

The Gendering of Atreus' Revenge in Seneca's *Thyestes*

Gendered dynamics frequently take center stage in Seneca's *Thyestes*, in particular in terms of the depiction of revenge. Whereas male characters in ancient literature are afforded the just ability to avenge insults against them, causing honor to accrue to them for their actions, women who do the same are limited to deceptive plots of revenge, for which they are subject to censure and blame. Seneca's *Thyestes* centers on the famous tale of brothers who both embody traits gendered as female, although in very different ways. While the play bears the name *Thyestes*, the playwright regularly offers Thyestes' brother, Atreus, as a primary character by centralizing his thoughts and actions. Though Littlewood (1997) focuses on the unsurprising presence of gendered qualities in *Thyestes*, mainly his subjugated position and metaphorical impregnation, it is important to note how often gendered traits are also found in Atreus. While these traits are found in Atreus' actions as well, it is his method of revenge which is especially gendered as "female" by the standards of (Greek) tragic narrative. In fact, throughout the play Atreus' "distinct feminine characteristics" are consistently brought to the foreground (Schiesaro 2003), such as his underhanded and deceitful methods of luring Thyestes back to the kingdom. This paper will explore the gendering of Atreus' actions as female throughout the play and argue that Atreus triumphs over his brother in a decidedly feminine and demeaning manner.

No human woman appears throughout the entirety of the *Thyestes*, even though the opportunity exists for a role such as Aerope, Atreus' wife and Thyestes ex-lover. Since human women are excluded as characters from the play, the audience is required to look elsewhere for these energies. When Seneca directly correlates the gruesome story of Procne's ruthless revenge involving children against her husband to Atreus' equally ruthless revenge plot (*Thyestes* 274 –

283), he guides the audience to understand Atreus' revenge as similarly coded as feminine: here, characterized by guile, trickery, and deceit. The audience is forced to connect and compare these two brutal acts of revenge.

I will concentrate on the subtle gendering of Atreus's actions as female as enacted through his revenge against his brother. To contextualize this understanding of Atreus and his actions, I will analyze similar examples drawn from Seneca's *Thyestes*, Euripides' *Medea*, as well as Ovid's Tereus, Procne, Philomela episode in the *Metamorphoses* (Ov. *Met.* 6.412-674) so as to establish this manner of revenge as a typically feminine response within the genres of vengeance narratives. I will argue that rather than understanding his actions as honorable and "masculine" due to his avenging a humiliating offense, Atreus' reliance on deception makes his vengeance better read and interpreted as being distinctly gendered as "feminine", and thus lessens his victory over Thyestes.

Works Cited

Littlewood, Cedric. 1997. "Seneca's *Thyestes*: The Tragedy with No Women?"

Materiali e Discussioni per L'analisi Dei Testi Classici 38: 57-86.

Schiesaro, Alessandro. 2003. *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan*

Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.