

## TANTALVS POETA: THE CATALOGUE OF THE GREAT SINNERS IN SENECA'S *THYESTES* 1–13\*

### ABSTRACT

*The opening lines of Seneca's Thyestes (1–13), which feature Tantalus' reference to the so-called great sinners, have received little critical attention. Through both an intertextual and an intratextual analysis, this article reveals the peculiarities of this allegedly canonical list of sinners by comparing it to similar catalogues in other Senecan dramas, as well as by identifying its structural function within this particular tragedy. This kind of two-fold approach enables a reinterpretation of certain key passages of the drama vis-à-vis lines 1–13, as well as a reassessment of Tantalus' role as the creative force and architect of the tragedy.*

**Keywords:** Senecan drama; *Thyestes*; great sinners; intertextuality; intratextuality; prologue

Quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit	
audivo fugaces ore captantem cibos?	
quis male deorum Tantalos uisus domos	
ostendit iterum? peius inuentum est siti	
aridae in undis aliquid et peius fame	5
hiante semper? Sisyphi numquid lapis	
gestandus umeris lubricis nostris uenit	
aut membra celeri differens cursu rota,	
aut poena Tityi qui specu uasto patens	
uulneribus atras pascit effosis aues	10
et nocte reparans quidquid amisit die	
plenum recenti pabulum monstro iacet?	
in quod malum transcribor?	(Sen. <i>Thy.</i> 1–13)

From the accursed abode of the underworld, who drags forth the one that catches at vanishing food with his avid mouth? Who perversely lets Tantalus see once more the hated homes of the gods? Has something worse been devised than thirst parched amidst water, worse than hunger that gapes forever? Can it be that Sisyphus' slippery stone comes to be carried on my shoulders, or the wheel that racks limbs in its swift rotation? Or the punishment of Tityos, who with his cavernous vast opening feeds dark birds from his quarried wounds—who regrows by night what he lost by day, and lies as a full meal for the fresh monster? What evil am I being reassigned to?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Latin text of the tragedies is from O. Zwierlein (ed.), *L. Annaei Senecae tragoediae* (Oxford, 1986); the English translation is from J.G. Fitch (ed.), *Seneca: Tragedies* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002 [vol. 1] and 2004 [vol. 2]), with minor changes.

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In Tantalus' speech at the beginning of the *Thyestes*, after he is called forth onto the stage by the Fury (1–4), Tantalus forms part of a broader category—namely, the catalogue of sinners (1–13). While this catalogue has been considered a purely typological summary, the entire prologue of Seneca's *Thyestes* (which also serves as the first act of the tragedy: 1–121) has been the subject of various studies. Scholars have analyzed the specificity of the prologue vis-à-vis Seneca's alleged sources, as well as in relation to his own dramatic production;<sup>2</sup> the relationship between the prologue and the rest of the drama has also been examined in terms of its structure, content and meaning.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, there is general agreement on the strategic and structural importance of the prologue for the rest of the tragedy, in so far as the prologue (as a microcosm or prototype of the entire play) embeds certain patterns that continue to be the dominant motifs throughout the drama. These include crime, punishment and *nefas*, to mention only the most important.<sup>4</sup>

Although much has been written about the prologue as a whole (1–121), the beginning (1–13), which features the catalogue of the so-called great sinners (namely, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion and Tityos) has mostly been overlooked. By building upon previous studies concerning the prologue of the *Thyestes*, as well as upon those that focus on the catalogue of the great sinners across many authors and on the broader motif of the underworld in Seneca's dramas, this article demonstrates that *Thy.* 1–13 not only are a rhetorical and stereotypical pattern but also hold crucial dramatic value for this particular play, as well as articulating Tantalus' role as both the poet and the architect of the tragedy.

The catalogue's strategic function for the architecture of the drama emerges from the lexical connections and from repeated allusions to other pivotal passages in the play. While the thematic and linguistic links between lines 1–13 and the cannibalistic feast (885–1112) have already been noticed by Tarrant (n. 2) and Boyle (n. 2) in their commentaries, the textual allusions to other passages of the *Thyestes* encapsulated in these opening lines have not yet been fully explored. As we will see, the shared patterns between lines 1–13 and the dialogue between Thyestes and his son Tantalus at lines 404–90, the scene of the *penetrare regni* (641–90), and the fourth choral ode (789–884) imply that these passages, which occur later in the drama, are anticipated by, and can be (re)interpreted in relation to, the opening lines.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. K. Anliker, *Prologe und Akteinteilung in Senecas Tragödien* (Bern, 1960); C. Monteleone, 'I modelli di Seneca nel prologo del *Thyestes*', *GIF* 32 (1980), 77–82; A. Schiesaro, 'Seneca's *Thyestes* and the morality of tragic furor', in J. Elsner and J. Masters (edd.), *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation* (London, 1994), 196–210; P. Mantovanelli, *Patologia del potere. Studi sulle tragedie di Seneca* (Granarolo dell'Emilia, 2014), 115–26. For the sources of the prologue, see G. Picone, *La fabula e il regno. Studi sul Thyestes di Seneca* (Palermo, 1984), 5–27; R.J. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca's Thyestes* (Atlanta, GA, 1985), 86; A.J. Boyle (ed.), *Seneca Thyestes* (Oxford, 2017), lxxix–cxiii and 97–100. This prologue has been specifically compared to the prologue of the *Agamemnon*: see E. Paratore, 'Il prologo dell'*Agamemnon* e quello del *Thyestes* di Seneca', *Vichiana* 11 (1982), 226–34.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Schiesaro, 'Forms of Senecan intertextuality', *Vergilius* 38 (1992), 56–63, at 58–9; Schiesaro (n. 2), 196–210. According to K. Volk, 'Cosmic disruption in Seneca's *Thyestes*: two ways of looking at an eclipse', in K. Volk and G.D. Williams (edd.), *Seeing Seneca Whole* (Leiden and Boston, 2006), 183–200, the prologue anticipates the cosmic disorder that takes place later in the drama; see also Tarrant (n. 2), 85–6; Boyle (n. 2), 99.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. H.M. Hine, 'The structure of Seneca's *Thyestes*', *PLLS* 3 (1981), 259–75, at 259–63; C. Segal, 'Boundary violation and the landscape of the self in Senecan tragedy', in J.G. Fitch (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Seneca* (Oxford, 2008), 136–56, at 153–4.

Before moving on to this comparative analysis, it is beneficial to trace the development of the infernal theme within the context of Seneca's work in order to understand how such a catalogue fits within the *Thyestes*. I will then conduct an intertextual analysis of lines 1–13 to compare them to the catalogues of other tragedies, and explore the intra-textual relationship between the catalogue and other passages within the drama. By highlighting the catalogue's high degree of artistic elaboration, this two-fold approach (intertextual and intratextual) reveals that its lexical, stylistic and thematic patterns give new significance to other—perhaps unexpected—passages within the *Thyestes*, and disclose Tantalus' metapoetic function as the architect of the tragedy.

## I. STAGING THE UNDERWORLD: SENECA AND THE GREAT SINNERS

Descriptions of horrific settings, infernal or supernatural creatures, and a dash of realism are particularly prominent as recurring and highly specific patterns in Seneca's dramas, and are usually expressed in one of two forms: as the account of a fierce and bloody scene—as with *Phaedra's* final scene, where the body of Hippolytus is entirely dismembered by his horses (*Phae.* 1000–114)—or with the representation of supernatural creatures or diabolical beings that belong to Hades.<sup>5</sup> The second form is predominantly achieved through the description or invocation of infernal beings emerging from the underworld.<sup>6</sup> Among these beings is the group of the great sinners.

The great sinners are well-known mythological figures—namely, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion, Tityos and the Danaids.<sup>7</sup> The catalogue recurs with certain *uariationes synonymicae* in six of the other Senecan (or pseudo-Senecan)<sup>8</sup> dramas (*HF* 750–9; *Med.* 743–9; *Phae.* 1229–37; *Ag.* 15–22; *HO* 942–8 and 1068–82; *Octauia* 619–23) and has thus been viewed as a purely rhetorical stereotypical pattern.<sup>9</sup> The catalogue of the great sinners appears as early as Book 11 of the *Odyssey* (11.576–600: Tantalus, Sisyphus, Tityos) and, with certain variations, within subsequent Greek and particularly Latin authors such as Lucretius (3.978–1010: Tantalus, Tityos, Sisyphus, the Danaids), Tibullus (1.3.67–80: Ixion, Tityos, Tantalus, the Danaids) and Virgil (*G.* 4.467–84; *Aen.* 6.580–607: various categories of sinners). Yet it was only from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* onwards (4.455–63) that it could be said to have become canonical.<sup>10</sup> In Seneca's dramatic production, the catalogue appears to be repeated with a certain insistence. This emphasis may be due both to Seneca's literary taste

<sup>5</sup> See G. Petrone, 'Paesaggio dei morti e paesaggio del male: il modello dell'oltretomba virgiliano nelle tragedie di Seneca', *QCTC* 4–5 (1986–7), 131–43; M.J. Mans, 'The macabre in Seneca's tragedies', *AClass* 27 (1984), 101–19. For a review of scholarship and literature on the issue of performativity of Senecan dramas, see Tarrant (n. 2), 13–15; J.C. Fitch, 'Playing Seneca?', in G.W.M. Harrison (ed.), *Seneca in Performance* (London, 2000), 1–12; Boyle (n. 2), xl–xlii.

<sup>6</sup> For this specific pattern, see Picone (n. 2), 29–31.

<sup>7</sup> The definition of 'sinners' has been employed for these infernal damned by, e.g., Tarrant (n. 2), 99 and H. Hine (ed.), *Seneca Medea* (Warminster, 2000), 185.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on the authenticity of the *Hercules Oetaeus*, cf. C. Walde (ed.), *Hercules labor: Studien zum pseudosenecanischen Hercules Oetaeus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 252–307; L. Degiovanni (ed.), [*L. Annaei Senecae*] *Hercules Oetaeus* (Firenze, 2017), 3–15; for the *Octauia*, see R. Ferri (ed.), *Octauia: A Play Attributed to Seneca* (Cambridge, 2003), 5–54; A.J. Boyle (ed.), *Octauia: Attributed to Seneca* (Oxford, 2008), xiii–xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. F. Della Corte, 'Il catalogo dei grandi dannati', *Vichiana* 11 (1982), 95–9.

<sup>10</sup> Among these authors, only in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* does the catalogue occur in its complete form, featuring Tityos, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion and the Danaids; cf. Della Corte (n. 9).

for the infernal theme and to the general tendency of creating lists, which significantly developed in early imperial Latin poetry.<sup>11</sup>

The great sinners are well known for being guilty of terrible acts against men or deities; therefore, each of them is punished by torture in the underworld.<sup>12</sup> Within the literary and artistic sources, the punishments are varied: the Danaids, who killed their husbands, are condemned to carry a jug to fill a bathtub (*pitthos*) without a bottom (or with a leak) to wash away their sins;<sup>13</sup> Ixion, who fell in love with Juno, is bound to a burning solar wheel for eternity by order of Jupiter, at first spinning across the heavens, and then in later myths transferred to Tartarus; Sisyphus, who deceived the gods, is made to endlessly roll a huge boulder up a steep hill; Tantalus, who killed his son and offered his flesh to the gods, stands in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches, unable to reach them; finally, Tityos, who committed impiety by trying to rape Leto, is picked apart by two vultures that consume his liver, which grows back every night. But what gives this traditional pattern, which is highly recurrent across the tragedies, such a particular status within the *Thyestes*? Why does this group of sinners play such a significant dramatic role at the beginning of the tragedy? Also, how (and why) is the catalogue of the *Thyestes* different from those that occur in the other dramas (that is, in the *Hercules furens*, the *Medea*, the *Phaedra*, the *Agamemnon*, the *Hercules Oetaeus* and the *Octavia*)?

The concept of the catalogue as essentially a list of infernal sinners recurring throughout Seneca's dramatic production has been dealt with in an insightful essay by Mantovanelli, the only scholar to have specifically discussed the canonicity of this pattern.<sup>14</sup> Concerning the *Thyestes*, Mantovanelli observes that the catalogue should be attributed to the topos of the *transcriptio poenae* (cf. *in quod malum transcribor?* 'what evil am I being reassigned to?', 13) and notes that the position of Tityos at the end of the list is linked to the motif of insatiability, which permeates the entire tragedy.<sup>15</sup> However, remarks of this sort do not appear to offer any new perspective on *Thy.* 1–13.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, other peculiarities of the catalogue in the *Thyestes* appear to have been neglected altogether, and it is precisely these peculiarities that reveal the catalogue's significance for other passages, and the whole architecture, of the drama.

It has been observed that Tantalus' ascent from the underworld and his subsequent dialogue with the Fury sanction the 'birth of the play'.<sup>17</sup> While Frangoulidis has argued recently that the role of the metaliterary author of the drama in the prologue pertains

<sup>11</sup> Cf. G. Williams, *Change and Decline: Roman Literature in the Early Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), 197–8, 211–19, 249–50, 271; on Seneca's excessive rhetoricity, cf. Boyle (n. 2), xliii–xlix.

<sup>12</sup> See, respectively, W.H. Roscher, s.v. 'Danaiden', *LGRM* 1.1 (1884), 949–52; id., s.v. 'Ixion', *LGRM* 2.1 (1890), 766–72; id., s.v. 'Sisyphos', *LGRM* 4 (1909), 958–72; id., s.v. 'Tantalos', *LGRM* 5 (1916), 75–86; id., s.v. 'Tityos', *LGRM* 5 (1916), 1033–55. For artistic references, see E. Keuls, 'Danaiides', *LIMC* III.1.337–41; C. Lochin, 'Ixion', *LIMC* V.1.857–62; J.H. Oakley, 'Sisyphos', *LIMC* VII.1.781–7; A. Kossatz-Deissman, 'Tantalos', *LIMC* VII.1.839–43; R. Vollkommer, 'Tityos', *LIMC* VIII.1.37–41; also Boyle (n. 2), 104–7.

<sup>13</sup> Paus. 10.31.9–11. Two variants are attested for the punishments of the Danaids: in the first version, they try to fill up a larger water jar that is leaking (cf. Lucr. 3.1008–10; Hor. *Carm.* 3.11.26–7; Sen. *HF* 757); the other version is that described above (cf. Sen. *Med.* 748–9; Juv. 6.614 A–B; Porph. *Abst.* 3.27). See also Hine (n. 7), 186.

<sup>14</sup> See Mantovanelli (n. 2), 127–39.

<sup>15</sup> See Mantovanelli (n. 2), 130–1, 133–4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tarrant (n. 2), 87–8; Boyle (n. 2), 106–7.

<sup>17</sup> Schiesaro (n. 3), 58.

exclusively to the Fury,<sup>18</sup> the following pages demonstrate that Tantalus' manipulation and reinterpretation of the catalogue of sinners articulate his control over the architecture of the *Thyestes*, as well as laying the foundation for the structure of the entire tragedy. By evoking and appropriating this pattern, namely the catalogue, which features prominently within Seneca's tragedies and marks their high degree of artistic refinement, Tantalus places himself in an authorial role. Both as a character within his narrative and as a metaliterary external poetic agent, Tantalus functions as the archetypal creator, and originator, of the *tragedy*.

At a narrative level, Tantalus' dismemberment and cooking of the limbs of his son Pelops foreshadow Atreus' and Thyestes' crimes, while his ascent to the upperworld anticipates the abhorrent quasi-pregnancy of Thyestes at the end of the drama (1035–51; see n. 40 below): cf. *uoluntur intus uiscera et clausum nefas | sine exitu luctatur* 'the flesh churns within me, the imprisoned horror struggles with no way out', 1041–2; *genitor en natos premo | premorque natis—sceleris est aliquis modus!* 'see, a father burdening his sons and burdened by his sons. There is some limit to crime!', 1050–1. Thyestes' distorted pregnancy with the dismembered bodies of his children is a product of the subversion of natural laws, in so far as it marks the passage of his children from life to death, instead of producing life through childbirth.

The appearance of Tantalus on stage at the beginning of the *Thyestes*, representing the return of an inhabitant of the underworld to earth, also articulates a rupturing of natural laws, although inverted with respect to Thyestes' cannibalism, since it marks a passage from death to (momentary) life. Along with this reversal of natural laws, the chthonic motif is an indicator of Tantalus' metapoetic agency, since hell has been acknowledged as both a symbol of and a means to initiate poetic creation, particularly in Virgil, Lucan, Statius and Valerius Flaccus.<sup>19</sup> The role of the underworld as a place of literary tradition and memory suggests that Tantalus' ascent from and reference to the underworld at the beginning of the drama activates his identification with a poetic creative force within the tragedy. Concurrently, the recollection of the first lines of the prologue in Thyestes' cannibalistic feast suggests that the culmination of the plot of the *Thyestes* evokes, and is highly dependent upon, Tantalus' crime as well as his early appearance in the play.

Tantalus' expulsion, or ascent, from the underworld also anticipates the cosmic and moral disruption that characterizes the entire drama (as we shall see in the next section; cf. 789–884). This disruption of natural laws is echoed and amplified by a sort of metaliterary disruption of certain traditional aspects of the catalogue of the great sinners, which is unsettled from a structural point of view. By asking to endure greater punishments than his own (4–6), Tantalus breaks with the expected format of the catalogue as a series of punishments and sinners where each punishment is attributed to a particular sinner, as he imagines that all punishments fall upon him.<sup>20</sup> As a mythological figure, Tantalus disrupts human and divine laws, while as a tragic character and the architect of the *Thyestes* he infringes the canons of the dramatic

<sup>18</sup> S. Frangoulidis, 'Furia as an *auctor* in Seneca's *Thyestes*', *Trends in Classics* 9 (2017), 179–90. See also Schiesaro (n. 2), 204 and (n. 3), 59.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition* (Cambridge, 1993), 58–60; id., 'In the steps of the Sibyl: tradition and desire in the epic underworld', *MD* 52 (2004), 143–56, at 143–4.

<sup>20</sup> In the two catalogues at *Phae.* 1229–37 and *HO* 942–8, respectively, both Theseus and Deianira ask that the punishments befall them.

genre. The exceptionality of Tantalus' ascent from the underworld and the blurring of boundaries between human and infernal space reverberates in Tantalus' violation of the norms of the literary canon.

The motifs of expulsion, the disruption of natural laws, and the blurring of both textual and conceptual boundaries, all connect the opening lines to other pivotal scenes of the tragedy, such as Thyestes' cannibalistic feast. The coincidence between natural disruption and textual discontinuity is articulated by a disjointed, almost spasmodic, syntactic construction. Just as the opening of the tragedy (and the catalogue) is characterized by Tantalus' direct questions (cf. 1–6), so the end of the drama (and particularly the discovery of Thyestes' impious meal) is also marked by a series of questions, which increase the dramatic pathos of the scene (cf. 999–1051, 1100–12): *quis hic tumultus uiscera exagitat mea? | quid tremuit intus?* 'what is the turmoil that shakes my guts? What trembles inside me?', 999–1000; *quid liberi meruere?* 'what was my children's guilt?', 1100; *scelere quis pensat scelus?* 'who repays crime with crime?', 1103.<sup>21</sup> The first six lines of the drama are therefore thematically (through the expulsion, disruption of natural laws, crime and punishment), syntactically and stylistically (the repetition of questions; the violation of the canon) re-enacted in the final scene.

By introducing the catalogue through his rhetorical questions, Tantalus asks who is 'extracting' him from the underworld (1–2)<sup>22</sup> and who is showing him 'again' the *deorum ... domos* (3–4), which, if taken literally, means the 'homes of the gods'. Through references to his punishment in the underworld and to the *deorum ... domos*, Tantalus hints at the impious feast he offered to the gods on Olympus.<sup>23</sup> The reason for Tantalus' ascent from the underworld lies in a highly exceptional circumstance, namely the crime of Atreus and Thyestes, which surpasses even his own. This is implied by Tantalus' questions, where he wonders whether there is something worse than his *sitis harena* and his *fames hians* (4–6). Through these two expressions, Tantalus alludes to his own punishment, thereby (re)stating his identity both as a character within and the external conceiver of the drama after explicitly naming himself at line 3 (*Tantalo*).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, this rhetorical question also introduces the punishments of the other sinners—namely, Sisyphus, Ixion and Tityos. By mentioning, and reshaping, the (allegedly) canonical catalogue of sinners, Tantalus clearly proclaims the concepts of crime and punishment that inform the tragedy, and takes on the role of author.

In the catalogue at *Thy.* 1–13, Tantalus stands in a liminal position: he is incorporated in the catalogue as a sinner, but he also refers to the catalogue from an external point of view, that of the author. While Tantalus' evocation of the other punishments figuratively marks the sinners' presence in the tragedy, these sinners, unlike Tantalus, do not

<sup>21</sup> Anliker (n. 2), 23–9 argues that Tantalus' question at line 13 finds an answer later in the prologue, i.e. at line 86. In a way, Tantalus' question may be said to be the archetypical question of the entire drama as well as a keystone for its structure.

<sup>22</sup> See Boyle (n. 2), 101: 'Clearly the Fury has preceded Tantalus from hell.'

<sup>23</sup> For the variant reading *uiuas*, see Tarrant (n. 2), 86–7 (who prints *uisas*, which I prefer) and Boyle (n. 2), 104 (who prints *uiuas*); Fitch (n. 1), 230–1 prints *inuias*, which he translates as 'hated'.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the identification of the speaker as Tantalus is meant to occur even before Tantalus names himself, i.e. when he refers to himself as *auido fugaces ore captantem cibos* (2). Boyle (n. 2), cvi (see also 103) remarks that Tantalus' self-referencing at line 3 and the word *iterum* at line 4 seem to be 'clear pointers to the play's self-conscious belatedness, its awareness of the many previous dramatic performances of its myth'. According to C.A. Littlewood, *Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy* (Oxford, 2004), 132, 'in his first speech, before he is terrified by Furia, Tantalus appears to be initiating the tragedy on his own'; see also Tarrant (n. 2), 86; Mantovanelli (n. 2), 131–2.



concretely ascend from the underworld. Distinct from other catalogues, yet quite expectedly, as the speaker, Tantalus refers to himself and his punishment first on the list (2, 4–6). In other dramas, however, he is never listed first, the only exception being *Octavia* 619–23: *poenasque quis et Tantali uincat sitim* ‘and torments to surpass the thirst of Tantalus’, 621.<sup>25</sup> The reason for this position is due to Tantalus’ role within the prologue, where he is the *persona loquens*, and thus intervenes in the structure of the catalogue. Instead of being a marker of conventionality, Tantalus’ position is the result of an artistic variation on the same theme (the catalogue) and is due to his narrative and metapoetic role as the architect of the tragedy. Tantalus’ irruption into this fixed canon articulates his violation of the canon’s narratological and textual boundaries.

Tantalus’ pervasive presence in the drama and his metapoetic role as its architect emerge from how he is described in other passages of the tragedy, wherein the borders between his persona and certain pivotal narrative patterns appear extremely blurred. At line 53, for instance, the Fury exhorts him to ‘fill up the whole house with Tantalus’ (*imple Tantalo totam domum*). A hypostasis of crime and abjection, by approaching and ‘filling up’ the house of Atreus, Tantalus determines the subsequent narrative developments in the drama and becomes a symbol of the principle that informs the wretched destiny of his house. Tantalus’ function as a metaliterary entity, which begins the process of artistic construction, is confirmed by the Fury’s utterances at lines 83–6: ‘First, disorder this house (*perturba domum*); along with yourself, instil battles and the evil love of the sword in its kings; rouse their fierce heart to mad turmoil (*concuete insano ferum | pectus tumultu*).’ While the orders come from the Fury, it is Tantalus who has the responsibility to ‘disorder the house’ and create turmoil; it is Tantalus who activates the plot of the drama and drives the action in the tragedy, as opposed to the Fury, as has been stated by other scholars.<sup>26</sup>

Tantalus’ agency in the narrative features prominently in the Fury’s comments on how the house of Atreus and the surrounding landscape react to Tantalus’ arrival (101–21): the house ‘shudders throughout’ (*tota ... horruit*, 104) at Tantalus’ entrance, while the earth is oppressed by Tantalus’ steps (106–7), the waters desert the springs (107–8), the rivers are empty, the wind carries off the clouds (108–9), and the trees stand pale and bare (110–11). By entering, and shaking, the house of Atreus, Tantalus catalyzes the events that will lead to the killing of Thyestes’ sons and to his cannibalistic meal. Equally, the transformation to the surrounding environment caused by his presence is a hypostasis of how Tantalus’ agency changes and determines the narrative within the drama. Other passages also confirm Tantalus’ role as the driver of the plot, such as Atreus’ exhortation to his attendant to consider the examples of Tantalus and Pelops (*Tantum et Pelopem aspice; | ad haec manus exempla poscuntur meae* ‘look to Tantalus and Pelops: my hands are called to follow their examples’, 242–3), which serve to encourage them to act against Thyestes.<sup>27</sup>

The deviser of an appropriate punishment for Thyestes, Atreus, too, has been seen as the architect, the poet within the drama.<sup>28</sup> However, even Atreus acknowledges that his

<sup>25</sup> This passage from the *Octavia* is one of the anachronisms that have given rise to discussions about the authenticity of the tragedy; cf. Ferri (n. 8), 301–2; Boyle (n. 8), 224.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Frangoulidis (n. 18); A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (Cambridge, 2003), 31–4.

<sup>27</sup> According to Boyle (n. 2), 197–8, this reference to past examples has to be read as a parody of Roman practice.

<sup>28</sup> See Schiesaro (n. 26), 70–138.

actions are inspired by something greater, which he does not manage to grasp at first (*haud quid sit scio*, 269), as it goes beyond the limits of ‘human nature’ (*supraque fines moris humani tumet*, 268). The ‘*maius* motif’ (cf. *nescioquid ... maius et solito amplius* ‘something ... greater, larger than usual’, 267) that qualifies Atreus’ plans at lines 267–72 has been acknowledged as a metapoetic device, which through the amplification of Atreus’ and Thyestes’ *scelus* (‘crime’) also intensifies the force of the poetic creation.<sup>29</sup> A marker of poetic craftsmanship that can also be seen in the Fury’s words at lines 54–7, the ‘*maius* motif’ features prominently in Tantalus’ speech at lines 1–13 (cf. *peius inuentum est*, 4). By connecting Tantalus’ metaliterary role in the prologue with Atreus’ conception of his murderous plans, the recurrence of this motif suggests that Atreus’ inspiration to do something that goes beyond human laws is the result of Tantalus’ arrival in, and perturbation of, the house. It is Tantalus that ultimately inspires Atreus’ plans.

Tantalus’ metapoetic function as a creator of the text and his challenge to the previous literary tradition also emerge from the description of his own punishment. In most of the other Senecan catalogues of sinners, the focus of Tantalus’ punishment is on water, and his inability to drink it. While the mention of water is also a constant in the other catalogues, food is not always present. When food is mentioned, it features in shorter sentences: *poma destituunt famem* ‘the fruits leave his hunger cheated’, *HF* 755; *nec pomis adhibet manus* ‘[he] did not stretch his hands to the fruit’, *HO* 1078. The mention of both the *sitis* and the *fames* in this prologue must be interpreted against the plot of the *Thyestes*: Tantalus’ *fames*—that is, his lack of food—is an antiphrastic prolepsis of Thyestes’ cannibalistic feast, which produces aberrant satiety.<sup>30</sup> By focussing on the *fames*, Tantalus thus plays with a leitmotiv of the drama and foreshadows the dramatic events that occur at the culmination of the tragedy.

Furthermore, Tantalus’ reference to both the *fames* and the *sitis* contributes to a personification and materialization of the punishments, which also characterize the other sinners listed in the catalogue of the *Thyestes*. This emphasis on the *fames* and the *sitis*, as well as on the objects that cause the torments of Sisyphus and Ixion, is consistent with the principal motifs of the tragedy, which focusses on the *scelera* (‘crimes’) and the *poenae* (‘punishments’).<sup>31</sup> By imagining that these *poenae* could be worse than his own (*peius inuentum est*, 4), Tantalus articulates the ‘*maius* motif’ (namely, an enlargement of evil), which is expanded in the lines following the catalogue (13–20; cf. in particular *addi si quid ad poenas potest* ‘if something can be added to the punishments’, 15) and features in the entire drama, particularly in the final act. While this motif has encouraged us to appreciate the metapoetic agency of both the Fury and Atreus in other passages of the drama (cf. 23–121, 176–335 and see above), its origin lies in the very first lines of the prologue, which are uttered by Tantalus.

<sup>29</sup> Schiesaro (n. 26), 77–8, 130; see also Littlewood (n. 24), 152–4, 236.

<sup>30</sup> In terms of lexical analysis, across the tragedies featuring the catalogue of sinners, four words are used to indicate the liquid into which Tantalus is plunged but from which he cannot drink: *aqua* (‘water’, *Ag.* 20), *amnis* (‘water’, ‘stream of water’, ‘river’, *HF* 752; *Phae.* 1232), *latex* (‘stream of water’, *HF* 753; *HO* 943) and *unda* (literally, ‘wave’, *HF* 753, 755; *Med.* 745; *Ag.* 19; *Thy.* 5; *HO* 944). See, respectively, *TLL* 2.346.68–363.58, s.v. *aqua*; 1.1942.19–1951.19, s.v. *amnis*; *OLD* s.v. *latex*; the substantive *unda* may be translated both as ‘wave’ and, with a sort of metonymic value, ‘a body of flowing water, a river, a spring, etc.’; cf. *OLD* s.v. *unda*.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Anliker (n. 2), 24–9; Littlewood (n. 24), 22–3; Mantovanelli (n. 2), 117–20; also Boyle (n. 2), lxxix–lxxxix.



This emphasis on the materiality of the punishments features prominently in the references to other sinners within *Thy.* 1–13. At lines 6–7, Sisyphus' torture is recalled through a mention of *Sisyphi ... lapis* ('stone'), where the emphasis is on the 'slippery' stone rather than on the sinner himself.<sup>32</sup> The mention of Sisyphus' *lapis ... lubricus* (6–7), moreover, activates an intertextual link with the reference to the *aulae culmine lubrico* in the choral ode (392), where the chorus emphasizes how 'slippery' the position is of those who hold a powerful role vis-à-vis the humbler man, content to stay in his 'obscure place' (394). The glory of a high position is slippery and feeble, just like Sisyphus reaching the top of the slope, from where his stone is inevitably bound to roll back down. The focus on the object of torture can also be found in Tantalus' reference to Ixion, which is implied by his punishment, with the sinner's name not even mentioned: *membra ... differens ... rota* (8).<sup>33</sup> Although the spinning wheel also occurs in other catalogues, it is only in *Med.* 744 (*rota resistat membra torquens, tangat Ixion humum* 'the wheel that tortures limbs may stop, Ixion touch the ground') and in *HO* 946–7 (*merui manus praebere turbinibus tuis, | quaecumque regem Thessalum torques rota* 'I deserve to surrender my hands to the spinning of the wheel that racks the Thessalian king') and 1068 (*haesit non stabilis rota* 'the restless wheel stayed put') that *rota* is the subject of the sentence and thus appears to actively torment the sinner.<sup>34</sup> The insistence on punishments not only condenses the themes of *nefas*, *culpa* and *poena* that recur throughout the drama, it also establishes a dialogue with other passages, as we have seen with *culmine lubrico* at line 392 and will see in more detail in the coming pages.

As a sort of climax or crescendo of the emphatic display of the tortures' crudeness, the physical aspect of the depiction of the sinners becomes evident within the description of Tityos, which is indicated through the expression *poena Tityi* (9) and is expanded upon more here than in the other tragedies.<sup>35</sup> In the *Thyestes*, the vulture's *plenum ... pabulum* ('full meal', 12)<sup>36</sup> is semantically linked to the concept of plenitude and anticipates the cannibalistic feast of the final episode in the drama.<sup>37</sup> While the description of Tityos clearly underscores the connection between the opening lines and the final act, the enormous *nefas* not only is relevant to Thyestes' cannibalistic

<sup>32</sup> For Sisyphus' punishment, cf. Hom. *Od.* 11.593–600; Hyg. *Fab.* 60; Sen. *Apocol.* 14.3, 15.1.8; *Ep.* 24.18; see Tarrant (n. 2), 87–8; for the stone, see also *TLL* 7.2.948.49–953.39, s.v. *lapis*.

<sup>33</sup> For Ixion's punishment, see also Hyg. *Fab.* 62. For an artistic account, cf. the painting in the Ixion Room of the House of the Vettii at Pompeii, which was contemporary with Seneca: see B. Andreae, *The Art of Rome* (London, 1978), pl. 74.

<sup>34</sup> The extended reference to Ixion in *Phae.* 1236–7 is a rather peculiar case and, within the catalogue of the *Phaedia*, is consistent with the plot of the tragedy. Theseus has just discovered that he committed a terrible mistake by cursing (and thus causing the death of) his son Hippolytus, who was in fact innocent; for this, he seeks to atone by undergoing the great sinners' punishments. The mention of Pirithous (1235) and the subsequent emphasis on Ixion's punishment (1236–7) serve as a form of *contrappasso* to his crime.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *HF* 756 *praebet uolucris Tityos aeternas dapes* 'Tityos furnishes the vulture with an eternal feast'; *Phae.* 1233–4 *uultur relicto transuolet Tityo ferus | meumque poenae semper accrescat iecur* 'let the savage vulture fly over to me, abandoning Tityos, and let my liver grow constantly for torment'; *Ag.* 18 *ubi tondet ales auida fecundum iecur* 'where the greedy bird crops the ever-growing liver'; *HO* 947 *effodiat audius hinc et hinc uultur fibras* 'let a greedy vulture on each side root out my guts' and 1070–1; *Octavia* 622.

<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting the alliteration among *pascit*, *plenum* and *pabulum*, which enhances both the realism and the dramatic pathos of the scene.

<sup>37</sup> See Tarrant (n. 2), 89; Boyle (n. 2), 107.

feast but also dominates the atmosphere of the drama by featuring in many passages, as we will see in the next section.

## II. *IN QVOD MALVM TRANSCRIBOR?* TANTALUS, THE GREAT SINNERS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE *THYESTES*

As we have seen, the catalogue of the *Thyestes* is characterized by particular features that give it a specific significance within the tragedy. The peculiarity of this catalogue in respect to other similar catalogues is further demonstrated by the following three points. First, the sinners undergoing their punishments appear to be on display, in so far as the realism in Tantalus' description creates a sort of parade effect, whereby the sinners are patently exposed to a theoretical observer/reader. Evidence of this can be seen, for example, in the emphasis on Sisyphus' *lapis*, which 'must be carried' (*gestandus*) by Tantalus at lines 6–7; the crude description of the *rota* 'which racks limbs through its quick rotation' (8);<sup>38</sup> the realistic description of Tityos, who opens his vast cavernous belly (*specu uasto patens*, 9) and lies (*iacet*, 12) as though he is on display, exposed to the gaze of a potential observer. This visual description of the sinners and the physicality of their punishments establishes a link with the voyeuristic pleasure that Atreus experiences at the sight of Thyestes' desperate reaction upon discovering that he has just eaten his children (1052–68, 1096–9).<sup>39</sup> The spectacle offered by the suffering of others as well as the voyeuristic pleasure this contemplation may produce also characterize the description of the sinners and are expressed in the emphasis upon the tangibility and corporeality of their punishments.

Secondly, it has already been noted that the text of the play begins with the expulsion of Tantalus and the other sinners, who seem to ascend to the stage from Hades. Although the other sinners are only recalled through Tantalus' mentions of their punishments and are not actually present on the stage (whether literary or theatrical), these references draw the contours of the sinners with a certain amount of realism, as we saw. This ejection of infernal creatures may be interpreted as a reverse anticipation of the cannibalistic feast that takes place later in the drama: having unintentionally swallowed his sons, Thyestes wishes to vomit, that is, to expel them from his body (1041–51).<sup>40</sup> Thyestes remarks on how eating the dismembered and cooked corpses of his children has not only infected his body but has also subverted the rules of nature (1068–96). A similar subversion of natural laws and the infringement of literary canons we mentioned previously also denote Tantalus' ascent from the underworld, as well as the descriptions of the other sinners.<sup>41</sup> Tantalus' irruption from the earth and his

<sup>38</sup> A certain amount of realism is conveyed by the participle *differens*; cf. Tarrant (n. 2), 88; Boyle (n. 2), 106.

<sup>39</sup> For Atreus' voyeuristic pleasure, see Mantovanelli (n. 2), 124–6; C.A. Littlewood, 'Gender and power in Seneca's *Thyestes*', in J.G. Fitch (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Seneca* (Oxford, 2008), 244–63, at 253–9.

<sup>40</sup> C.A. Littlewood, 'Seneca's *Thyestes*: the tragedy with no women?', *MD* 38 (1997), 57–86, at 77 notes the overlap between pregnancy and vomiting in the description of Thyestes' discovery of his abhorrent meal; see Boyle (n. 2), on 1041.

<sup>41</sup> For the links between Ovid's description of the primordial chaos and the underworld in the *Thyestes*, and for some remarks on Seneca's reception of the Ovidian episode of Tereus and Procne, see R.J. Tarrant, 'Chaos in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its Neronian influence', *Arethusa* 35 (2002), 349–60; see also Schiesaro (n. 26), 178–90 and Littlewood (n. 39), 253–9.

disruptive displacement of the list of sinners breaks the natural laws of life on earth, along with the expected textual (and literary) norms of the traditional catalogue, thereby anticipating the violation of human, social and natural laws that cannibalism represents.

Finally, the Danaids are not listed in the catalogue of the *Thyestes*. Since the Danaids are not always mentioned in the various Senecan catalogues, and appear in only three tragedies (*HF* 757; *Med.* 748–9; *HO* 948), their absence should not be seen as a unique peculiarity of the *Thyestes*. However, in this specific case, the reason for their absence may be explained in light of the structural and stylistic arrangement of the drama, which has been said to be a ‘tragedy with no women’.<sup>42</sup> The Danaids’ absence from the catalogue thus represents a form of consistency with the plot of an all-male tragedy. However, there is something more than this: Sisyphus, Ixion and Tityos, alongside Atreus and Thyestes, are responsible for having committed horrible crimes that went specifically against the Olympian order, as did Tantalus.<sup>43</sup> The sinners listed in the *Thyestes* thus represent (and anticipate) the inability of the Olympian gods to prevent the crimes of Atreus, and accordingly those of Thyestes.

This allusion to the fact that these crimes go against the natural order and are outside the control of the Olympian gods is also implied by Thyestes’ words at lines 1092–5: *si nihil superos mouet | nullumque telis impios numen petit, | aeterna nox permaneat et tenebris tegat | immensa longis scelera* ‘but if nothing moves the gods, if no divinity strikes with his weapons at the wicked, let night remain forever, and hide these immeasurable crimes in lasting darkness’.<sup>44</sup> While this attempt at subverting natural rules and Olympian power is clear in the narratives of Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion and Tityos (as well as in those of Atreus and, indirectly, Thyestes), the same cannot be said for the Danaids. Although killing their husbands is a serious crime, it is not intended to challenge or jeopardize the Olympian order. The absence of the Danaids thus also conforms with the motifs of the drama and may be seen as further proof of the strategic arrangement and structural function of the catalogue.

This strategic role finds further evidence in the intratextual links, as well as in the thematic parallels, between the catalogue and other key passages of the *Thyestes*—namely, the dialogue between Thyestes and his son Tantalus at lines 404–90, the description of the *penetrabile regni* (641–90), the fourth choral ode (789–884) and the final act—which are herein systematically analyzed following the sequence in which they appear in the drama. To begin with, certain reminiscences from lines 1–13 can be found in the dialogue between Thyestes and his son Tantalus (404–90). Thyestes’ utterance at lines 449–51 activates a connection with Tantalus’ and Tityos’ punishments: *o quantum bonum est | obstare nulli, capere securas dapes | humi iacentem! scelera non intrant casas* ‘oh, what a blessing it is to stand in no one’s way, to take carefree meals lying on the ground! Crimes do not enter huts’; cf. *fugaces ... captantem cibos* (2), 5–6; Tityos is often portrayed (both in literary and in artistic sources) as lying on the ground while enduring his punishment (cf. *humi iacentem* at

<sup>42</sup> Littlewood (n. 40), 57–86.

<sup>43</sup> Tantalus offers to the gods (at a feast that takes place precisely on Olympus) the dismembered body of his son, Pelops; Sisyphus deceives the Olympian gods in many ways; Ixion attempts to seduce/rape Hera; Tityos tries to rape Leto and is subsequently killed by Apollo and Diana.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. 1092 (*si nihil superos mouet* ‘but if nothing moves the gods’); see also 407 (*si sunt tamen di* ‘if there really are gods’); Littlewood (n. 24), 130–48.

line 451).<sup>45</sup> Another possible allusion to Tityos' punishment can be found at lines 474–5, where Thyestes' son maintains (rather naively) that family love can be restored: *redire pietas unde summota est solet*, | *reparatque uires iustus amissas amor* 'family feeling often returns when it has been banished, and rightful love regains its lost strength'; cf. *nocte reparans quidquid amisit die*, 11. The lexical reminiscence of Tityos' punishment is entirely antithetical to the actual meaning of Tantalus' remark.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the use of language that recalls Tityos' punishment may be read, in terms of tragic irony, as a sinister prefiguration of the following events.

While the presence of the motifs of lines 1–13 in the dialogue between Thyestes and his son can be read as a proleptic anticipation of Thyestes' cannibalistic meal, the parallels with the messenger's description of the *penetrabile regni* ('the inner sanctum of the realm', 651) in the house of Pelops (641–90) articulate the blurring of boundaries between underworld and upperworld that features at the very beginning of the drama. As has been noted by certain scholars, the description of Pelops' house (which is now Atreus' house) recalls the landscape of the underworld.<sup>47</sup> In particular, at lines 678–9, the messenger says: *nox propria luco est, et superstitio inferum* | *in luce media regnat* 'the grove has a night all its own, and an eerie sense of the underworld reigns in broad daylight'. The *iunctura* of *superstitio inferum* activates a thematic and intratextual connection with the first line of the tragedy (cf. *inferorum sede*, 1), which also features a *locus horridus*: although *sedes* and *superstitio* do not have the same meaning, they both articulate a sort of materialization of the underworld in the upperworld, which is expressed by the sinners at lines 1–13 and by the *locus horridus* at lines 641–90, respectively. The word *superstitio*, moreover, conveys the idea of a violation, which is also implied by Tantalus' ascent from the *inferorum sede* at the very opening of the tragedy.<sup>48</sup> As Tantalus' ascent onto the literary stage of the drama marks the start of the play, so the blurring of boundaries between the upperworld and the underworld in the description of the *penetrabile regni* introduces the first abject crime, namely Atreus' killing of Thyestes' sons.

Within this passage, other expressions that recall lines 1–13 can be found, such as *arcana in imo regio secessu iacet* ('at the farthest and lowest remove there lies a secret area', 650), which evokes the motifs of lines 9–12, *specu uasto* (9), *atras ... aues* (10), *plenum recenti pabulum monstro iacet* (12): the adjective *ater* (10) implies a sense of darkness that, together with the *uastus specus* (9), parallels the mysterious and obscure atmosphere conveyed by the expression *in imo regio secessu* (650). Lines 666–9 also trigger a lexical connection with the prologue: *talis est dirae Stygis* | *deformis unda quae facit caelo fidem*. | *hinc nocte caeca gemere ferales deos* | *fama est* 'such is the unsightly stream of dread Styx, which generates trust in heaven. Here in the blind darkness rumour has it that death gods groan'; the *dirae Stygis* | *deformis unda* recalls the reference to the underworld at line 1;<sup>49</sup> moreover, the infernal river and the mention

<sup>45</sup> See Vollkommer (n. 12); K. Scherling, 'Tityos', *RE* VI.A.2.1598–609; cf. in particular the fresco in the Domus of Esquilinus, which portrays the Danaids, Tantalus and Tityos lying on the ground (1608); see also Lucr. 3.984–91 and Ov. *Met.* 4.457–8.

<sup>46</sup> For Tantalus' "'naive" quasi-Stoic theism' in this passage, cf. Boyle (n. 2), 269.

<sup>47</sup> See M. Erasmo, 'Enticing Tantalus in Seneca's *Thyestes*', *MD* 56 (2006), 185–98, at 195–6; for a philosophical interpretation of this description, see F. Michelon, '*Penetrabile regni*: natura e paesaggio nel *Thyestes* di Seneca', *Dionysus ex Machina* 2 (2011), 234–57, at 236–8.

<sup>48</sup> See Boyle (n. 2), 334–5.

<sup>49</sup> This emphasizes the link between the grove and the lower world; see Tarrant (n. 2), 187; Boyle (n. 2), 331.

of the *unda* evoke Tantalus' *unda* (cf. *siti | arente in undis*, 4–5); the *ferales deos* are an antithetic parallel of the *deorum ... domos* (3) and the *nocte caeca* is also the moment when Tityos' liver regrows (cf. *nocte reparans*, 11). Tantalus' lexical choices to describe the sinners from the underworld at lines 1–13 substantiate the account of the house of Pelops/Atreus later in the *Thyestes*, thereby confirming his role as the force that shapes the drama, along with the main origin of the crimes that occur in the narrative.

Furthermore, the metapoetic quality of the '*maius* motif' (or the enlargement of evil) recurs at lines 672–3 (*et insultant loco | maiora notis monstra* 'and things more monstrous than any known caper about the place'), after having featured both in lines 1–13 and in Atreus' speech (cf. *peius ... peius*, 4–5; *nescioquid ... maius*, 267). The substantive *domus*, which at line 3 indicates the houses of the gods, recurs twice (641, 649). The emphatic repetition of *domus* articulates the idea of a monstrous house, which is antithetical to the houses of the gods and permeates the entire passage.<sup>50</sup> This insistence on the (monstrous) 'house' demonstrates how the plot of the drama is thematically, rhetorically and stylistically connected to the figure of Tantalus, who (as we have seen) fostered the crimes of Atreus by 'filling up' the whole house at line 53 and by provoking turmoil within it at line 83. At line 3, Seneca thus had Tantalus mention the 'hated houses' of the gods to set his entrance in the play and portray himself as the primary cause of all evils within (and for) the house of Atreus. These lexical and thematic similarities show that this passage (641–90) is reminiscent of the very first lines of the drama, that is, the catalogue of the great sinners. Such a connection suggests that the infringement of natural laws, along with the '*maius* motif', that characterizes Tantalus' mention of the sinners is also a prominent feature in the account of the *penetrable regni*.

The infringement of cosmic laws also features in another passage that bears similarities with the opening of the tragedy—namely, the fourth choral ode at lines 789–884. Within this ode, the chorus describes the reversal of natural laws, thereby recalling the sense of chaos produced by the rise of Tantalus from the underworld and his mention of the other sinners.<sup>51</sup> This sort of ancestral chaos is expressed through a reference to the Giants and the following mention of Tityos at lines 805–8, which linguistically and thematically recall the catalogue of the great sinners (cf. *pectore fesso* and *specu uasto*, 9; *renouat* and *reparans*, 10): *numquid aperto carcere Ditis | uicti temptant bella Gigantes? numquid Tityos pectore fesso | renouat ueteres saucius iras?* 'can it be that the prison of Dis is open and the conquered Giants are venturing war? Can it be that wounded Tityos renews his ancient rage in his weary breast?'.<sup>52</sup> In terms of key patterns, the two passages (that is, lines 1–13 and 789–884) also share the idea of chaos and disruption of natural laws, as well as the pollution of the earth brought about by Giants, Titans and other monsters who usually reside in the underworld.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The *domus*, as 'a constant dramatic presence', is a pervasive motif of the drama; cf. Tarrant (n. 2), 45; Boyle (n. 2), 324–7.

<sup>51</sup> On the motif of cosmic disruption featuring in this ode, see Tarrant (n. 2), 204–5; Boyle (n. 2), 363–7; Tarrant (n. 41), 355–6; Littlewood (n. 24), 29–30; Volk (n. 3), 184–200.

<sup>52</sup> Tarrant (n. 2), 206–7 and Boyle (n. 2), 371 observe that Tityos was not included in the Gigantomachy by Greek authors but was considered guilty of other offences against the gods, as we have seen. Tityos is portrayed in the Gigantomachy in the Altar of Zeus at Pergamum (200–150 B.C.E.) and is accounted in the Gigantomachy by Virgil (*Aen.* 6.595–600) and Horace (*Carm.* 3.4.49–80). Seneca's choice to mention Tityos in this context may thus be read as a sort of insistence on the Tityos-motif that can also be found in the opening of the drama.

<sup>53</sup> See Tarrant (n. 2), 207: 'the chorus make the Giants resemble the Tantalids [...] Tityos, too, resembles the true source of cosmic disorder'.

This chaos is the natural reaction to the fact that Atreus dismembered and cooked the bodies of Thyestes' sons, events described by the messenger at lines 749–88. The messenger's report is the reply to two questions from the chorus, both of which are marked by the 'maius motif': *an ultra maius aut atrocius | natura recipit* 'does nature have room for anything still greater or more atrocious?', 745–6; *quid ultra potuit?* 'what could he do beyond this?', 747.<sup>54</sup> The link with the motif of the enlargement of evil, which also features in lines 1–13 and in many other passages of the drama, implies an affirmative answer to these two rhetorical questions: just as Tantalus' ascent from the underworld brought forth a break of the natural laws and blurred the borders between underworld and upperworld, so Thyestes' cannibalism later in the tragedy is able to overcome natural, as well as human and social, boundaries.<sup>55</sup> As the motif of 'hell on earth' has been seen as a hallmark of Seneca's poetic engagement with other authors and as a means to cause readers to reflect on the main themes of the play,<sup>56</sup> the use of the chthonic motif at lines 1–13, along with its recurrence in other passages of the tragedy, enhances Tantalus' role as a poetic agent.

The description of Thyestes' feast is marked by certain patterns that recall Tantalus' and Tityos' punishments, as well as the broader frame of the *malum*, which informs the catalogue: *saepe praecusae cibum | tenuere fauces—in malis unum hoc tuis | bonum est, Thyesta, quod mala ignoras tua ... tota patefient mala* 'often his blocked throat holds the food. In your troubles there is this one boon, Thyestes, that you are ignorant of your troubles! ... All your troubles will be revealed', 781–3, 788; cf. 2–3, 9, 13; cf. also 902. In particular, the sentence at line 788 (*tota patefient mala*) appears to be related to Tantalus' archetypal question at line 13 (*in quod malum transcribor?*) and provides an explanation for it. At line 13 Tantalus was looking for a *malum*, an evil, which was suitable for him; at line 788 the messenger says that 'all evils are revealed'. After more than seven hundred lines, Tantalus' initial question, which opens the tragedy and sets its context, is answered by the chorus commenting on Thyestes' cannibalistic feast: the greater, and greatest, *malum* that Tantalus was searching for is finally revealed, and is expressed in the apocalyptic natural events that are described by the Chorus.

The materialization of the infernal world on earth culminates in the final scene of the drama. The last act (885–1112) is a section of the tragedy where the lexical and thematic features of lines 1–13 appear to recur quite regularly, as we have already seen to some extent. To begin with, we noted that Atreus' words at lines 890–1 recall the context of Tityos' punishment at line 12, *plenum ... pabulum*, where there is a reference to the concept of plenitude: *pergam et implebo patrem | funere suorum* 'I shall go, and fill the father with the death of his sons'.<sup>57</sup> Featuring in the Fury's exhortation to 'fill up the whole house [of Atreus] with Tantalus' (53), the motif of plenitude is an articulation of Tantalus' (meta)literary agency. While at line 53 the house's plenitude with Tantalus fostered the events that would subsequently occur within the *Thyestes*, in the last act the reiteration of this motif becomes the materialization of Tantalus' role as the catalyzing force within the drama. The motif of the meal/feast also recurs at line 888 (*nimis diu*

<sup>54</sup> See Tarrant (n. 2), 197; for the significance of *natura* in this passage, cf. Boyle (n. 2), 351–2.

<sup>55</sup> Besides this, further intratextual allusions to lines 1–13 can be found in the passage: *triste pabulum* ('ghastly feed', 751; cf. *plenum ... pabulum*, 12); *ipse diuisum secat | in membra corpus* ('with his own hands he cuts and separates the bodies limb by limb', 760–1; cf. *membra ... differens*, 8, which also conveys the idea of dismemberment).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. C.V. Trinacty, *Senecan Tragedy and the Reception of Augustan Poetry* (Oxford, 2014), 35–7, 215–31.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. also *Ag.* 26–7; Tarrant (n. 2), 89; Boyle (n. 2), 394–5.



*conuiua ... iaces* ‘too long you have lain there feasting’; cf. *plenum recenti pabulum monstro iacet*, 12) before appearing at line 902 (*festa patefiat domus* ‘let the revels of the house be revealed’): cf. 9 *specu uasto patens* (the verb *patefiat*, from *patefacio*, is a compound of *pateo*).<sup>58</sup> When Thyestes asks where his sons are, Atreus ambiguously replies (978–9): *ora quae exoptas dabo | totumque turba iam sua implebo patrem* (‘I shall show you shortly the faces you long for, and give the father his fill of his own dear throng’), which lexically and conceptually recalls Tantalus’ and Tityos’ punishments (cf. *auido ... ore*, 2; *plenum ... pabulum*, 12; cf. also 890–2). The motifs of crime, torture and plenitude that denote Thyestes’ cannibalistic act are amplified by the connection with the crimes and punishments of the sinners at the beginning of the tragedy.

These motifs are echoed also at lines 1033–4: *utrumne saeuīs pabulum alitibus iacent*, | *an beluis uorantur, an pascunt feras?* ‘are they lying as fodder for cruel birds, or being devoured by monsters, or feeding beasts?’; cf. 10, 12 (*uulneribus atras pascit effosis aues ... plenum recenti pabulum monstro iacet?*).<sup>59</sup> Moreover, lines 1040–2 seem to recall lines 2 and 10, *hoc est quod auidus capere non potuit pater*. | *uoluuntur intus uiscera et clausum nefas | sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam* ‘this is what the greedy father could not take in! The flesh churns within me, the imprisoned horror struggles with no way out, seeking to escape’: cf. *auido fugaces ore captantem cibos* (2), the variant reading *uisceribus* at line 10 (accepted by Tarrant),<sup>60</sup> and *differens cursu rota* at line 8 (cf. *uoluuntur*, 1041). Finally, the words *di, fugistis. audite inferi* ‘gods, you fled; listen, hell’ (1070) mark an antithesis similar to *inferorum sede* vs *deorum domos* (1, 3). This comparison demonstrates that, beyond the principal motifs of crime and punishment, the catalogue also features micro-themes such as impious plenitude, and both cosmic and natural disruption, which also appear in the description of the inner sanctum of the house of Pelops and in the fourth choral ode, besides the cannibalistic feast. While the comparison with the disruption of natural laws, as well as with the displacement of literary patterns, that occurs in Tantalus’ catalogue shows that the scenes of the *penetrable regni* and the fourth choral ode are also characterized by motifs of infringement and violation (that is, the rupture of an enclosed space and the break of natural laws), the links with the cannibalistic feast at the end of the drama further emphasize the architectural importance of lines 1–13, which set out the framework of the tragedy and establish a thematic circularity between the beginning and the end.

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The survey conducted in this article has demonstrated that certain lexical and thematic patterns which feature in lines 1–13 of Seneca’s *Thyestes* also recur frequently in key scenes of the drama: the dialogue between Thyestes and his son Tantalus; the killing and cooking of Thyestes’ children, along with the description of the *penetrable regni* where it takes place; the fourth choral ode; and Thyestes’ discovery of his *scelus/nefas* in the final act. The comparative analysis has contributed to enriching our understanding

<sup>58</sup> See also line 788, *patefiat mala*, and the *malum* mentioned by Tantalus at line 13; Tarrant (n. 2), 219.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Boyle (n. 2), 433; for a discussion on the variant readings, see Tarrant (n. 2), 234.

<sup>60</sup> See Tarrant (n. 2), 88: the conjecture *uisceribus* proposed by Auantius is indeed highly suggestive and would enhance the proximity of the two passages.

of these pivotal passages: the connection between the *penetrable regni* and the sinners, for example, shows that the concept of violation is a prominent feature not only in Tantalus' ascent from the underworld but also in the description of the inner sanctum of the house of Pelops/Atreus. Along with other references to Tantalus as the informing principle of the *Thyestes* (cf., for example, 53, 83–5), these thematic and textual similarities suggest that Seneca has Tantalus act as a sort of motor for the dramatic narrative.

The catalogue is ultimately a prototype of the principal motifs of the drama. Its traditional features are unsettled and displaced, reworked and manipulated according to the plot of the *Thyestes*, so the catalogue of the great sinners functions as a form of poetic tool for Tantalus to establish the foundations of the tragedy, in terms of structure, content and lexicon. The peculiarities of the catalogue vis-à-vis similar catalogues in other tragedies suggest that the reference to the sinners in the opening lines is not incidental but rather reflects the role of Tantalus as the designer of the tragedy. By encapsulating the motifs of *nefas*, *scelus*, the reversal of natural laws, contamination and pollution, hunger and satiety, the infernal world and landscape, and the 'enlargement of evil', as well as by alluding to a threat to the Olympian order, this particular catalogue shows itself to be an important component of the architecture of the *Thyestes*. As a rhetorical pattern, a metapoetic tool, a textual hypostasis of the theme of violation that recurs throughout the drama, the catalogue of the *Thyestes* allows Tantalus to present himself both as the initiator (and forerunner) of the crimes of Atreus and Thyestes within the narrative, and as the architect, conceiver and creator of the tragedy at a metanarrative level.

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