CHAPTER 2

Staging Thyestes

THE POETICS OF *FUROR*

libet reverti

(Seneca, *Agamemnon* 12)

Quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit
avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?
quis male deorum Tantalo visas domos
ostendit iterum? peius inventum est siti
arente in undis aliquid et peius fame
hiante semper?

Who drags me forth from the accursed abode of the dead, where I snatch at food ever-fleeing from my hungry lips? What god shows Tantalus again the homes he saw to his ruin? Has something worse been invented than parching thirst in the middle of water, worse than ever-gaping hunger?

The *Thyestes* begins by staging the process of its own construction. Tantalus not only wonders at the unexpected turn his punishment is taking, but also questions the very existence – the theatrical essence – of the drama that is bringing him on the scene. His questions, while ostensibly bearing on his fate as a mythic character, also look in anguish at the unfolding of the tragic action, as if he watches himself from the outside becoming a character of a dramatic text. Who dragged him from the depths of the underworld and forced him onto this stage? What is this novel situation that is worse than hell, one where, paradoxically, he is punished by being forced to punish others? Similarly, the subsequent fight between the Fury and Tantalus' shadow embodies a creative conflict between passive forces, on the one hand, which try to resist the drama's violence, and active forces, on the other, which create and further the dramatic action.

This initial self-reflexive gesture is one of the strategies that complicate the audience's perception and suggest with increasing intensity a fractured, conflictual understanding of the text. Violence is encoded already in the

prologue's dialogic form, which opposes two parties with different opportunities and levels of power to reinforce words with deeds. Division, fracture and conflict impose themselves as dominating forces from the very first lines, when Tantalus' evoked shadow addresses his yet unknown counterpart. Dialogue, it should be noted, appears only in this Senecan prologue,[1] and we can better evaluate the implications of this form of expression if we compare this prologue with that of *Hercules furens*. The enraged Juno who delivers the entire prologue of *Hercules furens* is in many respects parallel to the Fury: both superhuman characters provide the impetus which sets in motion the dramatic action, and both correspond in function to the creative momentum which underlies each tragedy as a whole. Moreover, Juno's words and attitude establish a close connection with the role of Juno in *Aeneid* 7, a text which, as we will see shortly, forms an essential backdrop to the prologue of *Thyestes*. Yet the two scenes differ significantly: Juno's speech is not a dialogue and does not stage a conflict between a sinful creative impulse and a moral resistance to the creation of *nefas*, a conflict represented in *Thyestes* by the Fury and Tantalus' shadow respectively. This structural difference deprives the prologue in *Hercules furens* of the dialectical contrast between silence and speech – one which, I will now argue, is central to *Thyestes*.

Tantalus has a dramatic consistency which is not altered by the Fury's final, inevitable victory. He is a guilty man, as he readily acknowledges: 'I should be the one to suffer punishment, not to inflict it' (*Thy.* 86–7: *me pati poenas decet | non esse poenam*). His moral opposition to the Fury's demand is heightened by this admission. The Fury wants Tantalus, who resists in vain, to arouse new, terrible *scelera* on earth. Those *scelera* are the tragedy itself, since *Thyestes* is precisely the tale of a compelling and memorable *scelus*.

Textual markers are uniformly pointed: this prefatory debate might be read as a symbolic enactment of the birth of the play and an open (although far from neutral) window onto the forces that preside over its creation. Indeed, if Tantalus' firm appeal to moderation had succeeded, there would be no *Thyestes* at all. Tantalus is appalled at the request to come back to earth; his anguish is clear in the repeated questions in lines 1–5, which I quoted above. *Iterum* is the keyword here.[2] Tantalus questions the senseless

[1] Hine (1981) offers a persuasive analysis of the prologue and its thematic links to the rest of the play.

[2] *Iterum* is often a metaliterary mark. Haupt suggested early on that at Ov. *Fast.* 3.471–2 the adverb signals Ovid's allusion to Catullus' Ariadne (Haupt (1875–76) 71, with Conte (1985) 38). The verb *soleo* has similar functions; see Leo (1878–79) 149–55. See later, p. 193, n. 44, for further observations on this topic and its thematic relevance.

drama of re-enactment, and the novel 'invention' (see *inventum*, line 4). Indeed, the Fury reminds him that his *scelus* would not be original: 'let the banquet be spread – you will come as a guest to a feast of crime well known to you' (62–3: *epulae instruantur – non novi sceleris tibi | conviva venies*). But what is personally and morally unacceptable is precisely what this tragedy and its poetics are made of: re-enactment, repetition, obsessive return of, and return to, what could (and should) best be left unsaid.[3] The tragedy firmly rejects the moral option of silence. The question that Tantalus utters here for the first time is also the key question of the play as a whole: why *again*?[4] The Fury inspires *scelera*, the very *scelera* that make up the whole of *Thyestes*. Thus the Fury effectively inspires this poetry: from the very beginning of the play, there is no escaping the daunting connection between poetry and *scelera*.

Tantalus does try to resist. After much remonstration he finally assumes a firm and fierce stance (90–5); he simply will not obey: 'here I will stand, and prevent the evil deed' (95: *stabo et arcebo scelus*). His attempts to impart moral guidance and avoid errors would befit a sage, perhaps even a Stoic sage. His resistance, however, does not last long, as the Fury tortures him on stage (96–100):

> quid ora terres verbere et tortos ferox
> minaris angues? quid famem infixam intimis
> agitas medullis? flagrat incensum siti
> cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat.
> sequor.

Why do you terrify me with the sight of your lash, and fiercely threaten me with your twisted snakes? Why do you rouse pains of hunger deep in my innards? My heart burns with fiery thirst, and in my burnt-out vitals a flame is darting – I follow you.

Tantalus' words attest to the impossibility of his moral stance and of his didactic purpose. The vehement language which describes his intentions

[3] The prologue of *Agamemnon* is centred as well on the topic of return and reiteration. While the relative chronology of *Ag.* and *Thy.* in Seneca's literary production cannot be certain, in mythical time the actions of *Ag.* come after those narrated in *Thy.* and are in fact a direct consequence of them (on the dating of both plays see p. 5, n. 7). The ghost of Thyestes in the prologue effectively recalls Tantalus' shadow, especially since they both claim to prefer the underworld to the devastation awaiting them on earth. Thyestes' exclamation at line 12 – *libet reverti* – means precisely that he would rather return to the underworld than assist in the terrible revenge which is about to happen. It should be noted, however, that according to Fitch's metrical study (Fitch (1981)), *Ag.* would have been written before *Thy.* For a more sceptical position on the dating of *Ag.*, prior to Fitch (1981), see Tarrant (1976) 5–6. The whole issue is reassessed in Nisbet (1990).

[4] It is tempting to charge *transcribor* (13) with metadramatic resonances, if for no other reason than its etymological reference to writing. The verb is seldom used in poetry, see Virg. *Aen.* 5.750, 7.422; Ov. *Ibis* 187; *Met.* 7.173. See Tarrant (1985) 89 and Jacobi (1988) 153.

(*moneo, stabo, arcebo*)[5] is suddenly and irrevocably reversed in the bitterly ironic repetition of a Stoic-sounding *sententia*: *sequor* is what the sage should say when facing destiny, since it is better to follow willingly than be dragged.[6] *Naturam sequi* – 'following Nature' – is the paramount principle of a truly Stoic life: Tantalus does after all respect this intimation, his true nature being germane, rather unsurprisingly, to that of the Fury.[7] The Fury's power is the power of unavoidable destiny. The Fury is the Muse of *scelus*, and her victory is the victory of poetry (of this particular brand of *poiein*) against the repressive silence advocated in vain by Tantalus.

Tantalus' pained questions at 96–9 synthesize a number of associations that *Thyestes* will repeatedly explore. First, his doomed resistance to the Fury's instigation recalls the similar reaction that seers display when the god violently overpowers them and forces them to speak – compare the violence of Apollo on the Sybil at *Aeneid* 6.77–80 and 100–1.[8] Secondly, the particular choice of images makes the languages of erotic desire and creative impulse intersect, and cruelly deprives both of their comforting metaphorical value. The standard association of fire and eros connotes the Fury's order as an irresistible, sinful desire redolent of erotic passion.[9] At the same time, these images are bound up with the vocabulary of poetic enthusiasm, the burning power which moves poets to create.[10] In this respect the passage anticipates a central moment later in the play, where a merciless Atreus

[5] Compare the behaviour of *virtus* in *De vita beata* 15.5 (*illa fortiter stabit et quidquid evenerit feret*); the fact that the *sapiens* remains unperturbed in the face of natural disasters: *stabit super illam voraginem intrepidus* (*Q Nat.* 6.32.4); *Ben.* 5.2.4: (*vir bonus*) *ad ultimum usque vitae diem stabit paratus et in hac statione morietur*; and Jocasta's attempt to stop the massacre at Thebes: *ibo, ibo et armis obvium opponam caput, | stabo inter arma: petere qui fratrem volet, | petat ante matrem* (*Phoen.* 407–9). The original suggestion, however, is probably Virgilian; see *Aen.* 7.373–5 (Allecto and Latinus): *his ubi nequiquam dictis experta Latinum | contra stare videt, penitusque in viscera lapsum | serpentis furiale malum totamque pererrat*.

[6] *Sequor* was athetized by many editors, starting with Bentley, but modern texts retain it (see Hine (1981) 267–8 for a defence of Bentley's decision). Its relevance for the characterization of Tantalus is crucial, and the parallel with Thyestes' *sequor* at 489 seems decisive. See also Plaut. *Trin.* 1–2, a passage with interesting points of connection with the whole scene at hand; see below, n. 18. There are other instances of half-lines in the Senecan corpus, such as *Phoen.* 319, *Tro.*1103 and *Phaed.*605. See Calder (1984); Tarrant (1985) 103; and Zwierlein (1986) 298.

[7] Cf., for instance, Seneca's use of *sequor* in *De vita beata* 15.6 (with Schiesaro (1996)), where he claims that the principle always to be followed is *deum sequere*, 'follow god!' An emphasis on *sequi* occasionally lends Aeneas a Stoicizing connotation; see M. W. Edwards (1960).

[8] At *Aen.* 6.77–80 the language (*excussisse, fatigat, domans, fingit premendo*) alludes to the taming of horses, which could also be suggested by the use of *verbere* at *Thy.* 96 (cf. the whipping motion suggested by 101, on which below, p. 178, n. 6).

[9] For the metaphoric associations of *ardere* and related images see Fantham (1972) 10–11 and 87–8.

[10] On the 'warmth' of inspiration see Ov, *Fast.* 6.5–6: *est deus in nobis, agitante calescimus illo: | impetus hic sacrae semina mentis habet* and especially Ov. *Tr.* 4.1.41–4, in explicit connection with Bacchic inspiration: *utque suum Bacche non sentit saucia vulnus, | dum stupet Idaeis exululata modis, | sic ubi mota calent viridi mea pectora thyrso, | altior humano spiritus ille malo est*. For the association of

strives to find inspiration for his new creation – the plot of his revenge and of the rest of the tragedy (250–4):[11]

> dira Furiarum cohors
> discorsque Erinys veniat et geminas faces
> Megaera quatiens: non satis magno meum
> ardet furore pectus, impleri iuvat
> maiore monstro.

Let the fearful band of Furies come, the discord-sowing Erinys, and Megaera, shaking her twin torches; the frenzy burning in my breast is not great enough; some greater horror must fill me.

Atreus, far from being tortured by the Furies, appeals to them for the impulse to act creatively, to produce in effect a dramatic text which he will perform and inflict upon Thyestes. Both passages implicitly depict the Fury's impulse as a sinful desire which finds its final realization in poetry. This *furor* cannot be resisted, and the play enacts the sinister force of a victory against morality, reason and *fas*.

In this same prologue Seneca offers intimations about the literary background in which we should situate these declarations of poetics. Three texts in particular stand out, belonging to three authors whose presence looms large in Seneca's tragic world: Euripides, Ovid and Virgil.[12]

Friedrich Leo first pointed out a connection between the prologue of *Thyestes* and the dialogue between Iris and Lyssa in Euripides' *Hercules furens* (822–74).[13] The actual verbal coincidences are faint, but the overall structure of the dialogue is close to Seneca's scene in important details. At the beginning of the second part of the play, the two infernal characters appear on stage to lay the curse of madness on Heracles. Like Tantalus' shade, Lyssa does try to resist Iris' commands, albeit unsuccessfully (Eur. *HF* 843–54). No physical torture ensues, but Iris replies scornfully to Lyssa's noble attempt at changing her mind: 'Zeus' wife did not send you here to display wisdom' (857: οὐχὶ σωφρονεῖν γ' ἔπεμψε δεῦρό σ' ἡ Διὸς δάμαρ).

calor and prophetic inspiration, see Ov. *Met.* 2.641 *incaluitque deo, quem clausum pectore habebat* (Ocyrhoe).

[11] On this passage see p. 46 below.

[12] A connection with Accius' *Atreus*, cautiously suggested by La Penna (1979) 136, n. 1, cannot be ruled out. According to La Penna, *inc.inc.* lviii and lix Ribbeck² must refer to Tantalus, and might thus belong to the prologue.

[13] Leo (1912) 201–2. Calder ((1983) 185–6) compares the scene with the dialogue between Hephaestus and Kratos at the beginning of Aeschylus' *Prometheus* (1–87), mediated through Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and argues that Sophocles, not Euripides, is Seneca's primary model.

As she prepares to yield, Lyssa invokes the sun as witness of her resistance and unwillingness to accomplish the monstrous deed demanded by Iris (858–73). At the end of her speech, which illustrates in great detail the events that will soon follow (and is thus similar to the anticipatory function of the Senecan prologue), Lyssa sends Iris back to Olympus and enters the house where she will wreak destruction (872–3).[14] In *Thyestes* Tantalus seems to perform both actions, since he first enters the house, and then is sent back to the underworld by the Fury.[15]

Seneca's Fury herself offers at least one other strong signal of intertextual self-awareness in her first, most effective speech (*Thy.* 54–7):

> ornetur altum columen et lauro fores
> laetae virescant, dignus adventu tuo
> splendescat ignis – Thracium fiat nefas
> maiore numero.

Decorate the lofty column and let the doors be green with festive laurel; a fire worthy of your arrival must shine brightly – then let the Thracian crime be done, but multiplied.

Through allusive amplification (*maiore numero*)[16] the Fury inaugurates here a map of intertextual connections which will prove crucial for the whole play: the Thracian *nefas par excellence* is the bloody story of Tereus, Itys and Procne, especially as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[17] The Fury underlines her truly metadramatic function by showing her knowledge of mythical and literary history, and by explicitly alerting us to the allusive resonances of the play. The Fury's intertextual competence is one of the ways in which she acquires a metadramatic status: her references to other poetic texts reflect the genesis of the play and its modes of signification, and go well beyond the dramatic level acted on the stage. What she effectively proposes and realizes is a self-conscious *mise en abyme* of Ovid's and Sophocles' story which will span the remainder of the play. The agonistic stance expressed in *maiore numero* acknowledges the new dimension that this dramatic repetition of *nefas* will assume. As we will see shortly, any repetition of *nefas*

[14] The chorus notes the Bacchic connotation of her actions in the house: Λύσσα βακχεύσει (897), a significant detail in view of the Bacchic overtones of *Thyestes*; see pp. 133–8. A further element of contact between this scene and Seneca's play can be detected at *HF* 865–6, where Lyssa specifically points out that Heracles will not be aware that he is killing his own children.

[15] The succession of these actions is somewhat problematic; see below, pp. 178–80.

[16] On the thematic importance of *maius* and related concepts see pp. 130–1. *Maius* in relevant contexts can often also encode a statement of poetics, as in Virg. *Ecl.* 4.1 and *Aen.* 7.44 (where the 'Iliadic' part of the poem is 'greater' than the first part, just as the *Iliad* is 'greater' than the *Odyssey*).

[17] See later, pp. 179–80.

is necessarily worse than its model – more obsessive, more painful, more 'guilty'. At the level of poetics, the repetition will encourage the exploration of a more intense and emotionally loaded language of recursive patterns and of elaborate internal echoes.[18]

The most evident intertext for the prologue of *Thyestes*, however, is the opening scene of *Aeneid* 7.[19] The sequence of events in Virgil's poem is more intricate, but the fundamental pattern is very similar. Enraged by the apparent triumph of the Trojans, who have finally landed in Italy (7.286–322), Juno summons Allecto and commands her to bring *discordia* and destruction into the Latin field (7.335–40), thus igniting the war against Aeneas and his people:

> tu potes unanimos armare in proelia fratres
> atque odiis versare domos, tu verbera tectis
> funereasque inferre faces, tibi nomina mille,
> mille nocendi artes. fecundum concute pectus,
> dissice compositam pacem, sere crimina belli;
> arma velit poscatque simul rapiatque iuventus.

You can take brothers who love each other and set them at each other's throats. You can turn a house against itself in hatred and fill it with whips and funeral torches. You have a thousand names and a thousand ways of causing hurt. Your heart is teeming with them. Shake them all out. Shatter this peace they have agreed between them and sow the seeds of recrimination and war. Make their young men long for weapons, demand them, seize them!

The Fury's orders to Tantalus strongly echo Juno's words (*Thy.* 83–6):

> ante perturba domum
> inferque tecum proelia et ferri malum
> regibus amorem, concute insano ferum
> pectus tumultu.

First throw your house utterly into confusion, and bring in strife along with you, bring passion for the sword, the bane for rulers, and with wild upheaval strike the savage breast.

[18] In spite of some notable differences (Calder (1983) 196, n. 22), it is also worth noting the possible connection (Leo (1912) 202) with the prologue (1–3) of Plautus' *Trinummus*, where Luxuria and Inopia, mother and daughter, set in motion the action of the comedy: LU. *sequere hac me, gnata, ut munus fungaris tuom.* | IN. *sequor, sed finem fore quem dicam nescio.* | LU. *Adest. em illae sunt aedes, i intro nunciam.* There is no traumatic conflict in this dialogue, which is quickly resolved by Inopia's only slightly puzzled obedience. Alone on the stage, Luxuria embarks on an extended and explicitly metadramatic monologue, addressing the audience directly and giving precise indications about the play that has just begun.

[19] Tarrant (1985) has useful notes (listed at p. 85, n. 2) on several of these passages. The model is pointed out by Monteleone (1980) 77. See Timpanaro (1981) 127–8, for a thorough analysis of the connections between Juno in *Hercules furens* – where the goddess acts again as the *primum mobile* of *furor* – and in the *Aeneid*.

The vivid expression *concute pectus* as well as the insistence on *domus* as the target (*Aen.* 7.336 and *Thy.* 83) and the use of *inferre* (7.337 and 84) link the two texts. Furthermore the results of Juno's and the Fury's destructive orders are alike; the Fury points out to a bewildered and reluctant Tantalus how his presence has affected the house of the Pelopides (*Thy.* 103–7):[20]

> sentit introitus tuos
> domus et nefando tota contactu horruit.[21]
> actum est[22] abunde. gradere ad infernos specus
> amnemque notum; iam tuum maestae pedem
> terrae gravantur.

Your house feels your entering and has recoiled in horror from your unutterable contagion. Enough! More than enough! Go to the caves of the underworld and your familiar river; already your step falls heavily on the saddened earth.

The Fury's words resonate with Juno's final admonition to Allecto (*Aen.* 7.552–4):

> terrorum et fraudis abunde est:
> stant belli causae, pugnatur comminus armis,
> quae fors prima dedit sanguis novus imbuit arma.

There is enough terror and lying. The causes of war are established. They are fighting at close quarters and fresh blood is staining whatever weapons chance first puts into their hands.

When Allecto, at Juno's request, returns to Acheron, she relieves earth and sky of their painful burden. *Terrae gravantur* at *Thyestes* 107 elaborates on Virgil's description of the forces of evil once again oppressing the earth (*Aen.* 7.568–71):

> hic specus horrendum et saevi spiracula Ditis
> monstrantur, ruptoque ingens Acheronte vorago
> pestiferas aperit fauces, quis condita Erinys,
> invisum numen, terras caelumque levabat.

Here they point to a fearful cave which is a vent for the breath of Dis, the cruel god of the underworld. Into this cave bursts Acheron and here a vast whirlpool opens its pestilential jaws, and here the loathsome Fury disappeared, lightening heaven and earth by her absence.

[20] Lines 103–7 foreground the issue of the temporal structure set out in the prologue: see below, ch. 5, pp. 178–80.

[21] On the possible Bacchic overtones of this image see below, p. 138, n. 60.

[22] This use of *ago* (which is absent in the Virgilian model) can be considered a technical theatrical term; see *OLD* s.v. 25 and 43. But the very form *actum est* is often used to describe a situation which has deteriorated beyond repair, and in the Fury's mouth it is appropriate to preserve especially this sense of ultimate destruction.

In Seneca's prologue, however, the impact of this founding scene extends further, beyond the direct association between the Fury's and Allecto's acts of pollution. The second part of the dialogue between the Fury and Tantalus, for instance, echoes Allecto's fateful visit to Turnus at *Aeneid* 7.406–74. The metaphoric *taedae* with which Allecto excites Turnus after his initial refusal ('with these words she threw a burning torch at the warrior and it lodged deep in his heart, smoking with black light' – *sic effata facem iuveni coniecit et atro | lumine fumantis fixit sub pectore taedas*, 7.456–7) become the all too real fires employed by the Fury to bend Tantalus' well-intentioned reluctance at *Thyestes* 98–9. Here we should contrast Turnus' self-assured, even overtly mocking reaction to Allecto, appearing to him in the shape of old Chalybe, with Tantalus' high-minded, explicitly moral concerns.

Another significant point of contact between the two texts can be established. Before approaching Turnus, Allecto had successfully stirred Amata to action (7.385–90):

> quin etiam in silvas simulato numine Bacchi
> maius adorta nefas maioremque orsa furorem
> evolat et natam frondosis montibus abdit,
> quo thalamum eripiat Teucris taedasque moretur,
> euhoe Bacche fremens, solum te virgine dignum
> vociferans

Not content with this, she flew into the forests, pretending that she was possessed by Bacchus, and rose to greater impieties and greater madness by hiding her daughter in the leafy woods, hoping to cheat the Trojans out of the marriage or delay the lighting of the torches. 'Euhoe, Bacchus!' she screamed. 'Only you are worthy of the virgin . . .'

The diffracted allusion to this passage is to be found in the 'second prologue' of *Thyestes*, where Atreus deliberates the best way to obtain his revenge. In act 2 Atreus is under the inspiring spell of *furor* and *ira* introduced into his house by Tantalus and the Fury: structurally, this position coincides with that of *Aeneid* 7. Atreus' words at *Thyestes* 252–4 – 'the frenzy burning in my breast is not great enough; some greater horror must fill me' (*non satis magno meum | ardet furore pectus, impleri iuvat | maiore monstro*) – are redolent of Amata's *maius nefas* and *maior furor* at 7.386. *Maius*, at any rate, is the hallmark of Atreus' monologue throughout.[23] The connection between the two scenes, supported by structural as well as lexical arguments, sets up an association between Atreus and the world of Bacchic frenzy: this

[23] Seidensticker (1985) identifies in the *maius*-motif the binding element of this play, and indeed a fundamental characteristic of Senecan drama in general.

is a relationship whose importance, as we will see, goes well beyond the scope of this specific instance.[24]

By pointing directly at *Aeneid* 7 and acknowledging Virgil's archetypal role as a poet of *furor*, Seneca reconstructs a meaningful sequence of literary history and invokes a powerful model for his own nefarious endeavours. Seneca establishes an important continuity with the second half of the *Aeneid*.[25] The thematic connection, as we have seen, is clear. Juno's very words to Allecto – 'you can take brothers who love each other and set them at each other's throats' (7.335) – leave us in no doubt that the new battles in store for the Trojans will be of a different kind from those told in the first six books. The merging of Trojans and Latins at the end of the poem retrospectively casts their conflict as a civil war. Seneca now shows that the fratricidal origins of Roman history, symbolically enshrined in the conflict opposing Romulus to Remus, reach even further back.[26] Yet it is precisely this tale of horrors which is Virgil's 'greater work' (*maius opus*, 7.45), his 'higher order of things' (*maior rerum . . . ordo*, 7.44), or, indeed, the *maius nefas* of Amata (7.386) which Atreus, too, will strive to emulate. These Virgilian echoes also show how *Thyestes* condenses the horrors of civil strife in the polarized contrast between two brothers. The theme had obvious, obsessive resonances in the culture of the first century.[27] By alluding to Virgil, Seneca implicitly reflects, too, on a crucial issue of poetics, the same issue that Tantalus had raised in his opening speech: why again? He also defines his own writing as repetition, as a painful, irresistible return to horrors which have already been sung. Seneca thus situates his tragedy in a tradition of Juno-inspired poems (and actions) whose authoritative model he traces back to Virgil: these poems are characterized by the violent subversion of an ordered world structure guaranteed by Jupiter, and allied with the chthonic (and, crucially, female) forces of 'irrational' passions and desires.[28] But *Thyestes* differs from the *Aeneid* in another relevant detail. Whereas in *Aeneid* 7 Allecto is instructed by Juno, in the tragedy her counterpart, the Fury, acts of her own accord, and the absence of a divine figure prevents a further displacement of moral responsibility on the gods. The Fury has learnt her lesson and now acts on her own initiative.

The second half of the *Aeneid* impresses on the reader a set of ethical dilemmas which the first, for all the suffering it described, did not present

[24] See ch. 3, *passim*.
[25] On Seneca and Virgil see especially Putnam (1995) 246–85.
[26] Hardie (1993) 23; Quint (1993) 79; see Hor. *Epod*. 7.1; Luc. 1.95; Virg. *Aen*. 7.317; 12.313.
[27] A useful survey can be found in Frings (1992).
[28] On the model of epic inspired by Juno, as opposed to the epic under the sign of Jupiter, see now Hershkowitz (1998) 95–124.

so poignantly. (The final books of the poem are also much more extensively engaged in the detailed description of killing – one thinks particularly of the large battles in 10 and 11 – and thus confront the reader with the same questions about the aesthetic appeal of violent representation which are inevitable for Seneca's and Lucan's audience. In this respect it is important to stress the continuity of first-century literature *vis-à-vis* its Virgilian model.[29]) At the beginning of book 7 a 'happy ending' is within reach; hence Virgil's (and Juno's) decision to start the poem all over again, as it were, with a second proem, and to expand it considerably with a detailed account of a quasi-fratricidal strife is all the more disturbing. Poetic innovation and moral responsibility run hand in hand; the latter six books are more troubling because they represent new and 'unnecessary' amplifications of the plot, because they reproduce the physical horrors of war which the Trojan exiles hoped to have left behind, and above all because they give voice to the unsurpassed evil of civil war.

All the moral implications of these poetic strategies are active in Seneca's text, which – as a whole – stands as a challenge to the repressive decorum of silence. *Thyestes* repeatedly presents ethical instances (which are more or less convincing, more or less hypocritical) and pits them against a subversive passion which generally gains the upper hand. It is around ethics and its enemies that the play enacts the struggle between repression and subversion.

From an ethical point of view, then, Seneca is as guilty as Virgil, since he chooses to retell a story whose devastating contents he knows well: once again, to sing of *nefas* is in a sense to perpetrate it.[30] Seneca raises the stakes of his moral conflict by giving voice at the beginning of the play to an alternative which the *Aeneid* had only implied: Tantalus does proclaim his intention to steer away from the Fury and her orders, but his ultimate defeat only amplifies the horror of *nefas*. Yet this is precisely what Virgil had done, and Seneca attempts in turn to displace moral responsibility by invoking such a mighty predecessor. The spiral of violence and poetry about violence, it seems, offers no escape.

TANTALUS' TONGUE

libet loqui pigetque
(Seneca, *Phaedra* 637)

The presence of a perceptible metadramatic level in the prologue of *Thyestes* implies a complex of voices, motives, contrasting forces and cross-references

[29] See Narducci (1979) 80–9.

[30] A point very effectively made by Masters (1992), esp. 10.

which must undermine a moral, didactic reading. The metadramatic dimension acts as a bent mirror, which multiplies and distorts, complicates and blurs our perception. The central action of the play – Atreus' revenge – will have to be perceived by the audience within the alienating frame provided by the prologue, with its discordant attempts at establishing responsibility and causal connections. In experiencing the play as a whole, we cannot forget what the prologue implies for the rest of the tragedy: an intrinsic complicity between tragic *nefas* and its representation is imposed on the audience in the revelation of the Fury's 'backstage' deliberations. The audience is made to realize that the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the play is coextensive with that *nefas*, since the prologue, in offering a tangible embodiment of the power of poetry and its source of inspiration, has established that connection before their very eyes. We can walk out there and then. But if we keep watching (or reading), we forfeit our claim to naïve innocence. The play's very existence, the prologue tells us, is guaranteed by the unrelenting evil of the characters who perform it, such as the Fury and Atreus.

Only if we neglect the structural importance of the prologue is it possible to locate the 'essence' of the play in the contrast between two ethical types, Atreus and Thyestes, whose actions may bear comparison with, for instance, a character described in *De ira* or some sort of Stoic *proficiens*.[31] Constrained by the supposedly clear-cut choice between a Stoic *proficiens* with suspect credentials and a blood-thirsty, monstrous tyrant, the audience might have reasons to doubt the poignancy of the play and its emotional impact. The real dramatic and emotional crisis of the tragedy lies not so much in the tension between Thyestes and Atreus – both of whom, for different reasons which I will consider further on,[32] are unlikely ethical prototypes – as in the ethically troubling connotations of the very act of representation that is foregrounded by the prologue. From this point onwards the audience will be continuously forced to negotiate the conflicting aspects of that representation – pleasure and pain, moral horror and, at a certain level, an implicit acceptance of that very horror.

The Fury and Tantalus establish in a tense dialogue the connection between their deeds and the tragic text they will bring to life. The Fury intensifies

[31] For information on previous treatments of the play along these lines, and a new proposal, see Lefèvre (1985). I will consider below (pp. 163–76.) to what extent the chorus is left unscathed by the cognitive turmoil that is forced on the audience in the prologue and can thus be seen as a reliable incarnation of a superior moral stance.

[32] See below, pp. 139–51.

the tragic plot by conquering Tantalus' resistance and instigating him to pollute the house of his descendants (*Thy.* 23–9):

> perge, detestabilis
> umbra, et penates impios furiis age.
> certetur omni scelere et alterna vice
> stringatur ensis; nec sit irarum modus
> pudorve, mentes caecus instiget furor,
> rabies parentum duret et longum nefas
> eat in nepotes;

Forward, cursed shade, and drive your sinful house with fury. Make them vie in every kind of crime and draw the sword on either side; let there be no limit to shame in their anger; let a blind fury incite their souls; make the rage of parents last, and make the long trail of sin reach their children's children.

What she is plotting is indeed a *nefas*, as she reiterates at line 56: 'let the Thracian crime be done, but multiplied' (*Thracium fiat nefas* | *maiore numero*). In a series of instructions spanning lines 52 to 67, the Fury effectively organizes the staging of the drama. *Fiat nefas* (56), *epulae instruantur* (62: 'let the banquet be spread') and, finally, *mixtus in Bacchum cruor* | *spectante te potetur* (65–6: 'let blood mixed with wine be drunk before your eyes') articulate in a careful sequence the fundamentals of her plot, the specific form the pollution will take, and the audience which is supposed to be watching the performance. The Fury insistently declares her intention to subvert the moral order of events, to give space (and voice) to what is normally repressed and silenced. The language of subversion defines her speech at several critical junctures. She begins by voicing her desire that the two restraining qualities of *modus* (26) and *pudor* (29) give way to *furor* (27), *rabies* (28) and, of course, *nefas* (28). In a similar vein, she cautions that no repulsion for novel crimes will be tolerated: 'give no one time to hate a past crime – let a new one unceasingly arise' (29–30: *nec vacet cuiquam vetus* | *odisse crimen: semper oriatur novum*). *Ira* will know no bounds, will in fact overturn all prohibitions: 'let there be nothing which wrath deems forbidden' (39: *nihil sit ira quod vetitum putet*). In the war between morals and immorality that she is at the same time describing and waging, there will be one clear winner, which will rejoice over previously powerful leaders of people: *Libido victrix* ('Lust triumphant', 46). The hierarchy of crimes will also be overturned: in the house of the Pelopidai, she assures, *stuprum* will become *levissimum* ('a trivial crime', 47). Her conclusion is sweeping and unequivocal: 'let fraternal sanctity and faith and every right be trampled under foot' (47–8: *et fas et fides* | *iusque omne pereat*). *Nefas* will hold sway in

a completely subverted, topsy-turvy world, from which *fas* has been utterly banished.

It is worth lingering on the formulations that the Fury adopts in describing her project. She insists on a subversion of values which can best be described as a denial of accepted norms and values: *fas* will be replaced by *nefas*. Both of these terms encode an important linguistic aspect: originally, *fas* and *nefas* referred to days in which certain kinds of utterances were allowed or forbidden.[33] By ordering *fiat nefas*, the Fury is precipitating the speaking of 'unspeakable' crimes which will exist for us precisely because they will be written, spoken, represented. Tantalus' desire to preserve *fas*, and resist the attack of *nefas*, is equally couched in linguistic terms (89–95):

> ducam in horrendum nefas
> avus nepotes? magne divorum parens
> nosterque (quamvis pudeat), ingenti licet
> taxata poena lingua crucietur loquax,
> nec hoc tacebo: moneo, ne sacra manus
> violate caede neve furiali malo
> aspergite aras. stabo et arcebo scelus.[34]

Shall I, their grandfather, lead my grandsons into horrible crime? O great lord of gods, and my father too (though this fact may cause you shame), even though my tongue be condemned to severe punishment and tortured for speaking, I will not withhold even this; I warn you, do not defile your hands with execrable slaughter; do not stain your altars with a madman's crime. Here will I stand, and prevent the evil deed.

The dialectic of free speech and repression articulated in these intricate lines is revealing. In the subverted world foreseen by the Fury's forceful advocation of *nefas* over *fas*, in both its linguistic and moral dimensions, Tantalus feels that his own ability to announce the moral injunctions he wants to deliver is painfully restrained by the Fury's torture. His *lingua*... *loquax* (92) will be punished for trying to advocate the values of *fas*, which no longer have any place in a world dominated by the Fury. Later on, the play will pointedly pit Atreus' resourceful wordiness against Thyestes'

[33] As Varro explains in his definition, according to which the *dies nefasti* are those in which the praeto[r] cannot utter (*nefas fari*) the official formulae *'do', 'dico', 'addico'* (*De lingua Latina* 6.30); cf. Ov *Fast.* 1.47–8.

[34] *Scelus* and *nefas* are used in largely overlapping fashion by Seneca (in spite of, for instance, th[e] distinction suggested by Cic. *Paradoxa* 25). *Nefas*, however, foregrounds in its very semantic structur[e] a conflict between 'talk' and 'silence' which is central to my interpretation of the play. A significan[t] instance of this contrast is found in the exchange between the messenger and Theseus at Sen. *Phaed* 991–3: NUNT. *o sors acerba et dura, famulatus gravis,* | *cur me ad nefandi nuntium casus vocas?* | TH *ne metue cladis fortiter fari asperas.*

inability to recognize that the words he hears are shifty signifiers in a scheme that is too elaborate for him to understand. Even at his most tragic Thyestes is not nearly as articulate as his rhetorically proficient brother. Groping in vain for an explanation of his despair as the tragedy reaches its *dénouement*, he privileges non-verbal forms of communication, tears, moans, gestures: 'grief loves accustomed tears; miserable people have an ominous desire to weep. I feel like uttering ill-omened laments; I feel like tearing apart my clothes, full of Tyrian purple; I feel like shrieking' (952–6: *maeror lacrimas amat assuetas, | flendi miseris dira cupido est. | libet infaustos mittere questus, | libet et Tyrio saturas ostro | rumpere vestes, ululare libet*). Soon afterwards, once Atreus' crime has been unveiled in all its magnitude, words again seem to fail him: 'what cries in my misery shall I utter, what complaints? What words will suffice me?' (1036–7: *quas miser voces dabo | questusque quos? quae verba sufficient mihi?*).[35]

Tantalus, on the other hand, had once been a victim of his own excessive verbosity. The mention of his 'impertinent tongue' recalls a salient aspect of his mythological record, the fact that he had been punished by the gods for revealing their secrets to human beings. The prologue of Euripides' *Orestes* refers explicitly to Tantalus' 'intemperance' (ἀκολασία), and, largely through Euripides' influence, he is later consistently identified as the paramount example of 'supremely audacious verbal *hybris*'.[36] In Seneca's *Thyestes*, Tantalus' *hybris*, paradoxically, consists in verbalizing a moral restraint: the cruel thwarting of his attempt in the midst of painful torments graphically exposes how, in a Fury-dominated world, there is only room for advocating *nefas*, for voicing and acting the language of pollution and crime.[37]

The prologue of *Thyestes* provokes an uneasy reflection on the very nature of theatrical experience,[38] but its intricate and ambivalent intersection of silence and speech has much in common with another first-century literary work, Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. Just before the climactic moment of the battle at Pharsalus, Lucan, who is fraught with doubts and worries about the

[35] The messenger confesses his difficulty in reporting Atreus' crime at 684: *quis queat digne eloqui?*, a topical declaration of inadequacy (see Tarrant (1985) 189). But Thyestes' words are motivated well beyond their topicality.

[36] Willink (1983) 32; cf. Willink (1986) 79–80. Ovid, for instance, calls him a *taciti vulgator* (*Am.* 3.7.51) endowed with a *garrula . . . lingua* (*Am.* 2.2.44).

[37] Critics have connected the contrast between 'voice' and 'silence' in authors such as Ovid with the issue of free speech in the Principate; see Baldo (1989) and Feeney (1992).

[38] It is useful to keep in mind as a background the Romans' tormented attitude towards actors and their ethical status; see C. Edwards (1993) 99, and the whole chapter for discussion of the actors' ambivalent role in society.

very nature of his task, entrusts a pained reflection to the narrator's voice (7.552–6):[39]

> hanc fuge, mens, partem belli tenebrisque relinque,
> nullaque tantorum discat me vate malorum,
> quam multum bellis liceat civilibus, aetas.
> a potius pereant lacrimae pereantque querellae:
> quidquid in hac acie gessisti, Roma, tacebo.

Mind of mine, shun this part of battle and leave it to darkness, and from my words let no age learn of horrors so immense, of how much is licensed in civil war. Better that these tears and protests go unheard: whatever you did in this battle, Rome, I shall not tell.

The prologue of *Thyestes* explodes the contradiction which Lucan so acutely faces, and which pervades the very structure of his poem. Having chosen to sing of Pharsalia and the evils of civil war, Lucan atones for his guilty projects by repeatedly delaying the narrative process, postponing (or even silencing) the revelations of truths that are as historically inevitable as they are morally shocking.[40] But in *Thyestes* there is no narrator who can negotiate the conflicting demands of his project. The stage for the play is bare, and 'good' and 'evil' must confront each other in isolation. The outcome of the match is predictable, yet it is still important to notice how little opposition *nefas* receives, here or elsewhere, in the play. We will see a number of instances in which delay or resistance are at work, but they will be silenced even more swiftly than Tantalus' compunctions are laid to rest in the prologue. Unlike an epic poet, the dramatist Seneca is not statutorily supposed to sing the great (positive) deeds of the past,[41] and the proem to *Thyestes* carries Lucan's logic one step further as it radically denies the act of resisting the poisonous advance of *nefas*.

Tantalus, as we have seen, is punished a second time, but for reasons antithetical to those which warranted his penalty in the well-ordered divine cosmos of Greek myth: there he had been punished for revealing divine secrets, for voicing a *nefas*; here he is punished for trying to voice a *fas*, a lesson of moral restraint. The comparison between his current and past predicaments highlights very clearly the violent subversion of rules which

[39] Narducci (1979) 33; O'Higgins (1988) 215–16; Feeney (1991) 277.

[40] A point which is brilliantly stressed by Henderson (1987) and Masters (1992).

[41] Feeney ((1991) 277, n. 119) rightly refers to Virg. *Aen.* 9.446–9 and especially 10.793 as explicit declarations of this purpose. It might be added that a direct, phonic echo of 10.791–3 (*tuaque optima facta,* | . . . | *non equidem nec te, iuvenis memorande, silebo*) could be traced in Luc. 7.556 (*quidquid in hac acie gessisti, Roma, tacebo*); for similar examples of 'phonic' allusion see Conte and Barchiesi (1989).

follows the gods' fall from a position of control in the universe and their substitution by the Fury's infernal power. Tantalus has not been able to understand that the world has changed, that, in the world of *nefas* (of *Libido victrix*), *fas* is inevitably suffocated: his restraint would effectively amount to the suppression of the *nefas* embodied by the Fury's poetic performance, which cannot, will not, be tolerated. Tantalus, himself a victim of repetition, is once again forced to heed his mythical propensity for verbal *hybris*; he tries to give his *hybris* a moral purpose by putting it to the service of morals, but he is quickly and violently disappointed.

Tantalus' own past error and present behaviour underscore the essential nature of the confrontation between himself and the Fury as a contrast between a repressive silence, which would deny *nefas* any means of expression, and an avoidance of *scelus*, which is also realized in linguistic terms. At the same time, this reference buttresses the equation of silence and inaction on the one hand, and word and action on the other.

The prologue's articulation of a dialectic between repression and its removal scaffolds the creative struggle represented in the play. Indeed it invites consideration of the basic structure of the play in the light of the assumption that literature might indeed be 'a return of the repressed made available to a community of men but rendered harmless by sublimation and fiction'.[42] In a series of powerful monographs now grouped under the general title 'Literature, reason, and the repressed. Three Freudian Studies',[43] Francesco Orlando has over the past thirty years developed a coherent theory of literature that is rooted in Freud's reflections on the linguistic characteristics of *Witz*. By exploring extensively the linguistic analogies of *Witz* and poetry, both of which are indebted to the peculiar logical forms of the unconscious,[44] Orlando has argued that literature exploits the 'formal return of the repressed' which creates pleasure by a number of expressive devices – precisely as *Witz* does – and at the same time conveys, in an institutionally acceptable form, contents which would be subject to partial or total social censorship. Orlando's own masterful readings of Racine's *Phèdre*[45] and Molière's *Misanthrope*,[46] as well as of a number of philosophical texts from the Enlightenment, testify to the theory's wide applicability

[42] Orlando (1978) 19 and 137–8.
[43] Orlando (1971), (1973), (1979) and (1982): the first two volumes are available in English as Orlando (1978). See also, more recently, Orlando (1993).
[44] In his later works Orlando draws extensively on the ground-breaking work of Ignacio Matte Blanco, who provides an exhaustive formulation of the 'logic of the unconscious'; see Orlando (1993) *passim*, and especially Matte Blanco (1975).
[45] Orlando (1971). [46] Orlando (1979).

and impressive heuristic potential. Yet it is clear that certain literary texts seem to embody more strongly than others the idea that they represent a return of the repressed; furthermore, the rhetorical complexity of these texts can be readily considered to be one of the ways in which repressed contents are camouflaged. In the case of Senecan tragedy both assumptions would *prima facie* withstand examination: in the case of *Thyestes* however, the analysis of the prologue that I have proposed highlights a persuasive thematization of the return of the repressed which warrants further investigation.

In a very important sense *Thyestes* can be read as an experiment in the nature and limits of tragic (poetic) language and an answer to the problem of the relationship between poetry and reality. The antagonisms raging in the play invest a number of different spheres of human nature and activity. Language is one of these spheres, and the conflict between Tantalus and the Fury is also a friction between the words of tragedy and the silence preserved by their avoidance. The prologue thus represents poetry as the medium through which *scelera* and *nefas* can be expressed, and against which the moral restraint personifed by Tantalus' shadow remains fatally impotent. Not only are words actions, as the double aspect of *scelus* and *nefas* itself powerfully suggests, but the words of poetry represent a decisive victory against the repressive morality of silence. If we extrapolate the conflict between (repressive) silence and words already encoded in the word *ne-fas*, we can better visualize the reversal brought about by voicing deeds and words (*fas*) which had been deemed worthy of censure and perhaps oblivion. It is not by chance that 'evil' Senecan characters such as Atreus (*age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet, | sed nulla taceat*: 'up, my soul do what no coming age shall approve, but none forget!', 192–3) and Medea (*paria narrentur tua | repudia thalamis*: 'let the story they tell of your divorce be like the one they tell of your marriage', 52–3) are obsessed with the hope that their actions will not be passed over in silence. Their rebellion, which subverts normative codes of conduct, demands a similar overturning of the decorum of silence and is coextensive with it. Atreus will do unspeakable things, and that is precisely why he wants to ensure that they will be spoken and talked about for ever.

In giving voice to *nefas*, poetry reverses the repressive instance that *ne-fas* would encode. Silence was, after all, the standard, expected reaction to *nefas*. At the political level, for instance, *damnatio memoriae* awaited the enemies of the state whose very names, let alone actions, were consigned to eternal oblivion by a stroke of the pen. For a long time, literature seemed bent on extolling virtues rather than on giving any space to offensive conduct

Seneca himself refers explicitly to the difference in treatment (*Consolatio ad Marciam* 1.4):

legitur [sc. Cremutius Cordus], floret, in manus hominum, in pectora receptus vetustatem nullam timet; at illorum carnificum cito scelera quoque, quibus solis memoriam meruerunt, tacebuntur.

But he is now read, he lives, and ensconced in the hands and hearts of men he fears no passing of the years, but these cut throats – even their crimes, by which alone they deserved to be remembered – will soon be heard of no more.

It will fall to Tacitus to subvert this basic rule and to claim for his historical prose, which does not shrink from mentioning negative behaviour if necessary, the hitherto little-explored function of a deterrent (*Ann.* 6.7.5):

neque sum ignarus a plerisque scriptoribus omissa multorum pericula et poenas, dum copia fatiscunt aut, quae ipsis nimia et maesta fuerant, ne pari taedio lecturos adficerent verentur: nobis pleraque digna cognitu obvenere, quamquam ab aliis incelebrata.[47]

And I am not unaware that many writers omit to discuss the dangers and punishments of many men, either because they flag at the quantity, or because they are afraid to afflict their readers with experiences which they have themselves found excessive and sad: as far as I am concerned, many things came to my notice which I consider worthy of record, even if they have been left unrecorded by others.

At a more radical level, the presentation of Atreus' actions as an intrinsic victory over repression, together with the collusion established between poetic word and *scelus*, gives *scelus* an emotional appeal which defies the feeble attempts at moral correctness that are ostensibly advocated in other parts of the play. Also, as we have seen, any attempt made by the audience to identify their emotions with any given character is distorted by the play's intricate metadramatic structure; for any action represented in the play must not only be interpreted and judged *per se*: the very form of its representation also carries upsetting ethical connotations.

The most important case in point is Atreus himself. The text constantly challenges its audience to assess the ethical status of Atreus and his actions, but also questions the ethics of the author's choice to represent them. Thus the possibilities of emotional identification offered to the audience are multiplied and result in a potentially endless set of conflicts. The audience must constantly assess the plausibility of Atreus' complaints and the explanation

[47] The issue is discussed by Luce (1991) 2912–13, to which I am indebted. He identifies in Diodorus 1.1.5 and 15.1.1 the only other instance of history acting as a deterrent in ancient historiography. I will explore below (pp. 228ff.) whether Seneca's tragedies, too, might be considered a deterrent against morally repulsive behaviour.

he offers for his actions, and at the same time deliberate whether they can enjoy the aesthetic emotions offered by Seneca's poetry without colluding *ipso facto* in its powerful violation of *fas*.[48] Conversely, the audience might sometimes sympathize with Tantalus' advocacy of silence and simply wish that the tragedy did not exist at all.

The function of this polymorphic prologue, as I have tried to show, is radically to complicate a straightforward opposition between the oppressing force of Atreus' violence and the moral values defended, however faintly, by Thyestes, the *satelles* and the chorus. The prologue introduces a dynamic which subjects otherwise clear-cut values to multiple transformations and interactions. The prologue functions as a vital metadramatic frame for the drama as a whole, ensuring that dramatic and metadramatic dimensions are always co-evident. It also casts in a different light a dilemma which I have already touched on,[49] namely whether we should read the tragedies as negative illustrations of values and ideas advocated in Seneca's prose works. The very architecture of the play promotes a multiplication and diffraction of meanings that makes summary comparison with other texts necessarily absurd. What the prologue impresses upon us is first and foremost the lacerating power of the poetic word, which imposes on its creator and its public a set of moral implications that cannot necessarily be bound into a reassuring unity.

FRAMING *THYESTES*

libet videre
(Seneca, *Thyestes* 903)

I

The prologue sets up a pattern of representation which is essential to the structural organization of the tragedy as a whole. The Fury and Tantalus cease to act, but they are not meant to disappear. The tragic action will unfold before their eyes, and Tantalus, too, will be forced to watch the monstrous banquet he has unavoidably, if unwillingly, precipitated: 'let blood mixed with wine be drunk before your eyes' (65–6: *mixtus in Bacchum cruor | spectante te potetur*). The conflict between the Fury and Tantalus draws a line between active and passive forces, performers and spectators,

[48] This is the most explosive aspect of the 'return of the formal repression' which Orlando posits as one of the forms in which the repressed returns: certain densely figurative parts of the work offer a direct aesthetic pleasure.

[49] See above, pp. 2ff.

power and powerlessness; it is rewarding to read it also as a meditation on the implications of poetry and its effects on both author and audience. Tantalus, once he has performed his primary task, becomes a spectator himself, an impotent, horrified prisoner. As he lurks in the background throughout, his perspective remains an imposing, if latent, counterpart to our own troubled experience as spectators of *Thyestes*.

The conflicting drives personified by the Fury and Tantalus in the prologue infect the play as a whole. This contrast generates in the text a series of oppositions that are subordinate to and dependent on the basic polarization of silence and tragedy instigated by the Fury and equally liable to be construed as a conflict between repression and its removal.

Just as the contrast between Tantalus and the Fury pits one of the principal moving forces of the tragedy against the potentially most effective obstacle to it, further dramatic confrontations in the play mirror the same antithesis. The *satelles*' initial reaction to Atreus' plans in the second act is precisely one of resistance. Functionally, then, the *satelles* and Tantalus are paired together in their vain attempt to stop Atreus and the Fury respectively. Atreus complains about his inactivity (176–8: *ignave, iners, enervis*… | … | *inulte*, 'undaring, indolent, nerveless, unavenged'), and braces himself for new, spectacular actions, indeed for a new *scelus* (203). The *satelles*, on the contrary, advocates the restrained morality which Tantalus had unsuccessfully embraced, and tries to counter Atreus' machinations with an invitation to desist from the proposed *scelus*. However, as we will see shortly, he ultimately changes his initial attitude, accepts Atreus' point of view and tries to expose the weak points of his plot rather than insist on the need for restraint. As in the prologue, if Atreus yielded to the *satelles*' invitation, there simply would be no tragedy at all. Once again, the intimate connection between the unfolding of the plot and Atreus' responsibility is foregrounded. The equivalence between *nefas* as an action and a poetic representation of that action is made emphatic in Atreus' self-presentation at 176–204. Atreus plans to perpetrate a *nefas* (193) of unrivalled atrocity, one which can therefore aspire to immortal fame, to never being silenced (192–3).[50] The remarks that follow, at 250–4, after a brief altercation with the *satelles* show that Atreus is again a victim of the same *furor* of poetic creation as is symbolically represented by the prologue, when Tantalus is forced to submit to the Fury's irresistible force of inspiration.

[50] See Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* 3.1.133–5: 'What shall we do? Let us that have our tongues | Plot some device of further misery | To make us wondered at in time to come.'

The same pattern is repeated in the dialogue between Tantalus and his father, Thyestes, at 404–90. Here, too, the contrast between father and son focuses on Thyestes' reluctance to further the dramatic plot (436: *placet ire, pigris membra sed genibus labant*, 'I would like to go, but my limbs waver on my shaky knees') and Tantalus' insistence that he follow the prescribed series of events (440: *evince quidquid obstat et mentem impedit*, 'overcome whatever opposes and thwarts your will'). Thyestes' final words (488–9: *eatur. unum genitor hoc testor tamen:* | *ego vos sequor, non duco*, 'let us on. Yet this one thing your father does declare: I follow you, not lead'), in fact, pointedly echo Tantalus' shadow's ultimate confession of defeat: *sequor*, 'I follow' (100).[51] Finally, in the first meeting between the two brothers, Thyestes incarnates a role which by now we have learnt to recognize as ineffective and morally dubious. Thyestes does indeed try to resist Atreus' enticements, much as Tantalus had done in the prologue, and as the *satelles* had perfunctorily attempted to do in the first act, but his sudden and rhetorically startling surrender to Atreus' argument is not comparable either to Tantalus' suffering while he is tortured or to the undeniably weak position of the *satelles*: Thyestes, whose superficial determination had begun to vacillate while he was talking to his son, acquires in this central scene of the play the new role of a moving force. In this way he signals his final transformation from victim to accomplice.

The whole tragedy thus hinges on the antithesis of two sets of functionally similar characters: on the one hand, the Fury, Atreus and Tantalus, on the other, Tantalus' shadow, the *satelles* and Thyestes. The two groups possess different degrees of textual knowledge and stand in different positions *vis-à-vis* the metadramatic aspect of the play. The first group includes all the forces that work towards the tragedy's resolution, those whose *furor* in carrying out the proposed *nefas* is coextensive with the removal of the repression that lifts the play from silence into existence. The second group is made up of characters who in one way or another want to uphold that repression, those who try, with different degrees of determination and credibility, to stop the ruinous pattern of events instigated by their antagonists. This contrast is reinforced, as we will see, by the fact that the two groups represent authors and victims of deception.[52] The moving forces of the tragedy, *furor*, *nefas* and *furor*-inspired poetry, are embodied by consummate deceivers, against whom Tantalus', Thyestes' and the *satelles*' moralizing attempts are

[51] Note also that Tantalus' exhortation in the two following lines (489–90: *respiciet deus* | *bene cogitata. perge non dubio gradu*) echoes a similar command on the Fury's part: *perge, detestabilis* | *umbra* (24–5).

[52] On Tantalus see below, pp. 48–9.

completely ineffectual, partly because they are predicated on an incomplete, flawed knowledge and assessment of the events.

The systematic correspondences among the characters of the play map the opposition between repression and its removal that was emphasized in the prologue and reiterate and expand the basic conflict between poetic expression and morally justified silence. A further set of oppositions is also implied: between *nefas* and *fas*, *ratio* and *furor*, honesty and deception. The conflict between Atreus and Tantalus on the one hand, and the *satelles* and Thyestes on the other, reflects the contrast between the Fury and Tantalus' shadow in the prologue, since it dramatizes the fundamental dichotomy between furthering and suppressing the dramatic plot. The prologue sets up a conflict which pervades the whole play, leading the audience to suspend judgement on the utterances and actions of the characters, not only in the prologue, but throughout the play. At the same time, we must also be prepared to recognize that Atreus, the playwright with bloody hands, stands out in the play as the incarnation of a victory against the constraints of moral repression, a triumph which is inevitably connected with the force and pleasure of poetry.

Before turning in the following chapters to analyse the main characters of the play and their epistemological horizons, I should make a closer examination of the structural relationship between the various scenes and the different levels of the tragedy that I have outlined. The play unfolds at different levels. The first is represented by the prologue and the indication of the apparently limitless agency of the Fury, whose presence will have to be felt, though not seen, in the rest of the play. Indeed, if *spectante te* at line 66 is to be taken literally, Tantalus is throughout the play an unseen, incapacitated spectator of the events that he has been forced to precipitate. As a hidden spectator of the events that will unfold, Tantalus would parallel Hermes in Euripides' *Ion*, a prologue character (προλογίζων) who hides away (probably behind a panel shaped as a bush) as soon as he notices Ion arriving on the scene at the end of the prologue (78–80), and never reappears.[53] Although hiding-scenes at the end of a prologue are to be found in several authors,[54] Seneca's *te spectante* retains the defining features of *Ion*

[53] See Halleran (1985) 102. In Seneca's probably Euripidean model Tantalus remained to see the banquet (Lesky (1922–23) 533); according to Steidle (1943–44) and Hine (1981), however, Seneca's Tantalus does leave once and for all when he has polluted the house. This issue is closely connected with the interpretation of the Fury's seemingly contrasting orders at 66 and 105–6 (*gradere ad infernos specus* | *amnemque notum*): does the Fury change her mind in the course of the prologue and relent on her initial order that Tantalus watch the ensuing actions (so Tarrant (1985) 98), or do the two contrasting orders follow each other in a compressed temporal sequence? I discuss the issue in ch. 5, pp. 178–80.

[54] Aeschylus (Taplin (1977) 334–5), other tragedians (Soph. *El.* 77–85; Eur. *Hipp.* 51–3; *Hec.* 52–4), Old and New Comedy (after Leo (1908) 68, see, e.g., Fraenkel (1962) 22–6 and Handley (1965) 171–2).

(a play, incidentally, deeply concerned with the issues of viewing, spectatorship and representation), where the προλογίζων is a divine character who remains on the scene to watch the events but does not reappear later in the play.[55]

At a further, included level, we can place Atreus' deliberations on how to fulfil his wish for revenge, his own author-like plotting. At the third level, finally, we watch Atreus turn into an actor of the play he has devised, and Thyestes being taken in by the elaborate performance of his brother. It might be useful to sum up these distinctions as follows:

	First level	Second level	Third level
	(a) Prologue	(b) Play	(c) Atreus' play
1	Fury, Tantalus (1–121)		
	[T	*I chorus (122–75)*	
2	A	Atreus, *satelles* (176–335)	
			II chorus (336–403)
	N		
3			Thyestes, Tantalus (404–90)
	T	Atreus alone (491–507)	
			Thyestes, Atreus (508–45) *III chorus (546–622)*
	A		
4	L	chorus, mess. (623–788)	
		IV chorus (789–884)	
5	U	Atreus alone (885–919)	
			Atreus, Thyestes (920–1004, *agnoscis*)
	S]	Atreus, Thyestes (1005–1112)	

II

An analysis of the second level of dramatic action in *Thyestes* reveals a close structural similarity to the prologue, since the dialogue between Atreus and his *satelles* parallels that between the Fury and Tantalus' shadow.[56] The specific metadramatic implications of this part of the play are particularly evident in the characterization of Atreus, whose plotting is insistently associated, as we have seen, with the creative activity of a poet.

This second part of the play opens with a monologue by Atreus, which parallels Tantalus' opening speech. Seneca favours the use of an expository monologue at the beginning of several plays (*Hercules furens*, *Troades*, *Medea*), or, as in this case and in *Oedipus*, an opening monologue which

[55] Eur. *Hec.* 52–4 offers another interesting point of comparison: the ghost of Polydorus disappears as his mother, Hecuba, arrives on the scene, having dreamt, he claims, of his own presence.

[56] I will discuss later (ch. 4) the possible political implications of the dialogue between Atreus and the *satelles*.

then turns into a dialogue for the rest of the first act:[57] Atreus' first appearance is thus overtly characterized as a programmatic gesture. There is no need to suppose that the Fury and the *satelles* should arrive on stage with their respective counterparts, although their initial words pick up at half-line:[58] in both cases it is a solitary speech, heavily punctuated by questions, which has pride of place. Just as the Fury did, Atreus vows to take his revenge on Thyestes by producing a *nefas* of great novelty – *quid novi rabidus struis?*, asks the worried *satelles* (254: 'what strange design are you plotting in your rage?') – and unsurpassed audacity: *fiat hoc, fiat nefas | quod, di, timetis* (265–6: 'let it be done, let a *nefas* be done at which, o gods, you take fright'). His *nefas*, as we will see, is an eloquent poetic artefact, a deceitful ploy whose author (*quid sit quod horres ede et auctorem indica*, says the chorus at line 639: 'tell what it is that makes you shudder, and point out its author') fully exploits the potential of words to ensnare and betray. Atreus' *nefas* is the core action of the whole tragedy, the well-devised and well-acted scheme to which Thyestes is doomed to succumb.

While the pairing of *nefas* and poetry was already clearly established in the prologue, Atreus' declaration of poetics adds significant details to our understanding of exactly what kind of poetic activity the text is referring to. The scene opens, as the prologue did, by pitting Atreus against the *satelles* in a debate on what should be the presiding force of creation (248–54):[59]

> SA. nulla te pietas movet?
> AT. excede, Pietas, si modo in nostra domo
> umquam fuisti. dira Furiarum cohors
> discorsque Erinys veniat et geminas faces
> Megaera quatiens: non satis magno meum
> ardet furore pectus, impleri iuvat
> maiore monstro.

SA. Does no sense of Piety move you?
AT. Away, Piety, if ever you have had a place in our house. Let the fearful band of Furies come, the discord-sowing Erinys, and Megaera, shaking her twin torches; the frenzy burning in my breast is not great enough; some greater horror must fill me.

57 The beginnings of *Phoenissae* (a dialogue throughout) and of *Phaedra* (a monody followed by two scenes) privilege other options. As Tarrant ((1976) 157) notes, Seneca's 'predilection for the introductory monologue is "Euripidean"'. In addition to Tarrant see Anliker (1960) 23–9.

58 At lines 23 and 203 respectively.

59 As Tarrant ((1985) 128–9) rightly points out, many features of Atreus' behaviour closely resemble Seneca's description of an *iratus* (cf. especially the angry man's inclination towards the sublime, *Thy.* 268 with *De ira* 1.10.2). On Atreus as an *iratus* see the important article by Staley (1981). While my emphasis here is different, his perspective should certainly be kept in mind.

As the Fury invoked the precedent of Procne and Philomela, here Atreus, echoing in *maiore monstro* (254) the Fury's *maiore numero* (57), names her as his Muse. The tortures inflicted by the Fury on Tantalus' shadow become the self-conscious ardour of the new poet, the metaphoric fire of inspiration or the unsettling force of poetic enthusiasm (96–9):

> quid ora terres verbere et tortos ferox
> minaris angues? quid famem infixam intimis
> agitas medullis? flagrat incensum siti
> cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat.

Why do you terrify me with the sight of your lash, and fiercely threaten me with your twisted snakes? Why do you rouse pains of hunger deep in my innards? My heart burns with fiery thirst, and in my burnt-out vitals a flame is darting.

In two later, closely related passages Atreus insists he is being dominated by the sweeping force of inspiration. First he confesses his emotional distress (260–2):

> AT. fateor. tumultus pectora *attonitus*[60] *quatit*
> penitusque volvit; *rapior* et quo nescio,
> sed rapior[61]

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

His conclusion clearly recalls the Fury's intimation at line 56 – 'let the Thracian crime be done, but multiplied' (*Thracium fiat nefas | maiore numero*): *fiat hoc, fiat nefas | quod, di, timetis* (265–6: 'let a *nefas* be done at which, o gods, you take fright'). *Rapior* provides a description of Atreus' state of mind that is paralleled in a densely programmatic Horatian ode, 3.25, where the poet explicitly connects the force of Bacchus' inspiration with his transportation into uncharted, perilous territories.[62] As we will see shortly, it is precisely this type of Bacchic, enthusiastic poetics that Atreus embodies on

60 Its Greek equivalent συγκεραυνωθείς also has distinct Dionysiac overtones; see Mendelsohn (1992) 111. *Attonitus* is first found in poetry in Virgil, but an Ennian model is possible. For Bacchic overtones see *Aen.* 7.580 *attonitae Baccho . . . matres* and Hor. *Carm.* 3.19.14 *attonitus . . . vates* (with Livy's description of revellers at *Bacchanalia* at 39.15.9 *vino . . . attoniti*). On Seneca's abundant and nuanced use of the adjective in the tragedies see Pasiani (1967).

61 The structure of lines 261–2 recalls the famous Catullan distich (85) about the epistemological quandary caused by erotic passion: *odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris. | nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

62 *Quo me, Bacche, rapis tui | plenum? quae nemora aut quos agor in specus | velox mente nova?* (lines 1–3). Cf. lines 17–18: *nil parvum aut humili modo, | nil mortale loquar.* On this passage see Pasquali (1920) 14 and 549–50 (with bibl. 813–14); and La Penna (1971). See also *Sat.* 2.1.10: *si tantus amor scribendi te rapit*, and Ovid's Medea (fr. 2 Ribbeck^2): *feror huc illuc, ut plena deo.* I will return later to the Dionysiac aspects of Atreus' character, pp. 133–8.

the stage of *Thyestes*, and that we, the spectators, should consider to be the driving force of the play.

Subsequently, as the *satelles* is reduced to a completely impotent sparring partner, who does little more than feed his master the next line, Atreus caps his own poetic prologue by describing in further detail the grandiose *nefas* he is plotting,[63] and by invoking his own special Muses, Procne and Philomela (267–77):

> AT. nescioquid animus *maius* et solito amplius
> supraque fines moris humani *tumet*
> instatque pigris manibus – haud quid sit scio,
> sed *grande* quiddam est. ita sit. hoc, anime, occupa
> (dignum est Thyeste facinus et dignum Atreo,
> quod uterque faciat): vidit infandas domus
> Odrysia mensas – fateor, *immane* est scelus,
> sed occupatum: *maius* hoc aliquid dolor
> *inveniat.* animum Daulis *inspira* parens
> sororque; causa est similis: assiste et manum
> impelle nostram.

AT. My mind swells with something greater, larger than normal, and beyond the bounds of human custom, and it urges on my sluggish hands – I do not know what it is, but it is some great thing. So let it be. Haste, my soul, take hold of it. (It is a crime worthy of Thyestes, and worthy of Atreus, such that each of them could perform it.) The Odrysian house once saw an unspeakable banquet – this is a monstrous crime, I grant, but it has been done before; let my grievance find something worse than this. Inspire my soul, o Daulian mother and sister; my case is like yours; help and urge on my hand.

The nature of the poetic creation which Atreus envisages is evidently very close to the one imposed by the Fury on Tantalus. His deeds will have to be sublime, literally exceeding human boundaries – *supraque fines moris humani* (268). They will be original, as the *satelles* unwillingly points out by asking *quid novi rabidus struis?* (254).[64] And, above all, they will have to outdare all precedents, just as the Fury had demanded: *Thracium fiat nefas | maiore numero* (56–7). These features – in particular the programmatic combination of novelty and awareness of the tradition[65] – would be enough to lend Atreus' declaration of intents a distinct literary colour, even if he had not used a number of key terms which Seneca elsewhere applies explicitly

[63] I will analyse the character of the *satelles* below, pp. 154–64.
[64] On Atreus' 'sublimity' see the next chapter, p. 127.
[65] Compare especially *Letters to Lucilius* 79.6, in which Seneca discusses the relationship between invention and tradition with regard to a poem on Aetna which Lucilius might be tempted to compose.

to poetic creation.[66] The most important of such parallels is undoubtedly with *De tranquillitate animi* 17, where, as we have seen in chapter one,[67] Seneca offers the most overt endorsement of the Democritean and Platonic theory of poetic enthusiasm, and praises the emotional excitement that leads to sublime poetry.[68] It is worth quoting again the last few lines of the dialogue (17.10–11), important elements of which are closely paralleled by Atreus:

> For whether we believe with the Greek poet that 'sometimes it is a pleasure also to rave', or with Plato that 'the sane mind knocks in vain at the door of poetry', or with Aristotle that 'no great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness' – be that as it may, the lofty utterance that rises above the attempts of others is impossible unless the mind is excited (*mota mens*). When it has scorned the vulgar and the commonplace, and has soared far aloft fired by divine inspiration, then alone it chants a strain too lofty (*grandius*) for mortal lips. So long as it is left to itself, it is impossible for it to reach any sublime (*sublime*) and difficult height; it must forsake the common track and be driven to frenzy (*efferatur*) and champ the bit and run away (*rapiat*) with its rider and rush to a height that it would have feared to climb by itself.

Atreus emphasizes in a similar fashion the connection between the 'irrational' force of poetic inspiration – one that literally 'snatches away' – and a grandiose, sublime form of poetry which deserves the highest praise. Indeed, poetic *enthousiasmos* can transform man into a semi-divine entity, a *vates* whose utterances have a higher claim to truth.[69] It is especially worth noting that the last sentence of the passage appears radically to subvert the hierarchical principle on which Stoic ethics is predicated, by relegating the *rector* to a subordinate position. Poetry, as an irrational force, smashes the barriers of both rationality and decorum, and overrides any hesitation enforced by *timor* (*Tranq.* 1.14): 'then again, when my mind has been uplifted by the greatness of its thoughts, it becomes ambitious of words, and with higher aspirations it desires higher expression, and language issues forth to match the dignity of the theme; forgetful then of my rule and of my more restrained judgement, I am swept to loftier heights by an utterance that is no longer my own' (*rursus ubi se animum cogitationum magnitudine levavit, ambitiosus in verba est altiusque ut spirare ita eloqui*

[66] This comparison is developed in full by Picone (1984) 56–61. Picone's book offers a fascinating reading of *Thyestes*, though he places a different emphasis on Atreus as 'doppio negativo del *vates*' (59).
[67] Above, pp. 22–3. [68] Mazzoli (1970) 50–9.
[69] I agree with Mazzoli ((1970) 52, n. 94) that this passage is connected with the description of the Sybil at Virg. *Aen.* 6.48–51. See Picone (1984) 59, n. 39, and further references to *De ira* 2.35.6; *De vita beata* 2.2; 9.2; *Ep.* 108.26.

gestit et ad dignitatem rerum exit oratio; oblitus tum legis pressiorisque iudicii sublimius feror et ore iam non meo).

On the basis of these connections, it is now clear that the metadramatic implications of the Fury's actions, perceptibly if indirectly suggested in the prologue, constitute an essential dynamic of *Thyestes* as a whole: act 2 confirms more explicitly what the audience already had cause to suspect at the very beginning of the play. As for Atreus, we are now effectively invited to consider him a *magnum ingenium* as well as a sublime poet, one who attains greatness by overstepping the boundaries of *timor* and *mores* through a superior form of *enthousiasmos*. It would still be possible to suppose that Atreus' poetic activity is represented here as an anti-model of the 'true' poet, a negative mirror for the moral conscience of the Stoic author.[70] Such an interpretation, however, is rooted in the assumption that Seneca's prose works try to justify the un-Stoic aspects of the Democritean-Platonic theory of poetic inspiration by subordinating them to a morally praiseworthy goal, and by trying to restrain the potentially disruptive effects of the sublime. I have already tried to show[71] that even if we confine analysis to the theoretical prose works, it is very difficult to arrive at such an unambiguous assessment of the moral implications of poetry. I would suggest that metadramatic passages such as *Oedipus* 509–658[72] emphasize the feeling of ambivalence and awe surrounding the process of poetic creation, and indeed set inspiration and creation in a twilight zone of horrific, haunted groves. In the case of Atreus, however, any comforting solution seems to be denied by the context itself. Nothing in *Thyestes* suggests the notion that Atreus should be imagined as a *negative* model of the poet. The principles he advocates – originality, knowledge of the tradition, desire to reach the highest peaks of creation – are nowhere accompanied by a critique of the notion of good or successful poetry. Perhaps we might argue that the text frames Atreus' poetry as 'bad' by exposing its association with unethical deeds, and that we should therefore be able to distinguish between his abstract principles of poetics and his wholly unprincipled conduct. But, even if we set aside for the moment a more nuanced evaluation of Atreus' motives and behaviour,[73] we are still bound to recognize that his poetic success is intrinsically twinned with his thirst for revenge: he devises his seductive and successful plot precisely as a means to exact retribution from his brother.

[70] Picone's thesis (1984) 59. [71] See ch. 1, *passim*.
[72] Ch. 1, pp. 8–10. [73] Ch. 3, *passim*.

However, if, as I have suggested, act 2 replicates in a more obvious way a set of ideas already clearly established in the prologue, we should feel fully justified in reading the connection between Atreus and the sublime poet described in *De tranquillitate animi* as thoroughly consistent, in so far as it upholds the equation between poetry and the lifting of repression, and is predicated on the inherently ambiguous notion of poetry as a transgression of psychological, moral and expressive limits. All sublime, grandiose poetry is *nefas*, is inevitably implicated in transgressive actions, since it abandons self-composure in a heady atmosphere of semi-prophetic creation. Atreus is but one example of sublime poetry, one which concretizes the emotive alliance between poetry and *nefas*. As it repeats itself for the second time, the contrast between poetry and repression so forcefully voiced by Tantalus and the Fury seems even more skewed in favour of the latter's violent, trangressive force. In the dialogue between Atreus and the *satelles*, even Tantalus' credible, if short-lived, attempt at resistance has disappeared. So has the sense of impotent despair with which he surrenders himself to the overwhelming force of the Fury. The *satelles* is an ineffective dialectical adversary, whose ethical considerations will be summarily dismissed by Atreus' swift, pragmatic attitude.[74] The victory achieved by the Fury in the prologue has been decisive, and its effects are felt throughout the drama over which she grimly presides.

III

Atreus reappears on stage as the crafty author and director of his own tragic play in a brief aside in act 3: he is in front of the royal palace as Thyestes and his children approach, and comments smugly on the favourable turn that events have taken. The beast (his brother) has been captured. All that is required now is to keep up the fiction, to start acting as planned. The emphasis on deception is explicit: 'when rage scents blood, it cannot be concealed; yet it must' (504–5: *cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi* – | *tamen tegatur*).[75] The ensuing performance will be based, unsurprisingly, on deception: Atreus' last words before addressing his brother, *praestetur fides* (507), are revealing, since they mean both 'let me be true to our promise' (ironically), and 'let me put on a display of *fides*'. This scene marks the transition between the second and third levels of the plot: it opens with Tantalus and Thyestes approaching the royal palace unaware of what has

[74] See below, pp. 154–61. [75] On lines 497–505 see below, pp. 99–100.

been plotted within (404–90), it gives space to Atreus' aside (491–507), and it ends on the two brothers meeting in what is for Atreus a masterful display of intrigue (508–45). It is in this third and innermost level of the tragedy, where the revenge finally takes place, that Atreus doubles up, not unlike a cunning Plautine slave, as an actor in the play he has himself plotted. But the performance has begun even before he appears on the stage: it falls to Thyestes and his son – ignorant actors – to begin the dramatization of the plot that Atreus has carefully orchestrated; they have been duped into coming here by Atreus, who, as we soon realize, is watching the proceedings very closely.

Thyestes' arrival in the vicinity of Argos clearly represents a fresh beginning. We might compare it, for instance, to Orestes' arrival at Argos at the beginning of Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, or Odysseus' landing on Lemnos in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. In the first few lines of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* the blind Oedipus wonders where he has finally got to, and Dionysus arrives in Thebes as Euripides' *Bacchae* begins.[76] The most interesting parallel, however, can be found in the prologue of Sophocles' *Electra*. There Orestes reaches Mycenae accompanied by the old pedagogue, who, like Thyestes, first talks about the satisfaction of his old desire to return (8–10): 'and look! before us, at our very feet you see Mycenae of the golden hoard, and there the grim palace of Pelops' line, deep stained with murder'.

The dialogue between Thyestes and Tantalus is structured along the lines of the two dialogues that precede it, namely that between the Fury and Tantalus in the prologue and the debate between Atreus and the *satelles* in act 2, both directly or indirectly charged with inceptive functions. The closing lines of this scene – Thyestes' tormented *sequor* (489) – again mark with explicit verbal echoes the connection with the prologue. As the vigilant Fury presides over the actions she has initiated, we must imagine that Atreus is watching the first act of his new play. Frames and levels of spectatorship multiply, and, as we will see, inevitably complicate our own act of viewing.[77]

Indeed, a great deal of prominence is assigned in this scene to the issue of viewing and understanding. Thyestes approaches his city and the royal palace as a confused spectator of the performance laid on for him by his brother (407: *cerno*). Although he cannot fully understand the dangers awaiting him, he nonetheless hesitates to be drawn onto the stage that

[76] The verb ἥκω is often used to mark the arrival of supernatural entities on the stage at the very beginning of a play; see, for example, Eur. *Bacch.* 1, *Hec.* 1, *Tro.* 1, *Ion* 5.
[77] Ch. 6, *passim*.

Atreus has prepared. He is aware of the distance between appearance and reality, of the seductive illusion of spectating, though ultimately he is unable to draw the right conclusions from these premonitions (414–16):

> clarus hic regni nitor
> fulgore non est quod oculos falso auferat:
> cum quod datur spectabis, et dantem aspice.

there is no reason why the shining splendour of power should mislead my eyes with its false radiance; when you look at a gift, check who is giving it, too.

The spectators' point of view is aligned with the privileged viewing position of Atreus (and also of the Fury and Tantalus' ghost). We know full well that Thyestes' intimations of impending doom are justified, and his words, like much in the ensuing dialogue with his son, are pregnant with tragic irony. As he first sees Thyestes at line 491, Atreus is certain that he has succeeded in his ploy: his viewing is endowed with full awareness and understanding. The repetition of *cerno* in the third line of his speech (493) echoes the presence of the same verbal form in the fourth line of Thyestes' own opening remark (407), and in so doing calls attention to the very different levels of awareness and understanding that accompany Thyestes' and Atreus' viewing. This time, however, there is irony in the tyrant's words, and the exclamation with which he greets his brother at line 508 – *fratrem iuvat videre* ('it is sweet to see my brother') – underlines the fact that Atreus' viewing is geared towards a full emotional satisfaction, rooted in the complete control of the situation. It is the pleasure of poets, but is also the pleasure of spectators who have been privileged with an inside knowledge of the play's creative mechanisms. Atreus' manipulation of the emotional connotations of viewing is clear at line 525, when his exhortation – *oculis... nostris parce* ('spare my eyes') – craftily exploits the duplicity of his perspective. Far from being disturbed at the sight of Thyestes, he enjoys both his current pitiable state, and the anticipation of the fact that if Thyestes renounces his present misery and accepts to share the throne, he will fall prey to an even worse fate.

Several other details in the scene emphasize how different the characters' level of cognition can be, and therefore call our attention to the different fictional levels operating in the scene. For instance, Thyestes' praise of *quies* at line 469, which he himself is ultimately unwilling to transform into actions, is expressed in words that shortly afterwards will be echoed by Atreus with completely different implications: as *praestetur fides* (507) echoes *praestatur fides* (469) in the same metrical position, we are almost invited to suspect that Atreus has listened to his brother and is now exploiting his

own words to express very different contents. A similar ironic twist can be detected in Tantalus' final words at 489–90: 'a god will regard with favour what has been well devised. Haste on with assured step' (*respiciet deus | bene cogitata. perge non dubio gradu*). Not only is there no intimation in the play of the gods' moral agency,[78] but in fact we are led to assume shortly afterwards that Atreus – who would certainly not object to being called a god – has been watching this scene all along.

IV

In the fourth act of the tragedy a messenger relates to the chorus and the audience a series of actions which they cannot witness directly and, by sharing with them events which Thyestes will ignore until a later stage (1052–68), aligns them with Atreus' true intentions and behaviour.[79] This double narration of the pivotal scene of the tragedy effectively thematizes the reiteration of *nefas*. Each different level of narration no longer encases a subsequent one, but instead the same action can be watched more than once from different perspectives corresponding to different audiences. This new element reinforces the density of the play's structure, a topic on which I will shortly focus: the key action of the plot is never performed on the stage (as tragic conventions prescribe), but its absence is reflected in multiple mirrorings, in an attempt to fill the void with competing narratives, each bearing different emotional connotations, and each involving a different audience and hence different reactions.[80] But here, too, it is tempting to invoke that particular concept in order to account for the multiplication of an object which still denies us direct access and can only be perceived at a certain remove. It has often been said that Senecan tragedy suffers from an excess of parataxis, an inability to privilege an organic plot *vis-à-vis* the centripetal tendency to align somewhat detached scenes. *Thyestes,* with its largely organic plot, would be the exception that proves the rule. Yet *Thyestes* precisely suggests that this paratactical arrangement might be more the product of a specific epistemic and aesthetic *Weltanschauung* than an index of artistic weakness. The structure of the final act of *Thyestes* is symmetrical to that of act 3, which interposes Atreus' monologue between two scenes *en abyme*. In act 5, however, it is the 'staged' dialogue between the two brothers which occupies the intermediate position: the

[78] Ch. 4, pp. 152–4. [79] I will discuss other aspects of this speech later, pp. 87ff.
[80] I will discuss Seneca's fractured treatment of time in ch. 5.

beginning and end of the act are reserved instead for what I termed th second level.[81]

At the beginning of act 5 (885–919) Atreus celebrates his triumph shortl before revealing to his brother the gory details of the massacre. At line 88 a *verbatim* repetition from his 'prologic' speech (279: *bene est, abunde esi* 'it is well, more than enough')[82] marks the close connection between th two sections, both of which emphasize the exceptional grandiosity of th *nefas* he has perpetrated (885–8):

> aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super
> altum superbo vertice attingens polum.
> nunc decora regni teneo, nunc solium patris.[83]

I move on a level with the stars, and, above all others, touch with proud head th lofty heavens. Now I hold the glory of the realm, now my father's throne.

These opening lines clearly recall the end of Horace's first ode: *quods me lyricis vatibus inseres, | sublimi feriam sidera vertice* (*Carm.* 1.1.35–6: 'bu if you include me among lyric bards, I will hit the stars with my exalte head'). Later, as Atreus congratulates himself at the sight of his brother desperation, a more tenuous reference to the same poem surfaces again as *nunc meas laudo manus, | nunc parta vera est palma. perdideram scelus, nisi sic doleres* (1096–8: 'now I praise my handiwork; now is the true paln won. I would have wasted my crime, if you weren't suffering this much' echoes the contrast between true and Olympic celebration which Horace' ode develops at lines 3–6 after Virgil, *Georgics* 3.10–20 (*palma* figures ii both passages).[84] The allusion to such well-known programmatic passage again highlights the fact that Atreus sees his actions as artistic achievement comparable to those of famous poets even as he plans the final step of hi revenge – revealing to Thyestes the full import of the *nefas*.

In this last section of the tragedy Atreus insists with renewed emphasi on the visual dimension of his actions, and confirms his awareness of th

[81] The second and third scenes are separated in the tragedy by two choruses (546–622; 789–884), long speech by the messenger (623–788) and Atreus' monologue at 885–919, which all contribute t alter the spectator's point of view.
[82] I discuss these important internal links again in ch. 5, p. 179.
[83] These lines are a plausible model for Tamora's cries of joy at *Titus Andronicus* 2.1.1–4: 'Now climbetl Tamora Olympus' top, | Safe out of fortune's shot, and sits aloft, | Secure of thunder's crack o lightning flash, | Advanced above pale envy's threatening reach', where they are mischievously sho through mock-Stoic images of the serene security of the sage such as, for example, *Thy.* 365–8.
[84] Atreus' 'Priamel' should be read in conjunction with Thyestes' own reference to the same Horatiai ode in his proemial speech at 404–20: the *palma* (410) he enjoyed most was that of racin *paterno . . . curru* (410), while Atreus, following Horace's own predilection, has chosen the reward of poetry. See below, p. 116.

centrality of spectatorship. The first indication of this awareness surfaces when, having just embarked upon his plan, Atreus is able to visualize the scene that will later unfold on stage: *tota iam ante oculos meos | imago caedis errat* (281–2: 'already before my eyes flits the whole picture of the slaughter'). Now Atreus wants to make sure that all concerned have a clear picture of the *nefas*: the gods should be kept back so that they can see what has happened (894–5: *ut ultricem dapem | omnes viderent*, 'so that they all may see the avenging banquet'), or at least Thyestes should: *quod sat est, videat pater* (895: 'but it is enough if the father alone sees it'). The next scene, in which Atreus is still acting the self-assigned role of the loving brother until the anagnorisis shatters the fiction of this second level of the representation, will afford him the pleasures of spectatorship, as Thyestes slowly and painfully discovers the truth. Atreus will watch Thyestes watching, will be the spectator of a pained spectator: 'it is a pleasure to note, when he sees his children's heads, how his complexion changes, what words his first grief pours forth' (903–5: *libet videre, capita natorum intuens, | quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor | effundat*).[85] The pleasure will reside primarily in the slow unfolding of Thyestes' reactions in front of his brother: 'I do not want to see him miserable, but his becoming so' (907: *miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser*). The daedalean structure of the play once again multiplies the levels of spectatorship and thematizes it.[86] As we have seen in chapter one, Stoic theory devotes a considerable amount of attention to the plight of spectators, torn between a critical analysis of the actions they are watching, and the ever-present risk of being too deeply affected by them.[87] As Atreus steps back and watches the performance that he has staged, he impersonates just such an affected, undetached spectator, who derives direct satisfaction from witnessing the spectacle: *libet* ***videre***, *capita natorum* ***intuens***... (903). In a further indication of structural affinity, Atreus prescribes for Thyestes what the Fury had initially intimated to Tantalus' ghost: *mixtum suorum sanguinem genitor bibat* (917: 'his sons' mingled blood let the father drink') echoes *mixtus in Bacchum cruor | spectante te potetur* (65–6: 'let blood mixed with wine be drunk before your eyes').

Before the anagnorisis marks the tragedy's sudden return to its second level of action, Atreus can enjoy a spectacle similar to, but hugely more satisfactory than the one he had been treated to at Thyestes' arrival. We observe Thyestes' emotional monologue with him and, to a certain extent,

[85] A particularly perverse desire. See Virg. *Aen.* 10.443 with Harrison (1991) 186.
[86] Ch. 1, pp. 14–15. [87] Ch. 6, pp. 235–43.

through him. Thyestes is relapsing into the doubtful, sceptical mood that had coloured his dialogue with Tantalus, but once again he seems unable (or unwilling) to excavate his doubts: for Atreus, and for us, his words are hopelessly entrapped in a tragic irony which is only intensified by Atreus' *double entendres* in the ensuing dialogue.

The interplay of different levels of tragic action foregrounds the power of Atreus' deceit. We see Atreus plotting his revenge and carrying it out while completely fooling his brother with a charade of friendliness. I will discuss at the end of this book whether we are entitled to read in this multiplication of levels a cautionary tale – that by watching the poet's cunning behaviour we can learn to mistrust his ploys – or whether his deceitfulness inevitably forestalls any such resistance on our part. Anagnorisis plays a pivotal role in the shift between these different levels of the tragedy.[88] Anagnorisis reveals *again*[89] a state of things which should have never been forgotten: Thyestes is tragically forced to recognize Atreus' true nature only because he has failed to heed his own confused but true premonitions, hesitantly voiced when he arrived on stage. The deceiving power of poetry, it appears, is such that it can make people forget even what they already sense and ought to understand. But in the present context anagnorisis also points up the play's dramatic structure and exposes to Thyestes his irredeemable epistemic inferiority. While the audience sides with Atreus' superior form of understanding, it is also aware of a further vantage point which is denied even to Atreus, since they have been watching the events of the play alongside two closer spectators – the Fury and Tantalus' ghost.

TRAGEDY, TERMINABLE AND INTERMINABLE

humanae vitae mimus... (Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 80)

I

The tortuous relationships between different levels of dramatic action in *Thyestes* heighten the audience's perception of the play as an artificial literary product, and its metadramatic structure prominently foregrounds the process of artistic creation. The audience, rather than being confronted with a finished, self-contained entity, faces a work in progress, as the play's ingredients are slowly and meticulously cooked up, live. By shattering the illusion of fictionality, metadrama carves up a schism between the readers'

[88] Ch. 6, p. 248. [89] See a more extended discussion of this topic in ch. 5.

involvement in the artistic creation and their awareness of its fictional status. This 'paradox' accents the readers' active rather than passive involvement in the process of decoding and understanding.[90] By turning the fictional, theatrical nature of the play into such an upfront thematic concern, *Thyestes* occupies a distinctive place in Seneca's tragic corpus and bears comparison with the other mastertext which develops similar reflections, Euripides' *Bacchae*.[91]

I have argued that metadrama inevitably introduces a critical dimension, a distance between the events represented on the stage and the audience's perception of them. By complicating the structure of the play and directing the audience's attention towards its inner mechanisms, metadrama lures the audience to reflect on what exactly they are watching and how it is constructed. They are watching a tragedy, a performance provoked – as in this particular instance – by revenge, by the regressive desire for retribution which spans generations and involves human as well as superhuman agents. It is a revenge plot based on deception and lies, and the audience is granted a privileged epistemic viewpoint by being shown, from the very beginning, how that dissemblance operates.

It would be too optimistic, however, to conclude that this critical gap is what ensures the 'philosophical' and moral viability of plays which revolve to a disturbing extent around anger, violence, *nefas* and horror. On the contrary, the frames encompassing different levels of action in a play such as *Thyestes* may well be seen to complicate further the effects of the performance precisely because they raise the audience's threshold of awareness. As I have already pointed out, framing ensures the multiplication of points of view and the production of competing accounts of and reactions to the events, thus reducing the possibility of a unified response on the audience's part.

But framing, and especially repetitive, multiple framing, inevitably produces a more general disturbing effect. The compact boundaries of the dramatic action are highlighted, and yet *eo ipso* effectively annihilated in the apparently unstoppable fugue of frames.[92] The violent actions encased in Atreus' inner play and, at a remove, in the prologue are portrayed as the direct result of a violent sequence which, evidently, the frames are hardly able to control. As the next frame portrays Atreus struggling to devise an original plan, apparently propelled only by his own thirst for revenge, the audience's awareness of his motivations shatters his image of 'uncaused

[90] Hutcheon (1984) 7, referring to the modern novel. [91] See pp. 133–8.
[92] Or, with Derrida (quoted by Goldhill (1991) 259), 'frames are always framed'.

cause'. But this epistemic superiority is also bound to provoke further worries: as frames appear inevitably enframed, so the starting point of violence and *nefas*, ever more elusive, is constantly pushed back without any guarantee that it might find an ultimate resting point. How can we safely exclude the possibility that there has been a prologue behind the prologue? Who sent the Fury? Does someone know more than we do, in spite of all the indications attesting to our privileged point of view? It is precisely through this mechanism of regress *ad infinitum* – thematized in the play by three inset levels of dramatic action – that frames lose their potential as controlling, ordering devices and rather turn out to be no more than flimsy fences easily trespassed by uncontrollable forces. Frames, multiplied in a sequence of horrors, become the signposts – and the harbingers – of the trouncing of order.[93]

In yet another sense, frames have a crucial role in the play's signifying strategies. Framing introduces into the tragedy a structuring device which appears to ensure the orderly succession of embedded levels of action. Yet we are soon led to realize that the markers provided by frames guarantee that each successive level of action is perceived as dialectically juxtaposed to the previous one, and that critical ingenuity is required in order to extract further meaning from this 'interplay of difference'.[94] Framing imposes comparison between the various dramatic techniques at work in different levels of the play, as we will see, and also between the characters who share analogous functions in those different levels: the Fury, Atreus and Tantalus junior, we noted, all press ahead with the development of the plot which Tantalus' ghost, the *satelles* and Thyestes himself resist in vain. Finally, framing introduces a comparison between the various aspects of each character as he enters a new frame: which Thyestes is more credible – the worried exile who hesitates to follow Tantalus' enthusiastic recommendations or the gullible, power-greedy man who blithely accepts his brother's pleas? Here, too, frames separate, and at the same time ensure that we juxtapose and compare the actions they encase.

By privileging what they encase[95] and – almost literally – setting each scene against a well-defined backdrop, frames give those comparisons a sharper profile. Seneca privileges in his plays detached scenes which do not necessarily follow each other with compelling coherence and urgency.

[93] The interplay of frames recalls in some ways Euripides' 'most Euripidean' play, *Orestes*, which also shows the traditional tragic forms, saturated by 'too many options crowding in from the past', as it reaches a breaking-point. See Zeitlin's (1980) brilliant analysis (quotations from pp. 51 and 57).
[94] Goldhill (1991) 236, a very perceptive discussion of the role of framing in Theocritus.
[95] A role of frames aptly stressed by Caws (1985) 21, 262 and *passim*.

Yet, far from laying bare the 'rhetorical' nature of Senecan tragedy, frames underline the most profoundly dramatic aspects of the play.[96] Frames define boundaries and thus mark separation and even detachment, but precipitate comparison and contrast. They dissect different parts of the play, but they hardly arrange an orderly, inert sequence of *tableaux*; on the contrary, they highlight the inevitable collision of dramatic levels and the relentless conflicts that plague successive generations.

II

As I turn now to a specific aspect of the critical detachment inherent in *Thyestes*, my argument becomes more speculative. I propose to analyse how certain features of the play invite a critical reflection on the particular form of tragedy that Seneca is writing, and on its position in the history of tragic forms. My starting point is the distinction between different levels of action which I summarized earlier in the chapter. Through a succession of frames, *Thyestes* isolates an inner core, a deepest level, where Atreus acts out a plot of his own devising and successfully punishes his brother. As I observed earlier, this third level of the tragedy is composed of a compact sequence of scenes. It begins in the second act with the exile's arrival to his land, and the dialogue between himself and Tantalus (404–90). After Atreus' monologue at 491–507, which reverts to a higher level of the tragic structure, the two brothers meet (508–45), thus sealing the fate of Thyestes' children. Before reaching the third and final scene of this third level of action, the climactic confrontation in which the horrific reprisal is declared (920–1004), the tragedy sets aside the orderly succession of different levels observed so far and turns to a lengthy and elaborate messenger's speech.[97]

The three scenes which occupy the innermost frame of *Thyestes* constitute a miniature tragedy. This is not, strictly speaking, an instance of 'play-within-the-play'; and yet there are strong enough signs that this part of the play has a specific, well-outlined structure. (In fact, this could be seen as a very bold and experimental example, *ante litteram*, of the play-within-the-play form, one in which the boundaries of fiction and reality are more fluid.) It is certainly a performance through which Atreus achieves, all too directly, his ultimate goal of revenge. The first scene devised by Atreus, Thyestes' arrival, is a clear marker of dramatic beginning. The emotional centre of the play is devoted to the studied deception: the blindfolded Thyestes offers his children as 'pledge of his faith' (520: *obsides fidei*), or, in Atreus' words, as

[96] On this topic see ch. 6. [97] On which, see pp. 169–70.

'destined victims' (545: *destinatas victimas*). In the final encounter between the two brothers Atreus revels in its image of oblivion, and even more in Thyestes' reaction to the final revelation. This structure is not very different, for instance, from that of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, which hinges on Odysseus' deception. In *Thyestes*, this 'beginning, middle and end' structure is encased within a prologue and an epilogue, which problematizes the premises and consequences of the included play. The five acts of *Thyestes* operate as a framing device which embraces the three-act inner tragedy, organized by Atreus and to a noticeable extent modelled on Greek standards. It is as if Seneca's 'posteriority' is thematized here by an encompassing structure which becomes a showcase for, and a commentary on, a type of tragedy that no longer exists and is no longer viable.[98]

III

Of the three levels of tragic action that I have described, only the third and innermost level of the tragedy finds a coherent closure on stage: Atreus' revenge is plotted, carried out and revealed in the three 'acts' that I have analysed. But the two other levels of the tragedy – the first one, in which the preliminary decisions about the *nefas* were taken, and the second, in which Atreus mulls over his plan and later reveals it to Thyestes – remain undoubtedly open and portend no shortage of future evils. In this case the 'interplay of differences' marks a contrast between Atreus' teleological plot and the unending potential for tragedy embedded in his family's curse. In this way *Thyestes* affords its audience both the reassuring satisfaction of closure and the tormenting promise of renewed terrors. Nothing could be more final than the cannibalistic banquet, a funeral of sorts,[99] and nothing more open-ended than the final words exchanged by the brothers, a curse fulfilled in subsequent stages of the mythical narrative, which the audience can already begin to fathom (and, indeed, remember): TH. *vindices aderunt dei; | his puniendum vota te tradunt mea.* | AT. *te puniendum liberis trado tuis* ('TH. The gods will be my avengers; my prayers deliver you to them for punishment. AT. For punishment, I deliver you to your children', 1110–12). Ultimately, even at the apex of his success, Atreus, too, cannot achieve

[98] The five-act structure differentiates Seneca's plays from their Greek models, though not the comic ones; see Tarrant (1978) 218–19, esp. 219 and n. 40 and Hunter (1985) 35–42. On act division in Senecan drama see Anliker (1960) 49–93. Antecedents can indeed be found in Greek comedy, certainly in Menander's *Dyscolos* and possibly in four more of his plays (*Aspis*, *Epitrepontes*, *Samia* and *Sicyonios*). See Horace's *Ars P.* 189–90, with Brink (1971) 248–50.

[99] See Fowler (1989) 85 = (2000) 249.

complete satisfaction, because his desire is so boundless that it could never, by definition, be completely fulfilled. The micro-dramas which make up the play try in vain to order and set boundaries onto a flow of emotional cravings which ultimately reject all constraints.[100]

This contrast between closure and lack of closure, entrenched in the very core of the plot, might be read as a reflection on the nature of tragic action and the forms that it can take on stage. The 'inner plot', a self-contained unity, does achieve a clear-cut conclusion in the horrendous anagnorisis at line 1004. By dropping his mask as an actor and returning to the role of author, Atreus denudes the foundations of his closed tragedy. At the same time, he indicates his dissatisfaction with that form: there is, in fact, no real possibility of tragic closure. Closure, as achieved on stage by the banquet, can only be a momentary illusion, predicated on deceiving an unguarded spectator like Thyestes. We will observe later that this is one of the many ways in which Thyestes is portrayed as a tragic hero of old, deaf to the cunning devices and linguistic creativity of his brother, and therefore inevitably bound to be defeated.[101] For the audience, which has been alerted to the metadramatic organization of the play, as for Atreus, closure remains an elusive option which the open-ended finale shatters without recourse. There is no guarantee that the evils visited upon the House of Argos by Tantalus' reappearance have really ended. True, the Fury did say that she had seen enough (105), but her intimation that Tantalus watch Thyestes while he drinks his children's blood (102), coupled with the absence of closure at the end of the play, mean that Tantalus and his curse ominously overshadow the play's final moments. Here, too, we can observe the discomforting effect of open frames, of frames which fail to fulfil their task and thus highlight the absence of a reassuring resting point. Similarly, Atreus cannot claim that he has achieved a conclusion. He has succeeded in taking revenge, and he has without question won this round of confrontation with his brother. But his very last words, which in a way do signal closure by capping the second level of tragic action he had set in motion at 176–204, are in fact totally open-ended. The frame is now complete, but its closure is more formal than substantial.

Greek tragedy, too, is deeply sensitive to the signifying potential of closure and openness, and often hints within the play, or even towards its conclusion, at future developments of the family plots, thus announcing new stages of literary invention. It is only in the *Oresteia,* however, that we can find something approaching the open-endedness of *Thyestes*. At

[100] See later, p. 94. [101] I develop this line of analysis in ch. 3.

the end of *Agamemnon* (1662–73), for instance, the repartee between the *coriphaeus* and Aegisthus, centred on predictions of violent retribution, offers a relevant parallel to the last few lines of Seneca's play.[102] The conclusion of *Choephoroe*, though projecting an open window onto Orestes' future, is less explicit in its heralding of specific events, and the curtain falls on *Eumenides* with a convincing finality. In Sophocles it is only *Oedipus at Colonus* that closes with the announcement of a sequel, as Antigone pleads with Theseus to be sent back to Thebes, where the fight between her brothers is imminent.[103]

Against the background of Greek tragedy, we can better appreciate the novelty of *Thyestes*' reflection on closure, yet it would be misguided to posit a radical opposition between a tightly closed Greek model and Seneca's open-ended finale. While it is important to recognize that the ending of *Thyestes* is indeed unusual in its degree of openness, it is preferable to couch the discussion in terms of different balances between elements of closure and openness which characterize different tragic experiences. Sophocles intersperses his main narrative with inset stories which lack a definite ending and repeatedly announce future developments, but the main plot does normally achieve its *telos*, which thus appears to be challenged by the divergences of the inset narratives.[104] Instead, Seneca opposes the openness of his main plot to the 'included closure'[105] of Atreus' *mise en abyme*. The Sophoclean dialectical model is also present, of course, in Virgil. The unending debate between openness and closure in the *Aeneid*, the constant struggle between Jupiter's teleology and Juno's passion for delays, digressions and alternative plots is extended within the text, while the poem's end offers (ostensibly) a 'Jovian', closural ending.[106] Seneca turns this model inside-out, upturning

[102] '*Aeg*. But to think that these men should let their wanton tongues thus blossom into speech against me and cast about such gibes, putting their fortune to the test! To reject wise counsel and insult their master! *Chorus* It would not be like men of Argos to cringe before a knave. *Aeg*. Ha! I'll visit you with vengeance yet in days to come. *Chorus* Not if fate shall guide Orestes to return home. *Aeg.* Of myself I know that exiles feed on hope. *Chorus* Keep on, grow fat, polluting justice, since you can. *Aeg*. Know that you will make atonement for your insolent folly. *Chorus* Brag in your bravery like a cock beside a hen. *Clyt.* Care not for their idle yelpings. I and you will be masters of this house and order it aright' (trans. Smyth).

[103] '*Ant*. . . . Then send us back to Thebes, if yet we may heal this mortal feud and stay the self-wrought doom that drives our brothers to their tomb. *Theseus* I will do that . . .' (1769–76). Note, however, that the chorus has the last word: 'and now cease your laments. Everything has been ordered appropriately' (1779).

[104] On Sophocles: Knox (1964); Roberts (1989); Kraus (1991). On Aristophanes: Bowie (1993). See also Foley (1985).

[105] A term I borrow from Fowler (1997a) 18 = (2000) 302.

[106] See Hershkowitz (1998) 68–124; Quint (1993) 50–96. On epic, not only Virgilian, closure: Hardie (1997).

the balance of the two principles. He reflects on epic's ambivalent desire for closure as much as epic reflects upon tragedy's, and calls into question both genres' hope (or illusion) of actually achieving a definite closure.

The lack of closure at the end of *Thyestes* is compatible with the fact that the play carefully eschews a conclusive moral statement. Thyestes' appeal to an absolute moral order is immediately quashed by Atreus' mocking disillusionment, and even the chorus, as we will see, is denied (literally) the last word.[107] Openness is the vehicle which finally expresses the absence of absolute points of reference, of divine guarantees of order and morality to which characters and audience alike can turn in search of an authoritative take on events. Here, again, Seneca seems to have gone one step further in the deconstructive approach displayed by the *Aeneid*; it is no longer a question of opposing Jupiter's teleology to Juno's openness, since we are not even sure that a divine figure can effectively embody superior principles.[108] Significantly, as Atreus questions Thyestes' gesturing towards divine sanctions (both moral and narrative), he is ultimately interrogating the very nature of his victory. He succeeds in undermining Thyestes, but he is nonetheless confessing that closure must be temporary and illusory for himself as well: he might not care in this moment of triumph, but we know that he will indeed care later. His mythical saga is emphatically not over.

We understand now how important it is that the tragedy's conclusion forcefully recalls and returns to its beginning. The very structure of the final exchange between Atreus and Thyestes mirrors the one between Tantalus and the Fury. The parallelism again reinforces the sense of openness repeatedly suggested in the play: indeed, it is almost as if the tragedy closed (momentarily) with a new prologue, a preview of coming attractions. We will see that this deconstruction of beginnings and endings carries with it a sense, among other things, that finality is elusive and that repetition inevitably prevails. At the beginning of *Agamemnon* it will be Thyestes who returns to earth as a ghost and sets in motion a new plot of revenge.[109]

Atreus' ability to bring his own masterplot to a definite close is a function of his power in the tragedy. His intellectual and material resources are definitely superior to those of Thyestes and allow him to execute his plot to the letter. He is impotent, however, to control the tragedy's final openness, the promise of future evils which will tip the scale against him and his descendants. As a playwright, and as a tyrant,[110] Atreus' power is shown to

[107] Ch. 4, pp. 175–6.
[108] On this final reference to the gods see p. 152. [109] See p. 203.
[110] Note that the language of poetic achievement evoked at 885–8 (above, p. 59) neatly doubles up as a reference to the ruler's *katasterismos*.

be almost absolute, but temporally limited. His victory, complete as it might seem, is hardly an instance of *imperium sine fine*: the end of *Thyestes* proves the inevitability of a next instalment. *Thyestes*, by triggering the illusion of teleology in its inset play, is the only one of Seneca's tragedies to develop a significant metadramatic reflection on this issue, and in a sense it provides a theoretical explanation for the uncertain closures which we find in other plays. If the ability to close off narrative is indeed a sign of power, then the lack of closure which characterizes *Thyestes* and other Senecan tragedies must be seen as an indicator of the fact that power structures and roles are inherently fluid, and that the stable certainties of Stoic fate are ultimately predicated on the unstable and unforeseable workings of *Fortuna*.

The constrast between the internal closure and the openness staged by frames can also offer some insight into the relative artistic appeal of these two methods of structuring a text. Atreus' plot converges on the intense pleasure of *anagnorisis*, which implies for him the ultimate success of his plot, and for the audience is the most intense point of the whole play, the moment of revelation. The play's final postponement of closure, however, defers fulfilment and pleasure, pointing towards an as yet unseen tragedy. These are two different principles of aesthetic pleasure, and Atreus ultimately proves his mastery in both; in this, too, he shows a multiple personality consistent, as we will see, with his 'Dionysiac' nature.[111]

Although Atreus fashions himself (and, to a great extent, actually is) controlling, he is in turn controlled by the Fury and the overarching authority of the author. It is Seneca's decision, ultimately, to deny his play an organic and convincing closure, and to let it end with the ominous announcement of future *nefas*. In writing the tragedy Seneca has already defied the intimation of closure that came to him in the form of literary tradition, has reopened in a self-conscious, painful fashion a tragic discourse whose vitality had by his time already been questioned. At the end of the play it falls once again to the authorial voice, masked by the silent Fury, to declare the issue forever open.

[111] Ch. 3, *passim*. Atreus also appears to be flouting gender boundaries, as discussed in ch. 3. Narrative closure and openness (or, better, different degrees of closural definition) are susceptible to a gender-oriented interpretation. See Fowler (1997b) 10 = (2000) 293, who relates closure and openness to 'logo-' and 'phallocentricity', building on Cixous (1986) 88, (1991) 49–50 and Gallop (1982).

THE PASSIONS IN PLAY

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