

CHAPTER I  
COHERENCE

Identity is predicated largely upon coherence. The quality of being *idem*, to use the term's etymological root, or 'the sameness of a person . . . at all times in all circumstances', to use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) definition (entry 2a), is what allows any given individual to be recognised as such. Behavioural continuity ranks alongside bodily continuity as one of the most crucial markers of selfhood, underpinned by the myriad habits and repetitive actions that comprise the fabric of a person's daily life. To simplify a point made by Plato (*Laws* 792a) and Aristotle (*NE* 1103a17), ἦθος – character or disposition – emerges from ἔθος – habit; identity implies that one does the same or similar things, and believes and professes and aims to achieve the same or similar things *identidem*.<sup>1</sup> Such repetition, and the links it creates between past and present conduct, forms a gauge to future actions, too. Conversely, we are labelled as behaving 'out of character' whenever we break this mould and deviate from the expected. Though it sounds tautological, there is a lot of truth in the claim that you have to keep being you in order to be you. Identity is not achieved in an instant, nor presented at birth as a given, but built and judged over time. One's own and others' sense of one's self unrolls and evolves from the memory and maintenance of specific behavioural choices. What makes the amnesiac or the schizophrenic, for example, so troubling as identities is precisely this lack of continuity, predictability, and finally, knowability.

This chapter employs the concept of moral and dispositional coherence to explore the identity of the two most impressive and emblematic characters of Senecan tragedy: Medea and Atreus.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Identidem* obviously contributes to the evolution of the modern English term 'identity'. On ἦθος, De Temmerman (2014) 5 remarks: 'the term's original meaning . . . foregrounds habituation as a factor involved in *shaping* it'.

<sup>2</sup> Braden (1985) 42 declares them 'Seneca's strongest dramatic creations' and remarks in an earlier publication – Braden (1970) 28 – that the plays in which they feature are Seneca's 'best realised works'. Dingel (1974) 88–9 regards them as parallel creations.

Although, on first glance, these two *dramatis personae* may not seem particularly promising candidates for qualities such as constancy and uniformity, having often been cited as paradigms of uncontrolled passions and consequently fractured selfhood,<sup>3</sup> they actually display acute concern for presenting themselves as integrated and continuously unified individuals.<sup>4</sup> Single-minded in their pursuit of evil, Atreus and Medea resort repeatedly to measuring their current behaviour against deeds performed in the past and those they intend to perform in the future. They interrogate the extent to which their present selfhood matches their projected ideal, and how well their present performance fits the literary and theatrical expectations attendant upon their inherited roles. Shortfalls are met with bitter self-reproach. Not only are Atreus and Medea aware of their own *personae*, but they are also aware of how to fashion and maintain those *personae* in ways that render them recognisable to others.

Recognition and recognisability are likewise key elements in the assessment of identity, and they form a recurrent thread of discussion throughout this chapter. Because Seneca conceives of identity as end-directed, as the outcome of persistent, congruent, self-fashioning, it stands to reason that he anticipates its confirmation in summative moments of acknowledgement. Recognition is a natural complement to this teleological concept of selfhood, and the urgent repetition evinced by Seneca's *dramatis personae*, while it may seem endless, always looks towards its final, terrible realisation in ultimate wickedness. Coherence in Senecan tragedy is best understood through the prism of recognition scenes, for it is here that questions of identity are posed with particular urgency. Are characters really who they claim to be? Have they revealed or

Consciously or not, scholars of Senecan tragedy tend to analyse Atreus and Medea side by side: see, for example, Boyle (1997) 116–33 and Littlewood (2004) 180–240. Casual remarks by Gill (2006) 424 show just how instinctive this comparison has become.

<sup>3</sup> Prominent examples from anglophone scholarship: Marti (1945) 229–33; Poe (1969); Pratt (1983) 81–91 and 103–7; Nussbaum (1994) 439–83, with some important caveats; Gill (1987) and (2006) 421–34.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, Schiesaro (2003) 208: 'Medea, although we might want to see her portrayed as an unruly, furious, and uncontrollable maenad, in fact consistently evaluates her predicament and displays dogged determination to achieve her goals.' Gill (2006) 424 voices a similar opinion, though he ends up arguing against it: 'Seneca's Medea . . . is a highly integrated and consistent character.'

concealed aspects of themselves? Have they changed in any fundamental way since they first stepped onto the stage? Senecan *anagnorisis* ('recognition') builds on a venerable Greco-Roman tradition of dramatic recognition scenes and adapts it to a new purpose, namely demonstrating that consistent performance of one's role leads to confirmatory acknowledgement of the identity one seeks. For Atreus and Medea, recognition marks not a moment of unmasking or the revelation of a previously dissembled identity, but rather proof of just how consistently they have played their assigned parts. And just how comprehensively they have achieved their feats of horror.

### *Recognition*

As a necessary prelude to the topic of self-coherence, I consider first the close conceptual relationship that binds recognition to identity on the one hand, and to dramatic performance on the other. In the theatre (and in literature more broadly)<sup>5</sup> *anagnorisis* draws attention to characterisation, motivation, psychology, and typology; it prompts audiences to contemplate how *dramatis personae* construct their own and others' sense of self. Yet scenes of *anagnorisis* on stage also raise questions about identity that extend beyond the immediate, imaginary world of the play to encompass human action, self-presentation, and the role of performance in everyday life. Dramatic recognition gestures to the potential gap between who people are and who they appear to be. In doing so, it threads the character, the actor, and the moral agent onto the same continuum.

This connection between *anagnorisis* and selfhood is part of recognition's status as 'a peculiarly dramatic device'.<sup>6</sup> Recognition belongs to drama more than to any other literary genre, the reason being that it implicates a character's identity in precisely the same way that theatrical performance implicates an actor's. When performers assume a role, they not only destabilise their own identity – at least in the eyes of others – but they also raise the far more troubling possibility that all human selfhood is precariously fluid.

<sup>5</sup> Cave (1988) studies recognition as a literary, not exclusively dramatic device.

<sup>6</sup> Goldman (2000) 8.

This possibility arises from the actor's skill in editing, rehearsing, and developing behaviour so that it appears seamless and convincing.<sup>7</sup> Such self-fashioning belies to some extent the idea of naturally unified identity, and when skilled theatrical performers portray an image of unified selfhood, they paradoxically reveal that selfhood to be a construct and its image an illusion. The issue, therefore, is not merely that actors engage in contrived conduct, but that their professional activity blends the categories of 'natural' and 'contrived', preventing any simple distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction', 'person' and 'character'.

It follows that the anxiety attendant upon *anagnorisis* in ancient drama reflects the ontological anxiety surrounding actors themselves. Recognition in dramatic performance typically attempts to dispel the threat of problematic selfhood by generating a sense of resolution and declaring the newly revealed or more fully apprehended identity to be true and correct. Ion is restored to himself when Creusa recognises his birth tokens; Oedipus is likewise restored to himself, albeit unhappily, when he uncovers the truth about Laius' killer; Sophocles' Orestes reveals himself to Electra at the conclusion of an elaborate performance in which he goes as far as announcing his own death.<sup>8</sup> In every case, the formerly deceptive or mistaken identity is pronounced a momentary aberration rejected in favour of a more fundamental, and presumably natural, kind of selfhood. Against the actor's protean qualities, recognition scenes champion the claims of birth, family ties, and inherent characteristics. Even when they occur in the middle of a play's action, such scenes constitute moments of resolution and stability,<sup>9</sup> so much so that they feature increasingly as a denouement in ancient drama; it is no coincidence that all of Seneca's recognition scenes take place at the ends of his plays.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For the notion of seamless performance or 'flow', on stage and in life: Goldman (2000) 63–73 and Turner (1982) 55–6.

<sup>8</sup> This final example, the recognition scene in Sophocles' *Electra*, achieves resolution not just by stabilising identity and re-establishing a family relationship, but also by likening Orestes to a tragic messenger (*El.* 1098–1114), thus evoking the penultimate scene of a tragedy, and by association, the concluding function of *anagnorisis*. On Orestes as a messenger, see Ringer (1998) 185–6.

<sup>9</sup> Thus Cave (2008) 122: 'The typical recognition plot deals in closure.'

<sup>10</sup> Besides this chapter's treatment of *Med.* 978–1027 and *Thy.* 970–1112, see: *Her.* 1138–1344; *Phaed.* 1159–1280, discussed from another perspective in Chapter 3; and *Oed.* 998–1061.

Thus, the traditional recognition scene in Greek and Roman drama is a moment that pivots upon revelation, as characters either uncover a previously misapprehended identity, or realise more fully the capacities of an individual they have hitherto underestimated. As Aristotle defines it, the central principle of recognition scenes is change (μεταβολή, *Poetics* 1542a), whether that change applies to largely external circumstances, like social status and family relationships, or internal ones, such as a character's *ethos* and sense of self. The act of *anagnorisis* is, typically, a turning point that resolves uncertainties, reveals secrets, and clarifies misunderstandings.<sup>11</sup> Seneca, however, handles the recognitions scene of *Medea* and *Thyestes* in a unique way, treating them as moments in which identity, far from being altered or rediscovered, is instead amplified and thereby validated. Genuine and constructed selfhood are not incompatible in Seneca's view, with the result that his characters engage in performance as a means of self-realisation.<sup>12</sup> They approach recognition as the final stage in a steady and inherently theatrical process of moral and psychological development, which they pursue over the course of an entire play. In the words of Brian Hook: 'Senecan self-presentation does not operate as self-revelation as much as self-confirmation.'<sup>13</sup>

Consequent to its focus on identity, *anagnorisis* may also be said to delineate character both as an implied human personality and as a fictional construct. The duality is confirmed by the act of recognition itself, which draws attention on the one hand to a character's selfhood, and to the confluence of actor and character (as we have seen), and on the other hand, emphasises a character's status as a fabricated dramatic entity. While the mimetic or representational aspect of recognition deals with a character's 'human' traits – and behind it, a performer's human traits – the semiotics of recognition treat those traits as an assemblage of textual information. In semiotic terms, the act of recognising means interpreting

<sup>11</sup> Clarification may, however, be only temporary. Duckworth (1952) 151–60 discusses examples from *palliata* in which recognition complicates later action. On recognition and disclosure, see Kennedy and Lawrence (2008) 2.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards (2002), on the coincidence of acting and self-actualisation in Seneca's work.

<sup>13</sup> Hook (2000) 58.

correctly the signs that indicate a given character's identity: the marks on Oedipus' body; the tokens kept in Ion's box. Terence Cave notes that scenes of recognition become 'a focus for reflection on the way fictions as such are constituted'.<sup>14</sup> They can resemble processes of reading and writing, as characters and audience alike are called upon to analyse the symbols displayed before them and to organise those symbols into some kind of coherent whole. Such 'textual recognition' (as I shall call it) often occurs at the expense of 'ethical recognition' and vice versa, since highlighting one requires us to dismiss or minimise the other. We may read a character either as a quasi-human or as a literary entity; the two rarely coincide. But Seneca's recognition scenes *are* one example of this rare coincidence: the figures involved in them construct their identities in terms that are simultaneously metapoetic and moral, literary and personal.

### 1.1 *Medea*

#### *Recognising Seneca's Medea*

The final exchange between Jason and Medea begins with Medea standing on the roof of her house accompanied by one child and carrying the body of the other in her arms. In defiance of Jason's pleas, she kills the second son, climbs into an airborne chariot, and throws the children's bodies down to their father, declaring, 'do you recognise your wife? This is how I usually escape' (*coniugem agnoscis tuam? / sic fugere soleo, Med. 1021–2*). At first glance, the request seems metatheatrical, and this is how it has most often been interpreted.<sup>15</sup> By asking Jason whether he recognises her, Seneca's Medea highlights her status as a dramatic

<sup>14</sup> Cave (1988) 46. Likewise, Kennedy and Lawrence (2008) 2: 'recognition becomes key to the way we make meaning and the way we read'.

<sup>15</sup> Boyle (1997) 132 and (2014) cxv–cxvii and *ad Med.* 1019–22; Littlewood (2004) 192; Trinacty (2014) 125–6. Winterbottom (1976) 39, in his review of Costa's commentary, takes this metatheatrical interpretation for granted. For metatheatricality in the *Medea* more generally, see also Mowbray (2012) 399–407; Kirichenko (2013) 101–18 and Michelon (2015) 46–54. Despite the reservations of Rosenmeyer (2002), I use the term 'metatheatricality' advisedly, to refer to all instances of theatrical self-reference, and especially to those that highlight the conventions of theatre qua conventions. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

character that has previously performed the same story in Euripides' and Ennius' dramas, and probably in Ovid's lost tragedy as well.<sup>16</sup> If she uses *sic* to mean specifically her airborne flight from Corinth,<sup>17</sup> then yes, we have witnessed this scene before at the close of Euripides' version. Seneca's audience would also doubtless have been familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Medea departs the scene in a flying chariot drawn by serpents on no fewer than three separate occasions (*Met.* 7.220–3; 350–1; 398). Her exit has become a demonstrable cliché, and Seneca invites the audience to recognise it as such.

Medea's *agnoscis*, too, may be construed as encouraging a metatheatrical interpretation, not only because of its self-reflexive presence in a recognition scene, but also because, as Stephen Hinds has shown, Latin poets often use the verb to signify their allusions to earlier writers.<sup>18</sup> *agnoscere* denotes an open practice of poetic appropriation, as in Seneca the Elder's remark that Ovid lifted phrases from Vergil *non subripiendi causa, sed palam mutuandi, hoc animo ut vellet agnosci* ('not for the sake of stealing, but of borrowing openly, with the intent that it be recognised' *Suas.* 3.7).<sup>19</sup> With this meaning activated, recognition of Medea's character deepens and broadens to encompass recognition of Seneca's place within the Greco-Roman literary tradition. Metatheatrical connotations are further compounded by *soleo*, which, like *agnoscis*, can function as an 'Alexandrian footnote', signalling the poetic past that informs Medea's current behaviour;

<sup>16</sup> On the traceable parallels between Euripides' and Seneca's Medeas, see Costa (1973) 8; Gill (1987); and Lefèvre (1997a). Arcellaschi (1990) examines Medea's role in Roman drama, and Manuwald (2013) presents a deft survey of the heroine's changing representation in Latin literature. Too little of Ovid's *Medea* survives for scholars to gauge its influence on Seneca's version. There are, however, demonstrable links between Ovid's depiction of Medea in *Heroides* 12 and *Metamorphoses* 7, and the figure portrayed in Seneca's tragedy: see Leo (1878) 166–70, and for more recent discussion, Hinds (1993) 34–43 and (2011) 22–8; Trinacty (2007) and (2014) 93–126; and Boyle (2014) lxxiii–lxxvi.

<sup>17</sup> Both Costa (1973) *ad Med.* 1022 and Boyle (2014) *ad Med.* 1019–22 take *sic* as referring to the chariot. Hine (2000) *ad Med.* 1022 notes more cautiously that *sic* could also refer to Medea's habit of inflicting death before departure, and that the line is probably meant to convey both meanings simultaneously.

<sup>18</sup> Hinds (1998) 9.

<sup>19</sup> Bartsch (2006) 262.

both the audience and Medea herself have grown *accustomed* to her leaving the stage in this manner.<sup>20</sup> The overall effect of Medea's question, on this reading, is to widen as much as possible the gap between intra- and extra-dramatic levels of recognition: the audience comprehends who Medea is because the audience has read Euripides, Ennius, and Ovid, while Jason, presumably, has not.

It is also tempting to infer from Medea's combination of *soleo* and *agnoscis* a reference to the visual dimension of theatre, whereby any given scene may reproduce aspects of other, preceding performances. This argument must remain speculative, given the lack of evidence for Seneca's plays ever being staged during his lifetime. Yet, even if Seneca's *Medea* was not performed in front of a first-century AD Roman audience, the visual qualities of its final scene – Medea above in a chariot; Jason below on the ground – could still be understood as replicating the visual qualities of Euripides' version. And, in the unknowable event that Seneca's tragedy was actually performed during his lifetime, Medea's *agnoscis* would surely encourage the audience to recognise this visual parallel.<sup>21</sup> Such 'optical allusion' – as Robert Cowan has dubbed the technique – is not uncommon in ancient drama, a famous example being Aristophanes' use of the *mechane* in the *Peace* (80–179) to parody Euripides' *Bellerophon* (306–8 Kannicht).<sup>22</sup> It would, of course, be even more metatheatrical to evoke such visual recollection in the context of an actual recognition scene.<sup>23</sup>

The Medea that emerges from this reading of the final exchange is a self-consciously theatrical construct, a fictional entity

<sup>20</sup> The term 'Alexandrian footnote' derives from Ross (1975) 78, where it describes Roman writers' methods of appealing to literary tradition. On Seneca's *soleo* as an Alexandrian footnote, see Boyle (1997) 132 and Cowan (2011) 363.

<sup>21</sup> As Boyle (2014) cxvi points out, there is also the opportunity for Jason (and the audience) to recognise, visually, the correspondence between Medea's character and her mask.

<sup>22</sup> Cowan (2013).

<sup>23</sup> Thus, Easterling (1997) 168–9 argues for visual similarity between the Aeschylean, Sophoclean, and Euripidean versions of Electra's reunion with Orestes: in Aeschylus, Electra carries an urn of funeral offerings (*Ch.* 84–151); in Sophocles, Orestes presents Electra with an empty urn (*El.* 1113–1219); in Euripides, Electra carries a water jar (*El.* 54–149). The latter two versions evoke aspects of the Aeschylean 'stage picture' partly in order to summon recognition from the audience.

assembled from earlier texts and a dramatic role embodied by earlier performers.<sup>24</sup> She is also, crucially, slotted into a literary tradition in a way that contributes to the perceived stability and coherence of her character. This Medea is the product of multiple iterations of the same behaviour maintained and revisited across a number of separate instantiations in poetry and drama. She fulfils her *dramatis persona* in a way the audience has come to expect from its previous encounters with her textual self. She is recognisable because she sticks to the established script.

Besides confirming Medea's textual identity, however, the exchange and its explicit stress on recognition also confirm her ethical identity as an implied human personality, and this is an aspect of the scene that has received far less scholarly attention. When Medea cites prior dramatic versions of herself, she invites the audience to see in her current behaviour the degree of self-coherence necessary for creating not just a recognisable theatrical role but also a stable, recognisable personality. *anagnorisis* of Medea qua fictional construct coincides with acknowledgement of her personal qualities as a moral agent.<sup>25</sup> Medea is who she is because she behaves in keeping with the requirements of her *persona*, which enables others to perceive a link between her deeds and her nature.<sup>26</sup>

Medea's use of *soleo* is a case in point, because as well as being a potential marker of intertext, it also – quite simply – indicates customary activity: what a person tends to do, what he or she is therefore likely to do, and as a result, who he or she is likely to be. Seneca's Phaedra uses it in this way to describe Theseus' philanthropic habits, and her sarcastic remark, *praestat . . . nuptae quam solet Theseus fidem* ('Theseus displays to his wife his usual

<sup>24</sup> A point made long ago by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1919 III) 62, whose quip, 'diese Medea hat Euripides gelesen' ('this Medea has read Euripides'), has become one of the mainstays of scholarship on Senecan tragedy.

<sup>25</sup> Bartsch (2006) 261 makes a similar observation: 'The result of the drama's attention to the question of recognition is that *personal* self-recognition and *literary* recognition necessarily coalesce here.' See also Boyle (2014) cxvi.

<sup>26</sup> A point raised by Sissa (2006) 41–2, in relation to tragic *anagnorisis*: 'Tell me how you act and I will tell you what kind of person you are . . . recognition of agency implies recognition of moral identity, because the nature of an act . . . exposes the character of the agent.' See also Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a35. On the confluence of *being* and *doing* in Seneca's characterisation of Medea, see Campbell (2019).

faithfulness' *Phaed.* 92) does not appear to activate any specific allusion. David Armstrong notes similar occurrences of the term in Seneca's *Troades*, where it refers more to the Greeks' practice of sacrificing a virgin prior to long sea voyages than to the iteration of a specific poetic text: Pyrrhus demands from Agamemnon permission to sacrifice Polyxena on the basis that these are *solita* ('customary', *Tro.* 249), and Calchas concedes that permission with the wry comment, *dant fata Danaeis quo solent pretio viam* ('fate grants passage to the Danaeans at the usual price', 360).<sup>27</sup> The term also features in *Hercules*, where it denotes the hero's past undertaking of Atlas's task: *mundum solitos ferre lacertos* ('shoulders accustomed to holding up the sky', *Her.* 1101). In these passages, characters cite each other's habitual behaviour as a way of passing judgement on personal qualities. Who you were in the past dictates who you should be in the future.

Hence, Medea's triumphant *soleo* at 1022 signifies not only her meta-literary habits, but also the behaviour she has repeated across the course of her life as a quasi-human within the drama, specifically, her tendency to commit brutal murders immediately prior to or during her flight.<sup>28</sup> Slaughter and escape are two events that recur, paired, throughout Medea's story: she dismembers her brother, Absyrtos, as she sails from Colchis; she destroys Pelias before leaving Thessaly; she leaves behind in Corinth the bodies of Creon, Creusa, and her own two children. Seneca stresses throughout the play this repetition inherent in Medea's story, and he draws particular attention to the killing of Absyrtos because this act provides a precedent for Medea's impending infanticide. Just as Medea will kill the second child in Jason's presence, so she recalls Absyrtos' death being 'thrust in his father's face' (*funus ingestum patri*, 132); similarly, she treats the slaughter of her own children as a warped form of payment for her brother's murder (956–7; 969–71; 982). Imagery of dismemberment is also used to connect the two events: when Medea in her final monologue urges her own children to embrace her – *et infusos mihi / coniungite artus* ('and join with me your poured out limbs', 946–7) – her

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong (1982) 240.

<sup>28</sup> A meaning championed by Armstrong (1982) 240 and upheld by Hine (2000) *ad Med.* 1022.

stilted and sinister language<sup>29</sup> evokes the several references she has already made to Absyrtos' limbs (47–8; 912), while *infusus* recalls the blood she has shed elsewhere (134–5: *funestum impie / quam saepe fudi sanguinem*, 'how often I have spilled blood, murderously'; 452–3: *quaeque fraternus cruor / perfudit arva*, 'the fields drenched in my brother's blood'). Pelias' death, too, involves dismemberment and so forms part of this nexus (133–4; 475–6). The overall effect of these associations is to demonstrate that Medea has always performed the kinds of actions she will perform again by the end of this play. Not just the external audience, but Jason too, as Medea's internal audience, is called upon to recognise the uniformity of her behaviour.

Medea alludes to that uniformity even in Jason's presence: the first words she speaks to him in the entire play are, 'I have fled, Jason, I am fleeing. Changing abodes is nothing new, but the reason for flight is new: I used to flee on your behalf' (*fugimus, Iason, fugimus. hoc non est novum, / mutare sedes; causa fugiendi nova est: / pro te solebam fugere*, 447–9). Her language here is almost identical to her statement in the recognition scene – *sic fugere soleo* – which, notably, comprises her final speech to Jason. Close correspondence between the two passages hints at an equivalent correspondence between Medea's past and present action, and also between her individual actions and declarations over the course of the play. Once again, Medea prompts Jason to acknowledge the behavioural patterns that have long since defined her character. In fact, this is a notable instance of her quasi-human and fictional identities converging, because when she announces that her action is not new – *hoc non est novum* (447) – the phrase's meta-literary resonance is just as irresistible as its claims about personal coherence. Medea and Jason (*fugimus*: I/we) have escaped before in Euripides, in Apollonius, in Ovid, to name but a few prominent examples. The habitual nature of this activity, its repetition across literary texts and within these characters' 'lives', is a core constituent of their identity and a means by which they

<sup>29</sup> Segal (1986) 9 remarks that the 'depersonalised and abstract vocabulary' used by Seneca to describe Medea's embrace of her children (946–7) not only gives the passage a 'self-consciously artificial' quality, but also sounds ominous in the context of the protagonist's impending crime.

may be judged. Poetic iteration coincides with, and bolsters, personal continuity.

It follows that *anagnorisis*, too, may be used to affirm coherence in a personal as well as literary sense. Seneca certainly deploys the concept in this way at the end of *Epistle* 120, in terms that cannot fail to evoke the dramatic tradition of recognition scenes:

Magnam rem puta unum hominem agere. Praeter sapientem autem nemo unum agit, ceteri multifformes sumus. Modo frugi tibi videbimur et graves, modo prodigi et vani; mutamus subinde personam et contrariam ei sumimus quam exuimus. Hoc ergo a te exige, ut qualem institueris praestare te, talem usque ad exitum serves; effice ut possis laudari, si minus, ut adgnosci.

Consider it a great thing to play the part of one man. Besides the sage, however, no one plays the part of one man; the rest of us are multiform. Now we seem to you sober and serious, now wasteful and vain; we keep changing our mask and we put on the opposite of what we have taken off. Therefore, demand this of yourself: that you maintain right to the end the character you have resolved to present. Bring it about that you may be praised, or if not, at least recognised. (*Ep.* 120.22)

This passage harnesses a theatrical analogy to illustrate the Stoic principle of *constantia*: Lucilius is advised to continue behaving ‘in character’, as it were, to cleave to the role he has adopted and to perform it in a consistent manner because only then will he render himself recognisable to others.<sup>30</sup> Coming at the end of this extended theatrical parallel, *adgnosci* suggests the concluding and validating function typically ascribed to dramatic recognition scenes: people’s habit of switching between roles creates the kind of ontological instability that *anagnorisis* aims to resolve. The twist here is that, contrary to standard Greco-Roman dramatic practice, *anagnorisis* establishes Lucilius’ identity not through revelation, but through steady confirmation. The recognition that Seneca envisages in *Epistle* 120 involves no unveiling of a previously unsuspected identity, for that would imply *inconstancia*; rather, Lucilius is understood and acknowledged as the person

<sup>30</sup> On self-coherence and consistency in Sen *Ep.* 120.22, see Edwards (2002) 382; Inwood (2005) 288–93; Bartsch (2006) 262; Star (2012) 65–9; Aygon (2016) 61. Also useful are the comments of Brunt (1975) 13–14 on the Stoics’ tendency to think about *constantia* in terms of theatrical roles.

he has always, consistently, been. Likewise, when Seneca declares at the beginning of *Epistle* 31, *agnosco Lucilium meum* ('I recognise my Lucilius'), he means that Lucilius is now fulfilling the promise – and even more literally, the *person* – he had previously displayed (*incipit, quem promiserat, exhibere, Ep. 31.1*). Lucilius has not suddenly altered his character but has simply come closer to perfecting a disposition to which he aspires.<sup>31</sup>

The same may be said of Seneca's *Medea*, who, in her final showdown with Jason, seeks recognition for an identity she has been developing over the entire course of her play. *Medea* has not changed her personality in the tragedy's final few lines, nor has she revealed a new aspect of herself: she has merely amplified and perfected a role she has long desired to enact. How Seneca depicts and explores this process of self-development is the subject of the next two sections.

### *Appropriate Behaviour*

The heroine's self-fashioning is most apparent in the way she cites her own name at critical points in the tragedy. Although her *illeism* has already attracted considerable scholarly attention,<sup>32</sup> it is worth reviewing briefly here, in order to show how *Medea* uses it to ensure her self-coherence and *constantia*. Compared to Euripides' heroine, who utters her own name on only one occasion (*Eur. Med. 402*), Seneca's does so a remarkable seven times: 'Medea remains' (*Medea superest, 166*); 'Medea is a greater fear' (*est . . . maior metus / Medea, 516–17*); 'Medea does not compel you' (*nec . . . te . . . / Medea cogit, 523–4*); 'undertake whatever Medea can do' (*incipit / quidquid Medea potest, 566–7*); 'now I am Medea' (*Medea nunc sum, 910*). She begins the play by invoking deities *quosque Medae magis / fas est precari* ('whom it is more right for Medea to call upon', 8–9); later, she rationalises that her children's crime is having Medea for a mother (*et maius scelus / Medea mater, 933–4*). When the Nurse uses Medea's name to command

<sup>31</sup> Bartsch (2006) 260–2.

<sup>32</sup> Traina (1979) 273–5; Segal (1982) 241–2; Petrone (1988) 61–2. Fitch and McElduff (2002) 24–7 make some pertinent, general comments on self-naming in Senecan tragedy.

her attention, the heroine famously replies, ‘I shall become her’ (Nut: *Medea*— Med: *Fiam*, 171). The cumulative effect of all this self-naming is that Medea’s conduct becomes a process of self-construction in which the protagonist knows her role and strives to live up to it.<sup>33</sup> Like Lucilius in *Epistle* 120, Seneca’s Medea tries as much as possible to remain ‘in character’. She performs herself both in the literal sense of acting a dramatic part and in the figurative sense of developing a stable, recognisable identity. Her behaviour throughout the play is simultaneously metatheatrical and quasi-Stoic; her self-citation alludes to her previous appearances in drama, and in literature more generally, at the same time as it emphasises continuity between her past, present, and future actions.

Medea’s *fiam* at line 171 is a particularly telling example of this overlap between metatheatrical and Stoic versions of her identity. On the one hand, the word conveys Medea’s awareness of her own literary past, and presents her behaviour as a model derived from earlier poetry. In fact, it confirms Medea’s already paradigmatic status via allusion to Hypsipyle’s remark in *Heroides* 6.151, *Medeae Medea forem* (‘I would have been a Medea to Medea’).<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, *fiam* evokes not just textual identity, but a slow and deliberate process of ethical self-construction. Medea will ‘become’ Medea because she will ‘be made’ into Medea: the verb’s passive force connotes a quintessentially Senecan Stoic project of self-reform, one that splits the individual into moral agent and malleable object. Seneca uses the verb in a similar manner at *de Ira* 2.10.6, when he declares, *neminem nasci sapientem sed fieri* (‘the wise man is not born but made’). Interpreted alongside such evidence, Medea’s promise to work upon and thereby achieve an ideal version of herself begins to sound like a distinctly Stoic goal. Her implied human identity is no less consciously constructed, and no less paradigmatic than her fictional one.

<sup>33</sup> Fitch and McElduff (2002) 25: ‘self-naming is often a way of defining who one *should* be, an index of the gap between one’s present performance and one’s ideal role’. See also Braden (1985) 42 and Rosenmeyer (1989) 52.

<sup>34</sup> Trinacty (2007) 71–2.

Medea's self-citation is also quasi-Stoic in the way it leads her to resemble an actor. Just as a theatrical performer adopts a part and endeavours subsequently to maintain it, so Medea strives to bridge the distance between her current and ideal self. In this regard, too, her behaviour relates to Seneca's advice in *Epistle* 120, where the main point of the theatrical analogy is to associate people with stage performers.<sup>35</sup> According to Seneca, most individuals change their masks frequently (*mutamus subinde personam*), but the wise man plays just a single role, that of himself (*unum hominem agere*). Thus, far from claiming that all acting is inherently deceptive, Seneca allows the possibility that consistent performance will in fact establish and enhance genuine selfhood. Playing one role is the same thing as being one person: Seneca exploits the semantic range of *agere* that 'subsumes within it both the act that is in earnest as well as the act that is just an act'.<sup>36</sup> Whenever Seneca's Medea resorts to the talismanic power of speaking her own name, whenever she projects her actions onto the silhouette of her pre-established role, whenever she seeks an audience for her atrocities (e.g. *Med.* 992–4), she points up the presence of the actor behind the theatrical event. In doing so, moreover, she overturns the insincerity typically associated with dramatic performance, because her self-aware enactment enables her to pursue and achieve unity; it closes rather than opens the gap between the performer as person and as role.

The theatrical analogy Seneca employs in *Epistle* 120.22, and which I regard as central to understanding Medea's bid for recognition, most likely derives from Stoic *persona* theory, in which individuals are understood to perform roles that merge with and thereby display normative aspects of their identity.<sup>37</sup> The main proponents of this theory, Panaetius and Cicero (*Off.*

<sup>35</sup> Frede (2007) 160 discusses the ways in which Stoic theatrical metaphors establish a link between actors and human beings; see also Gibson (2007) 125. Sources – mostly philosophical – that use the 'dramatic simile of life' have been collected by Kokolakis (1969).

<sup>36</sup> Gunderson (2015) 19.

<sup>37</sup> On the relationship between performance and identity in Stoic *persona* theory, see Burchell (1998) and Bartsch (2006) 220–9. Gill (1988) explores how the theory engages with concepts of personhood and personality. Nédoncelle (1948) provides useful background on the semantic range of the term *persona*.

1.107–115),<sup>38</sup> hold that human selfhood comprises four distinct facets or *personae*, each of which must be observed according to what befits it. The first of these *personae* is universal, pertaining to humans' shared condition as rational beings. The second *persona* rests upon individual attributes and aptitudes that are nonetheless conventional rather than radically unique (a good example might be someone with a talent for public speaking devoting themselves to oratory).<sup>39</sup> The third *persona* is imposed by circumstances, such as being born into wealth or poverty, and the fourth derives from choices individuals make over the course of their lives. Under this schema, tailoring one's conduct to one's *persona* is the ethical equivalent of achieving a seamless performance: both activities require an outwardly directed display of self-coherence intended to guarantee recognisable identity; actor and role are assumed ultimately to coalesce. Of course, Seneca's Medea is not strutting around on stage proclaiming the value of this particular Stoic theory, but her methods of self-assessment display deep affinities with it. Acute consciousness of the demands placed upon her by her dramatic *persona* recalls the Stoic injunction that people should not deviate from their assigned parts in life. In both cases, decisions about future behaviour are made according to their degree of fit with: a) the capacities one has displayed to date and the circumstances in which they have been exercised, and b) the expectations incumbent upon a given role. Like Medea, Stoic *persona* theory celebrates personal coherence and continuity achieved via sincere, self-actualising performance.

One does not have to look far in Seneca's tragedy to find evidence of Medea's consummate ability to 'play one person' (*unum hominem agere*). So unvarying are the traits she exhibits throughout the play that many of her final deeds are alluded to as

<sup>38</sup> Although Panaetius' work has been lost, it is widely regarded as the basis for Cicero's account of *persona* theory in *Off.* 1.107–21. Cicero himself (*Att.* 16.11.4) acknowledges Panaetius as his source. For more detail on Cicero's Panaetian background, see Dyck (1996) 17–29, and fuller treatments in Pohlenz (1934), and Gärtner (1974). De Lacy (1977) 169 demurs – against Cicero's own statement – that nothing specifically identifies Panaetius as the author of Cicero's fourfold *persona* theory but admits that there are very few alternatives.

<sup>39</sup> Further discussion in Gill (1994) 4607.

early as her opening monologue. To some extent, this is a standard Senecan technique, whereby the tragedies' initial scenes hint obliquely and ironically at events the audience knows will occur by the plays' end.<sup>40</sup> Yet the parallels between Medea's first speech and final actions are so close that they suggest a greater than usual effort on Seneca's part to link the two scenes. For example, Medea proclaims darkly that she has given birth to her revenge though she is not yet conscious of its precise form (*parta iam, parta ultio est: / peperit*, 'now it is born, my revenge is born: I have given birth' 25–6).<sup>41</sup> The metaphor resumes when she remarks, 'a home born through crime must be abandoned through crime' (*quae scelere parta est, scelere linquenda est domus*, 55). Further hints of her future infanticide lurk in Medea's exhortation to 'seek a path to revenge through the vitals themselves' (*per viscera ipsa quaere supplicio viam*, 40), referring in this instance to the entrails of a sacrificial animal, but also anticipating the murder of her offspring, and perhaps even evoking her later claim to extract with a sword any foetus recently implanted within her womb (*in matre si quo pignus etiamnunc latet / scrutabor ense viscera et ferro extraham*; 'if there is any love pledge hiding even now within this mother, I shall search my innards with the sword and drag it out', 1012–13).<sup>42</sup>

In her search for an appropriate course of action, one that will grant her the most successful form of revenge, Seneca's Medea acknowledges both implicitly and explicitly the contours of her destined role. Parity is all: future violence must develop from the models of the past; she vies to equal and to exceed the acknowledged potential of her earlier self. 'Whatever wickedness Phasis and Pontus witnessed, the Isthmus will witness . . . wounds and slaughter and death spreading through the limbs' (*quodcumque*

<sup>40</sup> Pratt (1983) 34.

<sup>41</sup> Hinds (2011) 24 notes that this line most likely alludes to Ovid *Her.* 12.208: *ingentes parturit ira minas*.

<sup>42</sup> Medea's reference to sacrifice in lines 38–40 is, in the words of Costa (1973) *ad loc.*, 'enigmatic and sinister': besides indicating actual, sacrificial animals, the *victimae* Medea mentions may be variously interpreted as Jason and Creusa or Medea's children, while, as Zwierlein (1986b) proposes, the *viscera* could be regarded as belonging to Medea herself. On the language of pregnancy and birth in Medea's opening monologue, see Rimell (2012) 227–8, and McAuley (2016) 219–20.

*vidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas, / videbit Isthmos ... / ... / ... vulnera et caedam et vagum / funus per artus*, 44–5; 47–8): the rough fates of Pelias and Absyrtus set the stage for the murders to come. Medea envisages for herself a *persona* in keeping with her past conduct and also with the established constraints of her dramatic part. The young Medea is asked to step aside in favour of the fully matured, fully murderous mother: *gravior exurgat dolor: / maiora iam me scelera post partus decent* ('a heavier grief swells up: greater crimes befit me now that I have given birth' 49–50). Once again, the remark foreshadows her infanticide and hence, the source of her perfected identity: *scelera* and *partus* jostle uncomfortably close together, as though Medea's mind was making connections it could not yet admit to itself, and in this context, *gravior* inevitably conjures the shadow of its cognate, *gravidus*.<sup>43</sup> Medea's thought processes in this scene are geared towards not just the right or the most effective act of vengeance, but the one that most suits her nature. The question lingering behind her opening monologue, and breaking through to the surface in line 50, is *quid deceat*? How should Medea respond to the situation in which she has been placed? What is the 'right' thing to do?<sup>44</sup>

This concept of *decorum*, of appropriateness, unites *persona* theory to its desired outcome of *constantia*: one achieves moral coherence by fulfilling one's allotted role in a way that 'fits' its requirements.<sup>45</sup> If one happens to be lame, for example, one should not attempt to become an athlete, for that would not be fitting or seemly. Significantly for Seneca's Medea, *decorum* is also closely connected to notions of self-performance, as the following passage from Cicero's *de Officiis* demonstrates:

expendere oportebit quid quisque habeat sui eaque moderari, nec velle experiri quam se aliena deceant; id enim maxime quemque decet quod est cuiusque maxime. Suum quisque igitur noscat ingenium, acremque se et bonorum et

<sup>43</sup> The *gravior/gravidus* link has also been spotted by Boyle (2014) *ad Med.* 48–50, and McAuley (2016) 220.

<sup>44</sup> Bartsch (2006) 264–5.

<sup>45</sup> The role of 'fitting behaviour' (τὸ πρέπον, *decorum*) in Stoic *persona* theory is discussed by Brunt (1975) 13–16; Gill (1988); Dyck (1996) *ad Cic. Off.* 1.93–9; Gibson (2007) 122–6.

## 1.1 *Medea*

vitiorum suorum iudicem praebat, ne scaenici plus quam nos videantur habere prudentiae. Illi enim non optimas sed sibi accommodatissimas fabulas eligunt

Each person ought to consider what characteristics belong to him, and to manage them, without wishing to test how someone else's characteristics might suit him; for what suits each person most of all is that which is most his own. Let each man therefore know his own natural disposition and show himself a sharp judge of his good morals and vices, so that actors may not seem to have more wisdom than us. For they select not the best plays, but the ones most appropriate for them (*Off.* 1.113–14)

Cicero's advice has much in common with the end of Seneca's *Epistle* 120: both texts compare people to actors; both stress the need for individuals to remain consistent within their chosen roles. Where Seneca warns against changing masks, Cicero cautions people not to exchange their characteristics for others' that may not suit them (*nec velle experiri quam se aliena deceant; id enim maxime quemque decet quod est cuiusque maxime*). On this analysis, achieving *decorum* is the equivalent of 'playing one person'. Naturally, this is only a metaphor in Stoic theory, a way of articulating specific ethical precepts; people are not really actors. But the theory undeniably promotes a view of the self as conscious performance, and when this view is transmitted into theatre proper, as is the case in Seneca's *Medea*, then stage acting undergoes a substantial metamorphosis and becomes less about pretence than about candour. What may seem the ultimate example of *inconstantia* – actors assuming someone else's characteristics – becomes instead the epitome of constant, unfeigned selfhood.

Whether Seneca's *Medea* actually draws on Cicero *Off.* 1.113–14 cannot be known for certain, but in addition to her use of *decent* in line 50, there is another tempting parallel towards the end of the play, when the heroine declares, *Medea nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis* ('now I am Medea; my character has grown through evils' 910). *Medea*'s avowed knowledge of her *ingenium* resembles Cicero's injunction for each man to know his own natural disposition (*suum quisque . . . noscat ingenium*); in each case, self-awareness is the key to achieving an appropriate identity.<sup>46</sup> For

<sup>46</sup> Gibson (2007) 121–2 and Dyck (1996) *ad Off.* 114 both see in Cicero's *suum quisque . . . noscat ingenium* a submerged reference to Delphi's γνῶθι σεαυτόν. Seneca's *Medea*, likewise, seems to know herself very well, and this possible link to Delphi's motto is

Medea, moreover, *ingenium*'s semantic association with birth (*gigno*; *genus*; *genius*) allows even tighter links to be drawn between her given disposition and her fully realised self: the protagonist's inborn nature is confirmed by her killing what she has borne.<sup>47</sup> This is a deeply disturbing form of *decorum*, but it is *decorum* all the same.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that Medea's *decorum* is fictional as well as quasi-human, because the term denotes not just appropriate behaviour, but also literary appropriateness.<sup>48</sup> Horace in the *Ars Poetica*, for instance, uses *decet* to describe the fit between style and genre (*singula quaeque locum teneant sortita decentem*; 'let each individual thing, allotted, keep to its appropriate place' *Ars* 92), or the way a character's words harmonise with his or her emotions (*tristitia maestum / voltum verba decent, iratum plena minarum*; 'sad words suit a sorrowful face, threatening words an angry one' *Ars* 105–6). Viewed against this background, Medea's aspiration to commit suitable crimes becomes a meta-literary and, more narrowly, metatheatrical statement that draws attention to her conduct as a fabricated dramatic character. In fact, her fictional and implied human identities overlap, because metatheatricality helps the audience comprehend Medea's self-consistency: only if we know Medea's story in advance can we truly appreciate the uniformity of her conduct.<sup>49</sup> Like performance, *decorum* is a concept that straddles the spheres of ethics and aesthetics, thereby ensuring that Medea accomplishes *constantia* in that most inconstant of mediums: fiction.

### *Past Continuous*

As I have noted already in the introduction to this chapter, coherence can only ever be judged over stretches of time, when habits

reinforced by Medea's ancestry: she is the daughter of the Sun, and Apollo is the Sun god.

<sup>47</sup> McAuley (2016) 224 on Medea's *ingenium*: 'Medea has given birth to – and crucially for – herself.'

<sup>48</sup> The overlap between aesthetic/literary and ethical appropriateness is discussed by Gibson (2007) 115–47. Seo (2013) 13–15 and 94–123 asserts *decorum*'s importance as a guiding principle for characterisation in Latin literature.

<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Gill (1987) 32 remarks of Medea's final monologue: 'Medea's self-reinforcement by her image of herself gains force by allusion to the literary tradition in which that image has come to be shaped.'

are acquired and individual actions crystallise into patterns. For Seneca's *Medea*, this kind of *constantia* manifests itself in her obsessive concern for continuity with the past. What has happened before must happen again, over and over, because this is what it means for *Medea* to be 'Medea'.

Scholars have rightly recognised that return is a major motif in this tragedy, as *Medea* desires simultaneously to retrace her steps (*redire*) and to recuperate what she has lost (*reddere*).<sup>50</sup> In response to Creon's order that she leave his kingdom and 'go and complain to the Colchians' (*i, querere Colchis*, 197), *Medea* agrees on one condition: 'I'm going back, but he who brought me should take me' (*redeo. Qui avexit, ferat*, 197). As Lisl Walsh observes, Seneca's *Medea* 'views the present as a logical repetition of past events'; she has fled with Jason several times before so it is only to be expected that the same should happen now.<sup>51</sup> 'Give me back my crime', she demands of Creon (*redde crimen*, 246) – by which she means Jason – and later in the same exchange, 'give the fugitive back her ship, or give back her companion' (*redde fugienti ratem / vel redde comitem*, 272–3). She repeats the request to Jason himself in Act 3 in a move that corroborates her coherence at an intratextual level as well as demonstrating the two scenes' repetitious similarity: 'repay this suppliant' (*redde supplici ... vicem*, 482); 'give back to the exile what's hers' (*redde fugienti sua*, 489). *Medea* envisages departure from Corinth only in terms of revisiting a familiar set of locations rather than setting out for somewhere new: 'To whom,' she asks Jason, 'are you sending me back?' (*ad quos remittis?* 451, repeated almost verbatim at 459: *quo me remittis?*) She argues that she cannot possibly return to Phasis or Colchis, the Symplegades, Iolcus, Tempe (451–7). Contrary to the *Argo*'s daring outward exploration of new territory (301–79),<sup>52</sup> *Medea*, its most famous cargo, continually expresses her wish to retrace old steps.

<sup>50</sup> The foundational study is Schiesaro (2003) 209–13, followed by Walsh (2012) 77–80, and Slaney (2019) 62–70. Guastella (2001) 200–3 discusses more broadly the role of past, present, and concepts of repayment in *Medea*'s logic. On general motifs of repetition in Senecan tragedy: Boyle (1983), and Gunderson (2017).

<sup>51</sup> Walsh (2012) 79.

<sup>52</sup> On the *Argo*'s programmatic importance within Seneca's *Medea*, see Slaney (2019) 70–9.

Hers is not purely an impulse towards regression, however, since Medea's statements look forwards to the future just as much as they look backwards to her undeniably chequered past.<sup>53</sup> In wanting to flee *with Jason* (she even invites him to join her at 525: *innocens mecum fuge*; 'flee with me, guiltless'), Medea hopes not only to reinstate a (presumably) happier period of her life, but also to begin again, if not precisely *anew*. When she ponders how Jason ought to have reacted to the marriage foisted upon him by Creon, she argues first for suicide (138–9), but retracts the idea immediately in favour of his continued life: *si potest, vivat meus, / ut fuit, Iason* ('if possible, let Jason live, as he was – mine' 140–1). Her ideal is for Jason to remain the same, a hope that seems to encapsulate a certain wistful affection on Medea's part, but also hints at the story's grim end. For Medea's hope will be fulfilled: Jason will never really belong to nor be seen as belonging to anyone else; he will remain hers and that is the core of her revenge. Her sweet sentiment turns sour, but still, the two meanings occupy the same continuum. Essentially, Medea resurrects the past in order to move on: *scelera te hortentur tua / et cuncta redeant* ('let your crimes encourage you, and let them return – all of them' 129–30). What she has previously committed for Jason, she will now commit against him.

To attain coherence, one's endings need to reflect one's beginnings, which is a fitting aim for the protagonist of a play that commences and concludes with the same word (*di*, 1; *deos*, 1027). Medea seeks balance as she orchestrates her tragic performance:

paria narrentur tua  
repudia thalamis: quo virum linques modo?  
hoc quo secuta es. rumpe iam segnes moras:  
quae scelere parta est, scelere linquenda est domus.

May the stories of your divorce  
equal those of your marriage: how should you leave your husband?  
The same way you followed him. Now break through these torpid delays:  
a home born through crime must be abandoned through crime.

(*Med.* 52–5)

<sup>53</sup> Here I diverge slightly from Schiesaro (2003) 209–13, who emphasises the retrogressive aspect of Seneca's Medea, and from Guastella (2001) 199, who argues that Medea's impending 'divorce' from Jason represents an irreparable break between her past and her present.

In Medea's eyes, *repudium* brings her marriage full circle and is less a new event than the recasting of an old one.<sup>54</sup> It both builds upon and outstrips its earlier model, which is what Medea also hopes for her identity throughout the drama. Rhetorical antithesis reinforces at the level of composition the equilibrium she attributes to her actions: *quo . . . linques . . . / . . . quo secuta es; quae scelere parta est, scelere linquenda est domus*. Once again, the implicit logic of Medea's reasoning is that she will dissolve her relationship with Jason via infanticide, just as she initiated it, long ago, through fratricide: although she does not yet realise it at this early point in the drama, her children's deaths will replicate and pay for that of Absyrtus. More generally, she looks to her formerly wild passion for Jason, to its stimulus that drove her to dare the unthinkable, as a model for her future revenge: *si quaeris odio, misera, quem statuas modum / imitare amorem* ('if you wonder what limit, wretch, to put on your hate, copy your love' 397–8).

It is of course possible to take *narrentur* in line 52 as a metapoetic marker that activates memories of Medea's past appearances in literature. Though a fairly generic allusion, the most likely text this word calls to mind is *Heroides* 12, where Medea narrates the circumstances of her marriage to Jason and its blood-soaked dowry in terms similar to, albeit far more muted than, Seneca's (*Her.* 12.113–6; 199–203). Yet a direct intertext is not absolutely necessary here, because even without one Medea's exhortation still functions as a meta-literary promise to cohere with preceding representations of her character. Not only does her personal past duplicate her poetic past, but her personal future duplicates it as well: the tale of her *repudium* has likewise already been told, many times over, and this Medea aspires to match it (*paria*) by reiterating her actions in a context simultaneously personal, mythic, and poetic. Hence, in terms of her fictional as well as her quasi-human identity, Seneca's Medea vows to unite her past, present, and future into one seamless whole.

This obsession with temporal continuity also emerges at the micro level of Medea's grammar, specifically in her preference for

<sup>54</sup> On the Roman quality of Medea's *repudium* and its relationship to actual Roman legal procedures, see Abrahamsen (1999); Guastella (2001); McAuley (2016) 211–13.

## Coherence

reiterating in quick succession the same verb in two different tenses:

quodcumque vidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas  
videbit Isthmos

whatever wickedness Phasis and Pontus witnessed  
the Isthmos will witness

(*Med.* 44–5)

fugimus, Iason, fugimus

We have fled, Jason, we are fleeing

(*Med.* 447)

excidimus tibi?  
numquam excidemus

Have you forgotten me?  
You will never forget me<sup>55</sup>

(*Med.* 561–2)

Medea's iterative language forges links from past to present, past to future, in a bid to ensure parity between her deeds and their deserts, her former and current self, her suffering and Jason's. Very occasionally, these verbal doublets signify how Medea's life in Corinth differs from her former good fortune, as when the heroine remarks to Creon that she was a more than eligible match as a young Colchian virgin: *petebant tunc meos thalamos proci, / qui nunc petuntur* ('back then princes were seeking my hand in marriage, princes who now are sought' 218–19). But, most of the time, Medea's *geminatio* constitutes an acknowledgement of patterns of behaviour in her life, and of the symbolic similarity that couples Jason's losses to her own. 'May the children be lost to their father's kisses; they have been lost to their mother's', she avers towards the end of her last monologue (*osculis pereant patris, / periere matris*, 950–1). Payback, like self-formation, is all about balance, which Medea achieves right down to the level of syntax.

<sup>55</sup> More precisely, 'have I slipped from you[r memory]? I shall never slip [from your memory]', but the translation I give above captures the punch of Medea's (and Seneca's) Latin.

## 1.1 *Medea*

I have examined already how *Medea*'s opening monologue gestures towards the play's culminating events, but there is one example still outstanding that deserves consideration here, namely, the heroine's flight from the stage in an airborne chariot. In her initial complaint over Jason's betrayal, *Medea* appeals to her ancestor, the Sun, for rescue:

da, da per auras curribus patriis vehi,  
committe habenas, genitor, et flagrantibus  
ignifera loris tribue moderari iuga

Let, let me ride through the air in my ancestral chariot.  
Entrust me with the reins, father, give me leave  
to guide the fiery steeds with blazing straps

(*Med.* 32–4)

The image conjured in these lines is reified by the play's end, and lexical echoes further confirm the link: *Medea*'s final line to Jason is, 'I shall ride through the air in a winged chariot' (*ego inter auras aliti curru vehar* 1025, cf. *per auras . . . vehi*, 32).<sup>56</sup> It is precisely these kinds of parallels that establish *Medea*'s identity as a coherent individual. The woman the audience sees at the tragedy's outset is the same one Jason sees at its end, in her famous assertion of *anagnorisis*. To some extent, of course, this is not surprising, because moments of recognition are predicated upon connecting the past to the present and in Greek tragedy, *anagnorisis* typically recalls events that have happened offstage in a time prior to the drama's beginning.<sup>57</sup> For example, Aeschylus' *Electra* recognises the cloth she wove for baby Orestes; Sophocles' *Oedipus* discovers himself by tracing his origins back to the moment his parents exposed him, and to his quarrel at the crossroads. But Seneca's *Medea* differs from this trend because the past recalled most powerfully in its recognition scene is the protagonist's initial monologue, and this compositional choice, in turn, allows Seneca to shift his emphasis from revelation to confirmation. By calibrating a careful set of parallels between the play's first and final scenes, Seneca calls attention to the heroine's self-conscious continuity rather than, as

<sup>56</sup> Boyle (2014) *ad Med.* 32–6.

<sup>57</sup> Zeitlin (2012).

happens in most recognition scenes, the recovery of a seemingly lost identity that has been distorted or mistaken over time.

*Medea and the sapiens*

It may seem odd, at first, to attribute quasi-Stoic or Stoic-inflected *constantia* to Seneca's Medea, a woman in the grip of passion and plotting a terrible revenge. It can and has been argued that Medea's identity actually disintegrates over the course of the play.<sup>58</sup> If one takes the Stoic position, broadly stated, that virtue means following nature, which in turn means exercising one's *ratio*, then Medea cannot be said to attain even remotely Stoic status. If, as Seneca asserts, nobody except the *sapiens* (i.e. the ideal Stoic wise man) can succeed in 'playing the role of one man', doesn't Medea's submission to *ira* and *furor* mean that she fluctuates and must, by definition, be inconsistent?

There is no easy answer to this question. True, Medea's final monologue (893–977) presents a self divided and indecisive, very much on the Euripidean model.<sup>59</sup> Seneca's heroine wavers between successive swellings of spousal anger (916–25; 950–7) and maternal pity (926–47); she addresses her *furor* (930), *dolor* (914; 944), and *ira* (916; 953) as though they were independent entities battling for control of her soul; she justifies infanticide via the wild logic that her children stand in for those Creusa never had (921–2) and that their deaths will be payment for her betrayal of Aetes and Absyrtus (957; 970–1); she even hallucinates that her brother is present, accompanied by a crowd of Furies (958–68) and committing retributive murder through her unwilling hand (969–70). Reinforcing these impressions of wild fluctuation is Medea's description, at several points in the tragedy, as *incerta* – 'unstable', 'indecisive'. The Nurse calls her such at 382 and Medea twice applies the adjective to herself, first when she admits to being 'carried along in all directions, unsteady, frenzied, mad' (*incerta*

<sup>58</sup> Henry and Walker (1967) 175–9 and (1985) 113–14; Gill (2006) 421–35. Tietze Larson (1994) 140–5 argues for precisely the opposite course from what I'm pursuing here, namely that Seneca's Medea is a prime example of *inconstantia*.

<sup>59</sup> The two monologues' parallels and differences are the subject of careful study by Gill (1987). On Medea's psychological instability, see also Gill (2009) 66–76.

*vecors mente non sana feror / partes in omnes*, 123–4) and later, in her final monologue, when she is tossed by competing surges of love and hate: ‘a rip-tide sweeps me along, uncertain’ (*anceps aestus incertam rapit*, 939). The terminology is significant because Seneca elsewhere envisages the Stoic sage possessing psychological stability to such an extreme extent that it sometimes verges on immobility (e.g. *Clem.* 2.5.5; *Ep.* 59.14; *Const.* 2–3).<sup>60</sup> If the *sapiens* will not be moved, where does that leave Seneca’s Medea?

Clearly, there is *some* element of constancy in her *persona*, despite the evidence I have cited to the contrary. This coherence is highlighted not just by my preceding discussion, but also by a particular trend in Senecan scholarship that has been gaining momentum over the last few decades. Recent work by Shadi Bartsch and Christopher Star has demonstrated how deeply Stoic notions of selfhood permeate Seneca’s tragedies, to the extent that Seneca’s *dramatis personae* employ Stoic methods of self-construction to vastly un-Stoic ends.<sup>61</sup> Shakespearian scholars likewise have detected in Seneca’s tragic *corpus* a distinct inclination towards ‘amoral constancy’, whereby characters cleave to their wickedness and so exhibit a disturbing similarity to the *sapiens*.<sup>62</sup> In a related vein, Roy Gibson has shown how Ovid spots and playfully slips through loopholes in Cicero’s theory of appropriate behaviour.<sup>63</sup> The conduct of Seneca’s Medea could likewise be regarded as illustrating potential contradictions at the heart of Cicero’s and Seneca’s ethical theory, since emphasis on self-consistency leaves open the slim possibility of people persevering in wickedness, and emphasis laid upon fitting behaviour – *quid decet* – can surely lead to individuals perpetrating further crimes on the basis that such action suits their moral makeup.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Miles (1996) 40–51, and further discussion below, 85–6.

<sup>61</sup> Bartsch (2006) 255–81; Star (2006) and (2012) 62–83. Johnson (1988) 93–7 also sees in Seneca’s Medea a perverted image of the Stoic *proficiens*.

<sup>62</sup> Brower (1971) 164, and Miles (1996) 57–62. More broadly, Braden (1985) 28–62.

<sup>63</sup> Gibson (2007) 117–29.

<sup>64</sup> Gill (2006) 431–2 argues that if a decision is made in favour of the passions according to what is mistakenly perceived as appropriate, this will not result in true, Stoic *decorum*. Cicero, too, circumvents the possibility of ‘bad’ *decorum* by declaring *admodum autem tenenda sunt sua cuique, non vitiosa, sed tamen propria, quo facilius decorum illud,*

Such cracks in the logic of *decorum* are sometimes visible in Seneca's prose works, as in the assertion at *de Vita Beata* 3.3 that, 'the happy life is one in harmony with its own nature' (*beata est ... vita conveniens naturae suae*) and similarly, *Epistle* 41.8, where humans are said to achieve moral perfection by 'living in accordance with their own natures' (*secundum naturam suam vivere*). Admittedly, both passages situate self-coherence squarely in the context of *ratio*, which should make such harmony the preserve of virtue alone. But Seneca's self-reflexive formulation, bereft of qualifiers, remains troubling. As Elizabeth Asmis notes, 'one's own nature is ... an ambiguous expression. It can denote human nature in general, as characterised by rationality, and it can also denote each human being's individual nature.'<sup>65</sup> By exalting the life lived *ὁμολογουμένως* ('in agreement') but omitting *τῇ φύσει* ('with nature'), Seneca opens the door, just slightly, to a- or immoral constancy, where individuals perfect their own natures regardless of virtue's normative demands.<sup>66</sup> Medea coheres with herself even if she doesn't cohere with *ratio*.

The theatrical metaphor of Stoic *persona* theory is likewise problematic, because it leaves little if any room between the role and the performer: if you are your *persona*, what happens when the most appropriate *persona* for you is Medea, or Atreus?<sup>67</sup> An approach to selfhood that relies so much on dramatic analogies inevitably runs into problems when placed in actual drama. Seneca's Medea does exhibit the irrational, passionate behaviour

*quod quaerimus, retineatur* (*Off.* 1.110) The difficulty in Senecan drama, however, is that a character's *decorum* is primarily literary – for example Medea cannot *not* commit infanticide – and therefore tends to warp the parameters of ethical self-development. Since Medea's dramatic *persona* is such that she must engage in criminal acts, pursuing ethical *decorum* requires her to decide in favour of destructive, irrational behaviour.

<sup>65</sup> Asmis (1990) 226.

<sup>66</sup> Evidence for the Stoic principle of 'living in accordance with nature' is conflicting, with some of its formulations indicating, at best, a strand of individualism in Stoic thought, at worst, solipsism. Stobaeus (*SVF* III 12) says that Cleanthes added *τῇ φύσει* ('with nature') to Zeno's *τὸ ὁμολογουμένως ζῆν* ('to live in agreement'). Diogenes Laertius 7.87 attributes *τῇ φύσει* to Zeno. Chrysippus glossed 'nature' as *τὴν τε κοινὴν καὶ ἰδίως τὴν ἀνθρώπων* ('both common nature and private human nature' *SVF* III 4; Diog. Laer. 7.89). For further discussion of the phrase's individualistic/solipsistic implications, see Braden (1985) 19–20, Asmis (1990) 225–6.

<sup>67</sup> As Gibson (2007) 122–6 demonstrates, this issue troubles Cicero's treatment of *decorum* and *persona* theory throughout *Off.* 1.92–151.

that brands her the antithesis of the *sapiens*, yet she also displays a remarkable ability to monitor and fashion her conduct along Stoic lines.

Such an impasse need not imply that Seneca intended to criticise in his tragedies principles he had preached elsewhere;<sup>68</sup> the cause is subtler than that, and may well lie not (or not only) in the potential conflicts of philosophy, but in Seneca's vocabulary. Because Seneca conceives of identity and morality in Stoic terms, he uses his arsenal of distinctly Stoic language to describe people and their morals, regardless of whether those people are real or fictive.<sup>69</sup> In the case of his *Medea*, acts of self-exhortation and her desire to arrive at an ideal version of herself must be conveyed in broadly Stoic vocabulary because this, for Seneca, is the definitive way of portraying moral identity, judgement, and action. The uniformity of Seneca's style across his philosophical and dramatic oeuvre leads to friction between artistry and ethics, but that friction may not be entirely intentional on Seneca's part.

A clear example of this stylistic overlap is Seneca's Cato who, in the *de Providentia*, behaves in almost exactly the same manner as Seneca's *Medea*.<sup>70</sup> The Cato portrayed in this text cites his own name as a means of ensuring that his impending suicide fits the reputation he has so far assumed: 'Cato has a way out' (*Cato qua exeat habet, Prov. 2.10*); 'this sword will grant Cato the freedom it was not able to grant the fatherland' (*ferrum istud . . . libertatem, quam patriae non potuit, Catoni dabit, Prov. 2.10*); 'for Cato, seeking death at another's hands is as disgraceful as seeking life'

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Dingel (1974) 118, who argues that Seneca's tragedies contradict his philosophy at the most fundamental level. The majority of scholars dealing with this issue pursue a more moderate approach, asserting that Seneca's plays engage with his philosophy chiefly by providing negative *exempla* of the passions; a representative sample of such scholarship includes: Knoche 1972 [1941]; Marti (1945); Lefèvre 1972 [1969]; Pratt (1983) 73–131; Henry and Walker (1985); Davis (2003) 69–74. Star (2012) 83 comes to one of the subtlest possible conclusions: 'In his tragedies, Seneca is neither negating, inverting, nor denying his philosophical ideals; rather, he is expanding them.'

<sup>69</sup> Shelton (1978) 70–1 proffers a similar explanation for the quasi-Stoic characterisation of Seneca's Hercules: 'he has the qualities admired in a Stoic sage, but he abuses them. Is Seneca trying to demonstrate the dangerous potential of the Stoic sage? I think, rather, that he characterises people in Stoic terms because these are the most common to him . . . Stoic terms may simply reflect Seneca's manner of expression.'

<sup>70</sup> Johnson (1988) 88 notes a broad correspondence between these two figures. Star (2006) 218–21 sees in the Cato of *Prov. 2.10* a model of Stoic self-command that is replicated in the tragedies.

(*tam turpe est Catoni mortem ab ullo petere quam vitam*, *Prov.* 2.10). Like Medea, Cato envisages his self as a role from which he should not deviate; he treats his past identity as a paradigm for future conduct. He even refers explicitly to the concept of *decorum* when he defines death by another's hand as 'a compact with fate that does not suit [his] greatness' (*fati conventio . . . quae non deceat magnitudinem nostram*, *Prov.* 2.10).<sup>71</sup> The evident parallels between Cato and Medea generate difficulties for Seneca's ethical theory: while Cato puts his precepts to a relatively innocuous purpose and ends up being applauded for his *constantia*, Medea adopts the same attitudes as a means of accomplishing bloody revenge. The outcome depends upon which character one chooses to maintain.

Another crucial point to emerge from Medea and Cato's resemblance is that invoking one's own name does not have to be metatheatrical. Although Seneca sketches Cato's death in undeniably dramatic terms and frames the episode as a 'spectacle worthy for a god to gaze upon' (*spectaculum dignum ad quod respiciat . . . deus*, *Prov.* 2.9),<sup>72</sup> Cato is not performing himself as an intrinsically theatrical role; he is a person, not a character. Further, the episode's dramatic colouring, combined with its emphasis on *constantia* and *decorum*, suggests the underlying influence of Stoic *persona* theory. Cato's performance is intended to validate his identity via sincere enactment of a pre-existing role. Like Medea's reasoning throughout her tragedy, Cato's relies on the memory of who he was and the expectations that he and others have developed from observing patterns in his behaviour.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> In a similar manner, Cicero in *Off.* 1.112 argues that suicide was an act suited to Cato's *persona*: *atque haec differentia naturarum tantam habet vim, ut non numquam mortem sibi ipse consciscere alius debeat, alius in eadem causa non debeat. Num enim alia in causa M. Cato fuit, alia ceteri, qui se in Africa Caesari tradiderunt? . . . Catoni cum incredibilem tribuisset natura gravitatem, eamque ipse perpetua constantia roboravisset semperque in proposito susceptoque consilio permansisset, moriendum potius quam tyranni vultus aspiciendus fuit.*

<sup>72</sup> On Cato's death as spectacle and Cato as actor, see Edwards (2002) 390–1; Solimano (1991) 70–1; Hijmans (1966) 237–8.

<sup>73</sup> Walsh (2012) 80 argues that the major difference between Medea and Cato in the *de Providentia* is Medea's reliance on past versions of herself, as opposed to Cato's reliance on abstract principles, but I disagree: although Seneca's Cato has not been subject to the same literary repetition as his Medea, he still conceives of his past self as a model for his current conduct.

Similar to Medea asking for recognition at the end of her play, Cato seeks self-confirmation during and through the last moments of his life, his suicide; a coherent performance, like a coherent identity, is best judged at the end.

There are other ways, too, in which Medea resembles a Stoic *sapiens*, even in her seemingly irrational final monologue. Star points out that Medea's last big speech in the drama exhibits numerous examples of Stoic-style self-exhortation via which the protagonist attempts to recover a state of *constantia*.<sup>74</sup> Utterances such as *nunc hoc age, anime* ('do it now, soul' 976) and *quaerere materiam, dolor* ('seek your material, o my pain' 914) recall the self-command Seneca advocates elsewhere as a means of ensuring coherent conduct: 'demand it of yourself', he tells Lucilius in *Epistle* 120.22 (*a te exige*).<sup>75</sup> The Cato of *de Providentia* likewise uses self-directed imperatives to guarantee the continuity of his actions: *aggredere, anime, diu meditatatum opus, eripe te a rebus humanis* ('embark on this long-contemplated task, my soul: rip yourself away from human affairs' 2.10). Admittedly, Cato's route to *constantia* is smoother than Medea's, but, even though she undergoes an intense struggle with opposing desires, she nonetheless reasserts her recognisably vengeful *persona* by the tragedy's end. Moments before plunging her sword into her second son, she has regained enough confidence to command not just execution of the task, but active enjoyment of it: *perfruere lento scelere, ne propera, dolor* ('take pleasure in this gradual crime, my pain, don't rush' 1016).<sup>76</sup>

As an epilogue to this section, I wish to consider briefly one more, potential barrier to Medea's attaining *constantia*: trickery. Deceit is an undeniable motif in this play. Characters fear Medea as an architect of *fraus* (e.g. 181; 290–1), and their fear is not without reason, for she has plotted it in the past (475) and plots it again in the present (564; 693; 881). *dolus* likewise figures as a prominent term in the tragedy (e.g. 496; 882). This vocabulary of deception is sometimes treated as having metatheatrical currency because it implies pretence, which is assumed in turn to imply

<sup>74</sup> Star (2012) 77–82.

<sup>75</sup> Star (2012) 23–69.

<sup>76</sup> The similarities I examine here rest primarily on Medea's *manner* of speech, but there are also examples of her *content* reflecting Stoic precepts; see Chapter 4, 289–91.

dramatic performance.<sup>77</sup> Stage actors can be said to deceive the audience inasmuch as they don a *persona* other than their own and lead us to believe, however superficially and momentarily, in the fictions they create.<sup>78</sup> Playwrights achieve the same kind of effect, albeit through less immediately devious means. On this basis, Medea's skill in trickery could be said to enlarge her characterisation as a self-conscious performer and even as a quasi-dramaturg, or poet. However, while Seneca's Medea undoubtedly occupies these roles, she does so via sincere rather than deceptive conduct. Not once in her interaction with other characters does she fabricate what she feels or intends. While she may tell the occasional half-truth, she never really dissembles, and in the face of so much self-conscious illeism, she cannot seriously be thought of as playing any role other than her own. Instead, the deception taking place in this tragedy happens because of misinterpretation, because, for example, Jason believes Medea values her sons more than her marriage (442–3), or because Creon wants to be viewed as a fair ruler and thus grants her an extra day, despite his deep mistrust (285–99). Just as Medea enacts a genuine *persona*, so, paradoxically, she achieves *fraus* without being *falsa* herself.

### *Recognition without Revelation*

I have argued so far that Medea's recognition comes as no real surprise, that the play's audience, at least, ends up recognising a figure it has known all along and of whose capacities it has been forewarned throughout the drama. Jason, one could argue, is in a slightly different position, because his *anagnorisis* of Medea involves painful realisation of his own errors. What Jason experiences in the tragedy's final scene is a moment of re-appraising and re-knowing (hence: ἀνα-γνωρίζω) a person he knew before, but whom he had seriously underestimated.<sup>79</sup> Forcing Jason to this

<sup>77</sup> See in particular Michelon (2015) 46–54.

<sup>78</sup> Thus, Michelon (2015) 17 calls deception the 'meccanismo fondamentale dell'azione teatrale' ('essential mechanism of theatrical action'). For my caveats on this approach, though, see Chapter 3, 212–13.

<sup>79</sup> Thus, Cave (1988) 33: "Ana-gnōrīsis", like 're-cognition' ... implies a recovery of something once known rather than merely a shift from ignorance to knowledge."

new level of comprehension is certainly one of Medea's aims, but it is overshadowed by her need for Jason to validate her self-construction and acknowledge its coherence. Significantly, she phrases her final question to him in terms that call attention to her normative identity: not, 'do you recognise me?' but 'do you recognise your wife?' The third-personal formulation invites Jason to acknowledge an essential congruence between Medea's individual behaviour and the role it has been designed to fulfil. Further, it invites Jason to recognise in Medea precisely the woman he once married, the woman whose conduct has never really changed in spite of her wildly fluctuating temper. In the words of Alessandro Schiesaro:<sup>80</sup>

To be able to 'recognise' Medea as 'Medea', or Atreus as 'Atreus', is predicated on the immutability of fundamental characteristics which define them as what they are . . . They both guarantee that past patterns will prevail: they rise from the certainty of a model which their antagonists need to learn. Once they do, once they 'recognise', they admit the fallibility of their desire, or hope, for change.

This Medea is the same as she always was, and Jason's primary purpose in the final scene is to corroborate her *constantia*.

Another crucial way in which Jason validates Medea's identity is through his role as spectator.<sup>81</sup> When he arrives on the scene, Medea calls him *spectator iste* (993) and declares, *quidquid sine isto fecimus sceleris perit* ('whatever crime I committed outside his presence has been wasted', 994). Besides being metatheatrical and deeply sadistic,<sup>82</sup> this desire for an audience is a symptom of Medea's careful self-fashioning, since, as Seneca and Cicero both imply, verification of consistent conduct depends on its being seen. One's personal coherence is, in the end, discerned and judged by others, and the normative nature of Stoic *personae* implies outward evaluation as opposed to private, individual fulfilment. Even in the case of people evaluating *constantia* for and within themselves, the activity requires one to develop a self-critical gaze that performs the function of an external assessor: Lucilius must

<sup>80</sup> Schiesaro (2003) 213.

<sup>81</sup> Dupont (1995) 185. Braden (1985) 61 remarks that Seneca's tragic protagonists often desire validation from their victims.

<sup>82</sup> On sadistic spectatorship in Senecan tragedy, see Littlewood (2004) 215–39.

monitor himself as ‘Lucilius’, Cato as ‘Cato’, Medea as ‘Medea’.<sup>83</sup> This is exactly what the heroine of Seneca’s *Medea* has been doing over the course of her tragedy, and in the play’s last few moments, she hands that responsibility over to Jason. He is there not just to be an internal, metatheatrical audience for Medea’s spectacular performance, but also to provide acknowledgement of her identity. Once again, the final exchange in this drama hinges on the authorising rather than revelatory function of recognition. *anagnorisis* in this instance does not involve unmasking or disclosure, but continuity and validation.

### *Recognition without Reunion*

So, Medea achieves coherent selfhood in the end, but it comes at the expense of everything else. Whereas conventional recognition scenes tend to involve a renewal of family relationships,<sup>84</sup> Seneca’s Medea realises the opposite, namely acknowledgement of her ability to destroy interpersonal ties. Her request that Jason recognise her as his wife plays ironically on the ideas of reunion and legitimacy germane to *anagnorisis* in both tragic and comic plotlines. Such recognitions typically reassert and also authorise relationships between people: Electra regains her brother; Ion reclaims his status as Creusa’s child; Oedipus learns simultaneously his true parentage and the socio-sexual boundaries he has unwittingly crossed.<sup>85</sup> The results are even more pronounced in New Comedy and *palliata*, where long-lost children are recovered and status issues resolved so that long-term lovers are finally able to unite; *anagnorisis* brings with it the prospect of restoring order to previously incomplete, incorrect, or unbalanced collectivities.<sup>86</sup> Seneca’s Medea, however, longs to cut all social ties, and the profusion of family terms used by Seneca throughout the tragedy

<sup>83</sup> This ‘internalisation’ of social judgement is a marked trait of Seneca’s philosophy: see Roller (2001) 77–88 and Bartsch (2006) 183–229.

<sup>84</sup> On the key role of family relationships in *anagnorisis* see Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b, as well as the structural study by Sissa (2006).

<sup>85</sup> Goldhill (1986) 84.

<sup>86</sup> Konstan (1983).

only serves to emphasise his heroine's ruinous pursuit of isolation and autonomy.

One example is Medea's obsessive desire to be acknowledged as Jason's wife.<sup>87</sup> She begins her tragedy by invoking 'the gods of marriage and Lucina guardian of the marriage-bed' (*di coniugales tuque genialis tori, / Lucina, custos* 1–2), and refers to herself as *coniunx* far more frequently than other characters in the play refer to her as such.<sup>88</sup> Like the Medea of Ovid's *Heroides*, she focuses on her dowry and on the impossible process of restitution she feels that Jason ought to perform as a consequence of their 'divorce': *tibi patria cessit, tibi pater frater pudor / hac dote nupsi; redde fugienti sua* ('my fatherland fell to you, my brother, father, modesty. I married you with this dowry; give the fugitive back what is hers' 487–8). Her opening speech even includes the bitter wish that Jason's future sufferings will make his marriage to her seem a blessing in retrospect: *me coniugem optet* ('let him long for me as his wife' 22).<sup>89</sup> In fact, the wish verges on paradox, because having Jason long for her as his wife is precisely what Medea wants at this early point in the drama. Yet she also wants to achieve her identity by destroying family ties so that Jason no longer has any wife at all.

The same paradoxical tension underlies her final request for Jason's recognition, for Medea wants Jason to claim her and no other in the role of his wife, but she also wants to confirm that she has abolished all of that role's actual, social requirements. This conflict is heightened by her use of the verb *agnoscere*, which can refer specifically to legitimisation and family reunion, as is often the case in descriptions of parents legally recognising their offspring: *quem ille natum non agnoverat, eundem moriens suum esse dixerat* ('he had not acknowledged him as a son, but declared him so on his deathbed' *Nep. Ag.* 1.4); *expositum qui agnoverit, solutis alimentis recipiat* ('a father who recognises a son exposed in infancy should take him back only after having paid for his

<sup>87</sup> See in particular Abrahamsen (1999); Guastella (2001); Walsh (2012), and McAuley (2016) 201–28. Frank (1995) also makes some pertinent observations about the rhetorical effects of kinship terms in Senecan tragedy.

<sup>88</sup> A tendency noted by Abrahamsen (1999) 110–13.

<sup>89</sup> Although Zwierlein (1986a) follows Axelson in emending *optet* to *opto*, I agree with Hine (2000) *ad loc.* that the MSS reading should be retained because the contradictory sentiment seems typically Senecan.

upbringing' Quint. *Inst.* 7.1.14). Placed alongside these examples, Medea's request for recognition evokes familial restoration and the resumption of social duties: Jason is called upon to recognise Medea's spousal status in a legal as well as emotional sense, even while Medea's vengeful acts have precluded the possibility of reunion.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Seneca's recognition scene hints at only to deny the renewal that *anagnorisis* typically brings. Confirmation of Medea's identity prevents rather than generates social reintegration.

Such allusions to reunification haunt the final exchange between Jason and Medea as if to remind the audience of other, happier versions of dramatic recognition. For example, when Jason arrives on stage, Medea describes the culmination of her revenge as a moment that reverses time and reinstates her as a virginal Colchian princess:<sup>91</sup>

iam iam recepi sceptrā germanum patrem,  
 spoliūque Colchi pecudis auratae tenent;  
 rediere regna, raptā virginitas redit.  
 o placida tandem numina, o festum diem,  
 o nuptialem!

Now, now I have regained sceptre, brother, father,  
 and the Colchians keep the spoils of the golden fleece;  
 the kingdom has been restored, my plundered virginity restored.  
 O divine powers, finally favourable, O festive day,  
 O wedding day!

(*Med.* 982–6)

Medea's assertion is a hyperbolic reflection of the customary events of recognition scenes, in which brothers really are united with sisters, and fathers with children. Even Medea's perversely gleeful reminder that this is Jason's wedding day (*o nuptialem!*) conjures, obliquely, the love matches that tend to conclude New Comic and *palliata* plots.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, with Creusa now dead by

<sup>90</sup> The legality – or otherwise – of Medea's marriage to Jason is treated by Abrahamsen (1999) and McAuley (2016) 205–6.

<sup>91</sup> Medea's claims make no sense if taken literally, but Schiesaro (2009) 228–34 is right to suggest that they are symptomatic of Medea's obsession with the past and with her past self. As Kerrigan (1996) 277 points out, undoing the past is one of the avenger's main aspirations.

<sup>92</sup> Despite pioneering work by Tarrant (1978) and Grant (1999), Seneca's debt to New Comedy/*comoedia palliata* remains a relatively unexplored and potentially very rich topic.

Medea's hand, the heroine's exultant *o nuptialem* articulates her own, sole claim to be Jason's wife; it hints, bitterly, at the resumption of social relationships so often dependent on acts of *anagnorisis*.

In like manner, Jason's acceptance of his sons' bodies seems to build upon, almost to parody, the convention of parent-child recognition that pervades earlier drama. The event is facilitated by Medea herself, who differs from Euripides' heroine in her lack of concern for her children's burial (cf. Eur. *Med.* 1378–83).<sup>93</sup> Rather than carry the corpses with her, Seneca's Medea leaves them for Jason, declaring sarcastically, 'now take back your sons, as their parent' (*recipe iam natos parens*, 1024). Comparable language of restitution and recovery is used to describe family reunions in *comoedia palliata*, as in Plautus' *Captivi*, when Hegio thanks the gods for 'giving back and restoring' his son (*quom te redducem tuo patri reddiderunt*, 923),<sup>94</sup> or in Terence's *Hecyra*, when the courtesan Bacchis reveals Myrrina's background story and, as a direct consequence, restores to Pamphilus both his son and his spouse (*gnatum ei restituo . . . / uxorem . . . reddo*; 'I return his son to him . . . / I give back his wife' 818–19). The parallels in vocabulary suggest a further, structural similarity: like the fathers of Roman comedy, Jason takes part in a recognition scene in which he is granted the opportunity to acknowledge and reclaim his children. The verb *recipere* may even suggest the legitimising function of *anagnorisis* since it, along with *agnoscere*, features in the legal maxim reported by Quintilian (*Inst.* 7.1.14: *expositum qui agnoverit, solutis alimentis recipiat*; 'a father who recognises a son exposed in infancy should take him back only after having paid for his upbringing'). Thus, Medea's language in this final exchange pushes Jason, however ironically, to assume an authorising, paternal role in relation to the family he has disrupted. Seneca's handling of the scene draws attention to the reintegration and social harmony so often consequent upon acts of recognition, making their absence from his tragedy all the more acute. The paradox for Seneca's Medea is that self-coherence and consequent

<sup>93</sup> Hine (2000) *ad Med.* 1024

<sup>94</sup> It must, however, be noted, with Lacey (1978–79) 132, that Plautus rarely uses the father-son reconciliation motif to conclude his plays.

recognisability entail the kind of crimes that will destroy any chance of a family reunion. Acting in the role of Jason's wife leads Medea, ultimately, to be a wife in name only. Likewise, she leaves Jason in the purely nominal position of *parens*.

So, Medea's pursuit of ideal selfhood happens at the expense of the self-in-relationship, and her solipsism stands in stark contrast to the conventionally social consequences of recognition. Like the Stoic sage, of whom she is a dark mirror image, Seneca's Medea achieves a radical form of independence – a kind of *autarkeia* – as a result of her conscious, careful self-realisation.<sup>95</sup> What we see, what we in fact *recognise* in Seneca's Medea are the aims of self-coherence and self-perfection taken to an extreme where being true to oneself all but means producing and upholding one's own definition of virtue. Geoffrey Miles remarks that Stoic doctrine contains within it the potential for this sort of amoral constancy, in which 'authenticity of the self becomes an end in itself'.<sup>96</sup> Such potential only increases in the context of Senecan drama, where the performance of dramatic roles bleeds into the performance of implied human ones. It is Medea's combined sense of herself as both a dramatic character and a quasi-human personality that leads her to pursue an unwavering course of wickedness and, by the tragedy's end, to expect audience acknowledgement for the consistent playing of her destructive, selfish, violent role.

## 1.2 *Thyestes*

### *Recognition in the Thyestes*

It is not only in the *Medea* that Seneca uses a recognition scene to explore questions of identity and self-coherence; the *Thyestes*, too, addresses such topics in its final Act, albeit with a shift in focus that incorporates two characters, and two perspectives, in contrast to Medea's monolithic vision. The exchange begins with Thyestes sated to the point of discomfort by a meal whose grisly provenance is still unknown to him; upon Atreus' entrance, Thyestes greets his

<sup>95</sup> Both Braden (1985) 34 and 57, and Johnson (1988) 87 and 93–7 perceive traces of Stoic *autarkeia* in Medea's conduct. Fuller discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>96</sup> Miles (1996) 61.

brother and asks to see his children. Atreus responds by unveiling the boys' heads and hands,<sup>97</sup> and inquiring with characteristic black humour, *natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?* ('do you recognise your sons at all?' 1005). Thyestes replies, *agnosco fratrem* ('I recognise my brother' 1006).

At first glance, Atreus and Thyestes' interaction appears to fit a standard pattern of recognition, in which one or more characters acquire new and typically unexpected information, which then leads to a change in their circumstances. It is in fact possible to interpret the scene according to Aristotle's definition of *anagnorisis* as, 'a change from ignorance to knowledge, generating either love or hate between characters marked for either good or bad fortune' (ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν μεταβολή, ἢ εἰς φιλίαν ἢ εἰς ἔχθραν, τῶν πρὸς εὐτυχίαν ἢ δυστυχίαν ὀρισμένων, *Poetics* 1452a30-2). Thus, the brothers' final confrontation is the moment at which Thyestes realises that he has been led into a trap (ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν μεταβολή), and that instead of being co-regent, he is the victim of brutal revenge (πρὸς εὐτυχίαν ἢ δυστυχίαν); it is also the moment at which Atreus drops his pretence of reconciliation (ἢ εἰς φιλίαν ἢ εἰς ἔχθραν).

But Thyestes' reply, *agnosco fratrem*, suggests that the true focus of this scene lies elsewhere, that it is not only about disclosure and newly acquired knowledge, but also about recognisability. In declaring that he recognises Atreus, Thyestes implies that his brother's identity is closely bound up with, even dependent upon, the process of *anagnorisis*. Like Seneca's Medea, Atreus seems to use recognition as a means of confirming his self-coherence and asserting the character traits that Thyestes has already acknowledged earlier in the play. Also like Medea, Atreus achieves recognition primarily through understanding his *persona* and the patterns of behaviour incumbent upon it, while Thyestes embodies the opposite: an inconsistent individual fundamentally lacking in self-awareness. Questions about Thyestes' identity, and *his* recognisability, suffuse this final

<sup>97</sup> Despite the lack of implicit stage directions, it is reasonable to assume that Atreus presents Thyestes with his children's remains, whether on a platter, in a casket, or in the hands of servants. Braun (1982) 45–6 argues that this exchange requires performance in order to be understood and regards it as definitive proof that Seneca wrote for the stage. Further discussion of the scene's dramaturgy can be found in Calder (1983) 187, and Kohn (2013) 130–1.

exchange as well, even though neither character addresses them openly. To what extent does Thyestes know himself? And does his changeable behaviour have any bearing on the painful revelation he undergoes in the tragedy's final Act? The recognition scene that concludes Seneca's *Thyestes* expands upon many of the key features present already in the *Medea*.<sup>98</sup>

### *Recognition and Role-Play*

One of these features is the self-conscious theatricality that colours Atreus and Thyestes' conversation. As in the *Medea*, the characters' prominent use of *agnoscere* points up the conventional form and purpose of recognition scenes, thereby inviting the audience to construe Atreus and Thyestes as essentially theatrical figures whose roles have been enacted before. Although neither of the brothers makes any reference to 'customary' behaviour (there is no *sic fugere soleo* here), the scene's insistent repetition of *agnoscere* nonetheless reminds us that this is not the first time Atreus and Thyestes have staged their fraternal conflict. Indeed, their story was popular subject matter for ancient dramatists, and for Roman playwrights especially,<sup>99</sup> while one of the most famous pre-Senecan versions of the play, Accius' *Atreus*, appears to have concluded with a similarly gruesome scene of unveiling (226–32 Ribbeck, *TRF*<sup>2</sup>).<sup>100</sup> Even if precise allusions slip our grasp, owing

<sup>98</sup> In making this claim, I do not mean to suggest a particular sequence for the tragedies' composition, though the *Thyestes* is generally thought to have been one of the last plays Seneca wrote. Fitch (1981) remains the standard authority on the play's dating.

<sup>99</sup> From the Greek versions, it appears that Sophocles' *Atreus* and Euripides' *Thyestes* were both known to Roman readers. Fragments survive from at least three Roman versions: Ennius' *Thyestes*; Accius' *Atreus*; and Varius' *Thyestes*. In addition, we hear of numerous plays being composed on the topic throughout the late republic and early empire: by Cassius of Parma (Pseudo-Acro *ad Hor. Epist.* 1.4.3); by Sempronius Gracchus (*Ov. Pont.* 4.16.31); by Mamerus Scaurus (*Dio* 58.24.3–4); by Pomponius Secundus (Nonn. 144.24); by the (fictive?) Maternus in *Tac. Dial.* 3.3. Goldberg (1996) 277 remarks that Thyestes' story became a 'rhetorical cliché' in first-century AD Rome. Caution must be exercised, though, because not all versions can be assumed to have dealt with precisely the same parts of the Atreus-Thyestes myth, for example Jocelyn (1967) 413 argues that the events of Ennius' *Thyestes* take place at Thesprotus' court in Epirus, following Atreus' revenge, and Warmington (1988) 346 regards this play's action as occurring in two localities: Mycenae, then Epirus.

<sup>100</sup> For Accius' likely influence on Seneca, see Zwierlein (1983) 123–4; Tarrant (1985) 42–3; and Boyle (2006) 127–33. Careful work by Leigh (1997) demonstrates that

to the fact that Seneca's is the only complete surviving tragedy on this topic, it is still possible to detect subtle irony in Atreus asking Thyestes whether he recognises his children (*Thy.* 1005): Thyestes has, presumably, performed this scene before, and he should know by now what to expect.

The potential metatheatricality of this final exchange becomes more prominent when viewed against the backdrop of the tragedy overall, where Thyestes in particular is often portrayed as playing a role. The reunion in Act 3, for example, begins with Atreus inviting the audience to see Thyestes through his eyes, as some sort of distasteful spectacle: *aspice, ut multo gravis / squalore vultus obruat maestos coma / quam foeda iaceat barba* ('look at how his dirty, matted hair envelops his gloomy face, how his foul beard droops' 505–7).<sup>101</sup> Thyestes himself continues the metaphor when he casts Atreus as a spectator to his grovelling apology: *lacrimis agendum est. supplicem primus vides* ('I must plead my case with tears. You are the first to see me beg' 517). By asking his brother to assume the pose of an internal audience member – something Atreus is only too happy to do – Thyestes activates a self-consciously dramatic scenario in which the histrionics of an orator (*lacrimis agendum est*) merge with those of an actor, and we are left querying the sincerity of Thyestes' teary performance. The move also places Atreus in a position of power, which he consolidates by designing further roles for Thyestes. 'Remove your hands from my knees' he chides the grovelling figure, 'and seek my embraces instead . . . Put aside your filthy clothing . . . and take up richly adorned garments like my own' (*a genibus manum / aufer meosque potius amplexus pete. / . . . / . . . squalidam vestem exue, / . . . et ornatus cape / pares meis, Thy.* 521–6). Via this false promise of reconciliation and its implicit lure of luxury,<sup>102</sup> Atreus compels Thyestes to perform the role that has been devised for him. The

Varius' tragedy is also likely to have featured Thyestes' cannibal feast, though the exiguous nature of that play's remains makes measuring Seneca's debt impossible.

<sup>101</sup> Thus Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 504–7: 'Part of the extraordinary dramatic power of this play is Atreus' ability to control the audience and to shape the play in conjunction with them.'

<sup>102</sup> Thyestes' appetitive weakness is noted by Boyle (1983) 216–17, Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 524–6, and Meltzer (1988) 320. It is analysed at greater length by Davis (2003) 43–52.

summons to change clothing is not just an index of (feigned) hospitality, but also a metatheatrical gesture of the sort more commonly found in Plautine comedy (e.g. *Pseud.* 735; 751–5).<sup>103</sup> Thyestes the actor must remove his old costume (*exuo* can be used as a technical term in the theatre) and assume along with his new robes his fully tragic role; he must undergo a transformation from shabby sylvan hermit into the royal personage required by tragic convention.<sup>104</sup> Concomitantly, Atreus confirms for himself the part of dramaturg, dictating his brother's gesture, outfit, and general comportment in the manner of a playwright or director.<sup>105</sup>

Self-conscious allusions to theatrical performance ripple through the *Thyestes*' final Act as well, with Atreus treating his brother more and more as a spectatorial object. Following an initial gloat of triumph, he commands his servants to 'unbar the palace doors and throw the festal house open to view' (*fores / temple relaxa, festa patefiat domus*, 901–2), a move that enables him to accompany the play's external audience in watching Thyestes at the banquet.<sup>106</sup> The ensuing scene, in which Thyestes sings to himself a fifty-line song, is framed not just as Atreus eavesdropping on his brother's private thoughts, but also as Thyestes, unwittingly, giving a very public and stage-managed performance. Once again, Thyestes is playing precisely the role Atreus has designed for him, and Atreus stands back to admire the results:

libet videre, capita natorum intuens  
 quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor  
 effundat aut spiritu expulso stupens  
 corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est.  
 miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser.

<sup>103</sup> Elements of *comedia palliata* in Seneca's *Thyestes* have been explored by Meltzer (1988) 314–15.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Mercury's definition of the tragic genre at *Amphitruo* 61 as plays in which 'kings and gods walk the stage'.

<sup>105</sup> Thus, Littlewood (2008) 254: 'Atreus expresses his domination of Thyestes by making him perform as an actor who cannot resist his script or more simply as a visual object.' For Atreus as dramaturg, see Tarrant (1985), Boyle (1997) 117–18, the much broader study by Schiesaro (2003) 45–61, and Mowbray (2012) 401–2. Mader (2010) shows how Atreus assimilates cruelty to processes of artistic creation.

<sup>106</sup> Schiesaro (2003) 60; Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 903–7.

## 1.2 *Thyestes*

I want to see how his face changes colour as he gazes  
on his sons' heads, what words his initial grief pours forth,  
or how his body stiffens, dumbfounded, breathless.  
This is the fruit of my labour.

I don't want to see him wretched, but to see him *becoming* so.

(*Thy.* 903–7)

By focusing closely upon individual physical details, Atreus imagines Thyestes as a consummate actor, someone so skilful he can represent not just an emotional state, but also the entire process involved in reaching that state.<sup>107</sup> Under Atreus' equally skilful direction, Thyestes' face and body are imagined as achieving the kind of expressive faculty his role requires of them. Further, as a proleptic description of the impending recognition scene, Atreus' words lead the audience to evaluate Thyestes' subsequent reaction in terms of his imputed thespian competence: *we* watch while he gazes at his sons' remains, and *we* are curious to see how his response registers in his visage, his body, and his language.<sup>108</sup> While Thyestes embarks, unhappily, on the process of recognising his sons, so the tragedy's audience begins to recognise, even to acknowledge, correspondences between Atreus' description and Thyestes' enactment. Such metatheatricality gains an added dimension when the scene is staged, because the actor playing Thyestes may choose to perform his recognition precisely in accord with Atreus' preceding sketch.

A final, clinching detail of Thyestes' actor status is the festival setting of the banquet that seals his fate. Atreus calls the occasion a 'festal day' (*festum diem*, 970) and Thyestes employs the same phrase when drunkenly urging himself to be happy: 'why do you forbid me', he asks his long-accustomed wretchedness, 'from celebrating this festal day?' (*quid . . . festum . . . vetas / celebrare diem?* 942–3). Gary Meltzer notes that such vocabulary 'evokes the conventions of comedy' where 'drunken celebration, singing and feasting' are typical features, especially as markers of the

<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Mowbray (2012) 402 notes that Atreus' words 'emphasise that it is the process rather than the result that matters . . . he would like to experience the action-over-time phenomenon inherent in being a spectator at a play'. Mader (2010) interprets the passage according to the tragedy's broader themes of punishment-as-process and violence-as-artistry.

<sup>108</sup> Littlewood (2008) 259.

drama's happy ending.<sup>109</sup> I would take Meltzer's idea one step further here, and suggest that *festus dies* is also meant to evoke the context of the *ludi* that typically hosted performances of Roman drama.<sup>110</sup> If Seneca's *Thyestes* was indeed staged on just such a festival occasion, then the phrase's metatheatrical connotations would be virtually impossible to ignore: Thyestes, like an actor, participates in the Saturnalian hedonism of Atreus' *ludi*, albeit with less than comic results. The phrase retains much of its force even when removed from this immediately ludic context and, in conjunction with Atreus' repeated use of *videre*, encourages the audience to regard Thyestes as a performer both in Seneca's and in Atreus' play.

When Thyestes performs these roles within the tragedy, moreover, he draws attention to himself as a *dramatis persona* that may be assumed and put aside at will; the part of 'Thyestes' is embodied and played in accordance with Atreus' – and Seneca's – script. To the extent that Atreus represents a playwright, Thyestes can also be said to represent a constructed literary character, a purely textual entity animated and controlled by someone else. Thyestes the actor alters his costume and gesture at another's bidding; Thyestes the character alters his circumstances and eventual fate. Viewed within the play's broader context, then, the recognition scene acquires a metatheatrical quality in which Thyestes – qua character and actor – performs a part that somebody else has orchestrated and is now sitting down to observe.

But what of Atreus? To a lesser extent, the recognition scene casts him, too, as an actor, in addition to his more conspicuous roles as dramatist and director. When Thyestes states, *agnosco fratrem* ('I recognise my brother' *Thy.* 1006), he acknowledges both Atreus' essential moral qualities – their true ugliness now fully apparent – and the well-known parameters of Atreus' dramatic part: this conduct, in this scene, is how we expect Thyestes' brother to behave.

Unlike Thyestes, however, who assumes the roles he is given, Atreus does not seem inclined to play any part other than his own. Admittedly, he deviates from his usual disposition at the beginning

<sup>109</sup> Meltzer (1988) 315.

<sup>110</sup> A suggestion I have since found, as well, in Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 942–6.

## 1.2 *Thyestes*

of Act 3, when he reins in his anger temporarily in order to stage a scene of reconciliation: *cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi—/ tamen tegatur* ('when anger hopes for blood, it does not know how to be hidden— but let it be hidden', *Thy.* 504–5). This momentary aim of covering up his true feelings resembles an actor's ability to assume identities other than his or her own. Atreus prepares for his reunion with Thyestes in a manner akin to an actor rehearsing a part, and his complicit aside to the audience confirms this association even in the absence of any explicitly metatheatrical language.<sup>111</sup> With Thyestes almost within earshot, Atreus adds, *praestetur fides* (507), a slippery declaration that can mean either 'let me fulfil my promise / keep my word', or, 'let me display my trustworthiness / let a believable performance be given'.<sup>112</sup> Of course, the *fides* that requires a performance in order to seem so is not really *fides* at all; once again, a gap appears to open between who Atreus is and who he professes to be. But the very ambiguity of his rhetoric ensures, paradoxically, that Atreus can play a part and remain true to himself, since the false *fides* he enacts before Thyestes is, at the same time, Atreus' being faithful to his own intentions. He has resolved to greet his brother and to entice him back to royal power, which is exactly what he proceeds to do, albeit with a purpose that Thyestes cannot yet divine. Hence Atreus' role-play may be seen as articulating a genuine facet of his identity, a characteristic he shares with Seneca's Medea, and which will occupy the bulk of my discussion in the chapter sections to come. Before plunging back into this topic of sincere performance, however, I would like to consider one more example of Atreus' theatricality, namely, his famous opening monologue.

Atreus enters the stage in Act 2 upbraiding himself for tardiness in the matter of revenge:

ignave, iners, enervis et, quod maximum  
probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor,  
inulte: post tot scelera, post fratris dolos  
fasque omne ruptum questibus vanis agis  
iratus Atreus?

<sup>111</sup> Moore (1998) examines the metatheatrical effects of asides in Plautus.

<sup>112</sup> Further discussion of the line's meaning can be found in Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 507, Schiesaro (2003) 55, and Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 504–7.

## Coherence

Useless, feckless, impotent, and what I regard  
the greatest source of shame for a tyrant in high power,  
unavenged: after so many crimes, a brother's betrayal,  
all moral codes broken, do you act as angered Atreus  
by means of empty complaint?

(*Thy.* 176–80)

Critics have often commented upon the speech's metatheatrical quality.<sup>113</sup> Because *agere* means both 'performing a deed' and 'performing a stage role', Atreus' language draws attention to the fact that he is currently acting in front of an audience, and that his character, like Medea's, has been played before. By citing his own name, Seneca's Atreus measures himself against a prior dramatic tradition only to find that his present conduct falls far below the expected mark: *questibus vanis agis / iratus Atreus?* As Gordon Braden notes, the participle-noun combination *iratus Atreus* is reminiscent of a play title, such as *Hercules Furens*, or of the excerpted roles that, according to Suetonius, Nero liked to perform on stage: *inter cetera cantavit Canacem parturientem, Oresten matricidam, Oedipodem excaecatam, Herculem insanum* ('he sang, among other parts, Canace in labour, Orestes the matricide, Oedipus blinded, Hercules insane' *Ner.* 21.3).<sup>114</sup> Horace, too, uses this kind of phrasing to denote the principal characteristics of individual tragic roles – *sit Medea ferox invictaque, flebilis Ino, / perfidus Ixion, Io vaga, tristis Orestes* ('Medea should be fierce and unbowed, Ino teary, Ixion treacherous, Io wandering, Orestes morose' *Ars* 123–4.) – as does Quintilian: *ut sit Aerope in tragodia tristis, atrox Medea, attonitus Ajax, truculentus Hercules* ('So, in tragedy, Aerope is morose, Medea fierce, Ajax mad, Hercules aggressive' *Inst.* 11.3.73). In fact, for Horace and Quintilian as well as for Seneca's Atreus, these formulaic classifications may well be designed to evoke stage characters' masks, in which case Atreus once again asserts himself as a role, implying that his present 'empty complaints' do not suit the dictates of his costume.

<sup>113</sup> Braden (1970) 17, and (1985) 42; Boyle (1997) 117 and (2006) 211; Fitch and McElduff (2002) 25; Erasmo (2004) 124.

<sup>114</sup> Braden (1985) 42. *Hercules Furens* is in fact the title of the Senecan play given by the 'A' branch of MSS, while the 'E' branch gives simply *Hercules*.

Thus, Atreus' speech identifies him from the outset as a well-known *dramatis persona*, classifiable not just by his name, but also by his appearance, and by the emotion he is typically assumed to exhibit. The near-anagram of *iRATUS* and *ATReUS* further suggests that rage is embedded within Atreus' dramatic part and essential to its realisation.<sup>115</sup> Like Medea, this Atreus can be seen to construct himself as a fundamentally literary (and more specifically, theatrical) entity. Consequently, the recognition he receives may be interpreted as an acknowledgement of his textual identity, that is, of his existence as an assemblage of earlier texts and performances. Atreus is recognisable – to Thyestes, to the audience – because he has performed his part in accordance with its pre-established parameters. Although the lack of surviving precedents renders dramatic allusions far less apparent in Seneca's *Thyestes* than in his *Medea*, there is still little doubt that a metatheatrical atmosphere suffuses the final scene.

### *Performing the Self*

Atreus' opening speech deserves further consideration, however, because it establishes his quasi-human identity just as much as his fictional one. Significantly, Atreus' language describes no division between himself and the part he plays: he both *is* and *acts* Atreus, and does not pretend to be another person in the manner of a professional stage artist. Whereas the notion of acting, singing, or dancing a role is typically expressed by a verb plus accusative—as in the phrase *agere partes* ('to play a part')<sup>116</sup> – Atreus employs instead a nominative in apposition (*agis / iratus Atreus*) and this subtle syntactical shift conveys the equivalence of his *dramatis persona* and his self. Senecan scholars tend to overlook this small but crucial point. When Seneca, elsewhere, describes people pretending to be angry, or enacting the roles of angry men, he uses the

<sup>115</sup> Burnett (1998) 12; Fitch and McElduff (2002) 25 n.22

<sup>116</sup> *OLD* s.v. 'pars' entry 9. Cf. Sen. *Contr.* 2.6.4: *nec amantem agis, sed amas*; Sen. *Ep.* 120.22: *unum hominem agere*. The same construction is used to describe singing a role – as in the passage from Suetonius *Nero* 21.3, cited above – and dancing one, for example *Latin Anthology* R. 310: *Andromacham atque Helenam saltat*, and further discussion in Kokolakis (1976) 217–29.

standard accusative construction: *nam et histriones in pronuntiando non irati populum movent, sed iratum bene agentes* ('for actors also move their audience with their delivery, not by being angry, but by acting well the part of an angry man' *Ira* 2.17.1). Similarly, *Epistle* 80.7 uses the phrase *agere felicem* to refer to someone pretending to be happy. The accusative is such a natural, instinctive companion of *agere* that it may even be ventured as the reason for the variant, and ultimately unsustainable, reading found in the A manuscripts of Seneca *Thyestes* 179–80: *questibus vanis agis / iras?*<sup>117</sup> The reader who altered this line presumably expected Atreus to perform his anger rather than, as the more difficult and accepted phrasing implies, to perform *as himself*, as 'Atreus enraged'.

While it may seem pedantic, this grammatical point is actually vital, because it implies that Atreus envisages his role as a genuine expression of his identity. There is no difference, for Atreus, between being true to his dramatic part and being true to his self. In addition, the semantic range of *agere* allows the theatrical metaphor to be combined with the simpler meaning of 'behave' or 'perform an action', a combination that once more suggests the equivalence of acting a part and being a person.<sup>118</sup> These two facets of Atreus' identity overlap, since in attempting to meet the qualities and requirements of his dramatic role he also strengthens his status as an implied human personality.

This link between actor and role, character and person, is drawn tighter still when Atreus alludes to the Stoic concept of *decorum*, specifically in regard to his position as tyrant, which he feels he has so far failed to fulfil: *quod maximum / probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor / inulte* ('what I regard the greatest source of shame for a tyrant in high power: unavenged' 176–8). Atreus knows that

<sup>117</sup> Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 179–83 notes that the difficult expression, *agis* minus an object, is almost certainly authentic.

<sup>118</sup> Roach (1996) 3 describes a similar semantic range for 'performance' in English. In both cases, the term's variety of meanings suggests a theoretically crucial and enduring confluence of theatre and 'real life'. See also Aygon (2016) 222: 'Il arrive aussi que Sénèque associe les deux sens du verbe *agere* (se comporter/jouer un rôle), notamment lorsqu'un personnage s'interpelle lui-même' ('Seneca happens to link the two meanings of the verb *agere* (to behave/play a role) especially when a character is addressing himself').

in order to achieve this title he must set aside his present grumbling in favour of setting fire to the world around him: *iam flammis agros / lucere et urbes decuit* ('it has already been fitting for fields and cities to flash with fire' 182–3); the rules of *decorum* demand he engage in actions appropriate to his particular status. Moreover, the part of tyrant that Atreus cites in this passage is not just a dramatic role, a prior instantiation either of Atreus himself or of any other violent autocrat known to stalk the ancient stage, but also a social role, an occasional and acknowledged – if not exactly welcome – aspect of ancient politics. Thus, when Atreus evaluates his (currently insufficient) tyrannical *persona*, he behaves much like an aspiring Stoic who has been enjoined to weigh his actions according to what befits (*decet*) his status, abilities, and circumstances.

This need to align one's actions with one's given social role is a recurring theme in Stoic accounts of *decorum*/τὸ πρέπον. For instance, Epictetus advises individuals to 'preserve appropriate behaviour as men, as sons, as parents, and so forth according to other terms for relationships' (τὸ πρέπον σφύζουσιν ὡς ἄνδρες, ὡς υἱοί, ὡς γονεῖς, εἶθ' ἐξῆς κατὰ τὰ ἄλλα τῶν σχέσεων ὀνόματα, *Diss.* 4.6.26). In the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus describes the form and content of life's duties as dependent upon each person's particular social position, with the result that a poor man cannot hold office or display his munificence in acts of euergetism, while a wealthy man is clearly free to do so (*Ench.* 24).<sup>119</sup> In a similar manner, Cicero discusses *decorum* in terms of social status at *Off.* 1.122–4, and besides addressing the broad categories of old and young men, and private individuals, he glances at the obligations incumbent upon specific public posts.<sup>120</sup> Thus, he pronounces that it is the proper function (*proprium munus*) of magistrates 'to maintain the laws, to dispense justice, and to keep in mind the things entrusted to their good faith' (*servare leges, iura describere, ea fidei suae*

<sup>119</sup> Such focus on social roles is central to Epictetus' notion of a person, on which, see Frede (2007) 154–7.

<sup>120</sup> More than any other Stoic writer, Cicero elides the concept of a person's 'proper function' with his or her social role, as can be seen from his decision to translate Panaetius' τὰ καθήκοντα ('appropriate acts') as *officia* ('duties' but also 'public offices'). For fuller discussion of this overlap, see Brunt (1975) 15; Miles (1996) 26; Roller (2001) 91.

*commissa meminisse*, *Off.* 1.124). Seneca's Atreus likewise acknowledges the exigencies and expectations involved in being a tyrant, even though his role, unlike that of Cicero's magistrate, is not a particularly admirable one.

In general, Seneca takes a dimmer view of such precepts, and discourages people from following them too closely (*Ep.* 94.1). Yet he does resort to Cicero's and Epictetus' ideas when explaining why a Cynic philosopher should not ask for money: *indixisti pecuniae odium; hoc professus es, hanc personam induisti: agenda est* ('you have proclaimed your hatred of money; this has been avowed, you have adopted this role: you must play it' *Ben.* 2.17.2).<sup>121</sup> Once again, the similarity to Atreus should be clear, since Seneca, like his fictional tragic protagonist, plays on a double meaning of *agere* as 'to act a role' and 'to behave', and treats *persona* in the similarly dual sense of 'dramatic role' and 'station in life'. It is this slippage between the theatrical metaphor and the human reality it has been designed to represent that allows us to view Atreus' self-construction in quasi-human as well as fictional terms. At the same time as being a metatheatrical trope, understanding and evaluating one's role is an activity germane to Stoic ethical theory. Leaving aside, for the moment, all questions about Atreus' morality, we can see that his methods of self-assessment are equally relevant to the fictional world portrayed on stage and to the non-fictional world beyond it; this way of thinking about the self applies to people as much as it applies to dramatic characters, with the result that Atreus treats himself simultaneously as a literary construct and an implied human personality.

### Decorum, Text, and Ethics

This potential blurring of fiction with life derives not just from the Stoics' use of *decorum*/τὸ πρέπον, but from the very terms themselves, which conveyed an aesthetic meaning long before they were endowed with an ethical one.<sup>122</sup> In fact, the Stoics'

<sup>121</sup> Further discussion of this passage can be found in Aygon (2016) 49–50.

<sup>122</sup> Pohlenz (1965) 100–4, surveys the aesthetic connotations of τὸ πρέπον in fifth and fourth century BC Greek texts. Gibson (2007) 124–5, discusses the aesthetic origins of

interest in suitability and seemliness speaks to their view of personal conduct as an artistic project. In the words of Christopher Gill, Stoic ethical theory ‘invites each person to adopt . . . a quasi-aesthetic attitude towards himself and his life’;<sup>123</sup> good behaviour, like good art, is imagined to be the appealing outcome of conscious and skilful (self-)fashioning. *decorum*’s connotations are such that the term assimilates rules for human conduct with principles of literary style, and in particular, of characterisation, so that the aspiring Stoic is urged to compose his identity in the manner of a poet composing a text:

Haec ita intellegi, possumus existimare ex eo decoro, quod poetae sequuntur . . . Sed ut tum servare illud poetas, quod deceat, dicimus, cum id quod quaque persona dignum est, et fit et dicitur, ut si Aeacus aut Minos diceret ‘oderint dum metuant’ aut ‘natis sepulchro ipse est parens’ indecorum videretur, quod eos fuisse iustos accepimus; at Atreo dicente plausus excitantur, est enim digna persona oratio; sed poetae quid quemque deceat, ex persona iudicabunt; nobis autem personam imposuit ipsa natura magna cum excellentia praestantiaque animantium reliquarum. Quocirca poetae in magna varietate personarum etiam vitiosis quid conveniat et quid deceat videbunt.

We can infer that these things [moral *decorum*] are understood in this way from that seemliness which poets maintain . . . We say that poets observe what is fitting when actions and words are worthy of each individual role, with the result that if Aeacus or Minos were to utter the lines ‘let them hate as long as they fear’, or, ‘the parent himself is a tomb for his sons’, it would not seem fitting, because we agree that these men were just; but Atreus provokes applause when he says these lines, because the manner of speech is worthy of his role. Poets, however, will judge what befits each individual according to his role, while nature herself has imposed on us a role greatly superior to and excelling all other creatures. Consequently, poets will see what is suitable and appropriate for a great variety of characters, even for wicked ones. (*Off.* 1.97)

Here Cicero explains *decorum* in terms of artistic congruence. Developing the analogy of moral agent as poet,<sup>124</sup> he recommends that individuals engage in actions most appropriate to their rational

the term *decorum*. On the difficulties raised by translating τὸ πρέπον as *decorum*, see Dyck (1996) *ad Off.* 1.93–9.

<sup>123</sup> Gill (1994) 4606–7. Renaissance writers, such as Castiglione in his *Il cortegiano*, likewise recognised this aesthetic approach to selfhood as a major theme in Cicero’s *de Officiis*.

<sup>124</sup> Thus Dyck (1996) *ad Off.* 1.126–49: ‘the simile of the playwright (§97–98) really controls the whole presentation of *decorum*’.

nature, and to their specific, personal qualities; he cites, by way of illustration, the dramatist's need to correlate a character's dialogue with his or her given *persona*. Just as the sentiment *oderint dum metuant* ('let them hate as long as they fear' Accius 203–4 Ribbeck *TRF*<sup>2</sup>) suits Atreus on stage, so are goodness, constancy, and restraint presumed to suit human beings.

By eliding the two meanings of *decorum*, however, Cicero risks derailing his own argument, because no matter how much Atreus' 'seemliness' meets aesthetic requirements, it can hardly be deemed an example of morality. As Gibson remarks, 'if ethically dubious sentiments are appropriate on the dramatic stage, then might not dubious actions – by an obvious if irresponsible logic – be appropriate to certain characters on the stage of life?'<sup>125</sup> Although Cicero attempts to circumvent such 'irresponsible logic' – by claiming that only the poet will consider what befits bad characters (*etiam vitiosis quid conveniat*, *Off.* 1.97) – he fails because of the slipperiness of his analogy in this passage, which links moral agents not just to poets, but also to actors and characters.<sup>126</sup> Atreus as a stage *persona* is used to illustrate how individuals should manage their *personae* in day-to-day life. Cicero brings the fictive tyrant and the aspiring Stoic into uncomfortable proximity when he declares that Atreus earns applause by speaking in character (*Atreo dicente plausus excitantur, est enim digna persona oratio*) and that the moral agent who achieves *decorum* 'provokes the approval of those around him' (*movet adprobationem eorum, quibuscum vivitur*, *Off.* 1.98). In both instances, *decorum* is presented as a somewhat visual quality that demands an appreciative audience.<sup>127</sup> Performing one's

<sup>125</sup> Gibson (2007) 125. Edwards (2007) 159 makes a similar observation: 'the metaphor of acting also allows scope for moves which could be seen as undermining orthodox Stoicism. The fascination of the stage is hard to resist. The most compelling characters are not always the most virtuous.'

<sup>126</sup> This link between moral agents and actors, which I have explored briefly above in relation to Seneca's *Medea*, is actually a very common feature of Stoic ethics: see, for example, Cic. *Fin.* 3.24 or Ariston of Chios in Diogenes Laertius 7.160 / *SVF* I 351, who states that the sage is a good actor, capable of playing Thersites or Agamemnon as fate requires.

<sup>127</sup> The visual aspect of *decorum* in Stoic texts derives from the root meaning of  $\pi\rho\epsilon\pi\omega$  as 'to be conspicuous / to shine forth'; see Dyck (1996) *ad Off.* 1.93–9 for further discussion.

*persona* correctly means engaging in actions appropriate to it: Atreus, in this passage, does precisely that. Thus, by merging *decorum*'s ethical and aesthetic connotations, Cicero leaves open the possibility of amoral constancy, of individuals pursuing morally reprehensible ends yet still achieving *decorum*.<sup>128</sup>

This reasoning applies to Seneca's Atreus even if we loosen the connection between moral agents on the one hand and stage characters on the other. Cicero in the theatrical analogies of *de Officiis* Book I is above all interested in associating the *proficiens* with the actor or poet, both of whom seek congruence in the compositions they present to an admiring public. But Atreus, too, behaves and evaluates his actions *as an actor*, particularly in his opening monologue, and his main purpose in doing so is to ensure appropriate conduct, coherence at once moral and aesthetic. Hence, there remains a potential and troubling parallel between Seneca's Atreus and the aspiring Stoic. Atreus may claim *decorum* chiefly as an actor and as a character, but that brings him perilously close to achieving it as an (im)moral agent, too, especially given that his performance is such as fundamental source of his self-realisation. Like Medea, Atreus knows, studies, and plays his assigned dramatic role in a way that recalls the injunctions of Stoic *persona* theory.

The unsettling blend of ethics and aesthetics also features in Atreus' plan for revenge: *dignum est Thyeste facinus et dignum Atreo* ('the crime is worthy of Thyestes and worthy of Atreus' 271). As a cognate of *decorum*, *dignus* conflates Atreus' dramatic (and more broadly literary) identity with the behavioural standards of his implied human personality. On the one hand, his intended crime is worthy of him because it adheres to paradigms established in earlier literature: it fits the pattern of revenge in Accius' *Atreus*, and more explicitly, it follows the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, which Seneca's Atreus nominates as his model (*Thy.* 272–3; 275–7). Just as Procne slaughtered and served up her son to her husband, so Seneca's protagonist will slaughter and serve up

<sup>128</sup> Another potential source of amoral constancy in the *de Officiis* is the emphasis Cicero places on personal characteristics (the Panaetian second *persona*), which, as Gibson (2007) 123–4 points out, might lead individuals to cultivate vicious rather than virtuous behaviour on the basis that it suits their natural attributes.

his brother's children to his brother. In doing so, he will fulfil a poetic identity that derives from Ovid *Metamorphoses* 6.424–673, and behind this Latin precedent, from Sophocles' (now lost) *Tereus*.<sup>129</sup> So, Seneca's Atreus attains *decorum* by following the parameters of a pre-established, specifically literary *persona*. Like the Atreus in *de Officiis* 1.97, who speaks in a manner worthy of his character (*digna persona oratio*), Seneca's Atreus behaves appropriately by pursuing what is *dignum* for his textual, theatrical self.

On the other hand, though, *dignum* also has ethical connotations, so that Atreus' statement at 271 reflects upon his quasi-human *persona*. In effect, Atreus implies that he will realise his selfhood by exacting vengeance upon Thyestes: his chosen deed (*facinus*) is the kind of crime (*facinus*) that will enable him to be truly, properly 'Atreus', and to acquire *dignitas* as an individual.<sup>130</sup> By declaring the appropriateness of his revenge, Seneca's Atreus encourages his audience not only to look back to prior literary realisations of his role, but also to anticipate, on the basis of his present self-projection, the identity he will display by the drama's end. Like Medea, like a Stoic *proficiens* who understands what is appropriate for him, Atreus works towards perfecting his *persona*.

Thus, when Seneca's Atreus employs principles of *decorum* to fuel his own, vicious self-construction, he capitalises on the concept's innate weakness and vulnerability to misappropriation. It is not as if Atreus has taken a pristine Stoic idea and warped it out of shape by applying it to the dark world of his tragedy; the idea itself was problematic long before it reached Senecan drama. By combining ethics with aesthetics, and by developing an implicit connection between moral agents, poets, literary characters, and actors, Cicero's account of *decorum* lays itself open to precisely the kind of self-justification practised by Seneca's Atreus.

<sup>129</sup> Schiesaro (2003) 70–99 provides a full and fascinating discussion of the Ovidian intertext.

<sup>130</sup> As Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 271 points out, 'Seneca's characters have an acute, if twisted, sense of their *dignitas* and insist on committing only those crimes appropriate to it.' Braden (1970) 23, similarly remarks that *dignum* 'is not altogether ironic, at least to Atreus'.

Nor is Cicero the only author to give an ambiguous account of *decorum*. Owing to the *de Officiis*' popularity, the concept of 'seemliness' pervades a lot of late republican and early imperial Latin literature, where its function as a moral principle overlaps frequently with principles of artistic composition.<sup>131</sup> A particularly relevant example for Seneca's Atreus comes from the *Ars Poetica*, where Horace advises poets that the rules for appropriate conduct in life correspond to appropriate characterisation in literature:

qui didicit, patriae quid debeat et quid amicis,  
 quo sit amore parens, quo frater amandus et hospes,  
 quod sit conscripti, quod iudicis officium, quae  
 partes in bellum missi ducis, ille profecto  
 reddere personae scit convenientia cuique.

He who has learnt what is owed to one's country, and to one's friends,  
 how a parent, a brother, and a guest should be loved,  
 the duty required of a councillor and a judge, the role  
 of a leader sent into war, that man assuredly  
 knows how to render things befitting each character.

(*Ars* 312–16)

Via the terms *officium* (314), *persona* and *conveniens* (316), Horace makes it clear that he is alluding to Cicero's *de Officiis*.<sup>132</sup> He adopts Cicero's main analogy as well, only in reverse: the good poet is the equivalent of a moral agent who knows what befits each person according to his or her station in life. But lurking beneath this analogy is the riskier comparison between suitable public behaviour and suitable behaviour in literature. The *persona* in life becomes the *persona* in text, with the result that amoral *decorum* seems both viable and justifiable. It is easy to translate Horace's advice into Atreus' self-construction: Seneca's protagonist must be bloodthirsty and violent because

<sup>131</sup> Approaches to the topic of *decorum* in late republican / early imperial Latin literature include: Labate (1984) 121–74; Gibson (2007) 115–47; and to a lesser extent, Oliensis (1998) 198–223.

<sup>132</sup> For the *de Officiis*'s influence on Horace's *Ars Poetica*, see Oliensis (1998) 200–6 and Gibson (2007) 133–42. Rudd (1989) 35–6 argues for *decorum*'s overall importance as a major theme in the *Ars Poetica*. Brink (1971) *ad Ars* 316 remarks the plausible allusion to Cicero's *persona*-theory (*Off.* 1.107–21) but cautions against regarding the passage as doctrinally Stoic.

such characteristics are part of his *officium* as a tyrant, and of his inherited dramatic *persona*. Atreus must commit crimes just as a magistrate must uphold the law and a child obey its parent. The ethics of *decorum* all but encourage unethical conduct.

*To Thine Own Role Be True*

I return from this lengthy but necessary digression to the topics of *anagnorisis* and self-coherence. If Seneca's Atreus actually pursues the *decorum* he envisages, it follows that his behaviour will be consistent and consequently, recognisable. Like Medea, Atreus can realise his ideal selfhood only via seamless and steadfast enactment of his allotted role. On top of his efforts to harmonise his actions with his given identity, he must display the kind of constancy that will enable both Thyestes and the play's audience to acknowledge his ethical *persona*.

Initial survey of the tragedy suggests that Atreus fails in this regard, because his successful revenge depends upon his faking affection for Thyestes that he does not really feel. Atreus plays a role in order to lure his brother back to Argos, and to the extent that it conceals or glosses his intentions, that role is not entirely genuine. But neither is it entirely false, because one of Atreus' most prominent traits is his ability to manipulate language, and to exploit its ambiguities so that he lies and tells the truth concurrently.<sup>133</sup> Take, for example, the words with which he greets Thyestes:

fratrem iuvat videre. complexus mihi  
redde expetitos. quidquid irarum fuit  
transierit; ex hoc sanguis ac pietas die  
colantur, animis odia damnata excidant.

It is a pleasure to see my brother. Return my embrace  
so eagerly sought, all anger has passed;  
from this day forward, may blood and family ties be cherished,  
may hatred be renounced and vanish from our hearts.

(Thy. 508–11)

<sup>133</sup> Atreus' linguistic cleverness is remarked on by Meltzer (1988), and Schiesaro (2003) 111–13.

This declaration of good faith seems, superficially, very inviting, and Thyestes is so convinced by it that he apologises immediately for ever having harmed his brother: *diluere possem cuncta, nisi talis fores. / sed fateor, Atreu, fateor, admisi omnia / quae credidisti* ('Were you not like this, I could explain everything away, but I confess, Atreus, I confess, I perpetrated all the things you thought I did', 512–14). Thyestes is thoroughly taken in. He is persuaded of his brother's goodness, but Atreus' speech is laced with double meanings that his victim cannot detect. Thus: Atreus *is* delighted to see his brother, not because he desires reconciliation, but because the prospect of revenge instils in him a perverse sense of pleasure. The participle *expetitus* is similarly ambiguous, since it can denote something desired and something sought with hostile intent.<sup>134</sup> When Atreus declares, *quidquid irarum fuit / transierit*, Thyestes interprets this to mean that his brother no longer feels anger, whereas Atreus' real feelings are so extreme that they have surpassed (*transierit*) such paltry classification. As the minister remarks in Act 2, Atreus' revenge is worse than mere anger (*maius hoc ira malum*, 259). Atreus has not dropped his indignation but gone beyond it.

Even the most reverent sections of Atreus' greeting can be seen to represent his true attitude. In his exhortation to 'cherish blood and family ties' (*sanguis ac pietas . . . / colantur*) the verb's sacral overtones hint at his plan to kill Thyestes' children in a travesty of religious ritual, while *sanguis* also recalls his preceding admission of bloodlust (*cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi*; 'when anger hopes for blood, it does not know how to be hidden' 504).<sup>135</sup> Equally implicit in this phrase is the memory of Thyestes' adultery as an act that transgressed both *sanguis* and *pietas*, and that will lead to Atreus' transgression of the same. The greeting's final line is ominously vague: it could mean that Atreus promises to cease his hostilities, but it could just as easily be an exhortation for Thyestes to lay aside the *odium* he previously felt for his brother. Rightly or not, Atreus regards Thyestes as a threat, and his desire for 'hearts to be free from anger' (*animis odia . . . excidant*) can be

<sup>134</sup> Tarrant (1985) *ad. Thy.* 509.

<sup>135</sup> Tarrant (1985) *ad. Thy.* 510.

read as his attempting to allay Thyestes' potential aggression. The entire speech is a masterpiece of subtly sinister intent that enables Atreus to act in character at the same time as appearing not to.

It is testament to Atreus' self-coherence that he manages to maintain this performance for the full duration of the play; rarely does he utter a sentence that is not riddled with double meanings. For instance, he boasts of having returned Thyestes to his birthright: *maior haec laus est mea / fratri paternum reddere incolumi decus* ('Mine is the greater praise, restoring to my brother, safe, his ancestral glory' 527–8). While not the conciliatory gesture that Thyestes takes it for, neither is this claim pure falsehood. The truth is that Thyestes will remain *incolumis* (in the strict sense that he will not suffer irreparable bodily damage), and that Atreus will treat his revenge as cause for acclaim (*nunc meas laudo manus*; 'now I praise my handiwork' 1096). Besides denoting the Pelopid diadem, moreover, the expression *paternum decus* can also denote Thyestes' children, who are 'the glory of their father' on the model of such phrases as *decus innuptarum* ('the most prominent of the unmarried women' Cat. 64.78) and *o decus Argolicum . . . Ulixes* ('O Ulysses, glory of the Argives' Cic. *poet.* 29.1). Seneca, too, employs the phrase when he has Eurybates describe Agamemnon as *telluris . . . Argolicae decus* ('the glory of the Argive land' *Ag.* 395). If this sense is accommodated, then Atreus' ostensible promise of returning power to Thyestes becomes instead a much more ominous promise to return Thyestes' sons to their father, which the audience already knows will happen in a savagely literal way. Finally, the semantic link between *decus* and *decorum* suggests, albeit in fainter tones, both the personal appropriateness of Atreus' conduct and the aesthetic appropriateness of the tragedy's eventual outcome. Revenge, the act of returning Thyestes to his birthright, is the primary means by which Atreus achieves his identity. Far from being false performances, therefore, Atreus' ostensible displays of goodwill repeatedly enact his *persona*'s most genuine aspects.

Atreus' word games have long been recognised as major sources of black humour and dramatic irony in this play, where the distance separating Thyestes' perspective from the audience's is also the distance between the superficial and hidden meanings of

Atreus' statements.<sup>136</sup> When, at the end of Act 3, Atreus leaves the stage promising to 'give the gods their designated offerings' (*ego destinatas victimas superis dabo*, 545), only the audience can see the darker nuance lurking under his seemingly pious sentiment: Atreus will perform a sacrifice, but Thyestes' children will be the victims, and the recipient his own prospective godhead (712–14).

Deceptive language permeates Act 5 as well, because Atreus exploits the coincidence of literal and figurative registers to round off his revenge with a series of jokes at his brother's expense.<sup>137</sup> In response to Thyestes' sudden discomfort following the banquet, Atreus (ostensibly) reassures him: 'believe that your children are in their father's embrace' (*esse natos crede in amplexu patris*, 976); 'no part of your offspring will be taken from you' (*nulla pars prolis tuae / tibi subtrahetur*, 977–8); 'I shall present the faces you long for' (*ora quae exoptas dabo*, 978). When he urges Thyestes to 'take up the ancestral cup, with wine poured in' (*poculum infuso cape / gentile Baccho*, 982–3), the suggestively transferrable epithet, *gentile*, alludes to his earlier act of mixing wine with the blood of Thyestes' offspring (917).<sup>138</sup> Blinded by the conventional sense of Atreus' words, Thyestes cannot see the cruel reality of taking them at face value.<sup>139</sup>

While Atreus evidently manages to deceive Thyestes, his success does not have to mean that he himself behaves in a deceptive manner. Alessandro Schiesaro describes Atreus' linguistic prowess as 'sophisticated dissemblance'<sup>140</sup> but the label is inappropriate because Atreus never really dissembles; he never plays a role

<sup>136</sup> The main studies are Meltzer (1988) and Schiesaro (2003) 111–13. Earlier scholarship acknowledges Atreus' wit, and the more general presence of humour in Senecan tragedy but tends to regard such moments as bad taste: see comments by Duff (1964) 209; Baade (1969) xvii; and an uncharacteristically dismissive remark by Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 1046–7, to the effect that Thyestes' reluctance to beat his breast is 'a dreadful specimen of misplaced cleverness'.

<sup>137</sup> Meltzer (1988) 314 remarks upon Atreus' tendency to combine the symbolic with the literal meaning of words and images, especially during this final exchange.

<sup>138</sup> Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 982–3; Meltzer (1988) 316.

<sup>139</sup> Here I disagree with Schiesaro (2003) 111, who claims that Thyestes is 'literal-minded'. Certainly, Thyestes is presented as less clever than Atreus, but it is precisely his failure to take Atreus' statements literally that generates such dramatic irony in the tragedy's final Act.

<sup>140</sup> Schiesaro (2003) 111. Michelon (2015) 36–45 similarly argues that *dolus* and *fraus* are core elements of Atreus' characterisation.

other than his own, and although sometimes economical with the truth, he neither distorts nor misrepresents his intentions, merely grants Thyestes the liberty of interpreting them in a positive light. Atreus remains true to his word, just in a way that Thyestes does not expect. The real cleverness of Atreus' performance lies in his enticing Thyestes to deceive himself and knowing that his brother is willing to do so.<sup>141</sup>

Thus, a large part of Atreus' *constantia* comes from his ability to 'play one role' (*unum hominem agere*, *Ep.* 120.22). While he does not share Medea's obsessive need to derive coherence from repetition of the personal past,<sup>142</sup> nonetheless he exhibits and exhorts himself to uniformity over the course of the play. Seneca reinforces this uniformity, moreover, via numerous lexical correspondences that link Acts 3 and 5, to show that the Atreus who greets his brother so warmly is precisely the same man who subsequently slaughters, cooks, and dishes up his brother's children. Atreus has not changed, not in any essential way, even if Thyestes' perception of him has. For example, Atreus speaks of *complexus expetitos* ('eagerly sought embraces' 508–9) when greeting his newly returned brother in Act 3, and resorts to the same vocabulary in the final Act, when revealing the children's grisly remains: *iam accipe hos potius libens / diu expetitos . . . / fruire, osculare, divide amplexus tribus* ('now, rather, greet gladly these [children] you have sought for so long . . . enjoy them, kiss them, divide your embraces by three' 1021–3). The latter scene mirrors the former because it, too, is a warped moment of reunion in which Thyestes 'welcomes' his sons just as Atreus has earlier welcomed Thyestes. Another notable correspondence is the verb *reddere*, which Atreus uses when promising to reinstate Thyestes in his royal birthright (*fratri paternum reddere incolumi decus*, 528), and again when he gloats over having united Thyestes and his children forever: *reddam, et tibi illos nullus eripiet dies* ('I shall return them, and no day will take them from you' 998).

<sup>141</sup> Thus, Harrison (2014a) 600–1: 'Atreus makes the single correct assumption that Thyestes will deceive himself at the prospect of a return to luxury.'

<sup>142</sup> The ancestral past does, however, loom large in Atreus' sense of himself and his action within the tragedy: see Boyle (1983) 220–2, and Fitch and McElduff (2002) 27–8.

Divinity is also a theme that binds the latter half of the play, first with Atreus declaring his intent to perform a sacrifice (*ego destinatas victimas superis dabo*; ‘I shall give the gods their designated offerings’, 545), then with the messenger’s report that Atreus has sacrificed Thyestes’ children as offerings to himself (*mactet sibi*, 713),<sup>143</sup> and finally with Atreus likening his own success to deification (*aequalis astris gradior*; ‘I stride equal to the stars’ 885) and claiming that he is ‘the highest of heavenly beings’ (*o me caelitum excelsissimum*, 911).<sup>144</sup> Such connections demonstrate the evenness and coherence of Atreus’ character, and the undeviating manner in which he performs his part. The only difference between the Atreus Thyestes encounters in Act 3 and the one he encounters in Act 5 is Thyestes’ own clarity of perception.

The recognition scene in the *Thyestes*, therefore, pivots upon Atreus seeking acknowledgement for his consistent self-presentation. When the protagonist asks Thyestes, ‘do you recognise your sons at all?’ (*natos ecquid agnoscis tuos*, 1005), not only does he invite the father to identify the body parts placed before him, but also, at a more abstract level, to validate the fact of Atreus’ revenge. This moment is the final goal at which all of Atreus’ actions have been aimed; in acknowledging the deed, Thyestes acknowledges the person behind it as well. By killing, cooking, and serving Thyestes’ sons, Atreus has fulfilled the requirements of both his fictional and his quasi-human identity. Thyestes certainly thinks so: *agnosco fratrem* (‘I recognise my brother’ 1006).

### *Atreus sapiens*

Atreus’ uniform conduct equates him, in a warped and paradoxical way, with Cicero’s and Seneca’s images of the Stoic sage. A handful of scholars note this connection and tend to regard it

<sup>143</sup> Traina (1981) 151–3 argues on the basis of Latin religious terminology that *sibi* goes with *mactet* (rather than with the other option, *dubitat*), with the result that Atreus here occupies the dual role of the priest conducting and the god receiving a sacrifice.

<sup>144</sup> On themes of divinity in the *Thyestes*, see in particular Boyle (1983) 218–20 and (1997) 51–2. Seneca’s text also hints that, in claiming divine status for himself, Atreus draws upon the widespread trope of poetic immortality, for example *Ov. Met.* 15.875–6: *parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis / astra ferar.*

as a case of antithesis rather than resemblance, of Atreus as anti-rather than quasi-*sapiens*.<sup>145</sup> But Atreus' qualities are modelled so closely on Stoic principles of 'appropriateness' that, I would argue, he represents their extension, not their negation.<sup>146</sup> By remaining within his own role and giving a faithful, unvarying performance, Atreus may be said to achieve the *decorum* that Cicero defines in minimal terms as 'nothing more than evenness in the overall course of life and of each individual action' (*decorum nihil est profecto magis quam aequabilitas universae vitae, tum singularum actionum, Off.* 1.111). Atreus maintains *aequabilitas* throughout the course of the play's events, in each of the deeds he perpetrates. His command of language also ensures harmony between what he says and what he does, with the result that his behaviour matches the core qualities that Seneca attributes to the *sapiens*: *maximum hoc est et officium sapientiae et indicium, ut verbis opera concordent, ut ipse ubique par sibi idemque sit* ('this is the greatest duty and proof of wisdom, that deeds should be in accord with words, that [the wise man] should, everywhere, be the same and equal to himself' *Ep.* 20.2). Like the Senecan wise man, Atreus is *unus idemque inter diversa* ('one and the same in varying circumstances' *Const.* 6.3), displaying an identical *persona* when he welcomes Thyestes and when he exults in the macabre fact of his revenge.

Such ethical and figurative constancy crystallises into a literal event when Atreus proceeds to kill Thyestes' sons. The messenger who reports this crime describes a kind of earthquake – 'the whole palace trembled as the ground shook' (*tota succusso solo / nutavit aula*, 696–7) – and adds that Atreus remains unaffected by the surrounding physical tumult: *movere cunctos monstra, sed solus sibi / immotus Atreus constat* ('the portents moved everyone, but Atreus alone, unmoved, stands his ground' 703–4). Here Seneca combines literal and metaphorical registers, so that the ground's physical movement, its jolting of palace and attendants alike, becomes an emotional or

<sup>145</sup> Seidensticker (1985) 131 calls Atreus, an anti-*sapiens*, 'der stoische Weise auf den Kopf gestellt' ('who turns the wise man upside-down'); Tarrant (1985) 24 calls Medea and Atreus 'perverted mirror images of the *sapiens*'.

<sup>146</sup> An idea floated by Miles (1996) 51–9.

psychological *motus*, to which everyone except Atreus succumbs.<sup>147</sup> A similar blend of meaning occurs in Seneca's philosophical works, where strength of character is illustrated, again and again, via images of physical endurance.<sup>148</sup> Seneca's *sapiens* is *inconcussus* (*Ep.* 45.9 and 59.14); he will not, in the psychological sense, be moved (*ille ne commovetur quidem, Ep.* 35.4). As Miles observes, Seneca envisages *constantia* in terms of 'motionlessness of immovable objects triumphantly withstanding irresistible forces'.<sup>149</sup> In this regard, as in so many others, Atreus resembles a Stoic hero who remains true to his purpose and true to his self despite all opposition.

Immovability is, in Senecan Stoicism, the companion of self-coherence, because being shaken implies changing the course of one's action and consequently, changing one's identity. In the same letter that Seneca praises the *sapiens* for his steadfastness, he also advises Lucilius, *profice et ante omnia hoc cura, ut constes tibi* ('make progress and endeavour above all else to be consistent with yourself' *Ep.* 35.4). The phrase is similarly used to describe psychological tranquility and wholeness at *Ep.* 66.45, *animus constat sibi et placidus est* ('the soul is consistent and calm'), and at *Consolatio ad Polybium* 8.4, where Seneca counsels the addressee not to undertake light literary pursuits until his mind 'is wholly self-consistent' (*nisi cum iam sibi ab omni parte constiterit*,). In all cases, *constantia*, the attainment or recovery of it, is envisaged as the state of being at one with oneself, of being congruent as opposed to changeable or unsettled. Atreus, too, appears to possess this quality of self-coherence, because the messenger in the *Thyestes* employs exactly the same expression – *sibi ... / ... constat* (703–4) – to describe Atreus' firmness of purpose. There are undeniable Stoic overtones here: Richard Tarrant deems Atreus' pose 'a travesty of *constantia*', while Anthony Boyle calls it 'an ironic exemplification of ... Stoic

<sup>147</sup> The interrelationship of moral/psychological and physical universes is a recurrent theme in Seneca's tragedies, and one with roots in Stoic philosophy: see Herington (1966) 433 on the *Thyestes* in particular; Rosenmeyer (1989) 113–203; and Williams (2012) *passim*, but especially 17–92.

<sup>148</sup> On images of physical endurance in Seneca's prose works, see Lavery (1980) 147–51; Miles (1996) 38–57; and Wilson (1997) 63–7.

<sup>149</sup> Miles (1996) 45.

virtue'.<sup>150</sup> But I am inclined to view Atreus' self-coherence as more than a passing parody, because he displays throughout the tragedy substantial if warped associations with Stoic *persona* theory, with the principles of *decorum*, with Stoic ideals of moral constancy in the face of enormous opposition. Although Atreus is not interested in pursuing virtue, although he is in fact intent upon committing a particularly heinous set of crimes, nonetheless his behaviour recalls Seneca's vision of *constantia sapientis* in numerous fundamental respects. In doing so, it lays bare the theory's potential perils, showing consistent selfhood to be a largely solipsistic enterprise in Seneca, something that tilts dangerously towards becoming an end in itself.<sup>151</sup> Most critics would argue that Seneca's Atreus cannot claim *constantia* because he is not virtuous. I see the equation in reverse: Atreus demonstrates a high degree of coherence, and that makes *constantia* a problematic virtue.

In this regard, it is also worth noting that the expression *sibi constat* can imply not just moral/personal coherence but also coherence of literary characterisation. Horace uses it in this latter sense when giving advice to playwrights in his *Ars Poetica*:

aut famam sequere aut sibi convenientia finge  
 scriptor. honoratum si forte reponis Achillem,  
 inpiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer  
 iura neget sibi nata, nihil non adroget armis.  
 sit Medea ferox invictaque, flebilis Ino,  
 perfidus Ixion, Io vaga, tristis Orestes.  
 siquid inexpertum scaenae committis et audes  
 personam formare novam, servetur ad imum,  
 qualis ab incepto processerit, et sibi constat.

Either follow tradition or invent what is self-consistent.  
 If, by chance, you bring Achilles back on stage to be honoured,  
 make him impatient, irascible, relentless, fierce,  
 he should say laws don't apply to him, always reach for the sword.  
 Medea should be fierce and unbowed, Ino teary,

<sup>150</sup> Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 703–4; Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 703–6. Agapitos (1998) 238 likewise treats the passage as a mockery of Stoic values. Davis (1989) 428 notes the phrase's Stoic colouring.

<sup>151</sup> Thus Miles (1996) 61: 'Seneca's is essentially an individualistic philosophy: the Senecan Stoic's aim is self-consistency and self-perfection, the fact that this is ultimately 'for the good of all men' being only an added justification.'

## 1.2 *Thyestes*

Ixion treacherous, Io wandering, Orestes morose.

But if you bring to the stage something untried, and dare  
to fashion a new character, make sure it maintains to the end  
the nature it had from the beginning, and that it is self-coherent.

(*Ars* 119–27)

The passage combines ethics with aesthetics in a way that resembles, and thus sheds light on, Seneca's own work. Like Atreus' self-affirming exhortation to act *iratus* (*Thy.* 180), Horace advises playwrights to align characters with the emotions most appropriate to them: Achilles must be *iracundus* in order to be properly Achilles. It is not hard to detect shadows of moral *decorum* lurking behind such poetic *decorum*, and Horace, like Cicero before him and Seneca after him, allows the possibility of its justifying bad behaviour on the sole plea of suitability: a patient, even-tempered, gentle Achilles may be morally preferable, but aesthetically unrecognisable. Horace's notion of preserving a consistent character from beginning to end likewise finds echo in Seneca's instruction to Lucilius at *Ep.* 120.22: *qualem institueris praestare te talem usque ad exitum serves* ('maintain right to the end the character you have resolved to present' cf. *Ars* 126–7: *servetur ad imum / qualis ab incepto processerit*.) One can *constat sibi* as a character and as a person, and the overlap of these two realms allows Seneca's audience to see Atreus' fictional identity concurrently with his quasi-humanness. Atreus pursues coherence both as an implied person and as a *dramatis persona*.

Furthermore, the blending of these two realms warns against overhasty dismissal of Atreus' *constantia*, for although Seneca's *Thyestes* is a work of fiction, fiction itself plays a prominent role in the formation and articulation of these particular Stoic precepts. It is clear that Seneca understands coherence as a literary as well as a philosophical concept, and this coincidence not only precludes rigid separation of his tragedies from his prose works but could even be said to render Atreus' *decorum* more, not less, real. Rather than an imitation or a parody of the principle, Atreus' *constantia* is a valid instantiation of a virtue destabilised by its own wayward logic. *decorum*'s patently aesthetic qualities all but encourage Atreus' being brought in as an example of the self that Stoic self-coherence

can create. Of course, Seneca's project in the tragedies does not have to be so blatantly didactic, and I would definitely guard against interpreting it as such. But it is equally true that the philosophical material present in Seneca's dramas is not so much a reflection of what he has written elsewhere, as an extension of the same mirror, with a slightly darker tint. Consciously or not, Seneca encourages his readers to put Atreus and Lucilius side by side.

As in the case of Seneca's *Medea*, the argument I advance here is a minority view. Most critics of Senecan tragedy prefer to see Atreus as a fluctuating, changeable figure completely at the mercy of his own destructive *furor* and *ira*.<sup>152</sup> By giving in to his passion, Atreus should – according to strict Stoic reasoning – exhibit a fragmented *persona*, fickle, unreliable, inconstant in purpose.<sup>153</sup> Seneca himself suggests as much in the *de Ira*, when his fictional interlocutor protests, 'some angry people behave consistently and control themselves' (*at irati quidem constant sibi et se continent, Ira* 1.8.6), but Seneca responds in the negative: 'only when anger is receding and yielding on its own accord, not when it is boiling' (*cum iam ira evanescit et sua sponte decedit, non cum in ipso fervore est, Ira* 1.8.6). According to this view, Atreus, who revels in *ira* as his defining quality, should be either an incoherent individual, or a calm one. This is not the case, however: Atreus manages to be both angry and stable, and his accomplishment speaks to the ambiguities latent in Stoic *decorum*. It also speaks to Seneca's immersion in the Stoic vocabulary of identity, to the extent that any kind of self-construction pursued by the characters in these tragedies becomes a quasi-Stoic act, even if it is far from virtuous. Atreus succeeds not because he is 'good', but because he knows himself, understands his capacities, and follows the established parameters of his role.

<sup>152</sup> A broad yet representative sample of this view: Knoche (1972) [1941]; Herington (1966) 453–4; Poe (1969); Staley (1981); Pratt (1983) 103–7; Lefèvre (1997b) 60–8.

<sup>153</sup> It could be argued that Atreus' insatiable appetite for revenge is likewise a symptom of inconstancy, which Poe (1969) and Littlewood (2008) certainly suggest. But Atreus' revenge is also a kind of self-fulfilment, so that he may be interpreted as hungering after both. Moreover, he does appear to achieve satisfaction, and hence, recognisability, by the end of the play (e.g. 1096ff).

## 1.2 *Thyestes*

### *Inconstant Thyestes*

Atreus' selfhood is so firm that Thyestes, too, recognises his brother's essential qualities long before the final moment of *anagnorisis*. While en route to Argos, Thyestes disputes with his eldest son the extent of Atreus' good intentions, and whenever the young man voices his optimism, Thyestes responds with deep misgivings. He fears – rightly as it happens – that Atreus poses a threat to his children: *vos facitis mihi / Atrea timendum* ('you render Atreus a source of fear for me' 485–6). He also doubts whether any love is possible between himself and his brother:

amat Thyesten frater? aetherias prius  
perfundet Arctos pontus et Siculi rapax  
consistet aestus unda et Ionio seges  
matura pelago surget et lucem dabit  
nox atra terris, ante cum flammis aquae,  
cum morte vita, cum mari ventus fidem  
foedusque iungent.

Does Thyestes' brother love him? Sooner will the sea  
drench the heavenly Bear, and the snatching wave  
of the Sicilian tide cease flowing, and ripe crops  
rise from the Ionian deep, and black night bring light  
to the earth, sooner will water make an alliance  
with fire, life with death, the wind with the sea.

(*Thy.* 476–82)

The irony of Thyestes' *adynata* is that several of them await him. Atreus' sacrifice and Thyestes' unwitting cannibalism will cause night to overtake day (776–8; 789–93; 990–5) and death to be joined with life (1035–51).<sup>154</sup> Although not fully aware of it, Thyestes has anticipated the arc of his own story. He has also painted an unnervingly accurate portrait of his brother, which only confirms Atreus' undeviating conduct and consequent recognisability. This begs a question: if Thyestes has such insight into his brother's character, why does he accept Atreus' invitation?<sup>155</sup>

<sup>154</sup> See Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 476–82.

<sup>155</sup> Senecan scholarship has never really succeeded in resolving this issue, although the question about Thyestes' motives is posed with particular urgency by Boyle (1983) 213–18.

The simple answer is that Thyestes is fickle. In contrast to Atreus, Thyestes does not match his words to his deeds, and seems to possess little comprehension of his own *persona*.<sup>156</sup> Whereas Atreus stands *immutus* and thereby displays his self-coherence, Thyestes' initial appearance is marked by physical faltering.<sup>157</sup> He declares that he 'moves forward an unwilling step' (*moveo nolentem gradum*, 420), while his son Tantalus describes him as 'caught in uncertainty' (*se . . . in incerto tenet*, 422) and 'stepping back from the sight of his homeland' (*a patria gradum / referre visa*, 429–30). He accepts the crown from Atreus a mere two lines after asserting his 'definite plan' to refuse it (*respuere certum est regna consilium mihi*, 540). Later, in Act 5, he cries while celebrating his good fortune (938–44), and spurns the past poverty (920–37) to which he has previously devoted such praise (446–70).<sup>158</sup> Seneca's Thyestes is a figure riddled with contradictions.

Thyestes' inconsistency is the opposite of Atreus' quasi-Stoic self-coherence. When discussing the need for harmony between a man's beliefs and his deeds, Seneca defines *sapientia* as the act of 'always feeling willingness for the same thing, and always feeling unwillingness for the same thing' (*semper idem velle atque idem nolle*, *Ep.* 20.5). Thyestes clearly subverts the precept, not only by continuing to move when his foot is *nolentem* (420), but also by desiring a feast that he will not, ultimately, want to have consumed. If the highest expression of Atreus' power is to make people 'want what they do not want' (*quod nolunt velint*, 212), then Thyestes' fate is the ultimate example of that power: he consumes his own flesh and blood even though his 'hands are unwilling to obey' (*nolunt manus / parere*, 985–6), and orders himself to be of good cheer even as 'tears fall from his unwilling face' (*imber vultu nolente cadit*, 950).<sup>159</sup> Thyestes, it seems, falls

<sup>156</sup> The contrary argument pursued by Curley (1986) 148–51, namely that Atreus misunderstands Thyestes and Thyestes comprehends his brother only too well, is not particularly convincing.

<sup>157</sup> Miles (1996) 58.

<sup>158</sup> On Thyestes' contrasting attitudes towards his exile, see Lefèvre (1985) 1274–8, and Rose (1986–7) 121–5.

<sup>159</sup> Lexical connections noted by Tarrant (1985) 47, and Rose (1986–7) 123 and 127.

victim to Atreus not because he fails to understand his brother, but because he fails to understand his own wishes.

Unsurprisingly, Seneca's *Thyestes* also differs from Atreus in displaying two *personae* rather than a single distinct one over the course of the tragedy. Scholars have often remarked that Thyestes grows steadily to resemble Atreus the more time he spends in his brother's presence: having once decried the treacherous pleasures of royal luxury (453; 455–8), he ends up reclining upon purple and gold (909), drinking from a silver cup (913), wearing Tyrian purple (955–6), and dwelling within precisely the kind of 'towering house' he had denounced at the outset (*domum / . . . imminentem*, 455–6 cf. the description of the Pelopid palace at 641–56).<sup>160</sup> The *Thyestes* of Act 5 mimics Atreus' speech patterns, too, when he commands himself to forget 'grim poverty, the companion of fearful exile' (*trepidi comes exilii / tristis egestas*, 923–4). Atreus speaks of exile in identical terms, calling himself a *trepidus exul* ('frightened fugitive', 237) during Thyestes' former rule in Argos, and characterising Thyestes' experience as 'grim poverty' (*tristis egestas*, 303).<sup>161</sup> The *Thyestes* of Act 3, in contrast, praises exilic poverty for keeping him safe (449–52). This split *persona*, this metamorphosis from humble forest-dweller to gluttonous aristocrat, becomes especially prominent when Thyestes, surprised by his sudden sadness in the middle of the banquet, commands himself to 'banish old Thyestes from [his] mind' (*veterem ex animo mitte Thyesten*, 937). Self-naming, as we have seen, is usually a method of achieving *constantia* in Seneca tragedy, but in this case, it points towards the major fault line in Thyestes' character, the fact that he vacillates between two irreconcilable modes of behaviour.

This lack of self-coherence is accompanied by an equal lack of self-knowledge.<sup>162</sup> Of course, it is central to the play's plot that Thyestes does not know until too late what his meal contained, but such ignorance in Seneca's version is not ancillary; it is, rather, a defining aspect of Thyestes' character. The messenger portrays

<sup>160</sup> Rose (1986–7) 124 is a particularly acute study of this metamorphosis. See also the comments by Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 453 and Boyle (2017) *ad Thy.* 908–12.

<sup>161</sup> Parallels discussed by Rose (1986–7) 123.

<sup>162</sup> On Thyestes' lack of self-awareness, see Davis (1989) 429.

it, ironically, as the only benefit of Thyestes' situation: 'the one good thing in your troubles, Thyestes, is that you do not know your troubles' (*in malis unum hoc tuis / bonum est, Thyesta, quod mala ignoras tua*, 782–3). Atreus adopts a harsher view, and complains that his revenge fell short because Thyestes 'with his wicked mouth tore his sons apart, but he did so unaware, and they were unaware' (*scidit ore natos impio, sed nesciens, / sed nescientes*, 1067–8).<sup>163</sup> More than mere sadism, Atreus' remark recalls a key point about the construction of identity in Senecan drama: one must understand one's capacities in order to attain the appearance – which is also the reality – of coherent selfhood. We have seen that Cicero in the *de Officiis* counsels each man to 'know his own natural disposition' (*suum quisque . . . noscat ingenium*, *Off.* 1.114); Medea and Atreus both adhere to this advice, but Thyestes evidently does not. The portrait he paints of himself in Act 3 no longer applies by Act 5. Although Thyestes enters the stage declaring that, for him, 'daytime is not devoted to sleep and night joined to sleepless revelry' (*nec somno dies / Bacchoque nox iugenda pervigili datur*, 466–7), these are precisely the kinds of activities he is engaged in by the tragedy's end.<sup>164</sup> Both as a quasi-human and as a fictional identity, Thyestes seems unaware of how he is going to behave.

Thyestes' cannibalism, too, functions as a symbol of his ignorance, because when he consumes his own children, he literally does not know what is inside him. The boundaries of his identity blur: his chest 'groans with a groan that is not [his]' (*meum . . . gemitu non meo pectus gemit*, 1001), and his body becomes composite: 'as a father, I crush my sons, and I am crushed by my sons' (*genitor . . . natos premo / premorque natis*, 1050–1), with the phrase's chiasmic structure reinforcing its sense of interchangeability. Physical confusion mirrors Thyestes' behavioural

<sup>163</sup> Crucially, this scenario would negate any need for recognition qua revelation, because Thyestes, although powerless, would already be fully aware of his deeds. That Atreus desires such a possibility shows, once again, his interest in using *anagnorisis* for validation rather than disclosure.

<sup>164</sup> Notably, Seneca uses the metonymic *Bacchus* to connect Thyestes' image of the drunken ruler (*nec somno dies / Bacchoque nox iugenda pervigili datur*, *Thy.* 466–7) with a later image of Thyestes himself (*satis mensis datum est / satisque Baccho*, *Thy.* 899–900).

confusion: his *persona* is just as incoherent as his body, and vice versa. When the play's second chorus describes 'death weighing heavily' (*illi mors gravis incubat*, 401) on the ambitious king, who ends his days 'unknown to himself' (*ignotus . . . sibi*, 403), it anticipates the image of Thyestes in the final Act, burdened by his children's death and unaware of what his body contains.<sup>165</sup>

What Seneca says of the fallible human multitude applies particularly well to his Thyestes: *mutamus subinde personam et contrariam ei sumimus quam exuimus* ('we keep changing our masks and we put on the opposite of what we have taken off' *Ep.* 120.22).<sup>166</sup> Although an older trend in Senecan scholarship interprets Thyestes in partially positive terms, as a Stoic *proficiens* who fails to uphold his principles,<sup>167</sup> this character is, instead, problematic and divided from the moment he steps onto the stage. His fickleness has obvious implications for the recognition scene, too, namely that Thyestes is slow to recognise his own situation even though he acknowledges Atreus' selfhood with ease. The process of *anagnorisis* in the *Thyestes* is drawn out not just for dramatic effect, but also to emphasise the extent of the victim's ignorance. Thyestes' first assumption upon being presented with his sons' heads is that the boys have been murdered and their remains left lying on the ground as fodder for birds and beasts (1032–3). That he is still at this moment unaware of his own cannibalism points to a broader lack of self-knowledge: Thyestes has acted without full understanding of his deeds, and he remains unaware of what is – literally and figuratively – going on inside him, until Atreus announces the entirety of his and his brother's crime. Whereas Atreus is recognisable, Thyestes, it seems, cannot manage to play just one, consistent part.

<sup>165</sup> Davis (1989) 429 remarks that *ignotus sibi* applies to Thyestes.

<sup>166</sup> Cicero's definition of vice at *Tusc.* 4.29 also seems eminently applicable to Seneca's Thyestes: *habitus aut adfectio in tota vita inconstans et a se ipsa dissentiens*. Notably, Thyestes' change of clothing can also be read as symbolic of his changeable nature.

<sup>167</sup> A representative sample: Gigon (1938) and Knoche 1972 [1941], and in anglophone scholarship, Poe (1969) 360–1, Hine (1981) 272–3, Pratt (1983) 103–7.

*Recognition and Isolation*

Constancy in Senecan tragedy is not just amoral; it is also destructive. Like Medea, who pursues her ideal selfhood by removing or rendering void all interpersonal ties, Atreus tears apart his own family not just in the name of revenge, but also for the purpose of self-realisation. Earlier, I discussed how *anagnorisis* in the *Medea* subverts traditional relationships between recognition and reunion; the same thing happens in the *Thyestes*, with the protagonist seeking acknowledgement for the deeds he has perpetrated against his own relatives. The final Act of this play sees Atreus triumphant, and totally isolated.

The vocabulary of reunion is even more prevalent in *Thyestes*' recognition scene than it is in *Medea*'s. Thyestes demands that Atreus 'return [his] sons to [him]' (*redde iam natos mihi*, 997), and Atreus responds by assuring his brother, darkly, of eternal union: 'I shall return them, and no day will take them from you' (*reddam, et tibi illos nullus eripiet dies*, 998). Seneca expands upon this (warped) motif of parent-child recognition by having Atreus refer repeatedly to physical acts of welcome: 'believe that your children are here, in their father's embrace' (*hic esse natos crede in amplexu patris*, 976); 'open your embrace, father, they have come' (*expedi amplexus, pater; / venere*, 1004–5); 'enjoy them, kiss them, divide your embraces by three' (*fruere, osculare, divide amplexus tribus*, 1023). With such statements, Seneca adapts a traditional feature of *anagnorisis* in Greco-Roman drama, where characters' first impulse following a happy moment of recognition is, typically, to embrace. Thus, when Sosicles realises the identity of his twin brother, Menaechmus, he exclaims that he 'cannot refrain from hugging [him]' (*contineri quin complectar non queo*, *Men.* 1124); Daemones, in the *Rudens*, takes his long-lost daughter, Palaestra, in his arms (*ut te amplector lubens!* 'how gladly I embrace you!' *Rud.* 1175). Similar scenes are also found in tragedy, as when Sophocles' Electra realises that Orestes is not dead, but standing right beside her: Ἔχω σε χερσίν; ('do I hold you in my arms?' *El.* 1225).<sup>168</sup> Seneca's

<sup>168</sup> There is also an ironic quality to Electra's question, because prior to embracing the body of the real Orestes, she has been holding in her hands the urn assumed to contain her brother's ashes – 'Orestes' in another, far less substantial form.

Atreus, by contrast, draws attention to the futility and impossibility of such positive emotional displays. Whereas traditional recognition scenes tend to reassert an individual's legitimate identity, and thereby reintegrate that individual with a collectivity such as the family, Atreus overturns the process: he destroys and dis-unites individuals as a way of asserting his own identity.

In fact, legitimacy is a major theme both in the *Thyestes*'s recognition scene, and in the play overall.<sup>169</sup> Because of Thyestes' adultery with Aerope, Atreus worries about his own sons' parentage (240; 327–30), which he plans either to confirm or to deny categorically via his revenge. When Thyestes displays grief upon learning of his cannibalism, Atreus takes this to mean that his brother's children were legitimate (*certos*, 1102) and that his own sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, are also legitimate by association. Although Atreus' logic is far from secure, his pre-occupations have significant bearing on the moment of *anagnorisis*, where the verb *agnoscere* evokes the legal recognition of children, just as it does in the *Medea*. By asking Thyestes whether he recognises his sons – *natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?* 1005 – Atreus also demands that his brother acknowledge and validate the children's parentage (cf. *Nep. Ag.* 1.4 and *Quint. Inst.* 7.1.14, above). Ironically, the assertion of legitimacy that Atreus orchestrates in this scene happens at the expense of the family, not to its benefit.

This legal sense of *agnoscere* also links back to the play's first Act, in which the Fury, while enumerating events to come, poses an elusively ambiguous question: *ecquando tollet?* ('will he ever lift it/them up?' 59). Most editors assume that the line refers to Atreus picking up a weapon, especially in the context of the Fury's prior, impatient demand, *dextra cur patruī vacat?* ('why is the uncle's right hand empty?' 57). However, *tollere* can also refer to a father picking up a newborn child in a formal gesture of recognition.<sup>170</sup> Plautus' *Amphitruo* provides an apt, if irreverent, parallel in a plot that likewise deals with issues of paternity and

<sup>169</sup> Fuller discussion in Chapter 4, 309–20.

<sup>170</sup> Interpretation of these lines is problematic. Line 57 refers to Thyestes – *nondum Thyestes liberos deflet suos* – but Tarrant (1985) and Zwierlein (1986a) bracket it as spurious because it disrupts the Fury's otherwise chronological description of events. If

legitimacy: Jupiter, as the real father and counterfeit Amphitruo, commands Alcmena to ‘lift the child up, when it’s born’ (*quod erit natum tollito*, *Amph.* 501). Seneca’s text is less explicit, but even if we accept this meaning as a mere shadow in the Fury’s speech, it still seems to anticipate Atreus’ concerns over parentage and Thyestes’ eventual, ill-fated *agnorisis*.

Just as Medea does with Jason, so Atreus puts Thyestes in the position of authorising and admitting responsibility for a family he has previously disrupted. Atreus demands from his brother validation both of the children’s parentage, and of his own power to make Thyestes suffer. His self-construction is bound so inseparably to the act of revenge that any acknowledgement of the deed itself becomes, by extension, acknowledgement of Atreus’ identity (as Thyestes quickly realises). Practising constancy sets Atreus on a path of conflict with the entire world around him, and his self-realisation prevents rather than generates social harmony. *agnorisis* in Seneca’s *Thyestes* perverts some of the most standard connotations of recognition in Greco-Roman drama: instead of uncovering an unexpected identity, it confirms an extant one; instead of reasserting relationships between previously estranged individuals, it destroys interpersonal ties precisely in order to declare their legitimacy.

Motifs of isolation in this final Act pertain not only to Thyestes’ gruesome (re)union with his offspring, but also to Atreus’ sense of self-deification, which approximates to Stoic *autarkeia*. Seneca’s philosophical writings often equate the *sapiens* with a god: he is likened to Jupiter (*Ep.* 9.16); his soul ‘ought to be such as befits a god’ (*talis animus esse sapientis viri debet qualis deum deceat*, *Ep.* 92.3); Lucilius ‘will rise as the equal of god’ if only he takes nature for his guide (*par deo surges*, *Ep.* 31.9). Atreus envisages for himself a similar degree of divine equality when he boasts of walking ‘level with the stars’ (*aequalis astris gradior*, 885). An image that, in Senecan Stoicism, is meant to articulate the wise man’s perfect

57 is removed, then *tollit* most likely refers to Atreus’ sword. If, on the other hand, it is kept – and Tarrant (1985) *ad Thy.* 58–9 is not beyond entertaining this possibility – then *tollit* may evoke Thyestes’ later act of lifting the children’s flesh to his lips or, as I propose, may create a broader, thematic link with the Roman custom of fathers acknowledging paternity by lifting children up from the ground.

## 1.2 *Thyestes*

union with nature becomes in the *Thyestes* an index of Atreus' self-motivated removal from the bounds of human society. Like Medea, Atreus uses his vengeance and attendant self-construction to achieve a radical form of independence: he attains a unified and fully realised identity by cutting familial and social ties; his self-sufficiency is innately destructive. Even Thyestes' acknowledgement of fraternity – *agnosco fratrem* (1006) – indicates, ironically, that Atreus has sabotaged all blood relationships just in order to arrive at this moment of recognition. He fulfils his allotted *persona* at the expense of everything else.

### *Conclusion*

Erik Gunderson describes the Stoic *proficiens* as 'someone looking back at himself *as if* from the terminus of the journey as he advances along the road to the same end'.<sup>171</sup> Medea and Atreus also behave this way: they project idealised identities and proceed to evaluate their current selves from that future perspective. The activity is typical of Seneca's *dramatis personae*, who engage in it not only for metatheatrical effect, but also to monitor their selfhood and thereby ensure its constancy. Medea and Atreus want to match their behaviour to their roles, and their words to their deeds; they endeavour to achieve *aequabilitas* across sequences of dramatic action, and in Medea's case, across the entire arc of her literary and mythological life. Constancy in Senecan tragedy is sought with great effort and won at great cost.

It is also a principle that requires evaluation over time. Logically enough, constancy is not an instant character trait, but one that may be discerned only towards a story's end. It is when Medea requests recognition from Jason that she proves the full extent of her self-coherence. When Thyestes recognises Atreus, he draws attention to the end-directed self-construction his brother has pursued with such vehemence. Scenes of *anagnorisis* in these tragedies are designed to validate, often via the agency of an unfortunate spectator, the identities that protagonists have crafted and perfected through their crimes.

<sup>171</sup> Gunderson (2015) 9.

Recognition is a point at which multiple topics from Senecan philosophy and Senecan drama intersect. As the conclusion of a constant performance (*Ep.* 120.22), *anagnorisis* combines implied human *personae* with dramatic ones, renders *constantia* dependent upon external acknowledgement, and comes perilously close to divorcing self-coherence from virtue. Exhortations to behave in a morally upright manner hold less sway when seemliness (*decorum*) is envisaged primarily in terms of a seamless performance. Medea and Atreus both capitalise on the moral ambiguity of this principle, and invoke *decorum* as a means of persevering in the fundamentally wicked activities for which their roles befit them. Thus, the recognition scenes in each of these tragedies emphasise the complex interplay between literary character and actual, human selfhood. In doing so, they open up the possibility for *constantia* to become an im- or amoral quality.