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Botanical Shakespeares: The Racial Logic of Plant Life in Titus Andronicus

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FOUCAULT FAMOUSLY TRACES TO the 17th century a set of epistemological shifts that would ultimately lead to the displacement of the homological patterns of thinking which were the mainstay of the Renaissance. If the new systems of classification would come to thrive on rational taxonomies and careful attention to differences of kind and category, the earlier model favored the observation of correspondences and similitudes, perceiving rich connections among living things. Eventually, this predilection for observing such resemblances would vanish with new ways of thinking and new systems of classification. Under the force of a distinctly modern epistemology, the differences structuring categories like human, animal, and plant would be emphasized and reinforced, and systems of discrimination would be set into place to perform the work of assigning each kind of body a discrete place within a vast and all-encompassing taxonomic order. If part of this process, as outlined by Foucault, entailed the cordon-off of word and language from the “signs and forms of truth,” such that science was from this point on divided from history, his work reminds us and invites us to reconsider how disciplinary compartmentalization continues to shape the kinds of questions we ask of materials that predate such institutionalized divisions. Before language came to be viewed by science as a veil (of fiction, romance, or error) necessarily bracketed in the pursuit of truth, how did those forms of knowledge which we have come to think of as scientific intrude into and inform texts that modernity assigns the status of high literary culture? We might also ask how literary culture itself may have enabled, rather than have merely recorded, the drive toward differentiation, classification, and compartmentalization that has since become the domain of science.

Of course, the recent tendency in literary criticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to locate literary texts within a broader discursive field already registers a response to Foucault’s insights. As such, we have long grown accustomed to finding readings of medical texts alongside those of the period’s drama or other literary productions in attempts to sort through early modern notions of identity, sexuality, and subjectivity. But if such readings respond in part to the Foucauldian insight that
in surveying a range of discursive moments we can observe the patterns of logic that underpin a cultural formation—that which the culture presumes to be true—they have also been somewhat restrictive in the kinds of discursive crossovers they have allowed. In the case alluded to above, where medical texts are mined for what they can tell us about the human body, critics have implicitly narrowed notions of embodiment such that they comply with a modern episteme. Indeed, such analyses may have the effect of reifying the category of the human. Questions of embodiment have led us, rather unreflectively, that is, to medicalized representations of mostly human bodies. If Foucault reminds us that the subject of history had a body, however, he also suggests that this body was often represented through discourses lateral to or proximate to those more literally describing the human form. In the argument that follows I will ask what it means that drama of the early modern period often navigates human difference by reference to botanical discourse. More specifically I will explore how granting botanical language constitutive force in representations of the early modern subject might change our readings of the period’s literature. My argument is not merely that botanical imagery pervades the drama as a charged thematic. Rather I suggest ways that dramatic literature attempts to make use of this discourse to resolve key conceptual issues about human difference. In reading Titus Andronicus I will identify some of the ways that the logic governing botany shapes the racial transactions with which the play has come to be associated.

In fact, that Shakespeare’s first Roman play embodies a modern racial logic has become a commonplace of criticism on the play. Many have seen the association of Aaron’s blackness with his malignity as indicating that the play should be read as part of a continuum with the racial paradigms that underpin modernity which tend to narrate human difference as a function of skin color. These readings are suggestive in their explanatory power, but I also hope to show that they are incomplete and even misleading in the teleological narrative that they tell. The story of race that this early Shakespearean play records, I argue, is far more backward-looking than forward-looking in the way it envisions divisions of human “kinds.” In sorting through the play’s dependency on botanical images, concepts, and hierarchies, I hope to show how forcefully the play understands difference in relation to qualities of blood. In fact, it seems to lean much more heavily on early modern notions of race as rooted in bloodlines and genealogies than it does on skin color, even if and as the play allows skin color to inflect these older ideologies of kind. Criticism thus far has tended to emphasize emergent forms of alien identity in the
play, but I will be more concerned to elucidate the continuing grip of vestigial notions of racial identity—the idea that within the borders of the Roman polis itself bloodlines are charged with differences of kind.

**Flesh: from the ground up**

For Shakespeare, as for many poets and dramatists of the period, plantlife served as a powerfully attractive discourse for working through a range of relationships inhering among people, offering a supple and nuanced vocabulary for considering questions of reproduction and difference. The Greek philosopher Anaximander may have been the first to insist on the connections among plants and other life forms in describing them as a sort of animal fixed in the earth. And Aristotle would build on this observation, tying it to reproductive discourse, when he chose to begin his “Generation of Animals” with a discussion of plants. Here he identified them as “rooted animals” and implicitly set into motion a way of thinking that would observe correspondences across a range of fleshy bodies, animal and plant no less than human. The persistence of such ideas was profound, audible even up to the late seventeenth century when Milton invoked them in his epic account of creation. In narrating the creation of the various animal species, he borrows the Aristotelian way of thinking which links animal form to plant form, describing behemoth as “born of earth,” the stag as bearing up “his branching head,” and sheep rising “[a]s plants” from an earthy soil.

If such accounts emphasized the crossovers between plant and animal, rather than that between plant and human, such connections were but a step away. In Shakespeare’s day herbals and husbandry manuals regularly made such translations, understanding botanical parts as versions of human anatomy. In John Gerarde’s expensive *Herball* of 1597, an enormous compendium of varieties of herbs and flowers, categories dividing human from plant entangle in tantalizing ways. References to “bastard Daffodils” and “wilde Saffron,” to the “drunken Date tree” or the “faire haired Iacint,” testify to a different sense of nature, one which figures as eminently permeable the boundary separating the social and political behaviors that inform the human world from botanical life. The more popular genre of the husbandry manual records this logic as well, identifying precise analogs between botanical parts and the human anatomy. In such tracts the correspondences between plant and human flesh, linked in sharing a common humoral physiology, are precisely delineated. The tree’s sap translates as blood, its emerging cions as eyes,
and the bark is perceived to be a kind of skin threatened with wounding by the practice of grafting. Indeed, as Brian Ogilvie has recently argued in the context of his study of sixteenth and seventeenth century natural history, during this pre-Linnaean and “pretheoretical” taxonomic moment when natural history emerged as a discipline defined by its fascination with the particulars of nature but also by its reluctance to reduce “nature to a system,” Renaissance naturalists espoused classificatory principles that “involved a pronounced anthropocentric element.” Working with Theophrastus’s basic categories—consisting of trees, shrubs, ‘under-shrubs,’ and herbs—naturalists like Hieronymus Bock and Carolus Clusius injected what Ogilvie describes as “common-sense judgments” into their classifications. As such, they allowed criteria such as “similitude in form,” aesthetic appeal, and relative nobility to serve as organizing principles of their classificatory schemes. Indeed, qualities that we have come to think of as attributes of the social realm emerge unabashedly as defining principles for plants in these histories. So, for Clusius, trees, by virtue of their nobility, are properly given priority to lower plant forms in the descending hierarchy that informs his own natural history, a decision that Gerarde echoes in proceeding from the “highest Cedar to the lowest Mosse.” Both naturalists move, as it were, from the more perfect towering forms to their earth-bound, vulgar counterparts. The prevalence of such structuring principles across a wide range of Renaissance natural histories indicates just how extensive the interarticulation of social and natural forms was for this period. As Allen J. Grieco has argued, both realms were “structured by a vertical and hierarchical principle,” with the effect that “society had a ‘natural’ order and nature had a ‘social’ order.”

The social logic registered in the pages of these Renaissance herbals attests to an observation long ago made by Bruno Latour in the context of defining modernity. He proposed that whereas moderns “steadfastly hold to the absolute dichotomy between the order of Nature and that of Society,” premoderns tended to be unconcerned with the division, “[dwelling] endlessly and obsessively on [the] connections between nature and culture.” Not yet devoted to supporting the pretense that these two realms are distinct, the cultural logic expressed in the world of Renaissance botany understands the “natural world” as a site always already infused with cultural categories. If today personhood has come to be constituted as at a remove from and even in contradistinction to the natural world, such ideas are modern inventions, not signifying for this earlier period when differences in plant life helped in large part to model differences in the human world.
If these correspondences were self-evident for Renaissance naturalists, the same could be said of Renaissance dramatists. Indeed, it would hardly be an overstatement to suggest that the very plot of Shakespeare’s Roman play depends on the culturally available homology linking plant to person, using it to powerful effect to work through a set of social contradictions implicated in the production of competing notions of human difference. Critics have long noted the play’s central image of the state as body, perceiving in its violent staging of dismembered hands, heads, and limbs a representation of Rome’s political challenges and failures. But the play also draws its metaphors from images of an embodied natural world, imagining the state not only as a human body but as a vegetative body. Indeed, that the play elaborates the central conceit of the social body as a plant has been overshadowed by attention to patterns of thinking which separate human bodies into a distinct ontological class. Shakespeare’s Ovidian source allowed no such tidiness, thriving on crossovers of form between human, plant, and animal, and transposing human flesh into bark in any number of narratives. If as modern readers we find ourselves pushed to the extreme when confronted with the play’s violent imagining of flesh lopped, plucked, pruned, hewed, cooked, and even planted, part of our unease certainly derives from our inability to see flesh as anything but a self-identical category. Human flesh hardly conjures for us images of flowers, trees, or bushes. For us, such categories are distinct. But for Shakespeare and his earliest auditors and readers, laws of kind were similar among people as among plants.

That botanical forms could constitute a supple and powerful tool for grappling with the contradictions produced by an eroding social hierarchy can be seen in condensed form in Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece,” the narrative poem that many critics suggest was written contemporaneously with Titus. Desperately trying to stave off the advances of the tyrant Tarquin, Lucrece rushes through a series of arguments urging him to restrain his passion. Just before he silences her from an appeal that persists for 13 stanzas, Lucrece moves from imagining “the ocean” of his blood stained by “Black lust, dishonour, shame, misgoverning” and thereby “hearsed” by the dark puddle of his passion, to a meditation on how such behavior might be represented in a botanical register. She pleads:

‘So shall these slaves be king, and thou their slave;
Thou nobly base, they basely dignified;

The lesser thing should not the greater hide.
The cedar stoops not to the base shrub’s foot,
But low shrubs wither at the cedar’s root.'
In these lines, presumably natural qualities of blood—the tempered blood of royalty and the darkened blood of those enslaved to passion—translate directly into the hierarchies that govern botany. Blood and botany are thereby linked in being infused with distinctions of rank, and Tarquin’s submission to his lust reads as a monstrous violation of natural forms, one that inverts the law maintaining a firm divide between shrubs and cedars. The same cluster of images—of royal cedars, lesser shrubs, and withering herbs—guides us through the dense political landscape of Shakespeare’s ancient Rome as portrayed in *Titus Andronicus*. When Titus insists to Marcus “we are but shrubs, no cedars we,” insisting, it would seem, on the ontological difference separating his kin from the royal Saturninus, Shakespeare draws on the distinctions underpinning well-developed botanical hierarchies to work through notions of human difference. At the play’s end Lucius directs us to the centrality of such homologies for the play when he proposes to mend the Roman polis by instructing the people “to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf” (5.3.69–70). His use of the image of a vegetable body—a sheaf of corn—to transmit a political vision is, I suggest, indicative of a larger pattern in the play whereby natural forms are made to carry complex social valences. In this context, Shakespeare draws on well-developed botanical hierarchies to dramatize and, even, facilitate the transmuting of one system of kind into another.

**Of Kin and Kinds**

Indeed *Titus* resembles the other tragedies and histories in the Shakespearean corpus to the extent that it engages the overdetermined language of *kin* and *kind*. From Hamlet’s “a little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.65) to Lear’s fool’s pronouncement that “fathers that bear bags / Shall see their children kind” (2.4.48–49), the language of “kind” dominates plays centrally concerned with identifications rooted in blood. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word functions as a synonym for “race” in this period, both terms referring to identities believed to be materially and metaphysically conjoined in and through lines of blood. But the near obsessive return to this term in the histories and tragedies also suggests a category under mutation. *Titus Andronicus* captures the liminality of the word at this time with particular force. On the one hand the term resonates in the play in its traditional association with kinship and blood ties, with references to “brethren” and “brothers” alone registering as many as 45 times in the play. But the word “kind”
is made to absorb meanings beyond this traditional sense in articulating the idea of a Roman identity. Titus, for instance, thanks “Kind Rome” for preserving Lavinia safely upon his return from war (1.1.168). He means less that Rome has been “good” or “kind” in modern parlance, than that Rome has been “familial” in protecting his own family member. He thereby invokes a more expansive definition of family. Although some critics of race have tended to see the boundary of the Roman polis as denoting sharp distinctions between a Roman collective as set against a group of barbarous others external to the state, with the implication that by loosening this boundary Rome inaugurates its downfall, there is much evidence in the play that difference is not yet comfortably aligned with the boundaries of the state. Rather the play seems concerned to dramatize the process by which Rome comes to prefer one definition of kind as against another.

The idea that there is or could be a family of Romans is a notion that is specifically aligned with the Andronicus clan, and one that is as often rejected as accepted by Saturninus and his chosen empress, Tamora. Like Tarquin of Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece,” Saturninus prefers to view himself as the “peerless” emperor of Rome, a ruler whose distinction inheres in his princely blood as embodied by the “successive title” (1.1.4) he defends so aggressively in the play’s opening scene. He repeatedly rebukes Titus for attempting to flatten such distinctions by positioning himself on par with the Emperor or by suggesting that Saturninus is indebted to him. Following Lavinia’s seizure, what Saturninus refers to as her rape, by Titus’s kinsmen, Saturninus makes explicit the feelings he has already gestured at when he sneers: “Full well, Andronicus, / Agree these deeds with that proud brag of thine / That saidst I begged the empire at thy hands” (1.1.310–12). Earlier he had hinted at such sentiments when Marcus, acting as Tribune, offered the princely “roabe” (Q1, 7) of rule to Titus. Saturninus pressures this word minutes later when he says what Titus has done is to “robbe” (Q1, 8) him of his kingdom, suggesting that Titus seeks to steal a privilege properly denied him by right of blood. By embracing Tamora with the pronouncement that she is “of the hue / That I would choose were I to choose anew” (1.1.265–66), Saturninus insists on the differences that separate her blood from that of an Andronicus, as embodied by Lavinia, Titus, or his sons. I suggest that it is less her white skin color, as has recently been suggested, than her nobility that appeals to Saturninus in this moment through his invocation of the word “hue.” By analogizing her to the moon, to Diana, he interpellates Tamora as princely, queenly, and noble. An overdetermined word in the play in its transposition from “hue” to “hew,” Saturninus
here invokes it in reference to the moon’s shimmering silver color, the “hue” of nobility that connects Tamora to the goddess Diana, described in Golding’s Ovid as “so comely and so tall . . . she overpeered them all.” The connections of “hew” to nobility and rank is substantiated in part by the OED, which records a usage of “nobill hew” to describe the silvery shimmer of a sword, an object closely linked to rank. But the chaste comportment of the goddess also resonates with hue’s other meaning: form. The ever-present subtext for Shakespeare’s play, Golding’s Ovid uses this word to describe the earthy mass prior to creation as having “neither shape nor hue.” As such, Saturninus views Tamora not as an alien “kind,” as Titus does because she is a Goth, but as someone more proximate to himself as a prince than the lesser Roman warriors of the Andronicus clan.

Indeed, from the play’s start Titus is defined through his difference from Saturninus. Not princely by blood, we are led to believe that, like his many sons whom he has knighted in the field for countless acts of heroism, he has earned rather than inherited his claim to gentility. Marcus asserts as much in the opening scene when he applauds Titus for achieving his status through “many good and great deserts to Rome” (1.1.24). His words confirm what Saturninus elsewhere insists: that Titus is of a different “stock” (1.1.305) than his own royal line. And yet we also know that Titus desires upward mobility—he has taken care to embellish his family’s burial monument (1.1.356), just as he is pleased by the prospect that his family will be united with the royal line when Saturninus agrees to take his daughter, Lavinia, as his bride. We see him wrap himself in a language of kinship in relation to Saturninus and emphasize the extent to which their two natures have become one. When Saturninus refers to him as “the father of my life” (1.1.257), he momentarily concedes to the conjunction. Moreover, when Titus kills his own son for standing in the path of this union, he reveals the extent to which he seeks to move beyond a narrow notion of “kind” as flesh and blood to a broader identification, one where the differences between himself and the royal Saturninus will be sidestepped on the path to forging a collective identity of Romans.

The contest between two very different notions of kind which I have argued is writ small in the figures of Titus and Saturninus gains focus in and through the play’s use of botanical forms. Indeed, this is one of the play’s preferred discursive registers for sorting through these distinctions. In the first act, the contestation of these different ideologies gains expression primarily in and through the image of the body politic or the polis as a human body. On one hand, we can observe Titus’s clan laboring to unite a splintered Rome in and through the production of an external enemy.
In violently dismembering Tamora’s firstborn son by hewing his limbs and then setting them to flame, Titus and his sons seek to consolidate Roman bonds. In effect, their actions smuggle into Rome the idea that Romans can and should be a united body, a brotherhood—a notion that necessarily repudiates distinctions of rank. But this idea is contested first by Tamora, who insists on the overlap between Goth and Roman when she defends her son in a rhetorically nuanced appeal that demonstrates her nobility, and then by Saturninus, who embraces Tamora as a princely peer, first as a privileged prisoner and then as his empress.

But if the play opens with this image of Rome as a headless body, it quickly moves beyond this metaphorical register to that enabled by the green world of the second act’s hunt scene. In moving the play’s actions to the forest, Shakespeare gestures at an alternate signifying system for the state in the intricate relationships that inhere among the various forms of plantlife that collectively constitute this wooded terrain. In the third scene of this act, Tamora gives us two antithetical images of how the forest-as-state might operate, images that line up with the quite distinct notions of difference that I have argued riddle the play at large. On the one hand, when alone with Aaron, she celebrates this green world of bush, trees, and soil as functioning harmoniously, with a range of life forms thriving under the nurturing gaze of a royal sun (2.2.10–29). Birds, snakes, trees, leaves and bushes emblematize this harmony, as they absorb and then redistribute the benefits they receive from the sun. In this model, harmony is produced in and through the underpinning principle of hierarchy, as reified in the varying spatial planes that these life forms occupy: some tower high above, others crawl or lie beneath. Notably, Aaron and Tamora are protected by and absorbed into the shade of one of these trees. Far from being foreign to or intruding upon this landscape, Tamora and Aaron are effortlessly absorbed into it, even imagining themselves as Romans indeed when Tamora projects them into the epic account of Rome’s founding in the figures of Dido and Aeneas. Significantly, this epic account interpellates them as princes, assimilating them to Rome on the merits of their social station rather than violently exorcising them as strangers.

Minutes later, when the lovers are discovered by Bassianus and Lavinia, and subsequently by Tamora’s sons, the landscape mutates. In the narrative that Tamora uses to seduce her children to commit murder, we witness the earlier reverie dampened, as its vision degenerates into its antithesis. In effect, in this second view of the landscape we get what for Tamora is a nightmarish version of the social body that the Titus clan favors. The earlier image of Rome as a collectivity ordered by the
harmonious ranks of natural forms flourishing under the nurturing gaze of a regal sun has been marred. What was fertile is now described as “A barren detested vale” with “trees . . . forlorn and lean, / O’ercome with moss and baleful mistletoe” (2.2.93–95). Towering trees hang limply, bending beneath the pressure of “climbing” plants, reversing the social hierarchy “naturally” ordering these plant forms. Images that minutes before had fed and expressed Tamora’s sexual desire for Aaron are now observed for their sterility: “Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds” (2.2.96). This dystopia concludes with the image of Tamora being bound “Unto the body of a dismal yew” (2.3.107), a tree that symbolizes the melancholy that Aaron earlier owned as his birthright (2.2.31–33). If Aaron is figured as a blighted tree, Tamora is inscribed as a forcible graft—corrupted through union with this tree. As the references to the “ten thousand swelling toads” (2.2.101) and the overcoming moss suggests, this sort of union is figured as deadly precisely because it obliterates distinctions. The “dismal” nature of this tree—like that of the toads and moss—threatens to take over the noble nature of this queen. In this image, I suggest, Tamora constructs the world as it might be were Titus’s vision for the social body allowed to prevail. It is a world that threatens the sun, generates indistinction, and, most centrally for her, seeks to debase her royal blood. Just as in the opening scene Titus literally orchestrates the lowering of Tamora, in bringing a queen to beg in the streets, so this dystopia anticipates how his clan will translate her down the social scale, hailing her not as a queen but as a “Lascivious Goth” (2.2.110).

Indeed the warfare that ensues between Tamora’s supporters and those of Titus is conducted through the language of these socially coded botanical forms and landscapes. Styling himself a father to all Romans, Titus is continually referred to through phrases that analogize him to a stately tree—a cedar or oak—from which emerge a set of interlocking slips and branches. It is an image, like the image of interlocking hands that Katherine Rowe discusses in relation to this play, which seeks to knit a diverse body of Romans into a familial unit. When Lucius flees to the Goths to seek aid in his struggle against Saturninus, he is identified by the Goths as the “Brave slip sprung from the great Andronicus” (5.1.9). Similarly, in his absence, Lucius’s own son, the young Lucius, is absorbed into the same botanical field in being described by Titus as a “tender sapling” (3.2.50), one whose nature is visibly conjoined to both father and grandfather in the warrior-like ethos he embraces.

Given the cultural dominance of this iconography for the Titus family, it should perhaps come as no surprise that Tamora and Aaron’s attack on Titus takes form precisely as one waged across this botanical register.
They first assault the buds and branches that line this tree, beginning with Titus’s offspring. If Titus has favored images of ascendance for his offspring in tending to their rise up the ranks by knighting them in the fields, Tamora and Aaron reverse this trajectory in bringing the “branches” of his family low, literally trapping his two sons Quintus and Martius in a hole in the earth. When Quintus observes the “rude-growing briers” (2.2.199) on the “subtle hole” (2.2.198) in the earth, he sees an image of himself and his brother Martius reinscribed in and through the botanical imagery that animated their father’s desires. Not ascending to new heights as the organic imagery of the tree would suggest, they are instead made to descend, quite literally, “[i]nto this gaping hollow of the earth” (2.2.249). Stately branches thereby get transmogrified into base briers. If the play at large over-articulates the connections between social status and physical location onstage—as when Tamora’s union with Saturninus evokes her physical relocation when he insists “Ascend, fair queen” (1.1.338)—Tamora and Aaron reverse them in the images of botanical descent that they forcibly impose on Titus.

These same reversals underpin the script they devise for Titus’s daughter, Lavinia. Figured as a sapling tree, Lavinia is “washed and cut and trimmed” (5.1.95), made to submit to a barbarous form of cultivation at the hands of Chiron and Demetrius. When Marcus finds her following their ruthless attack, these images become overdetermined as he questions “what stern ungentle hands / Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare / Of her two branches” (2.3.16–18). When she later in the play is directed by Marcus to use a staff as a “Guide” to etch the identity of her attackers in the sandy plot he discovers (4.1.69–71), the stage directions translate her arms into “stumps,” much as Chiron does earlier in taunting “Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so / And if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe” (2.3.3–4). Together these descriptions express the logic of her body as a forcibly blighted tree. The debasement of the family’s iconography is rendered still further when Titus, too, falls to the earth in pleading for the pity of the Tribunes. In his appeal to and prostration on the earth, Titus brings this symbolic reversal full circle. No longer a stately tree, he has been forced down, inhabiting a space more lowly than that occupied by the other botanical sub-categories of shrubs and under-shrubs when he imagines his hands as little save “withered herbs” “meet for plucking up” (3.1.178–179). He concedes, in effect, that he has been reduced to the bottom-most rung of the social hierarchy. Just as the Goths denigrate Titus by using debased terms of address—referring to him as “old Titus” (3.1.153) or “old man” (5.2.149) rather than the more stately “old Andronicus” (4.1.129) which his family
members prefer—so, too, do their assaults assume visual force, in that they “raze” the sundry branches of an ascending tree, one that Titus had hoped would grow to new social heights.

**Racial slips**

In their attack on Titus, Tamora and Aaron press for a notion of race in direct opposition to the one he favors. Rather than allowing Titus’s clan to construct Roman identity in opposition to them as outsiders, they set about to enframe him with the debased signs of the “other,” making him the antithesis to the courtly identities in which they wrap themselves. The strength of their ties to Rome’s elite culture should give critics pause in being guided by subsequent colonialist and imperialist developments to discover Tamora and Aaron as the play’s de facto racial “others,” the clear “aliens” in the struggle dramatized by the play. For such critics, much of the first two acts of the play necessarily remains an unresolved puzzle. Indeed, the earliest scenes of the play are notable for withholding such pronouncements. Far from being alien or barbarous, Tamora and her steward Aaron express an intimate knowledge of Roman cultural codes, and they are absorbed into the polis in an almost effortless way. From her first words onstage, Tamora indicates her proficiency, indeed fluency, with regard to Roman values, as Heather James has already compellingly demonstrated. In urging Titus to spare her firstborn son, she grounds her arguments in a textbook expression of Roman virtus, repeatedly emphasizing and defining the ideals of Roman nobility: valor, magnanimity, pity. Later she will use this knowledge to better effect when she convinces Saturninus to make a show of peace with his political adversaries, deftly choreographing an elaborate truce. In case we have missed the point about how to read such actions, she explicitly translates their meaning for us when she declares to Titus: “I am incorporate in Rome” (1.1.467). It should give some critics pause that neither Titus nor Lavinia seem surprised by her assimilation. Lavinia interprets Saturninus’s promise of noble treatment as an expression of “princely courtesy” (1.1.276), that is, the courtesy one prince properly extends to another. Titus had anticipated this regal posture when he surrendered the rights to hold her as prisoner to Saturninus, assuring her that the emperor “for your honour and your state / Will use you nobly and your followers” (1.1.263–64). He goes so far as to express a desire to be a part of her ascendancy, first when he bemoans his exclusion from her court in observing “I am not bid to wait upon this bride” (1.1.343) when
she and Saturninus make sudden plans to wed, and later when he tells Marcus that she is “beholden to the man / That brought her for this high good turn so far” (1.1.401–2), referring to himself. Other Romans, too, have at first little to say about Tamora and Aaron as “aliens.” Indeed, the moderate criticism that does arise after these formal stagings of incorporation comes from Titus’s brother, Marcus, and is framed quite specifically as a distraction from the Andronicus clans’ more intimate woes. Marcus seeks to assuage Titus’s sorrow—what he calls his “dreary dumps” (1.1.396) at seeing his family reduced to factional warfare—by turning his focus to Tamora’s sudden advancement within Rome. As we will see, this strategy of deflection—of appeasing an internal rivalry through the production of an external enemy—will become a central tool for the Andronici, particularly in connection with Aaron.

That Aaron will have to be made into an “other,” rather than arriving to the play loaded down with such associations, becomes apparent when we consider the absolute ease and finesse with which Aaron navigates the transition to Roman incorporation, ever in-step with his “new-made empress” (1.1.519). Though a party on the sidelines for the first act of the play, when the second act opens, Aaron appears onstage in a choral relation with the audience, giving him the privileged dramatic role of providing commentary on the play’s events. Resembling his Marlovian predecessor, the upstart Tamburlaine, Aaron here prepares himself for socially upward movement, a process arguably embodied onstage by his assumption of royal livery when he asserts “Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts! / I will be bright, and shine in pearl and gold” (1.1.517–18). As the scene shifts with the entrance of yet another set of warring brothers, in Chiron and Demetrius, Aaron reacts in such a way as to indicate that if the brothers are mere novices in the rituals constituting courtly love, he is the consummate insider, a nuanced practitioner of such social forms. In fact the treachery that he embraces in this transitional scene reveals his insider knowledge all the more in that he will use Roman culture—here Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—to effect his ends. If Titus will later need to be directed to the Ovidian text itself to decode how his daughter has been violated—“See. See!” (4.1.54) he exclaims in reading as if for the first time of the dangers of Ovid’s wood—Aaron indicates that he knows the genres of Roman mythology by heart, moving in and out of roles as diverse as that of Aeneas and the messenger Raven. Indeed, the play’s overdetermined references to him as a raven suggest that playing this ill-fated bird may be his ultimate role in the play. Like Ovid’s bird, who elects to deliver Phoebus the unwanted message that his beloved is not chaste only to be rewarded with the blackening of his
otherwise white feathers, Aaron finds himself relishing the delivery of various unwanted messages and forced to absorb the cost as a result. A figure who sits at the crossroads of discourse as consummate translator—in translating the dictates of courtly culture to Tamora’s indecorous sons, in translating Titus’s figural sense of “having a hand” in Roman politics into its perversely literal form, and in translating his own evil words and deeds into a currency that Lucius will accept in exchange for his son’s life—Aaron is master of Roman oratory, delivering “wondrous things” (5.1.55) at a terrible cost to himself.

Indeed, if critics like Emily Bartels have argued for a reading of Aaron as motivated by an impervious form of evil, a seemingly motiveless malignity, I suggest by contrast a carefully orchestrated and politically strategic textual performance on his part, one which suggests a familiarity with and absorption of Roman politics. He is a master of courtly discourse and the serpentine paths to power. Notably, all of his actions relieve Tamora of various rivals to the throne. He first removes the greatest threat to the throne, Bassianus, an accomplishment which the speech prefixes of the first Quarto register quite succinctly in naming Saturninus, following this moment, “King” (Q1, 18). He then seeks to destroy the wide-ranging networks of power that Titus has wrapped himself in by orchestrating the attack on Lavinia and by framing Titus’s two sons for Bassianus’s death. This process is brought to fruition, as it were, when he secures the banishment of Titus’s one remaining viable claimant to the throne, Lucius. If Titus had labored to produce unity across the ranks among Romans, Aaron reinstates a steep social hierarchy, with his mistress at the top. In a cunning reversal of Saturninus’s predicament at the play’s start—when he feels himself reduced to begging for the throne from Titus—Aaron has righted this wrong, seeing to it that the Andronici suffer the humiliation of receiving “their alms out of the empress’ chest” (2.2.9).

In doing as much, Aaron delivers the unwanted message that royal “kinds” do not mix with lesser “kinds.” He enforces a strict separation, as it were, between trees and shrubs, with implications for himself. So long as Aaron accepts his place, much as he insists the Andronici do, as a servitor in Tamora’s court—as steward and tutor to her children—he elicits little if any resistance from the other Romans. It is notable, for instance, that Titus’s sons, Martius and Quintus, each refer to him during the hunt of the second act by his first name, Aaron, rather than the epithet “Moor” (2.2.215 and 217). Moreover, those members of the Andronicus clan who know nothing of his sexual escapades with the Empress repeatedly overlook him in numbering their enemies.
banished Lucius departs for the Goths (3.1.300), he identifies Saturninus as the chief architect of their woes when he promises Titus that he will “be revenged on Rome and Saturnine” (3.1.301). Moreover, if we bracket the editorially vexed banquet scene of 3.2—which first appeared only in the 1623 Folio version of the play, nearly 30 years after the play’s initial performance—Titus, too, consistently identifies his enemy as the Tarquin-like Saturninus. He seems altogether to overlook Aaron’s status as outsider. Only in the textually suspect scene of 3.2 do we see Titus implicated in imagining Aaron’s blackness as demarcating his “otherness.” Here, as we saw earlier in relation to Tamora, it is Marcus who prompts the strategy of embracing this exclusionary language and logic in comparing Aaron to the “black ill-favoured fly” whom he kills for sport (3.2.67). When Titus responds, jabbing the already injured fly, by observing, “Yet I think we are not brought so low / But that between us we can kill a fly / That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor” (3.2.77–79), he accepts Marcus’s suggestion that Aaron can be made useful to them in absorbing the lowliness that has otherwise attached itself to them. In the same way that the play’s final four lines, and some of its most racially loaded language in a modern sense, was tacked on to the Folio version of the play, there is a belated quality to the association of Aaron’s blackness with villainous behavior throughout the play at large. Rather than expressing a racist ethos, the play seems concerned to dramatize the very mechanisms by which such discriminations are produced.

Indeed, the play seems to chart a clear break in the language surrounding Aaron, identifying a precise moment when he begins to slide from his status as acceptably Roman in the eyes of Titus and his supporters. That moment can be pinpointed in the second act, when he and Tamora are discovered by Lavinia and Bassianus in intimate isolation in a corner of the woods. The willful violation of the royal bloodline that this union signals marks a turning point in the language surrounding Aaron. In stepping beyond his social place as one who waits on the Queen to someone who “weights” on her in another sense, Aaron initiates his own undoing. In the scene just prior, when he plots with Chiron and Demetrius how this hunt will proceed, we already see his social aspirations rising with him. If at first he seems content to inhabit the social role assigned him by Rome—in diligently instructing his pupils in the codes of Roman honour—he soon gives it over. Arguably it is Chiron’s word “T’achieve” (1.1.580) that spurs this change, leading him to consider the pleasure of moving beyond the dictates of blood and race by embracing the ethos of a self-made man. He already knows the pleasure of “braving” Saturninus in enjoying his queen. But soon we will see his aspirations
move beyond the goal of furthering even her power, when he seeks to protect his infant at a cost to her. Earlier he had confided to Tamora that his soul “never hopes more heaven than rests in thee” (2.2.41), but these aspirations change suddenly once he sees his newborn. Notably, his willingness to serve—both politically and amorously—comes to a halt. In fact, if at first Aaron and the boys find a way to dodge the calamity that this tawny child poses for the empress, Aaron later chooses to send them all to the post by revealing to Lucius their many villainies in the interests of preserving his son. Indeed, his devotion to his son has been hailed by critics as a representation that humanizes a character otherwise portrayed as an embodiment of pure evil. But I would argue that there is more at work in his promise to the child to feed him “on berries and on roots, / And fat on curds and whey, and suck the goat, / And cabin in a cave, and bring [him] up / To be a warrior and command a camp” (4.2.179–182). For, the vision he conveys here is nothing less than the quintessential Roman ideal, as embodied by Aaron’s mortal enemy. In seeking to make his bastard son a Roman warrior, Aaron walks in the footsteps of the play’s other warrior, who, as we have seen, has spent his life promoting the advancement of a family of warriors up the botanical ranks, hoping to one day graft them onto the royal cedar. If Titus’s goal fails when Saturninus rejects Lavinia in the chaos of the opening scene, Aaron’s yet does not, for in the body of his infant son he has managed to mix his own ignoble blood with the high blood of a prince.

Indeed, it is arguably his success on this front that seals his doom. For, even as Aaron’s desire to see his own blood ennobled positions him beside Titus among the play’s social aspirants, it is the Andronici who will insist on and labor to produce a difference to separate them into two different “kinds.” What begins as an indecorous mixture between prince and servant—a violation of rank which Bassianus traces to Tamora’s laxity in being unfurnished of her guards and sequestered from her train—is translated by the Andronici into contamination by an alien, because black, body. When Titus’s ally, Bassianus, along with Lavinia, discovers Tamora all but in the act with Aaron, they immediately settle on a lexicon of coloration to express their disgust. They refer to the act’s spottedness, ravenousness, and blackness. In doing as much, they stay within the field of representation that Shakespeare had used in his “Rape of Lucrece” to describe the Roman Tarquin’s violation of his own princely blood in raping Lucrece. He, too, is described as spotted and darkened by his actions, words that suggest he has irreversibly tainted, through the passion of his lust, his royal bloodline. As for him, so for Tamora, whose submission to adulterous lust signals a capricious disregard for the very system of blood that upholds her.
Almost immediately, Lavinia describes their acts of coupling as “slips” (2.2.86), invoking the language of grafting to express what she perceives to be a deviation from acceptable patterns of generation. It is significant that in Shakespeare’s history plays at large, this horticultural practice often signaled a potential threat to noble blood—specifically, the mixing of noble blood with a lesser kind. In 2 Henry VI, for instance, Suffolk charges Warwick with being the “fruit” of a union produced when “noble stock / Was graffed with crabtree slip” (3.2.213–14), suggesting that he embodies a debased composite. If grafting was readily available to Shakespeare as an image for mixture, it most often described the mingling of bloodlines perceived to be disparate in kind because disparate in rank. This is precisely the stance that Perdita takes in The Winter’s Tale, when she stands against “streaked gillyvors” or multicolored carnations on the grounds that they are illicit mixtures, impugning such “slips” for being “nature’s bastards” (4.4.82–83). She refuses to transplant a single one into her garden. In his disingenuous response to her stance, Polixenes unpacks the cultural codes presumed to be violated through the mixtures promoted by this “art” (4.4.90). He urges: “we marry / A gentler scion to the wildest stock, / And make conceive a bark of baser kind / By bud of nobler race,” a process he describes as “[mending]” nature (4.4.92–96). That was precisely how horticultural manuals of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries tended to conceive of the plant mixtures produced by their “Arte” of grafting. Sap, the substance understood to pass between stock and scion in the grafting process and therefore the central site of exchange, was analogized to blood. The process of grafting, as Leonard Mascall carefully described for would-be horticulturalists, involved the “meeting of the two sappes,” an idea which Hugh Platt would substantiate in his Floraes Paradise by envisioning the technique as “ioyning sap to sap” until they are “well knit.” When the gardener of Richard II worries that the King has allowed the plants of his political world to grow “over-proud in sap and blood” (3.4.60), he draws on these well-established correspondences.

For the Titus clan, these suspected mixtures serve as catalysts, providing them with the occasion to attack the system of blood that had advanced Tamora at their own expense. The language of blackness and spottedness that initially refers to the act of coupling itself and has particular force in representing Tamora’s degenerate fall from princely nobility, quickly accrues to Aaron alone, such that he comes to absorb the threat against Rome. The play exposes this language as a strategic ploy, used by one debased group so as to reconstitute the social body to their own good effect. In identifying the Moor’s black body as the ultimate source of
depravity, Titus’s clan succeeds in shifting Roman identity away from rank or blood and toward a national collective. As such, Aaron’s blackness emerges as the crucial axis of difference which enables the resolution to the epistemological crisis regarding notions of kind that I have identified as present in the play and in early modern English culture at large. That his “kind” becomes the antithesis, the anvil on which Roman identity is hammered out, is displayed at the play’s end. If Roman soil is that which will conjoin those hailed by this emergent discourse of “kind,” then the fertile effects of such soil must be denied to Aaron. Planted “breast-deep” in the earth, refused sustenance, Aaron will be forced to embody the image of a blighted tree—a tree denied growth, ascendancy, and fruit. His constant presence will serve as a reminder that he is “nothing so kind” (2.2.156) as Roman stock, and his fruitlessness will guard against the production of slips, grafts, and mixtures to muddy these distinctions.

And yet, like Titus’s stump which continues to flow with the family’s life-blood despite his dismemberment, thereby confounding Aaron’s attempt to “raze” his family line, the play ultimately resists such ideological containment for Aaron as well. It does so by protecting the life of Aaron’s sapling child, scion of Tamora’s royal line, who lives to contest the claim to power that Lucius seizes for himself at the play’s end. That Aaron will rise again through this branch of an otherwise blighted trunk, the speech prefixes hauntingly anticipate in refusing to assign Lucius the epithet “king.” This absence signals a deferral, a pause that anticipates the next phase in the cycle of botanical forms.

NOTES


2. For attempts to define objective knowledge in contradistinction to literary genres, a tendency which gained momentum throughout the seventeenth century, see, for instance, Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society* (London, 1667); and René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (London, 1649).

3. Barbara Shapiro has argued that “scientific and humanistic studies” during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shared a “common approach to the problem of knowledge and the appropriate means of gaining that knowledge,” enjoying considerable overlap as knowledge-tools; see her “History and Natural History in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England: An Essay on the Relationship between Humanism and Science” in *English Scientific Virtuosi in the 16th and 17th Centuries: Papers read at a


6. An exception to this tendency is Ian Smith’s account of how the play contributes to “race as a cultural category in the period”; see “Those ‘slippery customers’: Rethinking Race in Titus Andronicus,” Journal of Theatre and Drama 3 (1997): 45–58, esp. 46. Smith seeks to place ideologies of color in relation to “the multiple ideological sites through which racialization is produced.” Finding insufficient the tendency of critics to rely solely “on the colour binary . . . for understanding the discourse of race in the early modern period,” Smith’s essay proceeds to “focus on language as a critical locus of racial encoding” (46–47).


10. See William Lawson, A New Orchard and Garden or The best way for planting, grafting, and to make any ground good, for a rich Orchard (1618; London, 1631). For sap and wounded bark, see fol. 9; for the tree’s eyes, see fol. 39 and passim.


12. Ogilvie, 219 and 215. Allen J. Grieco makes a similar point in arguing that “plant categories and classification systems existed, of course, long before Linnaeus introduced the modern systematic order that is still in use,” noting further that what distinguishes the Renaissance taxonomy from its eighteenth-century counterpart is its reliance “on

13. For Clusius’s reasoning, see Ogilvie, 216; see also Gerarde, Dedication to Sir William Cecil and fol. 64. According to Grieco, these models “were constructed according to a vertical ordering principle,” such that “plants which grow to be tall are endowed with a particular nobility” and those “that do not grow high off the ground . . . are usually considered to be vulgar” (141). Insofar as creepers occupied an intermediary position, they were suspect, viewed as a potential source of impurity.


17. For a recent article that does attend to the play’s botanical imagery, see Tzachi Zamir, “Wooden Subjects,” *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 277–300. Zamir argues that Lavinia’s “symbolic reduction to a tree” (277) serves as an externalization of the “agonizing internal rift” produced by grief. For Zamir, the image functions to critique the aestheticizing of pain central to tragedy while also embodying the “nonlinear,” organic shape of trauma (285).

18. Consider, for instance, Daphne’s flight from Apollo which results in her metamorphosis into a laurel tree; or the rites of mourning by the sisters of deceased Phaeton, which transform them into trees dripping with gummy tears; or Syrinx’s sudden transposition while flying from Pan into a cluster of mournful reeds.


20. All quotations of *Titus Andronicus* are to the Arden Shakespeare edited by Jonathan Bate (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2003), 4.3.46. Further citations will be by act, scene, and line and will appear parenthetically in the text. Citations of other Shakespearean plays are to the *Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997) and will also be cited by act, scene, and line parenthetically in the text. Occasionally I refer to details of the play’s quarto text of 1594, and citations for this text will be to the facsimile copy in *Shakespeare’s Plays in Quarto*, ed. Michael J. B. Allen and Kenneth Muir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). These, too, will be cited parenthetically in the text and will refer to this edition’s modern pagination.

21. *Oxford English Dictionary*, race, sb. 10a and b; 11 a, b, c and d; and 12.


23. For a reading that emphasizes her white skin color, see Royster.


28. In her *Shakespeare’s Troy: Drama, politics, and the translation of empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Heather James observes that Tamora, too, is “no slouch at barbed allusions” (58) amid a detailed discussion of how the play at large uses Ovid to launch a critique of Virgilian epic and the imperial ethos it instates. See Ian Smith’s essay “Slippery Customers” for a similar emphasis on Aaron’s rhetorical abilities.


30. Jonathan Bate, the editor of the play’s Arden edition, the text from which I cite, follows Q1 in placing this scene within the first act. However, most modern editions follow the Folio in positioning Aaron’s speech at the beginning of the second act.

31. For Ovid’s account of the raven’s blackening, see Golding’s translation, ed. Forey, 2.664–795.


