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Shakespeare and the Conscience of Aaron

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Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare's first Roman play, stages the story of a city which quickly and relentlessly slips from a victorious and Roman 'pious' scenario into one of revengeful horror. Evil, however, emerges as a question, as the play is heading to its closure: when the butchery of a total war seems to have exhausted the possibilities of horror and a disgraced humanity – like Walter Benjamin's angel – is violently propelled into the future with its "face turned to the wreckage it leaves behind" (Benjamin 1999, 249). This is epitomized by the displacing space of a ruined monastery, the place where the surviving heir of the Andronici's (the general Lucius) and the Moor following the Goths (Aaron) are strategically summoned by Shakespeare as if to an endgame: a challenging dispute on evil and conscience. This essay foregrounds the tangle of issues (religious, theological, philosophical, cultural, racial) triggered by Act 5 and the provocative role this scene assumes within the framework of the play as well as in Shakespeare's tragic canon.

Keywords: *Acte gratuit*, conscience, homeopathic tragedy, performed evil, spectrality

Endgame

Even though performed as *the* matter of the play, evil in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's Roman "most lamentable tragedy", emerges as a question, as the play is heading towards its closure: when the butchery of a total war seems to have exhausted the possibilities of horror and a disgraced humanity, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, is violently propelled into the future with its "face turned to the past" and the wreckage it leaves behind. "The pile of debris" has grown "skyward", as we might well say inspired by the same philosopher (Benjamin 1999, 249). And the metallic roar of war fades, visually, on an image of history as a silent view of ruins, abandoned by the gods.

When the play begins we are in the aftermath of Titus's triumph. The general, "surnamed the Pius" (I.i.23), has hardly returned to

Rome from his victorious ten-year war against the Goths, when hostilities resume in the "irreligious" (I.i.133) redoubled cruel form of a vindictive crescendo, a bloody showdown under a sky of indifferent gods. "O, heavens, can you hear a good man groan / And not relent or not compassion him?" (IV.i.123-24). Meaningfully, it is Astrea, the goddess of moral justice, who first deserts the human beings. Shakespeare devotes the entire scene three of act Four to the theme of departing gods and delayed, disturbed communication between earth and heaven (IV.iii.1-120). "*Terra Astrea reliquit*: be you remembered, Marcus / She is gone, she is fled" (IV.iii.4), Titus laments, in a landscape which foretells the "wrathful skies" which scourge – unconcerned − Lear's body in the later eponymous play (*King Lear*, III.ii.42).

> Titus
> […] Marcus, we are but shrubs, no cedars we,
> No big-boned men framed of the Cyclops' size,
> But metal, Marcus, steel to the very back,
> Yet wrung with wrongs more than our backs can bear.
> And sith there is no justice in earth nor hell,
> We will solicit heaven and solicit and move the gods.
> (IV.iii.46-51)

Titus weeps, sighs, prays, he shoots messages to the gods with an arch, he vomits, he is run mad, and all in vain. As I have argued elsewhere, Titus's humoral characterization introduces us to Shakespeare's tragedy as a world marked by the unheroic and earthbound mournful manner: the *Trauerspiel* as defined by Benjamin (see Del Sapio Garbero 2022, 105-12). This has a bearing on the way evil is distributed and experienced in this play. Shakespeare assigns mainly to Titus what Ricoeur would call the "lament" of suffered evil, and assigns mostly to Aaron, the Moor, the "blame" of committed evil: "evil as wrongdoing and evil as suffering belong to two heterogeneous categories", the philosopher observes, "that of blame and that of lament" (Ricoeur 1985, 636). To the miscreant Aaron, as I want to argue in these pages, Shakespeare also unexpectedly assigns the task of bringing the issue of conscience to the fore.

Titus, the steely Roman soldier, has by now turned into "the woefull'st man that ever lived in Rome" (III.i.290). We might discern

in him a biblical lamenting Job: the upright and just man put to the test by his God who, pathetically in Shakespeare's play, experiences his relation with his gods in the terms of a Derridean dysfunctional postal space (see Derrida 1987, 5). The effect searched for by the playwright is deliberately anti-tragic as is often the case in this first Roman play: letters are foolishly shot up to heaven by Titus and his makeshift group of archers – "There's not a god left unsolicited" (IV.iii.61) –, despite being aware that their dispatches are destined to return unanswered (IV.iii.66-75). So much is Titus "wrung with wrongs" (IV. iii.47), and so immensely blinded by the thread of vindictive logic is he, that he feels he has a right to lament injustice and plead for piety and sympathy. His eyes cannot see that in the prevailing disowned humanity around him everything has acquired the hardness of stone, a pervading imagery in the *finis imperii* Rome of *Titus Andronicus*. "Pray to the devils", the demonized Moor echoes in scorn from afar, "the gods have given us over" (IV.ii.48). And yet starting by Tamora's son Alarbus sacrificed to the Roman gods, soon reciprocated by equal ferocity (the murder of Bassianus, Lavinia's rape) on the part of the Goths, Titus (differently from the biblical Job) has played no minor part in the ongoing activity of relentless butchery. After Alarbus, burned to appease the groan of the dead, Titus has slaughtered Mutius, his own son, for disobeying the rules of *romanitas*, and he is meditating Lavinia's killing, his own dishonoured and dishonouring daughter, which he pursues warranted, he argues with himself, by the law of the "precedent" (V.iii.43).

It is at this point, in the first scene of the fifth act, as the play is moving towards its end with its heavy load of evil, death, and grief, that Shakespeare makes us hear a child's cry coming from "a ruinous monastery" (V.i.21), which soon turns into the setting of Aaron's execution and what we might call an endgame: a fairly underrated dispute on evil and conscience between Aaron, the Queen Tamora's attendant and lover, and the Roman general Lucius, Titus's only surviving son. What fuels it and what is at stake is a child's life, the newborn offspring of Aaron and Tamora, who is destined to be hanged with his father.

My questions. How is it that Shakespeare assigns to Aaron, a recognized agent of evil in the play, an "incarnate devil" (V.i.40), the task of defending a child's life? How is it that he leaves in his hands

the only occurrence of the word "conscience" in the play (V.i.75), and in such a crucial circumstance: at the end of the play and almost in parallel with Titus's slaughter of his beloved daughter? And how could all this be a matter of concern in the resumed post Reformist debate on moral issues, in the way it problematizes categories as well as Aaron's character as a villain?

Titus Andronicus is a play on woe and revenge, more than on evil and guilty conscience. Differently from the almost coeval and yet unpublished *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus* releases none of the metaphors which gesture towards a self-inspecting and judicial interiority. The play narrates the story of a city that quickly and relentlessly slips from a victorious and 'pious' scenario into one of revengeful horror and tragic quiescence dried up of any upheaval of the soul: a corroding "worm of conscience", a "tormenting dream", visions of "hell of ugly devils", such as those profusely evoked by Margaret in her cursing tirades against Richard (*Richard III*, I.iii.222-27); or a Richard-like, guilt-ridden conscience ("My conscience hath a thousand several tongues", V.I.iii.191), or even a terrorizing and chastising spectrality like the one that burdens Richard's heart on the night of the battle (V.1.iii.116-220).

When we come to this in *Titus Andronicus* – namely the troublesome awareness of evil – Shakespeare seems to rely upon Aaron, the Moor, an all-encompassing evildoer who easily takes upon himself all the evil in the world, however impartially evil may have been distributed between Romans and Goths. Aaron though, starting with his name is also constructed as a figure of ambiguity. Is he a Jew? Is he Muslim? Perhaps he is both if we consider that both Jews and Muslims were figures of otherness in Shakespeare's time (see Fiedler 1974, 148; Griffin 2017, 296-99; Bartels 1990, 433-54). Further, his appeal to conscience arrives late, and only as the instrumental argument of blackmail. In fact he disclaims having a conscience. And he enjoys showcasing this lack. Faced with Aaron's many crimes, critics tend to see the defence of his child as the manifestation of a "basic human bond or instinct" (Lake 2018, 175) unaffected by morality. But can Aaron be taken at face value?

What I am mainly concerned with foregrounding in the following pages is the tangle of issues (religious, theological, ethical, racial) iconically represented in Act 5, scene one, and – retroactively gesturing back towards the play's beginning – the provocative role such a scene assumes in relation to the play as well as Shakespeare's tragedy.

"Lucius, save the child"

Evil and conscience are pervasively dealt with in Shakespeare's plays, and not less engagingly, I contend, than in *Titus Andronicus*, his layered and hybridized Roman play, where the moral world of the classical culture coalesces, archaeologically, with that of the Judaic-Christian tradition and the revision brought about by the Reformation. This is epitomized by the spectral historicity of ruins – a "ruinous monastery" – from whose crevices a child's cry unexpectedly reaches us as the "echo of a 'lament' from history", we might say borrowing from Benjamin's "Paralipomena to 'The Concept of History'" (2003, 401). *Titus Andronicus*'s de-situated monastery, a site of discontinuity, presses on the onlookers' gaze with the same uniqueness and unavoidability which define Benjamin's 'image of the past'. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1999, 247). In a way that the playwright of *Titus Andronicus* might have made eagerly his own, Benjamin provides a concept of history which is one with memory; one which is characterized by moments of empathic, intensified acknowledgement, when history urges shockingly upon the present "as one of its own concerns" (*Idem*). Meaningfully Benjamin's image of the past prefigures a "dialectical constellation" of meanings, rather than homogeneous and normalising continuity (Benjamin 2003b, 401; 1999, 255). "The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers" (Benjamin 1999, 247).

> Goth
> Renowned Lucius, from our troops I strayed
> To gaze upon a ruinous monastery,
> And as I earnestly did fix mine eye
> Upon the wasted building, suddenly
> I heard a child cry underneath a wall.
> (V.i.20-24)

The unexpected apparition of the "ruinous monastery" – a displacing view in the Roman landscape of the play – which Shakespeare unveils in a moment of danger, urges on the spectator as a broken and confusing temporality; or in other words, as a site full of time: an overdetermined site. It confronts us at once with the past and the

'now', and with a sight which is catastrophic and Messianic, as we might say following Benjamin.

> But who comes here […]?
> [SI] *Enter a* Goth, *leading* AARON *with his child in his arms*.
> (V.i.19)

Ruins could be a matter of anxiety in Shakespeare's England. Indeed, they foregrounded a site of mixed and disturbing memory (see Del Sapio Garbero 2022). Suddenly the ruinous Roman matter of the play was brought home in Shakespeare's post-Reformation time, when the view of dissolved monasteries and fierce iconoclasm was not all that distant. And yet this was not the topic to deal with in Elizabethan England. William Camden, the chorographer of the old 'Britannia', which in many aspects can be considered a proto-archaeological 'restorer' of a historical as well as affect-charged landscape in Shakespeare's times, was one of those who, going against the grain, felt compelled to overtly take on the responsibility of their memory, however unsettling that task could be for some of his readers. He took pain to underline this in his address "To the Reader": "There are certaine, as I heare who take impatiently that I have mentioned some of the most famous Monasteries and their founders. I am sory to heare it, and with their good favour will say thus much" (Camden 1610, n.p.). Tangible and spectral, the defaced silhouette of monasteries, when still extant, gestured towards the groans of a ruinous past and effaced memory. It also brought forth a territory of both sacred and sacrilegious deeds: an overdetermined if aporetic site, which attracted poets, travelers, antiquarians, and playwrights.

The threatened murder of a father and his child found crying among the silent ruins of a monastery depicts the story of repetitive and indiscriminate evil, in *Titus Andronicus*, its umpteenth monstrosity in the increased cruelty of an endless war. "There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed" (V.iii.65), the general Lucius reasserts *per* alliteration. We are outside of Rome's walls where news arrives of the imperial city being held in the grip of the retaliating logic of revenge and where the general Lucius is quartered at the head of an army of Goths: a foreign army ready to invade the "ingrateful" city in the name of a disputable promise of peace – like Coriolanus, the playwright reminds us (IV.iv.67), predicting a play of contradictory

honour and treachery still to be written. "Therefore, great lords" – thus the general spurs his Gothic lieutenants –, "wherein Rome hath done you any scathe / Let him make treble satisfaction" (V.i.5-8).

Meanwhile preparations are being made for Aaron's execution: the "incarnate devil" (V.i.40; V.i.145-50ff), a figure of pure evil in the general opinion, but also an icon of fatherly care. The air is imbued with agonizing suspense in what might be imagined as a sort of momentous ceasefire. As for the SI, Q1 (at Lucius order) *Goth brings a ladder, which Aaron is made to climb; another Goth takes the child.*

> Lucius
> Too like the sire for ever being good.
> First hang the child, that he may see it sprawl:
> A sight to vex the father's soul withal.
> Get me a ladder.
> (V.i.50-53)

The scene is accurately staged and pictorially devised. It spans from V.i.1 to V.i.151. And it is only at V.i.145, at Lucius's order, that "*Aaron is made to climb down*" [SI] from his ladder with the promise of a death which is only postponed: "Bring down the devil, for he must not die / So sweet a death as hanging presently" (V.i.145-46). The playwright has seemingly taken all the time needed to stage his 'spectacle of the scaffold' (see Foucault 1991, 32ff) as a locus defined by the symbology of overwhelming evil and exemplary retribution. Sight and speech are attentively orchestrated, and space is emotionally dense with its underwritten religious discourse of law and guilt; but also with an expectancy which dilates the moment in which, uncannily, evil converses with the sacred. "If the crowd gathered round the scaffold, it was not simply to witness the sufferings of the condemned man or to excite the anger of the executioner" as Foucault wrote in his book devoted to the penal system in early modern times. "It was also to hear an individual who had nothing more to lose curse the judges, the laws, the government and religion", he points out underlining the witting theatricalized transformation of punishment into a cathartic place of sharing: "The public execution allowed the luxury of these momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish", and one could watch the condemned person accusing "heaven for the misery that brought him to the crime, reproach his judges for their

barbarity, curse the minister of the altars who accompanies them and blaspheme against the God whose organ he is" (Foucault 1991, 60-61). Indeed, the scaffold was also the place where the condemned could turn into a puzzling "reversible figure" to the sight of the onlookers (*Idem*, 67ff). He was a criminal and a hero: the martyred protagonist of a painful and lamentable story; what in *Titus Andronicus* we are referred to, through Aaron, meta-theatrically, as evil "Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed" (V.i.66). The playwright could not renounce such a spectacular death, or deprive his villain of his momentous sacrificial protagonism, but he was aware of its ennobling if ambivalent meanings, when he interrupted his hanging to be replaced by a second, demeaning death: a shameful "breast-deep in earth" ending (V.iii.178).

Marked by the insisting figure of the oxymoron, *Titus Andronicus* is a play imbued with ambivalent signification; an ambivalence which characterizes the rituality of piety and violence throughout the play (see Moschovakis 2002, 463-64; but see also Waitt 1957, 39-49). This is pivotal in Aaron's first annulled death. Stopped halfway up the ladder Aaron establishes a verticality which interacts with the silent skeleton of the monastery – a memory of offended sacredness –, with a contradictory sense of greatness and desolation. Public executions by hanging were a familiar view in Tudor times. Many of them, and increasingly in the last two decades of the sixteenth century, were for offences against the faith. In some of the spectators this might elicit comparison with one of those Renaissance paintings in which ruined classical arches and architectures were absorbed as a recurrent backdrop of sacrificial subject matters. It can also be interesting in this instance to mention the Renaissance anatomical tables where medical and pictorial knowledge of the human is often illustrated by making recourse to the imagery of martyrs, saints, and the condemned.

It is however from such an elevated and unsuitable position that the so far silent Aaron utters his injunction:

> Aaron
> Lucius, save the child,
> And bear it from me to the empress.
> If thou do this, I'll show thee wondrous things
> That highly may advantage thee to hear
> If thou wit not, befall what may befall,
> I'll speak no more but 'Vengeance rot you all'!
> (V.i.54-58)

The underlined uncomfortable verticality of the scaffold forces the beholders to keep their eyes pointed upwards on Aaron's bleak ladder. Are we summoned, as spectators, to share with Aaron the same awkward position, as he transforms his rickety ladder into a challenging space of negotiation, and himself – the child in his arms – into a controversial 'reversible figure'? (Foucault 1991, 67). Shakespeare leads our emotions and judgement astray as the play heads towards its no less problematic ending: Aaron unexpectedly looks like a nursing, Madonna-like image while performing his role of devilish scheming. We might call it a figure of scandal. Certainly it is all contrived in a way aimed at capturing the audience in a space of impervious imagining and reasoning, or what we might call provocative ethics.

Attention is high as we witness from below, in great discomfort, Aaron's beseeching if towering and intimidating cry: "Lucius, save the child". An injunction which in the ruinous wartime landscape of the play, underwritten by Aaron's ambivalent figure, spreads into the air resonating, we might feel, with the authoritative and interiorized biblical commandment of the *Tablets of Law* – "Thou shall not kill" –, if not the obligation of the written or unwritten natural Law. In return for this request Aaron barters the confession of his own crimes, what he peddles as "wondrous things" – an unheard-of bulk of evil, "That highly may advantage thee to hear" (V.i.57), he underlines, well aware of how much his narrative can bear upon Lucius's military career. But that will be not before Lucius has sworn by his god – "what god soe'er it be" – that he will stick to the pact:

> Lucius
> Say on, and if it please me which thou speak'st,
> Thy child shall live and I will see it nourished.
> Aaron
> And if it please thee? Why, assure thee, Lucius,
> '*Twill vex thy soul to hear what shall I speak*:
> For *I must talk* of murders, rapes and massacres,
> Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
> Complots of mischief, treasons, villainies,
> Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed,
> And this shall all be buried in my death
> Unless thou swear to me my child shall live.
> (V.i.59-68, my emphasis)

If Lucius orders the hanging of the child that this may "vex" the father's sight (V.i.51-52), Aaron responds, with equal wickedness, by promising a "vex/ing" narrative of real and unimaginable evil – whatever the price. This subtly assimilates linguistically the two contenders as they confront each other on the tight rope of perilous words and signs. At a time when everything is under scrutiny in Reformed England – words, signs, images, rituals – it comes as no surprise that language is overcharged with the anxiety of a meaning devilishly inoculated – "For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres", V.i.63) – and alert to the risky rhetorical skirmish of sight and speech. A dynamic which foretells in important ways *Hamlet*'s play of silent and spoken language at the arrival of the Players at Elsinore (III.ii.SI, 133), in Lukacher's view, an "extraordinary allegory of conscience" (1994, 131).

As the two most stimulated senses at the theatre, sight and hearing are profusely scattered in Shakespeare's canon whether to simply draw attention to what is happening on stage or to refer us to their important cognitive role. But eyes and ears were no neutral matter in Shakespeare's times. They had come to be terms of problematized meaning: "The emperor's court is like the house of Fame / The palace full of tongues, of eyes and ears" (I.i.627), Aaron warns. They were imbued with the uneasy fear that the auricular might turn, subversively, into the inoculated: in a way that might dig deep into the abysm of the human soul. As later in *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, or *King Lear*, to say the least, they gestured towards the reformist iconoclastic dispute on sight as an organ of infective and perilous knowledge and attendant anxiety about permeable body parts: sight as well as ears (see Del Sapio Garbero, 2010).

The antanaclastic juggling of the verb 'to vex' between Aaron and Lucius is not accidental. Antanaclasis – asserting by inverting – was one of Shakespeare's favourite tropes, especially in *Hamlet*, where it underscores linguistically moments of particular risk: "Queen: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended. / Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended" (III.iv.8-9). In Aaron's 'dispute' such a figure of speech also highlights the underwritten mirroring shift of one character into the other and vice versa, unveiling the play of conscience.

Aaron's call for conscience

As Leslie Fiedler has put it, Aaron is "a kind of Iago in blackface" (Fiedler 1974, 148).

> Aaron is, however, by no means directly responsible for most of the horrors he recounts, only somehow, *symbolic* of them all, an embodiment of the psychic blackness they figure forth, as if the play were not merely one more projection upon blacks of intolerable white guilt, but an analysis of the mechanism itself. (149)

In my view language is that mechanism: it is the way Shakespeare makes Aaron subtly deconstruct, at the end of the play, the limits of himself as a stereotype to address questions which cast him forth towards the unsettling secular subjectivity of a new episteme. Aaron's unexpected appeal to conscience to prevail on Lucius and save his son is compelling. It moves the discussion to the level of morality and legitimation.

> Lucius
> Tell on thy mind, I say thy child shall live.
> Aaron
> Swear that he shall and then I will begin.
> Lucius
> Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god.
> That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?
> Aaron
> What if I do not? – as indeed I do not –
> Yet for I know that you art religious
> And hast a thing within thee called *conscience*,
> With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies
> Which I have seen thee careful to observe,
> Therefore I urge thy oath; for that I know
> An idiot holds his bauble for a god,
> And keeps the oath which by that god he swears,
> To that I'll urge him, therefore thou shalt vow
> By that same god, what godsoe'er it be
> That thou adorest and hast in reverence,
> To save my boy, to nurse and bring him up,
> Or else I will discover nought to thee.
> (V.i.69-85, my emphasis)

In the context of a play marked by repetitive and indiscriminate slaughter, a violence which has brought Romans and Goths alike well beyond the rules of war (III.i.272-74), the word 'conscience' occurs only here, in V.1.75. But it breaks in with the impetus of something which has been hindered so far. It appears in a form syntactically evocative of its evangelic source: "the light within you" (Matthew 6-23; see Wilks 1990, 2). However, it deviates from the sacred text by substituting "light" with "thing": "I know you art religious / And hast a thing within thee called conscience" (V.i.74-75). But what gives it special prominence is Aaron's fearless claim that he doesn't hold the "thing" in name of which he is pleading pardon for his child. He has neither conscience nor gods, he proclaims (VI.i.71-74), defiantly boasting his deprivation.

He does have a soul, though, ever since considered the seat of conscience and the human. Indeed, if we pay attention we discover that Shakespeare makes his villain summon it more than once, and not accidently. Aaron showcases it first ironically in the guise of a melancholic and lustful sonneteer (II.ii.40); then, disproving the appellative of "inhuman dog" (V.iii.14), as a defender of a racially proud self, when the moral meaning of conscience emerges as self-conscience. "Let fools do good and fair men call for grace; / Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (III.i.205-06); and then ultimately and most crucially just before his dreadful execution, by no means a small moment, when he uses it as an endorsement, a guarantee of his unrepentant statement of free will: his very last word.

> Ah, why should wrath be mute and fury dumb?
> I am no baby, I, that with base prayers
> I should repent the evils I have done.
> Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did
> Would I perform if I might have my will.
> If one good deed in all my life I did
> I do repent it from my very soul.
> (V.3.183-99)

In light of the questions all this raises, Aaron's confessional tirade doesn't seem to merely be the irreverent piece of a villain's stock repertoire, I argue. It brings in, on stage, the topicality of conscience in the new centrality it had come to acquire in the redefined discursivity of Luther and Calvin: one which problematized the Scholastic role it

had played for centuries in assuring the reasoned analogical order between man, Natural Law and God. Hence the certainty of its being a reliable faculty in apprehending the good and in avoiding the evil. As John S. Wilkshas it:

> In the Middle Ages, conscience came to be regarded as a volitional ability of the soul (*synderesis*), unimpaired after the fall, and related to the Natural Law, through which it was capable of inclining man to God. This Thomist conception, a synergism of reason and revelation sustained within a comprehensive world-view, was to last over 300 years. (Wilks 1990, 2-3)

But such an orderly postulate was conspicuously shaken in Reformist Europe: "If the alliance of faith and reason had been the harmonious diapason of scholasticism, their utter discord formed the primary doctrine of the reformers and challenged the entire Catholic system" (3). What was at stake in the ensuing English plethora of controversies between Anglicans and Calvinists was the doctrinal certainty of conscience, the very idea of an unimpaired conscience after the fall, whose integrity, especially to Calvinist thought, remained as only a shadowy reminder much more exposed to the turmoil of passions and evil (see Wilks 1990, 3-4). The controversy was settled with a practical reassertion of the classical-Christian tradition, authoritatively resumed, through the Scholastics, by the Anglican Richard Hooker whose *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (see 2025, Book I) was published in 1594 – the same year in which Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* was first performed (written 1589-1593). However, the question of conscience continued to inspire an impressive amount of literature painstakingly marked by the knowledge of anatomy and its defining dissecting metaphors. Meaningfully, the questioning discursivity of anatomy in this period provided a shared lexicon for science, art, poetry, and theology, acting as the key which led, theologically or secularly, to the complexity of the soul and the discovery of the body[1].

1 See the following: Immanuel Bourne, *The Anatomy of Conscience* (1623); Ephraim Huit, *The Anatomy of Conscience* (1626); John Woolton, Bishop of Exeter, *A Newe Anatomie of Whole Man, as well of his Body, as of his Soule* (1576); Robert Fill[e], *The Anatomie of the Soule* (1590); Anon., *The Anatomie of Sinne* (1603); Robert Anton, *Vice's Anatomy* (1617); Charles Pierse, *Vertue's Anatomie* (1618); and Bartholomew Robertson, *The Anatomie of a Distressed Soule* (1619).

Theatre largely contributed to the history of conscience. Shakespeare's *Richard III* thrives on it. What instead Shakespeare stages with Aaron in the preceding *Titus Andronicus* is its boasted deprivation, a lack of God and conscience, which allows for both sarcasm and epistemic concern, one which drastically refers us to a historic rupture, a discord. Indeed, Shakespeare's Aaron blatantly proclaims his evildoing as an act of free will, a much-debated concern in Reformist England. In this the Moor seems to anticipate a new secular subjectivity which Shakespeare will explore in his later personifications of evil (I am thinking mostly of *King Lear*'s Edmund, Lear's daughters, *Julius Caesar*'s Cassius). And yet, Aaron needs Lucius's faith, in order that he may test the terms of his negotiating strategy (for "Thou art religious / and hast a thing within thee called conscience", V.i.74-75) and force on the Roman general the responsibility and obligations of his oath. In the way he stands up to religious matters, he has much of the Nietzschean 'scientist' of *The Gay Science* – the man to come, the fearless man "stretched in the contradiction of today and tomorrow", to whom the philosopher devotes aphorism 344 entitled "In what way we, too, are still pious" (Nietzsche 2013, 194-95b). Nietzsche will catalyse such an epistemic issue of overlapping world-views by means of his suggestive crepuscular gods, the "shadows of gods", which are to him the gods of "necessity" (118).

In turn, before being executed, Aaron promises not a repenting confession, but the "show" of his "wondrous things": "Swear that he shall [live], and then I will begin" (V.i.70). But you cannot ask for god's warrant – "what god soe'er it be" as Aaron settles the matter – if you are a miscreant. Lucius retorts: "Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god. / That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?" (V.i.70-72). Faced with necessity, Shakespeare's atheist Aaron doesn't hesitate to conjure up strategically the inner juridical scene of conscience. He seems to know how it works. In fact he makes the most to 'catch' – before Hamlet – Lucius's false conscience. The point is that Lucius doesn't acknowledge him as a subject endowed with the prerogatives which makes him fit for a pact. Aaron is an outsider to Law and the Covenant, out of the order of the civil society conceptualized by Hooker in his *Laws* (see Hooker 2025, Book 1). He is unfit. For Lucius the disavowal of both god and conscience

invalidates the legitimacy of the pact, whose validity in fact depends on the worth of both the contractors: on their reckoning the same laws and obligations. There is no responsible pact, no legitimacy, if one of the parts disclaims one of its founding tenets.

This may have sounded intriguing to those familiar with an ongoing forty-year period of religious disputes in the secularized scaffolds of the theatre. It raised issues that more than one theatregoer might bring home. Was it in Aaron's faculty to plead for his child's life while rejecting whatever dot of conscience or faith? Or better: was he in any way entitled to call for conscience from outside the rules which framed the interconnecting relation between the Natural Law and God's Law? But also: isn't the summoning of conscience as such, no matter how disdainfully this maybe done, an attestation of conscience? Conscience as care: "Lucius, save the child". And further, interrogating one's relation with unanswering divinities: why all this evil, this wrong?

By proclaiming his deprivation, Shakespeare's Aaron, I argue, unhooks the Scholastic reasoning – namely the holistic and ordered universe of symmetries providentially sanctioned by God –, prospecting a fractured and discontinuous scenario: a world in which theology is being replaced, secularly, by history and necessity. Indeed it is theatre in Reformist England that, as powerfully as in *Titus Andronicus*, takes on the task of gathering ruins and taking on care: the legacy of troubled bodies, wounds, ghosts, and problematized interiority.

Aaron is indeed the villain who, ahead of any other overt or under cover villain in Shakespeare's theatre, forces us to think on conscience "otherwise" (Ricoeur 1985, 635), namely by challenging our capacity of bearing contradictions. He is the villain who together with his black baby, – "the tempest whirling in the court" (IV.ii.161) as he puts it –, defiantly breaks up the Covenant, the world of ordered analogies between earth and heaven. And yet unreasoningly, he invokes the 'natural' obligations which can save his child – "the fruit of bastardy" (V.i.48), "the offspring of so foul a fiend", a "base", abominable "hue" to both Goths and Romans – which they perceive, physically, as a discordant and disturbing anomaly to be eliminated. "The mother wills it so", the Nurse reports. "He shall not live", Chiron (the white half-brother) advises in the grip of fear. "He shall not die", Aaron retorts, whatever it takes (IV.ii.73-83).

As earlier mentioned, Aaron is also the villain who foreruns the fearless characters of *Lear*'s Edmund – bound to Aaron by his villainy and the appellatives of "base" and "bastard" – as well as Lear's sulphurous daughters and *Caesar*'s Cassius, the agonistic generation of youths who in different ways announce a fearless and secularized idea of nature: the protagonists of both change and tragedy. Edmund – Gloucester's 'illegitimate' son in *King Lear*, a villain and a "counterfeit" (Neill 2000, 128) – is the one who, from the very start of the play, makes the audience know that this is what tragedy is all about, when in the first act he breaks in blatantly with his unsettling 'ode' to Nature (I.ii.1-22):a disordering if vital acceptation of nature which disavows the old Natural Law as a heap of ridiculed analogies (I.ii.104-120). Not differently from Cassius's and Casca's dispute on catastrophic meteorology, on the threatening night of the conspiracy (*Julius Ceasar*, I.iii.41ff), the villain and evildoer are often made to gesture, overtly or not, towards an epistemic turn in Shakespeare's tragedy, a world of pressing if bemusing knowledge: "LEAR: Then let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III.vi.34-36). We don't know whether Lear will unravel the enigma. But we do know that Titus, another father, has used that same knife against Lavinia's shameful sight. The playwright Heiner Müller, in his highly dissecting theatrical remake of Shakespeare's *Titus*, which he renames *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome*, intuits here common elements of barbaric modernity: a tragic will to know which associates Shakespeare's fathers – and hence Lavinia and echoes of Regan: "THE GENERAL IN PEACETIME… BURROWS IN THE LABYRINTH OF THE BOWELS / LOOKING FOR THE SEAT OF SOULS WITH HIS KNIFE" (Müller 1985, 138-39).

In the Renaissance, an era marked by a succession of epistemic fractures, which redefine with equal violence earth and heavens, the human body – the joint – which articulates the system of pacifying analogies between microcosm and macrocosm, the Natural Law and the Law of God, can only be envisaged as a battlefield teeming with competing knowledge and troubled metaphors (Del Sapio Garbero 2011). Such a world of collapsing specularity will be staged in *King Lear* where it explodes in all its dramatic immanent and cosmic relevance. And where subjects find themselves alone with an illness which makes them the prey of a storm of conflicting forces: "Contending

with the fretful elements; / Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea, / Or swell the curlèd waters 'bove the main" (III.i.4-6).

It is no coincidence that *King Lear* is pervasively haunted by the semantics of "nature", "natural", "unnatural" striving for meaning (some fifty occurrences, with "unnatural" more than "natural", more frequent than in any other play). 'Nature' is a lemma run mad like the King. Rather, it is as if natural philosophy itself were yearning to be readjusted in the shattered world of the play.

> Lear
> How, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones!
> Had I your tongues and eyes, I would use them so
> That heaven's vault should crack!
> (V.iii.253-55)

But the heavens, as anticipated in *Titus Andronicus*, do not answer.

As pointed out by Ned Lukacher in *Daemonic Figures. Shakespeare and the Question of Conscience*:

> The Protestant Reformation challenged the ecclesiastical administration of conscience and sought to recover the individual experience of inwardness of the Pauline epistles. The challenge was not so much to the certainty of conscience as to the manner of achieving such certainty. It is at this point that Shakespeare entered the scene. Shakespeare is the crucial figure in this history, for he calls conscience into question both as a matter of natural law and as a matter of theological or intellectual certainty. (Lukacher 1994, 32)

"*By the gate of suspicion*" (Ricoeur)

Starting from the crux denounced by Augustine of Hippo in respect to the difficulty of explaining evil's existence in light of God, evil remains a theological and philosophical unresolved question. For if it is sure that God is the Master of heaven and earth, the creator of all things visible and invisible, how can we presume, Augustine argues conversing with God, that evil is also the work of God's? "I strained to see for myself the truth of an explanation I had heard", he expounds, "that the cause of evil is the free decision of our will, in consequence of which we act wrongly and suffer your righteous judgement; but I could not see it clearly", he confesses in the grip of a search which wears him out and makes him feel guilty, "choked", the prey of error (Augustine 1817 [410 CE]. VII:3.5, 161).

> But then I was forced to ask more, 'Who made me? Was it not my God, who is not merely good, but Goodness itself? Whence, then, did I derive this ability to will evil and refuse good? Is it in me simply so that I should deserve the punishment I suffer? Who established that ability in me, who planted in me this bitter cutting, when my whole being is from my most sweet God. If the devil is responsible, where did the devil come from? If he was a good angel who was transformed into a devil by his own perverted will, what was the origin of this evil will in him that turned him into a devil, when an angel is made entirely by the supremely good creator?' I was pushed down again by these thoughts and nearly choked; but never was I sucked into that pit of error where no one confesses to you, because people would rather hold that you suffer evil than that we commit it. (VII: 3-5,161-162)

Shakespeare seems to have Augustine in mind when depicting Titus's suffered evil, but also the unanswered interrogative manner, and the blurring between angel and devil, good and evil. Augustine doesn't find an answer to his questions as he pursues his spiritual *Bildung*: a self-fashioning journey which is tantamount to the transferring of the morality of the classical world into that of Christianity. But he doesn't abandon his search in his Catholic way to truth, a search which lays bare his contention with a faith which is still "in many ways unformed", he says, "wavering and at variance with the norm" (VII:5,164). "And suppose that evil doesn't exist", he asks?

> Where, then, is evil; where does it come from and how did it creep in? What is its root, its seed? Or does it not exist at all? But in that case, why do we fear and avoid something that has no reality? […] Either the evil we fear exists, or our fear itself is the evil. (VII:5,163)

Written in 410 CE and first translated into English in 1679, Augustine's extolled spiritual journey, together with his renowned *The City of God* (413-426 CE), continued to be recognized as a landmark in post Reformist England. Shakespeare may have been inspired by his speculations on 'evil' and 'devil', as well as the reflections of the City's Book III on abandoning pagan gods, when writing his archaeologically layered and hybrid *Titus Andronicus*. Further, it may be not irrelevant to note that Shakespeare's *finis imperii* Roman play is set in the same troubled times as the Church Fathers: namely in the span of time encompassing the 4th and the 5th centuries CE, on the eve of the deflagration of the Roman Empire, culminating in the ruinous repetitive sacks inflicted by the Goths in 410-450.

Fostered by the renewed concern for the evil's 'Why', 'Whence from', and 'Why me' in his own times, Shakespeare relies on the secularized motif of a nature made in the image of hostile gods in his first Roman play. One which, echoing Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, he symbolizes tragically as a swallowing "den":

> Titus
> Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt –
> O, had we never, never hunted there! –
> Patterned by that the poet here describes,
> By nature made for murders and for rape.
> MARCUS O, why should nature build so foul a den,
> Unless the gods delight in tragedies
> (IV.i.56-60)

We still feel echoes of Augustine's difficulty to cope with evil – and its relation with free will – in our contemporary philosophy. As widely argued by Paul Ricoeur in his lifelong philosophical confrontation with evil, any interrogation of such a hard rock of morality – is inescapably a failure to both philosophy and theology: a confrontation with an aporia which can be met with, he suggests, only "with the help of a phenomenology of the experience of evil" (Ricouer 1985,635), or better by addressing it as a hermeneutics: an exploration of its "symbolic function – that is to say, its power of discovering and revealing the bond between man and what he considers sacred"(Ricoeur1969, 5). And yet, intertwined as it is with sin and suffering, of which it represents "a sensitive point", the point of "crisis" (Ibidem), evil is never completely demythologized, the philosopher observes: for – even in our secularized forms of civilization – evil remains an inaccessible enigma. Can this sound as an "invitation to think less", the philosopher wonders, "or a provocation to think more, or to think differently about it?" (Ricoeur 1985, 635; 644)

Titus Andronicus invites us to enter the inner world of evil, woe, and conscience, "by the gate of *suspicion*": with the same unanswered interrogations, petrified as we are, together with its characters, by repetitive inundating violence, a pervasive metaphor in the play, which sweeps away any motivation. "If there were reason for these miseries, / Then into limits I could bind my woes" (III.ii.220-21), Titus laments in front of the enormity of his tragedy cruelly made visible

and allegorized by Lavinia's amputated body and her disarticulated language: no more than a naked surviving lament, a spectral bloodthirsty "groan", for most of the play. It is from such a sense of repetitiveness and colossal purposelessness that Titus's irrepressible and disturbing laughter originates (III.i.265). Evil has already been carved on Lavinia's fragmented body, tongue, voice, and gestuality when, as if springing from the catastrophe – or perhaps providence – another cry calls for attention, a child's cry: one which provokingly brings forth the question of conscience, of what it means to have a conscience.

Conscience is an "attestation *of self*" for the philosophers. "To hold conscience – in the sense of the German *Gewissen* – to be the place of an original form of the dialectic between selfhood and otherness is an enterprise fraught with difficulties", in Ricoeur's expounding of the concept. It is also an "assignment of responsibility". Because it means to put to the test "a surplus of meaning necessarily concretized in notions as *suspect* as 'bad' and 'good' conscience", and because it involves more than a challenge "to enter the problematic of conscience by the gate of *suspicion*" (Ricoeur 1994, 340; 341). Ever since conceptualized by both nonmoral classical and Christian moral thought as an internalized natural law (sanctioned by God in the Christian doctrine), conscience was a concept thoroughly re-interrogated and redefined in reformed England, as shown by the copious doctrinal literature on the argument and, most famously, by William Perkins, the theologian and author of *A Discourse of Conscience* (1597) and *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (1611) who, together with Richard Hooker, can be considered as the founder of the Anglican school of moral theology (see Wilks 1990, 5).

Was conscience a "concept in transition" in reformed Europe? (Stone 2009, 423-44). Certainly the sacred had come to be addressed and experienced as an unstable issue in the face of the whirling shifts from a confessional faith to another, and vice versa, which characterized the Tudor's re-formation, its moral/theological thought as well as its religious practices: what has come to be seen as a "traumatic event" (see Anderson 2006, 21-25), a story of fiery religious controversies and 'martyred' bodies (*Titus Andronicus*, III.i.108). One in which the interpretation of the Letter (signs / doctrine) could easily turn into a perilous test for your life, as witnessed by Foxe's popular *Acts & Monuments.* Indeed, trauma

was part of the Reformist reshuffled knowledge which together with the secularizing drive of the 'new science' brought about a redefinition of the human.

Arguably Shakespeare's "wicked" Rome (V.ii.99) – constantly addressed in its moments of crisis and change – could be felt as utterly contemporary in Tudor post-reformist England, when instability and overlapping temporalities had been made architectonically visible (as earlier mentioned) by the dissolution of monasteries and their libraries (1535), both of them significantly figuring in *Titus Andronicus* as ruins and signs of a disquieting sense of discontinuity and problematized memory and heritage (see Del Sapio Garbero, 2022, 11; 84-94).

Aaron's spying of Lucius's ways of praying ("I know that you art religious / And hast a thing within thee called conscience, / With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies / Which I have seen thee careful to observe" (V.i.74-77), referred Shakespeare's audience to a story of re-editing, overlapping, effacements, substitutions, transformations, and policed implementation by law, parish after parish, of the reformed faith, textbooks, and ceremonies. This was tangible in everyday life. Instructions to the reader in the new *Elizabethan Book of Prayer* (1559) helped people cope with the change by explaining, soon after the Preface, "Why some [ceremonies] be abolished, and some retayned"[2]. Moral concepts, evil, sin, conscience, memory, seemed to undergo the same epistemic mobility and readjustments. They were in the hands of the prince (see Duffy58 *et passim*; 565-93 and Targoff 2001). But this also meant, as Shakespeare put on record in his theatre – often and blatantly through his ambiguous agents of evil –, that you could claim your own way to knowledge or morality.

Nietzsche would say that morality and moral concepts were in the hands of history. Conscience is the offspring of a "terrible necessity" to the philosopher. It is one with the origins of language, he suggests, and the necessity of our ancestors to communicate with each other: a premise by which conscience – which he defines as a developing consciousness of our actions, thoughts and emotions in relation to the others – is inscribed in the time of history (see

2 https://archive.org/details/prayerbookofqueeochur/page/18/mode/2up?q=ceremonies

Nietzsche 2013, paragraph 354). The connections of conscience with moralities, theodicies – the sacred, as well as the secular, institutions, laws, language, myths, good and evil – are part of such a history (see Nietzsche 2003, aphorism 199).

Ned Lukacher's psychoanalytic approach to Shakespeare's conscience takes pains to assess a similar postulate when he writes how the poet:

> questions both the Christian ontotheological interpretation of conscience, which regards it as the residue of a divine spiritual fire, and the classical interpretation of the *daimon*, which regards it as a principal of natural law, an indwelling presence that watches over the soul but is neither of divine origin nor of human making. Shakespeare unsettles both interpretations while nevertheless insisting on the necessity of posing the question of conscience again and again". (Lukacher 1994, 1-2)

The question of conscience, the critic argues, "is the unanswered and unanswerable". Indeed, "All we will ever know are the figures of conscience, its language and arguments" (30). But what defines its existing is its ghostliness, Lukacher points out, "the uncertainty of its Being"; what, summoning Kant and a Freud-Heideggerian scenario, he highlights in its inner "pathological character", its "need to appeal": the Hamlet-like mode of melancholy that "keeps examining the ground of its own functioning" (54). "Again and again". Which doesn't mean for the critic that he is escaping history: for, he says, "The question of time is invariably the undoing of the certainty of conscience. […] Conscience is the name of the shadow" (31). And it is exactly such an interaction of 'time' and 'functioning' that defines its historicity, or 'historicality', as Lukacher prefers to rephrase it.

Lukacher doesn't deal with *Titus Andronicus* in his engaging theoretical examination of conscience in Shakespeare, nor does Ricoeur, but both provide great reflection which helps us approach the play's concealed conscience, its obliterated argument: a conscience overwhelmed by the necessity of vengeance, until it explodes provocatively with the words of the Other and the force of omission in Act 5.

In Shakespeare's times, a period of religious turmoil, doctrinal disputes, reframed notions of moral categories, as well as secular redefinitions of the self championed in the name of the retrieved Greek

motto "Nosce te ipsum", the abysmal darkness of the conscience – and consciousness – move on to the space of theatre. Conscience in its Judaic-Christian relation with evil, sin and guilt, was a matter widely addressed and anatomized in Reformist England. As mentioned above, it was speculated upon as a moral and doctrinal argument, as well as performed on the scaffolds of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, where the homiletic allegorical figures of the medieval moral plays and interludes developed decisively into the profundity of inspecting and self-inspecting characters provided with situated flesh, blood, passions.

Interestingly however, Shakespeare's representations of interiority retained part of their allegorical potentiality, in the capacity the new theatre had of allowing the maximum of truth through the maximum of disguise and fictionality. Suffice it to mention Shakespeare's emblematic – "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (*Hamlet*, II.ii.523-24), and the allegorizing if objectifying role played by the language of dumb shows – from *Hamlet* to *The Tempest* –: namely the way they produced inner and problematized meaning through theatrical redoubling.

In the hallucinatory ending of *Titus Andronicus*, evil comes spectrally on the chariot of Revenge, uncannily resumed by Tamora and her two sons Demetrio and Chiron disguised as 'Rape' and 'Murder': her 'ministers' (V.ii.60): "Knock at [Titus's] study", she orders, "where they say he keeps / To ruminate strange plots of dire revenge; / Tell him Revenge is come to join with him / And work confusion on his enemies" (V.ii.5-8). Horror is redoubled with the "habiliment" (V.ii.1) of a pageant; just like the horror which Titus devises in the suspended temporality of his library, the storage of a memory gone wild and acting with the malignant agency of a killer: "And what is written shall be executed" (V.ii.15). Theatre allows for the same and the Other, with characters – Tamora, Titus, Chiron, Demetrius – knowingly playing the game for some 150 verses (V.ii.1-150) as both agents and allegories of Revenge: each of them producing reciprocating and menacing spectrality, and each of them reciprocally aware of their split sameness. "I knew them all, though they supposed me mad / and will 'o'erreach them in their own devices" (V.ii.142-43), Titus remarks before moving on to "play the cook" (V.iii.204) in his final self-annihilating *coup de theatre*.

Interestingly, in Tamora's pageant, they are all in disguise – and so is Titus "like a cook", SI (V.iii). Apart from Aaron who has just delivered the remorseless confession of his crimes and is heading fettered – but undisguised – towards his (un)"sweet" death.

Rehearsing D-Evil: "Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed"

As stated by Nietzsche in one of the aphorisms of *Beyond Good and Evil* (chapter IV, aphorism 129), the devil is "the oldest friend of Knowledge"[3]. Shakespeare's Aaron, I think, largely substantiates such an axiom. In fact he is a knowledgeable and knowing personification of evil: a 'devil' aware of the role he is performing in the play. The endgame between Aaron and Lucius in Act 5 is shaped by its symbolism (V.i.147-50 / V.iii.110-13). Insistently interpellated as a 'devil', Aaron is the one who astutely forces on Lucius the obligation of 'thinking of evil and conscience' in its interiorized relations with divinity, prohibition and guilt. Used to speak in the marginal dim-light of the asides, Aaron though is also the one who, when asked to speak, speaks too much and excruciatingly.

That Aaron is a "reversible figure", earlier discussed in the theatrical view provided by Foucault is fairly agreed. Moors at theatre, it has been said, stood for Jews, bastardy, deformity, ungrateful and monstrous sons and daughters in the Elizabethan perception. But there is one role which Aaron performs increasingly knowingly in the course of the play: that of the devil. This is meta-theatrically foregrounded by Aaron himself when in delivering his promised if remorseless public confession he summarizes it, ambiguously, as something "Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed" (V.i.66). Is Aaron commenting on his "abominal deeds" (V.i.64), whose "plots" and whose list can be hardly pitiful, or is he ventriloquising the playwright's idea of tragedy as a complex oxymoronic chemistry of horror, sorrow and pity? In this I think, *Titus Andronicus* seems to confirm Orgel's assessment of the Renaissance theory of tragedy and catharsis as a kind of corporeal "homeopathic" tempering of the emotions, a socially desirable "physical mimesis" (Orgel 2002, 138).

3 https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm#link2HCH0004

Placed in the last act of the play, Aaron's confession – or the release of his "wondrous things" as he has it – , seems to function, wittingly, as a sort of *pharmakon*: a "ruthful" medicine which he inoculates, devil like, as a venom, in Lucius' ears and in the onlookers' by concomitantly appealing "piteously" to their reaction. But his is not the much invoked reaction – the "sympathy of woe […] / As far from help as limbo is from bliss" (III.i.149) –, which Titus insistently implores all for naught in his Benjaminean *Trauerspiel*. Aaron's confession aims at making 'ruthful yet piteously' the fearful mixed heap of limbs and sorrow which we see piling to the sky throughout the play, by taking it all on his shoulders, namely by offering an image of himself as a device: a *deus ex machina* of evil, as well as a meta-theatrically conscious scapegoat. We might compare it to Edgar's overtly fictional representation of abjection in *King Lear*, and the way it functions alike as a "physic" in Lear's experience of evil (III.iv.34).

Altogether Aaron's confession gestures towards a converging and meta-theatrical juxtaposition of author and character (see Lombardo 1999, viii) which allows for Aaron's overdetermined final and spectacular performance as an agent of evil. A performance, though, needed by both Aaron and Lucius: the former to save his child, the latter to boast a good tale in his imminent entering Rome as a conqueror and would-be peacemaker. "Indeed, I was their tutor to instruct them", Aaron says in sealing his role as a deviser, instructor, and supervising onlooker of the barbarity perpetrated in the "abhorred pit" (II.ii.98).

> Well, let my deeds be witness of my worth:
> I trained thy brethren to that guileful hole […]
> I wrote the letter that thy father found […]
> And what not done that thou hast cause to rue
> Wherein I had no stroke of mischief in it?
> I played the cheater for thy father's hand,
> And when I had it, drew myself apart
> And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter.
> (V.i.103-13)

Evil has already been "performed" in the previous acts (mostly in Act 2) when Aaron announces its "ruthful" auricular repetition (V.i.66): all in all imagined as a linguistic performance.

> Why, assure thee, Lucius,
> 'T will vex thy soul to hear what shall I speak:
> *For I must talk* of murders, rapes and massacres
> Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
> Complots of mischief, treasons, villainies,
> *Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed*,
> And this shall all be buried in my death
> Unless thou swear to me my child shall live.
> (V.i.61-67, my emphasis)

Thus he explains, obliquely pleading for the compassion of the audience ("For I must talk of"). And indeed for his onlookers Aaron's final linguistic performance provides all the emotional release which comes together – 'piteously' – from insufferable ill and no less retribution. However, such a hyperbolic textual awareness of the character, as I would like to call it, also deflates the enormity of evil by causing – as Titus's unreasonable laughter or the paranoia about hands, or flies – a disturbance in the flow of the tragic emotion. A Brechtian interrupting interference, which as suggested earlier in this essay, we might phrase with Ricouer "a provocation to think more, or to think differently about [evil]" (Ricoeur 1985, 635).

Astutely imbued with performative idiom, Aaron's final remorseless confession seems to have no end in conveying ill 'done' and 'to be done', imaginable and unimaginable – "Ay, that I had not done a thousand more" (V.i.124-40) – determining an excess, I argue, which in overdoing the Moor's stereotype problematizes him as a villain. Indeed it fulfils what the play tends to construct theatrically as a racialized confessing and unredeemable agent of evil. The coeval *Richard III* comes to mind, with his slightly parodic conscience:

> My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
> And every tongue brings in a several tale,
> And every tale condemns me for a villain.
> […]
> All several sins, all used in each degree
> Throng to the bar, crying all, "Guilty, guilty!"
> (*Richard III*, V.iii.191-97)

But let us stay with the hellish "bitter tongue" boasted by the unrepenting Aaron (V.1.150):

Aaron
Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things
And willingly as one would kill a fly,
And nothing grieves me heartly indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.
(V.i.141-49)

The effect is that of a never-ending enumeration of evils, which together with its intertwined hammering assertion of free will, seems to want to ironically exhaust all the possibilities of horror. Aaron is a voice, the voice of a perilous devil: "Sirs, stop his mouth, and let him speak no more", Lucius orders to his soldiers in the grip of an excruciating crescendo: a "torment" to his conscience which can be silenced only by the Moor's execution. Because you "hast a thing within thee called conscience", Lucius seems to ruminate, and as if aware that he cannot get the tale – "That highly may advantage thee to hear" (V.i.56) – without being inundated by an evil which is discovered as the guilt of many in the play. Shakespeare makes his audience participate bathetically to this by reducing the enormity of the evil Aaron is confessing: "a thousand dreadful things" which he boasts he has perpetrated "willingly as one would kill a fly". A figure of speech (amplification through diminution) which provocatively downgrades the violence of Aaron's deeds into normality: a normality which invites consideration in light of Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'.

But this is not the only occurrence. For Shakespeare had contrived a longer scene, in which the fly symbolism turns into uncanny and moralized theatrical action, but which is absent in the three Quarto editions of the play and was included later in the first Folio (III. ii.52-82). Here tyranny toward flies is shown, interestingly, as the Andronici's pastime, Marcus's and Titus's as they sit at a banquet.

SI [*Marcus strikes the dish with a knife*]
Titus
What thou strike at, Marcus, with thy knife?
Marcus
At that that I have killed, my lord – a fly.
Titus
Out on thee, murderer. Thou killest my heart.
(III.ii.52-54)
"How if that fly had a father and a mother?
(III.ii.61).

The perception of Titus's deranged mind is comically one of dismay and disproportionate similitudes. "He takes false shadows for true substances", Marcus observes. But Titus promptly changes his mind as soon as he is told that the insect "was a black ill-favoured fly, / Like the empress' Moor. Therefore I killed him" (ii.52-71). And Titus: "Give me thy knife, I will insult on him" (III.ii,.72).

> […] we are not brought so low
> But that between us we can kill a fly
> That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor.
> (III.ii.77)

Foreseeing Titus's banquet of human bodies in Act Five, the scene disturbingly reproduces the logic of a violence, which develops as an everyday job in *Titus Andronicus*. It also shows the way the *acte gratuit* articulates its own spectrality. Substituting enormity with triviality – and vice versa – is not just a figure of speech in "wicked" Rome. It can disclose tragi-comically the horror of reality, the reality being first of all, as incisively observed by Charlotte Scott, the fly's material disclosure "that there is food on the Andronici's table and that there is blood on their hands" (Scott 2014, 264). Mockingly if disquietingly, conscience is interrogated by means of a customary fly, in a way that comments sarcastically on the repetitive butchery of the play.

Aaron is the racialized community's bad conscience, he who appears spectrally as "a fly / That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor" (III.ii.78-79). He is a "hue" (IV.ii.73). He is a devil and a fly, reality and spectrality, an overdetermined character as well as an anthropomorphized trifle. He is voice and nuisance, an enduring "bitter tongue" (V.i.150) and the fly's "pretty buzzing" (III.ii.65).

He is a character as well as the author of himself, a task which he performs in devil-like fashion, with the maximum of proficiency, but without being a devil: "If there be devil, would I were a devil" (V.i.147), Shakespeare makes him say in his last words, as he leads his onlookers towards the play's end. Grounding on what I am calling his textual awareness Aaron ironically cooperates with his 'author', in constructing as well as deconstructing, or resisting, the process of his 'Othering', namely the fictionality of his displayed hyperbolic stereotype (but see also Bartels, 442-43).

As noticed by Lukacher, speaking of Shylock, Shakespeare's engagement with the conscience is often tainted with something parodic (see Lukacher 1994, 115). In *Titus Andronicus* conscience finds a derogatory size by means of Titus's and Aaron's fly. Morality (and law) provide no comfortable ethics in Shakespeare's first Roman play. Meaningfully Aaron boasts he hasn't got a conscience and yet, provocatively, he makes his audience hear its voice – its unsettling inaudible language–, as well as its buzzing. He also makes his audience hear a child's cry.

"Of this was Tamora delivered, / The issue of an irreligious Moor, / Chief architect and plotter of these woes", Marcus says at the end of the play (V.iii.119-21) asking for Rome's compassion. Through the Moor's child Shakespeare grafts onto the heart of evil the possibility of the good, whatsoever the law his character is obeying, and whatsoever the conscience he may acknowledge as his own. Be that as it may, Aaron, and his legacy as a villain, do a lot to add to the 'wonderous things' of theatre, to its wonderful performance of the wounds of Shakespeare's age and of ours.

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