

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

Nothing is more elusive than the theatrical moment, as it exists only in the fleeting conjunction of players, audience, and play, for without any one element of this triad the resultant experience is simply not theatre (Slater 1985). In general, theatrical experience is a shared illusory convention between the actors and the audience, and more specifically, theatrical experience of the ancient Greek and Roman's tragedies is considered a deceptive one, because it created the sense of deceit/fraud, which according to Gorgias is the aim of tragedy (Ringer 1998). Thus, when this convention of the dramatic deceit/illusion is reflected in the play performed on stage, then it mirrors itself, and as a result the theatrical experience becomes "metatheatrical". The "metadramatic" experience of a play comes into being in various ways, but mostly through the presence of a character that takes on the role of the on stage or course-internal creator, who functions as the poet's literary parallel. This character is inspired and conceptualizes a plan of action, a "sub-play" based on deceit and illusion, that s/he tries to perform with the appropriate theatrical means (actors, theatre props, masks, deceit/contrivance, fraud) for a successful outcome.

In this paper, I attempt to show that Medea takes on this role in the homonymous Euripides' and Seneca's tragedies, by conceptualizing and acting out a plan, a "sub-play", which stages a false truth, creating at the same time the illusion of reality. I begin with an overview of the relation between tragedy and deceit/illusion in order to establish the framework for the approach of Euripides' and Seneca's *Medea*. However, the core of my discussion focuses on the words that indicate the deceitful character of Medea's acts (*μηχανή*, *δόλος*, *ars*), and echo a reference to the illusionistic nature of theatrical mimesis (Falkner 1998). In this way, I try to prove that Medea's intention and, meanwhile, her ability to deceive effectively her opponents and her on-

stage-audience guarantees the success of her “sub-play”, and the breaking, or at least the “cracking”, of the fourth wall.

The “fourth wall”, the invisible-imaginary wall-boundary that separates the audience from the actors, and through which the audience can see but the actors cannot (Mangan 2013), is a theatrical convention that preserves the illusion of theater. The actors pretend that they cannot hear or see the audience and the audience gets to enjoy the pleasure of watching their pretended reality. But like all conventions, this one is shattered, when an on-stage-character or situation reminds the audience that what they see is not real. Although many scholars argue that “the breaking of the fourth wall” is almost a cliché in both ancient Greek and Roman comedy, they do not share the same opinion regarding ancient tragedy. Nevertheless, in *Medea*’s case the theatrical illusion seems to be exposed to the audience through the main character. Finally, I suggest that both Euripides’ and Seneca’s *Medea* are two tragedies which “play” with the theatrical conventions, with *φαίνεσθαι* (*to appear*) and *εἶναι* (*to be*), truth and lie, presenting in this way the real nature of the theatre, which converses with the audience’s mind and imagination.

Bibliography

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