

Atreus and Thyestes: Icons of Misrule

Accius' *Atreus*, Seneca says (*De ira* 1.20.4), is what you would expect from a play written in the time of Sulla; Lucius Varius Rufus' *Thyestes* was performed at Augustus' triple triumph after the Battle of Actium; Seneca's *Thyestes* evokes Nero in its depiction of the tyrant Atreus. Scholars of Roman tragedy have analyzed the popularity of the myth of Atreus and Thyestes for Roman tragic plots in terms of Roman politics: a story of homicidal brothers struggling for supremacy within a single kingdom was bound to play well in Rome, and the myth's apparently inbuilt hostility to tyranny made it a natural choice for playwrights inclined to subtle protest against the rule of strongmen (Bishop, Davis, Erasmo, Tarrant).

While these scholars all mention the Greek antecedents for tragedies on the myth of Atreus and Thyestes, no one has suggested a political explanation for the myth's popularity in fifth- and fourth-century Greek tragedy: Sophocles, Euripides, Agathon, Apollodorus, Chaeremon, Cleophon, Carcinus, Diogenes of Sinope, and Theodectes all wrote an *Atreus* or (more often) a *Thyestes*; Sophocles wrote at least one of each. If not political subtext, then what prompted the popularity of this myth in the Greek world? Xanthakis-Karamanos, following Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453a11), suggests that the fourth century saw tragic plots return repeatedly to the same few families, such as those of Oedipus and Thyestes, both because the stories made for good theater and because tragic playwrights were attempting to outdo their predecessors formally and stylistically rather than by attempting new or different plots. This explanation seems somewhat circular, however, as well as tinged with a hint of wistfulness over the "decline" of tragedy in the fourth century.

This paper will suggest that the Atreus and Thyestes myth was already popular in fifth- and fourth-century tragedy for similar reasons that it remained popular into the Roman period: it

allowed playwrights an opportunity to tap into the political sentiments of their audiences, if they so chose, while also allowing them to disavow any overt political ideology, if need be. The myth could be presented in such a way as to play up the tyrannical character of Atreus, and to emphasize Thyestes' victim status, as Accius' *Atreus* seems to have done; this might have gone over well in democratic *poleis*, and this may be why so many more *Thyestes*-plays are recorded than *Atreus*-plays. At the same time, there is anecdotal evidence of some version of this story being staged for the tyrant Alexander of Pherae: the actor Theodorus supposedly played Atreus' wife Aerope so movingly that Alexander burst into tears (Aelian *VH* 14.40). We might think of Varius Rufus' *Thyestes* being performed for Augustus, which, one imagines, must have presented Atreus as more of an avenging hero (Erasmio). It may be telling that Sophocles wrote both an *Atreus* and a *Thyestes*: at the start of the Greek tragic tradition for this myth, in the midst of the democratic Athenian *polis*, the master tragedian found he could tell both sides of the story.

Bibliography

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