

## The Influence of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* on Seneca's *Thyestes*

Over the past decades, a resurgence of interest in the intertextuality of Senecan tragedy has influenced the larger recuperation of Seneca's poetic sophistication. Nevertheless, scholars have largely put aside the question of Seneca's Greek tragic models in order to focus on Roman predecessors; some even maintain that such study is fundamentally hampered by the large chronological distance between them (Tarrant 1995). But this paradoxically moves Seneca away from his status as a tragic poet and hinders our ability to see his dramaturgical response to the canonical plays of Athens. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on the Thyestes' allusive response to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. While it builds on Calder 1983 and Schiesaro 2003, it simultaneously breaks new ground in investigating Seneca's Aeschylean characterization and imagery.

The first part focuses on Seneca's use of guile as a key trait of Atreus' personality, a trait which he borrows from Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and her plots for revenge (e.g. Aesch.Ag.155; Aesc.Ag.1495; Aesch.Ag.1625; see Chesi 2014, Kyriakou 2011). Seneca transfers this feminine guile to his own protagonist and, in doing so, creates the incompatible image of an effeminate tyrant. For example, in the dialogue with the *satelles*, the latter emphasizes Atreus' desire that the guile (*fraudem, dolos* Sen.Th.316-321) by which Thyestes will be captured (*captus dolis* Sen.Th.286) will in turn be inherited by his sons. Moreover, Thyestes himself is aware of his brother's guile (Sen.Th.470-473,482-483), almost as if he has read Aeschylus' sequel, and is therefore suspicious of the reconciliation (Tarrant 1985), adding a metatragic aspect to Seneca's reception of Aeschylus' drama.

Another common characteristic of Atreus and Clytemnestra is linguistic prowess, dissimulation and the manipulation of speech through double entendres (Schiesaro 2003, Goldhill 1984). Clytemnestra uses words of affection to welcome her husband (Aesc.Ag.905) and describes her spousal anxiety (Aesc.Ag.890-892). However, her ambiguous words about

the role of Justice in Agamemnon's arrival reveals her true intentions (Aesch.Ag.910-913). Atreus adopts a similar linguistic doublespeak in his reconciliation scene: he impatiently seeks his brother's embrace (Sen.Th.508-511), but always uses ambiguous terms (*vincla*, *victimae* Sen.Th.545-546) that foreshadow his wicked plan.

These aspects of characterization are complemented by imagery of both plays. In both, nets are used to describe the trap for the victims, metaphorically reinforcing the gendered presentation of *dolus*, since weaving and its products were associated with female guile (McClure 1999). Clytemnestra's plan was twice compared by the chorus to a spider's web (Aesch.Ag.1491-1496,1516-1520) and the cloth used in the murder scene is assimilated to a fishing net (Aesch.Ag.1381-1387). The presentation of Clytemnestra as a fisherman/spider and Agamemnon as a fish/insect-victim, I argue, influences that of Atreus as an Umbrian hound and of Thyestes as a wild animal in Seneca's play (*Plagis tenetur* Sen.Th.491-503).

Finally, the image of the slaughtered children as sacrificial animals, which is used for Iphigeneia as a goat and preliminary offering of the Greek ships, *προτέλεια* (Aesch.Ag.224-247, Fowler 1991), is transferred in Thyestes to the murder of the children and highlights the inversion of values such as *fas* and *nefas*. The language used to describe the sons of Thyestes as *hostiae* (Sen.Th.759) and *victimae* with their forehead bound by a *vitta* (Sen.Th.682-690) is 'sacrificial' (Tarrant 1985) as well as the procedure followed in the same scene by Atreus as a *sacerdos* (Sen.Th.691).

This paper demonstrates Seneca's sophisticated reception of Aeschylus' complex characterization, figured speech, and imagery. In doing so, I argue that Seneca's Greek tragic models deserve the same careful intertextual analysis taken for granted for his Augustan predecessors (Trinacty 2014). Though once put aside in order to foreground Senecan innovation, the time is ripe to bring Seneca back into dialogue with Greek tragedy's reception.

## Bibliography

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