

MISMARKED FLESH: THE INTERPRETABILITY OF THE MALE BODY IN JULIO-
CLAUDIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

India Watkins Nattermann: Mismarked Flesh: The Interpretability of the Male Body in Julio-Claudian Literature
(Under the direction of Sharon L. James)

This dissertation studies the increasing failure of the elite Roman male body to serve, as it had done for centuries, as an easily interpretable sign of social identity. The socio-political shift from Republic to Empire led to general disorientation and a crisis of male elite identity that found expression through depictions of the male body. Through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Petronius' *Satyrical*, and Senecan drama, I study this preoccupation in light of the Roman socio-historical context and modern theories of bodily identity found in Kristeva, Spillers, and Scarry, among others. I argue that we can trace the frequent scenes of misrecognition and confusion and the preponderance of wounded, marked, and dismembered non-slave bodies to this identity crisis. The mutilated male body in Julio-Claudian literature becomes a nodal point for multiple intersecting anxieties about gender, class, and status in an uncertain world.

Chapter One reviews the socio-political context of the early empire and contemporary theories of embodied identity, and surveys the scholarship on embodied masculinity in early imperial literature. Chapter Two shines light on the confusion of bodily signifiers in the disorienting worlds of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and of Augustan Rome, showing through such stories as Actaeon and Pyramus that failure to interpret signs or to act as an interpretable signifier can be disastrous. Chapter Three examines the new vulnerability of elite men in Augustus' Rome through the mutilated and dehumanized male bodies of the *Metamorphoses*, including Marsyas

and Hippolytus. Chapter Four connects the confusion of bodily signifiers with a larger failure of the body in Petronius' *Satyricon* and in Neronian Rome: whether they do not display legible social identities, fail to perform sexually, or are assaulted, bodies in Petronius' novel are problems. Chapter Five connects the abject bodies of Seneca's *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*, and *Phaedra* to the violence of Nero's reign, reading them as broken signifiers whose misinterpretation spells disaster for their onlookers. Chapter Six offers concluding thoughts, as well as case studies of Pompey's head in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Hercules' suffering in the pseudo-Senecan *Hercules Oetaeus*.

To my mom, who showed me how it was all done.

And to Lukas, who encouraged and supported me every step of the way.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Setting the Scene: Socio-Political Changes in the Julio-Claudian Period

Through the political chaos of the end of the Republic and the shifts in power structures of the imperial system, traditional elites¹ had to reimagine their status and power in the face of constant change. Throughout this dissertation, I will examine these changes through four distinct, yet interrelated, lenses: (1) the transformation of Republican political offices from positions of immense power and authority to empty performances; (2) the disruption of social distinctions through increased social mobility, created by broader economic shifts and the imperial ability to promote and demote individuals at will; (3) the increasing liability of elites to arbitrary violence and violation at the whim of the emperor; and (4) the rapidly increasing need to interpret correctly the behavior of the all-powerful emperor.

With the rise of Augustus, elite Roman men had to renegotiate their status relative to an autocrat who insisted he was merely the first citizen among his equals in senatorial rank. While many workings of the Republic, like the Senate, lumbered on during his reign, the possibility for real social advancement using the Republican political system no longer existed.² Elites were

¹Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “elite” as shorthand for a specific kind of aristocrat: men of senatorial background who for centuries had controlled the Republic through their positions in the Senate and as consuls. Although the definition of “elite” began to shift in the late Republic with rising social mobility (a phenomenon I discuss further below), I focus on these traditionally aristocratic men and their reactions to the socio-political changes around them.

²See Gruen (1995) and Wallace-Hadrill (2008) for historical overviews of the Roman Republic and its end, as well as of the development of Roman national identity (Gruen 1992). Winterling (2009) examines

forced to keep playing the game of Roman politics according to the same rules—to run for various political candidacies, to sit in the Senate—but the game itself had changed: now a single individual's whim determined any man's success. In the competitive oligarchy of the Republic, the *cursus honorum* was an apparatus of social advancement and a source of deep pride. For example, the historian Velleius Paterculus, who most likely wrote toward the end of Augustus' reign and during Tiberius', lists the reasons why Metellus Macedonius was considered extremely blessed and successful in his lifetime: he won numerous offices, honors, and triumphs and enjoyed multiple successful campaigns and a long life, and his four surviving sons—a mixture of former, current, and future consuls—carried his bier to his grave (1.11.6–7).³ In the transition from Republic to autocracy, this ladder of social and political advancement became a means to advance the glory of the emperor, rather than a way to cement one's own reputation.⁴ For a

tensions between surviving Republican political structures and imperial autocratic power. See also Pina Polo (2004) for an overview of the meaning of *mos maiorum* in the development of a Roman national and elite identity in the Republican period. Garnsey and Saller (1982, 1987) provide general historical overviews of the empire.

³I use historiographical works (namely, those of Velleius Paterculus, Dio Cassius, Suetonius, and Tacitus) throughout this dissertation not as sources of hard fact about the Julio-Claudian period, but as reflections of the kinds of stories in circulation and anxieties at play in this period.

⁴In his reading of Tacitus' historiographical works, Henderson points out that the continuation of Republican political apparatuses conceals the radical shift in power relations in the early imperial period (1998, 270). Overall, he sees the Julio-Claudian period as one in which language has lost its meaning, and in which such terms as *libertas* and *consulatus* must be renegotiated (ibid., 267–69). O'Gorman likewise reads the frequent misunderstandings and failures of language in Tacitus as metaphors for the perversion of the Republican political system (2000, 14). Even though Tacitus wrote after 69 CE, his *Annales*, a history of the entire Julio-Claudian period, deals with many of the same issues and anxieties. In light of the political chaos of the Year of Four Emperors (69 CE), Tacitus' works look to the past in an attempt to determine how to be an elite, Roman man in this unstable world. Scholars generally read Tacitus' works as privileging elite concerns: Rubiés, for example, sees his historiography as marked by the narrow interest in the relationship between empire and *libertas* from his perspective as a member of the senatorial class (1994, 37). Sullivan also sees elites' main motivation in the empire as the assertion of their own *libertas*, which he defines as “the ‘freedom’ of the exploiting classes to promote their own interests and evade the dictates of any central authority other than the senate” (1985a, 115). Despite the relevance of Tacitus' works to the themes explored here, a fuller discussion of these works is outside the scope of this project.

Roman elite male whose social, political, and gendered identity depended upon succeeding in this game, this shift from concrete means of advancement to performance in the name of the emperor would have been disorienting.

The social structure of the empire changed not only because an autocrat was the head of state,⁵ but also because he could promote and demote people at will (Lavan 2013, 66–68). In particular, emperors increasingly relied on imperial slaves and freedmen, loyal solely to him, for sensitive or important tasks, rather than involve an elite class with its own political agendas.⁶ Such enslaved people and freedmen could wield vast amounts of power: the emperor Claudius was portrayed as ruled by his wife and freedmen (Millar 1977, 77; MacLean 2018, 120).⁷ Some promoted freedmen came to gain unheard-of status and riches: according to Tacitus, Nero even granted the actor Paris the right to call himself freeborn, an honor that erased a fundamental distinction between the patrician elite and nouveau-riche class of freedmen (*An.* 27.3). In addition, Marcus Antonius Pallas, a freedman under Claudius, received honors from the Senate for his law prohibiting a free woman from cohabiting with an enslaved person, to the tune of 15 million sesterces; later, his fortune of 300 million sesterces made him one of the richest men in

⁵Strictly speaking, Augustus was merely the “first citizen” (*princeps*) of the Roman Republic, but for all intents and purposes, he functioned as the head of an autocracy.

⁶The power of freedmen waxed and waned over the course of the Julio-Claudian period: Augustus and Tiberius relied on them infrequently, but Claudius and Nero promoted and rewarded great numbers of them, while freedmen appointments again declined in the subsequent Flavian period (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 181). See Bradley (1994), Joshel (2010), and Hunt (2018) for historical overviews of Roman slavery. Fitzgerald (2000) and George (2002) engage with elite anxieties about the institution of slavery. Boulvert (1970) and Weaver (1972) examine the social mobility of imperial freedmen throughout the empire and in the Julio-Claudian period, respectively. See MacLean (2018) and Perry (2018) for fuller examinations of the ideologies surrounding manumission and citizenship. Treggiari (1969) connects the rise of freedmen in the early empire with the politically active agents of the *triumviri* at the end of the Republic.

⁷See Osgood (2011) for a history of Claudius’ reign with an emphasis on his public perception; according to Osgood, Claudius increasingly used freedmen for imperial business and was harshly criticized for it.

the empire, and his descendants reaped the rewards, with one becoming consul in 167 CE (MacLean 2018, 107–11).⁸

Unsurprisingly, elites resented the social promotion of the enslaved and formerly enslaved over themselves: as Rose MacLean has pointed out, a telltale sign of a “bad” emperor was his reliance on freedmen, according to authors like Tacitus and Pliny (2018, 120).⁹ In Tacitus in particular, anxiety about elite status in relation to powerful slaves and freedmen is palpable. For Tacitus, times when freedmen were in charge were, in short, evil: *Crescens Neronis libertus (nam et hi malis temporibus partem se rei publicae faciunt)* (Crescens, one of Nero’s freedmen [for even these men make themselves a role in the state in evil times], *Hist.* 1.76.3).¹⁰ In this world of shifting political and social structures, where the lowest of the low could be promoted to unimaginable riches and power, what it meant to be a successful member of the Roman elite was no longer clear. The system that governed elites’ political careers and social success had fundamentally changed, while the value system through which elites derived their social identities had become unmoored.

⁸Millar points out that while ancient historiographers focus on only a few notable examples of wildly rich freedmen, the rise of a moderately wealthy freedmen class was a major shift in the late Republican and early imperial periods; he points to an inscription honoring a freedman from Veii in 26 CE (*ILS* 6579) that shows that he attained respectability as an *Augustalis* with a seat at public dinners (1977, 69) as an example. Garnsey likewise argues that freedmen of moderate wealth made up a significant portion of the population (1981, 368).

⁹López has shown that rising numbers of manumitted slaves led to increased numbers of plebians entering the *ordo*. In light of these shifting social dynamics, he describes how elites hated such *nouveaux riches* freedmen not only out of snobbishness, but also because these freedmen acted as informers in their proximity to the emperor (1995, 327).

¹⁰All translations of Tacitus and the other historians are my own.

Embodied Identity in Rome

As the outrage of Tacitus and other nobles at prosperous freedmen shows, elite men had always defined their social identity in relation to others; moreover, this social identity was rooted in their physical bodies. As Jonathan Walters has explained, the social definition of Roman masculinity depended upon the fantasy that men's bodies were inviolate; that is, the elite man defined his body as one that could inflict, but not suffer, violence and penetration, whereas the bodies of the enslaved and women were defined by their vulnerability and penetrability (1997, 30–33).¹¹ This social identity of Roman men as inviolate was even legally codified long before the empire under the Porcian laws (199–84 BCE), which forbade corporal punishment for male citizens and thereby distinguished between the enslaved and free. Richard Saller argues that *libertas* in Roman thought chiefly meant freedom from corporal punishment, as “freedom” in American popular consciousness conjures up associations with “freedom of speech” or “the right to bear arms” (1991, 155).¹² David Fredrick has expanded this notion of bodily inviolability beyond the physical, arguing that elite men saw themselves as socially untouchable and wholly in control in economic, political, and sexual spheres (2002, 236ff.). Elite men, then, defined and communicated their gender and status through the integrity of their bodies, as well as their control over their own and subordinates' bodies.

¹¹I stress that only elite male bodies were considered inviolate because the common soldier, subject to corporal punishment under military hierarchy (Walters 1997, 40–41; Späth 2011, 444), and the sexually appealing *praetextus* (Walters 1997, 33–35; Meister 2012, 39–40) were points of anxiety in Roman thought. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that Roman discourses on sexual practice were linked to ideologies of power: that is, men were to act as the penetrative partner in a sexual relationship, regardless of the sex of the receiving partner. See Williams (1999) for a fuller treatment of this topic.

¹²Cicero, for example, considers the fatal corporal punishment of a citizen an attack on *libertas* itself (*Rab. Post.* 12).

External appearances, moreover, were the means by which social identities were expressed and determined throughout Rome's history. As Lauren Hackworth Petersen puts it, social roles in Roman society were marked by "external appearances, and, by extension, by the legibility of those appearances" (2009, 186). Barbara Kellum sums it up even more concisely: "the self was literally a projection of exterior signs" (1999, 288).¹³ Because of the embodied and visible nature of their social identities, elite men were highly conscious of the way that their comportment, dress, movements, and more communicated their masculinity and elevated status. For example, in describing how Publius Scipio Nasica incited the citizens against Gracchus in defense of Rome, Velleius Paterculus describes his stance on the Capitol steps, with his toga wrapped around his left arm, in detail (2.3.1): Scipio's dress, posture, and gestures were equally important as his words in communicating his authority. Anthony Corbeill's work (2002, 2006) draws on Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*—learned and socialized bodily comportment—to examine such elite male bodily practices: he examines discourses on gesture, physiognomy, oratorical practices, gait, dress, sexual practices, and more to argue that elite males expressed their social identities in Republican Rome through their bodies.¹⁴ Because of this highly visual method of communicating gender and status, the male body was the object of much scrutiny. Velleius Paterculus relays an anecdotal story about Livius Drusus that illustrates how submitting to and passing such public scrutiny was an elite Republican virtue: when an architect offers to

¹³She writes in full, "[i]n the Roman world, you were, for all intents and purposes, what you appeared to be... Clothes, bodily adornments, gait, purchases, and attendants were all avidly and reciprocally construed in the street, the observer was observed, and vice versa" (1999, 288).

¹⁴Also drawing on rhetoric, Gleason (1999) similarly argues that elite Roman masculinity needed to be constantly reasserted and maintained via outlets such as oratory. Though Gleason studies oratorical practices in the Second Sophistic, a period later than the subject of this dissertation, the connection between masculinity, the body, and the performance of rhetoric extends through the empire back to the Republic. Petrone also emphasizes that the orator's embodiment was judged by his audience, which voiced its approval or disapproval through their bodies as well (2010, 38).

build Livius Drusus' new house away from the prying eyes of the public, the senator instructs him rather to build it in such a way that whatever he does, everyone can see him (*quidquid agam, ab omnibus perspici possim*, 2.14.3). Being an elite man in Rome meant constantly and publicly performing one's masculinity and status through the body.¹⁵

With the socio-political changes that accompanied the shift from Republic to empire, however, the stakes upon which elite masculinity was grounded became unmoored.¹⁶ First, violations of elite bodies became commonplace throughout the violence of the end of the Republic and as the early emperors attempted to establish their control.¹⁷ During the proscriptions of the dictator Sulla (80s BCE) and the second triumvirate (43 BCE), targeted elites, their friends and families, and those randomly caught in the crossfire were brutally executed, sometimes by mob violence (Dio Cassius 47.3–12). The dismemberment of Cicero's head and hands, for example, haunted the elite consciousness for decades, if not centuries (Richlin 1999).¹⁸ Such anxieties about suffering a degrading death are well-attested for the

¹⁵Wray's 2001 study of Catullus draws on sociological studies of Mediterranean communities to illustrate the pervasive scrutiny and gossip that constituted late Republican Rome.

¹⁶Concepts of Roman masculinity first underwent a shift during the expansion of its borders and its assimilation of Greek and Eastern cultures during the mid-Republic. McDonnell sees two competing modes of masculinity in this period—the traditional, martial Roman mode and the erudite, cultured philhellenic one (2003, 251)—the conflict between which, he argues, led to the end of the Republic (ibid., 235).

¹⁷The execution of Tiberius Gracchus in 133 BCE marked a shift in the treatment of elite bodies in Republican Rome. Velleius Paterculus often gives detailed descriptions of elite deaths in the infighting of the last days of the Republic. Quintus Catulus, for example, committed suicide by breathing in the fumes of a newly plastered wall he set on fire rather than submit to an ignominious death: *simul exitiali hausto spiritu, simul incluso suo mortem magis voto quam arbitrio inimicorum obiit* (2.22.4).

¹⁸See Varner (2001) for a list of mutilations of elite corpses from Dio Cassius', Suetonius', and Tacitus' works. Such anxieties, of course, are not unique to the Julio-Claudian period, though they become persistent preoccupations: the treatment of Hector's corpse in the *Iliad*, as well as the cruelty of Vergil's Mezentius, show concerns about corpse mutilation (see, among others, Segal 1971 and McClellan 2019).

imperial period in Tacitus, as well: for example, Scaevinus, in his attempt to gain support for the Pisonian conspiracy, cites the degrading death that awaits his elite audience as a reason for sacrificing one's life for freedom (*venturos qui ipsum quoque vincirent postremo indigna nece adficerent, quanto laudabilius periturum, dum amplectimur rem publicam, dum auxilia libertati invocat*) (The men would come who would bind him also and put him in the end to an unworthy death. How much more honorably would he perish in the act of embracing his Republic, while he invoked help for liberty, Tac. *Ann.* 15.59).¹⁹ In addition, the Porcian laws governing corporal punishment were not always respected, as emperors and magistrates increasingly ignored the status of those they punished (Saller 1991, 154; Edwards 1997, 74). This violence as a method for control was, according to Shelton, "not only to instill fear, but also to mutilate, because the presence of scars and deformities served to mark clearly a person's low status and thus 'degrade' her/him" (2000, 89). Bodies that had been throughout the Republic defined as inviolate, legally forbidden from being beaten or penetrated, were now increasingly often subjected to degrading punishments and deaths.

As the formerly inviolate bodies of the elite became subject to mutilation and degradation, freedmen with their marked and scarred bodies, once defined by vulnerability, rose to positions of power. Without a senatorial education, the newly elevated class of freedmen

¹⁹Tacitus also describes the beheading of Flavus, another participant in the Pisonian conspiracy, and the executioner's boasts about his "brutality": *et ille multum tremens, cum vix duobus ictibus caput amputavisset, saevitiam apud Neronem iactavit, sesquiplaga interfectum a se dicendo* (and, trembling greatly, even though he cut off his head with scarcely two blows, he boasted to Nero about his brutality, saying that he had killed him with just a blow and half, *Ann.* 15.67). In addition, Otho leaves orders that his body should be cremated as quickly as possible after his suicide, so that his corpse would not be mutilated: *funus maturatum; ambitiosis id precibus petierat ne amputaretur caput ludibrio futurum* (the funeral was hurried; he had sought this with earnest entreaties, so that his head would not be cut off in mockery, *Hist.* 2.49). Elites could be forced into shameful punishments that treated them as if they were enslaved: Caligula had Titus Vinius thrown into heavy chains, and Claudius forced him to drink out of earthenware cups at a dinner party (*Hist.* 1.48).

lacked the proper *habitus* of the elite; that is, their gait, gestures, comportment, and other bodily habits were not aligned with those of the elite, and they were not permitted to wear the senatorial stripe.²⁰ Regardless, as Petersen argues based on depictions of freedmen in material culture, the bodily signifiers of freedmen were more ambiguous than elite authors would have us believe: this ambiguity, she argues, caused elites to anxiously exaggerate the differences between themselves and these *nouveaux riches* (2009, 204). Furthermore, many freedmen's bodies likely bore the brands, scars, and tattoos of their former enslavement, physical marks that no changes in dress or comportment could erase:²¹ as Brooke Holmes puts it, scars and tattoos "cued subjection to a master, narrowing one's identity to whatever was imprinted on the skin and locking that

²⁰Davies comments on the art of toga-wearing as a class marker that was not easy to learn: "[t]he imperial toga was large and expensive: wearing it well was an art which had to be learned (and which also presumably required trained servants): it was an art too which must have reinforced the distinction between them and us—wearing a scruffy garment which just about qualified for the name of toga was one thing, but wearing the full imperial toga effortlessly must have been much like being able to tie an impeccable bow tie in more modern times" (2005, 127). Barghop (1994, 80) similarly uses Bourdieu's concept of bodily *hexis* to describe senatorial behavior: by definition, this bodily comportment cannot easily be learned, but is inscribed on the body from birth or painstakingly acquired through close imitation (Bourdieu 1987, 125–26). As Barghop puts it, the bodily *hexis* of the Republican senatorial class was "dem senatorischen Fleische quasi eingeschrieben" (1994, 206–07). Meister, in contrast, argues that there was no ideal aristocratic *habitus* in the Republican period (2012, 17–18), as elites were torn between the ideals of sophisticated urbanity and traditional severity (ibid., 51–53).

²¹Scars were a fraught and contradictory ideological sticking point in Roman thought. On the one hand, scars from honorable wounds on the front of the body could be a useful rhetorical or political tool (Salazar 1999, 212), which are well-attested (Livy 6.20.9, 45.39.16f.; Amn. 400, 402; Dio Cass. 54.14.2f.). On the other hand, by the early imperial era, this political "gimmick," as Evans calls it, was probably a hangover from the Republican past (1999, 89) outdated since the Punic Wars (ibid., 93), and it sufficed to say that one had battle scars, rather than actually displaying them (ibid., 91). It was also possible to overdo it: excessive scarring or deformities were simply embarrassing (ibid., 86–87). Meister sees the Republican male body as a tool for political and martial efficacy: scars could thus enhance this body's honor, or physically damage its ability to serve the Republic (2012, 98). Thus, the source, location, and type of scar were important for its ideological reception: whip-marks crisscrossing a formerly enslaved person's back are not to be lumped together with a well-healed battle scar on a former general's breast (Meister 2012, 103). The figure of the gladiator further complicates our understanding of scars in antiquity: legally degraded, often enslaved, despised, and the objects of public spectacle, gladiators' scarred and opened up bodies nevertheless possessed a certain sex appeal, to the extent that Juvenal dubbed their female fans *ludiae* (6.104). See Barton (1993, 47–74) for further discussion of the appeal gladiators held for Romans.

identity against the passage of time” (2008, 100).²² In the early empire, elites had to deal with the close proximity of formerly enslaved people in positions of power and new forms of degrading punishments: once secure in their embodied dominance, aristocrats faced uncertainty about their relative social position and status.

Visible status markers reflected this uncertainty: they became unreliable for reasons beyond socially climbing freedmen. Emperors frequently changed the regulations regarding clothing and status symbols, or flouted their own rules by rewarding helpful freedmen or other henchmen from the lower classes, leading to a wholesale breakdown of the Republican symbolic system of dress (Barghop 1994, 121–28).²³ Augustus, for example, rewarded multiple freedmen who had helped him solidify his power with equestrian status and the gold rings that advertised it (e.g., Dio Cass. 48.45, 50.30), and allowed former senators culled from their ranks to continue wearing the senatorial stripe regardless (Suet. *Aug.* 25.1–2). Not only did such status markers become unmoored from the Republican rank systems with which they were once synonymous, but interpreting status markers and bodily signifiers became a high stakes game. Catharine Edwards lists a series of elite suicides at the first sign of imperial displeasure: as she puts it, the ambiguity of the emperor’s expressions and intentions “constituted part of the apparatus of terror through which the emperors of Roman historiography sought to control members of the elite” (2007, 118).²⁴ The single most important change that the imperial system brought—the

²²Perry (2018) explores a similar issue in his work on freedwomen: how could a former slave’s body, defined by its sexual availability, be transformed into the body of a respectable Roman matron, defined by its polar opposite, sexual unavailability and chastity? Freedmen faced a similar problem: their bodies, once defined by their physical vulnerability, were now rubbing shoulders with those who projected an aura of inviolability.

²³See Barghop (1994, 83ff.), Davies (2005), Edmondson (2008), Petersen (2009), and Meister (2012, esp. 41–50), for further discussion of the toga in Rome as a status marker.

²⁴See, also, O’Gorman (2000) and Ihrig (2007) on the uninterpretability of imperial signs.

arbitrariness of the exercise of imperial power—thus finds expression through the body of the emperor, as bodily signs and their interpretation become life-or-death matters. At the same time, the rise of the autocracy rendered the elite male body, formerly an easily legible text of power, vulnerable to violence and degradation, and disrupted the status markers that in the Republican era exuded an aura of control and superiority.

Embodied Masculinity in Julio-Claudian Literature

Because of the uncertainty surrounding the correct social performance for the Roman elite, early imperial authors dwell on the interpretability of the citizen male body.²⁵ This concern with the male body as a signifier extends across a wide range of genres: Ovid foregrounds bodies in the mythical landscape of his epic poem, the *Metamorphoses*, while Petronius' picaresque "novel" also draws attention to the body in its carnivalesque ribaldry.²⁶ Likewise, Senecan tragedy brings bodies to the fore, particularly in scenes of extreme violence.²⁷ To a certain extent, this focus on the body can be traced back to generic conventions: the body's boundaries were a concern of epic from its origins with Homer's *Iliad*,²⁸ and the picaresque frequently

²⁵In fact, we can see the beginnings of such an interest in the male body in the early Principate: as Zimmermann Damer has shown, elegy foregrounds the problem of the speaker's embodied identity, which is tangled up in the social, legal, and historical contexts of the early Principate (2019, esp. 4). Her book and other work on male identity in Roman elegy will be discussed below.

²⁶I read the *Satyricon* within a Neronian context; see footnote 211 for further discussion of the question of dating Petronius' novel.

²⁷Due to the constraints of space, I have chosen not to include Lucan's historiographical epic, *Bellum Civile*, in this dissertation, in part because its historical subject matter departs from the mythical and fictional subjects of the works of Ovid, Petronius, and Seneca discussed here. See, however, Chapter 6, pp. 226–31, for a brief case study of Pompey's head in Lucan's epic.

²⁸Our earliest classical text, the *Iliad*, displays an interest in the bounds of human-ness in its persistent anxiety about the threat of necrophagy, starting from the proem: μήνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος /

features bawdy sexual adventures. Furthermore, drama is performed (or is imagined to be performed) using embodied action, while the male body in duress is a hallmark of Seneca's source of Attic tragedy (Hawley 1998, 86).²⁹ Yet I find it striking that each Julio-Claudian author chooses to foreground so heavily this aspect of his chosen genre, be it epic, fictional narrative, or tragedy; in my mind, the range of genres featured in this dissertation speak that much more to Julio-Claudian authors' preoccupation with the male body.

In the late Augustan period, Ovid populates the mythic landscape of his *Metamorphoses* with disoriented figures: bodies constantly transform into other shapes, and as the unfortunate Dryope, who unwittingly wounded a nymph transformed into a lotus flower, warns, a vengeful deity could be lurking behind every rock or bush (9.378–81). Previous treatments of many of Ovid's myths do not dwell on bodies or transformation to the same extent: for example, Daedalus' jealous murder of his nephew Perdix gives the poet the opportunity to fabricate the boy's transformation into a partridge (Gantz 1993, 262).³⁰ When nothing is as it seems and any individual could be disguised as another, the issue of the interpretability of the body comes to the fore. In the world of Petronius' *Satyricon*, some forty years later, people's identities are similarly indiscernible from their outer appearances. The narrator, Encolpius, fails to identify characters he

οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε, / πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν / ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν / οἰωνοῖσι τε πᾶσι.... (sing, goddess, of the destructive wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, which brought countless griefs on the Achaeans and sent many strong souls of heroes to Hades, and made them spoils for dogs and all the birds of prey..., 1–5). As Holmes has shown, the Homeric body is an entity whose boundaries are strictly enforced: penetration via wounding is a constant threat, and the Homeric warrior must guard his bodily boundaries closely (2010, 41–83). See Most 1991 (esp. 20, n. 37) for an overview of this concern about male bodily integrity in classical literature.

²⁹E.g., Sophocles' *Philoctetes* dramatizes its hero in extreme pain.

³⁰Even where previous traditions did include a metamorphosis, Ovid makes it the focus of his story. Cadmus' transformation into a snake seems almost an afterthought in early mythography, but it appears the climax of Ovid's rendition (Gantz 1993, 472).

meets along the way, as their bodily signifiers do not function as they should. For example, at the freedman Trimalchio's dinner party, he mistakes his host's stonemason for a magistrate, judging from his fine clothes and ceremonial pomp; in his fright, he almost makes a run for it (65).

Likewise, characters from Senecan drama are preoccupied with issues of recognition and identity. Tragic recognition, a trope of the genre, becomes embodied in Seneca's version of these myths: for example, the heads and hands of Thyestes' sons allow him to recognize both his brother's betrayal and his own crime (*Thy.* 1002–08). In Senecan drama, the male body becomes a nodal point for issues of identity.

In addition to this increased attention to interpreting the male body, Julio-Claudian literature also abounds in descriptions of bodily failure and destruction. Senecan drama is often criticized for its seemingly gratuitous gore: where previous versions of a myth may mention a violent death in a few lines, Seneca delves into them at length. For example, the messenger describes Astyanax's death to his mother in the most graphic terms possible: his bones are scattered and broken, his features deformed, his neck snapped, and his brain splattered across the rocks (*Tro.* 1109–17). In the *Metamorphoses*, men, in comparison with women, more often experience dismemberment, flaying, and other violent deaths in addition to transformation (Segal 1998, 25–27).³¹ Although Encolpius and his friends escape any horrific fate, they are threatened with (and sometimes suffer) beatings, rape, and captivity. Furthermore, Encolpius' impotence, another kind of bodily failure, is a thread that runs throughout the extant novel. In the literature of the Julio-Claudian period, male bodies do not work the way they should: often, this failure of male bodies to function as signs leads to total bodily destruction and a crisis of identity. In this

³¹In her work on female death in epic, De Boer has shown that women in the *Metamorphoses* rarely experience the kind of violent death that, for example, Dido does in Vergil's *Aeneid*. As she points out, such bloody deaths are reserved for men in Ovid's mythography (2016, 167–80).

dissertation, I hope to demonstrate that this preoccupation with gore and bodily failure functions even more significantly than previously recognized: it allows elite Roman readers to read themselves into these tortured bodies, providing an outlet through which they can work through their anxieties about the socio-political structures and norms shifting around them.

Literature Review

Scholarship has long recognized that elite male identity in Rome was embodied. As discussed above, Walters (1997) and Frederick (2002) explain the elite male fantasy that their bodies were inviolate, and Corbeill's (2002, 2006) and Gleason's (1999) work examines how masculinity was trained and performed through elite education and oratorical practice, each scholar elucidating the anxieties that such a definition of an embodied identity could engender.

The subject of elite male identity and psychology during the transition from Republic to empire has been much studied.³² In particular, scholars have turned to Roman elegy to find evidence for an elite crisis of identity with the shift in political systems. Paul Allen Miller (2004), for example, uses a Lacanian framework to argue that the fall of the Republic led to a crisis of the Symbolic for elites: he then connects this crisis to what he considers the unique subject position of the elegists, or the "lyric consciousness." Also drawing on Lacan, Micaela Janan (2001) likewise sees a slippage between ideology and subjectivity at the end of the Republic, leading to a crisis of identity integral to elegy. Erika Zimmermann Damer (2019) also explores the elite male anxieties latent in elegy, but refocuses on the bodies that populate these

³²See Humpert (2001) for the construction of masculinity in *adulescentes* in the late Republic, and McDonnell (2006) for an analysis of Roman masculinity through the term *virtus* throughout the Republic. Meister also calls the late Republic a "Krisenmoment" for Roman identity (2012, 85).

poems: according to her, elegy asks what it means to be male and embodied in the political upheaval of the end of the Republic and the early Principate.³³ Other scholars examine how the rampant violence during this transition may have affected elite subjectivity. T.P. Wiseman (1985) reminds the reader of the ubiquity of slave torture and violence in Catullus' Rome and describes their psychological threat for male citizens. Similarly, Amy Richlin (1999) argues that the head symbolizes the inviolability of the citizen body (and, in contrast, the vulnerability of the enslaved body) and shows that Cicero's decapitation provoked horror among elites that resonated for generations (see above).

Scholars have also seen crises of elite identity well into the empire.³⁴ Many have turned to Tacitus' works to uncover the way elites coped with this transition from Republic to Principate. Richard Alston, for example, argues that Tacitus's main concern was how to define the *vir*, who in the Republic exercised control over himself and others, under an emperor's rule (1999, 215), and to address the concerns of an elite audience for whom "narratives of elite identity were in flux" (2009, 156). In a similar vein, Rhiannon Ash argues that the power

³³Drinkwater similarly reads the elegiac trope of *militia amoris* as an apt metaphor for a loss of masculine status (2013, 188).

³⁴In his analysis of the term *virtus*, McDonnell argues that the definition of Roman masculinity changed alongside that of citizenship in the shift to the Principate (2006, 388–89). Bartsch also sees a slippage in this term in the early empire (2006, 228). In a similar vein, Corbeill analyzes gesture in this period to argue for a collapse of the metaphysical order (2004). Alston similarly argues that this shift changed Roman conceptions of masculinity (1999, 206), which traditionally hinged on the distinction between enslaved and freeborn (*ibid.*, 207). See Roller (2001) and Rowe (2002) for further historical considerations of the ways elites dealt with the transition from Republic to empire: Roller examines how early imperial aristocrats "conceptualized, shaped, and sought to manage the autocracy in which they lived" (2001, 6), while Rowe is interested in how a citizen is transformed into a subject. In his analysis of *dissimulatio*, Rudich (1993) more specifically examines the psychological strain of living under a tyrant like Nero, which, he argues, led to a crisis of values (1993, 239): as he puts it, "[t]he period of two generations between the fall of the Republic and the time of Nero was too short for a steady means of adjustment to the increasingly ambivalent reality of the principate to be worked out" (*ibid.*). Barghop similarly describes "Dispositionen-für-Angst" in the senatorial class engendered by a disjunct between traditional elite modes of existence and new socio-political norms (1994, 16–17).

vacuum left by Nero's death damaged elites' collective class identity (2009, 95), and that the mutilation of Galba's and Piso's bodies (*Hist.* 1.44.2), in particular, was a symbol of the "disastrous fragmentation of identity in civil war" (ibid., 90). S.P. Oakley (2009) also thinks that Tacitus' works address an elite audience, and argues that the historian's main concern is to work out what elite *libertas* means under various emperors. Thomas Späth (2011) examines Tacitus' attitude toward elite masculinity, in particular, and concludes that political players in his works had to adapt their performance of masculinity to the political climate: for example, Tacitus recasts Agricola's political inactivity and submission to the emperor, considered effeminate by Republican standards, as admirable self-restraint and humility.³⁵

Other scholars have used the popularity of spectacles like gladiatorial games to think about shifts in elite identity in the empire. Carlin Barton's work uses cultural-psychological and sociological theories to argue that the lack of meaningful competition amongst elites led to an obsession with the "monstrous," such as the gore of gladiatorial games (1993), and to a redefinition of *honor* (2001) in the empire. Shadi Bartsch (1994) also turns to the spectacle and performance of gladiatorial games to think about elite identity in the empire; her later work (2006) engages with the concept of the gaze and elite self-presentation in the formation of identity. Jason König (2005) turns, rather, to texts about Greek athleticism to argue that imperial treatments of this subject reveal elite anxieties about Roman identity.

Yet other scholars examine the role of rhetorical practice in the construction of elite masculinity in the empire. Through her analysis of rhetoric as performance in maintenance of elite masculinity, Gleason (1995) argues that masculinity was a point of anxiety for imperial

³⁵See Späth's 1994 dissertation for a comprehensive analysis of male and female constructions of gender in Tacitus.

authors. Likewise, Corbeill (2004) more broadly considers gestures (in oratorical practice, but also in the arena, for example) to uncover what he considers the collapse of the metaphysical order in the early empire. Erik Gunderson (2003), on the other hand, turns to the sometimes outlandishly violent subject matter in rhetoric to argue that the obsession, in oratory, with mutilation and dismemberment disguises real anxieties about bodily vulnerability under an autocratic regime: in fretting about the “mutilation” of the rhetorical genre, he argues, elites show their concern for their own bodily safety.³⁶ Similarly, Catharine Edwards (1999) argues that the emphasis on control over one’s body in Stoic thought shows the elite response to decreased control over the bodies of others in an autocracy.

The self and embodied identity have been subjects in scholarship on Ovid, Petronius, and Seneca, as well. Zimmermann Damer (2019, see above) reads the body in Ovidian elegy as a “text in bad faith,” in which bodily signifiers do not match interior intentions. In scholarship on the *Metamorphoses*, the proem’s promise to sing about *nova corpora* has given rise to a wide range of work on the bodies of the text, much of which sees metamorphosis and the bodies that undergo it as central to the text’s meaning.³⁷ Many look to Ovid’s self-conscious metapoeticism to elucidate bodies’ role in his poetry: Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos (1999), for example, read metamorphosis as metapoetic, connecting Ovid’s reshaping of the literary tradition with the loss of form bodies experience within the poem: as they put it, “Ovid’s aggressive reshaping of literary traditions finds its shocking equivalent in the loss of physical integrity that awaits his characters on the level of plot” (1999, 162). Elena Theodorakopoulos (1999) also argues that the

³⁶Gunderson’s earlier book (2000) more generally deals with the failure of oratorical practice to create an ideal masculinity.

³⁷See Anderson (1963) for a lexical analysis of the various words describing beauty and transformation in the text. Anderson concludes that beauty is both itself transformed and is a transformative force in the poem.

violence against human bodies in the poem has to do with the creative and political anxieties of writing poetry: “Ovid’s images of the mangled or fractured body resonate with the problems of writing a coherent Roman epic poem” (1999, 148). Joseph Farrell (1999) similarly contends that Ovid casts the body as unstable by drawing parallels between it and the perishable book, on the one hand, and between the eternal soul and poetic voice, on the other. In contrast, Ralph Hexter (2002) connects these bodies with Ovid’s own body, reading the boundaries crossed in metamorphosis with the poet’s exile.

Many scholars have connected these transformed bodies of the *Metamorphoses* with issues of identity.³⁸ In the mid-twentieth century came psychological readings of Ovid that emphasized crises of personal identity. Hermann Fränkel’s influential *Ovid: A Poet Between Two Worlds* (1945) argues that the theme of metamorphosis grapples with the fragility and fluidity of personal identity and the alienation from the self. Leo Curran (1972) also sees transformations as a way of exploring personal identity, and reads the emphasis on breached bodily boundaries and the general reversion to disorder as distinctly anti-Augustan. In contrast, Paula James (1986) argues that metamorphosis constitutes an identity crisis not only for those transformed, but also for the gods who effect these transformations: these punishments, she argues, are the gods’ insecure reactions to blows to their own concepts of self. More broadly, Penelope Murray (1998) argues that these metamorphoses question what it means to be human, and that Ovid’s emphasis on the body shows that he regards the body’s materiality as an essential component of human identity (as argued for Ovidian elegy by Zimmermann Damer). According to Murray, Ovid sees

³⁸Enterline (2000) discusses the connection between body, voice, and identity in the *Metamorphoses* and its influence on early modern literature. The gendered body is also a fruitful topic in Ovidian scholarship. In analyzing the Calydonian boar hunt episode in book 8, Chappuis Sandoz (2010) argues that Ovid’s depictions of male and female bodies are easily legible performances of gender, as in theater. Keith, in contrast, reads Ovid’s epic as a negotiation of what it means to be male (1999b).

human identity as dependent, to some extent, on social identity and external appearances (1998, 86); on forcing a disjunct between appearance and identity in metamorphosis, Ovid is asking how important the body is to what it means to be human (ibid., 80).

Other scholarship has focused instead on social identity within the politics of the early empire, instead of personal identity. Charles Segal (1998), for example, argues that Ovid uses the body to examine the conflict between order and disorder and to show a descent into chaos. He concludes that the frequent transformations and mutilations in the text speak to an elite loss of autonomy in the new regime. Micaela Janan's Lacanian reading (2009) of the Theban cycle also considers identity politically, as a relationship not only between self and other, but also between individual and society. Thomas Habinek argues that as both a subject and object of the imperial machine, Ovid's poetry must also be examined as implicated in imperialism (2002, 46–47). Carole Newlands similarly draws attention to power structures in Ovid's poem: "[c]entral to the Ovidian universe, then, are unequal relations of power" (2018, 142). She reads these power relations and the violence they inflict on bodies through the lens of the new power structures of the empire: "the poem's cumulative effect drives us to consider the moral and political complexities of a metamorphic world often supported by the violent exercise of power" (ibid.).

Much scholarship situates these bodies in the cultural context, and particularly within the entertainment culture, of the empire. Philip Hardie (2002b) points to the popularity of gladiatorial games in the Augustan period as the background for the fragmented bodies throughout the poem. Similarly, Gareth Williams aligns Ovid's interest in grotesquery, particularly in the *Metamorphoses*, with the contemporary cruelties of the arena in his attempt to shock his audience: "[j]aded palates need added spices; as public displays of cruelty proliferated in the late Republic and early Empire, so there was a tendency toward greater sensationalism in

the Roman theatre and contemporary literature” (1996, 85). Andrew Feldherr (2010) likewise reads the text’s emphasis on spectacle against the backdrop of imperial spectacle, and links the issues with representation and interpretation in the poem, which frequently revolve around bodies, as an exploration of power relations that stems from contemporary status anxieties.

Ismene Lada-Richards (2013) reads the *Metamorphoses* through the lens of another popular form of entertainment, pantomime dancing: she argues that the body, in dance and in its larger social context, was privileged particularly in Augustan Rome as a means of communication, and that transformation in Ovid’s texts shows characters’ alienation from their own “bodily schema.”

This alienation affects not only the body’s communication, but also its integrity: at moments of emotional duress, she argues, the self “becomes distilled into body parts” (2013, 106).

Petronian scholarship looks to the failures of bodies and the tricks of illusion throughout the text to argue that anxieties about appearance and the transgression of boundaries are important themes. William Arrowsmith (1966) traces a pattern between the intertwining opposites of impotence and plenty to argue that eating and sex are linked with defecation and death in the *Satyricon*. Similarly, Jason König (2008) connects repeated failures of eating, drinking, and sex with dismemberment and anxieties about the inviolability of the elite body in the early empire. He links this concern with mutilation to the fragmentation of the author’s voice and points to the frequent issues of deceptive appearance: bodies in the *Satyricon*, König, argues, reveal anxieties about illusions and bodily inviolability. Victoria Rimell (2002) also connects the body and text in her analysis of Petronius: she reads corporeality as a metaphor for the entire novel and argues that disintegration and the transgression of boundaries are persistent themes. In contrast, Christopher Star reads Petronius alongside Seneca through a Stoic lens, arguing that

both authors are concerned with Stoic self-fashioning through the body, though Petronius' work represents a "carnivalization of Stoic self-fashioning" (2012, 98).

Because of Seneca's status as Stoic philosopher, considerations of the (Stoic) self in his works are numerous. For example, Shadi Bartsch (2015) examines Seneca's construction of an ideal Stoic self from his prose letters, and Christopher Star (2012) argues that Seneca responds to the turmoil of the Neronian period by constructing an "empire of the self." Gretchen Reydam-Schils (2005) shows how Stoic selfhood in Seneca's works is ultimately caught up in social relations. Scholars also tend to read Seneca's drama through a Stoic lens: Austin Busch (2009), for example, argues that his treatment of death in *Thyestes* and *Troades* airs un-philosophical fears about suicide and life after death, and Thomas Rosenmeyer (1989) sees the gore of Senecan drama as an expression of the Stoic emphasis on materiality. Other scholars look to Seneca's dense intertextuality to think about the construction of self in his dramatic works: John Fitch and Siobhan McElduff (2002) see the adoption of different *personae* by various characters as a central concern of Senecan tragedy and argue that the instability of *personae* is linked with the characters' ultimate demise.³⁹ Similarly, Christopher Gill (2009) attempts to reconcile the Stoic concept of the integral self with Medea's and Phaedra's unruly passions.

Although violence is ubiquitous in Senecan drama, relatively few scholars engage with it.⁴⁰ Antje Wessels (2014) brings it within the realm of aesthetics, arguing that the violence of Seneca's drama was the philosopher's attempt to cultivate an aesthetic that diverged from popular entertainment. Glenn Most (1992) broadly discusses the prevalence of mutilation and

³⁹Trinacty similarly argues that the characters of Seneca drama wield allusions to other texts in an "active contestation of meaning" (2014, 19).

⁴⁰A more detailed literature review of explanations of Senecan gore can be found in Chapter Five, pp. 169–72.

dismemberment in Neronian literature by connecting it to, on the one hand, the popularity of gladiatorial games and, on the other, to Stoic anxieties about the body as a site of identity. Spectacles in which humans are hunted like animals, in combination with the importance of the body for constituting identity in Stoic thought, Most argues, leads to uneasy reflections of the stability of human, embodied identity. Joanna Pyplacz (2010) also connects what she calls Seneca's "aesthetics of disgust" to gladiatorial games, arguing that the gore of his tragedies was simply a way of competing for the attention of the masses in an age when this type of entertainment was ever more popular. In a similar vein, Alessandra Zanobi (2014) argues that pantomime was to blame for the excessive violence of Senecan drama. Thus, most Senecan scholarship (and work on Neronian literature in general) explains its violence through the popularity of gladiatorial games or Stoic thought, without considering that such games were popular long before (and after) the Neronian period (Beacham 1999, 12–16)⁴¹ and that Stoicism was far from ubiquitous.

Other scholars take a more nuanced psychological view of these plays. R.F. Newbold argues that concerns about bodily safety can manifest as a preoccupation with images of bodily violation (1979, 94), which he sees in early imperial authors like Tacitus and Seneca (ibid., 98–99).⁴² Erich Segal (2008) uses a psychoanalytic lens to read Seneca's tragedies as an expression of the fear of living under an autocracy: Seneca's landscapes and broken bodies, he argues, express the precariousness of public life in the empire. Cindy Benton (2002) argues that the *Troades* stages anxieties about the vulnerability of the elite body in the empire: the suffering

⁴¹See Dunkle (2008, especially 153ff.) for an overview of gladiatorial games in Republican Rome.

⁴²Newbold measures the "boundary perception patterns" of late antique authors, using Tacitus, Seneca, Suetonius, Vergil and Horace as controls (1979, 95): while late antique authors "scored" the highest, Tacitus, Seneca, and Suetonius showed a marked increase in images of boundaries and boundary violation (ibid., 98–99).

Trojan women, she contends, reflect elites' ambiguous subject position under Nero. Helen Slaney (2015) also connects dismemberment in Senecan drama to its political context: she uses the Kristevan abject (discussed below) to uncover what she considers an uneasiness with the porous borders of the growing empire. I will argue, rather, that readings these bodies as signifiers allows us to push beyond the connection between the gore of Julio-Claudian literature and contemporaneous popular entertainment. Not mere crowd-pleasing gore, the ubiquitous violence in these texts is connected to a larger concern about the interpretability of the male body and male civic identity in a rapidly changing and unpredictable socio-political environment.

Theories of Embodiment

As I argue in this dissertation, historical and literary sources during the shift from Republic to Principate show that elite male identity was grounded in the body, and that this embodied identity was the source of much anxiety. Modern theory on the body—historical, psychoanalytical, or literary investigation—shifts focus to the bodies that form the basis of human experience, and thinks broadly about the role the body plays both in forming an individual sense of self and in larger cultural and political movements. As James Porter puts it, the body is a “nodal point of anxiety and disquiet” (1999, 6), a mirror that both reflects and distorts the culture wars of the world it moves in. The lenses of modern theory open up further avenues of investigating the role of the body in the early Principate: careful application of theory makes it possible to go beyond merely describing the preoccupation with the male body in this period, and enables us to speculate on its possible causes and draw connections between it and the period's social and political context. The theories I will use to contextualize the elite Roman

preoccupation with embodied male identity come from a wide variety of backgrounds—history, gender theory, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, to name a few—and therefore approach the body’s role in forming identity from a variety of different angles.

The Body and Class Tensions: Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault’s work in Volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* connects the body to its social and political context. For Foucault, uneven power dynamics underlie everything: they constitute the construction of reality, from how people conceive of themselves as individuals, to how they move through the world and interact with others. Further, Foucault identifies the body as the place where tensions from these unequal relationships of power play out. He uses the Victorian obsession with sex as his case study, arguing that the aversion to sex in the Victorian era was not a subconscious “repression” of sexual desire as popularly thought, but was rather an “intensification of the body” (1978, 123). That is, controlling sex was not a way of alienating oneself from the body, but was a symptom of the newly formed bourgeoisie’s preoccupation with the body, a way of separating this newly minted class by regulating the behaviors of the bodies that constitute it. Thus, Foucault connects a preoccupation with sex and the body unique to the Victorian era with the period’s class tensions: according to him, the tensions arising from the emergence of the new bourgeois class play out through the body in ways not readily apparent.

In the Julio-Claudian period, an unstable political context similarly manifests in a somewhat surprising attention to the body, an attention that does not focus on sex, but is preoccupied with the elite male body as a signifier, particularly when this bodily signifier fails to function. As an obsession with sex recurs again and again in Victorian writings, so the specter of

the unidentifiable, dismembered, or otherwise destroyed male body haunts Julio-Claudian literature. For example, in his version of Thebes' origin in *Metamorphoses* 3, Ovid foregrounds the bodies of the house of Cadmus' family members and emphasizes themes of recognition: Cadmus fails to recognize a snake as sacred and is himself transformed into a serpent, and after Actaeon and Pentheus become unidentifiable to those close to them, they are torn apart. As I discuss in Chapter Two, Ovid repeatedly contrasts Actaeon's name with his new, deceptive form as a stag, in order to stress the mismatch between his identity and body. Likewise, Ovid stages the failure of Pentheus' body to communicate his identity to his mother and aunt, both blinded by the power of Bacchus. For both Actaeon and Pentheus, the failure of their bodies to signify their true identities leads to gruesome dismemberment. Just as the Victorian obsession with sex masked broader tensions about bourgeoisie identity, as Foucault has shown, this dwelling on bodily destruction in Julio-Claudian literature stems not from a mere love of gore, but from deeper questions of classed and gendered identity in an uncertain political era.

Bodily Identity as Performance: Judith Butler

Even when such gory scenes are absent, the body as a signifier, usually an unsuccessful one, recurs again and again in Julio-Claudian literature, as questions of identity—how one can recognize another person, both as a unique individual and as a representative of his class and gender—become fraught. Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* can help elucidate how identity and recognition could become so problematic. According to Butler, identity is not an ineffable, intangible essence unique to an individual, but a project of active, ongoing maintenance: a person's dress, comportment, speech, actions, and more all work together to give the impression that her identity is a wholly stable, integral part of

herself (1990, 185–93). The stability of identity, however, is an illusion, dependent upon a consistent and “legible” performance: viewers must be able to clearly and consistently interpret the “signs” of this social performance. That is, everyone must (1) agree that, for example, long hair, dangly earrings, a dress, and a high voice read as “feminine,” and (2) the individual using these signals of femininity must employ them wholly consistently and “successfully,” in order for this “female” performance to be read as such and to appear as an essential part of her identity. If, however, this individual combined a female-signaling dress and high voice with, say, a beard, the illusion that femininity is a wholly integral, inseparable part of them would be shattered. Moreover, Butler presents this consistent performance of gender identity as a compulsory one: combining gendered bodily signals—such as the long hair, dangly earrings, high voice, and dress mentioned above—is not an expression of individual identity as much as it reflects a society’s rules about gender presentation.⁴³ Butler’s theory of gender as performance can thus help us think through not only the workings of a consistent and “legible” performance of identity, but also the power structures that dictate which identities are legible and which are not.

In early imperial literature, this “performance” of identity is a confusing jumble of signals that reveals, unsettlingly, that identity is a kind of costume that can be donned and removed at will. In the bewildering world of Petronius’ *Satyricon*, for example, Encolpius repeatedly fails to “read” the social performances of those around him, but this failure is not entirely his fault. The freedman Trimalchio’s get-up, for example, is a confusing jumble of conflicting signs: he sports a freedman’s shaved head, a shawl with a purple stripe, mimicking a senator’s robe, and gold rings mixed with iron, in his aspiration to equestrian status (32). Identity in the world of the *Satyricon* is revealed as a kind of theatrical performance, and a confusing one, at that. These

⁴³Butler examines the performance of drag—that is, a subversive bodily performance—to characterize normative gender performances as compulsory and internalized.

disorienting performances of social identity dramatize how the social upheaval of the early empire—where a former slave could acquire obscene riches, as Trimalchio did—has disrupted the “correct,” seemingly “natural” performance of bodily identity from the Republic, resulting in constant confusion.

Threats to Bodily Identity: The Kristevan Abject, Anzieu’s Skin-Ego, and Scarry’s Body in Pain

As the stories of Actaeon and Pentheus attest, the preoccupation with bodily identity in Julio-Claudian literature also manifests as a near-obsession with gory, dismembered, or otherwise destroyed bodies. The social identity of an elite Roman man had long been, as discussed above, centered on the illusion that his body was inviolate, unable to be beaten, penetrated, or killed ignominiously, yet in the violence of the early empire, many elites were tortured, corporally punished or executed, and mutilated after death. In Julio-Claudian fiction, such mutilations are at the forefront of the elite consciousness: hardly a single play from the Senecan corpus lacks a scene of dismemberment of a non-enslaved person.

Julia Kristeva’s work on the abject can help explain how elite Roman men came to define their bodies as inviolate, as well as how such bodily penetration or destruction could come to be a persistent preoccupation in Julio-Claudian literature. Kristeva attempted to show that in the male-focused field of psychoanalysis, women lack subjectivity and can disrupt the neat formations of (male) identity that Freud and Lacan theorized. According to Kristeva, the abject is anything that occupies or crosses bodily boundaries, like excrement, blood, or other effluvia. The female body is abject, because it, on the one hand, leaks effluvia in menstruation, childbirth, and nursing, and because, on the other, the male subject must reject the maternal body and define the boundaries of his own body in order to develop his own identity. Because the abject transgresses

boundaries both physically (between the inside and outside, like effluvia) and psychologically (between the subject and object, as with the maternal body), it threatens the identity of whomever it encounters. The abject, according to Kristeva, “disturbs identity, system, and order” and “does not respect boundaries, positions, rules” (1982, 4).

As the social upheaval of the early empire muddled distinctions between social classes and rendered identity problematic, so the abject punctures the fantasy of the male body as inviolate. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, Seneca presents Hippolytus’ dismembered corpse at the end of the play as a broken signifier that no longer conveys his personal identity or characteristic beauty. In light of the Kristevan abject, the violence against Hippolytus’ body emerges not as gratuitous gore, but as a way of dwelling on the boundaries between self and other and on bodily identity. In short, the anxieties of identity in the early Principate play out in extended descriptions of abject bodies in its literature.⁴⁴

These anxieties come to the fore in Ovid’s linked descriptions of cannibalism, which use abject imagery to dwell on the meaning of identity. Repeated episodes of cannibalism (or near-cannibalism) show the issue of blurred boundaries between self and other in the Kristevan abject as vividly embodied: in cannibalism not only is the distinction between self and other muddled, but bodily boundaries are also physically transgressed. Each of these episodes zeroes in on the *viscera*, the internal organs, to illustrate this extreme transgression.⁴⁵ When Tereus unwittingly eats his son Itys (discussed further in Chapter Three), he wishes to disembowel himself to

⁴⁴This preoccupation with the boundaries of the body is not new to the Julio-Claudian period. In addition, to Homer’s *Iliad*, the vivid descriptions of plague in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* (2.47–54) and Vergil’s *Georgics* (3.478–566) reveal an anxiety about breaching the body’s boundaries.

⁴⁵Hines (2018) shows that the use of *viscera* in the *Metamorphoses* connects reproduction with destruction and argues that this link recalls the recent civil war, figured as an act of self-violation.

separate his son's body from his own: *et modo, si posset, reserato pectore diras / egerere inde dapes semesaque viscera gestit, / flet modo seque vocat bustum miserabile nati* (and he tears at his chest and tries, as if he could, / to vomit up the dire feast and half-digested **innards**, / and he weeps and calls himself the miserable tomb of his child, 6.663–65). Likewise, Achaemenides, left behind by Ulysses' crew on the Cyclops' island and traumatized by the sight of his friends' deaths, fears that his *viscera* will become merged with Polyphemus': *mors erat ante oculos, minimum tamen illa malorum, / et iam prensurum, iam nunc mea viscera rebar / in sua mersurum* (death was before my eyes, but the least of evils, / for I thought that he would grab me and merge / my **innards** with his own, 14.202–04). And in his case for vegetarianism, Pythagoras describes eating meat as a kind of cannibalism, in which various *viscera* are merged together: *heu quantum scelus est in viscera viscera condi / ingestoque avidum pinguescere corpore corpus / alteriusque animans animantis vivere leto!* (alas, how much of a crime it is that **innards** are hidden **in innards** / and that a greedy body grows fat by eating another body, / and that a living thing thrives through the death of another living thing! 15.88–95).⁴⁶ Pythagoras also linguistically illustrates the merging of bodies that cannibalism entails in placing the words for different bodies and selves side by side: *corpore corpus, alteriusque animans animantis*.

These episodes dispel the fantasy that the subject is an inviolate, self-contained whole in a shocking way, as a particularly taboo act blurs the lines between self and other. The frequent descriptions of abject bodies in Julio-Claudian literature, then, dwell on the all-too porous boundaries between self and other and the precariousness of bodily identity, which, in the upheaval of the early Principate, is a sign of the instability of personal, social, and civic identity of the male elite.

⁴⁶Erysichthon, too, ends up eating his own body in a fit of divinely insatiable hunger (8.875–78).

In a few of the most gruesome mythological renderings of the Julio-Claudian period—like Ovid’s brief, gut-wrenching treatment of Marsyas (6.382–400)—the skin plays a prominent role. The treatment of these myths reveals an interest in skin as a key signifier of identity, a role that Didier Anzieu’s concept of the “Skin-ego” elucidates. According to Anzieu, the skin constructs a sense of bodily identity through three functions: it acts as (1) a sack that contains the internal organs and the rest of the body, (2) a barrier that protects the internal body, and (3) a mode of communication, in that it both transmits touch and sensation, and records markers of identity, such as birthmarks, wrinkles, scars, or tattoos (2016, 15–19). When, in infancy or early childhood, something either prevents the skin from performing any of these functions, or the child imagines that his skin is damaged or lacking, the proper formation of an adult Skin-ego, a secure sense of self in one’s own body, is hindered (ibid., 39–43). That is, the skin’s proper functioning is foundational to a stable bodily identity, and fantasies of destruction to this bodily and psychical wrapping, such as a masochistic preoccupation with flaying, indicate a broken Skin-ego and lack of secure sense of self.

As I describe in Chapter Three, Marsyas’ skin no longer contains or protects his body after Apollo flays him in punishment for losing a musical contest against him.⁴⁷ As Ovid puts it, his entire body is nothing but a wound, as his nerves, muscles, and internal organs are laid bare.⁴⁸

⁴⁷A reading of the myth of Marsyas constitutes an entire chapter in Anzieu’s work (2016, 51–62). Anzieu, however, draws on key details not found in Ovid’s rendition of the story to illustrate the importance of the Skin-ego for the development of individuality and sexuality. In the version of the myth Anzieu draws on, Marsyas’ flayed skin, preserved in its entirety in a cave at the head of the life-giving river Marsyas, continues to respond to the sound of pipes. Anzieu, then, reads Marsyas’ flayed skin as the Skin-ego, which protects the Ego, leads to the development of a healthy sexual maturity, and helps the Ego communicate (ibid., 53–54). In Ovid’s version, Marsyas’ skin is not preserved, but is stripped to ribbons, and the river Marsyas that springs from the country folk’s tears is not explicitly associated with fertility (*Met.* 6.382–400).

⁴⁸*nec quicquam nisi vulnus erat: cruor undique manat, / detectique patent nervis, trepidaeque sine ulla / pelle micant venae; salientia viscera possis / et perlucentes numerare in pectore fibras*: there’s nothing

Furthermore, Marsyas' skin also fails to fulfill Anzieu's third function of the Skin-ego, in that it no longer communicates who he is: with his skin stripped back, Marsyas' glistening (*micant, perlucentes*) and trembling (*trepidaeque, salientia*) body resembles a precious object or a stringed musical instrument more than a hairy satyr or even a living being.⁴⁹ Without his skin and the security it offers his sense of self, Marsyas is reduced to an object, not a subject.

In her philosophical work *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry also explores the disjunct between self and body in her discussion of the experience of being in pain. According to Scarry, the body is a tool that, when healthy, functions so smoothly as to become almost invisible: a young, healthy individual does not waste thought on a short walk to the mailbox, for example (1985, 47–53). Only when this tool malfunctions does its failure force an awareness that the body is something separate from the self. The body in pain causes the subject to see her body not as something wholly contiguous with herself, but as an object in revolt: the same short stroll to the mailbox forces an elderly person with arthritis to be painfully aware of his body with every step in a way that the young person cannot understand. The realization of this disjunct between self and body, subject and object, that pain causes, according to Scarry, leads to a crisis of identity not easily resolved.

Scarry's understanding of the body in pain can help elucidate Marsyas' pithy quip that has long disturbed commentators for its seeming irreverence:⁵⁰ "*quid me mihi detrahis?* (Why are you dragging me from myself)?" he asks, as Apollo is peeling off his flesh (6.385). This

left apart from wound; blood flows everywhere: / his uncovered sinews lie exposed, his quivering veins throb / and glisten without any skin to cover them; you could count the entrails as the palpitate, / and the vitals showing clearly in his breast (6.388–92).

⁴⁹See Feldherr and James (2004) for a fuller treatment of this idea.

⁵⁰E.g., Galinsky (1975, 195), Williams (1996, 84), and Anderson (ad loc.).

rhetorical question is not merely a wry observation, another example of Ovid's disturbing humor, but touches on the very nature of the body and self *in extremis*. The enjambment of *ego* in two forms, *me mihi*, shows Marsyas' awareness that his tortured body is simultaneously himself and not himself: as Scarry has theorized, Marsyas' agony makes him realize that his rebelling body is not synonymous with himself. In the *Satyricon*, Encolpius, too, speaks of his impotent penis as something separate from himself. In describing his failure to perform, he places the blame squarely on his penis, drawing a line between himself and this frustrating body part. In order to illustrate his point, he argues that others who have similar maladies, like gout, say that their bodies are doing them a bad turn.⁵¹ As I describe further in Chapter Four, such language presupposes a disjunct between body and self the way Scarry theorizes, as Encolpius here realizes that his rebellious body is not synonymous with himself and figures his impotence as a kind of betrayal. Thus, Marsyas' rhetorical question and Encolpius' impotence are not simply darkly humorous side-plots, but ways of questioning issues of identity and the body's relationship to the self.

The Body as a Signifier of Control: Hortense Spillers

These recurring images of destroyed bodies speak not only to a crisis of personal identity—how an individual could be recognizable in the wake of an ignominious death—but also of a social identity governed by larger power structures. That is, when the overarching power structures that dictate social scripts are disrupted, social identity and one's role in gender and class hierarchies become uncertain. And, as Foucault showed, the body becomes the playing

⁵¹*podagrici pedibus suis male dicunt, chiragrici minibus, lippi oculis, et qui offenderunt saepe digitos, quicquid doloris habent, in pedes deferent*: gouty people damn their feet, arthritic people their hands, the bleary-eyed their eyes, and those who often stub their toes blame their feet whenever they have trouble (132.14).

field upon which these disorienting shifts in power dynamics play out. Hortense Spillers' distinction between "flesh" and "body" shows exactly how overarching dynamics of power can shape the bodies that participate in them, and helps connect the Julio-Claudian preoccupation with wounded and marked bodies with the upheaval of the early Principate.

Spillers, an American Black feminist theorist, wrote her groundbreaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in response to the 1965 Moynihan report on Black poverty.⁵² She drew a distinction between Black "flesh" and the white "body": according to Spillers, flesh is the objectified and enslaved body that is marked through scarring, branding, and other tortures (1987, 67). Through this marking, flesh becomes a sign only of the enslaver's domination,⁵³ and fails to signify any other kind of identity or status: the opacity of the flesh blocks out any other identity the individual might possess and renders the enslaved person a living symbol of the enslaver's dominance.⁵⁴ Body, on the other hand, belongs to the subject, not the object, and the enslaver (ibid.). The enslaver builds up his identity by inscribing

⁵²In this essay, Spillers attempts to find a space for Black femininity in the wake of the Moynihan report's claims that Black poverty stemmed from the perversion of "typical" familial structures in Black, matriarchal families by pushing back against negative stereotypes of Black women and the idea that matriarchy was destroying the Black American family. Although Spillers focuses on femininity, her observations on enslavement's effects on gender expression as a whole provide insights for the performance of masculinity, as well.

⁵³Scarry similarly understands the wounded body as a signifier of one party's control over another: in her work on the Hebrew Bible, she argues that God demonstrates his power through marking the bodies of his followers (1985, 198–204).

⁵⁴In his work on the male body in Roman Egypt, Montserrat similarly sees the enslaved body as pure *soma*, but leave the possibility that this body could be transformed via manumission open (1999, 153). He examines papyri, particularly ads searching for escaped enslaved individuals, to argue that enslaved bodies are represented as feminized, childish, passive objects (ibid., 158–59). Gleason makes use of a similar distinction in her analysis of Josephus' account of the siege of Jerusalem: she argues that acts of violence in these texts function as a kind of language of dominance (2001, 51) that is universally understood in cultures in which "autonomy and control were articulated in the language of the body" (ibid., 84).

the flesh of the people enslaved to him through torture. Unlike flesh, body is also transparent, which allows a view past the owner's physical self to his subjecthood: that is, the enslaver's body is not a symbol inscribed by others, but a vehicle for his own personal and social identity.⁵⁵ Thus, in Spillers' view, bodies become texts of power dynamics: the power structures that govern people's lives become, quite literally, written on the body.⁵⁶

In the Julio-Claudian period, normative power structures have been inverted: senators lacked real power, while freedmen had the ear of the emperor (see above). Therefore, its literature is populated with images not of enslaved bodies being inscribed through torture, but of non-slave bodies: those who meet violent ends in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Senecan drama are not historical Roman men of the senatorial class, but they are certainly not enslaved.⁵⁷ As I will show in Chapter Three, the king Pelops' ivory shoulder, rewarded to him as a kind of consolation prize after his father butchered him and served him for dinner, functions both as a marker of his dehumanization at the hands of his father and of his personal identity and high status. In the literature of the Julio-Claudian period as in Spillers' work, bodies are texts of domination and control, but shifts in the power structures that encode these bodies-as-texts render them muddled.

⁵⁵This distinction between opacity and transparency obviously maps onto the dichotomy Blackness vs. whiteness, and Spillers' work in critical race theory deals with the American slave trade and the institution of slavery in the American South. Even though Rome's system of enslavement was not based on race, her work is nonetheless relevant, as the elite male privilege of bodily inviolability was the basic distinction between enslaved and free (Walters 1997, see above). Furthermore, violence against the enslaved was a common method of control, and branding and scarring were widespread tactics of punishment and identification (see Hunt 2018, 146–52).

⁵⁶Montserrat similarly describes the male body in Roman Egypt as a "surface upon which power relations were mapped" (1999, 153).

⁵⁷Pentheus, for example, is a king, and Seneca's Thyestes is a former one.

Conclusion

In Julio-Claudian literature, the wounded, marked, or dismembered male body is not to be dismissed as an off-color attempt to compete for attention in the age of gladiatorial games, as, for example, Joanna Pyplacz has argued: it becomes a nodal point for multiple, intersecting anxieties about class, gender, and status in an uncertain political age. A body previously defined as socially inviolate is, in this literature, penetrated and inscribed to the point of total destruction; a body that should be an easily legible text of control and power is reduced to a confusing jumble of signs. These theorists of the body help to connect these nightmarish images to larger socio-political concerns: crises of social identity of the male elite converge on the recurring image of the disordered, dismembered male body. And the images of this non-functioning, non-signifying body, in turn, help the elite men reading and writing these texts work through their disorienting loss of status and power in a new world in which nothing means what it once did.

CHAPTER TWO: Bodily *Signa* and Disorientation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

False Façades in Augustan Rome and the World of the Metamorphoses

As its proem announces, transformed bodies are the subject of the *Metamorphoses*. In the whirlwind of stories that follow, readers would be forgiven for losing sight of this main theme, but the narrator is clear: *in nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora: di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas) / adspirate meis...* (my mind moves me to talk about forms changed into new bodies: gods, favor my undertaking, for you have changed even this, 1.1–3).⁵⁸ In these opening lines, Ovid repeats *mutare* twice, and the enjambed position of *corpora* draws further attention to the poem's new subject.⁵⁹ As William S. Anderson points out, Ovid's topic is "the instability of form, which normally gives things identity in the world" (1997, ad loc.). Even though many of the ensuing stories focus on other topics,⁶⁰ the reader should not forget that new

⁵⁸In this chapter and the following chapter, the text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is from the following sources: Anderson's 1997 text and commentary on Books 1–5, Anderson (1972) on Books 6–10, Hopkinson (2000) on Book 13, and Myers (2009) on Book 14. All translations are adapted from Martin's 2004 translation.

⁵⁹Farrell notes that the prominent position of *corpora* gives it "something of the titular quality conventionally assigned to the first word of an epic poem" (1999, 127). Feldherr points out that the enjambment of *corpora* also forces readers to adjust their expectations of what was changed: instead of reading *mutata* substantively, they suddenly find a new object of the sentence (2010, 2). These lines announce, both explicitly and metapoetically, that change is coming.

⁶⁰For example, Medea's exploits, which occupy roughly the first half of Book 7 (1–424), have little to do with transformation, unless her renewal of Pelias' youth counts. Feldherr argues that the ever-shifting construction of the poem has paradoxically led commentators to undervalue the centrality of metamorphosis to the text (2002, 163).

bodies and shifting forms are the main themes in the world that Ovid constructs over the next fifteen books.

And how utterly disorienting this world is, in which stories are layered upon each other like a collage, in which bodies and the natural world they inhabit are in perpetual flux. At the end of the epic, the philosopher Pythagoras expounds his view of nature—one that Andrew Feldherr dubs a “comprehensive reading” of the poem (2010, 150)—in which bodies constantly and bewilderingly change shape:

nec species sua cuique manet, rerumque novatrix
ex aliis alias reparat natura figuras:
nec perit in toto quicquam, mihi credite, mundo,
sed variat faciemque novat, nascique vocatur
incipere esse aliud, quam quod fuit ante, morique
desinere illud idem. cum sint huc forsitan illa,
haec translata illuc, summa tamen omnia constant.
nil equidem durare diu sub imagine eadem
crediderim: ...

Nothing retains its own appearance, and the renewer of things,
nature, changes figures into other shapes:
nothing, believe me, has perished in the whole world,
but changes and renews its appearance, and is said to be born
when it begins to be different than it was before, and to die
when it ceases to be the same. Though some things move close,
and other things move far off, nevertheless the sum of everything stays the same.
I believe that nothing persists for a long time under the same
form... (15.252–60)⁶¹

When bodies and objects never cease to change their appearances (*nec species sua cuique manet*, 252), one can no longer rely on one’s eyes to give a true report of the surrounding world. At the

⁶¹Scholars have taken up various interpretative tacks with this passage. Enterline reads it metapoetically, pointing out that *forma* can also refer to poetic composition (2000, 62–64). Along another interpretive vein, Hardie connects this view of a world in flux with Empedocles’ philosophy, and reads this passage in particular with Empedocles fragment 8 in mind. He also argues that the philosopher’s claim that the world engenders monsters with limbs joined together haphazardly (B 61) echoes the unpredictable nature of Ovid’s metamorphoses (2002a, 206).

same time, Ovid privileges “visual cognition” in the text: individuals use sight to navigate their places in this world, and, in turn, are evaluated by their appearances (Feldherr 2010, 125–29).⁶² Thus, the poem presents a relentless assault on the reliability of visual evidence and, by extension, on the identity that visual appearance is meant to signify.⁶³ Ovid’s world, in which bodies are made to change form like moldable wax, dispenses with the notion that both bodies and identities can be inviolate and reliable.

This world of constant flux is more than merely bewildering. It is also dangerous: because a vengeful deity may be lurking behind every rock or friendly face, a false step may be punished with an alienating transformation for virtually no reason. As Dryope is being turned into a poplar tree as punishment for plucking a lotus flower that was formerly a nymph, she gives her husband some unsettling advice to pass on to their infant son: she tells him never to pick flowers, but rather to think that every fruit, every flower, is really the body of some goddess (9.380–81). It seems that her transformation as punishment for this seemingly mundane action and the heart-rending separation that ensues are Ovid’s inventions:⁶⁴ with these changes, Ovid shows his interest in the disorientation of a world where everything is not as it seems.

⁶²As Judith Butler has theorized, a consistent and “legible” performance of identity is required to create the impression that identity is intrinsic to the self: when the physical appearance that helps constitute this performance of identity is in constant flux, the illusion that identity is an unchanging, integral component of the self is shattered.

⁶³The relationship between illusion and reality in Ovid’s epic is the topic of much scholarship. Hardie writes that in his poem, “Ovid creates a mythological drama out of the psychological drama of the delusions of sight and sound” (2002a, 156). Rosati similarly sees illusion and deception as the operative motifs of Ovid’s text: “[t]he reality of the *Metamorphoses* is labyrinthine, elusive, shifting: from beneath the veil of appearances, another, different reality can always emerge, and characters wander about as if lost in this universe of errors” (2021, 127). Humans blunder through this “shifting, deceptive reality,” he argues, and are characterized by “a natural tendency to err” (ibid., 126).

⁶⁴In other extant versions of the tale, Dryope is rewarded for the birth of her son by transformation into a nymph (Anderson, ad 9.324–94).

In focusing on deceptive appearances and the disorientation they engender, Ovid uses the familiar but safely removed world of Greek mythology to reflect, in a distorted fashion, contemporary Rome.⁶⁵ In Augustan Rome, too, appearances and reality often did not align. Dio Cassius captures this sense of disorientation in his description of the Principate as a monarchy disguised as a republic (53.12–19). Even though the Republican administrative framework survived, he says, the emperor, who controlled all funds and military power, sat at its pinnacle and gave himself official titles merely to convey the impression of having obtained power by virtue of the laws (53.16–17).⁶⁶ Augustus’ propaganda, namely that he was merely restoring the Republic to its former glory, divorced language from reality: he called himself the first citizen, *princeps*, among his fellow elites in a republic, while he was laying the groundwork for a dynasty of emperors, as his former peers found themselves increasingly powerless.⁶⁷

These deceptive appearances extend to the confusion of bodily signifiers as well.⁶⁸ In the poem, as in contemporary Rome, bodies no longer reliably signify social status and power, even

⁶⁵Hardie calls the world of the *Metamorphoses* a “looking-glass world that bears more than a passing likeness to the delusory and unstable world of appearances in Tacitus’ picture of imperial Rome” (2002b, 40).

⁶⁶“The senate as a body, it is true, continued to sit in judgment as before, and in certain cases transacted business with embassies and heralds, from both peoples and kings; and the people and the plebs, moreover, continued to meet for elections; but nothing was done that did not please Caesar” (53.21.6). Dio Cassius also outlines in detail the individual changes that rendered the Republican politicians mere cogs in an imperial bureaucracy (53.12–15): for example, proconsuls, procurators, and propraetors were appointed from all social classes and now received salaries and orders (53.15). The historian also traces this illusory form of government back to the confusion of the civil wars: he similarly dubs the second triumvirate as a monarchy playing at being a republic (45.11.3). See Lavan (2013, esp. 66) for a sketch of how Augustus’ autocracy masqueraded as a republic.

⁶⁷Lavan also argues that modern historians should not confine the emperor’s powers to his specific juridical abilities, pointing out that his control over the armies and elites’ political careers, as well as his superior wealth, were further sources of imperial power (2013, 66).

⁶⁸The emperor’s body, too, becomes a site of contradictions and confusion: see Vout (2009b) and Meister (2012) for analyses of the symbolism behind the emperor’s physical body as well as representations of it.

though outer appearance loses none of its importance in signaling social identity in this period (Feldherr 2010, 45). Owing to the increasing ease of social promotion throughout the late Republic, the old caste system of Rome began to falter. No longer were the haves clearly divided from the have-nots, as sudden changes in fortune or successful army campaigns could make the lowly freedman or foot soldier wildly rich and socially elite. Dio Cassius emphasizes this social flux in his descriptions of soldiers during the civil wars using their earnings to buy up the confiscated luxury goods of elite Romans, sold wholesale at low prices: while elites were afraid to draw attention to their wealth by buying them back, soldiers of all class backgrounds purchased the previous trappings of high status (47.17). These newfound riches were solidified with increases in status: revenue problems led the second triumvirate to enroll men from all backgrounds, even soldiers and sons of freedmen and the enslaved, in the Senate (Dio Cas. 48.34). Andrew Wallace-Hadrill sees this method of converting material wealth into status as the main means by which culture was changed in the late Republican period, as equestrians and local Italian elites rose to power (2008, 37).⁶⁹ Pedro López Barja de Quiroga's statistical analysis of class mobility (1995) demonstrates how this extreme social flux continued into the early empire: he shows that increasing numbers of *equites*, along with uneven distributions of formerly enslaved people and immigrants in various Italian cities, allowed for socially advancing plebians to enter the *ordo* in unprecedented numbers.⁷⁰ Ultimately, Augustus was able to enroll and expel individuals from various *ordines* at will with his power of censor (Dio Cas. 53.17). While

⁶⁹He further distinguishes between the Republican system of "rank," which remained relatively fixed throughout Rome's history, and "class," which he defines by the possession of luxury, and which emerges after systems of rank have begun to falter (2008, 29).

⁷⁰This trend becomes more extreme as the Principate continues, but finds its origins in the upheaval of the late Republic and early empire.

property requirements for holding office still were in place, Augustus would often make up the difference in favored candidates' wealth (54.17).⁷¹ The political chaos of the late Republican period compounded by the shift from Republic to autocracy shook up the Republican systems of rank that formerly governed social and political life.

For the elites, accustomed to the old Republican system of clothing and other bodily signifiers, using class markers to distinguish the *nouveaux riches* from patrician blue-bloods became increasingly difficult.⁷² Dio Cassius, for example, relates more than one tale of powerful freedmen rewarded by being enrolled in the equestrian order and given multiple gold rings.⁷³ In this face of this increasing social mobility, Augustus attempted to sharpen the distinctions between social classes, as his hierarchical seating patterns for elites at public festivals (Feldherr 2010, 44) and his law forbidding anyone except magistrates to wear the purple dress (Dio Cas. 49.16) demonstrate.⁷⁴ Other measures did little to stem the confusion: he culled the ranks for

⁷¹In addition, in 18 BCE men of all classes except the senatorial were now allowed to marry freedwomen and count their offspring as legitimate (Dio Cas. 54.16). In 5 CE, daughters of freedmen were decreed eligible to become priestesses of Vesta, as not enough senatorial families were offering their daughters, though none were chosen by lot (Dio Cas. 22.5).

⁷²This difficulty arose from the confusion of the civil wars and the late Republic (Edmondson 2008, 32; Meister 2012, 109): Dio Cassius relates a few (possibly fictitious) anecdotes about enslaved individuals who were actually elected to official posts before being caught out by their enslavers. A certain Maximus was recognized by his enslaver while fulfilling his duties as quaestor, but was not punished. Another serving as praetor was not as lucky: he was first freed and then hurled headfirst down the Capitol steps (48.34.5).

⁷³Augustus rewarded Menas for betraying Sextus in favor of him in 39 BCE (Dio Cas. 48.45) and Antonius Musa for curing him of a life-threatening illness in 23 BCE. Musa was further rewarded with an exemption on taxes for himself, his descendants, and all other doctors forever and a public funeral complete with a golden image of him when he died (53.30).

⁷⁴Augustus' other measures to limit citizenship and manumission (Suet. *Aug.* 40.3), to strictly divide seating in the arena by class and gender (ibid., 44), and to require wearing the toga while conducting business in the forum (ibid., 40) attempted to curb, or at least control, this growing social fluidity. Beacham calls the theater of Marcellus in the Augustan era "color-coded," with the broad purple stripes of the senators in the front shading into the narrower purple stripes of the equestrians, followed by the white togas of citizens and the undyed wool of the poor and the enslaved in the back (1999, 126).

senators, which had swelled to over a thousand during the civil wars, multiple times over his rule.⁷⁵ He allowed, however, those removed from the senatorial ranks to keep their senatorial dress and places of privileges in the orchestra (Suet. *Aug.* 35.1–2): as Dio Cassius puts it, “some few were left in an intermediate position, being regarded as belonging neither to the Senate nor the people” (ὀλίγοι δὲ τινες ἐν τῷ μέσῳ, μήτε τῆς γερουσίας μήτε τοῦ δήμου νομιζόμενοι, κατελείφθησαν, 54.14.5). Though these former senators could no longer meet in the Senate, they moved through Rome in the same dress and in the same positions of privilege, and would have been indistinguishable for the casual onlooker from the “real” senators. In contemporary Rome as well as in the world of Ovid’s poetry, the body, previously an easily legible text of social identity, has become difficult to decipher.

Ovid’s choice of myth, not history, for his epic poem gives new expression to the disjunct between appearances and reality in the contemporary political landscape. He uses familiar stories to give new voice to the increasing disorientation that subjects of an authoritarian regime were subjected to (Segal 1998, 36): just as “orientation seems more difficult in an ever-expanding bureaucratic and autocratic government” (Segal 1998, 32), transformation after transformation relentlessly chip away at the reliability of visual evidence. The world of Ovid’s *carmen perpetuum* becomes more and more unsettling as the gulf between visual proof and underlying truth widens, until nothing and nobody are as they first appear.

⁷⁵The first cut occurred in 29 BCE after the Senate’s increases during the civil wars. Augustus reduced it again to 600 senators in 18 BCE and again in 13 BCE. He also established minimum census values for senators, which made elites potentially dependent upon his vast resources if they did not wish to lose their rank along with their wealth (Millar 1977, 297).

Bodily Signifiers and Recognition in the Metamorphoses

Because bodily signifiers in the *Metamorphoses* are unstable, words describing the interpretive process appear frequently: terms denoting signs (*signum, nota, vestigium*) and recognition (*noscere, cognoscere*) recur in scenes in which an individual's identity is at stake. Rather than provide clarity, these words often highlight how mixed up bodily signs have become. In Ovid's world, bodily signifiers are not merely deceptive, as when characters' changed forms no longer indicate who they truly are: sometimes signs have no fixed meaning, or end up meaning nothing at all.⁷⁶

Ovid's framing of the first metamorphosis, a point in the text where his audience would have paid close attention, encourages readers to see these issues with *signa* and their interpretation through the lens of contemporary Rome: he directly evokes Augustan Rome in his description of the council of the gods Jupiter has called to discuss humankind's moral depravity.⁷⁷ The poet first describes the Olympian gods' palaces as the Palatine of the sky:

...dextra laevaue deorum
atria nobilium valvis celebrantur apertis
(plebs habitat diversa locis): hac parte potentes
caelicolae clarique suos posuere penates.
hic locus est, quem, si verbis audacia detur,
haud timeam magni dixisse Palatia caeli.

...and on the left and right the palaces

⁷⁶Scholarship previously attempted to pin down a pattern or key for the metamorphoses in the text, like Solodow (1988), who saw transformation as the crystallization of an innate essence, as did Schmidt (1991), who argued that the poem's theme was not metamorphosis and change, but the innate collective identity of humankind. Such readings are too neat for Ovid: Feldherr, in contrast, argues that the poem puts "competing views about change in dialogue with each other" (2010, 34), and that no single key explicates every metamorphosis in the poem (2010, 35).

⁷⁷According to Müller, the entire scene is inessential to the plot and included only as a way to draw connections to contemporary Rome (1987, 286). Ovid is simultaneously working on the *Fasti*, which includes history among its legends and myths.

of the distinguished gods are bustling with folding doors flung wide
(the plebs reside in other quarters): in this neighborhood the rich
and powerful deities have *their* household gods enshrined.
This is the place where, if I may be so bold,
I would hardly hesitate to call the Palatine of the great heavens (1.171–76).

In this tongue-in-cheek analogy, Ovid situates the deities of myth squarely within the civic structures of contemporary Rome by dividing them by status: some, described as *nobiles* and *potentes...clarique*, enjoy large, busy palaces, while the *plebs* reside in other, unspecified quarters of the city.⁷⁸ As Anderson points out, Ovid pretends to apologize for such a bold comparison, but this preface to his analogy only calls attention to it (ad 175–76).

The ensuing council meeting is also a caricature of contemporary Rome: the king of the gods plays the part of Augustus, and the other gods, fawning senators. Jupiter irrationally, as Anderson puts it, states that Lycaon's despicable actions warrant eradicating all of humankind, and the council wholeheartedly agrees (1997, ad 163ff.).⁷⁹ After Jupiter concludes his call for action, Ovid describes the assembled gods' horrified reaction with another direct comparison, this time between the king of the gods and the *princeps*: *nec tibi grata minus pietas, Auguste, tuorum est, / quam fuit illa Iovi* (nor was the piety of your followers, Augustus, any less pleasing

⁷⁸Feeney (1991, 199) notes that calling the Olympians' quarters the "Palatine of the sky" touches closely on Augustus, as he held Senate meetings in the library attached to his temple to Apollo on the Palatine (Suet. *Aug.* 29.3). Scholars generally read Ovid's works as working against the Augustan propaganda machine: Barchiesi, for example, argues that the poet sets himself as oppositional to "Augustan discourse" in "an unprecedented campaign of persuasion and revision" with "its universal diffusion at all levels" (1997b, 253). Bömer, in contrast, reads this depiction of the Augustan elite as a piece of flattery ("massive Schmeichelei," ad 175), yet such a reading requires taking Ovid's words at face value, always a dangerous task. Galinsky likewise connects Ovid's "revitalization" of myth with Augustus' "restoration" of the Republic, conceding that Ovid's poem does focus on change, but only as a means to explain the world's current state (1999, 105). Fratantuono (2011), too, departs from other scholars in his book exploring the poem's intertextuality with Vergil's *Aeneid* by arguing that the main goals of the *Metamorphoses* are philosophical, not political.

⁷⁹Müller points out that the council of gods agrees to this extreme solution before they have even heard what crime Lycaon has committed (1987, 280), and Feeney notes that the depiction of the assembly of the gods as yes men is counter to literary depictions of divine councils as scenes of lively debate (1991, 200). Solodow likewise links this scene with Tacitus' descriptions of the sycophantic Senate (1988, 85).

to you, / than that of Jove's was to him, 1.204–05). If the parallels between Jupiter's council and Augustus' privileged place among the elites were not already clear, readers could not fail to miss this direct address their ruler. By casting Jupiter as the *princeps* and the other gods as obsequious elites in the first transformation story, Ovid encourages his readers to connect this world with the disorientating political landscape of contemporary Rome.

Ovid's choice of Jupiter as the narrator of the first transformation story also brings up associations with the gap between reality and appearances in Augustan Rome. Jupiter presents himself as reluctant moral authority, who is forced to eradicate humankind in a cataclysmic flood after Lycaon's transformation into a wolf reveals the utter depravity to which humankind has fallen (1.237–39).⁸⁰ Feldherr, however, points out that although Lycaon's transformation seems to have occurred spontaneously, we have only Jupiter's version of events, which may have skipped over his hand in the metamorphosis to avoid implicating himself (2010, 137–38).⁸¹ Jupiter's narration of the first metamorphosis casts him as a moral leader, but over the next fifteen books, Ovid shows his self-presentation to be hypocritical: the king of the gods spends much of his time sneaking behind Juno's back and raping nymphs instead of solemnly meting out rewards and punishments or taking any concern for justice. By setting up these parallels between the Senate and the council of the gods, between the *princeps* and Jupiter, Ovid pokes

⁸⁰Habinek draws attention to yet another parallel between Augustus and Jupiter in this episode: he argues that describing the threat of Lycaon as something on par with the giants' attack of Mt. Olympus evokes Augustan ideology, as the defeat of Augustus' foes was often represented as the Olympians' triumph over the giants (2002, 51). Thus, according to Habinek, Jupiter's strategy mirrors contemporary Roman foreign policy (2002, 51–52).

⁸¹Though Ovid depicts many transformations as a strange new form forced onto an unsuspecting victim, occasionally metamorphoses have a distinctly moralizing character, as here: for example, the stony-hearted Propoetides are turned into actual stones for misusing Venus' gifts by becoming the first prostitutes (10.220–42).

fun at his contemporary counterpart and his fondness for portraying himself as a moral leader,⁸² once more showing that in this world, as in Augustan Rome, appearance and reality do not align.⁸³

The story of Lycaon's transformation also introduces and highlights the issue of interpreting bodily signs in the *Metamorphoses*. First, Lycaon fails to recognize the signs Jupiter gave upon his descent to earth in human form: *signa dedi venisse dei, vulgusque precari / coeperat; inridet primo pia vota Lycaon...* (I gave **signs** that a god had come, and the common folk began / to pray; at first Lycaon laughed at the pious prayers..., 1.220–21). On one of the few occasions that a god signals his presence in this bewildering world,⁸⁴ Lycaon refuses to take the portents seriously. This theme of misrecognition, purposeful or accidental, is repeated throughout the poem (Feldherr 2010, 131).⁸⁵

Jupiter's description of Lycaon's new form also plays with the theme of metamorphosis: *fit lupus et veteris servat vestigia formae; / canities eadem est, eadem violentia vultus, / idem*

⁸²Augustus presented himself as the leader who returned Rome to her original, unsullied virtues, as when he boasted of the Julian laws in his *Res Gestae*: *legibus novis me auctore latis multa exempla maiorum exolescentia iam ex nostro saeculo reduxi et ipse multarum rerum exempla imitanda posteris tradidi* (with new, extensive laws of my own authorship, I restored many of our ancestors' traditions that were dying out already in our time, and I myself handed down traditions in many matters worthy of emulation to our descendants, 8). Likewise, Johnson sees a swipe at Augustus' Julian reforms in Ovid's depiction of Venus as an aggressive sexual imperialist in Book 5: "Ovid portrays [the legislation of 19 BCE] as little more than compulsory sexuality, imposed by a man who claimed descent from the goddess of love herself" (1996, 143–44).

⁸³Newlands also reads this episode as an expression of anxieties about unrestrained imperial power: "the collapse in time between the myth of Lycaon and the Augustan age...makes deeply disturbing the unequal relations of power violently on display in heavenly politics" (2018, 143).

⁸⁴Cf. Pentheus, who refuses to believe the cautionary tale that the Bacchic priest Acoetes (or Bacchus himself in disguise) tells about his transformation of a ship's crew into dolphins (3.577–691, more below).

⁸⁵Feldherr points out that misrecognizing a god is a familiar mistake in the confusing world of the *Metamorphoses* (2002, 170). This theme of misrecognition is also doubled: as Lycaon attempts to discover whether Jupiter really is a god, the gods reveal his own deception (2010, 131).

oculi lucent, eadem feritatis imago est (he becomes a wolf and preserves traces of his former shape: / his greyness is the same, the same cruel face, / the same eyes glow, the same image of savagery, 1.237–39). Instead of stressing the strangeness of his new body, the repetition of *idem* emphasizes the parts of him that have stayed the same, most notably his face and eyes, the features most distinguishable for an individual. His savagery also remains, for which he was previously notorious (*notus feritate Lycaon*, Lycaon known for his savagery, 1.198). In his new form, Lycaon busies himself with his former pastimes: he dismembers herds of sheep (1.233–35) just as he did the Molossian hostage (1.226–29). Even though the king’s body has been utterly transformed, the wolf Lycaon more fully embodies the unique features and personality traits he possessed as a human.⁸⁶

Jupiter concludes his description of Lycaon’s transformation by calling him the very image (*imago*) of ferocity (1.239). The word *imago*, which often denotes a deceptive image (Anderson 1963, 23)—like the human form Jupiter assumed to deceive and rape Callisto (1.213)⁸⁷—is jarring after a description of a body that apparently suits Lycaon’s character more than his human form. Furthermore, believing that Lycaon is a true wolf requires accepting Jupiter’s one-sided version of events wholesale (Feldherr 2010, 139). By first describing Lycaon’s metamorphosis into a wolf as a transformation into a form truer to himself, then

⁸⁶Solodow sees Lycaon’s transformation as the paradigm of his schema of metamorphosis as a “clarification” of preexisting qualities (1988, 175–76; see also Galinsky 1975, 46). Feldherr points out that Lycaon’s name also suggests that his new wolf-form clarifies his true identity (2010, 38–39). Such a model of transformation is, however, rather an outlier: Bömer notes that the pronoun *idem* seldom appears in accounts of metamorphoses (ad 238).

⁸⁷See also, for example, Actaeon’s deceptive form as a deer (*falsi...sub imagine cervi*, 3.250) and the accusation that Phaethon’s mother is hiding behind the illusion that Phaethon’s father is a god (*genitoris imagine falsi*, 1.754). In addition to “image” or “form,” *imago* can also mean “phantom” or “pretense” (*OLD*, *imago*). In contrast, Solodow argues that the phrase *imago feritatis* points to Lycaon’s instant recognizability in his new form and links art with clarity (1988, 205).

describing this new body as a mere *imago*, Ovid highlights the problem of interpreting bodily signs: is Lycaon's wolf body his true self, or is it an illusory form that masks the king's real human identity?

The relationship between signs and meaning also comes into question in perhaps Ovid's most famous tale on deceptive appearances, that of Narcissus. Gianpiero Rosati reads this episode as a programmatic commentary on the twisted relationship between illusion and reality: "[c]onfused by the intertwining of reality and appearance, he [Narcissus] is unable to disentangle himself from the net of illusion" (2021, 49). As Narcissus is gazing upon his reflection, he searches for signs of mutual affection from his "beloved" before he realizes his mistake:

spem mihi nescio quam vultu promittis amico,
cumque ego porrexī tibi bracchia, porrigis ultro,
cum risi, adrides; lacrimas quoque saepe **notavi**
me lacrimante tuas; nutu quoque **signa** remittis
et, quantum motu formosi suspicor oris,
verba refers aures non pervenientia nostras!
iste ego sum: sensi, nec me mea fallit **imago**...

you promise an unknown hope to me with your friendly face,
and when I stretch out my arms to you, you stretch yours in return,
when I laugh, you laugh back; I've also often **noted** your tears
when I am crying; you return **signs** with a nod
and, as many words as I suspect arise from the motion of your lovely mouth,
you return, which do not penetrate my ears!
That man is me myself: I understand, and my **image** does not deceive me... (3.457–63).

At first, Narcissus scrutinizes his beloved's body and misreads his own reflected gestures as bodily *signa* of a requited love: he notes his beloved's tears when he himself cries, and sees his own gestures returned with a nod. His speech oscillates between identifying these gestures as connected to him and as belonging to another, but he gradually realizes how poorly he has read these signs: the beloved whom he had interpreted as "other" turns out to be merely a watery image of himself. Gestures that at first seemed unambiguous signs of a shared love lack, upon a

closer look, any referent. They meaninglessly reflect back his own desires (Janan 2007, 287): Micaela Janan calls his reflection “a dead letter” that fails to convey meaning (2007, 290).⁸⁸

In staring at his own reflection, however, Narcissus does not come to a fuller understanding of his self or bodily identity. Instead, he wishes that he could divorce his body from his self: *o utinam a nostro secedere corpora possem! / votum in amante novum: vellem, quod amamus, abesset!* (Oh, how I wish I could separate my body from myself! / That’s a new wish for a love—I desire that what I love would depart!, 3.467–68).⁸⁹ In her Lacanian reading of this myth, Janan argues that Narcissus vacillates between seeing this image as self and as other, and that his monologue splits his sense of self, dispensing with the ordinary notion of the self as fixed and whole (2007, 288–90).⁹⁰ He cannot come to terms with the fact that his body and self are one and the same: he violently beats his breast in mourning, but is horror-stricken when he sees the bruises he inflicted upon his beloved’s body. In performing his grief, Narcissus actually attacks the body he so loves and cannot bear his guilt and regret: he wastes away, consumed by the fires of love within (3.480–90).

Narcissus’ desire to separate self and body mirrors the realization that the body is an entity distinct from the self in the experience of pain. By infiltrating the body and forcing the

⁸⁸Enterline points out that words for representation often fall between bodies and perceptions of them: here, Narcissus perceives his body as an *imago* (2000, 6). Earlier in this episode, Ovid described Narcissus’ reflection as mere *simulacra* (3.432): Hardie argues this word shows Ovid’s engagement with Lucretius’ theory of visual *simulacra* (2002a, 150–52).

⁸⁹Narcissus later wishes that his body could take on its own life as a separate being: *hic, qui diligitur, vellem, diuturnior esset! / nunc duo concordēs anima moriemur in una* (I would have wished that my beloved could live on! / But now we two together will die as one soul, 3.472–73).

⁹⁰Feldherr fits Narcissus’ story into the larger framework of the house of Cadmus (discussed further below) by showing how each of these stories show a disjunct between outward form and perceiving self (2010, 180). Likewise, Gildenhard and Zissos argue that the story of Narcissus is meant to stand in for Oedipus’ in the Theban narrative and demonstrate how Narcissus’ self-referential language evokes Oedipus’ unwitting truths about himself (2000, 137).

awareness that the body is a separate, and not wholly obedient, component of the self, pain disrupts the illusion that the body is contiguous with the self and thus causes a crisis of identity (Scarry).⁹¹ Likewise, Narcissus' infatuation with his reflection unravels the distinction between self and other (Janan 2009, 168–72): for Narcissus, the thought that body and self are a contiguous entity is unbearable, rather than a comforting fiction. Repeatedly confronted by his inability to separate his body from himself, he experiences a crisis of identity in which he wastes his body away. His obsession with his reflection and its bodily signs leads to a disjunct between body and self and, ultimately, to a fatal crisis of identity: only in death and his subsequent transformation into a flower will his material existence and self co-exist in peace.

The story of Cipus, too, shows the process of interpreting bodily signifiers as more complicated than it first appears (15.565–621). When an Etruscan seer interprets the mysterious horns adorning his forehead as a sign of his rule, Cipus—a praetor of the early, and still mythical, Roman Republic—is horrified and instead announces in the Senate that these horns mark a future tyrant: *'est' ait 'hic unus, quem vos nisi pellitis urbe, / rex erit; is qui sit, signo, non nomine dicam: / cornua fronte gerit!* ('there is,' he said, 'one among us, who, unless you drive him out of the city, / will be king; who this man is, I will tell you by a **sign**, not by name: / he bears horns on his forehead!', 15.594–96). Instead of taking these horns as a marker of deserved kingship, as they were presented to him, Cipus manipulates their interpretation to protect Rome from monarchy. The horns, then, act not as a straightforward symbol that denotes a single outcome, but as a sign whose meaning can be twisted to serve competing goals.⁹²

⁹¹Cf. Marsyas' and Hercules' suffering in this poem, to be discussed in depth in Chapter Three.

⁹²A political reading of this episode does not narrow down the horns' meaning as a symbol. Barchiesi connects Cipus' horns with the crown presented to Julius Caesar and the various monarchic honors and titles Augustus refused (1997a, 185–86). He points out that the story concludes with Cipus receiving as much land as he could plow from sunrise to sunset (15.618–19), a description he says evokes the Roman

These horns are not merely multivalent symbols: they also complicate Cippus' sense of identity. His address to the Senate, Franz Bömer points out, engages in what he calls typical Ovidian "Ichspaltung," pitting himself against an "undemokratischen Alter ego" (ad 594). By revealing his horns in this way, Cippus casts his body as a disobedient entity separate from his own wishes. In the end, he lives in an uneasy truce with his rebellious body by masking the horns' monarchic pretensions under a laurel wreath (15.591–92). While the bodily signs that Narcissus first interpreted as laden with significance were, in the end, meaningless, Cippus' horns are meaningful signs, but what exactly they portend—Cippus' banishment, a threat to the Republic, a peaceful monarchy, or, as Barchiesi would have it, monarchical pretensions hiding behind Republican honors—is not set in stone.

Signs in the *Metamorphoses* are rarely, if ever, straightforward: whether they are devoid of meaning or simply ambiguous, the words involved with interpreting them show how confusing this process has become.⁹³ In the first transformation of the poem, Ovid introduces doubt on the role of bodily signifiers in signaling identity: instead of simply portraying a king in a wolf's body, Ovid presents Lycaon's new form both as an expression of his inner self and as an externally imposed disguise. Even more confusingly, Cippus' horns are a sign with no fixed meaning, while the gestures and expressions Narcissus so closely scrutinized turn out to be no signs at all. In the world of the poem, bodily forms and signifiers are not merely in constant flux:

empire, and with simply hiding his horns under a laurel wreath, Augustus' symbol: "[w]ill this honorific crown be a substitute for monarchy, or a veil for it? The story allows both conclusions: it is given as a substitute, but functions as a veil" (1997a, 186).

⁹³This uncertainty over signs continues until the very end of the poem. The narrator describes the portents of Caesar's death, in an elliptical fashion, as hardly uncertain: *signa tamen luctus dant haut incerta futuri* (they nevertheless give **signs**, hardly unclear, of a future grief, 15.782). It is unclear, however, what exactly this imminent grief (*luctus...futuri*) is: Venus' grief at her descendant's death, more general mourning for Caesar, or the impending civil war.

their very meanings and their relationships to identity, or even the question of whether these meanings or relationships exist, are in doubt.

Misrecognition and Bodily Destruction

For the men in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular, interpreting signs is not merely confusing, but often fatal. As mentioned briefly above,⁹⁴ men in Ovid's poem meet gory ends more often than women do. Women frequently undergo alienating transformations—such as Io, who, turned into a cow, desperately tried to communicate with her family by tracing her name in the dirt with her hoof (1.649–50)—and sometimes die in horrifying ways, like Semele, burned in the inferno of Jupiter's divine form (3.307–09). These harrowing experiences for women often directly result from a god's attempt to rape them.⁹⁵ As Katherine De Boer has pointed out, although women in the *Metamorphoses* often experience violence at the hands of gods, they do not die drawn-out, gory deaths, as Dido does in the *Aeneid*. Rather, De Boer argues, Ovid reserves such descriptions for men (2016, 167–80).⁹⁶ Charles Segal also notes that men in the *Metamorphoses* tend to die in more brutal ways, but connects this gendered division with the “boundary anxiety” inherent in masculinity: these gory deaths, he argues, shatter the illusion that the male body is inviolate (1998, 25–26). Situating these male anxieties about the penetrability of the body within the larger socio-political context, he argues that the ubiquitous spectacles of

⁹⁴See Chapter One, footnote 31.

⁹⁵A few other examples of women transformed after rape (or attempted rape) by a god include Daphne, Syrinx, Callisto, etc.

⁹⁶Of course, the exception proves the rule in Ovid: Philomela's mutilation departs from this pattern of violence against only male bodies (Newlands 2018, 154; Segal 1998, 26).

punishment of the enslaved and gladiatorial games make such preoccupations more palpable for elite men (ibid., 32).⁹⁷ For Segal, then, the violent deaths for men in the *Metamorphoses* are an extension of the anxieties inherent in Roman conceptions of the male body as impenetrable.

The House of Cadmus: Cadmus, Actaeon, and Pentheus

Male deaths in the *Metamorphoses*, however, are linked not only in their extended descriptions of pain and gore, but also in their focus on identity and recognition, on characters' ability to navigate this world of appearances and, in turn, to be seen for who they are. In his version of Thebes' origin in Book 3, for example, Ovid foregrounds both the bodies of Cadmus' relatives and themes of recognition across several individual tales.⁹⁸ First, Phoebus tells Cadmus he will know where to found Thebes by following a heifer who has never borne the yoke to where she rests:

vix bene Castalio Cadmus descenderat antro,
incustoditam lente videt ire iuencam
nullum servitii **signum** cervice gerentem.
subsequitur pressoque **legit vestigia** gressu,
auctoremque viae Phoebum taciturnus adorat.

Scarcely had Cadmus come down from the Castalian grotto,
when he saw an unguarded heifer ambling along,
whose neck bore no **sign** of slavery.
He followed and **read** the **tracks** impressed by her gait,
and silently gave thanks to Phoebus as the leader of this path (3.14–18).

⁹⁷Other scholarship also looks to contemporary spectacle to illuminate the gore in the *Metamorphoses*. Feldherr argues that Ovid's visualizations of myth use the political dynamics of spectacle to "construct a civic dimension to the act of reading" (2010, 167) in that reconciling different points of view forces the reader (or viewer) to reflect on her political position, making these myths relevant to issues of community and identity (2010, 169–70). Galinsky, in contrast, lamented such scenes as "a concession to the taste of the Roman public and a concession that does not seem to have been grudgingly granted" (1975, 138).

⁹⁸See Hardie (1990) for a reading of Ovid's Theban history as pointedly "anti-*Aeneid*," and Keith (2010) for a study of the Dionysiac and tragic themes of the Theban narrative.

Not only is the heifer a sign from Phoebus that marks the spot where Cadmus should establish his city, but the cow herself is also recognizable by her lack of scars. Furthermore, Cadmus reads (*legit*) her tracks like a text, following her until she lays herself down to rest. In following the directions from Phoebus, Cadmus proves himself adept at reading signs. An undomesticated cow in a seemingly empty landscape is perhaps an unusual sight, given how expensive and valuable cattle were in antiquity,⁹⁹ but not a supernatural one: Cadmus successfully reads the subtle signs around him to uncover the divinity in a seemingly ordinary cow and fulfill the prophecy.

When he encounters a giant snake attacking his men, however, Cadmus fails to notice any signs that such an unusual monster might be the work of some god. First, the serpent lurks near a subterranean spring deep in the woods:

silva vetus stabat nulla violata securi
et specus in medio virgis ac vimina densus
efficiens humilem lapidum compagibus arcum,
uberibus fecundus aquis; ...

an ancient wood, never violated by the axe, stood there,
and in the middle a cave overgrown with twigs and branches,
which formed a low arch joined together by stones,
and was watered by fertile streams of a spring; ... (3.28–31)

Anderson points out that this scene has all the trappings of a *locus amoenus*, with features like the virgin wood and the cave that harken back to Homer (ad 28–30). In addition, Cadmus stumbles upon this scene, in search of his missing men, at midday (*fecerat exiguas iam sol latissimus umbras*, now the sun at its highest point made the shadows scarce, 3.50). Repeatedly

⁹⁹Anderson ad 3.14–16. Anderson argues that it would be unusual to find an untended cow in Greece, where cattle were so valuable. A wandering heifer, however, is not nearly as strange a sight as the giant serpent that next appears.

throughout the *Metamorphoses*, and elsewhere in classical literature,¹⁰⁰ the idyllic scene at midday becomes a place where boundaries between divine and mortal are blurred, often with violent consequences. Here, Ovid explicitly foreshadows the violence to come with the adjective *violata* (Anderson ad 28–30).¹⁰¹ However, this wood also resembles the unscarred heifer who designated the spot of Thebes’ founding: like the undomesticated cow, this forest has never been marked by the violence of agriculture, in this case, the ax. Cadmus, however, has seemingly forgotten that the unmarked cow was a sign from a god, and violates this sacred space when he avenges his men, whom the serpent had killed.

The trope of the *locus amoenus* turned into a scene of violence functions as such only because the victims are unwitting: Zeus surprises Callisto resting by the stream, and Cadmus is unaware that such a pristine spot might be sacred to some god. The giant snake itself defending its sacred stream, however, is a clue that this place is not ordinary. Ovid emphasizes the serpent’s huge size and unusual markings: *ubi conditus antro / Martius anguis erat cristis praesignis et auro* (where there was hidden in the cave / a serpent of Mars, remarkable with its crest and golden scales, 3.31–32).¹⁰² As the serpent raises itself up to strike Cadmus’ terrified men, the poet also emphasizes its gigantic size in hyperbolic fashion. In a direct address to the reader, Ovid notes that if it were even possible to see the entire snake at once, it would appear as big as

¹⁰⁰Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, for example, cites the cicadas chirping at noon as a sign of their status as divine messengers between the gods and humans (259). Callisto, too, stopped to rest from the noontime heat by a spring deep in the woods, where Zeus found and raped her (2.417–24).

¹⁰¹Parry (1964) first pointed out that in the *Metamorphoses*, the *locus amoenus* is frequently the site of violent rapes and forcible transformations. Bernstein further describes how this reversal of the literary trope betrays the security that this secluded spot traditionally promises and adds to the general disorientation of this world (2011, 83). See also Segal (1969) for an extensive study of the landscape in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁰²Anderson notes that the adjective *praesignis* is Ovid’s own invention (ad 31–32): this unusual word further draws attention to the snake’s strange crest and golden skin.

the constellations in the sky: ...*tantoque est corpore, quanto / si totum spectes, geminas qui separat Arctos* (its body was such that, / if you could see the whole of it, it would appear as the Snake who separates the twin Bears, 3.44–45). The dragon’s massive size and unusual markings, however, seem to make no impression on Cadmus: he sees the bodies of his comrades and immediately decides to avenge them (3.58–59). Whereas Cadmus successfully reads the subtle indications that the unmarked heifer was a divine portent, he fails to note that such a remarkable monster might have a connection to a god.

After the battle is over and Cadmus stands gazing at his prize, he hears a disembodied voice telling him he too will become a spectacle:

vox subito audita est (neque erat **cognoscere** promptum,
unde, sed audita est): ‘quid, Agenore nate, peremptum
serpentem spectas? et tu spectabere serpens.’

Suddenly a voice was audible (nor was he able to clearly **recognize** its source, but it was audible): “Why, son of Agenor, are you gazing at this dead serpent? You too will be gazed upon—as a serpent” (3.96–98).

Ovid repeats the passive verb structure *audita est* in successive lines in the same metrical position to emphasize the absolute clarity of the voice. But even though the voice is clearly audible, it is unlocatable. Whereas Ovid described the voice’s audibility passively—“it was audible”—he phrases Cadmus’ inability to locate its source as a failure of recognition on his part (*neque erat cognoscere*). Once again, Cadmus fails to correctly read the signs of a divine presence to his detriment.

The voice’s riddling prophecy spells out Cadmus’ fate: he will become a snake and, hence, a spectacle himself. No longer will he be an active agent who attempts to interpret the signs of this bewildering world; rather, he will become a passive object of others’ gazes. The line’s structure mirrors this neat inversion: *serpens* and *spectare* repeat in a chiasmic structure

around a central caesura (Anderson ad 95–98).¹⁰³ However, the prophecy’s link between spectacles and serpents glosses over the fact that it is not entirely clear why Cadmus should be punished at all. The voice seems to suggest that Cadmus’ gazing upon the serpent is his mistake: Anderson connects Cadmus’ later metamorphosis with the theme of forbidden sights and divine penalties that unfolds across Book 3 (ad 95–98).¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Cadmus’ slaying of a creature precious to Mars could also be the reason behind his forced transformation.¹⁰⁵ I, however, read his metamorphosis into a snake as an arbitrary punishment for his failure to navigate the bewildering world of the *Metamorphoses*: he is rewarded for correctly locating and interpreting the divine portent of the unmarked heifer, but he stumbles in failing to recognize the dragon as divine.¹⁰⁶ As punishment, he is transformed from a subject and interpreter of signs into an object and spectacle in the eyes of others. This theme—the inversion from subject to object, spectator to spectacle—continues throughout Book 3, as Cadmus’ descendants are brutally punished for witnessing forbidden spectacles and failing to read the signs of the divine around them.

Like Cadmus, Actaeon also unwittingly violates a sacred spot. Ovid describes each feature of this *locus amoenus* over eight lines: like the dragon’s cave, this grotto deep in the

¹⁰³The line’s metrics also draw attention to it: as Anderson puts it, the prophecy is “rendered gravely resonant by four successive spondees and alliteration” (ad 95–98).

¹⁰⁴However, Anderson also casts doubt on the assumption that the transformation is a punishment at all (ad 95–98).

¹⁰⁵Feldherr suggests that Cadmus’ lapsed sacrifice to Jupiter could have launched the violence that haunts the house of Cadmus in Book 3 (2010, 190–91).

¹⁰⁶Elsewhere, Cadmus struggles to distinguish between spectacle and reality. The soldiers sown from the dragon’s teeth are described as *signa*, as a theatrical illusion brought to life (3.111–14). As Feldherr points out (2010, 181), Cadmus, however, misinterprets their struggle as reality and attempts to join in, before he is warned not to “insert himself” into their show (3.116–17).

woods is also formed from a natural stone arch and contains a clear spring (3.155–62).¹⁰⁷ As Anderson puts it, “the similarity in the two settings implies a similarity of trouble for Actaeon” (ad 161–62). In addition, Actaeon wanders into this sacred spring at midday. Ovid takes care to note that this scene unfolds at noon: both the narrator (3.144–45) and Actaeon himself (3.151–52) describe the sun’s position in the middle of the sky. As noted above, the woods at midday are no safe place for mortals: Anderson calls it a “frequent setting for disaster” throughout the *Metamorphoses* (ad 143–45). This noontime *locus amoenus* with its parallels to the scene of Cadmus’ disaster, then, foreshadows the violence to come.¹⁰⁸

Whereas Cadmus’ crime, if there was one at all, was unclear, Ovid casts Actaeon as an innocent spectator who accidentally invaded a goddess’ privacy. He introduces the tale by asserting that Actaeon made a mere mistake: *at bene si quaeras, fortunae crimen in illo, / non scelus invenies; quod enim scelus error habebat?* (But if you look closely, you’ll find the crime lies with fortune, / not with him; for what crime can a mistake really commit? 3. 141–42). In couching this assertion as a direct address, Ovid forces readers to examine for themselves if Actaeon has committed any true offense and to come to the same conclusion as the narrator. Furthermore, as Anderson notes, Actaeon’s *error* is no ill-considered decision, but is literally one of wandering: he happens upon this sacred spring where Diana is bathing (ad 141–42).¹⁰⁹ The

¹⁰⁷Ovid goes on to say that *natura* artlessly fabricated this arch so ingeniously that it rivaled *ars* (3.158–59). Anderson notes here that this playful distinction between Art and Nature points to the contemporary Augustan fashion of “natural” grottos in garden design (ad 155–58). Such a picturesque and fashionable setting contrasts starkly with the scene of gore that follows. Newlands, in contrast, sees an interweaving of violence and beauty in this setting rather than a juxtaposition: “violence resides *within* the beautiful landscape” (2018, 149).

¹⁰⁸See Parry (1964), Segal (1969), and Bernstein (2011) for further discussion of Ovid’s play with the *locus amoenus* trope.

¹⁰⁹In emphasizing Actaeon’s innocence, Ovid departs from the earliest versions of this story, in which Actaeon deliberately offended Diana (either by challenging her to a hunting contest, violating her

landscape, too, where Actaeon wanders is repeatedly described as trackless. When he and his companions are tired out from hunting at midday, he calls them in wandering (*vagantes*) through the pathless wilds (*per devia lustra*, 3.146). He later comes upon Diana's grove as he is wandering through the strange forest: *per nemus ignotum non certis passibus errans* (wandering through the unfamiliar wood with uncertain steps, 3.175). Unlike Cadmus' environment, which was marked with signs of divinity, this forest is unmarked, and Actaeon wanders cluelessly through this unfamiliar environment. In foregrounding Actaeon's mistake and the trackless wilds of the forest, Ovid stresses how bewildering the world of the *Metamorphoses* is and how easy it is to make a mistake with fatal consequences.

When Actaeon is transformed into a deer, Ovid turns to the themes of recognition and identity, emphasizing the psychological horror of his predicament rather than the gory details (Newlands 2018, 150). First, Actaeon, fleeing his own hunting dogs in the form of a deer, attempts to assert his identity by stating his name and ordering his dogs to recognize their master: *Actaeon ego sum: dominum cognoscite vestrum!* (I am Actaeon: recognize your master!, 3.230). As Anderson notes, Actaeon's name appears here in the text for the first time: he was previously identified by patronymics and other epic circumlocutions (ad 228–31).¹¹⁰ By the time his name is revealed, however, it is too late: this identity no longer matches his changed form, and he “has

sanctuary, or trying to rape her, cf. Hyginus 180). He instead builds on later versions of the tale, in which Actaeon chances upon Diana bathing, playing up Actaeon's innocence and Diana's cruelty (Anderson ad 138–252). Bömer (ad loc.) notes that Ovid compares himself with Actaeon when defending the *error* that led to his exile (*Trist.* 2.103–14). The only hint of culpability on Actaeon's part lies in Ovid's characterization of his hunting as excessive: the hills are infected with his slaughter (*mons erat infectus variorum caede ferarum*, 3.143), and the lines of his nets are soaked with gore (*lina madent, comites, ferrumque cruore ferarum*, 3.148). In searching for justification for Actaeon's brutal punishment, some scholars have landed on this description of his hunting activities (e.g., Feldherr 1997, 29).

¹¹⁰Likewise, as Tissol (1997, 125–26) points out, Marsyas' name is omitted until after his flaying (see pp. 90–96 in the following chapter).

ceased to be Actaeon except to himself” (ibid.). Even this plea for recognition would sound like nothing more than a stag’s bellowing, but Ovid silences Actaeon completely: *animo verba desunt: resonant latratibus aether* (words fail him: the air resounds with barking, 3.231). As Anderson points out, his last-ditch effort to assert his true identity and save himself is only imagined (ibid.). The poet also repeats the young prince’s name in the same metrical position in consecutive lines, describing how his companions look and call for him: *ignari instigant oculisque Actaeona quaerunt / et velut absentem certatim Actaeona clamant* (unaware, they urge on the dogs and look for Actaeon / and call for Actaeon over and over, as if weren’t there, 3.243–44). By repeating Actaeon’s name in this scene, Ovid drives home the realization that his identity and body no longer match: he has become utterly unrecognizable to his friends as well as his hunting dogs (Franco 2014, 66–67).

Ovid also draws contrasts between the familiar and unfamiliar in order to emphasize the uncanny situation Actaeon finds himself in. When Actaeon is turned into a deer, the poet describes the transformation of each feature, noting that only the prince’s human mind remained (*mens tantum pristina mansit*, only his mind remained untouched, 3.203). Every bodily signifier—his appearance, his voice, and, presumably, his smell—indicate that he is an ordinary stag. As the dogs are tearing him apart, Ovid draws attention to the young prince’s strange new body by contrasting it with the surrounding hills. The landscape, previously wild and trackless, is now familiar, yet filled with Actaeon’s strange new cries: *...gemit ille sonumque / etsi non hominis, quem non tamen edere possit / cervus, habet maestisque replet iuga nota querellis* (he groans and the sound / is not human, yet not one that a deer could / produce, and he fills the **well-known** hills with sad cries, 3.237–39).¹¹¹ These familiar ridges are another example of the

¹¹¹Anderson notes that Actaeon and his companions hunt in the hills, but that Actaeon wanders by himself into an unknown, deeply wooded valley, which Ovid calls Gargaphie, when they break at noon (ad 3.155–

dramatic irony throughout the passage—Actaeon has become hunted instead of the hunter (e.g., 3.228–29), but they also draw attention to another inversion: previously Actaeon, secure in his human form, wandered a strange landscape, but now his body and its signifiers, not the surrounding hills, are unfamiliar to him.

In addition, this description of the sounds he emits as neither deer-like nor human underscore the pure agony he undergoes: Ovid suggests that his pain is something beyond what either a human or an animal could experience. In her work on the body in pain, Scarry notes that a key feature of pain is its sheer incommunicability: the bodily sensation of pain defies any attempt to pin it down in words, which makes a painful experience an isolating one as well. According to Scarry, pain goes even beyond resisting language: it actively destroys language, along with all sense of self and meaning (1985, 29–30). Through Actaeon’s alienating transformation into a deer, Ovid underscores the isolation of the body in pain and the way pain destroys the sense of self: Actaeon cannot communicate or alleviate his pain because he cannot signify his true identity. The image of Actaeon suffering without words, muzzled by his deer’s body, is a powerful image for the incommunicability of pain and its capacity to break down an individual’s sense of self. Furthermore, the description of his screams as beyond human or animal capabilities also evokes Scarry’s conception of pain: agony destroys language, just as Actaeon’s cries are beyond earthly sounds.

Though Actaeon’s cries indicate for the readers something of his agony, they fail to communicate anything to his friends or his dogs that devour him. Stripped of his previously identifying bodily signifiers (appearance and voice), Actaeon attempts to save himself via the one mode of communication left to him, namely bodily posture: ...*genibus pronis supplex*

58). We can presumably imagine that Actaeon has fled the strange valley back into the familiar ridges after he is turned into a deer.

similisque roganti / circumfert tacitos tamquam sua bracchia vultus (kneeling on his knees as a suppliant and similar to one praying, / he begs with silent eyes, as if they were his hands, 3.240–41). Unable to lift his arms in the typical gesture of supplication, he fails to make his new body communicate what he wishes: in her analysis of Ovidian transformation in light of pantomime dance, Ismene Lada-Richards reads metamorphosis as the progressive alienation of the victim’s “body schema,” that is, his typical way of moving, posture, etc. (2013, 120). His friends, standing around enjoying the hunt, misinterpret this posture as an ordinary deer falling forward on its legs as it dies. Instead of calling off the dogs, they encourage them to finish off the prey and call Actaeon’s name (3.243–44, above). The young prince even turns his head at the sound of his name, but nobody notices (*ignari*, 3.243): they remark what a pity it is that he should miss such a fine hunt (*ad nomen caput ille refert—et abesse queruntur / nec capere oblatae segnem spectacula praedae*, he turns his head at his name—and they complain that he isn’t there / and that the slow-poke is missing the **spectacle** of the booty before them, 3.245–46). Actaeon dies at the moment this final attempt at recognition falls short (Feldherr 1997, 30). His body has utterly failed him: his human form was too fragile to function as a protective shell, but his new shape does not allow for self-expression (Theodorakopoulos 1999, 154), so that his companions misinterpret or fail to notice his attempts to manipulate his body to communicate with them.

Like Cadmus, Actaeon also witnessed a forbidden sight, and is turned into a spectacle (*spectacula*, 3.246, above) himself as punishment. This particular spectacle lies not in the transformation itself, as for Cadmus, but in his dismemberment. As he hears his friends lamenting his absence, Actaeon wishes that he were not there, or were instead standing alongside his friends, merely watching the hunt: *vellet abesse quidem, sed adest, velletque videre, / non etiam sentire canum fera facta suorum* (he might wish to be absent, but he’s there, and he might

wish to see, / and not to feel, the savage deeds of his own dogs, 3.247–48). As in the prophecy announced to Cadmus, there is a neat inversion here between spectator and spectacle: Cadmus, gazing upon the snake, was told that he would soon be a snake and a spectacle himself.

Ovid, however, draws a contrast not between seeing and being seen, but between seeing and *feeling*: Actaeon might wish he could watch the hunt instead of feeling (*sentire*, 3.248) the ravaging of his own dogs. He has become the passive object of his friends' gazes, but Ovid emphasizes the physical sensation of pain in his experience of being a spectacle (Gildenhard and Zissos 1999, 173). He equates the transformation from recognizable to unidentifiable, from hunter to hunted, from active subject to passive object, from spectator to spectacle, with the bodily experience of pain. As Scarry theorizes, torture and the pain it causes introduce a distinction between body and voice: in choosing not to acknowledge his victim's pain, the torturer takes control of language and the voice, while the prisoner becomes all body (1985, 57). Here, too, Actaeon's friends continue to speak and call his name, while his experience of the spectacle they so enjoy is entirely tactile: they talk, while he is silenced in his pain. In drawing this distinction between seeing and feeling, Ovid once again draws attention to the body as a signifier: Ovid illustrates the body's failure to communicate as the breakdown of the body in agony. This dissolution of the body's ability to signify is mirrored, in turn, in Actaeon's dismemberment: the destruction of his physical body echoes the breakdown between his bodily signifiers and his personal identity.

As Actaeon slowly dies, Ovid emphasizes the strangeness of his transformed body by describing it as a kind of deceptive disguise that masks his true identity: *undique circumstant mersisque in corpore rostris / dilacerant falsi dominum sub imagine cervi* (they surround him and with their muzzles buried in his body / they tear their master apart **under the appearance of**

a **false** deer, 3.249–50). Anderson notes that the use of *sub* here emphasizes the human behind the deer: it means that the dogs are actually killing their master, hidden under the stag’s body (ad 249–50).¹¹² Actaeon’s new deer form may be a deceptive illusion, but this “false image” is wholly convincing to both his dogs and his friends: despite the repetitions of his name, his true identity is hidden to everyone except himself.¹¹³ By showing so painfully the disjunct between body and identity, Ovid brings the issue of recognition to the fore. When the body no longer functions as a vehicle of personal identity and can no longer communicate with others—when it becomes unrecognizable and unsignifying—it ceases to function as a body at all. The result of this failure of Actaeon’s bodily signifiers is utter destruction: he dies of “countless wounds” (*per plurima vulnera*, 3.251).

The themes of spectator turned spectacle, misrecognition, and bodily destruction culminate with the story of Pentheus. Unlike Cadmus and Actaeon, however, Pentheus ignores or misinterprets multiple warnings about his impending fate, both explicit and more subtle. Rosati sees the Ovidian motif of deceptive appearances as particularly operative in Pentheus’ tale: as he puts it, Pentheus privileges his “own illusory certainty of [his] dominance over a reality that is actually only appearance disguised as reality” (2021, 109). First, the seer Tiresias retorts that it

¹¹²Scholars have read this scene as particularly theatrical. Feldherr connects Actaeon’s death with the later imperial practice of “fatal charades” (see Coleman 1990) and the tension between fiction and reality they engender (2010, 172–74). Just as the reader is torn between the show Actaeon’s friends enjoy and the horror of his death, a viewer of a fatal charade would experience tension between sympathizing with the condemned enslaved person, which would shatter the illusion, or maintaining the illusion, which would inadvertently elevate the enslaved to the status of mythological hero (2010, 178). Gildenhard and Zissos link this tension between illusion and reality to the role of the mask on the tragic stage, which similarly illustrates a “contrast between authentic inside and inauthentic appearance” (1999, 173). Keith sees the emphasis on dramatic recognition and reversal in this story and throughout the Theban narrative as drawn from the Athenian stage (2001, 263–64). See also Keith (2001, esp. 258–69; 2010) for further explorations of Dionysiac and tragic themes within the Theban narrative.

¹¹³Franco sees a death by dog attack as the “complete annihilation of identity by the very animals that are required to recognize their master and acknowledge his authority” (2014, 64).

would be far better if Pentheus himself were blind, so that he could be spared the sight of Bacchus' rites and his subsequent dismemberment at the hands of his mother and aunt (3.517–25).¹¹⁴ Tiresias' warnings could not be more detailed or explicit, but Pentheus ignores them and drives the seer off (3.526). Pentheus then sends slaves out to capture Bacchus, whom he considers a false god and a degenerate, but they bring back Acoetes, who introduces himself as a priest of Bacchus (3.572–83). Acoetes launches into a lengthy story describing his own conversion to the Bacchic rites (3.582–91): on one of his voyages, he encountered the god disguised as a child and brought him aboard. When his treacherous sailors try to kidnap the child, Bacchus reveals himself as a god and transforms them into dolphins. The bare bones of this tale in themselves offer a warning for the discerning listener: despite the revelry that accompanies his rites, Bacchus is not to be crossed.

In addition, Acoetes presents himself as adept at interpreting signs and seeing through disguises, in contrast to the (willfully) blind Pentheus. He was born a poor fisherman, he says, but taught himself the arts of navigation in order to become a ship captain (3.584–96): he describes how he learned the constellations and marked (*notavi*, 3.595) the different winds and safe harbors. When his ship anchors at the island where they find Bacchus, he presents himself as a skilled tracker as well: *...exsurgo laticesque inferre recentes / admoneo monstroque viam, quae ducat ad undes. / ipse quid aura mihi tumulo promittat ab alto / prospicio...* (I get up and order the men to carry water from a nearby / spring and I show them the way that leads to the water. / I myself climb a tall hill to gauge the direction of the wind... 3.601–04). The string of first-person verbs (*exsurgo*, *admoneo*, *monstro*, *prospicio*) casts Acoetes as a man of action as well as a

¹¹⁴*quem nisi templorum fueris dignatus honore, / mille lacer spargere locis et sanguine silvas / foedabis matremque tuam matrisque sorores* (unless you honor him with temples, / you will be torn into a thousand pieces and scattered far and wide, and you will pollute the forests / with your blood and your mother and the sisters of your mother as well, 3.521–23).

discerning one. Even before Bacchus comes on the scene, he presents himself as someone skilled at interpreting signs and navigating the surrounding environment.

When Bacchus appears in the form of a sleepy, gender-ambiguous child, Acoetes instantly recognizes that he is divine, though he is not sure which god the child may embody: ... *specto cultum faciemque gradumque: / nil ibi, quod credi posset mortale, videbam* (I examined his dress, his appearance, his gait: / I saw nothing, that could be believed to be mortal, 3.609–10). Just as he noted the direction of the winds and constellations to navigate his ship, Acoetes reads the signs of the child's bearing and appearance to (correctly) conclude that he is not mortal. When the sailors only feign sailing for the child's desired location, Naxos, Acoetes watches how Bacchus pretends to realize their deception and to burst into tears. The sailors see a distressed child, while Acoetes calls him *deus inludens* (the god, toying with them, 3.650) and *flenti similis* (seeming to cry, 3.652): he recognizes Bacchus' deceptions for what they are.¹¹⁵ By presenting himself as a discerning interpreter of signs, Acoetes warns his internal audience to look closely when Bacchus is involved (Feldherr 2010, 188).¹¹⁶

The story also contains a further warning for Pentheus, beyond the larger message of Bacchus' power and retribution. Acoetes describes the sailors' metamorphosis in detail, in particular how one attempts to grab a rope only to realize he has no arms: *alter ad intortos*

¹¹⁵Feldherr argues that Acoetes has revised this characterization of Bacchus' actions with the clarity of hindsight: because he describes how he has also been crying through this entire exchange (3.656), Feldherr argues, Acoetes does not realize that the child (or god) will not be harmed (1997, 31). Acoetes does not explain, however, why he is crying: he could just as well be weeping in fear of the punishment that will surely strike the sailors (and possibly their captain) for their treachery.

¹¹⁶Some scholars, in fact, argue that we can understand Acoetes as Bacchus in disguise (e.g., Feldherr 1997, 34; Bömer ad 577–700). In Euripides' *Bacchae*, a Bacchic priest plays the same role in warning Pentheus as the Stranger (who is actually Dionysus in disguise). Acoetes' miraculous escape from prison (more below) corroborates this reading. Adams argues that Bacchus presents himself as low-class knowing that the king will disregard whatever he says (2003, 152).

cupiens dare bracchia funes / bracchia non habuit truncoque repandus in undas / corpore desiluit (one, wishing to catch hold of a twisted rope, / does not have arms and backflips into the waves / with his limbless body, 3.671–86). This description of metamorphosis foreshadows Pentheus' fate (Anderson ad loc.; Feldherr 1997, 35). In light of Tiresias' explicit warning of his dismemberment, this description of a useless, limbless trunk should give the king pause.

As he did with Tiresias' admonitions, however, Pentheus disregards the tale as a stalling tactic and has Acoetes thrown in prison (3.692–97). There, however, the chains fall from his shoulders and the doors fly open (3.699–700). The narrator emphasizes the miraculous nature of these events by repeating *sponte sua* (all on their own) at the beginning of these lines.¹¹⁷ As he did all the signs before, Pentheus ignores this miracle as well and persists in his opposition of Bacchus (3.701). Throughout this episode, Pentheus is warned multiple times in a way that Cadmus and Actaeon were not so lucky as to experience: Tiresias spells out his doom for him, and a Bacchic priest tells a lengthy cautionary tale about the power of Bacchus before miraculously escaping from prison. While Cadmus' and Actaeon's failures of interpretation were depicted as understandable (if, apparently, not forgivable) in the bewildering world of the *Metamorphoses*, Pentheus essentially stops his ears and closes his eyes in the face of the obvious. His gory end is a punishment for his refusal to recognize Bacchus' power (Feldherr 1997, 31).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷The narrator also distances himself from this tale with the familiar phrase *fama est* (there's a rumor that..., 3.700).

¹¹⁸As Feldherr points out, however, the kind of recognition required for Pentheus to save himself was at odds with the civic and masculine values he espouses for Thebes (1997, 46). In his tirade against the god, the young king echoes Roman stereotypes of Eastern culture as emasculating in its luxury and urges his men to take up arms against this corrupting Eastern invasion (3.531–63). This characterization of Eastern culture is also quintessentially Greek and prominent in Euripides' *Bacchae* (e.g., 50ff., 176f., 302ff., 799), but takes on additional meaning in light of contemporary conceptions of elite Roman masculinity. Though Pentheus' internal audience, in a rush to welcome the new god, does not pay much mind to their king's

Pentheus' failure to recognize the god results in his failure to be recognized, in turn, and in his dismemberment. Like Cadmus and Actaeon, Pentheus shifts from spectator to spectacle: he spies on the Bacchantes' rites from a clearing on the mountain, until his mother catches sight of him and attacks (3.708–11). Even as Pentheus watches the rites from his secure (as he thinks) hiding place, the narrator emphasizes his visibility: *monte fere medio est cingentibus ultima silvis, / purus ab arboribus, spectabilis undique campus* (almost on top of the mountain there was a clearing surrounded by woods, / but itself free from trees and **visible** on all sides, 3.708–09). Pentheus is caught in the clearing like an actor in a spotlight onstage—or, like a victim of the games in the arena.¹¹⁹

Though Pentheus has not been transformed as Actaeon was, the Bacchantes, in their blindness, see him as a wild boar (3.713–15). Ovid emphasizes the stark contrast here between perception and reality by making his mother, Agave, the first to see and attack him. He repeats *prima* in a tricolon only to reveal at the end of the sentence that the instigator of the attack is Pentheus' own mother: *prima videt, prima est insano concita cursu, / prima suum misso violavit*

civic values, the external audience (i.e., the Roman reader) may well have approved of his depiction of a martial civic identity (McNamara 2010, 188). Likewise, the description of those hastening to Bacchus' rites as of every class and gender may have disturbed a Roman audience (*turba ruit, mixtaeque viris matresque nurusque / vulgusque proceresque ignota ad sacra feruntur*, the crowd seethes, and men and matrons and daughters-in-law / and the common rabble and nobles, all mixed together, are born along to the new rites, 3.529–30). Pentheus seems unable to fit Bacchus—with his Eastern luxury, gender-bending appearance, and rites that muddle distinctions between class and gender—into his conception of Theban civic identity: his failure to reconcile these two worldviews makes him unable to recognize Bacchus' importance as a god. Just as in contemporary Rome, where the increasing erasure of class distinctions led to a crisis of elite masculine identity, the Bacchic rites threaten, in Pentheus' eyes, the Theban model of masculinity and civic stability. In the end, his inability to adapt his worldview to the changes the new god brings leads to the erasure of his identity in the eyes of those closest to him and to his ultimate destruction.

¹¹⁹Cf. Euripides, where Dionysus bent down a fir tree so that Pentheus could perch atop it (*Bacc.* 1063–64). Feldherr considers Pentheus particularly Roman in his frequent use of spectacles of violence to assert control and argues that this shift from spectator to spectacle “subtly inverts a paradox of Roman power, that an emperor was never more conspicuously powerful than when he adopted the role of spectator” (2010, 184).

Pentheia thyrsos / mater... (the first to see him, the first to be stirred up in a frenzied chase, / the first to violate her Pentheus with a hurled thyrsus, / was his mother... 3.710–13). The verb *violare*, in combination with the possessive *suum*...*Pentheia*, also underlines the utter violation of this scene: as his mother, Agave should be able to recognize her son anywhere, but instead she brutally attacks. In addition, this is the last appearance of Pentheus' frequently recurring name: as his body is destroyed, his name and identity likewise fall away (Feldherr 2010, 187). The scene of dismemberment that follows echoes the description of Actaeon's demise, but without the qualifying factor of Actaeon's transformation into a deer: Pentheus' own mother and aunt tear him apart with their bare hands.¹²⁰

When Pentheus realizes that his visual appearance means nothing to those nearest to him, he resorts to words in an attempt to save himself. He first speaks mildly, admitting the error of his ways (3.717–18), but this confession does not ward off the impending punishment. He then evokes Actaeon, hoping to knock some sense into his aunt by reminding her of her son's gory fate: *'Autonoe! moveant animos Actaeonis umbrae!'* ("Autonoe! Let Actaeon's shade move you!" 3.720). His name, however, means nothing to Autonoe, who responds by tearing his arm off: *illa, quis Actaeon, nescit dextramque precantis / abstulit...* (she does not know who Actaeon

¹²⁰Like the crowd of Bacchantes, in Book 4 Athamas is also blinded in a murderous frenzy: as punishment for raising Bacchus, Juno makes his wife Ino and their two sons appear as a lioness with her cubs to Athamas. As in the stories of Actaeon and Pentheus, the frenzied Athamas hunts down his loved ones as if they were prey: *clamat 'io, comites, his retia tendite silvis! / hic modo cum gemina visa est mihi prole leaena'* (he shouts, "hey ho, men, throw your nets over these woods! / Just now it seemed to me there was a lioness here with her twin cubs," 4.513–14). Athamas' phrasing highlights how subjective his perception is: as Anderson points out, the passive *visa est* with the dative of agent *mihi* can also mean that he does not see the lioness with her cubs, but the beasts only seem to him to appear there in the hall (ad loc.). Despite the uncertainty of his perception, Athamas moves straight into action, snatching one of the infants out of his mother's arms and bashing him against a rock (4.515–18). Like Actaeon and Pentheus, this unnamed young boy suffers a violent death when his identity, here as his father's own child, becomes obscured. See McAuley (2016, esp. 133–35) for an analysis of the layered representations of Ino in this episode.

is, and she tears off his right arm / as he begs, 3.721–22).¹²¹ Ovid emphasizes the speed of her attack by eliding any other reaction she might have to his words and stringing these two actions together with the enclitic *-que*: she does not recognize the name, and she rips off his arm, in what Anderson calls “the most grotesque answer to prayer yet” (ad loc.).

Pentheus’ pleas to his mother elicit a similar response. He displays his now armless body and begs his mother to look at him: *non habet infelix, quae matri bracchia tendat, / trunca sed ostendens deiectis vulnera membris / ‘adspice, mater!’ ait* (he, unfortunate one, does not have any arms to stretch toward his mother, / but showing his wounded torso with the missing arms, / he says, “Look, mother!,” 3.723–25).¹²² Like Actaeon, Pentheus is unable to manipulate his body into the traditional posture of supplication, but for a different reason: while Actaeon’s attempt was misinterpreted as a deer stumbling, Pentheus lacks arms entirely and instead displays his bleeding trunk to evoke pity in his mother. Instead, Agave rips off his head: *visis ululavit Agave / collaque iactavit movitque per aëra crinem / avulsumque caput digitis complexa cruentis...* (Agave rejoiced at the sight / and tossed her head and threw her hair / and, holding the torn-off head in her bloody hands..., 3.725–27). Again, this bloody scene unfurls at breakneck speed. Ovid links short, action-packed phrases together with *-que*, and phrases the decapitation itself in perfect passive participles: she already holds the torn-off head in her hands before the reader can even blink. Pentheus’ attempt to force his mother to recognize him—to take pity on his wounds

¹²¹In her analysis of female madness in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Salzman-Mitchell questions whether these mothers (and aunt) are truly blind in their Bacchic madness, or whether they are using the cover of the rite to rebel against the patriarchy in an “empowering performance” (2021, 49).

¹²²Enterline points out that language in the *Metamorphoses* alternates between doing too much (as in Sol’s promise to Phaethon, more below), or, as here, too little (2000, 27–28). Pentheus’ display is so grotesque as to border on the comical: Segal confesses he is tempted to translate the line as “Look, Ma, no hands!” (1998, 35). Gildenhard and Zissos (1999, 165) likewise call attention to the passage’s stylistic peculiarities: Pentheus’ mutilation finds a parallel on the lexical level in his “chopped off wounds” (*trunca...vulnera*, 3.724).

and to remember their relationship (calling her *mater*)—backfires spectacularly. She sees only wounded prey, and she tears off the one body part a mother should recognize anywhere, her child's face and head.

Pentheus' failure to make his body communicate here is so shocking precisely because there is nothing wrong with his body: unlike Actaeon, he has not been transformed. Regardless, his appearance, words, and body language all fail to evoke the desired response in his viewers. Furthermore, these are not strangers, with whom an attempt to communicate could easily fall flat: it should be simple for a mother and aunt to recognize and take pity on a beloved son and nephew.¹²³ Instead, Pentheus is torn apart in what Segal calls a "cartoon-like, choreographed stylization of the act of dismemberment" (1998, 35). In addition, Ovid's version of this tale lacks Bacchus' explicit involvement, as famously seen in the Euripidean version, where the god spurred on the Bacchantes: Anderson characterizes the dismemberment as an "exclusively human act," a fact that makes such a gory scene all the more disturbing (ad 701–33). In making Pentheus' closest family members dismember him with their bare hands with no visible divine intervention, Ovid illustrates the extreme breakdown in his body's ability to communicate. Pentheus, then, fails both to interpret the signs of his impending doom and to use his body to communicate effectively. His punishment is nothing less than total bodily destruction.

Unlike Euripides' *Bacchae*, this scene ends with Pentheus' dismembered trunk, no Bacchus, and no repentant Agave (Anderson ad 725–28). Instead, Ovid describes how the Bacchantes rip him apart: *non citius frondes autumni frigore tactas / iamque male haerentes alta rapit arbore ventus, / quam sunt membra viri manibus direpta nefandis* (just as swiftly as the

¹²³James reads Pentheus' total loss of identity in the eyes of those closest to him as punishment for Bacchus' failure to be recognized as a god, not only by Pentheus, but also by his fellow gods (1986, 24).

wind that snatches the autumn frostbitten / leaves that barely cling to the tall tree / are his limbs torn apart by impious hands, 3.729–31). Dehumanized and powerless in this simile, Pentheus resembles the various women transformed into plants to escape rape in the poem—in particular Daphne, who, as a laurel tree, still had to submit to Apollo’s unwanted caresses (Salzman-Mitchell 2021, 37).¹²⁴ In the end, Pentheus’ inability (or refusal) to interpret the signs around him and to adapt his views accordingly is mirrored in his unrecognizability in the eyes of his family, as he becomes bloody spectacle instead of spectator and a passive *exemplum* of Bacchus’ power.

Phaethon and Pyramus

Actaeon and Pentheus were dismembered when their bodies became unrecognizable in punishment for offending a deity, whether or not this perceived slight warranted such a grisly end. In the world of the *Metamorphoses*, however, a simple mistake in interpreting signs can also have disastrous consequences, whether or not a touchy divinity was involved. Phaethon, for example, does not offend any god; nevertheless, some simple blunders result in his fall from his father Sol’s chariot. Throughout the story, words for signs (*signum*, *vestigium*, *nota*) recur, as he fails to correctly interpret the signifiers around him in his quest for proof of his paternity. In the end, he cannot pull off the performance of his identity as Sol’s son, and utter disaster follows.

First, his friend Epaphus mocks him for his lack of a father, taunting that his mother has invented a divinity to make up for his illegitimate conception: *non tulit Inachides, ‘matri’ qui ait, ‘omnia demens / credis et es tumidus genitoris imagine falsi* (Epaphus could not bear it, and he said, “You, you fool, / believe your mother in all this, and are all puffed up with the **specter** of a

¹²⁴Segal also notes that this simile echoes Vergil’s solemn comparison of the dead crowding the banks of the river Styx (*Aen.* 6.309–12) in a confusing clash of tones (1998, 35).

made-up father,” 1.753–54).¹²⁵ Tortured by the idea that the divine father of whom he is so proud is just an illusion, Phaethon asks his mother for concrete proof of his paternity: *ede **notam** tanti generis meque adsere caelo!* (give me **evidence** of such a lofty birth and let me lay claim to heaven! 1.761). The narrator even repeats Phaethon’s request with a synonym for *nota*: *oravit veri sibi **signa** parentis* (he begged for **signs** of his true parentage, 4.764). Phaethon’s mother responds to his plea with directions to Sol’s palace; there, Phaethon repeats his request for proof of his identity to his father, echoing Epaphus’ accusation: *nec falsa Clymene culpam sub **imagine** celat, / **pignora** da, genitor, per quae tua vera propago / credar, et hunc animis errorem detrahe nostris!* (If Clymene is not concealing her shame under false **pretenses**, / give me **proof**, father, by which I might be believed to be your true / son, and free my mind of this doubt!, 2.37–39).¹²⁶

Here, Phaethon wishes for a sign to prove to himself and others that he is Sol’s legitimate offspring: Feldherr sees his journey as one for truth proved through tangible signs (2016, 28). As Anderson points out, he is desperate that others believe his noble status (ad loc.). Barbara Weiden Boyd argues that Ovid’s version of this tale departs from his Euripidean source in his emphasis on Phaethon’s anxiety over his paternity: insecurity, she points out, is Phaethon’s main impetus behind his quest (2012, 107).¹²⁷ With these repetitions of words for signs, Ovid casts the

¹²⁵Bömer charts the resonance of Epaphus accusation of a *falsus genitor* across Phaethon’s dialogue (ad 738): Phaethon repeats synonyms for father and false over and over.

¹²⁶Scholars have seen this exchange as an invitation to read this episode metapoetically. Feldherr argues that the distinction here between truth and *ficta* brings up questions about the status of stories in Ovid’s poem (2016, 28); in a similar fashion, Boyd reads the repetition of the proem’s opening words (*in nova fert animus*) in Clymene’s suggestion that Phaethon seek proof of his parentage from Sol himself (1.775) as a metapoetic indication that Ovid is beginning his own epic journey (2012, 103). She goes on to draw parallels between Ovid’s Phaethon and Homer’s Telemachus.

¹²⁷Galinsky likewise points out that Ovid’s emphasis on Phaethon’s psychological quest for his identity is the novel aspect of the story (1975, 49). Other scholars, most notably Feldherr, have read Phaethon’s

story as a quest for proof that would not only secure Phaethon's own sense of identity, but would also allow him to perform that identity convincingly in the eyes of others.

When Sol answers that Phaethon may seek anything of him as proof of his fatherly love, the boy asks to drive the sun's chariot across the sky for the day (2.47–48). Immediately regretting his offer, the god becomes distraught, and offers his obvious fear as proof of paternity: *scilicet ut nostro genitum te sanguine credas, / pignora certa petis: do pignora certa timendo / et patrio pater esse metu probor. adspice vultus / ecce meos...* (You seek **sure proof** so that you can believe / you were born from my blood; / I give you this **sure proof** in fearing for you / and I'm proven to be your father by my paternal worries. Look, right now, / look at my face,... 2.90–93). Sol's offered signs should not be difficult to interpret: the emphatic *ecce* combined with the imperative *adspice* add urgency to Sol's request, but Phaethon ignores the undeniable (*certa*) signs of his identity in his father's face.¹²⁸ Given the choice between private validation of his parentage and a flashy display of his father's recognition, Phaethon chooses the proof of his paternity that will make him the son of a god in the eyes of others as well.¹²⁹

Bound by his hasty oath, Sol attempts to instruct his son at least in the markers of the path: along with instructions in how to drive the horses, he bids Phaethon to stick to the middle path between the northern and southern heavens (*hac sit iter—manifesta rotae vestigia cernes*

search for truth through a philosophical lens: Feldherr argues that Phaethon's quest resembles the winged soul's journey to the heavens in Plato's *Phaedrus* (2016, 28–29). Feldherr also cites Schiesaro's argument (2014) that Phaethon here resembles Lucretius' Epicurus in his quest for knowledge (2016, 44, n. 7).

¹²⁸In his analysis of repetition in this narrative, Feldherr also argues that Sol's palace represents a place where signifier and signified collapse into each other, a place of "semantic wholeness where signs and reality are one" (2016, 34).

¹²⁹Galinsky rather argues that Phaethon rejects Sol's "proof" as a human reaction to his question because he has built up his father in his head as a divine superhero, not a worrying father (1975, 50–51).

(The path is there—you will see **clear** wheel-**tracks**, 2.133).¹³⁰ He gives the star signs, too, as markers of the right path between the fiery poles of the heavens (2.137–40). Sol’s instructions are not the only directions available to Phaethon: the doors of his palace show the earth and sea full of people and deities, and the sky laid out with the twelve signs of the zodiac: *haec super inposita est caeli fulgentis imago, / **signaque** sex foribus dextris totidemque sinistris* (and over this is engraved the image of the shining heavens, / and six **signs** each on the left and right doors of the zodiac, 2.17–18). This ekphrasis on the carved relief doors of the palace opens Book 2, and yet the glittering spectacle lacks any internal viewer. Furthermore, as Feldherr points out, these carved scenes anticipate Phaethon’s “destructive romp” through the heavens (2016, 28). Phaethon, however, walks straight past these signs of what is to come (2.19–22): Valerie Merriam Wise says that Phaethon is “inattentive, if not oblivious” to the doors’ scenes, and that his disinterest shows the limitations of his interpretative abilities and imagination (1977, 46). Faced with clear proof of his paternity and signs of the path he should follow, Phaethon nevertheless embarks on his foolish journey totally blind.

Instead of following the obvious trail (*manifesta vestigia*) and letting the zodiac signs mark his way, Phaethon takes fright at the looming Scorpio, and drops the reins (2.198–200). The horses, who did not realize that Phaethon’s light frame was even in the chariot (*sed leve pondus erat nec quod **cognoscere** possent / Solis equi*, but his weight was light and not such that the horses of Sol / were able to **recognize**, 2.161–62), run amok over the heavens. In using the word *cognoscere* to describe the horses’ inability to feel his weight, Ovid casts their mad dash across the heavens as a parallel failure of recognition: not only does Phaethon fail to recognize

¹³⁰As Adams points out, Phaethon wishes to follow in his father’s literal footsteps (2003, 258). Throughout this story, Ovid plays with the different senses of *vestigia* (Adams 2003, 258, n. 70): as tracks (2.133, above), as metonymy for steps (2.21), and as the scattered traces of the fallen chariot (2.318, more below).

the true proof of his paternity or the signs marking his path, but even Sol's horses fail to recognize the change in driver. The combination of these failures leads to global disaster.

As the horses zigzag across the sky, they set the earth on fire (2.203–303), until Jupiter blasts Phaethon from his seat in the chariot to save the earth from certain destruction (2.311–13). Ovid describes the image of Phaethon falling through the sky as if he were a star: *ut interdum de caelo stella sereno / etsi non cecidit, potuit cecidisse videri* (just as sometimes a star, even if it does not fall / from the serene heavens, can seem to have fallen, 2.321–22). In this image, Phaethon is forever suspended in midair, only seeming to fall. Ovid then glosses over his crash to the ground with a euphemism. The river Eridanus “receives” and “bathes” him, almost as if he were still alive (Anderson ad loc.): *excipit Eridanus fumantiaque abluit ora* (Eridanus receives him and washes his smoking face, 2.324). Ovid's oblique language here elides the reality of Phaethon's bloody death, which he displaces onto the chariot, whose parts lie scattered over the earth like a dismembered body: *illic frena iacent, illic temone revulsus / axis, in hac radii fractarum parte rotarum / sparsaque sunt late laceri vestigia currus* (here lie the reins, there the axle torn from / the pole, in another spot the spokes of the shattered wheels / and the **traces** of the mangled chariot lie scattered far and wide, 3.316–18). In a kind of *sparagmos*, the various pieces of the chariot are strewn (*sparsaque*) here and there (*illic...illic*), far and wide (*late*), until only traces (*vestigia*) of the mangled (*laceri*)¹³¹ carriage remain. Like Actaeon and Pentheus, Phaethon's failure to correctly interpret the signs around him and, in turn, to be fully recognized as Sol's son leads to a gruesome death.

¹³¹*Lacerus* more often refers to the body, rather than to broken objects (Anderson ad loc.; Bömer ad loc.).

Unlike the members of the house of Cadmus, however, Phaethon gains the recognition he so longed for in death. The Naiads bury his body in a tomb that signifies Phaethon's name, paternity, and his death—in short, his identity:

Naides Hesperiae trifida fumantia flamma
corpora dant tumulo, **signant** quoque carmine saxum:
HIC : SITVS : EST : PHAETHON : CVRRVS : AVRIGA : PATERNI
QVEM : SI : NON : TENVIT : MAGNIS : TAMEN : EXCIDIT : AVSIS

The Italian Naiads lay his body, still smoking from the three-forked thunderbolt, in a tomb, and they **mark** the stone with a poem:
HERE LIES PHAETHON, THE DRIVER OF HIS FATHER'S CHARIOT,
WHICH, EVEN IF HE DID NOT MASTER IT, HE DESTROYED IN HIS DARING,
(2.325–28).

Only in death does Phaethon gain the public proof of his paternity for which he so longed. Yet his tomb is a poor stand-in for his original wish to fully embody his father's identity: as Feldherr points out, this epigram shows how Phaethon is both his father and yet not, in that he temporarily took on his father's role, but failed spectacularly (2016, 41). Not satisfied with the private signs of his father's love in his quest for proof of his identity, Phaethon wished to drive his father's chariot across the sky in a kind of public performance of his father's recognition and favor. When, however, he fails to carry off his performance as Sol's semi-divine son and to mark the signs around him, he dies a gruesome death. All that remains of him are the words signifying the identity he attempted to bolster with public proof: Phaethon himself—his body, the memory of his life prior to his ride across the heavens—is gone, and his tomb stands as a *signum* of his mangled body.¹³²

In Book 4, Pyramus, too, repeatedly misreads the signs around him, and suffers a grisly death. He and his star-crossed beloved, Thisbe, first communicated through a crack in the wall

¹³²As Feldherr points out, his mother treats his tomb as if it were his body itself, weeping over it and clasping it to herself (2002, 178).

dividing their gardens via secret signals: *consciis omnis abest; nutu **signisque** loquuntur* (no go-between helps them: they speak with nods and **signs**, 4.63). After they plan to run away together in secret, Thisbe spies a lioness prowling their meeting place and flees, dropping her veil, which the cat mangles with her bloody jaws (4.99–104). Pyramus, arriving later, sees the lion's tracks and the bloody cloak, and fatally misinterprets the situation: *serius egressus **vestigia** vidit in alto / pulvere **certa** ferae totoque expalluit ore / Pyramus; ut vero vestem quoque sanguine tinctam / repperit, 'una duos' inquit 'nox perdet amantes...'* (having come later, Pyramus sees **clear tracks** of a wild beast / in the thick dust, and he goes white all over; / and then when he also finds the cloak dyed / with blood, he says, "one night will destroy two lovers...." 4.105–08). By calling the lioness' tracks unmistakable (*certa*), Ovid plays with Pyramus' mistake in interpreting them: the tracks are unmistakably those of some fearful beast, but the lover nevertheless jumps to the wrong conclusion. Rosati points out the disjunct between sign and referent in this episode: "the error arises from the automatic association of a sign with the reality it habitually denotes: for Pyramus, the lioness' footprints and Thisbe's bloodied veil are certain proof of her death, while the paradox of the situation lies in the very randomness of the sign, and its actual lack of meaning" (2021, 107).

In despair, Pyramus commits suicide by stabbing himself in the groin. What follows is an almost comically gruesome simile of a burst pipe that vividly illustrates the spout of blood springing from his wound:

ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte,
 non aliter quam cum vitiato fistula plumbo
 scinditur et tenui stridente foramine longas
 iaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera rumpit.
 arborei fetus adspergine caedis in atram
 vertuntur faciem, madefactaque sanguine radix
 purpureo tinguit pendentia mora colore.

As he lies on his back on the ground, his blood jets out high into the air,
not unlike when a water pipe is split where the lead
has rotted and shoots long streams of water through the hole
with a thin hissing and beats against the air with its thrusts.
The fruits of the tree are turned black
with the sprinkles of gore, and the roots soaked with blood
dye the hanging fruits a purple color (4.121–27).

This jarring simile clashes with the fairytale-like romance thus far. First, the comparison is fussily technical and anachronistic: the daughter of Minyas who is narrating the story could not have known about Roman plumbing systems (Anderson ad 122–24). The simile is also absurdly and humorously unrealistic: what in reality would be, at most, a thick gurgling of blood becomes a powerful jet that shoots high enough into the sky to douse the mulberry tree above him.

Scholars previously saw this simile as a joke in poor taste, a prime example of the excesses of Silver Age Latin (e.g., Galinsky 1975).¹³³ More recently, scholarship has attempted to fit this simile in with Ovid's larger poetic program: Carole Newlands, for example, argues that this passage is purposefully disruptive in order to signal Ovid's break with the generic conventions of romance in this story (1986, 145–46) and that it taps into the contrast of manmade art versus the unbridled force of nature in this book of the poem (1986, 147–50). Robert Shorrock, as well, argues that this simile does double duty as a metaphor for Ovid's poetic "plumbing" that tries, and fails, to control an alternate version of Pyramus' fate, in which he turns into a river (2003, 627). For both Newlands and Shorrock, the pipe simile fits into Ovid's larger poetic agenda.

In their attempts to justify the simile, however, Newlands and Shorrock underplay just how excessive it is. Its discordance and over-the-top imagery draw attention to Pyramus' dying

¹³³ According to Galinsky, this simile shows Ovid's "indifference to human suffering" (1975, 128) and his delight in the gory and macabre (1975, 153).

body as abject, in Kristevan terms. The sheer amount of blood, which shoots up high enough to douse the mulberry tree's leaves and is abundant enough to soak its roots, draws attention to the simple fact that Pyramus' body is no longer contained and inviolate. The simile's phrasing, furthermore, blurs distinctions between bodily effluvia: the spurt of blood reminds the reader of ejaculate. Newlands points out several features that make the spurt of blood what she calls a "giant orgasm" (1986, 143): Pyramus stabs himself in the groin (*in ilia*) and the pipe ejects (*iaculatur*) streams of water that pulse with repeated thrusts (*ictibus*).¹³⁴ Despite the simile's crass sexual undertones, this spurting, leaking body bears more resemblances to the abject maternal body than to the inviolate male body of the Roman imagination. In shattering the illusion that the male body is a neatly contained whole in such a spectacular manner and casting it rather as a leaky body verging on the feminine, the abject description of Pyramus' dying body threatens his identity.

Furthermore, this simile objectifies Pyramus' body: Shorrock (2003, 626–27) points out the cluster of musical words (*fistula*, *foramen*, *ictus*, *tenuis*, *stridens*) to argue that the plumbing from this simile is itself a metaphor for the music of poetry. If the pipe from the simile does double-duty as a wind instrument, then, by extension, Pyramus' body is also described as a musical pipe.¹³⁵ The bleeding body of Pyramus is simultaneously described as an abject corpse and objectified as various types of pipes: it no longer acts as a signifier of an inviolate subject in control of himself. The pipe simile, then, draws attention to Pyramus' abject body to emphasize

¹³⁴Newlands also draws attention to the fact that the mulberries are called "offspring" (*fetus*) and that the damaged (*vitiato*) pipe conjures up associations with sexual immorality (1986, 143). Segal, in addition, calls this simile "the least subtle *double-entendre* in the poem" (1969, 50).

¹³⁵Syrinx is, of course, turned literally into a musical instrument (1.705–12), while Marsyas' flayed body is also described with language that evokes a musical instrument, this time a stringed one (6.382–400). I will discuss Marsyas in the following chapter.

its utter destruction, objectification, and ensuing loss of identity: in its jets of blood, Pyramus' dying body bears closer resemblances to the female body or pipes than it does to the lover of an ancient romance.

Unlike Pyramus, Thisbe immediately grasps what has transpired when she emerges from her hiding place. Although she is at first confused because of the mulberry tree's blood-stained fruit, she recognizes (*cognoscit*) its location and shape (4.131), and immediately identifies her lover (*cognovit*, 4.137). After a brief lament, she then recognizes her cloak (*cognovit*, 4.147) and sees the unsheathed sword, and understands what has happened. In contrast to Pyramus, Thisbe swiftly and correctly interprets the signs left behind by her lover's death.¹³⁶ She also commits suicide, stabbing herself through the breast with the same sword (4.162–63), but apart from these facts, Ovid does not describe her body or death in any more detail (Segal 1998, 26). As De Boer has shown, this kind of gory description of the dying body is reserved for Pyramus, not Thisbe (see above).

Before Thisbe stabs herself, she also prays for the mulberry tree splattered with Pyramus' blood to retain this dark color: *signa tene caedis pullosque et luctibus aptos / semper habe fetus, gemini monimenta cruoris* (retain the **sign** of this bloodshed and keep always these black / fruits, fitting for a funeral, as a **monument** of our double gore, 4.160–61). She requests that the dark fruit act as a marker (*signa*) and monument (*monimenta*) of the gore that surrounds her, rather than of their shared love: like Phaethon's tomb, the darkened mulberry tree is left behind as a

¹³⁶Often, but not always, women in the world of the *Metamorphoses* are more adept at interpreting the signs around them, though this skill does not seem to give them much of an advantage. The spring Cyane, for example, recognizes Proserpina as Pluto is abducting her and attempts to stop his rape, but the god plunges his chariot into her waters, splitting her in two and permanently dissolving her into tears (5.420–37). She nevertheless floats Proserpina's girdle on her surface as a sign (*signa...manifesta, notamque*) to her mother Demeter of where her daughter has gone, a clue that the goddess immediately recognizes (5.568–73). Despite correctly interpreting the sign of her daughter's rape, Demeter still lacks her missing daughter, and after she plunges Sicily into drought and famine, regains her for only half of the year.

signum of Pyramus' bloody body. Pyramus failed to navigate this world of confusing signifiers, and in the end, his abject and objectified body ceases to act as a signifier of his identity. Only the reddened mulberry tree remains to commemorate his bloody death.

Conclusion

These stories show how the “looking glass” world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* magnifies the issues with deceptive appearances and recognition in the contemporary political landscape. As bodily signifiers in Augustan Rome become increasingly divorced from the social identity they are supposed to broadcast, the relationship between sign and referent in the *Metamorphoses* is similarly muddled. Not only is physical appearance frequently a deceptive façade, as the hundreds of transformations show, but bodily *signa* also can have multiple, competing meanings (as do Cipus' horns) or, in the end, mean nothing at all (as in Narcissus' tale). In undermining the relationship between sign and referent, Ovid ramps up the disorientation of Augustus' new autocratic regime in his fictional world.

The world of the *Metamorphoses* also raises the stakes of these issues of appearance and reality: the goriest fates in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are reserved for men, and these stories abound not only in blood and guts, but also in fatal misrecognitions and misinterpretations. Correctly interpreting *signa* and navigating this bewildering world is, for Ovid's male characters, a matter of life and death, as characters like Pyramus and Phaethon show. Furthermore, when the identity of a male character in Ovid's poem becomes obscured in some way—whether, like Actaeon, his body has been transformed, or some god has blinded those closest to him, as for Pentheus—his body is destroyed: the failure of male bodies to communicate in Ovid's world often means the

dissolution of this very body. By assigning such dire consequences to the failure to be recognized properly, Ovid raises the stakes of the interpretability of the male body, a fraught issue in contemporary Rome as well: he suggests that the body's failure to act as an interpretable signifier means nothing less than total ruin. The disorientation and arbitrary violence of Ovid's world and of the increasingly autocratic Rome renders this body and, by extension, bodily identity wholly vulnerable and unstable, an issue that the next chapter will explore in depth.

CHAPTER THREE: Violence Against the Male Body and the Destruction of Identity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Vulnerable Bodies in Augustan Rome and Ovid's Metamorphoses

Ovid's world is unsettling for its inhabitants and readers alike not only because nothing is as it seems, but also because its ruling gods brutalize people and transform bodies at a whim. No fewer than six rapes (or attempted rapes) and ensuing transformations unfold in the first five books alone,¹³⁷ and brutal punishments like Marsyas' flaying occur with little provocation (6.382–400, more below). Ovid's rendering of Jupiter's rape of Callisto vividly illustrates how destabilizing both this impulsive cruelty of the gods and the confusion arising from constantly shifting forms can be. When Jupiter happens to see the nymph alone in the woods one afternoon, he decides on a whim to rape her (2.422–24).¹³⁸ Callisto follows the person she thinks is her leader Diana into the woods, but Jupiter, disguised as the virgin goddess, attacks her (2.401–40). Afterwards, she no longer trusts her eyes and is frightened when she sees the real Diana again (2.443–45).¹³⁹ In this world, unpredictably cruel deities hold sway, and bodily signs shift with no warning, leading to widespread fear and disorientation.

¹³⁷I.e., Daphne, Io, Syrinx, Callisto, Leucothoë (who is buried alive and then transformed into a flower), and Cyane (Hades' plunge into her waters, in a semi-rape, reduces her permanently to tears). Daphne and Syrinx narrowly escape rape by their transformations into a laurel tree and reeds.

¹³⁸See Johnson (1996b, especially 10–12) for an excellent line-by-line analysis of Jupiter's actions here, and an exploration of Ovid's overall tone in this episode.

¹³⁹*ecce, suo comitata choro Dictynna per altum / Maenalon ingrediens et caede superba ferarum / adspicit hanc visamque vocat: clamata refugit, / et timuit primo, ne Iuppiter esset in illa* (look, Diana,

Ovid's depiction of deities who casually wield their absolute power according to their own whims, often with devastating consequences for those subject to them, echoes the new power structures of the Principate. Charles Segal argues that Ovid's choice of metamorphosis as a theme taps into contemporary anxieties about the lack of control, disorientation, and arbitrary violence subjects of an authoritarian regime were subjected to (1998, 36).¹⁴⁰ For elite Romans in particular, the adjustment to an authoritarian form of government was destabilizing: as Augustus' grip over the government tightened, elites had to cope with the loss of their former standing and governing power, while pretending their contributions in the civic sphere still mattered.¹⁴¹ For example, Augustus' various measures to increase senatorial attendance show that elites began to regard sitting in the Senate as more of a chore than an honor.¹⁴² Augustus ultimately announced in 13 CE that his twenty hand-picked advisors possessed the Senate's stamp of approval, whether or not the Senate actually met (Dio Cas. 56.28.2–3). The institution that was formerly the

accompanied by her chorus, striding / through the deep Maenalus and proud in the slaughter of beasts, / sees her and calls out to her: the nymph flees / and first fears that Jupiter is lurking in her, 2.443–45).

¹⁴⁰As Segal puts it, “[a]s the center of power seems increasingly remote, the abrupt transformation of one's life by sudden, arbitrary violence seems more possible, and orientation seems more difficult in an ever-expanding bureaucratic and autocratic government” (1998, 32). In addition to this change in regime, I would add the dizzying social changes at work in the period as a factor contributing to the general sense of disorientation.

¹⁴¹Habinek has rightly criticized political readings of Ovid for focusing overly on the person of Augustus instead of the broader social changes at work: why wouldn't unflattering portrayals of the gods, he argues, also extend to the aristocratic class? (2002, 56). Likewise, Feldherr points out that though Augustus himself appears relatively infrequently in the *Metamorphoses*, the text's focus on power relations encourages reflections on Roman hierarchies (2010, 7).

¹⁴²In 17 BCE, Augustus increased fines for tardy arrival by senators (Dio Cas. 54.18.3). When, presumably, this measure was not effective, he announced that the Senate could pass decrees with fewer than 400 members present (11 BCE; Dio Cas. 54.35.1). In 9 BCE, he adjusted the minimum numbers of senators in attendance based on the type of decree and again increased fines for latecomers, in addition to fixing two days per month for Senate meetings. Non-attendance and tardiness, however, were so widespread that Augustus was forced to set up a system of punishment by lot in order to collect these fines (Dio Cas. 55.3).

cornerstone of Republican political life and elite identity now lacked any real power: Augustus' measures paint its members more akin to a pack of truant schoolboys than powerful politicians.

The formerly supreme senatorial class were not merely politically stymied in 9 BCE: senators had to grapple with the fact that their success and their very lives depended upon the whim of a single individual, a condition underlined by the cruelty and thoughtlessness of the gods in the *Metamorphoses* (Feeney 1991, 223).¹⁴³ Dio Cassius' history of the Augustan era creates a picture of wholly arbitrary imperial power. The erasure of Gallus' poetry and very name provided a chilling example for other poets of the Augustan era: after Augustus stripped Gallus of his honors in a formal *renuntiatio amicitiae* in 26 BCE, the poet, socially and politically ostracized, committed suicide (Dio Cas. 53.23.5–24.1; Claassen 2017, 320). The twists and turns of Sphaerus' life show that Augustus' blessing or condemnation could make or break a career: a shepherd whom Augustus advanced to the consulship without even awarding a seat in the Senate, he was ultimately executed by Augustus as an enemy in 40 BCE, but nevertheless honored with a public funeral (Dio Cas. 48.33.2–3). One needed not know Augustus personally to be subjected to his whims: in desperation of raising enough troops to quell the uprisings in Germany and Gaul in 9 CE, Augustus drew lots, then disenfranchised and confiscated the property of every fifth man under the age of 35 (and every tenth man over 35), even sentencing some to death when enrollment did not increase. The Roman elite had to adjust

¹⁴³See Millar (1977) for a study of imperial power that emphasizes its arbitrariness and the anxiety that such absolute power could induce. Feeney argues that attitudes toward Augustus and toward divinity often overlap in the *Metamorphoses*: he describes an “apprehensive preoccupation with divine anger” in Roman religion and argues that “the pages of the *Metamorphoses* contain one of the most extended encounters with this attitude that we possess” (1991, 223).

to a world in which the favor of a single person was essential for advancement, while his disapproval could spell disaster without notice.¹⁴⁴

Under Augustus' rule, the elite bodies decreed inviolate during the Republic under the Porcian laws (see Chapter One, pp. 5–6) could be subjected to abuse and degradation, no longer at the mercy of the mob, as in the political chaos of the end of the Republic, but at the autocrat's whim. The emperor's power extended to the ability to put senators and knights to death within the pomerium, and his tribunician power allowed him to destroy his enemies without a trial (Dio Cas. 53.17). Although historians emphasize Augustus' famous clemency, they also relate stories of his arbitrary violence.¹⁴⁵ Suetonius, for example, tells how Quintus Gallius was forcibly removed from the Senate under the suspicion of concealing a dagger under his robes; when he turned out to be carrying only tablets, he was nevertheless tortured as if he were enslaved and executed (*Aug.* 27.4). In 2 BCE, Iullus Antonius, along with some other prominent men, was executed for sleeping with Augustus' daughter Julia, under the pretense that they were designing upon the empire (Dio Cas. 55.10.15).¹⁴⁶ The unpredictable nature of such persecutions and

¹⁴⁴Even when one's life was not on the line, Augustus' treatment of Lepidus shows how humiliating this adjustment to an autocracy could be: Augustus frequently ordered Lepidus from the city to the country and back again at a moment's notice, took him with him to the Senate to subject him to jeering, and purposely called on his vote last in the Senate (Dio Cas. 54.15.4–6).

¹⁴⁵In comparison with the widespread slaughter of the civil wars and proscriptions, and with the more volatile personalities of later emperors, Augustus does appear relatively mild. The unpredictable violence of the proscriptions, however, still haunted the elite consciousness, as Dio Cassius shows (47.4). (See Richlin 1999 on how the trauma of the end of the Republic echoed through the empire.) Gnilka similarly draws attention to mob violence in the late Republic that extended into the empire (1973, 262), and connects dismemberments by crowds with the popularity of the stories of Pentheus and Actaeon as literary themes (ibid., 263). Regardless of the widespread violence of the regime shift, however, Augustus' introduction of an autocratic government legally and practically rendered formerly inviolate bodies vulnerable to his whims, whether or not he chose to exercise them.

¹⁴⁶Dio Cassius often glosses over the punishments and executions of elite Romans, mentioning them offhandedly. Nevertheless, a few more examples can be found in his pages: Fannius Caepio and Murena were convicted of conspiring against Augustus and executed in 22 BCE (54.3.4), and in 18 BCE a few more men were executed, though the historian does not elaborate upon their identities or crimes (54.15.4).

executions is echoed in stories like that of Actaeon, who, through no fault of his own, fails to navigate the bewildering world of the *Metamorphoses* and suffered extreme consequences. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as in contemporary Rome, punishment is swift and unpredictable. The elite no longer have control over their futures or their formerly inviolate bodies.

In the shift from Republic to Principate, the specter of corporal and capital punishment for elites eroded their sense of masculine identity rooted in the ideal of the inviolable body. Furthermore, this threat compounded the confusion of bodily signifiers: not only markers like the senatorial stripe or equestrian gold rings, but also permanent marks like scars, could no longer be relied upon to communicate an individual's status.¹⁴⁷ The advancement of recently wealthy soldiers (discussed in Chapter Two, pp. 39–42) flooded the ranks of the senatorial and equestrian elite with scarred and marked bodies.¹⁴⁸ Other social changes were at work, too: in 11 CE, knights were permitted to fight as gladiators, as disenfranchisement no longer discouraged them (Dio Cas. 56.25.7–8). This increasing social fluidity eroded distinctions between elite and non-elite on the very canvases of their bodies: no longer did scars shamefully acquired through beatings or gladiatorial combat exclude one from the upper ranks.

For elites, the difficulty of distinguishing between these increasingly muddled social strata was profoundly destabilizing.¹⁴⁹ Augustus' limitations on manumission betray elite

In a speech to Augustus, Livia encourages him to stop killing political prisoners, arguing that such executions breed speculation and resentment amongst the people (55.18–19). Even if Dio Cassius does not examine this subject in-depth in his history proper, her plea to Augustus paints a vivid picture of the general sense of unrest and distrust engendered by arbitrary punishments.

¹⁴⁷See Chapter Two, pp. 39–42 for more examples of increased social fluidity in this period.

¹⁴⁸See footnote 21 for further discussion and citations of the ambivalence of scars in Roman thought.

¹⁴⁹Hints of unease are found already in elegy: in *Amores* 3.8, the speaker rails against his beloved's new lover, a newly promoted equestrian he describes as a *sanguine pastus eques* (an equestrian fed on blood, 3.8.10). He complains to his beloved that this former soldier earned the wealth he pays her with his body,

anxieties about increasingly fluid social mobility: he decreed that enslaved people who had been put in irons or tortured could not acquire citizenship along with freedom, as other freed individuals could.¹⁵⁰ With this measure, he attempted to exclude branded or shamefully scarred bodies from the ranks of Roman citizens (Suet. *Aug.* 40.4), but, as Susan Treggiari points out, such regulation would have been difficult to enforce (1969, 237–38): such measures say more about elite anxieties than they do about freedman status in practice. In her studies of depictions of freedmen, Lauren Hackworth Petersen shows that the freedman’s body becomes a site of contradictions in the eyes of elites, a confusion that betrays elite anxieties about manumission and social advancement (2009, 209–12).¹⁵¹ The possibility, then, for scarred or otherwise marked bodies to advance to the ranks of the formerly inviolate senatorial elite undermined their sense of bodily identity and class cohesion.

and dwells on the scars he earned in his course of duty: *cerne cicatrices, veteris vestigia pugnae— / quaesitum est illi corpore, quiquid habet* (look at his scars, the marks of an old battle— / whatever he has, he obtained it through his body, 3.8.19–20). In dwelling on his rival’s body, the speaker reveals his profound sense of unease with the soldier’s advancement to his own civic class. See Zimmermann Damer (2019, esp. 231–37) for further discussion of the anxieties about masculinity the speaker reveals in this poem. Tibullus also reveals discomfort with upward social mobility in lamenting that a formerly enslaved person, with feet chalked for the auction market, could now rule over his *puella* (2.3.59–60). In focusing on the erst-while marks on this unnamed freedman’s feet, Tibullus implies that such bodily signifiers leave their mark long after they are washed off. Cf. Prop. 2.16, in which another *barbarus* possess the poet-speaker’s former “kingdom” (2.16.27–28).

¹⁵⁰Treggiari points out that although this regulation was intended to prevent criminals from becoming citizens, it also excluded those who had been punished by their enslavers from their ranks (1969, 237–38). Other measures to curb manumission include Augustus’ decree to fix a minimum age for both the manumitter and manumitted in 4 CE (Dio Cas. 55.13.4–7) and his posthumous injunction included in his will to limit manumission (Dio Cas. 56.33.3–4).

¹⁵¹Feldherr also describes how the process of manumission crystallizes elite anxieties about enslavement: depending on whether you believe slavery is an innate or imposed condition, manumission could suggest a disjunct between appearance and reality, or the stability of aristocratic blood in adverse circumstances. Feldherr further links these two views with the two versions of metamorphosis in tension throughout the text (2010, 107). He also points to the enslaved Sosia’s and his master Amphitruo’s differing reactions to having their identities taken over in Plautus’ *Amphitruo*—Amphitruo clings to his former identity, while Sosia readily strikes out as a freedman—to argue that for elites, “maintaining control of one’s face” was crucial in maintaining one’s identity (2010, 45–46).

In this chapter, I examine episodes that dwell on the wounded, dismembered, or otherwise mutilated male body in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in light of these contemporary social-political changes. In these stories, Ovid closely links the body with identity, showing how extreme violence disrupts the performance of identity until the person behind the mutilations is no longer recognizable. Just as the threat of violence against formerly untouchable elites and the blurring of social distinctions even at the level of the body undermine elite bodily identity in Augustan Rome, Ovid likewise illustrates how violence can overshadow or even erase an individual's identity by destroying his body.

The Wounded Body and the Loss of Identity: Marsyas and Pelops

Phaethon, Pyramus, and the other male characters in the previous chapter failed to navigate their bewildering surroundings and were turned into gory spectacles. In other stories, Ovid invites the reader to contemplate and interpret the mutilated male body itself and to judge for herself if this ruined body can continue to communicate identity. While Actaeon and Pentheus were dismembered after their true identities were obscured, Ovid explores in the episodes discussed below how violence itself can erase an individual's identity.

In the tale of Marsyas, this punitive violence is so extreme that it renders his body not merely unrecognizable, but as an object instead of a living being. First, Ovid skips over the musical contest between Marsyas and Apollo and moves straight to his punishment: in this compressed narrative (6.382–400), seven out of eighteen lines (6.385–91) are devoted to the satyr's flayed and tortured body. In eliding the backstory,¹⁵² Ovid shifts the focus of this tale

¹⁵²This narrow focus is even more surprising in light of his extended treatment of other artists, such as Arachne and Orpheus (Niżyńska 2001, 154). Ovid also refers to Apollo as Latous (6.384) with an epic

from questions of crime and punishment (as he did in his extended treatment of Actaeon's "mistake") to Marsyas' tortured body and his pain. Without its explanatory or moralizing context, Marsyas' punishment becomes even "more harrowing and repulsive" (Tissol 1997, 126).

The scene opens with its only dialogue: *'quid me mihi detrahis?'* inquit; / *'a! piget, a! non est,' clamabat "tibia tanti!'* ("Why are you dragging **me from myself**?" he asks, / "Ah! I take it back! Ah! The flute," he was shouting, "is not worth such a price!" 6.385–86). Marsyas' question has long bothered commentators for its seeming pithiness, at odds with the scene of torture that follows:¹⁵³ Anderson thinks that Ovid inserts his characteristic wittiness in the satyr's mouth, so that he speaks with "unlikely sophistication" (ad loc.). Other scholars have read Marsyas' question through a psychological lens: the double pronouns both demonstrate a "cleavage of self" (Fränkel 1945, 81) and objectify in language the physical cleavage in his flaying (Tissol 1997, 59).¹⁵⁴ This question, however, does not reflect a split in the consciousness or the body alone, but it alienates the body from the subject in his experience of pain, as Scarry

circumlocution and notes only that Marsyas was punished, within a series of tales about divine retribution (6.382–85). In the absence of any other information, the reader can imagine Apollo himself flaying Marsyas. Ovid may have neglected to recount the background of this story for more than one reason: perhaps he shied away from depicting a god whom Augustus was fond of embodying as the torturer of a suffering artist. For Niżyńska, Ovid's omissions point to Marsyas' role as a symbol for artistic and religious autonomy (2001, 60). Lateiner similarly sees Marsyas' flayed body as a metapoetic image of imperial censorship and of "the artist's pain and vulnerability" (2006, 21). See Miller (2009, esp. 350) and Niżyńska (2001, esp. 158–59) for the close relationship between Apollo and Augustus.

¹⁵³Galinsky thought this question "reflects [Ovid's] unfeeling attitude to and even delight in cruelty" (1975, 195). Williams likewise considers it "ill-timed, even tasteless" (1996, 84). Cf. the jarring comparison between Pyramus' bleeding body and a broken pipe (4.121–27; discussed in Chapter Two, pp. 77–82).

¹⁵⁴Bömer similarly reads this question as a darkly humorous literalization of the "Ich-Spaltung" (ad loc.). In his analysis of style and semantics in the *Metamorphoses*, Tissol argues that Ovidian "wit" is not mere fluff but shows the collapsing of semantic boundaries: characters in duress often use paradox (1997, 14–15), which only intensifies, not dissipates, the horror of such scenes (ibid., 129). For Feldherr, this pithy question shows the tension Marsyas embodies between his role as "inadequate *lusor*" in a kind of laughable satyr play that concludes the trio of stories of divine retribution, and a poet and musician in his own right (2010, 100–02).

has shown. With the enjambment of *ego* in two forms, *me* and *mihi*, Marsyas distinguishes between his self and his body, in the same way as the experience of pain forces the awareness that the body is not continuous with the self. This seemingly simple question encourages the reader to view Marsyas' body as something that can be separated from the self, the object to the self's subject.

The scene of flaying that follows uses the language of exposure: *clamanti cutis est summos **direpta** per artus, / nec quicquam nisi vulnus erat; cruor undique manat; / **detectique patent** nervi...* (as he screams, the skin is **stripped off** the surface of his body, / until there's nothing left apart from wound; blood flows everywhere; / his **uncovered** sinews **lie exposed**... 6.387–89). Ovid describes the satyr's body as opened up to the viewer's gaze: as Charles Segal puts it, Ovid "goes out of his way to emphasize the violation to the body's cavities" (1998, 34). In addition, Gareth Williams points out that as Marsyas' body is increasingly stripped away, the narrative itself becomes more explicit and anatomically specific (1996, 83). Despite this language of revealing, Marsyas' flaying does not uncover any deeper truth about his identity or self; rather, he loses control over the shape of his body as his skin is stripped away (Feldherr 2010, 102). As Anzieu theorized, the skin is a crucial component of a sense of self, whose lack or damage can lead to crises of identity (1995, 44). Marsyas' skin cannot perform any of its roles in constructing identity: it no longer protects his body, holds together his internal organs, or communicates who he is to the viewer. Without its skin, "a necessary precondition for having a self," Marsyas' body can no longer communicate what he wishes (Theodorakopoulos 1999, 156). Instead, the reader is treated to a survey of his exposed organs, which glitter and vibrate as if they have taken on a life of their own.

At the end of his survey of his flayed body, the narrator speaks to the reader in a direct address that further objectifies Marsyas' body. He notes that a spectator would have been able to count his exposed organs: *...salientia viscera possis / et perlucentes numerare in pectore fibras* (you could count the entrails / as they palpitate, and the vitals showing clearly in his breast, 6.390–91). With this address, Ovid encourages readers to imagine themselves as part of the internal audience of the gory scene (Williams 1996, 83). In addition, the poet switches to the present tense halfway through the description of the satyr's body (*manat*, 388) in order to make this scene more immediate (Galinsky 1975, 134). Again, Ovid's language emphasizes the exposure of Marsyas' body, yet this address discourages any emotional reaction on the reader's part.¹⁵⁵ In inviting readers to count the trembling organs and vitals, the poet nudges them to view Marsyas' body with detachment, as if they were witnessing a dissection¹⁵⁶ rather than the torture of a fellow living being.¹⁵⁷ This second-person address encourages readers to objectify Marsyas' tortured body along with the narrator.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵Niżyńska, in contrast, argues that the immediacy of the scene plays up the horror of the spectacle and evokes the reader's sympathy (2001, 155).

¹⁵⁶Lada-Richards compares the reader's contemplation of Marsyas' body to the "ocular scalpel" of the dance critic (2013, 124).

¹⁵⁷This scene could also be read as the butchering of an animal: in Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*, the satyr hangs upside-down as if in a butcher's shop. I argue below that Ovid reduces Marsyas' body to a series of inanimate objects, but this episode also questions the boundaries between human and animal in its depiction of the satyr's flaying. Adams draws attention to an element of class in this narrative: as one of the rustic, "plebian" gods in the *Metamorphoses*' divine hierarchy, Marsyas cannot compete with Apollo's aristocratic musical talent (2003, 156–57).

¹⁵⁸Some scholars think that because the reader is encouraged to view Marsyas' body with detachment, this attitude necessarily leads to voyeuristic delight (Galinsky 1975, 195). Williams, for example, argues that this scene leaves room for two emotional reactions: either compassion on the part of the reader, or a "frisson of sadistic delight" (1996, 83–84). He nevertheless concludes that the portrayal of Marsyas has "little or no sympathy" because the reader is invited to gaze upon the passage's gory details rather than the satyr's agony (ibid., 84). Viewing a dissected or sacrificed body with objectivity, however, does not mean that the viewer takes pleasure in the sight. The question is, rather, whether viewing a scene of torture with the same detachment as one would watch a cow being butchered is morally upright. Though

The description of Marsyas' body, as well, draws similarities between it and various objects. Without the skin to protect and contain the interior of his body, his internal organs seem more like other objects than parts of his body. As Paula James and Andrew Feldherr point out, his flayed body is strongly reminiscent of a musical instrument (2004, 96). First, his nerves and veins vibrate like the strings of a lyre: ...*trepidaeque sine ulla / pelle micant venae; salientia viscera possis / et perlucentes numerare in pectore fibras* (his **quivering** veins **throb / and glisten** without any skin to cover them: you could count the entrails / as the **palpitate**, / and the vitals showing clearly in his breast, 6.389–91). The verb *numerare* also denotes putting verse into musical meter (Feldherr and James 2004, 83). Not only does his body resemble a stringed instrument, but the lyre's construction also echoes Marsyas' flaying: the shells of dismembered tortoises often served as the sounding-box of lyres, while animal entrails made up the strings (Feldherr and James 2004, 96). In addition, his flayed body glitters and gleams (*micant* 390, *perlucentes* 391) as if it were a precious object or the sun itself (Feldherr 2010, 104): with this “aestheticization of violence” (Hardie 2002b, 41), Ovid encourages the reader to view his tortured body as if it were a glittering work of art, not a brutal spectacle.¹⁵⁹ Marsyas' flayed body is objectified in a gory version of the very musical instrument that defeated him.¹⁶⁰

Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae* were written roughly a generation after Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the philosopher engages in questions of the morality of depicting pain that are relevant here: in 10.5, he both condemns the artist who creates images of others' pain and implicates the viewer in this moral conundrum. See Morales' 1996 chapter for a further discussion of this topic.

¹⁵⁹Feldherr argues that this description of Marsyas' body makes Ovid into a producer of spectacle, like the emperors who put on bloody gladiatorial games (2004, 87). Newlands argues that this “aesthetic distancing” makes “the unbearable bearable” in this gory picture (2018, 165).

¹⁶⁰Though Marsyas, as a satyr, is not wholly human, Ovid's language makes his body into an object, rather than a piece of meat. In stripping Marsyas of his personhood, Ovid went a step further than reducing him to an animal, making him an instrument instead. Cf. Syrinx (1.689–712), who is transformed into reeds in her flight from Pan: though she escaped rape, Pan fashions her new reed form into pipes as the only form of communication between them (1.709–12).

As he carefully peels off Marsyas' skin, Apollo appears here both as his torturer and a perverted musician on the lyre to which the satyr's body is reduced. In creating this bloody scene through his poetry, Ovid, too, tortures the suffering satyr. Scarry's discussion of the relationship between torturer and victim can elucidate this power dynamic further: as Scarry theorizes, the torturer takes control over language, while the victim, voiceless, is reduced to mere body and sensation (1985, 52–57). As the poet, Ovid controls this narrative and its description of Marsyas' body: his poetry both deconstructs and objectifies his body to the extent that he appears more like a musical instrument than a living being.

In addition, the luxury object that Marsyas resembles, the lyre, is Apollo's accoutrement. Ovid's poetry and Apollo's knife transform Marsyas' body into Apollo's trademark: instead of displaying the satyr's identity, Marsyas' flayed body signifies Apollo's identity as a musician. Furthermore, the lyre was the means by which the god defeated Marsyas: by transforming Marsyas' body into a version of the very instrument that bested him, Apollo renders his opponent a signifier of his own superiority over him in the contest.¹⁶¹ Despite the new significance of Marsyas' flayed body as a signifier of Apollo's dominance, this symbolism, along with his body and identity, is wholly erased by the end of the story. Even though gore seeps everywhere (6.388), Ovid makes the river Marsyas stem from his mourner's tears, not his blood (6.392–400).¹⁶² Just as Gallus' fall from grace ultimately led to the erasure of his poetry and name,

¹⁶¹As Newlands puts it, "Marsyas' body has ceased to be human; Apollo's triumph over him is symbolized by his ghastly metamorphosis into the victorious instrument, a bloodstained image that implicitly comments on the cruelty of Apollo's victory" (2018, 166).

¹⁶²Cf. Pyramus, whose blood permanently stained the mulberry tree's fruit crimson (4.160–61; discussed in Chapter Two, pp. 78–82). As Anderson notes, the name Marsyas represents the only continuity between river and satyr (*ad loc.*). Newlands also sees Marsyas' end as complete bodily dissolution (2018, 168). Theodorakopoulos likewise understands this detail as the complete erasure of Marsyas himself: "Marsyas torn from himself sheds blood which disappears, and leaves behind no better part, no *opus*,

Marsyas' flaying leads to his objectification and the erasure of his identity that extends on after his death.

Directly after Marsyas' flaying, Pelops recounts how his father Tantalus dismembered and cooked him, and how the gods reconstituted his body, filling in his missing shoulder with ivory (6.401–11). While Ovid dehumanized the satyr's flayed body, here the poet treats Pelops' body as an object in its reassembly, not in its dismemberment:

concolor hic umerus nascendi tempore dextro
corporeusque fuit; manibus mox caesa paternis
membra ferunt iunxisse deos, aliisque repertis,
qui locus est iuguli medius summique lacerti,
defuit: inpositum est non conparentis in usum
partis ebur, factoque Pelops fuit integer illo.

At the time of his birth, this shoulder was the same color as the right
and made of flesh; after his limbs were torn apart by his father's
hands they say the gods joined them together, and while the other parts were found,
the spot in between his throat and the top of his arm
was missing: an ivory piece, not matching the others,
was inserted, and Pelops was made whole again (6.406–11).

In this brief tale, Ovid focuses on Pelops' reconstitution, glossing over Tantalus' sacrilege and his dismemberment. He first states that Pelops' body was originally all of one piece, taking pains to show that his now ivory shoulder was formerly made of flesh like the other (*concolor*, 406; *corporeus*, 407). The actual dismemberment occurs swiftly, in a perfect passive participle (*caesa*, 407), while the poet describes in the following lines each step of Pelops' reassembly. Even though the gods merely put him back together, Humpty Dumpty style, Ovid emphasizes their total control over his body and describes their work as if they were making him anew: his body is

nothing to preserve him at least symbolically, besides the grief of those who witness or hear of his demise; his name is attached to the traces of others' mourning, instead of his own suffering" (1999, 157).

refashioned (*factoque...illo*, 411)¹⁶³ and made whole (*integer*, 411). Pelops' assembly appears here like the creation of an ivory sculpture, as the gods join together (*iunxisse*, 408) his scattered parts and reconstruct his body.¹⁶⁴ Even though the gods make him whole again, the ivory spot permanently marks his body as a construction made of smaller pieces, a kind of crafted object instead of a naturally whole human being.

Pelops' ivory shoulder not only acts as a gleaming reminder of his body's status as a fashioned object, but also commemorates his physical suffering and dehumanization at his father's hands.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, brands, scars, and other markers of enslavement permanently remind those who bear them of their pain and those who view them of these bodies' degraded status, as Spillers has theorized (1987, 67–69). In doing so, such markers reduce the enslaved to an objectified “flesh” by memorializing the enslaver's control over their bodies. Pelops' shoulder functions as a kind of scar in Spillers' sense of the word, in that it preserves a reminder of others' control over his body in his dismemberment and reconstitution. Furthermore, Tantalus treated Pelops as worse than someone enslaved to him: in butchering, boiling, and serving him for

¹⁶³Bömer suggests understanding this odd phrase as an ablative of means, i.e., “durch jene Tat” (ad loc.). Such a translation, however, overlooks the possibility that *illo* refers to Pelops in a kind of ablative absolute: “after Pelops was put together again...”

¹⁶⁴Pygmalion also fashioned his ideal woman out of ivory (10.248), and her body, even before she came to life, blurred the lines between skin and precious material (10.255). Salzman-Mitchell points out that constructing a statue from ivory means joining many smaller pieces to make a whole (2008, 303), and reads this image metapoetically, connecting it to Ovid's conception of the *Metamorphoses* and of art itself (2008, 304–06). She further argues that Ovid depicts Pygmalion's artistic work as dehumanizing, a fetishized “dismemberment” of idealized parts of the female body fused together for male pleasure (2008, 308). Though the male gaze plays no role in Pelops' story, his body is similarly objectified in its dismemberment and reconstitution.

¹⁶⁵It is tempting to read Tantalus' savage treatment of his son alongside Augustus' adoption of the honorific *pater patriae* in 2 BCE. Father-son relationships in the *Metamorphoses* in general are dysfunctional, at best (cf. Sol and Phaethon, Jupiter and Hercules, and Tereus and Itys).

dinner, he treated his son like an animal. Pelops' shoulder, then, marks his body as an object manipulated by another, rather than a part of his self.

Yet in a few key ways, Pelops' ivory mark departs from Spillers' conception of inscribed flesh. First, Spillers theorizes that brands and scars primarily function to mark the body of the enslaved as property: they mask an individual's identity with scarred flesh (1987, 67). Pelops' shoulder, on the other hand, shows his individuality: he displays it to prove his identity (*ebur ostendisse sinistro*, he showed the ivory on his left shoulder, 6.405).¹⁶⁶ In addition, the gods fill in Pelops' missing shoulder with a luxury good as a kind of consolation prize for his suffering, while scars and brands are inflicted as punishment, not as a reward. Lastly, as a luxury good, ivory hints at Pelops' elite status as a king, while brands and scars designate the body of the enslaved as a living symbol of the enslaver's domination, and nothing more. Thus, Pelops' ivory shoulder both identifies him as an individual and a king and commemorates his dehumanization and objectification. Despite the gods' intentions in choosing a luxury good to complete his body, the ivory shoulder shows how extreme violence has overshadowed Pelops' identity. Like Marsyas' flayed body, which was rendered a signifier of Apollo's dominance, Pelops' shoulder comes to identify him, even as it commemorates his father's and the gods' control over his body.

Pelops' body, then, does not fall neatly into Spillers' distinction between flesh and body, and his ivory shoulder becomes a multivalent sign of conflicting meanings: he is an individual subject, like the enslaver, but one whose body has been subjected to the dehumanizing torture and domination of enslavement. Reading the signifier of Pelops' shoulder in light of Augustus'

¹⁶⁶Of course, brands and scars also serve as identifying features for fugitives, though Spillers would argue that they mark the body of the enslaved as a specific piece of property for its enslaver rather than as an individual subject. For example, three third-century BCE papyri describe the runaway Thorax as round-faced with a scar below his left eyebrow (Hunt 2018, 148). Hunt also notes that enslavers often branded or tattooed fugitives in the face or kept the heads of those enslaved to them half-shaved to make a flight attempt more difficult (ibid., 150).

exclusion of branded or scarred freedmen from the ranks of citizens (see p. 89 above) further complicates the assumption that the ivory mark was a reward from the gods: for both these excluded freedmen and for Pelops, extreme violence has come to define their bodily identities forever. Pelops' ivory shoulder unsettlingly signifies both his elite status and his degrading treatment at the hands of his father, and thereby speaks to the anxieties surrounding bodily identity and integrity in the upheaval of the early empire.

The Transgression of Bodily Boundaries, the Kristevan Abject, and the Threat to Identity

Even in stories in which (at least some) characters escape death and dismemberment, Ovid shows how the transgression of bodily boundaries threatens the subject's identity. In the following episodes (Tereus, Hippolytus, and Hercules), Ovid portrays the breaching of bodily boundaries as utterly abject and, therefore, a threat to identity. The abject brings identity into question in two ways: (1) on the physical level, through blood, vomit, and other effluvia, it dispels the fantasy that the (male) body is impenetrable and (2) it blurs the lines between the self and other on a psychological level. Ovid's liberal descriptions of gore, *viscera*, and other bodily effluvia vividly force an awareness of the body's vulnerability that directly counters the Roman construction of the male body as inviolable (see Chapter One, pp. 5–6).¹⁶⁷ Psychologically, the abject makes it difficult to tell where the self ends and the other begins, and, therefore, to

¹⁶⁷Caenis/Caeneus (12.146–209, 459–535) and Cycnus (12.64–145), literally impenetrable men, embody this male fantasy of invulnerability. Keith, however, shows that their masculinities are constructed against feminine penetrability (1999b, 233–34), and that their “feminine” deaths by suffocation and strangulation, respectively, expose bodily inviolability as a mere fantasy (ibid., 238). The abject in ancient Greek and Latin literature, then, is inextricably caught up in cultural constructions of gender, and is not confined to things our society would consider disgusting (i.e., blood and guts, corpses, etc.). Kristeva's discussion of the maternal body as abject reminds us how unsettlingly and disgustingly permeable the female body could seem to a male audience in antiquity.

maintain one's identity as a distinct self. By emphasizing the bodies of these male characters as abject, Ovid makes the instability of identity his focal point in these mythological tales.

Ovid's choice of metamorphosis as a theme renders the boundaries of the body porous, but his stories of cannibalism and extreme violence highlight the materiality of the body even more through these particularly taboo and gruesome acts. In these episodes, Ovid uses the image of transgressive eating to link the abject with the destruction of identity: Tereus' cannibalism of his son Itys (and the other acts of violence in this story) throw their identities and relationships into confusion. Likewise, Hercules' abject death by an all-consuming poison renders him a new (but, as I will show, not necessarily better) person. The extreme violence of Hippolytus' dismemberment similarly renders him unrecognizable, even when his life is miraculously restored to him. Although Tereus, Hercules, and Hippolytus ultimately escape the mutilating death of the likes of Marsyas, the violation to their bodies in the form of cannibalism and extreme violence nevertheless destroys their identities.

Cannibalism: Tereus, Procne, Philomela, and Itys

The violence of the Tereus episode—Philomela's rape and mutilation, Itys' dismemberment, and Tereus' cannibalism of him—shows in a particularly shocking and taboo way how threats to the identity can be embodied (Newlands 2018, 153).¹⁶⁸ The first act of violence, Tereus' rape of Philomela, has already drawn identity into question by confusing familial roles, as Philomela complains: *omnia turbasti: paelex ego facta sororis, / tu geminus*

¹⁶⁸Newlands also reads the power relations in this episode politically, as “perhaps Ovid's most disturbing and extreme exploration of the devastating consequences of tyrannical power, exercised without restraint” (2018, 152). Seneca's *Thyestes*, which draws on this episode, is often read similarly (see Chapter Five).

*coniunx, hostis mihi debita Procne!*¹⁶⁹ (you have thrown everything into confusion: I'm made a rival to my sister, / you a husband to both, and Procne is made my enemy! 6.537–38). Tereus' violent rape has stolen Philomela's virginity and thrust her, unwilling, into the role of her sister's enemy and rival.

After Procne has learned of Tereus' crime and rescued her sister, her punishment of her husband further muddles their familial relationships. In her deliberation, she first focuses on Tereus' person, deciding between gouging out his eyes, cutting out his tongue, castrating him, or hacking him into pieces (6.614–19).¹⁷⁰ Hurting Tereus physically, however, does not satisfy her lust for revenge. Instead, she settles on their son because of his similarity to his father: '*a! quam / es similis patri!*' ("Ah! How like your father you are!" 6.621–22). In choosing Itys as a stand-in for Tereus, Procne finds a method of revenge that destroys his identity as a loving father: as Anderson puts it, she "manages to murder Tereus and sentence him to a life of endless pain at the same time" (ad 620–22).

¹⁶⁹Anderson argues that amending *poenae* here to *Procne* makes the line redundant and suggests understanding *poenae* to mean that Tereus has become Philomela's enemy deserving of the harshest punishment (ad 537–38).

¹⁷⁰*Aut linguam atque oculos et quae tibi membra pudorem / abstulerunt ferro rapiam, aut per vulnera mille / sontem animam expellam!* (Either his tongue or his eyes or that member that stole / your virginity I'll cut out with a sword, or I'll force the spirit out of his body / through a thousand wounds! 6.616–18). Procne models her revenge after her sister's pain: she wishes to cut out the offending eyes and member that violated her sister or to force Tereus to suffer the same fate as Philomela after her tongue was cut out. Because this dissertation focuses on the male body, there is, unfortunately, not enough space to discuss the scene of Philomela's mutilation (6.555–60), whose unusual focus on her tongue writhing in the dust makes it particularly grotesque. Philomela is the only female character in the *Metamorphoses* to experience this kind of physical mutilation; see, however, Richlin (2014b), who argues that Philomela's mutilation stands in for the omitted details of the rape scene and that "the flickering stump of the tongue, like a clitoris, makes Philomela's ruined mouth a simulacrum of her ruined genitals" (2014, 141), as well as Newlands on the sexualization of her tongue (2018, 157). See, also, Oliensis' Freudian reading, which describes the slippage between Philomela's tongue, the child Itys, and the phallus in this story (2009, 77–88).

In addition, Procne's choice to murder her son and her callousness in carrying out the act negate her role as mother: Ovid takes care to note that she strikes the fatal blow without even turning her face aside, despite Itys' desperate cries of *mater, mater!* (6.640–42).¹⁷¹ As she decides what to do, Philomela and Itys compete for her sympathies: in ultimately avenging Philomela's rape, Feldherr argues, the sisters' identities collapse into each other as two women who share carnal knowledge of Tereus, as Procne is no longer differentiated as Itys' mother (2010, 201–02). Lastly, Itys' similarity to his father transforms him into scapegoat for his father's crimes instead of a blameless child. Feldherr describes Procne's gaze upon her son as a "process of objectification": under her eyes, Itys "becomes increasingly alien to the point where he comes to signify someone who is not there and loses his power to express his subjectivity through speech by calling her *mater*" (2010, 201). Thus, Procne's choice to dismember and cook her son, while shockingly violent, does deeper damage on the level of identity: as revenge for destroying the sisters' relations with each other through the violent act of rape, Procne renders herself a murderess instead of mother, Tereus a "tomb" instead of a father for his son (more below), and Itys a scapegoat for his father instead of an innocent child.

In the following scene of cannibalism, the boy chosen for his similarity to his father becomes physically inseparable from his father. On the most basic level, this abject act of cannibalism threatens Tereus' identity as a distinct human being by breaching the boundaries of his body: it makes a body that should be separate from him internal to him. When Tereus calls for his son, Procne's riddling reply shows that she understands the threat behind this transgression of bodily boundaries: she does not answer that their son is dead, or even that

¹⁷¹Rosati notes that ironically, the quality that distinguished Procne as an ideal wife and mother—namely, producing a son who looks like his father—inspires the crime in which she disavows her role as mother (ad 622).

Tereus has eaten him, but that their son is inside him (‘*intus habes, quem poscis*,’ “You have inside you, whom you seek,” 6.655). As Feldherr points out, this final dialogue of the story mangles Itys’ name with *intus*, just as Procne has mutilated his body (2010, 227).¹⁷² When Tereus realizes what he has done, he wishes he could disembowel himself in a mirror image of the abject act of cannibalism: *et modo, si posset, reserato pectore diras / egegere inde dapes semesaque viscera gestit*¹⁷³ (and now, if it were possible, he gestures that he would cut open his breast / and expel the horrible feast and the half-digested innards, 6.663–64). Tereus’ desperate wish to separate these *viscera* from his own innards has little to do with restoring his son to life or atoning for his crime: he fantasizes, rather, about solidifying the boundaries of his own body once more.¹⁷⁴ Yet this imagined act of violence is, in itself, abject: instead of restoring physical integrity to Tereus’ body, disembowelment would not reestablish the distinction between their bodies. It could only render his body more abject.

Itys’ similarity to his father, however, had already blurred the lines between their bodies. Ovid describes how Tereus stuffs himself with his own flesh and blood: *ipse sedens solio Tereus sublimis avito / vescitur inque suam sua viscera congerit alvum* (Tereus himself, sitting high on his ancestral throne, / eats and stuffs **his belly with his own flesh and blood**, 6.650–51).

¹⁷²Later, *iterum* (6.656) appears as another mutilation of Itys’ name (Feldherr 2010, 227).

¹⁷³One of the oldest manuscripts contains *immersa* instead of *semesa*, an alternative that Anderson accepts. He rejects, however, *emersa* on the grounds that the innards would be torn out of Tereus’ breast, not vomited up, and suggests that *emersa* could be a corruption of *immersa* that gradually became *semesa* (ad 663–64).

¹⁷⁴Bömer (ad 15.88) and Barchiesi (ad 15.88–90) trace a connection between episodes of cannibalism through Ovid’s repeated use of *viscera*. Achaemenides also fears that his *viscera* would be merged with the Cyclops’ (14.202–12). Bömer notes that here, as in Tereus’ wish, the word *viscera* has less to do with physical guts or flesh but is a way of distinguishing between the self and other (ad 14.203). Pythagoras likewise borrows this language of the abject to cast eating meat as taboo as cannibalism is (15.88–90).

Pointing to the repetition of reflexive adjectives, Caitlin Hines argues that Ovid's word choice here figures Tereus' feast as an act of self-cannibalization.¹⁷⁵ By describing Itys' body as nothing other than an extension of Tereus', even before cannibalism has erased the distinction between the two, Ovid blurs the lines between father and son even further.¹⁷⁶

After he wishes he could disembowel himself, Tereus laments his new role as his son's tomb: *flet modo seque vocat bustum miserabile nati* (sometimes he weeps and calls himself a miserable tomb for his son, 6.665). In calling himself a *bustum*, Tereus uses a grotesque inversion of pregnancy to figure his body as a hollow container for half-digested body parts, rather than a gestating baby.¹⁷⁷ As Mairéad McAuley points out, Tereus' cannibalism is "a moment of inverted penetration and parturition," in which Tereus' digestion of his son's body makes the child even more unrecognizable instead of bringing him to life (2016, 137). This image is abject not only in its elision of pregnancy and cannibalism, but also in its rendering of Tereus' body as a pregnant, female body. Instead of an inviolable unit, Tereus' body is associated with the abject maternal body in the Kristevan sense, which leaks various effluvia in childbirth and nursing and whose pregnancy blurs the distinctions between mother and child. Through its close association with the abject, the maternal body threatens masculine identity

¹⁷⁵Barchiesi likewise calls this scene "una monstruosa autofagia" (ad 651).

¹⁷⁶Under space constraints, a note here on Hermaphroditus, whose identity and bodily boundaries are also indistinguishable from others', will have to suffice. Hermaphroditus is first introduced as recognizably the child of both his mother and his father (4.290–91). Commentators note that this line speaks to the sexual ambiguity of adolescence (Anderson ad 290–91; Barchiesi ad 288–91). Keith points out that from the beginning, Hermaphroditus fails to distinguish himself from the female (1999b, 220), and his story ends with the fulfillment of Salmacis' wish to be joined to him forever, so that it is impossible to tell whether he is male or female (4.376–79). While Hermaphroditus is emasculated, Salmacis' subjectivity seems to have been erased entirely: "Salmacis and her gods have eradicated the valid and precious individuality of two people" (Anderson ad 375–79).

¹⁷⁷In addition, the "belly" (*alvum*, 651) into which Tereus stuffed his son's *viscera* can mean both "gut" and "womb."

predicated on the inviolability of the male body.¹⁷⁸ Figuring Tereus as a pregnant mother also deepens the confusion of relationships that his rape of Philomela had begun: Tereus is no longer a father but a pregnant mother or a tomb. Finally, this tomb is a sign of the absence of the dead Itys (Hardie 2002a, 270), just as Itys himself became a sign of his absent father in his mother's eyes. Tereus' cannibalization of his son destroys his own physical, familial, and gendered identity, as well as completely erases Itys, both physically and verbally, as the garbled echoes of Itys' name in the text illustrate.

In the end, Tereus', Philomela's, and Procne's transformations into birds do not wrap up the story as tidily as they first appear to do. Philomela's swallow form reflects the violence of this episode: *altera tecta subit, neque adhuc de pectore caedis / excessere notae, signataque sanguine pluma est* (one takes refuge under the roof, nor have the **signs** of the slaughter / faded from its breast, and its plumage **is marked** with blood, 6.669–70).¹⁷⁹ Likewise, as a hoopoe, Tereus continues to menace the sisters with his long beak (6.671–74). This ending may seem a stroke of poetic justice, but Feldherr points out that symbolism of the swallow's *notae* and the hoopoe's beak is ambiguous: Tereus' new beak could represent either his sword or his phallus, while the bloody marks on Philomela's plumage could commemorate either Itys' slaughter or her own mutilation and rape (2010, 227).¹⁸⁰ Until the very end, Ovid uses the physical body to

¹⁷⁸This threat is particularly apparent in Greek myth, where the monstrous, engulfing female threatens the heroes who encounter her (e.g., Scylla, Charybdis, etc.). See Carson 1990 for a further explanation of Greek anxieties about the maternal body.

¹⁷⁹Most commentators take *pluma est* (670) as a collective singular that refers to both Philomela the swallow and Procne the nightingale (e.g., Anderson ad 668–70), but it could also refer to Philomela alone.

¹⁸⁰Likewise, both Newlands (2018, 162) and Enterline (2000, 5) see the red *notae* that Philomela weaves against a white background in her secret message to her sister both as signs that describe her plight and marks, like bruises, of the violence she has suffered.

illustrate, in the most brutal way possible, the destruction of familial relationships and social identity: Tereus' rape and mutilation of Philomela destroys her relationship to her sister, Procne disavows her role as mother in her dismemberment of Itys, Tereus' cannibalization of his son turns him into a gestating mother or a tomb instead of a loving father, and Itys' identity is erased when his body is destroyed as a stand-in for his father's.

The Abject Body and New Identities: Hercules and Hippolytus

Ovid's treatment of Hercules' apotheosis similarly foregrounds his body and its dissolution by portraying the poison that destroys him as eating him alive. Although Hercules is made divine, Ovid shows how the venom renders his body abject and leads to a new, and not necessarily better, identity. In the lead-up to this episode, Ovid's narrow focus on Hercules' mythography reflects this emphasis on his body: he treats Hercules' famous labors only obliquely, in Hercules' complaints to Juno (Solodow 1988, 30), and focuses instead on the fight with Acheloüs and on his death and apotheosis.¹⁸¹ In the competition between Hercules and Acheloüs for Deianira's hand in marriage, Ovid foregrounds Hercules' physical strength as the seat of his identity, while Acheloüs resorts to verbal wit and trickery.¹⁸² Before the fight, Acheloüs attacks the basis of Hercules' supposed advantage, his divine paternity: taking only Alcmena's role as his mother as a given, he says that either Hercules is a bastard or his divine paternity is invented (9.23–26). Instead of verbally retorting, Hercules announces that he will win the fight with punches (9.29–30): he stakes the proof of his divine paternity and, by extension, his identity, in the strength of his body, and wins.

¹⁸¹These episodes of Hercules' mythography also, of course, fit best into Ovid's theme of metamorphosis.

¹⁸²This battle between words and deeds is repeated in Ulysses' and Ajax's competition for Achilles' shield (13.1–398).

The narrative then skips over Hercules' famous labors to an extended treatment of his final suffering under the poisoned cloak. Throughout this narrative, Ovid casts his body as abject: the venom breaches his bodily boundaries and merges the poisoned robe with his skin. In infiltrating his body, the poison renders Hercules' once-impregnable body feminine in its porousness. From the very first moments of his suffering, Ovid points to this destruction of Hercules' characteristic masculinity: at first, he manages to suppress his groans with his characteristic *virtus*, but breaks out in womanly screams (*dum potuit, solita gemitum virtute repressit, / victa malis postquam est patientia, reppulit aras / inplevitque suis nemorosam vocibus Oeten*; while he could, he suppressed his groans **with his usual manly strength**, / but after his endurance was overcome by pain, he overturned the altar / and filled forested Oeta with his screams, 9.163–65). As Anderson puts it, “Ovid comments slyly on the defeat of Hercules’ *virtus*: his outcries in agony are fantastic” (ad 163–65).

The venom not only overcomes Hercules' characteristic *virtus*, but also physically infiltrates and breaks down his body from the inside out. To illustrate the transgressive nature of the poison, Ovid first portrays it as a fire that penetrates to the deepest parts of Hercules' body:

ipse cruor, gelido ceu quondam lammina candens
 tincta lacu, stridit coquiturque ardente veneno.
 nec modus est, sorbent avidae praecordia flammae,
 caerulusque fluit toto de corpore sudor,
 ambustique sonant nervi, caecaque medullis
 tabe liquefactis tollens ad sidera palmas...

The blood itself, just like when glowing hot iron
 is dipped into an icy basin, seethes and boils with the fiery venom.
 There is no bound: the greedy flames drink up his heart,
 dark sweat pours down from his whole body,
 and his scorched nerves sing out, and as his marrow melted
 down deep within his bones, he lifts his hands up to the stars... (9.170–75)

To make Hercules' pain more vivid, Ovid borrows a simile from the *Odyssey* that describes how white-hot iron seethes when dunked into cool water.¹⁸³ Using this "window reference," Ovid evokes Ulysses driving a flaming stake through Polyphemus' eye. As Scarry describes, pain is almost impossible to translate into words without metaphors, often of weapons (e.g., a "stabbing" pain; 1985, 16–17): here, Ovid uses the weapon of the fiery stake to render Hercules' invisible, untranslatable pain into something more understandable to his readers. In addition, Ovid expands upon the aural and visual effects of the fire metaphor to further bring Hercules' pain to life. First, his blood hisses and seethes like boiling water, and even his nerves sing out: either they whine as they burn or they snap under the pressure of the heat (Anderson ad 174). Ovid also describes the invisible fire's effects on Hercules' body: it penetrates to his very marrow and melts it, and on the outside, his body pours out sweat. In penetrating Hercules' formerly inviolable body and dissolving his once-solid form, the venom renders his body abject.

Ovid also uses images of eating to illustrate the transgressive, abject nature of the poison. It drinks up (*sorbent*, 173) his heart, and later Hercules describes how it feeds upon his limbs: *sed nova pestis adest, cui nec virtute resisti / nec telis armisque potest, pulmonibus errat / ignis edax imis, perque omnes pascitur artus* (but a new kind of plague is here, which cannot be resisted with manly strength / nor with force of arms: a **ravenous** fire ranges / through my deepest lungs, and it **feeds on** each and every limb, 9.200–02).¹⁸⁴ This poison not only penetrates

¹⁸³*Od.* 9.391ff. (Anderson ad 170–71).

¹⁸⁴Hercules continues this connection between the destruction of his body and transgressive eating by ordering Juno to feast her eyes upon his pain: '*cladibus, exclamat, 'Saturnia, pascere nostris! / pascere et hanc pestem spectata, crudelis, ab alto / corque ferum satia!*' ("Feast," he shouts, "Saturnia, upon my destruction! / Feast and watch this plague, cruel as you are, from the heavens / and satisfy your savage heart!") 9.176–78). He imagines that just as the fire is feeding upon his body, Juno might feed upon the gory sight.

to the innermost parts of his body, but it feeds upon him while he's still alive, breaking down his body as if he were being torn apart by wild animals (as Actaeon, for example, was).

In addition to the images of fire and eating, Hercules casts the poison as a plague (*pestis*, 177, 200) that penetrates to the innermost parts of his body.¹⁸⁵ Casting the venom as sickness shows his body's complicity in its own destruction: for the first time, Hercules faces no external foe that he can defeat with weapons or mere brute strength (*nec virtute resisti / nec telis armisque*, 200–01). Instead, the venom turns his own body against him, much as the experience of pain in Scarry's thought casts the body as betraying the feeling self. The body that formerly had always done Hercules' bidding, had defeated innumerable foes with its characteristic strength, now turns against him. The combination of these images of fire, eating, and sickness vividly illustrates how his formerly impregnable strength is rendered formless, soft, and abject.¹⁸⁶

Hercules' characteristic strength also works against him as he attempts to rip off the cloak, pulling his skin with it:

nec mora, letiferam conatur scindere vestem:
qua trahitur, trahit illa cutem, foedumque relatu,
aut haeret membris frustra temptata revelli,
aut laceros artus et grandia detegit ossa.

Right away he tries to tear the fatal robe:

¹⁸⁵Elsewhere in classical literature, the effects of the plague on the body are also described as abject. Thucydides' plague narrative, for example, shows how the sickness penetrates to the innermost organs and turns the body inside out in all manner of effluvia (2.49). This convention extends through the description of the plague concluding Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (6.1090–1286), the plague narrative most recent to Ovid's writing.

¹⁸⁶The imagery of fire, consumption, and sickness all draw from Vergil's description of Dido's lovesickness at the beginning of Book 4 of the *Aeneid* (4.1–5), as Alison Keith has pointed out to me. These symptoms of an imagined sickness become all too real in Hercules' case, as he is consumed by a fiery poison that this wife thinks is a love potion. By bringing Vergil's description of lovesickness to life in all its abject detail, Ovid paints a horrifying picture of comeuppance for Hercules' adultery, a change that is tempting to read in light of Augustus' strict morality laws condemning adultery (18/16 BCE).

but when he pulls it off, it pulls off his skin, too (sickening to tell),
or clings to his limbs, despite his attempts to rip it off,
or he bares his mutilated limbs and his enormous bones (9.166–69).

In fusing with his skin, the cloak erases the distinction between Hercules' body and the poisoned robe, between self and other. Hercules first attempts to reestablish the bounds of his own body by removing the alien cloak, but he succeeds only in tearing off his own skin, opening his body up further. The preponderance of verbs that describe Hercules' attempts (*conatur, temptata*) to tear off the cloak (*scindere, trahitur, trahit, revelli*) show how his normal impulse toward action works against him.¹⁸⁷ The poison's characterization as a plague already showed the body's complicity in its destruction; now the venom's fusing with his body erases the distinction between the two, and means that Hercules actively destroys his own body in his attempts to save himself. Ultimately, the cloak alienates Hercules from his body, formerly the defining feature of his identity.¹⁸⁸

Hercules' alienation from his body finds its full expression in his final apotheosis on the funeral pyre. This fire burns away his mother's mortal parts, leaving only the divine bits inherited from his father:

interea, quodcumque fuit populabile flammae,
Mulciber abstulerat, nec **cognoscenda** remansit
Herculis **effigies**, nec quicquam ab **imagine** ductum
matris habet, tantumque Iovis **vestigia** servat;
utque novus serpens posita cum pelle senecta

¹⁸⁷Cf. Marsyas, whose body was also laid bare (*detecti*, 6.389) in his flaying, though at Apollo's hands, not his own. Erysichthon's end also resembles Hercules' destruction: Famine infiltrates his innermost body (8.825–29) and causes him to eat himself in his ravenousness (8.872–78). Anderson notes that Ovid's description of Erysichthon tearing up his own body in his hunger (*ipse suos artus lacero divellere morsu / coepit*, he himself began to **tear at** his own limbs with his **mangling** / jaws, 8.877–78) mirrors Hercules' self-flaying (ad 9.161–2, ad 169). In the end, Erysichthon is wholly divorced from his body just as Hercules is, an alienation that Erysichthon acts out by eating his own body (Anderson ad 8.877–78).

¹⁸⁸The pseudo-Senecan *Hercules Oetaeus* takes this collapsing of boundaries between poisoned robe and Hercules' body and the alienation of Hercules' body from himself to new extremes, portraying Hercules' death as self-annihilation (discussed further in Chapter Six).

luxuriare solet squamaque nitere recenti,
sic, ubi mortales Tirynthius exuit artus,
parte sui meliore viget maiorque videri
coepit et augusta fieri gravitate verendus.

In the meantime, whatever parts were flammable,
the fire took away, until Hercules' **likeness** no longer
remained **recognizable**, and he had nothing that he received
from his mother's **form**, but kept only **traces** of Jove;
and as when a new snake is accustomed to luxuriate when
its old age is shed with its skin and to glitter with its fresh scales,
so Hercules, when he had cast off his mortal limbs,
flourishes in his better part and begins to appear
greater and become more worthy of reverence in his majestic weight (9.263–70).

In this final fire, all traces of Hercules' famous strength and familiar form (*effigies, forma*) are burned away: as Anderson puts it, "his familiar, brawny shape is nowhere to be seen, as his mother's shapely beauty is burned away" (ad 263–65). What is left is only traces (*vestigia*) of Jupiter's parentage, yet these clues are illegible (*nec cognoscenda*): without his characteristic strength, Hercules is no longer recognizable.¹⁸⁹ Hercules gains a new form as a reward for his extreme physical suffering, but this new body has no connection with his former identity.

Not only is Hercules' new body unfamiliar, but Ovid also sketches it in only the broadest of strokes: it is vaguely bigger and better (*meliore...maiorque*). Anderson does not take these words at face value, and reads Hercules' apotheosis as an attack on the concept of divinization: "Ovid makes no effort...to define the new form and existence of Hercules as a 'better' life..." (ad 263–65). In addition, he argues that the snake simile is ambiguous:¹⁹⁰ it suggests that

¹⁸⁹Solodow argues that Hercules' apotheosis does not truly count as a transformation, since his divinity was within him all along (1988, 191). If Solodow's point is correct, Hercules' new inscrutability remains to be explained.

¹⁹⁰Anderson points out that snakes were both revered and associated with treachery and destruction (ad 266–67). Bömer, in contrast, distinguishes between snakes in general and the image of a snake shedding its skin, which, he argues, is always a positive one (ad 266).

Hercules' famously strong body was mere flesh that "clothed" his divine core. Anderson, however, denies that his spiritual part is superior: he notes that *gravitate* can also be understood as physical weight, even "pudginess," rather than moral gravity (ad 268–70). Though on the surface, Ovid casts Hercules' transformation into a god as a positive change, his vagueness about Hercules' new and improved form and life, in combination with his dubious portrayal of the gods thus far, casts doubt on whether this metamorphosis is really the miracle it is touted to be. Even if the reader should take Ovid's promise of Hercules' "bigger and better" divine form at face value, the fact remains that he is unrecognizable: his body and identity were inseparable, and a Hercules without his famous strength and brawny muscles is unimaginable.

The gory dismemberment of Hippolytus' body similarly leads to an entirely new identity. Ovid's account emphasizes the brutality of his death to show how extreme violence can ruin bodily identity beyond restoration, even if the body itself could be miraculously resurrected. His account of the dismemberment itself focuses on action. Instead of being invited to dwell on his mutilated body, as in Marsyas' case, Hippolytus himself narrates his death so that the reader sees his body torn apart before her eyes:¹⁹¹

excutor curru, lorisque tenentibus artus
 viscera viva trahi, nervos in stirpe teneri,
 membra rapi partim partimque reprensa relinqui,
 ossa gravem dare fracta sonum fessamque **videres**
 exhalari animam nullasque in corpore partes,
noscere quas partes: unumque erat omnia vulnus.

I am thrown from the chariot, and **you would have seen** how my limbs were entangled in the reins, my living guts dragged from my body, my sinews clung to the trees, my limbs snatched in one direction and left caught fast in another, my broken bones loudly snapped, and how my wearied spirit was breathed out, and **you would not have recognized** which parts

¹⁹¹Barchiesi notes that Euripides' Hippolytus wished for this very role, that he would be able to watch his death from outside his body as a spectator instead of experiencing it firsthand (1997a, 184). Cf. Actaeon, who also wished for this very thing (3.247–48).

any of these body parts were: everything was all one wound (15.524–29).

As in Marsyas' flaying, Ovid draws the reader in as a spectator of this gruesome scene with the second-person address *videres* (527). In addition, he begins the account with a string of violent verbs to describe how each body part is torn in a different direction. While readers were invited to examine Marsyas' flayed body calmly, here they are given a front-row seat to a spectacle more in line with Roman entertainment: this scene could be an unfortunate accident at a chariot race or the much-cheered outcome of a gladiatorial game.¹⁹²

Although Ovid explicitly encourages the reader to visualize this scene, he simultaneously complicates this readerly vision. First, the verb *videres* is delayed several lines, appearing alongside two verbs that describe actions that cannot be seen: the sound of his bones breaking and his last breath.¹⁹³ In encouraging the reader to "see" a sound and an invisible breath, the poet makes this scene more vivid and, at the same time, plays with the reliability of visual evidence. Ovid conjures up a violent spectacle for the reader's inner eye while casting doubt on the spectator's ability to see all that he describes.

In addition to being action-packed, this description also underlines the utter destruction of Hippolytus' body by reducing it to its individual pieces. Words for parts are repeated twice in pairs to emphasize the disjunction of his body (*partim partimque*, 526; *partes...partes*, 528–29).

Ovid details how each individual body part is not merely separated from the whole, but also

¹⁹²Charles Segal argues that here Ovid has transposed the spectator's perspective of the original Euripidean messenger speech to Hippolytus' first-person narrative (1984, 314), but in doing so, he overlooks the role of the reader as viewer of this spectacle.

¹⁹³Hippolytus' last breath could perhaps be seen in the movement of his breast, though this motion is so subtle as to be almost imperceptible in comparison with the violence of the preceding verbs. Furthermore, his body was supposed to have been utterly torn apart: are Hippolytus' head and torso intact enough such that one could witness his last breath? Lastly, an onlooker would only recognize his last breath as such after Hippolytus stops breathing: one "sees" (or hears) someone's last breath only in retrospect.

destroyed in the process (e.g., how his muscles are splattered against the nearby trees, 525).

Hippolytus' formerly whole body is reduced to a jumble of mutilated parts. In the end, the only unity his body-in-parts still enjoys is its destruction: Ovid ends this account with the pithy *sententia* that Hippolytus' body is all one wound (*unumque erat omnia vulnus*, 529).¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, these pieces are not even recognizable as body parts: Ovid says that you would not recognize which parts are which (*noscere quas partes*, 529). Once again, Ovid draws readers in, daring them to distinguish, say, an arm from a leg, much less to identify Hippolytus amongst this gore. Here, Ovid shows how the extreme violence of Hippolytus' dismemberment has destroyed his bodily identity to the extent that no single body part is recognizable: not only is Hippolytus, more than the sum of his parts, no longer himself, but his body is no longer even identifiable as a body.

Even after Aesclepius nurses him back to health and the nymph Cynthia gives him a new lease on life, Hippolytus remains unrecognizable. In order to protect him, Cynthia makes him older and changes his appearance: *utque forem tutus possemque impune videri, / addidit aetatem nec cognoscenda relinquit / ora mihi...* (so that I would be safe and could be seen without incident, / she added years to my face, nor did she leave it / **recognizable**..., 15.538–40). Even after his miraculous restoration, Hippolytus' body, in both age and appearance, is not identifiable as his own. Furthermore, his new appearance is no mere disguise: his name has also been changed to Virbius, and he now spends his days in the woods as Cynthia's attendant (15.543–46).¹⁹⁵ His memories and personality may remain the same, but in the eyes of others, he is a new

¹⁹⁴Cf. Marsyas, whose body was *nec quicquam nisi vulnus* (6.389). Marsyas' body, however, while stripped open, is still generally whole, while Hippolytus' lies in pieces.

¹⁹⁵Barchiesi argues that in giving Hippolytus a new ending, Ovid is transplanting a Greek myth to Rome (1997a, 185). Gildenhard and Zissos likewise connect Hippolytus' transformation with a broader shift from Greece to Rome in the final books of the *Metamorphoses*. They show how Greek anxieties (about

person: when he first approaches Egeria at the beginning of the story, he heads off her surprise at his former identity by acknowledging he can scarcely prove it (...*mirabere, vix probabo / sed tamen ille ego sum*, you'll be astonished, I can scarcely prove it, / but nevertheless I am he, 15.499–500). The only link between his former and current lives, the only proof of his previous identity, is the gruesome story he then tells.

Scholars generally see Hippolytus' new lease on life as wholly positive: Theodorakopoulos, for example, argues that Virbius shows "a coherence and stability denied to humans left to their own devices" and demonstrates the "restorative function" of Rome in the final books of the poem (1999, 151). But in giving Hippolytus an entirely new identity after his dismemberment, Ovid inextricably links the body with identity: he shows that when the body is destroyed, the performance of bodily identity is disrupted to such an extent that even the miraculous resurrection of the body cannot restore his former self in the eyes of others.¹⁹⁶ As with Hercules' apotheosis, Hippolytus' new form shows that the abject destroys the subject's sense of self, despite the miraculous endings these characters are afforded.

Conclusion

Ovid uses the stories discussed throughout this chapter to highlight the body's crucial role in performing identity and to illustrate bodily harm's consequences for identity: Marsyas' flaying reduces him to an object, and, in the process, his identity is erased. Pelops is likewise

the penetrable body as female, the vulnerability of the tragic body, and others) embodied in Hippolytus' mutilation are dispelled in his new, whole form as a Roman *vir* (1999, 176–78): in his transformation, Hippolytus turns Greek myth into a Roman *exemplum* (1999, 180).

¹⁹⁶Bömer tentatively suggests that Hippolytus' new life shares parallels with Ovid's future exile (ad 15.492–546). Even though Virbius has gained a new lease on life, he still dwells on his past suffering.

dehumanized, and his body marked with his ivory shoulder becomes a site of contradictions and his identity defined by the violence he suffered. In dwelling on the mutilated male body in these stories, Ovid shows how extreme violence not only destroys the body, but also overshadows and ultimately destroys the identity dependent on this body. While Marsyas' tale describes the utter destruction of both his body and identity, Ovid explores the abject in the other episodes described here to show that even when the body is not torn apart, the abject chips away at the subject's construction of identity. Ovid uses a shockingly taboo act, cannibalism, to vividly illustrate how the abject unravels a subject's social and personal identity in Tereus' story. Even when a character emerges from an experience with the abject with a new lease on life, as Hercules and Hippolytus do, whether he is the same person remains to be seen.

In these stories, Ovid explores the concept of embodied identity to its furthest extreme. The new vulnerability elites felt at the heels of the civil wars' violence and under the shift to an autocracy finds its expression in these extended descriptions of flaying, dismemberment, cannibalism, and other gore. If, as in contemporary Rome, social and personal identity is inextricably rooted in the body, Ovid dwells on the mutilated male body to ask, what happens to this identity when the body that communicated it is destroyed? His answers show how extreme violence and pain destroys an individual's sense of self in a variety of ways: sometimes it objectifies and alienates his body from himself, in Marsyas' and Hercules' cases, or overshadows his former identity, as with Pelops, or leads to an entirely new one, as for Hippolytus and Hercules. For Ovid, the violation of the male body is a fatal attack on the subject's identity.

CHAPTER FOUR: Problematic Bodies in Petronius' *Satyrica*

A Brief Introduction to Petronius' Satyrica

Anachronistically called a novel, the *Satyrica* is a first-person fictional prose text narrated by the protagonist Encolpius at some later point in time.¹⁹⁷ He, along with his boy-love Giton and companion Ascyltos, make up a complicated love triangle,¹⁹⁸ as they carry out various escapades on the fringes of society.¹⁹⁹ Despite their involvement in petty crime and lack of Roman *trinomina*, Encolpius and Ascyltos seem to be well-educated, freeborn young men, while Giton's status is murkier.²⁰⁰ The trio is constantly propositioned for sex or faced with persistent

¹⁹⁷Beck first proposed separating the "sophisticated and competent" narrator Encolpius from Encolpius the "subject of narration," whom he considered "chaotic and naïve" (1973, 43). Conte (1996, 3) proposes a further distinction, separating the "hidden author" (Petronius) from the novel's "mythomaniac, narrating character" (Encolpius).

¹⁹⁸Richlin (2009, 85) points out that the youths' term of address for each other, *frater*, implies an interchangeability in sexual roles (that is, who was penetrating and who was penetrated). She considers their relationship a complicated and ever-shifting threesome (2009, 86).

¹⁹⁹The *Satyrica* is considered the first example of the picaresque novel, a genre characterized in part by its protagonist, who "moves aimlessly through a contemporary reality which he cannot comprehend and which pays him back the compliment by not comprehending him" (Murgatroyd 2013, 243). See Walsh 1970 and Harrison 2009 for further discussion of Petronius' *Satyrica* as a picaresque novel.

²⁰⁰Andreau thinks that Encolpius and his friends are non-elite, given that *equites* are invoked only four times (14.2, 57.4, 92.10, and 126.10) and that Encolpius seems to agree with Trimalchio on the power of money (2009, 123–24). Richlin, in contrast, outlines a list of occurrences in the novel that point to Encolpius' and Ascyltos' privileged status (2009, 87): when their cloak is stolen, they plan to go to court, a recourse unavailable to non-citizens (13.4); during the *Cena*, the freedman Hermeros complains that Ascyltos is acting like an arrogant *eques* (57.4); when Encolpius and Giton, disguised as slaves, are whipped, much is made of their suffering as "respectable freeborn" men (107.10); and a hired servant protests that he's no less free than Encolpius and Giton (117.12). Despite being called freeborn, Giton is referred to as *puer*, and when he leaves Ascyltos for Encolpius, the former searches for him by

sexual aggression, an unusual feature of the novel that further obscures their unclear social positions.²⁰¹

The question of the status of Encolpius and his friends is also unresolved because of the highly fragmentary state of the text.²⁰² The extant novel begins somewhere in a Greek town near the bay of Naples, with Encolpius' tirade against the decline of rhetoric and education. Encolpius then gets lost and is led to a brothel by an old woman, where he meets Ascyrtos trapped there (1–11): after fleeing and reuniting with Giton, they try to sell a stolen cloak to the farmer to whom it belongs, who is coincidentally wearing the tunic they lost with (unbeknownst to him) gold coins sewn inside. After mutual accusations of theft and a debate with the police, they trade their clothing items and return home (12–15). At dinner, Quartilla, a priestess of Priapus, accuses the trio of interrupting her rites and requires sex as expiation. A forced, all-night orgy occurs, in

disseminating a runaway slave advertisement (97). On the other hand, it is completely unclear who Giton's enslaver would be, and later in the novel (117), he swears a gladiator's oath alongside Encolpius as a free person (the enslaved could not swear oaths). Encolpius also rants that one of them was freeborn and wore the toga, while the other became free by means of *stuprum* (transgressive sex) and was penetrated in a slave prison (80f.). Giton's status, then, is entirely unclear (Richlin 2009, 86–87). Like Richlin, I consider Encolpius and Ascyrtos well-educated, freeborn young men who are living like outlaws on the edge of respectable society, while Giton appears subordinate to them in some way, though his exact status is not included in the extant text.

²⁰¹Richlin (2009, 84) points out that Encolpius looks effeminate, like a male prostitute (7.2; 126.2), and Ascyrtos is also treated like one (7.4–8.4; 92.7–10). Yet adult citizen males who allowed themselves to be penetrated lost their honor and some civil rights, and were called *infames* (Richlin 2009, 83). I explore the threat that this unusually persistent sexual aggression poses to the bodily integrity of Encolpius (and his friends) further below.

²⁰²The extant text seems to comprise books 14–16 from a novel of at least 16, and possibly 24, books. Some scholars consider the possibility that the novel could parody the *Odyssey* (Connors 1998, 26f.), a hypothesis that lends support to the notion that the *Satyricon* were originally 24 books. Such a calculation, however, would make the *Satyricon* very long indeed. In contrast, by comparing average book lengths of Greek novels and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, van Thiel argued that the *Cena Trimalchionis* episode alone covered three books (1971, 21ff.), which would put the total length of the novel at 400–600 pages, of which about 150 are preserved. These pages are not a continuous narrative, but a collection of fragments and excerpts of various sizes, states of preservation, and sources (Hofmann 2014, 96). See Hofmann (2014, 96–98) for an overview of the different manuscript sources for the text. See also Jensson (2004) for a speculative attempt to reconstruct the story in its entirety.

which Encolpius fails to have sex with the enslaved Psyche, then is repeatedly assaulted by *cinaedi* whom he considers disgusting, while Giton “marries” and has sex with the seven-year-old Pannychis as the others watch through a peephole (16–26). Two days later, the threesome attends a banquet hosted by the wealthy but tasteless freedman Trimalchio (the *Cena Trimalchionis*): this lengthy episode contains detailed descriptions of their host’s boorishness and the elaborate and deceptive appearance of each dish, as well as the conversations of the other freedmen in attendance (26.7–78). After they escape into the dawn, Giton declares Ascyrtos his lover, and Encolpius takes up a sword in pursuit until a soldier disarms him (79–82). Some days later in an art gallery, Encolpius meets the seedy poet Eumolpus, who joins their dysfunctional trio.²⁰³ After Giton, complaining about Ascyrtos’ treatment, rejoins Encolpius, Eumolpus makes advances on the boy during dinner; when Encolpius tries to throw him out, the other two imprison him in his room, where he tries to hang himself until Giton pretends to commit suicide with a blunted razor. Ascyrtos then rejoins this love comedy in his search for Giton, who hides under the bed but betrays himself by sneezing. After more fighting, Ascyrtos exits the extant

²⁰³Here Eumolpus tells an inset story about his affair with (or assault of?) a boy he was tutoring in Pergamon, and extemporizes 65 verses on the fall of Troy until he is chased away by listeners throwing stones. The “novel” is a jumbled and fragmentary mixture of prose and poetry, which Zeitlin considers a “radically anti-classical work” (1971, 634) and a “disorderly conglomeration of styles [that] reflects the confusions of present reality” (ibid., 650). Sullivan similarly considers Encolpius’ character fragmentary and inconsistent because he exists only as a mouthpiece for Petronius’ disjunctive literary ends (1968, 119). In contrast, Connors (1998) reads the poetry in the *Saytrica* not as a jarring juxtaposition in style, but as an integral part of the text’s fictional landscape; for Connors, the text is a truly intergeneric work, not a novel with a sprinkling of poetry. The text poses interpretative challenges not only in its mix of prose and poetry, but also in its borrowings from various literary genres. The *Cena* alone draws on Horace’s *Satire* 2.8 and Plato’s *Symposium* (Bodel 1999, 33–34), and incorporates the epic theme of *katabasis* as well as various comedic genres. Other episodes riff on tropes from New Comedy, the *Odyssey*, mime, tragedy, epic, and more (Schmeling 1999, 20; Murgatroyd 2013, 242). Schmeling suggests that Petronius is more interested in experimenting with previous literary forms than anything else (1999, 25); Walsh also considers him a “literary opportunist” (1970, 23). Rimell, in contrast, points out that eating and food are conflated with language, literature, and music in Petronius’ text, and connects these “literary effusions” with the novel’s frequent bodily functions (2009, 69–72; more below).

novel, and the rest are reconciled (83–99). The new trio boards a ship that, unfortunately, belongs to Lichas, whom Encolpius and Giton were fleeing after some offense from the lost portion of the text.²⁰⁴ Eumolpus disguises Encolpius and Giton as enslaved runaways, but after the sailors whip them for shaving their heads onboard (considered bad luck at sea), Encolpius and Giton are recognized. After an impassioned trial and battle, they all reconcile, and Eumolpus tells the story of the Widow of Ephesus. The ship, however, is wrecked in a storm, and Lichas drowns while the trio is rescued by treasure-hunting fishermen (100–115). Finding themselves in legacy-hunting Croton,²⁰⁵ they resolve to disguise Eumolpus as a wealthy and childless, but feeble, landowner and Encolpius and Giton as his slaves in a get-rich-quick scheme. As the enslaved “Polyaenus,” Encolpius suffers impotence when trying to sleep with the elite Circe, who has a passion for low-class men. He entrusts himself to Oenothea, a priestess of Priapus, for a cure, which consists of a leather phallus and a bunch of nettles, but then escapes, and later his potency is restored. The extant novel ends with Eumolpus’ dictation of his will, which stipulates that his beneficiaries are those who are willing to eat his corpse (116–41).²⁰⁶

The first section of the extant text demonstrates that, despite this whirlwind of picaresque adventures, the novel is not simple entertainment, but explores issues that preoccupy its elite

²⁰⁴Encolpius apparently was sleeping with Lichas and his wife Hedyle, and had stolen a rattle and robe sacred to Isis. It seems that Tryphaena, Lichas’ companion, also gave up Encolpius as a lover in exchange for Giton, whom Encolpius then stole from her (Hofmann 2014, 102).

²⁰⁵On the journey from the shore into Croton, Eumolpus recites another epic poem, this one on the civil war (119–24). Like Lucan’s epic *Bellum Civile*, this poem emphasizes the deep violation that internecine conflict engenders through explicit violence against the body and through the common motif of the Roman Republic as a body politic, though space constraints make it impossible to discuss this inset poem here. See Connors (1998) for in-depth readings of the poetry in Petronius’ text.

²⁰⁶On this episode, see Rimell, who reads cannibalism as a symbol of civil war (2002, 168–74), and Köstner, who argues that it also represents the destruction of social bonds and *amicitia* (2018, 210). There is no space to discuss here the role of cannibalism in the text further.

audience. Our text begins with Encolpius complaining to Agamemnon, an instructor of oratory, that rhetoric has been reduced to empty posturing and blathering:

‘num alio genere furiarum declamatores inquietantur, qui clamant: “haec vulnera pro libertate publica excepi, hunc oculum pro vobis impendi; date mihi [ducem] qui me ducat ad liberos meos, nam succisi poplites membra non sustinet”? ... nunc et rerum tumore et sententiarum vanissimo strepitu hoc tantum proficient, ut cum in forum venerint, putent se in alium orbem terrarum delatos.’

“Are our orators tormented by another kind of Fury when they shout: ‘These wounds I sustained on behalf of public freedom; this eye I sacrificed for you; give me someone to lead me to my children, for my hamstrung knees cannot support my body’? The only result of this bluster and empty noise is that when pupils enter the forum, they think that they’ve been transported to another world” (1.1–2).²⁰⁷

In the intense competition of Republican politics, rhetoric was both the main tool for personal advancement and the hallmark of elite identity.²⁰⁸ In Petronius’ world, however, it has become mere “bluster and empty noise.” What’s more, these declaimers put their bodies on display to underline their points, instead of relying on their arguments alone. As a performance art, oratory walked a fine line between cultivated elite practice and common entertainment.²⁰⁹ In baring their wounds to a crowd of onlookers, these declaimers resemble common actors or gladiators—who would be classed alongside prostitutes as *infames*—more than the politicians of the Republican era. Encolpius’ complaint shows that a practice once essential to elite identity has become both

²⁰⁷Throughout this chapter, the text is taken from the 2009 Teubner edition edited by Konrad Müller, and translations are adapted from Rouse’s 1987 Loeb translation.

²⁰⁸See Gleason (1995, 1999), Gunderson (2003), and Corbeill (2004) for further discussions of how oratorical practice was essential to elite, embodied identity.

²⁰⁹As Fantham puts it, “[i]n all the theater arts there was a careful social grading: between respectable composing and shameful performing..., between the dressed and naked body, conspicuous in arena combat, between private and public performance..., and of course between the status of persons” (2013, 24). See Bartsch (2006, esp. 151–64) for further discussion of the fine shadings in distinction between the actor and orator, and Edwards (1994, 1997) for a discussion of performers’ lack of legal status as *infames*, particularly in regard to bodily violability and the threat they posed to elites.

pointless and low-class, and thereby questions the very definition of what it means to be elite in the world of the *Satyrice*.

Misleading Appearances in the Satyrice and Neronian Rome

As in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, nothing in the *Satyrice* is as it first appears. Petronius' story, however, takes place in the contemporary Roman empire,²¹⁰ and does not hide its references to contemporary culture behind the veil of Greek myth. The novel's obsession with artifice and illusion stems from the wider cultural context of Neronian Rome:²¹¹ historical accounts of this period present politics as an elaborately staged theatrical spectacle, in which the line between artifice and reality has been blurred beyond recognition. Illusion was built into the foundations of the empire: Suetonius says that Tiberius introduced the appearance of liberty

²¹⁰Although no one disputes that the *Satyrice* take place in the Roman world, it is nevertheless too simplistic to read the novel as a mildly fictionalized account of contemporary Roman politics and culture: first of all, the action takes place in southern Italy, not Rome itself. Scholars nevertheless debate the extent to which Petronius' world resembles the Rome of his day. Prag and Repath warn that while the Rome of the *Satyrice* is not a mirror of contemporary culture, it must also be recognizable in order to be funny (2009, 9–10). Similarly, Richlin sees the novel as a kind of literary “funhouse” or “painted backdrop of the Roman world” that distorts and exaggerates contemporary culture (2009, 94). Bodel cautions that in order to discern the extent of Petronius' satire, we must first “recognize the social realities he comically distorts as clearly as the literary models he parodies and imitates,” a task easier said than done (1999, 34). Slater denies that realism is Petronius' goal: he argues that Petronius' satire is aimed at “the very process of interpretation, at the ability of individuals to read their companions and their environment” (1987, 174). My work also departs from scholarship that attempts to connect aspects of Petronius' work to specific events or personages from the period (e.g., Sullivan 1985a).

²¹¹Most scholars understand Petronius to be Titus Petronius Niger, consul of 62 CE and mentioned in Tacitus (*Ann.* 16.18–19), though internal evidence gives only a *terminus post quem* (Prag and Repath 2009, 7–8). See Buckley and Dinter (2013) for an overview of the culture, literature, and politics of Neronian Rome. Some (most notably Martin 1975) have suggested a date in the Flavian period, but generally scholars find the text read most productively in the context of the 60s CE (Prag and Repath 2009, 9). See Hofmann (2014, 98–100) for an argument that the *Satyrice* were written in the first half of the 2nd century CE, and Sullivan (1985b) for further discussion on the date and author. See also Rose (1966), who complicates scholars' frequent assumption that Petronius was satirizing Nero and his court.

(*speciem libertatis*, *Tib.* 30) in consulting the Senate in all matters, but that in reality, he revealed the Principate little by little (*paulatim principem exseruit*, *ibid.*, 33).²¹² Nero, however, took this theatrical bent of the Principate to new levels: his every move seems designed to put on a good show above all else.²¹³ For example, his attempt to murder his mother by sending her out to sea in a collapsible boat resembled a stage trick more than a serious assassination attempt (*Tac. Ann.* 14.4–5); when she escaped, he pretended that she miraculously survived a shipwreck, and she played along (14.6).²¹⁴ After the second attempt by stabbing was successful, the Senate understood that its survival depended on playing along with Nero’s insistence that he avoided certain death, and voted games, thanksgivings, and statues in celebration (*Bartsch* 1994, 21–22; *Tac. Ann.* 14.12.1). In Nero’s Rome, illusion, play-acting, and deceit became the imperial policy, and his subjects were forced to play along in this make-believe world for their very survival.²¹⁵

²¹²That is, the Principate as an institution already existed, and Tiberius at first pretended to support a Republican-style government, only to assert his authority more overtly over the years. Artifice as an imperial strategy continued throughout the early empire: during Caligula’s reign some twenty years later, the news of his death was first greeted with guarded skepticism by those who thought that the emperor himself started the rumor of his murder to find out his subjects’ true feelings about him (*Suet. Cal.* 60).

²¹³A brief example: Nero’s triumph in 67 CE to celebrate his victories in the Panhellenic games resembled a stage performance of a triumph rather than a real one: he rode in a chariot that Augustus himself had used, and his attendants continuously shouted that they were “soldiers of the triumph,” as if they needed to convince the crowd (*Champlin* 2003, 231; *Vout* 2009b, 106). See also *Buckley and Dinter* (2013).

²¹⁴*Barton*, in contrast, suggests that historical reports of Nero’s sexual proclivities and cruelties were derived from political invective (1994, 55–56). See *Champlin* (2005) for an attempt to reinstate Nero’s reputation in the wake of historians’ damning portrayals of him. As he puts it, “[t]here is no need to whitewash Nero: he was a bad man and a bad ruler. But there is strong evidence to suggest that our dominant sources have misrepresented him badly, creating the image of the unbalanced, egomaniacal monster, vividly enhanced by Christian writers, that has so dominated the shocked imagination of the Western tradition for two millennia. The reality was more complex” (2005, 52). *Griffin* likewise argues that Nero’s terrible reputation depended, in part, on the need for later historians to explain why the Julio-Claudian dynasty failed (1984, 16–17).

²¹⁵The subject of theatricality both in Neronian Rome and in *Petronius’ Satyricon* is a rich one with an extensive bibliography. *Littlewood* points out that late Republican spectacles, such as triumphs, weddings, and funerals, already began to blur the boundaries between illusion and reality (2015, 166). *Bartsch’s Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (1994) demonstrates how the theater under Nero’s rule became a site for the anxiety-inducing reversal of actor-

In Petronius' world as well, theatricality hijacks reality to the extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two: as Caroline Vout puts it, Petronius revels in the "hall of mirrors" of Neronian culture (2009b, 107).²¹⁶ In this world, appearance is frequently exposed as mere illusion: "[w]e are constantly challenged to decipher who is acting what role, what is an act, or not an act, so that difficulties of interpretation become self-conscious exercises in reading body language... which is often called into question or ultimately confused by characters' shifting, multiple identities" (Rimell 2002, 16). The *Cena Trimalchionis* episode, essentially a long theatrical performance, provides a concentrated version of the confusion created by illusion and performance throughout the rest of the novel.²¹⁷ Each successive dish masquerades as something else: as Rimell puts it, they "repeatedly enact the unpredictability of appearances" (2002, 40). A roast pig, for example, causes Trimalchio to blow up at his cook, who supposedly forgot to gut it before cooking; when he is ordered to slice the pig open in the dining room, sausages and black puddings tumble out instead of innards (49). As Rimell points out, this scene

audience relations. Boyle similarly argues that the pervasive theatricality of the Neronian period led to a collapse between the public performance of one's *persona* and one's personal identity (2006, 182): as he puts it, the early imperial "cultural and educative system had generated a world of actors" (ibid.). Other scholars find a similar emphasis on artifice in the historians: Henderson (1998), for example, traces the process of "derealization" and degradation of language in Tacitus' works. Other scholars see dramatic intertexts and metapoetics in Petronius' text: Panayotakis (1995) outlines the comic, mimic, and tragic influences on episodes of the *Satyricon*, while Rudich (1997, 240) and Rosati (1999) argue that the entire *Cena* is a play directed by Trimalchio in its own right. See also Buckley and Dinter (2013).

²¹⁶Rudich similarly describes Petronius' novel as an "all-inclusive metaphor, or emblem" for the *dissimulatio* required to live under a tyrant such as Nero (1997, 191).

²¹⁷Scholars also read Trimalchio's dinner party of a reflection of the topsy-turvy banquets Nero himself hosted: Stein-Hölkeskamp (2005, 14), for example, argues that banquets in Neronian literature overturn all boundaries (e.g., social distinctions, the barrier between life and death, etc.) because Nero himself perverts this social ritual that was originally intended to solidify relations between the emperor and elite with his tyrannical demands and excesses (ibid., 22). Davison also connects Trimalchio to Nero in arguing that the freedman casts himself as the *editor* of an arena event that threatens bodily boundaries (2019, 2–12).

is both a performance and a double ruse, as Trimalchio first duped his guests into thinking the cook had made a mistake, and then reversed his trick by revealing it as play-acting (2002, 41–42).²¹⁸

The theatricality of this dinner could fill a book-length study, but a final example will have to suffice. One of Trimalchio's many quips sums up the illusory and unintelligible nature of the world Petronius has created:

‘quod autem,’ inquit, ‘putamus secundum litteras difficillimum esse artificium? ego puto medicum et nummularium: medicus, qui scit quid homunciones intra praecordia habeant et quando febris veniat... nummularius, qui per argentum aes videt.’

“But what,” he said, “do we think the most difficult trade is, after literature? I think it’s the doctor and the money-changer: the doctor, who knows what people conceal inside their breasts and where fevers come from... [and] the money-changer, who sees bronze through silver” (56.1–3).

For Trimalchio, tradesmen who must look past the exterior to interior have the hardest jobs in this world of smoke and mirrors.²¹⁹

Though the structures of illusion and theatricality pervade almost every aspect of Petronius’ novel, bodies—their appearances and performances—are the most problematic to interpret in the text. As Rimell points out, Trimalchio’s comment about doctors and money-

²¹⁸Encolpius comes to expect the rug to be pulled out from under him, but he still cannot see beneath the banquet’s façades: later, when he struggles to interpret a wild boar wearing a freedman’s cap, another guest asserts that the symbolism is perfectly obvious (the boar was uneaten on the previous day and thus returns freed), and that Encolpius’ primed expectation that another wild ruse will follow is an overinterpretation (41.1–3).

²¹⁹Zeitlin, in fact, sees Trimalchio’s observation as a natural reaction “to a world whose reality proves to be illusory and counterfeit, and, therefore, ultimately unintelligible” (1971, 661). Another major theme throughout the *Cena*, which space constraints make impossible to discuss, is the frequent allusion to death. Arrowsmith contextualizes Trimalchio’s obsession with death in a larger web of associations between “mortality and money, surfeit and sickness, impotence and plenty” throughout the text (1966, 304). Connors (1994), in contrast, situates Trimalchio’s obsession with death within what she terms the larger “textualization” of death in the Neronian period (e.g., the seemingly scripted deaths of elites, death narratives in historiography, etc.).

changers situates the difficulty of distinguishing the interior from exterior squarely within the realm of the body (2002, 57). For Rimell, in fact, bodies are a focal point in the text for exploring the slippage between reality and artifice that makes this world so confusing (2002, 13).²²⁰ Jason König, as well, sees the disjunct between physical appearance and inner identity and the tension between recognizability and anonymity as central issues in the novel (2008, 127). He traces these concerns back to the Neronian context, arguing that elites in the early imperial period are particularly concerned with training and comportment as means of distinguishing themselves from non-elites (ibid.).²²¹ The interpretability of the body becomes a central tension of the novel, as well as the locus where one of the text's defining questions—the relationship between artifice and reality—is worked out.

These bodies are so difficult to interpret in part because the class structures that govern social identity are in disarray. In the world of the *Satyricon*, only wealth, not background or birth, constitutes social capital. Apart from the fabulously wealthy Trimalchio, other freedmen at his banquet tell stories about rapid climbs up the social ladder.²²² Diogenes, for example, contrasts

²²⁰When the elite Circe, for example, is confronted with Encolpius' impotence, she interrogates her maid about possible bodily failings on her part (128.1), then snatches up a mirror to examine her body for herself (128.4). Schmeling (1994, 157–58) also points out that sight alone often fails to identify characters, and that touch is used to corroborate the eyes; Lichas, for example, fondles Encolpius' private parts to confirm that it is really him (105.9–10).

²²¹König points to athletic and rhetorical training and philosophical self-care as practices that attempt to shape bodies to fulfill elite criteria (2008, 127). See also Barghop (1994, discussed in footnote 20) for an application of Bourdieu's theory of bodily *hexis* (learned, cultivated bodily comportment) to Roman class distinctions.

²²²Scholars have long debated Trimalchio's exact legal status and considered whether his background can be understood as representative of freedmen in the early imperial period. Auerbach (1953) first asserted that the lively picture of freedmen culture that emerges from this episode was highly realistic. Rostovtzeff (1957) argued that Trimalchio represents a new bourgeoisie class of the early empire involved in commercial, agricultural, and lending activities; these *nouveaux riches*' wealth, he argues, made up for a lack of status and any constraints imposed by patrons (D'Arms 1981 also takes up this argument). Veyne (1961), in contrast, emphasized the constraints of Trimalchio's legal status, and painted freedmen as an "aborted class" blocked from upward mobility. Andreau denies that the *Cena* can tell us anything

an unnamed freedman's previous manual labor as a porter (*modo solebat collo suo ligna portare*, sometimes he used to carry wood on his neck, 38.8) with his present riches (*hodie sua octingenta possidet. de nihilo crevit*. Now he has 800,000 sesterces. He grew from nothing, 38.7).²²³ Gareth Schmeling points out that a private fortune of 800,000 sesterces is sizable, twice the amount needed to rise to the equestrian class (ad loc.). Here, Diogenes equates this freedman's fortune with his identity: in possessing 800,000 sesterces, he has become a somebody from a nobody.²²⁴ Hermeros, another guest, not only points to his present wealth as a marker of his respectability, but also recasts his servile background as an honorable choice made to obtain free citizen status: *quare ego servisti? quia ipse me dedi in servitutem et malui civis Romanus esse quam tributarius* (Why did I serve? Because I gave myself into slavery and preferred to be a Roman citizen rather than pay tribute, 57.4).²²⁵ Hermeros' active verbs (*servisti, dedi, malui, servivi*) and repetition of personal pronouns (*ipse me*) emphasize his agency in his fate. For Hermeros, enslavement is a mere stepping-stone on his journey to respectable citizen status, not something that should be

definitive about freedmen in the early empire: he considers Trimalchio a "purely literary creation, inserted into a context deliberately presented as less fictional" (2009, 116). He also points out that this episode does not present a cross-section of freedmen culture: the novel does not mention imperial slaves or freedmen in administrative positions, nor do the freedmen at the *Cena* comment on their current relationships with their patrons or the *obsequium* (respectful behavior) or *operae* (assigned days of labor) they may have owed them (2009, 118). Likewise, in his study of freedmen in Rome, Mouritsen (2011) emphasizes freedmen's ongoing relationships with their patrons as the basis of their social and economic status in Roman society.

²²³See Boyce (1991) and Petersmann (1999) for discussions of the language of freedmen in the *Satyrice*.

²²⁴See MacMullen (1974, 138–41) for examples of elite disdain toward porters.

²²⁵A final example of the social mobility on display at the *Cena*: Phileros says that the freedman Chrysanthus died blessed, because he advanced from enslavement to riches. He also uses *cresco* to describe Chrysanthus' upward social mobility: *itaque crevit quidquid tetigit tamquam favus* (and so he grew anything he touched, like a honeycomb, 43.1–2). Note, however, that here *cresco* is transitive and refers to Chrysanthus' wealth, not to Chrysanthus himself.

concealed,²²⁶ just as for the unnamed freedman above, backbreaking manual labor was no barrier to amassing twice the required wealth to enter the equestrian class.

Although Hermeros casts his enslavement as a deliberate decision, the fates of other enslaved individuals in the text appear to be decided wholly by the whims of fortune.²²⁷ During the banquet, a *puer* dressed as Bacchus is freed merely in order for Trimalchio to make a good pun (41.6–8).²²⁸ As he substitutes the cap of freedmen for the grapes and vines of his Dionysiac costume, the boy seems to be taking on another play-acting role, instead of experiencing a life-changing stroke of luck.²²⁹ Class distinctions in the *Satyrice* appear porous not only because of these stories of rapid social ascents, but also because characters regularly associate with those outside their class, even if they do not change their statuses themselves. The enslaved Chrysis, for example, says she sleeps only with men of at least equestrian status, while her mistress Circe prefers whip-marked slaves and freedmen (126.8–10).²³⁰ In the world of the *Satyrice*, class distinctions seem to exist only to be flouted.

²²⁶Schmeling reads Hermeros' diatribe as both proud and defensive of his rapid social climb. He points out that many freedmen are not so forthcoming about their former status, omitting it from their epitaphs (Schmeling ad 37.4–7).

²²⁷Connors reads the ups and downs of Fortuna as a structuring theme of the text, and as a means of portraying the unpredictability of life under a despot (1998, 82–83).

²²⁸*liber esto... 'non negabit me' inquit 'habere Liberum patrem'* (Be free... "You won't deny," he says, "that I have father Liber," 41.7–8) Trimalchio plays on the double meaning of *liber* = free and *Liber* = Dionysus. Schmeling reads this playful pun as a mask for Trimalchio's "unfulfillable wish to have been born free" (ad loc.).

²²⁹Trimalchio also frees an acrobat who fell against him, injuring his hand, because he does not wish to have been wounded by a slave (54.5). This transformational moment for the enslaved acrobat is similarly the result of a mere whim of Trimalchio, who seems more interested in a theatrical ending to the incident than anything else.

²³⁰*ego etiam si ancilla sum, numquam tamen nisi in equestribus sedeo* (even if I'm only a maid, I never settle unless it's on knights, 126.10). Schmeling presumes that Chrysis sleeps with elite men in hopes of advancing her own status (ad 126.9), though such an assumption overlooks Chrysis' lack of agency as an enslaved woman in choosing her sexual partners. Rudich more generally sees "a dynamic interplay in

Despite the picture of extreme social flux that emerges from these episodes, the insurmountable distinction between freeborn and formerly enslaved remains (Bodel 1999, 35), as Hermeros' defensive diatribe shows. The trick, however, is telling the difference between the two, in a world in which individuals can shift between classes with such ease. This tension, engendered by social mobility, between outer appearance and true identity magnifies trends from early imperial Rome. Although the shift from Republic to empire entailed a new top-down, autocratic government, wider social changes in the post-Augustan era took the form of increasing social fluidity, rather than wholesale social reorganization. Speculative and commercial ventures allowed freedmen to amass their own wealth, which was formerly synonymous with power and status and the province of the landed aristocracy alone. Moderately wealthy freedmen, like those who dine alongside Trimalchio, did not constitute a separate bourgeoisie class, but were assimilated into the upper classes (Garnsey 1981, 369).²³¹ The influx of these *nouveaux riches* changed the makeup of the equestrian (and senatorial) classes, while successive waves of provincial outsiders fundamentally shifted the makeup of the Senate (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 123–24).²³² As Wallace-Hadrill puts it, “[t]his remains one of the historically most remarkable features of the Roman empire, that the power system was constantly permeable to the energy of

Petronius' novel of sexuality and societal status,” in which higher class characters exploit their status to gratify their sexual desires, while lower class characters use sex as a means of climbing the social ladder (1997, 209): Ascyrtos, for example, gains a wealthy patron after he is spotted naked in the baths (92), and is next seen offering a substantial reward to regain Giton (97).

²³¹Wallace-Hadrill, in contrast, sees wealthy freedmen as a “sub-elite” group floating somewhere between the proletariat and true elite (2008, 37).

²³²Three-quarters of consuls, in fact, in the period from 18–235 CE were not known to have a single direct consular descendant in the past three generations (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 124). This shift in the Senate's constitution also stems from an unprecedented expansion of citizenship in the early empire, through grants, military service, connections to the emperor, and manumission (Lavan 2013, 74). Here, the picture of freedmen we derive from the *Cena* diverges from historical accounts: none of the freedmen at Trimalchio's dinner mentions children, while Tacitus says that many *equites* and senators were descended from freedmen (*Ann.* 13.27.1–2; Andreau 2009, 119–20).

new elites from the peripheries” (2008, 36). In the early empire, the Republican social distinctions between senator, knight, and subaltern remained operative, but increasing social fluidity from various quarters rendered the barriers between classes more porous than they were before.

In addition to wealth, imperial favor disrupted traditional systems of class. The majority of young politicians competing for the quaestorship came from wealthy families who had special permission from the emperor to stand as a candidate, while sons of senators made up the minority (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 151).²³³ Even for young men of patrician background, climbing these first few rungs of the political ladder was impossible without the emperor’s approval (Lavan 2013, 67).²³⁴ Closeness to the emperor allowed a new kind of elite class to emerge, a “power” elite made mostly up of Greeks, formerly enslaved individuals, and equestrians promoted through imperial favor (Millar 1977, 290–91; Hopkins and Burton 1983, 171–74). By Nero’s time, this new elite class staffed the most important positions across the empire and possessed immense wealth and unprecedented power (Mordine 2013, 105).²³⁵ In

²³³Even though consuls were appointed from Nero onwards, there was still a great deal of competition for elected positions on the lower rungs of the *cursus honorum* (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 150).

²³⁴Hopkins and Burton point out that this system was no meritocracy: the emperor’s approval was rather based on connections and favors (1983, 153). For example, Suetonius notes that Tiberius once gave a random man a quaestorship because he chugged an amphora of wine at a banquet at his request (*Tib.* 42.2), and that Caligula gave another individual the praetorship out of turn merely for eating enthusiastically at one of his dinners (*Calig.* 18.2).

²³⁵The promotion of freedmen to positions of power was relatively rare still during Augustus’ and Tiberius’ reigns, but Claudius and Nero elevated many freedmen to all levels of government (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 181). See Boulvert (1970) for a comprehensive catalogue of freedmen’s careers in imperial government.

contrast, the traditionally elite—patricians and nobles of Republican lineage—belonged to a “grand set” that lacked any real power (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 172).²³⁶

The promotion of former subalterns over themselves was difficult for elites to swallow: Pliny, for example, is horrified to read an inscription from the Senate to Claudius’ freedman Pallas, thanking him for his services and offering him the insignia of a praetor and 15 million sesterces (*Letters* 8.6; Burton and Hopkins 1983, 177; Lavan 2013, 70).²³⁷ The traditionally elite were further humiliated by Nero’s insistence that they appear onstage and in the arena: he assigned matrons and men of consular rank parts in the *Iuvenales* (Suet. *Nero* 11.1) and forced 400 senators and 600 knights to fight wild beasts and perform various services (e.g., as machinists or musicians) in the arena (ibid., 12.1).²³⁸ The emperor’s whims, then, humiliated elites of Republican lineage and deprived them of any real influence. At the same time, larger social changes—i.e., increasing social fluidity and the expansion of citizenship—further

²³⁶Partially because of patricians’ hereditary threat to the emperor’s legitimacy (Lavan 2013, 69), they were “apparently ‘kicked upstairs,’ given preferential promotion but prevented from being powerful” (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 153–54). By Nero’s time, status (i.e., consulships) and actual power (provincial governor and general appointments) had become distinct (ibid., 171): Nero began to appoint consuls himself, and he no longer chose senators as commanders of legions or provincial governors (Beacham 1999, 208–09). For example, the Brutii Praesentes family produced six consuls in about a century, but only one governor of a military province: “such men may have had influence as friends, dinner companions or advisers of emperors, and their prestige and marriage connections extended to the imperial family itself (a daughter of a Brutius Praesens married the emperor Commodus), but their social status was not matched by the exercise of effective power in administrative positions, and certainly not in the frontier regions of the empire” (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 173). McDonnell also sees a widening gulf between the civilian and military sides of Roman society, as the senators were increasingly barred from military service and the traditional exercise and display of *virtus* (2006, 388). See also Rudich (1993, introduction) for an overview of elites’ loss of power in the early empire.

²³⁷This attitude is prevalent throughout Suetonius’ account of Claudius: he portrays him as ruled by his wife and freedmen (*Cl.* 25.5, 29.1) and lists in detail the honors awarded to his freedmen (28). As the Principate became more established, knights gradually replaced freedmen in these positions of power (Hopkins and Burton 1983, 181).

²³⁸Suetonius notes that Nero included even individuals whose fortunes and reputations were intact (*et quosdam fortunae et existimationis integrae*, 12.1).

degraded Republican social distinctions. By Nero's time, the divorce of status and real power, formerly one and the same, draws the very definition of elite status into question.

Confusing Class Markers: Dress and Appearance

The world of the *Satyricon* is similarly destabilizing for those attempting to navigate its dizzying social mobility and frequent illusions. The image of a labyrinth not only structures the *Cena*—when Encolpius and his friends lose their way attempting to escape the debauchery, the porter tells them that nobody exits Trimalchio's house the same way he came in (72.10)²³⁹—but also acts as a model for reading the novel as a whole (Bodel 1999, 37). Giton, too, treats the world around them like a maze to be conquered: when they set out from Trimalchio's house, they find their way back to their lodgings only by following the bright chalk marks with which Giton, afraid he would get lost even in broad daylight, had marked their path (79.1–4).

While Giton was able to guide his friends back to their lodgings, Encolpius is particularly inept at navigating this world and uncovering its deceptions.²⁴⁰ During Trimalchio's dinner, “Encolpius continually fails to interpret Trimalchio's food-texts correctly...despite having his

²³⁹In this respect, Encolpius' and his friends' adventure resembles a heroic *katabasis*, a descent to the underworld (Morgan 2009, 35–36). Trimalchio is also obsessed with death (Arrowsmith 1966, 306–07; Bodel 1994, 251; Hope 2009, 142): the entire *Cena* resembles a funereal gladiatorial game that echoes the funeral games of *Aeneid* 5 (Saylor 1987, 593–601), and Trimalchio ends his revelry by enacting an elaborate version of his own funeral (78). See particularly Arrowsmith, who traces a “cyclical rhythm of associations” between death, *luxuria*, satiety, and defecation (1966, 307–08).

²⁴⁰It is essential to remember that the entire novel is filtered through Encolpius' flawed perspective, which makes the text, already difficult for the reader to navigate, much more destabilizing: as Schmeling puts it, “the voice of *Satyricon* is always that of Encolpius, but it is so unreliable, his perception so conditioned by fantasies of self, his statements of facts so regularly contradicted, his contexts so steeped in literature, that we are forced to treat the whole work with caution. At the same time, we function at the mercy of Encolpius to obtain all information” (1999, 29). Beck considers Encolpius the narrator's primary aim the reshaping of his past experiences to amuse his audience (1973, 61).

suspicious permanently aroused” (Rimell 2002, 38).²⁴¹ He is especially bad at interpreting bodily signs as markers of class to correctly identify the other characters he encounters. When he becomes lost trying to find his lodgings, he asks an old lady selling vegetables—whom he calls an *anacula* (little old lady, 6.4, 7.4) and *mater* (mother, 7.1)—where he is staying. When she, absurdly, answers in the affirmative and offers to lead him there, he is not the least bit suspicious (6.4–7.1). Only when he sees the naked prostitutes lounging behind doorways does he protest that he does not recognize the place (7.4). He then stumbles into his companion Ascylos, who tells a similar story: he trusted an *eques* and followed him to the same brothel, where the supposedly respectable *paterfamilias* (8.2) attempted to assault him (8.1–4).²⁴² Encolpius’ mistake early in the extant text sets the tone for the rest of the novel: not only did he, completely lost, fail to realize that the old lady was actually the drunken, lecherous *lena* of Latin literature, but he also believed her absurd claim that she, a complete stranger, would know where he was staying.

An episode during Trimalchio’s banquet shows that Encolpius is not merely gullible and overly trusting, but simply bad at interpreting markers of class. When the stonemason Habinnas joins the revelry, Encolpius takes his white dress and lictors to mean that he is a *praetor*, and leaps up to make a dash for it (65.3–4). As Schmeling puts it, he “again fails to understand the situation” (ad 65.4).

²⁴¹Encolpius also fails to interpret the images he encounters and often confuses things inside pictures with those outside of them (Rimell 2002, 38). For example, he almost breaks his legs jumping backwards in fright at the *cave canem* mosaic at the entrance to Trimalchio’s house (29.1). Slater reads this scene as a parody of the powers of mimetic art (1987, 167). Like Cadmus, Encolpius stumbles in killing a goose sacred to Priapus; even though the geese ran from the god’s temple, he has no idea he has made a mistake until he is surprised at the old woman Oenothea’s horrified reaction (136.12–137.3).

²⁴²Schmeling (ad 8.1) notes that Ascylos could have invented this story to explain why he was found in a whorehouse without a girl or a boy (i.e., to cover up his moonlighting as a prostitute).

Encolpius fails not only to interpret other characters' bodily markers, but also to manipulate his own appearance. When Ascyrtos steals his boyfriend Giton, he talks himself into an epic rage and pursues them with a sword.²⁴³ Almost immediately, however, a soldier notices his lack of military dress and obvious trepidation, and orders him to give up his sword (82.3). His *phaecasiati*—white slippers popular amongst philosophers and scholars (Conte 1996, 13)—betray his civilian status: he has failed to pull off his role by wearing the wrong costume. In addition, his demeanor—his facial expression and bearing—fails to match his disguise, as he crumples in fear at the slightest hint of violence.

Even though the soldier immediately notices that he is pretending, Encolpius cannot determine, in turn, whether the soldier is the real deal: *notavit me miles, sive ille planus fuit sive nocturnus grassator* (a soldier noticed me, though maybe he was an imposter or a night-prowling thief, 82.2). Once again, he fails to determine identity and status from appearance, but in the end, his confusion does not affect the outcome of the encounter: he immediately caves in at any threat of violence, and is therefore either emasculated by a real soldier, or upstaged by a “soldier” who is better at playing his part. After this ordeal, Encolpius is relieved to be stripped of his sword (82.4): his reaction reinforces the impression that his *furor* was merely playing a part, and badly, at that.²⁴⁴

²⁴³Conte sees this episode as evidence of Encolpius' “mythomaniac” tendencies: he takes on the role of Achilles, whose hand Athena must stay (1996, 12). Panayotakis notes that he also resembles a frenzied Vergilian Aeneas searching for his Creusa (2009, 54).

²⁴⁴Encolpius' failed disguise recalls an episode from Dio Cassius. According to the historian, revenue problems led Augustus to enroll so many people in the Senate that some slipped through the cracks: a certain enslaved Maximus was recognized by his enslaver while fulfilling his duties as a *quaestor* (35.5). Maximus, however, more successfully pulled off his disguise than Encolpius did: someone who knew him personally recognized him, despite his convincing performance as an elite. Encolpius, on the other hand, cannot pull off a single, simple disguise, even in the funhouse world of the *Satyricon*, where it seems everyone is playing a part.

Although Encolpius continually fails to interpret the identities of the people he meets, his confusion is not entirely his fault: bodily signifiers in the *Satyricon* reflect the dizzying social fluidity in this world, rendering them difficult to interpret. As Rimell puts it, “identities of characters in the *Satyricon* are never written all over their faces, and nothing is what it seems” (2002, 37).²⁴⁵ Trimalchio’s appearance as described during his entrance to his banquet is presented as an interpretive puzzle, “a complex sign to be decoded by the audience” (Slater 1990, 55). His getup is detailed as an incongruous combination of various class markers:

pallio enim coccineo adrasum excluserat caput circaque oneratas veste cervices
laticlaviam immiserat mappam fimbriis hinc atque illinc pendentibus. habebat etiam in
minimo digito sinistrae manus anulum grandem subauratum, extremo vero articulo digiti
sequentis minorem, ut mihi videbatur, totum aureum, sed plane ferreis velut stellis
ferruminatum. et ne has tantum ostenderet divitias, dextrum nudavit lacertum armilla
aurea cultum et eboreo circulo lamina splendente conexo.

His shaven head peeked out of a scarlet cloak, and around the heavy clothing on his neck he put on a napkin with the broad purple stripe and fringes hanging all around. He had on the little finger of his left hand a large gilt ring, and on the top joint of the next finger a smaller, and—as it seemed to me—solid gold ring, but clearly ornamented with soldered-on iron stars. And as if he had not displayed his wealth enough, he bared his right arm, decorated with a golden armband and an ivory band fastened with a shining metal plate (32.1–3).

First, Trimalchio’s shaven head marks him out as a freedman,²⁴⁶ yet his napkin with the broad purple strip mimics the *latus clavus* of the senatorial class (Schmeling ad loc.). Although few would mistake a napkin for a toga, his rings skirt the line of proper dress for the freedmen class: the *senatus consultum* of 23 CE decreed that only those of equestrian status or higher—and who

²⁴⁵Zeitlin also points out that nobody is who they seem to be in the novel (1971, 658). The starving artist Eumolpus, however, is the one possible exception in this world of illusion and disguises. He is easily identified by his shabby clothes (83.7): “Eumolpus’ learnedness is inscribed on his body almost like a written mark, for an audience to read like a book” (Connors 1998, 63–64). In the end, though, Eumolpus too turns out to be deceptive and untrustworthy (Rimell 2002, 122).

²⁴⁶Schmeling presumes that Trimalchio is going bald and crops his hair closely for that reason (ad 32.1). Whatever the reason behind Trimalchio’s shaved head, it makes him seem like he was newly freed, and betrays his origins.

were freeborn for three generations—could wear gold rings (Schmeling ad 32.3). In proudly wearing a gold-plated ring and a golden ring studded with iron, Trimalchio “perhaps does not break the law, but he does bend it and hints at a high status which he does not hold” (Schmeling ad 32.3). Thus, Trimalchio’s appearance contains elements from three different classes—senatorial, equestrian, and freedmen—showing his ambitions to transcend his origins, yet betraying them at the same time. As Hackworth Petersen puts it, “Trimalchio’s body humorously under- and overstates his social position” (2009, 203).

Trimalchio’s description of his likeness on his future tomb makes these aspirations a reality: he says he will be portrayed in the *toga praetexta* and wearing five golden rings (71.9). Schmeling notes that the toga here does not necessarily mean that Trimalchio wishes to be portrayed as a senator: he will appear on his tomb at the highest point of his career, as a *sevir Augustalis* (ad loc.).²⁴⁷ The golden rings, on the other hand, reveal Trimalchio’s fantasy of transcending his status: only the emperor could grant freedmen the right to wear them (Schmeling ad loc.). Trimalchio’s appearance, then, both in representations of him and in reality, combines elements of various classes in a way that skirts the law and confuses the viewer: as Slater puts it, it “is a gallimaufry of contradictory signs” (1990, 59).

Though his getup is outlandish, he is not merely aping his freeborn superiors (so Schmeling), but is aspiring to a class of freedmen who were awarded entrance to the equestrian or senatorial class and, with it, the right to wear these status markers. For example, Claudius

²⁴⁷Schmeling’s interpretation of Trimalchio’s wish to be portrayed in his toga is debated: Courtney argues that there is no evidence that *seviri* were allowed to wear *praetextae* and that this aspect of his outfit is usurped, as well (2001, 120 n. 66). Trimalchio also has his *toga praetexta* brought out to be admired, and remarks that he will be buried in it (78.1). Courtney, again, questions the legitimacy of this detail, arguing that *seviri* could wear this honorary dress only at their inaugural games and at the distribution of donations (2001, 120–21), though Livy (34.7.3) notes that lowly municipal officers were buried in the *toga praetexta* (Schmeling ad 78.1).

rewarded his secretary Narcissus and his treasurer Pallas with honors from the Senate and the insignia of quaestors and praetors, along with immense monetary gifts (Suet. *Claud.* 28), while Augustus awarded the freedman Menas many gold rings and equestrian status when he deserted Sextus and joined his side (Dio Cas. 48.45.6–9).²⁴⁸ Trimalchio aspires to equestrian status because entrance to this class is within his reach (Bodel 1999, 35). In the early empire, class markers became decoupled from status in other ways, as well. For example, knights and sons of knights admitted to the Senate’s ranks (see above) became indistinguishable from the patrician bluebloods: by 38 CE, promising knights were allowed to wear the senatorial stripe even before they entered its ranks as a visible token of their candidacy (Burton and Hopkins 1983, 168–69). In addition, some emperors were generous with the honor of wearing triumphal regalia: Nero conferred them upon quaestors and even knights (Suet. *Nero* 15.2).²⁴⁹ Trimalchio’s appearance, then, not only shows how he mimics his betters, but also demonstrates how class markers in the early empire have become divorced from the status with which they were once synonymous.²⁵⁰

Trimalchio’s behavior, in addition to his dress, is erratic and unsettling in its frequent code-switching. After he bursts into a lewd dance in the middle of his dinner, his wife Fortunata

²⁴⁸Claudius was infamous for rewarding his freedmen with fabulous honors: Posides received a headless spear at his British triumph; Felix was awarded commands of cohorts, troops of horse, the province of Judaea, and marriage to three queens; Harpocras enjoyed the privilege of riding through the city in a litter and giving public entertainments; and Polybius, his literary advisor, was allowed to walk between two consuls (Suet. *Claud.* 28). He also granted a freedman the honor of wearing the *latus clavus*, with the stipulation that he later be adopted by an equestrian (Suet. *Claud.* 24.1). In addition, Augustus rewarded the freedman physician Antonius Musa not only golden rings and equestrian status, but also exemptions from taxes for himself and his descendants for saving his life in 23 BCE (Dio Cas. 53.30.3).

²⁴⁹Claudius also distributed triumphal regalia freely, even letting his daughter’s child fiancé, Silanus (Suet. *Claud.* 24.3), and equestrian *procurates* (24.1) wear them.

²⁵⁰Barghop argues that the immense power these freedmen possessed, sometimes even after the death of the emperor who promoted them (1994, 186–87), did not match their social status, leading to a “Diskrepanz zwischen Rang und Status” (ibid., 187).

reminds him of his status, and Encolpius remarks: *nihil autem tam inaequale erat; nam modo Fortunatam <verebatur>, modo ad naturam suam revertebatur* (there was nothing, however, so inconsistent; for sometimes he feared Fortunata, sometimes he reverted back to his natural state, 52.11). Just as his outfit combines incongruous elements from different classes, his behavior at the dinner switches between boorishness and a performance of dignity.²⁵¹ This juxtaposition of class markers, both visual and behavioral, prevents the viewer from “reading” his body correctly. As Butler theorizes, the successful performance of social identity lies in its consistency: an individual’s dress, gestures, hairstyle, walk, and other bodily features must all work together to create the impression that his social performance of identity is intrinsic to him (1990, 185–93). Trimalchio’s performance, however, swings wildly between inconsistencies, and thus reveals his identity as a theatrical act that he adopts and abandons from moment to moment.²⁵²

Mismarked Bodies in the Satyricon and Rome

Trimalchio’s dress and persona keep him from pulling off a successful performance as a member of the elite, but the bodies themselves of other characters, rather than their outfits, do

²⁵¹Trimalchio’s frequent mistakes in mythology also betray his lack of formal education. For example, he mixes up Cassandra and Medea (52.1) and gives such a garbled version of the Trojan War that it is almost impossible to keep up with the mistakes (59.4).

²⁵²Verboven (2009, 131–32) terms this phenomenon “social dissonance,” in which individuals obtain some trappings of social rank (e.g., wealth), but not others (like education). He states that Trimalchio “lacks the composure of true *homines liberales* (“men born to freedom”)—that ill-defined quality that distinguishes a respectable man from an upstart and which derives from the seemingly natural and unconstrained manners of one who has assimilated all relevant status criteria as an inseparable part of his social identity” (2009, 132). While a freeborn, elite man’s performance of his social identity is so consistent and naturalized as to appear intrinsic to him, the “social dissonance” in Trimalchio’s performance reveals that he is putting on an act.

not match their prescribed roles. His *puer*, for example, is described as not merely ugly, but also preternaturally aged: *chiramaxio, in quo deliciae eius vehebantur, puer vetulus, lippus, domino Trimalchione deformior* (on a handcart, in which his favorite rode, a wrinkled boy, bleary-eyed, uglier than his master Trimalchio, 28.4).²⁵³ Despite his aged appearance, Croesus is described repeatedly as a *puer*, and he acts the part: he crams his equally ugly puppy full of bread (64.6) and leaps on Trimalchio's back to play a game of *bucca bucca* (64.11). Commentators have attempted to explain away this inconsistency between his appearance and role: Schmeling (ad 28.4) notes the "precocious ageing of pathics (and eunuchs)." Dunstan Lowe explains further: he notes that "monster marts" served imperial taste for differently-abled slaves, and suggests that Croesus may have had a congenital aging disorder (2012, 833). I argue, in contrast, that the inconsistency here between Croesus' aged appearance and his childish role and behavior is key: whether or not Trimalchio's *deliciae* has aged out of his status as *deliciae* or only appears to have done so, his body does not fit his role.²⁵⁴ This gross mismatch between socially prescribed role and appearance reveals his performance as a playful, petulant child as mere show. While a beautiful, charming *puer* may trick the viewer into thinking that he gladly serves his enslaver, Croesus' appearance shatters the illusion and reveals his behavior as a performance to please his master.

²⁵³He is again described later in the dinner as bleary-eyed and having bad teeth: *puer autem lippus, sordissimis dentibus* (a bleary-eyed boy, with extremely disgusting teeth, 64.6).

²⁵⁴Weiss also notes this mismatch between child and old man in his argument that Petronius presents bodies as inherently unstable and mutable and that Petronius "confuses corporeal categories" throughout his novel (2019, 167–69). On a similar note, the freedman Echion also complains about puny gladiators from a recent show: he says that they would topple over if you blew on them, and described them as *de lucerne equites* (45.11), slight figurines from lamps or lampstands (Schmeling ad loc.). He admits that there was a decent Thracian, but complains that he fought *ad dictata* (adhering too closely to his trainer's commands, mechanically, 45.12). The bodies and performances of these gladiators prevent them from putting on a good show: rather than embodying the ethos of a gladiator, they are revealed as sub-par performers.

The bodies that populate the *Satyrica* are unsettling to the viewer: their visual class markers are inconsistent, and the bodies themselves do not match their social identities. Without consistency between appearance, behavior, and social identity, the identities of the novel's characters are revealed as mere play-acting, making recognition difficult. The treatment of another kind of bodily marker in the text—namely, brands and scars—reveals elite anxieties about this disjunct between social role and body. The torture of the enslaved imprints class markers into the flesh itself, and cannot be changed like Trimalchio's outrageous costume. These permanent markers, in Spillers' thought, signify an individual's (or group's) power over another: scars and brands are permanent inscriptions of hierarchical power structures. The power structures of the *Satyrica*, however, are anything but permanent: how do such lifelong signs of enslavement fit into the novel's world of social flux? The episode in which Encolpius and Giton disguise themselves as enslaved fugitives reveals elite anxieties about the distinctions (or lack thereof) between enslaved and freeborn bodies in a world where all social hierarchies seem up in the air.

When they learn that their ship belongs to Lichas, the very man whom they were fleeing, Encolpius and Giton desperately confer with Eumolpus about how they might escape detection. Encolpius first suggests dying their bodies with ink, from their hair down to their toenails, to disguise themselves as enslaved Ethiopians (102.13). Giton responds incredulously, first comparing dark skin to permanent bodily modifications to argue that such a change is not so simple: *'quidni?'* inquit Giton *'etiam circumcide nos, ut Iudaei videamur, et pertunde aures, ut imitemur Arabes, et increta facies, ut suos Gallia cives putet...'* ("Why not?" said Giton, "and circumcise us so we look like Jews, and pierce our ears to imitate Arabs, and chalk our faces so Gaul would take us for her own citizens...,” 102.14). Giton's sarcastic remarks point out that

such disguises are either painful (e.g., circumcision) or wholly impractical (such as dying the skin with ink or chalk). He then expands upon Encolpius' suggestion by pointing out all the other bodily features they would have to possess:

'tamquam hic solus color figuram possit pervertere et non multa una oporteat consentiant, ut omni ratione mendacium constet... age, numquid et labra possumus tumore taeterrimo implere? numquid et crines calamistro convertere? numquid et frontes cicatricibus scindere? numquid et crura in orbem pandere? numquid et talos ad terram deducere? numquid <et> barbam peregrina ratione figurare? color arte compositus inquinat corpus, non mutat.'

“As if this color alone could change our shapes, and it weren't needed that many other things fit together so that we can pull off our lie... Come on then, why don't we fill up our lips with an ugly swelling? And transform our hair with curling tongs? And split our foreheads with scars? And stretch our legs into a bow? And bend our ankles to the ground? And shape our beards into a foreign cut? Painted-on colors dirty the body, they don't change it” (102.14–15).

Giton's rebuttal draws attention to a whole host of other bodily characteristics of Ethiopians as an ethnic group (full lips, coiled hair, a specific trim of beard) and of enslaved people (scarred foreheads, bowed and deformed legs).²⁵⁵ This response exemplifies the ancient notion that enslaved bodies were different from freeborn ones in some fundamental physical ways (George 2002, 46–47). And, as Michele George points out, enslaved individuals often did look different: not only torture, but also hard physical labor and lack of medical care or proper nutrition left their marks on the body (2002, 47).²⁵⁶ In addition, Giton notices what Trimalchio overlooked: he points out that a successful performance of social identity depends upon consistency between appearance, bearing, and behavior: without all of these characteristics, he sarcastically points out, they stand no chance of passing as enslaved Ethiopians.

²⁵⁵Schmelting points out that the scars mentioned here could be the ritual scarring of the face common in some African groups, rather than tattoos or brands inflicted in punishment (ad 102.15).

²⁵⁶The bowed legs and twisted ankles here could indicate untreated rickets, for example (Schmelting ad 102.15).

In turn, Eumolpus proposes a kind of short-cut for their dilemma, disguising them as enslaved runaways by shaving their heads and painting on false tattoos:

‘hic continuo radat utriusque non solum capita sed etiam supercilia. sequar ego frontes notans inscriptione sollerti, ut videamini stigmatē esse puniti. ita eadem litterae et suspicionem declinabunt quarentium et vultus umbra supplicii tegent.’

“Let him shave each of your heads right away, and your eyebrows too. Then I’ll come and mark your foreheads with a neat inscription, so you’ll appear to be punished with this marking. These letters will simultaneously distract suspicious onlookers and will hide your faces behind the shadow of punishment” (103.1–2).²⁵⁷

Eumolpus proposes nothing short of transforming Encolpius’ and Giton’s free bodies into enslaved flesh, in Spillers’ sense of the word. For Spillers, flesh is a blank canvas for the enslaver’s marks of punishment: through branding, whipping, and other forms of torture, the enslaver inscribes the flesh of those enslaved to him with the marks of his dominance and thereby writes his own subjectivity into existence. Similarly, Encolpius’ and Giton’s bodies are shaved and made into blank canvases for Eumolpus’ pen, so that they can “be read like books, and the brands on their foreheads are to stand as bold titles” (Rimell 2002, 115).²⁵⁸ In addition, Spillers understands flesh as an opaque substance that obscures the enslaved person’s individual identity. Likewise, these temporary tattoos will distract viewers from their personal identities by overshadowing them with the aura of shame and punishment.²⁵⁹ As enslaved flesh, Eumolpus proposes, Encolpius and Giton will be wholly unrecognizable.

²⁵⁷Jones points out that the *stigmata* Eumolpus describes here could refer to either tattoos or brands, but that *stigmata* in reference to humans elsewhere almost always refers to tattoos (1987, 140–41).

²⁵⁸Rimell (2002, 115) connects this image of Encolpius and Giton with that of Horace’s little book, which appears like a “freshly depilated slave ready for market” (*Ep.* 1.20.1–6). She draws attention to metaliterary terms for the body and literature throughout this entire passage (ibid., 114–15).

²⁵⁹Rimell points out that these tattoos are meant to work like cloaks that cover their faces, and connects this image with the larger themes of darkness and veiling as metaphors for deception throughout the novel (2002, 37). Brands and tattoos could, of course, perform the opposite function: runaway slave ads frequently mention scars and tattoos as identifying marks (Hunt 2018, 148–49). Such markers, however,

These false tattoos, however, do not work. Lichas and his wife Tryphaena immediately recognize Giton by his voice (105.5–8), and Encolpius’ legendary penis gives him away (105.9–10).²⁶⁰ Even though their disguises fail to make them anonymous, the tattoos are still somewhat convincing: Tryphaena, thinking that her former playthings really were disfigured, weeps over their supposed punishment and subsequent deformity (105.11). Lichas, however, sees straight through the entire ruse, and laughs at her for believing these “tricks of the low stage” and this “mere outline of an inscription” (*mimicis artibus; adumbrata inscriptione*, 106.1).²⁶¹ The uncovering of Encolpius’ and Giton’s deception demonstrates that the body cannot be transformed into flesh by merely painting on it: the kind of inscription by which an enslaver renders body into flesh requires torture, punishment, and domination. Without top-down power structures and the lived bodily experiences that result from them, these markers of enslavement are mere costumes: Giton’s and Encolpius’ former beauty is quickly restored with drawn-on eyebrows and wigs (110.1–2).

If body cannot be easily transformed into flesh, this episode suggests, the reverse is also true: it is not so simple for enslaved flesh to become a free body, even after manumission, as

identify an enslaved person as an individual only insofar as she is a distinct piece of property, not an individual subject in her own right.

²⁶⁰Encolpius remarks specifically that Lichas does not glance at either his head or hands, the body parts supposedly the most recognizable (105.9–10). He also compares himself to Ulysses, whom his nurse recognized in disguise by the scar on his thigh (105.10). Encolpius’ comparison shows a strange slippage between these texts: he compares his penis to a scar in that they both give away true identities, while his tattoo (like a scar) is supposed to hide his identity (but does not). Richlin argues that the insertion of the *Odyssey* in this scene is evidence of the pleasure the novel takes in sexualizing myth (2009, 95).

²⁶¹Panayotakis argues that their disguise makes them look like a cross between a fugitive slave from New Comedy (e.g., Pl. *Cas.* 952–53) and the bald-headed fool from mime (1994, 602–03). As he sees it, Eumolpus used the ink so freely that they end up looking more like caricatures of fugitives than the real thing (1995, 149). In addition, he reads the entire episode upon the ship as inspired by comedic tropes (1994, 597): for example, each of their suggestions for avoiding detection and their rebuttals constitutes, he argues, a miniature mime act in itself (1994, 606–07).

Trimalchio's appearance and behavior in the *Cena* have already shown.²⁶² In a kind of amusing, reverse-psychology fashion (who would try to turn himself into an enslaved person?), Encolpius' and Giton's failed disguise asserts that there is an insurmountable distinction between freeborn and enslaved bodies. Hackworth Petersen sees anxieties about the slippage between freed and freeborn bodies in this passage (2009, 204): from her perspectives, elites had a vested interest in remaining distinguishable from the enslaved, freedmen, and ordinary citizens, which led to them overstating the differences between these relatively indistinguishable bodies (ibid.) A story from Dio Cassius, probably apocryphal, similarly reinforces the fantasy that branding prevented the enslaved from ever climbing out of bondage. After a series of stories about enslaved individuals who exchanged clothes with their enslavers to take their places in the proscriptions (47.10), the historian tells about a certain enslaved man with brands who could not take his enslaver's place: instead, he donned his enslaver's clothes and met his pursuers on the road, pretending that he had already murdered his master (47.10.4–5). These stories pinpoint branding as the only foolproof way to distinguish between non-elite and elite bodies, and showcase the anxieties of elites about the slippage between their own bodies and those of subalterns: elites cling to the fantasy that their bodies are inviolable and therefore qualitatively different from all others.²⁶³ These tales

²⁶²See Bodel (2017) for an explanation of the Roman concept of slavery and manumission as an ongoing process, not a static state of being, and Mouritsen (2011) for a study of freedmen and manumission more generally, as well as an examination the mental acrobatics elites had to perform to justify the large-scale Roman practice of allowing the “inferior” enslaved to join the ranks of citizens.

²⁶³As noted in Chapter Three, pp. 89, Augustus attempted to further codify this distinction in law: he decreed that branded or formerly tortured slaves would not be awarded citizenship with manumission (Suet. *Aug.* 40.4).

reassure elites by concluding that markers like brands forever prevented an enslaved person from appearing free.²⁶⁴

Yet as the power structures that relegate bodies to their various classes shift with the growing empire, the question of how to tell the difference between freeborn and enslaved bodies becomes fraught.²⁶⁵ C.P. Jones (1987, 149) notes that imperial authors increasingly dwell on the possibility that freeborn individuals may be wrongfully condemned to hard labor and tattooed in the process (e.g., Scribonius Largus *Comp.* 231). Caligula, in fact, did have his elite opponents tattooed and relegated to the mines and road-paving operations (Suet. *Calig.* 27.3). Furthermore, there was no specific attire for the enslaved in Rome, a point of anxiety for elites: “the result was a dangerous ambiguity in visible signs of status among the majority of the Roman population which obscured who was free and who was a slave, and which threatened the social fabric itself” (George 2002, 44).²⁶⁶ In the face of this social uncertainty, elites clung to the fantasy of their bodily inviolability as a way of telling the difference between themselves and subalterns, as the stories about enslaved people in disguise in Dio Cassius show.

This fantasy of bodily inviolability is evident not only through Encolpius’ and Giton’s disguises as enslaved people, but also in other references to scars throughout the novel. Despite the real violence that the protagonists repeatedly experience, all scars throughout the text are

²⁶⁴They also are reassuring to elites by implying that the enslaved people who were indistinguishable from their enslavers were apparently “good” slaves who sacrificed themselves for their enslavers.

²⁶⁵Duff traces the relaxation of regulations regarding freedmen dress as the empire went on: by the early empire, even the sons of freedmen could wear the *toga praetexta* before the age of 16 (1928, 58–59).

²⁶⁶In the absence of ubiquitous and clear markers of enslavement, elites relied on their own clothing, bearing, and other signs of status to broadcast their superiority (George 2002, 42–43). According to George, toga-wearing was important for the elites who primarily benefitted from the difference in status markers, while the lower classes did not care much about such distinctions (2008, 96).

either imaginary, metaphorical, or false (Rimell 2002, 121).²⁶⁷ In repeatedly staging violence against non-enslaved bodies that emerge unscathed, the novel engages in elites' fantasy that their bodies cannot be marked. Yet at the same time, the absurdity of the scene in which Encolpius and Giton disguise themselves exposes this scenario as pure fantasy. These episodes and contemporary stories about slave disguise and the torture of prominent individuals flirt with the idea that elite bodies could be scarred, while simultaneously asserting the impossibility of such a notion: this doublethink demonstrates how elites cling to the idea of bodily inviolability as a way to distinguish themselves from subalterns.

The obsession of elites with distinguishing their bodies from subalterns' manifests itself in anxieties not only about the possibility of torture, but also about the practice of manumission. Thinking about brands and scars is another way of thinking about slavery itself: either such marks are outward identifiers of an innate (and deserved) state, or they are unfairly permanent signs of an imposed condition.²⁶⁸ Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to glean an overall attitude toward enslavement from the novel, a small episode from the *Cena* points toward an understanding of enslavement as an unfairly and unpredictably imposed condition. Jealous of their sexual relationship (Schmeling ad loc.), Scintilla threatens to have the darling of her husband, Habinnas, branded (69.1).²⁶⁹ This careless remark demonstrates how such a lifelong

²⁶⁷A possible exception is the whip-marks that Encolpius bears after his beating at the hands of Circe's henchmen (discussed further below); although he hides in bed for a few days to conceal them from Giton and Eumolpus, lasting scars are not mentioned (132.6).

²⁶⁸There were two, competing models for slavery in the ancient world: Thalmann distinguishes between the "suspicious" version which justifies enslavement by arguing that only those with an inferior nature become enslaved, and the "benevolent" version, which posits that enslavement is a result of the whims of fortune and could happen to anyone (1996, 115–17).

²⁶⁹Schmeling (ad loc.) also compares this episode with Herodas' fifth mime, which also contains jealous threats of branding (65–67).

mark of degradation—one that warrants exclusion from the ranks of citizens—could be administered at a whim, through no fault of the enslaved. It also reminds the reader that even powerful slaves in wealthy families—those who were most likely to be manumitted and climb the social ladder (Hunt 2018, 120)—could be beaten or even branded at the drop of a hat. This episode reveals the conundrum that markers of slavery pose: either they reliably demarcate enslaved bodies from freeborn bodies—in which case it becomes likely that scarred or branded formerly enslaved people join the ranks of citizens—or they do not, in which case enslaved bodies are dangerously similar to elite ones.

In addition, the bodies of freedpersons bore forms of trauma not as immediately recognizable as a brand or scar. Trimalchio, for example, talks openly about serving as his master's *puer*: he defensively expostulates that what the master orders is not shameful (*nec turpe est*, 75.11), yet describes his eagerness for his beard to appear (75.10–11).²⁷⁰ Richlin interprets Trimalchio's remark about his first beard as a rare glimpse of an ex-slave's attitude about his former sexual abuse (2009, 90).²⁷¹ According to Richlin, the formerly enslaved carried a lifelong stigma from their (forced) sexual availability during enslavement (2009, 83).

²⁷⁰Scholars debate whether Trimalchio's remark about fourteen years of service meant that he was a *deliciae* until he was fourteen years old (Reeve 1985, Bodel 1989, Baldwin 1993, Schmeling ad 75.11), or for a duration of fourteen years (Richardson 1986). Whether or not Trimalchio performed sexual services for his enslaver is also a matter of debate: Pomeroy argues that Trimalchio's remark "is as likely to refer to the embarrassment of being an infantile object of entertainment...rather than to shame at his sexual exploitation" (1992, 50), while Bodel points to parallels between Trimalchio and Clesippus (Pliny, *HN* 34.11–12) to argue that a sexual relationship is implied here (1989, 225).

²⁷¹Hermeros' comment (*dedi tamen operam, ut domino satis facerem*, I nevertheless tried to please my master, 57.10) also hints that he was a *puer delicatus*, like Trimalchio. His tirade against Ascyrtos defending his choice to enslave himself and his life's success (57.9–10) can be read as an almost comic defense of his masculinity—which he defines as legal, physical, and financial autonomy—in light of his former sexual abuse (Alston 1999, 221 n. 3).

Freedwomen, as well, faced the difficulty of transforming their former flesh, the sexual property of their enslavers, into the respectable body of a Roman *matrona*.²⁷² The freedman Hermeros, for example, says that he bought his wife so that nobody could wipe his hands on her (57.6). The conjecture “hair” completes this sentence,²⁷³ but what is at stake is the desire to control the body’s sexual integrity (Richlin 2009, 90–91). He also describes Fortunata as someone from whom you would not have wanted to take bread, but who now runs everything (37.3–4). This comment casts her formerly enslaved body as somehow polluted: he also calls her a *lupatria* (vixen, 37.6) and Trimalchio calls her an *ambubaia* (Syrian flute girl and whore, 74.13), lending the impression that she was a dancing girl and sex worker in her youth (Schmeling ad 37.6).²⁷⁴ Hermeros praises Fortunata’s business sense and thrift extensively (37.6–7), but he does not mention her respectability or chastity, hallmarks of the proper Roman *matrona*. These comments show that even when the “right sort” of the formerly enslaved join the ranks of citizens, their bodies testify to marks of trauma and abuse that is not inscribed on the skin.

References to markers of enslavement in the *Satyricon* uncover a contradiction. On the surface, they reinforce the notion, comforting to elites, that signs such as scars and tattoos reliably and permanently demarcate flesh from body: Encolpius and Giton cannot transform their bodies into flesh, and their failure implies that the reverse is also true, that the formerly enslaved are forever markedly different from freeborn elites, no matter how rich they may become. At the

²⁷²See Perry’s 2008 book, *Gender, Manumission, and the Roman Freedwoman*, on the ways in which freedwomen socially transformed their bodies from sexual available to the sexual unavailability of the proper *matrona*.

²⁷³While bathing, Trimalchio also dried his hands on the long hair of his *pueri* (27.6).

²⁷⁴Trimalchio also remarks that Fortunata is a great dancer (52.8).

same time, however, the power structures that distinguish subaltern from elite are not only in flux, but also wholly arbitrary, as Scintilla's threat of branding shows. In addition, the high rate of manumission, along with the social upheaval of the early empire, meant that the enslaved, with their supposedly marked and forever different flesh, did not always remain the lowest of the low. When the formerly enslaved joined the ranks of citizens, elites had to grapple with the conundrum that either the bodies of the formerly enslaved weren't so different from their own, supposedly inviolable bodies, or that these people, still bearing both the visible and invisible stains of enslavement, were their social equals. Elites were left without a clear foil against which they could form their own embodied identities: bodily identifiers in the *Satyricon* show how yet another aspect of elite identity is destabilized in the upheaval of the early empire.

Failures of the Body: Incontinence and Impotence

Bodies in the *Satyricon* are difficult not only to interpret visually, but also to control: characters fail to command both the communications and most basic functions of their bodies. Trimalchio's bowel movements are as inconsistent as his behavior. He asks his guests to excuse him, as his stomach is acting up: *'ignoscite mihi,' inquit, 'amici, multis iam diebus venter mihi non respondit'* ("Excuse me," he says, "friends, already for many days now my stomach has not been responding to me," 47.2). While he attempts without success to assert control over his appearance and behavior, he does not even try to contain his bodily functions: he phrases his upset stomach as a minor rebellion over which he has no authority.²⁷⁵ He also encourages his

²⁷⁵ Trimalchio's unruly body opens up further interpretative possibilities here: namely, that of the Bakhtinian grotesque. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body, like the abject body, is porous and penetrable: orifices and protuberances are emphasized to create a comically ugly body. Unlike the abject body, however, the grotesque body functions in a carnivalesque manner, playfully overturning the

guests not to restrain themselves, pointing the way to supplies just outside the dining room door, with the warning that retained stomach vapors can prove fatal (47.5). According to Trimalchio, bodies are not only disobedient entities at odds with the self, but also dangerous ones, whose innate instability can take a fatal turn at any moment. Therefore, he argues, it is better to simply let one's body take the lead.

Before encouraging his guests to use the toilet whenever the need arises (47.5), Trimalchio spouts one of his mildly philosophical quips, which sums up his view of the body: *nemo nostrum solide natus est* (none of us is born solid, 47.4). According to König, the novel's focus on bodies with porous boundaries, like Trimalchio's, reflects anxieties about the body's innate capacity to elude control (2008, 128). In addition, this remark flippantly and crudely dispels with the fantasy that the elite male body is inviolable: if the body's boundaries cannot be closed off, then it lies dangerously open to assault. Trimalchio's conception of the body as an uncontrollable, porous entity is particularly problematic for Roman conceptions of masculinity.²⁷⁶ While masculinity in Rome was predicated on control over oneself, one's family and household, and one's finances, Trimalchio cheerfully admits that he does not even try to rein in his body's most basic functions. In addition, his conception of the body as porous directly counters the elite fantasy of the male body as impregnable and closed-off, defined against vulnerable enslaved bodies and leaky female bodies. Although Trimalchio positions himself as

conventions of beauty to poke fun at socio-political structures like class or religious norms. This scene, as well as many others I discuss, is, frankly, funny, and I unfortunately do not have the space to do justice to the humor of Petronius' novel. The obvious humor of the text, as well as the repeated emphasis on activities like eating, sex, and defecation, lend themselves well to a Bakhtinian interpretation: see Branham 2019 for a Bakhtinian analysis of the *Satyricon*. Because this interpretative tack is well-trodden ground, I have chosen to focus on the theorists already mentioned (see Chapter One, pp. 23–34 above) to further explore the relationship between the male body, social identity, and power structures in this novel.

²⁷⁶See Chapter One, pp. 5–6 above for a fuller discussion of Roman understandings of masculinity.

an up-and-coming elite, his attitudes toward the body and masculinity are revealed to be wholly different from the views of his peers.²⁷⁷

Encolpius, unlike Trimalchio, tries to get his body under control, but he too fails. His failing takes the form not of incontinence but of impotence, a recurring theme throughout the extant text.²⁷⁸ His sexual failings, however, are no isolated theme or comic side plot: the rhetoric surrounding his impotence connects it to the larger issue of his body's failure to function as it should. Froma Zeitlin argues that his impotence mirrors his inability to navigate his surroundings successfully (1971, 673): just as he cannot interpret others' bodily signifiers or make his body appear or communicate as he wishes, he cannot control his sexual functions. In a letter to him, Circe describes his lack of performance with her as a symptom of a much bigger health problem:

‘negant enim medici sine nervis homines ambulare posse. narrabo tibi, adulescens, paralyisin cave. numquam ego aegrum tam magno periculo vidi: medius [fidi] iam peristi. Quod si idem frigus genua manusque temptaverit tuas, licet ad tubicines mittas’ (129.5–8).

“The doctors say that people without sinews cannot walk. I’ll tell you, young man, watch out for paralysis. I have never seen someone sick in such great danger: you’re as good as dead. If this same chill attacks your knees and hands, you might as well send for the funeral trumpeters.”

²⁷⁷In contrast, Hermeros makes an impassioned defense of his masculinity, defining it as control over himself, his loved ones, and his finances (57.9–10; see footnote 271 above). Perhaps we can read Trimalchio's and Hermeros' divergent understandings of masculinity as differing reactions to their former sexual abuse in the “female” role of the *puer delicatus*: Hermeros reasserts a traditional understanding of masculinity, while Trimalchio attempts to grapple with his abuse by insisting on his lack of shame (both at his compliance to his master and his uncontrollable body).

²⁷⁸Encolpius' impotence is a recurring theme (it is a problem during Quartilla's Priapic ceremony, his encounter with Circe, and his treatment with Oenothea), and possibly a key one. Klebs (1899) first suggested that the wrath of Priapus was a structuring theme for the novel, and scholars have entertained the idea ever since: Slater, for example, considers Encolpius' impotence *a* structuring theme, if not *the* structuring theme (2009, 26). Rimell argues that Petronius reconfigures the epic theme of the wrath of Poseidon with Priapus in order to challenge the literary canon through “destabilized, violated or metamorphosed male bodies” (2002, 102–03).

She connects his impotence with paralysis, warning that people cannot walk about without their sinews (*nervi*). According to Schmeling, *nervi* regularly stand in for the penis in rhetoric about potency and impotence (ad 129.5).²⁷⁹ Even so, Circe's word choice here is no mere pun: in her mind, an erect penis is as important to the functioning of the body as the sinews that string everything together.²⁸⁰ She even warns that his failure could be the harbinger of an early death. In this episode and during Quartilla's Priapic ceremony, discussed below, Encolpius' impotence is also described as a mortal chill that spreads through his body (Schmeling ad 20.2).²⁸¹ Far from an isolated, unfortunate incident, Encolpius' impotence is a symptom of his body's failure to function, even to the point of death.²⁸²

Encolpius, in contrast, does not see his impotence as a personal failure or a symptom of a larger issue with his body, but as his body's rebellion against him. Embarrassed with his outburst to his unresponsive penis, he comforts himself with examples of those who have also reproached various parts of their bodies:

‘aut quid est quod in corpore humano ventri male dicere solemus aut gulae capitique etiam, cum saepius dolet? quid? non et Ulixes cum corde litigat suo, et quidam tragici

²⁷⁹See Keith (1999a) for further discussion of the use of the term *nervi* in rhetoric, with further bibliography.

²⁸⁰Kuriyama describes how in ancient Greco-Roman thought, the articulated body (rather than the muscled one, which first emerges with the rise of anatomical dissection in the early Renaissance period) became the hallmark of masculinity (2002, 134–43). In his letter back to Circe, Encolpius echoes her rhetoric: he uses his penis as metonymy for his entire body (Rimell 2002, 146), which has lost its shape and wholeness (*totoque corpore velut laxato*, 128.2). The priestess Oenothea also sums up his malady with the diagnosis that he has “reins in water” instead of genitals (*lorum in aqua, non inguina habet*, 134.9).

²⁸¹*sollacitavit inguina mea mille iam mortibus frigida* (she applied herself to my genitals, already cold with a thousand deaths, 20.2).

²⁸²Arrowsmith ties this episode into the larger web of associations he traces between death, *luxuria*, and satiety: according to Arrowsmith, sexual indulgence to the point of satiety in this novel leads to impotence, which is associated with death (1966, 309–10). In *Amores* 3.7, Ovid similarly connects the poet-speaker's impotence with paralysis and death (3.7.13–16, 59–60).

oculos suos tamquam audientes castigant? podagrici pedibus suis male dicunt, chiragrici manibus, lippi oculis, et qui offenderunt saepe digitos, quicquid doloris habent, in pedes deferunt...’

“Isn’t it the case that we’re accustomed to damn body parts, like the stomach or the throat or even the head, when it aches too much? Isn’t it? Didn’t even Ulysses argue with his own heart, and some tragedians curse their eyes as if they could hear them? Gouty people damn their feet, arthritic people their hands, the bleary-eyed their eyes, and those who often stub their toes blame their feet whenever they have trouble” (132.13–14).

In contrast to Circe, Encolpius downplays the implications of his impotence: he figures his non-functioning penis as a nuisance rather than a sign of paralysis or death. In order to further distance himself from his malady, he divorces his member from himself: instead of an integral part of himself, he figures his *membrum virile* as a disobedient, troublesome appendage.²⁸³ Encolpius’ distinction between his body and self mirrors that of the body in pain in Scarry’s thought (see the discussion of Marsyas in Chapter Three, pp. 90–96 above):²⁸⁴ faced with his body’s refusal to function as it should, Encolpius disowns it in an attempt to salvage his sense of self.²⁸⁵ Tom Murgatroyd points to Lichas’ greeting to Encolpius’ penis to argue that this body part is key to his sense of self: “for someone with the name ‘In-groin,’ the lack of a functioning

²⁸³In his reply to Circe’s reproachful letter, Encolpius also describes himself as a soldier ready but for his missing weaponry: *illud unum memento, non me sed instrumenta peccasse. paratus miles arma non habui* (Remember just one thing: not me but my weapons offended you. I was a ready soldier without arms, 134.4). This metaphor further characterizes his limp penis as a broken tool rather than an integral part of himself.

²⁸⁴Although Encolpius’ experience of impotence is not painful, I nevertheless find Scarry’s framework helpful for thinking through his characterization of his penis as a separate, disobedient appendage. In addition, in his rhetorical questions about disobedient body parts, Encolpius aligns his non-functioning member with other, more painful conditions (e.g., gout, arthritis, stubbing one’s toe).

²⁸⁵Encolpius goes so far as a castration attempt in his quest to separate his body from himself (132.7–8). Rimell calls his attempt a “self-conscious disconnection of body parts” that leads to a collapse of his physical wholeness (2002, 164).

member is bound to cause a crisis of confidence and identity” (2013, 251).²⁸⁶ These repeated scenes of impotence, then, allow the author to dwell on the relationship between the body and self and the role of the body in forming identity.

Ultimately, Encolpius’ control over his body is no better than Trimalchio’s, despite his attempts to separate it from himself.²⁸⁷ Unlike Trimalchio’s incontinence, his impotence has more obvious bearings on his masculinity. Margaret Anne Doody argues that these implications are the main takeaway of the *Satyricon*: the novel, she says, “calls the bluff of the masculine ideal, the notion that male sexuality is easy, unspoken, authoritative, and authoritarian” (1996, 112–13). She argues further that the *Satyricon*’s characters eschew traditional, Augustan models of masculinity, at the price of their freedom and bodily autonomy (1996, 113). This interpretation overlooks the fact that Encolpius’ sexual failures and the violence he routinely faces (discussed further below) are wholly unwelcome:²⁸⁸ rather than pursue one mode of masculinity over another, Encolpius fails in a traditional performance of masculinity to control his own body, much less to be in charge of those subordinate to him. We can read Encolpius’ failure to perform his masculinity as a response to the challenges of defining elite masculinity in the early empire (Rudich 1997, 250). Elite men struggled to reconcile their new roles as subjects instead of masters of themselves and their households: Thomas Späth argues that Tacitus demonstrates how

²⁸⁶Slater also sees these scenes as a threat to Encolpius’ identity, in that sexual failure endangers the comic self, defined as the sum of its appetites (1990, 49). Cf. also Ovid’s *Amores* 3.7, in which the poet-speaker presents his failure to perform as a personal failure as a live man.

²⁸⁷Encolpius fails to castrate his penis, which has shriveled inside of his body (132.8), nor does he regain full control over his sexual ability. Earlier in the novel, he also failed to hang himself when Eumolpus locked him in his chamber (94.8).

²⁸⁸One cannot, for example, compare Encolpius directly to the speakers of Augustan elegy, who forgo masculine norms by masochistically positioning themselves as enslaved to their mistresses’ whims.

elites had to adapt their performance of masculinity to their new reality of being subjects to an autocrat (2001, 440).²⁸⁹ Petronius, in contrast, dramatizes the failure of elite masculinity instead of its evolution: within the context of the increasingly oppressive Neronian regime, Encolpius' failure to control his own body is a mirror for the bumbling attempts of elites to define their role as men in a Rome where their dignities, rights, and privileges have increasingly been stripped away from them.

Physical and Sexual Violence against Male Bodies in the Satyricon

Male bodies in the *Satyricon* not only fail in their most basic functions and their attempts to communicate, but are also vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. The lack of control over the body evident in Encolpius' impotence and Trimalchio's incontinence also encompasses bodily vulnerability: Encolpius and his friends cannot control what others seek to do to their bodies. Throughout the novel, bodies are opened up and violated in ways that threaten the construction of masculinity as inviolable. Rimell sees this attack on male bodily integrity as a hallmark of the text itself.²⁹⁰ She argues that the novel tries to get "inside" its audience by transgressing boundaries between inside and outside to illustrate the breakdown of self: "this disarming, even aggressive, strategy attacks a traditional construction of the citizen male (and

²⁸⁹Agricola, Späth argues (2011, 440), displays *obsequium* in obeying orders and stepping aside from public affairs when he became dangerously popular (Tac. Ag. 8.1, 8.3, 40.3–4).

²⁹⁰Connors likewise sees these attacks on Encolpius' and his friends' bodily integrity as central to the text. She reads them through a socio-political lens, arguing that the novel's plot hinges on a discussion of *libertas*, as Petronius explores the loss of freedom for elites under Nero (2008, 174–76).

educated male reader) as an independent, impenetrable, self-contained stronghold” (2002, 10).²⁹¹

Although the question of Encolpius’ exact status is not entirely resolved (see footnote 200 above), he is certainly not enslaved and seems to be a freeborn citizen. These scenes, then, dramatize violence against freeborn men: along with the other marked and scarred bodies in the text, these wounded male bodies express the anxieties of Petronius’ elite audience about their increased vulnerability in the early empire. Just as dwelling on branding and scarring becomes a way to mull over the difference between enslaved and freeborn bodies in a rapidly changing world, these episodes of violence, both threatened and enacted, question the meaning of status in the upheaval of the Principate.

That the violence Encolpius repeatedly faces in the text has to do with status and the meaning of eliteness becomes clear in a short episode shortly after the shipwrecked trio lands near Croton. In their ruse pretending to be enslaved to the rich and childless Eumolpus, Giton and Encolpius swear life and limb over to Eumolpus: *uri, vinciri, verbarari ferroque necari, et quicquid aliud Eumolpus iussisset. tamquam legitimi gladiatores domino corpore animasque religiosissime addicimus* (to be burned, conquered, beaten, and killed with the sword, and whatever else Eumolpus might order. Just like real gladiators we most solemnly commend our

²⁹¹The quotation continues: “while the same force of metaphor dissects and infiltrates a canonic body of literature, often to transform it (almost) beyond recognition” (Rimell 2002, 10). Rimell reads the violated bodies throughout the text metapoetically, as symbols of the dangerous power of literature to infiltrate the reader’s body. To illustrate her points, she focuses on the repeated imagery of eating: “inside the consumer [literature] is a volatile force transmuted in the process of digesting which may also gnaw away its host from within. This disruption of civilising hierarchies between eater and eaten evokes a graphic picture of the risks of eating (and therefore reading) *per se*” (2002, 9). As Rimell has already traced the web of connections between eating, bodily violation, and literature, I will focus on violations to masculine bodily integrity: sexual assault and violence. Unlike Rimell, I read these threats to the citizen male body through a socio-political rather than literary lens.

bodies and souls over to our master, 117.6).²⁹² As Schmeling points out, these lines contain a paraphrase of the oath with which gladiators transformed their bodies into public property, to be tortured or disposed of for the audience's amusement (ad loc.). This oath casts the loss of status it entails in terms of the body: the inviolable body of the male citizen is transformed into a body subjected to beatings, torture, and even death, no different from an enslaved body.²⁹³

While Encolpius and Giton merely disguise themselves as enslaved to Eumolpus, contemporary historians show that elites taking the gladiators' oath was a growing trend in the early empire. Dio Cassius states that men of equestrian status began fighting as gladiators because they no longer cared about the loss of status (56.25.7–8): whether or not they really felt this way, Tiberius' morality laws, which imposed harsher penalties for those who gave up their status to engage in sex work or gladiatorial games, show this voluntary degradation of status was a problem in the emperor's eyes (Suet. *Tib.* 3.5). Carlin Barton explains this strange trend as an elite strategy of resistance: instead of debasing themselves in serving the emperor, according to Barton, some elites pledged themselves as gladiators in a kind of voluntary self-abasement made bearable by its distastefulness to the *princeps* (1989, 10–11).²⁹⁴ Giton's and Encolpius' playful

²⁹²Rimell argues that Encolpius' and Giton's pretend oath exposes the artificiality of Croton's social hierarchies, which revolve around childless legacy-hunters (2002, 88).

²⁹³Encolpius continues to situate his pretended loss of status in his body: when he fails to please Circe, he offers himself up for corporal punishment in his letter: ...*in haec facinora quaere supplicium. sive occidere placet, <cum> ferro meo venio: sive verberibus contenta es, curro nudus ad dominam* (...demand punishment for these crimes. If you decide on execution, I'll come with my sword: if you're satisfied with a beating, I'll run naked to my mistress, 130.3). These lines play with the elegiac trope of the poet-speaker as enslaved to his mistress' whims and as a soldier of love fighting for his beloved. Even though they were male citizens for the most part, soldiers occupied a gray space in Roman conceptions of masculinity: subject to their general's commands and beatings, they were exempt from laws protecting the citizen male body from corporal punishment. See Walter (1997, 40–41) and Alston (1999) for further discussion of the soldier's place in Roman conceptions of masculinity.

²⁹⁴See Barton (1989, 9–10) for a detailed list of elites who entered the arena as gladiators. Littlewood similarly understands elites' desire to perform in the arena as a way of gaining an "alternative, abject glory" (2015, 165).

oath, then, is not mere play-acting in this novel of tricks and disguises, but, read in the context of the early empire, it evokes an actual trend of elite self-degradation and resistance in an attempt to negotiate their status under a newly autocratic government.

While Encolpius and Giton willingly pledge themselves to Eumolpus, they constantly face unwanted sexual attentions throughout the text. This recurring sexual violence further links anxieties about elite bodily integrity in the early empire with conceptions of masculinity. In the beginning of the extant novel, Encolpius narrowly escapes rape in a brothel (see above) by throwing his cloak over his head and elbowing his way through the dark corridors (7.4).

Ascyltos, however, tells how a man he took for a respectable *paterfamilias* forcibly dragged him inside the brothel and assaulted him, until Ascyltos fought him off (8.2–4). Rimell notes that dark, enclosed spaces threaten Encolpius' and his companions' bodily integrity throughout the text (2002, 130): in Quartilla's claustrophobic quarters as well, they undergo degradation, assault, and rape.²⁹⁵

The section of the text that recounts Quartilla's Priapic ceremony is very fragmentary, but her ceremonies seem to take a turn when Encolpius, at first a somewhat willing participant, calls for help: an enslaved maid pricks his cheek with a pin, while Ascyltos is threatened with a sponge soaked in aphrodisiac (21.1). When the text picks back up, we find Encolpius being assaulted by a *cinaedus*.²⁹⁶

ultimo cinaedus supervenit myrtea subornatus gausapa cinguloque succinctus... modo extortis nos clunibus cecidit, modo basiis olidissimis inquinavit, donec Quartilla ballaenaceam tenens virgam alteque succincta iussit infelicibus dari missionem...

²⁹⁵Rimell includes the ship's hull, which is cast as the cave to Lichas' Polyphemus, and the tomb in the Widow of Ephesus story as other enclosed spaces that threaten entrapment and violation (2002, 130).

²⁹⁶The most salient feature of the *cinaedus* was his sexual deviance of his effeminate gender presentation, and stereotypically *cinaedi* also had a predilection for anal penetration. See Williams (1999, 175–81) for further definition and discussion of the *cinaedus*.

Finally a *cinaedus* arrived, dressed in a myrtle-colored cloak cinched with a belt... sometimes, wrenching our buttocks apart, he battered us, sometimes he polluted us with reeking kisses, until Quartilla, holding a whalebone wand and ready for action, ordered that we, unfortunate ones, should be given a reprieve (21.2)...

Here, Encolpius and Ascyltos are, at the very least, sexually assaulted by a *cinaedus*, who was supposed to take a passive role in homosexual relationships. Schmeling, in fact, reads *extortis nos clunibus cecidit* as anal rape, and points out that Encolpius' loss of virility, which most commentators discuss in terms of his impotence, really begins here, when he is forced into a passive sexual role to a penetrating *cinaedus* (ad loc.).²⁹⁷

Encolpius' degradation is not confined to a blow to his masculinity, however. When Quartilla releases them, her language (*dari missionem*) echoes the formula used to manumit the enslaved or release gladiators from their service (Schmeling ad loc.). Encolpius' sexual assault is figured as a bodily violation akin to that experienced by subalterns. Adult citizen males, in fact, who allowed their bodies to be penetrated did lose their honor and some civil rights, and were classified alongside gladiators and prostitutes as *infames* (Richlin 2009, 83). Ascyltos' and Encolpius' reaction shows that they see this violation as a shameful degradation in both masculine superiority and status: they solemnly swear that they will take this horrible secret to their graves (21.3).²⁹⁸

Later in this seemingly endless orgy, Encolpius becomes confused by the double entendre *embasicoeta*, which means both something like "night-cap" and *cinaedus* (24.1–2), and finds

²⁹⁷Weiss, in contrast, reads these passages to mean that the *cinaedus* forced Encolpius' and Ascyltos' sexual contact, reducing them to sexual toys for his own pleasure and penetration (2019, 176–77). He also cites the narrator's phrasing that the *cinaedus* "changed his horse" (*equum cinaedus mutavit*, 24.4) to argue that Petronius here dehumanizes his characters in treating them like animals (ibid., 177).

²⁹⁸*uterque nostrum religiossimis iuravit verbis inter duos peritulum esse tam horrible secretum...* (21.3).

himself once again sexually assaulted by a pathic. This time, the *cinaedus* attempts to encourage a sexual response on Encolpius' part:

consumptis versibus suis immundissimo me basio conspuat. mox et super lectum venit
atque omni vi detexit recusantem. super inguina mea diu multumque frustra moluit.
[per]fluebant per frontem sudantis acaciae rivi, et inter rugas malarum tantum erat cretae,
ut putares detectum parietem nimbo laborare.

When he had exhausted his verses, he slobbered all over me with his polluted kisses.²⁹⁹
Then he came up onto my couch and ripped my coverings off, as I resisted, and was
grinding greatly for a long time on my groin in vain. Streams of sweating gum flowed
over his forehead, and there was so much chalk in the wrinkles of his cheeks, that you
would think an uncovered wall was peeling in the rain (23.4–5).

Even though Encolpius resists the *cinaedus*' advances, he once again finds himself without control in the assault, unable to either take an active role in the encounter or to escape. In his previous assault, his sense of masculinity came under fire because he was forced to play the passive, receiving role in a sexual encounter; this time, he finds himself unable to assert active, sexual dominance over another *cinaedus*, whose sexual performance was considered more akin to a woman's than a man's.³⁰⁰ As John McMahon puts it, Encolpius' virility and very sense of identity are threatened, "as his readiness for sexual performance pales in comparison to that of one whose sexual and social status is by cultural tradition deemed lower than his own" (1998, 200). From the very beginning of the extant text, Encolpius' masculinity and bodily integrity are repeatedly and forcibly violated.

²⁹⁹This and the earlier *cinaedus* are said to have polluted kisses because *cinaedi* were thought to perform *fellatio* (Schmeling ad 23.4).

³⁰⁰The *cinaedus*' physical appearance also resembles a woman: he wears Arabic gum in his hair and chalk as makeup, both of which have melted and drip off his face. With his slobbery kisses and dripping face, his body resembles the leaky, porous female body, which disturbingly dominates and attempts to penetrate Encolpius. See Richlin (2014a) for further analysis of the characterization of both cosmetics and the female body as smeary and disgusting in Latin invective.

Later in the novel, these repeated violations of Encolpius' masculine bodily autonomy are closely linked with his other bodily failing, his impotence. At the beginning of Quartilla's Priapic ceremony, his penis failed to respond to her aphrodisiacs (20.2), and his lack of erection later in the orgy (23.5) leads to his forced, passive participation in the ceremonies, rather than an active role. Even when he is not sexually assaulted, the violence he experiences is linked back to his impotence. When, after many promises, he fails to please Circe a second time, she sends her body-servants to hoist him up and whip him (*cubicularios et me iubet catomizari*, 132.2), and her lowest slaves to spit on him (*omnes quasillarias familiaeque sordissimam partem ac me conspui iubet*, 132.3).³⁰¹ Encolpius' impotence directly causes a degrading corporal punishment more suited for a slave than for a lover.³⁰² As after his assault, Encolpius is ashamed of this violation to his bodily integrity: in order to hide his whip-marks from Eumolpus and Giton, he pretends to be sick in bed (*verberum **notas** arte contexi*, 132.6). By mentioning these whip-marks, the text brings up the possibility that Encolpius may not escape these adventures wholly unmarked: he seems to think that they will disappear within a few days, but Circe's preference for whip-marked slaves (126.8–10, see above) suggests that scars from this beating could be more permanent. The possibility that Encolpius could bear scars from his punishment further blurs the distinctions between inscribed flesh and inviolable body that his disguise as an enslaved runaway first hinted at.

³⁰¹Schmeling translates *cubicularios* as "body-servants," and explains *quasillarias* as enslaved females occupied in the spinning room (ad loc.).

³⁰²It is almost as if the elegiac trope of the submissive lover enslaved to his mistress' whims has become all too real here.

The cure he willingly seeks for his impotence presents a further assault on his bodily integrity and masculinity. First, Proselenus, enslaved to the priestess Oenothea, escorts him to her mistress' inner chambers and flagellates him:

ac me iterum in cellam sacerdotis nihil recusantem perduxit impulitque super lectum et harundinem ab ostio rapuit nihilque respondentem mulcavit. ac nisi primo ictu harundo quassata impetum verberantis minuisset, fortisan etiam brachia mea caputque fregisset. Ingemui ego utique propter mascarpionem...

And she led me unresisting once more into the priestess' chambers, bent me over the couch, and seizing a cane from the doorframe, beat me when I wasn't responding. And if the cane hadn't broken at the first strike and lessened the impact of her blows, she probably would have broken my arms and head. I groaned at the beating (134.4–5)...

This time, Encolpius willingly submits (*nihil recusantem*) to his degrading punishment, bent over the couch like a schoolboy.³⁰³ The beating is directly connected to his impotence. He says that she struck him as he was not responding (*me...nihilque respondentem mulcavit*): whether or not this participle has a causal force, the line shows how Encolpius' body is beaten for being unresponsive. In addition, Schmeling notes that the unusual word Encolpius chooses to describe his punishment, *mascarpio*, may be formed from the analogy of *masturbator* / *masturbatio* (ad loc., citing Adams 1982). Even though Proselenus does not sexually assault Encolpius, her beating of him is linked to his sexual performance and reminiscent of his earlier forced masturbation.

Oenothea's remedy, too, resembles an assault more than it does a healing process. She dips a leather dildo in a mixture of oil, pepper, and nettles, and penetrates him with it anally (138.1),³⁰⁴ rubs his genitals with a mixture of cresses and southern-wood, and slaps his lower stomach with green nettles (138.2). This strange concoction of ointments and violence "should

³⁰³Cf. *recusantem* (23.4), when Encolpius resists the *cinaedus*' attempts to rip off his coverings.

³⁰⁴*profert Oenothea scortum fascinum, quod ut oleo et minute pipere atque urticae trito circumdedit semine, paulatim coepit inserere ano meo...* (138.1).

probably be seen as an attempt to restore Encolpius' virility, but possibly as an act of retribution for disturbing the rites of Priapus" (Schmeling ad loc.). Rimell takes her analysis of this scene a step further: she points out that his remedy resembles not only a rape, but also preparations of a sacrificial victim (2002, 163). The more Encolpius tries to reassert control over his body, to cure his impotence, the more he loses his grip over it, and "risks being treated as a passive sexual object to be cut up and eaten, rather than proving his maleness" (Rimell 2002, 164). Once again, Encolpius' failure to control his sexual functioning leads to bodily assault: the violations against him in his remedy for his impotence transform his dominant male body into a punching bag.

Throughout the novel, Encolpius lacks control over his own body, a prerequisite for the performance of Roman masculinity. Whether he cannot make his body respond sexually when he wishes, or he is beaten, raped, or assaulted, he lacks agency over the one thing that should be his own. Despite the constant violence he faces, he miraculously escapes permanent harm: all scars in the text are either imagined or fake (Rimell 2002, 121; see above), and his whip-marks, he says, will be gone in a matter of days. In portraying Encolpius' body in this way—beaten, penetrated, and uncontrollable—the novel explores the breakdown of the fantasy of the impenetrable male body, but in a way palatable for its elite readers: Encolpius and his friends are attacked and raped, but they escape permanent marks of degradation. Yet at the same time, Encolpius' assumption that these whip-marks will disappear brings up the possibility that he is wrong, and that he will retain permanent scars from this beating, rendering his body unsettlingly like the inscribed flesh his fake tattoos could not make him. The problematic bodies of the *Satyricon* expose the folly of elite Roman constructions of masculinity, and unsettlingly blur distinctions between flesh and body.

Conclusion

Bodies throughout the *Satyricon* defy expectations, both for their owners and their viewers: they are unrecognizable or confusingly do not match their socially prescribed roles, and fail in some of their most basic physical functions. While amusing, these incontinent, impotent bodies are not mere farce. Instead, they reflect the bewildering social mobility in the novel and in contemporary Rome. In a culture in which social identity is emphatically embodied, these bodies become a nodal point of societal tensions, a canvas upon which questions of masculinity and elite status can be worked out in the destabilizing world of Neronian Rome. In the new power structures of the early empire, the old-world elites had the most to lose: their former power, wealth, influence, freedoms, and very lives all hang upon the whim of a single individual. Their social identities are predicated on bodily inviolability and an instantly recognizable aura of power, both of which are under threat in the shifting power structures of the early empire. The misidentified and beaten bodies that abound in Petronius' novel, then, are a way of working out issues destabilizing for the elite. No mere amusement for an idle elite class, the *Satyricon* engage with issues central to elite identity in the Neronian period.

CHAPTER FIVE: Scrambled Signifiers and the Broken Body in Senecan Drama

Introduction: Theatricality, Senecan Drama, and Neronian Rome

In many ways, the collapsing distinction between illusion and reality in the Neronian period finds new expression in Senecan drama.³⁰⁵ First, Seneca's choice of genre heightens this sense of theatricality: these tragedies—whether performed, recited, or read privately—play out as a drama, either before a live audience or in the mind's eye.³⁰⁶ In addition, Seneca's emphasis on role-playing in his dramas echoes the pervasive theatricality in Nero's Rome.³⁰⁷ In the

³⁰⁵See Chapter Four, pp. 122–23 for a full discussion of theatricality in Nero's Rome.

³⁰⁶The scholarly consensus has, for the most part, shifted from detailing the difficulties of performing Seneca's plays (e.g., Zweierlein 1966) and arguing that the tragedies were written for recitations before a select audience (Bearne 1965, 111) or for solo virtuoso performances (Costa 1973, 3), to examining the dramaturgy in the texts (Duckworth 1994, 71; Harrison 2000; Boyle 2006, 192–94; Kragelund 2008; Stroh 2008). Grant, for example, points out that features for which Seneca is often criticized (implausible asides, for instance, or a lack of continuity in the plot) are often found in Plautus' comedies, for whose staging there is undisputed evidence long into the imperial period (1999, 28–31). Other recent work blurs the boundaries between the performance of rhetoric and drama (Fitch 2000, 5–6; Easterling and Hall 2002; Littlewood 2004, 3).

³⁰⁷The self and identity are rich topics in Seneca's prose writings, as well. Edwards emphasizes the self-consciousness about roles found in Stoic philosophy (2007, 145–80), and Bartsch similarly notes an “intensification of the relationship to oneself” in Roman Stoicism (2015, 189). The body, too, is a prevalent image in Senecan prose. In examining the bodies in Seneca's writings, Courtil points to the violence of the first century CE (2015, 51–53), as well as the culture of medicine and Seneca's interest in it (148ff.), as context. Bartsch, in contrast, emphasizes the expendability of the body—which is portrayed as a mere earthenware vessel or decaying dwelling for the soul—in Stoic philosophy (2005, 76–77; 2015, 192). According to Bartsch, this understanding of the body is at odds with elite Roman conceptions of the masculine body (2005, 78–79), leading to Seneca's philosophical emphasis on mental, rather than physical, impenetrability (ibid., 79–80; 2006, 175). Rimell likewise emphasizes the vulnerability of the male body in Seneca's letter of consolation to his mother through the metaphor of grief as a wound: as she puts it, the philosopher “engages in provocative, critical ways with the wound as figurative gap between putative Stoic ideal and (potential) lived reality, a reality in which the process of cultivating the

competitive, public world of politics in both the Republic and Principate, the pressure for elite men to create *personae* both impressive and convincing to others was strong (Fitch and McElduff 2008, 158). Likewise, Seneca's characters cycle through various *personae*, in hopes of landing on one that achieves their desires and is simultaneously convincing in the eyes of others: thus, in her attempts to woo Hippolytus, Phaedra tries on various elegiac masks, as well as the guise of the woodland huntress or fierce Amazon (Fitch and McElduff 2002, 33).³⁰⁸ In both Seneca's world and the world of its audience, role-playing, dissimulation, and inauthenticity are the norm.

Seneca's choice of themes and topics, too, reflect the concerns of the Neronian period. Some commentators suggest that Seneca chose tragedy as a means to question his contemporary world (Boyle 1997, 20; Trinacty 2015, 30). Although his chosen genre of tragedy necessarily draws on Greek myth (in contrast to Petronius' fictionalized contemporary setting), these stories had political resonances in their new contexts. In Tacitus' *Dialogus*, the interlocuter Maternus promises to lay bare all the political criticism he forewent in his *Cato* in his *Thyestes* (3.4).³⁰⁹ Although his newest work draws on Greek myth instead of Roman Republican history, his promise shows that a mythical, Greek setting could, and often did, contain political criticism. Using Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a comparison, Richard Tarrant notes that the distance of Greek

ethical subject by securing the real and symbolic body against penetrability is open-ended, unstable, or even bound to fail" (2020, 545).

³⁰⁸Some scholars see characters' struggles to define their *personae* as the defining feature of Seneca's tragedies. Fitch and McElduff think that this process of self-construction is central to Senecan drama (2002, 18), as it "misidentifies and fragments the authentic self," leading to alienation, ruin, and the destruction of others (2008, 174). Gill is likewise interested in psychological unity and the disintegration of the self but suggests that Seneca's own life—as Stoic philosopher and active politician—is the source of the internal conflicts within his characters (2009, 82).

³⁰⁹See Sullivan (1985a, 156–57), Bartsch (1994, 115–25), and Tarrant (1995, 226–27) for discussions of this episode from Tacitus' *Dialogus*.

subjects could make such criticism safer to explore (1995, 228–29),³¹⁰ but such a tactic was not foolproof: Suetonius describes how Tiberius turned on the author of an *Agamemnon* and of a history of Brutus and Cassius: he was executed and his works destroyed, despite Augustus’ earlier stamp of approval (*Tib.* 61.3).³¹¹ Seneca’s emphasis on certain themes, too, reflects Roman concerns: in his *Thyestes*, power and tyranny are structuring motifs (Sullivan 1985a, 157; Tarrant 1995, 228). Shadi Bartsch argues that the workings of power in this play reveal its Neronian context, pointing to Atreus’ opinion that kings should prefer forced praise as a measure of their power (205–07) as evidence (1994, 176). Seneca draws further parallels with contemporary times by explicitly Romanizing these myths: Atreus addresses the chorus as *Quirites* (396), a detail that encourages the audience to imagine the scene in a Roman political context (Buckley 2013, 217).³¹² The combination of Seneca’s emphasis on politically relevant themes and his inclusion of Roman details further blur the lines between the plays and their contexts.³¹³

³¹⁰Similarly, Ovid’s choice of mythology for his epic allows him to explore tyrannical and oppressive power relations (Newlands 2018, 177) in a way that simply would not be possible with a subject closer to home.

³¹¹Rudich points out that unlike modern censorship, imperial approbation was wholly unpredictable and arbitrary (1997, 13), which led to a state of anxiety on the part of Neronian authors in which they had to watch every word and social interaction (*ibid.*, 15–16).

³¹²*Thyestes* is a favorite choice of commentators for drawing comparisons with contemporary politics: Tarrant, for example, considers these parallels most pronounced in this play (1995, 226). Cf. Leigh (1996) on Varius’ *Thyestes* and Mark Antony’s notorious appetites. Edwards, in contrast, sees political parallels in Seneca’s prose works: she argues that the metaphor of the relationship between the enslaver and enslaved throughout his *Letters* can be understood as that of between the emperor and senators (2009, 157). Cf. also Rebeggiani (2018) for a study of imperial power in the works of Statius.

³¹³Other features of the Neronian period that further collapse the boundaries between reality and theater (discussed in Chapter Four, pp. 122–23) include Nero’s roles onstage that echoed his real life (e.g., as Orestes after he murdered his mother; Bartsch 1994, 38–39), as well as fatal charades, which staged real executions as mythical fantasies (*ibid.*, 54–55). See Coleman 1990 for further discussion of these “fatal charades.”

Not only the action onstage, but also the dynamics of the audience blur distinctions between theater and reality. In *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian*, Bartsch describes a dynamic in which actor-audience relations are reversed: the senatorial audience, displayed prominently in the front of the theater or arena, becomes the spectacle scrutinized for the proper reactions to the hosting (or acting) emperor (1994, 3–11).³¹⁴ This scrutiny was a high-stakes game: Suetonius describes how Paetus Thrasea was charged with death for having a sullen expression (*Nero* 37.1). As Richard Beacham puts it, “[w]hat had traditionally been a prestigious place of honor on account of its high visibility had now become a veritable ‘hot seat’” (1999, 232).³¹⁵ In Seneca’s dramas, too, bodies and their signifiers are described in minute detail, as internal spectators attempt to guess the emotional states of other characters from their external cues.³¹⁶ These attempts operate on the belief that strong emotions are displayed through the body, what A.J. Boyle calls “a core assumption of Senecan tragedy” (*Oed.* ad 509–13).³¹⁷ Although the characters of Senecan drama seem to believe that they can determine the protagonists’ thoughts and intentions from their outward appearances, they are often wrong: no one, for example, guesses that Medea will murder her children until it’s too late. Senecan drama thus sets up the body and its outer appearance as a spectacle to be viewed and a

³¹⁴Littlewood also points out that Roman theaters lacked a proscaenium, rendering the boundary between actor and audience physically unclear (2015, 166).

³¹⁵I will discuss punishments and executions of elites in the post-Augustan period in more detail below.

³¹⁶To give just a few examples: the chorus attempts to guess what crime Medea will undertake from her frenzied appearance (*Med.* 382–96, 445–46, 849–78), Cassandra’s prophesying body is mistaken as a sign of madness (*Ag.* 710–19), and the chorus in *Hercules Oetaeus* insists that it can tell what Deianira is hiding from her face (704–05).

³¹⁷Roesch likewise argues that the chorus’ insistence that it can uncover all of Deianira’s secrets from her appearance in *Hercules Oetaeus* attests to the “readability” of the body (2012, 71). Tietze points out that such extended descriptions of bodies and emotional states are unusual for drama and sees them as a kind of epic narration (1989, 282), though I argue that this emphasis has more significant implications.

sign to be interpreted, but this interpretation is almost always unsuccessful. As I argue here, the Senecan body is presented as a stubbornly uninterpretable, unsignifying, or misinterpreted sign: this lack of interpretability of the body, in turn, is symbolized through the body's destruction.

Wounded Bodies in Neronian Rome and Seneca's Tragedies: A Literature Review

Senecan drama is notorious for its explicit scenes of violence. Commentators have cast their nets in various directions to reconcile the Stoic philosopher with his blood-soaked plays. Some return to Stoicism as an explanation, rather than stumbling block, for this seemingly gratuitous gore: Thomas Rosenmeyer, for example, connects the violence of the dramas back to a Stoic emphasis on body and materiality (1989, 94–95).³¹⁸ Stoicism alone, however, cannot explain the pervasive violence of Julio-Claudian literature as a whole: although Seneca himself was a Stoic, Ovid was certainly not, and the philosophy was a slight influence, at best, on Petronius and Lucan.³¹⁹

Many scholars likewise reduce the gore of Senecan drama (and of Julio-Claudian literature) to the insidious influence of gladiatorial and other arena games:³²⁰ Boyle, for example,

³¹⁸Boyle, too, sees the emphasis on body and physicality as a hallmark of Stoic physics (1997, 134). Asmis and Nussbaum point out that if such gore has a Stoic message, it is an utterly pessimistic one: Stoicism as a strategy fails in these plays, for unclear reasons (2010, xx), and an overwhelming sense of helplessness clouds the characters' actions (ibid., xxii).

³¹⁹See Volk and Williams (2021) for an in-depth study of philosophy in Ovid's works.

³²⁰Fuhrmann, for example, sees arena games as the source for the prevalent violence in early imperial literature (1968, 30); although he traces this theme back to Ennius, he sees Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the real starting point for the imperial interest in gore (ibid., 33–41). Williams likewise connects the cruelty of the imperial period, which he sees as manifested in gladiatorial games, with the violence in its literature, beginning with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1978, 188). Zanobi proposes that gladiatorial games were the common background for the theme of dismemberment in pantomime dances (Atreus and Thyestes, for example, were popular subjects) and in Seneca's dramas (2014, 175). For more general

suggests that Seneca, troubled by the delight of audiences in arena games, uses tragedy to recreate such spectacles so that he could control their effect on their viewers (1997, 135–36).³²¹ Many commentators see the gore in Seneca’s plays as a form of competition in a performance culture that prioritized blood and guts.³²² Although arena games reached new heights of elaborate spectacle in the early empire, they were not unique to the Neronian period: gladiatorial games, for example, had been highly popular throughout the Republic (Beacham 1999, 12–16).³²³ Thus, the pervasive violence of Julio-Claudian literature cannot be traced back to them alone.

Other scholars argue that this grotesque aesthetic serves loftier goals than mere titillation. Glenn Most numbers the Stoic view of the body among several elements, including arena games, that contributed to “an anguished reflection upon the nature of human identity and upon the uneasy border between men and animals” (1992, 405).³²⁴ Antje Wessels, in contrast, sees the

overviews of the function of such games in Roman society, see Wiedemann (1992), Wistrand (1992), Plass (1995), Kyle (1998), and Beacham (1999).

³²¹Scholars have frequently examined *Epistle 7* to determine Seneca’s attitude toward arena games, which was previously considered to be purely negative (Wistrand 1990, 31–37). Wistrand first gave a more nuanced reading of this letter, arguing that Seneca criticizes executions performed with the intent to entertain, not to morally instruct, rather than arena games wholesale (1990, 38).

³²²Pyplacz suggests that this violence is intended merely to shock viewers, or to hold their attention (2010, 277). Varner similarly connects both the grotesquery of Neronian wall paintings and Senecan drama to a “grotesque vision” (2000, 132). This shared aesthetic, he argues, in particular the dismemberment in Seneca’s plays, can be linked back to the familiar sights of the arena (*ibid.*, 131–32), and may have also been intended to titillate audiences (*ibid.*, 127). Boyle also argues that Seneca cultivates an “aesthetic of shock” engendered by his socio-political context and literary moment and shared by contemporary authors (1997, 136), but does not interrogate where such an aesthetic might have originated. Aygon, in contrast, argues that scenes of gory death are suitable for tragedy and known from epic (2004, 120–21), and that Seneca describes the mutilation of the body only insofar as the tragic story requires it (*ibid.*, 128). Mans similarly points out that the violence of Seneca’s plays is so heavily foreshadowed that it cannot be shocking (1984, 103). Instead, he argues, this aesthetic of the “macabre” is intended to illustrate the “appalling consequences and destructive power of uncontrollable emotions” (*ibid.*, 110–11).

³²³Cicero, in fact, complains to his friend Marius about the elaborate excess of the spectacles at the games already in 55 BCE (*Ad. fam.* 7.1).

³²⁴Similarly, Duncan considers both violent tragedy and the popularity of gladiatorial games symptoms of the same “[i]mperial fascination with watching identity in peril” (2006, 203–04). Others see darker

violence, both physical and psychological, of Senecan drama as his attempt to cultivate an aesthetic distinct from the surrounding violence of the period (2014, 4).³²⁵

Other scholars, with whom I am more closely aligned, situate the violence of these plays within their socio-political context beyond performance and entertainment culture.³²⁶ Many see the peril of Senecan drama as an expression of living under an oppressive, autocratic regime.³²⁷ Erich Segal reads the physical precariousness of living under an autocracy through a Freudian lens, arguing that Seneca's emphasis on dismemberment stems from a "boundary anxiety," which he defines as the masculine "concern with...corporeal integrity in its most fundamental sense" (2008, 149). Helen Slaney similarly connects anxieties about unchecked imperial power with broken bodies: as she puts it, "Seneca's work is full of compromised borders, both somatic

preoccupations underlying this gore. Meltzer argues that Seneca's incongruous wit in scenes of explicit violence is designed to shock the audience into a "confrontation with evil" (1988, 310) and prompt it to examine questions on human nature and monstrosity (*ibid.*, 209). Park Poe similarly thinks that its explicitness rises to the level of a "sadistic and masochistic fascination" (1969, 358) that attests to a "revulsion from life" characteristic of Senecan drama and the Neronian period as a whole (*ibid.*, 356).

³²⁵By challenging the audience's imagination and prompting them to reflect on their roles as spectators, she argues, Seneca reestablishes the boundary between theater and reality, between aesthetic and real violence, that the theatricality and spectacle of the Neronian period blurs (2014, 14). Wessels argues that Seneca accomplishes this goal by focusing on forms of violence other than the physical and by showing their interruptions of socio-political and religious networks (*ibid.*, 21).

³²⁶Henry and Henry connect the sense of uneasiness elites, as they argue, felt at the hands of enslaved people and freedmen to images of cosmic disintegration in Neronian literature (1985, 48–50). Habinek examines elite identity in Seneca's prose works: he sees a tension between strictly inscribed social classes and increasing social fluidity, and argues that Seneca uses his prose works to articulate a new elite identity in the face of this social upheaval (1998, 137).

³²⁷Regenbogen (1928), one of the first commentators to seriously consider the question of Senecan gore, turned to its socio-political context, arguing that death figures prominently in Seneca's works because it was a reality with which he and other elites under the Principate lived from day to day. Charles Segal describes the Senecan aesthetic as "baroque" and draws parallels between the Reformation era and the early imperial period through the "concentration of enormous power in the hands of a few, [and] the irrational terror of living under capricious or even insane emperors" (1984, 313).

and conceptual, as the inside spills out and the outside pours in, confounding the principle of autonomy” (2015, 31).

Elite Romans were indeed subjected to increasing levels of violence and coercion under the early emperors. In Suetonius’ biographies, anxiety about the arbitrary nature of imperial punishment, particularly under the so-called “bad emperors,” virtually leaps off the page: he writes that Tiberius had almost all twenty of his advisors killed on some pretext or another (*Tib.* 55) and that Claudius put more than thirty-five senators and three hundred knights to death (*Claud.* 29.2). He also describes how Caligula had a senator torn to pieces and stabbed with styluses as a public enemy (*Calig.* 28) and how among Nero’s legendary acts of cruelty, he even considered throwing people live to an Egyptian *polyphagos* to be eaten raw (*Nero* 37.2)—a particularly Senecan threat.³²⁸ The increasing theatricality of these punishments contributed to the sense of destabilization in elite Romans, as the lines between spectacle and real life were eroded.³²⁹ Suetonius describes how Tiberius came up with creative and spectacular punishments:

³²⁸Suetonius’ biographies are littered with examples of the “bad” emperors’ capriciousness and bloodthirstiness. Tiberius condemned his grandsons Nero and Drusus to death (*Tib.* 54.2); Caligula executed an ex-praetor for asking for more time to rest, because he should have recovered by then (*Calig.* 292.); and Nero had Cassius Longinus killed for keeping a mask of his ancestor Cassius in his house (*Nero* 37.1). Caligula also loved watching executions and punishments (*Calig.* 11) and had prisoners chosen at random for arena games, rather than according to the severity of their crimes (27.1). Bodies of elites were also sometimes mutilated after their deaths; see Varner’s 2004 book on *damnatio memoriae* and corpse abuse (esp. 3–4, 44–104) for a complete list of examples. Suicide, forced or otherwise, was also a means of exercising violence against Rome’s elite classes: see Gris  (1982), Plass (1995, esp. 91ff.), Hill (2004), and Edwards (2007, esp. 113–31) for further explorations of the function of elite suicides in the early empire. Hill sees suicide as a means for elites “of indelibly defining one’s social *persona*” in the socio-political quicksand of the early empire (2004, 26). Even when senators were not condemned to death, imperial punishments undermined their authority as elites and heads of their families: Caligula, for example, liked to select matrons at his dinner parties to sleep with in front of their husbands (Suet. *Calig.* 36). In contrast, “good” emperors (e.g., Augustus, and, later, Vespasian and Titus) were less eager to exercise much arbitrary violence against the senatorial class.

³²⁹Benton sees forcing elites to perform in the theater as an act of coercion akin to violence, in that it broke down the distinction between the bodies of elites and of *infames* (2002, 43). In addition, Coleman notes that from the reign of Nero onwards, “fatal charades,” which staged executions as mythical

offenders were flung off the cliffs at Capraea, and any bones still intact were broken by men with boat oars at the bottom (*Tib.* 62.2), or thrown down the stairs of mourning and dragged to the Tiber with hooks (61.4). Thus, the violence of Senecan drama and Neronian literature as a whole cannot be traced to any single execution or spectacle, but should be read against this pervasive atmosphere of destabilization and persecution in the early empire (Buckley 2013, 217).

I would like to take this analysis a step further to argue that Senecan drama was not influenced merely by the violence of an autocratic regime, but that the broken bodies littering his plays are expressions of a deeper disorientation in a world in which social identities no longer mean what they once did. As I will argue through close readings from *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*, and *Phaedra*, the destruction of bodies is closely linked to the interpretation of signs, both embodied and external, so that the dismembered bodies at the end of the plays serve as non-functioning signs in themselves. On the one hand, these broken bodies can be read within the social-political context of the plays as symptoms of a larger failure of the body to communicate identity and status.³³⁰ On the other hand, Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject further explains Seneca's choice to use dismembered bodies to express the destruction of identity: the abject body, with its lack of boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, threatens the fantasy that the body is a self-contained, inviolate whole. This fantasy was particularly formative for the identity of elite Roman men, whose social status was predicated on the socio-legal definition of their gender and status as inviolable, but whose new reality in the early empire included frequent threats to

reenactments, became applicable to free aliens and perhaps even low-status citizens, in addition to the enslaved (1990, 55).

³³⁰See Chapter Four, pp. 129–33, 136–37 for further discussion of the body's failure as a reliable indicator of social identity in the Neronian period.

their autonomy, physical or otherwise.³³¹ The body in Seneca is, as Porter dubs it, a “nodal point of anxiety” (1999b, 6), a canvas upon which to work out societal tensions. Seneca uses this canvas in his exploration of the dismembered and wounded body in his plays as a broken signifier of personal and social identity.

Disorientation and the Body as a Signifier

Oedipus

Seneca’s *Oedipus* is littered with signs that its characters fail to interpret. Like Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, Seneca’s version dramatizes the protagonist’s slow process of recognizing his true origins and his crime (Wessels 2014, 204–05). Seneca, however, foregrounds obscure signs and portents that fail to provide any clarity (Henry and Walker 1983, 128): for example, he replaces the scene in which Tiresias is forced to identify Oedipus as his father’s killer with a series of uncanny supernatural events (Boyle 1997, 94). Oedipus’ failure to correctly identify the signifiers around him is thus not entirely his fault: secrecy, darkness, doubt, and confusion are structuring motifs throughout the play (Slaney 2015, 24). The tragedy opens with an emphatic chiasmus highlighting *Titan dubius* (uncertain sun, 1) that sheds weak light on the chaos and slaughter of the plague.³³² As commentators have pointed out, this first appearance of the adjective *dubius* sets a tone of doubt and confusion for the rest of the play (Mastronarde 2008,

³³¹See Chapter One, pp. 27–29 of this dissertation for further discussion of the Kristevan abject and elite male identity in Rome.

³³²The text of *Oedipus* is taken from Boyle’s 2011 commentary, and all translations throughout this chapter are adapted from Fitch’s 2018 Loeb translations.

22).³³³ Later, in the conversation between Creon and Oedipus, the oracle that Creon reports is repeatedly described as *dubius* (212, 213), a designation that, in turn, makes Oedipus uncertain (*incertus*, 209).³³⁴ As Boyle points out, Seneca's repeated emphasis on the oracle's ambiguity contrasts with Sophocles' focus on transparency (ad 212–24). Seneca creates a world in which obscurity and confusion reign.

Despite this bewildering atmosphere, Oedipus presents himself as skilled at unraveling puzzles. He concludes his boasting about his past trials by saying that he stood down the Sphinx's threats and solved her riddle: *nodosa sortis verba et implexos dolos / ac triste carmen alitis solvi ferae* (the knotted words of fate and the entwined tricks / and the grim riddle of the winged beast I untied, 101–02). Later, he encourages Creon to tell him the oracle by assuring him that he alone is skilled enough to unravel her words: *fare, sit dubium licet: / ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur* (tell it, however doubtful it may be: / knowing the meaning of ambiguities is granted to Oedipus alone, 215–16). As Boyle's commentary points out, this appearance of Oedipus' name in the third person is his first (out of three) instance of self-naming.³³⁵ For Oedipus, outwitting the Sphinx and the cleverness it entailed are integral parts of his identity: he sees himself as someone who looks past the deceptive appearances of things to the truth hiding behind them. Despite his failure to grasp what is really happening, this

³³³Boyle's commentary on this line (ad 1) details the other usages of *dubius* throughout the play. As Mastronarde puts it, this adjective "occurs in a set of coherent repetitions which contribute to the verbal and emotional texture of the play" (2008, 224). Töchterle likewise calls it "zweifellos ein Schlüsselwort... des Einleitungsbildes" (ad 1).

³³⁴The repetition of *dubius* and *incertus* in reference to Oedipus also foreshadows his tottering steps at the end of the play, when he almost trips over Jocasta's corpse (1050–51). The swaying bullock in the extispicy scene (342–44) and the resurrected Laius' prophecy that Oedipus will go forth with faltering steps (656–57) likewise look forward to Oedipus' blindness.

³³⁵ In addition, the placement of his name next to *noscere* glosses its etymology from οἶδα (to know).

misunderstanding of himself leads him to plunge ahead in unraveling the mystery, misled by his self-confidence. When Creon urges him to step down from his throne, Oedipus, convinced he can see beyond Creon's false concern, accuses him of scheming to take his place (659–708). He defends this decision by saying that good kings fear doubtful outcomes: *Cre. quid si innocens sum? Oed. dubia pro certis solent / timere reges* (*Cre.* What if I'm innocent? *Oed.* Kings should fear things in doubt / rather than certainties, 699–700). Oedipus' gnomic statement is meant to justify his harsh decision to lock Creon up, but he unwittingly hits on a truth of the play: the obscure, confusing signs that Oedipus fails to interpret will be his downfall.

Throughout the play, these obscure signs are also emphatically embodied. Emphasis on embodied signifiers is not new to Seneca: the tortured body in Sophocles' *Oedipus* is established as a mark of truth (Ballangee 2009, 12).³³⁶ "The physical body here [in *Oedipus Rex*] arises as a locus of certainty in the midst of a fog of ambiguity that otherwise clouds events and knowledge in this play," as Jennifer Ballangee describes (2009, 41). In Seneca's version, however, the tortured body as an unmistakable signal of authenticity becomes distorted, abject, and impossible to interpret.

The lengthy extispicy scene, in which Tiresias attempts to uncover the source of the contagion and the mystery behind the oracle, foregrounds such abject bodies. This scene is Seneca's addition—with this rite of Etruscan origins, he simultaneously Romanizes the Oedipus story and transforms the signs to be interpreted into bodies. Throughout the ritual, Tiresias remains convinced that the dismembered bodies of the sacrificial victims hold the key to unlocking the mystery, even as these abject bodies prove difficult to interpret. He begins by

³³⁶For the enslaved in the ancient world, the tortured body as a locus of truth was an all too familiar reality. See DuBois' seminal work *Torture and Truth* (1991) for further exploration of the practice of torturing enslaved people and its underlying ideologies.

confidently bidding his daughter Manto to narrate the clear signs of the ritual to him in his blindness:³³⁷ *tu lucis inopem, gnata, genitorem regens / manifesta sacri signa fatidici refer* (you, daughter, who guide your father, deprived of the light, / recount the **clear signs** of this ritual divination, 299–300). Although he himself cannot see these sacrificial bodies, he is confident that the signs will still be clear to his daughter.

Yet before the animals are killed, Manto tells her father that even he would be in doubt as to how to describe the flames: *quis desit illi quive sit dubites color, / caerulea fulvis mixta oberravit notis, / sanguinea rursus; ultima in tenebras abit* (you would doubt to say what color was missing, or what was there, / it shimmered blue mottled with yellow **marks**, / then back to blood-red; finally, it faded into shadows, 318–20). The shifting appearance of the fire ends in darkness and obscurity, before it splits into two flames (321–23); at the same time, the wine libations change into blood and dense smoke crowns Oedipus' head (324–27). Tiresias is once more at a loss to interpret the signs that confront him:

quidnam loquar? sunt dira, sed in alto mala;
solet ira certis numinum ostendi **notis**:
quid istud est quod esse prolatum volunt
iterumque nolunt et truces iras tegunt?

What should I say? These things are dire, evil but deeply hidden;
divine anger is usually shown by unmistakable **signs**:
what is it that they want exposed,
yet not exposed, and why do they conceal their fierce anger? (330–33)

As Boyle points out, Seneca here replaces the all-knowing revelations of Sophocles' Tiresias with a seer who stumbles over obscure and ominous signs (ad 291–402). Though Tiresias cannot

³³⁷The lengthy descriptions of the animals' bodies here have brought up the issue of performance. Rosenmeyer thinks that Manto's narration of events to the blind Tiresias provides a convenient excuse for the playwright to have the scene take place offstage (1993, 327f.). Fitch, on the other hand, rejects both Rosenmeyer's suggestion and Sutton's proposal that drugged calves or trained bulls could have been used as impractical onstage, and proposes that this scene was written with *recitatio* in mind (2000, 10–11).

interpret the dire outcomes of this ritual, the audience certainly can (ibid.): the doubled and shifting flame refers to Oedipus' confused nature as both son and husband to his mother (Boyle ad 314–20), while the smoke wreathing his head foreshadows his blindness (Boyle 324–27) and points to him as the source of the contagion. The ritual thus begins with foreboding signs, the meaning of which escapes the internal audience but that the viewers can decode.³³⁸

Despite his confusion, however, Tiresias clings to the belief that divine signs, particularly those revealed through the bodies laid open in the extispicy, will be clear and unmistakable. When it comes time to slice the animals open, he reiterates this belief like a mantra: *infausta magnos sacra terrores cient. / sed ede **certas** viscerum nobis **notas*** (This inauspicious ritual arouses great fears. / But tell me the **certain signs** of the entrails, 351–52). The disorder and obscurity of these portents, however, are exactly the signifiers that Tiresias fails to interpret. The key to understanding the jumbled bodies of the sacrificed animals is their very abjection, which will represent the violation inherent in Oedipus' patricide and incest.

In the extended description of the extispicy, Seneca plays up the abject nature of the disemboweled bodies. First, the shaking corpses spray blood everywhere, instead of merely dripping it: *non levi motu, ut solent, / agitata trepidant exta, sed totas manus / quatiant, novusque prosilit venis cruor* (not with a slight movement, as is normal, / are the organs trembling, but they are shaking my whole / hands, and abnormal blood is spurting from the veins, 353–55). Manto next describes the individual organs already putrefying within the freshly killed corpses: *cor marcet aegrum penitus ac mersum latet, / viventque venae. magna pars fibris*

³³⁸Another foreboding yet confusing signifier can be seen in the bull's mode of death. While the heifer willingly threw herself onto the blade, the bull resisted: *at taurus duos / perpessus ictus huc et huc dubius ruit / animamque fessus vix reluctantem exprimit* (but the bull, after suffering / two blows, plunges erratically here and there / and though weakened, scarcely and reluctantly gives up his life, 342–44). As Boyle points out, the two blows point to Oedipus' later blinding and exile, and its mode of death to his tottering steps and half-life at the end of the play (ad 341–44).

abest / et felle nigro tabidum spumat iecur (The diseased heart is wasting away from the inside and lies hidden deep within, / and the veins are livid. The liver, with much of its lobes missing, / foams rotten with black bile, 356–58). Seneca thus begins this ekphrasis of the disemboweled animals by playing up those aspects of corpses that are already abject, particularly the abundance of effluvia they produce. In addition, the image of the organs rotting inside a body that was moments before alive further blurs the line between life and death that corpses already cross.

The sacrificial victims are also abject in that their bodies are profoundly disordered.

Nothing is where it should be:

mutatus³³⁹ ordo est, sede nil propria iacet,
sed acta retro cuncta: non animae capax
in parte dextra pulmo sanguineus iacet,
non laeva cordi regio, non molli ambitu
omenta pingues viscera obtendunt sinus:
natura versa est; nulla lex utero manet.

The whole order is changed, nothing lies in its proper place,
but everything turns back on itself: with no room for breath,
the lungs clogged with blood lie on the right side,
the region of the heart is not on the left, with its soft coating
the caul does not extend its fatty folds over the entrails.
Nature is turned upside down; no law remains in womb (366–71).

The individual features of the victims' anatomies cross boundaries, with every organ in the wrong place. The corpses' disorder also reflects the erasure of distinctions inherent in the crime of incest (ad 371–72), and the organs turning back onto themselves (367) represent Oedipus' sexual penetration of the maternal body that gave him his origins. The concluding line of this passage also points to Oedipus' crime: by using the word *uterus* to refer to the body's inner

³³⁹*Mutatus* is, of course, a profoundly Ovidian word (see footnote 59 above): the heifer's changed and disordered body resembles the transformed animal bodies of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Once again, we see change, disorientation, and the confusion of signifiers occurring together in these passages.

cavity as a whole, Seneca points to Oedipus' violation of the "laws of the womb" (Boyle ad 371–72).

The signs pointing to Oedipus' incest become more explicit as Manto probes further: she finds a fetus lodged in the womb of the unmated heifer (*quod hoc nefas? conceptus innuptae bovis*, But what is this monstrosity? A fetus in an unwed heifer! 373). What is more, the fetus, like the heifer's other organs, is out of place: *nec more solito positus alieno in loco, / implet parentem* (nor is it positioned as usual, but it fills its mother / in an unnatural place, 374–75). This out-of-place fetus even more clearly signals that Oedipus' children were conceived in the wrong womb. In addition, the maternal body is also inherently abject, in that it contains another body within the self.³⁴⁰ the slaughtered heifer, then, is triply abject in its grotesque effluvia, its scrambled organs, and its fetus occupying the wrong cavity.

The extispicy scene ends with the *viscera* leaping out of Manto's hands and the disemboweled corpses rising like zombies to threaten the attending priests: *temptantque turpes mobilem trunci gradum, / et inane surgit corpus ac sacros petit / cornu ministros; viscera effugiunt manum* (the foul torsos vigorously attempt to walk, / and a gaping body rises up and attacks the attending / priests with its horns; the entrails escape my hand, 378–80). As Wessels points out, this extispicy mixes up boundaries not only in that the organs are out of place, but also in that even the ultimate limit between life and death is violated (2014, 201–02).³⁴¹ In the end, the priests observing the spectacle are hunted by the object of their inspection, as the

³⁴⁰Jocasta's unwitting incest also amplifies the inherent abjection of the maternal body, in conceiving unnatural children in her womb. This image of the incestuous maternal body as doubly abject culminates in her mode of suicide in Seneca's version: she stabs herself in the violating and violated womb as punishment for her crime (1038–39).

³⁴¹Just as the bull's tottering steps while dying foreshadowed Oedipus' blindness, the corpses' existence between life and death points to his future exile (Boyle ad 341–44).

boundary between observer and observed is turned upside down: “[m]an könnte sagen, die Betrachter haben ihr Objekt nicht mehr ‘im Griff’” (ibid., 202). The sacrificial victims’ abject bodies resist their role as divine signifiers (ibid., 203). Although the audience would recognize the increasingly obvious hints at Oedipus’ incest, the internal audience of this abject spectacle, baffled at the import of these signifiers, find themselves hunted by the very signs they are supposed to interpret. The end of the extispicy scene shows that reading these bodies as signifying texts is difficult, if not impossible, and thereby problematizes the Sophoclean motif of the body as a legible text.

The description of the plague that opens the tragedy also features abject bodies as uninterpretable signifiers of Oedipus’ crime. Oedipus himself describes how the high number of deaths has forced families to crowd funeral pyres and burial plots:

nec ulla pars immunis exitio vacat,
 sed omnis aetas pariter et sexus ruit,
 iuvenesque senibus iungit et gnatis patres
 funesta pestis, una fax thalamos cremat,
 fletuque acerbo funera et questu carent. ...
 non ossa tumuli sancta discreti tegunt:
 arsisse satis est—pars quota in cineres abit!
 dest terra tumulis, iam rogos silvae negant.

Not any quarter is immune or lacks destruction,
 but every age and sex equally perishes,
 the deadly plague joins the young with the old and
 fathers with sons, and a single torch cremates marriage beds,
 and funerals lack bitter tears and laments (52–56). ...
 No individual mounds cover the hallowed bones:
 it’s enough that they were burned—yet how small a portion is turned into ash!
 There is no land for graves, and now the forests deny wood for pyres (66–68).

The plague’s high mortality rate has led to this abject jumble of bodies, in which half-cremated bones from multiple corpses are thrown together.³⁴² In addition, the lack of distinction—

³⁴²The chorus also later describes how the plague has allowed death to break free from the underworld in an unnatural mixture of earthly and hellish (160–79): the Styx mixes with Sidonian streams (161–62),

particularly of age, sex, and familial role—between family members in their cremation and burial “mirrors that of the incest which has caused it” (Boyle ad 52–56). Oedipus himself, however, fails to read the plague as such, despite emphasizing its violation of familial boundaries (Littlewood 2004, 81).

The individual bodies ravaged by the disease are, too, abject. The chorus gives a detailed list of the plague’s progression that emphasizes its violation of the body’s boundaries:

O dira novi facies leti
 gravior leto:
 piger ignavos alligat artus
 languor, et aegro rubor in vultu,
 maculaeque cutem sparsere leves.
 tum vapor ipsam corporis arcem
 flammeus urit
 multoque genas sanguine tendit,
 oculique rigent, resonant aures
 stillatque niger naris aduncae
 cruor et venas rumpit hiantes;
 intima creber viscera quassat
 gemitus stridens
 et sacer ignis pascitur artus.

O strange appearance of an abnormal death
 worse than death:
 heavy languor binds the torpid
 limbs, and a flush appears in the diseased face,
 and light spots sprinkle the skin.
 Then a fiery heat burns in the very
 citadel of the body
 and distends the eye sockets with much blood,
 and the eyes become fixed, the ears ring

Cerberus has broken free of his chains (171–73), and ghosts steal through the forest (174–75). A dismembered Pentheus is one of the shades that emerges from the gaping underworld (617–18), and the shade Laius later mentions him in his admonition that it’s better for mothers to dismember their sons than sleep with them: *o Cadmi effera, / cruore semper laeta cognato domus, / vibrare thyrsus, enthea natos manu / lacerate potius!* (O savage house / of Cadmus, always delighting in kindred blood, / shake the thyrsus, rend your sons with god-driven / hands, rather than this! 626–29). Pentheus and Agave, along with the other Bacchantes who dismember him, appear repeatedly in the play as a motif of inherited guilt typical for Senecan tragedy. At the same time, *cruor* in these lines becomes yet another abject and misrecognized signifier of Oedipus’ crime: blood is a sign not merely of relatedness, but of transgression, as intrafamilial slaughter and incest come to define the house of Cadmus.

and black blood drips from the curved
nostrils and bursts the gaping veins;
frequent strident groans shake
the innermost entrails
and an unholy fire feeds upon the limbs (180–93).

The chorus' list of symptoms move from the external appearance of the body (the flushed skin, 182; the rash, 183) to the fever's destruction of the body from the inside: the eye sockets fill with blood (186), and blood drips from the nose (189) and bursts open the veins (190). The organization of this description visually charts the plague's penetration and destruction of the body from the outside in. In addition, this emphasis on dripping and spurting blood shows how the internal effluvia of the body become external by violently bursting out of the wrong orifices.³⁴³ Their description ends with an image of the body as fodder for the sacred fire: no longer an agent, the body has become dead matter to feed the beast of the plague.³⁴⁴

These diseased bodies, along with the other abject bodies of the play, prove uninterpretable for internal viewers. The only embodied signs that lead to any revelation are Oedipus' scars. Throughout Oedipus' conversation with the old man who delivered him, as an infant, to the shepherd to be exposed, *nota* and *noscere* are repeated over and over:

Oe. nunc adice **certas corporis** nostri **notas**.
Sen. forata ferro gesserat vestigia,
tumore nactus nomen ac vitio pedum.
Oe. quis fuerit ille qui meum dono dedit

³⁴³This description is not only physically abject, but also metapoetically confused. Boyle notes that Seneca here mixes allusions to Thucydides (2.49), Lucretius (6.1145–1214), Ovid (*Met.* 7.544–47), Vergil (*Georg.* 3.187–92), and even Catullus' Sapphic ode (51.9–12) in a kind of intertextual erasure of boundaries: "[t]he result is an unnerving fusion of the animality, even bestiality, of man with an ironically erotic treatment of the plague itself" (ad 180–92).

³⁴⁴Most recent editors, including Boyle, retain line 193 in its original place, between lines 188 and 189, while Töchterle (following Zweierlein) and Fitch (following Richter) place it here, after line 192. Like Töchterle and Fitch, I find its original placement awkward. Furthermore, this phrase reworks the line at the climax of Virgil's plague description (*Georg.* 3.566): placing it at the end of the list of symptoms retains this sense of a climax.

corpus requiro. *Sen.* regios pavit greges;
 minor sub illo turba pastorum fuit.
Oe. eloquere nomen. *Sen.* prima languescit senum
 memoria longo lassa sublabens situ.
Oe. potesne facie **noscere** ac vultu virum?
Sen. fortasse **noscam**: saepe iam spatio obrutam
 levis exoletam memoriam revocat **nota**.

Oe. Now tell me, too, about **the unmistakable markers of my body**.
Sen. You bear soles of your feet pierced by iron,
 and you took your name from the swollen deformity of your feet.
Oe. I need to know who it was who handed over
 my **body**. *Sen.* He tended the royal flocks;
 a subordinate group of herdsmen was under him.
Oe. Tell me his name. *Sen.* The memory of old men languishes
 first, ebbing away tired from long disuse.
Oe. Would you be able to **recognize** him by the features of his face?
Sen. Maybe I will **recognize** him: often a slight **marker**
 recalls a faint memory buried by time (811–21).

The unmistakable signs (*certas notas*) that Tiresias was convinced he would find in the bodies of the sacrificed animals now appear on Oedipus' body (Boyle ad 351–52). Oedipus also foregrounds his body in this scene of recognition: he bids the old man to tell him about the markers of his *body* (811), and to recount who handed over his *body* (815). The bodily signifiers that so had befuddled the internal audience in the extispicy scene have become clear markers of identity, as Oedipus offers up his own body to the blind old man as a spectacle and sign to be interpreted. As it turns out, Oedipus' body is no less abject than the disemboweled corpses of the sacrificed animals. The markers that hold the key to his identity are his pierced feet, long scarred over: this original penetration of his body not only signifies his true parentage, but it also points to his abject crime, his incest with his mother and the murder of his father. In this climactic *anagnorisis*, the abject body as an uninterpretable sign is transformed into a clear signifier, but of terrible and abject knowledge.

Oedipus' self-imposed punishment is designed to render his offending body abject in turn.³⁴⁵ Now that he understands that the embodied signifiers' import lay in their abjection, he makes his body into an abject sign of his crime. The messenger's account of his blinding emphasizes the penetration of his body:³⁴⁶

gemit et dirum fremens
manus in ora torsit. at contra truces
oculi steterunt et suam intenti manum
ultro insecuntur, vulneri occurrunt suo.
scrutatur avidus manibus uncis lumina,
radice ab ima funditus vulsos simul
evoluit orbes; haeret in vacuo manus
et fixa penitus unguibus lacerat cavos
alte recessus luminum et inanes sinus
saeuitque frustra plusque quam satis est furit.
tantum est periculum lucis. attollit caput
cavisque lustrans orbibus caeli plagas
noctem experitur. quidquid effossis male
dependet oculis rumpit, ...

He groaned and raging terribly,
he bent his hands toward his face. And in turn, his wild
eyes stood out and intently followed
their own hands, meeting their wounds halfway.
With hooked hands he greedily dug out his eyes,
and wrenching out his eyeballs from their deepest roots,
he rolled them out together; his hands cling to the empty eye sockets
and embedded deeply, his hands tear with their fingernails at the hollow
recesses of his eyes and those empty sockets
and he rages in vain, and storms on excessively.
So great is the threat of light to him. He raises his head,
and scanning the expanse of the sky with his empty orbs
he tested the darkness. Whatever is left hanging from his eyes
not completely dug out, he breaks off... (961–74)

³⁴⁵Park Poe considers Oedipus' self-blinding an application of warped morality (1983, 155–56): his mutilation is thus a visual and physical expression of his twisted logic. The spectacle of the male body in pain is not, of course, unique to Seneca, but originates in Attic drama (Hawley 1998, 86). Hawley points out that in blinding himself, the Sophoclean Oedipus makes himself the object of others' gazes (ibid., 89).

³⁴⁶Many of the goriest scenes in Senecan drama are dramatized through messenger speeches, Seneca's favored mode of description (Larson 1994, 63); Medea's onstage murder of her children is a notable exception.

The repetition of synonyms for “deeply” (*radice ab ima funditus*, 966; *penitus*, 968; *alte*, 969) portray his blinding not only as a mere wounding, but also as a shocking violation of the body’s innermost cavities, a reflection of his unlawful penetration of his mother’s womb.³⁴⁷ In addition, the messenger’s gory details emphasize the abject effluvia that result from his blinding: he describes, for example, in stomach-churning detail how Oedipus nonchalantly breaks off the strings dangling from his empty sockets (973–74). The messenger’s description concludes with an image of Oedipus’ head doused in blood: *rigat ora foedus imber, et lacerum caput / largum revulsis sanguinem venis vomit* (a foul shower wetted his face, and his mutilated head / vomits copious blood from the torn veins, 978–79). Boyle draws attention to the word choice of *vomit*, which he considers designed to further incite the audience’s revulsion (ad 978–79). The verb *vomeo* adds another dimension to the abjection of Oedipus’ body: almost as if his eyeless body spewing blood were not enough, Seneca adds the image of another effluvium, namely vomit, to compound the abjection of the scene.

Seneca’s version of Oedipus’ blinding is abject not merely in its gory details, but also in the way that it illustrates Oedipus’ loss of identity through the divorce of his body from his self. Rather than pierce his eyes with Jocasta’s pin, as in Sophocles’ version, Oedipus here digs his eyes out with his own hands, which are repeatedly emphasized (962, 963, 965, 967).³⁴⁸ In addition, his eyes take on a life of their own, eagerly leaping into his hands (962–64). Here,

³⁴⁷Oedipus in the *Phoenissae* takes this emphasis on penetration one step further: he wishes he could reach through his eye sockets to his brain itself (174–81). According to Erich Segal’s psychoanalytic reading, this desire reflects his wish to reach back to his prenatal existence, which was already a shameful penetration of his mother’s body (2008, 143).

³⁴⁸Erich Segal notes that Oedipus’ blinding and Jocasta’s penetration of her womb with the sword (1038–39) parallel each other, in that they dramatize their suffering as being trapped within their bodies (2008, 142–43).

Scarry's theory on the body in pain brings his body's betrayal to the fore. Whereas in Scarry's thought, the torturer's violence forces the sufferer's awareness of a disjunct between body and self, Oedipus' pain is self-inflicted. Thus, the divorce between Oedipus' body and sense of self goes deeper: even his individual body parts are depicted as turning against each other, as his hands and eyes desert the body of which they were once contiguous parts, aligning themselves instead with his guilty self. In response to his realization of his abject crime, Oedipus turns on his offending body and renders it permanently abject—floating somewhere in the realm between life and death, blind and exiled.

The abjection of Oedipus' blinded body also lies in its altered identity. The abject threatens identity by muddling the barriers between inside and outside, self and other, and Oedipus' blinding symbolizes this identity crisis in his choice of his eyes to bear the brunt of his punishment. Alessandro Schiesaro points to Oedipus' eyes as the tools of his self-professed superiority in interpretation: "[a]t the end of the play, Oedipus, the cunning thinker and observer, the man who boasts his ability to interpret 'traces'...in his search for truth, ultimately destroys the instrument and symbol of his reason" (2003, 12). Isabella Tondo, in contrast, argues that Oedipus attacks his eyes as the windows to the soul, as expressions of interiority and personal identity, in his ultimate choice to live a half-life without human communication (2010, 54). In the end, Oedipus renders his body abject in every way possible: missing body parts and spewing blood, he carries on in limbo between life and death, blinded and exiled, and lacking the feature from which he formerly derived a sense of pride and self-worth.

In his version of *Oedipus*, Seneca reworks a play about a slow process of terrible recognition and brings signs to the forefront. Many of these signs take the form of bodies (i.e., the plague victims and the corpses from the extispicy), but these bodily signifiers are abject,

disordered, and non-signifying. What in Sophocles' version was a process of emerging clarity, of piecing together clues to arrive at a terrible conclusion, becomes in Seneca's hands a tragedy with a relentlessly dark and foreboding atmosphere, in which these signs lead inexorably to further confusion, darkness, and abjection. In the end, the only unmistakable signs in the play, namely Oedipus' scars, lead to his purposeful destruction of his body and identity through this very abjection.

Thyestes

Unlike Oedipus, Atreus is presented a criminal mastermind, who interprets and manipulates signs to shape the plot of the *Thyestes*. He exerts his control over every aspect of the tragedy as a metapoetic director of a play within a play pulling all the strings.³⁴⁹ Frequently, Seneca pulls back the curtain to show his manipulations: in a conversation between Atreus and his assistant, Atreus explains his deliberation on whether to involve his sons in his plot to lure Thyestes back to the palace with the promise of shared kingship (316–33). He first demurs, blaming the indiscretion of youth as justification for deceiving his sons as well (317–23). He then changes tack, briefly deciding to test his sons' loyalty by involving them in his plan against their uncle (324–30). With this decision, however, Atreus does not lay all his cards on the table: instead, he plans to carefully gauge his sons' reactions to the proposed deception in order to determine if they are really his own, or the result of the affair between Thyestes and his wife Aerope. He thus proposes making his children into signs to be interpreted themselves. In the end, however, he lands on keeping his sons in the dark in order to safeguard his plans (330–33).

³⁴⁹For further discussion of Atreus as the playwright of the drama, see Boyle (1997, 117f.) and Schiesaro (2003, 55ff.). Schiesaro reads Atreus' role politically as well, seeing him as a master dissimulator and notorious tyrant connected with Roman imperial power (2003, 114).

Tarrant points out that this conversation has no narrative importance (ad 321–33); rather, it presents Atreus as a master manipulator of everyone around him.

Like Oedipus, who bragged about his ability to track down *vestigia*, Atreus also presents himself as a skilled tracker and interpreter. As Thyestes approaches the palace, Atreus describes himself in an extended simile as an Umbrian hound who has quarried his prey:³⁵⁰

plagis tenetur clausa dispositis fera: ...
vix tempero animo, vix dolor frenos capit.
sic, cum feras vestigat et longo sagax
loro tenetur Umber ac presso vias
scrutator ore, dum procul lento suem
odore sentit, paret et tacito locum
rostro pererrat; praeda cum propior fuit,
cervice tota pugnat et gemitu vocat
dominum morantem seque retinenti eripit.
cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi—
tamen tegatur. ...

The beast is held fast in the nets I set out: ...
I can scarcely restrain my spirit, my bitterness can scarcely be reined in.
Just as when a keen-nosed Umbrian hound tracks beasts and,
held by a long leash, probes the trails, pressing down
his nose, while from far off he senses the boar
from its faint scent, he obeys and silently scours
the ground with his snout; but when the prey is closer,
he struggles with all the force of his neck and bays to hurry
his slow master and rips himself from his restraints.
When anger has hope of blood, it knows no concealment—
nevertheless, it must be concealed (491, 496–505).³⁵¹

³⁵⁰Bestiality and the fragile boundary between humanity and animality are motifs throughout the play: every character is described as a different animal at some point (Boyle 1997, 45–46), and Boyle considers men's portrayal as beasts the main theme of the play (1983, 209). Atreus, for example, is later described as a tiger from the Ganges when he is deciding which child to murder first (707–13) and as a bloodthirsty lion (732–37).

³⁵¹The text of *Thyestes* is taken from Boyle's 2017 edition.

Atreus' choice of specifically an Umbrian hound for this comparison emphasizes his skill as a manipulator: these dogs were primarily trackers, not killers (Tarrant ad 498).³⁵² This simile thus focuses on searching, tracking, and trapping rather than on the end result of the hunt (Schiesaro 2003, 99–101). In addition, it vividly illustrates Atreus' difficulty in concealing his emotions. Despite his bloodlust, however, Atreus successfully hides his true intentions and persuades his brother to let his guard down. As Thyestes approaches, Atreus also gleefully describes his tattered appearance (505–06). According to Tarrant, this scene, along with the simile, displays “Atreus’ absolute control of the situation and his keen enjoyment of his power over Thyestes... Atreus remains intensely aware of every detail of the scene he is manipulating, from the pounding excitement of his own heart to the matted tangle of Thyestes’ beard” (ad 491–511). Atreus not only manipulates every detail of the play’s unfolding, but he also revels in this control.

Atreus’ control over the play expands as he takes on additional roles in his punishment of Thyestes: he is presented as a high priest in his sacrifice of Thyestes’ children, as master chef when he cooks them, and as the conscientious host at the feast. When describing the children’s murder, the messenger fixates on the orderliness of the ritual:³⁵³

ipse sacerdos, ipse funesta prece

³⁵²The verb *scrutare* here connects Atreus with Ulysses in Seneca’s *Troades*, also an expert decoder of signs and reader of bodily signifiers. As he is attempting to get his hands on Astyanax, he successfully reads (*scrutare*, 615) Andromache’s body language to determine that she is more anxious than distraught and thereby to uncover her deception (613–31), leading to Astyanax’s death. Constraints of space make an in-depth study of *Troades* impossible here.

³⁵³This messenger speech, which comprises over ten percent of the play’s total verses (Dinter 2013, 9), has attracted much scholarly attention for the way the messenger’s tone shifts from seemingly horrified to complacent. Zanobi argues that although he is initially aghast at what he has witnessed, his narrative quickly lapses into that of an impersonal mouthpiece (2014, 168–69). Littlewood, in contrast, considers this change in tone to one of delight, as the messenger focalizes Atreus’ own greed and pleasure in his savagery (2004, 226–40): “[a]s well as dramatizing once again in this tragedy the power of evil to subdue moral sensibility and to find expression, the change in the messenger models a sadistic spectatorship” (ibid., 239–40).

letale carmen ore violento canit.
stat ipse ad aras, ipse devotos neci
contrectat et componit et ferro apparat;
attendit ipse: nulla pars sacri perit.

He himself is priest, he himself with sinister prayers
sings the death chant in a bloodthirsty voice.
He himself stands by the altar, he himself handles and arranges
those doomed to slaughter and readies them for the knife;
he himself checks the details: no part of the ritual is forgotten (691–95).

The repetition of *ipse* (five times in as many lines) emphasizes Atreus' new role as the high priest of the sacrifice, exerting control over every detail. These lines also describe how Atreus conforms to every ritual prescription: no part of the rite was left out (687–90, 695). This stark juxtaposition between unthinkable crime and orderliness emphasizes Atreus' transgression: as Meltzer puts it, "the fastidiousness with which Atreus conducts the slaughter and sacrifice throws into high relief the fundamental distinction he fails to make, that between a human being and an animal" (1988, 325).³⁵⁴ After Atreus butchers the children's bodies, he transforms into a chef in his careful preparation of their flesh: *haec veribus haerent viscera et lentis data / stillant caminis, illa flammatus latex / candente aeno iactat* (Some of the flesh clings to spits and sits dripping / over slow burners, other parts the kindled water / in the boiling cauldron tosses about, 765–67). Atreus' multi-stage preparation of the children's bodies mirrors his fastidiousness during their sacrifice: in cooking their flesh so elaborately, he casts himself in the role of master chef and the children's corpses as mere material for his machinations.

³⁵⁴Tarrant sees Atreus' role here as high priest as the point at which he establishes his status as a god (ad 687–90a). Boyle, however, points out that Atreus uses these rituals to undo social bonds, rather than uphold them (1997, 47): "Atreus outbestialises the beasts by inverting the kinds of institutions which make human civilised life possible: kingship, sacrifice, feast" (ibid., 46). He elsewhere compares this emphasis on inversion to that found in Petronius and Tacitus (1983, 213). Lefèvre likewise emphasizes the topsy-turvy nature of this scene: he sees Seneca's Atreus as a perverted Stoic hero, who is free from care along with all moral, social, or ethical concerns (2005, 105–06).

Thyestes, in contrast, lacks control over himself as well as his circumstances, and stumbles in interpreting the signs around him.³⁵⁵ More vividly, at several points in the tragedy, Thyestes is described as alienated from himself, as his body gives off signs of foreboding that he cannot interpret. When he is approaching the palace, he first moralizes on the nature of kingship, warning that one should not be lured in by the false glitter of the crown (414–16). Despite this astute observation, when a sense of foreboding comes over him, he cannot pinpoint its source. He describes how his steps falter: *nunc contra in metus / revolvor: animus haeret ac retro cupit / corpus referre, moveo nolentem gradum* (now I am relapsed back into / fears: my spirit falters and wants to turn / my body back, I force reluctant steps, 418–20).³⁵⁶ When his son Tantalus questions his sudden reluctance, Thyestes replies:

causam timoris ipse quam ignoro exigis.
 nihil timendum video, sed timeo tamen.
 placet ire, pigris membra sed genibus labant,
 alique quam quo nitor adductus feror.

³⁵⁵Atreus' dominance over Thyestes is also reflected in his mastery, and Thyestes' lack of control over, language. In the final scene in which Atreus forces Thyestes' gradual realization of whom exactly he is eating, Atreus' gleeful comments are full of horrible double entendres. For example, in response to Thyestes' request to have his children join them, Atreus replies: *hic esse natos crede in amplexus patris. / hic sunt eruntque: nulla pars prolis tuae / tibi subtrahetur* (Consider your sons here in their father's embrace. / Here they are, and here they will be; no portion of your offspring / will be taken from you, 976–78). Tarrant's commentary points out that these lines expand upon Procne's taunting response to Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*intus habes quem poscis*, *Met.* 6.655; more below). Schiesaro calls Atreus' manipulation of language "an intrinsic part of his primacy over Thyestes" (2003, 111). Unlike Atreus, Thyestes lacks a command over his language. In an attempt to diplomatically sidestep his brother's insistence that he share the throne, for example, he lets slip double entendres that seem to confirm Atreus' worst fears: namely, that his children are not his own, but his brother's. He generously replies, *meum esse credo quidquid est, frater, tuum* (Whatever is yours, brother, I regard as mine too, 535): he means that he does not need a formal share of power, that his brother's kingship is enough for him, but Atreus' paranoia could also construe these words to mean that he fathered the children Atreus thinks are his. He also admits, *sed fateor, Atreu, admisi omnia / quae credidisti* (but I confess, Atreus, I confess, I committed all / that you thought I had, 513–14), which could also be taken as confirmation of Atreus' suspicions. Whereas Atreus wields double entendres as a weapon and tool of his superiority, Thyestes' language gets away from him.

³⁵⁶Cf. Oedipus' faltering steps at the end of the play (*Oed.* 1047–49); like Oedipus, Thyestes is blind to the crime he will commit, although his body knows better.

You ask the reason for my fear, which I myself do not know.
I see nothing of which I should be afraid, but I'm afraid nonetheless.
I wish to proceed, but my limbs falter on weak knees,
and I am pulled away unwilling from the goal I struggle toward (434–37).

Here, Thyestes regards his body in bewilderment as a separate and not wholly obedient entity.

His body takes on a life of its own: his steps are unwilling (*nolentem*, 420), and the repetition of passive verbs shows that he is at the mercy of its whims (*revolvor*, 419; *abductus feror*, 437).

With this sense of foreboding, Thyestes is wholly alienated from himself, as his body becomes a distinct and uninterpretable being.³⁵⁷ The scene ends with Thyestes abruptly and somewhat incongruously bidding Tantalus to lead him to the palace, despite his misgivings (*ego vos sequor, non duco*, I'm following you, not leading, 489). With this sudden shift, Thyestes' character appears weak and unresolved.³⁵⁸ According to Tarrant, this remark shows that Thyestes wishes to present his actions as forced upon him, rather than chosen (ad 437). In this scene, Thyestes describes his body as something separate from his self, but also something over which he has no control, as he abdicates responsibility for his choices or their outcomes.

Later, as Thyestes is unwittingly feasting upon his sons' flesh, he sings that his body displays strange signs of grief that baffle him:

vernae capiti fluxere rosae,
pingui madidus crinis amomo
inter subitos stetit horrores,
imber vultu nolente cadit,
venit in medias voces gemitus. ...
libet infaustos mittere questus,

³⁵⁷Tarrant likewise notes that the verbs *revolvor* and *haeret* illustrate Thyestes' disassociation from himself (ad 419). Meltzer reads Thyestes' bodily alienation here and elsewhere as a manifestation of his psychological conflict between "his appetite for power...and his philosophical reservations about the instability of rule" (1988, 323).

³⁵⁸This characterization is further developed throughout the conversation with Tantalus: Thyestes admits he suspects some trick on his brother's part (473), and even fears for his children's safety (482–89), but does not act on this suspicion.

libet et Tyrio saturas ostro
 rumpere vestes, ululare libet.
 mittit luctus **signa** futuri
 mens ante sui praesaga mali:
 instat nautis fera tempestas,
 cum sine vento tranquilla tument.
 —quos tibi luctus quosue tumultus
 fingis, demens? credula praesta
 pectora fratri. Iam, quidquid id est,
 vel sine causa vel sero times.
 —nolo infelix, sed vagus intra
 terror oberrat, subitos fundunt
 oculi fletus, nec causa subest.
 dolor an metus est? an habet lacrimas
 magna voluptas? ...

The springtime roses slip from my head,
 my hair, though soaked in heavy myrrh,
 stands on end in sudden shivering fits,
 teardrops fall from my unwilling eyes,
 a groan interrupts my words. ...
 I long to utter ill-omened laments,
 I long to rend
 my garments steeped in Tyrian purple,
 I long to howl.
 My mind, foreboding its own misfortune,
 sends **signs** of future grief:
 a savage storm threatens sailors,
 when the calm seas swell without any wind.
 —What griefs, what upheavals are you conjuring
 for yourself, you madman?
 Present your brother with a trustful heart:
 whatever it is that you fear,
 you fear either without cause or too late now.
 —Poor me, I don't wish to,
 but a vague terror wanders within me,
 my eyes pour out sudden tears,
 but there's no reason for them.
 Is it grief or fear?
 Or does great pleasure give rise to weeping? (947–51, 954–70)

Once again, Thyestes experiences his body as separate from himself: tears pour from his unwilling face (*vultu nolente*, 950), and, as Tarrant puts it, “Thyestes enumerates the symptoms of his own *malaise* like a horrified spectator” (ad 947–51). In addition, he presents his body as a

sign to be interpreted, detailing his symptoms as if they were clues to a mysterious sickness: his hair stands on end (949), and his eyes pour forth tears (950, 967). He even describes these symptoms as *luctus signa futuri* (signs of future grief, 958); as Rosenmeyer puts it, Thyestes' body first has an understanding of something that his mind cannot grasp (1989, 121). He vacillates between considering these symptoms meaningless mementos of many years of hardship that his body cannot shake off (952–53) or portents of a future disaster (958). Though he hits on the truth here, the end of his song trails back off into rhetorical questions (969–70), with no more knowledge of what is to come than before.³⁵⁹ Once again, Thyestes presents his body as an external, yet uninterpretable, signifier: “Thyestes proves himself an inadequate reader of signs, signs he detects but fails to exploit, since he is a defeatist who yields to the force of events” (Schiesaro 2009, 224–25).³⁶⁰

As the feast continues, these signs become more threatening and more obvious, and shift from Thyestes' body to his surroundings: the wine slips away from his lips, the table begins to tremble, night falls in the middle of the day, and the ground begins to shake (985–97). Full of foreboding, Thyestes cries for his sons to be brought to him (997),³⁶¹ but only when his body begins to exhibit further signs does he locate the source of his misfortune. He cries, *quid hic tumultus viscera exagitat mea? / quid tremuit intus? sentio impatiens onus / meumque gemitu*

³⁵⁹Here is yet another example of Thyestes' lack of control over language. As Tarrant puts it, “[t]he song ends weakly, trailing off with a bemused question; overwhelmed by events, Thyestes is equally at a loss to control his words” (ad 969).

³⁶⁰Although Thyestes is presented as particularly passive, he is not the only character in Senecan tragedy who struggles to interpret signs. In fact, most do: Atreus and Ulysses (see footnote 352) are notable exceptions.

³⁶¹Perhaps this request shows that Thyestes still does not realize that his brother would take his revenge upon his children, but perhaps it demonstrates that he is beginning to realize what his brother is capable of, and calls his children in the desperate hope of being proved wrong.

non meo pectus gemit (What is this turmoil that is stirring up my guts? / What trembles inside of me? I feel a restless burden / and my breast groans with a groaning not my own, 999–1001). On the cusp of his terrible revelation, Thyestes’ body once more takes on a life of its own with its inexplicable rumbling and groaning (Tondo 2010, 51). Yet this alienation from his body goes one step further: with the phrase *gemitu non meo* (1001), Seneca creates the impression that Thyestes’ children, lamenting their fate, have hijacked his body, which then behaves in ways that he cannot understand.³⁶² Thyestes’ lack of control over his body in the final scene correlates directly to Atreus’ mastery: “[t]hat Thyestes understands and controls less well than Atreus even the workings of his own body is a mark of Atreus’ total domination” (Littlewood 2004, 199). Atreus’ mastery and Thyestes’ impotency are expressed through the body: Thyestes lacks control over the function of his body, which is alienated from him and rendered unintelligible to him, while Atreus exercises his control through the bodies around him, rendering them abject as signs of his domination.³⁶³

The detailed description of Atreus’ murder of Thyestes’ children demonstrates how he turns them into signifiers of his rage and revenge. At the moment of their murder, the messenger describes their instant transformation from living humans to mere corpses:

... educto stetit
ferro cadaver, cumque dubitasset diu
hac parte an illa caderet, in patrum cadit.

³⁶²Tarrant comments on these lines: “Seneca relates unrelated ideas, the weight of undigested food... and the thought that Thyestes’ children protest at their confinement, to produce a jarring combination” (ad 1000).

³⁶³This dynamic is reflected in the play’s pervasive hunger versus satiety motif. Boyle outlines Thyestes’ progression from knowledge and satiety to ignorance and hunger (1997, 50–51), while Atreus ironically stuffs Atreus full with his children’s bodies in an attempt to satisfy his rage (ibid., 45). Boyle considers this repeated motif as the operative theme of the tragedy: “they interlace the play so thoroughly that the ending seems a natural consequence of Tantalus’ curse” (ibid., 54). At the same time, this motif, which fits in well with the inherited guilt of the house of Tantalus, also reflects a larger theme of domination and subservience, control and impotency, that finds expression through the bodies of the play.

tunc ille ad aras Plisthenem saevus trahit
adicitque fratri. colla percussa amputata;
cervice caesa truncus in prona ruit,
querulum cucurrit murmure incerto caput.

... When the steel was pulled out
the cadaver stayed upright, and after it hesitated for a long time
whether to fall this way or that, it fell on its uncle.
Then that savage drags Plisthenes to the altar
and adds him to his brother. Struck through, the head is amputated;
with the neck severed the trunk falls forward,
the head rolls away, complaining with some unintelligible murmur (723–29).

As Tarrant points out, the word choice *cadaver* is unusual in poetry (except in Lucan's work), and conveys the full reality of death at this moment (ad 724). In a way, Thyestes' children have already been stripped of their personhood: as Alessandra Zanobi puts it, they "are already presented as mere pieces of flesh, thus foreshadowing the end their corpses will undergo" (2014, 171). The use of *cadaver* here, however, is jarring in more ways than one. Although Tantalus has been instantly rendered a corpse, this mere piece of flesh is still imbued with human-like agency and relationships: it hesitates for a long time (*dubitasset diu*, 729) about which way to fall, then topples upon *its* uncle (730). In addition, Plisthenes' head mumbles unintelligibly in the dust (729). In these lines, Seneca underscores the inherently abject nature of the corpse: these dismembered cadavers still imbued with lifelike qualities emphasize the violation of the boundary between life and death that corpses already embody.

In the extispicy that follows, Atreus stamps his own meaning into this dehumanized flesh. The messenger describes in detail the way Atreus lays these bodies bare to determine the hidden meanings encoded within:

erepta vivis exta pectoribus tremunt
spirantque venae corque adhuc pavidum salit.
at ille fibras tractat ac fata inspicit
et adhuc calentes viscerum venas **notat**.

postquam hostiae placuere, securus vacat
iam fratris epulis.

Torn from the living chests the organs are still trembling
and the veins are still pulsing, and the heart is still leaping in terror.
But he handles the entrails and inspects the fates
and **takes note** of the still-hot veins of the guts.
Once the victims prove satisfactory, he, free of care, takes time
for his brother's feast (755–60).

As in the description of their murder above, these lines describe the children's bodies as abject, as they blur the lines between flesh and human being. The list of innards in lines 755–56 (*exta, venae, cor*) objectifies their bodies by aligning them with the sliced-open sacrificial corpses in Tiresias' extispicy (*Oed.* 351–58).³⁶⁴ At the same time, the verbs emphasize the movements of these organs (*tremunt, spirant, salit*), while the children's chests are described as still living (*vivis*) and their hearts as still fearful (*adhuc pavidum*). This jarring juxtaposition between living child and slaughtered flesh underscores the abjection of their bodies.

In the next lines, Atreus treats his nephews' corpses as signifiers on the question that most preoccupies him: namely, whether his children are his own. After making a careful inspection of the entrails and their veining (757–58), the messenger simply states that Atreus was pleased with the auspices. Tarrant comments that these lines are further examples of Atreus' perverse insistence on sticking to established ritual, and that Atreus does not seem to wish to divine the future (ad 755–58). In contrast, Schiesaro sees the children's bodies as surrogates for the body Atreus really wants to inspect, that of his adulterous and incestuous wife, Aerope (2003,

³⁶⁴The messenger's description of the children's trembling organs and veins further objectifies them by drawing on scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, specifically Marsyas' glistening, quivering flesh as he is being flayed (*Met.* 6.382–400; Tarrant ad 756) as well as Philomela's tongue murmuring in the dust (*Met.* 6.555–60; Tarrant ad 755). As I have argued (see Chapter Three, pp. 90–96 above), Ovid's description of Marsyas' flayed body both objectifies and aestheticizes it by making it into a glittering precious object or quivering musical instrument rather than a still-living body.

88). He further connects this extispicy scene with Atreus' superiority in interpreting signs throughout the play: "[t]he characterization of Atreus as an expert hunter and decoder of *vestigia*, I would argue, is best appreciated in the context of this investigation, and not only...in the context of his ability to deceive Thyestes in the rest of the play" (ibid., 101).³⁶⁵ Thus, in slicing his nephews open in order to determine their paternity, Atreus renders them abject signifiers on the question of his wife's fidelity. In casting Atreus not merely as the murderer of his nephews, but also as the seer-like interpreter of their bodies, Seneca once again brings the abject, opened body to the fore as a sign to be decoded. Although the bodies of Thyestes' children, of course, could reveal only who their parents are, not who fathered Atreus' supposed children, Atreus reads his own meanings into their flesh, as he somehow divines the paternity of his own children from his nephews' bodies.

In the next stage of the sacrifice, Atreus further transforms his nephews' bodies into his chosen signifiers. The messenger describes the butchering of their flesh piece by piece:

... ipse divisum secat
in membra corpus, amputat trunco tenus
umeros patentis et lacertorum moras,
denudat artus durus atque ossa amputat;
tantum ora servat et datas fidei manus.

...He himself cuts the divided
body limb by limb, he chops away the broad shoulders
right up to the neck and the resisting arms,
heartless, he lays bare the joints and chops away the bones;
he preserves just their faces and hands given in trust (760–64).

³⁶⁵As in the extispicy scene in *Oedipus*, Atreus' sacrifice is also accompanied by signs of doom: the wine changes to blood, the royal emblem keeps slipping from his head, and the ivory statues weep (700–02). Everyone else is horrified at these portents, but Atreus continues undeterred (703–04). Given Atreus' skill in recognizing and decoding signifiers, it is unlikely that he simply misses these foreboding signs; more likely, he is aware of the disaster they portend, as he himself has carefully planned it.

In disassembling the corpses limb by limb, Atreus renders them pieces of butchered flesh to be cooked. He saves only their heads and hands, which Tarrant notes were often set aside in real sacrifices; for Atreus, however, the children's faces will force their father's horrified recognition, and their hands will serve "as grotesque souvenirs of the pretended reconciliation" (ad 764). Thus, Atreus' dismemberment of his nephew's bodies not only treats them as animals to be butchered and cooked up, but also stamps his own meaning onto their corpses, as they become props in his carefully orchestrated revelation at the end of the play.

Thyestes' response to this sight confirms that Atreus' transformation of his sons' bodies is complete. After Thyestes once again begs for his children to be brought to him, Atreus, gleefully displaying the severed heads and hands, replies, *expedi amplexus, pater; / venere. natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?* (Unfold your embrace, father; / they have come. Don't you recognize your sons? 1004–05). Without missing a beat, Thyestes replies, *agnosco fratrem* (I recognize my brother, 1006). With this remark, Thyestes confirms that his children's bodies have been transformed: no longer do their abject corpses signify their identities, but they have been reduced to signs of Atreus' domination and cruelty.³⁶⁶

Atreus likewise renders Thyestes' body into an abject spectacle and signifier of his control. For Atreus, the pleasure of his revenge lies in watching his brother's slow realization of what he has done, as if in the theater.³⁶⁷ Before the crime is revealed, Atreus describes his longing to see his brother's bodily symptoms of despair:

³⁶⁶Or, as Meltzer puts it, "[h]e thus directs one's attention away from the hideous spectacle of his children's severed heads to the hideous condition of Atreus' soul" (1988, 323). Bartsch, in contrast, sees the *anagnorisis* of this play as evidence of Seneca's shift from a socially constructed concept of identity to a personal understanding of the self (2006, 261).

³⁶⁷Wessels sees Thyestes' dawning realization as the true "Gewalterfahrung" of the play (2014, 64). Boyle likewise emphasizes that Atreus is mainly concerned with his brother's knowing participation in

libet videre, capita natorum intuens
quos det colores, verba quae primus dolor
effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens
corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est.
miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser.

I long to see what color he turns,
looking at his sons' heads, what words his first grief
pours out, or, breathless with shock,
how his body stiffens. This is the fruit of my labor.
I do not want to see him broken, but *being* broken (903–07).

Atreus' speech sets up a dichotomy between his dominant gaze upon the despair he has orchestrated and Thyestes' passive body. As Littlewood puts it, "the pain of this recognition and the horror of the crime is expressed in Thyestes' body. Atreus' power of his actor-audience watches his scripted revenge fulfilled in the passive flesh of his victim" (2004, 183). Thus, part of Atreus' revenge lies in turning his brother, not just his nephews, into a spectacle under his controlling gaze.

At the end of the play, Atreus declares himself well pleased with this spectacle. Observing his brother's despair, he announces, *liberos nasci mihi / nunc credo, castis nunc fidem redidi toris* (now I believe that / the children are mine, and that my bed is faithful and chaste once more, 1098–99).³⁶⁸ Just as he reworked the dismembered bodies of Thyestes' sons into signs of his true paternity in the extispicy scene, he takes delight in observing the spectacle of Thyestes' grief by interpreting it as a sign of his children's paternity and his wife's fidelity.

his revenge: Atreus wants an aware audience, an internal spectator of his crime, not an ignorant one (1997, 118).

³⁶⁸That is, Thyestes' despair is so profound that the slaughtered children must have been his only ones, and Atreus' sons are his own. The conversation continues, *Thy. quid liberi meruere? Atr. quod fuerant tui. / Thy. natos parenti—Atr. fateor, et, quod me iuvat, certos (Thy. What did my children do to deserve this? Atr. They were yours. / Thy. Sons to their father—Atr. I admit it, and, I'm delighted to say, they were definitely your own sons, 1100–01).*

Atreus, then, manipulates the bodies of the people around them, rendering them signifiers that he then interprets as he sees fit.

As the feast goes on, the spectacle of Thyestes' body becomes more and more abject. Even at the beginning of the banquet scene, the messenger casts him as a disgusting beast: *lancinat natos pater / artusque mandit ore funesto suos. / nitet fluente madidus unguento comam / gravisque vino est; saepe praecclusae cibum / tenuere fauces* (The father is mangling his sons / and gnaws his own limbs with entombing teeth. / He is glistening, his hair soaked with dripping oils / and he is heavy with wine; often his blocked throat / holds the food, 778–82). As Tarrant points out, the word choice *mandit*—a word for normal animal behavior or unnatural human behavior—casts Thyestes as a wild beast (ad 779). The adjective *madidus* takes this characterization further by aligning Thyestes eating with the image of Atreus as a lion whose jaws are dripping with gore (*cruore rictus madidus*, 734).³⁶⁹ The oils dripping from Thyestes' head, then, stand in for the figurative gore dripping from his mouth. Even the normal trappings of a banquet—i.e., perfume and wine—become abject when applied to Thyestes.³⁷⁰

The true abjection of Thyestes' body, however, lies in the unnatural blurring of self and other that occurs when he consumes his sons. When he first realizes what he has done, he longs to tear open his body to free his children:

voluuntur intus viscera et clusum nefas
sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam.
da, frater, ense (sanguinis multum mei
habet ille) ferro liberis detur uia.

³⁶⁹Tarrant notes that *madidus* appears only in the *Thyestes* of Seneca's plays, and argues rather that it draws a contrast between the wild beast Atreus and the perfumed Thyestes (ad 780). Park Poe also emphasizes the oily moistness of Thyestes' head and hair when he succumbs to his appetite (1969, 369–70).

³⁷⁰This scene as a whole is a kind of “grotesque parody” of Roman comedy: Atreus crows at his cleverness like a *servus callidus*, and Thyestes sings as he feasts and burps in his greed (Meltzer 1988, 314–15).

negatur ensis? pectora inliso sonent
contusa planctu - sustine, infelix, manum,
parcamus umbris.

The flesh churns within me, and the imprisoned horror
struggles with no way out and seeks an escape.
Give me your sword, brother (it already has much
of my blood); a path must be given to my children with the blade.
A sword is denied? Let my breast resound, beaten
with smashing blows—no, hold your hand, you wretch,
we must spare the shades (1039–47).

In these lines, Thyestes casts his flesh as an unholy prison and his churning stomach as his children struggling to escape (1039–40). He first desires to slice his body open to free them (1041–42), but when Atreus refuses to give him this satisfaction, he tries to beat his body to pieces before he fears hurting his children. Though somewhat ridiculous, these lines underscore the unnatural fusion of self and other that Thyestes now embodies: he and his sons have become one.³⁷¹

In his analysis of “boundary violation” of Senecan tragedy, Erich Segal argues that Thyestes’ fate represents the worst nightmare of this anxiety, as a foreign substance inextricably and irreversibly becomes a part of his own body (2008, 152).³⁷² Yet from their first appearance onstage, Thyestes’ children are assimilated with their father (Tondo 2010, 47).³⁷³ In addition,

³⁷¹Tarrant thinks that these lines undermine Thyestes’ attempts at dramatic dignity and prevent the audience from sympathizing with him (ad 1046–47). Rather, this realization mirrors that of Narcissus, who also beat his body in despair until he was horrified to see the bruises blooming across the limbs of his “beloved” (Ov. *Met.* 3.480–87).

³⁷²See the introduction for further discussion of this source. Segal also notes that *Thyestes* combines the internal boundary violations of Thyestes’ body with external ones, as Atreus delights in dismembering his nephews (2008, 155). Hook points out that all sorts of boundaries are violated in the *Thyestes*: he notes the confusion of crimes in the Pelopid house and the repeated mixture of substances (1992, 185–86), as well as the indistinguishability of the brothers as “co-criminals” in this act of cannibalism (ibid., 208–09).

³⁷³*plagis tenetur clausa dispositis fera: / et ipsum et una generis inuisi indolem / iunctam parenti cerno* (the beast is held fast in the nets I set out: / I see both the man and, along with him, the essence of that hated line, / joined with their father, 492–94).

Thyestes' sons are equated with their father even as he unwittingly eats them: in line 780 (quoted above), the messenger says that Thyestes gnaws on his own limbs (*artusque... suos*). This reflexive renders Thyestes' feast at once a kind of autophagy, even as he acts as a tomb for his children (Tondo 2010, 48),³⁷⁴ and wholly abject, as the lines between self and other has been irrevocably crossed. By the end of the play, this confusion—is Thyestes an unnatural container for his children? Are they one and the same?—renders Thyestes' body uninterpretable as well as abject. As Tondo puts it, “à la fin du repas, elle deviendra une énigme à élucider, un macabre mélange de viscères du père et des enfants, image d’une tout autre relation parentale problématique” (2010, 49).

Thyestes' body is abject not only in this unnatural fusion of self and other, but also in its parallels with the maternal body, itself inherently abject for this reason. Littlewood sees Thyestes' body as thoroughly emasculated: first, he argues, Atreus' dominant gaze and verbal irony reduce Thyestes to a passive object (2008, 254). He also notes that Thyestes' body is feminized throughout this scene: words for stomach and womb, as well as food and fetus, are elided (2004, 200–01).³⁷⁵ He thus argues that Thyestes' unwitting consumption of his children is a violation of his body akin to rape: in his mind, Atreus reestablishes his masculinity and paternity that Thyestes called into question in sleeping with his wife by metaphorically raping his

³⁷⁴With this image, Seneca borrows from Ovid's treatment of Tereus' feast, in which he similarly described Tereus as eating his own flesh and blood (*Met.* 6.650–51), and his body as a tomb (*bustum*) for his son (6.665).

³⁷⁵The image of Thyestes as a pregnant woman has its origins in Ovid's Tereus, who is also reduced to a passive, feminized visual object (Littlewood 2004, 197). Yet the intertexts with the *Metamorphoses* complicate the gender roles in this final scene. Littlewood points out that in taking on Philomela's role as avenger, Atreus also assumes the role of the raped woman: as he puts it, “a drama of sexual dominion and threatened masculinity underlies the political tragedy” (2008, 245). Schiesaro likewise aligns Atreus with the wronged Philomela, and points out that he uses the traditionally female tactics of trickery and concealment to entrap Thyestes (2003, 81).

brother, thereby carrying out a Roman male fantasy of revenge against a male adulterer (2008, 253).³⁷⁶ Thyestes' body is doubly emasculated: he appears as an expectant mother in an especially abject and grotesque form of pregnancy, and his unwitting consumption of his children violates his body just as rape does the female body.

The play ends with the image of Thyestes' abject body. Atreus announces, *te puniendum liberis trado tuis* (I hand you over to your children for punishment, 1112). This line, of course, refers to the awareness of his cannibalism that Thyestes must live with for the rest of his life. But it also refers to the ultimate fate of their consumed remains. Schiesaro takes this line to refer to vomit and connects it back to Thyestes' figuratively pregnant body: "Thyestes, too, will be forced to perverse 'delivery' as he vomits his own children" (2003, 90).³⁷⁷ The play concludes with the focus returned to Thyestes' abject body: dripping with oil and wine and threatening explosive effluvia, his disgusting body blurs the lines between self and other, father and son, male and female, rendering it uninterpretable. What's more, this abjection is the result of Atreus' revenge, as the tyrant reduces his brother to this abject spectacle in order to read a sign of his own dominion and masculinity.

Atreus is thus one of the few characters in Seneca drama who not only interprets signifiers correctly, but also bends them to his vision of revenge. But what does it mean that Atreus, the puppeteer of this utterly dark drama, is devoid of all moral or ethical concerns? Henry and Henry point out that characters who maintain their sense of identity in Senecan

³⁷⁶Littlewood also points out that the drunken banqueter is a stock character of invective described as effeminate, a literary parallel that further removes Thyestes from the role of threatening adulterer (2004, 199).

³⁷⁷Santucci, connecting this line with Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and the bodily grotesque at the end of Seneca's *Phaedra* and *Oedipus*, rather argues that this line refers to excretion (2022, 190–98). Both bodily functions are, of course, abject.

drama, such as Atreus and Medea, are irredeemably evil (1985, 113–14).³⁷⁸ Commentators are also struck by the overwhelming sense of darkness in the *Thyestes*: there is no moral retribution, no glimmer of hope, at the play’s conclusion (Boyle 1983, 218). Part of this darkness, I argue, lies in the realization that the world Seneca creates, one that he repeatedly connects with imperial Rome, is rigged to benefit only its villains. The characters who can navigate the bewildering world of Senecan drama, full of obscure signifiers and uninterpretable bodies—or, even worse, those who manipulate these bodies as signifiers for their own gains—are irredeemably evil. Villains like Atreus use this rigged and bewildering system to take advantage of those closest to them. Those who trust others, like Thyestes, are destroyed for their naïveté as well as for their inability to see past the deceptions of this misleading world. The evil Atreus’ successful revenge and his superiority at the end of the play question whether it is possible—or even excusable—to trust even one’s nearest family members in such a world.

The Broken Body as a Scrambled Signifier: Hippolytus in Seneca’s Phaedra

Like his Thyestes and Oedipus, Seneca’s Hippolytus misreads the signifiers around him. This failure proves his undoing: despite increasingly obvious clues, he does not notice Phaedra’s passion for him until she makes it explicit. After she is rejected, her misleading accusations

³⁷⁸What’s more, Atreus’ control of the plot of the play through the bodies around him does not mean that he has control over himself: he is taken over by his insatiable appetite for revenge (Meltzer 1988, 317–18). Commentators conclude that the darkness of *Thyestes* ultimately implicates both the poet and the viewer (or reader) of the play. Schiesaro, for example, considers Seneca just as guilty as Atreus, “since he chooses to re-tell a story whose devastating contents he knows well: once again, to sing of *nefas* is, in a sense, to perpetrate it” (1994, 202). Poe Park likewise argues that “*Thyestes* has something to say about...the satisfaction derived by the poet from describing the slaughter or by the reader from reading the description: the play declares that it is a satisfaction of a natural impulse to violence and ultimately to self-destruction” (1969, 359).

cause his father Theseus to curse him; the sea monster conjured up by this curse hunts down Hippolytus and his horses, causing a fright that leads to his dismemberment. At the end of the play, his broken body itself becomes a signifier, but a scrambled one that others desperately try to put back in order.

Hippolytus is oblivious to Phaedra's symptoms of lovesickness. When the chorus asks the nurse how the mistress is doing, the nurse replies with a lengthy description of Phaedra's misery: she burns with a fever that warms her cheeks and brightens her eyes (362–65); she is not long satisfied with any position, repose, hairstyle, or outfit (365–73); her strength and youth have wasted away (373–80); and she weeps continuously (381–83). Although the fever and fatigue may safely be taken as symptoms of a physical disease, her tears and peevish dissatisfaction with her hair and clothes point to a more emotional condition. Michael Coffey and Roland Mayer comment that the nurse sets out the conventional features of lovesickness (ad 363), and Alfredo Casamento (ad 360–405) notes that she resembles Vergil's lovesick Dido (*Aen.* 4.66ff.). To the reader of Latin literature familiar with these elegiac tropes, Phaedra's lovesickness is obvious.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁹Many of Seneca's characters appear to be readers of Augustan literature, as they are frequently aware of their previous literary iterations (Edwards 2007, 150). After killing her children, Medea announces *nunc Medea sum* (now I am Medea, 910), as if she had read Euripides' tragedy. Phaedra also manipulates elegiac intertexts to cast herself as Hippolytus' lover: she rejects the title of mother and sister (609–11) and begs him to call her his slave (611–12), offering up her body to trials by snow, fire, and sword (613–22). These tropes are commonplace from Latin love poetry: the elegiac lover frequently casts his relationship as a *servitium amoris*, and such tests of loyalty are also traditional (Coffey and Mayer ad 615). See Trinacty (2014, esp. 63–93) for a fuller discussion of the ways in which Phaedra crafts her elegiac persona from Augustan intertexts. Hippolytus not only fails to catch Phaedra's overt elegiac intertexts, but also loses control over his language. In an attempt to comfort her, he promises he will take his father's place: *te merebor esse ne viduam putes / ac tibi parentis ipse supplebo locum* (I will deserve of you that you do not consider yourself widowed / and I myself will take the place of my parent for you, 632–33). Hippolytus meant that he would guide the household and look out for his brothers (631), but Phaedra misconstrues his words, considering them invitation enough to declare her love (634–37). As Coffey and Mayer comment, “decent Hippolytus walks into the trap and unwittingly plays Phaedra's game of reidentification of roles within the household” (ad 633).

Hippolytus, however, fails to notice any of these signs when Phaedra reappears onstage and swoons into his arms (585–90).

Phaedra's plan, however, backfires: horrified by her overt declarations of love, Hippolytus first thinks to murder her (704–09), then throws away his sword in disgust and rushes off to his beloved forest (713–18). Faced with the prospect of his public censure, Phaedra and her nurse manipulate the scene to implicate him in an attempted rape. The nurse first focuses on Phaedra's body: she orders the attending chorus, *hanc maestam prius / recreate. crinis tractus et lacerae comae / ut sunt remaneant, facinoris tanti notae* (But first revive this despairing / woman. Let her disheveled hair and torn locks / remain as they are, **markers** of such a great crime, 730–32).³⁸⁰ Although *recreo* most often means to revive from a faint, it can also mean to remake or create anew (*OLD, recreo*): here, the nurse orders the chorus to recreate Phaedra's bodily appearance into that of a rape victim. In addition, her rumpled hair, formerly a sign of her lovesickness (401–02) and a result of her altercation with Hippolytus (707), is remade into a sign of Hippolytus' attempted rape. In its later ode to Hippolytus' beauty, the chorus again focuses on her torn hair, casting it as a typically female deception: *en scelera! quaerit crine lacerato fidem, / decus omne turbat capitis, umectat genas. / instruitur omni fraude feminea dolus* (What crimes! She seeks to be believed from her torn hair, / she dishevels the beauty of her coiffure, she wets her cheeks. / A trick is being plotted with every female deception in the book, 826–28).³⁸¹

³⁸⁰The text of the *Phaedra* is taken from Coffey and Mayer's 1990 edition.

³⁸¹Casamento points out that there is a contradiction here in the nurse's orchestration of the crime scene and the chorus' condemnation of Phaedra, and suggests that in the interlude Phaedra has begun to directly participate in the deception (ad 826–28).

Phaedra's body is remade into a deceptive signifier that fools the male characters in the play, but not the female chorus.³⁸²

When Theseus returns, Phaedra and the nurse further manipulate their language to implicate Hippolytus without accusing him outright. Theseus threatens to torture the nurse to get to the bottom of the matter (882–85), and Phaedra confesses, *temptata precibus restiti; ferro ac minis / non cessit animus; vim tamen corpus tulit* (though tempted, I withstood his prayers; my spirit did not yield / to the sword or his threats; nevertheless my body suffered violence, 891–92). Her “confession” here is deliberately ambiguous: her words can be construed to refer either to the attempted “rape” or her illicit love. In his introduction to his commentary, Boyle calls this accusation “a series of ambiguities, ironies and innuendoes,” noting that “Phaedra was indeed ‘attacked by prayers,’ ‘threatened by sword,’ and her body did indeed ‘suffer violence’” (1987, 31–32). She leaves her words up to Theseus’ interpretation: she lets her torn hair and Hippolytus’ abandoned sword speak as signs of his attempted rape.

When Hippolytus first rushes away, the nurse notes with satisfaction that he has left behind his sword: *pignus tenemus sceleris* (we hold the proof of the crime, 730). As she is setting the scene for Phaedra’s “rape” by preserving her mussed hair, she likewise recasts the sword as evidence for the crime. Later, when pressed to name her attacker, Phaedra replies, *hic dicet ensis quem tumultu territus / liquit stuprator civium accursum timens* (this sword will tell, which the

³⁸²In addition, Phaedra considers herself permanently stained by the inherited guilt of her mother’s crimes. She states that she recognizes her preordained evil in the woods (112–14) and that it is the fate of her family not to be in control of themselves (698–99). Hippolytus, too, sees this hereditary guilt as a driving force behind Phaedra’s actions: he calls the minotaur a marker (*nota*) of Pasiphae’s crime (688–93), thereby implying that Phaedra’s hidden passion and deceptive appearance lack such obvious signs. Inherited guilt is a favorite Senecan motif (Coffey and Mayer ad 113), but here each character uses it to his or her rhetorical advantage: Phaedra implies that this guilt should absolve her of her crimes, while Hippolytus suggests that the lack of an external marker of Phaedra’s illicit love means he should not be blamed for failing to notice it.

ravisher left behind, / terrified by the commotion of the townspeople and fearing a crowd, 896–97). Phaedra thus also holds up the sword as a telltale sign of her attacker’s identity. In Euripides’ version of the play, Phaedra writes her accusations in plain language upon wax tablets (Eur. *Hipp.* 877; Boyle ad 896). Charles Segal connects this letter with the sword through the letters inscribed on the hilt: “the small signs on the hilt, furthermore, make the sword itself a form of writing, with a message that Theseus has to ‘read’” (1986, 204).³⁸³ This sword gains further significance from Ovidian intertexts as well. Theseus himself was acknowledged as the true son of his father Aegeus thanks to the symbols inscribed on the sword³⁸⁴ (Coffey and Mayer ad 899–900); this identification then foils the plans of his evil stepmother Medea (Boyle ad 899f.). Seneca replaces the letter of the Euripidean drama with a symbol of deeper significance: the sword handed down from father to son, formerly a sign of patrilineal descent and patriarchal authority that safeguards the family, has now been reconfigured as evidence of intrafamilial crime.

And Theseus reads the symbol of the sword exactly as Phaedra and the nurse had intended: he cries, *quod facinus, heu me, cerno? quod monstrum intuor? / regale parvis asperum signis ebur / capulo refulget, generis Actaei decus* (What crime, oh me, do I see? What monstrosity am I looking at? / The royal ivory inscribed with tiny **symbols** / on the hilt gleams before me, the glory of the house of Actaeon, 898–900). Theseus reconfigures the inscriptions on the sword’s hilt from a symbol of his family to a crime and monstrosity (*facinus, monstrum,*

³⁸³In his Lacanian reading of the play, Charles Segal goes on to read this sword as a phallic symbol that symbolizes the authority of the Father and Law (1986, 204–06).

³⁸⁴*pater in capulo gladii cognovit eburno / signa sui generis* (the father **recognized** on the ivory hilt of the sword / the **signs** of his own family, Ov. *Met.* 7.422–23).

898).³⁸⁵ This reading, however, is the wrong one, encouraged by Phaedra's and the nurse's manipulations: "Theseus misreads the signs of Phaedra and Hippolytus with tragic consequences" (Littlewood 2004, 260).³⁸⁶ Like Hippolytus, Theseus proves an inadequate interpreter of signs, easily misled and manipulated.³⁸⁷

Furthermore, while Phaedra and the nurse exercise control over the signifiers in the play (i.e., Phaedra's appearance and the sword), Hippolytus lacks control over the drama's symbolic systems. He unwittingly allows his physical appearance to be reconfigured as a sign of his bodily vulnerability. Through repeated intertexts, mythological parallels, and wordplay, the second choral ode emasculates Hippolytus and casts him as vulnerable to violence.³⁸⁸ First, the chorus compares him to Phoebe and to Bacchus (741–60), the former a female and the latter a gender-ambiguous mythological figure: Hippolytus' sung *decus*, then, seems a feminized kind of beauty.³⁸⁹ The chorus then asks, *quid deserta petis? tutior aviis / non est forma locis* (Why do you seek deserted places? Beauty is not / safer in pathless places, 777–78). It goes on to warn

³⁸⁵Casamento (ad 894–900) notes that Seneca's choice to replace the tablets with a sword more closely binds the male members of the family together, and foreshadows Theseus' pathetic recognition of his crime in Hippolytus' broken body (1249, discussed further below).

³⁸⁶Later, Theseus also misreads Hippolytus' body as the deceptive one: he says that his son's body is lying by affecting stern manners, a severe countenance, and rough garb to hide his innate lechery (915–17).

³⁸⁷Charles Segal further suggests that at the conclusion of the play, Theseus does not quite grasp the implications of his actions or the moral complexity of Phaedra's suicide: "Theseus' behavior at the end suggests that he may not be entirely adequate to the moral and emotional complexities of which he has had to be the judge. Tragedy leaves us with something that the Law of the Father cannot fully resolve" (1986, 201).

³⁸⁸Boyle also notes that this choral song creates a sense of foreboding surrounding Hippolytus, particularly in combination with the first ode on the power of sexual love (1997, 64).

³⁸⁹Charles Segal's Freudian reading of the play confirms this gender-ambiguity: he argues that Hippolytus has failed to reach manhood by supplanting his father, leaving him "suspended ambiguously between male and female" (1986, 109).

that wanton nymphs (*Naidēs improbae*, 780) and lascivious dryads (*lascivae nemorum deae...Dryades*, 783–84) will surround him in the groves at noontime. These lines not only recall Hylas, Hercules’ favorite who was captured by nymphs (Boyle ad 781; Casamento ad 777–84), but also align Hippolytus with the many raped nymphs of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.³⁹⁰ Thus, the chorus’ ode to Hippolytus’ beauty puts him in a uniquely female position of bodily vulnerability by describing his beauty as feminine and casting him as a potential rape victim.

The chorus’ song also repeatedly foreshadows Hippolytus’ dismemberment in these very woods: the forest poses a physical danger to him in that its rocks, trees, and brambles will tear him apart.³⁹¹ The chorus also warns him that Diana, looking down from the sky, may become infatuated with him and lose control of her chariot, causing a lunar eclipse (785–94). This is, of course, exactly what happens to Hippolytus: he loses control over his own chariot, which causes his shining beauty (796–97) to be permanently darkened by his gruesome death. Cindy Benton sees this warning as more than mere foreshadowing, but argues that this combination of gazes (i.e., the moon/Diana’s, Phaedra’s, and the monster’s) cause Hippolytus’ dismemberment: “the limb-by-limb description of the beautiful body that attracted Phaedra’s gaze (795–820) foreshadows the literal dismemberment of Hippolytus that results from the monstrous bull’s gaze and pursuit” (1999, 105).

Finally, the chorus focuses on the fleeting impermanence of beauty (761–76). It concludes by praying that Hippolytus may escape all of the threats that beauty poses, as few men

³⁹⁰For example, both Callisto (*Met.* 2.401–40) and Io (*Met.* 1.587–600) were raped by Jupiter after resting in the woods at noon. Cf. also Actaeon, who wandered through the pathless woods before being dismembered by his female hunting dogs and Diana’s wrath (*Ov. Met.* 3.138–252).

³⁹¹The forest’s role in Hippolytus’ dismemberment will be discussed in more detail below.

have possessed beauty without penalty,³⁹² and may safely reach ugly (*deformis*) old age (820–23). Thus, the chorus foreshadows Hippolytus’ ultimate loss of beauty in dismemberment, by stressing the impermanence of physical perfection, then praying for his loss of *forma*. As we shall see, the description of Hippolytus’ dismemberment and the subsequent *compositio* of his body repeatedly return to his lost *forma*: his mangled remains are without both beauty and a defining shape.³⁹³ In addition to the chorus, Phaedra herself also pinpoints Hippolytus’ physical appearance as the cause of her infatuation (646–62). Thus, the female gaze in this drama reconfigures Hippolytus’ beauty as a threat to his bodily integrity, and this threat ultimately is carried out in his gruesome dismemberment.³⁹⁴

Hippolytus’ passivity ultimately manifests itself through his loss of control over his horses and his subsequent dismemberment: he is reduced to material to be interpreted and debated in the form of his mangled, disordered body.³⁹⁵ His “misreading” of the various signs

³⁹²This hint at a punishment for beauty recalls the nymphs of the *Metamorphoses* who condemn their beauty as the cause of all their troubles (e.g., Daphne, 1.546) and further aligns Hippolytus with the rape victims of Ovid’s poem.

³⁹³Commentators also note that these lines recall Ovid’s version of Hippolytus’ end (15.538–40), in which the nymph Cynthia ages him and alters his appearance to protect him (Coffey and Mayer ad 822–23; Casamento ad 820–23). See Chapter Three, pp. 112–15 for a fuller discussion of this episode.

³⁹⁴Hippolytus loses control not only over the way his physical appearance is described, but also over the symbolism of his beloved forest. In his debate with the nurse about a life spent hunting in the woods, he portrays the forest as a Golden Age paradise, free from corruption and strife (483–564). His vision of the forest, however, is contradictory: his opening song (1–84) describes a hunting scene full of bloodshed (Davis 1983, 126; Littlewood 2004, 292). The nurse and Phaedra sexualize this landscape (Segal 1986, 68f.); the nurse argues that sexuality is a natural part of the woods he idealizes (446–82), and Phaedra, too, understands them in the elegiac sense (233–35; 608–16) as a site for amorous pursuit (Littlewood 2004, 280; Trinacty 2014, 72). Phaedra, the nurse, and the chorus combine forces to sexualize Hippolytus’ forest retreat from sexuality and sexual aggression, and he loses this contestation of meaning about his beloved woods (Trinacty 2014, 19).

³⁹⁵As Littlewood puts it, Hippolytus “loses power over his appearance, his words, his acts, and his ancestry. Though he finally understands Phaedra’s intentions he does not hear Theseus’ condemnation or recognize the monster which destroys him. Most importantly he does not show any awareness of the texts, the narrative, and the figures which make him ‘easy material’” (2004, 298).

and texts around him and his lack of control in the narrative find expression in his scrambled, illegible body at the end of the play. This powerlessness is underscored in his scene of dismemberment, in which the very forest he so loved tears him apart:

late cruentat arva et inlissum caput
scopulis resultat; auferunt domi comas,
et ora durus pulchra populatur lapis
peritque multo vulnere infelix decor.
moribunda celeres membra pervoluunt rotae;
tandemque raptum truncus ambusta sude
medium per inguen stipite ingesto tenet;
paulumque domino currus affixo stetit.
haesere biuges vulnere—et pariter moram
dominumque rumpunt. inde semianimem secant
virgulta, acutis asperi vepres rubis
omnisque truncus corporis partem tulit.

Far and wide the fields are bloodied and his head, dashed upon
the rocks, bounces back; the brambles pluck away his hair,
and the hard stones ravage his lovely face
and his doomed beauty perishes in many a wound.
The swift wheels roll over his dying limbs;
and finally the trunk of a tree charred into a stake holds him
fast with the stock driven right through the middle of his groin;
and for a little while the chariot stands still, held by its impaled master.
The team is stayed by the wound—and at the same time they break off
their delay and their master. Afterwards the thickets slash
him, half-dead, the rough brambles with their sharp thorns too,
and every tree trunk bears a piece of his body (1093–1104).

The messenger's description of Hippolytus' mutilation zeroes in on the various components of the forest—the trees, thickets, brambles, and rocks—as each inflicts its damage upon his body.³⁹⁶ As Boyle puts it, “the world he thought he controlled rips the flesh from his limbs and the limbs from his body” (1997, 65). Furthermore, this landscape, which Phaedra, the nurse, and the chorus have sexualized (see footnote 394 above), destroys Hippolytus in a sexual manner, by impaling

³⁹⁶Kennedy (2018, 224) points out other themes from the play with which these injuries resonate: for example, his blood soaking the fields (1093) recalls Hippolytus' bloodthirstiness in hunting (1–83). Cf. Actaeon's excessively bloody hunting in the *Metamorphoses* (3.143, 148; see footnote 109).

him with a stake through his groin (1098–1102). It is significant that Seneca invented this detail (Casamento ad 1097–1102), and no Freudian background is necessary for reading Hippolytus’ death as a symbolic rape-cum-castration (Boyle 1997, 58). In addition, these lines focus on his head (1093, 1095) and hair (1094), which were also emphasized in previous praise of his beauty (Casamento ad 1093–96). This focus on his head and groin recalls his beauty at the moment of its destruction, which vividly dramatizes the destructive power of repressed sexuality (Kennedy 2018, 224).

Just as the forest is described by its separate components, the messenger’s speech focuses on the individual parts of Hippolytus’ body in its dismemberment. The messenger describes the damage that each natural feature inflicted on each part of Hippolytus’ body (1093–95, 1102–03), and concludes that every tree trunk carries a different piece of his formerly intact form (1104). His dismemberment is, in the truest sense of the word, a *sparagmos*, a scattering.³⁹⁷ This abject image of his corpse dispenses with the fantasy that the body is an inviolable, intact whole.³⁹⁸ As Slaney puts it, “the human body is here reduced to components and deprived of the formal unity which now appears at the least transient and unreliable, if not downright illusory” (2015, 31). Furthermore, mutilation objectifies Hippolytus: his body parts shift from subjects to objects of

³⁹⁷Charles Segal notes that stylistically, Seneca’s narrative of Hippolytus’ dismemberment is also disjointed: it shifts from Hippolytus to his horses before being interrupted by a comparison to Phaethon (see footnote 402 below), and then describes his bodily injuries and his penetration through the groin, while the horses pause briefly and then take off again (1984, 323). In addition, the zeugma *pariter moram / dominumque rumpunt* (1101–02), with the two objects of the zeugma enjambed, stretches the limits of this literary device to create a jarring image of the moment of Hippolytus’ death.

³⁹⁸In Seneca’s *Troades*, too, scattering is presented as the ultimate threat to identity: Hector’s dismemberment (412–15) is reenacted in the threatened dispersal of his bones (648–56); Andromache tells Hecuba that Polyxena is the lucky one, as she will be covered by her native land while the rest of the Trojan women will be scattered over the earth (696–71); and Astyanax’s body broken by his fall is depicted as spread over the earth (1110–17). As Boyle puts it, “imagery and motifs of dust, ashes, tomb, smoke, loosing, tearing, burning, ravaging, scattering, dismembering, bursting, collapsing, sustain the play’s preoccupation with death and dissolution” (1997, 67).

violence and become “a lifeless mass of unrecognizable pieces” (Charles Segal 1984, 325).³⁹⁹

His abject dismemberment destroys the illusion of the body as an impregnable whole and active subject by reducing it to a scattered jumble of objectified body parts.

This emphasis on scattering and the destruction of Hippolytus’ bodily integrity along with his beauty plays on the double-sided nature of the word *forma*: both his characteristic beauty and his defining shape are destroyed at the same time. Faced with the jumbled remains of his body, characters try, and fail, to locate this lost beauty. At the end of his speech, the messenger asks, *hocene est formae decus?* (Has the glory of his beauty come to this? 1110). Phaedra asks much of the same thing when she sees his corpse for the first time: *heu me, quo tuus fugit decor / oculique nostrum sidus?* (Oh woe to me, where did your beauty flee, and the your eyes, my stars? 1173–74).⁴⁰⁰ Finally, Theseus, too, asks *huc cecidit decor?* (Has his beauty fallen to *this*? 1270). This repeated focus on Hippolytus’ characteristic beauty shows that his physical appearance was intrinsic to their concept of his identity.⁴⁰¹ When his abject death destroys this beauty, it destroys his identity in the eyes of others along with it.

³⁹⁹Even the more sentimental *peritque multo vulnere infelix decor* (and his doomed beauty perished in many a wound, 1096) displays an emphasis on multiplicity and scattering in comparison with Ovid’s Hippolytus, whose body was turned into one giant wound (*unumque erat omnia vulnus*, everything was all one wound, 15.529).

⁴⁰⁰Phaedra also asks, *Hippolyte, tales intuo vultus tuos / talesque feci?* (Hippolytus, am I really looking upon your face / and did I make it so? 1168–69). With this question, she implies that she bears the responsibility for his mutilated death.

⁴⁰¹Hippolytus, in contrast, put little stock in his outer appearance, but cast himself as the son of his Amazonian mother and follower of the huntress Diana. Thus, the identity that others seek to find in his broken remains is their conception of him (cf. Oedipus, who destroyed his eyes as important to his own sense of self as an expert decoder of signs; see above).

These repeated questions bring up the problem of recognition, traditionally the *anagnorisis*, at the end of the tragedy.⁴⁰² Instead of some terrible revelation, the characters in Seneca's *Phaedra* are confronted with a jumbled pile of remains that defies definition and does not lead to any deeper truths. In addition, the search for his scattered body parts casts his corpse as a signifier that they struggle to decode. The messenger describes how the family's slaves wander through the woods to track down his scattered limbs:

errant per agros funebris famuli manus,
per illa qua distractus Hippolytus loca
longum cruenta tramitem **signat nota**,
maestaeque domini membra **vestigant** canes.

The band of mourning slaves wanders through the fields,
through the places where Hippolytus was dragged
and **marked** a long trail with bloody **markers**,
and mournful dogs **track down** their master's limbs (1105–08).

At the end of the scene of mutilation, Hippolytus' body is no longer described through its parts alone, but is further abstracted and removed from himself as a person, as it is reduced to scattered signs that his dogs and slaves track down.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰²This theme of recognition was introduced already in the scene of dismemberment through an overt comparison to Ovid's Phaethon (*Met.* 2.161). Like Sol's horses, Hippolytus' do not recognize the burden of his body tangled in the reins: *talis per auras non suum agnoscens onus / Solique falso creditum indignans diem / Phaethonta currus devio excussit polo* (just as the chariot, not **recognizing** its burden through the sky / and resenting that the day had been entrusted to a false Sun, / flung Phaethon from the pathless heavens, 1090–92). By drawing a comparison with Phaethon through this unusual characterization of the horses failing to recognize their burdens, Seneca brings the theme of recognition to the fore. This simile also further underlines Hippolytus' loss of control over the forces around him (Davis 1983, 126–27).

⁴⁰³Scholars have not missed the inversion of Hippolytus' role from hunter to hunted (e.g., Boyle 1997, 66). In addition, details from his chariot accident also reinforce this inversion: as Boyle puts it, "the hunter of the play's first scene, confident then with his armoury of snares, nets, spears and dogs, falls victim to the 'gripping snares' and 'clinging knots' of a far more powerful huntress (1086f.)" (1997, 66). Littlewood (2004, 296) notes still more repeated details that underscore this shift from hunter to hunted, including the dew from his hunting song (11, 42) and the sea spray, like dew, shed by the monster (1027). As Boyle points out, hunting is a major motif of the play, which deals with many of the same themes I attempt to trace through the body, such as control, dominance, power, and characters' attempts to shape the course of their lives through their fantasies (1997, 57–58). In addition, scholars draw parallels

But just as the bodies of the sacrificial animals in the extispicy scene of Seneca's *Oedipus* stubbornly refused to give clear signs, this body-as-signifier resists interpretation. In the long concluding scene, the chorus repeatedly enjoins Theseus to lay out his body properly ordered for burial:⁴⁰⁴

disiecta, genitor, membra laceri corporis
in ordinem dispone et errantes loco
restituere partes: fortis hic dextrae locus,
hic laeva frenis docta moderandis manus
ponenda: laevi lateris **agnosco notas**.
quam magna lacrimis pars adhuc nostris abest!

The scattered limbs of his torn body, father,
arrange in order and put the wandering parts
back in place: here is the place for his strong right hand,
here his left hand, skilled in managing the reins,
should be placed; **I recognize the signs** of his left side.
But how large a part is still lacking for our tears! (1256–61)

In the chorus' attempts to put Hippolytus back together, his body appears like hopelessly jumbled jigsaw puzzle pieces, many of which are missing and others damaged beyond repair.⁴⁰⁵

between Hippolytus' and Actaeon's fates: both are transformed from hunter to hunted by their dogs (Boyle ad 1105f.). Littlewood (2004, 296–97) also argues that the language at the end of the hunting song (81–84) alludes to Actaeon's flight as a deer (3.225–35). Like Actaeon, Hippolytus also fatally missteps in failing to correctly interpret the signs around him, and loses control over his bodily integrity as a result.

⁴⁰⁴As commentators have pointed out, this scene recalls the Roman ritual of *concinatio corporis*, the gathering of body parts and remaking of the body before burial (cf. Stat. *Theb.* 3.131f., Apul. *Met.* 7.26), in addition to combining the final scenes of Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae* (Boyle 1997, 87). The end of Euripides' *Bacchae* contains a lacuna of at least 50 lines, in which Agave may have laid out Pentheus' limbs for burial (Kennedy 2018, 227). Kennedy argues that Theseus in these lines "gruesomely literalize[s]" this rite (ibid., 226), while Charles Segal thinks that the play's finale rather dramatizes the unfulfillment of this burial rite and the emptiness that Hippolytus leaves in his house (1986, 193–94).

⁴⁰⁵This scene has attracted scholarly ire and ridicule, particularly in earlier studies: Butler calls it the "climax of absurdity" (1909, 69–70). In their commentary, Coffey and Mayer echo this sentiment, arguing that Seneca made a fatal mistake in failing to realize that so much detail would be read humorously rather than tragically (ad 1256–61).

These pieces are also described as signifiers (*notas*, 1260), but they point only vaguely to the left side of Hippolytus' body: the chorus cannot use them to pinpoint specific body parts, much less Hippolytus himself from these remains. In the end, Theseus' final speech sums up the damage done to Hippolytus' body: *hoc quid est forma carens / et turpe, multo vulnere abruptum undique? / quae pars tui sit dubito; sed pars est tui. / hic, hic repone, non suo, sed vacuo loco* (What is this thing lacking form / and disgusting, torn up everywhere with many a wound? / What part of you this is, I do not know; but it is part of you. / Place it here, here, not in its own, but in an empty spot, 1265–68). According to Charles Segal, the ugliness of this spectacle results from the missing body parts and wholeness of human form (1986, 216): without its defining shape and beauty (*forma*, 1265), Hippolytus' body is reduced to an objectified, repulsive thing (*hoc*, 1265).⁴⁰⁶ Theseus, too, cannot identify his dismembered body parts, and resorts to placing them in any empty space: this hopelessly disordered body appears as a scrambled, illegible sign.⁴⁰⁷

In addition, the chorus addresses Theseus as *genitor* (1256), and Theseus, too, refers to himself as a father as he narrates his actions: *dum membra nato genitor adnumerat suo / corpusque fingit* (while the father counts out the limbs for his own son / and fashions his body, 1264–65).⁴⁰⁸ Charles Segal argues that this repetition of *genitor* casts Theseus in the role of

⁴⁰⁶Casamento notes that this thing is not only unrecognizable, but even resists being called by a name (ad 1265–68).

⁴⁰⁷Astyanax's body, too, is described as a scrambled signifier after his leap from the towers of Troy: *signa clari corporis, / et ora et illas nobiles patris notas, / confudit imam pondus ad terram datum* (the signs of his illustrious body, / his face and those noble marks of his father, / his weight of his body plunging to the earth has mixed up, *Tro.* 1112–14). His broken body is also a shapeless lump (*iacet / deforme corpus*, his body lies without form, *Tro.* 1116–17). I do not have the space here to examine Astyanax's death in further depth.

⁴⁰⁸Many scholars add a metapoetic lens to this scene. Boyle argues that it represents Seneca's failed attempt to re-member Euripides into a Roman whole (1997, 12), while Kennedy (2018, 237) contends that

creator, “as if he were again engaged in the creative act of giving life to his son” (1986, 216).⁴⁰⁹

In addition, the verb *fingo* creates the impression that Theseus is creating Hippolytus’ body entirely anew, like a sculptor.⁴¹⁰ The reader (or listener) is left with the sense that Hippolytus’ refashioned body is no longer Hippolytus, not only because it is mangled beyond recognition, but also because the new shape that Theseus gives it is utterly different than its former one.

As in the *anagnorisis* of the *Thyestes*, Hippolytus’ body does not prompt others to recognize him in his remains. Gazing upon his corpse, Theseus says, *Hippolytus hic est? crimen agnosco meum* (Is *this* Hippolytus? I **recognize** my crime, 1249).⁴¹¹ Just as Thyestes’ recognition of his brother’s cruelty in his children’s dismembered corpses confirmed that these bodies were turned into abject signifiers of Atreus’ choosing, Theseus’ recognition of his own fault in Hippolytus’ mangled corpse shows that his son’s scattered remains no longer signify his

it “powerfully suggests how the body acts as a trope of artistic unity and integrity” by referring to Horace (*disiectae membra poetae*, *Sat.* 1.4.62). Segal thinks that Hippolytus’ body represents Seneca’s attempt to join together many poetic traditions, including Euripides’ two plays, Sophocles’ *Phaedra*, and Ovid’s 4th *Heroides* and seventh book of the *Metamorphoses* (1986, 215): “just below the surface of Seneca’s text, with the attempt to recompose mutilated fragments of a once beautiful form, lies Seneca’s own authorial problem: recomposing into a beautiful unity the now scattered pieces of a past tradition” (*ibid.*). Schiesaro sees rather questions about *mimesis* in poetry in these lines: “[i]n Theseus’ anguished question at the sight of his dismembered son... we can infer a much larger question on the nature of representation and the understanding behind it” (2003, 201).

⁴⁰⁹He also notes that “[a]s Theseus recomposes the body, his creative shaping... of its form brings him full circle with his earlier murderous disjunction of its parts” (1986, 217).

⁴¹⁰Ovid’s Pygmalion also fashioned an entirely new body of his ideal woman out of disparate pieces of ivory (*Met.* 10.248) in a fetishized “dismemberment” of idealized parts of the female body arranged for male pleasure (Salzman-Mitchell 2008, 304–06). Theseus’ resemblance to Pygmalion here only underscores their differences: his inability to create a whole from the jumble of pieces before him compared with the artist’s skill, and the grotesque abjection of Hippolytus’ body compared with the smooth form of the ivory statue.

⁴¹¹Sutton suggests removing the question mark at line 1249, arguing that *Phaedra*’s speech shows that Hippolytus’ face is still intact in the form of the mask worn by the actor onstage, so Theseus’ question must be rhetorical, if a question at all (1986, 52–53). This question, however, fits right in with the series of rhetorical questions about Hippolytus’ loss of beauty; there is no need to remove it.

identity.⁴¹² Theseus interprets Hippolytus' body and identity as he sees fit, just as Phaedra and her nurse did earlier in sexualizing him (see footnote 394 above).⁴¹³ This broken signifier suggests that regarding the body as a reliable indicator of identity is fraught and dangerous business. In the end, despite Hippolytus' distinct and characteristic appearance, his body is transformed into an abject scattering of markers that simply do not add up to his former bodily appearance, no matter what his father and the chorus do. This dismemberment, moreover, is heavily foreshadowed through his powerlessness in the rest of the play: he fails to interpret the signs around him, leading to an ultimate loss of control over his chariot and his bodily integrity. In the end, Hippolytus' scattered remains show that the body signifies nothing beyond abjection, loss of control, and despair in this play.

Conclusion

Much like the worlds of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or of Petronius' novel, the worlds that Seneca creates in his dramas are utterly disorienting. Characters attempt to navigate a morass of obscure portents and deceptive signs, only to fail over and over again: Oedipus and Tiresias

⁴¹²Rosenmeyer rather sees an emphasis on automatization in the refusal of Hippolytus' body to be put back together, as if it were asserting its own rights (1989, 122). One could perhaps see this same emphasis in the illegibility of the sacrificed animals in *Oedipus*' extispicy scene and of Thyestes' bewildering body, as these bodies refuse to be read as signifiers. Other scholars see a loss of personal identity symbolized in Hippolytus' dismemberment. According to Tobin, this lack of recognition and the destruction of characters' understandings of themselves and others lie at the heart of Senecan tragedy (1966, 70). As Charles Segal puts it, "he is left mangled, his personal identity violated utterly in a *sparagmos* that leaves him totally unrecognizable" (1986, 129). Wessels likewise sees the inability to put his body back together as a symbol of his loss of identity (2014, 231).

⁴¹³Segal also gives a Freudian reading of this final scene, which he sees as burdened by the "troubling materiality" of Phaedra's and Hippolytus' corpses: "[t]hough crushed beneath the counterweight of the earth, it [Phaedra's body] blocks by its recurrence any closure through the decree of the father, the word of Law" (1986, 219).

cannot decode the ominous portents that hint at the king's crimes, Thyestes fails to heed the foreboding signs of his own body, and Theseus is misled by Phaedra's and the nurse's deceptive "clues" pointing to Hippolytus' rape. What's more, Seneca brings bodies to the fore as signs to be decoded: the extispicy scenes in his *Oedipus* and *Thyestes* present abject bodies as divine signs in need of interpreting, and the other characters of his *Phaedra* debate over the meaning of Hippolytus' jumbled remains. These abject bodies, however, resist interpretation: their overflowing gore and dismembered limbs defy both their bodily boundaries and any attempt to pin a clear meaning on them. Ultimately, bodies in Senecan drama emerge as broken signifiers, whose failure to signify is symbolized through their utter destruction.

Seneca's bewildering worlds vividly dramatize the disorientation of early imperial Rome, in which the traditional bodily signifiers of class and identity have been upended (see Chapter Four, pp. 122–32 for further discussion of this topic). In addition, his gory scenes of dismemberment show how easily missteps in this confusing world can turn fatal: Hippolytus' end, for example, is the result of Phaedra's and the nurse's manipulations and Theseus' failure to see behind their deceptions. Hippolytus' violent death, presented as a natural consequence of such a bewildering world, evokes the high-stakes drama of the early imperial court, where a misinterpreted facial expression could earn a death sentence. In Neronian Rome as in Seneca's dramas, the body becomes an object of intense scrutiny, and misinterpretations or ambiguous signs can spell disaster at a moment's notice.

Only a few characters in Seneca's tragedies can navigate this world, can manipulate its signifiers and the bodies around them to their own ends, and these characters are irredeemably evil. Atreus, for example, directs his revenge like his personal drama, manipulating and deceiving all around him: ultimately, his control is reflected in his utter destruction of the bodies

of Thyestes and his children. By connecting the ability to interpret and manipulate signifiers with pure evil, Seneca paints a dark picture of power and control within the context of the early empire. Rather than point his finger at any one emperor or tyrannical act, his dramas reflect a bewildering world full of inexplicable signifiers, in which those in control, the puppeteers pulling the strings, are the villains.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

Summary

Early imperial Latin literature is notorious—and problematic to some—for its detailed descriptions of gore. But, as I have argued in this dissertation, a broader view of Julio-Claudian literature shows that bodies—particularly, male bodies—take on an unprecedented importance. Ovid and Seneca rework Greek myths to foreground these bodies: Ovid’s version of Marsyas’ tale, for example, is dominated by an extended ekphrasis on the satyr’s flayed body, while Seneca rewrites the Oedipus story to feature bodies as portents. The male body in Petronius’ novel similarly dominates the narrative, as the reader is confronted with a carnivalesque, at times grotesque, body that dwells in the baser functions. Rather than recede into the background, the body and issues of embodiment are at the fore of Julio-Claudian literature.

Yet these bodies are at odds with the traditional ideals of the elite Roman man, who defined his gender and status through his body’s legally protected inviolability. The physical appearances of male characters are frequently deformed through extreme violence: both Ovid and Seneca, for example, dwell on the dismemberment of Hippolytus. At other times, these supposedly inviolate bodies are rendered porous and penetrable: Ovid’s Pyramus stabs himself through the groin in an absurdly grotesque simile of a pipe gushing water, and, despite his freeborn status, Petronius’ Encolpius constantly faces sexual assault and rape. Even when male characters avoid physical and sexual violence, they are often not in control of their own bodies:

Encolpius struggles with impotence throughout the novel, while Seneca's Thyestes and Ovid's Tereus unwittingly find themselves the vessels for their own children. The male bodies presented throughout Julio-Claudian literature defy the ideal of the impenetrable, self-controlled, inviolable Roman elite man: they are mutilated, sexually assaulted, rendered both powerless and abject.

These problematic bodies gain further significance in their frequent representation as signs. Words denoting signifiers (*nota*, *signum*, *vestigium*) and recognition ([*re*]cognosco) cluster in scenes in which embodied identity is at stake: Phaethon desperately tries to obtain visible proof (*nota*, *Met.* 1.761) of his paternity, only to end up a dismembered corpse with an empty tomb marked by his name (*signant*, *Met.* 2.326), while Seneca presents Hippolytus' jumbled remains as a scrambled sign (*nota*, *Ph.* 1107, 1260) to be decoded. In other scenes, bodies are presented as objects of scrutiny that onlookers attempt to "read": Encolpius tries to guess Trimalchio's status from his outlandish get-up, a mishmash of conflicting class markers (32), and Tiresias attempts to decode the bodies from the extispicy scene in Seneca's *Oedipus* (*signa*, 299; *notae*, 331, 352). In other episodes of extreme violence, the issue of recognition comes to the fore: Pentheus (*Met.* 3.717–27) and Actaeon (*dominum cognoscite vestrum!* *Met.* 3.230) desperately attempt to make themselves recognizable to their loved ones before they are dismembered, while the lopped-off head and hands of Thyestes' children represent the climactic *anagnorisis* of Seneca's play (*agnosco fratrem*, *Thy.* 06). Violated male bodies in Julio-Claudian literature are presented as signs or texts that onlookers must decode.

Yet these bodies resist their role as signifiers in a way that repeatedly leads to an overwhelming atmosphere of disorientation and bewilderment. Phaethon's performance as a demi-god fails disastrously and results in his fall from Sol's chariot; Trimalchio's outfit and performance as an elite are not legible; and in Seneca's tragedies, the sacrificed bodies from the

extispicy scene and Hippolytus' dismembered corpse stubbornly refuses to be read as meaningful signs. The body-as-text that Julio-Claudian literature represents is a slippery one that consistently eludes interpretation.

Read in the light of the ideal, impenetrable body of the elite male fantasy, the broken bodies-as-signifiers that litter early imperial literature dramatize anxieties about embodied identity in the constantly changing socio-political climate of the period. In the shifting power structures of the early empire, the assumptions that defined the elite male body—and, thereby, social and embodied identity—as inviolable and impenetrable became destabilized: no longer could elite men count on their gender and status as protections from the violent whims of the emperor. The elite male body is no longer a legible text of high status and power. In the fictional literature of the period, the abject male body became a way of working out these anxieties. As Kristeva explains, the abject both attracts and repulses: it is disgusting, yet one cannot look away. Literary representations of abjection thus become a cathartic method for working out anxieties about the identity that it threatens. The problematic male bodies populating Julio-Claudian literature stem from precisely this contradictory impulse to both look and to look away: the wounded, marked, and dismembered male bodies in these texts are “nodal points of anxiety,” as Porter puts it (1999, 6), through which their authors dwell on the meaning of eliteness and masculinity in a world in which all definitions and norms are changing.

Pompey's Head in Lucan's Bellum Civile: A Case Study

Any study of the body in Julio-Claudian literature cannot be complete without Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, but my treatment of him here is confined to these few pages. Lucan's epic poem

on the civil war between Pompey and Caesar shares the same obsession with the physical violation of the male body as Ovid's epic and Seneca's tragedies: as many scholars have pointed out, the mutilated citizen body stands as a metaphor for the dismembered body politic of the Republic (e.g., Edwards 2007, 34) and for the collapse of the self in civil war (Bartsch 1998, 3).⁴¹⁴ The themes that I have traced here—physical violence, issues with recognition, and the body's ultimate failure to function as a signifier—feature prominently in Lucan's prologue:

bella per Emathios plus quam civilian campos,
 iusque datum sceleri canimus, populumque potentem
 in **sua** victrici conversum **viscera** dextra,
cognatasque acies, et rupto foedere regni
 certatum totis concussi viribus orbis
 in commune nefas, infestisque obvia **signis**
signa, pares aquilas et pila minantia pilis.

Of wars across Emathian plains, worse than civil wars,
 and of legality conferred on crime we sing, and of a mighty people
 attacking **its own guts** with victorious sword-hand,
 of **familiar** battle lines, and, once the pact of tyranny was broken,
 of conflict waged with all the forces of the shaken world
 for universal guilt, and of **standards** ranged in enmity against
standards, of eagles matched and javelins threatening javelins (1.1–7).⁴¹⁵

In these opening lines, Lucan casts the civil war as a violation of bodies: he presents the reader with an image of soldiers plunging their swords into their own guts (*sua... viscera*, 3), as the civil body turns upon itself. In using the reflexive *sua*, Lucan emphasizes the sense of violation in these lines: not only are these bodies abject and penetrated, but they also turn on themselves as they attack their fellow citizens. The familiarity of the opposing battle lines (*cognatasque acies*, 4) further heightens this sense of violation, and presents an issue that runs throughout the text: in this war, familiar friends are treated as foreign enemies, while the reader becomes familiar with

⁴¹⁴Bartsch sees Lucan's poem as a "prolonged expression of a crisis around the body" (1998, 12), whose main thrust is "the subject under siege" (ibid., 45–46).

⁴¹⁵Lucan's text is adapted from the 1928 Loeb edition, and translations from Braund's 1992 translation.

uncanny sights better left unseen (such as portents, 2.1–4; or necromancy, 6.624–774). These lines show that in Lucan’s world, the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar, friend and foe, self and other, is blurred. Finally, *signa* appear in this prologue (*infestisque obvia signis / signa*, 6–7) as military standards.⁴¹⁶ Here, equal and well-known battle standards—as well as identical eagles of the Roman state and javelins, the weapons of Roman legionaries—face off against each other, thereby becoming further symbols of the violation of civil war. In the poem’s opening lines, abject bodies and confused signs symbolize the violation of civil war.

Violated bodies, recognition, and signs appear frequently throughout the poem, but I will focus on one example: Pompey’s body and head in his decapitation.⁴¹⁷ Even before his grisly end, Pompey’s body is presented as a sign to be interpreted.⁴¹⁸ As he approaches from afar in another ship, his wife Julia notes (*notavit*, 8.55) his hair in disarray, his pallor, and the dust on his clothes to read of his defeat at the battle of Pharsalia (8.54–57). However, the symbolism of Pompey’s body most comes to the fore in his death and abuse of his corpse. The scene of his decapitation is abject in its gory details,⁴¹⁹ but focuses far more on what the great general’s face

⁴¹⁶*Signa* appear most frequently in Lucan’s text in this specific sense, as military standards, though they take on further symbolic meaning, as each general touts “his standards” as a sign of his martial and moral superiority.

⁴¹⁷Other episodes I cannot examine here include: the mutilations of Sulla’s civil war (2.146–233), particularly their description as *mortis nova signa* (new signs of death, 2.115) and the scene of parents trying to recognize their children in a pile of jumbled bodies (2.167–68); the abject body and rites of the witch Erichtho (6.529–68), particularly her rite of necromancy resurrecting a corpse (6.624–774); and the emphasis on recognition before, during, and after the battle of Pharsalia (7.197–206, 7.463–66; 7.792–94).

⁴¹⁸Throughout his speech in Book 2 (2.531–95), Pompey also presents his standards and his face as instantly recognizable symbols of his success and superiority throughout the world (2.531, 576, 592).

⁴¹⁹This description draws attention to each layer of his neck that Septimius must saw through (*tunc nervos venasque secat nodosaque frangit / ossa diu*, then he severed the muscles and veins and hacked long / at the knotted bones, 8.672–73), and emphasizes Pompey’s breath moments before the decapitation (8.670–71) and the signs of life as the sword cuts through his neck (8.682–83), thereby blurring the lines between life and death.

once meant. The narrative shifts from a stomach-churning account of his decapitation to a description of this face's former symbolism: *hoc leges Campumque et rostra movebat, / hac facie, Fortuna, tibi, Romana, placebas* (it [Pompey's head] swayed the laws, the Campus and the Rostra; / with this face you stood proud, Roman Fortune, 8.685–86).⁴²⁰ Pompey's head and face, in their strong bearing and recognizable appearance, acted as symbols of the Republic.

In Pompey's decapitation, this symbol of the Republic is twisted at the hands of his enemies: the face that formerly guided the Roman state is turned into a hideously mummified version of himself (8.688–91). Pompey's head is made abject in the step-by-step description of the process of mummification, which describes how his blood was drained, his brains torn out, and the head dried from the inside out (8.689–90). The former symbol of the Roman state is also made foreign by this Egyptian practice, described as a "hideous art" (*arte nefanda*, 8.688), and by the role of Egyptians in his death: a *Pharius satelles* (Egyptian minion, 8.675) has the honor of bearing his decapitated head away. Pompey's head, which formerly stood for the glory of the Roman Republic, is rendered abject, foreign, and degraded at the hands of his enemies and turned into a symbol of Caesar's victory.⁴²¹

The rest of Pompey's body is similarly degraded: unburied, his headless trunk is tossed by the waves, ground against the sand, and bashed against the rocks (8.708–10).⁴²² As the corpse now lacks a defining shape (*nullaque manente figura*, when all shape is lost, 8.710), the only

⁴²⁰The narrator also emphasizes that Pompey's countenance and bearing did not change at all in suffering his painful end (8.663–67).

⁴²¹Pompey's mummified head also becomes a public spectacle that symbolizes Caesar's victory: his son Sextus later says that he saw his father's head paraded around the city on a pike (9.133–43), though McClellan notes that Sextus' witnessing of such a sight is a narrative impossibility (2019, 75).

⁴²²This image recalls Priam's trunkless body from Vergil's *Aeneid* (2.557–58), as scholars (e.g., McClellan 2019, 68–69) have noted.

marker (*nota*) by which Pompey can be identified is the corpse's lack of a head (*una nota est Magno capitis iactura revolsi*, 8.711). These lines describe how the signifiers for Pompey's body have been deformed. Formerly, his famous face signified his superiority and identity; now, this gruesomely mummified head serves as a sign of Caesar's victory, while his dismembered body signals his identity.

Because the symbolism of Pompey's body has been appropriated by his enemies, his follower Cordus attempts to make his grave into a symbol. In a lengthy description of these attempted funeral rites (8.712–80), Cordus burns the rest of Pompey's body and marks (*signemus*, 771) the spot with a stone as a token (*nota*, 772) so that future admirers might recognize (*norit*, 774) its significance. Despite Cordus' efforts, this makeshift grave as a symbol for Pompey's greatness fails utterly. In a lengthy lament, the narrator complains that Cordus imprisoned the general in this poor grave, instead of allowing his great spirit to roam over the land (8.795–822): this paltry tomb is the wrong signifier for Pompey's greatness. The book and these complaints conclude with the remark that this insignificant grave will one day soon disappear, an occurrence the narrator considers a happy one, as then such atrocities as Pompey's death may no longer be believed (8.865–72). Thus, Cordus' attempts to construct a tomb that might signify Pompey's identity and greatness are presented as doomed from the start: such a symbol, the narrator suggests, can signify nothing beyond the crime and violation of civil war.

Ultimately, Pompey himself and the hope for a resurrected Republic that he embodied cannot be captured in corporeal signifiers. These signifiers are mutilated, distorted, and appropriated by the enemy (i.e., his dismembered body and mummified head) or are erased (his makeshift grave). Thus, like the bodies-as-signs from other Julio-Claudian works, Pompey's

mutilated body fails to signify his identity, ultimately becoming an abject symbol of violation and loss of identity.

Looking Forward: Problematic Bodies and Male Identity in Flavian Literature

This interest in the violated male body and identity extends beyond the Julio-Claudian period, and into the Flavian, a period (69–96 CE) of relative political stability marked by its flowering of literature. After the civil war of 69 CE, the new Flavian dynasty settled into a more harmonious relationship with the senatorial elite. Yet in this brief period, Rome witnessed the eruption of Vesuvius, the siege of Jerusalem, and the aggressive expansion and fortification of the empire's frontiers. Despite these cultural changes, the Flavian author of the pseudo-Senecan *Hercules Oetaeus* displays a similar interest in Hercules' embodiment and suffering as his Neronian counterpart, although, as we shall see, the surprisingly upbeat ending of the play gestures toward a shifting attitude toward imperial power.

Pain and the Destruction of Identity in Hercules Oetaeus: A Case Study

In the pseudo-Senecan tragedy *Hercules Oetaeus*,⁴²³ the relationship between Hercules' body and identity is a thread that runs throughout the drama. Like the corpses of Hippolytus and Astyanax, Hercules' body is rendered abject when the poisoned cloak that his wife Deianira gave him melds with his body and dissolves it. Yet unlike these tragic heroes, Hercules experiences

⁴²³Unlike the other plays discussed in this dissertation, *Hercules Oetaeus* is widely considered a pseudo-Senecan drama: its extreme length, frequent borrowings from other Senecan dramas, and upbeat Stoic ending, at odds with the sense of inescapable doom that hangs over the other plays, lead scholars to consider that this tragedy was written in the late first or early second century CE (Fitch 2018, 338). Despite its uncertain authorship, I include this play here as a likely example of Flavian-era literature that picks up on and amplifies many of the concerns of Senecan drama.

his body's abjection while he is still alive, and he himself describes its destruction and his reactions to it. He emphasizes the poison's penetration of his deepest marrow (1220, 1227) and details its progression from his outer skin through his limbs to settle in his bones (1224–27): his formerly impenetrable body is utterly violated. The burning poison ultimately reduces his body to a formless, melted heap: he describes how his bones collapse and the hinges (*compagibus*) of his body rupture under the fire's heat (1228–29). Instead of viewing the impregnable, solid hero, readers are confronted with an image of Hercules reduced to an abject puddle.

But more disturbing to Hercules than the gore of this scene is the poison's infiltration of his body. His son Hyllas describes the lack of distinction between the cloak and Hercules' body: the cloak merges with Hercules' skin (*vestis immiscet cutem*, 831), and when the hero tries to pull it off, it tears off his skin with it (826–27). Hercules himself seems more disturbed about the poison's invisibility (Walde 1992, 173): he repeatedly laments that his ultimate demise will occur through an opponent that refuses to show its face (1165–73; 1258–64; 1392–95). The venom's invisibility and its penetration of his internal body cavities ultimately prevent Hercules from distinguishing between himself and the poison that is killing him. At the end of his extended description of the effects of the poison on his body, he dissociates himself from his new, abject body (*Herculeae non sunt membra*, these limbs are not Hercules', 1231). He also remarks that even after he has laid his body bare, flaying his skin to uncover his opponent, he cannot find the poison (1258–64): he ends by lamenting that the venom is indistinguishable from himself (*o malum simile Herculi*, oh evil all too similar to Hercules, 1264).

As Christine Walde points out, the poison's equivalence with Hercules himself is part and parcel of his strength: he can be conquered only by something as strong as he, but it has penetrated his body so deeply that he cannot destroy it without destroying himself as well (1992,

205). In the end, Hercules' alienation from his body is so complete that he turns on his body (Slaney 2015, 20). When Hyllas describes how the cloak tears off Hercules' skin, he phrases this destruction as a self-imposed flaying with the repetition of pronouns (*artus ipse dilacerat suos*, he flays his own limbs, 826). His mother Alcmene, too, refuses to believe that something as inconsequential as a poison administered by female treachery could undo her son, and suggests that his endless labors have bred some terrible sickness within his body (1396–98): that is, she insists that Hercules must have done this to himself, under the logic that only the hero is strong enough to destroy himself.⁴²⁴ Thus, Hercules is so alienated from his body that that he and other characters depict his suffering as a final, fatal struggle between his self and body.

This suffering and the dissociation that it causes shake the very core of Hercules' identity, of which his body and its legendary strength formed the crux (Tobin 1966, 65). The chorus of Oechalian women had opened the play by singing about the strength and impenetrability of Hercules' body (151–72), a depiction that underscores the contrast with its later demise (Walde 1992, 114). Deianira, too, equates Hercules' bodily impenetrability with his very life: she says that at the moment at which Hercules began to be vulnerable, he began to die (894).⁴²⁵ By destroying his body, the poison also destroys Hercules' sense of self. In his lament, Hercules says that out of all his trials, only this suffering has caused him to cry out (1265–72): the poison's destruction of masculine, heroic sense of self becomes obvious to all through his tears (Walde 1992, 205).

⁴²⁴The chorus, too, sings that with no enemy left to conquer him, it is fitting that Hercules dies by his own hand (1214–17).

⁴²⁵Hercules' bodily strength is also inextricably bound up with his identity in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* (Rosenmeyer 1989, 121), as the hero is recognized by his muscles and *viscera* (622–25).

Hercules' shaken sense of self is evident as he repeatedly and desperately seeks assurance that those around him still recognize him as the legendary hero. He asks Jupiter whether he can still recognize his son now that his body, which accomplished his legendary feats, is destroyed; Jupiter does not respond (1233–48). These questions show that Hercules identifies himself through his body and the feats it accomplished, and that he does not know how to present himself so as to be recognized without it.⁴²⁶ Hercules likewise begs his mother to recognize him (1345–49), even as she laments his wasted body by asking where his legendary strength and limbs have gone (1340–45). The hero is desperate to be recognized as such despite his wasted form, yet simultaneously doubts that this is possible.

Only when Hercules realizes that his demise was fated does he regain his legendary fortitude: Philoctetes describes how his countenance was transformed as he willingly sacrificed his body to the pyre's flames, and says that he ceased weeping and groaning, but even gave counsel despite his burning body (1726–55). Once the hero realizes that Fate, and not merely a stronger opponent, has defeated him, his crisis of identity seems to be resolved (Tobin 1966, 69). This regaining of his former sense of self is symbolized through his new, divine form: Alcmene instantly recognizes his deified form as himself (1944–46), even though Hercules explains that the mortal bits inherited from his mother were burned away, leaving only his divine, paternal features (1966–68).⁴²⁷

⁴²⁶Walde points out that the passive verb *credetur* (1248) shows that Hercules is less worried about Jupiter's recognition of himself personally as his son, and is more concerned about living a life that can be considered as worthy of his status as a demi-god (1992, 205). Ovid's Phaethon was likewise more interested in choosing a favor from his father that conspicuously cemented his status as the god's son in the eyes of others than in assuring himself of his father's affection (see Chapter Two, p. 73–74).

⁴²⁷Ovid's Hercules, in contrast, is not recognizable in his new, divine form (*Met.* 2.263–65).

Hercules Oetaeus thus stages an extended crisis of identity through the destruction of the body, a theme drawn from Ovid and Seneca's treatments of mythological heroes. Its ending, however, is surprisingly positive for a "Senecan" drama: Hercules regains his sense of self by accepting his fate, and is rewarded with a new, divine form that embodies his former identity in all its glory. This Flavian tragedy departs from its Julio-Claudian inheritance: it shares the early imperial interest in the connection between embodiment and identity under duress, yet this identity crisis is resolved through divine intervention instead of ending at an impasse, a denouement that perhaps reflects a shifting attitude toward imperial power.

Concluding Thoughts

These and other early imperial and Flavian works take up the brutalization of the elite male body in different genres, from epigrammatic elegiacs to narrative historical epic, as a means of engaging with the continued and widespread anxiety about the status, meaning, and safety of those who used to be the ruling class of Rome. The connection between shifting socio-political structures and an obsessive fixation on the body in contemporaneous creative media, moreover, is not confined to Rome. Noël Carroll has shown that the popularity of "splatter" horror films stems from a growing sense of uneasiness about cultural instability through the 20th century (1990, 212). As she puts it, the horror genre's "expatriation on the instability of norms...the theme of person-as-meat, the paranoia of its narrative structures, all seem to address an uncertainty about living in the contemporary world which is made more urgent since within memory—or the illusion of memory—there is the belief that there was a time, not so long ago,

when things seemed stable and a sense of certainty prevailed” (1990, 213–14).⁴²⁸ Might the illusion of a shared memory of the Roman Republic function in the same way for elites, underscoring the uncertainty in their present positions and leading to a similar obsession with the “person-as-meat?”

The dismembered, non-signifying male bodies that litter Julio-Claudian literature, then, are not only symptoms of the elite identity crisis engendered by the shift from Republic to Principate, but also of a broader connection between socio-political instability and an attention to the body. Foucault already drew a similar line between the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution and the bourgeoisie’s response in Victorian England, an obsessive fixation on sexuality (see Chapter One, pp. 24–25): in various times and places, bodies are the canvases upon which anxieties sparked by an unstable socio-political environment are worked out. The particular manifestation of this attention to the body—a ramping up of gore in horror films, as Carroll argues, or sexual repression, as Freud describes—depends upon its cultural context, namely, upon preexisting cultural conceptions of embodiment, class, and gender. But these cultural products, both horror movies and Senecan drama, attest to a cross-cultural, timeless connection between the body and socio-political context, as the body over and over serves as a canvas upon which anxieties, new cultural definitions, and identity crises are worked out.

The gore of Julio-Claudian literature, then, cannot be regarded as an extraneous detail that must be justified through the popularity of arena games in early imperial Rome. Its broken bodies are, rather, an intrinsic part, and a defining feature, of early imperial literature, and one that we must grapple with to understand these works and their cultural context.

⁴²⁸Kühne similarly connects crises of masculinity with changes to political systems, namely, the growing power of subalterns in twentieth-century nation states (1996, 16).

This literature speaks to the way members of a certain class, of a certain gender, at a certain time respond to the unpredictability of an autocratic regime. Those of us who have always lived in a stable, lasting democracy must make a point of trying to imagine how unsettled life is under such a regime, how the real and immediate threat of a gruesome death looms over those who live within it. This disorientation moves beyond events as spectacular as a theatrical suicide and pervades every aspect and all social levels of life under an autocracy, as Petronius' *Satyricon* shows. Forced suicide, a terrible "accident," painful and humiliating corporal punishment are not merely a bit of baroque color or crowd-pleasing inspiration drawn from popular games. They are a real and daily possibility for the elite Romans who read and wrote these works.

And for those who had a memory, even if merely a shared cultural memory, of a different kind of power structure, a time when they themselves called all the shots, such a threat must have been very destabilizing indeed. Reading these bodies as symbols and signifiers helps us to move beyond seeing a connection between this literature and its contemporaneous popular entertainment culture, and helps us to think about what the literature was doing for the elite men who wrote and read these works. Such extended dwellings on the abject, such time spent on bodies torn apart, on bodies failing what they are meant to do, are ways of working through this threat to life, and the dread of this threat, that hangs heavily upon them. At the same time, it is a way of working through what it means to be elite, to be a man, to be a Roman senator in a time when civic virtues have been diluted, so to speak (e.g., Tac. *Ag.* 42). The body—one's only way of experiencing and moving through the world, as well as of broadcasting to that world who one is—is caught up in this crisis of symbolism and identity, so that it, along with language, class, and culture, no longer means what it once did. These broken signifiers of bodies do not merely

fail to signify what they had traditionally communicated for all the centuries of Roman history, but are so utterly broken that it becomes unclear whether they can signify anything at all ever again.

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