Epilogue

Verum . . . nulli . . . nisi audituro dicendum est
(Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 29)

The analysis of Stoic perception and evaluation of literary phenomena offers an interesting way out of the dilemma of reading the tragedies as either enactments or extended refutations of Stoic *dogmata*. The very explanation of how passions work and are perceived which Seneca offers in accordance with Stoic principles makes the effect of a literary utterance less safely ascertainable than one would like to expect. At the level of *assensio*, which is the critical juncture in the development or forestalling of a passion, readers are left alone with their hermeneutic burden. They might have thoughtful teachers to guide them in the process, much as Plutarch recommends, but the author of the text, with his responsibilities and intentions, is inevitably out of the picture.

Predictably, the situation is more muddled than this. Tragedy involves conflict, the battle between two sides, whose respective stances must be represented with equal accuracy and conviction if the play is to be effective. Bad behaviour will take centre stage, represented with accuracy and artistic as well as psychological credibility. This fact alone introduces into the play a degree of openness and ambiguity that no amount of authorial intention can hope to dispel for good. As I said earlier, I find wholly unpersuasive the proposition that Seneca must secretly have meant his tragedy to be a systematic refutation of the philosophical positions that are advocated in his prose. But for all the reasons explored above, his choice of the tragic form is inevitably perilous and ambivalent. A full recognition of the double-edged powers of poetry, a recognition which could derive directly from the theoretical principles of Stoic poetics, would have perhaps recommended a different course of action. For instance, it could have supported an attempt at poetry along the lines of Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*, where the pleasurable impact of the medium is put to the service of an impeachable moral lesson.

But to resort to the psychagogic qualities of poetry in order to represent negative passions, to create powerful *phantasiai* of winning evil, is to take a step too far on the path to collusion with the enemy.

Seneca's tragedies do precisely what most tragedies, or at least good tragedies, must do: they present a forceful 'display' (*phantasia*) of contrasting forces and passions and ask the audience, brought to 'ecstasy' (ἔκστασις), to examine their feelings and assumptions. This examination will be all the more difficult, and all the more rewarding, the more the poet will have been able to make a compelling case for the very forces that constitute tragedy. This position is perfectly in line with what our Stoic sources have to offer on the subject of poetics, but they cannot go further than that. As I have tried to show, when they try to explain how, exactly, the fearful myths presented by tragedy can produce 'steering away' (ἀποτροπή) rather than 'incitement' (προτροπή), they do not offer anything more than a suspiciously circular argument. This is true in a particularly poignant way in the case of tragedies, such as many written by Seneca, which do all they can to blur the possibility of a clear-cut ethical reading, by presenting figures such as Medea and Atreus as deeply connected with the fascinating tension of poetic creation, for instance, or by depriving characters such as the *satelles* and the chorus in *Thyestes* of much of the poetic credibility and ethical consistency which might mould them into powerful counter-examples. The audience, at least an audience of *proficientes*, will only be able to resist the wicked allure of the various forms of tragic passion on the strength of previously held moral convictions, which can thus be tested and perhaps strengthened. Only in this very restricted sense does tragedy preserve an educational function, the only function which Stoicism is ready to grant it. But the risks implicit in writing tragedy are considerable, all the more so, as I just emphasized, in the case of Seneca. What we ultimately face is the impossibility of Stoic tragedy. For *sapientes* will have no interest in it, and *proficientes* are as likely to be deceived by it as they are to draw useful precepts. As Seneca admits in one of his *Letters to Lucilius* (29.1), 'for one must not speak the truth to a man unless he is willing to listen' (*verum . . . nulli . . . nisi audituro dicendum est*).

Where do these theoretical considerations leave the present reading of *Thyestes*? Above all, I hope they might allow an appreciation of this and other plays that is less focused on the philosophical 'truth' they supposedly encode, less predicated, that is, on the dubious assumption that a final message can indeed be ascertained. I am not advocating a free-floating indeterminacy as much as I am trying to place tragedy's complex signifying strategies squarely at the centre of the reader's and the critic's attention.

There is no code to be broken: rather, there are emotions to be experienced and negotiated, rational intimations to be assessed.

Everything in *Thyestes* points to future evil. The *alternae vices* of the House of the Pelopidai admit no other solution. What we have watched is but a fragment, a segment of a longer, more painful story. The curtain comes down to announce not 'the end', but 'to be continued'. The intersecting layers of dramatic action that structure the play offer an illusion of order and enclosure just as they remain ultimately at the mercy of an exterior, non-human force, a Fury that has appeared and disappeared to motivate the action and can return, as she indeed will, at any moment. In this respect everything, even Atreus' undoubted triumph, is momentary and elusive.

Thematically and ideologically, the play is a celebration of *nefas*: it reaffirms its poetic excitement, its dazzling aesthetic quality, its right to be foregrounded. But it shows, or at least hints at, more: that perhaps *fas* and *nefas*, just as they cannot be taken as reliable guides in deciding *a priori* what can actually be said or not be said in poetry, and what will or will not be poetically successful, might not even constitute reliable moral definitions in themselves. There is no way in which we can escape the moral dilemma that Seneca imposes on us when he celebrates Atreus' deeds, since he explicitly connects them to the appeal of poetry; but he goes further, since he relentlessly undermines the superficial moral judgement expressed by the chorus: Atreus does have his reasons; the murders he commits could be seen as an archaic, fascinating ritual in which he tries to restore, by horrendous retaliation, the integrity of the *genos* that has been obscenely perverted by Thyestes. Once these elements of doubt are allowed to creep into the otherwise neat system of Stoic morality, there is no way back; once we start doubting what is *fas* and what is *nefas*, who is right and who is wrong, the moral certainties which Seneca seems to offer in much of his work begin to crack (perhaps they were a generous illusion all along). The fact is, and *Thyestes* shows it splendidly, that the *other* world, the one of passions, blood, revenge, hatred, deceit and darkness, has its appeal; its *horror* is inextricably fused with *voluptas*, its pleasure and beauty (moral or otherwise) forever disjointed. The *sparagmos* is now complete, since no certainties, whether moral or poetic, survive the force of the tragedy intact. Like Procne, we are left to 'storm ahead confusing right and wrong'.

Atreus is, simply, too good not to be true. His overwhelming physical domination of the play in every conceivable aspect triggers the audience's emotional response to a degree which is unparalleled by any other character. The issue, again, is not whether Seneca, in a round-table debate over 'Poetry and Emotions' with his fellow Stoics, would have defended him or not; in all likelihood he would have argued that yes, the 'moral' lesson of the play is to be found in the chorus's well-meaning purple passages about power's self-restraint, or in the *satelles*' sheepish advocation of a moderate, considerate tyranny. Or again, as he defensively puts it in *De vita beata*, he would have defended Thyestes on the basis that, after all, what you really need to do is to try to be wise (repent and you will be saved). *Poètes maudits* are (at least in their theoretical dimension) a very recent discovery, and there is no point in asking Seneca to provide a satisfactory prototype. But Seneca could no better control the implications and emotional provocations of his play than any 'modern' author can. And, without purporting to explore his own personal ambivalences about the kind of writing he offers, I suspect that he would have been the first to admit (perhaps *sotto voce*) that he had intentionally stacked the cards against Thyestes, the *satelles*, and the dully moralizing chorus. There is too much pleasure in Atreus for the author or the audience to be unaffected by it. Atreus is fulfilled, emotionally and artistically, not to mention intellectually. He is, in his own words, a (pagan) god who has scared away the pious gods of traditional religion, the guarantors of a world order whom Thyestes ineffectually invokes even as their power has been shattered by Atreus' determined cruelty. He relishes passions and he relishes pain, his enemies' pain. There is pleasure to be found in passions, and it is a pleasure that *Thyestes* and Atreus want us to share with them.

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THE PASSIONS IN PLAY

Thyestes *and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*

ALESSANDRO SCHIESARO

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