

“A pestelaunce on the crabyd queane”: The Hybrid Nature of John Pikeryng’s *Horestes*

J.-A. GEORGE

University of Dundee, Scotland

ABSTRACT

John Pikeryng’s hybrid morality *Horestes* (1567) was advertised on its original title page as “A Newe Enterlude of Vice Conteyninge, the Historie of Horestes with the cruell revengment of his Fathers death, upon his one naturtll [sic.] Mother”. Drawing upon the *Oresteia*, Pikeryng employed the Clytemnestra analogy to comment upon the murder of Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, King Consort of Scotland and husband of Mary Queen of Scots. This ultimately unsolved crime —the actual manner of Darnley’s death remains a mystery— also took place in 1567. To make matters worse, within months Mary married the Earl of Bothwell —the man her subjects claimed was Darnley’s murderer. Much of the importance of *Horestes*, then, is related to its role as a political allegory. Towards the close of the play, in fact, its political function is emphasised by Dewtey’s compliment to Elizabeth I. This allegorical figure asks the audience to pray “For *Elyzabeth* our Quene, whose gracious maiestie: / May rayne over us, in helth for aye” (ll. 1194-95). The play is noteworthy, however, not simply as a commentary on the political situation in Scotland in the late 1560s. Its use of classical figures and morality play allegories (Counsell, Nature and Fame to name but a few), its mixing of verse and song, and its employment of a multiple plot structure all add to the distinct nature of *Horestes*. Indeed, one might say that its true significance lies in its very hybridity. And whilst *Horestes* is obviously indebted to the mediaeval morality play tradition, it also keenly anticipates the drama of Shakespeare (especially *Hamlet*) and his contemporaries. These and related issues shall, therefore, be explored in this essay.

“A pestelaunce on the crabyd queane”!¹ A forceful statement, to be sure, especially as it is spoken by the Vice in a moment of high drama —*i.e.*, just

¹ All quotations from *Horestes* are taken from the edition of the play by Karen Robertson and J.-A. George (1996).

before Clytemnestra, an allegorical Mary Queen of Scots, is about to be led away and executed. It is also worth noting here that this execution takes place off stage, not in full view of the audience. This seems a significant staging decision on Pikeryng's part and I shall, accordingly, return to it a bit later in this essay. Returning to the Vice's exclamation, however, its context is as follows:

Let me alone, com on a way, that thou weart out of sight,
 A pestelaunce on the crabyd queane, I think thou do delyght,
 Him [*i.e.*, Horestes] to molest, com of in hast, and troubell me no more,
 Come on com on, ites all in vaine, and get you on a fore,
Let Clytemnestra wepe and go out revenge also
 (ll. 835-38)

As has already been remarked, the Vice, in his disguise as Revenge, speaks these words to Clytemnestra; that he feels confident enough to employ such a harsh, dismissive tone with a social superior indicates just how far Clytemnestra has fallen as a result of her adulterous relationship with Egistus (the Bothwell figure in the play) and her collusion in her husband's murder. Horestes, in the tradition of the *de casibus* tragedy, also draws attention to her plight: "By al the godes my hart dyd fayle, my mother for to se, / From hye estate for to be brought, to so great myserey" (ll. 749-50).

In the line "A pestelaunce on the crabyd queane", the use of "crabyd" must also be remarked upon. The word has its origins in the twisted, crooked gait of the crab and came to mean "crooked", "cantankerous" or "perverse". Interestingly, this is a term often employed, though not exclusively, to describe women.² This can be seen as far back as the English mystery plays. In the Chester cycle, for example, Noah complains to the audience after his disobedient wife strikes him that: "...women be crabbed ay, / and none are meek, I dare well say" (Mills 1992:ll. 105-106, 54). There is also a relevant usage, attributed to Socrates, in William Baldwin's *A Tretise of Morall Philosophie. Now once againe enlarged by the first aucthor* (1564): "Crabbed wives be compared to rough stirring horses" (s.iii^r). It is also worth noting that Socrates is presented as an authority on the unruly behaviour of women in *Horestes*. In his last speech, one directed firmly at the audience, the Vice

² In *Horestes*, the word appears three times. Aside from the instance already noted, the phrase "crabyd rage" occurs in lines 171 and 465.

notes (with some conviction) that: “For as playnely *Socrates* declareth unto us, / Wemen for the most part, are borne malitious” (ll. 1092-93).

The Vice’s robust support for *Socrates*’ view of women, whilst part and parcel of the general misogynistic tone of the play, is of course historically problematic: though *Horestes* comments obliquely on the disastrous rule of Mary Queen of Scots via the character of Clytemnestra, the play is also pitched at the “good” female ruler, Elizabeth I. This is confirmed towards the close of the play when Duty (who, admittedly, we find employing a rather conventional rhetorical strategy) asks the audience to pray “For *Elyzabeth* our Quene, whose gracious maiestie: / May rayne over us, in helth for aye” (ll. 1194-95). Thus, *Horestes* provides a lesson as well as a warning to a female monarch on the process of good governance. *Pikeryng*, in what might be called his “Mirror for Princes” moments, sermonises that the successful prince [*i.e.*, *Horestes*] must accept advice from his counsellor and solicit support from a neighbouring ruler. By way of contrast, *Pikeryng* also presents us with a negative exemplum of rulership, Clytemnestra: an adulterous queen who is as indifferent to the opinion of other monarchs as she is to that of her own subjects. Her scornful attitude is further emphasised by her twice declaring that she “set[s] not a pyn” (ll. 621, 704) for the power of others.

Clytemnestra’s attitude is, of course, out of step with the overall philosophy of the play, where the importance of following counsel (who appears as an actual character in the play, very much in the tradition of the mediaeval moralities)³ is highlighted throughout. *Idumeus*, for example, advises *Horestes* in another speech where *Socrates* is quoted to lend authority to the argument to

Take yet my last commaundement, and beare it in thy minde,
Let now they men courragiousnes, in the their captayne finde
And as thou art courragious, so lyke wyse let their be,
For safegard of thy men a brayne, well fraught with pollicye.
For over rashe in doinge ought, doth often damage bringe,
Therefore take counsell first before, thou dost anye thinge.
For counsell as *Plaato* doth tell, is sure a heavenly thinge.
And *Socrates* a certaynte doth say, counsell doth brynge.
Of thinges in dout for *Lyvy* sayes, no man shall him repent,
That hath before he worked ought, his tyme in counsell spent
And be thou lybraull to thy men, and gentell be also,

³ Nine out of the twenty-five characters in *Horestes* are, in fact, personified abstractions.

SEDERI XIV

For that way at thy wil thou mayst, have them through fire to go
And he that shall at any tyme, deserve ought well of the,
Soffer him not for to depart, tyll well reward he be.
(ll. 478-491)

This passage, clearly functioning primarily as a “Mirror for Princes”, is also important in that it forces us to consider the relationship between counsel and one of the major themes of the play, revenge; for Horestes is ultimately supported by both Councell (broadly understood as the political realm) and the gods (symbolic of the spiritual or divine) in his desire for revenge against his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Egistus. As Councell observes:

As I do thinke my soferayne lord, it should be nothing ill,
A Prynce for to revenged be, on those which so dyd kyll.
His fathers grace but rather shall, it be a feare to those,
That to the lyke at anye time, their cruell mindes dispose:
And also as I thinke it shall, an honer be to ye,
To adiuuate and helpe him with, some men revenged to be.
This do I thinke most fyttest for, your state and his also,
Do as you lyst sieth that your grace, my mind herin doth kno.
(ll. 268-75)

It is argued very openly here that revenge will serve both a public and a private good. Thus, the whole issue of revenge is far less covert, far less interior, in *Horestes* than it is in a play such as *Hamlet*.

As has already been noted, Horestes’ desire to avenge his father’s death is given the green light by another authority as well; the gods. This is, at least, what the Vice *claims*, in his initial disguise as Courage, when questioned by Horestes:

What nede you dout, I was in heaven, when al the gods did gre
That you of *Agamemnons* death, for south revengid should be.
Tout tout, put of that childish love, couldst thou with a good wil
Contentyd be? That one should so, they father seme to kyll?
Why waylst thou man, leave of I say, plucke corrage unto the.
This lamentation sone shall fade, if thou imbrasydest me.
(ll. 199-204)

In John Lydgate’s *Troy Book*, one of the possible sources for Pikeryng’s play,⁴ divine approval for Horestes’ actions is also given:

But ful streitly God shal after deme
And iustly venge with due recompense
Intrusioun brou[gh]t in by violence,
And felly quite swiche horrible þinges
And sodeyn slau[gh]ter, specially of kynges,
Gretly to drede in euery regioun.
(Book V, 1142-47)

Considering *Horestes* as a political allegory, it seems clear, on the one hand, that there is support in the text for the idea that the state (in the form of Councill) may legitimate the murder of a murderous monarch. What is more difficult to interpret, however, is a point hitherto neglected by critics; how are we meant to understand the fact that it is only through the Vice (a completely untrustworthy character) that Horestes is assured that the gods promote his quest for revenge? To problematise the issue even further, Horestes is clearly duped into believing that the Vice is the messenger of the gods for the perennial trickster answers in the affirmative to the prince’s question: “Ar you good syr, the messenger of godes as you do say” (l. 197).

The Vice is never unmasked or punished for this act of deception; indeed, in keeping with the traditional trajectory of this figure in other moral interludes, he never gets his deserved comeuppance. As we have already seen, in *Horestes* the Vice is allowed to degrade (and possibly even act as the executioner of) Clytemnestra. He gains much by her death and that of Egistus, for it is through their executions that the Vice’s main goal is achieved—revenge. The Vice also has some influence over *Horestes* and, in this way, challenges the belief that all counsel is good. Related to this, if it is agreed that the play serves, at least in part, as a “Mirror for Princes”, what is perhaps being called into question is the nature of those who act as advisors to rulers. The moral here, as in, say, *Richard II*, is to beware of sycophants and false counsel. As Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest warns:

⁴Three main texts have been posited as possible sources for *Horestes*: *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (William Caxton’s 1473 translation of a French work by Raoul LeFèvre), John Lydgate’s *Troy Book* and John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. Though an undisputed source may never be traced, it is possible to link Pikeryng’s play to these works.

Allas, ye lordes, many a fals flatour
 Is in youre courtes, and many a losengeour,
 That plesen yow wel moore, by my feith,
 Than he that soothfastnesse unto yow seith.
 Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye;
 Beth war, ye lordes, of hir trecherye.
 (Benson 1989:259, ll. 3325-3330)

The Vice is only really thwarted towards the end of the play, in fact, when word of Horestes' impending marriage to Hermione reaches him. He is, effectively, displaced by the prince's future wife: "Horestes is maryed, god send him much care: / And I Revenge, am dryven him fro" (ll. 1046-47).

Horestes, a hybrid morality, was advertised on its original title page as "A Newe Enterlude of Vice Conteyninge, the Historye of Horestes with the cruell revengment of his Fathers death, upon his one naturtll Mother". In this extended version of the play's title, value judgements about Horestes' actions seem to be being made. His "revengment", for example, is coupled with the adjective "cruell". Additionally, Clytemnestra is not simply referred to as the prince's mother; rather, she is his "naturtll" (natural) mother. This suggests that the specific act of revenge here —exacted by a child against its parent— is, despite the support of Councill, unnatural. Indeed, in the play itself, the one figure who speaks out openly against Councill's advocating of Clytemnestra's murder is Nature. Dame Nature, possibly dressed in symbolic robes and a crown (as in, for example, *The Trial of Treasure*), offers the counter-argument to that of Counsell. Her ultimate belief is that Horestes' vendetta is unnatural:

I do confesse a wycked facte, it was this is most playne,
 Not withstanding from mothers bloud, thou must thy hands refrain
 Canst thou a lacke unhappye wight, consent revenged to be,
 On her whose pappes before this time, hath given foud to the
 In who I nature formyd the, as best I thought it good,
 Oh now requight her for to pain, withdraw thy hands from bloud.
 (ll. 415-20)

Pikeryng's allegorical representation of Nature makes explicit the gendered division of law. She speaks, as can be seen in the passage above, for the rights that derive from the body of a mother. The maternal body, having borne and fed the infant, then has claims on the child that cannot be denied. This, Nature argues, is at the heart of natural law (Robertson and George

1996:21). A few lines later she alludes to Oedipus (a myth which forms part of the psychological subtext of the play), hoping, it would seem, that his story will act as a deterrent to Horestes:

Yf nature cannot brydell the, remember the decaye,
Of those which herto fore in south, their parents sought to slay
Oedippus fate, caull thou to minde, that slew his father so,
And eke remember now what fame, of him a brode doth go.
(ll. 438-441)

What is particularly striking about Nature’s speech here is how closely it resembles one found a bit later in the play when Clytemnestra begs Horestes to spare her life:

Have mercy sonne and quight remitte, this faute of mine I pray,
Be mercyfull Horestes myne, and do not me denaye.
Consider that in me thou hadest, thy hewmayne shape composid
That thou shouldst slay thy mother son, let it not be disclosyd,
Spare to perse her harte with sword, call eke unto thy mynd,
Edyppus fate and as *Nero*, showe not thy self unkynde.
(ll. 799-804)

This alignment of Queen Clytemnestra and Dame Nature makes particularly clear the gender hierarchies of vengeance.⁵ A macabre touch is also provided in this scene, for as she pleads, Clytemnestra is made to contemplate the body of her lover Egistus, who has just been executed. The stage direction for this reads: “*fling him of the lader and then let on bringe in his mother Clytemnestra but let her loke wher Egistus hangeth*” (SD l. 790). Horestes seems here to be employing a psychological strategy not dissimilar to that used by Ferdinand against his sister in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In both cases, the male attempts to bring the female to despair before she dies. Such a desire is illustrative of the undercurrent of misogyny found within Horestes and begs the question of what we are to make of this in an entertainment for Elizabeth I. As has been argued elsewhere:

⁵ On the title page of *Horestes* the doubling scheme is given. The connection I am attempting to establish between the rhetorical strategies of Clytemnestra and Nature would, of course, been further strengthened had it emerged that these two characters are doubled. Though they are not, it is interesting to note that Clytemnestra and Hermione are to be played by the same actor. Very Oedipal doubling, to be sure.

...[Elizabeth I] maintained rule by taking a position as the exceptional and ambiguous female body. Though her presence at the apex of the hierarchy disordered traditional analogies between patriarchal household and state ...she did not overtly challenge the prerogatives of male hierarchies by defending or extending privilege to other women. Tudor legal theorists evaded the problems of female rule by developing the fiction of the 'king's two bodies'. The defective fallible body natural, subject to aging and death, was subsumed in the body politic, perfect and without defect...This fiction, developed to ensure continuity of jurisdiction and property despite the death of a monarch, was under some strain when the monarchical body natural was female...*Horestes* presents one method of coping with the female 'body natural' by subordinating to paternal law all claims made for the particularly female body in the play. (Robertson and George 1996:22)

Dame Nature's argument that *Horestes*' killing of Clytemnestra would be unnatural is not only discredited by Councill and (possibly) the gods, however, for *Horestes*' own assessment of Clytemnestra's maternal skills calls into question her role as mother:

O paterne love why douste thou so, of pytey me request,
 Syth thou to me wast quight denied, my mother being prest:
 When tender yeres this corps of mine, did hould alas for wo
 When friend my mother shuld have bin then was she chefe my fo
 (ll. 179-82)

That *Horestes*, during his "tender yeres", perceived his mother as a "fo" rather than a "friend" speaks to the unnatural behaviour of Clytemnestra. And the debate between what is natural and what is not has a wider currency within Elizabethan drama. In *Hamlet*, for example, Hamlet's responds to Claudius' address, "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—" (I. ii, 64) with the paranomastic aside "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (I. ii, 65).⁶ The similarities between Hamlet's situation and that of *Horestes* are, of course, striking.

Dame Nature, as we know, ultimately loses her debate with *Horestes*. Councill wins the day with the caution that: "Therefore O king if that her [Clytemnestra's] faute, should unrevenged be, / A thousand evylles would insu, their of your grace should se" [ll. 524-25]. In an alteration characteristic of a play which moves (like, say, Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*) very rapidly between lively exchanges of low humour and serious moral crises, between

⁶ With a pun on the earlier meaning of "kind", "natural".

spoken dialogue and song, the gravity of Councill gives way to the gaiety of the queen as she and her lover next occupy the stage and sing a song about the Trojan war. In the song, a celebration of erotic love, an analogy is made between the love of Helen and Paris and that of Clytemnestra and Egistus. Employing the conventional language and imagery of courtly love, Clytemnestra concludes the musical interlude with this declaration:

And as she lovvd him best whyle lyfe,
Dyd last so tend I you to do:
Yf that devoyd of warr and stryfe,
The Godes shall please to graunt us to.
Syeth you voutsafest me for to take,
O my good knyght:
And me thy ladye for to make,
My hartes delyghte.
(ll. 595-601)

Egistus returns the queen’s avowal of love and is then startled by the sound of trumpets: “What menes this sound for very much, it doth my hart afright” (l. 605). The trumpet blasts announce the arrival of the invading army and the subsequent fall of Clytemnestra and her lover. We are now fully immersed within the political dimension of the play.

After Clytemnestra and Egistus flee the stage the mood of the play shifts once more, for we are met with a scene of slapstick inversion in which a woman attempts to escape her pursuer: “*Enter a woman, lyke a beger rounning before they soldier but let the sodier speke first, but let the woman crye first pitifulley*” (SD l. 625) This beggar woman ultimately, however, asserts herself over the soldier: “*Go a fore her, and let her fal downe upon the and al to be beate him*” (SD l. 634). This standard topos of the topsyturvy world provides, as has been argued elsewhere,

... a signal image of the anxieties provoked by female rule. Elizabeth I’s advisers pressed on her the advantage of marriage to such an extent that she was forced to silence Parliament on the subject. *Horestes*, when considered within the context of English anxieties over the marriage of their queen, condenses the dilemma her subjects faced over female rule. An unmarried female monarch disrupted the male hierarchies of authority figured in husband and king, but a married reigning queen could subordinate the interests of her people to that of her husband, as the English had experienced with the marriage of Mary Tudor to Philip II of Spain, or at worst could collapse into murderous adultery, as so recently demonstrated in Scotland.

SEDERI XIV

The play resolves the dilemma of female rule by producing a young prince who executes justice on his mother. The revenge plot then transmutes into the marriage of Horestes and Hermione, providing an affirmation of the hierarchies of household and state, a dream of order that shifts the play from issues of vengeance and justice to an image of the ideal gender order that guarantees female containment. (Robertson and George 1996:23)

The unnamed woman in this scene clearly echoes the defiant behaviour displayed by Clytemnestra a few lines earlier when she claims to “set not a pyn” (l. 621) for the might of her son and his army. Unlike Clytemnestra, however, this female manages to vanquish her soldier-foe and come out, quite literally, on top. This moment of slapstick is also choreographed in a strikingly similar way to that of the tussle between Noah and his wife in the Wakefield cycle play:

[They fight]
WIFE Out, alas, I am overthrown! Out upon thee, man's wonder!
NOAH See how she can grown, and I lie under;
(ll. 408-09)

Perhaps Pikeryng was taking at least some of his leads from an earlier dramatic tradition?

Slapstick soon gives way to “real” violence in Horestes, however, with the staged hanging of Egistus: “*fling him of the lader*” (SD l. 790). It seems possible that, at this moment, the audience is meant to think of the most notorious hanging in mediaeval drama, that of Judas. The Coventry Passion Play II, for example, the stage direction for this act of self-murder reads: “þan Judas castyþ down þe mony and goth and hangyþ hymself” (SD l. 236). And in Wakefield play 24, a fragment known as *The Hanging of Judas*, we are presented with another interesting parallel with *Horestes* for the story of Oedipus is implicitly alluded to in Judas' opening remarks:

Alas, alas, and welaway!
Accursed caitiff I have been ay;
I slew my father, and after lay
with my mother;
and later, falsely, did betray my
own master.
(ll. 1-6)

If Pikeryng’s implicit intention was to portray Egistus as a Judas-figure, he probably did so in order to underscore for his audience the particularly heinous nature of Egistus’ crime.

It is also interesting to reflect as to why Egistus’ death is staged, whilst that of Clytemnestra is not. We must not assume, in any case, that this indicates an historical uneasiness with depicting violent deaths of women on the stage. No decorum was observed, for example, with Gertrude’s very public demise in *Hamlet*; and there is the even more graphic execution of the Duchess of Malfi in Webster’s revenge tragedy. In the latter play, the executioners enter with “a coffin, cords and a bell” (SD I. 160). The Duchess kneels soon after, and bids: “Come violent death” (I. 231). She is then strangled (I. 234) in full view of the audience. Why, then, does Clytemnestra’s death happen off camera? Pikeryng’s possible reluctance to stage the death of a female monarch seems eerily to anticipate Elizabeth I’s own unease at the thought of her cousin’s execution. It took her twenty years, after all, to sign the death warrant of the Scottish queen.⁷ Raoul LeFèvre’s *The recuile of the Histories of Troie* (1553), one possible source for *Horestes*, was not so discreet on this matter. LeFèvre recounts Clytemnestra’s murder, as well as the punishment of Egistus, in grisly and graphic detail:

On the morne Horrestes did his mother Clitemestra be brought tofore him all naked her handes bounden, and assone as he sawe her: he ran upon her wyth hys naked swerde, and cut of her two pappes, and after slew her with his handes, and made her to be drawn to the felde for the houndes to eate and devoure and to the birdes, after he did do dispoyle Egistus and doo drawe him through the citie, and after dide doo hange him on a forke, and in likewyse he did to all them that were culpable of the deathe of hys father, thus venged horrestes the death of the good kynge Agamemnon his father. (Robertson and George 1996:81)

OTHER MARYS

The figure of Mary Queen of Scots has continued to attract the attention of artists down the centuries. Contemporary Scottish interest in her life and reign is best reflected in Liz Lochhead’s *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987). First performed at the Lyceum Studio Theatre in Edinburgh, the play focuses primarily on the relationship between

⁷ “John Pikeryng may be an alternative spelling for John Puckering, a student at Lincoln’s Inn who was called to the bar on January 15, 1567. Puckering, as Speaker of the House of Commons nineteen years later, presented the Commons’ petition urging the execution of the Scottish queen in terms that oddly replay the issues raised in *Horestes*” (Robertson and George: 5).

the Scottish queen and Elizabeth I—a relationship never explicitly explored in Pikeryng’s text. But like *Horestes*, Lochhead’s play also foregrounds Mary’s affair with Bothwell and the murder of Lord Darnley. This violent event, and the angry public outburst which ensued, is dramatised by Lochhead in an elaborate stage direction:

(Mary and Bothwell *kiss and sink down to the floor in love-making, rolling over and over. Drums are building up to a crescendo. Darnley where she left him on the sickbed, murmurs her name.*)

Justice!

(*And this time the very word makes an enormous explosion happen as Darnley at Kirk o’Field goes up. As smoke clears everyone else but Mary and Bothwell, who are still writhing in love-making on the floor, begins an accusatory chant.*)

All: Burn the hoor! Burn the hoor!

(Lochhead, Scene 6, 60)

Horestes, too, is an “accusatory chant” of sorts against Mary Queen of Scots as it is the first extant play to offer a critique of her rule. Positioned uncertainly between court and popular performance in London, and written with the intention of influencing English political responses to the death of Darnley, Pikeryng’s play may have been performed before a variety of audiences to incite anti-Marian sentiment more widely (Robertson and George 1996:31).

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Author’s address:

University of Dundee

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

English Department

Nethergate

Dundee DD1 4HN, Scotland, United Kingdom

j.a.george@dundee.ac.uk