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MEDEA
READING NOTES

1. **Argo** (17.1) — The ship that Jason sailed in his search for the Golden Fleece. (See Fagles’ note on p. 200.)

2. **the grey-blue jaws of rock** (17.2) — Floating rocks near the mouth of the Bosphorus Strait. Before Jason secured safe passage through the Strait, Greek ships had been cut off from the Black Sea by these rocks, called the Symplegades or “Clashing Rocks.” When Jason passed, the rocks became stationary and the Black Sea was opened.

3. **Colchis** (17.3) — A kingdom at the east end of the Black Sea where the Golden Fleece was guarded by a dragon. Located in the farthest eastern land that the Greeks knew, they associated Colchis with the Sun. When Jason accomplished his mission there, he fled with Medea, the daughter of the king of Colchis, and she became his wife.

4. **Pelion** (17.3) — A mountain situated on a peninsula in Thessaly, Greece, it is covered with forest, and would have provided ample lumber for the building of the Argos. In Greek mythology, Mount Pelion was also the home of Chiron the Centaur, who tutored many Greek heroes, including Jason.

5. **Pelias** (17.5) — King of Iolcus in Thessaly. Pelias feared Jason as a rival to his throne, for Jason was the son of Pelias’ half-brother Aeson. In order to get rid of Jason, Pelias sent him to find the Golden Fleece, hoping that Jason would perish in the quest. When Jason and Medea returned to Jason’s homeland in Iolcus, King Pelias refused to give up his throne to Jason. So Medea tricked Pelias’ daughters into killing their father; she told them that if they killed him and cut him in pieces, she would revive him into a younger man. When Pelias was killed and the treachery revealed, the people of Iolcus drove Jason and Medea away, and they fled to Corinth.

6. **Glauce, Creon’s daughter** (18.3) — Creon is the king of Corinth. He offers Jason an alliance by giving him the hand of his daughter Glauce in marriage. Of course, Medea is displeased by this arrangement.

7. **the holy fountain of Peirene** (19.17) — A fountain in Corinth that was said to have been sacred to the Muses and the favorite watering-hole of Pegasus.

8. **Mighty Themis!** (22.17) — The Greek goddess of divine law as well as social custom. Medea calls upon Themis to bring punishment on Jason for breaking his oath of marriage to her.

9. **My brother I shamefully murdered!** (22.25) — When Jason and Medea fled Colchis and her father pursued, Medea killed her brother, chopped him into pieces, and threw them into the sea. In this way they escaped her father while he retrieved the body parts.

10. **Pontic Sea** (23.33) — The Black Sea.

11. **by Queen Hecate** (29.9) — A goddess associated with witchcraft and the knowledge of poisonous plants. Medea plans to take revenge against Jason, Creon, and Glauce through the power of Hecate, whom she reveres above all deities.

12. **Sisyphus** (29.20) — A king who was punished by the gods for his constant habit of lying. He was punished with having to roll a huge boulder up a hill, watching it roll down, and continually repeating this task forever. Sisyphus was an ancestor of Creon.
13. the fire-breathing bulls (31.18) — For permission to seek the Golden Fleece, the king of Colchis required Jason to yoke fire-breathing bulls (or oxen in some versions) and use them to sow a furrow. Medea gave Jason a potion that protected him from the bulls’ flames.

14. a voice sweeter than Orpheus (33.18) — When Jason went out on his voyage, he was told he would need the help of Orpheus, a musician who could charm men, beasts, and even stones with his music. When the Argonauts passed the Sirens on their way back to Greece, Orpheus played and sang so beautifully that his music drowned out the deadly calls of the Sirens.

15. Aegeus, son of Pandion the wise (37.16) — Aegeus was a legendary king of Athens, who took the throne after his father, Pandion, died. Aegeus was unable to produce a son, so he went to the oracle of Delphi and was told he must “not unstop the wineskin’s neck until he came home again.” Unable to interpret this himself, he went to seek the counsel of Pittheus, King of Troezen. Pittheus understood the oracle and ensured that Aegeus got drunk that night and lay with Pittheus’ daughter Aethra. Aethra subsequently lay with Poseidon, and thus she became pregnant with a son, who would grow up to become another king of Athens, Theseus. At the point in the play when Aegeus converses with Medea, he is on his way to see Pittheus.

16. once you can get to Athens I’ll keep my promise and protect you all I can (39.23-24) — Although it is not mentioned in the play, the story goes that Medea was indeed received by Aegeus in Athens and even became his wife. See also 41.3-5.

17. By the Sun, my father’s father (40.15) — Medea was a granddaughter of Helios, the god of the Sun.

18. sons of Erechtheus (42.22) — The legendary founder of the city of Athens was Erechtheus. All of Athens’ citizens were called his ‘sons.’

19. golden-haired Harmony (42.22) — The goddess of harmony and concord.

20. Ino (56.32) — A queen of Thebes who was transfigured into a goddess of the sea by Zeus. She jumped into the sea in order to flee her husband, Athamas, whom Hera had driven mad. She, like Medea, had killed one of her sons while fleeing her husband.
1. But now her world has turned to enmity (17.15) __________ a feeling of hostility
2. Scorned and shamed, she raves (18.4) ____________ talks wildly
3. What thanks she has received for her fidelity (18.6) __________ loyalty, faithfulness
4. Racking her heart, racking her anger (20.16) ____________ torturing
5. Her will fierce and intractable (20.21) ___________ not easily controlled
6. The dark cloud of her lamentations (20.24) __________ expressions of grief
7. I would not have you censure me (24.1) __________ to criticize harshly
8. Others are ill spoken of as supercilious, just because their ways are quiet (24.4) ____________ haughtily disdainful
9. May do my daughter some irreparable harm (25.33) __________ incapable of being remedied
10. Evil skilled practitioners (29.23) __________ persons who do a specific kind of work
11. An exile with no redress satisfaction for wrong or injury

12. It is not even audacity; it’s a disease shameless boldness

13. hankering after this new marriage longing, craving

14. you are guilty of perjury to me the willful giving of a false oath

15. How we are besmirched and mocked soiled, tarnished

16. Alone with my forlorn waifs children with no home or friends

17. This hurricane of recrimination and abuse returning one accusation with another

18. invidious calculated to create offense

19. your scurrilous taunts grossly offensive

20. You dare outface me now with glib high-mindedness! insincerely fluent and easy

21. friendly overtures you obstinately reject proposals or offers

22. Childless I am; so some fate has ordained destined or predestined

23. I touch your beard as a suppliant, embrace your knees one who humbly entreats

24. a coronet of beaten gold a small crown

25. She crowns with a diadem of sweet-scented roses a crown

26. unhappy Jason, ill-starred in marriage ill-fated, unlucky

27. Am I to let them off scot free? without any punishment or harm

28. she took the embroidered gown and put it round her decorated with needlework

29. How to evade reprisal retaliation for injuries

30. the propounders of wise theories ones who offer something for consideration

31. consign them to another hand to transfer to another’s custody

32. You abomination! Of all women most detested anything greatly disliked
Medea grieves and loathes the news that her husband, Jason, has agreed to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. She has spoken threats about Jason, Glauce, and Creon.

Comprehension Questions

1. What news has Medea received? Describe her reaction.
   Medea grieves and loathes the news that her husband, Jason, has agreed to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. She has spoken threats about Jason, Glauce, and Creon.

2. In response to Medea’s behavior, what punishment has Creon prepared for her?
   Creon banishes her and her sons from Corinth.

3. How does Medea behave around Creon when he comes? Summarize what she says and does, and describe how her behavior contradicts what she is plotting in her heart.
   Medea claims that she has been misunderstood, that she does not blame Creon or his daughter for the marriage, and that she will submit and yield herself to Creon’s superior strength. She kneels, begs, and clings to Creon like a suppliant. She convinces him to give her a day to make preparations for the sake of her sons. In her heart, however, she plans to murder him and his daughter.

4. When Jason offers to help Medea and their sons find refuge in exile, how does Medea respond? Where does she seek help instead?
   She disdainfully refuses Jason’s offer of assistance, and instead gets help from Aegeus, who promises to receive her in Athens.
5. “I admit, you have intelligence.” (33.5)

Why is Medea famous for her intelligence? What clever feats had she performed in the past to help Jason? Does Jason acknowledge his indebtedness to her?

Medea is famous for her intelligence because of the ways she helped Jason accomplish his quest. She helped Jason yoke the fire-breathing bulls, she killed the dragon that guarded the golden fleece, she deceived her father and killed her brother so the Argos could escape, and she convinced King Pelias’ daughters to kill him so that Jason could take the throne (31.17-28). Jason does not acknowledge his indebtedness to her but instead to Aphrodite (33.1-4).

6. When Medea sends for Jason, he comes to hear her request. What is it? What is her real motive?

She pretends to apologize to Jason and convinces him to ask Glaucé to persuade Creon to revoke the boys’ exile. She also asks for Jason to allow the boys to deliver a dress and coronet to Glaucé as a token of Medea’s good will. Her real motive is to kill Glaucé, for the gifts are laced with deadly poison.

7. What is the only part of her plan that Medea dreads and weeps over? Why does she steel herself to do it anyway? In your answer, quote a relevant line from Medea’s speech.

Medea dreads killing her sons. She steels herself to do it because she thinks they will die anyway and she would rather be the one to kill them than her enemies: “I'll not leave sons of mine to be victims of My enemies’ rage” (50.3-4). She also wants to hurt Jason.
8. Summarize how Glauc and Creon died, according to the Messenger’s report. Why does Medea ask to hear this news rather than immediately flee?

Glauc wears the gown and coronet, and after enjoying them for a few moments, she suddenly faints into a chair. When she revives, she screams in agony and tries to rip off the garments, but she cannot, and she dies from the burns that melt the skin off her bones. Creon arrives and embraces Glauc on the ground, but the poison clings to him so that he, too, dies. Medea does not immediately flee because she finds pleasure in hearing how horribly Glauc and Creon died.

9. “Where kindred blood pollutes the ground
A curse hangs over human lives;
And murder measures the doom that falls
By Heaven’s law on the guilty house.” (56.12-15)

Explain these lines spoken by the chorus. What kindred blood has been shed? Whose house is guilty of it? By the end of the play, is the pollution of this blood cleansed?

The kindred blood refers to the two sons of Jason and Medea. Jason and Medea are both guilty. By the end of the play, the blood has not been cleansed, but Medea plans to cleanse herself by ordaining an annual feast and sacrifice to expiate the murder (60.4-10).

10. How does the play end?

Jason finds his two dead sons and Medea in a chariot drawn by dragons, and although they both grieve about their sons, Medea has triumphed over Jason, since he is unable to touch or bury his sons.