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DARK WIT AND BLACK HUMOR IN SENECA'S *THYESTES*

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In *De Ira* Seneca describes the horrible disfigurement and imprisonment of a man named Telesphorus by a tyrant. Telesphorus, whose ears and nose have been cut off, is forced to live in a tiny cell like an animal: he is starved, filthy, and covered with sores. Devoid of any semblance of humanity, he becomes a hideous spectacle for the tyrant and any other visitors, who, far from feeling pity for him, recoil in disgust at his appearance: "factusque poena sua monstrum misericordiam quoque amiserat" (3.17.4). After appealing to the reader's morbid curiosity as much as his sympathy for Telesphorus' plight, Seneca makes this surprising, epigrammatic statement: "Tamen, cum dissimillimus esset homini qui illa patiebatur, dissimilior erat qui faciebat" (3.17.4). Through a witty reversal, Seneca asserts that the victim's *utter* monstrosity, described in the superlative (*dissimillimus...homini*), is paradoxically surpassed by the monstrosity of the tyrant. The unfortunate man, who was a spectacle, an object of horror and perverse curiosity for the reader, now becomes a suffering human being (*patiebatur*); the inhumanity of his treatment now far overshadows his inhuman appearance.

The passage illustrates well an aim and method common to both the prose works and the tragedies of Seneca: the author asks us to consider the human soul's potential for evil, for the monstrous, by confronting us with shockingly brutal behavior. The violence and horrors portrayed in Seneca are not gratuitous, but rather serve as a basis for exploring the questions: "What is it to be human?" "What is it to be a monster?" "How does a human being become a monster?" Seneca cleverly uses the tortured man's monstrous outward appearance to force the reader into considering the tyrant's essential, inner monstrosity. This movement from the external to the internal, or the revelation of the internal through the external, is characteristic of Senecan thought. In the drama as well as the prose works, Senecan wit plays a pivotal role in revealing the moral condition of both victimizer and victim beneath appearances which may be deceptive.

Wit in Senecan tragedy is often criticized as an example of Silver Age artifice which sacrifices dramatic realism and tragic pathos for rhetorical effect. Critics deride specimens of Senecan wit and black humor as superficial, vulgar, and inappropriate. An article by Richard Jenkyns in the new *Oxford History of the Classical World* provides the most recent example of this criticism. Dispensing with Seneca in two paragraphs, Jenkyns calls his rhetoric "feeble rant" and condemns his penchant for "the gruesome, the sensational, and the extreme." Jenkyns singles out for attack Seneca's use of black comedy at the

end of the *Phaedra*: "In more talented hands such bizarreries might have a grotesque kind of power."[1] Many earlier critics voice less sarcastic but equally strong condemnations. Duff, for example, claims that a deeper sense of the comic would contribute to Seneca's tragedy, not detract from it, as do the author's "unintentional comicalities."[2] Baade thinks that the absurdities produced by Senecan wit result from the author's tendency to overreach himself.[3] Tarrant considers an instance of black humor at the end of Seneca's *Thyestes* to be a "dreadful specimen of misplaced cleverness."[4]

Far from being frivolous, misplaced, or unintentional, however, Senecan wit in the tragedies is a vehicle of paradox which reflects a complex moral order. The cleverness attacked by critics is an important part of Seneca's "theatre of cruelty," a theatre which shocks the audience into a confrontation with evil. Wit is an important element of what Pratt calls the "system of moral communication between the dramatist and the audience."[5] It is true that the witty comments made by Seneca's characters are often dramatically inappropriate or inconsistent. But Seneca is more concerned with drawing attention to aspects of man's moral condition than with maintaining dramatic verisimilitude.

This paper will examine the role of wit and black humor in the *Thyestes* (a play which T. S. Eliot called the "most unpleasantly sanguinary" of Seneca's tragedies),[6] focussing on Thyestes' solo song at the beginning of Act 5 (920–69) and the dialogue between him and Atreus which occupies the rest of the act (970–1112). Thyestes' monody, for which there is no model in extant ancient literature,[7] well exemplifies Seneca's capacity for creating unique blends of the comic and the terrible. In presenting the banquet song and the ensuing dialogue, Seneca dwells on Thyestes' grotesque predicament: he has unknowingly devoured his own sons at the feast prepared for him by his brother, Atreus, who lured him back from exile with the promise of shared rule. Throughout Act 5

[1] Richard Jenkyns, "Silver Latin Poetry and the Latin Novel," in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, edd., *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (New York 1986) 683, 684.

[2] J. Wight Duff, *A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age: From Tiberius to Hadrian*, ed. A. M. Duff, 3rd ed. (New York 1964) 209. Duff finds "too ludicrous to be pathetic" the scene at the end of the *Hippolytus* in which a distraught Theseus attempts to piece together his son's mutilated body.

[3] Eric C. Baade, ed., *Seneca's Tragedies* (London 1969) xvii.

[4] R. J. Tarrant, ed., Seneca's *Thyestes*, American Philological Association Textbook Series 11 (Atlanta 1985) 235. Tarrant is speaking of Thyestes' reluctance to beat his breast in tragic lamentation to spare the sons he has just devoured (1046–47). Tarrant's commentary on the play is otherwise sensitive to the ironic implications of Senecan wit. References to the Latin text are drawn from Tarrant's edition of the play, which will be cited by his name.

[5] Norman T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill 1983) 129.

[6] T. S. Eliot, introduction, *Seneca his Tenne Tragedies, translated into English*, ed. Thomas Newton, orig. pub. in 1581 (Bloomington 1964) xxiii–xxiv.

[7] Cf. Otto Regenbogen, "Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* 7 (1927/28) 196. Regenbogen, who considered the *Thyestes* to be perhaps Seneca's most powerful drama, felt that the psychological acuteness and theatricality of the scene contributed to its uniqueness.

Atreus takes maniacal pleasure in toying with his drunk brother, who is unaware that the banquet he has just enjoyed consisted of his own sons. Using clever puns, *double entendres*, and sexual innuendo, Atreus attempts to treat Thyestes' suffering as a comic spectacle.

Seneca's dark wit, I will argue, reflects his moral and artistic purpose: Thyestes' song, which is at once pathetic and ludicrous, shocking and banal, dramatizes the dreadful consequences of his abandonment of his philosophical principles. In deliberating about whether to return from exile and accept the crown, Thyestes speaks in terms which recall the Stoic sage,[8] but quickly lets his ambition and greed overcome his better judgment. The scene thus represents an implicit critique of Thyestes' corrupt soul. But there is another purpose to Seneca's daring, theatrical presentation of the scene, a purpose analogous to the moral of the Telesphorus story: Seneca lingers over Thyestes' monstrous plight in order to confront Atreus' essential monstrosity.

Before examining the scene in greater detail, it may be useful to point out some general characteristics of wit in Senecan tragedy. Seneca displays great verbal ingenuity, an essential element of wit, in creating variations on mythological themes. For example, a recurrent motif in the *Thyestes* is that someone suffering from brutal treatment could regard the torments of the underworld as a refuge, a notion that reverses the traditional view of Hades. Such paradoxes, often expressed by Seneca in pithy, epigrammatic form, are "erected...into a principle in the poetics of astonishment."[9] Seneca's revision of traditional material does not represent mere linguistic virtuosity, but reflects central themes in the play. The concept of death as a refuge, together with the motif of deeds so monstrous that previous crimes seem innocent, contributes to a disturbing portrait of man's potential for evil.

The comic exploitation of the morbid, the grotesque, or the pathetic—what might be termed "black humor"—is another crucial component of Senecan wit. Black humor, which produces an "unresolved clash of incompatibles,"[10] generally leaves its audience amused but somewhat disturbed. Both wit and black humor in Seneca tap the plausible but unexpected dramatic possibilities of traditional material.[11] But wit works primarily on an intellectual or verbal level, while black humor tends toward the visual and the physical.[12] Senecan black humor derives much of its power through blurring fundamental distinctions or transgressing important boundaries—between life and death, human and animal, self and other.[13] By presenting brutal scenes in shockingly inappropriate ways,

[8] Cf. Olof Gigon, "Bemerkungen zu Senecas *Thyestes*," *Philologus* 93 (1938) 176–83, although I do not believe, as Gigon does, that Thyestes is a *sapiens*.

[9] Gordon Williams, *The Nature of Senecan Tragedy* (forthcoming) 49.

[10] Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London 1972) 27. Thomson so describes the effect of the grotesque.

[11] Williams (above, note 9) 67.

[12] I owe this distinction to Matt Dillon.

[13] Cf. Thomson (above, note 10) 35, who speaks of a confusion between the animate and inanimate as a characteristic of the grotesque; Charles Segal, "Boundary Violation and the Landscape of the Self in Senecan Tragedy," in *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca 1986) 332, who describes

Seneca invites the reader to examine his perhaps unconscious ambivalence toward the events so presented. The combination of the ludicrous and the terrible heightens the sense of alienation conveyed by the drama.

The grim parody of a festive banquet which Atreus sustains throughout most of the play, with its incongruous use of traditional comic elements, illustrates a powerful technique of Senecan black humor: the sophisticated, self-conscious manipulation of generic expectations. Another of Seneca's favorite sources of black humor is the attribution of lifelike qualities to corpses, as in the description of the slaughter of Thyestes' sons.[14] The ironic perspective provided by the sustained use of dark wit and black humor not only heightens the horror of tragic events but also helps unite what might otherwise seem a disjointed, episodic drama.

To set the stage for my examination of Thyestes' solo song: a jubilant Atreus opens the scene at the beginning of Act 5, gloating over the success of his scheme to avenge Thyestes' crimes against him: Thyestes committed adultery with Atreus' wife and conspired with her to steal his brother's throne. In the previous act a messenger describes to the chorus in great detail Atreus' grisly execution of Thyestes' children, his subsequent preparation of the banquet, and Thyestes' greedy enjoyment of it. Reclining at Atreus' table, a drunken Thyestes sings a song in which he unsuccessfully attempts to banish his fears about his apparent good fortune. Instead, he is overcome by vague doubts and fears without realizing the immediate source of his discomfort, an instinctive reaction against the dreadful meal he has just consumed. Thyestes does not realize what he has done even after Atreus shows him the severed heads of his sons (1004–5); Atreus postpones his triumphant announcement of the contents of the meal for nearly thirty lines after having the heads brought in on a platter. Seneca cleverly delays Thyestes' discovery of the outrage for most of Act 5 in order to explore both his and his brother's psychological and spiritual state. As Tarrant puts it: "The scene is a harrowing portrayal of psychological

Thyestes' plight as a dreadful violation of the normal boundaries between self and other (cf. note 42, below) ; and A. J. Boyle, "*Hic Epulis Locus:* The Tragic Worlds of Seneca's *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes*," *Ramus* 12.1&2 (1983) 212–13, who asserts that Atreus violates the fundamental distinctions between man, god, and beast implicit in ritual sacrifice. For a provocative theory of the origins of hostile humor, see Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* tr. and ed. James Strachey (New York 1960). Freud argues that aggressive humor opens up forbidden sources of comic pleasure that are usually consciously suppressed (103, 106, 127, 137–38).

[14] After long deliberation one corpse decides to fall on Atreus (723–25); the severed head of the other mumbles in protest (728–29). This passage will be discussed later in the article. For two other macabre examples of corpses or spirits exerting their will, see the *Troades*: the slain Polyxena falls on Achilles' tomb, as if in revenge; the personified tomb of Achilles answers in kind by instantly drinking in Polyxena's blood (1158–59, 1162–64). Senecan characters are fond of treating corpses as if they were alive in some way. As he tries to piece together his dismembered son, Theseus considers that the individual fragments of the corpse merit separate burial (*Hipp.* 1273–74).

disintegration, unique in ancient literature and, for all its grotesque exaggeration, uncomfortably real."[15]

The anxiety and foreboding that Thyestes expresses in his song contrast with two previous descriptions which portray him greedily enjoying the meal set before him. The first such description is the messenger's in Act 4; the second appears in Atreus' own account, delivered immediately before the song in Act 5. After describing Atreus' ritual slaughter of Thyestes' children in his palace and the cooking of the remains, the seemingly omnipresent messenger describes how Thyestes devours the meal:

> ...lancinat natos pater
> artusque mandit ore funesto suos;
> nitet fluente madidus unguento comam
> gravisque vino; saepe praeclusae cibum
> tenuere fauces. in malis unum hoc tuis
> bonum est, Thyesta, quod mala ignoras tua... (778–83)

These lines are remarkable for the sensual immediacy they convey through an ingenious arrangement of words. The juxtaposition of *natos* and *pater* in the first line of the passage, as well as the framing of *ore funesto* by *artusque...suos* and of *cibum* by *praeclusae..fauces*, linguistically mirrors the gruesome actions being described. *Lancinat* and *mandit* imply a bestial tearing of the flesh which is in grotesque juxtaposition to Thyestes' grooming (*nitet fluente madidus unguento comam*). The stylistic elegance of the poetic *mando* and the Greek accusative *comam* also contrasts with the nature of actions the messenger is describing. The thickness of the verbal texture of the description makes the decadence of the scene the more repellent. The messenger states that the only good to be found amidst such evils is Thyestes' ignorance of them.

The only hint given of reservations on Thyestes' part is, perhaps, the reference to food that sticks in his throat, an apparent result of his greedy haste to consume the meal. But it may also indicate an unconscious blockage, undercutting the impression of free-flowing excess created by the description of his heavy drinking and of the nard dripping from his hair. This blockage foreshadows the conflict Thyestes expresses in his monody between the wish to enjoy the benefits of power and the mysterious prohibition he feels against doing so. The messenger's account suggests that, without realizing it, Thyestes already finds the meal hard to swallow. But the overall impression is that of a man enjoying thoughtless gluttony.

Atreus' description of Thyestes' meal, which immediately precedes the song, is as repellent as the messenger's:

> nimis diu conviva securo iaces
> hilarique vultu...
> resupinus ipse purpurae atque auro incubat,
> vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput.
> eructat. o me caelitum excelsissimum,
> regum atque regem! ...ecce, iam cantus ciet

[15] Tarrant 221.

> festasque voces, nec satis menti imperat. (898–99, 909–12, 918–19)

Again, the contrast between "civilized" luxury (*purpurae atque auro*) and barbaric crudeness is clear: Atreus describes a gleeful, drunken Thyestes burping contentedly as he reclines, barely able to keep his head up. *Eructat,* placed at the beginning of line 911, has a powerful impact. Thyestes' belch lifts Atreus into the throes of exaltation as he rejoices in his victory. The soaring emotion of his exclamation, *o me caelitum excelsissimum*, which is reinforced by the increasing length of the words in the phrase, contrasts with the vulgarity and brevity of the preceding sentence, *eructat.* At the beginning of his speech Atreus joyfully claimed that he walked with his head level with the stars (885–86); Thyestes' burp makes Atreus' apotheosis complete.

In his manic glee Atreus sees the whole universe, from the physical to the metaphysical, cooperating with his lust for revenge. He interprets signs as diverse as his brother's belch and the darkness which replaces daylight as confirming his omnipotence. Atreus would like to compel the fleeing gods to witness the spectacle as well (893–95), but decides to be content with making Thyestes aware of his deed, a desire he expresses wittily: "pergam et implebo patrem / funere suorum" (890–91). Atreus' language here is playfully ambiguous. He must mean he will fill Thyestes with the *knowledge* of his funereal banquet, since Thyestes has already eaten the banquet itself (he will repeat the joke to Thyestes at line 979). Atreus' desire to make Thyestes aware of his crime is again metaphorically expressed at line 896–97: "etiam die nolente discutiam tibi / tenebras, miseriae sub quibus latitant tuae." Atreus pledges to enlighten Thyestes about his condition even if day has fled, removing all light from the world—a striking paradox. Atreus speaks of disclosing this information in terms which imply a divine revelation.

The images of heights, openness, power, and freedom in Atreus' speech (885–919)[16] contrast strikingly with Thyestes' state of helplessness and anxiety in the song. Atreus feels he has taken the place of the gods whose help he no longer needs. His mood is expansive, jubilant; he takes pride in his successful manipulation of events. In a melodramatic second-person aside reminiscent of Plautus' comic stage technique,[17] Atreus urges his brother to quaff the wine he has provided: *ne parce potu* (914). Atreus' gloating aside invites the complicity of the reader, encouraging him to regard Thyestes as an entertaining spectacle. The contrast between the scheming Atreus and the distraught Thyestes in the scene recalls another model scene from Plautine comedy, in which a slave

[16] Cf. *altum...polum* (886), *superbo...vertice* (886), *summa votorum* (888), *discutiam tibi tenebras* (896–97), *vota transcendi mea* (912). For comment on the contrast between exterior and interior spaces in the play, see Segal (above, note 13) 248.

[17] Pointed out by Tarrant, who cites Plautus *Amph.* 313 and *Most.* 174–75, 183 as parallels (220).

congratulates himself over the success of his trick while the victim despairs of his ill-fortune.[18]

Atreus' references to the banquet as a festive, holiday occasion frame Thyestes' song (*festasque voces* [919] and *festum diem* [970]). These references heighten the impact of Thyestes' strained verses. Atreus again evokes the conventions of comedy: drunken celebration, singing, and feasting are typical associations of both Aristophanic and Plautine comedy.[19] Atreus' allusion to a day of celebration echoes the Fury's grim humor when, in the prologue, she grants the shade of Tantalus a holiday (*liberum...diem* [63]) from his usual torment of famine to participate in the banquet.

Atreus' reference to Thyestes' burp also belongs to the sphere of comedy, especially Aristophanic comedy, which often uses vulgar physical processes as comic material.[20] The mingling of the perverse and the quotidian, the dreadful and the comic in Atreus' description produces a grotesque effect. His wish that Thyestes should not only eat but also *enjoy* the horrid meal is apparently fulfilled.[21] Atreus himself takes fiendish, manic delight in preparing the banquet. The messenger describes in gruesome detail the three separate means of preparation Atreus uses for the meat: some he sticks on spits for roasting, some he boils, and the rest, the heads and hands, he leaves in their natural state (764–67).[22] Atreus' dispassionate, methodical manner somehow makes his horrible deeds even more shocking. His fastidious concern with the culinary details of the banquet is eerily consistent with his requirement that Thyestes enjoy the meal. Atreus' celebrative banquet for his brother really begins with this grotesque parody of a genteel host's concern for the dining pleasure of his guest.[23] The manic pleasure Atreus takes in preparing the meal is mirrored by the unwitting pleasure Thyestes takes in consuming it.[24]

[18] See *Pers.*, where a gleeful Toxilus exults in his triumph over the duped Dordalus (753–62), who sings a song of ruin (778–88). For an Aristophanic precedent, see the pair of speeches by Lamachus and Dicaeopolis at the end of *Ach.* (1190–1203).

[19] Cf. the endings of *Ach.*, *V.*, and *Av.*, as well as *Most.* (690–99) and *Men.* (473–76).

[20] For an earlier comic treatment of cannibalism, see Euripides' *Cyclops*. The Cyclops burps after devouring two of Odysseus' men (410). Another similarity of the two accounts is that both contain grotesque juxtapositions of the celestial and the vulgar. The Cyclops' belch seems to inspire Odysseus with a "godlike" thought (411), while Thyestes' burp turns Atreus' thoughts heavenward (911).

[21] Cf. the phrasing of Atreus' wish ("liberos *avidus* pater / gaudensque laceret et suos artus edat" [277–78]) with the messenger's description of Thyestes' meal ("lancinat natos pater / artusque mandit ore funesto suos" [778–79]) and with Thyestes' description of himself as "*avidus*...pater" (1040) (my emphases).

[22] Euripides' *Cyclops* gives a similar description of the preparation of a cannibal banquet. The Cyclops boils, roasts, or broils the meat (357–58, 401–404). In *Thyestes*, the "groaning" of the meat on the spits (*gemuere* [772]) anticipates the "groaning" of Thyestes' children in his stomach.

[23] See the messenger's account at 764–72.

[24] The link between the brothers is strengthened by the parallel imagery in the sacrifice and banquet scenes. Both are described as voracious: Atreus is compared

Atreus continues the grim parody of a happy reunion when he reassures an anxious Thyestes that he is already embracing his sons, who will never be parted from him:

> Hic esse natos crede in amplexu patris.
> hic sunt eruntque; nulla pars prolis tuae
> tibi subtrahetur. ora quae exoptas dabo
> totumque turba iam sua implebo patrem.
> satiaberis, ne metue. nunc mixti meis
> iucunda mensae sacra iuvenilis colunt;
> sed accientur. poculum infuso cape
> gentile Baccho. (976–83)

Throughout this speech, which is filled with black humor, Atreus uses puns and *double entendres* to play on the dismemberment and ingestion of Thyestes' children. For example, he assures Thyestes that "no part" of his children will be taken away from him and that he will be filled with their presence (977–79). Atreus puns on *ora* when he tells his brother that he will soon see the "faces" of his children; he applies a variation on the joke when, showing Thyestes the severed heads of his children, he asks if he recognizes them. Atreus, in assuring Thyestes that his need to see his children will be "satisfied" (*satiaberis, ne metue* [980]), cruelly plays on the physical satisfaction Thyestes expressed in the meal (*satias dapis* [973]). Atreus' mock reassurance implies, as well, that the banquet is fitting punishment for Thyestes' appetite for power. But Atreus' pun on Thyestes' "satisfaction" also calls to mind the tyrant's own obsessive need to satisfy his revenge.[25] In his supposed concern for his guest's complete satisfaction and comfort, Atreus continues his grotesque parody of the genteel host.

Similarly, Atreus' reference to the meal as a sacred ritual ("iucunda mensae sacra iuvenilis colunt" [981]) works on two levels, maintaining his charade of a holy festival day while reminding the reader of his sacred mission of revenge. Atreus concludes the speech with another grim witticism about the banquet: the "ancestral" drinking-cup (*poculum...gentile* [982–83]) which he asks Thyestes to pick up suggests a "family" drinking-cup in a sinister sense.[26] Atreus' use of the subject matter, mood, and style of comedy heightens the horror of the banquet. His grotesque parody of a comic feast is ghastly, to be sure, yet strangely appropriate in a play obsessed with the theme of eating. Indeed, unrestrained, perverse appetites, both literal and figurative, are the subject of the play.

to a hungry tiger (707–13) and a bloodthirsty lion dripping (*madidus*) with gore (732–41); the messenger describes Thyestes, whose hair is dripping with nard (*madidus* 780, 948), as greedily devouring his meal in the passage mentioned earlier (778–82). Thyestes' description of himself as *avidus* evokes Atreus' slaughter (1040).

[25] Cf. the contradictions in Atreus' opening speech of act 5 (885–919), which will be examined shortly.

[26] Cf. Tarrant 227.

The monody fulfills Atreus' wish of seeing Thyestes being made miserable (*dum fit miser* [907]), as Thyestes' optimism gives way to uncontrollable anxiety. Atreus' speech invites comparison with Thyestes' song; the contrast is reinforced by the shift from Atreus' iambic to Thyestes' anapestic meter. The soliloquy and the monody reveal the brothers in apparently opposite states of mind. Atreus seems to be at the apex of his fortunes and confidence, while Thyestes is at the nadir of his, racked by self–doubt and fears of loss of control. Atreus' speech reveals a man who is determined to bend nature itself to his will, while Thyestes is unable to will himself to relax and enjoy his new–found good fortune.

A closer look at Atreus' monologue reveals a man possessed by a diabolical need for control and an insatiable lust for revenge. One indication that Atreus' lust for revenge is insatiable is that in a speech comprising only 34 lines, he mentions satiety and insatiety in contradictory ways six times. Immediately after stressing his complete satisfaction with his work ("bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi" [889]), Atreus reverses himself: his revenge will not be complete until Thyestes knows about it. A few lines later, Atreus is apparently dissatisfied that he cannot also compel the gods to witness his revenge, but he convinces himself in another reversal that it is indeed sufficient for Thyestes to witness it (893–95). Atreus is also buffeted by contradictory impulses about whether his brother should continue or stop drinking. At first he asserts that Thyestes has consumed enough food and wine (*iam satis mensis datum est / satisque Baccho* [899–900]); he needs Thyestes to be sober enough to appreciate the evil act he has committed. A mere fifteen lines later Atreus is sarcastically urging his brother to drink more.

The final occurrence of the term *satis* in the speech is in Atreus' boast that Thyestes lacks sufficient command of himself: *...nec satis menti imperat* (919). By this time the comic irony works against Atreus himself, whom no revenge will satisfy, as the speech makes clear.[27] Atreus' melodramatic claim that the successful execution of his plans was enough to satisfy even him (*etiam mihi* [889]) is progressively undermined. Although Atreus ridicules Thyestes' lack of

[27] Cf. Seneca's portrait of Medea, who experiences similar doubts about the adequacy of her revenge. At first she reproaches herself for acting too quickly (919–21), then not quickly enough (937); assures herself that her vengeance is satisfactory (957), rejoices in it (985–86), repents of it (989), and finally decides it is void until Jason witnesses it (992–94). The verbal parallels between Atreus and Medea are striking. Both consider their victims a sacrificial offering and the day of vengeance a religious holiday (*victima: Med.* 970, *Thyest.* 545; *festus dies: Med.* 985 and *Thyest.* 970); both feel that vengeance magically restores the state prior to the injury they received (Medea's virginity is restored [984], while Atreus' paternity is assured and his marriage purified [1098–99]); both ask their victims if they recognize their handiwork (*coniugem agnoscis tuam*? [*Med.* 1021], *natos ecquis agnoscis tuos*? [*Thyest.* 1005]). For a discussion of the ironic undercutting of Medea's apparent triumph, see two articles by Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark: "Senecan Tragedy: Patterns of Irony and Art," *CB* 48 (1972) 71 and "Art and Ethics in the Drama: Senecan 'Pseudotragedy' Reconsidered," *ICS* 7.1 (1982) 134.

self–control, he inadvertently shows that he is no more master of himself than his brother. Atreus is controlled by an insatiable appetite for revenge.

Thyestes' failure to master himself and his reactions becomes increasingly clear as the song he began hopefully degenerates into despair and confusion:

> Pectora longis hebetata malis,
> iam sollicitas ponite curas.
> fugiat maeror fugiatque pavor,
> fugiat trepidi comes exilii
> tristis egestas, rebusque gravis
> pudor afflictis... (920–25)

From the beginning of the song Thyestes seems to be troubled by disquieting fears he is unable to exorcise. Just as Atreus' speech ironically undercuts his conscious meanings, so Thyestes' song conveys a host of unintentional meanings.[28] Thyestes' reference in the first line to *pectora longis hebetata malis* carries ironic force. He is consciously referring to the past evils of his long exile without realizing that his present circumstances are far more evil. The apparent evils of exile may have weakened Thyestes' resistance to the real evil posed by the temptation of rule. Thyestes' dilemma reflects a pervasive irony in the play: a condition previously considered evil comes to appear good in the light of present evils.[29]

Throughout the song Seneca plays on the tension between Thyestes' present mood of forced exultation and the nagging suspicion, barely conscious at first, that he is deluding himself. Thyestes is attempting to banish all of the negative emotions he associates with the exile forced on him by Atreus. Each of the first four lines is divided into two rhyming halves, with repetitions of sounds and words (*fugiat* is repeated three times). This repetition gives the first stanza of the song an incantatory quality. Thyestes' wish to banish troublesome emotions strikes both a pathetic and a comic note, recalling the drama's recurrent theme of the impossibility of flight from evil.

Seneca starts his witty exploitation of this theme at the very beginning of the play, with Tantalus' reference to food that ever eludes his grasp: *fugaces...cibos* (2). Ironically, the spirit of Tantalus yearns for the security of his accustomed torments, as he fears being driven on to still greater punishment. Indeed, Tantalus' fears are soon realized. The Fury appears with the promise of a meal that even Tantalus would flee: "inveni dapes / quas ipse fugeres. siste, quo praeceps ruis?" (67). The comic effect of these lines stems in part from the fact that the ghost, in attempting to flee, takes the Fury's rhetorical phrase literally. But the joke also turns on the implication that the mythological Tantalus can have scruples. Tantalus is presented as fearing crimes so heinous that they would make even him appear innocent (18–20).

Seneca extends the joke as the hapless shade of Tantalus protests being dislodged from his secure place in Tartarus: "Me pati poenas decet, / non esse poenam" (86–87). The shade makes his protest on moral grounds, pleading for a

[28] Cf. Tarrant 221.
[29] Cf. 86–87, 744–45, 749–53.

return to an order in which he is assured of his deserved punishment. Tantalus' comic attempt at flight subverts the traditional associations of Hades by suggesting that one of the damned could crave the comfort of his punishment (68–69).[30] The grim joke raises the specter of a hell on earth far more evil than the fixed, repetitive torments of the mythological underworld. The moral that Tantalus draws from his situation is *amate poenas* (82).

Seneca applies another variation on the theme of flight from evil in describing the wine that evades the lips of Thyestes: "admotus ipsis Bacchus a labris fugit" (987). The allusion to Tantalus' torments in hell is clear, but there is perhaps a more subtle allusion to the flight of the gods in Thyestes' metonymic reference to wine as Bacchus.[31] The flight of Bacchus from Thyestes' lips partakes of the general flight of the gods, accentuating the hopelessness of his predicament. In yet another witty variation on the theme of flight near the end of the play, Seneca has Thyestes allude to the children imprisoned within his stomach as unsuccessfully seeking flight from their confines: "...et clusum nefas / sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam" (1041–42).

The motif of flight in the play is closely related to the motif of "filling": the duality of flight versus occupation, of emptiness versus fullness pervades the entire drama. The Fury's command that Tantalus infect the house of Atreus with his evil spirit (*...imple Tantalo totam domum* [53]) is realized in both a physical and metaphysical sense.[32] Just as the flight of the gods creates a vacuum in the universe which evil can fill, Thyestes' abandonment of his philosophical principles creates a vacuum that is "filled" by the impious banquet he consumes. Indeed, both Atreus and Thyestes are "filled" with the spirit of Tantalus,[33] but in Thyestes' case the "filling" takes a horribly concrete form. As Herington points out, the moral and physical aspects of the Senecan universe are inextricably intertwined, and evil finds material expression in Senecan tragedy.[34]

To return to the song: Thyestes' language becomes sententious, stilted, and highly compressed as he tries to reassure himself of the morality of his actions:

> ...magis unde cadas
> quam quo refert. magnum, ex alto
> culmine lapsum stabilem in plano

[30] Like Tantalus, Thyestes will pray to be buried in hell as a refuge for his agony (1074–88). For other examples of the *topos* of death as a refuge, see *Hipp.* 1229–43, *Ag.* 750–52, *Oed.* 1059–61. For the idea of sin that renders previous crime piety, see *Med.* 904–5.

[31] References to the gods' flight occur at 264–65, 776–78, 1021, and 1070.

[32] One may choose to interpret the prologue as an allegorical representation of a spiritual conflict. Cf. Gregory A. Staley, "Seneca's *Thyestes*: 'Quantum Mali Habeat Ira,'" *Grazer Beiträge* 10 (1981 [1983]) 237–38.

[33] In a conversation with his attendant, Atreus, meditating on a spectacular crime, describes being "filled" by a state of transport: "impleri iuvat / maiore monstro" (253–54). Atreus' jokes about "filling" Thyestes up with his own children have been pointed out (890–91; 979).

[34] C. J. Herington, "Senecan Tragedy" (rep. from *Arion* 5.4), in *Essays on Classical Literature*, ed. Niall Rudd (New York 1972) 181, 189, 195.

figere gressum; magnum, ingenti
strage malorum pressum fracti
pondera regni non inflexa
cervice pati, nec degenerem
victumque malis rectum impositas
ferre ruinas. (925–33)

Tarrant's observation that Thyestes sounds like "a caricature of a sententious moralist"[35] is pointed. In his song Thyestes directly contradicts the Stoic sentiments he mouthed in resisting first his son's, then Atreus' exhortations to accept the crown. Thyestes' encounters with his son and brother are worth examining in greater detail, since they provide a kind of counterpoint to the banquet song. Both scenes portray Thyestes' abject surrender of his ideals as a fateful moral compromise which leads directly to the catastrophic banquet. Indeed, Thyestes' spiritual and emotional confusion in these two scenes from Act 3 is described in terms which specifically anticipate the account of the banquet.

Thyestes, speaking with his son, initially expresses strong doubts and fears about returning from exile. Thyestes' uncertainty and fear ("nunc contra in metus revolvor" [418–19]) foreshadow the turbulent emotions he expresses in his monody, particularly the sensation that his stomach is churning (*volvuntur intus viscera...* [1041]).[36] The image of chaos implied by the verb *volvo* also anticipates the outraged Thyestes' plea to the gods to overturn the entire world in revolt against Atreus' crime: "nubibus totum horridis / convolve mundum..." (1078–79).

Arguing against his son's advice to accept Atreus' offer of shared rule, Thyestes asserts a philosophical preference for the rigors of exile, a period he describes as happy and secure (418). He contrasts the comfort and safety of humble circumstances with the dangers and instability of rule. The controlling metaphor of his central speech (446–70) is, significantly, "carefree banquets" (*securas dapes* [450]). Thyestes speaks of the joys of eating from "narrow tables" (452) and drinking from cups which he need not worry are poisoned (451–52). Thyestes claims another advantage for a modest life in terms which also anticipate the impious banquet: one avoids the greed of empire associated with "feeding" on tribute from other nations ("nec ventrem improbum / alimus tributo gentium" [460–61]).[37] Whether or not these references indicate the strength of Thyestes' unconscious "appetite" for rule, his choice of the metaphor of "eating" to convey his belief in moderation is highly ironic.

Thyestes caps this speech with a paradoxical Stoic epigram: "immane regnum est posse sine regno pati" (470). Yet less than twenty lines later, Thyestes suddenly and unaccountably changes his mind, succumbing to his son's arguments. His attempt to justify his decision takes the form of another

[35] Tarrant 222.

[36] Cf. Regenbogen (above, note 7) 196.

[37] Cf. specifically Thyestes' use of the words *mensa* and *scyphus* (452), both of which Atreus uses in his ceremonial introduction of the banquet–song (*hoc mensa cludatur/ scypho* [916]).

clever epigram ("Serum est cavendi tempus in mediis malis; / eatur" [487–88]), which sounds suspiciously like the feeble rationalization at the end of his song ("vel sine causa vel sero times" [964]

Thyestes' exchange with his brother in the episode which follows, the coronation scene, takes a similar course. At first, Thyestes argues strongly against succumbing to the power and prestige of rule, which he regards as transient and unstable (537). But then, just as he does with his son, he suddenly and mysteriously reverses himself (542). The coronation and banquet scenes bear clear structural similarities. In both scenes Atreus, after mocking Thyestes in a sarcastic second-person aside, addresses his brother with a warm greeting (507–11, 970–72).[38] Both scenes portray Atreus easily deceiving a naive, gullible Thyestes.

Contradicting in his song the sentiments he expressed earlier, Thyestes disdains the poverty of his exile and rejects his former cautiousness about the instability of rule (925–33; 938–41). He congratulates himself for the bravery with which he endured exile: "...magnum, ingenti / strage malorum pressum fracti / pondera regni non inflexa / cervice pati" (928–31). The compressed syntax of these lines reflects Thyestes' forced, twisted logic. The lines also perhaps unconsciously reflect the concrete sense in which the pressures of rule presently weigh him down. The phrase *fracti...regni* applies literally to the broken limbs of Thyestes' sons and metaphorically to his broken line of succession.[39] Thyestes' reference to his oppressed feeling (*pressum*) anticipates the unremitting, reciprocal pressure which he describes between his digested sons and himself: *premo premorque* (1050–51); the punishment he then asks for, appropriately enough, is to be buried under the full weight of hell (1013–16). Thyestes ought to have followed Tantalus' advice and loved his earlier punishment of exile. The exile which he regards as an evil in his song becomes, in light of his present circumstances, a good.

Thyestes' wish to discard his moral reservations culminates in a wish to dispose of his austere, moralistic self entirely: "veterem ex animo mitte Thyesten" (937). The futility of Thyestes' wish is ironically reflected in the stilted moralisms which he develops to rationalize his decision:

> Proprium hoc miseros sequitur vitium,
> numquam rebus credere laetis;
> redeat felix fortuna licet,
> tamen afflictos gaudere piget—
> quid me revocas festumque vetas
> celebrare diem, quid flere iubes,
> nulla surgens dolor ex causa?
> quid me prohibes flore decenti
> vincire comam? prohibet, prohibet! (938–46)

A series of these moralisms, uttered in the third person (*magis...refert* [925–26]; *proprium...laetis* [938–39]; *tamen...piget* [941]), gives way to a desperate cry

[38] Cf. "aspice, ut multo gravis / squalore vultus obruat maestos coma, / quam foeda iaceat barba..." (505–7) with *ne parce potu...* (914–19).

[39] Cf. Tarrant 222.

in which Thyestes addresses the unknown source of his grief ("quid flere iubes, / nulla surgens dolor ex causa?" [943–44]). Thyestes' psychological tumult has physical manifestations. In a melodramatic passage a few lines later he describes how the garland falls off his head and his hair stands on end:

> Vernae capiti fluxere rosae,
> pingui madidus crinis amomo
> inter subitos stetit horrores,
> imber vultu nolente cadit,
> venit in medias voces gemitus.
> maeror lacrimas amat assuetas,
> flendi miseris dira cupido est.
> libet infaustos mittere questus,
> libet et Tyrio saturas ostro
> rumpere vestes, ululare libet. (947–56)

Tarrant comments that Thyestes seems to regard himself "like a horrified spectator."[40] Thyestes' sense of eerie, inner division is heightened by the strange groans, apparently coming from someone else, that interrupt his song and his later conversation with his brother (951, 1001). Thyestes' involuntary wish to cry out in grief and to rend his clothes (954–56) reflects customary rituals of mourning, as Steidle points out.[41] It is as if Thyestes were unconsciously enacting a ritual lamentation for his sons.

The song ends with a pathetically deluded note, as Thyestes wonders whether he is crying from joy or sorrow at his triumphal return from exile: "dolor an metus est? an habet lacrimas / magna voluptas?" (968–69). Again, Thyestes' words convey an unintended irony: the pleasure he takes in the banquet will indeed bring him pain. Thyestes' confusion about whether he is experiencing *dolor* or *voluptas* ironically exemplifies the Stoic moral on the transience of pleasure announced in an earlier choral ode: "dolor ac voluptas / invicem cedunt; brevior voluptas" (596–97).

Segal describes Thyestes' predicament in terms of alienation from his physical self:

> This is the acme of the horror: Thyestes is trapped in the evil of his own body. The nightmare of the boundary violation is all the greater as the foreign matter, the source of evil (*clusum nefas*), is stuffed within himself as both alien and fearfully his own. The victim is bloated and distorted in his own flesh by being crammed full of a poisonous feast that he cannot disgorge and must assimilate. The scene's outrage works through its evocation of the primary processes over which we have no conscious control, the digestive absorption of alien substance converted into our very being.[42]

[40] Tarrant 224.

[41] Wolf Steidle, "Die Gestalt des *Thyest*," in *Senecas Tragödien*, ed. Eckard Lefèvre (Darmstadt 1972) 496.

[42] Segal (above, note 13) 332.

Segal is certainly right to underline the horror of a "primary process" gone awry. The song reveals a man at odds with his own physical process, his own physical being. But Thyestes' alienation from his physical self in the song evinces a deeper, spiritual alienation. His attempt to banish his former self (*veterem Thyesten*) reflects the state of moral schizophrenia into which he has fallen. The song reveals Thyestes as a man radically divided against himself, unable to reconcile his appetite for power with his philosophical reservations about the instability of rule.

Atreus delays telling Thyestes about the banquet he has consumed for a full sixty lines after the song. Once Thyestes realizes that his sons have been murdered, he thinks, at worst, that their corpses have been exposed (1032–33). Atreus exploits Thyestes' ignorance of the full extent of the horror, relishing the opportunity to indulge his wit through grim hints of the banquet. Atreus, revealing to Thyestes the heads of his children, suggests that Thyestes prepare to embrace them: "Expedi amplexus, pater; venere" (1004–5). Atreus' suggestion represents yet another variation on the grim parody of celebration and harmony he has been enacting since his brother's return from exile.[43] Then comes the coup Atreus has been leading up to all along: he asks Thyestes if he recognizes his dismembered children (*natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?* [1005]).[44] Thyestes immediately replies that he recognizes his *brother*: *Agnosco fratrem* (1006).

The remark is completely unexpected. One would hardly think that Thyestes would be able so deftly to turn Atreus' witticism back on him, especially after being the helpless butt of his brother's sadistic jokes for so long. Williams aptly comments: "It is a moment of horrific shock for Thyestes, but, instead of expressing something of his agony, he indulges a clever word-play with the murderer."[45] Using Atreus' own word (*agnosco*) against him, Thyestes pointedly condemns his brother. He thus directs one's attention away from the hideous spectacle of his children's severed heads to the hideous condition of Atreus' soul. The effect of Thyestes' remark, like that of Seneca's reversal in the Telesphorus story, is to shift the focus from the victim to the victimizer.

The witty retort Thyestes delivers when confronted with his children's severed heads, while unrealistic in the dramatic situation, exemplifies the use of wit as a weapon recommended by Seneca in the *De Ira* passage.[46] There, Seneca

[43] The joke recalls lines 976–79, in which Atreus mockingly reassured a worried Thyestes that his children were already in his embrace (976–79). Atreus further exploits the witty possibilities of punning on *amplexus* when he tells his brother, "fruere, osculare, divide amplexus tribus" (1023).

[44] Cf. Medea, who asks Jason the same question, but in reference to herself (*Med.* 1021).

[45] Gordon Williams (above, note 9) 72. Williams goes on to suggest that Thyestes' extemporaneous reply indicates that he was subconsciously aware of Atreus' plans much earlier. Indeed, Thyestes suppresses what he knows of Atreus' unforgiving, vengeful character (476–82).

[46] For a fuller treatment of the passage, see Staley (above, note 32), who argues that Thyestes acts "in the way Seneca prescribes [in *De Ira*] for a man in his

advocates the use of wit as a defensive weapon against the outrages perpetrated by tyrants: when living at court under the control of a powerful tyrant, one must be able to laugh off even the deaths of one's loved ones (*funeribus suis adridendum est* [3.15.3]). Yet Seneca cautions that the restraint necessary in such circumstances can be taken to extremes, as in the story of Harpagus, who is made to eat a cannibal banquet by the king whom he serves.[47] When informed of this and asked by the tyrant how he liked the meal, the unfortunate victim replies that he always enjoys eating at the king's table (3.15.1–2). Attacking Harpagus' obsequious reaction to the outrage, Seneca makes a joke at his expense: all he gained through his pusillanimity was permission not to eat the "remains" of the meal (*Ne ad reliquias invitaretur* [3.15.2]). Seneca's joke turns on a pun on the word, *reliquiae*, which can mean either the "remains" of a meal or human "remains."[48] The *politesse* implied by the word, "invitaretur," is comically at odds with the king's brutality, a contrast also seen in Atreus' observance of social graces in preparing and serving Thyestes' banquet.

Thyestes' recognition of the extent of Atreus' crime, or of his own involvement in it, is not yet complete, however; while realizing his sons have been murdered, he has yet to realize the contents of the banquet he has just consumed. Atreus takes advantage of Thyestes' ignorance of this yet again, assuring him, in a *jeu de mots*, that he has whatever is left, or not left, of his sons ("Quidquid e natis tuis / superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes" [1030–31]). Atreus' pun, which is similar to Seneca's in the Harpagus passage, plays on two possible meanings of *supersum* as "be left over" and "survive."[49]

The author further exploits the gruesomeness of Thyestes' plight by having him refrain from beating his breast in tragic lamentation for fear of injuring his sons, who are imprisoned within him. Thyestes' suppression of an instinct to beat his breast seems another variation of the hopeless inner division he experiences in his banquet song. Thyestes' response to his tragic loss is ludicrous, but his belated sense of restraint invites a serious question: How does one express one's grief or keep one's dignity when put into such a monstrous dilemma? Thyestes' incomplete tragic gesture also perhaps suggests the limitations of conventional responses to grief.

Thyestes' inability to engage in a ritual act of mourning contrasts with the maniacal attention Atreus pays to ritual protocol in "sacrificing" Thyestes' children. The messenger uses the terminology proper to a sacrifice to describe Atreus' slaughter of the children and his preparation of the banquet.[50] Atreus,

position" (244). Thyestes' witty "recognition" of his brother provides additional confirmation of Staley's argument.

[47] In an earlier passage, Seneca is similarly critical of a man who praises the aim of a king who has just shot his son to death with an arrow (3.14.3).

[48] See "reliquiae," 1B and 2 in the *OLD*.

[49] See "supersum," 4 and 5 in the *OLD*.

[50] As pointed out by Alfonso Traina, "Seneca, *Thyest.* 713 s.: *Mactet sibi o sibi dubitat?* Un Recupero Esegetico," *Maia* n. s. 33 (1981) 151–53. See references to Atreus as priest (*sacerdos* [691]), his altar (*ara* [684, 693, 706, etc.]), his sacrificial victims (*victima* [688, 718]), fillets (*vitta* [686]), and meal (*salsa mola* [688]), for example.

who clearly regards his wanton act of vengeance as a religious act,[51] himself directly refers to Thyestes' children as sacrificial offerings (*destinatas victimas* [545] and *hostiarum* [915]). Throughout the messenger's account of the sacrifice, Atreus' lust for revenge, described in epic similes comparing him to a lion or tiger (707–13, 732–41), contrasts strongly with the cold precision of the slaughter, which is described in graphic, anatomical detail (760–63). The messenger reports that Atreus is at such pains to conduct the "sacrifice" correctly that he cannot seem to decide which of the children should have the "honor" of being the first sacrificial victim (713–16); upon due consideration, Tantalus is chosen and is stabbed through the neck (717–23). The fastidiousness with which Atreus conducts the slaughter and sacrifice throws into high relief the fundamental distinction he fails to make, that between a human being and a sacrificial animal.[52] Atreus' choice of the younger Tantalus for the honor of being first sacrificed reminds the reader of the inspirational debt Atreus owes to the spirit of father Tantalus. Surprisingly, the young Tantalus, who had urged his father to abandon his philosophical principles, accepts death stoically (720–21).

Atreus' uncertainty about whom first to kill is paralleled by the corpse's long hesitation about where to fall. After standing for "a long time" (*diu*) in deliberation, the corpse finally decides to fall on Atreus (723–25). The black humor of the incident comes from the incongruity of the corpse's deliberation and protest. Baade comments aptly: "Seneca's characters refuse to relax their emotional tension even in death."[53] Seneca may be having fun with Tantalus' belated adoption of Stoic principles, a change which comes too late to save his life.[54] But the joke is also on Atreus, whose meticulous preparations cannot prevent the indignity of having a corpse fall on him. The black comedy continues as Plisthenes' corpse also makes a final, feeble gesture of protest: his truncated head rolls off his body murmuring incoherently (728–29). The chaotic slaughter contrasts with the ritual precision with which Atreus dissects the bodies and inspects the entrails (755–63).

What emerges in the messenger's account is Atreus' need to justify his actions by elevating his lust for revenge into a holy mission. Traina argues that Atreus is putting himself in the position of the god who receives the sacrifice as well as the sacrificial priest who conducts it.[55] This interpretation is supported by the hyperbolic language of Atreus' speech at the beginning of Act 5. Atreus'

[51] See Motto and Clark (1972) (above, note 27) 74 for a discussion of the concept of *virtus perversa* in *Hipp.*

[52] Cf. Boyle (above, note 13). For another example of the peculiar combination of frenzy and deliberation, see the account of Clytemnestra's sacrificial murder of Agamemnon. The axe-wielding queen surveying her victim is compared to a priest who calmly chooses the spot he will strike on the neck of sacrificial oxen (*Ag.* 897–900).

[53] Baade (above, note 3) xvii.

[54] Cf. the statement made by Thyestes after giving in to his son's arguments: "Serum est cavendi tempus in mediis malis" (487).

[55] See Traina (above, note 50) 152. Traina supports his argument with an interpretation of the phrase *mactet sibi* (713).

self-proclaimed apotheosis, together with the sacrificial offering he makes in his own honor, recalls Tantalus' sacrifice of his children to the gods, again demonstrating that Atreus is filled by his ancestor's spirit.[56]

Narrating these events, the messenger pauses to assure the horrified chorus that the evils which are to come will make the actions Atreus has taken so far appear pious (744–45). Seneca here is exploiting one of his favorite paradoxes in the play, the theme of an evil so terrible that it can negate lesser evils. What might have seemed the ultimate evil is merely a step along the way: "Sceleris hunc finem putas? gradus est" (746–47). The messenger applies another variation on the paradox as he expresses his wish that the bodies of the children were in fact exposed to carrion, an outrage which comes to seem benevolent in the light of what is to come.

In the closing exchange between Atreus and Thyestes, Atreus counters Thyestes' bewildered questions and protests with terse, pointed rejoinders (1100–1103). Reminding Thyestes of the adultery he committed, Atreus successfully undercuts his brother's invocation of the gods as guardians of virtuous men (1102–3). Throughout the play Thyestes' portrait as a well-meaning, repentant soul diverts the reader's attention from his crimes, which Atreus bitterly recounts early in the play (221–24). The impression of Thyestes' helpless innocence is heightened not only by the monstrosity of Atreus' revenge but also by Atreus' delusion that Thyestes was plotting a similar revenge against him (1104–10).[57] Now, at the end of the play, Atreus pointedly reminds Thyestes of his culpability.

The play ends with Atreus mocking Thyestes' final, anguished plea for divine revenge. When Thyestes consigns Atreus to the the gods for punishment, Atreus responds by consigning Thyestes to his own children for punishment. In a retort which echoes Thyestes' own words, Atreus continues to insist on the moral symmetry between his brother and himself:

> *Thyestes.* his puniendum vota te tradunt mea.
> *Atreus.* Te puniendum liberis trado tuis. (1111–12)

Atreus' witty *double entendre* suggests that Thyestes' children will punish him for his misdeeds not only morally but also physically, by churning his stomach.[58] As he did in the grim jokes he made earlier, Atreus speaks of the children as if they were still alive. His reference to Thyestes' children as a means of punishment again demonstrates the fulfillment of the Fury's curse on Tantalus' descendants.

The example of Atreus certainly seems to confirm Hunter's argument that Senecan tragedy leaves the evildoer in "manic possession" of the goal he sought.[59] Except for the pointed rejoinder, *agnosco fratrem* (1006), Thyestes

[56] Lines 144–48 refer to Tantalus' crime.

[57] Cf. Atreus' earlier expression of this conviction (already mentioned): *meum bibisset* (918).

[58] Williams (above, note 9) 54 sees in Atreus' remark a prediction for Thyestes of "the most terrible bout of indigestion in history."

[59] G. K. Hunter, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (New York 1978) 182–83.

seems helpless to defend himself against Atreus' sadistic wit in the closing section of the play. But the fact that Atreus has successfully accomplished his revenge does not finally satisfy him even now. Here, as before, the tenuous nature of Atreus' "manic possession" is revealed both by his own shifting criteria for success and by his dependence on Thyestes' reactions.[60] Even as he congratulates himself over the successful manipulation of his brother, Atreus remains frustrated that he cannot gain still greater control over him. This frustration continues even after Atreus informs Thyestes of his deed, when Atreus laments that his brother didn't *knowingly* eat his children (1065–68). And near the end of the play, Atreus claims that his revenge would have been nullified, if Thyestes had not bemoaned his fate (1097–98). Even Atreus' triumphant witticism in the closing line of the play—"Te puniendum liberis trado tuis" (1112)—perhaps carries an implication unintended by him: the curse on the house will continue, and Atreus' crimes will be avenged through another of Thyestes' children, Aegisthus.[61]

Hunter's phrase, "in manic possession," is revealing: the manic, insatiable nature of Atreus' revenge renders it inherently unstable. Seneca insists upon the vulnerability of the victim, to be sure, but also portrays the perpetrator of the crime as a victim of the vicissitudes of his passion. Motto and Clark, using Atreus and Medea as examples, perceptively point out that the triumph of evil in Senecan drama is qualified by the portrayal of the evildoers as insatiable.[62] Indeed, the play illustrates the truth of the Stoic axiom that the worthiest, most secure possession is self-possession.

Another of the drama's central themes concerns the cancerous nature of evil. Destructive irrational impulses, once admitted into the soul, can easily expand to overtake it entirely. Atreus' epigrammatic remark, "You will not avenge crimes unless you surpass them" (*scelera non ulcisceris, nisi vincis* [195–96]) can be taken as a keynote in the play's portrait of evil. Seneca's obsession with deeds that negate previous conceptions of evil is no mere witticism or rhetorical trope, but a reflection of the mounting horrors of Seneca's age. Herington, defending the *Thyestes* against the charge that it is gratuitously violent, puts its gruesome episodes in the context of the political realities of the period:

> The mad, meticulous murder-ritual in the Palace yard, the diabolical cookery, the garlanded reveler quaffing wine and blood with

[60] In *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (New Haven 1985) 61–62, Gordon Braden argues that Atreus, who needs Thyestes to confirm his accomplishment, searches in vain for "some crowning touch" for his revenge: Atreus is the ironic position of "Hegel's Master, who finds that recognition by the Slave he has defeated cannot be the recognition that would sustain him..."

[61] For a reference to the next stage in the continuing cycle of violence, see the speech by the ghost of Thyestes in the prologue of the *Ag.* (23–36). Significantly, the ghost links Atreus' crime with Aegisthus' revenge through the metaphor of drinking: Thyestes drank in the Fury's commands to produce Aegisthus by an incestuous union with his daughter ("non pavidus hausi dicta, sed cepi nefas" [*Ag.* 31]).

[62] Motto and Clark (1982) (above, note 27) 134.

> unaccountable tears—for Seneca these are only pictorial by-products of the more terrible realities with which he was concerned in the tragedies, the prose and the Julio-Claudian court. *Thyestes* is in fact the most clearly Stoic, and in some ways the most compassionate and human, of the dramas.[63]

The images of "filling" and "pressing" that pervade the play exemplify the Senecan principle about the expansive nature of evil. In the portraits of both Atreus and Thyestes Seneca presents the consequences of abdicating conscious control and responsibility for one's actions.[64] The brothers' surrender to passion is framed in similar terms: both are seized by tumultuous, powerful forces they cannot resist and do not understand.[65] Staley's argument that the brothers represent "two sides of a thematic unity" is cogent:[66] the portraits of Atreus and Thyestes in Act 5 (and indeed, throughout the play) are complementary. They both attempt to convince themselves that they have gained mastery of themselves through their mastery of the externals of power and control, but neither one "masters his mind sufficiently."

Atreus posits a moral equivalence between Thyestes and himself. Throughout the play Atreus argues that since both he and Thyestes are equally corrupt, he must strike first to prevent his brother from committing the same crime.[67] According to Atreus, only the thought that Atreus' children might be Thyestes' own prevents his brother from serving them up to Atreus (1104–10). The tyrant's need to establish a moral equivalence between his brother and himself explains his strange wish that Thyestes should not only enjoy the meal, but eat it knowingly. As Atreus knowingly planned the murders, so Thyestes must knowingly eat the meal; as Atreus took pleasure in preparing the banquet, so Thyestes must take pleasure in eating it. Atreus' gruesome puns about the banquet as a perverse union of father and sons reveal the tyrant's sense of poetic justice: he views the banquet as a justifiable means of avenging Thyestes' perverse union with his wife.[68]

[63] Herington (above, note 34) 208. Also cf. Regenbogen (above, note 7) 216, who argues that Seneca's new conception of the tragic grew in part from the terror, violence, and fear of imminent death that pervaded first-century imperial Rome.

[64] Cf. Staley (above, note 32) 241–42 on the role of an initial, conscious acceptance of passion.

[65] Cf. Atreus' "rapior et quo nescio, sed rapior" (261–62) with Thyestes' "alioque quam nitor abductus feror" (437). Both brothers use the term *tumultus* to describe the confusion into which they are thrown (cf. Thyestes' *Quis hic tumultus viscera exagitat mea?* [999] with Atreus' *tumultus pectora attonitus quatit* [260]).

[66] Staley (above, note 32) 236. The duality Staley draws between "the power of passion and the possibility of its being controlled" does not apply to the scene under consideration here.

[67] Cf. also 193–95 and 271–72.

[68] It is perhaps not too far-fetched to see in the sexual implications of the banquet a foreshadowing of the next stage in the cycle of revenge: Thyestes'

Although the play's imagery establishes clear parallels between the brothers, the drama as a whole works against Atreus' repeated attempts to establish a moral symmetry between them. Thyestes' appetite for power leads him unwittingly into atrocity, but Atreus consciously allows himself to be devoured by a maniacal, insatiable lust for revenge. In his portrait of Atreus, Seneca dramatizes a principle of evil relevant to the horrors of our own age: men or nations, transforming a lust for vengeance into a divine mission, are capable of committing the greatest crimes against humanity. Atreus' methodical sacrificial slaughter illustrates the fundamental truth that brutal crimes are often committed in the most fastidious way, for the most "pious" motives.

Through his clever, sadistic jokes, Atreus seeks to ridicule his victim's dreadful predicament. Indeed, Atreus successfully uses Thyestes himself as his instrument of revenge,[69] playing on his brother's moral weaknesses. Yet as helplessly confused and divided as Thyestes is, his song portrays a man engaged in moral conflict. Doubts he had about accepting Atreus' offer resurface disturbingly, and he feels a foreboding of the coming catastrophe. Thyestes thus displays a moral awareness which is absent in Atreus. When his fears are realized, Thyestes is able to turn this moral awareness to his advantage through his pointed recognition of his brother's nature: *Agnosco fratrem* (1006). Thyestes' assertion reflects a presence of mind and clarity of moral vision lacking in him earlier. He attains a moment of tragic recognition, not only of his brother's character but also of his own. Thyestes' recognition prompts the audience to come to its own recognition of the nature of the "entertainment" Atreus has been offering. Although Thyestes had tried to convince himself to continue trusting Atreus (962–63), he now emerges from his delusions and, through his philosophical parry, reasserts his humanity and dignity.

Such intervals of moral lucidity are rare and ephemeral in Senecan tragedy, however, and the ending of the play does not leave the reader with a secure moral. Seneca's comic or farcical treatment of suffering and death intensifies the sense of man's radical alienation which the tragedy conveys. Senecan wit is purposefully disturbing and unsettling, exposing man's subjection to destructive inner forces. Thyestes is the archetypal tragic man in Seneca: driven by suppressed longings and lacking a moral foundation, he easily falls victim to the pervasive evil of an apparently godless world. Seneca's tragedy transforms the myth of Thyestes into a philosophical fable in which the catastrophe results directly from Thyestes' moral compromise.[70]

Using an array of comic techniques and conventions, Atreus encourages the audience to view Thyestes as ridiculous and his tragic predicament as grotesque. Yet the portrait of Atreus' own inhumanity undermines his attempt to turn his brother into a subhuman comic spectacle, and the comedy he employs ends up

incestuous union with his daughter (a union described in terms which recall the banquet in *Agam.* 28–36).

[69] Cf. Atreus' boast to his attendant that he will use a weapon more deadly than iron or fire in avenging Thyestes' crimes: *Ipso Thyeste* (259).

[70] Cf. Herington (above, note 34), who puts Thyestes' dilemma in the context of choices faced by "the practicing Stoic" and by Seneca himself (208).

working against him to create a gruesome portrait of man's proclivity for evil. The drunken, gorged Thyestes singing at Atreus' table makes a monstrous spectacle indeed. But Seneca invites us to confront a more monstrous spectacle still, that of Atreus' diseased soul.[71]

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