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

Seneca's Palace of Atreus

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

\[
\text{Non vertice alti montis impositam domum}
\text{et imminantem civitas humilis tremit,}
\text{nec fulget altis splendidum tectis ebur}
\]

1 The author would like to acknowledge the assistance during the period when this article was written of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada and Ontario Graduate Scholarships.

2 On the consistency between the image of the palace in these speeches, see Faber 2007.
somnosque non defendit excubitor meos;
non classibus piscamur et retro mare
iacta fugamus mole nec ventrem improbum
alimus tributo gentium, nullus mihi
ultra Getas metatur et Parthos ager;
non ture colimur nec meae excluso Iove
ornantur araæ; nulla culminibus meis
nutat silla

The lowly state does not tremble at [my] overhanging house, fixed upon the peak of a lofty mountain, nor does grandiose ivory shine from my high ceilings; no bodyguard keeps my sleep safe. I do not fish with armadas and drive the sea back by imposing breakwaters, nor do I feed my insatiable stomach with the tribute of nations; there is no plantation laid out for me beyond the Getae and Parthians; I am not revered with incense, nor are altars adorned for me to the exclusion of Jupiter; no forest sways, planted upon my roofs.³

It can be objected that this passage does not describe the house of the Tantalids at all, and that Thyestes is merely conjuring up generic images of imperial pomp. Certainly, the negative form of the description does not allow us to firmly identify the reference, but there seems sufficient reason to at least associate Thyestes’ description with the palace at Argos. First, Thyestes is not speaking simply as a rustic philosopher, but as a former king—he has experienced these things first-hand, and it is natural that he draw upon his own experience.⁴ Indeed, this passage tallies sufficiently with the second description of the palace to suggest that Seneca is presenting the same type of bloated residence. This second description comes in the speech of the Messenger who brings the news of Atreus’ crime:

In arce summa Pelopieæ pars est domus
conversa ad Austros, cuius extremum latus
aequale monti crescit atque urbem premit
et contumacem regibus populum suis

³ All translations are my own; quotes from Thyestes are based on R.J. Tarrant’s 1985 edition.
⁴ cf. Rose 1986, who notes the prevalence of first-person pronouns and verbs used in this passage, suggesting Thyestes’ personal involvement in the scene he describes.