

**“Tragic-Comic  
Structure Unmoored:  
A Note on Julie  
Taymor’s Titus &  
Children’s Toys”**

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**Abstract:** This paper reads Aaron, The Moor's *plotting* in William Shakespeare and Julie Taymor's *Titus* speculatively suggesting an alternative way to think about Bergson formulation of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living"; whereas, plot-as-*structure* becomes dis-articulated from *subject* undermining the work's racist framing of Aaron as "irreligious Moor [and] chief architect and plotter of these woes" (5.3:121-122).

**Keywords:** *Titus Andronicus*, Julie Taymor, William Shakespeare, The Moor, Tragic-Comic, Subject and Structure.

The struggle against the German political present is the struggle against the past of modern nations, which continue to be harassed by reminiscences of this past. It is instructive for them to see the *ancien régime*, which in their countries has experienced its *tragedy*, play its *comic* role as a German phantom. Its history was *tragic* as long as it was the pre-existing power in the world and freedom a personal whim—in a word, as long as it believed, and had to believe, in its own privileges. As long as the *ancien régime*, as an established world order, was struggling against a world that was only just emerging, there was a world-historical error on its side but not a personal one. Its downfall was therefore tragic.

The present German regime, on the other hand—an anachronism, a flagrant contradiction of universally accepted axioms, the futility of the *ancien régime* displayed for all the world to see—only imagines that it still believes in itself and asks the world to share in its fantasy. If it believed in its own *nature*, would it try to hide that nature under the *appearance* of an alien nature and seek its salvation in hypocrisy and sophism? The modern *ancien régime* is merely the *clown* of a world whose *real heroes* are dead. The last stage of a world historical form is its *comedy*.

—*Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*,  
Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

...The advantage of a small [toy] theatre exactly is that you are looking through a small window. Has not every one noticed how sweet and startling any landscape looks when seen through an arch? This strong, square shape, this shutting off of everything is not only an assistance to beauty; it is the essential of beauty. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.

—"The Toy Theatre," G.K. Chesterton<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, 1843-1844, 247.

<sup>2</sup> Chesterton 1901, 66-67

Before he even speaks, the “raven-coloured” Moor appears to be a self-contained, self-incriminating sign system—a darkness that seems undeniably visible.

–*Speaking of the Moor*, Emily C. Bartels<sup>3</sup>

This essay is about a Moor, a boy, and their toys. What happens when you dramatize and formalize tragic-comic *structure*’s horrific decoupling from *subject*?

In William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1593-94), Titus’s nationalism—his atavistic presumptive logic in relation to imperial Rome in decline’s sense of its national and racial *purity* is perpetually on shaky ground. His is a nationalism-as-production requiring constant repetition and upkeep. One might imagine a professorial admonishment of Old Titus for not being sufficiently dialectical in how he constitutes and consistently calibrates internal and external, national and *inter*-national, friend and enemy. This is an acute crisis symptom and misrecognition in light of the actuality of Rome in its imperial expansion as always, already multi-national. In her characteristic clarity and luminous analytic, Emily C. Bartels probes the representational work of the figure and *actuality* of the Moor-- in the unfolding action of Shakespeare’s play’s procedure as “state-authorized excoriation of the Moor as Other—the Other to outdo and undo all others.” Titus’s brother, Tribune Marcus Andronicus deems Aaron, the Moor as “chief architects and plotter of these woes”<sup>4</sup> (5.3.122). This paper offers a speculative reading of this evocation of *plot* as tragic structure mechanized and gone awry. Bartels’s critical exposition carefully toggles back and forth tracing the complex calculus of *othering* in relation to the Moor and Goth in constant dialectical attunement to how difference, heterogeneity, and antagonism are internal to Rome as actuality—coherent characteristics of an Empire in decline’s lasts gasp. This is succinctly captured in her diagnosis that “the association of Moor with the alien is not what is given here, but what must be made...”<sup>5</sup> Aaron, the Moor mitigates and traverses the levels and landscapes of imperial Rome, conspiring in a “place where the crossing of cultures is not the exception but the rule”<sup>6</sup> This messy separateness of the Moor-- his outsider-insider status-- is not ultimately resolved by way of interpretive incorporation; but rather functions to cast in crisis a ledger that designates inside and outside, external and internal threat-- a multi-nationalism perpetually denied but factual nonetheless. Titus’s players

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3 Bartels 2008, 80.

4 Shakespeare 2005, 106.

5 Bartels 2008, 68

6 Bartels 2008, 70

are “unscripted partners in a volatile history of conquest and consent.”<sup>7</sup> Part of the mechanistic horror in *Titus*’s unfolding is a kind of run-a-way train mechanized violence that fails to properly balance the proportion of force and consent necessary for sustaining an effective hegemony.

This paper examines Shakespeare’s play alongside how Julie Taymor bookends her theatrical adaptation *Titus* (1999). Taymor’s film stages Aaron’s doings and undoing, mobilizing a provisional, speculative theory of the tragic-comic that poses questions of inside/outside and insurgency appropriate to an Empire in decline. Taymor frames her film’s opening with a modern child (who becomes Young Lucius) as surrogate perspective for her audience surveying much of the action in the play often with skilled surreptitiousness. We first meet the boy adorned in a cut-out paper bag, ravaging hot-dogs and playing frantically with action-figures. He kinetically mirrors a televised military conflict before forcefully *returned* to the Roman Colosseum by a rough and tumble composite Biker-Clown-Legionnaire amidst an array of artillery explosions. A Roman soldier-figure travels back with the boy and the ceremonial washing away its dirt heralds the arrival of a mechanized synced up Roman platoon. Such return inaugurates the film’s Roman plot-- Titus’s most recent return as one part of a sequence of perpetual warfare against the Goths. The film ends with the child exiting the action moving towards a computer-generated sunrise with Aaron and Tamora, Queen of the Goths turned Roman Empress’s infant child in tow. The modern boy becoming Young Lucius turns his back on the action and steps off a Shakespeare modified Senecan tragedy revenge-plot that has piled on the bodies and brutalities. David McCandless’s exemplary “A Tale of Two *Tituses*” succinctly captures how the figure of Young Lucius inaugurates and forecloses the drama: “To the extent that the boy’s violent play called the world of violence into being, his absence from it signifies its collapse.”<sup>8</sup> Tamor stages Young Lucius with child stepping off of a comic-structure that has effectively unmoored subject from structure, actant from mutually conflicting ideals-- signaling the Hegelian sense of tragedy. Both Shakespeare and Tamor’s are curious variations on the *Return to Rome* as a problem for radical thought. I propose reading Aaron as figural-vengeance plot as a representational counter-measure and counter-attack against how he is racialistically dehumanized. Certainly not because of the horrific brutalization and carnage his plotting directs and realizes, but rather it is how such functioning as plotting architect renders Aaron as a figurative stand-in for structure; therefore, bypassing typical racist tropes and their attendant binaries of nature/culture, feeling/ thinking, center/periphery, and ultimately, subject and structure.

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7 Bartels, 2008 68.

8 McCandless 2002 509.

Aaron's *plotting* read here speculatively suggests an alternative way to see comedy and the comic's relation to its earlier tragic-stage. I work with a *progressive-regressive* understanding of Aaron's framing in the play and film; whereas, the staging of Aaron as plot and plotter (Aaron as structure) undermines the employment of racist fantasy, informing but never completely limiting Aaron as subject. Aaron's plotting offers a speculative opportunity putting forward a provisional theory on how comedy extends and complicates the insurgent work of tragedy and the tragic by how it radically decouples subject and structure, actant and design. Consider Horace Walpole's formula that "This world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel"<sup>9</sup> in relation to racist tropes that code feeling and thinking along a metropole-periphery, colonial-scripted *Europe as thinking* and *Africa as feeling* axis. Aaron's conspiratorial plotting as a main engine propelling forward the dramatic plot is speculatively read here as making visible *structure* as thought. The work of dramatic structure to make such structure visible. The comic brings to the fore *structure* brimming with thought and design as its *content*, disarticulating from its condition of possibility—tragedy's fusing of subject and structure, tragedy's heroes fusing with action and ethical-political-military-strategic ideal or dueling ethical or juridical prerogatives. The comic aspect of the macabre-phantasmagoria unraveling in *Titus* stages the push-pull and war between subject and structure, uncoupling a fusion that tragedy relies upon as main operation.

This essay poses the question: What would happen if we take seriously Julie Taymor's 1999 film *Titus*'s opening framing scene of the child frantically playing war with his action-figure toys, emphasizing toys over child? Not as a rejection of the trope of childlike innocence and rejuvenating force as answer to tragedy (as in Bengali polymath, writer, and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore's maxim<sup>10</sup>); but rather, as a figure for the fusing-decoupling critical work of the *tragic-comic*.

Writing about Andrei Tarkovsky's film adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, Fredric Jameson offers up a compelling counter-intuitive formulation for the relationship between adaptation and original. Speaking on Shakespearean productions by Orson Welles, Peter Sellers, and Kenneth Branagh, Jameson writes: "The word 'text' obscures the dawning suspicion that Shakespeare's original script (or scenario) is not an original in our sense, nor could it ever be. This is no doubt a distressingly subversive apprehension, which might well lead us to another one: namely that the older paradigms of fidelity—and the newer Merchant-Ivory versions—do not faithfully reproduce their originals so

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9 Qt. in Zupančič 2008 8.

10 "Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man." This Tagore quote frames Sean Penn's 1991 film *The Indian Runner*.

much as they produce them—in the process turning them into classics (that is to say, by definition ‘originals’ that invite further such adaptations and performances).”<sup>11</sup> This is surely a critical-analog to Marx’s oft-referenced methodological insistence that “the anatomy of the human is a key to the anatomy of the ape.” In this matter of source material appearing *after*, consider this plot synopsis included as possible source for Shakespeare’s *Titus*. Housed in the Folger Shakespeare library is a copy translated from its Italian source is a mid-eighteenth-century chat-book entitled “The History of *Titus Andronicus*: The Renowned Roman General.” Its brevity and concision capture the frantic ensuing palimpsest of gruesome violations and blood drenched succession sequence of *Titus*’s dramatic progression via its writing. Its exposition transitions with the mechanistic efficiency of automata. In Shakespeare’s Act one when Titus slays his son Mutius, Titus queries Marcus: “Whether by *device* or no, the heavens can tell” (I.1: 396).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, this is an echo of the last line of Plato’s *Apology*-- Titus’s musings foregrounds *device* as plot/structure on display here in the eighteenth-century précis by way of its rapid-fire recounting. Here is the expository opening from “The History of *Titus Andronicus*, The Renowned Roman General”:

Who, after he had saved Rome by his valor from being destroyed by the barbarous Goths and lost two and twenty of his valiant sons in ten years’ wars, was, upon the Emperor’s marrying the Queen of the Goths, put to disgrace and banished; but being recalled, the Emperor’s son by a first wife was murdered by the Empress’ sons and a bloody Moor, and how charging it upon Adronicus’ sons, though he cut off his hand to redeem their lives, they were murdered in prison; how his fair daughter Lavinia, being ravished by the Empress’ sons, they cut out her tongue, and hands off, etc.; how Andronicus slew them, made pies of their flesh, and presented them to the Emperor and Empress; and then slew them also; with the miserable death he put the wicked Moor to; then at her request slew his daughter and himself to avoid torment.”<sup>13</sup>

This précis is an effective versioning of the pace of dramatic and cinematic unfolding of Shakespeare and Taymor’s *Tituses*. Its condensed, quick transitioning captures how in both productions, the layering of violence upon violation as its *device* comes off as dis-articulated from its character’s motivations: whether hubris, strategic-errors, or righteous battling against some competing,

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11 Jameson 2011, 216.

12 Shakespeare 1594, 2005, 31.

13 Quoted in Shakespeare 1594, 2005, 116.

mutually-exclusive, established *rights* and *wrongs*. The structure in its unfolding *unmoored* from character suggests another connotation and use, an alternative reading and mobilization of Henri Bergson's self-stated "starting point" from his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Aaron's *plotting* and the Young Boy/ Young Lucius's *play* constitute a shared object lesson: Aaron, the Moor's intrigue contributes to the feeling that the plot of Titus is to evoke Bergson's formulation— *du mécanique plaque sur du vivant*-- or, "something mechanical encrusted upon the living".<sup>14</sup> Here, a speculative meditation on how the comic in the tragic-comic disarticulates character from motivation, fashioning of semblance of dramatic unfolding/plot trajectory as an unmoored automata—enveloping most key characters in its murderous unfolding. Beginning her film with a scene of modern child's play, Taymor is most certainly gesturing at the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, or *Alienation Effect* that decouples actor from role played, disturbing the classical Aristotelian unities as criteria for tragic drama (unities of action, time, and place), creating a disjunctive, incongruous coupling of competing settings (Taymor's Rome of antiquity contains Model-Ts, motor-cycles, video-games, microphones, and punk rock sartorial flavors). For Brecht, famously, this is a technique meant to not let his audience lose themselves in the spectacle and cease critical thinking—the Diderot-sourced dance between duel-valorizing theatrical functions as the pleasure to entertain or the pleasure to instruct. Yet, something else is happening here. The children's toys open up a lane, extending a line to well-established insistences on not underplaying play and the role of the child as sites to calibrate and re-calibrate an anti-fascist political-theoretical and radical dramatic project. Taymor's (and for that matter Brecht's) tactics underscore the Bergsonian dialectic of mechanical/ living. Young Lucius literally discards *encrusted* dirt Roman Legion solider in the opening gesture of Taymor's film—inaugurating the assemblage of living (yet mechanized) Roman soldiers. The inanimate washed toy solider inaugurates a soldier mass as mechanistic information actuality.

In a dialogue on Taymor's *Titus* from *Cinéaste*, Young Lucius's character's vantage point and *function* is discussed:

Her dazzling layers of imaginative juxtapositions, notably her sensitive and original framing of the tale through the eyes of the boy Lucius (Osheen Jones), take us beyond the brutality and madness, and provide viewers with a catharsis, an insight into the emotional vulnerabilities behind the violence and human tragedy it ultimately causes. The film's visually stunning final image evokes a fragile but clear sense of hope about the future of humanity.

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14 Bergson 1912 49; Zupančič 2008, 111-126.

Here is Taymor speaking on her mobilization of Young Lucius--adding him to the scene where banished Elder Lucius proclaims "Now will I to the Goths and raise a pow'r / To be revenged on Rome and [Emperor] Saturnine" (3.1:299-300)—and her modification of Shakespeare's ending pertaining to the fate of Aaron and Tamora's infant child:

The young Lucius is in mine because he's watching that event. IN the play I had that as a soliloquy at the end of Part One. I thought those are words that he should say to the child, they are horrific. He's kissing this boy, they're saying goodbye, they're hugging each other, and it just gave so much resonance to how we justify—"Don't worry, we're going to avenge"—whatever it may be that we say with children...

In my stage version, the baby was in a coffin that was delivered by the clown onto the banquet table and, when the child opened up the baby coffin, you heard many babies crying, the birds, the bells. That was too oblique and abstract for a movie because that would be saying that the child is dead. In the theater it's symbolic. So I changed it and I put him in the cage, which is even darker, in a way, because you say, "My God, this child is an animal in a cage and he's black and... what will his life be!" So with Lucius opening that cage and taking the baby out of the coliseum, the child, now of his own free will, takes the baby and exits out of the coliseum, this theater of violence, of cruelty, and into this bleak but open landscape that has water, which means there's a possibility for fruition, of cleaning, of forgiveness. It's also a movement towards the sunrise, which is the next generation **But it freezes on that image, just that slice of the sun coming up** [emphasis mine]. It's not a full sunrise. It's about possibility and hope but it's not about solution.<sup>15</sup>

Elder Lucius proclaims Aaron's *atrocities-exhibition* sentence concluding Shakespeare's play. The sadistic punishment prefigures Bernard Rose's reimagining of Clive Barker's *Candyman* (1992): "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 offense he dies, This is our doom. Some stay, to see him fast'ned in the earth" (5.3:179-183). The psychopathology of lynching necessitates its audience: Lucius hails an audience for the punitive spectacle. McCandless in his analysis of this closing *shot*, evokes the language of mechanism: "As with Lavinia's pedestal [where she is bound by Tamora's sons Demetrius and Chiron after they rape her, cut off her tongue and hands, and replace her hands with spindly proliferating tree branches] Taymor defamiliarizes a

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<sup>15</sup> De Luca, Lindroth, Taymor 2000, 29.



process of objectification by concretizing an objectifying mechanism.”<sup>16</sup> McCandless proposes Young Lucius’s exiting the Colosseum as “fortifying the Symbolic against the Real by staging a wish-fulfillment fantasy; a *dénouement* uncomfortably comparable to the Hollywood Happy Ending... What the boy heads toward is an illusion, a haven provided by the flats of aesthetic escapism.”<sup>17</sup> I will conclude this paper, respectfully, with a different reading of Tamor’s staging of Young Lucius and infant child’s grand exit’s relationship to the tragic-comic and how the *Tituses* figure Aaron as conspiring plot-structure unmoored from subject.

One of the object lessons Bergson employs to illustrate his comic principle—his “something mechanically encrusted upon the living” is the infamous *jack-in-the box*:

As children we have all played with the little man who springs out of his box. You squeeze him flat, he jumps up again. Push him lower, and he shoots up still higher. Crush him down beneath the lid, and often he will send everything flying. It is hard to tell whether or not the toy itself is very ancient, but the kind of amusement it affords belongs to all time. It is a struggle between two stubborn elements, one of which, being simply mechanical, generally ends by giving in to the other, which treats it as a plaything. A cat playing with a mouse, which from time to time she releases like a spring, only to pull it up short with a stroke of her paw, indulges in the same kind of amusement...

Now, let us think of a spring that is rather of a moral type, an idea that is first expressed, then repressed, and then expressed again; a stream of words that bursts forth, is checked, and keeps on starting afresh. Once more we have the vision of one stubborn force, counteracted by another, equally pertinacious. This vision, however, will have discarded a portion of its materiality. No longer is it Punch and Judy that we are watching, but rather a real comedy.<sup>18</sup>

Tamor’s opening scene regains a *portion* of this *materiality* that her dramatic unfolding and formalization compromises. She stages contrast as dialectical interdependence between vitalism and mechanization, stasis and frenetic movement, contemporary *now-time* and the *Return to Rome*. Bergson’s movement from toy jack-in-the-box, to the mechanistic

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<sup>16</sup> McCandless 2002, 508.

<sup>17</sup> McCandless 2002, 510.

<sup>18</sup> Bergson 1912, 69-71. For an infinitely rich engagement with Bergson and the “Idea of Négritude” see Diagne, Bachir Souleymane, 2007, 2011.

vulgarity of Punch and Judy's puppet policeman's perpetual re-animation after being knocked down – to the fully realized dramatic work (Bergson's example is Molière's *Le Mariage Forcé*) retains a diminished materiality. Alenka Zupančič's, to my mind, unsurpassable critical discussion of Bergson links his theory of the comic with the comparably "aprioristic and rather abstract duality of his basic philosophical position, which perpetuates in more than one aspect the dualism of matter and spirit, body and soul, and in which body (inertia, automatism) inevitably falls on the side of what is imperfect and deficient. This is also why Bergson can ultimately define the phenomenon of laughter as nothing but, or more than, a mechanism of social corrective (of this imperfection)." To make it plain—this is a matter of the competing philosophical methods, outlooks, and their attendant politics—dualistic versus dialectical thinking. With dialectical exactitude Zupančič poses the key question: "What if the mechanical element in the comic is not simply one of its two poles or compounds, which is being "stuck," encrusted, on the other pole (on "life"), but could be said to refer to the very *relationship* between (any) two poles appearing as a "mechanical" relationship?"<sup>19</sup> Bergsonian dualism, in Zupančič's analysis "completely overlooks the possibility of this duality already being a (retroactive) *effect* of the comical, not simply its starting point...the comic movement does in fact real something twofold, a fundamental divergence in what is otherwise perceived as a harmonious or organic whole, and in this sense it could be said to point to an original, preexisting duality."<sup>20</sup> On the dialectics of the *tragicomedy*, she elaborates:

...It is a commonplace to say that comedy is full of "mechanical," textual repetitions, whereas we do not really find this kind of repetition in tragedy. But perhaps we can find something more interesting and conceptually productive if we formulate this slightly differently: tragedy cannot stand textual, mechanical repetition, whereas comedy not only stands it, but thrives on it. A tragedy that repeats itself is no longer tragedy (and even if its repetition is absolutely horrible, the latter is deprived of its epic dignity, essential to tragedy proper). Yet if tragedy that repeats itself is no longer tragedy, this does not make it comedy. This point is very important: comedy is not a repetition of tragedy, it is a repetition of something structurally prior or independent of tragedy. There is no direct passage from tragedy to comedy; we not get comedy by repeating. In this respect, we must be careful to distinguish between comic sequences within tragedy (as described above) and

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<sup>19</sup> Zupančič 2008, 115.

<sup>20</sup> Zupančič 2008, 114-115.

what is usually called tragicomedy. The repetition of tragedy falls into this latter category of tragicomedy.

The genre of tragicomedy, which has experienced such a significant rise all through modernity (and postmodernity), is to be understood in the perspective of the repetition of tragedy (not in the perspective of the development of comedy). It is a development that takes place within the tragic paradigm. It involves the recognition of the fact that the tragic itself (with all its epic splendor) is ultimately but a mask of the really miserable, a mask that cannot survive its own repetition. The repetition of tragic events deprives the latter of their aura and transforms them into something common, unexceptional..."<sup>21</sup>

*Titus* most certainly rips off the mask. How do the *Tituses* present a speculative re-emphasis and re-working of Bergson's terms and Zupančič's counter? And what about *tragedy*? And how can Zupančič's emphasis on retroactive effect resonate with how the *Tituses* configure and resist Aaron the Moor as both subject and structure, character and plot. Bartels makes the point that focus on the Moor's malevolent design, transgression, and violent punishment (again, he is buried alive to his head and it is decreed that anyone who attempts to provide him sustenance shall be killed)--the attendant racist dehumanization that frames his character functions to ultimately provide cover for the fact that Adronicus's son Lucius--banished, returned, and now aligned with a Goth army has killed the Emperor Saturninus.<sup>22</sup> Racist dehumanization, qualifying Aaron as "irreligious Moor, Chief architect and plotter of these woes" (5.3: 121-122) serves to provide "shiny object" cover for the crime of violent succession. To insist on a kind of immanent critique of the tragic-comic, as opposed to the comedy as something vis-à-vis tragedy from without, focuses our attention to internal contradictions, antagonistic and constitutive from within, not without. What I want to suggest is that Aaron's *plottings* can be brought out speculatively to function as a meta-theatrical calling attention to the play and film's structure and unmooring of structure and subject. The terror and comedy of the *Tituses* is as much a matter of how we perceive plotting getting ahead of the plotters, asserting its own dynamism decoupled from subjectivity or reason it is the "slaughter bench of history" on display on the proscenium or screen.

Play is not just object-- it is an inter-play of object and narrative. For G.K. Chesterton (writing on the utility of the fairytale), stories and play do not generate fear and animate devils; but rather primes the child with the

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<sup>21</sup> Zupančič 2008, 174-175.

<sup>22</sup> Bartels 2008, 96: "Bringing Aaron into visibility appears thus as a way to make invisible Lucius's unconscionable murder of the legitimate head of state."

confidence to kill them. Chesterton's is an age-appropriate analog to the adult lesson that *Hangmen Also Die!*<sup>23</sup> Like Brecht, Chesterton emphasizes *clarity* and the theatrical and narrative problems of vicarious stand-ins: "What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of the bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon."<sup>24</sup> Taymor's decisions link her film to a long line of critical-aesthetic and radical musings on the gravitas of child's play. Imagine Bergson's jack-in-the-box in Bowie's toymaker's stockpile; or for that matters Benjamin's Russian children's museum window. From David Bowie self-titled 1967 first album, "Come and Buy My Toys":

*Smiling girls and rosy boys  
Come and buy my little toys  
Monkeys made of gingerbread  
And sugar horses painted red*

*Rich men's children running past  
Their fathers dressed in hose  
Golden hair and mud of many acres on their shoes  
Gazing eyes and running wild  
Past the stocks and over stiles  
Kiss the window merry child  
But come and buy my toys...<sup>25</sup>*

Bowie's recording is a pageant of playful folk and cabaret tunes reminiscent of what would become his lifelong obsession—Weimar, Germany and its performative afterlives. Weimar markers include the radical song-writing of Kurt Weil, the self-reflexive militant poetics and playwrighting of Bertolt Brecht, the vocal delivery and madcap control of singer Lotte Lenya and Nina Simone's *Pirate Jenny*—the *force of song* marshalled against the ravages of fascism. Recorded during the same dates and times (and studio) as both *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Pink Floyd's *Piper at the Gates*, most of these Bowie firsts are bursts of story juxtaposing adult commerce with youthful play. Gloomy, gothic grown-up matters (*problems of necessity*) meet the joyous and anarchistic business of children (*resources for freedom*). Short beautiful bursts of song are accompanied by John Renbourn on guitar and Dek Fernley on bass. Bowie couples for listeners images of selling solutions

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23 Recall this is the name of the 1943 anti-fascist noir directed by Fritz Lang and adapted by John Wexley from one of Brecht's short-stories.

24 Chesterton 1901-1913, 2015, 47.

25 Bowie 1967

for the harsh winter--“Sell Me a Coat”--and the thirsty-persistent but charming imploring of the youth to “Come and Buy My Toys”. His restrained yet forceful by way of its melodic consistency in tone and vocal delivery weaves a web of associations marrying doom with joy, austerity with abundance, child-like fancies of flight with the crushing, grounding reality-crash of political economy. John Renbourn would go onto forming the folk band *Pentangle* building on the work and form of “Come and Buy My Toys”, especially its folk elements and allusions from the English ballad “Scarborough Fair”. “Come and Buy My Toys” is amongst other things, a poetic *adaptation*. A year prior to the release of English literary and social critic William Hazlitt’s 1817 masterful study on *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (to be discussed later in this paper), London’s *The Monthly Magazine* (home to writings by William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Dickens) published the poem that became the source material for Bowie’s song (See figure one).<sup>26</sup> Bowie’s antecedent is the poem “A Toyman’s Address” (subtitled ‘in the style of modern poetry’) by the author “G.N.” published in 1816. Compare this stanza from G.N. with the aforementioned lines from Bowie:

Smiling girls, rosy boys,  
Here—come buy my little toys.  
Mighty men of gingerbread  
Crowd my stall, with faces red.  
—from “A Toyman’s Address” (1816)

*Smiling girls and rosy boys*  
*Come and buy my little toys*  
*Monkeys made of gingerbread*  
*And sugar horses painted red*  
—from “Come and Buy My Toys” (1967)

Bowie’s adaptation, his repetition with a difference, his migration from poem to song, from page to ear function as a kind of retroactive actualization of G.N.’s promise. Bowie’s song, its relation to its set (the full-length album) makes good on G.N.’s claims to modernity— “in the style of modern poetry”. Incorporating and modifying G.N.’s prosody into a song-cycle, perhaps lacking the militant intention of someone like Brecht; but still resonating with one of the German Marxist playwright’s key concerns. The evisceration of every trace in mass-culture from youth to adulthood of fascist sensibility and dominance—the sort of ominous sensibility that Tamor’s *Titus* portends. There’s a theory of history here bound up in the repetition of art forms, housed in a journey from poem to song.

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<sup>26</sup> For further discussion see: <https://www.bowiebible.com/songs/come-and-buy-my-toys/>

Consider the 24 July diary entry capturing the 1943 infamous conversations between Brecht and literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (both country-hopping in Europe trying to outrun the genocidal onslaught of Nazi invasion) at Brecht's house at Skovsbostrand 8, 5700 Svendborg, Denmark:

On a beam which supports the ceiling of Brecht's study are painted the words: 'Truth is concrete.' On a windowsill stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign round its neck on which he has written: 'Even I must understand it.'<sup>27</sup>

Brecht's toy-donkey—the insistence on the imperative to understand—resonates with how his friend Benjamin theorizes the appeal of children's toys as both knowledge and play. In the 3 August diary entry capturing their conversation, Brecht foregrounds how a program of revolutionary culture must include an artistic program on par with his song-sequence entitled *Children's Songs in the Poems from Exile*. Poking and proding the *war pigs*, Brecht insists on a project scale that is covers all the bases, both colossal and *cellular*: "We must neglect nothing in our struggle against that lot. What they're planning is nothing small, make no mistake about it. They're planning for thirty thousand years ahead. Colossal things. Colossal crimes. They stop at nothing. They're out to destroy everything. Every living cell shrinks under their blows. That is why we too must think of everything..."<sup>28</sup>

.....  
<sup>27</sup> Benjamin 1943, 89. See also Adorno, 1951 and Dienst, 2011- an indispensable resource for thinking through and past understanding debt as solely capitalistic burden and unwanted obligation.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin 1943, 98.



**Figure One: “A Toyman’s Address”--*The Monthly Magazine* Vol. 42 (1816)<sup>2</sup>**

There is a striking reverberation between C.L.R. James’s 1932 *Letters from London* (cataloging his visit to the *Victoria & Albert Museum*) and Walter Benjamin’s 1927 *Moscow Diaries* in that they are both obsessed with museum collections of children’s curiosities. James captures his enthusiasm with an emphatic expository cry lauding “Models! Models! Models!”<sup>29</sup> For James, the enthusiastic explosions of children’s energy, the frenzy of smiles, haptic engagement-- *touching* is the way young people theorize--the way they model and engage their sense-perception, reason, and use. Their sticky hands and gleeful screams integrate theory and practice. It is as well the regaining of a portion of materiality.

Walter Benjamin’s short article “Russian Toys” links handicraft, reflection on cottage industry and different degrees of development in the mode of production with child’s play indicative of the unrelentless intellect captured by the child’s desire and willingness to know:

The toys of all cultures were products, initially, of a cottage industry. The stock of primitive forms in use by the lower groups in society, the peasants and the artisans, provided the sure foundation for the development of children’s toys up to the present.

29 I work with James’s encounter at the Science Museum alongside his (and Rilke’s) meditations on Rodin’s *St. John the Baptist* (1881) in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution*.



There is nothing remarkable about this. The spirit from which these products emanate—the entire process of their production and not merely its result—is alive for the child in the toy, and he naturally understands a primitively produced object much better than one deriving from a complicated industrial process. Herein, incidentally, lies the legitimate basis of the modern trend to produce “primitive” children’s toys. If only our artisans would not so often forget when doing this that it is not the constructive, schematic forms that appear primitive to the child, but rather the total construction of his doll or his toy dog, insofar as he can imagine how it is made. This is just what he wants to know; this first establishes his vibrant relationship with toys.<sup>30</sup>

The production is “not merely the result”. It is principally about process—emphasis on the *how*. Aesthetic form, in its simplicity appeals to the child who hasn’t yet had her dialectical curiosity extinguished by the cold road of commerce. The “spirit from which these products emanate” is the desire and ability to know. It is the valorization of *process* over *product*.

These notes on *Titus* and toys echo the prefatory framing for a project examining theatrical and theoretical meditations on 5<sup>th</sup>-century B.C.E. Roman General Gaius Marcius Coriolanus and Patrice Lumumba, first Prime Minister of the Independent Democratic Republic of Congo. It extends prior efforts, taking up philosophical, genre-study and (after Raymond Williams) colloquial resonances of *Tragedy*. Recall that Williams in his study *Modern Tragedy* encourages scholars to confront Tragedy as “smash-up on the road”<sup>31</sup> alongside more academic conceptualizations. Williams wants an analytic that marries how tragedy is used in our day-to-day speech with how it is utilized in a university Classics, Philosophy, or Theatre seminars. I engage this long tradition of thinking about tragedy to revisit the topic of my first book: complexities pertaining to the relationship between insurgent leaders and masses, and works that stage a historical return in Black Radical and Marxist thought.

Variations in the form of plays, philosophical/critical studies, Pan-Africanist missives, and films on *Coriolanus* (for critic Tony Tanner, “the last great tragedy written for the English stage”)<sup>32</sup> and Lumumba function akin to Slavoj Žižek’s adaptation of Sophocles’s Greek Attic tragedy *Antigone*—specifically, Žižek’s experiment with multiple endings as “ethico-political exercises.”<sup>33</sup> As such, Žižek adds another entry to the long list of *Antigone* adaptations—dramatic and theoretical-critical

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30 Benjamin 1986, 123.

31 Williams 1966, 2006, 33-34.

32 Tanner 2010, 653.

33 Žižek 2016, xxv.



that include Brecht, Rainer Werner Fassbender, Judith Malina, Jacques Lacan, and Kamala Shamsie.

Performance as critical-philosophical experiments and *Tendenz Kunst* [politically partisan art] are the building blocks to secure something different than what we are accustomed. Adaptation is the technique potential product of the radical will that helps bring such *differences* online.

Roman general and warrior Gaius Marcius is given the supplemental name Coriolanus after his sacking of the city of Corioli, banished for his unwillingness to bare his scars to the people at a ritualistic inauguration as tribune at the height of acute class strife and food riots (Shakespeare's version-- in Plutarch's *Lives* he complies). Subsequently, after the long road of banishment he aligns with Rome's enemy the Volscis and makes peace with Aufidius, his Volsci counterpart. They vow to join forces and destroy Rome together—Gaius for the outrage and contempt of banishment; Aufidius for the insult and injury of colonial occupation. Just prior to the epic leveling of Rome, Gaius is persuaded by his militaristic widowed mother Volumnia<sup>34</sup> (again more developed in Shakespeare than Plutarch) to renounce this traitorous alliance and broker piece with the Volscis. This brokered peace preempts the infernal leveling of Rome. For his betrayal and re-alignment back with his natal and imperial Rome, Coriolanus dies by Volsci hands.

African independence leader Patrice Lumumba renounces his so-called *Évolué* class status (a colonial administrative policy category / racist settler logic announcing one's status as vetted functionary)-- first as postal-clerk, then as traveling *Polar Beer* salesman (an opportunity to cognitively map what would become the Independent Democratic Republic of Congo martyred, mutilated, buried in innumerable unmarked grades by a willing coalition of Congolese government and military elite [friends in fact], Belgian elite, and the American Central Intelligence Agency. Lumumba traveling the country selling his beer establishes the vision and connections to imagine his country whole and free from one of the most brutal and sadistic regimes of European colonial rule in Africa—the Belgium of King Leopold. Lumumba's murder and dismemberment spreads his body all over the country he worked tirelessly to unite. Subsequently, his ideas and iconography continue to inspire artists, activists, and intellectual interested in a world free of colonial logics and domination.

Why pair Coriolanus and Lumumba—and my attendant categories of Liberalism and Loss? The specific details of such *whys* unfold (Hegel's *Phenomenology's* war against the *Ready-mades* are as prescient now as ever) via juxtaposition. As in my work on theater and the Haitian

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34 For a beautifully forceful discussion of Volumnia see Rose 2018, 50-53.

Revolution, I am interested in the analytic couplet stagecraft/statecraft. *Coriolanus* and Lumumba variants, their proffered possibilities offer keys to theorizing liberalism's evolution and its present crisis and impasse—its contemporary war-scape of racist terror, imperial aggression, its sadistic assault on the trans-community, its consistent wrestling with death cults and suspicion vis-à-vis medical and climate science, its judicial attempt (in the United States) at mandating forced births that risk the health, well-being and very lives of women, a generalized corruption that does not even attempt to hide, an ecological omnicidal devastation and brutal assault on labor. “One, two, many” *Coriolanus* and Lumumbas foreground a dialectical meditation on parts and wholes, mediating claims and tasks of leadership, the severance and persisting of historical memory and radical political desire essential for thinking the scale of revolutionary Pan-African projects waging war against the current actuality of our grim planetary crossroads: either robust and unyielding eco-socialism or death.

Children's imaginary flourish isn't limited to toy figurines. They also have been known to play with insects. Consider these two scenes from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus*, and the “Butterfly Hunt” entry from Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900* respectfully:

Marcus. Alas, my lord, I have but killed a fly.  
Titus. “But!” How, if that fly had a father and mother?  
How would he hang his slender gilded wings,  
And buzz lamenting doings in the air!  
Poor harmless fly,  
That, with his pretty buzzing melody,  
Came here to make us merry! And thou has killing/ him.  
Marcus. Pardon me, sir; it was black ill-favored fly.  
Like to the Empress' Moor. Therefore, I killed him.  
Titus, O, O, O,  
Then pardon me for reprehending thee,  
For thou hast done a charitable deed.  
Give me thy knife, I will insult on him,  
Flattering myself, as if it were the Moor,  
Come hither purposely to poison me.  
[*He strike at it*]  
There's for thyself, and that's for Tamora.  
Ah, sirrah!  
Yet I think we are not brought so low  
But that between us we can kill a fly  
That come sin likeness of a coal-black Moor.  
Marcus. Alas, poor man! Grief has so wrong on/ him,  
He takes false shadows for true substances...(31:59-80)<sup>35</sup>

.....  
35 Shakespeare 2005, 68

Volumnia He had rather see the swords and hear a / drum than look upon his schoolmaster.

Valeria O' my word, the father's son! I'll sear 'tis a/ very pretty boy. O' my troth, I looked upon him o'/ Wednesday half an hour together: 'has such a confirmed countenance! I saw him run after a gilded butterfly, and when he caught it he let it go again, and after it again, and over and over he comes, and up / again, caught it again. Or whether his fall enraged him, or now 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it! / O, I warrant, how he mammoocked it!

Volumnia One on's father's moods.

Valeria Indeed, la 'tis a noble child.

Virgilia A crack, madam.

Valeria Come, lay aside your stichery. I must have you play the idle housewife with me this afternoon.

Virgilia No, good madam, I will not out of doors.

Valeria Not out of doors?

Volumnia She shall, she shall.

Virgilia Indeed, no, by your patience. Ill not over the threshold till my lord return from the wars.

Valeria I will wish her speedy strength, and visit her/ with my prayers, but I cannot go thither.

Volumnia Why, I pray you?

Virgilia 'Tis not to save labour, nor that I want love.

Valeria You would be another Penelope. Yet they say/ all the yarn she spun in Ulysees' absence did but fill Ithaca full of moths... (1.3: 58-87).<sup>36</sup>

When a red admiral, say, or a sphinx moth—with whom I should have been able to catch up easily—made a fool of me with hesitations, feints, and fits of dawdling. I would have liked to be able to dissolve myself into light and air just so as to near my prey unobserved and pounce on it. And my wish was granted to the extent that each quiver or vibration of those wings for which I'd desperately fallen left its breath on me, or stole into me. The old hunter's adage was beginning to come true for us: The closer I drew to the creature with every fiber of my being, the more butterfly-like I became inwardly, the more did the ways of the butterfly borrow the color of human resolve, and at last it seemed to me that its capture was the sole price through which I might regain possession of my human nature... As for the strange tongue used by butterfly and flowers to communicate before his eyes—by now he had wrested several of its laws. His bloodlust had grown less and his trust greater in like degree.<sup>37</sup>

.....  
<sup>36</sup> Shakespeare 2008, 182-183.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin 2010, 18-19.

Taken as a set, these meditations on fusing and splitting would be rich fodder for Otto Fenichel's analytic. In *Titus*, Young Lucius retroactively assigns a killed fly as stand-in for Aaron as a quick solution to get out of trouble. Titus and Young Lucius's layering of racist insult is a second order rationalization. As such it functions as a microcosm of the play's sleight of hand emphasis on the Aaron plot as a whole and the attendant othering: this sleight of hand draws attention away from a project of succession via revenge-plot. Valeria's invocation of Penelope's weaving Laertes's burial shroud brings to the fore the conflation of a survival strategy as well as a narrative technique: Penelope's weaving and unweaving of the shroud defers the suitors' aggression and holds out hope for Odysseus's return. As a meta-device, the shroud brings attention to deferring the resolution of Homer's epic. Penelope's shrewd tactic to ward off the suitors and their crass violation of *xenia* (ξενία) foregrounds the text's constructiveness. "Over and over he comes, and up / again, caught it again" is the entomological equivalent to Bergson's jack-in-the-back and taunting cat. Shakespeare inaugurates and navigates a logic of mutilation and prothesis. In Tamor's film, Lavinia augments her severed hands replacing branches with toy parts—a nod to the opening scenes action figure frenzy. Whereas, Coriolanus's arms morph into super-human killing machines, the sword fusing with the body via the rhetoric of the play. The capacity for harm is as dire as the impact of the non-compliant "the mutinous parts"(1.1:108) from Menenius's *Fable of the Body Politic*. Benjamin's tableau of childhood-hunter and hunted in all its rhetorical flourish stages a fusing that Coriolanus only achieves, fleetingly, through temporary alliance and counter-alliance wrought from war.

As two of Shakespeare's Roman plays ostensibly concerned with questions of alignment and counter-alignment, mutilation and prothesis, banishment and return, force and consent, diplomacy as both the *deferral* of war and war by other means-- *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* strike a stark opposition in terms of their critical reception. There is only single mention, designating *Titus Andronicus* as a "flame-tipped welter" in M.W. MacCallum's massive 1925 monograph *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Backgrounds*.<sup>38</sup> I will briefly focus on three critics—T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, and William Hazlitt- speaking through Friedrich Schlegel.

T.S. Eliot in the vexatious essay "Hamlet and His Problems" lauds the "tragic success" of *Coriolanus* asserting that it "may be not as 'interesting' as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success."<sup>39</sup> Eliot's other verdict

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38 MacCallum 1925, 177.

39 Eliot 1920, 1998, 57.

lacks such generosity: *Titus* is “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which the best passages would be too highly honored by the signature of Peele.”<sup>40</sup> W.H. Auden does not go as far as Eliot. His is critique via omission. Auden’s 1946-1947 *Lectures on Shakespeare* at The New School of Social Research are as brilliant as they are hilarious. They are exemplars of punchy precision and serious thinking. Auden lectures weekly on all of Shakespeare’s plays plus *The Sonnets* minus *Titus* and a riotous bait-and-switch operation vis-à-vis *The Merry Wives of Windsor*-- Auden enters class complains about the play’s dullness and instead plays the class a recording of Verdi’s *Falstaff*. During an October 1946 lecture on *Richard III*, Auden reasons:

*Henry VI* is a general history. *Richard III* concentrates on an individual character: the character of a villain. There is a difference between a villain and one who simply commits a crime consciously, for its own sake. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is an early example of the villain in Shakespeare. Barabus in *The Jew of Malta*, another crude villain, is an example in Marlowe. In appearance these characters—a Jew, a Moor, a hunchback—are all outside the norm.<sup>41</sup>

Auden’s delineation between one who commits a crime and the villain resonates with Hegel’s Jena-period essay “Who Thinks Abstractly?” in its meditation on an example of abstract thinking as reducing a murderer to the act of murder and forsaking consideration of other mediations or defining characteristics: “This is abstract thinking to see nothing in the murderer, except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul all other human essence in him with this simple quality.”<sup>42</sup> From a November 1946 lecture on *The Taming of the Shrew*, *King John*, and *Richard II*:

We shall not spend very much time on *Taming of the Shrew*. It is the only play of Shakespeare’s that is a complete failure, though *Titus Andronicus* may be another. The plot of *Taming of the Shrew* belongs to farce, and Shakespeare is not a writer of farce. Ben Jonson might have made the play a success, but it is not up Shakespeare’s alley.

And finally, in a 1947 *Julius Caesar* lecture: “Shakespeare’s two significant tragedies preceding *Julius Caesar*—we can forget *Titus Andronicus*—are *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*.”<sup>43</sup>

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40 Shakespeare 2005, 2.

41 Auden 2000, 13.

42 Hegel 1807-1808, 1965, 116-117.

43 Auden 2000, 125.

Hazlitt, the always aiming ever so honorable pugilist comes to Shakespeare's spirited defense. In the "Doubtful Plays of Shakespeare" section of his 1817 book of criticism *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, Hazlitt's opening move is to pass the baton to Schlegel citing his insistence that "All the editors, with the exception of Capell, are unanimous in rejecting *Titus Andronicus* as unworthy of Shakespeare."<sup>44</sup> This offers Schlegel an opportunity to propose his comparative method-procedure where one should weigh the worth of a literary work (establishing its pedigree) alongside comparable works in a set. Schlegel lambasts critics who proceed backwards and "set out with a preconceived opinion against a piece, and seek, in justification of this opinion, to render the historical grounds suspicious, and to set them aside". Warring with critics that he views as help-mates of the *a priori* and the ready-made, Schlegel's verdict on *Titus* is ultimately-- failure. Such failure is bound up with how he views *Titus* as misunderstanding and failing to execute a "true idea of the tragic." *Titus* is "framed according to a false idea of the tragic, which by an accumulation of cruelties and enormities degenerates into the horrible, and yet leaves no deep impression behind..." Schlegel has no time for critics of Shakespeare's *Roman Plays*<sup>45</sup> and their purported "immaturity." In an astonishing analogic pivot, Schlegel compares such critical misjudgment to early stages in the founding of Rome and imperial designs: "Are the critics afraid that Shakespeare's fame would be injured, were it established that in his early youth he ushered into the world a feeble and immature work? Was Rome the less the conqueror of the world because Remus could leap over its first walls?"

Schlegel sympathetically laments that Shakespeare "found only a few indifferent models." He privileges *process* over *product* asserting that "In Shakespeare's acknowledged works we find hardly any traces of his apprenticeship, and yet apprenticeship he certainly had." It is clear that such *models* for *Titus* include Senecan Revenge Tragedy and Book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—specifically, Tereus's rape of Philomela—the "other [who] has no tongue/ To speak at all."<sup>46</sup> These are some of Shakespeare's *Titus*'s "few indifferent models." The play's central off-stage horror-- the rape and dismemberment of Andronicus's daughter Lavinia-- who is simultaneously lauded and objectified as "Rome's rich ornament" (1.1:52). As Bartels makes clear, "The Ovidian pre-text...does not begin to tell Lavinia's story, does not begin to voice the horrors of the mutilated body on stage. Nor can the dramatic embodiment of the

.....  
44 I consulted a facsimile of Hazlitt's 1817 book now in public domain and available on Project Gutenberg.

45 On Shakespeare's *Roman Plays* see Charney 1961.

46 Ovid, 1986, 141.

pre-text give sustaining voice or meaning to Lavinia's body, "Rome's rich ornament" and tragic "changing piece," which is abstractly more and physically less than the sum of its parts..."<sup>47</sup> Here the logic of canonization and the reliance upon staged brutalities—a dual-movement of shock and neutralization-- meet at a crossroads. Literary allusion, diegetic references to Ovid cannot expiate a myriad of complicities and itinerary of horrors. What I have tried to make clear is that the "few indifferent models" cannot explain away how the *Tituses* discomfort. The ever-proliferating tragic on the level of the plot become heightened, exacerbated, and palpable, but not obvious. This disclosure/foreclosure, this showing and hiding renders brutalities all the more terrifying by way of dis-articulating such *plottings* from its dramatic persona/ subjects. The comic undoing within the labor of the tragic gets formalized in the *Tituses* via Aaron's dastardly antics and the racialisms that cast his character. A frantic chain of terrors, murders, and mutilation do not only provide adequate cover for bloody succession and the speculative theoretical richness enacted by dramatic form. They substitute for a key formal characteristic of the works—the disarticulation of revenge structure form subject functioning as a *mechanistic* engine, revved up and outside even its architects' control.

In reference to the French Jacobins *Return to Rome*<sup>48</sup>, Marx's sense of the interplay between the tragic and the comic is worked on in his writings on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Marx establishes limits and categories delineating the *world-historical* from the merely *personal* bound up in the interplay between tragedy and the comic. With resonant and typical concision and brilliance, Richard Halpern's *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* links Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* discussion of farce with the political problem of the lumpen-proletariat. This is an opportunity to recall Hegel's take on of philosophical labor of laughter: "Laughter, for Hegel, *dissolves*; specifically, it dissolves ethical binding into free self-consciousness. At the same time, comedy must itself remain devoted to presenting the rational. The laughable as such cannot be its aim."<sup>49</sup> Titus in its particular actualization of the interplay of the tragic and the comic, dissolves structure from subject—the revenge-design consumes almost all.

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47 Bartels 2008, 89.

48 See also the fascinating and dynamic "Critical Battle Against the French Revolution" section of Marx and Engels's *The Holy Family* (1845).

49 Halpern 2017, 217.



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Writing in reference to James A. Snead's magisterial *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* and Melville, Toni Morrison identifies a central device of the racist imaginary as what she calls "Dehistoricizing allegory" which "produces foreclosure rather than disclosure. If difference is made so vast that the civilizing process becomes indefinite—taking place across an unspecified infinite amount of time—history, as a process of becoming, is excluded from the literary encounter... Melville uses allegorical formations—the white whale, the racially mixed crew, the black-white pairings of male couples, the questing, questioning white male captain who confronts impenetrable whiteness—to investigate and analyze hierarchic difference."<sup>50</sup> What interests me here is how Snead and Morrison think about duration, proximity, and distance. Creating an indefinite gap between *self* and a myriad of others, a temporal trick of imperialism is akin to underplaying the contemporary after-lives of American slavery by positing an infinite long-durée that conflates the Egyptian- happenings in the *Book of Exodus* with the Kansas-Nebraska Act! Titus's scripting of Aaron constitutes a malevolent representational racist calculus that the structure—its myriad of *plottings*-- dialectically undermines.

Young Lucius and infant slow walk into the interregnum of Tamor's partial sun-set. This is not ideological closure of the Happy Ending. Rather, the youth walk off a run-away comic atrocity-exhibition that is the *Tituses* structure unbound from subject. Young Lucius and infant child march off into contingency. Theirs are the as yet undecided possibilities engendered by their refusal of "all chief architects and plotters of these woes.

.....  
<sup>50</sup> Morrison, 1992, 68-69.



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Volume 10  
Issue 2