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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Miscellany

Special Section

Francesco Dall'Olio*

Horestes "and a Tragedie of the kinge of Scottes": Theatre and Politics at Elizabeth's Court[1]

Abstract

In their edition of the *British Drama Catalogue,* Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson rejected the possibility that John Pikeryng's interlude *Horestes* (1567) is to be identified with a play mentioned in a note of the *Revels' Accounts* as being performed before the Queen at Whitehall in 1567-1568. With this article, I intend to take up the matter and argue instead that this identification is at least probable. When accepted, the identification provides us with a scenario that fits perfectly inside well-known cultural patterns of the time, such as the writing of a play by a young and ambitious politician wanting to make himself known and, more relevantly, the use of theatrical performances in front of the Queen as occasions to offer advice to the sovereign on political and religious matters. This is a relevant topic for *Horestes*, given the often-stated nature of the play as a defence of the rebellion of the Scottish nobility against Mary Stuart (also taking place in 1567) and her subsequent deposition: a position that could have had serious consequences for its author, but that could instead be freely stated when expressed throughout the performance of a play.

Keywords: *Horestes*; John Pikeryng; Mary Stuart; theatre and politics

1. Introduction

Among the notes in the *Revels' Accounts* relating to the expenses for plays staged at Whitehall Palace before the Queen between 14 July 1567 and 8 March 1568, there is one that has aroused some curiosity among scholars of the early Elizabethan theatre. The note records the expenses incurred for the performance of seven plays, the full list of which is provided:

> The first namede as playne as Canne be, The second the paynfull pilgrimage, The thirde Iacke and Iyll, The forthe six fooles, The five callede witte and will,

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> The sixthe callde proligallitie, The seventhe of Orestes and a Tragedie of the kinge of Scottes. (Feuillerat 1963, 119)

Some scholars have speculated that the last play on the list is to be recognised in John Pikeryng's interlude *Horestes*, whose first and only printed edition was published in 1567. However, the editors of the *British Drama Catalogue* Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson tend to reject this identification, for various reasons, including the lack of any allusion to a court performance in the text printed in 1567.

With this article, I intend to argue that, although there is no tangible evidence that *Horestes* is the play performed in front of Elizabeth, nevertheless such an event would fall within a cultural pattern typical of early Renaissance English theatre: the performance of plays in front of the sovereign as a particular form of advice on specific political and/or religious topics. All that we know of the interlude, its author and the historical and cultural context of its writing and performance bears profound similarities to the cases known to us in which this tradition has been observed. My demonstration will proceed in four parts. In Part 1, I will set out what we know of the play, its subject matter and its author. In Part 2, I shall present and discuss Wiggins and Richardson's reasons for rejecting the identification of *Horestes* with the play mentioned in the *Revels' Accounts*; more specifically, I will explain why I do believe that they are not strong justifications to reject the identification. Part 3 shall see a necessarily brief exposition of the early modern England tradition to use theatrical performances of play as a means of political discussion at the Tudor court, and especially as a way to give the sovereign advice on relevant issues. Such exposition will set out the background for Part 4 of the article, where I will show how the well-known relationship between *Horestes* and the events surrounding Mary Stuart's deposition help fit the hypothetical performance of the interlude into this established cultural pattern.

2. John Pikeryng's *Horestes*

Within the complicated history of the relations between English Renaissance theatre and ancient Greek literature (especially the theatre),[2] the myth of

[2] Since the 1990s, a new wave of studies has re-proposed the question of the influence of Greek literature on Elizabethan theatre on a new foundation: see the introduction to the special issue of *Classical Reception Journal* on this subject (Demetriou and Pollard 2017) for a more accurate exposition; cf. also Giovanna Di Martino and Cécile Dudouyt's introduction to their edited volume on early modern translations of Greek drama (Di Martino and Dudouyt 2023).

Orestes represents a very special case. It is the only Greek myth consistently present on the early modern English stage, from its earliest stages in the 1560s[3] to its latest in the 1650s. During this time period, no less than four plays are dedicated to the myth of Orestes (cf. Miola 2017), starting with John Pikeryng's interlude. Almost fifty years later, it would be followed by Thomas Heywood's *The Second Part of the Iron Age* (1612-1615, printed in 1632) and Thomas Goffe's *The Tragedy of Orestes* (1613-1618, printed in 1633). Lastly, in 1649, came Christopher Wise's translation of Sophocles' *Electra.* In addition, we also know about one or two lost plays, *Agamemnon* and *Orestes' Furies*, written by Thomas Dekker and Henry Chettle and performed by the Admiral's Men in 1599.[4] This is not only a very conspicuous presence, but also the only significant exception to the apparent disinterest of early modern English theatre to the subjects of ancient tragedy.

Among these works, Pikeryng's interlude stands out for some very particular characteristics. While the other plays present the myth more or less as presented in ancient theatre, *Horestes* stages the myth as recounted in the medieval literary tradition of the romances. Its original source was Dictys Cretensis' *Ephemeris Belli Troiani*, a prose text dating back to the 3rd century AD, and the differences of this version with those of the classical theatre are conspicuous. First of all, all traces of the tragic perspective of the *genos* curse disappear: Aegisthus is not related to the Atreides and Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon only for his adultery with Cassandra. The trial at the Areopagus takes place in front of other Greek kings and is the result of the accusations of Menelaus, who wants to take over the kingdom of Mycenae.[5] In Medieval romances, this scene is rewritten so that it happens before a council of knights, and it even includes an offer by the duke of Athens to fight on Orestes' behalf in ritual combat. Whereas the matricide,

[3] Maybe even earlier, if Lucy Jackson is correct in recognizing an influence of Euripides' *Orestes* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* on the way Nicholas Grimald's *Archipropheta* (printed 1548) staged the characters of Herod and Herodias as haunted by the 'ghosts' of their crimes (as Orestes is haunted by the Furies in Euripides' tragedy): cf. Jackson 2023, 215-7, 221-2. She also theorizes that the character of the Syrian *ancilla* in the same play, who announces and mourns the death of John the Baptist, could be based on both the Phrygian slave in Orestes and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' Agamemnon: cf. Jackson 2023, 217-21.

[4] These plays are mentioned in Philip Henslowe's diary and the debate remains open as to whether they are one play in two parts or two separate tragedies: see the entries dedicated to the two respective titles in the *Lost Plays Database* (LPD 2024). Louise Schleiner suggested that these two plays may have exerted an influence on some aspect of *Hamlet*: see Schleiner 1990.

[5] This detail may be inspired by Euripides' *Orestes*, where Menelaus is depicted as a double-crossing opportunist, ready to betray his nephew when it clearly appears the people of Argos do not approve his actions and are about to condemn him.

as in the ancient myth, is expressly ordered by the oracle as a necessary means of regaining the kingdom, in Middle Age romances this means the deletion of the Furies' persecution and the possible madness of Orestes, as well as of the subterfuges and deceptions present both in Aeschylus and in the two plays written about Electra (Orestes' sister, which is also deleted) by Sophocles and Euripides, respectively. In those texts, Orestes arrives to the palace without being recognised, and pretends to be a messenger carrying the news of his own death, thus gaining access to the presence of his mother and Aegisthus. In Dictys and the Middle Age romances, Orestes is at the head of a military expedition supported by Idomeneus, king of Crete and by the Phocian king Strophius (and, in ancient myth, father of Pylades, Orestes' trusty friend – another character completely absent).[6] It is also specified in all versions that Orestes cuts off Clytemnestra's breasts before killing her. This version of Orestes' myth is present in the main Medieval texts about the Trojan War, such as Benoît de Saint-More's *Roman de Troye* (twelfth century), Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae* (fourteenth century) and Raoul Lefèvre's *Recuyell of the Historie of Troye*. These works would later become the sources for the two texts identified as the sources for *Horestes*: William Caxton's English translation of Lefèvre (reprinted 1553) and John Lydgate's *Troy Book* (reprinted 1555).[7]

Pykering's interlude re-proposes this story with some important variations. He eliminates Orestes cutting off Clytemnestra's breasts, replacing it with a more dignified off-stage death for the character, and for reasons of narrative economy, deletes the character of Strophius, leaving Idomeneus (Idumeus in the text) as the only ruler supporting Orestes. The trial at the Areopagus is retained (we have even Nestor offering himself to fight in defence of Horestes' honour), but Menelaus does not display the selfish motives described in the sources: his denunciation of Orestes is now motivated by a genuine demand for justice. Above all, several allegorical and/or comic characters are introduced (characteristic of the theatrical genre of the interlude) and made the protagonists of several scenes. Of particular importance are the figures of the Vice and Councell, whose actions are fundamental both to the unfolding of the plot and to the ultimate message of the play. In Scene 2, the Vice persuades Orestes to overcome his doubts and pursue revenge against his mother, pretending to be a messenger of the gods: "I was in heaven when al the gods did gre [sic] / That you of

[6] Unlike Electra's, Pylades' absence in these texts is a surprising one, especially since both in the Middle Age and the Renaissance, Orestes and Pylades were a classical *exemplum* of friendship.

[7] The identifications were proposed by Brie 1912 and Merritt 1972, respectively.

Agamemnons death, for south, revengid should be" (199-200).[8] Then the Vice assists Orestes throughout the central scene of the interlude, the siege of Mycenae (Scene 7), at times even becoming almost a negative double of the hero.[9] Also, Orestes gives to the Vice the charge of killing Clytemnestra, and he leads her offstage to her destiny. The action of the play as designated by Pikeryng thus depicts the Vice as the true driving force of the plot, according to a narrative scheme also found in other interludes of the time, such as Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* (1553) and R.B.'s *Apius and Virginia* (1567 ca, printed in 1575: cf. Grantley 2003, 21). In all these texts, the dramatic action is the result of the negative actions of the Vice, who either persuades the antagonist to indulge his illicit desires or tricks the protagonist into making a mistake. However, in *Horestes*, unlike what usually happens in these texts, the initial deception of the Vice is never revealed: up until the ending of the interlude, Orestes will remain convinced that he has acted following the will of the gods ("by the godes I was comaund there to", he says while on trial at the Areopagus, 973), but no god will ever appear to explicitly say it is so.

However, this does not make Orestes' action a damnable one. As Robert Knapp pointed out, in Renaissance moral thought vengeance could be seen as both in a positive and in a negative light: "Vengeance is a virtue when it punishes wrongs done to God and one's neighbor; vicious when it is cruel or brutal, usurps the magistrate's authority, or is remiss when it should be severe" (Knapp 1973, 210). And in fact, Orestes receives an explicit approval of his action by the other important allegorical character in the play, Councell, who sees Orestes' revenge and Clytemnestra's death as an act of justice, aimed at punishing a grave crime: "Her faute is great, and punnyshment it is worthy to have, / For by that meane the good, in south, from daungers may be saufe" (526-7). By killing his mother, Orestes will re-establish order, thus again providing his citizens with a true paradigm of justice, as is the duty of the sovereign:

> For, lo, the universaull scoul of all the world we knowe
> Is once the pallace of a kinge, where vyces chefe do flow
> And, as waters from on head and fountayne oft do spring,
> So vyce and virtue oft do flo from pallace of a kinge;

[8] I quote from Axton 1982.

[9] Particularly relevant is the proximity between the words with which Orestes, in encouraging his troops, states that he wants to be the first to go up on the walls ("The walles be hye, yet I intend uppon them first to go / And, as I hope, you sodierrs will your captayne eke be hynde", 682-3) and the way in which Vice, shortly afterwards, exhorts him to keep his word: "Nowe to thy men lyke manley hart I pray the for to showe, / And, as thou seiste, be first the man that shall the citie wyn" (719-20).

> Whereby the people, seeing that the kinge adycte to be,
> To prosecute the lyke they all do labour, as we se.
> (526-33)

The arguments presented here by Councell will be repeated by Orestes twice, first in front of his mother when she begs him not to kill her ("cities are well governed in dede, / Where punishment for wicked ones by lawe is so decreed", 811-12), and then in the trial at the Areopagus. The action of *Horestes* contrasts Councell's perspective on the matricide with the action of the Vice, whose 'official' status as the representative of evil in the world of the play is here replaced with a more 'neutral' role as the incarnation of the human impulse to revenge, that can lead to committing heinous crimes as well as punishing evil-doers.[10] This contrast forms the true substance of the interlude, making the play a discussion in dramatic form on the permissibility of Orestes' matricide.

This is not surprising when one considers the personality of the author of *Horestes*. For some seventy years now, it has become customary to identify the 'John Pikeryng' named on the frontispiece of the 1567 *quarto* edition with a renowned Elizabethan politician and diplomat, Sir John Puckering (see Phillips 1955, 233-5, 239-44).[11] Born in 1544, in 1567 he had just completed his education as a lawyer at Lincoln's Inn, the first step towards a brilliant political career. After holding many minor administrative posts, he would be elected twice speaker of the House of Commons between 1584 and 1587, where he was able to intervene decisively on some important points of Elizabeth's anti-Catholic policy, which led to his appointment as *Queen's serjeant.* His subsequent tireless activity in the service of the crown (especially in suppressing conspiracies in favour of Mary Stuart) earned him in 1592, in addition to the knighthood, the title of Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, which he held until his death (1596). If we accept Phillips' identification, *Horestes* (the only literary work known to us to be connected with Puckering) is to be seen as part of the young politician's debut in the political environment of the time. In this, Puckering would have been following in the footsteps of Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, authors of one of the first Elizabethan tragedies, *Gorboduc*, first performed in 1561 at the Inns of Court, and later enjoying – especially Sackville – brilliant political careers. The similarity

[10] Horestes is not the only character in the play seeking vengeance: so do all the low-class characters of play in their scenes, as well as Menelaus in the trial, when he tries to have Orestes condemned for the matricide. However, as Knapp noted, unlike Horestes', their actions "lead to no justice, lacking both adequate cause and authority" (Knapp 1973, 209).

[11] The following information on Puckering comes partly from Phillips 1955 and partly from the entry on Puckering in the *Oxford DNB* by N.G. Jones (*ODNB* 2024).

is further supported by the fact that both *Gorboduc* and *Horestes* are plays containing obvious political subtexts; as such, they would constitute a means whereby their authors could first make themselves known as possible advisors to the sovereign.

Some of the evidence seems to suggest that *Horestes* enjoyed some success. The epilogue of the printed text reports that the interlude was performed before the Lord Mayor of London:

> For all the nobylytie and spiritualtie let us pray,
> For judges, and head officers, what ever they be,
> According to oure boundaunt dewties; espetially, I saye,
> For my Lord Mayre, lyfetennaunt of this noble cytie.
> (1199-202)

It is also worth noting the surprising closeness in time between the performance of the interlude and its printing: very rare for the time, when years might pass between the performance of a text and its first printed edition, if such an edition emerged at all.[12] All of this suggests that *Horestes* enjoyed a fair amount of popular success.

Moving towards the conclusion of this first part, what we know about *Horestes* paints a picture that is not only coherent, but also fits into the cultural conventions of the period: a young law student, intent on pursuing a political career, writes a play in the style of a popular genre of the time (the interlude) to make himself known, following the example of others before him. To do so, he chooses a subject already known from previous literary tradition in a form familiar to an audience that was still unaware of (or had only just become acquainted with) the classical version of the myth. He rewrites it according to the literary conventions of the referenced theatrical genre, while at the same time exploiting those same conventions to transform it into a commentary in dramatic form on one of the most pressing political problems of the moment. This last element makes *Horestes* a perfect candidate for taking part in the well-established political practice of using the performance of plays in front of the sovereign to advise him/her on grave political matters. However, as I said, the discussion of this eventuality by Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson ended with the two scholars pronouncing against the hypothesis that *Horestes* was ever staged at Court. In the following section, I am going to review Wiggins and Richardson's reasons for saying so and discuss their validity, in order to ascertain if a representation of *Horestes* at court is truly an eventuality to be discarded.

[12] This is true for both the aforementioned *Apius* and *Respublica*; the last one even remained in manuscript form until the 20th century: see Grantley 2003, 289.

3. *Horestes* at Court?

Puckering's *Horestes* is present in the second volume of Wiggins and Richardson's catalogue, at no. 451. It is not registered under his usual title; it is instead simply renamed *Vice*: a choice based on the original title of the *quarto* edition, whose title presents the play as "A New Enterlude of Vice Conteyninge, the Historye of Horestes".[13] This choice is made by the editors of the catalogue to distinguish this play from the *Horestes* named in the *Revels' Accounts*, listed by them at no. 465 of the same catalogue, and which they consider a different play. Their rationale for distinguishing the two plays is presented as thus:

> Proposed identification of this play with the *Orestes* performed at court in 1567-8 . . . is problematic. The absence from the text of the 'house' provided for Orestes at court is not a major issue, since it was presumably a stage house, a booth or sign associating a particular route of entry with Orestes. However, the text's strong emphasis on the likely presence of cutpurses in the audience, and the assumption of a daytime performance, do not seem compatible with presentation at court. The date of Q is also awkward: either the play was already in print before the court performance or the date on the title page refers to the old-style year ending on 24 March 1568; but if Q was printed that March, the printer strikingly neglected an opportunity to make the volume more attractive by referring to a recent court performance on the title page. (Wiggins and Richardson 2012)

They come back to the question at no. 466, when speaking about the "tragedie of the King of Scottes" mentioned in the *Revels' Account* (see above), they do maintain that the identification of these three plays "entails imposing a very tendentious topical interpretation" (ibid.).

In my opinion, most of the reasons Wiggins and Richardson bring about to reject the identification are not as stringent as they affirm, such as, for example, the so-called "strong emphasis on the likely presence of cutpurses in the audience". Upon reading of the play, one finds only two instances of his supposed instances, both times during a soliloquy of the Vice. In the first one, the Vice is about to go off scene to join Horestes in his expedition, and he promises to the audience that, while he is away, "My cosen Cutpurse wyll, I truste, / Your purse well tast" (674-5). The second one occurs in the last soliloquy of the character in the play: as he goes off stage for the last time, he warns his cousin to "be ruled by me, / Or elles you may chaunce to end on a tre" (1120-1). Two recurrences of this theme hardly qualify, in

[13] Only in this instance, I quote the text from the semi-diplomatic edition included in the ClaRE archive (Pikeryng 2024; https://clare.dlls.univr.it/gestionale/edition/view-gems?id=284).

my view, as evidence of a "strong emphasis", even more so because they do not refer to a generic presence of cutpurses among the audience. What we have in both instances is the Vice speaking (or pretending to speak) to one specific character, one he affirms to know very well, the so-called Cousin Cutpurse. This character is part of an established comic routine from the Vice, which we can trace also in other 1560s theatrical texts of the time, where it is featured in a much more prominent way than it is in *Horestes*. A good example in that regard is Thomas Preston's tragedy *Cambises*, staged for the first time in 1560-1561, but first printed in a *quarto* edition in 1569 (two years after *Horestes*). In spite of his official definition as a 'tragedy', the work still presents many stylistic and dramatic features typical of the interludes,[14] including the presence of a Vice named Ambidexter. Like the Vice in *Horestes*, Ambidexter calls upon his 'cousin' during the soliloquies.[15] Unlike in Puckering's text, though, in *Cambises* the Vice's references to his 'cousin' are not restricted to one or two lines, instead they are each time developed in lengthier iterations:

> In deed as ye say I have been absent a long space.
> But is not my cosin Cutpurse, with you in the mene time?
> To it, to it Cosin and doo your office fine.
> (6.602-4)

> But how now Cosin Cutpursse with whome play you?
> Take heed for his hand is groping even now.
> Cosin take heed, if ye doo secretly grope:
> If ye be taken Cosin, ye must looke through a rope.
> (6.702-5)

> He is as honest a man as ever spurd Cow:
> My Cosin cutpurse I meane, I beseech ye judge you.
> Beleeve me Cosin if to be the Kings gest, ye could be taken:
> I trust that offer would not be forsaken.
> But Cosin because to that office ye are not like to come:
> Frequent your exersises, a horne on your thumb.
> A quick eye, a sharp knife, at hand a receiver:
> But then take heed Cosin ye be a clenly convayour.
> Content your self Cosin, for this banquit you are unfit:
> When such as I at the same am not worthy to sit.
> (10.1000-9)

[14] So much so that the *Stationers' Register* refers to *Cambises* as "an enterlude" (*SRO* 1122).

[15] I refer to and quote the text from Robert Carl Johnson's edition of *Cambises* (Preston 1975), which is divided in scenes and whose verses are numbered in a continuous series that does not restart with every scene.

If the mention of Cousin Cutpurse is to be taken as an indication that such criminals are present in the audience, then I would say that the emphasis on this data in *Cambises* is way stronger than in *Horestes*. And yet, this had never stopped scholars such as David Bevington (1968, 158) and Eugene D. Hill (1992, 405) to find it likely that the play could have been staged at court even with no evidence this actually happened, just for the political undertones that *Cambises* has always been recognized to have (cf. Armstrong 1955; Hill 1992; Dall'Olio 2019).[16]

It is true, though, that the mention of Cousin Cutpurse seems to point out to the staging of *Horestes* in a popular, low-class context. However, I could think of another reason for this, one that also deals with the other reason Wiggins and Richardson give against the staging of *Horestes* at court: "the assumption of a daytime performance". It is a well-known fact that, at the moment of writing or editing a theatrical script, an author and/or an editor tries to give the reader an idea of what the text would be like when played. And we do have evidence that, by the second half of the 1560s and the beginning of the 1570s, did exist in England a readership interested in theatrical texts that acted as "a vicarious experience of the [theatrical] event through ownership of a copy of the playbook" (Walker 1998, 30). This means that the "assumption of a daytime performance", as well as the mentions of Cousin Cutpurse in the soliloquies of the Vice, could have less to do with the circumstances of the staging of the play and more with the intention of the printer to recreate for his readership the context and the feeling of a performance in front of a popular audience. After all, we saw in Part 1 that we do have some evidence from the printed text that the work enjoyed some popular success in London: it is therefore likely that, at the moment of printing, the text was meant to summon up such a context of performance in the reader's mind. While on that subject, it is worth mentioning that the only textual evidence of a daytime performance in *Horestes* is the "good morrowe" (2) the Vice bids the audience with at the beginning of the play. Nothing would have prevented an actor from changing the line in the event of an

[16] The case is even more intriguing if we consider that *Cambises* and *Horestes* share, in addition to being often recognized as two politically charged plays, other similarities. Like *Horestes*, *Cambises* too is the work of a young member of the intellectual elite of the time: Thomas Preston, born in 1537, had just received his M.A. in Classics at Cambridge, King's College, by the time the tragedy was first staged (1561). He would go on to have an illustrious academic career (he would be Master of Trinity Hall (1584) and vice-chancellor of the University (1589-1590), in some ways comparable to the successful political career of Puckering. And as Puckering would eventually be admitted in the Privy Council, so Preston would also become a favourite of Queen Elizabeth, who considered him to be *scholarem suum*. I take the information about Preston from his biographical note in the *ODNB* by Alexandra Shepard.

evening performance; in a similar way, nothing would have prevented actors from toning down the jokes of the Vice and the references to his 'cousin' should the royal audience find it too offensive. So far, then, the evidence brought about by Wiggins and Richardson against the staging of *Horestes* at court is circumstantial at best.

More consideration should instead be given to the third argument they give against the identification: the lack of any allusion to a court performance in the printed text. I do agree with the editors when they say that, if the text has been printed after such a staging, then the printer's choice not to mention that would indeed be strange: why would he ever renounce to something that would be a significant source of interest for *Horestes*? However, I also find the alternative scenario Wiggins and Richardson themselves suggest for such an absence, that "the play was already in print before the court performance", to be quite likely. First of all, we should remember that we do not have a specific chronology of events. On the one hand, the frontispiece of *Horestes* only says that the play was printed in 1567, without saying anything more about the circumstances of the first staging. On the other hand, the note in the *Revels* only gives us a period of time for the staging of the seven plays, without specifying when exactly each of those performances took place. It is then far from impossible that the immediate, although ephemeral, success of *Horestes* (as evidenced by the unusual closeness between the first staging of the play and its print) lead to a quick printing of the play as a way for the printer to cash in on it, and that only later *Horestes* had been staged at court. The real question here is why, if that is the case, the text has not been reprinted immediately following the performance. My suggestion is that the answer can be found in the view involving the facts of Scotland that the play was expressing, one that was unwelcome to the Queen but also quite spread amongst her political advisors. This opinion (of which I shall talk in more detail in Part 4 of the essay) made *Horestes* a controversial text to be printed again, even after a performance in front of the Queen.

To conclude, none of the objections raised by Wiggins and Richardson against the identification between Puckering's interlude and the seven plays mentioned in the *Revels' Account* can be taken as conclusive evidence. When put under scrutiny, such objections emerge as based on a unilateral reading of some elements in the text, for which another explanation can be given that is equally as possible, such as Cousin Cutpurse being a standard comic routine for the Vice character or the assumption of a daytime performance being an editorial choice rather than a true indication of the context of the performances. The lack of an allusion to a court performance can be seen as stronger evidence, but given the absence of a precise chronology for when those events took place, on its own it is not enough to exclude that the performance did occur after the printing of the text. This leaves us

with a seemingly impossible choice. If another play was indeed staged about Orestes, as Wiggins and Richardson suggest, then we deal with another lost play from early modern English theatre, which admittedly is not an unlikely possibility.[17] Then again, it cannot go unnoticed that the court performance of a play such as *Horestes* – an interlude whose subject is classical in origin, whose author has been identified in a young aspiring politician, whose style is reminiscent of that of contemporary popular theatre, and whose content has often been seen as a comment upon a relevant political situation of the time – could enrich what we know about an important tradition of early modern English theatre, that of using the performance of the play to give the sovereign advice, sometimes even expressing opinions that would have been otherwise impossible to utter out loud. I will now turn to a discussion of this tradition.

4. Theatre and Politics at the Tudor Court

We may start with Shakespeare, more or less. In Scene 9 of *Sir Thomas More* (the collective play written by Shakespeare and other playwrights between the late 1590s and the early 1600s),[18] the titular character hosts a banquet at his house in Chelsea; as part of the feast, More employs a company of actors to perform an interlude entitled *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*. The interlude is then performed on stage by the actors during the banquet, and More himself ends up acting in it to supply for the temporary absence of an actor. He plays an allegorical character, Good Counsel, and performs the part so well that he wins the respect of the actors: "Would not my lord make a rare player? O, he would uphold a company beyond all ho . . . Did ye mark how extemp'rically he fell to the matter, and spake Luggins's part almost as it is in the very book set down?" (9.301-6). This last remark can be seen as a reminder to a similitude More himself loved to use in his writings, that between the performance of an actor on stage and that of the politician in real life, waiting for the right time to deliver his advice to an audience and adapting his speech to the situation at hand. The most prominent example of this use comes from *Utopia,* where More exhorts Raphael Hythloday to learn to 'play the part' of the advisor (see on this passage Lupić 2019, 10-30):

[17] Speaking about this lost play, Wiggins and Richardson suggest it was performed by the Children of Windsor and the Children of the Royal Chapel, although they do not give any evidence for this: see Wiggins and Richardson, no. 465.

[18] There is no definite date for the composition and staging of *Sir Thomas More*. John Jowett argues for the original text to have been written around 1600: see Jowett in Shakespeare 2011, 424-33. I quote the text from this edition.

> Est alia philosophia civilior quae suam novit scaenam, eique sese accomodans, in ea fabula quae in minibus est suas partes concinne et cum decoro tutatur. Hac utendum est tibi. Alioquin dum agitur quaepiam Plauti comoedia, nugantibus inter se vernulis, si tu in proscaenium prodeas habitu philosophico et recenseas ex *Octavia* locum in quo Seneca disputat cum Nerone, nonne praestiterit egisse mutam personam quam aliena recitando talem fecisse tragicomoediam? . . . Quaecumque fabula in manu est, eam age quam potes optime, neque ideo totam perturbes quod tibi in mentem venit alterius quae sit lepidior.
>
> [There is another philosophy, better suited for the role of a citizen, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand and acts its part neatly and appropriately. This is the philosophy for you to use. Otherwise, when a comedy of Plautus is being played, and the household slaves are cracking trivial jokes together, you come onstage in the garb of a philosopher and repeat Seneca's speech to Nero from the *Octavia*. Wouldn't it be better to take a silent role than to say something inappropriate and thus turn the play into a tragicomedy? . . . So go through with the drama in hand as best you can, and don't spoil it all just because you happen to think of a play by someone else that might be more elegant. (More 2007, 94-7)]

More's ability as an actor in scene 9 thus serves as yet another proof of his qualities as a good politician, able to adapt himself to every circumstance and in doing so always give the right advice for the situation. From that point of view, More comes to be the perfect incarnation of the ideal politician/courtier as the political thought of Renaissance Europe envisioned him in texts like Baldassarre Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (printed 1532, and translated in English by Thomas Hoby in 1561): a man capable of "guadagnarsi . . . talmente la benivolenzia e l'animo di quel principe a cui serve . . . e conoscendo la mente di quello inclinata a far cosa non conveniente . . . con gentil modo valersi della grazia acquistata . . . per rimoverlo da ogni intenzion viciosa" ("earning to such an extent the good will and the mind of that prince he serves that, if he ever sees that prince inclined to something unproper, with gentleness he'd use the grace he acquired to remove him from any vicious intent"; 4.5, 358-9; my translation).[19]

This overlap between acting and politics was not only a literary convention used to describe how a politician ought to act: sometimes it took on a very practical meaning. Scholarship of the last three decades often observed how, in the history of early modern British theatre, either playwrights or their patrons used the performance of a play as an occasion to comment

[19] It should be noted that, in the most famous scene of the drama (the one usually attributed to Shakespeare), More did just that, by quelling with a speech the revolt of the London citizens and persuading them not to act against the laws.

on important issues of politics and religion. This is particularly relevant for the genre of the interludes, whose performance in house of nobilities and at court made them particularly suitable to be used as a form of teaching the audience and giving advice on important matters. Greg Walker defined very well the cultural foundations on which such a process was based (see Walker 1998, 63-6). The master of the house, as he presided over the feast, played the role of the good ruler, exerting his power and magnificence in the right way – which meant, according to the political culture of the time, also listening to and accepting advice from his 'subjects', without imposing any restrictions upon their liberty of speech. In return, the playwright or the patron who set up the performance is called to provide such advice as a way of performing his duty as a wise advisor and helper of the master, speaking to him freely and without fear of antagonising him. Theatrical representation thus became a terrain for political exchange and confrontation, even more so because the stature of the performance as a playful event and of the feast itself as a moment of relative relaxation of social norms allowed the author an even greater freedom of speech. At the Tudor court, this often translated into an opportunity for the intellectuals to advise the sovereign directly on major internal and external political issues.

This is the case of two famous interludes by John Heywood, *The Play of the Weather* (1533) and *The Four PP* (1534). The author was the best-known playwright at the court of Henry VIII, but he also carried a reputation of secretly being a Catholic. In *The Play*, Heywood stages the story (partially taken from a dialogue by Lucian) of Jupiter attempting to arrange the weather of the world in a way that meets the needs of all mortals. However, everything he does ends up disappointing some representatives of different types of men, who come to complain about it and ask for a change. A similar plot also recurs in *The Four PP*, where four different characters representing four different trades (a Palmer, a Pardoner, a 'Pothecary', a Pedlar) discuss matters of religion in a vain attempt to find a compromise and proceed together in a pilgrimage. In these plays, Heywood expresses a clear condemnation of the religious strife plaguing the country during those turbulent years, while at the same time inviting Henry to a policy of tolerance and acceptance, in order to guarantee genuine peace in his kingdom (see Walker 1998, 89-100; 2005, 100-19).

It was however around the half of the century that this use of the theatre as a means of political communication reached its peak. Many interludes printed and/or performed in between the 1540s and the 1560s do indeed present a very transparent political allegory, sometimes to the point of being almost too explicit in their advocation for a particular cause. This is the case with David Lyndsay's *A Satire of the Three Estates,* first printed in 1602, but staged at the court of Scotland for the first time in 1540 (cf.

Grantley 2003, 312-3). It is a true religious satire, which sees his protagonist Rex Humanitas being coaxed by a group of Vices to give in to his carnal desires, taking advantage of the fact that Lady Sensuality (i.e. the Catholic Church) approves of his behaviour. After the positive character Divine Correction (who presents himself as sent by God "to punische tyrants for their transgressioun, / And to caus leill men live upon their awin", 1603-6; I quote the text from Lyndsay 1998) persuades the King to reform, the second part of the play sees the sovereign presiding over a full-fledged session of Parliament, where the 'three estates' of the kingdom (nobility, church and people) are gathered to redress the wrongs made by the Vices. A position of prominence is given to John the Commonweal, representant of the people, to which Lydnsay entrusts a speech that attacks the Scottish Catholic Church and his orders: "I mein nocht laborand spirituallie, / Nor for thair living corporallie: / Lyand in dennis lyke idill doggis, / I them compair to weil fed hoggis". The interlude, often acknowledged as an important text in the history of both English theatre and the evolution of British political theory (cf. Majumder 2019, 50-70), ends up with the Parliament putting down a detailed project to reform the Church in no less than fifteen points. For that reason also, the *Satire* is perhaps the most explicit example of how the space of the theatrical performance could be transformed into a moment of political discussion.

While no interlude in England would ever be thus politically charged, nonetheless many examples can be found of interludes being used to comment about political issues. In 1553, the plot of the aforementioned *Respublica*, staged in front of Mary Tudor, is based on the same narrative mechanism as the *Satire*: the main character, Respublica, is tricked by a group of Vices into giving in to its desires, only to be brought back to the right path by a series of positive allegorical characters. Prominent among these is Nemesis, an allegorical representation of Mary himself, come to redress the evils of the country and punish the wicked. Seven years later, in 1560, another play already mentioned in this essay, Thomas Preston's *Cambises*, expressed in more or less explicit tones an open condemnation of the behaviour of previous English sovereigns towards the Reformation (see Hill 1992, 426-7). The depiction of the Persian king Cambises (a well-known figure of tyrant in Renaissance literature: see Hill 1992, 419-22; Dall'Olio 2020) as a prince that "in his youth was trained up, by trace of vertues lore: / Yet (béeing king) did clene forget, his perfect race before" (Prol. 19-20) was a reminder to Henry VIII as was depicted and criticised in some Protestant circles: the king who, after ruling for years like an ideal king, then revealed his true face when he used the Reform for his own ends, with no intention to actually reform the Church. By the end of the play, the cruelty of Cambises towards his victims is explicitly compared to that of Edmund Bonner ("was a kin

to Bishop Bonner"; 11.1142), Bishop of London under Mary and renowned persecutor of Protestants: a comparison that makes even clearer the political undertones of Preston's tragedy.

It is therefore highly significant that one of Elizabeth's first acts of government is an edict, dating back to 1559, concerning "Unlicensed Interludes and Plays", in which it is declared illegal to address "either matters of religion or the governance of the estate" (Hughes and Larkin 1969, 115) in plays not approved from the Crown. The purpose of the edict is clearly to put an end to the freedom that was guaranteed by the theatrical event, preventing it from becoming a means for the dissemination of dissident opinions that could jeopardise the legitimacy of Elizabeth's title and worsen the already tense atmosphere of conflict within the country created by Mary's persecutions of Protestants. However, at least during the first decade of her reign, the edict proved ineffective, as evidenced by the great success of *Cambises*, which would turn it into a classic of Elizabethan tragedy. Such a success was a demonstration of how strongly rooted was the conception of theatre as an important medium for political discussion, despite any intervention against it. Another prominent example of how deeply rooted this tradition was would be, two years later, the performance at court, during the Christmas festivities of 1561-1562, of Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc*, under the patronage of Robert Dudley Earl of Leicester. It was an event with a deep political subtext (see Walker 1998, 197-210): it was intended to persuade Elizabeth to marry Leicester instead of giving her hand to a foreign husband. If she did, then Elizabeth would have proved to be a good sovereign who listened to the advice of her faithful subjects.

In the light of what we have seen in this section, I think it is now clear that, should we accept the identification of Puckering's interlude with the play mentioned in the *Revels' Accounts*, the resulting scenario would fit perfectly within the customs of early Elizabethan theatre. *Horestes*, in this picture, would be yet another case of an interlude whose performance before the sovereign could be a way of advising the sovereign on important political issues, as many authors and plays had done before him. In Puckering's case, this case is particularly relevant since, as research over the last fifty years has widely acknowledged, *Horestes* in fact represents a commentary in dramatic form on the events that transpired in Scotland in the same year as the interlude was printed.

5. *Horestes,* Mary, and Elizabeth

On 10 February 1567, Henry Stuart Lord Darnley, second husband of Queen Mary Stuart of Scotland, was murdered in mysterious circumstances. What

followed was a rather slow investigation, which fuelled the suspicion among the Scottish nobility that Mary herself had organised the act to get rid of her unwelcome consort. This only aggravated the already existing tensions, in regard to both politics and religion. Mary had only a few years before come to live in Scotland after a life spent at the French court, and despite her choice of pursuing a policy of religious appeasement and tolerance, her undeniable Catholic faith was hardly well received by the mostly Protestant noblemen, who for twenty years had ruled the country in more or less complete autonomy. Darnley's murder and Mary's subsequent marriage (15 May 1567) to James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, and prime suspect in the murder, proved to be the last straw. A month later, on 15 June, an army of rebellious nobles defeated the royal army at the Battle of Carberry Hill and captured the Queen. They imprisoned her in Edinburgh and forced her to abdicate in favour of her and Darnley's son James, who was not even a year old.

That *Horestes* was somehow connected to these events was first suggested by James E. Phillips (1955), in the same article that proposed the identification of the author with Sir John Puckering. Subsequently, other scholars have taken up and deepened Phillips' hypothesis, showing how the dramatic structure and imagery of the interlude bear stylistic similarities to polemical writings against Mary of the time (see Robertson 1990; George 2004). The comparison between Mary and Clytemnestra (two unfaithful wives who kill their husbands to marry their lovers) had already recurred in some anti-Marian ballads written to lament Darnley's death, and it became so popular that four years later, in 1571, George Buchanan would use it again in a letter to the English diplomat Daniel Rogers to describe how dangerous the deposed sovereign was (see Phillips 1955, 233). Moreover, Lincoln's Inn, where Puckering studied, was a notorious den of opponents of the Queen of Scots, to such an extent that it earned an official reprimand from none other than William Cecil.[20] Nor is it to be forgotten that the most notable actions of Puckering's political career are linked to Mary's fate. In the 1580s, Puckering was at the forefront of actions against plots in favour of Mary, starting with that of William Babington, and it was his tireless activity in this field that earned him a knighthood. Both Puckering's biography and the socio-political context of 1567 thus seem to provide a strong indication not only of him being the author of *Horestes*, but also of the nature of the play as a commentary on what happened in Scotland.

Speaking of which, it must be noticed that the way Puckering treats the issue of matricide within his interlude bears very strong similarities to the way the issue of the subjects' right to revolt against a bad king is treated in the dialogue *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos*. Printed in 1579 after a long circulation

[20] We are left with the letter in which Mary thanks Cecil for his intervention: see *SPO* 1566-1568, 148-9.

in manuscript form, it was actually written in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1567 as a way to justify the actions of the nobility. The author, George Buchanan, was one of the most renowned and celebrated writers of the time, as both a translator from Greek and a poet and tragedian in his own right; he was also one of the most eminent representatives of Protestantism in his homeland. In the dialogue, Buchanan states that kingship is an institution created by the people to enforce the law and that the king's power cannot be dissolved from its function of acting as a defender of the law. He then asks his interlocutor (the English politician Thomas Maitland) who should check that the sovereign is respecting his office. Maitland has no doubt: "ipsum regem" ("the king himself", Buchanan 2004, 31).[21] Buchanan does not agree: leaving the king as the sole authority over himself means granting a man, by nature subject to corruption, absolute power, and that would mean putting the state at great risk. On the contrary, it must be the people who control him, since they are the true source of royal power: "non rex legi sed lex regi coercendo quaesita est. Et a lege id ipsum habet quod rex est, nam absque ea tyrannus esset . . . Lex igitur rege potentior est ac velut rectrix et moderatrix et cupiditatum et actionum eius" ("It is not the king who is established to limit the law, but the law to limit the king. And it is the law that defines what a king is, while he who departs from it is a tyrant . . . The law is therefore more powerful than the king, and acts as a check and moderator of his actions and desires"). It follows that if the king fails in his duty, the people have every right to rebel and even kill him as an enemy to the state.

It was not the first time such an idea had been proposed. The right of the people to depose and kill an evil ruler had already been raised in some important political texts of the Middle Ages, and in the second half of the 16th century had been taken up and expanded in some important texts written by Protestant intellectuals in exile during Mary Tudor's reign, such as John Ponet (*A Short Treatise of Politick Power*, 1556) and Christopher Goodman (*How Superior Powers ought to be obeyed of their subjectees,* 1558; for a more in-depth discussion I refer to Dall'Olio 2017, 476-81; 2022, 229-31). There are, however, significant differences (see Mason and Smith in Buchanan 2004; Majumder 2019, 89). In those texts, the right of the people to disobey and rebel against the king was argued on religious grounds: the ruler is to be punished insofar as his behaviour makes him a sinner who fails in his God-given task. In *De Iure*, this religious perspective is absent: Buchanan states that the reason why the people can punish the sovereign is that the latter has received his power from the people. This too was not a novel idea: it had already appeared within some political treatises of those years, most notably

[21] All quotations from the *De Iure* text come from Buchanan 2004. The translation is mine.

Sir Thomas Smith's *De Republica Anglorum* (written in 1561-1562, printed posthumously in 1583). This text opens with a definition of the state as "a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord" (Smith 1583, 49) and of the sovereign as "who by succession or election commeth with the good will of the people to that gouernement, and doth administer the common wealth by the lawes of the same and by equitie, and doth seeke the profit of the people as much as his owne" (6). In a sense, then, Buchanan's dialogue was merely applying a widespread idea of Renaissance political theory to the concrete situation in Scotland, taking it to its more extreme but also more logical conclusions: Mary had been a bad sovereign, and since she received her power as Queen from the people, they had exercised their power over her by taking it away and entrusting it to a worthier ruler.

The same logic can be found in *Horestes* and specifically in the way Puckering stages the discussion and eventual justification of Orestes' matricide. As we saw in Part 1, two allegorical characters, the Vice and the Councell, are deeply connected to this issue. The former, as the official representation of evil within the world of the interlude, convinces Orestes to go to war against his mother, deluding him into believing that his action is approved by the gods; he then accompanies him in battle and is charged by Orestes with the task of killing his mother. This proximity between the hero and Vice, from a dramatic point of view, underlines how Orestes' action is, in itself, of evil origin and nature. Other elements of the play reinforce this negative view of the matricide. In scene 4, Puckering stages a heated confrontation between Orestes and another allegorical character, Nature. She reproaches the young man for his behaviour, accuses him of "tyraney" (i.e. of following his own desire against any right, as a tyrant does) and invites him to remember the unfortunate fate of those who dared kill their parents, such as Oedipus[22] and Nero. Also recurring in the imagery of the interlude is a metaphor – that of fire as a symbol of desire – used by the author to highlight how Orestes' revenge is part of a cycle of death and destruction with potentially damaging results for the state: the young man claims to be burning with desire to carry out his revenge ("my hart doth boil in dede, with firey piercing heate", 216); the adulterers Aegisthus and Clytemnestra affirm that the love that pervades them is like a fire (554-69); the Vice triumphantly affirms, while appropriating Revenge's name, that "when

[22] This mention of Oedipus is arguably one of the first instances in British literature when the character is somehow presented as a tyrant. This was not the way Renaissance literature usually viewed Oedipus. In fact, four years before Puckering's interlude, in Alexander Neville's English translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* the character was portrayed as an essentially good ruler: cf. Woodbridge 2010, 134-5; Dall'Olio 2018.

myne eayre is set on fyare / I rap them, I snap them – that is my desyare" (670-1); finally, another allegorical character (Fame) tells the audience that "in lyke sort Revenge hath set [Menelaus] on fyare" (905) when he has heard of Orestes' crime. There is thus no doubt that Orestes' matricide is seen as a crime in the interlude, at least when it is considered a crime against the natural, biological bonds between mother and son.

At the same time, however, matricide is approved by Councell as punishment for Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, which must be punished for the good of the commonwealth. This becomes even more important because Councell is a character with a double symbolic value. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as an allegory of an abstract concept (that of reasonableness, to which every concrete action may be referred); on the other hand, it also represents a reference, if not to an actual governing body, at least to a group of people who constitute the expression of the general will of the kingdom and the law that represents it. It is no coincidence, as Karen Robertson (1990, 31-2) noted, that the character speaks in abstract, bureaucratic terms where the family ties between Clytemnestra and Orestes are purposely blurred, in order to better highlight the principle that "the prince as the executor of public law . . . cannot be called a tyrant even when he sheds his mother's blood" (Robertson 1990, 31). Orestes himself affirms this principle in order to rebut Nature's accusations: "If that the law doth condemn her as worthy death to have, / Oh Nature, woulst thou will that I her life should seme to sayve?" (434-5). At the end of the interlude, it is this opinion that will prevail: the judges of the Areopagus will deem that Orestes has performed an act of justice in killing his mother, and Menelaus will renounce revenge and give his daughter in marriage to Orestes.[23]

The interlude thus ends with the victory of the principle that the true source of the sovereign's power is the will of the people, which is even able to absolve him of terrible crimes if they end up being for the benefit of the commonwealth.[24] Therefore, if a king is a good king, he has to consult the

[23] It is, as Miola (2017, 160) points out, an ambiguous ending. As I mentioned before, the Vice's deception is never revealed (the character is entirely absent from the scene at the Areopagus), and Orestes does not show repentance for his action, thus not allowing for any moral 'redemption' on his part as would be suited to the conventions of the interludes. Moreover, Idumeus persuades Menelaus to renounce justice for reasons of pure political expediency: it is not justice in the absolute sense that prevails at the end of the interlude, but reasons of state, or, as Idumeus defines it, the "pollicye" (481), a term that is deeply ambiguous (see Latham 1984, 97-8).

[24] Once again, this is an idea that could already be found not only in the aforementioned texts of resistance in the 1550s but even in a literary work such as *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), a collection of examples from English history gathered by a group of authors led by William Baldwin with the intent of providing young magistrates with moral examples about how to administer justice. In that work, it was

people before taking any actions, as Idumeus advises Orestes to do as he leaves for war: "Over rashe in doinge ought doth often damage bringe; / Therfore take councell first, before thou dost anye thinge" (482-3). In the final scene of the interlude, Orestes demonstrates that he has learned his lesson well when, upon ascending to the throne, he asks his subjects if they would accept him as their sovereign, and only after their positive response does he officially become king. As long as Orestes acts as their representative and in agreement with them, nothing he does can be considered a crime. This line of thought is perfectly analogous to that expressed by Buchanan in *De Iure*, where it served to justify the right of the Scottish nobles to depose Mary in the name of the welfare of the kingdom of Scotland. According to Buchanan, since it is the authority of the people that gives kings their powers, the war against those kings that "non patriae sed sibi gerunt imperium neque publicae utiliatis sed suae voluptatis rationem habent" ("do not rule for the good of the country but for themselves, taking decisions not for the public welfare but for their own pleasure", Buchanan 2004, 54), is a right war: the people have the right to depose those that come short of their task, and give the authority to another one that would wield it better.

From this point of view, it should be noted that Puckering makes a particular modification to his sources that adds further significance to Clytemnestra's death. In the interlude, unlike what happened in the sources, where Orestes mutilated his mother by cutting off her breasts before throwing her body to the dogs, Clytemnestra is led off-stage by the Vice to be killed. As pointed out by Bigliazzi (2018), in Elizabethan theatre sovereigns are never killed on stage unless they are first deposed (like Richard II) or are usurpers (like Richard III). This rule is respected in *Horestes*, even more so by the contrast of Clytemnestra's death with that of Aegisthus, who is simply hanged on stage. That Clytemnestra is instead killed off-stage represents a subterranean recognition of the legitimacy of her position as Queen, which adds another level to Orestes' rebellion: he is no longer just a son rebelling against his mother, but also a subject rebelling against his sovereign. Puckering's interlude thus emerges as a perfect dramatic counterpart to Buchanan's dialogue: both texts justify and approve the deposition and killing of a ruler who, however much he/she may hold legitimate power, misused it by proving unworthy of their task. This element, when added to the other clues in our possession (the chronological proximity between the printing of the interlude and the rebellion; the traditional juxtaposition of Mary and Clytemnestra; Puckering's attendance at Lincoln's Inn; Puckering's subsequent political

explicitly stated that, although rebellion against constituted authority was a crime and a sin, sometimes God allowed it to punish the people in authority for their sins: see Lucas 2007.

career), makes the conclusion almost inevitable that *Horestes* represents not only a commentary in dramatic form on what happened, but also a defence of what the nobility did.

This would be perfectly in line with the traditional political stature of the interludes, which, as we saw in section 3 above, were texts habitually used to express and argue matters of a political nature as a way to advise the sovereign how to act. In Puckering's case, however, this point takes on a second-level significance, since in this case the author was expressing ideas that, had they been expressed otherwise, would have earned him some unwanted attention from the royal censorship. While Elizabeth accepted the action of the Scottish nobles, she never approved of it; in the subsequent years, she would have long hesitated before condemning Mary to death, well aware that, in doing so, she risked setting a dangerous precedent.[25] In addition, in the years immediately following the occurrences in Scotland, the English religious political and cultural establishment, under the Queen's leadership, would take precautions to prevent 'dangerous' ideas such as those expressed in *De Iure* (whose reading was forbidden by an Act of Parliament in 1584) from spreading. In 1571, the Anglican Church published a text, the *Homilie Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion,* where it is clearly stated that the people had no right to rebel against the sovereign instituted by God, not even if he proved unworthy of his role: "a rebel is worse then the worst prince, and rebellion worse then the worst government of the worst prince" (*Homilie* 1571, B1*v*). The people are thus invited to consider the accession to the throne of a tyrannical ruler as a punishment imposed by God for their sins and to trust in the justice of the Lord, who "wyll either dysplace hym, or of an evyll prince, make hym a good prince" (B2*v*). For the next fifty years, this would become the official position of the Tudor and Stuart kings, and the censors would be very strict in checking that it was never questioned. However, at the time of the printing of the *Horestes,* theatre was still a place where it was possible to express even dangerous ideas when not explicitly against the will of the sovereign. Robert Dudley had done it in 1561 when, by patronising the performance of *Gorboduc* at court in 1562, he tried to use it to persuade Elizabeth to marry him, thus tackling a subject that Elizabeth would not allow anyone to talk about.

If we were to accept the identification of the *Horestes* with the "play of Orestes and the Scottes" (a juxtaposition that, in the light of what we have seen, is very significant) recorded in the *Revels*, the event would basically fall within the same cultural pattern as *Gorboduc*: the performance of the play by a young author seeking affirmation at court becomes also a way

[25] George speculated that "[Puckering]'s . . . reluctance to stage the death of a female monarch seems . . . to anticipate Elizabeth I's own unease' at the prospect of having Mary beheaded" (George 2004, 75).

to offer advice to the sovereign on a difficult and potentially dangerous matter without suffering any consequences. From that point of view, Robert Knapp's criticism for the political interpretation of the play (an exception amongst scholarship on *Horestes*) seems to somehow miss the point. Of course, Knapp is right when he points out that, when compared to the more complex discussion about Mary's deposition going on in official letters and treatises at the time, Puckering's treatment of such political issue is very superficial: "he glosses over the difficult questions that so occupied Elizabeth and her councillors; he lets his characters assume the warrant of heaven and the right of Horestes in a thoroughly unrealistic way" (Knapp 1973, 215-16). However, Puckering was not writing a political treatise on the subject, nor was he yet an important political figure, able to discuss such matters in an environment where they deserved more serious considerations. He was a young politician for which the staging of an interlude of his at court was the first step to make himself known. Moreover, his interlude was to be performed during a festivity, i.e. an environment where the play was supposed first of all to entertain. It is then not a surprise that he simplified as much as he could the political issue at stake, so that they would more easily adapt to the plot of his play while at the same time ensuring that the message was clear. It is also not a surprise that, in spite of this performance, the text was not reprinted again: it was unlikely that Elizabeth would ever allow again the staging of a play that seemed to affirm that the people had the right to depose a sovereign.

6. Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, we have no documentary evidence to support the hypothesis that *Horestes* is the play mentioned in the *Revels' Accounts* as having been performed at Whitehall in 1567-1568. However, I believe to have demonstrated that not only the arguments brought by Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson to reject the identification are not as strong as they seem, but also that, if one accepts such an identification, the resulting scenario fits perfectly within the cultural patterns of the early Elizabethan age concerning politics and theatre. On the one hand, the staging of the interlude in 1567 would represent the debut of a young jurist, John Puckering, with political ambitions, who, through the reworking for the stage of a subject known from previous literary tradition, addresses relevant political issues of his time. In doing so, he demonstrates not so much his skills as a dramatist, but rather, those necessary for the career of a Renaissance politician, especially the ability to express his views by exploiting one of the official channels of political communication of the time. On the other,

as I showed in Part 3, the performance of plays during festive occasions often represented an occasion for members of the political elite (either the authors themselves, or their patrons) to offer their advice to the sovereign on important topics. This would even allow them sometimes to freely express on stage opinions that might otherwise have met with opposition, as would be the case with *Horestes*, given its oft-recognised connection with the events surrounding the deposition of Mary Stuart as described in Part 4 of the article. More specifically, the nature of the play as a defence in dramatic form of the right of the Scottish noblemen to rebel against a Queen unworthy of her role (an argument in many ways analogous to that of George Buchanan's dialogue *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos*) made it the exponent of a view not officially approved by the crown and yet having deep connections to English Renaissance political thought of the time. It is therefore far from inconceivable that some members of the Elizabethan court sympathetic to the cause of the Scottish nobles patronised the performance of *Horestes* before Elizabeth as a form of advice to the Queen. In the absence of any valid alternative (we have no record of any other plays concerning the Orestes myth written or performed in this period), in my opinion this is a scenario that points decisively in favour of identifying *Horestes* with the play mentioned in the *Revels' Accounts*, thus making it another highly remarkable example of the links between theatre, politics and feast in Elizabethan England.

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