

NOTES ET DISCUSSIONS

Innuendo and Incrimination in *Thyestes*, 314-316

Résumé. — Analyse des vers 314-316, autour du sens précis de *illic* (v. 316). Trois interprétations du texte de Sénèque sont possibles. D'abord, *illic* pourrait renvoyer aux enfants d'Atrée, celui-ci mettant en doute leur légitimité, car il soupçonne que sa propre femme a commis l'adultère avec son frère Thyeste. Ensuite, *illic* pourrait renvoyer à Thyeste, dont Atrée pressent qu'il est, tout autant que lui-même, susceptible de perpétrer des crimes sauvages et contre nature, étant donné qu'ils descendent l'un comme l'autre du traître Pélops et de l'infanticide Tantale. Enfin, *illic* pourrait renvoyer au ciel proprement dit et aux divinités impliquées dans le cannibalisme. En dernière analyse, les trois lectures sont également possibles et pertinentes, ce qui est met en lumière la paranoïa d'Atrée.

Lines 314-316 of Seneca's *Thyestes* lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, all of which will help the reader obtain a clearer understanding of the protagonist Atreus. Atreus the king of Argos has divulged to his attendant, the *Satelles*, his plan to lure his despised brother Thyestes back to Argos and his intention to slaughter his brother's children. The attendant offers a series of objections, whereupon Atreus, without any transition, remarks:

[...] *istud quod uocas saeuum asperum
agique dure credis et nimium impie,
fortasse et illic agitur.* (*Thyestes*, 314-316.¹)

That which you call savage, fierce,
and believe to be done harshly and with excessive impiety
is perhaps going on even *there*.

The crucial question concerns the precise meaning of this *illic*. Atreus had just been speaking about his own children; he explained that he could not possibly corrupt them or teach them bad habits, for the simple reason that they were born already corrupt (*mali*, line 313). In short, evil is transmitted in their genes. In that case, the above lines might well imply that what the *Satelles* had considered extreme and unnatural behavior was natural to these degenerate children and was suitable to their character. Rather than commencing life with a *tabula rasa*, they

1. In L. Annaei Senecae, *Tragoediae*, ed. Otto ZWIERLEIN (Oxford, 1986), p. 306.

have begun with a *tabula contaminata*. For, according to Atreus, they were born depraved—a disturbing assumption.

Yet this is not so far-fetched a conception as at first it might appear. Time and again, Atreus pauses in the play to wonder about the nativity of these offspring. He believes that his own wife was seduced by his brother Thyestes, and thus questions the legitimacy of his own children, Agamemnon and Menelaus.² He had in fact, decided to send both of them on a mission as ambassadors to Thyestes. Remarkably, the determined Atreus wavers three times in the space of seventeen lines (317-333) about whether or not to inform his sons of his deadly plot before it is fulfilled. He fears that if they be Thyestes' offspring, they will somehow naturally betray Atreus and instinctively protect their true father. Hence they are capable of allegiance to Thyestes and of hostility to himself. The very savage deeds Atreus plans to perpetrate against Thyestes are deeds the children could be devising against himself.

The second and more common reading of *illic*—the one suggested in a note in the Loeb edition of the plays—posits that *illic* refers to Thyestes.³ That is, Atreus, with some justifiable dread, suspects that Thyestes is as capable as Atreus is of savage and unnatural crimes. And why not? They descend from Pelops the betrayer and from Tantalus the filicide. A number of times in the play, Atreus makes quite clear his suspicion that Thyestes might well be planning savage crimes against him.⁴ By such reasoning, Atreus justifies his own rashness, haste, and vengeance.

But we would like to propose a third alternative, one equally plausible in the context of this play. *Illic* in this reading could refer to heaven itself and the deities. Atreus has just mentioned impiety; with a rough and sarcastic innuendo, he bluntly hints at the fact that the gods themselves are no strangers to such plans and to such deeds as the murder of children and the cannibal feast. This is bitterly true, since Tantalus, Jupiter's own son, had murdered Pelops and had duped the gods into partaking of a sordid cannibal banquet which they found so repulsive that they awarded Tantalus one of the most painful punishments in the Underworld. Furthermore, one need merely remember the cannibalistic tendencies of Saturn⁵ and that other cannibal feast instituted by Procne and mentioned in

2. Consult lines 240, 327-330, 1098-1099, 1101-1102, 1104-1110.

3. Frank Justus MILLER's note to line 316 reads "By Thyestes against Atreus" (in *Seneca's Tragedies* [Cambridge, Mass. - London, 1961], 2.118).

4. *Vid.* lines 200-204, 270-271, 289, 1104-1110. Ironically, Thyestes only exacerbates Atreus' fears and imaginings when he unwittingly tells him "*sed fateor, Atreu, fateor, admisi omnia / quae credidisti*" (lines 513-514). Paolo MANTOVANELLI, in *La metafora del 'Tieste'* (Verona, 1984), p. 16, proposes that lines 314-316 indicate that Thyestes and his sons are also planning such a crime against Atreus. Giancotti believes that *illic* refers to Thyestes (Seneca, *Tieste*, ed. FRANCESCO GIANCOTTI, 2 vols. [Torino, 1988] 1.315; Tarrant considers that it refers to Thyestes and his children (*Seneca's Thyestes*, ed. R. J. TARRANT [Atlanta, 1985], p. 135).

5. One of the most powerful paintings in Western art is Goya's depiction of "Saturn devouring his own children" (1820-1822).

this Senecan play⁶ to know that both gods and men alike are only too shamefully familiar with this loathsome species of crime.

In the final analysis, we would like to suggest that here, to some extent, all three of these readings are possible, pertinent, and relevant. Throughout the play, Atreus is portrayed as being in a literal fever of vengeful frenzy. He can hardly sit still, and his mind flashes from deed to deed and idea to idea with a kind of lurching lunacy:

—He will deploy his children overtly in his plots;

—he cannot trust them or even verify their nativity and identity.

—He must strike before the savage Thyestes does the same;

—he considers Thyestes as naive and easy dupe to his own malevolent plans.

—He will follow in the footsteps of previous criminals (Tantalus, Procne);

—he will outdo them all.⁷

—He is indifferent to and heedless of the gods;

—he will catapult himself on high into a species of godhood of his own devising.⁸

Atreus feverishly oscillates amongst all of these positions again and again throughout the drama. And, to be sure, this insanity is the very disease both the Fury and Tantalus have deliberately infected him with at the outset of the play. Of course, the disease that he has caught is Tantalus's disease—he is doomed forever agitatedly to shift from one goal to another—perpetually teased and tantalized, perpetually condemned to being insatiable, uncertain, and unfulfilled.

In addition to his furor, Atreus reveals another very important trait. In Accius' drama, the *Atreus*, one memorable line that has come down to us is

Oderint, dum metuant.

Let them hate, so long as they fear.

It is the maxim, needless to say, of a cruel and Machiavellian tyrant. Seneca was fascinated by this line, quoting it no less than three times in his prose writings,⁹ and discussing it at some length in two of these passages. He found it "odious" in and of itself, worthy in its callous ruthlessness of a Sulla. And we should remember that his own Atreus in the *Thyestes* makes similar cruel remarks.

6. Philomela, Procne, and their impious "Thracian" deeds are referred to in lines 56, 272-277.

7. See lines 194, 242, 267-280, 885-888, 1096-1097.

8. Consult lines 217-218, 885-888.

9. *De Ira* 1.20.4; *De Clem.* 1.12.4; and 2.2.2.

*Sanctitas pietas fides
priuata bona sunt; qua iuuat reges eant.* (217-218.)

Sanctity, piety, loyalty are the goods of the common man; let kings go where they will.

*Maximum hoc regni bonum est,
quod facta domini cogitur populus sui
tam ferre quam laudare.* (205-207.)

This is the greatest advantage of royalty—the people are forced to endure and to praise the deeds of their master.

Seneca's irony is that the viciousness of a cruel lord often redounds upon himself. As Seneca remarks in his prose:

*Multis timendi attulit causas timeri posse.*¹⁰

Many a man who inspires fear is fearful himself.

This is patently the case with Atreus the king in this drama; his hatred and craze for violence and vengeance has come home to roost—and he has himself become a fearful paranoid. In short, Atreus in this drama comes to suspect dangers from almost every source, amply justifying our interpretation that numerous implied enemies are intended by the “*illic*” of line 316.

Thus does Seneca present us with a full-dress portrait in this play of an incredibly vicious ruler who is simultaneously tortured by paranoia and dementia. That, very simply, is his character. And in Seneca's hands, a very powerful character he is indeed—one of the most memorable villains in all the annals of world literature.

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10. Ep. 14.10.