

Playing Mercy: the Value of Virtue in Seneca's *Thyestes*

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The absence of clemency within Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes* proves how necessary this virtue is for a ruler. In his treatise *De Clementia*, Seneca recommends the virtue *clementia* to the young emperor Nero. Seneca hopes that *De Clementia* "might act as a mirror (*modo speculi*)" and provide a picture of Nero "as someone who will attain the greatest pleasure of all (*perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium*)."¹ He argues that acting virtuously is freeing in itself and leads to the best and happiest life. A close reading of the power that the tyrant Atreus has over his subjects, but lacks in regards to himself, could also function to recommend this virtue to an emperor. Some scholars argue that there is a fundamental difference between Seneca the philosopher and Seneca the tragedian and that his objectives in the philosophical works do not conform with those in his tragedies. Specifically, it can be argued that Atreus inverts Seneca's arguments about the utility of *clementia* for a ruler's own advantage. Atreus does seem to have more power as a tyrant who imposes his will upon his subjects, without concern for *Fama*. However, we must consider the role of Tantalus, insatiable and ever-growing desire, in this play. Both Atreus and Thyestes are plagued by this intense desire, which makes their happiness and satisfaction contingent and dependent. An examination of the passion of *ira* and the virtue of *clementia*, shows that only the exercise of this virtue could truly free both Thyestes and Atreus from their cyclical and mutual torture. In the first section of this essay I will show how Atreus takes up and inverts Seneca's arguments about the utility of clemency in the discussion between Atreus and his advisor, the *satelles*. In the second half I will argue that although Atreus believes he is free, he is actually enslaved by an ever growing and cyclical desire for rage and revenge. The supreme power and value of *clementia* is displayed negatively in the *Thyestes* by its absence.

Atreus' Tyrannical Power

Atreus, as the epitome of a tyrannical tyrant is primarily

1. Seneca, and Susanna M. Braund. *De Clementia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.1.1.

concerned with power. He is not satisfied with grasping power momentarily, but wishes to cheat fickle fortune's vicissitudes by establishing a stable and uncompromising power over his subjects. Atreus' interaction with his advisor, the *satelles*,² shows that rather than being dependent upon good *fama* and garnering power through the love of his subjects, Atreus establishes his power by controlling the very will of his subjects. In response to the *satelles*' question as to whether Atreus fears *adversa fama*, Atreus replies that this is exactly the value of kingship: the people are compelled to praise and endure their king.³ Gottfried Mader extrapolates on this point, noting that silent acquiescence is not sufficient to the tyrant, rather, "the oppressed must suffer the added indignity of actually praising their tormentor's handiwork, i.e. they are driven to an act of conscious counter volition."⁴ The subjects' suffering is perfected by their active participation in servitude as simultaneously patients and agents.

The *satelles* has apparently studied his Seneca; he counters with the Senecian argument that fear does induce praise, but ultimately results in enemies. Instead, "one who seeks the tribute of sincere support will want praise from the heart rather than the tongue *qui favoris gloriam veri petit, / animo magis quam voce laudari volet*."⁵ This recalls the dictum: *oderint, dum metuant*, which Seneca cites in the *De Clementia* along with other works.⁶ In *De Clementia* Seneca argues that an index of a ruler's genuine popularity is that people say the same thing about him in public as they do in private; there is no disjunction between *vox* and *animus*.⁷ In opposition to this and the reciprocal fear/hate dynamic, which expresses as a caution to tyrants in the philosophical works, in the *Thyestes* there is a symbiosis between simulation and tyranny.

2. Schiesaro sees that "the designation of Atreus' counselor as *satelles* is metaphorically most fitting: other characters revolve around the larger-than-life royal protagonist with the limited, virtually non-existent autonomy of satellites locked in a gravitational field that they cannot control." Schiesaro, Alessandro, *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139.

3. Seneca, *Thyestes*, in *Oedipus: Agamemnon; Thyestes; Hercules on Oeta; Octavia*, ed. John. G Fitch, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 205-7.

4. Gottfried Mader, "Quod Nolunt Velint: Deference and Doublespeak at Seneca, Thyestes 334-335," *The Classical Journal*. 94.1 (1998): 35-36.

5. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 209-10.

6. Mader "Quod Nolunt Velint," 36, fn. 13, notes the repetition in *Ira* 1.20.4; *Clem.* 1.12.3-4, 2.2.2. and related sentiments at *Ira* 2.11.4; *Clem.* 1.25.3; *HF* 353; *Phoen.* 654-659; *Oed.* 703-704; *Ag.* 72; *Oct.* 458.

7. Seneca, *Clem.*, 1.13.4-5.

Sincere praise is not important to Atreus. He argues that “sincere praise often comes even to the lowly man; false praise comes only to the mighty (*laus vera et humili saepe contingit viro, non nisi potenti falsa*).”⁸ Using the exact same logic Seneca argues that an act of clemency establishes and enforces power. Seneca sees that “one may take life even of a superior, but not give it ever except to an inferior (*vita enim etiam superiori eripitur, numquam nisi inferiori datur*).”⁹ This contradiction shows the heart of Atreus’ political ideology: true power is not achieved by establishing good will with the subjects, for this would be contingent and imply responsibility. Power can only be achieved when his subjects bend their wills to his. Atreus sees that there is no way to tell whether his subjects are acting according to his own will or their own volition, if both parties want the same thing. The only way to truly enforce power is to force the subjects to want that which they would not choose. As Mader puts it, “power ... is the tyrant’s capacity to enforce his will upon his victims, thereby destroying their psychological autonomy and integrity.”¹⁰ Atreus’ subjects “must want what they do not want! (*quod nolunt velint*).”¹¹

It is no secret that this is completely contradicts Seneca’s arguments in the *De Clementia*, where he says that being loved as a ruler results in a better and more stable power than being hated does. The heart of Seneca’s arguments about the value of virtue as a ruler stem from seeing the ruler and their subjects in a harmonious symbiosis. He uses the image of the mind and the body to describe this relationship as well as that of the father and the son.¹² In both cases it is the reciprocal concern that shows how established the power structure is.¹³ Besides the value of virtue for its own sake, Seneca shows the *utilis communio* of employing *clementia*. Clemency results in the subjects’ goodwill towards their ruler, especially in the case of the person specifically receiving the clemency, but this also diffuses to the general populace through *bona fama*. This goodwill translates into personal security for the ruler.¹⁴ With a clement ruler, the people risk their individual lives in war in order

8. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 211-12.

9. Seneca, *Clem.*, 1.5.6.

10. Mader, “Quod Nolunt Velint,” 37.

11. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 212.

12. Seneca, *Clem.* 1.3.5, 1.5.1; 1.14.1-3, 1.15.3.

13. *ibid.*, 1.3.3-4, 1.4.1-3, 1.13.4-5, 1.19.6-8.

14. *ibid.*, 1.8.6-7, 1.10.2, 1.11.4.

to protect their king and country. They know it will result in safety as long as they are successful.¹⁵ Thus, *clementia* is as expedient as it is moral.¹⁶ Seneca cannot enforce any action on Nero. In place of this he must hint at the dangers of neglecting his interest in security.¹⁷

As the scene with the *satelles* evinces, Atreus' tyrannical calculations allow for none of this Stoic logic. Indeed he inverts these claims. The *satelles* can only counter this by saying that Atreus will achieve only an unstable power, that rule is unstable where there is no *pudor, cura, iuris, sanctitas, pietas, and fides*.¹⁸ But Atreus sees these as private values that hinder rather than harness his own freedom.¹⁹ As Mader puts it, "the affirmation of arbitrary power which emblemizes the tyrant exactly inverts the ideals of restraint and consensus in *De Clementia*."²⁰ The dramatic action of this scene and the play as a whole shows just how inadequate the *satelles'* arguments are at changing Atreus' actions and just how powerful Atreus is. The *satelles* goes from advising the typically Senecian-Stoic course of action to becoming "effectively an accomplice in the elaboration of Atreus' revenge plot" throughout the course of the scene.²¹

The greatest proof of the tyrant's power in this scene comes in the form of the *satelles'* last words. He tells Atreus that he will keep their plot secret without any warning, saying, "I need no warning. Loyalty and fear will hide it in my heart—but chiefly loyalty (*haud sum monendus: ista nostro in pectore / fides timorque, sed magis fides*)."²² Schiesaro sees this as evincing Atreus' power, insofar as his "power consists in replacing psychological and moral truth with factual superiority, which forces a reliable consent: the *satelles* final words provide direct proof of the fact that *fides* can indeed be attained not by proposing *honestas*, but by creating a system whereby superior power cannot be resisted."²³ But this *fides* is clearly only simulated. The *satelles'* final words must be understood in relation to the previous discussion, in which Atreus

15. *ibid.*, 1.3.4, 1.4.1.

16. *ibid.*, 1.8.6.

17. *ibid.*, 1.8.6-7, 1.19.5-6, 1.25.2-5, 1.26.1-2

18. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 215-16.

19. Seneca pretends to hear this objection himself in *Clem*. He notes that sovereignty is in fact a "noble slavery *nobilem servitutem*" (*Clem*. 1.8.1).

20. Mader, "Quod Nolunt Velint," 39.

21. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*, 155.

22. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 334-35.

23. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*, 158.

exposes how little the *fides* of his subjects means to him, since their *timor* is most important. Speaking of his *timor* is merely a slip into truth, which the *satelles* needs to rectify quickly. It is clear that the *satelles* adds '*sed magis fides*' as a simulated *vox* rather than a sincere expression of his *animus*. Thus, Atreus gets exactly what he desires; he bends the *satelles*' will to his own. The *satelles*' display of acquiescence enforces the triumph of Atreus' political ideology.

The way in which Atreus successfully imposes his will upon all the other characters of the play seems to confirm that he does indeed have the power he seeks. He is, after all, completely successful in taking revenge on Thyestes. On account of Atreus' success and the failure of all the other characters in the play, Alessandro Schiesaro argues that this play does not promote the tenants of Stoic philosophy, but rather displays "a dramatized contrast between two different conceptions of power, a losing and a winning one."²⁴ He argues that it does not matter which character has a higher moral stance; instead, it is their rhetorical ability to persuade, both on stage and in the palace that makes them powerful. The arguments, which the *satelles* borrows from Seneca himself, are a mere "fiction of half-hearted resistance," and thus "Atreus embodies a view of power which in practice, if not in theory, is truly in keeping with the reality of Roman imperial rule."²⁵

This functions within Schiesaro's overall verdict that there is no philosophical coherence present throughout Seneca's cross-genre corpus. In his introduction, he advises that we would do well,

to relinquish the desire to reunite the whole Senecan corpus under the reassuring, conclusive sign of Stoic orthodoxy, or even only of Stoicizing morality. We must give up the illusion of a 'Seneca morale', who structures his literary production along the constant axis of philosophical doctrine, and welcome in its stead the nuanced image of an author who is at times enigmatic, often contradictory and always challenging.²⁶

Schiesaro can argue that Seneca's *Thyestes* presents a favourable view of tyranny through the character of Atreus. Later in

24. *ibid.*, 163.

25. *ibid.*

26. *ibid.*, 6-7.

the work he says that Atreus, "as the ultimate *superbus*, will be far from destroyed at the end of the tragedy."²⁷ I argue, however, that although Thyestes does not destroy Atreus, Tantalus' infection destroys any freedom Atreus could have.

Richard Tarrant, on the other hand, writes an article, which attempts to consider the possible coherence in Seneca's works, but he ends up merely locating some major themes that Seneca repeats without making a conclusive argument one way or another. He does note the frequency with which Seneca deals with tyrants and the *oderint dum metuant* dictum (14-15).²⁸ In the following section of this essay I will oppose this claim to show how the *Thyestes* can be read as reinforcing rather than contradicting the ideas about the virtue of clemency that Seneca puts forth in *De Clementia*.

Atreus' Powerlessness

Atreus may be powerful in relation to his subjects but he is powerless in regards to his inner freedom. He is trapped by the curse of his grandfather, Tantalus. Both brothers suffer from the insatiable and ever growing desire, the passion of anger that the shade of Tantalus and the Fury introduce at the opening of the play. Atreus fosters a desire for revenge that grows within him. Even after committing the most unthinkable acts of bloody vengeance, Atreus is not satisfied. The only satisfaction he acquires is contingent upon Thyestes' misery, but the ending of the play shows that this inflicted misery only feeds the retributive cycle of hunger for revenge. The result of this insatiable passion is a sky devoid of divinity. Atreus' hunger leads him to surpass his human station and act as a god, but he cannot save himself. There is no Zeus to send distributive *dike* in order to rectify and soothe the mortals' passions. The only thing that could save Atreus and Thyestes from this *miasma* would be an act of clemency. The power of the virtue of clemency is apparent in the disaster created by its absence. This is shown in the way that Thyestes acts when he believes that Atreus has been clement towards him. Thus, the power of clemency as that which is truly freeing, that which leads

27. *ibid.*, 169.

28. Fitch (2002, 25) sees a coherence in the tone of both the tragedies and philosophical works but does not further this consideration: "Despite the overt optimism of the philosophical works, their emphasis on the extremes of experience, on adversity, torture, violent death, gives them at times a darkness of timbre comparable to the tragedies."

to the true reward of stable power, is implicit in the *Thyestes*.

Starting from the prologue Seneca shows how Atreus' insatiable desire for revenge derives from his father, Tantalus. Tantalus, whose punishment in the underworld is suitably to "catch at vanishing food with his avid mouth," is sent to the upper world like a plague of foul contagion.²⁹ The image of a plague captures how this anger is not confined to one member of the family but spreads to all.³⁰ The Fury's instruction to "fill the whole house with Tantalus (*impele Tantalos totam domum*)" makes explicit how Tantalus fills Atreus and Thyestes with the insatiable desire that they feel.³¹ Tantalus' own never ending punishment is fed by being the impetuous to Atreus' horrendous deeds. This punishment is worse "than thirst parched amidst water, worse than hunger / that gapes forever."³² Ironically Tantalus bemoans the fact that he will fill up (*complebo*) that which admits to no limits, "any space unused in the quarter of unnatural crimes."³³

The interaction between Tantalus and the Fury is a dramatization of the psychological motivations of insatiable desire and anger. The Fury, an eponymous cause herself, impels Tantalus to "goad this unnatural house into vengeful rage."³⁴ Just as Seneca argues in the *De Ira*, the Fury emphasizes the limitless quality of anger. She says,

Let there be no limit to anger, no shame in it ... Let there be no space for anyone to loathe an old offence: let new ones always arise, and many within one, and while crime is being punished, let it grow.

*nec vacet cuiquam vetus
odisse crimen: semper oriatur novum,
nec unum in uno, dumque punitur scelus,
crescat.*³⁵

This anger is not only ever growing, but it is also halted by no shame.³⁶

29. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 2; 88-89.

30. See Seneca, *De Ira*, in *Moral and Political Essays*, eds. John M. Cooper, and J.F. Procopé, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.2.1.

31. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 53.

32. *ibid.*, 5-6.

33. *ibid.*, 20-22.

34. *ibid.*, 24.

35. *ibid.*, 29-32.

36. *ibid.*, 39.

Both Atreus and Thyestes are overcome by the passion of anger.

In his three-book treatment of anger, *De Ira*, Seneca discusses the causes of anger, the reasons why it is opposed to Stoic virtue, and how to get rid of anger in oneself and in others. Seneca describes anger as a kind of brief *insaniam*; it is the worst passion since it is wholly opposed to Stoic sensibility. It is a hideous and frenzied emotion, which is especially to be guarded against on account of the way that it causes decisions to be made rashly rather than on the basis of calm reasoning. Seneca sees it as a form of madness that is,

just as void of self-control [as insanity is], forgetful of decency, unmindful of ties, persistent and diligent in whatever it begins, closed to reason and counsel, excited by trifling cause, unfit to discern the right and the true—the very counterpart of a ruin that is shattered in pieces where it overwhelms.

*aeque enim impotens sui est, decoris oblita, necessitudinum immemor, in quod coepit pertinax et intenta, rationi consiliisque praeclusa, vanis agitata causis, ad dispectum aequi verique inhabilis, ruinis simillima, quae super id quod oppressere franguntur.*³⁷

Thus Seneca sees that anger is bad both on account of the pain that one feels when angry and the way that anger effects decision-making and actions. He argues that “no plague has cost the human race more (*nulla pestis humano generi pluris stetit*).³⁸

Following Aristotle’s definition,³⁹ anger is simultaneously a desire and a pain. The pain is felt at an injustice committed against one and the desire is felt towards retribution for this injustice.⁴⁰ Atreus is thus archetypal *exemplum* of anger. Seneca could be describing the cause of the miasma in the ruling family of Argos, when he says that,

37. Seneca, *De Ira*, 1.1.2.

38. *ibid.*, 1.2.1.

39. Aristotle’s definition is: “a desire, accompanied by pain, for what appears to one to be a punishment for what appears to one to be belittlement by people for whom it was not proper to belittle oneself or someone close to one,” *Rhetoric*, eds. W. R. Roberts, Ingram Bywater, and Friedrich Solmsen, (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 2.2.1378a.

40. Seneca, *De Ira*, 1.2.3.

anger changes all things from their best and justest condition into the opposite. Whoever falls into its power, forgets all obligation. Allow it, and a father turns into an enemy, a son into a parricide, a mother into a stepmother, a citizen into an enemy, a king into a tyrant.⁴¹

Seneca's attempt to prove the completely negative character of anger must overcome the argument that anger functions as a motivation to virtuous action. Seneca notes how Aristotle connects the desire for justice with anger. Seneca's response is that the virtuous actions, which are motivated by anger, should also be able to be motivated by reason alone. If actions are committed by anger but without reason, then they cannot be virtuous actions. At best, anger acts as a crutch towards virtuous actions. The more likely case, however, is that anger fuels the flames of desire and pain, clouds judgment and causes the kind of exponential increase in revenge that we find in the *Thyestes*. Seneca sees that "anger ... is greedy for punishment (*ira ... avida poenae est*)."⁴² This avarice takes a firm hold of Atreus.

Added to the way in which Atreus enacts an *exemplum* for the insatiable passion of anger, there is a specific analogy between Gaius, whom Seneca consistently uses as the *exemplum par excellance* for sadistic villainy, and Atreus in *De Ira*.⁴³ The tyrant Gaius condemns a man's son to execution and invites the father to dine on the same day. Just like Atreus, this tyrant derives greater satisfaction from inflicting mental torture than bloodshed. In particular, Gaius posts a guard to scrutinize the guest's behavior in order to take pleasure in his reaction.⁴⁴ Atreus also expects to delight at observing Thyestes' reactions when he reveals that he has eaten his own children. He says, "this is the fruit of my work: I do not want to see him broken, but to see him being broken (*fructus hic operis mei est. / miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser*)."⁴⁵ In the third book of *De Ira* Seneca relates a similar incident involving Harpagus and the Persian

41. This is a passage from Martin of Braga (sixth century), *On Anger II*, which scholars believe to be a lost quotation from Seneca's *De Ira*. See John M. Cooper and J. F. Procope, eds., *Moral and Political Essays*, p. 19, fn. 7.

42. Seneca, *De Ira*, 1.5.3.

43. *ibid.*, 2.33.

44. *ibid.*, 2.33.4.

45. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 905-6.

king, who is another frequent emblem of tyrannical cruelty.⁴⁶

It is clear from a consideration of *De Ira* and *De Clementia* in relation to the *Thyestes* that Atreus' anger functions in the play in the same way that it would in the treatises. It is as an *exemplum* of what not to do. But why not? Atreus seems to be a successful and powerful ruler. Atreus is only successful at miserably inflicting revenge on Thyestes and controlling the wills of his subjects, but he is not successful at freeing himself from his Tantalian desires. Even after committing the most horrendous of crimes he is not satisfied. A persistent *maius*-motif,⁴⁷ which lies at the core of Atreus' programmatic statements, displays his excessive tendencies. He uses *maius* at least three times: *maiore monstro, nescioquid ... maius*, and *maius hoc aliquid dolor / inveniat*.⁴⁸ The Fury introduces this motif of excess in the prologue when she says, "Let the Tracian outrage be performed with larger numbers! (*thracium fiat nefas / maiore numero*)."⁴⁹ This excess is also seen in the way that Atreus' schemes of revenge intensify.

The messenger also emphasizes the infinite progression of crime and the way that enacting it does not satiate Atreus in his discussion with the Chorus. The messenger compares Atreus to an Armenian lion who slaughters a herd: "though his jaws are / bloodsoaked and his hunger checked he does not abandon / his anger, but attacks the bulls ... just so Atreus rages, swollen with anger (*cruore rictus madidus et pulsa fame / non ponit iras: hinc et hinc tauros premens / ... non aliter Atreus saevit atque ira tumet*)."⁵⁰ Atreus' desire for justice should be fulfilled by even half of the actions that he attempts against Thyestes. However, his insatiable anger does not allow for cessation. The messenger shows this in response the Chorus' question as to whether nature has room for any greater atrocity than Atreus' act of sacrificing his own nephews, when he says, "You think this is the endpoint of crime?

46. Seneca, *De Ira*, 3.15.1-2. Tarrant notes these convergences but offers no insight into the reason for this repetition. R.J. Tarrant, ed., *Seneca's Thyestes*, Textbook Series (American Philological Association) No. 11, (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1985): 15.

47. A term introduced by B. Seidensticker, "Maius solito: Senecas Thyestes und die tragoedia rhetorica," *Antike und Abendland* 31 (1985): 116-36, and reused by Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*, 143.

48. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 254, 267, 274-75.

49. *ibid.*, 56-57, emphasis added.

50. *ibid.*, 732-37.

It is just a step! (*sceleris hunc finem putas? / gradus est*).⁵¹ The way that Atreus continually makes up his mind and then changes it in order to scheme up some worse crime also reflects this progression.

In the fifth act Atreus believes he has even overcome the gods by his actions and he finally remarks that slaughtering Thyestes' children is sufficient. By slaying the children he is now secure in his throne. Thus, he has "reached the pinnacle of [his] prayers (*summa votorum attig[it]*)," and can say, "this is good, this is ample, this is enough now, even for me (*bene est, abunde est. iam sat est etiam mihi*)."⁵² But as soon as the line ends he asks, "but why should it be enough? (*sed cur satis sit?*)."⁵³ Although he recognizes that this is a just form of retribution, Atreus' satisfaction lasts no longer than the blink of an eye. This extremely brief satisfaction comes after slaughtering the children. Atreus can rest here only for a moment before continuing on to feed the children to Thyestes, an even greater crime.

Atreus' anger comes to light as even more insatiable when he is not satisfied after he has fed Thyestes his sons and informed him of this. In response to the revelations Thyestes exclaims incredulously, "there is some limit to crime! (*sceleris est aliquis modus!*)."⁵³ For Atreus, however "crime is owed some limit when you commit crime, not when you repay it (*sceleri modus debetur ubi facias scelus, / non ubi reponas*)."⁵⁴ Atreus means as a justification for his horrendous act of punishment, but it can also be seen in the greater cyclical nature of vengeful justice. But Atreus does not wait for the crime to be repaid with interest again to consider even greater crimes. He is not even satisfied with this atrocious act. He says,

Even this is too little for me. Straight from the wound should I have poured the hot blood into your mouth, so you could drink the lifeblood while they lived. I have cheated my anger in haste. I dealt wounds pressing the blade home, I slaughtered at the altar, I propitiated the hearth with votive killing, I chopped the lifeless bodies, pulled the flesh into small pieces. ... all this a father could have done better. My anger was to no avail. He didn't know and they didn't know.

51. *ibid.*, 746-47.

52. *ibid.*, 885-891.

53. *ibid.*, 1048.

54. *ibid.*, 1049-51.

*hoc quoque exiguum est mihi.
 ex vulnere ipso sanguinem calidum in tua
 defundere ora debui, ut viventium
 biberes cruorem — verba sunt irae data
 dum propero, ferro vulnera impresso dedi,
 cecidi ad aras, caede votiva focos
 placavi et artus, corpora exanima amputans,
 in parva carpsi frustra et haec ferventibus
 demersi aenis, illa lentis ignibus
 stillare iussi; membra nervosque abscidi
 viventibus, gracilique traiectas veru
 mugire fibras vidi et aggressi manu
 mea ipse flammis — omnia haec melius pater
 fecisse potuit, cecidit in cassum dolor:
 scidit ore natos impio, sed nesciens,
 sed nescientes.⁵⁵*

Even after feeding the children to their father Atreus is still insatiable and believes that he has cheated his own anger because of the haste that his anger prompted. This shows just how trapped Atreus is by his appetite. Atreus wants Thyestes to be so utterly powerless that he would act opposite to his deepest convictions. Atreus cannot be satisfied unless the father drinks the living blood of his own children, consciously murdering them himself, and acting thoroughly in contradiction with his own will and thus losing any remaining shred of autonomy.

The only way that Atreus does experience some relief from his incessant anger and desire for revenge is through witnessing Thyestes' suffering. After Thyestes delivers a lengthy and miserable soliloquy. Atreus says,

Now I commend my hands, now the true palm is won.
 My crime would have been wasted if you did not feel
 pain like this. Now I believe that the children are mine,
 and that my bed is faithful and chaste once more.

*Nunc meas laudo manus,
 nunc parta vera est palma, perdideram scelus,
 nisi sic doleres. liberos nasci mihi*

55. *Ibid.*, 1052-1068.

*nunc credo, castis nunc fidem reddi toris.*⁵⁶

If this is true satisfaction—from Atreus' track record this seems unlikely—it is not one that frees him. Indeed this satisfaction is wholly contingent upon another's passions. Atreus has shown how successful he can be at controlling the actions and the false praise of his citizens, but controlling another's passions is not a very stable form of power. He may be able to temporarily inflict this kind of pain on Thyestes, but this results in a lose-lose situation for Atreus. If Thyestes holds this passion of misery and anger, he will join the cycle and take revenge on Atreus. If he can free himself from it, Atreus loses his satisfaction.

The ending of the play and the mythological background for it make Thyestes' ability to forgive and forget seem quite unlikely. Thus the anger and desire that Tantalus instills grows beyond Atreus and envelopes the whole family. In the prologue the Fury goads Tantalus to affect not only Atreus, but both brothers, saying, "let them compete in crime of every kind, and take turns to unsheathe the sword (*certetur omni scelere et alterna vice / stringatur ensis*)."⁵⁷ Schiesaro sees that the theme of revenge "underlines the circular repetitive nature of the conflict between brothers;" the action of the play is "merely another round in an endless cycle of Aeschylean revenge and counter revenge" (141).⁵⁸ At one point the chorus also blames both brothers for the endless cycle of violence; they are only taking turns.⁵⁹ The chorus asks, "What rage drives you to shed each other's blood, to seize the throne through crime? (*quis vos exagitat furor, / alternis dare sanguinem / et sceptrum scelere aggredi?*)."⁶⁰

Schiesaro argues that this endless cycle means that either brother could and would have committed the horrendous crime. He sees that "the role of the brothers is in a sense ... interchangeable, that – had it been his turn Thyestes' revenge could have been every bit as gory as the one that Atreus happens to be plotting; that – finally – their different roles in the tragedy are predicated on a specific series of actions and counteractions, but not on an essential moral difference."⁶¹ This is

56. *ibid.*, 1096-99.

57. *ibid.*, 26.

58. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*, 141.

59. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 340.

60. *ibid.*, 339-41.

61. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*, 140.

indeed how Atreus describes Thyestes,⁶² but is he surely not the most reliable character witness. There is something about the way that Seneca portrays Thyestes' character that does not allow for this interpretation. Thyestes is certainly cursed by the same bloodline as Atreus. He feels the same pull of desire, which is why he indulges in the feast with Atreus.⁶³ He is, however, reluctant to return and reluctant to take rule alongside Atreus because he has learned the cost of having everything from the experience of losing everything.

The main difference between Atreus and Thyestes is the way that Thyestes acts when he believes that Atreus has been clement to him. This also proves the power of clemency as the sole source of salvation in the face of tyrannical anger. Atreus deceives Thyestes by pretending to forgive him. Thyestes takes this as a serious act of clemency and immediately confesses to his brother. The *pietas* that Atreus shows makes Thyestes' case indefensible.⁶⁴ Moreover, Thyestes humbles himself in front of Atreus, pleading to him with tears (*lacrimis agendum est*) and tells him, "you are the first to see me supplicate (*supplicem primus vides*)."⁶⁵ He then begs Atreus, "let passion be erased and gone (*ponatur omnis ira et ex animo tumor / erasus abeat*),"⁶⁶ and he gives to Atreus that which he so desperately wants to take, his *innocentes*, "as hostages of [his] good faith (*obsides fidei*)."⁶⁷ Clemency turns the proud Thyestes into a supplicant for the very first time, and thus affects a cessation of *ira*. In this case it is only a false reprieve because it is a false clemency. This moment provides a glimpse into the possible future where Atreus and Thyestes could live as brothers free from the curse of rage.

The importance of the virtue of clemency is thus shown by its absence in the *Thyestes*. Atreus and Thyestes could only find freedom from the cyclical insatiable anger through an act of clemency. In the second book of *De Clementia*, Seneca defines clemency as "restraint

62. After revealing his crime to Thyestes, Atreus tells Thyestes that he knows Thyestes is only hurt because he was not the one to arrange the feast, that he was not as quick on the draw. Seneca, *Thyestes*, 1104-1110.

63. Atreus delights at this indulgence and tells the audience: "He is lying on purple and gold, sprawling backwards, propping his wine-heavy head on his left hand. He belches! Oh I am the highest of heavenly gods, and king of kings! I have surpassed my own prayers. He is stuffed, he imbibes pure wine from a silver cup." *ibid.*, 909-913.

64. *ibid.*, 513-15.

65. *ibid.*, 517.

66. *ibid.*, 519-20.

67. *ibid.*, 512.

of mind when it is able to take revenge (*clementia est temperantia animi in potestate ulciscendi potest*),” then as “the leniency of the more powerful party towards the weaker in the matter of setting penalties (*lenitas superioris adversus inferiorem in constituendis poenis*),” and finally, “a tendency of mind in leniency in the matters of exacting punishment (*inclinatio animi ad lenitatem in poena exigenda*).”⁶⁸ Defined negatively it is opposite to cruelty which is inhuman and incredible, ‘cruelty is the tendency of the mind towards excessive harshness (*crudelitas inclinatio animi ad asperiora*).’⁶⁹ Seneca thus shows how exercising this virtue leads to the most humane life.

Clementia results in peace throughout the kingdom, but more importantly it causes peace within the ruler. It can make “any house it enters happy and calm. But in a palace (which is all the more rare) it will make it more amazing (*clementia, in quamcumque domum pervenerit, eam felicem tranquillamque praestabit, sed in regia, quo rarior, eo mirabilior*).”⁷⁰ In the *De Clementia* Seneca basically describes how the *Thyestes* could be inverted from a tragedy to a comedy through the act of clemency. He describes how marvelous a king would be whose “anger meets no obstacle (*irae nihil obstat*),” but who is able to act rationally rather than being motivated by his passions.⁷¹ Anger is not fitting for the king because it lowers him to the level of his subjects.⁷²

For Seneca preserving life is the duty, the *proprium* of a king. It is most exalted when it matches the gods and this can only happen through an act of mercy.⁷³ The action of mercy exalts the ruler not only because it places the subject in the ruler’s debt, but also because it frees the ruler from the passion of rage that drives him to insanity. Seneca notices the continuous nature to the retributive cycle in the way that it persists through future revenge, but also how it persists and grows within the cruel man. This is why Seneca advises the ruler against cultivating fear because of hatred, without realizing “the intensity of the frenzy that arises when hatred grows beyond

68. Seneca, *Clem.*, 2.3.1.

69. *ibid.*, 2.4.3.

70. *ibid.*, 1.5.4.

71. *ibid.*

72. Seneca writes, “savage, implacable anger does not suit a king, because he does not maintain much superiority over the person with whom he levels himself by getting anger (*non decet regem saeva nec inexorabilis ira, non multum enim supra eum eminet, cui se irascendo exaequat*),” *ibid.*, 1.5.6.

73. *ibid.*, 1.5.7, 1.7.1-2

limits (*quanta rabies oriatur, ubi supra modum odia creverunt*).⁷⁴ This is,

the very worst aspect of cruelty – that you have to persist with it. No way back to better things is open. Crimes have to be safeguarded with more crimes. And is there anything more unhappy than a person who finds evil inescapable?

*Hoc enim inter cetera vel pessimum habet crudelitas, perseverandum est nec ad meliora patet regressus; scelera enim sceleribus tuenda sunt. Quid autem eo infelicius, cui iam esse malo necesse est?*⁷⁵

On the one hand, cruelty enslaves the man who suffers from it and causes self-hatred.⁷⁶ On the other hand, clemency results in true happiness, *felicitas*, which “is power on the divine level (*haec divina potentia est*).”⁷⁷

If we apply Seneca’s philosophical ideas about *clementia* and *ira* to his tragedy, *Thyestes*, we find a dramatic support of Seneca’s philosophical ideas, rather than a conflicting portrayal of the power of tyranny. The *satelles* adopts Seneca’s ideas but is unable to withstand Atreus’ power. Thus, the *Thyestes* does not negate the power of Stoic philosophy or prove that there is no coherence to Seneca’s thought across his multi-genre corpus. Although Atreus does present a contrasting view to Seneca’s, his power is shown to be limited insofar as it is incapable of freeing himself from the constraints of insatiable desire. Tantalus and the Fury infect the house with desire and wrath. These forces are responsible for the ever-growing anger and need for ever-greater revenge within Atreus and the resulting cyclical pattern of revenge within his family. The gods seem to be eclipsed in this play, and Seneca shows this through the use of a literal eclipse of the sun. Atreus’ impious sacrifice places him in a double role; he sacrifices to himself and is thus the priest and the god. The absence of the gods means that there can be no god-given judgment and justice. There can be no *deus ex machina* to establish an Athenian law-court, in the way that Aeschylus solves

74. *ibid.*, 1.12.4.

75. *ibid.*, 1.13.2.

76. *ibid.*, 1.13.3.

77. *ibid.*, 1.26.5.

a similar problem of cyclical retributive revenge in the *Orestia*. For Seneca, *clementia* is the only virtue that could replace this *dike*. Only *clementia* could soothe the wrath in the house of Tantalus and restore the familial bond. It is the highest virtue both because only those with the highest station are able to perform this act and because it mirrors the actions of the gods. Seneca argues for the power of *clementia* in its false presence and its absence in the *Thyestes*.