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Aaron's Roots: Spaniards, Englishmen, and Blackamoors in *Titus Andronicus*

Focusing on the play's genealogy and various allusions to the black legend, this article recovers the long-neglected Spanish dimension of Gothic identity in Titus Andronicus and reconsiders the racial discourse of the play in the light of this information. Within an analogical setup associating Goths with Spaniards and Romans with Englishmen, the play attempts intellectual emancipation: it attempts to think through the topical question of the black African presence in 1590s England on English terms — outside of the Iberian conceptual frameworks with which black Africans had long been associated.

Why is Aaron the Moor part of the Gothic court in *Titus Andronicus*? Given the importance of this character to the development of a racial discourse in early modern English theatre, investigating the reasons for his presence in the play is crucial. I seek to understand the merger of the Moors' and the Goths' histories, pushing beyond 'inextricability' and 'inexplicability', to quote Emily C. Bartels.¹ According to the dominant critical consensus, Aaron condenses and makes more visible through blackface the difference of the white barbarians within the Roman community.² Without rejecting that interpretation, I propose a complementary reading of *Titus Andronicus* in light of early modern European socio-historical contexts and transnational exchanges. I argue that among the possible readings of Roman and Gothic identities in the play, one reading emphasizes the Spanishness of the Goths in late sixteenth-century perceptions. Reckoning with this analogy and recuperating the long-neglected Spanish dimension of *Titus Andronicus* can impact productively our understanding of Aaron and of the play's treatment of race and slavery. Indeed, close readings reveal that, within an analogical framework, the play attempts to think through the question of the black presence in 1590s England on English terms — outside of the older Iberian conceptual frameworks with which black Africans had long been associated. In

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this article, I first pinpoint the most salient Spanish elements in the play before turning to moments when the play contests or distances itself from the Iberian cultural framework. Finally, I examine the incipient English take on race and slavery that the play proposes.

Spain in *Titus Andronicus*

In *España en Shakespeare*, Pedro Juan Duque devotes a total of five lines to *Titus Andronicus*, stating that the play cannot be traced back to any Spanish source.³ This assessment ignores the fact that the character of Aaron, as I will show, has its roots in Matteo Bandello's twenty-first *novella* (Part three), which is based upon a well-known incident that happened in the Spanish island of Mallorca in the second half of the fifteenth century.⁴ Giovanni Pontano first imported this Spanish anecdote into Italian learned culture when he wrote his treatise on servitude, *De obedientia*, between 1480 and 1494, during his long-term employment at the Aragonese court of Naples. Bandello subsequently based his novella upon Pontano's account as well as those from members of Neapolitan aristocratic circles. Shakespeare probably read Bandello's rendition.⁵

The plot of Bandello's novella goes thus. A Moorish slave, having received an extremely violent and unjustified beating at the hands of his Spanish master, decides to wait patiently for the best moment to get his revenge. His master, Rinieri Ervizzano, realizing how unfair he has been to his long time slave, decides to make amends by freeing him and keeping him as a free servant in his household. The Moor feigns gratitude. He waits for a day when Rinieri goes hunting, leaving his wife and young children in the custody of his trusty servant: the Moor sequesters them inside the master's castle and pulls up the drawbridge. He first rapes the wife under her children's eyes. The eldest son calls for help, and is heard by a messenger. Alerted by this messenger, Rinieri rides back to the castle and begs his former slave to spare the life of his loved ones. From the top of the castle's tower, the Moor promises to do so, if the master cuts off his own nose — a punishment reserved for runaway slaves. Desperate, Rinieri cuts off his own nose. The Moor laughs at him, breaks his promise, stabs the mother, and throws both children and mother from the top of the tower. He then jumps into the sea, killing himself in order to escape punishment at the hands of Rinieri's hunters.

The influence of this novella over Aaron's course of action is unmistakable. That Lavinia's rape (orchestrated by Aaron and often read as a rape by proxy) should take place while the Andronici men are hunting echoes the rape of the master's wife by Bandello's Moor while the master is hunting. Aaron's broken

promise to *Titus* that his two sons will be spared by the emperor if he cuts his own hand echoes the broken promise of Bandello's Moor to spare his master's two boys if he cuts off his own nose. The laughs of Bandello's Moor and of Aaron in the face of such gruesome self-inflicted mutilations are identical. And Aaron's unrepentant death echoes the final contentment of Bandello's Moor as he takes his own life. Most interestingly, *Titus Andronicus* inverts a core motif of Bandello's novella. In the novella, the Moor achieves his vengeance by killing the master's baby boys, so the babies are the instruments of the Moor's vengeance. By contrast, in *Titus Andronicus*, the baby, Aaron's own, is the instrument of the Moor's downfall, as his desperate attempts at saving the life of the only creature he truly loves precipitate his doom.

Shakespeare's play is in conversation with Bandello's novella, a tale set in a Spanish territory and involving a white Spaniard and a black Moor. This tale was used by some early modern writers to think about slavery, a practice often perceived by Europeans as quintessentially Spanish.⁶ So where did the Spanishness of Bandello's story go in Shakespeare's play?

I want to suggest that Spanishness can be read between the lines as Gothicism. Scholars have noted the antiquarian interest that early modern Europeans, both in England and on the continent, took in the Goths as they engaged with late Roman history, often insisting on the nuanced account of Gothic culture in ancient sources.⁷ Early modern theatre-makers and consumers were more familiar with the Goths than we are. To us, the Goths evoke Germanic barbarians, and the 'hyperwhiteness' of the Gothic queen Tamora, to quote Francesca T. Royster, certainly reinforces such impressions. But to early modern people, the Goths also evoked the Christian kingdom of the Visigoths who ruled Hispania until the Moorish invasion in the early eighth century.

As Barbara Fuchs has shown, referencing this early medieval Gothic past was an important part of the early modern Spanish process of 'ideal nation' formation that sought to erase the African roots of Hispanic culture.⁸ This process of fictive national self-fashioning was not limited to the sphere of humanist scholarship and official historiography.⁹ Indeed, a quick look at the representations of Gothic history in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spanish theatre, especially in the dramatic productions of Lope de Vega, evidences the pull of cultural identification with the Goths in Spanish popular culture.¹⁰ Imagining the *reconquista* and the expulsion of *Conversos* and Moriscos as the means to reinstitute the Christian order of the medieval Visigothic kingdom, those plays often conflate Gothic and Castilian identities.¹¹

The self-identification of Spaniards with Gothic ancestors was noted abroad. In his fascinating analysis of *Othello*, Eric Griffin asserts that ‘English polemicists ... were well aware that Spain’s Gothic past provided a related set of historical and genealogical antecedents’.¹² To be convinced, we only need to consider the repeated allusions to the Gothic roots of Spain in the intense anti-Spanish propaganda from the 1580s and 1590s. For instance, in *A Comparison of the English and Spanish Nation* (1589), Robert Ashley writes:

Without speaking of the Romans, who commanded over all Europe, the Goths, the Vandales, the Moores, the Saracens have ruled over Spain. Therefore if of good right the Goths and Vandales are counted cruell, the Moores perfidious and revengefull, the Saracens proud and villainous in their manner of living, I pray you, what humanities, what faith, what courtesie, what modestie and civilitie may we thinke to find amongst this scumme of Barbarians?¹³

Ashley’s perception of Gothic culture as barbaric might have been more reductive than others, but he is fully aware of the Gothic heritage of Spaniards. The presence of this motif in anti-Spanish propaganda starts with the foundational text of the black legend in England: the 1583 English translation of Las Casas’ *The Spanish Colonie*. In the preface, the translator, James Aligrodo, warns the reader:

Thou shalt (frendly Reader) in this discourse beholde so many millions of men put to death, as hardly there haue been so many spaniardes procreated into this worlde since their firste fathers the Gothes inhabited their Countries, either since their second progenitors the Sarazens expelled and murdered the most part of the Gothes.¹⁴

Those pamphlets were widely read in the 1580s, so, for spectators attending a performance of *Titus Andronicus* in the early 1590s, Shakespeare’s Goths probably had an air of Spanishness.¹⁵

The analogical setup is buttressed by the play’s allusions to several recognizable features of the black legend in relation to Gothic characters. The first element of the black legend invoked in *Titus Andronicus* is the association of Spaniards with Africanness and blackness: what Fuchs has pointed out as the repeated pan-European attempts at ‘rendering Spain visibly, biologically black’ by upbraiding ‘Spain’s racial difference, its essential Moorishness’.¹⁶ The play renders this association dramatically through Aaron the Blackamoor, whose presence in the midst of the Goths stops being mysterious from a socio-historical viewpoint when we consider it within the Gothic/Spanish analogical structure of the play. Tamora’s

affair with Aaron evokes what the black legend describes as the allure of miscegenation in Spanish culture (materialized in the Blackamoor baby). But even before spectators learn about Tamora's affair with a black man, her very name construes her as Africanized. Indeed, easily reading as '*esta mora*' — literally, 'that Moorish woman' in Spanish — the Gothic queen's name already overbrims with Moorishness, even if that Moorishness is not physically visible (as was the case for most Moriscos, a great source of anxiety for early modern Spaniards). In other words, Tamora's identity is overdetermined as African, in keeping with the popular perception of Spanish identity in late sixteenth-century England.

The imagery of cannibalism that permeates the play also evokes another feature of the black legend. David B. Goldstein has shown that the anticlimactic speed of the cannibalistic scene of the play (when Titus has Tamora eat the flesh of her own sons) goes against the representations of cannibalism in Greco-Roman culture, which emphasize the act of eating and masticating, and manifests instead the influence of early modern accounts of cannibalism in the new world, which emphasize the acts of killing, roasting, and dismembering. He argues that visions of Indians as savages and noble savages collected from travel writings suffuse the play, and that, within this economy of fantasies, Tamora and the Goths stand alternatively for Spanish *conquistadores* and for Indians in the Spanish Americas (often for both at the same time).¹⁷ Such evocations of cannibalism are reminiscent of the passages in Las Casas' *Spanish Colonie* where Spanish conquistadores are depicted as increasingly involved facilitators of cannibalistic Indian practices. They are also reminiscent of the rhetoric of cannibalism that was wielded against the Catholic conception of Eucharist that Spain championed in late sixteenth-century Europe and the Americas. Unwittingly eating her own sons' flesh, the Gothic queen crystallizes fantasies of cannibalism associated in the period with Spanish Catholicism.

The last feature of the black legend that *Titus Andronicus* invokes is the association of Spanish identity with Judaism and Jewish blood. In the 1590 *Coppie of the Anti-Spaniard*, one of the strongest anti-Spanish pamphlets of the period, the author calls Spaniards 'those *Marranos*, yea, those impious atheists', and calls the Spanish king 'this king of Maiorca, this demi Moore, demi Jew, yea demi Saracine': anti-semitic slurs are woven into the familiar indictment of the African roots of Spanish identity.¹⁸ In *Titus Andronicus*, Jewishness, Moorishness, and blackness are also woven together in the Hebraic name of the Blackamoor, Aaron. 'Shakespeare's experimentation with names' might reflect 'the instability of race and the boundary between civilized and barbaric', to quote Francesca T. Royster, but, in the case of Aaron, it also reflects the instability of race within the Spanish

identity evoked on stage by the Gothic clique: the instability of an identity perceived as an inextricable mixture of Jewishness, Moorishness, and blackness.¹⁹

This perception of Iberian identity as judaized was probably reinforced by the visible presence in London of Portuguese and Spanish *Conversos* (such as Elizabeth I's physician, Roderigo Lopez) who had fled the Inquisition and were often suspected of crypto-Judaism.²⁰ That Aaron should bear the name of a Jew (Moses's brother) who fled a land of persecution (Egypt), and who, for his sins, was denied entrance to the promised land of freedom by God, only strengthens the potential association of this character with the not-so-welcome London *Conversos*. As Gustav Ungerer points out, those *Conversos* were also associated with blackness in public perception because, bringing with them their Iberian lifestyle and cultural mindset, they often had in their households some of the black sub-Saharan slaves that had been so common in Portugal and Andalusia since the middle of the fifteenth century. According to Ungerer, the London *Conversos* community reached its peak precisely at the time of *Titus Andronicus*, 'in the last decades of queen Elizabeth's reign when it numbered between eighty and ninety members'.²¹ In that sense, Aaron's presence among the Goths, with his Hebraic name and his physical blackness, had a topical value and helped evoke on stage the nexus of racialized identities through which early modern England read Iberian identity both abroad and at home.

With the ongoing development of transnational and comparative approaches to early modern English theatre, the presence of Spain in *Titus Andronicus* was bound to get some attention. Going against the grain of traditional readings of Rome as analogical ancestor of England by virtue of the *translatio imperii* that early modern English historiography regularly invoked, Eric Griffin proposes an analogical reading of Rome as a figure of the early modern Spanish empire, the New Rome.²² In that configuration, Griffin argues, *Titus Andronicus* dramatizes how 'the identity of Spain becomes culturally coded in terms of miscegenated, mixed, or "mongrel" identity', and how 'these miscegenation fears were in turn injected into early modern English society by focusing a dichotomizing "it can happen here" formula on England's former political and dynastic ally'.²³ Sharing with Griffin the fundamental idea that *Titus Andronicus* sets forth a dialogue between English and Spanish cultures about empire and race, I consider a different (but not necessarily mutually exclusive) analogical setup that allows for a more contrastive reading of English and Iberian versions of race and slavery in the play.

Indeed, in the analogical setup that I have delineated (Romans/English — Goths/Spaniards), starting with Tamora's statement 'I am incorporate in Rome, / A Roman now adopted happily' (1.1.459–60),²⁴ the play's political investment

lies not solely in examining what happens when the Roman body politic tries to 'incorporate' a group of Goths that includes a Moor, but also in examining what happens when the English body politic tries to 'incorporate' Iberians and their black slaves, either literally or symbolically: literally in the case of Iberian immigrants in London, and symbolically to the extent that smuggling black slaves into England (a practice on the rise) meant adopting *de facto* Iberian social practices that English culture rejected *de jure*, and, in that sense, turning Spanish.²⁵ Within this setup, the reaction of some Roman characters to the Gothic conception of race and slavery in *Titus Andronicus* offers a space for examining England's conception of race and slavery. Indeed, some Roman characters' rejection of Gothic practices registers a larger cultural attempt at thinking through the questions of race, of slavery, and, more generally, of the black presence in early modern England on English terms — outside of the Iberian framework with which it has been associated for so long.

An Intellectual Separation

Black Africans and Afro-descendants constituted 0.5% of the 1590s London population, and while most owed their presence to Anglo-Iberian commercial and diplomatic exchanges and rivalries (including the presence of Iberian slave-owners in England, and the participation of individual English merchants in the Mediterranean slave trade), by the turn of the century, the country had a small yet highly visible Afro-British population.²⁶ That population started to generate anxieties, especially following the influx of black slaves after the signature of the Guinea charter in 1588. Indeed, this increase worsened existent tensions about the distribution of material resources, which translated into a spectacular rise of English xenophobia and anti-African sentiment in London.²⁷ There is a scholarly consensus that *Titus Andronicus* addresses those topical anxieties and taps into rampant anti-African sentiments, but I want to suggest that Shakespeare's play also registers attempts at thinking through the African presence as an English issue to be addressed in English terms. Those attempts are particularly palpable in the play's engagement with and self-distancing from the well-entrenched practice of Iberian slavery.

When Aaron is first introduced on stage, his costume, which distinguishes him from other members of the Gothic court, leads the audience to see him as a slave:

Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts,
 I will be bright and shine in pearl and gold,
 To wait upon this new made Empress.
 To wait said I? To wanton with this Queen. (2.1.18–21)

Aaron cannot stand the mere idea of ‘waiting upon’ someone in any sense of the word at this point: the slave rejects his own servitude. Ancient slavery comes to overlap with the early modern Iberian slavery culture a little later, when Bassanius, discovering Tamora and Aaron together in a secluded part of the forest, insults both of them:

Believe me, Queen, your swart Cimmerian,
 Doth make your honour of his body’s hue,
 Spotted, detested, and abominable.
 Why are you sequestered from all your train,
 Dismounted from your snow-white goodly steed,
 And wandered hither to an obscure plot,
 Accompanied but with a barbarous Moor,
 If foul desire had not conducted you? (2.3.66–73)

Calling Aaron a ‘swart Cimmerian’, Bassanius evidences a familiarity with Iberian slavery culture and the Iberian imperial context, for *cimarrones* were runaway African slaves in the early modern Spanish Americas. Most modern editors usually explain the term with a short footnote stating that Cimmerians were a ‘legendary people upon whom the sun never shone’²⁸ from the confines of Europe (north of Caucasus and the Black Sea, according to Herodotus). Their rationale is that the land of Cimmerians was very dark, which makes it a fitting setting for the Moor: in that sense, Bassanius would associate the darkness of the nook where Tamora and Aaron are surprised with the darkness of the Cimmerians’ land, and the blackness of Aaron’s skin. Samuel Johnson first articulated this rationale, which seems to have come down to us unquestioned since: ‘the Moor is called “Cimmerian” from the affinity of blackness to darkness’.²⁹ This explanation is unsatisfactory, however, for it blatantly contradicts climate theory, which was still the dominant mode of accounting for black skin in the 1590s: according to climate theory, a Blackamoor could only come from a region scorched by the sun. ‘Cymerion’ is the original spelling used both in the quartos and in the first folio: I read it as a phonetic distortion of the Spanish word ‘*cimarrón*’ — a word that entered English literary culture under the influence of Sir Francis Drake, who first encountered black *cimarrones* in Panama in the 1570s. We can find the word

cimarrón distorted into 'Cimaroons' in *Sir Francis Drake Revived* (1626) — which Drake himself is supposed to have corrected before his own death in 1596.³⁰

Calling Aaron a *cimarrón*, Bassanius is associating him with runaway black slaves in the Spanish Americas. From an early modern English viewpoint opposed *de jure* to the institution of slavery, the most direct manifestation of Spanish 'tyrannical' aspirations according to the black legend, the *cimarrón* was not necessarily a negative figure. Some fifty years later, in *The History of Sir Francis Drake*, Sir William Davenant would imagine a strategic alliance between *cimarrones* and Englishmen united in their hatred of Spaniards. But in the context of this scene, Bassanius is using the term *cimarrón* to bring Aaron back to the original slave status from which he has been trying to distance himself, as an insult. Moreover, *cimarrones* typically recovered their freedom by running away to the mountains or to the forests: thus, by using this term when he encounters Aaron and Tamora in a wild secluded part of the forest, Bassanius implies that this space of the forest is a space of lawlessness, where the fundamental rules of the Roman social order can be violated. The play proves him right. In this scene, we see Bassanius (associated with Englishness within the analogical setup under consideration here) wielding a category proper to Spanish imperial slavery culture for his own ideological purposes.

Another Roman character, Lucius Andronicus, engages with Iberian slavery culture in the scene when he meets the Blackamoor child:

LUCIUS Oh worthy Goth this is the incarnate Devil,
 That robbed Andronicus of his good hand,
 This is the pearl that pleased your Empress eye,
 And here's the base fruit of her burning lust,
 Say wall-eyed slave whither wouldst thou convey,
 This growing image of thy fiendlike face,
 Why dost not speak? What deaf, not a word?
 A halter, soldiers! Hang him on this tree,
 And by his side his fruit of bastardy.

AARON Touch not the boy, he is of royal blood.

LUCIUS Too like the sire for ever being good,
 First hang the child that he may see it sprawl,
 A sight to vex the father's soul withal.
 Get me a ladder.

(5.1.40–52)

Looking at the mixed child, all Lucius can see is resemblance to the black father ('this growing image of thy fiendlike face'), a resemblance primarily located in

skin tone, since references to diabolism on stage in relation to African characters usually hinge on an imagined commonality of blackness between Africans and devils. This reading of the child as black like his father echoes non-fictional discourse, such as George Best's often quoted reaction in front of a mixed race child in 1578: 'I my selfe haue séene an *Ethiopian* as blacke as a cole broughte into *Englande*, who taking a faire Englishe woman to Wife, begatte a Sonne in all respectes as blacke as the Father was, although *England* were his natiue Countrey, & an English woman his Mother'.³¹ Such typically English reactions contrast sharply with the Iberian mindset. For a characteristic feature of Iberian racial culture at the end of the sixteenth century was the development of an episteme fit to incorporate and make legible the ongoing hybridization of the imperial population. This episteme developed through a rich taxonomizing racial lexicon and a comprehensive and nuanced human chromatic palette: the importance of those epistemological developments in Spanish popular culture transpires in the creation of a *mulata* maid stock character visually distinct from stock *negro* characters in Lope de Vega's plays at the turn of the century.³² In other words, by reading the mixed child as identical to his black father, Lucius is looking at the child with early modern English eyes.

Interestingly, he is not the only character to do so, for his reaction merely echoes the nurse's description of the child as 'a joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue' (4.2.66), and Aaron's own description of the child as 'this myself, / The figure and the picture of my youth' (5.2.106–7). Those reactions are surprising, coming from characters, whom, within the analogical setup under consideration here, one would expect to show a more Iberian cultural mindset. We can account for those reactions by considering the fact that the nurse might very well be a Roman (when she references 'the fair-faced breeders of our clime', at 4.2.1.68, it is unclear whether she is referring to the clime of Rome or of Gothic lands). Similarly, Aaron might see his own image in his child for affective reasons, and because he is, at that moment, engaging in a defense of blackness per se (this hypothesis is strengthened by the greater sensitivity to racial nuances and hybridity that Aaron manifests when he calls his son a 'tawny slave, half me and half thy dam' at 5.1.1.28). But we also have to reckon with the possibility that the Roman/English perception of race might be taking over the stage at that moment, that the analogical setup might be giving way to the strength of English racial imagination, at a moment when the audience probably could not see but only imagine the complexion of the dummy child.

Lucius displays an English sensibility not solely in his imaginative perception of the child's racial identity, but also in his perception of the child's legal

status. Lucius calls Aaron a slave twice: 'Say, wall-eyed slave' (5.1.1.44), and 'Away, inhuman dog, unhallowed slave!' (5.3.1.14). His perception of Aaron's status is unmistakable, and close to that of Bassanius. When, in the scene quoted above, Lucius discovers the mixed baby and reads him as a miniature of his father, he subjects the baby to the same forms of social exclusion as his father and orders a summary execution, ordering for them to be hanged side by side. He disregards the rights of a male child who was born a free citizen according to Roman law. Indeed, according to the Roman law famously captured in the maxim '*partus sequitur ventrem*', children were to inherit their mother's status, regardless of their father's condition. That law still ruled early modern Iberian slavery culture. It is not surprising, then that Aaron should be aware of this disposition of Roman and Spanish law, and that he should invoke it by protesting: 'Touch not the boy, he is of royal blood' (5.1.1.49).³³ This disposition, however, ran contrary to early modern English law (until the latter changed and aligned itself on the Roman model in the British colonies, starting with Virginia, in 1662). Thus, by determining the boy's social status based on his father's status and complexion, Lucius is not thinking like a Roman or an Iberian, but like an early seventeenth-century Englishman. By rejecting Aaron's legally valid protestation solely based on what he perceives as the racial similarity between father and child, Lucius is separating himself from ancient and foreign modes of thinking about race and slavery.

This intellectual separation is not formalized as such: it is violent, vengeful, opportunistic, and chaotic — Lucius is after all, marching on Rome with a Gothic army in a context akin to civil war that makes it hard to distinguish between Romans, Englishmen, Goths, and Spaniards any longer. Rome and anti-Rome, the lawless space of the forest, are merging. And yet, within that confusion, something is emerging. Lucius's treatment of Aaron and his baby is largely circumstantial, a response to the havoc that Aaron has brought upon Lucius's family, and in that sense, this gesture does not result from a definitive political and ideological agenda.³⁴ Yet there is little doubt that, once order is restored, the emergent values asserted by Lucius in this chaotic scene, such as the willingness to disenfranchise some Roman citizens based on the color of their skin, will inform his rule as new Roman emperor. We catch a glimpse of this new Roman social order at the end of the play, and in that glimpse, the play presents one possible version of what a thoroughly early modern English take on race and slavery might look like.

Afro-Britons and the Body Politic

What Lucius sees in the mixed race baby is a menace to the established order of the Roman society, threatening, most exemplarily, to interrupt the rightful royal lineage. Indeed, Aaron's baby is a double threat to the Roman political system, first because he is the fruit of adultery on the part of the empress, second, because Aaron's plan to save his son's life consists in putting a Moorish impostor on the throne:

Not far, one Muliteus, my countryman
 His wife but yesternight was brought to bed.
 His child is like to her, fair as you are.
 Go pack with him, and give the mother gold,
 And tell them both the circumstance of all,
 And by this their child shall be advanced
 And be received for the emperor's heir,
 And be substituted in the place of mine,
 To calm this tempest whirling in the court;
 And let the emperor dandle him for his own. (5.2.151–60)

Aaron could have used the child of any poor white Roman for that matter. Instead, his plan to use a white Moorish Roman child is designed in ways that point first to an imagined solidarity among Moorish Romans trumping their political allegiance to Rome, and second, to a Moorish desire to take over Rome, to take over the country. Those fantasies are characteristic of xenophobic imagination across the ages, and the early modern London reflected in this play was not exempt from them.

Nonetheless, a couple of dramaturgic moves in the play reveal some degree of resistance to the idea that Rome — and, by extension, London — could be rid of their Blackamoors. First, Aaron's mixed race baby is not hanged: Aaron negotiates to save his life, and, after Lucius has promised that 'Thy child shall live, and I will see it nourished' (5.1.60), spectators lose trace of the baby. We can only imagine that he gets to grow up in Rome in some servile employment — he grows up in the shadows, but he does not disappear from the city.

Second, the dynamics of compassion in the playhouse during the scene of Aaron's execution create a moment of collective disavowal of Lucius's racist agenda.

Set him breast-deep in earth and famish him,
 There, let him stand, and rave, and cry for food.

If anyone relieves or pities him,
 For the offence, he dies. This is our doom.
 Some stay to see him fastened in the earth. (5.3.178–82)

The very fact that Lucius should need to forbid Roman and English spectators alike from taking pity on Aaron is an indicator that the risk was real: some of the spectators (most probably, those who were sympathetic to Aaron as a father) could take pity on him, and could reject Lucius's resolution of the play. At this moment, a significant part of the audience must have dissociated themselves from the problematically authoritative voice of Lucius. This final scene scripts a potential disavowal of Lucius's attempt at ridding Rome of the synecdochic Moor on the audience's part.

Indeed, Lucius is a morally problematic character from the beginning of the play: his moral authority stands on shaky grounds, and by extension, so does the model of Roman order that he champions. He appears, throughout the play, as Titus's good son, the embodiment of old Roman virtue, who 'loves his pledges dearer than his life' (3.1.290). This figure of authority systematically commits deeds that make the audience withdraw their sympathy from him, however. Indeed, his first appearance on stage portrays him as an executioner, and, worst, a performer of human sacrifices, as he is the main supporter of his father's decision to sacrifice Tamora's son and to ignore her prayers: 'Away with him, and make a fire straight, / And with our swords upon a pile of wood / let's hew his limbs till they be clean consumed' (1.1.126–9). The barbarity of the human sacrifice that he performs stains Lucius from the opening of the play. Moreover, he seems to enjoy the taste of blood — or at least, its smell: 'Alarbus' limbs are lopped / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire, / Whose smoke like incense does perfume the sky' (142–5). There is little doubt that the scene when Lucius sets up to lynch a defenseless baby constituted a moment of intense pathos in the theatre. Finally, when Lucius orders for Tamora's body to be thrown outside of the city and left without sepulture, he commits an act of impiety, as we know from his own earlier reaction to Titus's refusal to let Mutius be buried properly. A pitiless, blood-thirsty, impious child killer. In other words, the rich sadistic imagination betrayed in the execution plan designed by Lucius for Aaron is the culmination of series of acts that, within the analogical setup of the play, probably had spectators distance themselves in part from this Roman character, his values, and worldview.

The execution plan designed by Lucius to punish Aaron also casts some doubt metaphorically over the possibility of uprooting Africans from Rome or early modern London. Indeed, in Lucius's imaginative mind, it is the Roman soil itself

that will kill Aaron by denying him sustenance and ignoring his bodily needs. Lucius goes for strong symbols, and yet, this ambivalent image can also read in the opposite way, as Aaron ironically taking root in the Roman soil. Indeed, this final image of Aaron rooted in the Roman soil merits some consideration: it is one of the core motifs from the Bandello source text that Shakespeare reworks. In Bandello's novella, the Moor, after having raped Rinieri's wife, forced him to mutilate himself, and killed his children, commits suicide by leaping from the highest tower of Rinieri's castle into the Mediterranean sea in order to deprive Riniari of any potential vengeance. A hyper-visible Aaron buried neck-deep into the ground is, in terms of verticality, the symmetrical opposite of the Moor disappearing from the audience's sight from the castle's highest tower, and this attempt at quite literally bringing the Moor down is both meaningful and ambiguous.

Indeed, the image of Aaron as planted in the soil like a tree resonates with the tree imagery that crops up throughout the play in relation to Aaron. To precipitate the fall of Titus Andronicus's sons, Aaron buries gold beneath 'the elder-tree / Which overshades the mouth of that same pit / Where we decreed to bury Bassianus' (2.3.271–3). This fateful tree is essential to Aaron's 'obscure plot', and it initiates a running association of trees with death and human corpses throughout the play. Bassianus's corpse becomes a tree when Chiron orders 'make his dead *trunk* pillow to our lust' (2.3.130, emphasis mine); so does Titus's body when Lucius and Marcus go 'fetch *an axe*' to cut his hand (3.1.184, emphasis mine). When Aaron describes Lavinia's bodily mutilations as a form of '*trimming*', to Lucius's consternation (5.1.93–4, emphasis mine), he merely echoes Marcus's previous question to his niece: 'what stern ungentle hands / hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare/ of *her two branches* ...?' (2.4.16–18, emphasis mine). Aaron generally treats corpses as trees, since as he narrates:

Oft have I digg'd up dead men from their graves,
 And set them upright at their dear friends' doors,
 Even when their sorrows almost were forgot;
And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
 Have with my knife carved in Roman letters,
 'Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead'. (5.1.135–40, emphasis mine)

The fateful association of trees with corpses could continue when Lucius threatens to have the Blackamoor baby hanged on a tree. When a 'distraught' Titus declares to his brother 'we *are but shrubs, no cedars we, / No big-boned men framed of the Cyclops' size*' (4.3. 46–7, emphasis mine), he uses the same tree imagery to convey the frailty of the human condition. Throughout the play, the image of a human

body turning into a tree signifies the process of a human body turning (or well on its way to turning) into a corpse.

Aaron's final planting into the Roman soil is the culmination of this metaphorical net, but it reinjects some life into this imagery of death, by evoking the image of a tree that is not cut, chopped, axed, or engraved upon, but alive, firmly planted, with sap running from root to branches.³⁵ 'Fastened into the earth', Aaron is not expelled from Rome (as opposed to Tamora's corpse). Rather, he is forced to stay, even against his wish, and the part of his body buried in the ground turns into roots that, feeding on the richness of the English-Roman soil, are bound to grow and propagate his seeds. If the three edicts that Elizabeth I promulgated between 1596 and 1601 to deport 'Negars and Blackamoors' from England were met with resistance by English subjects, as Emily C. Bartels has shown, most of the time for purely selfish economic reasons, the fates of Aaron and his son in *Titus Andronicus* already suggested, in 1594, that, for all the xenophobia and anti-black sentiment in early modern London, black Africans could not be excised from the social fabric of English society so easily, for they had already taken roots in the English soil.³⁶

Conclusion

I have argued that recuperating the long-neglected Spanish dimension of *Titus Andronicus* — palpable in the play's genealogy and its numerous allusions to the black legend in relation to Gothic characters — can cast a new light on the racial discourse of the play. More specifically, it brings to light the play's interest in thinking through the urgent question of the black presence in England on English terms, separating itself from the historical, epistemological, and legal Iberian frameworks through which blackness and slavery had been apprehended for so long. The result of this attempt is tentative and highly ambivalent, for the character whose racial literacy is probably closest to Shakespeare's spectators, Lucius Andronicus, ends up implementing harsh policies from which spectators must have distanced themselves, and whose efficiency is dubious anyway.

Aaron's threatening posture in the ink and pen drawing signed by Henry Peacham in the 1595(?) Longleat manuscript (Fig. 1) has confused generations of Shakespearean scholars, who have struggled to reconcile Aaron's menacing brandishing of a sword with the lines from the play quoted below the illustration. Indeed, those lines reference the initial scene of Roman triumph when Goths are paraded as prisoners and Tamora begs for her son's life, a situation in which Aaron is unlikely to have held such a powerful and threatening posture. Several

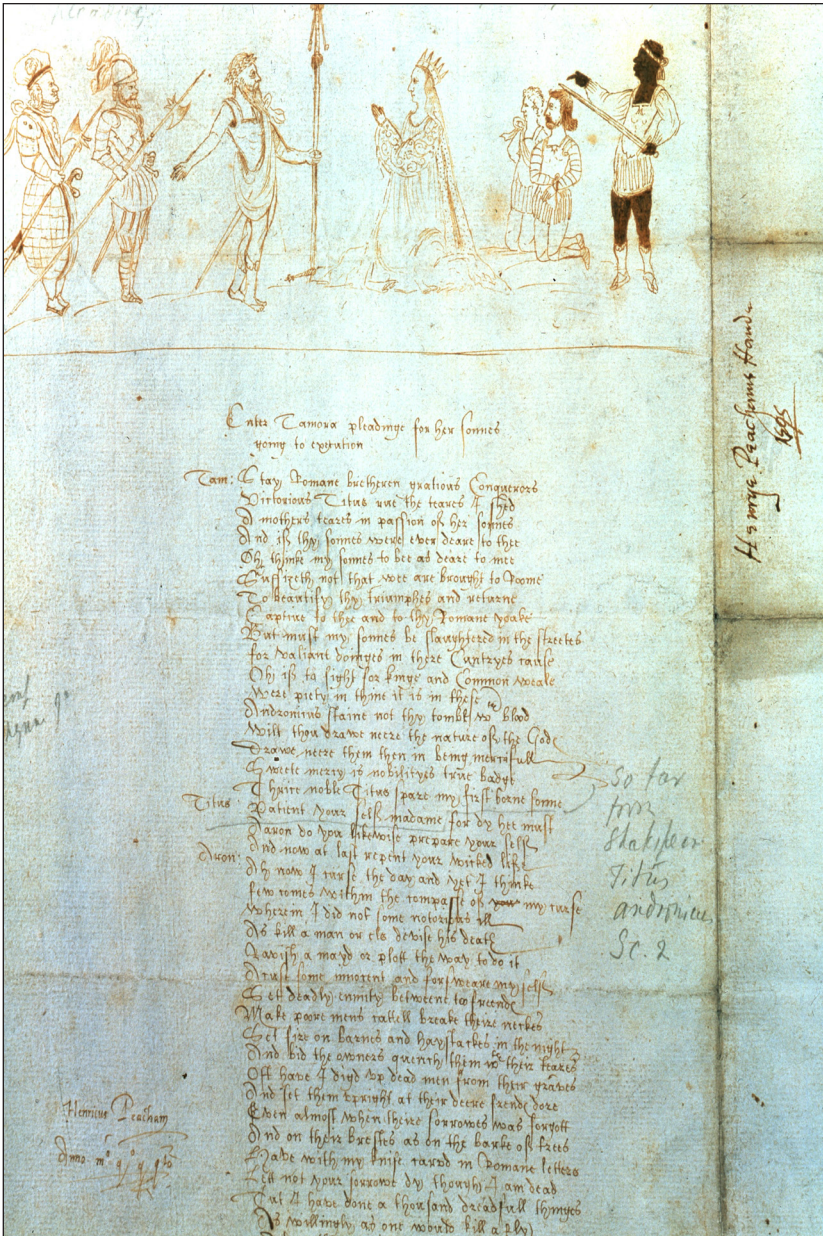


Fig.1 The Peacham Drawing, Longleat Manuscript (1595?). Reproduced by permission of the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Warminster, Wiltshire, Great Britain.

hypotheses have been formulated over time to account for this discrepancy; in light of the ideas discussed in this article, I propose to add a new hypothesis to the list.³⁷ Our confusion comes from the ambiguity of Aaron's allegiance and belonging: does he belong to the Gothic clique, as we know from the play-text, or does he obey the Romans, as the drawing suggests? Maybe this ambiguity accurately renders the ambiguity of Afro-Britons' positioning in 1595 English perceptions. Maybe English spectators themselves struggled to decide whether Africans and Afro-descendants living in England were closer to Spaniards/Goths or to Englishmen/Romans. Maybe this drawing registers the play's incipient attempt at thinking through the question of the black presence in conversation with but not through the lens of Iberian culture.

Notes

- 1 Emily Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia, 2008), 82, <http://dx.doi.org/10.9783/9780812200294>.
- 2 Here I am borrowing the phrase used by Anthony G. Barthelemy about the Moorish maid Zanche in John Webster's *The White Devil*: she 'makes visible the blackness that is only figuratively present' in her depraved white Italian masters. Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 127. The idea that Aaron is structurally associated with the Goths, an extension of the Goths whose barbarity is not as immediately visible as Aaron's, has been widely shared by scholars considering issues of race in the play. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 67, recapitulates the conversation on the subject citing, among others, Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (New York, 2002) and Francis Barker, 'Treasures of Culture: *Titus Andronicus* and Death by Hanging', David Lee Miller, Sharon O'Dair, and Harold Weber (eds), *The Production of English Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca, 1994), 226–61. Challenging this status quo has prompted some of the most interesting recent work on *Titus Andronicus*. For instance, Bartels herself in *Speaking of the Moor*, sets out to prove that Aaron is not out of place in Rome, while Francesca T. Royster, in 'White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.4 (2000), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2902338>, argues that the Goths' extreme whiteness itself might have been immediately visible.
- 3 Pedro J. Duque, *Shakespeare en España: Presencia de España y de lo español en Shakespeare y su obra* (León, 1991), 169.

- 4 The official seventeenth-century chroniclers report the anecdote thus: 'They (Moorish slaves) enjoy more freedom (than Christian slaves in Algiers), they are very haughty, and sometimes, punishment makes them despair, like that other Moor who, afraid of being beaten, locked himself up in a tower with the children of his master, and, who having thrown the children down at their father's feet, jumped down after them'. Dameto Juan, Vicente Mut, Gerónimo Alemany, Miguel Moragues, Joaquín María Bover, *Historia general del reino de Mallorca, segunda edición*, 4 vols (Palma, 1841), 3.595.
- 5 Matteo Bandello, *La terza parte de le novelle del Bandello* (Lucca, 1554). Bandello acknowledges in the dedicatory letter that he has read Pontanus's rendition of the story, but he claims to have followed more closely the version of the story that Sir Leone da Iseo told him in person. We know nothing about Leone da Iseo, but the way Bandello talks about him in this dedicatory letter addressed to 'the Lord Vincenzo Coscia, a noble Neapolitan' suggests that Da Iseo was a common acquaintance in Neapolitan aristocratic social circles.
- 6 For instance, when François de Belleforest translated Bandello's story a few years after its original publication, he added the following comment: '*Bienheureux pour vray le pais de France où la liberté est seule est recogneue et où les esclaves sont remis en leur pleine delivrance*' [The kingdom of France is blessed where we only recognize freedom, and where slaves are freed]. François Belleforest, *Second tome des histoires tragiques, extraites de l'italien de Bandel* (Paris, 1566), 319.
- 7 On the antiquarian interest in Gothic culture, see Samuel Kliger, *The Goths in England, a Study in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge MA, 1952), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674337190>, and Ronald Broude, 'Roman and Goth in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Studies* 6 (1970), 27–34. Broude shows that seventeenth-century English historiography was lax enough for some to think of the Goths as ancestors to the English.
- 8 Barbara Fuchs, *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity* (Urbana, 2003), 1–20.
- 9 On official early modern Spanish historiography, see Richard Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore, 2009).
- 10 Besides *El postrer godo de España* (1617), which most famously dramatizes the fall of the Visigoth kingdom at the hands of the Moors, Lope de Vega also represented the Goths in *El rey Bamba* (1604), *Los prados de León* (1621), and *El divino africano* (1623). Calderón also staged Gothic history in *El origen, pérdida, y restauración de la Virgen del Sagrario* (1637).
- 11 For instance, Veronika Ryjik notes that in *El ultimo godo* (1647), Lope de Vega has some characters anachronistically call a Gothic lord 'castellano' (Castilian). Veronika

- Ryjik, 'Las dos Españas de Lope de Vega y la reelaboración del mito fundacional en *El Ultimo godo*', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 29.1 (Otoño 2004), 213–30.
- 12 Eric Griffin argues that the character of Roderigo, given the resonance of his Spanish name, was bound to evoke simultaneously Roderick, the last Visigothic king whose lust and weakness occasioned the downfall of Visigothic Hispania, and the national medieval hero, Rodrigo, or El Cid, the Moor killer. Eric Griffin, *Renaissance Drama and the Spanish Specter: Ethnopoetics and Empire* (Philadelphia, 2009), 168–206, here 188, <http://dx.doi.org/10.9783/9780812202106>.
 - 13 Robert Ashley, *A Comparison of the English and Spanish Nation* (London, 1589), 19.
 - 14 *The Spanish colonie, or Briefe chronicle of the acts and gestes of the Spaniardes in the West Indies, called the newe world, for the space of xl. yeeres: written in the Castilian tongue by the reuerend Bishop Bartholomew de las Casas or Casaus, a friar of the order of S. Dominicke. And nowe first translated into english, by M.M.S.* (London, 1583), 1.
 - 15 A play such as William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (written 1618–20), staging the fall of the medieval Visigothic kingdom at the hands of the Moors, suggests that the association between Gothicism and Spanishness in English popular culture endured more than thirty years after *Titus Andronicus*.
 - 16 Barbara Fuchs, 'The Spanish Race', Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (eds), *Re-Reading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, (Oxford, 2008), 88–99, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226307244.001.0001>. For Fuchs, the black legend conflates what Europeans perceived as the immorality of the Spaniards' relation to Others in the new world with what they perceived as the physiological blackness of Spaniards (94–5).
 - 17 David B. Goldstein, 'The Cook and the Cannibal: *Titus Andronicus* and the New World', *Shakespeare Studies* 37 (2009), 99–133. Note that the reading of cannibalism in the play as related to the Spanish Americas is not the only possible interpretation of this motif; for instance, Louise Noble reads it as related instead to the early modern practice of medical cannibalism in England, 'mummy'. "'And Make Two Pasties of Your Shameful Heads": Medicinal Cannibalism and Healing the Body Politic in *Titus Andronicus*', *ELH* 70.3 (Fall 2003), 677–708, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2003.0029>.
 - 18 Anthony Munday, *The Coppie of the Anti-Spaniard* (London, 1590), 9.
 - 19 Royster, 'White-Limed Walls', 442.
 - 20 On Roderigo Lopez and the Portuguese Marrano community in London at the turn of the century, see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York, 1996) 70–6. See also Edmund Valentine Campos, 'Jews, Spaniards and Portingales, Ambiguous Identities of Portuguese Marranos in Elizabethan England', *ELH* 69.3 (Fall 2002),

- 599–616, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2002.0023>, and Alan Stewart, ‘The Birth of a National Biography: The Lives of Roderigo Lopez, Solomon Lazarus Levi, and Sidney Lee’, *Entertext* 3.1 (2003), 183–203.
- 21 Gustav Ungerer, ‘The Presence of Africans in Elizabethan England and the Performance of *Titus Andronicus* at Burley-on-the-Hill, 1595/96’, *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 21 (2008), 20–55, here 32.
- 22 On the English identification with ancient Rome, especially once James I assumed power, see Thomas James Dandeleit, *The Renaissance of Empire in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 2014), 248–81, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139045704.006>, Anthony Miller, *Roman Triumphs and Early Modern English Culture* (New York, 2001), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230628557>, and Freyja Cox Jensen, *Reading the Roman Republic in Early Modern England* (Boston, 2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004233034>.
- 23 Eric Griffin, ‘Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the Strangers’ Crisis of the early 1590’s’, Ruben Espinosa and David Ruiter (eds), *Shakespeare and Immigration*, (Burlington, 2014), 13–36, here 28.
- 24 All quotations from *Titus Andronicus* are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, second edition, eds Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York, 2008), cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.
- 25 On those larger cultural anxieties and the fear of turning into a nation foreign unto itself, see Daniel J. Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York, 2003), 3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-05292-6>.
- 26 Ungerer, ‘Presence of Africans’, 20. On the demographic dynamics and social positioning of Afro-Britons, see Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Burlington, 2008).
- 27 On the social context of crisis that led Tudor Africans, despite their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, to be perceived as competitors for resources in times of economic duress, see Habib, *Black Lives*, 118. Emily C. Bartels argues that, in the last of the three decrees promulgated by Elizabeth to expel ‘Negroes and Blackamoors’ from the kingdom, ‘the Queen’s explicitly “racist” language suggests that England’s subjects had grown more inclined ideologically towards discrimination against “blacks” as a subject group’. See her ‘Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 46.2 (2006), 305–22, here 319, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.2006.0012>. Habib, *Black Lives*, understands those decrees as the logical outcome of the hostility towards Tudor Africans.
- 28 *Norton Shakespeare*, 425.

- 29 Samuel Johnson, 'Titus Andronicus', in *The Yale Digital Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (2014), 747, http://www.yalejohnson.com/frontend/sda_viewer?n=108511.
- 30 'Cimaroons' are defined as 'a black people which about eighty years past fled from the Spaniards their masters, by reason of their cruelty, and are since grown to a nation, under two kings of their own. The one inhabiteth to the west, the other to the east of the way from Nombre de Dios'. Philip Nichols, *Sir Francis Drake Revived* (London, 1626), 5. The word was later spelled 'Symerons' by Davenant in *The History of Sir Francis Drake* (London, 1659).
- 31 George Best, *A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northvveast, vnder the conduct of Martin Frobisher Generall deuided into three books* (n.p., 1578), 29.
- 32 The development of a taxonomizing racial lexicon is observable in Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios reales de los Incas* (1609), and in the dictionaries compiled by Antonio de Nebrija and Sebastián de Covarrubias. The development of a rich human chromatic lexicon is particularly visible in Alonso de Sandoval's *De Instauranda aethiopiū salute* (Seville, 1627), 10, as well as in contemporary Spanish paintings, such as *La mulata* by Diego Velázquez (ca 1618–20).
- 33 Aaron shows that he is aware of this law when he defends his son against the attacks of Chiron and Demetrius: 'Look how the black slave smiles upon the father, / As who should say, old Lad I am thine own. / Nay he is your brother by the surer side, / Of that self blood that first gave life to you, / And from your womb where you imprisoned were, / He is enfranchised, and come to light: / Although my seal be stamped in his face' (4.2.115–26). In this passage, when the baby looks at his father, he is referred to as a 'black slave', but when the baby is described as coming out of his ultra-white mother's womb, Aaron puns in order to refer to the baby as 'enfranchised', using legal vocabulary. Aaron implies that Tamora's womb has the power to free her son twice.
- 34 On the circumstantiality of the measures taken by Lucius against Aaron and his son, see Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*: 'Ultimately, we cannot know how the Goths or the Romans would react to the 'black' baby if it were not a sign of the Gothic queen's adultery' (98–9).
- 35 In a fascinating article, 'Botanical Shakespeare: the Racial Logic of Plant Life in *Titus Andronicus*', *South Central Review* 26.1/2 (2009), 82–102, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/scr.0.0043>, Jean Feerick reads the botanical imagery pervasive in *Titus Andronicus* in the light of race understood as bloodline and, using the analogy of the family tree, argues that 'dramatic literature attempts to make use of the botanical discourse to resolve key conceptual issues about human difference' (83). Feerick also reads the final torture of Aaron as an act of planting: she sees Aaron's body as a 'blighted

tree — a tree denied growth, ascendancy, and fruit' (99) that shall however 'rise again' through another 'branch', which is the 'sapling' Blackamoor baby. I entirely agree with Feerick's reading of this image, but I seek to explore its resonance in the particular social context of 1590s London.

36 Bartels, 'Too Many Blackamoors', 319.

37 For a recapitulation of those hypotheses, see June Schlueter, 'Rereading the Peacham Drawing', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50.2 (1999), 171–84, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2902185>.