

Medea and Jason

Now they were plowing through the ocean's waves,
 the Argonauts, in their Thessalian craft,
 and Phineus they had already seen,
 dragging his weary way through scant old age
 in never-ending night; and the young sons
 of the north wind had driven off the Harpies
 that snatched the food out of the poor man's mouth;
 and after undergoing many trials
 at the command of their famous leader, Jason,
 they reached at last the swift and turbulent
 brown waters of the river Phasis.

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There,
 while they present themselves and their demands
 for the fleece that had been given to the king,
 and he describes the great and terrible
 labors they must accomplish to attain it,
 the daughter of the king is overcome
 by a passion which she struggles to resist
 for a long time.

But when her raging madness
 will not submit to reason, she cries out,
 "All your resistance is in vain, Medea;
 what god opposes you, I do not know—
 I wonder if this isn't love, so called,
 or something rather like it—for why else
 would these ordeals imposed upon the strangers
 by my own father seem too harsh to me?
 Because they *are!*

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"Why do I fear that one
 whom I have only just now seen will die?
 What is the power that can cause such fear?
 There is a fire in your untried heart,
 poor wretched girl! Dislodge it if you can!

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I'd act more sanely, if I only could,
 but this new power overwhelms my will;
 reason advises this, and passion, that;
 I see the better way, and I approve it,
 while I pursue the worse.

“O royal virgin,
 why is it that you blaze now for this stranger?
 Why dream of marriage in another world?
 You love *this* land: surely it can furnish
 a husband worthy of you?”

“This man's fate—
 whether he lives or dies—is up to heaven.
 May he live, then! It's quite appropriate
 for me to offer such a prayer as that,
 even without my loving him at all.

“But look at the heroic deeds of Jason!
 What heartless wretch could be indifferent
 to youth and breeding joined with manliness?
 Absent these qualities, who would not be
 moved by the beauty of his countenance?
 My heart was moved by it, most certainly.

“And now, unless I come to Jason's aid,
 he will be scorched by fire-breathing bulls
 and clash with enemies sprung from the soil
 that he himself has seeded, or be given
 as sacrifice to sate the greedy dragon!

“If I permit this, I'll confess myself
 a tiger's daughter with a heart of stone!
 But why can I not look upon his dying
 and not defile my eyes? Why can't I urge
 his enemies against him, cheer on the bull,
 the earthborn warriors, the sleepless dragon?
 Because the gods wish him a better fate!
 And yet not prayers are needed here, but deeds!

“Will I betray the kingdom of my father,
 only to have the stranger whom I save
 set sail without me for another's bed,
 leaving Medea to her punishment?
 If he could do that, leave me for another,
 let the ingrate die!

“But no: that isn't in him,
 not in his face, not in his noble spirit,
 not in a man as beautiful as he,
 that I should fear duplicity from him,
 or his neglecting what I am deserved.

“Besides, he'll give his word to me beforehand,
 and I will call the gods as witnesses
 of our compact. Why fear, when all is safe?
 Prepare for action now, without delay;
 you will have Jason's gratitude forever,
 he'll join himself to you with solemn vows,
 and you'll be praised as his deliverer
 by throngs of women throughout all of Greece!

“So shall I then sail off, abandoning
 my sister, brother, father, gods, and homeland?
 My father is cruel and my homeland crude;
 my brother is no more than a mere child,
 and my sister sides with *me* in this affair.
 Within my breast the greatest of all gods
 has found his residence! I do not leave
 greatness, but elope with him to seek it!

“I will be called 'Savior of Grecian Youth,'
 and come to know a better land, and cities
 famous, even here, for art and culture;
 and that young man, whom I would not exchange
 for all the wealth of this world, at my side;
 and with him as my husband, in felicity,
 I'll be considered heaven's favorite,

and with my forehead I will touch the stars.

“But what of . . . oh, what *are* their names, those clashing
mountains in midocean people speak of?
And what of ship-devouring Charybdis,
that sucks the sea in and then spits it out?
What of rapacious Scylla, surrounded by
her savage dogs, baying off Sicily?

“Nothing to me: holding the one I love,
lying contentedly in Jason’s lap,
I’ll make the long sea voyage in his arms,
and nothing fear unless I fear for him.

*“Marriage you call it then, Medea, do you?
Aren’t you merely covering your guilt
with a deceptive name? Just look ahead:
how great a sin it is you’re thinking of!
Turn from this crime and flee while you are able.”*
She spoke: before her stood stern Rectitude,
earnest Devotion, blushing Modesty;
and Love, defeated, now prepared to fly.

Then she went off to Hecate’s ancient altar,
hidden deep in the forest’s deepest shades.
Here she was resolute, and her impulsive
ardor would appear to be extinguished—
but broke out once again at sight of Jason:
her cheeks reddened, and a suffusing glow
spread across her countenance completely,
as when a spark that has been hidden under
a crust of ash is nourished by a breeze
and comes to life again as it’s stirred up,
regaining all the vigor it once had;
just so her smoldering love, which you’d have thought
was almost out, came blazing up anew,
to see the young man standing in her presence,
and—as it happened—looking even better

than usual. You would have understood
and pardoned her for her infatuation.

And when he took her hand and spoke to her
in a modest tone, and pleaded for her help,
and gave his word that he would marry her,
she wept profusely as she answered him:
“I clearly see what I’m about to do:
not ignorance beguiles me now, but love.
Through my good offices, you will be saved;
fulfill the promise you have made me then!”

He swore by Hecate and by whatever other
deities might dwell within that grove,
and by the father of his own prospective
father-in-law, the all-beholding Sun,
and by the peril of his coming trials;
so she believed him and at once passed on
the magic herbs; from her, he learned their uses,
then joyfully withdrew to his own tent.

The flickering stars were scattered by the Dawn:
the folk assembled on the field of Mars,
then placed themselves on the surrounding heights;
and in their midst, the king himself was seated,
conspicuously clad in purple robes
and holding a scepter carved from ivory.

But look! Two fire-breathing, bronze-shod bulls,
exhaling, scorch the grasses underfoot!
And just as fiery furnaces resound,
or limestone hisses in an earthen kiln
and then ignites when sprinkled with fresh water,
so those two rumbled with their pent-up blaze,
and bellowed from scorched throats; nevertheless,
the son of Aeson dares to stand against them.
At his approach, they turn their dreadful faces
to glare at him and drop their mighty horns,

tipped with iron; now their cloven hooves
pound the powdery earth, and now they fill
the smoky air with bellowing that blazes!

The Agonauts are paralyzed with fear;
Jason ignores those flaming exhalations
and presses on (what potent medications
Medea has given him!), ever closer,
until his right hand daringly caresses
their dangling dewlaps.

Now he yokes
his team, and makes them draw the plow across
that field unused to prior cultivation:
the Colchians marvel, and the Argonauts
raise a great cry that lifts up every spirit.

Then, from a bronze helmet, Jason removes
the serpent's teeth and sows them in the field.
Earth softens seed that had been steeped beforehand
in virulent poison; and now, as growth begins,
those scattered teeth commence to take new forms,
as when an infant in its mother's womb
takes on a human shape, and not until
its separate parts have been composed together
does it emerge into the common air;
so when their human forms had been accomplished
in the quickened womb of pregnant Mother Earth,
they rose up from that newly fertile field,
and—an even greater miracle—the arms
they bore to warfare had been born with them!

But when the Greeks observed the men preparing
to fling their sharpened spears at Jason's head,
their faces and their spirits fell together;
and even she who'd made him safe was frightened
at seeing one man set on by so many,
and turning pale, she sat there cold and bloodless.

And fearful that her magic herbs should prove
ineffectual, she murmured incantations
and summoned secret powers to his aid.

He lifts a heavy rock and sends it flying
into their midst, which redirects their rage
against each other: those earthborn brothers
die of mutual wounds in bitter civil war.

The Greeks congratulate the winner then,
eager to hold him warmly in embrace;
you also wanted to embrace the winner,
barbarian maiden, but restrained yourself
out of your fear of what the folk would say.
You did what was permitted you to do:
gave joyful thanks in silence for the charms
and for the gods who had accomplished this.

All that remained was to deploy your herbs
against the vigilant custodian
whose elevated crest and thrice-forked tongue
and curving fangs proclaim him as the dragon
who guards the tree that holds the Golden Fleece.

But after Jason doused the wakeful snake
with juice of the plant that brings oblivion,
and thrice recited words to summon sleep,
the spell that pacifies the raging seas
and stills the roaring brook, a slumber sealed
those eyes that had not known its sway before.

And now that haughty hero, Aeson's son,
obtained the golden trophy and—the one
who'd made it possible—his trophy bride,
and carried both off to Iolchos harbor.

Medea and Aeson

Delighted that their sons have all returned,
Thessalian parents gratefully bring gifts
and burn great heaps of incense on the pyre,

as a dedicated bull with gilded horns
falls to the blade.

But Aeson absents himself
from the solemnities of this thanksgiving,
worn-out by the great weight of all his years
and near to death.

His son, the hero, says,
“Dearest, to whom I must confess I owe
my very life, although you’ve given all,
and even though all that you’ve given me
has far exceeded all my expectations,
if by your spells you could accomplish this
(and nothing is impossible for them!),
I’d have you take some years from my own life
and add the subtracted portion to my father’s!”
He wept without restraint.

Medea was moved
by the great devotion shown in his request;
the image of the father she’d abandoned
came to her mind, so unlike her husband’s.

Without revealing how she felt, she said,
“Dearest, what blasphemy falls from your lips!
Do you believe me able to take years
from you and give them to another man?
Why, Hecate will never grant me this—
you ask for what has never been permitted.

“But Jason, I will nonetheless attempt
to offer you an even greater gift:
with my own feats of magic, I will try
to lengthen your father’s life by many years,
and not by revoking any years of yours,
if Hecate will only aid me now,
and nod assent to this great enterprise.”

Three nights must pass before the moon’s horns close

into a circle; now when it is complete,
and in its fullness gazes down on earth,
she sets out walking barefoot from her house,
with garments loosened and with unbound hair
cascading down her back, and makes her way
without companion, straying through the deep
silence of midnight, when men and birds and beasts
are all released into profound repose,
with not a peep or murmur from the hedgerow,
and in the trees the leaves are stilly silent,
and even the dewy air is motionless;
she lifts her arms up to the brilliant stars,
and spins around: once, twice, thrice;
and thrice she pours branch water on her hair,
and thrice she cries out wailing in the night,
and then kneels down upon the earth to pray:

“O Night,” she cries, “most faithful guardian
of secrecies, and you, O golden Stars,
who with the moon relieve the blazing sun;
and you as well, three-headed Hecate,
who are aware of our undertakings,
and who assist the mage’s spells and arts;
and you too, Earth, provider of potent herbs,
you, Breezes, Winds, Mountains, Rivers, Lakes,
you gods of every grove, and every god
of night, be present now! For with your aid,
when I have willed it, I have caused the streams
to flow back in between their startled banks
up to their sources; I’ve calmed the raging flood
and I’ve enraged the calm seas with my spells;
I drive the clouds off, and I bring them back;
I chase the winds away, and I recall them;
I break the jaws of serpents with my spells,
and I uproot the living rocks and oaks;

I make whole forests move; by my command
the mountains tremble, and the deep earth groans,
and spirits of the dead come from their tombs.

"You also, Moon, I draw you from the sky,
though clattering bronze attempt to aid your labors;
the chariot of my grandfather Sun
grows pale at the power of my incantations,
and Dawn grows pale from thinking of my poisons.

"For me you dulled the sharp flames of the bulls,
bending their fretful necks to bear the plow;
you brought the serpent-born to slay themselves
in cruel warfare, and you lulled the rude
protector of the Golden Fleece to sleep,
and with its guardian beguiled, you sent
his treasure sailing off to Grecian cities.

"Now I must have a potion to renew
old age, restoring it to youthful bloom.
And you will give me one, for not in vain
do the stars above me flicker their assent,
and not in vain does my chariot appear,
drawn by its matched pair of flying dragons."

And there it was: her chariot, sent down
from the aethereal regions. Once aboard,
she stroked her dragons' necks and flicked their reins
lightly, and they ascended; below her lay
Thessalian Tempe; she set her dragons for
those regions that were sources of her herbs:
and she descried below plants found on Ossa
and lofty Pelion, on Othrys, on Pindus,
and (larger than that last one) on Olympus;
the herbs that pleased her she took, root and all,
or snipped off leaves with her bronze pruning hook.

Many appealing herbs were found along
the banks of the Apidanus, and many more

along the Amphrysus, nor were *you* exempt,
Enipeus, from her provisioning,
and Peneus and Sperchios and Boebe;
and from Euboean Anthedon she seized
a life-prolonging herb not yet made famous
by the effects that it produced on Glaucus.

After nine days and nights had seen Medea
in her dragon-driven chariot, traversing
the skies above those regions, she returned
to her own home; her reptiles had been touched
only by the *odors* of those herbs,
and yet they shed the skins of their old age!

Nearing her house she halted on its threshold:
and there, beneath the blue sky's canopy,
without allowing Jason to embrace her,
she built two altars out of turf; on the right
was Hecate's—and Youth she gave the other.

She decorated them with sacred boughs
fetched out of the forest; near the altars,
she dug a pair of trenches in the earth,
and there performed her rites. She slit the throat
of a black sheep and let his blood drain out
into the trenches; over it she poured
a goblet full of honey, liquified,
and then a goblet full of tepid milk,
while praying to the gods who dwell below,
begging the king of shadows and his bride,
stolen from earth, that they should be less eager
to cheat an old man of the breath of life.

And then, when by her prayers and incantations
the underworld was calmed, she had them bring
Aeson's exhausted body to the altars;
and once her spells had put him in a sleep
resembling death, she stretched the old man out

on a bed of strewn grasses, then sent her mate
and his attendants off, commanding them
to keep far hence, lest their profaning eyes
should violate the mysteries.

They left

as she had ordered them, and then, her hair
unbound like one of the Bacchantes, Medea
walked all around the blazing altars, steeping
her torches in the trenches black with blood,
until, igniting them upon the altar stones,
she purified the old man three times each,
with water and with fire and with sulphur.

Meanwhile the potent brew in her bronze cauldron
is on the boil, leaping with thick white foam;
in it are roots dug up in Thessaly
cooking with seeds and flowers and black juice;
she adds some pebbles from the Orient,
some sand grains washed by Ocean's ebbing tide,
some hoarfrost gathered in the full moon's light,
the nasty wings and flesh of a screech owl,
the innards of a werewolf, which can change
his feral mask into a human face,
the scaly skin of a Libyan water snake,
an old stag's liver, and the head and eggs
of an ancient crow that had lived longer than
nine human generations.

When, with these,
and with a thousand other such ingredients
(whose names we needn't bother mentioning),
the miracle to come had been arranged,
the foreign woman took a long-dead branch
from a fruitful olive tree and stirred her pot,
mixing it thoroughly from top to bottom.

But look! Almost at once, that stick turned green,

and just a short time later put out leaves,
and suddenly was loaded down with fruit!
Wherever her bronze cauldron overflowed
and the hot potion splashed upon the ground,
flowers and tender grass turned the earth green.

Medea, seeing this, unsheathed her sword
and slit the old man's throat to drain his blood,
which she at once replaced with her elixir;
as soon as Aeson had consumed the stuff
(poured either in his mouth or in his wound),
his beard and hair immediately changed
from white to black, his gauntness and his pallor
and aura of decay took their departure,
as all his wrinkles filled out with new flesh
and withered limbs regained their muscle tone:
Aeson was now astonished to recall
himself as he had been four decades past!

(Bacchus observed this wonder from on high,
and realizing how his aged nurses
could be rejuvenated by her gift
at once obtained it from the sorceress.)

Medea and Pelias

Now, so that guile might not go out of fashion,
Medea feigned a breakup with her husband
and ran off as a suppliant to Pelias;
since he himself was burdened with the weight
of old age too, his daughters welcomed her;
pretending friendship, the cunning Colchian
took the girls in and shortly won them over.

And while she entertained them all with stories
of her remarkable accomplishments,
she told at length of how she had restored
Aeson to his prime. Her story raised the hope
among her listeners that by such arts

their father too could be rejuvenated:
they begged her aid, imploring her to name
her own reward, however great it was.

A moment's silence while she seemed in doubt,
as by her fictive indecisiveness
she kept the pleading girls in high suspense—
but when she'd given them her word, she added,
"We'll have a demonstration, so that you
may be more confident about this gift
I offer you: your oldest sheep, the aged
bellwether of your flock, will soon become,
through my concoctions, a young lamb again."

Worn-out by his innumerable years,
the woolly one, with great horns curving round
his bulging temples, was brought forth at once;
slitting his throat with her Thessalian blade
(which his exhausted blood could barely stain)
the sorcer woman quickly plunged his carcass
into the cauldron, where the heat reduced it,
and where his horns (and years) were burned away.

A feeble "*Baa, baa*" comes from deep within:
to their astonishment, a little lamb
skips out and eagerly essays a bleat,
then scampers off—to find a milky teat!

The daughters of Pelias were dumbstruck then,
for she had done exactly as she promised!
Even more eagerly, they urged her on.
Three times now Phoebus had unyoked his team
after their plunge into the western stream;
on the fourth night, the stars were glittering
when the deceitful daughter of Aetes
brought up to boil a cauldron of clear water,
and added to it herbs of no real power.

A death-like sleep (produced by magic spells)

had quite unstrung the king and his defenders.

As ordered by the Colchian, his daughters,
slipping across the threshold of his room,
surround his bed: "Slackers! Why hesitate?
Unsheathe your swords and spill his ancient gore,
and I'll refill his veins with youthful blood.
Your aged father's life is in your hands;
if you have any love for him at all,
if you're not merely stirred by empty hopes,
then give your father what you owe him, now:
drive his old age off with your sharp weapons,
let his blood out by plunging in your swords!"

Urged on by her and by their piety,
each child commits the worst crime that a child
can possibly commit against a parent,
and only to avoid a much worse crime!
Unable nonetheless to watch themselves,
they turn away and blindly strike at him.

Bleeding profusely, leaning on one elbow,
he struggles to get up, though slashed to ribbons,
and as he raises arms in supplication
amid a thicket of swords, cries out to them,
"What are you doing, daughters? Why arm yourselves
to slay your father?" Their hands—and spirits—fall;
he would have gone on speaking, but Medea
slit his throat and plunged his mangled body
into the cauldron full of boiling water.

The flight of Medea

And she, had she not taken to the air,
escaping in her dragon-driven carriage,
would not have gone unpunished for that deed.

Aloft, she fled above Mount Pelion,
where Chiron makes his home, and over Othrys,
famed site of the adventures of Cerambus,

who managed to escape Deucalion's flood
 on wings provided him by mountain nymphs
 when the heavy earth was being overwhelmed
 by the engulfing waters of the sea.

On her left she passed Aeolian Pitane
 with its gigantic serpent made of stone,
 and Ida's grove, where once the son of Bacchus
 rustled a calf; in order to protect him,
 his father changed the boy into a stag;
 she passed the site where Helen's lover lies
 beneath a meager monument of sand,
 and passed those fields which Maera terrified
 with her strange barking; flew above the city
 of Eurypylus, where the Coan women
 were changed to cows when Hercules set off
 on his great expedition against Troy;
 and over Rhodes, that island dear to Phoebus,
 and Ialysos, home of the Telechines,
 whose eyes so blighted everything they saw
 that Jupiter condemned them to be plunged
 under the waters governed by his brother;
 she passed the ancient city of Carthaea
 on the Isle of Cea, where Alcidas once
 would find himself astonished by the strange
 metamorphosis of daughter into dove.

And after that she saw the Hyrian lake
 and Tempe, home of Cycnus, celebrated
 for his sudden transformation into swan:
 for at this boy's imperious command,
 Phylis tamed wild birds and a fierce lion
 and brought them to him as love-offerings;
 ordered to overcome a bull as well,
 he did so, but when he saw his passion
 so utterly ignored and unrewarded,
 refused to give the latest of these presents

to the one who sought it; enraged, the boy
 cried out, "You'll wish you had!" and straightway leapt
 from a high rock: all thought he had been slain,
 but changed into a swan, he hung in midair,
 supported by strong pinions, white as snow;
 his mother, Hyrie, quite unaware
 of his deliverance, dissolved in tears,
 and turned into the lake that bears her name.

Nearby is Pleuron, where, on fluttering wings,
 Combe, the daughter of Ophius, escaped
 the death her sons had planned.
 Medea saw the fields of Latona's Calaurea,
 fields well aware of how a king and queen
 were also changed to birds. Now on her right,
 Cyllene passes by, where Menephron,
 just like a beast, would bed down with his mother;
 and in the distance she beholds Cephisus,
 weeping for the end his grandson came to,
 changed to a tumid sea calf by Apollo;
 and near him was Eumelus, who had tears
 because his son had changed into a bird.

To Corinth then she came on dragon wing,
 Corinth, the city of the sacred spring;
 for here, according to an old tradition,
 mankind sprang from wet fungus by fission.

But after the new bride that Jason took
 was poisoned by the old wife he forsook,
 and fisherfolk off Corinth glimpsed through haze
 the ruined palace of the king ablaze,
 the blade that dripped with her own children's gore
 enraged their father, whom she fled before,
 her fatal vengeance leaving all undone!

Now, once again, the dragons of the Sun
 bore her aloft, off to the citadel
 of Athens, where the citizens all tell

the tale of Phene, their most righteous queen,
 who, with her mate, Periphas, was last seen
 flying side by side in tight formation;
 and they recount another transformation,
 that of Polypemon's Alcyone,
 leaning on her new wings—a halcyon!

570

Aegeus welcomed the new refugee,
 and by that act of hospitality
 condemned himself; the king, not satisfied
 to have her as his guest, made her his bride.

Medea, Aegeus, and Theseus

Then Theseus appeared, a son unknown
 to his own father; the valorous young man
 has pacified the land between two seas.
 Medea, wishing to destroy him, mixed
 a cup with poison brought from Scythia
 a long time past; they say this poison came
 from the jaws of Cerberus.

580

There is a cave
 as black as blindness, with a gloomy mouth,
 and a path that leads down to the underworld.
 Upward along that path, great Hercules
 dragged Cerberus on adamantine chains,
 while the great beast struggled hard against him,
 and turned his eyes away from the harsh daylight.

Now goaded to a frenzy by his rage,
 he filled the air with barking from three throats,
 and spattered the green fields with his white foam.
 They say those foam flecks grew, and taking root
 were nourished by the richness of that soil,
 and found in it the power to do ill;
 the rustics call them, since they grow on rocks,
 the aconites, or “flowers lacking soil.”

590

This poison, through Medea's treachery,

father Aegeus offered his own son
 as to an enemy, and Theseus,
 all unaware of any ill intent,
 had taken it and raised the cup to drink,
 when his father recognized the family crest
 on the ivory hilt of the hero's sword,
 and swept the poisoned goblet from his lips.
 Medea fled the death that would have followed
 in a cloud cover summoned by her spells.

600



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METAMORPHOSES

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