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

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

[159] Foley (1980).

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

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

CHAPTER 4

Atreus rex

NON QUIS, SED UTER

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

I

Despite its title, *Thyestes* is of course a play about Atreus, whose fundamental role in articulating the plot is matched by his consistently overpowering presence on stage. The designation of Atreus' counsellor as *satelles* is metaphorically most fitting: other characters revolve around the larger-than-life royal protagonist with the limited, virtually non-existent autonomy of satellites locked in a gravitational field that they cannot control.[1] The counsellor voices his feeble resistance as Atreus' plot is already marching along briskly; the chorus is feeble and unable to affect, at times even to understand, the irresistible progress of the revenge.[2] And Thyestes, too, for all his aspirations, most often appears to be the necessary but hardly self-determined complement to his brother. After all, he is lured into a carefully organized trap, and his every reaction, practical as well as psychological, has been successfully gauged and pre-analysed by Atreus.

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

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

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

and Thyestes are never polar opposites, representing two well-defined sides of an ethical debate. The more we delve into the details of Seneca's characterization, the more we are able to appreciate the complex, nuanced and often intrinsically contradictory personalities of both brothers.

As it consistently tries to sustain the contrast between them, the play devotes remarkable attention to the potential deconstruction of this opposition, a process that should come as no surprise after what we have repeatedly observed about the complex structure of the tragedy, and the ethical implications of that structure. Seneca offers a far from univocal image of Thyestes: he is a character whose loudly proclaimed moral aspirations fail to assert themselves with the required degree of conviction, a character on whose conduct past and present the play casts heavy shadows of doubt and uncertainty. But even more pervasive, and certainly more disruptive in the linear development of the play, is the suggestion that, in a sense, the roles of the brothers could have been interchangeable, that – had it been his turn – Thyestes' revenge could have been every bit as gory as the one that Atreus happens to be plotting; that – finally – their different roles in the tragedy are predicated on a specific series of actions and counteractions, but not on an essential moral difference. I will insist on this last aspect first.

The audience is immediately informed of Thyestes' crime by Atreus at the beginning of his speech in act 2 (176–80; quoted above, p. 131):

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

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

I will try to show later what these *scelera* actually are; what matters at this point is that after the prologue's announcing of the triumph of *furor* and *nefas* in the house of the Pelopidai, it is Thyestes' *scelera*, *dolos* and *fas ruptum* that are foregrounded. The fact that an obviously partisan source voices these accusations does not detract from their impact. Atreus is clearly not trying to justify his behaviour; if anything, he is complaining about his tardiness and lack of resolve. Even more importantly, nowhere in the rest of the play are these accusations rebuked: they stand unchallenged, notwithstanding Atreus' display of cruelty. Far from setting a supposedly

'moral' Thyestes against his monstrous brother, the tragedy constantly insists, through Atreus' viewpoint, on the moral affinity, even the potential equivalence, between the two men.

The complex family history of the Pelopidai gave a certain prominence to Thyestes' crimes. He had seduced Atreus' wife, Aerope, and possibly polluted his brother's family line.[3] Atreus, at the beginning of the play, is determined to take revenge for such crimes, and he repeatedly hints at the fact that he suspects Thyestes of preparing a revenge as cruel as the one he has in mind (193–6):

> aliquod audendum est nefas
> atrox, cruentum, tale quod frater meus
> suum esse mallet – scelera non ulcisceris,
> nisi vincis.

I must dare some atrocious, bloody crime, such that my brother would have wished it to be his own – you don't avenge crimes if you don't surpass them.

By insisting on the notion of revenge, the play underlines the circular, repetitive nature of the conflict between brothers – and of the play which portrays it. What we are about to see is merely another round in an endless cycle of Aeschylean revenge and counter-revenge.[4]

In fact Atreus is constantly worried at the thought that his brother might strike first with comparable cruelty (201–4):

> proinde antequam se firmat aut vires parat,
> petatur ultro, ne quiescentem petat.
> aut perdet aut peribit: in medio est scelus
> positum occupanti

Therefore, before he grows in strength and readiness, let him be attacked first, lest he attack me while I am at peace. He will either kill me or die; the crime is there, ready for him who will seize it first.

The awareness that a similar crime – exceptional as it appears – could have been devised, or is being devised by Thyestes is crucial to understanding Atreus' psychology (314–16):

> istud quod vocas saevum asperum,
> agique dure credis et nimium impie,
> fortasse et illic agitur.

[3] The motif is well developed in Greek tragedy: Aesch. *Ag.* 1192–3; Eur. frs. 466–9 Nauck², *El.* 699–728. For possible reconstructions of Ennius' *Thyestes* and bibliography on earlier treatments of the myth see Jocelyn (1967) 412–19. On earlier treatment of the mythical plot see Marchesi (1908); Lesky (1922–23); Lana (1958–59); Lefèvre (1976) 22–7.

[4] See now esp. Kerrigan (1996).

What you call cruel and harsh, and think is being done ruthlessly, regardless of right or wrong, perhaps is being done there too.

Such a reassured awareness of the interchangeability of their roles and their reactions seems to justify Atreus' self-description as (so far) *innocens* (279–81):

> bene est, abunde est: hic placet poenae modus
> tantisper. ubinam est? tam diu cur innocens
> servatur Atreus?

This is good, plentifully so. I like this way of punishing him, at least for now. Where is he? Why does Atreus maintain his innocence for so long?

It is not easy to determine to what extent previous Roman tragedies dwelt upon Thyestes' own faults, yet it is clear that two traditions concerning his return to Mycenae coexisted:[5] according to Accius,[6] who is here following Aeschylus,[7] Thyestes returns of his own accord in order to take revenge on his brother:

> iterum Thyestes Atreum adtractatum advenit
> iterum iam adgreditur me et quietum exsuscitat:
> maior mihi moles, maius miscendum est malum,
> qui illius acerbum cor contundam et comprimam

Once again Thyestes comes to attack Atreus; once again he approaches to rouse me from my calm. Bigger is the danger, bigger the evil I must stir up to crush and crunch his cruel heart.

From a verse by Varius we can glean a similar scenario:[8]

> iam fero infandissima,
> iam facere cogor.

now I suffer unspeakable evils; now I am forced to commit them.

While Seneca ostensibly espouses an alternative version of the mythical plot and makes Thyestes' return contingent on Atreus' deceitful invitation, he transforms Accius' (and presumably Varius') version into a powerful subplot which substantially affects our perception of the events. His Atreus emerges as an unusually nuanced and composite character, who is neither the 'quiet',

[5] Jocelyn (1967) 414; Tarrant (1985) 120.

[6] 198–201 Ribbeck^2 = 29–32 Dangel. On this passage and its connection with Seneca's *Thyestes* see Marchesi (1908) 86; Lana (1958–59) 316–17; Cipriani (1978); De Rosalia (1981) 225–6; Dangel (1995) 277.

[7] *Ag.* 1587–8, see Jocelyn (1967) 414, n. 1.

[8] Fr. 1 Ribbeck^2. Note that Quintilian introduces Varius' lines as an example of audacious conduct spurred by *indignatio* rather than *malitia* (3.8.45). On the reconstruction of Varius' play see Lefèvre (1976) and Leigh (1996).

potentially passive target of Accius nor an irrational or deranged *iratus*. Or, more precisely: the intertextual memory of Thyestes' criminal actions and intentions forces us to wonder whether Atreus' relentless obsessions are not after all justified. The alluring force of the play resides precisely here: Atreus reasons according to a symmetrical logic akin to the epistemic protocols of the unconscious when he identifies his brother with himself, but his intimations, far from being dismissed, are actually corroborated by the chorus.[9] Indeed Atreus sees the outside world as a projection of his own self – he is above anyone else: *cunctos super* (885), and does not recognize the independent will of others: *quod nolunt velint* ('what they don't want, let them want it', 212).

The implications of Seneca's strategy are lit up by the fact that Accius' fragment is emphatically recalled not only at *Thyestes* 202 (*quiescentem*), but also in the insistent *maius*-motif[10] which lies at the core of Atreus' programmatic statements[11] and had already been introduced by the Fury in the prologue (*Thracium fiat nefas | maiore numero*).[12] The allusive gesture paradoxically highlights Seneca's departure from Accius: this time the Fury is responsible for inspiring Atreus' plans, which are no longer exclusively (or even primarily) contingent on Thyestes' own intentions.

Atreus' depiction of his motives is essential to our understanding of the play. We cannot read Atreus as a larger-than-life monster without paying at least some attention to his claims that his cruelty was provoked, and that he is taking revenge for heinous crimes. Thyestes' crime 'polluted' Atreus' blood, and he is fittingly punished by drinking his children's blood. There are no predetermined roles or certainties allotted. (In his own philosophical writings, Seneca observes that slaves should be treated decently because, among other factors, a sudden and unexpected turn of events can easily turn free men into slaves.[13])

An equally upsetting sense of shifting boundaries casts its shadow over the actions of Thyestes. Depending on unpredictable events, Atreus could end up as a quiet victim, viciously wronged and subsequently destroyed by his evil brother, or as a man whose justified awareness of the injuries

[9] 'Symmetrical' logic, or bi-logic, is a concept formulated by Matte Blanco (1975) and (1988). On projective identification, a concept originally developed by Melanie Klein, see Matte Blanco (1988) 103–5 and *passim*. Note that Atreus himself cannot escape the deflagration of the boundaries of the self which he advocates: he 'fills up' Thyestes with the body of his children (890–1: *implebo patrem | funere suorum*), but he is himself filled up by the external force of divine inspiration (253–4: *impleri iuvat | maiore monstro*).

[10] A term introduced by Seidensticker (1985).

[11] See 254 (*maiore monstro*), 267 (*nescioquid . . . maius*) and 274–5 (*maius hoc aliquid dolor | inveniat*).

[12] Lines 56–7. See above, p. 27, on the programmatic importance of *iterum*.

[13] *Letters to Lucilius* 47.10.

he has endured pushes him towards a revenge which must necessarily be exaggerated and perverse.[14]

In the second part of the tragedy, once Atreus' plans have been meticulously and successfully realized, he turns his suspicions into a mocking reproach to his brother, who, given the opportunity, would have done exactly the same. This satisfying thought is first voiced in the monologue in which Atreus contemplates the completion of his scheme (917–18: *mixtum suorum sanguinem genitor bibat:* | *meum bibisset*, 'his sons' mingled blood let the father drink; he would have drunk mine'), and is then communicated to Thyestes himself at the very end of the play (1104–10):

> scio quid queraris: scelere praerepto doles;
> nec quod nefandas hauseris angit dapes:
> quod non ~~pararis~~! fuerat hic animus tibi
> instruere similes inscio fratri cibos
> et adiuvante liberos matre aggredi
> similique leto sternere – hoc unum obstitit:
> tuos ~~putasti~~

I know what you complain of: you are sorry that this crime has been pre-empted; nor do you grieve that you have swallowed unspeakable foods: just that you have not prepared them yourself for me. This had been your plan, to prepare the same banquet for their unwitting father, and with the help of their mother attack the children and kill them in identical fashion. Just one thing stopped you: you thought they were yours.

This declaration echoes with perfect symmetry Atreus' remarks in his initial monologue, and, once again, it should be noticed that neither Thyestes nor, for instance, the chorus makes any attempt at rebuking it, preferring instead to expand on the monstrosity of Atreus' deeds.

While Atreus is perfectly aware of the moral implications of his plans, of his new *scelera*, he also knows that the revenge he has plotted will taint Thyestes even more than himself: 'what is the crowning outrage in this crime he himself will do' (285–6: *quod est in isto scelere praecipuum nefas,* | *hoc ipse faciet*).[15] Atreus' observation is not groundless: the explicit ritual overtones of the actual murder connect the central episode of the tragedy to a well-known mythical background; Thyestes' inexcusable contamination thus increases the immorality of his character.

[14] Atreus states explicitly that the revenge is to be disproportionate to the crime: *scelera non ulcisceris,* | *nisi vincis* (195–6).

[15] See later in this chapter, pp. 145–6.

The chorus appears to lend credibility to Atreus' words as it voices its conviction that both brothers are to be blamed for the endless succession of evils in the family, and that they are only taking turns (340: *alternis*)[16] in their folly (339–41):

> quis vos exagitat furor,
> alternis dare sanguinem
> et sceptrum scelere aggredi?

What rage drives you to shed by turns each other's blood, to seize the throne through crime?

But further interventions of the chorus on the same topic do not raise comparable doubts. In a renewed outburst of optimism the chorus rejoices again, at 546–76, at the reconciliation of the two brothers, but grants that Atreus had substantial reasons for his rift with Thyestes: his *ira* was indeed provoked by 'great causes' (552). The culmination of this attitude (perhaps the only point on which the chorus is not severely out of step with reality) comes as a reaction to the messenger's distraught appearance on the stage. The messenger's first words announce that a terrible *nefas* (624) has been perpetrated, but specify no author; the chorus's question at 638–40 is revealing:

> animos gravius incertos tenes.
> quid sit quod horres ede et auctorem indica:
> non quaero quis sit, sed uter. effare ocius.

You keep our minds in doubt too painfully. Tell what it is that makes you shudder, and point out its author. I am not asking who it is, but which of the two. Speak out quickly.

Much as it occupies the moral high ground, the chorus is not necessarily bound to side with Thyestes from the beginning. Its tormented question at line 640 opens a dramatic vista, once more, on what *could* have happened: what Thyestes himself, that is, could have accomplished against his brother. To the growing number of characters who are ready to believe in the moral equivalence of Atreus and Thyestes (first Atreus, then the chorus), we must finally add Thyestes himself, who, after discovering what he has done to his children, appropriates the very word with which the chorus had indicated his potential responsibility: *uter*. Thyestes immediately, if unknowingly, sides with Atreus' contention that the monstrous banquet will make him as guilty as the brother who has devised it. Now, the meal over, Thyestes admits

[16] Statius will make this hallmark of fratricidal strife the opening statement of the *Thebaid*: *fraternas acies alternaque regna profanis* | *decertata odiis* (*Theb.* 1.1–2).

he should be punished along with Atreus (1011–12: *stare circa Tantalum | uterque iam debuimus*, 'we should both of us long since have stood alongside Tantalus'), and he personally invokes Jupiter's punishment on both of them (1085–8):

> vindica amissum diem,
> iaculare flammas, lumen ereptum polo
> fulminibus exple. causa, ne dubites diu,
> utriusque mala sit; si minus, mala sit mea.

Avenge the day which has been lost, throw your flames, banish light from the sky and fill it with your thunder. Let the cause of both of us – do not wait in doubt – be equally evil; if not, let mine be evil.

These words echo Medea's invocation to Jupiter in Seneca's eponymous tragedy: whether his thunderbolt strikes herself or Jason, it will always punish a crime: 'whichever of us falls will perish guilty; against us your bolt can make no error' (535–7: *quisquis e nobis cadet | nocens peribit, non potest in nos tuum | errare fulmen*). But the comparison is not innocent either. In *Medea*, Jason's faults play a well-defined and explicit role, incomparable with the hushed references to Thyestes' previous crimes which surface at crucial points in *Thyestes* (and, for this reason, are usually played down by critics). By equating himself with Jason, Thyestes finally acknowledges that his brother's suspicions against him were not, after all, misplaced.

No amount of implicit or explicit accusations levelled against Thyestes' past behaviour, however, can make up for the extraordinary emotional impact that Atreus' machinations must have on the audience. In foregrounding relative differences of behaviour, not an ontological opposition, Seneca implicitly builds on a view of civil strife which has trouble establishing a reliable hierarchy of responsibility. Ovid had already rewritten the confrontation between Aeneas and Turnus in relativistic terms, and Lucan's civil war is mired in the confusion which inevitably arises as like fights against like.[17] The irrationality of the civil war goes hand in hand with the intolerance of distinctions, boundaries and clear-cut oppositions which mark the logic of the unconscious.

Atreus and Thyestes are waging their own civil war. They are brothers, but their moral outlook is also similar: it is difficult to point to hard and fast hierarchies, to a well-defined sense of right and wrong. As we turn to the analysis of the brothers' characterization, we would do well to keep in mind that the tragedy offers very little in the way of solid and incontrovertible

[17] Ov. *Met.* 14.568–72, with Hardie (1993) 24–5. See also (as Hardie does) Sil. 9.402–5, who will remark explicitly on the interchangeability of Scipio and Hannibal.

moral assessment, and that even the most explicit indications, such as some of the chorus's statements, are unsteadied by context.

II

The potential equivalence repeatedly suggested in the text between the character, motives and intentions of the two brothers is matched by an image of Thyestes which no amount of goodwill can restore to *bona fide* Stoic credibility. Against Atreus' resplendent violence, his sublimity of words and thoughts, Thyestes can only muster ambiguous gestures towards Stoicizing wisdom. His manner is tentative, however, his conviction faltering. The audience's moral endorsement of Thyestes as a victim, problematized by the language of doubling and interchangeability – as well as by the sustained connection between Atreus and poetic pleasure – is made even more difficult by the portrayal of Thyestes' actual behaviour in the tragedy.

A long-standing tradition, which in modern times can be traced back to a 1938 article by Olof Gigon,[18] has chosen to recognize in Thyestes a Stoic sage, a man who is seriously trying to live his life according to high moral principles and refuses to hate even after enduring the worst of revenges. Atreus' disturbing claims that Thyestes is guilty, developed at 221–4 and answered by Thyestes at 512–14, would provide an example of dramatic discontinuity,[19] just as the contrast between those charges and Thyestes' overall characterization should in the end be attributed to the imperfect amalgamation of multiple sources.[20] Along similar lines, E. Lefèvre has more recently interpreted Thyestes as a *proficiens* who still hesitates on the right road, a man whose behaviour would correspond to the 'second type' described in *Letters to Lucilius* 75.13, those who 'have shed the most serious diseases and inclinations of the mind but in such a way that they do not yet have guaranteed possession of their freedom from danger: they can still relapse' (*et maxima animi mala et adfectus deposuerunt, sed ita ut non sit illis securitatis suae certa possessio; possunt enim in eadem relabi*).[21]

Such readings of *Thyestes* strive to preserve a measure of coherence between Seneca's tragedies and his prose works. Yet almost without fail they

[18] Gigon (1938).
[19] Thyestes' statements at 512–14 are interpreted by Gigon ((1938) 182) in reference to a general consciousness that human beings are all guilty.
[20] Gigon (1938) 182.
[21] See Lefèvre (1985). Marti (1945b) offers a similar interpretation of Lucan's Pompey (see Marti (1945a) for the thesis that Seneca's tragedies represent a coherent programme of Stoic instruction to Nero, with each play illustrating a Stoic idea in dramatic form).

stumble on a crucial methodological issue, inasmuch as they try to extrapolate from the fabric of the play a unified image of Thyestes without paying enough attention to how his words and his actions are actually presented in the plot, and how the complex interplay of different points of view affects our impression of Thyestes' character. Even more fundamentally, such an essentialist reading of *Thyestes* (or indeed of any other Senecan play) is rooted in the attempt to preserve a diametrical opposition between 'good' (perhaps even 'Stoic') and 'bad' characters, which in turn would ensure the viability of a didactic reading of the tragedies: the representation of unmitigated evil could then be seen to act as a deterrent. 'Good' and 'bad' qualities, of course, would also be bound to determine the public's reactions: approval and disgust, both ethical and aesthetic, would unify the moral and artistic dimensions of the plays.

The 'moral' aspirations of Thyestes and the chorus, however, are criticized even as they are apparently endorsed. The chorus's excessive readiness to believe the unbelievable (such as, for instance, the sudden quiet between the brothers), its loose connection with the dramatic events at large, belie its philosophical credentials and lend its vaguely stoicizing feelings a lack of conviction which deprives the audience of a solid point of emotional identification against Atreus. Thyestes is similarly denied his own authoritative voice, since his prototypical role – that of the 'good king', the Stoic sage – is weakened by his uncertainties and ambiguities, his sudden contradictions, his unclear resolve. What is more, his potential function as the positive emotional pole of the tragedy is undermined by the moral parallelism that is voiced by Atreus and validated by the chorus with its persistent, if feeble, doubts.

Thyestes begins, quite literally, with a false step. His appearance on the stage, back at Argos after a long and painful exile, is marked by a strong sense of joy and relief (404–7):

> optata patriae tecta et Argolicas opes
> miserisque summum ac maximum exulibus bonum,
> tractum soli natalis et patrios deos
> (si sunt tamen di) cerno . . .

The longed-for homes of my fatherland and the wealth of Argolis I see at last, and, greatest and best of goods to a wretched exile, a stretch of native soil and the ancestral gods (if gods do exist after all) . . .

Stoic sages, notoriously, should avoid hopes and fears alike, and the emphatic presence of *optata* at the very beginning of the speech can hardly be regarded as innocent.[22] Thus, if we allow the participle to contradict Stoic

[22] Tarrant (1985) 149.

orthodoxy, we cannot accept Thyestes' impassioned lines at face value: his orthodox strictures against power, and his desire to leave Argos (412–20) are overshadowed by the suspicion that he is appropriating the rhetorical stance of a Stoic sage without real conviction.

Equally troubling is the conclusion of his exchange with Tantalus. After a dialogue which sets his desire to avoid Argos against Tantalus' insistence that he go ahead, Thyestes yields to his son with a contorted disclaimer (487–9):

> serum est cavendi tempus in mediis malis.
> eatur. unum genitor hoc testor tamen:
> ego vos sequor, non duco.

It is too late to take caution when one is deep in troubles; let us go. As your father, though, this one thing I declare: I do not not lead you; I follow.

Sequor at line 489 recalls the conclusion of the prologue, where Tantalus' ghost, tortured by the Fury, finally submits to her with that very word: *sequor* (100). The analogy highlights the difference. Tantalus was tortured and in fact had no means to escape from an overwhelming supernatural entity. Thyestes has been engaged in a dialectic exchange with his son which would easily leave room for retreating. The tragic-sounding acceptance of what appears to be an inevitable destiny is totally disproportionate to the situation.

When we look at Thyestes' reactions to his brother's proposal in act 3, we are confronted with a puzzling succession of emotional states. Atreus' initial aside (491–507) is likely to reinforce in the audience the notion that he enjoys a superior awareness of events, and stresses again the fictionality that will dominate the whole scene: his final words – *praestetur fides* (507) – raise the curtain on a new play. Thyestes' reaction to Atreus' deceptively friendly welcome strikes an odd note (512–16):

> diluere possem cuncta, nisi talis fores.
> sed fateor, Atreu, fateor, admisi omnia
> quae credidisti. pessimam causam meam
> hodierna pietas fecit. est prorsus nocens
> quicumque visus tam bono fratri est nocens.

I could excuse all I have done if you were not like this. But I confess it, Atreus, I do confess it: I have done everything you believed me to have done. The brotherly feelings you display today make my case as bad as possible. The man who has appeared guilty to so good a brother is guilty indeed.

Recalling Thyestes' impassioned demonstration to Tantalus that Atreus could only be lying and trying to deceive him (423–8, 434–9), this

unrequested admission of guilt, though couched in somewhat ambiguous terms (note especially *visus* in line 516), comes as a surprise, or as an unexpected confirmation of Atreus' own charges against his brother. Thyestes' spontaneous offer of his children as *obsides* seems to underline his decision, already voiced at 489 (*sequor*), to follow the flow of events with no further hesitation, whether this is going to hasten a tragic ending which he dimly foresees, or because he has after all accepted Tantalus' arguments. It is in any event a serious, tragic Thyestes who enters this uneven dialogue with Atreus, and it is all the more surprising to see precisely how he turns his initial refusal into an acceptance of Atreus' fake offer. After two longer interventions, the brothers engage in a stychomythic exchange (533–43):

> TH. ...liceat in media mihi
> latere turba. AT. recipit hoc regnum duos.
> TH. meum esse credo quidquid est, frater, tuum.
> AT. quis influentis dona fortunae abnuit?
> TH. expertus est quicumque quam facile effluant.
> AT. fratrem potiri gloria ingenti vetas?
> TH. tua iam peracta gloria est, restat mea:
> respuere certum est regna consilium mihi.
> AT. meam relinquam, nisi tuam partem accipis.
> TH. accipio: regni nomen impositi feram,
> sed iura et arma servient mecum tibi.

TH. ...allow me to hide in the crowd.
AT. This kingdom can take the two of us.
TH. Brother, whatever is yours I believe to be mine too.
AT. Who can turn down the gifts flowing in from good Fortune?
TH. Whoever knows from experience how easily they can flow away.
AT. Do you want to prevent your brother from achieving such great glory?
TH. Your glory has already been accomplished; mine has yet to be: it is my firm determination to turn down the kingdom.
AT. If you do not accept your share, I will relinquish mine.
TH. I accept it; I will take the name of king which is thrust upon me; but laws and armies and I too will obey you.

Note here Thyestes' sudden reversal: it takes him all of one line to shift from a determination to shy away from the throne, to accepting the substance of his brother's offer.[23] It is true that in the tragedies Seneca often portrays decisions precisely in this light, as sudden, abrupt deviations from a path

[23] Thyestes' specific acceptance of the *regni nomen* sounds particularly ironic in the light of his earlier strictures: *falsis magna nominibus placent* (446). *Accipio* is used by Thyestes with ominous connotations at 520–1 (*obsides fidei accipe | hos innocentes, frater*), by Atreus at 1021–2 (*iam accipe hos potius libens | diu expetitos*).

which had hitherto been carefully followed. More than the acceptance *per se*, this extreme abruptness underlines the fundamental inconsistency of Thyestes' character;[24] the audience, relying on their privileged knowledge of the implications of Atreus' offer, are bound to be surprised at this transition. The whole structure of the dialogue accentuates Thyestes' unreliability and inevitably affects the substance of what he has been saying so far: his lofty Stoic *sententiae* are ensnared in the grotesque demise of their spokesman's reputation. The very nature of *phōnai*, cut and dried maxims supposed to be of use in determining one's everyday conduct, only heightens the sense of ridicule.

A sceptical evaluation of Thyestes' character should not necessarily entail an automatic endorsement of Atreus. This is not the point. What we should keep in mind, rather, is that Thyestes is no moral testing stone, and that Atreus' violence finds in the play no immediately convincing alternative. Even more upsetting is how far Atreus' point of view can influence the chorus's and the audience's perception of his adversary: in Atreus' perversely symmetrical logic, Thyestes is his criminal doppelganger, ontologically identical and only momentarily, by chance, cast in a subordinate role. The play is unable to counter the force of this logic and its primal appeal, a logic cherished and reviled in equal measure. The poignancy of *Thyestes* is precisely that it leaves us to contemplate the contrast between a ruthless but aesthetically and emotionally appealing murderer and a hypocritical, faltering and charmless adulterer.

DE CLEMENTIA

> quod nolunt velint
> (Seneca, *Thyestes* 212)

Atreus is at the same time the *sacerdos* and the addressee of the sacrifice, as he makes clear that he is offering the victims to himself.[25] By collapsing two roles which normal religious practice obviously kept apart, Atreus signals a more general subversion of rules. Sacrifice traditionally articulates a well-defined hierarchy between gods, men and animals. Thus a god is always the recipient of the sacrifice, a man the performer, an animal its object.

[24] One may compare Medea's behaviour in Ovid's *Met.* 7, when she stresses the importance of following virtue (69–71), but quickly changes her mind at the sight of Jason (76–7). More poignant is the parallel with Agamemnon in Aesch. *Ag.* 944–5 (but note how forcefully Clytemnestra argues for her request before Agamemnon yields), and Pentheus in Eur. *Bacch.* 845–6: in both cases the change of mind has tragic consequences.

[25] On Atreus as a god see Hine (1981) 266.

As a man becomes god, others (Thyestes' children) tragically fulfil the role of animal victims. Gods are dragged down from the sky, or, in turn, man can raise himself to the stars. Either way the foundations of religious and political order are fatally challenged.

Atreus' appropriation of a divine persona exacerbates the gods' problematic status in the play and the world it pictures. Thyestes and the chorus display a firm belief (at least, a firm discursive belief) in their existence and importance, while Atreus effectively disposes of them, and replaces them with himself. His main target, clearly, is the upper gods, the *superi*. It is to them that the scorning dismissal of line 888 – 'I release the gods: I have attained the utmost of my prayers' (*dimitto superos: summa votorum attigi*) – is referred, and it is they who are said to have fled at line 1021. In this particular removal of upper deities, and the concurrent promotion of violent characters connected with the underworld, Atreus fulfils Juno's programmatic and metaliterary statement in the *Aeneid*: 'if I cannot prevail upon the gods above, I shall move hell' (7.312: *flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*). Even more so, of course: Acheron is not simply exploited, but brought to earth.

Thyestes' own statements about the gods are often contradictory. In his opening speech he voices scepticism about their existence: *tractum soli natalis et patrios deos | (si sunt tamen di) cerno* (406–7). Later, when Atreus has revealed his actions, Thyestes reacts with utter despair: 'the gods have fled away' (1021: *fugere superi*). But suddenly, at line 1077, Thyestes embarks on an impassioned prayer to the *summus caeli rector* ('exalted ruler of the sky'), who is asked to avenge Atreus' crime. The rhetorical elaboration of the *klēsis* can only sound hollow after the inconclusiveness of the previous statements, and provides the background for Atreus' repartee at 1102–3, when he responds to Thyestes' emphatic 'I call on the gods who guard the innocent' (*piorum praesides testor deos*) with a chilling reference to his past misconduct: 'why not the marriage-gods?' (*quid? coniugales?*). The tragedy ends by reaffirming Atreus' and Thyestes' opposing views about the role of gods and men in shaping events (1110–12): 'TH. The gods will be my avengers; my prayers deliver you to them for punishment. AT. For punishment, I deliver you to your children' (TH. *vindices aderunt dei; | his puniendum vota te tradunt mea.* | AT. *te puniendum liberis trado tuis*).

Atreus constantly refers to the level of human interaction, and his self-fashioning as a god is in fact consistent with the notion that gods do not have any impact on human activities. The standard criteria for divinity are wrecked: each man is his own god provided that he can muster sufficient

power. This ambivalent affirmation of divinity in a godless world communicates one of the most chilling messages of the play. The triumph on stage of a king-priest-god is, of course, an explosive combination in the context of Imperial Rome's structuring ideology. Under Augustus the *princeps*[26] had acquired a distinctive characterization as a *sacerdos*,[27] prominently involved *ex officio* in a number of sacrificial rituals even as his divine attributes increase dramatically.[28] In a world where human actions have effectively appropriated divine power, that boundless power is concentrated in new and novel gods.

Such a radical redefinition of the relationship between human and divine is central to the conceptualization of power in *Thyestes*, a play whose political implications have often been at the heart of interpreters' concerns. The issue is made more, not less, complicated by the fact that the play offers the superficially attractive possibility of a reading *à clef*.[29] Atreus could be Nero; the hapless *satelles*, a Seneca-like counsellor, though noticeably less successful; Thyestes, a victim, *the* Victim of the tyrant's cruelty; the chorus, a righteous but powerless *senatus*. Clearly, if we accept these equations we are bound to steer our reading of the play in one specific direction. If Atreus is (like) Nero, then he must be wrong, because he impersonates the ultimately cruel and irrational tyrant – Suetonius' unadorned words project here their powerful shadow. Even if we accept that Thyestes' blatant inconsistencies hardly make him a convincing hero, we will inevitably tend to cast the chorus in the ambitious role of the external moral adjudicator who comments philosophically on the follies of human power.

The main difficulty with such a reading is that it works only by taking messages out of context, most notably the second chorus on kingship and the *satelles*' or Thyestes' sententious statements.[30] None of these lofty

[26] The very etymology and concept of *princeps* ('he who takes the first portion') may be traced back to sacrificial ritual; Scheid (1988) 273.

[27] On the importance of sacrifice in the articulation of Roman imperial cult see Price (1980); specifically on the *Ara pacis* and its interpretation in this context Zanker (1988) 118 and *passim*.

[28] It is interesting to recall a passage from *De clementia* in which the characterization of the *princeps* as *sacerdos* and the imagery of murder-as-sacrifice are combined. Augustus debates whether he should punish L. Cinna, who attempted to murder him: *'ergo non dabit poenas, qui . . . non occidere constituat, sed immolare?' (nam sacrificantem placuerat adoriri)* (' "shall he not pay the penalty who . . . is determining not to murder but to immolate me?" (for the plan was to attack him while offering sacrifice)', 1.9.4).

[29] *Thyestes* teases the audience in this direction, thanks to a number of anachronistic references to Roman reality, especially the incongruous mention of *Quirites* at 396; see Picone (1976). Direct references to contemporary events in the plays are advocated by Lefèvre (1985) and (1990), but see Calder (1976–77). See above, p. 16.

[30] Note, however, that in spite of Suetonius' attractive definition of Nero as *religionum . . . contemptor* (*Nero* 56.1), he was not the only emperor criticized in this way; see Suet. *Tib.* 44 and *Cal.* 32.3, with Barton (1994) 53.

propositions, however, exists in a vacuum, and their meaning shifts considerably once they are assessed within the complex dynamics of the play. The politics of *Thyestes*, I will argue, are located not so much in what the characters say as in how, when and to whom they say it. Atreus may be a monster, and the chorus a safe-haven of restraint and reason, but what is particularly upsetting in the scenes that I want to analyse in this context is that they engage extensively with the reality outside the play, with other texts and with actual political positions. Once 'reality' is drawn into the world of *Thyestes*, it is less easy to dismiss the whole of the play as a nightmare: perhaps it is as 'real' as the solid political tracts it brings into the fray, and perhaps the *Realpolitik* it advocates in both theory and practice is not just a frenzied fiction.

The dialogue between Atreus and his *satelles*, as we have already noticed, reiterates and expands the complex interaction between layers of dramatic plots and substantiates the connection between Atreus' mastery of his vengeance plot and the creative force of poetry.[31] It is now important to consider more systematically the role played by the *satelles* in that dialogue, and especially the protocols of political behaviour to which both he and Atreus refer.[32]

The first point to note is the disproportionate stage presence given to each of the two characters. This is hardly surprising given the respective roles they play, but this inequality is not a mere reflection of this hierarchy: in principle nothing prevents the *satelles* from playing a much more prominent role, and, conversely, his complete subordination can only affect the ideas he voices. The scene opens with a long monologue by Atreus (176–204), who fails to acknowledge the *satelles*' presence. The latter's opening words come in the form of a question at 204–5: 'doesn't public disapproval deter you?' (*fama te populi nihil | adversa terret?*). The questioning mode often conveys the emotional and cognitive weakness of a character, as in the case of Tantalus in the opening scene of the play, or, as we will see shortly, of the chorus in many other instances. Here the *satelles* avoids both assured statements and emotional outbursts, but chooses to couch his first intervention in the respectful and hesitant mode of a question. He does not pass any general moral comment on the plans that his master is devising, nor does he try to stop him; indeed, just like the chorus, his question raises a (minor) possible objection which Atreus has already anticipated and dismissed, since he has already stated that a negative reputation is precisely what he strives for:

[31] See ch. 2, p. 46.

[32] Tame and submissive the *satelles* might be, but it would be wrong to deny him a distinct personality, as Knoche ((1941) 70) does by suggesting that he simply embodies another aspect of Atreus' irrationality.

'Up, my soul, do what no coming age shall approve, but none forget' (192–
age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet, | sed nulla taceat).

Atreus' answer to this first question – a pragmatic apology for the nee
of sheer force in the exercise of power – prompts the *satelles* to explai
his own political philosophy more assertively. Note that at this point th
satelles does not suggest an alternative to Atreus' exclusive focus on the be
means to preserve power: the *satelles* – even at his most eloquent – makes n
attempt to raise the discussion to a higher plane of abstract moral principle
in practice he accepts Atreus' agenda in full, and thus poises himself fo
inevitable defeat. Even his belated praise of *honestum* (213), *sanctitas, piet*
and *fides* (216) is subordinated to the question of how to retain power an
popularity, and thus fails to turn the dialogue into a loftier debate abou
absolute good and evil. The *satelles*' exhortation comes in the apparentl
confident form of a *sententia* (213: *rex velit honesta: nemo non eadem vole*
'let the king want what is right; no one will want anything else'), but eve
so the clumsiness of the litotes betrays the weakness of the statement.

As in the dialogue between Thyestes and Atreus, *sententiae* are ex
ploited in order to highlight, in fact, the moral inconsistency and potentia
hypocrisy of those who utter them. Compared to Atreus' articulate, elo
quent and passionate oratory, the *satelles*' staccato statements sound lik
perfunctory attempts to remind his master of a hardly compelling point o
view. Just as Thyestes turns in the space of two lines from a determine
refusal to accept Atreus' invitation (540) to a thinly qualified assent (542–3)
the *satelles* moves from the firm principle stated at line 219 – *nefas nocer*
vel malo fratri puta ('count it wrong to harm even a wicked brother') –
to the astonishing exhortation with which he responds to Atreus' length
remarks: 'slain by the sword, let him spew forth his hateful soul' (245: *ferr*
peremptus spiritum inimicum expuat).

From this point onwards (we are not yet at the middle of the scene) th
satelles – forgoing any attempt to keep the moral high ground – is effectivel
an accomplice in the elaboration of Atreus' revenge plot.[33] His renewe
mention of *Pietas* after his initial acquiescence can only be understood as
reference to the way in which Atreus will carry out his vengeance: havin
endorsed the idea of murdering Thyestes (245), the *satelles* mentions *Pieta*
when Atreus confesses that a simple killing is not enough (246: *de fine poena*
loqueris, ego poenam volo, 'you speak of the punishment's completion;
desire punishment itself'). This scaling down of the role of *Pietas*, which

[33] See La Penna (1979) 138. Note also La Penna's important suggestion (133–4) that Accius' *Atreus*, by way of contrast, could have staged direct and violent resistance against a tyrant.

is consistent with the disappearance of *sanctitas* and *fides*, reflects back on the initial reference to it at line 217, and emphasizes the weakness of that first appeal.

Now the *satelles* can only question the details of Atreus' plot, suggesting better alternatives or pointing out dangerous loopholes in the planning. The rapid exchange at 255–8, for instance, underlines the closeness of the two men's cooperation and the *satelles*' active advisory role:

> AT. nil quod doloris capiat assueti modum;
> nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis.
> SA. ferrum? AT. parum est. SA. quid ignis? AT. etiamnunc parum est.
> SA. quonam ergo telo tantus utetur dolor?

AT. Nothing confined within the limits of ordinary anger; I will not overlook any crime, and none is enough.
SA. The sword?
AT. Too little.
SA. Fire, then?
AT. Still too little.
SA. What weapon, then, will such grief use?

Once again, Atreus' impassioned speech at 267–86 has an amazing effect on his advisor, who immediately erases any remaining difference between himself and his master: the trap devised for Thyestes is now 'ours' (287: *nostros... laqueos*). In the final part of the scene, moreover, the *satelles*, by asking several questions on points of detail, shows his complete acquiescence in the revenge plot, his desire to avoid possible mistakes, and his total dependence on Atreus' sharper intuitions. Ethical and intellectual weaknesses are thus joined together. From hesitation to tacit agreement to active, if rather useless, participation, the *satelles*' moral stance has now been completely invalidated.

After Atreus' plot has been sketched out, the *satelles* devotes his questions to analysing Thyestes' possible reactions (286–9 and 294–5):

> SA. sed quibus captus dolis
> nostros dabit perductus in laqueos pedem?
> inimica credit cuncta. AT. non poterat capi,
> nisi capere vellet.
> ...
> SA. quis fidem pacis dabit?
> cui tanta credet? AT. credula est spes improba.

SA. But caught by what wiles will he be led to set foot in our traps? He sees enemies everywhere.
AT. He could not be caught if he didn't himself want to catch...

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

In this context the *satelles*' usual inquisitive mode foregrounds his subordination to Atreus as far as a proper understanding of psychological reactions is concerned. It is now Atreus' turn to utter sententious statements – *non poterat capi, | nisi capere vellet* (288–9) and *credula est spes improba* (295) – but these seem to be predicated more on solid practical experience than on the rather cold moralistic tone of the *satelles*' own pronouncements at the beginning of the scene. Atreus' statements, moreover, will prove reliable and true in the rest of the play. This contrast between the *satelles*' generic, textbook *sententiae* and Atreus' authoritative, experienced beliefs is highlighted in the exchange at 305–7:

> SA. iam tempus illi fecit aerumnas leves.
> AT. erras: malorum sensus accrescit die.
> leve est miserias ferre, perferre est grave.

SA. By now time has alleviated his troubles.
AT. You are wrong: a sense of wrongs grows day by day. It is easy to bear misfortune; to keep on bearing it is hard.

Similarly, it is Atreus who carefully considers the reliability of his own sons as possible accomplices in the execution of the plot, and bases his judgement, once again, on actual experience: 'the art of silence is taught by life's many ills' (318: *tacere multis discitur vitae malis*).

In the closing lines of the scene, at the master's injunction to keep their deliberations secret (333: *nostra tu coepta occule*, 'as for you, conceal my plans'), the *satelles* replies that 'he needs no warning': 'no need to admonish me; both fear and loyalty shall shut them in my heart, but rather loyalty' (334–5: *haud sum monendus: ista nostro in pectore | fides timorque, sed magis claudet fides*).[34] This distinction between *timor* and *fides* must be read in conjunction with the previous discussion on the role of fear in the exercise of power (205–10); there Atreus had boldly rejected the *satelles*' apology of sincere popular favour for the tyrant by pointing out that truly unfettered power consists not so much in convincing one's subjects, but forcing them to want even what they do not want: *quod nolunt velint* (212). Power consists in replacing psychological and moral truth with factual superiority, which forces a reliable consent: the *satelles*' final words provide direct proof of the fact that *fides* can indeed be attained not by

[34] Calder ((1976–77) 9) suggests that a pause before *fides* would convey very effectively the truth, namely, that *timor* will guarantee the *satelles*' silence.

proposing *honesta*, but by creating a system whereby superior power cannot be resisted.

I now focus again briefly on the overall structure of the dialogue. In his transition from dissent to complicity the *satelles* can be unflatteringly compared with Phaedra's *nutrix*. In *Phaedra* the first dialogue between the queen and her nurse occurs in the same structural position as the dialogue in *Thyestes*, namely in the first act. There, again, the nurse represents the paradigm of *ratio* and moderation as opposed to Phaedra's insane passion, but she is much more active and articulate than the *satelles*: not only does she speak more extensively, thus acquiring substantial stage-presence, but she is also capable of putting forth an insistent, fiery rhetoric which the *satelles* repeatedly fails to achieve. Not unlike the *satelles*, the nurse shifts her position in the course of the dialogue; however, this structural similarity foregrounds the *satelles*' own weakness. First of all the nurse starts changing her mind only when faced with Phaedra's resolve to commit suicide, and her words indicate that her softening to Phaedra's wishes is a direct result of her motherly affection for the woman: 'and so should my old age allow you to rush headlong to your death? Stop your frenzied impulse' (262–3: *sic te senectus nostra praecipiti sinat | perire leto? siste furibundum impetum*). The *satelles* swiftly became Atreus' accomplice without any direct menace, either against himself or others. Secondly, the degree of the shift is remarkable. At the end of the dialogue the nurse does agree to sound out Hippolytus on Phaedra's behalf, but again explains her choice on affective grounds, and her words convey the sense that Hippolytus is being unduly harsh to Phaedra (267–73):

> solamen annis unicum fessis, era,
> si tam protervus incubat menti furor,
> contemne famam: fama vix vero favet,
> peius merenti melior et peior bono.
> temptemus animum tristem et intractabilem.
> meus iste labor est aggredi iuvenem ferum
> mentemque saevam flectere immitis viri.

My mistress, only comfort to my tired old age, if so unruly is the frenzy that seizes your mind, disregard fame: fame is not partial to truth, but better to those who deserve worse and worse to the good. Let me sound out his sad and intractable heart. Leave this difficult task to me – to approach this fierce youth and bend his cruel mind, harsh as he is.

After the choral ode, the nurse takes the stage again to describe Phaedra's awful state of mind and physical distress (360–86), and before addressing Hippolytus she invokes divine protection for her deeds (406–30). These

moments of hesitation and deferral stand in sharp contrast to the *satelles*' rapid shift from a moral high ground to the level of Atreus' plotting, and especially to his final, wholehearted subscription to his master's criminal plans in the name of *timor* rather than *fides* (335).

Before the *satelles* disavows any attempt to influence Atreus, he insists on four closely connected topics: the ruler's necessity to acquire a good *fama* (204–5); the ambivalent effects of *metus* (207–10); the ruler's duty to pursue *honesta* (213) and the necessity to uphold *pudor, cura iuris, sanctitas, pietas, fides* (215–17). With their laconic, often formulaic tone, many of the *satelles*' words have a rather textbookish ring to them, and in fact they reflect widespread Hellenistic and Roman ideas on how a prototypical 'good king' should behave. Given this background, it is not surprising that they are often close to Seneca's own words in *De clementia*, but this intertextual relationship should not be explained away. It would be pointless to evaluate the *satelles*' words without considering that they reflect – if, as seems probable, *Thyestes* was written later than *De clementia* – what Seneca elsewhere considered to be the right prescription for a ruler's considerate behaviour.[35]

The *satelles*' very first statement concerns *fama*: *fama te populi nihil | adversa terret?* (204–5). *Principes multa debent etiam famae dare* ('princes are bound to give much heed even to report') was the advice Seneca had offered Nero in *De clementia* (1.15.5), but the *satelles*' use of the verb 'to terrify' (*terret*) is strikingly incongruous after Atreus' bold and self-confident opening monologue at 176–204. At 207–10 the *satelles* tries to impress upon his master the inherent dangers of a power based on fear:

> quos cogit metus
> laudare, eosdem reddit inimicos metus.
> at qui favoris gloriam veri petit,
> animo magis quam voce laudari volet.

Whom fear compels to praise, them, too, fear makes into enemies; but he who seeks the glory of true favour will wish heart rather than voice to sing his praise.

Compare *De clementia* 1.12.3–4:

interim, hoc quod dicebam clementia efficit, ut magnum inter regem tyrannumque discrimen sit, uterque licet non minus armis valletur; sed alter arma habet, quibus in munimentum pacis utitur, alter, ut magno timore magna odia compescat, nec illas ipsas manus, quibus se commisit, securus aspicit. (4) contrariis in contraria agitur: nam cum invisus sit, quia timetur, timeri vult, quia invisus est, et illo execrabili versu, qui multos praecipites dedit, utitur: 'Oderint, dum metuant.'

[35] On all the passages from *De clementia* see now Malaspina's rich commentary (Malaspina (2001)).

Meanwhile, as I was saying, it is mercy that makes the distinction between a king and a tyrant as great as it is, though both are equally fenced about with arms; but the one uses the arms which he has to fortify good-will, the other to curb great hatred by great fear, and yet the very hands to which he has entrusted himself he cannot view without concern. Conflicting causes force him to conflicting courses: for since he is hated because he is feared, he wishes to be feared because he is hated, and not knowing what frenzy is engendered when hatred grows too great, he takes as a motto that accursed verse which has driven many to their fall: 'Let them hate, if only they fear.'

The debate reaches its climax at 215–17, where the *satelles* sums up the essential qualities of a stable kingdom: 'where there is no shame, no care for right, no honour, righteousness, faith – there sovereignty is unstable' (*ubi non est pudor | nec cura iuris sanctitas pietas fides, | instabile regnum est*). Several passages in *De clementia* deal with these concepts, and similar lists of positive qualities can be found, for instance, at 1.19.8: 'who would dare to devise any danger for such a ma... who would not wish to shield him, if he could, even from the chance of ill – him beneath whose sway justice, peace, chastity, security and honour flourish?' (*quis huic audeat struere aliquod periculum? quis ab hoc non, si possit, fortunam quoque avertere velit, sub quo iustitia, pax, pudicitia, securitas, dignitas florent . . . ?*). Compare also 2.1.4:

nunc profecto consentire decebat ad aequum bonumque expulsa alieni cupidine, ex qua omne animi malum oritur, pietatem integritatemque cum fide ac modestia resurgere et vitia diuturno abusa regno dare tandem felici ac puro saeculo locum.

Now assuredly it were fitting that men, thrusting out covetousness from which springs every evil of the heart, should conspire for righteousness and goodness, that piety and uprightness along with honour and temperance should rise again, and that vice, having misused its long reign, should at length give place to an age of happiness and purity.

Finally, *cura iuris* refers at the same time to respect for judicial procedure, and to the all-important Hellenistic notion that the good ruler should constantly consider himself subjected to the rule of the Law. Indeed this is one of the notions that Seneca literally puts in Nero's mouth in the reported speech which opens *De clementia*: 'I so hold guard over myself as though I were about to render an account to those laws which I have summoned from decay and darkness into the light of day' (*sic me custodio, tamquam legibus, quas ex situ ac tenebris in lucem evocavi, rationem redditurus sim*, 1.1.4).

Against this careful mix of respectable Stoic concepts, Atreus' behaviour is all the more remarkable. The disproportion in the quantity and quality

of words he can muster *vis-à-vis* the *satelles* is part of a dramatic truth which the presumed moral superiority of the *satelles* can hardly efface. This was, of course, what the public expected of him, and a repenting Atreus would not have been credible. As Cicero remarks in *De officiis*, the famous motto *oderint dum metuant* can stir up an applause precisely because it fits the speaker so well: 'When Atreus speaks in this manner, he elicits an applause, because his words are worthy of his character' (*Atreo dicente plausus excitantur; est enim digna persona oratio*, 1.28.97).[36] But just as it would be dramatically inappropriate to overestimate the *satelles*' moral high ground, it would also be wrong to dismiss Atreus without scrutinizing his words more closely, as if they simply represented the furious outpouring of a demonic character.

Atreus displays a coherent vision of power which is not simply based on *ira*, and thus disqualifiable as irrational, but rather on a keen perception – grounded in experience – of the realities of human interaction. Atreus' philosophy of power consists in the exclusive focus on praxis; the exercise of power should not be predicated on anything but the most effective ways to preserve and further it, and every strategy should be evaluated according to this perspective, leaving aside irrelevant considerations about morality, divine power or the search for popular favour.

The contrast between inessential and essential components of power is foregrounded in the very first words that Atreus and the *satelles* exchange: at the latter's enquiry about *fama | . . . adversa* (204–5), Atreus replies by focusing on *facta* (206). The *satelles*' question is predicated on the contrast between words and deeds, and on the assumption that external power could force the latter but not control the former, that an obedient population might still retain the psychological freedom to bestow on its ruler a negative *fama*. Atreus replies that the tyrant can force thoughts as well as deeds: 'the greatest advantage of royal power is this, that the people are compelled as well to bear as to praise their master's deeds' (205–7: *maximum hoc regni bonum est, | quod facta domini cogitur populus sui | tam ferre quam laudare*). There is a sense of proud and almost joyful subversion of the *satelles*' credibility in Atreus' words which makes his behaviour look more convincing and consistent by comparison. Similarly, when the *satelles* replies that true praise only reaches those who covet *favoris gloriam veri* (209), Atreus quickly points out that he is not interested in a reward which even a humble subject could attain: *laus vera et humili saepe contingit viro, | non nisi potenti falsa. quod nolunt velint* (211–12). Atreus is here applying a

[36] Contrastii

logic which Seneca had tried to turn to very different ends in *De clementia*, where he repeatedly points out that the most authentic sign of distinction for a ruler lies in his ability to choose *not* to do something that any one of his subjects could also do: anybody can kill in revenge, but only the ruler can decide to refrain from revenge and spare a life (1.5.4). Atreus bases his decision to spurn the reward of genuine praise on precisely the same sense of distinction and uniqueness. Later in the play, Thyestes portrays himself as a ruler who supposedly enjoys the people's favour and expects a warm welcome on his return home: 'Argos will come to meet me, a great crowd will come' (411: *occurret Argos, populus occurret frequens*). Yet the play does not provide any indication that this actually occurs, and Thyestes' words are left without any visible sign of fulfilment, thus encouraging us to suppose that Atreus' cynical lack of illusions is more realistic than his brother's faith in popular favour.

While the motto *quod nolunt velint* is a reminder of the famous *oderint dum metuant*, it is also significantly different, and a great deal more demanding. Atreus aspires to complete control over his people's reactions, and is aware that force can turn dissent into consent, that his superior will can bend an initially uncooperative mind. Always an innovator, Atreus also injects into his political philosophy a sense of bold novelty, which parallels his search for private vengeance. Like the Fury of the prologue, he curtly dismisses the notion that he should look for consent and approval: like Tantalus' shadow, his subjects will be forced to forget their own wishes and conform to his. Thyestes provides in fact a dramatic confirmation of Atreus' insight when in the following act he yields to his son's persuasive advice and enters the city unwillingly: 'my mind falters and wishes to take my body back; my steps are unwilling' (419–20: *animus haeret ac retro cupit | corpus referre, moveo nolentem gradum*).

In his assertive defence of the tyrannical ethos, Atreus is more than a predictable stereotype of a tragic tyrant. His words are forceful, original, impressive, and his deeds cohere with his policy statements. The *satelles* (and, as far as he is later concerned, Thyestes) can only voice a perfunctory array of well-meaning but ineffectual commonplaces, which the tragedy itself reveals – by the way they are uttered, and the defeat they encounter – to be hardly worth serious consideration. The contrast between the two characters is illuminating, once again not because of the practical results of the confrontation – the unsurprising fact that Atreus has his way and carries out his revenge plan undisturbed – but because Seneca chooses to represent the opposition to Atreus' plans and thoughts in an extremely ambivalent and unappealing form. The *satelles* did not have to turn into

an Antigone to make his lofty thoughts more believable. The fact that he is not essential, in the rest of the play, for the actual realization of Atreus' revenge, further characterizes his acquiescence as an act of moral weakness, of almost willing submission to Atreus' vision. Of course Atreus held him hostage and could have easily punished any resistance; but the play does not give any indication that this might happen, and portrays instead the *satelles*' parabolic descent from resistance to complicity.

Although it may be superficially appealing to identify Seneca himself in the *satelles*, a fit complement for a Caligula or Nero in the role of Atreus, the debate between Atreus and his minion is more than a reflection of a specific incident in the history of Roman political life. It is in fact a dramatized contrast between two different conceptions of power, a losing and a winning one. It matters little which one holds the higher moral stature on paper: what really matters (on the stage, and, in fact, in the palace) is how they deal with each other, and what degree of credibility they are able to instil in the audience. The dialogue juxtaposes a truth and a fiction: the fiction of half-hearted resistance versus the matter-of-fact truth of what power really is and how it functions. In this respect Atreus embodies a view of power which in practice, if not in theory, is truly in keeping with the reality of Roman imperial rule.

The chorus may well appear to be a more reliable candidate for moral guidance than the *satelles* or, for that matter, Thyestes himself.[37] Indeed it is tempting to control the disruptive force of the play by locating a reliable moral message in the chorus's lofty interventions, or at least by arguing that the chorus enjoys a relatively detached position apart from the moral turmoil experienced by the main characters.[38] True, much of what the chorus observes in various moments of the tragic action can be connected with Stoic concepts as they are explained and advocated by other sources.[39] The chorus, however, is, willingly or not, completely enmeshed in the vicissitudes of the play, both because its comments fit in the linear sequence of events and often explicitly refer to very recent developments, and because the chorus, for all its idiosyncratic behaviour, is yet another character on the stage. The chorus's actions and reactions cannot be evaluated in the abstract, as a moral commentary which can be taken at face-value, but must

[37] Among recent work on Senecan choruses in general see Tarrant (1978) 221–8; Mazzoli (1986–87); Davis (1993); and Castagna (1996). Hiltbrunner (1985) 989–91 offers an annotated bibliography.

[38] Tarrant (1985) 137.

[39] Tarrant remarks ((1985) 45) that 'the breadth of its [the chorus's] perspective and the dignity of its ultimate response give the play its only moments of moral sanity'. That may well be true; it is arguable, however, whether this 'sanity' can muster enough credibility to be counted as a realistic alternative.

be evaluated dialectically, as another, often dissonant, voice in the conflict of contrasting points of view staged in the play.

The chorus first appears on stage after the metadramatic prologue, and delivers an impassioned appeal for an end to the chain of horrors which has so far besieged the Pelopidai. The very beginning of the ode is characterized by a vein of hesitation and uncertainty[40] which is evident in the repetition of hypothetical statements (122–6):

> Argos de superis *si* quis Achaicum
> Pisaeasque domos curribus inclitas,
> Isthmi *si* quis amat regna Corinthii,
> et portus geminos et mare dissidens,
> *si* quis Taygeti conspicuas nives...

If any of the gods loves Achean Argos and Pisa famous for its chariots, if any loves the kingdom of Corinthian Isthmus, its twin harbours, and the sea divided, if any loves the far-seen snows of Taygetus...

In these lines the chorus displays not only scepticism on the existence of a divine protection for Argos in particular, but also doubts about the possibility of knowing even very basic facts such as the existence of protecting gods.

This cognitive inadequacy acquires a further dimension in the following lines, as the chorus deals with Tantalus' past and thus invites a close comparison with the prologue. Lines 122–6 list several locations close to Argos, and the description of the last one, the snow-covered peaks of Taygetus, ends in a brief digression on the alternating forces of winter and summer, which provoke and dissolve the snow (127–9). Against this background of natural alternation – by definition constant and unstoppable – the chorus voices the desire that no new misdeeds plague the royal household, and specifically that there be a conclusion to the *alternae... vices* (133)[41] which have so far besieged it (132–5):

> advertat placidum numen et arceat,
> alternae scelerum ne redeant vices
> nec succedat avo deterior nepos
> et maior placeat culpa minoribus.

Let divine power look to us peacefully and forbid that crimes in alternate sequence return, that a worse grandson succeed his grandfather, or a greater crime please the new generations.

[40] Tarrant (1985) 106. In this passage Seneca goes well beyond the traditional *si* = *siquidem* in prayers and conveys hesitation and scepticism.

[41] See *Ag.* 77–8: *quas non arces scelus alternum* | *dedit in praeceps?*, with Tarrant's remarks ((1976) 182)

The chorus speaks here without any knowledge of the prologue's events, and possibly in a temporal sequence which is parallel rather than subsequent to those events.[42] But from a dramatic point of view these hopes are unequivocally voiced *after* the prologue has already shown that they can no longer be nurtured, that repetition constitutes the play's moral and dramatic dynamic: a number of specific verbal parallels underlines the stridency of this contrast.[43] The chorus sides here with forces which have tried to prevent the unfolding of dramatic events, and, just like Tantalus' shadow or the *satelles*, it is doomed to failure. Indeed, the following emphatic statement: *peccatum satis est* (138) sounds particularly ironic, since the immediate context suggests, rather, a relentless pattern of return.

Inextricably linked to the prologue, the first choral song looks forward to future developments in the plot. This prefiguration of events is not presented, however, as a form of predictive ability which would bestow on the chorus a claim to higher knowledge, but is rather perceived in this context as involuntary, and therefore tragically ironic. The chorus describes Myrtilus' and Tantalus' crimes while hoping that they will never be repeated (138: *peccatum satis est*), but in fact they ostensibly prefigure the monstrous deeds that the tragedy will once again evoke. Deception is the element stressed most in this part of the song, thus hinting at its importance in the subsequent unfolding of the plot;[44] especially *deceptus totiens* ('so often deceived', 159) and *falli libuit* ('gladly has been baffled', 167), both referring to Tantalus, aptly describe Thyestes' own behaviour at a later stage and reinforce the structural parallelism which links the two characters throughout the play. But precisely because of the context, this insistence on deception reflects also on the chorus's own tendency to be deceived, its inability to grasp events effectively.

Even the richly detailed description of Tantalus' punishment is consistent with the chorus's display of inadequate knowledge – or sheer wishful thinking. Contrary to the chorus's opinion that Tantalus has been subjected to the most appropriate form of retribution (150–1: *nec dapibus feris* | *decerni potuit poena decentior*, 'nor could a more fitting punishment have been decreed for such barbarous food'), the prologue has already shown that a worse torture has in fact been devised for him (70–1; 82–3). Similarly, the final image of the ode describes, with a strong sense of closure, the apparently eternal situation of Tantalus in the underworld, where he is

[42] See ch. 2 and ch. 5, *passim*.

[43] See 25: *alterna vice*; 28–9: *rabies parentum duret et longum nefas* | *eat in nepotes*; 89–90: *ducam in horrendum nefas* | *avus nepotes?* (Tarrant (1985) 108 on 133–5); line 135 recalls one of the Fury's most striking mottos: *Thracium fiat nefas* | *maiore numero* (56–7).

forced to drink dirty shallow water after all the enticing goods presented to him have disappeared (174–5). Again, the prologue has shown that closure and conclusion are far from guaranteed, since Tantalus has already been summoned to earth and forced to provoke a new turn in the terrible series of the catastrophes suffered by the Pelopidai.

Because of the chorus's tragic inability to understand the situation unfolding on the stage, the absence of precise indications of who exactly its members are[45] acquires particular relevance. It enhances the chorus's shadowy appearance, its rarified, almost inactive existence,[46] suspended in the netherworld between powerful dramatic actions. Its utterances of hope, its calls for restraint, are neutralized by the weakness of its interpretative tools. The first song makes it clear that the chorus has no higher claim to the truth, and does not offer to the public a secluded island of moral certainty amidst the turmoil of the tragedy.

Subsequent choral odes strengthen these intimations of tragic irony and doomed inefficacy, and further reduce the plausibility of retrieving a deeper and truer meaning of the play from the chorus's words. *Credat hoc quisquam?* The opening of the third choral ode once again foregrounds the issue of knowledge and belief. This second interlude between actions, namely between the meeting of the brothers and the appearance on scene of the messenger, centres on the chorus's inability to see beyond the deceptive surface of Atreus' actions: once again, the chorus and Thyestes are paired as victims of deception, and the chorus's reiterated expressions of fear remain a mute and ineffective counterbalancing element. Since the ode directly follows one of Atreus' most ominous *double entendres* (545: *ego destinatas victimas superis dabo*), the opening words are even more loaded with tragic irony (546–51):

> credat hoc quisquam? ferus ille et acer
> nec potens mentis truculentus Atreus
> fratris aspectu stupefactus haesit.
> nulla vis maior pietate vera est:
> iurgia externis inimica durant,
> quos amor verus tenuit, tenebit.

[45] Tarrant (1976) 180 on the 'impersonal quality' of Senecan choruses; see Tarrant (1985) 106, n. 1, with Leo (1897) 510–13. On the notion, however, of the chorus as a 'collective character' see Grimal (1975) 265, with Picone (1976) 64. There are useful remarks on the chorus's personality also in Rozelaar (1976) 561–63 and a nuanced discussion in Davis (1993) 39–63. Zwierlein ((1966) 74–6) sees in this 'impersonal quality' yet another sign that the plays were not performable.

[46] It is worth noting that in both of the *parodoi* that Tarrant ((1985) 106) compares with this ode, Aesch. *Sept.* 87–170 and Soph. *OT* 158–215, the chorus is seen reacting to events with a fear inspired by its perception of the disasters to come.

Will anyone believe this? Atreus, that cruel, harsh man, out of control, blood-soaked, stopped still at sight of his brother. No power is stronger than true fraternal love; angry strife with strangers lasts, but those whom true love has bonded together will continue to bond.

This insistence on the veracity of brotherly love is particularly striking since the chorus completely misrepresents the conflict between appearance and reality in the dealings between them: far from being moved by Thyestes' appearance, it is in fact Atreus who is able to deceive him with a false *aspectus*.

Tarrant rightly compares this song to several Sophoclean choruses which express hope immediately before a catastrophe,[47] and the messenger will shortly provide ample evidence of such a *metabolē*. Note, however, the peculiar status of the chorus's remarks. After the dialogue of act 3 it is clear, for instance, that the audience enjoys a superior degree of knowledge, which connects it to Atreus and differentiates it from Thyestes and the chorus. Thus the chorus's belated mixture of belief, hope and fear must strike the audience as a tragically pointless stance. The enormous disparity in levels of knowledge, I would suggest, makes it difficult for us to identify with the chorus's feeling.

This choral ode, not unlike the first one, contains a number of potentially contradictory or at least puzzling statements. In the first stanza, for instance, it is remarkable that the actions that the chorus attributes to *Pietas* – the love which supposedly re-links Atreus' and Thyestes' hands – are themselves violent and cast an ominous light on the success of the reconciliation: 'Love stays the steel, and joining their hands leads men, even against their will, to Peace' (558–9: *opprimit ferrum manibusque iunctis | ducit ad pacem Pietas negantes*). *Negantes* squarely emphasizes the brothers' unwillingness (once again mutual) to yield to peace, even if the chorus would lend it a concessive force.

The second stanza displays again a sceptical inclination: 'this sudden lull out of so great uproar, what god has wrought?' (560–1: *otium tanto subitum e tumultu | quis deus fecit?*) – a question which has a rather obvious answer for the audience – lends itself to irony. Appropriately, the ensuing lines indulge in a detailed, obsessed description of the dangers now apparently past, and not of the new, apparently positive situation. As it suddenly shifts its thoughts backwards, the chorus itself falls prey to the irresistible attraction of painful reiteration. The wound of the recent *bellum civile* (562) cannot be forgotten even in this apparent lull, and the chorus perceptively lingers on the expectation of war rather than on actual fights, which have not

[47] *Aj.* 693–717; *Trach.* 633–62; *Ant.* 1115–54; *OT* 1086–109.

occurred so far. The concluding remark, that the fear of war is worse than war itself (572: *peior est bello timor ipse belli*, 'worse than war is the very fear of war') represents one of the few immediately authentic and believable statements uttered by the chorus. Of course, it does mean rather more than the chorus is aware of, since *timor* is still very much a present factor; but it is important to recognize that this moment of authenticity and credibility comes precisely when the chorus abandons its analysis of what it perceives to be the present reality (which it is utterly inadequate to comprehend) and privileges instead the self-evident emotional reality of fear. In other words: when the chorus finally yields to the same force which has already subjugated the shadow of Tantalus and Thyestes. The force of remembering, repeating and re-enacting is stronger than the peace supposedly at hand.

This lack of balance between past and present, and between fear and solace, largely holds true for the following stanza, which contains an elaborate simile referring to natural forces, preceded by a positive statement on the newly acquired peace (573–6):

> iam minae saevi cecidere ferri,
> iam silet murmur grave classicorum,
> iam tacet stridor litui strepentis;
> alta pax urbi revocata laetae est.

now the sword's dire threats have ceased; now the deep trumpet-blare is silent; now the shrill of the clarion's blast is quiet; deep peace has been restored to the happy city.

Out of nineteen lines which form the simile, only four depict the sea finally at rest; the bulk of it is occupied with a vivid account of the tempest which precedes the calm. Even as this positive side is finally introduced, at line 588, it is with a hypothetical *si* rather than a temporal *cum* (588–95):

> si suae ventis cecidere vires,
> mitius stagno pelagus recumbit;
> alta, quae navis timuit secare
> hinc et hinc fusis speciosa velis,
> strata ludenti patuere cumbae,
> et vacat mersos numerare pisces
> hic ubi ingenti modo sub procella
> Cyclades pontum timuere motae.

If the winds' strength has failed, the sea sinks back calmer than a pool; the deep waters which even a ship adorned with fully spread sails on both sides had feared to cleave, now lie open even to a small pleasure-boat; and now one can count the fish under water, right where a moment ago the Cyclades, shaken by a huge storm, feared the sea.

None of the positive statements stands without an immediate balance in the opposite direction provided by a return to the negative past, accomplished by *quae* at line 590 and *hic ubi* at line 594. This is yet another instance of the chorus's propensity to indulge more in the recollection of past fears than in the enjoyment of the present. By its very tortuous, revolving nature, it underscores the real lack of definitive closure which is inherent in the simile and is then made explicit in the gnomic statement of 596–7: 'no lot endures long; pain and pleasure, each in turn, give place – more quickly, pleasure' (*nulla sors longa est: dolor ac voluptas | invicem cedunt; brevior voluptas*). Indeed, just as calm succeeds tempest, tempests come back over and over again.[48]

The real significance of this section of the ode lies, then, more in the implications suggested by its structure than in the often less than compelling lexical choices, and this is consistent with the general interpretation of the chorus's attitude that I have outlined so far: the chorus does say several useful and perceptive things, but almost invariably *malgré soi*, between the lines rather than explicitly, with tragic irony rather than full awareness. For the chorus, the storm followed by a period of calm is an apt analogy for Atreus' conversion, and on the basis of this false assumption it expands with utter seriousness on the larger moral framework governing human actions: fortune is mutable, powerful men should beware of sudden reversals, and remember that they, too, are subject to divine punishment (596–622). The statements which hold true do so, however, in a very different sense to that envisaged by the chorus itself, and many are simply reversed. The elaborate discussion of divine retribution at 607–14, for instance, culminates in the certainty that *superbi* will be punished (613–14: *quem dies vidit veniens superbum, | hunc dies vidit fugiens iacentem*, 'whom the rising sun has seen high in pride, him the setting sun has seen laid low'), and the chronological framework invites us to read this as a reflection – among other things – on tragic time; yet, of course, the ultimate *superbus*, Atreus, will be far from destroyed at the end of the tragedy.

The discrepancy between the chorus's actual grip on events and its prominent presence in the play is never more evident than in its dialogue with the messenger immediately after the third ode. The messenger's arrival on the scene provides powerful confirmation of the cyclical and yet largely unpredictable nature of events which the chorus had endorsed in the second

[48] A topical image, to be sure, but it is worth comparing Soph. *Aj.* 669–76, especially 674–5: δεινῶν τ' ἄημα πνευμάτων ἐκοίμισε | στένοντα πόντον, in the context of Ajax's misleading acceptance of the *status quo*.

part of the ode, and the messenger's first line (623: *quis me per auras* ***turbo*** *praecipitem vehet* | . . . ?, 'what whirlwind will drag me headlong through the air?') is pointedly linked to the chorus's last utterance (621–2: *res deus nostras celeri citatas* | ***turbine*** *versat*, 'god shakes our affairs in a swift whirlwind'). In the scene that follows, the chorus is directly involved in the tragic action, since it interrogates the messenger and reacts to his narrative as it unfolds. Yet this active role is matched by the superficiality of the chorus's reactions. After insisting that the messenger deliver his news quickly (626, 633, 638–40) and being informed of Atreus' deeds, the chorus resumes its dialogic function by asking a series of questions on points of detail; all the questions are formulated along the same syntactical pattern, and all – with the partial exception of the third – display little emotional involvement: *quis manum ferro admovet?* ('who lays his hand on the sword?', 690); *quem tamen ferro occupat?* ('whom, for all that, does he first attack with the steel?', 716); *quo iuvenis animo, quo tulit vultu necem?* ('with what spirit, with what countenance did the youth bear his death?', 719); *quid deinde gemina caede perfunctus facit?* | *puerone parcit, an scelus sceleri ingerit?* ('what did he then do after the double murder? Did he spare one boy, or did he heap crime on crime?', 730–1).

These interventions do nothing to alter the assumption that the chorus is tragically ignorant and superficial, not just unable to modify events (something which it is not expected to do), but also clumsy and unfocused in its reactions, predictable and formulaic in its expressions of horror. In fact even these emotional outcries are emphatically delayed, and the questions are, until after the better part of the rhesis, the only reaction we hear. It is only at line 743 – when almost all of Atreus' crimes have been exposed – that the chorus gives voice to its own emotions, with an exclamation whose stylistic banality underlines the inadequacy of the response: *o saevum scelus!* ('oh, savage crime!'). Subsequently, it is still questions – barely more coloured with emotion – which we hear from the chorus: *an ultra maius aut atrocius* | *natura recipit?* ('does nature admit anything greater or more atrocious?', 745–6) and *quid ultra potuit? obiecit feris* | *lanianda forsan corpora atque igne arcuit?* ('what more did he manage to do? Did he perhaps throw the bodies for wild beasts to tear apart, or refuse them fire?', 747–8) sound an almost ironic note because of the predictability of the answers they will receive.

Shocked by the sudden disappearance of the sun, anguished by fear and despair, in the fourth and final song the chorus acquires a more powerful and convincing dramatic status. For the chorus this is already the end of the play; Atreus' crimes have been told in detail, and the exchange with the

messenger has been a true anagnorisis: now the chorus knows how wrong it had been in its optimistic assumptions about Atreus' conversion. It is at this point, therefore, that the chorus finally seems to come into its own as far as both emotion and cognition are concerned: it knows all there is to know and has a chance to react not simply with hope or fear – both, in a sense, are preliminary reactions – but with a more forceful set of emotions. Yet again, Seneca's handling of the ode highlights precisely opposite implications, and the chorus's final appearance ultimately leaves in its trail more questions than answers.

This ode, to begin with, is emphatically not what it could be expected to be, namely a reaction to the rhesis. The chorus is laconic and inexpressive when it hears the messenger's chilling narrative. Even its questions, which could after all reflect a desire to learn as many details as possible before attempting a deliberate response, evidently fail to stir new emotions. The ode limits its focus to the very last fact the messenger had told, the sudden disappearance of the sun, which is described as a divine reaction of disgust at Atreus' crimes. This novel event startles the chorus and leads it to new worries and new doubts: rather than concentrating on a set of events which had just been narrated in detail and whose causes are by now clear, the chorus wonders at length about a consequence which the messenger had already briefly but definitively explained at 783–5.

Thus it is under the usual light of detachment and bewilderment that the chorus enters on stage once more, and, again, its first words are uttered as questions (789–93):

> quo terrarum superumque parens,
> cuius ad ortus noctis opacae
> decus omne fugit, quo vertis iter
> medioque diem perdis Olympo?
> cur, Phoebe, tuos rapis aspectus?

Father of lands and heavens, at whose rising every star of the dark night flees away, where, oh where do you turn your orbit and destroy the day in the middle of its path? Why, Phoebus, do you snatch away your sight?

Tantalus' attitude had been similar (1–4):

> quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit
> avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?
> quis male deorum Tantalo visas domos
> ostendit iterum?

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?

The Fury, on the other hand, knew from the beginning that the sun might well disappear: 'Look! Titan himself is in doubt whether to order the day to follow on, and with his reins to force it towards its destruction' (120–1: *en ipse Titan dubitat an iubeat sequi | cogatque habenis ire periturum diem*), and Atreus is not worried, but pleased, that the earth is shrouded in darkness: 'so that shame should not impede me, the day has retreated. Go ahead, while the sky is empty!' (891–2: *ne quid obstaret pudor, | dies recessit: perge dum caelum vacat*). Once again the contrasting camps of characters are opposed to each other by (among other things) a different level of knowledge and a different capacity to react effectively to events: in this case, moreover, the contrast is sharpened by the otherwise dramatically inexplicable fact that the chorus goes on wondering why the sun disappeared even after it has been told.

The surprising way in which the chorus frames its intervention after the rhesis makes the hypotheses that it formulates as it tries to understand the *causa* (803) of such a novel event even more puzzling (803–14). The emotional tone of these lines switches from the familiar examples mentioned before (the sound of the *bucina*, the bewilderment of the farmer) to a much loftier catalogue of possible mythical explanations, all centred around the fight between Zeus and the Giants – the archetypal *exemplum* of subversive violence directed against a superior power. This, in turn, leads the chorus to surmise that far more wide-ranging consequences have to be feared, and the next two stanzas alternate between the certainty of an unbearable catastrophe and the suspicion that the world has indeed come to an end. Thus the chorus is ready to consider the disappearance of the sun as a fatal blow to the regular alternation of cosmic rhythm, and a sense of permanent damage prevails: 'have the usual movements of the world come to an end? will there be no more sunsets, no more sunrises?' (*solitae mundi periere vices? | nihil occasus, nihil ortus erit?* (813–14)). After a graphic description of the novel meeting between a bewildered Aurora and the sun – *insueto novus hospitio* ('startled at such unwonted welcoming', 821) – the chorus returns to doubt and fear (827–32):

> sed quidquid id est, utinam nox sit!
> trepidant, trepidant pectora magno
> percussa metu,
> ne fatali cuncta ruina
> quassata labent iterumque deos
> hominesque premat deforme chaos...

But whatever this may be, if only it were night! Our hearts tremble, tremble shaken by great fear, lest all things fall down shattered by fated ruin, and once again shapeless chaos weigh upon gods and men.

But doubt and fear quickly turn into the certainty of a final *ekpyrōsis*, as the subjunctive is followed by a long string of future indicatives (starting with *dabit* at line 837) which culminate in the final ruin of the Chariot at line 874 (*ruet*). In these thirty-seven lines – over a third of the total ode – the detailed insistence on a series of specific astronomical disasters lends support to the chorus's belief that the end of the universe is imminent.[49] This belief is yet again stated in more doubtful terms at first (875–81), but is finally acknowledged in the drastic tone of a gnome (875–84):[50]

> nos e tanto visi populo
> digni, premeret quos everso
> cardine mundus?
> in nos aetas ultima venit?
> o nos dura sorte creatos,
> seu perdidimus solem miseri,
> sive expulimus!
> abeant questus, discede, timor:
> vitae est avidus quisquis non vult
> mundo secum pereunte mori.

Of many generations, is it ours which has been deemed worthy to be overwhelmed by the sky, its axis upturned? Has the last day come in our time? Alas for us, begotten with cruel lot, whether we have lost the sun or banished it! Away with lamenting, go away, Fear: he who does not want to die when the world is dying with him is too greedy for life.

Both tone and contents send strong signals of closure, and in fact this is the chorus's last appearance on stage (there is no *exodos*, as we will see shortly); yet it is precisely the lack of closure that is highlighted in the rest of the play. Not only have the *mundi vices* not been permanently altered and the world has not come to an end, but the next two hundred lines will in fact repeat from a different narrative point of view the final part of the events that the rhesis had announced: in dramatic terms, that is, the banquet unfolds all over again as Atreus, instead of taking the sudden darkness as an indication of divine disgust, exploits it to further the completion of his plans. In pointed contrast to the chorus's insistence on closure, the play ends with the promise of future retributions: 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). Use of the

[49] Note that even as the chorus is ready to admit that a final end has arrived, it is still in doubt as to why exactly that happens.

[50] A gnomic closure is common in Greek tragedy: Kremer (1971) 117–21, and, for further references, Roberts, Dunn and Fowler (1997) 276.

future tense, together with the symmetry between Thyestes' and Atreus' final lines, ensures that no final word has been spoken, and that the *vices* of their enmity still have a long way to go: whether gods or humans will enforce it, vengeance is the only prospect on which both characters agree.

Once again we see that the chorus's sustained tone is undermined by failure to really grasp what is happening. More pointedly, the description of the conflagration of the universe, coherent as it is with Stoic belief, conspicuously fails to represent the last word and again makes the chorus look misguided in its moral loftiness and basic lack of understanding. In this final song the chorus had sided with Tantalus and the *satelles* in its wish that no further progress be made, that an end be put to the domino-effect of *nefas*; that since the Fury's and Atreus' drive to repetition had already been fulfilled, this at least be matched by a final repetition of a different nature (note *iterum* at 831 and 833), the end of a cosmic cycle and the return to chaos, and silence. None of these wishes comes true: the world goes on, Atreus and Thyestes brace themselves for future reprisals, and the play chooses to continue, and even to repeat the *nefas* it sings.

Although it has often been thought to embody the tragedy's 'real' message, the second ode does not cast the chorus in a different light. A more optimistic interpretation, which sees in it 'the play's closest approach to a positive statement of values' whose 'beauty ... remains deeply satisfying'[51] is possible only if we agree to see in a positive light the chorus's detachment from the surrounding events. This would be an awkward line to pursue, however, because Seneca's choral odes in general, and those of *Thyestes* in particular, cannot really be considered self-standing interludes (*embolima*).[52] Successfully or not, they attempt to establish a connection with reality, and consequently display, rather than emotional *autarkeia*, joy and fear, worry and hope. Thus the chorus's weakness appears functionally similar to the *satelles*' unexcited and quickly dismissed attempt to restrain Atreus, or to Thyestes' own ambivalence in the choice between a properly 'Stoic' behaviour and the reality of his wishes and fears.

As it elaborates an ideal model of 'royalty' just after the audience has witnessed the depth of Atreus' deception, the choral ode emerges as a triumph of wishful thinking over reality.[53] Atreus and his *satelles* have painstakingly

[51] Tarrant (1985) 138; see Davis (1993) 172: '[Odes 2 and 3] establish a philosophic standard by which the play's central characters, Atreus and Thyestes can be judged.'

[52] *Pace* Zwierlein (1966) 76–80.

[53] On 'contrastività' as a fundamental feature of Senecan choruses see the important remarks by Mazzoli (1986–87).

mapped the future course of actions, and there can be no further doubt that the Fury's goals will be attained. In particular, the final part of the dialogue focuses on deception and secrecy, as Atreus and the *satelles* consider Thyestes' reactions to the invitation to return home, and Menelaus' and Agamemnon's involvement in the ploy. In this context many keywords already present in the first ode return to the forefront: *fraus* (312, 316), *dolus* (318), *fallere* (320, 321). In fact the very last exchange between the two characters on stage elaborates on the importance of keeping their secrets well hidden, even from Atreus' own sons (332–3), and, we must infer, from anybody else (334–5). The chorus appears to be still hoping for a future which is no longer attainable.[54]

A further unsettling implication emerges from a detailed comparison of the standards advocated by the chorus and the behaviour of Atreus and Thyestes.[55] In its eloquent rehearsal of traditional Stoic *topoi* the chorus predictably aligns itself with Thyestes' own moralizing, unreliable as this may be shown to be.[56] But on closer inspection the chorus's autarchic view of power is paradoxically more in tune with Atreus' than Thyestes' behaviour. It is Atreus, after all, who truly despises the fickleness of popular favour and the external signs of royal status.[57] Were it not for his 'ambition' (350: *ambitio*) he would be an almost perfect embodiment of the qualities extolled in the ode. Thus, by opening itself to a paradoxical interpretation which is clearly at odds with the chorus's presumable 'authorial intention', the song does more than reinforce the feeling that interpretation is fraught with ambiguities; it also involuntarily sanctions, in one of the most eloquent parts of the tragedy, the notion that 'real' power can invariably turn language to its own advantage, and that even the most hallowed of Stoic precepts are not safe from tendentious exploitations *à la* Atreus.

The chorus's reaction to and understanding of events is perhaps the most important aspect of its characterization. The chorus's lack of defining traits, its constant mood of doubt and uncertainty, its tendency to misinterpret,

[54] The contrast with the preceding scene is even greater if lines 336–8 are retained (*tandem regia nobilis, | antiqui genus Inachi, | fratrum composuit minas*); they are deleted by Richter (1902) (followed by Sutton (1986) 40–1) because they are inconsistent with the preceding scene and anticipate 546–51, but are retained by Zwierlein and Tarrant. Calder (1989) suggests that they are spoken by the chorus as it comes back on stage – probably at 330 – and utters its real beliefs (from 339) only after Atreus and the *satelles* have left. This explanation presupposes that the chorus already knows that Atreus plans to pretend to welcome back Thyestes, which is unlikely given that the plan has just been hatched.

[55] I am indebted here to Davis (1993) 176–8.

[56] See above, pp. 141ff.

[57] Lines 344–7 and 353–7.

the feebleness of its emotional responses – all these factors conspire to subtract a great deal of dramatic and moral appeal from its noble-sounding and apparently inspired ethical considerations. Thus the solutions it offers on a variety of levels – the 'true' nature of power or the preference for a retired, ataraxic life, its faith in the gods' presence and providence, the certainty of retribution – are all fatefully undermined.

It is interesting to note that Senecan plays never give the chorus the last word,[58] thus depriving it of any opportunity to deliver a final evaluation of the events. The chorus's feelings and thoughts are only voiced between events, whether or not these have been directly witnessed or even correctly understood. Not even in structural terms does the chorus enjoy a privileged platform. It is small wonder, then, that its recipes for a better life appear in the end to be more of an exercise in abstract morality than a compelling indication of viable options.

[58] The only exceptions are represented by the certainly un-Senecan *Octavia*, and the dubious *Hercules Oetaeus*; Leo (1897) 512. See p. 68.

CHAPTER 5

Fata se vertunt retro

fata se vertunt retro
(Seneca, *Agamemnon* 758)

I

The time has almost come to bring the reading of *Thyestes*, if not yet to a conclusion, at least to a point where we can take a comprehensive view of the main issues that I have analysed in previous chapters. Before doing so, I would first like to explore a set of related topics which play an important role not just in *Thyestes* but in several other Senecan tragedies. Accordingly, in this chapter I will largely move away from *Thyestes* and offer a thematic reading focusing mostly on other plays: *Hercules furens*, *Troades*, *Agamemnon*, *Medea* and *Oedipus*. In the next chapter I will extend the argument developed here, in order to situate my final analysis of *Thyestes* within a broader context.

I propose to look first at certain peculiarities of Seneca's treatment of dramatic time. There seems to exist a broad consensus, implicit or explicit, that many of the plays' temporal structures display markedly idiosyncratic features. Unfortunately, this is often taken as further evidence for the theory that, by abandoning the conventions of Attic drama, Seneca has irretrievably adulterated the pure forms of tragedy, so that his treatment of time, like many other aspects of his dramatic technique, testifies to a decadence in the evolution of tragedy. It is well established that Seneca breaks away from many fifth-century conventions:[1] the unity of time and space, the rigid delimitation of the time allotted to the tragic action, the coherent succession of scenes in an undisturbed temporal continuum – these are all rules to which Seneca finds surprising (and, I think, highly effective) alternatives. The notion that many of his plays offer detached tableaux

[1] The classic

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