
‘Artificia mali’ is the revised version of Winter’s (W.) 2011 Heidelberg dissertation. W. investigates how *Thyestes* and *Medea* both present the planning and performance of revenge as the creation of an ‘evil work of art.’ With this analysis of the links between metatheater and crime, W. builds on the work of Boyle (1997), Littlewood (2004), and especially that of Schiesaro (2003). The main strength of this book lies in the detailed close readings of the two plays, as W. attempts to outline the «Machart» that defines *Thyestes* and *Medea*. W. demonstrates how the key themes, paradoxes, and the rhetorical techniques that Seneca employs can reveal the larger structure of the development of revenge within the plays, as well as the artistic principles used to create the play qua play. Despite the richness of the readings given to the two plays, it feels that the book has missed several opportunities for further explication and analysis. For example, given her focus on ‘revenge tragedies’, *Thyestes* and *Medea* are obvious choices, but W. never makes it clear how she differentiates them from Seneca’s other plays. How do *Agamemnon* and *Hercules* not qualify as revenge plays? The dating of Seneca’s plays is notoriously difficult and imprecise, but it is generally agreed that *Medea* was composed before *Thyestes*.1 W. chooses to treat *Thyestes* first, however, and could have improved her overall analysis by considering how the differences between the two may say something about the development of Seneca’s tragic art.

The introduction outlines the state of research on Seneca’s plays and provides a brief overview of revenge in the ancient world. W. also defines how the concept of metadrama can be applied to Seneca’s plays. For W., Senecan metadrama consists primarily in the plays’ self-reflexivity, such as the stage-managing conducted by Atreus and Medea. This self-reflexivity draws attention to the plays’ own status as a work of art. By investigating how the development of revenge mirrors the development of the play, we can discover the specific style («Machart») of the dramas (37). W.’s overall analysis looks at three main points, the focus on the planning of revenge, how this revenge is received and viewed within the plays, and finally how these plays deal with the essential paradox of how the depiction of violence and destruction can produce a work of art (38–39).

Chapter two investigates how Atreus develops his plan for revenge in the second act. W. argues that three themes structure this development and thus structure the play itself. Atreus’s planning is based upon repetition, increase, and paradox. Atreus desires to repeat and surpass past crimes. This leads to *Thyestes* being placed in the paradoxical position of consuming *suos artus* ‘his own limbs’ (277) at the end of the play. As noted above, paradox is a key concept for W.’s analysis. In this chapter, she also notes that Atreus’s planning combines order and madness. Later, she considers the paradoxical links between pleasure and pain in the planning and execution of revenge, as well as the easily reversed concepts of spectacle and spectatorship.

Chapter three focuses on how Medea develops her revenge. W. opens by briefly offering her reason for considering this play in tandem with *Thyestes*. She states that of all of Seneca’s characters, only Medea plots her revenge in an intense manner as Atreus (69). Yet she also notes that there are key differences between the two avengers. Atreus has a clear idea from the start that his revenge must be directed against his brother, and devises his plan comparatively quickly. Medea’s plan develops gradually over the course of the play, and, according to W., is more the product of her subconscious than her reason. Medea also focuses on her position as a mother. W. pays particular attention to the use of *parere*, and how images of giving birth relate to the creation of Medea’s revenge as a work of art (78–97). Thus, although not stressed by W., gender is a key factor differentiating how Atreus and Medea perform their revenge.

W. argues that Medea’s revenge is also characterized by repetition, but unlike Atreus, Medea focuses on her own past (99). Medea’s revenge creates symmetry with the past, specifically redressing her own crimes against her family and that of Pelias (106). This symmetry in part makes Medea’s revenge «kunstreich und künstlich» (109). Paradoxically, Medea’s revenge also focuses on increasing the horrors of the past. Like Atreus, Medea wishes to commit *maiora scelerata ‘greater crimes’* (50), which she accomplishes by murdering four people to make up for two previous deaths, Creon and Creusa atone for the death of Pelias, and her two children for her brother (111–112).

Chapter four considers the role of vision in both plays. W. adopts concepts from gaze theory, particularly the notions of the assaultive gaze and the reactive gaze that have been used with reference to Seneca’s plays, but were first developed to analyze modern horror films.¹ As she notes, the assaultive gaze is active and can primarily be related to Atreus, while the passive, reactive gaze applies to his victim, Thyestes. W. also astutely points out that Thyestes does not play an entirely passive role. By calling on the gods and nature to witness and avenge his suffering, Thyestes at least attempts to take on an active role as a spectacle (141). W. also notes how the messenger’s report of Atreus’s murders incorporates both the reactive and assaultive gazes, first as he witnesses the crimes, then as he describes them to the horrified Chorus (153–56).

Her analysis of vision in *Medea* focuses on the final act. Here as well, active and passive gazes are problematized. Medea wishes to be a spectacle, and for Jason to be her spectator, which would seem to neat distribute passive and active roles. Indeed, for a brief period, Jason seems to have power, as he orders the Corinthians to catch Medea and destroy her along with the palace. Medea is soon able to reverse this apparent power imbalance, however. She forces Jason to look at her and gains pleasure from his pain (149–151).

W. concludes this chapter by briefly considering how the focus on vision in these two plays affects the audience. She argues that the various reactions of the characters provide the «extrafiktionalen Betrachter» with a series of possibilities for how to react to the terrible deeds that have been represented in the play (177).

---

In the end, however, W. denies that any form of self-understanding can be gained by the audience. For W., this fact is demonstrated by Thyestes’s inability to understand the paradox that he has become at the end of the play (178–179).

Chapter five considers the relationship between ‘Böse’ and ‘Kunst’ by investigating four key themes. The first is the connection between delay and revenge that can be found in both plays. Delay functions ambivalently. For example, Atreus is angry for not having immediately carried out his revenge. Yet delay also allows for him to plan his revenge to perfection. Thus, delay is a key component for the «ästhetische Qualität» of revenge (193). The second theme is limit and limitlessness. Both Medea and Atreus wish to go beyond the limits of past crimes. For Medea these two themes are particularly important. As the play’s second and third choral odes point out, the sailing of the Argo represents the first transgression of the geographical limits set down by the gods. Medea’s revenge can also be seen as repayment for these transgressions (195–212). W. then considers the connections between repetition and the creation of something new. Finally, she investigates the role of paradox in Thyestes. By the end of the play, Atreus has turned his brother into a work of art that both transgresses boundaries, and by doing so, draws attention to the very boundaries that have been transgressed. W. also argues that the final paradoxical figure of Thyestes is foreshadowed by Tantalus at the opening of the play.

After a brief conclusion summarizing the book’s main points, W. adds a final chapter («Ausblick») that seeks to develop an «ideengeschichtliche Genealogie der Darstellung des Bösen». W. suggests that Senecan tragedy prefigures later works that focus on the aesthetics of evil, and investigates writers from the 18th century onward, such as the Marquis de Sade, Joseph de Maistre, E.T.A. Hoffman, and Edgar Allen Poe. The possible connections are intriguing, but W. limits herself to describing the aesthetic characteristics of these authors, rather than directly connecting them to Seneca. In fact, mention of Seneca is almost entirely absent from the final chapter, and relegated to footnotes at the start and end (e.g., 282 n.691, 311 n.822). An opportunity is missed to set Seneca’s plays directly into a larger intellectual context, both in terms of their relationship to later anti-Enlightenment and Romantic literature, and possibly how his plays may similarly comment on the rationality of Stoicism in terms of Horkheimer and Adorno’s ‘Dialectic of Enlightenment’.

A deeper problem can be found in the book’s treatment of art and evil. Although there are unquestionable metadramatic elements in these plays, Medea and Atreus do not explicitly refer to their revenge as an *artificium*, as W. points out (38 n.98). ‘Kunst’ and ‘Böse’ have a range of meanings closer to the Latin *ars* and *malum* than the English ‘art’ and ‘evil,’ but more could be done to address this fact. For example, the nurse refers to Medea as a *scelerum artifex* (734). For W., this phrase is key for understanding Medea’s revenge as a work of art (277 n.680). There is, however, an ambiguity inherent in the Latin *artifex*, which is underexplored in this book. Is the Nurse calling Medea an ‘artist’ here? This is only one of the meanings of the Latin word, which can also have more negative connotations such as ‘contriver (of something artificial)’ (*OLD* 6.b), and ‘perpetrator’ (*OLD* 6.c). This ambiguity can be seen in some of the English translations of the
Nurse’s phrase. Fitch renders it as «artificer of crimes». Wilson gives «criminal mastermind». In contrast, Boyle’s recent translation refers to Medea as an «artist of crime». A comparison with other uses of this phrase in Seneca’s plays seems to move away from the concept of ‘artist’. Hippolytus ends his misogynistic rant calling women in general scelerum artifex (Pha. 559). Andromache addresses Ulysses, o machinator fraudis et scelerum artifex (Tro. 750). In contrast, although not noted by W., in his philosophy Seneca uses artifex to mean an ‘artist’ or ‘maker’ to describe the divine creator and the wise man (e.g., Prov. 5.9, Ep. 53.11).

The relationship between revenge and evil or crime that W. sets up also deserves further exploration. Although W. prefers to avoid philosophical questions in her analysis (16–20), by making this connection she appears to align herself with a Socratic rejection of retaliation. In contrast, ‘helping friends and harming enemies’ was a key maxim that defined traditional morals in the ancient world. Augustus may have coopted the ideal of revenge by commissioning Varius to write his Thyestes. Even Seneca is not willing to reject retaliation entirely; one can properly punish if guided by reason (see De ira 1.19.2).

In sum, while W. presents a generally convincing case for reading the revenge of Atreus and Medea as evil works of art, more could have been done to draw out the ambiguities inherent in the key concepts she investigates. The exclusive focus on Thyestes and Medea also limits the effectiveness of W.’s interpretations. Still, by investigating revenge and crime as aesthetic practices in two of Seneca’s plays, W. has opened the door for broader considerations which include how this connection may or may not be at work in his other plays, how it may have resonated in Seneca’s Rome, as well as how specifically Senecan drama may be seen as a forerunner of modern aesthetic movements.

Middlebury

Christopher Star

---