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MADNESS IN JASPER HEYWOOD'S 1560 VERSION OF
SENECA'S *THYESTES*

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THE ROMAN TRAGEDIAN Seneca is generally, and rightly, considered to have made a profound impact on the dramatists of the English Renaissance. As his work preceded theirs by many centuries (he lived from A.D. 1-65), and as translations of it appeared in England before the major English tragedies, it is interesting to consider how he dealt with important issues which we see as dominant in the English plays. One such issue is that of madness.

Seneca becomes an even more important starting point once we realize that the English translations of his plays can be studied as, in a sense, English works. Of course any translation assumes a somewhat independent status if it is offered as a text which can be read without reference to the original, and the English translations of Seneca are no exception to this rule. (The fact that educated readers like Thomas Kyd or William Shakespeare could and did at times read Seneca in a Latin version does not make the translations unimportant in relation to either these readers or others.) From a literary viewpoint, the style of the translations establishes them as artistic creations rather than perfunctory renderings. And it is an interesting fact that Latin editions of Seneca varied greatly in the variants which they offered, so that a translator often had a genuine choice among alternatives—a choice which, once made, could make a significant difference to the outcome. As well, there is the circumstance that even when two translators tackle an identical text they are likely to present individual traits, whether rightly or wrongly. And at times a translator will offer something wholly his own, as Jasper Heywood did when he added a new final scene to *Thyestes*.

Thyestes was amongst the first plays to be translated, and was published in 1560. Most readers of Seneca's plays agree that it is one of his best, and students of Seneca's influence on the dramatists of the English Renaissance usually see it as a play which made a remarkably potent

impact. As it is also one in which madness is a conspicuous element, it needs to be considered by all who admit the importance of that issue in Renaissance drama. It so happens that *Thyestes* is at present also the only Elizabethan translation of which there is a modern, extensively annotated edition,¹ which makes detailed discussion of any of the other plays more difficult, although they are all important and interesting and appeared on an equal footing with *Thyestes* in Thomas Newton's collection of the translations under the title *Seneca His Ten Tragedies, Translated in English*, published in 1581.

The Seneca-Heywood *Thyestes* shows an intense preoccupation with what goes on within the mind, but it is not as though madness is seen as purely self-generated. We will understand its occurrence better if we first orientate ourselves concerning events as they are given in the play, as well as those which are implied as a background to its plot.

The play centers primarily on two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes. They are the grandsons of Tantalus, who when still alive committed a crime fairly similar to that perpetrated by Atreus in *Thyestes*: He served up the flesh of his son Pelops to the gods. Pelops had banished Atreus and Thyestes for the murder of their half-brother. Upon the death of Pelops, Atreus returned and took possession of his father's throne. However, Thyestes stole Atreus' wife and a ram which was supposed to give to its owner power over the kingdom. Although Atreus (in Heywood's version, 2.62) banished Thyestes, and although we can see in act 3 that Thyestes is not at all keen to reign, Atreus thinks up a plot of revenge which is designed to exceed the harm which he feels Thyestes has done to him, in order to pre-empt an imagined strike against him by Thyestes, and thoroughly to afflict him with suffering. Hence, unbeknownst to Thyestes, he gives him the flesh of his own sons to eat.

The action of *Thyestes* commences just before Atreus thinks up his plan, and we learn of the background to it only as the play proceeds and even then not always directly. But there certainly is a connection between Atreus' plot and that of Tantalus, and Atreus is in part motivated by Thyestes' theft of his wife and the ram. While Atreus does not seem aware of the fact, his action appears to be in part inspired by that of Tantalus, whose ghost, accompanied by the fury Megaera, hovers over the beginning of the play (somewhat like that of Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedy*, or like that of Hamlet's father). And Atreus himself makes a great deal of the misdeeds, real or supposed, of his brother. Ultimately, however, although both the ghost of Tantalus and the

¹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Thyestes*, trans. Jasper Heywood (1560), ed. Joost Daalder (New York: Norton, 1982). All quotations are from this edition. The Introduction considers the impact of *Thyestes* on English Renaissance drama at length, but not in relation to madness and the unconscious.

genuine misdeeds of Thyestes are important to the play, its interest lies more in the workings of Atreus' mind than in these external matters.

In fact, Thyestes' misdeeds are little more than an excuse for Atreus' thirst for revenge. His sense of injuries committed and supposed to come is quite in excess of what reality would lead a sane mind to perceive. Nor could we describe him as conditioned by a criminal milieu. But the play does suggest that, in a rather mysterious way, the spirit of his grandfather enters into his mind, although it is clear that that could not happen if his mind was not very ready, however unconsciously, to receive such an influence. We are shown a mind predisposed to insanity, but in part steered by a vigorous external influence which is the more pernicious because it is not perceived. It would be wrong to say that Tantalus' ghost simply symbolizes what occurs within Atreus' mind, for the ghost has an existence of its own. But inasmuch as the ghost's influence is one of which Atreus is not aware it appears as though Seneca sees it as operating through what we would now usually call the unconscious. And this influence is more potent than anything Thyestes does.

When we first see Tantalus' ghost, at the beginning of the play, it shows an obvious reluctance to be disturbed:

What fury fell enforceth me to flee th' unhappy seat,
That gape and gasp with greedy jaw the fleeing food to eat?
(1.1-2)

There appears to be an ethical dimension to this distaste. The fury is Megaera, an avenging deity that seeks to spur on the ghost towards doing evil. But she does not meet with much positive response from Tantalus' ghost:

To suffer pains it seemeth well my part,
Not woes to work.
(1.87-88)

But evil is in the nature of the ghost, as Megaera points out:

Full well hath felt the coming in of thee
This house, and all with wicked touch of thee begun to quake.
(1.102-103)

The ghost is quite unlike that of Hamlet's father, which is by nature good and keen to stir Hamlet towards revenge. This ghost is intrinsically evil, even if now it does not seek "woes to work." And it can be manipulated, in a way that the ghost in Hamlet need not be, to do evil at the behest of a supernatural world in which furies are an active force. Yet, although this ghost, unlike that in Hamlet, works through the

unconscious, both ghosts are potent forces and essential to the action. Both, also, are presumably responsible, or at least in part, for the madness which characterizes the revenger.

But a major difference with *Hamlet* is that here we have a fury, an avenging deity, which is much more bloodthirsty than the ghost of Hamlet's father. While Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, fully recognizes the need for revenge, there is no force, either in the supernatural or in the natural world, that seeks revenge with such enthusiasm as this fury. It seems as though Seneca is prepared to acknowledge the existence of revengeful forces, at both levels, to an extent that Shakespeare is not. In both plays, the revengers do not escape madness, but Atreus—no doubt in part under the influence of the supernatural world—is more insane than Hamlet. We can sympathize with Hamlet's quest for revenge to a degree that we cannot with Atreus', whose revenge seems inherently unreasonable even as far as its supernatural component is concerned.

Megaera is vehement about what she wants to happen, and specific. Her speeches, in act 1, may well give us the feeling that Atreus will be totally subject to the impact of Tantalus' spirit upon him, and at the end of the play it perhaps remains possible to argue that ultimately what we have witnessed is merely the operation of the supernatural. But the creative arrangement and presentation of events must be taken into account. Act 2 focuses strongly on the way Atreus' mind works while we forget about the fury and the ghost of Tantalus, so it seems difficult to believe that the play is not concerned with psychology rather than the impact of the supernatural on human affairs. Atreus at once accuses himself of cowardice, and his determination at long last to *do* something about his wish for revenge appears to be self-propelled rather than motivated by the ghost of Tantalus, which is neither seen nor mentioned. Atreus complains about what he has left undone for so long, and what, above all, should be done:

... some mischief great there must be vent' red now
Both fierce and bloody, such as would my brother rather long
To have been his.

(2.18-20)

What we see here is not just an intense craving for revenge, but, more interestingly and revealingly, an attempt on Atreus' part to locate within Thyestes such feelings as he himself has, and this while he provides no evidence whatever for his belief about his brother. It is not altogether clear why Atreus should do this. It is not necessary to conclude that he is suffering from an unconscious guilt-complex which drives him to blame his brother for something he feels himself but considers he ought not to feel. But it does seem as though the play

unmistakably indicates to us that Atreus confuses fact and fantasy, in the sense that he believes something to be the case—and with absolute conviction—without *knowing* that it is. In act 1 Megaera had said to the ghost of Tantalus:

... the cruel breast strike through and hateful heart
With tumult mad.

(1.85-86)

And an internal mad tumult is exactly what we see now in Atreus. It seems safe to decide, therefore, that the play sees as a primary sign of madness Atreus' tendency to substitute a make-believe reality for that which would be recognized as such by sane people. Furthermore, Atreus no doubt invents things which he imputes to his brother because by doing so he provides himself with what appear to him good reasons for his hostility towards Thyestes. This, too, is part of his insanity, and the more so because he is not conscious of the motivation for his fantasies.

His tendency to heap fantastic abuse on his brother is obsessive, and perhaps the more so because it has no basis in reality. At the very least, it completely exceeds his awareness of the real wrongs which Thyestes committed against him, which are mentioned almost in passing:

My spouse he stale away for lechery,
And reign by stealth.

(1.47-48)

In fact, when we see Thyestes in act 3 there is neither woman nor ram, and presumably Atreus speaks of something which happened in the distant past. Certainly he is more preoccupied with what he imagines Thyestes to be motivated by at the present time (in act 2):

Doth ever he lay down his hateful ire?
Doth ever he the modest mean in time of wealth regard?
Or quiet in adversity? I know his nature hard,
Untractable, that broke may be, but never will it bend.
For which ere he prepare himself or force to fight intend,
Set first on him: lest while I rest he should on me arise.
He will destroy or be destroy'd; in midst the mischief lies,
Prepar'd to him that takes it first.

(2.22-29)

The accusations here fit Atreus' own character better than that of Thyestes. Indeed, they are utterly at variance with the truth: Thyestes later will actually "lay down his hateful ire," or rather his justified distrust of Atreus; he is devoted to the "modest [i.e., moderate] mean" in his frugal but happy life, and to "quiet in adversity." He does not have

the "hard" nature which Atreus imputes to him; nor is there any question of his preparing himself for a fight against Atreus. Atreus' unconscious urges him to believe a distortion of reality so as to justify the plot which he comes to think up; he is not a liar, but someone who believes in his own lies, as his perception of reality is impaired.

We find him mad, not simply because the play proves that his vision is wildly inaccurate, but because he himself—unaware of what drives him—thinks it is correct.

Interestingly, Atreus does appear to realize in one place that he is driven by a force beyond his conscious control. When the idea occurs to him—at first dimly—that he may use Thyestes himself for his revenge, he says:

... a tumbling tumult quakes within by bosoms, lo,
And round it rolls. I moved am, and wot not whereunto.
(2.85-86)

The "tumult" may be that caused by the ghost of Tantalus (cf. 1.86), but the important point is that Atreus is here aware of a force which elsewhere seems to operate through his unconscious. Similarly, his conscious intellect appears to respond to a prompting of the unconscious when he hesitates before he fully commits himself to his murderous plan:

But why, my mind, yet dread'st thou so at last,
And faint'st before thou enterprise?
(2.108-109)

These are moments of comparative mental health. And occasionally his view of reality appears to be accurate enough, as when he decides how his sons are to try and persuade Thyestes to return in order to walk into the trap. They are to tell him

...that home he would from exile come again,
And miseries for kingdom change, and over Argos reign
A king of half.
(2.123-125)

Although Thyestes is not at all keen to give up his physical "miseries" (with which he is more satisfied, he believes, than with power), he does return, presumably because Atreus is correct in thinking that he does not in fact enjoy his exile. And we see nothing, in lines 123-125, of Atreus' habit, so prevalent elsewhere, of imputing to his brother all sorts of villainous motives.

Nevertheless, that *is* Atreus' prevalent tendency, and it perhaps shows itself at its most insane in his belief that his own sons are actually

Thyestes' progeny. Not only is that idea without substance by itself (even though Thyestes stole his wife), but particularly crazy is Atreus' thought that if his children do not co-operate in his plan they are to be judged Thyestes' sons, while, conversely, their participation will prove them his own offspring. Seneca shows impressively that it is such a fantastic misconception which is a sign of insanity, not a breakdown in logic, for Atreus is in his mad way consistent enough. Thus he says initially, before he asks for their co-operation:

... if they him uncle call—
He is their father.
(2.156-157)

In other words, if the sons acknowledge Thyestes as their uncle (which he is), then Atreus will conclude that their reluctance to undertake anything against him proves that Thyestes is in fact their father, not their uncle. And when, with the help of his sons, he has carried out his plan, Atreus explains to Thyestes:

... now even children born to me
I count.
(5.3.130-131)

This is rather oddly put, by Heywood rather than Atreus, but means in effect: "Now I reckon even that children born to me are indeed such—I count them as belonging to me, not you." His madness lies less in his paranoia about the question of offspring as such than in the way he thinks one can settle one's doubts about such matters; for it is, after all, a fact that his brother stole his wife, but it is completely untrue that his sons' willingness to join him against his brother proves anything about their biological origin.

So far, we have examined evidence of Atreus' madness which can perhaps best be described as showing some form of rationalization, i.e., an unconscious wish on his part to find a reason for doing something which the rational, conscious part of his mind does not accept, or would not accept if it knew of it. It is harder to find an explanation for his madness in act 4, where a Messenger relates how Atreus sacrificed Thyestes' sons. The description is of extraordinary power, partly because Atreus' behaviour is so very bizarre. Thus, for example, we are told:

He is himself the priest, and he himself the deadly verse
With prayer dire from fervent mouth doth sing and oft rehearse.
(4.69-70)

Yet more sick and sickening is the picture of his painstaking attempt to determine the future from the entrails of his victims, Thyestes' sons:

From bosoms yet alive outdrawn the trembling bowels shake,
The veins yet breathe, the fearful heart doth yet both pant and quake:
But he the strings doth turn in hand and destinies behold,
And of the guts the signs each one doth view not fully cold.

(4.133-136)

The commonplace reaction here would be one of horror at the thought that Atreus shows no feeling for the children he has just killed—a sense intensified for us by the fact that they appear to be still partly alive. But, while this response is legitimate, the more startling effect is that of Atreus' insanity: the punctilious care with which he uses the bodies for a purpose which to us seems wholly inappropriate, and not just from a moral point of view. We, in contrast to Atreus, realize that his "reading" of the entrails is outrageously abnormal because even from his own perspective it makes no sense: he is not interested in what his victims might reveal to him about things to come, but only in killing them and feeding them to Thyestes.

It is very difficult to decide what Seneca had in mind in presenting to us this extraordinary incident. One is tempted to think that he wished to imply that Atreus is unconsciously horrified by his deed and tries to justify it by turning it into something very different and seemingly more respectable. But although Seneca's intention may well be in this direction, we are not given a specific enough hint to warrant so firm a conclusion. Rather, our sense of Atreus' utter insanity here arises from the fact that there appears to be such a huge discrepancy between his real intention and the conviction with which he does something very different which obviously he feels deserves his utmost attention. Psychologically, then, the main effect is one of a person who appears to believe completely in a task which we know to be quite incongruous from his and our point of view, while yet we do not understand to what his absorption is due. The absence of a clearly implied reason for his conduct makes the picture of Atreus' insanity here the more potent; and it strikes one as convincing because it fits in with the play's general presentation of him as a person who passionately believes in the justice and correctness of his mistaken views and actions. Seneca's picture of insanity seems true universally and eternally, and as such is psychologically persuasive even if we do not quite know what underlies Atreus' study of his victims' entrails, and feel that it does not help us to remember the fury and Tantalus' ghost.

It is interesting and illuminating to pay some attention to the character of Thyestes. In contrast to Atreus, Thyestes is not insane, but he is quite complex and fallible. He is not a model of wise behaviour, but from his

faults we can learn what to avoid, as fellow human beings, while Atreus is too extreme for us to recognize much of ourselves in him—which is not to deny that people like Atreus exist, and that most of us probably at some time or other exhibit some such pathology as his.

Thyestes is like many of us in trying hard to do what is good for him, but finding it difficult to eschew what is not. When we first see him in 3.1, he is human enough to acknowledge that he has missed "The touch of soil where born I was" (3.1.3). But he attempts to persuade himself that the world of court is unreliable, through Atreus' presence and its materialism and power. He tells us that the "mishaps" (3.1.13) of his banishment have been more compatible with happiness, and he argues against his son Phylisthenes who attempts to convince him that his distaste for the courtly life is mistaken.

But Thyestes fails to act on his convictions, and it soon becomes obvious that, although his simple life as a countryman was indeed better for him, his praise of it rests in part on a vain attempt to persuade himself of its superiority, in other words on a rationalization. He does not really know his own urges well, but unlike Atreus he tries to understand himself, and his yielding to Atreus' tempting offer of a regal crown in 3.2 is a sign of weakness rather than mental confusion; it is moreover only the crown which Thyestes accepts, not worldly power. He does display an astonishing naïveté. Although in 3.1 he showed himself properly suspicious of Atreus, he is soon swayed by the latter's presence and a deceitful speech, so that in 3.2.24 he says, "I grant the fault was mine in every part." But the most revealing presentation of Thyestes is offered in 5.2. At this stage he has eaten his sons, unknowingly, and that fact accentuates for us the ironic contrast between his cheerfulness and the reality of which he is unaware. There is, indeed, a touch of pathos in the way he tries to convince himself that he is now happier than when he was banished:

O beaten bosoms, dull'd so long with woe,
Lay down your cares, at length your griefs relent;
Let sorrow pass, and all your dread let go,
And fellow eke of fearful banishment,
Sad poverty.

(5.2.1-5)

Yet Thyestes is, again, rationalizing. Seneca indicates to us that the tendency is a common one, but the difference with Atreus is that Thyestes is capable of changing his rationalizations quite easily. He is as ready now to try and believe that life at court will make him happy as he was in 3.1 that his banishment did so. Furthermore, his changeability implies that an alternative view is never far away, so that he does not run the risk of a seriously and permanently distorted view of reality

like Atreus'. It does not take him long to discover that in fact he is *not* comfortable with his new existence. At first he tries to suppress his doubt:

It is the wont of wight in woeful case
In state of joy to have no confidence.
(5.2.19-20)

But almost immediately he adds:

Why call'st thou me aback, and hind'rest me
This happy day to celebrate? Wherefore
Bidst thou me. sorrow, weep without a cause?
(5.2.23-25)

Repeatedly, throughout his long soliloquy, his unconscious is seen to send him messages which, unlike Atreus, he is not able to ignore. He ends the scene in uncertainty, but we can see that he will not be really surprised—as in fact he is not—when he learns how his brother has deceived him (5.3).

From a psychological point of view, perhaps the one relatively disappointing feature of the Seneca-Heywood *Thyestes* is the attention given to Megaera and Tantalus' ghost. Presumably this is to be seen as providing something like a factual explanation for Atreus' conduct, but in the event there is not a very clear link between that and these supernatural beings. One might even go further, and suggest that *despite* the fury and the ghost what is unexplained about Atreus' motivation can be accepted by us as part of existence, and that what we can understand about the way his mind works is utterly convincing and powerful. In defence of Seneca's use of the infernal powers we can also say that he is entitled to the view that these have an impact upon us, although such an assumption on his part does not seem psychologically necessary.

Some major facts stand out in the play's presentation of madness. It shows us how madness is generated at least in part within the unconscious, which plays havoc with a person like Atreus in a way he does not understand. Madness comes to the fore as a strongly held but fantastically distorted view of reality as perceived by others. Seneca's central contention appears to be that madness occurs when a person loses his ability to see reality factually, and substitutes for that ability a purely subjective, inaccurate view which is prompted by what the unconscious leads one to believe.

As the unconscious is something people can form a concept of at any time in human history, is it impossible to *prove* that Seneca's presentation of it in this play, and his view of it in relation to madness,

influenced English Renaissance dramatists. On the other hand, students of the English Renaissance have probably limited their attention, when studying Seneca at all, too much to the issue of revenge. It is likely that, just as he influenced dramatists like Kyd and Shakespeare in their handling of that much-discussed matter, he contributed to the fascination with the unconscious which not only they, but many others—like John Webster or Thomas Middleton—so persistently display. I hope at the least to have shown how Seneca's presentation of the role of the unconscious in madness is both interesting and perceptive, and what, just like myself, Renaissance dramatists may in this respect have noticed when confronted with *Thyestes* in the form in which it was known to most Elizabethans, namely Jasper Heywood's translation.

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