ATREUS *ARTIFEX* (SENECA, *THYESTES* 906–7)

> Libet uidere, capita natorum intuens
> quos det colores, uerba quae primus dolor
> effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens
> corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est.
> miserum uidere nolo, sed dum fit miser. (*Thy*. 903–7)

Thus Atreus, savouring in advance the torment he will inflict upon Thyestes: unconstrained by an Eighth Amendment, he intends his revenge to take precisely the form of some transcendentally cruel and unusual punishment. Emphasis on the gaze in particular captures both the speaker's sadistic glee and his artistic genius, making him a gloating spectator, keenly observing the tormented observer within his own carefully staged performance. Commentators have often noted these interconnected aspects. 'Atreo ritorna al monologo, dicendo e pregustando la malvagia gioia che si ripromette dal vedere le reazioni di Tieste alla vista delle teste mozze dei figli.'[1] 'As Atreus steps back and watches the performance that he has staged, he impersonates … an affected, undetached spectator, who derives direct satisfaction from witnessing the spectacle: *libet uidere, capita natorum intuens* … (903).'[2] 'Viewing pleasure is interwoven with the pleasure of mastery, and this is nowhere better seen than in Atreus' enjoyment in the shifting colours of Thyestes' face.'[3] *Nefas* parades as art, the aesthetic dimension is paramount here: 'Es ist konsequent, daß für Atreus die Form des Verbrechens vor seinem "Inhalt" Vorrang hat.'[4] Lines 906–7 in particular come crucially into play here: I shall argue that Atreus' gloating connects with an identifiable aesthetic discourse, which in turn gives sharp point to the torment-as-art theme at a climactic moment in the drama.

The voyeuristic impulse, first, betokens the raw savagery familiar from a number of other Senecan passages: thus the avid spectatorial interest at gratuitous displays of butchery in the arena (*Ep*. 7.2–5) or at the execution of Astyanax and Polyxena (*Tro*. 1075–87, 1125–37), thus also Caligula's desire, in an analogous situation, to observe the reactions of the wretched Pastor, invited to dine in grand style with the emperor on the same day that his son had been executed by Caligula (*De ira* 2.33.3–5). Atreus, in the same way as Medea, prolongs the climactic moment and luxuriates in the victim's anguish (*Med*. 1016, *perfruere lento scelere, ne propera, dolor*), but more explicitly than in Medea's monologue, the crowning atrocity is now consciously conceived as an artistic triumph (*fructus hic operis mei est*) with a

[1] F. Giancotti (ed.), *Seneca, Tieste* II (Turin, 1989), 200 (*ad* 901–7).

[2] A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play* (Cambridge, 2003), 60. And again later (96): 'Killing Thyestes' children will also guarantee the additional pleasure of watching him watch their death, or at least their corpses.' Atreus' literary pedigree can be traced to the rhetorical tyrant of Roman historiography and invective, on whom see J.R. Dunkle, 'The rhetorical tyrant in Roman historiography: Sallust, Livy and Tacitus', *CW* 65 (1971), 12–20; R. Tabacco, 'Il tiranno nelle declamazioni di scuola in lingua latina', *MAT* 9 (1985), 1–141. Defining vices include *uis, superbia, libido* and *crudelitas*. In the tyrannical gaze, topical *crudelitas* conjoins with exquisite *uoluptas*: see also M. Leigh, *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement* (Oxford, 1997), 282–91; E. Keitel, 'Feast your eyes on this: Vitellius as a stock tyrant (Tac. *Hist*. 3.36–39)', in J. Marincola (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* II (Oxford, 2007), 441–6.

[3] C.A.J. Littlewood, *Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy* (Oxford, 2004), 193.

[4] E. Lefèvre, 'Senecas Atreus – die Negation des stoischen Weisen?', in J. Axer and W. Görler (edd.), *Scaenica Saravi-Varsoviensia. Beiträge zum antiken Theater und zu seinem Nachleben* (Warsaw, 1997), 57–74, at 69.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S000983880999067X Published online by Cambridge University Press

corresponding shift in emphasis from the 'utilitarian' to the aesthetic aspect: hence the crucial distinction between punishment as endpoint in a process (*miserum uidere nolo*) and punishment as the process itself (*sed dum fit miser*).

That distinctive emphasis can be tracked through the play. When in the first act the shade of Tantalus complains that he should be the patient of retribution, and not its agent, his paradoxical formulation (*me pati poenas decet, | non esse poenam*, 85–6) prefigures the idea of punishment-as-process as something worse than punishment itself. Atreus picks up this theme when he deliberates with his attendant on a suitable means of revenge (245–8):

> SAT. Ferro peremptus spiritum inimicum expuat.
> ATR. De fine poenae loqueris; ego poenam uolo.
> perimat tyrannus lenis: in regno meo
> mors impetratur.

Again the conclusion of the process (*de fine poenae loqueris* ≈ *miserum uidere nolo*) is pointedly set against the process itself (*ego poenam uolo* ≈ *sed dum fit miser*) – signalling a heightened aesthetic sensibility that transcends conventional categories (*perimat tyrannus lenis*). The priority of aesthetics comes out especially in Atreus' meticulous observance of sacrificial ritual when slaughtering his nephews (687–95), famously culminating in the lines *quem prius mactet sibi | dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet. | nec interest – sed dubitat et saeuum scelus | iuuat ordinare* (713–6): this is 'the estheticism of terror, the seeming bestowal of significance on the meaningless.'[5] If the grand gesture functions at one level to celebrate the celebrant himself, at another it suggests also the standard Roman categories used to describe artistic creation: formalized ritual is to its perversely novel intent as *ars* is to *ingenium*, with the paradoxical conjunction marking the true *artifex*. And when the messenger relates the fate of the butchered nephews to a bewildered chorus, we have another memorable reference to the theme of punishment as exponentially self-surpassing process (745–7):

> CHO. An ultra maius aut atrocius
> natura recipit? NVN. Sceleris hunc finem putas?
> gradus est.

To the consummate *sceleris artifex* whose vindictiveness knows no limits (*nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis*, 256), punishment is quintessentially a work in progress, susceptible of infinite refinement.

All of which bears on lines 903–7, where this theme reaches its ghoulish apex. Atreus' crowning achievement will be to witness the onset of Thyestes' physical

[5] E. Lefèvre, 'A cult without God or the unfreedom of freedom in Seneca tragicus', *CJ* 77.1 (1981), 32–6, at 35. For the conspicuous emphasis on the aesthetic dimension in this scene, see further K. Anliker, *Prologe und Akteinteilung in Senecas Tragödien* (Bern and Stuttgart, 1960), 59: 'Das ist die Freude des Künstlers an seinem Werk. Atreus ist ein "ästhetischer" Verbrecher'; P. Mantovanelli, *La metafora del Tieste. Il nodo sadomasochistico nella tragedia senecana del potere tirannico* (Verona, 1984), 65–9; G. Picone, *La fabula e il regno* (Palermo, 1984), 97–102; A.J. Boyle, *Tragic Seneca* (London and New York, 1997), 47: 'The rules, the rite, the proper order of things, seem almost as important as the vengeance they exact'; Lefèvre (n. 4), 68–70; and id., 'Die Konzeption der "verkehrten Welt" in Senecas Tragödien', in L. Castagna and G. Vogt-Spira (edd.), *Pervertere: Ästhetik der Verkehrung* (Munich and Leipzig, 2002), 104–22, at 111–13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S000983880999067X Published online by Cambridge University Press

reactions, to savour his punishment as a calibrated and kinetic sequence of symptoms leading to incipient paralysis: *libet uidere … | quos det* ***colores****, uerba quae* ***primus*** *dolor | effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens | corpus* ***rigescat***. Not the end point, therefore, but movement towards that point in a process consciously conceived as high art. Aesthetic pleasure is generated crucially by the visible and dynamic aspects of the punishment (*dum fit miser*). The suggestively polysemic *colores* merges the gazes of appreciative artist-colourist and of tormentor relishing his victim's changing complexion; and self-congratulatory *fructus hic operis mei est* explicitly acknowledges both the *artifex* and his masterwork. It will be no coincidence therefore that Atreus' gloating resonates with categories from an aesthetic discourse that can be recovered, first, from Seneca himself. In a passage on the special delight of forming new friendships Seneca, quoting the philosopher Attalus, adds an analogy from the fine arts, where the painter derives greater satisfaction from the process of creation than from his finished product (*Ep*. 9.6–7):

> Habet autem non tantum usus amicitiae ueteris et certae magnam uoluptatem sed etiam initium et comparatio nouae. Quod interest inter metentem agricolam et serentem, hoc inter eum qui amicum parauit et qui parat. Attalus philosophus dicere solebat iucundius esse amicum facere quam habere, 'quomodo artifici iucundius pingere est quam pinxisse.' Illa in opere suo occupata sollicitudo ingens oblectamentum habet in ipsa occupatione: non aeque delectatur qui ab opere perfecto remouit manum. Iam fructu artis suae fruitur: ipsa fruebatur arte cum pingeret.

In each of the examples the result of the process is set against the process itself (*usus amicitiae ueteris – comparatio nouae amicitiae; metentem – serentem; qui amicum parauit – qui parat; amicum habere – amicum facere; pinxisse – pingere*).[6] Most pointedly, the reference to painting captures the greater aesthetic exhilaration (from the artist's point of view) of the creative act itself (*iucundius – oblectamentum – delectatur*): the process is intrinsically pleasing (*ingens oblectamentum habet in ipsa occupatione*), surpassing any delight the finished work can give (*non aeque delectatur …*). This is exactly the distinction in the tyrant-artist's maxim *miserum uidere nolo* (≈ *pinxisse, opus perfectum*), *sed dum fit miser* (≈ *pingere, ipsa fruebatur arte cum pingeret*). Atreus has read his Attalus, and transposes these categories to his own criminal masterpiece.

Nor is this passage alone in recognizing the distinctive aesthetic pleasure of the work-in-progress phase; and given this context of *Thy*. 906–7, Ovid too is a likely intertextual presence here. His Tereus and Procne story (*Met*. 6.424–674) provides an explicit precedent and point of mythological reference for Atreus' own atrocity (*Thy*. 56–7, 272–7)[7] and commentators on lines 903–6 have compared, for the general sense, *Met*. 6.653–4: *dissimulare nequit* ***crudelia gaudia*** *Procne | iamque suae* ***cupiens*** *exsistere nuntia cladis*.[8] But the contextual emphasis in *fructus hic operis …* , I suggest, points rather to another passage that is much closer to the theme of artistic creativity: not Procne now, but Arachne, the artist par excellence

[6] C. Richardson-Hay, *First Lessons* (Bern, 2006), 301 aptly remarks: 'Friendship is both a means and an end, the means (like the sowing of the crop, the painting of a picture or infancy) no less valuable than the end, although the end is always perhaps diminished by the loss of its anticipation of the pleasure of its process.'

[7] See further F. Bömer (ed.), *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen Buch 6–7* (Heidelberg, 1976), 117–18; Picone (n. 5), 105–6; R. Jakobi, *Der Einfluß Ovids auf den Tragiker Seneca* (Berlin and New York, 1988), 152–67; Schiesaro (n. 2), 70–85.

[8] Thus Jakobi (n. 7), 165; G. Viansino (ed.), *Seneca, Teatro* II (Milan, 2007), 395.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S000983880999067X Published online by Cambridge University Press

who can challenge Minerva herself. In the run-up to her contest with the goddess, Ovid has a detailed description of the master spinner at work (*Met*. 6.14–23):

> huius ut adspicerent opus admirabile, saepe
> deseruere sui nymphae dumeta Timoli,
> deseruere suas nymphae Pactolides undas.
> nec **factas** solum **uestes**, **spectare iuuabat**
> tum quoque **cum fierent** (tantus decor adfuit arti),
> siue **rudem primos** lanam glomerabat in orbes,
> seu digitis subigebat opus repetitaque longo
> uellera mollibat nebulas aequantia tractu,
> siue leui teretem uersabat pollice fusum,
> seu pingebat acu: scires a Pallade doctam.

Here the spectators enjoy viewing not just the finished products (*nec factas solum uestes*), but the dynamic process of their creation (*tum quoque cum fierent*) – to which end Ovid adds the extended *siue – seu – siue – seu* sequence itemizing the gradual transformation of the raw materials (*siue* ***rudem primos*** *lanam glomerabat in orbes*) into perfect artworks. The pointed formulation at 17–18 in particular, distinguishing the finished work from its genesis, captures the same aspects identified by Attalus and Atreus, and acknowledges the pleasure (now from the spectator's point of view) of observing a masterpiece in the making.[9] This is not a case of *ars est celare artem*, but rather (as in *Thy*.) of zooming in on the painstaking process of artistic creation.[10]

Atreus is consistently represented as a master of double entendre, with his loaded rhetoric again and again allowing the evil genius to shimmer through.[11] Lines 906–7 are another instance of this typical stylistic characterization: his discourse, splicing together the perspectives of creative artist (as in the Attalus passage) and admiring spectator (as in the Arachne story), marks the tyrant as refined aesthete and sublimates *nefas* as artistic accomplishment. Seneca's dictum on style and the man comes easily to mind here: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis uita* (*Ep*. 114.1): so it is with the consummate tyrant-artist.

Royal Holloway, London GOTTFRIED MADER
madergj@gmail.com
doi:10.1017/S000983880999067X

[9] Ovid's fascination with the active work-in-progress phase is captured also in the exhilaration of young Icarus as his father works meticulously on their wings (*Met*. 8.189–200), and more obliquely in the Hymettian wax simile in the Pygmalion story (10.284–6).

[10] The '*ars est celare artem*' rhetoric operates with identical categories but reverses the emphasis, now privileging result over process: thus Ovid's instructions on female cosmetics (*Ars am*. 3.209–34), where the process itself should be kept carefully under wraps (*ista dabunt formam, sed erunt deformia uisu,* | *multaque,* ***dum fiunt****, turpia;* ***facta*** *placent*, 217–18). And the shaping of the raw materials, in the case of Arachne an index of high artistic skill, is now airily dismissed (219–34): this represents a symmetrical inversion of the discourse noted above. On the Ovidian *dissimulatio artis*, see further R.K. Gibson (ed.), *Ovid: Ars Amatoria Book 3* (Cambridge, 2003), 183, 186–7.

[11] See R. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca's Thyestes* (Atlanta, 1985), 216; G. Meltzer, 'Dark wit and black humor in Seneca's *Thyestes*', *TAPhA* 118 (1988), 309–30, at 316 and 323; G. Mader, 'Spoken like a god. Ambivalence and stylistic characterization at Seneca, *Thy*. 895–897', *RhM* 145 (2003), 218–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S000983880999067X Published online by Cambridge University Press