

The Description of the Palace in Seneca *Thyestes* 641-82 and the Literary Unity of the Play

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Abstract

In the ongoing debate concerning the performability of Senecan tragedy, the plays tend to be studied as either literature or drama. One consequence of this artificial distinction is that set passages such as *descriptions loci* appear to support the view that Seneca's plays were intended for public reading, as 'recitation drama'. By means of a close examination of the messenger's description of the palace of Atreus (*Thyestes* 641-82) in the context of the play as whole, this article suggests that the description functions as a structural device that provides unity to the text of the play.

Keywords

Roman tragedy, Seneca, *Thyestes*, ekphrasis, literary unity, dramatic performance

1. Introduction

According to Suetonius, Caligula derided Seneca's rhetorical speeches as 'mere classroom exercises, sand without lime' (*Cal.* 53). In the modern era this criticism was extended to the tragedies. Schlegel (1817, 27-8), whose negative view long influenced students of Senecan tragedy, charged that the plays were marked by "rhetorical excesses, lacking in theatrical effect and substance". Supporting evidence, or so it seemed, was the *descriptio loci*. In what is still a standard book on declamation in the first century AD, Bonner (1949, 58) observes "how loosely these *descriptions* were attached to the real subject-matter". The reader of Seneca's plays may be

inclined to interpret the descriptions as casually inserted purple passages, stocks in trade of the *rhetor*. Indeed, Butler (1909, 48) states that Seneca's tragedies were cooked following a simple recipe: equal amounts of declamation, philosophic aphorism, and description. He explains that "introductions of description wholly alien to the play" are due to Seneca's pathetic "love of horrors" (1909, 49). In a similar vein T.S. Eliot (1927, x) questions Seneca's decision to interrupt the drama of *Hercules Furens* with Theseus' long description of Hell (650-827).

Fortunately Herington's tongue is firmly in cheek when he sums up (1966, 451-2) the common reaction to the descriptions in the tragedies: "poor weak Seneca has fallen once more for the blowzy charms of Rhetoric, he has committed another *ekphrasis* for the transient delight of some Roman drawing room or other". Herington goes on to demonstrate that Theseus' depiction of Hell performs an important function in *Hercules Furens*, namely to symbolize the power and violent action of Hercules, and to effect mood. About the ekphrasis of Atreus' palace in *Thyestes* 641-2 he states (1982, 528): "that description is no mere verbal ornament; for the scene is both a just emblem of false kingship, and an appropriately dark setting for Atreus' maniacal sacrifice of Thyestes' sons, which is next described". Herington's articles served to rehabilitate the reputation of Senecan tragedy, and recent years have seen appropriate revisions. Most importantly, Smolenaars (1998, 51-65) argues that in the description of Atreus' palace Seneca manipulates allusions to the ekphrases of the temple to Apollo (*Aeneid* 6.9-13), Latinus' palace (*A.* 7.170-86), and Cacus' grotto (*A.* 8.241-305) in order to inveigh against imperial Rome, the palace, and Nero in particular. That reading demonstrates the relevance of the description for contemporary politics and topography; it does not, however, protect it from the accusation that it is a *tour de force* not integral to the drama. Tietze Larson (1994, 135) maintains: "In their capacity as set-pieces the descriptions in Senecan tragedy can be regarded as pieces of virtuoso entertainment, *purpurei panni* with no particular relevance to their contexts". The supposed dramatic irrelevance of the ekphrases, first employed by Zwierlein (1966, 113-7) in his argument against the stage-performance of Seneca's plays, continues to be cited in the ongoing debate about the nature of the tragedies.¹⁾

¹⁾ For recent surveys of the debate see Davis 2003, 19-36 and Fitch 2000, 1-12. Kragelund (1999, 236) laments that "assumptions about modes of performance have had a distorting impact on modes of reading and interpreting" Senecan drama.

The ekphrasis in the messenger's speech in Act Four of *Thyestes* is of the following scope: the palace proper (641-50); the central ancient grove (651-6) and the votive offerings which decorate it (657-64); the stream (665-7); and the sights and sounds emanating from the grove (668-82).²⁾ As this article seeks to demonstrate, the ekphrasis is not merely art for art's sake, but a unifying factor in the play and integral to its various thematic concerns. The description serves to underscore the role of the house of Pelops in each Act of *Thyestes*, and functions as a structural device that joins disparate scenes and moderates the episodic nature of the play. Of course it is not new to interpret a literary ekphrasis by privileging its role in the immediate and general context; however, when applied to Senecan tragedy, an organicist interpretation serves to advance our understanding of the composition of Seneca's play as a work of literature.³⁾ The demonstration of the unity of *Thyestes* at the structural, stylistic, and thematic levels of the text, consequently, serves to deflate the argument of incoherence and removes one objection against on-stage performability of the play.

2. *Domus Pelopea* (641-50)

The palace inhabited by Atreus is the setting and the focal point of the play.⁴⁾ Tarrant (1985, 45) observes that *Thyestes* "is unusual among Seneca's plays for the prominence it gives to the physical setting"; the words *domus* and *tecta* occur more frequently in *Thyestes* than in any other play attributed to Seneca.⁵⁾ The house of Pelops is mentioned emphatically in the opening lines.⁶⁾ The phrase *Pelopea domo* (22) at the culmination of Tantalus' speech

²⁾ The otherwise exhaustive new study of the ekphrases in Seneca's tragedies by Aygon (2004, 229-31) is regrettably brief about the description in *Thy.* 641-82, and ascribes to it only a "fonction symbolique" (364-5).

³⁾ On the relation between ekphrasis and narrative generally see the contributions in Goldhill-Osborne 1994, and Elsner 1996, Fowler 1991, and Laird 1993; Friedländer 1912 remains the standard work on classical literary descriptions.

⁴⁾ For a discussion of the setting of the play see Sutton 1986, 14-5, who concludes that "the *scaena frons* does indeed represent the royal palace".

⁵⁾ *Domus*: *Thy.* 19, *Her. F.* 18, *Ag.* 14, *Phaed.* 13, *Her. O.* 12, *Med.* 11, *Tro.* 7, *Oed.* 5, *Phoen.* 4; *tecta*: *Thy.* 7, *Her. F.* 6, *Med.* 6, *Phaed.* 5, *Tro.* 5, *Phoen.* 3, *Her. O.* 3, *Oed.* 2, *Ag.* 2.

⁶⁾ On the palace as setting for Act One see Shelton 1975, 257-9 and Hine 1981, 267.

not only recalls *domos* (3), but also anticipates *Pelopidae... domus* at the beginning of the ekphrasis (641), and serves to establish a verbal link between the opening of the play and the messenger's description.⁷⁾ A stronger link between Act One and Four is effected by the personification of *domus*. In the prologue the house is depicted as having a character that is violent (*violontae domus*, 32) and unholy (*impia... domo*, 46); it has a fate that vacillates (*dubia... / fortuna... labet*, 33-4). The building senses the coming of the ghost of Tantalus and bristles at his touch (*sentit introitus tuos / domus et nefando tota contactu horruit*, 103-4). This personification is recalled and developed in the first lines of the ekphrasis (641-5). There we read that the house faces westward (*pars est domus / conversa ad Austros*, 642), has a side that grows (*cuius extremum latus / ... crescit*, 641-2), bears down on the city (*urbem premit*, 643), and keeps the people 'under its thumb' (*populum suis / habet sub ictu*, 645).⁸⁾ The personification in the ekphrasis develops the analogy between the *house* of Pelops and the *dynasty* of Pelops, and effects unity by recalling the device at the play's opening.

The demise of the Tantalid family which forms the subject of the play is expressed by the image of a collapsing building; this image permeates *Thyestes*, but is developed especially in the messenger's speech (696-702) immediately following the description of the palace, and reappears in Thyestes' climactic prayer for the destruction of the cosmos in Act Five (1077-96). The image occurs first in the prologue when the Fury encourages the ghost of Tantalus to disturb the impious household deities (*penates impios furiis age*, 24), to scatter them (*misce penates*, 52), and to put havoc in the house (*perturba domum*, 83). The Fury's commands to cause destruction affect the natural order, and Act One concludes with the reaction of the sun, which like the hesitant house (*dubiae... domus / fortuna... labet*, 32-3), wavers: *en ipse Titan dubitat an iubeat sequi / cogatque habenis ire periturum diem* (120-1).

The first speech of Atreus, which commences Act Two, employs falling-house imagery in a prayer for the ruin of the palace and the family: *haec*

⁷⁾ The importance of the prologue as a structural device is discussed by Schiesaro (1994, 203-5) and Hine (1981, 259-75).

⁸⁾ Tarrant (1985, 184) notes that in *de Clementia* 1.26.4 Seneca applies the idiom *sub ictu* to the tyrant who is not happy *nisi eodem tempore grex miserorum sub ictu stetit*. Another striking personification of the house is *discedit* ('disperses', 649).

ipsa pollens incliti Pelopis domus / ruat vel in me, dummodo in fratrem ruat (190-1).⁹⁾ These words recall those of Tantalus (*numquam stante Pelopea domo / Minos vacabit*, 22-3) and anticipate the phrase *Pelopiae... domus* (641) at the beginning of the ekphrasis. The collapse appears more imminent later in Act Two, when Atreus perceives that the palace, as if shattered, creaked in all its buildings, and the shocked household gods turned their backs (*ac totis domus / ut fracta tectis crepuit et moti Lares / vertere vultum*, 263-5). As in Act One, so in Act Two the falling-house imagery is accompanied by the confusion of the natural world: *imo mugit e fundo solum, / tonat dies serenus* (262-3). In Act Four, following the description of the palace, the messenger reports that an earthquake causes the grove to shudder, and that the palace, uncertain which way to fall, swayed and seemed to waver (*lucus tremescit, tota succusso solo / nutavit aula, dubia quo pondus daret, / fluctuanti similis*, 696-8).¹⁰⁾ The anticipation of the imminent murder of Thyestes' children is accompanied by a response in the heavens, for the messenger relates the sighting of an ominous falling star that traces an angry furrow in the sky (*e laevo aethere / atrum cucurrit limitem sidus trahens*, 698-9). This close association between the house of Atreus and the world of nature is effected in the ekphrasis by the personification of the house (641-9), the portrayal of the grove and especially the oak-tree as a tyrant (650-6), and the confusion of the natural order within the grove (668-82).

In combining these features in the ekphrasis, the playwright not only anticipates the account of the death of Atreus' sons, but also propels the drama towards the ending, in which the demise of the Tantalid dynasty is extended in Thyestes' prayer to the destruction of the natural world and the universe (1077-96). Thyestes addresses Jupiter as sovereign of a heavenly palace (*aetheriae potens dominator aulae*, 1077-8), bidding him confuse the elements not with the restrained force of the natural weapon of lightning against dwellings and homes that are personified as innocent (*tecta et immeritas domos*, 1081). The comparison of the Pelopid palace to

⁹⁾ The references to the palace in Act Two and Three (249-50; 262-6; 336-8; 404-7; 512) suggest that there is no change in setting.

¹⁰⁾ Tarrant (1985, 191, at line 698) comments: "the wavering of the *aula* is the physical counterpart of the shifting fortunes of the house, a specific instance of the condition set out by the Fury in the prologue".

a huge mountain (*cuius extremum latus / aequale monti crescit*, 642-3) now gains greater meaning, for Jupiter is asked (1082-7) to use the same force with which he had leveled the triple mountain of Pelion, Ossa and Olympus, and that not only against the house of Pelops, but also against the entire cosmos (*totum... mundum*, 1078-9).

When seen in light of the earlier references to the *domus Pelopea*, the reflections of the chorus upon the dynasty and its palace in the ode which concludes Act Two (336-403) appear more fitting than is generally acknowledged, and promote the literary unity of the play.¹¹⁾ Zwierlein (1966, 78) interpreted the chorus' apparent ignorance of Atreus' treachery as evidence for the inconcinnity between the choral song and the preceding report of the *satelles*; however, its observations about royal power form an appropriate comment upon the house of Atreus. The chorus' pronouncement about the impermanence of material wealth (342-7) follows Atreus' prayer for the fall of the house (190-1) and his sensations of its collapse (262-3), and concludes with the assertion that true kingship does not require a splendid palace: *regem non faciunt opes, / non vestis Tyriae color, / non frontis nota regia, / non auro nitidae trabes* (344-7). These words are all the more relevant when we recall that the palace forms the setting of the play. What is more, the repetition of *auratas trabes* in the ekphrasis (*immane tectum, cuius auratas trabes / variis columnae nobiles maculis ferunt*, 646-7) links the choral ode to the ekphrasis and imports its philosophical tenor.

Thyestes' speech at the opening of Act Three reflects the song of the chorus and also foreshadows the ekphrasis. When he sees the *domus Pelopeia*, Thyestes expresses the joy of a returning exile: *optata patriae tecta et Argolicas opes / miserisque summum ac maximum exulibus bonum* (404-5). The words *summum bonum* (405) lend a philosophical flavour, and recall the chorus' injunction.¹²⁾ They also illustrate the conflicting impulses in Thyestes' character, for only a few lines later (420) he expresses a desire to

¹¹⁾ On the relationship between the song of the chorus and the action of the play see Sutton 1986, 40-1, Davis 1989, 421-35, and Hill 2000, 578-9.

¹²⁾ Davis (1989, 429) notes the coincidence between the sentiments of the chorus and those of Thyestes: "Just as the chorus denies any connection between *auro nitidae trabes* 347 and true kingship, so Thyestes takes pride in his indifference to such vanities: *nec fulget altis splendidum tectis ebur* 457".

escape to the countryside.¹³ While Thyestes' vacillation points to his status as Stoic *proficiens* rather than *sapiens*, the commonplace of 'swearing off wealth' is employed to link his speech to the ekphrasis and to develop its philosophical tone. It is worthy of note that Thyestes expresses wealth in terms of a magnificent palace: *non vertice alti montis impositam domum / et imminentem civitas humilis tremit, / nec fulget altis splendidum tectis ebur* (455-7). Besides the association of dwelling with mountain which anticipates the description of the palace (*cuius extremum latus / aequale monti crescit*, 642-3),¹⁴ one observes the analogy between building and tyrant, and the personification of state (*civitas humilis tremit*, 456), which recurs in 643 (*urbem premit*). Furthermore, the motif of wealth and splendour invoked by Thyestes reappears in the ekphrasis: *fulget hic turbae capax / immane tectum, cuius auratas trabes / variis columnae nobiles maculis ferunt* (645-7).¹⁵ In *Aeneid* 7.170-91, the literary model for this passage, Latinus' palace is portrayed as a large and splendid building; the playwright adapts it here to effect cohesion by informing the ekphrasis with the philosophical concerns expressed by the chorus and Thyestes.

3. The Central Grove (651-6)

Having examined how the description of the palace proper is linked to both earlier and later passages on verbal and thematic levels, we now consider the ancient grove of trees at the center of the precinct (651-6). Tarrant observes the structural significance of this part of the ekphrasis: "by placing the grove at the center of the palace... Seneca... symbolically equates the source of evil with the seat of power" (1985, 184-5, at 651-6). While these lines are indebted to various literary predecessors, in the context of the play they invite a comparison with earlier passages.¹⁶ Trees

¹³ Lefèvre (1985, 1263-83) provides a full discussion of the philosophical aspects of Thyestes' character. For an overview of the *interpretatio Stoica* see now Hine 2004, 173-209.

¹⁴ Thus Tarrant (1985, 156, at 456), who also suggests (1985, 8) that Thyestes' ambivalence towards power may reflect Seneca's own situation in 60-62 AD.

¹⁵ Also the phrase *ornantur arae* (464) in Thyestes' speech recurs in the depiction of the grove (684).

¹⁶ Smolenaars 1998, 50-60; the literary allusions in 651-6 are treated also by Agapitos (1998, 248).

appear first in the prologue, when Tantalus depicts his dwelling place in the underworld (1-23; 68-83), and when it is reported how the trees in the palace precinct react to his appearance (110-1). The link between the trees in the underworld and the ones in the palace grove is produced also in the ekphrasis, in which the trees are associated with death: *taxus et cupressus et nigra ilice / obscura nutat silva, quam supra eminens / despectat alte quercus* (654-6). Having prompted a comparison between the trees in the grove and the ones in the underworld, the playwright underscores the evil nature of the former by drawing a contrast. Whereas the tree to which Tantalus begs to return is heavy with fruits that avoid his lips (*labrisque ab ipsis arboris plenae fugas*, 69), the trees in the palace grove are depicted by the absence of these characteristics. There no tree offers abundant branches, and none is tended by the pruning knife: *nulla qua laetos solet / praebere ramos arbor aut ferro coli* (652-3).¹⁷ Thus the portrayal of the grove as a lifeless hell worse than death is reinforced by the reminiscence of the fruitful trees in the underworld.

The portrayal of the barren trees in the palace precinct (652-3) serves to link the ekphrasis also to the Choral Ode in Act One, which describes the setting of Tantalus. In lines 122-75 trees bend their laden branches and mockingly offer fruits to Tantalus (*gravidis frondibus incubat / et curvata suis fetibus ac tremens / alludit patulis arbor hiatibus*, 155-7). The trees are personified also by the image of pregnancy suggested by the words *gravidis* and *incubat* (155), *curvata* and *fetibus* (156). The trees dangle their riches (*divitias*, 162) before Tantalus, juicy apples dance (*insultant*, 164) on the branches and goad (*accendant*, 165) him in his hunger; by these words the grove is portrayed as a tyrant who despises a poor subject. The connection between the choral ode and the messenger's depiction is strengthened by the same technique in the ekphrasis; there the trees are personified by the words *praebere* (652), *laetos... / ramos* (652-3), and *nutat* (655). At the centre of the grove stands an oak, which like a tyrant gazes down upon the surrounding trees and conquers the grove: *silva, quam supra eminens / despectat alte quercus et vincit nemus* (655-6). The comparison of the oak to a tyrant and the grove to common folk not only reinforces the parallel

¹⁷ Note also the personification of the trees in their reaction to the appearance of Tantalus: *palescit omnis arbor ac nudus stetit / fugiente pomo ramus* (110-1).

between the grove and the palace, but it also connects this section of the ekphrasis to the Chorus' depiction of trees in Act One.¹⁸⁾

The relationship between ruler and common people is a theme that recurs throughout the play, and appears also in the depiction of the palace and the grove.¹⁹⁾ In Act Two the theme is treated by Atreus and the servant (204-19), and ends with the servant's statement that a kingdom is liable to collapse (*instabile regnum est*, 216) if it does not maintain shame, justice, sanctity, or piety. In Act Three Thyestes refers to the relation between ruler and populace from two perspectives. In a buoyant mood he imagines himself as ruler whom the people meet: *occurret Argos, populus occurret frequens* (411). However, in lines 446-70 the personification of *civitas* as humble and trembling before the oppressive house reinforces the identification of the tyrant with the dwelling he inhabits: *non vertice alti montis impositam domum / et imminensem civitas humilis tremit, / nec fulget altis splendidum tectis ebur...* (455-7). As was noted above, these words also anticipate the messenger's description of the palace (*fulget hic turbae capax / immane tectum*, 645-6), which culminates in two phrases that express the separation of tyrant from the people: *post ista vulgo nota, quae populi colunt* (648) and *arcana in imo regio secessu iacet* (650).

4. The Votive Offerings in the Grove (657-64)

The depiction of the weapons adorning the grove (659-64) is yet another means whereby disparate scenes are united in the messenger's description. While there are several allusions in these lines to the ekphrasis of Latinus' palace in *Aeneid* 7.170-91,²⁰⁾ the emphasis upon domestic strife is new. *Vocales tubae* (659), as Tarrant notes (1985, 186), refers to the trumpets used to signal the start of the chariot race between Pelops and Oenomaus. The chariot of Oenomaus that was sabotaged by Myrtilus is displayed also

¹⁸⁾ The representation of the Pelopid dynasty as tyrannical extends to the depiction of Pelops' oriental crown: *hoc Phrygius loco / fixus tiaras Pelopis* (662-3). Tarrant (1985, 186, at 659-64) observes that if an analogy between the dynasty and Rome's rulers is intended, this passage would function as a damning political comment.

¹⁹⁾ For a discussion of this theme in light of Seneca's *De Clementia*, see Davis 2003, 69-74.

²⁰⁾ Smolenaars 1998, 51-65; Agapitos 1998, 248-9.

(*fractique currus... / iunctaeque falsis axibus pendent rotae*, 660-1). Pelops' drowning of Myrtilus is intimated by *spolia Myrtoi maris* (660), a phrase which refers to a part of the myth that is recounted in Act One (139-43). The references to the strife within the house of Pelops culminate in the generalising 'every type of crime' (*omne gentis facinus*, 662), which echoes Tantalus' wish that in the impious house adultery be the most trivial crime: *impia stuprum in domo / levissimum sit facinus* (47-8). In Act Two, in the summary of wrongs committed against him, Atreus employs *facinus* in reference to Thyestes' adultery with Aerope (*hunc facinus ingens ausus assumpta in scelus / consorte nostri perfidus thalami avehit*), and in his vow to avenge the wrongs (*nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis*, 256). The word occurs also in Atreus' veiled allusion to the plot to murder the children (*dignum est Thyeste facinus et dignum Atreo*, 271), to which the messenger refers when he reports what happened (786). Thus the phrase *omne gentis facinus* (662) links past crimes with the ones performed in the action of the play, and reveals the significance of this part of the ekphrasis for the account of the murders which follows.

5. The Stream (665-7)

As the messenger's description reaches the place where the murders are about to take place, the language and imagery increasingly anticipate later scenes in the play. To be sure, river imagery occurs throughout Act One: Acheron is used as a metonym for the underworld (17), Tantalus begs to return *ad stagna et amnes et recedentes aquas* (68) and then to the fiery Phlegethon (72-3). When the spell of madness has been cast over the house of Pelops, the Fury orders Tantalus to return to the nether world and the familiar stream (*ad infernos specus / amnemque notum*, 105-6). The reaction of springs and rivers-to the presence of Tantalus is recorded (107-9), as are the responses-of the Lernaean marsh and the rivers Alpheus and Inachus (115-9). By contrast, at the conclusion of Act One, the chorus desires to escape to the clear and cool waters of Alpheus (*gelido flumine lucidus / Alpheos*, 130-1). These images have their climax at the end of the Act in the depiction of the torture of Tantalus: the running river averts its waters when Tantalus reaches for them (171-5).

Like the description of the trees in the grove, the portrayal of the stream is employed to join this part of the ekphrasis with the depiction of the

underworld in Act One. This link is effected by the comparison of the stream to the river Styx, which recalls the underworld streams mentioned earlier in the play: *talis est dirae Stygis / deformis unda* (666-7).²¹⁾ It is effected also by personification; in Act One, Acheron is scared and trembling (*maestus Acheron paveat*, 17), Phlegethon is directly addressed (72-3), Inachus hides (*Phoronides / latuere venae*, 115-6), and Alpheus refuses to offer its water (*nec suas profert sacer / Alpheos undas*, 116-7). The stream in the ekphrasis is personified by the words *tristis* and *stat* (665). Just as the rivers in the underworld respond to the actions of the Tantalids, so too does the river in the palace precinct.

The depiction of the stream also anticipates Act Five, however, in which the association of the infernal rivers with the underworld is used in Thyestes' recognition speech to invoke extensive destruction (1006-21). When Thyestes realizes that he has consumed his sons, he prays that Earth cover up the horrible deed and sink the palace into chaos: *non ad infernam Styga / tenebrasque mergis rupta et ingenti via / ad chaos inane regna cum rege abripis?* (1007-9). In these lines underworld imagery is developed more fully. The river Acheron also functions as a metonym for the underworld in Thyestes' wish that Atreus and he be covered up: *hoc tuamque immani sinu / demitte vallem nosque defossos tege / Acheronte toto* (1014-6). With words that recall Tantalus' prayer at the beginning of the play (13-20), Thyestes invokes burning Phlegethon to stir up scorching sands over their entombed souls: *ardenti freto / Phlegethon harenas igneus tostas agens / exilia supra nostra violentus fluat* (1017-9).

6. Sights and Sounds in the Grove (668-82)

The ekphrasis does not end until line 682 (*quo postquam furens / intravit Atreus*), but the distinction between description and narrative is blurred by the report of sights, sounds, and actions in the grove in 668-82. This increasingly dynamic depiction reinforces the link between the ekphrasis and the imminent narrative account of the most recent, horrible events in the grove. It also serves to unite the beginning and ending of the play by

²¹⁾ The main model for this passage is *Aeneid* 6.385-416 (the river Styx); however, as Agapitos (1998, 249) notes, Seneca's depiction contrasts with another model, the richly flowing oracular spring at Albuena in *A.* 7.81.

means of imagery. As Hine (1981, 26-3) and Smolenaars (1998, 60-2) have demonstrated, underworld imagery permeates this section of the ekphrasis. The mingling of the upper and lower realms, conveyed by the Fury and the ghost of Tantalus in the prologue (1-23; 68-83), and by the chorus in the first ode (149-75), is stated more emphatically in this part of the description. The account of the groans uttered by the gods of death (*gemere ferales deos / fama est*, 668-9), the rattling chains (*catenis... excussis*, 669), the howling ghosts (*ululantque deos*, 670), and the gigantic phantoms that haunt the place (*insultant loco / maiora notis monstra*, 672-3) recalls Tantalus' depiction of the ghosts that suffer in the underworld (74-83). The wandering hosts of dead men emerging from their tombs (*errat antiquis vetus / emissa bustis turba*, 671-2) are reminiscent of Tantalus' forced appearance: *quis inferorum sede ab infausta extravit / avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?* (1-2). Moreover, these lines anticipate the anxious musings of the Chorus following the messenger-speech, as it fears that gates of the underworld have been opened to release the Giants: *... numquid aperto / carcere Ditis victi temptant / bella Gigantes?* (804-6).

The inversion of day and night in the ekphrasis likewise functions as a linch-pin between the play's opening and ending. The Fury calls for darkness during daytime (*Nox alta fiat, excidat caelo dies*, 48-51) and announces the departure of the sun: *en ipse Titan dubitat an iubeat sequi / cogatque habenis ire periturum diem* (119-20). In the messenger's depiction of the grove in the palace precinct darkness reigns; even during daytime the grove possesses a peculiar night-time gloom: *nox propria luco est* (678). After the ekphrasis, the darkness which has descended remains. The messenger reports that Phoebus hid his face from the murder of Thyestes' children (*O Phoebe patiens, fugeris retro licet / medioque ruptum merseris caelo diem, / sero occidisti*, 776-8); indeed, he utters a prayer for darkness (785-7). Following the messenger's report, the first words of the chorus concern the inversion of the natural order and the disappearance of the sun (*cur, Phoebe, tuos rapis aspectus?*, 793). Indeed the entire choral song is about the darkness which replaces the normal light of day. Thus the playwright links the ekphrasis to the drama, and heightens the significance of the darkness at the grove by extending it to the universe. The chorus expresses the fear that the disappearance of the sunlight anticipates the *ekpyrōsis* that will destroy the universe (875-80). Thyestes, too, notices the darkness in the middle of day (*dies recessit*, 892), and as Atreus' horrible deed is revealed to

him, he observes more keenly that the distinction between day and night has departed (*ipse quin aether gravis / inter diem noctemque desertus stupet*, 990-1). The darkness enveloping the palace is extended now, and Thyestes notices that the ceiling of the heavens seems to be shaken (*magis magisque concussi labant / convexa caeli*, 990-4).

7. Conclusions

Several conclusions may be drawn from this examination of the function of the ekphrasis in the context of *Thyestes*. One concerns the relevance of the messenger speech to the rest of the play. A recent book on the role of description in Senecan tragedy makes the general observation that “the Senecan messenger-speech stands . . . as a piece which is entirely separable from the dramatic context in which it occurs” (Tietze Larson 1994, 70). As this paper has demonstrated, this assessment must be adjusted, at least regarding *Thyestes*, in which the messenger speech is integral to its immediate and general contexts. By means of verbal and thematic reminiscences and foreshadowings, the description of Atreus’ palace functions as a structural device uniting various scenes in the play.

The analogy between the palace and the tyrannical dynasty (641-56), the portrayal of the grove as place of family history (657-64), and the mingling of the upper and lower realms (665-82) show that the ekphrasis is not a mere *tour de force*, but the *locus* for the interaction of human, natural, and cosmic activities. As was first noted by Regenbogen (1961, 437-8) and developed by Park Poe (1969, 374-5), in Senecan tragedy the behaviour of individuals is intimately bound up with their environment. In *Thyestes* it is the description of Atreus’ palace which brings together in brief compass spheres of human habitation, nature, and the underworld to convey the Stoic concept of the harmony of the universe, the *συνπάθεια τῶν ὅλων*.²² In combining these elements, the ekphrasis recalls the Fury’s command in line 48-53 that the whole universe be affected by Tantalus’ curse and that the natural order be overturned. In uniting the imagery of the collapsing house, falling dynasty, and the response of nature, the ekphrasis prepares for the

²² The parallel between the house and the natural world is discussed by Park Poe (1969, 374).

account of Atreus' murder, and propels the drama towards Thyestes' final, explicit prayer for destruction of the family, the palace, the city, and the world.

Lastly, we may conclude that much may be gained by reading *Thyestes* as a work of *literature* as well as drama. The value of this interpretative approach to the plays of Seneca was intimated by Tarrant when he stated that the playwright "neglected traditional dramatic form in favour of unifying motifs and images because his conception (and experience) of tragedy was more literary than theatrical" (1978, 229 note 81). Similarly, Fantham has suggested that "Seneca... wanted his public to experience his tragedies simply through the spoken, and even written, word" (2000, 23).²³ More recently Littlewood (2004, esp. 127-48) has demonstrated the literary self-consciousness in Seneca's tragedies, thus making the case for an interpretation that permits a complexity of literary as well as dramatic factors. In sum, the argument that *Thyestes* was not performed because it is incoherent does not succeed in consideration of the coherent structure that is effected by the recurring imagery and internal references. Regardless of Seneca's intentions about the performance of the plays, we may conclude that *Thyestes* does not consist of 'sand without lime'.

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²³ Cf. Goldberg 1996, 276: "... we might productively argue that rhetoric—in particular declamation—was a positive influence on Roman tragedy because it asserted the primacy of language over spectacle".

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