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## The Gift of “The Shattering of the Self”: Murder and Sacrifice as Aesthetic Eminence in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*

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### 1. Introduction

William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Titus Andronicus* carries a difficult history. The kind of dynamic present in the play is raw and the drives, the movement, the rituals are complicated and at times horrific. Painted on the surface as a revenge-play in the tradition of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, it nevertheless, and essentially because of its primitive nature, manages to delve into the deeper, more ambiguous, realm of the symbolic and the poetic, which for significance relies fundamentally on violence as catalyst for the greater existential feeling of pleasure in the face of the abominable. Perhaps the play belongs in a tradition of its own, separate from Shakespeare’s other works, in a series of texts which dedicate themselves to the pleasurable study of perversion. Texts such as these make complicated the nature of established values and symbols, precisely because the narrative is inherently fragmented and torn, inconsistent, disruptive, even on a structural level. But the play’s imperfections only empower the text to give way to a meaningful exploration of fundamental violence in relation to the pleasure principle, with the ensuing horror of such a connection in turn frightening and perplexing the spectators, just as much as it entertains them. John Dover Wilson in his introduction to the play in *The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare* edition, describes the narrative thus:

Plethora, for example, is particularly conspicuous [in *Titus*]. There are some fifteen murders and executions in *Titus*, more than half of which take place on the stage; the heroine is raped, a little ‘off’, her tongue cut out and her hands ‘lopped’ from her arms; her father agrees to sacrifice his right hand to purchase life for his sons, in return for which their decapitated heads and his sundered hand are flung in contempt at his feet; in revenge for all this he then slits the throats of his daughter’s violators in full view of the audience, while she holds a basin between her stumps to catch the blood; [...] In short the play offers the usual bill of fare: motiveless malignity, continual blood-letting, and a relentlessly sustained assault upon the tear-ducts of the spectators.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. John Dover Wilson (New York: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, 2008) x.



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It is this abundance, this abandonment of conventional taste in favour of dramatic spectacle, having in mind the enhancement of the representation of the Real<sup>2</sup> without any mercy, which makes of *Titus* a rich playground for the epistemological crisis of identity, pleasure and the self which this paper aims to discuss. As Antonin Artaud further explains, on the idea and vitality of a merciless stage:

An idea of the theater has been lost. And as long as the theatre limits itself to showing us intimate scenes from the lives of a few puppets, transforming the public into Peeping Toms, it is no wonder the elite abandon it and the great public looks to the movies, the music hall or the circus for violent satisfactions, whose intentions do not deceive them.

Our long habit of seeking diversion has made us forget the idea of a serious theater, which, overturning all our preconceptions inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.

Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt.<sup>3</sup>

It is my contention that these representational techniques of murder and sacrifice enact in the play an effect, aesthetic in nature, which, due to its exuberant and excessive quality, I have termed to be a sort of 'aesthetic eminence', by which parameters significance is measured in the pleasure which destruction brings, even as it disturbs. The complicated pleasures and the particular notion of taste found within the play, gratifying even to a modern palate (if taken to mean as they do that certain qualities are as attractive as they are repulsive), are representative of an epistemological crisis, whereupon we do not know who we are in relation to the sensations which this object awakes. However, whatever dark and complicated feelings emerge from such a pursuit are better handled through exposure, rather than repulsion by censure<sup>4</sup>. An aesthetic appreciation of the horrible reveals subtleties about the nature of reality and even about the beautiful itself – it reveals the shadow in the thing.

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian Johnston, "Jacques Lacan," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta,

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/lacan/>> 29 July 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 84-85.

<sup>4</sup> After the transitory early modern period, these ambivalent and heterogeneous drives of the human subject will be severely censured and suppressed by the ideologies of the emergent new social order of modernity. Shakespeare himself anticipates and foreshadows this turn by gradually abandoning the representational techniques of abjection and horror for a more discursive, word-dominated drama. See: Attila Kiss, *Contrasting the Early Modern and the Postmodern Semiotics of Telling Stories* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011) 94, 104.

## 2. The Conceptual Framework – The Shattering of the Self and More

Despite the brutality and callousness of the play, it was a considerable theatrical success in the early-modern period and in more modern adaptations, as Cynthia Marshall explains in *The Shattering of the Self*:

After several centuries of critical condescension, *Titus Andronicus* has been reassessed in the last fifty years, mostly on the evidence of several successful theatrical productions. [...]

It is easy to assume [...] that certain actions are inherently repellent – too easy, in fact, since *Titus* features most of the acts likely to appear on such a list (cannibalism, dismemberment, sexual violence), yet its early popularity has been well documented as well as recently repeated. So while it is an interesting sociological point that the Elizabethans had like us, a penchant for gory entertainment, the correspondence of tastes is merely tautological when it comes to explaining the problematic appeal of this play's violence. Moreover, to subordinate the intensity of theatrical effect to the play's narrative or thematic lessons may produce a structure of meaning but does so without fully acknowledging the theatrical dynamic. [...] [W]hy would an audience, any audience, enjoy *Titus's* reiteration of violence against the human body? "Enjoy" may seem an odd verb to use here, since most viewers today will claim to appreciate the play *in spite of* its violence or alternatively to reject it *because of* the effects Palmer calls horrific. Yet enjoyment or pleasure of some form is the goal of any paying theatrical audience, as Shakespeare was well aware. The brilliance of *Titus Andronicus* lies in the way it allows viewers to be scandalized and morally outraged by events portrayed on stage but also and at the same time to identify with characters who suffer and commit acts of horrific violence.<sup>5</sup>

In this manner, the problematic of the play becomes clear: while something of an unsophisticated effort from a young Shakespeare, the materialization of the text, its potency when brought to the stage and the enjoyment and horror which ensue, effectively make complicated the very notion of pleasure and enjoyment itself. For while we may attempt to create a distance between the idea and the reality, it might very well be that at the stage there is no such division, and the disruption which comes from the incarnation of one's symbolic nature in the form of exquisite language and mirroring raises many a difficult emotion, and places in question who it is that we actually are – thus opening our sources for meaning to an existential search which is conducive to further, more complex, meaning and identification

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 106-7.



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(perhaps the very point of language). As Russ McDonald in one of the introductions to the play explains:

Tradition had declared *Titus* absurd, but theatregoers found themselves engaged and emotionally stirred. The Polish critic Jan Kott summarized this conflict in his response to the Brook production: "I have recently reread it, and found it ridiculous. I have seen it on the stage, and found it a moving experience. Why?"<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the key to an understanding of the impetuous and grotesque<sup>7</sup> power of the play lies in the idea of sublimation – the expression of certain visceral, animal, realities which, in the face of a potent ritual, such as that which is staged in theatre, come to the fore. Victor Turner in *By Means of Performance* discourses on this notion, and feeling, of elusive yet meaningful emotions, by viewing them as the liminal, and the powerful exploration which the stage provides.

All these [...] ritual processes contain within themselves what I have in several writings called a liminal phase, which provides a stage (and I used this term advisedly when thinking about theatre) for unique structures of experience [...], in milieus detached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, esoteric and paradoxical instructions, the emergence of "symbolic types" represented by maskers or clowns, gender reversals, anonymity, and many other phenomena and processes which I have elsewhere described as liminal. The limen, or threshold, [...] is a no-man's-land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future as anticipated by the society's normative control of biological development.<sup>8</sup>

These visceral realities are amply displayed in our taste for violence, or in the heightened sensation of pleasure which comes when enjoyment is entertained with pain. This in turn is transformed by our imaginations and converted into language in a manner so careful and even elegant, so enjoyed like a very fine wine, so as to become essentially an aesthetic experience, taking into consideration that extreme violence in literature and art follows something of a pattern. This will become obvious in Shakespeare's allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Russ McDonald (New York: Penguin Books, 2017) xxx. All future references to the play will be based on this edition.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the relation between the grotesque and humour see: John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/>> 29 July 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?" *By Means of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 11.

play,<sup>9</sup> harkening to an idea of a tradition in regard to a certain taste for slaughter and disorder in the imagination.

Ted Hughes, writing on Shakespeare's affinity with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, notes the two writers' "common taste for a tortured subjectivity and catastrophic extremes of passion that border on the grotesque." Hughes does not emphasize the individual tastes of Ovid and Shakespeare but instead sees them as products of similar times to which they give vivid expression.<sup>10</sup>

These patterns carry meaning. Underlying these currents of negative and destructive, tragic emotions, there is also an unmistakable vein of humour which punctuates the difficult story, bringing something of a different and strange flavour to the text – which adds invariably to its literary, theatrical excellence. This connection is made explicit most poignantly by Thomas De Quincey in "On Murder," a satirical essay which, nonetheless, seeks to express (and sing the praises of) the nuanced pleasures which exist when one takes the time to admire the wonders of violence and of a decently performed murder. As Robert Morrison further explains in the introduction to the essay:

'On Murder' seizes on the satiric and artistic approach to murder De Quincey introduced in 'On The Knocking', pushing the logic of such a rationale in ways that are both disturbing and seductive, and submerging the ethical to the aesthetic. 'Everything in this world has two handles,' he argues with that deadpan aplomb that gives the essays such energy. 'Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle... and *that*, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated *aesthetically*... that is, in relation to good taste. [...] De Quincey's views on murder are also buttressed by a variety of philosophical sources, including Aristotle's notion of catharsis: 'the final purpose of murder, considered as fine art, is precisely the same as that of Tragedy, in Aristotle's account of it, viz. "to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror". De Quincey also reworked and extended key eighteenth-century notions of the sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke describes a theatre audience anxiously awaiting the performance of 'the most sublime and affecting tragedy' when it is 'reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square'. The theatre of course empties in a moment, demonstrating 'the comparative weakness of the imitative arts' and proclaiming 'the triumph of real sympathy'. Art and violence are again conjoined: Shakespeare is good, but the spectacle of public execution is better. [...] De Quincey saw clearly the openings and opportunities that such positions allowed [...]. For 'once natural violence was considered as a possible source of aesthetic experience,' Joel

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<sup>9</sup> McDonald xli.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall 12.



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Black observes, 'what was to prevent human violence, which inspired perhaps even greater terror, from making aesthetic claims as well?'<sup>11</sup>

These passages are telling, for while the aesthetic appreciation of violence can be considerable, even conducive to personal wellbeing, such as is pointed out by its association with catharsis, it is violence's position as a conduit of meaning which is truly relevant here, because of the passions it inspires and the connection it establishes with the sublime. And while the fury of a storm or the dreadful devastation of a tsunami are certainly sublime experiences, filling us with a sense of wonder and tremendous horror, human violence acquires its true expression in the idea of ritual, in the remarkable outbursts of passion which theatre seeks to enact – and the more sincere and effective the illusion, the greater the emotional impact on its audience. This is to say that the text with little to no mercy, and which generously salts the wounds with moments of inappropriate humour, even gross in nature, establishes in its bluntness and primitive candour a sophisticated sublimation of the harsher aspects of reality which are not so easily ignored. But in regard to rituals, as I was before said, the stage may hold no candle to the scaffold.

René Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred*, discusses the connection that violence has with sacrifice, ritual sacrifice, and the role such things perform in more primitive societies, namely societies without a modern legal system. Ritual sacrifice, performed on animals or humans alike, served as prevention to the issue of violence, which resolution was very difficult once the grievous crime of murder was committed. His theory on the aspect of sacrifice rests on the idea that violence is absolutely unavoidable, and an unmistakable component of our identities as human beings. To prevent extraordinary violence, ancient peoples performed ritual sacrifices which goal was to “deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a [sacrificeable] victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect”.<sup>12</sup>

[T]here is a common denominator that determines the efficacy of all sacrifices and that becomes increasingly apparent as the institutions grow in vigor. This common denominator is internal violence – all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels

<sup>11</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *On Murder*, ed. Robert Morrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) xiv-xv.

<sup>12</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977) 4.



within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric.<sup>13</sup>

The notion of ritual sacrifice, particularly human sacrifice, much as it may horrify and perplex us, seemed to have been an absolute necessity in a bygone age, and indeed a very positive element within the community, performed as it was to great effect. The victim would simply serve as a symbolic reminder of the brutality of existence and the spectators die by proxy. The release is supposed to have been considerable.

Medea, like Ajax, reminds us of a fundamental truth about violence; if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into “proper” channels.<sup>14</sup>

Violence, undirected toward ritual sacrifice, often resulted in murder, which in turn created a nearly endless cycle of violence which served nothing but itself; an insatiable violence whose flow is very difficult to cull once sprung.

To kill her would be to run the risk of one of the two groups interpreting her sacrifice as an act of murder committing it to a reciprocal act of revenge. The notion of vengeance casts a new light on the matter. [...] [B]etween these [sacrificial] victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance.

The considerable importance this freedom from reprisal has for the sacrificial process makes us understand that sacrifice is primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance.<sup>15</sup>

Violence is wildly attractive, as Shakespeare's play reminds us. We cannot help but be drawn to it, whether it is the scaffold, the stage, or the sacrificial altar. There is a connection between our identity and the violent impulse itself – a truth which art often mirrors. There is meaning that is evoked by the violence, some fundamental importance in it which connects us as mortal beings with life itself, with essential reality. Sacrifice, then, is ritualized violence which is contained, and so fundamentally constructive, as opposed to murder which is often done for pleasure, or as revenge, and so destructive. It is the consistent act of inconsequential murder and even of emancipated evil (in the figure of the Moor) that will serve to drown the characters

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<sup>13</sup> Girard 8.

<sup>14</sup> Girard 10.

<sup>15</sup> Girard 13.





and spectators of the play in blood, leading us to be shattered, relentlessly, by its force. In that essential destruction, as we fully appreciate the depths of the depravity concocted by Shakespeare in this most early, most visceral of his literary efforts, our pleasure will increase by the imaginative stimulation it provides. The analysis of these dichotomous forces of murder and sacrifice, of the existential quest which shatters and abjects, will serve to substantiate Shakespeare's play as a particular masterpiece in what regards the expression of essential human desire, for gratification and for destruction, at the cost of everything – the abandonment itself being the much sought-after reward. And as if by design, Shakespeare's play begins with a sacrifice.

### 3. Murder and Sacrifice in *Titus Andronicus*

Murder and sacrifice are both connected with violence, but whereas the second stands for harmony and order, the first stands for the breaking down of the social fabric, even to the point of societal extinction. Powerful negative emotions such as hatred, greed, lust, which translate into violence, must necessarily always find an outlet. If one is not constructed for the purpose, then the passions will follow their relentless course of their own accord.

It is the appeasement of violence, through ritual sacrifice, that the play begins with. Titus of the proud house of the Andronici returns from a gruesome war with the Goths victorious, holding considerable captives as tribute such as Tamora, the queen of the Goths, her lover, and her sons. Bearing the costs of war, Titus brings yet another son to be interred in the family vault, a son who died for the glory of Rome. Titus's character is implacable; he is absolutely loyal to Rome and was exceptional in warfare. As compensation for all the grievances suffered in bloodshed yet more blood must be spilt, but this time with the aim to restore harmony in an act of sacrifice. As Lucius, one of Titus's most honourable sons yet alive, proclaims: "Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs on a pile, / *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh, / Before this earthy prison of their bones, / That so the shadows be not unappeased, / Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth".<sup>16</sup> The idea of the mutilated body emerges here initially, as the "proudest prisoner of the Goths" will be hewn and his freshly severed limbs burned on a pile to appease the ghosts of violence past, namely that which was inflicted against the Roman army. A grotesque spectacle to be sure, yet one suited

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<sup>16</sup> *Titus Andronicus* I.i.99-104 (hereby referred to as *Titus*).

to whet the appetite of both soldier and citizen of Rome. This sacrifice, however, is already a slight perversion of Girard's definition of ritual sacrifice, since this ritual is not meant to prevent further violence exactly, but to repay the crimes of the past which brings it dangerously close to revenge. Shakespeare's game of substitution, conscious or not, sets the stage markedly for the brutality which must follow.

It will be Tamora's eldest son who is to be sacrificed in this manner, despite her mournful pleas, and this too will be a source of grief, since Titus supports Saturninus for Emperor, out of his unflinching sense of tradition and loyalty, despite the fact that Saturninus is not suited for the task. This is made abundantly clear by his preference for Tamora, a wicked and powerless opponent, rather than Lavinia, who is the very image of a noble Roman woman. Bassianus, the other pretender to the throne who appeared more decent in his caste, happened to love Lavinia greatly and in the face of Titus's gifting of the imperial power to Saturninus, which came with the hand of Lavinia, he kidnaps her as he feels he must, for they are in love and thus feel their affections overcomes their political, legal and filial duties. Titus is outraged by this breach of tradition and candour and his sons, who were aware of their sister's desires, seek to protect her and whisk her away with Bassianus, with only Mutius standing behind to afford them time. Titus, in a fit of rage slays his own son, thus opening himself up for the misfortune and self-destruction which is to be his reward, for such an act, infanticide no less, is an inherently destabilizing choice, upsetting the well-being of the community. From Titus's point of view, his son was not sacrificed but executed for treason, and this ruthless logic will cost him immediately as the emperor he supported abandons him.

LUCIUS

My lord, you are unjust, and more than so,  
In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son.

TITUS

Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine;  
My sons would never so dishonour me.  
Traitor, restore Lavinia to the Emperor.

[...]

SATURNINUS

No, Titus, no. The emperor needs her not,  
Nor her, nor thee, nor any of thy stock.  
I'll trust by leisure him that mocks me once;  
Thee never, nor thy traitorous haughty sons,  
Confederates all thus to dishonour me.  
Was none in Rome to make a stale,

But Saturnine? Full well, Andronicus,  
 Agree these deeds with that proud brag of thine,  
 That said'st I begged the empire at thy hands.<sup>17</sup>

His abandonment of Titus is short-sighted, an emotional decision roughly sketched for dramatic effect but which is consistent with Saturninus's character. This is seen by his evident unawareness of being cuckolded by his paramour, who was and still is, effectively, the enemy of Rome. The emperor is most certainly naked.

Saturninus eventually forgives Titus, instigated by Tamora, only so that she may exact her revenge – she swears to bring down the house of the Andronici. The agitation and unsettling start which this first act manifests serves well for the further destabilizing actions that, pillared as they are on baseless violence and gruesome mutilation, will violate those bodies upon which the action is centred. The violence in the play can assume such shattering force that it will veritably unsettle the reason and expression of the characters (and of the audience by proxy), transforming them in dizzying revolutions. And while the gore may seem gratuitous or overly blunt, it is that physicality of bodies turned corpses, or lumbering as they are mutilated, that creates the powerful effect of mirroring, cradled in fear and horror, which is a condition for the sublime, though it be dark. This encounter with the sublime essence of the end, of death and distortion of one's regular essence (by the mutilation), gives shape to the transformative, meditative cruelty which is the characters conditions of mortality, value and meaning. The negation brought about by death, the senselessness of murder, the fear of retribution, the disfigurement, both bodily and mental, of rape and torture – these are the basis upon which *Titus* establishes its aesthetic eminence, inelegant, crude, but effective in its shock value. The callous parading of horrors found within the narrative are conditional on our feeling repulsed by them. This horror aesthetic carries meaning which an otherwise more meditative and subtler design cannot hope to match, on the virtue that nature itself too lacks grace when it comes to its rough handling of its own constituting elements. That it is an integral part of existence does not make conflict fundamentally destructive:

For conflict forces the antagonists to diagnose its source, and in so doing, to become fully aware of the principles that bond them beyond and above the issues that have temporarily divided them. As Durkheim said long ago, law needs crime, religion needs sin, to be fully dynamic systems, since without “doing,” without the social

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<sup>17</sup> *Titus* I.i.295-299/302-10.



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friction that fires consciousness and self-consciousness, social life would be passive, even inert.<sup>18</sup>

But whereas nature is based on pure mechanism, Aaron's wickedness is pure design. His indulgence on mischief and carnage are most disturbing, for unlike Tamora his sole motivation is violence for violence's sake: he chooses to enjoy it, he dwells in it for pleasure. His devotion to destruction mark him as a figure of evil. This figure certainly has an antecedent:

In Hieronimo, Kyd created a passionate father driven to insanity by the injustice of the world, and Shakespeare borrowed details of that portrait in representing the experience of his suffering patriarch. In Barabas, the Jewish outsider who is the villain-hero of the *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe adapted the popular figure of the Machiavel, the Italian villain loosely deriving from the political writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. He thus supplied an immediate model for Shakespeare's Aaron, the wicked Moor who becomes the principal agent in Titus's misery.<sup>19</sup>

It is Aaron who concocts the plan to have Lavinia raped and Bassianus murdered, while incriminating Titus's sons Quintus and Martius for the murder, with his dark light shining through most prominently when he manages to trick old Titus into forfeiting his proud hand for the lives of his sons only to have the heads and the hand returned and laid before him, helplessly – a father's plea, most noble and touching though it might have been, absolutely ignored and ridiculed, giving evidence to the state of affairs in Rome. The sheer injustice and tasteless cruelty is part of the aesthetic character of the play, which empowers it to feel oppressive, ultimately, and forbidding. For the expression of these raw emotions, considering the powerful use of language for the task, we must look to that chilling stage direction which precedes Chiron and Demetrius after their rape of Lavinia, as well as to the way they harass her relentlessly, senselessly, after the fact. Their callous disregard for the enormity which they have committed only heightens the feeling of disgust and so of pleasure.

*II.4 Enter the Empress' sons [Demetrius and Chiron], with Lavinia, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished.*

DEMETRIUS

So, now go tell, and if thy tongue can speak,  
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished three.

CHIRON

Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,

<sup>18</sup> Turner 9.

<sup>19</sup> McDonald xxxii.

An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.  
 DEMETRIUS  
 See how with signs and tokens she can scrawl.  
 CHIRON  
 Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.  
 DEMETRIUS  
 She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash,  
 And so let's leave her to her silent walks.  
 CHIRON  
 An 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.  
 DEMETRIUS  
 If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord.<sup>20</sup>

The play with words in reference to her hewn hands and tongue and her general predicament, fresh, as it were, from the act, is a particularly striking example of language as it is used to express the horrible which makes abject.<sup>21</sup> The anger and hatred which such a visceral moment inspires may very well be bottomless. Marcus's reception of Lavinia, though often considered outlandishly out of place, actually possesses very meaningful rhetorical moments which are effectively critical in translating Lavinia into the symbolical realm, which necessitates poetic language.

MARCUS  
 A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,  
 And he hath cut those pretty fingers off,  
 That could have better sewed than Philomel.  
 O, had the monster seen those lily hands,  
 Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute,  
 And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,  
 He would not then have touched them for his life.  
 Or had he heard the heavenly harmony,  
 Which that sweet tongue hath made,  
 He would have dropped his knife, and fell asleep,  
 As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet.  
 Come, let us go and make thy father blind.<sup>22</sup>

The emotion which these words carry forward unto the audience creates the connection necessary for the effect of the shattering of the self to occur, as it requires both identification and horror.

But the children of Tamora are infant devils, whose cunning and wordplay cannot match that of Aaron. As McDonald affirms:

<sup>20</sup> *Titus* II.iv.1-10.

<sup>21</sup> On the "horrible which abjects," see: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 1-3.

<sup>22</sup> *Titus* II.iv.41-52.

Aaron's talents as a wisecracker confound expectation. The glee with which he snookers Titus into giving up his hand, for example, complicates an audience's emotional reaction to one of the most ghastly events in the play. Humor lightens his malevolence for a time, but the jokes rapidly fade in light of his monstrous behavior. This includes, but is not limited to, adultery, forgery, planting evidence, incitement to rape, slander leading to decapitation of the innocent, dismemberment, promise-breaking, and outright murder. Late in the play Shakespeare introduces yet another turn, in the person of Aaron's infant son, over whom the killer smiles and coos. Moments later, he viciously stabs the child's nurse while mocking her dying cries. Such emotional oscillation in our response to character is part of Shakespeare's larger design in *Titus*. It is also, of course, the key to the complex power of the great tragedies.<sup>23</sup>

It is his use of language which truly marks him as a wicked character, whose amoral perspective allows for a more creative use of words as symbols.

The puns in *Titus*, like the violence, are so abundant and conspicuous that they must be taken as part of Shakespeare's audacious bid for professional notice. [...] Aaron's scoffing implies a kind of verbal energy that Shakespeare often confers upon his villains, notably Richard III and Iago. As with those psychopaths, Aaron's verbal facility connotes an imaginative amorality that extends to the manipulation of persons and events. [...] When, for example, he taunts his captors with the narrative of his crimes, his language seems to explode with double and triple meanings.

AARON

They cut thy sister's tongue, and ravished her.  
And cut her hands, and *trimmed* her as thou *sawest*.

LUCIUS

O detestable villain! call'st thou that *trimming*?

AARON

Why, she was washed and cut and *trimmed*, and 'twas *Trim* sport for them which had the doing of it.

(V.i.92-96, my italics)

Changes in the verb "trim" have robbed this passage of some of its brutality: "to trim" meant not only to cut, but also to tidy, to put in good order, to decorate. According to Aaron, rape has improved Lavinia.<sup>24</sup>

Humour is a manner in which we may deal with the horrible, and the play with language evidenced here by Aaron is humorous, witty and whimsical, and effective in being both playful and fundamentally damnable. The character is making a joke, a cruel joke, but a joke

<sup>23</sup> McDonald xxxix.

<sup>24</sup> McDonald xliiii-iv.

nonetheless. The grotesque idea of Lavinia having been improved by rape correctly places the sensational moment as an aesthetic effect with a symbolic meaning, namely that she has transcended, in a negative, monstrous way, the beauty and reason which belonged to her, but which made her too plain, too ordinary. The dramatist required tremendous violence to transform her into the “map of woe”,<sup>25</sup> an agent which propels the narrative forward, and gives definition to the torturous pleasures contained within. Horror has a face and it is beautiful as it is daunting, for it is that sense of loss, so poignant because she was so wonderful, in her rhetoric and demeanour, which hurts the most. As a reward for her moral behaviour and general quality, she was made into an aesthetic object by having been martyred. “Decorated” in this manner, she now embodies the abject horror of loss, and the essential injustice of reality, inherently predatory and violent, based on conflict and opposition. The spectacle she presents is revolting and crushing, her grievous wounds too sharp a statement on the perishable nature of our bodies. As Cynthia Marshall explains:

[B]odies on the stage do not exist as stable objects read by disengaged viewers. The phenomenology of theatre structures an interaction through which viewers are aware of their own physical existence in the presence of other highly marked bodies on the stage. [...] The spectatorial crises recurring in productions of *Titus Andronicus* register the impact of images of bodily disintegration. The handless, headless, tongueless bodies represented on stage offer a mirror stage gone tragically amuck. [...] Here, the truth one reads in performance involves a challenge to fundamental ideas of bodily presence and totality.<sup>26</sup>

In Lavinia's sight, transformed, we are at a loss (for she is this loss), and cannot make sense of the cruelty – except as to think of her as the forceful reminder of the violence in the heart of man. This concept is not strange to Titus, who has thrived in an environment of violent schemes.

One of the greatest shifts in the play occurs in Titus, who once might have committed this extreme violence in the name of Rome, making it palatable because it had a ritual, a formula, a procedure – there was the weight of language behind it to make it permissible. But Rome has failed him and turned against him. Now that he feels powerless, the aim of his violence has changed, from ritual sacrifice to personal vengeance, for once having lost his hand, along with his sense of agency, he acquires it anew with rhetorical, theatrical vigour.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Titus* III.ii.12.

<sup>26</sup> Marshall 108.

<sup>27</sup> McDonald xlvi.



The most unsettling puns are delivered by Titus himself, and the word that he reiterates most obsessively is “hands.” [...] When Marcus seeks to protect Lavinia from self-inflicted injury – “teach her not thus to lay / Such violent hands upon her tender life” (III.2.21-22) – Titus objects to his brother’s figurative usage, literalizing the phrase (“lay hands upon”) in a passage that critics have usually found embarrassing.

What violent hands can she lay on her life?  
Ah, wherefore dost thou urge the name of  
hands...  
O, handle not the theme, to talk of hands,  
Lest we remember still that we have none.  
(III.2.25-30)

The quibble on “handle” is not an aberration but typical in its obviousness and indecorum. Titus plays with words in a way that seems indecent or grotesque. [...] [T]he slippery language here indicates a kind of obsessive distraction, as if only a madman could jest about such painful occurrences. [...]

The concentrated equivocation in the two scenes that constitute Act Three focuses the audience’s gaze on the play’s central images of powerlessness, Lavinia’s bleeding stumps, and Titus’s own severed limb. And the double entendre on “handle,” perhaps the most outrageous of the many puns having to do with dismemberment, punctuates the dramatist’s concern with the fundamental problems of cruelty, suffering, and self-destruction.<sup>28</sup>

Cruelty, suffering, and self-destruction; harsh themes we are capable of exploring, much as it unsettles us, because of the power of imagination and art. Even in a mere act of mirroring, of play, we are able to obtain a sense of control in the face of the inexorable. We confer some dignity back to an existence otherwise spotted with bloodshed and loss. With the power of art and that of rhetoric, we stay, for a moment, the crisis of meaning which is the basis for a lot of our grief. Indeed, we respond to grief with exuberance and ritual. We do away with the sometime senselessness of existence and the barbarism of death with great art. Similarly, Titus’s final act of feeding Tamora her own sons in a cannibal feast is most expressive of the sort of shattering of bodies which only sincere drama can provide and it is up to Titus’s newly acquired theatrical and dramatic vision to express in a sublime and horrible manner that evidence of reality which is most gruesome and inescapable, that violence, and a terrible fascination for it, despite the consequences (and sometimes even because of them), which resides within us all. In that final horrid feast, Tamora eats her own sons, Titus slays her, the

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<sup>28</sup> McDonald xliv-v.



blade fresh from having slain his own daughter, releasing her from her shackles as grotesque mirror of our horrors, is slain himself by Saturninus who is then slain by Lucius who claims, finally, his rightful place as emperor and upholder of proper roman conduct. Lucius's ascension, however, feels like a small aftertaste, bearing in mind that our palates were already so gorged with dramatic spectacle and sensation – with aesthetic eminence.

#### 4. Conclusion

Language, then, enables the shattering of the self to occur just as it becomes a tool for the aesthetic effect, while also allowing for the contemplation of the issue of violence as it translates into murder and/or sacrifice. Language, inherently complex and belonging to the realm of the symbolic, engenders the discourse on the self which is critical and existential. Pleasure is at the root of our embracing of violence, even as it disgusts us or frightens us, and this is an essential element to comprehend. This is part of who we are. This is the reality and complexity of personal identity. We sublimate that violence through ritual and art, as we must.

[T]he anthropology of experience (abolishing the sharp distinction between the classical study of culture and socio-biology) finds in certain recurrent forms of social experience (notably social dramas) sources of aesthetic form, including stage drama and dance. But ritual and its progeny, the performance art among them, derive from the subjunctive, liminal, reflexive, exploratory heart of the social drama [...]. True theatre “at its height signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.” When this happens in performance, there may be produced in audience and actors alike what D’Aquili and Laughlin (1979: 177) call in reference both to ritual and meditation a “brief ecstatic state and sense of union (often lasting only a few seconds) and may often be described as no more than a shiver running down the back at a certain point.” A sense of harmony with the universe is made evident, and the whole planet is felt to be *communitas*. This shiver has to be won, achieved, though, to be a consummation, after working through a tangle of conflicts. Theatre best of all exemplifies Thomas Hardy’s dictum: “If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst.”<sup>29</sup>

We require that sublimation. The only other alternative is the return to a purer state of being where our will translates into violent conflict, a state where discussion and debate, as we understand it from a modern sense, is impossible. Without an outlet, and an exceptional one which accurately portrays the horrors we know to be real, it seems inevitable that our selves, drawn to conflict and opposition and contradiction as we are, will seek to embody that violence

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<sup>29</sup> Turner 13.



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which is nourishment for our imagination. At the core of the conflict resides a complex sense of subjectivity and being which, caught between order and chaos, finds itself at a loss for the proper words to express its own condition. In the early modern period, Shakespeare's theatre functioned as a social laboratory to experiment with the crisis caused by the epistemological dilemmas of a nascent modern subjectivity. In this time of identity crisis, *Titus Andronicus*, with its techniques and themes of horror and ambiguity, offered for the audience "a temporary respite from the accumulating pressures of individual selfhood"<sup>30</sup>. The efficacy of this kind of aesthetic pleasure was later gradually repressed by the new, Cartesian ideologies of modernity. And yet its significance, on an intuitive level, has not been completely forgotten.

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<sup>30</sup> Marshall 4.



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