

MISZELLEN

SPOKEN LIKE A GOD Ambivalence and Stylistic Characterization at Seneca, Thy. 895–897

Act 5 of *Thyestes* opens with Atreus congratulating himself on the success of his ghoulish revenge: Thyestes has unwittingly devoured the flesh of his own sons, all that remains now is for Atreus to reveal to his victim the true nature of the *cena*. The psychic anguish caused by that revelation will be the tormentor's crowning triumph (cf. 782–784, 906–907, 1096–1098); hence his sadistic relish at the prospect of enlightening Thyestes, . . . *quod sat est, videat pater. / etiam die nolente discutiam tibi / tenebras, miseriae sub quibus latitant tuae* (895–897). This marks the starting point of a wide dramatic arc that culminates in the double *agnorisis* (1005–1006, 1034), the shattering ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνώσιν μεταβολή.

The quoted lines acquire further point within the drama's tightly woven thematic structure, and here three aspects are relevant. First, it has well been remarked that “dispelling darkness usually connotes a return to normal . . . , but here darkness is a protection and clarity brings ruin”.¹ There is an intentional touch of paradox in this implicit correlation darkness/security and light/ruin: as in Oedipus' pest-ridden Thebes,² reversal of the normal structure of expectations signals the fundamental dislocation in the drama's moral universe.

Next, the elemental imagery at 895–897 is demonstrably related to the overarching system of cosmic activity, and that thematic connexion gives the lines their distinctive point. As prefigured in the prologue (48–51), Atreus' slaughter of his nephews causes the sun to recoil in horror (776–778, 784–788); the cosmic reverberations of a perverted moral order are spectacularly enumerated in the ‘darkness at noon’ chorus (*solitae mundi periere vices . . .*, 789–884),³ and from that point the dramatic progression towards the *agnorisis* is marked by repeated references to unnatural darkness (891–895, 990–995, 1035–1036). Atreus at 896–897 takes full

1) R. J. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca's Thyestes* (Atlanta 1985) ad loc., who compares *Lucr.* 4.341 and *Verg. Aen.* 12.669.

2) *Oed.* 5, *stragemque quam nox fecit ostendet dies*; cf. also *Ag.* 577–578, *Phoebus redit / et damna noctis tristis ostendit dies*.

3) Collapse of the celestial order is an expression of the *sympatheia* posited by the Stoics: see C. J. Herington, *Senecan Tragedy, Arion 5* (1966) 433–434; T. G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1989) esp. chapter 4; C. Schmitz, *Die kosmische Dimension in den Tragödien Senecas* (Berlin/New York 1993) 86–115, esp. 95–99.

cognizance of these elemental convulsions, and also gives the idea a clever twist that serves as an effective means of stylistic characterization.

Lines 895–897 essentially replicate the messenger’s earlier prediction made at the onset of unnatural darkness:

NVN. . . . *in malis unum hoc tuis
bonum est, Thyesta, quod mala ignoras tua.
sed et hoc peribit. verterit currus licet
sibi ipse Titan obvium ducens iter
tenebrisque facinus obruat taetrum novis
nox missa ab ortu tempore alieno gravis,
tamen videndum est. tota patefiunt mala* (782–788);

AT. *utinam quidem tenere fugientes deos
possem, et coactos trahere, ut ultricem dapem
omnes viderent – quod sat est, videat pater.
etiam die nolente discutiam tibi
tenebras, miseriae sub quibus latitant tuae* (893–897).

The two extracts answer each other point for point: in spite of the sudden darkness (*etiam die nolente* = *verterit currus licet / sibi ipse Titan* . . .) which still conceals from Thyestes the truth about the *cena* (*miseriae sub quibus latitant tuae* = *quod mala ignoras tua*), he will nevertheless be enlightened (*videat pater; discutiam tibi / tenebras* = *tamen videndum est*).⁴ Both passages, that is, play on the idea that Thyestes is both literally and figuratively in the dark. Atreus at 895–897 sharpens the ambivalence into a suggestive conceit. At one level *discutiam tibi / tenebras* (varying *videat pater*) means “I will dispel your ignorance, I will enlighten you” (*tenebrae* as standard metaphor for *ignorantia*⁵ and harking back also to the messenger’s conjunction of darkness and ignorance). But given Atreus’ own preceding reference to unnatural darkness (*etiam die nolente*) as well as the echo of the messenger-speech (*tenebris que facinus obruat taetrum novis*, 786), the phrase *discutiam tibi / tenebras* is clearly chosen also with an eye to the recurrent *dies recessit*-motif: literal and metaphorical meanings coalesce,⁶ the act of enlightenment is here described as a

4) *Nox / videndum* as defining tension in the drama’s second half: K. Anliker, Prologe und Akteinteilung in Senecas Tragödien (Bern/Stuttgart 1960) 27.

5) E. g. Cic. Sul. 40, *in tantis tenebris erroris et inscientiae clarissimum lumen menti meae praetulistis*; Lucr. 3.1–2, *e tenebris tantis tam clarum extollere lumen / qui primus potuisti inlustrans commoda vitae*; and further OLD s.v. 3. For the junctura *discutere nubes, caliginem* vel sim. (both literally and figuratively) cf. TLL V,1.1373.21–39.

6) Anliker (above, n. 4) notes that *discutiam tibi / tenebras* is “doppelsinnig”. Similarly Schmitz (above, n. 3) 101: “Da die Sonne, der die Funktion des Enthüllens zukommt, sich weigert, das Verbrechen aufzudecken, wird Atreus nun diese Aufgabe übernehmen. Diese Gleichsetzung schlägt sich in der Ankündigung *discutiam . . . tenebras* nieder, wobei die metaphorische Bedeutung weit hinter den wirklichen Anspruch, wie das Sonnenlicht die Finsternis zu zerschlagen, zurücktritt”. The scene is then literally illuminated at 908, *aperta multa tecta conlucent face*. Anliker (above, n. 4) remarks: “Dies ist eine grandiose Konzeption. In der totalen Weltfinsternis ist einzig der Saal, in dem Thyest beim Mahle liegt, von grellem Licht beleuchtet, ein Symbol für das Thema *tamen videndum est*”.

grandiose elemental gesture. Read thus, the expression in effect characterizes the speaker as participant in the drama's elemental processes in a way to suggest his δύναμις θεοῦ, for control over nature typically emblemizes divine (or other supernatural) power.⁷ And this in turn is stylistically consistent with the diction of the megalomaniac who just lines before had styled himself as more than human: *aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super / altum superbo vertice attingens polum. /... / dimitto superos* (885–888).⁸

A further nuance will also be relevant here: Atreus' phraseology in evoking the impending *anagnorisis* has a distinctive apocalyptic complexion that suggestively reinforces the impression of the speaker's superhuman status. Two well-known passages will help fix the stylistic register. Early in Iliad 5 the Greek hero Diomedes is superficially wounded by an arrow in the shoulder, and prays to Athene for vengeance on his Trojan adversary Pandaros. The goddess in granting his request additionally dispels from the hero the constraints of ordinary mortal vision:

ἀγλῶν δ' αὖ τοι ἄπ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἔλον, ἢ πρὶν ἐπῆεν,
ὄφρ' εὖ γιγνώσκῃς ἡμὲν θεὸν ἠδὲ καὶ ἄνδρα

(Hom. Il. 5.127–128).

This is the common Homeric mist-over-the-eyes-motif;⁹ and the point is that whether preternatural darkness descends over the fighters (Il. 5.506–508; 16.567–568; 17.268–270; 20.321–322; 21.6–7) or conversely is dissipated (15.668–670; 17.643–650; 20.341–342), the phenomenon invariably betokens divine intervention (by Ares, Athene, Zeus, Here or Poseidon). Grandeur still¹⁰ is Vergil's elaboration of this motif in the majestic pronouncement of Roman Venus to her son at a pivotal moment in the *Aeneid*:

*aspice: namque omnem, quae nunc obducta tuenti
mortales hebetat visus tibi et umida circum
caligat, nubem eripiam...* (Aen. 2.604–606).

7) Such powers are attributed to deities, witches and inspired bards, e.g. gods: Pind. frg. 108B Snell-Maehler, θεῶ δὲ δυνατὸν μελαινας / ἐκ νυκτὸς ἀμύαντων ὄρσαι φάος, / κελαινεφεῖ δὲ σκότει / καλύψαι σέλας καθαρὸν / ἀμέρας; Hor. Carm. 1.12.30–32 (with Nisbet-Hubbard), 3.29.43–45; Verg. Aen. 1.142–143; witches: Tib. 1.2.49–50; Prop. 4.5.9–12; Ov. Am. 1.8.9–10, Met. 7.199–206 (with Bömer ad 199); Lucan 6.461–465; bards: Prop. 3.2.3–4; Hor. Carm. 1.12.7–12. Conversely attempts by humans to constrain nature or transgress its boundaries are a mark of *hybris*, e.g. Hdt. 7.24,35; Lucr. 3.1029–1032; Hor. Carm. 1.3.21–40; Sen. Ben. 6.31 etc.

8) Cf. Tarrant ad 885–886: "Atreus is implicitly claiming equality with the gods, as he will do openly in 911 (cf. also 545, 713)." Further P.J. Davis, *Shifting Song: The Chorus in Seneca's Tragedies* (Hildesheim 1993) 214–216; and below, n. 12.

9) On which see G.S. Kirk (ed.), *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume II: books 5–8* (Cambridge 1990, repr. 1993) 69 (ad 5.127–130); B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad* (Wiesbaden 1968) 22, 52–54.

10) A. Wlosok, *Die Göttin Venus in Vergils Aeneis* (Heidelberg 1967) 87 n. 56 remarks: „Die gewöhnlich als Vorbilder angeführten, sehr viel knapperen Homerstellen Il. 5.127 f.; 20.341 f. haben bei weitem nicht den grundsätzlichen und feierlichen Charakter dieser Vergilverse“.

Atreus' rhetoric resonates with analogous assumptions: as the goddess dispels inhibiting darkness to reveal the metaphysical forces working Troy's destruction, Atreus as self-styled *divus* in a symmetrical apocalyptic gesture will disclose to his wretched victim the workings of transcendental *nefas*. In the preceding fourth act Atreus' slaughter of his nephews was described as a meticulous travesty of religious ritual (682–718), making it in effect a sacrifice to his own *ira*.¹¹ Lines 896–897 now take the process of stylistic characterization a step further to suggest a *divus praesens*: more than just monumental *hybris*, this signifies the apotheosis of *ira* and *nefas* in a universe devoid of gods.¹² *Ille mi par esse deo videtur ...*

The *double entendre* that is throughout a characteristic feature of Atreus' diction¹³ at 895–897 takes the form of a clever interplay between the literal and metaphorical meanings of *tenebrae*. Compression enhances expressivity.¹⁴ More than just a rhetorical flourish, the resulting point *nox / videndum* is an effective means of stylistic characterization to suggest the apocalyptic perspective of the man who would be god. In a paradoxical way therefore the carefully pitched style – in the sense of Horace, Ars 112–118 – underscores the megalomaniac's psychological derangement.

Pretoria

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11) Cf. Tarrant ad 545; S. Walter, Interpretationen zum Römischen in Senecas Tragödien (Zürich 1975) 46–49; E. Lefèvre, A Cult without God or the Unfreedom of Freedom in Seneca Tragicus, CJ 77 (1981) 32–36; A.J. Boyle, Tragic Seneca (London/New York 1997) 46–48.

12) On Atreus as a symmetrical inversion of the Stoic *sapiens*, who is god's equal, see E. Lefèvre, Senecas Atreus – Die Negation des stoischen Weisen?, in: J. Axer, W. Görler (edd.), Scaenica Saravi-Varsoviensia (Warsaw 1997) 57–74, here 64–66.

13) E.g. Thy. 970–972, 976–983, 1030–1031, 1103, 1112; with Tarrant 216 and G. Meltzer, Dark Wit and Black Humor in Seneca's Thyestes, TAPhA 118 (1988) 309–330, esp. 316, 323.

14) A comparable configuration at HO 1744, *uere ardentem putes* (of Hercules' fiery death on the pyre). For more spaced-out versions of the technique, compare (e.g.) Vergil's use in Aen. 4 of figurative love-wound and literal death-wound, as well the ambivalent hunting imagery in that book: see P. Hardie, Virgil, New Surveys in the Classics 28 (Oxford 1998) 90–92. The same kind of 'associative integration' also in the opening scene of Sen. Pho., where the key terms *caecus*, *errare*, *via*, *dux*, *dirigere* suggestively conflate literal and figurative-philosophical meanings (as in Sen. Ep. 50).