

Reading Antiquity: Seneca tragedy lecture

A) Background

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca (“Seneca the Younger”): b. c. 4 BC–d. 65 AD (forced to commit suicide). Exiled by Claudius, 41 AD; recalled by Agrippina as tutor for Nero, 49 AD and advisor when Nero emperor 54 AD.
 - Seneca’s eight tragedies: *Agamemnon*, *Hercules Furens*, *Medea*, *Oedipus*, *Phaedra*, *Phoenissae* (incomplete), *Thyestes*, *Troades*; *Hercules Oetaeus* (suspect authenticity)
 - *Apocolocyntosis* + Stoic works. *dialogi* (10 ethical treatises: *De providentia*; *De constantia sapientis*; *De ira*; *Ad Marciam de consolatione*; *De vita beata*; *De otio*; *De tranquillitate animi*; *De brevitae vitae*; *Ad Polybium de consolatione*; *Ad Helviam de consolatione*); *De clementia*; *De beneficiis*; *Natural Questions*; *Epistulae morales*
 - Dating uncertain: Seneca (b. 4AD; d. 65) writing under rule of Tiberius (14-37), Gaius: “Caligula” (37-41), Claudius (41-54), and/or Nero (54-68)? *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* probably Latest (60-62 AD?); *Hercules furens* (middle group) written by 54 AD?
- 1) “The hypothesis is no more than possible, but there is an undeniable fascination in the thought that the *Thyestes*, which contains Seneca’s most harrowing depiction of pathological tyranny, might have been composed towards the end of his days in the court of Nero.” (Tarrant 1985)
- Reception uncertain: no external evidence for performance of Senecan tragedy or otherwise. First century AD tragedy: possibility of full-scale productions in theatres
 - in imperial times, theatres could be used for all sorts of entertainment (e.g mime and pantomime)
 - Tragedies could be private productions; possibility they were designed for reading; possibility designed for recitation

- > several possibilities in reception of Senecan tragedy: trend towards assuming public or private performance (e.g. small three-sided stage raised stage with spectators on all three sides, small chorus of 3: so Marshall)
- development of tragedy over centuries (physical changes in theatrical setting; changes in stagecraft e.g. chorus no longer continually on stage)
- alleged beginnings of Latin literature in September 240 BCE (unknown scripted Latin play(s) at the *Ludi Romani*, adapted from Greek originals by Livius Andronicus). Livius Andronicus' tragic titles: e.g. *Achilles*, *Aegisthus*, *Tereus*
- relationship to Athenian tragedy (not sole/specific model); also non-dramatic intertexts (e.g. Vergil's *Aeneid*; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*); relationship to prior Roman tragedy
- Of hundreds of Republican tragedies, only fragments extant: approx. 1,700 lines left of tragedies by Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, Pacuvius and Accius plus 260 lines of uncertain attribution, probably by these playwrights.

B) the *Thyestes*

- plot: two warring brothers (king) Atreus and (exile) Thyestes; Atreus feigns reconciliation > kills his nephews and serves them up as food to their father; reveals trick
 - previous plays on *Thyestes* e.g. by Sophocles, Ennius, Varius Rufus (29BC)
 - Backdrop: House of Atreus. Grandfather = Tantalus (slaughtered and served up son Pelops to gods > tortured in underworld)
- 2) “The little boy was run through with a sword ... Tantalus, you carved him up, to serve as a feast for the visiting gods. Eternal hunger follows as reward for such a meal; eternal thirst, too” (*Thy.* 144-50)
- Tantalus' son Pelops: cheated in chariot race, killing Oenomaus to get bride Hippodamia

3) “the broken chariot, spoils of the Myrtoan Sea; the wheels hang down from the pole that deceived the king” (*Thy.* 660-1, of Pelops' cheating)

- Atreus and Pelops contested kingship. Possession of Ram with the Golden Fleece > kingship. Thyestes had seduced Atreus' wife to get ram (hence Atreus unsure whether he is the true father of Agamemnon and Menelaus). Atreus had exiled brother but out for revenge

- Mythical future: Thyestes fathers son (Aegisthus) by daughter Pelopia and son kills Atreus. Aegisthus later aids killing of Agamemnon and is killed by Orestes

- impact of past on present= important

- Power of heredity (Thyestes greedy and hungry for food/Atreus hungry for vengeance/power); cyclic crime but also getting worse

4) “Spread out your madness through the house. Make them resemble you, make them hate, make them thirst to drink their own blood” (*Thy.* 100-2, Fury to Tantalus)

5) “The wine slips away from my very lips” (Atreus, *Thy.* 987: cf. Tantalus)

6) “We should both already have been with Tantalus” (*Thy.* 1011-12, Thyestes of himself and brother)

7) “Look to Tantalus and Pelops: my actions must be made to fit their model” (*Thy.* 242-3, Atreus)

8) “The rage that burns my heart needs to become more savage. I want to be filled with greater horror” (*Thy.* 252-3, Atreus)

9) “none will be enough” (*Thy.* 255, Atreus)

10) “In *Thyestes* the Tantalid images of hunger, thirst, eating, drinking, emptiness, fullness, banqueting, absence of satiety and limits so interlace the dramatic action that Atreus' crime against Thyestes is seen as consequence and reenactment of Tantalus' original sin.” (Boyle, 12)

Propositions)

- excess and wish to outdo

11) “The rage that burns my heart needs to become more savage. I want to be filled with greater horror” (*Thy.* 252-4, Atreus)

12) “Let every crime participate, and let the sword be drawn by each in turn. Let anger know no limit, no shame, while darkening passion whips their hearts, Long live the father's fury, and let eternal sin enter the hearts of his offspring. Let nobody have the time to hate a bygone sin. Let new ones always rise, with more than one in every one, and let crime grow” (*Thy.* 25–32, Fury)

C) Seneca and Stoicism

- Stoic Ethics: people born with corrupt understanding but each should strive, as *proficiens*, to be a sage. Reason not passions/emotions (to which sage immune: *apatheia*, “equanimity”); sage immune to misfortune; virtue sufficient for happiness. Goal was happiness = “living in agreement with nature” i.e. (in one sense) living in agreement with the ability to reason

- Stoic physics: linked and intelligent cosmos, pervaded by *pneuma* (= reason/ intelligence/ fate/ fortune/ god/ nature). Everything interconnected and has reverberations. *Sympatheia*.

- Ethical reading?

13) “Since Seneca’s main purpose is to dramatize positive and negative exempla of a philosophy in which Virtue and Vice are absolutely opposed, the dramas are full of moral extremes.” (Pratt)

14) “[the young Tantalus] dies like a Stoic, self-secure, making no appeal, falling upon Atreus in lifeless condemnation (720-25)” (Pratt; a positive model)

15) “He [Thyestes] is a *proficiens* who does not reach the goal of rationality.” (Pratt)

- Thyestes mouths Stoic words but no will to act; later surrenders to misfortunes, unlike a sage

- If Atreus negative example, why show victory? Lure of dark side for spectators?

16) “Atreus’ acts are shown so horribly because his passion is horrible. They are shown so horribly so that the hearer will feel horror and thus aversion to such nonhuman behaviour.” (Pratt)

17) “The moral certainties which Seneca seems to show in much of his work begin to crack ...the *other* world, the one of passions, blood, revenge, hatred, deceit, and darkness, has its appeal, (Schiesaro 254)

18) “Ultimately, Seneca tragicus takes on genre-specific presuppositions which are separate and distinct from those of the prose works.” (Ker 28)

- Stoic physics: exploited in imagery and action (cf. Rosenmeyer)

- Everything interconnected > crime causes disruption in universe: see e.g. flight of sun in *Thyestes*

- Not stressing order: “a kind of rogue Stoicism” (Rosenmeyer); in Seneca's plays as a result of *sympatheia*, universe is in peril. Horror of Atreus' deed magnified

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