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

1. Plutarch, *De Gloria Atheniensium* 348 c-d

ἦνθησε δ' ἡ τραγωδία καὶ διεβοήθη, θαυμαστὸν ἀκρόαμα καὶ θέαμα τῶν τότε ἀνθρώπων γενομένη καὶ παρασχούσα τοῖς μύθοις καὶ τοῖς πάθεσιν ἀπάτην, ὡς Γοργίας φησὶν, ἦν ὁ τ' ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατήσαντος, καὶ ὁ ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος; τοῦ μὴ ἀπατηθέντος. ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος, ὅτι τοῦθ' ὑποσχόμενος πεποίηκεν: ὁ δ' ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος εὐάλωτον γὰρ ὑφ' ἡδονῆς λόγων τὸ μὴ ἀναίσθητον.

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

ἐγὼ δ' ἔρημος ἄπολις οὐσ' ὑβρίζομαι
πρὸς ἀνδρός, ἐκ γῆς βαρβάρου λεληθισμένη,
οὐ μητέρ', οὐκ ἀδελφόν, οὐχὶ συγγενῆ
μεθορμίσασθαι τῆσδ' ἔχουσα συμφορᾶς.

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.

Seneca, *Medea*, 118-20

hoc facere Iason potuit, **erepto patre patria atque regno sedibus solam exteris deserere durus?**

Could Jason have done this? After robbing me of my father, my fatherland, my kingdom, could he callously abandon me by myself in a foreign country?

3. a. Euripides, *Medea*, 259-66

τοσοῦτον οὖν σου τυγχάνειν βουλήσομαι,
ἦν μοι πόρος τις **μηχανή τ'** ἐξευρεθῆι
πόσιν δίκην τῶνδ' ἀντιτείσασθαι κακῶν
[τὸν δόντα τ' αὐτῶι θυγατέρ' ἦν τ' ἐγήματο],
σιγᾶν. γυνὴ γὰρ τᾶλλα μὲν φόβου πλέα
κακὴ τ' ἐς ἀλκὴν καὶ σίδηρον εἰσορᾶν·
ὅταν δ' ἐς εὐνήν ἠδικημένη κυρῆι,
οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη φρὴν μαιφονωτέρα.

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

effera ignota horrida,
tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala
mens intus agitat: uulnera et caedem et uagum
funus per artus –

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.

4. a. Euripides, *Medea*, 98-104, 108-10, 187-89

τόδ' ἐκεῖνο, φίλοι παῖδες· μήτηρ
κινεῖ κραδίαν, κινεῖ δὲ ὄλον.

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

σπεύδετε θᾶσσον δώματος εἴσω
καὶ μὴ πελάσσητ' ὄμματος ἐγγυὺς
μηδὲ προσέλθητ', ἀλλὰ φυλάσσεσθ'
ἄγριον ἦθος στυγεράν τε φύσιν
φρενὸς αὐθαδοῦς.

... τί ποτ' ἐργάσεται
μεγαλόσπλαγχνος δυσκατάπαυστος
ψυχὴ δηχθεῖσα κακοῖσιν;

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

b. Seneca, *Medea*, 157-58, 382-386

Nutrix Siste **furiale** impetum,
alumna: uix te tacita defendit quies.

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

5. a. Euripides, *Medea*, 368-69, 372-85, 389-91, 402

δοκεῖς γὰρ ἄν με τόνδε θωπεῦσαί ποτε
εἰ μὴ τι κερδαίνουσαν ἢ τεχνωμένην;
... τήνδ' ἐφῆκεν ἡμέραν
μεῖναι μ', ἐν ἧι τρεῖς τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν νεκροῦς
θήσω, πατέρα τε καὶ κόρην πόσιν τ' ἐμόν.
πολλὰς δ' ἔχουσα θανασίμους αὐτοῖς ὁδοῦς,
οὐκ οἶδ' ὁποῖα πρῶτον ἐγχειρῶ, φίλαι·
πότερον ὑφάψω δῶμα νυμφικὸν πυρί,
ἢ θηκτὸν ὄσω φάσγανον δι' ἥπατος,
σιγῆι δόμους ἐσβᾶσ' ἴν' ἔστρωται λέχος.
ἀλλ' ἔν τί μοι πρόσαντες· εἰ ληφθήσομαι
δόμους ὑπερβαίνουσα καὶ τεχνωμένη.
θανοῦσα θήσω τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἐχθροῖς γέλων.
κράτιστα τὴν εὐθεῖαν, ἧι πεφύκαμεν
σοφοὶ μάλιστα, φαρμάκοις αὐτοῦς ἐλεῖν.

...
οὐκ ἔστι. μείνας' οὖν ἔτι σμικρὸν χρόνον,
ἦν μὲν τις ἡμῖν πύργος ἀσφαλῆς φανῆι,
δόλωι μέτειμι τόνδε καὶ σιγῆι φόνον·
...

ἀλλ' εἶα φείδου μηδὲν ὦν ἐπίστασαι,
Μήδεια, βουλεύουσα καὶ τεχνωμένη.

b. Euripides, *Medea*, 772- 793

ἤδη δὲ πάντα τὰμά σοι βουλεύματα
λέξω· **δέχου δὲ μὴ πρὸς ἡδονὴν λόγους**.
πέμψασ' ἐμῶν τιν' οἰκετῶν Ἴασονα
ἐς ὅψιν ἐλθεῖν τὴν ἐμὴν αἰτήσομαι.

her feelings, stirring up her anger. Go quickly into the house, and do not come into her sight or approach her, but beware of her **fierce nature and the hateful nature of her wilful temper**.

...
what will her proud soul, so hard to check, do when stung by this injury?

...
though she glowers at the servants with the **look of a lioness with cubs** when any of them approaches her with something to say.

Control your **impulsive (frenzied) rage**, my child; even silence and stillness can hardly protect you.

...
Like an **ecstatic maenad** taking erratic steps, **crazed and possessed by the god**, on snowy Pindus' peak or Nysa's ridges, so she keeps running here and there with wild movements, with signs of **frenzied rage** in her expression.

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!**

Now I shall tell you all of my designs. **Hear, then, words that will give you no pleasure**. I shall send one of my servants and ask Jason to come to see me. When he arrives,

μολόντι δ' αὐτῶι **μαλθακούς λέξω λόγους,**
ὡς καὶ δοκεῖ μοι ταῦτα καὶ καλῶς ἔχει
 γάμους τυράννων οὓς προδοὺς ἡμᾶς ἔχει,
 καὶ ζῦμφορ' εἶναι καὶ καλῶς ἐγνωσμένα.
 παῖδας δὲ μείναι τοὺς ἐμοὺς αἰτήσομαι,
 οὐχ ὡς λιποῦσ' ἂν πολεμίας ἐπὶ χθονὸς
 [ἐχθροῖσι παῖδας τοὺς ἐμοὺς καθυβρίσαι],
 ἀλλ' ὡς **δόλοισι** παῖδα βασιλέως κτάνω.
 πέμψω γὰρ αὐτοὺς δῶρ' ἔχοντας ἐν χεροῖν,
 [νύμφηι φέροντας, τήνδε μὴ φεύγειν χθόνα,]
 λεπτόν τε πέπλον καὶ πλόκον χρυσήλατον·
 κᾶνπερ λαβοῦσα κόσμον ἀμφιθῆι χροῖ,
 κακῶς ὀλεῖται πᾶς θ' ὅς ἂν θίγηι κόρης·
 τοιοῖσδε χρίσω φαρμάκοις δωρήματα.
 ἐνταῦθα μέντοι τόνδ' ἀπαλλάσσω λόγον.
 ὦμωξά δ' οἶον ἔργον ἔστ' ἐργαστέον
 τοῦντεῦθεν ἡμῖν· τέκνα γὰρ κατακτενῶ
 τᾶμ'·

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 aggredere, 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 flammae
 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**?

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:

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

ἀλλ', ὦ τέκν', εἰσελθόντε πλουσίους δόμους
πατρὸς νέαν γυναῖκα, δεσπότιν δ' ἐμήν,
ἰκετεύετ', ἐξαιτεῖσθε μὴ φεύγειν χθόνα,
κόσμον διδόντες· τοῦδε γὰρ μάλιστα δεῖ,
ἐς χεῖρ' ἐκείνην δῶρα δέξασθαι τάδε.
ἴθ' ὡς τάχιστα· μητρὶ δ' ὄν ἐρᾷ τυχεῖν
εὐάγγελοι γένοισθε πράξαντες καλῶς.

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

Ite, ite, nati, matris infaustae genus,
placate uobis munere et multa prece
dominam ac nouercam. uadite et celeres domum
referte gressus, ultimo amplexu ut fruar.

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

tuum quoque ipsa corpus hinc mecum auerham.
nunc hoc age, anime: non in occulto tibi est
perdenda uirtus; **approba populo manum.**

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!**

9. Seneca, *Medea*, 992-94

derat hoc unum mihi,
spectator iste. nil adhuc facti reor:
quidquid sine isto fecimus sceleris perit.

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.

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* Plutarch, *De Gloria Atheniensium* translation by Frank C. Babbitt (Loeb)
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Seneca's *Medea* translation by John G. Fitch (Loeb)