

Me Dulcis Saturet Quies: Bad Epicureans in Seneca's Thyestes

In *De Vita Beata* (12.4), Seneca criticizes those who live a debauched life under the banner of Epicureanism because they “hear the praise of pleasure, but do not consider how sober and abstemious the ‘pleasure’ of Epicurus really is.” My paper interprets Seneca’s *Thyestes* as a meditation on these bad Epicureans. I argue that both Thyestes and Atreus use language plucked from the school, but consistently act in contradiction to their intertextual inclinations. This language primarily takes the form of intertextual references to Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. This, in addition to shedding further light on Seneca’s artistry, also addresses a considerable gap in the scholarship on *Seneca Tragicus*, which has shown surprisingly little interest in his reception and treatment of Epicureanism (cf. Davies: 1898: 427; Pierini 1996: 37; Schiesaro 2015: esp. 251).

Thyestes’ understands the Epicurean the rejection of earthly ambition but, like those in *De Beata Vita* 12 mis-defines pleasure. His stance is captured well by the chorus’ cleverly paradoxical prayer: “May a sweet quiet sate me” (*me dulcis saturet quies*, 393). The question he asks, with indigestion, in the monody he performs after consuming his children—“why does great pleasure bring tears?” (*an habet lacrimas magna voluptas?* 969)—is softball for an Epicurean. Thyestes wants pleasure through the satiation of his appetite within the *quies* prescribed by Lucretius, not pleasure from the calm that comes to body and soul in a retreat from the hungers and thirsts of public life.

Atreus, by contrast, is characterized by a peculiar fusion of hubristic Lucretian impiety and sanguinary religiosity, whereby he correctly rejects fear of the gods but clings desperately to a fear of death, manifested in his uncertainty about the paternity of his children. He shocks the threatening gods looking down on the sacrifice (*atque ultro deos / terret minantes*, Thy. 704-5)

just as Epicurus himself thwarted them with his philosophical investigations (DRN 1.62-79). In so doing, Atreus boasts in Lucretian fashion, that he rose to be level with the gods (*aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super / altum superbo vertice attingens polum*, 885-6). But, despite his hubris, his sacrifice of Tantalus Jr. and Plisthenes evokes Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphianassa (DRN 1.84-101), pairing with Lucretius' description to create an imbrication of child-murder in which Atreus' lineage would eventually suffer the same fate, under Agamemnon, as he forced on his brother by feeding him his children.

Bibliography

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