“My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls”: Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, “Black” Hair, and the Revenge of Postcolonial Education

At the beginning of Act 2, Scene 3 of *Titus Andronicus*, after vowing revenge against Titus for the ritualistic sacrifice of her eldest son, Tamora, the defeated Queen of the Goths and newly ascendant Empress of Rome, ironically asks Aaron, her adulterous “black” lover, “wherefore look’st thou sad/When everything doth make a gleeful boast?” (2.3. 10-11). While the forest, with its melodious birds, sunning snakes, and quivering leaves, arouses for Tamora erotic desires to match those of Virgil’s Aeneas and Dido, it only functions for Aaron as a convenient site for their revenge. In that regard, Aaron begins to answer with a multiclause rhetorical question of his own that ends with, “What signifies . . . /My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls/Even as an adder when she doth unroll/To do some fatal execution?” (2.3.32-34-36).

No critic, to my knowledge, has ever noticed this part of Aaron’s self-description—and that’s if it gets noticed at all—as anything more than an obvious representation of his racial difference. Film, for its part, has also missed its significance or perhaps simply deemed it performatively insignificant, as represented by Jane Howell (1985) keeping it as an unperformed and therefore awkwardly spoken line in her BBC production and Julie Taymor (1999) cutting it altogether from her Hollywood one. What in part explains this critical and performative oversight, as Edith Snook generally identifies, is that “hair is [just] not a popular subject in early modern studies” (115); and although it “might figure in the scholarly analysis of race in early modern England. . . it rarely does, for work there tends to focus on skin colour” (115). Of course, race has always been about much more than skin color; it has always also encompassed the sense
we attempt to make of a complex nexus of performative acts and physical features. However, as I have highlighted with Aaron’s self-description, hair also possesses a distinguishing kind of manipulability. In other words, while “washing an Ethiope white” represented for the period a statement of the indelibility of black skin as a stable marker of black villainy, Aaron’s hair straightening destabilizes this neat psychosomatic equation and creates for him the possibility of a resistant, liberated identity. In what follows, I will argue that Aaron’s hair-straightening represents Shakespeare’s appropriation of the imaginative boldness of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in an effort to develop a liberating alternative to the death-obsessed literalism within the Roman literary tradition. In this regard, *Titus* is a postcolonial play, and Aaron its postcolonial hero. And it is through the application of Ovidian magic to Aaron’s hair—like the application of a poetic hair relaxer—that Shakespeare imagines a postcolonial future for England.

If, as Gordon Teskey succinctly concludes, “Revenge . . . [is] memory in action” (180), Aaron is in a sense reminding Tamora of their hatred for Titus and, specifically with the uncurling of his woolly hair, illustrating for her a dynamic process of converting that hatred into action. At once mnemonic and demonstrative, Aaron’s explanation is just one of many examples of his pedagogical disposition. “Indeed,” as he proudly summarizes to Lucius in the final act, “I was . . . tutor to instruct” (5.1. 98) Chiron and Demetrius to rape and mutilation Lavinia; “I trained” (5.1.104) your brothers, Martius and Quintus, to the pit containing Bassianus’s body; and “I wrote the letter” (5.1. 106) framing them for his murder.

To be sure, Aaron is a proudly educated, masterful teacher of revenge. But, as many scholars have examined, he is not alone in his belief in the power of education to define the world and affect change in it. In one way or another, just about all of the characters reference or attempt to enact elements of the classical tradition to make sense of their lives and resolve a
range of problems. However, as Aaron’s reference to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—his identification of Lavinia as “Philomel”—suggests, that tradition is itself the source of those problems. In other words, for Aaron, thoughts of Ovid’s Philomela and Tereus lead to thoughts of raping and mutilating Lavinia; and in the second half of the play, for Titus, thoughts of Ovid, Livy, and the Roman centurion Virginius lead to self-absorbed patriarchal thoughts of killing her. In-between, from 2.4 to 5.3, Lavinia’s tongueless, handless body represents the horrific psychosomatic consequences of materializing those thoughts into action. And for as much as her male relatives draw on those thoughts—that education—in attempts to understand her, we are left with a disturbing sense, as Grace Starry West identifies, that “their education . . . always gets in the way” (73), that their awkward uncertain aesthetization of her mutilated body “may be designed to show the [ethical] limits of Roman tradition as well as Roman literary education” (75).

Nothing shows that limit more disturbingly than Lavinia’s own heroic attempt to speak her victimization through a direct, physical engagement with classical texts. Like a nightmarish school lesson come to life, 4.1 opens with her chasing down her horrified nephew, Young Lucius, for his packet of schoolbooks. After he drops them, she clumsily selects *Metamorphoses* and, as Titus describes, “tosseth” (4.1. 41) and “busily . . . turns the leaves” (4.1. 45) with her stumps to the Philomela story. With help from her uncle, who improvises a writing method for her that “recalls,” as the Norton Shakespeare editors point out, “Io in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (412), “she takes the staff in her mouth . . . guides it [through the sand] with her stumps and writes” (412), as Titus quotes, “‘Strumpum—Chiron—Demetrius’” (4.1. 77): that is all to say, “Like Philomela’s body by Tereus, my body has been defiled by Chiron and Demetrius.” At this point, as I have already identified, attention shift entirely to Titus’s vengeance, and Lavinia only functions as a representation of her presumed “shame” (5.3. 46) and Titus’s extreme “sorrow”
(5.3. 46). But what about her sorrow? In other words, Lavinia’s haunting mutilated presence and her heroic attempt to speak her victimization represent much more than this patriarchal simplicity. Indeed, as Emily Detmer-Goebel points out, her male relatives “find no words to acknowledge Lavinia’s deeper source of pain” (87). But, as I have been saying, their expressive failure is not their own; it is an educational one. And Shakespeare indicates as much with her clumsy, mediated appropriation of the *Metamorphoses*.

In this light, *Titus* is only partially Ovidian. A Senecan-influenced tragedy as well, focused as it is on militarism, dismemberment, physical mutilation, and revenge killing, the play almost completely strips *Metamorphoses* of its titular creativity—of its defining metamorphic device—to confront us with the horrors of a grotesquely literal society. For Titus’s Roman characters, there is nothing equivalent to Ovid’s optimistic transition from rape, mutilation, and confinement to his “But suffering sharpens the wits and misfortune makes/One resourceful” (575); and there is certainly nothing equivalent to the comparable metamorphosis of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus into the *deus ex machina* compensation of melodious birds. Rather, in a play that begins with a funeral and ends with funeral decisions, the Roman characters must deal with the literal (presumably decaying) matter of bodies and body parts without any hope of divine or creative intervention. Within this context, to believe otherwise, as Titus’s desperate pleas for divine justice indicates, makes one mad or at least thought as much. And in that sense, Titus’s movement from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to Livy’s *History*—from the transformative magic of avian metamorphosis to the grotesquely literal “pattern, precedent, and lively warrant” (5.3. 43) of Virginian filicide—represents a return to the senses of a death-obsessed society in decline.

Aaron represents and exposes the pathology of this literalism. But as a cultural and racial outsider somatically marked as a kind of exogenous literary device, his hair-straightening also
represents the creative, magical reality of Ovidian metamorphosis. While hair is an overdetermined, recurring signifier in the *Metamorphoses*, its function as a source or site of political as well as avenging power resonates most powerfully through Aaron’s uncurling hair. In book one, before sharing with the assembled gods his intentions to destroy humanity, “Jove shook the awesome locks of his head three times and again/so causing the earth and the sea and constellation to tremble” (179-180). In book three, Diana’s transformation of Acteon into a stag begins when “she splashed his hair with revengeful drops [of water]” (190). In book four, Juno travels to Hades to implore the snake-haired fury Tisiphone, who she found “tossing the wriggling adders [of her hair] away from in front of her face” (475), to help her take revenge against Semele through her daughter Ino. Agreeing to do so, Tisiphone pursued Ino and her husband, Athamas, and drove them mad by throwing two of her poison-breathing snakes at them. At the end of book four, after demonstrating the petrifying power of Medusa’s head, Perseus explains that “her marvellous hair/was her crowning glory” (796-797), until Minerva transformed it into “horrible snakes” (802) as punishment for the “sin” of having been raped by Neptune in Minerva’s shrine. In book five, Ceres appears before Jupiter “with a continence clouded with fury,/her hair let loose, exuding malice” (512-513), as she implores Jupiter to help her recover Proserpine from Pluto in the Underworld. In book six, Philomela’s hair first represents her anger and violation—“she tore her disheveled/hair” (531-532)—and then the grotesque satisfaction of her vengeance—“her hair besprinkled/with blood from the crazy carnage, and Itys’s gory head/was tossed in his father’s face” (657-659). And finally, in book eight, in an attempt to win the love of her father’s enemy, Scylla traitorously cuts off Nisus’ “magic lock of resplendent crimson” (9) on which “the power of his kingdom depended” (10).
Also, as Jonathan Bate and Liz Oakley-Brown suggest, early modern readers and theatergoers would have associated Aaron’s name and pedagogical disposition to the biblical Aaron. In that sense, I would suggest that his hair also associates him with The Book of Judges story of Samson. Reflecting his adherence to Nazarite restrictions, the seven locks of Samson’s unshorn hair illustrate this signification in two ways. In the first, it marks his distinction from Philistian culture and the Israeli “wickedness” (XIII. 1) that God punishes with Philistian oppression; in the second, it is the source of the physical power that seemingly promises to liberate the Israelis from that oppression. As we know, it is Samson’s exogamous desires—his weakness for Philistian women—that forces a more complicated fulfillment of this purpose. That is, after revealing the secret of his power to Delilah, Samson is set upon by the Philistines, who shave his head, cut out his eyes, and condemn him to hard labor in a Gazan prison. For whatever reason, they allow his hair to grow back. And when more than three thousands of them gather to thank their god Dagon by in part making a “laughingstock” (XVI. 25) of him,

Samson called unto the Lord, and

said, O Lord God, I pray thee, think upon

me: O God, I beseech thee, strengthen me

at this time only, that I may be at once

avenged of the Philistines for my two

eyes. (XVI. 28)

This is the second and last time Samson prays for help; the first time comes a chapter earlier, after his killing of a thousand Philistian men (with the jawbone of an ass) works up a life-threatening thirst. God answers both times: the first by producing water from the jawbone and the second with the return of Samson’s strength. What makes the second time different,
however, is that his blindness ironically allows him to see and accept the “inward light,” as Milton would later rationalize it, of his divine, anti-colonial purpose. Much like the consequences of gratuitous violence in Titus, that blindness also reconciles the difference between personal and political revenge. That is, his blindness represents his personal experience of Philistian oppression, an experience that effectively solves the problem of his exogamous desires. And with the personal reconciled to the divinely political in this way, he is able to redirect the restored power of his regrown hair against the Philistines with brutal efficiency: “so the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he had slain in his life” (XVI. 30).

Representing a conquered and humiliated people, Tamora and her surviving sons also hope for this kind of divine, avenging power. For instance, after Tamora castigates the “cruel irreligious piety” (1.1.130) that claims her eldest son, Demetrius implores his mother to stand resolved; but hope withal

The selfsame gods that armed the Queen of Troy
With opportunity of sharp revenge
Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent
May favour Tamora, the Queen of the Goths—
When Goths were Goths and Tamora was queen—
To quit her bloody wrongs upon her foes. (1.1. 135-141)

Later, after Bassianus spots Aaron leaving Tamora in their forest hideaway and ironically questions whether he has discovered Diana, the goddess of chastity, in such a compromised position, Tamora imagines,

Had I the power that some say Dian had,
Thy temples should be planted presently
With horns, as was Actaeon’s and the hounds
Should drive upon thy new-transformèd limbs. (2.3. 61-64)

As I have pointed out, Roman literalism renders such hope in the classical gods as well as such fantasies of divine power maddeningly futile. However, what rescues Tamora from the extreme sorrow and seeming madness that grips Titus is that Aaron, despite or perhaps because of his professed atheism, is her god or, at least, functions as one. Like the snake-haired Tisiphone to Juno, Aaron answers her prayer for divine power in the form of her sons’ arrival to carry out his Ovidian plot. This argument is, of course, contrary to the widely help opinion that Aaron’s villainy defines him as “a man divorced of the gods” (137). But to think of him in this way, while consistent with the medieval and early modern association of blackness with villainy, is to miss the divine magic of his uncurling hair and specifically how it evokes a decidedly more complex understanding of divine justice and power.

His function as avenging god also explains their adulterous, interracial love. That is, with someone like Aaron to help her make the literally impossible possible, it is no wonder, as our opening passage illustrates, that Tamora forgets herself and risks her political legitimacy—her legitimacy as a woman, as a queen, and as an empress—for the love of her “sweet Moor, sweeter to [her] than life!” (2.3. 51). In the play, as in the period, love is a necessary mystification, because it functions to harness and thereby legitimate the dangerously subversive and potentially violent erotic desires essential for both the generation of offspring and the expansion of empire.

The play begins at the end of just such a process, a process initiated by Titus’s exceptionally virile production of “five and twenty valiant sons” (1.1. 79). However, by the time of the play, after twenty-one of those sons have died in the ten-year war against the Goths, there is no
evidence—beyond, of course, those sons “alive and dead” (1.1. 81) and one daughter—of the woman (or perhaps women) and presumably the Roman culture of love that helped produce them. This absent-presence of Mother Andronicus as an ultra-fertile site of female sexuality perhaps reflects the traumatic after-effects of something like what Freud famously identified as the renunciation of sexual pleasure required for the establishment and extension of civilization. In other words, a ten-year process of conquering the Goths by in part repressing the desire for all things Gothic, including the desire for lascivious Gothic women like Tamora, the war has arguably transformed Rome into a society deeply uncomfortable with the expression and representation of sexuality—particularly female sexuality—at home.

As Aaron and Tamora’s relationship as well as Chiron and Demetrius’s violation of Lavinia illustrates, giving into those desires is what non-Romans in need of Roman conquest and colonization do. By contrast, to maintain this distinction, the Romans avoid or carefully justify sexuality as the necessary business of reproduction. For instance, Titus offers a quantitative justification of his pre-war virility, when he qualifies his twenty-five sons as only “Half of the number that King Priam had” (1.1. 80), as if to suggest that the fall of Troy had as much to do with the sexual excesses of Priam as Paris. Also, the act-one dispute between Saturninus and Bassianus for Lavinia centers not on competing claims of love factored in terms of emotional or erotic desire but a legal dispute over property. When Saturninus threatens, “if Rome have law or we have power/Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape” (1.1. 400-401), Bassianus disputes the charge with the confident but decidedly unsexy expression of faith that “the laws of Rome [will] determine” (1.1. 404) that he merely “seize[d]” (1.1. 403) and is now “possessed” (1.1. 405) of what rightfully belongs to him. For as disruptive as this dispute initially proves, its appeal to law and its legal objectification of Lavinia—its definition of rape as solely a property
crime between men—limit for men and completely deny for women sexual desire and the sexual agency that might develop out of it; in that regard, it’s not surprising that the dispute over Lavinia fades as quickly as it emerges. In such a world, a death-obsessed world in decline, as I have termed it, more comfortable with the filicidal literalism of Livy’s History or the sterility of Roman law than the magic of Ovid’s Metamorphoses or the erotic agency of his Art of Love, the regenerative legitimation of erotic desire is simply too disturbing.

Despite or perhaps because of their villainy, Aaron and Tamora’s interracial love also suggests for early modern England a postcolonial alternative to its continuing dependence on Roman literary education. In terms of what he identifies as “linguistic postcolonialism,” Richard Helgerson compares Princess Catherine’s English lesson in Henry V to Will Page’s Latin lesson in The Merry Wives of Windsor to illustrate, “An English lesson now leads somewhere; a Latin lesson doesn’t. English is the future; Latin . . . a lingering past ready for closure” (297). Further addressing “the bawdy puns into which both [lessons] so rapidly descend” (296), which in Henry V “[fit] the rape imagery that accompanies Henry’s conquest of France and [Catherine’s] own sexual submission” (297), Helgerson concludes, “The triumph of English . . . is specifically sexual. Latin is allowed no such destiny-filled impregnating power” (297). In Titus, English also triumphs and that triumph is also sexual. But as I have been suggesting, it does so through a considerably more complex process. That is, by distinguishing between rhetorical modes in the classical tradition—between violent literalism and magical creativity, Shakespeare suggests that England’s postcolonial future depends not on a wholesale rejection of Latin or Roman culture—not, in other words, on sending Roman literary education to the grave along with all of its victims—but on a radically selective process of translation and appropriation. Nothing could be more radical and, for most critics, implausible or even incomprehensible than appropriating and
translating for England a liberated future in the form of a hair-straightening Moor. In short, nothing could be more radical than thinking of Henry V, one of England’s most celebrated monarchs, in terms of Aaron the Moor, one of Shakespeare’s most villainous characters. But that is precisely what Shakespeare is doing, for the magic of Aaron’s hair straightening anticipates and represents the magic of the “destiny-filled impregnating power” that results in the play’s only birth: the birth of Aaron and Tamora’s “blackamoor child” (4.2. 51).

What are we to make of the appearance of this dark-skinned, interracial baby? Another reflection of the play’s Roman sexual anxieties, this child comes out of the nowhere that is the unrepresented female reproductive body. Like the absent-present Mother Andronicus, the play never represents Tamora’s pregnancy and only first mentions it in 4.2, when Aaron tells us—appropriately enough hidden in an aside—that it’s almost over, that Tamora’s already confined to a palace birthing room in the “unrest” (4.2. 31) of her labor pains. In the early modern period, childbirth represented one of those rare instances when men relinquished their direct patriarchal authority to the expert experiential knowledge of women. As David Cressy explains, “Very few men gained intimate entry into the birthing room or knew what happened behind the screen [that shielded a laboring woman’s body]. The transformation [of pregnant women’s bodies] belonged to a powerfully gendered domain” (15) with the midwife at its center. So, along with Saturninus and the rest of Rome, Aaron and Tamora’s sons are forced to wait for Cornelia the midwife—another absent-present woman—to finish her work and inform Saturninus whether or not the gods have blessed him with a male heir.

How Tamora, Cornelia, and the nurse manage to transport the racist patriarchal nightmare of an illegitimate black child from the palace undetected is left to our imagination. But once the
nurse finds Aaron, she delivers his child with a message from Tamora that reveals the brutality of her incorporated Romanness and the limits of his:

A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue.

Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad

Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime.

The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,

And bids thee christen it with thy dagger’s point. (4.2. 66-70)

Against this normative expression of infanticidal Roman racism, Aaron first pushes back with a characteristic bit of Roman misogyny. “Zounds, ye whore,” (4.2. 71), he curses her, before asking a morally charged rhetorical question that sadly continues to resonate in our world, and specifically in the “Black Lives Matter” movement: “is black so base a hue?” (4.2. 71). He won’t do it; he can’t do it. In a death-obsessed world, where the titular character sacrifices twenty-one of his sons in war and kills a son and a daughter at home—right on stage of all of us to see, Aaron refuses to take his infant son’s life.

A few years before the production of Titus, in Richard Duke of York also known as 3Henry VI, Shakespeare registers the horrors of England’s War of the Roses in mournfully represented acts of child murder, patricide, and filicide. The play opens with the murder of a Yorkist child, the young Earl of Rutland, and ends with the exceptionally brutal murder of a Lancastrian child, Prince Edward. In between, the overly pious King Henry witnesses two soldiers make the heartrending discovery that they have each killed a family member: one his son, the other his father. All these instances pivot on ethically charged questions like Aaron’s. In just one example, Queen Margaret questions the Caesar-like brutality of the Yorkist brothers against her son with,
[Caesar] was a man—this, in respect, a child;

And men ne’er spend their fury on a child.

What’s worse than murderer that I may name it? (5.5. 55-57)

In this way, Aaron can’t kill his son because to do so would be against what Shakespeare worked through as the thing for England not to do just a few years before. Indeed, Shakespeare links Aaron—through his hair, his sexuality, his morally charged question, and his subsequent protective paternal love—to England’s colonial and postcolonial history and offers his son as hope for England’s future.

Also, as Carolyn Sale argues, that link may even be a racial one. Reading against the current of scholarship “which has viewed Aaron as an African figure who represents ideas of race and ‘racialism’ at the end of the sixteenth century” (26), Sale instead encourages us to consider “the ways in which Aaron addresses constructions of race and barbarism from Britain’s past” (26). Described as a “swart Cimmerian” by Bassianus, that is, a dark-skinned member of “a legendary people [linked to ancient Briton] and upon whom the sun never shone” (Norton 396), Aaron recalls the complex racial history of the British Isles as sketched by William Harrison, who claimed that the Britons had once borne a darker ‘hue’ because they were of a ‘race proceeding of Cham’, the son of Noah believed to have turned black for the sin of viewing his father naked or for having sex with his wife aboard the ark. (31)

“[I]s black so base a hue?” therefore initiates a process of reminding the Elizabethans of their pre-colonial blackness, which Aaron attempts to develop into a postcolonial point of pride:

“Coal-black is better than another hue,” he attempt to teach Tamora’s son and by extension the Elizabethans, “In that it scorns to bear another hue” (4.2. 98-99).
Perhaps on some deep level, as deep as the play’s fear of female sexuality, that’s why Shakespeare can’t bring himself to have anyone else kill Aaron or his son. Despite Lucius’s sadistic order to “First hang the child, that [Aaron] may see it sprawl” (5.1. 51) as they both die, Aaron’s offer of a detailed confession on the grounds that his son is spared is enough for Lucius to agree that “if it please me what thou speak’st/Thy child shall live, and I will see it nourished” (5.1. 59-60). Lucius is clearly not “pleased” with Aaron’s boastful recounting of his villainy. But, as far as we know, nothing happens to the child. In fact, Lucius is so disturbed by Aaron’s confession that he spares Aaron’s life as well: “Bring down the devil,” he orders the Goths, “for he must not die/So sweet a death as hanging presently” (5.2. 145-146). At that point, gagging Aaron is enough. But that doesn’t even hold, for he’s brought back on stage in the next and last scene taunting Lucius with, “Some devil whisper curses in my ear/And prompt me, that my tongue may utter forth/The venomous malice of my swelling heart” (5.3. 11-13). Eventually the only thing left to do is kill Aaron. But when A Roman reminds Lucius of that, reminds him to “give sentence on this execrable wretch/That hath been breeder of these dire events” (5.3. 76-77), Lucius orders instead,

    Set him breast-deep in earth and famish him.
    There let him stand, and rave, and cry for food.
    If anyone relieves or pities him,
    For the offence he dies. This is our doom.
    Some stay to see him fastened in the earth. (5.3. 178-182)

In a play where speech and life are so easily and brutally taken away, why can’t Lucius kill Aaron? The answer is that he has not just been a breeder of dire events; he has also been an Ovidian breeder and protector of life. In a sense, Lucius’s punishment literalizes that. That is,
instead of killing and burying him; it turns him into a raving, crying tree. And to make it punishable by death to relieve or pity him also reveals that someone might be persuaded to do so, as I have. England’s postcolonial future depended on someone taking that chance.

Works Cited


1 All quotations are from the first edition of *The Norton Shakespeare*. 