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Tortured Calculations: Body Economics in Shakespeare's Cultures of Honor

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This paper's title involves a pun that, when unpacked, reveals the complex relationship between our underlying assumptions about justice, systems of exchange, and our bodies. The Latin root of "torture," *torquere*, means, "to twist." Torture involves twisting another's body to inflict pain. The term shares its root with a seemingly unrelated concept: a *tort*, or wrongful injury to another's person, property, or reputation, is brought under the jurisdiction of compensatory law, which is founded on the notion of payback—getting your just desert. A *torte*, on the other hand, which bears no etymological relationship to the other two terms, is simply a pastry—getting just a dessert. A tort involves the twisting of one's civil obligations. A *torte* involves the mixing together and baking of separate ingredients, the gustatory result of which cannot be readily reduced to its individual components. This paper explores the ways in which *human bodies*, *payback*, and *comestibility* become inescapably entangled in cultures in which honor is the prevailing virtue.¹

Shakespeare was deeply sensitive to the social and psychological processes through which these concepts become entwined when honor is at stake—to the ways in which, as a means of corrective response, men who transgress a code of honor can be rightly reduced to their bodies, similar to how those who are not allowed to be full participants in an honor culture (most particularly women) always already are. This paper examines Shakespeare's earliest depiction of honor cultures in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and then briefly discusses how the ideas they trade in are further developed and complicated later in his career, focusing on *Othello*. While he never explicitly uses the twisted pun around which this paper is organized, it is nevertheless one worthy of Shakespeare—a pun that, rather than engulfing us in the mire, deepens our understanding both of these works and of the cultures of honor they depict.

Shylock's attempt to exact a pound of Antonio's flesh, and the threat of cannibalism that lies beneath it, may immediately strike one as the clearest instance in Shakespeare of a notion of justice transforming

the human body into food—of a wrongdoer being reduced to a body reconceived as no more than meat to be dished out and served to the victim in service of meting out justice. But how Shakespeare explores this transformation of self into flesh is better understood as an extension and revision of his earlier explorations in *Titus* and *Lucrece*. Like his Roman predecessors, Shylock belongs to an honor culture. Guiding the systems of justice to which such individuals are subject is the *law of the talion*, which receives its definitive formulation in “eye for an eye.” For them, the scales of justice demand nothing more or less than the practical equivalent of perfect balance when honor is at stake. This is why, as legal and literary scholar William Ian Miller notes, it is called “exacting” revenge: you took my eye, so nothing other than your eye can satisfy me as the specie of compensation unless we can negotiate a substitute that we both agree to be of relatively equal worth (16).²

Shylock's failure to exact vengeance marks a talionic system of justice losing out to a supposedly more progressive one: that of Christian justice, whose core values of forgiveness and mercy are largely alien to honor cultures. Shylock's loss is mainly the result of his psychological inflexibility: his failure to imagine receiving anything other than the precise letter of his bond. But this pathological condition, and the moral and practical limitations that it suggests for honor, are associated in the play much more strongly with Shylock's Jewishness—his emphasis on word over spirit, body over soul—than with the precision demanded by the deuteronomic talionic system that underlies and guides his decisions. His absolute unwillingness to negotiate a substitute for Antonio's flesh until it is too late (4.1.318, 336), which talionic justice not only allows, but normally expects, bears this out. Since the moral and psychological processes underlying these sorts of negotiations, and the transformations of selves and bodies they often involve (i.e., of selves into bodies and bodies into partible items of trade), are precisely what this paper is interested in, *The Merchant of Venice* is not the best starting point for the present inquiry. *Titus*, on the other hand, elucidates the moral limitations of honor and talionic justice without miring us in the religious complications that lie at *Merchant's* dramatic heart—such as placing blood libel on all fours with the Eucharist: “But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian” (2.5.14-15).

At the play's outset, Titus is as rigidly absolutist and literalistic as Shylock. In Act 1, he unreflectively has Alarbus sacrificed (121-6), gives Lavinia to Saturninus (244-5), and reflexively kills his own son, Mutius (291), simply because these acts are what the Roman code of honor that he upholds demands—not to do so would be unimaginable. But as the play progresses, we see Titus, in response to his growing awareness of how his family is being reduced to nothing, become increasingly flexible with regard to how he interprets the honor code's demands, while still operating fully within them. While Titus's response to the suffering he and his family have undergone may seem extreme or excessive by our lights, from the standpoint of the talion they can be understood as both fitting and just. Far from further tarnishing his or his family's honor, Titus's taboo-transgressing act of forcing Tamora to eat her own sons reasserts the Roman code of honor as the dominant moral order. As such, the play ultimately shows us that the consequences resulting from the talionic calculus, and, more fundamentally, of considering justice a matter of balance or evenness, can be just as gruesome as those resulting from the unprincipled, imprecise barbarism over which it supposedly marks an advance.

We have all adopted a talionic mindset at some point in our lives. Anyone who grew up with siblings has a particularly intimate knowledge of it. Your brother breaks your toy, so you carefully determine which of his toys is as important to him as yours was to you and, when you break it, all seems right in the world. That is, of course, until he finds out, thinks the toy you broke was better than the one he did, and retaliates, setting in motion a chain of events that, without parental intervention, could easily lead to Obi-Wan Kenobi's decapitation. Such talionic impulses, though we may be reluctant to admit it, persist long into adulthood. And what *Titus* so strongly illuminates is that the talion, in how it calculates evenness and determines the means for achieving it, can render results by which we should be deeply troubled. It is thus possible to read the play as offering a *reductio* on talionic justice and the inordinate concern for honor that compels individuals to adopt it. The play's success on this score is amplified because our sympathies largely remain with Titus even as he performs arguably the most stomach churning, least morally palatable actions in the entire play. We not only understand his desire for vengeance, but root for him, and when he succeeds we are as satisfied as

we are horrified.³ These two responses do not comfortably coexist and, as such, prompt critical reflection upon our own talionic impulses.

In watching Titus negotiate his space of possible retaliatory action up through its successful realization, we witness the familiar talionic calculus operating in unfamiliar and heightened circumstances. Because of this, one can begin to appreciate how the talion empowers victims by enabling a transformation of those who wronged them from agents of harm to passive recipients of the victim's will. Titus's conversion from a whimpering mass of aimless grief and anger (in Act 3.1), to a pretend madman, torturer, butcher, and pastry chef (all in Act 5.2), and finally a server of both kinds of des(s)ert (in Act 5.3) marks the stages through which he reclaims the power and honor that Tamora took from him and his family. This exchange of power is facilitated by the talionic demand for *in-kind retaliation*, "eye for an eye," which re-humanizes victims by licensing them to dehumanize those who wronged them, forcing the wrongdoers to have experiences similar enough to those they caused their victims to rebalance the scales of justice. We see this most clearly in Titus's torture of Chiron and Demetrius on Lavinia's behalf.

Torture, according to essayist-critic Jean Améry, attempts to diminish the victim's status as a person (partially or fully) by means of a reduction to the body through the infliction of pain. One's subjectivity is restricted because one's body becomes an instrument upon which other subjectivities can enact their intentions. Lacking hope for successful protest, one comes to identify oneself as little more than one's body, which, through what is done to it, loses its integrity. That is, one comes to view one's body less as an organic whole capable of producing self-directed action and more as an unsystematic collection of parts receptive to indiscriminate twisting, breaking, dislocation, and detachment. As a result, one loses one's sense of being at home in the world because the core assumption of one's body as one's own, as an integral part of oneself, has been violated. Torture, in other words, engenders a perverse dualism within its victim's sense of identity: the self is forced into a body it no longer recognizes as its own. The question with which the survivor of torture must live, then, which Améry believes cannot even begin to be settled without the possibility of justice, of corrective action against the torturer, is: *Where am I?* (28, 39-40).

Chiron and Demetrius do not survive their torture. But Titus still forces this question upon them when, in an act of speech, he carves them up and portions them out to their mother, imaginatively reinterpreting them as a pastry—their bones and blood forming the crust, their flesh the filling—where they will end up indistinguishably mixed together in their mother’s stomach (5.2.186-203). Where once she nourished them, they will now nourish her—their matter remixed with her body, which, as we learn from Lucius in the next scene, wild beasts will feast on after her death (5.3.195-200). Their bodies will end up so widely dispersed as to be untraceable. By metaphorically reversing the direction of their births by arranging for them to be consumed by their mother, Titus essentially tells Chiron and Demetrius that he intends to erase them from existence: to un-birth them. And lacking someone to take corrective action against Titus, they have no means of resistance. Chiron and Demetrius have no chance of reintegration into the world because, unlike Titus or even Aaron, they have no heirs, and thus no one obliged to avenge them, no one to properly remember them, or, from the standpoint of the talion, “re-member” them—i.e., reconstruct their selves so as to make them whole again after their deaths (Miller 99). Instead, Titus gives Chiron and Demetrius something to remember, as Lavinia’s participation in their torture serves to remind them why their treatment is deserved. And by allowing Lavinia to participate, Titus is properly remembering his dismembered daughter by enabling her reintegration into the prevailing moral scheme—a reintegration she desperately desires (as well as deserves), as is made clear earlier when she identifies her rapists, writing, “*Stuprum—Chiron—Demetrius,*” with her uncle’s staff (4.1.78).⁴

Philosopher Susan J. Brison, following Améry, makes clear that, as a victim of rape and mutilation, Lavinia would have undergone a trauma similar in kind to torture; i.e., the phenomenologies of both are largely identical (Brison 46-7; Améry 28). Chiron and Demetrius’s torture, therefore, is a fitting response from a talionic standpoint because it forces them to experience the sort of trauma Lavinia experienced at their hands. As such, we can view Titus as imaginatively refiguring Lavinia’s rape in their torture. He begins by binding them and stopping their mouths (5.2.160-1), treating them as ones whose protests can be ignored and whose autonomy and bodily integrity are readily violable, just as they had treated Lavinia, whom they rendered an uncommunicative “map of woe”

(3.2.12), and thus the subject of others's interpretations and revisions. Such a loss of narrative control, Brison argues, is indicative of the loss of humanity, disintegration of self, and dislocation from the world of moral action engendered by both rape and torture (49-59). Brison concludes that these pernicious consequences can only begin to be reversed with the possibility of justice (74). Améry agrees, singling out the talionic response as particularly conducive to this end (28). So by using her tormentors as means to their mother's suffering, as they had used her as a means to her father's, Lavinia shares in doling out justice to Tamora, the ultimate source of her suffering.

Tamora has overestimated her desert, and her disproportionate retaliatory cravings have displaced the talion as Rome's prevailing moral system. But Lavinia and her father give Tamora her just desert, stuffing her excessive appetite for vengeance back down her throat and thereby revealing the depths of her barbarity, placing her on all fours with Lear's "barbarous Scythian" who "makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite" (*Lr.* 1.1.116-18).⁵ As Titus himself says, "I shall never come to bliss / Till all these mischiefs be return'd again, / Even in their throats that have committed them" (*Tit.* 3.1.272-4). In many honor cultures, excessive avengers are metaphorically identified as cannibals (Miller 30). Titus and Lavinia literalize this metaphor and, by exposing Tamora as a perverter of justice, initiate the reestablishment of talionic justice and its demand for precise calculation—a project that is completed when Lucius kills Saturninus for killing Titus, which reclaims the talion by returning to the simple economics of a life for a life. But this final reclamation of talionic justice can only be achieved by Titus trading Lavinia's life for Tamora's.⁶

By being reintegrated into the prevailing moral system through the torture and deaths of Chiron and Demetrius, Lavinia's value is at least partially restored—i.e., she regains social currency. As a result, she becomes an item of trade within the retaliatory scheme: she gets even with Tamora and, as such, her life can be redeemed for Tamora's. But this monetization of the victim's life is not the sense of redemption normally sought within a talionic system. Instead, the reintegration of the victim into the world of moral action seems to be the form of redemption that the talion seeks out—i.e., one is attempting to buy back one's honor in

order to regain one's status as a player in the honor game (Miller 69, 130). Lavinia's position in this world is thus revealed to be contradictory: she is worthy of justice, but cannot be made whole by it. While Lavinia may have been reintegrated into the prevailing moral scheme prior to her death, we learn that it is one for which she, as a woman whose chastity has been violated, is no longer fit: Virginius's precedent is still viable (5.3.35-47). Lavinia's dual status as a *subject* seeking revenge on her own behalf and an *object* of lost or restored value is thereby shown to be contradictory. That she cannot be fully redeemed as a participant in this world reveals the limitations of talionic justice in this culture. The talion's failure in this case seems to be strongly tied to the inadequacies of the patriarchal system through which it operates and its inordinate concern for masculine honor, which cannot perceive a woman as a unified whole possessing her own honor over which she has control, but instead as merely a contributor to her family's honor over which men (her father, husband, brother(s), or uncle(s)) have control.

Further light can be shed on this conclusion by examining Lucrece's situation. The poem obsesses over the subject/object distinction, and the fear that the violation of her body (Lucrece-as-object) can pollute and thereby corrupt her soul (Lucrece-as-subject). Because of this, she concludes that she has no alternative but to end her role as subject and fully embrace her status as an object in the world, detaching her still pure soul from her body before it has a chance to be polluted by the latter's violation. Unlike Lavinia, however, for Lucrece there is no attempt to reintegrate into the world of human action, as her suicide completes the divorce of self and body initiated by Tarquin's objectification. And while her death sets the revenge scheme against Tarquin in motion, she does not actively participate in its realization. Instead, Lucrece's death immediately prompts a masculine competition between her husband and father over which possesses her, and thus which one has the greater claim to grieve: "The one doth call her his, the other his, / Yet neither may possess the claim they lay" (1793-4).

Lucrece and Lavinia's deaths serve to illuminate the fact that women in honor cultures have no positive rights with respect to their own bodies. Such rights instead belong to their masculine possessors. These men almost entirely make the decisions regarding women's bodies. This conception of women is one with which Shakespeare was very much

familiar—and one that, unfortunately, is not alien to us today. Within the early modern mindset, which traces back to at least Aristotle (see *Politics* 1.13), women are only granted negative duties with respect to what they *cannot* do with their bodies—they must be obedient, chaste, silent, and passive, and women are considered virtuous so long as they remain so.⁷ The second virtue is taken from Lavinia, while the third is forced upon her. Lucrece chooses radical silence through her suicide, although her corpse ends up speaking more loudly than she herself ever could. However, its message is co-opted by Junius Brutus, whose desire for public revolt against the elder Tarquin subsumes Lucrece's claim for private vengeance against the younger Tarquin. Ultimately, Brutus redeems Lucrece's body, exchanging it for the exile of the Tarquins—purchasing their formerly untainted bloodline with Lucrece's tainted blood to dishonor them for generations (1849-55).

This monetized redemption of Lucrece's body, which justly extorts the Tarquins's honor, serves to buy back her lost virtue (at the cost of her life)—her lasting fame traded for their lasting infamy. Just as Lavinia's death enables the reestablishment of the Roman Empire, Lucrece's death enables the establishment of the Roman Republic, of which Brutus is founder and first consul. What Shakespeare seems to be indicating here is that the ultimate political power women can hope to achieve in cultures of honor comes not through their participation in the dominant moral order, but rather through their radical exclusion from it. Women, therefore, can never be fully at home in any world governed by masculine-controlled honor.

Lucrece becomes the object of Tarquin's lust because she gains value as the most beautiful and virtuous of all the Roman noblemen's wives. Unlike the other women, Lucrece is able to control her baser appetites in her husband's absence, which demonstrates that his governance over her extends beyond his presence. Consequently, as stated in *The Argument*, Collatinus becomes the most honorable man among his peers: “[O]nly Collatinus finds his wife (though it were late in the night) spinning amongst her maids; the other ladies were all found dancing and revelling, or in several disports; whereupon the noblemen yielded Collatinus the victory, and hiswife the fame” (16-21). But by

forcibly taking Lucrece's chastity, Tarquin strips Collatinus of that honor by corrupting its source.

Shakespeare continues to think through the issues of honor, chastity, and value later in his career, offering perhaps his most nuanced examination in *Othello*. In *Othello*, however, the focus is less on honor as it pertains to vengeance, though this is certainly relevant, and more on honor as it pertains to valuation (of self and others) more generally. Othello is a Collatinus whose standing in society is complicated because he happens to share a complexion with Aaron. But his otherness, and the devaluation it normally entails, means he cannot expect others to presume his honor; instead, he must continuously demonstrate his value through public and private performance. Playing on this fact, Iago becomes a more malevolent and artistic Tarquin, corrupting Othello's image of Desdemona by imaginatively stripping her of her chastity. But even more like Aaron, he directs another, namely, Cassio, to commit the (virtual) violation for him—ironically, to corrupt a Moor like Aaron. Unlike Aaron, however, Othello possesses honor and hopes to maintain it. The honor Othello believes Desdemona has taken from him as a result of her perceived infidelity instigates his retaliatory scheme against her to recuperate his lost honor. Othello laments, "O curse of marriage! / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites!" (3.3.268-70). Continuing the theme from *Titus* and *Lucrece*, feminine appetites are here shown to be beyond the purview of masculine control. As a result, they pose a threat to a man's honor and, consequently, to his very status as a man.

But from another key perspective in the play, masculine appetites pose an even greater threat to femininity. Emilia makes this clear:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:
 They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;
 They eat us hungerly, and when they are full
 They belch us. (3.4.103-6)

To give into a man's sexual desire is to be feasted upon—to be devoured, digested, and expelled. Because of her imagined unfaithfulness, Desdemona is similarly degraded: transformed from the object of Othello's sexual desire to the target of his vengeance. And through his imaginative re-figuration of the consummation of their marriage in murdering Desdemona, Othello satisfies his desire for justice. This

satisfaction is not merely moral or aesthetic, inasmuch as her punishment is tailored to fit the crime, but is also conceived of as gustatory: Desdemona is consumed by the ritualized re-consummation.

Both Othello and Iago imaginatively give their revenge mouths and stomachs. The former's:

...bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall nev'r look back, nev'r ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up, (3.3.457-60)

while the latter claims to love Desdemona, "Not out of absolute lust.../ But partly led to diet [his] revenge," until he is "even'd" with Othello "wife for wife" (2.1.292-3, 99). Feeding, then, is revealed to be central to the talionic viewpoint. Wrongs have to be "fed" with the proper material quantity of *something* in order to recuperate honor. And as *Othello*, *Lucrece*, and *Titus* show, that something is frequently the human body. But in these works honor is rarely, if ever, fully recuperated when appetites and feeding are at work. This has a particularly pernicious effect on the principal women of these three works, all of whom are cannibalized by—both consumed by and expelled from—their respective talionic systems and the patriarchies that reinforce them. Shakespeare, therefore, renders talionic systems untenable because he illuminates through the treatment of women that, at least when men are in charge, they are gluttonous and insatiable in their very conception. Ultimately, such systems will consume themselves, since, as Ulysses observes in *Troilus and Cressida*, "appetite" is "an universal wolf," which "Must make perforce an universal prey, / And last eat up himself" (1.3.121, 123-24).⁸ The simple economics and aesthetics of "eye for an eye" may be appealing in theory, but its realization in practice is apt to produce effects that leave a bad taste in one's mouth.

Notes

¹. I owe a great depth of thanks to Lori Schroeder Haslem, whose thoughtful comments on previous drafts were invaluable in shaping the final version of this paper. She is also responsible for first inspiring my deep interest in Shakespeare when I was her student at Knox College by, among other things, tuning me in to the philosophical possibilities of his work. Even though we are now colleagues, I am grateful still to be benefiting from her teaching. This paper also greatly benefited from discussions with students in my “Moral Life in Literature” course, on the subject of revenge in Shakespeare, in the falls of 2009 and 2011. The first group enabled me to discover my ideas. The second enabled me to shape and refine them.

². Miller’s analysis of revenge and honor cultures has greatly influenced the present discussion.

³. For a discussion of the various sorts of “satisfaction” relevant to discussion of revenge, see Miller, Chapter 10.

⁴. My thanks to Bradin Cormack for pointing out this moment’s significance to my thesis.

⁵. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who made we aware of this connection.

⁶. Just like his daughter, Titus also cannot live. He has kept Lucius at a distance so that his own moral taint will not infect the public’s perception of his son. It is because Lucius has been excluded from his father’s unsavory activities that his moral status as Emperor cannot subsequently be challenged.

⁷. This is perhaps most straightforwardly seen in *The Taming of the Shrew*, which was written around the same time as both *Lucrece* and *Titus*. In his appeal to the Tenth Commandment to justify why he and his “bonny Kate” will not attend their own wedding reception, Petruchio says,

I will be master of what is mine own.
 She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house,
 My household stuff, my field, my barn,
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing;
 And here she stands, touch her whoever dare;
 I’ll bring mine action on the proudest he
 That stops my way in Padua. (3.2.229-35)

Stated simply, Kate’s father has given up any rights he previously had to her body in a legal transfer of property to her new husband and, as such, his complaint is now baseless because she no longer has any negative duty not to disobey him. “Action,” here, should thus be understood more as a legal, rather than physical, threat. Indeed, the former sense underwrites the latter.

⁸. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who drew my attention to this passage.

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