CHAPTER 3

A craftier Tereus

THRACIUM NEFAS

TIT. How now, Lavinia? Marcus, what means this?
Some book there is that she desires to see.
Which is it, girl, of these? . . .
BOY. Grandsire, 'tis Ovid's *Metamorphoses* . . .
(Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* 4.1)

1

Explicitly invoked by the Fury in the prologue and by Atreus in his inspired monologue, the allusive pattern which links significant moments of *Thyestes* to the Ovidian tale of Tereus and Procne (*Met.* 6.412–674) is crucially important. Both stories culminate in the revengeful slaughter of children who are then cooked and served to their ignorant fathers in perverse banquets; neither narrative spares its readers the goriest details.

Seneca's recognition of Ovid's Tereus as the foremost archetype of narrative violence will be heeded centuries later by Shakespeare in *Titus Andronicus*, a play steeped in classical sources (Seneca and Ovid), and routinely criticized for its grotesque excesses of violence and goriness.[1] As Marcus first catches sight of Lavinia's violated body, he not only evokes the Ovidian model, but reiterates the agonistic comparison with Ovid inaugurated by Seneca's *maiore numero* (2.4.38–43):

> Fair Philomel, why she but lost her tongue,
> And in a tedious sampler sew'd her mind;
> But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee.

[1] On *Titus*' classical background see Waith (1957); Tricomi (1974); Miola (1983) 42–75; Bate (1995) 90–2; James (1997) 42–84. The emphasis on the Ovidian model is justified, but should not detract from the importance of *Thyestes*, much favoured by an earlier generation of critics, as appears now to be the case (Baker (1939) 119–39, endorsed by Bate (1995) 29, n. 2). The strong metatheatrical component of *Titus* is arguably inspired by Seneca rather than Ovid.

> A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,
> And he hath cut those pretty fingers off,
> That could have better sew'd than Philomel.

Lavinia overcomes the silence to which mutilation has doomed her b pointing her family to the relevant section of the *Metamorphoses*, just the horrors of *Thyestes* emerge from the silence that Tantalus' ghost ha advocated in vain, thanks to the powerful inspiration of Ovid's *Thraciu nefas*.

Thematic parallelism offers an ostensibly adequate explanation for th intertextual relationship, a relationship which is further encouraged b the connection that the *Metamorphoses* establish, in turn, not only wit Sophocles' prototypical (and lost) *Tereus*, but also with Accius' *Atreus*, on of Seneca's most influential models.[2] On a more general level, it is hardl surprising to find the *Metamorphoses* registering in the intertextual back ground to Senecan tragedy, whether one might want to explain this perva sive phenomenon as a generic ('Silver'?) stylistic affinity or a more pointe signifying strategy.[3] Plotting, however, is not the only aspect of these text that bears comparison, and I will in fact postpone this issue for the tim being.

As we have seen, the Fury acknowledges the hellish atmosphere of th Tereus story[4] and places her own endeavours under the aegis of Tereu *nefas*, advocating a new 'Thracian *nefas*'[5] with even more victims.[6] Th strategy of excess announced at the outset is clearly a very important aspec of the way in which *Thyestes* will negotiate its relationship with the Ovidia model. But even more significant is the presence of such a clear program matic intention at the core of a section of the play with strong metadramati resonances. *Thracium fiat nefas* is the founding gesture of a tragedy whic will come to light under the ominous auspices of its astonishingly violen precedent. Indeed this opening announcement instructs any compariso of the two texts to take into account the whole span of Ovid's episod and not just its climactic resolution, even if the Fury stresses (if the text i

[2] The most significant points of contact between Accius' *Atreus* and Ovid in this episode are registere by Bömer (1969–82) II. 117. On the possible connections with Accius' *Tereus*, and in general, se Fränkel (1945) 377–81. Jacobi ((1988) 153) argues against a direct connection between Seneca an Accius.

[3] The issue of the relationship between Seneca and Ovid has received considerable attention (recentl from Jacobi (1988)), but a satisfactory critical analysis is still missing.

[4] This atmosphere and its implications will be discussed by Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos i their forthcoming monograph on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

[5] The whole episode of Tereus, Procne and Philomela begins in Ovid with the words *Threicius Tereu* (6.424), almost an internal 'heading'.

[6] *Maior* can also carry metaliterary overtones, as, famously, in Virg. *Aen.* 7.44–5 (see above, p. 31).

sound) that the finale will indeed form a privileged point of contact: 'not yet does Thyestes cry for his sons – and when will he [sc. Atreus] lift his hand?' (58–9: *nondum Thyestes liberos deflet suos | ecquando tollet?*).

The story of Tereus and Procne, to be sure, is not just a celebrated tale of violence, revenge and moral ambiguity which displays significant analogies with the plot of *Thyestes*. More importantly, the myth of Philomela can be considered the ur-myth about the origin of a certain type of poetry, one which is produced 'by the disorder of relations and the confusion of identity represented as incest, cannibalism or civil war',[7] and is fuelled by the dark forces of violence and vengefulness. In the background of *Thyestes* stands the incestuous relationship between Thyestes and his sister-in-law Aerope. This concern for perturbed family connections (*dubius sanguis*, 240)[8] will lead Atreus to pour his nephews' blood into his brother's cup, to find a cannibalistic resolution to the fratricidal strife that for a Roman audience inevitably recalls the horrors of civil war. By positing at the outset such a strong correlation with the Procne episode, the plot of *Thyestes* alerts us to its powerful implications for a reflection on poetry, its power and its dangers.

This set of associations is recognized in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, where it is actually amplified and extended, as several characters deploy their passions – lust, revenge, ambition – in self-consciously metatheatrical fashion. The arch-villain Aaron is a master of words – as his name suggests[9] – who engineers the larger part of the plot and is fully conscious of his metatheatrical role (5.1.63–6):

> For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres,
> Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
> Complots of mischief, treason, villainies,
> Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed.[10]

His lover and accomplice Tamora is equally aware that she is setting in motion 'the complot of this timeless tragedy' (2.3.265) as she writes and delivers a fake letter which will precipitate the death of Titus' sons. Later in the play she tries to deceive Titus by staging a nightmarish pantomime ('I must ply my theme', 5.2.80) in which she acts as 'Revenge' ('I am not Tamora: | She is thy enemy and I thy friend. | I am Revenge, sent from th'infernal kingdom...', 5.2.28–30) and her own children are cast in the

[7] Kilgour (1990) 33. [8] See below, p. 102.

[9] 'An Elizabethan audience would have known that the biblical Aaron had an eloquent, persuasive tongue (Exodus, 4.10–16)' (Bate (1995) 125).

[10] 'Lamentable to hear about, yet done in order to excite pity' (Bate (1995) 247).

roles of 'Rape' and 'Murder'. Titus himself, as he prepares to take his own revenge, invokes the Ovidian mastertext, 'For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, | And worse than Procne I will be revenged' (5.2.194–5), and proceeds to stage his own version of the Thyestean banquet: 'I'll play the cook' (5.2.204).

Most strikingly, Shakespeare's Lavinia collapses the two Ovidian archetypes of female ability to overcome censorship and repression through a mediated form of quasi-artistic expression. She is a novel Philomela, as she makes explicit by pointing out the relevant sections of the *Metamorphoses*, but she then proceeds to write down the names of the villains with a staff on a 'sandy plot' (4.1.69), much like Io had done, once metamorphosed into a cow (*Met.* 1.649–50). Both writing and poetry are born under the same sign – that of a violated woman who cunningly devises alternative means to tell her story.[11]

Words play an important role already in the first part of the story of Tereus. Overcome by his desire for Philomela, Tereus showers her with emotional language which is supposedly conveying Procne's desire for her sister to come to visit her, but in truth merely encodes his lust into acceptable (speakable) forms: *facundum faciebat amor* ('love made him eloquent', *Met.* 6.469). It is thanks to this elaborate and deceitful speech that Tereus is able to overcome his father-in-law's disapproval and depart with Philomela (6.473–4). Beguiling words become once again Tereus' preferred weapon, when he falsely reports to his wife that Philomela is dead and misleads her with a moving description of *commenta funera* (6.565). Only once in this first part of the tragedy does language function transparently. Significantly, this happens when Tereus, alone with his prey, unveils to her the true nature of his unlawful and unholy desire (6.519–26):

> iamque iter effectum iamque in sua litora fessis
> puppibus exierant, cum rex Pandione natam
> in stabula alta trahit silvis obscura vetustis
> atque ibi pallentem trepidamque et cuncta timentem
> et iam cum lacrimis, ubi sit germana, rogantem
> includit fassusque nefas et virginem et unam,
> vi superat frustra clamato saepe parente,
> saepe sorore sua, magnis super omnia divis.

The voyage now is done, and now they leave the weary ship and land on their own shore; and then the king drags off Pandion's daughter up to a cabin in the woods, remote and hidden away among dark ancient trees, and there pale, trembling,

[11] Cunning being a trait 'most associated with the feminine domain': Zeitlin (1996) 349, 358.

fearing everything, weeping and asking where her sister was, he locked her, and revealed his own black heart and ravished her, a virgin, all alone, calling and calling to her father, calling to her sister, calling, even more, to heaven above.

This time words do tell the truth, and this truth is the central crime of the scene. Indeed, Tereus consistently embodies the connection between *nefas* and words, both when he exploits them in order to conceal his desires, and when, once the restraining factors represented mainly by the presence of Pandion have been overcome, he is finally free to remove the mask of repression and voice his desire.

The privileged relationship between words and *nefas* is also apparent *ex negativo* in the brief section where Philomela vows to report the whole truth about Tereus' crimes. She will set aside her modesty and speak up (6.544–8):

> ipsa pudore
> proiecto tua facta loquar; si copia detur,
> in populos veniam; si silvis clausa tenebor,
> inplebo silvas et conscia saxa movebo.
> audiet haec aether, et si deus ullus in illo est.

I'll shed my shame and shout what you have done. If I've the chance, I'll walk among the crowds: or, if I'm held locked in the woods, my voice shall fill the woods and move the rocks to pity. This bright sky shall hear, and any god that dwells on high!'

Her wish is brutally crushed by the mutilation that Tereus inflicts on her as she tries to speak, *luctantem loqui* (6.556). The violent removal of Philomela's tongue shatters her illusion that words, if clear and explicit, can still have a role in the world of *nefas*. It is interesting to contrast the dark setting in which Tereus reveals his passion to her (6.524: *fassus . . . nefas*), redolent of the obscure, menacing shadows that haunt infernal or semi-infernal landscapes – one is reminded of the *locus horridus* in *Oedipus* and *Thyestes* – with Philomela's vain invocation of a divine order represented by the *aether*'s listening to her (6.548).

The second 'act' of Ovid's narrative is taken up with Philomela's cunning attempt to reveal the hidden truth, and Procne's plotting of a terrible revenge against her husband. It is in this context that words – spoken or otherwise conveyed – again play a crucial role. Philomela has no way to express her feelings verbally. Her mouth lacks a means of expression (6.574: *os mutum facti caret indice*), but she can resort as an alternative to *ingenium* and *sollertia* (6.575).[12] The novel *indicium sceleris* will thus be a craftily textured cloth (6.576–9):

[12] *Ingenium* being, of course, a poet's virtue; see *OLD* s.v. 5.

> stamina barbarica suspendit callida tela
> purpureasque notas filis intexuit albis,
> indicium sceleris, perfectaque tradidit uni,
> utque ferat dominae, gestu rogat;

on a clumsy native loom she wove a clever fabric, working words in red on a wh ground to tell the tale of wickedness, and, when it was complete, entrusted it t woman and by signs asked her to take it to the queen.

The outcome is indeed a *carmen*[13] (6.582), which her sister can read the fabric in spite of the constraints and the repressive violence to whi its author has been subjected: Philomela, though horribly mutilated, h found what T. S. Eliot will call her 'inviolable voice' (*The Waste La* 101). Philomela's muted words actualize the double meaning of *textus* both 'cloth' and 'text' and evoke the metaphorical association betwe 'weaving' and 'plotting':[14] her message thus overcomes the repressive for of violence described in the earlier part of the story. To the strength Tereus' actions Philomela opposes the silent reproach of her embroider messages, powerful enough to unleash Procne's avenging *furor* (6.581–6)

I touch here upon an issue of crucial importance in the ideological textu of *Metamorphoses*. There, too, Philomela's web strengthens the equation poetic word and return of the repressed which I have highlighted in *Thyest* The structural function of Philomela's 'words' is not dissimilar to that Tereus' normal verbal utterances. His dissemblance breaches the decoru of silence that he should be respecting and displaces his feelings. The lim tations imposed upon Philomela are those of violence and confinement, y words function in the same way, by slyly overcoming the barrier of silen and inaction. It is precisely this consistency in the way words operate th makes them ambivalent and double-edged. Words are inherently disrupti because they can subvert moral principles just as easily as nefarious ones

Even in the latter case, however, the ultimate balance of good and e is difficult to ascertain. Certainly Philomela's encrypted 'words' overcon Tereus' immoral orders, and manage to reveal the fate she has suffere The impressive might of her words is emphasized by their positioning in

[13] Ovid does not reveal explicitly whether the *carmen* is composed of images or letters (see Bön (1969–86) 11.156). The connotations of *carmen*, however, are unmistakable.

[14] Bergren (1983) 71–5; Scheid and Svenbro (1996).

[15] Other emphases, of course, can be preferred. In a perceptive article (Segal (1994)), for instan Charles Segal has chosen to insist rather on Procne's ability to keep her reactions at bay wh she deciphers her sister's messages. This is certainly an important aspect of the narrative, whi touches more on the issue of the reader's response to the (poetic) message. As far as emotional a cognitive dimensions are concerned, however, this episode underlines the liberating potential of t poetic word. I would also be inclined to argue that what Segal considers to be the unsatisfacto 'pseudosolution' of the final metamorphosis is in fact a compromise between an attempt to someh condemn the cruelty of the tale and the need to preserve the story's confused moral balance.

linear sequence which connects crime to punishment: Philomela's 'writing' becomes an indispensable instrument of revenge. Yet this revenge is highly problematic, because Procne's actions will reduce the moral chasm between herself and Tereus to dangerously narrow proportions. Procne's perverse revenge problematizes the reader's ability to side emotionally with either the victims or the villains.[16] The words used to describe Procne's reaction on reading the woven *carmen – fasque nefasque | confusura ruit poenaeque in imagine tota est* ('she stormed ahead, confusing right and wrong, her whole soul filled with visions of revenge', 6.585–6) – apply equally well to the readers' confusion, as they suspect in Procne's muted rage the intimation of further unspeakable violence to come. Struck by the unusual message that she has received, Procne reacts with apparently restrained emotion. Once again, the words and cries that her *dolor* would have normally elicited must be stifled in the presence of a violent, repressive force. In this case, however, Procne's conscious and voluntary gagging of her emotions is geared towards a delayed yet fuller satisfaction, one that will come not from words but from deeds. For us, reading this scene of reading, this is yet another confirmation of the psychological impact of words, which rouse emotions and stir up violence.

Since they are the cause of Procne's avenging murder, Philomela's words testify once again to the close connection between words, which work against repression, and *nefas*.[17] By revealing to her sister the *nefas* she has endured, and stirring her Bacchic *furor*,[18] Philomela is functioning here as a quasi-divine mover of events. If Procne's reaction is reminiscent of Virgil's Amata – the Bacchic woman who sets in motion, at the human level, the violent narrative of the second half of the *Aeneid* – Philomela is structurally analogous to Juno and the Fury, whose decision and responsibility it is to stir Amata to action. Thus, by speaking unspeakable words, Philomela is endowed with the same inceptive function assumed by the Fury in the prologue to *Thyestes*.

[16] A point well stressed by Segal (1994).

[17] I am thus inclined to disagree with Segal's rather optimistic conclusion that 'as the web of words that calls attention to its textual origins, it [the weaving] objectifies the crime and in that way enables the reader to take the full measure of its horror' (Segal (1994) 266).

[18] The Dionysiac connotation is reinforced by the Horatian model for *fasque nefasque* at *Met.* 6.585, that is, *Carm.* 1.18.7–11 (at 10): *ac ne quis modici transiliat munera Liberi, | . . . | . . . monet Sithoniis non levis Euhius, | cum fas atque nefas exiguo fine libidinum | discernunt avidi.* Note the reference to *Sithoniae . . . nurus* immediately following at *Met.* 6.588. See *Titus Andronicus* 2.1.133–5 (Demetrius, Tamora's son, as he accepts Aaron's invitation to 'revel in Lavinia's treasury' (131)): '*Sit fas aut nefas*, till I find the stream | To cool this heat, a charm to calm these fits, | *Per Stygia, per manes vehor*' (the last line is based on Sen. *Phaed.* 1180: *per Styga, per amnes igneos amens sequar* (Phaedra vowing to pursue Hippolytus)).

It is important to stress that female characters embody this force of (written) poetic creation associated with a removal of repression, as explicitly recommended, indeed, by Ovid himself at *Ars amatoria* 3.611–32. Even under strict control, women will always be able to deceive – *dare verba* – husbands and custodians: *tot licet observent, adsit modo certa voluntas, | quot fuerant Argo lumina, verba dabis* ('even if as many guardians watch you as Argos had eyes, you'll manage to deceive if you really want to', 3.617–18). We face here an instance of the 'Bacchic' paradigm that endows women and goddesses with a subversive creative power such as that of Juno in the *Aeneid*,[19] who challenges and sabotages at every turn Jupiter's fixed, teleological prescriptions. This disruptive power is one that Atreus – a 'Bacchic' character whose self-identification with a female character, Procne, highlights his complex gender connotations – claims for himself. But we also face a subversive transformation of the traditional prescription of female silence and tameness into an exuberant, active and pernicious loquacity. Readings of the Procne story that are informed by a feminist perspective have focused especially on the 'voice of the shuttle', and its potential to grant voice and power to the silenced weaving of women.[20] It is a voice whose profoundly disturbing energy is never lost sight of: it can denounce crimes, and call for revenge, just as easily as it can unleash the powers of hell.

Thyestes lays great emphasis on the force of poetic language. The prologue, as we have seen, represents both the bond between words and *nefas*, and the violent dialectic between repression and its removal which words precipitate. Other parts of the play, too, insist on this connection. Atreus' cunning use of words – appealing, mendacious and ultimately victorious – is consistently matched against Thyestes' inability to look beyond their literal surface, hence his final demise. Atreus has read his Ovid, and displays through a number of revealing allusions a detailed knowledge of Tereus' story, in particular of Procne's avenging plans. Thyestes, on the other hand, fails to 'remember' Tereus' plight and is thus unprepared to counter his brother's plan. He betrays his lack of awareness when he proclaims that *lacrimis agendum est* ('it is time for tears to push forward my case', *Thy.* 517) – a doomed proposition which ironically ignores Procne's much more effective injunction to the contrary: *'non est lacrimis hoc' inquit 'agendum'* (Ov. *Met.* 6.611) and Juno's authoritative precedent *'non lacrimis hoc*

[19] On women as 'catalysts, agents, instruments, blockers, spoilers, destroyers' see Zeitlin (1996) 347.

[20] See Joplin (1984), an insightful reading of the Tereus and Procne episode from a feminist standpoint. See also the recent essay by Richlin (1992). On the theme of violence in Ovid see Galinsky (1975) 132–40.

tempus' ait Saturnia Iuno (Virg. *Aen.* 12.156: 'no time for tears, now said Iuno daughter of Saturn'). Atreus' highly figurative and rhetorically powerful form of expression embodies the poet's own craftmanship. Like the Muses, who – traditionally – can sing the truth, but can also sing convincing lies,[21] poets can bend words to express any feeling and any emotion, whether true or false, deeply moral or astonishingly cruel. New prominence, too, is granted to the notion that the play presents itself as a way to overcome ideological, literary and ethical limitations. The strength of Philomela's web is indeed the strength of *Thyestes* as a whole.

Both texts show that the words of poetry can reveal unexpected extremes of violence, and that there is no limit to the creativity of human wickedness. Seneca competes with his model at a metanarrative level as well, further blurring the distinction, already problematic in Ovid, between good and evil. Atreus' desire to surpass all previous horrors powerfully reflects the play's agonistic relationship with its literary ancestor.[22] By remembering and repeating well-known criminal deeds, those of Tereus and Procne, Seneca is already raising the moral stakes of his own writing, since his rewriting will necessarily exemplify a new, bloodier advance in the literary depiction of horrors, and will necessarily result from yet another brutal breach of the *decorum* of silence. If Tereus' and Procne's final metamorphosis guarantees that their violence will forever be encoded in the bloody stains of their feathers, then Seneca's play testifies that the message has not been lost.

II

After highlighting, in Ovid's narrative, concerns and reflections which carry perceptible metaliterary overtones, I would like to focus on a comparative analysis of the two plots, which, by introducing for the first time a set of concepts central to the rest of this book, will greatly assist an understanding of some key features of Seneca's play. It is useful to look at analogies and important differences between the two episodes, especially outside the comparison between the two banquet scenes: if we focus a comparison exclusively, or even predominantly, on these sections, we may end up playing down the extent to which the two texts clash in their articulation of the plot.

On the one hand, Ovid plots his story on a large narrative stretch which encompasses a series of episodes that are all closely linked to each other

[21] Bergren (1983) is excellent on the specific connection between Muses, women, truth and language.
[22] See Tarrant (1985) 130.

and are all equally indispensable for a coherent understanding of the final
His story is neatly divided into two main sections, the first one leadin
to Philomela's rape and mutilation, the second, chronologically distin
(*Met.* 6.571: *signa deus bis sex acto lustraverat anno*, 'through all the twelv
bright signs of heaven the sun had journeyed'), centred upon Procne's r
venge and leading up to the banquet and the final metamorphosis. *Thyeste*
on the other hand, chooses to stage only the last part of the confrontatio
between the two brothers, and voices the causes of Atreus' *furor* in a limite
number of carefully worded, almost coded references. Yet the programmat
reference to the Thracian *nefas* which defines the Fury's creative intentio
invites further comparisons between the two plots.

To begin with, the first part of the Tereus episode foregrounds the sam
themes of deceit and betrayed trust that play an equally important ro
in *Thyestes*. In Ovid's poem, the narrator's voice explicitly insists on th
contrast between reality and appearance which only Philomela's cunnin
stratagem will reveal to Procne. Tereus, madly in love with his wife's siste
is able to conceal his lust under the veil of soothing words (6.469–74):

> facundum faciebat amor, quotiensque rogabat
> ulterius iusto, Procnen ita velle ferebat;
> addidit et lacrimas, tamquam mandasset et illas.
> pro superi, quantum mortalia pectora caecae
> noctis habent! ipso sceleris molimine Tereus
> creditur esse pius laudemque a crimine sumit.

Love made him eloquent; and, if at times he pressed his pleas too far, why, Procn
wished it so; he even wept, as if she'd ordered tears. Ye Gods above, how black th
night that blinds our human hearts! The pains he took for sin appeared to prov
his loyalty; his villainy won praise.

In Pandion's trusting of his daughter to Tereus, we recognize what Thyest
himself will do: both men maintain that *fides* will guarantee the safety
their offspring. Pandion reminds his son-in-law of his obligations (498), an
Thyestes, in an astounding feat of self-deception, goes as far as claimin
that those children will in fact ensure his own loyalty: 'as pledge of m
faith, brother, take these innocent boys' (*Thy.* 520–1: *obsides fidei accipe*
hos innocentes, frater).

The second segment of the story told by Ovid – Philomela's rape
does not find a direct counterpart in Seneca's play. It is very much presen
however, in the background to *Thyestes*, that part of the mythical plo
which is not directly staged but is alluded to and offers a very interesting,
incomplete, explanation of the events Seneca portrayed. Philomela attack

Tereus, blaming him for the violence she has endured, for ripping apart the family (*Met.* 6.537–8):

> omnia *turbasti*: paelex ego facta sororis,
> tu geminus coniunx, hostis mihi debita poena.

You have confused everything. I'm made a concubine, my sister's rival; you're a husband twice, and Procne ought to be my enemy!

The charge is not dissimilar to Atreus' invective against his brother as he is planning his revenge (*Thy.* 222–4):

> coniugem stupro abstulit
> regnumque furto: specimen antiquum imperi
> fraude est adeptus, fraude *turbavit* domum

My wife he took away with his debauchery; he stole my kingdom; the ancient token of our dynasty he gained by fraud, by fraud unsettled our house.

This background is necessary in order to understand fully the rigorous selection of relevant aspects of the plot which Seneca operates *vis-à-vis* his model. All the intertextual pointers concur in establishing a connection between Atreus and Procne.[23] As he sets out to repeat the horrors witnessed by Tereus' family in the even more audacious form willed by the Fury, Atreus follows in Procne's footsteps while planning the *nefas* and carrying it out.

The allusion to Ovid is clarified in the crucial scene of *Thyestes* where Atreus reveals his plans to the counsellor. Even in this deceptively clear-cut case it is interesting to look for specific insights on how Seneca has systematically reworked his model.

The beginning of Atreus' monologue condenses in a question the experiences and emotions which Ovid had divided between Philomela and Procne. In Atreus' words to himself (178–80)

> post tot scelera, post fratris dolos
> fasque omne ruptum questibus vanis agis
> iratus Atreus?

after so many crimes, after a brother's treacheries, and breaking every law, you are busy with idle complaints – is this Atreus in a rage?

we recognize Procne's impatient exhortation to action after Tereus' crime has been revealed (*Met.* 6.611–13):

[23] Both are compared to a tigress, at Ov. *Met.* 6.636–7 and *Thy.* 707–14, on which see below, p. 123 and nn. 111–12.

> 'non est lacrimis hoc' inquit 'agendum,
> sed ferro, sed siquid habes, quod vincere ferrum
> possit.'[24]

'This is not time for tears, but for the sword', she cried, 'or what may be mightier than the sword.'

This intertextual strategy sheds some light on the multifaceted character of Atreus, who, in the portion of the plot that is elaborated by Seneca, is a new avenging Procne, but also represents himself as a female victim – a battered Philomela. It is through allusion that Atreus' protestations about his own rights acquire the special emotional value warranted by Philomela's innocence. And a similar overtone could readily be detected in line 220, where Atreus replies to the shocked counsellor that, when it comes to Thyestes, the very notion of *fas* becomes blurred beyond recognition. *Fas est in illo quidquid in fratre est nefas* ('whatever is wrong to do to a brother is right to do to him', *Thy.* 220) recalls, in its apparent oxymoron, the moral justification that Procne uses to absolve herself as she contemplates the punishment she has in mind for her husband: *scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo* (*Met.* 6.635: 'loyalty for a husband like Tereus is a crime').

It is Atreus, again, who recalls Procne's words – *magnum quodcumque paravi:* | *quid sit adhuc dubito* (*Met.* 6.618–19: 'some mighty deed I'll dare, I'll do, though what that deed shall be, is still unsure') – as he announces his plan: *haud quid sit scio,* | *sed grande quiddam est* ('I do not know what it is, but it is some great thing', *Thy.* 269–70).[25] And both Atreus and Procne are able to imagine in detail the final outcome of their revenge: *poenaeque in imagine tota est* (*Met.* 6.586: 'her whole soul is filled with visions of revenge') prefigures Seneca's *tota iam ante oculos meos* | *imago caedis errat* ('already before my eyes flits the whole picture of his slaughter', *Thy.* 281–2). In order to pursue his revenge, Atreus displays qualities traditionally associated with women in Greek and Roman culture: 'secrecy, guile, entrapment'.[26] Thyestes' trust in the traditionally male qualities of steadfastness and earnestness which he advertises especially in act 3 will prove to be no match.

[24] See also the exchange between the *satelles* and Atreus at *Thy.* 257 (on which see above, p. 17, n. 28): SAT. *ferrum?* AT. *parum est.* SAT. *quid ignis?* AT. *etiamnunc parum est*, which may also recall Accius' Procne planning her revenge – *atque id ego semper sic mecum agito et comparo* | *quo pacto magnam molem minuam* (634–5Ribbeck² = 446–7 Dangel). On the possible connection between the Dionysiac atmosphere of Accius' *Tereus* and *Thyestes* see p. 133, n. 137 below (on 446–7 Dangel).

[25] See Ovid's Medea (*Her.* 12.212): *nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit*, which echoes in a metanarrative vein Propertius 2.34.66 (*nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade*): Bessone (1997) 32–41, 282–4.

[26] Zeitlin (1996) 360.

In the final revelation of their plot, Atreus and Procne show their affinities once again: *quidquid e natis tuis | superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes* ('whatever is left of your sons, you have; whatever is not left, you have', 1030–1) recalls *'intus habes, quem poscis'* (*Met.* 6.655: 'it's inside you, the son you're looking for'). Also the more shaded connection between Atreus and Philomela resurfaces in the cruel joy with which Atreus appears to accomplish what for the girl had remained an unfulfilled desire. To Philomela's muted satisfaction – *nec tempore maluit ullo | posse loqui et meritis testari gaudia dictis* (6.659–60: 'she never wanted more her tongue to express her joy in words that matched her happiness') – he can oppose eloquent cries of joy: *nunc meas laudo manus, | nunc parta vera est palma. | perdideram scelus, | nisi sic doleres* ('Now I praise my handiwork; now is the true palm won. I would have wasted my crime, if you weren't suffering this much', *Thy.* 1096–8).

The analogy established in the text between Atreus and his Ovidian models lends him a psychological *chiaroscuro*, and further discourages the temptation to oppose bluntly his supposedly all-negative *ethos* to the supposedly positive *ethos* of his brother Thyestes. From the *Metamorphoses*, in fact, Seneca inherits the key issue of the ethical responsibility of the main characters (Tereus and Procne), an issue which the final metamorphosis pointedly refuses to resolve by sealing the fate of both spouses in a new, but eternal, condition. To Tereus' responsibility Ovid opposes a monstrous revenge with intractable moral implications. If Tereus' tyrannical cruelty is neither lessened nor justified by the terrible punishment his wife prepares for him, neither does Procne personify a fully endorsable moral option. The pointed and systematic connection between the *Metamorphoses* and *Thyestes* reinforces precisely this precarious and destabilizing morality.

The impact of the final banquet on the overall ethical connotation of the Ovidian characters applies, in reverse, to the tragedy as well. For one thing, the link between Atreus and Procne invites the reader to credit Atreus with the same objective, if partial, justification which monstrous suffering guarantees to both Procne and Philomela. Secondly, the association between Thyestes and Tereus reflects upon this apparently blameless victim the inhuman traits which make Tereus' redemption impossible even in the context of his extreme punishment.

A synopsis of the two plots offers one final insight. The Tereus episode foregrounds the notion that victims will turn into executioners, and, of course, *vice versa*. Philomela and Procne's revenge against Tereus is increasingly horrific. At the end of the tale Tereus, the violent and cunning villain,

is thoroughly defeated. This intertextual model introduces in *Thyestes*, to a lesson of reciprocity and continuity that is pointedly reinforced by oth features of the play. The Fury had already made clear from the very b ginning, in a series of generic statements, that the vicissitudes of reven and counter-revenge would continue: *certetur omni scelere et alterna vice stringatur ensis* ('Make them vie in every kind of crime and draw the swo on either side', 25–6). The story of Tereus, Procne, Philomela and the successors unequivocally confirms this sinister intimation.

III

The two lines along which I have chosen to carry out a comparison betwee the Procne episode and *Thyestes* neglect a number of basic characteristi of the Ovidian story, since they only concentrate on analogies and diffe ences of plot and on thematic implications. Yet at this point it is fruitfu to take into account a more basic and specific implication suggested b this intertextual connection. As I have already mentioned in passing, th Fury and Atreus do not simply refer to a generic plot for the Procne stor but explicitly invoke the specific instantiation of that mythical story-matte accomplished by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. The story of Tereus was ce tainly a productive tragic theme at least from Sophocles onwards,[27] yet it to his epic predecessor, rather than, for instance, to the tragedy of Acciu that Seneca insistently refers. The importance of this choice is heightene of course, by the prominent position of the Fury's initial arousal of th *Thracium nefas* in a prologue fraught with programmatic, metaliterary im plications. Thus the recognition of the fact that Tereus and Procne are tragi characters only throws into sharper relief the fact that *Thyestes* invokes a epic text as its authorizing Muse, and as a fundamental model that mus not only be equalled, but surpassed.

Generic affiliations become all the more pertinent when Ovid him self steps into the picture, so that simple labels such as 'epic' (or indee 'tragic') cease to be encompassing or definitive: the *Metamorphoses* provid numerous and dazzlingly complex instances of generic cross-fertilizatio and manipulation. Ovid himself, to begin with, looks to Sophocles an Accius as his models and is engaged in the same exercise of transgeneri appropriation that we witness in *Thyestes* – only the direction is differen It is reasonable to assume that Seneca capitalizes on that complexity, as h alludes in his play both to an epic poem, which in turn alludes to tragi

[27] An exte

models, and to those tragedies directly, thus creating an intricate web of allusive relationships which resembles the stemma of a heavily contaminated textual tradition. Seneca imitates Ovid not only in the subject matter and expressive options of his work, but also in his intricate intertextual protocols, which thrive on multiple references. Yet again, to extrapolate the methodological and structural aspects of the phenomenon jeopardizes a full appreciation of its core element: why does the tragedy of *Thyestes* begin with an explicit and programmatic evocation of epic?

The Fury herself provides an interesting point of comparison. The Fury who dominates the prologue is a direct descendant of the Virgilian Fury responsible for bringing the second half of the *Aeneid* into existence. An epic Fury, she coherently invokes epic models, although she is herself closely connected in turn with a tragic precedent, Euripides' Lyssa. It is almost as if tragedy could not refer back directly to tragedy, but should necessarily rely on an epic filter and thus testify to the impossibility of an immediate connection, to a hiatus in the continuous tradition of tragic writing. Here again Senecan tragedy highlights its posteriority, its position outside the mainstream of tragic writing. But, again, it is not just any filter that is interposed between Seneca and, say, Sophocles and Accius. It is specifically the filter of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and peculiar aspects of Virgil's *Aeneid* – the epic of violence and *horrida bella* rather more than the celebration of heroic virtues and beliefs. This might very well be the most far-reaching implication of Seneca's choice. By giving pride of place to the Fury of *Aeneid* 7 and to Ovid's Procne he has not only demonstrated the shifting boundaries of generic affiliations, thus reclaiming from the start his freedom to experiment; he has also presented epic as the expression of *nefas*, as the corrupted, doomed voice of history gone sour. It is not easy for History directly to enter the hallowed halls of mythical tragedy, especially of a tragedy written in a land, a language and a time other than that of Classical Athens. But the shadow of history, with its pains and burdens, can reveal itself, indirectly, in the peculiar selection of epic themes to which we are treated in the prologue. Epic, we are warned, is not going to provide a sound moral counterpoint to the towering horrors of tragedy. Epic is in fact nothing less than the explicit justification invoked by the Fury: after Virgil's civil war and stories such as Ovid's Procne, only further violence and horror are conceivable, if anything *maiore numero*.

At the end of this book, once we can rely on a more substantial dossier, I will deal more again with the issue of epic elements in Senecan tragedy, and in particular with the hypothesis that the presence of epic might encourage in the audience the form of critical spectatorship which Bertolt Brecht

considers the defining characteristic of 'epic' theatre – a detached reflection on the actions performed on stage which would certainly befit a tragic form that is rich with philosophical intimations.[28] For the moment I emphasize the suggestion that 'epic' acquires early on in *Thyestes* a function which does not seem to encourage such a reflection on drama. Rather, epic appears from the very beginning of *Thyestes* as the voice of destruction and violence, of endless horrors and cruel, often excessive revenges. Other instances, from other plays, will do little to soothe our sense of surprise and anxiety as we contemplate the polluting force of infernal epic.

CRIME, RITUAL AND POETRY

'I'll play the cook'
(Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* 5.2)

A playwright, a spectator and an actor, Atreus is also high priest of his own rites, even a god himself. In act 4, where he appears in the messenger's detailed narrative, all these aspects are revealed together:[29] in the climactic moment of his *nefas*, standing alone in the recesses of his palace, Atreus shines through in all his idiosyncratic depravity, as he undertakes what looks like a Dionysiac *sparagmos*[30] with due respect for all the procedures of a proper Roman sacrifice.[31] It is in this murder-as-sacrifice,[32] already present to a certain extent in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*[33] and Accius' *Atreus*,[34] that Atreus achieves the paradoxical combination of 'holy and horrible, fulfilment and uncleanness, sacrament and pollution' which is at the heart of the Dionysiac experience.[35]

The location for Atreus' sacrifice is out of this world. Behind and below the public quarters, the royal palace 'splits up' (649: *discedit*) into many rooms, until it reaches an *arcana regio* ('a secret spot') located 'in its innermost recess' (650: *in imo . . . secessu*). Only barren trees survive in this

[28] Ch. 6, pp. 246ff.
[29] On this scene see esp.: Burkert (1983) 104–6; Petrone (1984); Picone (1984) 94–7; Tarrant (1985) 180; Dupont (1995) 193–6.
[30] For child-murder in Dionysiac rituals see Dodds (1960) xix and n. 3; Burkert (1983) 105.
[31] Human sacrifice is considered un-Roman (Livy 22.57.6), though occasionally attested (Suet. *Aug.* 15). On sacrifice in Rome see Scheid (1988); on its imagery, Huet (1994).
[32] See Euripides' *Cyclops* for the association of cannibalism and sacrifice: there 'the horror of cannibalism is intensified by the careful, civilized sacrificial practice' (Seaford (1984) 152).
[33] See *Ag.* 1096–7 (where the children of Thyestes are called *sphagas*), with Zeitlin (1965).
[34] Accius 220–2 Ribbeck² = 51–3 Dangel: *concoquit | partem vapore flammae, veribus in foco | lacerta tribuit*. The sacrificial overtones of the description are revealed by the use of *focus*; see Dangel (1995) 281–2, with further references.
[35] Dodds (1960) xvii.

locus horridus,[36] a natural enclosure in the bowels of a man-made building. This space is filled with the 'gifts' (659: *dona*) which played crucial roles in the family's history – the trumpets, Oenomaus' chariot, the broken wheels – a pictorial documentation of the ruling house's tormented past. Spoils of war regularly celebrate the rulers' achievements, and Seneca is here alluding pointedly to Latinus' *regia* in *Aeneid* 7.[37] Differences, however, abound, because Seneca takes pains to emphasize how far we find ourselves from the public rooms of the house, those where celebratory displays are to be expected. In this deep, dark, private domain, relics of the past line up like memories in the recesses of the mind. Everything in there is hidden, and frightening even to mention: *quidquid audire est metus | illic videtur* ('whatever is dreadful even to hear of, there is seen', 670–1). An old crowd freed from ancient graves (671–2: *errat antiquis vetus | emissa bustis turba*, 'the crowd of the long-since dead come out of their ancient tombs and walk around'), and 'creatures more monstrous than men have known' (673: *maiora notis monstra*) dwell in the grove, and they make the upper chambers of the palace freeze with terror (677: *attonita*)[38] as they wander at night amidst the cries of the gods of death (668: *feralis deos*). Even the light of day cannot restrain the horrors of the grove: 'terror is not yet allayed by day; the grove is a night unto itself, and the horror of the underworld reigns even at midday' (677–8: *nec dies sedat metum: | nox propria luco est, et superstitio inferum | in luce media regnat*). It would be difficult to conceive of a *locus* more evocative of the fundamental characteristics of the unconscious, indeed a place where nature, in all its dark, hostile power, survives in spite of the elaborate superstructures that encircle and delimit its sway, and where memories of the past roam unchecked as a constant source of fear.[39] Remarkably, it is in this place of passion, violence and memory that knowledge elects to hide: 'from here the sons of Tantalus are used to enter on their reign, here to seek help when their affairs are in distress or doubt' (657–8: *hinc auspicari regna Tantalidae solent, | hinc petere lassis rebus ac dubiis opem*).

Several analogies connect this grove to the one where Laius is evoked from the dead in *Oedipus*, and the metapoetic dimension of that scene

[36] On *locus horridus* and Seneca's role in the development of the motive see Schiesaro (1985), with further bibliography. A reference to this type of description is to be found in *Letters to Lucilius* 41.3, a letter which will be discussed below, p. 127.

[37] Smolenaars (1998).

[38] *Attonitus* can be used in connection with poetic inspiration, and has a distinct Bacchic connotation: above, p. 51, n. 60.

[39] In Freud's celebrated simile, the mental realm of phantasy is described as a 'nature reserve' where useless and even harmful entities are allowed to grow unchecked (*Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud (1915–17) = *SE* XVI.372, with Orlando's seminal treatment (1993) 17).

is aptly matched in *Thyestes* by the ceremonial aspect of the sacrifice, likely catalyst for metadramatic engagement.[40] Atreus, *sacerdos* of his rit (*Thy.* 691), is here also a *vates*, a magician-poet like Tiresias, who perform arcane rituals and utters a sinister *carmen*: *ipse funesta prece | letale carmen o violento canit* (691–2: 'he himself with a sinister prayer chants the death-sor with a violent voice') recalls *carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax decantat ore* (*Oed.* 561–2: 'over and over he unfolds a magic song, an with frenzied lips, he chants a charm').[41] Significantly, the trembling the grove at Atreus' magic intonations (*Thy.* 696–9: *lucus tremescit, to succusso solo | nutavit aula, dubia quo pondus daret | ac fluctuanti simil* 'the grove begins to tremble; the whole palace sways as the earth quake uncertain in which direction to fling its weight, and seems to waver') ca be compared both with the onset of horror at Tiresias' words (*Oed.* 576 and with the effects of Tantalus' pollution in the prologue of *Thyestes*, y another passage with strong metapoetic implications: *sentit introitus tuos domus et nefando tota contactu horruit* ('your house feels your entering an has recoiled in horror from your unutterable contagion', *Thy.* 103–4). Subversion of nature, too, occurs on both occasions. The Fury observ that waters start to flow backwards (107–8), and the messenger remarl on the startling metamorphosis of wine into blood as Atreus performs h ritual libation (700–1).

Just as Tiresias evokes Laius' truth from the underworld, and Lucan Erictho turns to a corpse in her search for knowledge, it is in these hellis deadly abodes that Atreus conducts his painful negotiations between pa sion and knowledge, past and present, prediction and memory, poetry an death. The text's insistence on the hostile, dark nature of the place is n a symptom of rhetorical excess, for the sacrifice must be performed in a uncanny underworldly location if it is to display fully its connection wi the forces of *nefas*. But several details in the description point to a specif significance of the *locus horridus*. The *adytum* where the sacrifice takes pla is located deep inside the house, 'in a deep, secluded place' (650: *in imo . secessu*), a 'cavern' (681: *specus*) covered by 'an ancient grove' (651: *vetustum . nemus*), overshadowed by dark vegetation. The Freudian 'symbolic geo raphy of sex' is transparent.[43] More importantly, it is very significant

[40] See Hornby (1986) 49–66. A further metadramatic aspect of Atreus' behaviour can be gleaned the details of how he cooks the boys' entrails (765–7). Cooking is often characterized, in comed as an activity with metadramatic connotations. On cooks in comedy see Dohm (1964); on t metadramatic implications they hold in Plautus see Gowers (1993) 50–108.

[41] On this passage, see above, pp. 11ff. [42] See ch. 1, p. 38.

[43] S. Freud, *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ('Dora')* (Freud (1905) = *SE* VII.94, 9 See *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud (1900) = *SE* V.348, 355); *On Dreams* (Freud (1901) = V.684); *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Freud (1916–17) = *SE* XV.158–60).

the context of the tragedy's plot. Atreus' crucial concern regards the true paternity of his children, which, he would like to believe, can be ascertained by the observation of Thyestes' reaction to the death of his own offspring, and an inspection of their entrails. Thus Atreus' descent to the womb-like *arcana... regio* ('secret spot', 650) beneath the royal palace becomes a fitting symbolic exploration of *Aerope*'s entrails, where the truth about his *dubius... sanguis* conceivably resides. The careful investigation of the boys' entrails (755–8) is a *mise en abyme* of the only (impossible) 'inspection' which could actually assuage Atreus' doubts, that of his adulterous, even incestuous, wife. It is in her womb that the original *nefas* has taken place, the confusion of generations feared by Phaedra's nurse: 'are you preparing to mix the father's wedding-bed with the son's, and to welcome in your impious womb a mixed-up progeny?' (*Phaed.* 171–2: *miscere thalamos patris et gnati apparas | uteroque prolem capere confusam impio?*).[44] The whole structure of the play, moving from one level of the action to a deeper, inner one, and culminating in Atreus' *extispicium*, deep in the womb-like recesses of the palace, dramatizes this descent into the secrets of conception.[45]

This symbolism is much developed by Shakespeare, who stages the worst horrors of *Titus Andronicus* in a dark forest, 'A barren detested vale... forlorn and lean' (2.3.92–3).[46] Its central feature is an 'abhorred pit' (98) with a strong Senecan colouring (2.3.98–104):[47]

> And when they show'd me this abhorred pit,
> They told me, here, at dead time of the night,
> A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
> Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
> Would make such fearful and confused cries,
> As any mortal body hearing it
> Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly.

The 'pit' evokes King Lear's obsessed description of female genitals (*King Lear* 4.6.123–8):[48]

> Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
> Though women all above:
> But to the girdle do the Gods inherit,

[44] The womb of Thyestes' incestuous daughter is also a receptacle of *nefas* (*Ag.* 31): *coacta fatis gnata fert utero gravi | me patre dignum* (33–4).

[45] See Irigaray's analysis ((1985) 243–364) of the cave in Plato's *Republic* as a womb-like 'source of all representations' (Robin (1993) 111), with Leonard (1999).

[46] A locus of 'instinctual, evil and fatal force' (Marienstras (1985) 45).

[47] By a sort of metonymy, the pit in Shakespeare also comes to symbolize (metadramatically) the classical underworld and its hellish sources of inspiration; see Tricomi (1974) 18.

[48] Tricomi (1974) 18 n. 3; Willbern (1978) offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the pit in *Titus*.

> Beneath is all the fiend's: there's hell,
> There's darkness,
> There is the sulphurous pit – burning, scalding,
> Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah.

But Seneca's gendered landscape of the unconscious implies ramifications which go well beyond Shakespeare's important, if somewhat transparent, imagery. Atreus' *arcana... regio*, as we have seen, finds a close parallel in the *lucus ilicibus niger* (530) at the very heart of *Oedipus*. There the imagery is even more heavily loaded with sexual connotations. Not only do we find a forest which is permanently kept in the dark, but the emergence of the hellish creatures from the depth of the earth is described as a painful birth, and a monstrous one since dead creatures are brought to the light (572–81):[49]

> 'rata verba fudi: rumpitur caecum chaos
> iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur.'
> subsedit omnis silva et erexit comas,
> duxere rimas robora et totum nemus
> concussit horror, terra se retro dedit
> gemuitque penitus: sive temptari abditum
> Acheron profundum mente non aequa tulit,
> sive ipsa tellus, ut daret functis viam,
> compage rupta sonuit, aut ira furens
> triceps catenas Cerberus movit graves.

'I have uttered prevailing words; blind Chaos is burst open, and for the people of Dis a way is given to those living on earth.' The whole forest shrank down, then raised its foliage, the oaks were split and the whole grove shook with horror; earth withdrew and groaned deep inside: whether Acheron did not tolerate an assault against its hidden depths, or the earth itself broke down its barriers in a thunder to give way to the dead; or three-headed Cerberus furious with rage shook his heavy chains.

Poetry comes to light through a painful birthing process which gives shape to the passions residing in the underworld, and is thus associated with the fear-inspiring secrets of the female body. The story of Procne and Philomela also indicated a strong connection between poetic inspiration and womanhood. A raped and silenced Philomela had found in her thirst for revenge the strength and ingenuity for 'writing up' Tereus' crimes. Philomela turns her fury into the cunning plot which takes her husband in. As she kills Itys, she overcomes her maternal function and perversely forces on Tereus an impossible birth (*Met.* 6.663–5):

[49] Note that the *sacerdos* begins his rites by excavating the ground: *tum effossa tellus* (550).

et modo, si posset, reserato pectore diras
egerere inde dapes inmersaque viscera gestit,
flet modo seque vocat bustum miserabile nati.

Gladly, if he could, he would want to open his breast and eject that terrible feast, the entrails immersed into his own, and now he cries and calls himself his son's miserable tomb.[50]

Thyestes, too, will be forced to a perverse 'delivery' as he vomits his own children.[51] But Atreus, acting as the main purveyor and creator of poetic plots and explicitly acknowledging his identification with Procne and Philomela, also inevitably erodes the boundaries of his masculinity. *Nefas* and its poetry are described as they emerge from the feminized entrails of the earth. Medea – another avenger acting as a playwright – will put it with epigrammatic clarity: *parta ultio est:* | *peperi* (*Med.* 25–6: vengeance is born: I have given birth).

In the merging of frenzy and control, of *ira* and *ordo*, which characterize the sacrifice, Atreus reveals once more his deeply metadramatic role. As a playwright, he carefully devised and executed a complex plot; as a *sacerdos*, he once again plays both instigator and executor. In both cases, he fuses inspiration and *technē* in the heady cocktail which provokes awed pleasure, the sacred rituality of the priest in communication with the divine, the frenzied poet able to express divine *enthousiasmos* in refined, regulated language.

The messenger himself seems to marvel at Atreus' deliberate observance of ritual, which is reported after the physical setting of the scene has been engagingly described (*Thy.* 682–90):

quo postquam furens
intravit Atreus liberos fratris trahens,
ornantur arae – quis queat digne eloqui?
post terga iuvenum nobiles revocat manus
et maesta vitta capita purpurea ligat;
non tura desunt, non sacer Bacchi liquor
tangensque salsa victimam culter mola.
servatur omnis ordo, ne tantum nefas
non rite fiat.

After Atreus entered there in a frenzy, dragging his brother's children, the altars are decorated – who has adequate words for this? Behind their backs he forces the noble hands of the youths, and their unhappy heads he secures with a purple band. Nor is incense missing, nor the holy liquor of Bacchus, and the knife, which

touches the victim with salted meal. Every detail is preserved, lest such a cri
take place in breach of ritual.

The scene we are invited to imagine is eerily compelling: here is the w
tyrant dominated by *furor*, finally alone with his designated victims, w
no one in sight, who chooses to perform his vengeance with carefully cho
sacrificial gestures, fussing about minutiae.

Atreus himself seems to be aware of the fact that he has been perfor
ing a real sacrifice when he later describes his actions to Thyestes: 'w
deep-driven sword I wounded them; I slaughtered them in front of
altar; I appeased the sacred fires, offering their death as a vow' (1057
ferro vulnera impresso dedi, | *cecidi ad aras, caede votiva focos* | *placa*
These words resonate alongside Atreus' question to the *satelles* in act
'tell by what means I may bring ruin on his wicked head' (244: *profa*
dirum qua caput mactem via).[52] Although the meaning of *macto* in t
particular context must be closer to 'afflict' than to 'sacrifice', the techni
use of the verb cannot surely be too far away, and a paraphrase such
'how I might offer sacrifice in such a way as to torment Thyestes mo
aptly conveys the implications of the line.[53] The messenger, too, reso
to specific sacrificial language: 'he wonders whom he should first sacrif
to himself, whom he should slaughter second' (713–14: *quem prius ma*
sibi | *dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet*).[54] The *nefas* must
performed, of all things, *rite*, *comme il faut*. The sacrifice is divided into
customary phases, *praefatio*, *immolatio* and *litatio*, to be followed later
the *epulum*. All the most important aspects of the ritual are mentioned
the narrative: the altar is decorated (684), the victim's head is bound wit
vitta (686), wine and incense are used (687), as is *salsa mola* (688). No p
of the procedure must be skipped (695: *nulla pars sacri perit*); order m
triumph (689: *servatur omnis ordo*); *ordinare* is indeed a source of delig
(715–16: *nec interest – sed dubitat et saevum scelus* | *iuvat ordinare*, 'it d
not matter, but still he hesitates, and has pleasure in ordering his sava
crime').

Although by far the most explicit, *Thyestes* is not the only Senecan trage
to represent murder in the guise of sacrifice.[55] *Hercules furens* provides
eloquent example, by way of a noticeable departure from its Euripide

[52] *Dirum* casts Thyestes in the role of a cursed victim; the expression *mactare* (*caput*) is indeed u
in sacrificial contexts – see, for example, Livy 21.45.8, Sil. 5.653.

[53] See Putnam (1995) 275.

[54] Traina (1981) neatly sums up the case for understanding *mactet sibi* rather than *sibi* | *dubitat*.

[55] On this and other perverted sacrifices in Seneca see especially Petrone (1984) 40–3 and Dup
(1995) 189–204.

model. Hercules' frenzied slaughter takes place in the context of a sacrifice he is offering to the gods, which cruelly degenerates into the killing of Hercules' own wife and children (*Her. F.* 898–9: *nunc sacra patri victor et superis feram | caesisque meritas victimis aras colam*, 'now I shall make offerings for my victory to my father and the gods, and honour their altars as they deserve with sacrificed victims'). Amphitryon connects sacrifice and murder by explicitly addressing his son with these charged words: *nondum litasti, nate: consumma sacrum* ('you have not yet made full offering, son; complete the sacrifice', 1039). In *Troades* the Greeks present the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena as a required sacrificial offering to the dead Achilles: the youths' blood is needed to placate his rage and allow the fleet to sail from Troy. The conflicting points of view in this tragedy, with the Trojans actively questioning, emotionally if not ideologically, the actions of the Greeks, problematize the equivalence between sacrifice and murder. Hippolytus' death in *Phaedra*, too, has distinctly sacrificial overtones. Theseus slowly and painfully reconstructs his son's corpse in a fashion reminiscent of similar rituals after sacrificial slaughters, when the body of the slain animal is rearranged in its proper order. Such belated *pietas*, incidentally, is conspicuously absent from *Thyestes*.[56]

The pervasiveness of sacrificial motives in Senecan drama invites the audience to reflect on a religious problematic which might well have been thought of as anachronistic and misplaced, once tragedy had severed its connection with its traditional Greek roots. Sacrifice occupies a central role in Greek tragedy. In Euripides especially, perverted human sacrifice, such as the slaying of Pentheus or of Heracles' children, marks a larger social and religious crisis,[57] as, in different ways, does Seneca's exploitation of this particular motif. The analogy, however, stops here. Euripidean sacrifices ostensibly attempt to heal the wound they inflict: the poet ultimately reconstructs and reaffirms tradition through the cathartic power of sacrifice.[58] *Thyestes* makes no overt attempt at reparation, symbolic or otherwise, for the extraordinary disruption signalled by Atreus' perverted sacrifice. The prominence of sacrifice in *Thyestes* thus seems to correspond to yet another aspect of Seneca's intertextual and metaliterary strategy. I remarked in chapter two that framing the potentially self-enclosed structure of a 'traditional' play that is redolent of Greek forms affords a reflection on the viability of that particular type of tragedy. Similarly, giving sacrifice the same structural importance it enjoyed in Euripides, but depriving it

[56] Valuable observations in Petrone (1984) 31–4. *Oedipus* displays sacrifice in two central scenes, but they are not directly connected with murder (291–402 and 530–658).
[57] Zeitlin (1965). [58] Foley (1985).

of any constructive, forward-looking value, betrays the awareness that this particular escape from *nefas*, too, is gone for ever.[59]

The Roman model for the association between sacrifice and murder is the final scene of Virgil's *Aeneid*. On the verge of accepting Turnus' supplication, Aeneas is struck by the sight of Pallas' baldric, and buries his sword in the neck of his enemy (12.945–9):

> ille, oculis postquam saevi monimenta doloris
> exuviasque hausit, furiis accensus et ira
> terribilis: 'tune hinc spoliis indute meorum
> eripiare mihi? Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas
> immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit.'

[Aeneas] feasted his eyes on the sight of this spoil, this reminder of his own wild grief, then, burning with mad passion and terrible in his wrath, he cried: 'Are you to escape me now, wearing the spoils stripped from the body of those I loved? By this wound which I now give, it is Pallas who makes sacrifice of you. It is Pallas who exacts the penalty in your guilty blood.'

Seneca amplifies the sacrificial protocol latent in this scene (though Aeneas' *immolat* is telling enough) and makes it register at the forefront of his account. Just as *Aeneid* 7 had been prominent in the inaugural movements of the tragedy, the end of the poem is powerfully evoked in the climactic scene of *Thyestes*, in the action that effectively brings the plot to a close, if not to a closure. The end of *Aeneid* 12 seems to have found in Seneca a reader devoted to the point of obsession, who confronts that scene and its disturbing implications time and again in his tragedies.[60] The comparison with the *Aeneid* yields important insights. At the conclusion of the poem we face 'an almost too neatly schematic dramatization of René Girard's theory of the "sacrificial crisis" ',[61] the breakdown of the *foedus* which Aeneas and Latinus had finally reached (*Aen.* 12.161–215). Aeneas' sacrificial murder of Turnus restores the violated order, but only by means of equally transgressive violence: the reparation is far from satisfactory, and far from final.

There is (fortunately) no need to rehearse here the vast body of criticism on the final scene of the *Aeneid*; suffice it to say that the comparison is instructive. In its basic outline, *Thyestes* offers a similar scenario. Thyestes has caused the violent disruption of order which Atreus concisely portrays in the statement *fas . . . omne ruptum* ('breaking every law', 179). His sacrificial

[59] A similarly deflating attitude can be discerned in Euripides' *Cyclops*, where Ulysses' companions are slaughtered with ritual accuracy; Seaford (1984) 151–3 and 180–1.
[60] As Putnam (1995) 246 rightly remarks. [61] Hardie (1993) 21.

killing of Thyestes' children fulfils the need for reparation and restoration, so much so that, in Atreus' words, it actually restores a *status quo ante* which might have been thought of as irrevocably lost. Whatever our assessment of Aeneas' behaviour, *his* explanation for the killing of Turnus is unequivocal: Pallas must be avenged.[62] This intertext thus emphasizes once again Atreus' deep conviction that he has been wronged and is seeking a justifiable retribution. His sacrificial killing is a direct response to Thyestes' violation of *fas* in the seduction of his brother's wife. The sacrifice would thus seem to heal the wound that Thyestes inflicted and restore the order that he upset. Atreus' retribution is especially apt in the light of the firmly held belief that incest and cannibalism are homologous acts.[63] Thus Thyestes' intercourse with his sister-in-law Aerope must be expiated with a similarly perverse and unnatural action: he will be forced to eat his own children.

As he implicitly identifies cannibalism and incest, Atreus displays in all its upsetting force the working of his peculiar form of logic. Incest 'pollutes' the body with the seed of a close relation; eating one's own children is a similar form of unacceptable 'ingestion'. Atreus identifies behind these two very different gestures a common element which becomes central to his thinking and on which he bases his course of action. Like Plato's tyrant, he overruns the boundaries which keep distinct facts and actions separate and follows a form of logic which is akin to the logic of the unconscious: analogies overcome differences and precipitate the identification of disparate actions. This form of generalizing thought was originally considered typical of schizophrenia, but it is one of the greatest achievements of post-Freudian thought to have realized that this strange logic, where symmetry replaces the rigid conventions of Aristotelian thought, is actually an ineliminable component of the mind, given free rein in the workings of the unconscious but normally kept at bay during conscious activity. It is interesting in this connection to look at an observation that Freud makes in *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage*:[64]

> In general, it may perhaps be said that the neurotic instability of the public and the dramatist's skill in avoiding resistances and offering fore-pleasures can alone determine the limits set upon the employment of abnormal characters on the stage.

[62] Note that Aeneas had already ordered a human sacrifice immediately after Pallas' death: Virg. *Aen.* 10.517–20 and 11.81–2.

[63] Pl. *Resp.* 571c–d with Parker (1983) 98 and 326 and Burkert (1983) 104. On the connection between sex and eating see Kilgour (1990).

[64] *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* (Freud (1942, but written 1905 or 1906) = *SE* VII.305–10

and rephrase it in the light of the observations above. Atreus' 'abnormali does appeal to the public precisely because it displays a form of logic a behaviour which does away with the restrictions of 'adult' Aristoteli logic. He does not appeal so much to our 'neurotic instability' as to t ineliminable part of our thinking which chafes at the 'unnatural' impositi of criteria such as non-contradiction, asymmetry, hierarchy. We do not ha to be closet cannibals to be taken in by Atreus' extraordinary flights of log which are part and parcel, of course, of his being a poet.

In *Thyestes* the disruption of bonds is rooted in the *alternae vices* of reali These events, left out of the play's direct dramatic focus, and only allud to in more or less detail, are surely 'real' in that they are subtracted from t stage manipulation we witness. While we are asked to focus only on t 'perversion' of Atreus' deeds, we might well wonder whether the reali he is trying to control and alter is any more acceptable or 'normal' tha his striking revenge against it. Interestingly enough, for all the empha that the reversal of the sun attracts in *Thyestes*, it lacks the prominen it had received in earlier texts, where it was credited with a fundamen cosmogonic function.[65] According to part of the earlier tradition, for i stance, Atreus' murder caused the sun to change its path once and for a In this play, characterized by the general absence of ethical certainties, t sun does indeed show its disgust at the murder and abruptly disappears the middle of the day, only to resume its regular route the following da Atreus' deeds, extraordinary as they may be, can only upset the order nature for so long, because after all they, too, are part of nature. What call 'normal' and 'abnormal' are generalizations that might well stand relative contrast to each other, but offer very little in the way of absolu certainty.

Just as there is no absolute limit to ethical disruption, there can hard be a well-defined sense of closure and ending to human revenge. killing Thyestes' sons instead of their father, Atreus follows a sacrifici protocol, but he also introduces an element which is consistent with h characterization in this play. Atreus' choice obeys a homeopathic pri ciple that is perfectly understandable within the norms of sacrifice.[66] the personal wound that most directly aggrieves him is the doubt ca by Thyestes' relationship with Aerope over the paternity of Agamemno and Menelaus, then killing Thyestes' sons repeats and returns the san wound, and fits in with the play's insistence on the notion that horror

[65] Burkert (1983) 105 and n. 13.

[66] Medea, too, chooses to kill her own offspring rather than Jason himself. See Girard (1972) 24

self-perpetuating.[67] Epicurus famously maintained that pain is either very intense, but brief, or long, but then bearable. *Thyestes* seems to show that evil can be both extraordinarily intense and potentially endless. Sparing Thyestes not only spares Atreus' double, but ensures the continuation of their duel in the family saga, ensures that revenge can be exacted not just once, but many times over. Thyestes' invocation to the gods, to a principle of absolute justice that would also entail a final moment of judgement, is rejected in favour of a new phase of human action. Leaving the conflict open, of course, exposes Atreus himself to possible future retribution, and his lot will not be spared. Closure cannot possibly appeal to the tyrant who had chided his counsellor for the simplistic suggestion that Thyestes be quickly dispatched (246–8). Nothing is in fact more alien to Atreus than his feigned willingness to forgive and forget: 'let all our anger pass away. From this day, let ties of blood and love be honoured, and accursed hatred disappear from our hearts'.[68] An unequivocal rejection of finality resurfaces towards the end of the play, when Atreus contrasts process and result: 'I do not want to see him miserable, but his becoming so' (907: *miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser*). Killing Thyestes' children will also guarantee the additional pleasure of watching him watch their death, or at least their corpses: 'it is a pleasure to note, when he sees his children's heads, how his complexion changes, what words his first grief pours forth' (903–5: *libet videre, capita natorum intuens, | quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor | effundat...*). Atreus has already built repetition into the structure of his revenge, killing the children himself a first time, and then forcing Thyestes to kill them, as it were, all over again; and the text reinforces this repetition by allowing the audience to hear twice, at least in part, the narrative of the murder, first from the messenger in act 4, and then, more succinctly, from Atreus himself in act 5 (1057–65).

However, Atreus' obsession with the repetition of revenge, his refusal of closure, will also prove to be his undoing. In the final line of the tragedy he gloats that Thyestes' punishment is not a hope for the future but a fact already accomplished (1112: *te puniendum liberis trado tuis* – 'for punishment,

[67] In this respect Atreus is the victim of his own logic; see above, pp. 117ff.

[68] 509–11: *quidquid irarum fuit | transierit; ex hoc sanguis ac pietas die | colantur, animis odia damnata excidant*. This statement is yet another one of Atreus' *double entendres*: he surely means it when he says *sanguis colatur*, but not in the way the sentence seems to convey. His own 'respect' for (his own) blood, together with the worry about the *dubius sanguis* that Thyestes has caused, is precisely the source of his *ira*. Another possible ironic connotation is detected by Tarrant ((1985) 164): '[t]he sacral overtones of *colatur* ('be worshiped') may also carry ironic force, since Atreus will in fact turn his bloodshed into a ritual act'. Tarrant also notes that *sanguis* recalls *sperat ira sanguinem* at line 504.

I deliver you to your children' – picks up *premor... natis* – 'I am weighed upon by my sons' of 1051), but he also foreshadows the reversal of fortunes that his offspring will endure. Indeed *te puniendum liberis trado tuis* could be applied to Atreus himself, since Thyestes' revenge will be accomplished with the killing of Agamemnon. This following phase of the family history shows the force of repetition: once again incest (between Thyestes and Pelopia) will lead to murder.[69]

The sacrificial proceedings of act 4 encapsulate the core motives of the play and its main character, as well as, arguably, the reason for its power and appeal. Atreus had already displayed in act 2 the strength of his Dionysiac inspiration and had shown in act 3 how cunningly and masterfully he could perform in order to achieve his goals. Here we finally realize that his project goes beyond the specific objective of revenge. His ambition is effectively to create a new world order (hence the ritual importance of *ordo*) in which the traditional gods lose their power, accepted political philosophy is shown to be useless and void, and even the traditional categories of order and frenzy can be deconstructed and redefined. Atreus' sacrifice is the most Dionysiac of rituals: the slaughter and cooking of victims. It is a ritual which uncannily represents both the establishment of civilization and a throwback to barbarity. Atreus does not necessarily portray Nero on stage, nor indeed should his behaviour inevitably be collated with the anedoctal evidence of extravagant cruelty which peppers Suetonius' *Lives*. The ritualization of violence encoded in the murder-as-sacrifice shows that Atreus is the incarnation of imperial power at a much more radical and discomforting level.[70] Almost from its inception that power had played an elaborate and risky game by suggesting, increasingly, the religious dimension of the emperor. First as a *sacerdos*, then as a *divus*, the emperor of Rome had (even in the West) relied more on the accretion of power and mystique than a careful exploitation of religious symbols would allow. Atreus shows the game for what it is – he is god to himself, and god to his subjects. His power makes him so. Dionysus, too, had become under Augustus an attractive symbol of power and regeneration, not to mention a useful figure for summoning the awed memory of Alexander. This, too, is a symbol which Atreus transforms into reality. In *Bacchae* the cunning god had shown the inevitable limitations

[69] On this connection see, in general, Irwin (1975). For the mythical plot see Hyg. *Fab.* 87 and 88; the latter offers a complicated and largely unparalleled version of the plot which, uniquely, offers a complete closure: Pelopia commits suicide; Aegisthus kills Atreus; Aegisthus *in regnum avitum redit* with his father Thyestes.

[70] The ritualization of violence in *Titus Andronicus* has more specific political ramifications; Bate (1995) 23–4.

of an earthly power based on the limited intellectual and imaginative resources of a Pentheus. In *Thyestes* Atreus shows that a ruler can appropriate the animal, wild strength of Dionysiac inspiration and use it for his own purposes in a seductively creative form. We are reminded of the revolution which Lucan had encapsulated in unsurpassable, if wholly unappreciative, terms at the very outset of his *Bellum Civile* (1.2): *ius... datum sceleri* – 'legality conferred on crime'. *Thyestes* makes us wonder whether *ius* and *scelus* can be so neatly distinguished and set against each other.

THE LOGIC OF CRIME

Videturne summa inprobitate usus non sine summa esse ratione? (Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.69)

I

Atreus' extraordinary power explicates itself on several levels. His dramatic, larger-than-life personality has many different sides, from wild aggression to comic penchant for punning; throughout, he is obsessed with ever bigger pursuits, transcending, by his own admission, the 'boundaries of mankind' (267–8) and aspiring to reach or even surpass the power of the gods. It is the gods, indeed, who constitute Atreus' ultimate point of comparison – his power over men is not open to discussion, and his doubts concern only how, not whether, he will defeat his brother. His *nefas*, he believes, will be such that even the gods will have to take notice and flee in horror (265–6; 888). His *nefas*, he finally gloats, has lifted him to the stars (885–6: *aequalis astris gradior*). In this exhilarating declaration of success Atreus combines the *nefas* of gigantomachy[71] and the proud claims of a cultural hero such as Lucretius' Epicurus, whose intellectual victory managed to expand the boundaries of human knowledge and 'exalt us mortals as high as heaven' (*De rerum natura* 1.79: *nos exaequat victoria caelo*).

As we have already seen repeatedly, it is unhelpful to import into the complex texture of the tragedy a system of moral categories that has been developed out of context, as the specifics of Atreus' case are bound to be bulldozed in the discussion of general principles.[72] It is far more important

[71] Interestingly enough, the motif is explicitly mentioned by Thyestes at 1084 among the guilty excesses that Jupiter has quashed in the past. Any such divine retribution of Atreus' *nefas* is conspicuously absent from Seneca's play. A cursory anticipation is also in the chorus's words at 806.

[72] An important analysis of Atreus is offered by Knoche (1941), who stresses his irrational and violent features, his 'spirit of anti-nature', the irredeemable madness rooted in his evilness, and connects them to Seneca's own experience under Caligula's reign of terror. The date of publication of the article, of course, is not irrelevant. See also Lefèvre (1985).

to understand the means by which Atreus overpowers Thyestes and in th process becomes the emotional fulcrum of the play. Atreus' engrossing en ergy derives from his superior intellectual ability to manipulate the vigou of his passions. His most powerful weapons are, firstly, the method h brings to his 'madness': the epigraph of this section quotes Cotta's use o Atreus (and Medea), in *De natura deorum* 3.68–9, as evidence that *ratio* i not a generous gift of the gods, because it can be turned to negative uses *videturne summa inprobitate usus non sine summa esse ratione?* ('does he no appear to have acted with the highest degree of criminality and at the sam time the highest degree of rationality?'). Secondly, Atreus is able to us language creatively (and passionately) as a weapon to overcome Thyestes fatally narrow literalness. Thirdly, he displays an instinctive comprehensio of human nature, and an ability to foresee and manipulate his opponent' reaction. Atreus is not a madman, of course. But he shows that there i much beyond Thyestes' unbending logic and referential use of language - that the passions associated with primal instincts and desires open up dif ferent forms of logic and expression. These may abandon the reassurin certainties of non-contradiction, but prove invaluable in the execution o Atreus' plot.

In the chthonic bowels of the palace Atreus chooses to 'enquire the fates (*Thy.* 757: *fata inspicit)* by looking at the entrails of his victims. The resul pleases him (759: *hostiae placuere*). We have already been offered an imag of Atreus as a hunter of traces. In act 3, as he is finally ready to meet hi brother, Atreus is certain that his plot is close to completion. Thyestes, i accepting to come back to Argos, has fallen into the trap: the prey, Atreu gloats, is firmly bound in the nets he has prepared (491: *plagis tenetur claus dispositis fera*). The hunting imagery is extended in the image that Atreu offers of himself immediately thereafter (496–505):

> vix tempero animo, vix dolor frenos capit.
> sic, cum feras vestigat et longo sagax
> loro tenetur Umber ac presso vias
> scrutatur ore, dum procul lento suem
> odore sentit, paret et tacito locum
> rostro pererrat; praeda cum propior fuit,
> cervice tota pugnat et gemitu vocat
> dominum morantem seque retinenti eripit:
> cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi –
> tamen tegatur.

I can scarcely contain my heart; hardly can my grief tolerate restraint. Thus a keen Umbrian dog, when he is kept on a long leash in pursuit of wild animals, and with lowered muzzle sniffs the traces, while through its lasting scent he perceives the

boar afar, he obeys and with silent tongue explores the place; but when the prey is closer, he fights with all his head, and moans and begs the master holding him and breaks away from his restraint: when his rage scents blood it cannot be concealed; yet it must.

This extended simile has often prompted reservations in critics who either fault its epic tone, dissonant in a dramatic context, or criticize its descriptive excesses.[73] It would be rash, however, to underestimate the importance of this detailed passage only because similar descriptions are offered by Ennius,[74] Virgil and Ovid. Indeed, a comparison with those influential models highlights once again the specific function of these lines in the context of the play, and offers a vivid and explicit representation of a crucial aspect of Atreus' character: his passion for, and success in, attaining knowledge and using it for his purposes.

The Umbrian-dog simile effectively depicts Atreus' intents and his heuristic methods. The dog possesses an instinctual drive which can be compared to Atreus' own *furor* and *ira*, but this is displayed only after a diligent enquiry has enabled it to discover the prey, and should remain subordinated to a strategy of dissimulation which can guarantee the successful outcome of the hunt (504–5: . . . *nescit tegi; | tamen tegatur*). In this respect Seneca's accurate choice of words to describe the search (*vestigat, sagax, scrutatur, sentit*) begs comparison not with generic hunting scenes, but, more specifically, with Lucretius' simile in book 1 of *De rerum natura* (404–8):

> namque canes ut montivagae persaepe ferarum
> naribus inveniunt intectas fronde quietes,
> cum semel institerunt vestigia certa viai,
> sic alid ex alio per te tute ipse videre
> talibus in rebus poteris caecasque latebras
> insinuare omnis et verum protrahere inde.

for as dogs, thanks to their nose, often find the resting place of a mountain prey, covered with leaves, once they have trodden on certain traces, thus in such matters you will be able to see by yourself one thing after another, and to penetrate all the secret recesses and extract from them the truth.

[73] For a reasoned defence and an analysis of possible models see Tarrant (1985) 162.

[74] The use of *sagax* is a direct – if limited – point of contact with Ennius, 332–4 Skutsch (340–2 Vahlen): – *veluti, [si] quando vinclis venatica velox | apta dolet si forte <feras> ex nare sagaci | sensit, voce sua nictit ululatque ibi acute*. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 22.188–93: 'but swift Achilles, relentlessly pressing on, kept on after Hektor. And as when a dog startles a fawn in the mountains and chases it out of its lair, through hollows and glades, and even if the fawn takes to cover and crouches in a thicket, the dog tracks it (ἀνιχνεύων) and runs it down – even so Hektor could not get away from the swift-footed Peleion.' See also Varius, *De morte*, fr. 4 Courtney, though the context may have been more ominous (Courtney (1993) 274).

Verbal correspondences are significant even if it is not necessary to postulate a direct correlation: Seneca speaks appropriately of *vestigia*, the fundamental object of venatic enquiry[75] and expands the description of the dog's careful exploration (*pererrat*, which stresses the accuracy and scope of the search, conveys some of the force of *montivagae*). Comparison with the models strengthens the point, since neither Virgil nor Ovid devotes comparable attention to this aspect of the search; they focus more on the final outcome of the hunt.

This simile sets the stage for the more intriguing notion that the sacrifice that Atreus performs is also an *extispicium*, a procedure meant to yield important information. The two details together open an interesting vista on a very important aspect of the plot which only occasionally surfaces in the text, but at all times stays firmly at the back of Atreus' mind. Atreus is uniquely able to combine the forceful determination of his willpower – an arcane, prerational inner strength – with the seemingly endless resourcefulness of his intellectual gifts. He is not only determined to take as cruel a revenge as possible on Thyestes for forcing him out of power – and his *furor* will help him to do precisely that – but also concerned with a rational (if obsessive) doubt which demands to be assuaged, in principle, by careful investigation, namely whether his children are actually his own or the illegitimate offspring of Thyestes' adulterous relationship with Aerope. The characterization of Atreus as an expert hunter and decoder of *vestigia*, I would argue, is best appreciated in the context of this investigation, and not only, as the simile suggests, in the context of his ability to deceive Thyestes in the rest of the play.

Atreus states his concern about the paternity of his children early in the play (220–4):[76]

> fas est in illo quidquid in fratre est nefas.
> quid enim reliquit crimine intactum aut ubi
> sceleri pepercit? coniugem stupro abstulit
> regnumque furto: specimen antiquum imperi
> fraude est adeptus, fraude turbavit domum.[77]

Whatever is wrong to do to a brother is right to do to him. What crime has he left untouched, or when has he ever recoiled from a sin? My wife he took away with his

[75] On the so called 'venatic paradigm' see Ginzburg (1992) and Cave (1988) 250–4; see later, p. 135, for the important presence of venatic metaphors in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

[76] In later versions of the play the presence of the illegitimate sons becomes a central motif; for a survey see Rossi (1989).

[77] See Accius 205 Ribbeck² = Dangel 33: *qui non sat habuit coniugem inlexe in stuprum*, with Lana (1958–59) 318. *Turbare domum* suitably recalls Aeschylus' μιαίνειν γένος (*Supp.* 225).

debauchery; he stole my kingdom; the ancient token of our dynasty he gained by fraud, by fraud unsettled our house.

Because of the *stuprum*, Atreus' house has been contaminated, his (positive) certainties shattered: 'my wife seduced, the solidity of my power is shattered, my house is polluted, my offspring uncertain – nothing is certain save my brother's enmity' (239–41: *corrupta coniunx, imperi quassa est fides,* | *domus aegra, dubius sanguis est et certi nihil* | *nisi frater hostis*). The revenge-plot aimed at punishing Thyestes thus doubles also as a trial which will try to ascertain the children's real lineage and soothe Atreus' torment about his *dubius sanguis*, an expression that condenses a crucial concern of Roman culture, that of *turbatio sanguinis*.[78] Accius' Atreus had expressed the problem lucidly (206–8 Ribbeck^2 = 34–6 Dangel):

> quod re in summa summum esse arbitror
> periclum matres conquinari regias,
> contaminari stirpem, admisceri genus.[79]

This I believe to be the greatest danger in matters of high state: when royal mothers are polluted, the family is defiled, the lineage mixed up.

At the conclusion of act 2 Atreus shares with the *satelles* the plan he has devised in order to test Agamemnon's and Menelaus' loyalty and, by implication, their paternity. He intends to make them accomplices in his revenge plot against Thyestes: a sign of hesitation on their part would reveal that Thyestes, not Atreus, is in fact their father (*Thy.* 325–30):

> consili Agamemnon mei
> sciens minister fiat et fratri sciens
> Menelaus adsit. prolis incertae fides
> ex hoc petatur scelere: si bella abnuunt
> et gerere nolunt odia, si patruum vocant,
> pater est.

Let Agamemnon be aware of my plot and carry it through, and let Menelaus stand by his brother, fully aware, too. Let this crime test how true are my uncertain offspring: if they refuse to fight and don't want to wage the war of hate, if they call him 'uncle', he is their father.

In the end, however, Atreus will abandon the plan to make his children aware of his intentions out of fear that they might unwillingly reveal what he is plotting (331–3). At the end of the play Atreus declares himself satisfied

[78] The term is used by Ulpian, *dig.* 3.2.11.1. On *dubius sanguis* see especially Guastella (1988) 68–72.

[79] For Seneca's Atreus, the 'greatest fault' *vis-à-vis* this 'greatest danger' would be the absence or lateness of a suitable reaction.

that his children are really his (1098), as if the *vaticinium* he has perform on the corpses of his victims had actually yielded solid results. But there also a different aspect worth noticing here: Atreus' adherence to logical ru of enquiry, as highlighted by the Umbrian-dog simile, is always temper by his reliance on a form of symmetrical, 'irrational' logic. A trace can detected in lines 329–30, with their paradoxical statement that *si patru vocant* | *pater est* ('if they call him "uncle", he is their father'). This ki of short-circuiting identification returns in a different form at the end the play, when Atreus chooses to interpret the death of his nephews the 'rebirth' of his own children: since Thyestes' pain at the death of children proves unequivocally that they really were his (a point which course had never been in question), then, symmetrically, it would follo that Atreus' children were not the fruit of Aerope's adulterous liaison wi her brother-in-law.

The physical setting of the *vaticinium* is extremely important. The dar ness of the secret rooms of the royal palace inspires fear and awe (650–(yet this is precisely the place where the Pelopidai usually seek 'safe answe (680: *responsa . . . certa*) in times of crisis and uncertainty (658: *lassis rebus . ac dubiis*).

The connection between the horrific appearance of these abodes a the certainty of the answers that the Pelopidai are able to obtain there further strengthened by a reference to the Styx, an archetypal *locus horrid* which is also the source of undoubted *fides* even for the gods (666–7). T diagnostic examination of the victims' entrails will resolve Atreus' concer over the *dubius sanguis* (perhaps of the *dubiae res* of 658) of his proge (755–60):

> erepta vivis exta pectoribus tremunt
> spirantque venae corque adhuc pavidum salit;
> at ille fibras tractat ac fata inspicit
> et adhuc calentes visce·um venas notat.
> postquam hostiae placi ere, securus vacat
> iam fratris epulis.

Torn from the still living breast the vitals quiver; the veins still breathe and t fluttering heart still beats. But he handles the organs and enquires the fates, a notes the markings of the still warm veins. When with the victims he has satisfi himself, he is now free to prepare his brother's banquet.

The vocabulary of enquiry employed here is again reminiscent of t Umbrian-dog simile: note, for instance, the repetition of different verb forms that imply Atreus' search with technical precision. Note also t

pregnant meaning of *placuere* and of *securus*, which I take to designate that Atreus is finally sure that his suspicions were unfounded, and that his children are really his. The very act that guarantees his revenge over Thyestes (the chief goal of his actions) is also the means by which he can lay his other concerns to rest. His empirical enquiry is successful not in spite of, but because of, its deep association with the instinctual aspects of his personality: the *furor* that inspired his actions thus far is now also explicitly presented as a viable source of rational understanding.

At the end of the tragedy Atreus revels in his triumph (1096–9; quoted above, p. 82):

> nunc meas laudo manus,
> nunc parta vera est palma. perdideram scelus,
> nisi sic doleres. liberos nasci mihi
> nunc credo, castis nunc fidem reddi toris.

Now I praise my handiwork; now is the true palm won. I would have wasted my crime, if you weren't suffering this much. Now I am convinced that my children are my own; now I believe that I can trust again the purity of my marriage-bed.

Atreus notes first that Thyestes' grief at the revelation of his children's gruesome death ensures that he is in fact their father (1100–2):

> TH. quid liberi meruere? AT. quod fuerant tui.
> TH. natos parenti – AT. fateor, et, quod me iuvat,
> certos.

TH. What was the children's sin?
AT. They were yours.
TH. Sons to the father –
AT. Sure. And, I am pleased to say, definitely yours.

Shortly afterwards Atreus answers Thyestes' moralizing appeal to the gods with the retort that the true reason for his despair is in fact quite different (1106–10):

> fuerat hic animus tibi
> instruere similes inscio fratri cibos
> et adiuvante liberos matre aggredi
> similique leto sternere – hoc unum obstitit:
> tuos putasti.

This had been your plan, to prepare the same banquet for their unwitting father, and with the help of their mother attack the children and kill them in identical fashion. Just one thing stopped you: you thought they were yours.

The assumption underpinning Atreus' reasoning appears to be that Thyestes' despair at the death of his children would have been more moderate if he had been certain that Agamemnon and Menelaus, too, were his own offspring. But while he must have suspected that this was the case (or, Atreus claims, he would have made the first move to punish Atreus), the following sequence of events has made it clear to both Atreus and Thyestes that Agamemnon and Menelaus are undoubtedly Atreus' children.

Atreus characterizes his victory as a triumph of foreknowledge and anticipation: Thyestes would have tried to catch him unprepared (1107: *inscio*), but his own *scientia* has been faster, and more effective. Moreover, Atreus is now confident that the children he has killed are undoubtedly Thyestes' own (1102: *certos*), and, symmetrically, that Thyestes' suspicion that Agamemnon and Menelaus could also have been his offspring has been proven false. Thyestes has been prevented from mounting a successful revenge plan because of his unconfirmed opinion (1110: *putasti*) that Agamemnon and Menelaus could be his children; Atreus, however, has acted on his apprehension and searched for the truth. Thyestes' chief mistake lies in his inability to understand that fear can be a reliable form of knowledge. Throughout his anguished *canticum* (920–69), Thyestes comes tantalizingly close to expressing his subconscious fears and thoughts (his language, accordingly, appears fractured, hesitant, obscure), yet he is still unable fully to grasp their significance.

Atreus believes that his fresh realization of paternity, as well as Thyestes' grief, can to a certain extent undo the past: *liberos nasci mihi | nunc credo, castis nunc fidem reddi toris* (1098–9). At the end of her tragedy Medea reaches a similar conclusion: 'restored is my kingdom, my ravished virginity is restored!' (*Med.* 984: *rediere regna, rapta virginitas redit*). Both Atreus and Medea, by envisaging their destructive revenge as a means to reshape past events, display a form of logic which is rooted in the world of unconstrained and boundless desire, finding a suitable home in the guts of Atreus' palace.

II

Atreus' passions are consistently intertwined with a deep understanding of human psychology, and, in general, with a marked intellectual superiority. An analysis of several passages will highlight exactly how Atreus displays his intellectual power, especially his psychological insight, his fiendish ability to manipulate language in ways which far transcend Thyestes' literal-minded approach, and finally his superior awareness and understanding of a literary tradition which can provide useful protocols for his behaviour.

Atreus lures Thyestes back to Argos because he correctly assumes that Thyestes will not be able to resist the seductive prospect of a return home. The whole sequence of events bears out Atreus' initial claim that he understands full well the workings of Thyestes' mind: 'I know the untamable spirit of the man; bent it cannot be – but it can be broken' (*Thy.* 199–200: *novi ego ingenium viri | indocile: flecti non potest – frangi potest*).[80] The dialogue between Thyestes and Tantalus in which the former elaborates at length his hesitation as they approach the city can only bolster the audience's impression that Atreus always knew better. As Tantalus himself points out, Thyestes' doubts are pathetically overdue: 'it is too late to guard when in the midst of danger' (487: *serum est cavendi tempus in mediis malis*). This ability for psychological insight is initially revealed in Atreus' discussion with the counsellor, who doubts that Thyestes – fearful as he is of a possible revenge – will accept Atreus' invitation (294–5):

SA. quis fidem pacis dabit?
cui tanta credet? AT. credula est spes improba.

SA. Who will give him confidence in peace? Whom will he trust so much?
AT. Wicked hope is credulous.

Shortly thereafter the counsellor offers, in the dogmatic form of a *sententia* (one of his favourite forms of expression),[81] a commonplace psychological reason why Thyestes is unlikely to accept his brother's invitation (302–5):

AT. hinc vetus regni furor,
illinc egestas tristis ac durus labor
quamvis rigentem tot malis subigent virum.
SA. iam tempus illi fecit aerumnas leves.

AT. On the one side, his ancient rage for power, on the other, miserable poverty and harsh toil will tame the man, however much hardened by so many disasters.
SA. By now time has made his troubles light.

Atreus is quick to dismiss the *satelles*' argument with a statement similarly couched in sententious terms: 'You are wrong: a sense of wrongs grows day by day. It is easy to bear misfortune; to keep bearing it is hard' (306–7: *erras: malorum sensus accrescit die. | leve est miserias ferre, perferre est grave*). The following sequence of events leaves no doubt as to who is right and wrong in this exchange, but the impression that Atreus actually understands the

[80] Thyestes himself will admit in due course that Atreus had been right all along, though by not spelling out any specific detail he continues to dissimulate to a degree (513–14): *sed fateor, Atreu, fateor, admisi omnia | quae credidisti.*

[81] On *sententiae* see p. 157.

whole situation better than anybody else is also confirmed at a later st by an unexpected source – Thyestes himself. In the *canticum* immediat prior to the final anagnorisis Thyestes expresses his joy at the end of long suffering (922–4):

fugiat maeror fugiatque pavor,
fugiat trepidi comes exilii
tristis egestas

away with grief, away with terror, away with bitter want, the companion of hun exiles.

The literal repetition of Atreus' own words at line 303 indirectly reve that Atreus' evaluation of his brother's feelings had been right all the tin and that the superficially wise *satelles* had actually failed to understand important aspect of Thyestes' personality. Towards the end of the sa section, however, Thyestes' mood shifts considerably, as he is sudde overcome by an ominous and inexplicable sensation of fear (957–64):

mittit luctus signa futuri
mens ante sui praesaga mali:
instat nautis fera tempestas,
cum sine vento tranquilla tument.
quos tibi luctus quosve tumultus
fingis, demens?
credula praesta pectora fratri:
iam, quidquid id est, vel sine causa
vel sero times.

My mind gives warning of imminent grief, presaging evil for itself; when the ca sea swells without wind, a harsh tempest is upon the sailors. What distresses, w upheavals do you imagine for yourself, you fool? Let your heart trust your brot by now, whatever it is, you worry about it either without reason, or too late.

Credula at line 962 echoes *credula* at line 295 and confirms that Atreus w right to assume that Thyestes would not shun his invitation. Here, o again, Thyestes proves himself an inadequate reader of signs, signs that detects but fails to exploit, since he is a defeatist who yields to the force events.

While Atreus successfully combines passion and rational knowled exploiting a thorough understanding of the former as a reliable basis for latter, Thyestes owes his demise largely to his mistrust of (subconscio feelings as cognitive tools. Once he reaches Argos Thyestes has a fi albeit belated and ineffectual, moment of hesitation. In his exchange w Tantalus he does have doubts and fears which the play will realize;

suspects that Atreus is plotting his revenge, and insists on turning back: 'but now I am returned to my fears; my mind falters and wishes to take my body back' (418–20: *nunc contra in metus | revolvor: animus haeret ac retro cupit | corpus referre*). The very setting of the scene – Thyestes is already in Argos – taints his proclamation with irony, since his wise words on the potentially deceptive appearance of things are not based on previously ignored details (416: *cum quod datur spectabis, et dantem aspice*, 'when you look at a gift, check who is giving it, too'). Nonetheless Thyestes insists on his desire to avoid meeting Atreus (434–7):

> causam timoris ipse quam ignoro exigis.
> nihil timendum video, sed timeo tamen.
> placet ire, pigris membris sed genibus labant,
> alioque quam quo nitor abductus feror.

You ask me the cause of my fear, but myself I do not know it. I see nothing I should fear, yet I do. I would like to go, but my limbs waver on my shaky knees, and I feel I am dragged away from where I strive to go.

Thyestes confronts here the same opposition between rational understanding and emotional foreboding that we have encountered before, but he is ultimately unable to rely on the cognitive force of *metus*. He falls prey to Tantalus' well intentioned, if somewhat superficial, pleas, and marches towards his destiny. Thyestes closely follows the words Atreus had used to describe the state of manic excitement which pre-empted his masterful creation of the revenge-plot (260–2):[82]

> fateor. tumultus pectora attonitus quatit
> penitusque volvit; rapior et quo nescio,
> sed rapior.

I do confess it. A mindless tumult shakes and churns my breast deep inside. I am dragged away, I do not know where to, but I am.

Atreus, however, did follow his emotions and was thus able to devise a plan whose success is now increasingly likely; yet Thyestes experiences a similar inner tension, but does not listen to his emotions and thus faces a complete defeat.

Once alerted to the implications of this internal allusion, we will be even more inclined to receive Thyestes' ensuing speech with scepticism, if not incredulity. Lines 446–70 are devoted to a long rhetorical parade, largely dependent on well-known *topoi*, in which Thyestes proclaims his preference

[82] See p. 51 (with n. 60 on *attonitus*).

for a quiet life removed from the superficial attractions of power. This speech is often considered to be paradigmatic of the positive ethical values that are potentially offered by the tragedy as a whole.[83] Even if we discount for the moment the larger, and definitely more complex, ethical frame that the play elaborately constructs, the epistemological status of Thyestes' considerations renders them unreliable and even ironic, for clearly he does not practise what he is in the process of preaching. Thyestes concludes his impassioned tirade with an *adynaton* which, one expects, should convey an unshakeable conviction (476–82):

> amat Thyesten frater? aetherias prius
> perfundet Arctos pontus et Siculi rapax
> consistet aestus unda et Ionio seges
> matura pelago surget et lucem dabit
> nox atra terris, ante cum flammis aquae,
> cum morte vita, cum mari ventus fidem
> foedusque iungent.

His brother loves Thyestes? Sooner the sea will bathe the heavenly Bears, and the greedy waves of the Sicilian strait will be still; mature crops will grow in the Ionian sea and dark night will give light to earth; sooner water with fire, life with death, and wind with sea will join in a trusty pact.

Once again this intimation, which in itself is perfectly justified and expressed in such strong terms, is inexplicably discarded just a few lines later, when Thyestes reluctantly embraces Tantalus' point of view that it is now too late for fear, and that they should proceed to meet Atreus. In fact, alongside the highly elaborate rhetorical tone of the *adynaton*, Thyestes' brusque and inconsistent decision looks even more dissonant and inconsequential. The effect is similar to the one achieved at 539–43, when Thyestes rapidly retreats from his proclaimed determination not to accept the power that Atreus offers him (540: *respuere certum est regna consilium mihi*, 'to refuse the throne is my fixed intent') and quickly yields to his invitation (542: *accipio*, 'I do accept').[84]

The second time that Thyestes confronts a reliable insight on the true state of events, an insight offered not by rational consideration but by pure emotion, he behaves in exactly the same way. His *canticum* opens with an explicit rejection of *pavor* (922), followed by a reproach of the usual attitudes of the wretched, who cannot believe their novel good fortune (938–41):

[83] See below, pp. 166ff. [84] See below, pp. 150ff.

proprium hoc miseros sequitur vitium,
numquam rebus credere laetis:
redeat felix fortuna licet,
tamen afflictos gaudere piget.

This failing is typical of luckless people; they never put trust in their happiness: even when their good fortune returns, those who have suffered find it hard to rejoice.

Credere carries obvious ironic overtones that extend to the whole sententious tone of the phrase: once again Thyestes talks like a wise man, only to find his words received by an audience which, on the basis of its previous experience, cannot possibly believe them. *Dolor* swiftly follows (942–4):

quid me revocas festumque vetas
celebrare diem, quid flere iubes,
nulla surgens dolor ex causa?

Why do you restrain me and forbid my celebrating this festive day? why do you force me to cry, o grief springing up without a cause?

Thyestes repeatedly fails to understand the underlying causes of his feelings (434, 964, 967) and is thus incapable or unwilling to trust them, when they could have offered him a means of escape, at least the first time. His misdirected rationalism has only assisted Atreus' ploys and demonstrated once more his uncanny ability to manipulate knowledge successfully in order to achieve his goals. Atreus' words after the *canticum* offer final, triumphant proof of this ability, as he mocks his brother with elaborate lies about his good intentions (970–2; 976):

festum diem, germane, consensu pari
celebremus: hic est, sceptra qui firmet mea
solidamque pacis alliget certae fidem.
...
hic esse natos crede in amplexu patris

My brother, let us celebrate this festive day with mutual accord; this is the day which will make my sceptre firm and bind tightly the bonds of our assured peace... Be sure that your sons are here in the bosom of their father.

Only when he can no longer forestall the tragic fate of his children does Thyestes seem capable of borrowing Atreus' smart, ironic use of language. This moment comes in the emotional and expressive centre of the tragedy, when Atreus unveils (in more senses than one) the severed heads of his victims before their horrified father. To Atreus' mocking question – *natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?* ('do you recognize your sons?', 1005) – Thyestes replies

without missing a beat: *agnosco fratrem* ('I do recognize my brother', 1006). This is, we soon realize, a momentary insight, where the truth shines through and is at last acknowledged even by a reluctant Thyestes. In this extraordinary moment of primal pain Thyestes faces the raw truth of the feelings he had previously mistrusted: Atreus could not possibly have changed for the better. In the logic of anagnorisis, past certainties return to reclaim their importance. In his retort, Thyestes is able to compete with his brother's epistemological and emotional self-assurance, to face reality without the painstaking veneer of pious intentions and illusions. It is, appropriately enough, only a fleeting moment of truth, and hopelessly belated at that. After his epigrammatic repartee Thyestes can only invoke divine retribution, a solution which sounds hollow and ineffectual given Atreus' own appropriation of a divine role. Yet even this momentary ability to stare truth in the face confirms that only emotional awareness can afford such an epiphany, that one moment of piercing pain, resistant to any verbal rationalization, can reveal the truth in its vilest upsetting contours.

III

A canny master of ideas, Atreus is also an exceptional crafter of language. His power is expressed also through a careful exploitation of *double entendres* which fly over Thyestes' head: the contrast between Thyestes' literal-mindedness and Atreus' sophisticated dissemblance is another aspect of the epistemological battle between the two brothers. Atreus' manipulative use of language is responsible for the often unsettling curious mixture of horror and wit which characterizes this tragedy. Once again this feature finds a pertinent parallel in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, where Aaron's 'satanic drollery' conceals his savage intentions in the reassuring metaphors of elevated poetic language (a mirroring of Shakespeare's own writing process).[85]

Some instances of this phenomenon are particularly noteworthy.[86] When Atreus promises: 'wear the crown set on your reverend head; I will offer to the gods the destined victims' (544–5: *imposita capiti vincla venerande gere; | ego destinatas victimas superis dabo*) the reader is aware of the gory implications of his words, and this awareness creates a complicity central to the emotional balance of the play. But the ironic overtones of Atreus' *double entendres* are nowhere more pronounced than in his final meeting with Thyestes, when the latter is at last dimly conscious that terrible deeds

[85] Bate (1

have been perpetrated. At Thyestes' request to give him back his children, Atreus responds with a riddle (997–8):

TH. redde iam gnatos mihi!
AT. reddam, et tibi illos nullus eripiet dies.

TH. Give back my sons to me!
AT. I will give them back, and no day will grab them away from you.

His response to Thyestes' subsequent request is no different (1027–31):

TH. redde quod cernas statim
uri; nihil te genitor habiturus rogo,
sed perditurus. AT. quidquid e natis tuis
superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes.

TH. Give me back what you will see burned at once. As a father, I am not asking for something to keep, but to lose.
AT. Whatever is left of your sons, you have; whatever is not left, you have.

Riddles, puns and *double entendres* far from being mere verbal accessories, are an intrinsic part of Atreus' primacy over Thyestes. They also convey the deeper conviction that taking things at face value is a desperately inadequate strategy when confronting unpredictable, cataclysmic and 'monstrous' deeds. In a cosmos in which even the sun will be forced to alter its course, it is foolish of Thyestes not to realize that words may not quite mean what they seem to mean. In this respect Seneca is fully involved in a reflection on the limits of irony, which is already developed in Ovid and will become central in Tacitus.[87]

The different levels of linguistic awareness displayed by Thyestes and Atreus can be closely charted in a series of utterances centred on the use of the verb *capio* and its compounds. *Capio* is used many times by both brothers, and it soon establishes itself as a keyword which precipitates many of the central themes of the play, at least as soon as Atreus offers an interpretation of his brother's behaviour in typically epigrammatic form: to the *satelles*' objection that Thyestes is not likely to be taken in by the plot which he is brewing, Atreus points out Thyestes' self-defeating inconsistency: *non poterat* ***capi***, | nisi ***capere*** *vellet* ('he could not be caught, were he not bent on catching', 288–9); the ominous connotations of the word are revealed in the same scene, as Atreus elaborates on various aspects of his plan and assumes that Thyestes' sons will easily be taken in by the illusion of a return home: 'if too stubbornly Thyestes spurns my prayers, I will

[87] On Ovid see Doblhofer (1960) and Schawaller (1987); on Tacitus see especially Plass (1988), who also has interesting remarks (92–8) on Seneca.

move his sons with my entreaties: they are inexperienced, weighed down by grave misfortunes, and easy to trick' (299–302: *si nimis durus preces* | *spernet Thyestes, liberos eius rudes* | *malisque fessos gravibus et faciles capi* | *prece commovebo*); even more sinister are Thyestes' words in his highly rhetorical praise of a modest life: 'oh, how good it is not to be an obstacle to anyone, to eat food without care while lying on the ground!' (449–51: *o quantum bonum est* | *obstare nulli, capere securas dapes* | *humi iacentem!*), which are echoed – again – in the anagnorisis scene: AT. *poculum infuso cape* | *gentile Baccho.* TH. *capio fraternae dapis* | *donum* ('AT. Take this cup, an heirloom, filled with wine. TH. I take this gift of my brother's feast', 982–4).[88] At 520–1 Thyestes entrusts his children to Atreus – *obsides fidei accipe* | *hos innocentes, frater* ('as pledge of my faith, brother, take these innocent boys') – who will return them with precisely the same word: *iam accipe hos potius libens* | *diu expetitos: nulla per fratrem est mora* ('now, rather, take these with joy; you have waited for them a long time. Your brother causes no delay', 1021–2). And it is finally Thyestes who highlights the dramatic echoes of *capio* in his last (and involuntary) pun on the word: *hoc est quod avidus capere non potuit pater* ('this much the father, for all his greed, could not devour', 1040); Thyestes was unable to understand what lay in store for him, but was tragically capable of receiving the flesh of his own children.[89]

Ironic twists on *capio* come to symbolize Thyestes' intellectual inadequacy and weak resolve. We might apply to him the chorus's remark on Tantalus in the underworld, who is unable to reach the food and drink laid in front of him time and again: *deceptus totiens tangere neglegit* ('deceived so often, he tries no more to touch', 159). Indeed Tantalus displays a self-defeating masochism which the chorus captures with epigrammatic brevity: *falli libuit* ('gladly has he been baffled', 167).

IV

Atreus' use of 'obscure' forms of communication as he plots the *mise en scène* of act 3 is part of his dissembling character. Atreus rightly identifies dissimulation as an *instrumentum regni*, and in so doing he problematizes the contrast between 'tyrant' and 'king' which had been proposed in the second act. The tyrant can disguise his threats, and plausibly act as a good king – tyranny and dissimulation are closely connected in Greek and Roman

[88] Note that *gentile*, too, is ominously ambiguous, since it could suggest 'a drink consisting of your *gens*, with wine poured upon it' (Tarrant (1985) 227).
[89] On metaphors of incorporation see Kilgour (1990) and now especially Rimell (2002).

thought. The potential ambiguity of dissimulation makes the king, but especially the tyrant, a difficult 'text', and it inevitably raises an epistemological as well as a political problem. In *Thyestes* everybody dissimulates: the *satelles* disguises his fear; Atreus cloaks his thirst for revenge; Thyestes covers up his own worries. The distinction is not between those who dissimulate and those who do not, but between effective and ineffective dissimulation. The intellectually superior Atreus is fully aware of Thyestes' deception, and goes on to triumph over him. Thyestes, on the other hand, suspects that his brother is dissimulating, but – fatally – he does not act on this intimation.

Power and dissimulation are already linked as anthropological themes; witness the many stories in which a king seizes power by acting as a harmless fool, for instance Peisistratos and Brutus, or, before them, Odysseus πολυμήχανος, who dressed up as a poor beggar in order to regain his throne and his wife.[90] In Roman political discourse dissimulation is a defect traditionally associated with Tiberius, thanks of course to Tacitus' and Suetonius' pathological portraits.[91] It should not be forgotten, however, that a form of dissimulation characterizes imperial power from the outset. Brutus' dissimulation marks the end of the monarchy and the beginning of the Republic, but Augustus' own dissimulation allows an essentially monarchical power to be smuggled in as a slightly edited version of the Republican constitution.

As Torquato Accetto will brilliantly point out centuries later in *Della dissimulazione onesta*, dissimulation is a totalizing form of communication and behaviour, because 'the discourse of dissimulation must dissimulate', and also because the only way to reply to those who dissimulate is by dissimulating in turn. This is why Atreus is afraid that his children may not be able to dissimulate (315). Dissimulation, in sum, is a weapon of power and against power, and must be judged according to internal criteria of efficacy and expediency. Thyestes, technically speaking, is a bad dissimulator, Atreus an excellent one.

Dissimulation is deeply connected with theatrical fiction, and it is interesting to note that the product of Atreus' dissimulation is the *mise en scène* of act 3. Dissimulation and deception are principles of artistic creation at least since Hesiod, well before Accetto will write, famously, that 'everything beautiful is nothing but gentle dissimulation'. Like Hesiod's Muses, tyrants

[90] On Brutus see Bettini (1987). In Shakespeare's tragedy Titus must also resort to dissimulation – he feigns madness – in order to accomplish his revenge: 'I knew them all, though they supposed me mad, | And will o'erreach them in their own devices – | A pair of cursed hellhounds and their dam' (5.2.142–4).

[91] See Giua (1975); Zecchini (1986); Baar (1990) 146–50 (and 51–7).

and poets deceive or reveal the truth on a whim. A constantly dissimulating tyrant is inevitably a bad dissimulator (as Tiberius is, in fact, according to Accetto). The discourse of power, like the discourse of poetry, is very much exposed to the deconstructive force of dissimulation. Already Odysseus as he lies while maintaining that he is 'speaking truthfully' (*Od.* 14.192) comes dangerously close to the Cretan paradox. In his *Panegyricus* Pliny will state that sincerity, or rather the appearance of sincerity, can be obtained by emulating those forms of spontaneous expression that it would take too long to falsify.[92] Centuries later Baltasar Gracián will argue that after all sincerity itself is a lie.[93] (Modern literary theory would indeed agree that the 'reality effect' intensifies the fictional status of a narrative.)

V

As an authorial figure, Atreus is fully aware of the intertextual inspiration of his actions, and this knowledge of precedents and models will give him a decisive advantage at crucial junctures. Atreus explicitly displays his knowledge of the Ovidian story of Procne and Tereus, the single most important source of inspiration which he invokes in his very first appearance on the stage. Thus, as we have seen, when we hear Thyestes declare, in the emotionally charged meeting with his brother, that *lacrimis agendum est* (517), we can only suspect that he is simply ignoring Procne's more resolute words in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: *'non est lacrimis hoc' inquit 'agendum.'*[94] This is an oversight that Atreus would certainly have avoided, but it is not simply a matter of academic competence.[95] The important point is that while Atreus is following a masterplot which guarantees him useful material for his revenge, Thyestes confesses his ignorance of that model and fails to foresee the fatal danger that awaits him.

No less ironic is the effect resulting from Thyestes' inept appropriation of Virgil. In his *canticum* at the beginning of act 5 Thyestes begins to be dimly aware of the tragedy awaiting revelation: 'my mind gives warning of imminent grief, presaging evil for itself' (957–8: *mittit luctus signa futuri | mens ante sui praesaga mali*). Virgil's Mezentius had been able to realize even before the procession arrived that the corpse carried back to the camp was

[92] See *Pan.* 3.1 and 3.4, whose contorted logic reveals a very interesting cognitive quandary. Note that similar concerns emerge already in Republican times, as the factiousness of political life destroys deep-seated beliefs in the certainty of the meaning of key political terms: *vera vocabula rerum amisimus*, as Catilina points out (Sall. *Cat.* 52.11, with Canfora (1991)).

[93] *Oraculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia*, para. 13.

[94] See p. 77.

[95] We should perhaps remember Ps.-Longinus' observation that 'in fact one finds low emotions distinct from the sublime, like pity, grief, fear' (*Subl.* 8.2).

that of his son Lausus: *agnovit longe gemitum praesaga mali mens* ('Mezentius had a presentiment of evil. He heard the wailing in the distance and knew the truth', *Aen.* 10.843). The almost verbatim repetition highlights the sharp contrast between Thyestes and Mezentius, the former unable to decode the ominous signs that surround him just as the latter swiftly jumps to the right conclusion.[96]

A similar instance of Thyestes' insensitivity to literary models can be found in another elaborate intertextual connection which I have already touched upon.[97] Finally back in Argos, Thyestes recalls with barely restrained emotion his youthful victories in the races, as he sees 'the racecourse thronged with youth, where more than once, lifted to fame, have I in my father's chariot won the palm' (409–10: *celebrata iuveni stadia, per quae nobilis | palmam paterno non semel curru tuli*). As we have seen, these lines echo two important programmatic passages, Horace's first ode (*Carm.* 1.1.3–6) and the proem to the third book of Virgil's *Georgics* (3.10–20). Atreus, too, will have a chance to reactivate the audience's memory of these models by picking up the keyword *palma* almost at the very end of the play: *nunc meas laudo manus, | nunc parta vera est palma. perdideram scelus, | nisi sic doleres* (1096–8). His *palma*, to be sure, has nothing to do with Thyestes' racing exploits; it has been warranted by the astute manipulation of reality on which his revenge has been predicated all along, by his ability to produce a spectacle (Thyestes pained by harrowing grief) which constitutes his own literary masterpiece.[98] In his first ode Horace had singled out racing victories as the first item in a long list of lesser pursuits which he shuns for the glory of poetry, as he declares at the end of the poem, addressed to Maecenas: 'but if you include me among lyric bards, I will hit the stars with my exalted head' (*quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres, | sublimi feriam sidera vertice*).[99] Atreus, by contrasting his *vera palma* with Thyestes' pointless evocation of past sporting achievements, shares his awareness of Virgil's and Horace's line of thought, which, evidently, Thyestes either did not know or did not share.

[96] The instance is analysed by Tarrant (1985) 225. Note that, significantly, Atreus is similar to Mezentius; see below, pp. 125–6 (on the lion simile).

[97] Ch. 2, p. 59.

[98] Actors may have fought to conquer a *palma* already in Plautus' time; see Plaut. *Amph.* 69, *Poen.* 37, *Trin.* 706 and Ter. *Phorm.* 16–17 with Duckworth (1952) 78. For authors see Cic. *Phil.* 1.36.

[99] Hor. *Carm.* 1.1.35–6. A parallel could also be drawn between the imagery of 885–6 (*aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super | altum superbo vertice attingens polum*) and that of Hor. *Carm.* 2.20.1–4 (*non usitata nec tenui ferar | penna biformis per liquidum aethera | vates, neque in terris morabor | longius . . .*). 2.20 concludes the second book of the *Odes*, and *aequalis astris . . .* of Atreus (885) signals a similar moment of completion (cf. 888–9: *summa votorum attigi. | bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi*).

By displaying his intimate, active knowledge of the literary tradition, Atreus further boosts his privileged relationship with the audience, which is invited to share Atreus' literary awareness, and thus to side against Thyestes' unattractive literalness, his deadly lack of literary competence.

PERFECTION, OF A KIND

> Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
> And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
> He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
> And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
> When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
> And when he cried the little children died in the streets.
>
> (W. S. Auden, *Epitaph on a Tyrant*)

I

Through a powerful combination of qualities – passion and reason, tragic violence and tragi-comic irony – and through his ability to exceed the expected and the acceptable, Atreus embodies in the play the limitless energy that Tantalus had tried in vain to keep in check in the prologue to *Thyestes*.[100] Atreus' power is doubly lethal, because it not only makes room for *nefas*, but also gives it an unquestionable aesthetic attractiveness. Atreus the poet is cunning, funny, articulate, simply irresistible. The destruction of any boundary to *nefas* and *decorum* is thus inextricably linked to his creative power, and we, the audience, must admit that one cannot exist without the other.

Thyestes discourages, we have seen, clear-cut definitions of characters and (even more) their hasty promotion to ethical types. Atreus cannot be reduced to a furious monster, Thyestes to a Stoic *sapiens* more or less close to possessing a *bona mens*. Positing a stark contrast between an unreasonable tyrant and a (potentially) 'good king' would be equally unreliable, if for no other reason than that tyrant and *rex iustus* are not ontologically opposite types. As Cicero, for instance, points out, the just king and the tyrant are different points in a continuum. Acting like a tyrant can be a momentary madness or a lifelong pattern, since it depends on a more or less successful control over passions, but one is not 'born' a tyrant, and the struggle is never won once and for all. A *tyrannus* can always be lurking behind the comforting image of the *rex*, and, as Cicero claims, there is very little

[100] See above, ch. 2, *passim*.

distance between the two: 'when the king begins to act unjustly... he himself is a tyrant, the worst type, and the closest one to the best'.[101]

The mastertext of this juxtaposition between king and tyrant is to be found in Plato's *Republic*.[102] The tyrannical man comes about through a degeneration of the democratic man, because in the former remain 'stronger and more numerous' (571b) the 'illicit', indeed 'terrible' and 'savage' (572b) desires common to all men, but 'in some individuals... repressed by laws and better instincts can be totally extirpated or lessened and weakened' (571b). These desires (571c–d):

> are awakened in sleep when the rest of the soul, the rational (λογιστικόν), gentle and dominant part, slumbers, but the beastly and savage (θηριῶδές τε καὶ ἄγριον) part, replete with food and wine, gambols and, repelling sleep, endeavours to sally forth and satisfy its own instincts. You are aware that in such case there is nothing it will not venture to undertake as being released from all sense of shame (αἰσχύνης) and all reason (φρονήσεως). It does not shrink from attempting to lie with a mother in fancy, or with anyone else, man, god or brute. It is ready for any foul deed of blood; it abstains from no food, and, in a word, falls short of no extreme of folly (ἀνοίας) and shamelessness (ἀναισχυντίας).

This passage, whose wider significance will not escape Sigmund Freud,[103] posits a connection between psychology and politics which will be at work more or less explicitly in most of the Hellenistic and Roman reflection on 'the good king', and definitely in Seneca's own *De clementia*. The sleep of reason, we might well say, creates tyrants; or, to put it another way, the tyrant is he who never controls or represses his instincts but gives them immediate and complete satisfaction. We know from a great wealth of anthropological and literary material that all rulers, in more or less mediated or terrifying ways, are characterized as men who regularly break or trespass all sorts of boundaries. Rulers (especially tyrants) are all-powerful since their superhuman power makes them more similar to terrifying animals such as lions and leopards than to mere mortals.[104]

The literature of Imperial Rome focuses insistently on this conceptual knot. One may turn to Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, a fascinating

[101] Cic. *Rep.* 1.65. [102] See Lanza (1977) esp. 65–94.

[103] First of all in a 1914 addition to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud (1900) = *SE* IV.67): 'Plato, on the contrary, thought that the best men are those who only *dream* what other men *do* in their waking life'. The remark is echoed almost verbatim in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Freud (1916–17) = *SE* XV.146). There is no mention of Plato in *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* (*Der Dichter und das Phantasieren* (1907): *SE* IX.143–53), where Freud analyses the relationship between (day)-dreams, fantasy and poetic creation and effectively, if implicitly, appropriates for psychoanalysis Plato's seminal observation. It is a well-known limitation of this and other Freudian writings on art that they focus more on the subject matter than the signifying practices shared by art and the unconscious.

[104] On the excesses of Greek tyrants see Catenacci (1996), especially 142–70 on erotic ones.

document about the perception of power in the first century, to understand how the contemporary imagination lived with the presence, high on the Palatine, of rulers increasingly free from meaningful checks and balances. Politics must needs turn into psychology, because it is the individual ruler's psychology, that of the *rex-tyrannus*, which must be controlled, reined in, bettered. The whole of *De clementia*, the most important work for understanding Seneca's and some of his contemporaries' political vision, is simply an attempt to persuade Nero that it is in his moral and practical interest to acknowledge those limits which no outside force is any longer capable of imposing.

Plato's intuition that the tyrant is a man who gives free rein in his life to *alogon*, the violation of rational and ethical norms, and accomplishes what moral self-repression or external laws keep out of the reach of normal people is rich in theoretical implications. If in the tyrant there is at work a form of extreme violence akin to the violence of unrepressed desires, those which get free rein in dreams unless proper rational control is exercised, then a dispassionate reflection on the tyrant's potential emotional appeal as a literary character is in order, especially as he can be at the same time terrifying and magnificent, attractive and repulsive.

In book 10 Plato deals for the second and last time with the issue of poetry and its dangers. Poetry leads people astray for at least two reasons: because poets tend to imitate in their work the worse instincts of the soul, not the better ones (603c–605c), and because poetry incites the audience to privilege the parts of the soul which are best kept under control (605c–607a). Poetry is equivalent to loosening inhibition, to yielding to *alogon*, which in political terms is embodied by the 'tyrannical character', linked as he is to irrational and uncontrollable forces. Poetry has no citizenship in a well-regulated *polis* because it escapes the control of reason. The notion that poetic inspiration is connected with divine elements and contains something inexplicable is pre-Platonic (Democritus), but it is Plato's specific contribution to regard this inspiration as irrational, even Bacchic (533e–534e).[105] Poetry often arrives in dreams, is inspired by supernatural sources whose epistemological status is frequently debated in Augustan poetry. The rich tradition of the inspiring dream codifies in Greek and Roman literature the positive side of the relationship between poetry and dreams. But another side is not entirely forgotten, namely the awareness that an excess of poetic irrationality can

[105] See Murray (1996) 7–9. Note in this context Zeitlin's remarks on the gender assumptions which underlie Plato's rejection of poetry as a dangerous 'female' mimesis (1996) 367–74 (on the connection between women and mimesis Zeitlin (1996) 375–416 is crucial). Indeed the tyrant, a 'theatrical' man who is a slave of his passions, resembles a woman: *Resp.* 577b and 579b–c with Zeitlin (1996) 3[illegible] and n. 56.

compared to the disturbed and unreliable dreams of a sick man. Consider the opening of Horace's *Ars poetica* (6–9a):

> credite, Pisones, isti tabulae fore librum
> persimilem cuius, velut aegri somnia, vanae
> fingentur species, ut nec pes nec caput uni
> reddatur formae.

Believe me, Pisones, the book will be very similar to this picture, if idle fancies (*vanae . . . species*) are shaped in it as in the dreams of feverish people, so that neither head nor foot can be assigned to a single shape.

Horace contrasts the folly of this limitless imagination with the reliable rules of good judgement (9b-13):

> 'pictoribus atque poetis
> quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas'
> scimus, et hanc veniam petimusque damusque vicissim;
> sed non ut placidis coeant immitia, non ut
> serpentes avibus geminentur, tigribus agni.

'But painters and poets have always enjoyed a full right to dare whatever they fancied.' True, this is a licence which we poets request and concede in turn; but not to the extent that savage animals should lie down with domestic ones, or snakes should mate with birds, or lambs with tigers.

The 'licence' (*licentia*) which Horace grants to poets[106] is an enlightened absolutism of sorts: there is a lot they are free to do, but they should not overturn the foundations of human nature and society. Light-hearted and full of grotesque imagery as these lines may sound, their seriousness is not to be underestimated, especially if we consider that the Horatian examples of *adynata*, of impossible conjunctions, recall a very important section of *De rerum natura* book 5 (lines 878–924). There Lucretius argues that the first living creatures created by Mother Earth must surely have been imperfect, even 'monstrous' to our mind, but they could not defy the basic rules of atomic aggregation which forbid the union of different species.

Let me briefly restate the crux of my argument: it is possible to argue, at both a contextual and theoretical level, that poetry is the sphere of human activity where the kinds of thoughts, feelings and images which reason would rather keep under control and even silence are expressed and communicated. Furthermore, one might propose that the poet's violation of this censorship is homologous to the tyrant's transgression of behavioural norms. The poet,

[106] Cf. Mayor (1879), and Brink ad loc.

that is, is like the tyrant, because just like him he ignores the boundaries set by *logos* and *nomos*. Not all poets, and not all the time, of course. We should adopt in this case as well an articulation of the concept that is parallel to the one suggested above between *rex iustus* and tyrant, an articulation which Augustan and post-Augustan poetry and poetics encapsulate in the related but distinct concepts of *poeta* and *vates*.[107] We could therefore complete the theoretical proposition by positing an analogy, on the one hand, between *poeta* and *rex iustus*, and, on the other, between *vates* and tyrant, the former two champions of moderation and self-restraint, the latter closer to sublime forces of Bacchic *enthousiasmos* or Apollinean inspiration.

The parallelism that I posit does not exhaust the exegetical dividends afforded by comparing the political and the poetic. Indeed, the theoretical argument developed so far can be put to further use once we formulate a final corollary. I would like to argue that there exists between the tyrant and the enthusiastic *vates* a latent solidarity based on a basic homology. In first-century literature the tyrant is attractive because of the similarities between those who exercise political power and the power of the poets.[108] A *vates* will invariably be a subject of power in his sphere of activity, and an object of power in the political domain: hence the powerful tensions and contradictions we find in the relationship between poets and rulers in the Rome of Augustus and Nero (and beyond).

II

The tyrant's attractiveness is rooted in the characteristics he shares with the *vates*. Poets and tyrants are similar, first of all, because they both claim for themselves the right to act *supra . . . fines moris humani* (268). They both are 'authors', *auctores*, creators and innovators of reality, masters of life and death, of creation and destruction.[109] Atreus' power is explicitly connected, in the tragedy, with his ability to create a compelling *mise en scène*. The poet is like the tyrant, and the tyrant can dress up as a poet in order to fulfil his goals. His weapons are exactly the same: creativity, dissimulation, irony,

[107] For a full picture of the emergence and development of the concept of *vates* in the first century see Newman (1967). One feature appears to underline the new meaning of the word after Virgil (and Varro, who, according to Isidorus, *Orig.* 8.7.3, suggested among others the interesting etymology of *vates* '*a vi mentis*'): the term *vates* 'made the poet a being with more than ordinary powers' (Newman (1967) 100). See Jocelyn (1995).

[108] A similarity that famously becomes, in the case of Nero, an identification; Bartsch (1994) 36–62.

[109] One might recall the debate between Socrates and Polus on whether rhetors have real power in the *polis*. According to Polus they do, because 'like tyrants, they can kill whoever they want to, deprive anyone of his property and expel him from their cities as they think fit' (Pl. *Grg.* 466c).

double entendres, knowledge of the literary tradition. Atreus' superiority over Thyestes in words, logic and deeds is reflected in his strong impact on the audience. If nothing else, there can be no doubt where our aesthetic allegiances lie:[110] with Atreus' energetic poiesis, his mastery of words and puns, his ruthless determination to plot, stage and act his revenge.

One way to gauge the potential effect of Atreus on the audience is to look at the reactions of the characters who watch him within the play, from the docility of the counsellor in act 2 to the messenger's horror as he recalls the sacrificial slaughter in act 4. In both cases we face the impotent awe of human beings confronted with behaviour that goes well beyond their normal horizon of expectations.

The messenger provides the most articulate analysis of the reactions that Atreus inspires, and conveys them not only in his moral judgement, but also in the elaborate similes he uses in his gripping portrait of the king. Atreus is first compared to a tigress in his uncertainty over the order of the sacrifice (707–14):

> ieiuna silvis qualis in Gangeticis
> inter iuvencos tigris erravit duos,
> utriusque praedae cupida quo primum ferat
> incerta morsus (flectit hoc rictus suos,
> illo reflectit et famem dubiam tenet),
> sic dirus Atreus capita devota impiae
> speculatur irae. quem prius mactet sibi
> dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet.

As in the jungles by the Ganges a hungry tigress wavers between two calves, eager for both prey, uncertain where she should bite first (to the one she turns her jaws, then turns to the other, and keeps her hunger waiting), so does cruel Atreus scan the heads destined to his cruel rage, and wonders whom he should first sacrifice to himself, whom he should slaughter second.

Shortly afterwards, as the chorus enquires about the fate of Thyestes' younger child, the messenger engages in a new comparison of a similar type (732–41):

> silva iubatus qualis Armenia leo
> in caede multa victor armento incubat
> (cruore rictus madidus et pulsa fame
> non ponit iras: hinc et hinc tauros premens
> vitulis minatur dente iam lasso inpiger),
> non aliter Atreus saevit atque ira tumet,

[110] For the notion of 'aesthetic allegiance' see Orlando (1971) *passim*.

> ferrumque gemina caede perfusum tenens,
> oblitus in quem fureret, infesta manu
> exegit ultra corpus, ac pueri statim
> pectore receptus ensis in tergo exstitit.

As in the Armenian woods a maned lion, victorious after much slaughter, lies dov amidst the herd (his jaws reek with gore, but even after he has quelled his hunger rages on: now here, now there attacking the bulls, he threatens the calves, tirel even as his jaws are tired) – not otherwise Atreus raves and swells with anger a holding the knife drenched with double slaughter, forgetting whom he is attackin with deadly hand he drives it through the body, and the sword enters the bo breast and stands out upon his back.

While the first simile focuses on Atreus' procedural doubt, the tigre image highlighting the combination of rational and bestial, the secon develops at length an aspect of the lion's behaviour emphasized in previou texts, namely the animal's indulgence in violence well beyond the practic impulse to kill its prey.[111] It is not simply hunger that drives the lion, bu an instinctual passion for violence which is partly pursued for its own sak Both similes concentrate on Atreus' animal-like behaviour, a notion whic should not immediately and inevitably translate into a moral judgemen but which does introduce a key element of his characterization. As we hav already noticed, Atreus' bestial nature plays an important role when th tragedy comes to terms with the relative positioning of, and transactio among, men, gods and animals, as articulated in sacrifice.

The immediate antecedent of both similes can be found (unsurprisingl in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is especially interesting to note that Procne compared to a *Gangetica tigris*[112] just as she sets out to murder her son; th detail of the beast's hesitation when confronted with two victims furthe echoes Perseus' own uncertainty at *Metamorphoses* 5.164–9. Neither pas sage, however, mentions lions, and while yet another Ovidian line migh have suggested the choice of a different animal,[113] there is much to b gained by expanding the possible implications of Seneca's departure fro

[111] Note the change in gender from a male to a female animal between the two similes. The detail ma be significant in the light of the Dionysiac aspects of Atreus' personality which I discuss belo Dionysus was, notoriously, a sexually ambivalent god, described as having feminine traits, especiall from the fifth century onwards; see Dodds (1960) 133–4; Detienne (1979) 20–52. The tradition i present in Rome as well, see Naev. 57 Ribbeck² (from the *Lycurgus*). Note also the traditiona association of Dionysus with a lion that goes back to the *Homeric Hymns* 7.44 (Dodds (1960) xv with n. 6), and present in Sen. *Oed.* 424–6, 457–8.

[112] *Met.* 6.636–7: *veluti Gangetica . . . | . . . tigris*, to compare with Sen. *Oed.* 458: *tigris . . . Gangetica* on which passage see the preceding note. See p. 80.

[113] According to Tarrant (1985) 195, who refers to *Met.* 15.86: *Armeniae tigres iracundique leones*. Not the insistence on *ira* at *Thy.* 735 and 737, above.

his model. By comparing Atreus to a lion Seneca does more than reiterate Atreus' beastly violence: he invites reflection on important thematic and metaliterary affiliations. Chronology notwithstanding, it is probably best to turn first to Lucan's Caesar, who is characterized as a lion in the first, extended simile which the *Bellum Civile* devotes to its main character (204–12):

> inde moras solvit belli tumidumque per amnem
> signa tulit propere: sicut squalentibus arvis
> aestiferae Libyes viso leo comminus hoste
> subsedit dubius, totam dum colligit iram;
> mox, ubi se saevae stimulavit verbere caudae
> erexitque iubam et vasto grave murmur hiatu
> infremuit, tum torta levis si lancea Mauri
> haereat aut latum subeant venabula pectus,
> per ferrum tanti securus volneris exit.

Then he broke the barriers of war and through the swollen river quickly took his standards. Just so in torrid Libya's barren fields the lion, on seeing his enemy at hand, crouches in hesitation till he has concentrated all his anger; next he goads himself with fiercely lashing tail, his mane is bristling, from his massive jaws deep he roars – then if a lance, hurled by a swift Moor, or hunting-spears pierce and stick in his broad chest, ignoring such a terrible wound he rushes onward, driving the weapon deeper.

Lucan insists on the lion's *ira* (a traditional detail),[114] but also stresses the beast's almost heroic defiance in the face of the enemy. Lucan's Caesar, of course, consistently proves to be a character whose unrestrainable proclivity to *nefas* and violence constitutes the emotional and narrative focus of the poem, an attractive, if fearful, mixture of defiance and ruthlessness, epic grandeur and impious heroism. In this respect Caesar follows in a distinguished line of (anti)heroes whose most immediate and influential model can be traced to two important Virgilian characters, Turnus and Mezentius. They, too, are repeatedly compared to a lion, and Virgil elicits from his Homeric model a consistent series of connotations.[115] In *Aeneid* 9

[114] See Sen. *De ira*. 2.16.1: *iracundia leones adiuvat*; Hor. *Carm*. 1.16.15 with Nisbet-Hubbard (1970) 211. It is important to note that the passage refers to Thyestes' *ira*, a somewhat difficult notion given Atreus' traditional association with revenge. Among the possible explanations that Nisbet and Hubbard advance, it is worth reporting that of Vollmer (on Stat. *Silv*. 5.1.57), who suggested that Varius might have introduced a variation of the legend in which Thyestes' anger played a more significant part.

[115] The most relevant Homeric similes are to be found in *Il*. 3.23–6 and 17.540–2, which insist on the lion's anticipated joy at the carnage; 12.292–300 is also interesting for Sarpedon's somewhat excessive behaviour (like a lion, he has a θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ). *Il*. 17.61–7 foregrounds the abundant blood in which the animal revels. Also, Odysseus' victory is compared to the behaviour of a lion, see *Od*. 4.335–9 (= 17.126–30), with Moulton (1977) 139 and 123 (with further references).

Turnus is described as a lion standing unperturbed in front of his enemies (9.792–8):[116]

> ceu saevum turba leonem
> cum telis premit infensis; at territus ille,
> asper, acerba tuens, retro redit et neque terga
> ira dare aut virtus patitur, nec tendere contra
> ille quidem hoc cupiens potis est per tela virosque.
> haud aliter retro dubius vestigia Turnus
> improperata refert et mens exaestuat ira.

... crowding him like a pack of huntsmen with levelled spears pressing hard on a savage lion; the lion is afraid and gives ground, but he is still dangerous, still glaring at his attackers; his anger and his courage forbid him to turn tail, and though he would dearly love to, he cannot charge through the wall of steel and the press of men – just so did Turnus give ground, uncertain but unhurried, and his mind was boiling with rage.

This description focuses on the strength and defiance of the animal, its bloodthirstiness and grandiosity. Even when wounded, the lion will rejoice in the forthcoming slaughter and continue to display its determination (12.4–9):

> Poenorum qualis in arvis
> saucius ille gravi venantum vulnere pectus
> tum demum movet arma leo, gaudetque comantis
> excutiens cervice toros fixumque latronis
> impavidus frangit telum et fremit ore cruento:
> haud secus accenso gliscit violentia Turno.

Just as a lion in the fields round Carthage, who does not move into battle till he has received a great wound in his chest from the hunters, and then revels in it, shaking out the thick mane on his neck; fearlessly he snaps off the shaft left in his body by the ruffian that threw it, and opens his gory jaws to roar – just so did the violent passion rise in Turnus.

It is precisely the pleasure gained from the anticipated slaughter that Virgil highlights in the simile devoted to Mezentius later in book 10 (723–9):

> impastus stabula alta leo ceu saepe peragrans
> (suadet enim vesana fames), si forte fugacem
> conspexit capream aut surgentem in cornua cervum,
> gaudet hians immane comasque arrexit et haeret
> visceribus super incumbens; lavit improba taeter
> ora cruor –
> sic ruit in densos alacer Mezentius hostis.

[116] A similar

Just as a ravening lion scouring the deep lairs of wild beasts, driven mad by the pangs of hunger, if he sights a frightened she-goat, or sees a stag's antlers rising, he opens his great jaws in delight, his mane bristles and he battens on the flesh with foul gore washing his pitiless mouth – just so did Mezentius charge hot-haste into the thick of the enemy...

By comparing Atreus to a lion Seneca thus places him in a genealogy of characters who display a powerful passion for *nefas* and inspire the awed attention of the audience. Heroic in his evil, Atreus, like Mezentius or Caesar, shows that the more overt layer of moral condemnation offered by the poem's structuring ideology can be at odds with the inner tensions and deeper emotions evoked by the text. Turnus, like Mezentius, attains grandiosity by heeding his passion (his *furor*) well beyond the normal bounds of human behaviour.[117]

The analogy with man-eating lions and tigers indirectly highlights Atreus' involvement with cannibalism. Here again Seneca's strategy is rich and sophisticated. The association with wild beasts and the elaborate cooking scene reported by the messenger all conjure up the image of a cannibalistic Atreus, who would thus join the series of tyrants (especially Eastern ones) who did not shrink from eating human flesh, sometimes specifically as a form of punishment.[118] In this case, however, Atreus' (and Seneca's) masterstroke consists in shifting the blame, indeed the *praecipuum... nefas* (*Thy.* 285),[119] onto Thyestes. Atreus is, for all purposes, the cannibal of the two, yet he cunningly manages to involve his brother in this peculiarly tyrannical *nefas* while ostensibly refraining from it himself. This can be seen, on one level, as the pinnacle of dissimulation, a strategy at which Atreus excels.[120] On the other, however, it proves a central tenet of Atreus' philosophy, that one cannot rely too much on 'intrinsic' differences between ethical types. Atreus shows how flimsy the divide between man and animal can be (hence the lion similes and the cannibalism), but shows furthermore that even among men unforeseen turns of events can result in a blurring of ethical categories. Again, who is the 'real' animal, Atreus, who

[117] This conclusion is not weakened by the fact that the lion simile is first encountered in connection with Nisus (9.339–41). Nisus is hardly a Mezentius-like character, but it is important to remember his initial words: 'Is it the gods who put this ardour into our minds, or does every man's irresistible desire become his god?' (183–4: *'dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt, | Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?'*).

[118] Again a feature of Plato's tyrant, *Resp.* 565d-566a. An analogy can also be drawn between cannibalism and incest, both forms of 'unnatural' appropriation of a body; see Parker (1983) 98, 326 and above, p. 94. Thus, in a sense, as he eats his children Thyestes is also perversely repeating the crime that led to his punishment. On the Greeks' view of cannibalism see Detienne (1979) 53–67; on similar charges directed against a tyrannical Mark Antony see Leigh (1996).

[119] See below, p. 144. [120] On dissimulation see pp. 113ff.

plots the banquet, or Thyestes, who actually eats the flesh of his children? If Atreus is a god, or at least, certainly, 'plays god' with Thyestes (thus also blurring the boundaries between gods and men), the latter cannot be absolved of his actions simply because he did not know what he was doing and because a superior power put him in harm's way. Oedipus, of course, would be able to disabuse Thyestes of any such ill-conceived notion of innocence.

It is equally important to frame the lion simile in the context of an explicit reflection on literature proposed by Seneca in *Letters to Lucilius* 41. This letter elaborates a defence of the sublime aesthetic appeal of terrifying images, such as a dark grove, a deep grotto (41.3) or a lion which is *speciosum ex horrido* and cannot be watched without intense fear (41.6: *non sine timore aspici*): its *decor* lies in fact in this very quality. *Letter* 41 does not answer in full the moral issues raised by such a vocal defence of 'beauty arising from fear' – *speciosum ex horrido*, as the phenomenon could be defined – but, interestingly, the example reinforces the intimation that one should live according to one's nature: a tamed, dressed up lion would be a pitiful spectacle (41.6). This identification of naturalness and aesthetic appeal paves the way for a full artistic exploitation of the psychagogic and aesthetic potential of negative characters, and, of course, of such a distinctly Senecan feature as the *locus horridus*.[121] Atreus is not artistically appealing in spite of his cruel, negative nature, but precisely because his nature, as we see in the messenger's simile, is not in the least bridled or tamed.

Atreus can thus be seen to embody a form of artistic and behavioural sublimity which transcends humanity and attracts the audience beyond and even against the purview of their ethical beliefs. What is sublime can in fact overcome the distinction between 'beautiful' and 'ugly', and aims instead at offering powerful, uncontrollable emotions:

> For grandeur (τὰ ὑπερφυᾶ) has the effect of transporting its audience rather than persuading it; and anything amazing and astonishing (σὺν ἐκπλήξει... τὸ θαυμάσιον) always prevails over what is merely persuasive and pleasant. The fact is that persuasion is generally something we can resist, whereas these other effects exert an irresistible power and force (δυναστείαν καὶ βίαν ἄμαχον) and overcome every hearer.

This incisive analysis of the effects of sublimity is developed in the tract *On the Sublime* (Περὶ ὕψους) which, not long before Seneca composed his tragedies (or perhaps even at the same time), dealt with the notion of sublimity in a particularly influential fashion.[122] There is little to be

[121] In general see Schiesaro (1985), with further bibliography. [122] *Subl.* 1.4.

gained in exploiting *On the Sublime* as a 'source' for Seneca's conception of tragedy, and not just because its elusive chronology would make such a strategy risky, at best.[123] But it is surely fruitful to turn to this work in search of a contemporary analysis of the sublime, and to refer to it in the present attempt to ground in specific forms of behaviour and expression Atreus' nature as a 'sublime' character endowed with 'a consummate excellence of language' (1.3: ἀκρότης καὶ ἐξοχή τις λόγων). The comparison with *On the Sublime*, of course, is made all the more pertinent by Atreus' distinctive metadramatic role: as a poet on stage, obsessed with the plotting and *mise en scène* of his own play, Atreus develops a coherent and articulate poetics, one which centres on the unrestrained power of poetry over its creator and its audience alike.[124]

If the messenger's simile between Atreus and a lion thus acquires an intriguing metadramatic overtone, a deeper connection can also be established between Atreus' artistic project as a whole and the intrinsic nature of sublime poetry as articulated in *On the Sublime*. Among the 'natural' (8.1: αὐθιγενεῖς) sources of sublimity, Ps.-Longinus lists first 'the power of great thoughts' (8.1: τὸ περὶ τὰς νοήσεις ἀδρεπήβολον), and second 'strong and inspired emotion' (8.1: τὸ σφοδρὸν καὶ ἐνθουσιαστικὸν πάθος). Indeed, 'nothing contributes more to greatness of expression than authentic emotion at the right moment, as if some frenzy or divine inspiration animated the words (8.4: ὑπὸ μανίας τινὸς καὶ πνεύματος ἐνθουσιαστικῶς ἐκπνέον), filling them, as it were, with the divine breath of Phoebus (8.4: φοιβάζον)'. The sublime is, in sum, 'the echo of a great soul' (9.2: μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα). I recall here my observations about μεγαλοφροσύνη in chapter one, especially in connection with Cleanthes' aspirations to a form of poetic expression that could aptly convey 'divine greatness' (θεῖα μεγέθη).[125] There I tried to show that any attempt to rein in the potentially disruptive force of poetic *enthousiasmos* and reconcile it safely with the Stoics' stated goal of a morally instructive poetry is intrinsically doomed to failure. Atreus can now offer a case study of a 'sublime' poet in action, one who allows us to glimpse not only, as it were, the finished product, but also the creative stages that bring it to life.

Atreus' passion is intense, grandiose and, to borrow from Ps.-Longinus, distinctly φοβερόν (10.6). He explicitly declares his intention to scare off a very special sector of his audience, the gods themselves, with his

[123] On the sublime in Seneca valuable general indications are offered by Michel (1969). I am not sure that the connection is invalid just because in his prose Seneca would not admit that he is trying to move his readers to *ekstasis* (*Subl.* 1.4, cf. 15.9), as Traina (1987) 123 argues.

[124] See above, ch. 1. [125] *SVF* 1.486. Cf. Mazzoli (1970) 47. See above, p. 23.

extraordinary *nefas*[126] – not to mention the fact that the direct and indirect witnesses of his sacrifice (the messenger, the chorus, Thyestes himself) react to his actions with unrestrained terror.[127] An element of the intense emotions that Atreus is capable of stirring is undoubtedly connected with the very violence of his own passions. Ps.-Longinus offers, in connection with Sappho's fragment 31 Voigt, a compelling analysis of the impact of unrestrained passions, especially of those that catalyze different emotions at once: 'Are you not astonished at the way she summons up all together – mind and body, hearing, tongue, sight, colour, as though they were separate elements external to her, and feels contradictory sensations, freezes and burns, raves and reasons (after all, she is terrified or even on the point of death), as if she wanted to display not one single emotion, but a complex of emotions' (*Subl.* 10.3).

Ps.-Longinus connects sublimity with a specific attitude entertained by the poet about his past and his future. The poet who aspires to sublimity is characterized by his deeply agonistic relationship with his models, which he should imitate and emulate (13.2: μίμησις and ζήλωσις) as he constantly concerns himself with the judgement of posterity: 'If I write this, how might posterity judge it?' (14.3). Atreus entertains precisely the same concern and has a trenchant answer ready: *age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet,* | *sed nulla taceat* ('up, my soul, do what no coming age shall approve, but none forget', *Thy.* 192–3). Atreus' programme of poetic imitation is indeed predicated on μίμησις and ζήλωσις *vis-à-vis* his models. Not only is he fully aware of the pertinent models for his own endeavour, and explicitly turns to them for inspiration (*Subl.* 13.2), but he also insists on competing with them, on trying to surpass their evil with an increasingly original *nefas* of his own. According to Ps.-Longinus' striking image this inspiration drawn from past models 'impregnates' the poet just as the divine wind penetrates the Pythia: 'many [poets] are possessed by a spirit not their own, just as (so the story runs) the Pythia at Delphi sits on her tripod near a cleft in a ground which (so they say) breathes out a divine vapour, and is thereby made pregnant (ἐγκύμονα) by the supernatural power and is at once inspired to prophecy. Likewise, from the genius of the old [writers] a kind of effluence (ἀπόρροιαι) from those holy mouths flows into the souls of their imitators' (13.2). As *vates*, the sublime poet operates at the critical juncture between overwhelming inspiration, prophecy and poetic creativity. To achieve these heights of inspiration and poetry he must go

[126] 265–6: *fiat hoc, fiat nefas* | *quod, di, timetis.*

[127] The messenger at 634–8; the chorus at 744, 789–884; Thyestes at 920–69 (before the revelation).

beyond the closed boundaries of his masculine self, and be pervaded by an irresistible outside force precisely as Atreus does: *tumultus pectora attonitus quatit | penitusque voluit; rapior et quo nescio, | sed rapior* (*Thy.* 260–2).[128]

Atreus' obsession with *maius nefas* is directly connected with his agonistic attitude towards tradition, and is but one aspect of his sublime nature, always in search of higher pursuits and stronger emotions, constantly obsessed with excess, with what is 'more' and 'bigger'. The *maius*-motif[129] pervades his reflections in act 2; to him *nullum* [sc. *facinus*] *est satis* ('no crime is enough', 256); his *animus* pushes him to accomplish *nescioquid... maius et solito amplius* ('something greater, larger than normal', 267); pain forces him to devise a revenge bigger (*maius*, again) than the one meted out to Tereus (272–5). His never-ending search for *maius* is consistent with the ideology of tyranny. The tyrant constantly hungers to escape limitations, to ignore sufficiency and moderation. A relevant statement on the subject can be found in one of the most interesting literary debates 'on tyranny', the exchange between Jocasta and Eteocles in Euripides' *Phoenissae*. A distraught Jocasta is firm in her belief that to the wise man what is adequate is always enough (554: ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἀρκοῦνθ' ἱκανὰ τοῖς γε σώφροσιν), and that the search for τὸ πλέον ('advantage', literally 'more') is the pursuit of a mere name (553). But Eteocles had already made it clear that striving after 'more' is a given which does not require (nor indeed allow) any explanation: 'it is not manly (ἀνανδρία) to lose more and settle for less', being happy with τοὔλασσον ('less') when it is possible to have 'more', τὸ πλέον (509–10). The search for τὸ πλέον, *maius*, can never cease; it is the prime motivator and ultimate goal of the ἀνὴρ τυραννικός – of the ethics and aesthetics of tyranny.[130]

On the Sublime does not confine its analysis to the psychological tension underlying the poetics of sublimity, but takes into account a number of particularly representative techniques of expression that are related to it. A sublime style reveals itself both in specific arrangements of the subject matter and in a series of rhetorical tropes. Among the former, particular consideration should be devoted to αὔξησις, the ability to gather a number of details and present them as a compelling whole (*Subl.* 12.2). In his speech in act 2, for instance, Atreus overwhelms the counsellor thanks also to the elaborate accumulation of details which reinforce the vividness of his plot. *Phantasia*, too, is a principle that Atreus-the-author would readily embrace. *Phantasia*, Ps.-Longinus explains, occurs when 'moved by

[128] See above, pp. 51ff. [129] See p. 31, n. 16.

[130] See Mastronarde (1994) 303 on the discussion in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Republic* about the tyrant as 'the supreme example of the πλεονέκτης', which is presupposed by these lines.

passionate emotion, you seem to see the things of which you speak, and place them before the eyes of your audience' (15.1). Atreus is fully aware of the effectiveness of this process even as he is still in the planning phase of his revenge. The strength of his inspiration and the vividness of his project are such that a full picture of the imminent slaughter is already available to him: 'already before my eyes flits the whole picture of the slaughter; his lost children heaped up before their father's face' (*Thy.* 281–3: *tota iam ante oculos meos | imago caedis errat, ingesta orbitas | in ora patris*).

The reader of *On the Sublime* need perhaps go no further than the first few lines of Atreus' initial monologue (176–80) in search of distinctive features of the sublime:

> ignave, iners, enervis et (quod maximum
> probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor)
> inulte, post tot scelera, post fratris dolos
> fasque omne ruptum questibus vanis agis
> iratus Atreus?

Undaring, indolent, nerveless, and, what in important matters I consider a king's worst reproach, unavenged, after so many crimes, after a brother's treacheries, and breaking every law, you are busy with idle complaints – is this Atreus in a rage?

This period is strongly marked by asyndeton, a stylistic device which raises the emotional pitch of the sentence and, as Ps.-Longinus explicitly indicates, is one of the hallmarks of the sublime, just like interrogations and self-interrogations, which are another device frequently employed by Atreus.[131] Significantly, the whole structure of this period – an extended self-addressed question – falls within the *technai* of the sublime listed by Ps.-Longinus.[132]

The three adjectives that Atreus uses at line 176 to describe his behaviour so far are all found in rhetorical and literary contexts. *Ignavus*, as we glean from Horace's *Epistles*,[133] can be used of an indolent, slow style, similar to the type of *compositio* which Quintilian will define as *tarda et supina* ('slow and languid', 9.4.137). Its Greek counterpart, *argos*, plays a significant

[131] On asyndeton in Senecan tragedy: Canter (1925) 169ff. and Billerbeck (1988) 122–3. The *Auctor ad Herennium* (4.41) provides an apt description of the device's effects: 'this figure (asyndeton) has animation and very great force, and is suited to concision' (*hoc genus* [sc. *dissolutum*] *et acrimoniam habet in se et vehementissimum est et ad brevitatem adcommodatum*). See also Quint. 9.3.54 and Calboli (1993) 370–2, esp. n. 178. Self-apostrophe occurs at 192 (*age, anime*).

[132] *Subl.* 18.1–2: 'the impassioned rapidity of question and answer and the technique of making an objection to oneself make the passage, by virtue of its figurative form, not only more sublime, but more convincing. For emotion carries us away more readily when it seems to be generated by the moment rather than deliberately assumed by the speaker, and the self-directed question and answer represent the momentary quality of emotion.' On the technique see Canter (1925) 140ff. and Billerbeck (1988) 123.

[133] *Epist.* 2.1.67, with Brink ad loc. for further references.

role in Ps.-Longinus' comparison between Hyperides and Demosthenes (*Subl.* 34.4):

> Yet Hyperides' beauties, numerous as they are, are without grandeur: 'inert (ἀργά) in the heart of a sober man', they leave the audience at peace. Nobody is afraid when he reads Hyperides. But as soon as Demosthenes begins to speak, he gathers to himself the faculties of true genius in their highest form – the intensity of lofty speech (ὑψηγορίας τόνον), vital emotion, abundance, variety, speed where it matters, all his unapproachable force (δεινότητα) and power (δύναμιν).

Horace will call *versus... inertes* (*Ars P.* 445), 'lifeless lines', lines *virtute carentia* (*Epist.* 2.2.123) as boring as the *carmen iners* with which, Calpurnius' Lycidas will complain, a rival has inexplicably wooed his beloved Phyllis (*Ecl.* 3.59–60). *Enervis* ('feeble') belongs to the vast repertoire of anatomic and physiological metaphors we find in Latin literary terminology; Cicero, for instance, relates *enervis* to *mollis*, 'weak' (*Tusc.* 4.38); Quintilian relates it to *effeminatus*, 'unmanly' (9.4.142).[134]

Note, however, Tantalus' description of his father as Thyestes enters the stage for the first time in act 3 (*Thy.* 421–2):

> pigro (quid hoc est?) genitor incessu stupet
> vultumque versat seque in incerto tenet.

> My father (what is it?) moves with slow step as if in a daze, keeps turning his face, and is mired in doubt.

The ensuing dialogue repeatedly contrasts the huge difference between Atreus' determined *enthousiasmos* and his brother's uncertainty (tinged with hypocrisy) as he extols the virtues of measure, exile and modest living *vis-à-vis* the false wealth of power.

Atreus will promptly overcome his initial weakness, and go on to embody a stylistic and behavioural model grounded in energy, speed and determination. It is a model which Cicero already recognized in Accius' Atreus, and one he recommends himself to the speaker who wants to convey *vis* with words.[135]

[134] *Enervis* also occurs in Tac. *Dial.* 18.5, on which see Gudeman (1914) 318–19. More generally, Bramble (1974) 35–8 (esp. 36, n. 3), with further bibliography.

[135] *De or.* 3.219 'energy (must take) another kind of tone, intense, vehement, eager with a sort of impressive urgency' (*aliud* [sc. *vocis genus... sumat*] *vis, contentum, vehemens, imminens quadam incitatione gravitatis*). There follows a quotation of Accius' *Atreus* 198–201 Ribbeck² = Dangel 29–32 (quoted below, p. 142), where the anaphora of *iterum* and the polyptoton *maior/maius* clearly contribute to the stylistic strength Cicero wants to exemplify.

III

In his polymorphous manifestations Atreus tramples the boundaries between different realms. As author, director and spectator, he occupies the entire scenic space, with all its possible functions and points of view. As both victim and executioner, he lays claim to the audience's sympathy for the wrongs he has suffered while also eliciting their horror at the intensity of his revenge. As the protagonist of the play, he parades an unrivalled capacity to use language creatively and metaphorically to ensnare his victims. He enjoys the prerogatives of masculine political power, but he does not hesitate to rely on his feminine inner self as he yields to passions and allows himself to be carried away by inspiration, as he deceives and entraps his enemy. His knowledge of the literary tradition establishes beyond any doubt his metadramatic credentials, just as his insistence on the sacrificial nature of the slaughter that he performs seems to secure his divine status as a man who behaves like a wild animal and shines like a god.[136]

What surfaces from a synoptic analysis of all these tightly interconnected aspects is not simply Atreus' extraordinary complexity nor even his ability to unify the tensions between drama and metadrama, between the illusional power of the poetic word and the harsh impact of the reality principle realized in his all-too-real revenge. Atreus, all-encompassing, all-powerful, ecstatic, embodies the sublime in its ultimate, Dionysiac incarnation. If Dionysus – Euripides' Dionysus above all – is the god of theatre, Atreus can be considered his (super)human counterpart, endowed with many of the same alluring ambiguities and irresistible attractions.

The analogy extends to fundamental aspects of Atreus' persona. As 'gods' of theatrical mimesis both Atreus and the protagonist of *Bacchae* act as playwrights on the stage and control the unfolding of the dramatic action. Both Atreus and Dionysus import into the tragedy comic elements which not only enrich their expressive repertoire, but also prove invaluable in the battle against less articulate opponents such as Thyestes and Pentheus.

Atreus' Dionysiac overtones are established early in the play as an effect of the intertextual connection with Ovid's Procne, whose revenge takes place in the frenzy of *trieterica Bacchi*.[137] Appropriating the wounded persona of the betrayed queen, Atreus also shares in the violent revenge that can be

[136] Boyle (1983b) 212.

[137] Ov. *Met.* 6.587. Ovid follows Accius' less usual version of the myth, which places the story in a Thrace converted to the cult of Dionysus; Dangel (1995) 346–7. The setting may well go back to Sophocles; Ciappi (1998) 439. On the connections between the sacrifice of Thyestes and the Dionysiac dimension of the Procne story see Burkert (1983) 181–2.

understood only in the context of such wild rites. Similarly, when Atreus confesses to the unexplained and overwhelming power of the inspiration that has taken him over,[138] he transcends the normal limits of human action and partakes of the irrational excess of the god of *furor*, Dionysus-Bacchus himself. *Thyestes*, like the Euripidean archetype of Dionysiac tragedy, *Bacchae*, is (among other things) a tragedy of revenge and of familial bonds ignored, overturned and destroyed. Thyestes may not be aware of what he is doing, but Atreus certainly is when he specifies that the most hideous aspect of his revenge be carried out by him. Like Agave, Thyestes is effectively blinded (wine fuddles his mind) and forced to become (at least symbolically) the killer of his own offspring. Finally, the crime committed by Atreus is similarly coloured by the religious overtones of a rite, of a novel ceremony in honour of a novel god, Atreus himself, who is even more controversial than his Greek counterpart.

Atreus, like Dionysus, plays a crucial metadramatic role, appearing as the consummate manipulator of words, knowledge and emotions, and overpowering all others. Much of Atreus' and Dionysus' power resides in their ability to introduce into the tragic text a dimension of skilled irony, manipulation and disguise which other characters are unequipped to understand, and by which they are inevitably trapped. Pentheus is baffled by this different form of communication and is consistently taken in by it.[139] In the second episode of *Bacchae*, in particular, Dionysus' *double entendres* exploit the same linguistic ambiguity that will serve Atreus so well in his successful attempt to tease and deceive his brother.[140] The god, we are reminded, is a *sophos* (*Bacch.* 656), whose knowledge far exceeds that of uninspired mortals such as the king of Thebes. We realize now that the 'comic' elements play a very significant role in the articulation of the play's meaning, because they strike at the core of what *sophia* really is. One of the recurrent themes of *Bacchae* is precisely that those who appear to be 'foolish' (Dionysus and his followers) are actually 'wise', and the 'wise' are ultimately devoid of sense.[141] Puns and *double entendres* bring home this fundamental opposition and its paradoxical resolution.

[138] Lines 267–78, on which see above, p. 130. It may be worth pointing out the comparable structure of the exchange between Cadmus and Agave at *Bacch.* 1281–2 (ΚΑ. ἄθρησον αὐτὸ καὶ σαφέστερον μάθε. | ΑG. ὁρῶ . . .) with *Thy.* 1005–6: AT. *natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?* | TH. *agnosco fratrem.*

[139] Segal (1982) 230 aptly labels him an 'authoritarian literalist'.

[140] See for instance the god's remark on Pentheus' significant name at *Bacch.* 508. Pentheus, however, does recognize Dionysus' linguistic prowess: ὡς θρασὺς ὁ βάκχος κοὐκ ἀγύμναστος λόγων (491). See 479–80.

[141] The topic is particularly prominent in the first episode; see especially 196, with 269, 326, 332, 655–9.

While the comparison between *Thyestes* and *Bacchae* is especially significant at a symbolic and functional level, some further thematic affinities are worth mentioning. Hunting imagery plays an important role in both plays. Agave and her fellow Bacchants literally 'hunt down' Pentheus until he is ripped limb from limb (731–3, 977, 1189–91). The outcome of Atreus' hunting will be no less devastating for being almost entirely psychological: the traps he has deployed against Thyestes will indeed yield the desired, bloody result: 'the beast is caught in the nets I placed; I see both him and, joined together with him, the offspring of the hated race I see' (*Thy.* 491–3: *plagis tenetur clausa dispositis fera:* | *et ipsum et una generis invisi indolem* | *iunctam parenti cerno*) parallels Dionysus' reference to Pentheus at *Bacchae* 848, 'the man is falling within the cast of the net' (ἀνὴρ ἐς βόλον καθίσταται).[142] While in Seneca Thyestes' definition as a *fera* is without direct consequences, in Euripides the Bacchants attack Pentheus because they mistakenly believe that he is a lion (989–91). The lion, however, is one of the animals traditionally associated with Dionysus[143] and indeed, when he is captured by Pentheus' soldiers, he is presented as a wild beast (436: θήρ). Dionysus thus 'shifts' this animal quality onto Pentheus, using him as a scapegoat, a process which is parallel to the one whereby Atreus, the really 'feral' cannibal, ultimately casts Thyestes in the role of a bestial man-eater.

Also, the belated anagnorisis of Thyestes can be compared with Pentheus' equally ineffectual anagnorisis in *Bacchae*. There the king finally acknowledges his past errors (1120–1), and realizes that his end is close (1113), but to no avail: the divine force of Dionysus should have been recognized and obeyed earlier, just as Thyestes' ultimate understanding of Atreus' character and intentions – *agnosco fratrem* – only underscores his previous intellectual failure. Agave's recognition of her own deeds, too, is tragically belated (1345).

The knowing smile of Dionysus is an apt emblem for Atreus, too, as he contemplates from a superior vantage point the extent of his success. Equating himself with the gods, Atreus becomes a veritable god of tragedy, the presiding icon of the metadramatic manipulation staged in *Thyestes*. As Dionysus precipitates Pentheus' death in a sort of 'play within the play'[144] which he himself has authored, so does Atreus plot and enact his revenge over Thyestes.

Common to all aspects of Atreus' superiority over Thyestes is his ability to play at the same time from different scores, to undermine Thyestes'

[142] On hunting and nets see also 231, 451, 1021 and *passim.*

[143] *Bacch.* 1019, with Dodds (1960) 205 and xviii.

[144] Foley (1980) 109. I am indebted to Foley for many insights on *Bacchae.*

certainties, and to assuage his latent fears by switching unpredictably between codes which would normally be considered mutually exclusive. Alongside Thyestes' utterly tragic, and fatally doomed, monodimensionality,[145] Atreus displays a huge range of behaviour, which is ultimately the key to outmanoeuvring his brother.

At times Atreus takes issue with the boundaries of generic affiliation, and infiltrates into the tragedy a distinctly comic tone.[146] We have already insisted upon Atreus' double role as author and actor. Although Atreus, needless to say, is not another Plautine *servus currens*,[147] as he directly addresses the audience in impassioned asides[148] he comes very close to the conspiratorial attitude that several Plautine protagonists assume *vis-à-vis* their public.[149] The crossing of boundaries thus accomplished is at least twofold, since what is at stake is not only the generic categorization of the play, but also the social status of the protagonist – a king who abandons all sense of propriety and whose behaviour on stage recalls, of all things, that of cunning, comic slaves. *Pace* Cicero, who decreed that 'comic elements in tragedy, and tragic in comedy, are inappropriate', [150] comic elements can become striking signifying strategies in tragedy, highlighting with their ironic *contrappunto* the fatal ignorance of certain characters, and creating opportunities for emotional release which bond the audience with the characters who control irony (a strategy famously not lost on Shakespeare).

A similar manipulation of genre-specific codes underlies the final scene of the play. Setting the tragedy's *dénouement* at a banquet precipitates a generic short-circuit, which further destabilizes the audience's expectations.[151] Banquets and food play a prominent role in comedy, and the text's attention to Thyestes' bodily functions (his untragic burping, 911)[152] activates the

[145] I borrow the term from Foley (1980) 122.

[146] On 'comic' and 'tragic' see Silk (2000) 52–97; on Euripides and the 'comic' see briefly Silk (2000) 51; Seidensticker (1978); Gredley (1996); and Taplin (1996). Specifically on *Bacchae*, and the 'liminality of genre' of Dionysus in the play, see Segal (1982) 254–6.

[147] Ulixes' language in *Tro.* 613–14 is indeed reminiscent of clevet comic slaves; see Boyle (1994) 190. Such *servi* could in turn evoke lofty mythological models for their enterprises; see Plaut. *Bacch.* 925; *Pseud.* 1063, 1244 with Fraenkel (1960) 9–12.

[148] On asides see Tarrant (1978) 237, who points out that they seem to belong to fourth-century tragedy as much as to comic theatre. On the importance of asides in the latter see Duckworth (1952) 109–14.

[149] In turn, clever slaves in Plautus are eager to appropriate tragic or epic models for their exploits. See again Chrysalus' *canticum* at *Bacch.* 925–78, modelled on *Iliou persis*, but with likely borrowings from tragic language; Fraenkel (1960) 57–63, with Norden (1927) 370. See also *Pseud.* 1063, 1243–4 (all prepared by 524, 584).

[150] *De optimo genere oratorum* 1.

[151] A *deipnon* concludes Plautus' *Stichus* (739–72), as well as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, *Acharnians* and *Birds*. See Duckworth (1952) 380.

[152] Meltzer (1988) 315 with Dover (1968) 70. On burping in Plautus see *Pseud.* 1295, 1301. See also Manilius 5.462 *ructantemque patrem natos* (referring to Thyestes), with Aesch. *Ag.* 1598–601.

comic intertext. At the same time, of course, we are bound to perceive the banquet as the inevitable last step in the elaborate sacrifical ritual which had structured Atreus' killing of Thyestes' children.[153] The sudden appearance of a drunken Thyestes on the stage catalyzes the tragic irony of the drama's final moments, as it displays a character desperately unaware of the looming disaster. Moreover, the comedy implicit in this presentation ultimately denies Thyestes the compassion that such a character could otherwise elicit. The generic boundary-crossing promoted by Atreus is yet another tool in his unequal fight against Thyestes, because he has been able to manipulate the literary code, once again, to his exclusive advantage. He has taken up the *ethos* of a comic hero, better to deceive his brother, and has organized a banquet which takes the normal comic obsession with food and warps it into its most gruesome and painful opposite. Thyestes, unable as usual to comprehend his brother's ingenuity, is completely deceived, and his belated, rather weak intimations of uneasiness are drowned out by the loud incongruity of the scene. By evoking a comic intertext which Thyestes has failed to suspect, Atreus effectively invites the audience to relinquish empathy for Thyestes, and to replace these tragic emotions with a sense of physical disgust and moral detachment which strips Thyestes of any remaining sense of dignity.

Equally interesting in this context is Atreus' apparently friendly request that his brother change the exile's shabby attire for robes worthy of his newly regained royal status: 'take off your foul garments, spare my eyes, and put on ornaments equal to mine' (524–6: *squalidam vestem exue,* | *oculisque nostris parce, et ornatus cape* | *pares meis*).[154] Changing clothes, a frequent event in comedy,[155] only ends in disaster for Senecan tragic characters, especially when they trade upwards.[156] Agamemnon relinquishes his military garments and accepts Clytemnestra's robe just before he is murdered (*Ag.* 881–4).[157] In *Troades*, Helen treacherously persuades Polyxena to dress for her wedding while she is actually being driven to her death (883–5).[158] In *Thyestes* we can observe the same interplay of irony and doom, as the final touches to Thyestes' new outfit pave the way for one of Atreus' most chilling *double entendres*: 'wear the crown set on your reverend head; I will offer to the gods the destined victims' (544–5: *imposita capiti vincla venerando gere;* |

[153] On the sequence sacrifice–*extispicium*–banquet Tarrant (1985) 198 compares Ov. *Met.* 15.130–9.

[154] The importance of this aspect has been pointed out by Erika Thorgerson in an unpublished seminar paper (Princeton, 1994).

[155] On the metadramatic implications of robing see Segal (1982) 223.

[156] See *Tro.* 883, *Ag.* 881–3, with Tarrant (1985) 165.

[157] See Tarrant (1976) 339. [158] See Fantham (1982) 341.

ego destinatas victimas superis dabo). There can be little doubt that the text orients the audience towards an ironic evaluation of these details, if only because of the explicit caveats offered by the chorus in the ode preceding this scene, which Thyestes is conspicuously failing to heed: 'a king is not made by riches, nor by the colour of a Tyrian garment, nor by the royal mark of honour on his head', *regem non faciunt opes,* | *non vestis Tyriae color,* | *non frontis nota regia* (344–6). In act 5, as a drunken Thyestes is suddenly overcome by anguish, his royal garments now dishevelled, the possibility that the audience may share his emotions is further reduced (909–10, 947). *Bacchae*, too, offers a striking example of this fatal connection: when, at line 842, Pentheus unwittingly agrees to dress as a woman, he not only elicits an ironic reaction of which he is utterly unaware, but also takes a decisive step towards his own demise.

Atreus shares with Dionysus the superior power that derives from their being in control of the dramatic strategies enacted on stage. Unlike Thyestes and Pentheus, they control events because they devised the plot and set it in motion; they are not only passive actors, but also crafty authors.[159] In the manipulation and transgression of boundaries that shape human society and literary expression, *Bacchae* and *Thyestes* reveal both the artificiality and the strength of those delimitations.[160] Both plays force their audiences into a complex negotiation of conflictual emotions, offering them the vision of an exhilarating freedom and at the same time of the horrific extremes that freedom could provoke.[161]

[159] Foley (1980).

[160] A tentative connection could be established between *Thy.* 103–4 (*sentit introitus tuos* | *domus et nefando tota contactu horruit*) and the earthquake that shakes Pentheus' palace at *Bacch.* 586–92. The contexts are clearly different, yet the notion that the royal palace metaphorically shatters when (Bacchic) *furor* enters could perhaps be related.

[161] A tension poignantly captured in *Bacch.* 861, where Dionysus is called δεινότατος, ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἠπιώτατος.

CHAPTER 4

Atreus rex

NON QUIS, SED UTER

dignum est Thyeste facinus, et dignum Atreo
(Seneca, *Thyestes* 271)

1

Despite its title, *Thyestes* is of course a play about Atreus, whose fundamental role in articulating the plot is matched by his consistently overpowering presence on stage. The designation of Atreus' counsellor as *satelles* is metaphorically most fitting: other characters revolve around the larger-than-life royal protagonist with the limited, virtually non-existent autonomy of satellites locked in a gravitational field that they cannot control. The counsellor voices his feeble resistance as Atreus' plot is already marching along briskly; the chorus is feeble and unable to affect, at times even to understand, the irresistible progress of the revenge.[2] And Thyestes, too, for all his aspirations, most often appears to be the necessary but hardly self-determined complement to his brother. After all, he is lured into a carefully organized trap, and his every reaction, practical as well as psychological, has been successfully gauged and pre-analysed by Atreus.

The unquenchable enmity between the two brothers only casts their blood-bond into sharper relief. Indeed, Atreus conjures up an image of his brother that virtually mirrors himself – an image that the chorus finds plausible. This elusive yet powerful bond adds significantly to the disturbing appeal of the play: because they know each other so deeply, and because we can only glimpse the nature and depth of their relationship, both Atreus

[1] Note that the word, even in its basic meaning of 'escort' or 'attendant' does often carry a rather negative connotation (*OLD* s.v. 1), and can also be used in the fully negative sense of 'accomplice in crime' (with gen.: *OLD* s.v. 2).

[2] For more details on the chorus's attitude see below, pp. 164–76.

THE PASSIONS IN PLAY

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