

## Notes

## AN APPROPRIATE REVENGE: MEDEA AND MACDUFF

SCHOLARS have for many years discussed the influence of Seneca on English Renaissance drama.<sup>1</sup> Among Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* has attracted special attention: one scholar declared that '*Macbeth* without Seneca would have been impossible'; another called it 'the most Senecan of all of Shakespeare's plays'.<sup>2</sup> Modern editions, from Kenneth Muir<sup>3</sup> to Nicholas Brooke<sup>4</sup> and Sandra Clark<sup>5</sup> have documented many echoes of Seneca, in particular *Agamemnon*, *Hercules Furens*, *Phaedra*, and *Medea*.

Yet one notable echo of *Medea* has been overlooked. At the beginning of Seneca's second Act, *Medea* enters with a soliloquy denouncing Jason, who has abandoned her for a new wife, despite all that she has done for him. In his excellent edition and translation John Fitch summarizes her actions on his behalf; she used 'her magic skills to help him accomplish the trials set by Aectus. . . . To slow down her father's pursuit as she escaped with Jason and the Fleece on the *Argo*, she killed and dismembered her brother Absyrtus, and scattered his limbs on the sea'.<sup>6</sup> Now desperate

for revenge, she searches frantically for a suitable victim:

incerta vecors mente non sana feror  
partes in omnes, unde me ulcisci queam?  
utinam esset illi frater! est coniunx: in hanc  
ferrum exigatur. (123–6)

In John Fitch's lucid translation:

Perplexed and frenzied and maddened I turn  
one way and another. Where could I find  
revenge? If only *he* had a brother! He has a  
wife: let the sword be thrust into her.

As Fitch glosses line 135, 'whom he could kill as she killed her brother'.<sup>7</sup> John Studley's somewhat verbose rendering (1566) manages to find a more direct mode for *Medea*'s resolve:

I would the wretch a brother had; but what? he hath a Wyfe.  
Goe cut her throate, with gastly wound bereve her of her  
lyfe.<sup>8</sup>

This passage in *Medea* seems to have inspired that sequence when *Macbeth*, having seen the Witches' 'First Apparition: an armed head', which delivers the warning 'Beware Macduff' (IV.i.68–70), decides to act on 'The very firstlings of my heart':

The castle of Macduff I will surprise,  
Seize upon Fife, give to th'edge o'th'sword  
His wife, his babes and all unfortunate souls  
That trace him in his line. (IV.i.146–52)

To the best of my knowledge this echo was first pointed out in 1923 by E. E. Kellett and has been since lost from view.<sup>9</sup>

But Shakespeare recalled another passage from Seneca's play. In Act 3 *Medea* confronts Jason and begs him to revoke the sentence of exile (447–539). He refuses, but offers her 'anything from my father-in-law's house' that 'can comfort and lighten your exile', leading to this exchange:

MEDEA Only allow me to have the children  
as companions in my exile, in whose embrace  
I can pour out my tears. You have the prospect  
of new ones.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 354–5.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Whibley (ed.), *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies Translated into English*. Edited by Thomas Newton Anno 1581, 2 vols (London and New York, 1927), II, 60.

<sup>9</sup> See E. E. Kellett, *Suggestions. Literary Essays* (Cambridge, 1923), 50–1.

<sup>1</sup> See the useful articles by Frederick Kiefer, 'Seneca's Influence on Elizabethan Tragedy: An Annotated Bibliography', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, xxi (1978), 17–34, and 'Seneca's Influence: A Bibliographic Supplement', *ibid.* 28 (1985), 129–42. For discussion of recent scholarship see Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy. The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford, 1992, 1997), 92–121, and Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford, 2013), 186–95.

<sup>2</sup> Both quotations (C. Mendell, 1941; H. N. Paul, 1950) are taken from Inga-Stina Ewbank, 'The Fiend-like Queen: a note on *Macbeth* and Seneca's *Medea*', *Shakespeare Survey*, xix (1966), 82–94.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Muir (ed.), *Macbeth* (London, 1953, 1959), 112, 145, and *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1977), 213–14.

<sup>4</sup> See Nicholas Brooke (ed.), *Macbeth* (Oxford, 1990), 76–8, 191.

<sup>5</sup> See Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (eds), *Macbeth* (London, 2015), 91–4, and Index, 379. All quotations are from this edition.

<sup>6</sup> See John G. Fitch (ed.), *Seneca VIII: Tragedies I* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge MA and London, 2002), 334.

JASON I admit I would like to obey your appeal, but fatherly love of them forbids. Not even my king and father-in-law himself could force me to endure that. This is my reason for living, this is the solace for my heart, so scorched by cares. I would sooner be deprived of my breath, of my body, of the light.

MEDEA [*Aside*] Does he love his sons so much? Good, he is caught! The place to wound him is laid bare. (541–50)

In Seneca's incomparably compressed utterance:

Sic natos amat?

Bene est, tenetur, vulneri patuit locus.

When Ross brings news to Macduff, that having fled to England, he has left his family as the 'quarry' for Macbeth: 'your wife and babes | Savagely slaughtered' (IV.iii.205–6). Macduff is at first silent, then asks two brief questions: 'My children too?'; 'And I must

from thence: My wife killed too?' (212–14). Malcolm suggests 'our great revenge' as a cure for 'this deadly grief', but Macduff is still pursuing his own line of thought:

*He has no children:* All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O Hell-kite. All?

(IV.iii.219–20)

Sandra Clark notes that, although the 'He' is 'often assumed to refer to Macbeth', some scholars 'have taken it to mean Malcolm, whom Macduff is implicitly reproving for want of sympathy' (268 note). That Macduff has Macbeth in view is now apparent from the progression in Medea's wish for revenge, from 'If only *he* had a brother' to 'Does he love his sons so much?'.  
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