

Tantalus' touch and the repeating curse in Seneca's *Thyestes*

Tantalus' punishment in the underworld features prominently in the first ode of Seneca's *Thyestes*. Thinking that Tantalus' perpetual suffering atones for his impious deception of the gods, the chorus prays for an end to the recurring crimes among the Tantalides. It has long been observed that the chorus fails to perceive the changes in the natural landscape of Argos and is ignorant of the main plot. Scholars attribute this failure to the identity of the chorus: as virtuous Argive citizens, their moral integrity prevents them from anticipating the upcoming court intrigue (Giancotti 1988; Davis 1989; Hill 2000; Schiesaro 2003). In this paper, I argue that the chorus' perception of the plot and its reality, though seemingly dichotomous, shares Tantalus' touch as a common theme. Thus, the first ode does not conflict with but rather complements the first scene, together setting up the theme that Boyle 2017 has identified as central to the entire play: inescapable guilt.

First, I demonstrate that the two reasons the chorus perceives Tantalus' suffering as adequate atonement for his crimes, the perpetuity of the punishment (*aeterna fames...aeterna sitis*, 149–150) and emotional exhaustion (*fessus*, 152), are both realized through the motif of touch. His attempt to touch the fruit reflects a psychological shift from resisting to succumbing to an illusory allure. The fruit and water fleeing away from his touch drive the cyclical nature of his punishment, rendering his hope eternally futile. While two other Senecan plays, *Hercules Furens* and *Agamemnon*, depict Tantalus with either naïve hope (Sen. *HF* 752–5) or resigned despair (Sen. *Ag.* 769–72), *Thyestes* surpasses both by tracing the full emotional arc between the two extremes. Tantalus here is represented not merely as a passive victim but as an active participant trapped in an endless loop of temptation, resistance, and inevitable failure.

Next, I argue that Tantalus' role in the first act is defined by his symbolic value as the bearer of underworld punishment, structured around the recurring "touch–flee" motif. Driven by the Fury into the upper world, Tantalus was coerced into touching the royal house in order to ignite new cycles of the family curse. In the changes in the natural landscape (104–121) following Tantalus' touch (103: *nefando...contactu*), the retreating water and fleeing fruit mirror the outcome in the underworld. The shared language of 'flight' in both scenarios (111: *fugiente*; 154: *fugacior*, 172: *profugus*) further intensifies the connection. However, while the chorus in the first ode sees Tantalus' punishment as sufficient penance, the touch here produces a reversed outcome: it serves as the catalyst for a series of future calamities. The wide extent of landscape changes beyond the house underscores the vast nature of the violence in the royal family, which is not just self-contained but will also contaminate all of Argos. In this light, the first ode provides a retroactive commentary on the destructive power of his touch in the center of the punishment, thereby legitimizing the continuation of the family curse on his descendants.

Bibliography

- Aygon, Jean-Pierre. 2003. "Le banquet tragique: le renouvellement du thème dans le *Thyeste* de Sénèque." *Pallas* 61: 271–84.
- Boyle, A. J. 1983. "*Hic epulis locus*: The tragic worlds of Seneca's *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes*." In *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus essays on Senecan drama*. Edited by A. J. Boyle, 199–228. Berwick, Australia: Ramus.
- Boyle, A. J. 2017. *Seneca: Thyestes. Edited with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, P. J. 1989. "The Chorus in Seneca's *Thyestes*." *CQ* 39.2, 421–435.
- Dupont, Florence. 1995. *Les monstres de Sénèque: pour une dramaturgie de la tragédie romaine*. Paris: Berlin.
- Erasmus, Mario. 2006. "Enticing Tantalus in Seneca's *Thyestes*." *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 56, 185–198.
- Giancotti, Francesco. 1988. *Seneca, Teste. Testo criticamente riveduto e annotato. Volume I (Atti I, II e III)*. Torino: Giappichelli.
- Hill, D. E. 2000. "Seneca's Choruses." *Mnemosyne* 53.5, 561–587.
- Hine, Harry. 1981. "The Structure of Seneca's *Thyestes*." In *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar, Third Volume*. Liverpool: Francis Cairns.
- Poe, Joe Park. 1969. "An analysis of Seneca's *Thyestes*." *TAPA* 100: 355–376.
- Schiesaro, Alessandro. 2003. *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarrant, R. J. 1985. *Seneca's Thyestes*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.