

# Sinestesiaonline

PERIODICO QUADRIMESTRALE DI STUDI SULLA LETTERATURA E LE ARTI.  
SUPPLEMENTO DELLA RIVISTA «SINESTESIE»

ISSN 2280-6849

Anthony Ballas

## VIOLENCE IN 'TITUS ANDRONICUS': A BENJAMINIAN APPROACH

---

### ABSTRACT

This paper offers an interpretation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* from the vantage of Walter Benjamin's concept of «divine violence», which he theorized in his early work *A Critique of Violence* (1921). *Titus* is well known for its over-the-top, gruesome violence, which is perhaps what led to the play's waning popularity during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The gore of the play is punctuated by the violent legal apparatus operative within, the Roman Law of equal retribution, *lex talionis*. *Lex talionis* ensures that the play's characters seek retribution in the form of extreme violence, ushering in what Benjamin refers to as mythical violence, a never ending cycle of bloody, violent acts sustained by the legal system itself. What has yet to be considered is the presence of divine violence in the play, as Benjamin puts it, as a form of violence that is «lethal without spilling blood». This paper considers how Aaron the Moor's self-reflexive villainy, and radical act of grace (when he saves his son from certain death at the hands of Tamora and her nurse) suspend the dialectic of mythical violence and thereby threaten the hegemonic legal order of *lex talionis* in terms consonant with Benjamin's description of the function of divine violence.

### KEYWORDS:

Shakespeare, Rome, Violence, Race

### EMAIL:

anthony.ballas@ucdenver.edu

---

There is an undeniable economy of bodies operative in *Titus Andronicus*. Sons' lives are violently exchanged for others in retribution, body parts severed and traded, and daughters brutalized all in service of revenge, and all under the tacit acceptance of the law of equal retaliation. By having Alarbus murdered in retribution for the loss of his sons, Titus commences the dialectic of revenge between the Romans and the Goths that is central to the play. This dialectic is precisely what Walter Benjamin described as mythical violence: a law-making and law-preserving violence that keeps intact the cyclical 'tit for tat' between the two groups, upholding *lex talionis* as though it were natural law. Though Benjamin posits the possibility of divine violence as that which expiates the law, most attempts to account for this second order of violence are generally doomed to a kind of weak messianism, and thus never quite materialize practically. In this essay, I attempt just this: to materialize a cogent account of divine violence through the exemplary actions of a villain, Aaron the Moor.

Before turning to divine violence, it is important to understand how for Benjamin the «law's interest in a monopoly of violence» keeps *lex talionis* intact.<sup>1</sup> In the play, the Roman state has the total monopoly of violence, which maintains both Gothic and Roman identities through the law of retaliation, though the relations that maintain it are unstable, and often deeply ironic. In Act I, for instance, the unity of this Roman monopoly is not only threatened by the presence of the Goths, but is threatened from within the Roman state as well. The «common voice» of the Roman republic (1.1.20-1)<sup>2</sup> that Marcus naively announces in his first lines of the play, we soon find out, is itself fractured: Bassianus and Saturninus compete with one another to be emperor, a fraternal spat that is further complicated by the arrival of Titus' cavalcade of sons and captive Goths. The arrival of this motley ensemble of living, deceased, and soon to be deceased Romans, Goths, a Moor, and, as the stage direction indicates, «*others as many as can be*» provides a visual blurring of the boundaries of group cohesion. These characters march onto the stage as one lump sum composed of disparate nationalities and ethnicities, complicating Marcus's notion of «common voice».

It doesn't take long for this «common voice» to be fractured even further. After Alarbus is taken off stage to be murdered in retribution, Tamora acknowledges how she has been «incorporate into Rome» (1.1.472), and feigns affiliation with Roman leadership. Though she plots against the state in secret, her acknowledgement reads as an open adoption of *lex talionis*. Indeed, the boundaries between the Goths and Romans are so blurred throughout the play that the audience begins to suspect the 'civilized' and the 'savage' might be one in the same. The audience thus inquires in a way similar to Portia upon entering the trail of Shylock, asking «who is the merchant and who is the Jew?»<sup>3</sup> In *Titus*, the Roman and the Gothic cannot easily be told apart, and the mythical violence of *lex talionis* is their common ground.

Romans and Goths meet on another common ground in the play. Titus' appointment of Saturninus as caesar in the first act sets an appropriate tone for both groups. Throughout the play, Roman and Gothic characters alike endeavor to symbolically or literally devour their young like the god Saturn himself was purported to have done. Thus, not only is the law of retribution valorized as the law of the land, but so too Titus and Tamora channel Saturn, consuming their own young with no remorse. When Titus declares, «Lord Saturnine, whose virtues will, I hope / Reflect on Rome as Titan's rays on earth» (1.1.227-8), he is unaware that it is explicitly Saturn's 'virtue' of devouring his young that will be most reflected during the narrative. This reflection becomes immediately perceivable when Saturninus chooses Lavinia as his wife, to which Titus immediately capitulates, surrendering his only daughter into the perverse exchange between brothers which will eventually usher Lavinia to her death by his own hand. Titus also wastes no time dispensing with his son Mutius when he intervenes during the seizure of Lavinia, declaring, «No man shed tears for noble Mutius / He lives in fame, that died in virtue's cause» (1.1.397-8). The 'virtue,' again,

---

<sup>1</sup> W. BENJAMIN, *Reflections*, Peter Demetz ed., Schocken Books, New York, NY 1986, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all line-citations are from W. SHAKESPEARE, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by B.A. Mowat and P. Werstine, Folger Library, Washington, D.C. 2005.

<sup>3</sup> W. SHAKESPEARE, *Merchant of Venice*, ed. by M. Lindsay Kaplan, Bedford St. Martin's, New York, NY 2002, 4.1.169.

seems to rest on a combination of *lex talionis* and symbolically on Saturn's devouring of his young. Tamora, of course, will also partake of her progeny's flesh, as later on she is tricked into literally devouring Chiron and Demetrius. The play's steady stream of murder, rape, dismemberment, both symbolic and literal cannibalism, and decapitations makes Marcus' naive attempt to «help to set a head on headless Rome» perhaps most ironic, as there's no scarcity of heads to choose from as the play progresses (1.1.186).

In this mix of mythical violence, retaliation and cannibalism of the young, one character seems to confound all logic. Although characterized as a mendacious, unrepentant evil, Aaron the Moor throws a wrench in this cycle of mythical violence. Cutrofello, following Benjamin, is right to comment on Aaron's similarity to Richard and Iago, as all three are symbolically born under Saturn's sign. Aaron himself alludes to this when Tamora attempts to seduce him in the forest:

Madam, though Venus govern your desires,  
Saturn is dominator over mine.  
What signifies my deadly standing eye,  
My silence, my cloudy melancholy,  
My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls  
Even as an adder when she doth unroll  
To do some fatal execution? / No, madam, these are no venereal signs.  
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,  
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head (2.3.30-9)

Although he describes himself as saturnine when Tamora attempts to seduce him, Aaron's villainy is perhaps aligned more so with a kind of saturnalia, given his ridiculous, over the top displays of violence and laughter, and is in this way perhaps better characterized as a kind of Richard-Feste hybrid: he is a diabolical evil of ridiculously clownish proportions. For Benjamin and Cutrofello, «the diabolical, no less than the angelic open up a tear in the fabric of the world».<sup>4</sup> I claim that the fabric Aaron diabolically tears open is the very fabric of mythical violence the play: the combination of *lex talionis* and devouring of the young spontaneously consented to and practiced by the Romans and the Goths. Through his over the top and self-reflexive evil, Aaron refuses to partake in the law of retaliation while also refuses to dispense with his child.

At one level, Aaron complicates the cycle of mythical violence by maniacally poking fun at it, and turning his actions, and perhaps to a degree even the play itself, as Leggatt observes, into a «grotesque comedy».<sup>5</sup> It may be useful to read his over-the-top, excesses of violence and odiousness in *Titus* as precisely this: a comedic, almost parodic commentary

---

<sup>4</sup> A. CUTROFELLO, *All For Nothing*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2014, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> A. LEGGATT, *Titus Andronicus: A Modern Perspective*, in W. SHAKESPEARE, «*Titus Andronicus*», ed. by B.A. Mowat and P. Werstine, Folger Library, Washington, D.C. 2005, pp. 241-250. This comic dimension of the play is also alluded to by Royster, as she describes how, «in a culture that values moderation, it is appropriately lack of moderation which provokes disasters. In *Titus* the over-the-top horrors are matched by excesses of rhetoric which finally tilt over into the comic»: see F. ROYSTER, *White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus'*, in «*Shakespeare Quarterly*», LI, 4, Winter, 2000, p. 440. Aaron, perhaps more than any other character, exemplifies this comic dimension of rhetorical and horrific excess.

on the boundary separating Roman civility from Germanic barbarism. This boundary is blurred: Tamora is of course «incorporated» early on into Rome, and Titus near the play's end declares, «Let rape and murder stay with me» (5.2.137).<sup>6</sup> Though unlike Tamora and Titus, Aaron does not attempt to mask his evil by professing a moral rectitude or god-given right to retaliate, but is actually quite self-consciously an atheistic, evil, almost trickster kind of character. For instance, when he is setting the trap for Bassianus and his sons in Act II, he self-consciously comments to himself in a timbre similar to Richard III, congratulating himself for a «very excellent piece of villainy» (2.2.7). This comment is quite comical. He is also very aware of the role of sibling rivalry in the play, and provides a kind of meta-commentary for the audience, as he cries out in an aside while he orchestrates the rape of Lavinia, «Clubs, clubs! These lovers will not keep the peace» in reference to the quarreling of Chiron and Demetrius (2.1.37). Through asides such as these, Aaron is granted a special epistemological position in the play, which may have been a rather estranging experience for early modern audiences accessing these thoughts from the standpoint of a Moor.

Although Aaron is a character embodying total evil, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. His son is one of the only progeny to come onto the stage and not be violently dispensed with. Rather, due to Aaron's defiant act of grace in the face of Tamora's order to «christen it with thy dagger» (4.2.72), the boy is saved from the mythical cycle of violence, or, as Žižek might put it, he «resists interpellation» into the economy of *lex talionis* and child cannibalism.<sup>7</sup>

Tamora, by contrast, is fully interpellated into the Roman legal schema. When Lavinia pleads with Tamora in search of female solidarity, asking her to «Be a charitable murderer» (2.3.178), Tamora justifies herself by appealing directly to the economic exchange of retribution, saying, «So should I rob my sweet sons of their *fee*» (2.3.179, emphasis mine). Although also evil, Tamora's evil is unlike Aaron's, given that she embodies an evil which has consented to *lex talionis* as though it were a contractual agreement: her sons are to receive recompense for the murder of their brother.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Tamora, Aaron is quite willing to breach his contract<sup>9</sup> with Titus, and openly shares his intentions to do so with the audience in an aside (again, a privileged intimacy for a Moor to share with Shakespeare's audience): «I go, Andronicus, and for thy hand / Look by and by and have thy sons with thee. / [Aside] Their heads, I mean. O, how this villainy / Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it! / Let fools do good and fair men call for grace; / Aaron will have his soul black like his face» (3.1.203-8). Aaron alludes to this moment again in Act V, which is perhaps one of the most profound moments of «grotesque comedy» (to an almost Bakhtinian degree) in the play, when Aaron describes the broken contract with Lucius: «I played the cheater for thy father's hand, / And when I had it, drew

---

<sup>6</sup> Prior to that, Titus almost drolly declares, «Welcome, dread fury, to my woeful house / Rapine and Murder, you are welcome too» (5.2.84-5).

<sup>7</sup> S. ŽIŽEK, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, New York, NY 1989, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> This is undoubtedly one of the most tragic moments in the play. It is comparable to Shylock's plea for a Daniel in the court scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. Neither character, of course, receives their advocate in time.

<sup>9</sup> For Benjamin, the contract itself is a form a violence, «like the [broken contract] the origin of every contract also points toward violence». See W. BENJAMIN, *Reflections* cit., p. 288.

myself apart / And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter. / I pried me through the crevice of a wall / When, for his hand, he had his two sons' heads. / Beheld his tears, and laughed so heartily / That both mine eyes were rainy like to his» (5.1.113-19). Not only does Aaron break the contract, but he exploits Titus' expectations within the system of exchange under *lex talionis*; where he expects a 1:1 ratio of exchanges (a hand for a hand, eye for an eye), Aaron gives him more than he bargained for: a hand and his sons' two heads. On top of this, Aaron laughs at Titus' own hysterical display of laughter, a moment which is so grotesque and out of place that it verges on divine violence – their grotesque display of tandem laughter momentarily suspends the tragic dialectic of *lex talionis*.<sup>10</sup>

Aaron too suspends the dialectic of devouring the young in the play. When he is presented with his own son, he beamingly accepts him, «Why, then she is the devil's dam. A joyful issue!» (4.2.68). Tamora's Nurse (a Goth), however, does not see the joyful issue in the child that Aaron claims to see, but rather «A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue! / Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime / The Empress sends it thee, thy *stamp*, thy *seal*» (4.2.69-72, emphasis mine). Benjamin's final words of his *Critique of Violence* bear an uncanny resemblance to the Nurse's description, as he puts it, divine violence is «the *sign* and *seal*, but never the means of sacred execution» (Benjamin, 1986, p. 300, emphasis mine). By embracing his son, and saving it from Tamora's request to «christen it with thy dagger's point» (4.2.72) Aaron pokes another hole in the hegemonic fabric of the Roman world, suspending the dialectic of child sacrifice and consumption that Titus and Tamora spontaneously consent to. His son becomes the *sign* and *seal* of a pure means of violence against the mythical violence of the state, insofar as he does not fall under the auspices of *lex talionis*.

In Act V, Aaron bargains with Lucius not to kill his child, which ensures that even after Aaron's death his son will not be absorbed into the cycle of retaliation and consumption as Titus and Tamora's children are: «Why, assure thee, Lucius, / 'Twill vex thy soul to hear what I shall speak; / For I must talk of murders, rapes, and massacres, / Acts of black night, Abominable deeds, / Complots of mischief, treason, villainies, / Rueful to hear, yet piteously performed. / And this shall all be buried in my death, Unless thou swear to me my child shall live» (5.1.62-9). Aaron, the «irreligious Moor» and «chief architect and plotter of these woes» is in the end the only character to even minimally suspend the legal hegemony of *lex talionis* in the play (5.3.122-3). His irreligious and immodest displays of villainy are in the end a point of rupture inside the rote framework of Roman and Gothic retaliation. He goes to the end with his villainy, and in this way refuses capitulation to Roman hegemony: «Ah, why should wrath be mute and fury dumb? / I am no baby, I, that with these base prayers / I should repent the evils I have done. Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did / Would I perform, if I might have my will. / If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul» (5.3.186-92). In this way, he is an early modern (though quite loquacious) Bartleby kind of figure. Although Aaron does not have a pithy turn of phrase like Bartleby's «I would prefer not to», his refusal to allow his son to be incorporated into the cycle of *lex talionis* or Saturn's devouring 'virtue' is confounding

---

<sup>10</sup> The moment shortly after when Titus holds his sons' heads and has Lavinia place his hand in her tongueless mouth might, however, rival this moment.

to the dominant Roman legal and cultural structure.<sup>11</sup> Although a villain, Aaron's act of ensuring the safety of his child goes directly against the Roman cultural and legal order: he does not symbolically or literally devour his young, nor exchange him for retribution.<sup>12</sup>

Divine violence is often thought of as one grand, ruptural event, as Benjamin himself puts it, «a pure immediate violence that might be able to call a halt to the mythical violence».<sup>13</sup> We ought instead consider divine violence in more granular and less monolithic terms: in *Titus*, the play ends with the possibility of a racially coded character to exist in a circulation of exchange with another without the state law «reaffirming itself».<sup>14</sup> Royster points this out as the threat of the whitemoor lurking after the play's final act, «as the play ends, Aaron's son remains alive somewhere. But perhaps even more threateningly, the son of Muliteus remains alive as well. Muliteus's whitemoor son... survives to encode Elizabethan anxiety about foreign influence, a racial encryption that threatens society from within».<sup>15</sup>

However, I claim there is an even deeper threat causing anxiety to English identity, one that Benjamin actually alludes to regarding divine violence as an «unalloyed means of agreement», a correspondence between subjects that is unalloyed to the law. These are what Benjamin calls «indirect solutions» which cannot be reabsorbed into the economy of mythical violence.<sup>16</sup> Aaron's act of grace «boundlessly destroys» the mythical foundations of *lex talionis*; although his other acts are devious, his act of preserving his child is «lethal without spilling blood» and potentially even «purifies the guilty, not of guilt... but of law».<sup>17</sup> In other words, the law itself, *lex talionis*, is what is obliterated by the act of divine violence, opening up the possibility of a correspondence between the sons of Aaron and Muliteus to survive beyond the Roman legal regime. Lucius' attempt to restore the economy of retaliation in Act V, «There's meed for meed, death for deadly deed» (5.3.67), is rendered impotent. Though Aaron is brutally punished, and a new law ordained, «If anyone relieves or pities him, / For the offense he dies. This is our doom» (5.3.182-4), Aaron's and Muliteus's children have stowed away unnoticed in the narrative—out of sight even to the audience. In Benjaminian terms, the difference between the Roman-Gothic economy of bodies and Aaron's act is that «the first demands sacrifice, the second accepts

---

<sup>11</sup> Not to mention the saturnine demeanors of both characters... See H. MELVILLE, *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, in *The Complete Shorter Stories*, Everyman's Library, New York, NY 1997, pp. 18-51.

<sup>12</sup> We should remember that characters like Aaron and Richard are, as Benjamin describes, like the «great criminal[s]» that win the «secret admiration of the public». See W. BENJAMIN, *Reflections*, cit., p. 283.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 297.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 286.

<sup>15</sup> F. ROYSTER, *White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus'* cit., p. 454. This racial circulation of exchange, although communicative in the play, points to the potential presence of what Lenin might have called a dual power structure of social and economic exchange, one that, in this case, alludes to a perpendicular structure running against the Roman legal order (or a potentially even deeper one in a Moorish community in England itself). Although such a community did not congeal into a state or governmental body, the seeds for such a power are perhaps detectable in these more or less clandestine social relations that function *underneath* state authority. See V.I. LENIN, *The Dual Power*, in «Marxist Internet Archive», <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/09.htm>

<sup>16</sup> See W. BENJAMIN, *Reflections* cit., p. 289. Although Royster is correct that race is not a strict binary white / black in the play, there is no unalloyed whiteness in the play – but there is an unalloyed blackness.

<sup>17</sup> W. BENJAMIN, *Reflections*, cit., p. 297.

it»,<sup>18</sup> which is what makes Aaron's act divine violence: he accepts his own sacrifice while professing openly his profound evil, all in order that his son is able to escape the legal apparatus of the state, and therefore the talons of Roman retaliatory law.

The stage direction from Act I is worth a second look for the way it visually foreshadows the eventual upending of the Roman «common voice»: [*sound drums and trumpets, and then enter two of Titus' sons and then two men bearing a coffin covered with black, then two other sons, then Titus... and then Tamora... and her sons Alarbus, Chiron and Demetrius, with Aaron the Moor, and others as many as can be, then set down the coffin, and Titus speaks*] (1.1.65-70). The string of Roman bodies entering onto the stage is directly mirrored by the subsequent string of Goths that trail behind them. Even the position of Titus' deceased son in his casket is visually mirrored by the soon-to-be-killed Alarbus in the sequence of Gothic bodies. This is a visual allegory for *lex talionis*, a balanced economy of bodies already bound up in a visual exchange with one another – a «common voice» that speaks the language of violent exchange through the 1:1 ratio of retaliation. Aaron's body stands out here: he is the only racially-coded black character to enter the stage in a line of white bodies, but he is also numerically out of place, as Alarbus, Demetrius, and Chiron each have a mirror image on the Roman side via a casket, Martius, and Quintus, and Titus is as well mirrored by Tamora. Aaron is the last character given a name in the procession before a host of unnamed characters is described «*as many as can be*». He is a veritable extra in the visual economy of Roman and Gothic bodies, which makes the procession of bodies that follow after him all the more interesting: they are not named and therefore bear no readymade affiliation, opening up the possibility that they could be anyone: Roman soldiers, Gothic captives, a mixture of both, or perhaps even a few more of Aaron's Moorish compatriots. His outsider status is in this way indexed from the beginning of the play, as already in the blocking of Act I, there's a visual allusion to his potential for rupture and divine violence.

Is this not what Benjamin described apropos of epic theatre and the «filling in of the orchestra pit» as a void on the stage that resists symbolization? The black, veiled coffin of Titus's son and the black body of Aaron, the only two notably black features of *mise-en-scene* in Act I that never enter into an exchange with one another, marking a kind of «abyss whose silence in the play heightens the sublimity».<sup>19</sup> This sublimity is divine violence.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 297.

<sup>19</sup> W. BENJAMIN, *Illuminations*, ed. by H. Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, NY 1985, p. 154.