

XVIII.—Claudian's *In Rufinum* 1.83–84 and a Vatican Vase-Painting

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Claudian says that the Fury Megaera instigated Rufinus' crimes; as a parallel, he cites five mythical outrages incited by Furies. The Furies' part in the first four myths is otherwise attested; there is no literary parallel for Claudian's statement that a Fury instigated Thyestes' incest with his daughter Pelopeia. A vase-painting in the Vatican Library portrays a man and a woman identified by Loewy and Petersen as Thyestes and Pelopeia. A Fury gazes down on the pair. Neither Loewy nor Petersen explains the Fury's presence. It is here suggested that the Fury is portrayed as the instigator of Thyestes' incest.

hac auspice taedae . . . natae iunxere Thyesten

The passage of Claudian's *Invective In Rufinum*¹ in which these words occur is a lurid portrayal² of the Fury Megaera, to whom the word *hac* refers. It was she, according to Claudian, who introduced her nurseling Rufinus into the Court of Theodosius the Great at Constantinople, thus setting in motion the crimes of avarice, cruelty, and perfidy with which the poet taxes the hated minister. To Claudian, these misdeeds of Rufinus are not simple instances of malfeasance: they seem to him to rival the outrages perpetrated by the fury-driven personages of mythology. To provide a proper setting, he recites the deeds of madness and lust which the same Megaera had instigated in days of old:

Non nisi quaesitum cognata caede cruorem
illicitumve bibit, patrius quem fuderit ensis,
quem dederint fratres; haec terruit Herculis ora
et defensores terrarum polluit arcus,
haec Athamantheae direxit spicula dextrae,
haec Agamemnonios inter bacchata Penates
alternis lusit iugulis; hac auspice taedae
Oedipoden matri, natae iunxere Thyesten.³

Five distinct tales of outrage are referred to in these verses: (1) Hercules' murder of his children; (2) the slaying of Learchus by

¹ See H. L. Levy, *The Invective In Rufinum of Claudius Claudianus* (Geneva, New York, 1935).

² Cf. P. Fabbri, "Il genio del male nella poesia di Claudiano," *Athenaeum* 6 (1918) 48–61.

³ *IR* 1.77–84.

his father Athamas; (3) the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and of the two latter by Orestes; (4) the unnatural marriage of Oedipus; and (5) the incestuous relations of Thyestes with his daughter Pelopeia.

In attributing the first four of these crimes to the instigation, or at least to the intermediation, of the Furies, Claudian follows a tradition which can in each case be attested from other Latin sources. For the first, we may cite Seneca's *Hercules Furens*;⁴ for the second, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid;⁵ for the third, Seneca's *Thyestes*,⁶ and for the fourth, still another play of Seneca's, the *Oedipus*.⁷

I have, however, been unable to find any literary parallel whatsoever, either in Latin or in Greek sources, for Claudian's concept that Thyestes committed incest at a Fury's instigation. Now it is difficult to believe that Claudian, following his predecessors, as was his habit, in the first four instances, would depart from them in a fifth to introduce an innovation. It is much more reasonable to suppose that he is here too following an established tradition, but one which chances not to be represented by any extant work of literature. One must turn, therefore, to non-literary sources for traces of a form of the Thyestes myth which connects the Furies with his unnatural act. I believe that I have found evidence of such a tradition in a vase-painting now in the Vatican Library; but before we turn our attention to the painting it will be well to examine more closely the myth in question.

In the commonly accepted story,⁸ the incest of Thyestes with his daughter Pelopeia is explained as growing out of an oracle. He was informed by Apollo at Delphi that he could find an avenger of the wrongs perpetrated upon him by Atreus—but only in the person of a son borne to him by his own daughter. This form of the myth (it is given by Servius in his commentary on Vergil *Aeneid* 11.262) was almost universally accepted. This may account for the fact that we find no mention elsewhere in extant literature of a part played in the affair by the Furies; for Apollo, the god of

⁴ 100–109.

⁵ 4.473–477 (Ovid identifies the Fury as Tisiphone). With verse 475 (*movit et obstantes, etc.*), cf. *IR* 1.42: *obstantes in tergum reppulit angues*.

⁶ 249–252.

⁷ 644, cf. note 14.

⁸ W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie* 3 (1902–1908) 1862.34–60.

From Petersen, *Altische Tragödie als Bild- und Buchnenkunst*
 Thyestes and Pelopeia (?)

light and of healing, would scarcely be portrayed as subserving the purposes of those grim avengers.

There was another tradition, however, which makes no mention of an oracle, and which readily lends itself to the development which we find in our present passage. This story is told by Hyginus, *Fabulae* 88: Thyestes learns of Atreus' outrageous deed in serving him his own son's flesh to eat. He flees first to King Thesprotus at Lake Avernus, and then goes to Sicyon. Here his daughter Pelopeia had been left for safe-keeping. He comes upon her by chance at night, while she is taking part in a sacrifice to Minerva. Fearing to pollute this sacrifice, he hides in a wood. Now Pelopeia stumbles while leading a group of choral dancers, and stains her garment with the blood of a victim. Going to the river to wash away the blood, she lays aside her spotted garment. His head covered, Thyestes rushes forth from the wood and overpowers her. While in his embrace, Pelopeia draws his sword from its scabbard. On her return to the temple she hides it under the base of Minerva's statue. Thus runs the pertinent portion of Hyginus' story. Of the remainder of the tale, we need note only one point: the sword of Thyestes was destined to play an important part, both as a recognition token and as a weapon; and we shall notice the sword when we turn our attention to the vase-painting.

Now, as we have seen, Hyginus makes no mention of an oracle. Rossbach⁹ conjectured that the version of Hyginus goes back to a Greek tragedy (though this has been questioned),¹⁰ the author of which was offended by the notion that Apollo could have been guilty of incitation to incest. Traces of this feeling may be observed in Seneca's *Agamemnon*:¹¹ Aegisthus, the offspring of the unnatural union, boasts that his birth was ordained by the god: Auctore Phoebus gignor: haud generis pudet. The nurse expostulates: Phoebum nefandae stirpis auctorem vocas . . . ? . . . Quid deos probro advocas?

Hyginus' story, whether based on a Greek tragedy or not, evidently represents a tradition which does not implicate Apollo in the outrageous deed. It was necessary for Claudian, if he intended to use the Thyestes myth at all, to choose a version in which the

⁹ "Auge und Pelopeia," *Philol. Abhandlungen* Martin Hertz . . . dargebracht (Berlin, 1888) 154.

¹⁰ H. I. Rose, *Hygini Fabulae* (Leyden, undated), *ad loc.*

¹¹ 294-297.

Apollinic oracle played no part. This is especially true in view of the fact that, in the Preface to the first book of the *In Rufinum*, Claudian celebrates his hero Stilicho as the modern Apollo, who has slain Rufinus, a new Python.

At this point the objection may perhaps be raised that, if the version of Hyginus makes no mention of an oracle, neither does it say a word about a Fury. True: but Hyginus' *Fabulae* are mere sketches, which frequently leave out details. An exact parallel is fortunately available. Though Hyginus thrice mentions the madness of Athamas,¹² he makes no reference whatever to the Furies; yet the role which they played in driving Athamas mad is evidently part of the tradition, for it is vividly portrayed by Ovid in the passage cited above.¹³

Let us now consider the *a priori* probability of the appearance of the Furies in the Thyestes story. What crime had Thyestes committed prior to his incest which might have brought down upon him the wrath of the avenging goddesses? At once there leaps to mind the horrible tale of the Thyestean banquet, in which the father, all unwitting, partakes of the flesh of his children. The fact that Thyestes was ignorant of the nature of his deed would not necessarily absolve him from the visitation of the Erinyes.¹⁴ But there is a much stronger basis than this for bringing the Furies into the story of Thyestes and Pelopeia. According to a Peloponnesian myth,¹⁵ Thyestes and his brother Atreus, at Hippodameia's instigation, murdered their half-brother Chrysippus. The tale of this fratricide is told by Hyginus in a neighboring passage;¹⁶ with it we may perhaps connect Thyestes' unwillingness to profane the sacrifice to Minerva as related above. Such fratricidal blood-guilt would of course make him a fit subject for persecution by the Furies. If, as Rossbach believes,¹⁷ a tragic writer was responsible for the form of the Thyestes myth which avoids the Apollinic oracle, the incitation of the Furies might have provided him with the needed motivation for Thyestes' attack on his daughter.

¹² *Fab.* 2, 4, and 5.

¹³ See note 5.

¹⁴ Cf. the threat of Laius, whom Oedipus slew not knowing him to be his father: *mecum Erinyn pronubam thalami traham* (Sen. *Oed.* 644).

¹⁵ Roscher, *op. cit.* (see note 8) 1.904.2-66.

¹⁶ *Fab.* 85.

¹⁷ See note 9.

That Claudian had in mind the murder of Chrysippus it is very reasonable to suppose. He mentions fratricide in the passage quoted near the beginning of this discussion: *cruorem . . . quem dederint fratres*; ¹⁸ yet no other case of this crime is involved in any of the five myths which he cites.

So much, then, for conjecture: it is certainly antecedently probable that the non-oracular form of the Thyestes incest myth portrayed Thyestes as driven to the unnatural deed by the Erinyes of his half-brother Chrysippus, and that Claudian followed this tradition.

I believe that we may find concrete evidence for this point of view, in so far as the tradition is concerned, in the vase-painting to which I have several times referred. This is found on a vase of Apulian workmanship, now in the Gualtieri collection in the Vatican Library. Millingen, who was the first to publish a satisfactory reproduction, says that it is one of the most interesting of the collection, because of the elegance of the composition and the details of the costumes, as well as because of the researches for which it furnishes material.¹⁹ Millingen's last remark has been amply justified: the painting has been thoroughly studied by many scholars, among them Welcker,²⁰ Vogel,²¹ Reinach,²² Loewy,²³ Petersen,²⁴ and Séchan.²⁵

The painting portrays an old man, gray-haired and gray-bearded, girt with a sword, and seated on an altar. Next to him, on his right, is a woman with her cloak drawn over her head. To his left there stands a bearded male figure, evidently a king, addressing him; to the right of the woman is seen a man bearing a lance. In the upper plane, above the two central figures, we find a pair readily recognized as Aphrodite and Eros. To their right there is a seated figure identified by Welcker as Nemesis, while to their

¹⁸ *IR* 1.77-79.

¹⁹ *Peintures Antiques et Inédites de Vases Grecs* (Rome, 1813) 43.

²⁰ *Alte Denkmäler: Dritter Teil, Griechische Vasengemälde* (Göttingen, 1851) 371-377.

²¹ *Scenen Euripideischer Tragödien in Griechischen Vasengemälden* (Leipzig, 1886) 120-123.

²² *Peintures des Vases Antiques* (Paris, 1891) 104-105.

²³ "Zu Griechischen Vasenbildern," *Eranos Vindobonensis* (Vienna, 1893) 271-274.

²⁴ *Die Attische Tragödie als Bild- und Bühnenkunst* (Bonn, 1915) 617-634, esp. 630-632.

²⁵ *Études sur la tragédie grecque dans ses rapports avec la céramique* (Paris, Champion, 1926) 209-210.

left, gazing down at the central figures, is an unmistakable Fury, in her traditional panoply of snaky locks, scourge, and torch.

After Reinach had expressed dissatisfaction with previous interpretations of the painting, without advancing any of his own, Emanuel Loewy attacked the problem anew. In a closely reasoned article,²⁶ he agrees with Welcker in identifying the sword-girt old man as Thyestes; but he sees in the woman next to him not, as Welcker conjectured, Thyestes' sister-in-law Aerope, but rather his daughter Pelopeia. In this identification Petersen, as we shall see, concurs. Loewy briefly identifies four other figures in the painting: the two above Thyestes and Pelopeia are, he agrees, Aphrodite and Eros; the crowned figure to Thyestes' right is the king of Sicyon, while the figure above the king is, of course, a Fury. But Loewy offers no explanation of the Fury's presence beyond the very general one that she serves as an indication of the entanglement of a tragic plot.²⁷

Another interpretation of our painting is set forth by Eugen Petersen in an appendix to his work on Attic tragedy.²⁸ Here, Petersen reconstructs a lost *Thyestes* of Sophocles in a manner remarkably elaborate in view of the paucity of the data at hand. He reconciles the two traditions about Thyestes' incest, ingeniously interweaving into his reconstructed plot both the story of the oracle and that of Thyestes' nocturnal adventure with his daughter. He believes that the subject of our painting is ultimately derived from the lost play of Sophocles, but he assigns the painting to a point in the story later by many years than the time of Thyestes' incest, to a period, that is, in which Aegisthus was a full-grown man. For it is as Aegisthus that he identifies the lance-bearer to Pelopeia's right, while he sees Atreus in the crowned figure to Thyestes' left; he regards the scene as occurring shortly before Pelopeia's self-inflicted death.

A point, rather trivial in itself, may be instanced here to show the great need for caution in judging the validity of Petersen's interpretation. He would have us believe that the sword with which Thyestes is so conspicuously girt is not the weapon which plays so large a part in the story, but another, procured to replace

²⁶ See note 23.

²⁷ *Op. cit.* (see note 23) 272: weist sie . . . auf die Schuerzung eines tragischen Knotens hin.

²⁸ See note 24.

the first, and encased in the original scabbard, thus being, he says, "both the same and not the same."²⁹ This far-fetched idea is characteristic of the lengths to which Petersen goes in conjectural inventiveness. But a much more serious difficulty is presented by the group which appears above the heads of Thyestes and Pelopeia. Petersen concurs in the identification of these as Aphrodite and Eros. He admits in an off-hand manner that Aphrodite is out of place in the scene as he interprets it,³⁰ but he makes no attempt to explain the incongruity. In my opinion, this point weighs decisively in favor of Loewy's interpretation, which explains the presence of Aphrodite and Eros as a symbol of an amorous adventure.³¹ Now Petersen goes no further than Loewy in explaining the Fury's presence; she indicates, says he, the tragic outcome of the story.³²

Finally we come to Séchan. In his masterly work on Greek tragedy as reflected in vase-paintings,³³ Séchan disputes the identification of the two central figures as Thyestes and Pelopeia. However, he bases his objections entirely upon the incongruities which he finds in Petersen's interpretation, which he rejects for reasons which are in large part quite similar to those voiced above. Though he cites Loewy in a footnote, he does not discuss his interpretation at all, in spite of the fact that Loewy's placing of the scene earlier in the action of the myth avoids the very difficulties which rightly led Séchan to reject Petersen's conclusions. Séchan himself advances no positive suggestions in the body of his text, but ventures in a footnote to suggest a return to Millingen's attribution to the *Oedipus at Colonus*—this despite the grave difficulties which he himself acknowledges. It would seem that, until some scholar puts forth either a more tenable interpretation of the scene, or a convincing refutation of Loewy's theory, the latter might well continue to serve as a basis for the further study of this interesting painting.

To sum up, then, I agree with Loewy and Petersen in identifying

²⁹ *Op. cit.* (see note 24) 632.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: "Aphrodite mit Eros, fuer eine Thyestesszene nicht so wohl gewaehlt wie jene < = Athena >."

³¹ *Op. cit.* (see note 23) 272: "dass es ein frevlerischer Liebesumgang ist . . . , das <zeigt> . . . die ueber ihnen thronende Aphrodite mit Eros zur Seite."

³² *Op. cit.* (see note 24) 632: "Dafuer ist die Erinys . . . ein verstaendlicher Hinweis auf den tragischen Ausgang."

³³ See note 25.

the central figures as Thyestes and Pelopeia, and with the former in setting the time of the scene portrayed early in the action of the story. I see the Fury, however, in a much more dynamic role than that attributed to her by either of these two scholars. In my opinion, she is present as the avenger of the fratricidally slain Chrysippus, and as the instigator, exactly as Claudian portrays her, of an outrageous union, which, through its offspring Aegisthus, was destined to heap further calamities on the accursed descendants of Pelops.

If my assumption is correct, the bringing together of Claudian, *In Rufinum* 1.83–84 and the vase-painting in the Vatican collection results in a striking and hitherto unnoticed illustration of the former, and in a clearer and better-rounded interpretation of the latter.