

SENECA'S *THYESTES* AND THE POETICS OF MULTIPLE TRANSGRESSION

Seneca as a tragedian* has undergone in the last three decades an extended re-evaluation, witnessing a substantial number of publications which cover various aspects of his dramatic output¹. However, one specific area of research has been left unexplored: Seneca's conception of poetry, not as theoretical statement, aesthetic judgement or choice of apt quotation², but as formative idea and moving force in his own work and in his own poetic language. For it is evident that poets establish through their works a series of internal operative principles³, which stand in a creative dialogic relation to other texts⁴. One such set of principles consists of an author's poetic concepts, which may be explicitly or implicitly stated in a given text⁵ and which

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1. See indicatively the bibliographical survey by B. Seidensticker & D. Armstrong, «Seneca tragicus 1878-1978», *ANRW* II, 32.2 (1985) 916-968.

2. The subject has been covered by J. Dingel, *Seneca und die Dichtung* [Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften, N.F. 51], Heidelberg 1974, pp. 20-63.

3. In the philosophic sense of inner coherence which is governed by the interaction of a text's concrete and abstract semantic levels, by which is understood the historical/cultural background and the sum of its aesthetic aspects; see R. Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, Tübingen ⁴1972, pp. 25-196 and H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen ⁵1985, pp. 107-174.

4. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by M. Holquist, translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist [University of Texas Slavic Series 1], Austin 1981, in particular pp. 259-300.

5. See, for example, the studies by S. Goldhill, *The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature*, Cambridge 1991 and T. D. Papanghelis, *Ἡ ποιητική τῶν Ρωμαίων «νεωτέρων». Προϋποθέσεις καὶ προεκτάσεις* [Ἑλληνική Ρωμαϊκή καὶ Ποιητική], Athens 1994; for the latter see my review in *Hellenika* 45 (1995) 173-181.

form part of its broader intertextual nexus⁶. In certain cases it is possible to juxtapose these principles to available theoretical pronouncements on poetry and/or style by other contemporary authors or by the poets themselves in other works of theirs.

In the present paper I propose to examine the internal operative principles of Seneca's art as a tragedian and, in particular, how these principles may manifest themselves through the plays or affect them as dramatic texts. This examination will be conducted parallel to a reading of some of Seneca's «practical advices» on the art of reading and writing as expressed in his Letters. Obviously, such an analysis cannot, at present, be carried out on a larger scale. It shall, therefore, be limited to one major, in my view, poetic concept of Seneca, that of transgression, and to one play, the *Thyestes*. In this context transgression is understood as the attempt to go beyond boundaries in a desire to exercise control over the *status quo* in any of its forms. I will try to demonstrate that in the *Thyestes* Atreus's revenge on his brother is a metaphor for the way in which a poet prepares his own text. My working hypothesis is that in the *Thyestes* this is accomplished through (a) the inversion of accepted notions and ideologies, and (b) the deviation from established norms and canons. While inversion and deviation aim at the rejection of dramatic and poetic balance, poetical transgression as a governing principle defines in this tragedy of revenge and cannibalism a peculiar and highly ambivalent relation between author and reader⁷.

6. H. R. Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, Frankfurt ²1991, pp. 655-865 and R. C. Holub, *Reception Theory. A Critical Introduction*, London - New York 1984 on reception; Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue*, Paris 1978 and G. Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte*, Paris 1979 on intertextuality.

7. On the *Thyestes* in general see R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca's Thyestes. Edited with Introduction and Commentary* [American Philological Association. Textbook Series 11], Atlanta 1985, from whose text I quote; in a number of instances Tarrant's closer adherence to the manuscript tradition, as well as his conjectures, yields a less smooth and, therefore, more interesting text than O. Zwierlein's in his edition of the plays (Oxford ²1987, pp. 293-333). Agreeing with Tarrant, *Thyestes*, pp. 10-13, I consider the play as one of Seneca's last, written probably between AD 60-62; on the matter of chronology see also Elaine Fantham, *Seneca's Troades: A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary*, Princeton 1982, pp. 9-14 and J. G. Fitch, «Sense-Pauses and Relative Dating in Seneca, Sophocles and Shakespeare», *AJP* 102 (1981) 289-307. On the play's possible sources (Sophocles, Euripides, Accius) see Tarrant, *Thyestes*, pp. 40-43, who opts for Accius' play *Atreus*, on which see O. Zwierlein, «Der Schluss der Tragödie "Atreus" des Accius», *Hermes* 111 (1983) 121-125. For the present analysis the question if Seneca's plays were actually staged or only recited is of little relevance; see the balanced views of R. J. Tarrant, «Senecan Drama and its Antecedents», *HSCP* 82 (1978) 213-263 and A. Dihle, «Seneca und die Aufführungspraxis der römischen Tragödie», *A&A* 29 (1983) 162-171 against D. F. Sutton, *Seneca on the Stage* [Mnemosyne. Supplementum 96], Leiden 1986, who proposes full stage performance.

I. Dramatic transgression

In the *Thyestes* the chorus believes in the existence of an «accepted order of the universe» (813 *solitae mundi vices*), standing under the oppressive rule of a higher power (610-612)⁸. It is exactly this accepted order that Atreus wishes to transgress⁹. His resolve to exact vengeance on his brother is described, both by others and himself, in terms of a desire to commit an act greater than anything known. Already in the prologue, Tantalus indicates that his offspring will «dare things yet undared» (20 *inausa audeat*), while the Fury insists on the lack of limit in anger (26) and the steady growth of crime in the Tantalid family (29-32). Atreus, in Act II, expresses this desire admirably when he declares that «you cannot pay back crime but by surpassing it» (195-196 *scelera non ulcisceris, | nisi vincis*). In goading himself to find enough rage he wishes that his breast «would be filled with a greater horror» (253-254 *impleri iuvat | maiore monstro*). The appearance of this unnamed *maius monstrum* triggers a brief exchange between Atreus and the Attendant, where the concept of dramatic transgression is fully developed. The Attendant asks and Atreus responds (254-270):

SAT.	Quid novi rabidus struis?	
ATR.	Nil quod doloris capiat assueti modum; nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis.	255
SAT.	Ferrum?	
ATR.	Parum est.	
SAT.	Quid ignis?	
ATR.	Etiam nunc parum est.	
SAT.	Quonam ergo telo tantus utetur dolor?	
ATR.	Ipsa Thyeste.	
SAT.	Maius hoc ira est malum.	
ATR.	Fateor. tumultus pectora attonitus quatit penitusque volvit; rapior et quo nescio, sed rapior. imo mugit e fundo solum, tonat dies serenus ac totis domus ut fracta tectis crepuit et moti Lares vertere vultum — fiat hoc, fiat nefas quod, di, timetis.	260 265

8. On the philosophical attitudes of the play's chorus see now P. J. Davis, *Shifting Song: The Chorus in Seneca's Tragedies* [Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien 26], Hildesheim - Zurich - New York 1993, pp. 172-183.

9. On the character of Atreus in the play and Seneca's concern with the pathology of evil see the still valid remarks by U. Knoche, «Atreus: Ein Beispiel», in E. Lefèvre (ed.), *Die Tragödien Senecas*, Darmstadt 1972, pp. 477-489 (orig. publ. in 1941), as well as J. P. Poe, «An Analysis of Seneca's *Thyestes*», *TAPA* 100 (1969) 355-376 and A. J. Boyle, «*Hic epulis locus*: The Tragic Worlds of Seneca's *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes*», *Ramus* 12 (1983) 199-228.

SAT.	Facere quid tandem paras?	
ATR.	Nescioquid animus maius at solito amplius supraque fines moris humani tumet instatque pigris manibus; haud quid sit scio, sed grande quiddam est.	270
ATT.	What mad new plan is this?	
ATR.	None that established limits can contain; no crime shall I pass over; none will satisfy.	
ATT.	The sword?	
ATR.	Too little.	
ATT.	Fire?	
ATR.	Still too little.	
ATT.	What weapon then will such a passion use?	
ATR.	Thyestes' self.	
ATT.	An evil worse than vengeance!	
ATR.	Yes. A frantic turmoil shakes and turns the core of my spirit; I am borne I know not where, but borne I am. The ground groans from its depths; the clear sky thunders; all the house, as if collapsing, crashes; the household gods in fear have turned away their faces. Let this be, this horror come to pass, O gods, at which you tremble.	
ATT.	Tell me, what do you plan?	
ATR.	Something greater, beyond accustomed ways, above the bounds of human nature swells in me and drives my sluggish hands; I know not what it is, but some tremendous thing it must be.	

The transgression of limits (255), combined with a sense of dissatisfaction (256), leads Atreus' thought to Thyestes as the instrument of his own punishment, while the Attendant describes the idea as *maius <ira> malum* (259). The exchange climaxes with Atreus expressing his desire for the *maius et solito amplius* (267), an act that will transgress the boundaries of human nature and force the gods to turn away in fear. Atreus lives in a world of comparisons with the «comparative of surpassing» as his guiding principle¹⁰.

In the disjointed world of the play, it is mythology that offers the prime examples to be rivaled. Tantalus had seen himself as the ancestor of crime in myth: «From my seed comes forth a throng to dare things yet undared and make me innocent» (17-20 *iam nostra subit | e stirpe turba quae suum vincat*

10. On the *maius solito* concept and the «comparativus Senecanus» see B. Seidensticker, «Maius solito: Senecas Thyestes und die tragoedia rhetorica», A&A 31 (1985) 116-136, especially pp. 119-127.

genus | *ac me innocentem faciat et inausa audeat*)¹¹. But Atreus also is fully aware of his position in the myth of the Tantalids. The opening words of his entrance monologue characterize not his role in the play but his mythological prototype (176-180):

Ignave, iners, enervis et, quod maximum
probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor,
inulte; post tot scelera, post fratris dolos
fasque omne ruptum questibus vanis agis
iratus Atreus?

Inactive, idle, gutless, and —what seems
to me worst of all in tyrant— unavenged!
After all these crimes, your brother's treacheries,
the breaking of all law, does angered Atreus
retaliate with mere complaints?

Iratus Atreus is well aware of the effect his crime should have on future generations: «Come now, my soul, do what no age to come shall praise, but none forget» (192-193 *age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet, | sed nulla taceat*)¹². Towards the end of the play, as Thyestes has eaten his children's flesh, Atreus exclaims: «Now I hold the proof of rule, now I hold my father's throne» (887 *nunc decora regni teneo, nunc solium patris*). Obviously, on a first level this refers to the assertion of his rule brought about by Thyestes' destruction; but the repetition of *nunc* shifts the perspective to a second level, the moment when Atreus the character is equated with Atreus the mythological *exemplum*. This is a typical trait of Seneca's «angered» characters, as when Medea, about to kill her own children, candidly admits «now I am Medea» (*Med.* 910 *Medea nunc sum*)¹³.

Atreus sees his vengeance as being inspired by other mythological *exempla*. The Fury had insinuated that «the Thracian crime shall be performed again, but with more victims» (56-57 *Thracium fiat nefas | maiore numero*). Later, he looks up to his ancestors as his prototypes: «Consider Tantalus and Pelops; precedents like these must guide the products of my hands» (242-243 *Tantalum et Pelopem aspice; | ad haec manus exempla poscuntur meae*).

11. See also *Thy.* 81-82 (Tantalus as teacher) and 86-87 (Tantalus forced into obedience).

12. He is so perceived by others, as when the Messenger points to the execution of the terrible deed (753-754 *o nullo scelus | credibile in aevo quodque posteritas neget*).

13. See R. J. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca. Agamemnon. Edited with a Commentary*, Cambridge 1976, p. 172 on *Ag.* 25 *vincam Thyestes sceleribus cunctos meis*. This trait reflects the use of Greek myth, now culturally dislocated, within the Roman context. Greek mythology has become the background to and the material for other, mostly literary, pursuits. On the cardinal position of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in this process see D. C. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic. Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition*, Oxford²1993, pp. 188-249.

Shortly after, Atreus finds the model for his revenge, namely the Thracian crime already referred to by the Fury. It is the famous story of Procne, Philomela and Tereus¹⁴: Tereus, married to Procne, falls in love with Procne's sister Philomela and rapes her; as a revenge Procne serves Tereus the cooked flesh of their child. Atreus, in the scene just discussed, responds to the Attendant (267-286):

Nescioquid animus maius at solito amplius supraque fines moris humani tumet instatque pigris manibus; haud quid sit scio, sed grande quiddam est. ita sit. hoc, anime, occupa.	270
dignum est Thyeste facinus et dignum Atreo; uterque faciat. vidit infandas domus Odrysia mensas —fateor, immane est scelus, sed occupatum; maius hoc aliquid dolor inveniat. animum Daulis inspira parens	275
sororque (causa est similis); assiste et manum impelle nostram. liberos avidus pater gaudensque laceret et suos artus edat. bene est, abunde est; hic placet poenae modus tantisper. ubinam est? tam diu cur innocens	280
versatur Atreus? tota iam ante oculos meos imago caedis errat, ingesta orbitas in ora patris —anime, quid rursus times et ante rem subsidis? audendum est, age; quod est in isto scelere praecipuum nefas, hoc ipse faciet.	285

Something greater
beyond accustomed ways, above the bounds
of human nature swells in me and drives
my sluggish hands; I know not what it is,
but some tremendous thing it must be... —yes!
Quick now, my soul, and seize it; here's a deed
to suit both Atreus and Thyestes, one
that each must do. The Thracian house once saw
a shameful feast... to be sure, a dreadful crime,
but one already thought of; my revenge
must fashion something more. Procne and Philomel,
mother and sister, inspire me: my case
resembles yours, stand by me and guide my hand.
How if the greedy father tears his children's flesh,
with joyful hunger eats the limbs he bore?
Enough and more! Such vengeance pleases me

14. On the sources of the myth and its poetical importance in the play see below pp. 17-18.

for now. Where is he? Why should Atreus stay
 guiltless so long? The scene of bloodshed flickers
 before my eyes, the father's childlessness
 thrust in his face. —Heart, why do you quail again
 and shrink before the deed? Come, dare you must:
 in this revenge of yours the leading role
 will be the victim's own.

Atreus is at once inspired by his model (270-272) and frustrated because of it (273-274): he needs to surpass it (274-275). He will succeed in this by forcing Thyestes to become an «actor» joyfully (278) assuming his part in a play his brother will stage. There is no question in the monologue of an actual dilemma: Atreus only wavers as to the heights of his transgression, not as to the transgression itself.

This desire to transgress moral boundaries is fulfilled through the inversion of a highly moral concept, that of heroic *aristeia*. The attainment of excellence is a supreme goal in a heroic world, encapsulated in the Homeric «always to be the best and stand far above others» (*Iliad* 6.208 αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων). Atreus is motivated by this very heroic desire, only in an inverted sense since he wishes to reach the *maius malum* rather than the *summum bonum*¹⁵. The language he employs patently declares his drive for highest glory; the *nescioquid maius et solito amplius* which makes his *animus* swell is an expression modelled on the pronouncement of epic heroes at a moment of crisis: «My mind excites me now to engage in battle or to perform something great; I cannot endure this lulling calm», cries out Nisus in the *Aeneid* (9.186-187 *aut pugnam aut aliquid iamdudum inuadere magnum | mens agitat mihi, nec placida quiete est*), developing a pattern established by Homer¹⁶. At the end of the play Atreus sees himself as having surpassed other humans (885) and attained true glory: «Now I approve my handiwork, now the true palm of victory is won» (1096-1097 *nunc meas laudo manus, nunc parta uera est palma*).

The inversion of *aristeia* as the supreme heroic principle leads to an inversion of *apatheia*, the supreme virtue of Stoic philosophy: Seneca depicts Atreus as an inverted Stoic sage¹⁷. Instead of exercising control over himself in order to remain ἀπαθής, he consistently wishes to act (176-178) and to exercise control over others. For example, Atreus considers himself a tyrant

15. See K. Trabert, *Studien zur Darstellung des Pathologischen in den Tragödien des Seneca*, Diss. Erlangen 1953, p. 54.

16. Μὴ μὲν ἀσπουδί γε καὶ ἀκλειῶς ἀπολοίμην, | ἀλλὰ μέγα ῥέξας τι καὶ ἐσομένοισι πύθεσθαι (*Iliad* 22.304-305), from Hector's speech before his encounter with Achilles. One should note that also Atreus wishes to receive due praise from his subjects (*Thy.* 205-207).

17. See Knoche's study (as above n. 9), pp. 485-487.

(177). Furthermore, he conceives his revenge on Thyestes not as a concluded act but as a process (244-248):

- ATR. Profare, dirum qua caput mactem via.
 SAT. Ferro peremptus spiritum inimicum expuat.
 ATR. De fine poenae loqueris; ego poenam volo.
 perimat tyrannus lenis; in regno meo
 mors impetratur
- ATR. Now speak, how may I crush this impious creature?
 ATT. At swordpoint let him yield his hateful life.
 ATR. You name the end of pain; I want the thing itself.
 Let the gentle tyrant kill; in my domain
 death is a favor.

This inverted *apatheia* is manifested in his mental and verbal control over the Attendant in Act II and over Thyestes in Act V. Atreus subdues his interlocutors by his superb command of language, manipulating words¹⁸ and delivering the sharpest *sententiae* in the play. In the crucial scene of the children's slaughtering, everybody falters, yet the Messenger suggests that «Atreus alone remains unmoved, true to his aim» (703-704 *solus sibi | immotus Atreus constat*). Both mental firmness (*immotus*) and resolute decisiveness (*constat*) are important traits of the Stoic sage¹⁹.

Atreus' *aristeia* and *apatheia* represent inversions of the self; these inversions in their turn extend to inversions of relationships with others. Atreus inverts the proper relation between ruler and subject by being a tyrant: «Dominion's greatest gift is this: the people must not only bear, but praise their master's deeds» (205-207 *Maximum hoc regni bonum est, | quod facta domini cogitur populus sui | tam ferre quam laudare*) and many other such pronouncements express this attitude²⁰. Furthermore, Atreus sees the relation between himself and his brother as the exact opposite of what is expected. «To harm a brother, however bad, is wrong» (219 *nefas nocere vel malo fratri puta*) states the Attendant, whom Atreus silences with his «wrong toward a brother is no wrong toward him» (220 *fas est in illo quidquid in fratre est nefas*)²¹. Similarly, Thyestes sees in his brother an evil enemy²². At the first

18. See the analysis of Atreus's linguistic skills by Tarrant, *Thyestes*, on *Thy.* 180-181 («globalizing» language), 203 (verbal assertiveness) and 497-503 (the use of the epic simile). A result of Atreus's command of language is his destructive wit, on which see G. Meltzer, «Dark wit and black humor in Seneca's *Thyestes*», *TAPA* 118 (1988) 309-330.

19. Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 192 *ad locum*.

20. *Thy.* 211-212, 218, 246-248. On the political dimensions of tyranny in the play see Seidensticker, «Maius solito», pp. 134-136.

21. Compare also *Thy.* 271-272, 293-294; Atreus even sees his own children as depraved

A concomitant result of all these transgressions and inversions is the rejection of dramatic balance. Both Acts II and IV are huge monologues interrupted by prompting questions: the second act depicts Atreus's course towards the discovery of the *maius solito*, in the fourth act the Messenger presents the criminal deed in an extended description moving far beyond the limits of conventional space. Theatrical action is minimalized, while descriptive narrative and exploration of the self is maximized²⁴; at the same time, any sense of inner development in the play is cancelled. The characters freeze in the one dominating aspect of their dramatic personality: Atreus is not a real person, he is the personification of anger²⁵.

Tumescent anger channels itself into the utter destruction of the opponent. Atreus, as mentioned above, perceives this destruction as a developing process; he is not so much interested in the outcome, but in the way Thyestes as protagonist in his own drama will be led to eat his children and then discover what he has done (903-907)²⁶:

libet videre, capita natorum intuens,
quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor
effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens
corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est;
miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser.

I want to see
his face change color as he gazes on
his children's heads, to hear the first outpourings
of his grief, to watch his body stiffen with the shock
as the breath is driven from him. I do not care
to see him broken, but to watch him as he breaks.

It is this delight in the process itself that dictates the Messenger's vast descriptive narrative of Atreus killing the children, cooking their flesh and serving it up to his brother (682-775). It is this same delight, momentarily frustrated, that forces Atreus at the very end of the play to reiterate this process to Thyestes (1053-1068); only then does Thyestes collapse completely, only then does Atreus feel fully satisfied.

24. See now Ch. Segal, *Language and Desire in Seneca's Phaedra*, Princeton 1986, pp. 3-28 with an overview of previous bibliography.

25. *Thy.* 180 (*iratus Atreus*), 254 (*rabidus*), 546-547 (*ferus ille et acer | nec potens mentis truculentus Atreus*), 704 (*immutus Atreus*), 712 (*dirus Atreus*), 737 (*non aliter Atreus saeuit atque ira tumet*), 1056-57 (*verba sunt irae data | dum propero*).

26. See also *Thy.* 199-200, 246, 285-286.

II. Poetic transgression

Atreus's desire to transgress the limits by surpassing his models, destroying his brother and attaining the *maius malum* can now be examined in conjunction with Seneca's rhetorical composition of the *Thyestes*. Looking at the play's text as a whole we are reminded of Quintilian's objections (*Inst. Orat.* 10.1.129-130)²⁷:

sed in eloquendo corrupta pleraque atque eo perniciosissima, quod abundant dulcibus vitiis. [...] nam si aliqua contempsisset, si parum non concupisset, si non omnia sua amasset, si rerum pondera minutissimis sententiis non fregisset, consensu potius eruditorum quam puerorum amore comprobaretur.

In style, however, much of his writing is depraved; and its effect is all the deadlier because it is rich in attractive faults. [...] Had he rejected some of these faults, had he not been desirous of many others, had he not been so infatuated with all of his own, had he not broken the weight of things with his minute sentences, he sooner would have found the approval of cultured men rather than the admiration of youths.

Quintilian not only points out specific stylistic features, like the *minutissimae sententiae*, but also points to Seneca's insistent infatuation with his own *dulcia vitia*. The astute critic correctly recognized in him an author who desired through the cultivation of «attractive faults» to transgress the boundaries of established norms and deviate from elegant style, by which Quintilian implied his own classicist notion of eloquence²⁸. Yet Seneca himself, while donning the mask of a conservative critic condemning novelty in style, hints at the importance of *vitium* when it comes to excel (*Epist.* 114.11):

sunt qui non usque ad vitium accedant (necesse est enim hoc facere aliquid grande temptanti) sed qui ipsum vitium ament.

There are others who do not merely come close to a stylistic fault (which must inevitably happen if one is striving for something great), but have a passion for the fault itself.

Vitium, then, is something which a poet should approach as closely as possible if he wishes to attain that *aliquid grande*. The similarity between this statement and Atreus' pronouncement about the unspecified *maius et solito*

27. On this famous passage see now the exhaustive analysis by M. Laureys, «Quintilian's judgement of Seneca and the scope and purpose of *Inst.* 10.1», *A&A* 37 (1991) 100-125.

28. On the decline of eloquence as perceived at the end of the first century see H. Caplan, «The decay of eloquence at Rome in the first century», in idem, *Of Eloquence: Studies in Ancient and Medieval Rhetoric*, Ithaca 1970, pp. 160-195 and Elaine Fantham, «Imitation and decline: Rhetorical theory and practice in the first century after Christ», *CP* 73 (1978) 102-116.

amplius (267) cannot be overlooked. Seneca's *dulcia vitia* are fairly easy to detect: mixture of highest poetic style and common idiom, peculiar phrases, obscurity in metaphor and metonymy, clipped patterns in the structure of sentences, and above all the imposing presence of *sententiae*²⁹.

In the *Thyestes* all devices of rhetoric are excessively employed in order to create a poetic discourse radically deviating from convention³⁰: paradoxical combinations of words, especially the clashing of concrete and abstract usage³¹; arbitrary condensations of meaning and syntax³²; massive rhetorical figures, *tricolon* and *chiasmus* in particular³³. The cumulative effect of these devices is the rejection of poetic balance, an attitude parallel to the already mentioned rejection of dramatic balance.

We have seen Seneca's theoretical and practical insistence on toying with the *dulcia vitia*. In two further letters he provides clearer indications as to his poetics, especially in connection with poetic writing and *mimesis* of the classics. His friend Lucilius wishes to write something about Aetna but hesitates. Seneca writes to his (*Epist.* 79.7-8):

iam cupis grande aliquid et par prioribus scribere. Plus enim sperare modestia tibi tua non permittit, quae tanta in te est ut videaris mihi retracturus ingenii tui vires, si vincendi periculum sit: tanta tibi priorum reverentia est. Inter cetera hoc habet boni sapientia: nemo ab altero potest vinci nisi dum ascenditur.

You have for some time been desirous to write something great and equal to the old masters. For your modesty does not allow you to set your hopes any higher; this quality of yours is so pronounced that, it seems to me, you are likely to curb the force of your talent, if there should be any danger in surpassing others; such is your reverence towards the old masters! Among other things, wisdom has this advantage: no man can be surpassed by another, except during the climb.

Once again Seneca focuses on writing as the attainment of an *aliquid grande*, this time in order to equal one's predecessors. He describes the desire of surpassing in terms of a process, here the climbing of a mountain. Writing

29. See A. Setaioli, «Seneca e lo stile», *ANRW* II, 32.2 (1985) 653-775 and G. W. Most, «*Disiecti membra poetae*: The rhetoric of dismemberment in Neronian poetry», in R. Dexter - D. Selden (eds.), *Innovations of Antiquity*, London - New York 1992, pp. 391-419, in particular pp. 406-408 on the «mutilation» of sentences.

30. For full details see H. V. Canter, *Rhetorical Elements in the Tragedies of Seneca* [University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 10], Urbana, Illinois 1925.

31. Indicatively see *Thy.* 4-5 *siti arente*, 5-6 *fame hiante*, 70-71 *atrum cubile*, 168 *silva mobilis*, 226 *arcanus aries*, 766 *flammatu latex*.

32. For example, *Thy.* 175 *altum de rapido gurgite pulverem*, 225 *est Pelopis altis nobile in stabulis pecus*, 282-283 *ingesta orbitas in ore patris*.

33. *Thy.* 267-268, 728-729.

poetry, Seneca insinuates to Lucilius, means putting aside reverence for the classics. His advice *nemo ab altero potest vinci nisi dum ascenditur* (*Epist.* 79.8) astonishingly parallels Atreus's statement *scelera non ulcisceris, nisi un- cis* (*Thy.* 195-196).

This poetic rivalry, expressed on the theoretical level in an understated manner, leads us to a poetical concept where poetry destroys its *exempla*, viewed simultaneously as models and opponents³⁴. This is the attitude of an age that has established its canon of classic authors and labours under its burden³⁵. In the same letter to Lucilius, Seneca tries to convince his addressee to devote to *Aetna* a whole poem and not just a passage in another work; he continues (*Epist.* 79.5):

Quem quominus Ovidius tractaret, nihil obstitit quod iam Vergilius impleverat; ne Severum quidem Cornelium uterque deterruit. Omnibus praeterea feliciter hic locus se dedit, et qui praecesserant non praeripuisse mihi videntur quae dici poterant, sed aperuisse.

Ovid could not be prevented from using this theme simply because Vergil had already fully covered it; nor could either of these poets frighten off Cornelius Severus. Besides, the topic has served them all with happy results, and those who have gone before seem to me not to have forestalled all that could be said, but merely to have opened the way.

Seneca refers here to Vergil and Ovid, not in their bucolic or elegiac guise, but in their role as epic poets: the treatment of the «*Aetna* topic» appears in the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* respectively³⁶. Moreover, Seneca's admonition to devote a whole poem to the chosen subject is exactly a case of attempting to surpass the model. What seemed to be Lucilius's concern — Vergil and Ovid having blocked the way—, Seneca turns into the greatest asset of contemporary poets. He continues (*Epist.* 79.6):

Multum interest utrum ad consumptam materiam an ad subactam accedas: crescit in dies, et inventuris inventa non obstant. Praeterea condicio optima est ultimi: parata verba invenit, quae aliter instructa novam faciem habent. Nec illis manus inicit tamquam alienis; sunt enim publica.

34. On this «agonizing» rivalry see H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, London 1975.

35. On this issue see E. Burck, *Vom römischen Manierismus*, Darmstadt 1971 and, in a more interpretive vein, the recent studies by J. Henderson, «Lucan: The Word at War», *Ramus* 16 (1987) 122-164 and Ph. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*, Cambridge 1993.

36. *Aen.* 3.570-587 and *Met.* 15.340-355; it is worth noting that Seneca himself uses the «*Aetna* topic» in *Thy.* 582-587. Whether this passage is of any help in identifying the author of the pseudo-*Virgilian Aetna* is another matter (see W. Richter, *Aetna* [Texte und Kommentare 1], Berlin 1963, pp. 1-6).

It is very different whether you approach a subject that has been exhausted, or one where the ground has merely been broken; in the latter case, the topic grows day by day, and what is already discovered does not hinder new discoveries. Besides, he who writes last is in the best of positions; he finds already at hand words which, when ordered in a different way, show a new face. And he is not pilfering them, as if they belonged to someone else: they are public property.

Seneca openly declares that appropriating other texts is not in any way damnable. This, obviously, is nothing new; extraordinary is the brief remark about the rearrangement of words yielding a new text. Here lies the crucial step in Seneca's procedure of composition: rearrangement means cutting up an entity into its constituent parts. We need not search long to find Seneca defining his approach. In yet another letter to Lucilius he writes (*Epist.* 84.5-7):

Nos quoque has apes debemus imitari et quaecumque ex diversa lectione con-gessimus separare (melius enim distincta servantur), deinde adhibita ingenii nostri cura et facultate in unum saporem varia illa libamenta confundere, ut etiam si apparuerit unde sumptum sit, aliud tamen esse quam unde sumptum est appareat. [...] idem in his quibus aluntur ingenia praestemus, ut quaecumque hausimus non patiamur integra esse, ne aliena sint. Concoquamus illa; alioqui in memoriam ibunt, non in ingenium.

We also ought to copy these bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading, for such things are better preserved if they are kept separate; then, by applying the supervising care of our intellect and talent, we should so blend those several essences into one flavor that, even though it betrays whence it came, yet it nevertheless is clearly different from that whence it came. [...] So it is with the food which nourishes our intellect —whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not our intellect.

The conventional image of the poet as a humble bee collecting from various sources³⁷ has been shifted to fit the actual process of reading and composing poetry: collect, separate, rearrange, eat. Through the semantic ambivalence sustained by the literal meanings of *concoquo* («to cook together»³⁸ or «to digest»³⁹) and its transferred metaphorical usage here («to absorb into the mind»⁴⁰) the poet might assume the role of the cook preparing a dish which the reader should eat and digest. In other words, the

37. For example, Hor. *Carm.* 4.2.27-32 *ego apis Matinae moro modoque (...)*.

38. Sen. *Epist.* 95.28 *ostrea, echini, spondyli, nulli perturbati concoctique ponantur.*

39. Sen. *Epist.* 86.11 *et expectabat ut in balneo concoqueret.*

40. Sen. *Epist.* 2.4 *et cum multa percurrens, unum excerpe quod illo die concoquas.*

poet, in asserting his intellectual and artistic control over his august predecessors, «dismembers» their texts in order to create out of them his own text. This intertextual process precludes any thought about a peaceful symbiosis between model and emulator.

This practice is not unknown to poets before Seneca's time, though the intertextual game is conducted on a far smaller scale and in a less obvious manner⁴¹. This is not the case with Seneca. He chooses only famous passages that would not have escaped notice; moreover, the passages are substantial in their length so as to linger in the reader's memory. Seneca adheres to the chosen passage without employing other, extraneous material; the older passage is subjected, as we shall see, to various forms of rearrangement, while its conventional meaning and central images are corrected, subverted or even inverted to their negative opposite. It is no coincidence that, just as in his Letter 79, the two *exempla* thus attacked in the *Thyestes* are Vergil and Ovid in their epic guise⁴². The tragedian does not hide his intentions; he builds his aggressive poetics on the basis of a discourse surprisingly lucid in its sarcasm. Three examples should suffice to demonstrate this procedure⁴³.

In Act I the Fury has brought the Ghost of Tantalus from the Underworld to infect the palace of Pelops with his «loathsome touch» (*Thy.* 104 *nefando contactu*). The Fury allusively sketches out the history of this bloodstained family whose crimes will ultimately stain the whole of the earth and even the gods above (25-53). The perversely inverted relations in the family itself — relations of hatred, sin and crime— are described as the effect of uncontrollable *ira* (39-49):

nihil sit ira quod vetitum putet:
 fratrem expavescat frater et natum parens
 40
 natusque patrem; liberi pereant male,
 peius tamen nascantur; immineat viro

41. See, indicatively, Horace's criticism of hackney poets in *Sat.* 1.4 and his notion of the *callida iunctura* (*Ars poet.* 46-48 with the notes by C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry. The «Ars Poetica»*, Cambridge 1971, pp. 138-140). For two more complex instances of intertextual dialogue see R. F. Thomas, «Catullus and the polemics of poetic reference (c. 64.1-18)», *AJP* 103 (1982) 144-164 on the opening lines of the Catullan *epyllion* and G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry*, Oxford 1968, pp. 263-267 on the appropriation by Vergil (*Aen.* 6.179-182) of Ennius (*Ann.* 187-191 V.) and Homer (*Il.* 23.117-120).

42. On Seneca's tense relation to Ovid in particular see the pertinent remarks by Tarrant, *Thyestes*, pp. 17-19; see also the more technical analysis by R. Jakobi, *Der Einfluß Ovids auf den Tragiker Seneca* [Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 28], Berlin - New York 1988.

43. Further examples of conscious appropriation and «destructive» rearrangement in the play: *Thy.* 74-83 = Verg. *Aen.* 6.548-627; *Thy.* 103-104 = Ovid. *Met.* 6.601-602 (Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 103); *Thy.* 344-403 = Verg. *Georg.* 2.490-499 + Hor. *Carm.* 4.15:21-24.

infesta coniunx; bella trans pontum vehant,
 effusus omnis irriget terras cruor,
 supraque magnos gentium exultet duces
 Libido victrix; impia stuprum in domo
 levissimum sit facinus; et fas et fides
 iusque omne pereat. non sit a vestris malis
 immune caelum. 45

Let their anger look on nothing as forbidden
 let brother fear his brother, father son,
 son father; let their children's death be foul,
 their birth more dreadful still; let wives conspire
 against their husbands, and let wars traverse the seas,
 so all the earth may be drenched with blood, and over
 the mighty chiefs of nations conquering Lust
 may exult triumphant. In this house of crime
 let adultery be thought the least of sins—
 all right, all trust, all good must pass away.
 The heavens too shall not remain untouched
 by your crimes.

Seneca's model is a famous passage from the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* (1.142-151): Ovid, after having presented the creation of the earth and the prehistory of mankind, concludes this part of his narrative with the description of civilization's fourth and basest age. There are obvious verbal and thematic links between the two passages⁴⁴, though it is on a structural level that full parallelism is achieved. Seneca proceeded in two steps. First, he removed the Ovidian passage from its universal context in order to fit it into the history of the Tantalids and, then, placed it again on the cosmic stage: whereas in Ovid the goddess of Justice (1.149-150 *virgo Astraea*) has left the world, it is triumphant Lust that remains behind in the Fury's *Weltanschauung*. Seneca succeeded in lending his version an even stronger negative coloring⁴⁵.

This Ovidian passage was a favorite with Seneca. He quotes it verbatim in the second book of *De ira* (9.2) in order to describe the vices of his own day and the effects of anger on the Stoic sage. He also uses it in the *Phaedra* (550-558): Hippolytus describes the decline of the human race from the Golden Age to the Age of Iron (483-558), ending with an attack on the evilness of

44. *Thy.* 39 = *Met.* 1.144 *vivitur ex raptō*; *Thy.* 40 = *Met.* 1.145 *fratrum*; *Thy.* 40-41 = *Met.* 1.148 *filius ante diem patrios inquit in annos*, *Thy.* 42-43 = *Met.* 1.146 *imminet exitio vir coniugis*; *Thy.* 43 = *Met.* 1.142 *prodit bellum*; *Thy.* 47-48 = *Met.* 1.149 *victa iacet pietas* + 1.129 *fugere pudor verumque fidesque*; *Thy.* 48-49 = *Met.* 1.151 *neve foret terris securior arduus aether*.

45. See the excellent analysis by Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 93.

women (559-564)⁴⁶. If the relative chronology of the tragedies proposed by J. G. Fitch is accepted⁴⁷, and *Phaedra* is one of Seneca's earliest plays⁴⁸, an interesting picture emerges. In *Phaedra* Seneca follows Ovid in very close imitation on a structural and verbal level. However, in the *Thyestes* the passage has been stylistically reworked and thematically integrated in a far more refined manner, surpassing the earlier play as to poetic artistry and surpassing the *Metamorphoses* as to the pessimistic *Weltanschauung* evoked. Furthermore, the lines should be related to Seneca's preoccupation in the play with the corrupting influence of tyranny: they seem to voice a criticism of his own age⁴⁹. This hypothesis is supported by the introduction of *ira* as a major concept in the *Thyestes* on the one hand⁵⁰, and its attested connection, on the other, with the Ovidian passage through *De ira* which in all probability was written after *Phaedra*⁵¹. If this is so, we are faced with a poet who starts out with a conventional approach to his predecessors and progressively develops his poetics of transgression.

The second example comes from the play's second act. We have already seen how Atreus wishes to attain that *maius solito* and how he is inspired by the «Thracian crime» of Procne (267-286). This episode from Greek mythology is not chosen randomly by Atreus: the Fury had already hinted at its existence (56). Seneca's specific mythological source and poetic model is the respective episode from the *Metamorphoses* (6.424-673)⁵². That this is so Seneca clearly signals by the use of the adjective *Odrysia* (273), a *recherché* substitute for «Thracian», attested only in this episode of the *Metamorphoses*⁵³. Lexical and stylistic material from the Ovidian passage⁵⁴, as well as central concepts⁵⁵, have been overtly appropriated by Seneca, but the episode

46. Segal, pp. 89-93 discusses the passage at length but, surprisingly enough, fails to notice its Ovidian parentage and the connections with *De ira*.

47. See above n. 7.

48. Probably written some years before AD 54 (Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 12).

49. See also Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 48.

50. See above notes 9 and 24.

51. Miriam T. Griffin, *Seneca. A Philosopher in Politics*, Oxford 1976, pp. 396-398, who rightly argues for *De ira* a date around AD 52.

52. Ovid's version is the oldest surviving full-scale treatment; for the other sources, including lost plays by Sophocles and Accius, see the commentary by Franz Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso. Metamorphosen (Buch VI-VII)*, Heidelberg 1976, pp. 114-117 with a brief discussion of the possible relations between Ovid, Seneca and Accius.

53. *Met.* 6.490 *rex Odrysius* (i.e. Tereus).

54. *Met.* 6.618-619 *magnum, quodcumque paravi: | quid sit, adhuc dubito* = *Thy.* 269-270 **aud quid sit scio, | sed grande quiddam est*; *Met.* 6.658-659 *prosiluit Ityosque caput Philomela cruentum | misit in ora patris* = *Thy.* 282-283 *ingesta orbitas | in ora patris*; *Met.* 6.586 *poenaque in imagine tota est* = *Thy.* 280-281 *tota iam ante oculos meos | imago caedis errat*.

55. *Met.* 6.635 *scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo* = *Thy.* 220 *fas est in illo quidquid in fratre*

in general, the crime and its inception in particular, have been radically condensed. Atreus surpasses his *exemplum* on two levels. The first is numerical: Procne kills one child and Atreus three; this is indicated again by the Fury in the by now familiar «comparative of surpassing» when she exclaims «the Thracian crime shall be performed again, but with more victims» (56-57 *Thracium fiat nefas | maiore numero*). The second level is a psychological one: while Tereus simply eats his child at a formal banquet⁵⁶, Atreus wishes that Thyestes should greedily and joyfully devour his children's flesh⁵⁷. The process of cutting and rearrangement results in Atreus leaving Procne behind and, vicariously, Seneca going beyond Ovid⁵⁸.

The third example constitutes the most complex case of intertextual dismemberment in the *Thyestes*. In Act IV, the Messenger opens his narration of Atreus' crime with a long description of the *Pelopias domus* (641-682)⁵⁹. The *ekphrasis* follows the basic pattern established by poetic practice and rhetorical theory: the *locus horrendus* is described in a movement from outside to inside (641-649) that culminates in the presentation of the palace's innermost recesses encompassing a gloomy grove (650-664), dark pool (665-679) and oracular cave (679-682)⁶⁰. It is immediately obvious that Seneca bases his description on a famous passage from the *Aeneid*. At the beginning of Book 7 and after the poem's second prooemium (7.37-45), Vergil first reports the portents announcing the arrival of Aeneas to Latium and shortly after describes the palace of Latinus (*Aen.* 7.59-91 and 170-191). Following the course of Seneca's text the reader is astonished at the verbal, semantic and iconographic parallels:

<i>Thyestes</i>	<i>Aeneid</i>
641 in arce summa	≈ 7.171 urbe summa
643 urbem premit	≈ 7.170 ingens
646 immane tectum	≈ 7.170 tectum augustum
647 variis columnae nobiles maculis	≈ 7.170 centum sublime columnis
651 nemus	≈ 7.172 horrendum silvis

nefas; *Met.* 6.609-610 *ardet et iram | non capit* ≈ *Thy.* 253 *ardet furore pectus* + 259 *ira* + 268 *tumet*; *Met.* 6.612 *vincere* ≈ *Thy.* 195 *vincis*; *Met.* 6.613 *omne nefas* ≈ *Thy.* 256 *nullum facinus* + 265 *fiat nefas*; *Met.* 6.627-630 ≈ *Thy.* 283-284 (hesitation and final call to action).

56. *Met.* 6.650-651 *ipse sedens solio Tereus sublimis avito | vescitur inque suam sua viscera congerit alvum*.

57. *Thy.* 277-278 *liberos avidus pater | gaudensque laceret et suos artus edat*.

58. Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 130.

59. On the narrative and dramatic function of *ekphraseis* in the plays see now Victoria Tietze Larson, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy* [Studien zur klassischen Philologie 84], Frankfurt 1994.

60. On this descriptive pattern see, for example, Aphth. *Prog.* 12 (Rabe 37.9-14).

652 penetrale regni	≈ 7.59 in penetralibus altis
650 arcana in imo regio secessu	≈ 7.59 tecti medio
652-653 nulla qua laetos solet praebere ramos arbor aut ferro coli	≈ 7.60 sacra comam multosque metu seruata per annos
654-656 taxus ... cupressus ... nigra ilice ... quercus	≈ 7.59 laurus
657 hinc auspicari regna	≈ 7.173 hic scepra accipere
659-664 affixa inhaerent dona ... barbarico chlamys	≈ 7.183-186 multaque praeterea ... rostra carinis
665 fons stat	≈ 7.81 fonte
671-672 errat antiquis uetus emissa bustis turba	≈ 7.177-181 ueterum effigies ... astabant
673 maiora notis monstra	≈ 7.44-45 maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo, maius opus moueo
673-675 quin tota ... sine igne	≈ 7.71-77 praeterea ... tectis
675 simulacris	≈ 7.89 simulacra
678 nox propria luco est	≈ 7.88 sub nocte silenti + 7.82 lucos
678 superstitio inferum	≈ 7.172 religione parentum
679 hinc orantibus	≈ 7.85-86 hinc ... petunt
680 responsa	≈ 7.86 petunt
681 laxantur ... et immugit	≈ 7.84 sonat ... exhalat
682 uocem deo soluente	≈ 7.90-91 uoces ... deorum conloquio

On closer inspection, however, even more astonishing are the differences between the two texts, as the Vergilian passage has been completely cut up, rearranged and condensed. Seneca has transferred the revered ancestral world of Latium to a primeval Greek world of Roman colored horror⁶¹: the august hall placed in the center of the town has become an impious palace perched on an ominous citadel; the fearfully protected laurel-tree has been expanded into an uncultivated forest of dark, funerary trees; the pious kingship of Latinus has been transformed to the tyrannic rule of the Tantalid family; the richly flowing oracular spring at Albunea has been turned into a stagnant, black pool at the Styx; the cherished effigies of the ancestors are now the fearful ghosts of the Underworld; the silent night of Faunus' oracle has become a depressing «darkness at noon». But most important of all, Vergil's voice in the second proemium, where he emphatically asserts his poetry's «greater task» (7.44-45 *maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo, | maius opus moueo*) has been transferred by Seneca to a context of terror: the *maior ordo rerum* of Italic history is inverted to the *maiora monstra* of Greek myth (673), while the *maius opus* of the poet is recast as the *maius monstrum* of

61. On the way in which Roman elements infuse the «Greek» world of Seneca's plays see S. Walter, *Interpretationen zum Römischen in Senecas Tragödien*, Diss. Zürich 1975.

the tyrant (254).

This is not the only instance of Seneca's preoccupation with this Vergilian passage. In his *Agamemnon* the Prologue is spoken by the Ghost of Thyestes who stands terrified in front of the *Pelopias domus* of which he furnishes a brief description (Ag. 5-11). The passage revises on a smaller scale *Aen.* 7.170-176 and inverts it in a new, Mycenaean, context⁶²; Seneca's insistence on correlating the Pelopid palace—the everpresent symbol of corrupt power in both plays⁶³—with this Vergilian passage becomes marked. If *Agamemnon* is Seneca's earliest play⁶⁴, we are confronted with a case similar to our first example. Comparing the reworking in the earlier and the latter instances, it again appears that Seneca has systematically developed his technique from the more stereotyped form of *mimesis* to a far more complex procedure. Moreover, the refinement of his poetical concepts seems to run parallel to a growing disappointment with and a resulting criticism of his own society.

III. Ritual initiation and vindictory poetics

Having successively examined the rejection of dramatic and poetic balance, we must now see if these two forms of transgression might coincide in the play, therefore furnishing us with an indication of Seneca's poetics. In the play itself Atreus and Thyestes are assigned specific functions within their dramatic roles. In the fourth act, Atreus is described by the Messenger as a priest preparing a sacrifice to the gods, conducted according to ritual order and with all necessary detail meticulously observed (691-695):

Ipse est sacerdos, ipse funesta prece
 letale carmen ore violento canit;
 stat ipse ad aras, ipse devotos neci
 contrectat et componit et ferro parat,
 attendit ipse; nulla pars sacri perit.
 He himself is priest, himself intones the chant
 of death and wildly utters funeral prayers.
 He stands beside the altar, he inspects
 the doomed ones, setting them in order for
 the blade; he serves as minister —no part
 of the rite is lost.

The fivefold repetition of the pronoun *ipse*, twice within the same verse (691, 693), underlines the overpowering role of Atreus as coordinator of the

62. Compare in particular *Aen.* 7.175 *haec sacris sedes epulis* with Ag. 11 *hic epulis locus* and see Tarrant, *Agamemnon*, pp. 164-165.

63. This symbolic character is established already at the beginning of the two plays (*Thy.* 3, 24, 33, 53, 83, 101-104; Ag. 7, 44, 77-86, 121-122); see also Tarrant, *Thyestes*, p. 45.

64. As persuasively argued by Fitch and Tarrant (see above n. 7).

perverted ritual; he assumes every function, including that of the god. Thyestes is depicted as a victim⁶⁵, both by the Messenger in the same act (776-788) and by Atreus in the fifth (890-919); Thyestes obediently performs the role he has been assigned.

The last scene of the play brings about the *anagnorisis* in which Atreus reveals what he has done and Thyestes learns what he has suffered. It is a ritual of initiation into the process of dismemberment and cannibalism. The enactment of this ritual demands two conditions: active Atreus as omniscient initiator desires to «grant» vengeance (*qua* knowledge), which he views as a process⁶⁶; passive Thyestes as doubting initiate desires to acquire power (*qua* knowledge), which he perceives as a state of life⁶⁷. Atreus draws Thyestes into the ritual, Thyestes willingly hands himself over to Atreus for its completion. This necessary pact is confirmed at the end of Act III (534-545):

ATR.	Recipit hoc regnum duos.	
THY.	Meum esse credo quidquid est, frater, tuum.	535
ATR.	Quis influentis dona fortunae abnuit?	
THY.	Expertus est, quicumque quam facile effluant.	
ATR.	Fratrem potiri gloria ingenti vetas?	
THY.	Tua iam peracta gloria est, restat mea; respuere certum est regna consilium mihi.	540
ATR.	Meam relinquam, nisi tuam partem accipis.	
THY.	Accipio. regni nomen impositi feram, sed iura et arma servient mecum tibi.	
ATR.	Imposita capiti vincla venerando gere; ego destinatas victimas superis dabo.	545
ATR.	This realm has room for two.	
THY.	Whatever's yours, brother, I reckon mine.	
ATR.	Who spurns the gifts of fortune's flowing tide?	
THY.	Whoever's learned how easily they ebb.	
ATR.	Will you not let your brother win great glory?	
THY.	Your glory is accomplished; mine remains. It is my fixed resolve to refuse the crown.	
ATR.	Unless you take your part I must relinquish mine.	
THY.	I yield; I shall bear the name of king you place on me. But you our laws and arms shall serve along with me.	
ATR.	Bear then the encircling crown placed on your reverend head. I shall prepare the chosen victims for the sacrifice.	

65. He is already seen so by Atreus in the third act (*Thy.* 491-495).

66. *Thy.* 199-200, 246, 277-278, 682-716, 890-918.

67. *Thy.* 288-289 (as seen by Atreus), 416, 420, 446, 453, 537.

On the level of dramatics we are confronted with the agreement between the two brothers: Atreus offers power divided in two parts, Thyestes initially refuses; Atreus suggests that he will withdraw from his part, Thyestes unexpectedly accepts, Atreus leaves to prepare the ritual. I would like to suggest that on the level of poetics this exchange represents the author-reader contract: the author offers art divided in two parts (i.e. writing and reading), the reader initially refuses, the author insinuates that he will withdraw from his part, the desirous reader accepts, the author retreats to prepare his text.

Seen in this perspective the *Thyestes* appears as an initiation to the double-sided art of writing and reading. The end of the play (970-1112) could be thus understood as operating simultaneously on two levels. Atreus establishes the process of initiation by asking Thyestes to celebrate with him the joyful day (970-973). Thyestes, who is already caught in a feeling of anxiety, insists on seeing his children, obviously as living entities (975); Atreus answers (977-980):

hic sunt eruntque; nulla pars prolis tuae
tibi subtrahetur. ora quae exoptas dabo
totumque turba iam sua implebo patrem.
satiaberis, ne metue.

Here they are, and will remain. No single part
of your family will be taken from you; I
will show you those dear faces and I'll fill
the father with the sight of all his brood.
Have no fear, you will be satisfied.

In a first *anagnorisis*, Atreus reveals the mutilated heads (1004-1006). Thyestes, after appealing in vain to the pact of faith (1024-1028), asks of Atreus to hand him over the remains of the mutilated bodies (1029-1030); Atreus answers, offering the second step in the ritual towards knowledge (1030-1034):

ATR. Quidquid e natis tuis
superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes.
THY. Utrumne saevis pabulum alitibus iacent,
an belvis scinduntur, an pascunt feras?
ATR. Epulatus ipse es impia natos dape.

ATR. Whatever of your sons remains,
you have; whatever's lost, you have as well.
THY. Do they lie as food for birds, or are they torn
by savage monsters, or do they feed beasts?
ATR. In an impious feast you have dined on them yourself.

At this point, we should remember Seneca's admonition that one cannot

absorb texts as a whole, but only in a compounded form. I would suggest that, in the light of the preceding analysis, the mutilated and devoured bodies on the level of drama stand for the dismembered and rearranged texts on the level of poetry. Atreus explains to Thyestes how he conducted the sacrifice and cooking but is frustrated that his brother was not cognizant of the ritual's meaning (1052-1078): the poet discloses the technique of his art but is disappointed that the reader did not actively participate in the process.

As Thyestes collapses completely, Atreus exults in his own apotheosis (1078-1110); the play ends with a verbal clash (1111-1112):

THY.	Vindices aderunt dei; his puniendum vota te tradunt mea.
ATR.	Te puniendum liberis trado tuis.
THY.	The avenging gods will come; my prayers give you to them for punishment.
ATR.	For your punishment I give to your sons.

This is not a dramatic conclusion; it is simply the end of action, leaving the listener confronted with the unresolved opposition between the two brothers. However, the open end also seals the opposition between author and reader in the disjointed world of poetic transgression and vindictory poetics. In the play's last line Thyestes' punishment through his beloved children represents on the level of drama Atreus's revenge on his brother; alternatively, the same line, in describing the reader's subjugation through his beloved texts, establishes on the level of poetics Seneca's success over his predecessors.