Fixing Moderation: *Titus Andronicus* and the Aristotelian Determination of Value

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Declared "a tissue of horrors," "a heap of Rubbish," and "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written,"[1] *Titus Andronicus* has elicited criticism for being too much and not enough, excessive in its sensationalism yet lacking in its stylistic organization. The play's protagonist, likewise, has appeared both immoderate and erratic, unhinged by his own inclination toward extreme behavior, his conduct neither rationally nor consistently governed. But why has it seemed so obvious to read *Titus*'s excesses as indicative of its (ostensible) crudeness of form, a marker of its chaotic internal structure? Why has its protagonist, as if embodying the flaws of the play as a whole, so clearly seemed an intemperate figure, deficient in both rhetorical and moral moderation? Rather than being merely the product of a muddled aesthetic, *Titus*'s excesses, I will argue, signal instead the play's use of extremity to define the ethical, a representational strategy that exhibits sophistication and nuance amid, even through, sensational display. For excess and moderation, taken up throughout *Titus Andronicus*, themselves stand as established conceptual categories in early modern England, shaped by continual explication and revision. As Shakespeare's first Roman play, in which allusions to a turbulent Roman history and culture abound,[2] *Titus Andronicus*, with all its horrors, seems far

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[1] Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspere and His Predecessors* (London: John Murray, 1896), 138; Edward Ravenscroft, *Titus Andronicus, or The Rape of Lavinia . . .* (London, 1687), sig. A2^{r}; and T. S. Eliot, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," *Selected Essays 1917–1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 65–105, esp. 82. J. Dover Wilson, likewise, compares the play to "some broken-down cart, laden with bleeding corpses" (*Titus Andronicus*, ed. J. Dover Wilson [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968], xii). Arguing against such critiques of the play, A. C. Hamilton cites both Wilson and Eliot and notes, "One word may sum up the reasons for rejecting this play: *excess*" ("*Titus Andronicus*: The Form of Shakespearian Tragedy," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14 [1963]: 201–13, esp. 201).

[2] On the uses of Roman history and culture in *Titus*, see Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997); Naomi Conn Liebler, "Getting It All Right: *Titus Andronicus* and Roman History," *SQ* 45 (1994): 263–78; Vivian Thomas,

removed from the deliberative measures of Greek philosophy. Yet when situated within Aristotelian ethical theory of the late 1590s, *Titus Andronicus* reveals a remarkably coherent underlying structure and—perhaps even more surprising—a deeply moderate protagonist, who exhibits a strain of noble equanimity and a sense of reasoned temperance.

At stake in this essay, then, is a rereading of *Titus Andronicus* that intends to alter our understanding of the play's excesses by defining moderation in ways that may at first seem counterintuitive, even bizarre. For Aristotelian ethical epistemology—deeply ingrained in late sixteenth-century England and central to *Titus*—understands the ethical mean as the point of moral equilibrium between two diametrically opposed extremes. Absolute yet also culturally intuited, the ethical mean admits a theoretical range of action as "moderate," depending upon the circumstance. Moreover, as a site of social stability yet hermeneutic uncertainty, the mean requires perpetual fixing—in the sense of not only locating but also repairing. Contingent upon context, it requires continual identification and, when dislocated by rampant immoderation, restoration. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare treats the contextual determination of moderation and the mean's ontological fixity as compatible. This paradox of flexible rigidity helps position Titus as horrifying yet just, noble while savage, as he negotiates the shifting terms of Rome's civic contract. As Rome becomes increasingly chaotic in its flouting of gratitude (the social mean discarded by the feckless Saturninus), Titus must refashion moderation within a newly altered context. His corrective revenge reintroduces two traits implicit in the city's initial contract based on gratitude (and absent in the crimes against his family)—namely, proportionality and a calculation of equivalent exchange. Shakespeare creates a remarkable series of ethical relocations throughout the play, recontextualizing Titus, surnamed Pius, in extreme circumstances in a world grown immoderate. Within this context, Titus's horrific violence functions not, as we might initially intuit, as excessive but rather as quite the opposite, as a type of radically adaptive moderation-in-extremity.

I. Aristotelianism and the Early Modern Formulation of Value

As Charles B. Schmitt and David A. Lines have shown, the decline of Aristotelianism in early modern England has been significantly misunderstood. While not "considered an *auctoritas* in some infallible sense," Aristotle was "the

Shakespeare's Roman Worlds (London: Routledge, 1989); Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), and "*Titus Andronicus* and the Mythos of Shakespeare's Rome," *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1981): 85–98; and T.J.B. Spencer, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans," *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957): 27–38.

main authority in moral philosophy far into the sixteenth century," his ethics informing university systems and published materials throughout Europe.[3] In particular, *The Nicomachean Ethics* "perhaps as much as any other work from antiquity, emerged from the Reformation struggles as a keystone of both Catholic and Protestant education"[4] and was the standard text for curricula in moral philosophy.[5] However, Aristotle's influence extended beyond the university system, since "there was a general revival of interest in philosophy, particularly of the Aristotelian tradition, in England during the last quarter of the sixteenth century."[6] The philosopher's works were frequently republished, a testament to Aristotle's widespread appeal beyond the university.[7] Printed more than any of Aristotle's other texts, the *Ethics* went through numerous translations.[8] At the time Shakespeare wrote *Titus*, Aristotelian philosophy informed literary texts engaging with myriad political and ethical issues, helping to shape their representations of moderation and excess.[9]

The conflicted hermeneutics of fixing value in late Elizabethan England appeared across a wide array of discourses, including economic, religious, and legal ones, some of which have received ample attention in *Titus* criticism. In its most directly material expression, the notion of value arose with the currency devaluation crisis of the 1590s, which raised the question of whether value existed intrinsically from a seemingly arbitrary cultural consensus or by royal fiat. According to Jesse Lander, "The crisis of value that roiled the world of late sixteenth-century England" derived partly from Elizabeth's "'calling down' [of] the base coinage to its 'true' value," an act that, in conjunction with rapid inflation, had "a corrosive effect on the coin's ability to function as a standard of value" and "put enormous strain on the language of value in its various

[3] David A. Lines, *Aristotle's "Ethics" in the Italian Renaissance (ca. 1300–1650): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 79.

[4] Charles B. Schmitt, "Aristotle's Ethics in the Sixteenth Century: Some Preliminary Considerations," in *The Aristotelian Tradition and Renaissance Universities* (1979; rpt. London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 87–112 (nonsequential pagination), esp. 94.

[5] Lines, 78.

[6] Charles B. Schmitt, *John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1983), 26–27.

[7] Schmitt, "Aristotle's Ethics," 89–90.

[8] The first English edition, rendered by John Wilkinson from an Italian version in 1549, was followed by several commentaries, including Samuel Heiland's, published in 1581, and John Case's widely influential *Speculum quaestionum*, "printed in Oxford in 1585 and reprinted in 1596"; see Schmitt, *John Case*, 23, 24.

[9] For a brief but suggestive study on the influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Shakespeare, see W. R. Elton's "Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 331–37. See also John Wasson's "*Measure for Measure*: A Play of Incontinence," *ELH* 27 (1960): 262–75.

forms."[10] As Jonathan Gil Harris has recently shown, "not only the debasement of England's currency but also unprecedented volatility in international exchange rates" exacerbated this crisis and prompted attempts to fix the coin as a "common measure of value."[11] The "movement of bullion across national borders" called further attention to "the mutability of financial value in the course of foreign currency exchange" and provided avenues for "imagin[ing] rival models of value as intrinsic or extrinsic."[12] Indeed, as Harris has convincingly argued, early modern inquiries into the relationship between "intrinsic telos" and "socially imposed nomos" extended beyond economic discourses to theories of language and even disease.[13] Moreover, the discourses of religious belief also participated in the crisis of fixing value in the late sixteenth century. The hermeneutics behind Protestant and Catholic disagreements pointed to a transcendent absolute, at once knowable yet stubbornly elusive, across differing cultural traditions.[14] And in legal matters, "by the late 1580s, the location of equity had become a political issue, as a result of the growing antagonism between common law and prerogative jurisdictions."[15] Consistent across varying perspectives and concerns, the contested discourses of value shared a governing presupposition, however, that true value not only existed but also required deciphering. In the midst of social flux, fixing a median point of consensus, particularly regarding ethical value, proved essential for developing a just society: the variability of context necessitated, not obviated, fixing an ethical mean.

The contested semiotics of value figured in the myriad discourses briefly surveyed here exemplifies the central quandary posed by the age's prevailing Aristotelianism: determining whether the ethical mean is absolute and transcendent, situational and contextual, or (as Aristotle intimates) some tenuous fusion of the two.[16] Academic yet pragmatic, the question fundamentally

[10] Jesse M. Lander, "'Crack'd Crowns' and Counterfeit Sovereigns: The Crisis of Value in *1 Henry IV*," *Shakespeare Studies* 30 (2002): 137–61, esp. 138, 143, 146.

[11] Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004), 93; on the crisis of economic value and its relation to the stage, see 83–107.

[12] Harris, 84–85.

[13] Harris, 85.

[14] For a discussion on early modern religious difference and *Titus*, see Nicholas R. Moschovakis, "'Irreligious Piety' and Christian History: Persecution as Pagan Anachronism in *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 53 (2002): 460–86, esp. 473.

[15] A. N. McLaren, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth 1558–1585* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 230.

[16] On the mean's indeterminate nature, see Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002), esp. 1–11; see also J. O. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley:

shapes how one construes the "ethical." Since the mean, by its very nature, exists in contradistinction to two extremes, Aristotle often defines it relationally, by expressing it through opposition, articulating what it is *not*. One may find the mean of bravery, for example, by avoiding both cowardice and foolhardiness, two deviations from the mean that exhibit, respectively, too much or too little regard for one's safety (*Ethics*, 37–43, esp. 40 [2.6–2.7]).[17] Thus, ascertaining the mean relies in some measure upon context, for the point of recklessness or cowardice may shift, depending upon circumstance. This reliance on context at once creates moderation and allows for extremity, for it prompts the ethical person to "'save extreme reactions for extreme situations.'"[18] Such a formulation promotes patient endurance yet opens the possibility of justifiably extreme reactions, provided they are proportional to extreme circumstances. Therefore, when Aristotle speaks of the ethical mean, he points not simply to an appropriate action but to an appropriate *range* of action, adaptable as the occasion warrants. Recognizing that locating the mean remains inherently fraught but nonetheless indispensable, Aristotle often advocates approximating virtue as closely as possible.

The influence of context on finding the mean likewise shapes Aristotle's taxonomy of distributive and rectificatory justice, two formulations, as we will see, that figure centrally in the imperial election and the sacrifice of Alarbus. Here, as in personal ethics, just exchange exists on a potentially variable (and, therefore, disputable) point of equilibrium; consequently, ethical behavior admits a range of possibility. In Book 5 of the *Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between distributive justice, or the proper distribution of goods, and rectificatory justice, the legal justice rendered for physical injury.[19] Governing the "distributions of honour or money or the other things that fall to be divided among those who have a share in the constitution" (*Ethics*, 111 [5.2]), distributive justice ultimately leaves imprecise just how such division should occur. Aristotle predicates distributive justice on merit; but as he readily admits, merit proves a notoriously slippery concept to fix in place, "for all men agree that what is just in distribution must be according to merit in some sense, though they do not all specify the same sort of merit" (*Ethics*, 112 [5.3]). While the indeterminate

U of California P, 1980), 157–70. On Aristotle's rejection of ethical relativism, or subjectivism, see Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), esp. 20–49.

[17] I follow *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Sir David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), which is cited parenthetically in the text as "*Ethics*" and by page number(s), with book and chapter number(s) in square brackets.

[18] Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 99.

[19] On Aristotle's taxonomy of justice, see D. D. Raphael, *Concepts of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 43–55.

designation of "merit" precedes the enactment (or, perhaps, approximation) of distributive justice, rectificatory justice remains contextually shaped by its reactive nature. Describing physical suffering (not just material dispossession) as a type of disequilibrium between a gainer and loser, Aristotle explains that

> this kind of injustice being an inequality, the judge tries to equalize it; for in the case also in which one has received and the other inflicted a wound, or one has slain and the other been slain, the suffering and the action have been unequally distributed; but the judge tries to equalize things by means of the penalty, taking away from the gain of the assailant.
>
> (*Ethics*, 115 [5.4])

Recognizing that "the term 'gain' is applied generally to such cases—even if it be not a term appropriate to certain cases, e.g. to the person who inflicts a wound—and 'loss' to the sufferer," Aristotle argues that "at all events when the suffering has been estimated, the one is called loss and the other gain" (*Ethics*, 115 [5.4]). Rectificatory justice, as "the intermediate between loss and gain," must, therefore, attend to context, for the judge resets the fulcrum in order to "equalize things by means of [a] penalty," but does so only after "the suffering has been estimated" (*Ethics*, 115 [5.4]). The impulse to establish the ethical mean remains not simply a matter of personal hermeneutics but the particular concern of a just society seeking to maintain civic order.

Within his taxonomy of justice, Aristotle articulates a third category known as "justice in exchange" (*Ethics*, 117 [5.4]), a formulation especially attuned to the importance of gratitude or grace for ensuring equitable transactions. While justice in exchange has often been read as a precursor to modern economic theory, recent scholarship has persuasively recuperated its broader purview—current well into the seventeenth century—as a category that encompasses the determination of value in any type of exchange.[20] Justice in exchange, according to Aristotle, is the "sort of justice [that] hold[s] men together—reciprocity in accordance with a proportion and not on the basis of precisely equal return," since "it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together" (*Ethics*, 117–18

[20] For perhaps the most cogent discussion of justice in exchange as "a distinct, third form of justice," see Lindsay Judson, "Aristotle on Fair Exchange," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1997): 147–75, esp. 149. On justice in exchange (also called "commutative justice" and "reciprocity") as a subset of rectificatory (or "corrective") justice, but a category that still seeks "'correction' of a social imbalance" that need not be economic in nature, see also Gabriel Danzig, "The Political Character of Aristotelian Reciprocity," *Classical Philology* 95 (2000): 399–424, esp. 401. On justice in exchange as central to early modern theories of social contract, see Lynn Johnson, "Friendship, Coercion, and Interest: Debating the Foundations of Justice in Early Modern England," *Journal of Early Modern History* 8 (2004): 46–64. For the relevance of justice in exchange to early modern narratives of revenge, see Ullrich Langer, "The Renaissance Novella as Justice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 311–41, esp. 315–17.

[5.5]). Immediately after this latter observation, Aristotle states that "men seek to return either evil for evil—and if they cannot do so, think their position mere slavery—or good for good—and if they cannot do so there is no exchange, but it is by exchange that they hold together" (*Ethics*, 118 [5.5]). After Aristotle discusses the exchange of "evil for evil . . . good for good," he contemplates graciousness: "This is why they give a prominent place to the temple of the Graces—to promote the requital of services; for this is characteristic of grace—we should serve in return one who has shown grace to us, and should another time take the initiative in showing it. Now proportionate return is secured by cross-conjunction" (*Ethics*, 118 [5.5]). As Aristotle moves from revenge ("men seek to return evil for evil") to his exposition on "cross-conjunction," or the geometric proportion used to secure proportionate return, his emphasis on grace takes central place. Grace, necessary "to promote the requital of services," facilitates Aristotle's ethical economy of justice in exchange: the absence of grace signals the breakdown of fair requital.[21]

While justice in exchange defines social equilibrium as the work of grace and proportionate return, equanimity of personal character is largely revealed through truthfulness and "ready-wit" (*Ethics*, 103 [4.8]). Indeed, both truthfulness and wit indicate the equability present in one's broader transactions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle briefly treats truthfulness and ready-wit: "In the field of social life," it is important to "describe those who pursue truth or falsehood alike in words and deeds and in the claims they put forward" (*Ethics*, 100 [4.7]). Noting that "falsehood is *in itself* mean and culpable," Aristotle describes the truthful man as one who "would seem to be as a matter of fact equitable" (*Ethics*, 101 [4.7]). Equanimity is both a personal adherence to the mean and an indicator of whether one will operate selfishly or unselfishly, with grace or ingratitude. He continues, "For the man who loves truth, and is truthful *where nothing is at stake*, will still more be truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base, seeing that he avoided it *even for its own sake*" (*Ethics*, 100 [4.7]) (emphasis added). Thus, when Aristotle subsequently turns to describe the ready-witted, he presents the application of wit as an index of one's equanimity. Since ready-wit for Aristotle "implies a sort of readiness to turn this way and that," he views it as no mere parlor game: "For such sallies [i.e., turns of wit] are thought to be movements of the character, and as

[21] Early modern political theorists, sometimes explicitly citing Aristotelian theories of commutative justice, commented on the function of grace, or gratitude, in mediating social contracts. See, for example, Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 63–68; and Thomas Hobbes, "Chap. XV. Of other Lawes of Nature," *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 100–111.

bodies are discriminated by their movements so too are characters" (*Ethics*, 103 [4.8]). For Aristotle, then, one's degree of truthfulness, of equitable behavior, is best marked by "the claims . . . put forward" "where nothing is at stake," and the movements of one's wit allows another to evaluate, to "discriminate," the qualities and movements of that person's character. Within Aristotelian ethics, truthfulness signals equanimity, falsehood is a type of fractured exchange, and ready-wit provides a sense of one's ethical character.

II. From Gratitude to Ingratitude: (Un)Settling the Mean in Titus's Rome

Shakespeare frames *Titus*'s representation of civic piety—in language notably evocative of the *Ethics*—by raising the issue of the ethical life as distinguished by consistent virtue yet also shaped by the vicissitudes of circumstance. In doing so, he suggests that context influences ethical value. Shakespeare introduces the plight of the Andronici family by picturing Titus as a type of Priam, having lost his sons in battle on behalf of the state. "Romans," Titus intones, "of five and twenty valiant sons, / Half of the number that King Priam had, / Behold the poor remains, alive and dead" (1.1.82–84).[22] Marcus assures his brother that these dead sons have "aspired to Solon's happiness" (l. 180), a reference to Solon's dictum that no man may be called happy until he is dead and finally beyond fortune's caprice. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle himself invokes Priam and Solon to frame his inquiry into what constitutes the virtuous life.[23] Asking if happiness derives from being good or having good fortune, Aristotle emphasizes the former but admits the possibility of the latter. He argues that

> there is required, as we said, not only complete virtue but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy. Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we, as Solon says, see the end?
>
> (*Ethics*, 19 [1.9–1.10])[24]

[22] I follow the Pelican Shakespeare text of *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Russ McDonald (New York: Penguin, 2000).

[23] On Aristotle's critique of Solon, see T. H. Irwin, "Permanent Happiness: Aristotle and Solon," *Aristotle's "Ethics": Critical Essays*, ed. Nancy Sherman (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 1–33.

[24] Aristotle argues that "the happy man can never become miserable—though he will not reach *blessedness*, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam" (*Ethics*, 21 [1.10]). He concludes, somewhat imprecisely, "The good or bad fortunes of friends, then, seem to have some effects on the dead, but effects of such a kind and degree as neither to make the happy unhappy nor to produce any other change of the kind" (*Ethics*, 23 [1.11]).

This tension between "complete virtue" and a "complete life" recurs in *Titus*, suggesting that context may indeed influence ethical value, that the measure of a person's life may derive from not only action but also situation and circumstance.

Shakespeare most saliently establishes the instability of the ethical mean endemic to Rome through the disputed election, an instance of distributive justice where political ideology defines merit, and where self-interest—except in the notable case of Titus himself—defines political ideology.[25] In the clamorous contest for "rule and empery" (1.1.19), each rival presumes a discernible point of equilibrium, locating that point, however, in his own understanding of merit. Thus, when Marcus entreats Bassianus and Saturninus to "Plead your deserts in peace and humbleness" (l. 48), each brother accepts the proposition, perceiving the election as a matter of equitable valuation. Bassianus, for example, agrees to "Commit my cause in balance to be weighed" (l. 58), while Saturninus, even in the syntax of his request, invites his auditors to weigh his merit as on a balance: "Rome, be as just and gracious unto me / As I am confident and kind to thee" (ll. 63–64). The rivals employ rhetoric here that will be echoed in the play's reiterations of *suum cuique*.[26] This rhetoric belies a fraught endeavor, however, for as Aristotle had observed, each individual defines merit differently and according to his own political ideology: "democrats identify it with the status of freeman, supporters of oligarchy with wealth (or with noble birth), and supporters of aristocracy with excellence" (*Ethics*, 113 [5.3]). Such formulations for designating merit may remain tenable within each political philosophy. Across ideological divides, however, merit becomes even more contested, since the political consensus needed to establish it breaks down.

Shakespeare's play reveals the indeterminacy of median value even further by receding another level, by blurring the political ideologies of the rival claimants. Saturninus, who will rule as absolute tyrant, employs language reminiscent of Aristotle's description of the "supporters of oligarchy"; his is the argument of noble birth, more specifically, of primogeniture.[27] Saturninus also emphasizes whom he addresses. He first entreats the "Noble patricians, patrons of my

[25] On the mixed ideologies and self-interest of the claimants compared to Titus's role as "ethical icon," see Gail Kern Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985), 58–60, esp. 60.

[26] "*Suum cuique* is our Roman justice," notes Marcus (1.1.283); even Aaron invokes the thought when he declares, "I am of age / To keep mine own" (4.2.104–5). On "Marcus [as] citing the standard formula for distributive justice developed in classical writings on ethics, jurisprudence, and the law from Aristotle onwards," see also Andrew Hadfield, "'Suum Cuique': Natural Law in *Titus Andronicus*, I.i.284," *Notes and Queries* 52 (2005): 195–96, esp. 195.

[27] See also Andrew Hadfield, "Shakespeare and Republicanism: History and Cultural Materialism," *Textual Practice* 17 (2003): 461–83, esp. 470–77.

right" to "Defend the justice of my cause in arms" (1.1.1–2) and then calls his "followers" to "plead my successive title" because "I am his first-born son," urging them to not "wrong mine age" (ll. 3–5, 8). Bassianus's counterargument, at first glance, suggests the Aristotelian "supporters of aristocracy" who identify merit with "excellence," for he bases his appeal on "virtue," as well as on "justice, continence, and nobility" (ll. 14, 15). However, he concludes his speech by striking a distinctly democratic note. Bassianus, like those who "identify [merit] with the status of freeman," blends the rhetoric of virtue and excellence into a democratic appeal, for he does not address the patricians specifically but tells the people, "But let desert in pure election shine, / And, Romans, fight for freedom in your choice" (ll. 16–17). As the rivals adopt different ideologies in order to arrogate power, the variability within concepts of merit becomes amplified by the variability both of ostensibly homogeneous political ideology and, more broadly, of context.

Titus stands notably apart from this display of unrestrained self-aggrandizement, adapting instead to a radically altered political landscape—an open throne, immense popular support, weak rival candidates—by neither arrogating absolute power to himself nor shifting his political fealties for personal advantage. Bassianus had appealed to the Romans' "freedom" and desire for "pure election," invoking "justice, continence, and nobility" as desirable attributes. In contrast, Marcus enters to announce that the people "have by common voice" already "in election for the Roman empery / Chosen Andronicus surnamèd Pius," because "a nobler man, a braver warrior, / Lives not this day within the city walls" (ll. 21–23, 25–26). The reason for Titus's popular appeal quickly becomes clear in Marcus's first address to his brother:

> Titus Andronicus, the people of Rome,
> Whose friend in justice thou hast ever been,
> Send thee by me, their tribune and their trust,
> This palliament of white and spotless hue,
> And name thee in election for the empire.
> (ll. 182–86)

Positioning Titus as not only a friend to the people of Rome but also a friend *in justice*, Marcus describes Titus's popular support as deriving from two manifestations of the ethical mean in social action. Both justice and friendship, at their core, focus on equity and the mean; both require equanimity, a balance wrought by fair and mutual exchange.[28] And here, it is justice—the quest for

[28] On the close relationship between friendship and justice, see Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 242–44; see also Johnson, 46–64, esp. 50–61.

the equitable mean—that becomes the means for Titus's intimate affiliation with the people. Shakespeare underscores the sense of equivalence wrought here between soldier and populace by joining the two in a single verse line: "Titus Andronicus, the people of Rome" (l. 182). Paradoxically, this fundamental sense of equanimity leads to Titus receiving, yet rejecting, power. Having served for forty years as a soldier (l. 196), he perceives political duty as beyond his capacity; he demurs and instead expresses loyalty to the emperor he has served by electing "our emperor's eldest son" (l. 227). [29]

In the sacrifice of Alarbus, Titus also appears noble—although not entirely blameless—within the context of Aristotelian rectificatory justice, on account of his relative degree of mercy and, more particularly, by his privileging self-denial over full equanimity in a matter that concerns him personally. [30] For in rectificatory justice, it will be recalled, "the judge tries to equalize" the disproportion wrought when "one has slain and the other been slain" and "the suffering and action have been unequally distributed" (*Ethics*, 115 [5.4]). Since Aristotle defined rectificatory justice as "intermediate between loss and gain," one could argue that if Titus fails here, it is because he does not do more, that he kills only one of Tamora's sons rather than all. Titus has Alarbus killed for the Andronici "*brethren* slain," noting that "religiously *they* ask a sacrifice," and Alarbus must die to "appease *their* groaning shadows that are gone." Upon the sacrifice, Lucius remarks, "Remaineth naught but to inter our *brethren*," and Titus makes his "latest farewell to *their* souls" (1.1.126, 127, 129, 149, 152) (emphasis added). If one pillar of Aristotelian rectificatory justice resides in the equalizing of injuries, one might reasonably ask whether Titus's sacrifice of Alarbus becomes questionable not because of its excess but rather because of its restraint, its refusal to demand even more. With twenty-one sons killed in battle and the whole array of captured enemies before him—not just Alarbus, but Tamora, Demetrius, Chiron, and Aaron—Titus calculates his loss in a context that might very well allow a space between gain and loss that admits the taking of multiple lives. [31] Yet here, Titus denies his right and eschews

[29] On the tensions inherent in this *unilateral* decision to *decline* power, see also Sid Ray, "'Rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy': The Politics of Consent in *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 49 (1998): 22–39, esp. 31–33.

[30] My reading of Titus as sympathetic and noble even in the sacrifice of Alarbus runs counter to most critiques of the play that agree, if with qualifications, with Tamora's valuation that the deed is simply "cruel irreligious piety" (1.1.133). On the speciousness of Tamora's overall argument, however, see Jane Hiles, "A Margin for Error: Rhetorical Context in *Titus Andronicus*," in "*Titus Andronicus*": *Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 233–47, esp. 233–38.

[31] See also Deborah Willis, "'The gnawing vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 53 (2002): 21–52, esp. 35. The play does not specify precisely how many

equity for a sacrifice of one. Such a reading of Titus's act as restrained, as a variation of mercy, makes Lavinia's unfortunate reference to her father while pleading with Tamora (Lavinia says, "O, let me teach thee for my father's sake, / That gave thee life when well he might have slain thee" [2.3.158–59]) more understandable and, indeed, reasonable: she assumes him to be merciful and the piety of gratitude ordering Rome's earlier interaction as still potentially redeemable.

While Titus's sense of equity and his gratitude to the state do not completely exonerate his moral failings, they do mitigate them, for he nobly—even if sometimes foolishly and myopically—seeks public order before self-gratification. Indeed, Titus is "Pius" because his civic selflessness, paradoxically, constitutes his identity. In killing Alarbus, as in killing Mutius and Lavinia, Titus evinces an often-overlooked selflessness. Although he remains personally involved in Alarbus's sacrifice, Titus identifies his dead sons by their civic roles—as "brethren" rather than "sons." The distinction reminds us that Titus functions here not simply as a father but rather in a doubly official capacity—as returning general and potential emperor-elect.[32] This scene occurs between the people's selection of Titus and his final refusal of power, a placement that seems designed to highlight Titus's civic role. His slaying of Mutius, likewise, occurs only after his son draws his sword in the streets of Rome and publicly threatens his father, an affront to civic order and the filial gratitude that supports it.[33] Even when Titus kills Lavinia, he recognizes the deed as an "outrage" (5.3.52) that parallels Lavinia's "*Stuprum*" (4.1.78) (the Latin means not simply "rape" but "outrage") and as needing "A reason mighty, strong, and effectual; / A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant / For me, most wretched, to perform the like" (5.3.43–45). Whatever the degree of his moral failings, Titus tends to respond to disruption rather than to cause it; he errs on the side of keeping communal order and remains noticeably less inclined toward the self-gratify-

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Andronici were killed by the Goths. However, no one countermands Titus's assumption of a correlation between the current war and his sons' deaths—not even Tamora, who builds her plea for Alarbus on the same predicate, namely, that her sons were merely "fight[ing] for king and commonweal" (1.1.117). A broadside ballad (ca. 1655–65) entitled "The Lamentable and Tragical History of *Titus Andronicus*" likewise picks up the same implication in its subtitle, "With the fall of his five and twenty Sons in the Wars of Goths" (reproduced in John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], as Figure 9).

[32] Rectificatory justice "can be manifested only by someone who is acting in a judicial or quasi-judicial capacity"; see J. O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 76.

[33] Here, I concur with the predicate behind Robert Miola's reading that "[b]ecause the Roman family appears as the basic unit of the city, Titus's attack on Mutius is an attack on Rome itself" (*Shakespeare's Rome*, 50). Mutius's standing in Titus's way, sword drawn and threat given, *before* Titus does anything to him, I suggest, threatens the city itself.

ing, community-fracturing excesses exhibited by his enemies.[34] Titus's piety, however imperfect, nonetheless nobly privileges the ethos of gratitude over unrestrained self-interest.

The exchanges that accompany Titus's refusal of the empery and his transfer of power to Saturninus reveal that gratitude functions—although in a markedly variable, uncertain way—as a type of currency in *Titus Andronicus*.[35] Bassianus, for example, attempts to forestall Titus's selection of Saturninus by playing to gratitude, claiming that "thanks to men / Of noble minds is honorable meed" (1.1.218–19). Although Titus chooses to reject Bassianus's claim, the fundamental premise that gratitude functions as mediating currency appears again just a moment later. The tribunes consent to Titus's impending choice "To gratify the good Andronicus / And gratulate his safe return to Rome" (ll. 223–24). The repetition of "gratify" and "gratulate" identifies Titus's political capital as originating in a mutually understood ethos of reciprocity. The converse, of course, occurs throughout Saturninus's rule, as equitable exchange dissolves into ingratitude. As a result, Titus will send his arrows into Rome, declaring himself "old Andronicus, / Shaken with sorrows in ungrateful Rome" (4.3.16–17), a sentiment Marcus echoes in "Tak[ing] wreak on Rome for this ingratitude" (l. 34). Likewise, when the First Goth bemoans Titus, "Whose high exploits and honorable deeds / *Ingrateful* Rome *requites* with foul contempt" (5.1.11–12) (emphasis added), he explicitly conflates unjust exchange (the requital of contempt for honor) with the abrogation of gratitude. If, as Aristotle had argued, "it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together" and that grace "promote[s] the requital of services," Rome disregards both the proportionate return found in justice in exchange and the gratitude needed for maintaining a priori terms for fair trade.

Saturninus's ascension to the throne brings the greatest test yet to Roman social cohesion. By dissolving the "unit . . . fixed by agreement" (to use Aristotle's rhetoric of material and social currency) in favor of dissimulation (*Ethics*, 121 [5.5]), the new emperor single-handedly resets the definition of the normative in Rome. Saturninus had used the rhetoric of gratitude when he requested that the people be "just and gracious" to his claim (1.1.63), but a later invocation

[34] Aristotelianism argues that dedication to the common good is fundamentally more aligned with justice than self-gratification. Aristotle "maintain[s] that if something is conducive to the common interest, it is also just, and vice versa"; see Thomas I. White, "Aristotle and *Utopia*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 29 (1976): 635–75, esp. 657.

[35] On gratitude as a "value which remains strong in all the Roman plays," see Thomas, 32. On the breakdown of gratitude as "integrating force" in *Titus*, see also Eugene M. Waith, "The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*," in Kolin, 99–113, esp. 106.

of gratitude suggests his faulty understanding of its importance. After receiving the crown, Saturninus directs his first words as emperor to Titus:

> Titus Andronicus, for thy favors done
> To us in our election this day,
> I give thee thanks in part of thy deserts,
> And will with deeds requite thy gentleness.
> (ll. 237–40)

Shakespeare has the emperor counterpoise "I give thee thanks" against "thy deserts." By doing so, Shakespeare underscores the limitations inherent in how the emperor perceives the deed of requital. In response to Titus's "favors done," Saturninus will offer thanks "in part" and then "deeds" that will "requite . . . gentleness." Rather than the natural outgrowth of gratitude, Saturninus's promised deeds become an *addition* to his verbal display. He seems to conceptualize thanks and deeds as distinct entities, a rhetorical move suggesting that gratitude functions for Saturninus only on the level of language. Although he acknowledges here the social function and centrality of gratitude, the new emperor's words reflect a rejection of the economy of gratitude, which will become brutally apparent in successive scenes.

At first, Saturninus seems to participate in the ethos of gratitude by making Lavinia the second half of his promised requital to Titus ("And for an onset, Titus, to advance / Thy name and honorable family, / Lavinia will I make my empress" [ll. 241–43]), staking the people's fidelity to him upon this display of gratitude:

> Thanks, noble Titus, father of my life.
> How proud I am of thee and of thy gifts
> Rome shall record, and when I do forget
> The least of these unspeakable deserts,
> Romans, forget your fealty to me.
> (ll. 256–60)

Yet when Titus relinquishes Tamora (and Saturninus appropriates Tamora for himself), he unravels the bonds created by exchange among the Romans. For at the very moment Titus formally declares Tamora to be Saturninus's charge ("Now, madam, are you prisoner to an emperor" [l. 261]), Saturninus voices interest in his new possession: "A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue / That I would choose, were I to choose anew" (ll. 264–65). This exchange of Lavinia for Tamora not only breaks faith with Titus—if faith there ever was—but also leads to a public, material eschewing of traditionally ordered exchange itself when Saturninus declares "Ransomless here we set our prisoners free" (l. 277). Here, Saturninus's caprice (eschewing gratitude for disproportionate

exchange), more than Titus's slaying of Alarbus (showing grace by disavowing full personal satisfaction), initiates chaos.

As the focus of Saturninus's whim, Tamora becomes emblematic of a new social order in which dissimulation mediates social commerce. Notably, the new empress immediately recognizes the importance of masking disproportionate exchange by a false show of equivalency. For while Tamora affects a disinterest that would have equity for all, maintain the social mean, and continue the commerce of gratitude, she employs the rhetoric of Rome's civic piety—specifically, the language of gracious equity—simply to ensure her own tenuous hold on power. Claiming she must "speak indifferently for all" (l. 433), Tamora thus postures neutrality but also signals her method for navigating the court, for it is by "speak[ing] indifferently" that Tamora survives: her apparent impartiality conceals and enacts the substitution of proportionate exchange for the disproportionate. Indeed, she explicitly articulates her strategy in these very terms, advising Saturninus to

> Dissemble all your griefs and discontents: . . .
> Lest, then, the people . . .
> Upon a just survey take Titus's part,
> And so supplant you for ingratitude.
> (ll. 446, 448–50)

Behind Tamora's rhetoric of moderation and impartial speech exists a systematic attempt to forestall and subvert a just appraisal via dissimulation. Eclipsed by the play's more graphic crimes, the emphasis here on dissembling in conjunction with ingratitude signals a fundamental shift to inequality and disproportionate return within Rome.

If, as Aristotle noted, ready-wit signals one's fundamental ethos, while dishonesty marks one as inequitable by nature, Shakespeare heightens the villainy of "high-witted Tamora" (4.4.35) by emphasizing—of all things—lying. Tamora's ready-wit for lying reveals her character as fundamentally (not simply strategically) dishonest, a trait that undermines the idea of her complicity in Lavinia's rape and mutilation as a revenge, enacting proportion in her own right. At the beginning of the scene, Tamora is preoccupied not with thoughts of revenge for Alarbus but with desire for Aaron, until he informs her of the impending assault. Tamora's role in the prearranged plot consequently seems less like revenge and more like an occasion to employ her ready-wit.[36] Tamora's elaborate fiction that Bassianus and Lavinia "have ticed me hither to this place" in order to leave her to a "miserable death" (2.3.92, 108) proves superfluous, a fabrication that aligns Tamora with Aristotle's blameworthy liar who deceives

[36] See also Willis, 39–40.

even "where nothing is at stake."[37] For neither expediency nor strategic calculation renders a fictitious excuse necessary. At the very least, the idea that Lavinia's rape and Bassianus's murder occur as revenge for Alarbus begs the question of causality. Reading revenge here requires one to believe that Aaron, Demetrius, and Chiron would have acted differently had Alarbus lived.[38] Moreover, Tamora complies with Lavinia's rape and also with Bassianus's murder, although he played no part in Alarbus's slaying. Tamora's temporary claim to sympathy in the Alarbus scene derives from her (convincing) adoption of the language of equity, yet that claim is undercut by her subsequent villainies and her dubious connection to any consistent ethos of equity. Tamora's unbounded power in Rome, it seems, frees her not to revenge a son she hardly mentions but to practice her deceptive, self-gratifying ways without restraint.

III. Redefining Moderation in Extremity: Titus, Marcus, and Consuming Sorrow

This relocation of moderation and extremity recontextualizes Titus in a "wilderness of tigers" (3.1.54), a new culture of extremes at once disorienting and devouring. Titus acclimates to his overwhelming sorrow and threatening environment by figuring both in terms of consumption. While Titus changes referents—at times, grief threatens to swallow him; at other times, he absorbs sorrow to the point of overflowing—his metaphors always center on consumption. Titus understands the extreme immoderation that surrounds him as consuming the innocent and recognizes his radical recontextualization as creating a dissolution of boundaries, between him and his grief and between him and the culture of extremes that caused it. Titus assumes that the world *must* consume something. He describes the earth as having a "dry appetite" (l. 14), pleads that his tears may "staunch" it (l. 14), begs the earth "refuse to drink my dear sons' blood" (l. 22), and describes Saturninus, Aaron, and the Goths as devourers: "How happy art thou then," he wryly declares to Lucius, "From these devourers to be banishèd!" (ll. 56–57). Fearlessly confronting his family's suffering, Titus responds to Marcus's warning "I bring consuming sorrow to thine age" (l. 61) with "Will it consume me? let me see it then" (l. 62). Unlike Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, who seeks oblivion, Titus adapts by immersing himself in his grief.

[37] Moreover, since "[t]he forest walks" have "many unfrequented plots . . . / fitted by kind for rape and villainy" and "[t]he woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull" (2.1.114–16, 128), the conspirators with their victims remain secure from intrusion.

[38] On Aaron's insatiable villainy, see his "confession" at 5.1.124–44. On Demetrius and Chiron's desire for "a thousand Roman dames" to rape and mutilate, see 4.2.41.

Through their shifting use of vehicle and tenor, Titus's metaphors of consumption metonymically enact the tumbling inversion of fixed point and context characteristic of Saturninus's Rome. Shakespeare counterbalances Titus's express desire to be (further) consumed by Marcus's news with imagery of being filled to capacity. Thus, Titus inverts the metaphor of consumption when he asks upon seeing his daughter:

> What fool hath added water to the sea
> Or brought a faggot to bright-burning Troy?
> My grief was at the height before thou cam'st
> And now like Nilus it disdaineth bounds.
> (ll. 68–71)

While here Titus's grief "like Nilus . . . disdaineth bounds," a moment later he will be "as one upon a rock" (l. 93) and will act as one

> Environed with a wilderness of sea,
> Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave,
> Expecting ever when some envious surge
> Will in his brinish bowels swallow him.
> (ll. 94–97)

Titus's grief, like Nilus's, absorbs to overflowing, yet Titus, isolated on a rock, confronts the raging sea *external* to him, the sea that threatens to take *him* into *it*. Throughout the third act, the rhetoric of excess as a flood continually changes so that, when comforting Lavinia, Titus imagines their cheeks as both flooded and flooding: with "miry slime left on them by the flood" yet also making "a brine pit with our bitter tears" of the fountain below (ll. 126, 129). Titus, engulfed by his family's grief, perceives his experience as a personal dissolution into sorrow and the surrounding context, a context where meaningful ethical referents have themselves dissolved.

As Titus merges with his grief, he acclimates wholly to his environment; from the outset, his reaction to the crimes against his family—for all its intensity—presents an almost organic sense of proportionality and an Aristotelian temperance of anger, preparing for his revenge to appear as a redefined moderation within extreme circumstances. Aristotle delineates two failings in respect to temper, two deviations from the mean: on one hand, an excessive passivity that never rises to anger, and on the other, a rash disposition to seek revenge. Aristotle dismisses the former as a culpable "unirascibility" and likens the latter to "hasty servants who run out before they have heard the whole of what one says and then muddle the order," concluding that a rash disposition "by reason of the warmth and hastiness of its nature . . . springs to take revenge" (*Ethics*, 42 [2.7], 173 [7.6]). By contrast, "the man who is angry at the right things and with

the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised" (*Ethics*, 96 [4.5]). While a "good-tempered man" is "thought to err rather in the direction of deficiency" and is "not revengeful, but rather tends to make allowances," making too many such allowances is also morally culpable. For "the deficiency, whether it is a sort of 'unirascibility' or whatever it is, is blamed" (*Ethics*, 97 [4.5]). Such people "are thought to be fools" or "thought not to feel things nor to be pained by them" (*Ethics*, 97 [4.5]). Moreover, since such a man "does not get angry, he is thought unlikely to defend himself," and he is inclined to being "slavish" (*Ethics*, 97 [4.5]). Thus, good temper neither hastens to revenge nor unthinkingly forbears. Indeed, Aristotle qualifies his earlier repudiation of revenge by appealing to circumstance and perception:

> The man who strays a little from the path, either towards the more or towards the less, is not blamed; since sometimes we praise those who exhibit the deficiency, and call them good-tempered, and sometimes we call angry people manly, as capable of ruling. How far, therefore, and how a man must stray before he becomes blameworthy, it is not easy to state in words; for the decision depends on the particular facts and on perception.
>
> (*Ethics*, 98 [4.5])

Since "it is not easy to define" this ethical mean or "at what point right action ceases and wrong begins" (*Ethics*, 98 [4.5]), Aristotle opens a space for expressing anger under particular circumstances, speculating "how far . . . and how a man must stray" before he is deemed immoderate.

Given Titus's emphasis on excess as a flood and his view of himself as a container that cannot contain, his deep sense of proportion is both remarkable and easy to overlook. Yet Titus neither lacks irascibility nor rushes to revenge. Given his circumstances, Titus falls within the Aristotelian mean, for he eschews a "slavish" passivity and stands in stark contrast to the hasty servants who rashly run off. Instead, Titus deliberately and unflinchingly confronts his family's pain, slowing the dramatic pace and signaling his temperate anger.[39] In fact,

[39] The degree of selfishness or selflessness exhibited by Titus here has been a point of contention among critics. On Titus as exhibiting, for example, "a fantasy of perfect visual understanding, a Lear-like scene of mutual narcissism," see Katherine A. Rowe, "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 45 (1994): 279–303, esp. 295. On Titus's interpretation of Lavinia as "both the occasion and the expression of his madness, *his* inner state," even while he "acknowledges the integrity and otherness of Lavinia's experience and intentions," see Douglas E. Green, "Interpreting 'her martyr'd signs': Gender and Tragedy in *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 40 (1989): 317–26, esp. 322, 324. Despite his notable capacity for both solipsism and misinterpretation, however, Titus nonetheless responds (given his circumstances) in a manner neither hurried nor laborious, neither excessively emotive nor dispassionate, thereby exhibiting an often-overlooked temperance of anger. For Titus as attentive, deliberative, and even "fixated on [Lavinia's] grief and physical suffering," see Willis, 43.

no movement toward revenge occurs until after his lengthy ruminations. By the same token, Titus clearly remains affected by his family's woes, proves himself (if proof was needed) as capable of defending himself, and thereby avoids Aristotle's unirascibility. Titus appears as "manly [and] capable of ruling." By markedly slowing the dramatic action in the third act as Titus anguishes over his family's trauma, Shakespeare uses Titus's effusions of flooding and consumptive imagery, paradoxically, to signal the Roman's containment, preparing us to encounter his subsequent revenge as a type of moderation fashioned to meet extreme circumstances.[40]

Within this Aristotelian context of anger, Titus and Marcus contrast rather sharply, with Marcus—contrary to most critical valuations of him—appearing to be further from the mean than the intensely distraught Titus.[41] At first glance, this judgment may seem counterintuitive. Marcus, after all, fashions himself as Titus's moderator. When, for example, Titus tells Lavinia that "with our sighs we'll breathe the welkin dim / And stain the sun with fog" (3.1.211–12), Marcus checks what he perceives as hyperbole, remonstrating, "O brother, speak with possibility, / And do not break into these deep extremes" (ll. 214–15). Portraying Titus's speech as doubly excessive (as "deep extremes") and unnatural (one that Titus must "break into"), Marcus invites his brother to infuse his speech with realism, entreating Titus to "let reason govern thy lament" (l. 218). After Titus receives the heads of his two sons, Marcus yet again poses as a moderating force, promising

> now no more will I control thy griefs:
> Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand
> Gnawing with thy teeth; and be this dismal sight
> The closing up of our most wretched eyes.
> (ll. 259–62)

Even when he invites rage, Marcus remains a foil to Titus, who falls silent: "Now is a time to storm; why art thou still?" (l. 263). When Marcus regarded outbursts as inappropriate, Titus rages; when he deemed it "time to storm,"

[40] Urmson observes that "the doctrine of the mean does not require the doctrine of moderation" ("Doctrine of the Mean," 162).

[41] Francesca T. Royster's description of Marcus as a moderating force may be considered representative: "Moderation and restraint were to Elizabethans the quintessential Roman virtues. . . . nobility was assumed to express itself in 'continence' or self-restraint. When Titus is running to rhetorical extremes . . . his brother gives him good Roman advice. . . . Significantly, Titus refuses to restrain himself or observe moderation. . . . In a culture that values moderation, it is appropriately lack of moderation which provokes disasters" ("White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 51 [2000]: 432–55, esp. 440). See also Maurice Charney, *Titus Andronicus* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 46–61.

Titus subsides. Marcus understands Titus's subsequent laughter as impropriety, asking, "Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour" (l. 265). This contrast between the brothers' variance functions as the one constant throughout the scene's many reversals, with Marcus always supposing himself the moderating influence.

But if, as I have suggested, Titus acts in accordance with the mean in respect to anger (even in his apparent extremes), then Marcus becomes something altogether different. And the moderation offered by Marcus is no moderation at all but rather the unirascibility noted by Aristotle. For we may think of Titus and Marcus as polarities framing an indistinct mean. Marcus tries to dissuade Titus from emotional extremes, but Titus explicitly challenges his ostensibly moderate responses to the aggressions against them. Titus depicts his extremes as the compassionate, reasonable response to his suffering child. He reasons as he rages:

> When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o'erflow?
> If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad,
> Threatening the welkin with his big-swollen face?
> And wilt thou have a reason for this coil?
> I am the sea; hark how her sighs doth blow!
> She is the weeping welkin, I the earth:
> Then must my sea be movèd with her sighs,
> Then must my earth with her continual tears
> Become a deluge, overflowed and drowned,
> For why my bowels cannot hide her woes,
> But like a drunkard must I vomit them.
> Then give me leave; for losers will have leave
> To ease their stomachs with their bitter tongues.
> (ll. 221–33) [42]

Returning Marcus's appeal to "reason" back onto itself, Titus points to Lavinia as "reason for this coil," as she "becomes an icon that justifies and excuses vengeance, a reminder of the Andronici's just title to their acts of retribution." [43] Moreover, Titus claims that Lavinia makes his extremes not only reasonable but necessary: "Then *must* my sea be movèd with her sighs, / Then *must* my earth . . . / Become a deluge, overflowed and drowned." Merging with his own grief, Titus has merged with his daughter's pain—her sighs, her tears, her woes. As Titus both consumes and is consumed by Lavinia's pain, he calls attention to

[42] On these lines as "elaborate and laboured comparisons . . . confused, ineffective, inconsistent, and end[ing] in . . . really unpardonable lines," see H. Bellyse Baildon, "How *Titus Andronicus* Looks Forward to Shakespeare's Later Plays," in Kolin, 65–73, esp. 65.

[43] Rowe, 296.

his suffering daughter and suggests that Marcus's appeal to reason is a tepid response to present suffering. Marcus's initial response to Lavinia was to desire the identities of her attacker so that he might "rail at him to ease my mind" (2.4.35). Titus, in contrast, renders a more appropriately intense response and moves toward something more reciprocal than a mere verbal thrashing conjoined with personal relief. Under the circumstances, Titus's response seems both proportionate and reasonable, especially compared to that of Marcus. Shakespeare does not offset a reasoning brother with a frenzied one. Rather, he gives us a father both reasoning and frenzied, an uncle rational yet soft-tempered.

Shakespeare has Marcus step aside to let his brother "storm" only to have a clear-eyed, calm Titus then adopt the language of equilibrium, proportion, and moderation even in his resolve to revenge. Immediately after receiving the heads of his two sons, Titus depicts revenge as a reinstitution of equilibrium, a direct response to the complete collapse of proportionate exchange in Rome.[44] His language distinctly invokes proportionality:

> For these two heads do seem to speak to me,
> And threat me I shall never come to bliss
> Till all these mischiefs be returned again
> Even in their throats that hath committed them.
> (3.1.271–74)

While the heads "seem to speak," the move to return mischiefs "even in their throats" represents, as Gillian Murray Kendall has shown, a shift "back into the literal: we find later that it is literally in their throats that Titus finds his revenge—by slitting them."[45] This shift into literalness occurs because proportionate exchange requires a material, equivalent return. Visually enacting the emphasis on proportionality inherent in this language of reciprocity, Titus invites his family to adopt a physical stance mirroring his vow to revenge each injustice: "You heavy people circle me about, / That I may turn me to each one of you / And swear unto my soul to right your wrongs" (ll. 276–78). Titus's rhetoric of righting the wrongs of his family channels his vengeful energies—just as he had directed his previous martial exploits—into the service not simply of his own interests but also that of others'.

[44] Rowe observes, "Though Saturninus had not welcomed his gifts in the opening scene, Titus imagines his dismemberment as a second gift-exchange. But, as becomes clear from its literal deconstruction, the language of lending and giving lacks political force in Rome. . . . [T]he tableau [of the severed heads] dramatizes not only the actual severance of political contract but the fact that Titus's 'victorious hand' had never effected political contract in the first place" (293).

[45] Gillian Murray Kendall, "'Lend Me Thy Hand': Metaphor and Mayhem in *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 40 (1989): 299–316, esp. 302.

Marcus's unirascibility in the context of such extreme brutality reveals a misguided understanding of balance that makes Titus keep his brother at a remove from his plans: "'Tis sure enough, an you knew how. . . . / You are a young huntsman, Marcus; let alone" (4.1.95, 101). Marcus misreads this statement as acquiescence to fate, forgetting that Titus earlier vowed vengeance, and thinks Titus "so just that he will not revenge" (l. 128). Yet Titus may remain alert to Marcus's limitations as a revenger. For although Marcus vows to "prosecute by good advice / Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths, / And see their blood or die with this reproach" (ll. 92–94), Shakespeare has subtly challenged Marcus's ability to muster the anger that it takes to do so. Upon finding Lavinia wandering in the woods, Marcus had imagined producing only a verbal assault ("O that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast, / That I might rail at him to ease my mind!" [2.4.34–35]). Even here, Marcus's first response to knowing "the beast[s]" is to exclaim that this knowledge is enough "To stir a mutiny in the mildest thoughts / And arm the minds of infants to exclaims" (4.1.85–86). The chasm is wide and deep, however, between a mutiny of thoughts and exclamations and grinding a mother's sons into pudding. When Titus tells Marcus, the "young huntsman" to "let alone," he repudiates his brother's direct help but not, however, the hunt itself.

IV. Reestablishing Proportionate Return in Rome: Titus's Revenge as Moderation-in-Excess

Although Titus speaks of his hunt as righting others' wrongs, his revenge takes shape within this altered ethical economy as a type of justice in exchange rather than as rectificatory justice—not as the equalization of injuries mediated through law but as the extralegal enactment of equivalent return. Rendering like for gruesome like, Titus now not only acts outside any official capacity but also seeks (can *only* seek) equivalent return. Aristotle notes that justice in exchange, or reciprocity, "fits neither distributive nor rectificatory justice—yet people *want* even the justice of Rhadamanthus to mean this" (*Ethics*, 117 [5.5]). "In many cases," he continues, "reciprocity and rectificatory justice are not in accord"; for example, when "an official has inflicted a wound, he should not be wounded in return" (*Ethics*, 117 [5.5]). Rectificatory justice, implemented by someone in a judicial capacity, might have applied when Titus was the returning conqueror, but it clearly does not when he seeks to injure the royal family in return for his family's suffering. Moreover, while rectificatory justice functions on a mathematical proportion of *equal* return, justice in exchange relies on *equivalent* return. Since precisely equal return is quite impossible here,[46] Titus

[46] In addition to the other immutable crimes against the Andronici, Lavinia's wound is "unrecuring" (3.1.90): that is, it is both incurable and unique.

seeks equivalency, his revenge consequently adopting an aesthetic parallelism with the crimes against his family.

It may, indeed, seem radical to think that Titus's revenge, rather than functioning as mere lunacy wrought by extreme duress, is structured instead by the rational principles of Aristotelian exchange theory. But the correlation in both ancient and early modern discourse between justice in exchange and retribution—as well as Titus's own obvious investment in social contracts—prompts such a reading. As John Kerrigan notes, Aristotle recognized the affinities between justice in exchange and vengeance: "The author of the *Metaphysics* was impressed by the teleology of revenge plots, by their eye-for-eye attentiveness to lucid causal relations, while the social analyst of the *Nicomachean Ethics* found in their mutual violence an instructive obverse to that principle of benign reciprocity which he recommends in his writings about friendship."[47] Not merely a classical preoccupation, the notion that "commutative justice also comprises and transcends the principle of revenge or simple reciprocity" appears in early modern representations of vengeance as well.[48] Since early modern revenge narratives "transmitted *structurally* notions of justice that are to be found in the 'theoretical' material of the time"—even in instances lacking "conscious collusion between the literary and the moral"[49]—we have good cause, indeed, for thinking of justice in exchange as shaping the various forms of equivalent trade throughout the play. Moreover, since "revenge tragedy . . . deals in a conventionalized way with basic issues which everyday experience, socio-legal practice, and ethical speculation have made relevant,"[50] it makes sense that *Titus Andronicus*, as a play that "repeatedly integrates contractual language with brutalized bodies,"[51] would apply the prevailing constructs of Aristotelian exchange theory to its most violent acts. If Titus's brutal revenge—structured by a rational principle of social contract and functioning, thereby, as an altered form of justice in exchange—strikes us as intensely dissonant, the strangeness of the notion derives from the very distance between ourselves and a culture deeply rooted in

[47] Kerrigan, 5. However, we should recall that Aristotelian reciprocity, or justice in exchange, is not merely benign in itself. As noted earlier, Aristotle argues, "For it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together. Men seek to return either evil for evil—and if they cannot do so, think their position mere slavery—or good for good—and if they cannot do so there is no exchange, but it is by exchange that they hold together" (118 [5.5]). Built into the original Aristotelian formulation, retribution can (and does) function *as* a type of justice in exchange.

[48] Langer, 317.

[49] Langer, 339–40.

[50] Ronald Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28 (1975): 38–58, esp. 47.

[51] Thomas P. Anderson, "'What is Written Shall Be Executed': 'Nude Contracts' and 'Lively Warrants' in *Titus Andronicus*," *Criticism* 45 (2003): 301–21, esp. 310.

Aristotelian ethical epistemology. The rather surprising substructure of moderation beneath the grotesque appearance of Titus's revenge, however, emerges throughout each stage of the play's denouement as Titus systematically repays, in kind, the pain inflicted upon the Andronici.

Notably, Titus exhibits his sense of equitability by creating proportionate exchange, an equivalent return, even in his method of vengeance; since the crimes against his family take shape as and during a hunt, he likewise figures his revenge as hunting. This is a remarkably clever turn, for as A. C. Hamilton has noted, the hunting of Lavinia itself occurs as an inversion. "In the second act," Hamilton explains, "the formal hunt of the panther and the deer which celebrates the marriages is inverted: the black panther is Aaron who hunts the deer, Lavinia, and the marriage celebration ends with the death of the bridegroom and the rape and savage mutilation of the bride."[52] When Titus tells Marcus to "let alone," he employs the hunting trope to emphasize the importance of isolating Demetrius and Chiron:

> But if you hunt these bear whelps, then beware:
> The dam will wake, an if she wind ye once.
> She's with the lion deeply still in league,
> And lulls him whilst she playeth on her back,
> And when he sleeps will she do what she list.
> (4.1.96–100)

As Titus plans to isolate "these bear whelps" from their "dam," he inverts the mechanics of the play's most heinous crimes in order to create equivalency where he cannot obtain precise equality. Aaron had advised Tamora's sons to separate Lavinia from the other women in the woods, to "Single you thither then this dainty doe" (2.1.117), something Demetrius echoes to Chiron later: "We hunt not, we, with horse nor hound, / But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground" (2.2.25–26). Tamora, as yet unaware of the plot, also foreshadows "a double hunt" (2.3.19), and Marcus relates his tragic discovery by explaining that he "found her straying in the park, / Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer / That hath received some unrecuring wound" (3.1.88–90).[53] Creating an aesthetic proportion between *scelus* (or great crime) and retribution by transposing the roles of hunter and hunted in his revenge, Titus reveals again his characteristic sense of equity while also seeking to return his city to a space ordered by fair exchange.[54]

[52] Hamilton (see n. 1 above), 207.

[53] Lavinia herself, with an unknowingly dark irony, describes Tamora and Aaron in similar language, for they are "singled forth to try experiments. / Jove shield your husband from his hounds today!" (2.3.69–70).

[54] See also Willis, 48–49.

Not only does Titus's revenge invert the strategic mechanism of dividing and conquering figured in the *scelus*, but it also reacts to the Goth family crimes by precisely inverting them. Where Demetrius and Chiron single out Lavinia from other Roman women and divide her (in multiple ways), Titus divides the two sons from their mother and, in a single paste, returns them to her. Titus, having the heads of his two sons, grinds the heads of Tamora's sons for her food. Titus confronts Demetrius and Chiron:

> 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,
> And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
> Like to the earth, swallow her own increase.
> (5.2.186–91)

By "rear[ing]" a "coffin" and entombing the sons in their "unhallowed dam," Titus creates a sharp counterpoint to the interment of his own sons in the "sacred receptacle" (1.1.95) of his "father's reverend tomb" (2.4.296). Imagining his revenge as a pious rite, Titus inters Demetrius and Chiron in a manner befitting their lives, something Lucius also does to the bodies of Tamora and Aaron at the play's end. Moreover, where the tomb will close Titus's sons off to him forever, Tamora will forever have her sons too much with her.[55] Titus had planned to return "these mischiefs . . . even in their throats that hath committed them," and he ensures that she swallows their remains. In this grotesque reshaping of Titus's piety, Shakespeare creates a type of proportion, an enactment of equivalent exchange,[56] that retains the sense of equilibrium figured in the earlier Roman civic contract. In an ungrateful city, Titus reinstitutes proportionate return through revenge.

As Titus inverts the crimes against his family, the punishment of Aaron likewise takes on a sense of equivalent exchange, revealing the thoroughness of the Andronici's translated ethic of moderation and proportionate return. Aaron represents the most extreme inversion of traditional piety, but he also functions structurally to foreshadow (fittingly, in reverse) the justice about to be enacted by Titus. Before Titus's revenge, Publius commands of Tamora's sons,

[55] Kahn (see n. 2 above) adumbrates this affiliation by equating Lavinia's womb with the tomb and Tamora's stomach with Lavinia's womb (52, 70).

[56] Titus further emphasizes the use of like against like in his words to the three Goths. To Demetrius, he says, "And when thou finds't a man that's like thyself, / Good Murder, stab him; he's a murderer"; to Chiron, he urges, "find another that is like to thee, / Good Rapine, stab him; he's a ravisher"; and to Tamora, he says, "Well shalt thou know her by thine own proportion" (5.2.99–100, 102–3, 106).

"Stop close their mouths, let them not speak a word" (5.2.164), a sentiment which Titus reiterates not once but twice ("Sirs, stop their mouths, let them not speak to me" [l. 167] and "What would you say if I should let you speak? / Villains, for shame you could not beg for grace" [ll. 178–79]). This silencing of the victim mimics Tamora's "I will not hear her speak, away with her!" (2.3.137) and forces the sons into the mute pleaders they themselves had made of Lavinia. But it also recalls the scene immediately prior where Lucius invites exposition from Aaron. "Say on, and if it please me which thou speak'st, / Thy child shall live," says Lucius (5.1.59–60), and he anticipates, again in relief, Tamora's demise. Whereas Tamora eats to the point of surfeit and Demetrius and Chiron speak no further words, Aaron, in his punishment, will consume nothing and yet speak fully. Shakespeare describes Aaron, like Tamora, as a "ravenous tiger" (5.3.5), but he also depicts the Moor as a producer of evil, in addition to being a devourer of good. Thus, "this execrable wretch" and "breeder of these dire events" (ll. 177, 178) who loosed misery on the Andronici must himself waste in an earthy pit: "Set him breast-deep in earth, and famish him. / There let him stand and rave and cry for food" (ll. 179–80). Aaron, who operates largely uninhibited after Tamora's incorporation into Rome, must be "fastened in the earth" (l. 183). In contrast to Tamora, Aaron must consume nothing and instead be swallowed himself. At once ravenous and execrable, Aaron will starve even as he feeds the earth.[57]

As the social order of Rome disintegrates with the dissolution of the equivalent exchange to be found in gratitude, the proportionate return figured in Titus's revenge, while gruesomely enacted, serves as a type of moderation in extreme circumstances and restores graciousness and equity to Rome.[58] The restoration of order, imbued with the language of proportionality and the mean, concludes with the contrast between Aaron's extreme impiety and Lucius's moderate—if to some problematic—valuation of events. Lucius's installation replaces the ingratitude that marred the play with a new antithesis, namely, "Rome's gracious governor" (l. 146).[59] With the restoration of graciousness—a condition where, to recall Aristotle, people repay "good for good . . . evil for evil"—Marcus invokes the rhetoric of proportion rendering "tear for tear, and

[57] See also Emily C. Bartels, "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *SQ* 41 (1990): 433–54, esp. 447.

[58] Harry Keyishian observes that "When Rome's system of mutually beneficial, reciprocal relations was disrupted, Titus restored it by imposing a symmetry of harm for harm"; see *The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 48.

[59] Despite skepticism about the Andronici's claim to piety, Miola views Lucius as "a man capable of wise leadership" (*Shakespeare's Rome*, 69).

loving kiss for kiss" and even shapes the image of infinite grief into something mathematically reasonable, a ratio meet and proper to his debt: "O, were the sum of these that I should pay / Countless and infinite, yet would I pay them" (ll. 158–59). The return of an equitable society makes Marcus's speech appropriate to the circumstance. Lucius, proving himself the "gracious governor," honors the dead emperor's status, orders him interred "in his father's grave" by "loving friends," but commands Tamora's body to be thrown "forth to beasts and birds to prey" (ll. 191–92, 198). Recreating consumption of like by like, the new emperor enacts a just exchange by returning the brute-like to the brutes: "her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity!" (ll. 199–200). Interestingly, Lucius leaves this "ravenous tiger" (l. 195) to the beasts and birds of prey but only imagines the birds—not the beasts—as showing pity, underscoring that even the beastly consume their own in a type of fitting justice. With the return of a state characterized by gratitude, the traditional piety that dispatches Romans to family tombs and foreign barbarians to the wilds and the disinterested earth also returns.[60]

Titus Andronicus prompts us to contemplate the moral ambiguities and the culpabilities distributed between Roman and Goth that permeate its central narrative. But the play's Aristotelian framework also invites us to consider ethical value as not only variable but also discernible, if only faintly so, through its persistent appeal to equity. Shakespeare's play creates an enduring sense that equity does, in fact, exist—even if its precise location may be contested. For even during the cataclysmic shifts that unsettle Rome, gratitude consistently functions, whether positively in its application or negatively in its neglect, as the final standard for action, something which Romans and Goths alike acknowledge. The unethical extremes of Saturninus's Rome radically recontextualize Titus and create a milieu that requires a corrective response proportionate to the surrounding immoderation. Within its context and given its preoccupation with equity, Titus's revenge appears grotesque yet within the range of measured behavior. Indeed, Titus's just response to Rome's excesses reveals that the ethical person must simultaneously identify and resist extremes in order to find the mean, even if following such behavior might resonate as extreme under ordinary circumstances. The mean—as a site at once absolute and intuited, threatened yet defined by extremity—continually requires identification and revision. It requires, in short, a perpetual process of fixing moderation.

[60] See also Paster, 84.