Although the reputation of *Titus Andronicus* has been steadily improving since the post-World War II period, the number of articles and books on the play has increased most dramatically in the past twenty years. As Philip C. Kolin notes in his fine overview of recent criticism on the play, "From 1960 through early 1994, bibliographies in *PMLA* cite 121 entries on *Titus*, 77 of them falling in the years 1981 through early 1994" ("Titus Andronicus and the Critical Legacy" in *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, Philip C. Kolin, ed. [New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995], 3–55, esp. 10).

the play is informed by gender ideology. The Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is an almost exclusively male world; its two female characters, their roles sharply circumscribed by patriarchal norms, are both dead by its end, and few other women are even referred to in passing. As Coppélia Kahn has recently written, in Shakespeare’s plays and in the traditions Shakespeare inherited, “Romanness is virtually identical with an ideology of masculinity.”

Seldom, however, has feminist criticism taken a close look at what genre and tradition have cited as the play’s main concern: revenge. To the extent that feminists have confronted the issue, they have tended to downplay women’s participation in revenge, emphasizing instead their role as victim. In such readings Tamora’s excessive cruelty and violence is held to have its ultimate source in male fantasy; Lavinia’s insulting treatment of Tamora in Act 2 and her active participation in her family’s revenge plot in Acts 3 through 5 are either ignored or viewed as imposed on her; and Titus and the other male members of his family are represented as reducing Lavinia to an object, silencing her, or subjecting her to a patriarchal script. The play as a whole is taken to be structured around the spectacular display of the female body, written on by violence, while violence against the male body is ignored.

Such readings may speak to a wish to construct the violence of revenge as a purely “male” problem or an effect of patriarchy. They are consistent with a tendency in a good deal of feminist writing beyond the domain of Shakespeare criticism. Women are the nonviolent sex, far more likely to be victims of violence than its perpetrators. When they do fight back, it is often argued, their violence is a justifiable act of self-

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3 Kahn, 2.

4 Readings of Tamora that stress her origins in male fantasy include Asp, 336 and 342–43; Kehler, 320 and 328; and Marshall, 208–9. These are all compelling readings; my objection is not to the analysis of the play in terms of male fantasy but to the suggestion that violence is attributed to Tamora solely because of it. Readings of Lavinia that do not acknowledge her active participation in revenge or that see her participation as merely submission to a patriarchal script include Asp, 339–40; Cohen, 85; Eaton, 63; and Green, 323–24, among others. My reservations about points made in these essays are discussed further on pages 41ff. below.

5 Essays that downplay or ignore violence against the male body include Cohen and Harris.

6 Cohen in particular speaks of a “male lust for vengeance” and also holds that Tamora “renounces her own sexual identity [when she] . . . identifies her desire with that of the male rapists” (85 and 88).
defense. Yet if feminist writing has usually ignored women's participation in revenge, there are exceptions in which revenge has been subject to open and uncritical embrace. Feminists such as Andrea Dworkin have advocated vigilante violence in response to rape or other instances of patriarchal oppression; mainstream films such as Thelma and Louise or Eye for an Eye, along with many slasher films, now feature female revengers as heroes; books such as 8 Ball Chicks: A Year in the Violent World of Girl Gangsters describe in harrowing detail the retaliatory violence practiced by contemporary girl gangs.7 The revengers described or imagined in these texts go beyond mere self-defense, actively promoting vigilante killing and other forms of retaliatory violence, at times even encouraging spectatorial delight in the infliction of pain on the perpetrator's body.

Perhaps, then, feminists will benefit from a closer look at revenge tragedies and their conventions. It matters how you fight back. Early modern dramatists considered revenge from multiple viewpoints and examined it in the context of changing notions of honor and shame. They wrestled in sophisticated ways with the unstable relation of revenge to justice and repeatedly asked what the "private man" should do in response to a wrong when the gods are silent and the state too weak or corrupt to bring about just solutions. Their answers were typically ambivalent: revenge is a nearly irresistible response, yet it is also a source of escalating violence and new wrongs. Driven to excess in some form, the revenger often lashes out at the innocent as well as the guilty or in some other way overshoots the mark. Revenge plays tend to leave reader or audience in a state of tension. The plays' interrogative endings put pressure on audiences to think again about revenge as a reflex response.

Revenge plays became popular in England at a time when Protestant reformers and state authorities were energetically denouncing the private revenges of aristocratic clans and "brawling" at all social levels, while seeking to expand a centralized legal system.8 Elizabethan dramatists often called into question the effectiveness of

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this new emphasis on state-centered justice, with central authorities frequently portrayed as too weak, corrupt, or partisan to provide effective third-party mediation or just solutions to quarrels. At the same time, however, they strongly criticized the innocent suffering produced by honor-driven feuds and factional violence. Dramatists—notably Shakespeare—exploited dramatic structure in order to complicate what Edward Muir has described as the traditional revenge narrative, told from the viewpoint of a specific clan and its allies. Such narratives, Muir suggests, transmitted orally within households around the hearth or written down in family papers or polemical broadsides, served to solidify a clan’s internal bonds by demonizing and denouncing enemies; simultaneously they offered justifications for defending family honor with violence. They “encouraged mimesis in hearers and readers, providing the crucial means by which individuals, especially males, formed their identities in imitation of heroic predecessors and in opposition to hereditary enemies.”

In contrast, Shakespeare’s revenge plays frequently put the audience in the middle, producing divided loyalties and shifting, ambivalent identifications, while bringing out the resemblance between opposing sides in feuds and factional violence. The plays are structured by multiple perspectives, calling into question the partisan aims of the traditional revenge narrative.

Shakespeare unsettled conventions of revenge narratives in another way, too. As Muir points out, the traditional revenge narrative marginalized women. Men had a vested interest in portraying vendettas as “grand struggle[s]” highlighting masculine traits of bravery, daring, and fighting skill. Women appeared, if at all, as idealized figures of chastity to be protected or, more darkly, as vulnerable vessels of the enemy to be raped and despoiled. But in many of Shakespeare’s plays, as well as in those by other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, women are sometimes active participants in revenge plots. Like Tamora, characters such as Margaret in the Henry VI plays, Bel-Imperia in The Spanish Tragedy, the Duchess of Gloucester in Richard II, and Lady Capulet in Romeo and Juliet actively engage in honor-driven quarrels or exhort others to do so. They are typically presented—as male revengers are—in ambivalent terms. In representing women in this fashion, Shakespeare brings out a feature of women’s roles that tended to be suppressed in traditional narratives, just as it often is today. His plays offer parallels to what Muir and other historians have revealed in the subtext of surviving historical records, where women are present not only as icons of chastity and victims of rape in vendettas and feuds but also as

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9 Edward Muir, Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta & Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), xxviii. Though Muir’s book focuses on a specific region in Italy, in the passage from which I quote he is speaking more broadly about Renaissance Europe. Cf. Lucius’s instructions to his son to remember the stories Titus told him (5.3.163–65).

10 Muir, 281.
agents actively pursuing revenge. As Muir points out, they participated by “encouraging their men to remember their obligations, teaching sons to avenge dead fathers, shaming husbands into countering insults.”

They acted at times as patrons, providing money or other forms of support. On occasion, they may even have engaged in actual fighting.

_Titus Andronicus_ stands out among revenge plays for its insistent exposure of revenge as a cross-gender and cross-cultural phenomenon. In it, revenge has a leveling aspect, as women as well as men, sons as well as fathers, “others” as well as Romans are drawn into its spell. Their acts of revenge are embedded in honor values and practices that, as Shakespeare shows, traverse national boundaries and have both gendered and ungendered features. Assumptions about honor profoundly shape the identities and actions of the Goth queen Tamora; Titus, the Roman military leader; his daughter, Lavinia; as well as Aaron the Moor— influencing the way they interpret and respond to wrongs and driving them, sooner or later, to adopt the revenger’s role.

Honor-driven retaliatory practices, Shakespeare also shows, offer to members of both sexes what I will call a perverse therapy for traumatic experience. Indeed, in _Titus Andronicus_ we are confronted with traumas of the most extreme kind. Characters in this play are subjected not only to rape but also to torture, dismemberment, and death; they are combat survivors and prisoners of war and victims of slavery. Like Shakespeare, recent trauma theorists have explored ungendered as well as gendered features of trauma’s effects on subjects, often bringing together in their studies the (usually male) survivors of wartime combat and the (usually female) survivors of rape. Like Shakespeare, they have shown that trauma does not stop with the individual victim; rather, family members and others close to the victim experience a form of secondary trauma. Like Shakespeare, trauma theorists have called attention to the disturbing ways in which victims can become perpetrators as they attempt to cope with profound threats to self-concept and with overwhelming emotion.

Reading _Titus Andronicus’s_ construction of honor and revenge in dialogue with trauma theory can, I believe, help us move beyond the blind spots in some recent feminist criticism of this play. Calling attention to Lavinia’s plight need not require
a deadening of response to the pain of Titus and other male characters; nor does a recognition of the play’s embeddedness in patriarchal structures require a disavowal of women’s complicity in revenge’s excess. Rather, the play invites us to see how characters of both sexes turn to revenge in the aftermath of trauma to find relief from terrible pain. Traumatic loss gives rise to a “gnawing vulture” within (5.2.31): as parents in this play confront the murder, dismemberment, or rape of their children, they are also subjected to potentially overwhelming experiences of loss, powerlessness, humiliation, and other threats to psychological integrity. Attempting to restore a sense of cohesion and agency as well as to defend themselves from intolerable emotions, revengers enact increasingly over-the-top spectacles of violence, “getting even” with enemies by outdoing them. What is done to contain trauma reproduces trauma for others. Ironically, “wholeness” is achieved only through acts of foreclosure and self-mutilation: in Titus Andronicus the perverse therapy of revenge eventually consumes the self it tries to save.

TRAUMA THEORY

One starting point for contemporary trauma theory is the influential definition set forth in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in its section on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In this account PTSD follows events that are “generally outside the range of usual human experience,” such as rape, military combat, bombing, torture, kidnapping, incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a death camp, and accidents or natural catastrophes involving serious and widespread physical injury. Such events, or “stressors,” regularly produce a variety of related symptoms, among them “recurrent painful, intrusive recollections of the event” and “dreams or nightmares during which the event is reexperienced”; “psychic numbing”; sleep disorders; hyperalertness; irritability, anxiety, and depression. DSM–IV foregrounds the intrusive recollections and their disruptiveness, and expands on the term “dissociativelike states.” Recurrent, intrusive recollections, commonly termed flashbacks, can take varying forms, but in general they tend to be powerfully visual, even photographic; Robert Jay Lifton, for example, describes traumatic memory as an “indelible image” or “death imprint.” In addi-

14 DSM–III, 236.
15 DSM–III, 236.
tion, to the person experiencing them the recollections seem to be happening not in the past but in the present, so that he or she has no distance from them. They are characteristically charged with emotions, particularly panic or intense fear. The recollections are often fragmented, lacking narrative coherence. Dissociation, on the other hand, refers to the way traumatic recollections may become split off from the rest of the survivor’s life, causing psychic numbing rather than extremes of emotion. When traumatic memories can’t be integrated into the rest of the psyche, dissociation produces a constriction of identity.17

Explanations for the symptoms of PTSD are the subject of heated and complex debate—too complex to treat at length here—but a key point emphasized in much psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and medical discourse is summed up by Judith Herman: “helplessness constitutes the essential insult of trauma.”18 The radical helplessness experienced by the subject faced by death, serious injury, or loss of loved ones means that the central nervous system is flooded with emotions—fear, panic, grief, etc. Such flooding can overtax cognition; the mind cannot process all that is happening, especially when confronted by conflicting stimuli (as in combat, when a soldier may feel divided between saving himself and saving a friend). The overwhelming aspects of the experience threaten the subject’s structures of meaning. For Ronnie Janoff-Bulman trauma shatters the subject’s “assumptive world”; especially susceptible, in her view, are assumptions about personal invulnerability, about the world as a meaningful and comprehensible place, and about the positive value of the self.19 For Mardi Horowitz, the traumatic event assaults not just self but the self in relationship; it shatters “inner schemata” of self and world.20 When trauma is caused by human agents (rapists, for example, or war criminals), it can do more lasting damage than trauma caused by accident or natural disaster. One’s assumptions about human relationships, one’s basic trust in others, may be profoundly tested or undermined by such experiences, making it difficult to reconnect to the human community, to form new attachments or sustain old ones, to reach out to or feel empathy for others.

Doctors and some psychiatrists tend to stress the immediate damage caused by the traumatic event itself, such as its impact on the central nervous system, or the

18 Herman, 41.
cognitive overload caused by emotional flooding. Flashbacks are viewed as relatively unmediated photographs of the actual traumatic event. Psychoanalytic writers, on the other hand, emphasize that the “assumptive world” shattered by trauma also has an unconscious component. Thus Melvin Lansky’s study of a group of combat and rape survivors suffering from post-traumatic nightmares demonstrates that, although the main plot and imagery (i.e., the manifest content) of these nightmares derived from the traumatic events themselves, they also contained allusions to childhood events and showed a “richness of dynamic activity” that could “be better appreciated in the light of the dreamer’s life history.” Theories of trauma that stress damage to the survivor’s “assumptive world” or “inner schemata” might be said to occupy an eclectic middle ground, incorporating elements of both medical-psychiatric and psychoanalytic models. The “assumptive world” of the person who undergoes a traumatic experience in adulthood has been developed over the course of a lifetime of relationships and interactions, and will include unconscious as well as conscious features.

One model with particular resonance for Titus Andronicus is set forth by Richard B. Ulman and Doris Brothers in The Shattered Self: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma. Rejecting the traditional psychoanalytic formulation that trauma is caused primarily by a fantasized event, these authors draw on the self psychology of Heinz Kohut as well as psychiatric studies to argue that “the unconscious meaning of real occurrences causes trauma by shattering central organizing fantasies of self in relation to selfobject.” Such fantasies are “meaning structures” that organize the subject’s experience of selfhood as it has developed from early childhood in a “selfobject milieu.” A “selfobject” for Kohut and his followers is any person experienced as “subjectively connected to and extended from self” who enables a cohesive sense of selfhood to emerge through experiences of being “admired, praised, and valued” and through idealizing identifications. In early childhood the primary caretaker (usually the mother) is the main selfobject, acting as a mirror for the child’s grandiosity and exhibitionism, as well as facilitating experiences of merger with her idealized and seemingly omnipotent attributes. As the child grows up, others—siblings, friends, admired adults—take on selfobject functions. In optimal circumstances self-selfobject relations, through “transmuting internalizations,” enable the modulation of the child’s

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23 Ulman and Brothers, 2.
24 Ulman and Brothers, 2 and 6.
25 Ulman and Brothers, 6.
grandiose self-image and sense of omnipotence into something more realistic.\textsuperscript{26} Selfobjects come to be appreciated as “true objects”—that is, they are no longer simply taken for granted as extensions of the self but can be related to as “separate and distinct” individuals.\textsuperscript{27} Yet the distinction between selfobject and true object is not absolute. Even in mature love the true object will continue to perform some self-object functions.

For Ulman and Brothers, when traumatic events such as combat or rape occur in adulthood, shattering central organizing fantasies, they affect not only the self’s sense of value and inner cohesion but also the self’s ability to relate to others as true objects. Traumatic events can trigger a kind of narcissistic retreat, in other words; the self is so threatened that all its energies must be drawn back into the task of self-preservation. People vary, of course, in their vulnerability to trauma; some are more resilient than others. One factor determining the extent of one’s vulnerability may be the degree to which the sense of self retains archaic features (based, that is, on illusions of grandiosity or invulnerability). Yet if the traumatic event is severe enough, almost anyone will experience traumatic shattering and at least some of the symptoms of PTSD.

The ahistorical and universalizing tendency of much trauma theory has not gone uncriticized. Some theorists have come to emphasize the cultural construction of traumatic experience and its aftermath. “Victims of traumatic stress live in specific situations in specific societies,” write the editors of the essay collection \textit{Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics}.\textsuperscript{28} Culture, as well as particular personal histories, helps to construct the “assumptive world” that is shattered by trauma, and it defines what is experienced as trauma in the first place. As one contributor states (in an example with relevance for \textit{Titus Andronicus}), survivors of war and organized violence in Mozambique “are haunted by the spirits of their dead relatives, for whom the traditionally prescribed burial rituals have not been enacted.”\textsuperscript{29} Western-based talk therapy may not work in non-Western cultures that “have little place for the revelation of intimate and personal material outside the close family circle.”\textsuperscript{30} Cultures also have internal variations: gender, class, and ethnicity introduce other variables that influence the way trauma is experienced. One can go too far in stressing what combat trauma and rape have in common; some theorists point out; the former has specific consequences for male identities, the latter for female. For Janice Haaken, although “the search for the unifying basis to human suffering” has

\textsuperscript{27} Siegel, 71–72.
\textsuperscript{30} Summerfield, 24–25.
a progressive dimension, the PTSD label can obscure the “specificity of survivors’ experiences and the complexity and variability of victim/perpetrator relationships.”

31 Date rape, marital rape, and incest, for example, are “relationally complex experiences,” and that sets them apart from traumatic events in which the perpetrators are strangers. 32 Other theorists stress the multiplicity of trauma experiences and the importance of attending to differences among trauma survivors which are less easy to categorize. As Cathy Caruth warns, “The difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists,” and others who work with trauma survivors. 33 Ultimately, both differences and similarities must be taken into account for a fuller understanding of trauma.

The self-psychological model offered by Ulman and Brothers—whatever its wider applicability—is particularly suggestive, I believe, for understanding the construction of identities in honor cultures, in which personal identity is bound up with other members of one’s clan and lineage. As Anthony Fletcher has summed up, “honour belonged to the collectivity; it was a temporary possession for the individual, held in trust.” 34 Self-image was family based, part of a larger group identity, fashioned through identification with the father and with idealized ancestors but also projected into the future through one’s children. Parents, children, ancestors, and allies frequently functioned as selfobjects for each other, enabling merger with idealized figures and preserving grandiose fantasies. When family members are murdered, raped, or severely injured—which, in Titus Andronicus, are regularly recurring events—the other members of the family also feel damaged, as if a part of the self has been lost or killed along with the family member. The enhanced, family-based group identity that anchors individual self-image comes under attack, its honor put in question. The loss of the family member as true object to be grieved and mourned coexists with an equally strong sense of narcissistic wound, produced by the loss of selfobject; murder is a “wrong” but also a shaming act of disrespect.

Shakespeare’s rich treatment of trauma and its aftermath in Titus Andronicus constructs trauma in terms of both cultural and psychological factors. Titus and Tamora, along with other Romans and Goths and Aaron the Moor, share a set of beliefs about honor and revenge, a set of stories, a set of scripts for action. They

32 Haaken, 1080.
34 Anthony Fletcher, Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500–1800 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995), 126.
draw on the same literary tradition—Ovid, Virgil, tales of the Trojan War—when designing their own responses to traumatic events. Much as do the authors in the collection Beyond Trauma, Shakespeare underscores the role of these cultural traditions in shaping how characters “read” their traumatic experiences. At the same time, the play suggests the porous boundaries of what we commonly regard as discrete national groups. Despite a few differences—most visible in their conflicting views on human sacrifice—Goths and Romans to a large extent share a common culture. Beliefs about honor and revenge are part of a transnational inheritance that informs the identities of most characters in the play, whatever their ancestry.

Shakespeare’s construction of trauma also highlights the role of humiliation and the damage to self that is simultaneous with the loss of children who function as selfobjects, offering a suggestive parallel to Brothers and Ulman’s theory. The primary traumatic events in this play all involve the death or severe injury of children. Except for Lavinia, the main trauma survivors are parents or other close relatives who witness but cannot prevent the children’s suffering or death. The children who are killed or injured are cherished by the parents as separate individuals—Alarbus is Tamora’s “dear” son (1.1.111); Lavinia is “dearer than my soul” to Titus (3.1.103)—but they are also anchors of identity for the parents, selfobjects vitally connected to the parent’s own social status, self-image, and emotional stability. When the child is wounded or killed, a part of the parent’s self dies, too; thus Titus says, “he that wounded [Lavinia] / Hath hurt me more than had he killed me dead” (3.1.92–93).

Shakespeare also probes the psychological aftermath of trauma, which cannot be understood solely in terms of honor and damage to self-image. The play offers a rich portrait of the emotions aroused by traumatic experience and their potential to overwhelm the psyche. Indeed, metaphors of flooding or consumption are often used to express grief, particularly in Act 3: to Titus, grief is like the overflowing Nile, the deluge, the ocean. The psychological aftereffects of trauma in this play include not only grief but also fear, helplessness, vicarious suffering, and psychic numbing, as well as shame, humiliation, and outrage. Characters search for ways to heal or “ease” their extreme emotions, to find, as it were, their own trauma therapy. “Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopped, / Doth burn the heart to cinders” (2.3.36–37), but through railing, speaking bitter words, mourning or weeping together, characters experiment with ways to find relief.

It will not be the thesis of this essay that Titus, Lucius, Tamora, Aaron, or even Lavinia are suffering from PTSD. For one thing, no character in the play has

flashbacks, intrusive memories, or nightmares, the key symptoms for a diagnosis of PTSD. Shakespeare’s psychology of trauma overlaps with, yet is distinct from, modern conceptions. Nevertheless, the play itself is shot through with recurring images of dismemberment, decapitation, “lopped” limbs, bodily violation, and cannibalism (1.1.146; 2.3.17); humans are repeatedly hunted, hacked up, or eaten as if they were animals. The sacrifice of Alarbus, in particular, is recalled frequently by the imagery in later scenes of the play. Each atrocity echoes the ones that preceded it while building on them in new, unexpected ways.

But rather than claim that Shakespeare invented PTSD four hundred years before DSM–III,36 I will argue that the honor-driven retaliatory practices which Shakespeare assumes to be pervasive in Roman and Goth cultures allow his characters an alternative way to cope with the overwhelming emotions and shattering of self-structures generated by traumatic events. After the failure of their experiments with other ways to find relief, characters turn to revenge “To ease the gnawing vulture of [their] mind[s] / By working wreakful vengeance on [their] foes” (5.2.31–32). Revenge acts as a container for traumatic emotion, enabling characters to bypass or transmute major PTSD symptoms such as intrusive recollection or psychic numbing, while also helping them recover a sense of agency, cohesion, and meaningful action. It allows them to restore the damaged self-selfobject relationship by recuperating an honorable family image.

At the same time, however, revenge enables only a perverse form of healing. The experience of damage to self-image that coincides with traumatic loss exerts a pressure that produces revenge’s excess. The parent or close relative who survives the child’s death struggles, in a sense, with a double death—his own as well as the child’s. Tamora’s image of the “gnawing vulture [in the] mind” that needs to be eased by revenge is relevant here—the vulture continues to feed on a dead part of the self long after the external death of the child has taken place.37 The point will be not merely to avenge the dead child with another death but also to avenge the damaged self; hence the revenger seeks out additional targets for destruction. Despite the fact that the language of revenge is a language of symmetrical payback, of “quit[ting]” or “requit[ing]” a wrong (1.1.144, 3.1.297), of repaying “meed for meed, death for a deadly deed” (5.3.65), vengeful acts commonly exceed rather than equal the original wrong. Particularly in this play, revengers overtop in order to get even. Thus Tamora will seek to “raze” Titus’s whole family for the death of her son Alarbus (1.1.456); thus Titus will seek to “o’erreach” his enemies “in their own devices” (5.2.143).

37 On the trauma survivor’s “dead” self, see Shay, 51–53.
At the same time, in *Titus Andronicus* revengers seek to reenact a traumatic scene with the roles reversed: revenge has an intimate relationship with theater. The experience of humiliation leads the revenger not only to double his or her violent deeds but also requires a public performance to repair self-image. Now he is the one on top and in control, while the perpetrator of the original wrong is placed not in the position of the true victim (the murdered or violated child) but in that of the trauma survivor—the parent forced to experience extremities of loss and humiliation through the murder or violation of his child. Hence the violence of revenge swerves from its true target, requiring the sacrifice of innocents who function as props in the revenger’s show, performed for an audience that includes the perpetrator along with the broader community.

By reenacting the traumatic scene with roles reversed, the revenger may also hope to get rid of the emotions that threaten to engulf him by projecting them back into the perpetrator. Now it will be the enemy parent who experiences the vicarious suffering, the sense of powerlessness, the loss, the grief—in short the trauma—of seeing a child maimed or killed, while being helpless to stop it. In the language of revenge, quitting a wrong often involves returning it, preferably in the “throat” of the wrongdoer (1.1.554; 3.1.275). When a debt has been quitted (i.e., repaid), it ceases to exist. When something is “returned,” one no longer has it. It is as if the wrong, along with the suffering it produced, could be transformed into an object and “returned to sender,” like an unwanted present. The revenger’s ultimate goal may indeed be the perpetrator’s annihilation—but not until a long period of mental torture has preceded it.

Since revenge requires excess to contain the emotional legacy of trauma, it is hardly surprising that it creates the conditions for a potentially endless cycle of retaliatory killings. What seems to the injured family like justice—“righting a wrong”—is perceived by the family’s enemies as unjust and produces new traumas in need of containment by revenge. The revenger’s self is a constricted self, consumed by the need to revenge in ways that blind him to all other considerations. In Shakespeare’s construction, it also becomes a split self, shaped by dissociation. Overwhelmed by loss and humiliation, both Tamora and Titus cut themselves off from their grief; “sorrow” becomes “an enemy” and the process of mourning is aborted. Revenge offers reempowerment and repairs family and personal identity, while grief leads only to chaos. Yet revenge cannot mend bodies, revive the dead, or help trauma survivors form new attachments. Grief keeps reasserting itself. Hence the

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38 Cf. Herman: “The revenge fantasy is often a mirror image of the traumatic memory, in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed” (189). In general, however, revenge is seldom a topic that comes up in the discussion of trauma and its aftermath; Herman’s own discussion of revenge is limited to a single page.
tendency for revenge to become obsessive; when the self has not come to terms with its losses, revenge’s satisfactions prove temporary.

The play also produces a version of dissociation for the audience. Trauma has an affinity for the grotesque. This is a play that at times evokes bizarrely inappropriate emotions and disjunction between thoughts and feeling. There is a gap, in many scenes, between what we feel and what we think we should feel, or between the language characters use and the realities they describe. As one critic has put it, *Titus* is Shakespeare’s “early experiment in the disruption of an audience’s stock responses”; as another has said, it is a play full of “juxtapositions . . . designed to induce a sort of evaluative vertigo” and “jarringly appropriate incongruities.”

Characters who claim our sympathies suddenly morph into villains (Tamora); heroes seem excessively problematic (Titus in Act 1); villains have sudden moments of decency (Aaron); in scenes where we expect pathos, we get black comedy (Quintus and Martius falling into the pit); characters give speeches full of complex rhetorical figures in situations that appear to call for action, not words (Marcus’s first speech to Lavinia after her rape). Throughout, the play juxtaposes laughter with terrible despair. The closer revenge gets to justice, the more blindly, even comically perverse it seems. Even at the end of the play, the “assumptive world” torn apart by trauma is not fully put back together for us. Rome still is wedded to “cruel piety,” its restored “wholeness” produced by a kind of sleight of hand.

In the sections that follow I take a closer look at Shakespeare’s exploration of the intimate relationship between trauma and revenge by examining three key traumatic events: the combat deaths of Titus’s sons, the sacrifice of Alarbus, and the rape of Lavinia. I also explore the perverse therapies characters use to cope with their traumatic experience, examining how revenge both contains and fails to contain the potentially overwhelming emotions trauma unleashes. Though there are many parallels between *Titus Andronicus* and contemporary trauma theory, Shakespeare, I believe, also has his own special insight into the psychology of trauma and revenge. At the end of the essay, therefore, I briefly consider some of the differences between Shakespeare’s play and contemporary trauma theory and make some observations about Shakespeare’s particular contribution to today’s debates.

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41 On the play’s use of comedy, see Richard J. Brucher, “‘Tragedy, Laugh On’: Comic Violence in *Titus Andronicus*,” *Renaissance Drama* 10 (1979): 71–91; for Brucher the ‘comically savage depiction of violence’ comes “into conflict with a more fundamental recognition that violence which causes real pain ought not to be amusing” (81). See also Kerrigan, 193–216.
TITUS AND THE GHOSTS OF WAR

Much discussion of Titus Andronicus cites the ritual sacrifice of Tamora’s son Alarbus as the play’s initiating conflict. Viewed by the Romans as a pious duty, it is “cruel” and “barbarous” to Tamora and her sons, an unholy act of murder that they must avenge (ll. 133–34). As Naomi Liebler has put it, “the tragedy is set in motion by conflicting ritual observances, a set of relativities, a clash of cultures.” 42 Nevertheless, it is not the first traumatic event referenced by the play; the ritual’s function is tied to the battlefield deaths that precede it. Titus Andronicus is at first a “coming home” story: Titus and his son Lucius return as combat survivors, carrying coffins and haunted by ghosts. Their experience of loss is notably extreme. In the course of five wars with the Goths, twenty-one Andronici sons have been killed on the battlefield. Now Titus and Lucius are plagued by disturbing visions of the sons trapped in limbo until their “poor remains” (l. 84) receive proper burial. Their visions have the quality of waking nightmare. Titus sees his sons “hover[ing] on the dreadful shore of Styx,” restless and angry (l. 91), while Lucius fears “prodigies” the ghosts will send if their anger remains “unappeased” (ll. 104, 103).

The traumatic legacy of war, then, provides a key context for the sacrifice of Alarbus. The ritual is designed to help survivors of combat cope with the loss of fallen comrades—in this case, comrades who are also family members—and is a prerequisite for proper burial. It is tempting to relate Titus’s state of mind to what trauma theorists today would call survivor guilt. Titus, however, reproaches himself not for his own survival but for being “unkind and careless” because he is slow to get his sons buried (l. 89). Until they are laid to rest in an honorable tomb, “Secure from worldly chances and mishaps” (l. 155), they are in an acutely vulnerable and shamed state. In addition, they are full of unsatisfied anger. They require not only proper burial but also an “extra” death: neither victory on the battlefield nor the capture of the enemy’s royal family has been enough to pay them back for their own loss of life. The survivors owe them another killing: the ghosts would take out their rage on their own family if not allowed one further opportunity to humiliate the enemy. Moreover, this killing must be extravagantly bloody, recapitulating through the lopping of limbs and hewing of flesh the conditions of death on the battlefield. The ghosts are in an important sense the play’s first revengers.

At the same time, the sacrifice of Alarbus can be thought of as the play’s first example of trauma therapy, designed to ease the minds of the survivors as well as satisfy the ghosts. The rites of human sacrifice and proper burial enable the sur-

vivors to contain potentially overwhelming emotions, restore self-image, pay a debt
to the dead, enhance family honor, and reconnect to the broader community. Like
many of the play’s subsequent spectacles of revenge, the ritual reenacts a traumatic
scene with the roles reversed: Lucius, acting on behalf of his fallen brothers, takes
on the role of dominance and control by torturing and killing Alarbus, the symbol-
ic substitute for his brothers’ former killers. Significantly, it is a very public perfor-
man: Lucius’s acts are witnessed and approved of by all of Rome. All the while
Tamora and her sons are forced to look on, horrified and powerless. The Andronici
sons’ remains are placed in an honorable tomb, “sumptuously re-edified” (l. 356),
while Alarbus’s body is dismembered, desecrated, “clean consumed” (l. 132). The
ultimate indignity is to have nothing left of a loved one to bury.

For the Romans, human sacrifice is very successful in enabling the griefwork rec-
ommended by modern trauma theorists. Though Titus is clearly saddened by the
death of his sons (ll. 95–98), he is not overpowered by it; later he will claim “For
two-and-twenty sons I never wept, / Because they died in honour’s lofty bed”
(3.1.10–11). The Goths, of course, have a different perspective; to them the Romans
are merely committing an act of unspeakable cruelty. The rest of the play indeed
unfolds from this crisis of cultural difference. At the same time, however, crisis is
also the result of similarities. In her plea to Titus before Alarbus’s sacrifice, Tamora
appeals to notions of mercy and equity that Rome also shares, and she and her sons
react to the killing of a family member as any Roman family would, viewing it as a
wrong that blood relatives have a duty to avenge. The story of Hecuba that Tamora’s
sons use as a sanction for their revenge is from Ovid’s Metamorphoses—a Roman
author’s text (1.1.138–42). The ritual the Romans use to bring closure to the war
relocates conflict instead of settling it, converting war between nations into a
vendetta between families. From here on out, Titus Andronicus will rewrite the “com-
ing home” story as revenge tragedy.

Tamora’s Revenge

Discussion of Tamora’s character and role in the play has often focused on her sex-
uality and exoticism: she is a “Semiramis,” “foul adulteress,” with a “foul desire” for a
“swart” and “barbarous” Moor, as well as a bereaved mother (2.2.118, 109, 79, 72, 78).43
For some of the critics who see her in these terms, Tamora is built primarily out of
patriarchal stereotypes, becoming, for misogynist reasons, increasingly demonized as
the main villain of the play once she turns against Titus and his family.44 Yet though

43 Kehler offers a rich study of Tamora as a “lusty widow” figure (318–22), and Hanna examines
Tamora in relation to legends of Semiramis (13–16).
44 Thus, for example, Kehler sees character inconsistency in Tamora’s move from grieving mother
to sexualized revenger, an “about-face” on Shakespeare’s part (321) that she explains as follows: “as
her lustful sexuality is clearly a key aspect of her character, I would like to refocus the discussion by examining her response to the sacrifice of Alarbus—another type of war trauma. Her villainy is not driven by lust; rather it unfolds from her reaction to the horror of her son’s death by torture, dismemberment, and fire. That loss, for Tamora, will be filtered through a powerful sense of humiliation. Calling attention not only to her sexuality but also to her finely tuned sense of entitlement as queen and mother in an honor culture, Shakespeare gives Tamora more coherence as a character than these critics generally acknowledge, and she plays a crucial role in Shakespeare’s exploration of the multiple yet related ways in which revenge can provide an emotional container for trauma. The play brings out strong parallels between Roman and Goth responses to atrocity: Tamora, like Titus, experiences trauma as a “double death,” in which both damage to self and loss of child are central. As such, the “cure” of her revenge will also require excess, replaying Roman actions while intensifying their brutality.

Tamora’s moving plea in Act 1 to spare her son’s life makes vivid her grief and her attachment to Alarbus: He is as “dear” to her as Titus’s sons are to him, as valiant and pious in fighting for “their country’s cause” (1.1.111, 116). But before the scene is over, her attention will shift from grief to her own sense of humiliation; unlike the Andronici, she has no access to rites that can help survivors retain a connection to the dead. Far from being supported by a broader community, she must endure the loss of her son in front of an indifferent, even hostile audience of foreigners. She is onstage, rendering the offense to her honor more acute, deepening her narcissistic wound. Her later aside to Saturninus demonstrates how much this sense of humiliation fuels her desire for revenge:

I’ll find a day to massacre them all,
And raze their faction and their family,
The cruel father and his traitorous sons
To whom I sued for my dear son’s life,
And make them know what ’tis to let a queen
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.

(1.1. 455–60)

Alarbus is still “dear son,” but it is the injury to her identity as queen—forced to “Kneel in the streets,” making a plea “in vain”—that prompts her wish to “raze” Titus’s family and faction. Tamora reads the trauma of loss primarily as a wound to her own identity. Her narcissistic rage subsumes her grief: after this moment it

maternal supplicant, Tamora is a powerless character, less interesting than a femme fatale. . . . Perhaps that’s why the morning after Alarbus’s hewing. . . . Tamora is discovered speaking sylvan seduction poetry to Aaron. No longer a naturalistic character, she is strategically reduced and refashioned in accordance with a historical trajectory of misogyny, one of whose topoi is the lusty widow” (320).
is as if the loss of Alarbus will be too painful to recall directly. She will not even experience his presence as a ghost.

Tamora's villainy grows out of her acute sense of humiliation rather than out of her lustful nature. It is as if the tenderhearted mother simply dies with Alarbus and in her place stands an insulted, vindictive queen, bent on a highly inflated form of payback—razing Titus's family and faction—an exaggerated form of vengeance for her damaged self-image. Yet in Act 1, Tamora's sensitivity to humiliation links her to the Romans more than it differentiates her. She seems aptly paired with the vain, touchy Saturninus, whose own motive for revenge grows out of the offense he takes at Titus's popularity with the people, which seems briefly to strip Saturninus of his hoped-for election as emperor (“Andronicus, would thou were shipped to hell / Rather than rob me of the people's hearts” [ll. 210–11]). Titus displays the same sensitivity to insult when he kills his own son Mutius for humiliating him by defending Bassianus's claim to Lavinia. Even after Titus's rage passes, he cannot openly admit that he may have "In a bad quarrel slain a virtuous son" (l. 347). Indeed, of the three characters, Tamora's sense of humiliation and vengeful anger seems by far the most justified. Even the excess that is evident in her wish for revenge replicates Roman practice: the sacrifice of Alarbus also required a surplus death. She becomes, in effect, the Roman she claims herself to be (“Titus, I am incorporate in Rome, / A Roman now adopted happily” [ll. 467–68]).

Through the insistent doublings and echoes in the play, Shakespeare shows us that villains and heroes share a common emotional situation in their experience of the humiliation of traumatic loss. They are differentiated ultimately by the way they respond to this situation. Villains come to be villains primarily because they are willing to kill or severely injure comparatively innocent family members to achieve the goal of revenge. Thus Tamora will require the death of two sons along with the rape and maiming of a daughter as payback for the single death of Alarbus—making the ritual of human sacrifice look in retrospect curiously civilized. Her villainy is distinguished from the Romans' primarily by degree, growing out of a psychology and set of cultural practices shared with them.

Tamora's sexuality is not irrelevant here. Among other things, it helps to underscore the incontinence of her revenge and links her to the rest of her family; Tamora's rapist sons, her lover Aaron, and even the cuckolded, licentious Saturninus share an illicit sexual hedonism along with their participation in an extreme form of

45 The only other time Tamora mentions Alarbus is during her confrontation with Lavinia, when, urging on Chiron and Demetrius, she refers to him as "your brother" (2.2.164), not "dear son."
46 In his opening speech Bassianus suggests his brother's general lack of restraint (1.1.13–16); this impression is reinforced when Saturninus, seeing Tamora after Titus has promised Lavinia to him, comments: "A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue / That I would choose were I to choose anew" (ll. 265–66).
revenge. Her unholy family, reconstituted in the context of war trauma and captivity, contrasts with Titus’s chaste family of self-sacrificing “servitors” of Rome, even as the two families share a response to humiliation and traumatic loss.

Interestingly, Tamora’s lustful nature at first appears to distract her from the project of revenge. Her erotic union with Aaron in the forest’s pastoral setting takes her to a zone of regressive pleasures, enacting a fantasy of return to infancy. There, “each wreathed in the other’s arms,” she hopes to lose herself and find rest, the noises of hunting merging with birds to become “a nurse’s song / Of lullaby to bring her babe asleep” (2.2.25, 28–29). Tamora seems here to wish to be both mother and child; finding a substitute for her lost son in Aaron, both she and her lover are soothed like infants by a nurse. Tamora temporarily renounces the claims of the adult world and drives the reality of loss out of consciousness altogether, much like trauma survivors who seek escape via substance abuse or other forms of addiction. In this state of mind, revenge is beside the point. Or perhaps it has become feminized. It is as if Tamora—a woman governed by Venus (l. 30)—might find her desire for vengeance on Rome satisfied by merely cuckoldling Rome’s emperor via her adulterous union with a black lover. If it were not for the male initiative taken by Aaron, revenge might be derailed by wayward female appetites.

Lust, then, does not cause revenge’s villainous excess; what Shakespeare shows instead is how lust may be harnessed to achieve revenge’s violent aims. Serving Saturn, not Venus, Aaron thwarts Tamora’s desire to retreat into indolent, “venereal” pastimes (l. 37), placing her back in a situation that revives her thirst for revenge by arranging for Bassianus and Lavinia to find them in a compromising embrace. Postponing erotic union with Tamora until their revenge plot is completed, he stages a version of coitus interruptus, intensifying her experience of shame and heightening her desire for retaliation when Bassianus and Lavinia confront and mock her for her adulterous behavior.

Her attention redirected, Tamora becomes Aaron’s inventive and brutal collaborator in an improvisational theater of revenge. Tamora’s eloquent—if-spurious pit speech (ll. 91–115) not only cleverly carries forward the plot against Titus’s family, it also powerfully evokes the humiliation and rage associated with her experience of

47 Aaron orchestrates much of what happens in Act 2, having scripted in advance a plan to have Lavinia raped, Bassianus killed, and Titus’s sons framed for their father’s murder. It is Aaron who cleverly redirects the competitive “braving” (1.1.525 s.d.) of Chiron and Demetrius away from the goal of seducing Lavinia and toward raping her, and who draws on Ovid’s story of Philomel for a model (2.2.43). For reasons of space, I have left out any discussion of Aaron’s role as trauma survivor—which, in any case, Shakespeare presents neither in the same way nor to the same extent that he does for Tamora and Titus. For a compelling discussion of Aaron and race, see Emily C. Bartels, “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race,” SJQ 41 (1990): 433–54 (reprinted in Kolin, ed., 265–83).
Alarbus’s sacrifice and with the more recent events in the forest. Her description—mendacious though it is—of being bound to a tree and abandoned in an “abhorred pit” (l. 98), to be set upon in the dead of night by “A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes, / Ten thousand swelling toads [and] urchins” (ll. 100–101), all making “fearful and confused cries” (l. 102), provides an image richly expressive of the powerlessness, the social rejection, and the shame involved in being publicly humiliated. It is the insults of Lavinia and Bassianus, and the way they recall earlier Roman actions against Tamora, that most obviously trigger the shift of landscape imagery in Act 2 from courtly, Ovidian woods to “barren detested vale” (l. 93) and “abhorred pit.” At the same time, as a recoding of the landscape by Tamora in the service of Aaron’s plot, the pit imagery conveys the brutality of their revenge, glancing ahead to the fusing of violence and sex implicit in the imminent offstage rape of Lavinia. A complex, overdetermined image, the “abhorred pit” is among other things the place where humiliation and eroticized violence come together.

Fueled by her powerful sense of insult, Tamora’s improvisational theater of revenge works its perverse cure through repetition and overtopping. It is her own subjective experience of Alarbus’s death that she seeks to reproduce in Titus and that dictates the shape of her revenge. As the confrontation with Lavinia unfolds, the scene rehearses aspects of Tamora’s traumatic experience while reversing the roles of the players. Lavinia, imploring for her life, appeals to Titus’s example, who “gave thee life when well he might have slain thee” (l. 159). But Tamora is recalling a different scene:

Hadst thou in person ne’er ended me,
   Even for his sake am I pitiless.
Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain
   To save your brother from the sacrifice,
But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
Therefore away with her and use her as you will:
   The worse to her, the better loved of me.

(ll. 161–67)

Lavinia takes the place of Alarbus, while Tamora and her sons assume the roles of Titus and Lucius. Though Titus is not present in the forest, he is the most important audience of what is performed there—destined to endure the very suffering Tamora endured as a witness of her son’s terrible sacrifice. In short order, Titus will be forced to kneel in the streets to make a plea in vain; to confront the dismemberment and pain of his daughter and to receive the body parts of his sons, dishonored and executed as murderers. As Alarbus’s body was desecrated, so Lavinia’s will be violated through rape.

Thus Tamora’s theater of revenge provides a therapy similar to that offered by the Roman spectacle of human sacrifice. As Titus and Lucius were able to recover a
sense of agency, repair damaged self-esteem, and purge themselves of unbearable emotions by reversing the experience of battlefield loss, so Tamora reclaims dominance through enacting a fantasy of undoing the past through reversal, purging her own feelings of humiliation and powerlessness by projecting them into Titus. Rather than attacking Titus directly or calling him to account as modern notions of justice might require, her revenge brings satisfaction by targeting his children and turning the parent into an anguished witness of their suffering. At the same time, “getting even” paradoxically requires excess in order to secure the humiliation of one’s enemy—through the “show” of revenge to *show him up*. Hence, perhaps, the aptness of making Lavinia’s rape the centerpiece of her revenge; Lavinia, rather than one of Titus’s sons, is closer to being Tamora’s double, her rape a way of retaliating for Tamora’s own sense of violated selfhood as well as for the violation of the body of Alarbus. Given the extent of Tamora’s humiliation, the “double death” to be avenged has, as it were, multiplied. Revenge in a highly image-conscious honor culture, Shakespeare suggests, almost inevitably becomes a competition in which violence must escalate: humiliating one’s enemy can best be achieved by outdoing him.

Tamora’s revenge also enables her to reconnect with what little community is left to her. If Titus is the chief audience of her theater of revenge, it is also enacted for her sons and for Aaron, its improvisational and collaborative nature making it the joint project of a war-damaged “alternative” family, reconstituted through eroticized violence and adultery. “You shall know, my boys, / Your mother’s hand shall right your mother’s wrong” (ll. 120–21), Tamora says before she has discovered that letting her sons rape Lavinia will be an even better way to get revenge; “Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain.” If for Lavinia Tamora’s consent to the rape is a mark of her deplorable lack of womanhood (ll. 182–83; see also ll. 136, 147), for Tamora it is her duty as a mother not to “rob [her] sweet sons of their fee” (l. 179). Similarly, the sons stage their murder of Bassianus as a performance of family identity for Tamora: “This is a witness that I am thy son” (l. 116), announces Demetrius while stabbing Bassianus. Having completed this phase of her revenge, Tamora now is free to find Aaron: “Now will I hence to seek my lovely Moor,” she says as she exits, “And let my spleenful sons this trull deflower” (ll. 190–91)—as if a resumption of her “venereal” pleasures with Aaron might coincide with her sons’ assault on Lavinia. Whatever discord previously existed in this family (such as the competitive wrangling between brothers that began Act 2, and Aaron’s thwarting of Tamora’s amorous desires) has been replaced by a shared sense of purpose, a family enterprise, made possible by Lavinia’s rape.

**After Lavinia’s Rape**

Of all the traumatic events in *Titus Andronicus*, it is Lavinia’s rape that has received the most attention, especially in recent feminist criticism. Indeed, many
feminists focus on the rape to the exclusion of the play’s other atrocities, implying that whatever suffering Lavinia’s male relatives experience does not count in quite the same way as Lavinia’s, does not warrant the audience’s sympathy or the critic’s attention. Stressing the ways in which patriarchal assumptions construct the play’s representation of rape, some of these critics go on to accuse Lavinia’s male relatives of ignoring her suffering and acting as if the rape were to be understood solely as a stain on patriarchal family honor; Titus and Marcus, they suggest, are responding to the rape as if it were traumatic only for themselves.48 More specifically, these critics claim that the male Andronici silence and reduce Lavinia to an object, treat her as a mirror of their own narcissistic concerns, or ignore the reality of her pain by turning her into a “literary device devoid of literal meaning,” a “picture” of something other than herself, a mere pretext for literary allusions, excessive punning, and other forms of baroque wordplay.49 A few go so far as to claim that the male Andronici are interested in Lavinia only until they can extract the names of the rapists, at which point they cast her aside to gratify the “male lust” for vengeance.50 Their treatment of her amounts to a “second rape.”51

But as other critics—including some feminists—have noted, in the scenes that immediately follow Lavinia’s entrance after her rape, the situation is much different. Titus, in fact, surprises us by his refusal to react predictably as a Roman patriarchal father. When Marcus announces “This was thy daughter,” Titus insists:

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48 This is not to say that the ideology of rape as stain is irrelevant to the play; on the contrary. For important discussions of rape in the play, see Helms, 557–58; Kahn, 47–72; and Wynne-Davies, 129–35.
49 Harris, 395; and Kendall, 308. Kendall also writes: “After her rape and mutilation, . . . [Lavinia] becomes a kind of code, a cipher that needs deciphering. But she is also a cipher in the sense of being a null. The other characters speak of her as if she were an object” (314). Cohen writes: “Lavinia does not speak after her rape. The men speak for her. Her silence is filled by male voices. . . . Even when she finally expresses herself, it is in a language and manner that is inevitably masculinist” (85); Eaton writes: “the play emphasizes her ‘lively body’ and her reinscription as a woman in a patriarchal humanist script” (63). Rowe writes: “Signifying her own lack of expressive agency, Lavinia thus conveniently represents to her family nothing more than their own experience. . . . Her relatives see Lavinia as a mirror and through a mirror” (295). However, Rowe’s argument is really more nuanced; she sees Lavinia as acquiring some agency once she takes Titus’s hand in her mouth and acknowledges her active participation in the revenge plot (300). Related points are made by Green, 201–3; and Marshall. Critics who assign more importance to Lavinia’s ability to write via the body and who allow for more agency, as I do, include Fawcett, Kahn, Wynne-Davies, and Cunningham.
50 According to Asp, “Lavinia embodies in a grotesque literal extreme the patriarchal wish that women remain silent and obedient to male commands and interpretations, without expressing desires of their own, subsumed under male goals and values. . . . When Lavinia reveals her information [about the rapists], she ceases to be an object of interest; there is no more to be learned from observing her” (340). Harris, too, notes that after the rape Lavinia “has no recognizable value. She becomes an unfamiliar, unknown presence to the men around her” (393).
51 Bate, ed., 36.
“Why, Marcus, so she is” (3.1.63–64). When Lucius first sees Lavinia and says “this object kills me,” Titus reproves him: “Faint-hearted boy, arise and look upon her” (ll. 65–66). Far from turning her away as a defiled object or focusing on rape’s stain, Titus draws her more closely in to their small family circle, becomes fixated on her grief and physical suffering, and throughout Act 3 shows little interest in revenge or the names of those who wronged her. He invokes a “picture” of Lavinia only to insist on her living presence and her bodily suffering.52

Certainly it is true that throughout much of Acts 3 and 4, Marcus and Titus indulge in a bizarrely timed literariness. (Marcus’s speech at 2.3.11–57 is often singled out as an example of this, with its blazon of Lavinia’s body, along with its extensive verbal play with “hands” and the many allusions to Ovid and other writers.) Yet their tendency to aestheticize Lavinia’s pain coexists with an acute awareness of her suffering and an urgent desire to “ease” her grief (3.1.122). Lavinia’s male relatives simultaneously reach out to her and retreat from her into a world of words, in a moving if also sometimes absurd attempt to gain control over their own potentially overwhelming emotions. Rather than silencing Lavinia or thoughtlessly imposing meanings upon her, Titus struggles to find a way to hear her speak, learning from her a new language of gestures by observing her and miming her movements, receiving validation or correction from her in the form of sighs, hand motions, tears, and kisses. His goal is not to find the name of her defilers but to find a way to end her suffering (“Gentle Lavinia, let me kiss thy lips / Or make some sign how I may do thee ease” [ll. 121–22]). As Mary Laughlin Fawcett has shown in a powerful study, father and daughter engage in a complex dialogue and become collaborators in making meaning. Lavinia is “at once subject and object, narrator . . . and addressee . . . . Speech may be silenced, but as long as the body can move at all, writing will out.”53

Ironically, her father is only capable of hearing Lavinia’s “voice” after her tongue has been cut out: “her silence after her mutilation appears to be a development, an increase in eloquence, rather than a stopping or a reversal.”54

What is it, then, that Lavinia “says” to her father in these scenes? Using gestures, a copy of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and her uncle’s staff, she finds a way to express her pain and grief, to describe what happened to her in the forest, and eventually to name those who raped and maimed her (4.1.1–78). She enters into a pact with her male relatives to seek “mortal revenge” upon her enemies (ll. 87–94). But she also makes clear that part of her grief comes from witnessing the pain and suffering of

52 Titus says “Had I but seen thy picture in this plight, / It would have madded me; what shall I do / Now I behold thy lively body so?” (3.1.104–6). He brings up a “picture” only to insist on its referential power, not its power to create aesthetic distance, then goes on to stress that what he sees is not a picture and thus is even more affecting.

53 Fawcett, 262 and 266.

54 Fawcett, 266.
her male relatives: she weeps at the mention of the brothers she knows are dead (3.1.112–13); sobs and weeps at her father’s grief (ll. 137–38; see also ll. 144–48); kneels with Titus to pray for heaven’s pity (l. 210); kisses the decapitated heads of her brothers (l. 250 s.d.). Perhaps it is worth noting that while some critics dismiss the pain of Titus and Marcus, Lavinia herself does not.

The play is arguably at its most moving in these scenes of shared suffering, in which the surviving members of this once-proliﬁc, powerful, and highly regarded patrilineal clan attempt to console each other in a Rome that has become for them “a wilderness of tigers” (l. 54). Lavinia’s male relatives provide her, however brieﬂy, with something resembling the community of witnesses that some trauma therapists consider crucial in helping a survivor of rape or other traumatic event to cope with her experience, enabling her to recover a sense of safety and human connection while listening supportively to her story.55 But if Lavinia’s pain is certainly more urgent and terrible than that of her father, uncle, and brother, theirs, too, is serious and potentially overwhelming. Titus has, after all, just seen two of his sons taken to prison, a third son banished, a son-in-law killed; he has been publicly spurned by Rome’s tribunes as well as by Tamora and Saturninus, left prostrate in the dirt to tell his “sorrows to the stones” (l. 37). It is in this charged context of his own vulnerability that the sight of Lavinia wounds him worse than death.

If Lavinia’s male relatives can be viewed in these scenes as a witnessing community, providing support for a trauma survivor, in the terms of other theorists they can be viewed as survivors themselves of “secondary traumatic stress.”56 Such stress is caused by “knowledge of a traumatizing event experienced by a signiﬁcant other,” often a family member or spouse, a knowledge that produces vicarious suffering and forces them to confront their own powerlessness.57 Variously described as “emotional contagion,” “the ripple effect,” and “trauma infection,” secondary traumatic stress can be intense and dislocating for families of survivors and also for members of therapeutic communities that work with survivors.58 Shakespeare’s representation of the interactions between Lavinia and her male relatives strongly suggests, if not the contagiousness of Lavinia’s pain, its ﬂuidity: in Titus’s metaphors overwhelming grief ﬂows from body to body, becoming ﬁrst the overﬂowing Nile (l. 72), then a ﬂood (l. 127), ﬁnally a sea that engulfs both father and daughter (ll. 226–30; see also ll. 95–98). In addition, Titus is repeatedly made aware of his own powerlessness. His ﬁrst impulse when Marcus brings Lavinia to him is to chop oﬀ his own hands,

55 See Herman, 214–17ff.
56 Charles R. Figley and Rolf J. Kleber, “Beyond the ‘Victim’: Secondary Traumatic Stress” in Kleber et al., eds., 75–98. On traumatic countertransference, see also Herman, 140–47.
57 Figley and Kleber, 78.
58 Figley and Kleber, 78–79.
as an act of solidarity with her but also as an expression of how the hands have served him "to effectless use" (l. 77). When his hand is literally cut off, supposedly in exchange for his sons’ lives, it, too, will prove to have served “in vain” (l. 74). “What shall we do?” he several times asks, and finds only more questions (ll. 105, 134).

Nevertheless, such parallels to therapeutic communities, if taken too far, can be misleading, even sentimental; what Shakespeare shows us in these scenes are healing strategies that utterly fail. Like many trauma theorists, Titus and Marcus hope that putting grief into words and sharing it with others will help to ease it. The play repeatedly underscores the pressure they feel to give some sort of expression to sorrow through speech or gesture, even when there is no one to hear: Titus writes in the dust (l. 12), speaks to stones; Marcus comments, “Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopped, / Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is” (2.3.36–37); Lavinia painfully struggles to find a way to communicate without words or hands. But even when they find an audience able to understand and sympathize, their attempts to ease pain through language only intensifies the pain. They seem aware that their project is doomed before it begins: Marcus ends his first speech to Lavinia by saying “Do not draw back, for we will mourn with thee; / O, could our mourning ease thy misery!” (ll. 56–57)—articulating the hope and commenting on the impossibility of satisfaction almost in the same breath. Similarly, Titus in his speech at 3.1.117–36 gives expression to the wish that they could ease Lavinia’s grief by imitating her condition. He toys with the hypothesis that by cutting off hands in sympathy, biting tongues, becoming a “dumb show” of grief alongside her, they will be able to control grief: mimicry externalizes pain, takes it out of the suffering body, allows it to be moved from place to place as if it were a physical substance. But he ends where he began, asking the question “What shall we do?” The most that can be accomplished, it seems, is to invent “some device of further misery” (l. 135).

Instead of diminishing it, giving grief expression causes it to increase. At the same time, it retraumatizes by creating new episodes of powerlessness. As their handkerchiefs become too full of their own tears to absorb the tears of the others, so also their “sympathy of woe” leaves them “As far from help as limbo is from bliss” (ll. 149–50). The unsatisfied hope that heaven will answer Titus and Lavinia’s prayers is replaced by the impossible wish that their sighs will “breathe the welkin dim / And stain the sun with fog” (ll. 212–13). Titus’s language can’t encompass his pain; a rhetoric that begins with a comparison to a river that “disdaineth bounds” (l. 72) is pressed to ever-greater extremes as sorrow grows. His imagery takes on cosmic proportions as Titus describes himself as sea and earth and Lavinia as the “weeping welkin,” her tears and sighs causing his sea and earth to be taken over by “a deluge” that cannot “hide her woes” but only “vomit” them up (ll. 222–34). And Titus’s “bottomless” sorrow (l. 218) is about to grow; immediately after this speech he will receive the heads of his decapitated sons and his own severed hand returned
to him. Temporarily, at least, he will have no words left. We approach a crisis of representation as traumatic experience exceeds language’s ability to describe it. But this is not quite Shakespeare’s point: even if language could adequately represent pain here, it could not sufficiently heal or end it.

What will, of course, provide a kind of healing is revenge. Significantly, it is not until the messenger brings Titus and his surviving family his hand along with the heads of his executed sons that his thoughts start seriously to turn in this direction. Only with the messenger’s entrance is Tamora’s own revenge complete. The Andronici have been forced to endure extremes of grief and powerlessness; now they are also served the “double death” of humiliation: “To weep with them that weep doth ease some deal, / But sorrow flouted at is double death” (ll. 245–46), comments Marcus after the heads and hand are delivered. Retrospectively, it seems that shared mourning did provide some ease; but now they are entering a realm where even this small relief is unavailable. Tamora has made their grief her “sports” (l. 239), gulling them into false hopes, now mocking and scorn ing them with cut-off heads and hand; in so doing, she transforms the landscape of grief into something darker, more hellish, more macabre. Throughout Act 3, Shakespeare has emphasized the contrasts between Tamora’s family and the surviving members of the Andronici clan: while Tamora and her sons and lover show few signs of grief and no capacity to mourn, escaping instead into the pleasures of illicit sex, the Andronici find no escape from grief and give themselves over to extremes of mourning. But from here on out, as the Andronici, too, come together to take up the collaborative project of revenge, the families will strongly resemble one another; in triumphing over Titus, Tamora also makes him into her double.

Perhaps because Shakespeare offers us a more extended look at the aftermath of Lavinia’s rape than he does of Alarbus’s sacrifice, we are able to grasp in more detail the role humiliation can play in reshaping traumatic experience. Tamora’s grief was seemingly transformed in an instant into a desire for revenge by the humiliating experience of being forced to “kneel in the streets” and plead “in vain” for her son’s life. Now we see in a more leisurely fashion how humiliation can compound the pain of loss; how it can create cognitive overload and result in what trauma theorists call “psychic numbing”; how it can flip the switch, as it were, and produce dissociation. Marcus becomes “like a stony image, cold and numb,” while Titus has “not another tear to shed” (ll. 259, 267). Titus’s laughter at this point (l. 265), simultaneously appropriate and inappropriate, also signals the play’s stylistic shift into the grotesque. Traumatic events, in a sense, help to create the grotesque, maimed bodies and minds, confounding limits, undermining assumptions about what is appropriate and reasonable. The vacuum created when loss combines with humiliation also creates the need for more absurd and desperate substitutions. Hence the form of Titus’s madness: whereas Titus had earlier acknowledged the failure of language
to control emotion, now he asserts its success, taking figures literally, equating objects with the things they stand for: the fly that stands for Aaron the Moor because it is black (3.2.67–79); the heart, and thus the misery, that can be “thumped down” by pounding flesh or wounded and killed with sighs and groans (ll. 9–11); the severed hands that can be forgotten simply by not naming them (ll. 26–30). In the wake of humiliation, it seems that the vulnerable “I” can no longer allow its woes or its limitations to be exposed to public view—even if that public is merely Titus’s own family.

Yet there is also a sly, knowing self-mockery here; Titus is aware that the joke is on him; hence his bitter laugh. In fleeting moments he subtly acknowledges his “tenfold grief” (l. 6) and the inadequacy of language (“Fie, fie, how frantically I square my talk, / As if we should forget we had no hands / If Marcus did not name the word of hands” [ll. 31–33]). At the same time his assertions of mastery can be viewed as an act of faith in the reempowered self that he hopes to bring into being, a kind of holding pattern until he is able to take “real” action. He cannot undo loss, restore hands, heal wounds, bring back the dead: for grief there is no cure. But revenge will have its satisfaction.

Humiliation, then, reshapes the emotional landscape of grief and loss; trauma now (as for Tamora and her family) is experienced primarily as damage to self-image and family honor. Whereas grief and concern for Lavinia’s suffering led Titus only to further grief and an intensified sense of powerlessness, damaged honor is something that can be restored by taking revenge. For Titus the decisive moment seems to be the “dismal sight” of his sons’ decapitation (3.1.262). “Which way shall I find Revenge’s cave?” Titus asks as he gazes on them:

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

(ll. 271–75)

The violation of bodily integrity that Titus confronts in these heads without bodies suggests the fragmentation of his emotional integrity: the sons, as self-objects, can no longer mirror the father’s wholeness or embody family honor. Like the ghosts of Act 1, they accusingly threaten Titus, as if he is to blame for their condition; at any rate, they make him responsible for rectifying it. His language, dictated by classical precedent and aristocratic custom, promotes the consoling illusion that revenge will not merely reduplicate the wrongs inflicted on the family but can actually “return” or get rid of them and the terrible emotions they arouse, by putting them back into the bodies of those who first committed them. The reality of loss and grief is not so much denied (Titus will acknowledge it from time to time) as side-
stepped, internally divided from a main self that is restored to agency: “sorrow,” as Titus says, has become his “enemy,” though it still exerts its pressure (l. 268).

Ironically, Tamora has almost done the Andronici a favor by so openly making sport of their pain. They now have a “job” to do, a sense of purpose and direction. Titus assigns the other members of the family various tasks, sending Lucius off to raise an army and “employ[ing]” Lavinia and Marcus (ll. 282–88); soon, even Lucius’s young son is involved, since now is a time even to “arm the minds of infants” (4.1.86). Feminist representations of Titus’s treatment of Lavinia have more textual support from 4.1 on; his struggle to “interpret all her martyr’d signs” (3.2.36) comes to settle on deciphering the names of those who raped and maimed her, and he presses her into service as an assistant in the project of revenge. Yet even here it is Lavinia who initiates the discovery of her rapists’ names by chasing young Lucius and making frantic gestures over the schoolboy text of Ovid’s _Metamorphoses_. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Titus has offered and Lavinia has accepted revenge as a strategy for coping with grief and shame. For what will be restored through revenge is family self-image, not Titus’s alone. The family project is sealed through vows and pledges in which all members participate and which Marcus initiates (4.1.87–94). Significantly, revenge is a promise Titus first makes to them—a task he takes upon himself on their behalf.59

Their revenge unfolds along now-familiar lines. Humiliation, a wound that is produced in public, seeks healing through public spectacle: Titus designs their revenge to disclose itself through a series of scenes, to punish his audience(s) through theater. Like Tamora’s, Titus’s theater of revenge makes use of bits and pieces of his family’s traumatic experiences, reenacting trauma with the roles reversed, working its perverse cure through repetition and overtopping. Titus’s revenge thus cites the previous spectacles of Lavinia’s rape, his two sons’ decapitation, and Tamora’s scornful “merry jest” (5.2.174). He recycles the emotions associated with these experiences—humiliation, powerlessness, and horror—but makes Tamora the one who must endure them. And he pushes the poetics of revenge one step farther, “o’erreach[ing] them in their own devices,” embellishing on tropes introduced by Tamora and her sons (l. 143). As we move from the hunt in Act 2 to the feast in Act 5, Titus carries forward the metaphorical reduction of human to animal by reducing the “animals” to meat, showing us, as it were, what comes after the hunt when the prey is brought home. Thus Lavinia, the “dainty doe” (1.1.67) hunted and violated, is repaid by seeing Chiron and Demetrius drained of blood and butchered like animals. Titus makes a special point of ensuring that his victims will not be able to speak while he tells them at length and in detail of their impending fate: “stop

59 Titus swears to each of them to “right your wrongs” (3.1.279). Bate’s stage direction seems wrong here: “they” don’t vow, only Titus does.
their mouths,” he twice commands (ll. 161, 167), while they are being gagged and bound, echoing Chiron’s words to Lavinia in Act 2 and echoing as well their silencing of Lavinia by cutting out her tongue. The bodies of Tamora’s sons will be dismembered as Titus’s children have been, but again their degradation will be increased: their bones will be ground “to powder small” (l. 198) to make a paste, their “vile heads” (l. 200) baked into the pie. It is noteworthy that Titus specifies “heads” here, recalling his own sons’ decapitation. Titus’s words to Chiron and Demetrius also recall the pit of Act 2, the “swallowing womb” into which his own sons fell and which also suggested the rape of Lavinia; now Tamora’s sons will be forced back inside their mother’s body, in what amounts to a kind of oral rape by Titus. “Like to the earth,” she will “swallow her own increase” (l. 191); she will eat “the flesh that she herself hath bred” (5.3.61). Her womb was the breeding place for murderers and rapists; her stomach will become their grave.

Titus is determined to make Chiron and Demetrius witnesses of their own powerlessness and humiliation, but his ultimate audience is Tamora: it is for her that he stages his final, shocking coup de théâtre, setting her up to dupe her, humiliate her, and expose her sons’ crimes. Interestingly, he doesn’t even bother to mention the crimes she is most directly responsible for: the worst pain he can do to her is through her sons, again recapitulating his own experience of trauma, in which surviving the injury or death of one’s child is what has been most deeply wounding. Dressed as a cook, he plays up to Tamora’s view of him as “mad” and dupes her into “daintily” eating his meat pie (5.3.60)—as Titus was duped by her and Aaron into cutting off his hand. She must not only eat her sons’ flesh but know that she has done so, living just long enough to see their crimes exposed in front of Saturninus and, by implication, all of Rome. She dies knowing that Titus has turned his own defeat into public triumph over her.

At the same time, what is most shocking about Titus’s final scene is his slaying of Lavinia. Here, the patriarchal father most obviously reasserts himself; in killing Lavinia, he submits to classical precedent, removes the “stain” from family honor, and ends his own “sorrow” (“Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die” [ll. 45–46]). Her visual presence is a reminder to Titus of his own overwhelming grief and powerlessness; ending his grief and shame takes priority over Lavinia’s life. Lavinia indeed is treated as an object here, a mere prop in Titus’s final show. Yet in a peculiar way Titus seems to be critiquing the ideology of rape in staging the murder of Lavinia for Saturninus and Tamora as another “merry jest,” carried out at his audience’s expense in order to mock them. Veiling his intentions along with Lavinia’s identity, he skillfully manipulates them into thinking he has performed a senseless, “unnatural” deed (l. 47), then uses that deed to expose the crimes committed by Tamora’s sons. It is a defiant act of reclaiming mastery that “returns” dishonor back to them and reveals the brutality of Rome’s
own assumptions about appropriate responses to rape. Saturninus is tricked into calling the murder of Lavinia “unnatural and unkind” (l. 47) even though he subscribes to the logic of honor-killing (ll. 36–43). Similarly Titus’s own words double back on Titus himself: appealing to the story of Virginius as a model for his own actions, he describes that father as “rash,” his deed an “outrage” (ll. 36, 51). Titus’s performance contains its own self-critique: he knows his killing of Lavinia is horrible, yet he does it anyway, in a context that guarantees his own death.

To an extent, Titus’s revenge can be said to be more just than Tamora’s, in that Titus primarily targets the individuals responsible for the crimes against his family: Tamora’s sons are in fact rapists and murderers. By contrast, Tamora seized on members of Titus’s family who were not directly involved in the sacrifice of Alarbus. For all the doubling that goes on in the play, for all the blurring of the roles of victims and perpetrators, Tamora and Aaron do remain its chief villains. This does little to mitigate our impression of revenge’s perverse excess. It is almost a matter of happenstance that Titus does not kill innocent members of Tamora’s family: since her family and faction is much smaller, he simply runs out of bodies. That the Andronici are not above killing children to punish parents is evident in Lucius’s readiness to kill Aaron’s infant son, who is saved only by Aaron’s own clever wheeling and dealing. The Clown, too, is a casualty of Titus’s theater of revenge, if an unintended one. And Saturninus, though the play does little to arouse our sympathy for him, remains a rather ambiguous figure: guilty of negligence and vindictive feeling, the degree of his participation in the crimes committed by Tamora’s family is unclear.

In a sense, then, Titus is forced by circumstance to seek out other ways of overpowering Tamora; piling up more bodies isn’t possible here. Hence he embellishes on the style of her revenges rather than increasing them in number, outdoing Tamora in macabre wit, getting the last laugh through new, more horrific ways of causing pain and degradation. The play also invites us to see that revenge’s excess is not always directed against “others”: rather, it can take self-mutilating, even suicidal form—appropriately enough for this family of “Rome’s servitors” (1.1.357). Having hacked off his hand, then hacked up his own family, Titus is also quite clearly putting himself in harm’s way when he kills Tamora. Family honor may be restored, but it seems evident that Titus has not really ended his woe by killing Lavinia: the consuming emotions unleashed by traumatic loss can be truly extinguished only by the end of consciousness. The cure that Titus ultimately finds is his own death.

In Titus Andronicus Shakespeare provides a powerful exploration of the multiple yet related ways in which revenge can provide an emotional container for traumatic loss and humiliation. The play’s three main spectacles of revenge—the sacrifice of Alarbus, the rape of Lavinia followed by the decapitation of Titus’s sons, and the final bloodbath—rework the traumatic events that precede and precipitate them,
providing a form of therapy for the survivors by enabling them to reenact elements of the traumatic scene with the roles reversed, reestablishing agency and a position of mastery. Yet revenge fails to deliver more than a very partial healing, its mastery giving way to new experiences of powerlessness and grief, its solutions ultimately self-mutilating. Tied to excess and innocent death, revenge’s perverse therapy also mutilates the larger community, recreating trauma in the attempt to contain it. We remain in a maimed world, a grotesque world, of diminished selves and skewed, contradictory assumptions.

Shakespeare’s representation of trauma in *Titus Andronicus* offers suggestive parallels to many aspects of contemporary trauma theory. For Shakespeare as well as trauma theorists, trauma assaults a self-selfobject relationship, produces cognitive overload, and leads to a constricted self more vulnerably focused on narcissistic injury. It produces a pressure to repeat and reenact aspects of the traumatic scene in encrypted form, if not to experience flashbacks. It shows characters pushed to the point of psychic numbing and dissociation. Despite the characters’ relative lack of inwardness in this play (especially when compared with the later tragedies), Shakespeare’s psychology of trauma in *Titus Andronicus* nevertheless achieves a good deal of complexity, bringing out characterological, situational, and cultural dimensions while also suggesting trauma’s elusiveness and intractability.

At the same time, reading this play in dialogue with trauma theory suggests that Shakespeare has his own contribution to make to current conversations about trauma and healing. There is, first of all, little attention paid to revenge in trauma theory, even among theorists who are interested in the role that shame and narcissistic injury can play in the psychic life of some trauma survivors. Shakespeare’s insight that revenge can provide an emotional container for traumatic loss and humiliation—one that may even protect survivors from many symptoms of PTSD—provides a possible explanation for the persistence of revenge practices in many cultures and could open up new lines of inquiry. Second, Shakespeare lacks the confidence of some trauma theorists that talking about traumatic experience leads to healing; the play, therefore, might shed an interesting light on current debates about the importance of retelling the trauma story through narrative. To the extent that revenge therapy “works,” it does so by abandoning the project of speaking about and sharing grief, as well as by privileging theater over narrative.60 Shakespeare’s focus on theater points to the central role of damaged self-image in trauma and to the need for enactment in front of an audience to secure a new, reempowered identity.

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60 The play, in fact, might be said to recapitulate the history of drama in its treatment of revenge, moving from ritual (Alarbus’s sacrifice) to improvisation (Tamora and Aaron in 2.2) to medieval allegory (Tamora’s masque of Revenge in 5.2) and finally to Renaissance revenge tragedy. Through the final bloodbath, Titus’s theater and Shakespeare’s play become one.
Third, in contrast to many trauma theorists, Shakespeare draws attention to the permeable line between victims and perpetrators. Trauma theorists, probably because most of them are therapists and clinicians, almost always represent the trauma survivor in sympathetic terms; suffering confers a halo of innocence, while the perpetrator remains a shadowy, even demonized figure, the “other” of trauma theory. It is, of course, the job of the therapist to help the trauma survivor, no matter what his or her background. Shakespeare instead complicates audience response to trauma survivors and presents them in the context of a broader history, showing us victims who become perpetrators, and heroes and villains who share a common experience of traumatic loss and humiliation. They become differentiated by their response to victimization rather than by the mere fact of it.

Finally, Shakespeare’s play underscores the limits of healing as a metaphor and goal of trauma therapy, resisting the optimism and redemptive claims of some trauma theorists. Traumatic experience irrevocably alters the survivor’s perception of the world. It produces wounds, physical and mental, that by their very nature cannot heal, losses that cannot be recovered. But despite the play’s bleak vision, its basically pessimistic view of the chances for healing in the aftermath of trauma, it is perhaps untrue to the spirit of the play—to the play’s peculiar humor and incongruities—to end on an exclusively despairing note. I would like to return, therefore, to the macabre yet strangely moving stage image produced when Titus puts his family to work after Tamora’s “merry jest”—that is, after they have received the heads of Quintus and Marcius and Titus’s own cut-off hand. Directing Marcus to bear one head while he bears the other, he also turns to Lavinia and Lucius, saying

And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed:
Bear thou my hand, sweet wenche, between thy teeth.
As for thee, boy, go get thee from my sight:
Thou art an exile and thou must not stay;
Hie to the Goths and raise an army there,
And if ye love me, as I think you do,
Let’s kiss and part, for we have much to do.

(3.1. 282–88)

Here we glimpse briefly the possibility of hopeful action and a reconstituted community, in which the freaks, the losers, and the exiles, stubbornly persisting in the face of their losses and humiliation, find dignity in labor and “much to do.” If healing is possible, perhaps it can be best accomplished through an embrace of the grotesque.