Reading Aeschylus through Seneca:
The “Tapestry Scene” in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Atreus’ Persuasion of His Brother in Seneca’s *Thyestes*

1. Sacrificial Imagery

*A*. Clytemnestra: The sheep are already standing, ready for slaughter, in front of the altar (1057). See also 1114-18, 1504, Zeitlin 1965.

ἕστηκεν ἡδη μῆλα πρὸς σφαγᾶς πάρος

*Th*. Messenger: He stands by the altar himself, himself handles and arranges those doomed to slaughter and readies them for the knife . . . (693-94). See also 93-95, 544-45, 682-95, Boyle 2017, 335.

stat ipse ad aras, ipse deutos neci
contractat et componit et ferro admuet

2. Inner Palace

*A*. Clytemnestra: . . . in the very centre of the palace (1056).

ἔστιας μεσομφύλου

*Th*. Messenger: At the farthest and lowest remove there lies a secret area that confines and age-old woodland in a deep vale – the inner sanctum of the realm (650-52).

arcana in imo regio secessu iacet,
alta uetustum ualle compescens nemus,
penetrale regni

3. Public Opinion

*A*. Agamemnon: All the same, the buzz of popular talk is something very powerful. (938) See also 456-60, 793-98, 1400-14, Sommerstein, 90-91 n. 162.

φήμη γε μέντοι δημόθρους μέγα σθένει.

*Th*. Satellus: You have no fear of hostile talk among the people? (204-05). See also 204-18.

Fama te populi nihil
aduersa terret?
4. Danger of Power

_Ag._ But Justice shines out on _smoky hovels_, and honours the righteous man: gold-spangled abodes where hands are not clean she quits with eyes averted, and goes to pious ones, not revering with praises the might of wealth if it is counterfeit. (773-81)

Δίκα δὲ λάμπει μὲν ἐν ἀτμοσφαιρίῳ ὑπομαστὶν,
τὸν δὲ ἐν αἰσθήματι τίμει βοῶν.
τὰ χρυσόπαστα δ᾽ ἔδεθλα σὺν
πίνῳ χερῶν παλιντρόπους ὑπομαστὶν λεπτὸν ἔδεθλα σὺν
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_Th._ Thyestes: While I stood on high, I never ceased to feel terror, or to fear the very sword at my side. Oh, what a blessing it is to stand in no one’s way, to take carefree meals lying on the ground! Crimes do not enter _huts_, and one takes a cup safely at a _humble table_; poison is drunk in gold (447-53). See also 446-70.

_Dum excelsus steti,
numquam pauere destiti atque ipsum mei
ferrum timere lateris. O quantum bonum est
obstare nulli, capere securas dapes
humi iacentem! scelera non intrant casas,
tutusque mensa capitur angusta cibus;
uenenum in auro bibitur

5. Animal Imagery

_Ag._ Cassandra: This is the two-footed _lioness_, sleeping with a wolf while the noble lion was away, who will kill me, wretched that I am (1258-60)
See also 1228, 1233, 1224.

αὕτη δίπους λέαινα συγκοιμωμένη
λίκωρ, λέοντος ἀγυγοῦ ἀποστείρον, ὑπομαστὴν
κτενεῖ με τὴν τάλαιναν

_Th._ Messenger: As in the forests of Armenia a _maned lion_ falls victoriously on a herd amidst much slaughter (732-33).
See also 497-503, 707-13, 732-37

Silua iubatus qualis Armenia leo
in caede multa uictor armento incubat
6. Gender Bending

Ag. Watchman: For such is the ruling of a woman’s hopeful heart, which plans like man (10-11).
See also 348-49, 483-87, 1401-06, 1625-27, 1643-46, 1661.

ὤδε γάρ κρατεῖ
γυναικός ἄνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ.

Th. Messenger: As in the woods by the Ganges a hungry tigress wavers between two young bulls, craving each prey and uncertain where to sink her teeth first (707-10)

deiuna siluis qualis in Gangeticis
inter iuuencos tigris erruit duos,
utrisque praedae cupida quo primum ferat
incerta morsus

7. References to the Past

Ag. Cassandra: A house that hates the gods, one that has knowledge of many crimes in which kin have been slain and heads severed – a place where men are slaughtered and blood sprinkles the floor (1090-92).
See also 104-59, 184-247, 1095-97, 1219-22, 1242-45, 1476-77, 1497-1512, 1583-1603

μισόθεον μὲν οὖν, πολλὰ σονίστορα
αὐτόροφα κακά καρατόμα,
ἄνδροσφαγεῖον καὶ πεδορραντήριον.

Th. Atreus: Look to Tantalus and Pelops: my hands are to follow their examples. (242-43)
See also 18-20, 313-14, 336-41.

Tantalum et Pelopem aspice;
ad haec manus exempla poscuntur meae.

8. References to the Future

Ag. Chorus: [Calchas] For there awaits, to arise hereafter, a fearsome, guileful keeper of the house, a Wrath that remembers and will avenge a child (154-55).
See also 248-49, 1098-1135, 1178-97.

μίμνηται γὰρ φοβερὰ παλίνορτος
οἰκονόμος δολία μνάμων μὴν τεκνόποινος

Th. Fury: Let brother be afraid of brother, parent of son, son of father; let death come to children vilely, but birth more vilely; let husband be menaced by wife’s enmity; in this unnatural house let adultery be the lightest of misdeeds (40-42, 43a, 46b, 47, Fitch numbering). - See also 311.

fratrem expauescat frater et natum parens
natusque patrem, liberi pereant male,
peius tamen nascantur; immineat uiro
infesta coniunx, Impia stuprum in domo
leuissimum sit
9. Removal of Clothing/Accepting New Clothing

Ag. Agamemnon: Do not **strew my path with clothing** and thereby make it invidious (921-22). Agamemnon: Well, if that’s what you want, let someone quickly **take off my shoes** (944-45). See also 958-65, 1126-29, 1377-83, Griffith.

μηδὲ εἴμαισι στρώσας ἐπίφθονον πόρον
tίθει . . .  
ἀλλ᾽ εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦθ᾽, ὑπαί τις ἁρβύλας  
λύοι τάχος . . .

*Th.* Atreus: **Off with these filthy clothes** – have pity on our eyes – and **accept finery** equal to mine; prosper and take on a share of your brother’s power (524-27). - See also Tarrant 1985, 165, Boyle, 285

Squalidam uestem exue,  
oculisque nostris parce, et ornatus cape  
pares meis, laetusque fraterni imperi  
capesse partem.

10. Hunting and Net Imagery

Ag. Clytemnestra: I staked out around him an endless **net**, as one does for a fish – a wickedly opulent garment (1382-83). See also 1114-18, Vidal-Naquet.

ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον, ὡσπερ ἰχθύων,  
περιστιχίζω,

*Th.* Atreus: The beast is held fast in the **nets** I set out (491)  
See also 286-87, 497-78, Boyle, 273, 275

Plagis tenetur clausa dispositis fera

11. Thystes’ Conversation with Tantalus

a) Thystes: When you examine a gift, look at the giver too . . . Can you trust the most unreliable of things, a brother and throne? (416, 424-25).

cum quod datur spectabis, et dantem aspice . . .  
rebus incertissimis,  
fratri atque regno

b) Thystes: A throne has no room for two. (444)

Non capit regnum duos.

c) Dangers of Wealth and Power: 446-70
d) Thyestes: For myself I fear nothing now: you are the ones that make Atreus fearful to me (485-86).

Pro me nihil iam metuo: uos facitis mihi
Atrea timendum.

12. Atreus: The throne has room for two (534).

Recipit hoc regnum duos.

13. Ag. Chorus: And when he put on the yokestrap of necessity, his mental wind veering in a direction that was impious, impure, unholy, from that point he turned to a mindset that would stop at nothing; for men are emboldened by miserable Infatuation, whose shameful schemes are the beginning of their sufferings (218-23).

ἐπεὶ δ’ ἀνάγκας ἔδυ λέπαδνον
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν
ἀναγνον ἄνιερον, τόθεν
tὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν
βροτοὺς θρασύει γὰρ αἰσχρόμητις
tάλαινα παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων.

Th. Tantalus: Despite caution, you fear being deceived?
Thyestes: The time for caution is past in the midst of evil. Onward! But this one thing I affirm as your father: I am following you, not leading. (486-89).

Serum est cauendi tempus in mediis malis.
eatur. Vnum genitor hoc testor tamen:
ego uos sequor, non duco.

14. Ag. Agamemnon: No one wears the yoke of slavery willingly . . . Now since I have been subjugated (κατέστραμμα) into obeying you in this, I will go, treading on purpose to the hall of my house. (953-57)

ἐκὼν γὰρ οὐδὲις δουλίῳ χρῆται ζυγῷ . . .
ἐπεὶ δ’ ἀκούειν σοῦ κατέστραμμαι τάδε,
εἰμὶ ἐς δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν.

Select Bibliography

Lavery, J. 2004 “Some Aeschylean Influences on Seneca’s Agamemnon” MD 53: 183-94.