

THE CHORUS IN SENECA'S *THYESTES*

The relationship between the choruses of Seneca's tragedies and the action of the plays in which they occur is one of the least understood and most controversial aspects of the Roman dramatist's work. It is often asserted that Seneca's choral odes are mere act-dividers, that their relationship with the play's action is loose and unconvincing. I would not care to assert that the handling of the chorus is flawless in all instances in Seneca's tragedies (or indeed in the works of any ancient tragedian), but in his best works it is, I believe, masterly. In this paper I propose to illustrate the close and complex interconnection between ode and action in Senecan tragedy through an analysis of the choruses of *Thyestes*.

A preliminary matter first. In what follows I shall assume that Seneca wrote with the possibility of staging in mind. There seems little point in rehearsing the arguments for and against stage performance of Seneca's tragedies.¹ Suffice it to say that because Seneca's tragedies do in fact work very effectively on stage I find it difficult to escape the view that Seneca wrote with at the least the possibility of stage production of some sort in mind. This assumption needs stating because it affects the nature of the problems that *Thyestes* poses and the manner in which I attempt to resolve them. Let us turn then to the odes themselves.

IDENTITY OF THE CHORUS

First of all, who then sings them? Although the members of this chorus are not identified in the usual Senecan manner, it is not difficult to infer from the content of their first song that they are Argive nobles,² for this is a chorus that cares passionately about its city's welfare. They begin with a prayer:

Argos de superis si quis Achaicum
Pisaeasque domos curribus inclitas,
isthmi si quis amat regna Corinthii...(122–4)

That they know of no god to whom they can address their appeal is a measure of their desperation. The repeated 'si quis' underlines their anxiety. Much of the prayer is taken up with description of familiar places in the Peloponnese (122–31). The detailed

¹ The classic statement of the case against the possibility of staging is to be found in O. Zwielerlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1966). This view is adopted by R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca's Thyestes* (Atlanta, 1985), p. 15 but he accepts the possibility of actual performance in Seneca's lifetime, p. 15. n. 77. For arguments in favour of the possibility of staging see A. J. Boyle, 'Senecan Tragedy: Twelve Propositions', *Ramus* 16 (1987), 78–101, W. Calder III, 'The Size of the Chorus in Seneca's *Agamemnon*', *CP* 70 (1975), 32–5, D. F. Sutton, *Seneca on the Stage* (Leiden, 1986) and B. Walker's review of Zwielerlein, *CP* 64 (1969), 183–7.

² Just as we can infer the identity of the chorus of *Med.* from the content of their song. Most Senecan choruses either identify themselves or are identified by others (*Tro.* 67ff., *Oed.* 124ff. *Ag.* 310ff., 586ff., *HF* 827ff.). *Pha.* is an exception. However, on the basis of manuscript evidence it is arguable that they are Cretan women. See A. J. Boyle, *Seneca's Phaedra* (Liverpool, 1987), p. 154. In *Thy.* the phrase 'nobiles Argi' 119 might be taken as foreshadowing the chorus's identity. It should be noted that an audience would have less difficulty in recognising the identity of a chorus than do readers precisely because they can see them. See D. F. Sutton, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 35ff. For an opposed view see O. Zwielerlein, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 74ff.

description of each locality suggests the chorus's own affection for the land its members live in. Each place is picked out by reference to its most characteristic quality: Corinth with its isthmus, Taygetus and its snows, the river Alpheus and its proximity to Olympia. But the chorus goes beyond mere listing of prominent landmarks through its evocation of the seasons, the effects of summer and winter upon Mt Taygetus (126–9), and the cool refreshment afforded by Alpheus (130f.). It is love for their land which prompts the chorus's anxiety. These then are citizens of Argos who love their country.

THE PRESENCE OF THE CHORUS

Since for the most part Seneca follows classical Greek practice in postponing entry of the chorus until after the first scene,³ it is in no way problematical that a chorus should be ignorant of the events which take place in the first Act of a tragedy. We are not surprised then that in their first ode the chorus shows no awareness of Tantalus' encounter with the Fury.⁴

The second chorus of *Thyestes* is, however, more problematical. For Zwierlein inconcinnity between ode and preceding action is simply more evidence for the unperformability of Senecan drama.⁵ However, for critics like myself who believe that Seneca wrote with the possibility of performance in mind, or for critics like Calder⁶ who believe that Seneca wrote for the private stage, or like Sutton⁷ who believe that he wrote for the public stage, there is a problem: the chorus seems unfamiliar with the events of Act 2.

After line 335 the chorus enters to sing its second ode. Their opening words are, superficially at least, surprising:

tandem regia nobilis,
antiqui genus Inachi
fratrum composuit minas. (336–8)

Surprising because the audience knows these words to be false. The discrepancy between the chorus's words and the previous Act has caused considerable difficulty. Sutton⁸ has attempted to resolve the difficulty posed by these lines by deleting them, a solution first proposed by Richter. Sutton favours this solution because he accepts that Seneca conforms to classical Greek practice in the handling of the chorus, i.e. that the chorus remains onstage from *parodos* to *exodos*. He argues as follows:

But in order to lay to rest the notion that the chorus is withdrawn during the acts it is worth pointing out that on a number of occasions the chorus is demonstrably thought of as present for the episodes. This is obvious in cases where the chorus does engage in dialogue with an actor or (a rather frequent scene in Seneca) in which a Nuntius or similar eyewitness describes an offstage event to the chorus.⁹

He then goes on to cite fourteen alleged instances in which we can be certain the

³ In *Hercules*, *Medea*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon* and *Phaedra*, but perhaps not in *Troades*.

⁴ It is of course quite normal in a classical Greek tragedy for a chorus to prove ignorant of the events of the prologue. The first chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* is a familiar example. That chorus celebrates the release of Thebes from all anxiety at precisely the moment when a fresh crisis has arisen.

⁵ Zwierlein, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 78.

⁷ Sutton, op. cit. (n. 1).

⁹ Sutton, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 37f.

⁶ W. M. Calder, art. cit. (n. 1), 32–5.

⁸ Sutton, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 40.

chorus is present on stage during an Act.¹⁰ Against Sutton's position we can cite a number of instances in which the chorus is clearly not present. Note that at *Phaedra* 601 Hippolytus actually draws attention to the fact that there are no witnesses present: 'en locus ab omni liber arbitrio uacat' and that at *Hercules* 827ff. Theseus draws attention to the chorus's arrival:

densa sed laeto uenit
clamore turba frontibus laurum gerens,
magnique meritas Herculis laudes canit. (*Her.* 827–9)

This particular instance is strikingly reminiscent of Menander's practice.¹¹ In that writer we often find that the first Act will end with such words as these:

καὶ γὰρ προσιώντας τοῦσδε Πανιστάς τινας
εἰς τὸν τόπον δεῦρ' ὑποβεβρεγμένους ὁρῶ,
οἷς μὴ ἵνοχλεῖν εὐκαιρον εἶναί μοι δοκεῖ. (*Dyscolus* 230–2)

The same device is also used in the *Aspis*, *Epitrepontes* and *Perikeiromene*. Seneca's use of a formula characteristic of Greek New Comedy suggests that he has employed it for the same reason: to mark the entry of the chorus that has been absent.

In at least two plays then, *Phaedra* and *Hercules*, the chorus is withdrawn and is not present during an Act. Calder and Tarrant have argued that the evidence points to greater flexibility in the handling of the chorus in post-classical tragedy generally than was usual in fifth-century Athens (though even there withdrawal of the chorus was not unknown¹²), and they are, in my view, certainly right.

Returning to *Thyestes* the first thing we should note is that the textual emendation proposed by Richter and still supported by Sutton does not resolve the apparent contradiction, for the chorus proves equally ignorant of the events of Act 2 in their third ode as well (546ff.). Otherwise they could not interpret the apparent reconciliation of Act 3 as resulting from 'pietas' (549). Richter's proposed surgery is simply not drastic enough to solve the problem.

But if we accept that a Senecan chorus may or may not be present during an Act the problem is more apparent than real. It is not difficult for us, especially if we are an audience in a theatre, to grasp what has taken place. We can deduce that being citizens of Argos the members of the chorus have heard reports of the reconciliation which is to take place between the two brothers. We know, however, from their visible absence from the stage in Act 2 that they are not privy to Atreus' true plans. In one respect then the members of the chorus are in the same position as when they sang their first ode, that is to say they are ignorant. The first ode began with a prayer that 'these reciprocal alternations of crime should not return' (133) at precisely the moment when the cycle had been renewed. The second ode proclaims brotherly reconciliation at precisely the time when reconciliation has become impossible.

The fourth choral ode of *Thyestes* has also proved difficult. When the members of the chorus sing the first three odes of *Thyestes* they sing in ignorance. We, the audience, were able to see that they were absent from the stage in Acts 1 and 2. That

¹⁰ Not all cases are persuasive. Some, for example, are merely entrance cues at the end of an ode, e.g. *HF* 202ff., *Phaed.* 358f., *Oed.* 205 after which a chorus might well leave the stage. Others contain no suggestion of the chorus's presence, e.g. *Phaed.* 909ff., 1256ff., *Ag.* 408ff. There are nine indisputable cases.

¹¹ See also Eur. *Phoen.* 196f.

¹² R. J. Tarrant, 'Senecan Drama and its Antecedents', *HSCP* 82 (1978), 213–63. Tarrant, p. 223, notes the following instances: Aesch. *Eum.* 232–43, Soph. *Ajax* 815–65, Eur. *Alc.* 747–860, *Helen* 386–514, *Rhesus* 565–674.

they were ignorant of Atreus' true intentions was not surprising. In Act 4, however, the messenger addressed his narrative of Atreus' crime to the members of the chorus. And yet this chorus too, as Zwierlein has pointed out,¹³ is ignorant. Its members are aware of the surrounding darkness but are at a loss when it comes to identifying its cause. Hence their urgent demands for explanation: 'cur, Phoebe, tuos rapis aspectus?' 793, 'quid te aetherio pepulit cursu? quae causa tuos limite certo deiecit equos?' 802–4, and their anguished speculations at 805ff. If they have heard in detail of Atreus' crime why do they need to ask the questions? In this case Zwierlein's criticism seems to me simply misplaced. Atreus' crime may be monstrous but the flight of the sun is so appalling an event that it is psychologically plausible that the chorus finds itself paralysed with fear. What seems obvious to a scholar in his study may not seem obvious at all in the panic of the moment.

But if we accept that a Senecan chorus can be either present or absent during a particular Act we are left with a larger problem. The critic or director must decide whether or not the chorus is present in each particular instance. When is the chorus on stage in *Thyestes*? I have argued that it is not present in Acts 1 and 2. The opening words of the third chorus suggest that it has been present in Act 3, for its first three lines offer a description (albeit an inaccurate one) of the immediately preceding action. It is certainly present in Act 4. Whether the chorus should be present in Act 5 is a question for a director to decide. It is perhaps preferable that it be absent in Act 5 for it does not participate in the action and its presence might be a distraction: in Act 5 the mind of the audience should be concentrated solely on Atreus and Thyestes.

I would now like to turn to an examination of the relationship of each of the four choral odes of *Thyestes* to the Acts which surround them.

The first ode: 122–75

Even though the first ode is not a direct response to the events of Act 1 the chorus's words in fact relate closely to what has just been said and done. Reference to the isthmus of Corinth (124f.) cannot fail to remind the spectator of the Fury's description of the present state of the isthmus (112–14). And if Tantalus' presence has stripped Cithaeron of its snows (117f.) then Taygetus is not likely to be covered with its 'far-seen snows' (126). Alpheus may normally be a 'clear, cool stream' (130) but it is so no longer (116f.). Moreover, the orderly succession of seasons (125–9) that the chorus envisages has already been shattered by the unnatural effects of Tantalus' intrusion into the world.¹⁴ For the attentive spectator or reader the chorus-members' description of their land underlines not only their affection for it but also their ignorance.

But it is in the conclusion of their prayer that the chorus proves most deluded:

aduertat placidum numen et arceat,
alternae scelerum ne redeant uices
nec succedat auo deterior nepos
et maior placeat culpa minoribus.
tandem lassa feros exuat impetus
sicci progenies impia Tantali. (132–7)¹⁵

¹³ Zwierlein, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 77f.

¹⁴ R. J. Tarrant, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 126–9.

¹⁵ Unlike Zwierlein, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* (Oxford, 1986) and Tarrant (1985) I am inclined to treat 136f. as the conclusion of the prayer rather than the introduction to what follows.

That such a prayer has no hope of fulfilment has been demonstrated in Act 1: Tantalus has already infected his descendants and we, the audience, know that his sin will be repeated on a grander scale. The chorus's prayer that such a recurrence of crime ('scelerum' 133) should be forbidden ('arceat' 132) will be no more effective than Tantalus' attempt to forbid the crime ('arcebo scelus' 95).¹⁶ Indeed the words they choose 'alternae scelerum...uices' 133 are clearly intended to recall the words of the Fury's command: 'et alterna uice/stringatur ensis' 25f. The chorus's hopes have already been proved vain. Its conclusion is brief: it hopes that Tantalus' descendants might change if only through exhaustion ('lassa' 136). It hopes that they will cast off their 'bestial impulses' ('feros...impetus' 136). But here too its hopes are vain. The Fury has already commanded Tantalus to excite their 'bestial hearts' ('ferum pectus' 85f.), and she is successful, for bestiality is the leading quality of both Atreus ('ferus' 546, 721 and note 497ff. [Umbrian hound simile], 707ff. [Indian tigress simile], 732ff. [Armenian lion simile]) and Thyestes (491, 497ff., 778ff.).¹⁷

The chorus displays greater understanding in its analysis of the condition of the Tantalid house (138ff.). But even here it fails to understand the connections between past and present. There has been enough sin ('peccatum satis est' 138), at least from the point of view of ordinary human beings. But the Tantalids are far from ordinary. In their case moral law counts for nothing ('fas ualuit nihil' 138). In their case even the fact that all are equally wicked ('commune nefas' 139) had failed to deter.¹⁸ To establish that this truly is 'commune nefas', 'shared wickedness',¹⁹ the chorus cites the cases of both the earlier human members of the family: Pelops and Tantalus.

In the case of Pelops they stress his treacherous killing of Myrtilus ('proditus occidit' 140), the deceitful charioteer of Oenomaus ('deceptor domini' 140). Pelops' crime has no direct parallel in the play but it does recall the chorus's earlier reference to Pisa (123) and foreshadow Thyestes' own recollections of his past:

cerno...
celebrata iuueni stadia, per quae nobilis
palnam paterno non semel curru tuli. (407–10)

Not only does Thyestes refer to chariot-racing, he actually reminds us of his father's involvement (and of course his involvement was criminal) in that sport. It is tempting then to see this aspect of Thyestes as an element inherited from his father.

If Pelops in some respect foreshadows Thyestes then Tantalus most clearly anticipates Atreus. He too is a child butcher. Like Atreus in Act 4 (691ff.), Tantalus plays the role of priest, for Pelops is an 'immature victim' ('immatura...uictima' 146), is slain at an altar/hearth ('focus' means both 'hearth' and 'altar')²⁰ and is of course offered to

¹⁶ Tarrant, op. cit. (n. 1), notes that 'arceat' recalls 'arcebo' in 95.

¹⁷ The description of the manner in which Thyestes devours his children at 778ff. suggests bestiality for 'lancinat' and 'mandit' are not words one associates with human eating. O. Skutsch observes that 'mandere' 'stresses the visual aspect of eating and therefore tends to be used in scenes of horror, such as the Cyclops eating Odysseus' companions, Livius 32 Mo.; Virg. *Aen.* 3.627' (*The Annals of Q. Ennius* [Oxford, 1985], p. 278). Note too that Seneca quotes Epicurus with approval on the subject of solitary 'uisceratio' ('eating of sacrificial meats'). It is, he says, characteristic of lions and wolves (*Ep.* 19.10).

¹⁸ In fact in the case of Atreus 'commune nefas' is not a deterrent but an incentive to crime. It is his belief that his brother is precisely like himself that leads him to plot against Thyestes. The chorus does not understand the psychology of crime.

¹⁹ For this interpretation of 'commune nefas' see Tarrant, op. cit. (n. 1), ad loc. O. Zwielerlein, *Kritischer Kommentar zu den Tragödien Senecas* (Stuttgart, 1986) concurs (139).

²⁰ Note that Thyestes' children are also slain at an altar/hearth ('focus' 61, 768, 1058).

the gods. If the feast that Pelops offers is bestial ('dapibus feris' 150), that of Atreus is fit for beasts (747–51, 1033).

Perhaps the most important phrase in this section of the ode is 'commune nefas' 139. For the citizens of Argos 'shared crime' characterises the former members of the Tantalid house, Tantalus and Pelops. It is a measure of their lack of understanding that 'shared crime' characterises its present members equally well, that the chorus's understanding of the past produces no realistic assessment of the present generation of Tantalids.

The second ode: 336–403

The second and third odes are markedly different from the first and fourth. Both are reflective in character and together they establish a philosophic standard by which both Atreus and Thyestes can be judged. Moreover, these odes reveal the inadequacy of philosophy when confronted by the phenomenon of total tyranny.

Let us consider the second ode. On this occasion the chorus's subject is the nature of kingship. Its words are pertinent in relation to what we have just seen, for Atreus embodies the very antithesis of all that this chorus represents, and in relation to what we are about to see, for Thyestes, superficially at least, espouses the values here proclaimed. After its three-line introduction (336–8) the chorus continues with a generalised rebuke addressed to those with a lust for power ('cupidi arcium' 342) but one with particular pertinence to Atreus and Thyestes.

quis uos exagitat furor,
alternis dare sanguinem
et sceptrum scelere aggredi? (339–41)

Note how this brief question recalls key words and phrases. Here the chorus stresses: the notion of reciprocity ('alternis' 340), recalling its earlier prayer ('alternae...uices' 133) and the Fury's command ('alterna uice' 25); the idea of rage reminding us of the 'furor' with which the Fury infects the house (27, 101), of the 'furor' which fills the heart of Atreus (253), of Thyestes' alleged 'regni furor' (302); the concept of crime ('scelus') recalling the delight taken in the repetition of this word by the Fury²¹ and Atreus.²² The chorus singles out forces already at work within the house of Atreus. But what is most significant about the chorus's words is that they constitute a question, a question that is not so much a plea for information as a statement of incomprehension. It is ironic therefore that they accuse those who lust for power ('cupidi arcium' 342) of ignorance of the nature of kingship: 'you do not know' ('nescitis' 342). By their first three lines the members of the chorus have made it clear that it is they who are ignorant. It is also ironic that the chorus's observations on kingship have been immediately preceded by the debate between Atreus and his attendant, a debate in which the moralist's position was simply swept aside. The moralising discourse which follows is to have no effect on the play's action.

What then is a king? The chorus's conception of the king is both philosophical and paradoxical: philosophical because they define kingship in terms of the possession of moral properties,²³ paradoxical because they deny that those things which men commonly associate with kings are essential to kingship. In what follows I would like to consider how the chorus's words apply to Atreus and Thyestes.

²¹ 25, 31, 37, 38, 62.

²² 31, 178, 196, 203, 222, 234, 273, 285, 311, 312, 322.

²³ cf. the Stoic notion that only the wise man is truly king, e.g. Zeno (Cic. *Pro Mur.* 61); Chrysippus (*SVF* 3.332, 617).

The chorus's method is to alternate between denial and assertion. They begin with four negative definitions ('non' occurs in each of lines 344–7), with the denial that the external trappings of monarchy (wealth, purple robes, diadems and gilded beams) define what it is to be a king. Next they turn to those qualities which they assert to be essential to kingship: 'rex est qui posuit metus/ et diri mala pectoris' 348f. Freedom from fear is a goal of both Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. But although the chorus's words might remind us of Virgil's description of the philosopher 'who had cast all fear... beneath his feet',²⁴ a description clearly intended to evoke the reader's memories of Lucretius and Epicurus, the chorus's sentiment is more Stoic than Epicurean, for the ideal king, like the Stoic sage, is free not only of fear of death but of all fears.²⁵ But not only is the true king, the Stoic sage that is, perfectly fearless, he is also without vice. This too accords with Stoic doctrine. But the chorus's phrasing of this idea is more pointed than my paraphrase might suggest. The king is said to be free not merely from the usual Stoic vices, fear, desire and so on, but from 'the evils of a perverse heart', a phrase that seems excessively strong in its context, since we expect that a person describing an ideal will declare the subject to be free of even venial faults, not merely innocent of the most appalling crimes. But the phrase is one that is particularly appropriate to a man like Atreus, especially when we recall that, as Tarrant observes, 'both "pectus" and "dirus" have already figured in reference to his passion.'²⁶

At 350 the chorus returns to defining the king negatively, enumerating the qualities which the king will not possess. He will not be affected by unbridled ambition (350), by the fickle favour of the mob (351f.), by gold (353–5), by abundant harvests (356f.), by thunderbolts (358f.) or raging seas (360–2) or military force (363f.). For those acquainted with Stoic teaching much of this is familiar material. What renders it striking is the extent to which Seneca had given the chorus's sentiments a Roman colouring.²⁷ But why the Roman colouring? One reason is that it foreshadows Thyestes' own moralising discourse in Act 3.²⁸ Thyestes too juxtaposes a fairly colourless account of the life of virtue (450–4) with a vivid account of the life of vice in very Roman terms (455–67). The two accounts have in common the fact that they have no effect on the play's action whatever, for Atreus has no interest in moralising and Thyestes is readily seduced from virtue's path.

When the chorus turns to a more positive definition of the king their language becomes more neutral.

qui tuto positus loco
infra se uidet omnia
occurritque suo libens
fato nec queritur mori. (365–8)

²⁴ *G.* 2.490–2

²⁵ cf. *Const.* 9.2.

²⁶ Tarrant, *op. cit.* (n. 1), ad loc.

²⁷ The gold is not any gold but gold mined in Rome's Spanish provinces (the Tagus being in Lusitania); the harvests are specifically from Libya, source of much of Rome's grain supply; the storms are on the Adriatic, a sea of interest to Romans wishing to cross from Italy to Greece but of little concern to Argives of remote antiquity; the weapons he does not fear are specifically foreign, non-Roman: 'chalybs' 364 being associated with the Chalybes, a people from the Black Sea, 'lancea' 363, a word of Celtic or Spanish origin (*OLD* s.v.), and usually associated with non-Roman forces, e.g. Hirtius, *BG* 8.48.5; Livy 10.26.11; 22.6.4; 25.34.11; 27.27.7; 31.34.4; Luc. 3.465; Sen. *Nat.* 1.1.14; Tac. *Germ.* 6.1.

²⁸ Another reason (and perhaps the most important one for the interpretation of the play as a whole) is that by this means Seneca stresses the pertinence of what the chorus says, indeed of the play itself, to his own times; *Thyestes* may be about ancient Argos but its subject is contemporary Rome.

With this description the identification of the true king with the Stoic sage is complete, for self-sufficiency, the ability to look down upon human affairs with complete detachment, is one of his leading characteristics.²⁹ The thought of the following section (369–90) is not easy to follow. The chorus appears to picture a contest between the assembled kings ('reges conueniant' 369) of this world with the true monarch. Even though those popularly thought kings should band together (presumably for hostile purposes),³⁰ even though foreign nations should strive against him ('certet' 376), the man of good sense is secure in the tenure of his kingship: 'mens regnum bona possidet' 380. What follows (381–90) explains how this can be. True kingship requires not military strength but philosophic self-possession:

rex est qui metuet nihil
rex est qui cupiet nihil:
hoc regnum sibi quisque dat. (388–90)³¹

Again these sentiments are Stoic commonplaces.³²

How effectively do the chorus's sentiments relate to Atreus? Although Atreus is clearly no ideal king he does conform in unexpected ways to the chorus's prescriptions at 344–9. He is indifferent to the trappings of power (344–7; 353–7): his concern is for power itself not the accompanying glitter, for Atreus strives to be a true 'potens' (212f.). He is indifferent to concerns for life and personal safety (358–68) since he rates his own life at nought if he can obtain revenge against his brother (190f.). He is indifferent to the 'fickle favour of the impetuous mob' (351f.) for he values the judgements of his subjects not at all (205ff.). Like the sage who sees all beneath himself ('infra se uidet omnia' 366) he will soon 'walk equal with the stars and above all men' 885 ('aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super'). Atreus may not as yet meet the criteria laid down at 388–90, absence of fear and desire, but he soon will. By the end of the play Atreus will fear nothing, since his sole source of fear will have been removed. When about to kill Thyestes' children he shows no fear, showing the constancy of a Stoic sage ('sed solus sibi/immotus Atreus constat' 703f.). By the end of the play he will desire nothing for all his desires will have been fulfilled (888).³³ It is one of the play's great ironies that the words of the chorus might almost be taken as prophecy rather than cliché.

We might argue then, paradoxically of course, that Atreus embodies the chorus's ideal of philosophic kingship, for he embodies the virtues they proclaim albeit in ways they cannot comprehend. Clearly, if these citizens of Argos had knowledge of their king they would view him as the very antithesis of the ideal that they proclaim. It is only his possession of 'wild ambition' ('ambitio impotens' 350) which marks Atreus off from the true king. This irony, the fact that this quintessential tyrant actually

²⁹ For self-sufficiency see *Ep.* 9.3–5, 12–19; for looking down on human affairs see *Ep.* 73.14 (where the 'sapiens' is compared to Jupiter); cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 3.15.

³⁰ This seems to be the implication of 'conueniant', especially given the use of 'certet' at 376. 'Conuenire' itself is a fairly colourless verb.

³¹ Tarrant, *op. cit.* (n. 1), like most modern editors, rejects 388 and 389. Zwierlein retains them in his OCT, *op. cit.* (n. 15). For a defence of these lines see B. Seidensticker, *Die Gesprächsverdichtung in den Tragödien Senecas* (Heidelberg, 1969), p. 106 and Zwierlein, *op. cit.* (n. 19), p. 304. Both treat the futures as gnomic.

³² e.g. A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987), 67M (D.L. 7.121–2).

³³ For this reason the futures seem to me to be not only gnomic but also genuine futures. The words they offer as philosophic generalisations turn out to be factually true, but in a manner they would find appalling.

meets most of the criteria laid down by the chorus for philosophic kingship, serves only to underline the superficiality of the chorus's understanding of the nature of power.

What then of Thyestes? To what extent does he meet the ideals established by the chorus? Thyestes of course presents himself as a Stoic sage, professes to have enjoyed his life of poverty (418) and the security it offered (449ff.) and to be suspicious of the trappings of wealth (455–70). It is not surprising then that details in this ode foreshadow Thyestes' homily in Act 3. When Thyestes is self-consciously philosophical there is a remarkable coincidence between his sentiments and those of the chorus. Just as the chorus denies any connection between 'auro nitidae trabes' 347 and true kingship, so Thyestes takes pride in his indifference to such vanities: 'nec fulget altis splendidum tectis ebur' 457. Just as it asserts that the true king has no need of military force (369–87), so Thyestes claims to be secure without arms: 'sed non timemur, tuta sine telo est domus' 468. The true king is indifferent to death: 'nec queritur mori' 368 and Thyestes claims to value death above worldly kingship (442).

But comparison between the sentiments of the chorus and Thyestes' words before his assertion of adherence to philosophic values (404–11) and his subsequent behaviour reveals his adherence to those values to be superficial.³⁴ Wealth ('opes' 344) may not make a king but in Thyestes' opening speech it is the wealth ('opes' 404) of Argos that is most prominent in his thinking.³⁵ A king may be unmoved by the mob's fickle favour (351f.) but Thyestes looks forward to the people's reception: 'occurret Argos, populus occurret frequens' 411. The true king knows no fear (388) but Thyestes is now afraid: 'nunc contra in metus/reuoluor' 418f., 'sed timeo tamen' 435. Even more telling are Thyestes' actions. The chorus claims that neither clothes of Tyrian colour ('uestis Tyriae color' 345) nor a crown ('frontis nota regia' 346) make a king but by the end of Act 3 Thyestes has accepted kingship by putting aside his squalid garments ('squalidam uestem' 524) and by accepting a crown ('regiam capitis notam' 531). Thyestes' actions make plain that he is deceived about the true nature of his values. He truly is 'ignotus...sibi' 403.

The ode concludes on a private note as the chorus turns from general reflections on the nature of kinship to a wish for a tranquil life. It draws a sharp contrast between the life dedicated to the possession of power ('potens' 391), the life chosen by Atreus ('potenti' 212), and its own preference for quasi-pastoral security.³⁶ It does not seem, however, to grasp that the ability to make such a choice may well depend on precisely who 'stands on the slippery pinnacle of power' (391f.).

The third ode: 546–622

The third choral ode of *Thyestes* is similarly philosophical but this time the chorus begins with an account of the reconciliation between the two brothers. The opening lines (546–8) make plain the chorus-members' lack of understanding at several levels.

³⁴ This interpretation of Thyestes' character coincides with that of A. J. Boyle, 'Hic epulis locus: The Tragic Worlds of Seneca's *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes*', *Ramus* 12 (1983), 199–228, and Tarrant, op. cit. (n. 1), 148f.

³⁵ cf. Tarrant's, op. cit. (n. 1), note on 404: 'Thyestes consciously means only "wealthy Argos" (*opes Argolicae* = *Argos opulentum*...), but the audience comes gradually to see that the literal sense "longed-for wealth of Argos" (with *optatas* supplied from *optata*) more accurately represents Thyestes' feelings.'

³⁶ The chorus employs language (especially 'dulcis' and 'otium') characteristic of Virgil's handling of pastoral themes whether in the *Eclogues* or *Georgics*. Note especially Virgil's description of himself *qua* author of the *Eclogues* at *G.* 4.563–6.

They are of course right in one sense to characterise Atreus as 'ferus' (cf. 497–503), as 'nec potens mentis' (cf. their earlier description of the tyrant's 'ambitio impotens' 350), and 'truculentus'. But they are wrong to suppose that these qualities inhere only in Atreus. Thyestes too has been characterised (admittedly by Atreus) as 'bestial' (491, 497ff.) and that description will be confirmed by events later in the play (778f.). Further, it is Thyestes who is most 'unable to control his mind'. Act 3 presents precisely the failure of the rational mind to control Thyestes' body (419f.). It also presents Atreus exerting extraordinary powers of self-control. Atreus is subject to great passions ('uix tempero animo' 496) as the simile at 497–503 confirms and yet control is exerted as his behaviour shows. Atreus is in fact capable of heroic self-control. The statement that Atreus 'fratris aspectu stupefactus haesit' 548 is simply false. It was Thyestes who was 'stopped dead' (cf. 'animus haeret' 419), Thyestes who was 'stunned' ('stupet' 421).

The inference that the chorus draws from its interpretation of events illustrates not merely its ignorance of facts but also its incomprehension of the world of this play: 'nulla uis maior pietate uera est' 549. It contrasts lasting quarrels between strangers ('externis' 550) with temporary strife within families: 'quos amor uerus tenuit, tenebit' 551: an extraordinary statement to make in a tragedy given that so many Greek and Roman tragedies are concerned precisely with familial strife.

The picture of warring armies that follows recalls Atreus in Act 2 and his grim imaginings of the battles that he ought to have fought in order to gain vengeance against Thyestes. The 'light-armed cavalry squadrons' ('leues...turmae' 554) recall Atreus' picture of Argos resounding with cavalry ('sub nostro sonet/ Argolica tellus equite' 184f.), while shining swords brandished on either side ('hinc illinc agitatus ensis' 555) recall the drawn swords flashing everywhere ('strictum undique micare ferrum' 183f.) of Atreus' imagination. In Act 2 visions of war led to the banishment of 'pietas': 'excede, Pietas' (249). In the third chorus visions of war lead to the victory of 'pietas':

opprimit ferrum manibusque iunctis
ducit ad pacem Pietas negantes. (558f.)

As in their earlier odes the members of the chorus are supporters of traditional morality. But when their words are juxtaposed with the realities of this play, what they offer as fact proves little more than pious hope.

In the lines that follow (560–76)³⁷ the chorus contrasts the present peace ('otium' 560) with the preceding period of civil strife. It presents a long and vivid account of the preparations for defence (561–71), followed by a much shorter account of the advent of peace (573–6). But perhaps even more interesting than these two accounts is the question with which the chorus begins: 'otium tanto subitum e tumultu/quis deus fecit?' 560f. The question points once more to the chorus's hesitant belief in a divinely-sanctioned moral ordering of the world. Just as its members appealed for help to some unknown benefactor, 'if any of the gods loves Achaean Argos' (122ff.), so now they wonder who has come to their assistance. Even when help comes, or seems to come, the chorus lacks confident belief.³⁸

The simile (577–95) which follows makes essentially the same point as the preceding

³⁷ Tarrant's, *op. cit.* (n. 1) arrangement of these lines seems to me superior to that of Zwierlein's OCT, *op. cit.* (n. 15), including his exclusion of 572. For a brief defence of the usual view see Zwierlein, *op. cit.* (n. 19), p. 305.

³⁸ Tarrant, *op. cit.* (n. 1) compares Tityrus' statement at Virg. *Ecl.* 1.6: 'deus nobis haec otia fecit'. (Tarrant talks of 'Vergil's confident assertion'. The speaker is Tityrus, not Virgil.)

section. The chorus describes a massive storm (577–87), depicting in vivid detail its effects upon man and mythological beast alike and then the subsequent calm (588–95). The passage is very much a bravura piece and is full of striking detail (for example Laertes' terror, 586f. and the fish swimming in translucent waters 593). It is important to note the disproportion between lines devoted to the storm and lines devoted to the calm. Perhaps the principal thematic significance of the passage is that it foreshadows the disaster to come. Thyestes in Act 5 speaks of his feelings of anxiety and sorrow as predictive of a storm (957–60). At 596 the chorus turns from reaction to immediate events and returns to philosophical generalisations of the kind that characterised their previous ode. This time it sings of the mutability of fortune. The principle it outlines 'nulla sors longa est' 596 is a reminder to the monarch to temper his behaviour bearing in mind the instability of human affairs. They set up the notion of a cycle ('dolor ac uoluptas/iniucem cedunt' 595f.) but an asymmetrical one ('breuior uoluptas' 596). It is noteworthy that the previous descriptions of war and peace, storm and calm conform to this principle, the descriptions of war and storm being considerably longer than those of peace and calm.

It is this constant alternation that strikes fear into the heart of great monarchs. The monarch is described in terms more reminiscent of a Roman emperor than any Argive king:³⁹ 'ille qui donat diadema fronti' 599. One thinks of the crowning of client kings. Before him nations tremble, at his nod Medes and Indians and Dahae end their wars. But this monarch also resembles Atreus, for he has just placed a diadem upon his brother's brow.

Just as monarchs have power over their peoples, so the gods have power over monarchs.

quidquid a uobis minor expauescit,
maior hoc uobis dominus minatur (610f.)

This belief may be of venerable antiquity⁴⁰ but in the world of this play it is simply false.

The chorus's maxim in this section is, however, pertinent:

quem dies uidit ueniens superbum,
hunc dies uidit fugiens iacentem. (613f.)

But it is not applicable in the sense the chorus might expect, for Atreus might now be arrogant ('superbum') but he will not be laid low. Rather it is Thyestes who has donned the arrogance of power and who will be laid low. The accuracy of the chorus's comment is underlined by the choice of the word 'fugiens'. It presumably intends it as a synonym for 'departing' but by the end of this play the day will in fact have fled.

The chorus closes with the conventional notion of Fortune's wheel. Their advice deserves to be heeded by Thyestes. He should not be over-confident in the midst of success. The gods are not so favourable to him that he can promise himself another day. His affairs are truly borne on the whirlwind ('turbine' 622 cf. 'turbo' 623).

The fourth ode: 789–884

The fourth choral ode is one of Seneca's most powerful and most effective. Its subject, cosmic disorder, has been foreshadowed at several points in the play. In its third ode the chorus sang of day's flight ('dies...fugiens' 614); in Act 4 the messenger reported

³⁹ Tarrant, op. cit. (n. 1) compares the words Seneca put into the mouth of Nero at the beginning of *De Clementia* 1.1.2.

⁴⁰ cf. Call. *Hymn* 1.70–85; Hor. *Carm.* 3.1.5–6.

that a falling star appeared in the sky as Atreus began his work (698f.) and at the conclusion of his speech he alluded to the flight of the sun (776–8).

Enveloped by darkness, the chorus begins with a series of questions.

quo terrarum superumque parens,⁴¹
 cuius ad ortus noctis opacae
 decus omne fugit, quo uertis iter
 medioque diem perdis Olympo?
 cur, Phoebe, tuos rapis aspectus? (789–93)

The threefold questions and the repetition of 'quo' 789, 791 underline the chorus's urgency. The unexplained disappearance of the sun at midday has, not surprisingly, induced a sense of panic. They are disoriented. Nature is not following its normal course. The Evening Star has yet to appear, the sun has yet to reach its western goal, the end of the day's third quarter has not yet come,⁴² and the ploughman is stunned that meal-time has come before his cattle are weary and yet the sun has disappeared. The familiar ordering of the heavens has been suspended.

At 802 the chorus turns once more to question what catastrophe can have caused this appalling event? Have the giants burst out of their prison to wage war? Has Tityos renewed his anger? Has Typhoeus escaped confinement? Has the battle of the gods and giants been renewed? Three of the four possibilities raised by the chorus involve the violation of natural boundaries by the Giants, their escape from the prison house of Dis, Typhoeus' freedom from confinement under Etna's weight and the piling of Ossa upon Pelion so as to form a path to Olympus. These three surmises are mistaken but boundary violation is a cause of this disorder, that is, the eruption of Tantalus into the world above. This association of the Tantalids with the Giants is strengthened when Thyestes later calls upon Jupiter in his role as Giant-slayer to destroy Atreus and himself (1084). The fourth possibility, that the wounded Tityos has renewed his anger, is also mistaken. It is not Tityos who has renewed his anger but Atreus. Reference to Tityos should also remind us of the play's opening speech, for Tityos, like the children of Thyestes, is a being who is primarily viewed as food (9–12). The chorus's speculations might be mistaken but they are nevertheless pertinent to the present case.

At 813 the chorus begins to draw inferences from what has happened. If the sun has disappeared at midday then we must conclude that the once familiar ordering of the world is at an end: 'solitae mundi periere uices' 813.⁴³ It can only imagine this situation in mythological terms: Aurora, goddess of dawn, is confronted with a weary sun-god while the sun-god himself is startled to see Aurora. Its conclusion, however, is in terms of mythological beings but factual description:

non succedunt astra nec ullo
 micat igne polus,
 non Luna grauis digerit umbras. (825–7)

⁴¹ *Parens* is the reading of all manuscripts and (even if a little unusual) is particularly suitable in its context. Therefore I do not follow Zwielerlein's OCT, op. cit. (n. 15), in adopting Heinsius' conjecture *potens*. It is ironic that the chorus addresses the sun as 'father' since the crimes committed by one father against another's sons and the crime committed by a father against his own sons (776–9) are the precise causes of Phoebus' flight.

⁴² For this interpretation see Tarrant, op. cit. (n. 1) ad loc.

⁴³ Zwielerlein prints 812 and 813 as questions. I prefer the usual practice (followed by F. Leo, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* [Berlin, 1879], I. C. Giardina, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* [Bologna, 1966] and Tarrant, op. cit. [n. 1]) of printing these lines as statements. For reasons see Tarrant ad loc.

What is most appalling about this darkness is that it is not the normal darkness of the night but an unnatural phenomenon. The sun has disappeared but the moon and stars have not come to take their place. It is an unrelieved and unnatural darkness.

That this is not mere imagining on the chorus's part is made clear in the next section: 'sed quidquid id est, utinam nox sit!' 828. Realisation of their circumstances provokes terror in the chorus-members: 'trepidant, trepidant pectora magno percussa metu' 828f. Their fear is quite specific: lest chaos overwhelm both men and gods, sea and land, the order of the universe in fact.

Then follows a series of predictions as the chorus imagines the collapse of the constellations. The passage is a lengthy one (almost forty lines in length: 835–74) for the chorus seems to aim at completeness. Why this emphasis on the stars? Firstly, for the Greeks and Romans the stars are conceived of as gods. Indeed this chorus calls them 'turba deorum' 843 and 'sacris...astris' 844. To predict that the stars will collapse is to foretell the end of divine governance of the universe. Secondly, the orderly motion of the stars and planets is a symbol of the world's order, both physical and moral. Related to this is the idea that the gods are guarantors of the moral ordering of the world. If the visible symbol of order collapses where does that leave morality? Moreover, it is significant that the chorus speaks of the world's order breaking down. The unknown crime which has caused this disorder is so great that the universe cannot contain it. Instead of responding and punishing this crime the universe itself is thought of as collapsing.

And it is in the context of a collapsing universe that the action of Act 5 takes place. When Atreus enters the stage it is bathed in darkness or is to be thought of as such.⁴⁴ This is the first opportunity we have had of seeing him since the killing of the children and their being fed to Thyestes. Atreus' success has proved total and consequently his exultation knows no bounds. He speaks as follows:

aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super
altum superbo uertice attingens polum.
nunc decora regni teneo, nunc solium patris.
dimitto superos: summa uotorum attigi. (885–8)

The metaphor of touching the stars is a common means of suggesting the achievement of success in Roman literature.⁴⁵ It has connotations of apotheosis. Thus Horace's half-humorous prediction that his head will 'bump the stars'⁴⁶ (*Carm.* 1.1) achieves fulfilment in *Carm.* 3.30 when he lays claim to immortality. The implications of Jupiter's promise to Venus at *Aen.* 1.259f. are made clear in his speech to Juno at 12.794f.: Aeneas is to become immortal. Atreus' claim too has the same implications. That to claim equality with the stars is to assert one's own divinity is clear in *Thyestes* too since the stars have already been referred to as divine by the chorus ('turba deorum' 843; 'sacris...astris' 844). That this is Atreus' intention is also clear. We should recall that Atreus sacrificed Thyestes to himself ('sibi' 713) and very shortly he will exclaim: 'o me caelitum excelsissimum' 911. But there is more than this.

⁴⁴ If the play were performed indoors then presumably the stage could be in virtual darkness. If outdoors then the audience would need to take their cue from references by the chorus and the messenger and imagine that the action now takes place in darkness.

⁴⁵ e.g. Hor. *Carm.* 1.1.36 'sublimi feriam sidera uertice'; Virg. *Aen.* 1.259f. 'sublimemque feres ad sidera caeli/ magnanimum Aenean', cf. 12.794f. 'indigetem Aenean scis ipsa et scire fateris/ deberi caelo fatisque ad sidera tolli'; Ov. *Met.* 7.60f. 'quo coniuge felix/ et dis cara ferar et uertice sidera tangam', *Pont.* 2.5.57 'huic tu cum placeas et uertice sidera tangas'.

⁴⁶ For the humour of this line see P. Connor, *Horace's Lyric Poetry: the Force of Humour* (Melbourne, 1987), p. 45.

Atreus claims not merely to be equal of the gods but to be as high as the stars ('aequalis astris'). He conceives of this in a very physical fashion: he is higher than every creature ('cunctos super'), his head touches the heavens. He occupies a portion of the sky just as stars do. But in the light of the previous choral ode we should ask what is it to be as high as the stars in a world in which the constellations have collapsed. Does it imply, as Tarrant suggests,⁴⁷ 'that by his crime Atreus has brought the heavens down to his own level'? If Atreus were unaware of the collapse of the stars we might conclude that Tarrant is right, and that the audience is to infer that his achievement is worthless, for equality on such terms is meaningless. However, Atreus clearly is aware: 'dies recessit: perge dum caelum uacat' 892. It follows then that Atreus means that he alone now occupies the space once occupied by stars. Atreus views his achievement not as worthless, but as the greatest of human achievements. For him the gods are now superfluous: 'dimitto superos' 888.

But is Atreus right? Can he 'dismiss the gods'? Has the moral ordering of the world collapsed? At line 1005 servants enter bearing the heads of Thyestes' children. Thyestes responds with the passionate speeches. The first is an appeal to Earth (1006–21). Thyestes demands a response to Atreus' crime, insists that an abyss open and plunge himself and Atreus to the underworld. But the speech closes with an acknowledgement that his prayer has failed: 'immota tellus, pondus ignauum iaces? fugere superi' 1020f. When told that he has himself feasted on his sons Thyestes acknowledges this fact once more: 'hoc est deos quod puduit, hoc egit diem/ auersum in ortus' 1035f. Thyestes' third appeal (1068–92) is initially to every quarter of the world and then to Jupiter. Again he acknowledges the flight of the gods: 'uos quoque audite hoc scelus, quocumque, di, fugistis' 1069f. And yet Thyestes still appeals to heaven's ruler ('summe caeli rector' 1077). He appeals for vengeance, for thunder and lightning to assault the universe, for his own destruction. There is no response from Jupiter or any other god; only the crushing replies of Atreus. The simple answer to my question then is that Atreus is right. The gods have fled and the tyrant remains unpunished. The chorus then was right: the world's moral ordering has collapsed.

CONCLUSION

In considering the four choral odes of *Thyestes* I have placed considerable emphasis on the chorus-members' ignorance, an ignorance which is not limited to mere unawareness of facts but which extends to a more general and more profound lack of understanding of the way in which the world that they inhabit works. Particularly in their first three odes the sentiments that they express and the prayers that they recite, are quite without effect in Atreus' realm. In their first three odes the members of the chorus present themselves as conventional if somewhat sceptical believers in moral guardianship of the gods. They appeal to the gods in Ode 1 for an end to the cycle of crime which had afflicted Argos; in Ode 3 they assert Jupiter's authority over rulers (607ff.). As we have already seen these views find no confirmation in the play's action. It is in their fourth ode that they come closest to achieving an understanding of the nature of their world. Now they no longer make confident assertions. They begin with questions and they conclude by posing further questions. This much is progress. Have they deserved this fate? Is this the end of the world? Have their actions driven away the sun? But whatever the answers to these questions might be the

⁴⁷ Tarrant, *op. cit.* (n. 1), *ad loc.*

chorus, unlike the other participants in the drama, is at least able to adopt an attitude to the play's events that is consistent with morality:

abeant questus, discede timor:
uitae est audius quisquis non uult
mundo secum pereunte mori. (882–4)

Another Stoic cliché perhaps. But in the circumstances stoical resignation is perhaps the only option left to the powerless subjects of a tyrant.

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