

Reading Aeschylus through Seneca: The “Tapestry Scene” in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and
Atreus’ Persuasion of His Brother in Seneca’s *Thyestes*

By contrast with Republican comedy, where scholars have established that playwrights worked closely with Greek precedents (Lowe 2007, 81-132), the relationship between Seneca’s tragedies and those of the great Attic tragedians must be approached more cautiously. We do Seneca a disservice if we understand him solely as the direct descendant of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, ignoring not only huge differences in dramatic convention and the mediating influence of lost Augustan tragedies (Tarrant 1978 and 1995), but also the way in which Seneca may have used tragedy as a means of exploring Stoic ideas about passion and power (Marti 1945, Henry and Walker 1963). Even where Seneca addresses the same plot as a Greek playwright, as in his *Agamemnon*, and detailed correspondences have been identified (Lavery 2004, 190-92), most agree that the influence of the Greek model is minimal.

This is not to say that there is no value in considering Seneca and the Greeks together. Counterintuitively, one example of a particularly close connection between Seneca and a Greek ancestor is found between two plays that address different myths: Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Seneca’s *Thyestes*. These plays follow the same plot – a returning ruler is punished out of vengeance – and tell that story using similar imagery (especially sacrifice) and themes (the importance of public opinion, the dangers of power). The characters in one play have analogues in the other (especially Clytemnestra/Atreus and Agamemnon/Thyestes). And, most importantly for my purposes, both plays wander freely in time, constantly evoking the events of the past and predicting those of the future. This temporal looseness highlights the fact that both playwrights are engaging with the same mythical cycle, albeit focusing on different points in the story. Independent of which play was written first (the *Agamemnon*) and which deals with earlier

events (the *Thyestes*), these dramas are mutually informative because both contribute to the same Greco-Roman tradition of the House of Atreus in a way that is not bound by strict notions of time.

It is in this sense that I suggest that, in a reversal of the usual understanding of what constitutes an intertextual relationship, Seneca can shed light on problematic scenes in Aeschylus. In particular, I argue that the conversation in which Atreus persuades Thyestes to share in his royal power (524-545) offers an instructive parallel for the “tapestry scene” of the *Agamemnon* (931-545) where Clytemnestra persuades her husband to enter the house walking on rich robes (note, a direct intertextual relationship has been proposed here: Boyle 2017, xcv, 273). Both dialogues are perplexing in that, despite a brief and unpersuasive stichomythic exchange, their respective arguments meet little resistance and quickly succeed. Seneca’s play makes better sense of this moment because it stages an earlier conversation between Thyestes and his son (404-90) where Thyestes’ objections are more fully explored and Tantalus wears down his father’s resistance. While no comparable scene occurs in the *Agamemnon*, Seneca’s play prompts us to recognize that *Agamemnon*, too, has already expressed objections and been forced to capitulate in a scenario involving his child, namely the sacrifice of Iphigenia as narrated by the Chorus. If we consider that episode to be the counterpart of the Thyestes/Tantalus scene in Seneca’s play, then *Agamemnon*’s capitulation, like Thyestes’, becomes more comprehensible. In both plays, a scenario involving the man’s child compels him to act against his will and conditions his ineffectual resistance in a future scene of persuasion.

The correspondences between the “tapestry scene” and Atreus’ persuasion of his brother reveal how the distinct stories told in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Seneca’s *Thyestes* align with the dark logic of the myth cycle surrounding the House of Atreus without insisting on a rigid

notion of time or causality. Here and elsewhere, both plays perpetuate the same patterns through multi-generational versions of parallel characters in a way that allows us to use one play as a means of better understanding the other, independent of when they were composed. I argue that a more flexible interpretive model such as I suggest here opens up new ways of approaching the big questions that surround these great works.

Bibliography

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