Ecumenical Kingship: A Reading of the Second Ode of Seneca's *Thyestes*

Before the title character's hesitant return to Argos in Seneca's *Thyestes*, the chorus delivers a poignant ode on the true nature of kingship (336-403). Though often interpreted as an exhortation for mindful kingship over despotic rule (e.g. Davis 1989), little discussion has centered on the universalizing and ecumenical nature of the ode itself. In this paper, I view this cosmic overview of kingship as Seneca's comment on the increasing ostentation of the Roman imperial court. The need to reconcile the ecumenical world-ruler with the Stoic wise-king was a daunting philosophical task, and the chorus' surrender at the ode's conclusion (391-403) may reflect Seneca's own resignation. The ode begins with comment on the actual plot and setting of the play in mythical Argos (336-8), but then directs the audience along a journey through the entire world, describing all of the trappings of usual kingship, which in reality do not give any true power (339-90). By its end, the chorus announces that it prefers seclusion and anonymity to rule, but the appearance of *Quirites* and the adjective *plebeius* have brought the ode into a very Roman space (391-403). The chorus has transported the audience from ancient Argos into the present via, importantly, a tour of the *oikoumenē*. I argue that this ecumenical view of kingship is connected to the growing universalizing ambitions and presentations of the Roman emperor and his imperial court. Throughout the first century, the Roman imperial infrastructure increasingly appealed to universal power to license its control over its vast provincial territory (Bang 2011, Schneider 2012). This phenomenon of legitimization via universalism is not unique to Rome, rather seems to be a conventional, and almost necessary, method of survival for large agrian empires (Bang and Kołodziejczyk 2012). Claiming a right to cosmic rule, however, carried with it ostentatious baggage. Purple robes, glittering palaces, and great wealth (345-7) all were essential parts of displaying an emperor's authority over the whole world, as was situating his

position above other rulers: one must be the king of kings (see 369-79). To the Roman aristocracy, however, this pageantry reeked of perceived Eastern despotism.

Traditional Roman aristocratic virtues and the philosophical inheritance of classical Greek thought pervasive in the first century's intellectual milieu was firmly set against such displays of power. Particularly for the Stoic Seneca, kings—or emperors—should be wise men, able to rule themselves before others (see, notably, Griffin 1992). Rulers concerned more with the display of grandeur only show their tyrannical instability, and Cedric Littlewood has effectively shown that in the *Thyestes*, the power of ostentatious Atreus is paradoxically undermined by its own expression: the masculine, ruling king is made effeminate and impotent by the loss of the golden-fleeced ram and his wife (Littlewood 1997). Kingship cannot firmly rest upon capricious symbols of power, yet the political reality of Seneca's world necessitated some kind of compromise between the "wise ruler" and "king of kings." Negotiating communication between the emperor and his subjects was imperative, even more so when those "subjects," too claimed royal authority. Toward the end of the second ode, the chorus envisions a gathering of foreign princes, all diplomatically posturing with the traditional trappings of power (369-90). How can the wise king, who has no need for military arms, compete? The ode leaves the question unanswered. Instead the chorus exhorts another to stand on the slippery height of the *aula*, while the speaker will end his life in obscurity (391-403). Seneca himself, deeply involved in the *aula* of Nero, seems unable to solve this dilemma, perhaps preferring to withdraw himself to *otium*.

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