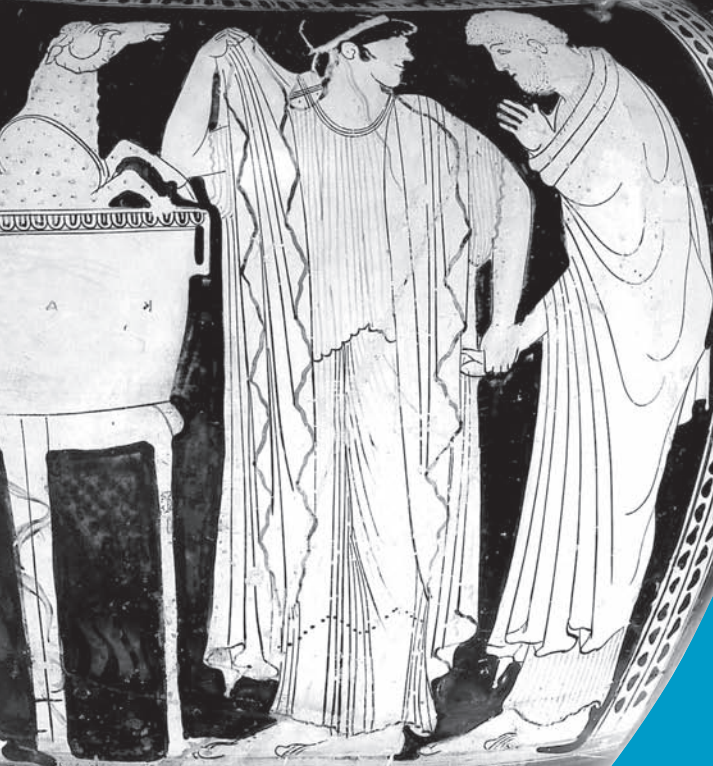


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Euripides
MEDEA



Translation, Introduction and Notes
A.J. Podlecki

Euripides' *Medea*

**Translated
with an Introduction
and Notes**

A.J. Podlecki

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Introduction

The Mythical Background

It is clear from scattered references in our sources that Medea and her various adventures belong to the earliest stratum of Greek myth. The episodes that are most familiar to the modern reader are those recounted or alluded to in Euripides' play, in a short passage in Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode, and in an epic poem which survives, *The Adventures of the Argonauts (Argonautica)*, by the Hellenistic writer Apollonius of Rhodes. But there were other stories, some perhaps of greater currency in ancient Greece than the ones best known to us. The version we consider as standard makes of Medea a priestess (or even a daughter) of the moon-goddess Hecate, and herself a witch, daughter of Aietes, who was the brother of Circe, both of them children of Helios the Sun-god. The locus of this magical family was Colchis, on the remote eastern shore of Pontus, "The Sea," known to the Greeks also as "Euxine" ("Hospitable," a title of hope) and to the modern traveler as the Black Sea. But another series of stories placed Medea firmly (if mythically) in the genealogy of Corinth's ruling family. According to this account, which had behind it the authority of the Corinthian poet Eumelus (probably somewhat earlier than Homer, and so before 700 B.C.), Helios gave his son Aietes Corinth—then known as Ephyra—as part of his domain. When Aietes in answer to an oracle went off to Colchis, the kingship passed to his brother Aloeus and then to some of his descendants who, however, because of certain difficulties they got into, made the people of Ephyra-Corinth regret that Aietes had given up the kingship. So they summoned Aietes' daughter Medea from where she was living, Iolkos in Thessaly, and she became their queen; her husband Jason followed her and

they ruled jointly. Wishing to make their children immortal (this was apparently because of a false promise by Hera), as each was born Medea “hid” them (that is, buried them alive) in Hera’s sanctuary at Corinth, but when Jason learned what she was doing he, quite naturally, disapproved and returned to Iolkos, so Medea, too, left Corinth and turned the kingdom over to Sisyphus (see note on v. 405 below; in a variant, known to Pindar, she married Sisyphus and presumably ruled Corinth with him). Although there are points of contact with at least one event in Euripides’ play, her murder of her children, this is a very different and somewhat more respectable series of adventures than the better-known version.

She comes into the story of the Argonauts (“Sailors on the ship *Argo*”) when the exploits of these Dark Age buccaneers are already well under way. Homer knew the tale, even though he chose not to tell it, simply referring to it in several places in an offhand way (he refers to the *Argo* as “the sea-faring ship which everyone is concerned with,” indicating perhaps that he felt enough poetic accounts were already in circulation). Jason, he says, was the only sailor to escape shipwreck on the “Wandering Rocks” (see note on v. 2, “Clashing Rocks”), because he was helped by the goddess Hera, who loved him. Elsewhere Homer records Thessalian Iolkos as the kingdom of Pelias, half-brother of Aison, who was Jason’s father. And of course the witch Circe, daughter of Helios and sister of Aietes, figures prominently in the story of Odysseus’ wanderings.

If Homer never mentions Medea by name she does find a place, albeit a small one, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which gives a brief account of the “labors” imposed by Pelias on his nephew, Jason. During his journeys, we learn, Jason met Medea and brought the “flashing-eyed maiden” back to Iolkos with him as his wife; they had a son, Medeios (elsewhere called Medos), whom the centaur Chiron raised. It is assumed that Medea figured in the genealogical poetry, now lost, which was current at Hesiod’s time and later, and some details are specifically assigned to the non-extant *Naupactica*, “Tales about Naupactus.” As we shall see, one of her tricks was narrated in the *Nostoi*, “Returns,” which was part of the so-called epic “Cycle” intended to fill out the Trojan tales told by Homer. Medea was best known, however, for the help she rendered to Jason in his quest of the Golden Fleece, a tale alluded to by the early elegiac poet Mimnermus in a work that does not survive, and it is to this segment of Medea’s story that we must now turn.

Jason’s father Aison had been deprived of his kingdom, Iolkos, through the treachery of Aison’s half-brother, Pelias. Pelias, however, had received an oracular prophecy that he would have to surrender the kingship to a legitimate claimant known only as “the half-shod man.” When Aison’s son, Jason, ap-

Euripides' *Medea*^o

Characters

Nurse
 Creon, King of Corinth
 Children of Medea
 Tutor
 Jason
 Chorus of Corinthian Women
 Aigeus, King of Athens
 Medea
 Messenger

(The scene^o is a street in Corinth. Medea's house is in the background. An elderly female, Medea's "Nurse"—that is, personal maid—steps out of the front door and addresses the audience.)

NURSE^o

I wish that the ship Argo^o had never flown
 Through the dark, Clashing rocks^o to the land of Colchis,^o

The translation was made originally from D.L. Page's edition (Oxford, 1938; reprinted), but has been revised in light of J. Diggle's Oxford text (1984) (cf. also David Kovacs, ed. and trans., *Euripides: Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea* (Loeb Library, Cambridge and London, 1994).

The *scene* is before a house in Corinth, evidently that in which Jason and Medea had lived with their two boys (not named in the play; later accounts name them as Pheres and Mermeros) before Jason's withdrawal to the palace.

Nurse. As often in Euripides, a character appears and gives some background information. Here it is Medea's "Nurse," that is, personal maid, who explains that Medea's present troubles can be traced back to the time when Jason set out from Thessaly with the Argonautic expedition to the land of Colchis, where he met Medea and with her help secured the Golden Fleece (see Introduction).

1. *The ship Argo:* the vessel built by the "Argonauts" under Athena's inspiration for the quest of the Golden Fleece.
2. *Clashing rocks:* they are sometimes identified with the *Planktai*, or "Wandering Rocks," which Homer mentions. These reefs, at the western end of the Black Sea near the mouth of the Bosphorus, were believed to shift their position inexplicably, and so were particularly treacherous to sailors. (The phenomenon described appears to have been discovered in some offshore rocky islands quite often covered in a low mist; see W.F. Pickard in *Greece and Rome* 34 [1987] 1-6).

Colchis: on the eastern shore of the Black Sea.

That in the forest glens of Mt. Pelion^o the pine
 Had never been cut for her, had never been made
 Into oars for the hands of excellent sailors who hunted 5
 The Golden Fleece for Pelias.^o My lady,
 Medea, would never have sailed to Iolkos^o towers,
 Her spirit struck senseless^o with love of Jason.
 She wouldn't have persuaded Pelias' daughters^o to kill
 Their father; she wouldn't have settled here in Corinth, 10
 With her husband and children. She tried to please
 The people to whose land she had come, an exile,
 And for her part to fit in with Jason in everything.
 This, to my mind, is a woman's greatest safety:
 Not to take the opposite side from her husband. 15
 But now—everything's hateful, her love is sick.
 Jason betrayed his children and my mistress
 For the marriage-bed of a royal bride; he's married
 The daughter of Creon, the ruler of the country.
 And Medea – poor woman! – treated with dishonor,^o 20
 Shouts “Where are the oaths? Your right hand given
 In trust?” She calls upon the gods to witness
 What kind of return she has received from Jason.

-
3. *Mt. Pelion*: a mountain in southeast Thessaly, from which the Argonauts set sail. In their war against the Olympian gods the giants attempted to pile the neighboring Mt. Ossa on Pelion to scale the heights of Olympus.
6. *Golden Fleece for Pelias*: Jason's uncle Pelias had treacherously deprived his half-brother, and Jason's father, of the kingdom of Iolkos (v. 7). When Jason turned up to claim the throne, Pelias attempted to get him out of the way by insisting that he perform an apparently impossible “labor,” fetching the fabulous fleece of a golden ram from faraway Colchis (he later reneged on his promise to turn the kingdom over to Jason if the latter were successful in his quest).
7. *Iolkos*: modern Volo, on Thessaly's southern coast, seat of Pelias' kingdom.
8. *her spirit struck senseless*: it seems difficult to believe that the Medea we see in this play, coolly calculating the best means of revenging herself on those who have wronged her, could ever have been “swept away” by her love for Jason. But that is what the story requires and is certainly one of the features of the myth as it is told by other writers.
9. *Pelias' daughters*: when Pelias refused to give up his rule to his nephew, who had successfully carried out the assigned task (see note on v. 6), Medea devised a terrible scheme to remove him. Having first demonstrated her magic abilities by rejuvenating a ram, she persuaded Pelias' daughters to cut up their father and boil him, promising them that this would have the effect of renewing his youth. It did not. (She refers to her misdeed several times in the play; see vv. 485-6 and 504-5).
20. *Treated with dishonor*: this in particular is what rankles in Medea's soul; besides the thought of all she has given up for what now turns out to have been a bad bargain (v. 23), and her very human feeling of helplessness and inferiority at having her male support removed—not to mention sheer jealousy—her honor also is a stake (see also v. 33).

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