

The Darkness of Man:
A Study of Light and Dark Imagery in Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*
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Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon* are texts in which light rarely presents itself, instead it is dark that is present from start to finish. Throughout the course of these texts, I take note of the use and presence, or lack, of light. There appear to be two specific uses of light that serve specific purposes in *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*: natural light (generally indicated with primarily *die-* or *luc-*¹ based words), and artificial light (referenced by words related to/derived from *flamma* or *ardeo*²). Natural light is prominently used only when discussing its being consumed by darkness, while artificial light appears in passages saturated with destruction and chaos. The only occasion in which either of these forms of light is described positively is in prayer.

Throughout the course of this paper, I will explore these different uses of light as a representation of man's attempt to fight his dark nature, while darkness represents man's natural state of violent behavior. Beginning with *Thyestes*, I will first discuss the encompassing nature of darkness in this play, then I will explore instances of natural and artificial light, in particular the uncommon occurrences of natural light, which is portrayed in a positive manner. Finally, I will argue for reading the nature of artificial light as man's fruitless attempt to fight his violent nature. Although my argument refers mainly to *Thyestes*, I will then explore Seneca's *Agamemnon* in the same manner in order to provide further context and explore the continued imagery across connected storylines.

Thyestes delves into the woes of the house of Tantalus after Tantalus' punishment. His grandsons, Atreus and Thyestes, have been battling each other for the kingdom by sneaky and deceptive means, whether it be Thyestes tricking Atreus into turning the kingdom over to

¹ For example: dies, lux, lumen, etc.

² While *ardeo* and *flamma* can be used to describe "natural"/natural light, within the context of this paper, fires, lamps, etc are indicated through the use of these words.

whoever had possession of the golden lamb, or Atreus using the advice of the gods to get the kingdom back, the two were always at odds. In the midst of this destruction and trickery, is where the play begins. I will first look at the beginning of the play as it opens in darkness with Tantalus taunted in the underworld by a Fury who insists that he go up to the house of Atreus and encourage Atreus to follow his hatred down a violent path. The chorus then muses over the idea of a kingdom living in peace, that one day the strife among rulers would pass, and that the curse of Tantalus would be forgotten. However, this is not the case as I go on to analyze the fire imagery present as Atreus plans to punish Thyestes in the worst way he can imagine – to kill Thyestes' sons, and then have Thyestes unknowingly consume them. The chorus provides some positive light imagery as they contemplate what makes a good king: not wealth or power, but wisdom. After Thyestes' return, the chorus rejoices over the reunion, praising this time of peace in a passage that again includes positive light imagery. This reconciliation is short-lived when the messenger informs the chorus of Atreus' terrible deeds. This passage is full of light and dark imagery as daylight disappears when Atreus took Thyestes' three sons, and murdered them, sacrificing them before exacting his revenge. In the final ode where darkness imagery is prevalent, the chorus sings in fear as they respond to the sun's sudden disappearance in the middle of the day. They theorize over what heinous act could cause such a cosmic shift. They fear the end of the world and sing of the heavens falling, as they fear what is to come of whatever terrible act could cause such chaos. In the final scene, also set in darkness, Thyestes realizes something is amiss. After discovering the demise of his children, he speaks of darkness and light as he prays, but to no avail. Atreus has exacted his revenge and gets the final word as the play comes to a close in a world shrouded in darkness.

The story told in Seneca's *Agamemnon* is similar to that of *Thyestes*. Beginning after the completion of the Trojan War, Seneca's *Agamemnon* takes place as Agamemnon is returning home to an angry wife, Clytemnestra, after many years away. Clytemnestra's anger towards her husband was born from Agamemnon's actions at Aulis, he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, in order to appease the gods so that his army could sail to Troy. The play begins in darkness as a shade, this time the shade of Thyestes, introduces a world of darkness and destruction. I will look at the parallels between the beginnings of these plays while further delving into the implications that such a dark and chaotic introduction has on the overall message of the play. Then I will continue the discussion of darkness by exploring the first chorus and Clytemnestra's introduction as both describe the corruption of the house of Tantalus, and how there is no way to hide from the terrible deeds committed within the family. More than that, I will explore Clytemnestra's fiery rage as she seeks revenge on her husband. The play then continues on to recount Agamemnon's journey home from the war. This story is riddled with light falling victim to the power of night as Agamemnon's associates suffer due to the destruction that is so closely connected to him. I will then discuss the events that take place after Agamemnon's return as Cassandra's perception of light and dark through her visions highlight man's violent nature, and Clytemnestra's rage burns on until, at the end of the play, it culminates in the murder of her husband.

Darkness

Seneca's *Thyestes* tends to be referred to as 'the most unpleasantly sanguinary'³ and violent of Seneca's plays. Violence is the major driving force of action throughout the course of

³ P.J. Davis quoting T.S. Eliot, 2003. 37.

this play, and it is accompanied by darkness.⁴ It is a common literary trope to use darkness as a metaphor for evil, or in the case of this play, violent acts conveying this evil, as it battles the light that represents man's desire to be good. However, my goal is to go one step farther and argue that this play suggests that man is naturally full of this darkness as he goes through life, attempting to find good or light in himself, generally, to no avail. This constant looming presence of darkness throughout the play leads one to believe that darkness is the natural state of man.

This play is one that takes place in darkness. From the beginning, the audience is ushered into the play in darkness and with violence. The first character introduced to the audience the shade or shadow of Tantalus, the cursed grandfather of the family of Atreus. We are immediately introduced to one who sits in the underworld (*inferorum sede*, 1), a land removed from the light and full of shadows. This darkness is representative of Tantalus' state. Not only is he a shade, but he is punished because of his violent deeds performed in life. Tantalus dwells in the underworld to suffer punishment for all eternity. However, at the beginning of this play, we encounter the shade of Tantalus as he is being ripped from the underworld by a fury. We are in a liminal space between the underworld and the world of the living, and Tantalus embodies this liminality. Although he had been dwelling in the underworld to atone for his violent actions in life, he has been forced somehow into the land of the living where the fury commands: continue, detestable shade, and go curse the irreverent household gods (*perge, detestabilis / umbra, et penates impios furiis age*, 23-24). He is the character from which all of the violence is born within this play.

While in this darkened realm, the audience is also quickly introduced to the violent nature of the play and of man. Not only does the name Tantalus carry with it a violent history, but

⁴ Examples: Sen. Thy. 1, 24-51, the entirety of the messenger's account but particularly lines 668-686, the chorus' final ode particularly lines 802-813 and 835-874, 1068-1096.

Tantalus is also brought into the play in a violent manner as he is dragged (*extrahit*, 1) from the underworld by a Fury. He recounts violent punishments suffered in the underworld as the Fury urges him on to curse the house of his grandsons. She goads him for 44 lines, a scene saturated with destruction:

*certetur omni scelere...
 ...dubia violentae domus
 fortuna reges inter incertos labet;
 miser ex potente fiat...
 ...liberi permeant male...
 ...effusus omnes irriget terras cruor...
 misce penates, odia caedes funera
 accerse et imple Tantalos totam domum. (25-53)*

Let them compete in all crime...Let the fluctuating fortunes of this violent house fall between shaky brothers...Let the wretched one fall from power...let death come to children badly...let the blood be poured out on all lands...Bring to the household gods havoc and summon hatred, slaughter, death and fill the whole house of Tantalus.⁵

Here, in the midst of a physically dark scene, the fury describes the destruction she wishes to befall the house of Tantalus in violent terms. The house and ruler will ‘fall,’ the children should die, and blood be spilt as devastation consumes the house, a house explicitly described as ‘violent.’ The play is set initially in darkness and violence as the Fury urges Tantalus to plant the seed of violence into the hearts of his grandsons in order to “Let there be another night, [to] let daylight be lost from the heavens.”⁶ After the multiple hortatory subjunctives associated with violence, Seneca uses a similar syntax to talk about darkness. The parallel structure in this section, as marked by the numerous phrases beginning with ‘let,’ equates violence with darkness because they are set up as equals in these parallel statements. Any form of violence or destruction inflicted upon the house of Tantalus is aligned with the absorption of light by night. This relationship continues to be seen throughout the play.

⁵ Unless indicated, all translations are mine

⁶ 51 (Fitch)

Darkness is a prominent image that suppresses light, as shown in these following passages where the messenger describes the scene as Atreus murdered Thyestes' children:

*nox propria luco est, et superstitio inferum
in luce media regnat. (678-79)*

...the grove has a **night** all its own, and dread of the underworld reigns in the middle of the light.

*...tenebrisque facinus obruat taetrum novis
nox missa ab ortu tempore alieno gravis,
tamen videndum est. (787-88)⁷*

...and by this strange **darkness** the foul deed is overwhelmed in this oppressive **night** sent (to rise) at an alien time, yet it must be seen.

Here the grove (*lucus*) and the light (*luce*) are juxtaposed in a way, as I will discuss more later, that highlights the darkness that fills the scene. Seneca makes it glaringly obvious just how dark it is in this scene. The darkness is strange, blind, and oppressive, overpowering everything else around it. There is no light, even in the middle of the day, and the underworld seems to have found a place to dwell on earth. Darkness, both metaphorical and literal, hijacks the play and rules over the scene.

The overwhelming sense of darkness continues to the final scene as Thyestes describes his surroundings, before learning of his terrible and accidental actions:

*vix lucet ignis; ipse quin aether gravis
inter diem noctemque desertus stupet. ...
spissior densis coit
caligo tenebris noxque se in noctem abdidit...(990-94)*

The fire barely gives off light; even the sky itself is sluggish and stupefied, deserted between day and **night**...the air gathers more thickly than dense shadow, and **night** puts itself away in **night**...

⁷ Emphasis added. Throughout the course of the paper certain words or phrases may be bolded. All bold words in quotes of the original text and of translations have been added by me.

Initially the audience is introduced into a liminal space as it is uncertain as to whether it is day or night, but the final two lines of the quote emphasize darkness and a sort of double night as *noxque* and *noctem* appear in the same line. His world is engulfed in darkness. There seems to be nothing but darkness remaining at the end of the play as Thyestes prays to the “Night, black and heavy...,”⁸ and calls to let night reign eternal (*aeterna nox permaneat*, 1094). The darkness that ushered the audience into the play is also there at the end of it. The situation is no better at the end of the play than it was at the beginning, if anything, things are worse. The beginning and ending with darkness represents the cycle of violence present within this family.

Darkness and violence are not only visually present throughout the text, but Seneca makes them hereditary traits passed from father to son to grandson. Each member of the family introduced in the play is associated with darkness. We are first introduced to the dark nature of Tantalus as he enters the play as a shade in the underworld and, as shown above, Atreus and Thyestes are accompanied by darkness. The same is also true of the children in the play. When the messenger is relaying the course of events to the chorus, he discusses young Tantalus, Thyestes’ son named for his grandfather: *primus locus, ne desse pietatem putes, / avo dicatur; Tantalus prima hostia est* (717-18), (first place, lest you think he [Atreus] deplores piety, is dedicated to his grandfather; Tantalus is the first sacrifice). Young Tantalus is equated to his grandfather, the elder Tantalus, not only because they share a name, but also because he is marked as the first to be sacrificed, the one who marks Atreus’ downfall as he commits his crime. Because young Tantalus is representative of the elder Tantalus in this scene, this leads one to believe that he would also share the darkness associated with his predecessor. No one in the family is exempt. Scholars have noted the hereditary nature of violence, “In their case moral law counts for nothing” and the house of Tantalus must suffer according to the suffering of the

⁸ 1071-72 (Fitch)

previous generation.⁹ But Atreus and Thyestes also inherited a darkness from their grandfather, and they continue to demonstrate this violent nature by betraying and plotting against each other all throughout their lives. Whether it be Thyestes tricking his brother in order to get the golden fleece for himself and sleeping with Atreus' wife, or Atreus devising a plan to make his brother suffer in retaliation, both act evilly towards one another in order to satisfy their need for revenge. This darkness is all consuming and inescapable not only in the present but also is the past and future for this family as it runs in their blood. When Atreus forms his plan to punish his brother, his assistant asks him about the risks of teaching his own children to act out these heinous crimes and Atreus confirms that, "Though no one teaches them the ways of deceit and crime, kingship will teach it. You fear their becoming evil? They are born so. What you call cruel and savage, and consider too harsh and unnatural a step, is perhaps being taken on that side too."¹⁰ Because this family has been so closely associated with, and even equated to, darkness throughout the text in form through Tantalus the shade, or through connection by not only dwelling in a darkened, space but also acknowledging it,¹¹ they cannot escape it. When Atreus "hands Thyestes over to his children for punishment the audience cannot but be aware that this is not the last word for the house of Pelops" for the story later continues when "Aegisthus, Thyestes' son, will murder Agamemnon, Atreus' son."¹² This violence is inherent in these men, and continues from generation to generation, "no external power has intervened to defend moral order and to control Atreus' (or anyone's) excesses, nor will it."¹³

Not only is this dark imagery indicative of the violent nature of Seneca's *Thyestes* itself, but this darkness, this violence, also represents a "sense of the world as a geopolitical entity

⁹ Davis 1989: 425

¹⁰ 312-316 (Fitch)

¹¹ As discussed on page 5

¹² Littlewood, 263

¹³ Littlewood, 263

[which] is clearly linked to his (Seneca's) experience as a citizen of Rome."¹⁴ Due to his being a learned and philosophical member of the political sphere in Rome, Seneca's darkness could be read as a metaphor for the political atmosphere in Rome. William Calder goes so far as to say that Seneca was teaching Nero to be an Atreus, in the sense that "he must be an Atreus to survive," that "in a topsy-turvy universe where Hell is to be preferred to a world where values have gone mad, the topsy-turvy man, whose values alone are in tune with the world (i.e. violent and far from traditional morality),¹⁵ can survive."¹⁶ Seneca illustrates this 'topsy-turvy' nature through his use of light and dark imagery as he inverts night and day. This suggests that, in order to succeed as a man of power, as Atreus wishes to do, one must give himself over to his violent nature. However, this mindset reaches outside of the realm of tragedy and into reality as Charles Segal tells us "The sadistic violation of human flesh by mutilation, decapitation, and crucifixion was an all too familiar reality in the amphitheaters of Seneca's contemporaries. The anxiety reflected but the traged[y] in this area of experience [has] a basis in fact."¹⁷ The Romans were accustomed to seeing blood spilt for the sake of entertainment: gladiatorial games, staged hunts, reenactments of battles, the list goes on and on. Atreus embodies this shift "in a world turned upside-down, [where] the ruler only survives if he dares what to traditional morality is undareable and rejoices without guilt or regret in his success."¹⁸ Calder even suggests "Atreus is no longer a ridiculous parody" of the violence that permeates society, "He is a fact with which we live."¹⁹ That is to say, Atreus is not an extreme example of a man seeking revenge through

¹⁴ Tarrant, 229-30

¹⁵ Parenthetical added by me

¹⁶ Calder 1976: 11

¹⁷ Segal, 155

¹⁸ Calder 1983: 190

¹⁹ Calder 1976: 2

overtly violent means but the representation of a society that is willing to exploit over the top violence in order to satiate its needs.

Such a fascination with violence then extends beyond the play and into the lives of the audience. Such portrayal of violence acts not only as a form of entertainment, but as an experience through which the audience can live vicariously. By watching or reading the play, the audience is immediately connected to the action and implicated in the nefarious deeds. Joe Park Poe argues that

Thyestes has something to say about the enormous satisfaction which Atreus derives from his slaughter, and indirectly about the satisfaction derived by the poet from describing the slaughter or by the reader from reading the description: the play declares that it is the satisfaction of a natural human impulse to violence and ultimately to self-destruction. (Poe, 359)

By perceiving the play, the audience can experience a secondhand violence to satisfy their immoral and unspoken desires that they cannot act on in life. Poe follows suggesting that “Seneca universalizes Atreus’ act, so to speak, and sees in it an instinct rooted in man’s very nature and common to all men.”²⁰ For Atreus, this desire for violence is something that “is preordained by something inherent in his nature; it is something, moreover, over which his objective self-consciousness exercises no control.”²¹ This desire is something so intricately woven into man’s being that it is inescapable and even uncontrollable. Within the realms of the play, this desire for violence is visible in not only Atreus, but the messenger as well. P.J. Davis discusses the pleasure the messenger seems to receive from describing the heinous act, noticing that “the Messenger displays the same wit as Atreus...[as] He declares with gleeful irony that in killing young Tantalus first Atreus displays his *pietas*.”²² The messenger adopts similar speech to Atreus, therefore, aligning himself with the perpetrator. This presentation of the story suggests

²⁰ Poe, 361

²¹ Poe, 362

²² Davis 2003: 76

that the messenger “comes to share the viewpoint of the murderer” as he is “deriving vicarious satisfaction from these gruesome events.”²³ This illustrates man’s desire to align ones’ self with violence, even if only vicariously in order to satisfy their need for it. Not only does Seneca’s play present man’s desire and natural inclination towards violence in a graphic and dark manner and create a space where man pursues these feelings freely and without the fear of punishment, but it allows and encourages a space for the audience, that is also drawn to this darkness, to experience the violence in a controlled manner.

Natural vs. Artificial Light

Light can be seen to represent the morality of man, the good that coexists with evil and with darkness. In my reading of Seneca’s *Thyestes*, I have noticed relatively few instances where light is present in any manner. The only mention of light or day is when that light is being taken away or the day is being overcome by night and or darkness. From the few examples I did find, I noticed two distinctly different types of light represented. These two types are what I refer to as natural and artificial light. I have noted passages in the text that include natural light when words with the *die-* or *luc-* root are used, and passages using artificial light as being marked by words related to *flamma* or *ardeo*. I define natural light as the light that does not require the influence of man in order to occur. Therefore, it is then present whenever ‘day’ is mentioned or when something is described as ‘light’ or ‘shining,’ or is mentioned in relation to daylight. Artificial light, on the other hand, requires some sort of act of creation by a person or thing in order for it to appear. This occurs whenever ‘flames’ or ‘fire’ are mentioned, or when something is described as burning, blazing or on fire.

²³ Davis 2003: 76

Natural Light

What seems natural, the sun, day, etc., is never truly present in the play, thus, the *Thyestes* proves it to be a subservient force. Human beings are predominantly diurnal creatures who function during the day; this fact would then lead one to believe that the main action of the play would take place during the day. Typically, light triumphs over the darkness. However, as if shaded by the nefarious deeds within the house of Atreus, the sun and the day are constantly extinguished by the night and darkness, forces that prove to be dominant. As a consequence, the typical pattern of light over dark does not hold. The fact that the disappearance of the sun is so striking throughout the course of the play, and so shocking to the characters, proves that the darkness is strange and, therefore, that it was at some point day and light in the play. This shock is most evident during the final chorus. The chorus observes the loss of light and the consequential change in the world as they cry out in fear asking, “What has driven you (Phoebus/the sun) out of your heavenly course...The regular cycles of heaven are lost...[as] he bids the darkness rise” with no light present to “dispers[e] the heavy shadows.”²⁴ The chorus is at a loss for what could cause such an extreme cosmic shift, in which night would replace the day with no warning. They are consumed with fear and anxiety as they are *trepidant, trepidant pectora magno / percussa metu* (828-29) (trembling, trembling, their hearts are shaken with a great fear) as they envision the destruction of the cosmos and the disappearance of day, of natural light. As previously mentioned, Thyestes even points out that *Vix lucet ignis; ipse quin aether gravis / inter diem noctemque desertus stupet* (990-91) (the fire barely gives off light; even the sky itself is sluggish and stupefied, deserted between day and **night**) before he has learned the fate of his sons. Thyestes recognizes that something is amiss as the sun disappears at a strange time.

²⁴ 802-827 (Fitch)

The sun has abandoned the world and left it in darkness. The natural order of things has fallen by the wayside as night conquers the day. By extension, morality has lost as the violent nature of man reigns all-powerful over the kingdom. After learning of his brother's terrible deeds, Thyestes acknowledges this shift, and his desire to return to the light, as he begs the heavens:

*...vindica amissum diem,
iaculare flammis, lumen ereptum polo
fulminibus exple. (1085-87)*

Avenge the lost **day**, throw flames, restore the **light** stolen from heaven, fill up the sky with your thunderbolt!

The only hope to escape this violence is to bring light back. However, Thyestes discusses the light, the righting of the cosmos, as something that is out of his control. He tells the gods to 'avenge' and 'restore' despite the fact that the heavens have been subjected to Atreus' actions as well. The interaction between the gods is in the final ode as such: *ipse insueto novus hospitio / Sol Auroram videt occidus (821-22)* (He himself not used to the new reception, the setting Sun sees Aurora). Darkness is so powerful in the play that even the gods are subject to its will.

The fact that darkness plays a more dominant (or at least specific) role and that the sun and the day go unmentioned until they are being replaced with darkness, it seems as though light is merely an afterthought, while darkness reigns as the new normal. Light seems unable to compete with this darkness, as darkness becomes more natural, taking its place during the day. Light becomes so inconsequential that it even when it seems to appear in the text, there is no light to be found. That is to say, in the messenger's account of Thyestes' son's sacrifice, there is a play on words. *Luc-* appears multiple times in the text,²⁵ however, not always as the word for

²⁵ Some examples: lines 130, 183, 372, 479, 668, 678, 679, 696, 817, 908, 990

light. *Luc-* is used to discuss the grove where the murders took place. When describing the murders, the messenger introduces the grove in this manner:

*hinc nocte caeca gemere ferales deos
fama est, catenis **lucus** excussis sonat
ululantque manes. (668-70)*

Here in the blind night rumor has it that the gods of the dead groan; the **grove** resounds with the rattling of chains and the howling of ghosts.

In a play that rarely mentions light, and only in the context of it being taken away or being destructive, one cannot help but take note of *lucus* here. However, it is quickly realized that *lucus* is not light, but a grove here. Even when light is present in this passage, it is not actually light but something else. In the same passage, the messenger later goes on to say *nox propria **luco** est, et superstitio inferum...regnat (678-79)* (the grove has a **night** all its own, and dread of the underworld reigns in the middle of the day). One can even sense the impending doom as *lucus tremescit (696)* (the **grove** trembles). Puns are not uncommon in Seneca's writings for example, as A.J. Boyle points out in his commentary on Seneca's *Medea*. In line 910 (*creuit ingenium malis*), "she puns not only on her name but on the ambiguity of *mala*," as *ingenium* can refer to her genius or intelligence as the name *Μήδεια* "implies [that it] is her 'nature'...[while] she binds her name alliteratively" to *mala* as she is one who suffers but also as one who exhibits some evil tendencies.²⁶ Although he does not pun on a name here, Seneca does play with the nature of things. Here, *lucus*, when used for grove, would insinuate etymologically that this is a place of light and of life²⁷. However, that is not how the grove is described. *Luc-* does not represent morality or the hope of such, as it once did in the text. It does not even signify light in any way because light hides and masquerades as something else - all that is left is darkness.

²⁶ Boyle, 356

²⁷ Lucus: "the shining i.e. open place in the wood – a wood or grove," A Latin Dictionary, Lewis and Short "cognate with LVX, LVCEO," Oxford Latin Dictionary

The only time light and day are mentioned explicitly in their bright, shining, and positive forms, is in prayer. These prayers are hypothetical musings of the chorus, longing for a brighter day, so to speak. They pray that “If any god loves Achaean Argos,”²⁸ or anyone who has been touched by *lucidus* / *Alpheos* (130-131), that they could then hope for freedom from the vicious cycle brought on by Tantalus’ actions. No proof is given to insinuate that this scenario has or ever will be achieved. There is only the wistful hope of the chorus longing for a brighter future. The chorus also speaks optimistically of what a king ought to be. Here is where other bright imagery appears. The chorus speaks of a king being one not marked by wealth but by bravery and wisdom as the passage discusses “bright bed[s]”²⁹ and *gemmis...lucidis* (372) (shining gems). These two phrases in hopeful prayers are the only places where anything is described in the text as bright or light or gleaming and is not immediately covered in darkness. This is significant because light imagery is rarely present in the *Thyestes*, and when it is mentioned, the audience has been conditioned to expect destruction or darkness close behind. The only time that peace and morality can rule true over the world is in hypothetical and unobtainable situations hoped for by the chorus. However, even in these descriptions where light can be interpreted as positive, it is not the light and bright (the wealth) that makes a good king. The chorus explicitly states that *regem non faciunt opes* (344) (riches do not make a king) further supporting the argument that when we see light we expect dark, therefore, the mention of light in these prayers represents hopelessness. For characters in *this* play, to exist in a state of light or peace is not the norm but a theoretical musing. However, even when day is allowed to exist as it should, it is only for the purpose of destruction. The only mention of day in which the sun or the day itself is not being beaten back by the darkness is at the beginning of the play when Tantalus talk about others

²⁸ 122 (Fitch)

²⁹ 355 (Fitch)

who are punished in the underworld, Tityos specifically. Tityos is fed on by birds for eternity, doomed as the one “*et nocte reparans quidquid amisit die*... (11) (and by night acquires anew whatever he lost by **day**). Here, even in the midst of a day uninterrupted, there is something wrong. Destruction and suffering and violence are all still the focus of this day. It is during the day that the birds feed upon Tityos. Even in the daylight, man is not free of the natural violence of the world.

Artificial Light

Artificial light relies on the actions of another to create it. For the purpose of my discussion of the play, this is manifest in fire. Where daylight cannot shine, manmade light sources do what they can to break the darkness. Although fire tends to be a symbol of destruction and chaos, it can also represent life. I argue that in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, these flames represent man’s attempt to bring morality into a world of darkness, even if their attempts prove futile. Moreover, when these flames are associated with chaos and destruction, it is usually when morality itself is being destroyed.

The first example of artificial light in the text appears in the first act while Tantalus tries to fight the urge to give in to the Fury’s plan, but to no avail. Here he cries out: *flagrat incensum siti / cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat* (98-99) (My heart burns, set ablaze by thirst, and **flames** cut through burning within). Although I have focused primarily on *flamma* in this passage, there are other fire/burning words: *flagrat* and *incensum*. Here light in the form of fire is a violent force and is described as a blazing feeling in the heart of Tantalus. Over the course of this scene, Tantalus tries to fight the demands of the Fury. He does not want to curse the house of his grandsons. This fire in his heart, although describing his punishment, represents his fruitless attempts at remaining moral in an attempt to keep violence out of the lives of his family. He

states that, because of his actions *Me pati poenas decent* (86) (my fitting role is to suffer punishments) as he atones for his wrongdoing in life. In order to adhere to standard moral law, that actions have consequences, Tantalus is fully aware that he must pay for his actions. He is also fully aware that his actions, as well as similar actions performed by anyone else, are wrong as he tells the fury,

*Moneo, ne sacra manus
Violate caede neve furiali malo
Aspergite aras. (93-95)*

I warn, do not dishonor your hands
by cutting others down and do not scatter the altars
with the evil of the furies.

Tantalus acknowledges that his actions were wrong, immoral, and that he deserves the punishment he received. He is also morally conscience enough to warn others against following his path, and he wants to protect his descendants from suffering as he does. However, despite his attempts darkness wins, and the inherent violence of man cannot be stopped.

These destructive flames also appear when Atreus first enters. At the beginning of act two Atreus muses over the ruin that should come of his hatred for his brother. Atreus muses over the destruction he wishes to wreak against his brother:

*fremere iam totus tuis
debebat armis orbis et greminum mare
utrimque classes agree, iam **flammis** agros
lucere et urbes decuit...
(180-83)*

Now the whole world resounds to your weapons and your fleets set out on both sides of the twin seas, now fields and cities begin to shine with **flames**...

Here Atreus speaks of a physical fire, one that burns and destroys cities and property. However, he goes on and claims that:

non satis magno meum

*ardet furore pectus, impleri iuvat
maiore monstro. (252-54)*

The fury **burning** my heart is not big enough, I want to be filled with a greater monstrosity.

This fire is not a physical one. This is a metaphorical fire, a moral fire, within the heart of Atreus. Seneca is connecting tangible fire to the inner, moral fire of Atreus as he discusses the burning he wishes to do physically as well as the burning anger within his heart. These physical fires are man-made. Not only does he speak of burning down field but Atreus *aggressi manu / mea ipse flammis* (1064-65) (piled up fires [himself] with [his own] hands) when making the sacrificial fires for his nephews. The light is an attempt to lead one from darkness. Atreus is so overcome with anger that he takes the light and allows it to burn out of control until it destroys everything in its path. Even the largest flame will eventually burn itself out until there is nothing left but darkness. This is not a new idea that Seneca exploits. In his *Medea*, the protagonist is full of the fire of hate, a fire that “will destroy her rival Creusa and will finally bring about disaster,” this “image [then] becomes a striking part of tragic reality.”³⁰ After Medea has called upon Hecate to

*meet in pectus venasque calor,
stillent artus ossaque fument
vincatque suas flagrante coma
nova nupta faces. (836-39)*

Let heat pass in her heart and veins,
let her joints drip and her bones swell
and let his new bride with flaming hair
outshine her own torches.

The light that one would hope to bring in peace into a dark world remains unseen as the violent nature of man prevails. The same is true of Thyestes when he recognizes how unlikely it is that there will be an end to the violence when he discusses his fear concerning Atreus’ forgiveness.

³⁰ Armisen-Marchetti, 159

*ante cum flammis aquae,
cum morte vita, cum mari ventus fidem
foedusque iungent. (480-82)*

...sooner will **flame** and water come together, death and life come together, or the sea and the wind join in a bond of allegiance.

Thyestes realizes that something seems strange about the whole situation. Here Thyestes imagines a flame as being joined with water to form some kind of bond. There is no way that could happen. Even in these theoretical musings involving fire and light it has no way to survive and will quickly be snuffed out. It is a further reminder that light has no chance and that this play exists in a state of “unnatural darkness.”³¹ The water would extinguish the fire, therefore, putting out any hope of peace between the two brothers. All that can remain between them is darkness.

Hope and morality, as represented by the sacrificial pyre, even try to avoid the heinous deeds of Atreus. One can see the pyre as a metaphor for hope or morality because a sacrificial pyre should be a holy place. A sacrificial fire should be a physical representation of man’s morality as he praises the gods. During the murders, the messenger describes the pyre as such:

*haec veribus haerent viscera et lentis data
stillant caminis, illa flammatus latex
candente aeno iactat. impositas dapes
transiluit ignis inque trepidantes focos
bis ter regestus et pati iussus moran
invitis ardet. stridet in veribus iecur,
nec facile dicam corpora an flammae magis
gemuere. (765-772)*

Here the entrails cling to the spits and sit dripping over burners, others scatter over **flaming** kettles, it leaps past the solemn feast again and again, two, three times, carried back, and **burns** against its will commanded to endure there. The liver hisses on the spit, I could not easily say whether the bodies or the **flames** groaned more loudly.

What should be a holy fire did not want to burn; it did what it could, leaping from its place and groaning (*gemuere*), to avoid the monstrous act. The personification of the flames illustrates that

³¹ Davis 1993: 258

it is morality which fought against the violence, but to no avail. Light and morality's failure to defeat darkness is illustrated further in the final chorus as this artificial light disappears or is destroyed. Here the chorus discusses their fear surrounding the disappearance of the sun. They imagine a myriad of horrific things that must have happened in order to cause the natural order of night and day to cease. One such example the chorus gives is that as the day has been absorbed by darkness,

*...non Phoebis
obvia **flammis** dement nocti
Luna timores vincetque... (838-40)*

...the Moon will no longer conquer the terrors of the night
facing Phoebus' **flames**...

The chorus states that the sun will no longer free the world of darkness. The horrors of the night will rule as there is no light to dissipate them. The chorus goes on to describe the falling of the heavens, constellations, stars: *Leo **flammiferis** aestibus **ardens** / iterum e caelo cadet Heruleus...* (855-56) (Hercules' *Lion*, will fall a second time from the heavens **burning** with a **fiery** heat...). Morality has abandoned the earth as violence and wrath take control. Despite the presence of light, a symbol of morality, there is an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Phoebus' flames have vanished from the sky and any remaining light in the dark, the stars, are imagined as crashing to the earth and leaving the world in complete darkness.

There is no hope, and light is lost. Thyestes resigns himself to the fact that "the gods above have fled,"³² but cries to them in desperation to bring hope and order back to this world drowning in darkness. He begs they would avenge the lost day, throw flames (*vindica amissum diem, / iaculare **flamas***, 1085-86), in an attempt to restore order, to bring back light to this violent world. Thyestes recognizes that the only way to even attempt to rectify the situation is to

³² 1020-21 (Fitch)

pay the price himself. He must do the moral thing: he must be punished. Thyestes begs for the gods to end his life in a bright, fiery blaze: *me pete, trisulco flammeam telo facem / per pectus hoc trans mitte*. (1089-1090) (Strike me! Send over the brand of the fiery, three-forked spear through this chest!). At this point in the play, Thyestes expresses morality's defeat. He has lifted up unanswered prayers and resigns himself to the fact that there is no hope.

*Si nihil superos movet
nullumque telis impios numen petit,
aeterna nox permaneat et tenebris tegat
immense longis scelera.*

If nothing moves the divine
and if no one aims his weapons at the wicked,
let night continue perpetually and cover with long darkness
these immeasurable crimes.

Thyestes has accepted and acknowledges that now only darkness can continue in a world plagued by violence. As the play reaches its close as Atreus, another dark figure, gets the final word. Instead of the gods issuing out a punishment in an attempt to restore order to the cosmos and to bring back light, the world remains in darkness as Atreus “consign[s Thyestes] to [his] children for punishment.”³³ The gods are gone, light is gone, violence has won, and darkness reigns.

Agamemnon

This play continues to explore the violent happenings within Tantalus' family. The action begins with an opening speech given by the shade of Thyestes himself. He describes to the reading a brief summary of the happenings of his life, including the happenings of *Thyestes* as well as the rest of his life, such as his incestuous relationship with his daughter. I will first discuss the fact that the play begins in darkness with a shade, Thyestes, leaving the underworld before dawn as the audience is ushered into the play under a blanket of darkness. The first

³³ 1113 (Fitch)

chorus then goes on to explore the vulnerability of royal power as they revisit the faults of the house of Tantalus. The audience is then introduced to Clytemnestra fighting her overwhelming and fiery rage towards her husband while her nurse and lover, Aegisthus, attempt to calm her and encourage her anger respectively. The chorus then sings a song of thanks for the gods as they prepare to welcome a victorious Agamemnon home and Eurybates enters in order to inform everyone that Agamemnon approaches as he recounts the happenings of the war as well as the storms and fires the army faced while returning home. The chorus reflects on living in the midst of disaster and recounts Troy's fiery fall. It is in the fourth act that Cassandra predicts the violent demise of Agamemnon, and it is after this distressing vision, when Agamemnon finally returns. The final chorus is devoted to the stories of Hercules as they rejoice over their rulers' successful homecoming. However, these revelries are short lived, as in the final act, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murder Agamemnon, send Electra to prison, and the play closes as Cassandra is led off to be executed.

Darkness

The *Agamemnon* begins the same way as the *Thyestes*. The audience is first introduced to a shade in a liminal space between the underworld and the world of the living. However, instead of Tantalus introducing the tragedy, our previously victimized Thyestes, Agamemnon's uncle, provides the opening speech. Thyestes begins by opening the play in a world of darkness:

*opaca linguens Ditis inferni loca
adsum profundo Tartari emissus specu (1-2)*

I leave the dark place of infernal Dis
and am here sent from Tartarus' deep cavern

Although leaving the underworld, a place of darkness and violence and distress, Thyestes is not particularly enthusiastic about his transition into the living world as he states that he is *incertus*

utras oderim sedes magis (2) (uncertain of which seat I hate more). He knows of the horrors that take place in life; in the same speech he reminds us that he himself performed some of them:

viscera exedi mea. (27)

I have consumed my own flesh and blood!

*avo parentem (pro nefas!), patri virum,
natis nepotes miscui* –. (35-36)

Grandfather and parent (oh impious deed!), father and husband,
children and grandchildren I have mixed – day and night.

He has introduced both darkness, as he leaves Dis and enters the world in a time of darkness, and violence, as he reintroduces his heinous acts in life. He directly relates these acts to light and dark as he states the he has confused *nocti diem* (mentioned above). In life, he inverted what is right and what is wrong in such a way that has led to his suffering in the underworld. He has once again opened the play with darkness and violence together.

As he dreads his approach to the world of the living, Thyestes continues this theme of darkness and violence as he recalls what awaits in the underworld. He even states in his introduction speech:

*libet reverti. nonne vel tristes lacus
accolere satius, nonne custodem Stygis
trigemina nigris colla iactantem iubis,
Ubi ille celery corpus evinctus rotae
in se refertur, ubi per adversum irritus
redeunte totiens luditur saxo labor,
ubi tondet ales avida fecundum iecur,
et inter undas fervida exustus siti
aquas fugaces ore decepto appetite
poenas daturus caelitum dapibus graves?* (12-21)

I want to go back. Is it not better to live near those
sorrowful lakes, near the keeper of Styx
throwing his triple necks with their black beards about?
Where the body is bound to the quick wheel

carries back on himself, where insignificant labor
 is mocked as the stone repeatedly falls back,
 where the greedy bird shears the productive liver,
 and between the waves, the one consumed by burning thirst
 reaches for fleeting water with cheated lips,
 burdened with punishment for his feast with the gods.

The darkness of the underworld, of Styx and its darkened watchdog, is wrought with violence as he recalls many who reside below for punishment, his own grandfather included. This not only speaks to the level of violence present in men after life, but men who are still living as well. Although the living are not explicitly mentioned in this passage, due to Thyestes' musings, wanting to return to the underworld and insinuating that it is better to dwell in such a place than to live on the earth. He knows firsthand just how cruel and violent men can be, and is fully aware of how terrible that existence can be. Not only is past violence apparent to Thyestes during this speech, but future violence soon to come. As if having a vision of what is to happen in the play, Thyestes declares:

*...post decima Phoebi lustra devicto Ilio
 adest – daturus coniugi iugulum suae.
 iam iam natabit sanguine alterno domus.
 enses secures tela, divisum gravi
 ictu bipennis regium video caput;
 iam scelera prope sunt, iam dolus caedes cruor:
 parantur epulae! (42-48)*

...after ten cycles of Phoebus he has conquered Ilium
 and is here – to offer his throat to his wife.
 Soon now the house will swim in blood after blood.
 Swords, axes, spears, I see a king's head cut
 by the heavy blow of a double axe;
 now wicked deeds are near, now deception, cutting down, blood:
 a feast is being prepared!

This is a passage saturated with violence and gore, all of which lies ahead in the tragedy. And all this explanation and narration takes place in darkness. Not simply in the underworld, as we know Thyestes is currently occupying a liminal space outside of such, but at night just before the dawn.

At the end of his speech Thyestes acknowledges this time of day, or night as it were, as he asks *aut quid cadentes detinet stellas polo? / Phoebum moramur* (55-56) (what keeps the setting stars in the heavens? I am delaying Phoebus). Everything before the first chorus occurs under the cover of night, consumed in darkness, as Thyestes explores the violence of his life, and of others, both past and present.

Thyestes is not the only one to explore this idea. Immediately following his speech comes the first choral ode. This chorus explores the vulnerability of royalty “through the moral corruption fomented by power.”³⁴ The obvious example they discuss is that of Thyestes as they describe the events that transpired in *Thyestes: densasque nemus spargens umbras / annosa videt robora frangi* (94-95) (and a heavy thick mass, a grove, casts shade and sees its aged trees shattered). The deed that Thyestes performed, although accidental, was heinous and the dark deed overshadows the story, and the family as a whole. Clytemnestra even says that *perlucet omne regiae vitium domus* (148) (every fault of the royal house shines through) leading one to believe that there is no hope of escape from this family’s dark history, and as soon will be seen, their dark future.

This darkness not only surrounds the members of the house of Tantalus alone, but those associated with them as well. No one is safe from the destruction that follows this family. This is made clear when Eurybates recounts the happenings of the journey home from war to Clytemnestra. Although Agamemnon’s army leaves Troy victorious, their victory is cloaked in darkness and destruction. From the beginning, as they leave Troy, *quod unum pervicax acies videt, / Iliacus atra fumus apparet nota* (458-59) (the one thing seen to a sharp gaze was a black sign, the smoke from Ilium). Despite the victory, this darkness is looming, almost following the army as they leave to return home. Eurybates tells of a storm:

³⁴ Fitch 2004: 115

*exigua nubes sordido crescens globo
nitidum cadentis inquinat Phoebi iubar... (462-63)
...nox prima caelum sparserat stellis, iacent
deserta vento vela... (465-66)
..cum subito luna conditur, stellae latent.
nec una nox est: densa tenebras obruit
caligo et omni luce subducta fretum
caelumque miscet. (470,472-74)*

A small cloud springing up in a foul sphere
befouled Phoebus' shining as he set...
...Early night had cast the stars about the heavens, the sails
Cast out by the wind...
...when suddenly the moon was hidden, stars concealed.
there is not a single night (**it's a double night**): a thick mist overwhelmed the dense
gloom
and having drawn away all light
mixed sky and sea.

Just as in *Thyestes*, darkness reigns over the light. A storm suddenly rises and consumes the light and creates a sort of unnatural night in the middle of the day. The storm rages, as the gods themselves fall from the shattered heavens, and black chaos is brought forward into the world (*rupto crederes caelo deos / decider et atrum rebus induci chaos*, 486-87) and *premunt tenebrae lumina... / inferna nox est* (493-94) (dreadful darkness weighed on the light). Ships are destroyed, men killed, and the army punished in order to atone for what they had done at Troy.³⁵

The darkness of Troy follows Agamemnon home when he brings Cassandra back with him from the war. She is not oblivious to the violent nature of the house of Tantalus, and this is made evident through her visions. When her vision begins in act 4, her mind is engulfed in darkness and she cries out: *ubi sum? Fugit lux alma et obscurat genas / nox alta et aether abditus tenebris latet* (726-27) (where am I? The nourishing light has vanished and deep night obscures my eyes and heaven is hidden and concealed by darkness). Even though she has yet to see the deeds that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus will commit against Agamemnon, already her

³⁵ Fitch 2004: 173

vision is clouded by the dark act that is to take place. Once her vision begins, the darkness does not end as she foretells that

*haec hodie ratis
Phlegethontis atri regias animas vehet,
victamque victricemque. (752-54)*

Today this boat
in black Phlegethon will carry the souls of royalty,
conquered and conqueror alike.

She recalls the darkness, the blackness, of the underworld and she sees death and gore in Agamemnon's future. Her vision even continues with a passage full of darkness as she tells of the Furies preparing for such an event:

*instant sorores squalidae,
anguinea iactant verbera,
fert laeva semustas faces
turgentque pallentes genae
et vestis atri funeris
exesa cingit ilia;
strepuntque nocturne metus,
et ossa vasti corporis
corrupta longinquo situ
palude limosa iacent. (759-68)*

The filthy sisters take position,
they scatter snake-like whips,
they carry in their left hand half-burned torches
and their cheeks are pale and bloated,
and black funeral clothes
encompass their waists;
and the fears of darkness roar,
and the bones of a devastated body
spoiled by long decay
lie in the muddy swamp.

These terrifying beings roam around this devastated land in darkness, even their torches are going out as soon they will be gone and all that will be left is the dark. Just as the play came in with darkness, the violent future that lies ahead will amount in nothings but darkness.

Natural Light

Just as in Seneca's *Thyestes*, there is a lack of natural light appearing throughout the text of *Agamemnon* unless it is taken away or used as a sign of destruction. When Eurybates is telling Clytemnestra of the treacherous journey home, he describes a storm beginning: *in alta iam lux prona, iam praeceps dies* (461) (now the light bends to the stars, now the day falls headlong). This is a unique way to describe the day, as night is traditionally associated with falling for example, nightfall is a popular term used to describe the coming of night. Light is present in the day, but it must concede to the power of the night as it falls away, almost taking on the qualities of night as it ceases to be day. The army should be in good spirits as they are finally returning home after ten long years of war. However, this disappearance of the sun marks a violent and destructive time as *exigua nubes sordido crescens globo / nitidum cadentis inquinat Phoebi iubar...* (462-63) (a small cloud springing up in a foul sphere befouled Phoebus' shining as he set), and a storm that destroys ships and kills men occurs. One is then led to believe that the mention of the sun or of daylight is a sign of something terrible or that something terrible is to come.

Clytemnestra even recognizes that in this house the terrible and violent are impossible to hide when she tells her nurse in their opening scene that *perlucet omne regiae vitium domus* (148) (every fault of the royal house shines through). The horrific deeds committed by this family cannot be concealed or ignored as they shine through the house. Shining and other bright imagery is generally associated with more positive situations, however, as this house tends to be a place of darkness and destruction, it is fitting that the faults of the house are what shine through. It is also interesting to note that in situations where light should be read in a positive context, it is merely an introduction to the destruction that is to come. For example, after

Eurybates account of the journey home, Clytemnestra expresses her desire to honor her husband's return: *sacris colamus prosperum tandem diem / et si propitios attamen lentos deos* (402-03) (we must honor this day at last with sacrifices and if it is in gods' favor, however flexible). Where a sacrifice should be a good sign, the audience, knowing the progression of events, is aware of the irony of such a statement, as Agamemnon will soon be killed.

Natural light is present, but not to illuminate the good or bright. Whenever this light appears, it is closely followed by destruction and death. Thyestes' speech ends with him saying: *redde iam mundo diem* (56) (now return day to the world). The play is entering a time of light; however, the play is full of dark imagery and violence. This entering into the light simply marks the day when Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are going to kill Agamemnon. The light of this day only serves to illuminate the violence and destruction present in the house. Light exposing destruction continues as Eurybates concludes his account of the journey home, he speaks of the return of day:

*cecidit in lucem furor;
postquam litatum est Ilio, Phoebus redit
et damna noctis tristis ostendit dies.* (576-78)

Madness fell into the light;
But after a sacrifice had been made or Ilium, Phoebus returned
and the sorrowful day exposed the destroyed things in the night.

The aftermath of the devastating storm is to be fully revealed in the light. Although it is day and light shines once again, it is only there to reveal the horrible occurrences that took place in the dark. The relief that would be expected from the coming of day is lost in the pain created in the night. The same thing happens after Cassandra has had her vision of Agamemnon's end.

Cassandra is recovering from the vision of the terrible fate that awaits Agamemnon when he says to her:

*iam recipit diem
marcente visu. Suscita sensus tuos:
optatus ille portus aerumnis adest.
festus dies est. (788-791)*

Now she with dull eyes
The day receives. Gather your senses:
That long wished for haven from toil is here.
This is a festive day!

Twice he mentions the day – light has come back into her eyes as she returns to her senses, and he calls for celebration as his return marks a ‘festive day.’ However, he remains unaware of what the day holds for him. The day returning, the festive day, holds little reason for celebration or happiness as Agamemnon assumes, as it will soon become apparent that is it, indeed, his final day. Cassandra does the same thing with her vision: *sed ecce gemino sole praeifulget dies / geminumque duplices Argos attollit domos (728-29)* (but look, the day shines with twin suns and Argos is duplicated and raises up twin homes). Here Cassandra is alluding to the adultery that has taken place, both in regards to Helen and Paris and to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Both of these relationships led to death and destruction and violent acts, the former leading to war and the latter leading to a violent murder. Moreover, this reference to two suns recalls Euripides’ *Bacchae* line 918 when Pentheus, dazed and dressed as a Bacchant, discusses his costume with Dionysus. The association with made here recalls insanity, destruction, and death, therefore, clouds this bright perception of the double suns adding an air of looming negativity to the scene. Despite the sunny and bright imagery presented by Cassandra, there is nothing positive or bright about it. Natural light’s role in this text is to illustrate more faults that are present in the house and to precede the ultimate demise of the namesake for the tragedy.

Artificial Light

Fire appears numerous times throughout the course of Seneca's *Agamemnon*, again as a representation of destruction and false hope. Where one would think fire could represent a light in this darkness, man's attempt to light the way, that is not the case in this text. Fire imagery is most frequently associated with Clytemnestra. When she first appears she speaks of her anger towards her husband as he brings Cassandra back from the war with him: *...quod ardens impia virgo face / Phasiaca fugiens regna Thessalica trabe* (119-120) (the girl whose torch blazes with impiety as she fled her Phasian kingdom on a Thessalian ship). This woman, Cassandra, is described in fiery terms as her presence angers Clytemnestra, further spurring on the negative feelings directed towards her husband and, therefore, fueling her already strong desire to violently harm her husband. Moreover, the Phasian kingdom and Thessalian ship refer to Medea's homeland and Jason's ship. Clytemnestra's anger is then compared to Medea's fire and Medea's rage. This comparison then looms over the rest of the play as the audience waits for some violent and deadly act to take place. Clytemnestra is so enraged she tells her nurse that *flammae medullas et cor exurunt meum* (132) (flames consume my heart and bones). Just as Atreus called for a greater blaze within his heart in order to exact his revenge against his brother, Clytemnestra's heart burns with the same heat-fueled fire as she seeks to punish her husband for his wrongdoing. Even as she starts to calm down, she speaks to Aegisthus who encourages her: *Aegisthe, quid me rursus in praeceps agis / iramque flammis iam residentem incites?* (260-61) (Aegisthus, why do you drive me headlong into the abyss and now inflame my anger as it rapidly slows down?). Her anger is out of control, burning and consuming all that she does. This fire is accompanied by violence as Clytemnestra, heart ablaze, muses over her husband's demise: *per tuum, si aliter nequit, / latus exigatur ensis* (199-200) (through your side, if there is not another

way, the sword must be driven). She believes that Agamemnon is an illness to those around him and that *et ferrum et ignis saepe medicinae loco est* (152) (both fire and steel often appear in place of medicine). In this line she directly connects fire to violence as she deems steel, a sword, a form of medicine, a cure for that which she views as a problem.

Throughout the text, fire imagery most frequently appears is in times of distress almost as a sign of false hope. Much like in the *Thyestes*, fire represents man's attempt to find morality in this violent and destructive world. A great deal of this imagery appears during Eurybates' speech concerning the storm encountered during the army's homecoming. In the midst of this horrible storm, they seek relief but are only faced with more destruction:

*...excidunt ignes tamen
et nube dirum fulmen elisa micat;
miserisque lucis tanta dulcedo, ut male
hoc lumen optent. (494-97)*

However the fires fell away,
and terrible lightning flashed from ominous clouds;
and it was such a sweet light for the wretched, such that
they preferred this brightness.

These men, although traveling home after victory, are now paying the price for their actions.

Eurybates tells us that, after the storm is over and the chaos ceases, *postquam litatum est Ilio, Phoebus redit* (577) (after an acceptable sacrifice is made for Ilium, Phoebus returns). These men must atone for what has happened in battle. Therefore, despite the joy of returning home, and the light that might represent this hope and happiness, they are faced with destructive light. Even lightning, a still destructive force, brings them hope of reprieve in the midst of the fiery strife. Ajax, son of Oileus/Lesser, is a great example of this light of man in this scene. Eurybates tells of Ajax's actions during the storm: *vela cogenten hunc sua / tento rudente flamma perstrinxit*

cadens (533-34) (as he gathered the ropes to fasten them, he felt the pulse descending flames).

He continues on:

*...et navem manu
complexus ignes traxit et caeco mari
conlucet Ajax; omne resplendent fretum.* (541-43)

and as he grasped the ship with his hand
he pulled forth fire from it, and in the blind sea
Ajax gave off light from every side; all of the strait shined.

This man shines, illuminating the scene. When someone is described in such light terms, it is generally assumed that it is done so in order to portray a positive image of the person, usually used in a figurative sense. However, this scene is literal. Ajax is on fire and is a light source himself. This is a gruesome image where fire is consuming Ajax to the point where he himself is a light source. The image of a man on fire does not necessarily project a positive and hopeful image as one might seek from light. He may provide a source of light for others in the midst of this storm, but it is at the expense of him being on fire, once again, a very violent and destructive image.

This sense of false hope continues through Eurybates speech as he tells of the army seeking refuge from the storm and falling prey to the enemy once again:

*hanc arcem occupat
Palamedis³⁶ ille genitor, et clarum manu
lumen nefanda vertice e summo efferens
in saxa ducit perfida classem face.* (567-571)

Here he occupied the citadel
that father of Palamedes, shining a bright light in his hand
from the highest point, with that treacherous beacon,
he led the fleet onto the rocks.

This beacon is a sort of apparition, much like Thyestes at the beginning of the play, functioning as a precursor to the destruction and doom to come. While Thyestes opened the play before

³⁶ Nauplius taking revenge on the Greeks for the betrayal and death of his son Palamedes

murder enters the house, the light that should be leading the army to safety does nothing more but lead them into more danger and destruction as they are drawn to what they think is safety by this false beacon. The chorus also acknowledges this fiery light as false hope. In their third ode, the chorus discusses the relief from these fires:

*nullus hunc terror nec impotentis
procella Fortunae movet aut iniqui
flamma Tonantis. (592-95)*

Here, no one is touched by any terror or by any storm
of stormy Fortune or by any fire
from the violent Thunderer.

*pax alta nullos civium coetus
timet...
...non urbe cum tota populus cadentes
hostica muros populante flamma
indomitumve bellum. (596-603)*

peace fears no citizens' conspiracy...
...no city with all of its people will fall
as the walls of the enemy burn
in untamable war.

Despite an ordinary non-Stoic reader's dispositions to see relief from destruction as life-enhancing, the chorus is saying that it is death that provides liberation. Only in death can one avoid terror, storms, fire, and the violence of such. Cassandra follows this chorus with a similar message when she says to Agamemnon that *libertas adest. Mihi mora est securitas (796-97)* (freedom is at hand. For me death is freedom from concern). Just as Thyestes, in his introductory speech, discusses his preference for the underworld to the land of the living, death, even though terrible and possibly wrought with punishment, provides relief from the hardships of life. This source of light, fire, does not bring hope or peace into this destructive and violent world. Cassandra sees this and calls to Phoebus: *recede, Phoebus, iam non sum tua; / extingue flammam pectori infixas meo (722-23)* (leave, Phoebus, now I am not yours; extinguish the flames you

fixed in my heart). Flames represent hardship and pain. Instead of being a light in the darkness, they illuminate the destruction and expedite the violence.

Conclusion

Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon* are plays full of chaos and destruction. From filicide, to deception, murder, decapitation, and cannibalism, there is nothing but violence piled on violence throughout this family's history. Seneca makes it seem that an undeniable inclination towards violence that is present in man drives all of these characters. Throughout the course of these plays, light and dark represent the battle taking place between morality, light, and man's natural, violent state of being, darkness. The house of Tantalus lives in a world where darkness swallows the light, and any hope the light may have presented becomes irrelevant and disappears. From *Thyestes*' opening with the shade of Tantalus in the underworld, to the messenger telling of Atreus committing murder in the midst of a false night, to the chorus imagining a myriad of destructive scenes, to Thyestes surrendering himself to what has happened, Seneca's *Thyestes* is wrought with dark and light imagery that accompany the ever-violent existence of the house of Tantalus. Meanwhile, in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, light and dark function in much the same way as they do in *Thyestes*. From a dark introduction with the shade of Thyestes, to Clytemnestra's fiery rage and the destruction faced by Agamemnon's army on their journey, to the murder of Agamemnon, the violent nature of man is closely associated with darkness. Not only do familial lines cross over from one play into another as the house of Tantalus inhabits both storylines at very different places in time, but light and dark imagery overflow from one play to the other as well. Just as light is extinguished, absent, and closely associated with violence in his *Thyestes*, Seneca's *Agamemnon* lacks the presence of positive light imagery. In both of these plays, the good that was once associated with light and brightness

has been corrupted and now represents the violence and destruction of which man is capable.

These plays paint a picture of the inescapable nature of man as he fruitlessly seeks relief from the endless violence to which he is drawn.

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