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Translated by R. C. Trevelyan
Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

The Medea was produced in the year 431 B.C. when Euripides was probably 49 years old. It was the first play in a tetralogy that also included the *Philoctetes*, the *Dictys*, and the *Theristae*, a Satyric drama. Euripides gained the third prize, Euphorion, the son of Aeschylus, being the first, and Sophocles second. Among the surviving plays of Euripides, only the *Alcestis* was composed earlier.

My object in this translation has been to reproduce as faithfully as possible for those who cannot read Greek, not only the meaning, but the form, phrasing and movement of the original. In the dialogue the problem is a simple one. A normal English blank verse, though shorter by two syllables than a Greek iambic line, and of different rhythmical structure, is yet not dissimilar in movement and general effect. It ought then to be possible, without omissions or padding, to translate the dialogue into blank verse line for line.

In the lyrics and anapaests the difficulties are far greater, and no solution can be quite satisfactory. I have tried to imitate as closely as possible the metrical pattern and phrasing, in such a way that one musical setting would fit both the Greek and the English words.

All Greek poetry is quantitative, the metrical design being determined by the length and shortness of the syllables, not by the stress, whereas the structure of English verse depends in the main upon stress. If then we are to reproduce the pattern of a Greek rhythmical phrase in English, we must, as it were, translate quantity into stress. At the same time, as often as possible, long English syllables must be made to correspond to long Greek syllables, and short to short syllables. The success or failure of such an experiment will depend upon the degree

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to which a reader who knows no Greek can feel that he is reading, a translation no doubt, but a translation into intelligible English metre and poetry.

In the case of the famous Ode in praise of Athens (lines 826–865) I found the Greek rhythms so difficult to reproduce in English that it seemed better here to give up the attempt, and use freer verse-forms, rather than do violence to the phrasing and diction for the sake of a theory.

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THE STORY

Jason, son of Aeson, King of Iolkos in Thessaly, had been the leader of the Argonauts, the crew of heroes who had sailed in the Argo to Colchis in quest of the Golden Fleece. By the help of the enchantress Medea, daughter of Aeëtes, the son of Helios and King of Colchis, Jason was successful, and returned with the Fleece and with Medea to Iolkos. Here by her magic arts Medea destroyed King Pelias, Jason's uncle, who had usurped his throne; but, horrified at the murder, the men of Iolkos banished Jason and Medea, who found a refuge at Corinth. Here Jason became the friend of Kreon, the King, who offered him his daughter, Glauke, in marriage, if he would send away Medea. But she, driven to frenzy by Jason's faithlessness, first destroyed Glauke and her father, and then, further to punish Jason, killed their two young children, and fled to Athens in a magic chariot drawn by winged dragons.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MEDEA

JASON

KREON, *King of Corinth*AEGEUS, *King of Athens*NURSE *of Medea*TWO BOYS, *children of Jason and Medea*ATTENDANT *of the children*

A MESSENGER

CHORUS *of Corinthian women*

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Before MEDEA'S house in Corinth. The NURSE enters alone.

NURSE

Ah would that Argo ne'er had flown between
 The blue Symplēgades to the Colchian land,
 Nay, that in Pēlion's glens ne'er had been felled
 The pinetree, nor with oars had armed the hands
 Of those chieftains who sailed to win the Fleece
 Of Gold for Pēlias; for then had my mistress,
 Medea, ne'er embarked for towered Iolkos,
 Smitten with love for Jason to the heart;
 Nor yet had she beguiled Pēlias' daughters
 To slay their sire, nor with her lord and children 10
 Dwelt here in Corinth, still by Jason loved,
 And eager in all things to comply with him.
 For then is the home's welfare most assured,
 When the wife is not at variance with her lord.
 But now all's enmity, cankered what was most dear.
 For his own children and my mistress Jason
 Would now betray, wedding a royal spouse,
 The child of Kreon, monarch of this land.
 But miserable Medea, thus dishonoured, 20
 Invokes their oaths, recalls their joined right hands,
 That mightiest pledge, summons the Gods to witness
 What recompense she receives from Jason now.
 Fasting she lies, yielding to grief her body,
 Wasting in tears continually since first
 She had knowledge how her lord was wronging her;
 Neither lifting her eyes, nor from the ground
 Raising her face; but deaf as any rock
 Or ocean wave, she heeds not chiding friends;
 Save when she turns her beauteous neck aside, 30
 And to herself bemoans her father dear,
 Her country, and her house, which she betrayed
 Following the man who now dishonours her.
 Thus bitterly by misfortune has she learnt

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The wisdom of cleaving to one's fatherland.
 Her sons she hates, nor joys to see them more.
 I am fearful lest some mischief she devise;
 Since dangerous is her mood, nor to such wrong
 Will she submit. I know her, and dread her wrath. 39
 For terrible is she: if any rouse her hate, 44
 Easy by no means will his triumph prove.
 But here are the boys returning from their sports.
 Naught of their mother's sorrows do they reck,
 For in the young mind misery has no home.

Enter the two BOYS and their ATTENDANT.

ATTENDANT
 Tell me, thou ancient house-serf of my lady,
 Why dost thou stand here at the gate, alone, 50
 Wailing aloud these sorrows to thyself?
 How could Medea consent that thou shouldst leave her?

NURSE
 Nay, old man, thou who guardest Jason's children,
 The ill-fortunes of their masters must needs grieve
 And touch the very souls of faithful slaves.
 And I now to such anguish have been wrought
 That a yearning took me to come forth and here
 Proclaim to Earth and Heaven my lady's woes.

ATTENDANT
 Has she not then yet ceased wailing her miseries?

NURSE
 Would it were so! Her trouble is scarce begun. 60

ATTENDANT
 Ah blind fool!—if we may speak so of our masters—
 For of her latest troubles she knows naught.

NURSE
 What mean you, old man? Grudge not to tell me all.

ATTENDANT
 'Tis nothing. I recall the words I spoke.

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NURSE

I entreat you, hide naught from your fellow-slave.
 I will keep silence, if need be, thereon.

ATTENDANT

As I approached the benches where the elders
 Sit at draughts near Peirene's hallowed spring,
 Pretending not to listen, I heard one say
 That Kreon, this land's ruler, has resolved
 To expel these boys together with their mother
 From Corinth. Yet if this report be true
 I know not, but could wish it were not so.

70

NURSE

Will Jason suffer his sons to be thus wronged,
 Even though he be at discord with their mother?

ATTENDANT

The old ties are grown weaker than the new;
 And no more to this house is he a friend.

NURSE

Then are we undone, if a new wave of woe
 Must overwhelm us, ere of the old we are yet rid.

ATTENDANT

But thou—since 'tis no moment for our mistress
 To know of this—be calm and speak no word.

80

NURSE

Children, hear you what love your father bears you?
 Curse him I will not, for he is my master.
 Yet to his dearest false has he been found.

ATTENDANT

Who that lives is not? Now first dost thou learn
 That all men love themselves more than their neighbour
 (Some justly, some through greed), seeing that a father
 For a new bride's sake loves his sons no more?

NURSE

Go, boys, within the house.—All will be well.
 But thou, keep them, as far as may be, aloof:

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Bring them not near their mother in this dark mood.
 Already have I seen her glaring upon them
 Savagely, threatening mischief. From her rage
 She will not cease till she strike down some victim.
 Not among friends, but foes, may her wrath fall!

MEDEA, *from within*

Ah woe!

What misery is mine! Utter grief and despair!
 Ah woe, woe is me! Might I but die now!

NURSE

It is she, dear children, she, your mother,
 Goaded her heart with wrath's bitter goad.
 Enter the house now quickly, I pray you;
 Yet venture not near, lest she behold you. 110
 Do not approach: be wary; provoke not
 That savage mood which sullenly dominates
 Her relentless heart.

Tarry not: haste, go quickly within now.
 This gathering cloud of wailing and tears,
 It is plain she soon with stormier flashing
 Wrath will enkindle. Such a spirit as hers
 In its headstrong pride, stung by affliction,
 What reckless deed may it not dare? 110

Exeunt CHILDREN with ATTENDANT, within the palace.

MEDEA, *from within*

Ai, ai!

Bitter my wrongs, ah bitter, and worthy
 Of loud lamentations! Oh ye accursed
 Sons of an unloved mother, may ruin
 Whelm you and your sire and the whole house!

NURSE

Ah woe, woe is me! Ah ruthless heart!
 In the father's guilt, say, how should the sons
 Have a share? Why thus hate them?—Ah children,
 I tremble aghast—what will befall you!
 Strange are the moods of princes; and haply

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Being wont to command, ill-schooled to obey, 120
 Never easily will they remit their wrath.
 For a life inured to equality is best.
 Nay, mine be a fate that from Greatness afar
 And in safety assured shall attain old age.
 For first by its mere name all men know
 Moderation is best: great gain doth it bring
 To all who ensue it. But to no mortal
 E'er of avail was excess of Greatness:
 More cruel the doom it inflicts, when against
 Some house God's anger is kindled. 130

The CHORUS of Corinthian women has now entered.

LEADER OF CHORUS

Was it hers, that moan as of anguish—the woe-struck
 Colchian queen?
 Still unappeased is her wrath. I entreat thee, good mother,
 Speak: for within from the court's double gate did I hear
 lamentation:
 And how in the anguish afflicting a house that is dear to me,
 Alas, how should I rejoice, friend?

NURSE

There is *no* house more. Gone is it utterly. 140
 Lured by a royal bride is the lord's heart;
 While she in her bower lies pining away,
 Poor lady. No word spoken in kindness
 May dissolve from her soul misery's frost.

MEDEA, *from within*

Ai ai!
 Would that a flash from heaven might cleave through
 My brain! What profit is life to me henceforth?
 Woe, woe! Would now that in death I could end
 This abhorred living hell and be rid of it!

CHORUS

Heardest thou?—Oh Zeus! Oh Earth! Oh Light!— *Strophe*
 What a fierce wild dirge of woe broke forth
 From the hapless wife! 150