

The Effect of Senecan Allusion in Statius' *Thebaid* VIII

In this paper, I will first argue that in Seneca's *Thyestes*, the ruler Atreus' is the foil of the ideas expressed in Seneca's earlier treatise *De Clementia*. According to Seneca, a just ruler must necessarily practice *clementia* devoid of *crudelitas*. At 1.25.2, Seneca elaborates the development of *crudelitas*. *Crudelitas* reaches its furthest limits as a ruler invents novel forms of torture, extends the suffering of others, and then finally enjoys the eventual killing of another human being. Should a ruler practice *crudelitas* instead of *clementia*, communities will rise up and overthrow his power. A ruler who participates in *crudelitas* rather than *clementia* becomes bestial, approaching insanity, and will suffer the direst moral and political consequences for his unjust actions (1.25.4). Atreus' lust for revenge drives him to the furthest extent of *crudelitas*, as described in *De Clementia*.

The structure of the plot of the *Thyestes* mimics the evolution of the *crudelitas* of *De Clementia*. Atreus' actions throughout the entire play progress just as the practice of *crudelitas* by the unjust ruler. Moreover, Atreus is certainly characterized as the idea of the bestial ruler; he is directly described as *ferus* (546, 721) and likens himself to wild animals (*Thy* 497-503, 707 -11, 732-6). Atreus embodies the very antithesis of the ideas contained within the didactic *De Clementia*. As Schiesaro notes, one should read Senecan tragedies as negative illustrations of values and ideas advocated in Seneca's prose works (2003). By approaching the *Thyestes* in this way, Senecan political philosophy translates for the common audience into a more relatable moral commentary.

Finally, I will use this reading of the character Atreus in relationship to the *De Clementia* in order to better understand the Senecan allusions invoked by Statius in *Thebaid* VIII. In Book VIII, Statius' retelling of the cannibalism of Tydeus alludes to Atreus, and in turn, *De Clementia* 1.25.2. During Tydeus' act of cannibalism, diction falls into three semantic categories which are also featured in the *Thyestes*: eating language, references to power, and the notion of satiety. Additionally, like Atreus, Tydeus is also driven by anger and desire for revenge against his opponent, Melannipus. The similarities in textual language and the nature of the two characters allow the Statian reader an extra layer of meaning. The act of Tydeus, as it alludes to the *Thyestes*, functions as not only an emphatic political commentary on the nature of the just ruler, but also as the same dramatic "negative illustration" of moral values that ought to be absorbed by the universal reader.