Cracking the Fourth Wall: Deceit and Illusion in Euripides’ Medea and Seneca’s Medea

1. Plutarch, De Gloria Atheniensium 348 c-d

But tragedy blossomed forth and won great acclaim, becoming a wondrous entertainment for the ears and eyes of the men of that age, and, by the mythological character of its plots, and the vicissitudes which its characters undergo, it effected a deception wherein, as Gorgias records, "he who deceives is more honest than he who does not deceive, and he who is deceived is wiser than he who is not deceived." For he who deceives is more honest, because he has done what he has promised to do; and he who is deceived is wiser, because the mind which is not insensible to fine perceptions is easily enthralled by the delights of language. *

2. Euripides, Medea, 255-58

I, without relatives or city, am suffering outrage from my husband. I was carried off as booty from a foreign land and have no mother, no brother, no kinsman to shelter me from this calamity.

3. a. Euripides, Medea, 259-66

And so, I shall ask from you this much as a favor: if I find any means or contrivance to punish my husband for these wrongs [and the bride’s father and the bride], keep my secret. In all other things, a woman is full of fear, incapable of looking on battle or cold steel; but when she is injured in love, no mind is more murderous than hers.

b. Seneca, Medea, 45-48

Savage, unheard-of, horrible things, evils fearful to heaven and earth alike, my mind stirs up (plots) within me: wounds and slaughter and death creeping from limb to limb.


Just as I said, dear children. Your mother is stirring up

Seneca, Medea, 118-20

cerepto patre patria atque regno sedibus solam exteris deserere durus?

3. a. Euripides, Medea, 259-66

tosoudon ouv sou tivgyxanein voulysoymai, ev miax t' ezuvredhi pasin dikan t' onth paitesbathai kakow [tov donta t' autow thugatere' hne t' eghima], sigyn. gynh ghar talla men foibou pleia kaki t' es alkihen kai sidhron eisofan- othan d' e esvnik hodiymene kyrhi, ouk estin allh phrin miaiwenoter.

b. Seneca, Medea, 45-48

effera ignota horrada, tremend caelo pariter ac terris mala mens intus agitat; uulnera et caedem et uagum funus per artus –

tou' ekinoi, filoi paiodes' mithyr kinei kramidian, kinei de' cholon.
σπεύδετε θάσσον δώματος εἴσω καὶ μὴ πελάσητ' ὄμματος ἐγγὺς μηδὲ προσέλθῃ, ἀλλὰ φυλάσσεσθ' ἄγριον ἦθος στυγεράν τε φύσιν φρένος αὐθάδοῦς.

... τί ποτ' ἐργάσεται μεγαλόσπλαγχνος δυσκατάπαυστος ψυχή δηχθεῖσα κακοῖσιν?

καίτοι τοκάδος δέργμα λεαίνης ἀποταυροῦται δμωσίν, ὅταν τις μῦθον προφέρων πέλας ὁρμηθῇ.

Incerta qualis entheos gressus tulit cum iam recepto maenas insanit deo Pindi niualis urchte aut Nysae iugis, talis recursat huc et huc motu effero, furoris ore signa lymphati gerens.

Do you think I would ever have fawned on this man unless I stood to gain, unless I were plotting?

...he has permitted me to stay for this day, a day on which I shall make corpses of three of my enemies, the father, his daughter, and my husband. Now since I possess many ways of killing them, I do not know which I should try first, my friends: shall I set the bridal chamber on fire [or thrust a sharp sword through their vitals], creeping into the house where the marriage-bed is spread? One thing, however, stands in my path: if I am caught entering the house and plotting its destruction, I will be killed and bring joy to my foes. Best to proceed by the direct route, in which I am the most skilled, and kill them with poison.

... And so, I shall wait a short time yet, and if some tower of safety appears, I shall go about this murder by stealth (with deceit and in silence).

... Medea, spare nothing of the arts you are mistress of as you plot and contrive!
μολόντι δ' αὐτοῖς μαλθακοὺς λέξω λόγους, ὡς καὶ δοκεῖ μοι ταῦτα καὶ καλῶς ἔχει γάμους τυράννων οὓς προδοὺς ἡμᾶς ἔχει, καὶ ξύμφορ' εἶναι καὶ καλῶς ἐγνωσμένα. παῖδας δὲ μεῖναι τοὺς ἐμοὺς αἰτήσομαι, οὐχ ὡς λιποῦσ' ἂν πολεμίας ἐπὶ χθονὸς ἐχθροῖσι παῖδα τοὺς ἐμοὺς καθυβρίσαι, ἀλλ' ὡς δόλοισι παῖδα βασιλέως κτάνω. πέμψω γὰρ αὐτοὺς δῶρ' ἔχοντας ἐν χεροῖν, νύμφηι φέροντας, τήνδε μὴ φεύγειν χθόνα, λεπτότερον καὶ πλόκον χρυσήλατον· κἄνπερ λαβοῦσα κόσμον ἀμφιθῇ χροΐ, κακῶς ὀλεῖται πᾶς θ' ὃς θίγηι κόρης· τοιοῖσδε χρίσω φαρμάκοις δωρήματα. ἐνταῦθα μέντοι τόνδ' ἀπαλλάσσω λόγον. ὤιμωξα δ' οἷον ἔργον ἔστ' ἐργαστέον τοὐνεῖς· τέκνα γὰρ κατακτενῶ τἄμ'.

I shall speak soothing words to him, saying that I hold the same opinion as he, that the royal marriage he has made by abandoning me is well made, that these are beneficial and good decisions. I shall ask that the children be allowed to stay, not with the thought that I might leave my children behind on hostile soil for my enemies to insult, but so that I may kill the princess by guile. I shall send them bearing gifts, [bearing them to the bride so as not to be exiled,] a finely-woven gown and a diadem of beaten gold. If she takes this finery and puts it on, she will die a painful death, and likewise anyone who touches her: with such poisons will I smear these gifts. This subject, however, I now leave behind. Ah me, I groan at what a deed I must do next. I shall kill my children:

6. a. Seneca, Medea, 181, 290-91
molitur aliquid: nota fraus, nota est manus.

…

{CR.} Fraudibus tempus petis.
{ME.} Quae fraus timeri tempore exiguo potest?

b. Seneca, Medea, 562-67
hoc age, omnis aduoca uires et artes. fructus est scelerum tibi nullum scelus putare. uix fraudi est locus: timemur. hac aggdredere, qua nemo potest quicquam timere, perge, nunc aude, incipe quidquid potest Medea, quidquid non potest.

c. Seneca, Medea, 833-39
Adde uenenis stimulos, Hecate, donisque meis semina flamme condita serua: fallant uisus tactusque ferant, meet in pectus uenasque calor, stillent artus ossaque fument uincatque suas flagrante coma noua nupta faces.

d. Seneca, Medea, 879-83
{NVNTIVS} Periere cuncta, concidit regni status; nata atque genitor cinere permixto iacent.
{CHO.} Qua fraude capti? {NVN.} Qua solent reges capi: donis. {CHO.} In illis esse quis potuit dolus?

She is contriving something: her cunning (deception) is well known, so is her handiwork.

…

CR. You are seeking time for treachery. ME. What fear of treachery can there be in so brief a time?

I shall never be forgotten. To work, summon all your strengths and skills (cunning). The benefit of your crimes is that you think nothing a crime. There is scant room to deceive them: I am feared. Attack at the point where no one can fear anything. Press on! Now is the time for daring, and for undertaking all that Medea can do, and all that she cannot do.

Give the spur to my poisons, Hecate, and in my gifts, keep the seeds of fire concealed. Let them cheat the gaze, be inert to the touch, but let heat pass into her heart and veins, let her limbs melt, her bones smoulder, and let this new bride with her blazing hair outshine her own torches.

MES. All is lost! The fortunes of the kingdom are fallen; daughter and father lie with their ashes intermingled. CHO. How were they trapped? MES. As kings are always trapped: by gifts. CHO. What trickery could have been in them?
7. Euripides, *Medea*, 969-75

Now, children, when you have entered the rich palace, entreat your father's new wife, my mistress, and beg her that you not be exiled. And give her the raiment: this is the most important thing, that she receives the gifts into her hands. Go with all speed. And may you have success and bring back to your mother the good news she longs to hear.

Seneca, *Medea*, 845-48

Go now, my sons, born to a cursed mother: win over for yourselves the heart of your lady and stepmother with this gift and many prayers. Go, and return home quickly, so I may enjoy a final embrace.

8. Seneca, *Medea*, 975-78

Your body too I shall carry away with me in my own arms. To work now, my spirit! You must not waste your valour in obscurity; **have the people applaud your handiwork!**


This was the one thing I lacked, **this spectator.** I think nothing has been done as yet: such crime as I did without him was lost.

Bibliography


* Plutarch, *De Gloria Atheniensium* translation by Frank C. Babbitt (Loeb)

  Euripides’ *Medea* translation by David Kovacs (Loeb)

  Seneca’s *Medea* translation by John G. Fitch (Loeb)