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978-0-521-03765-5 - The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama
Alessandro Schiesaro

Excerpt

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Mme Martin: Quelle est la morale?
 Le Pompier: C'est à vous de la trouver.
 (E. Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve*)

Thyestes embodies a tragic conflict, and an even more tragic contradiction, between a desire to speak and the need to remain silent. Or, for us, between the desire to watch and the repulsiveness of what is on display. The sheer dramatic force of this tragedy – Seneca's best¹ – springs from casting Atreus' horrific violence as the creative drive behind poetic fiction. *Thyestes* stands out among the other plays by Seneca precisely because it mobilizes in novel, engaging fashion the archetypal connection between tragedy and violence, power, sacrifice. In this play we witness in its most engaging form a sustained reflection on the power and limits of poetry, a reflection which on the one hand appears to sum up almost a century of Latin literature and on the other codifies 'Silver' poetics at its expressive (and, in a way, theoretical) peak.

Thyestes foregrounds the complexities inherent in creating poetry as well as in reading or watching it. Atreus dominates the stage as a gifted poet, mired in the tension between order and chaos, passion and reason, *enthousiasmos* and craft. Inspiration, role-playing, deception and recognition are not only staged, but metadramatically analysed and questioned,² and force the audience to reflect on whether enjoyment of this type of poetry is not also a form of collusion with it.

¹ It has attracted Richard Tarrant's remarkable commentary (Tarrant (1985)), to which my work is much indebted. Giancotti (1988–89, vol. 1) is also often useful. Among critical works specifically devoted to *Thyestes* Picone (1984) is especially important; Mantovanelli (1984) offers a stimulating reading of several aspects of the play; Guastella (2001) deals at length with *Thyestes* in the context of a wide-ranging analysis of revenge as a tragic theme in Seneca and his successors. In English, there is much of value in Littlewood (1997), with whom I occasionally, if independently, concur.

² Like sex, self-reflexivity was not invented in the sixties: the scholiast to *Il.* 3.126–7 already remarked that as she weaves a cloth portraying the contexts between Greeks and Trojans Helen is 'a worthy archetype of [the poet's] own poetic art'. See Bergren (1983) 79.

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As the prologue shows, the poetic word, *qua* poetic word, can voice realities which would otherwise tend to be repressed, and the act of creation embodied in that word is inevitably an act of rebellion against logic and order. The complex framework of the prologue also renders the balance of moral responsibilities in the play difficult to determine and at every point pressures the audience to distinguish good from evil, illusion from reality, and hypocrisy from sincerity in the midst of conflicting, often contradictory, signals.

The conflict between different forms of logic and different attitudes to the passions can be most readily observed in the opposition between the rationality of Thyestes and the chorus *vis-à-vis* the idiosyncratic unpredictability of Atreus. Atreus is not irrational, nor is he mad. He operates according to different logical protocols, closer to those of the unconscious than those normally adopted in waking life. Therein lies, I argue, a great part of his irresistible appeal.

The primary aim of this book is to subject Seneca to the same kind of sustained literary analysis as is now taken for granted for other major Latin authors. I do not propose to offer a systematic psychoanalytic reading of *Thyestes*,³ although Freudian and post-Freudian theories of literature have shaped my approach to both literature in general and this tragedy in particular. *Thyestes* invites from the very beginning an engagement with concepts masterfully explored by Freud, since its prologue stages a conflict between the Fury's order to unleash the tragedy and Tantalus' desire to repress it. As the Fury succeeds, the words of the tragedy emerge as the product of a violent creative urge rooted in the underworld of the Furies and their passions: *Thyestes*, like the sixth book of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, is a harrowing exploration of the kinship between prophecy, death and poetry. The underworld and its passions, alluring and disconcerting alike, are always lurking beneath the surface of the text, just as in the most sacred part of the Roman *forum* a small opening, the *mundus*, permitted a ritualized and strictly controlled contact with the realm below: *ianua patet*, 'the door is open', Varro informs us, to the gods below, whose presence is controlled but not denied, regulated but not destroyed.⁴ In Seneca's poetry, too, 'for the people of Dis a way is given to those living on earth' (*Oed.* 573: *iter . . . populis Ditis ad superos datur*).

³ Such as, for instance, Segal's (1986) monograph on *Phaedra*, or Janan's (1994) on Catullus.

⁴ Varro *ap.* Macrob. *Sat.* 1.16.18 (= fr. 66 Salvatore): *mundus cum patet, deorum tristium atque inferum quasi ianua patet*, with Coarelli (1983) 207–25.

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Freud's theories about time and temporality and the post-Freudian focus on the unconscious as an alternative set of logical protocols⁵ offer valuable guidance as we approach a play that is marked by temporal discontinuities and leaps of logic, and approach a character such as Atreus, who is unable to overcome the past and to set clear boundaries between himself and his brother-doppelgänger. Atreus will be able to punish his brother precisely because he is able to trust his instincts and to manipulate words in unpredictable and duplicitous ways, to appropriate, even, distinctly 'feminine' characteristics as they suit him: Thyestes' 'logic', one-sided literalness, will be no match.

In turn, these insights help us understand the role and function of Seneca's intertextuality, a pervasive and intense feature of his writing, as indeed of other key first-century authors such as Ovid and Lucan.

Ancient tragedy does not exist, of course, in a vacuum, and each play elicits from the audience a preferred set of emotional identifications. *Thyestes* could (and may even aspire to) invite the audience (an admittedly vague term) to identify with the emotional suffering of the eponymous hero, as he is disgraced, betrayed and horribly punished. We would fear with him as his brother's deception unfolds, and suffer with him as his children are slaughtered. But the specific dramatic construction of Seneca's *Thyestes* radically modifies this expectation: its elaborate metadramatic structure offers a detailed knowledge of the Fury's and especially of Atreus' machinations and makes us party to the superior level of knowledge the latter enjoys over his brother. We side with the creator of fear and horror, not with his victim: on the whole we do not fear with Thyestes, we plot with Atreus, even if the hallmark of any successful work of art, as Freud was the first to admit, resides precisely in its ability to fragment the audience's identification. Specifically, since Atreus is endowed with all the characteristics of a successful creator of poetry, we inevitably pay tribute to his inventiveness as we revel in the aesthetic rewards of the tragedy and tacitly admit the possibility that powerful poetry may well be at odds with moral propriety. We do not have to posit a radically modern notion of consciousness to accept that *Thyestes* challenges the Stoic prescription that poetry should have an educational value.

Among the modes of representation which have a particular impact on the interpretation of the play, I single out, especially in chapter two, the technique of framing. Frames, to be sure, have attracted considerable interest from literary theorists, and deservedly so. Yet I will stress their

⁵ I refer especially to the works by Matte Blanco and Orlando listed in the bibliography.

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unusually emphatic role in the emotional dynamics outlined above. As Freud himself recognized, the very theatricality of the play acts as a frame by positing a distance between the audience and the events on the stage. In *Thyestes*, however, this general, external frame is supplemented by a very specific and elaborate set of internal frames which articulate different layers of dramatic action. These frames offer the audience an ordered and apparently reassuring context which acts to lower their intellectual defences and to pave the way for the emergence of violent, repressed contents. By the time these contents emerge fully in Atreus' extraordinary *mise en scène*, the audience is engulfed in the emotional violence of the tragedy. Indeed, the same interplay of order and violence constitutes a defining feature of Atreus' personality throughout, as can be observed, I will argue, in the eerily ordered procedure he follows in slaughtering his nephews.

Once we accept that the very structure of *Thyestes* maps out a profound conflict, we must of course investigate the nature of the repressed emotional truth that we are invited to experience alongside Atreus, a truth simultaneously hidden and revealed by the play. This search is more awkward if we focus predominantly on Atreus' cruelty or we privilege the political dimension of the conflict foregrounded by the chorus and by Thyestes – that is, Thyestes' expulsion from his father's kingdom, his exile, and Atreus' subsequent willingness to welcome him back as a partner in power. The harrowing emotional background of the play can be glimpsed, rather, in Atreus' brief but uncontradicted references to Thyestes' past behaviour. Atreus' revenge is not primarily motivated by issues of power, even if eliminating his nephews strengthens the dynastic position of his own offspring. The deep-seated causes of Atreus' anger and violence are Thyestes' incestuous relationship with Aerope and the consequent uncertainty about the true paternity of Agamemnon and Menelaus. By privileging a political reading of the play and heeding Thyestes' reflections on the nature and limits of power, the chorus actually distracts our attention from the primal emotions which motivate Atreus and inevitably cast Thyestes in a less flattering light. Despite the fact that he has come to laudable conclusions about the relative merits of power and powerlessness, Thyestes nevertheless remains an incestuous adulterer. The political subplot of the play is to a significant extent an enabling device for the emergence of darker instincts and issues which could not immediately command centre stage. In turn, the truth which seeps out in the confrontation between the two brothers makes the moderate political outlook of Thyestes and the chorus, their insistence that passions can be tamed and conflicts amicably resolved, look very dubious indeed.

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Atreus' anxiety about his paternity helps to explain why he plans and executes his revenge in such a way as to ascertain in the process his sons' instinctive allegiance: in the end they do not inform their uncle of the impending slaughter, and by their deeds they show to Atreus that he is, in fact, their father, as he finally realizes with joy: 'now I am convinced that my children are my own; now I believe that I can trust again the purity of my marriage-bed' (1098–9: *liberos nasci mihi | nunc credo, castis nunc fidem reddi toris*).

A predominantly political reading of the play opens up the possibility of a moralistic reading, but tames its deeper emotional power. Atreus' anger at the incestuous betrayal and his horror at the thought that the children are not his own are emotions readily shared by (at least) a Roman audience, and his revenge fulfils a profound if repressed truth – that in a similar situation they too would want to exact a similarly gruesome retribution. If, as Freud famously argues about *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*, successful tragedies focus on basic emotions and impulses of the human condition (a concept which retains full heuristic value even as we modulate it in a historical perspective), then we can understand why *Thyestes* is still considered the best of Seneca's tragedies, and why its emotional impact is comparable to that of other great masterpieces of theatrical literature. As a play which goes to the heart of the connection between poetry, power and incest, *Thyestes* can rightfully aspire to a hallowed position in the canon.

The temptation to read Atreus as a larger-than-life Nero – a trend that might have started very soon after the play was written⁶ – is still strong. As the pre-eminent literary work of (probably) the fifties,⁷ this tragedy is inevitably linked in our historical perception with the image of the emperor. The association may well be inevitable, but we should resist the temptation to see the tragedy as a document of sorts for the decadence of Neronian Rome, or – for that matter – as a manifesto for moral resistance to that decadence. All this would be predicated, obviously, even if not explicitly, on several dubious assumptions: that, for instance, (this) tragedy reflects the social situation in which it was produced; or that Nero was in fact the cruel and rather quirky tyrant who sang while Rome burned. Both assumptions, if proved, could most probably help our understanding of the play. Indeed,

⁶ Calder (1983) nearly shows that the character of Nero in the pseudo-Senecan tragedy *Octavia* follows in Atreus' footsteps.

⁷ There are no certainties about the dating of the tragedies, but metrical data point to a late date for *Thyestes* (Fitch (1981); cf. Nisbet (1990)). Calder ((1976) 28–30, (1983) 184) argues that *Agamemnon* is likely to follow *Thyestes*. For a more sceptical position on the dating of *Ag.* see Tarrant (1976) 5–6.

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it is perfectly plausible that a play such as *Thyestes* could have political overtones. Augustus, for instance, paid good money for Varius' *Thyestes*, which was staged after the victory at Actium and hinted at a connection between Atreus and Antony. Centuries later, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, which relies on both the *Thyestes* and its Ovidian model,⁸ will offer a coded but perceptible critique of contemporary royal power. But if I refrain from casting *Thyestes* in the dubiously honorific role of prime witness for a reconstruction of 'Neronian Rome', it is because we know little about the circulation of the plays (the longstanding quarrel about their performability having all but displaced such a crucial issue),⁹ and thus we are ill at ease when it comes to evaluating the relationship between the text and its possible audience: the emperor?¹⁰ dissident aristocrats? family members? nobody at all? (Conversely, we do not know to what extent the archetypal sadist Nero transmitted to us by generations of awed and scandalized critics is a product of historical accuracy or the crystallization of anthropological horrors in an appealing – if repulsive – set of rhetorical *topoi*).¹¹ Atreus' winning combination of wit and violence would have looked very different if staged in front of Nero not long after Britannicus was conveniently dispatched, or in the secrecy of Seneca's home as the Pisonian conspiracy took shape. As long as we lack for Seneca's *Thyestes* the details we possess about the circumstances in which Varius' *Thyestes* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* were represented, it is much better to focus on *Thyestes* as a reflection on power, creativity, perversion and desire which need not be explained in terms of a specific political background.

A tragedy such as *Thyestes* must also have been a considerable challenge for its self-professed Stoic author: Atreus' elaborate revenge plot is crowned with success, and Thyestes' less than compelling gestures towards restraint and morality are met with defeat (compare the very different ending of *Titus*). Thus we would probably do well, on the one hand, to dispense with a political reading (especially *à clef*), and, on the other, to relinquish the desire to reunite the whole Senecan *corpus* under the reassuring, conclusive

⁸ The relative importance is debated; see p. 70 n. 1.

⁹ I have little doubt that the tragedies, whether or not they were actually staged, were written as performable theatre plays. In practice, it is plausible that they were performed in small, private theatres, in the Hellenistic tradition; Calder (1976–77), (1984); Marshall (2000). Other theories: (i) *Lesedrama*, purely for recitation, as advocated most extensively by Zwierlein (1966) – cf. the review by Lefevre (1968); (ii) 'recital' with several voices, but no costumes and no stage setting, rather like operas in concerto-form – see Fantham (1982) 34–49; (iii) full staging, actual or potential – see Walker (1969); Herington (1982); Sutton (1986).

¹⁰ Calder (1976).

¹¹ See Elsner and Masters (1994) for discussions of Neronian culture, and specifically of the 'myth of Nero', from a variety of methodological points of view.

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sign of Stoic orthodoxy, or even only of Stoicizing morality. We must give up the illusion of a ‘Seneca morale’, who structures his literary production along the constant axis of philosophic doctrine, and welcome in its stead the nuanced image of an author who is at times enigmatic, often contradictory and always challenging.

Yet precisely because it should discourage a specifically ‘Neronian’ reading, *Thyestes* can safely be considered the mastertext of ‘Silver’ poetics. The play pushes to breaking-point a debate about the role and function of the poetic word which lies at the heart of works such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* or Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*. Its exploration of passion, hatred and horror is more concentrated and sustained than in Lucan or Statius; its lumping together of the personal and the political amplifies a line of thought which is central to post-Virgilian literature, as are its preferred forms of expression – self-reflexive, highly charged, bordering on the illogical. I hope that this book will also shed some light on that peculiar poetics and its main representatives.

I have framed the treatment of *Thyestes* with more general reflections on the nature of tragic poetry gleaned both from other Senecan tragedies and from his prosework. My goal was not to superimpose on the play a normative explanation that would forcedly orient interpretation, but, on the contrary, to claim that the tragedies’ own self-reflexive statements on the nature of poetry afford readers considerable latitude in their own exegetical explorations. Thus, in chapters one and six I argue from within Seneca’s own corpus for the legitimacy of an ‘open’ reading of *Thyestes*. In chapter two I disengage the metadramatic aspects of the prologue and reflect on the methodological implications of this self-reflexive aspect of the play. Chapters three and four are devoted to the analysis of the main characters, Atreus, Thyestes and the chorus. There I privilege what I consider to be the aspects of their textual existence that impact most extensively on the play as a whole: Atreus’ role as master of ceremonies in the sacrificial slaughter of his nephews and his unchallenged epistemic prowess; Thyestes’ contradictory and ineffectual penchant for moralization; and the chorus’s detachment from events and its incapacity to understand and affect them significantly. In chapter five I expand my analysis to a number of other plays in order to come to terms with two interconnected and fundamental aspects of *Thyestes* and other tragedies: their obsessive dealings with the past at the level of subject matter, and (most explicitly) their privileging of intertextual connections.

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CHAPTER I

Poetry, passions and knowledge

iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur

(Seneca, *Oedipus* 573)

negat enim sine furore Democritus

quemquam poetam magnum esse

posse, quod idem dicit Plato

(Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.80)

I

At the core of Seneca's *Oedipus* stands Creon's stunning narrative of his search for a truth that has so far escaped his fellow-citizens, even that cunning antonomastic observer, the king of Thebes. Overcoming a deep reluctance to speak, on account of Oedipus' threats, Creon retells his experience in all its gory detail (509–658). Suitably enough, the setting for his account is grim and terrifying, remote and obscure: 'there is, far from the city, a wood dark with ilex-trees near the well-watered vale of Dirce's fount' (*est procul ab urbe lucus ilicibus niger | Dircaea circa vallis inriguae loca*, 530–1).¹ It is in this extraordinary location, whose wilderness is the usual environment for magical contacts with the divine, that the *sacerdos* (548), soon referred to as a *vates* (552), begins his portentous rites. The prophet, who is possessed by divine powers, intones a magic song: 'he unfolds a magic song, and, with frenzied lips, he chants a charm which appeases or stirs the evanescent ghosts' (561–3: *carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax | decantat ore quidquid aut placat leves | aut cogit umbras*), then 'sings again, and looking at the ground, summons the shades with a deeper, stunned voice' (567–8: *canitque rursus ac terram intuens | graviore manes voce et attonita citat*). Thus he succeeds in evoking the ghosts of the dead: "I am heard," says the priest; "I have uttered prevailing words; blind Chaos

¹ For a comparable setting in *Thy.* 641–90 and its interpretation see ch. 4.

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is burst open, and for the people of Dis a way is given to those living on earth” (571–3: ‘*audior vates ait, | rata verba fudi: rumpitur caecum chaos | iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur*’).

The prophet’s invocation has horrific consequences: ‘trembling’ (*horror*, 576) shakes the grove, the earth splits open (582–6), and a triumphal procession of infernal creatures abandons its chthonic dens: ‘then grim Erinys sounded, and blind Fury and Horror, and all the forms that eternal darkness creates and hides’ (590–2: *tum torva Erinys sonuit et caecus Furor | Horrorque et una quidquid aeternae creant | celantque tenebrae*). There follow (592–4) ‘Grief’ (*Luctus*), ‘Disease’ (*Morbus*), ‘Old Age’ (*Senectus*), ‘Fear’ (*Metus*) and ‘Pestilence’ (*Pestis*).² The prophet is not disturbed by this, unlike Manto (595–6). Then other ghosts appear: Zethus, Amphion, Niobe, Agave with the Bacchantes, and Pentheus, a catalogue of tragic figures.³ Last, apart from the crowd, Laius shows his face, and speaking ‘in a rabid voice’ (*ore rabido*, 626), reveals the cause and nature of the plague.

This scene powerfully enacts what poetry and poets do. The traditional connection between the magic and prophetic power of poets and seers, crystallized in the multifaceted use of the words *vates* and *carmen*, finds here a contextual motivation.⁴ The *vates*, who through his song, that is, through carefully chosen words endowed with active power, *rata verba*, can bring to life the underworld’s demonic creatures, is analogous to the poet, whose inspiration vivifies the characters of tragedy. The regenerative powers of the *vates* and the poet intersect in the parade of tragic characters described at 611–18: both the *vates*⁵ and the poet can access a domain open

² *Violenta fata, horridus Morbi tremor, Macies, Pestis* and *Dolor* close off the tragedy in Jocasta’s final invocation at 1059–60. A different list of personifications appears in *Her. F.* 96–8 and 690–6 (see Fitch (1987) 150 and 300), recalling Virg. *Aen.* 6.273–81. At Ovid, *Met.* 4.484–5 *Luctus, Pavor, Terror* and *Insania* escort Tisiphone back on earth as instruments of Juno’s rage. See also the metaliterary cortège of *Fama* at *Met.* 12.59–61 (*Credulitas, Error, Laetitia, Timores, Seditio, Susurri*), with Zumwalt (1977) and Feeney (1991) 247–9.

³ Zethus and Amphion (whose mother Odysseus meets in the underworld: *Od.* 11.260–5) figure in Euripides’ lost, but once very famous, *Antiopa* (177–227 Nauck²), and in Pacuvius’ tragedy by the same name (1–20a Ribbeck²). They build the walls of Thebes by playing on the lyre (Hes. fr. 182 Merkelbach and West). Niobe, Tantalus’ daughter and Amphion’s wife, gives her name to tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles. The subject was popular for plays and mimes well into imperial times, if Nero is reported to have sung that very role (Suet. *Nero* 21). Agave and Pentheus appear in Euripides’ and Accius’ *Bacchae*, and in Pacuvius’ *Pentheus* (for which we have only Servius’ argument, *ad Aen.* 4.469). All these characters are Theban; on Thebes as a privileged *locus* of tragedy see Zeitlin (1990), a classic paper.

⁴ On *vates* see Newman (1967). The intersection of meanings between *vates* and *sacerdos* in passages such as Hor. *Carm.* 3.1.2–3 or Prop. 3.1.3 is also relevant (see the use of *sacerdos* at *Oed.* 548). On the importance of the concept of *vates* in Lucan see O’Higgins (1988) and Masters (1992). On *carmen* see Sharrock (1994) 63–4.

⁵ The term *vates* does not appear to refer directly to dramatic poets, nor would it be possible for this particular self-reflexive narrative, which is necessarily linked with a mythic plot, to stage anything like

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only to a non-rational, horrific form of Dionysiac inspiration,⁶ and both testify to the limits of a rigid faith in rational forms of explanation.⁷

II

When the play opened, we saw Thebes being slowly destroyed by the plague, and Oedipus paralysed by fear, after the Delphic oracle predicted the monstrous deeds he has in fact already accomplished. We are told that he fears ‘unspeakable things’ (*infanda timeo*, 15), yet his reaction is portrayed as excessive: such a situation should be confronted with reasoned poise, but Oedipus is completely engulfed by passions, as he declares at 25–7:

cum magna horreas,
quod posse fieri non putes metuas tamen:
cuncta expavesco meque non credo mihi.

When you dread some great calamity, you must fear also events which you think cannot happen. I dread every thing, and I do not trust even myself.

Jocasta’s exhortation at 82–6 confirms that we are to consider Oedipus’ emotions excessive, if not altogether unjustified:

regium hoc ipsum reor:
adversa capere, quoque sit dubius magis
status et cadentis imperi moles labet,
hoc stare certo pressius fortem gradu:
haud est virile terga Fortunae dare.

This very thing, I believe, is regal: to contain adversity and, the more dubious your station and the more the greatness of power wavers, the more to stand firm, brave, with unfaltering foot. It is not a man’s part to turn the back to Fortune.

This overwhelming fear is the real motor of the tragedy (not so, famously, in Sophocles). It is this that spurs Oedipus to engage in his painful search for truth through a tortuous path. His first chance to discover the truth is in fact vitiated by a residual trust in reason. In the scene beginning at

a properly named *poeta*. In Horace’s *Letter to Augustus* (*Epist.* 2.1.211–13), the tragic poet is equated with a *magus* who ‘with inanities wrings my heart, inflames, soothes, fills it with false terrors like a magician, and sets me down now at Thebes, now at Athens’.

⁶ Further observations below, ch. 3, *passim*.

⁷ By stressing the ‘irrational’ passions at work in the tragedies I do not want to deny the importance of the rational elements of artistry and craftsmanship which play an extremely prominent part in these texts. On the contrary, it is precisely thanks to the elaborate forms of its ‘mannerist’ rhetoric that ‘irrational’ and disruptive contents find their expression: ‘the figure is the perpetual tribute paid – and how willingly it is paid – by the language of the conscious ego to the unconscious’ (Orlando (1978) 169).