Culpability and Social Commentary in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*

by

Jay S. Looney

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Liberal Arts
Department of Verbal and Visual Arts
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

Major Professor: Lisa S. Starks, Ph.D.
Julie Armstrong, Ph.D.
Morgan Gresham, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
June 28, 2019

Keywords: Shakespeare, Sovereignty, Masculine Violence, Madness, Morality

Acknowledgments

I want to express my most sincere gratitude to Lisa S. Starks, my thesis advisor and the professor of many of my courses throughout my graduate and undergraduate work, who helped me rediscover my love for Shakespeare and early modern literature, and without whom this thesis would never have been possible. I would also like to thank Julie Armstrong and Morgan Gresham for all of their help throughout my time at USFSP and for their advice and suggestions which aided in the revision and completion of this thesis.

Table of Contents

Abstract

In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*, notions of identity, power, violence, madness, disability, transformation, and problematic masculinity are used to complicate culpability and comment on the societies within these plays and on Shakespeare's own society. In both plays, the main characters' identities ultimately break down as they attempt to rigidly conform to irreconcilably conflicting values. Additionally, the stage villains in both plays provide interesting insights into culpability and social commentary. I explore these themes individually in each play, and I also explore and argue for the connections between these themes in both plays. I argue that the social commentary and culpability issues in *Titus*, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, are repeated in other plays and in various ways, and that the ways in which these repetitions manifest, especially in *King Lear*, provide insights into Shakespeare's ideas of culpability in his tragedies and reveal certain critiques of societal values.

Introduction

In the third act of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Titus, weeping, follows a procession of senators and judges as they bring two of his sons to be sentenced and executed for a crime they did not commit. Titus declares, "For two-and-twenty sons I never wept, / Because they died in honor's lofty bed" (3.1.10-11). At this point in the play, Titus has only begun to experience the multiple tragedies that will shatter his family, his loyalty to Rome, and his mind. That Titus did not weep at the deaths of twenty-two of his children because they died in service to Rome's military agenda reveals something important about the society in which the play is set: there exists a pervasive glorification of violence, death, and problematic masculine values that Titus is unable to survive once it turns against him. He is happy to see an enemy, Tamora's son, Alarbus, sacrificed to appease the ghosts of the fallen Roman soldiers. However, when this sense of reciprocal violence is returned onto his family by Tamora, her children, and her lover, Aaron, his identity begins to break down.

The violence in *Titus* is both reciprocal and mimetic. At its core, *Titus* is a revenge tragedy, and Titus becomes locked in a cycle of reciprocal violence with Tamora. Because he had her eldest son executed, once she has been elevated in power through her marriage to the emperor, Saturninus, she permits her two remaining sons to rape and mutilate Titus's daughter, Lavinia. She and Aaron also scheme to kill Lavinia's husband, Bassianus, and plant false evidence so that two of Titus's sons will be blamed

for the crime. Ultimately, Titus and Tamora will both lose their lives to this cycle of violence. Mimetic violence occurs throughout the play as well. It is Ovid's story of the rape and mutilation of Philomela by Tereus that inspires Tamora's sons, Chiron and Demetrius, to "outdo" Tereus by removing not only Lavinia's tongue, but her hands as well. Since Philomela reported the crime through a tapestry, they believe that removing Lavinia's hands will prevent her from identifying them. Later in the play, in Act 5, before killing Lavinia in front of Tamora and the emperor, Titus provides precedent for killing his own daughter by asking Saturninus if he believed it right for Virginius to kill his own daughter after she was raped.

As characters continually use preceding or fictional acts of violence as models for their own violent acts, a clear condemnation of, or warning against, the repetition of violence begins to develop. Titus's sense of morality is so intertwined with the social constructs pertaining to masculine Roman values, that eventually a conflict arises that cannot be reconciled. Titus gradually loses his mental and emotional stability as he faces one tragic loss after another, and he also pretends at madness in order to carry out his revenge against Tamora and her sons. The question of moral culpability for the play's tragic events is complicated by Titus's madness. At some point, his mental state may cause him to be unable to stop escalating the violence. Before his mental state deteriorates, however, his personal culpability is complicated by the social constructs to which he adheres. Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators in a social system that glorifies violence?

Further social commentary in *Titus* is provided by Aaron the Moor. Aaron acts as the stage villain of *Titus,* scheming secretly to destroy Titus's family and shamelessly

reveling in his evil deeds. Aaron's motivations, though, are largely ambiguous. While he may be partially motivated by a desire to help Tamora seek revenge against Titus, his true motivations appear to stem from his position in society: as a Moor, he is judged and hated for something beyond his control. His world has branded him as inherently evil simply due to the color of his skin. In Act 3, Aaron declares that he will have his "soul black like his face" (3.1.204), suggesting that the world will see him as evil regardless of his actions. Aaron does not believe that he has a moral obligation to treat others well because others will treat him poorly and look down on him in any case. Essentially, he gains nothing from any social contract that exists between himself and the rest of society, so he has no reason to adhere to the socio-cultural expectations of others. Aaron claims to have no remorse for his actions to his dying breath; he often revels in the suffering he causes and embraces the role of villain and the stereotypes others judge him by. However, in Act 4, when the nurse calls his newborn child a "devil," among other insults, Aaron lashes back at her, saying, "Zounds, ye whore! Is black so base a hue?" (4.2.71). While he may pretend to agree with the stereotypes when they are directed at him, he cannot stomach hearing them directed at his son. While many of Aaron's actions are undoubtedly evil, his culpability is complicated by his position in a society that despises him.

Many of the issues in *Titus* seem to develop and reappear in later plays by Shakespeare. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet also displays real and feigned madness as he grapples with how to avenge the death of a family member. It is the ghost of his slain father who compels him to set out on his path of revenge, just as the ghosts of the fallen Roman soldiers compelled Titus to execute Alarbus. The glorification of masculine violence found in *Titus*, and the tragedy to which it leads, is notably present in *Macbeth* as well.

Madness also plays a major part in *Macbeth* and further complicates the culpability of Macbeth. All of these issues are also evident in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

In the opening scene of *Titus*, Titus himself is essentially offered the position of emperor because he is the favorite among the people. However, his sense of duty to Roman values compels him to turn down the offer and to support Saturninus as the rightful emperor due to his lineage. Immediately following this moment, when Saturninus becomes offended at the actions of Titus's brother and children because they will not support his marriage to the already betrothed Lavinia, it becomes clear how dangerous it is for so much power to be wielded by a single man. Despite Titus's unyielding support, which leads him to kill his own son for denying the emperor's wishes and his own, Saturninus holds Titus accountable with the rest of his family.

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, similar warnings concerning power are displayed. King Lear intends to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, but he demands that they each tell him how much they love him before he decides which part of the kingdom he will grant them. When Cordelia refuses to play along and instead answers honestly, saying "I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.90-1), he becomes enraged, denies her any portion of the kingdom, and disowns her before sending her away. When his friend and advisor, Kent, attempts to intervene, Lear warns him to "Come not between the dragon and his wrath!" (1.1.119). Kent persists, and he is banished for it. Lear's failing mind causes him to deny the only people who are truthful with him. Later in the play, he, like Titus, will see the dangers of giving away power—and the danger of the inevitable abuse of power—when his two eldest daughters toy with him and set ridiculous conditions before allowing him into their homes. Another

character in *Lear*, Edmund, displays characteristics similar to those of *Titus*'s Aaron. As a bastard, Edmund is disrespected and ostracized for a circumstance beyond his control. Like Aaron, Edmund serves as the scheming stage villain who orchestrates many of the tragic events of the play. In Edmund's final moments, though, he makes a choice which differs greatly from Aaron's final moments. Both of their ends reveal something about their motivations and suggest the extent to which their respective societies may be partly culpable for their behavior.

In this thesis, I examine the notions of moral culpability and social commentary in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*. I also explore the ways in which the use of madness in these plays complicates these notions. While analyzing these plays, I will draw to a lesser extent on a number of similar progressions of thought which appear in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Both moral culpability and social commentary are connected to the way in which the societies and their accompanying cultural beliefs are arguably responsible for the tragic events of the plays. Furthermore, madness features prominently in all of these plays: in *Titus* and *Hamlet*, the main characters display both real and feigned madness; in *Lear*, the main character displays signs of madness while another character, Edgar, feigns madness; and in *Macbeth*, madness, arguably caused by supernatural interference, slowly devours Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. This supernatural intervention is seen in *Hamlet* as well when the ghost of Hamlet's father reveals a truth that sets off the tragic events of the play.

I argue that Shakespeare uses these instances to critique societal beliefs that glorify masculine violence, condemn empathy, and encourage people to ostracize or discriminate against others for circumstances beyond their control. I further argue that

Shakespeare sought to condemn these social constructs not only in past cultures (or fictional versions of these cultures), but also in contemporary cultures, including his own. In *Titus*, the glorification of violence is on full display, arguably exploited for the entertainment of Shakespeare's audiences; however, the nature of the violence in the play is notably mimetic, suggesting a warning against the dangers of repeating or exaggerating past examples of violence. In *Lear*, the events of the play clearly warn against the dangers of authoritarian, monarchal power structures as any person with absolute power inevitably falls victim to human frailty. While a great deal of scholarship dealing with violence, madness, and other notions I explore in these plays already exists, I argue that a repetition or evolution of the ideas of culpability and social commentary, as they relate to these notions, can be seen in *Titus* and *King Lear*. As *Titus* is one of Shakespeare's earliest plays and *Lear* is one of his latest, the repetition of ideas and different approaches to ideas provides a new perspective on Shakespeare's treatment of culpability and social commentary.

Titus Andronicus – The Father of Revenge

Masculine Violence and Roman Values

In the opening lines of *Titus Andronicus*, the glorification of violence and the masculine social constructs inherent in the play's fictionalized Roman setting are made clear when Saturninus urges his fellow Romans to defend his claim to the throne: "Defend the justice of my cause with arms. / And countrymen, my loving followers, / Plead my successive title with your swords" (1.1.2-4). Saturninus encourages the threat or use of violence to preserve a patrilineal power structure. The violence in *Titus* is pervasive, reciprocal, mimetic, and largely masculine. The role of patriarchal power structures in the play are highlighted in the structure of the Roman family and reflected in the structure of the empire itself. Titus's own family, with Titus serving as its patriarchal "head," provides a compelling representation of the rights and responsibilities of the ideal Roman patriarch. Titus's strict adherence to Roman ideals, though, will ultimately fall apart as he is forced to choose between his emperor and his family.

The conflict between Titus and Saturninus begins in the first scene of the play as Marcus challenges Saturninus's bid to become emperor by informing him that the Roman people want to elect Titus. Although Titus is the popular choice to become the next emperor, he turns down the imperial throne and validates Saturninus's right to rule. The conflict between Titus and Saturninus comes to a head as a clash of Roman national and family values centered on Titus's daughter, Lavinia. Once his position as emperor is

secure, Saturninus decides to take Lavinia as his wife and Titus agrees to the proposal. Lavinia, though, is already betrothed to Bassianus. Apart from Titus himself, the entire Andronicus family declares their intent to keep Lavinia from marrying the emperor. Titus believes that the emperor's decision should overrule this previous commitment. Caroline Lamb explores the way that Shakespeare breaks down physical and metaphorical bodies into their component parts, emphasizes the impediment caused by a lack of unity between, or the lack of, parts, and ultimately illustrates the ability of a dismembered or disrupted whole to work around such impediments. Lamb writes, "'Headless' at the beginning of the play, Shakespeare's Rome suffers from an inability to unify its constituent parts under one harmonious politico-civil paradigm, an inability that is hauntingly echoed in the physical mutilations and dismemberments of the Andronicus family" (Lamb 42). This scene serves as the starting point of conflicts between irreconcilable Roman values, Titus and his family members, and Titus and Saturninus.

The conflict escalates when Titus's family members take Lavinia and leave and Titus and the emperor chase after them. When one of his sons, Mutius, attempts to bar his way, Titus's priorities and value system are revealed. He believes that his family members' wishes ought to be subordinate to those of Saturninus and Titus himself. Given the power of fathers over their children in ancient Rome, it is especially absurd to Titus that his own son would stand against him. Titus is incredulous at the idea of his son standing in his way, asking "What, villain boy, / Barr'st me my way in Rome?" before stabbing and killing Mutius (1.1.293-4). Emily Detmer-Goebel examines the families and incidents of filicide throughout *Titus Andronicus*, noting the right of a Roman father to kill his own child: "One source of this authority is the Roman law, *vitae necisque*

potestas, which is the government sanctioned right of the father to kill his child" ("Filicide and Family Bonds" 110). Detmer-Goebel explains that contemporary audiences would have likely been aware of the rights granted to Roman fathers as the topic came up in other early modern writings, and she proposes that the tragic results of filicide in the play provide a critique of these rights: "the play offers not just a critique of an ancient Roman law, it confirms the distinctly modern judicial system that limits the father's power over his children" ("Filicide and Family Bonds" 110). Shakespeare uses this example of violent masculine authority to critique past cultures and to venerate more progressive contemporary values.

At this point in the play, it is clear that Titus sees his role as a father and his love for his children as wholly subordinate to his subservience to Roman values and his children's subservience to him in accordance with these values. Titus's love for his children seems to be an abstraction of Roman values rather than a genuine emotional attachment. As Coppélia Kahn argues, "Titus's delinquency as a father derives from his over-zealous (and in the killing of his son Mutius, self-contradictory) commitment to these forms of *pietas* specifically involving men" (51). After Titus kills Mutius, both his brother, Marcus, and his son, Lucius, express their disgust with him. Lucius exclaims, "My lord, you are unjust—and more than so: / In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son" (1.1.295-6). Titus, though, is unmoved, responding, "Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine. / My sons would never so dishonor me. / Traitor, restore Lavinia to the Emperor" (1.1.297-9). Titus makes it clear with his use of the word "restore" that Lavinia, having been claimed by the Emperor, now belongs to Saturninus. Both Titus and Lucius are completely certain that their respective actions are just in terms of Roman and

familial values, emphasizing the potential, dangerous contradictions that can arise when simply adhering to these values. Saturninus, though, is not impressed by the lengths to which Titus has gone to prove his loyalty. Rather than praise Titus for sacrificing so much for his interests, Saturninus insults Titus and disparages the entire Andronicus family, and he further claims that he is no longer interested in Lavinia, preferring to have Tamora as his queen.

Disparagement and rejection by his emperor led to the initial collapse of Titus's steadfast nature. Marcus says, "O Titus, see! Oh, see what thou hast done— / In a bad quarrel slain a virtuous son" (1.1.344-5). Echoing the words that Lucius spoke before, Titus is accused by his family of being unjust and committing an abhorrent act. While Titus's response to Marcus largely echoes his earlier sentiments, that those who oppose the emperor are traitors, he now is despairing over the fact that their actions have "dishonored all our family" (1.1.348). Initially, he refuses to allow them to bury Mutius in the family tomb, but he eventually gives in to their demands; it is important to note, though, that he only begrudgingly agrees to Mutius's burial in the family tomb after Marcus, Lucius, Martius, and Quintus have kneeled before him and acknowledged his power and position as their patriarch. While his ability to adhere to Roman values begins to crumble at the level of serving the emperor, it may comfort him to cling to the smaller-scale value system of the Roman family. In another sense, he has little choice in how to respond here. His family members have all clearly stated their resolve in seeing Mutius buried in the family tomb and they are willing to put their own lives on the line to see it done. At this point, Titus's duty to Rome and to his family are already in direct conflict and while he may not have faltered in killing Mutius before the emperor's hurtful words,

he may no longer be willing to sacrifice his remaining family members simply because they defied Saturninus.

Titus as the Father of Revenge

Titus's unbending loyalty to Rome and its virtues leads him to contribute to many of the horrors that he must ultimately face. In sparing Tamora and sacrificing her son in accordance with Roman tradition, Titus fathers Tamora's role as Revenge, whose mythological manifestation she impersonates later in the play. The role of patriarchs and fathers is commented on throughout the play as Titus is implicated as the metaphorical "father" of the tragic events of the play. In Act 2, Lavinia is pleading with Tamora, whose two sons have just murdered Bassianus and have made clear their intentions to rape Lavinia. Lavinia says to Tamora, "for my father's sake / That gave thee life when well he might have slain thee. / Be not obdurate" (2.3.158-60). Lavinia is referring here to the fact that Tamora was captured while Titus was defeating the Goths in battle. Rather than saying that Titus spared her, though, Lavinia says that he "gave thee life," continuing a recurrent notion of Titus as the father or progenitor of many of his own problems throughout the play.

Patriarchy is represented throughout the play by Roman values, including the patriarchal roles of Titus as a father and Saturninus as an emperor, by hypermasculine ideals and a narrative world comprised primarily of men, and by focusing on the needs of men to the detriment of women. Titus represents and exists at the head of an environment of hypermasculinity that glorifies death and violence. As a father, Titus has glorified the deaths of more than twenty of his own sons who died in service to Rome. A farcical

strain which mocks the social constructs of Roman society is pervasive throughout this play, and Titus's unyielding nature, glorification of death, and ultimate downfall, are reflections of the characteristics, and ultimate downfall, of Rome. Titus's patriarchal role is intertwined with the culpability that is implicatively placed upon him throughout the play: he is depicted as somehow responsible for most of the tragedies that occur.

Titus's identity revolves around his loyalty to Rome and its values, but one of his most notable charactersitics is his role as a father. In a biological sense, he has fathered over twenty sons. However, just as he feeds Tamora's son to "the sacrificing fire" (1.1.147), over twenty of his own sons have fed, and will continue to feed, this fire with their deaths. Titus notably celebrates the deaths of his sons who have died in battle fighting for Rome. Further, it is the insatiable nature of this fire that will eventually consume more of Titus's sons, his daughter, his values, and himself. This fire is symbolic of the inherently unsustainable flaws of ancient Rome and, as the one who feeds it to the point of gluttony and drives it out of control, Titus is its irresponsible father. In fact, Titus is referred to as the father of his own enemies throughout the play. Beyond Lavinia's comment to Tamora that Titus "gave thee life," a similar connection is drawn between Titus and Saturninus. After Titus turns down the offered imperial seat and recommends Saturninus to rule instead (a mistake that will result in the tragedies to which he will ultimately be subjected), Saturninus addresses him as "Titus, father of my life" (1.1.256). While there is plenty of blame to go around in this revenge play, Shakespeare continually and implicitly notes Titus's culpability in his own downfall.

The Language of Violence and the Cycle of Revenge

Apart from Shakespeare's use of language to imply Titus's culpability, Titus's violent words and actions further implicate him in the cycle of revenge and contribute to a sense of moral ambiguity. Stephanie Bahr writes, "In his brutality, interpretive modes, and patterns of speech, Titus becomes indistinguishable from his enemies" (267). Bahr examines *Titus Andronicus* through the "interpretive violence" inherent in the Reformation, suggesting that the play provides a commentary on this violence and resists "any partisan reading of the Reformation" (269). There have been a number of scholars who have viewed the violence and plot of *Titus Andronicus* as representative of Reformation violence and politics. Mike Wilcock comments, "Anyone who thinks that Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is not intimately connected with the religious and political tensions of the day is surely being naïve" (338). Wilcock sees in *Titus Andronicus* a more clearly defined distinction between narrative representatives of Catholicism and Protestantism, suggesting that Tamora represented Queen Elizabeth I and that Titus's family represented a Roman Catholic family. Other scholars, though, have claimed that other contemporary figures involved in Reformation violence are better models for Tamora. For instance, Jo Eldridge Carney proposes Catherine de Médicis as the best contemporary model for Tamora, noting that Catherine's "legendary status as archetypal wicked queen had already gathered currency in her own life time" (415). Many compelling arguments have been made concerning contemporary models for Tamora and other characters in *Titus Andronicus*, but, in any case, the tragic end and use of language throughout the play provide a commentary on the culpability for the tragedy.

Intertwined within the focus on Titus as a father and a culpable party in his own downfall is the hypermasculinity and glorification of violence and death that is represented in the play by Titus and his loyalty to Roman values. Titus celebrates the death of so many sons in battle for the glory of Rome, and is unmoved by Tamora's pleas towards reason, "But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets / For valiant doings in their country's cause?" (1.1.115-16), and to emotion, "And if thy sons were ever dear to thee, / Oh, think my son to be as dear to me!" (1.1.110-11). Noticeably absent from Titus's response is any apparent rational consideration or emotional understanding of her plea: "Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me" (1.1.124). Titus matter-of-factly explains to her that her son obviously has to die to satisfy their religious tradition and to appease the ghosts of fallen Romans. In historical Rome, human sacrifice was forbidden. The fact that Shakespeare, who was certainly aware of this, presents human sacrifice as a seemingly lawful and virtuous act in Rome is fascinating. The supposed barbarity of the Goths throughout the play is positioned comically against what Shakespeare's audiences would have seen as barbaric in ancient Roman society. As Shakespeare's audiences laughed at and looked down on these barbarities, they reveled in their own, even while enjoying the violence in this play. Shakespeare's presentation of ancient Rome as more barbaric than it actually was may be a critique of the tendency of all societies to overlook their own barbarity while criticizing the supposed barbarity of others.

In *Titus*'s Rome, then, Titus's unempathetic response to Tamora is unsurprising, but the fact that he does not empathize with her is worthy of mention, as later in the play he begins to understand what it means to lose a child to a cause that he does not recognize as just. Titus's decisions in this scene ultimately provide the catalyst for the tragic events

that will occur later in the play. His decision to sacrifice Tamora's son is one of the initial violent acts in the main cycle of revenge in the play, preceded only by the deaths of his sons in battle against the Goths. Interestingly, though, his decision to spare Tamora, Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius also indirectly results in all the harms they will do to him. Similarly, Titus's humble decision to allow Saturninus to become emperor also results in tragedy. There is clearly more to Titus's culpability than his violent actions; his culpability also involves his value system: essentially, the Roman values to which Titus adheres are so inherently flawed and contradictory that even his acts of humility, self-sacrifice, and mercy result in violence and tragedy.

The violence in *Titus* is not only reciprocal, but also mimetic. References to classical texts abound in *Titus Andronicus*. The narrative of Lavinia's rape, in particular, is full of references to, and imitations of, stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. William Weber points out that "[q]uotations, images, and themes from Seneca, Livy, and Vergil saturate the play every bit as much as the blood of the Andronici. As varied as the play's classical source texts are, though, there is one that stands out from the crowd: the tale of Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" (699).[1] In Ovid's tale of Philomela, Philomela is raped by her brother in law, King Tereus, who then proceeds to cut out her tongue so that she cannot tell anyone what he has done. Ultimately, she weaves a tapestry revealing the rape and has it delivered to her sister, Procne, who is Tereus's wife. Together, Procne and Philomela get revenge by killing Procne and Tereus's son and then cooking and feeding the child to Tereus. In *Titus Andronicus*, characters make open references to this story

[1] For more on Ovid in *Titus*, see Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*; Starks-Estes, *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus*, esp. 83-97; Starks-Estes, "Transforming Ovid: Images of Violence;" and Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*.

when orchestrating, carrying out, and later discussing the rape of Lavinia. Chiron and Demetrius believe that they have solved the problem of this classical text by removing Lavinia's hands as well as her tongue, ensuring that she will not be able to speak or weave the story of what was done to her. Classical texts clearly provide an inspiration for the excessive violence of the act. A physical copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, though, is also used in the play to facilitate Lavinia's revelation of what happened to her, as Lisa S. Starks-Estes explains:

> It is she [Lavinia] who announces the play's intertextual links to Ovid in Act four, scene one, when she chases her nephew, Young Lucius, in order to use his book of *Metomorphoses* to reveal the traumatic event she endured, which she does by turning pages 'with her stumps' to point to the tale of Philomela and the 'gloomy woods' in which she was raped by Tereus. (88)

The physical presence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the scene places the mimetic violence and revenge of the play in a visually observable space. To the audience, the violent language serving as a precedent for the violent act becomes as physically and visually present as the new act of violence modeled after that precedent, which is itself visually presented through Lavinia's mutilation. Both Lavinia's mutilation and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are utilized by Lavinia to report the rape: Lavinia uses her "stumps" to turn pages and holds a stick in her mouth to reveal the crime and the names of the rapists. In addition, Shawn Huffman writes, "The Ovidian texts that served as a sort of guide to write such horrors upon her body become the ghostly hand allowing her to denounce Tamora's sons. The *Metamorphoses* is her phantom limb" (71). The mimetic violence in *Titus,* then, serves multiple purposes. As potential models for new acts of violence, real

and fictional violent precedents are presented as dangerous. However, these same precedents can be used to facilitate positive ends as well. In Lavinia's case, the physical text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is used to give her a voice and allow her to report the fact that she was raped. Violent precedents, though, also allow audiences to anticipate specific acts of violence. Taken out of the context of literature and performance, these precedents also allow for the anticipation and deterrence of future acts of violence.

Understanding the use of violent language is crucial to understanding the violence and social commentary in *Titus* Andronicus. The violent language of classical texts and stories is used throughout the play as a precedent for new acts of violence. Shakespeare himself uses violent language in the play to comment on the nature of mimetic violence by displaying its tragic results. The characters in the play not only repeat the violent acts of their precedents, but they attempt to outdo the models for their violence with increasingly horrific acts. Vernon Guy Dickson examines Shakespeare's use of rhetoric and emulation in the language of the play. Dickson writes, "As the characters compete to outdo available texts and each other's imitations of these texts and precedents, they weave throughout *Titus* a destructive pattern of conflicted, partial, and uncritical emulations" (379). When Marcus discovers Lavinia after she has been raped and dismembered, he launches into a completely inappropriate blazon of her body, further dismembering her through language by emphasizing her former beauty and focusing on the loss of that beauty:

> Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
> Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
> Doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips,

Coming and going with thy honey breath. (2.4.22-5)

The juxtaposition of graphic, violent language and the seemingly flattering, but ultimately detached and dehumanizing, language of the blazon here is disturbing. The idea that Marcus would notice or compliment Lavinia's lips or her breath while a "river of warm blood" is flowing from her mouth is absurd. This absurdity provides a critique of the inherently mutilating language of blazons that purports to flatter and express affection while objectifying, dehumanizing, and ultimately dismembering the blazoned woman's body.[2] Later in this monologue, Marcus says, "Oh, that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast / That I might rail at him to ease my mind!" (2.4.34-5). This moment is the first instance of men reacting to Lavinia's traumatic attack in a way which prioritizes their own suffering over hers. As Dickson describes it, "Marcus seeks to know Lavinia's heart, not to comfort her but to comfort himself through railing" (401). It is Marcus's Roman stoicism that leads him to attempt to contain the messy emotions one would expect him to have in this scenario, and the result is a grimly comical attack on Roman values. Just as Titus continually perpetuates and fathers the instruments of his own downfall due to his unbending loyalty to Roman values, such as his glorification of the deaths of his children and his subservience to the emperor, Marcus's attempt to respond to seeing his raped and dismembered niece without deviating from his most defining Roman value, stoicism, causes him to dismember her with language, adding to the harm he hopes to alleviate.[3] The use of violent language is continual in *Titus Andronicus*. As Gillian Murray Kendall

[2] For more on Marcus's speech as blazon, see Starks-Estes, "Transforming Ovid: Images of Violence;" Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*; Also see Starks-Estes, "Shakespeare's Perverse Astraea," 83-97, esp. 90-2.

[3] For more on Marcus's stoicism, see Starks-Estes, "Shakespeare's Perverse Astraea," 83-97, esp. 96.

claims, “The world of Titus is not simply one of meaningless acts of random violence but rather one in which language engenders violence and violence is done to language through the distance between word and thing, between metaphor and what it represents” (299).

Representations of Women

Another way in which Shakespeare comments on problematic masculine values in *Titus* is through his representation of women. Before killing Lavinia, Titus says, “—Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die!” (5.3.45-6). The masculine values of *Titus*’s Rome contribute to the focus on Lavinia’s “shame” and her father’s “sorrow” as the primary harms of her being raped. Further, the extent to which the male characters respond to Lavinia’s rape over the removal of her hands and tongue, reveals that her value, to them, resides primarily in her chastity. This prioritization further critiques a woman’s status as property in *Titus*’s Rome. In fact, Lavinia’s dismemberment, a gruesome act itself, is continually regarded by male characters as primarily tragic because it prevents her from exposing her rapists. After raping and dismembering her, Demetrius says, “So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,” and Chiron adds, “An if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe” (2.4.1,4). Of course, this dismemberment was intended to prevent her from reporting the rape, and this focus is further informed by the tale of Philomela. However, the entire consideration of dismemberment as an impediment to reporting rape illuminates the prioritization of male violence and the diminishing of women as valuable only for their chastity. The male characters surrounding Lavinia are focused on verifying that she was in fact raped and on

returning violence onto those who raped her. The women who appear in this play are isolated outsiders in a world of hypermasculine violence and ideals. As Deborah Willis writes, "The Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is an almost exclusively male world; its two female characters, their roles sharply circumscribed by patriarchal norms, are both dead by its end, and few other women are even referred to in passing" (22). Willis focuses on examining Lavinia's rape and eventual revenge with a feminist lens, exploring Lavinia's agency in the act of revenge rather than the agency of men in the play. Beyond the general scarcity of women in the play, the two central female characters, Lavinia and Tamora, are at extreme odds with one another; further, both of these women are presented as being the catalysts of harm or as otherwise problematic.

In the primary tale upon which the story of Lavinia's rape and dismemberment is modeled, Ovid's tale of Philomela, Philomela has access to a community of women who facilitate her ability to communicate and seek revenge. In *Titus*, Lavinia does not have access to such a community. Lavinia must rely on her male family members to help her respond to the crime committed against her. Sonya Brockman notes the distinct lack of a community of women upon which Lavinia could rely. Brockman writes, "Neither Lavinia nor Lucrece have access to a community of women; nor can they use that uniquely feminine communication that offers Philomela a chance at vengeance. Instead, both of Shakespeare's rape victims must rely on the sympathy, actions, and reactions of Roman men" (344). The focus of men's reactions to rape in *Titus Andronicus* can be disturbing, and the characters often seem to place more importance on the impact Lavinia's rape has on her father. Coppélia Kahn notes, "For Titus, Lavinia's worth resides in her exchange value as a virgin daughter" (49). By directing her sons to rape Lavinia, Tamora has

destroyed her value in her father's eyes. Before killing Lavinia, Titus attempts to justify the violent act by asking the emperor if Virginius was right to kill his daughter because she was raped. This appeal to mimetic violence reveals Titus's motivation for killing his daughter: he sets a precedent which refers only to her lost value as a virgin rather than her removed tongue and hands. Kahn explains that "Tamora gets back at Titus through his daughter by mocking and despoiling his investment in her" (49).

Further, a great deal of shame is placed on Lavinia as a result of her victimization. The masculine values of *Titus*'s Rome suggested that a woman should feel ashamed for suffering violence at the hands of men. Emily Detmer-Goebel points out Lavinia's unwillingness to say the word "rape," even after Chiron and Demetrius have made it clear that they intend to rape her. Her resistance to naming the act of rape speaks strongly to the absurdity of a culture which somehow shames women into not mentioning a violent act, even if they are victims of that act. Furthermore, Detmer-Goebel argues that "Lavinia's silence elucidates more than just an oppressive gendered ideal of feminine decorum" ("Lavinia's Voice" 76). Detmer-Goebel notes that changes occurring in early modern laws influenced this focus on the revelation of rape; essentially, laws had begun to distinguish between abduction and sexual assault, and women's testimony of sexual assault, rather than a man's claim of it, came to be relied upon. Lavinia's rape and eventual revelation of rape is central to the narrative of the play, and it further provides examples of the problems with the hypermasculine, violent values to which the Romans in the play subscribe. That Lavinia is ultimately able to reveal the crime and the names of her attackers was a potentially empowering response to rape that presented certain

contemporary laws, those beginning to view women as autonomous agents rather than objectified property, as positive.

Madness and Culpability

Throughout *Titus Andronicus*, Titus commits many actions, ranging from violent to self-sacrificial to merciful, which in some way result in harm done to him and his loved ones. Beyond inciting his enemies to violence with violence of his own, and beyond foolish missteps such as his blind loyalty to the emperor, Shakespeare's use of language further highlights Titus's culpability in his own tragic end. Titus is repeatedly depicted as the father or creator of his own enemies. There also exists a metaphor within the play linking Titus to Rome itself.[4] As Titus is somewhat responsible for his own downfall, so too is Rome responsible for its own, eventual destruction. The reasons for this implied culpability are varied, but a clear emphasis is placed upon the conflicting, unsustainable nature of Roman values. An overreliance upon, and an unyielding loyalty to, aspects of the Roman value system repeatedly led to problems when these aspects inevitably came into conflict with one another. Titus's culpability, though, is complicated by his apparent madness.

Shakespeare uses madness to provide social commentary and complicate notions of culpability in a number of his tragedies. In *Titus*, Titus becomes progressively less mentally stable throughout the play. In Act 3, after seeing the disembodied heads of his two sons, Titus laughs. When Marcus questions this reaction, Titus says, "Why, I have

[4] For an exploration of Lavinia, rather than Titus, as a symbol for Rome, see James, *Shakespeare's Troy*: "The raped and mutilated Lavinia is transformed into a visual palimpsest of the textual struggles that reflect the loss of cultural integrity in an empire mythically founded on rape" (James 106).

not another tear to shed" (3.1.265). Nicholas Brush examines the importance of tears in *Titus*.[5] Brush notes the unusual prevalence of tears in *Titus* and suggests that "tears mark the dissolutions of three thematic, plot-centric boundaries, as well as a fourth, metatheatrical boundary" (2). The third boundary that Brush explores is that between sanity and madness. Brush says of Titus that "his tears washed away what sanity he had left" (4). Titus also feigns madness in order to carry out his revenge. When Tamora and her sons visit Titus in disguise, he sees through the deception, claiming in an aside, "I knew them all, though they supposed me mad, / And will o'erreach them in their own devices—" (5.2.142-3). Brush explains, "Like Hamlet's insanity, Titus's madness can be interpreted multiple ways" (Brush 5). Both Titus and Hamlet seem to simultaneously suffer from and feign madness. There are other similiarities between *Titus* and *Hamlet* as well. Ghosts of fallen men voicing expectations of masculine violence serve as the catalysts for revenge in both plays. In *Hamlet*, King Hamlet's ghost compels his son to avenge his death. In *Titus*, the ghosts of fallen Roman soldiers must be appeased by the sacrifice of Tamora's son, Alarbus.

Aaron and Social Commentary

Titus's role as a parent is also contrasted throughout the play against the roles as parents of the supposedly barbaric outsiders, Tamora and Aaron. While Tamora is willing to sacrifice her child with Aaron in order to preserve her position, Aaron is not. Despite his depiction as an unapologetic villain who knowingly harms others without remorse,

[5] For more on Titus's instability, tears, and trauma, see Starks-Estes, "Shakespeare's Perverse Astraea," 83-97, esp. 95-7.

Aaron is notably concerned with preventing the death of his child, which implies a moral distinction between Aaron's love of his son and Titus's love of Roman virtues to the detriment of his children. These somewhat ambiguous distinctions between Roman values and the values of supposedly barbaric outsiders repeat throughout the play and provide a social commentary which is often expressed through black humor. Two examples of this black humor are provided in 1), the inappropriately humorous scene in which Aaron leads two of Titus's sons to stumble into a pit in the woods; and 2), Marcus's blazoning of Lavinia when he finds her after she has been raped and dismembered. The former scene depicts two sons of Titus, symbols of Roman values and more fuel for the fire that is the glorification of death, stumbling through the woods and falling into a pit. While Aaron is clearly the evil party in this scene, the Romans are depicted as foolish and self-defeating.

The ambiguity of Aaron's culpability is vital to the social commentary within *Titus*. Starks-Estes aptly describes Aaron's character and role in *Titus*:

> He is an epically anti-epic hero who is false to the hundredth degree - a Moor who glorifies and revels in acts of villainy, who is the mastermind of gang rape, mutilations, murders, and false accusations, the Other who mirrors back Rome's image of his blackness to destroy the crumbling empire from within. (85)

Many of Aaron's actions are undoubtedly evil, but he acts from a position of being hated for circumstances beyond his control. Aaron is ostracized and judged by everyone in his world, and he responds by sowing as much chaos and destruction as possible within that world. Aaron occupies an ambiguous space that arguably perpetuates and critiques the stereotypes of his character.

Like the excessive violence in the play that can be seen as both exploitative and critical of violence, Aaron can be interpreted in various ways. I argue that Aaron's self-awareness and his feelings toward his child provide a strong critique of society's unfounded hatred of him, and that this critique implicitly condemns, more generally, social ideals which encourage the hatred of people for circumstances or characteristics beyond their control. Aaron stubbornly and repeatedly validates the expectations others have of him, pretending to be without any sense of morality and to not care about their prejudices. However, Aaron reveals his true feelings in his indignant responses to his child suffering the same prejudices he suffers. Aaron further expresses his humanity in how deeply he cares for the life of his child: he makes Lucius swear, "To save my boy, to nourish and bring him up" (5.1.84). When speaking to Lucius, Aaron also reveals what he thinks of the Romans:

> If there be devils, would I were a devil,
>
> To live and burn in everlasting fire,
>
> So I might have your company in hell,
>
> But to torment you with my bitter tongue. (147-50)

In these lines, Aaron expresses not only that he would suffer any amount of pain for the chance to torment Lucius, but also that he expects Lucius to end up in hell regardless. On some level, Aaron repeatedly hints at his understanding of the injustice of his position in life.

Aaron's position in *Titus Andronicus* is complex, but his opposition to Titus is central to understanding the layered culpability suggested by Shakespeare. Noémie Ndiaye argues that the Goths of *Titus Andronicus* are representative of Spaniards, and

that the Romans represent Englishmen. In her discussion, Ndiaye provides a compelling argument concerning the model for Aaron. She sees Aaron as having been predominantly sourced in an incident which took place on Mallorca, a Spanish island, in the late 1400s.[6] One striking similarity which Ndiaye notes is that the slave rapes his master's wife while he is out hunting; in *Titus*, while Aaron does not rape Lavinia himself, he does encourage Chiron and Demetrius to do so, essentially orchestrating the rape which ultimately plays out while Titus is hunting. Just like the mistreated slave from the story recounted by Ndiaye, Aaron reacts violently to a world which has wronged him. In the final scene of *Titus*, Lucius orders that Aaron be buried in the earth up to his chest and left to starve to death. Further, Lucius declares that anyone seen helping him will be put to death. Aaron remains obstinate to his last word:

> I am no baby, I, that with 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. (5.3.184-9)

[6] The tale was imported into Italian by Givanni Pontano between 1480 and 1494, and Matteo Bandello later adapted this story and other accounts of the incident into a novella. Ndiaye goes through the plot of Bandello's novella, noting the striking similarities between the novella's narrative of a Moorish slave who seeks and enacts revenge against his master and the relationship between Aaron and Titus in Shakespeare's play. One of the most notable similarities is that the slave in Bandello's novella offers to release his master's wife and children unharmed if he will cut off his nose. After his master cuts off his own nose, the slave kills his wife and children anyway (Ndiaye 59-80). Similarly, in *Titus*, Aaron promises Titus that his two sons will be returned to him unharmed if he will cut off his own hand and send it to the emperor. In return for cutting off his hand, though, Titus receives the heads of his sons.

Aaron's obstinance is his form of rebellion against the injustice he recognizes in his world. Because he has resigned himself to the fact that he will never change the way that others perceive him, he is determined to stubbornly validate their prejudices. Because those prejudices lead to a real limitation of opportunities and real harm done to him, he is determined to visit harm upon the world that spurns him.

In *Titus Andronicus,* culpability and social commentary are revealed through masculine violence and values, issues of power and identity, the representation of Lavinia's rape and mutilation, Aaron's position within the world of the play, and his reaction to that world. The violence in *Titus* is presented reciprocally through the revenge cycle and mimetically through the use of literary and historical precedents. Titus's identity is wrapped up in a rigid devotion to Roman values which turn out to be irreconcilable. When those values begin to conflict with one another, Titus comes undone. While Titus is largely presented as somehow culpable for many of the tragedies that he faces, that culpability becomes complicated by his increasing madness throughout the play.

King Lear – "The Dragon and His Wrath"

Sovereignty, Human Frailty, and Identity

Sovereignty, the inevitability of human frailty, and the resultant abuses of power are all immediately displayed in the opening scene of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Before dividing his kingdom between his three daughters, Lear demands that they proclaim their love for him: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge?" (1.1.49-51). His two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, comply with his demand, each trying to hyperbolize their affections for him to the greatest extent in order to be granted greater portions of the kingdom. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, is unwilling to play along. Speaking honestly, Cordelia claims to love Lear "According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.91), and she goes on to insult her sisters' false claims. Lear becomes enraged and, once she has made it clear that she won't flatter him despite his repeated warnings, disowns Cordelia and denies her any portion of the kingdom. Lear's reaction appears to be borne out of a desperation to cling to his power or, more importantly, to the image of power. When Lear's loyal advisor, Kent, attempts to question Lear's decision to disown Cordelia, Lear angrily responds, "Peace, Kent! / Come not between the dragon and his wrath!" (1.1.119-20). Lear's wording here reveals the grandiose view he takes of himself and his power and suggests that he is, to some extent, aware of his irrational behavior.

As is the case in *Titus*, the first major conflict in *King Lear* revolves around the question of a patriarch's daughter, and in both cases a daughter's worth to her father is displayed through the presence of multiple suitors. In *Titus*, Lavinia is not given much of a voice, and what voice she has is further silenced with the later removal of her tongue. To her father, Lavinia is a piece of property that allows him to prove his loyalty to the state and its new emperor. Her implicit refusal to marry Saturninus, and the rape and mutilation that occur as an indirect consequence of that refusal, eventually lead to a revelation and transformation in Titus as he sees the irreconcilability of his conflicting values. In *Lear*, Cordelia's value to her father also revolves around how she can serve the state, but Lear is the state and the service is flattery of himself. Cordelia does have a voice. Rather than waxing poetic to flatter her father, though, she uses the absence of voice to rebel through silence: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (1.1.60). This refusal to bow to the demands of the state, and its indirect consequences, will lead to Lear's own revelation and transformation. In *Lear*, the audience is shown the toxicity of autocracies through the character of a corrupt patriarch. Both Titus's and Saturninus's failings can be seen reflected in Lear. Lear is both father and king, and his loyalty to the state manifests as an inflated sense of self-importance and an obsession with self-image.

In *Titus*, Titus's identity begins to break down as his seemingly unwavering loyalty to masculine Roman values come into conflict. His responsibilities as the patriarch of his family come into conflict with his required subservience to the patriarch of the Roman empire when Saturninus seeks to marry Lavinia. His loyalty to the emperor is further strained when Saturninus begins to despise him and his family and is ultimately shattered when the emperor's power enables his enemy, Tamora, to destroy his family.

Lear's identity revolves around his own power and the self-image based upon that power; he is willing to sacrifice anything to maintain it. Once he gives a portion of his power to his daughters, however, his identity begins to unravel. Lear's sense of self was wrapped up in his autocratic rule, and he somehow expected to maintain the same level of respect and image of power after giving up the responsibilities of power. He also, foolishly, expected his daughters to wield that power more selflessly than he ever did. It is only after he has lost every part of his former identity that he is able to undergo a transformation. Titus reaches this point when he sees the heads of his two sons delivered to him and realizes that the tragedies he has faced are a result of his own values. Having lost everything, Titus transforms into a revenge-seeker, no longer loyal to Rome. Lear reaches this point in the storm: stripped of all of his power, Lear faces the reality of what his former values have produced. Goneril and Regan's use of power reflects his own, and it is only when he sees that reflection that he can recognize its injustice. While he is still clinging to his self-image at this point in the play and continuing to blame his daughters for all of his problems, he is at least beginning to gain some self-awareness regarding the responsibilities of those with power. In the storm, Lear reflects on the lives of his powerless subjects:

> Oh, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just. (3.4.33-7)

As he is stripped of the power that has protected him from the harsh realities of life, he begins to empathize with those who are perpetually vulnerable to those realities. He recognizes that he has been shortsighted in not considering the needs of his subjects, and he encourages himself to more fully feel their struggles in order to be better prepared to help them.

Lear's irrational behavior and deteriorating mental state at the beginning of the play are problematic as an issue of sovereignty: Lear wields so much power that his irrational whims have the ability to cause great harm. Lear's dominion and his mental state are inextricably linked. Addressing this point, Rebecca Munson attempts to "illuminate the inherent connection between Lear's mental state and the state of the kingdom" by exploring the relationship between sovereignty "of mind and of state" (13).[7] Munson reflects on the ending of *King Lear* as a statement regarding the tragic and often irrational nature of reality, and she notes that the tragedy serves as a warning that "any inversion of sovereignty, either in the body natural or the body politic, not only mirrors but *causes* such an inversion in the other" (26). If Lear's mind begins to fail, then the state will inevitably begin to fail as well. If the state suffers problems, those problems will inevitably influence Lear's mental state.

In *Titus*, the dangers of one person holding too much power, and of divesting one's own power onto someone else, is made clear when Titus turns down the title of

[7] Munson suggests that Lear is portrayed as suffering from a humoral imbalance throughout the play and that the danger of this humoral imbalance is amplified by his political power; Munson also notes that early modern references to sovereignty were generally only used when referring to absolute monarchs rather than other heads of state (15). She explores the uses of the words "sovereign" and "sovereignty" throughout Shakespeare's plays. Instances of the former, which are numerous, seem rather straightforward and are typically used as a title to indicate one's political position as monarch; "sovereignty," though, is used less often and more ambiguously: sometimes, such as in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, "sovereignty" is used in reference to one's control over their mental faculties (15-17).

emperor and offers it to Saturninus instead. Titus's loyalty to masculine Roman values leads him to make this decision. Ultimately, Saturninus's power, and Tamora's power through her association with Saturninus, destroys Titus and most of his family. Similar warnings about the dangers of autocracies and the inevitable abuses of power are found in *Lear*. As Giuseppina Restivo notes, "Lear's tragedy is a tragedy of absolutism ... Lear's absolutism has already brought about Cordelia's and Kent's sudden banishment, as well as the landing of an attacking French army" (409). Every autocrat will ultimately abuse their power either through corruption, manipulation, or human frailty. Lear can be seen as a tyrant at the beginning of the play as he disowns and banishes all those who are willing to be honest with him. Lear's abuse of power stems from the corruption of his own arrogance and aggrandized self-image, the human frailty of an increasing irrationality in his old age, and, to some extent, the manipulations of the sycophants around him. When he gives away his power to his daughters, they abuse the inheritance to serve their own self-interests and pettiness. Lear's mental state is inextricably linked with the state of the kingdom throughout the play due to the nature of absolute monarchies.

Blindness, Disability, and Culpability

The downfalls of both Lear and Gloucester are displayed to the audience in unnerving detail. The removal of Gloucester's eyes and his subsequent blindness serve as brutal representations of both metaphorical downfall and physical disability. Throughout the play, beginning well before he loses his eyes, Gloucester makes repeated references to that which is seen, apparent, or otherwise visually observable. The excessive trust he places in his sight leads him into despair. Along with Lear, Gloucester represents the

older generation's fear of, and unwillingness to adapt to, the actions of their children, whether those actions are moral, as Cordelia's, or immoral, like Edmund's. Lear himself has become obsessed with the appearance of power and the resultant fear and respect with which others treat him, and he hungrily clings to a notion of power that he does not fully understand. Both Lear and Gloucester will lose a great deal before they come to accept the realities of their respective situations. Lear will lose his children and his mind, and Gloucester will lose his children and his sight.

Gloucester's troubles begin when he places too much trust in his eyes and in a son who, being branded a bastard and accordingly disrespected throughout his life, has no reason to be loyal to Gloucester. When Gloucester sees Edmund apparently tucking a letter away to hide it, he demands to see it for himself. Just before reading the letter, Gloucester says, "Let's see, let's see" (1.2.42). His overreliance on his sight ultimately leads to his undoing as he unquestioningly accepts the visual evidence presented by Edmund. Amrita Dhar claims that "Gloucester only learns to see feelingly in the course of the play and at the cost of his eyes" (76-7). Dhar considers Gloucester's blindness to be a loss which eventually leads to a regenerative experience as he learns to "see feelingly" once he has lost his eyes.

The scene in which Gloucester's eyes are removed is tragic and unsettling because the event is shown rather than narrated to the audience. The servant who speaks up to his master in an attempt to stop the brutal act expresses an empathy that is likely to be shared by the audience, and it is interesting to note that "he acts after Gloucester has already lost an eye. There is a peculiar delay and a peculiar driven-ness, therefore, to his action" (Dhar 80). This delay may point to the difference between imagining the

possibility of such a violent act and actually witnessing it. The servant and the audience are likely most empathetic upon seeing the initial removal of Gloucester's eye. This empathy at the onset of Gloucester's blindness informs the extent to which physical disability plays a role in *King Lear*.

The use of blindness in *Lear* is complicated because Gloucester's physical disability is often situated alongside, or conflated with, his metaphorical shortsightedness, with Lear's madness, and with a general inability of Gloucester and Lear to adapt to the realities of their world. Simone Chess explores the theme of blindness in early modern texts. Chess focuses on the importance of distinguishing actual physical disability from its common use as a metaphor, pointing out that "[a]s a metaphor, blindness—along with paralysis, limited mobility, cognitive difference, and other disabilities—is generally presented in negative ways" (105-6). In performances of physical blindness, however, audiences are able to understand physical disability in new ways and with potentially fewer negative connotations. Early modern performances of blindness reveal that "not only are eyes false informants that show us sights our minds recognize as misleading, but eyes are also always already in the process of failing, either gradually or entirely" (113). This reality situates blindness as the extreme end of a spectrum upon which everyone exists. By highlighting the unreliability of sight, Gloucester's blindness, and by extension his physical disability, can be considered transformative in a potentially empowering way.

Gloucester's physical disability and losses of power, respect, and his children are mirrored in Lear's failing mental state and his own losses. After losing his sight, Gloucester reflects on the ways in which his eyes had served him in the past: "I have no

way and therefore want no eyes. / I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.19-20). Gloucester is deeply scarred by the fact that he was so easily deceived by Edmund into banishing and trying to hunt down his loyal son, Edgar. He has realized that he relied too heavily on superficialities.

This physical loss triggering a revelation concerning former, unsustainable values, calls to mind a similar line in *Titus*. Upon seeing his daughter with her tongue and hands removed, Titus speaks about the use of hands:

> Give me a sword! I'll chop off my hands too,
>
> For they have fought for Rome and all in vain;
>
> .....
>
> 'Tis well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands,
>
> For hands to do Rome service is but vain. (3.1.72-3,79-80)

Upon seeing his daughter's condition, Titus's loyalty to Rome and its values begins to deteriorate. Eventually, he will cut off a hand in an attempt to buy the lives of two of his sons. When those sons' heads are returned to him instead, that loyalty is finally broken. In *Lear*, When Gloucester later reunites with Lear, the king says, "A man may see how this world goes / with no eyes" (4.6.146-7). This harkens back to Dhar's concept of seeing feelingly, as well as "the irreducible physicality of visual disability, and its relation to the creative and regenerative in the world of Lear" (77). Gloucester's blindness becomes regenerative in that his loss of sight allows him to discern things more clearly.

Near the end of the play, both Lear and Gloucester have lost a great deal, and both have essentially been stripped down to a state of existence that they never could have

imagined at the beginning of the play. Additionally, they both struggled in vain against the inevitable forces which ultimately stripped them of their former states. According to Susan Snyder, "What they achieve instead is a kind of reorientation, a transformed perspective that could not come about except by the radical reevaluation that such extremities force upon them" (296-7). The losses they have suffered, even though the losses were potentially avoidable, have resulted in some sort of new growth.

In *Lear*, Cordelia and Edgar offer an alternative way to deal with chaotic, harmful forces which are beyond one's control. Both Cordelia and Edgar serve as examples of positive change: they refuse to be corrupted by their parents' or their siblings' evils. Cordelia will not give in to her father's absurd, egomaniacal demands, nor will she mirror her sisters' sycophantic, self-serving compliance. She remains vigilant in what she believes is right, freely giving up her land and status to preserve her commitment to her principles. Similarly, Edgar surrenders his own position and inheritance, disguising himself as a mad beggar in order to survive. The distinction between the parents and children here is clear: the latter are willing to give up what they know will hurt them in order to survive or do what is right, while the former stubbornly cling to machinations and ideals which have been turned against them until they are forcefully stripped of more than they would have otherwise had to freely sacrifice. Snyder writes that the fool paints Lear as "an old man comically at odds with reality, giving orders to the universe" (300). While Lear's journey through the storm does evoke sympathy, it is undeniable that he has foolishly tried to control the uncontrollable.

Gloucester's blindness seems to be placed alongside Lear's madness, and both lose power and respect as the play unfolds. They each suffer from a disability which

ultimately facilitates revelation and transformation, but the characters of Cordelia and Edgar stand out as examples of those who choose the right path from the beginning. Cordelia does lose her life, but her death is a result of Lear's and Edmund's actions rather than her own. Snyder explains that "Lear's own end is postponed, so that he can suffer yet further agonies over her body before exhaustion at last takes him" (298). Cordelia's death is an example, similar to Lavinia's death in *Titus*, of a female character's demise being portrayed as punishment for her father. While she has done nothing wrong and arguably ought to survive as Edgar does, Lear loses his daughter to illustrate the tragic consequences of his misdeeds. However, these deaths may be interpreted as a warning against fathers valuing their daughters only insofar as they can serve their interests or the interests of the state. Had Lear valued his daughter's autonomy rather than her obedience, many of the tragic events of the play would have been avoided. In *Titus*, if Titus and Saturninus had both valued Lavinia's autonomy more than her apparent worth as property, the tragedies that befell them may have been avoided as well.

Ultimately, chaotic forces bring about misfortune throughout *Lear*, continually disrupting the expectations of audiences. Gloucester and Lear, though, like Titus, are culpable in their own eventual downfalls. Their misfortunes, though, allow them to achieve some sort of growth and understanding before they die. Just as the removal of Gloucester's eyes is the catalyst for evoking empathy for physical disability in the audience, Gloucester's encounter at the cliff at Dover is similarly emblematic: Snyder writes that "this edge of nothingness becomes for Gloucester a place of radically new vision" (295). Through the renewed understanding and vigor of Gloucester, Shakespeare

illustrates not only an optimistic point about redemption in general, but also draws the audience into the ways in which physical disability can facilitate positive change.

Poor Tom, Madness, and Transformation

King Lear is rife with notions of madness, predominantly in the characters of Lear and Edgar. In *Titus* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's protagonists display both real and feigned madness. In *Lear*, Lear himself genuinely succumbs to madness while another character, Edgar, feigns madness. Explaining the dangers of a monarch going mad, while noting early modern examples of such cases, A.G. Harmon explains that "[m]adness was so dangerous in the context of the monarch because in such instances reason, considered the 'sovereign of the mind,' had been thrust from its throne" (404). In the first scene of the play, Lear is already acting irrationally, and his deteriorating mental state is brought up by other characters. When Kent tries to change Lear's mind concerning the banishment of Cordelia, Lear warns him to stop. Kent, however, presses on, saying, "Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad" (1.1.142-3). Kent is banished for continuing to press the issue, likely meaning either that Lear has not been so irrational in the past, and as such Kent has had no cause to challenge him in such a manner, or that Lear has been more forgiving of such challenges in the past. In any case, there is an implication that Lear's mental state is especially unstable, although other characters do make a point of noting a history of irrationality: speaking to Regan, Goneril says, "'Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but slen- / derly known himself" (1.1.288-9). While Lear always behaved in a rash manner, Goneril and Regan's conversation makes it clear that he has

become considerably more irrational and that they blame the irrationality on his old age. Shweta Bali describes the factors contributing to Lear's madness:

> Indubitably, Lear's madness is an outcome of psychological forces. His overbearing nature that can no longer have its way against Goneril and Regan; his indignation at filial ingratitude; his child-like trust which is so blatantly betrayed; his remorse for the injustice he did to Cordelia; the conflict within him and his futile urge to avenge his greedy daughters and the final despair—all contribute to his madness. (88)

Lear's madness at first seems to be an exaggeration of aspects of his character: namely his rashness and sense of self-importance. As the play progresses, though, so does Lear's madness, exacerbated by his flawed perspective of power and his treatment at the hands of his daughters. As a storm rages and Lear becomes both mentally and physically exhausted, he eventually reaches a breaking point upon meeting Poor Tom, removing his clothes, and regarding Poor Tom as a wise man: "His mental strain and physical exhaustion culminate into an actual madness as compared to the feigned madness of Edgar" (Bali 90).

In order to hide from his father's misplaced wrath, Edgar disguises himself as "Poor Tom," a "Tom of Bedlam" (the common name used to refer to mentally ill beggars). Edgar's disguise and feigned madness are used to escape an unjust punishment and to facilitate a revelation of truth in his father and Lear. Titus's and Hamlet's feigned madness were used to facilitate their respective revenge plans, but all three characters highlight the unique, sometimes condescending deference reserved for the supposedly mad. In each case, the characters use the deceit of feigned madness to outwit and

overcome the injustices around them. James Kearney explores the character of Edgar and his interactions with his father, Gloucester, and with King Lear within the contexts of phenomenological notions of recognition, the "other," Levinasian, and other ethical perspectives. Kearney points out the prominent space provided to mentioning Edgar and his assumed disguise, Tom of Bedlam, on the title page of the 1608 quarto of *King Lear*, and suggests that early modern audiences may have had an expectation seated in the romance tradition that Edgar, after putting on the disguise of Poor Tom, would ultimately be revealed and recognized by his father and other characters in a satisfying unveiling (455). He notes that Poor Tom, who goes, perhaps frustratingly for the audience, unrecognized by the metaphorically and literally blind characters of Lear and Gloucester, respectively, acts as a sort of "ethical catalyst" (455). Poor Tom brings Lear to a place of conflict and eventual transformation as Lear first attempts to see Poor Tom as a reflection of himself; then he transforms himself by tearing off his own clothes and questioning his existing beliefs and perspectives in order to better reflect the state of Poor Tom. Poor Tom's time with Gloucester provides a more complicated series of ethical events: Gloucester is still operating under a metaphorically shortsighted view of other people as he conducts his transactions with Poor Tom, and "Tom" uses the disguise of poverty and madness to deceive his father in order to ultimately assist him. In his conclusion, Kearney mentions the "resolutely tragic" nature of *King Lear* but he also argues for the regular disruption of the tragic narrative by "small ethical moments" and the possibility of hope (466).

The motivations behind Poor Tom's actions, as he claims to lead his father to the cliffs of Dover while repeatedly deceiving him, are fascinating. To some extent, Edgar is

obviously trying to use disguise and deceit to save his father from committing suicide. After Edgar, as Poor Tom, tricks Gloucester into stepping off a ledge while making him believe he will be stepping off a cliff, he pretends to be an onlooker who saw Poor Tom, saying of Poor Tom, "It was some fiend" (4.6.74). That Edgar orchestrates such a complex deception, forcing his father to confront his own death and believe that he was guided to the cliffs by a demonic figure, shows that he is trying to do more than save his life. Before this deception, though, while Edgar was still pretending to be Poor Tom, he says as an aside, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (4.6.35-6). Edgar attempts to facilitate a transformation within his father so that he will finally be able to see things as they truly are. Edgar's deceptions cause Gloucester to question his perception of reality and to see things properly, perhaps for the first time.

Edmund and Social Commentary

Like Aaron in *Titus*, *Lear's* Edmund is ostracized and denied opportunities based on circumstances beyond his control. Edmund is a bastard, and although his father, Gloucester, claims that his legitimate son is "no dearer" (1.1.19), he also mentions his shame regarding Edmund and says of him that "the whoreson must be acknowledged" (1.1.22). Because he is younger than his brother Edgar, Edmund is unable to inherit his father's fortune. Edmund, like Aaron, serves as the stage villain of *Lear*, and his thoughts are made clear in his first soliloquy:

> Why brand they us
>
> With "base"? With "baseness," "bastardy"? Base? Base?
>
> .....

Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed

And my invention thrive, Edmund the base

Shall to th' legitimate. I grow. I prosper.

Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.9-10,19-22)

Clearly, Edmund is aware of, and deeply bothered by, the way that others perceive him. As his father's younger, illegitimate son, Edmund is insulted, disrespected, and denied opportunities. Counteracting these limitations, Edmund possesses an intelligence and social aptitude that are similar to Aaron's ability to manipulate in *Titus* or Richard's persuasive skills in *Richard III*. Edmund schemes to turn his father against Edgar; then schemes against his father; and, he then attempts to manipulate Goneril and Regan—all to gain power for himself. As Giuseppina Restivo writes, "Machiavellian and amoral, Edmund uses his intelligence to gain a social status his condition as an illegitimate son, heavily discriminated against, denies him" (434).

While Aaron occasionally expresses his humanity through showing how deeply he cared for the welfare of his child, Edmund does not seem to care for anyone besides himself throughout much of the play. When Edmund realizes that he is about to die, though, he makes a surprising decision to do some good: "I pant for life. Some good I mean to do / Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.218-19). Although his attempt fails to save Cordelia, it does spare Lear's life, at least briefly. As he has nothing to gain from attempting to save them, and nothing further to gain from having them killed as he knows he is dying, he has no interest in seeing them executed. The decision, then, may not be particularly moral as it costs him nothing, but he could have more easily allowed them both to die. His amorality is at least called into question by this potentially redemptive

act. Once he knows he is going to die, his only wish is to do something virtuous before his death, suggesting that his earlier, immoral actions may have been misguided attempts to either get even with a world that mistreated him, or to simply succeed despite a system that was designed to keep him from doing so. The words "Despite of mine own nature" reveal that Edmund has bought into the societal beliefs regarding bastards and allowed them to corrupt his self-image. Even while choosing a virtuous act, Edmund sees his nature as inherently evil. In *Titus*, Aaron's final moments are spent emphasizing that he does not repent his evil deeds and that, in fact, he only regrets that he couldn't commit more evil deeds. Edmund's final, virtuous act may serve as a more overt attempt than Aaron's final moments in *Titus*, to reveal the folly of social systems and societal beliefs that harm people for circumstances beyond their control.

Throughout *King Lear*, culpability and social commentary are presented through notions of power and identity, madness and disability, transformation, and Edmund's reactions to his position in the world. Unlike Titus, Lear is head of both his family and the state. This issue of sovereignty leads to Lear being more directly responsible than Titus for the tragedies that befall his family. Lear's madness also inevitably influences the state of the kingdom because of the nature of sovereignty. Gloucester's blindness is positioned alongside his own metaphorical shortsightedness, as well as alongside Lear's madness, in order to reveal the potentially transformative outcomes of disability. Both Lear's and Gloucester's staggering losses throughout the play highlight the rigidity of their value systems and the problems caused by that rigidity. Edmund reveals the harms done by insulting and limiting the opportunities of someone based on a circumstance beyond their control. Edmund is left with only two options: suffer the injustice of his

position or fight it. While his reactions to his situation often involve harming others, his final act is an arguably redemptive one that reveals something about his previous decisions.

Conclusion

In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*, notions of identity, power, violence, madness, disability, transformation, and problematic masculinity are used to complicate culpability and comment on the societies within these plays and on Shakespeare's own society. In both plays, the main characters' identities ultimately break down as they attempt to rigidly conform to irreconcilably conflicting values. Additionally, the stage villains in both plays provide interesting insights into culpability and social commentary. I argue that the social commentary and culpability issues in *Titus*, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, are repeated in other plays and in various ways, and that the ways in which these repetitions manifest, especially in *King Lear*, provide insights into Shakespeare's ideas of culpability in his tragedies and reveal certain critiques of societal values.

There are many similarities to be found in the notions of culpability and social commentary found in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*, and it is easy to see these similarities as a repetition or even an evolution of ideas by Shakespeare. Warnings regarding autocrats succumbing to corruption, manipulation, and human frailty are manifest in the characters of Titus and Saturninus in *Titus*; and in Lear, Goneril, and Regan in *Lear*. The culpability of Titus and Lear in their own tragic ends is repeatedly emphasized. Their respective identities are gradually broken down as they desperately try to cling to irreconcilably conflicting values. Madness plays a role in complicating the

culpability of both characters as well. In each play, society's inability to value women's autonomy leads to tragedy. Aaron and Edmund serve as the stage villains of these plays, and their culpability for their undeniably immoral acts is complicated by the treatments they must endure and the limitations placed upon them for circumstances beyond their control. There is an ambiguous commentary at work here in that these characters' evil actions seem to perpetuate and exploit the stereotypes about Moors and bastards. However, both characters reveal that they are aware of, and deeply bothered by, these stereotypes and their treatment at the hands of their respective societies. Both characters also display their humanity in different ways: Aaron reveals how much he cares about his son, and Edmund, with nothing to gain by doing so, attempts to spare the lives of Lear and Cordelia before he dies. I argue that, through the characterizations of Aaron and Edmund, Shakespeare sought to highlight the injustice of their circumstances. Ultimately, *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*, and the connections between them, reveal a great deal concerning Shakespeare's thoughts on culpability in his tragedies and on the societies within which these tragedies are set, as well as on Shakespeare's own society.

Works Cited

Bahr, Stephanie M. "*Titus Andronicus* and the Interpretive Violence of the Reformation." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 68.3 (2017): 241-70.

Bali, Shweta. "Mechanics of Madness in *Hamlet, Macbeth,* and *King Lear*." *The IUP Journal of English Studies* 9.4 (2014): 81-92.

Brockman, Sonya L. "Trauma and Abandoned Testimony in *Titus Andronicus* and *Rape of Lucrece*." *College Literature* 44.3 (2017): 344-78.

Brush, Nicholas. "Cry Me a River: Tears and the Dissolution of Boundaries in *Titus Andronicus*." *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* 16 (2016): 1-7.

Carney, Jo Eldridge. "'I'll Find a Day to Massacre Them All': Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* and Catherine De Medicis." *Comparative Drama* (2014): 415-435.

Chess, Simone. "Performing Blindness: Representing Disability in Early Modern Popular Performance and Print." *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*. Edited by Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood.The Ohio State University Press, 2013. 105-22.

Dhar, Amrita. "Seeing Feelingly: Sight and Service in *King Lear*." *Disability, Health, and Happiness in Shakespeare*. Edited by Sujata Iyengar. Routledge, 2015. 76-92.

Detmer-Goebel, Emily. "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape." *Shakespeare Studies* 29 (2001): 75-92.

Detmer-Goebel, Emily. "'Then let no man but I / Do Execution on my flesh and blood': Filicide and Family Bonds in *Titus Andronicus*." *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* (2015): 110-22.

Dickson, Vernon Guy. "'A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant': Emulation, Rhetoric, and Cruel Propriety in *Titus Andronicus*." *Renaissance Quarterly* 62.2 (2009): 376-409.

Harmon, A.G. "'Slender Knowledge': Sovereignty, Madness, and the Self in Shakespeare's *King Lear*." *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 4 (2008): 403-23.

Huffman, Shawn. “Amputation, Phantom Limbs, and Spectral Agency in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Normand Chaurette’s *Les Reines*.” *Modern Drama* 47.1 (2004): 66-81.

Kahn, Coppelia. “The Daughter’s Seduction in *Titus Andronicus*, or, Writing is the Best Revenge.” *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*. Routledge, 1997. 46-76.

Kearney, James. “‘This is Above All Strangeness’: *King Lear*, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition." *Criticism* 54.3 (2012): 455-67.

Kendall, Gillian Murray. “‘Lend Me Thy Hand’: Metaphor and Mayhem in *Titus Andronicus*.”*Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.3 (1989): 299-316.

Lamb, Caroline. “Physical Trauma and (Adapt)Ability in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Critical Survey* 22.1 (2010): 41-57.

Munson, Rebecca. “‘The Marks of Sovereignty’: The Division of the Kingdom and the Division of the Mind in *King Lear*.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 46 (2011): 13-27.

Ndiaye, Noémie. “Aaron’s Roots: Spaniards, Englishmen, and Blackamoors in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Early Theatre* 19.2 (2016): 59-80.

Restivo, Giuseppina. “Law, Constitution and Ethics in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.” *Textus* 21 (2008): 409-38.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*, Combined Text version. *The Norton Shakespeare*. 3rd ed., Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Gordon McMullan, W. W. Norton & Company, 2016. 2494-570.

Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. 3rd ed., Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Gordon McMullan, W. W. Norton & Company, 2016. 501-54.

Snyder, Susan. “*King Lear*: A Modern Perspective.” *King Lear*. Updated Ed., Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Simon & Schuster, 2015. 293-303.

Starks-Estes, Lisa S. “Shakespeare’s Perverse Astraea, Martyr’d Philomel, and Lamenting Hecuba: Ovid, Sadomasochism, and Trauma in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 83-97.

Weber, William W. “‘Worse than Philomel’: Violence, Revenge, and Meta-Allusion in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Studies in Philology* 112.4 (2015): 698-717.

Wilcock, Mike. "'Put to Silence': Murder, Madness, and 'Moral Neutrality' in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*." *Irish University Review* 38.2 (2008): 325-69.

Willis, Deborah. "'The Gnawing Vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53.1 (2002): 21-52.

Bibliography

Bate, Jonathan. *Shakespeare and Ovid*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

James, Heather. *Shakespeare's Troy: Drama, Politics, and the Translation of Empire*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Marshall, Cynthia. *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Starks-Estes, Lisa S. "Transforming Ovid: Images of Violence, Vulnerability, and Sexuality in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*." *Staging the Blazon in Early Modern English Theater*. Edited by Deborah Uman and Sara Morrison, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.

Starks-Estes, Lisa S. *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Esp. 83-97.