

# Comparison: emperors Nero and Trajan essay



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A

Comparison of Madness:

The

Emperor Nero and the Character of Atreus

Introduction

It is certain that the characterization by

Seneca of Atreus in his tragedy entitled the Thyestes is influenced by Nero

and the close relationship Seneca had with the emperor. The works of

Seneca were often influenced by

his personal life rather than any connection with a mythological

foundation. Seneca's epic tragedy,

Thyestes is perhaps the best example of this as Seneca's purging of his

personal life through his literary works.

This paper shall examine the tragedy of Thyestes in relation to

Seneca's personal life, with an emphasis on how the character of Atreus is a

representation of the emperor Nero.

Although frequently categorized among the

Roman writers, Seneca was from the provinces in Spain and journeyed to Rome in

a later part of his life. Seneca became

a writer and politician, and was banished from Rome by an angry Emperor

Claudius. Eventually, the Lady

Agrippina asked Seneca to return to Rome to become the young Neros childhood

tutor. Because of his favored petition

with Nero, Seneca became one of the most trusted advisors of the young emperor.

However, Seneca often found himself in the

position of watchdog, where he forced his own perceptions onto Nero in order

to ensure that the young emperor would not destroy either himself or the Roman

Empire through misguided behaviors. Yet

Seneca was unable to avoid some of the more pressing plots, and historians theorize

that he was involved in helping murder the emperors mother, the Lady

Agrippina. Seneca was finally unable to

deal with Neros obsessions and mood swings and 62 CE. he left the city of

Rome. Three years later, Seneca was

accused of taking part in a plot against Nero and he willingly committed

suicide to stave off the accusations.

Eight of Senecas works have survived the

ages, and these pieces draw heavily on both the Greek and the Roman

traditions. Foremost among Senecas

works are his tragedies, which draw upon the Greek mythologies but also promote

the rich Roman literary tradition.

Instead of being designed for public performances, these tragedies

appear to be more along the lines of private moments of catharsis.

Most personal, and certainly the most

gruesome, of these plays is the tragedy of Thyestes. The play has been considered an epic study

in madness, where the doomed character of Atreus is similar in almost every

respect to that of Nero. Through the

actions of Atreus, it is apparent that Seneca is telling the readers about the internal struggles of Nero. It can be

seen through his writing that Seneca desperately loved Nero yet was powerless

to stop his eventual fall and destruction.

### The Character of Atreus

The character of Atreus was, in the Greek tradition, the son of Pelops and Hippodamia.

Atreus was also the father of the Greek king Agamemnon. The myth of Atreus had that character enter

into a blood feud with his brother Thyestes, eventually having Atreus slip so far into a vengeful madness that he served a banquet to Thyestes of his own children.

Seneca was truthful to this original myth

in almost every respect, yet he drew out the agony of Thyestes and the madness

of Atreus in new ways. The prologue to

the play has the ghost of Tantalus taunted from Hell by a Fury. Tantalus, the character of a myth separate

from that of Thyestes but the grandfather to both Thyestes and Atreus, has long

been tormented in Hell though the constant offering of food that he can never

touch. The Fury warns Tantalus that his

grandsons are in need of guidance, as they appear fated to destroy the other,

and that the Fury might need to intervene to prevent the slaughter of the good

man Thyestes. Tantalus warns the Fury

that killing either man would be sinful and that the Fury should instead concentrate on keeping the alters clean.

The feud between Atreus and Thyestes begins

with the supposed rape of Atreus wife by Thyestes and the subsequent theft of

the Golden Fleece. Atreus is the king

of the island state Argos, the land where the hero Jason returned with the

Golden Fleece after his quest was completed, Atreus feels that the loss of the

Golden Fleece is a direct blow to his honor and abilities as king.

Atreus is not so upset about the fact that

his brother raped his wife Aerope, as he is concerned over the parentage of his

children. The two sons that were born

could have been fathered by either man, although there are strong hints that

Thyestes is the rightful father. To

test if the two male children, Agamemnon and Menelaus, were his, Atreus decided

to pit them in the fight against Thyestes.

He believes that if the two children were fathered by his brother, they

would not be able to raise a hand in violence against Thyestes in what Atreus considered rightful punishment. And in

an additional display of madness, Atreus determined that the best means of punishing his brother was to have Thyestes tear and eat of the flesh of his own

children.

The treatment of the people of Argos is

another indication that Atreus is insane.

He forces himself on his people, and makes them support his actions

regardless of consequence. His citizens

are terrified of their king, and the minister frequently advises Atreus that

his course of rule is not the way to govern a people. The minister warns that the kingdom will fall when there is

neither shame nor law nor trust nor piety.

Despite the council of his minister, Atreus

determines that the only way to properly punish his brother is to have him eat

his children in the space of a normal banquet.

Atreus states, in words that clearly indicate his madness:

“ My spirit rouses, as that of a

sick man who drags himself from his bed to go and vomit. I must dare something

atrocious, spectacular, so bloody, and altogether beastly that my own brother

will be driven to envy, even as he suffers its dire effects. His proud spirit will break, as mine will

heal to see it. The gory pudding stands on the banquet table. We must serve

each other and ourselves.”

(Slavitt: 68)

Atreus then lures his brother to the island

kingdom with the promise of allowing him to share in his throne, and then

butchers his three sons in a sacrifice.

After killing these children and preparing them as if for a feast,

Thyestes eats of his childrens flesh and enjoys the dish until a messenger

arrives and tells him what has been done to his children. Wanting proof,

Thyestes is shown his

childrens head and hands and begs Atreus for a burial, but Atreus laughs and

turns his brother away.

Comparisons Between The Myth and the Reality

The tragedy of Thyestes is truly bitter,

more because the horrific themes found within the story are founded upon

Senecas own relationship with Nero than due to the nature of the myth.

Taken apart from the context of Seneca and

Nero, the myth is a teaching fable that indicates that animosity between

brothers will always result in destruction.

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The significance of cooking and eating the children represents the perversion of: a sacred rite so degenerate that it terrifies the gods is the ultimate desecration of religion.” (Pratt: 102)

Beyond this, however, there is no true indication of madness, rather simply the presence of undying hatred and the theme of revenge.

Yet in Seneca's retelling, the character of Atreus takes on a dimension of insanity.

Worse, it can be seen that his insanity does not grow and consume him, but rather springs fully formed from the mind of the crazed king. (Tarrant: 81)

In respect to Nero, this clearly indicates the influence of that mad emperor in the character of Atreus. The histories by Suetonius chronicle this in

Chapters XXVII-XXIX. The historian describes how, after very little preamble, the madness of Nero springs fully formed from his being. Among the worst of what Nero was wont to do included:

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Nero castrated the boy Sporus and

actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his house attended

by a great throng, and treated him as his wife (Warmington: 144)

And

later:

Nero

so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts

of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust,

was dispatched by his freed man Doryphorus; for he was even married to this man

in the same way that he himself had married Sporus, going so far as to imitate

the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered. (Ibid:

144-145)

When

compared to the character of Atreus, there is little doubt that the madness in Nero was not reflected in Seneca's works.

Yet this is perhaps most evident in terms of particular plots devised by Nero against those of his own family.

It is not by accident that Seneca chose to parallel Nero against a mythological figure that worked from within to destroy his own family. Seneca was still residing under Nero's

command when Nero determined that the Lady Agrippina was trying to kill him. (There is some evidence for this,

as the lady was no doubt aware of her son's uncertain mental qualities, but she

is presumed to just wait until after Nero's certain eventual and dire end..) (Scarre: 48)

Although Suetonius suggests in his histories that Nero had incestuous relations with his mother, Nero determined that he needed to kill his own

mother in order to save himself from her manipulations. Seneca, a great friend of the lady, was

unwilling to join in the plot and was eventually coerced into aiding in her death.

This

scene is mirrored in Thyestes, where Seneca laments the unpunished deaths of

Thyestes children. Seneca, speaking

through his writings, purges his feelings in the following passage:

At home in Rome, someone has his own

half-brother poisoned at dinner. Everyone sees but says nothing and does nothing. Then he murders his own

mother, and nothing happens, nothing at all. The sun continues to rise in the east and travel its usual course across a clear baby-blue heaven, but how? Is there no justice? Are there no gods to keep such foulness away from the world?" (Tarrant: 93)

While

in his play, Senecas gods rise up to deliver punishment both on Atreus and his

child Agamemnon, it is plain that Seneca saw no such redemption or retribution

occurring within his own life. Nero was

allowed to run free, and according to Suetonius he was a vicious and abusive emperor who worked to destroy his own people through the expressions of his

madness. This is quite possibly why

Seneca was involved in the scheme to assassinate the emperor three years after

he was banished from the capital.

The

character of the unnamed minister in Thyestes is yet another strong example

of Senecas personal connections with the play. This minister acts as the singular voice of reason in the

tragedy. Privy to all of Atreus plots,

the minister is able to bear witness to both the insanity of his actions and

the effects that Atreus actions have on the people of his kingdom. The unnamed minister is thus the voice of

reason for the entire kingdom. Unable

to hold any actual power, the minister is aware that the only way to provide help for the country was to pull the king out of his madness.

From

the futile efforts of the minister, it can be seen that Seneca was at a loss when dealing with Nero. Seneca

apparently remained in his position as a trusted adviser to the mad emperor for

as long as he could, providing what wisdom he could interject whenever possible. It was only after the emperor

had lost all patience with Seneca that the politician and writer was once more

banished.

However,

from the histories, it appears that Seneca was not willing to let himself go quietly into that good night. Unlike

the unnamed minister from the play, Seneca is rumored to have been involved in

a plot designed to kill Nero. Whether

or not this is factual, Seneca was ordered to commit suicide in 65 C. E., only three years after Nero had him banished from Rome. Seneca obliged, killing himself with both a knife and poison.

## Conclusion

This

paper has demonstrated that the characterization of Atreus in Seneca's tragedy

entitled 'Thyestes' is influenced by the close relationship Seneca had with the

Emperor Nero. Atreus is cast as a

madman, an individual who sought to destroy his brother through the worst of

punishments. Atreus also worked to make

the people of his kingdom conform to his whims despite the wise council of his

minister.

The

parallels that can be made between the character of Atreus and the Emperor Nero

are apparent. Nero allowed his madness

to dictate his actions, as did the character of Atreus. Where Nero murdered his kin out of imagined

sins, so did Atreus. Where Atreus

fought against the words of his minister, so did Nero.

The

cathartic properties of Seneca's writing can be seen more as a purging of

Seneca's anger against the gods' refusal to punish Nero than a play for public performance. The need to express the

futility of the actions that the gods did not take against Nero forced Seneca to press the character of Atreus out of the image of Nero. Here, Seneca can be seen to explore the

relationship between a man who seemed immune from all punishment and the character

of a man who was eventually destroyed by the gods.

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