

# SENECA'S *THYESTES*: MYTH AND PERSPECTIVE

*Abstract:* In Seneca's *Thyestes* a large number of elements are transformed into indications of the imperial age allowing the *logos* of the myth to be recorded in time, while in the same time the literary narrative becomes multifaceted and abstract touching on the limits of the symbolic and the timeless. The tragedy, which is influenced not only by the rhetoric but also by Stoic philosophy, is based on the balance and intensity of political concepts, while its perspective offers a collection of opposite though combined inner forces and indicates a unity of past, present and future.

*Resumen:* En el *Tiestes* de Séneca, un número grande de elementos son transformados en indicaciones de la época imperial, permitiendo así que el *logos* del mito se plasme en el tiempo, al mismo tiempo que la narrativa literaria se hace polivalente y abstracta hasta tocar los límites de lo simbólico y de lo atemporal. Esta tragedia, que recibe influencias no sólo de la retórica, sino también de la filosofía estoica, está basada en el equilibrio e intensidad de conceptos políticos, mientras que su perspectiva ofrece una colección de fuerzas interiores opuestas aunque combinadas y remite a una unidad de presente, pasado y futuro.

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Seneca's age is marked by exaggerated intensity and a morbid tendency towards anything supernatural, while Seneca himself laid even more emphasis on the pathetic and melodramatic elements and added the intense factor of horror and blood.<sup>1</sup> In his works, Seneca highlights the fact that man «fed off» man's blood and accepts, indirectly, that philosophy has been defeated. Along with it, however, Roman drama had collapsed among the ruins of imperial theatres, while mime and pantomimic dancing were enjoying a revival in its place.<sup>2</sup> Gradually the spectacle degenerates, the viewers are led towards vain desires and the level of both spectacle and audience drops.

During this time and under these circumstances dramas were still being written. Of those, there survive ten tragedies under the name of Seneca; their plots are often regarded as stage rhetorics and are marked by mannered narratives, elaborate descriptions and rhetorical soliloquies.

It is accepted that the plot of *Thyestes*<sup>3</sup> was in accordance with the psychology and mentality of the period<sup>4</sup>. In this tragedy, Seneca deals with Atreus' vengeance against his brother Thyestes<sup>5</sup>. He

<sup>1</sup> With regard to the interest in massacres and death as a characteristic of writers belonging to the early imperial period, see, for instance, Joe Park Poe, «An Analysis of Seneca's *Thyestes*», *TAPhA* 100 (1969) p. 356 ff. A similar course applied later in drama history: following Shakespeare's magnificent works and the first period of the Stewart dynasty, playwrights turned towards works based on intrigue and horror intended to impress. The audience consisted mainly of courtiers, who seeking novel intense excitement, were interested in such themes; see F. L. Lucas, *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy*, New York 1969, passim.

<sup>2</sup> Quintilian, (*Inst. Orat.* 6. 3) expressing his admiration for mimes, says that their arms and movements make requests and promises, provoke and dismiss, excite and soothe, beg and applaud, express horror, joy, sadness, hesitation, approval, remorse, moderation, abandon, harmony and time.

<sup>3</sup> The work was written when Seneca returned from exile and imperial favour had already become apparent, i.e. during the period 54-62 AD.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Tacitus' comment (*Ann.* 12. 3. 2) that Seneca had a welcome talent that fully satisfied the preferences of the times.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that, as highlighted by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1453a), Thyestes constitutes a fitting tragic persona: ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία οἶον Οἰδίπους καὶ Θυέστης καὶ οἱ ἐκ τῶν τοιούτων γενῶν ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρες. William M. Calder III, «Seneca: Tragedian of Imperial Rome», *CJ* 72 (1976-77) p. 11, notes in relation to Atreus: «Atreus exemplifies Aristotle's wholly evil man as tragic hero».

was familiar with the nucleus of the work through the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, Ennius, Attius and Varius<sup>6</sup>. Of these but a few remnants survive. Seneca's *Thyestes* is the only whole extant work, the sole compensation for all those time-ravaged tragedies of the same theme. As is to be expected, not all playwrights dealt with the myth in exactly the same manner, since the context of a myth changes with the passage of time and the original nucleus acts as inert matter, that, for different reasons each time, is re-written and re-phrased. Since, however, a myth has a true message, that constitutes wishful thinking rather than the result of serious attempt to face the world, *Thyestes* is the product not only of Stoic thinking<sup>7</sup>, but also of the social and political conditions.

In the prologue to the drama, Tantalus' ghost appears in the House of his son Pelops, accompanied by one of the Furies. Tantalus transmits the idea of sacrilege into the minds of his grandchildren, so that Thyestes has unlawful intercourse with the wife of Atreus, has children by her, and is consequently driven away from Mycenae. Later, Thyestes and his unlawful children are called back by Atreus, who proceeds to slaughter Thyestes' offspring and offer them to his brother at a dinner given in his honour.

The long sequence of bloody incidents that follow unfolds for the audience through the conversation Tantalus has with one of the Furies and thus, somehow, the play concludes before it has really begun<sup>8</sup>. The Fury insists<sup>9</sup> that the ghost of Tantalus, having corrupted the House of his grandchildren, returns to its subterranean abode<sup>10</sup>. The chorus<sup>11</sup> begs the gods, who love the House of Pelops, to stave off misfortune and prevent Atreus and Thyestes from surpassing the crimes of their ancestors<sup>12</sup>.

With diabolical intention, Thyestes proceeds to commit adultery with the wife of Atreus, has three children by her and steals the ram with the golden fleece, a prerequisite of royal power. Atreus finds out about the treachery from an old slave and wonders how to take his revenge. The *satelles* offers to kill Thyestes by sword, but Atreus does not consider death sufficient punishment<sup>13</sup>. Obsessively persisting in his decision for total revenge, Atreus has already conceived the atrocious

<sup>6</sup> With regard to these earlier works and Seneca's sources for the tragedy in question, see, for instance, William M. Calder III, «*Secreti loquimur: An Interpretation of Seneca's Thyestes*», *Ramus* 12 (1983) pp. 184-188.

<sup>7</sup> Seneca, an eloquent, albeit morally weak person, who sought through his work to become the counselor of thousands of people, perceived was mainly influenced by the Stoic philosophy. Following the teachings of the Stoics Attalus and Sotion the Alexandrian, Seneca acquired self-control and the ability for self-criticism. In 49AD he became praetor and tutor of the twelve-year-old Domitian Nero, whom he was trying to keep within the bounds of moderation and legality. During Nero's reign he became *consul*, but when Agrippina, Nero's mother was executed, Seneca, by order of the emperor, wrote an apology, which the Roman people thought very distasteful, in which Nero justified his matricide. Though Seneca's action met with reproach, this elaborate defence could be disregarded and considered as a harsh obligation imposed on Seneca by his position. On the other hand, one could also consider the view that Seneca followed Stoic teachings in theory, without being totally dedicated to them. While recommending the ethical ideal, Seneca demanded of himself only a moderate pursuit of total virtue, confessing at the same time that total virtue was unattainable. Not one to disdain riches or rank, Seneca enjoyed the benefits of his position as counselor to a young, excitable and unbalanced emperor

by combining the dignity of the philosopher with the laxity of the leader slave. Finally, with regard to the influence of Stoic thought on Seneca's tragedies, see, for instance, Eckard Lefèvre, «Die philosophische Bedeutung der Seneca-Tragödie am Beispiel des Thyestes», *ANWR* II. 32. 2 (1985) 1263-1283; Norman T. Pratt, «Major Systems of Figurative Language in Senecan Melodrama», *TAPhA* 94 (1963) p. 199, n. 1; Joe Park Poe, *op. cit.*, especially p. 357, n. 8, with relevant bibliography.

<sup>8</sup> *Thyest.* 1-121.

<sup>9</sup> *Thyest.* 59 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Thyest.* 105 ff.

<sup>11</sup> According to Peter J. Davis, *Shifting Song: The Chorus in Seneca's Tragedies*, *Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien* 26, Hildesheim / Zürich / New York 1993, p. 58, the members of the chorus are not identified in *Thyestes*, but it is not difficult to infer from the content of their first song that they are Argives, for this is a chorus that cares passionately about their city's welfare.

<sup>12</sup> The myth of Tantalus, according to which he offered human flesh as dinner to the gods and was condemned to a life of eternal hunger and thirst, is well known.

<sup>13</sup> Atreus' dialogue with the *satelles* corresponds with the motif—known from other tragedies—of *domina - nutrix*; cf. Gottfried Mader, «*Quod nolunt velint: Deference and Doublespeak at Seneca, Thyestes 334-335*», *CJ* 94 (1998-99) pp. 31-32, where it is noted that: «A major

idea of slaughtering Thyestes' sons and serving their flesh at the dinner table. Atreus insidiously pretends that he shall lovingly receive his exiled brother and his sons, who insist on the acceptance of the offer. Thus, they return to Mycenae, where their suspicions are assuaged by deceptive compliments.

Thyestes submits to his brother with humility, entrusts him with his children and in turn, Atreus concedes half the kingdom to Thyestes. The reconciliation of the two brothers turns the thoughts of the chorus to the continuous alternation of joy and sorrow<sup>14</sup> in the lives of men; no one must have faith in happiness, or be driven to despair by misfortune. Atreus has already gone to a small grove<sup>15</sup>, where, violating his vows and the sanctities, he proceeds to commit acts of incredible horror. A messenger announces the crime to the chorus<sup>16</sup>.

Then a messenger describes the precipitous setting of Pelops' acropolis in Mycenae in dark colours. There, in this abode surrounded by deep-shaded forest, hang votive offerings and spoils. There, ghosts and apparitions wander, there the water of the spring flows calmly, while oracles issue from a cave. It is in this place that Atreus, as priest and slayer performs his brutal sacrifice: *ipse est sacerdos*<sup>17</sup> and hesitates momentarily<sup>18</sup> as to which of the three sons of Thyestes he will sacrifice first, but soon reaches his decision: *Tantalus prima hostia est*<sup>19</sup>.

Then the messenger describes the abhorrent sacrifice and the morbid dinner Atreus prepared from the flesh of his victims. At that moment, the sun stood still, changed its course and everything was covered in darkness.<sup>20</sup> The members of the chorus begin Ode 4<sup>21</sup> with questions<sup>22</sup> which demand explanation. They wonder whether it is a simple eclipse or an act of the gods. In actual fact, it is an introduction, a prelude to cosmic disaster as a result of human malice<sup>23</sup>, while

function of these scenes, in other words, is to dramatize the duel between the *furor* and *mens bona*, and the psychological aspects have been accordingly emphasized by commentators» and extensive relevant bibliography is provided. For the role played by the *satelles* in his dialogue with Atreus, see also Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Cambridge 2003, especially pp. 154-164.

<sup>14</sup> *Thyest.* 847 ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Thyest.* 641 ff. The layout of the area, and in particular the reference of line *Thyest.* 641: *In arce summa Pelopiae pars est domus*, has special political interest. As Gottfried Mader, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40 notes, «As Atreus' citadel towers menacingly above his resentful subjects (641-645), *rex* and *privati* inhabit unbridgeable moral spaces». For Seneca's stylistic elements in the description of the grove, see Victoria Tietze Larson, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy*, Studien zur klassischen Philologie 84, Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 120-121.

<sup>16</sup> *Thyest.* 691 ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Thyest.* 691.

<sup>18</sup> *Thyest.* 713-714: *quem prius mactet sibi / dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet.*

<sup>19</sup> *Thyest.* 718.

<sup>20</sup> A relatively similar image of a sun affected by developments and participating in them is to be found in the prologue of Seneca's tragedy *Oedipus* (1-4): *Iam nocte Titan dubius expulsa redit / et nube maestum squalida exoritur iubar, / lumenque flamma triste luctifica gerens / prospiciet auida peste solatas domos, / stragemque*

*quam nox fecit ostendet dies.* The same thought is to be found in Lucan, who, also influenced by the teachings of Stoicism, presents a sun reluctant to rise in Pharsalus on the day of the crucial battle between Caesar and Pompey (Luc. 7. 1-6: *Segnior, Oceano quam lex aeterna uocabat, / luctificus Titan numquam magis aethera contra / egit equos cursumque polo rapiente retorsit, / defectusque pati uoluit raptaeque labores / lucis, et attraxit nubes, non pabula flammis / sed ne Thesalico purus lucret in orbe*). For more on the subject, see Ulrich Hübner, «Der Sonnenaufgang vor Pharsalus. Zu Lucan. 7, 1-3», *Philologus* 120 (1976) pp. 107-116, where, especially pp. 109 ff., the presence of the motif in Thyestes' myth is highlighted and numerous parallel excerpts are mentioned, as, for example, Ov. *A. Am.* 1. 327-330: *Cressa Thyesteo si se abstinuisset amore / et quantum est uno posse carere viro?, / non medium rupisset iter, curruque retorto / Auroram versis Phoebus adisset equis* and Ov. *Tr.* 2. 1. 391-392: *si non Aeropen frater sceleratus amasset, / aversos Solis non legeremus equos.*

<sup>21</sup> *Thyest.* 789-884.

<sup>22</sup> For the aim of the questions used here, see Otto Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas*, Meisenheim am Glan 1966, pp. 77-78; Peter J. Davis, *op. cit.* p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Thyest.* 880-881. The strong emotional atmosphere has already been reinforced by the rhetorical questions a few lines above. For this device of speech in Senecan tragedy, cf. M. Billerbeck, *Senecas Tragödien; Sprachliche und Stilistische Untersuchungen, Mnemosyne*, suppl. 105, Leiden / New York / København 1988, pp. 123-126.

concurrently we are introduced to the Stoic theory relating to universal change and the end of the world<sup>24</sup>.

At the dinner that follows, the fast escalation of the dreadful events is breathtaking, their savagery inconceivable. Thyestes, unsuspecting, eats the flesh of his children and drinks wine mixed with their blood.

But it is a trait of the unfortunate to be wary of unexpected joy. Thyestes is overcome by premonitions of fear and pending disaster without knowing why. This pending disaster is indicated by the dominating imagery at this point in the work, i.e. the tempests, the floods, which reflect the continuous turmoil of revenge and the drama of blood<sup>25</sup>.

Thyestes asks for his children and Atreus gives his brother an ambiguous reply: *reddam, et tibi illos nullus eripiet dies*<sup>26</sup>, and presenting him with the severed heads and hands of the children asks if he recognizes them. Thyestes, devastated replies: *agnosco fratrem*<sup>27</sup> and then Atreus, gloating, reveals the unprecedented crime<sup>28</sup>. The dénouement of the horrible drama follows, in a single phrase uttered by Atreus: *epulatus ipse es impia natos dape*<sup>29</sup>. Thyestes implores Zeus to strike the cruel and heartless Atreus with lightning, while the latter continues to gloat sarcastically<sup>30</sup>.

The predominant characteristic of the work is its melodramatic form. The melodrama lies in recording of the conflict between good and evil, innocence and guilt. It is clear that in Seneca rage and other ills are both expected and absolutely perceptible<sup>31</sup>.

This tragedy of Seneca is like rhetoric in dramatic form and it is in accordance with the morbid tendency of the time for anything grand and supernatural. Concurrently however, it echoes the political situation of the time, during which the minds of the leaders, disordered by pleasures of the flesh, were afflicted by the terrible «disease» of Caesarean insanity<sup>32</sup>, apparent in the tragic heroes. Their endeavour to transgress their selves and all that has happened until then is endless.

Thus, Seneca's stance portrayed his time, a time when the people's assemblies were quiet, the Senate simply delivered its lesson and public opinion was formed and occasionally expressed by requests made in the area of entertainment<sup>33</sup>, which was an integral part of the imperial regime.

<sup>24</sup> As Joe Park Poe, *op. cit.*, p. 373 ff., accurately notes, in this description Seneca is following the Stoic dogma of *συνπάθεια τῶν ὅλων*, according to which every action has repercussions on the entire universe. Thus this tempest constitutes the externalisation of the tempestuous passion in Atreus' soul.

<sup>25</sup> With regard to the strong presence of imagery originating from storms in the play, see, among others, Norman T. Pratt, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-229.

<sup>26</sup> *Thyest.* 997.

<sup>27</sup> *Thyest.* 1006. Concerning the witticism, see mainly Gary Meltzer, «Dark Wit and Black Humor in Seneca's *Thyestes*», *TAPhA* 118 (1988) pp. 323, 326-327, 329.

<sup>28</sup> *Thyest.* 1030-1: *quidquid e natis tuis / superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes.*

<sup>29</sup> *Thyest.* 1034.

<sup>30</sup> Since the mind of the audience should be focused upon Atreus and Thyestes, the absence of the chorus during Act 5 seems dramatically preferable; cf. Peter J. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> See Anna Lydia Motto - John R. Clark, «Seneca's *Thyestes* als Melodrama», *RSC* 24 (1978) pp. 363-378, *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> After Octavian's death arbitrariness entered public life, and the emperors who came from the House of Augustus were in every way his inferiors. Each one tried to surpass his predecessor in cruelty and savagery. Tiberius' government controlled everything, including thought. As for the writers of the time, they feel contempt for their environment, they despair, and their discontent is expressed by bitter sarcasm, or acts full of inspiration and eloquence. This could explain the paradoxical phenomenon that the writers of the time are moralists and more or less satirists; as they cannot influence the public and the assemblies, they observe behaviour and try to reconcile the needs of the time with duty and honour. A turn towards philosophy offered an outlet for this attempt, as it showed them happiness *per se*, while rendering them indifferent to everything else. The Epicurean and Stoic movements lent themselves to this requirement, since Epicureanism facilitated the way towards corruption by allowing pleasure (thus voluntarily siding with the tyrants), while Stoicism rejected all pleasure and armed its followers during the attacks against the tyrants-emperors.

<sup>33</sup> The emperors always managed to «adapt» requests or demands expressed in the area of entertainment to suit

Through spectacles, the emperors had achieved a safe way of governing the masses and a sure weapon for supporting their authoritarianism<sup>34</sup>.

Within this general context, a large number of elements of narrative time are transformed into indications of the imperial age and literary narrative becomes multifaceted and abstract touching on the limits of the symbolic and the timeless.

Mycenae, the setting of the drama, is the distant echo of imperial Rome, and Atreus feels he is *regum atque regem*<sup>35</sup>. The heinous ancient myth was adapted to the temptations of power, to the passion of anger that takes over the soul of the tyrant and to the results of this passion. In Nero's time, the terror spread by his personality and actions inspired the depiction of a savage tyrant, which was a distortion of the true king-sovereign.

Seneca, with his own Atreus, goes beyond the simple description of a harsh monarch, reaching a morbidity which should be considered a complex, or better still a reaction to the social and political system of his time<sup>36</sup>. In his work, Seneca incorporates verities such as insatiable ambition, thirst for revenge that exceeds the limits of strong and common emotion, the survival of a leader in an environment of distrust, deceit, intrigue, crime, violence and conspiracy, the indifference to the divine, the violation of divine and human law, the lack of mercy, the passive acceptance of faith. Thus, the myth offers a gratification of man's natural impulse towards violence and finally self-destruction, and depicts the conflict between good and evil.

The moral atrocities found in Seneca's prose are in a way opposed by Stoic dogma. In *Thyestes*, however, these atrocities are simply presented without justification and this ever-present pain and fear of death inspires Seneca and urges him towards horrifying descriptions<sup>37</sup>. It could be regarded as something more than a simple rejection; it also reflects the repulsion the poet feels towards his environment. The poet does not recoil from the horror, but brings the description of Atreus to completion through his actions. He does not see in Atreus a personal weakness to be objectively judged and condemned, but an instinct that up to a point he himself shares and even expects his audience to share.

The undermining of morals and values during Nero's time reinforces the concept that Atreus becomes the diabolical model of the matricidal and fratricidal tyrant<sup>38</sup>, though, however, it is difficult to accept that Seneca's depiction of Atreus constituted a reproof of Nero.

The indirect justification of both myth and reality is to attribute the extreme rage to the family curse. Atreus' action has been predetermined by some innate trait of character, which his impartial self-awareness and conscience cannot control<sup>39</sup>. It is important to note that Atreus, an archetypal

their own agendas. On the other hand, they tried to keep the public occupied daily and for long hours, so that there was no room for thought which could lead to judgement and possibly revolution.

<sup>34</sup> Spectacles were shown at the amphitheatres. In reality they were an endless succession of dramas ending in fatalities, and the imposed salutation of those about to die indicates a humiliating contempt towards human dignity and the dangerous apathy of an entire nation.

<sup>35</sup> *Thyest.* 912.

<sup>36</sup> See Joe Park Poe, *op. cit.*, pp. 357 ff.

<sup>37</sup> At this point it is worth quoting a comment by C. J. Herington, «Senecan Tragedy», *Arion* 5 (1966) p. 460: «*Thyestes* is in fact the most clearly Stoic, and in some ways the most compassionate and human, of the

dramas. Anger, insatiate ambition, the intolerable choice between political kingship and the kingship of the mind, are not exactly dead issues yet, though we may be shy of formulating them this way».

<sup>38</sup> The remarks of William M. Calder III, *op. cit.* (n. 6), pp. 192-195 are perceptive, as he attempts, with convincing arguments, to connect Atreus in *Thyestes* with Nero in the tragedy *Octavia*. See also more recently Alessandro Schiesaro, *op. cit.* (n. 13), p. 97: «Atreus does not necessarily portray Nero on stage ... The ritualization of violence encoded in the murder as-sacrifice shows that Atreus is the incarnation of imperial power at a much more radical and discomfiting level» and p. 153: «Atreus could be Nero».

<sup>39</sup> Joe Park Poe, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-376, *passim*.

schemer, intriguer and terrible plotter, is governed by rage and thus the dominant concept of *furor*<sup>40</sup> becomes a family affair, a wretched inheritance.

In the prologue the miasma of evil is already present, dragged along by Tantalus, the pioneer of the atrocious act of cannibalism. But the curse of the Claudian generation<sup>41</sup> also casts a heavy shadow over the disordered Nero, whose violence is not an isolated phenomenon but part of many others, a legacy of his House, a curse of his race, although there is no myth about the punishment and condemnation of Nero's ancestors corresponding to the myth dealing with Tantalus' ordeal of hunger and thirst.

The passion of violence is passed on from generation to generation and increases with the enlargement of the family: *fratrem expavescat frater et natum parens / natusque patrem, liberi pereant male / peius tamen nascantur*<sup>42</sup>. The myth of the heroes describes the timeless reality, connects the past with the present.

The slave to whom Atreus reveals his plans for revenge, though initially reluctant to comply, since the unspeakable act comes into conflict with the principles of just government, religion and morality, finally submits and becomes a pawn, an accomplice, a participant in Atreus' furious thought and act. So while the unfairness and brutality of the tyrants is stigmatised, while the vanity and artificial happiness of the sovereigns are indicated, the sovereign is allowed unlimited arbitrary powers.

The fear of death and punishment is distant from the mythical Atreus and from the real king who sees things dispassionately and, according to Stoic thought, without the fear of death. The furious Atreus has a partner not only in malice but also in tolerance, in the general passive, malicious, submissive attitude of the city slave, who becomes a mouthpiece, speaking of justice and caution but also of obligatory consent. The insinuation is obvious: people are not loyal to leaders because of honesty, but because of fear, ambition and avarice. These relationships, however, only indicate the artificial happiness of tyrants.

Seneca's view on the nature of true kingship: *immane regnum est posse sine regno pati*<sup>43</sup> is a position that does not find reciprocation in the «city», it does not create *logos*, as Nero is following a course without end, without catharsis, without victory. When Atreus expresses<sup>44</sup> uncontrollable and unquenched passion, the irony of such choices is strongly apparent<sup>45</sup>. A passion which reminds one of a lion, which after satisfying its hunger, continues to kill until *dente iam lasso piger*<sup>46</sup>.

The insatiable Atreus is driven to misconduct, to madness, because of his deficient emotional satisfaction; he is suited to an environment of total mental rage, where conscious desire and control are easily overrun, where the weakness to seek *aliquid novi* is forever present. It is almost natural for someone who is troubled by agonizing questions regarding his wife's fidelity and his children's parentage to be unable to find peace, to come across as totally irrational and, at the same time, to be satisfied with nothing. Atreus is undoubtedly a tragic figure, someone who has lost his

<sup>40</sup> For the concept of *furor* in *Thyestes*, see Alessandro Schiesaro, «Seneca's *Thyestes* and the Morality of Tragic *furor*», in Jaś Elsner & Jamie Masters (eds.), *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History & Representation*, London 1994, pp. 196-210 and more recently Alessandro Schiesaro, *op. cit.* (n. 13), pp. 26-36.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the Julian - Claudian dynasty as being equally cursed as the generation of Tantalus see William M. Calder III, *op. cit.* (n. 6), p. 193, who cites [Sen.] *Octav.* 257-269.

<sup>42</sup> *Thyest.* 40-42.

<sup>43</sup> *Thyest.* 470. Gary Meltzer, *op. cit.*, p. 320, accurately describes this phrase «a paradoxical Stoic epigram».

<sup>44</sup> For the rhetorical style of his monologue, see, for instance, Gustav Adolf Seeck, «Senecas Tragödien», in Eckard Lefevre (ed.), *Das Römische Drama*, Darmstadt 1978, p. 395.

<sup>45</sup> *Thyest.* 889: *bene est, abunde est.*

<sup>46</sup> *Thyest.* 736.

human destination and finds an outlet for his tragic nature in a basic animal characteristic, that of food. The murder of the children «fulfilled» him but did not satiate his hunger, the tragic element follows in his steps, and his disturbed soul cannot find catharsis. He does not achieve victory because he is actually trapped; he is an instrument and victim of the family curse. He is not master, he is not slave; he is the partial darkness of the background, the leading *conductor* of a terrible symphony<sup>47</sup>.

In this drama, Thyestes is more patient and human<sup>48</sup>. He has known wealth, power, guilt, exile and return, destined for *fata sequi*. It is a speech of guidance, told by Seneca with heroic passion and without any humble submission to fate. Thyestes remains almost totally hortative when he savours and analyses his experience of evil, and his words are sententious as he tries to convince himself of the morality of his actions<sup>49</sup>. He consciously refers to the past tribulations of his exile, and being a tragic character himself, he does not realize that what is to come is far worse the simple evil. Exile, which he so easily dismissed as a time of suffering, is a benefit compared to the misfortune that befalls him. Though Thyestes appears to be an innocent victim of Atreus' cruelty, Seneca fairly strikes a balance between his two heroes in the last lines of the drama, when Thyestes says: *vindices aderunt dei; / his puniendum vota te tradunt mea* and Atreus replies: *te puniendum liberis trado tuis*<sup>50</sup>. The non-existence of a *deus ex machina*, deprived Thyestes of the satisfaction, or at least the consolation of seeing Atreus punished, but also deprived Atreus of condemnation. Thus, if we are to accept this parallel course, Seneca, by delivering Atreus from condemnation, is favouring Nero.

To summarise, the real origin of the decisions does not lie in the stimulus one receives from outside, but in his own free conduct. The notion of «acquiescence» or «consent» is strongly present in the foreground, and man, as a vehicle for *Logos*, is able to react affirmatively or negatively to the impulses generated inside him by sensual impressions and to the images they produce.

Indeed, Seneca portrayed this mechanism of Stoic philosophy with succinctness, saying that every rational creature will not act unless prompted by the sight of something and has received an impulse, which is then affirmed by consent<sup>51</sup>.

Seneca is divulging something hidden in the depths of time; he is revealing an intrinsic truth, a reality hidden behind phenomena, thus distancing himself from the public opinion of his time. Hence, the specific myth, as presented by Seneca, is based on the balance and intensity of political concepts, while his perspective offers a collection of opposite though combined inner forces. It is evident that in Thyestes' myth the intense psychological conditions come into conflict with the subject and with the soul, and are thus more violent than any other.

Through Atreus' Hyperbole and Hubris, through Thyestes' guilt and annihilation, the philosopher sends his political message towards every direction, sovereigns and people; through the elegant art of *γνωμολογεῖν* he castigates dissoluteness, implies future ills, and aims to offer a reflection of the present and expose Nero. He brings Atreus' myth closer to the real story of people placed

<sup>47</sup> See Anna Lydia Motto - John R. Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

<sup>48</sup> Thyestes' guilt, as well as his personality's faults, e.g. his insatiable ambition, do not however allow us to look upon him as the personification of *sapiens*, as supported by Olof Gigon, «Bemerkungen zu Senecas *Thyestes*», *Philologus* 93 (1938) pp. 176-183 and accepted by Joe Park Poe, *op. cit.*, especially p. 360. The view of R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca's Thyestes*, American Philological Association Text-

books Series 11, Atlanta 1985, p. 222, where Thyestes is described as «a caricature of a sententious moralist», is far more satisfying.

<sup>49</sup> *Thyest.* 920-933.

<sup>50</sup> *Thyest.* 1110-1112.

<sup>51</sup> Sen. *Epist.* 113, 18: *Omne rationale animal nihil agit nisi primum specie alicuius rei irritatum est, deinde impetum cepit, deinde adsensio confirmavit hunc impetum.*

within space and time, people accountable for their actions. Thus the myth does not only act as a subject of narration, or a theme for the development of ideas, but as a ground of intense speculation, where the relation between life and death, human and divine, and between the individual and fate projects the social context of his time.<sup>52</sup>

The past is as fresh in the city's memory as the present. The fate of the House of Atreus belongs to a distant past but clearly depicts the contrast between mythical tradition and the new political thought. Concurrently, it is near enough to the present to make the conflict of values painfully tangible and allow for the *logos* of the myth to be recorded in time.

The end of the tragedy does not refute the essence of the city. The unresolved question of the protagonists' guilt is certain to trouble the audience, to leave questions unanswered, to rouse consciences and generate doubt. Thus it is obvious that *Thyestes* indicates both the timelessness of myth, and the harmonious unity of past, present and future.

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<sup>52</sup> See Otto Regenbogen, «Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas», *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* 7 (1927-28) pp. 167-218, passim; Cary Weltzer, *op. cit.*, 309-330; cf. also the accurate comment of Ronald Syme,

*Tacitus*, Oxford 1958, p. 362: «some *Atreus* or *Thyestes* might come in useful for invective against palace and dynasty, for maxims of subversive statecraft».