

## AN ANALYSIS OF SENECA'S *THYESTES*

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These days not much attention is paid to the plays of Seneca. Of a recently published collection of essays on Roman drama not one is devoted to Senecan tragedy as such.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is clear to anyone familiar with Seneca's plays and with the kind of drama criticism done by Classicists: by comparison with most Greek tragedies Senecan tragedy is deficient in both plot and characterization. This means, to those whose critical thinking has been informed by Aristotle's *Poetics*, that it also is deficient in meaning.<sup>2</sup>

However, to concentrate exclusively on plot and character is to ignore much of the content of Seneca's plays. Evidence of this: 424 of the 1112 lines of Seneca's *Thyestes*, the play which I propose to discuss in this paper, are devoted to the prologue and the choral odes—that is, to parts of the play which formally are exterior to the dramatic action. Another 166 lines are taken by a messenger's speech which describes in full and sanguinary detail Atreus' killing of Thyestes' children and his preparation of them for table. It cannot be said that this speech either furthers the plot or adds to the picture we have of the character of Atreus or Thyestes. But the speech has great emotional

<sup>1</sup> T. A. Dorey and Donald R. Dudley (ed.), *Roman Drama* (New York 1965). There are two essays secondarily concerned with Senecan drama: one about Seneca's influence on Shakespeare, the other about his influence on Corneille.

<sup>2</sup> Representative of the hostile criticism often received by Seneca, when he is not being ignored, is C. W. Mendell's *Our Seneca* (New Haven 1941). Mendell condemns Seneca for being bad Sophocles. Critics favorable to Seneca often have been defensive, meeting the hostile critics on their own ground, so to speak. Thus Charles Garton, "The Background to Character Portrayal in Seneca," *CP* 54 (1959) 1-9, tries to show (unsuccessfully, it seems to me) that Seneca's characters are not stereotyped. For a brief review of the history of criticism of Senecan drama see P. J. Enk, "Roman Tragedy," *Neophilologus* 41 (1957) 282-307.

impact; and it must have a corresponding importance to the play as a dramatic presentation.

Descriptions like this, of bloodthirsty violence and/or ghoulishness, play a prominent role in *Thyestes*, and are no isolated phenomenon there. In fact, a preoccupation with carnage and death may be said to be a characteristic of literature of the early Empire (or at least of certain authors of the period). Passages of this nature occur often in Seneca's plays and in Lucan, and more than occasionally in Statius' *Thebaid*.<sup>3</sup> There is no real violence in what we have of Petronius' *Satyricon* but there certainly is morbidity and even ghoulishness,<sup>4</sup> and ghoulishness, I think (see below, note 10), is employed as a literary commonplace as early as the Augustan period, in the elegiac poetry of Tibullus and Propertius.

In spite of its frequency of occurrence, this interest in carnage and death is a characteristic of Silver-Latin literature which has been ignored almost entirely by critics. When noticed, it is briefly and in pejorative terms. Those who do bother to give some explanation of the motif's inspiration usually attribute it to the effort to command the reader's shocked attention, or sometimes merely to a perverted Roman taste for blood.<sup>5</sup>

However, this general neglect is not without exception. In 1928 Otto Regenbogen published a lengthy monograph emphasizing the importance of violence, suffering, and death in Senecan tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Regenbogen showed that Seneca's preoccupation with these things

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, *Thebaid* 1.596-619, 2.123-25, 2.504-18, 5.159-63, 5.594-606, 8.751-66, 10.296-305, 11.85-87, 12.22-31, 12.317-21.

<sup>4</sup> For the preoccupation with death in the "cena Trimalchionis" see Helen Bacon, "The Sibyl in the Bottle," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 34 (1958) 262-76. The surviving text of Petronius ends with a specifically ghoulish passage: the terms of a will stipulating that the heirs must eat the body of the deceased, followed by a conversation which is preparatory to the fulfilling of these terms (*Satyricon* 141).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, W. C. Summers, *The Silver Age of Latin Literature* (London 1920) 30 and 37, and J. Wight Duff, *A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age* (London 1960<sup>2</sup>) 259-60. This element in Silver-Age literature is not even mentioned by H. C. Butler in his *Post-Augustan Poetry* (Oxford 1909).

<sup>6</sup> "Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas," *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Franz Dirlmeier (Munich 1961) 409-62, reprinted from *Vortr. Bibl. Warburg* 7 (1927-28) 167-218. See esp. pp. 446-47, 454-58, 461-62. I have profited greatly from Regenbogen's discussion and I am indebted to this essay for most of the citations to Seneca's philosophical works which I give.

is not merely superficial and sensationalistic, but is directly and closely connected with beliefs expressed in his philosophical essays. In these essays Seneca not infrequently speaks of struggle and pain as an inevitable part of life, even for the wise man, and death as sometimes a desirable thing—a refuge and a relief. Seneca recognizes the existence of a death-wish in the minds of many of his contemporaries, even men of the strongest character;<sup>7</sup> he appreciates its potency, and it is reasonable to suppose that this is at least partially because he shares this morbid state of mind. But if the prominence of the death-motif in Senecan drama is not inconsistent with various declarations in his philosophical writings, nevertheless Regenbogen did not consider the plays to be merely Stoic tracts.<sup>8</sup> The plays are products not only of Stoic thought but of the social and political situation in which they were written. Death looms large in Seneca's mind because it was a presence with which he and other aristocrats under the Principate lived from day to day.

I think that most of what Regenbogen said is true. The horror of the times in which he lived clearly did contribute, at least, to the morbidity of Seneca's thought. The trouble is that Regenbogen did not go far enough. His was what I would call a "sociological" interpretation,<sup>9</sup> which saw Seneca's morbidity as a symptom of, or

<sup>7</sup> In *E. M.* 24.25 Seneca speaks of an "affectus qui multos occupavit, libido moriendi." And he adds that this "animi inclinatio . . . saepe generosos atque acerrimae indolis viros corripit."

<sup>8</sup> As does Berthe M. Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies, a New Interpretation," *TAPA* 76 (1945) 216-45 and "The Prototypes of Seneca's Tragedies," *CP* 42 (1947) 1-16. For other views of the importance of the Stoic content in Seneca's tragedies see N. T. Pratt, Jr., "The Stoic Base of Senecan Drama," *TAPA* 79 (1948) 1-11, and J. F. Brady, *A Study of the Stoicism in Senecan Tragedy* (unpub. diss. Columbia Univ. 1958).

<sup>9</sup> In this context two articles should be mentioned, by Helen Bacon (above, note 4) and by William Arrowsmith, "Luxury and Death in the *Satyricon*," *Arion* 5 (1966) 304-31, which discuss the morbid element in Petronius. Both writers discuss *luxuria* in Petronius, especially as it is directed to indulgence of the body, as well as the emphasis put by Petronius on the more repulsive aspects of the physical processes; they connect these with the preoccupation of Trimalchio, in particular, with the thought of death. But both think that, with regard to these things, Petronius is writing primarily as a social critic. In other words, like Regenbogen they explain these things as inspired by social conditions, and they go no further.

Another recent article, by Werner Rutz, "*Amor Mortis* bei Lucan," *Hermes* 88 (1960) 462-75, discusses the prevalence of the death-motif in Lucan. Rutz largely is concerned with demonstrating that Lucan goes further than Seneca in his attachment to

perhaps it would be better to say a reaction against, the social and political conditions in which he lived. It explained why suffering and death are so much on Seneca's mind, but it did not explain adequately why Seneca dwells so long and lovingly over such lurid, macabre descriptions as (760-67),

ipse divisum secat  
in membra corpus, amputat trunco tenus  
umeros patentes et lacertorum moras,  
denudat artus durus atque ossa amputat;  
tantum ora servat et datas fidei manus.  
haec veribus haerent viscera et lentis data  
stillant caminis, illa flammatus latex  
candente aeno iactat, etc.

Something other than fear of death, or weariness with suffering, inspires the gusto with which here Seneca describes the cutting up and cooking of dead bodies. This is more than merely negative. That is, more is involved than the poet's horrified revulsion from the circumstances of his environment. An intellectual synthesis has taken place (whatever the elements of the synthesis may be), for the poet is not simply recoiling from horror in a normal and predictable way. Of course this fascination with death—particularly the grisly physical details of death—is a perverted thing. The poet invites his readers to participate vicariously in an experience which is both sadistic and masochistic. But that the phenomenon can be called a "fascination"—that the death-motif clearly is of such a great interest to Seneca and that it is found in other authors as well—is an indication of its importance. Perhaps the importance of the death-motif has been so little understood because the attitude of mind betrayed by the author is outside the range of the normal reader's expectations and personal experience. But surely it is not outside the literary experience

death, and that his attitude toward death is not based on orthodox Stoic doctrine (see especially pp. 463-64, 467). Following H. H. Eckert, *Weltanschauung und Selbstmord bei Seneca und den Stoikern, in antiker Mystik und im Christentum* (diss. Tübingen 1951), an essay which I have not been able to see, he asserts (473-74) that by Seneca suicide is regarded as a release from a life which has become otherwise intolerable, but is not always justifiable. For Lucan, however, death is a positively desirable thing. Rutz is not much concerned with the question of what informs Lucan's attitude toward death.

of anyone in this century. The answer must be that Classicists have inherited the condescending prejudice of their fathers that Silver-Age literature is mostly meaningless bombast and empty, if sometimes stimulating, exaggeration. The intent of this paper is to show that in *Thyestes*, at least, this is not true. *Thyestes* has something to say about the enormous satisfaction which Atreus derives from his slaughter, and indirectly about the satisfaction derived by the poet from describing the slaughter or by the reader from reading the description: the play declares that it is the satisfaction of a natural human impulse to violence and ultimately to self-destruction.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This passage is one instance of a kind of literary necrophilia, which, as I indicated above, seems to me to be a characteristic of several authors of the early Empire. This necrophilia, I believe, is inspired by the feeling that life is unwholesome, a death-thing, a dealer and receiver of death. This idea is an oxymoron. But necrophilia is itself a psychological oxymoron. It is a perversion of normal instincts, a love of what is beautiful in its repulsiveness, desirable in its horror.

Undoubtedly these paradoxes sound suspiciously glib, but I believe that it can be shown that other authors, like Seneca, do associate with a life-process something noxious and unwholesome. A literal necrophilia is to be found in the elegiac poets ("The last embrace" is a commonplace of elegiac poetry), who frequently associate love with sickness and death. Tibullus, in particular, hardly seems able to talk about love without mentioning death. Sometimes his references to sickness or death seem oddly inappropriate, in their unpleasantness, to love poetry. The most extreme example is 2.6.29-40, where he says, "Spare me, I pray by the bones of your sister . . . for fear that she may send evil dreams to you and she may stand by your bed looking just as she did when she fell headlong from a high window and went to the underworld covered with blood." (In a like passage, 4.7.3-12, Propertius says, "Cynthia seemed to bend over my bed, Cynthia, who recently was buried. . . . She had the same hair and eyes as when she was carried to the pyre, her clothing was burned to her side, and the fire had eaten away the beryl she wore on her finger. The waters of Lethe had withered her lips, and the thumb-bones rattled in her fragile hands." Love's dream.)

The reason love and death are connected in Tibullus' mind is stated (among other places) clearly in 2.4. Love is a destructive thing—a debilitating and paralyzing force (2.4.1-4). It is a sickness bringing torture and suffering (5-10). But in spite of this the poet does not want to be freed. Not in order to be freed from his suffering, but to win his mistress' favor, he is willing to drink any sort of hellish potion (55-60). Love may be a destructive force, but it seems to have an irresistible attraction. In his first poem Tibullus comes closer than anywhere else to conceiving of love as a happy possibility (1.1.43-49). But within a few lines he is envisioning his own death (59-62):

te spectem, suprema mihi cum venerit hora,  
et teneam moriens deficiente manu.  
flebis et arsurum positum me, Delia, lecto,  
tristibus et lacrimis oscula mixta dabis.

This reflection on death is not at all the maudlin self-pity of a man thinking, "All this

An "Aristotelian" interpretation of *Thyestes*, in terms of individual character and individual motivation, can only lead to the conclusion that there is not much there: that it is nothing more than a melodrama (moreover, melodrama of a morally reprehensible kind). There is no inner conflict of character, but a conflict between two personalities, a good man and a bad man. That *Thyestes* is comparatively innocent, and even a good man, is quite apparent from the first scene in which he appears. He has been dispossessed of his birthright, his share of the throne, and even has suffered great physical privation, but he is not embittered, for he sees clearly the way of true virtue (470):

immane regnum est, posse sine regno pati.

His mouth is full of the ethical *sententiae* which in Rome answered for philosophy (443, see also 446-70):

TANTALUS (*Thyestes'* son): *summa est potestas—*

THYESTES: *nulla si cupias nihil.*

In fact, *Thyestes* in his indigence is portrayed as an easily recognizable type—the wandering ascetic sage.<sup>11</sup> That *Atreus* is the very opposite

must end." On the contrary. After the vision of happy love in 43-49, there is a progression: I'm a slave (55)—Let me be (57-58)—I'll die (59-62).

Tibullus states plainly that he both abhors and desires what he feels is torturing him. And it is apparent that in death he feels a kind of perverse satisfaction. This, if anything, is a fascination with an abomination. As such it testifies to a perversion of what we may think of as normal human values. However, morbidity, necrophilia, masochism, and sadism are found in post-World War I "naturalistic" literature, and have become common motifs since. Surely they are able to be understood, if not appreciated, by Classicists of today. So that the small amount of critical discussion of this phenomenon in the elegiac poets and later literature is very strange. For a fascination with an abomination may be more than just a literary curiosity, or a deplorable symptom of moral degeneracy. When it appears it implies in the author (or, if it appears in a literature with significant frequency, in the culture) a shift in attitude about what is good and bad, or at least about what is interesting and uninteresting. Senecan drama is not just second-rate Greek tragedy at all, but literature of an entirely different kind. It is not drama of the citizen concerned with his relative position in his society or above his society, but of man looking at the beast in himself. A fascination with an abomination is symptomatic of a recognition of new human motives: new, or not previously apprehended, forces working on the lives of men. Thus, deplorable as it may seem, a fascination with an abomination indicates a new dimension of understanding. It sees in the abomination a beauty to which other states of mind may be blind; or, if not its beauty, at least its *virtu* (which the fascinated subject may recognize to its own horror or grief).

<sup>11</sup> For a contrary opinion—that the play emphatically declares *Thyestes* guilty and worthy of punishment—see Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies, a New Interpretation" (above,

type needs no demonstration. He is a splendid villain, who suffers never a doubt, but glories in his villainy (909-15):<sup>12</sup>

resupinus ipse [Thyestes] purpurae atque auro incubat,  
vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput.  
eructat. o me caelitum excelsissimum,  
regum atque regem! vota transcendere mea,  
satur est, capaci ducit argento merum—  
ne parce potu; restat etiamnunc cruor  
tot hostiarum.

This is the stuff of melodrama, and, as I have said, it is melodrama which is morally outrageous. With its emphasis on torture and suffering, if *Thyestes* is concerned with no more than the criminal deception of an innocent victim, it can be no more than a sensationalistic exercise in sadism. (Of course, even if that is all there is in the play it at least indicates an interesting psychological condition in Seneca and whatever audience he had.) However, Atreus' act of treacherous violence is not viewed in the play merely as the inexplicable, cruel caprice of an individual. Seneca universalizes Atreus' act, so to speak, and sees in it an instinct rooted in man's very nature and common to all men.

Regenbogen's article showed that in his philosophical dialogues Seneca sometimes concerns himself with man's unhealthy instincts. Death, for instance, can be more than just a refuge which is to be sought from suffering by any normal, rational man. There can exist a perverse lust for death (*E. M.* 24.25) or a pleasure in suffering (*Ad Marc.* 1.7). In addition to this masochistic desire, he also recognizes the existence of a sadistic *voluptas* in the infliction of suffering and death (*De ira* 2.32.1, 2.5.2). In Atreus is to be found the embodiment of sadistic *voluptas*. The origin of this sadistic impulse is discussed in

note 8) 239-40. O. Gigon, "Bemerkungen zu Senecas Thyestes," *Philologus* 93 (1938-39) 176-83, agrees with me.

<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Knoche, "Senecas Atreus, ein Beispiel," *Die Antike* 18 (1941) 60-76, has shown that in the figure of Atreus, Seneca is portraying a type with which he is concerned in his philosophical dialogues: the brutal tyrant who is the perversion of a true king. This is true enough, but of course Seneca is doing more than picturing a kind of cruelty that any normally intelligent man (especially one living in the age of Nero) could imagine well enough for himself. In this play, among other things, Seneca is investigating the source of this cruelty.

detail in *De tranq.* 2.10–14, and is condemned morally in accordance with good Stoic dogma: it derives from an individual's abuse of his mind; his failure to control his desires as he should grows always greater until it culminates in a lust for human blood. In *Thyestes*, however, Seneca says something quite different. Atreus' act is motivated by something bigger than he is. It is preordained by something inherent in his nature; it is a something, moreover, over which his objective self-consciousness exercises no control.

It must be of fundamental significance that Atreus' violence is described in terms which associate it with eating, one of the basic animal functions. (In fact, the act of ingestion—suggested, of course, by Thyestes' eating of his children—might be called the controlling metaphor of the play. As well as Atreus' violence, Tantalus' act in the prologue of infecting his progeny with sinfulness also is symbolically an act of eating; it is clear that the deeds of both Atreus and Tantalus somehow are referable to Thyestes' meal, and that the acts of Atreus and Thyestes, so different in moral intent, in some way are of the same kind.) Atreus' killing of the children is described figuratively as an act of cannibalism. Immediately before the murder he is like a *ieiuna tigris* (707–8). His act of murder fills him but does not satisfy his "hunger"; in the midst of his slaughter he is like an Armenian lion which kills and eats its victims, and seems insatiable, continuing to kill even when his hunger is banished (733–36):

in caede multa victor armento incubat  
cruore rictus madidus<sup>13</sup> et pulsa fame  
non ponit iras; hinc et hinc tauros premens  
vitulis minatur dente iam lasso piger.

Early in the play, in the first scene, when he conceives his crime, he feels himself filled with *furor*, but still is unsated (252–54):

non satis magno meum  
ardet furore pectus; impleri iuvat  
maiore monstro.

And he feels that he never can be satisfied; two lines later he adds that nothing is enough (256):

nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis.

<sup>13</sup> Twice later (780, 948) *madidus* is used to describe Thyestes (see below, note 16).



Special notice should be given to the words *magno*, *maiore*, and *satis* above. Adjectives and adverbs of size and extent are very common in this play; especially those in the comparative degree, indicating spatial increase or growth. In this first scene Atreus denies all moderation, refuses to accept a limit of any kind. Any vengeance is too small. He seeks to discover a crime which is not just *immane* (273), but *maius* (274) than any ever before committed (254-55):

SATELLES: quid novi rabidus struis?

ATREUS: nil quod doloris capiat assueti modus.

For, says Atreus (195-96), *scelera non ulcisceris nisi vincis*. This frenzied desire for vengeance, which he feels as a horror filling him physically, but only whetting his appetite (252-54, see above), swells and wells up within him (267-68):

nescio quid animo maius et solito amplius,  
supraque fines moris humani tumet.

It is like a storm which shakes him within as it grows, and sweeps him away to new dimensions of criminality (260-62):

tumultus pectora attonitus quatit  
penitusque volvit; rapior et quo nescio  
sed rapior.

He is possessed by an impulse that transcends conscious desire,<sup>14</sup> and yet paradoxically he desires the possession. In the midst of his slaughter the word *tumet* is repeated. After killing two of the three sons, still

<sup>14</sup> This point should be stressed: Atreus is affected by a madness which is beyond the control of his conscious mind. Atreus' desire for vengeance may seem to fit comfortably within the assumptions of fifth-century tragedy, but the fact of his *furor* and its intensity should tell the discerning reader that he is, indeed, driven by *aliquid novi*. Fifth century Greek tragedy is drama of the *polis* and, with few exceptions, recognizes the motives only of the (anti-)socially oriented man. (Contrast the last scene of Sophocles' *OT* with the last scene of this play. Oedipus' concern for the children of his incestuous lust are entirely social ones, and he betrays no feeling whatever of inner impurity.) In Atreus there is a new kind of motivation at work. If *Thyestes* were merely a drama of intrigue the character of this long first scene (more than 150 lines) would be inexplicable. Few lines of this scene are devoted to Atreus' plot against his brother or his reasons for hating him. The primary purpose of the scene is to show that Atreus is manic, in a state of mental transport.

his *ira tumet* (737), and he does not feel himself replete until his vengeance is complete (889):

bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi.

The familiarity of the antithesis appetite-moderation makes it tempting to interpret this play as a Stoic tract. The insatiable Atreus grows to madness because of his emotional self-indulgence, while Thyestes is Atreus' opposite. Although he lives in a state of privation, he wants nothing because he lives a simple life and his needs are small (449-53, 470):

o quantum bonum est  
obstare nulli, capere securas dapes  
humi iacentem! scelera non intrant casas,  
tutusque mensa capitur angusta cibus;  
venenum in auro bibitur. . . .

. . . . .  
immane regnum est posse sine regno pati.

Thyestes has had moderation imposed upon him, and his calm, sensible words provide a striking contrast with Atreus' wild ravings.

Clearly this play is very much influenced by Stoic assumptions. But this is no more than you would expect from Seneca, and the Stoic interpretation cannot be pushed too far. For in fact it is not Atreus, who gives free rein to his passion, who suffers. It is Thyestes. Atreus, who sits on a lofty throne, is not punished but fulfilled. There is, then, a serious flaw in an interpretation which sees this play as a Stoic moral allegory about temptation, self-indulgence, and its fruits. In fact, the real interest in the play is not in Thyestes' temptation and fall at all. The real interest is a grisly, morbid one, in Atreus' rabid butchery. There is something in his own conception of Atreus which greatly interests Seneca, if it does also horrify him. The detailed description, which dominates the play, of the slaughter of the children and the cooking of their flesh, necessarily involves the vicarious participation of the poet (and of the audience, to the extent that it is receptive to the play) in Atreus' ghoulish acts. The very length of the description of Atreus' *furor* shows that Seneca sees in it not just a matter of individual wickedness, to be condemned objec-

tively or moralized upon, but an instinct which to some degree he himself shares and which he expects his audience to share.

Thus, even though immoderate appetite—physical appetite in particular—is identified with Atreus' sinfulness, it is made apparent from the beginning that the moral of the play is quite un-Stoic: orthodox Stoicism is committed to the idea that the world ultimately is good and that evil is unnatural and an aberration. Atreus' madness and incontinent cruelty are, on the contrary, part of his inherited nature. In the prologue his grandfather, Tantalus, is called up from Hades by a Fury for the purpose of impregnating his progeny with his own criminality. (This seems to be nothing more than a symbolic act, prefiguring the reawakening of the lust for violence which is immanent in the family; for before Tantalus is told that he is to be the instrument which will "drive his house to madness" [24] he himself predicts that they will be guilty of deeds of unprecedented criminality [18-20].)

Atreus' violence is not an isolated phenomenon, but one event among many, and a manifestation of the *furor* native to his race. And just as Atreus' individual desire for vengeance is described as a physical appetite which he is able to satisfy only through an act of surpassing violence, in the prologue all the sinfulness and cruelty of the play are symbolized by the act of eating. The Fury invites Tantalus to satisfy his hunger (64-66):

tuamque ad istas solvimus mensas famem.  
ieiunia exple, mixtus in Bacchum cruor  
spectante te potetur.

She compels Tantalus to fill himself, and by the same act to fill his progeny with his own criminality (53): *imple Tantalò totam domum*. This is a "filling" which (as later it is seen manifested in Atreus as an individual) will not satisfy but only whet their appetite for more; by turns they will thirst for vengeance, says the Fury (101-3):

hunc, hunc furorem divide in totam domum.  
sic, sic ferantur et suum infensi invicem  
sitiunt cruorem.

But if it is appetite—as inherited by Tantalus' offspring—and its indulgence which is at the source of violence, the starvation which has

been Tantalus' torture has had the opposite effect. He has suffered awful torment (152-57, 169-75):

stat lassus vacuo gutture Tantalus;  
 impendet capiti plurima noxio  
 Phineis avibus praeda fugacior;  
 hinc illinc gravidis frondibus incubat  
 et curvata suis fetibus ac tremens  
 alludit patulis arbor hiatibus.

. . . . .  
 instat deinde sitis non levior fame,  
 qua cum percaluit sanguis et igneis  
 exarsit facibus, stat miser obvios  
 fluctus ore petens, quos profugus latex  
 avertit sterili deficiens vado  
 conantemque sequi deserit; hic bibit  
 altum de rapido gurgite pulverem.

Instead of making him frantic for relief from his ravenous hunger at any price, the torture has made him virtuous. He recoils from the horrors to be committed by his offspring, preferring to suffer greater agonies rather than submit to them (68-73).

This starvation of Tantalus' is not temperance; it goes far beyond that. Implicit in the assumption that agonies of this sort make for virtue is an ethic not just of denial but of mortification of the flesh. "Amate poenas" (82), says Tantalus to his fellow-sufferers in Tartarus. Love them indeed, for they save you from the sins to which the flesh is heir. "When will it be granted to me," adds Tantalus (82-83), "to escape from the world of the living?"

The passion for violence in Atreus is almost a physical affection. It fills him (253-54), grows within him (268), and finds fulfilment only in physical action (889). This is not a strange idea for a poet who is a Stoic to have, for to the Stoics spirit and matter, appetite and emotion—indulgence of the physical wants and psychic impulses—are essentially the same. Stoic dualism discriminates between the irrational and rational, not the physical and spiritual. What is unexpected is that Atreus' tumescent passion has not merely grown within him but has grown to him as well (53; see above). It literally is the Tantalus in him. This passion, which is inborn in the Tantalidae, grows ever greater. Says Tantalus (18-20),

iam nostra subit  
e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus  
ac me innocentem faciat et inausa audeat.

And the Fury answers (30-32, 56-57):

semper oriatur novum  
nec unum in uno, dumque punitur scelus,  
crescat.

. . . . .  
Thracium [Procnæ Philomelaëque] fiat nefas  
maiore numero.

This growth of violent passion is a function of the growth, or reproduction, of the house of Tantalus (26-29):

ne sit irarum modus  
pudorve, mentes caecus instiget furor,  
rabies parentum duret et longum nefas  
eat in nepotes.

The first chorus prays, in vain (134-35):

[ne] succedat avo deterior nepos  
et maior placeat culpa minoribus.

This is inheritance of guilt, but it is more. Just as passion in an individual like Atreus, when once indulged, tolerates no limitation but grows to monstrous proportions, passion in this family grows from life to life, multiplying as the family multiplies (41-42): *liberi pereant male, peius tamen nascentur*. It is the function, in other words, of a life-process.

In this context it should be noticed that the virtuous Tantalus who recoils from his offsprings' criminality is more than just sterile; he actually is destructive of the life around him. It cannot exist in his presence (107-11):

cernis ut fontes liquor  
introrsus actus linquat, ut ripae vacent  
ventusque rarus igneus nubes ferat?  
palescit omnis arbor ac nudus stetit  
fugiente pomo ramus, etc.

Unlike Atreus, whose pent-up impetus shakes him within, almost as

if struggling for release, driving him on (260–62) to the perpetration of an unprecedented crime (254–55), Tantalus is sapped of his vitality by his abstinence (152): *stat lassus vacuo gutture Tantalus*. The word *lassus* and its synonym *fessus* seem in some way to have moral implications. The chorus prays (136–37):

tandem lassa feros exuat impetus  
sicci progenies impia Tantali.

Atreus later describes the children of Thyestes (while they and Thyestes still are in a state of virtuous deprivation) as *fessi*, wearied by their sufferings (301). But Atreus himself does not begin to lose his violent energy until he is wearied by slaughter. The messenger describes him as a lion in the midst of slaughter which has had its fill but continues killing *dente iam lasso piger* (736).

Since, therefore, Tantalus, who in the prologue is virtuous and abominates his progeny's *furor*, denies, or wishes to deny, his physical appetite utterly; since he is sapped of his vital force and even destructive of life; since, on the other hand, Atreus' desire for vengeance is described as a physical appetite; since, far from being *lassus* he is possessed of an impetus which is criminal; since criminality grows with the reproduction of the family; then it seems appropriate to expand the equation referred to above (pp. 364 and 366), emotion = appetite. This play says emotion = appetite = impulse to fulfilment of the natural physical functions. That is to say, emotion (or perhaps it should be called passion, for here we are concerned with intemperate and destructive emotion) is not just equated with, or derived from, an unnatural appetite for too much; in this play passion specifically is connected with animal appetite, and is derived from, or is a function of, the normal vital impulses for the maintenance of life.

The idea that violent *furor* is associated with the physical, or animal, processes of life brings us back to the death-wish which Regenbogen recognized as an important element of Seneca's thought. Seneca's great interest in the idea of self-destruction is evidenced most clearly in this play in Thyestes' frantic prayer, at the play's climax, for a thunderbolt to strike him and burn out his defilement, and a cataclysm to engulf the world (1035–96). One critic has called this final outcry

"an intense luxuriation in violence,"<sup>15</sup> and that is exactly what it is. A weariness with life—even a fear of life and a consequent desire for death as a refuge—may be accounted for by the frequency of violent death and suffering in the first century and the familiarity of the Roman aristocracy with these things. But simple familiarity with death does not adequately explain the ecstatic *libido moriendi* which Seneca describes in this passage and which he recognized as a characteristic of his era's mentality. The source of this malaise is revealed in *Thyestes* in the figures of both Thyestes and Tantalus. It is not just fear of the external circumstances of the environment, but a revulsion from life as such, and a recognition of the self—or at least of one's physical being—as something noxious and unclean. Thus Tantalus' desire for self-torment, in order to discipline the evil within him (68–73).

As for Thyestes, Seneca takes some care to convey to the audience an impression of Thyestes' uncleanness, emphasizing the repulsiveness of his appearance as he eats his meal and afterwards. He is a greasy, disgusting creature, head glistening with oil and heavy with wine (780–81, 948, 909–11):

nitet fluenti madidus unguento comam  
gravisque vino.

pingui madidus crinis amomo. . . .

resupinus ipse purpureae atque auro incubat  
vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput.  
eructat.

Not only does he belch. Food sticks in his throat, gagging him (781–82), and wine mixed with blood dribbles out of his mouth as he tries to drink (987–88):

admotus ipsis Bacchus a labris fugit  
circaque rictus ore decepto fluit.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noticed that in these descriptions of revolting gluttony moisture figures largely—I think with significance. Tantalus, on the other hand, until he is driven to sin by the Fury, is *siccus Tantalus*

<sup>15</sup> Pratt (above, note 8) 12.

<sup>16</sup> The words *madidus* (780 and 948, quoted above) and *rictus* (988) have been used before in connection with Atreus. In the simile describing him as a lion in the midst of slaughter, he is *cruore rictus madidus* (734).

(137). The account of his searing thirst (170-75) stands at the climax of the choral ode which describes his punishment, and in lines 103-11 (see above, p. 367) it is made plain that he is destructive of life because he deprives it of moisture, the stuff of life. It should be remembered that this dry torment is productive in Tantalus of virtuous scruples.

In the descriptions of Thyestes above, the oily moistness of Thyestes' hair is mentioned twice (780, 948), and probably the impression which this gives of a voluptuary sleekness, or healthy carnality, is important to Seneca. By contrast, before Thyestes succumbs to temptation and abandons his ascetic life, his hair has the appearance of a dry, matted, bristly thatch (505-7):

aspice ut multo gravis  
squalore vultus obruat maestos coma.  
quam foeda iaceat barba.

This, then, is the reason for Thyestes' prayer for a thunderbolt to strike him when he discovers what a horror his appetite has led him, albeit unknowingly, to commit: it is to cleanse himself by fire (1087-92). For Thyestes, death is not just an escape from the torments of the environment into unconsciousness. Like Tantalus, Thyestes calls down torment upon himself. There is an incontinent relish in his verbal self-flagellation because it brings some satisfaction of atonement and purgation.

I believe that the idea that violence, or violent passion, is a "natural" thing, deriving ultimately from animal energy, further explains Thyestes' desire for self-torment and death. Certainly it explains the lust for the infliction of suffering and death which is to be seen in Atreus and with which Seneca is more than once concerned in his philosophical writings (see *De ira* 2.32.1, 2.5.2, 2.5.5, *De tranq.* 2.10-14). Atreus' cruel violence is the fulfilment of a natural impulse, or inner need. It arises from the need for the impetus within him to find expression when it becomes too great to be contained. It is, if you please, natural activity run riot. "Natura enim humanus animus agilis est et pronus ad motus," says Seneca (*De tranq.* 2.11).

In this passage from the *De tranquillitate* (2.10-14) Seneca says that souls which are not kept tightly under control first take a masochistic



pleasure in labor and pain (2.12) and subsequently a sadistic pleasure in bloody violence (2.14). In other words, the desire to suffer and to inflict suffering are attributed to the same source. Perhaps, then, Thyestes' verbal abuse of himself and his desire for his own destruction—which partly is informed by his self-loathing—also are motivated by this same natural impulse which drives Atreus. For cannot self-destruction be viewed as the ultimate act of violence? Man's nature is sinister, and the human condition contains in it the seeds of its own destruction. After Atreus has filled Thyestes, communicating to him his *ferus impetus* (136), this impetus within Thyestes becomes so chaotically forceful and tumultuous that it threatens to overwhelm all of its surroundings, including its source (see below, p. 376). In fact, Thyestes' nihilistic call for a self-destruction which will involve the whole world (1076-96) is only an extension of a willingness expressed by Atreus to die in the collapse if only he can pull down the house of Pelops upon the head of his brother (190-91):

haec ipsa pollens incliti Pelopis domus  
ruat vel in me, dummodo in fratrem ruat.

Atreus' *furor* is so indiscriminate in its intensity that it is directed even toward himself. And when Thyestes calls for a thunderbolt to destroy him (1089-90):

me pete, trisulco flammeam telo facem  
per pectus hoc trans mitte,

he is echoing Atreus' earlier calling down upon himself of the Fury's torch (250-53):

dira Furiarum cohors  
discorsque Erinys veniat et geminas faces  
Megaera quatiens; non satis magno meum  
ardet furore pectus.

A few lines later (255, 258) the sort of emotion Atreus feels is twice called *dolor*. Thus the *furor* of Thyestes, after he has eaten, is of the same kind as the *furor* of Atreus. For Atreus' destructive force, like Thyestes', is masochistic as well as sadistic: he not only wishes to hurt Thyestes, but takes pleasure in his own distress.

After Thyestes has indulged his appetite and has been filled with

his children, he feels them kicking and groaning within him. It is easy to smile at this and dismiss it as Silver-Age hyperbole. But there is more significance to this tumult within Thyestes than that.

quis hic tumultus viscera exagitat mea?  
quid tremuit intus? sentio impatiens onus.

. . . . .  
volvuntur intus viscera et clusum nefas  
sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam.

To a reader with a little sympathetic imagination these lines (999–1000, 1041–42) might suggest a teeming womb. However, this is a comparatively minor matter. What is more important is that the *tumultus* which Thyestes feels within him after he has eaten is further confirmation of the equation I suggested above: emotion = appetite = instinct for fulfilment of the natural physical functions. For, disgusting as Thyestes' meal may be, it is eaten without conscious knowledge of the truth and certainly is motivated by nothing more than normal animal appetite. As soon as Thyestes has put away his *tristis egestas* (924) and nourished himself, he feels a violent turmoil within him (999–1000, see above). Long before he suspects the nature of his meal or his brother's treachery he feels coming upon him an uncanny disquiet, a *nulla surgens dolor ex causa* (944). This quickly grows to distressed agitation (954–56):

libet infaustos mittere questus,  
libet et Tyrio saturas ostro  
rumpere vestes, ululare libet.

This terrible foreboding rises within him like a tranquil sea which swells before the storm (as Atreus' passion swelled within him; see above, p. 363). He then adds (961–62):

quos tibi luctus quosve tumultus  
fingis, demens.

The strictly physical *tumultus* within Thyestes, which derives from his appetite, uncannily produces a corresponding emotional tumult. I say uncannily, but it seems to me that the reason is clear and, within the framework of ideas of this play, logical enough: to Seneca animal vitality is passion and violence. There is no need for any intermediary conscious mental process.

The description of the turbulence welling up inside Thyestes is so similar that it must be intended to recall the lines describing the more violent tumult of passion filling Atreus (253), which shakes him, which he feels swelling within him (267-68) and about to sweep him away (260-62, quoted above, p. 363). Perhaps it should be pointed out here that the disturbances both within Thyestes and within Atreus have a common source—Tantulus. In the prologue Megaera orders Tantalus (83-86): "ante perturba domum. . . concute insano ferum pectus tumultu." In other words their inner turbulence is hereditary, and natural to them.

Atreus' storm not only shakes him but buffets his surroundings as well (262-65):

imo mugit e fundo solum,  
tonat dies serenus ac totis domus  
ut fracta tectis crepuit et moti lares  
vertere vultum.

This is early in the play. Later, when he performs his terrible sacrifices, his violent passion is so overwhelming that the grove in which the sacrifices take place trembles, and an earthquake shakes the whole palace. The natural order of things is thrown into disorder, as statues weep and wine turns to blood. The strength of Atreus' evil shakes even the heavens, terrifying the gods (696-705). Finally it causes the sun, even, to flee the sky (789-93). The chorus fears that the whole universe will be shattered and fall into formless chaos (828-32):

trepidant trepidant pectora magno  
percussa metu.  
ne fatali cuncta ruina  
quassata labent iterumque deos  
hominesque premat deforme chaos.

Again, it is easy to smile and to depreciate the importance of passages like this as nothing more than empty ("poetic") exaggeration. The difficulty an academician reading *in camera* may have of maintaining his willing suspension of disbelief makes it tempting to assume a superficiality of intent on the part of the poet. Consequently no one except Regenbogen, to my knowledge, ever has considered whether

this amplification of reality is inspired by any more serious intent than that of arresting the attention of the audience. Regenbogen pointed out, I think correctly if rather vaguely, that this disturbance of the order of the universe is consistent with Seneca's belief as a Stoic: it is due to the *συμπάθεια τῶν ὅλων*.<sup>17</sup> It is true that Seneca probably would not have described the effect of Atreus' passion in this way if he had not been prepared by Stoic philosophy to believe that every action has reverberations throughout the universe; and suspension of disbelief would have been much easier for a Stoic than it is for a modern reader. But the question Regenbogen leaves unanswered is why Seneca chooses to describe this upheaval at such great length. As a Stoic, Seneca may have been prepared to believe in it but he need not have felt compelled to write about it. What significance does it have for the passion of Atreus or the sufferings of Thyestes?

The answer, I believe, is that this storm is an externalization of the storm of passion within Atreus. If Seneca believes that emotion once indulged knows no limit and grows until it produces enormities, then with this convulsion of the universe he is describing the logical result (given the existence of *συμπάθεια τῶν ὅλων*) of frenzy such as Atreus'. This frenzy grows within him until, when it bursts forth into physical expression—that is, when Atreus perpetrates his acts of passion—it shakes the world. It is important to see that when (about line 695) Atreus' storm first is described, the image of the storm is not externally or arbitrarily inserted by the poet simply for the purpose of exaggerating the fearfulness of Atreus' murderous act. As early as the prologue the storm image is used to describe the passion of Atreus and of the progeny of Tantalus generally. Atreus' storm has its origin within his vitals, and the image of the storm seems to symbolize the uncontrollable and uncontainable, and at the same time turbulent, undirected, impulsive (one is tempted to say visceral) quality of Atreus' emotions.

But to return to Thyestes' storm. That the turmoil in Thyestes is so similar to that in Atreus is ominous. On the one hand, Atreus is so fierce, bloodthirsty, and malevolent; on the other, Thyestes is a passive, even virtuous, victim. Yet there is a common denominator; what happens to Atreus at the beginning happens to Thyestes at the

<sup>17</sup> Regenbogen (above, note 6) 437–38.

end, for in the closing lines Thyestes' inner turmoil erupts into paroxysms of *furor* more violent than Atreus'. Thyestes' passionate outburst at the play's climax is far more than an unhappy sufferer's passionate cry for oblivion. It is clear enough that the author wishes to suggest that Thyestes, if not as consciously evil as Atreus, at least is as dangerous.

Atreus, who is so energetic, so lustful after vengeance and nearly insatiable, is also in his own way passive. He is not the master of his own soul or his own desires. His decision to seek vengeance is not a rational one. His personal motives are very lightly touched upon (only one passage of twenty-four lines is devoted to his motivation), and clearly the author is unconcerned with them or wishes to depreciate their importance. Much more space is devoted to Atreus' own highly rhetorical description of the intensity of his passion: he is swept away by a storm of emotion rising from within his bosom. Atreus' reasons for vengeance are not nearly so important as his extreme desire for it, which is like a physical hunger. Really there is no reason behind his madness. He is driven by a necessity of his race that he thirst for blood (102-3). The rational side of his being is dominated by his appetitive, irrational side.

This subjection to passion is what Thyestes has in common with Atreus. He may have the best of intentions, Atreus the worst. Certainly Thyestes has none of the malice Atreus has in abundance. Yet at the end Thyestes, too, is overcome by emotion which he cannot contain and which threatens to be more violent and destructive than Atreus'. I have tried to show that in this play passion is a coordinate of vitality. If this is so, it is easy to see what makes Thyestes' emotion so invidious that his cries of paternal despair have to be likened to Atreus' blood-lust. His emotion is more than just natural grief; it is born before he suspects the death of his sons, and literally grows out of his indulgence of his appetite. Thyestes' *furor* is not a moral affection, to be avoided at will, but an inevitable concomitant of his existence. He cannot escape his animal impulses, his creature condition of being alive and desiderative.

In this play, vitality/passion is an expansive, explosive thing, like a storm. The family grows, criminality grows with it, *furor* grows within Atreus, and then out of him. Thyestes fills himself to repletion, and within him turmoil grows. When Thyestes discovers what he

has done he is stricken with frenzy, and the storm within him becomes more violent, seeking to burst out (1041-42, quoted above, p. 372). In self-loathing he turns upon himself. He begs for a sword with which to cut out the obscenity (1044). When this is denied he begins to beat himself (1045-46). As he becomes more distressed he calls for a thunderbolt to strike him and burn out the impurity (1089-92):

me pete, trisulco flammeam telo facem  
per pectus hoc trans mitte. si natos pater  
humare et igni tradere extremo volo,  
ego sum cremandus.

However, this is more than a matter just of self-hatred; that is, in the extremity of his grief Thyestes does not, as would any rational man, long only to die. Figuratively the tumult within him already has burst forth. Its violence is not directed just against himself and his brother, but against all his surroundings. He calls upon the earth to swallow up all Mycenae (1006-11):

sustines tantum nefas  
gestare, Tellus? non ad infernam Styga  
tenebrasque mergis rupta et ingenti via  
ad chaos inane regna cum rege abripis  
non tota ab imo tecta convellens solo  
vertis Mycenae?

Finally he prays for a cataclysm (1078-80, 1085-87):

nubibus totum horridis  
convolve mundum, bella ventorum undique  
committe et omni parte violentum intona.  
. . . . .  
ignesque torque. vindica amissum diem,  
iaculare flammas, lumen ereptum polo  
fulminibus exple.

The swelling storm of Atreus' madness shook the world. Now Thyestes' passion threatens to engulf the universe.