

Beyond Tragic Vulnerability: Seneca's *Thyestes* (II)1. A labouring/birthing woman: the confounding of tragic *anagnorisis*

THYESTES: Quis hic tumultus uiscera exagitat mea?
quid tremuit intus? sentio impatiens onus 1000
meumque gemitu non meo pectus gemit.

adeste, nati, genitor infelix uocat,
adeste. Visis fugiet hic uobis dolor -
unde obloquuntur? **ATREVS:** Expedi amplexus, pater;
uenere. - natos ecquid **agnoscis** tuos?

THYESTES: **Agnosco** fratrem. Sustines tantum nefas
gestare, Tellus? non ad infernam Styga
tenebrasque mergis rupta et ingenti uia
ad chaos inane regna cum rege abripis?
non tota ab imo tecta conuellens solo 1010

uertis Mycenae? stare circa Tantalum
uterque iam debuimus. Hinc compagibus
et hinc reuulsis, si quid infra Tartara est
auosque nostros, hoc tuam immani sinu
demitte uallem nosque defossos tege
Acheronte toto. Noxiae supra caput
animae uagentur nostrum et ardenti freto
Phlegethon harenas igneus totas agens
exilia supra nostra uiolentus fluat -
immota tellus pondus ignauum iacet. 1020 cf. Ovid. *Met.* 1.7-8: *indigestaque moles..*
fugere superi. *pondus iners*

THYESTES

[999] What is this tumult that disturbs my vitals? What trembles in me? I feel a load that will not suffer me, and my breast groans with a groaning that is not mine. O come, my sons, your unhappy father calls you, come; this pain will pass away at the sight of you – whence come their reproachful voices?

[*Re-enter ATREUS with a covered platter in his hands.*]

ATREUS

[1004] Now, father, spread out your arms; they are here. [*He uncovers the platter, revealing the severed heads of THYESTES' sons.*] Do you **recognize** thy sons?

THYESTES

[1006] **I recognize** my brother. **Can you endure, O Earth, to bear a crime so monstrous?** Why do you not burst asunder and plunge down to the infernal Stygian shades and, by a huge opening to empty chaos, snatch this kingdom with its king away? Why do you not raze this whole palace to the very ground, and overturn Mycenae? We should both of us long since have been with Tantalus. Rend asunder thy prison-bars on every side, and if there is any place beneath Tartarus and our grandsires, thither with huge abyss let down your chasm and hide us buried beneath all Acheron. Let guilty souls wander above our head, and let fiery Phlegethon, with glowing flood downpouring all his sands, flow tempestuous above our place of exile – but the earth lies all unmoved, an insensate mass; the gods have fled away.

2) Atreus the avenging woman? (Discussion point)

Atreus also takes a woman (or two women) as role models for his terrible revenge. To what effect?

See **Thyestes 267-286:**

ATREVS: Nescio quid animus maius et 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,
quod uterque faciat. Vidit infandas domus
Odrysia mensas - fateor, immane est scelus,
sed occupatum; **maius** hoc aliquid dolor
inueniat. Animum Daulis inspira parens
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. Vbinam est? Tam diu cur innocens 280
uersatur 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.

ATREUS: Some greater thing, larger than the norm and beyond the bounds of human use is **swelling in my soul**, and it urges on my sluggish hands – I know not what it is, but it is some mighty thing. So let it be. Hurry, my soul, seize on it! This is a deed worthy of Thyestes and of Atreus; let each perform it. The Odrysian house once saw an unspeakable feast – it is a monstrous crime, I grant you, but it has been done before; let my bitterness find something **greater** than this. Inspire my soul, O Daulian mother, yes, and sister too (i.e. **PROCNE AND PHILOMELA: SEE OVID MET.6**); my case is like yours; help me and urge on my hand. Let the father with joyous greed tear his sons, and devour his own flesh. This is good, more than enough. This mode of punishment is pleasing.(280) Meanwhile, where is he? Why does Atreus live so long, still innocent? Already before my eyes flits the whole picture of the slaughter; his lost children stuffed down the father's throat– O soul, why do you shrink back in fear and halt before the deed? Come! You must dare it! What shall be the crowning outrage in this crime he himself shall perform.

3) Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a, on tragic anagnorisis

Some plots are "simple" and some "complex," as indeed the actions represented by the plots are obviously such. By a simple action I mean one that is single and continuous in the sense of our definition above, wherein the change of fortune occurs without "reversal" or "discovery"; by a complex action I mean one wherein the change coincides with a "discovery" or "reversal" or both. These should result from the actual structure of the plot in such a way that what has already happened makes the result inevitable or probable; [20] for there is indeed a vast difference between what happens propter hoc and post hoc. A "reversal"

is a change of the situation into the opposite, as described above, this change being, moreover, as we are saying, probable or inevitable— like the man in the Oedipus who came to cheer Oedipus and rid him of his anxiety about his mother by revealing his parentage and changed the whole situation. In the Lynceus, too, there is the man led off to execution and Danaus following to kill him, and the result of what had already happened was that the latter was killed and the former escaped. A "discovery," as the term itself implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or hatred in those who are destined for good fortune or ill. A discovery is most effective when it coincides with reversals, such as that involved by the discovery in the Oedipus. There are also other forms of discovery, for what we have described may in a sense occur in relation to inanimate and trivial objects, or one may discover whether some one has done something or not. But the discovery which is most essentially part of the plot and part of the action is of the kind described above, for such a discovery and reversal of fortune will involve either pity or fear...

4) The belcher vs. sublime Atreus. (Discussion point).

A.

aperta multa tecta conlucent face.
 resupinus ipse purpurae atque auro incubat,
 vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput.
eructat. o me caelitum excelsissimum,
 regumque regem! vota transcendere mea. (*Thyestes* 908-12)

The open hall with many a torch is gleaming. There he himself reclines at full length on gold and purple, propping his wine-heavy head on his left hand. **He belches** with content. Oh, most exalted of the gods am I, and king of kings! I have trumped my own hopes.

Compare also Persius, *Satire* 3.98-102

- **Read the following parallels (4B and 4C): what do you think it means that Thyestes belches?**

B. Cicero *Philippics* 2.63

tu istis faucibus, istis lateribus . . . tantum vini in Hippiae nuptiis exhauseras, ut tibi necesse esset in populi Romani conspectu vomere postridie. o rem non modo visu foedam, sed etiam auditu! si inter cenam in istis tuis immanibus illis poculis hoc tibi accidisset, quis non turpe duceret? in coetu vero populi Romani negotium publicum gerens, magister equitum, cui **ructare** turpe esset, is vomens frustis esculentis vinum redolentibus gremium suum et totum tribunal implevit!

You, with those jaws of yours, and those sides of yours, and that strength of body suited to a gladiator, drank such quantities of wine at the marriage of Hippia, that you were forced to vomit the next day in the sight of the Roman people. O action disgraceful not merely to see, but even to hear of! If this had happened to you at supper amid those vast drinking-cups of yours, who would not have thought it scandalous? But in an assembly of the Roman people, a man holding a public office, a master of the horse, to whom it would have been disgraceful even to **belch**, vomiting

filled his own bosom and the whole tribunal with fragments of what he had been eating reeking with wine.

C. With C. Edwards (*The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge, 1993, 192): 'Going beyond the private excesses regularly attributed to Roman voluptuaries -at banquets characterised by the overflow of wine and bodily fluids- Antony's body erupts in public. We catch a glimpse here of the self-presentation expected of Rome's political leaders, who should feel ashamed even to belch in front of others. Antony is criticised both for his lack of self-control and for his promiscuous mingling with low persons in the pursuit of sensual gratification.'

Cf. also **Pliny Panegyricus 49.6, 8**: 'As for the length of your banquets, polite manners prolong what frugaliry cut short. You do not arrive already gorged with a solitary feast before midday, to sit menacingly over your guests, watching and marking all they do, nor when they are fasting and hungry do you **belch** (*eructans*) from a full stomach and present or rather throw at them the food you disdain to touch, and after a pretence at enduring this insulting mockery of a banquet take yourself back to secret gluttony and private excesses...The emperor has rid his tables of the accessories of oriental superstition and the indecent antics of impudent fools; in their place is warm hospitality, love of culture, and civilized wit.'

5) The pregnant male /Atreus as perverse 'midwife'?

- **Greco-Roman myth** : birth of Dionysus/Bacchus from thigh of Zeus/Jupiter; cf. birth of Athena from head of Zeus. See e.g. Herodotus *Histories* 2, Euripides' *Bacchae*, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.
- **Philosophy**: Plato in the *Symposium* famously describes thought as a metaphorical form of giving birth. See *Symp.*206a11-12, 206e8-207a2. In the *Thaetetus*, the philosopher is imagines as an intellectual midwife who helps others 'give birth' to ideas but also decides whether intellectual 'children' live or die. As D.Leitao puts it in his 2012 book, *The Pregnant Male as Myth and Metaphor in Classical Greek Culture*, p13:
'Whereas the presence of woman is lost entirely in Aristotle, who defines her solely by her absence (her anatomical defectiveness), Plato's appropriation of the female reproductive role attempts to displace woman but unwittingly retains a place for her.'
- **Comedy**: e.g., in Aristophanes' *Assembly Women* (*Ecclesiazusae*, 359-371), the character Blepyrus, who is constipated and unwittingly wearing his wife's tunic, prays to the goddess of childbirth Eileithyia, to help him 'deliver' a turd.
- **Epic**: e.g. Homer *Iliad* 11.269-72 (wounded Agamemnon suffers like a woman in labour); Virgil *Aeneid* 7.44-5: *maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo / maius opus moveo* ('I am giving birth to a greater order of events; I set in motion a greater work').
On the maius motif in Thyestes, see Schiesaro (2003) 31, 34-5, 51, 70, 130, and lines 57, 252-4, 267.

Further reading:

A.Cavarero (1990) *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*.

Trans. S.Anderlini-D'Onofrio and A.O'Healy. Polity Press.

C.Littlewood. (1997) 'Seneca's *Thyestes*: the tragedy with no women?' *MD* 38: 57-86

N-Loroux (2014) *The Experiences of Tiresias. The Feminine and the Greek Man*.

Trans. P.Wissing. Princeton.

G.Mader (2003) 'Thyestes' belch (Sen.*Thy.*911-12)' *Classical Quarterly* 53.2: 634-6.

Meltzer, G. (1988) 'Dark wit and black humor in Seneca's *Thyestes*' *TAPA* 118: 309-30.

M.McAuley (2015) *Reproducing Rome*. Oxford.