

SENECA

THYESTES
PHAEDRA
THE TROJAN WOMEN
OEDIPUS
WITH
OCTAVIA

TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY E. F. WATLING

PENGUIN BOOKS

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FOUR TRAGEDIES AND OCTAVIA

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA (c. 4 B.C.—A.D. 65) was born in Cordoba, Spain, the second son of Annaeus Seneca the Elder. His father had a great respect for the traditional virtues of republican Roman life, and brought his three sons up accordingly. As a young adult, Seneca studied intensively the Stoic and Pythagorean philosophies and resided in Egypt for a period because of ill health. By A.D. 33 he was married to his first wife, had held the office of quaestor, and was achieving success as an advocate and teacher of rhetoric; he was also attracting attention by his incisive style of writing. He was forced to retire into private life at one point because of the suspicions of the emperor Caligula. He returned on the accession of Claudius, but was exiled in A.D. 41 to Corsica, accused of adultery with Claudius' niece. He wrote several works during the eight years in Corsica, including *De Ira*. He was recalled to Rome in A.D. 48 to act as tutor to the future emperor Nero, and became his principal civil adviser when he took power. The first five years of the reign were peaceful and moderate, for which much credit must be given to Seneca. However the feud between the emperor and his mother, Agrippina, weakened his position and he asked to retire in A.D. 62. Nero and Seneca parted on seemingly amicable terms, but the various political conspiracies which followed implicated Seneca, though probably on very flimsy evidence, so that his death was ordered in A.D. 65. Seneca anticipated the emperor's decree by committing suicide after several painful attempts; his second wife, Paulina, who tried to share her husband's fate, survived him by a few years.

E. F. WATLING was educated at Christ's Hospital and University College, Oxford. His translations of Greek and Roman plays for the Penguin Classics include the seven plays of Sophocles, nine plays of Plautus, and this selection of the tragedies of Seneca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Extracts from the Elizabethan translations of Seneca's tragedies are quoted, by kind permission of Messrs Constable and Co. Ltd, in the form in which they appear in Charles Whibley's edition of Newton's collection of translations (Tudor Translations, Constable, 1927).

THYESTES

THE crime which doomed the House of Pelops to a series of feuds and violent acts from generation to generation was that of Tantalus, a son of Zeus, who served his son Pelops as food at a banquet of the gods. Restored to life by Zeus, Pelops obtained a wife and a kingdom by treachery, and on his death after many other ruthless acts of conquest his throne became a bone of contention between his sons Atreus and Thyestes. Agreements to share the kingdom, or to rule it alternately, were broken more than once; each brother enjoyed periods of prosperity and suffered periods of banishment.

At the time of the play's action, Atreus is in possession and is plotting to entrap his brother by a false show of reconciliation. Thyestes, with his three sons, returns from exile, to be the victim of an atrocity recalling, but surpassing, the crime of their first ancestor. The curse on the house was to live on, the feuds to be repeated in the persons of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, and Aegisthus, son of Thyestes (by his own daughter Pelopia) and in the murder of Clytaemnestra by her son Orestes.

No Greek tragedy on the subject of Thyestes is extant, though a fragment of a *Thyestes* by Sophocles survives. Seneca may have been indebted to a predecessor, L. Varius Rufus, whose tragedy *Thyestes* was performed in 29 B.C. at the games celebrating the victory of Actium.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

GHOST OF TANTALUS

FURY

ATREUS, *King of Argos*

A MINISTER

THYESTES, *brother of Atreus*

YOUNG TANTALUS, *son of Thyestes*

PLISTHENES (*mute*), *his second son*

THIRD SON (*mute*)

A MESSENGER

CHORUS of *Argive elders*

*

Scene: at the palace of Mycenae

* *Atreus' wife of Atreus*
Princess of Thyestes

Pelopias = Thyestes' wife

* *are Atreus' children really his*

ACT ONE

Ghost of Tantalus, Fury

GHOST: Who hales me from my miserable rest
Among the dead below, where my starved mouth
Gapes for the food that runs out of its reach?
What god bids Tantalus return again
To this abode he never should have seen?
Is there some punishment in store for me
Worse than to stand dry-mouthed in running water,
Worse than the everlasting yawn of hunger?
Is there another stone of Sisyphus
Whose slippery weight my shoulders must support;
A turning wheel upon whose spokes my limbs
Must be extended; or a punishment
Like that of Tityos, whose hollowed bowels
Are open caverns where foul birds of prey
Feed on his flesh – each night replenishing
The losses of the day, to bring tomorrow
A rich repast for each returning fiend?
To what new torture have I been assigned?
O, thou unknown implacable dispenser
Of torments to the dead, if there can be
Yet more intolerable penalties –
Such as the keeper of hell's gaol himself
Would loathe to look on, such as would affright
Grim Acheron – to fill my soul with terror,
Find one for me! For from my loins is sprung
A generation whose iniquities,
Whose crimes, of horror never known till now,
Make all their predecessors' sins look small
And me an innocent. Does any place in hell
Still lack a tenant? I can furnish one
From my posterity. While stands the house

Of Pelops, Minos never will be idle.
 FURY: On with your task, abominable ghost:
 Let loose the Furies on your impious house.
 Let evil vie with evil, sword with sword;
 Let anger be unchecked, repentance dumb.
 Spurred by insensate rage, let fathers' hate
 Live on, and the long heritage of sin
 Descend to their posterity. Leave none
 The respite for remorse; let crimes be born
 Ever anew and, in their punishment,
 Each single sin give birth to more than one.
 Let those proud brothers each forfeit his throne,¹
 And be recalled to it again from exile -
 In this strife-riven house Fortune herself
 Will never know which way to turn between them.
 The high shall be brought low, the weak made strong,
 The kingdom tossed by ceaseless waves of chance.
 Let there be culprits banished for their crimes,
 And when restored, by mercy of the gods,
 Returning to their crimes, to make their names
 hateful to all mankind and to themselves.
 Vengeance shall think no way forbidden her;
 Brother shall flee from brother, sire from son,
 And son from sire; children shall die in shames
 More shameful than their birth; revengeful wives
 Shall menace husbands, armies sail to war
 In lands across the sea, and every soil
 Be soaked with blood; the might of men of battle
 In all the mortal world shall be brought down
 By Lust triumphant. In this house of sin
 Brothers' adultery with brothers' wives
 Shall be the least of sins; all law, all faith,

1. As if outside the supposed time of the play's action, Fury 'foresees' the course of the feud which is now coming to a climax.

All honour shall be dead. Nor shall the heavens
 Be unaffected by your evil deeds:
 What right have stars to twinkle in the sky?
 Why need their lights still ornament the world?
 Let night be black, let there be no more day.
 Let havoc rule this house; call blood and strife
 And death; let every corner of this place
 Be filled with the revenge of Tantalus!

Behold, the pillars shall be wreathed with flowers,
 The porches garlanded with festive bay,
 The fires heaped high to give you worthy welcome.
 Then shall a Thracian tragedy¹ be played
 With larger numbers. . . . Is the uncle's hand
 Ready? . . . Why does he pause? . . . When will he strike?
 Thyestes does not know his children's fate. . . .
 Now light the fire and make the cauldron boil! . . .
 Divide the bodies into little pieces! . . .
 Splash blood on the paternal hearth! Draw up,
 And serve the banquet! Here will be one guest
 Not unaccustomed to such villainies.

See, I am giving you a holiday
 And a rich feast to satisfy your hunger.
 Fill your lean belly, Tantalus; and see,
 There will be wine mingled with blood to drink.
 I fear I have devised a meal so strange
 That *you* will run away from *it*. No, stay!
 Where are you off to?

GHOST: To the lake, the river,
 The elusive water and the laden tree
 Whose fruits avoid my lips. O let me go
 Back to my lightless bed, my prison cell!

1. The 'Thyestean banquet' has a precedent in the case of Procne (wife of the Thracian king Tereus) who killed and cooked his son Itys in revenge for the king's outrage upon her sister Philomela.

Or if my punishment has been too light,
 There is another river, Phlegethon -
 Let me go there, let me be left to stand
 Midstream in waves of everlasting fire.
 Hear me, all souls condemned by Fate's decree
 To serve your penance: you that cowering sit
 Under a vaulted cave, whose imminent fall
 Is your eternal terror; you that face
 The jaws of hungry lions, or beleaguered
 By bands of raving Furies quake with fear;
 You that half-burnt ward off a hail of torches -
 Hear me! This is the voice of Tantalus,
 Who comes in haste to join you. Learn from me,
 And be content with your afflictions. When,
 Ah, when may I escape this upper world?
FURY: Not till you have put chaos in your house
 And with your coming set its kings at war.
 Fill them with evil lust for battle, shake
 Their raving souls with storms of insane strife.
GHOST: It is my place to suffer punishment,
 Not be myself a punishment to others.
 Am I commanded now to issue forth
 Like noxious vapour boiling from the ground
 Or some foul pestilence to spread destruction
 Over the face of earth? Am I employed
 To do a deed of monstrous wickedness
 Against my grandsons? Father of all gods! -
 My father, though in shame - let my loud tongue
 Itself be sentenced to extremest pain
 For this audacity, yet it will speak:
 My sons, I warn you! Do not soil your hands
 With sinful slaughter, keep your altars clean
 Of blood aspersed in impious sacrifice.
 I shall stand by you and avert that sin. . . .

Ah, wouldst thou, fiend, brandish thy fearful whip
 Before my face, and fright me with the serpents
 Writhing about thy horrid head? My belly
 Aches with the agony of my old hunger
 Awakened at thy bidding. In my blood
 A fire of thirst is raging, leaping flames
 Consume my vital parts. . . . Lead on, I follow.
FURY: So . . . so . . . cast wide thy spell of madness . . . here,
 And here, on every part of this doomed house. . . .
 With this . . . this . . . fury be they all possessed,
 And envy, thirsting for each others' blood.
 So . . . now the house has felt your coming in -
 It quaked from top to bottom with the touch
 Of your corrupting hand. Enough, well done.
 Now take your way back to the lower depths,
 Back to your river. The offended earth
 Protests under your tread: see how the springs
 Recede and shrink, the river beds are dry,
 The scarce clouds ravaged by a scorching wind.
 All trees are drained of colour, branches bare,
 Fruit fallen; and the seas, that washed the shores
 So close on either side the narrow Isthmus,
 Have fled so far apart, the land between,
 Now broader, barely hears their distant roar.
 The lake of Lerna is dried up, Alpheus
 Has closed his sacred river, and Phoroneus¹
 Is scarcely to be seen; Cithaeron's height
 Stands naked of its cloak of snow; in Argos
 The elders fear the drought of days gone by.
 Behold, the very Lord of Heaven, the Sun
 Is loth to drive his chariot forth, nor cares
 To hasten on the day that soon must die.

1. Phoroneus, son of Inachus, the first king of Argos; and so used for the name of the river which was also called Inachus.

CHORUS

If any god loves our Achaean Argos,
 Pisa, for chariots known, the twofold harbours
 On the twin seas of the Corinthian Isthmus –
 If any god looks down upon the far-seen
 Heights of Taygetus, where snows of winter
 Massed in deep drifts by Scythia's wild north-easter
 Melt to the summer winds that sailors wait for –
 If any loves the cooling stream, Alpheus,
 Running beside the famed Olympian circus –
 May such a god, we pray,
 Regard us with an eye of peace,
 And turn all harm away –
 Forbid the ever-repeated alternation
 Of crime with crime, spare us a new succession
 Of young blood baser than older generations,
 Of children apter in sin than were their fathers.
 Grant that at last the impious brood descended
 From thirsting Tantalus may tire of outrage.
 Evil has gone too far – law's rule is powerless,
 Even the common bounds of sin exceeded.

Treachery conquered Myrtilus¹ the traitor;
 The sea betrayed him as he betrayed his master,
 Drowned him, and kept his name, to make a story
 Known, to their cost, by all Ionian seamen.
 Tantalus' infant son² was infamously

1. When Pelops raced his chariot against Oenomaus, King of Elis, for the prize of the king's daughter Hippodamia, he bribed Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, to tamper with the axle and cause an accident. Instead of rewarding Myrtilus, Pelops threw him into the sea (cf. l. 660).

2. This was Pelops, and this was Tantalus's archetypal crime; but Pelops was restored to life by Jupiter, to continue the series of atrocities.

Put to the sword, while running to kiss his father,
 Slaughtered, a baby victim upon the altar,
 By his own father's hand, and cut to pieces,
 Served as a dish to grace the godly tables.
 The consequence of this repast was hunger,
 Hunger and thirst for all eternity;
 What fitter penalty
 Could any fate decree
 For the provider of that bestial banquet!
 Tantalus stands fainting, gasping,
 Empty-mouthed, with food abundant
 Over the sinner's head suspended
 Out of his reach, a prey elusive
 As the wild birds that Phineus¹ hunted.
 Trees all around him bend their laden branches
 Stooping and swaying with the fruits they offer
 In playful mockery of his empty mouthings.
 Time and again deluded, now the sufferer,
 Famished and desperate with his long torture,
 Will not attempt to touch them, turns his head down,
 Clenches his teeth and swallows down his hunger –
 Only to see the riches of the orchard
 Lowered to meet him, juicy apples dancing
 On bending branches, goading again his hunger
 Till he must shoot out hands to clutch . . . but useless –
 Soon as he moves, expecting disappointment,
 Up to the sky go all the swinging branches,
 Out of his reach flies that autumnal richness.
 Thirst follows, an agony equal to the hunger;
 His blood burns hotly, fiery torches
 Dry his veins; he stands demented
 Straining to reach the running river
 Close at his side; at once the water
 1. Blinded, and tormented by harpies.

Turns and deserts its empty channel,
 Runs from him as he tries to follow,
 Leaving, where once a torrent sped,
 Dust for his drink from its deep bed.

ACT TWO

Atreus, Minister

ATREUS: Am I a coward, sluggard, impotent,
 And – what I count the worst of weaknesses
 In a successful king – still unavenged?
 After so many crimes, so many sleights
 Committed on me by that miscreant brother
 In violation of all sacred law,
 Is there no more to do but make vain protests?
 Is this your anger, Atreus? All the world
 By now should be resounding to your arms,
 The sea to east and west bearing your fleets;
 Fire should be blazing over field and city,
 The glint of naked sword on every side.
 The thunder of our horsemen must be heard
 On every quarter of the Argive land.
 The woods must give the enemy no cover,
 The mountain tops no site for fortresses.
 The people of Mycenae, man by man,
 Must take the field and sound the trump of war.
 And be it known that whosoever here
 Protects or shelters our detested foe,
 His penalty is ignominious death.
 Ay, may this mighty house of noble Pelops
 Fall even on my head, if in its fall
 It crush my brother too. Awake, my heart,
 And do such deeds as in the time to come
 No tongue shall praise, but none refuse to tell.
 Some black and bloody deed must be attempted,
 Such as my brother might have wished were his.
 You cannot say you have avenged a crime

Unless you better it.¹ But how to find
 An act of vengeance terrible enough
 To bring him down? Is he resigned or cowed?
 Is he a man to celebrate success
 With modesty, or calmly brook eclipse?
 Not he; I know that man's rebellious temper;
 Nothing will move him; but he can be broken.
 Therefore, before he can collect his forces
 Or steel his courage, I shall go for him,
 Not let him come for me, and find me resting.
 Let him destroy me now or be destroyed;
 The gage of action lies upon the field
 For him to seize who can be quick to take it.

MINISTER: You do not fear your people's disapproval?

ATREUS: Of the advantages of monarchy
 The greatest is that subjects are compelled
 Not only to endure but to approve
 Their master's actions.

MINISTER: Men compelled by fear
 To praise, may be by fear compelled to hate.
 He who desires to win sincere approval
 Will seek it in the heart, not on the tongue.

ATREUS: A moderate man may win sincere approval;
 It takes a strong man to enforce feigned praise.
 Men must be made to want what they dislike.

MINISTER: Let the king want what's right, who will oppose
 him?

ATREUS: The king who binds himself to want what's right
 Sits on a shaky throne.

MINISTER: No throne can stand
 Where there is neither shame nor law nor trust
 Nor care for sanctity or piety.

1. *Scelera non ulcisceris, nisi vincis.* The Latin is quoted in Marston's
Antonio and Mellida (1599).

ATREUS: Sanctity, piety, trust - are luxuries

For private life. Leave kings to go their own way.

MINISTER: To harm a brother, even a guilty brother,
 Must be a sin.

ATREUS: Whatever might be sin
 Against a brother, can be only justice
 In this man's case. What has he left untouched
 By his unlawful acts, what crime not dared?
 He took my wife by rape, my throne by theft;
 By treachery he won our ancient crown;
 He brought our house to ruin by treachery.
 You know that in the royal byres of Pelops
 We have a famous animal, a ram
 Of mystic origin, king of a flock
 Of valuable beasts; its back is covered
 With an abundant fleece of purest gold,
 And from this fleece is made the golden sceptre
 Borne by each reigning heir of Tantalus.
 The owner of the ram is king; the ram
 Controls the destinies of all our house.
 His pasture, as befits a sacred beast,
 Is in a special precinct safely guarded
 By strong stone walls which circle and protect
 This grazing-ground on which our fates depend.
 My brother planned a bold and treacherous plot -
 My wife, the partner of my nuptial bed,
 Being privy to that most nefarious deed -
 To steal this golden ram. And from that fount
 Springs all this spate of mutual enmity.
 Banished, I wandered lonely and afraid
 Throughout my realm. No portion of my birthright
 Was safe from his rapacity and cunning;
 My wife seduced, my sovereignty disowned,
 My blood disgraced, my progeny suspected.

One thing alone was certain in my life –
My brother's enmity. Then why stand idle?
Where is my resolution? Think of Pelops
And Tantalus; these are the precedents
My hand is called to follow. . . . Tell me, man,
How can I best destroy that hated head?

MINISTER: A sword's point will draw out an enemy's
breath.

ATREUS: You tell me of the *end* of punishment;
I ask, *what* punishment? The kindest king
Can put a man to death; under my rule
A culprit should be made to beg for death.

MINISTER: Is nothing sacred?

ATREUS: Sanctity, begone! –
If thou wast ever known within these walls.
Come all the dread battalions of the Furies!
Come, seed of strife, Erinys! Come, Megaera,
With torches armed! My spirit yet lacks fire;
It would be filled with still more monstrous rage.

MINISTER: What new device will your wild rage invent?

ATREUS: No act that common anger knows. Nothing
Will I not do! Yet nothing will content me.

MINISTER: By sword?

ATREUS: Too light.

MINISTER: By fire?

ATREUS: Not yet enough.

MINISTER: What other tool can your dire vengeance use?

ATREUS: Himself – Thyestes!

MINISTER: This is worse than vengeance.

ATREUS: It is. My heart is shaken with a storm
Of passion that confounds it to its centre.

I am compelled, although I know not whither,
I am compelled by forces. . . . Hear! the earth
Groans from its depths; the sky is clear, but thunder

Rumbles, and from the house there came a crash
As if the roof were falling; and our gods,
Shaken, have turned their backs on us. So be it!
Let a black deed be done, which gods above
Will fear to see.

MINISTER: What deed is in your mind?

ATREUS: I know not what. Some deed more wonderful

Than mind can contemplate, more terrible
Than any ordinary act of man,
Beyond the bounds of human nature, fills
My soul and prompts my idle hand to action.

What it will be, I know not. It will be,
I know, something tremendous. . . . Yes, I have it!

Hold hard to this, my soul! This is a deed
Thyestes could be proud of, as can Atreus;

Let them be partners in the doing of it!

Was there not an abominable banquet
Seen in the house of Tereus¹ of Odrysia?

There was; and truth to tell, it was a crime
Most horrible. But I have been forestalled;

My vengeance must contrive a better crime.

Mother and sister of Daulis,² give me guidance!

My case is yours; help and direct my hand! . . .

What if the father could be made to tear

His children into pieces, happily,

With eager appetite – eat his own flesh? . . .

Good, very good. I could be well content

With such a punishment. . . . But now, where is he?

Is Atreus to be innocent much longer?

A picture of the murder, done, complete,

Rises before my eyes . . . the father's mouth

1. See on l. 56.

2. Procne and Philomela. The atrocity occurred in Daulis, or Phocis, being under the rule of the Odrysian (Thracian) king Tereus.

Devouring his lamented little ones. . . .
 What! Is this fear again, my heart? Dost faint
 Upon the point of action? Call thy courage up!
 In this vile act the most atrocious part
 Will be the victim's own.

MINISTER: By what device
 Will he be lured to walk into our net?
 He looks for danger everywhere.

ATREUS: We could not
 Catch him, were he not hoping to catch us.
 Already he aspires to win my throne;
 To gain this end he would stand up to Jove
 Armed with his thunderbolts; to gain this end
 He is about to brave the angry sea,
 To cross the dangerous shoals of Libyan Syrtis;
 For this, he will endure what he most hates -
 His brother's sight.

MINISTER: How will he be persuaded
 That peace is made?¹ Whom will he trust for that?

ATREUS: Dishonest hope is always credulous.
 But I shall give a message to my sons
 To carry to their uncle. They will ask him
 To quit his vagrant life in foreign lands,
 Exchange his penury for royal state,
 And be my partner in the rule of Argos.
 Should he prove obstinate and spurn these prayers,
 His sons, less hardened, tired of deprivation,
 And easy to deceive, will listen to them.
 But his inveterate determination
 To gain the kingdom, added to the weight
 Of his misfortunes and dire poverty,

1. Atreus has not yet explained that he proposes to trap his brother by an offer of reconciliation; but the Minister obligingly makes that inference.

Albeit these have toughened his resistance,
 Will surely bring him round.

MINISTER: May not long habit
 Seem to have lightened his afflictions?

ATREUS: No;
 The sense of suffering grows continually.
 A hardship may be easy to accept,
 But very irksome to endure for ever.

MINISTER: My lord, I would advise you to employ
 Some other instruments for your fell purpose.
 Young men are all too apt to learn bad lessons;
 The stratagems that you would have them use
 Against their uncle, they may come in time
 To use against their father. Very often
 A counsellor of crime has found his precepts
 Employed against himself.

ATREUS: They'll learn the ways
 Of crime and villainy, without a master;
 Their kingly life will teach them. Have no fear
 Of their becoming villains; they were born so.
 Besides, what is to your mind harsh and cruel,
 What you call heartless and inhuman conduct,
 May well be happening on the other side.

MINISTER: Your sons will know the trap you are pre-
 paring?

ATREUS: They are not old enough to keep a secret;
 They would betray the plot. It takes a man
 Experienced in defeat to learn discretion.

MINISTER: Would you deceive the very messengers
 By whom you purpose to deceive your enemy?

ATREUS: Yes, so that they at least be innocent
 Of guilt, or blame for their complicity.
 Why should I need to implicate my sons
 In my dark deeds? Let me alone exact

My own revenge. . . . No, no, my heart; no bungling,
 No weakening now! If you would spare your sons,
 You will be sparing his. No – Agamemnon
 Shall be a conscious agent of my plan,
 And Menelaus help him with full knowledge.
 Their handling of the deed will give me means
 To test the truth of their suspected birth.
 If they refuse the encounter, if they will not
 Help me to my revenge, if they protest
 'He is our uncle' – then he is their father.
 About it, then. . . . And yet, a timid face
 Can give away too much; in great affairs
 The unwilling hand is easily detected.
 No – my assistants shall be ignorant
 Of the importance of their mission. . . . You, sir –
 Say nothing of my plan.

MINISTER: I need no telling.
 Your words are locked within my breast by fear
 And duty – but by duty above all.

CHORUS

At last this royal seat, this ancient race of Inachus,
 Sees its old fratricidal feud composed, strife laid to rest.¹
 What senseless folly drove our kings to shed each others'
 blood
 And use such sinful means to win possession of a throne?
 Were they so covetous of royal citadels of power?

1. That the Chorus, here and again at 546, appear to be ignorant of Atreus's treacherous intentions, is a considerable strain on the dramatic convention. Some suppose that the Chorus is absent from the stage between the acts. But no realistic solution need be looked for; the Chorus may participate as much, or as little, in the action as is convenient; here they are assumed to be aware only of the 'overt' situation – the apparent reconciliation of the brothers.

Did they not know where only perfect kingship can be
 found?

It is not worldly wealth that makes a king,
 Nor the rich diadem encompassing
 His royal head, nor the proud gaudiness
 Of gilded halls and Tyrian purple dress.
 A king is he who has no ill to fear,
 Whose hand is innocent, whose conscience clear;
 Who scorns licentious greed, who has not bowed
 To the false favour of the fickle crowd.
 The minerals unearthed in western lands,
 The ore washed down in Tagus' glittering sands,
 Are not for him; nor all the golden grain
 Threshed from the harvests of the Libyan plain.
 He is the man who faces unafraid
 The lightning's glancing stroke; is not dismayed
 By storm-tossed seas; whose ship securely braves
 The windy rage of Adriatic waves;
 Who has escaped alive the soldier's arm,
 The brandished steel; who, far removed from harm,
 Looks down upon the world, faces his end
 With confidence, and greets death as a friend.

Above the king whose broad domain
 Covers the far-flung Scythian plain,
 The king who holds his court beside
 The ruby sea whose blood-red tide
 Sparkles with gems, the king who wards
 The Caspian pass from Slavic hordes;
 Above the king whose feet dare tread
 Upon the Danube's icebound bed,
 Or him who rules (where'er be these)
 The famed silk-farms of the Chinese:

Above all, innocence alone
Commands a kingdom of its own.

This kingdom needs no armed defence,
No horseman, nor that vain pretence
Of Parthian archers who, in flight,
Shoot arrows to prolong the fight.
It has no need of cannon balls
And guns to batter city walls.
To have no fear of anything,
To want not, is to be a king.
This is the kingdom every man
Gives to himself, as each man can.

Let others scale dominion's slippery peak;
Peace and obscurity are all I seek.
Enough for me to live alone, and please
Myself with idleness and leisured ease.
A man whose name his neighbours would not know,
I'd watch my stream of life serenely flow
Through years of quietness, until the day
When an old man, a commoner, passed away.
Death's terrors are for him who, too well known,
Will die a stranger to himself alone.¹

1. *Qui notus nimis omnibus / ignotus moritur sibi*. The Latin is quoted in Marston's *The Fawn* (1605).

ACT THREE

Thyestes, Young Tantalus, Plisthenes, and another son

THYESTES: The place that I have most desired to see -
House of my fathers, majesty of Argos;
My native soil - the exile's greatest joy,
The outcast's hope; gods of my fatherland,
If there be any gods. These now I see
With my own eyes; and there the sacred walls,
The Cyclops' work, of more than human grandeur;
And there the course where the young men resort,
Where I myself gained honours more than once
Driving to victory in my father's chariot.
All Argos, all her people, will be here
To meet me. I shall meet my brother, Atreus . . .
No! Back! Go back, man, to the forest's shelter,
The leafy glades, your life among the beasts,
Shared with the beasts. This blaze of royalty
Cannot deceive your eyes with its false show.
When you are tempted to admire the gift,
Observe the giver. I was confident
And happy in a life which most would think
Intolerable; now my fears return.
My spirit falters and arrests my body;
I am unwilling to go on my way.

TANTALUS: Why does my father move with such slow
steps

As in a trance, and cast his eyes around
Seeming to be uncertain of himself?

THYESTES: What, can you doubt, my brain? The course is
clear

And needs no anxious thought. A throne? A brother?
What could be more unworthy of your trust
Than those uncertain things? Are you afraid

Of hardships which you have already tamed
And learnt to overcome? Do you now seek
Escape from comfortable indigence?
No, better far to be a beggar still.

Turn back, while yet you can; get safe away.

TANTALUS: Why, father, what can make you turn away
From home, now you have seen it? Why refuse
To embrace such happiness? Here is your brother
Returned to you in reconciliation;
He gives you back your share of sovereignty,
Makes you yourself again, and reunites
The broken members of our family.

THYESTES: You ask me why, I cannot tell you why
I am afraid; I see no cause for fear,
And yet I am afraid. I would go on;
But I am paralysed, my knees are weak,
My legs refuse to carry me; some force
Repels me from the way I try to go,
As when a ship labours with oar and sail
But oar and sail are powerless to resist
The driving of the current.

TANTALUS: Set aside
Those obstacles that hinder your intention,
And think what prizes wait on your return.
Father, you can be king.

THYESTES: As I can die.

TANTALUS: Power supreme -

THYESTES: Is nothing, when a man
Wants nothing.

TANTALUS: You have sons to follow you.

THYESTES: One kingdom cannot have two kings at once.

TANTALUS: Choose misery when happiness is offered?

THYESTES: Take it from me, my son, great prizes tempt us
By their false aspects, and our fear of hardship

Is likewise a delusion. While I stood
Among the great, I stood in daily terror;
The very sword I wore at my own side
I feared. It is the height of happiness
To stand in no man's way,¹ to eat at ease
Reclining on the ground. At humble tables
Food can be eaten without fear; assassins
Will not be found in poor men's cottages;
The poisoned drink is served in cups of gold.
I speak as one who knows, and make my choice
The life of hardship, not prosperity.
Mine is no lofty dwelling-place built high
Upon a mountain top to overawe
The common folk below; I have no ceilings
Lined with white ivory, I need no watch
Outside my door to guard me while I sleep.
I own no fishing fleet, no piers of mine
Intrude their massive blocks upon the sea.
My stomach is no glutton, to be filled
With every nation's tribute; not for me
Are harvests reaped from fields in farthest east.
No man burns incense at a shrine for me;
I am no god with altars to my name
More richly served than those of Jupiter.
Roof-gardens of luxurious foliage
Are not for me; for me no steamy baths
Stoked by the labour of a hundred hands.
My day is not a time for sleep, my night
An endless vigil in the cause of Bacchus.²
But neither am I feared by any man;

1. Cf. Appendix II, 7.

2. A passage in Seneca's *Letters*, cxxii, inveighing against luxury, mentions consecutively 'rooftop gardens' and 'turning night into day'. The speech of Thyestes is, of course, singularly anachronistic!

My house is undefended, but secure.
Great is my peace, as my estate is small:
Kingdom unlimited, without a kingdom!

TANTALUS: You have no need to ask, nor to refuse,
A kingdom offered to you by a god.

Your brother asks you to be king with him.

THYESTES: Does he? There's danger there; some hidden
trap.

TANTALUS: Brotherly love can often live again
In hearts that once have lost it; true affection
Broken can be repaired.

THYESTES: My brother love me?
Sooner will Ocean wash the Seven Stars,
The fury of the wild Sicilian currents
Rest, the Ionian sea become a field
Of ripening corn, night's darkness be our daylight;
Sooner will water come to terms with fire,
Wind make a peace with sea, or life with death.

TANTALUS: But what harm do you fear?

THYESTES: All kinds of harm.
Why should my fear have limits, when his power
Is boundless as his hate?

TANTALUS: How can he hurt you?

THYESTES: I know - not for myself, for you, my sons,
I know that I must fear the power of Atreus.

TANTALUS: You fear some trap, in spite of all your
caution?

THYESTES: Caution is late, when you are in the trap.

Let us go on, then. But - your father speaks -
Remember this: 'tis you that lead, I follow.

TANTALUS: God will look kindly on your good in-
tentions.

Go boldly on.

[Enter Atreus, aside]

ATREUS: The net is spread, the game is in the trap.

I see my brother, with his hateful sons

Close by his side. Vengeance is now assured.

I have Thyestes in my hands at last,

Himself and all he has.¹ I am impatient,

And find it difficult to curb my wrath.

Thus does a keen-nosed Umbrian hunting-dog

In quest of game, while held in leash, silent

Follow the trail, nose to the ground, obedient

While still the scent is weak, the quarry distant;

But at close quarters with his prey, he'll fight

With every muscle of his neck, protesting

Against restraint, and strive to slip the leash;

And when he sniffs the scent of blood, his rage

Is almost uncontrollable, but still

Must be controlled. . . . Look at him, how his hair

Hangs all unkempt over his ruined face;

His chin unshaved. But we must offer him

A reassuring welcome. . . .

Welcome, brother!

How glad I am to see you! Let me feel

That long-desired embrace. . . . Let us forget

The anger that has parted us; henceforth

Let love and kinship ever be our law,

All enmity condemned and put away.

THYESTES: I could plead innocent; but as you come

In this kind mood, I cannot but confess,

Freely confess, my brother, I am guilty

Of all you have believed of me. This love

Has robbed me of my plea. Only to seem

Guilty in a devoted brother's eyes

1. *Venit in nostras manus / tandem Thyestes; venit et totus quidem.*
The Latin is quoted, with variations, in Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (1599).

Is guilt enough. I can but plead with tears –
 Though no man ever saw me plead before –
 And with these hands, that have touched no man's feet.
 Be all your anger set aside, your heart
 Eased of the tumult of your indignation.
 For the assurance of my trust, brother,
 My innocent sons shall be your hostages.

ATREUS: Touch not my knees, but come into my arms.

And you three lads, an old man's sentinels,
 Embrace me too. Take off that ragged garment,
 Brother, its sight offends me, and be dressed
 In robes like mine; accept with a good will
 Your part and share of our fraternal kingdom.
 It cannot but be counted to my credit
 That I admit my brother, safe returned,
 To the enjoyment of his royal birthright.
 To own a kingdom is a man's good fortune;
 To give one is an act of charity.

THYESTES: And may the gods, my brother, so reward you
 As your good deed deserves. As for the crown,
 That mark of royalty would scarce become
 This ruined head; this sorely troubled hand
 Can never hold a sceptre. Let me live
 Unseen, among the humblest of your subjects.

ATREUS: This realm is wide enough to hold two kings.

THYESTES: I know that what is yours is mine, my brother.

ATREUS: What man would spurn abundant fortune's gifts?

THYESTES: The man who knows how fast abundance ebbs.

ATREUS: May I not have this honour that I seek?

THYESTES: Your honour is assured; but what of mine?

I am determined to refuse the crown.

ATREUS: If you refuse your share, I give up mine.

THYESTES: Well . . . I accept the title thrust upon me,

But on condition all my arms, my powers,

And I, shall be devoted to your service.

ATREUS: Come then, and let your venerable head

Suffer the yoke that I shall put upon it.

Then I shall offer to the gods above

The sacrifice I have prepared for them.

CHORUS

Would any man believe it possible?

Atreus, that hard, that bitter man, that man of un-
 repentant cruelty,

Stands checked, awed into impotence, before his brother.

Truly there is no greater power on earth

Than natural affection.

Strife between strangers may go on for ever,

But where it has bound once

The chain of love will always bind again.

Peace had been broken by a storm of strife

For causes not to be despised.

The call to arms was heard,

The tramp of horsemen and the clink of harness,

Bright steel flashed to and fro at the command

Of Mars the God of Battle, armed and angry

And thirsting for fresh blood.

Yet now

Love has conquered the sword,

Bound the contesting hands,

And brought the combatants, despite themselves,

To reconciliation.

Which of the gods has given us this peace

So soon, after such bitter strife?

Loud was the noise of civil war, but yesterday,

Throughout Mycenae. Mothers stood pale with terror

Clutching their infants; wives watched fearfully
 While husbands armed, grasping reluctantly
 The long-forgotten sword, now dulled
 With the rust of peaceful days.
 Then there were crumbling walls to be repaired,
 Towers, weakening with age, to be restored,
 Gates to be hurriedly locked with iron bolts;
 While on the battlements the anxious guard
 Watched for the night's alarms.
 Worse than war is the fearful waiting for war.

Now, stilled is the threat of the killer's sword;
 Now, silent the trumpet's thrilling call,
 Silent the bugle's piercing note. Deep peace
 Comes back to the city, and all is joy again.

So, when the north gales fall upon the Bruttian sea
 And breakers roll in from the deep, the caves of Scylla
 Echo their pounding beat, and sailors yet ashore
 Tremble to see the swirling waters which Charybdis
 Greedily swallows down and vomits up again.
 Fear grips the brutish Cyclops sitting in the depths
 Of Etna's burning crater: will his father soon
 Put out with his cascade the everlasting fires
 That feed the furnaces of their unresting forge?
 Ithaca shakes, and the ill-used Laertes
 Expects to see his little kingdom drowned.

But when the winds lay by their force,
 The sea lies calmer than a lake,
 The ships that feared to cross the deep
 Spread their bright sails on every side,
 Boats dance upon a level floor
 So clear, the eye can count the fishes

Swimming beneath the waters, where
 Lately the fury of the gale
 Had lashed the waves, and Cyclad islands
 Trembled beneath their shock.

No state of life endures; pleasure and pain
 Take each their turn; and pleasure's turn is shorter.
 Time swiftly changes highest into lowest.
 That king - who can give crowns away;
 Before whose feet nations have bowed
 In fearful homage; at whose nod
 The Medes, or Indians, neighbours of the sun,
 Or Dahians whom the Parthian horsemen fear,
 Have sheathed their swords - himself
 Fears for his crown,
 Anxiously scans the signs of Fate,
 Dreads treacherous Time and the swift chance
 That can make all things change.

You - to whom the ruler of earth and ocean
 Gives the dread power of life and death - be humble;
 That overweening face does not become you.
 No threat of yours that makes your subjects tremble
 Is greater than that your master holds above you.
 Kings of the earth must bow to a higher kingdom.
 Some, whom the rising sun sees high exalted,
 The same sun may see fallen at its departing.¹
 No man should put his trust in the smile of fortune,
 No man abandon hope in a time of trouble.
 The Spinner of Fate twines good and bad together,
 Never lets fortune rest, keeps all things moving.

1. *Quem dies vidit veniens superbum, / hunc dies vidit fugiens iacentem.*
 The Latin is quoted in Marlowe's *Edward II.*

Never was man so sure of the good gods' favour
 That he could promise himself a safe tomorrow.
 Under God's hand, life's circle is ever revolving,
 The swift wheel turning.

ACT FOUR

Messenger, Chorus

MESSENGER: O that some whirling wind would carry me
 Away into the sky, or wrap my head
 In darkest clouds, to banish from my sight
 So foul a deed! O Tantalus, O Pelops!
 This house would fill even your souls with shame.

CHORUS: What is your news?

MESSENGER: What country are we in?
 The land of Argos, and of Sparta, where
 Two brothers¹ dwelt in love and harmony,
 Of Corinth, buttress 'twixt two warring seas -
 Or in the wild Danubian lands that shelter
 Fugitive Vandals, or the eternal snows
 Of Caucasus, the nomad Scyths' domain?
 What country is it that can be the scene
 Of such unspeakable abomination?

CHORUS: Whatever evil you have seen, reveal it.

MESSENGER: First let the tumult of my mind be stilled,
 And fear release my body from its grip.
 A picture of the brutal deed still floats
 Before my eyes. Carry me far away,
 Wild winds! Far from this place! Take me away
 To where the journey of the daylight ends!

CHORUS: You only hold us longer in suspense;
 Describe this deed you shudder at, and name
 The author of it; nay, I ask not 'who',
 But 'which of them'. Come, speak without delay.

MESSENGER: Part of the royal house of Pelops stands
 Upon the summit of the citadel,
 Facing the west, and at its outer edge

1. Castor and Pollux.

It towers above the city like a mountain
 Ready to crush the people, should they rise
 In insolent revolt against their kings.
 Within this building is a huge apartment
 Spacious enough to hold a multitude,
 A hall of dazzling brilliance; golden beams
 Rest upon handsome many-coloured pillars.
 Behind this public space, to which the people
 Freely resort, extends the private palace,
 Room after room, of great luxuriance.
 Deep in the secret heart of this domain,
 Down in a hollow, is an ancient grove,
 The sanctuary of the royal house.
 Here grow no trees of pleasant aspect, none
 That any pruner's knife has cultivated;
 Yew and dark cypress and black ilex twine
 A tangled canopy of shade; above,
 A tall oak towers and dominates the grove.
 This is the place in which the royal sons
 Of Tantalus consult the auspices
 And pray for help in danger or defeat.
 The trees are hung with offerings, with horns
 That called to battle, pieces of the chariot¹
 Won at the sea of Myrto – when the wheels
 Of the defeated car were treacherously
 Loosed from the axle; trophies of every crime
 Committed by this family are here;
 And here is hung the Phrygian crown of Pelops,
 A painted cloak from a barbarian foe,
 And many other spoils of victory.
 A spring, under the shadow of the trees,
 Forlornly drips and spreads its sluggish water
 Into a sombre pool; like that dark river

1. See note on l. 140.

Styx, by whose name the gods are known to swear
 Under this ground, at dead of night, 'tis said
 The gods of death are heard to utter groans;
 Chains rattle in the grove, and spirits cry.
 There sights are seen that mortals quake to hear of.
 The ghosts of men of ancient time emerge
 From their old tombs and wander in the wood;
 Spectres more strange than any known elsewhere
 Invade the place; flames flicker on the trees,
 And neighbouring roofs appear to be on fire,
 Though no fire burns within. Sometimes the grove
 Is filled with sounds of barking, thrice repeated;
 Sometimes gigantic phantoms haunt the palace.
 Daylight brings no relief from these alarms;
 The grove's own darkness is the dark of night,
 And even at high noon the ghostly powers
 Retain their sway. Here worshippers
 Receive responses from the oracles,
 And at such times the Fates' decrees are cried
 In thundering voices from the shrine; a god
 Speaks, and the cave gives forth a hollow sound.

Into this place came Atreus, like a man
 Possessed with madness, with his brother's children
 Dragged at his heels. The altars are prepared. . . .
 But oh, what words are fit to tell what happened? . . .
 He tied the princes' hands behind their backs,
 And bound their hapless heads with purple fillets.
 Incense was used, and consecrated wine,
 The salt and meal dropped from the butcher's knife
 Upon the victims' heads, all solemn rites
 Fulfilled, to make this act of infamy
 A proper ritual.

CHORUS: Who held the knife?

MESSENGER: *He* was the sacrificial priest, *his* voice

Boldly intoned the liturgy of death
 And spoke the funeral prayers; beside the altar
 He stood alone; and then laid his own hand
 Upon the three appointed to be slain,
 Placed them before him, and took up the knife.
 He saw that all was done; and all was done
 According to the rites of sacrifice.
 A shudder shook the grove; the palace rocked
 Over the trembling earth, and seemed to hang
 As if uncertain whether it should fall
 This way or that; and on the left a star
 Traced out an angry furrow in the sky.
 The sacrificial wine was changed to blood;
 The diadem upon the royal head
 Fell, twice or three times, to the ground; tears dripped
 From ivory in the temples. Every man
 Was moved to horror at these prodigies;
 Atreus alone, intent upon his purpose,
 Remained immovable, even defiant
 Against the menacing gods. Without delay
 He strode up to the altar and there stood
 With scowling eyes, glaring this way and that.
 A hungry tiger in an Indian forest,
 Coming upon two steers, will stand in doubt,
 Greedy for both, which victim to attack,
 Baring his teeth at one, then at the other,
 Holding his ravenous appetite in check
 While making up his mind. Just so was Atreus
 Eyeing the victims doomed to satisfy
 His impious vengeance: which shall be the first
 For slaughter, which the second head to fall?
 As if it mattered! But he won't be hurried –
 He wants to have his ghastly deed performed
 In proper order.

CHORUS: Which was slaughtered first?
 MESSENGER: The first – no one can say that Atreus failed
 In duty to his ancestors! – the first
 Was dedicated to his grandfather:
 The first to be dispatched was Tantalus.
 CHORUS: What look, what bearing did the young man
 show
 In face of death?
 MESSENGER: He held himself erect,
 Unflinching; prayers, that would have died unheard,
 He scorned to utter. With a savage blow
 The king drove in the sword, and pressed it home
 Until his hand was at the throat; the body
 Stood, with the sword plucked out, as if deciding
 Which way to fall, then fell against the king.
 Immediately the brutal murderer
 Seized Plisthenes and dragged him to the altar
 To add his body to his brother's, struck
 And hacked the head off; the truncated corpse
 Fell forward to the ground, and from the head
 That rolled away a faint last sob was heard.
 CHORUS: And after those two butcheries, what next?
 A third, or did he spare the youngest child?
 MESSENGER: Think of a tawny lion in Armenia
 Crouching amid the vanquished carcasses
 Of a whole herd of oxen, jaws agape
 And wet with blood, his hunger satisfied
 But not his fury; he will stalk the bulls
 This way and that, and still with flagging speed
 And slackening mouth make passes at the calves:
 So Atreus, still with fury unassuaged,
 His sword now reeking with two victims' blood,
 Fell on the third, and with no thought of mercy
 For the defenceless child whom he attacked

So violently, pierced the body through;
 The sword that entered by the breast was seen
 Protruding from the back; the boy fell dead,
 His spurting blood damped out the altar fires
 And through both wounds his spirit fled away.

CHORUS: Inhuman outrage.

MESSENGER: Do you shudder now?
 If this had been the end of his foul deed,
 You could have called him innocent.

CHORUS: What more?
 What more stupendous, more atrocious crime
 Can man conceive?

MESSENGER: No, this was not the end,
 Only a step upon the villain's way.

CHORUS: Could he do more? He threw the bodies out
 For beasts to maul – denied them funeral fire?

MESSENGER: Denied them fire! Ah, would that that were
 so!

Would that he had denied them burial,
 Denied them the consuming flames, left them
 To be a meal for birds, a hideous banquet
 For savage beasts! Well might their father pray
 For what most fathers would abhor to see –
 The unburiéd bodies of his sons. O sin
 Incredible to any age of man,
 And for the men of ages yet to come
 A thing to be declared impossible! . . .
 The entrails torn from the warm bodies lay
 Quivering, veins still throbbing, shocked hearts beating.
 Atreus picked at the pieces, scrutinized
 The message of the Fates, noted the signs
 In the internal organs hot with blood.
 Finding no blemish in the sacrifice,
 He was content, and ready to prepare

The banquet for his brother; hacked the bodies
 Limb from limb – detached the outstretched arms
 Close to the shoulders – severed the ligaments
 That tie the elbow joints – stripped every part
 And roughly wrenched each separate bone away –
 All this he did himself; only the faces,
 And trusting suppliant hands, he left intact.
 And soon the meat is on the spits, the fat
 Drips over a slow fire, while other parts
 Are tossed to boil in singing copper pans.
 The fire seems loth to touch the roasting flesh;
 Two or three times it has to be repaired
 To feed the crackling hearth, and still, reluctant
 To do as it is told, burns sulkily.
 The liver on the spits was heard to squeal;
 Which cried the more, the bodies or the fires,
 It would be hard to say. Above the flames
 A pitch-black smoke ascended, and this too
 Refused to rise up to the roof, but hung
 A thick and noisome cloud, filling the house
 With hideous vapours. Then . . . O patient Phoebus!
 Thy light was sunk in darkness at mid-day
 And thou hadst fled – thou shouldst have left us sooner!
 The father bites into his children's bodies,
 Chews his own flesh in his accursed mouth.
 Drowsy with wine, his glistening hair anointed
 With scented oil, he crams his mouth with food
 Till it can hold no more. O doomed Thyestes!
 This is the one good part of your misfortune:
 You know not what you suffer. Not for long
 Will this be true. The Lord of Heaven, the Sun
 May turn his chariot back and drive away;
 Black night may rise untimely from the east,
 And total darkness in the midst of day

Veil this atrocious deed; but you must see
And know your own misfortune to the full.

CHORUS

O Father of all earth and all that lives,
Whose rising banishes the lesser lights
That make the dark night beautiful:
Why hast thou turned aside
From thy appointed path?
Why hast thou blotted out the day
And fled from heaven's centre? Why,
O Phoebus, hast thou turned thy face from us?
Vesper, the herald of the close of day,
Is not yet here to usher in the stars;
Thy wheel has not yet passed the western gate
Where, with their day's work done,
Thy steeds should be unyoked. We have not heard
The third note of the trumpet telling us
That day is over.
Ploughmen will stand amazed –
Suddenly supper-time, and oxen not yet ready to rest!
What can have forced you, Sun, from your heavenly road?
What can have made your horses bolt from their fixed
course?
Are the Giants escaped from their prison and threatening
war?
Has tortured Tityos found strength in his breast again
to renew his old aggression?
Or has Typhoeus stretched his muscles to throw off his
mountain burden?
Is Ossa to be piled on Pelion again
To build a bridge for the Phlegrean Giants' assault?¹

1. The region of Phlegra in Macedonia was associated with the revolt of the Giants against Olympus.

Is all the order of the universe plunged into chaos?
Will there be no more East and no more West?
The mother of the daylight, dewy Dawn,
Who never fails to give the chariot-reins
Into the hands of Phoebus, now with horror sees
Her kingdom's frontiers in confusion;
It is strange work for her
To lead the tired horses to the water,
To see them sink their steaming necks into the sea.
The Sun himself is like a stranger lost in a strange land,
Meeting the morning as he goes to rest,
Calling for darkness when no night has come.
The stars have not appeared, there is no light in all the
sky,
No moon to break the darkness.

What darkness it may be, we cannot tell,
But pray that it be nothing else than night.

This is the fear, the fear that knocks at the heart,
That the whole world is now to fall in the ruin
Which Fate foretells; that Chaos will come again
To bury the world of gods and men; that Nature
A second time will wipe out all the lands
That cover the earth and the seas that lie around them,
And all the stars that scatter their bright lights
Across the universe.
Never again will the Lord of Stars lift his undying fire
To guide the march of time and give his signals to the
world
For summer and for autumn. Never again
Will there be Moon to catch the Sun's fire in her face
And take night's terrors from us, as she runs, outstripping
Her brother's pace upon her shorter orbit.

All mingled into one vast void will fall
The multitude of gods.

That belt of constellations that marks out the passage of
the years,
The highway of the holy stars that lies oblique across the
zones,

Will fall away, and see the stars fall with it.
The *Ram*, at whose approach, even before the spring's
full warmth,

Ships may spread sails to balmy zephyrs – he who once
Carried the frightened *Helle*¹ over the sea,
Into the sea himself will fall.

The *Bull*, who holds the *Hyades* between his shining
horns,

Falling will drag the *Gemini* down, and down will fall
The bent-armed *Crab*.

Leo, resplendent with the fires of summer,
Victim of *Hercules*, will fall again.

Virgo will fall, back to the earth that once she knew;
Libra's true-balanced scales will fall, and after them
Sharp *Scorpio*. So too the aged *Chiron*,²

With feathered arrows and Thessalian bow,
Will lose both bow and arrows. *Capricornus*,
Slow winter's icy harbinger, will fall and break the urn
Of the unknown one whom we call *Aquarius*;³
And last of the twelve signs, the *Fish*, will disappear.
Into the universal deluge will the *Wain* descend,
Which never touched the sea before;

1. See note on *The Trojan Women*, 1034.
2. *Chiron* the Centaur, in several myths a guardian and tutor of
young demigods (cf. *The Trojan Women*, 830), is identified with
Sagittarius.

3. In the Latin 'will break your urn, whoever you are'. There
appears to be no myth explaining the origin of *Aquarius*.

The *Snake*, like a meandering river sliding
Between the *Bears*; and the great *Dragon*'s smaller neigh-
bour,

The freezing *Cynosura*;¹ and the slow-footed watcher
Beside the wagon, *Arctophylax*,² will be shaken
And fall into the deep.

And are we chosen out of all earth's children
To perish in the last catastrophe
Of a disjointed universe? Are we
To see the world's end come?
A cruel fate brought us to birth, if we
Have lived to lose the Sun, or if our sins
Have driven him away.
But we must not complain, nor fear;
Too fond of life is he who would not die
When all the world dies with him.

1. Or *Ursa Minor*.

2. 'Keeper of the Bear', alias *Boötes*.

ACT FIVE

Atreus, Thyestes

ATREUS: I walk among the stars! Above the world
 My proud head reaches up to heaven's height!
 Mine is the kingdom and the glory now,
 Mine the ancestral throne. I need no gods;
 I have attained the summit of my wishes.¹
 Well done – and more than well. I ask no more. . . .
 No more? Enough? Nay, but I will do more.
 I will yet see this father eat his fill
 Of his dead offspring. Shame need not deter me;
 Daylight is gone. Yes . . . I need have no fear
 While heaven itself is empty; gods have fled;
 Would I could stop them, drag them back by force
 And make them see this banquet of revenge!
 Yet *he* shall see it; that will be enough.
 Day hides its face, but I will bring a light
 Into your darkness, brother, and unseal
 Your sorrows from the night that covers them.
 You have sat long enough at your repast,
 Now it is time to rouse you from your rest
 And change that happy smile. I need Thyestes
 Sober, to face so terrible a sight. . . .
 Slaves, open wide the doors! Let all men see
 Our hall, our temple of festivity!
 Now . . . to watch his face! . . . to see its colour
 Change, when he sees the faces of his sons!
 To listen to his first tormented cries,
 To see his body stiffen with the shock
 As if struck dead. This will be my reward

1. *Dimitto superos; summa votorum attigi.* The Latin is quoted in Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (1599).

For all my pains – I must not only see him
 Broken, but watch the breaking when it comes. . . .
 There – now the doors are open and the hall
 Is bright with torches. There, upon a couch
 Of gold and purple he reclines full length,
 His left hand propping up his drunken head. . . .
 His stomach heaves. . . . Now I am god of gods
 And king of kings! My prayers are more than
 answered. . . .
 He has fed full, and now he drinks again
 From a great silver goblet. Drink it up!
 There's blood to spare from all those slaughtered cattle,
 Of colour to match well with that old wine. . . .
 Ay, try that cup to finish off the banquet! . . .
 I want to see him drinking up that potion
 Made with his children's blood; he would have drunk
 Mine if he could! . . . Now he begins to sing
 A song of jollity . . . his wits are wandering.

THYESTES: Heart, dulled with long despair,
 Rise up, and banish care.
 Let fear and sorrow flee;
 Begone, chill poverty
 That banishment must know.
 Begone, the shame
 That clings to those brought low.

Man, think not of your plight
 When down, but of the height
 From which you fell.¹ 'Twas good
 When, fallen from where you stood

1. *Magis unde cadas quam quo refert.* The Latin is quoted in Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*.

Upon a dizzy peak, you found
 Your footing firm on level ground.
 'Twas good, that in your state
 Of humbled misery
 You stood under the weight
 Of ruined royalty
 With back unbowed and head held high,
 An undefeated soul
 Courageous in calamity.

Away, then, every mark
 Of ill, away the dark
 Shadows of destiny!
 Greet happy days with happy face;
 Forget the old,
 And put a new Thyestes in his place.

And yet, with those that have known evil days
 One fault remains: the good time, when it comes,
 Seems unbelievable; they will not trust it.
 Fortune may smile again,
 Those that have felt her heavy hand
 Have little heart for laughter.

Grief, dost thou pluck my sleeve again?
 Dost thou deny me this day's happiness?
 Grief, dost thou rise unbidden, unprovoked,
 And wouldst thou have me weep?
 Dost thou forbid me crown my head with flowers?
 She does, she does. . . .
 So, there they go . . . roses of summer. . . .
 Now they are off. And what is this?
 My scented and anointed hair
 Stands stiff with horror . . . tears on my cheeks

Not of my bidding . . . sobs in my voice
 When I would speak. . . .
 'Tis sorrow's way; she will not be denied
 The tears that she has grown to love. Weep then!
 Yes! I will weep, though in this time of joy.
 Yes! I will weep and howl
 And tear these Tyrian purple clothes. My brain
 Forewarns me of a thing
 That I shall have to weep for by and bye;
 It knows the coming evil; just as sailors
 Know that a storm is brewing, when the sea
 Begins to rise and swell, though no wind blows.

Why, fool, what griefs, what dangers
 Does your imagination see?
 Believe your brother with an open heart.
 Your fears, whatever they may be,
 Are either groundless, or too late. . . .
 It is no use; against my will some fear pervades my being;
 I have no cause to weep, yet tears start from my eyes.
 Is it for grief, or fear? Can a man weep
 For too much happiness?

ATREUS: Brother, we two must celebrate together
 This memorable day, which will confirm
 My kingdom and assure my confidence
 In everlasting peace.

THYESTES: I have dined well;
 And you have wined me well. Only one thing
 Can add a culmination to my pleasure -
 That I should share my pleasure with my sons.

ATREUS: Consider them already with you here
 In your embrace. They are, and will be, with you
 For evermore. No member of your family

Can now be taken from you. You shall see,
As you desire, their faces very soon,
And I shall see a father well content
Rejoicing in the presence of his loved ones.
Your cup shall be filled full; have no more fear.
Your sons are taking part in the enjoyment
Of festive fare – all the young folk together;
They shall be sent for. Let me offer you
A cup of wine from our ancestral vintage.

THYESTES: I shall accept your hospitable toast,
Brother, with pleasure. A libation first
To our paternal gods; then drain the cup. . . .
But what is this? My hand will not obey me,
The cup grows heavy, I can hardly lift it.
The wine I try to drink avoids my lips –
Some trick? – the liquor dribbles down my chin. . . .
And see, the table rocked, the floor is shaking.
The torches' light sinks low; the sky itself
Hangs dull and heavy, seeming to be lost
Between the daylight and the dark. And why –
The ceiling of the heavens seems to shake
With violent convulsions – more and more!
The murk grows darker than the deepest darkness,
Night is engulfed in night; all stars have fled.
Whatever be this peril, may it spare
My brother and my sons; on my vile head
Let the storm break. But let me see my children!

ATREUS: I shall; no day shall ever take them from you.

THYESTES: What agitation in my stomach swells?
What moves within me? Some protesting burden
Lies on my heart, and in my breast a voice
That is not mine is groaning. O my children!
Where are you? Come! Your ailing father calls you.
If I can see your faces, all my pain

Will soon be ended. Do I hear them? Where?
ATREUS [*exhibiting the children's heads*]: Embrace your
children, father! They are here

Beside you. Do you recognize your sons?
THYESTES: I recognize my brother! Canst thou bear,
O Earth, the weight of so much wickedness?
Wilt thou not break, and drown thyself and us
In the infernal Styx? Wilt thou not open
Into a vast abyss and sink in chaos
Kingdom and king? Not overturn Mycenae
And tear it stone by stone from its foundations?
We two should now be joined with Tantalus.
Unlock thy gates, O Earth, open them wide,
And to whatever dungeon lower lies
Than Tartarus, where our forefathers are,
Dispatch us quickly, down the steep descent
Into thy awful bosom, there to lie
Entombed under the weight of Acheron.
Above our heads let guilty spirits float,
Above our prison let the fierce hot flood
Of Phlegethon stir up the scorching sands! . . .
Dost thou lie idle, Earth, unmoved, inert?
The gods are fled.

ATREUS: But here are your dear sons,
Whom you have asked to see. Receive them gladly.
Kiss them, make much of them, embrace them all.
Your brother will not stop you.

THYESTES: Treachery!
Was this our pact? Is this your brotherly love
And reconciliation? Is this peace?
What can I ask for now? Not as a father
To have my children given back to me
Alive; but as a brother I will beg
This from my brother, which can be no loss

To his most infamous revenge: to give
A funeral to my sons. Can you not give me
Something which you will see immediately
Thrown on the fire? A gift, not to be kept,
But to be lost, is all this father asks.

ATREUS: You have them – all that now remains of them;
And all that is not here – is with you too.

THYESTES: What, are they lying out for birds of prey
To make a meal of? Are they set aside
For savage beasts or creatures of the field?

ATREUS: *You*, you yourself have dined on your sons' flesh!
You have consumed this monstrous banquet!

THYESTES: Gods!

This was the sight you could not bear to see!
This was the sin that drove the daylight back
To where it came from. O what words can tell,
What grieving can assuage my agony?
There are not words enough to speak of it.
Here are their severed heads, I see, their hands
Chopped off, the feet left from their broken legs,
The leavings of their father's gluttony.
My stomach moves; the sin within me strives
To find escape – cannot escape its prison.
Lend me your sword, brother, lend me that sword
Already glutted with my blood; its blade
Shall set my children free. You will not? Hands,
Beat on this breast until it break in pieces! . . .
No! Strike not, wretch! We must respect the dead.
When was such horror seen – when, in the days
Of Heniochus upon the awful crags
Of barren Caucasus, or in Procrustes' den,
The terror of the land of Attica?
I press my sons to death – they press their father.
Is sin illimitable?

ATREUS: There are bounds
To limit wilful sin; but sin's requital
Acknowledges no limits. I have done
Too little yet. I should have drained their blood
Warm from their wounds into your open mouth;
You should have drunk it from their living bodies.
I was too hasty, I rebuffed my rage;
I did it all myself – drove in the sword
To slay them at the altar, washed my hearth
With sacrificial blood, cut off the limbs
From the dead bodies, chopped them into pieces,
And threw the pieces into boiling cauldrons
Or had them slowly roasted on the fire;
Sinews and limbs I severed, warm with life;
I saw the meat impaled on slender spits
And heard it squealing; I heaped up the fires.
I should have made the father do all this!
His torture came too late; he never knew
What he was doing when his cursed teeth
Gnawed at those bones! His children never knew it!

THYESTES: Hear him, all seas that wash the winding shores!

Gods, wheresoe'er ye be, now fled from us,
Hear all this wickedness! Hear, powers below,
Hear, Earth! And thou, deep night of Tartarus,
Give ear to these my prayers; to thee alone
I come; thy starless dark, like this black day,
Alone can look upon my misery.
I will not pray for any evil thing;
I will ask nothing for myself – what good
Could ever now be mine? For you I pray:
Almighty ruler of the sky, great king
Of heaven's realm – wrap all the universe
In awful darkness, let the winds make war,
From every quarter of the sky let thunder

Loudly resound; not with thy gentler hand
 That tempers its assault upon the homes
 Of innocent men, but with that hand of wrath
 Which overthrew the triple-mountained pile,
 Ay, and the mountain-topping Giants too,
 Prepare thy weapons and discharge thy fires.
 Avenge the darkness of this stolen day,
 Send thunderbolts and lightnings to supply
 The place of this lost sun. Thou hast no need
 To weigh the issue; count us guilty, both;
 Or else on me alone pronounce thy sentence.
 Strike at this head, let triple forks of fire
 Impale this breast – how else should I expect
 To give my sons a burial, or commit
 Their bodies to the final flames, if not
 To be burnt up myself? . . . Ah, will the gods not hear?
 Have they no weapon to destroy the sinner?
 Then may eternal night endure, may darkness
 Cover these vast immeasurable sins
 For evermore. Sun, never move again,
 And I shall be content.

ATREUS: Well done, my hands!
 This is my true reward. My wicked work
 Would have been wasted, if I had not heard
 Those cries of agony. Now I am sure
 My sons are mine again, reborn to me;
 The slur upon my fatherhood is lifted.

THYESTES: What cause could you have had to hate the
 children?¹

ATREUS: That they² were yours.

THYESTES: Their father's sons. . . ?

1. Meaning his own sons.

2. Meaning *his*, Agamemnon and Menelaus, suspected of being
 begotten by Thyestes (cf. l. 327).

ATREUS: I know

They *were* their father's,¹ and I am content.

THYESTES: Now, by the gods that make us love our own –

ATREUS: Why not the gods of marriage?

THYESTES: Is a fault

To be requited with more wickedness?

ATREUS: I know why you are angry; 'tis your grief

That you were cheated of the crime you purposed.

You weep, not that you ate this loathsome meal,

But that you had not cooked it! Your intent,

I know, was to prepare a like repast

And serve it to your unsuspecting brother;

To seize *my* children, with their mother's aid,

And make an end of them, as I of yours –

And would have done it, but for one thing only:

You thought you were their father.

THYESTES: My revenge

The gods will give. I have no other wish

But to entrust to them your punishment.

ATREUS: As I do yours, into your children's hands.

Exeunt

1. i.e. 'mine'; but it is difficult to be sure whether this ambiguity
 was the author's intention or only the result of the compression of
 the Latin, particularly in Thyestes' exclamation *gnatos parenti* – sons
 to their father! An alternative interpretation is: THY. How were
 (my) children at fault? AT. In being yours. THY. (You could give)
 sons to their father (to eat)! AT. Yes, and I am happy to know that
 they were really yours. – Still the difficulty remains, why does
 Atreus now feel assured of his own sons' legitimacy?