The Crime Scene of Revenge Tragedy:
Sacrificial Cannibalism in Seneca’s *Thyestes* and
Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* *

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Abstract
Analyzing the parallel gestures of ritualistic brutality deployed in the cannibal banquet of Seneca’s *Thyestes* and Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, I reveal how the genre of revenge tragedies is simultaneously an instance of, and challenge to, Georges Bataille’s socio-economic theory of excess within a general economy. Excess, and not scarcity, is the motive and the condition for revenge. Both revengers react to a surplus of energy, or what I will call the “excess of possibilities,” that threatens autonomy. Thus, the victims of revenge embody the excess of possibilities in the plays since they are reminders of the contingency, and potential indistinguishability, of the agents of revenge. Sacrificial cannibalism emerges as the revenger’s means for autonomous differentiation, thus eliminating the unbearable interchangeability generated by surplus. Furthermore, by theorizing the excess of possibilities as the underlying pressure driving Atreus as a Senecan revenge figure, I argue that the citation of a specifically Senecan cannibal banquet, appropriated in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, is a gesture by the author to sacrifice, and thus gratuitously consume, the surplus violence generated by the act of representation itself.

Keywords

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In his critique of conventional economic theory, *The Accursed Share*, Georges Bataille offers a distinction between “restrictive” economy and “general” economy that privileges the sacrificial as humankind’s destined impulse to waste: “being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destined him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption” (23). A “restrictive” view perceives economy as “an isolated system of operation [wherein] problems are posed in the first instance by a deficiency of resources” (39), while the calculations of a “general” economy take into account all forms of production and are thus cognizant of an overall excess of resources. To convey the way in which natural production ultimately results in excess, Bataille offers as emblem the sun’s constant yield of energy that “must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (21). Ritualistic sacrifice is the ultimate expression of man’s “large squandering of energy”—and it is an expenditure that avows sovereignty over all other living beings. Only humans experience the pressures of excess within the general economy, and thus only humans desire to squander this excess whether through sacrifice, or through war, or through conspicuous consumption: “man is the most suited of all living beings to consume intensely, sumptuously, the excess of energy offered up by the pressure of life” (37). The pressures of excess are abated not by acquisition, but by waste. As Scott Cutler Shershow argues in his discussion of Bataille’s concept of “surplus,” the deficiency of objects is mere pretense for action: “Human subjects are finally motivated, not by rational economic calculation, but rather by the impulse to sacrifice and squander. . . . Such an economy therefore emphasizes consumption, operates by means of gifts, sacrifices, and reckless expenditure, and does so in the expectation of loss without return” (469). In other words, behavior cannot always be understood as the result of competition in the face of scarcity, but in many cases—as in those of sacrificial ritual—actions are in response to surplus energy in a general economy of uncontrollable and incessant production.

This paper explores how the genre of revenge tragedies is simultaneously an instance of, and challenge to, Bataille’s theory of excess within a general economy. Read within a restrictive perspective, revenge is the result of rivalry within a scarce

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1 Overall production, according to Bataille, inevitably leads to excess: “In a sense, life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources, possibly involving large squandering of energy. The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion” (30).
economy. Revengers react to a lack of resources troped efficiently, for instance, in the symbol of a contested crown threatened by the claim of a legitimate rival. In Seneca’s *Thyestes*, Atreus feeds his brother Thyestes a cannibalistic feast in order to avenge crimes of political treason and adultery. One might ascertain that the brothers’ conflict is generated by the lack of crowns or by the scarcity of faithful wives or other articulations of what Bataille coins “the deficiency of resources.” The elimination of his brother is equal to a valid acquisition for Atreus since there is no longer a rival that jeopardizes his aspiration for unquestioned sovereignty. However, from the perspective of a general economy, the revenger is a means to manage surplus, a side effect of pressures that emerge from excess. This paper will prove that Atreus’s crimes are motivated not by the desire to gain a coveted kingdom, but by the agonizing awareness of production outside of his control. Analyzing the parallel gestures of ritualistic brutality deployed in the cannibal banquet of Seneca’s *Thyestes* and Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, I reveal how excess, and not scarcity, is the motive and the condition for revenge. Both revengers react to a surplus of energy, or what I will call the “excess of possibilities,” that threatens supreme sovereignty. Thus, Thyestes and his children embody the excess of possibilities in Seneca’s revenge play, for they not only have claim to Atreus’s throne but also remind Atreus, by the existence of a brother potentially indistinguishable from himself, of the interchangeability generated by surplus. Furthermore, by theorizing the excess of possibilities as the underlying pressure driving Atreus’s sacrificial destruction in the cannibal banquet, I argue that the meta-dramatic citation of a specifically Senecan revenge ritual, appropriated in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, is a gesture by the author to consume, indeed to gratuitously squander, the surplus violence generated by the act of representation itself.

The preparation of Atreus’s victims is fundamentally sacrificial in that it ritualizes a process of loss. As he prepares the banquet, Atreus moves the victims out of the economy of use into the symbolic economy of the sacred: “The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the accursed share, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the order of things . . .” (Bataille 59; emphasis in original). Atreus’s crime, the murder and mutilation of his brother’s children, is made sacred by an elaborate, meticulous process of annihilation. The destruction of the children, their ultimate “violent consumption,” is a means to eliminate their utility and identity.
Destruction and consumption are intertwined in Atreus’s performance of what he imagines is a sacred ritual:

Into this place came Atreus, like a man
Possessed with madness, with his brother’s children
Dragged at his heels. The altars are prepared . . .
But oh, what words are fit to tell what happened? . . .
He tied the princes’ hands behind their backs,
And bound their hapless heads with purple fillets.
Incense was used, and consecrated wine,
The salt and meal dropped from the butcher’s knife
Upon the victims’ heads, all solemn rites
Fulfilled, to make this act of infamy
A proper ritual. (73)

The crime is solemnized by appropriating the formula of ritual through the altar, incense, wine, and rites. The process transforms the victims into sacred entities and dissolves their individual social identities. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer discusses the Senecan revenger’s careful preparation as, paradoxically, the production of expenditure: “He [Atreus] insists on controlling, prolonging, hastening, enjoying, protesting his death, not for what it promises, or for what it shuts off, but for the expenditure of manifest energy it makes possible” (58-59). Creating ritual from his crime—“this act of infamy”—expends energy, just as the crime itself eliminates the surplus value of his enemy’s children. While the preparation of the banquet is itself a kind of production since it creates and stages the solemnity necessary for sacrifice, the children’s transformation is essentially a process of expenditure, for the alteration eliminates their claim to the royal bloodline. As the “sacrificial priest,” Atreus removes them from “the order of things” and ensures the loss of possible heirs to his kingdom:

He was the sacrificial priest, his voice
Boldly intoned the liturgy of death
And spoke the funeral prayers; beside the altar
He stood alone; and then laid his own hand
Upon the three appointed to be slain,
Placed them before him, and took up the knife.

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2 All references to the play will be in page numbers and parenthetical within the text.
He saw that all was done; and all was done
According to the rites of sacrifice. (76)

The repetition of “all was done” signals the end of his act as well as stresses the encompassing nature of this act—the termination of “all” when sacrificed before the altar. Indeed, the vacuity of the sacrifice signals a further loss. The “funeral prayers” and “boldly intoned” voice are essentially meaningless since they are evoked for the purposes of revenge, not consecration. Despite appropriating the formalized ritual of sacrifice, Atreus nullifies the social purpose of sincere sacrifice by failing to legitimize his violence. He perversely mimics the expression of legitimate social expenditure; thus his sacred rite is a mere accompaniment, and cover, for murder.

And it is a crime directed at the future as much as the present enemy, since it privileges the loss of the moment over the consequences ahead. To preside over the wasteful expenditure of children, an act that Alessandro Schiesaro identifies as the “appalling elimination of potentiality” (201), is to eliminate the future possibilities symbolized by the children. Therefore, by sacrificing Thyestes’s children, Atreus attempts to deny the inevitable contingencies and possibilities of an unknown future. As Gordon Braden points out, “brooding some ultimate revenge upon the future [is] the last thing that threatens to escape the self’s control” (57). Atreus’s sacrifice is characterized by systematic and meticulous control over the present, and denial of anything beyond the banquet:

Finding no blemish in the sacrifice,
He was content, and ready to prepare
The banquet for his brother; hacked the bodies
Limb from limb—detached the outstretched arms
Close to the shoulders—severed the ligaments
That tie the elbow joints—stripped every part
And roughly wrenched each separate bone away—
All this he did himself; only the faces,
And trusting supplicant hands, he left intact.
And soon the meat is on the spits, the fat
Drips over a slow fire, while other parts
Are tossed to boil in singing copper pans. (78-79)
The tearing of the bodies is the literal fragmentation of use into disuse; to “hack,” “detach,” “sever,” and “strip” guarantees the thoroughness of the children’s ruin. The emphasis on fragmentation, as the children’s bodies are severed from their original form and meaning, underscores the revenger’s project of asserting domination. The complete annihilation of the children signals, for Atreus, the assertion of control over an excess of possibilities generated outside his control. He is the agent of destructive consumption that eliminates excess. Even to “leave intact” is ironic because the faces and hands are stripped of meaning, signifying not what is left unharmed but highlighting what is irrevocably severed. The princes become mere “meat” and “fat” for consumption in the revenge banquet ahead—the only future that Atreus is willing to acknowledge.  

Atreus orchestrates Thyestes’s consumption of his children: “What if the father could be made to tear his children into pieces, happily, / With eager appetite—eat his own flesh?” (57). The father indeed feasts on his children, his appetite described as excessively eager:

The father bites into his children’s bodies,
Chews his own flesh in his accursed mouth.
Drowsy with wine, his glistening hair anointed
With scented oil, he crams his mouth with food
Till it can hold no more. (79)

Eating until his mouth “can hold no more,” Thyestes’s appetite is grotesque in that it is uncontrollable and unknowing. The knowledge of “his own flesh” belongs to Atreus but is denied Thyestes. This incongruence privileges the connection between the creator of the banquet and the audience watching the grotesque parody of filial hospitality. Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky identifies the cannibal banquet as ultimately theatrical in that it is a staged spectacle: “. . . the theatrical revenger appropriates the cultured spectator’s revulsion at the consumption of flesh as the medium of his vengeance; he compels the victim to eat what the culture abhors, coercing from the spectator a communal disgust” (314). The banquet functions to represent the taboo of cannibalism as a spectacle of disgust, thus enabling Atreus to distinguish himself from his brother who, literally, does not recognize “his own flesh.” Atreus is the

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3 Schiesaro notices not just reversal of the future but an internal regression in Atreus’s actions: “The lack of closure inscribed in the end of Thyestes, with its call to further revenge, and therefore to further engagement with the past, mirrors the illusory closure of the prologue and highlights the overall regressive movement of the plot” (189).
director and judge, while his brother is the unknowing actor in a grotesque spectacle. The reader participates in Atreus’s “disgust”; and by this participation, confirms Thyestes’s identity as the monstrous cannibal. Atreus relishes the revelation of this fundamental difference, and finally reveals, “You, you yourself have dined on you sons’ flesh! You have consumed this monstrous banquet!” (90). Atreus announces the triumph of his revenge by emphasizing “you.” These accusations distinguish him from Thyestes; the act of consuming the “monstrous banquet” differentiates Atreus from a brother whose very existence threatens his sovereignty over the state, the family, and the self.

By feeding his brother the cannibal banquet, Atreus attempts to exorcise the anxiety of indistinguishability generated by a surplus of possibilities deemed unbearable to the Senecan revenger. Thyestes and his sons are no longer legitimate rivals for the throne—a key category of differentiation for Atreus. But the social differentiation enabled by the cannibal banquet goes beyond the uncertainties of monarchical rule. Thomas Curley identifies the problem of the brothers’ polarity versus shared identity in his discussion of the chorus’s comment: “Describe this deed you shudder at, and name the author of it; nay, I ask not ‘who,’ But ‘which of them’” (73). The chorus’s question indicates that the brothers are so similar as to be interchangeable in their ability to enact frightful offenses. As Denis and Elisabeth Henry note, Atreus performs “an inherited pre-disposition to sin. The Tantalids act under a compulsion to find their destiny and their satisfaction in devising new forms of evil” (64). Theorizing the cannibal banquet as the elimination of an excess of possibilities, I am extending Curley’s and the Henrys’ observation of the similarity of the brothers by showing that the ultimate motivation for Atreus’s revenge is not in response to anything Thyestes does, but what he is: a reminder of Atreus’s contingency as a brother, and proof of the ultimate equivalency of their positions. The threat of interchangeability motivates Atreus’s accusation that Thyestes fathered Atreus’s children—the underlying charge is that Atreus’s wife is not able to tell the difference between the brothers. However, the

4 Thomas Curley notes that “the assumption seems to be that the strain of criminal violence in the house of Pelops could erupt as easily in the person of either brother” (146).

5 For a discussion of the indistinguishability of brothers as cause for anxiety in Renaissance drama, see Janet Adelman’s chapter “Man and Wife Is One Flesh: Hamlet and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body” (11-37). See also René Girard’s discussion of Hamlet wherein he states that “Being the least differentiated relationship in most kinship systems, the status of a brother can become a mark of undifferentiation, a symbol of violent desymbolization, the sign paradoxically that there are no more signs and that a warring confusion tends to prevail everywhere” (274).
fidelity of Atreus’s wife is beside the point, for what truly matters for the Senecan
revenger is how the anxiety of resemblance is confirmed by a wife’s sexual
promiscuity. Thus, upon enacting his revenge and successfully distinguishing his
brother as a grotesque, monstrous cannibal, Atreus is able to secure his children’s
legitimacy. The cannibalistic banquet concurrently eliminates the anxiety of
indistinguishability and the doubt of patrilineage: “Now I am sure / My sons are
mine again, reborn to me; / The slur upon my fatherhood is lifted” (92). The
banquet allows the differentiation that establishes Atreus as sovereign of his family,
his state, his universe:

I walk among the stars! Above the world
My proud head reaches up to heaven’s height!
Mine is the kingdom and the glory now,
Mine the ancestral throne. I need no gods;
I have attained the summit of my wishes. (84)

Atreus celebrates unbridled autonomy. His revenge has secured him not just an
earthly kingdom, but a supreme god-like existence. To the Senecan revenger, “to
need no gods” is perfectly equivalent to complete uniqueness, unquestioned
autonomy confirmed only by eliminating the excess of possibilities. The “summit”
of Atreus’s wishes is not in fact the security of a kingdom, but the confirmation of
difference.

But his victory proves unsatisfying: “No more? Enough? Nay, but I will do
more” (84). The banquet allows Atreus to eliminate the children and the father
simultaneously, but the question of “Enough?” signals an awareness of the limits of
his crime. Although the excess of possibilities is destroyed by the preparation and
execution of the banquet, the very source of excess remains undefined, and is
registered as an insufficiency of revenge. This apprehension is expressed as
uneasiness about one’s sovereignty in the face of possibilities that, by their very
existence, threaten autonomy. Both his brother and his brother’s children are
ultimately creations of a mother—products of the uncontrollable reproductive force
that makes Atreus anxious for his wife and distressed about his brother’s
resemblance. In a scarce economy, revenge is the satisfying elimination of a rival;
but in the general economy motivated by the pressures of surplus, the problem of

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6 Braden recognizes this autonomous differentiation as a kind of trajectory away from all social
ties: “If Senecan characters go much further in their isolation, that is in great part because their
drive encounters no such network of social nuance and interconnection” (35).
excess (the brother and the brother’s children as possibilities that threaten one’s sovereignty), is produced by, and therefore evokes, female reproductive power. Yet this fundamental origin of Atreus’s interchangeability—the mother as the emblem of promiscuous production—remains unidentified and unpunished in Seneca’s revenge tragedy.

The mother’s promiscuous reproduction also remains unidentified in Bataille. Bataille highlights the role of the sun as the central trope of the general economy’s unbounded energy, a motif that has been critiqued as a nostalgic image of generosity. For Bataille, excessive energy is natural in that the sun is an emblem and source of surplus: “The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving” (28). Allan Stoekl elaborates: “it is first solar (as it comes to us from the sun), then biological (as it passes from the sun to plants and animals to us), then human (as it is wasted in our monuments, artifacts, and social rituals). . . . There never is or will be a shortage of energy; it can never be used up by man or anything else because it comes, in endless profusion, from the sun” (254). But production of human surplus is ultimately tied not just to the natural world, but to a sexually reproductive one. Tracing Atreus’s revenge to the anxiety generated by the excess of possibilities leads one to reconsider the underlying source of surplus. Although unidentified in Bataille, a fundamental source of excess perceived through the lens of Bataille’s general economy is, unavoidably, female fecundity. Managing excess through the means of vengeful destruction, Seneca’s play reveals that surplus is not generated by the sun’s abundance of energy, but rather by the dangerous outcomes of promiscuous production.

The anxiety of indistinguishability, so unacceptable to a Senecan revenger, is engendered by an intractable female sexuality. Seneca’s Thyestes reveals that the extravagant expenditure of the cannibal banquet—rituals of sacrifice and hospitality that ultimately perform loss—reacts to the distress over a mother’s ability to produce an excess of possibilities, represented by the surplus of a brother that threatens parity and interchangeability. The pressure of excess takes form in Senecan drama as a private horror with cosmic consequences. Braden characterizes Senecan drama as “the displacement of public by private as the locus of significant action. The basic plot of a Senecan play is that of inner passion which burst upon

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7 Shershow critiques what he calls Bataille’s “ethic of generosity” as “our nostalgic yearning for a gift economy that might have existed sometime, somewhere, finally reveals itself as a libidinal response to the atomization and crude economic calculation that represent the fundamental conditions of a capitalist economy” (489).
and desolates an unexpecting and largely uncomprehending world, an enactment of
the mind’s disruptive power over external reality” (39). The private anxiety that
lashes out at external reality is analogous to the Senecan revenger’s private fear of
the mother’s incorrigible fertility expressed, and thus exorcised, through the public
and elaborate destruction of the excess of possibilities she produces. It is this
recognition that I argue motivates the appropriation of cannibalism in
Shakespeare’s revision of the Senecan banquet, and signals part of what Robert
Miola considers a Shakespearean agenda to “outdo Senecan figures of revenge”
(Shakespeare 29). The cannibal banquet is deployed, in Titus Andronicus, not only
to eliminate an excess of possibilities, but also to ostracize the source of excess that
creates this surplus—Tamora, the mother. The difference between the two cannibal
banquets is that whereas Seneca’s Atreus destroys the symptoms of excess,
Shakespeare’s Titus seeks to annihilate its very cause.

Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus fully participates in England’s widely
intertextual mode of Renaissance revenge tragedies during the late sixteenth
century. The play dramatizes the return of Titus to Rome, a successful Roman
general whose exploits at war have generated the expansion of Rome and the
conquest of the Gothic royal line put on display in the opening scenes. In the course
of the play, Titus is the victim of the Gothic queen’s ascension as wife of the
corrupt Roman emperor, Saturninus. Tamora deploys the power of her position, as
new empress of Rome, to destroy Titus and his family. After his sons are executed
for a crime they did not commit, after his daughter is gang raped and mutilated,
after Titus is humiliated and maimed (tricked into lopping off his own hand), the
retired Roman general resolves to be the ultimate revenger against the unjust state
he once served. The play frequently calls attention to the ways in which
Shakespeare cites, as well as revises, previous representations of violence.9
Elaborating specifically on Shakespeare’s revision of Seneca, Braden notices that
both plays “feature a bloody spectacle of revenge that exceeds the accepted bounds
of human action; both exhibit filicide and the ghastly banquet of dead offspring as a
horrid climax” (23). Additionally, Titus’s preparation of the banquet is distinctly

8 Vernon Dickson observes Shakespeare’s indebtedness to his contemporary dramatists: “In
fact, throughout Titus Shakespeare borrows from his contemporaries—Peele, Kyd, Marlowe,
Thomas Nashe (1367-1601), and others—purposefully highlighting his own emulative place, his
own outdoing of his rivals, and creating a bloodier work than any by his contemporaries, pointing
to the emulative core of the work itself” (392).
9 The play has been described as Shakespeare’s most Ovidian drama. See Cora Fox’s
interrogation of the influences of Ovid’s Metamorphosis in her chapter, “Grief and the Ovidian
Politics of Revenge in Titus Andronicus.”
Senecan in its guise as a political gesture. Saturninus and Tamora only dine with Titus because the banquet functions as a meeting between the warring factions. This political context is one borrowed specifically from Seneca’s *Thyestes*, wherein Atreus lures his exiled brother with a promise of peace that “gives [him] back [his] share of sovereignty.” It is within this political context that food preparation, as an ostensible display of the willingness to establish a political alliance, enables revenge. Using *Thyestes* as the literary precedent for Titus’s banquet, the invitation to dine is primarily a performance of generosity—feigning camaraderie where there is instead rivalry, exhibiting embrace of the excess of possibilities when there is actually an insidious anxiety about this excess.

Titus’s victims are sacrificed for the same reasons as Thyestes’s children: to remove them from the economy of use as royal children, and to deny the future that the revenger cannot imagine beyond the banquet. Admittedly, Titus’s actions are perhaps less ritualistic than Atreus’s elaborate preparation. The stage directions remind us that Titus prepares the banquet somewhat brusquely: “Enter Titus Andronicus with a knife, and Lavinia with a basin” (5.2 stage directions). Despite this difference, the deaths of Demetrius and Chiron have been recognized as “form without substance”; that is, ceremonial in structure but devoid of sincere sanctity. Just as Atreus prepares his monstrous banquet elaborately in an attempt to refigure his “act of infamy,” so Titus disguises his cunning murder and gory mutilation as the meticulous preparation for a feast. Titus speaks to his victims:

> You know your mother means to feast with me, And calls herself Revenge, and thinks me mad:

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10 All references to the play will be parenthetical within the text and cited in the standard act, scene, and line divisions.

11 Critical interest in the ceremonial aspects of *Titus Andronicus* ranges from Eugene Waith’s observation of the breakdown of ritual as the play progresses to Stephen Mead’s argument that the failure of ritual in Alarbus’s death (in the play’s opening scene) is the very source of evil in the play. Compare Waith’s point that “The initial ceremonies of act I, whether political, military or religious, are all genuine ceremonies with traditional forms embodying the ideals to which the hero subscribes. . . . The ceremonies of the middle of the play serve a different, but related, function. Prayers to the paving stones, the ritual murder of a fly, and the dispatch of messages to the gods are form without substance. They express, not ideals with a questionable relationship to the situation at hand, but fantasies, clearly separated from external reality” (168) with Mead’s point that “the violence of *Titus* appears less a gratuitous spectacle and more as the result of a failed ritual” (463). However, read with theorizations on the general economy of Senecan revenge, ritual’s sacredness is not corrupted by the revenger so much as always already a means to destroy or waste; sacrifice is not lost or missed in the play but is, in a very fundamental way, the very means to lose.
Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
And make two pasties of your shameful heads . . . (5.2.185-90)

The preparation of the banquet is ceremonial in that it offers an elaborate expenditure of energy that is not meant to be profitable. Like the food preparation in Seneca, this one shows a feast as loss, consumption as privation. To relish the squandering of the victims, Titus describes his preparation more than once. Mary Laughlin Fawcett observes of Titus that “Twice he gives the recipe for the pasties he means to cook; he reiterates parts of the bodies until we begin to think the world is made up of nothing but hands, tongues, bones, threats, blood, heads, and stumps” (270). Titus’s “grinding” of the children is similar to Atreus in that it is a fragmentation of bodies reconstituted as ingredients of the banquet. Persons are mere “paste,” heads mere “pasties.” This world is not merely disjoined, but specifically fragmented for the purposes of consumption. But unlike Atreus who seeks to destroy the children of his enemy, Titus is keenly conscious that his annihilation of Demetrius and Chiron is a means to an end, a tactic to punish their mother. Titus’s banquet is a response to the mother that haunts, but remains unidentified, in Thyestes.

Titus explicitly proclaims that the banquet is for Tamora:

And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
Like to the earth, swallow her own increase.
This is the feast that I have bid her to,
And this the banquet she shall surfeit on . . . (5.2.191-94)

Tamora is a “strumpet,” her “increase” a reminder of her reproductive capacity. Her children are the result of her sexuality, her profane appetite evoked when the feast is presented before her. But Tamora’s “increase” also identifies her as the source of

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12 Critics theorizing the formulaic pattern of Titus Andronicus do not necessarily account for Seneca’s influence. See for instance Jack E. Reese’s formalist approach: “The elaborate system of balances and parallels, the repetition of motifs, the meticulously arranged stage tableaux, the pictorial quality of many scenes all tend to de-emphasize the physical violence by stylizing it. The characters are de-humanized by their language, their self-conscious posturing, and their association with a deeply formal and ritualistic environment” (84). I contend that the stylization is not an aesthetic pattern but rather the effect of solemnization taken from Seneca’s representation of Atreus’s banquet preparation.
problems of the play—the mother and motivator of rapists. It was with Tamora’s encouragement that Chiron and Demetrius rape and mutilate Titus’s daughter, Lavinia. The extreme crimes of Demetrius and Chiron lead back to Tamora, and thus the banquet punishes her as both the biological mother of the rapists, and the primary malevolence from which the sins of the play emerge. The fear of indistinguishability in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, which garners Atreus merely transitory satisfaction, is fully explored in the destruction of a mother that is identified as the ultimate source of—and through the banquet the object of—the excessively violent crimes in *Titus Andronicus*. As Karen Robertson notes, “While the rapists are indeed killed in Titus and ground into a pie, the culminating punishment is reserved for Tamora, their mother, suggesting ultimate feminine culpability for sexual crimes” (220). The feast more than signifies Tamora’s culpability, but stages her punishment and destruction, as recognized by David Willbern: “Being eaten by the mother symbolizes incestuous intercourse (entry into the mother’s body) as well as death by dismemberment and dissolution. It is simultaneously a rape and the retaliatory punishment such rape requires. It enacts the threat of material malevolence at its most hyperbolic, but directed against the monster’s own flesh” (187).

In Willbern’s explanation, Demetrius and Chiron undergo two kinds of punishments for rape: first, as children that re-enter the mother, they are labeled as outside the communal economy at the moment of “incestual intercourse,” and second, their very existence is negated by the mother’s “hyperbolic” appetite. But what Willbern does not convey in his reading is the dissolution of the mother figure herself. Willbern only figures Tamora as the “monster” whose appetite completes Titus’s revenge. However, Titus considers Tamora the inimitable recipient of the play’s violence, revenge enacted only secondarily upon the children:

> Why, there they are, both baked in this pie,  
> Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,  
> Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.  
> ‘Tis true, ‘tis true; witness my knife’s sharp point. (5.3.60-64)

What is “true” is not that he killed the children, but that “their mother daintily hath fed.” He emphasizes not murder, but return; a reversal of her “increase.” The

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13 This reversal is analogous to another kind of reversal that occurs in Seneca. The Henrys claim that “When brothers destroy each other, and parents devour their own children, all nature is seen to have reversed its course” (39). This sentiment is echoed in Schiesaro’s discussion of the
cannibalistic banquet not only sacrifices the children, but also symbolically denies their births by returning them to the mother’s womb, therefore annihilating Tamora’s identity as a mother. Titus undoes the excessive output of Tamora’s sexual fecundity and, in doing so, evokes and extirpates the mother’s threatening domination at the center of the text. Through the banquet, Tamora is no longer a mother, no longer the source of an excess of possibilities, no longer the female sexual agent whose reproductive capacity threatens male sovereignty. Tamora’s unknowing enactment of the double taboos of incest and cannibalism categorically classifies her as the inassimilable outsider who has infiltrated the top of Roman society. Lobanov-Rostovsky explores the Senecan banquet in Shakespeare’s play as a performance of recognition and expulsion, engaging in “the capacity to affirm difference, to assert a cultural distinction between cannibal and cultured spectator” (314). The staging of Tamora’s indiscriminate and eager appetite precedes her murder; her death is the essential extension of the play’s need to pinpoint the outsiders living amidst Titus’s Rome. Thus, the identification of Tamora as a cannibalistic monster is fundamentally linked to the Senecan need to differentiate the revenger from his enemy, the director of events from the trespasser for whom the banquet is a trap. However, the differentiation is not between brothers, but between the promiscuous mother and the masculine, militant Rome that Titus represents. The Roman ideal of autonomous masculinity is only secured through destruction of the sexually untractable and deceitful woman.

Yet enforcing a gendered, moral binary only calls attention to the difficulty of enforcement, thus problematizing the very differentiation it seeks to enact and assert. Of the stage directions, “enter Titus, like a cook, placing the dishes” (5.3 stage directions), Miola notices that “No longer the powerful figure who occupies the center of a Roman public place, Titus appears as a humble cook who waits upon guests in his own home. Instead of ceremoniously expressing love for Rome and loyalty to Roman ideals, he hides his hatred and treachery in the guise of sun’s eclipse as “the ultimate symbol of disorder” (220). Therefore, what is in Seneca a reversal of natural and cosmic forces, in Shakespeare is focused on the reversal of the most threatening force of the play: Tamora, the mother.

14 Francis Barker comments on the implicit categories of difference within the play as a “boundary between behavior and belief that is marker of being within the community, and that which is not. To one side of the boundary lies culture, and to the other lies either unmarked behavior, or behavior which is marked as the determinate ‘other’ of culture” (230). Titus evokes this distinction during the banquet, yet in feeding the “other” the cannibal feast, Titus implicates Rome in the savagery of cannibalism.

15 According to Mead, the point of ritual within society is to “distinguish legitimate from illegitimate violence” (459).
hospitality” (“Titus Andronicus” 217). The banquet signals the failure of Roman ideals to distinguish Titus from his enemy. There is no longer a clear opposition between the one who consumes and the one who prepares the cannibalistic feast, the one who threatens Rome and the Roman who treacherously enacts crimes to pinpoint, and in the process impersonate, the savage foreigner: “Titus cooks Tamora’s sons but does not eat; while Tamora eats but does not know what she eats. . . . Who, in such circumstances, is the cannibal, and where in such circumstances, is the line between civilization and barbarism? In each case—and there are many others—there seems to be a transgression of the line which demarcates the boundary between the civil and the savage” (Barker 256). The fantasy of Roman sovereignty is undermined by a banquet in which a savage meal is shared in a civil setting. 16 The banquet blurs the demarcation of otherness so central to the avenger’s conception and execution of revenge. Just as Atreus’s dissatisfaction at the end of his revenge reveals the limit of his autonomy, so Titus’s differentiation further links him to the producer of violence he seeks to annul.

The banquet, therefore, performs differentiation even while complicating the avenging agent’s claim to distinguish himself from his enemy. In other words, if the avenger’s purpose is to secure differentiation by revealing the cannibal amidst his society, the play nonetheless resists a categorical separation between the crime of preparing human flesh and the crime of eating it. Consequently, the cannibal banquet functions as an internal thematic mirror—the mise-en-abyme—not just within two revenge plays, but also of the revenge genre in which both plays partake. 17 The banquet blurs the distinctions assumed by discrete dramatic

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16 The distinction is also threatened by the fact that the banquet, as a ritual, fails to fully delineate those who belong in the community from the enemies of the community: “the role of religious ritual is to combat the enemy. Ritual and religion function to define what is pure and impure, and thereby enable people to achieve purity and establish clarity in a threatened community” (Mead 460).

17 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes mise-en-abyme as a narrative embedded within the matrix of the narrative in which it participates: “It can be described as the equivalent of something like Matisse’s famous painting of a room in which a miniature version of the same paintings hangs on one of the walls. . . . A famous example from Gide’s work is The Counterfeiters (1949) where a character is engaged in writing a novel similar to the novel in which he appears” (93). For a critical and recent discussion of André Gide’s work on mise-en-abyme, see Lucien Dällenbach, who argues that the essential functions of mise-en-abyme are “Simple duplication (a sequence which is connected by similarity to the work that encloses it); Infinite duplication (a sequence which is connected by similarity to the work that encloses it and which itself includes a sequence that encloses it, etc.); and Aporetic duplication (a sequence that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it)” (35; emphasis in original). The cannibal banquet functions in all of these levels in Shakespeare’s revenge play. The intense, meta-theatrical intertextuality of Titus Andronicus renders it a kind of cannibal banquet of literary predecessors.
representations and troubles the vicarious position of their audiences. The cannibal feast links the author and his audience in a performance of destruction that will not permit an easy delineation between the producer and consumer of violence. When Titus welcomes his guests to the banquet he also, by extension, invites the audience to participate in the spectacle ahead: “Welcome, my lord; welcome, dread Queen; Welcome, ye warlike Goths; welcome, Lucius; And welcome, all; although the cheer be poor, ‘Twill fill you stomachs; please you eat of it” (5.3.26-29). To “welcome all” is a specific expansion of a Senecan idea of revenge as performance. Whereas Atreus elaborately stages the banquet for personal satisfaction, Titus prepares the banquet with a larger audience in mind. Titus’s feast evokes and implicates an audience that will “eat of it” along with Tamora; that is, admission into the banquet anticipates an audience within the play that will participate in the crime of cannibal feasting, as well as gestures at an audience outside the play, vicariously complicit in the act of destructive consumption by bearing witness to the ritualized extravagance of the vengeful feast. The audience therefore watches two cannibal banquets in Titus Andronicus: one prepared by the revenger to eliminate the threatening excess that the mother represents, the other feast prepared by an author to exhaust the surplus inventory of bloody acts depicted by his literary predecessors.

Shakespeare both produces and consumes, stages and spends: he is the author who utilizes previous literary representations of violence, as well as generates a surplus of violence for his audience to consume. Titus’s banquet engenders violence by consuming it. In considering Fawcett’s claim that literary intertextuality is essentially “a kind of cannibalism,” I argue that the Senecan intertext in Shakespeare’s play portrays cannibalism and is itself a form of cannibalism in its consumption of that to which it is kin. It is in this way that the cannibal banquet emerges as representation itself, a mise-en-abyme that mirrors and comments upon the authorial project of participating in the revenge genre. The cannibal banquet therefore provides a quintessential instance of Bataille’s sense of “squandering”

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18 A. J. Boyle finds it necessary to remind us that “Many of the theatrical high spots of Senecan tragedy are characterized by violence . . . Renaissance spectacle is often similarly characterized” (164). But the violence is not, I argue, simply a matter of similarity but a willful multiplication, an enactment of excess that represents (becomes a medium for) authorial sovereignty over literary predecessors.

19 Language—and specifically language in the context of literary consumption and production—has been theorized “as rediscovery and appropriation of castration, as oral fixation, and as a kind of cannibalism. Since it borrows from the past, language must finally be based on incest, the mother-tongue for this speaker is a father-hand, inserted incestuously between the teeth of a ruined mouth, a vagina dentata” (Fawcett 262).
since Shakespeare participates in the genre by sacrificing the resources before him. Outdoing previous revenge figures—sacrificing them to his own purpose—Shakespeare defines his authorial autonomy. Literary consumption engages in a process of loss on a theatrical and meta-theatrical level: “The cannibal becomes a figure of theatre, an opportunity for the culture to enact—by a civilizing violence—the transcendence of a chaotic past, to affirm difference by effacing it. This cultural narrative of ascent is inscribed in—and negated by—the trope’s origin: the classicist’s exhumation of the Senecan corpus. The scholar nurtures a native literature on classical atrocities; the poet feeds on the Senecan body” (Lobanov-Rostovsky 311; emphasis in original). Shakespeare usurps the Senecan corpus by using Senecan tropes; he asserts literary virtuosity utilizing the writings he will ultimately supersede. The impulse to mimic, and simultaneously outdo, previous revenge figures is itself a compulsive expenditure of excess possibilities. Just as the revenge figure annihilates his enemies and thus eliminates the excess of possibilities that threatens his autonomy, so an author highlights his creative revisions by sacrificing and banqueting upon literary precedents. In the case of Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare applies the surplus of violent resources in order to establish authorial superiority over Seneca’s Thyestes.

This process of expenditure is not possible without an audience willing to consume violence. Evoked is our own familiarity with the horror of previous representations of violence—and it is this complicity that enables the experience of pleasurable and wasteful destruction. The cannibal banquet forces us to recognize Shakespeare’s citation of Seneca, and enables our participation in consuming the banquet that Shakespeare prepares. The author’s reproduction of violence and the audience’s consumption of literary representations of violence implicate the need to squander energy within controlled circumstances. René Girard notices of Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “Shakespeare’s most precious invitation to us, his invitation to become accomplices and share in his prodigious awareness of a dramatic process that always consists in some form of victimage or sacrifice, a process with such deep roots within us and effects so paradoxical and hidden that it can be reactivated and ridiculed simultaneously” (217). Audience participation in the production and expenditure of violence, or complicity in “some form of victimage or sacrifice,” occurs precisely because “the prodigious awareness of a dramatic process” remains within the socially acceptable confines of a stage or a page. The shared impulse to spend recklessly—to ritualize the destruction of lives, to enact a denial of an uncertain future, to relish the most heinous of crimes—is accessed by and represented in the cannibal banquet, wherein the destruction of an excess of
possibilities is experienced inclusively yet vicariously. Read through Bataille’s perspective, theatre is implicated in generating as well as consuming the surplus of violent representations within society. Representations of violence permit the surplus of a community’s destructive impulses to be experienced, and expelled, safely. That is, despite the excessiveness of brutality in both plays, the fact of being a play contains and controls the crimes of murder and cannibalism. Because Atreus and Titus prepare the monstrous banquet, we do not have to admit that Atreus’s “pleasure to be filled with a greater horror” (249) is ours as well.

Works Cited


About the Author

Dr. Carol Mejia LaPerle is Assistant Professor of Renaissance Drama at Wright State University of Dayton, Ohio. Her scholarship examines the links between literary expression and cultural history, particularly in historicizing the depictions of dissent in early modern England. Her publications include articles on Ben Jonson, Thomas Heywood, Elizabeth Cary, and the anonymously written *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*. Her current monograph project, inspired by participation in the National Endowment of the Humanities Summer Institute “Shakespeare from the Globe to the Global” held at the Folger Shakespeare Library, examines the material culture of early modern depictions of foreigners.

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