

THE PREDATORY PALACE: SENECA'S THYESTES AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF TYRANNY

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In Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes*, the royal palace of the Tantalids serves as a potent symbol of tyranny. The royal house is depicted as a sprawling, aggressive structure that threatens and ultimately engulfs both its human subjects and the natural world. This image of the palace is the correlative of the totalitarian spirit of its occupant, the tyrant-king Atreus. As the palace dominates and absorbs the world around it, so the king seeks to encompass the hearts of his subjects and ultimately the world itself. In this paper, I will explore the palace's aggressive nature, and suggest a historical model for it. First, I discuss the palace's oppression of its subjects, linking this to Atreus' self-conception as a monarch. Second, I will investigate the palace's ambiguous relationship with the natural world. Finally, I will discuss the relationship of Seneca's palace to a real-world expansionist palace, the *Domus Aurea*--"Golden House"--built by Nero in the heart of Rome. Was the Senecan model inspired by the Emperor's project, and, if so, what does this say about the play's connection to its contemporary world?

The palace of the Argolid kings is described in detail in two separate passages.¹ First, there is Thyestes' meditation on kingship, and his rejection of royal pomp and luxury :

Non vertice alti montis impositam domum
 et imminantem civitas humilis tremit,
 nec fulget altis splendidum tectis ebur
 somnosque non defendit excubitor meos;
 non classibus piscamur et retro mare
 iacta fugamus mole nec ventrem improbum
 alimus tributo gentium, nullus mihi
 ultra Getas metatur et Parthos ager;
 non ture colimur nec meae excluso Iove
 ornantur arae; nulla culminibus meis
 nutat silva

(455-465)

The lowly state does not tremble at [my] overhanging house, fixed upon the peak of a lofty mountain, nor does grandiose ivory shine from my high ceilings; no bodyguard keeps my sleep safe. I do not fish with armadas and drive the sea back by imposing breakwaters, nor do I feed my insatiable stomach with the tribute of nations; there is no plantation laid out for me beyond the Getae and Parthians; I am not revered with incense, nor are altars adorned for me to the exclusion of Jupiter; no forest sways, planted upon my roofs.²

¹ On the consistency between the image of the palace in these speeches, see Faber 2007.

² All translations are my own; quotes from *Thyestes* are based on R. J. Tarrant's 1985 edition.

It can be objected that this passage does not describe the house of the Tantalids at all; Thyestes is merely conjuring up generic images of imperial pomp. Certainly, the negative form of the description does not allow us to firmly identify the reference; but there seems sufficient reason to at least associate Thyestes' description with the palace at Argos. First, Thyestes is not speaking simply as a rustic philosopher, but as a former king – he has experienced these things first-hand, and it is natural that he draw upon his own experience.³ Indeed, this passage tallies sufficiently with the second description of the palace to suggest that Seneca is presenting the same type of bloated residence. This second description comes in the speech of the Messenger who brings the news of Atreus' crime:

In arce summa Pelopiae pars est domus
 conversa ad Austros, cuius extremum latus
 aequale monti crescit atque urbem premit
 et contumacem regibus populum suis
 habet sub ictu. fulget hic turbae capax
 immane tectum cuius auratas trabes
 variis columnae nobiles maculis ferunt
 post ista vulgo nota, quae populi colunt,
 in multa dives spatia discedit domus
 (641–9)

There is a place, in the highest citadel of Pelops' house, turned to the south, whose furthest flank rises to the height of a mountain, and presses upon the city and holds the people, contemptuous of their rulers, beneath its stroke. The monstrous roof gleams, containing multitudes, and glorious columns, variously speckled, bear its gilded beams. Behind this landmark for the masses, which nations tend, the rich house sprawls in every direction.

These passages share a sense of the palace as a hostile, threatening presence. In Thyestes' speech, the image is in some sense a Damoclean one: the palace is figured as hanging over the city, a dangerous object that could, at any point, fall to crush them.⁴ In the messenger's speech, though, the danger has become much closer, and much more active. The phrase *habet sub ictu*—"holds beneath its stroke" suggests a more active nature than building normally displays: the power of chastisement owned by the occupant of the palace is transferred to the building itself, and the structure is thereby given a strange kind of life. The palace no longer simply hangs over the people; it "presses upon them" and directly threatens them.⁵ The image is one of arrested civil war: the people

³ cf. Rose 1986, who notes the prevalence of first-person pronouns and verbs used in this passage, suggesting Thyestes' personal involvement in the scene he describes.

⁴ Thyestes emphasizes the city's abjectness before the looming palace by describing it as *humilis* – not merely 'low' in a geographical sense (though this sense is present) but also 'humble, lowly, obscure.'

⁵ As with *humilis* (see note 2 above), Seneca seems to be playing with both the purely

hold their rulers in contempt, but are held down by the palace; the palace perpetually threatens to crush them, but, for the moment, withholds the final blow.

Such a description of the relationship between palace and people is a far cry from the harmonious connection between ruler and subjects that, for example, we find in the (admittedly tongue-in-cheek) description of Augustus' Palatine home in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*:

Visite laurigero sacrata Palatia Phoebō:
 Ille Paraetonicas mersit in alta rates;
 Quaeque soror coniunxque ducis monimenta pararunt,
 Navalique gener cinctus honore caput;
 (3.389-392)

Visit the Palace, sacred to laurel-bearing Phoebus; He drowned the Egyptian fleet
 in the depths, and whatever monuments our Leader's wife and sister have built,
 and his son-in-law, whose head is crowned with naval honours.

In Ovid, the residence of the ruling family is celebrated as the home of those who defend the people in war and beautify their city with monuments; in *Thyestes*, by contrast, the people are "contemptuous of their rulers," and peace is maintained only through the superior force of the Palace.

Such a situation accords well with the kind of kingdom Atreus expressly wishes to rule. In his dialogue with his advisor (*Satelles*) in act II, Atreus makes clear that he has no interest in gaining his people's love. Indeed, it is only by their hatred that he can be sure that his rule is complete:

Maximum hoc regni bonum est
 quod facta domini cogitur populus sui
 tam ferre quam laudare. (205-7)

This is the greatest benefit of power: That the people are compelled to praise
 as many of
 their master's deeds as they must endure.

Atreus does not simply seek obedience from his subjects. Accius, an earlier Roman playwright, had his stage tyrant declare *oderint dum metuant*--"let them hate, as long as they fear"--a phrase Caligula which was apparently fond of quoting (Suet. *Cal.* 30.1). But, as Schiesaro observes, Atreus desires more than fear from his subjects: "Atreus aspires to complete control over his people's reactions, and is aware that force can turn dissent into consent."⁶ Atreus' motto would be closer to Tiberius' reworking of the phrase as *oderint dum*

geographical sense of *premere* as "abut, be sited near" and its more aggressive connotations as pushing or beating down (see the TLL entry on *premo*, esp. (I) B and (III)).

⁶ Schiesaro 2003 162.

proberent – “let them fear, as long as they praise” (Suet. *Tib.* 59). It is only by this unnatural combination of hatred and adoration that Atreus can be sure of his authority. His ambitions are totalitarian – he seeks to overturn the natural desires of his subjects, and eliminate any escape from his influence while they live (247): *perimat tyrannus lenis; in regno meo, / mors impetretur*: “let a soft tyrant kill; in my kingdom, death is begged for!”

Palace and king likewise echo each other in their shared preoccupation with height and magnitude. In Thyestes’ speech, the palace is *imposita vertice alti montis* – “on the peak of a lofty hill”; in the messenger’s speech, the fatal grove is hidden in “the highest citadel of Pelops’ house,” which rises “equal to a high hill.” Height, in *Thyestes*, is frequently associated with menace and hubris. Most obviously, there is the opening of Atreus’ crazed monologue in Act V, when, having accomplished his revenge, the king feels himself of godlike stature (885–6): *Aequalis astris gradior et cuncta super / altum superbo vertice attingens polum*: “I walk at the level of the stars, above all things and touch the high pole–star with My exalted head.”⁷ Thyestes, by contrast, in narrating his rejection of royal status, places himself as low as he can possibly be – in enjoying his humble meal, he pictures himself *humii iacentem* (451). Both the palace and its master thus strive upwards, seeking to overshadow all that lies below them, admitting of no superiors⁸.

King and palace are thus mirrors of each other:⁹ the sprawling, threatening edifice reflects Atreus’ consuming desire to encompass all aspects of his kingdom, a passion that ultimately expands to take in the entire universe. The palace, the most obvious and tangible embodiment of the ruler’s will, can only be an object of terror and hatred to the populace, whose hearts are overshadowed by their king as their city is overshadowed by his home.¹⁰

The palace’s bellicose relationship with its subjects is mirrored in its war against the natural world. Thyestes’ speech suggests a palace aggressively dismantling the barrier between nature and human civilization. Breakwaters are depicted as forcing the sea back;¹¹ and the overpowered sea is further subjugated by armadas whose sole purpose is to satisfy the ruler’s appetite (459). Nature is not merely attacked by the palace; it is absorbed into its

⁷ Other examples of height associated with danger include the towering oak in the sacred grove (656), and the evocation of piling Pelion on Ossa in the fourth choral ode (814).

⁸ It is worth noting that the Messenger uses the verb *cresco* to describe the palace’s height. Once again, the word implies motion and growth, infusing the palace with life and personality.

⁹ So Faber 2007 433.

¹⁰ A similar identification between a ruler and his habitation can be found in Seneca’s *Hercules Furens*, in which Theseus describes the gloomy palace of Dis, concluding that *magna pars regni trucis / est ipse dominus, cuius aspectus timet / quicquid timetur* – “A great part of the realm’s grimness is its lord, whose countenance all fearsome things fear” (725).

¹¹ These *moles* may not strictly be part of the palace; but since they are mentioned as part of the catalogue of royal arrogance, it is safe to assume that they form part of the palace’s conceptual world.

fabric, transformed into an ornament to the building's grandeur as "trees . . . sway upon the roof" (*culminibus . . . imposita nutat silva*). If the people are to be kept in a state of impotent rebellion, nature is to be utterly subjugated. Thyestes depicts a palace whose influence has spread to the borders of the known world: to feed its master, there are plantations among the Parthians and Getans (462), whose existence, once again, serves only to fill the tyrant's "insatiable stomach" (*ventrem improbum*, 461).¹²

Thyestes' depiction of the palace's war against nature is part of a long-standing exploration in Roman literature of the relationship between human civilization and the natural world.¹³ Romans did not, in general, idealize completely pristine nature, but found aesthetic satisfaction in the fusion of the artificial and natural.¹⁴ There was no agreement, however, on the proper proportions of this blend. At one extreme lay a largely unquestioning celebration of technical mastery, that saw nature as only of any value when heavily "improved" by artifice.¹⁵ The poet Statius and the younger Pliny, both from the generation after Seneca, give voice to this attitude. Statius, for example, praises the way a certain Pollius has re-formed the natural setting in constructing his villa: using verbs like *vincere* --"to conquer" and *domare*--"to master," the poet describes how Pollius has flattened hills (*Silvae* 2.2.54) and levelled groves (55) to create what Statius considers the perfect union of technology and nature.¹⁶ Pliny the Younger praises a villa for its varied views of the sea (*Epistulae* 2.17),¹⁷ which allow the occupant to see the ocean in different perspectives depending on his mood. As Pavlovskis remarks, Pliny essentially gives himself ownership of the entire vista: "master of the villa, here he appears to be master over the surrounding nature as well, capable of affecting the landscape to please himself."¹⁸ Nature in its basic state holds little attraction for these wealthy Romans: it is only when conquered by

¹² Hippolytus, in Seneca's *Phaedra*, also contrasts a palace and the natural world; here, however, the emphasis is very different. Hippolytus' palace is a hiding-place, where the king shuts himself away in fear, ignorant of the benign world of nature (524-525). In *Thyestes*, the palace and its occupant strike out at nature and absorb it -greed, not fear, is the main motive.

¹³ The last few decades have seen a great deal of interest in Roman attitudes to nature and the landscape. Pavlovskis' 1973 work on Flavian literature led the way, followed by Purcell's important 1987 article on the relationship between town and country in Roman thought. For a good introduction to the subject, with a full bibliography, see Spencer 2010. I can only scratch the surface of these issues here.

¹⁴ Pavlovskis 1973 *passim*, Purcell 1987 196.

¹⁵ Pavlovskis suggests that this attitude only emerges in the Flavian period (2-5), but his arguments are unconvincing. While it is true that earlier poets like Horace praised rustic simplicity (see below), their criticisms of urban expansionism show that many of their contemporaries did share this view, even if it did not find much literary expression until the Flavian era.

¹⁶ cf. Pavlovskis 1973 14, Newlands 2002 163-164.

¹⁷ Pavlovskis 1973 29-30

¹⁸ Pavlovskis 1973 30.

technological sophistication that the natural world can truly be fit for human occupation.

Other Roman writers are more ambivalent about the intrusion of civilization into nature. The poet Horace, writing some sixty years before Seneca, often expresses dismay at Roman luxury, and the exploitation of required to feed it. He laments the expansion of villas and estates at the expense of productive farmland (*Odes* 2.15, 2.18.17-27), and mocks both the Roman obsession with exotic fish and the exploitation of the sea that it requires (*Satires* 2.2, *Odes* 3.1.33-36). The naturalist Pliny the Elder condemns the ransacking of land and sea for luxuries (19.19.51-56), and at one point describes the reshaping of landscapes to satisfy greed as torture of the universal mother Earth (2.63.157).

But though these authors condemn unrestrained incursions into nature, they do not reject all human modifications of the landscape. Horace condemns luxury, but he does not advocate a return to primitivism.¹⁹ His ideal is a small, self-sufficient farm where hard work produces simple but pleasant food and drink (*Satires* 2.6, *Odes* 3.6.37-48). In *Epistle* 1.14 Horace twits his bailiff for calling the farm a "wilderness" (*tesqua*, 19) because it lacks the taverns, whores and baths of the city (19-25), and reminds him of all the potentially pleasant labours he must perform. Implicitly, Horace contrasts the farm with the wilderness as well as the metropolis, making it a happy medium between the two.²⁰ Within that medium, man-made alterations of the landscape are permissible: it is fine to cast breakwaters into a creek to water one's fields (*Epistle* 2.14.30), but not into the sea to expand one's mansion (*Odes* 3.1.33-36).

Pliny the Elder likewise accepts a good deal of alteration of nature. In his list of rivers, Pliny praises most those that are either navigable or adorned with bridges and cities.²¹ The creation new varieties of trees through grafting is depicted not as an insult to nature but an expression of gratitude for her bounty (*NH* 17.9/58). Indeed, human intervention is not only not harmful to nature, but at times even beneficial: brambles and ivy would devour the world if humans did not clear them for farmland (17.21/96). Pliny's account of the Chauci, a Germanic tribe on the coast of the North Sea, makes clear his view of a life lived without technology. The Chauci make virtually no alterations to nature: they have no flocks, live in the simplest huts, and survive on rainwater collected in pits and the fish exposed at low tide (16.1/1-2). For

¹⁹ Indeed, in *Satire* 2.2, Horace warns against replacing luxury with the extreme miserliness and self-denial of one Avidienus, who eat nuts from the forest and drinks wine so old it has turned to vinegar (lines 55-62).

²⁰ Johnson 1993 148-149, Spencer 2010, 25-26. Spencer elsewhere (2006, 259-262) suggests that Horace's poetry subtly implies that such a middle-ground is actually impossible to find: Rome and the Roman mindset have, like Seneca's Palace, expanded to envelop most of the natural world. Even if this is the case, however, the Horatian ideal remains that of a middle-ground, whether or not this is achievable.

²¹ Beagon 1996 287-289.

these unaccommodated men, Pliny feels no admiration, but only the deepest pity. Like Horace, Pliny's ideal life is lived between extremes: the wholesale exploitation of nature is to be condemned, but so is a life that relies solely on what nature provides unaided.²²

No such middle way can be found in *Thyestes*. Having fled the luxury and danger of the palace, Thyestes must live a life more reminiscent of Pliny's Chauci than of Horace's Sabine idyll. His dining is *angusta*--"narrow, meagre" (452), and done while lying on the ground (451). The degree to which Thyestes is lacking in the comforts of civilized life is emphasized by Atreus' description of his brother's haggard appearance:

aspice ut multo gravis
squalore vultus obruat maestos coma
quam foeda iaceat barba. (505-7)

Look how his hair, weighted with so much filth, hangs over his grim face;
how dirty hangs his beard!

In *Thyestes*, there no longer seems to be anything between hubristic decadence and utter privation.²³ The palace has expanded to engulf any such happy medium, and the only escape from its grasp is to live in complete self-denial.²⁴

The palace's war against nature once again reflects its ruler's character. Scholars have noted that Atreus' violations of rules of human nature in *Thyestes* result in a disturbance in cosmic nature.²⁵ This culminates, of course, in the fourth choral ode (789-884) in which the chorus imagines the entire natural order (embodied by the heavenly bodies) crashing down in confusion. Atreus' villainy, it seems, has been great enough to overthrow the guiding powers of the universe (*demitto superos*--"I dismiss the gods" he boasts in line 886). Both palace and king seek to overwhelm the natural order and remake it in their own image.

So far, I have drawn a strong distinction between the artificial palace and the natural world it seeks to conquer. But the relationship is actually

²² Beagon 1996 307-309.

²³ The extreme rejection of civilization is a Senecan motif. In Letter 90, Seneca condemns virtually all technological progress, and praises a primitive humanity who slept either under open skies or in huts of piled-up wood (90.10, 41).

²⁴ As both A. J. Boyle and P. J. Davis point out, Thyestes uses the verb *pati* "to endure" to describe his attitude toward his state (Boyle 1997 24, Davis 2003 47). His exile, while it may be preferable to the perpetual fears of kingship (446-453), is not pleasant. It is also worth noting that when Thyestes succumbs to the temptations of power, he is presented as having leaped straight from abject poverty to disgusting luxury. The Messenger describes him as "drenched on his head with perfume" and "heavy with wine" (780-1); and Atreus exults to see his brother belching in purple finery (910-11).

²⁵ e.g. Henry and Henry 1985 39, Davis 2003 68.

more complex. The palace is not only the product of human will. At the very heart of the palace, its spiritual centre, is a natural setting, explicitly untouched by human cultivation :

arcana in imo regio secessu iacet,
 alta vetustum valle compescens nemus,
 penetrabile regni, nulla qua laetos solet
 praebere ramos arbor aut ferro coli
 sed taxus et cupressus et nigra ilice
 obscura nutat silva, quam supra eminens
 despectat alte quercus et vincit nemus.
 hinc auspicari regna Tantalidae solent
 hinc petere lassis rebus ac dubiis opem

. . .

fons stat sub umbra tristis et nigra piger
 haeret palude; talis est dirae Stygis
 deformis unda quae facit caelo fidem.
 hinc nocte caeca gemere ferales deos
 fama est, catenis lucus excussis sonat
 ululantque manes.

(650-658, 665-

670)

A secret place lies in the deepest recess, a high wall enclosing a sacred grove: the innermost part of the kingdom, where no tree ever shows forth burgeoning branches nor is trimmed with iron; but the grove sways dark with yew and cypress and black oak, towering over which a high oak looks down and overwhelms the grove. Here, the Tantalid kings by custom inaugurate their rule, here they seek aid in doubtful and obscure matters

. . . a gloomy spring stands beneath the shadows, and oozes into a sluggish pool; such is the formless water of the fatal Styx, which makes oaths in heaven. Here, it is said, the gods of the dead groan in the blind night, the grove rings with clanking chains, and the spirits howl.

What are we to make of this description? On one level, the grim surroundings simply help set the mood for the abomination committed among them. But the grove's function goes beyond scene-painting. The grove is described as the *penetrabile regni*, the starting-point of the reign of the kings of Argos. The centrality of the place suggests that the Tantalid monarchy partakes of its sinister character. This supposition is in accord with the emphasis on heredity that runs throughout the play²⁶. There is a potential for taboo-breaking violence that runs through the Tantalid dynasty: in addition to the atrocities depicted in the play, we have Tantalus' first sacrifice of his child to his divine guests, Pelops' murder of his friend, Thyestes' future rape of his own daughter, Agamemnon and Menelaus' murder of Thyestes, Agamemnon's sacrifice of

²⁶ Davis 2003 42.

Iphigenia, etc. etc. etc.²⁷ The grove is the perfect symbol for this hereditary evil.²⁸ It is the product of nature, expressly said to be untouched by the instruments of cultivation; but the eerie quality of the place marks it out as unnatural. Similarly, the Tantalids' actions violate natural laws of kinship; yet, since they are the result of a hereditary curse, they spring from a part of each doer's nature.²⁹

Atreus, of course, shares the violent proclivity common to all the Tantalids. But the grove is especially suited to his character. Like the palace, Atreus can be seen as an elaborate, artful construction surrounding a core of perverted nature.³⁰ Atreus is, on the surface, a supremely intelligent and self-aware tyrant. In his debate with his minister (*Satelles*), he shows great skill in rhetoric, countering each of his underling's moral objections with penetrating and pithy arguments.³¹ Indeed, throughout the play Atreus' displays a deft command of language. He delights in gruesome puns and *doubles entendres*. After Thyestes has accepted his offer of double rule, for example, Atreus tells him (545-6): *Imposita capiti vincla venerando gere / ego destinatas victimas superis dabo*: "Bear the *vincla* on your reverend head, I will give the chosen (or bound) victims to those above." Atreus plays with the word *vinc(u)la*, which can mean either "diadem" or "chains"; and only he (and the audience) know just who the *destinatas victimas* will be. After Thyestes has unwittingly eaten his children, Atreus delivers an apparently affectionate speech laced with ghoulish irony:

Hic esse natos crede in amplexu patris.
 hic sunt eruntque; nulla pars prolis tuae
 tibi subtrahetur. (976-8)

Believe that your sons are here, in their father's embrace. They are and will be here;

No part of your offspring will be taken from you.

²⁷ Faber 2007 435-6.

²⁸ Faber 2007 434 suggests that, in its domination of the grove, the towering oak-tree may also evoke the figure of the tyrant.

²⁹ The grove's symbolism regarding the dynasty is strengthened by the description of the trophies hanging from the trees, all memorials of the darker exploits of Atreus' ancestors (659-664).

³⁰ Schiesaro 2003 86 frames the issue strikingly, albeit in a more general sense than we are discussing:

"It would be difficult to conceive of a *locus* more evocative of the fundamental characteristics of the unconscious, indeed a place where nature, in all its dark, hostile power, survives in spite of the elaborate superstructures that encircle and delimit its sway, and where memories of the past roam unchecked as a constant source of fear."

³¹ cf Schiesero 2003 162-3. Davis 2003 69-74, among others, points out the similarities between the minister's arguments and Seneca's own advice to Nero in *de clementia*. The author of *Octavia* certainly perceived the similarity, writing a conversation between Nero and Seneca (440ff.) that strongly echoes the dialogue in *Thyestes*.

The most obvious proof of Atreus' intelligence and industry is, of course, that his revenge is successful in every respect. He is able to predict his brother's every reaction, and never needs to adapt his plan in the slightest.³² As a number of scholars have observed, Atreus takes on the role of author, director and stage manager of his drama, placing the other actors exactly where he wishes them to be.³³

Behind Atreus' rational evil, however, as with the grove behind the palace's facade, lie deeply irrational motivations. Chief among these, Schiesaro has highlighted Atreus' repeated doubts over the paternity of his sons.³⁴ Atreus first expresses his anxiety over his children in Act II, when he debates with himself whether he should let Agamemnon and Menelaus in on the plot. Their reaction, he reasons, will inform him whether he is truly their father:

Prolis incertae fides
ex hoc petatur scelere; si bella abnuunt
et gerere nolunt odia, si patrum vocant,
pater est. (326-8)

Certainty concerning my dubious offspring will be found from this crime; if they refuse

the conflict and do not wish to act on my hatred, if they call him "uncle", he's their father.

Atreus ultimately opts not to involve his sons in the crime; however, by the end of the play he feels confident in their legitimacy (ln. 1098). Why exactly? Atreus seems to explain a few lines later. Thyestes' reaction to his sons' murder proves that they, Thyestes' sons, were legitimate (1101-3), and this apparently confirms to Atreus that his own children are also truly his. This conclusion is, of course, completely irrational. It is supported either by Atreus' belief that "Thyestes' despair at the death of his children would have been more moderate if he had been certain that Agamemnon and Menelaus, too, were his own offspring" – a rather dubious conclusion – or by the idea that Atreus and his brother are exact reflections. This idea has a certain logic--being twins, the two brothers resemble each other in many ways.³⁵ But to assume that physical and emotional resemblance extend to circumstances of life, and that if one brother's children are bastards the other's must also be, goes beyond

³² Boyle 1997 48-52 contrasts the deluded Thyestes to an Atreus who is horrifying in his clarity and self-knowledge.

³³ Boyle 1997 117, Schiesaro 2003, 55-6, Erasmo 2004, 124.

³⁴ Schiesaro 2003 87, 101-2.

³⁵ Schiesaro 2003 105, 139-140. For Thyestes and Atreus as mirror-images, cf. 290: *non poterat capi / nisi capere vellet* "He could not be captured unless he wished to capture" 271: *dignum est Thyestes et dignum Atreo* "worthy of Thyestes and worthy of Atreus." the chorus too seem to see an identity between the brothers (640): *non quaero quis sit, sed uter* – "I do not ask who has done this, but which of the two."

reasonable analysis. It is a kind of logic, but it is the logic of the insane. Atreus, at first glance seems a well-built fortress of evil, impregnable and perfectly constructed. However, at the heart of this edifice is a place of chaotic nature, where ancestral crimes still lurk and strange phantoms wander freely³⁶.

At this point, the question arises as to what inspired this striking metaphor. To be sure, the home of the Tantalids does have literary forbears. J. J. L. Smolenaars has noted several passages in Vergil's *Aeneid* that could be sources for Seneca's palace. The palace itself may be drawn from that of King Latinus, described in the seventh book of the *Aeneid*.³⁷ He also finds significant parallels in the language used to describe the palace in *Thyestes* and that used by Vergil in the episode at the Sibyl's cave in Cumae.³⁸ Atreus' entry into the grove, by this line of argument, evokes Aeneas' *katabasis*, and makes the grove into an image of the underworld, a comparison strengthened by the Stygian quality of the grove's spring.³⁹

But while it is perfectly credible that Seneca drew partly on the *Aeneid*, as Smolenaars himself notes (p. 54), not all aspects of Seneca's palace can be found in Vergil. Among the missing elements is the expansionist and hostile quality of the building we have been discussing. If there is an external inspiration for this aspect of the palace, we may be able to find it not in the literary tradition, but in Seneca's contemporary world.

Shortly before Seneca's death, the Emperor Nero had begun his own sprawling, grandiose palace, whose location and expanse caused a great deal of resentment among the Roman citizenry. Following the massive fire of AD 64, Nero devoted a great deal of energy to rebuilding Rome. As well as instituting what seem to have been sensible building-codes designed to prevent another such fire, he expropriated a large tract of land between the Palatine and Esquiline hills on which to build a residence in the style he felt he deserved. A vast parkland, placed so as to be cut off from the rest of Rome by natural boundaries, surrounded several buildings, chief among them the *Domus Aurea* – the

³⁶ Schiesaro 2003, 87-8 sees the grove as a symbol of feminine sexuality, evoking the possible infidelity of Atreus' wife. The auspices he takes from his nephews' entrails are interpreted as an attempt to establish the true paternity of his children:

Thus Atreus' descent to the womb-like *arcana . . . regio* ('secret spot' 650) beneath the royal palace becomes a fitting symbolic exploration of *Aerope's* entrails, where the truth about his *dubius . . . sanguis* conceivably resides.

There is however, no evidence that this is in fact the question about which Atreus is consulting the childrens' entrails nor is the feminine sexual symbolism of the grove entirely convincing (indeed, the towering oak could make just as easily the grove a symbol of *male* sexuality).

³⁷ Smolenaars 1998 53. It must be said, however, that several of the elements that Smolenaars adduces – size and luxury, "dominant location atop the citadel", "religious and political function" could be said to be common to *all* palaces worthy of the name.

³⁸ Smolenaars 1998 56-7

³⁹ Smolenaars 1998 60-1

'Golden House.'⁴⁰ This building, as its name suggests, was liberally decorated with gold, as well as marble, ivory, and brilliant, though eccentric, wall-paintings. At the completion of this opulent residence, the emperor is said to have remarked, "at last I have begun to live like a human being" (*quasi hominem tandem habitare coepisse*, Suet. *Nero* 31.2). The building of a private pleasure-palace in the very heart of the Rome did not accord easily with the early emperors' pretense of being merely senators charged with certain special powers; it is, therefore, not surprising that the *Domus Aurea* became emblematic for later writers of Nero's wastefulness and egotism.⁴¹

Did Seneca draw his inspiration for Atreus' palace from his Emperor's grandiose project?⁴² Before we discuss what evidence there exists for this, there needs to be a brief consideration of the date of Seneca's play. Nero began construction of the Golden House after the fire in July of 64; eight months later, Seneca committed suicide on the Emperor's orders, after being implicated in a plot against him (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.56-63). If there are parallels between the Golden House and the palace in *Thyestes*, the play must have been written in that comparatively narrow space of time. Seneca's plays are, however, notoriously difficult to date.⁴³ Only one firm *terminus post quem* is provided for one play: the *Apocolocyntosis*, written at the time of Nero's accession in AD 54, contains a parody of *Hercules Furens* -- the play must, therefore, have been written before that year. Not knowing *HF*'s place in Seneca's *oeuvre*, this fact does not, in itself, allow any of the other plays to be dated. John Fitch has greatly advanced the relative dating of Seneca's tragedies through a number of metrical tests.⁴⁴ All of Fitch's different tests put *Thyestes* among Seneca's latest works. This is good news for my hypothesis, but without absolute dates it is not, in itself, particularly useful.

The attempts that have been made to find an exact date for *Thyestes* tend to place it a year or two before the great fire and the construction of the *Domus Aurea*. One approach focusses on Seneca's nephew, the epic poet Lucan. It has long been noted that Lucan's *Pharsalia* contains echoes of Senecan dramas, including of *Thyestes*.⁴⁵ If we can know when Lucan composed these passages, we could find a *terminus ante quem* for Seneca's plays. Unfortunately, Lucan is as difficult to date as Seneca. We know that, at some point in the 60s, he published three books of his *Pharsalia*; shortly afterward, Nero, enraged at

⁴⁰ Boethius 1960 108

⁴¹ cf. Suetonius *Nero* 31.1

⁴² The author of *Octavia* seems certainly to have seen connections between the *Domus Aurea* and Seneca's imaginary palace. In Agrippina's prophecy about Nero's downfall, the description of Nero's palace echoes elements of *Thyestes*' first-act speech. There is, for example, reference to the world's resources being funneled to the palace and its master (*Oct.* 626-627), with particular attention paid to the submission of the Parthians (*Oct.* 628).

⁴³ Fitch 1981 289; Tarrant 1985 10-13; Nisbet 2004.

⁴⁴ Fitch 1981.

⁴⁵ Zwierlein 1983 246-248.

Lucan's writing, banned him both from publishing and from public office.⁴⁶ In 65, Lucan, along with Seneca, was implicated in a conspiracy against Nero and, like his uncle, was put to death. Precisely when Lucan first published is uncertain. R. G. Tarrant has suggested that "all of Seneca's plays were written before Lucan began work on his epic, which was probably not earlier than 60 and not later than early 63."⁴⁷ But dates ranging from 58 to 64 have also been proposed for Lucan's beginning his epic.⁴⁸ Even if Lucan did begin in or before 63, we do not know the order in which he wrote his work, or the degree to which he revised it--the Senecan echoes could thus have been inserted at any point before his death in 65.⁴⁹ Given the uncertainty's surrounding Lucan's dating, it does not seem particularly safe to attempt to date Seneca by his works.

Others have attempted to date the plays by finding references to contemporary events.

R. G. M. Nisbet sees such a reference in the choral ode that follows the apparent reconciliation between Atreus and Thyestes:

ille qui donat diadema fronti
 quem genu nixae tremuere gentes,
 cuius ad nutum posuere bella
 Medus et Phoebi prioris Indus
 et Dahae Parthis equitem minati
 anxius sceptrum tenet et moventes
 cuncta divinat metuitque casus
 mobiles rerum dubiumque tempus (599-606)

He who places a diadem upon the brow, to whom nations bend their knees and tremble, at whose nod the Mede, and the Indian who dwells near the sun, and the Dahae who threaten the Parthians with their horseman abandon their wars--he nervously grips his sceptre, fears and seeks to predict the shiftings of chance, which changes all, and the doubtful outcomes of time.

Nisbet sees in these lines an allusion to the Parthian king Vologaeses' coronation of his brother Tiridates as king of Armenia (Tacitus *Annals* 15.2.4) in AD 61; Nisbet therefore dates *Thyestes'* completion to the following year.⁵⁰ But Nisbet's dating is very problematic. First, this is far from the only possible inspiration for the image. Roman emperors had been crowning client-kings since Augustus.⁵¹ Several such events took place in the 60s. In AD 60,

⁴⁶ It has generally thought that it was the excerpt from the *Pharsalia* that enraged Nero, but Frederick Ahl (1971) argues that it was Lucan's now-lost work *De Incendio Urbis*--"On the Burning of the City"--that prompted his downfall.

⁴⁷ Tarrant 1981 10.

⁴⁸ Rose 1966 381.

⁴⁹ Rose 1966 384 asserts that "no one would publish individual books of a historical epic out of chronological sequence" This dogmatic statement is justly rejected by Ahl 1976 42.

⁵⁰ Nisbet 2008 360.

⁵¹ Braund 1984 26-27.

Nero had appointed Tiridates' predecessor Tigranes king of Armenia (Tac. *Ann.* 14.26.1); in 63, Tiridates had sought a coronation from Nero as well as the Parthians, and placed his crown at the foot of Nero's statue, declaring that it would only return to his head from the emperor's hands (Tac. *Ann.* 15.29). A year after Seneca died, Nero did indeed crown Tiridates in a lavish ceremony (Dio Cassius 62.63.4-6). Nisbet acknowledges these precedents, but argues that "any reference to a Roman emperor makes the anachronism too glaring in the context of Thyestes and Atreus."⁵² The fact, however, that Seneca refers to the people of Argos as "Quirites" (3960), an archaic term for Romans, suggests that he is not overly concerned about anachronism. Nisbet's supposed correspondence is simply too thin a foundation on which to rest the dating of the play. Even if one were to accept that this passage is inspired by the Parthian events, all we can conclude is that Thyestes was written after 62; Nisbet nowhere proves that the play had to be written in 62 and no later.⁵³

There is thus no compelling reason that *Thyestes* could not have been written during the construction of the *Domus Aurea*. We know that Seneca continued writing following his retirement. Two prose works survive from this period: *Natural Questions*, a work on scientific topics, and *Letters to Lucilius*, discussing ethical and philosophical issues.⁵⁴ In the latter works, I suggest that we can find evidence that increases the plausibility that Seneca *did* write *Thyestes* during the last year or so of his life. The 89th and 90th letters both include discussions of the relationship between human artifice and nature, and both contain language that strikingly echoes that of the *Thyestes*. In Letter 89, he advises Lucilius to condemn the massive estates of wealthy Romans, and gives examples of the kind of language he should use. "Is an estate that a nation once held too small for a single master?" (*Ager uni domino qui populum cepit angustus est*) he should ask (89.20), echoing the Thyestean palace "which nations tend" (*quae populi colunt*, *Thy.* 648) ; later in the passage, he condemns villas "raised to the height of mountains" (*in altitudinem montium educta*, 89.21), just as Atreus' palace "rises equal to a mountain" (*aequale monti crescit*, *Thy.* 643). In Letter 90, Seneca argues that technical mastery does not bring happiness, and is therefore not truly a branch of philosophy. Here again we have condemnation of "roofs that can hold nations" (*capacia populorum tecta*, 90.25, cf. *Thy.* 645: *turbae capax immane tectum*--"The monstrous roof containing multitudes"), with the later variation of "houses as big a cities" (*domos instar urbium* 90.43). This letter is particularly noteworthy in that it may well contain a reference to the Golden House itself. In section 15 of the letter, Seneca pours scorn on the kind of mind that

⁵² Nisbet 2008 360.

⁵³ Nisbet finds two further historical allusions in the play--one to the crossing of the Danube by nomadic peoples (362-364) and one to the penetration of the Caucasian Gates by the Alans (364-368). These references seem plausible, but neither, on their own, does anything to date the play.

⁵⁴ On the dating of these works, see Griffin 1976 305, 359-360, 396, 400.

invenit quemadmodum in immensam altitudinem crocum latentibus fistulis exprimat . . . et versatilia cenationum laquearia ita coagmentat ut subinde alia facies atque alia succedat et totiens tecta quotiens fericula mutantur

came up with how to expel saffron from hidden pipes from a great height . . . and constructed mobile ceiling-panels for dining-rooms, where one image succeeds another over and over and the whole roof changes with their courses.

This passage bears a striking resemblance to the imperial biographer Suetonius' description of the luxuries in the *Domus Aurea* :

cenationes laqueatae tabulis eburneis uersatilibus, ut flores, fistulatis, ut unguenta desuper spargerentur; praecipua cenationum rotunda, quae perpetuo diebus ac noctibus uice mundi circumageretur

(Suet. *Nero* 31.2)

Panelled dining-rooms with mobile ivory panels like flower, with pipes that sprinkled perfumes from above; the main dining-room was round, around which day and night perpetually circled, as if it were the world.

These parallels do not constitute definitive proof that *Thyestes* was written after July of 64; but they do show that during that time the idea of a monstrous, all-encompassing structure was on Seneca's mind, and that it may well have been connected for him with the emperor's new palace. We can now return to the question at hand: is there further evidence the *Domus Aurea* also influenced the image of the palace in *Thyestes*?

The strongest argument for a connection would be to find a physical resemblance between the palace in *Thyestes* and the Golden House. If something in Seneca's descriptions could be found to match the layout or decoration of the House, the case for influence could be much strengthened. Alas, Seneca's descriptions are too general to be of much help in establishing any clear matches. There are some tantalizing elements: Atreus' palace is said to face the south-east (642), as did the *Domus Aurea*. However, this orientation was shared by the imperial house on the Palatine, and the Capitoline temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.⁵⁵ The beams of the palace roof are described as *aureata* "gilded" (646), which certainly evokes the "golden" aspect of the Golden House; Thyestes mentions ceilings of ivory, which Suetonius lists among the House's luxuries (*Nero* 31.2). The Golden House was not, however, the only palace to feature such decoration. Indeed, most of the adornments Seneca lists are fairly generic, the kind one would find in any palace or wealthy house.⁵⁶ If we turn,

⁵⁵ Smolenaars 1998 55. Smolenaars goes on to suggest that the primary reason for the palace's orientation is to evoke the temple of Apollo at Cumae, connecting Thyestes' *adyton* to the cave of the Sybil.

⁵⁶ Indeed, the villas of wealthy Romans had been incorporating such "Hellenistic" luxuries from the late Republic on (Boëthius 1960 96-97). It might be tempting to connect the chorus' long

however, from the palace itself to the public reaction to it, things become more promising. There is evidence that the descriptions of the conflict between palace and citizens is an accurate reflection of contemporary attitudes toward Nero and the Golden House. Seneca may well have been inspired in this image by the poorly-disguised hostility felt by the Roman populace toward the self-aggrandizing estate of their ruler.

Like the citizens of Thyestes' Argos, those of Nero's Rome also seem to have viewed their ruler's palace as a threatening presence. Suetonius reports that an anonymous ditty was making the rounds in Rome, mocking the Emperor's ever-expanding residence:

Roma domus fiet: Veios migrate, Quirites,
 si non et Veios occupat ista domus. (Suet.
Nero 38.2)

Rome is turning into the House: let's move to Veii, Romans--
 unless that House takes over Veii too!

This is one of the most obvious depictions of the Golden House as hostile to the city of Rome, but it is far from the only one. Tacitus reports numerous rumours concerning the great fire: that Nero had sung about the fall of Troy as the city burned (*Annales* 15.39), that gangs had gone around preventing the flames from being extinguished (15.38), that Nero wished to rebuild Rome in his own image, renaming it after himself (15.40). The Romans at this time could surely be described as a people "contemptuous of their rulers". The perception was clearly that Nero cared only for his own comfort and the expansion of his own property - he was willing to, in effect, make war upon his own city and treat it as a conquered territory to achieve his goals.⁵⁷

Following Nero's death, Roman authors were eager to express their feelings about their late ruler's palace. The image of the Domus Aurea threatening to engulf the city is a frequent one. Pliny the Elder, cataloguing the grand houses of Roman history, singles out those of Nero and Caligula as the most magnificent; and the language he uses is striking :

bis vidimus urbem totam cingi domibus principum Gai_ et Neronis, huius quidem, ne
 quid deesset,
 aurea. (HN 36.24.111)

astronomical description with the rotating starry dome of the *Domus' triclinium* (Suet. *Nero* 31). The choral ode, however, bears a resemblance to Hercules' monologue in *Hercules Furens* (939ff), probably written before AD 54 (Tarrant 1987 10), making clear that star-imagery is an independent Senecan motif.

⁵⁷ The anonymous author of *Octavia* also makes Nero personally responsible for the fire; here, however, his motive is not the desire to build his palace, but to punish the Romans for taking the side of Octavia against Poppaea (828). Nevertheless, the image of a ruler at war with his own subjects is very much present.

We have twice seen the whole city encircled by the houses of the Emperors Gaius and Nero; the latter's, so that nothing would be lacking, was Golden.

The verb *cingere* -- "encircle" is not strictly accurate; the Golden House, after all, stood at the centre of the city;⁵⁸ but it captures the sense of siege that the emperor's project seems to have instilled in the Romans. A similar attitude is expressed by Martial in the *Liber Spectaculorum*, celebrating the Flavian emperors' construction of the Colosseum on the site of the Golden House :

Hic ubi sidereus propius videt astra colossus
 Et crescunt media pegmata celsa via,
 Invidiosa feri radiabant atria regis
 Unaque iam tota stabat in urbe domus.
 Hic ubi conspicui venerabilis amphitheatri
 Erigitur moles, stagna Neronis erant.
 Hic ubi miramur velocia munera thermas,
 Abstulerat miseris tecta superbus ager.
 Claudia diffusas ubi porticus explicat umbras,
 Ultima pars aulae deficientis erat.
 Reddita Roma sibi est et sunt te praeside, Caesar,
 Deliciae populi, quae fuerant domini.
 (Martial *Lib. Spec.* 2)

Here, where one sees the heavenly Colossus, near the stars, and the scaffolds rise in the midst of the old street, out gleamed the enviable atria of the savage king, and in all the city there was just one House. Here where the pier of the famous, admirable amphitheatre is erected, were the pools of Nero. Here, where we marvel at the swift benefits, the baths, the haughty field snatched the roofs from the destitute. Where the Claudian portico sends forth diffuse shadows, was the furthest point of the sloping courtyard. Rome is returned to herself, and, under your protection, Caesar, these delights belong to the people, which used to belong to their master.

The poem posits a clear opposition between palace and city. The new Emperor is praised for returning Nero's lands to the people, from whom he is described as stealing even their homes. Line 4 is especially striking, and evokes the anonymous lampoon cited earlier: the palace had expanded to the point that Rome is imagined as consisting more or less only of the *Domus Aurea*.⁵⁹ It seems clear that the sense that Nero's palace was a hostile presence in the midst of the city was a common one. Seneca's predatory citadel that "holds the people beneath its blow" could very well reflect the contemporary attitude toward his Emperor's residence.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ As indeed was the *Domus Tiberiana* of Caligula.

⁵⁹ Note also Seneca's reference in Letter 90 to "Houses as big a cities" (90.43).

⁶⁰ Note also the reference to the Colossus touching the stars, which rather strikingly echoes

It can be objected that all the sources quoted in this argument have been post-Neronian, and thus not guaranteed to represent popular opinion in Seneca's own time. Jaś Elsner, for example, argues that Nero's reputation as a profligate builder is largely the result of Flavian propaganda: "In effect, Nero only became an outrageous and prodigal builder when he fell from power."⁶¹ According to Elsner, there was nothing particularly radical about the Golden House. It was merely the next stage in the development of Julio-Claudian imperial residences, and it was only after Nero's downfall that it became converted into a symbol of tyrannical luxury.⁶² While it is true that Nero swiftly became a symbol of all that was to be avoided in a Roman leader, the public attitude to the Golden House cannot be explained away so easily. Nero's project differed from earlier imperial residences in several key ways. First, there are the circumstances of its construction. It is highly likely that the Roman populace would have reacted adversely to Nero's vastly expanding his own palace onto land which had previously been home to ordinary Romans. Even the Emperor's admittedly energetic relief efforts may not have always soothed resentment at the haste with which he turned the disaster to his own advantage. Secondly, as Elsner himself admits,⁶³ Nero's creation of a wilderness in the midst of the city went far beyond normal Roman practice. As Mary Beard has pointed out, the image of the emperor retiring to his garden is, in Roman literature, often employed to represent imperial arrogance and detachment.⁶⁴ From a suburban garden, an emperor could remain aware of the city, and supervise its government, without needing to have any contact with the masses. By placing his garden in the heart of the city, Nero signalled that his retreat would henceforth be permanent: he would govern Rome from a gated compound, shutting out everything but his private pleasures. The lampoons cited by Suetonius point to a very real resentment of the Emperor's extravagance.⁶⁵

The *Domus Aurea* displayed the same exploitative relationship to nature as

Atreus' megalomaniac soliloquy in which he imagines himself towering to the heavens (885-919) - here too, there may be a link between the tragic tyrant and the Roman emperor's fantasies.

⁶¹ Elsner 1994 123.

⁶² Elsner 1994 121

⁶³ Elsner 1994 122.

⁶⁴ Beard 1998 30.

⁶⁵ Some modern authors argue that Nero was hated only by the senatorial elite (cf. Erasmo 2004 120, Goddard 1994 76-79), but was popular with the *plebs*, citing in support several ancient historians (e.g. Tac. *Hist.* 1.78.2, Suet. *Otho* 7.2, Dio 61.5.2). There exist, however, other accounts that depict Romans of all classes as hostile to their emperor. Ordinary Romans are said to have rioted when Nero divorced Octavia (Suet. *Nero* 35.2, Tac. *Ann.* 14.61), and blamed him when the grain supply failed (45.1-2); on Nero's death, Suetonius reports that the Romans rejoiced and dressed in caps of liberty (57.2). Nero may have been popular with some people at some times, but this popularity was neither universal nor permanent. In AD 64, how you felt about Nero may well have depended on whether the rubble of your house was now part of the *Domus Aurea's* foundations.

the Senecan palace. Tacitus reports that contemporary Romans regarded the gardens as the most marvellous feature of Nero's construction (15.42). Both he and Suetonius remark on the massive effort put into making the estate appear a realistic countryside; Suetonius sketches a picture of the rustic illusion created by Nero's engineers:

item stagnum maris instar, circumsaeptum aedificiis ad urbium speciem; rura insuper arvis atque
 vinetis et pascuis silvisque varia, cum multitudine omnis generis pecudum ac ferarum.

(Suet. *Nero* 31.1)

Likewise, there was a pool, the image of the sea, enclosed by buildings in the style of cities; in addition, there were stretches of countryside varied with cornfields and vineyards, pastures and forests, together with masses of every kind of animal, tame and wild.

With this paradoxical landscape – a natural-appearing countryside entirely created by human artifice – Nero took the Roman ideal of augmented nature to its absurd extreme. This ideal, as expressed by writers like Statius and Pliny, celebrated landscape refined by human ingenuity; Nero's architects conjured landscape *ex nihilo*. Tacitus goes so far as to say that the "nature" of Nero's palace outstripped the natural world, declaring that his architects "attempted through artifice what Nature forbade" (*quae natura denegavisset per artem temptare, Annales* 15.42). Nero's false countryside was the perfect embodiment of Roman technical mastery, all for the amusement of a single man. This co-opting of the natural world is exactly what Thyestes censures in the Tantalid palace, with its rooftop forests and privatized oceans. Nature itself is conquered and occupied, forced into serving the Tyrant's interests.⁶⁶

Like Seneca's fictional palace, the Golden House seemed hostile to its own people, dominating and oppressing the city it ruled. Like the Senecan palace, the Golden House destroyed the distinction between nature and artifice, absorbing natural landscapes into its structure. In both palaces, the rational sciences of architecture and engineering serve a deeply irrational nature, giving concrete form to a tyrant's mad desires. As one of Nero's closest counselors, Seneca's first-hand knowledge of a megalomaniac builder surely influenced his vision of a tyrant's home.

Though Seneca's vision of the predatory palace was inspired by Nero, it is certainly not confined to him. The association of tyrants and megastructures has continued down the centuries, and recent history affords many examples. One of the most striking and well-documented instances are Hitler's plans for the

⁶⁶ At the risk of over-charging the analogy, Nero's gardens might even be considered to some degree analogous to the haunted grove in Atreus' palace. Both the *Domus Aurea's* garden and the grove are paradoxical, products of nature that are fundamentally unnatural.

rebuilding of Berlin after Germany's victory over Europe. Under Hitler's direction, Albert Speer drew up plans for a complete reconstruction of the centre of Berlin⁶⁷. A triumphal avenue 4.5 miles long would have led, past increasingly grandiose buildings, to what was to be the heart of the Nazi empire: a vast domed hall, capable of holding up to 180,000 people⁶⁸. At 762 feet high and with a diameter of 825 feet, this would have been 16 times the volume of St. Peter's in Rome.⁶⁹ The dome, and the only slightly less grandiose structures that surrounded it, were all meant to be public buildings. But, as Albert Speer himself later realized, the uniform magnificence of the area would have rendered it dull and stultifying, and would have introduced "a monumental rigidity that would have counteracted all our efforts to introduce urban life into this avenue."⁷⁰ As with Nero's Golden House, the Berlin plans amounted to the destruction of large swathes of a living city, to replace them with monuments to one man's ego.⁷¹

Hitler's plans were never realized, but a completed expression of the architecture of tyranny can be found in Nicolae Ceaușescu's "House of the Republic." This building, possibly the world's largest, dominates the centre of Bucharest. Like the Golden House, it was constructed on the ruins of citizens' homes: two residential districts were demolished to make way for the building, in an area five kilometres long and two kilometres wide.⁷² Echoing both Seneca's contemptuous citizenry and the criticisms of the Golden House, Romanians at the time commented that, rather than the victory of Socialism, the palace

⁶⁷ The other dictatorships of the 1930s embarked on similar projects. Under Stalin, designs were produced for a vast "Palace of the Soviets" that would dominate Moscow. Built on the site of a demolished cathedral, it was to be a tiered cylindrical tower some 300 metres high would support a 100-metre statue of Lenin (Hoisington 2003, 61). This building was featured constantly in propaganda, but only the foundations were ever laid. World War Two halted construction, and after the war Stalin seems to have lost interest. Khrushchev transformed the foundations into a massive swimming-pool, and after the fall of the Soviet Union the cathedral which had stood on the site was rebuilt (Hoisington 2003 64-67).

The existence of Roman monuments constrained Mussolini from carrying out the full-scale reconstructions planned by Hitler and Stalin, and his architectural projects more often involved the "liberation" of ancient structures by removing more recent surroundings (Agnew 1998 234-238). Nevertheless, the fascist regime did make some moves toward a new monumentality. Part of the original Roman Forum was bulldozed to create a new motorway leading between Mussolini's office and the Colosseum, lined with maps celebrating the old Roman and new Italian empires (Minor 1999). A competition was held in 1934 to design new headquarters for the Fascist Party; one of the entries proposed a massive curved wall of porphyry, the imperial stone, whose only adornment was to be a speaker's platform on which the Duce would stand, godlike, to address his adoring masses (Doordan 1983 126).

⁶⁸ Speer 1969 74, 134-138.

⁶⁹ Speer 1969 153.

⁷⁰ Speer 1969 134.

⁷¹ Indeed, it has been suggested that, just as Atreus and his palace echo each other, Hitler sought to merge himself into his architecture--far from dwarfing the Führer, as Speer feared (153), the massive dome would come to embody him (Ward 1970 40).

⁷² Danta 1993 175.

represented Ceausescu's victory over Bucharest.⁷³

In the 21st Century, the architecture of tyranny remains viable. It has recently been pointed out that architects are increasingly eager to work for authoritarian regimes.⁷⁴ Autocratic rulers' megalomania allows architects the ability to work on massive scale; their unfettered power allows them to present artists with a blank slate on which to build, without worrying about planning permissions or public reaction.⁷⁵ The dictators, for their part, receive not only the prestige of famous architects, but are able to embed themselves indelibly into their cities' fabrics. Totalitarian regimes seek to maintain a permanent presence in the hearts of their subjects. Making sure that their centres of power dominate the landscape is one of the most effective ways of doing so. Seneca, with his close proximity to an absolute ruler, understood this thinking all too clearly. In *Thyestes*, he gives a vivid picture of what can spring from the place of diseased nature at the tyranny's heart.

⁷³ Danta 1993 178-179.

⁷⁴ Lacayo 2008 53.

⁷⁵ Lacayo 2008 55-56.

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