

SCENE: In front of Medea's house in Corinth. Enter from the house Medea's nurse.

NURSE How I wish the Argo* never had reached the land
Of Colchis, skimming through the blue Symplegades,
Nor ever had fallen in the glades of Pelion
The smitten fir-tree to furnish oars for the hands
Of heroes who in Pelias' name attempted
The Golden Fleece! For then my mistress Medea
Would not have sailed for the towers of the land of Iolcus,
Her heart on fire with passionate love for Jason;
Nor would she have persuaded the daughters of Pelias
To kill their father, and now be living here
In Corinth with her husband and children. She gave
Pleasure to the people of her land of exile,
And she herself helped Jason in every way.
This is indeed the greatest salvation of all—
For the wife not to stand apart from the husband.
But now there's hatred everywhere, Love is diseased.
For, deserting his own children and my mistress,
Jason has taken a royal wife to his bed,
The daughter of the ruler of this land, Creon.
And poor Medea is slighted, and cries aloud on the
Vows they made to each other, the right hands clasped

* Jason's ship on the expedition of the Argonauts, sent by Pelias, king of Iolcus in Thessaly (Jason's uncle, who had usurped the throne), to Colchis on the Black Sea. The Symplegades were clashing rocks, one of the obstacles along the way. Pelion is a mountain in Thessaly. Medea was a princess of Colchis who fell in love with Jason and followed him back to Greece.

In eternal promise. She calls upon the gods to witness
 What sort of return Jason has made to her love.
 She lies without food and gives herself up to suffering,
 Wasting away every moment of the day in tears.
 So it has gone since she knew herself slighted by him.
 Not stirring an eye, not moving her face from the ground,
 No more than either a rock or surging sea water
 She listens when she is given friendly advice.
 Except that sometimes she twists back her white neck and
 Moans to herself, calling out on her father's name,
 And her land, and her home betrayed when she came away
 with

A man who now is determined to dishonor her.
 Poor creature, she has discovered by her sufferings
 What it means to one not to have lost one's own country.
 She has turned from the children and does not like to see
 them.

I am afraid she may think of some dreadful thing,
 For her heart is violent. She will never put up with
 The treatment she is getting. I know and fear her
 Lest she may sharpen a sword and thrust to the heart,
 Stealing into the palace where the bed is made,
 Or even kill the king and the new-wedded groom,
 And thus bring a greater misfortune on herself.
 She's a strange woman. I know it won't be easy
 To make an enemy of her and come off best.
 But here the children come. They have finished playing.
 They have no thought at all of their mother's trouble.
 Indeed it is not usual for the young to grieve.

*(Enter from the right the slave who is the tutor to
 Medea's two small children. The children follow him.)*

TUTOR You old retainer of my mistress' household,
 Why are you standing here all alone in front of the
 Gates and moaning to yourself over your misfortune?
 Medea could not wish you to leave her alone.

NURSE Old man, and guardian of the children of Jason,
 If one is a good servant, it's a terrible thing
 When one's master's luck is out; it goes to one's heart.
 So I myself have got into such a state of grief
 That a longing stole over me to come outside here
 And tell the earth and air of my mistress' sorrows.

TUTOR Has the poor lady not yet given up her crying?

NURSE Given up? She's at the start, not halfway through her tears.

TUTOR Poor fool—if I may call my mistress such a name—
 How ignorant she is of trouble more to come.

NURSE What do you mean, old man? You needn't fear to speak.

TUTOR Nothing. I take back the words which I used just now.

NURSE Don't, by your beard, hide this from me, your fellow-
 servant.
 If need be, I'll keep quiet about what you tell me.

TUTOR I heard a person saying, while I myself seemed
 Not to be paying attention, when I was at the place
 Where the old draught-players sit, by the holy fountain,
 That Creon, ruler of the land, intends to drive
 These children and their mother in exile from Corinth.
 But whether what he said is really true or not
 I do not know. I pray that it may not be true.

NURSE And will Jason put up with it that his children
 Should suffer so, though he's no friend to their mother?

TUTOR Old ties give place to new ones. As for Jason, he
 No longer has a feeling for this house of ours.

NURSE It's black indeed for us, when we add new to old
 Sorrows before even the present sky has cleared.

TUTOR But you be silent, and keep all this to yourself.
 It is not the right time to tell our mistress of it.

- NURSE Do you hear, children, what a father he is to you?
I wish he were dead—but no, he is still my master.
Yet certainly he has proved unkind to his dear ones.
- TUTOR What's strange in that? Have you only just discovered
That everyone loves himself more than his neighbor?
Some have good reason, others get something out of it.
So Jason neglects his children for the new bride.
- NURSE Go indoors, children. That will be the best thing.
And you, keep them to themselves as much as possible.
Don't bring them near their mother in her angry mood.
For I've seen her already blazing her eyes at them
As though she meant some mischief and I am sure that
She'll not stop raging until she has struck at someone.
May it be an enemy and not a friend she hurts!

(Medea is heard inside the house.)

- MEDEA Ah, wretch! Ah, lost in my sufferings,
I wish, I wish I might die.
- NURSE What did I say, dear children? Your mother
Frets her heart and frets it to anger.
Run away quickly into the house,
And keep well out of her sight.
Don't go anywhere near, but be careful
Of the wildness and bitter nature
Of that proud mind.
Go now! Run quickly indoors.
It is clear that she soon will put lightning
In that cloud of her cries that is rising
With a passion increasing. O, what will she do,
Proud-hearted and not to be checked on her course,
A soul bitten into with wrong?

(The Tutor takes the children into the house.)

- MEDEA Ah, I have suffered
What should be wept for bitterly. I hate you,
Children of a hateful mother. I curse you
And your father. Let the whole house crash.
- NURSE Ah, I pity you, you poor creature.
How can your children share in their father's
Wickedness? Why do you hate them? Oh children,
How much I fear that something may happen!
Great people's tempers are terrible, always
Having their own way, seldom checked,
Dangerous they shift from mood to mood.
How much better to have been accustomed
To live on equal terms with one's neighbors.
I would like to be safe and grow old in a
Humble way. What is moderate sounds best,
Also in practice is best for everyone.
Greatness brings no profit to people.
God indeed, when in anger, brings
Greater ruin to great men's houses.

*(Enter, on the right, a Chorus of Corinthian women.
They have come to inquire about Medea and to attempt to console her.)*

- CHORUS I heard the voice, I heard the cry
Of Colchis' wretched daughter.
Tell me, mother, is she not yet
At rest? Within the double gates
Of the court I heard her cry. I am sorry
For the sorrow of this home. O, say, what has happened?
- NURSE There is no home. It's over and done with.
Her husband holds fast to his royal wedding,
While she, my mistress, cries out her eyes
There in her room, and takes no warmth from
Any word of any friend.

MEDEA Oh, I wish
That lightning from heaven would split my head open.
Oh, what use have I now for life?
I would find my release in death
And leave hateful existence behind me.

CHORUS O God and Earth and Heaven!
Did you hear what a cry was that
Which the sad wife sings?
Poor foolish one, why should you long
For that appalling rest?
The final end of death comes fast.
No need to pray for that.
Suppose your man gives honor
To another woman's bed.
It often happens. Don't be hurt.
God will be your friend in this.
You must not waste away
Grieving too much for him who shared your bed.

MEDEA Great Themis, lady Artemis, * behold
The things I suffer, though I made him promise,
My hateful husband. I pray that I may see him,
Him and his bride and all their palace shattered
For the wrong they dare to do me without cause.
Oh, my father! Oh, my country! In what dishonor
I left you, killing my own brother for it. **

NURSE Do you hear what she says, and how she cries
On Themis, the goddess of Promises, and on Zeus,
Whom we believe to be the Keeper of Oaths?
Of this I am sure, that no small thing
Will appease my mistress' anger.

* Goddesses: Themis was the goddess of justice, the virgin Artemis would be sensitive to the plight of women.

** During the escape from Colchis, to delay her father's pursuit.

CHORUS Will she come into our presence?
Will she listen when we are speaking
To the words we say?
I wish she might relax her rage
And temper of her heart.
My willingness to help will never
Be wanting to my friends.
But go inside and bring her
Out of the house to us,
And speak kindly to her: hurry,
Before she wrongs her own.
This passion of hers moves to something great.

NURSE I will, but I doubt if I'll manage
To win my mistress over.
But still I'll attempt it to please you.
Such a look she will flash on her servants
If any comes near with a message,
Like a lioness guarding her cubs.
It is right, I think, to consider
Both stupid and lacking in foresight
Those poets of old who wrote songs
For revels and dinners and banquets,
Pleasant sounds for men living at ease;
But none of them all has discovered
How to put to an end with their singing
Or musical instruments grief,
Bitter grief, from which death and disaster
Cheat the hopes of a house. Yet how good
If music could cure men of this! But why raise
To no purpose the voice at a banquet? For *there* is
Already abundance of pleasure for men
With a joy of its own.

(The Nurse goes into the house.)

CHORUS I heard a shriek that is laden with sorrow.
 Shrilling out her hard grief she cries out
 Upon him who betrayed both her bed and her marriage.
 Wronged, she calls on the gods,
 On the justice of Zeus, the oath sworn,
 Which brought her away
 To the opposite shore of the Greeks
 Through the gloomy salt straits to the gateway
 Of the salty unlimited sea.

(Medea, attended by servants, comes out of the house.)

MEDEA Women of Corinth, I have come outside to you
 Lest you should be indignant with me; for I know
 That many people are overproud, some when alone,
 And others when in company. And those who live
 Quietly, as I do, get a bad reputation.
 For a just judgment is not evident in the eyes.
 When a man at first sight hates another, before
 Learning his character, being in no way injured;
 And a foreigner especially must adapt himself.
 I'd not approve of even a fellow-countryman
 Who by pride and want of manners offends his neighbors.
 But on me this thing has fallen so unexpectedly,
 It has broken my heart. I am finished. I let go
 All my life's joy. My friends, I only want to die.
 It was everything to me to think well of one man,
 And he, my own husband, has turned out wholly vile.
 Of all things which are living and can form a judgment
 We women are the most unfortunate creatures.
 Firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required
 For us to buy a husband and take for our bodies
 A master; for not to take one is even worse.
 And now the question is serious whether we take
 A good or bad one; for there is no easy escape
 For a woman, nor can she say no to her marriage.
 She arrives among new modes of behavior and manners,

And needs prophetic power, unless she has learned at
 home,
 How best to manage him who shares the bed with her.
 And if we work out all this well and carefully,
 And the husband lives with us and lightly bears his yoke,
 Then life is enviable. If not, I'd rather die.
 A man, when he's tired of the company in his home,
 Goes out of the house and puts an end to his boredom
 And turns to a friend or companion of his own age.
 But we are forced to keep our eyes on one alone.
 What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time
 Living at home, while they do the fighting in war.
 How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand
 Three times in the front of battle than bear one child.
 Yet what applies to me does not apply to you.
 You have a country. Your family home is here.
 You enjoy life and the company of your friends.
 But I am deserted, a refugee, thought nothing of
 By my husband—something he won in a foreign land.
 I have no mother or brother, nor any relation
 With whom I can take refuge in this sea of woe.
 This much then is the service I would beg from you:
 If I can find the means or devise any scheme
 To pay my husband back for what he has done to me—
 Him and his father-in-law and the girl who married him—
 Just to keep silent. For in other ways a woman
 Is full of fear, defenseless, dreads the sight of cold
 Steel; but, when once she is wronged in the matter of love,
 No other soul can hold so many thoughts of blood.

CHORUS This I will promise. You are in the right, Medea,
 In paying your husband back. I am not surprised at you
 For being sad.

But look! I see our King Creon
 Approaching. He will tell us of some new plan.

(Enter, from the right, Creon, with attendants.)

CREON You, with that angry look, so set against your husband,
Medea, I order you to leave my territories
An exile, and take along with you your two children,
And not to waste time doing it. It is my decree,
And I will see it done. I will not return home
Until you are cast from the boundaries of my land.

MEDEA Oh, this is the end for me. I am utterly lost.
Now I am in the full force of the storm of hate
And have no harbor from ruin to reach easily.
Yet still, in spite of it all, I'll ask the question:
What is your reason, Creon, for banishing me?

CREON I am afraid of you—why should I dissemble it?—
Afraid that you may injure my daughter mortally.
Many things accumulate to support my feeling.
You are a clever woman, versed in evil arts,
And are angry at having lost your husband's love.
I hear that you are threatening, so they tell me,
To do something against my daughter and Jason
And me, too. I shall take my precautions first.
I tell you, I prefer to earn your hatred now
Than to be soft-hearted and afterward regret it.

MEDEA This is not the first time, Creon. Often previously
Through being considered clever I have suffered much.
A person of sense ought never to have his children
Brought up to be more clever than the average.
For, apart from cleverness bringing them no profit,
It will make them objects of envy and ill-will.
If you put new ideas before the eyes of fools
They'll think you foolish and worthless into the bargain;
And if you are thought superior to those who have
Some reputation for learning, you will become hated.
I have some knowledge myself of how this happens;
For being clever, I find that some will envy me,
Others object to me. Yet all my cleverness

Is not so much.

Well, then, are you frightened, Creon,
That I should harm you? There is no need. It is not
My way to transgress the authority of a king.
How have you injured me? You gave your daughter away
To the man you wanted. Oh, certainly I hate
My husband, but you, I think, have acted wisely;
Nor do I grudge it you that your affairs go well.
May the marriage be a lucky one! Only let me
Live in this land. For even though I have been wronged,
I will not raise my voice, but submit to my betters.

CREON What you say sounds gentle enough. Still in my heart
I greatly dread that you are plotting some evil,
And therefore I trust you even less than before.
A sharp-tempered woman, or, for that matter, a man,
Is easier to deal with than the clever type
Who holds her tongue. No. You must go. No need for more
Speeches. The thing is fixed. By no manner of means
Shall you, an enemy of mine, stay in my country.

MEDEA I beg you. By your knees, by your new-wedded girl.

CREON Your words are wasted. You will never persuade me.

MEDEA Will you drive me out, and give no heed to my prayers?

CREON I will, for I love my family more than you.

MEDEA O my country! How bitterly now I remember you!

CREON I love my country too—next after my children.

MEDEA Oh what an evil to men is passionate love!

CREON That would depend on the luck that goes along with it.

MEDEA O God, do not forget who is the cause of this!

CREON Go. It is no use. Spare me the pain of forcing you.

MEDEA I'm spared no pain. I lack no pain to be spared me.

CREON Then you'll be removed by force by one of my men.

- MEDEA No, Creon, not that! But do listen, I beg you.
- CREON Woman, you seem to want to create a disturbance.
- MEDEA I *will* go into exile. *This* is not what I beg for.
- CREON Why then this violence and clinging to my hand?
- MEDEA Allow me to remain here just for this one day,
So I may consider where to live in my exile,
And look for support for my children, since their father
Chooses to make no kind of provision for them.
Have pity on them! You have children of your own.
It is natural for you to look kindly on them.
For myself I do not mind if I go into exile.
It is the children being in trouble that I mind.
- CREON There is nothing tyrannical about my nature,
And by showing mercy I have often been the loser.
Even now I know that I am making a mistake.
All the same you shall have your will. But this I tell you,
That if the light of heaven tomorrow shall see you,
You and your children in the confines of my land,
You die. This word I have spoken is firmly fixed.
But now, if you must stay, stay for this day alone.
For in it you can do none of the things I fear.

(Exit Creon with his attendants.)

- CHORUS Oh, unfortunate one! Oh, cruel!
Where will you turn? Who will help you?
What house or what land to preserve you
From ill can you find?
Medea, a god has thrown suffering
Upon you in waves of despair.
- MEDEA Things have gone badly every way. No doubt of that.
But not these things this far, and don't imagine so.
There are still trials to come for the new-wedded pair,
And for their relations pain that will mean something.
Do you think that I would ever have fawned on that man

Unless I had some end to gain or profit in it?
I would not even have spoken or touched him with my
hands.
But he has got to such a pitch of foolishness
That, though he could have made nothing of all my plans
By exiling me, he has given me this one day
To stay here, and in this I will make dead bodies
Of three of my enemies—father, the girl, and my husband.
I have many ways of death which I might suit to them,
And do not know, friends, which one to take in hand;
Whether to set fire underneath their bridal mansion,
Or sharpen a sword and thrust it to the heart,
Stealing into the palace where the bed is made.
There is just one obstacle to this. If I am caught
Breaking into the house and scheming against it,
I shall die, and give my enemies cause for laughter.
It is best to go by the straight road, the one in which
I am most skilled, and make away with them by poison.
So be it then.
And now suppose them dead. What town will receive me?
What friend will offer me a refuge in his land,
Or the guaranty of his house and save my own life?
There is none. So I must wait a little time yet,
And if some sure defense should then appear for me,
In craft and silence I will set about this murder.
But if my fate should drive me on without help,
Even though death is certain, I will take the sword
Myself and kill, and steadfastly advance to crime.
It shall not be—I swear it by her, my mistress,
Whom most I honor and have chosen as partner,
Hecate,* who dwells in the recesses of my hearth—
That any man shall be glad to have injured me.
Bitter I will make their marriage for them and mournful,
Bitter the alliance and the driving me out of the land.

* A goddess of the night.

Ah, come, Medea, in your plotting and scheming
 Leave nothing untried of all those things which you know.
 Go forward to the dreadful act. The test has come
 For resolution. You see how you are treated. Never
 Shall you be mocked by Jason's Corinthian wedding,
 Whose father was noble, whose grandfather Helius.*
 You have the skill. What is more, you were born a woman,
 And women, though most helpless in doing good deeds,
 Are of every evil the cleverest of contrivers.

CHORUS Flow backward to your sources, sacred rivers,
 And let the world's great order be reversed.
 It is the thoughts of *men* that are deceitful,
 Their pledges that are loose.
 Story shall now turn my condition to a fair one,
 Women are paid their due.
 No more shall evil-sounding fame be theirs.
 Cease now, you muses of the ancient singers,
 To tell the tale of my unfaithfulness;
 For not on us did Phoebus, lord of music,**
 Bestow the lyre's divine
 Power, for otherwise I should have sung an answer
 To the other sex. Long time
 Has much to tell of us, and much of them.
 You sailed away from your father's home,
 With a heart on fire you passed
 The double rocks of the sea.
 And now in a foreign country
 You have lost your rest in a widowed bed,
 And are driven forth, a refugee
 In dishonor from the land.
 Good faith has gone, and no more remains
 In great Greece a sense of shame.

* Sun god.

** Apollo.

It has flown away to the sky.
 No father's house for a haven
 Is at hand for you now, and another queen
 Of your bed has dispossessed you and
 Is mistress of your home.

(Enter Jason, with attendants.)

JASON This is not the first occasion that I have noticed
 How hopeless it is to deal with a stubborn temper.
 For, with reasonable submission to our ruler's will,
 You might have lived in this land and kept your home.
 As it is you are going to be exiled for your loose speaking.
 Not that I mind myself. You are free to continue
 Telling everyone that Jason is a worthless man.
 But as to your talk about the king, consider
 Yourself most lucky that exile is your punishment.
 I, for my part, have always tried to calm down
 The anger of the king, and wished you to remain.
 But you will not give up your folly, continually
 Speaking ill of him, and so you are going to be banished.
 All the same, and in spite of your conduct, I'll not desert
 My friends, but have come to make some provision for you,
 So that you and the children may not be penniless
 Or in need of anything in exile. Certainly
 Exile brings many troubles with it. And even
 If you hate me, I cannot think badly of you.

MEDEA O coward in every way—that is what I call you,
 With bitterest reproach for your lack of manliness,
 You have come, you, my worst enemy, have come to me!
 It is not an example of overconfidence
 Or of boldness thus to look your friends in the face,
 Friends you have injured—no, it is the worst of all
 Human diseases, shamelessness. But you did well
 To come, for I can speak ill of you and lighten
 My heart, and you will suffer while you are listening.
 And first I will begin from what happened first.