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Apocalypse Now: Atreus Homericus in Seneca’s *Thyestes*?

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Seneca’s *Thyestes* offers the fullest exposition of the theory and psychology of tyrannical power in the tragedies, from the perspectives of both tormenter and victim. The theme of power, progressively developed through the drama, reaches its spectacular climax at the *cena Thyestea* in Act 5 where Atreus’ plot comes to fruition and the tyrant-artist savours his transcendental revenge. The Act turns crucially on the contrast between the tormentor’s total control and his victim’s total loss of control, with the opposition sharpened by thematic responsions, structural markers and intertextual allusion. I am concerned here in particular with the contribution of literary allusions to the dramatic structure at this climactic moment.

*Thyestes’ extended monody (Thy. 920–969)* brings into focus some notable aspects of the overarching theme of power relations. As in high tragedy, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* coincide to devastating effect (Arist. *Poet. 1452 a 29–33)*: at this pivotal transition from ignorance to knowledge—the Aristotelian ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν μεταβολή*—the monody first recapitulates the mechanisms of *Thyestes*’ undoing, then the victim recognizes his tormentor’s controlling hand in his downfall (*At. natos ecquid agnoscis tuos? | Thy. Agnosco fratrem, 1005–1006*). Atreus’ total control over his brother is pointedly reflected in *Thyestes*’ symmetrical loss of self-control and in the enforced counter-volitional dilemma—which enacts the absolutist theory earlier explicated by the tyrant to his satellite:
At.  Maximum hoc regni bonum est, quod facta domini cogitur populus sui tam ferre quam laudare. Sat. Quos cogit metus laudare, eosdem reddit inimicos metus. at qui favoris gloriam veri petit, animo magis quam voce laudari volet.

At.  Laus vera et humili saepe contingit viro, non nisi potenti falsa. quod nolunt velint. (Thy. 205-212)¹

At.  The greatest advantage of kingship is this: that the people are compelled to endure their master’s deeds as well as praise them.

Sat.  Whom fear compels to praise, it also turns into enemies. But he who seeks the glory of true favour will want to be praised from the heart rather than the lips.

At.  True praise often comes even to the lowly, false praise only to the mighty. Let them want what they do not want!

Multiple responsions reinforce the ironies in Thyestes’ capitulation. The sobered exile and champion of asceticism is now seduced by the same falsus fulgor he had earlier disavowed (412-420, 446-454), he discards his former persona (veterem ex animo mitte Thyesten, 937), fatally abdicating philosophical regnum for secular kingship (immane regnum est posse sine regno pati, 470 ~ resupinus ipse purpurae atque auro incubat, 909). The transvestite motif in particular signals the culmination of his ensnarement by Atreus, for now “the crowning of the false king (544-546) externalizes the moral ruin of Thyestes.”² Renouncing his stoically tinged sapientia, the incipient Wise Man of the third Act becomes in the fifth the not-so-wise guy who is easy game for Atreus. In a memorable conjunction of grotesque and sublime, Thyestes’ sonorous belch pro-

¹ On this programmatic passage and its relevance to tyrant psychology, see Rose (1987); Mader (1998); id. (2014, pp. 148-150); Bessone (2011).

claims his total loss of self-control (*nec satis menti imperat, 919*) even as it validates Atreus’ total command of the situation (*eructat. o me caelitum excelissimum, 911*). This is the triumph of the *quod nolunt, velint* script. Thus the focus on Thyestes at 920–969, overtly showcasing his powerlessness and loss of agency, doubles as a tribute to the handiwork of the tyrant-as-artist (*fructus hic operis mei est, 906*): the two aspects entail each other, rise and demise proceed in pointed contrary motion. The crucial interaction between Atreus and Thyestes is intensified by a number of theatrical touches such as the contrasts light/darkness and knowledge/ignorance, and the interplay of the tormentor’s “assaultive” gaze with the “reactive” gaze of his victim.  

### THYESTES AS DAMOCLES

At this dramatic moment, two literary echoes of celebrated passages in Cicero and in the *Odyssey*—the first well known, the other so far not considered—come into play to give point to the fatal reversal by highlighting *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and the all-important theme of power relations. Thyestes’ subjection is predicated on a fatal loss of agency, signalled by mental confusion and discordant reactions. From first appearance, he was torn between the lure of *regnum* and his own dark misgivings; now that self-division culminates in a prolonged akratic dilemma, with body and mind acting out of sync in a sequence of grotesque involuntary reflexes. The themewords *nolle* and *invitus* that track his progressive surrender of selfhood (420, 565, 770) conversely affirm the triumph of the *quod nolunt, velint* principle: thus *nulla surgens dolor ex causa* (943), *imber vultu nolente cadit* (950), *nolo infelix* (965), *sed quid hoc? nolunt manus | parere* (985–986). The paradoxical conjunction of *dolor* and *voluptas* (968–969, cf. 596–597), as index of the fissured self, is now further nuanced by a suggestive literary allusion.

When Thyestes’ garland slips ominously from his head (945–949) and he longs to put off the tokens of kingship (954–956) as dark foreboding mars his pleasure (965–969), the reluctant banqueter replays the drama of Damocles at the court of

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3 Cf. Meltzer (1988, p. 315); Mader (2003[b]).


Dionysius, whose enjoyment of the *bios tyrannikos* was similarly negated by the sword suspended over his head:

*itaque nec pulchros illos ministratores aspiciebat nec plenum artis argentum nec manum porrigebat in mensam, iam ipsae defluebant coronae [~ Thy. 947, vernae capiti fluxere rosae]; denique exoravit tyrannum, ut abire liceret, quod iam beatus nollet esse …*  
(Cic. *Tusc.* 5.62)

And so he had no eyes either for those handsome attendants or the artistic silver-plate, nor did he stretch out his hand to the table; now the garlands themselves began to slip down. Finally he begged the tyrant to be allowed to leave, because he now had no wish to be happy.

Kingship is not what it seems: like Damocles, Thyestes now experiences *in situ* the truth of his own earlier misgivings, *clarus hic regni nitor | fulgore non est quod oculos falsa auferat: cum quod datur spectabis, et dantem aspice* (“There is no reason for the bright lustre of kingship to dazzle your eyes with its false glitter. When you look to the gift, look also to the giver,” 414-416). In either case the banqueter’s reaction pointedly confirms his delusion and misguided evaluation of the supposed advantages of kingship. Seduced (like Damocles) by the deceptive glitter of kingship, Thyestes has repudiated his philosophical asceticism, paid insufficient attention to Atreus’ ulterior motives and succumbed to his brother’s machinations: the intertextual allusion thus signals the endpoint of his moral downfall and his victim status (Thyestes is now to Atreus as Damocles was to Dionysius).

**DIVUS ATREUS**

If the slipping garland points to Damocles, I suggest that the distinctive conjunction in Act 5 of discordant reactions, loss of power, and apocalyptic rhetoric points also to *Odyssey* 20.345-357, another sinister prelude to a climactic *peripeteia*. An evocation of that passage would reinforce in particular the structural significance of Thyestes’ monody, highlighting the critical “moment before” and dramatizing the definitive reversal of roles and power dynamics. Since the reference text here is Greek, I argue


7 See Hangard (1971); Mader (2002); Degl’Innocenti Pierini (2008, pp. 1336-1340).
for an affiliation not on the basis of specific verbal echoes but rather of an analogous context and the shared thematic features discussed below. Nor can we know whether Seneca is referencing the *Odyssey* passage directly or through some (lost) intermediary Greek or Latin version; for the purposes of my argument, I assume the former.

Again, power relations define both texts. In Seneca, first, these are indexed rhetorically through the opposition high/low:

\[
\text{resupinus ipse purpurae atque auro incubat,}
\]
\[
vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput.
\]
\[
eructat. o me caelitum excelsissimum,
\]
\[
\text{regumque regem!} \quad (909-912)
\]

He himself *reclines* on purple and gold, *sprawled backwards*, supporting his head, heavy with wine, on his left hand. He belches. Oh, *highest of the heavenly gods* am I and king of kings!

The supine banqueter, head propped up unsteadily on his left hand, is set against his tormentor who now triumphantly parades as “highest of the heavenly gods”\(^8\) and “king of kings.” The vertical axis had appeared also to locate the philosophical asceticism of Thyestes *exsul*:

\[
dum excelsus steti, | numquam pavere destiti … | … o quantum bonum est | obstare nulli, capere secures dapes | humi iamcentem! (“While I stood on high, I never ceased to feel terror … Oh, what a blessing it is to stand in no one’s way, to take carefree meals *lying on the ground,*” 447-451; cf. 391-392; 455-456). Act 5 parodies the ascetic pose by placing it in a scenario that marks the ironic failure of ascetic insight; and as Thyestes abdicates his philosophical kingship (442-443, 470; cf. 344-349, 380-390), the tyrant proclaims his transcendental victory in the extragant “king of kings” *paronomasia.*\(^9\) Highest and lowest pointedly confront each other, signifying the spectacular triumph of Atreus.

In this heady context he constructs himself rhetorically as a god (885-888, 911) and his diction takes a distinctly apocalyptic turn: *etiam die nolente discutiam tibi | tenebras, miseriae sub quibus latitant tuae* (“Even though the daylight is unwilling, I will dispel for you the darkness that conceals your sorrows,” 896-897). Darkness and ignorance are here isomorphic, Atreus *divus* grandly conflates the visible onset of

\(^8\) Anticipated in *atque ultero deos | terret minantes* (704-705) and *dimitto superos* (888). Cf. also n.14 below.

\(^9\) The figure is discussed by Schäfer (1974, esp. pp. 74-75).
unnatural gloom (776–778, the “darkness at noon” chorus 789–884, 891–892, 990–995, 1035–1036) with his victim’s fatal ignorance. This is a pointed reprise of the messenger’s earlier warning, where those distinctions were also collapsed:

\[
\text{in malis unum hoc tuis} \\
\text{bonum est, Thyesta, quod mala ignoras tua.} \\
\text{sed et hoc peribit. verterit currus licet} \\
\text{sibi ipse Titan ovbium ducens iter,} \\
\text{tenebrisque facinus obruat taetrum novis} \\
\text{nox missa ab ortu tempore alieno gravis,} \\
\text{tamen videndum est. tota patetient mala.} \quad (782–778)
\]

In your troubles, Thyestes, there is this one boon, that you are ignorant of your troubles. But this too will perish. Though the Titan has reversed his chariot, tracing a course counter to himself, and though the foul crime is buried in strange darkness by oppressive night, released from the east at an unnatural time—yet you must see. All your troubles will be revealed.

The banqueter Thyestes is literally and figuratively in the dark,\(^\text{10}\) but nox, tenebrae and ignorantia will soon be dispelled. Atreus as master rhetorician\(^\text{11}\) plays sadistically with the correlative pairings light/darkness and knowledge/ignorance\(^\text{12}\)—but in the vicinity of the auto-apotheosis, his grandiloquent and elemental discutiam tibi | tenebras can also be construed as a (literal) gesture of divine omnipotence: he talks and acts like a god (e.g. Hom. Il. 5.127–128; 15.668–670; Verg. Aen. 2.604–606).\(^\text{13}\) The tyrant parades as an inverted mirror image of the more benign Jupiter of whom Horace had said, prudens futuri temporis exitum | caliginosa nocte permit deus | ridetque, si mortalis ultra | fas trepidat (“God in his providence conceals the future’s outcome in dark night and smiles if mortal man is anxious beyond due limits,” Carm. 3.29.29–32). For Atreus, however, mental anguish is precisely the point of the disclosure (899–

\(^{10}\) Cf. Schmitz (1993, pp. 90–115, esp. 101); Winter (2014, pp. 120–121, 129–130).

\(^{11}\) Cf. Tarrant (1985, p. 216): “Atreus’ language is at its wittiest as he toys with his discomfited victim.”

\(^{12}\) As (e.g.) Lucr. 2.55–56, 3.1–2; Ov. Met. 6.472–473, 652; Juv. 10.3–4, remota / erroris nebula (with the commentators); Solimano (1991, pp. 92–103).

\(^{13}\) See further Mader (2003[a]).
901-782-783, 903-907). The distinctive trope thus effectively conflates torment and triumph, apocalypse and apotheosis. As one commentator has remarked, “in his manic glee Atreus sees the whole universe, from the physical to the metaphysical, cooperating with his lust for revenge.”

ATREUS HOMERICUS

Atreus’ apocalyptic rhetoric at this pivotal moment, I propose, is coloured also by a reminiscence of Odyssey 20.345-58. Just before the contest with the bow, Athene deranges the suitors’ minds, discordant reactions capture their mental incoherence and loss of agency, and then Theoclymenus in a prophetic vision parses the strange scene as retribution for their crimes:

```text
ὣς φάτο Τηλέμαχος· μνηστήριοι δὲ Παλλὰς Αθήνη

οἱ δ’ ἡδή γναθμοῖς εἰλύαται κεφαλαί τε πρόσωπα τε νέρθε τε γοῦνα,
οἰμωγὴ δὲ δέδηε, δεδάκρυται δὲ παρειαί,

ὡς ἐφαθ’, οἱ δ’ ἁρα πάντες ἐπ’ αὐτῶ ἤδυ γέλασσαν. (Od. 20.345-358)
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14 On the hierarchy god–man–beast, Atreus is now self-proclaimed deus; but to the detached observer and in light of the earlier tigress and lion similes (707-714, 732-737), he is the god–beast. On the calculus of inversion in Iby. and its philosophical significance, see esp. Lefèvre (2015).

So spoke Telemachus, but among the suitors Pallas Athene roused unquenchable laughter, and deranged their minds. Already they were laughing with jaws not their own, and the meat they ate was spattered with blood, their eyes were filled with tears and their minds seemed to be wailing. Then godlike Theoclymenus spoke among them: “Wretched men, what is this evil you suffer? Your heads and faces and your knees beneath are shrouded in night, wailing blazes forth, your cheeks are covered with tears, the walls and lovely panels are sprinkled with blood. The porch is full of phantoms, full also the court, phantoms eager for Erebus beneath the darkness. The sun has perished out of heaven, and an evil fog spreads over all.” So he spoke, but they all laughed merrily at him.

This scene, billed “the most eerie passage in Homer,” is so surreal and ghoulish that it has even been considered a later addition. But its gloom, doom, and foreboding would have had a special appeal to Seneca, and may even have provided a distant cue to his own banqueting scene, where some of the distinctive emphases reappear. At least in formal-thematic terms, there are broad structural analogies. In either case, victims are grotesquely disabled through remote control by a higher power (Athene/divus Atreus) just before the decisive peripeteia, and both passages include a notable apocalyptic discourse. The Homeric schema co-ordinates the following elements: banquet, divine control, suitors alienated from their physical selves, involuntary reflexes, unnatural darkness, and apocalypse. Athene engineers the action from “above,” prompting hysterical laughter (οἱ δὲ ήδη γναθμοῖσι γελώων ἀλλοτρίοισιν);17 but the deceptive euphoria is accompanied by dysphoric physical symptoms (ὄσσε δ’ ἄρα σφέων | δακρυόφιν πίμπλαντο, γόον δ’ ωί̈ετο θυμός: οἰμωγὴ δὲ δέδηε, δεδάκρυνται δὲ παρειαί), and this disjunction indexes a fatal loss of agency. The seer Theoclymenus then glosses the situation (351-358), interpreting darkness, wailing, tears, and bloodied walls as signs of impending destruction, thereby raising the dramatic tension. The preternatural gloom that frames his speech (νυκτὶ μὲν ύμέων | εἰλύαται κεφαλαί τε πρόσωπά τε νέρθε τε γοῦνα, 351-352 ~ εἰδώλων δὲ πλέον πρόθυρον … | ἰεμένων Ἐρεβόσδε ὑπὸ ζόφον ἡέλιος δὲ | οὐρανοῦ ἐξαπόλωλε, κακὸν ἐρχόμενον ἀχλύς, 355-357) has a double function. First it connotes the suitors’ guilt and imminent punishment (κακὸν ύμιν | ἐρχόμενον, 367-368) for their reckless hybris (369-370, 394): these are marked

16 Russo et al. (1991, p. 240) ad Od. 20.351-357.
17 Rutherford (1992, p. 233) on ἀλλοτρίοισιν: “with jaws not their own”—i.e. not under their control.”
men, and at this moment their fate is made manifest.\textsuperscript{18} Simultaneously, the darkness plays on the tension ignorance/insight that is indexed also in νόος and compounds: the suitors are (metaphorically) in the dark, their wits befuddled by the goddess (παρέπλαγξεν δὲ νόημα, 345), while Theoclymenus’ vatic vision is unimpaired. The pattern runs through the ironic exchanges between suitors and prophet. They declare that it is Theoclymenus who is mad, because he apparently finds the place too dark (ἀφραίνει ξεῖνος ... | ἀλλὰ μιν αἰῶνα, νέοι, δόμου ἐκπέμψασθε θύραξ | εἰς ἄγορην ἥρχοσθαι, ἐπεὶ τάδε νυκτὶ ἑτέκει, “The stranger is out of his mind! ... Quick, young men, escort him out of doors to go to the assembly place, since here he finds it like night,” 360-362); but in his riposte, the clear-sighted prophet, picking up νόος and νοέω, corrects their misguided view (εἰσί μοι ὀφθαλμοί ... | καὶ νόος ἐν στήθεσσι τετυγμένος οὐδὲν ἀεικής. | τοῖς ἔξειμι θύραξε, ἐπεὶ νοέω κακὸν ἔρχομεν | ἐρχόμενον, “I have eyes ... and a stable mind in my breast that is in no way poorly fashioned. With these I will go out of doors, for I see disaster coming upon you,” 365-368). Hysterical laughter then audibly expresses the suitors’ failure to comprehend their predicament by “add[ing] macabre emphasis to the irony of their ignorance and folly. They laugh when events are most serious and ominous for them; yet their hysteria is combined with weeping (349), unexplained and unappreciated by them.”\textsuperscript{19} Theoclymenus’ impressive evocation of the disappearing sun (ηέλιος δὲ | οὐρανοῦ ἐξαπόλωλε, κακὴ δ’ ἐπιδέδρομεν ἀχλύς) cannot be taken literally as alluding to a simultaneous solar eclipse—\textsuperscript{20}—for the suitors do not perceive the dark-

\textsuperscript{18} Rutherford (1992, p. 234): “The darkness is symbolic of the suitors’ sins.” Levine (1983, p. 9): “The seer’s warning ... looks ahead to the slaughter. The scene is consequently a pivotal one, summing up the suitors’ crimes and looking forward to their punishment.” Cf. the warning signs at Sen. Oed. 325-327 (also with the suggestion of ignorance).

\textsuperscript{19} Rutherford (1992, p. 232). The suitors’ laughter at this crucial moment has been much discussed. Colakis (1986, p. 139) notes that “the wild laughter of the Suitors as hysteria [is] unique in Homer”; it expresses a misguided “feeling of security in their position” (Levine 1982, p. 98). Arnould (1990, p. 98), noting the psychological ambivalence of tears and laughing, calls Od. 20.345-439 “le cas exemplaire et limite d’une mobilité psychologique annonçant un renversement tragique.” Pivotal and proleptic functions of the scene within the epic’s larger thematic structure are analysed in Levine (1980, pp. 130-144) and id. (1983); Säüd (2011, pp. 207-208, 343-344). The ironic remark that the suitors “died laughing” (γέλῳ ἔκθανον, 18.100) effectively anticipates their later fate, and gives a special importance to 20.345-58. Ahl and Roisman (1996, p. 245) note the grimly witty wordplay agelae (339, vocative) – algea (339, “sufferings”) – gelo (346, “laughter”), and add that “another, unstated, wordplay lurks: a-geloion, ‘un-funny,’ for the situation is no laughing matter.”

\textsuperscript{20} See Rutherford (1992, p. 234).
ness he talks about (361-362)—but rhetorically at least the sun image amplifies their impending demise into a quasi-cosmic event and, to that extent, it bears comparison with Atreus’ own elemental posturing.

INTERTEXT AND INTERPRETATION

We have two analogous configurations, therefore, combining physical and metaphysical perspectives, playing on the contrasts of knowledge/ignorance and light/darkness, and self-consciously styled as spectacular, prophetic utterances. Atreus, like Athene, controls the situation from “above,” and adapts the apocalyptic discourse of the seer. This is not, however, to suggest an exact equivalence among the constituent elements in the two sequences: Homer’s darkness is metaphorical, while Thyestes finds himself both literally and figuratively in the dark, and lighting effects powerfully enhance the controlling presence of Atreus; Theoclymenus envisages the onset of unnatural gloom while Atreus will dispel it; Thyestes, like Damocles but unlike the reckless suitors, has an uneasy premonition of impending disaster (*mit-tit luctus signa futuri | mens ante sui praesaga mali, 957-958). And most poignantly, the apocalypse of Theoclymenus marks a crucial point in the nostos thematics that will culminate in the re-establishment of order in Ithaca—while Atreus’ elemental rant signals the moment that finally explodes the treacherous illusion of order and reconciliation.21 But what is notable in either case—and this in my view ultimately justifies treating the Homer passage as a pre-text—is the self-conscious rhetoric and dramaturgy of the apocalypse, and its structural function as marker of imminent reversal. Both texts play off the speaker’s privileged viewpoint against the limited insight of the victim, and employ an apocalyptic rhetoric that powerfully ratifies that superior status.

I conclude that the two literary echoes discussed serve to illuminate complementary aspects of the Thyestean banquet. In the Damocles allusion, the main focus is on the victim—his psychic disposition and agonizing prescience, the paradox of attraction and revulsion, and his subordinate status—all of which anticipates the fateful anagnorisis and the transition ἐκ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν. The Homeric allusion also touches on the psychological dimension (the suitors’ loss of agency), but has

21 Intertextual tensions and ideological engagement of this kind are thoroughly Senecan, as (for a single instance) his inversion of optimistic Vergilian motifs at Thy. 875-884, with Monteleone (1991, pp. 291-306) and Trinacty (2014, pp. 51-59).
additional thematic implications. By highlighting the victims’ crimes, arrogance and infatuation, it signals imminent retribution and demise—now made all the more emphatic by the controlling presence of Athena and the apocalyptic perspective of Theoclymenus. The Homeric pre-text would give point to Atreus’ auto-apotheosis and hyperbolical rhetoric: in the elaborate dramaturgy of revenge, the tyrant as unmoved mover in a universe of evil grandly affirms his total command over his hapless victim. The combined views from “above” and “below” present sadistic torment as a compelling psychodrama.  

22  I thank the journal’s editor and anonymous reader for a number of helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.
Works Cited


