

**Beyond Vulnerability: Seneca's *Thyestes* (I)**

- **Summary of play**

**Act 1:** The ghost of Tantalus is brought from the underworld and forced by a Fury to infect the royal house of Argos with his evil influence

Ode 1: the chorus prays that the gods will end the sequence of evildoing among Tantalus' descendants. Description of Tantalus' punishment in the underworld

**Act 2:** Atreus is excited by the prospect of taking revenge on his brother, and decides on a plan. He will invite Thyestes and his sons back from exile in a pretence of reconciliation.

Ode 2: The chorus makes point that true kingship is not about temporal power but about governing the self. The ideal is a simple life led in seclusion.

**Act 3:** Thyestes has doubts about returning to Argos, but is persuaded by his son to go. Atreus welcomes him warmly and dresses him in royal robes.

Ode 3: The chorus comments on the drastic change from war preparations to peace. No situation is immune to chance.

**Act 4:** A messenger described Atreus' sacrifice of Thyestes' sons, his cooking of their flesh, and Thyestes' grim feast.

Ode 4: the chorus reacts to the turning back of the sun. Is the cosmos on the brink of destruction?

**Act 5:** Thyestes, still unaware of what he has done, attempts to enjoy the feast, but is anxious. After mocking him, Atreus reveals the truth. Thyestes' prayers to the gods for retribution are met with silence.

- **Ovid *Metamorphoses* 6.401-674**

Tereus (King of Thrace), Procne (Athenian princess) and Philomela (Procne's unmarried sister)

**Bk VI:401-438 Tereus and Procne get married**

Now, Titan, the sun, had guided the turning year through five autumns when Procne said, coaxingly to her husband, 'If any thanks are due me, either send me to see my sister, or let my sister come here. You can promise my father she will return after a brief stay. It would be worth a great deal to me, if you allowed me to see Philomela.' Tereus ordered his ship to sea, and with sail and oar reached the harbour of Cecrops, and landed on the shore of Piraeus.

As soon as he gained access to his father-in-law, right hand was joined to right hand, and they began by wishing each other favourable omens. Tereus had started to tell of the reason for his visit, his wife's request, and promise a speedy return if she were sent back with him, when, see, Philomela entered, dressed in rich robes, and richer beauty, walking as we are used to being told the naiads and dryads of the deep woods do, if only one were to give them, like her, culture and dress. Seeing the girl, Tereus took fire, just as if someone touched a flame to corn stubble, or burned the leaves, or hay stored in a loft. Her beauty was worthy of it, but he was driven by his natural passion, and the inclination of the people of his region is towards lust: he burnt with his own vice and his nation's. His impulse was to erode her attendants' care, and her nurse's loyalty, even seduce the girl herself with rich gifts, to the extent of his

kingdom, or rape her and defend the rape in savage war. There was nothing he would not dare, possessed by unbridled desire, nor could he contain the flame in his heart. Now he suffered from impatience, and eagerly returned to Procne's request, pursuing his own wishes as hers. Desire made him eloquent, and whenever he petitioned more strongly than was seemly, he would make out that Procne wished it so. He even embellished his speeches with tears, as though she had commissioned him to do that too. You gods, what secret darkneses human hearts hide! Due to his efforts, Tereus is viewed as faithful, in his deceit, and is praised for his crime. Moreover Philomela wishes his request granted, and resting her forearms on her father's shoulders, coaxing him to let her go to visit her sister, she urges it, in her own interest, and against it. Tereus gazes at her, and imagining her as already his, watching her kisses, and her arms encircling her father's neck, it all spurs him on, food and fuel to his frenzy. Whenever she embraces her father, he wishes he were that father: though of course his intentions would be no less wicked. The father is won over by the twin entreaties. The girl is overjoyed, and thanks her father, and thinks, poor wretch, that what will bring sorrow to both sisters is actually a success for both.

#### **Bk VI:486-548 Tereus rapes Philomela**

Now little was left of Phoebus's daily labour, and his horses were treading the spaces of the western sky. A royal feast was served at Pandion's table, with wine in golden goblets. Then their bodies sated, they gave themselves to quiet sleep. But though the Thracian king retired to bed, he was disturbed by thoughts of her, and remembering her features, her gestures, her hands, he imagined the rest that he had not yet seen, as he would wish, and fuelled his own fires, in sleepless restlessness. Day broke, and Pandion, clasping his son-in-law's right hand, in parting, with tears welling in his eyes, entrusted his daughter to him. 'Dear son, since affectionate reasons compel it, and both of them desire it (you too have desired it, Tereus), I give her over to you, and by your honour, by the entreaty of a heart joined to yours, and by the gods above, I beg you, protect her with a father's love, and send back to me, as soon as is possible (it will be all too long a wait for me), this sweet comfort of my old age. You too, as soon as is possible (it is enough that your sister is so far away), if you are at all dutiful, Philomela, return to me!'

So he commanded his daughter and kissed her, and soft tears mingled with his commands. As a token of their promise he took their two right hands and linked them together, and asked them, with a prayer, to remember to greet his absent daughter, and grandson, for him. His mouth sobbing, he could barely say a last farewell, and he feared the forebodings in his mind. As soon as Philomela was on board the brightly painted ship, and the sea was churned by the oars, and the land left behind them, the barbarian king cried 'I have won! I carry with me what I wished for!' He exults, and his passion can scarcely wait for its satisfaction. He never turns his eyes away from her, no differently than when Jupiter's eagle deposits a hare, caught by the curved talons, in its high eyrie: there is no escape for the captive, and the raptor gazes at its prize.

Now they had completed their journey, and disembarked from the wave-worn ship, on the shores of his country. The king took her to a high-walled building, hidden in an ancient forest, and there he locked her away, she, pale and trembling, fearing everything, in tears now, begging to know where her sister was. Then, confessing his evil intent, he overcame her by force, she a virgin and alone, as she called out, again and again, in vain, to her father, her sister, and most of all to the great gods. She quivered like a frightened lamb, that fails to realise it is free, wounded and discarded by a grey wolf, or like a dove trembling, its feathers stained with its blood, still fearing the rapacious claws that gripped it. After a brief while, when she had come to her senses, she dragged at her dishevelled hair, and like a mourner, clawed at her arms, beating them against her breasts. Hands outstretched, she shouted 'Oh, you savage. Oh, what an evil, cruel, thing you have done. Did you care nothing for my father's trust, sealed with holy tears, my sister's affection, my own virginity, your marriage vows? You have confounded everything. I have been forced to become my sister's rival. You are joined to both. Now Procne will be my enemy! Why not rob me of life as well, you traitor, so that no crime escapes you? If only you had done it before that impious act. Then my shade

would have been free of guilt. Yet, if the gods above witness such things, if the powers of heaven mean anything, if all is not lost, as I am, then one day you will pay me for this! I, without shame, will tell what you have done. If I get the chance it will be in front of everyone. If I am kept imprisoned in these woods, I will fill the woods with it, and move the stones, that know of my guilt, to pity. The skies will hear of it, and any god that may be there!’

#### **Bk VI:549-570 Philomela is mutilated**

The king’s anger was stirred by these words, and his fear also. Goaded by both, he freed the sword from its sheath by his side, and seizing her hair gathered it together, to use as a tie, to tether her arms behind her back. Philomela, seeing the sword, and hoping only for death, offered up her throat. But he severed her tongue with his savage blade, holding it with pincers, as she struggled to speak in her indignation, calling out her father’s name repeatedly. Her tongue’s root was left quivering, while the rest of it lay on the dark soil, vibrating and trembling, and, as though it were the tail of a mutilated snake moving, it writhed, as if, in dying, it was searching for some sign of her. They say (though I scarcely dare credit it) that even after this crime, he still assailed her wounded body, repeatedly, in his lust.

He controlled himself sufficiently to return to Procne, who, seeing him returned, asked where her sister was. He, with false mourning, told of a fictitious funeral, and tears gave it credence. Procne tore her glistening clothes, with their gold hems, from her shoulders, and put on black robes, and built an empty tomb, and mistakenly brought offerings, and lamented the fate of a sister, not yet due to be lamented in that way.

#### **Bk VI:571-619 The truth is revealed**

The sun-god has circled the twelve signs, and a year is past. What can Philomela do? A guard prevents her escape; the thick walls of the building are made of solid stone; her mute mouth can yield no token of the facts. Great trouble is inventive, and ingenuity arises in difficult times. Cleverly, she fastens her thread to a barbarian’s loom, and weaves purple designs on a white background, revealing the crime. She entrusts it, when complete, to a servant, and asks her, by means of gestures, to take it to her mistress. She, as she is asked, takes it to Procne, not knowing what it carries inside. The wife of the savage king unrolls the cloth, and reads her sister’s terrible fate, and by a miracle keeps silent. Grief restrains her lips, her tongue seeking to form words adequate to her indignation, fails. She has no time for tears, but rushes off, in a confusion of right and wrong, her mind filled with thoughts of vengeance.

It was the time when the young Thracian women used to celebrate the triennial festival of Bacchus. (Night knew their holy rites: by night, Mount Rhodope rang with the high-pitched clashing of bronze). By night the queen left her palace, prepared herself for the rites of the god, and took up the weapons of that frenzied religion. Tendrils of vine wreathed her head; a deerskin was draped over her left side; a light javelin rested on her shoulder. Hurling through the woods with a crowd of her companions, terrifying, driven by maddening grief, Procne embodies you, Bacchus. She comes at last to the building in the wilderness, and howls out loud, giving the ecstatic cry of Euhoe, breaks the door down, seizes her sister, disguises her with the tokens of a wild Bacchante, hides her face with ivy leaves, and dragging her along with her, frightened out of her wits, leads her inside the palace walls.

When Philomela realised that she had reached that accursed house, the wretched girl shuddered in horror, and her whole face grew deathly pale. Procne, once there, took off the religious trappings; uncovered the downcast face of her unhappy sister, and clutched her in her arms. But Philomela could not bear to lift her eyes, seeing herself as her sister’s betrayer. With her face turned towards the ground, wanting to swear by the gods, and call them to witness, that her shame had been visited on her by force, she made signs with her hands in place of speech. Procne burned, and could not control her anger, reproaching her sister for weeping, saying ‘Now is not the time for tears, but for the sword, or for what overcomes the sword, if you know of such a thing. I am prepared for any wickedness, sister; to set the palace alight with a torch, and throw Tereus, the author of this, into the midst of the flames; or to cut out his eyes and tongue, and the parts which brought shame to you; or to force out his guilty

spirit through a thousand wounds! I am ready for any enormity: but what it should be, I still do not know yet.'

#### **Bk VI:619-652 The pitiless feast**

While Procne was going over these things, Itys came to his mother. His arrival suggested what she might do, and regarding him with a cold gaze, she said 'Ah! How like your father you are!' Without speaking further, seething in silent indignation, she began to conceive her tragic plan. Yet, when the boy approached, and greeted his mother, and put his little arms round her neck, and kissed her with childish endearments, she was moved, her anger was checked, and her eyes were wet with the tears that gathered against her will. But, realising that her mind was wavering through excess affection, she turned away from him, and turned to look at her sister's face again, till, gazing at both in turn, she said 'Why should the one be able to speak his endearments, while the other is silent, her tongue torn out? Though he calls me mother, why can she not call me sister? Look at the husband you are bride to, Pandion's daughter! This is unworthy of you! Affection is criminal in a wife of Tereus'

Without delay, she dragged Itys off, as a tigress does an un-weaned fawn, in the dark forests of the Ganges. As they reached a remote part of the great palace, Procne, with an unchanging expression, struck him with a knife, in the side close to the heart, while he stretched out his hands, knowing his fate at the last, crying out 'Mother! Mother!', and reaching out for her neck. That one wound was probably enough to seal his fate, but Philomela opened his throat with the knife. While the limbs were still warm, and retained some life, they tore them to pieces. Part bubble in bronze cauldrons, part hiss on the spit: and the distant rooms drip with grease.

The wife invites the unsuspecting Tereus to the feast, and giving out that it is a sacred rite, practised in her country, where it is only lawful for the husband to be present, she sends away their followers and servants. Tereus eats by himself, seated in his tall ancestral chair, and fills his belly with his own child. And in the darkness of his understanding cries 'Fetch Itys here'.

#### **Bk VI:653-674 They are transformed into birds**

Procne cannot hide her cruel exultation, and now, eager to be, herself, the messenger of destruction, she cries 'You have him there, inside, the one you ask for.' He looks around and questions where the boy is. And then while he is calling out and seeking him, Philomela, springs forward, her hair wet with the dew of that frenzied murder, and hurls the bloodstained head of Itys in his father's face. Nor was there a time when she wished more strongly to have the power of speech, and to declare her exultation in fitting words. The Thracian king pushed back the table with a great cry, calling on the Furies, the snake-haired sisters of the vale of Styx. Now if he could, he would tear open his body, and reveal the dreadful substance of the feast, and his half-consumed child. Then he weeps, and calls himself the sepulchre of his unhappy son, and now pursues, with naked sword, the daughters of Pandion. You might think the Athenian women have taken wing: they have taken wings. One of them, a nightingale, Procne, makes for the woods. The other, a swallow, Philomela, flies to the eaves of the palace, and even now her throat has not lost the stain of that murder, and the soft down bears witness to the blood. Tereus swift in his grief and desire for revenge, is himself changed to a bird, with a feathered crest on its head. An immoderate, elongated, beak juts out, like a long spear. The name of the bird is the hoopoe, and it looks as though it is armed.

## Seminar

- ❖ Read the following passage, the culminating scene of the play.
- Working individually or in pairs, first write **2-3 introductory sentences** explaining where we are in the play, what is at stake here, and highlight two or three points of interest / key themes, which you could then go on to discuss in more detail for a page or so (this is what you will have to do in the summer exam).
- Then write a **short paragraph** on one of those themes or points of interest, starting always by making an observation (briefly cite the text, or even just a key word), and attempting to turn that observation into an interpretation, joining the dots between related ideas.
- Here are some ideas for themes:
  - *Tyrannical power (as rhetorical power?)*
  - *Sadism*
  - *Thyestes as a 'woman'*
  - *Penetration / penetrability*
  - *Stoic self-control; Stoic ideas about passions (e.g. anger, lust)*
  - *Vision and blindness, seeing and not seeing*
  - *Atreus' artistic and rhetorical brilliance*
  - *Knowledge and ignorance*
  - *Moderation and excess: setting or transcending limits*
  - *Manipulation of time/timing*
- Remember:  
**OBSERVATION → CITE TEXT & EXPLAIN → INTERPRET**

### Thyestes vv.1022-1068 (Act 5 – final act)

ATREUS: Enough of that! You've been asking for your sons for long enough - now have them! It's fine by me. Hug them, kiss them, split your embraces among the three of them!

THYESTES: Is this what we agreed? What you promised, as a friend and brother? Is this how you give up hatred? ...I'm asking you, brother to brother - not for my sons back safe and sound. I just want what can be granted with no damage to your crime and hatred: let me bury them. Return what you can watch being burnt at once. I ask you for nothing to keep as a father, only something to lose.

ATREUS: You have what remains of them here; and what no longer remains of them you also have.

THYESTES: Have their bodies been thrown out for birds of prey or wild animals to eat?

ATREUS: You ate them yourself, a sacrilegious meal.

THYESTES: That's why it went so dark, that's what the sun-god couldn't bear to see... What words shall I utter in such wretchedness, what laments? What speech will be enough for me? I see the looped off heads, the wrenched-off hands, the feet torn from broken legs. This is what the greedy father could not take in! The flesh churns within me, the imprisoned horror struggles with no way out, seeking to escape. Give me your sword, Atreus. It already has much of my blood: the blade must give my children a path. No? You deny me the sword? I'll use my fists then, on my midriff, batter it, smash it open. Ah no, hold your hand poor wretch: we must spare the dead boys. Who has ever seen such horror? What Henioch, dwelling on the rough crags of inhospitable Caucasus, or what Procrustes, terror of Cecropian lands?<sup>1</sup> See, do I as a father press down on my sons, or do my sons press down on me? There is some limit to crime!

ATREUS: You should go only so far when you commit a crime, not when you're avenging one. But all this isn't enough for me. I should have poured the warm blood straight from their wounds into your mouth, so you could drink their blood while they were still alive. My haste cheated my rage. I sacrificed them at the altar, slaughtering them, slamming the knife in, I placated the hearth with votive killing; I chopped up their lifeless bodies and tore them to pieces, little pieces; I plunged some of the bits into boiling cauldrons, the rest I roasted, slowly, so they dripped into the fire; I severed sinews and limbs still warm with life; I skewered their livers on slender spits and watched them moan; I heaped up the fire with my own hands...I did all this; but their father could have done all this better. My grief has fallen into a void. He tore his sons in his impious mouth, but he didn't know it, and they didn't know it.

### And in Latin...

ATREVS: Iam accipe hos potius libens  
diu expetitos: nulla per fratrem est mora;  
fruere, osculare, divide amplexus tribus.

THYESTES: Hoc foedus? haec est gratia, haec fratris fides?  
sic odia ponis? non peto, incolumis pater  
natos ut habeam; scelere quod salvo dari  
odioque possit, frater hoc fatrem rogo:

sepelire liceat. redde quod cernas statim  
uri; nihil te genitor habiturus rogo,

sed perditurus. ATREVS: Quidquid e natis tuis  
superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes.

1030

THYESTES: Utrumne saevis pabulum alitibus iacent,  
an belvis servantur, an pascunt feras?

ATREVS: Epulatus ipse es impia natos dape.

THYESTES: Hoc est deos quod puduit, hoc egit diem  
aversum in ortus. quas miser voces dabo  
questusque quos? quae uerba sufficient mihi?  
abscisa cerno capita et avulsas manus  
et rupta fractis cruribus vestigia -  
hoc est quod avidus capere non potuit pater.

1040

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<sup>1</sup> Procrustes was an Attic highwayman who captured and tortured travellers by mutilating their bodies. The Heniochi were notorious pirates living on the Eastern shore of the Black Sea.

volvuntur intus viscera et clusum nefas  
sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam.  
da, frater, ense (sanguinis multum mei  
habet ille) ferro liberis detur via.  
negatur ensis? pectora inliso sonent  
contusa planctu - sustine, infelix, manum,  
parcamus umbris. tale quis vidit nefas?  
quis inhospitalis Caucasi rupem asperam  
Heniochus habitans quisve Cecropiis metus                   1049  
terris Procrustes? genitor en natos **premo**   *premo* = press, propel, push, copulate with, attack,  
premorque natis - sceleris est aliquis modus?   weigh down, burden, oppress, trample, bury.  
**ATREVS**: Sceleri modus debetur ubi facias scelus,  
non ubi reponas. hoc quoque exiguum est mihi.  
ex vulnere ipso sanguinem calidum in tua  
defundere ora debui, ut viventium  
biberes cruorem - verba sunt irae data  
dum propero. ferro vulnera impresso dedi,  
cececi ad aras, caede votiua focos  
placavi, et artus, corpora exanima amputans,  
in parva carpsi frustra et haec ferventibus                   1060  
demersi aenis; illa lentis ignibus  
stillare iussi. membra nervosque abscidi  
viventibus, gracilique traiectas veru  
mugire fibras vidi et aggressi manu  
mea ipse flammis. omnia haec melius pater  
fecisse potuit, cecidit in cassum dolor:  
scidit ore natos impio, sed nesciens,  
sed nescientes.

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## Coursework essay on Seneca's *Thyestes*, plus updated bibliography

(ps. I have most articles in pdf, so please ask if you struggle to find them on JSTOR or in the library)

**4) In what ways and to what effect does Seneca's *Thyestes* link vulnerability with rhetorical inadequacy and artistic failure?**

Practical criticism option (for Classics/Classics & English students who did not do this in term 1):

**3. Seneca, *Thyestes* 970-998.**

**Question: consider and analyse the spectacle of Atreus' sadism in this passage**

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