Seneca, Lucius Annaeus: Thyestes

(50)

- Christopher Trinacty (University of Missouri-Columbia)

Genre: Play. Country: Roman Empire.

In his play Thyestes, Seneca utilizes the tragic tale of the house of Tantalus to explore the psychological depths of tyranny, revenge, and dynastic miasma. The Thyestes details the relationship between the brothers Atreus and Thyestes and their struggle for supremacy, which results in Thyestes’ cannibalistic consumption of his own children. This is a mythological house known for such transgressions and the opening scene presents the ghost of Tantalus (grandfather of Atreus and Thyestes), who infects the household with his insatiable thirst and hunger. These motifs resonate both physically and figuratively throughout the play. Atreus and Thyestes were supposed to rule the kingdom alternately but their power-sharing agreement had been broken, first by Thyestes and then by Atreus. Seneca’s tragedy focuses on Thyestes’ return from exile to Mycenae and Atreus’ plotting and successful realization of revenge. Atreus’ character is a seductive figure, who is superior in strength and verbal wit to the simpering Thyestes, and his self-conscious reflections on power and the limits of vengeance offer insight into the Neronian conceptions of autocracy and violence.

Authors such as Sophocles (5th C. BCE), Ennius (169 BCE) and Varius Rufus (29 BCE) had written tragedies on this subject previous to Seneca, and Aristotle remarks on the suitability of characters such as Thyestes for tragedy (Poetics 1453a11-20). Only Seneca’s dramatic version, however, has survived the vicissitudes of textual transmission intact, and this play is representative of Seneca’s tragic style. His Latin is rhetorically sophisticated, both striving for striking one-liners (sententiae) and showing the polish of the Silver Age of Latin literature (in which the influence of declamatory oratory and erudite allusion was rampant). Senecan drama is often faulted for its concentration on speeches in preference to action, and T.S. Eliot famously pronounced, “In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it. His characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it; they recite in turn.” However, this new emphasis on rhetoric and dense intertextuality is emblematic of Seneca’s renovation of the tragic genre and, if characters are given to long speeches of introspection, it is because Seneca finds such self-reflection and decision-making to be the stuff of drama.

The play itself follows the general arc of a revenge tragedy in which a character, because of a perceived or actual wrong, plots against another character and is successful in his vengeance (e.g. Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Marston’s Antonio’s Revenge). The opening sequence between the Fury and Tantalus introduces the history of violence and pollution in the House of Tantalus, and provides a paradigm of the power-dynamic operating throughout the play. Tantalus tries to resist the power of the Fury but is forced against his will to give in, and to infect his ancestral home. The following Choral song reiterates the deserved punishment of Tantalus and integrates the action of the first scene into the larger mythical context. The futility of resistance is emphasized...
further in the second Act in which Atreus plans his revenge against Thyestes. In a long debate with his servant, Atreus dismisses any advice for moderation or leniency, and we find the servant himself conceding to Atreus’ grim desires. Atreus wishes to outdo all previous stories of revenge and discover a punishment correlative to his pain (“My heart burns with madness but not enough, I want to be filled by a greater monstrosity!” 252-4). Atreus’ thirst for revenge is insatiable and his desire to exceed his predecessors in revenge can be seen as a metaliiterary reflection of Seneca’s literary position, as he attempts to outdo previous poets (esp. Virgil and Ovid). From a dramatic perspective, the audience now understands the plot afoot, and must decide whether it will side with the avenger or the victim (this tension has been fruitfully explored by Schiesaro, 2003).

In the third Act, Thyestes appears onstage and strikes the pose of a Stoic philosopher secure in his poverty and indifferent to the allure of power. This guise, however, is quickly dispelled by the actions of his sons, who want a reconciliation with Atreus, and Thyestes’ own latent desire to share in power [within 10 lines his resolve to be “one of the crowd” (533-4) disappears and he becomes co-regent with Atreus]. Thyestes’ submission certainly indicates that the lip-service he gave to Stoicism was only a façade, but also may hint that he is still eager for power and that Atreus’ portrayal of him in the second Act (“This crime is worthy of Thyestes, it is worthy of Atreus, both of us would do it”, 271-2) may be correct. After a Choral song in which initial optimism for a peaceful settlement sours into pessimistic reflection (“No situation lasts a long time. Pain and pleasure yield in turn; with pleasure more brief”, 596-7), the play gains momentum through the Messenger’s speech of the following Act. In accordance with a convention of ancient drama, this speech details events occurring off-stage that would be difficult to enact in the theater. The Messenger announces how Atreus sacrificed Thyestes’ children, and Seneca lavishes attention on the locale of the sacrifice (through an extended description or “ekphrasis”) as well as the deaths of the children. This sacrifice takes place in the center of the palace, a gloomy atrium where ghosts wander and darkness rules. Here, the rotten core of the House of Tantalus is exposed, and Seneca often employs such pathetic fallacies to indicate the infectious effects of crime or sin on the outside world (a topic explored in Rosenmeyer, 1989). After the death of the children, the sun reverses its course in the sky (another example of the sympathetic relationship between the action of the play and the natural world), an event discussed in the subsequent Choral ode.

The final Act consists of Atreus’ revelation of his plot to Thyestes. Atreus opens the act in a semi-divine manner, believing that his head touches the stars and that he has become a god-like figure (“O, I am the highest of the gods and king of kings!” 911-2). His happiness only increases as he watches Thyestes ignorantly devour his children and drink wine infused with their blood. Atreus can be seen as a director and playwright within the play, who has devised his revenge plot and seen it through to its successful end (Boyle, 1997). This type of metatheatrical layering is relatively common in revenge tragedy, and one needs only to think of Hamlet’s superior acting ability even compared to that of the troupe he hires. When Atreus finally reveals that Thyestes has been eating his children (and Seneca adds to our suspense in delaying this discovery), Thyestes hopes for some reaction from the gods (“Do you, Earth, lie unmoved, a listless weight? The gods have fled” 1020-1). Are we to believe that Atreus really has become a god-on-earth and that such evil will not be punished? Seneca gives us no easy answers to this question and the play develops into a back-and-forth debate between Atreus and Thyestes about the rationale of crime and punishment. In the play’s final lines, Thyestes propounds that Atreus will be handed over to the gods for punishment, but it is Atreus who has the last word, claiming, “I hand you over to be punished by your children” (1112). This fitting conclusion emphasizes Atreus’ control over the action of the play, and indicates that his superiority over his brother extends to the verbal level.

Seneca’s Thyestes explores the power of a tyrannical figure over the world of the play and, therefore, some have found parallels with the Roman Empire of Seneca’s day. Scholars such as Fitch and Volk date this play to the final years of Seneca’s life under the emperor Nero, and find similarities between the figure of Nero and Atreus. Such allegorization of Senecan tragedy can become Procrustean (if Nero is Atreus, then Britannicus must be Thyestes, etc.), but the play does illustrate the magnetism of evil and the seeming futility of any resistance in ways that generally evoke the Neronian court. Critics have often tried to find connections between Seneca’s
avowed Stoicism in his prose works and the tragedies (e.g. Pratt, 1983). Seneca’s Stoic treatise *De Clementia* offers a fine counterpoint to the tyrannical expression of power found in the *Thyestes* and shows the drama’s perversion of Stoic tenets about good rule. While the Chorus and Thyestes may proclaim Stoic *sententiae*, the action of the play continually disrupts and undermines any positive Stoic message. The bestial pleasure that Atreus enjoys and the power of the emotions to determine the actions of the characters speak against traditional Stoic ethical views. In general, while Stoic language and imagery may appear in the *Thyestes*, the tragedy’s pessimism is antipodal to the ordered and rational Stoic world-view. Literary interpretations that take into consideration Seneca’s response to the Augustan poets, as well as the intricate imagery and symbolism of the language, may prove more convincing for readers coming to the play for the first time (Poe, 1969 and Tarrant, 1985).

**Bibliography**


- Christopher Trinacty (University of Missouri-Columbia)

First published 04 May 2009

**Citation:** Trinacty, Christopher . "Thyestes". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 4 May 2009.  

This article is copyright to © The Literary Encyclopedia. For information on making internet links to this page and electronic or print reproduction, please read Linking and Reproducing.

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X