

The Sky is Falling: Seneca's *Thyestes* and Virgil's *Eclogues*  
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Seneca's tragedies rewrite and re-examine scenes and language found in the works of Virgil. As such, they are highly intertextual, and Seneca utilizes Virgilian poetry in the characterization of figures such as Phaedra (Fantham, 1975) and Juno (Fitch, 1987), as well as in larger scene types such as the description of the palace of Atreus (Faber, 2007). Scholars have primarily focused on the relationship between Senecan tragedy and Virgil's *Aeneid* (Putnam, 1995; Schiesaro, 2003), but Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* also present Seneca with powerful poetic expressions for *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. These intertexts recall the original context of the Virgilian source material, and that context impacts their significance in Seneca's tragic world. My paper examines two intertextual echoes of the *Eclogues* in Seneca's *Thyestes* and points out the political and poetic implications of such echoes.

The Chorus' celebratory song (*Thy.* 546-622) reveals that they have not been privy to Atreus' deceitful machinations, and a sense of foreboding (enhanced by intertextual nods to the *Eclogues*) undercuts the ode's surface joy. The Chorus wonders, "What god has made sudden peace from such tumult" (*Otium tanto subitum e tumultu / quis deus fecit?*, *Thy.* 560-1). This line owes much to Virgil's first *Eclogue* in which the shepherd Tityrus claims that his peaceful state was created by a god (*O Meliboee, deus nobis haec otia fecit. Ecl.* 1.6). For Tityrus, young Octavian has granted him freedom and the land to tend his herd, and he expresses his gratitude by worshipping him as a god. Seneca interprets Virgil's line within its original historical context, as Tarrant argues, "by opposing *otium* to the *arma civilis ... belli*, Seneca makes explicit a connection that remains below the surface of Vergil's poem. Vergil's confident assertion has become a question, another instance of uncertainty about the gods' activities or even existence" (Tarrant, 1985: *ad loc.*). The Chorus' ignorance and their gullible belief that a god has intervened point to their fallible understanding of the dramatic situation. This same Virgilian line appears in Seneca's prose writings, and the interpretation found there helps to emphasize its political and historical ramifications (*Ep.* 73.10-11; *De Ben.* 4.6.3-5). The intertext clarifies the truth of the situation: Atreus and Thyestes are still fighting their (civil) war and *otium* will not be found in Seneca's tragic world. If the gods do exist, their role is taken over by Atreus (*dimitto superos*, 888), and the apparent peace is actually an interlude of a much longer war.

In addition, Seneca manipulates the optimistic prophecy of *Eclogue* 4 in order to show how similar language can be employed for contrary effect. At *Thyestes* 875 ff., the Chorus hypothesizes that the world is coming to an end because of the celestial phenomena accompanying Atreus' sinful actions and Thyestes' unknowingly cannibalistic meal. After detailing the fall of the constellations, the Chorus explains their position (*Thy.* 877-84):

in nos aetas  
ultima venit? O nos dura  
sorte creatos, seu perdidimus  
solem miseri, sive expulimus!

In this passage, the Chorus overturns the optimistic prophecy of Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*, where the poet sings (4-5):

Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;  
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.

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While Virgil hopes for the inauguration of a new order, Seneca's Chorus sings of the end of the previous order and is resigned to death. Seneca inverts the fourth *Eclogue* (where a Saturnian golden age will commence at the birth of a child), as this Choral song accompanies the death and devouring of children. In his tragic world a song of hope becomes a Choral lament, and the potential golden age of the mythic characters (*Thy.* 336-41) is abolished through the destruction of Thyestes' line. My paper discusses these two examples of Senecan intertextuality and shows how Seneca's creative use of Virgil's poetry highlights the power-hungry world of the *Thyestes*, and the destructive results of vengeance.