between the stage and the audience is removed, thus presenting the audience with competing realities to interpret.

What if no dramatists were available or able to write a *praetexta*? How then, could one allude to offstage reality onstage in the dramatic text or within the dramatic reality of a nonhistorical play (illusory drama)? As chapter 4 explores, the opening program of Pompey's theatre illustrates that, unlike a *praetexta* celebrating contemporary aristocratic achievements, in which the honorand appears as a protagonist on the stage, a historical person was alluded to onstage within the dramatic context of a tragedy. If *praetextae* represent a *contaminatio* with reality, this appropriation of the audience's reality in a tragedy through visual referents onstage to encourage an allusion further points to the way in which a restaged production of a previously staged play could become topically relevant. Pompey's *exemplum* of incorporating the audience's reality into the dramatic action of the play as an allusion to contemporary political events produced tragedies that were theatricalized versions of the audience's reality. The honorand has replaced the dramatist. Furthermore, the attempted restaging of Accius' *Brutus* following the assassination of Julius Caesar and Augustus' choice of Varius Rufus' *Thyestes* for his triple triumph of 29 B.C.E. point to the extent to which tragedy could allude to the audience's reality without altering the dramatic text of a previously produced play.





# CREATING METATRAGEDY

*deerat hoc unum mihi,*
*spectator iste. nil adhuc facti reor:*
*quidquid sine insto fecimus sceleris perit.*

(SENECA *MEDEA* 992–994)[1]

I lacked this one thing,
Jason as spectator. Up to now, I have done nothing:
without him, whatever crime I committed is wasted.

After killing her children, Medea (Seneca *Medea* 982–994) considers the effects of her anger and voices her one regret: that she did not turn Jason into a spectator, since her crime does not exist without him as audience, despite the fact that a crime was committed—her children are dead. In other words, Medea needs a stage audience to validate her stage actions. Audience reaction onstage replaces stage action in a drama, which makes the reaction of the actual audience irrelevant.

To examine the effects of this reciprocal relationship between the stage and the audience, two questions inform this chapter, arising from the semiotic reception of *praetextae:* How do dramatists or public figures advertise a historical event or their own status through mythological allusions on the tragic stage? How does the audience distinguish between actor, mythological character, and actual person being alluded to onstage when the allusion challenges what it recognizes as real off the stage? In other words, how does the audience interpret the simultaneous referents arising from these competing realities when it is viewing its

own theatricalized reality onstage? From a semiotic perspective, culture informs theatre, theatre permeates society, and then theatricality is incorporated back into the theatre; but when the audience's own metatheatre is incorporated into stage reality, the metatragedy of Seneca results: theatricality replaces theatre, as characters become their own audience watching or commenting on their own stage actions. The audience seated in the theatre shifts roles from spectator to witness. Where is the "real" audience?

Allusions to mythological characters operate on many levels, those that are self-styled and those that are styled by others, often occurring concurrently with other allusions, which may themselves be either self-styled or styled by others. I focus on self-styled allusions to mythological characters arising from the production of a tragedy, and on any effect such an allusion had in making a corresponding allusion to another political figure, rather than on allusions that are styled by others in non-dramatic contexts.[2]

The exact date when a dramatist or presenter first intended a mythological allusion arising from a production of a tragedy to be interpreted as political allusion is unknown. In support of a second-century B.C.E. date, Bilinski argues that Accius' plays reflect anti-Gracchan sentiment.[3] While we may suspect that some passages seem allusive, few details surrounding the production dates of any of Accius' plays survive; therefore it is difficult to interpret passages or plays as allusions to specific contemporary political events. However, in the case of Pompey's theatre opening, we do have evidence with which to interpret political allusions. The opening program of Pompey's theatre illustrates the effectiveness of alluding to a historical person onstage *within* the dramatic context of a tragedy, rather than having the actual person represented onstage, as in *praetextae*, therefore turning a nonillusory drama into an illusive one. As this chapter explores, Pompey's removal of the barrier between actor and audience through dramatic allusion influenced how tragedies could be at once fixed dramatic texts and allusive commentaries on contemporary political events in performance contexts. Versions of plays about Lucius Junius Brutus' expulsion of the Tarquins and Augustus' choice of Varius Rufus' *Thyestes* for his triple triumph point to the extent to which tragedy had become metatheatrical even before the stage appearances of Nero and the composition of Seneca's metatragedies.





## POMPEY'S THEATRE OPENING

When Pompey celebrated the gala opening of his theatre, which was the first permanent stone theatre at Rome, in 55 B.C.E., the lavish displays of the various *ludi* dazzled his audience with their extravagance.[4] In addition to scenic entertainment, there were numerous gladiatorial displays with many exotic animals.[5] This gala was carefully orchestrated by the dramatic censor, or more accurately manager, Spurius Maecius Tarpa, the first person ever to hold such a position in Rome. His appointment underlies the importance of the opening celebrations as a means of furthering Pompey's extraordinary prestige.[6] Aesopus, the most famous tragic actor then at Rome, was brought out of retirement to act in the opening production, but with disappointing results—at a key passage, his voice failed him.[7]

The theatre was part of a much larger complex that included the Temple of Venus Victrix, dedicated in 52 B.C.E., which was located directly across the stage, above the *cavea*.[8] At present, we know little about the form, appearance, or architecture of this temple.[9] There were also a *curia* or assembly hall, a Portico of Nations, gardens, a display gallery, and smaller shrines.[10] According to Pliny, the theatre could accommodate 40,000 spectators.[11] The luxuriousness of the theatre is demonstrated by its "air conditioning," effected by running water flowing in channels.[12] The theatre had a *scaena* three tiers high, and the entire stage area was lavishly decorated. Pompey's theatre was the sole permanent theatre at Rome for over forty years, until the construction of G. Cornelius Balbus' theatre in 13 B.C.E.[13] and the theatre of Marcellus, also dedicated in 13 B.C.E.[14] Due to its size, the theatre of Pompey continued to dominate the area after the construction of the later theatres, and its splendor ensured that it was one of the showplaces at Rome throughout its existence in a way that the other theatres were not.[15] These theatres were all built close to each other in the southern Campus Martius, thereby creating what would now be recognized as a theatre district, in an area readily accessible to, but technically outside the sacred line of, the *pomoerium*.[16]

Pompey's own description of his theatre at the dedication ceremony of the Temple of Venus Victrix in 52 B.C.E. is preserved by Tertullian, in a passage filled with Christian invective against pagan culture:

> *cum illam arcem omnium turpitudinum extruxisset, veritus quandoque memoriae suae censoriam animadversionem Veneris aedem superposuit et*

*ad dedicationem edicto populum vocans non theatrum sed Veneris templum nuncupavit, "cui subiecimus," inquit, "gradus spectaculorum."*[17]

Although he had built that monument of all things morally corrupt, in truth, even when he incorporated a censored temple of Venus as a memorial of himself, at the dedication ceremony, he called it, in an edict to the people, not a theatre but rather a temple of Venus, "to which I have added," he said, "the steps of a theatre."

Irony has been detected in Pompey's description of his theatre as a temple that could accommodate scenic productions; yet long before the construction of the theatre, Venus had been associated with theatrical or scenic productions.[18] With the dedication of the Temple of Venus Victrix, the relationship between theatre, politics, and religion becomes more complete than it had been in any of the previous temporary theatres. Up to that time, aediles were remembered for fabulous *ludi,* but they were not, except in the case of M. Aemilius Scaurus and his theatre, permanently associated with a particular structure for any of the games given.[19] Whereas plays were formerly produced on stages erected near temples *in conspectu dei,* they were now produced, in Pompey's theatre, both at and within the temple precinct of Venus Victrix. It is this architectural interplay between temple and theatre that leads to the construct: Venus' temple steps equal Pompey's theatre seats. According to Plutarch, Pompey later dreamed about Venus and his theatre on the eve of the Battle of Pharsalus and feared that through the family connection that he had cultivated with Venus, Caesar, who also claimed descent from Venus, would appropriate his glory.[20] Furthermore, it was a later irony that Augustus relocated the statue of Pompey, which had been erected in the theatre's *curia* and at the base of which Caesar was murdered, opposite the entrance of the theatre so that "Pompey" had to be passed in order for one to enter his theatre and the shrine of Venus.[21]

The importance of the theatre continued beyond Pompey's opening celebrations, most notably when Caesar celebrated his triumph over Pompey's African forces with spectacles in Pompey's own theatre in 46 B.C.E.[22] On a practical level, the theatre's seating capacity may have dictated the choice of venue, but on a symbolic level, Caesar seems to have taken hold of Venus' cult and her temple-theatre as a demonstration of his victory over Pompey and his own claims to Venus' cult. Julio-Claudian emperors continued to link their names with the theatre, most notably Claudius, who rededicated the Temple of Venus Victrix in a solemn ceremony:





*ludos dedicationis Pompeiani theatri, quod ambustum restituerat, e tribunali posito in orchestra commisit, cum prius apud superiores aedes supplicasset perque mediam caveam sedentibus ac silentibus cunctis descendisset.*[23]

[Claudius] opened the games at the [re]dedication of Pompey's theatre, which he had restored from fire damage, from a tribunal placed in the orchestra, after he had first offered sacrifice at the upper temples and had descended into the middle of the auditorium, before all the silently seated spectators.

Augustus restored some part of the complex in 32 B.C.E.[24] After a fire in 21 C.E., Tiberius again had the theatre restored, but the renovations were completed only under Caligula.[25] It was Claudius, however, who rededicated the temple, as Suetonius describes above, and who inscribed his name and that of Tiberius on the *scaena,* restoring once again, in the process, Pompey's name.[26] Nero put his stamp on the theatre for a visit by King Tiridates by having the interior gilded and adding purple awnings over the *cavea.*[27]

The theatre of M. Aemilius Scaurus, which preceded Pompey's theatre by only three years, had greater implications than any other temporary theatre for both its extravagance in theatre construction and its success in ensuring the immortality of its builder.[28] Although conceived of as a temporary theatre, it seems that no expense was spared in its construction. Pliny relates:

*in aedilitate hic sua fecit opus maximum omnium quae umquam fuere humana manu facta, non temporaria mora, verum etiam aeternitatis destinatione.*[29]

In his own aedileship he made the greatest of works ever made by human hand, not with temporary construction in mind, but rather made to last forever.

The *scaena* of the theatre was built in three tiers: the first of marble, the second of glass, and the top of gilded planks. Furthermore, it contained 360 Hymettus marble columns.[30] Between these columns stood 3,000 bronze statues.[31] The auditorium could accommodate 80,000 spectators, which is double the number of spectators Pompey's theatre could seat.[32] Pliny also mentions that the stage equipment, the gold cloth costumes, and the scene paintings were lavish to the extent that when

Scaurus reassembled all the theatre parts into his home on the Palatine, the lot was valued at 30,000,000 sesterces after being destroyed by fire.[33]

Pliny records that the theatre was intended to be used for a short period of time:

> *CCCLX columnas M. Scauri aedilitate ad scaenam theatri temporari et vix mense uno futuri in usu viderunt portari silentio legum.*[34]
>
> During the aedileship of M. Scaurus they saw 360 columns transferred to the stage of his theatre, which was temporary, and destined to be in use for scarcely a month, in silence of the laws.

Even though Pliny states that it was used "for scarcely a month," there is some evidence that the theatre actually stood for a number of years.[35] If this is true, then this theatre could be considered a prototype of the permanent stone theatre, since it stood longer than the festival for which it was built. One could also argue that the fact that this theatre became famous as Scaurus' own points in the direction of associating a theatre with a specific person rather than with the event being celebrated, and that Pompey's theatre represents the latest manifestation of a growing trend toward permanence.

Cicero provides us with rare information about Pompey's selection of plays for the opening program. Despite the lavish games given by Pompey on this occasion, Cicero reports in a letter to M. Marius that he was bored with the tragedies presented:

> *quid enim delectationis habent sescenti muli in Clytaemestra aut in Equo Troiano creterrarum tria milia aut armatura varia peditatus et equitatus in aliqua pugna? quae popularem admirationem habuerunt, delectationem tibi nullam attulissent.*[36]
>
> What pleasure, indeed, can 600 mules in the *Clytemnestra* or 3,000 bronze craters in the *Trojan Horse* or various armed battles of infantry or knights offer? What held the people captive would have brought no pleasure to you.

The *Clytemnestra* is that of Accius.[37] Two versions of the *Equos Troianus* were available to Pompey: that of Livius Andronicus and that of Naevius. While we can conjecture that the plot of each play centered on events surrounding the destruction of Troy, it is impossible to determine





how these plays differed, if at all, or which of the two plays was performed. The third dramatic item listed by Cicero, *armatura varia peditatus et equitatus in aliqua pugna,* is difficult to qualify with any certainty. It is not clear whether he means that armed battles formed a part of the dramatic action within either of the two plays mentioned, in which case, of the two plays, the *Equos Troianus* seems the most likely, or that in addition to these plays an unnamed tragedy or *praetexta* was performed. If the reference is in fact to an unnamed *praetexta,* then the *praetexta* in question must have been a restaged version of an earlier play and not an original historical play; since we know of only a few *praetextae* produced in Rome by 55 B.C.E., one would have expected Cicero to record the name if a new play had been performed, especially given the importance of this occasion, rather than to treat the performance as something trite and uneventful. It is difficult to imagine that Pompey would have presented one of the known *praetextae* that glorify the ancestors of rival dynasties on an occasion where everything was carefully planned to promote his own prestige.

The plays presented were carefully selected for the occasion. The triumphant return of Agamemnon in the *Clytemnestra,* signaled by Cicero's reference to 600 mules, and the staging of a sacked city in the *Equos Troianus* not only recall, but actually recreate, Pompey's own triple triumph held only six years before the opening of his theatre. This triumph was celebrated for his victory over his third conquered continent—a feat unparalleled in Roman history, as were his first two triumphs, which were granted while he was still an *eques.*[38] Figures of fourteen nations served as a reminder of the nations and tribes subdued by Pompey.[39] It is not known how many statues were placed in or around the theatre, but it is interesting to note that even though the count may have fallen short of the number included by Scaurus at the opening of his temporary theatre, Pompey's statues had symbolic value, where Scaurus' had none. In effect, the inauguration of the theatre also became the inauguration of a monument that would serve as a permanent or perennial commemoration in Rome of Pompey's illustrious career, as the triumphal arch was to do later for triumphing generals.[40]

Despite the emphasis that Pompey placed on Agamemnon's triumphal entry into Mycenae, the surviving fragments from Accius' *Clytemnestra* do not give details of this scene.[41] The ten fragments that do survive reveal that Cassandra returns with Agamemnon and is murdered by Clytemnestra:

(1)
*. . . sed valvae resonunt regiae.*[42]

. . . but the palace doors resound.

(2)
*omnes gaudent facere recte, male pigrent.*

All men rejoice when they do the right thing, but regret it when they do not.

The dramatic context of fragments 3–5 is unclear:

(3)
*deum regnator nocte caeca caelum e conspectu abstulit.*

The ruler of the gods removed the sky from sight with a blinding night.

(4)
*flucti inmisericordes iacere, taetra ad saxa adlidere.*

Merciless waves tossed and threw them against the foul rocks.

(5)
*pectore inchohatum fulmen flammam ostendabat Iovis.*

The just-begun lightning of Jupiter revealed a flame on his chest.

In fragment 6, Cassandra questions Clytemnestra's behavior toward her:

(6)
*cur me miseram inridet, magnis compotem et multis malis?*

Why does she mock pitiful me, who am a companion to great hardships?

Cassandra correctly prophesized the day of her death in fragment 7:

(7)
*scibam hanc mihi supremam lucem et serviti finem dari.*

I knew that this day would be my last and an end to my slavery.

(8)
*. . . ut quae tum absentem rebus dubiis coniugem*
*tetinerit, nunc prodat ultorem?*





. . . as she who held him as husband in his absence
in uncertain times, now she betrays the avenger?

Is fragment 9 a description of the fate of Agamemnon and Cassandra?

(9)
*. . . seras potiuntur plagas.*

. . . they receive their late blows.

In fragment 10, Clytemnestra seems to be speaking to Electra:

(10)
*matrem ob iure factum incilas, genitorem iniustum adprobas.*

You blame your mother for a just act, you esteem your father for an unjust one.

The emphasis on Agamemnon's triumphal entry in Pompey's production exaggerates the role of Agamemnon as a *triumphator* while downplaying his imminent murder. Cicero's reference to 600 mules and the gala events surrounding the theatre's opening make it clear that the audience was guided to interpret the triumph as Pompey's, rather than as Agamemnon's. From a dramaturgical perspective, this creates a number of difficult problems. At what point, for example, did the audience interpret the triumphal entry as Pompey's rather than Agamemnon's? If the returning and soon-to-be-murdered Agamemnon is equated with Pompey, does the audience need a selective response to know when Agamemnon ceases to be Pompey and when to return to the play proper and cease reading topical allusions into it? These questions are difficult to answer without knowing how the production "framed" the triumphal entry of Agamemnon and to what extent the audience was primed through the various *ludi* and visual cues to interpret the stage productions in relation to Pompey's triple triumph.

The presence of Pompey in the audience further contributes to the complex task of interpreting the effects of the opening program. A semiotic reading of Agamemnon's triumphal stage entrance produces the following dynamic: Pompey perceiving Agamemnon onstage as an allusion to himself; the audience perceiving Pompey as Agamemnon onstage, but also seeing him in the audience.

An audience would later face a similar interpretive dilemma at the production of Cornelius Balbus' *praetexta, Iter,* discussed in chapter 3,

at which Balbus himself was in the audience. Whereas Pompey was alluding to himself onstage, Balbus was actually portrayed onstage, with the result that he could see himself onstage and the audience could see him onstage and in the audience. Balbus may have been consciously imitating Pompey at the opening of his theatre, but unfortunately for this discussion, we do not know whether Balbus was present at the opening of Pompey's theatre or whether he alluded to its opening celebrations at the opening of his own theatre.

It seems that the association between Pompey and Agamemnon on this occasion was so successful that it was later used as a term of reproach against him. In 48 B.C.E., seven years after the opening of the theatre and shortly before the Battle of Pharsalus, Domitius Ahenobarbus made Pompey odious, according to Plutarch, by calling him "Agamemnon" and the "King of Kings."[43] Complicating the allusion to Agamemnon, however, is Pompey's self-identification with Alexander the Great outside of the theatre. At the beginning of his political career, Pompey adopted Alexander's hairstyle, to the amusement of his detractors.[44] As mentioned above, Pompey again alluded to Alexander in his triple triumph of 61 B.C.E. by wearing, or at least claiming to be wearing, Alexander's purple cloak.[45] If Appian's account is accurate, then there is a possible double allusion at the restaged production of Accius' *Clytemnestra:* Pompey's self-styled allusion to Agamemnon would recall his earlier self-styled allusion to Alexander the Great in his triumphal procession. Did Pompey further connect the two allusions by having the actor portraying Agamemnon onstage wear Alexander's purple cloak?

The representation of a sacked city onstage in the *Equos Troianus* was another ingenious way for Pompey to allude to his recent triumph at his theatre's opening, thereby taking full advantage of the opportunity (and audience) for advertising his political prestige. We do not know how the sacking of the city was described or whether an enactment was inserted into either Livius' or Naevius' version, since only one fragment survives from each play, nor do we know whether one of the conquering Greek generals was intended as an allusion to Pompey in this production.[46] From Cicero's account, the sacking of Troy seems to have been represented by bronze bowls displayed onstage.[47] The emphasis on booty may have reflected Pompey's recent triumph, at which he advertised on signs the number of towns taken under his command.[48]

With the plays presented at his theatre's opening, Pompey removed the barrier between actor and audience through dramatic allusion, with the result that a fixed dramatic text was made topical, not by adapting





the text onstage through actors' interpolations, thereby creating a new performance text, but by emphasizing scenes that the audience could understand both in the specific context of the play and in the more general context of the occasion of its restaging. The production alluded to a historical person or event onstage within the dramatic context of a tragedy, rather than having the person actually represented onstage, as in *praetextae*. The incorporation of offstage reality into the dramatic reality of the plays required the audience to have a selective response to the tragedies, resulting in changing perspectives: Are we watching Agamemnon's or Pompey's triumph? When does Agamemnon cease to allude to Pompey? Is this the destruction of Troy or some modern city? In essence we have the *contaminatio* of the play with allusions from the audience's reality, thereby turning ancient tragedy into a contemporary *praetexta*. Furthermore, whereas *praetextae* are dramatic recreations of historical events, here tragedy is understood *in relation to* a historical event.

## STAGING *BRUTUS*

The *contaminatio* of a tragedy with allusions from the audience's reality, whether or not these were physically incorporated into the drama onstage, finds frequent expression soon after Pompey's theatre opening. Of particular interest is the way in which a fixed dramatic text becomes a new performance text through allusion rather than through actors' interpolations. While the triumphing Agamemnon onstage in the *Clytemnestra* alluded to Pompey offstage, the dramatic allusion depended on the occasion of the theatre's opening rather than on its relation to a previous production. As allusive commentaries on contemporary political events in performance contexts, two plays emerge that show the intertextuality of themes and performances, the *Brutus* of Accius and the *Thyestes* of Varius Rufus. Not only do we have a character onstage alluding to a historical person in each, but we also have allusions to previously staged versions of these plays. In other words, the audience must interpret a play it is now watching in relation to how a previous version of the same play or a play on the same theme was understood as an allusion to a contemporary political figure.

Accius' *Brutus* recounted Sextus Tarquinius Superbus' rape of Lucretia and the expulsion of the Tarquins at the hands of Lucius Junius Brutus and (Lucius) Tarquinius Collatinus.[49] The original occasion for the

performance of Accius' *Brutus* is unknown. Whatever the date, the play was commissioned by (D. Junius) Brutus Callaicus for an occasion designed to add his brilliant achievements to those of his homonymous ancestors. Although Callaicus could have commissioned a play based upon his own achievements, in the tradition of such contemporary historical plays as Naevius' *Clastidium,* Ennius' *Ambracia,* or Pacuvius' *Paullus,* his choice of a play about his homonymous ancestor's role in founding the Roman Republic proved especially effective. Not only did a play based upon the achievements of his "ancestor" advertise anew his family's early valor, but it also placed the achievements of Callaicus on a par with those of this illustrious ancestor.

Livy's account of the legend (1.56–60) may have been based upon Accius' play.[50] According to Livy, while beseiging Ardea, the prince Sextus Tarquinius, son of King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, together with his brothers Titus and Arruns and his cousin Tarquinius Collatinus, decided to test the feminine virtues of their wives. The princes' wives were discovered at a banquet in the midst of young company, but Collatinus' wife, Lucretia, was home spinning wool in the midst of her slave women. Days later, Sextus returned to Ardea to rape Lucretia. Lucretia reported the crime to her husband Collatinus and to Brutus, whereupon she killed herself. Brutus, who had pretended to be dumb (hence his name) to survive the outrageous behavior of his uncle, King Tarquinius Superbus, revealed his true personality and gathered forces from Ardea to descend upon Rome. The king, who had usurped the throne from King Servius Tullius with his daughter Tullia's help, was expelled from Rome, with two of his sons, on account of his tyrannical behavior; he then settled in Caere (Etruria). His son Sextus, however, had assumed power at Gabii, where he was later killed. Brutus and Collatinus were elected the first consuls of the Roman Republic.

Four fragments from Accius' Brutus survive. It is not clear, however, at what point in the legend the dramatic action of the *Brutus* begins. We have speeches delivered by Tarquinius and a *vates,* but neither the names of any of the other characters nor the makeup of the chorus is recoverable, although one can assume that Brutus appeared in the play, as well as Lucretia, unless her rape was described in a messenger speech or a choral ode. The first two fragments, as previously cited in chapter 3, concern a dream of Tarquinius Superbus foretelling the rise of a Roman republic and its interpretation by a *vates,* or soothsayer.[51]

TARQUINIUS: *quoniam quieti corpus nocturno impetu*
*dedi sopore placans artus languidos,*





*visum est in somnis pastor ad me adpellere*
*pecus lanigerum eximia pulchritudine;*
*duos consanguineos arietes inde eligi*
*praeclarioremque alterum inmolare me.*
*deinde eius germanum cornibus conitier,*
*in me arietare, eoque ictu me ad casum dari:*
*exin prostratum terra, graviter saucium,*
*resupinum in caelo contueri maximum*
*mirificum facinus: dextrorsum orbem flammeum*
*radiatum solis liquier cursu novo.*

TARQUINIUS: Since then, at night's urging, I gave my body
to peaceful rest, soothing my tired limbs with sleep,
a shepherd, in a dream, seemed to drive toward me
a woolly flock of exceptional beauty;
two kindred rams were chosen,
and I slaughtered the nobler of the two.
Then the ram's brother butted with its horns
and rammed at me, and by that blow, I fell.
Then, lying on the ground on my back, seriously hurt,
I saw a great and marvelous deed in the sky:
the fiery radiating disk of the sun
melted to the righthand side on a new path.

This dream portends Tarquinius' overthrow by Brutus, who is still dissimulating his true intelligence at this point in the drama; but the *Vates* offers an interpretation that assures the king of Rome's greatness without preserving Tarquinius' own fragile position:

VATES: *Rex, quae in vita usurpant homines, cogitant curant vident*
*quaeque agunt vigilantes agitantque, ea si cui in somno accidunt*
*minus mirum est, sed di in rem tantam haut temere inproviso offerunt.*
*proin vide ne quem tu esse hebetem deputes aeque ac pecus*
*is sapientia munitum pectus egregie gerat,*
*teque regno expellat; nam id quod de sole ostentum est tibi,*
*populo commutationem rerum portendit fore*
*perpropinquam. haec bene verruncent populo! nam quod ad dexteram*
*cepit cursum ab laeva signum praepotens, pulcherrume*
*auguratum est rem Romanam publicam summam fore.*

SOOTHSAYER: Sire, what things men perform, ponder, worry over, and see in their lives

and what they do and busy themselves with when awake, if these things
occur to one in a dream,
it is less a cause for wonder, but in such a great matter the gods offer
you something unforeseen and not for nothing.
Be on guard lest the man whom you think is as dumb as a sheep bear
is a heart eminently fortified with wisdom,
and expels you from your kingdom; for that which was shown to you
regarding the sun
portends a change of affairs for the people
in the near future. May these things turn out well for the people! For,
since the powerful portent
took its course to the righthand side from the left, most wonderfully
did it foretell that the Roman state would be supreme.

These speeches are clearly modeled upon the speeches found in Aeschylus' *Persians,* between Atossa and the chorus (159–225). By modeling Tarquinius' dream upon that of Atossa, the mother of Xerxes, Accius makes the connection between the Persian kings and the Tarquins as dynasties that inflicted the evils of monarchy upon their subjects and stood in the way of democracy in Athens and the future Republic in Rome. These speeches are also connected to Pseudo-Seneca's *Octavia,* as discussed in chapter 3.

A reference to King Servius Tullius survives in the third fragment:[52]

*Tullius, qui libertatem civibus stabiliverat.*[53]

Tullius, who had established freedom for the citizens.

In the final surviving fragment, the office of the consuls is created:

. . . *qui recte consulat, consul siet.*[54]

. . . Let him who gives good counsel, be consul.

From a dramatic point of view, the creation of the consulship may not seem exciting, but from a thematic point of view, the play's ending emphasizes the role played by Brutus in establishing the Republic—a role that Brutus Callaicus was eager to promote in this play to add luster to his own accomplishments.

The second known occasion on which Accius' *Brutus* played an important cultural role was in 57 B.C.E. at the *ludi Apollinares,* when the





actor Aesopus aggressively promoted the recall of Cicero from exile. In the *Pro Sestio* (56–58), Cicero claims that Aesopus made apposite interpolations and emphatic line readings to plead Cicero's cause from the stage. It is not clear from Cicero's account, however, what the exact theatre program was on this occasion, that is, whether the entire *Brutus* was performed in addition to another play, or whether a quote was simply inserted into Accius' *Eurysaces* or Ennius' *Andromache,* which were also performed, in whole or in part, at the games. Since Cicero quotes from both of these plays in his speech, it is impossible to determine which play was "contaminated" by quotes from the other. Cicero does make it clear that Aesopus was adding lines spontaneously in response to the enthusiasm of the audience. The line of the *Brutus* that Aesopus recited was the line on King Servius Tullius that I just quoted: *Tullius, qui libertatem civibus stabiliverat.*

Cicero, who in the *Pro Sestio* was defending his actions in connection with the Catilinarian conspiracy of 63 B.C.E., makes the incredible claim that he was mentioned by name in Accius' play: *nominatim sum appellatus in Bruto,* "In the *Brutus* I was mentioned by name." Clearly Cicero means that Accius' Tullius refers to himself in some way, but the most likely explanation is that Aesopus and the audience (re)interpreted Tullius to mean Cicero or understood that he is Accius' Tullius by metonymy.[55] In writing of the audience's activities on the same occasion but at the performance of a comedy, Cicero relates how the text and actor could make a play topical as an attack against Clodius, who was present at the theatre:

*et quoniam facta mentio est ludorum, ne illud quidem praetermittam, in magna varietate sententiarum numquam ullum fuisse locum, in quo aliquid a poeta dictum cadere in tempus nostrum videretur, quod aut populum universum fugeret aut non exprimeret ipse actor.*

(*PRO SESTIO* 55)

And since mention has been made of stage performances, I shall not omit to mention that never, in so great a variety of sentiments [in the comedy], was there a passage in which something written by the dramatist seemed relevant to our own time either that the entire audience failed to understand or that the actor himself failed to point out.

On another occasion when the actor emphasized lines that alluded to Pompey in a negative way, Cicero also understood the audience's inter-

pretation of the allusion in relation to contemporary events rather than to the dramatist's foresight.[56]

By no stretch of historical revisionism could Cicero's claim be taken seriously by us today. Yet the fact that the claim *could* be made points to the extent to which descendants could lay claim to the accomplishments of ancestors, real or imagined, especially those made in service to the state. It furthermore illustrates the ability of Romans to accept such claims, thereby exchanging an interest in historical accuracy for the immediate benefits of historical instruction.

In the opening sentence of his *Pro Sestio,* Cicero claims that very few Romans have risked their lives for the sake of liberty and Rome's Republican constitution. That Cicero had his own services to the Roman people in mind is made clear by the later references to Aesopus' performance and his own recall from exile. By reminding his audience of the accomplishments of Servius Tullius, Cicero connects his own consulship to the achievements of the homonymous legendary figure.[57] Since Cicero was a *novus homo,* this connection provided a fictional royal pedigree for Cicero's family tree. Cicero had good reason to appeal to Roman legend to defend his infamous consulship, in which he executed leading conspirators without regard for proper legal precedents. As the self-appointed savior of Rome, in the dark hour of Catiline's conspiracy, Cicero was fashioning himself as another founder of the Roman Republic, although the title was never given, nor was it claimed by him. Since Romulus and Camillus were considered the previous founders of Rome, Cicero's posturing was extraordinary.[58] Assuming the glories of Roman legend also helped Cicero to exaggerate his own role in saving the Republic from Catiline's conspiracy.

If Cicero could position himself as a savior of the Republic, so, too, could Brutus in 44 B.C.E. As the putative descendant of the famous Brutus who expelled the Tarquins from Rome and helped establish the Roman Republic, Marcus Brutus, like Brutus Callaicus, tried to propagate a connection between himself and his "ancestor" using Accius' *Brutus* after the assassination of Julius Caesar.[59] Rome's legendary tradition already linked Marcus Junius Brutus' ancestors to the ideals of a Roman Republic, and his participation in Caesar's assassination in many ways echoed the heroism of his putative ancestor.

The perfect opportunity presented itself to Brutus at the *ludi Apollinares* in 44 B.C.E., four months after Caesar's death. During the *ludi,* Greek and Latin plays were staged, in addition to various other forms of scenic entertainment. As *praetor urbanus* for that year, Brutus was





in charge of providing the games for this festival. But since Brutus was absent from Rome, Gaius Antonius, brother of Mark Antony, was instructed to have the *Brutus* produced.[60] Such a connection between the man who expelled Tarquinius and Caesar's assassin would have cast Brutus in the role of a present-day tyrannicide, freeing the Republic from a second monarchy. This association would not have been difficult for contemporaries to make, since Caesar had already been identified with Tarquinius following his attempted coronation at the Lupercalia in 44 B.C.E.[61] and in a popular verse that was attached to statues of Caesar and Lucius Brutus days before his assassination:

> *Brutus, quia reges eiecit, consul primus factus est:*
> hic, quia consules eiecit, rex postremus factus est.[62]
>
> Brutus, since he expelled the kings, was made the first consul:
> this man, since he expelled the consuls, was made the last king.

Brutus' immediate concern was his own safety and return to Rome by means of popular support expressed in the theatre. Clearly, he thought that his self-identification with his putative legendary ancestor would be the best means to gain it.[63] In invoking his "ancestor," Brutus would have been recording his services to the state with the very same *praetexta* that had been written for his more recent ancestor, Brutus Callaicus, and that celebrated the patriotic exploits of the even earlier Lucius Junius Brutus. Centuries of patriotism by the Bruti would be concentrated—and, more importantly, advertised—in a single play. Thus Accius' play written for Callaicus would also become Marcus Brutus' own *praetexta.* In one important respect, however, Marcus Junius Brutus surpassed his ancestor. Whereas Lucius Brutus simply expelled the Tarquins from Rome, Brutus actually committed tyrannicide.[64]

Despite Brutus' emulation of his putative ancestor, it should not surprise us that Cicero claimed that Brutus was imitating Cicero himself rather than his legendary ancestor when he killed Caesar. Immediately following his assassination of Caesar, Brutus, in a wonderful example of the invocation and perpetuation of historical precedent at Rome, apparently called upon Cicero to witness the deed, as Cicero himself relates in the *Second Philippic,* inveighing against Antony as follows (2.12.28):

> *at quem ad modum me coarguerit homo acutus, recordamini. "Caesare interfecto," inquit, "statim cruentum alte extollens Brutus pugionem Ci-*

*ceronem nominatim exclamavit atque ei recuperatam libertatem est gratulatus." cur mihi potissimum? quia sciebam? vide, ne illa causa fuerit adpellandi mei, quod, cum rem gessisset consimilem rebus iis, quas ipse gesseram, me potissimum testatus est se aemulum mearum laudium extitisse.*

But consider how this clever fellow [Antony] has convicted me. "After Caesar had been slain," he said, "Brutus, at once raising up high his bloody dagger, shouted for Cicero by name and congratulated him on the recovery of freedom." Why me in particular? Because I was aware of the plot? Consider whether the reason for Brutus' shouting of my name wasn't for this reason, that, since he had done a deed exactly like the deeds I had done, he called on me especially to witness that he had appeared as a rival of my fame.

Cicero, in making this claim, actually lends contemporary political relevance to his own earlier actions and provides for the posture that he was even figuratively present at Caesar's assassination as a mentor to Brutus. Brutus, of course, had good reason to connect his assassination of Caesar with Cicero's execution of the Catilinarian conspirators. In the framework of political precedents at Rome, Brutus was rivaling not only the actions of his putative ancestor, but also, through his invocation of Cicero, the services rendered by Cicero to the state. Brutus, therefore, was at once appealing to his "ancestor" for a legendary precedent for his own actions and to Cicero for contemporary political and legal justification.[65]

Brutus' efforts as praetor to produce the *Brutus* in 44 B.C.E. were thwarted, however, by Gaius Antony, who, fearing the audience's retaliation against the conspirators for Caesar's murder, substituted the *Tereus* of Accius at the last minute.[66] This could have been the pretext to obfuscate the real aim—to prevent what the tyrannicides intended to create, namely, an enhancement of Brutus' image and status through his association with the homonymous founder of the Republic. We know from a letter he wrote to Cicero that Brutus, not knowing of the substitution, thought that the *Brutus* had been performed, and we can only guess at his disappointment at the disappearance of such a politically apposite opportunity. Cicero, in a letter to Atticus, records that the *Tereus* was nevertheless successful as political propaganda.[67] What was so topical about the *Tereus* that it was considered pertinent to Brutus' political situation at Rome?

The myth of Tereus' rape and mutilation of Philomela included the circumstances surrounding the revenge of Procne, Tereus' wife and Philomela's sister, who, in retaliation for her husband's crime, murdered her son Itys and served him to Tereus; eventually all three were turned into birds.[68] Could the general theme of murder and vengeance for tyrannical behavior, even in a mythological and familial, not political, setting, have been enough to remind the audience of Caesar's murder? Or was the success of the play due more to audience expectation than to the dramatic plot? Cicero records that the audience actually expected the Latin play, on the occasion of the *ludi,* to be politically apposite, in proof of which very few people attended the presentation of the simultaneously produced Greek games.[69] In either case, one cannot rule out the possibility that there was an "organized reception" for the play—that support for Brutus would have been expressed by the audience regardless of the play performed, since Cicero claims that at least some pro-Republican supporters were planted in the audience, and further suggests that there was little in Accius' play worth cheering.[70] In essence, Cicero transforms the audience from spectators to jurors.





As Shakespeare realized, the assassination of Caesar was a perfect theme for a drama, yet it never made it onto the Roman stage. Although there is no direct evidence, one wonders whether there was a conscious effort on the part of Caesar's supporters to connect his assassination with the plot of a tragedy at his funeral. Suetonius reports that between the funeral *ludi* the following line was sung in order to arouse pity and resentment at his death:

. . . *men servasse ut essent qui me perderent?*[71]

. . . Did I save them so that they might destroy me?

This is a quote from the *Armorum iudicium* of Pacuvius, in which Ajax bemoans the treachery of his companions. Accius wrote a play by the same name, but it must be assumed that either Pacuvius' version or this particular line from his play was judged to be more apt for the occasion than Accius' *Armorum iudicium.* The line makes an association between Caesar and Ajax, who, according to the Greek myth, lost a contest against Odysseus unfairly, thus implying that the death of Caesar was undeserved.[72] Furthermore, it places the assassination itself in a sort of mythical light and would be an appropriate response to Brutus' sympathizers, who had used the staging of Accius' *Tereus* to express their support.

The second play written on the theme of Brutus' expulsion of the Tarquins, the *Brutus* of Cassius Parmensis, is a little-known play of enor-

mous consequence for plays on the Brutus theme and the death of Caesar.[73] The author was an aristocrat who was also an enemy of Julius Caesar and Octavian/Augustus.[74] Although Cassius participated in Caesar's assassination, he should not be confused with Gaius Cassius Longinus, who, like Brutus, was the leader of the plot. The role played by Cassius Parmensis, however, was significant enough that he was killed following the Battle of Actium by Octavian's order.[75]

The evidence for attributing a *Brutus* to Cassius comes from Varro's *De lingua latina,* where he refers to the play by name:

> *inter vesperuginem et iubar dicta nox intempesta, ut in Bruto Cassii quod dicebat Lucretia: nocte intempesta nostram devenit domum.*[76]
>
> The period between dusk and dawn is called the dead of night, as Lucretia said in the *Brutus* of Cassius: "In the dead of night he came to our home."

The dramatic action of the play cannot be reconstructed from only one line, but it seems that if Lucretia is the speaker, the plot of Cassius' play centered upon her rape, and that the depiction of Brutus' expulsion of the Tarquins did not differ significantly in thematic content from either Accius' play or, indeed, Roman legend.

While a date in the 40's or 30's B.C.E. seems likely, it is not possible to determine the specific date of composition, nor even to know whether the play was ever performed. Of particular interest is the relation of this play to Accius' *Brutus.* A date of composition before Caesar's death is certainly possible, but it seems unlikely that Brutus would have selected Cassius' version over Accius' and failed to take advantage of the latter play's connection with his ancestors, real or imagined. A date following Caesar's assassination, however, would have had enormous consequences for Brutus' attempted restaging of Accius' play. Since Antony's brother substituted Accius' *Tereus* for his *Brutus,* an overt connection between the legendary and contemporary Brutus was not made. Did Cassius therefore write a new *Brutus,* either for stage production or for circulation, sometime after 43 B.C.E., to glorify all three Bruti—the legendary first consul and his homonymes, Callaicus and the contemporary tyrannicide—two of whom Accius' play had celebrated almost a century earlier? Certainty is impossible but, as in the earlier case of Brutus' attempted restaging of Accius' *Brutus,* the coincidence of legend and contemporary politics could not have been better planned.





Versions of plays on Lucius Junius Brutus' expulsion of the Tarquins illustrate the continuing removal of the barrier between actor and audience. Not only must the audience understand an allusion to a contemporary political figure effected through a character onstage, but it must also understand the relevance of this allusion to previously staged versions of the same play or theme. The (re)interpretation of stage reality in relation to the audience's reality results in the audience's growing theatricalized perception of its own reality: would Accius' play *Brutus* have alluded to Caesar's assassin, who himself imitated the actions of his putative ancestor Brutus? A similar dynamic is apparent with plays centering upon the Atreus-Thyestes myth, in particular the extent to which fixed dramatic texts continued to be understood as topical through allusions both to a contemporary political figure using a character portrayed onstage, and to previously staged versions.

## THYESTES ON THE ROMAN STAGE

The myth relating the rivalry between Atreus and Thyestes was popular on the Roman stage and involves three main episodes in dramatic versions, two of which take place in Mycenae and the third in Epirus. These episodes include Thyestes' adultery with Atreus' wife Aerope and his attempt to usurp the throne, Atreus' revenge at the infamous banquet in Mycenae, and Thyestes' exile to Epirus, where he rapes his daughter Pelopia and begets Aegisthus.[77] The myth was extremely popular on the Greek stage in the fifth and fourth centuries.[78] Roman versions include the *Thyestes* of Ennius, the *Atreus* of Accius, the *Thyestes* of Gracchus, the *Thyestes* of Cassius Parmensis, the *Thyestes* of Varius Rufus, the *Atreus* of P. Pomponius Secundus, the *Atreus* of Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus, the *Thyestes* of Seneca, and the *Thyestes* of Maternus.[79]

In recent studies, mythological tyrants on the Roman stage are treated as analogues to historical persons.[80] Separating drama from reality is difficult, however, when allusion is the means by which to distinguish the two. As a figurative device, allusion avoids direct analogy, thereby producing an "out" for dramatists undertaking dangerous themes, and for their perceived targets, of the "no offense intended, none taken" variety. When offense is actually taken, whether by the alleged target or by those pointing fingers (*animus nocendi*), only then does a generic description of a stage tyrant become a perceived insult. A ruler who is viewed as tyrannical differs from a self-styled tyrant who may

choose to reciprocate the charges of tyranny, through mythological allusion, against those who make them. When an all-but-in-name king, like Augustus, presents a play that seems to draw attention to his precarious constitutional position, the intended meaning of the allusion becomes more complicated to interpret. What message(s) did Augustus intend to send by commissioning a seemingly anti-tyrannical play, the *Thyestes,* for his triumph in 29 B.C.E.? To consider this, one must place the play in the wider context of dramas either written or perceived to have been written as condemnations of Imperial power. A closer look at tragedies on the Thyestes theme at Rome and allusions to the mythological king on the political stage reveals that there was a strong interrelationship between theatrical and political allusion, but the exact nature of this relationship is often difficult to reconstruct.[81]

It seems that a myth depicting fraternal or civil strife was perennially apposite at Rome. From this observation, however, it cannot be argued that all references to tyranny and all plays on the Atreus-Thyestes myth were intended as specific attacks against contemporary figures, unless we have the cultural contexts surrounding original or restaged versions. Although we know that Ennius' *Thyestes* was presented at the *ludi Apollinares* in 169 B.C.E., for example, we do not know specific details surrounding the occasion of performance, and therefore it is impossible to place the play in its cultural context. The same is true of Accius' *Atreus* in the Gracchan era. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, one may suspect anti-tyrannical sentiment and allusions to the political struggle at Rome between the Optimates and the Populares, yet without the original date of production, it is impossible to argue with any certainty the presence of contemporary allusions within the play. The plays presented at the opening of Pompey's theatre, therefore, remain the earliest surviving and most pivotal examples of the deliberate connection between the production of a tragedy and contemporary events.

The most important version of the Atreus-Thyestes myth for this study is Varius' *Thyestes,* whose production date is known, thereby allowing us an opportunity to consider its relation to earlier and later versions. My focus is on how plays on the Atreus-Thyestes myth may allude at once to contemporary political figures and previous versions and productions of plays on the same theme.

Varius' *Thyestes* was commissioned by Augustus and produced at the games presented after Actium in 29 B.C.E., celebrating his triple triumph.[82] The date and occasion of its production are established from two scholiast editions:





> *Varius cognomento Rufus Thyesten tragoediam magna cura absolutam post Actiacam victoriam Augusto ludis euis in scaena edidit; pro qua fabula sestertium deciens accepit.*[83]
>
> Varius Rufus produced the tragedy *Thyestes* onstage, which was composed with great care after Augustus' Actian victory, in his games; for this play, he accepted 1,000,000 sesterces.

Although there is no direct evidence in the form of an inscription to corroborate the date of Varius' play, there is no reason to doubt its accuracy.[84] Varius' *Thyestes* was well known in ancient Rome, and his connection with the Julian dynasty is supported by unflattering allusions to Antony in his epic poem *De morte.*[85] It is unknown why Varius was chosen for this important commission.[86] Was he the only poet in Maecenas' circle who wanted to try writing in this genre? After all, Propertius, Vergil, and Horace never attempted a dramatic work, and it is unlikely that Augustus would have approached the aristocratic Pollio, who did write tragedies, with this request.

Though commissioning a play on Aeneas would have seemed apt, Augustus could not look to a nonmythological ancestor, as the Bruti could, in the context of a *praetexta,* to frame an allusion to his own achievements. Had Julius Caesar commissioned a *praetexta* to record his military conquests, for example, Augustus could have restaged such a play to rival Brutus' attempted restaging of the play commissioned by Brutus Callaicus. Varius' *Thyestes* was perhaps one of the only plays written specifically for a triumph and produced in Rome since the triumph of Brutus Callaicus a century earlier.[87] If the scholiast's notice is accurate, then it is also the last recorded original production of a tragedy under the Republic.

The play is lost, and it seems to have been the only tragedy composed by Varius.[88] We know, however, that ancient literary criticism held Varius' play up as a model of excellence in tragic composition.[89] Only two lines survive, in a passage in which Quintilian compares Catiline's furious madness to Atreus' by quoting a speech by Atreus:

> *iam fero infandissima,*
> *iam facere cogor.*[90]
>
> Now I bear most unspeakable crimes,
> now I am forced to commit them.

Atreus' reference to the unspeakable deeds he is about to commit as a reaction to crimes committed against him points to a dramatic action centered in Mycenae preceding his revenge at the banquet scene.[91] Unfortunately, nothing is known of its actual performance and reception on this important occasion. The value of the performance as an allusion to Augustus, therefore, must be gauged by the popularity of the myth itself upon the Roman stage and, in particular, its relation to earlier dramatic versions at Rome.

Varius' play was preceded by three versions that established the dramatic tradition of the myth in Rome.[92] The first version to appear on the Roman stage was the *Thyestes* of Ennius. Although the point is controversial, Jocelyn convincingly argues that the events of Ennius' play take place in Thesprotus' court after the events in Mycenae, including Thyestes' adultery with Aerope and the banquet scene.[93] This implies that the myth was well known enough from Greek versions and literature for Ennius to treat a later aspect of the myth.

The plot of Accius' *Atreus,* on the other hand, does revolve around the infamous banquet scene. The surviving fragments reveal that Atreus has discovered Thyestes' adultery with Aerope, and they contain descriptions of the banquet and Thyestes' discovery of his crime.[94] In other plays on the Thyestes myth, Accius seems to have treated different events, such as the recognition of Aegisthus and the kidnapping of Chrysippus.[95]

In fragment 1, the family background of Atreus is given:

(1)
*Servius Dan. in Aen. VIII 130 "alii ita tradunt Steropes et Atlantis filios Oenomaum et Maiam fuisse, Oenomai Hippodamiam filiam, unde Atreus natus; at Maiae filius Mercurius, ex quo Arcades, de quibus Evander, quod Accius in Atreo plenius refert."*[96]

Servius Dan. on *Aen.* 8.130: "Others relate that Oenomaus and Maia were the children of Sterope and Atlas, that Hippodamia was the daughter of Oenomaus, of whom Atreus was born; also, Mercury was the son of Maia, from whom were the Arcadians, among whom was Evander, which Accius relates fully in the *Atreus.*"

Fragment 2 describes how Pelops won Hippodamia:

(2)
*simul et Pisaea praemia arrepta a socro*
*. . . possedit suo. . . .*





At the same time as he takes the Pisaean prize
. . . snatched from his father-in-law. . . .

Atreus lists grievances he has with his brother and resolves to punish him in fragments 3–5:

(3)
ATREUS: *iterum Thyestes Atreum adtractatum advenit,*
iterum iam adgreditur me et quietum exsuscitat:
*maior mihi moles, maius miscendumst malum,*
qui illius acerbum cor contundam et comprimam.[97]

ATREUS: Again, Thyestes comes to annoy Atreus,
again, he approaches me and disturbs my peace:
greater the toil for me, a greater evil must be planned,
I, who, will crush and smother his bitter heart.

(4)
*(quae) ego incipio conata exequar.*

What attempts that I begin, I will carry out.

(5)
ATREUS: *oderint,*
*dum metuant.*

ATREUS: Let them hate,
while they fear.[98]

In fragments 6–9a, Atreus describes how Thyestes committed adultery with his wife:

(6)
*qui non sat habuit coniugem inlexe in stuprum.*

He who did not think enough committed adultery with my wife.

(7)
*. . . quod re in summa summum esse arbitror*
*periclum, matres conquinari regias,*
*contaminari stirpem ac misceri genus.*

. . . Indeed, I consider it to be the highest danger
in high affairs of state, for mothers to have contaminated kingdoms,
to have fouled the stock and to have corrupted the tribe.

(8)
*adde huc quod mihi portento caelestum pater*
*prodigium misit, regni stabilimen mei,*
*agnum inter pecudes aurea clarum coma,*
*em clam Thyestem clepere ausum esse e regia,*
*qua in re adiutricem coniugem cepit sibi.*

Add, furthermore, the fact that the Father has sent to me a celestial sign,
through a portent, the foundation of my kingdom,
the golden fleece of a famous ram among the flocks,
which Thyestes dared to steal from my kingdom in secret;
in which deed, he took my wife as an accomplice to himself.

(9)
THYESTES: . . . *vigilandum est semper: multae insidiae sunt bonis.*[99]

THYESTES: . . . One must always be vigilant: for many ambushes are laid
for good men.

(9a)
*id quod multi invideant multique expetant inscitiast*
*postulare, nisi laborem summa cum cura ecferas.*

To seek that which many men envy and many seek
is foolish, unless you carry out the task with great care.

The description of the seating arrangement for the banquet is spoken by an unknown character and includes the earliest extant use, in Latin, of the term *tyrannus:*

(10)
*ne cum tyranno quisquam epulandi gratia*
*accumbat mensam aut eandem vescatur dapem.*

Neither let just anyone recline at the table for the sake of feasting
with a tyrant nor let him eat the same feast.[100]

Fragments 11 and 12 refer to Atreus' preparations for the banquet:

(11)
*epularum fictor, scelerum fratris delitor. . . .*

The maker of the feast, the destroyer of a brother's crimes. . . .





(12)
*concoquit*
*partem vapore flammae, veribus in foco*
*lacerta tribuit.*

He cooked
part with the steam of the fire, over the hearth
he separated the limbs onto spits.

Divine displeasure in the banquet is signaled by thunder in fragment 13:

(13)
*sed quid tonitru turbida torvo*
concussa repente aequora caeli
sensimus sonere?

But why did we hear
the sky suddenly roar
with the clash of thunder?

Fragment 14 describes Atreus' confirmation that Thyestes has eaten his children, but the fragment does not make clear whether Atreus is actually watching his brother as he delivers the line:

(14)
ATREUS: *natis sepulchro ipse est parens.*

ATREUS: A father himself is his children's tomb.

Thyestes realizes that he has been deceived by Atreus and reacts to the knowledge that he has eaten his own children and that he is now polluted:

(15)
THYESTES: *fregisti fidem.*
ATREUS: *neque dedi neque do infideli cuiquam. . . .*

THYESTES: You broke your trust.
ATREUS: Neither did I give, nor do I give, to one untrustworthy. . . .

(16)
*ipsus hortatur me frater, ut meos malis miser*
*manderem natos.*

My brother himself urged me, that I, poor wretch, through these evils, would eat my children.

(17)
*egone Argivum imperium attingam aut Pelopia digner domo?*
*quoi me ostendam? quod templum adeam? quem ore funesto alloquar?*

Shall I attain Argive power or be deemed worthy of the House of Pelops?
Where shall I show myself? What temple shall I approach? Whom shall I address with my deathly lips?

It is not clear whether Atreus or Thyestes is the speaker of lines 18–19:

(18)
*ecquis hoc animadvortet? vincite!*

Is anyone paying attention? Subdue him!

(19)
*numquam istam imminuam curam infitiando tibi.*

Never will I weaken that care in denying to you.

The placement and context of the last fragment is unclear:

(20)
*probae etsi in segetem sunt deteriorem datae*
*fruges, tamen ipsae suapte natura enitent.*

Even if good grain is spread among a bad crop,
nevertheless, it shines through its innate nature.

Accius' Atreus possesses the typical features of a ruthless tyrant, but his character may be tyrannical as a response to political pressures, in particular the political ambitions, whether real or perceived, of his brother Thyestes.[101] The fragments do not give an adequate picture of the characterization of Thyestes that might justify, however tenuously, Atreus' reasons for punishing him with such cruelty. Deception plays a large role in the play, both Atreus' punishment of his brother and Thyestes' later knowledge of it, but the fragments do not reveal whether the play contained an emphasis on deceit in the speeches.

Evidence for a *Thyestes* by the same Cassius Parmensis who composed a *Brutus* is controversial.[102] There are questions surrounding not only Cassius' composition of a *Thyestes* but also its possible stage production. The evidence is late and comes mainly from scholiasts: Apuleius the Grammarian, Porphyrion, and the Horatian scholiast Pseudo-Acro, who writes:

> . . . *multi crediderunt Thyestem Cassii Parmensis fuisse. scripserat enim multas alias tragoedias.*[103]
>
> . . . Many believed that there was a *Thyestes* by Cassius Parmensis. Indeed, he wrote many other tragedies.

No fragments survive from Cassius' play to corroborate the scholiasts' notices. The inherent anti-tyrannical sentiment of the Thyestes myth, while it fits into Cassius' known anti-Caesarian political stance, is not sufficient evidence for the play's existence.[104] The accumulated evidence, however, while sparse and somewhat contradictory, does point to the probability that Cassius wrote a *Thyestes*.[105] Depending on the date of Cassius' *Brutus,* we have the beginning of anti-tyrannical sentiment expressed in tragedies, at a date rarely, if ever, noticed.[106]

The importance of this play lies in its relation to Varius' *Thyestes*. The circulation or production of a *Thyestes* by a dramatist hostile to either Julius Caesar or Octavian/Augustus, depending upon the date of its composition, puts into perspective Augustus' commissioning a rival version of the *Thyestes* from Varius.[107] This response or challenge to Cassius would fit Augustus' style of literary discourse, since earlier he had responded to eulogies of Cato, written by various hands, with a treatise called *Anti Cato*. A number of important questions arise from the relationship between these two versions of the Thyestes myth: How does Varius' *Thyestes* allude to Augustus? What effect did this allusion, arising from the stage, have on the audience seeing Augustus seated in the audience? What is the relation of Augustus' triumphal celebrations to those of Pompey at the opening of his theatre?

The themes of fraternal strife and vengeance seem appropriate in a play that was produced for the festival celebrating the end of almost a century of civil strife at Rome and, most recently, Augustus' defeat of Antony and Cleopatra and the forces of Sextus Pompey. Even though both Atreus and Thyestes commit crimes against each other, Atreus seems to emerge as the successfully avenged party, however harsh his punishment against his brother.

The question of the timing of the play's production is also important

in seeing either Atreus or Thyestes as an allusive referent to Antony or Augustus. An association between Thyestes and Augustus as the party "wronged" by the aggression of Atreus/Antony could have rallied support for Augustus' cause before Actium, but the play was produced after Antony's defeat, where the emphasis of the occasion was on victory and punishment rather than on any wrongs suffered.[108] Indeed, the sole surviving fragments present Atreus' justification for his punishment.[109] If this interpretation is correct, Augustus would have presented himself, to the extent that the audience understood and applied the allusion, as a modern Atreus, and his opponent, Antony, as a usurping Thyestes deserving punishment.[110] This correspondence would reflect the tradition of certain Republican *praetextae* that celebrated victories and were named after the "conquered." The plays *Clastidium* and *Ambracia,* for example, are named after captured cities, and the play *Sabinae* is named after the legendary Sabine women who were raped and afterward assimilated into Roman society. This would also reverse Cassius' earlier association of Caesar or Octavian as Thyestes.

Mythological plays, however, cannot be made wholly apposite to the occasion of their performance, since any allusion arising out of the performance depends upon the interpretive skills of the audience, however much it is guided by a dramatist or presenter. Interpreting the allusion of a historical figure to a contemporary one would have been easier in the attempted restaging of Accius' *Brutus* and in the production or circulation of Cassius' version, since Caesar's assassin shared the name of his putative ancestor and performed a similar act. In the case of Pompey's choice of plays at the opening of his theatre, the triumphal return of Agamemnon in the *Clytemnestra* obscured his subsequent murder within the play, and the sack of Troy portrayed in the *Equos Troianus* reflected Pompey's magnificent military conquests of a few years earlier, rather than elicited sympathy for the besieged. The presence of Augustus, seated in the audience, would certainly have been awkward at a play in which Atreus murders Thyestes' children and serves their flesh to him, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the audience had the same selective response to the play and its allusions as Pompey's audience did when viewing the murder of Agamemnon. Ultimately, any association that emerges between Atreus and Augustus and Antony and Thyestes must remain vague due to the ambiguous nature of mythological allusions.[111]

However one attributes the allusions, the importance of the play lies in its relation to Pompey's use of tragedies at his theatre's opening and to earlier versions on the Atreus and Thyestes theme more than in any





direct analogy between Atreus and Augustus and Antony and Thyestes. We have fixed dramatic texts made topical through allusion, not only between contemporary political figures and mythological characters, but also between previous versions and productions of plays on the same theme. We do not know whether Augustus presented the *Thyestes* in Pompey's theatre, which would have provided a further allusion to both Pompey and the plays he presented at his theatre's opening.

Images of civil strife taken from mythology and other sources are common in Augustan poetry, yet the almost deliberate omission of the Thyestes myth following the production of Varius' play in the victory celebrations after Actium is noteworthy. There is no reference, for example, to the Thyestes myth in Vergil's poetry, and the only reference in Horace is in *Odes* 1.16.17–21, which roughly dates to the early to mid-twenties B.C.E., since *Odes* Books 1–3 were published in 23 B.C.E.:

> *irae Thyesten exitio gravi*
> *stravere et altis urbibus ultimae*
> *stetere causae, cur perirent*
> *funditus imprimeretque muris*
> *hostile aratrum exercitus insolens.*[112]
>
> Anger brought Thyestes to
> a tragic end, and for tall cities
> it is the first cause of destruction, why foundations
> tumble and a haughty enemy army
> ploughs under walls.

Ovid refers to the myth of the Thyestean banquet only once, at *Metamorphoses* 15.462. Did Augustus wish to downplay any associations between himself and the Atreus-Thyestes myth following his victory celebrations, to strike a note of reconciliation with Antony's former supporters?

The perception of Augustus as an avenger, whether for the Parthian victory over Roman forces, Caesar's assassination, or Mark Antony's political ambitions with Cleopatra, is persistent and finds expression outside of the theatre with evidence that connects Augustus to the House of Atreus and the theme of vengeance, in particular the mythological figure Orestes. The connection between Octavian/Augustus and Orestes the avenger of his father's murder would not have been difficult to make, but the support for any association depends on evidence gleaned from scattered literary and visual sources from various periods, before and

after 29 B.C.E., and any role Octavian/Augustus played in encouraging the allusion remains unknown.[113] Complicating any figurative connection between Augustus and Orestes is the earlier allusion made by Pompey to Agamemnon at the games celebrating his own triple triumph. It is unclear how the audience could have been guided to make or avoid the connection, if it were intended, to such a complex allusion. Nero would later adopt the role of Orestes with frightening parallels for the audience.

Later versions of plays dealing with the Thyestes myth were also understood as allusive commentaries on contemporary politics, often with deleterious results for the dramatist. Dio records that Macro, who was intent on ruining M. Aemilius Scaurus, called Tiberius' attention to certain passages in Scaurus' *Atreus* that could have been construed as criticism of the emperor. Furthermore, Dio claims that this was the real cause of the downfall of Scaurus, who died the year of the play's production, in 34 C.E.[114] One must keep in mind that Scaurus' play was probably no more critical of the emperor than other versions then in vogue. Allusive generalizations on the nature of tyranny do not, in and of themselves, constitute direct attacks against emperors. Indeed, it was to an emperor's advantage not to identify with attacks by taking offense and risk being perceived as tyrannical in any response; he was better served to ignore them and thus advertise himself to be nontyrannical.[115] Scaurus was singled out because of the intercession of Macro, who interpreted the verses of Scaurus in the most damaging way.

Other productions of the Thyestes-Atreus theme are more difficult to date and therefore more difficult to place in a cultural context. While certainty is impossible, Quintilian may have seen the *Atreus* of Pomponius Secundus shortly before 60 C.E.[116] This was a period roughly contemporaneous with Agrippina's murder (in 59 C.E.), and a time in Nero's reign fraught with imperial intrigue. These events were later deemed the stuff of tragedy and were described in the *praetexta Octavia* of Pseudo-Seneca. The cultural context of Pomponius' play, however, is lost.

Although it is impossible to date Seneca's *Thyestes,* the play may reflect the troubled period that immediately preceded its composition, if not its performance.[117] Whatever the exact date of its composition, the play appeared immediately following many other versions and may even have been influenced by a revival of Accius' *Atreus,* if Seneca's familiarity with the dramatic text reflects a production rather than a reading of the play.[118]

Seneca's entire play survives, of course, but it yields no specific information concerning anti-tyrannical sentiment. Generalizations on the nature of tyranny and examples of the tyrannical behavior of kings certainly exist, but there is nothing that can be construed as a direct attack against a specific emperor.[119] Conversely, one could argue that allusion and innuendo need not be specific, but rather only "possible" in the vaguest terms, in order to have the widest possible number and range of applications. Macro, no doubt, used such generalizations against Scaurus, but one cannot argue from general references to tyranny in Seneca's play that he intended passages or the entire play as an attack against an emperor. The brief scene between Atreus and an attendant (*satelles*) in which Atreus displays tyrannical behavior (205–220) does more for character delineation within the play than for character defamation outside of it:

SATELLES: *fama te populi nihil*
*adversa terret?* ATREUS: *maximum hoc regni bonum est,*
*quod facta domini cogitur populus sui*
*tam ferre quam laudare.* SAT.: *quos cogit metus*
*laudare, eosdem reddit inimicos metus.*
*at qui favoris gloriam veri petit,*
*animo magis quam voce laudari volet.*
AT.: *laus vera et humili saepe contingit viro,*
*non nisi potenti falsa. quod nolunt velint.*
SAT.: *rex velit honesta: nemo non eadem volet.*
AT.: *ubicumque tantum honesta dominanti licent,*
*precario regnatur.* SAT.: *ubi non est pudor*
*nec cura iuris sanctitas pietas fides,*
*instablile regnum est.* AT.: *sanctitas pietas fides*
*privata bona sunt; qua iuvat reges eant.*
SAT.: *nefas nocere vel malo fratri puta.*
AT.: *fas est in illo quidquid in fratre est nefas.*[120]

ATTENDANT: Does the negative opinion of the people
not scare you at all? ATREUS: This is the greatest advantage of possessing
a kingdom,
that the people are compelled to endure
rather than to praise the deeds of their master. ATT.: Those whom fear
compels
to praise are the same whom fear causes to hate.
But let he who seeks the glory of true kindness
to be praised by the heart more than by the tongue.

ATR.: True praise often comes to a humble man,
but false praise comes unless he be powerful. Let them desire that which they dislike.
ATT.: Let the king desire what is right: for there is no one who does not want the same.
ATR.: Wherever what is right appeals to a king, he rules
on a tottering throne. ATT.: Where there is neither shame
nor a concern for the law, nor sanctity, piety and faith,
a throne is unstable. ATR.: Sanctity, piety, and faith
are for private life: Let whatever qualities that are beneficial to kings be prominent.
ATT.: It is wrong to harm even a destructive brother.
ATR.: It is right against him whatever is wrong to commit against a brother.

Are we missing the gist of this and other passages? Were contemporary audiences and readers more adept at identifying or understanding such sentiments? Did the reception of anti-tyrannical sentiment in tragedy, in the form of innuendo, depend solely upon the cultural context surrounding actual performances, whether in original or revived productions, as it did in mimes? By way of contrast to the unspecific anti-tyrannical sentiments found in Seneca's *Thyestes*, references to tyranny in the Pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia* are explicit and do more to criticize Nero specifically and tyranny in general, however rhetorically, especially in the exchange between Nero and Seneca. Here the youth and rashness of Nero are contrasted with the wisdom and experience of Seneca, with specific attacks expressed in political terms (440–461):

SENECA: *nihil in propinquos temere constitui decet.*
NERO: *iusto esse facile est cui vacat pectus metu.*
SEN.: *magnum timoris remedium clementia est.*
NERO: *extinguere hostem maxima est virtus ducis.*
SEN.: *servare cives maior est partriae patri.*
NERO: *praecipere mitem convenit pueris senem.*
SEN.: *regenda magis est fervida adolescentia.*
NERO: *aetate in hac satis esse consilii reor.*
SEN.: *ut facta superi comprobent semper tua.*
NERO: *stulte verebor, ipse cum faciam, deos.*
SEN.: *hoc plus verere quod licet tantum tibi.*
NERO: *fortuna nostra cuncta permittit mihi.*
SEN.: *crede obsequenti parcius: levis est dea.*





NERO: *inertis est nescire quid liceat sibi.*
SEN.: *id facere laus est quod decet, non quod licet.*
NERO: *calcat iacentem vulgus.* SEN.: *invisum opprimit.*
NERO: *ferrum tuetur principem.* SEN.: *melius fides.*
NERO: *decet timeri Caesarem.* SEN.: *at plus diligi.*
NERO: *metuant necesse est—* SEN.: *quidquid exprimitur grave est.*
NERO: *iussisque nostris pareant.* SEN.: *iusta impera.*
NERO: *statuam ipse.* SEN.: *quae consensus efficiat rata.*
NERO: *destrictus ensis faciet.* SEN.: *hoc absit nefas.*[121]

SENECA: Is it right to treat relatives thoughtlessly?
NERO: It is easy for a man to be just whose heart knows no fear.
SEN.: Clemency is the best cure for fear.
NERO: To wipe out one's enemies is the greatest quality of a king.
SEN.: To preserve one's citizens is a greater quality for a *pater patriae*.
NERO: A soft old man should give instruction to children.
SEN.: Hot-headed youth ought to be controlled.
NERO: I think there is enough wisdom in youth.
SEN.: May the gods always approve your deeds.
NERO: I would be a fool to fear gods, when it is I who make them.
SEN.: You ought to fear the more power is yours.
NERO: My good luck allows all things to me.
SEN.: Trust in her favors less; she is a fickle goddess.
NERO: The man who does not know what is permitted to him is a fool.
SEN.: It is praiseworthy for a man to do what is right rather than what he wants.
NERO: The mob always kicks a fallen man. SEN.: The mob crushes what is hateful.
NERO: Weapons guard the *princeps*. SEN.: Trust is better.
NERO: It is right for Caesar to be feared. SEN.: Better for him to be esteemed.
NERO: It is obligatory that they fear. SEN.: Whatever is serious is expressed.
NERO: Let them obey my commands. SEN.: Command what is just.
NERO: I myself determine that. SEN.: What approval consensus determines.
NERO: A drawn sword will effect that. SEN.: Let this crime be absent!

The author of the *Octavia* actually does more to attack tyranny and emperors by naming Nero specifically. However, the same passages without Nero mentioned by name would become generic complaints about power rather than specific attacks on an emperor.

Like the anonymous author of the *Octavia,* the tragedian Curiatius Maternus expressed political dissidence in his plays. Tacitus, in the *Dialogus de oratoribus,* states that Maternus intended the plot of his *Thyestes* together with apposite allusions to be received as condemnations of Imperial oppression.[122] It is Maternus' friend Julius Secundus who expresses the danger inherent in reading a text like Maternus' *Cato* in public:

> *tum Secundus "nihilne te" inquit, "Materne, fabulae malignorum terrent quo minus offensas Catonis tui ames? an ideo librum istum adprehendisti ut diligentius retractares et, sublatis si qua pravae interpretationi materiam dederunt, emitteres Cationem non quidem meliorem, sed tamen securiorem?"*[123]
>
> Then Secundus said, "Maternus, does the talk of malicious men not terrify you so that you love your offending Cato less? Or have you pulled that text with the intention of revising it more carefully, having removed anything that might provide substance for prejudiced interpretation, and then republishing your Cato, not quite better, but at least more safe?"

The ability of the audience to transform a passage into political "allusion" is stated clearly by Tacitus' expression *prava interpretatio.*[124] The use of tragedy as a tool for criticism, however, was not one-sided. If tragedy was the means by which dramatists and the audience could voice displeasure with an emperor, it was a means open to the emperor as well. The reciprocity of criticism or dissent through mythological allusion finds expression with emperors who quoted from tragedy to express displeasure with their subjects. However, rather than portray themselves as tragic victims of unmerited criticism, certain Julio-Claudian emperors after Augustus allied themselves with mythological aggressors found in tragic texts. The effect was to have the emperors speaking the same "tragic language" as their subjects in the reciprocal voicing of mutual displeasure.

Even a play like the *Atreus,* often thought to be anti-tyrannical, was used by emperors to portray themselves as Atreus and thereby reverse roles with dissenters and challenge the charges of "tyranny" and oppression by their subjects/critics. No official policy is suggested, but the frequency of quotation is noteworthy. Tiberius, for example, placed himself in the role of Atreus by quoting the famous line from Accius' *Atreus: oderint dum metuant* ("Let them hate while they fear"), which he changed to *oderint dum probent* ("Let them hate while they approve").[125] As discussed above, Tiberius also charged Aemilius Scaurus with slandering Agamemnon in a tragedy in a passage that was either exclusively about the mythical king or only ostensibly about Agamemnon and really about Tiberius.[126] The accusation suggests that Tiberius was sensitive to charges of tyranny and that he was encouraging an association between himself and Agamemnon. According to Dio, Tiberius, in turn, attacked Scaurus through mythological allusion by saying, "I will make him an Ajax," meaning he would force him to commit suicide.[127] Tiberius thus realized the value of mythological allusion to voice his own political views in a way that reversed his perceived detractor's use of an ambiguous allusion and depended on the *animus* of his audience to interpret.





Afterward, the same line from Accius' play, in its original form, *oderint dum metuant,* was bandied about by Gaius.[128] Gaius' quotation of the original line contrasts with Tiberius' earlier rewriting of the line. This line is usually quoted to demonstrate the cruelty of the emperor Gaius Caligula rather than to place it in the wider literary context of the tragic tradition. Cicero, for example, had used the line earlier to criticize Julius Caesar: *quem metuunt, oderunt; quem quisque odit, periisse expetit.*[129] Cicero, therefore, is able to allude to an Atreus in the late Republic and expect the reference to the play and the parallel drawn between Atreus and Julius Caesar to be understood. There is no evidence that Claudius quoted the line in any context.

The emperor Nero, however, unlike any of his Julio-Claudian precursors who encouraged the allusion, associated himself with Thyestes, instead of with Atreus. Rather than simply quote lines from plays in which Thyestes appeared, Nero actually performed the role onstage in pantomimic productions.[130] The effect of this mythological role-reversal was to have the emperor assume the identity of the usurping tyrant, possibly reversing Augustus' (self-)identification with Atreus, and definitely reversing Tiberius' and Gaius' self-identification with Atreus, thus confusing the roles of emperor and subject and blurring the distinction between theatre and reality.

## NERO: *IMPERATOR SCAENICUS*

Although Nero—dubbed *imperator scaenicus* by Pliny[131]—taxed the interpretive skills of his subjects more than had any of his Julio-Claudian precursors, his reign should be seen as the culmination and not the beginning of a reciprocal theatricality on and off the stage. Whereas

Gaius was only rumored to be preparing for a public pantomime performance on the day of his death, Nero actually performed onstage, thereby changing the relationship of emperor and subject to actor and audience, which was itself forced to act and dissimulate any disapproval of his performance/rule.[132]

Nowhere is this confusion more apparent than in Suetonius' report that Nero frequently acted the roles of gods and heroes and goddesses and heroines, wearing a mask in his own likeness or that of his current mistress:

> *tragoedias quoque cantavit personatus heroum deorumque, item heroidum ac dearum, personis effectis ad similtudinem oris sui et feminae, prout quamque diligeret. inter cetera cantavit Canacen parturientem, Oresten matricidam, Oedipodem excaecatum, Herculem insanum.*[133]
>
> Moreover, he sang the tragic roles of heroes and gods, and even of heroines and goddesses, with masks modeled upon his own features or upon whatever woman he was in love with. Among others, he sang the roles of Canace in labor, Orestes the matricide, Oedipus blinding himself, and Hercules insane.

Dio (63.9.5) also gives details concerning Nero's costumes and specifies that he wore a mask modeled upon Poppaea Sabina for the female roles so that even in her death she could still participate in the spectacle. The semiotic implications of Nero's role-playing are fascinating: Whereas the audience could view the actor portraying the honorand of a *praetexta* onstage with the actual honorand possibly in the audience (definitely in the audience in the case of Balbus' *Iter*), the audience now viewed Nero onstage as a mythological character represented as Nero himself, through his mask and costume. Therefore, two Neroes are onstage (the actual Nero and the character represented as Nero), with no Nero in the audience. The audience faced a similar interpretative challenge in the case of Nero performing the role of a heroine or goddess with a mask of the deceased Poppaea Sabina as he assumed, simultaneously, three different identities: his own as Poppaea, who is herself now a mythological character onstage.[134] Onstage representation competes with allusion as illusory drama becomes, at once, illusory and nonillusory.

When does Nero's behavior, on or off the stage, cease to be theatrical/theatricalized? In other words, how can one identify or keep track of his changing political and theatrical roles, physical appearance, or





even sex? Apparently this was not easy. On one occasion, a soldier, upon seeing Nero in chains, rushed onto the stage in order to free him. On another, when Nero was onstage acting the role of Canace, a soldier replied to another who has asked what the emperor was doing: "He's in labor."[135] Intending to take advantage of access at one of Nero's stage appearances, one of Piso's fellow conspirators wanted to kill Nero while he was performing onstage, thereby transforming members of the audience into both spectators and witnesses.[136] As a symptom of the age, in which it was difficult to distinguish between theatre and theatricality, the conspirator himself seemed unaware that he would be transformed into an actor before his spectator/witness audience.

Nero's adoption of the role of Thyestes and his seemingly subversive self-identification with the tyrant raises important questions about his other roles—in particular, his association with the mythological hero Orestes. The association between Nero and Orestes as matricides was a popular one, as contemporary lampoons bear witness.[137] This association first took root in the popular imagination after Agrippina's murder, and at this time the act of matricide alone invited the parallel. It was only when Nero played the part of Orestes on the stage *after* the initial popular connection between the two had been made that the subversiveness of Nero's self-identification with the matricide became apparent.[138] Unfortunately we do not know whether he played the role wearing a mask of his own likeness to further confuse the audience. Nero's self-identification with the matricide was also evident in his refusal to take the stage in Athens because of the legendary Furies residing there. Nero himself pointed interpretation in this direction by claiming that he had nightmares and was haunted by his mother and the Furies.[139] Others may have followed Nero's lead of staging productions of the Orestes myth, since it seems that there were numerous revivals of earlier Latin versions of the Orestes myth on the Roman stage at this time, but whether these were encouraged by Nero or intended as criticism of Nero is unclear. Indeed, earlier versions of the myth were sufficiently popular for Seneca to incorporate elements into his *Agamemnon*.[140]

Our sources for the period are unanimous in criticizing Nero's stage performances. In the cases of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger, themselves members of the Roman elite who were writing for the Roman elite, the outrage of these sources is not surprising.[141] In the case of Juvenal, the satirist's touch finds a ready target in so egregious a subject as Nero. Tacitus calls Nero's zeal for performing disgraceful (*foedum*),[142] and Suetonius traces Nero's gradual progression to the stage with disdain.[143] Juvenal criticizes Nero as a modern-day Orestes who,

in addition to being a matricide, disgraces himself by performing onstage.[144] Dio also criticizes Nero in speeches put in the mouths of Boudicca and Vindex, who ridicule him for being an actor and empress, rather than an imperator and emperor.[145]

The senatorial class had good cause to feel persecuted by Nero. In addition to the discomfort of watching and *seeming* to be enjoying Nero's acting, they were themselves forced to take the stage—an act that was humiliating and a cause of mirth for the lower classes.[146] The pressure to *seem* to be enjoying Nero's antics onstage was intensified by the position of the senators and knights in the first fourteen rows in the theatre, directly under Nero's gaze both when he was performing and, conversely, when he was in the audience watching them perform, and also by the presence of spies in the theatre audience watching the reactions of spectators for any signs of insincerity.[147]

Outside the theatre, theatricality played a role in the lives of those dissimulating their true feelings toward Nero and members of his regime. Burrus and Seneca assisted Nero in his stage performances and pretended to approve of and enjoy his acting and singing.[148] Vespasian and Thrasea Paetus, however, refused to dissimulate their disapproval and boredom at Nero's performances.[149] Vespasian survived relatively unscathed, but Thrasea Paetus' behavior is cited as one of the reasons for his downfall.[150] In the *Annales* of Tacitus, Petronius emerges as the grand dissimulator. Under Petronius, who posed as the *arbiter elegentiae* of Nero's court while ridiculing the emperor privately, theatricality reaches new heights.[151]

Nero's bizarre and subversive behavior should not obscure the fact that for the most part he was extremely popular with the masses in Rome.[152] Nero's attacks against the sensibilities of traditional upper-class and upper-middle-class members, through participation in his own acting and their own forced appearances onstage, probably contributed to this popularity with the lower classes. Nero, furthermore, seems to have enjoyed the loyalty and goodwill of the soldiers, in addition to his own claque of *Augustiani,* and there is evidence that he was esteemed no less by them because of his stage appearances.[153] After Nero's death, numerous people claimed to be him in yet another, albeit late, example of metatheatrical role-playing associated with his reign.[154]

Even to an audience long accustomed to interpreting onstage characters and actions in relation to historical personalities and events offstage, and offstage actions in relation to the theatre, the question of whether what one is viewing inside the theatre or witnessing outside of it is "real" was not easy to answer. Nero, like Pompey and Augustus, made a fixed





dramatic text topical through allusion and physical representation: a known political figure is alluded to or recognized onstage; therefore, illusory drama becomes nonillusory drama—but ambiguity remains. When does Nero cease to be Nero? When does the theatre audience shift roles from spectator to witness? The result of this confusion is an audience—and indeed, even the stage characters themselves—searching for interpretive cues both inside and outside the theatre. In other words, theatricality replaces theatre as actors become their own audience watching or commenting on their own stage actions, leaving members of the stage audience wondering, once again, whether they are spectators or witnesses.

# ROMAN TRAGEDY

## *Theatre to Theatricality*

MARIO ERASMO

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS
AUSTIN