


HANS LIEB

Schaffhausen

**SENUM PRAESIDIA, TOT IUVENES:**

**BLACK WIT AT SENeca, THY. 523**

Seneca’s Atreus is not only a consummate criminal but also a master rhetorician, whose domination at the dramatic level is registered throughout in his control of the rhetorical situation. If we attempt to describe his style in terms of its rhetorical purpose, two broad types, sometimes shading off into each other, may be distinguished. First there is what we might term the rhetoric of *falsa nomina* or ensnarement, intended to allay Thyestes’ misgivings, kindle his innate lust for power and so lure him into the trap. Atreus’ design, accurately labelled *consilium triste* (308) by the


\(^{52}\) Eine *designatio* für das überraschste oder noch spätere Jahre ist im zweiten Jahrhundert ausgeschlossen.

\(^{53}\) M. Ceccius Iustinus und C. Iulius Bassus (CIL 18,87).

\(^{54}\) L. Minucius Natalis und L. Claudius [—] (CIL 16,175), frühestens am 18. März, spätestens am 18. August.

\(^{55}\) RMD 1,38.

\(^{56}\) Alföldy (Anmerkung 46) 138–140.

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satellite in private, is presented to Thyestes' face as a beguiling offer—thus the treacherous fictions that fratricidal hate has been replaced by brotherly love (508–511, cf. 431, 474–475, 546–559) and that Atreus is now willing to share power with the returning exile (526–527, 534, cf. 297–299, 472–473). Multiple references, before the brothers meet, to deception and concealment (316–321, 330–335, 414–416, 446–447, 482–484, 486–487, 504–505) anticipate Atreus' subsequent rhetorical strategy, while the immediate dramatic function of this style is well glossed in the images of hunting and trapping in acts 2 and 3 (sed quibus captus dolis / nostros dabit perductus in laqueos pedem? 286–287; plagis tenetur clausa dispositis fera, 491; cf. also 497–503). Thyestes' reaction (512–521, 542) is testimony to the efficacy of Atreus' beguiling talk.

If falsa nomina, deception and ensnarement represent the 'functionalist' side of Atreus' rhetoric, there is an equally significant 'aesthetic' dimension. Atreus sees his crowning triumph is the dolor he inflicts on Thyestes: libet videre, capita natorum intuens,/ quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor / effundat aut ut spiritu explus / corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est (903–906); nunc meas laudo manus, / nunc parta vera est palma. perdideram sceleus, / nisi sic dolores (1096–1098). The sadistic voluptas here openly articulated by the tormenter is repeatedly foreshadowed before the anagnorisis in a series of sinister double entendres, lost of course on the unsuspecting Thyestes (cf. 782–783, in malis unum hoc tuis / bonum est, Thesta, quod mala ignoras tua), but recognized by the reader as clear allusions to the impending nefas, and thus also as deliberate sadistic taunts of the victim. So for example Thyestes' fatal accipio (542) at the end of act 3 is answered by Atreus in a couplet that brings out the grim discrepancy between ceremony and underlying intent:

imposita capiti vincla venerando gere;
ego destinatas victimas superis dabo (544–545).

The metonymy vincla, for crown, caps the antecedent hunting imagery (cf. above) by suggestively equating the proffered diadem with the earlier laquei and plagae, thereby implying that the coronation has finally sealed Thyestes' fate. This is reinforced by the ambiguous destinatas victimas, for behind the superficial formality, the reassuring gesture of reconciliation, is a clear hint of Atreus' plan of revenge.2 Multiple ambiguities of this


2. Victimae foreshadow the slaughter of Thyestes' sons in a grandiose travesty of religious ritual (682–718), with ritual language then reappearing at the cena (919, 970–971).
kind serve as an effective means of characterizing Atreus, allowing his anticipatory delight and sadistic gloating to shimmer through an innocuous surface meaning.

Just before the couplet quoted above we have another cluster of ambiguous references which combine ensnarement and anticipatory gloating. Atreus in an effusive show of feigned affection invites Thyestes to become his partner in power:

_A genibus manum_

_auer meosque potius amplexus pete._

_vos quoque, senum praesidia, tot iuvenes, meo pendete collo. squalidam vestem exue oculisque nostris parce et ornatus cape pares meis laetusque fraterni imperi capesse partem_ (521–527).

The transvestite and _fraternal imperium_ motifs (524b–527) by their resonances index the progressive ensnarement of Thyestes. But Atreus δολιώτατος is also a refined aesthete, and beneath the endearing reference to his nephews at 523 lurks an ominous hint of sadistic _voluptas_. This nuance, whose significance has not been fully appreciated, fits into the wider scheme of stylistic characterization and is better understood from that perspective.

_Senum praesidia, tot iuvenes_ (523) is glossed as follows in the standard commentary: 'If the _senes_ are himself and Thyestes, Atreus is imagining a harmonious future in which Thyestes' children will look after both of them. This seems to have more point than taking _senum praesidia_ as an implied generalization ("young men are the protectors of the old"). And again (on _tot iuvenes_): 'Atreus lingers for a moment over the number of Thyestes' children, savoring his revenge in advance'. The sadistic nuance in _tot iuvenes_ is borne out by a few other hints as well—and this will

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3. Cf. R.J. Tarrant (ed.), Seneca's _Thyestes_, Atlanta 1985, 216: '[Atreus] dominates not only on the level of action but also on that of language, on which the struggles between the brothers have been reflected throughout the play. Thyestes' attempts to find suitable words for his grief and outrage [at the end of the play] are all to a degree thwarted, but Atreus' language is at its Wittiest as he toys with his discomfited victim [e.g. 970–971, 972, 976–983, 1030–1031, 1103, 1112]'. Further G. Meltzer, 'Dark Wit and Black Humor in Seneca's _Thyestes_', _TAPA_ 118 (1988) esp. 316, 323.


5. Tarrant (above, n. 3) ad 523.

6. Thus the gloating effect of the quantitative terms _venit in nostras manus / tandem Thyestes, venit, et totus quidem (494–495); ora quae exoptas dabo / totumque turba iam sua implebo patrem (978–979); quidquid e natis tuus / superest habes, quodcumque non superest habes (1030–1031).
in turn also affect our interpretation of the preceding *senum praesidia*. Atreus, I suggest, sarcastically evokes the reassuring picture of the aged fathers supported by their sons precisely because he relishes the prospect of depriving Thyestes of this consolation. And this deprivation is no less an element in his revenge than the act of cannibalism itself. Both aspects appear in an earlier passage,

\[
\begin{align*}
tota \ iam \ ante \ oculos \ meos \\
imago \ coedis \ errat, \ ingesta \ orbitas \\
in \ ora \ patris \quad (281-283),
\end{align*}
\]

where the suggestive junctura *ingesta orbitas* effectively conflates the notions of eating and childlessness. The envisioned *orbitas* of Thyestes that shimmers through the comforting *senum praesidia* will further intensify the victim's eventual dolor.

Children as the comforters or supporters (*levamen, praesidium, solacium*) of parents in old age or distress are of course a familiar literary topos, reflecting prevailing societal mores. Conversely it is especially in these circumstances that the absence or loss of progeny would be felt most sharply—a point appreciated by Seneca's Medea after Jason has declared what his children mean to him:

\[
\text{IA. } \text{Haec causa vitae est, hoc perusti pectoris curis levamen. spiritu citius queam carere, membris, luce. ME. Sic natos amat? bene est, tenetur, vulneri patuit locus } \quad (\text{Med. 547-550}).
\]

Like Atreus, Medea has a pronounced sadistic streak (Med. 991-994), and like Atreus she uses her victim’s children as the instruments of her revenge. *Perusti pectoris curis* as used by Jason might look beyond his present condition to his later years; Euripides' Medea is more explicit on this point, answering Jason's anguish with a cruel taunt that the reallosa of her daughter Polyxena.

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his children will be felt only in old age (an insight gained during the earlier scene with Aegeus):

IA. στεῖχω, δισσών γ’ ἀμορος τέχνων.

ΜΕ. οὐκ ὅρηνεῖς: μένε καὶ γῆρας.

IA. ὁ τέχνα φιλήμα (Med. 1395–1397).

This is a painful truism, borne out (e.g.) by Theseus’ anguish at Sen. Pha. 1253, O triste fractis orbitas annis malum. A similar nuance, it is proposed, is present also at Thy. 523, where senum praesidia at the same time dazzles Thyestes by its falsus fulgor (cf. 415) and gloatingly envisions a significant aspect of the psychic dolor which Atreus will inflict upon him. As such it conlates two characteristic features of Atreus’ rhetoric.

GOTTFRIED MADER

University of South Africa
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