

Shakespearean *Thyestes*

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Seneca's *Thyestes* sits in the background of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* much as, say, Gascoigne's *The Supposes* stands in relation to *The Taming of the Shrew*: clearly, in each case, the predecessor was formative for certain aspects of plot in the successor, but scholars have not devoted much energy to positing any deeper intertextual conversation. Robert S. Miola has made the most sustained case for Shakespeare's reception of Seneca, and this has led to further work particularly with regard to *Macbeth and Hamlet*.¹ Complicating matters is the fact that revenge tragedy more broadly took much from Seneca, so Shakespeare may have been incorporating trends in the subgenre. My intention in this paper is fairly modest: namely, to provide a compelling sense that Shakespeare did not merely borrow bits of plot and language from Seneca, nor did he simply let the cultural river of literary revenge tragedy flow into his pen, but rather sustained a close dialogue with Seneca, and in particular Seneca's *Thyestes*, much as he did with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.²

In *Thyestes*, the familial and political conflict between Atreus and Thyestes—the latter having usurped Atreus' turn at kingship in their alternation of the throne—threatens not only the

¹ Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford ; New York : Clarendon Press, 1992). See also Brian Arkins, "Heavy Seneca: His Influence on Shakespeare's Tragedies." *Classics Ireland* 2 (1995) 1-8. For *Macbeth and Hamlet*, see Yves Peyré, "'Confusion now hath made his masterpiece': Senecan resonances in *Macbeth*", and Erica Sheen, "'These are the only men': Seneca and Monopoly in *Hamlet* 2.2", in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 141-155 and 156-167 respectively.

² The attention to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (with a focus on the Lavinia-Philomela connection) has obviously been considerable. See, for example, Jessica Lugo, "Blood, Barbarism, and Belly Laughs: Shakespeare's *Titus* and Ovid's Philomela", *English Studies*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (August 2007): 401-417; Charles Martindale and Michelle Martindale, "Philomela in *Titus* and *Cymbeline*", in Charles Martindale and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity: An Introductory Essay* (Routledge: 1990), 47-56; and Grace Starry West, "Going by the Book: Classical Allusions in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*", *Studies in Philology* 79.1 (Winter 1982): 62-77. For the *Aeneid*, see Danielle A. St. Hilaire. "Allusion and Sacrifice in *Titus Andronicus*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 49.2 (2009): 311-331.

brotherly bond, but also the social order of the town, as represented by the Chorus. When Atreus seduces Thyestes back to Mycenae with false forgiveness, Thyestes' son Tantalus declares the reunion a joining of the body: "Thy brother returns to thee with wrath given o'er, gives thee back half the realm, unites the members of thy sundered house, and to thyself restores thee".³ The same imagery is used in *Titus Andronicus* in the opening competition between the brothers Saturninus and Bassianus for the rulership of Rome.⁴ Marcus Andronicus, suggesting that his brother Titus assume the throne instead, entreats, "Be candidatus then, and put [the robe of office] on, / And help to set a head on headless Rome" (I.i.185-86). The political dismemberment out of which the play begins finds its culmination in Marcus' words to the citizenry at the play's close, when Lucius is to be advanced as candidate for emperor:

You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome,
By uproar sever'd, like a flight of fowl
Scatter'd by winds and high tempestuous gusts,
O, let me teach you how to knit again
This scatter'd corn into one mutual sheaf,
These broken limbs again into one body . . . (V.iii.67-72)⁵

³ "ira frater abiecta redit / partemque regni reddit et lacerae domus / componit artus tequem restituit tibi" (II. 431-433), 126-127. Translations and Latin from *Thyestes* come from *Seneca's Tragedies*, Vol. II, tr. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library Volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

⁴ This fraternal conflict is deepened by the heated argument between Tamora's sons Chiron and Demetrius, and more subtly by the exchange of Tamora's sons' deaths for the deaths of Titus' sons. In Seneca's *Thyestes*, this brotherly and political infighting has specific resonance with regard to the household of Tantalus. So, too, in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare emphasizes the household of Andronicus from the outset with the burial of Titus' sons in the family crypt; the play returns to this locus at its close: "My father and Lavinia shall forthwith / Be closed in our household's monument" (V.iii.193-194). It is perhaps significant in this regard that Shakespeare was shortly after this time devoting his energies to *Romeo and Juliet*, with its focus on two households. Passages from *Titus Andronicus* are taken from *Titus Andronicus*, ed. J.C. Maxwell, *The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1961).

⁵ This passage also hearkens back to the violation and mutilation of Lavinia, prior to which Demetrius proposes, "First thrash the corn, then after burn the straw" (II.iii.123).

Within this larger framework of disjuncting, there are the many concrete acts of dismemberment for which *Titus Andronicus* is so infamous. Right away, Tamora's son Alarbus is sacrificed in stark fashion: "Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs, and on a pile / *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh" (1.1).⁶ Thence, Lavinia has her tongue and hands cut off, Titus cuts off his own hand, Titus' sons Mutius and Quintus are beheaded, and Titus cuts up Tamora's sons Chiron and Demetrius to bake them in a pie to be served to their mother. These more literal moments of vivisection of course echo the sacrifice of Thyestes' children in preparation for the feast at the end of Seneca's play. We first hear an account from a Messenger:

When with the victims he has satisfied himself, he is now free to prepare his brother's banquet. With his own hands he cuts the body into parts, severs the broad shoulders at the trunk, and the retarding arms, heartlessly strips off the flesh and severs the bones; the heads only he saves, and the hands that had been given to him in pledge of faith.⁷

Later, Atreus himself details the proceedings, as he glories over his brother:

With the deep-driven sword I smote them; I slew them at the altars; with their offered blood I appeased the sacred fires; hewing their lifeless bodies, into small scraps I tore them, and some into boiling cauldrons did I plunge, and some before slow fires I set to

⁶ Lucius reports back, "See, lord and father, how we have perform'd / Our Roman rites: Alarbus' limbs are lopp'd, / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire, / Whose smoke, like incense, doth perfume the sky." (I.i.142-45)

⁷ "Postquam hostie placuere, securus vacat / iam fratris epulis. ipse divisum secat / in membra corpus, amputat trunco tenus / umeros patentes et lacertorum moras, / denudat artus durus atque ossa amputat; / tantum ora servat et datas fidei manus" (759-764), 154-55. For "ora", Miller translates "heads", which is obviously the literal intention, but Seneca's synecdoche ("mouths") is a nice touch, emphasizing the speech-bearing capacity of the boys, who are distressingly silent in this scene; Shakespeare may have considered the appropriateness of the preserved but de-orialized heads for the parallel attack on Lavinia.

drip. Their limbs and sinews I rent asunder while still they lived, and their livers,
transfixed on slender spits and sputtering I saw, and with my own hand I fed the flames.⁸

Note that within both these passages Atreus' acting "With his own hands" receives emphasis. The word "hand" recurs an impressive number of times in Seneca's play. Here, hands hold a special status with respect to agency: Atreus saves the hands of Thyestes' sons (and later presents them to him), and his own commission of the crime is emphasized in terms of his hands. Similarly, *Titus Andronicus* is replete with references to hands, both as severed body parts and as instruments of human action.⁹ The powerful and the helpless are fused in Titus' response to seeing Lavinia after her mutilation: "Speak, Lavinia, what accursed hand / Hath made thee handless in thy father's sight" (III.i.66-7). Titus goes on to suggest divesting himself of his own manual agency: "Give me a sword, I'll chop off my hands too; / For they have fought for Rome, and all in vain" (III.i.72-73). We should recognize, then, that in Lavinia's torture "It is not just that Shakespeare is imitating, and trying to outdo, Ovid by 'improving' on the Philomela story";¹⁰ rather, he is weaving Philomela into his larger examination of human responsibility.

This is not to belittle Shakespeare's use of Ovid. There can be little doubt that Shakespeare turned to the *Metamorphoses* in incorporating the rape and cannibalistic aspects of the Philomela story. Not only does *Titus Andronicus* center its action on the rape of Lavinia, but Lavinia herself points to the story of Philomela in a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in order to reveal the truth behind her own violation and mutilation. But even at its most explicitly Ovidian

⁸ "ferro vulnera impresso dedi, / cecidi ad aras, caede votiva focos / placavi et artus, corpora exanima amputans, / in parva carpsi frustra et haec ferventibus / demersi aenis, illa lentis ignibus / stillare iussi. membra nervosque abscidi / viventibus, gracilique traiectas veru / mugire fibras vidi et aggressi manu / mea ipse flammam" (1057-1065), 176-77. Atreus' actions are foretold/inaugurated by the Fury at the opening of the play: "Now set o'er the flames let cauldrons foam; let the rent members one by one pass in" ("ignibus iam subditis / spument aena, membra per partes eant / discerpta" ll. 59-61, pp. 96-97).

⁹ See Katherine A Rowe, "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 45.3 (1994): 279-303, and Gillian Murray Kendall, "'Lend me thy Hand': Metaphor and Mayhem in *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn, 1989): 299-316.

¹⁰ Martindale and Martindale 54.

moments, *Titus Andronicus* retains its engagement with Seneca. The play's most notorious scene, in which Tamora's sons violate Lavinia, then cut away her tongue and hands so that she can not reveal the crime, re-enacts directly Tereus' brutalization of Philomela. But Shakespeare places this action in a wood modeled in part on the grove where Atreus sacrifices Thyestes' children.¹¹ The "barren, detested vale", devoid of sunlight, full of hideous noises serves as an intertextual environs in which Lavinia's limbs are cut off and Titus' sons are dropped in a pit (rather than a pot) ultimately to be beheaded.¹² Even when the Philomela story is explicitly invoked, Seneca is not far removed. The one direct (or nearly direct) quotation of Seneca (which comes from the *Phaedra*) occurs precisely at the climactic moment when Lavinia has divulged the crime and the perpetrators. Titus, having reached the breaking point, calls out

Magni Dominator poli,

Tam lentus audis scelera? tam lentus vides?

("Lord of the great heaven, why are you so slow to hear wickedness, why so slow to see it?")¹³

It is rarely noted that Shakespeare took his clue for this blending of the Philomelan and Thyestean strands from Seneca.¹⁴ Atreus, determining what crime could possibly fulfill his need for revenge, invokes Procne and Philomela as guiding spirits:

¹¹ In *Thyestes* the grove constitutes a site where the gods give forth oracles; I shall discuss below the absence of the divine in the play, for the present will observe that the Senecan backdrop supports Helga Duncan's suggestion that the grove is Tamora's profanation of the sacred space of the Andronicus tomb. (See note 20 for citation.)

¹² The murderous scene from *Thyestes* is of course more directly replicated in the concluding banquet when Chiron and Demetrius are butchered and subsequently fed to Tamora, but it should be noted that, just as II.iii develops out of the Senecan vale reference, so, too, does the climactic scene. When Tamora appears to Titus as Revenge, she says, "There's not a hollow cave or lurking-place, / No vast obscurity or misty vale, / Where bloody murder or detested rape / Can couch for fear, but I will find them out" (V.ii.35-8), recalling the vale, the secrecy, the murder and the rape of II.iii. We have both the dismemberment and decapitation of *Thyestes* with Titus as fatherly victim of revenge; this position is of course reversed when Titus becomes Atreus and butchers Chiron and Demetrius in order to feed them to Tamora. Titus is shown his sons' heads just as Thyestes is shown his sons' heads, hands, and feet; Shakespeare plays a bit with this revelation, having Titus contribute his own hand to the tableau.

¹³ My translation.

¹⁴ None of the editions of *Titus Andronicus* I have examined makes this attribution.

The Odrysian house once saw a feast unspeakable—'tis a monstrous crime, I grant, but it has been do; let my smart find something worse than this. Inspire my soul, O Daulian mother, aye and sister, too [i.e., Procne and Philomela]; my case is like to yours; help me and urge on my hand.¹⁵

To return to the site of Lavinia's horror, Marie Rutkoski has pointed out the emphasis in that scene on the legitimization of lineage.¹⁶ Tamora's children prove themselves hers by murdering Bassianus. In *Thyestes*, Atreus expresses anxiety over "my wife seduced, our pledge of empire broken, my house impaired, my offspring dubious". In *Titus*, this fear becomes reality, as Aaron cuckolds Saturninus, leading to the production of an illegitimate heir. Atreus proposes an interesting act of demonstration of his children's true descent when he considers bringing them in on the revenge plot:

Let Agamemnon be the witting agent of my plan, and Menelaus wittingly assist his father. By this deed let their uncertain birth be put to proof: if they will not wage the war of hate, if they plead he is their uncle, he is their sire.¹⁷

Ultimately, Atreus decides against this knowing participation. Titus demonstrates no such qualms, inviting his grandson Lucius to play a key role as messenger fully cognizant of Titus' intentions. Shakespeare emphasizes young Lucius' intellectual buy-in, having him first proclaim he would like to put a knife in the bosoms of Lavinia's assailants, then jeer in an aside that he

¹⁵ "vidit infandas domus / Odrysia mensas—fateor, immane est scelus, / sed occupatum; maius hoc aliquid dolor / inueniat. animum Daulis inspira parens / sororque; causa est similis; assiste et manum / impelle nostram" (272-77) , 114-15. It seems to me almost certain that Seneca draws not only his theme but also his language from the parallel moment in Ovid's story when Procne builds herself up to commit the crime.

¹⁶ Marie Rutkoski, "'Arm the minds of infants': Interpreting Childhood in *Titus Andronicus*", *Criticism* 48.2 (2006): 203-226.

¹⁷ "consili Agammenon mei / sciens minister fiat et patri sciens / Menelaus assit. prolis incertae fides / ex hoc petatur scelere: si bella abnuunt / et gerere nolunt odia, si patrum vocant, / pater est" (325-30), 118-19.

understands the coded message delivered to Chiron and Demetrius even though the two Goths don't.¹⁸

Perhaps the most striking resonance with and adjustment of Seneca's play involves the re-casting of evil forces. In *Thyestes*, Atreus acts alone, in a wholly grand manner. In *Titus*, Aaron and Tamora share out the plotting and, as indicated earlier, the role is further multiplied by Titus' revenge. Most obviously, this fragmentation and repetition call into question the virtue of Titus' code and indeed, on some readings, the butchery and cannibalism of empire.¹⁹ I want to emphasize, though, the most profound thematic shift from *Thyestes* to *Titus Andronicus*, the loss of the divine in the world. In a provocative exploration, Helga Duncan suggests that the play's emphasis on sacred spaces speaks to the Elizabethan loss of such spaces through the Reformation.²⁰ (Titus' opening tribute to the dead at the tomb of the Andronici becomes reformed by Tamora in the vale already mentioned in this paper, with the pit serving as tomb and the murder of Bassianus and mutilation of Lavinia standing in sacrificially.) I would add that Tamora's recall of *Thyestes* at this point helps to position the site as founded upon the sacred—since in Seneca's play the gods deliver there their oracles—and simultaneously empties that space of its supernatural force, since the gods are not evoked in *Titus* and, indeed, rather than oracle we have an insistence on silence, from Tamora's "I will not hear her speak" (II.iii.137) to Chiron's "Nay, then I'll stop your mouth" (II.iii.185) to the eventual cutting out of Lavinia's tongue.

¹⁸ IV.ii.4-17. It is worth pointing out that the knowing participation of Tamora's children in the murder of Bassianus and rape of Lavinia has already enacted this shift from *Thyestes* (and thereby furthers the parallels between Tamora's and Titus revenge acts).

¹⁹ See David B. Goldstein, "The Cook and the Cannibal: *Titus Andronicus* and the New World", *Shakespeare Studies* 37 (2009): 99-133.

²⁰ Helga L. Duncan, "'Sumptuously Re-edified': The Reformation of Sacred Space in *Titus Andronicus*", *Comparative Drama* 43.4 (2009): 425-453.

Even in the opening tomb scene, though, we can see a distancing from the supernatural.

Deborah Willis, in her trauma theory approach to *Titus Andronicus*, observes that “Titus and his son Lucius return as combat survivors, carrying coffins and haunted by ghosts”, Titus seeing “his sons ‘hover[ing] on the dreadful shore of Styx’” and Lucius anticipating “‘prodigies’ the ghosts will send if their anger remains ‘unappeased’”.²¹ Willis’s anchoring of this turmoil in the worldly psychological *response* to the warriors’ deaths is useful, for we do not in fact see the ghosts, nor any vision of the underworld to which Titus’ sons are apparently bound, beyond the imaginings of Titus and Lucius. *Thyestes*, on the other hand, commences in the underworld, with Tantalus bemoaning his punishment, only to be called forth by a Fury to go into the upper world and help spread further hideous criminal offense. Seneca clearly establishes two important premises at the outset: the afterlife, rewards and punishments included, does await after the earthly experience, and supernatural entities have direct influence on the events of the world. Shakespeare offers no such window to the extra-human in *Titus Andronicus*. Hell and Heaven are referenced frequently, but neither lends any tangible hand in the events which occur.

In fact, Shakespeare insists upon human usurpation of divine roles. Early in the play, Titus compares Saturninus to the nourishing sun, anticipating his “virtues will, I hope, / Reflect on Rome as Titan's rays on earth / And ripen justice in this commonweal” (I.i.225-27). Aaron positions Tamora similarly (in a speech that effects both the human taking on of a divine status and the female encroachment of male territory):

Now climbeth Tamora Olympus' top,
Safe out of fortune's shot; and sits aloft,
Secure of thunder's crack or lightning flash;

²¹ Deborah Willis, "The gnawing vulture: Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 53.1 (2002): 21-52. P. 35.

Advanced above pale envy's threatening reach.

As when the golden sun salutes the morn,

And, having gilt the ocean with his beams,

Gallops the zodiac in his glistening coach,

And overlooks the highest-peering hills;

So Tamora . . . (II.1.1-9)

This motif culminates in Titus and his family shooting arrows at the gods, the arrows falling in the palace of the Emperor. When Titus, ruing the departure of Justice from earth (“Terras Astraea reliquit: / Be you remember'd, Marcus, she's gone, she's fled” (3.5.4-5), bids someone dig down to Pluto to ask for assistance, Marcus’ son Publius responds,

. . . Pluto sends you word,

If you will have Revenge from hell, you shall:

Marry, for Justice, she is so employ'd,

He thinks, with Jove in heaven, or somewhere else,

So that perforce you must needs stay a time. (IV.iii.37-41)

With no help forthcoming from the underworld, Titus bids the group beseech heaven’s aid by firing arrows at the constellations:

'Ad Jovem,' that's for you: here, 'Ad Apollinem:'

'Ad Martem,' that's for myself:

Here, boy, to Pallas: here, to Mercury:

To Saturn, Caius, not to Saturnine;

You were as good to shoot against the wind.

To it, boy! Marcus, loose when I bid.

Of my word, I have written to effect;

There's not a god left unsolicited. (IV.iii.53-60)

Despite Titus' dismissal of Saturnine, Marcus makes clear where the real power lies:

Kinsmen, shoot all your shafts into the court:

We will afflict the emperor in his pride. (IV.iii.61-2)²²

Shakespeare fulfills this humanization of the divine in the failed deception that sets up the conclusion. Chiron and Demetrius accompany their mother in the guise of Revenge, Rapine, and Murder. Attempting to seduce Titus to further victimization, Tamora plays up her pseudo-supernatural status:

Know, thou sad man, I am not Tamora;

She is thy enemy, and I thy friend:

I am Revenge: sent from the infernal kingdom,

To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind,

By working wreakful vengeance on thy foes.

Come down, and welcome me to this world's light . . . (V.ii.28-33)

In *Thyestes*, the Fury *does* send Tantalus to earth to spur Atreus' revenge; here, hell has become an earthly masque. While this absence of otherworldly intervention is not unique to *Titus Andronicus*, it is worthy of remark. We might note the somewhat dramatic difference in this respect of *Titus* from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Both of the later tragedies incorporate supernatural influence into the action; to be sure, in each case doubt is cast upon the otherworldly presences, and this may be something of a legacy of Shakespeare's early exploration of this area in *Titus*.

²² The motif of the human ruler as sun culminates in the sparring between Lucius and Saturninus in the meeting at Titus' house. Saturninus asks, "What, hath the firmament more suns than one?" to which Lucius replies, "What boots it thee to call thyself a sun?" (V.iii.17-18). Atreus and Thyestes each expresses this inability for two to share the throne.

Be that as it may, *Titus* is an arena of human agency; no ghost of king or comrade visits the stage to haunt the tragic hero, nor does one comment from the sidelines. This is not to say that doubt about the gods existence is not expressed in *Thyestes*; Titus growing sensation that “Justice has fled the earth” finds its origin in Thyestes’ parallel laments that “the gods have fled away”²³. But in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare pares away any potential for attributing our crimes to forces beyond our own making, paving the way for Hamlet’s revelation (in a different key) that humans are corrupt flesh creating more corrupt flesh. As Jonathan Bate suggests, “By representing Revenge as a character’s device rather than a ‘reality’ outside the action, as it is in Kyd’s frame, [Shakespeare] suggests that retribution is a matter of human, not divine will.”²⁴ The survival of young Lucius and Aaron’s baby are important: with the legacy of Atreus in the background—Thyestes’ son Aegisthus surviving to murder Atreus’ son Agamemnon—we must assume that the political and familial conflict will continue. Without Athena and Apollo to step in, we must wonder if this strife is to continue into human perpetuity.

To add one dismal final layer onto this utterly pessimistic view of human existence, we should make the obvious point that Shakespeare has consumed the crimes of past texts—Seneca, Ovid, Virgil, etc.—and released them in a new cultural expression that preserves and perpetuates them. As several scholar shave noted, *Titus Andronicus* is not merely replete in its references to classical texts; rather it is ostentatious in their presence as determining the structures out of which atrocities are committed and responded to. Aaron plots Lavinia’s rape with Philomela in mind. Titus cannot think of killing Lavinia to relieve her of her shame without evoking Virginia and Virginius; even after slaying her, he is “as woeful as Virginius was” (V.iii.50). Texts themselves, and their handing down—the words “learn” and “teach” occur with some frequency

²³ “fugere superi” (1021), 172-73.

²⁴ *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 1995), 22.

in the play—become a cycle of violence. (And the same can be said of performance, as most obviously manifest in Tamora’s role-playing of Revenge.) It has been suggested that the feminine presence in *Titus Andronicus* challenges male textual authority. In some sense Lavinia’s silence may be the most promising outlook, which is to say no hope of a future doomed to perpetuation of verbal and physical atrocities. Unfortunately, just as young Lucius is schooled into the Roman way—which has of course become blurred with the Gothic or the early modern British way—Lavinia is drawn back into communication, writing the names of her attackers and of the crime, leading rapidly to her death at the hands of her father, in a moment that replays the original violence even as it rescues her from further suffering.

Emphasizing the afterlife of language is one of the most satisfying of Shakespeare’s adaptations of *Thyestes*, the incomparably nefarious Aaron. While Tamora shares with Titus the roles of Atreus and Thyestes, Aaron is more properly to be aligned with Tantalus and the infernal Fury of Seneca’s play. As with those two characters, Aaron spurs others on to crime. As suggested already, though, this motivation remains human. Called by his victims “devil” and “diabolical”, this Satan is a man who fathers a child; Aaron may be drawn *in extremis*, but he never leaves the ambit of human existence. As if to drive the point home, Shakespeare creates Aaron as an atheist; while Aaron’s status as Moor allows the play to respond to cultural anxiety, projecting the hellish onto the non-Western, internally Aaron operates outside of the religious systems of Roman or Goth, locating hell fully within the range of human possibility. So, near the conclusion, Aaron is subjected to a worldly version of Tantalus’ punishment:

Set him breast-deep in earth, and famish him;
There let him stand, and rave, and cry for food;
If any one relieves or pities him,

For the offence he dies. This is our doom:

Some stay to see him fasten'd in the earth. (V.iii.179-83)

We do not witness Aaron's death (unlike Tamora's) and so the illusion of perpetual tantalization exists simultaneous to his earthly fate. It is characteristic of Shakespeare's re-writing, indeed inversion, of other texts that the play concludes where *Thyestes* begins. Aaron goes right on speaking his poison to the end:

Some devil whisper curses in mine ear,

And prompt me, that my tongue may utter forth

The venomous malice of my swelling heart! (V.iii.11-13)

This is a direct counterpoint to the vale scene, in which Lavinia has her mouth stopped precisely when she is about to utter a curse.²⁵ Aaron vies with Lucius for the last word. Fury will not cease to speak, and the verbal act of repentance comes only as rejection of the good:

O, why should wrath be mute, and fury dumb?

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. (V.iii.184-190)

We speak through the same mouth with which we consume. We tear apart, consume, and then utter forth from the womb of the mind patterns for further malignity.

²⁵ "Confusion fall . . ." (II.iii.184).