

**Reading Aeschylus through Seneca:**

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

1. Sacrificial Imagery

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

ἔστηκεν ἤδη μῆλα πρὸς σφαγὰς 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 deuotos neci  
contrectat et componit et ferro admouet

2. Inner Palace

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

ἐστίας μεσομφάλου

*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,  
penetrabile regni

3. Public Opinion

*Ag.* 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  
δυσκάπνοις δώμασιν,  
τὸν δ' ἐναίσιμον τίει βίον.  
τὰ χρυσόπαστα δ' ἔδεθλα σὺν  
πίνῳ χερῶν παλιντρόποις  
ὄμμασι λιποῦσ', ὅσια προσέμολ-  
ε, δύναμιν οὐ σέβουσα πλού-  
του παράσημον αἴνῳ:

*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  
λύκῳ, λέοντος εὐγενοῦς ἀπουσία,  
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.

ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ  
γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον 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)

ieiuna siluis qualis in Gangeticis  
inter iuuenos tigris errauit duos,  
utriusque 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

μισόθειον μὲν οὖν, πολλὰ συνίστορα  
αὐτόφωνα κακὰ καρατόμα,  
ἀνδροσφαγεῖον 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.

μίμνει γὰρ φοβερὰ παλίνορτος  
οἰκονόμος δολία μνάμων μῆνις τεκνόποιος

*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.

μηδ' εἵμασι στρώσασ' ἐπίφθονον πόρον  
τίθει . . .  
ἀλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦθ' , ὑπαί τις ἀρβύλας  
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, ὥσπερ 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. Thyestes' Conversation with Tantalus

a) Thyestes: 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) Thyestes: 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 ἔδου λέπαδνον  
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν  
ἄναγνον ἀνίερων, τόθεν  
τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνων.  
βροτοὺς θρασύνει γὰρ αἰσχρόμητις  
τάλαινα 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 (κατέστραμμαι) into obeying** you in this, I will go, treading on purpose to the hall of my house. (953-57)

ἐκῶν γὰρ οὐδεὶς δουλίῳ χρῆται ζυγῶ . . .  
ἐπεὶ δ' ἀκούειν σοῦ κατέστραμμαι τάδε,  
εἴμ' ἐς δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν.

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