Thyestes' Slipping Garland (Seneca, *Thy.* 947)

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The fatal banquet in Act 5 which marks the dramatic and structural apex of *Thyestes,* is one of the virtuoso passages in Senecan tragedy, a densely suggestive scene in which multiple thematic strands converge to enhance the drama's grand *peripeteia.* The dazzling scenario symbolically charts the victim's inner transformation: Thyestes' regal garments (955-56), his outward appearance (948) with the appurtenances of luxury (909, 913, 945-46) pointedly externalize his repudiation of *veterem ... Thyesten* (937), his exilic identity expressed earlier in the stoically tinged ideal of the true king (344-90, 446-70). But, in spite of the lavish decor, misgivings persist, and the whole of *Thyestes'* long monody (920-69) is shaped to articulate a counter-current of dark foreboding that mars enjoyment of his present opulence. First he tries to renounce his former persona and assume a mood consonant with the festive setting (920-37); but he falls back into doubt in the second part of the soliloquy (938-69), which is characterized by a recurrent tension between the outward tokens of *luxuria* and his own vague premonitions of impending disaster. Those presentiments are indexed especially in the *invitus* motif, by involuntary physical reactions at variance with his surroundings and with his own intellectual resolve (*redeant vultus ad laeta bani,* 936): grief comes upon Thyestes for no apparent reason (944), his hair bristles in spite of himself (949), tears run down unwilling cheeks (950, 966-67), he groans spontaneously (951). Amidst these

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3 The *invitus* motif (e.g. 417-20, 985-88) dramatizes the conflict between mind and body to call attention to Thyestes' divided self: see R.J. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca’s Thyestes* (Atlanta
contra-rational symptoms, reference is also made to the garland that slips from his head:

Quid me revocas festunque vetas  
celebrare diem, quid flere tubes,  
nulla surgens dolor ex causa?  
quia me prohibit flore decenti  
vincire comam, prohibit, prohibet?  
Vernae capiti fluxere rosa,  
pingui madidus crinis amomo  
inter subtitos stetit horroses,  
imber vultu nolente cadit,  
venit in medias voces gemitus. (942-51)

The vivid detail *vernæ capiti fluxere rosa* (947) has been variously interpreted. Tarrant in the standard commentary on the play notes that ‘[i]n Hellenistic poetry slipping garlands are a sign of drinking to assuage the sorrow of a difficult love affair, cf. Call. Ep. 43.3-4 Pf., AP 12.135, Gow on Theocr. 7.64’ and goes on to suggest also that ‘[h]ere the loss of the garland portends Thyestes’ imminent loss of power ...’4 The association with the distraught lover is perhaps relevant to the extent that Thyestes too is drinking and tries to dispel his misgivings (910-14, 933-37), and the slipping garland might convey a hint of impending disaster,5 but these are at best secondary nuances. Giancotti, mindful of the immediate context, explains the detail instead by reference to the surrounding tension between the lavish setting and the physical symptoms of Thyestes’ involuntary repugnance: ‘Communque, al di là d’ogni possibile senso ulteriore, va considerato il senso primario del v. 947, che consiste, se non erro, nel

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4 Tarrant (note 3) 224 (ad 947).
divario e nel dissidio fra il corpo di Tieste e quanto è segno di piacere e di gioia. On this interpretation the dislodged garland, thematically akin to the other instances of the invitus motif by which it is flanked, pointedly externalizes the same nuance of reflexive aversion conveyed by those adjacent symptoms and then explicitly articulated a few lines further on, libet et Tyria saturas ostro / rumpere vestes (955-56). Certainly the context in which the detail is placed favours this as the primary significance of the verse vernae capiti fluxere rosea.

This interpretation is supported by another celebrated instance of a slipping garland in a broadly analogous situation, a passage which may even have inspired Seneca to include the detail. Cicero’s version of the Damocles story at Tusc. 5.61-62 is an exquisitely structured psychodrama en miniature to expose the deceptive glitter of the βλος τυραννικός. The flatterer, naïvely imagining the tyrant to be the happiest of men, is given the chance to experience at first hand the supposed bliss of this condition: a lavish banquet is prepared for him, complete with regal trappings, and for a brief moment Damocles thinks himself happy – until the sword appears above his head to spoil enjoyment of the abundant opulence before him. As the banqueter’s illusions are dispelled at this pivotal moment, his garlands slip spontaneously from his head: itaque nec pulchros illos ministratores aspiciebat nec plenum artis argentum nec manum porrigebat in mensam, iam ipsae defluebant coronae; denique exoravit tyrannum, ut abire liceret, quod iam beatus nollet esse. First the reflexive physical withdrawal and stifled pleasure (itaque nec pulchros ...), then the symbolic restatement of the idea through the displaced coronae: this unambiguously fixes the meaning of the detail. In Cicero as in Seneca the poignancy of the scene derives from the dissonance between the outward tokens of luxuria, supposedly conducive to happiness, and the protagonist’s physical reflexes, themselves symptomatic of his inner misgivings. In either case the

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6 Giancotti (note 5) ibid.
7 Damocles’ progression from illusion to enlightenment is signposted by the recurrent key terms ‘beatus’, ‘fortunatus’ and ‘fortuna’: quamquam hic quidem tyrannus ipse iudicavit, quam esset beatus – negaretque [Damocles] unquam beatiorem quamquamuisse – visne igitur ... o Damocle, quoniam te haec vita delectat, ipse eam degustare et fortunam experit meam? – fortunatus sibi Damocles videbatur – denique exoravit tyrannum, ut abire liceret, quod iam beatus nollet esse – satisse videtur declarasse Dionysius nihil esse ei beatum, cui semper aliqui terror impendeat?
disjunction is pointedly captured in the image of the slipping garland: a climactic detail at a climactic moment to externalize a sense of profound aversion and dissociation.  

Analogously also the smoke that settles on Oedipus' head, indicating his intellectual blindness (Oed. 325-27): again the conspicuous physical detail to externalize a complex psychodrama. See K. Töchterle (ed.), Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Oedipus (Heidelberg 1994) 322 (ad 325ff.).
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