‘Popish Tricks and Ceremonies’:

Sacrifice, Protestantism, and the *Other*

in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*

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Abstract

This paper explores the continuities between *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* as plays that explore the new meanings that such an ancient ritual as sacrifice, and related forms of violence, acquire in the context of the Reformation. After providing an overview of the theological discussions that were taking place during the time of the plays' composition, showcasing the great contrast between the Catholic understanding of the sacrifice of the Mass, and the emerging Protestant criticism of that notion, which also extended to *Others*, such as Pagans or Turks, the paper analyses the usage of religious language by the characters in order to understand how sacrificial violence and its association to foreign characters are involved in the symbolic layer of meaning of the plays. On the basis of Rene Girard's mimetic theory of desire and his understanding of the scapegoating mechanism, coupled with Protestant understandings of sacrifice, violence, and atonement, it seeks to provide a reading of *Titus* and *Othello* that transcends a melodramatic or purely legalistic conception of revenge as represented in tragedy.

Key words: Shakespeare, Protestantism, sacrifice, *Others*, drama, violence

0 Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* involve two generals, the plays' protagonists, who engage in violent acts they describe as sacrifices. This fact is of special interest when the playwright's theological context is taken into consideration: the position of sacrifice and its relationship to the Catholic Mass had been thoroughly examined and questioned by the Reformers, and was part of the discussions surrounding the Church of England's still evolving doctrine.

This paper aims to study the presence of sacrifice in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, and to understand the way the theological discussions about the Mass and the position of sacrifice in ritual, which were at the foreground of contemporary Protestant discourse, influenced the vocabulary used by the plays' characters to refer to those acts of sacrifice. The presence of foreign characters in the places the plays have as their setting will also be discussed. Finally, the key element that connects *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, their protagonists' position as high-ranking men of the army, will be taken into account.

Multiple authors have studied this aspect of the dramatist's plays, producing interesting examinations of sacrifice and its relation to the Reformation and *Otherness*, yet they have tended to do so separately. This project will attempt to explore the relationship between those issues by approaching the plays from the perspective of Rene Girard's analysis of mimetic violence in his classic study *A Theater of Envy*.

In order to achieve this, an explanation of the theological context wherein the question of sacrifice was being discussed will be provided. Afterwards, and keeping these discussions in mind, the plays will be analysed, firstly describing their Reformation context, and then purveying a thematic deconstruction of the characters' usage of

language related to sacrifice, as well as religious violence generally, in order to point out any Protestant overtones, which give the plays a layer of symbolic meaning. The *Otherness* of certain characters will be taken into account, since sacrifice is essentially a mechanism of communal and violent *Othering*, in the same manner war is.

Besides giving a sense of the symbolic depth of the imagery used by Shakespeare's characters, this analysis might serve to give a sense of the way in which Elizabethans and Jacobeans dealt with *Otherness*, showing us how deeply connected religious issues were to that question: the paganism of the pre-Christian past and of the post-Reformation present is central to sacrifice and *Otherness* in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*.

1 Contexts: Sacrifice, and *Otherhood*

1.1 Sacrifice and the Mass in Protestantism

As most historians of Early Modern religion would agree, to understand Protestant views of sacrifice one must begin with Catholic doctrine. Catholic Eucharistic theology defines the Mass as a "[perpetuation of] the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages" (Catechism of the Catholic Church: 1323). However, according to Luther, there was no reason to believe that "Christ had intended to offer a sacrifice or perform a good work" (Thompson 34) when instituting the sacrament.

The discussion concerning the Mass was certainly relevant, since the sacrificial language used by Catholics was seen by the reformers as an attempt to "repeat, or at least to supplement, the unrepeatable sacrifice which had put an end to sacrifice for sin" (Thompson 35). In their view, this was akin to taking away importance from Christ's sacrifice, which had put an end to the era of the *Law* and led to the age of the *Gospel* (in Lutheran terms) and made any further sacrifice (like those offered at the Temple in

Jerusalem) completely unnecessary: the ability to perform sacrifices is restricted to God, whereas men can only "perform a murder." (Schwartz 145) This means that there is "a crisis over the distinction between sacrifice and murder" (148) which is essential to the role of sacrifice in the plays.

Thomas Cranmer's Eucharistic doctrine, which had been made official by the Church of England's use of the Book of Common Prayer, had turned the "altar" into a mere "table" and reduced the previously transubstantiated "bread and wine" to just "bread and wine" before and after the consecration (Turrell 276). Reformers disliked the Mass' "materiality", and preferred to speak of "spiritual eating and drinking instead of the literal body of God" (Schwartz 146).

The 'magical' quality of the Mass had been stripped away, and turned into a non-sacrificial 'Lord's Supper', which served essentially as a memorial of Christ's everlasting sacrifice, a sufficient sacrifice which made any other unnecessary, and even blasphemous. Sacrifice, devoid of its "sacral significance, [...] is meaningless killing." (Schwartz 143)

Sacrifice, then, had become one of several "dead works under the law" (Waldron 149), and was viewed negatively by most Protestants. As a consequence, it was linked to idolatry as well, the dangers of which, according to Jennifer Waldron, had become "more and more generalised" (150): the Catholic Mass was not only unnecessary, but essentially "a pagan ritual" (Waldron 150). This association of sacrifice, even if Christianised, to pagan sacrificial rituals is key to both *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*.

Besides the problematic reiteration of a sacrifice which ought to have been eternally sufficient, the Catholic interpretation of "the offering of the Eucharist" (Thompson 69) being beneficial for the dead also proved controversial, and was generally rejected by the Protestants because of its association with beliefs regarding Purgatory (something the reformers saw as unbiblical, and, therefore, untrue). This specific point

will be taken into consideration when analysing *Titus Andronicus,* since it is profoundly significant in it: sacrifice appears associated with the souls of the dead.

Having been highlighted and thoroughly discussed by Protestant thinkers due to its relationship to the Roman Catholic Mass, the issue of sacrifice had become a part of popular discourse by Shakespeare's time. The playwright was certainly interested in the theological conflicts of his time, making them a central part of the plays we are concerned with. Theological controversy was so culturally significant that it necessarily fed into the works of the dramatist. The relevance they must have had for Elizabethan and Jacobean laypeople, thus, proves undeniable.

Sacrificial rituals were a central part of the state religion of the Roman Empire, in the ranks of which Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus served. It must be taken into consideration, however, that Shakespeare consciously projects Elizabethan ideas about religion onto the Roman past. Because of this, we ought to keep the theological debates surrounding the Reformation in mind to adequately understand the way sacrifice is utilised as a theme and narrative element by Shakespeare. This means we must situate *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* in "an Abrahamic context" (Jackson 70).

1.2 The Other

Characters which can broadly be defined as outsiders appear both in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*. In the context of post-Reformation England, sacrificial rituals had become associated with *Others* due to the Protestants' polemic association of *Popish* sacrificial masses to pagan rites. Any such sacrificial expression, then, could be associated with "Catholics, pagans, Turks, or backsliding Jews" (Waldron 150), that is, essentially, to anyone who did not subscribe to Reformed Eucharistic theology, whether belonging to the present or to the past.

2 Titus Andronicus

Shakespeare's *The Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus* is deeply troubled by the position of sacrifice as a divinely sanctioned instance of violence. Tamora's complaint, which defines her son Alarbus' sacrifice by Titus as "cruel, irreligious piety" (Shakespeare 175) explicitly introduces the tensions related to sacrifice, as well as its place in the religion practised by the Roman, civilised *Self*, into the play's language.

2.1 Titus Andronicus and its Reformation Context

Alarbus' sacrifice is meant to appease the "shadows" (Shakespeare 174) of Titus' dead sons, who "religiously [...] ask a sacrifice" (Shakespeare 175). This could be seen as a parallel to the idea of the Mass being offered for the benefit of the dead souls in Purgatory (Thompson 69). Of course, the religion practised in the Roman Empire was devoid of such a concept, but it must be understood that Shakespeare's representation of Imperial Rome is somewhat anachronistic, projecting ideas pertaining to his theological context onto the distant Roman past.

As many critics have noted, proof of this are the references to a "ruinous monastery" (Shakespeare 286), or Aaron's mocking description of Lucius' religiousness as "popish tricks and ceremonies" (288). Tamora and Aaron's view of Roman ritual is interesting, since both, the two most significant *Others* in the play, coincide in their condemnation.

2.2 Aaron's Irreligiosity

Aaron's position as a Moor, however, makes his views unclear. It may be said that the play's Goths are an amalgamation of all of Rome's enemies, but he seems to be seen as a complete outsider to the Goths also. Accordingly, the result of his coupling with Tamora

horrifies both Chiron and Demetrius (in *4.2*). His place among the Goths' ranks seems to be as liminal as that which Othello occupies in the Venetian army. This makes us wonder why he sees Roman rituals (and, particularly, sacrifice, which is the most important one in the play) as "popish tricks and ceremonies" (Shakespeare 288). Aaron "believes no god" (288) defining himself as irreligious, and contrasting himself with the pious Lucius. His *Otherness* is not only ethnic, but also spiritual, with his irreligiousness being seen as extremely dangerous, since it makes him wholly untrustworthy.

Despite his irreligiosity and atheism, which might make us think of other plays from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods (such as *The Atheist's Tragedy* (published in 1611)), and, thus, tempt us into viewing him as merely another example of the Machiavel stock character, his actions during the play's course reveal him to have a much more complex personality.

In *4.2*, Aaron refuses to kill his son, and offers an alternative victim instead: the nurse (Jackson 75). This could be read as a parody of substitutionary atonement, which raises the question of whether Aaron sincerely believes in the effectiveness of sacrifices or whether he only uses them manipulatively. It seems clear that his figurative sacrifice of the nurse is only meant to save his son, which points in the direction of manipulativeness.

Another instance of Aaron's manipulative use of sacrifice is found in *3.1*. The Romans are shown to sincerely believe in the effectiveness of propitiatory sacrifice; they are convinced by Aaron that by chopping off one of their hands their family members will be saved. The degree to which they are convinced of this is made evident when one considers that Marcus, Lucius and Titus all are more than willing to do so. They describe the offering of their hand as a “ransom [...] from their death” (Shakespeare 239) meant to “redeem [them] from death” (240). Aaron seeks to exploit the inadequateness of their

"popish tricks" (288), which makes them believe in an untruth that Protestants would have firmly opposed: that a sacrifice performed by a human being can have effective power.

Despite this, there is an issue that complicates Aaron's position on sacrifice. His final position is the "self-sacrificing defence of his child" (Gillies 110). The price he pays for saving his son is the confession of his crimes, which, of course, leads irrevocably to his punishment: his death. This may be interpreted as a parody or inversion of certain ideas concerning sacrifice. Aaron, instead of sacrificing his son, essentially gives his life up to save him. This is another instance of substitutionary atonement.

The actions Aaron performs during the play serve to invert pagan and Catholic ideas regarding sacrifice: Titus' offering of his own hand is unable to save his sons (a human sacrifice, or a sacrifice performed by a human, is unable to please the Emperor, and, certainly, much less able to please God). Aaron also does not sacrifice his son, although Abraham was willing to, as was Titus when killing Mutius.

2.3 *Popish* Titus

Possibly the most relevant and shocking instance of human sacrifice in Titus is the titular character's sinister murder of Chiron and Demetrius. The actions that appear in the scene themselves may be seen as a "dark parody" (Bate 304) of the transubstantiated Eucharist: Tamora's sons are murdered ritually, and their flesh and blood are served as a meal to their mother. This is a sort of inversion of transubstantiation in which the flesh and blood become the meal, instead of the meal becoming flesh and blood. Titus' murder of Chiron and Demetrius is a "cannibalistic vision of the Eucharist" (Bahr 267), which represents the culmination of the "macabre figurative-literal play" (267) the play engages in when dealing with sacrifice and violence. Furthermore, the language of the Eucharist itself is evoked when Titus tells Lavinia to "receive the blood" (Shakespeare 304).

Considering that the play's Rome is decorated with a "ruinous monastery" (Shakespeare 286), includes "begging hermits in their holy prayers" (Shakespeare 249), and that the "Roman rites" (Shakespeare 177) performed by the characters that inhabit it are derided as "popish tricks and ceremonies" (Shakespeare 288), it is very hard not to relate *5.2* to the Eucharistic debates of the author's context, as outlined above.

Titus' religion is, thus, associated with Catholicism, despite the period the play is set in, for multiple related reasons. Firstly, the spatial setting of the play itself: Roman paganism is linked to Roman Catholicism, seemingly as a sort of precursor. Secondly, because of the centrality of sacrifice to both, and of human sacrifice specifically: Christ's sacrifice is repeated at the altar by the priest, while the pre-Christian Romans provide human victims of their own. There seems to be a universal need for a propitiatory sacrifice.

Titus' insistence in performing violent sacrifices is understandable. He is, besides the embodiment of *romanitas*, an aged general, who has dedicated his life to Rome, defeating the barbarous stranger in battle in order to keep it distinct and apart from the civilised *Self*. His stoic militarism is no longer of use to him during the play's action: he can no longer "bind [his] woes [into limits]" (Shakespeare 242). His inability to deal with *Otherness* in the way he was used to causes his descent into barbaric sacrificial violence, causing "a crisis of community binding ritual" (Mead 463).

The play is set in a period "when Rome was at war both abroad and at home" (Kilgour 80). Titus, suddenly finding himself besieged by hostile Goths not only on the battlefield but at the very heart of Rome, looks to violent sacrifice as an alternative way of demarcating the boundaries of the self against alienating *Otherness*.

2.4 The Andronici's Usage of Religious Language

The violent acts Tamora encourages are identified symbolically by the Andronici with religious violence. Martius compares the dead Bassianus "to a slaughtered lamb" (Shakespeare 222), recalling Christological sacrificial imagery. Aaron, mockingly using the image of the meek sacrificial victim, says "I am a lamb" when speaking to Chiron and Demetrius in *4.2*. Lucius, similarly, asks Lavinia who has "martyred" (Shakespeare 234) her. This term was circulating widely due to the popularity of books such as Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (Bate 20). The English Reformation and the Catholic restoration during Queen Mary's reign had given new prominence to the idea of martyrdom, and, perhaps, to the panic caused by foreign intrusion, which may also be also argued to appear in the play. Titus avenges Lavinia's martyrdom, which has given religious connotations to her suffering, by punishing those who acted against her with religiously charged violence. He tells Chiron and Demetrius that "[he means] to martyr [them]" (Shakespeare 303).

Only the Andronici identify any religious connotation in the violent acts that they are involved in, whether as victims or perpetrators. Romans are *Popish*, but the Goths, however violently and subversively they behave, do not seem to conceive of sacrifice the way the Romans do. Thus, Lavinia is turned into a martyr by the Andronici (through their constant symbolic interpretation of literal violence), although Tamora did not mean to martyr her the way Titus means to martyr Chiron and Demetrius. Barbarity and civilization are in a state of confusion: the *Other* and the *Self* have become intermixed physically, psychologically, and religiously.

Lavinia's identification as a martyr makes her "[acquire] both Pagan and Christian resonance" (Bahr 260). The text of Titus Andronicus constantly plays with the "overlapping of classical and Christian textual meaning" (260): one of the play's main sources is the story, found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of Philomela's rape by Tereus; the

play's Reformation context adds a second layer of meaning to the "re-enactment of myths from Ovid's Metamorphoses" (Hughes 72), which is part of the wider association of Roman history with the author's Reformation context.

2.5 A Tragedy of Desire

Lavinia is "the cause of a potential civil war" (Kilgour 80) due to the rivalry between Saturninus and Bassianus, which is caused by their mutual desire for her. This rivalry eventually leads to her terrible rape and dismemberment, a process that eventually transforms her into a "[martyr]" (Shakespeare 234). It could be argued that Saturninus' desire for Lavinia is mimetic: he desires her because Bassianus desires her. His failure to possess her then leads to the rivalry between brothers that culminates in Bassianus' death and Lavinia's martyrdom: this sheds light on "the inherent violence contained not merely in sex, but also in love" (Schalkwyk 129). Bassianus and Lavinia are turned into scapegoats by Aaron, who, like Iago in *Othello*, will plot their demise.

Bassianus and Lavinia can be called scapegoats because they are infused with guilt by Tamora before they suffer Chiron and Demetrius' violence. They are transformed into villains, accused of desiring revenge. Tamora projects her moral blemishes onto them, causing their transformation into victims of a quasi-sacrificial vengeful violence. Titus' final killing of Lavinia can also be understood as a sacrifice; interestingly, he considers it an act of mercy towards her, in a similar way that Othello considers his killing of Desdemona to be a way to save her soul, which requires her previous confession of sins, as Lavinia's "shame" (Shakespeare 308) needs to be revealed before she can be sacrificed by her father. However, both Saturninus and Tamora are shocked by the instances of sacrifice they witness: the play takes place in a context of "sacrificial crisis" in which "the difference between impure violence and purifying violence" (Girard 54) is disappearing.

Lucius will have to reestablish this fading “purifying violence” (54) in order to stop the spread of “impure, contagious, reciprocal violence” (54).

2.6 Aliens and the Dangers of Polluting Intrusion

The play portrays Roman religion, and, obliquely, Roman Catholicism, as a fragile and incoherent system that a multiplicity of foreigners consistently exploit (Jackson 77). The play’s artificially reconstructed "Roman rites" (Shakespeare 177), as Lucius calls them, are centred on sacrifice. More gravely, the only instances of sacrifice that occur in the play involve humans murdering other humans in a religiously specified way. Since human sacrifice allows for violent murders to be performed in order to expiate ("done sacrifice of expiation / And slain the noblest prisoner of the Goths" (Shakespeare 170)), it essentially opens up a space in which behaviours associated with the barbarous *Other* can be performed. As Derek Hughes points out, the play "portrays regression [and] transformation into the brute" (72). The stranger and the *Self* become confused in the performance of human sacrifice, which, when deprived of its symbolic significance, is shown to be mere murder.

It may be said, then, that because of the play’s use of Protestant vocabulary, an analogy between the *sacrificial crisis* captured in Greek tragedy as described by René Girard (47), a *sacrificial crisis* in the late Roman Empire, as seen in the play’s action, and the contemporary “crisis over the distinction between sacrifice and murder" (Schwartz 148) caused by the Reformation can be perceived.

This intrusion of the foreigner into religious ritual allows for the intrusion of *Others* into the "body-politic" (Gillies 108). Aaron's copulation with Tamora, who, despite being ethnically different from the Romans can easily integrate with them (in all

likelihood because of her skin colour), represents the ultimate disgrace to the Roman state; Tamora and Aaron "infect the body-politic" (108) of Saturninus' degenerate Rome.

Human sacrifice, which is presented with Eucharistic overtones, as an element of religious ritual is shown to be problematic for multiple reasons. Firstly, it allows for the intrusion of behaviours and practices associated with the *Other* into the *Self*: violence and murder become accepted in very specific conditions, thus giving way to a sort of "[adulteration]" of the "Roman body-politic" (Gillies 110). Secondly, and as a consequence of the former reason, it allows for the exploitation of those behaviours, particularly by those strangers they are associated with. Consider, for instance, the way Aaron uses the Romans' sincere belief in propitiatory sacrifice against them, leading to the concluding transgression that the cannibalistic banquet represents: the definitive proof that the idea of sacrifice has suffered a "retrogression" (Hughes 72) into barbarism, straying away from its appropriate "symbolic form" (75), and engaging in a sort of literal violence that should pertain to the *Other*.

2.7 Lucius' Symbolic Justice and Aaron's Redemption

The ineffectiveness of sacrifice also breeds an impassioned desire for justice, reinforcing the sense of moral outrage expressed by Titus, who calls for "Justice" to be "[sent] down [...] to wreak [his family's] wrongs" (Shakespeare 273). Lucius' enforcement of justice can be read as a rectification of his father's confusion of literal and symbolic violence, which involves a redrawing of the distinction between the outsider and the *Self*.

Tamora vengefully caused Martius and Quintus' deaths; subsequently, Tamora is punished by Titus by receiving "no funeral rite" (Shakespeare 318). Aaron's punishment may be also understood to be related to Bassianus' death: he is "fastened in the earth" (317) in order to symbolically repay for his crimes. Whereas Titus' sacrifice of Alarbus,

as Tamora points out, is "cruel, irreligious piety" (175), Lucius' punishments are reasonably justified: he punishes Lavinia and Aaron with a symbolic and balanced form of justice that closely relates to the guilty party's crime. This correction of the notion of sacrifice which Lucius reinstates is supposed by some authors to be a "more conceptually advanced and symbolic form" (Hughes 75) from which the form practised by Titus is a "retrogression" (75).

Both Lucius and Aaron overcome the barbarous ritual of human sacrifice. In *5.1*, Lucius agrees to "see [Aaron's son] nourished" (Shakespeare 288); Aaron's self-sacrifice for the benefit of his son, coupled with Lucius' decision to let the child live, instead of hanging him, as he firstly proposes, in order to "vex the father's soul" (287), signifies the transformation of the child into "a force of redemption" (Gillies 110) for both Aaron and Lucius. The latter, states Gillies, is by that point "already blooded by his enthusiastic participation in the sacrifice of [...] Alarbus" (110-111). Thus, the Roman state is regenerated through the abandonment of expiatory violence.

Aaron performs a sort of vicarious atonement, redeeming his son's life by giving up his. Curiously, he had previously mocked a sacrifice of that type: chopping off Titus' hand did not redeem his sons' lives. Aaron and Titus intend to give themselves (or a part of themselves) as a ransom for others: this echoes the view that Christ "[gave] his life for the ransom of many." (Matthew 20:28[1]) The reason why Aaron's sacrifice is effective, in that it puts an end to the cycle of sacrificial revenge, is because it has "the 'founding' character of law" (Gillies 111) in which the regression into literal violence is replaced by a punishment that is symbolic in nature. Lucius redraws the blurred boundary between *Self* and *Other* and places the ultimate blame for the previous confusion on an all-encompassing foreigner: as Marcus calls him, a "misbelieving Moor" (Shakespeare 315).

[1] All biblical citations are to the Geneva Bible of 1599

No blood is spilt in Aaron's death, and no echoes of the Eucharistic sacrificial Catholic ritual can be found: his punishment is clearly different from those performed by Titus. The intention is merely to make an example of Aaron, signalling the dangerous possibility of the *Other*'s infiltration. Thus, no one is allowed to take pity on him. Aaron's death is as much a sacrifice as a mere execution, with no other pretence than to make him pay for his subversive behaviour. No Andronici will reinterpret his death in religious terms, as they have done before. Aaron's son, whatever his fate is, will have no reason to avenge his father, who, being an absolute alien, shall only be remembered as a warning against the stranger's polluting intrusiveness.

3 Othello

During the Jacobean period, the playwright would re-examine the theme of sacrifice by writing another tragedy in which an outstanding general becomes a murderous avenger. In Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello*, the titular character assumes the role of a priest and confessor when ritually murdering his wife, Desdemona. What makes this especially interesting is the fact that other characters describe her with religious and reverent language throughout the play.

3.1 Cassio's Ransoming, Merit, and Election

Cassio asks for Desdemona to help him "exist and be a member of [Othello's] love" and "ransom [him] into [Othello's] love again" (Shakespeare 320). Cassio's role, because of his use of language, is made equal to that of the unredeemed sinner who asks Christ to help him regain God's love. It is Desdemona, then, who takes on Christ's duty of ransoming the sinner, paying for his sins. Because of this usage of imagery related to theological interpretations of Christ's sacrifice, Desdemona's assumption of the role of a

"guiltless" (381) sacrificial victim is explicitly established, with the bed in which she is murdered becoming a sort of altar.

Desdemona's sacrifice does serve, in a way, to restitute Cassio's lost position and honour. With all those who participated in his undoing dead or captured, the moral order has been reestablished, and he can assume a position that is higher than the one he occupied previously. Cassio benefits from the others' deaths. It would appear that he is, indeed, ransomed by a sacrifice: according to Iago, he is named lieutenant despite lacking any military merit, which means that his access to Othello's love, as well as his governorship of Cyprus, are perhaps a sort of secularisation of *imputed righteousness*. This contrasts with the "heresy of merit" (Hunt 352). Desdemona's love for Othello is also not merited, since, as Emilia tells him, his sacrifice of Desdemona is "no more worthy heaven, than [he was] worthy her" (383). This is troubling for Othello, since he considers that his "demerits" (210) are what justify both his position in the Venetian state and his marriage to Desdemona.

Furthermore, critics like Maurice Hunt have detected the presence of a "Calvinistic God" (346), that predestines some to salvation and others to damnation, in *Othello*. Cassio states in a state of drunkenness that "there be souls must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved." (Shakespeare 264) Furthering this scene's significance is the fact that it has been understood by some scholars as a sort of "burlesque Communion" (Hunt 347). The question of *merit* had already appeared in inverted form in *Titus*, mentioned by Aaron: "my deeds be witness of my worth" (Shakespeare 290). In *Othello*, merit reappears, coupled with the language of atonement. If the world Othello lives in is socially Calvinistic, with merits not being accountable for an individual's social *election*, then it is understandable that part of his tragedy is caused by his failure to take

heed of the Calvinist "warnings against any trust in the aid of friendship of men." (Weber 106)

3.2 Assurance and Doubting

As was mentioned previously, Cassio makes use of salvific discourse when asking for Desdemona to defend his suit. Cassio's preoccupation with the loss of his position and reputation is akin to Protestant attempts to provide a way to gain *assurance of salvation*. Furthermore, critics such as McEachern point out that Othello's "doubts about Desdemona's fidelity [show] a Protestant unable to trust in God's love of him." (113) Perhaps it is this loss of faith in her fidelity, which corresponds to a loss of faith in his own salvation, that ultimately propitiates Othello's sacrifice.

The isotopy of damnation begins invading Othello's utterances after Iago has made him acutely aware of the possibility of Desdemona's adulterous behaviour. Examples of this are "let her rot and perish and be damned" (Shakespeare 335) or "I were damned beneath all depth in hell" (382). The former is applied to Desdemona, and the latter to Othello himself. Othello, influenced by Iago, projects the demonic features others see in him onto Desdemona, turning her into a sort of scapegoat of his own *Otherness*. Thus, the Moor attempts to justify his sacrifice of her: it is because of this that she is transformed into a "fair devil" (312). Othello's doubts about Desdemona's loyalty to him make him unsure both of his status as a convert, and of her oft-repeated "divine" (245) status.

Those who desire Desdemona transform her (Cassio does so unwittingly) into a spotless sacrificial victim that strongly resembles the Christian Messiah. The Moor of Venice, due to his doubts, first transforms her into a "fair devil" (Shakespeare 312) and then, after her sacrifice, an act during which Othello's perception of her status is unclear,

it is Emilia who reaffirms her previous role, while casting onto Othello the one he had assigned to his wife: “the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!” (381)

3.3 Othello’s Strangeness and Sacrifice

Othello's intrusion into the Venetian state is much more of a problem than Aaron's presence among the Goths. Firstly, Othello occupies an extremely high rank, and is trusted by the Duke. Secondly, his "political and military penetration of the city" (Gillies 139) is significantly worsened by his marriage to Desdemona, whereas Aaron was merely Tamora's lover. *Othello* takes place in a world in which the constant presence of the foreigner has become an essential, and potentially destabilizing, characteristic of cosmopolitan Venice, despite still being worrying for certain characters, such as Brabantio. This is why the Turks do not need to be physically present: Othello already embodies the threat they pose.

Othello knows two instances in which the use of violence is regulated and permitted: warfare, and, albeit in a symbolic sense, religion. As an outsider who has been integrated to some extent into the *Self* that Venice, as well as Christendom at large, represents, Othello is torn in two: he exists as an oxymoronic "civil monster" (329). He is both a “malignant and turbaned Turk” (396) and a man who is baptised (276). Othello’s struggle with his own *Otherness* is the reason why he adopts a priestly role and thinks of Desdemona's murder as a "sacrifice" (376). Since Othello embodies the intrusion of the stranger into the *Self*, which was, in Titus, represented by the Goths, he is condemned to confuse symbolic violence with its literal counterpart. Crucially, sacrifice is the only other permissible mechanism besides warfare to violently repress the alien’s presence.

Interestingly, both Titus and Othello, as well as being military heroes, offer human victims as sacrifices in payment for a perceived wrong. Othello punishes adultery, while

Titus punishes his sons' deaths, as well as Lavinia's rape. Being acquainted with one of the contexts in which violence is allowed seems to render one vulnerable to transforming the other context, that of religion, into an allowed venue for literal violence, whereas the violence of religion ought to be symbolic.

Furthermore, Othello's previously notable stoic martialism also fails to aid him when confronted with foreignness beyond the battlefield: in *Othello*, the *Otherness* is within the main character. We never see Othello directly battle the "general enemy Ottoman" (Shakespeare 218), but a struggle between his converted *Self* and the foreign "turbaned Turk" (396) takes place within him, making him lose his inner stability, prompting his "Farewell the tranquil mind" (303). This moment of transformation is similar to Titus', with the difference that Othello's struggle is against himself, not against a distinct subject that embodies *Otherness*.

3.4 Desdemona's Sacrifice, Othello's *Hubris*

By assuming a priestly role in sacrificing his quasi-divine wife, Othello seeks both to punish her for the sins he believes she has committed, and to purify her of them. Etymologically, to sacrifice means to render something sacred, yet "the victim is sacred only because [she] is to be killed" (Girard 1). Othello does not want to damn her: when sacrificing Desdemona, he desires to make sure that none of her sins are "unreconciled [...] to heaven and grace" (374), since he "would not kill [her] soul" (374).

The reason why Othello kills Desdemona, then, is to make sure that she commits no more mortal sins, ensuring both that no other man is cuckolded by her, but also that she can be saved. The transformation of his murder into a sacrifice depends on Desdemona's culpability as well as her confession: "Othello believes that [...] Desdemona's acknowledgment of guilt in confession [...] will make his killing an act of

sacrifice" (Beckwith 121). As in Titus, the difference between a murder and a sacrifice is set by the linguistic associations projected onto the action both by those who enact it and by those who suffer it, and by the assumption that the victim bears some sort of guilt.

Desdemona has become the object of collective desire, generating a rivalry between Othello, Cassio, Iago, and Roderigo. This results, as with Lavinia in *Titus*, in Desdemona's scapegoating: Iago projects his lustfulness onto her, Othello his demonic *Otherness*. The condition of her death becoming a sacrifice is her confession of imputed sins which she has not committed. Othello's vengeful anger at her presumed infidelity and at his inability to consummate his marriage culminates in Desdemona's sacrifice in the marital bed: "Eros and the destructive urge [become] one" (Girard 293). Furthermore, Othello's suicide constitutes his return to his previously discarded military role. Thus, desire, sacrifice, and warfare are fused in the play's final scene: the former is revealed to be as "[inherently violent]" (Schalkwyk 129) as the latter two.

Besides this, Othello expects Desdemona's death to bring forth portents similar to those that accompanied Christ's death: "a huge eclipse of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe should yawn at alteration." (Shakespeare 379) Othello confirms Desdemona's role as a Christ-like victim, while expressing disappointment at the differences: the consequences of her death are not as important, and noticeable in the external world, although it seems to him that they should be.

Othello's sacrifice of Desdemona is essentially shown to be "a perversion of the violence of monotheism" (Schwartz 151). His jealousy can also be seen as an echo of God's own jealousy. God states in the Old Testament that he is "a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). However, whereas God is justified in his jealousy, Othello is not. The actions the Moor of Venice performs from the point he becomes convinced of Desdemona's

wrongdoings are essentially dependent on his usurpation of a role, that of the divine avenger, which he cannot occupy: this could be understood as an example of *hubris*.

Additionally, Othello's priestly role is reminiscent of that of a "Mosaic High Priest" (Waldron 150), which in its turn echoes both the Binding of Isaac and the future sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, which, in Catholic theology, is repeated at every Mass. Othello's demand for "ocular proof" (Shakespeare 304) culminates in his contemplation of the marital bed, which, from his adopted priestly point of view, must be akin to the Holy of Holies, wherein the divine presence resides; in *Othello*, the "divine Desdemona" (245) lies therein. This performance of Mosaic ritual seems to point to Othello's regression into the *Law* in the detriment of the *Gospel*, which he, as a baptised man, is supposed to live under.

3.5 Desdemona's Vow and Temptation

Opposite to Othello and Iago's demonic vows in *3.3* is Desdemona's vow of marital fidelity, which appears in *4.2*. Her vow, which includes kneeling, as did Othello and Iago's, is a clear expression of her acceptance of her position as a "guiltless" (381) victim. Desdemona's use of the word "trespass" (Shakespeare 352) unwittingly identifies her husband with God himself. This could perhaps be connected with the Apostle Paul's understanding of marriage: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord." (Ephesians 5:22) Her devotion to Othello is equal, or superior, to the one she bears to God. Furthermore, Desdemona says her only sins are "loves [she bears] to [him]" (Shakespeare 375), implying that she loves Othello more than she loves God, and that she is more obedient to him than to God. This is something Othello himself seems to notice, insisting, as Claire McEachern (104) notes, that Othello loved "not wisely, but too well" (Shakespeare 395).

Interestingly, in a previous scene, Emilia tempts Desdemona in a way that can be compared to Christ's temptation by Satan while in the desert. Emilia uses imagery that insistently calls back to Satan's temptation of Christ: Michael Neills points out the similarities with both Matthew 16:26 and Luke 4:5-6 (361). Another episode that might be understood to contain allusions of Christ's life is *4.2*, in which Othello calls Desdemona a "whore" (346). Desdemona is humiliated and horrified by this, being accused by Othello of a "sin" (346) that she did not commit; similarly, Christ was humiliated and bore the sins of others, being sacrificed because of them. Desdemona, too, is sacrificed by Othello after being encumbered with sins that are not hers. Both Christ and Desdemona are scapegoats.

Multiple episodes of Desdemona's life as it appears in the play are comparable to the most significant scenes of Christ's life as portrayed in the Gospels. She is the only unequivocally righteous character in *Othello*, going as far as rejecting her status as the victim of a terrible injustice, blaming herself instead. It is no wonder, then, that she seeks to prove her truthfulness by saying "as I am a Christian" (Shakespeare 347), while Iago does so by saying "or else I am a Turk" (248).

3.6 Iago, Mimetic Desire, and Scapegoating

Iago manages to make Othello, who has been able, for at least some time, to maintain a balance between the *Other* and *Self* that exist inside him, become fully foreign and commit a regression into sacrificial violence. He "[undermines]" Othello's adopted Christian identity "in order to highlight [his] otherness." (Britton 113) It is Iago who puts into question any sense of *assurance* Othello might have had. This is possible because Iago is Othello's "mimetic double" (Girard 292): he can radically destabilize Othello's sense of himself because Iago embodies the paradox of the *Self* as outsider. His

irreligiosity and radical individualism mark him as such. Iago also expresses his frustration at being turned into a cuckold by murdering Emilia. It could be argued that Emilia finally becomes more obedient to God, by telling the truth, than to her husband, thus becoming Desdemona's opposite. Both Iago and Othello trust in their merits, and are disappointed by their inability to grant them any *assurance* of their social standing.

The ensign desires whatsoever he sees others possess, or what he sees others desire. His volition is purely imitative. Although it proves impossible to utter a definitive assertion concerning his motives, it is clear that he is, at least partially, moved by his desires, including his lusts, his ire, and his concupiscence. Ironically, Iago professes to be above lust and volition, mocking Roderigo's suicidal ideations. The thought of drowning himself is "a lust of the blood and a permission of the will." (Shakespeare 236) However, when he is alone and free to express himself liberally, he reveals himself to be subject to those vices of the flesh he mocks in Roderigo.

When convincing Othello of Cassio and Desdemona's outrageous crimes, Iago essentially projects both his jealousy onto Othello and his lustful desires onto Desdemona and Cassio, both of whom possess, in a way he never will, more than a semblance of virtue. This essentially translates into a sort of scapegoating: others unwittingly pay with their life for Iago's sinful vices, first becoming transformed by him into something they are not.

Two unwitting accomplices help Iago fulfil his devilish purpose: Emilia and Roderigo. Emilia, who tempts Desdemona, is later her greatest defender, as well as the first to reveal her husband's scheming. The reason why she serves Iago to such an extent is because she is too devoted to him, as well as her desire for worldly power, for which she would "venture purgatory" (Shakespeare 361). In contrast, Roderigo does so due to his overwhelming desire for Desdemona. Iago manipulates others' desires because he is

unable to fulfil his own. This has put him in a perpetual state of resentment and envy: this can be clearly noticed, for instance, when he states that "[Cassio] hath a daily beauty in his life that makes [him] ugly" (364).

3.7 Cassio's Triumph Over the *Other*

Othello tragically recognises his "sacrifice as murder" (Girard 341), and ends his life after readopting his military personality. The fact that Desdemona's sacrifice is referred to as a murder while being performed, with the victim affirming her innocence after its performance, makes it necessary to refer to Cassio's social *atonement* in terms of the moral influence theory, instead of the ransom theory, which he evoked previously. Cassio, like Lucius, now is aware of the need for a non-sacrificial "purifying violence" (Girard 54), which is the symbolic violence of justice: the same kind of justice applied by Lucius in *Titus*' last scene.

After Othello's suicide, Cassio is named governor and allowed to execute his justice upon the play's villain. This constitutes a victory of the *Self*, which had previously been polluted by the intrusion of the *Other*, with results similar to those that were found in *Titus*, of which literalization of symbolic religious violence is the most notable one, since it leads to the performance of barbarous human sacrifices. Venice is not like Rome, since cosmopolitanism and the constant presence of the foreigner is what defined it in the eyes of the Elizabethans and Jacobeans: it is threatened by the "barbaric Turk", the collective "alien *Other*" (Vaughan 21), yet, at the same time, expects to be defended by an outsider, a Moor, whose conversion is finally put into question. As a consequence of the permanent presence of strangers in Venice, Iago's punishment is worse than Aaron's: he is condemned to suffer horrible tortures, which will be "[enforced]" (Shakespeare 398) by Cassio, who is given authority by the State to punish the machiavellian villain,

similarly to how Lucius could legitimately decide Aaron's punishment, thereby setting a violent example that, by being remembered, would avoid further intrusions of the foreigner into the State.

The sacrificial rituals associated to ancient Judaism and Catholicism are taken to an extreme of literal re-enactment by an outsider (Othello), whose *Otherness* is exploited by the fiendish Iago. Cassio thus rises over them as the restitutor of a necessary (due to Venice's cosmopolitan nature) balance between *Otherness* and the *Self*, recalling Lucius' role in *Titus Andronicus*. This balance had been lost at the beginning of the play due to Othello and Desdemona's ill-starred marriage. Cassio is allowed to punish Iago however he sees fit, and to govern Cyprus: a space that is itself defined by the continued presence of *Otherness*.

4 Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* exhibit sacrifices that are performed in cities that see themselves as being the very centre of civilized life. Both titular characters are generals of an advanced age, who have dedicated their lives to the protection of the state from any external threat, even if the effort requires the sacrifice of their own lives. However, finding themselves confronting the enemy within, they resort to the extreme violence associated with the latter as the only possible means of preserving their wholeness. Both Titus and Othello become aware of their inability to maintain their stoic inner balance in a relevant transitional moment (i.e. "into limits could I bind my woes" (Shakespeare 242) in *Titus* and "Farewell the tranquil mind" (303) in *Othello*). As a consequence of this, they turn in desperation to the performance of barbarous sacrifice. These characters inhabit a world in which desire and love's "inherent violence"

(Schalkwyk 129) has generated a series of rivalries that they precariously resolve through a process of scapegoating, Lavinia and Desdemona being the most poignant examples.

These instances of sacrificial violence are imbued with the language present in contemporary Protestant discourse about the Mass, which confirms Shakespeare's interest in the theological discussions he was surrounded with: thus, Titus and Othello become priests, and their victims (Chiron and Demetrius in Titus' case, Desdemona in Othello's) the Eucharistic host which is offered at the altar: the table where Tamora's sons are offered to her as a meal, and Desdemona's bed.

The transformation undergone by those who suffer violence into martyrs suggests that what differentiates murder from sacrifice is, ultimately, religious symbolism that projects itself onto acts of extreme violence, in certain instances even by those who suffer from it, as is Desdemona's case. In both plays, however, the tragic "revelation of sacrifice as murder" (Girard 341) precedes the protagonists' deaths.

Due to this, Titus and Othello's vengeful justice is shown to be in itself an expression of the foreigner's barbarity. It must be taken into consideration that, for Elizabethans and Jacobeans, Catholics were a quasi-pagan *Other*. Because of that, their sacrificial punishments end up being replaced by a more legalistic and symbolic sort of justice: that which Lucius and Cassio practice when punishing Aaron and Iago, respectively. Lucius and Cassio are youthful men who can more successfully negotiate the outsider's presence in their society, which they know to be unavoidable: hence Lucius' decision to take care of Aaron's son and Cassio's assumption of the governorship of Cyprus, which is a liminal space where the lines between barbarity and civility are easily blurred. The community's welfare and the moral order of their societies is reestablished by the punishment of those who upset them, punishments which serve as admonishments against the *Other*'s intrusion.

4.1 Further studies and final thoughts

The topics discussed in this paper are so broad that the possibilities of expansion and further development of certain key ideas are almost unavoidable. Focusing on Protestant views on sacrifice, *Otherness*, and the military character of Titus and Othello has helped formulate a specific interpretation of the plays which in itself could be enlarged by incorporating passages that have had to be excluded for the sake of concision, or exploring aspects of the character's use of language that may be present in other plays: Aaron's references to *popery* and Othello's interrogation of *merit*, for instance.

Despite this, the elaboration of this paper has proved to be an extremely satisfactory and profitable experience since detailed rereadings of the plays soon revealed that, even when approached from the specific angle of my subject, they lend themselves to a multiplicity of interpretations that make any conclusion about Shakespeare's dramatization of sacrifice necessarily provisional. I hope to be able to gain new insights into my theme by expanding this TFG into a full-scale TFM next year.

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