

## Knaves and Fools in Senecan Drama

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—Knaves and Fools divide the world—  
(Proverb, 1659)

## 1

In a most interesting study, S. G. Farron proposes that Roman authors were the first to create literary characters who were purely and totally evil. Such characters, Farron argues, are unnatural, demonic; they display a monomaniacal drive to dominate and to destroy. Of necessity, such characters are simultaneously bestial or subhuman, awful and grandiose—being drawn, as they are, larger than life. Farron lists the primary examples of such evil characters:

- Sallust's Catiline
- Horace's Cleopatra (*Od.* 1. 37)
- Vergil's Mezentius
- Capaneus in Statius' *Thebaid*
- and the Atreus in Seneca's *Thyestes*.<sup>1</sup>

He introduces Seneca by noting that

Seneca's *Thyestes* presents what is probably the greatest possible manifestation both of a character's evilness and an author's fascination with it.<sup>2</sup>

And Farron adds, after considering the drama, that Atreus is the one character who displays "no other qualities but evil. . . . The *Thyestes* is purely a depiction of Evil overcoming Good."<sup>3</sup>

It could be argued, for instance, that perhaps Cleopatra or Mezentius, or even others in Farron's list, are not quite so monomaniacal, or "purely" evil.

<sup>1</sup> S. G. Farron, "The Roman Invention of Evil," *Studies in Antiquity* 1 (1979–1980) 13–46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

But certainly a good case can be made for Seneca's Atreus, one of the most frightening and malevolent tyrants to be found in world literature.

Although Atreus is assuredly the worst amongst a host of Senecan portraits of vengeful and evil *personae*, we must acknowledge that he is by no means alone. A number of other characters aspire to attain—however briefly—to his level of fury, vindictiveness, and malice. Pyrrhus, for example, the son of Achilles in the *Troades*, yearns for the power to generate and spread ruthless punishment and murderous reprisals among the defeated Trojans; in debate with Agamemnon, he is clearly merciless and insolent.<sup>4</sup> Clytaemestra in the *Agamemnon* is coarse and single-minded in her determination to murder her husband in cold blood; and elsewhere many a character “works himself up” to a level of fiendish savagery in the later phases of his drama: Theseus is goaded until he invokes potent curses, first upon Hippolytus; subsequently he prays to the spirits of Avernus for his own damnation (*Hippolytus* 903–58; 1201–43). Phaedra is driven to denounce deceitfully the one man she did love, so that he is returned a mangled and bloody corpse. Then, despairingly, but still rapt in a frenzy of unrequited love, she falls upon her sword (*Hippolytus*, esp. 1159–1200). Similarly, Oedipus at the close of his drama unleashes his passions and in a savage fury rushes to plunge out his eyes. Jocasta runs amok at the last moment and drives a sword into her own womb (*Oedipus* 1038–39). The *Nuntius* tells how Oedipus serves as his own judge, condemns himself and then howls and snorts and rages like a monster to inflict a ravenous blinding punishment upon himself:

qualis per arva Libycus insanit leo,  
fulvam minaci fronte concutiens iubam;  
vultus furore torvus atque oculi truces,  
gemitus et altum murmur, et gelidus fluit  
sudor per artus, spumat et volvit minas  
ac mersus alte magnus exundat dolor.  
secum ipse saevus grande nescio quid parat  
suisque fatis simile.

(*Oedipus* 919–26)

(As a Libyan lion rages through the fields, shaking his tawny mane with threatening brow, [so Oedipus], his face savage with madness and his eyes fierce, groans and roars deeply, and a cold sweat flows down his limbs; he froths at the mouth and pours out threats; his deeply submerged and enormous grief overflows; he himself, raging within, prepares for some enormous exploit equal to his fate).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Troades* 203–370. Throughout this study, in citations we refer to the edition of Ioannes Carolus Giardina, *L. Annaei Senecae, Tragoediae*, 2 vols. (Bologna 1966). Hereafter, the play and line numbers will be included, within parentheses, in the body of the text.

<sup>5</sup> All translations from the Latin are our own.

Subsequently, he rushes to exact a "payment" or vengeance upon himself for his supposed "debt":

. . . dixit atque ira furit:  
ardent minaces igne truculento genae  
oculique vix se sedibus retinent suis;  
violentus audax vultus, iratus ferox,  
. . . gemuit et dirum fremens  
manus in ora torsit.

(*Oedipus* 957-62)

(He spoke and rages with anger: his threatening cheeks are ablaze with ferocious fire, and his eyes scarcely hold themselves in their sockets; his face is bold, violent, wrathful, feral . . . He groaned and, roaring dreadfully, raked his hands across his face.)

And, similarly, Medea works herself up for the slaughtering of her sons; she passes into an almost delirious state:

. . . rursus increscit dolor  
et fervet odium, repetit invitam manum  
antiqua Erinys—ira, qua ducis, sequor.  
utinam superbae turba Tantalidos meo  
exisset utero bisque septenos parens  
natos tulissem!

(*Medea* 951-56)

(. . . my grief increases again and my hatred is seething; the old Fury seeks again my unwilling hand—wherever you lead me, wrath, I follow. Would that the throng of proud Niobe had issued from my womb, and that I, as mother, had borne twice seven sons!)

In all of these cases, the dominant *persona* finally rises to the bait of direst rashness, of passion, of frenzy, before precipitating the onset of an unique spate of devastation.<sup>6</sup> The only difference among them is that Atreus has been at mad fever-pitch throughout most of his play; he hardly needs to work himself into savagery; he has been there all along.

That is why he is virtually a paradoxical avatar of horrible grandeur. For Atreus is the apex of malevolent creativity—an irrational, raging villain, seething with anger, violence, and fury. Clearly he is the aggressive Malcontent type<sup>7</sup> in fullest bloom. And he is vividly made to portray the madness of the absolute tyrant, the lunatic guile and deceit of an Iago, the zeal and odium of a Barabas, the grizzly macabre lusts of a Bosola, the unnatural potency of a Tamburlaine;<sup>8</sup> he is a violator of his "oath" to his

<sup>6</sup> The seminal study surveying Seneca's plots, with their mad explosion of passion, remains C. J. Herington, "Senecan Tragedy," *Arion* 5 (1966) 422-71.

<sup>7</sup> We borrow the term from the title of John Marston's drama, "The Malcontent" (1604).

<sup>8</sup> Respectively, these characters appear in major Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas: William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604); Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (c. 1590); John Webster's

brother; a breaker of the laws of hospitality; a defiler of religion and a challenger of the gods. Ultimately he is a horrible instigator of cannibalism. He is a bold monster who never hesitates for a moment to boast of his dread successes—as if he were an omnipotent deity:

Aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super  
altum superbo vertice attingens polum, . . .  
(*Thyestes* 885–86)

(I walk equal to the stars and, rising above all, I touch high heaven with proud head.)

he gleefully intones, adding:

o me caelitem excelsissimum,  
regumque regem!  
(*Thyestes* 911–12)

(Oh, most lofty of the gods am I, and king of kings!)

Seneca's depiction of madness and vice is here supreme. The voracious Atreus himself toward the end appears content: "bene est, abunde est" (*Thyestes* 279), he at one point proclaims. And "quod sat est, videat pater" (*Thyestes* 895)—"It is enough, if the father [Thyestes] see" that he has been dining upon his own dismembered children. At last, when his revenge is fully accomplished, Atreus vaunts and swaggers as if he has won some grandiose Olympic victory:

Nunc meas laudo manus,  
nunc parva vera est palma.  
(*Thyestes* 1096–97)

(Now do I praise my hands, now is the true palm won.)

And Atreus's successes are truly Olympic and alarming, for he has committed every manner of crime and sin and sacrilege against both gods and men. Even the universe, as if appalled, has reacted by causing the sun unnaturally to cease its eternal course across the heavens; instead, it plunges backwards at midday, sinking in the East and immersing the planet in unholy and unaccustomed night. Nonetheless, even though the Chorus (and perhaps the audience as well) anticipate some final and tremendous heavenly retribution (*Thyestes* 776–884) against Atreus the King, no such punishment ever transpires. The fiend appears to have gotten away, scot-free.

Is he finally appeased?

*The Duchess of Malfi* (1614); and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587). Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1586) was one of the first Elizabethan tragedies to focus upon savagery and revenge; in it there are a number of insane, murderous, and suicidal figures.

bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi,  
(*Thyestes* 889)

(It is well, it is more than enough; now it is enough even for me.)

he declaims after he has accomplished all of his cruel deeds. Yet suddenly, he pauses and even partially reneges:

sed cur satis sit? pergam . . . .  
(*Thyestes* 890)

(But why should it be enough? I shall move onwards . . . .)

It is apparent that Atreus, the would-be demon-deity, seeks to sustain his wrath and to administer his punishments forever.<sup>9</sup> He feels an intrinsic urge to keep on the move—ever striving for a permanent yet continuous vengeance, some ultimate dark pleasure of blood-letting, an enduring ecstasy for his uninhibited vice.

Furthermore, what additionally exalts Atreus toward a horrible transcendence is his insistence upon electing rash and criminal proceedings that surmount cause and effect, that are free of reason. Primarily, he is concerned with his own dictatorial control—people are to be forced to tolerate, accept, and even praise whatever this lord and master chooses to accomplish.<sup>10</sup> What is more, Atreus is fixated upon performing some heinous crime that is a *ne plus ultra*: to have his deed be enormous, unusual—surpassing the deeds of all others.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, after all, what is the cause for his most bestial revenge? Atreus is none too clear about it. At one time in the past, Thyestes had maltreated him. But that was long ago. The present Thyestes is so changed and becalmed and penitent as almost to be an entirely different person. But Atreus remains unappeased: he suspects that Thyestes has had an illicit affair with his wife (*Thyestes* 220–23). There is scant evidence for such suspicion. Like Iago, Atreus will accept any supposed motive and utilize it as an occasion to wreak havoc; he will sacrifice his nephews at an unholy altar, dissect and roast them, thereafter serving them at a dreadful banquet to their father. One supposes—and the Elizabethans were apt to concur—that there could hardly be a more heavy dosage of evil than that!<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> There is an essential irony concerning many of these rabid murderers: they remain restless and unappeased, haunted by mad delusive dreams of grandeur. Phaedra is never satisfied, nor Medea, nor Clytaemestra, nor Oedipus, nor Atreus. And they remain naive as well, believing that they can "restore" some past balance by their viciousness; patently, they never can.

<sup>10</sup> Vid. Atreus' lines, 205–07. In his prose writings, Seneca is fascinated by a line from Accius' *Atreus*: "Oderint, dum metuant." He cites it in *De Ira* 1. 20. 4 and *De Clem.* 2. 2. 2; he discusses it further in *De Clem.* 1. 12. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> *Thyestes* 267, 255, 195–97.

<sup>12</sup> For our earlier study of this play, consult Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, "Seneca's *Thyestes* as Melodrama," *RSC* 26 (1978) 363–78. A modified version of this essay appears in Chapter IV of Motto and Clark's *Senecan Tragedy* (Amsterdam 1988).

To be sure, there are in Senecan theater characters of unabashed cruelty and evil. Most of the Senecan protagonists whom we have considered are by no means entirely evil throughout the course of their dramas, but they do tend, toward the close, to transform—through passion, rage, loss of sanity—into some species of unadulterated barbarian, oppressor, and tyrant. Atreus patently stands out amongst them all for the greater consistency of his savagery; after all, he is largely ravenous and infuriated all through the play. Farron is only partly right in asserting that Atreus commits crime gratuitously, without any motive. Rather, Atreus is driven by his own private conception of revenge. In addition, the “curse” of his family—wrought by the sins of Tantalus—further careen him toward greater and greater criminality and insatiability. He certainly is, overall, one of the great unregenerate villains in literature—a cruel Knave or Vice figure<sup>13</sup> who inaugurates powerful and shocking drama by his depravity and turpitude.

## II

Senecan theater is replete, not only with the knave and vicious character, but also with the fool. This latter is the figure of the weak or insecure *persona*, one fearful, outwitted, trembling, and given to vacillation and incertitude. He in fact plays precisely as important a role in the Senecan dramas as his counterpart, the aggressive malcontent and furious vice figure.

Needless to say, the fool, too, is hardly original with Seneca. In fact, only as the great mythic heroes (who never doubted or hesitated) begin to fall into abeyance and society passes from a shame to a guilt culture, do we begin to detect the rise of non-heroic men, the lonely, unsteady *persona*. E. R. Dodds has postulated that the dawning guilt-culture in the Archaic period in Greece (as in so many other cultures) introduced the “‘internalising’ of conscience”<sup>14</sup> and witnessed the “emergence of a true view of the individual as a person.”<sup>15</sup> Attempts were made to attribute justice to the gods and to continue support for the traditional patriarchal family. But the self was at odds with many of the customary codes and concepts still accepted by society at large. Hence, there was growing anxiety, the individual's sense of guilt; all of this leads to “the deepened awareness of human insecurity and human helplessness,”<sup>16</sup> “a new accent of despair, a new and bitter emphasis on the futility of human purposes”<sup>17</sup> that is in evidence even in the great tragic playwrights, Aeschylus and Sophocles.

<sup>13</sup> “Vice” characters are figures of evil in early English Morality Plays; they appear as “The Vices” or “The Seven Deadly Sins;” consult Lysander W. Cushman, *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature Before Shakespeare* (Halle 1900), and Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York 1958).

<sup>14</sup> E. R. Dodds, “From Shame-Culture to Guilt-Culture,” *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 37; see all of this second chapter, 28–63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

And indeed, wherever the cohesive, communal shame culture is displaced, and a guilt culture takes its place, the pressure upon the individual dramatically increases. He attempts to be self-assertive, self-reliant, replacing the mythic hero with himself, but, unlike the hero, he is far more insecure—because he must stand on his own, and because he is so dissimilar to the cult heroes of epic. Moreover, he is fraught with guilt feelings, wistful lamentation for a valiant and irrecoverable past, and cast down by a sense of isolation, ineptitude, and helplessness.

Bernard Knox particularly points to Euripides' *Medea*, a character constantly wavering in purpose and devoted to an incessant changing of her mind.

[Her] dramatic wavering back and forth between alternatives—four complete changes of purpose in less than twenty lines—marks the beginning of an entirely new style of dramatic presentation.<sup>18</sup>

Here is a clear foreshadowing of modern, restless, uneasy, indecisive figures—far removed from heroic positivism.

Moreover, one can think of similar types, the Creon of the Sophoclean *Antigone*, who is induced, under pressure, to change his orders and his mind, or recollect the Chorus of doddering and bureaucratic old men who falter and cannot determine what action to take when they hear the cries of Agamemnon from within, calling for help. Like many a modern legislature, this group cannot reach a consensus, and, in the meantime, the dead Agamemnon is beyond the need of any services they couldn't determine to render.<sup>19</sup> The debunking of the conventional hero is well served too by the Greek Satyr plays, by Aristophanic Old Comedy, and by some of the timid comic figures featured in Menandrian or New Comedy. Furthermore, one should consider the Jason depicted in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Here is a figure on an epic journey and adventure who appears more like an ordinary man, one who is charming but despondent, tactless, sentimental, and frequently paralyzed and helpless.

Another classic exemplar is Virgil's King Latinus. Henpecked by his strong-willed wife, Amata, and normally over-ruled by the vehemence and violence of Turnus, Latinus repeatedly abrogates his own governance and authority. At a crucial moment, when the citizenry raucously and heatedly favor war with Aeneas and the Trojans, Latinus simply gives up, and takes shelter:

. . . nec plura locutus

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Knox, "Second Thoughts in Greek Tragedy," *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore and London 1979) 240. Knox adds (p. 242), "In all of [Euripides'] plays which follow the *Hippolytus*, the instability of the world is paralleled by the instability of the human beings who live in it."

<sup>19</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1343–71.

saepsit se tectis rerumque reliquit habenas.<sup>20</sup>

(. . . Having said no more, he locked himself in his house and abandoned the reins of government.)

Later, when a truce is broken, *fugit ipse Latinus*.<sup>21</sup> Even when his wife commits suicide, he continues befuddled:

. . . it scissa veste Latinus,  
coniugis attonitus fatis urbisque ruina,  
canitiem immundo perfusam pulvere turpans.<sup>22</sup>

(Latinus goes, his garment rent assunder, astonished by his wife's destiny and his city's ruin, defiling his gray hairs with dust and dirt.)

He is a doddering, faulty monarch, who cannot sustain his purposes or uphold the standards of government. Dido too in the *Aeneid*, resembling the Euripidean Medea,<sup>23</sup> is strikingly weak and irresponsible. Once stricken by the flames of passion for Aeneas, she becomes indecisive,<sup>24</sup> and significantly allows the construction of Carthage and its fortifications to come to a halt:

non coeptae adsurgunt turres, non arma iuventus  
exercet portusve aut propugnacula bello  
tuta parant; pendent opera interrupta minaeque  
murorum ingentes aequataque machina caelo.<sup>25</sup>

(The towers that were begun do not rise, the youth does not practice its military exercises nor does it prepare safe harbors or bulwarks for war; the works and the huge battlements on the walls and the engine that stretches toward heaven hang interrupted.)

And Ovid is well known for his portrayals of unstable females: lonely, insecure women, capable of anger and aggression (*vid.* the Paedra, Medea, and Dido of the *Heroides*), the vengeful Procne,<sup>26</sup> and the confused and guilt-ridden women who are of two minds, like his incestuous Byblis<sup>27</sup> and Myrrha.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Aeneid* 7. 599–600.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. 285. On his vacillation, see esp. 12. 37: *quo referor totiens? quae mentem insania mutat?*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. 609–11.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Fantham reminds us of Seneca's debt to Virgil's Dido in his portrayal of Phaedra ("Virgil's Dido and Seneca's Tragic Heroines," *G&R* 22 [1975] 1–10). That Dido's literary ancestry can be traced to Euripides' Medea is well known.

<sup>24</sup> *Aeneid* 4. 74–79.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. 86–89.

<sup>26</sup> *Metam.* 6. 412–674.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. 454–665.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. 278–518. In a lighter vein, we should consider the comical businessman Alphaeus in Horace's *Ode* 1. 2; he lectures on the pristine virtues of the simple country life—and his rhetoric even converts himself! Hence, he decides to terminate all his business affairs; but in a trice he changes his mind: clearly he is a better banker than a philosopher.

Seneca crowds his stage with a host of such weak and debilitated characters, his dramas being heavily populated by fearful and trembling choruses, and characters agitated, uncertain, timorous, and tottering.

Unlike Euripides' cunning, crafty, rhetorical Jason, the Jason in Seneca's *Medea* is emotionless, mechanical, lacking in feeling, fearful.<sup>29</sup> He is a diffident opportunist who unfeelingly abandons wife and children for personal gain. He is the antithesis of the heroic Jason of the epic voyage of the Argonauts:

Alta extimesco scepra.  
(*Medea* 529)

(I tremble at lofty scepters.)

In short, he is weak, cowardly, and passive—a beaten man:

cedo defessus malis.  
(*Medea* 518)

(I surrender, worn out by misfortunes.)

In the Senecan *Agamemnon*, virtually all the major characters—Aegisthus, Clytaemestra, Thyestes, Agamemnon—are anti-heroic figures, prisoners of vice; they are hesitant, cowardly, ignorant, self-centered, insecure souls captured in their own tangled webs of deception.<sup>30</sup> They have succumbed to vice and folly. Aegisthus' very first appearance on the stage reveals a man beset by doubts and hesitations.

Quod tempus animo semper ac mente horrui  
adest profecto, rebus extremum meis.  
quid terga vertis, anime? quid primo impetu  
deponis arma?  
(*Agamemnon* 226–29)

(That time is at hand which I, to be sure, ever shuddered at in my soul and in my thought, the extremity of my affairs. Why do you turn your back, my soul? Why at the first attack do you lay aside your arms?)

Even at the climax of his revenge, when he and Clytaemestra are about to assassinate Agamemnon, he wavers:

haurit trementi semivir dextra latus,  
. . . : vulnere in medio stupet.  
(*Agamemnon* 890–91)

(With trembling right hand the half-man harries him on the side . . . : he is stupified in the midst of [delivering] the blow.)

<sup>29</sup> Vid. references to *timor* in *Medea* 433–38, 493–94, 516–19, 529.

<sup>30</sup> See especially Chapter VI of Motto and Clark's *Senecan Tragedy* on debilitation and *incertus* in the *Agamemnon*, pp. 163–214.

Clytaemestra, too, like her accomplice, is uncertain and insecure. Her opening soliloquy (lines 108–24) resembles Aegisthus' initial remarks in its display of her fluctuating state of mind:

Quid, segnīs anime, tuta consilia expetis?  
quid fluctuaris? . . .  
tecum ipsa nunc evolve femineos dolos . . . .

(*Agamemnon* 108–09, 116)

(Why, sluggish soul, do you seek safe plans? Why do you fluctuate? . . .  
now meditate a woman's deceptions . . .)

Her debate with the Nurse (lines 125–225) likewise indicates that her decisions are not wholly fixed, that she is subject to changes of opinion. Moreover, when Aegisthus appears, she proposes that they abandon the conspiracy against Agamemnon and terminate their own adulterous relationship (lines 234–309). But when Aegisthus, at the end of this *agon*, offers himself as a sacrifice, she again changes her mind and decides to perpetrate the crime against Agamemnon after all.

Even Agamemnon, the King and General, is a debilitated, nervous, anti-heroic character. He is perplexed by Cassandra's prophecies, and is unable to comprehend them. His talk to slaves and to prisoners (the captive women) is small, pathetic, insensitive; his boasting and his allusions to the *spolia* he has obtained at Troy are indeed crass, since the slaves whom he is addressing are the main portion of such booty. He brags almost pitifully of his victories, but he has lost most of his troops and his fleet at sea, and now he is surrounded by a sullen, hostile, and captive audience. He never even has a direct confrontation or meeting with his wife—which robs him in this drama of the opportunity to deal with equals, and he appears naively unaware of his losses in the past or of the dangers he now faces at home. He speaks of his arrival as inaugurating a "festal" day (line 791), but that is surely a classic instance of irony. He will shortly be dead—netted and sacrificed like some devoted bull or boar. He is fully demeaned—pitiful, passive, uninformed, and helpless. A proud leader's case could hardly be more ignorant or demeaned.

In the *Phaedra*, Phaedra is at the outset insecure, hesitant, dubious. She has been committed to the fires of incestuous love, but is fearful of this passion. The *Nutrix* debates with her and counsels decency, caution. Suddenly, after long debate, Phaedra changes her mind (*Phaedra* 250 ff.). She will avoid shame and terminate her love by committing suicide. Only then does the Nurse yield, offering to save Phaedra, aiding her by speaking to Hippolytus in her favor. But Phaedra, stricken by incestuous love and lust, remains throughout most of the drama timid, tremulous, fainting, unsure. She is described, in the toils of love, as restless in the extreme:

. . . nil idem dubiae placet,  
artusque varie iactat incertus dolor.

*(Phaedra 365–66)*

(Nothing the same pleases her in her state of flux, and uncertain grief tosses her limbs in various directions.)

. . . semper impatiens sui  
mutatur habitus.

*(Phaedra 372–73)*

(She, impatient with herself, keeps changing her clothes.)

. . . vadit incerto pede . . .

*(Phaedra 374)*

(She walks unsteadily . . .)

Of a similar nature is the Senecan Oedipus, who, unlike his Sophoclean counterpart, is not at all benign, authoritative, or self-assured. Rather, from the very beginning, this Oedipus is depicted as unstable, weak, insecure. His opening monologue (lines 1–81) represents him bemoaning the arrival of a new day, questioning the duties necessary for him as a leader, and even meditating flight from the plague-stricken land of Thebes. He stresses to Jocasta his anxieties. And, throughout the drama, his soliloquies<sup>31</sup> dramatize his doubts and his vulnerability. Such insecurity is also revealed in his continual apprehensiveness and timidity. In sum, King Oedipus is everywhere in this play oscillating in opinions, almost doddering and indeterminate. He is filled with self-doubt,<sup>32</sup> and, although periodically he will renew and reclaim his leadership status and assert that he has attained new confidence, he regularly loses it again. When compared with the awesome Sophoclean *Rex*, Seneca's would-be leader is astonishingly diminutive, feeble, guilt-ridden, and helplessly adrift.

This overall insecurity and debilitation are evident not only in human beings in Seneca's dramatic world, but also in ghosts from the Underworld. In the *Agamemnon*, the ghost of Thyestes appears at the opening of the play to foreshadow subsequent events. He is not, however, forceful, but rather a creature frightened by himself. He confesses his uncertainty (*incertus*, line 3) regarding which world he belongs in, the upper or the lower, and he immediately admits to defeat, conceding that Atreus has surpassed him in crime. He is unsteady and wishes to return to the realm below (*libet reverti*, line 12). He is supposed to motivate Aegisthus actively to seek revenge, but he is hardly inspirational. All in all, he is a haunted ghost, somewhat pathetic, and clearly unable to manage the tasks he has undertaken. He is inept, trifling, incapacitated.

Much the same may be said for the ghost of Tantalus in the Senecan *Thyestes*. In the Prologue, a Fury has retrieved Tantalus from the

<sup>31</sup> Especially *Oedipus*, lines 25–28, 77–81, 103–09, 765–72, 860.

<sup>32</sup> As in lines 764–66.

Underworld, expressly to induce him to incite his offspring to greater deeds of sacrilege and malice: the killing and feasting upon one another. Small wonder that the proud Tantalus attempts to escape from the Fury and to return hastily to the Underworld. The Fury prevents his escape, and, although Tantalus now swears that he will oppose any attempt to get him to infect his offspring with such a spirit of atrocity and frenzy, as soon as he is threatened he changes course again, following his jailer obediently.

Juxtaposed with the Knavish figure, such as Atreus, all of these characters may be said most often to resemble Fools. They cannot act with valor or certitude, and they are normally crippled by what one author has termed "decidophobia":<sup>33</sup> the Hamletesque disease that prevents one from fully making up one's mind. They are fools because they lack common sense and reasonable aims and goals. What is more, they are imposed upon by other men, and made victims and butts of fate. Most significantly, they are the exact counter to former heroic man, for they represent an altogether different side of the coin: they are anti-heroic, fearful, disquieted little men—unsure of their purposes, and unsteady in their progress. When compared with the grand heroes of the mythic past—Hercules, Achilles, Perseus, Prometheus—they strikingly remind us of shallowness and *descensus*. In the words of Shakespeare's Ghost:

O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!<sup>34</sup>

### III

Seneca's preoccupation with evil and with folly undoubtedly stems from his own first-hand observations of tyranny in Imperial Rome.<sup>35</sup> He was certainly familiar with the quirks of *imperatores*—Tiberius' sullen retreat to private villas, Caligula's envy of *litterati*, Claudius' addiction to gambling and courthouse hearings,<sup>36</sup> and Nero's midnight excursions and theatrical follies. And he knew all too well the foolishness of Empire's sycophants, flatterers, and yes-men, the treachery of *delatores*, the absurdity of a rubber-stamp Senate. He knew equally well the darker side of governance. He knew of court intrigues and assassinations. He had witnessed the slaughter of hundreds of Roman citizens, and he himself barely escaped execution on two different occasions. During Caligula's reign, he incurred the enmity of the mad emperor who, jealous of his fame, would have put him to death,

<sup>33</sup> Consult Walter Kaufmann, *Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy* (New York 1973), esp. 2–34, 87–89.

<sup>34</sup> *Hamlet* I. v. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Eckard Lefèvre, "Die Bedeutung des Paradoxen in der römischen Literatur der frühen Kaiserzeit," *Poetica* 3 (1970) 59–82, conjectures that the tense, chaotic world of cruelty and torment is reflected in the work of major authors of the era of Caligula and Nero by their use of paradoxes, nervous tensions, and clamorous hyperbole. The major study of scenes of terror, pain, and suffering in Senecan drama remains Otto Regenbogen's *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas* (1927; repr. Darmstadt 1963).

<sup>36</sup> In fact, Claudius' ludicrous foibles are satirized sharply in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*.

had not one of his mistresses pointed out that it was useless to execute him, since he was about to die of tuberculosis.<sup>37</sup> Later, during the reign of Claudius, Seneca was unjustly accused by Messalina, Claudius' wife, of having conducted an illicit affair with the Princess Julia;<sup>38</sup> he was condemned to death by the Senate and would have been executed, had not Claudius, at the last moment, commuted his punishment to exile.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, Seneca's own prose is sprinkled with references to and portraits of the foolish as well as the vicious. On the lighter side, he treats in his prose writings of vacillating contemporaries, those who suffer from *taedium* and from repeated instability and change of purpose.<sup>40</sup> He describes wealthy recluses, such as Servilius Vatia,<sup>41</sup> and foppish courtiers who turn night into day,<sup>42</sup> and cringing toadies and adulators who suffer almost fawningly the whims, the ruthlessness, and the riotings of emperors and superiors.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, Seneca's prose is also rich in portraits of extremely merciless rulers, several of whom he repeatedly cites, using them as exemplars of Savage Sovereignty. Again and again he refers to Phalaris, the notorious tyrant of Sicily, who in the Sixth Century B.C. had commissioned the Brazen Bull as instrument of merciless torture, and who had destroyed, among others, Perillos of Athens, the inventor of the machine.<sup>44</sup> He often mentions the tyrant Apollodorus, Sulla, and Volesus,<sup>45</sup> as well as a number of cruel Persian satraps and sultans,<sup>46</sup> and he refers to mythic figures of the same ilk—Busiris and Procrustes.<sup>47</sup> Last of all, one of his favorite examples of incredible madness and barbarism is the Emperor Gaius Caesar, called Caligula.<sup>48</sup> Repeatedly Seneca refers to that ruler's folly and vice. Such evil creatures apparently caught Seneca's attention,

<sup>37</sup> Dio Cassius 59. 19. 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 60. 8. 5–6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ad Polyb.* 13. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Tedium* and restlessness are treated at length in the *De Tranq. An.*; see also *Epp.* 23. 7–8; 24. 23–26; 28; 69; 71. 27, 35; 72. 7–11; 98. 5–6.

<sup>41</sup> In *Ep.* 55; see Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, "Hic Sicut Est: Seneca on the Deadliness of Idleness," *CW* 72 (1978–1979) 207–15.

<sup>42</sup> Consult *Ep.* 122.

<sup>43</sup> He frequently cites the flattery victims pay to kings and tyrants; see *De Benef.* 2. 12. 1–2; *De Ira* 2. 33. 2; 3. 15. 1–3; and especially Praexaspes' praise of Cambyses, *De Ira* 3. 14. 1–4. Julius Canus, a representative of courage, gives on the other hand an ironic "thanks" to Caligula in *De Tranq. An.* 14. 4–5.

<sup>44</sup> See, e. g., *De Benef.* 7. 19. 5, 7; *De Ira* 2. 5. 1–3; *De Clem.* 2. 4. 3; *Ep.* 66. 18. *De Tranq. An.* 14. 4 caustically refers to Caligula as "Phalaris."

<sup>45</sup> Apollodorus in *De Ira* 2. 5. 1; *De Benef.* 7. 19. 5; Sulla in *De Prov.* 3. 8; *De Ira* 1. 20. 4; 2. 2. 3; 2. 34. 3; 3. 18. 1–2; *De Clem.* 1. 12. 1; *De Benef.* 5. 16. 3; Volesus in *De Ira* 2. 5. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Such as Cambyses, Cyrus, Xerxes.

<sup>47</sup> Both referred to as archetypes of cruelty in *De Clem.* 2. 4. 1–2.

<sup>48</sup> See *De Cons. Sap.* 18. 1–5; *De Ira* 1. 20. 8; 2. 33. 3–6; 3. 18. 3–19. 5; 3. 21. 5; *De Tranq. An.* 14. 4–10; *De Brev. Vit.* 18. 5–6; *Ad Helv.* 10. 4; *De Benef.* 2. 12. 1–2; 2. 21. 5–6; 4. 31. 2–3.

captivating him with their horror. Clearly it is no accident that his prose and his drama are full of such scoundrels and brutes.<sup>49</sup>

Knaves and Fools, then, can be distinguished as two major categories in the Senecan arsenal of dramatic portraits. And certainly the two come together and play opposite one another most tellingly in the Senecan *Thyestes*. Throughout, Atreus is the deceitful manipulator, the aggressor who toys with his fool, Thyestes. He is everywhere powerful, full of noisome bravado, whereas Thyestes is precisely his opposite—a man grown timid, fearful, uncertain. The one is stentorian, the other diminuendo; the one vicious and bold, the other soft-spoken, willing even to be led by his sons. In all, Thyestes is the perfect tool for Atreus' vengeful machinations. Some critics have suggested that Thyestes, in his belated wisdom and eagerness to avoid the throne, is the Senecan archetype of the Stoical man, one fast approaching or already having attained the *summum bonum*.<sup>50</sup> But this is surely incorrect; for Thyestes is too passive, too much lacking in self-regulation, in regimen, in sense of direction to be any philosophical ideal whatsoever. Rather, he is pitifully a lonely penny in the other's mighty treasure chest. He accepts the sharing of the throne, he submits to Atreus' directions, and he becomes his willing diner, imbibor, and puppet. The potency of this drama, recently assessed as being among Seneca's last theatrical creations,<sup>51</sup> is owing very much to the rigor with which the two powerful figures so fully play out their roles.

Jonathan Swift considered both Knaves and Fools essential to the corrupt world man lives in. In fact, Swift officially celebrated every April First, All Fools' Day, as if it were sacrosanct—but he also scrupulously observed April Second as its obverse, All Knaves' Day.<sup>52</sup> Swift's implication is quite clear: both types were vitally necessary to the business of our fallen world.

Francis Bacon went further still, for he conceived of fools and knaves as very closely akin, both of them necessary to perpetrate the "foulest vice or disease of learning":

This vice therefore brancheth itself into two sorts; delight in deceiving, and aptness to be deceived; imposture and credulity; which, although they appear to be of a diverse nature, the one seeming to proceed of cunning, and the other of simplicity, yet certainly they do for the most part concur: for

<sup>49</sup> For an interesting survey of Seneca's realistic view that evil is prevalent in our world, see Evelyn Spring, "The Problem of Evil in Seneca," *CW* 16 (1922) 51-53.

<sup>50</sup> E. g., O. Gigon, "Bemerkungen zu Senecas Thyestes," *Philologus* 93 (1938) 176-83; Joe Park Poe, "An Analysis of Seneca's *Thyestes*," *TAPhA* 100 (1969) 360; and S. G. Farron (above, note 1) 36-37.

<sup>51</sup> John G. Fitch, "Sense-Pauses and Relative Dating in Seneca, Sophocles and Shakespeare," *AJP* 102 (1981) 289-307, concludes that the late plays are the *Phoenissae* fragment and the *Thyestes*.

<sup>52</sup> Vid. George P. Mayhew, "Swift's Bickerstaff Hoax as an April Fools' Joke," *Modern Philology* 61 (1964) 271.

... an inquisitive man is a prattler, so upon the like reason a credulous man is a deceiver.<sup>53</sup>

In some sense, they are essential one to the other; since no knave can cheat or delude without the presence of his butt or decoy. But Bacon goes further; the fool wants misdirection, and the knave aspires to misdirect. Moreover, the fool is a self-deceiver, and the treacherous man is engaged in empty activity, ultimately only fooling himself. Hence, they become two sides of a single counterfeited coin.

Seneca recognizes this interchangeability clearly enough. And, ironically, in his dramas many fools turn into knaves before a play is finished. The hesitant Clytaemestra becomes a cruel tyrant and efficient murderess; the timid, staggering Oedipus transforms into the savage wild man who will exact the "payment" and revenge due to himself; the reluctant Medea, goaded on by the Furies, becomes the ruthless, gloating filicide.<sup>54</sup> Seneca's point should be quite evident: both fools and knaves are lacking in constancy<sup>55</sup> and consistency. Of course, they are the victims of instability and inconstancy.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, when speaking in his prose writings of wholly and absolutely cruel tyrants like Phalaris, he makes several major points: there is excessive cruelty, but there is also a viciousness which exceeds reason, cause, and effect.

Possumus dicere non esse hanc crudelitatem, sed feritatem, cui voluptati saevitia est; possumus insaniam vocare . . .<sup>57</sup>

(We can say that this is not cruelty but savagery which takes pleasure in ferocity—in fact, we can call it madness . . .)

Such a one is Phalaris, a virtual cannibal who delights in human bloodshed, and is only gratified by cruelty; such a man is ultimately beyond the pale of humanity:

<sup>53</sup> "The Advancement of Learning," in *The Works of Francis Bacon* . . ., ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (Boston 1861–1864) VI. 125.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Garton notes that Senecan characters are, to the advantage of theater, ranting, self-divided, and ambivalent ("stiff, imposing, lurid, . . . pathetic"), dramatizing a mixtus of good and bad traits, but ultimately become subject to disintegration: "Senecan tragic character, at its most vivid, is seen to grow and to become more iron in a world of final disorder" ("The Background to Character Portrayal in Seneca," *CPh* 54 [1959] 1–9). Quotations are from pp. 4 and 5.

<sup>55</sup> The constant man never abandons plans or shifts in course, *Ep.* 67. 10, and, of course, false men are never found to be constant, *Epp.* 102. 13; 120. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Consistency is the mark of a man of good character, *Ep.* 47. 21; such men's words and deeds harmonize, *Epp.* 20. 1–6; 24. 19; 34. 4; 35. 4; 75.4–5; 108. 35–39. The inconsistent man is schizoid, wavering, *Ep.* 20. 4; on such restlessness and insecurity, consult esp. *De Tranq. An.* 1. 1–17; 2. 6–10.

<sup>57</sup> *De Clem.* 2. 4. 2.

. . . intercisa iuris humani societas abscidit.<sup>58</sup>

(. . . when he divorced himself from the human race, he divorced himself from me.)

Men of this calibre, contrary to what they think, will never achieve greatness.

Terribilia enim esse et tumultuosa et exitiosa possunt; magnitudinem quidem . . . non habebunt.<sup>59</sup>

(Men of evil nature [*mala ingenia*] can be terrible, tumultuous, and destructive . . . but greatness they cannot have.)

Such men have lost their humanity. They transform themselves, ultimately, from fool or knave into some subhuman creature—a bestial monster divorced from the human race.<sup>60</sup> Most of Seneca's plays trace and exhibit just such a transformation downward on the part of its major actors. The action in these dramas may even be considered a species of Ovidian Metamorphoses, where characters turn into animals before our very eyes. One critic has suggested that such intrinsic development of man into beast in Seneca's dramas foreshadows a predominant motif in modern literature—the twentieth-century grotesque.<sup>61</sup> True enough, for Seneca's plays do persistently trace—with savagery and acumen—the transformation downwards of base and little men into brutes and beasts.

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<sup>58</sup> *De Benef.* 7. 19. 8. Such fierce men secede from humanity, and become what Elisabeth Henry terms "monstrosities in nature" ("Seneca the Younger," in *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome*, ed. T. James Luce [New York 1982] II. 829).

<sup>59</sup> *De Ira* 1. 20. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Ruthless human killers are animalistic, Seneca avers; such subhuman behavior would prevail if animals were to rule: *De Clem.* 1. 26. 3. See also *De Clem.* 1. 25. 2 on brutality as being outside human bounds.

<sup>61</sup> Rainer Sell, "The Comedy of Hyperbolic Horror: Seneca, Lucan and 20th Century Grotesque," *Neohelicon* 11 (1984) 277–300. See also Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, "'There's Something Wrong With the Sun': Seneca's *Oedipus* and the Modern Grotesque," *CB* 15 (1978) 41–44. One critic believes that artists deploy paradox and grotesquerie as their response to a world that has lost unity and coherence, that has tumbled into chaos and muddle; consult Edward Diller, "Aesthetics and the Grotesque: Friedrich Durrenmatt," *Contemporary Literature* 7 (1966) 328–35.