

## A Piece of Humble Pie: The Process of Sacrifice in Seneca's *Thyestes*

What is sacrifice? For some, such as Girard and Burkert, sacrifice comes down to a single moment whether it be killing or eating, sacrifice fulfills a specific purpose. Others, like Smith, use a comparative model to break down the universality of sacrifice that has dominated scholarship about sacrifice for many decades. However, I align my view of sacrifice with Kathryn McClymond, who questions not what sacrifice is, but what makes an event sacrificial (25). McClymond urges readers to understand sacrifice “as a matrix of interconnected events” and encourages us to replace the categories of ritual phenomena with a more nuanced understanding of ritual activity.

In this paper, I consider Seneca's *Thyestes*, a play notorious for its gruesome scenes of butchery, clever wordplay, and nauseating descriptions of food. However, underlining these horror scenes are descriptions of sacrificial rituals. In particular, Senecan scholars debate whether the singular scene in which Atreus kills his nephews Tantalus and Plisthenes can be considered sacrifice. By taking up the approach outlined by McClymond, I will underscore the ritual events leading up to, during, and following this scene which constitute this entire play as a sacrificial process. More specifically by analyzing the language of this scene, the procession of the victims to Atreus' home, as well as the feasting that happens after the sacrifice of the children, it is easy to understand how these singular activities combine to generate a series of sacrificial events. With this polythetic methodology, I approach Seneca's *Thyestes* not to investigate the singular scenes of sacrificial slaughter or feasting, but instead to analyze scenes that play to varying degrees of sacrifice, no matter how abnormal they might be, in order to understand how the text advances itself through the various steps within the sacrificial process.

For example, the scene in which Thyestes and his children decide to come back to their ancestral home marks both the beginning of Atreus' revenge plot and also the start of the procession of the soon-to-be sacrificial victims to the altar. The language used in this scene specifically speaks to its meaning as a sacrificial metaphor. Not only are Thyestes and his children compared to wild animals, a polluted but still sacrificial form of offering, but Thyestes also commences the procession when he states *ego uos sequor, non duco* "I follow you, I do not lead." (Thyestes, 489) This statement while seemingly carefree begins the pollution of the sacrificial process. The audience, well aware of the myth and the slaughter that is to come, knows that two of the three making this procession will not live to the end of the play.

While at first, this example might not seem as important as the moment of sacrificial slaughter, every step in the process of sacrifice is important and meaningful, and in order to develop the full picture of the sacrificial process, readers must appreciate the seemingly less important moments in order to build up to the crescendo of slaughter.

#### Works Cited

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