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"Like to the Pontic sea": Early Modern Medea and the Dramatic Significance of Othello *III.iii.456-61*

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This article offers a new take on a passage from the 'seduction scene' in *Othello* (III.iii.456-61), where scholarship has often recognized an imitation of a passage from Seneca's *Medea* (404-7). It argues that this imitation has a deeper dramatic significance than previously recognized. It connects *Othello* to a well-established literary tradition founded on the perception of Medea in early modern English literature as a model of foreign, revengeful and powerful femininity. For this reason, her figure was, in Elizabethan prose and theatre, compared to or used as a model for the characterization either of rebellious female characters breaking societal norms to satisfy 'unnatural' desires, or for male characters suffering identity, social and/or gender, degradation. The passage in *Othello* apparently follows the same pattern. However, the context highlights a difference from this tradition, in so far as Othello is only an ambivalently integrated foreigner. The article shows how the imitation of Seneca's *Medea* in the seduction scene fits into the dramatic and thematic patterns of *Othello*, contributing to the recent re-evaluation of continuities between this play and Senecan drama.

Keywords: *Othello*, *Medea*, Seneca, Otherness, Classical reception in early modern literature

Premise

The last three decades have seen an increasing amount of critical interest in the relationship between *Othello* and Senecan drama. Robert S. Miola has analysed its connections with Seneca's Hercules tragedies (*Hercules furens* and *Hercules Oetaeus*) and the wider literary tradition around this mythical hero with regard to both the plot and Othello's characterization as a wandering hero falling prey to *furor* (Miola 1992, 129-41). More recently, Curtis Perry has expanded on Miola's analysis by interpreting the shift in Othello's self-presentation from a Cicero-

nian model (where Othello's identity is founded on public acknowledgment of his valour) to a Senecan one (where his identity is based on his ability to stay unwaveringly true to his own idea of himself) as evidence of the decline of the republican values of Venice (Perry 2020, 240-42). Perry has also suggested a link between Atreus (the villain of Seneca's *Thyestes*) and Iago: both characters trigger the dramatic action, and both project a reflection of the darker sides of their own personalities onto their main victim, Thyestes and Othello, respectively (Perry 2020, 243-49). Such issues will be the object of my discussion in the following pages, which are concerned with a particular passage in *Othello*'s 'seduction scene' (III.iii.456-61). Studies of Senecanism in this play have pointed out that those lines may be read as a more or less direct imitation of a passage from Seneca's *Medea* (Braden 1985, 175-77; Miola 1992, 129; Cressler 2019, 87; Perry 2020, 241). However, not only the exact nature of this parallel, but also its dramatic function, have not been fully clarified. My intent is to explore the relevance of this Senecan echo in both *Othello*, III.iii and in the play as a whole. I shall start by offering an analysis of the Pontic-sea passage (as I will refer to it from now on), highlighting why, in my opinion, Shakespeare is not only directly imitating the lines from Seneca's *Medea* singled out by Braden, but also building upon its original meaning. I will then show how the passage is part of an established poetic and literary tradition focused on the character of Medea which can be traced in texts of English Renaissance prose and theatre[1]. In those texts, Medea was a model for the characterization of either rebellious and violent female characters, or of male characters who were losing their social or gender identity. By setting the Pontic-sea passage against this tradition, I will weigh its position within this imaginary and contend that a comparison with that Elizabethan tradition shows its intrinsic relevance to the play as a whole. As will be seen, Shakespeare's use of the Medea model fits in well within the dramatic structure of *Othello*. Its full significance emerges once we take into account the peculiar status of Othello as a foreigner only apparently integrated within the Venetian society and Medea as a foreigner rebelling against the established order.

1 Surprisingly enough, this is a connection that, to my knowledge, has never been explored, although all major studies on the subject have acknowledged the reference to *Medea* in the Pontic-sea passage.

1. The 'Pontic' passage

At the end of the 'seduction scene', Othello is already convinced of Desdemona's guilt and is determined to take revenge. Iago, feigning care, tries to calm him down by suggesting that he may still want to change his mind. Othello indignantly replies[2]:

> Othello
> Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea
> Whose icy currents and compulsive course
> Ne'er keeps retiring ebb but keeps due on
> To the Propontic and the Hellespont:
> Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
> Shall ne'er look back.
> (*Othello,* III.iii.456-61)

This passage was singled out by Gordon Braden as an example of the "general wash of sentiments and topoi that can be called Senecan" (Braden 1985, 175) in English Renaissance theatre, suggesting the influence of a passage from the Latin text of Seneca's *Medea*[3]:

> Medea
> dum siccas polus
> versabit Arctos, flumina in pontum cadent,
> numquam meus cessabit in poenas furor.
> (Sen. *Med*., 404-7)
>
> (Until the pole will keep the dry Bears spinning, and the rivers will flow into the sea, my fury will never cease to think of punishments for them.)
>
> Medea
> While flushing floudes the frothy streames to rustling Seas doe send,
> To gird them gript with plonging pangues my rage shall neuer end.
> (Seneca 1581, 128*r*)

2 All quotations from *Othello* are from Shakespeare 2016.

3 Braden quotes a longer textual portion, comprising all the lines from 404 to 414. It is my opinion, however, that the mythological and geographical examples presented at ll. 407-11 are not relevant to the comparison. I quote the original Latin text from Seneca 2018; as for the English translation, I will mainly refer to John Studley's Renaissance translation (see below), except for when a more literal translation is needed, which will be my own.

Braden's analysis did not go further, and later studies have been divided on how to consider the relation between the two passages. Some, like Loren Cressler, have confidently recognized here a reprisal of "several *topoi* […] directly from Seneca's *Medea*" (Cressler 2019, 87). Others, like Perry, while acknowledging that the passage does constitute "a signal moment of Senecan self-declaration" (Perry 2020, 241), follow Braden in seeing here only "a possible verbal echo" of *Medea*. Braden and Perry's doubts have a solid foundation: the passage from *Othello* is not a word-for-word quotation of the Latin text. And yet, it is my opinion that there are enough formal elements to allow us to see an allusion to the rhetorical *topos* present in those lines from Seneca's *Medea*.

As Braden himself noted, the two passages are connected to a similar psychological pattern: "like Medea, Othello is rousing himself to an ideal of murderous constancy by annexing his own resolve to the power of vast and distant natural forces" (Braden 1985, 176). It should also be added that, in both plays, this dramatic outburst represents a violent reaction to an event that, for the characters, represents the final straw in their (real or perceived) misfortune. Medea, after being abandoned by Jason, is banished by Creon; Othello is eventually persuaded of the truth of Iago's lies and believes in Desdemona's betrayal. Both characters vow revenge, and when confronted with attempts to assuage their fury (the Nutrix and Iago, respectively) both confirm their unstinting determination. The two passages also display similar rhetorical structures: they first bring an example of Nature's potency and then express the speakers' resolution never to cease pursuing their revenge. They also use the same image of a course of water – "flumina" (rivers) in *Medea*, the "icy currents" of Pontus in *Othello* – flowing into a larger body – the "pontum" (sea) and the Hellespont – as part of an unchangeable order of things. This description allows them to utter their vengeful intent (called "furor" in *Medea* and "bloody thoughts" in *Othello*) in equally unchangeable and solid terms: they will not stop until they achieve their goal. Shakespeare proposes a lengthy geographical description of the Pontus' currents which is more elaborate than the simpler Senecan reference to a much more common phenomenon as the rivers flowing towards the sea. However, this kind of expansion was typical of Elizabethan translations of Seneca (as will be seen in John Studley's *Medea*). Since this

passage, as everybody agrees, displays a style reminiscent of those translations, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that what Shakespeare is providing here is his own expansion and rewriting of that Senecan passage to suit it to the character of Othello, while retaining something of the Senecan meaning.

In particular, the reference to a distant natural phenomenon echoes the account of Othello's own travels that, in Act 1, he says he recounted to Desdemona: "antres vast and deserts idle, / Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven […] / the cannibals that each other eat, / The Antropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulder" (I.iii.141-42, 143-44). Especially interesting is the mention of the Antropophagi. According to Ayanna Thompson (Shakespeare 2018, 15-17), Shakespeare found the word in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (whose English translation by Philemon Holland appeared in 1601), where it was used to refer to some Scythian tribe. From the same work, he also derived the description of the currents of the "Pontic sea" (Braden 1985, 174; Thompson in Shakespeare 2016, 15-17; Perry 2020, 241). Roughly corresponding to present-day Black Sea, it was often related to Scythia by a long-standing geographical and literary tradition dating back to antiquity (including Seneca; see below). Those two geographical references form a significant dramatic connection. Back in Act 1, we understand that it was by telling Desdemona about his travels that Othello first won her love (168, "She loved me for the dangers I passed"), and then convinced the Senate of Venice to look favourably upon their marriage (170, "I think this tale would win my daughter too", says the Duke). Both Desdemona's love and the Senate's acceptance of their union were interpreted by Othello as a mark of his acceptance in Venetian society and a public acknowledgment of his own status as a heroic general. But now that he thinks he has lost Desdemona's love, Othello seems to feel that he has also lost his status as a civilized hero. "Othello's occupation's gone", he had previously said in that same scene (*Oth.*, III.iii.360) at the end of a long passage where he equated the loss of Desdemona's love to that of "his very […] identity in European civilisation" (Serpieri 2003, 122)[4] as a general of the Republic of Venice. His decision to pursue revenge upon Desdemona can thus be

4 All translations from Serpieri 2003 are mine.

read as a way to construct a new heroic identity, which does not need social validation (Perry 2020, 241-42). The two geographical references to the area of Black Sea derived from Pliny thus serve as a poetical and dramatic leitmotiv, marking the climax of Othello's happiness as well as the beginning of his misfortune.

However, the same geographical references also constitute another link between Othello and Medea. In another long-standing tradition dating back to antiquity, the mythical Colchis from which Medea comes is located in that area (see Braund 1994, 8-39). Medea herself, in Seneca's play, refers to "Pontus […] Scythicus" (Sen. *Med*., 213-14) as she describes her motherland. This is the second occurrence of the term 'Pontus' in Seneca's tragedy, following Medea's initial soliloquy (*Med*., 44-45), where she voiced her resolve to be true to herself: "Quodcumque vidit Pontus aut Phasis nefas, / videbit Ishtmos" ("Whatever crime Pontus or Phasis saw, the Isthmus shall see")[5]. The *nefas* to which Medea alludes here is the murder of her brother Absyrtus, whom she cut to pieces to delay her father's pursuit of the fleeting Argonauts. The allusion establishes a comparison between Medea's past situation and her present one: as she was then ready to kill her brother for Jason's love with no hesitation, so now she is ready to commit any cruelties to punish him for abandoning her. It is a psychological process similar to the one we have just seen in Othello. As he promises to be as heroic in dealing with Desdemona's betrayal as he was in his military exploits, so Medea promises to be as cruel in her revenge as she was in her love. It is also worth noticing that in either case they refer to different bodies of water connected to Colchis (Pontus and the river Phasis) and Corinth (the Isthmus). This anticipates Medea's later comparison of her murderous resolution with the flowing of rivers in the passage Shakespeare seems to be reminiscent of as a model for the Pontic passage.

Pontus is also mentioned by Medea a third time, during her confrontation with Jason. This is an interesting moment because it comes shortly after the passage identified by Braden, and because Medea connects the "Pontici fauces freti" to the Simplegades. The Argonauts' success in passing those two mythical moving rocks was the most famous feat of their expedition:

5 I here provide my own translation, since Studley omits the reference to Pontus and only keeps that to Phasis.

> Medea
> Pontici fauces freti
> per quas revexi nobilem regum manum
> adulterum secuta per Symplegades.
> (Sen. *Med*., 454-56)

> The parlous hatefull iawes of Pontus […]
> By which I did saufe conduct home kings valiaunt armies great,
> Where roaring rocks with thundring noise the flapping waues do beate
> Or on the narrow wrackfull shore, of Simplegades twayne.
> (Seneca 1581, 129*r*)

The journey back from Colchis to Greece described by Medea follows the same route as the current of Pontus in *Othello* (and Studley's longer description of the Simplegades may be compared to Shakespeare's description of Pontus' tides). And if in Seneca the reference highlights that Medea's plight has no solution (now that Jason has abandoned her, she cannot return home), in Shakespeare Othello uses the image to express the irrevocability of his decision (now that he is resolved, nothing will change his mind). In both plays, the mythical passage from Pontus to Hellespont is evoked as the symbol of a (literal or metaphorical) journey from which there is no return.

We may then conclude that the Pontic-sea passage in *Othello* presents enough formal and dramatic connections with the one in Seneca's *Medea* singled out by Braden to be considered more than a possibly vague memory as Braden suggested. It can also be argued that Shakespeare in fact builds upon Medea's lines for specific dramatic purposes. Like the mythical figure of the Colchian sorceress, through a comparison between his own revengeful resolution and the natural phenomenon of a body of water flowing into a larger one, Othello too expresses not only his own desire to get compensation for his betrayed love, but also his resolution to reinstate his own identity, which he feels threatened and besmirched by an unfaithful lover. In this sense, the Pontic passage falls within the scope of a broader Elizabethan tradition of appropriations of the Medea model which articulate the violent or cruel vengeful behaviour of male or female tragic characters, or their loss of social or gender identity. To a discussion of this tradition I will turn now.

2. *Medea in English Renaissance*

There are good reasons for considering John Studley's translation of Seneca's *Medea* (first published in 1566, and then reprinted in the general edition of Seneca's tragic corpus edited by Thomas Newton in 1581) as the starting point for the Elizabethan literary reception of Medea. Although it was neither the first time she appeared in early modern English literature[6], nor was it the only ancient text recounting her story available to Elizabethan readers[7], Studley's translation represented the most detailed and complete literary version of the ancient myth during the English Renaissance[8]. The Medea portrait Studley offered constitutes what the Elizabethans very likely knew about her; it was mainly from this text that they derived their sense of the Colchian sorceress.

Studley modified Seneca's text significantly with a view to drawing a sympathetic portrayal of Medea as a woman seduced and forsaken, as the first lines of his Argument suggest: "Care sore did grype Medeas heart to see / Her Iason, whom shee tendred

6 As one of the main protagonists in the classical myth of the Argonauts, Medea featured in all the major retellings of the myth in Medieval English literature, from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (ll. 1598-1678; date unknown), to John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (5.3247-4229; 1387-1390), to John Lydgate's *Troy Book* and William Caxton's *History of Jason* (on which see below). This is only part of the much wider fortune of the character in European Medieval literature, on which see Morse 1996; McElduff 2012; Heavey 2015, 22-47.

7 Medea also featured in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (7.1-401), *Heroides* (Letter 12) and *Tristia* (3.9), all translated into English when Seneca's tragedy was also being translated (the first two in 1567 by Arthur Golding and George Turberville respectively, the latter in 1572 by Thomas Churchyard). On this see Lyne 2001, 72-73; Lyne 2004; Oakley-Brown 2011; Heavey 2015, 63-84. As for Euripides' *Medea*, the knowledge of this work in Elizabethan times is difficult to demonstrate. The *PLRE* archive does not present any edition of this play in any private library in England (unlike other tragedies, such as *Hecuba*), and no evidence of the influence of this tragedy has ever been suggested on any Elizabethan text (with the exception of Sidney's *Antonius*; see below, n17).

8 No rewriting of Medea's story may be found in English literature until Charles Johnson's *The Tragedy of Medea* (1730). Although Ovid exerted an influence over Medieval authors (see Galloway 2013; Heavey 2015, 32, 36-38), his texts never offer a full account of Medea's revenge, nor do they provide a profile of Medea that could offer an alternative model to Seneca.

with her lyfe, / […] Renouncing her" (Seneca 1581[9], 119*r*). For the same reason, he completely rewrote the first Chorus in order to emphasize her pain. In the Latin original, this is a wedding song for Jason and his new bride, where the Chorus rejoices at the hero freeing himself from Medea's clutches for a more suitable and happier marriage (Sen. *Med*., 102-06; Biondi 1984, 29-30). Studley's new piece has the Chorus express pity for her having been deceived by "false Iason" (Seneca 1581, 121*r*)[10]. Medea committed crimes for Jason's love, from the aforementioned murder of her brother Absyrtus, to that of Pelias, Jason's uncle, who was usurping his throne. Studley turned her original mention of such actions into an appreciation of her "good turns" or "good deeds" for Jason, with a clear sense of her goodwill towards him. In other words, her original acknowledgement of Jason's responsibility in her atrocities, which she does not hesitate to call *scelera* (crimes) in the Latin original (*Med*., 236-45, 465-76), is rephrased by Studley to foreground her commitment to being good to her lover. As a result, Studley's Medea emerges as a weaker character than in Seneca: the stress the translator puts on her suffering as a woman in love highlights how dependent she is on Jason and how much of a victim she is.

At the same time, Studley also "plays up the horror and the gore that Seneca's play suggests" (Heavey 2015, 53). While Seneca's text only alludes to the murders committed by Medea, Studley provides a full account of those crimes, emphasizing their bloodiest aspects. Studley also anticipates Medea's decision to kill her children at the play's outset, describing the murder in chilling terms: "at the Aulters of the God my children shalbe slayne, / With

9 I refer to the 1581 general edition of Seneca's corpus in English, not only as a second and 'definitive' version of the text, but also as the version more likely known to Shakespeare.

10 For a discussion of this kind of change in Senecan translations, see Kiefer 1978; Winston 2006, 47-53; Bigliazzi 2021. Studley is here strangely similar to Euripides, whose *Medea* has a Chorus sympathetic with the titular character. Euripides' tragedy had been translated into Latin for the first time by George Buchanan in 1543-1544, and had enjoyed some success (see Dall'Olio 2021, 124-29). However, there is no conclusive evidence that it was known in England by the time of Studley's translation; and, since the view of Medea as a victim of Jason was already present in some authors of late Medieval English literature, an influence of Euripides on this particular point is hardly arguable.

crimsen colourde bloud of Babes their Aulters will I stayne" (120*v*). Moreover, Studley expands on Seneca's descriptions of Medea's fury whenever he can, offering a more graphic depiction of her emotional turmoil:

> Nutrix
> Non facile secum versat aut medium scelus;
> se vincet: irae novimus veteris notas.
> Magnum aliquid instat, efferum immane impium:
> vultum furoris cerno.
> (Sen. *Med*., 393-96)

> (It is not a normal crime that she meditates to herself: she will surpass herself. I know the signs of ancient anger. There is something looming that is fierce, immense, ungodly. I see rage in her face.) (My translation)

> Nutrix
> Enkindled fury new in breast begins to boyle a mayne.
> Shee secretly entendes no mischiefe small nor meane of life
> To passe her selfe in wickednes her busy braynes deuise.
> The token olde of pinching ire full well ere this know I:
> Some haynous, huge, outragious great, and dredfull storme is nye:
> Her firy, scowling, steaming Eyes, her hanging Groyne I see,
> Her powling, puffed, frowning Face, that signes of freatting bee.
> (Seneca 1581, 128*r*)

These expansions and additions provide a more intimidating picture of Medea's rage than in the original Latin text, balancing and completing Medea's portrayal by unveiling a close link between her desire for revenge and her passion for Jason.

Medea thus emerges as a violent, deranged woman, unable to restrain her passions and capable of committing any crime to satisfy her desires. From this point of view, Studley's translation carries over traits that can be found in 15th-century depictions in such works as John Lydgate's *Troy Book* (1.1513-3720, 1420) and William Caxton's *History of Jason* (1477). In those texts, Medea was described as "a troublesome incarnation of female desire and disobedience" (Heavey 2015, 42), a negative example of a rebellious woman bent on doing anything to satisfy her desires beyond social conventions. As such, she was also explicitly condemned as a wicked woman, whose example women should avoid to follow. While Studley's translation does not

fully commit to this view[11], his interventions on Seneca's text do offer a depiction of Medea as a duplicitous female figure, whose tendency to recklessly abandon herself to her own overbearing passions leads her to commit terrible crimes out of either love or hate. In this sense, the early modern negative reading of Medea is not only retained, but even emphasized here, in so far as it provides the literary lenses through which Studley interprets and rewrites Seneca's text. It is in this light that Studley's faithful rendition of a few peculiar aspects of Seneca's Medea should be read. They were not present before, but they will prove fundamental to the subsequent reprisals of this figure in the Elizabethan period.

First, her wise side. In Seneca's tragedy, Medea is engaged in self-analysis: she wants to be what she thinks she is, and this involves her unwavering commitment to revenge[12]. This process, as noted by Shadi Bartsch, "echoes with many of the themes of the self-shaping of the Stoic student" (Bartsch 2006, 272; see also 255-81), thus turning Medea into a sort of evil counterpart of this ideal (a "monster-sage", 277)[13]. Studley's translation reproduces this psychological progress, as can be noticed in the first dialogue between Medea and the Nutrix. In Seneca, Medea's answer to the Nutrix's invitations to bear her plight without complaint is reminiscent of some crucial points of Stoic morality: "Numquam potest non esse virtuti locus" (*Med*., 161; "It is not possible that there is not a place for virtue"; my translation), "Fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest" (176; "Fortune may take away riches, but not valour"). Studley's translation does not preserve the Stoic undertones but keeps the wise content of those lines: "The show of sturdy valiaut heart, at any time doth shyne"; "Full well may fortunes welting wheele

11 On the contrary, his stress on Medea's plight as a victim of Jason can also be seen as an influence of the defenceless, helpless victim of Jason's seduction typical of the Medieval Medea. This was how Medea was represented by 14th-century writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower (see above, n5): cf. Heavey 2015, 53-55.

12 "Medea nunc sum" (*Med*., 910; "Medea am I made"), she says after being informed of the death of her first victims and before going on to kill her children. Her line here echoes her previous reply to the Nutrix (171; "Nu. Medea –" "M. Fiam"; "Nu. Medea – M. I will be"; my translation).

13 This depiction of the villain as a 'perversion' of the wise man is typical of Senecan theatre: cf. Biondi in Seneca 2018, 47-48.

to begging bring my state, / As for my worthy corage, that shee, neuer shall abate" (Seneca 1581, 124). This virtuous aspect is soon confirmed in Medea's subsequent confrontation with Creon, King of Corinth and Jason's new father-in-law, as he comes to sentence her to exile. Once again, Studley plays up elements already present in Seneca's drama: Creon, described as "puft up with pouncing pryde" (123*v*; "tumidus imperio", *Med*., 178), refuses Medea's request for a fair hearing of her case and insists that she goes into exile, "b'it either right or wrong" (124*r*; "aequum atque iniquum", 195). Such behaviour qualifies Creon as an unjust sovereign using his power to affirm his own interests as a tyrant, while at the same time bestowing upon Medea the honourable status of a subject resisting tyranny (Woodbridge 2010, 136-37)[14]. This emphasis on Medea's virtuous ability to remain strong in the face of adversities is another demonstration of her unwavering commitment to carry out her designs: she is as admirable in her decision not to bow to tyranny as she is monstrous in her resolution to kill her own children.

Another important feature of Seneca's Medea Studley also faithfully preserves is her foreignness. As Giuseppe Gilberto Biondi has pointed out (Biondi 1984, 49-53), Seneca presents the tragedy of Medea as consequent to the *nefas* (impiety) committed by the Argonauts, the first men to build a ship and voyage across the sea. Their enterprise plunged the world into chaos:

> Chorus
> Quaelibet altum cumba pererrat;
> terminus omnis motus et urbes
> muros terra posuere nova,
> nil qua fuerat sede reliquit
> pervius orbis.
> (*Med*., 369-72)

> Chorus
> All stynts and warres are taken cleane away,
> The Cities frame new walles themselues to keepe,
> The open worlde lettes nought rest where it lay.
> (Seneca 1581, 127*r*)

14 This is part of a larger trend in Elizabethan translations of Seneca, where similar scenes are rewritten by the different translators to exalt resistance against tyranny: see Woodbridge 2010, 130-38.

The Argonauts themselves have all met unfortunate deaths, which the Chorus sees as a proof of the punishment they received from the gods for breaking the "sancta / foedera mundi" (132*r*, "the frame / Of heauen" that "Ioue with sacred hand hath halowed"). Medea's marriage to Jason represents in this view a consequence of the unnatural chaos brought about by the expedition. In addition, Medea's revenge in Seneca underlines her barbarism. Not only does Medea's performance of the richly detailed rite to enchant the tunic which will kill Creusa occupy an entire scene, but Medea herself will also interpret her revenge as a recovery of her original barbaric identity:

> Medea
> Iam iam recepi sceptra germanum patrem,
> […]
> rediere regna, rapta virginitas redit.
> (*Med*., 982, 984)

> Medea
> Now, now my Scepter guilt I haue recouered once agayne:
> My Fathers wronges reuenged are, and eke my brother slayne:
> […]
> Possession of my realme I haue reclaimed to my hand;
> Come home is my virginity, that whilom went astray.
> (Seneca 1581, 139*r*)

As testified by these examples, Studley's translation reproduces this particular aspect of Seneca's tragedy, foregrounding another layer of Medea's psychology: besides being a rebellious woman, she is also a foreigner who holds arcane knowledge.

To sum up: Studley's translation retains the interpretative framework typical of early modern English receptions, which viewed Medea as a negative example of femininity. However, it adds new facets to it by retaining her typically Senecan foreignness and ability to lucidly and entirely commit herself to her designs. In doing so, Studley sets the tone for Medea's subsequent rearticulations in Elizabethan poetry, prose, and drama, which by and large will follow his interpretation of Seneca. We can already see this in two texts from the 1560s and 1570s, where Medea is referred to as a term of comparison for rebellious, violent female figures: Pandora, the protagonist of the third story in Geoffrey Fenton's anthology *Certaine*

Tragicall Discourses (1567), and Violenta, the female lead in Thomas Achelley's poem *Tragicall Historie of Didaco and Violenta* (1576). Both characters are explicitly compared to Medea as strong-willed women who enter into socially unsuitable marriages only to take revenge upon their partners when they are abandoned[15]. Like her, they are highly passionate female figures nurturing unbecoming desires and taking measures to satisfy them, with no hesitation or regard for any rules. Like her, they are described as strong-willed women, capable of committing to their own decisions with unshakable firmness. Their foreignness is also a key trait: being Italian and Spanish, respectively, and therefore Catholic, their 'unnatural' personalities are also presented as dependent on the corruption of their countries (Heavey 2015, 89-92, 97-98). In a word, both characters are modern versions of the literary paradigm embodied by Seneca's Medea in Studley's translation, which makes it all the more relevant that, unlike her, Pandora and Violenta are punished shortly after achieving their revenge. Such endings allow Fenton and Achelley to present their stories as cautionary tales for women, so that they conform to social rules and prove good examples of womanhood.

Fenton and Achelley's narratives – the former in prose, the latter in verse – represent the first instances of what would become an established pattern in Elizabethan literature about the use of Medea as a model for negative female figures pursuing either unnatural or criminal desires, eventually only to atone for their actions[16]. Elizabethan tragic theatre teems with such examples, from Atossa, the antagonist in William Alabaster's Latin tragedy *Roxana* (1592-1595, printed 1632), to Guendoline, the antagonist in the anonymous tragedy *Locrine* (1594, printed 1595). Both characters are presented as bent on taking revenge on a partner who has deserted them, as well as on his new lover, revelling in their anticipation of committing terrible crimes, only to fail to emerge victorious (Atossa), or to be pre-

15 Violenta kills her partner only, while Pandora also kills their children. It should be noted that Medea's primary role in Elizabethan literature is *not* as an infanticide.

16 The same pattern is applied directly to Medea in two poems, Richard Robinson's *The Rewarde of Wickednesse* (1574) and George Whetstone's *The Rocke of Regard* (1576), where Medea herself is shown as being punished in the afterlife for her crimes: see Heavey 2015, 92-93.

vented from carrying out their revenge (Guendoline; cf. Heavey 2015, 98-105). However, the most glaring example of this type of character is arguably Tamora from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (printed in 1594). Like the other female characters just mentioned, Tamora is a woman capable of strong passions, ready to do anything (including unspeakable crimes) in order to attain the object of her desire. She is a powerful foreign woman whose coming to Rome symbolizes an unnatural mixture of different people brought about by the political expansion of the city (Grogan 2013). At the end of the tragedy, Tamora falls victim to Titus' revenge, thus suffering the same fate as the other Medea-like female figures. Years later, Shakespeare would present another female character who has often been compared to Medea, albeit with major differences: Lady Macbeth (see Miola 1992, 106-7; Ewbank 2007; Clark and Mason in Shakespeare 2015, 90-92; Heavey 2015, 105-13). Unlike characters such as Tamora, Lady Macbeth is not a foreigner, nor does she pursue any vengeful plots. And yet, verbal echoes of Seneca's *Medea* in her invocation to the spirits of the night (*Mac.*, I.v.40-54) have suggested similarities with Medea's nocturnal side as a sorceress (Ewbank 2007, 83-85). Her subsequent driving force behind Duncan's murder also recalls the ability of Seneca's Medea to devise and project crimes in her attempt to get the object of her desire. Like other Medea-like figures in Elizabethan literature, finally, she does not enjoy the outcomes of her wilful agency but is driven insane by it.

However, Medea is not exclusively connected with female characters, as there are examples of male figures in Elizabethan tragedy who are also linked to her. In such cases, their experience of identity debasement goes through stages where they are likened to qualities associated with Medea, as in the case of Young Clifford in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 2* (printed 1594). In front of his father's body, Clifford promises to avenge him and compares his future exploits against the York family to Medea's murder of her brother Absyrtus (V.iii.57-59). In the context of civil war, Clifford's evocation of Medea's fury highlights the worsening of the conflict, whose violent escalation leads men to abandon and desert every social bond and commit themselves to a cycle of ever-growing violence (Heavey 2016). Clifford will hold true to this world by contributing to the murder of York and his son Rutland, only to die in battle shortly afterward.

Though brief, his tenure on stage perfectly exemplifies the path of the Medea-like male figure of Elizabethan tragedy, which will also be featured in other Elizabethan tragedies – albeit with some considerable differences. In Mary Sidney's closet drama *Antonius* (1592), Medea represents a model for the characterization not only (and not surprisingly) of Cleopatra as a barbarian and powerful woman, but also of Antonius as a "figure of abandonment and despair" (Zanoni 2021, 130)[17]. A decade later, around the time *Othello* was first staged[18], Andrugio in John Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (printed in 1602) commits to bear the strikes of Fortune with the same words addressed by Medea to the Nutrix:

> Andrugio
> There's nothing left
> Unto Andrugio, but Andrugio;
> And that nor mischief, force, distress nor hell can take.
> (Iii.i.59-61)[19]

As these examples show, when it comes to male characters, other qualities of Medea than her revengeful fury are evoked. However, the pattern does not change significantly. As a victim of Cleopatra's seduction, Antonius is a man who has lost both his national identity as a Roman and his gender identity as a man (Zanoni 2021, 130-31). As for Andrugio, not only is the aforementioned passage uttered in a context where he has been excluded from every social bond, but his effort will be revealed as vain in Marston's sequel play, *Antonio's Revenge* (printed 1602), where the audience is informed that Andrugio has fallen victim to his enemy, Piero[20]. For those characters as well as

17 Zanoni argues for Mary Sidney's possible knowledge of Euripides' *Medea*, either in Greek or in Latin (Zanoni 2021, 128-30). However, Zanoni herself acknowledges that this possible Euripidean influence is part of a net of mythical and literary references, of which Seneca in Studley's translation is also a part (132-33). Personally, I would also note that, in this case, Euripides' supposed influence does not seem to bring any substantial changes to the well-established pattern underlying Medea's presence in Elizabethan literature.

18 I follow Honigmann in seeing *Othello* as first performed around mid-1602: see Honigmann in Shakespeare 2016, 349-56.

19 I quote from Marston 1964.

20 In *Antonio and Mellida*, Andrugio, Duke of Genoa, is considered either dead

for Clifford, references to Medea illustrate an irreparable falling off of the male character from his social identity.

The Pontic-sea passage in *Othello* can be seen as another instance of this tradition of Medea-like male characters who have lost their social identity. The dramatic context in which the passage is uttered does indeed fit. Like Clifford, Othello is vowing revenge for a betrayal; in doing so, Othello is assuming for himself Medea's constancy against the blows of Fortune, like Andrugio. If Clifford and Andrugio have both lost their social identities (either by choice or by Fortune), Othello too, as already seen, feels as if he had. His subsequent decision to be resolute and firm in his punishment of Desdemona, as a way to recover his own heroic self, is a psychological process similar to that of Andrugio, who in Marston's tragedy tries to fight against Fortune by trying to conform to a model of heroic firmness after losing all he had – and in both *Othello* and *Antonio and Mellida* this decision is highlighted by a textual allusion to Seneca's *Medea*. Finally, as for Clifford and Andrugio, for Othello too this narrative pattern will end in tragedy: he will achieve his revenge, but he will then discover that it was carried out for nought, and consequently will commit suicide.

We may then conclude that the narrative and poetic pattern involving Medea in connection with male characters seems to be central to *Othello* as a play, and that Othello can be considered yet another example of a Medea-like male character typical of Elizabethan theatre; a character whose loss of social identity and seemingly heroic resolution to fight against his plight by exacting revenge on those who wronged him foretells a tragic destiny. However, the circumstance of the 'seduction scene', and more generally of *Othello* as a whole, gives an altogether new meaning to the Medea allusion

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or missing after a battle, and he is forced to disguise himself to avoid the persecution of his mortal enemy, Piero Sforza, Duke of Venice. At the same time, his son Antonio is in love with Mellida, Piero's daughter, and tries to woo her by infiltrating in Piero's court under a false name. At the end of the play, Antonio manages to persuade Piero to approve his marriage with Mellida and make peace with Andrugio. This happy ending will be revealed as false at the beginning of *Antonio's Revenge*, where Piero, in his opening soliloquy, informs the audience that he poisoned Andrugio. The rest of the play will see Antonio trying to get revenge over Piero for his father's death.

and the Medea narrative pattern here evoked; one that goes beyond the well-established poetic tradition contemporary to Shakespeare's play, and instead points to a more complex relationship between *Othello* and the Elizabethan imagery connected with Medea. To an exploration of this relationship I will now turn in the third and final part of this article.

3. Medea and Othello

When I suggested that Othello feels that he has lost his social identity, I meant to point out an important difference from the examples of other Medea-like male characters such as Clifford and Andrugio. In their cases, the loss of identity was real, due to objective, external circumstances. In *Othello*, instead, the audience knows that Desdemona's betrayal is Iago's invention, and that Othello has no actual reason to play the role of the betrayed man and plot for revenge against his spouse. In this sense, Miola was right in remarking that the Pontic-sea passage with the evocation of Medea highlights the success of Iago's plan by "proclaim[ing] […] that [Othello] has assumed the role Iago casts him in, that of a Senecan avenger" (Miola 1992, 129)[21]. Nevertheless, this is not the only effect of the Senecan parallel. The evocation of Medea and of the literary tradition connected with her are directly relevant to the way Shakespeare deals with the cultural construction of a dangerous Other in *Othello*. I would even argue that three different meanings may be traced in this passage, each one related to one of the main characters of the play (Othello, Iago and Desdemona) as well as to the Elizabethan Medea model circulating at the time.

Let us start with Othello. We saw that, in his words, the evocation of Medea expresses his sense of loss of his social identity as a member of European civilisation. Nonetheless, the action of the play makes it clear that such an identity had always been an issue. As Janet Adelman remarked, the first description the audience hears of Othello is

21 Loren Cressler offers another interpretation of this passage as "signalling the beginning of a revenge plot taking roots" (Cressler 2019, 87). I find this persuasive, given not only that the following events of the play will stage Othello's revenge on Desdemona, but also the well-known influence of Senecan tragedies on such works.

from Iago and Roderigo as they go to tell Brabantio about the Moor and Desdemona's secret marriage (Adelman 1997, 125-26). The image they evoke – a "lascivious Moor" (I.i.125), "an old black ram / Tupping [a] white ewe" (87-88) – is a very familiar one to the Elizabethan audience: the lustful black stranger, corruptor, and ravisher of women (Vitkus 2003, 91-92). Only the appearance of Othello on stage in the next scene will disperse this image, thus making the audience aware of the difference between what Iago and Roderigo presented as being true, and Othello's actual character as a noble and heroic general[22]. The rest of the action in Act 1 will continue to harp on this contradiction through Brabantio's attempt at having Othello punished for bewitching his daughter into marrying him – which Brabantio defines as a threat to Venice's identity[23]:

> Brabantio
> […] The duke himself,
> Or any of my brothers of the state,
> Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own.
> For if such actions may have passage free
> Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.
> (*Othello*, I.ii.99-102)

22 Much has been written about what a shock it would have been for an Elizabethan audience to see a black man integrated into European civilisation at its highest levels. Those studies were usually based on the assumption that the majority of black people present in Tudor England – which had become reasonably substantial by the end of the sixteenth century: cf. Serpieri 2003, 25, 222 – would consist of slaves, or at least low-rank citizens. Recent studies, such as Miranda Kaufman 2017, have questioned such a view, by pointing out instead at the presence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England of some notable examples of black men successfully integrated into English society, some even in high social places. Admittedly, this does suggest that Othello's character might not have been as shocking to Elizabethan audiences as has been thought.

23 Brabantio's fear is heightened by the fact that Venice in *Othello* is tellingly represented as a city "shot through with foreignness" (Perry 2020, 238), home to a highly heterogeneous group of characters whose foreign origin is either declared (Othello, the Moor, Cassio the Florentine) or implied (Iago and Roderigo carry Spanish names, even though they are presented as native to Venice). For a more detailed analysis of the place of Venice in Shakespeare's imagination, I refer to Laura Tosi and Shaul Bassi 2011.

As Daniel Vitkus showed, Brabantio "presents a clear analogy between Othello's […] theft of Desdemona and the Turks' […] attempt to steal Cyprus" (Vitkus 2003, 92). He describes Othello as a threatening stranger who used "drugs […] charms […] conjuration and […] mighty magic" (*Oth*., I.iii.92-93) to ensnare his daughter into an unnatural union. Even if he fails, his action still shows that Othello's confidence that his services to the State have granted him acceptance (I.ii.18-19, "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall outtongue his [Brabantio's] complaints") is not as well-founded as he thinks: as a Moor converted to Christianity, Othello still elicits suspicions whether he truly has become a proper member of society. And indeed, the moment Iago convinces him of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, Othello immediately resumes his original barbarian identity. In his study of the play as a "drama of conversion" (Vitkus 2003, 77), Vitkus shows how Othello's reaction to Iago's lies recalls, on the one hand, the description of the Moors contained in geographical treatises such as *De la descrittione dell'Africa* by Leo Africanus (published in an English translation by John Pory in 1600) as "honest and trusting but jealous and given to passionate, vengeful rage when wronged" (91); and, on the other, the well-known dramatic type of "the Islamic tyrant […] who rules by will and appetite, committing rash acts of cruelty" (99). By the end of the play, Othello himself will view his murder of Desdemona as a relapse into his identity as a barbarian. As he prepares to commit suicide, Othello tells a story about how he punished "a malignant and a turbaned Turk" who "beat a Venetian and traduced the state" (*Othello*, V.ii.351-52). In this tale, as Serpieri remarks, Othello splits himself into two different roles, so that "his acculturated ego kill[s] and punishe[s] his barbarian ego" (Serpieri 2003, 194). Iago's deception has transformed Othello into the threatening Other Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio saw him as at the beginning of the play[24].

24 Othello's Otherness as a black man has been the subject of much critical discussion, as well as public outrage. Famous is Coleridge's denial of Othello's negritude, as is the censorship of Victorian performances of the play, where the final sight of Othello and Desdemona's bodies was concealed from the audience (see Neill 1989). The theme has become relevant once again in the second half of the twentieth century, in the context of the struggle for civil rights. Notably, black actors have expressed different attitudes towards Othello's character, sometime

As we noticed in the previous section, foreignness was a recurring theme in Elizabethan interpretations of Medea, as well as a prominent one in Seneca's tragedy. An entire choral ode in that play presented the union between Jason and Medea as the proof of the unnatural mingling of people and countries caused by the Argonauts' voyage, threatening every social and national identity. Medea's revenge was also interpreted by Seneca as her way to recover her original barbarian identity. Most of the female characters presented by Elizabethan writers as Medea-like were foreigners (Pandora, Violenta, Cleopatra in Sidney's *Antonius*), including Tamora, whose coming to Rome in *Titus Andronicus* represents a sign of the decadence of the State. The evocation of Medea by Othello in III.iii resonates with such echoes. When he declares his intention to pursue revenge, Othello does not look like any Senecan-like avenger: he is implicitly associating himself with one specific Senecan avenger, Medea, the barbarian woman endowed with arcane magic (and it should be noted that Brabantio accuses Othello of having enchanted Desdemona), whose arrival in a civilized space represents a threat to national identity. In other words, by exploiting the implications of the Medea model qualifying male figures as deprived of their own identities, Shakespeare's suggestion of a Medea-like Othello further highlights his relapse into his barbarian self brought about by Iago's lies. In passing, it may be worth pinpointing a curious coincidence. When discussing the relationship between *Othello* and Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*, Miola viewed Othello's handkerchief as a counterpart of the tunic bathed in the blood of Nessus the Centaur that caused the hero's death (Miola 1992, 134-35). Along similar lines, it may be argued that the handkerchief recalls the tunic Medea enchants to kill Creusa. Both objects are parts of the family heritage of the two foreigners: Medea's is a gift of the Sun, her grandfather (*Med*., 570-71), and the handkerchief was given to Othello by his mother (*Oth*., III.iv.57). As in Seneca's tragedy, Medea's ritu-

seeing him as "a vehicle for racial uplift", sometimes "as a tool for racial oppression" (Thompson in Shakespeare 2016, 84; see also Bassi and Scego 2020 in relation to the use of blackface in 19th and 20th-century Italian reprises of *Othello*). At the same time, new attention has been dedicated to how *Othello* related to black people in Tudor England (on which see the previous note) and how race as a concept is present in the play (on which see Adelman 1997; Neill 2006, 123-30; Bassi 2016, 21-41).

al of enchantment is presented at length (740-848), so in *Othello* the Moor describes to Desdemona the ritual performed by the Egyptian wizard on the handkerchief (III.iv.71-76), a story he will later admit to having invented (V.ii.214-15). But above all, in either case, the two objects bring about the death of those who receive them, Creusa and Desdemona, respectively.

At the outset, I mentioned that Curtis Perry offered a reading of Iago as a character reminiscent of Seneca's Atreus (Perry 2020, 238-52) in so far as like him, Iago too projects onto his victim his own ideas of what a dangerous Other is in order to expel, punish, and repress the phantoms of his own troubled psyche: "Iago […] creates Othello's monstrosity via a process of projective identification" (250). The idea is not new in studies about *Othello*, as in the last thirty years or so this position has often been voiced to solve the much-discussed question of the otherwise inexplicable reasons behind his behaviour[25]. In my opinion, Othello's implicit assimilation to Medea is also significant in this regard. As we saw, in Elizabethan receptions of Medea she was often instrumental in expressing social anxieties about dangerous Otherness incarnated by rebellious women, or by fallen men, as threats to national and social identities. Figures akin to her were shown as eventually failing to either get what they wanted or escape the consequences of their actions. If they did not end up being punished (either by the law or by other characters taking revenge on them), they were shown as unable to suppress their own remorse, which led them to their demise. In either case, their failure reasserted the social order they upset. This narrative pattern is also present in *Othello*, where it constitutes the plot of the second part of the play, after Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. However, it originates earlier on, when Iago starts manipulating Othello in order to get revenge on him for depriving him of what he perceives as his rightful place in the world. This is apparent from the very beginning of the play, where Iago is shown lamenting to Roderigo how "his Moorship" (*Othello,* I.i.32)[26] denied him the place he deserved as his lieutenant (10, "I know my price, I am worth no

25 Perry himself admits his debt to the article by Janet Adelman 1997; see also Serpieri 2003.

26 See Serpieri 2003 on the ironic undertones of this definition, where "the suffix of prestige and honour *ship* joins in a grotesque oxymoron the lexeme of contempt *Moor*" (Serpieri 2003, 14).

worse a place"). The audience hears Iago suggest that "the lusty Moor" (II.i.293) slept with Emilia (I.iii.386-87, II.i.293-95), thus depriving him of his social role as a husband (Serpieri 2003, 51-53). In these passages Iago, like Brabantio, views Othello as an intruding foreigner, whose action disrupted the traditional order of things, like Medea and the characters she was often compared to. As a result, when Othello starts to behave as a wild Medea-like Moor as a result of Iago's deception, the allusion to the mythical figure of the sorceress highlights Iago's successful transformation of Othello into the negative Other as he envisions him from the outset. In this sense, the Pontic-sea passage not only shows that Othello has once again become his barbarian self, it also suggests that he has become the man Iago thought he was: the dangerous foreigner threatening the social order, who therefore must be repressed and punished.

Othello is not the only character on which Iago projects an image of dangerous Otherness. Desdemona is also subjected to a similar process of projection on Iago's part, in a way that evokes another narrative model that in Elizabethan literature was often related to the figure of Medea. As we have already recalled, the first female characters connected with Medea in Elizabethan literature, such as Pandora and Violenta, were young women rebelling against societal norms by contracting socially unfitting marriages. Desdemona is likewise a potentially rebellious figure. In Act 1, she goes to the Senate to defend her marriage in front of her own father (*Othello* I.iii.180-89), and argues for her right to follow Othello to Cyprus to enjoy "the rites for which [she] love[s] him" (I.iii.258) – an euphemism for sex. Desdemona is thus also revealed as a woman fully conscious of her desire and determined to satisfy it against all conventions[27]. Moreover, when Desdemona reaches Cyprus, Cassio welcomes her by exclaiming that the sea "omit[ted] / [its] mortal natures, letting go safely by / The divine Desdemona" (II.i.71-73), "our great captain's captain" (74). Iago himself recognizes the power she holds over Othello: "His soul is so enfettered to her love / That she may make, unmake, do what she list" (II.iii.340-41). These lines enhance Desdemona's por-

27 Serpieri points out that Othello, in the account of his seduction of Desdemona, nonetheless suggests that it was her who encouraged him to speak (see I.iii.151-54; Serpieri 2003, 35-39).

trayal as a woman capable of exerting power over men, endowed with courage and valour – all aspects that evoke continuities with negative female figures which writers such as Fenton and Achelley compared to Medea. In a sense, we could say that *Othello* presents the same division of the Medea-model into two characters, one male and one female, which Zanoni observed about Sidney's *Antonius*: Othello inherits from Medea her barbaric foreignness and revengeful fury, Desdemona her transgressive femininity (Zanoni 2021).

Desdemona's eventual fate is also somewhat in line with other Medea-like female characters: abandoned by the man she left everything for, she becomes a figure of despair, whose fate should admonish women not to follow her example. This is precisely the moral of the main source of *Othello*, the novella from Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio's *Gli Ecatommiti* (1565)[28]:

> Temo molto di non esser io quella che dia esempio alle giovani, di non maritarsi contra il voler dei suoi; a che da me le donne italiane imparino di non si accompagnare con uomo, cui la natura, e il Cielo, e il modo della vita disgiunge da noi. (Cinzio 2023, 8)
>
> (I am very much afraid to be the one who offers an example to young women not to marry against the wishes of their parents; and that Italian women may learn from me not to marry a man whom nature, heaven and the way of life separates from us.) (My translation)

We find here the same moralistic tone of Fenton and Achelley's stories about Pandora and Violenta (two other women from Catholic, Mediterranean countries) and, more in general, behind any appearance of Medea in Elizabethan literature: women should obey societal rules, disobedience out of personal desire only leads to disaster. On the surface, Desdemona's fate would seem just another instance of this simple common moral.

However, this is not the case. Shakespeare's Desdemona never shows signs of repentance or regret, she stays true to her word and time and again reaffirms her love for Othello, even after he turns

28 As often contended Shakespeare may have read the novella in Italian, since no English translation appeared until 1735: see e.g. Serpieri 2003, 213-21; Honigmann in Shakespeare 2016, 375-98.

against her (IV.ii.153-66; IV.iii.17-19)[29]. The supposedly rebellious and lustful woman is revealed to be a devoted, obedient wife, thus creating an evident contrast with her apparently being the protagonist of a story of female rebellion against authority and her eventual failure. This contrast is perceivable even in her speech at the Senate. While she defends her choice to marry the Moor against her father's wishes, she also expresses her resolution to be an obedient wife to Othello: "so much duty as my mother showed / To you, preferring you before her father, / So much I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord" (I.iii.186-89). As Michael Neill noted, these are not the words of a rebellious girl rejecting social standards, but rather those of a well-educated woman who knows her place in society and does honestly intend to occupy it the best she could (Neill 2006, 170-71). As much as Desdemona's choice of a husband may be unconventional, her attitude towards her spouse has no rebellious or unbecoming undertones: once her desire to be married to a man of her own choosing is satisfied, she craves for no other satisfaction. Just as Othello is not the wild barbarian some think he is (and only becomes one after Iago has deceived him), so Desdemona is not the lustful, unbridled and dangerous woman who is usually the protagonist of such stories of female rebellion.

Playing around precisely with this model, Iago presents her to Roderigo as an inconstant wife who will tire of Othello: "When she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice" (*Othello* I.iii.351-52); "her very nature will instruct her […] and compel her to some second choice" (II.i.220-33). His degraded portrayal of Desdemona (on which see Serpieri 2003, 65-68) suggests the revolting image of an unnatural woman whose desires are impossible to satiate, a "super-subtle Venetian"[30] (I.iii.357) who cannot be trusted. This anticipates the arguments Iago will later use to convince Othello of her betrayal:

> Iago
> To be bold with you,
> Not to affect many proposed matches

29 We may observe that Shakespeare has Emilia express regret for Desdemona's marriage with Othello, while in Cinzio this is uttered by Desdemona herself: see *Oth.*, IV.ii.127-28.

30 Behind this expression lies the reputation of Venetian women as courtesans in Elizabethan literature, on which see Salkeld 2012, 17-20; Stanton 2015, 135-48.

> Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
> Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends –
> Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
> (*Oth.*, III.iii.232-37)

Iago's words in this scene echo what in I.iii Brabantio told the Senate to convince them that Othello bewitched Desdemona ("It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect / That will confess perfection so could err / Against all rules of nature", *Oth.*, I.iii.100-02). He even goes so far as to notice Desdemona's disturbing ability to "seal her father's eyes up" (213-14) as evidence that she is deceiving Othello just as she did her father. Thus, Iago manages to convince Othello that Desdemona represents a threat not only for him, but for society at large: "she must die, else she'll betray more men", is Othello's ultimate self-delusion (V.ii.6). The success of Iago's deception leads him to think of Desdemona as a dangerous, despicable female character, whose rebellion to societal norms reveals her as unnatural and damnable – nothing less than Medea herself in the hands of writers who, like Fenton or Achelley, used her as a term of comparison for negative, violent female characters such as Pandora or Violenta.

Thus, the Pontic-sea passage from the 'seduction scene' acquires a third and final meaning. As he strengthens himself to pursue revenge against his wife, Othello is trying to acquire the same firmness in committing evil as the one Iago insinuated Desdemona possesses as a lascivious woman. Since, by cheating on him, she has proved to be a rebellious woman, dangerous to society – so his argument goes – Othello must be as firm and cruel in punishing her in order to administer justice, without faltering. The audience, however, knows that none of it is real, and that Othello and Desdemona are the victims of the lies of a man who projected onto them a fictitious image of dangerous Otherness which uncannily resembles recurrent Elizabethan interpretations of Medea, here split into two different models: the foreign man intruding into society and questioning its order (Othello), and the woman refusing to conform to social standards (Desdemona). The reference to Seneca's *Medea* at that point of III.iii thus ties into one crucial passage the main themes of *Othello*: the "staging of the damnation of the Other within a bourgeois-puritan civilisation that removes and expels the 'monsters' of its own imagination through projection" (Serpieri 2003, 5).

Conclusion

Curtis Perry was right: although *Othello* may not present an "especially overt […] engagement with the resources of Senecan tragedy […] Senecan models nevertheless prove useful throughout for thinking about [it]" (Perry 2020, 251). This is also true once the analysis is expanded to include not just the Senecan tragedies and their Elizabethan translations, but also the reception of the mythical models contained in them and the way they were read, interpreted, and re-imagined in the Elizabethan literary culture. This article has highlighted how the Senecan imitation present in *Oth*., III.iii.456-61, with its references to some passages of Seneca's *Medea* involving Pontus (Sen. *Med*., 404-7, 414-16), connects Shakespeare's text to a recurrent early modern reception of Medea as a troublesome incarnation of a dangerous, foreign femininity perceived as a threat to social order. As such, Medea as a figure derived mainly from Seneca proved to be a term of comparison, or a model for the characterization of either rebellious women presented as negative figures, or male characters experiencing the loss of their social identity.

As we have seen, this convention is also present in *Othello*, but here it is peculiarly a model for both the male and the female protagonists. It highlights Othello's perceived loss of his own identity as a member of the European civilisation and his falling back into the barbarous Moor other characters expect him to be underneath his civilized mask. At the same time, it puts Othello's barbarian relapse into perspective by situating it within the scope of Iago's own perverse plot of projections of fictional Otherness. From the outset, Iago is shown envisioning Othello as a figure of dangerous Otherness, depriving himself of what he viewed as his rightful place in society. The Pontic-sea passage, in marking the moment Othello starts behaving and talking as a Medea-like avenger, also highlights how Othello at that point begins turning into what Iago thinks him to be. Finally, the passage shows how Iago's deceptive description of Desdemona as an unscrupulous lusty woman, prey to her desire, echoes the model of negative femininity often associated with Medea – a model the audience of *Othello* probably shared and accepted, but found thwarted in Iago's false fabrication of a Medea-like Desdemona. In this way, Shakespeare's use of the Elizabethan Me-

dea imaginary is revealed to be closely tied to the dramatic and thematic cores of *Othello*, providing further evidence of this apparently 'un-Senecan' tragedy's links with Senecan drama and its contemporary reception.

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