medea's brash decision to kill her children. In the traditional mythology of th story, the children were killed in retaliation by the Corinthians after Medea killed Creon and the Princess. Here, also, Euripedes acknowledges the unnatural construction of the Nurse's long, expository monologue via the Tutor's questioning of the Nurse.

As the Nurse and the Tutor discuss Medea's grief, the Tutor lets it slip that he overheard something at the castle concerning Medea. He then tries to pretend he didn't just mention having overheard something. The Nurse, however, convinces the Tutor to tell her what he heard. While walking past the area where old men play dice, he says, he heard them say that Creon is going to exile Medea and her children. The Tutor says he doesn't know if the report is true.

Euripides creates suspense by having the Tutor withhold briefly secret information concerning a rumor of a third exile for Medea. The Tutor waivers between his duty as a servant to avoid spreading gossip and his feeling that he should honor his fellowship to another servant by sharing whatever information he might have.

The Tutor advises the Nurse to keep quiet and hide the rumor from Medea, and the Nurse advises the Tutor to keep the children out of Medea's sight. Just then, Medea cries from inside the house (offstage) that she is wretched and wants to die. The Nurse tells the children to run inside as fast as they can; Medea's wailing is the first danger sign. The boys go inside (offstage). The Nurse is convinced Medea will fan the smoke of her grief into the flame of fury.

The Nurse and Tutor exchange sage advice based on their knowledge of Medea's character and the Nurse's intuition that Medea will commit unnatural crimes against her children. Medea wails because of the pain of exile and the crimes Jason has committed, breaking his oaths and abandoning his family.

LINES 101-200

Offstage, Medea tells her sons that she is hated and that she wishes them dead because of their father's reprehensible behavior. On stage, the Nurse questions what the children have to do with their father's deeds. She reiterates that she's afraid for them and says its better to grow old in modest ways than to be forced through extremes as Medea has. The middle course, the Nurse comments, is best. The Chorus of Corinthian women enters, and speaks for the first time, saying it heard Medea crying.

Medea's eventual murder of her children is here further, almost shockingly, foreshadowed. The Nurse pleads to no one that the children are innocent and don't deserve their fate. Greatness, according to the nurse, isn't worth the pain it comes with. The Chorus overhearing Medea wailing is significant in that it shows her pain and travails are well known, the subject of public speculations about how she will respond to injustice.

The Chorus asks the Nurse to tell them what's going on. The Nurse responds that Medea and Jason's family is finished and recounts Medea's grief and Jason's infidelity. Medea wails from off stage that she wants to end her life. The Chorus comments that Medea shouldn't pray for death because she will, in the end, die anyway. It adds that she should not to waste away like this, mourning a lost lover.

The plot and predicament are reiterated which helps to keep the audience grounded despite the extensive backstory and general complexity of the history of the story. The Chorus can be thought of as a kind of audience within the play. It reacts to the developments as the playwright expected his Athenian audience to react.

Meanwhile, Medea once more calls out from off stage, asks the goddesses Themis and Artemis to witness how Jason has broken the oaths he made to her. She once more cries for her lost homeland and says she wants Jason and his new bride crushed—their whole house destroyed—for the wrongs they've committed against her.

Medea asks the gods to witness Jason's injustice—she sees what he has done as breaking a divine order, and herself as not just angry for being treated poorly but as righteously angry, defending herself and moral rightness before the gods. Our sense of his injustice to Medea is enhanced by Medea's desolation in exile. Medea openly admits that she wants to take justice into her own hands, and the punishment she wants to enact is extreme. She doesn't just want to hurt him as he hurt her. She wants to crush him, to annihilate him and everything he has. Her anger is extreme and all-consuming.

The Nurse asks if the Chorus hears the way Medea calls out to the gods, and says that she's certain to do something serious before her rage dissipates. The Chorus wishes it could see Medea face to face and reason with her. It asks the Nurse to go get her. She says she will get Medea, but that there's no reasoning with her.

The Nurse and Chorus's discussion continue to build the suspense leading up to Medea's challenging Natural Law by murdering her own children. The suspense—with Medea wailing in grief and rage offstage—has built to the point where the Chorus members, standing in for the audience, demand to see Medea with their own eyes.

The Nurse adds that men got things wrong by writing songs for festivals and feasts but not writing songs that can get rid of a person's grief. Why sing at a feast, she asks, if a feast is already pleasurable? She goes to get Medea.

The Nurse questions the way society responds to emotion with songs, implying the response fails us. And the Nurse's question raises a deeper question: if something so seemingly simple could be contradictory, might other aspects of society go against Nature?

LINES 201-300

Medea enters at the **door**. She tells the Chorus of Corinthian women that she has come out because she does not want them to blame her for being reclusive. She says there is no justice in people's judgments and that a foreigner, like her, must take special care to conform to the rules of her new state. Her heart is broken, she tells them. She has lost all joy. She wants to die.

Medea considers it her duty to respond to the Chorus's curiosity and to win them over so they will recognize her innocence. She assures them that, though an exile and foreigner, she respects and values them and the laws of their society despite her grief and despair.

Her husband, Jason, she says, is the most despicable man, and adds that, of all creatures on earth, women are worst off. She explains that women must buy a husband with a dowry, that what they buy is someone to rule them, that they must be clairvoyants (have psychic powers) to know what kind of man their husbands will turn out to be, and that, if a woman works really hard to make her husband content in marriage, then life can be bearable.

Medea offers Jason as an extreme example, calling him the worst man imaginable. She contrasts the condition of even the best of women, who are marginalized by societal customs and laws, with Jason's success in Corinth. Even if life is good for a woman, Medea argues, it's only because she is the servant of a decent man.

If a woman can't make her husband content, Medea says, it is better for her to be dead. She argues that childbirth is more frightening and painful than fighting in war and that, despite what men say, women's lives are no safer than theirs. The women of the Chorus, Medea says, have a home, but she has no family or safe place to go.

Medea makes what at the time would have been considered radical claims about the difficulty of life for women, even going so far as to suggest that the equal or greater suffering of women should give them equal standing with men. Once again, Medea's general abjectness is amplified by her exile.

She asks the Chorus for a favor, not to say anything if she can find a way to punish her husband for what he has done. The Chorus agrees to her request and interrupts to say the ruler, Creon, is approaching. Creon arrives at the **door** and orders Medea into exile with her two sons. Medea asks Creon why he is banishing her, and Creon says because he is afraid she will hurt his daughter. He has heard reports that she is threatening Jason, the Princess, and him.

Euripides creates dramatic irony by giving the audience and some characters (Medea and the Chorus) knowledge that is unknown by other characters (Creon and Jason). This enhances the tension and suspense. Creon enters and unjustly banishes Medea based on hearsay and his own emotions—his action is pre-emptive and without evidence. In acting in this selfish way he fails to uphold his duty as ruler. (Of course, he's right to be fearful of Medea, but that does not excuse his behavior.)

Medea tells Creon that he is acting based on her reputation as a clever and conniving woman and not based on her actual actions. It is her reputation that is always doing her harm. She says that, because she's clever, people are jealous of her, that, in reality, she is not so clever and that, as an outcast, she is in no position to cause any harm, especially to rulers like Creon. What wrong has she done him? she asks. She doesn't grudge him his success and claims that she wishes him, Jason, and the Princess good luck. Then, for good measure, she concedes defeat and begs Creon to take pity on her and allow her to stay in Corinth.

Medea challenges Creon and the ancient audience's assumptions about her as a woman by calling attention to Creon's injustice. She argues that there are rumors circling about what kind of person she is, but that these rumors don't get at the truth. She reminds Creon that she is an exile, so she deserves extra sympathy, charity, and pity. She untruthfully argues that she respects Creon as a ruler and wishes the best for him and his family, saying he has nothing to fear and should let her stay. In other words, Medea pretends to be the weak, dependent woman that she mocked earlier. She uses her cleverness to hide her cleverness.

LINES 301-400

After her speech, Creon trusts Medea even less than before even though, he says, she sounds harmless. He is terrified she is plotting evil. Medea gets on her knees and begs Creon by his daughter, the Princess, to let her stay. Despite her innocence, Creon will not put Medea before his own family. Mede laments that love can be a great evil for us while Creon weighs in that it depends on one's circumstances. Medea implores Zeus to remember that Creon performed these injustices.

Creon accurately judges Medea's character, yet rules unjustly by sentencing Medea into exile. She has, as yet, done nothing wrong. He bases his judgment on rumors he hears circulating at the palace. Medea's prayer to Zeus foreshadows the strange justice she will administer as the play progresses, and her conviction that she is seeking vengeance not only against the wrongs done to her but what she considers to be wrongs against the natural order that the Gods uphold.

Creon threatens to forcibly eject Medea with the help of his men, so Medea relents and begs instead a single day in which to consider where to go with her children. She says she doesn't care about herself, only the children. Creon recognizes that he is making a mistake, but consents to let Medea stay a single day. He threatens that, if Medea is still in Corinth the next day, he will execute her, and, wrongfully, supposes that a day is not long enough for her to do the damage he fears. He exits.

Perhaps out of pity, Creon rules against his better judgment. His sense that Medea will bring harm to him and his daughter if given the chance increases the intensity of the tragedy. His great failure , ultimately, is underestimating Medea's skill and cleverness, thinking her incapable of causing the harm he fears in a single day when, in fact, she is capable of it and more.

The Chorus wonders where Medea will find refuge from her troubles. Medea admits that she is beset by host of problems but hints that the troubles of Creon, Jason, and the Princess are yet to come. She laughs at Creon and calls him a fool for allowing her to stay, saying she has given him one day to make three deaths. She wonders which way to kill her enemies. Should she set fire to the bridal home or drive swords through their hearts? She decides to stick with her most trusted method: poison.

Medea quickly shows that the rhetoric she employed to convince Creon to let her stay in fact hides her true intentions. She reveals her plan to kill Creon, the Princess, and Jason. Medea's choice to use poison as a means for murder underscores her intelligence, craft, and cleverness, and suggests something of her 'savage' (non-Greek) nature with its connotations of witchery.

Medea wonders where she can go after the deed is done. Will anyone offer to protect her? She decides there is no one and that her best course of action is to wait and plot a little longer. If she finds somewhere to go, she will execute the murder by craft and stealth. If not, she resolves to attack them with a sword even at the risk of her own life. She swears by Hecate, whom she calls her chief goddess, that no one will ever cause her grief and not suffer for it.

Euripides describes here how improbable Medea's escape and survival would be if she commits the plans she plots without a place of refuge. It was nearly inconceivable, it seems, that anyone, especially a solitary woman, could manage without the refuge and backing of a polis (city-state). Without a place of refuge, Medea need not conceal her crimes because her chances of getting away are slim to none. Hecate was the goddess of witches.

Medea prophesizes that it will be a bitter and painful wedding for Jason and the Princess. She tells herself to spare none of her skill and go boldly into danger, and reminds herself that, unlike Creon and his family, she is of divine birth, the granddaughter of Helios, the sun god. Then she says, though divine, she is also a woman and may not have means to achieve nobility. Her cleverness lies in crafting evil.

Medea further foreshadows the Princess's death, building the suspense and dramatic tension. She reminds herself and the audience of her divinity, perhaps lending some supernatural justification to actions and plots that the Athenians would have considered simply unacceptable in a mere mortal. We get one of the first of several reminders, from Medea's own words, that the play's conception of gender roles is, at best, proto-feminist (pro-women in a not quite modern way). Not even Medea thinks men and women are equal. Earlier Creon connected a clever woman with danger, and here Medea goes further, connecting her own cleverness with plotting evil.

LINES 401-500

The Chorus begins its first choral ode by singing that sacred rivers now flow uphill. Men are traitors, it sings. There's no faith in oaths. Women will have the honor now, and shall escape the prejudices that have held them down. Until now, it sings, Apollo, the god of poetry and music, has not inspired women with lyric song. Time will tell more of women. Then the Chorus addresses Medea and recounts her journey from Clochis to Corinth, bemoaning her plight. To think that the Princess and not Medea now rules Jason's bed!

Jason's unexpected actions and Medea's insane resolve have turned the world upside down for the Chorus of Corinthian women. The Chorus supports an ancient understanding of women's rights, but keep in mind that for the Chorus (and, likely, the contemporaneous audience) it is a sign of extreme, unnatural disorder that a woman has taken it into her head to act in such a way. Nonetheless, women will have their day.

Jason enters. Medea and he converse in the area outside Medea's house. Jason scolds Medea for her temper, saying she could have stayed in Corinth if she had held her tongue. Almost mockingly, he tells her she is lucky that her punishment is exile and not death, and claims that, unlike the royal family, he wanted her to stay. He hypocritically boasts that, unlike Medea, he doesn't forget his friends and has come to see if he can provide her with anything for her impending exile.

Jason makes his first appearance and we get our first glimpse of his more or less entirely unsympathetic character, arguments, and moral position. Jason's hypocrisy is so thick that he doesn't recognize that any financial aid he provides to the wife and children he has abandoned would be fatuous and hollow.

Medea calls Jason a coward for his unmanliness. She says his coming to her is neither bravery nor courage given his newfound comfort in the arms of the Princess. She fumes at him for his shamelessness. She is grateful, however, for the opportunity to abuse him. She recounts how she saved his life in Clochis by helping him to yolk fire-breathing bulls and by slaying the dragon that protected the Golden Fleece. It was she, she says, who killed king Pelias by tricking his own daughters, and, in exchange, Jason has betrayed her.

Here we see that the source of the play's main drama (the quadruple murder of the Princess, Creon, and the children) is not the rightful actions of women or a woman, but, rather, the failures of men, once again complicating a straightforward, pro-women reading of the play. Medea has acted rightly toward her man, as she recounts to Jason, but Jason has repaid her tremendous, almost supernatural help by abandoning her.

Medea condemns Jason for taking another woman when he already has two sons. He has shirked his fatherly duties and neglected his oaths to her. She asks him if he thinks the gods he swore by no longer rule the earth. But, she says, she will deal with Jason as if he were a friend even though she questions what good it will do her. Where, she asks, can she go since she has betrayed her home and country for his sake – back to Pelias' daughters who she tricked into killing their own father for Jason?

Medea points out the manifold ways in which Jason has behaved in a manner unbecoming to a father and a man or, for that matter, anyone at all. His decision to break his oaths, more than a slight or insult to her, is a breach of divine law and a sign of disrespect to the gods by which he swore. She demonstrates how she is more than the ordinary exile because Jason has already robbed her of her homeland.

Medea says that all her friends are now her enemies because of the things she has done for Jason. She is sarcastic with Jason, calling him a marvelous husband. What a fine job he's done seeing to it that the wife and children who saved his life are being cast away as exiles and beggars. She bewails that there is no sure sign to tell whether a man is true or false. She invokes Zeus and says he should have given them some stamp or mark on their bodies to indicate which was which.

Medea continues to emphasize her solitude and the unusual intensity, for her, of the already intensely burdensome condition of exile. She points out Jason's many injustices and failures to uphold his duties and holds him as an example of what is wrong not just with himself but with all men. If the gods had made it clear whether a man was true or false by some outward sign, perhaps there would be no false rhetoric in the world, only truth.

LINES 501-600

Jason responds with an elaborate analogy, saying that he is like a boat pilot steering himself over the tempest raised by Medea's foul tongue. He says that Medea did nothing for him, it was Aphrodite, goddess of love, who did him service by making Medea fall in love with him and help him. It was Eros, he says, Aphrodite's father, who drove her to save his life. Despite this, he contradicts himself, and says he is grateful for the help she gave him, but she, he swears, gained more than she gave.

By eliminating Medea's agency and attributing all of her devotion and assistance she has given to him as simply a product of Aphrodite, goddess of love, Jason heaps insult on the injuries he has done Medea. Like a lying child who changes the name of the friend he says gave him a toy he actually stole, Jason promptly changes his story, saying it was not Aphrodite, but Eros (Love himself) whom he has to thank for his good fortune. In Jason's world of twisted deceit and neglected duty, Medea has done nothing for him.

Medea's home country, Clochis, Jason argues, is savage and primitive (not Greek) and living in Greece is inherently better because now she knows what justice means and gets to enjoy the benefit of having laws. All Greece, Jason says, has come to know Medea's talents, but if she had stayed in Clochis she would have remained anonymous. Fame, he says, is more valuable than anything.

Jason continues to advance empty arguments: that being Greek is in and of itself better than being from any other country because of the Greeks' superior insight and that fame is the greatest possible human achievement. Jason's shortsightedness blocks him from seeing that people can be famous outside of Greece and from accounting for the tremendous difference between fame for heroic deeds and infamy for terrible actions.

Jason now responds to Medea's spiteful words concerning his marriage to the Princess, arguing that what he did was wise and right. As an exile, the opportunity to marry Creon's daughter, the Princess, was the best thing Jason says he could have hoped for. It's not that he's tired of Medea or that he lusted after the Princess, or even that he wanted more children. He was only thinking of providing for his family by gaining access to the royal family's wealth; and, if he does have more sons, he could prosper by uniting the two families together.

Jason's most hypocritical and insulting argument—that he abandoned Medea and his children for their own good—is presented here. Jason is such a cunning rhetorician (arguer) that he is almost able to make his blatantly untrue position seem plausible. In reality, a sentence of exile in ancient Greece would have been incredibly onerous on a single mother with young children. Unprotected, Medea and the children would face danger and possible death at all times.

Jason accuses Medea of being blind to his wisdom because of her sexual jealousy. He says women only care about sex, but as a man he has to think of his family's well being. Men, he says, should have found a way to procreate without women and women shouldn't exist at all. Then, he says, life would be happy. The Chorus responds by saying Jason speaks well, but that he has acted wrongly and betrayed his wife.

Jason adds another entirely flawed argument to his speech—that the concerns of men are wholly dissimilar, higher, and more civic, than the concerns of women. It does not take a psychologist to see that Jason has abandoned his aging wife and young children not for their benefit and, at least in part, because of the opportunity for a fresh, young sexual prospect. The Chorus, naturally, is unconvinced by Jason's arguments. Euripides has made him a parody of empty rhetoric.

Medea retorts that an unjust man who speaks well despite his injustice deserves of an even greater penalty. Such a man brazenly dresses up his wickedness in false words. If Jason was a real man, Medea says, he would have convinced her that what he was doing was right before remarrying. Jason sarcastically suggests that Medea would have been "most helpful" had he announced his wedding plans.

Medea is an advocate for principled speech—one should only use arguments and rhetoric in service of justice and the truth, not to make false claims seem believable. If Jason were to acknowledge his despicable behavior as despicable, then, according to Medea's view, he wouldn't deserve the severe punishment she is soon to administer.

Medea says that it is not her bitterness that spurred Jason to take a new wife but rather his growing embarrassment at having her, a foreign wife, in a new land. Jason reiterates his argument that his decision had nothing to do with any woman, but was really to protect her and the children and to father new, royal sons. Medea rejects his help and his argument while Jason insists that exile will be better for her and the children if she takes his money.

Money—an arbitrary sign of a thing's imagined value—and hypocrisy are intimately linked even from this earliest stage of Western literature and philosophy. Jason thinks that he can buy himself justice when, in reality, justice stems from proper conduct and is, like truth, invaluable. Medea attributes Jason's decision to abandon her to his unmanly fear of being an outsider and a pathetic need for social ease achieved via conformity.

Medea and Jason argue about what Medea did to deserve exile. Jason says she called out curses and made threats on the royal family. Medea sarcastically asks if she married and then abandoned herself. Jason calls an end to the discussion, saying he is more than willing to give Medea money and letters of recommendation to his friends. Medea refuses Jason's aid.

Perhaps most surprising in the list of fatuous aids Jason proposes to give Medea are the "letters of recommendation." Though in some ways dissimilar from their modern counterparts, these letters, like money, represent a kind of social pretense. They are inflated representations constructed to avoid and diminish social obligations rather than fulfill them.

LINES 601-700

Jason calls on the gods to witness that he is willing to help Medea and the children, that it is she who refuses his help and only making things worse for herself. Medea urges Jason to go back to his new bride's bed, adding that, with a god's help, his marriage might be celebrated with a funeral song. Jason exits.

Jason has the gall to invoke the gods and claim that it is Medea breaking natural law by not accepting his help. Medea's response warns Jason of her coming wrath in the face of his empty argument that she is making things worse for herself by refusing his help. Her conflation of marriage and funeral, sex and death, is a theme of tragedy that stretches into the modern era, and her statement that a god will help to create such a tragedy reconnects his actions with the breaking of natural law.

The Chorus begins the second choral ode, reflecting on the occurrences in the preceding exchange. The Chorus says that love out of proportion can overwhelm a man's virtue, but love in moderation is the gods' greatest blessing. It makes a prayer for moderation, and asks Aphrodite not to excite unruly passions. Then the Chorus members pray that they may never be exiles, insisting they would rather die than lose their country.

The Chorus reiterates the Nurse's almost Buddhist plea for moderation in all things, attributing all of Medea and Jason's woes to excesses of passion and emotion. Then the Chorus links these emotional extremes to the unstable condition of exile, suggesting that exile stirs passionate excess and disproportion in general.

In its ode, the Chorus insists that it witnesses the terrible suffering of exile first hand in Medea and wishes a thankless death on anyone who dishonors a person with a pure heart.

Again the Chorus notes the strife of exile and intimates that Medea's current strife has its root in her original exile. Death is considered an appropriate punishment for injustice.

Aegeus, the king of Athens, enters and wishes his friend, Medea, joy. She wishes him joy in return and questions him about his travels. Aegeus has just been to see the oracle of Phoebus to ask how he might beget children. Medea is surprised that at his age Aegeus is still childless. Aegeus, after some prompting, reveals the oracle's command that he "not unstop the wineskin's neck" until reaching his ancestral homeland. Medea asks him why, then, he has come to Corinth. Aegeus reveals he is on his way to see Pittheus, King of Troezen, to consult with him on the oracle's message.

Aegeus coincidental arrival at Medea's moment of greatest need was seen as a flaw in the play's construction by commentators as early as Aristotle. Aegeus' arrival is remarkably convenient. It is not plausibly established earlier in the play, and Medea has already claimed in her argument with Jason that she is utterly friendless—apparently this is not quite so. It seems strange, to a modern reader, that there is such anxiety about the incredibly rational concern about where Medea will take refuge after all her passionate fury up until now, but this just emphasizes the incredible importance of having a home in the world of ancient Greece.

Medea wishes Aegeus success. Then he notices her wan look and vexed condition. She recounts Jason's betrayals. Aegeus is shocked and outraged. He is especially sympathetic when she reveals that Jason has left her for the Princess. Then Medea tells him she has been banished. Aegeus calls it despicable, and Medea begs him by his beard to shelter her in Athens. She says she can makes potions that will cure his impotence.

Aegeus's inability to have children and Medea's promise to help him serve as a kind of preemptive, symbolic atonement for Medea's murdering her own children—she will gain refuge and a new life by the promise of helping Aegeus to bring children into the world, almost replacements for the ones she will have lost. At the same time, his desire to have children offers a deep contrast to her willingness to kill her own in order to punish Jason.

LINES 701-800

Aegeus says he is keen to help Medea for the gods' and for the promise of children. He says that if Medea can come to his land (Athens) he will try to be her patron but, he insists, he will not take her with him from Corinth. She must reach his home by her own devices. He doesn't want his Corinthian friends to blame him for giving her refuge. Medea asks him for a pledge. She says that she trusts him, but if he is bound by oath he is less likely to give her up to her enemies if they pursue her.

Aegeus' reticence to help Medea does something to counter the narrative implausibility of his sudden arrival in Corinth. We catch a glimpse of the rationale of a ruler considering to grant refuge to exile and there is even a hint the Aegeus suspects that Medea's enemies will pursue her in the hopes of punishing her for her crimes.

Aegeus compliments Medea on her foresight and gives her his oath on the gods she names, Earth and Sun. He swears never to expel her from his land and never willingly to give her up to her enemies. She wishes Aegeus luck on his journey and swears she will reach his city soon. The Chorus makes a prayer to Hermes, the messenger god and god of travellers, to guide Aegeus home. Aegeus exits.

We see that, in the ancient world, not all men think intelligence and foresight are characteristics unbecoming of women. Significantly, Aegeus swears by the Sun (Helios), Medea's grandfather, to give Medea refuge and, in doing so, his kindly offer solidifies into a duty. This also serves to highlight the oaths that Jason made to Medea—oaths of marriage—which Jason broke. The Chorus approves of Aegeus' behavior and the help he offers Medea. He has made a wise stipulation and a just oath.

In a long soliloquy, Medea swears by Zeus and Justice that she will triumph over her enemies. She acknowledges the fortunate coincidence of Aegeus' arrival and takes it as a sign from the gods. She reveals her plan to have a servant fetch Jason back to her so that she can speak submissively and beg that the children might be allowed to stay in Corinth. She will use them, she says, in a plot to kill the Princess by sending them to her with poisoned gifts, a dress and a golden **crown**.

Medea acknowledges the convenience of Aegeus' coincidental arrival for her plot for vengeance and escape and attributes it to divine will. Medea spells out her intentions to kill the Princess for the first time here in full detail, and reveals the symbolic means for her murder, a poisoned crown signifying Jason and Creon's polluting the royal line (and thus their rulership) with reprehensible behavior and injustice.

If the Princess takes the dress and **crown** and lets them touch her skin, Medea says, the Princess will die horribly—so will anyone who touches her and comes in contact with the poison. Then, she says, though it causes her grief, the next step will be to kill her children. She will demolish Jason's whole house and leave the country. She says she can endure the unholy crime of murdering her sons over the mockery of her enemies. What's the point of living without a country, home, or refuge, she asks. Her mistake was leaving home at all. She prays that no one ever see her as week or submissive.

Once again we see the not altogether pro-woman construction of the plot. The Princess, almost innocent as far as Medea is concerned, will serve as a kind of sacrificial victim to punish the men who have caused Medea injury. Medea acknowledges outright her intention to kill her own children, for some reason seeing it as a necessary conclusion of the violence she intends to wreak on the Princess and Creon. She thinks it to be an action so bold and rash that it will leave her enemies speechless. Medea, so furious at having been made weak and submissive because she is a woman, wants never to be seen as being weak and submissive again—and is willing to break the natural law of motherhood by murdering her own children in order to make that so.

The Chorus says that because Medea shared her plan, it wants to help her, but says it can't reject the laws of human life and urges her not to carry out her plan. Medea says the Chorus hasn't suffered as she has and so can't understand. Killing her own children, she says, is the way to hurt her husband most. The Chorus says it will make her the most unhappy woman. Medea says she doesn't care. It is no time for moderation. She sends a member of the Chorus to get Jason. The Chorus member exits.

The Chorus takes the paradoxical position of offering Medea its support yet attempting to dissuade her from her course of action. Medea attributes the rashness of her action to the intensity of her suffering. Medea is so determined that she is willing to cause herself great pain and suffering simply to punish Jason. Medea thinks that it is a time for excess and passion rather than restraint.

LINES 801-900

The Chorus begins its third choral ode, calling the Athenians children of the gods and their land holy. They say that the nine Muses created Harmony there and that Aphrodite sends young Loves to sit with Wit and helps create the Athenian's diverse arts. The Chorus questions how such a sacred city could shelter a child-killer then begs and beseeches Medea not to kill her children. How can she kill her own sons and not weep? How will she keep her nerve?

The Chorus continues its vain plea that Medea reconsider her decision to kill her children. It contrasts the creativity associated with Athens (keep in mind that Euripides and all of the ancient playwrights—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes—were all Athenians) with Aegeus' unwitting promise to shelter a child-murderer.

Jason enters saying that, despite Medea's ill-will, he will listen to her. Medea deceitfully apologizes for what she said to him before and reminds him how they once showed each other kindness. She says that she has been berating herself while he was away because she has realized that his plan to marry the Princess was sensible and that he is doing what is right. She reflected, she says, and realized how stupid she was.

Jason falls for Medea's plot and returns to speak to her again. Medea is more than willing to employ deceitful rhetoric in her attempt to exact her vengeance on Jason. This suggests that rhetoric is a tool that can be employed for good and for ill and not something that is good or bad in and of itself.

Women, Medea says, are—she "won't say bad"—but they "are what they are." She asks his pardon for the way she acted and admits she was wrong. She calls the children out from the house and they enter through the door. She tells them to embrace Jason. She feigns fear that the children won't live long because of their impending exile. She weeps on one of the boys. The Chorus interrupts to say it too is weeping and hopes things don't get worse.

Medea is willing to disguise her attitude with Jason's prejudices (namely, that women are inferior to men) or, at least, to allow Jason to believe that she agrees with his prejudices in order to successfully execute her plot. Medea's stated fear that the children will come to harm in exile is ironic because both she and the audience know that she herself plans to harm them.

Jason is glad that Medea has come around to his view and says he doesn't blame her, even excuses her behavior based on her sex. He calls her "a sensible woman." He then tells his children he has made their future secure and that he thinks that one day they will be leading men in Corinth. Jason notices Medea weeping afresh and asks her why. She says she is thinking of the children. He says he will provide for them. She says she trusts him, that woman is "the weaker sex" and "born to tears" and he questions her again about why she is weeping over the boys.

Jason considers Medea a "sensible woman" because he believes she is now deferring to the better judgment of men. He confuses what is right with what he wishes to be right. Here, Medea may be genuinely weeping over what she believes she must do to her children rather than only acting—the play leaves it ambiguous whether she truly grieves over killing her children. Her explanation for her tears, however, is calculated to get the response from Jason that she wants.

LINES 901-1000

Medea says she is concerned for the children because she gave birth to them. She realizes, she claims, that it is best for her to be banished, but that the boys should stay. Jason should beg Creon to let them. Jason says he will try to persuade Creon. Medea tells him to ask the Princess. He says he thinks it might work—she "is a woman." Medea says she will help Jason win her over by sending along gifts—a finely woven dress and **crown** of beaten gold—and suggests that the boys carry them.

Once again Medea mixes truth with her deceit—she does care for the children because she is their mother, but, because of her intention to kill them, she can't truly be worried about what will happen to them in exile. Medea plausibly suggests that the Princess will have a weak spot for Jason's children and contrives a way to get her poisoned gifts into the Princess's hands. Jason, meanwhile, looks down on the Princess as being just "a woman" in the same way he looks down on Medea.

Medea tells Jason to send a maid (a member of the Chorus) to get the presents and tell the children to take the gifts to the happy, royal bride. Jason calls Medea foolish for parting with the dress and **crown**, saying the castle isn't short on such objects. His new wife, he says, will care more about what he has to say then about valuables.

Perhaps Medea insists that the children should take the gifts to the Princess because no one will suspect them as the vehicle for Medea's treachery. Jason increases the dramatic tension by arguing against giving the princess any gifts—which would foil Medea's plans.

Medea counters that gifts win over even the gods. They are even better at winning over mortals, she says, because mortals are so greedy. She says to buy her children out of exile she would pay not just with gold, but with her life. Medea instructs the boys to go to the palace, kneel before their father's new wife and beg her to spare them from exile. Jason and the boys exit.

If gifts in the form of sacrifices can win over gods, Medea argues, then they are even more effective at winning over human beings. Medea's claim that she would die rather than let her sons go into exile may actually be true, if the children don't at least get a chance to beg for forgiveness from the sentence of exile, then her plans will be ruined. Medea uses rhetoric to say true things that still manage to hide the full truth.

The Chorus begins its fourth choral ode, singing that it has no more hope for the boys' lives. They are already walking to their deaths. The Princess will receive her doom, her death. She will put on the gifts and die. The Chorus sings that Jason blindly brings death upon his new wife and children, and that it shares Medea's grief.

The Chorus, like Euripides' audience, knows that what Medea plans will come to pass, all that remains to happen is for it to actually happen. Jason is stuck, unwitting, in a situation of dramatic irony, he doesn't know what Medea, the Chorus, and we, the audience, already know. He must wait and see.

The Tutor enters and tells Medea that the children have been spared their banishment. Medea wails. The Tutor is perplexed and Medea wails again. He questions her and she says his news "is what it is" and that she doesn't blame him. She says she can't help weeping. The gods and her own evil schemes have brought her plans to fruition. The Tutor tries to comfort Medea, saying that the boys will make sure she comes home one day. She says she'll bring others home before that.

The Tutor is perplexed to find that Medea weeps over what he thinks is good news—that the children will be spared from banishment, but Medea knows that this result means that the Princess is, more than likely, already dying and that, to her mind, she must kill her children. The Tutor wrongfully believes Medea is weeping because of her own coming exile.

The Tutor advises Medea to bear her misfortune lightly. She tells him that she will and orders him to go into the house and prepare for the children's usual needs. He exits into the house through the door. She addresses her absent children saying that, unlike their mother, they have a home. She, contrarily, will have to go to another land, an exile once more. She berates herself for her pride and says that she raised her boys for nothing.

Medea accepts the Tutor's advice to bear her misfortunes lightly but the Tutor doesn't realize that Medea's misfortune is not so much exile as the obligation she feels to murder her own children. Medea suggests that in death her children won't be exiles—they'll have a home in the afterlife—and that she won't truly have a home or rest until she joins them there.

LINES 1001-1100

Once, Medea says, she placed great hopes in her children and thought that they would care for her in her old age. Her life, parted from them, will be grim and painful. Having moved to "a different sphere of life," they will no longer see their mother with their own eyes. Medea briefly loses her determination while looking at her children's eyes and smiles. She tells the Chorus her courage has left her and briefly resolves to take her children with her away from Corinth.

Medea begins to realize the full scope and weight of the unnatural action she is about to take. It is noteworthy that Medea characterizes her children's death as movement into a different sphere of life rather than a total departure from it. Having sworn, Medea almost considers it her duty to follow through with her plan, yet she begins to lose her resolve, increasing the dramatic tension and delaying what the ancient audience knew to be inevitable.

Medea asks herself if she wants her enemies to laugh at her for losing her resolve and leaving her enemy (Jason) unpunished. She suffers from a crisis of confidence, going back and forth between her options and speaking to herself, but at last resolves to go through with her original plan to murder the children. She knows, she says, that the Princess is dying with the poisoned **crown** on her head and she can't leave her work half finished. She justifies the horror of her actions by explaining that she is motivated by incredible passion, and passion "is the cause of all life's greatest horrors."

Medea continues to oscillate between action and inaction. It is practically her duty, to her mind, to finish the work she set out to do. We see her conviction that the Princess is already dead or dying. She has incredible confidence in her plan thus far and its inescapable conclusion. Somehow, in the midst of her "incredible passion," Medea also has the ability to step back and justify the actions she is about to take based on the fact that she is gripped by such passion.

Following Medea's renewed commitment to her plan, there is a choral interlude, not a formal choral ode, in which the Chorus of Corinthian women suggests that women, too, feel inspiration—even if it's lesser than that experienced by men. "Not all, but a few women" are creatively gifted by the Muses. Then the Chorus proceeds to relate the disadvantages of parenthood, saying it is best to be wholly without children. Parents are worn out with care, worrying how best to bring up their children and how to provide for their futures even though they don't yet know whether the children themselves are worth the effort.

Here the Chorus makes a case for the potential creativity and intelligence of some, if not all, women—still a somewhat radical suggestion in the entirely male-dominated Greek society. It implies, based on the motion of its interlude, that women may be limited from achieving or displaying their full creative potential due to the many burdens of parenthood. Parenting children is very challenging and the concerns associated with it by Euripides and the Chorus are much the same as parental concerns today.

And the worst misfortune, the Chorus adds, that can befall parents is to have brought up and provided for their children and then to see them die. It is the most painful grief the gods impose on mortals.

Here, the Chorus emphasizes the familiar sentiment that outliving one's children is one of the greatest griefs one can endure. Medea's grief must be doubly intense as she is to kill her children herself.

Medea addresses the Chorus members as friends and says that she sees the Messenger from the palace, one of Jason's servants, whom she's been awaiting. He is agitated and out of breath with news of a "fresh disaster." The Messenger enters and tells Medea she has done a wicked thing. She should flee by any means possible. She asks him why she should escape. He tells her that the Princess is dead by her poison and Creon is dead from embracing her in her death throes. Medea calls it "wonderful news."

It is perplexing that the messenger from the palace would be so sympathetic with Medea after witnessing the gruesome disaster he relates in the coming lines. He understands, as he makes clear, that Medea authored the murders. Medea's relief that the Princess and Creon are dead briefly pushes her anxiety about having to kill her children out her mind. Perhaps the reason for the messenger's sympathy is that he is one of Jason's servants, meaning that he used to one of Medea's servants as well before Jason abandoned her.

LINES 1101-1200

The Messenger asks Medea if she is mad for celebrating news of Creon and the Princess's deaths—doesn't such news frighten her? Medea says she will answer, but first she wants him to recount their deaths in vivid detail so she can relish in them. The Messenger tells her that the servants were delighted to see the children at the palace because they had been worrying over them and Medea. Now, they thought, their must have been some resolution of the Jason and Medea's quarrel.

Medea's passion and desire to hear the full account of the Princess and Creon's deaths provides a convenient motivation for the full description of events that would have been difficult to stage. There were few, if any, scene changes in ancient Greek drama, so any events that take place somewhere other than in the initially established space represented by the stage (in this case the courtyard outside Medea's house) had to be described in long, expository monologues.

Some servants, the Messenger says, kissed the children's hair, others their hands. He himself was overjoyed and followed the boys to the women's quarters. The Princess had her eyes on Jason before she saw the children enter. Once she saw them, she pulled on her veil and looked away. Jason tried to sooth her and asked her to look with love upon what he loves. He asks her to take the gifts, for his sake, and to pardon the boys' exile.

The Messenger's story confirms that Medea was wise to choose the children to deliver her gifts as none at the palace suspected them. It enhances the dramatic tension that the Princess initially refused to look on Jason's children and their gifts only to be persuaded by Jason himself to take pity on them. The description also emphasizes Jason's love for his children with Medea, and emphasizes the further pain she is about to inflict upon him by murdering them.

Seeing the fine gifts, the Messenger says, the Princess agreed to all Jason asked. Jason left the room and she put on the embroidered, poisoned gown and the poisoned **crown** and arranged her hair in the mirror. Then she stepped daintily around the room on her bare white feet. What they saw next was frightful: her skin changed color, she staggered sideways, her limbs shaking, and collapsed into a chair. One of her older attendants, thinking "the anger of Pan" had fallen on the princess, let out a cry.

The Messenger's vivid description of the events in the palace is perfectly calculated to evoke the most pity from the audience. The Princess's innocence, or innocent seeming behavior, is emphasized and reemphasized with rich diction and vivid imagery. The god of shepherds and herdsman, Pan, was sometimes thought to be the cause of groundless fear—giving us the root if not the meaning of our word 'panic.'

But, the Messenger continues, when the attendant saw that the Princess was frothing at the mouth, that her eyes were twisting about in their sockets, and that the blood had drained from her skin, she let out a deeper more shocked wail. Maids rushed to the king, Creon, and to Jason. People rushed all about the palace. The Princess said nothing for some time then gave a frightful scream. The gold **crown** gave off a stream of all-consuming fire and the dress devoured her flesh. She jumped up on fire and ran trying to fling off the crown.

The doubling of the attendant's wail and her initial misrecognition of the severity of the Princess's condition, then the Princess's 'dramatic' pause, heighten the intensity of the drama and suspense even as their vividness enhances the realism and plausibility of the scene described. That real seeming description, however, is soon interrupted by the supernatural behavior of the poisoned crown, perhaps making the supernatural seem more believable.

The Princess, the Messenger says, could not get the **crown** off. She fell and gruesomely died. The servants, having seen her death, were afraid to touch her but Creon rushed in and threw himself on the Princess and prayed to die with her. When he tried to rise, the dress clung to him and he tore his flesh from his bones wrestling with it. He died and now lies next to the Princess in the palace. The Messenger says Medea will determine for herself how to avoid punishment.

Creon's prayer to die at the Princess's side is promptly and fatefully answered. His death via entanglement in his daughters dress may serve to represent how he wrongfully, figuratively entangled himself in Medea and Jason's affairs by giving Jason his daughter to marry. The Messenger seems somewhat confident that Medea is cunning enough to escape from Corinth unscathed.

LINES 1201-1300

Human affairs, the Messenger philosophizes, are only shadows. No mortal is happy. One can only be more or less fortunate, not happy. His long, expository monologue concludes and the Chorus says that Jason earned this great calamity. It pities the Princess for her attachment to Jason.

By pitying her, the Chorus seems to acknowledge the lesser guilt of the Princess compared to Jason and Creon. Fair judgment and punishment, after all, was not then nor now thought of as tragic. It was the Princess's poor luck and fate that were the source of her doom.

Medea tells the Chorus she is resolved to kill the children and leave Corinth. She says she won't leave them for another to kill, that they have to die, and so, since she gave them birth, she would rather kill them herself. She questions herself for hesitating and tells her hand to take the sword. She tells herself to forget her children for this one day and then mourn. She exits with the children through the door.

Medea introduces the only somewhat plausible argument that, if she doesn't kill her child, her enemies will. Couldn't Medea channel her resources into protecting her children? Nonetheless she is resolved and takes the children offstage. It is significant that none of the deaths in Medea take place onstage. They are all concealed.

The Chorus begins its fifth choral ode. It asks Earth and Sun (Helios) to look down at what Medea is doing. She is Helios' granddaughter, so he should take special interest. It begs Helios to stop her. Have all Medea's travails been for nothing? It calls it terrible for a mortal to shed a family member's blood. The gods punish it. The children are heard screaming offstage. One of the children asks (from offstage) what he can do to escape. The other says he doesn't know.

The Chorus suggests that the death of Medea's children will mean that Medea has lived a pointless life and points out the severity of the breech of Natural Law encompassed in child-murder. It notes that the gods punish such crimes but fails to note that Medea herself is, in part, divine. The children speak for the first time, if only to make them seem more innocent and their being murdered more tragic and awful.

The Chorus asks if it should enter the house. The children cry for help. The Chorus calls Medea miserable and made of stone for killing her children. Only one woman that they know of, Ino, killed her own sons when she was driven mad by the gods. She killed herself and her children by jumping with them into the sea.

The Chorus compares the story of Medea to another story of child-murder in Greek mythology—that of Ino. One significant difference in the two myths is that Ino, crazed by the gods, also killed herself with her children. Medea, according to the Chorus, is entirely unique for deciding to kill her children and go on living.

Jason enters and questions the Chorus if Medea is still in the house. He says she will either have to hide beneath the earth or fly into heaven if she is to escape punishment. He cares about the children, however, and is worried his new relatives might do something to them to avenge Creon and the Princess's murder. The Chorus pities Jason's ignorance. He thinks that the Chorus means she intends to kill him. They let him know that his children are dead.

Jason accidentally, ignorantly predicts Medea's mode of escape (into the heavens). Jason's anxieties about the boys' safety at the hands of Creon's angry relatives underscores how much their deaths will hurt him. The Chorus pities Jason for always knowing less than it, Medea, and the rest of us. For not knowing what we and they know, he is constantly the victim of dramatic irony.

Jason asks where the children were killed. The Chorus tells him to open the door. He commands his servants to undo the bolts. He wants to see the bodies and take vengeance on Medea. Medea asks why they are rattling and battering the doors. She says if Jason wants her, then he should say what he wishes, but, she adds, he will never lay hands on her again.

Jason at last seeks to break the boundary between interior and exterior represented by the door throughout the play. Yet as a consummate perpetrator of deceit Jason isn't permitted the capacity to reveal the play's interior truth—that Medea has been justly vengeful for his injustice against her.

Medea appears in a flying chariot drawn by **chimeras** sent by Helios, her grandfather. The notes for the staging don't survive in the manuscript, but the chariot is either on the roof of her house or suspended over the stage by a crane. She has with her the bodies of her dead children.

The gods, especially Helios, appear to condone Medea's actions—they have, after all, sent her a flying chariot to take her to Athens. This machine from the gods (origin of the term "deus ex machina") is a common plot device in ancient tragedy.

LINES 1301-1400

Jason calls Medea the most detestable creature of all time. She has killed his children and destroyed him. He curses her. He says he is sane, but was mad to bring her from a savage land to Greece. He recounts how Medea killed her own brother to join him and says that no Greek woman could have killed her own children. He calls her a lioness, not a human. He calls her a vile creature, a child-murder, and commands her to get out of his sight.

Jason reveals that Medea was correct about what she could do to most hurt him—she has bereft him of the potential for future children and robbed him of the children he already had. Jason attributes Medea's seemingly unnatural actions to her being a foreigner, a non-Greek. Her inhumane behavior, in his eyes, has robbed her of her human form. Jason, it seems, is a human (capable of feeling grief and pain) after all.

Medea says she would respond at greater length, but Zeus knows what she did for Jason and how he dishonored her. He can call her a lioness if he likes, but she sees through him. He says she suffers too for her actions, but she says being spared his mockery relieves her. Jason calls out to his dead children saying what an evil mother they had. Medea says it was their father's sickness that killed them. Jason asks if this matter of sex was enough for Medea to kill them, and she asks if he thinks that is no small matter for a woman.

Even the death of their children cannot provide Jason and Medea with a respite from their arguments and mutual hostility, their fundamental disagreement about who was the ultimate cause of their children's death. Note that Medea acknowledge that she does feel grief and pain after the murders. She also confirms Jason's argument that she was motivated out of sexual jealousy, but where he (the betrayer) sees this as a minor thing she (the one betrayed, and who sees herself as representing all betrayed women) sees it as a very big deal indeed, suggesting that it is a symptom of the repression and submissiveness forced upon all women.

Jason says his infidelity would be a small matter to a sensible woman, but to Medea everything is disaster. Medea says that the gods know who caused this calamity. Jason retorts that they know her "abominable mind." Jason asks for his sons' bodies to bury and mourn. Medea refuses, saying she willy bury them herself at a sanctuary to the goddess Hera. She will establish a solemn festival in Corinth to atone for the killing of her children. She will go to Aegeus in Athens, and she prophesizes that Jason will die ignobly, struck on the head by a piece of his old ship, the Argo.

Once again Medea's travails are attributed to her excessive emotion and passionate nature. It seems, based on how things have gone according to Medea's plan and Helios' decision to send Medea a flying chariot, that the gods do indeed agree with Medea that Jason was the author of the calamity (the cause of the tragedy). Medea acknowledges that her actions were severe enough to require atonement in the form of a solemn festival. Jason will symbolically meet his end by being killed by a piece of the ship that carried him on his quest for the Golden Fleece and, in so doing, brought him to meet Medea.

Jason calls on avenging Furies and bloody Justice to destroy Medea. Medea asks what gods could listen to a man who breaks his oaths. They exchange biting insults. Medea tells Jason to wait until he is old to mourn—it is too early now. Jason says he longs to kiss his children again. Medea notes the irony of his wanting to touch and talk to them now when before he had banished them. He begs her. She says he is wasting breath.

Medea once again calls attention to Jason's hypocrisy when he calls on Justice to come to his aid when he has behaved unjustly all along. We see that Jason, now that he can no longer touch them, longs for his sons—a condition of desire recognizable as fundamentally human and so flawed. Medea, meanwhile, delights in taking vengeance on the man who betrayed her.

Jason calls on Zeus to witness how Medea, a child-murderer, is driving him away. He swears that he will call on the gods to witness her vile deeds as long as he has strength. He wishes he had never had children only to see her murder them.

Now that Jason is wronged, he calls on Zeus to witness the fact. Yet he did not call on Zeus when he wronged Medea, nor was he willing to admit that he had even wronged her by abandoning her and not resisting when she was sentenced to exile.

The Chorus speaks the final words in the play, saying that Zeus ordains many fates and the gods bring many things to end unexpectedly. What seems likely doesn't happen and unlikely things come to pass instead. So, the Chorus says, ends this story.

It is notable that the Chorus suggests that the conclusion of the events in the play is unexpected when they have been known, built, and foreshadowed throughout the course of the play. Perhaps what the Chorus means is that child-murder is so reprehensible and egregious that it always *seems unexpected, or perhaps what is unexpected is that the gods seem to agree with Medea, to see the child-murder as a necessary aspect of the punishment of Jason for his injustice toward Medea.*

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