“THE RARER ACTION”: REVENGE AND PITY IN TITUS

ANDRONICUS AND THE TEMPEST

A Thesis
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California State University, Chico

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in
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by

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Rachel Lilia Arteaga

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APPROVED BY THE DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE, INTERNATIONAL, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES:

Susan E. Place, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Robert Davidson, Ph.D.
Graduate Coordinator

Robert O’Brien, Ph.D., Chair

Harriet Spiegel, Ph.D.
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DEDICATION

To my family.
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ABSTRACT

“THE RARER ACTION”: REVENGE AND PITY IN TITUS ANDRONICUS AND THE TEMPEST

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In Williams Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus and The Tempest, pity is necessary to end the violence of revenge. The characters in Titus Andronicus fail to express pity and thus the play ends tragically and violently. In The Tempest, however, pity is expressed at the end of the play. The expression of pity by the hero Prospero ends the cycle of revenge and promotes a happy marriage between the two opposing families. Both plays conclude that not only is pity necessary to end the cycle of revenge, but that it is an essential expression of one’s humanity.

By looking at the changes Shakespeare makes to the elements of the revenge play, including the ghost of revenge, ritual sacrifice, and fate, one can come to a clearer understanding of pity’s role in Titus Andronicus and The Tempest. Furthermore, these changes can inform a modern reader of Renaissance England’s attitudes on revenge and pity. These attitudes are linked to the religious beliefs of the time and the conflicts
between Protestantism and Catholicism. The complex religious attitudes displayed in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Tempest* can further inform the reader on the changing religious dynamics of the English Renaissance.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Hamlet remains Shakespeare’s most well known and beloved revenge play; however, Titus Andronicus and The Tempest also fall into the category. An early effort, Titus is often criticized as a clumsy first attempt at the genre. This is especially true when compared to the great Hamlet. The Tempest is not considered a revenge play. The collectors of the First Folio categorized the play as a comedy, yet after the late 1800s scholars began to mark it as a late romance. While I do not disagree with either designation, The Tempest does have much in common with a revenge play, especially with Titus. Prospero seeks to right a past wrong by punishing his enemies. I will argue further that The Tempest fits almost every criteria for a revenge play. These criteria include an avenging hero, a ghost of revenge, an initial atrocity, ritualized action, and a final atrocity. The Tempest contains every element except the final atrocity which Prospero replaces with an act of mercy.

Besides sharing the theme of revenge, both Hamlet and The Tempest emphasize pity’s role in revenge. Although Hamlet is a tragedy and The Tempest a romance, both plays conclude that pity must be expressed if revenge and violence are to end. Hamlet is a tragedy because no pity is ever expressed; The Tempest is a romance because pity is expressed, albeit at the end of the play. In other words, the expression or failure to express pity determines the outcome of each play. Shakespeare removes the
emphasis on fate usually found in a revenge tragedy and instead leaves the decision to express pity up to the characters. That Shakespeare dealt with the themes of pity and revenge in an early play and a late play shows that he considered the ideas important enough to examine throughout his career.

By analyzing *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* together, one comes to a more complete view of Shakespeare’s ideas on revenge and pity. More important, the plays raise and help answer valuable questions. These questions contribute to the overall discussion of both plays and the English Renaissance in general. This study attempts to answer the following questions: What do both plays suggest to the audience with regards to pity? By offering pity as an antidote to revenge, how does Shakespeare change the genre of the revenge play? What do the plays suggest about the religious attitudes, including ritual, in Renaissance England? These questions arise from Shakespeare’s treatment of pity in both plays. The following chapters will focus on one or more of these questions. The first chapter introduces the ghost of revenge and the way in which Shakespeare manipulated the character in both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. Shakespeare’s work presents a complicated view of the religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. Before focusing on the religious conflicts in general, the second chapter relates the ritual aspects of both plays. Chapter 3 highlights these conflicts and suggests that religion, and specifically ritual and pity, concerned Shakespeare a great deal in both plays. The fourth and final chapter looks at who specifically must express pity and what pity tells the reader about humanity. I will attempt to offer further discussion of each question and a deeper understanding Shakespeare’s revenge plays and how pity relates to them as a whole.
In order to better understand pity and revenge in both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, a general knowledge of Renaissance England is useful. If one was wronged in Renaissance England vengeance was expected. However, vengeance and retribution, even for personal wrongs, were not to be enacted by private individuals, but were reserved for God and the king (Broude 50). Yet as the many revenge plays of the time illustrate, exceptions existed, especially “when wrongs were perceived disinterestedly as offences against God and commonweal, and when the response was motivated by piety and the love of justice” (Broude 57). Through *Hamlet*, Shakespeare challenges the assumption that vengeance should be “motivated by piety and the love of justice,” for such motivations drive the tragic action and insane violence of the play. If piety and a love of justice should not lead one to seek vengeance, then what legitimate reason could? Furthermore, no God or king acts on Titus’s behalf; the gods are absent, and the king corrupt. Titus is left alone to seek vengeance for himself. Once he starts, he finds no recourse for stopping the violence.

People in Renaissance England had an interest in revenge and retribution, yet pity and mercy were of little concern when it came to those who had done wrong. Though “sincere repentance and faith in God’s mercy might save a criminal’s soul from damnation . . . it could not save his neck from a hangman’s rope” (Broude 50). Again, in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare portrays a situation which counters the common assumptions of the day. Repentance and human mercy could save one’s neck from the hangman’s rope. As Prospero’s actions clearly show, one needs only to forgive the offense and offer mercy as a substitute to death. Prospero still punishes his enemies for their crimes but
does so in a less violent fashion and in a way which promotes true repentance while still restoring order to society.

Religious beliefs in Renaissance England complicated each individual’s view of revenge and mercy. Christian beliefs, both officially and privately, had been in a state of flux for well over seventy years by the time *Hamlet* was written. In England alone the official religion fluctuated between Catholicism and Protestantism depending on who was on the throne. By the early 1600s, when *The Tempest* was written, Protestantism was firmly established as the official religion of England. However, the past century of conflict was not just forgotten but continued to cause both official and personal conflicts in English society.

Playwrights were forbidden to openly portray religious subjects, yet some did attempt to address religion in a more overt fashion. Shakespeare’s religious beliefs cannot be known, nor are they readily apparent from reading his texts. At best what can be concluded about Shakespeare’s beliefs is that like his plays they are complicated and multidimensional. Shakespeare’s personal beliefs, though interesting and controversial, will not be examined in this study.¹ However, like other playwrights of the time, religious undertones can be found in his work. *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* are no exception. In particular, *Hamlet* addresses beliefs concerning ritual and piety, from which one can draw significant conclusions concerning religious beliefs of the time. As a tragedy, *Hamlet* is especially suited to deal with deep emotional turmoil. Huston Diehl writes,

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¹ For further information of Shakespeare’s religious affiliations and beliefs see Greenblatt’s *Will in the World*. 
tragedy is closely aligned with the central, defining rituals of its culture. Because so many of those rituals in early modern English culture were religious ones that were in the process of being radically transformed, tragedy offers Shakespeare a medium through which he can explore that transformation. (88)

I would extend Diehl’s statement to the theater in general, for *The Tempest*, though tragic in part and less focused on ritual, does offer religious commentary. *The Tempest* continues the discussion begun in *Hamlet* about revenge and pity and transforms it for the audience into a more positive statement on the effects of pity.

Magic and religion were combined in interesting ways in Renaissance England. Prospero’s magic would have been both common place and fantastical to audiences. Common practices of the time include divination, healing, blessings, finding lost goods, and conversing with fairies (Clark 102-103). Prospero’s less common practices would be his control of the natural elements and ability to control spirits. Prospero’s magic is also connected to the religious beliefs of early modern England. Both Protestant and Catholic officials saw

The real significance of witchcraft, as of all misfortunes, was not the immediate, this-worldly harm that it brought but the way the victim was given an opportunity for introspection and spiritual improvement. Misfortunes were a test or a punishment, sent by God, and the proper response to them was to reflect patiently on faith and sin, move on to repentance and then seek divine, clerical and eventually other approved forms of health. (Clark 116-117)

Prospero’s actions both affirm and deny the above beliefs. His use of magic does cause “introspection and spiritual improvement” for his enemies and himself, for Alonso repents and Prospero forgives. The test Prospero puts his enemies through also punishes his enemies, causing them to remember their sins. However, in the end, Prospero does not call on God but turns within himself to express mercy.
Revenge tragedies like Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* were extremely popular in Renaissance England. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s first contribution to the genre and, in part, mocks earlier English revenge-tragedies. Revenge-tragedies incorporated many themes of interest to audiences including excessive violence, revenge, and gods who took a special interest in revealing and punishing secret crimes (Broude 53). Playwrights, including Shakespeare, drew inspiration for their tragedies from the Roman playwright Seneca. Though many of the old Roman stories and themes resurfaced, English playwrights gave a particular Renaissance flair to their reworking of the genre. For example, *Hamlet* is set in Ancient Rome yet uses the anachronistic phrase “Popish” to describe the character Lucius. Shakespeare drew from Roman sources but wanted his play to address his Renaissance audience’s interests and concerns.

*Thyestes*, a Senecan tragedy, concerns the myth of the house of Atreus and was one of the sources used by Renaissance playwrights. The House of Atreus is traced back to Tantalus, who boiled his son Pelops and served him to the gods. For this he was punished eternally by being tempted with food and drink, yet without ever being able to partake in these temptations. The curse of the House of Atreus passes to Atreus and Thyestes, Pelops’s sons. After killing their half brother, Thyestes and Atreus arrive in Mycenae where they fight over the crown. The action of *Thyestes* concerns Thyestes’ rape/seduction of Aerope, Atreus’s wife. The curse continues when Atrues kills Thyestes’ sons and serves them to him at dinner. As each new generation is born into the House of

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2 For a thorough examination of Shakespeare’s use of Senecan tragedies see Miola.
Atreus the curse continues. Atreus’s sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, bring the curse to the Trojan War. Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, finally breaks the curse when he goes to trial for killing his mother Clytemnestra. Athena judges in Orestes’s favor and the curse is broken. The mythological precedent set by Tantalus and Atreus inspires Shakespeare to use a cannibalistic feast in *Hamlet*. The cycle of violence in the long line of the House of Atreus is reflected in miniature in *Hamlet*.

Senecan revenge tragedies take a specific form (Miola, *Reading* 166-117). An initial atrocity must be committed to create the avenger/hero. This first atrocity often includes a ghost or the character Revenge asking for vengeance. *Thyestes* actually has both the Ghost of Tantalus and a Fury who spurs on Tantalus’s revenge. After the avenger/hero’s character has been significantly developed, through the deliberation and planning of the act of revenge, a final atrocity takes place executed by the avenger himself, and sometimes in ritualistic fashion. The avenger/hero often appears mad or genuinely becomes insane. Shakespeare uses all of these elements to his full advantage in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*.

*Hamlet* most closely resembles the Senecan revenge tragedy with the exception of the ghost.³ At the end of *Hamlet*, for example, Titus plans a banquet for his enemy Tamora by ritualistically executing her sons. He then feeds them to their mother. *The Tempest* follows a similar pattern; however, Prospero does not commit the final atrocity. Instead he replaces the atrocity with an act of mercy.

³ Interestingly, Shakespeare does use the ghost in Hamlet, making the ghost of Hamlet’s father a key element of the play.
Not many studies link *Hamlet Andronicus* and *The Tempest*. An early revenge tragedy, *Hamlet* does not seem to have much in common with *The Tempest*, a late comedy/romance. Each play individually attracts various types of criticism and theory. As a Roman play, a wide variety of work on Rome exists on *Hamlet*. Robert S. Miola offers several excellent studies that I have referred to in various sections of this paper. An early attempt at the genre of revenge, *Hamlet* also provokes comparison to the later *Hamlet*.

*The Tempest* is of special interest to postcolonialists because of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban and Caliban’s role on the island. Though enlightening in other circumstances, the aforementioned works do not especially help the present study. Furthermore, I have not run across works which focus specifically on pity and revenge in relation to these plays. Instead, I have drawn information from a variety of sources using each as I see fit. My hope is to fill in the gap in the literature which presently exists by focusing on the relation between *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* and on how each play, individually and in combination, can inform its audience on revenge and pity.

To help guide the reader and clarify difficult sections of each play, I use a variety of approaches. As I look at different areas of each play, I am careful to read the text closely in order to discern the various layers of meaning in the text. Though at times this approach may complicate a reading of the text, in the end it gives a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of each work. I do not feel that complications in reading are necessarily a bad thing, but rather give the reader options when interpreting a text.

Likewise, I do not subscribe to one theoretical approach for my reading of each play. I believe each text suggests how it would like to be read each time. For
example, many who read *The Tempest* see a place for a postcolonial reading of the play; I am drawn to a more historical reading. Neither approach is wrong or more informative than the other. However, I will go so far as to say that I agree with Stephen Greenblatt when he states “It is not necessary to choose between an account of Shakespeare as the scion of a particular culture and an account of him as a universal genius who created works that continually renew themselves across national and generational boundaries” (2). When I find it helpful to read Shakespeare in his historical context I do. At the same time, much of what I find about the two plays does perhaps fall into the category of “universal truths.”

I find Shakespeare’s use of pity and revenge in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* central to each work and to Shakespearean scholarship in general. My hope is that this study can not only add new scholarship on *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* but will also lead to further discussion of pity and revenge in all of Shakespeare’s work and the English revenge tragedy in general.
CHAPTER II

THE GHOST OF REVENGE

The ghost of revenge’s entrance signals to the audience that they are about to view a revenge play. Such is the case with Seneca’s *Thyestes*. In *Titus*, the mention of a ghost occurs in the opening scene of the play, but not before the play begins, as is usually the case. The audience is indirectly introduced to the ghost in *The Tempest* through the storm caused by Ariel. Raising the storm is Ariel’s first act in the play which helps Prospero carry out his revenge. By including the ghost of revenge towards the beginning of both *Titus* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare communicates to the audience the genre of the play. However swiftly Shakespeare introduces the ghost of revenge, he just as quickly introduces an alternative form of the ghost. This alternative form is still a ghost of revenge but with significant changes in character. In *Titus*, the ghost of revenge is at first suspiciously absent. Later in the play, the ghost is “played” by Tamora, so she can trick Titus. In both cases, where there should be a real ghost, there is none. Though *The Tempest* has a ghost, Shakespeare changes Ariel from the typical ghost of revenge. As a magical spirit of the air, Ariel is more like a fairy, yet Ariel functions as a ghost of revenge: his duty is to help Prospero bring his revenge to fruition. Though the audience may be confused that a ghost of revenge should appear in a romance, Shakespeare clearly hints at Ariel’s role throughout the play. In another twist on the character of revenge, Ariel does not choose to help Prospero, but is forced to. The changes Shakespeare makes
to the ghost of revenge in both *Titus* and *The Tempest* address the nature of revenge and ultimately pity. Later chapters will discuss these changes further. For now the discussion will focus on how the ghost of revenge reveals to the audience changes to the typical revenge play and how these changes signal other changes to the genre.

*Titus* begins where any revenge tragedy should, with a ghost’s, or in this case ghosts’, return from the afterlife. Titus’s sons have fallen in battle and he fears their ghosts will return should he not follow the Roman custom of sacrificing “the proudest prisoner” (1.1.96), Alarbus, the son of his enemy, Tamora. The sacrifice of Alarbus must be performed “so the shadows be not unappeased, / Nor we [the Andronici] disturbed with prodigies on earth” (1.1.100-101). Though the audience is initially presented with the first aspect of the revenge tragedy, the appearance of the ghost of revenge, no ghosts ever appear. The importance of this scene cannot be overstated. Here Shakespeare first alters a major component of the Senecan revenge tragedy.

Titus’s fear that the ghosts of his sons may be “un appeased” and thus might bring “prodigies,” or evil occurrences, on his house is rooted in the mythology of the Furies. In *Thyestes*, the task of the ghost is to “let loose the Furies” on the “impious house” of Tantalus. The Furies, deities from the underworld who act on behalf of the dead to carry out vengeance, not only know the future of the House of Atreus, but are responsible for seeing it come to fruition. The House of Atreus has a long association with the Furies. The grandson of Atreus, Orestes, is pursued by the Furies for killing his mother Clytemnestra. However, in a judgment by Athena, the curse of the house of Atreus ends and the Furies become the Eumenides- the “kindly ones” (“Eumenides”).
The Fury in *Thyestes* is not kindly for it calls a reluctant Tantulus from the underworld and demands that he help seek revenge.

The Furies and ghosts not only help carry out revenge, but remind those on earth of the underworld’s and upper world’s close link. What one does on earth has a bearing on the world of the dead, thus crimes which incite vengeance necessarily require an otherworldly presence to help set the balance right. With his worry about the ghosts of his sons, Titus implies that he expects divine intervention. The audience would also expect a Fury-like character to initiate Titus’s revenge. The ghosts of his sons would serve this purpose well, for they might arise once wrongs are committed against their family and demand justice. Shakespeare, however, implies another worry altogether, and one only the audience will be aware of: a ghost should appear sometime in the play. The fact that one doesn’t appear changes the moral implications of revenge: Titus and the other characters in the play need no fury to incite their revenge, they eagerly accomplish the task themselves. The consequences of the Andronici’s revenge and the lack of divine intervention hints at a greater concern in the play: if no supernatural beings take an interest in the Andronici’s revenge, then who or what can stop the cycle of revenge and achieve justice? The characters in *Titus* are left to grapple with the implications of revenge on their own. Any consequences will result solely from their own actions. In other words, Titus, Tamora, and the other characters choose the end of the play; nothing has been preordained by higher forces.

Though Titus draws from Senecan revenge tragedies, as well as mythological sources, the characters and main action of the play are Shakespeare’s invention. The audience would know what to expect of the play in a general sense but would not know
the specifics of the plot. The unknown plot and removal of the ghost of revenge from *Titus* lessens the sense of fate in the play. In *Thyestes*, for example, the audience, whether Roman or Renaissance would be familiar with the story of the House of Atreus and could imagine no other outcome for the end of the play. The House of Atreus was doomed no matter the spin Seneca put on the story. The outcome of *Titus*, however, could not be known to an audience first viewing the play. Of course this is always the case when seeing a new play. However, since Shakespeare was working with the well known motifs of the revenge tragedy, the audience expected a level of familiarity with the play. Changes to familiar components of the revenge play take on great significance to the audience. What Shakespeare changes in *Titus* is the involvement of the fates. Nothing in *Titus* is fated, therefore, the conclusion of the play lies solely in the characters’ choices. For a formulaic type play like the revenge tragedy, the removal of the fates speaks to the play’s main conflict. The choice of pity or revenge determines how each character will end at the close of the play.

In another play on a Senecan revenge tragedy motif, Revenge does make a sort of appearance at the end of the play, giving the audience a further hint to deciphering the moral implications of Titus’s revenge. Tamora and her two sons disguise themselves as Revenge, Rape, and Murder, respectively, and appear to Titus in order to trick him and further carry out their revenge. Shakespeare pokes fun at the genre, essentially giving the audience a checklist of qualities which must be present in a revenge play. Explaining her disguise Tamora says,

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Thus, in this strange and sad habiliment,
I will encounter with Andronicus
And say I am Revenge, sent from below
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To join with him and right his heinous wrongs.
Knock at his study, where they say he keeps
To ruminate strange plots of dire revenge.
Tell him Revenge is come to join with him
And work confusion on his enemies. (5.2.1-8)

These disguises seem a foolish and clumsy attempt at trickery. Titus is not fooled. Later, he even pretends to be mad to conform to the role of avenger more precisely. However, the audience must assume that Shakespeare’s use of Tamora as Revenge is not just for a strange dark comic effect. Shakespeare deliberately leaves out the supernatural and wants Tamora and her sons to perform a poor parody of the spirit of revenge found in other plays. Leaving out any hint of higher powers leaves an important void in the world of the play; the gods have abandoned Rome, leaving humans free will and also a hand in their own destruction. With all the piety of Titus and the other characters one would think that at least one god or spirit would take an interest in the situation. Shakespeare has something else entirely in mind. Jonathan Bate writes, “By representing Revenge as a character’s device rather than a ‘reality’ outside the action, as it is in Kyd’s frame, [Shakespeare] suggests that retribution is a matter of human, not divine will” (22).

Certainly Bate makes an excellent point, for if the gods, unwilling or unable to interfere once revenge is enacted, then they will not, or cannot be expected to step in to express or help the characters express any form of pity. If no gods exist, then humans must express pity and mercy. Titus and Tamora have complete free will, yet they choose to continue the cycle of revenge which has decimated each of their families.

A useful bridge between the ghosts in Titus and Ariel in The Tempest is to look at the ghost in Hamlet. The ghost of Hamlet’s father most closely resembles the Senecan type ghost. As in Titus, the appearance of a ghost “bodes some strange eruption
to [the] state” (1.1.68), meaning something must be wrong or the ghost would not appear. Furthermore, the ghost in *Hamlet* is closely linked to fate which adds a sense of fate throughout the play. Horatio thinks that the ghost might be “privy to the country’s fate” (1.1.114) and thus may be able to reveal something advantageous. Hamlet believes the appearance of his father’s ghost must be a communication of his own fate. As the ghost beckons to him his “fate cries out” (1.4.58). In other words, his father’s ghost is telling him what he has been fated to do; the ghost, a supernatural force, is giving him directions and has determined the path of his future. If Hamlet feels that avenging his father is fated, then not much will tempt him to stray from his course.

Throughout the play Hamlet fights against his fate even as he wishes to follow the course of his revenge. As is the case with the tragic hero, what has been fated is not desired. As the player king states, “Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown; / Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own” (3.2.193-195). The revenge Hamlet desires throughout the play does not reflect the actual outcome of events, the “carnal, bloody and unnatural acts” (5.2.325), the accidental judgments, casual slaughters” (5.2.326), nor the “deaths put on by cunning and forced cause; / And, in this upshot, purposes mistook / Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads” (5.2.327-329). Fate in the revenge tragedy is never good. In both *Titus* and *The Tempest* fate has been removed, leaving the characters a chance at a happy ending.

In *Titus* and *The Tempest*, the ghosts are not linked to fate in the same way as the ghost in *Hamlet*. For both Titus and Prospero there is always another force to consider, pity. For Hamlet pity is never an option. The ghost pleads with Hamlet when he sees him for a second time in his mother’s chamber. The ghost asks Hamlet to speak to
his mother, “to step between her and her fighting soul” (3.4.103). Gertrude is blameless for her actions, according to the ghost, for “conceit in weakest bodies strongest works” (3.4.104). Unable to understand the exchange between Hamlet and the ghost, nor the implications of her actions, Gertrude is “amaz[ed]” (3.4.102) at what she sees before her. Because of her inability to understand, as well as her “weak[ness],” the ghost wants Hamlet to pity his mother and reserve revenge solely for Claudius who is acutely aware of his guilt. The Hamlet’s reply to the ghost is not promising:

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects. Then what I have to do
Will want true color – tears perchance for blood. (3.4.118-121)

To show any pity would change the nature of revenge; to show pity would not be revenge. Even if a mad Hamlet imagines the ghost at this point (his mother does not see the ghost), he still acknowledges that mercy is not an option if his full revenge is to be carried out.

Shakespeare also chooses to have the ghost in *Hamlet* be the typical revenge ghost for a simple reason: it is scarier, and Shakespeare wants the audience scared. In *Titus*, when no ghosts show up the audience is supposed to notice something wrong in the world of the play. Though bloody and violent, *Titus* is never eerie or scary in the same way as *Hamlet*. Shakespeare makes fun of the genre of revenge by having Tamora dress up as a ghost. No supernatural forces work in *Titus* and so nothing can serve to give the audience a good fright. The only frightening thing in *Titus* is human behavior. *The Tempest* does not have a typical ghost of revenge because having one would go against the tone of the play. The witch Sycorax, frightening when alive, has long since been dead
and does not enter the play as a real character. The ghost of Hamlet’s father, however, is so frightening it turns Marcellus and Barnardo “almost to jelly with the act of fear” (1.2.205). To scare the audience, Shakespeare is careful to connect the ghost to the folklore of the time. For example, the ghost won’t speak unless spoken to. Also, the cock’s crow warns the ghost to return to the underworld. The ghost himself claims his torment to be so horrible it would “freeze” (1.5.16) the blood if properly described. The effect of the ghost is horrific not only for Hamlet and the other characters, but for the audience as well. Shakespeare wants everyone concerned to contemplate Hamlet’s desire for vengeance.

As in Titus, the ghost of revenge figures prominently in The Tempest. As a spirit of the air, Ariel serves a function similar to a ghost of revenge. He not only is supernatural, but uses his supernatural powers to help the avenging hero. If previously unsure of Ariel’s role in the play, his speech during the banquet scene would call to the audience’s attention many elements of the ghost’s duties. Ariel’s main responsibility as the ghost of revenge is to remind Prospero’s enemies of the wrongs they have committed. Reminding Prospero’s enemies of their wrongs, Ariel helps bring him one step closer to his goal. Ariel tells Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio of his purpose in appearing: “But remember, / For that’s my business to you, that you three / From Milan did supplant good Prospero” (3.3.68-70). For Prospero’s enemies this is the first mention of his name, and the effect is sudden and stunning. Ariel plays the part of a Harpy so effectively he provokes “ecstasy” (3.3.108) or madness in Prospero’s enemies. Suddenly all that has occurred on the island takes on a darker meaning. Another element commonly found in a revenge play, madness, is usually reserved for the avenger. However, since Prospero has
control over his enemies through the use of his magic, he can cause madness and not fall victim to it himself.

As a Harpy, Ariel further connects the ghost of revenge to the Furies. Both mythological punishers, Shakespeare’s Harpy deals with revenge and fate as do the Furies. Entering from above the mythological disappearing banquet, Ariel calls Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio “Three men of sin, whom destiny” has “belch[ed] up” from the sea (3.3.53, 56). Ariel also names himself a “minister of fate” (3.3.61). Though not responsible for fate in general, the Furies were responsible for seeing proper vengeance carried out as deemed by fate. So in this sense, the Furies indeed can be viewed as “ministers of fate.” “Ministers” can be read in both its noun and verb forms, for the Furies hold a special position, but also help minister, or administer punishment. “Destiny” and “fate” suggest an overarching plan to the banquet, but not in the sense that Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio think. To Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, who believe the Harpy to be real, this message of a fateful punishment for their sins would not only inspire fear and guilt, but would cause them to acknowledge the truth of their sins. If they could somehow justify their actions before, because they have been told by a supernatural “minister of fate” that they were wrong, they must admit and face their wrongs. Therefore, the Harpy scene forces Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio to think about their past actions to Prospero, potentially bringing them one step closer to repentance.

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4 The mythological Harpy banquet refers to the Thracian king Phineus, who was punished by the gods for mistreating his sons. Blinded by Zeus, Phineus was sent to an island where a banquet of food was set before him. Each time Phineus tried to eat the Harpies would snatch away his food. Finally Phineus was rescued by the Argonauts (“Phineus”).
Ariel’s most significant role in *The Tempest* is to help Prospero carry out his revenge. However, in a reversal of the revenge play, Ariel does not choose to help Prospero; rather Prospero uses his magical powers to force Ariel to help him. Ariel has been indentured by Prospero because Prospero freed Ariel from imprisonment in a tree. Usually in a revenge play the ghost’s presence signifies the interest otherworldly forces have in the fate of the avenging hero. Ariel and the other spirits/supernatural creatures do not take an interest in Prospero’s fate, for they do not choose to help him. According to Caliban, the other spirits “all do hate [Prospero] / As rootedly as [he]” (3.2.86-90). That the supernatural creatures do not choose to help Prospero significantly lessens their role in the play as helpers to the avenger. Like Tamora, Ariel “plays” the ghost of revenge; his role is a show of trickery. The effect of Ariel’s performance returns the focus of revenge to Prospero. He controls Ariel and the other spirits and they serve his interests. Ultimately, Prospero’s choice to express revenge or pity is his alone to make; it is not dictated by fate or the gods. This free will in deciding to use pity makes the expression of pity more profoundly felt. Ariel can only help Prospero up to a certain point. After freeing Ariel, Prospero himself must decide how he should deal with his enemies.

The changes Shakespeare makes to the ghost of revenge alter both the outcome and moral implications of revenge. These changes also lead the audience to suspect and look for further changes to the genre of the revenge play. The mythological link to the Furies suggests the intervention of fate. However, the mention of fate emphasizes that in both *Titus* and *The Tempest*, the outcome of revenge is *not* fated as it would be in a mythological text. Divine intervention cannot change the outcome of revenge; rather, the outcome of revenge depends on the avenger’s actions.
CHAPTER III

THE RITUALIZATION OF REVENGE

Ritual observance drives much of the action in Titus. The Andronici fear that if they fail to perform the ritual sacrifice of Alarbus, then Titus’s sons, who have been slain in battle, will return to destroy the rest of the family. However, proper ritual action does not prevent the destruction of the Andronici; rather, Alarbus’s sacrifice initiates the violence in the play. Duties to cultural customs also prevent both Titus and Tamora from halting their revenge. Thus piety, in both the religious sense and with regards to duty, conflicts directly with the expression of pity which would allow all violence to end.

Prospero plans the rituals in The Tempest to awe the others on the island. The banquet scene instills fear in his enemies and brings Prospero one step closer to revenge. Performed for Miranda and Ferdinand as a happy interlude to the main action in the play, the wedding masque, the one positive ritual in both plays, is significantly interrupted by Caliban’s plot for revenge. Mirroring the main plot of revenge and usurpation, Caliban’s plot illustrates how revenge could potentially ruin the happy ending of marriage promised by a romance.

Before discussing Titus in depth, it may be useful to first look at the parts of Thyestes which could have led Shakespeare to the particular moral dilemma of piety versus pity which is so central to Titus. When the Fury calls the Ghost of Tantalus from the underworld, the Fury cries “On with your task, abominable ghost: / Let loose the
Furies on your impious house” (1.23-26). Tantalus’s house is impious because of Tantalus’s past actions, and will also become impious again through Atreus’s ritualistic slaughter of Thyestes’ sons. Though the ghost of Tantalus does not know what will happen to Thyestes’ sons, he reveals his fears in a warning to Atreus and Thyestes. Tantalus exclaims: “My sons I warn you! Do not soil your hands / With sinful slaughter, keep your alters clean / Of blood aspersed in impious sacrifice” (1.120-122). E. F. Watling conveniently translates the Latin to read “impious sacrifice,” and though “impious” is not a direct translation, the main idea holds; a sacrifice performed in an incorrect religious context will result in ruin. Tantalus’s warning to his sons should be kept in mind when reading Titus’s sacrifice of the Tamora’s son.

Described as a “Roman rite” (1.1.143), the sacrifice of Alarbus is the focus of the moral tension in the play. As mentioned earlier, this act constitutes the first atrocity of the Senecan revenge cycle. Miola states “Seneca taught Renaissance writers including Shakespeare how to make scelus the central principle of tragic action and design, how to focus on the crime, the perpetrators, the victims, and on the moral framework violated” (Miola, Classical Tragedy 116). Scelus translates as crime, evil deed, sin (“scelus nti”). The “moral framework violated” in this scene needs to be looked at closely, for it will complicate but also clarify what Shakespeare presents in the play. The “moral framework violated”, – the conflict between piety (ritual observance) and pity (principle religious belief) set up during the sacrifice of Alarbus – instigates every violent act in the play. As

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5 In Latin the line reads, “Perge, detestabilis / umbra, et penates impios furiis age” (1.23-24).
6 The Latin reads, “Moneo, ne sacra manus / Uiolate caede nuefe furiali malo / Aspergite aras. Stabo et arcebo scelus” (1.93-95).
the violent acts echo throughout the play, it becomes clear that in every case piety prevails over pity. Without pity, the cycle of violence cannot stop and excessive slaughter ensues.

The scene of the sacrifice of Alarbus deftly incorporates piety or duty to the customs of Rome with piety of a religious nature, drawing on the two types of piety which bring renown to Titus and the Andronici. In observance of his duty to Rome as well as to his religion, Titus encounters the overriding conflict of the play. Tamora clearly articulates the Andronici’s conflict when she pleads for her captive son. Tamora plaintively asks Titus, “Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods? / Draw near them then in being merciful. / Sweet mercy is nobility’s true badge” (1.1. 116-118). Tamora tries to appeal to Titus by arguing that the expression of mercy will bring him closer to the gods than the performance of a religious ritual. To be merciful is godlike and morally correct. Titus does not believe that mercy will benefit his family. When he denies Tamora’s plea for mercy in order to uphold a supposedly important observance of religious duty, Tamora cries “O cruel irreligious piety” (1.1.130). Tamora’s cry is pure Seneca. Tantalus’s warning to his sons – “My sons I warn you! Do not soil your hands / With sinful slaughter, keep your alters clean / Of blood aspersed in impious sacrifice” – is not only echoed in Tamora’s plea, but gives Shakespeare’s version of Senecan revenge tragedy true depth and resonance. Though Titus may seem like a blood bath of severed limbs and nasty cannibalism, these actions have a purpose other than to delight the often bloodthirsty Renaissance theatergoers. Through the action of Titus, Shakespeare suggests not only that too much piety and not enough pity is irreligious and an originator of
violence, but that for proper societal and religious order one must find a balance between the two notions. Piety must be pity, and pity must be piety.

Tamora uses the oxymoron of “cruel irreligious piety” (1.1.130) to describe the scene of the sacrifice. This oxymoron forms the crux of the play: are the outward rites and rituals associated with the practice of one’s culture or religion more important than the central tenets of a religion or culture? In Tamora’s view, the Andronici observe the outward rites and duties of their religion and cultural traditions, meaning they are pious, yet they forget the central belief of many religions – pity and mercy even for one’s enemies. Therefore, on some basic level, Titus is irreligious; he is not “near the nature of the gods;” rather, he is ungodly.

For Titus, piety is an essential expression of being Roman. Titus has been “surnamed Pius” by the Roman consuls and slays his son Mutius as part of his loyalty to Rome’s new emperor, Saturninus. When Titus refuses to bury Mutius in the Andronici’s tomb, Titus’s brother Marcus argues for Mutius’s proper burial by reminding Titus of his “impiety” (1.1.352). Marcus has to remind Titus of his larger role in Roman culture. Marcus tells Titus, “Thou art a Roman; be not barbarous” (1.1.375). Titus thinks he is showing his duty to Rome by refusing to bury his son in the family tomb, but Marcus reminds Titus that being “Roman” entails more than duty and loyalty to the present emperor. Romans must first and foremost bear themselves in a civilized manner, holding themselves to a higher standard than other cultures. This higher standard includes proper burial of one’s family members, something Titus greatly concerns himself with at the beginning of the play. Titus listens to Marcus because he wants to be a good Roman and exhibit proper Roman mores.
When viewed in its Roman context, revenge becomes another expression of Roman piety. Titus, “surnamed Pius / For many good and great deserts to Rome” (1.1.23-4), views his duty to Rome as coming before his love for his family. Titus is so dutiful he would rather slay his son Mutius than take back his word to Saturninus. Besides defining piety in a religious sense, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines piety as “faithfulness to the duties naturally owed to parents and relatives, superiors, etc.” (“piety” 843). It is in this sense of piety that Titus reacts here, complicating the definition of piety and Titus’s actions. As Titus suffers injustices by those in power, he turns to the Roman tradition of revenge to save his family from further wrongs. The constant allusions to classical Greek and other mythological and historic sources places revenge firmly in the framework of how ancient cultures responded to wrongs committed against their family. Tamora’s son Demetrius advises her:

> Then, madam, stand resolved; but hope withal  
> The selfsame gods that armed the Queen of Troy  
> With opportunity of sharp revenge  
> Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent  
> May favor Tamora, the Queen of Goths –  
> When Goths were Goths and Tamora was queen –  
> To quit her bloody wrongs upon her foes. (1.1.135-141)

“When Goths were Goths and Tamora was queen” illustrates the importance of Tamora’s sense of duty to her people to carry out her revenge. The distinction between the Gothic people and their Roman conquerors spurs on Tamora’s revenge. Just as Hecuba, the Queen of Troy, avenges her son’s death for personal reasons, she also seeks revenge as part of the larger circumstances she has been placed in; she has been deprived of her throne and sold into slavery because her people have been conquered. Likewise, Tamora avenges her son *and* the nation of the Goths against the conquering Roman, Titus.
Tamora acts as a symbol for her people just as Titus symbolizes Rome. Though Tamora becomes empress of Rome, she does so in order to have greater power to destroy her enemies, mainly Titus and the Andronici.

The comparison of Titus’s daughter, Lavinia, to Philomel of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* can also be viewed as setting up a precedent which establishes the custom of revenge for the characters. Lavinia is compared to Philomel at least three times in the play. The first comparison is by Aaron as part of his revenge plot against Bassianus and Titus’s sons. When Marcus first sees Lavinia after her brutal rape, he also evokes a comparison of the two stories. However, Lavinia’s own recognition of the connection between the two stories in front of her family brings to light the role played by Tamora’s family in Lavinia’s rape and mutilation. This role helps instigate the cruel revenge Titus carries out on Tamora and her sons – Tamora’s cannibalism during Titus’s banquet. For like Lavinia, Philomel has her revenge when her sister serves up a cannibalistic banquet to Philomel’s rapist, Tereus, her brother in law. Though Philomel’s story establishes a precedent for revenge, the characters do not stop to think of the consequences of which the mythic precedents warn them. Revenge is a duty and right/rite one must perform to protect oneself from further injustices; once initiated, however, the cycle of revenge, ingrained in the characters as a duty to their people and family, cannot be stopped unless a counter force is applied. This force is pity.

The pious Titus chooses to enact his revenge in a manner well established in the ancient world. Not only does *Titus* draw on the well known story of Philomel, Shakespeare would have been aware of the ritualistic aspects of such a feast. *Thyestes*
includes a cannibalistic feast preceded by a highly ritualized murder. Atreus kills

Thyestes’ sons in an act of revenge:

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. (684-690)

Though not directly parallel (Seneca’s ritualized revenge is much more descriptive),
Titus’s murder of Lavinia’s rapists takes on a similar ritualization. Titus’s “act of infamy”
also becomes “a proper ritual.” After binding and gagging Tamora’s sons, Chiron and
Demetrius, Titus explains:

Villains, for shame. You could not beg for grace.
Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you.
This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
While that Lavinia ‘tween her stumps doth hold
The basin that receives your guilty blood. (5.2.178-182)

Chiron and Demetrius become martyrs because Titus sacrifices them in a religious
manner. The blood of Lavinia’s rapists collects in a basin as would sacrificial blood.
Later, Titus’s “banquet serves to render violence structured and ritualistic instead of
arbitrary and chaotic” (Bate 23). Even at his most gory and brutal, Titus does not waver
from his performance of rituals in a pious manner.

Though ritualized, the sacrifices both Atreus and Titus perform are false
rituals, for they have no true religious precedent or meaning. The sacrifice of Alarbus, no
matter how brutal and barbarous it may seem, has religious precedent, for Titus follows
Roman custom. The ritualized murder of Chiron and Demetrius mocks a real sacrifice.
Because they raped and disfigured Lavinia, treating her like an animal and acting like
animals themselves, Titus sacrifices Tamora’s sons in a similar fashion. Chiron and
Demetrius’s throats are slit like an animal sacrifice. In such a sacrifice, blood would be
drained into a basin or let run over a sacrificial alter. Lavinia collects Chiron and
Demetrius’s blood in a basin to use later in the ritual feast. Furthermore, Chiron and
Demetrius’s blood is impure, unlike a sacrificial animal. Their “guilty” blood,
contaminated by their actions, pollutes the sacrifice. Adding to the mock ritual, Titus
“martyr[s]” Tamora’s sons. However, Chiron and Demetrius cannot be true martyrs for
they do not choose to sacrifice themselves for their family’s cause. Rather, Chiron and
Demetrius are martyrs in the sense that the pain and suffering inflicted on them by Titus
is in return for his martyrdom. Both parties, like the original Greek, *martur*, meaning
witness, inflict pain on each other and witness each other’s pain. Likewise the audience
“witnesses” the martyrdom of Alarbus and Chiron and Demetrius. The sacrifice of
Alarbus required his dismemberment and then for his body to be burned. This action
takes place off stage; however, Titus slits Chiron and Demetrius’ throats on stage so the
audience can witness their sacrifice. As audience members view the sacrifice, they
become part of the ritual. A tragic circle of martyrdom and pain cycles throughout the
play, ending only when all parties are dead and the play has ended.

The banquet scene in *The Tempest* recalls the ritual banquet in *Thyestes* and
*Titus*, for it also has a mythological element. In *Titus* and *Thyestes*, the ritual banquets
help the avengers carry out the punishment on their enemies. Similarly, the banquet scene
in *The Tempest* allows Prospero to punish his enemies and communicate to them his part
in their suffering. In mythology, the Harpy banquet can be traced to the myth of King
Phineus of Thrace. Several versions of the myth exist. In most versions, Phineus falsely
accuses his sons of murder. However, in all versions of the story, Zeus punishes Phineus for his wrongdoing by blinding him and exiling him to an island. Once on the island, a magical banquet appears from which Phineus tries to eat. Harpies snatch the food from him before he can ever take a bite. Eventually Jason and the Argonauts rescue Phineus in exchange for important information pertaining to their voyage. Several obvious connections exist between the story of Phineus and *The Tempest*. Like Phineus, Prospero suffers exile on an island due to a bad choice. Both men eventually leave the island when another ship arrives to help. These connections aside, the important link between the two stories is the magical banquet used to punish wrongdoers. The banquet used to punish Phineus sets a precedent for the Harpy banquet in *The Tempest*, linking the two banquets to a powerful punisher. Zeus punished Phineus, and Prospero, who acts as an all seeing godlike being, punishes and controls his enemies through the use of the banquet.

Prospero’s banquet begins with Ariel’s summoning of dancing spirits who deliver before Prospero’s enemies a delightful banquet. The music and dancing spirits the banquet produces in its guilty observers recall a pagan rite, as does the ecstasy of the observers once the banquet vanishes. The party believes the banquet to be set by magical being in good faith for their refreshment after their journey. The banquet is like a holiday meal put before them as a good gesture by the spirits of the island. However, just before the party begins to eat, Ariel appears as a Harpy, and the banquet disappears. As noted above, Ariel’s portrayal of the Harpy parallels that of the ghost of revenge, for they have similar functions. Ariel delivers for Prospero the punishment of his enemies in a ritualistic fashion well known from mythology. Once they realize who lies behind the
fearful banquet, Prospero’s enemies transform into a state of “ecstasy” (4.1.108), for they are so fearful and guilty they go mad.

Just following the banquet scene is the only positive ritual in either play – the wedding masque. Though the masque does not substitute for the actual wedding of Ferdinand and Miranda, it does portray the goals of their eventual union. The masque serves as a sort of pre-wedding reminder for the couple, in which the spirits enact the ritualistic aspects of the wedding. Iris explains her presence to the couple: “A contract of true love to celebrate, / And some donation freely to estate / On the blest lovers” (4.1.84-86). Iris further reminds the lovers to not break their “vows”; “no bed-right shall be paid” (4.1.96) until after the actual wedding ceremony. Iris walks the couple through each ritual aspect of their wedding. First the “contract” needs to be signed and the “donation” or dowry delivered. Both parties agree to the marriage and so a contract has already been made. The dowry the couple will receive is the restoration of their families. Ferdinand, who believes his father to be lost, has his father returned to him. Miranda is restored to her rightful place in society. After the “contract,” the couple may consummate their marriage, which they now have the “right” to do. However, they must also consummate their marriage as part of the marriage ritual; consummation is a “rite” in itself. Without consummation, the marriage proves invalid and the contract between the families is broken. The imagery of spring and of the harvest symbolizes the future fertility and offspring of the couple; the goddesses give their blessing so that Miranda and Ferdinand

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7 For a thorough study of the masque during this period see Ravelhofer’s The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume, and Music.
“may prosperous be, / And honored in their issue” (4.1.104-105). Once restored to their proper place in society future generations will benefit from Prospero’s actions.

Though Prospero wants his daughter to be happily married, he has another plan for the couple: their marriage will end the rift between the two families, for marriage unites two families into one. Therefore revenge becomes less of an option. The masque progresses well until Prospero is suddenly in a “passion” (4.1.143); he has remembered Caliban’s revenge and usurpation plot. The wedding masque is halted by a revenge plot symbolizing the postponement of the actual wedding. The interruption of the masque due to the desire for revenge reminds the audience yet again of revenge’s destructive powers. Revenge has the power to destroy happiness, love, and harmony between families. That the subplot of Caliban’s revenge mirrors the main plot is no coincidence. Though his actions do not actually have any bearing on the main action of the play – Caliban’s plot is easily thwarted by Prospero’s magic – Caliban’s plot not only reminds the audience of revenge’s destructive powers but prepares them for Prospero’s next move – forgiveness.

Ritual plays an important role in both Titus and The Tempest. In both plays ritual is closely bound with the expression of pity. In Titus, over-attention to rituals leads to the destruction of the family. In The Tempest, the positive ritual of marriage is thwarted by revenge. However, Miranda and Ferdinand’s marriage can proceed due to Prospero’s use of pity. As will be explained in the next section, the rituals in both plays lead to a discussion of the religion of early modern England.
Early modern England was in transitional phase with an “intense and sustained struggle . . . to redefine the central values of society”; these values included “religious doctrine and practice” (Greenblatt 95-96). Titus and The Tempest reflect the changing values of society in subtle and profound ways. Therefore, a helpful question to ask is: What does each play suggest about religion in the English Renaissance? The excessive ritual in Titus, previously discussed, offers a great deal for analysis. The Tempest, however, needs deeper probing to sort out any suggestions it may offer on religion. For further insight on The Tempest it is useful to turn to Stephen Greenblatt’s ideas on theater and the ritual of exorcism. Primarily theatrical, the rituals in The Tempest exist as both reality and illusion to the characters in the play. They depend entirely on Prospero’s magic. When Prospero relinquishes his magic, Shakespeare seems to suggest that theatrical religious practices need not be associated with the Christian tenet of mercy. What then do theater, magic, and Prospero’s voluntary relinquishing of his magic tell the audience about Elizabethan religious beliefs?

The question of religion surfaces in the characters of Aaron and Lucius who hold opposing views of the gods. Arguably the most evil character in Titus, Aaron is an atheist. Lucius is the most pious character and truly believes in his faith. When first brought to the Gothic camp, Lucius quickly wants to hang Aaron and his baby. Aaron’s
desire to save his baby and Lucius’s desire to have the baby killed, along with their conflicting views on religion, sets up an important debate in the play. Furthermore, Lucius’s decision at this point in the play speaks to Rome’s future, for Lucius soon becomes emperor. Lucius agrees to spare the baby only when Aaron promises to reveal important information. Though not consumed by the desire for revenge, Lucius’s act of mercy (if it can even be termed as such) results only from self gain. Lucius does not wish to spare any suffering besides his own. Even for the most faithful character in the play mercy has no effect.

Though he “believes no god” (5.1.71), Aaron takes Lucius’s piety as a guarantee that he will spare the child. Though Aaron may mock Lucius’s faith, he also believes it to be so sound he willingly risks his own child’s life on Lucius’s belief. Aaron explains to Lucius:

I know thou art religious
And hast a thing within thee called conscience,
With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies
Which I have seen thee careful to observe,
Therefore I urge thy oath. (5.1.74-78)

The direct opposite of Aaron, Lucius takes his religious duties seriously, and “careful[ly]” observes proper custom. However, the audience should take a deeper look at Lucius’s character. Lucius took a major part in the sacrifice of Alarbus. Like Titus, in his strict observance of religious ritual, Lucius is unlike his father in that he acts calmly and rationally when faced with his family’s enemies. Furthermore, he is never really forced to make decisions between piety and pity because exile has forced him outside the action of the play. However, Lucius hardly passes the pity test the other characters likewise fail. As the most faithful and properly observant character in the play, one would think that
Lucius’s attitude towards pity would be more favorable than the other characters’. His “conscious,” which Aaron appeals to, should at least allow Lucius to determine that mercy is the correct moral choice. Aaron implies that faithfulness to his religion, in combination with his conscious, could allow no other option for Lucius with concern to the baby. Lucius does not spare Aaron or Tamora from death, yet he does spare a baby who cannot harm him. He does this not because it is the right moral choice, but because Aaron will give him valuable information. If even Lucius cannot express pity properly, one must conclude that Shakespeare seeks to make a statement about piety, pity, and their roles in religion.

The conflict between piety and pity has immense significance with concern to the religious upheaval of Shakespeare’s England. Aaron’s anachronistic phrase of “twenty popish tricks” refers to the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism. To an Elizabethan audience, “popish” would have aroused an intense and complicated set of emotions. Born into the first generation of Englishmen who could continuously call themselves Protestant, Shakespeare’s audience nevertheless would have harbored mixed feelings about the fairly recent changes to their religious lives (Diehl 86). Though the official religion of England at the time was Anglicanism, and most of the audience’s leanings would have been towards that religion, there would have been former Catholics, perhaps recusants, in the audience, maybe even including Shakespeare himself.8 Because

8For a further connection between Shakespeare, Catholicism, and Titus Andronicus, see Lukas Erne’s ““Popish Tricks” and ‘a Ruinous Monastery’: Titus Andronicus and the Question of Shakespeare’s Catholicism.” Erne investigate[s] the evidence for Shakespeare’s Catholicism or Catholic sympathies and the way resistance to the implications of this evidence has affected the reading of both Shakespeare’s life and his plays” (136).
tensions ran so high, concluding in a neat manner the message *Titus* communicates to the audience about religion is no easy task. Playwrights could not openly portray religious issues on stage. Anything promoting Catholic doctrine was strictly forbidden (Diehl 87). Because of these difficulties, any message on the conflict between piety and pity in *Titus* will be complex.

Aaron uses the number twenty to signify an excess of “Popish tricks” or ritualized practices. The Andronici perform ritual after ritual without ever stopping to think of the meaning behind or the consequences of their actions. Rituals must only be performed because they outwardly show religious duty. Only Tamora ever seems to question the rituals performed in the play and yet even she does not escape her own complex set of rituals. The problem of excessive rituals in *Titus* translates directly to debates about ritual practice in Renaissance England. Certainly Protestants found fault in what they viewed as the excessive rituals of the Catholic Church. Titus’s ritualistic and cannibalistic feast may be a Protestant criticism of the ritual of the Eucharist (Bate 20). Catholics believe that the consecration of the bread and wine actually transforms them into the body and blood of Christ, thus the term transubstantiation. The eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine is no reenactment of Jesus’s sacrifice, but is the original sacrifice itself performed in the present. However, many Anglicans did not believe in the literalness of the Catholic Eucharist and viewed the ritual only as a reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice. Thus when Tamora eats her own offspring who have been murdered/sacrificed in a ritual fashion and fed to her in a ritualistic feast, Protestant audience members would have been acutely aware of the religious significance. Titus’s
initial human sacrifice of Alarbus, as well as the closing cannibalistic feast, illustrates to a Protestant audience the appalling nature of certain Roman Catholic beliefs.

Much of the debate on the Eucharist took place on the doctrinal level. Though a basic understanding of the changes in religion was well known by the common people, they would not know the sometimes small details of the doctrinal debates. In the switch from Catholicism to Protestantism, what often directly affected everyday people’s lives were changes in ritual and thus their personal relationship with God. Ritual practices link people directly and tangibly to their religion because of the very nature of a ritual – a repeated action which contains religious significance. Robert N. Watson writes of the changes Protestantism brought to Christianity:

Protestant theology . . . at once told Christians to aspire to direct communication with God, and told them to despair of ever knowing anything about Him; told them to focus obsessively on their prospects of eternal salvation, and to recognize that those prospects were beyond their power to control or even comprehend; to seek desperately, and yet mistrust utterly, an inner conviction of divine favor. (164)

The contradictory beliefs of Protestantism played out in a very tangible manner. For the first time in Christian history, many of the tangible means for people to communicate and know God were removed. Rituals were reduced to those only used in the early Church, images of saints and martyrs were stripped from buildings and churches, miracles were seen as superstition, good works no longer guaranteed salvation, and services and holidays changed dramatically (Diehl 92). So, though people were told that they could directly communicate with God without the intersession of a priest, ritual, image, their means were reduced basically to prayer. To many people, God must have suddenly seemed distant or even absent.
Titus addresses both the loss of ritual and the change with people’s communication with God. The characters in Titus believe that they carry out their cultural and religious rituals correctly. However, their performance of the rituals is found to be disastrously incorrect. The absence of divine power in Titus acknowledges the shift in the English Renaissance culture’s changing beliefs and customs of their personal relationship with God. God can no longer be reached through the methods that had existed for well over 1200 years. Because of these changes, one must ask what was stable in the beliefs of Christianity. Pity and mercy may be the answer.

The Andronici’s over attention to religious ritual and duty to Rome, at the expense of the basic Christian tenet of pity, reflects harshly on individuals who practice religion in a similar manner. Taking into account how both Protestant and Catholic audiences would have viewed Titus, one can conclude that perhaps the play is concerned less with conflicts between Protestants and Catholics and more about how individuals can best practice their religion. The gods have abandoned Rome because the Romans were irreligious and practicing a religion without its central core – those beliefs which form the basis of a religion, like mercy and pity. Shakespeare communicates through Titus that rites and rituals are acceptable as long as they have at their core the major tenets of the religion. Without these tenets, violence goes unchecked, disorder ensues, and the state destroys itself from the inside out.

Shakespeare’s use of ritual and theater/theatrical expression in The Tempest also suggests much about the religious conflicts in early modern England. The Harpy scene exhibits theatricality in that Prospero directs the action on the stage from above while Ariel performs the role of a Harpy. However, to those characters unaware of
Prospero’s magic, the Harpy scene exists as reality, frightening Prospero’s enemies into madness. In the wedding masque scene, Prospero explains to a stunned Ferdinand, after he abruptly ends the wedding masque, that the spirits he has just seen are “insubstantial” (4.1.155) “actors” (4.1.148) who will “dissolve,” (4.1.154) leaving nothing behind. And in the well known reference to “the great globe” (4.1.153) or the Globe Theater, Shakespeare himself may be referring to the illusion of theater.

Shakespeare also explores the theater in *Hamlet*. A quick discussion on the play within the play in *Hamlet* can help the reader better understand the more complex use of theater in *The Tempest*. Both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* employ theatrics to help reveal a truth about other characters in the play. Hamlet seeks to confirm his uncle’s guilt by judging his actions during “The Murder of Gonzago,” a play with a plot similar to the action in *Hamlet*. Though aware of his enemies’ guilt, Prospero uses the Harpy feast to remind his enemies of the truth of their guilt. At the same time, Prospero reveals that the magic and torments on the island are linked to his banishment from Milan. Hamlet’s thoughts on acting and the theater are of a more personal sort than the ideas in *The Tempest*. When Hamlet sees the first player’s performance of Hecuba, he thinks of his own condition eventually determining how the theater can speed his vengeance. In his soliloquy on acting and vengeance, Hamlet compares himself to the first player:

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing – no, not for a king
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward? (2.2.536-548)

Though Hamlet does achieve what he describes the player king to achieve, he thinks that he has failed to have any effect on those around him; he cannot carry out the necessary acts to avenge his father. And since he cannot be like the first player, he determines to use the theater to achieve his goals. With the “Murder of Gonzago” he will “make mad the guilty and appal the free” (2.2.541), for the actor can inspire and reveal real feelings in the audience even if Hamlet cannot. The use of theater in Hamlet is straightforward – root out the guilty by using the power of theater to reveal the true nature of specific audience members. In *The Tempest*, however, a masking and then revelation of theater accomplishes the profound work in the play.

The concealing and revealing of theater in *The Tempest* helps to answer the following questions: How does the use of theater and ritual in *The Tempest* inform the audience about religion in the English Renaissance? What does Shakespeare suggest about pity? Take, for instance, Stephen Greenblatt’s work on Samuel Harsnett,9 writer of *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (94). Greenblatt writes:

Exorcisms, Harsnett argues, are stage plays, most often tragicomedies, that cunningly conceal their theatrical inauthenticity and hence deprive the spectators of the rational disenchantment that frames the experience of a play. The audience in a theater knows that its misrecognition of reality is temporary, deliberate, and playful; the exorcist seeks to make the misrecognition permanent and invisible. (106)

9 Samuel Harsnett (1561-1631), Protestant chaplain, Archbishop of York, and author of *Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darnel* and *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*. His *Declaration* is a known source of *King Lear* and may also have been used in *Pericles* and *The Tempest* (Kingsley-Smith).
Though Greenblatt explains Harsnett’s ideas on exorcism, his main point is that Shakespeare appropriates Harsnett’s ideas and then drastically “transform[s]” (120) them to the stage. Greenblatt focuses on Shakespeare’s use of Harsnett in *King Lear* by discussing Edgar’s portrayal of Poor Tom. And though I am not suggesting that Shakespeare uses Harsnett’s work directly in *The Tempest*, I am suggesting that he uses a similar idea with regards to Prospero’s use of theatricality and magic on the island. Throughout *The Tempest* Prospero relies on magic to punish his enemies and awe the other people on the island. Specifically, Prospero uses magical theatricality in combination with ritual: first in the ritualized punishment of the Harpy banquet and secondly in the symbolic wedding masque. The Harpy banquet and wedding masque are theater, that is illusory. But like the audience of the exorcisms, the illusion, though known to some, is not revealed to others. Prospero’s enemies and the others on the island think Prospero’s magic stems from some source other than Prospero himself – the gods, another world, or the supernatural. The important thing is that for most of their time on the island, Prospero’s enemies do not believe the magic to be controlled by Prospero. At first Prospero does not reveal to his audience (those on the island) that his magic is “temporary, deliberate, and playful.” However, at the end of the play – and this is important – Prospero reveals to his enemies the illusion of his magic. This is the transformation of Harsnett’s idea that Greenblatt speaks of in *King Lear*. Rather than keeping the illusion to himself and maintaining his “invisible” power over his enemies, Prospero metaphorically shows his enemies his stage and playbook by revealing that magic is behind everything outrageous on the island. As his enemies marvel at the
illusion and recognize the power Prospero has over them, Prospero does something else – he gives up his magic. Without his magic, Prospero has no power, and yet it is here that he accomplishes the greatest achievement of the play – he forgives his enemies and shows them mercy. There is no ritual, no illusion, only the inner struggle Prospero must overcome to give up his desire for revenge and choose to pity his enemies. The play suggests that the expression of mercy/pity does not need to be wrapped up in an elaborate theatrical ritual. Or rather, the expression of pity exists as the greatest achievement in the play; magic, control of the supernatural, and vengeance are all trumped by pity.

As in Titus, ritual in The Tempest must be set aside for pity to be expressed. In Titus, excessive ritual and duty to Rome prevent the characters from expressing mercy. The Tempest likewise upholds that expressing mercy, the most important action in the play, ends revenge. Magic and theatrical expression, however much they help Prospero achieve his goals, in the end only hinder the expression of pity. The powerful Prospero significantly gives up his magic in exchange for something much more valuable, the restoration of his family. Prospero achieves this goal by showing his enemies mercy. Both plays, though they arrive at the conclusion by different means, suggest to the audience that mercy is the most important religious expression. That Titus ends so ominously and The Tempest ends with the promise of a fruitful future, artistically illustrates to the audience the benefits of merciful action.

Human(E) Pity

The importance Shakespeare places on pity in each play not only carries religious significance, but more importantly suggests that the expression of pity is
essentially human and humane. The characters in *Titus* cannot express pity. The violence, horror, and insanity of the play illustrate the worst of humanity. And though Titus turns to ritual and duty to gain some sort of control over his situation, because these actions prevent pity, the violence continues. Furthermore, no supernatural force ever appears, leaving Titus to make a choice about his actions. Likewise, Prospero must forgive his enemies and end his punishment of them without the aid of magic or the supernatural. Again pity, expressed by Prospero, shows the best of humanity, enabling a happy resolution to revenge and the lives of all involved.

In the middle of *Titus*, a series of events occurs in which various characters ask for and are denied mercy. In a twist of fate, Tamora holds power over Lavinia, for she has Lavinia captive. Perhaps the most horrific scene in the play, Lavinia begs Tamora to murder her so she won’t have to be raped by Chiron and Demetrius. Lavinia appeals to the bond of sisterhood two women share. Tamora’s response to Lavinia’s pleas is chilling. She tells her sons “The worse to her, the better loved of me” (2.3.167). Tamora commands her sons to rape, mutilate, and kill Lavinia in the worst way possible. Why is Tamora not moved by Lavinia’s pleas? Though Lavinia is not responsible for Alarbus’s death, Tamora cannot pity her. Tamora’s response of “for [Titus’s] sake am I pitiless” (2.3.162) addresses the continuous cycle of violence no character seems willing to break. Because Titus sacrificed her son, Tamora will not spare Lavinia, and because Lavinia is not spared by Tamora, Titus will not spare Chiron and Demetrius.

Next in the series of events Titus tries to plea for the tribunes to spare his sons. As the Roman tribunes file past Titus towards the senate house, he asks them for mercy, but “they [will] not pity [him]” (3.1.35) and his sons are found guilty of murder.
Titus has not yet learned of Lavinia’s state, thus his pleas for his sons are that much more dramatic and poignant. After discovering Lavinia’s terrible state Titus again must ask for mercy. Echoing Tamora’s earlier words, Titus asks the gods to show mercy. Titus prays:

O, here I lift this one hand up to heaven
And bow this feeble ruin to the earth.
If any power pities wretched tears,
To that I call. What, wouldst thou kneel with me?
Do then, dear heart; for heaven shall hear our prayers,
Or with our sighs we’ll breathe the welkin dim
And stain the sun with fog, as sometime clouds
When they do hug him in their melting bosoms. (3.1.205-212)

Titus wants the gods to show him mercy, for as Tamora argues to Titus, the gods can show much mercy. Expressions of mercy and pity are godlike actions. However, in every case where pity can be shown, humans, not the gods, directly control the expression of pity. Titus asks Lavinia to kneel and sigh with him. She cannot raise her hands because they have been cut off, nor can she answer Titus, for her tongue has been cut out. Titus’s own hand has just been cut off. At this point in the play, Titus has many just reasons to ask for and receive mercy. However, after all the terrible violence done to his family, no pity is given. Titus soon learns that his pleas of pity to both the gods and Saturninus, just as Lavinia’s pleas to Tamora, go unheard. Saturninus cuts off Titus’s hand and still kills his sons, returning their heads on a platter just as Titus begs the gods to spare him any further suffering. In fact, every plea for pity and prayer the characters make to each other or various higher powers gets no direct response. The higher power cannot even help humans express pity to each other. The expression of pity is for humans alone to make. However, the murderous events continue and though Titus asks others for mercy, he does not think to show pity himself.
Unlike Titus, Prospero is capable of expressing pity. Right before Prospero gives up his magic, he and Ariel discuss the emotion. Prospero has charmed Alonso and the rest of the company into a mad state so that they no longer have control of their senses. Before Prospero breaks the charm, the following exchange occurs between Prospero and Ariel:

Ariel: Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them your affections
Would become tender.
Prospero: Dost thou think so, spirit?
Ariel: Mine would, sir, were I human.
Prospero: −− And mine shall.
Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Though with high wrongs I am struck to th’ quick,
Yet with my nobler reason ’gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel.
My charms I’ll break, their senses I’ll restore,
And they shall be themselves. (5.1.17-32)

Ariel’s inability to feel compassion or pity for Prospero’s enemies stems from the fact that he is not human. Ariel’s reply implies that pity must be a human quality. The variant form of human, humane, is also implied by Ariel. To be humane is to show the characteristics of mercy and compassion. These expressions make one human. That Prospero “shall” act “tender” marks Prospero’s intent to act mercifully towards his enemies in the near future. These feelings will be “kindlier,” or more intensely felt than Ariel’s, not only because Prospero is human, but also because Prospero is the one who has been wronged. Though his enemies’ “wrongs” have “struck [him] to the quick” and part of him wants to carry out his revenge, his “noble reason,” or rational mind, can
defend him against his anger. And here is the key phrase of the play: “The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance.” Prospero’s act of mercy may be rare because it is uncommon for someone to express such an emotion to one’s enemies. However, “rare” also places a value on the expression of virtue. A rarity has value because of its scarcity. Thus virtue has a greater moral value as a human emotion than vengeance because virtue is less often expressed. This value also translates to the benefits Prospero will receive from the expression of his mercy. Something of great value conceivably gives great benefit to its owner; therefore, Prospero gains more through an expression of pity than he does by expressing vengeance. These benefits include the restoration of his dukedom, the relinquishing of Alonso’s hold over Milan, and not least of all, Miranda’s successful marriage, and the guarantee of her future happiness and comfort.

The question of what one chooses to do when one’s enemies are in one’s power also arises in Hamlet. Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius when Claudius appears to be praying. Like Prospero, both Claudius and Hamlet contemplate mercy and forgiveness. Claudius reasons,

Pray can I not.
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence? (3.3.38-47)

Mercy and forgiveness could “wash” Claudius’s sins clean. Yet, he cannot ask for mercy himself for his sins would not be forgiven “above” (3.3.60), or in heaven. Claudius is
“still possessed / Of those effects for which [he] did the murder” (3.3.53-54), his crown and his wife. Just as Claudius reasons that he cannot truly ask for and be granted mercy, Hamlet does reason that he can bestow mercy on Claudius. Hamlet can grant Claudius mercy at this moment by killing him. If Claudius is praying for mercy and forgiveness, then in death he would go straight to heaven. This gesture would be merciful, considering the great many sins Claudius committed in his life. However, Hamlet cannot murder Claudius at this moment, even though his revenge demands the king’s death. To murder Claudius in his moment of prayer would be to show pity and, as mentioned before, pity has no place in Hamlet’s revenge. Hamlet will even give up a chance at murder in order not to show mercy to his enemies.

As Prospero plans to grant mercy to his enemies, he also plans to “break” his “charms,” and restore his enemies to their senses. However, the breaking of his charms has another meaning. Following his exchange with Ariel, Prospero famously exclaims:

But this rough magic
I here abjure. And when I have required
Some heavenly music – which even now I do –
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I’ll drown my book. _Solemn music._ (5.1.54-57)

Prospero will no longer need his magic, but more importantly he cannot use it during his show of mercy. Though Prospero still directs Ariel, his magic wanes during his forgiveness of his enemies. As Alonso, Antonio, and the others enter, “Solemn music” plays, signaling the end of Prospero’s ability to use magic. No great show of his power is revealed to his enemies at this time. Nor is there a magical celebration of the union of
Alonso and Prospero’s houses, or the return of Prospero to his rightful place in society. Instead, Prospero changes from his magician robe to the clothes of a duke, emphasizing his return to his normal human role. No longer the fearful godlike controller of the spirits and elements, Prospero, now an ordinary man, can fully forgive and show mercy. His magic brought him up to the point of expression, but he cannot use it to help him to forgive. Again, pity is a human emotion, something neither Ariel nor Prospero’s “unnatural” brother are capable of showing. His magic gone, Prospero can humanely and honestly forgive Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, whether or not they fully repent.

The expression of pity is important to being human. Not only is it an emotion humans must rely on themselves to express, but it is a valuable, perhaps the most valuable human expression. As Prospero states, pity is “rare,” meaning it is difficult to express. However, to show mercy to your enemies brings the benefits such a good and rare expression should. To fail in expressing pity can, as Titus finds, results only in death and destruction.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

If Titus Andronicus stands as a warning against what happens when one disregards pity, then The Tempest portrays the positive outcome of the use of pity. In Titus, the characters fail to use pity, thus failing to stop the cycle of revenge. The Tempest nearly completes the revenge cycle; however, a final act of pity ends the revenge. Also like Titus, Shakespeare plays with the genre of revenge in The Tempest. Every element of revenge exists in The Tempest, from the initial atrocity to a supernatural character who aids the avenging hero. However, these elements exist with a difference – Prospero’s final act is not revenge but rather mercy. Through mercy he achieves repentance, forgiveness, and regeneration.

Prospero’s magic helps him achieve his goals, often allowing him to reverse typical revenge motifs, turning them on his enemies. Prospero’s control of the elements and supernatural beings reverses the absence of the supernatural in Titus. However, the outcome of both the absence or abundance of the supernatural in the end of the play results in the same conclusion – both force pity to be expressed by the avenging human hero. In Titus, Shakespeare removes the supernatural and gods traditionally associated with a revenge tragedy, forcing the choice of revenge and pity into human hands. Prospero acts like a god controlling supernatural beings, yet he must ultimately give up his magical powers if he wants his merciful acts and reconciliation with his enemies to...
secure a successful future for his daughter. Mercy must be performed by an ordinary human. Shakespeare again suggests that pity is an essential and valuable expression of one’s humanity.

Both plays also reflect the changing political climate of early modern England. Conflicting ideas between Protestants and Catholics lie under the surface of the plays, giving the reader a deeper understanding of religious beliefs in Renaissance England. Shakespeare closely examines and tests the merits of different ritual practices, ultimately concluding that pity, a central belief of Christianity, is the more important expression of a religion. Excessive ritual without mercy as a core belief and practice does not constitute piety. The close of each play reinforces Shakespeare’s message about pity, urging the audience to take heed of the characters’ actions. *Titus* ends a bloodbath; *The Tempest* restores proper order to society.

At the close of *Titus*, Lucius is emperor. He must decide the proper course of action with concern to Aaron’s execution and the disposal of Tamora’s body. Because of his evilness, Aaron must suffer extreme punishment before his death – he is to be buried to his waist and left to starve. Lucius commands that “If anyone relieves or pities him [Aaron], / For the offence he dies” (5.5.180-181). The message is clear: there exists a proper time and place for mercy and Aaron does not warrant any. Lucius’s attitude fits squarely with the Elizabethan idea of punishment and pity; “in general Tudor attitudes towards crime and punishment manifested little concern towards ‘Christian mercy’ or the social rehabilitation of the criminal” (Broude, 50). As emperor, Lucius can punish Aaron and Tamora in any way he chooses. In Renaissance England, those found guilty of the
worst crimes – for example, treason and murder – were not spared brutal and violent ends. Hangings, beheadings, and evisceration were a well known spectacle. Tamora’s body suffers likewise. Lucius throws her body to the beasts to be scavenged. Lucius claims Tamora’s life was “devoid of pity, / And being dead let birds on her take pity” (5.3.198-199). In other words, let the birds decide if they would like to take pity on her, for she is no longer Lucius’s concern. Like Tamora, Lucius shows no pity. That the play ends with a refusal of mercy to not just an enemy but an enemy’s body exemplifies the lack of pity throughout the play. Tamora does not even warrant pity enough for a proper burial. Throwing her body to the animals is a great insult in the ancient world. The play ends by continuing the mistakes of the rest of the play – when one should show mercy, none is given.

Though Lucius is Rome’s best hope to help restore order, the play ends ominously. Of course as a revenge tragedy the audience cannot expect a happy ending. Yet one would hope that with Lucius as a leader Rome would have a brighter future. This is not be the case. Rome’s long-term enemies have been invited inside its gates, leaving the city on the verge of collapse. The Roman lord speaking at the end of the play in the voice of the Roman elders echoes the sentiments felt by the audience:

Let Rome herself be bane unto herself,
And she whom mighty kingdoms curtsy to,
Like a forlorn and desperate castaway,
Do shameful execution on herself (5.3.172-175)

Perhaps Rome learned her lesson too late. Titus Andronicus serves as Shakespeare’s complex warning to Elizabethan England: religious or nationalistic piety should never supersede pity or else a Titus-like feast of revenge will consume individuals, families,
and even nations. Continuing a cycle of revenge in which no mercy is ever shown results in destruction. In the case of Titus, as in history, Rome eventually falls to the Goths.

To reinforce the importance of pity in The Tempest, Shakespeare ends the play by encouraging the audience to express pity. This ending presents a suitable closing point for this study as well, for it neatly wraps up the ideas about pity expressed above. Prospero gives his farewell, and in the last sentence of the epilogue urges the audience to take pity on him:

Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;  
And my ending is despair  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so, that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults  
As you from crimes would pardoned be,  
Let your indulgence set me free. (Epilogue, 13-20)

This playful urging of the audience to show mercy is, at the same time, serious in that it encourages the audience to express the emotion most central to the play. By “free[ing] all faults” the audience forgives any mistakes in the play. However, the audience is also reminded that forgiveness is a necessary component of pity. Like Prospero, if audience members can forgive sins and express mercy, then they can help restore a central balance in their lives. The audience practices the expression of pity and sees its real results when they applaud: in the world of the play they send Prospero on his way back to Milan, while
they also close the play. The epilogue again shows the audience that mercy is a beneficial and valuable human quality and urges them to show pity in their own lives.

Stephen Greenblatt might note this instance as a “circulation of social energy.” See Shakespearean Negotiations for a further analysis of how culture influences the theater and vice versa.
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