

VULBOD term 2, seminar 4
Seneca, *Thyestes* 1022-1068

Commentary:

In this climactic scene of *Thyestes*, Atreus slowly reveals to his brother what has become of his children. Thyestes at this point has been told that his sons have been murdered, and pleads for the return of their bodies for burial. Taking great pleasure in suggesting the crime through a series of puns which demonstrate his complete control of the situation (coextensive with his rhetorical mastery), Atreus finally spells out the blunt truth: 'You ate them yourself, a sacrilegious meal' (v1034). In the rest of the passage, Thyestes is left reeling at the sheer horror of what he has done, while Atreus, apparently frustrated that the suspense has been ruptured, fantasizes about repeating the murder in Thyestes' presence (vv.1052ff.). The scene marks both the culmination and frustration of Atreus' desire for revenge: despite succeeding in transforming Thyestes into a distorted caricature of a pregnant woman, Atreus' grief, in contrast to Thyestes' grotesque fullness, 'has fallen into a void' (v.1066). The passage deals intensively with a series of interrelated themes developed through the play as a whole, which I aim to comment on in what follows: for example, vision and blindness, knowledge and ignorance, the gendering of vulnerability as female, and the perversion of natural time.

Here, Atreus engineers and delights in a polarisation of all-seeing aggressor and blind victim. Indeed, the torture of Thyestes consists not (just) in the horror of having been made to consume the bodies of his own sons, but in the slow revelation of the crime, and therefore in Thyestes' gradually increasing awareness or vision of what he has done. At first his pleas are tragically lacking in insight: he asks 'let me bury them', ignorant of the fact that his sons are already 'buried' inside his tomb-like body, and instructs Atreus to 'return what you can watch being burnt at once', when of course the bodies have been burnt as they have been cooked. Yet we can observe how Thyestes shifts from a series of 'blind' questions, to using verbs of seeing: 'I see the cut-off heads, the wrenched-off arms... who has ever seen such horror?'

Thyestes' confusion and inarticulacy ('What words shall I utter...what speech will be enough for me?') stand in sharp contrast to Atreus' artistic and rhetorical brilliance. In lines 1022-4, for example, Atreus feigns benevolent nonchalance ('it's fine by me.'), but follows this with a tricolon of imperatives ('Hug them, kiss them, split your embraces among the three of them!') which conceal a terrible pun: Thyestes should 'split' his embraces, as if to recall Atreus' slicing of their bodies, suggesting that any future embraces will be definition be 'split', not only between the boys but between their body parts. The irony is so intense at this point that it strays into pantomime ('They're *insiiiiiiide* you!' we want to cry). Seneca makes us acutely aware of Atreus' ingenious imagination and masterly control over the plot. In Atreus' speech at vv.1052ff., we might note the multiple first

person perfect verb forms ('I should have poured the warm blood...I sacrificed them at the altar...I chopped up their lifeless bodies...I plunged...I severed...I skewered...I heaped...I did all this..'), which convey Atreus' resolution and command, and emphasize his agency in the killings. His short sentences and disjointed syntax again revisit and re-perform the chopping up of the boys' bodies. The notion that language or rhetoric itself is a powerful weapon for revenge, and that the re-telling of the crime is an act of torture, emerges overtly here. Atreus acts as a playwright producing an even more violent version of an earlier script, and vaunting a writer's control over time. Despite his slow-motion revelation of the various stages of the crime, and his success in perversely reversing natural time to place Thyestes' young sons back in a surrogate, male 'womb' (*viscera* = 'huts', 'womb'), Atreus now feels that his 'haste' 'cheated' his 'rage'. Details such as pouring the blood straight from the wounds into Thyestes' mouth, 'slamming the knife in', roasting the limbs 'still warm with life', 'slowly', as well as the image of livers hissing (or as he puts it 'moaning', *mugire*, like animals in pain) become sadistic, and reinforce just how vulnerable Thyestes and his sons are. The retelling, which exploits spondaic rhythms (e.g. *lentis ignibus* 1061) to elongate each moment, highlights the extent to which Atreus revels in his crime, and forces us to evaluate whether we should be entertained by this scene. This ethical question is prompted indirectly but seems to underpin the philosophical impact of the play.

Throughout this passage, vulnerability is made inseparable from blindness and ignorance, or from incomplete knowledge, just as Atreus' power is contingent on his superior knowledge and ability to see what Thyestes cannot (a superiority we as Seneca's audience also share). Yet crucially, the relationship between vision, knowledge and power (or vulnerability) is not a straightforward one, and seems to evolve within this very passage. At first, Atreus creates vulnerability in Thyestes via his knowledge of the fate of Thyestes' sons, where he states 'now have them! It's fine by me.' Thyestes' ignorance therefore makes him vulnerable to Atreus' manipulation. However, as his knowledge increases, he only becomes more vulnerable ('The flesh churns within me, the imprisoned horror struggles with no way out.') At the same time, Atreus is not satisfied by exploiting Thyestes' ignorance, and at the end of the passage wishes he had made Thyestes a knowing witness of every stage of the revenge plot (.. 'but he didn't know it, and they didn't know it').

The passage therefore also hints that knowledge does not always constitute invulnerability. It can also be traumatic, and cause immeasurable pain, while a lack of knowledge and awareness (in Thyestes) not only enables Atreus' crime, but momentarily protects him from it: what counts is who controls knowledge, who decides who knows what. Thyestes is not just tragically 'unknowing' about what Atreus has done; he is also, and perhaps more interestingly, lacking in knowledge and awareness of his own body or embodied self. We might relate this point to Thyestes' enforced status as a tragic caricature of the pregnant, labouring woman. When Thyestes demands 'Give me your sword, Atreus', he implies he wants to cut open his own belly to release the children ('the imprisoned horror struggles with no

way out, seeking to escape' 1041-2), a kind of perverse surgical birth which would also mime a more literal penetration by Atreus' male weapon. The use of "*natos*" to refer to the sons also evokes birth, while Thyestes' rhetorical question 'Do I as a father press down on my sons, or do I press down on me?' hints, in its use of the verb *premo* (whose semantic range includes 'to bury', 'to press', 'to weigh down/burden') at the act of bearing down in labour. Thyestes' body is patently not female – he has no reproductive power, and his greed has rendered him tragically and ironically disconnected from his own bodily experience, and thus defenceless against his brother's hatred. Seneca shows that it is Thyestes' vices (greed for power, food, wine, luxury, wealth) that have rendered him vulnerable, not his 'feminine', penetrable body in itself.