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Unmasking the Mechanics of Brutality in *Titus Andronicus*: A Žižekian and Girardian Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* through the dual lenses of Slavoj Žižek's theory of violence and René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism. It argues that the play offers more than a conventional revenge tragedy; it explores how violence is ritualized, normalized, and concealed through ideology. Žižek's tripartite model of violence (subjective, systemic, symbolic) helps explain how Roman rituals, imperial power, and patriarchal norms transform cruelty into civic virtue. Girard's notion of sacrificial violence and mimetic rivalry complements this framework by showing that efforts to restore social order through scapegoating often fail and instead escalate conflict. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Shakespeare's play critiques the ideological and mimetic structures that sustain violence, using Žižekian and Girardian frameworks to uncover how *Titus Andronicus* exposes the political and psychological mechanisms that render such brutality both necessary and invisible within systems of power. By analyzing key moments such as Alarbus's ritual death, Lavinia's mutilation, and Titus's grotesque revenge, the article demonstrates how violence is not a disruption of order but a structural force that upholds it. Through this lens, Shakespeare interrogates the cultural and psychological forces that make violence appear acceptable and even virtuous. The article contends that *Titus Andronicus* offers no clear moral resolution. Instead, it challenges readers to reflect on how violence is not only normalized but also rendered invisible and ideologically justified, prompting a critical reconsideration of how such mechanisms function within their own social and political realities.

Keywords: Mimetic desire, René Girard, scapegoat, Slavoj Žižek, symbolic violence, systemic violence, Titus Andronicus

Introduction

In early modern tragedy, violence is not merely spectacle but a language through which power and ideology express themselves. From ancient epics to modern dystopian fiction, writers have used violent scenes to expose underlying tensions, contradictions, and anxieties within societies, institutions, and cultural identities. Composed during the early 1590s, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* follows this tradition. Its graphic scenes are not only meant to shock or entertain the audience. Rather, these scenes are closely linked to the ideological and cultural structures of its time and show how public rituals, and cultural traditions can be used to justify and legitimize violence.

Titus Andronicus was written during a time of great unease in Elizabethan England. (Hadfield, 2005, p. 107). This unrest came from religious conflicts after the English Reformation, fears over who would succeed the throne, and England's growing desire to become a powerful empire. Shakespeare mixes these tensions into the play's themes of ritual, revenge, and the fall of moral and social order. Drawing on Roman history, the bloody conventions of Senecan tragedy, and Ovid's myths, Shakespeare crafts a dark tale of vengeance and societal breakdown.

While Shakespeare may not have intended to explore violence through a theoretical lens, the play's structure and content invite such analysis. However, the play's focus on public rituals, brutal spectacle, and institutional fragility invites that kind of reading. Early modern theatre often functioned as a critical lens on society, and *Titus Andronicus* exemplifies this tendency. By setting the play in Rome, Shakespeare creates the symbolic distance necessary to critique patriarchal violence and the instability of legal authority in his own society. (Bloom, 2004, pp. 211-12) What makes *Titus Andronicus* unique among early modern tragedies is how it combines graphic violence with a sustained critique of imperial, racial, and patriarchal structures.

This article examines the play through the theoretical perspectives of Slavoj Žižek and René Girard, with a primary focus on Slavoj Žižek's tripartite theory of violence. His categories, subjective (direct physical acts), systemic (structural violence embedded in social and political systems), and symbolic (violence within language, ideology, and representation), help reveal how ideology shapes and excuses acts of violence. The article also draws on René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism to explore the cycles of revenge running throughout the play. Rather than applying these frameworks separately, the article combines them to show how Shakespeare dramatizes the breakdown of both ideological fantasy and sacrificial order. Ultimately, this reading demonstrates that violence in *Titus Andronicus* plays a central role in exposing and preserving social order.

Rather than reducing Titus Andronicus to a simple allegory of violence, this study seeks to reveal how the play's acts of brutality are shaped by ideology and normalized by cultural tradition. Its main goal is to uncover the deeper political, ritualistic, and symbolic structures that legitimize, aestheticize, and perpetuate violence, moving beyond readings that focus only on individual flaws or psychological motives.

Žižek's and Girard's Theories of Brutality

To understand how violence operates in *Titus Andronicus* requires a framework that extends beyond a focus on physical brutality. The play demands engagement with the symbolic, ritualistic, and ideological dimensions that give violence its form and force. Thus, this study turns to the intersecting frameworks of Slavoj Žižek and René Girard, who argue that violence is not external to order but fundamental to its function. Their insights reveal how ritual can mask cruelty, while ideology rationalizes it, demonstrating how violence is not only tolerated but reframed as a moral imperative or social necessity.

Slavoj Žižek identifies three interconnected forms of violence: subjective (direct and visible harm), systemic (structural and institutional harm), and symbolic (violence embedded in language, norms, and ideology). Subjective violence refers to clear, physical acts like murder or mutilation, the kinds of brutal scenes found in *Titus Andronicus*. But Žižek insists that these acts are only the surface layer. Much like the tip of an iceberg, subjective violence is only the most visible part of a broader system that remains hidden beneath the surface. These visible acts rest upon an invisible structure that makes them acceptable and renders them natural or inevitable within the ideological framework. Systemic violence operates through political, legal, and economic institutions that sustain social inequality and legitimize domination. Žižek (2008a) explains this by noting that "objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent" (p. 2)[1].

In *Titus Andronicus*, Roman imperialism, honour culture, and patriarchal values all help maintain a system of ongoing violence. This violence often appears in symbolic forms, operating through language and widely accepted cultural practices. Žižek refers to this as symbolic violence, which is a kind of ideological force that decides who can speak, whose suffering is recognised, and what justice means. For instance, Lavinia's mutilation and the male appropriation of her narrative highlight how patriarchal ideology silences victims, reinforcing systemic control.

René Girard argues that violence originates in mimetic desire, the human tendency to imitate the desires of others. This imitation leads to rivalry and eventually social instability (Girard, 2000, p. viii; Newell, 2012, p. 7). In order to control such tensions, societies channel collective aggression onto a single figure, whose removal or sacrifice temporarily restores order and unity (Girard, 2000, p. 78). From this perspective, scapegoating is not random but an organized strategy for managing conflict. Shakespeare dramatizes this logic throughout *Titus Andronicus*. Alarbus, Lavinia, and even Titus himself become sacrificial figures caught in a cycle of mimetic violence. However, instead of resolving conflict, each act of sacrifice intensifies it and pushes society further into chaos. Girard's theory helps explain how violence is framed as a sacred obligation in the face of communal crisis. But the play also exposes the limits of this system; each new scapegoat worsens the conflict. In the end, the mechanism collapses under the weight of its own violence.

[1] Žižek uses the term objective violence to describe invisible forms of structural violence. It serves as an umbrella term that includes both systemic and symbolic forms of violence.

Together, Žižek and Girard offer different but complementary insights into the ideological and ritual dimensions of violence. Žižek shows how violence is built into ideological fantasy, while Girard explains how it spreads through ritual and myth. Both suggest that violence is not something that exists outside civilization, but is embedded in the very structures, linguistic, symbolic, and institutional, that sustain culture. This becomes especially clear in *Titus Andronicus*, where the stage turns into a space where justice yields to cruelty and order dissolves into bloodshed.

A Žižekian and Girardian Reading of Ideology and Sacrifice in *Titus Andronicus*

Titus Andronicus opens with a struggle for the Roman throne between Saturninus and Bassianus, the sons of the late emperor. The lack of a clear successor leaves Rome politically unstable. As Hannah Arendt (1970) notes, "violence appears where power is in jeopardy" (p. 56), and this absence of leadership paves the way for instability. The acts of revenge and betrayal that follow are not random; rather, they emerge from this fragile political structure. The opening scene thus sets the stage for the instability and violence that result when legitimacy is missing.

Amid this political instability, General Titus Andronicus returns from a long war against the Goths. He brings with him prisoners, including Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and her sons. As part of a traditional Roman ritual intended to purify Rome and commemorate its fallen soldiers, Tamora's eldest son, Alarbus, is to be sacrificed. Although Tamora desperately begs for her son's life, Titus refuses, insisting that the ritual must proceed to pay tribute to his own sons killed in battle.

This sacrifice marks the play's first clear example of what Žižek terms subjective violence. Although brutal, Titus presents the act as a sacred obligation, carrying it out "religiously" to honour his fallen sons (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 1.1.127). Subjective violence, as Žižek (2008a) explains, refers to visible and direct acts such as murder or assault, in contrast to the less visible forms of violence embedded within institutional and structural systems (pp. 1–2). Although Titus does not personally carry out the killing of Alarbus, the act is presented as part of Rome's larger ideological system. It is not a spontaneous or personal revenge, but a ritualistic execution based on tradition and cultural expectation. Titus explains the sacrifice as a way to "appease their groaning shadows that are gone" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 1.1.129), reframing his personal loss into communal duty. Still, this act seems less about mourning and more about a display of authority. As Futrell (2001) notes, public spectacles were instrumental in sustaining Roman dominance by promoting a shared sense of history and political purpose (p. 5). In this light, Titus's use of violence reinforces Roman authority under the guise of religious duty.

According to Žižek (2008a), subjective violence appears sudden because the ongoing structural violence that supports it is often hidden and overlooked (p. 2). From this perspective, Titus's act is not an exception to peace, but part of the quiet, everyday violence woven into Roman society. This violence is concealed by custom and legitimized through religious rhetoric. Žižek's concept of 'fetishist disavowal' offers insight into Titus's mindset. He adheres to Roman customs despite recognizing the inherent cruelty of the act. Rather than rejecting it, he frames

the sacrifice as religiously necessary (p. 53). As a Roman general, he also feels a strong obligation to preserve these traditions. In other words, Titus obeys not because he believes blindly, but because ideology demands it. This way of thinking allows cruelty to continue under the cover of tradition. Once turned into ritual, violence becomes something people not only accept but even admire (Girard, 1977, p. 36).

This early scene makes it clear that violence in *Titus Andronicus* operates beyond personal motives. It reflects a belief system that frames cruelty as part of civilization (Shakespeare's Globe, 2023). Tamora's cry, "O cruel, irreligious piety!" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 1.1.130), directly challenges Rome's moral and religious authority. For the Romans, the act is a duty; for Tamora, it is a blasphemous injustice (Willis, 2002, p. 35). Her response, as an outsider, exposes the contradictions behind Roman ideals of piety and order, revealing how they rely on violence. This moment also sets up the revenge pattern that drives much of the play. As Willis (2002) observes, revenge in *Titus Andronicus* often mirrors earlier violence, but with roles reversed: "the revenger seeks to reenact a traumatic scene with the roles reversed" (p. 33). It begins with Tamora begging for her son's life while Titus ignores her. This role reversal illustrates how "mimetic desire and violence communicate with one another" (Girard, 1977, p. 148): Tamora does not seek justice, but instead reenacts the cruelty once inflicted upon her in order to assert dominance within the same symbolic framework. These mirrored moments of pleading and refusal show how revenge transforms victims into aggressors. Willis (2002) terms this repetition a form of "perverse therapy" (pp. 25-26), through which characters attempt to relieve suffering by transferring it onto others.

From René Girard's (1977) perspective, Tamora and Titus are both victim and aggressor, caught in a pattern of copying each other's violence (p. 174). The problem is not that people break social norms, but that they repeat acts of violence, believing they are restoring justice, when in fact they are deepening the cycle of violence. Tamora is initially depicted as a barbarian, yet as an empress, she commits the same violence, ironically showing that Roman power relies on the same brutality it claims to reject. This change reveals that the line between civilization and barbarism is not moral but ideological; it is defined by who holds power rather than by an ethical difference.

As the play advances, Titus becomes increasingly aware of the ethical collapse of the order he once defended. His exclamation "Rome is but a wilderness of tigers" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 3.1.54) expresses his growing disillusionment with Roman values and the brutality they conceal. Shakespeare, through Titus's transformation, questions the ideological foundations of Roman and imperial power. What initially appeared as a story of revenge and honour evolves into a critique of how political systems sustain cruelty through tradition and ritual. The play also invites the audience to question violence that is sanctioned by the authority.

At first, the audience may accept Roman violence since it appears justified by religious and political structures. However, this perceived legitimacy gradually collapses as the play unfolds. Shakespeare demonstrates how ideology can frame cruelty as something noble when it serves to justify power or maintain order, revealing, in Žižek's terms, how "the fundamental level of ideological fantasy" structures social reality by recasting violence as virtue (2008b, p. 27). Žižek (2008a) cautions not to be distracted by visible acts of violence because such attention often obscures the deeper structural forces that authorize and sustain it (p. 11). This is

particularly relevant in the case of Alarbus's ritual killing, which appears as a sacred duty but masks the ideological violence beneath.

The spectacle in which his "limbs are lopped, and entrails feed the sacrificing fire" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 1.1.146-147) shocks the audience and distracts from the ideological structures that make such violence appear justified. However, for Elizabethan viewers, accustomed to public executions and punitive spectacles presented as justice, such ritual brutality likely appeared familiar (Öğütcü, 2016, p. 364). By drawing this disturbing comparison, the play encourages the audience to question the moral values that normalize violence in their own society.

From a Girardian perspective, Alarbus becomes a scapegoat, a "surrogate victim" sacrificed not for personal wrongdoing but to absorb communal tensions and restore social order (Girard, 1987, p. 25). The ritual burning of his body reflects the sacrificial logic behind this act. The result is not moral justice but a symbolic gesture aimed at restoring social order by directing violence toward a designated, "sacrificable" (Girard, 1977, pp. 4, 12) figure.

However, as Girard observes, scapegoating rarely resolves mimetic rivalry. Likewise, Kenji Yoshino (2009) argues in her study on *Titus Andronicus* that the play captures Elizabethan anxieties about the breakdown of legal authority and the rise of private vengeance. She explains that without law, personal vengeance can rapidly escalate into a cycle of retaliation, a "tit-for-tat" (p. 206) dynamic that eventually erupts into a blood feud between Romans and Goths.

In *Titus Andronicus*, the sacrificial killing of Alarbus fails to restore peace. Instead, it initiates a "Vicious cycle of mimetic desire" (Girard, 1977, p. 205) where violence functions as a constitutive element of the social order, rather than its disruption. Titus's attempt to uphold Roman justice ironically leads to future chaos. Tamora responds not with submission but with mimetic retaliation, mirroring the violence inflicted upon her (p. 49).

Tamora's transformation from a grieving captive to a vengeful empress is not purely emotional but ideological. Her rise is shaped by Titus's decisions, particularly his unwavering commitment to Roman ideals. When offered the throne by the tribune, Titus refuses and instead nominates Saturninus, the deceased emperor's eldest son. This choice reveals a prioritization of custom over strategic judgment, as Titus views the act as the proper Roman custom.

In response, Saturninus claims Lavinia, Titus's daughter, as his bride in order to strengthen his rule. However, Lavinia is already engaged to Bassianus, and with his and her brother's assistance, she escapes. Saturninus interprets this defiance not just as a personal rejection but as an insult to his authority. Saturninus rejects her and marries Tamora instead. Tamora's rise to power and her eventual pursuit of revenge are therefore not driven by emotion alone. It is shaped by ideological structures, patriarchal expectations, and wounded pride. Titus, on the other hand, sees Lavinia's elopement and her brother's intervention as a direct challenge to Roman order and his personal authority. In retaliation, he kills his own son, placing loyalty to Rome and patriarchal duty above family bonds.

The act can be understood as a result of how ideology constructs individuals as subjects through the process known as "ideological interpellation". Louis Althusser (2014) introduced this concept to describe how individuals become ideological subjects by being "hailed" into social roles (pp. 190, 264). Žižek expands on this idea by focusing on the symbolic order, the system of language, law, and norms, as the underlying framework that produces and regulates

subjectivity (Myers, 2003, p. 70). In Žižek's (2002, 2008b) view, individuals construct their identities by internalizing these roles and expectations, a process mediated by what he calls the "big Other", a symbolic authority that structures collective meaning and behaviour (p. 70; p. 225).

In the play, Titus is hailed with titles such as "Andronicus, surnamed Pius" and "Patron of Virtue, Rome's best champion" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 1.1.23–25), casting him as a symbol of Roman piety, virtue, and military honour. These titles affirm his prescribed ideological function within Roman society. His identity is shaped by principles such as duty (pietas), military honour, and strict patriarchal authority, all of which demand absolute loyalty, even at the cost of personal bonds. The title "Pius" directly reflects this ideal of pietas, reinforcing the ideological script he is expected to embody.

Titus's killing of Mutius, then, reflects not a personal mistake but a deliberate act shaped by ideological expectation. Žižek (2008a) might describe this as a case of "overidentification" (p.175), in which the subject becomes fully assimilated into their symbolic role, to the point where personal identity is subsumed. In Titus's case, the line between his role as a Roman general and his role as a father collapses. The ideological system has conditioned him to believe that no conflict can exist between the two. He does not merely follow Roman norms; he enacts them so completely that ideology operates through him. In this sense, ideology does not just inform what he does; it constitutes his very identity. As Žižek (2008b) puts it, "The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (p. 30).

Just like the earlier sacrifice of Alarbus, this act also fails to resolve the conflict. It intensifies the mimetic cycle, this time within the family. The very ideology that claims to ensure order ends up reproducing violence, undermining the same bonds it claims to protect. As Girard puts it, violence is "both the disease and the cure": it seems to restore order, but actually keeps the conflict going (Girard, 1977, p. 291).

From Girard's perspective, Titus's killing of Mutius exemplifies a mimetic crisis, a collapse of distinctions, whether social, familial, or personal, that destabilizes the collective order, creating a dangerous state of undifferentiation that threatens the social order (Girard, 2010, p. 220). Titus is torn between his loyalty to Rome and his role as a father, two identities that cannot peacefully coexist within the ideological framework he inhabits. Mutius, by defying Titus's authority over Lavinia becomes a rival figure who mirrors this internal conflict.

In killing Mutius, Titus not only enforces Roman authority but also silences the part of himself that hesitates or questions its demands. This rupture within the family signals the fragility and eventual breakdown of sacrificial logic. As Girard (1977) observes, "Those whom the sacrifice was designed to protect become its victims" (p. 40). When this mechanism collapses, the boundary between the victim and the community dissolves, leading to what Girard describes as "a superabundance of violence of a particularly virulent kind" (ibid., p. 40). This consequence becomes evident in the breakdown of order following Mutius's death.

This early chain of violence, initiated with Alarbus's sacrifice and intensified by Mutius's death, leads to the play's most harrowing moment: the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, as Willis (2002) notes, "As Alarbus's body was desecrated, so Lavinia's will be violated through rape"

(p. 40). This comment underscores the recursive pattern of mimetic violence in the play, in which earlier trauma returns in increasingly brutal forms.

Aaron the Moor, Tamora's lover, plans a revenge that exploits Rome's political disorder and growing mimetic tensions. He lures Bassianus, Tamora's political enemy, and Lavinia into a remote forest, where Tamora's sons, Chiron and Demetrius, murder Bassianus. Claiming to avenge their brother Alarbus, they then rape and mutilate Lavinia beside Bassianus's corpse (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 2.2.130). Initially, Tamora urges her sons to kill Lavinia quickly, but they refuse. Instead, they declare their intent to rape her, and Tamora gives her consent. This violence is not merely retaliatory. Lavinia has already been the focus of intense male competition, first chosen by Saturninus as a political bride, then reclaimed by Bassianus in defiance of imperial authority. This earlier rivalry casts Lavinia as a symbolically charged object of desire, shaped by the mimetic logic Girard (1977) outlines: "The rival desires the same object as the subject… the subject desires the object because the rival desires it" (p. 145). By the time Chiron and Demetrius attack her, they are stepping into an established chain of imitation in which Lavinia's value has already been inflated by the desires of other men. Their violence is not spontaneous, it mimics earlier rivalries and seeks to surpass them.

This moment reveals how ideology can pervert even traditional maternal rules. A figure, typically associated with care and protection, becomes complicit in a horrific act, and more disturbingly, in the rape of another woman. Lavinia articulates this betrayal with the lines "No grace? No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, /The blot and enemy to our general name" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 2.2.182–84). This act is deliberate and carefully planned, following the Roman logic of honour and revenge. Lavinia's body becomes a target of symbolic violence. Her suffering reflects how patriarchal and imperial systems exploit women's bodies to resolve male conflict. The forest pit, dark, isolated, and lawless, functions as a distorted reflection of Rome's ideological decay. It highlights how far Rome's values of order and unity have collapsed.

Lavinia's rape and mutilation by Chiron and Demetrius exemplify all three of Žižek's forms of violence: subjective, systemic, and symbolic. The assault is a clear act of subjective violence: direct, personal, and visible. Yet beneath it lie deeper systemic structures embedded in Roman patriarchy. Lavinia's body becomes a site of political and symbolic control. She is violated not only by her attackers but also by male figures such as Saturninus, Bassianus, and her father, Titus, who treat her as a symbol of family honour and political loyalty rather than an individual (Willis, 2002, p. 22). Žižek (2008a) explains that we usually notice violent acts, such as murder, assault, or war, "against the background of a non-violent zero level" (p. 2). This background appears peaceful, but it is misleading. It causes us to overlook the deeper, ongoing harm built into everyday systems. As he puts it, "objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state" (p. 2), meaning that what we see as usual is not really free of violence, it just hides it in ways we don't always recognize. So, Lavinia is not merely a victim of personal cruelty; she is constructed as a silent symbol of honour and shame within a culture that systematically devalues and silences women.

Symbolic violence is most clearly seen in the fate of Lavinia. Silenced both literally and ideologically, she is brutally mutilated and left unable to express herself within the bounds of patriarchal power. Her suffering exposes how symbolic systems determine how patriarchal discourse regulates meaning and marginalizes the voices of victims. When Marcus brings and

presents Lavinia to Titus with the words, "This was thy daughter" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 2.4.55), his statement functions not merely as a report of tragedy but as a symbolic framing of her trauma. Lavinia's physical mutilation renders her literally voiceless, yet even this silence is not her own. Marcus immediately assumes interpretive control, speaking on her behalf and assigning meaning to her suffering. In other words, Marcus takes control of her story, turning her into a symbol of patriarchal grief. Žižek would interpret this as an instance of symbolic violence, where the victim's experience is overwritten by ideological discourse. This dynamic recalls Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, where the woman's pain is appropriated to reinforce masculine ideals of honour, morality, and civic virtue. In both cases, the woman's pain becomes public, but her voice disappears.

Lavinia's dismemberment is not just physical; it is also symbolic. She is stripped of agency and excluded from any form of self-representation. Shakespeare draws here on the myth of Philomela, who, after being raped and silenced, weaves her trauma into a tapestry, becoming a classical archetype of violated women forced into symbolic expression. As Analicia Garcia Priego argues (2023), Lavinia, both mutilated and muted, is reduced to a state of non-being, "not… a separate entity from her father" (pp. 27–28), but fully absorbed into his grief and honour. Her body no longer functions as an autonomous subject; it becomes, as Priego writes, "the only thing she can offer her father" (pp. 27–28), a symbol of violated patriarchal pride. Even when Lavinia writes the names of her attackers on the soil, her message is mediated by male interpretation, reinforcing her dependence on the patriarchal symbolic order.

From a Girardian perspective, Lavinia becomes a scapegoat within a failed sacrificial system. Her suffering triggers further violence. Her trauma reflects both personal pain and the structural forces that produce and sustain it. Through Lavinia's fate, Shakespeare shows how violence operates simultaneously at the subjective, systemic, and symbolic levels, demonstrating how individual suffering is deeply entangled with ideological power. Her mutilation does not restore order; instead, it intensifies the cycle of revenge, as Titus's subsequent actions against Chiron and Demetrius escalate the conflict. The failure of this sacrificial act exposes the limits of Girard's scapegoat mechanism, revealing the ideological decay of Rome's patriarchal and imperial systems.

The cycle of vengeance reaches its most grotesque expression when Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius and bakes their bodies into a pie, which he then serves to their mother, Tamora. This act is extreme in its theatrical brutality. Titus announces, "I will grind your bones to dust, /And with your blood and it I'll make a paste…/And make two pasties of your shameful heads" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 5.2.186–191). In this moment, the pursuit of justice becomes a grotesque performance. For Žižek, such moments mark the breakdown of the symbolic order: normative structures disintegrate, and honour collapses into horror (Bharti & Sinha, 2023, p. 651). Harold Bloom (1999) describes this transformation as a "coffin-like piecrust" (p. 84), a grim parody of justice. From a Girardian viewpoint, the banquet fails as a sacrificial ritual. Rather than restoring harmony, it escalates mimetic violence and transforms justice into an act of cannibalistic revenge that devours meaning itself.

This breakdown of ritual justice reaches its final expression in Titus's killing of Lavinia, a sacrifice meant to cleanse shame, but one that instead exposes the moral collapse of the entire system. Titus's words, "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, /And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 5.3.45–46) show that her violated body is treated

as a personal insult to his status, denying her reintegration into a society that deems raped women worthless (Priego, 2023, p. 28).

This ideological disintegration is completed in Aaron's final speech. Refusing to ask for forgiveness, he declares, "If one good deed in all my life I did, /I do repent it from my very soul" (Shakespeare, 1594/2021, 5.3.189–190). His open rejection of remorse dismantles the illusion of Rome's moral order. From a Žižekian perspective, Aaron exposes the violence that lies buried beneath the appearance of justice, revealing the fragility of Roman virtue. From a Girardian standpoint, he refuses to become the scapegoat, denying the community of the catharsis that punishment would provide. By openly embracing his guilt without seeking redemption, Aaron breaks the sacrificial logic that sustains Roman ideology, leaving its structure exposed and powerless.

Conclusion

Titus Andronicus ends without offering a clear resolution. The violence that dominates the play leaves behind not only physical destruction but also social and moral disintegration. Through Žižek's perspective, the play exposes how violence sustains ideological fantasies until they implode under their own contradictions. From Girard's viewpoint, sacrificial rituals that are meant to end conflict instead intensify it, feeding an endless spiral of vengeance. Together, their theories expose Shakespeare's tragedy as a powerful critique of how violence is woven into the very fabric of law, honour, and identity.

Titus's final acts, especially the banquet scene, evoke what Žižek (2008a), drawing on Walter Benjamin, describes as "divine violence": a sudden and radical eruption that appears to come "out of nowhere", disrupting established ideological norms (p. 4). Yet in this context, such an eruption does not resolve the crisis but deepens it. The play denies the audience catharsis, offering no moral closure or emotional relief. Instead, it highlights a world in which violence replaces justice as the primary mode of interaction.

Rome's collapse exposes the failure of its institutions to control the very violence they depend on. Lavinia's mutilation, the revenge against Tamora's sons, and Aaron's final defiance each point to a society where brutality is embedded in its identity. In Žižekian terms, the symbolic order collapses under its own contradictions. In Girardian terms, the scapegoat mechanism breaks down entirely, as violence no longer serves a unifying or purifying function.

Ironically, the Goths, initially depicted as Rome's enemies and symbols of barbarism, ultimately play a role in restoring political authority. Lucius, the last surviving son of Titus, assumes power with their support and is appointed emperor. This reversal complicates earlier boundaries between civilization and savagery. While Rome collapses under the weight of its ideals of honour and revenge, those once excluded from its moral and political order become agents of stability. Although the main plot reaches a conclusion, the play offers no emotional or moral resolution. Instead, it encourages reflection on the beliefs and social practices that

normalise violence in both the play's world and the audience's own social and political realities. In a way, Shakespeare seems to suggest that when a society abandons its ethical foundations, it begins to resemble the very barbarism it claims to oppose.

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