

‘THE RESTLESS MIND THAT WOULD NEVER
RAGING LEAVE’:

Jasper Heywood’s *Thyestes*

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Part of the fascination of the material I am presenting here lies in the difficulty of settling exactly which text to regard as definitive, and also to decide how that — if it can be defined — can be fitted into a context or contexts. The texts of *Thyestes* interlock in a number of ways. Seneca probably wrote his play in about 62–3 AD, perhaps during a period of withdrawal from Nero’s imperial court, where he had been a significant influence as the emperor’s erstwhile tutor.¹ Initially he had been a moderating force upon Nero, but after the treason trials and the murder of the latter’s wife Octavia in 62 AD as well as the deaths of his mother and half-brother, Seneca lost ground. As an author Seneca was well known in the Middle Ages, though perhaps not so much for his tragedies as for his moral and philosophical preoccupations, which it became important to reconcile with Christianity.² The tragedies attracted early printing, the first edition being by Andreas Belfortis at Ferrara in 1484. This was followed by a considerable number of editions in the sixteenth century in several European countries, including a contribution from Erasmus (1514). The next step was translation: there is a record of a translation of *Hercules Furens* by John Sheprey at Oxford between 1530 and 1541.³ Jasper Heywood’s version of the *Thyestes*, printed in 1560, is one of the first to have survived. He also translated the *Troas* (1559) and *Hercules Furens* (1561). His work on these three of the ten reputed tragedies was subsequently supplemented by other scholars, and some twenty or so years later in 1581 a composite volume called *The Tenne Tragedies* was edited and introduced by Thomas Newton, though Heywood had taken up other interests by then and had no direct influence upon the collected volume.

And so we come to Joost Daalder’s edition of Heywood’s *Thyestes* which paid special attention to Seneca himself, Heywood’s methods as translator, and the presentation of a text.⁴ This edition brought together the skills of classical scholarship as well as an understanding of Heywood’s personal context and as such it remains a valuable resource in assessing ways in which Seneca’s plays came alive again in the sixteenth century. However there is one important limitation to Daalder’s edition: in accordance with