Fractions of Ovid in *Titus Andronicus*

The necessity of conclusion forces a contradiction upon Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: to come to a conclusion, the poem must violate the logic of inter-generational succession, the logic of *translatio imperii*, and most importantly, the logic of metamorphosis itself, which has given the poem its structure and meaning. Ovid’s narrator sums up this metamorphic and translational logic in one of the final passages of the poem: “Even so did Atreus yield to Agamemnon’s claim of honour, so Aegeus to Theseus, Peleus to Achilles; indeed, to choose an instance that must match them both, Saturn is less than Jove” (XV.855-8).\(^1\) A moment later, the “final” apotheosis of Augustus seems to coincide with the poet’s sense of completion for his work: “Now stands my task accomplished” (XV.871). Contrary to the metamorphic logic of the narrative up to this point, the conclusion expresses a desire for completion of Rome’s imperial task and totalization of the world under its banner as Rome’s imperial leader, Augustus, reconciles humanity to the gods and even joins the gods in divinity. The narrator imagines the entire world encompassed by Roman law and governance, and the *Pax Romana*, personified by Augustus:

“Need I count barbarian lands and peoples by the shores of Ocean, east and west? His [Augustus’] writ shall run wherever men can live, in every land; the sea likewise shall bow to his command! When peace has been bestowed upon the world, turning his thoughts to civil rights, he’ll show justice and equity in lawgiving, and by his own example guide men’s ways” (XV.830-5).

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Rome here finally brings about a totalized world, registered in the words “wherever” and “every,” which puts an end to the former differences and the antagonisms between barbarian and civilized nations. The wrath, lust, and envy formerly motivating metamorphosis have settled into the “peace … justice, and equity” of empire. The *Metamorphoses* is indeed self-contradictory in this concluding shift from metamorphosis to teleology: the Roman Empire would appear to be the sudden, static outcome of perpetual transformation.

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, I would argue, acts as a sequel to the *Metamorphoses* which undoes its conclusion, unleashes metamorphosis again, and acknowledges the metamorphic forces of wrath, lust, and envy within empire itself. As it looks ahead of Ovid’s early-imperial Rome to a late-imperial Rome, *Titus Andronicus* sends the Roman empire regressively back through episodes that formed it in the *Metamorphoses*, showing perhaps how empire experiences its foundational transformations in reverse, as it declines. The play sends Rome back to the conclusion of the Trojan War, to the treachery of Thracian Polymestor against Priam and Hecuba, and the excessive wrath of Achilles, which strikes at the Trojans from the grave, as presented in *Metamorphoses*, Book 13. It sends it back to the uneasy alliance between Athens and Thrace, between civilization and its semi-barbarian protector, in the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela in *Metamorphoses*, Book 6. It even sends it as far back as a primeval confrontation between civilization and barbarism in the story of Athenian Triptolemus and Scythian Lyncus in *Metamorphoses*, Book 5.

*Titus Andronicus* presents a violent opposition between civilization and barbarism that is immediately ironized by the fact that the ostensibly “civilized” Romans and “barbaric” Goths both possess the supposedly civilized cultural tradition of Greece and Rome, arguably in the compiled form of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Both the Romans and the Goths use the Ovidian
tradition as a rhetorical resource to express the trauma of violence, the abjection of mourning and sorrow, and the manic enthusiasm of vengeance. Understood as a privileged and totalized *whole*, this tradition is nonetheless subject to fragmentation and decimation by characters in moments of abjection and then to multiplication and amplification in moments of vengeance. Simultaneously mourning his lost sons and paying homage to Rome itself in Act 1, Titus expresses the fragmentation of his Trojan legacy:

> Romans, of five-and-twenty valiant sons,  
> Half of the number that King Priam had,  
> Behold the poor remains, alive and dead.  
> These that survive, let Rome reward with love. (1.1.79-82)²

While the number of Titus’ offspring may still strike us as mythically abundant, Titus sees his paternal glory as reaching only *half* that of the legendary Trojan king. He feels his appearance on the historical scene to be determinately late, with decadence and decay built necessarily into the passage of time. His own reproductive output—and thus the potential for military service that comes with the production of sons—is only a fragment of that of the heroic age of the Trojan War. This already reduced number has now been decimated by war: only a “poor remains” is left. It is “poor” in the sense that it is drained of the implied wealth of the whole but also “poor” perhaps in its ability to evoke pity. The quantification of the Trojan legacy—into halves and remainders of a whole—suggests its status here as a formal sum of divisible, equivalent, abstract parts that constitute a value through their sheer quantity; the content of that legacy seems subordinate to its form.

The ironic cultural alliance between enemies in *Titus* is perhaps most obvious in Titus’ identification with the Trojan king Priam and Tamora’s identification (through Demetrius’

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interpretation) with Hecuba: in their competition for possession of the Trojan legacy, the two fall unexpectedly into the roles of husband and wife, king and queen of Rome’s tragic ancestral city of Troy. As defeated captives of Rome, Demetrius sees the Goths as wholly separated from their former identity: it is now past the time when “the Goths were Goths” (1.1.140). They are no longer self-identical. As a reaction to this state of abjection, Demetrius alludes to Ovid’s account of Hecuba’s revenge upon the treacherous Polymestor in Book 13 of the

Metamorphoses:

    Then, madam, stand resolved, but hope withal
    The *selfsame* gods that armed the Queen of Troy
    With opportunity of sharp revenge
    Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent
    May favour Tamora, the Queen of the Goths
    (When Goths were Goths, and Tamora was queen)
    To quit the bloody wrongs upon her foes. (1.1.135-41, emphasis added)

Unlike Titus, who expresses loss as a fragmentation of the Trojan legacy, Demetrius conjures a vision of the complete restoration of that legacy, in the service of revenge. The “selfsame gods” that aided Hecuba in her revenge may be able to restore the Goths to their selfsame identity. In Ovid’s telling of this episode from the aftermath of the Trojan War, the Thracian Polymestor (“the Thracian tyrant”) violates a contract of adoption and protection he made with Priam by slaughtering Priam’s son Polydorus once the Trojans are defeated in war. Hecuba’s vicious act of vengeance against Polymestor is punished with her metamorphosis to a dog; however, her howls of sorrow touch all (Trojans, Greeks, and the gods) with sympathy, and all agree that her “tragic end … was unfair” (XIII.575). In Demetrius’ allusion to this episode from Ovid, he reframes Titus’ purported act of sacrifice as a violated contract. Tamora’s revenge may cost her her humanity, but her cause may achieve universally-recognized justice. The ambiguity of the Thracian, as geographically and politically intermediate between Greece and Troy, is projected
onto Titus and Rome. Demetrius’ allusion to Hecuba in Thrace also evokes her confrontation with the ghost of Achilles, who, like Titus, demands an additional sacrifice after war hostilities have concluded: the sacrifice of Hecuba’s daughter Polyxena over his grave. The story suggests that Achilles’ ghost violates a civilized principle of proportionality in war by demanding yet more sacrifice on the already defeated Trojan side. It seems appropriate that Achilles’ singular and excessive wrath would continue to demand “one more” victim, even after his death. Titus risks the same kind of excess in his demand for “one more” victim in the person of Tamora’s son Alarbus.

In her plea for her son’s life, Tamora undertakes a radical critique of the opposition between civilization and barbarism, and proposes an extension and universalization of Roman values. The scene of supplication between Titus and Tamora, Roman conqueror and Gothic captive, presents a tableau of the interlocking oppositions of civilized/barbarian, free/bonded, and male/female. Against these radicalized oppositions, Tamora asserts parental love as a universal value and even seeks to universalize the traditional Roman value of piety, embodied by Pius Aeneas, founder of Rome, and sustained in the present by “Pius” Andronicus:

And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,  
O, think my son to be as dear to me …  
O, if to fight for king and commonweal  
Were piety in thine, it is in these. (1.1.107-115)

(Pietas or piety—defined as duty to family, country, and the gods—is consistently asserted as a ground of Roman identity in the play.) Tamora also invokes quantities and equations in her counter-argument against the excessive claim of Titus: “Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome / To beautify thy triumphs and return / Captive to thee and to thy Roman yoke” (1.1.109-111). In this assertion of sufficiency—the sufficiency of Gothic captivity and slave labor to demonstrate Roman triumph—Tamora proposes to “call it even” between Romans and Goths.
Titus, like the ghost of Achilles, insists upon “one more.” When Titus refuses Tamora’s call for mercy and seizes her eldest son for sacrifice, she, rising from her kneeling position, declares a reversal in the terms of the opposition between pious Roman and cruel barbarian: “O cruel, irreligious piety!” (1.1.130). If piety means to offer or to take just enough to achieve reciprocity or justice, cruelty means to take an excess. The “civilized” Roman virtue of piety—and the “barbarian” vice of cruelty—can be understood in the quantifiable, economic terms of sufficiency and excess.

After Tamora’s exclamation, her sons continue to analyze the Roman/barbarian opposition. Chiron and Demetrius interpret Titus’ condemnation of their brother, by way of a reference to “barbarous Scythia” and the multiplication of its legacy in the present day of imperial Rome:

Chiron: Was never Scythia half so barbarous!
Demetrius: Oppose not Scythia to ambitious Rome!
Alarbus goes to rest and we survive
To tremble under Titus’ threatening look. (1.1.131-4)

Chiron completes the radical reversal that Tamora began: Rome has now exceeded even the exceptional Scythia in barbarism. Demetrius asserts that now Rome has become singular, in its “ambition,” transgressing all bounds of comparison and opposition. Entering into a kind of second-order exceptionality, Rome has become the exception to the exception. Scythia, a model of barbarism that used to stand alone, in independent wholeness, is now reduced to a fragment: not even “half” of Rome’s whole. Demetrius suggests that death is now preferable to “survival” as a slave under Roman law. The captive persists in a state of “trembling”: this trembling reflects the anxiety induced by the bonded state, in which the violence of previous war and capture is held in reserve and indiscriminately unleashed within an ostensibly civilized and peaceful legal order. As in the demand of Achilles’ ghost, here war persists after the official
conclusion of hostilities, in the “cruel” exaction of excess penalty. Crucially, Demetrius’ assertion that Scythia is less than “half” of Rome in barbarity is another attempt to quantify and formalize the Ovidian legacy. A crucial point of reference for the “barbarous Scythian” is Ovid’s tale of the primeval meeting between the Athenian Triptolemus and Scythian Lyncus, who tries to kill his guest in order to steal and take credit for the “gift of Ceres,” the technology of agriculture. This represents a failure of hospitality and gratitude on the part of the barbarian, whose moral failure is registered in his metamorphosis to an animal (the lynx). Again, the barbarian’s “cruelty” can be seen in the refusal to enter into a social contract, and in the taking of excess.

_Titus Andronicus_ contains just this single, though arguably very significant, explicit reference to the figure of the Scythian; appropriate to the obscurity of this figure of the Scythian, the play also contains an indirect, obscured reference. A.C. Hamilton has suggested that Tamora’s name derives from Tomyris, legendary queen of the Scythians who, according to Herodotus, defeated the Persian king Cyrus the Great in the fifth century, BCE.\(^3\) Though outwardly and officially a Gothic queen, Tamora silently bears the history of a paradigmatic barbarian leader who brought down a renowned civilized force. Tamora’s singularity and perhaps the singularity of the Scythian of whom she bears a nominal trace can be seen in Lavinia’s provocation, which seeks out a historical analogue for Tamora only to deny its relevance: “Ay, come, Semiramis, nay, barbarous Tamora,/ For no name fits thy nature but thy own!” (2.3.118). Tamora dwells here in a state of exception and self-reference.

I would like to suggest another context for _Titus Andronicus_ which, I would argue, continues the metamorphosis of barbarian and Roman through the decline of the Roman empire.

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\(^3\) _The Early Shakespeare_ (San Marino, Calif., 1967) 87.
and the rise of its successor. Shakespeare’s play, with its late-Roman setting and Ovidian universe of references, obscures the Christian context put forth by the prose history, “The Tragical History of Titus Andronicus,” which is regarded by some critics as a source for the play.

The prose history asserts its time period as that of the Roman empire’s greatest extent, under the Christian emperor Theodosius, in the late 4th century CE. The assumption is that the Roman empire had been fully Christianized by this time; its invaders, the Goths, are “a barbarous people, strangers to Christianity.”4 The category of “barbarian,” normally opposed to “Greek” or “Roman” in those contexts, is here opposed to “Christian.”

The epistles of St. Paul, I would argue, perform a kind of metamorphosis upon the identities and oppositions of the Roman empire, as reflected in Ovid. Ovid imagined the “Roman” and the “civilized” as eventually overwhelming and cancelling out all particular barbarian identities. In Paul’s transformative vision, the Christ event negates and renders “indifferent” these opposed ethnic and legal categories, both “Roman” and “barbarian,” which define the Roman empire of his time. Paul’s transformative claim famously appears in Galatians 3:28. The epistle to the Colossians, though probably authored not by Paul but one of his followers, offers the most extensive litany of categories and is perhaps the most relevant to Titus Andronicus: “Where is nether Grecian nor Iewe, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bonde, fre: but Christ is all and in all things” (Col. 3:11).5 Notably, in this epistle, between Jew/Greek and bond/free are the categories “Barbarian, Scythian” (barbaros, skuthes). Paul does use the term “barbarian” in the Epistle to the Romans to limn a third primary


5 References to the Bible are to The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1969). This translation was commonly found in private homes in the Elizabethan period, if not in the churches; it is generally regarded as “the Bible of Shakespeare.”
distinction in his thought: “I am detter bothe to the Grecians, and to the Barbarians, bothe to the wisemen & unto the unwise” (Rom. 1:14). The distinction Greek/barbarian is a political distinction for Aristotle, who asserts that the Greeks are natural masters of men while non-Greeks (barbarians) are natural slaves. He defends this with a climatic theory which grants the Greeks both skill and spirit, mastery and freedom, because of Greece’s intermediate geographical placement between Europe and Asia. For Aristotle, the distinction between Greek and barbarian parallels the Roman legal distinction between freeman and slave. Ovid clearly assumes these oppositions between barbarian and civilized (whether Greek or Roman) in his text though he defines them in relation to social contract and reciprocity, as we have seen.

The Pauline author of Colossians performs a kind of deconstruction of these Greco-Roman oppositions, extracting a figure of exception beyond them, before reforming all into members of a new body; this what I would call Christian “metamorphosis.” It is clear that the Pauline author suggests, with the inclusion of “barbarian” in Colossians 3:11, a fundamental division in Greek national consciousness (and in Ovid): Greek/barbarian. However, an irregularity, an asymmetry emerges in the catalogue of divisions because “barbarian” is matched not with “Greek” but with “Scythian.” It is not as if the Pauline author has entirely abandoned his rhetorical scheme of oppositions at this point, because he returns to it with “bond/free” at the next point. It is as if the very regularity, the law of this rhetorical scheme is disrupted in medias res by the figure of the Scythian. In Greek sources like Herodotus, the ethnic category of Scythian certainly is not opposed to the barbarian but rather constitutes one particular example of the barbarian. The Scythian is perhaps a synecdoche of the barbarian. I would argue that the opposition Greek/barbarian is evoked implicitly by the Pauline author, effectively isolating the

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The Scythian is cut off from the order of opposition itself. The fact of this term’s isolated and singular use in Paul and in the New Testament (and in Titus Andronicus) drives the figure further outside the realm of reliable, useful category into exception, at least within Christian discourse. The Pauline author includes the Scythian within the Christian covenant as a kind of absolute other, that is, an other that has not been brought into relation with an established national group, especially a group that Paul might claim membership in. As Hellenized Jew and Roman citizen, Paul can claim membership in almost all the groups named in Colossians 3:11; however, the Scythian (and even the barbarian) remains remote from Paul’s personal experience. The call to the Scythian is, in effect, this epistle’s “call into the wilderness,” into a singularity and exceptionality that has not been assimilated to the self/other oppositions of Jewish, Greek, or Roman national consciousness. However, the singularity of the Scythian figure, and the oppositions of Greek/barbarian and bond/free, are neutralized by Paul’s rhetorical structure of “neither … nor …” All of these figures are metamorphosed into members of a new body, the body of Christ.

The conclusion of Titus Andronicus witnesses the formation of a Pauline community of Romans and Goths whose former ethnic identities have dissolved into sympathy and friendship, and a newly-conceived body politic and empire. The members of each community who are committed to revenge grounded in their ethnic identities as Romans or Goths—Titus, Saturninus, Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius—are consumed in their plots and ultimately cut out of the body politic. The remaining Andronici and the Gothic army they lead are integrated through the workings of grief and pity. Lucius describes his banishment and appeal to the Goths:

The gates shut on me, and turned weeping out,
To beg relief among Rome’s enemies,
Who drowned their enmity in my true tears,
And oped their arms to embrace me as a friend. (5.3.104-7)
This scene of supplication repeats and reverses the scene in Act 1. The body politic seems to experience an opening and liquefaction here that integrates the “poor remainder of the Andronici” as new leaders for the leaderless community of compassionate and just Goths (5.3.130). This moment offers a pro-spective vision of a Christian “Holy Roman Empire” of diverse ethnicities united in common compassion. Marcus perceives the work of mutual incorporation between Roman and Goth in this way:

O, let me teach you how to knit again
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,
These broken limbs again into one body;
Lest Rome herself be bane unto herself …
Speak, Rome’s dear friend, as erst our ancestor,
When with his solemn tongue he did discourse
To lovesick Dido’s sad attending ear
The story of that baleful burning night
When subtle Greeks surprised King Priam’s Troy. (5.3.69-83)

Especially remarkable here is the altered significance of Rome’s Trojan legacy, a legacy transmitted by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: the Trojan War becomes not, as it was for Titus, proof of the decimation perpetrated by time and war nor, as it was for the Goths, a model for inter-ethnic revenge. It is now a source of “solemnity” for its Roman narrator as he relates this essential history to a “saddened” audience of Gothic converts to Rome’s empire.