"That bloody mind I think they learned of me": Aaron as tutor in Titus Andronicus

Meg F. Pearson

Dept. of English and Philosophy, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA, USA

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Meg F. Pearson*

Dept. of English and Philosophy, University of West Georgia, 1601 Maple Street, Carrollton, GA 30118, USA

Titus Andronicus foregrounds hands – the severed limbs of Lavinia and Titus in particular – because, in this play, revenge depends on the written, writing hand. Even as the play seemingly deprives the Andronici of their agency by lopping off their limbs, Shakespeare’s earliest Roman tragedy offers up writing as a means to action and revenge. Aaron the Moor, the play’s explicit villain and master plotter, relies heavily upon writing and reading to destroy the Andronici. This heavily citational play has several well-read characters, but it is Aaron who emerges as a master of both inscription and interpretation. Aaron’s role in Titus Andronicus seems at first straightforward: he manipulates other characters, seemingly for no reason other than a delight in devilry, and is suitably punished at the play’s conclusion. Yet the play presents him not only as a villain, but as a criminal so skilled that he may teach others his craft. Aaron teaches revenge, and the Andronici’s survival depends on recognizing this. His victims come to recognize that only by employing writing and reading themselves, only by becoming Aaron-esque authors, may they exact some form of vengeance. In this play, only “what is written shall be executed” (5.2.15, emphasis added).

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Titus Andronicus foregrounds hands – the severed limbs of Lavinia and Titus in particular – because, in this play, revenge depends on the written, writing hand. Even as the play seemingly deprives the Andronici of their agency by lopping off their limbs, Shakespeare’s earliest Roman tragedy offers up writing and analysis as means to action and revenge. Aaron the Moor, the play’s explicit villain and master plotter, relies heavily upon writing and reading to destroy the Andronici. This heavily citational play has several well-read characters, but it is Aaron who emerges as a master of both inscription and interpretation. His facility with constructing his own written and literal plots, in addition to his ability to interpret the actions and writings of others, makes Aaron the play’s most potent actor and playwright. Yet the play does not stop at making Aaron an able villain, it makes him a model. His victims come to recognize that only by employing writing and reading themselves, only by becoming Aaron-esque authors, may they exact some form of vengeance. In this play, only “what is written shall be executed” (5.2.15, emphasis added).

Titus offers “another course” to revenge (4.1.118). The play’s genre – seemingly a standard, if startlingly gory revenge tragedy – calls for bloody action and bloodier reaction, but Titus Andronicus shifts much of its attention from swords to pens. In
retribution for the sacrifice of Tamora’s eldest son, the Andronici suffer punishment upon punishment from the newly empowered Goth empress and her contingent. Tamora’s sons rape and mutilate Titus’s daughter Lavinia, and Tamora connives with her lover, Aaron, to have Titus’s remaining sons murdered, framed for murder or exiled. Titus himself is tricked into cutting off his own hand to ransom his imprisoned sons. These griefs temporarily shatter the Andronici, who are helpless to respond until they begin to manipulate their enemies as they have been manipulated. Their shift from helplessness to agency hangs upon their hard-gained education in reading situations, creating their own traps and incorporating writing into their plans for revenge. Their teacher for this new behaviour is their enemy: Aaron the Moor.

Aaron teaches a particular type of revenge, and the Andronici’s survival depends on recognizing his abilities. Aaron’s role in Titus Andronicus seems at first straightforward: he manipulates other characters, seemingly for no reason other than a delight in devilry, and is suitably punished at the play’s conclusion. Yet the play presents him not only as a villain, but as a criminal so skilled that he teaches others his craft. To term Aaron a teacher of any kind perhaps strains credulity. This, after all, is the malicious scoundrel who dies regretting only that he may once have done “one good deed in all [his] life” (5.3.188). However, the pedagogue figure offers an unexpected route into understanding the relationship between teaching and revenge. In the analysis of Jonathan Goldberg, for example, the pedagogue inhabits the margins of his world due to his exclusion from the nobility and ruling class, but he also possesses considerable access to those upper echelons because he tutors the sons (and occasionally the daughters) of that world (Writing Matters 45).

Roger Ascham, tutor to Edward VI and Elizabeth I and author of The Scholemaster (1570), guides us as an example of a pedagogue who straddled this divide. Ascham’s teacher in The Scholemaster sits, as Ascham did, marginalized on the sidelines of a gathering of gentlemen. This figure serves in loco parentis; he facilitates his pupils’ “indoctrination into civilized and courtly values” (Writing Matters 44). Writing pedagogy further served to guide students towards becoming authors in their own right, particularly to use classical texts as models for writing and invention. With a teacher’s assistance, the student is given the meaning of a particular text and how it might be applied most effectively to achieve a rhetorical end. After mastering the original through imitatio, the student proceeds to invent his own version, employing amplification and other devices to best appeal to the reader.

When we export this construct into Titus Andronicus, we can begin to see how Aaron the Moor functions as a pedagogue, tutoring Tamora’s sons and even Tamora herself. He guides them through his nefarious plans and uses his abilities with language, particularly written language, to help the Goths achieve their ends. The execution of his plans relies upon the literal written word, and his capacity to read, interpret and rewrite the actions of others that helps him to maintain his dominance. Interpretation, imitation and invention serve necessary purposes on the path to inscription and revenge. By helping the Goths become literate criminals, Aaron makes himself indispensable, in spite of his questionable standing, his social role and his ethnicity. Aaron crafts the Goths’ rise to power by instructing them in reading and writing. Plots, inscriptions and interpretations drive the Goths’ actions, and so Aaron drives the Goths straight into the Imperial Palace of Rome.

The play asserts Aaron’s teaching abilities and links them explicitly to his ability to plot. After his capture by Titus’s eldest son Lucius in the play’s final scenes, Aaron
notes his influence upon Lavinia’s rapists, Chiron and Demetrius, saying, “Indeed, I was their tutor to instruct them” (5.1.98). Aaron’s instruction helps secure the newly empowered Goths for the moment, but the villain does not anticipate the appearance of a truly apt pupil. Aaron teaches Chiron, Demetrius and Tamora without fearing that his students will exceed him. However, Aaron’s crafty plans against the Andronici instruct even as they harm. Just as Roger Ascham used classical texts as models for his aristocratic pupils, Aaron’s tactics model revenge for the Andronici even as they nearly destroy them. His fatally plotted scrolls, false messages, distorted myths and assorted plots are experienced as devastation by the Andronici, but then are appropriated by them and turned against their creator. Without Aaron, the Andronici, Titus in particular, would never have plotted their gruesome revenge upon the Goths.

In spite of the considerable attention paid to the role of literature and writing in the play, no one has yet connected this literary villain to the Andronici through their shared reliance upon reading and writing for effective action. Intriguingly, the most recent work on writing in Shakespeare looks away from Titus Andronicus, arguing as Alan Stewart does in 2008 that the play seems to be the exception to how Shakespeare handles letters on stage (5), or considering the play’s interest in writing as simply a transitional moment, as does Patrick Cheney in the same year (71–72). At only two moments in the 11 excellent essays found in Shakespeare’s Book: Essays in Reading, Writing, and Reception (Meek et al.) does a critic engage with writing in Titus. Several critics, however, such as Philip C. Kolin, Jonathan Bate and Kazuhiko Murai, have made careful note of how acts of reading operate in the play. Their approaches offer an interpretive trajectory towards the manner in which reading and writing can lead to revenge, but none of these studies have explored how or why the Andronici adjust their reading and amend their writing. By attending to Aaron’s pedagogical influence, we see how the play stages Titus’s learning curve, and that of his family. In the opening acts they fail to speak compellingly or write lastingly. Aaron’s crimes against them use the perceived legitimacy of the written word to destroy and silence. Only when Titus begins to model his actions on Aaron’s, only when the Andronici stop speaking and start writing, can the play’s bloody justice be accomplished.

A hyperbolic lesson in the inefficacy of speech

Before Titus learns that writing is the medium of power, he speaks but is rarely heard. The term the play uses early on to indicate attention or its lack is “marking”, a rich word that foreshadows the inscription to come, but first indicates Titus’s inability to make himself heard or noticed. Consider its usages in the play. When Titus lies in the dust pleading with the Roman tribunes for his sons’ lives, he is ignored. He tells his son Lucius sadly, “if they did hear/They would not mark me, if they did mark,/They would not pity me” (3.1.34–35). Later, when the ravished and mutilated Lavinia is brought before her father, Titus expresses his passive grief with watching, not acting: “For now I stand as one upon a rock,/Environed with a wilderness of sea,/Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave” (3.1.93–95). The isolated man who only stands observing the sea as it comes to engulf him has no agency in Rome. Finally, in one of the spoken moments that Kazuhiko Murai might term “despicable” for its ludicrousness, Titus crows to his brother that he can indeed
understand his now tongueless daughter: “Mark, Marcus, mark! I understand her signs” (3.1.143). The alliteration and onomatopoetic exclamation reduces Titus to a barking dog rather than a man or a citizen whose words are worth hearing. Titus himself marks only his own pain; unheard and unnotated, he is also unable to read or interpret the plots surrounding him for more than three acts. Only when Titus and his family assert their own agency to mark, their ability to write in a manner that produces results, will their actions become noteworthy.

Titus and his family do inscribe from time to time in the early acts of the play, but they rarely do so in a manner that lasts. The media for their grievances are natural and transitory; they cannot write permanently. Even before Titus loses his hand to Aaron’s treachery, he does not turn to pen or paper to write down his complaints or to petition his leaders. When Titus begs the tribunes for the lives of his two sons, he cries to them that “for these two, Tribunes, in the dust I write/My heart’s deep languor, and my soul’s sad tears” (3.1.12–13). Seemingly aware of how temporary these dusty missives will be, Titus changes his tears into “prevailing orators”, but to no avail (3.1.26). Lucius reminds him that he laments in vain.

Although repeatedly identified as learned, Lavinia’s facility with writing before her maiming remains unclear in the play. After her mutilation, like her father, Lavinia turns to the earth for her inscriptions. Though she attempts to use a book of Ovid to explain her victimhood, Lavinia cannot reach her family until she resorts to a poor kind of writing. Urged to “give signs” and identify her rapists, Lavinia follows her uncle Marcus’s direction and displays “what God will have discovered for revenge” in a “sandy plot” (4.1.73, 68). In order to “print [her] sorrows plain” (74), Lavinia takes the staff in her mouth, guides it with her stumps, and writes (s.d. l. 75). Lavinia’s pen, which she uses to write the names of Chiron and Demetrius as well as stuprum, meaning rape, is a strange stylus held between her damaged wrists and resting in her speechless mouth. Marcus’s staff replaces Lavinia’s tongue, but the resulting inscription remains oral, distressingly so, and therefore intangible. Though what Lavinia writes should be enough “to stir a mutiny in the mildest thoughts,/And arm the minds of infants to exclaims”, her grainy accusation can be erased effortlessly (4.1.84–85).

Reading also eludes the Andronici at first, particularly in the case of Lavinia’s injuries. Interpretation is linked repeatedly to writing in the play. Action requires both properly expressed language and a proper reader. Titus calls for Lucius and Marcus to look upon Lavinia, but none of them are able to fully understand her injuries or determine the identity of her assaulter. Instead they hypothesize and analogize. Rather than progressing through plotting, they wallow in self-serving analysis. Upon discovering his niece with her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished (s.d. 2.4), Marcus fetishizes the pieces Lavinia has lost, contributing belated encomia for her missing hands and tongue. Offering an etymology of dismemberment, he connects Lavinia’s amputations with the pruning of trees (dismemberment was a gardening term): “what stern ungentle hands,/Hath lopped, and hewed, and made thy body bare,/Of her two branches, those sweet Ornaments,/Whose circling shadows Kings have sought to sleep in ...?” (2.4.16–19). Her hands and “pretty fingers” are lilies that “tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute”, but all have been cut away (ll. 42–45). Marcus attempts to transform Lavinia into a tree, into a lily that cannot feel pain, but he has come too late. Lavinia is no longer Philomel here, but a disfigured Diana. Like Ovid’s Apollo, who cut several of the transformed Diana’s laurel branches as trophies,
Chiron and Demetrius have “lopped and hewed” Lavinia’s ornaments to make her sure (l. 17). Marcus’s response cannot escape the reference to deal with the desperately wounded woman before him. He engages both himself and his wounded niece more deeply in the allusion to Philomel, reinforcing Lavinia’s role as the mutilated woman rather than taking even the most basic action, such as offering first aid. Aaron revised the myth of Philomel to include Lavinia, and his subject and her family find the roles inescapable.

Upon bringing Lavinia before her family, Marcus is joined by Titus and his son Lucius in his attempts to interpret what has occurred. Their understanding is completely muddled, however, and the crimes against Lavinia remain inscrutable to the family. The men notice the tears Lavinia sheds at the mention of her brothers and wonder whether “perchance she weeps because they killed her husband” or “perchance, because she knows them innocent”, seeking all the while for precedents for such behaviour in other sources, sources they might imitate (3.1.114–15). Even when Titus calls out, “I understand her signs”, it is clear that he can only read in his daughter a mirror image of his own grief, a “sympathy of woe” (3.1.143, 148). She is “thou map of woe, that thus dost talk in signs”, and her family struggles to “wrest an alphabet” with which to translate her (3.2.12, 44). Writing becomes wrenching for the Andronici, and their inability to communicate in a manner that can be interpreted outside their family dooms them to suffer in silence. Though Titus desires that those “that have our tongues/Plot some devise of further misery/To make us wondered at in time to come” (3.1.133–35), he longs for an attention that can not yet exist for him or his family. To be wondered at is not to be heard or avenged. Their interpretation becomes solipsism, leading only to reinforce their own agonies and despair. Additionally, their plotting remains oral—using “our tongues”—rather than the more effective written word.

**How Titus learns revenge**

Aaron understands how writing functions in Rome. He writes, as David Bergeron has argued more generally for the period at large, “to communicate, comprehend, create, and control” (“Introduction” 18). Written, official language alone can “wound … to the quick” (4.2.28). Aaron deploys his words via credible media, such as scrolls and official announcements, lending his malicious articulations more weight and credence. He composes the letter that convinces Saturninus of the Andronici boys’ guilt in 2.3, and later he plays the false herald of Saturninus, offering the boys’ lives in exchange for Titus’s hand in 3.1. In his autobiographical speech to Lucius after his capture in 5.2, Aaron describes his earlier effective writings, such as the inscriptions carved on newly exhumed corpses which begged their families to remember their sorrows. The play confirms the potency of official inscriptions and declarations through the credulous responses of other characters. The emperor Saturninus blithely accepts the truthfulness of Aaron’s forged letter implicating Titus’s sons Quintus and Martius. When the Andronicus suggest that the accusations should be proved before proceeding, Saturninus retorts, “If it be proved? You see, it is apparent” (2.3.292, emphasis added). Once preserved, language compels. The written word has fatal powers that far exceed the orations that come so easily to the play’s characters.
Unlike the broken Andronici, Aaron’s schemes work because he comprehends how to activate language and encourage a particular reading. For nearly four acts, Aaron holds sway over the play’s action: his words seem the only effective ones to be found. Whether written or spoken, Aaron’s language is both inter-textual and steeped in a discourse of inscription. Aaron’s ability to map the story of his Goth mistress’s rise and the Andronici’s fall makes him the author of their futures.9 Aaron’s opening speech in 2.1 – filled with epic similes of ambition and elevation – indicates both his literacy and his desire for greater things. He salutes Tamora like a classical bard, describing her,

As when the golden sunne salutes the morn,
And hauing gilt the ocean with his beames,
Gallops the Zodiacke in his glistening Coach
And ouer-looks the highest-piering hills.
So Tamora.
(2.1.5–9)

These mythological comparisons – unexpected from the villainous henchman – serve to emphasize Aaron’s worthiness as a character and as an antagonist. He is no ordinary servant, nor is he a nameless Moor like those drawing Bajazeth’s cage in Tamburlaine. He recognizes the power inherent in what Marlowe had recently termed “working words”.9 Aaron embraces villainy and seeks advancement, but he is not the enemy a playgoer (or Titus) expects.

Aaron’s calculating capabilities are distinct from those of other clever stage villains like Iago or Barabas. Though charismatic, those figures do not possess Aaron’s literary abilities. Aaron’s awareness of and facility with myth and classical poetry rivals that of the Andronici. In this play, his literate mind is more valuable than Iago’s spite or Barabas’s wealth. It is he who first suggests the rape of Lavinia by connecting her to ravished mythological precedents such as Lucrece (2.1.109) and Philomel (2.3.43). His references to Enceladus, Typhon and Alcides hurtle over the heads of his mistress’s sons (4.2.92–94), and only Aaron can parse the Horation ode Titus sends to Chiron and Demetrius, the men who raped his daughter, and recognize that “the old man hath found their guilt” (4.2.26). Here is an opponent worthy of Titus and his family, one who surpasses even his witty mistress, Tamora. Compared to her lover, Tamora is an amateur. The Goth queen’s masque of Revenge meant to torment Titus near the end of the play – is seen through immediately, and she responds to Lavinia’s pleading proverbs of mercy before her ravishment with the mystified confession, “I know not what it means” (2.3.157).

The play highlights Aaron’s superior ability to read situations as well as texts, particularly his authorship and manipulation of the deaths of Bassanius, Quintus and Martius, and the rape and mutilation of Lavinia. Titus’s inadequate markings, which follow this sequence, serve to highlight Aaron’s greater mastery. When Tamora longs to tumble with Aaron in the isolated woods during the morning hunt, she sees the place as a sunny glade where “every thing doth make a gleeful boast” (2.3.11). Aaron has established previously that the woods are “ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull”, revealing Tamora’s oblivious misapprehension and emphasizing his control of the setting as a locale for crime (2.1.129). Aaron’s alternative perspective adds to his identification as a subaltern voice in the play. Tamora reads her lover’s silent intensity as arousal, forcing Aaron to explain, “No Madam, these are no venereal signs” (2.3.37), and finally to offer a full re-reading of their rendezvous:
This is the day of doom for Bassanius;  
His Philomel must loose her tongue today,  
Thy sons make pillage of her chastity,  
And wash their hands in Bassanius’ blood.  
(2.3.42–45)

Aaron sees clearly and remains supremely able to enforce his interpretations upon his surroundings, co-opting the space around him into playing a role in his larger schemes.

Aaron sketches out the mechanisms of vengeance and then schools his fellow characters in his plans’ execution. Aaron encourages his Goth students towards a new sort of inventio – a more effective and flexible creativity. He relies heavily upon the word *plot* to describe his methodologies, a word in transition in the late sixteenth century. *Titus Andronicus* contains 12 uses of plot, a high number given the word’s near or total absence in Shakespeare’s other tragedies, and the play’s interest in schemes, particularly Aaron’s written plans, explains this number. It is simultaneously a piece of ground, a literary or dramatic outline, and a subversive scheme. The multiple meanings of *plot* gesture towards the Moor’s ability to improvise and expand upon a particular theme, in this case the ruin of Lavinia and Titus and his family. Aaron’s ability to use written language to create action mirrors that of the playwright, who fuses inscription and action in every production. The ravishment of Lavinia, the murder of Bassanius, and the accusations against Quintus and Martius may be seen as set pieces in Aaron’s repertoire. The audience is cued to the staginess of these incidents, as well as Aaron’s control over the actors, by the play’s repetitions of *plot*.

Warning his young masters against openly pursuing Lavinia’s love or competing with one another for her, Aaron declares, “I tell you Lords, you do but plot your deaths/By this device” (2.1.78–79). By disagreeing upon who deserves Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius open themselves up to the wrath of the Romans. Aaron immediately comprehends the danger and recommends unity for the brothers, a different kind of design. To gain Lavinia, the boys must instead take advantage of the “many unfrequented plots” available in the forest (2.1.116). The pieces of land in the woods are themselves rarely travelled, but the literary topos of the forest is rich ground for an abduction narrative.

While Chiron and Demetrius undertake their mentor’s policy and stratagem – killing Lavinia’s husband, Bassanius, disposing of his body in a hole and then raping Lavinia – the Moor himself composes a “fatal-plotted scroll”, to be delivered by Tamora, which indicts two Andronici sons as Bassanius’s murderers (2.3.47). These plans rely upon the Andronici’s inability to either read Aaron’s schemes or construct their responses as well as the persuasiveness of written evidence. To accomplish this murder, Bassanius must be lured in to a locale that he himself describes as “an obscure plot” (2.3.77). Like his new in-laws, Bassanius cannot read Aaron’s plot – he cannot survey this forest ground and read in it his own destruction. In keeping with the play’s insistence upon plots as both places and plans, the Andronici brothers Quintus and Martius are also led to their own plot: their grave. The “loathsome pit” and “subtle hole” where Bassanius’s body has been dumped appears “very fatal” to Quintus, whose “heart suspects more than [his] eye can see” (2.3.193, 198, 202, 213). Although Quintus remains unable to read Aaron’s plan, he can sense its dangerous implications. Tamora reinforces this connection between Aaron’s plotting and the men’s’ grave when she asserts to Saturninus that the forged fatal-plotted scroll is “the complot of
this timeless tragedy” (2.3.265). Although “complot” may operate simply as a synonym for plan, it is juxtaposed in this play with the pit itself, recalling the linkages between plots and cemeteries or gravesites. Aaron embodies a demented copia in these scenes, an ability to extrapolate and amplify infinitely upon a theme: the annihilation of the Andronici.

**Swords and pens**

The structure of *Titus Andronicus* encourages an awareness of Aaron’s influence upon Titus’s ability to revenge. As seen above, scenes of Aaron’s manipulation of writing or deployment of dramatic set pieces are juxtaposed with Titus and his family weeping to themselves or misinterpreting what they have seen, read or experienced. Not until act 4 do the Andronici become cognizant of how writing serves their purposes and plan to act upon its power. Once Titus is forced into an awareness of writing’s potential, realizing fully that Lavinia’s scratches can stir a mutiny, for example, he desires to activate language in the manner of his unwitting mentor, Aaron. Writing enables their revenge, he discovers, because in writing their suffering can be shared, understood and remembered. To this point in the play, only their bodies show their pain, but their flesh does not present the right message, at least not yet. Rather than weeping over her wounds, Titus now plans to employ Lavinia’s accusing words as a “lesson” to show his teacher how well he has learned to write vengeance (4.1.105). He declares that he will “go get a leaf of brass,/And with a gad of steel will write these words,/And lay it by” (4.1.101–3).

Titus begins to imitate Aaron in order to use writing as a weapon that can operate without its master’s presence. It may be launched into the world to act on his behalf. Additionally, by choosing a gad of steel as his pen, Titus recognizes and deploys the violence inherent in instruments of writing. In *Campo di Fiore di Quattro Lingue* (1583), a version of Juan de Vives’ writing tutorial, Claudius Hollyband creates a dialogue between two callow students and their writing instructor that illustrates this bloody potential of writing. Writing is a thing “wherby thou mayest become both wiser and better”, the boys are assured, but the lesson does not begin with wisdom (339). First, the writing master inquires of his pupils, “Haue you brought your weapons?” (331). Titus’s gad of steel, comparable to the sharpened quills and penknives necessary for writing, is recognizable as a weapon in its own right. More important to Titus’s “new course”, however, is the recognition – however clichéd – that the pen can do as much damage as a sword. A sheath of quills and scrolls will harm as well as a quiver of arrows.

Titus enacts this analogy between pens and swords by sending weapons to Chiron and Demetrius wrapped in verses from Horace. Like Aaron, Titus learns how to make and deploy literary allusions in a manner conducive to action. Written missives that demand interpretation effect change more subtly and more successfully than drawn swords. Gillian Murray Kendall explains Titus’s manoeuvre as translating the language of violence into actual violence, but the act also suggests that he has learned his lesson from Aaron (311). He does not write his message to Chiron or Demetrius, though the weapons are addressed to them. Titus writes to the man who will understand what is written, to Aaron. Chiron recognizes the lines on his gift and cries, “O, ’tis a verse in Horace, I know it well”, but reveals that his recognition is limited to his having “read it in the Grammar long ago” (4.2.22–23). Titus not only
incorporates verse into his arsenal; he relies upon the lines’ familiarity to render them banal to all but the best readers. He encodes his revenge in poetry just as Aaron used the Philomel myth to destroy Lavinia.

Aaron sees through Titus’s ploy as he is intended to, and through his response we are guided to appreciate the Andronici’s new subtlety. He mutters aside, “Now, what a thing it is to be an ass!... the old man hath found their guilt,/And sends them weapons wrapped about with lines/That wound beyond their feeling to the quick” (4.2.25–28). The possessive pronoun “their” indicates Titus’s new course in two ways. First, the meaning of the lines – “he who is of upright life and free from crime does not need the javelins or bow of the Moor”11 – is too subtle for the boys’ feeble intellects. Chiron and Demetrius take the verse at face value as an appropriate epigram for weapons, made particularly so by the mention of a Moor, but do not recognize that they are both “deciphered” as villains (4.2.8).12 In addition, Aaron’s use of the possessive “their” to describe Titus’s message endows the lines themselves with sensibility. Unlike the frail flesh, Horace’s words can do injury (“wound’) and remain untouched. Titus’s inspiration gains additional resonance when considered against the spectacular destruction of his family in the previous scenes. Writing can produce action without the threat of immediate bodily harm.

In addition to uncovering the power of allusion and written scrolls, Titus also learns reading from Aaron. Titus begins to read situations like texts, and understands that interpretation itself can be persuasive, even empowering. Titus and his family do not fathom Aaron’s plans until a scene that seems to present the Andronici as completely in pieces: Titus has lost his hand, Quintus and Martius their heads, and Lavinia her hands and tongue. The family on stage offers a legible tableau of decimation. However, as Titus begins to recognize that there is value in interpretation and inscription, he tests his new skills by offering a new reading of this grotesque family portrait. Titus’s brother Marcus, again won over by the persuasive symbolism of dismemberment, believes that “these miseries are more than may be borne” (3.1.242). He tries to make Titus share his despair by reading the spectacle thus:

see thy two sons’ heads,
Thy warlike hand, thy mangled daughter here,
Thy Other banished son with this dear sight,
Struck pale and bloodless, and thy brother I,
Even like a stony image, cold and numb.
(3.1.253–57).

In this image of division, Titus learns to read unity. Like Aaron when he corrects Tamora’s misinterpretation of the forest plot, Titus can read the potential within his family’s physical brokenness. They are all damaged now; Titus and Lavinia are both mangled, and even those who remain physically whole have been altered to stony images by the violence. Inspired by this counterintuitive familial bond, Titus begins to foresee a way to revenge that will not require any further physical sacrifices from his family. Titus first activates the passive tableau of victims – one authored by Aaron through his various scrolls and misdirections – in an active, if unnerving procession. There are no overt directions for the pageant, only Titus’s instructions to his family to pick up the pieces and move on. “Come, brother, take a head./And in this hand the other will I bear,/And Lavinia, thou shalt be employed./Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth” (3.1.278–81).13 This funeral procession
should remind us of how fractured this family has become. Daughters and old men carry away the bloody remains while the young men seek exile. But this image also shows the family carefully reconciling their missing pieces and revising their tragedy.

The Andronici persevere by interring the pieces properly at last, and dismemberment is given new meaning. Titus begins to rely on his remaining right hand to bear the burden of his son’s head. Marcus also carries a head, as though it were simply a prop rather than a son or nephew’s face. Lavinia’s participation is required, but the use of her mouth to carry her father’s hand could feel like another violation, another penetration. The disturbing image serves to remind us yet again of her missing hands and her maimed mouth, but it also shows that she can still participate in the family ceremony. She can help guide the hand that blessed her in act 1 to its proper rest inside the privacy of their home and their tomb. For this reason, this distressing ritual has method in its madness. This is re-incorporation, as the body domestic puts itself together, as well as reinterpretation, as the Andronici learn to read themselves whole. Marcus’s reading of isolation and failure, like Aaron’s, is superseded by Titus’s interpretation.

Just as Aaron played upon the naivety and credulousness of the Andronici and Saturninus, so Titus begins to exploit others’ limited expectations both of him and of written petitions. As part of this new plan of writing revenge, which features a degree of calculated madness familiar to the denizens of revenge tragedy, Titus adds more official communiqués to the quiver of Andronici weapons. He and his allies prepare arrows with letters on the ends of them to implore heaven for help (4.3., s.d.). As Titus tells his family and few friends, “sith there’s no justice in earth nor hell,/We will solicit heaven and move the Gods,/To send down Justice for to wreak our wrongs” (4.3.50–52). These arrows seem puny and comic, especially given the involvement of the clown who confuses “Jupiter” with a “gibbet-maker”, but Titus assures his followers that the petitions are “written to effect” (4.3.79–80, 60).

Titus specifically terms the arrow-messages “petitions”, lending them a formality lacking from his previous correspondences. Not only does the historical English tradition of applying directly to the monarch for the redress of wrongs informs Shakespeare’s petitions, but this scene also participates in the convention of written supplications. The right to petition guarantees direct access to the monarch or authority, but that access was most commonly obtained through written address. Titus employs this political instrument under cover of his supposed madness, even as his fellow petitioner-archers bemoan their uncle’s distraction, but the petitions are indeed effective. The arrows, addressed “ad Iouem . . . ad Apollinem,/Ad Martem” (4.3.54–55), are shot into the court where they can better “afflict the Emperor in his pride” (4.3.63). Rather than enlisting his tears as orators, Titus now makes his words into armed soldiers. His final “supplication” is sent to Saturninus via the Clown, who is instructed to “kneel, then kiss his foot, then deliver up your pigeons, and then look for your reward” (4.3.103–5). This performance of supplication conceals another weapon, however: a knife folded in the petition (4.3.108).

The reaction of Titus’s opponents leads us to realize that Titus has truly written to effect. Like Aaron’s dismayed acknowledgement of Titus’s wit, Saturninus’ furious response to the arrowed petitions indicates how potent proper writing can be. The emperor roars, “Sweet scrolls to fly about the streets of Rome!/What’s this but libelling against the Senate,/And blazoning our unjustice everywhere . . . ?” (4.4.16–18). The mobility of the messages – intended for the emperor but aimed at the gods – becomes
especially threatening to Saturninus. As Titus recognizes, this is the way to petition power. Unlike the unmoved lords of Rome who ignored Titus’s pleas for his sons’ lives, Saturninus is “overborne,/Troubled, [and] confronted” (4.4.2–3). Even though Saturninus is able to parse both Titus’s intent and his “feignèd ecstasies”, still he becomes entangled in Titus’s new plot (4.4.21). The petitions rouse the imperial family and compel them to read and obey the mad scrawlings, even against their will.

Titus exploits Tamora’s relative illiteracy as well once he masters Aaron’s skills. Tamora’s poor plotting is made immediately apparent when she disguises herself and her sons as Revenge, Rapine and Murder in order to lure Titus out and Lucius home near the play’s conclusion. Titus marvels mockingly, “how like the Empress and her sons you are!” (5.2.84). Obviously Tamora still requires Aaron’s assistance. Indeed, Titus wonders where her tutor has gone:

Well are you fitted, had you but a Moor.
Could not all hell afford you such a Devil?
For well I wot the Empress never wags
But in her company there is a Moor,
And would you represent our Queen aright,
It were convenient you had such a Devil:
(5.2.85–90)

Tamora and her sons have not written a good enough play, they cannot forge a plot that will function, and they do not know when to script their exits.

Titus’s now-superior ability to read the plots of others allows him to not only evade Tamora’s snares, but to use her devices against her. When the empress assures him that “Revenge now goes,/To lay a complot to betray thy foes”, Titus responds confidently, “I know thou dost” (5.2.46–48). He reads in her fumbling the model of his own plot, which he then reveals to her hapless sons who have been left behind with him. He will bid Tamora to a feast drawn from the conclusion of Philomel’s sad story. Her sons will be made into meat pies and served to their mother, just as Procne, the sister of Philomel, served her son Itys to his father Tereus. “This is the banquet she shall surfeit on”, Titus warns the boys, “For worse than Philomel you used my daughter,/And worse than Progne I will be revenged” (5.2.193–94). He has read the myth, seen it deployed, and now becomes capable of rewriting it for his own purposes of revenge. *Imitatio* leads to *inventio*, which leads to a horrific amplification.

**Scripting revenge**

As the play hurtles towards its wounded finale, we pause for a moment in Titus’s study, where he is furiously writing down his plans. Like Aaron, Titus has become a master of activating his language. Surpassing his teacher, he begins to lend his writing additional potency by writing in his own blood. He outpaces Aaron’s fatal plotted scroll by making his written plans as bloody as his hoped-for vengeance: “for what I mean to doe/See here in bloody lines I have set down” (5.2.13–14). In addition to using a politically expedient style or genre of writing, Titus now empowers the material letter itself. Just as the staining of a letter with tears heightens the missive’s emotional effect, blooding a letter inserts a piece of the author into the inscription.16 A letter functions in the absence of its author, and this ritualistic incorporation of his own body into the ink increases the effect.17 Using his own blood as ink, perhaps even using his damaged wrist as an inkpot, Titus reinforces his
plans using the compulsive force of blood-stained letters. Setting down a plan in blood implies both permanence and willingness for self-sacrifice, a dangerous combination in a revenger. Unlike most revenge tragedies, which rely heavily on performance, particularly masques, for their climatic scenes, here we see inscription made literally vital. This distinctive persuasive power may be seen in several other tragedies such as *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) by Thomas Kyd and George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois* (1607), where the blood red letter is deployed to compel obedience.

To write in blood is to inscribe oneself, to use one’s own essence as a pathetic appeal that can then function as the author’s proxy. Like pathos itself, however, the bloodied letter can be too persuasive. When Hieronimo catches Bel-Imperia’s missive written in blood “for want of ink” (3.2.26), his response is paranoia. “Hieronimo, beware, thou art betrayed,/And to entrap thy life this train is laid . . . . This is devised to endanger thee” (3.2.37–40). Rather than trusting Bel-Imperia’s explanation of his son’s murder, Hieronimo sees the bloody lines as a dangerously persuasive device – perhaps one better employed by the protagonist – and urges himself against credulity.

The danger foreseen by Hieronimo is realized in Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, where a bloody letter lures the hero to his death. After being stabbed and racked by her husband, Tamyra agrees to write to her lover, Bussy. She declares, “I’ll write, but in my blood that he may see,/These lines come from my wounds and not from me” (5.1.168–69). Unlike Titus’s lines, Tamyra’s are meant to be warnings to the reader rather than effective instructions for revenge. Yet her red ink compels obedience in spite of her hopes. Bussy is taken in, and reads Tamyra’s bloody lines as “a sacred witness of her love”, one that makes his spirit “apt t’encounter death and hell” (5.2.90, 96). The bloodied letter seems irresistible; it operates with the force of its author through the pity of its recipient.

Having activated his writing by infusing it with his own blood, Titus continues to evolve as a literate revenger. The full extent of Titus’s education at Aaron’s hands is made explicit when he returns to Aaron’s reference to Philomel. Jonathan Goldberg interprets Titus’s return to the myth as the patriarch “ultimately reenacting the Ovidian text . . . as a further citational act” (*Shakespeare’s Hand* 27). However, Titus actually improves upon his teacher’s literate analogies, which have previously been used to suggest potential courses of actions. Aaron, like a latter-day Tereus, incites his charges Chiron and Demetrius to ravish and silence Lavinia. Rather than alluding to myths as Aaron did, Titus plans to script his own re-enactment of the legend, literally activating the language through the medium of theatre. Like Philomel, who was forced to use her wordless art of weaving to communicate her plight, Titus’s plotting develops into a performance in act 5 that can be seen as well as heard. In Titus’s script, he plays both Philomel and Procne, the beleaguered sister who avenges Philomel. This manoeuvre situates the play back in the tradition of revenging masquers and playwrights, but it also reminds the audience of Aaron’s role in this story. By incorporating writing stories and reading myth into the staging of revenge, Titus appears to surpass his teacher.

Aaron employs allusions to suggest courses of action, and relies on written scrolls that can do his bidding without his physical presence. Although his manipulation of the hunting scenes in act 2 appears directorial, Aaron does not possess complete control over those moments; he may have directed the action, but he did not script those scenes. Titus has tested the extent of written revenge by using petitions and his
own blood to make his writing as powerful as possible. He concludes in act 5 that although writing can enable revenge, it cannot guarantee the violence he desires. Scrolls and petitions do have force in the play, but they are still too limited in their scope. Writing "address[es] the eye instead of the ear", argues Heather Kerr, and Titus wishes to amplify his address through adaptation into drama (11). Titus requires a scene that will lure his enemies to him so that he might slaughter them all. He looks to the "pattern, precedent, and lively warrant" of stories to guide him (5.3.43), as Aaron has modelled, and executes his own final revenge by brutalizing the already overburdened Philomel myth, the same text that maimed Lavinia. He bids Tamora to a feast drawn from the conclusion of Philomel's sad story. Revenge tragedies frequently make use of plays or masques within the main action to undertake their final revenge. Hieronimo's masque in The Spanish Tragedy, Vindice's "masque of revengers" in The Revenger's Tragedy and Hamlet's Mousetrap all expose and often punish criminal behaviour. What differentiates Titus from his avenging brethren is his determination to throw the words and texts that damaged his family back upon those who hurt them. The Philomel myth has not been seen to its conclusion until Titus returns to the text for his performance. Aaron set him a theme, and Titus is determined to complete his assignment, even to "o'erreach them in their own devices" (5.2.143).

Titus moves from writing scrolls to plotting drama as act 5 draws to a close. He arrives as a Prologue in costume like a cook (s.d. 5.3.25). His appearance is strange enough to merit comment from the emperor Saturninus, who wonders, "Why art thou thus attired Andronicus?" Titus assures his guest that he is dressed so "because I would be sure to have all well;/To entertain your highness and your Empress", but the cue to performance is clear (5.3.30–32). Titus's welcome even contains a humility trope recognizable to theatregoers who have heard the Prologue express his misgivings about the quality of the play-to-come: "although the cheer be poor,/ 'Twill fill your stomachs" (5.3.28–29). He directs everyone to take their places, and he promises to entertain his noble guests as they sit to their gruesome banquet. Tamora declares, "We are behold[ing] to you good Andronicus" (5.3.33), but once again does not realize the import of her words. She has joined us in the role of spectator, where she can only behold and hear rather than affect the action. She and Saturninus are now the ones who can only mark Titus's show, and it is their tragedy.

As though to emphasize the artifice of his performance, reminding his audiences what he has wrought for his revenge, the climax of Titus's script employs an antiquated rhyme scheme reminiscent of earlier Elizabethan plays. The rhyming stichomythia follows Titus's murder of Lavinia:

SATURNINUS What, was she ravished? Tell who did the deed.
TITUS Will't please you eat? Will't please your highness feed?
TAMORA Why hast thou slain thine only daughter thus?
TITUS Not I: 'twas Chiron and Demetrius.
They ravished her and cut away her tongue,
And they, 'twas they, that did her all this wrong.
(5.3.54–57)

The language has a hurtling momentum all its own as Titus and his royal guests fling lines at one another. After a brief exchange in which Saturninus calls for the empress's sons, the rhymes return.
SATURNINUS Go fetch them hither to us presently.
TITUS Why, there they are, both bake’d in this pie.
Whereof their Mother daintily hath fed,
Eating of the flesh that she herself hath bred . . .
He stabs the Empress
SATURNINUS Die, frantic wretch, for this accurs’d deed.
He kills Titus
LUCIUS Can the son's eye behold his father bleed?
There's need for need, death for a deadly deed.
He kills Saturninus. Confusion follows.
(5.3.58–65)

After five acts of blank verse, the rhymed exchanges give the scene a grotesque childishness, a sense that is exacerbated by Titus's chef costume. Titus has written to effect once more, and his insane absurdist play confuses his guests so that he might stab the Empress Tamora before being slain himself. This inevitable death – the fate of all revengers – could represent Titus's loss of control as “he is displaced by the text of his revenge” (Cutts 147). However, his words remain in circulation in Rome through his son, Lucius. Unlike all the reading and writing that has perpetuated violence, “performance . . . engenders a sense of structure and resolution” (Palmer 108).

Titus finally exceeds his teacher by outliving his own revenge. The players are all dead, and Marcus returns the play’s dialogue to blank verse as he emerges to play Epilogue to Titus’s drama, addressing “you sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome” (5.3.66). The revenge has been taken, the play has ended, but history remains to be written. This inevitable chronicle should be penned by Lucius as the new emperor, but the references to communication after Titus’s death revert to orality. Titus’s story, which we have just seen unfold, is referenced now in the language of telling and remembering, but not as writing. “Many a story hath he told to thee,/And bid thee bear his pretty tales in mind,/And talk of them when he was dead and gone”, Lucius reminds the family (5.3.163–65). With the end of Saturninus and Tamora’s reigns, perhaps the spoken word may be heard once again, but the credulous faith in speaking seems naïve and premature after so many failed orations. However, Titus’s orality is reclaimed and immortalized just as his unwilling teacher is mocked to death.

As his punishment, Aaron will be buried breast-deep and starved. “There let him stand, and rave, and cry for food”, declares Lucius, warning that “if any one relieves or pities him,/For the offence he dies” (5.3.179–81). The greatest plotter will be left without expression or audience, but Aaron remains unmoved by his punishment. He is “no baby”, he states (5.3.184). His actions and his written words have spoken for him, giving infamous voice to his mute wrath and dumb fury. It is him “by whom our heavy haps had their beginning”, realizes Lucius (5.3). What Lucius does not yet realize is how Aaron’s “bloody mind” taught Titus how to save his family, how Aaron’s writing lessons enabled his prey to retaliate and to be remembered after they both are dead and gone (5.1.101).

Notes
1. 5.1.101.
2. For Elizabethan audiences as well as many contemporary critics of the play, “Aaron is evil incarnate, a consummate and despicable villain devoid of any redeeming qualities” (White 361). Yet, as Jeannette White continues, “the Moor’s ends, as he well knows, are fated, but
this awareness does not prevent him from constantly and consciously trying to subvert the
established order as he perilously negotiates his space as subject and rejects his position as
‘other’” (337). Aaron’s attempts at subversion explicitly employ his superior command of
writing and reading.
3. The Scholemaster’s “Preface to the Reader” begins with such a scenario: “When the great
plage was at London, the yeare 1563. the Quenes Maiestie Queene Elizabeth, lay at her
Castle of Windsore: Where, vpon the 10. day of December, it fortuned, that in Sir William
Cicells chamber, hir Highnesse Principall Secretarie, there dined togethre these perso-
nages, M. Secretarie him selfe. Syr William Peter, Syr J. Mason, D. Wotton, Syr Richard
Sackuille Treasurer of the Exchecker, Syr Walter Mildmayne Chauncellor of the Exchecker,
M. Haddon Master of Requestes, M. John Astely Master of the Jewell house, M. Bernard
Hampton, M. Nicæus, and J. Of which number, the most part were of hir Maiesties most
honourable priuie Counsell, and the rest seruing hir in vere good place. I was glad than,
and do reioice yet to remember, that my chance was so happie, to be there that day, in the
companie of so manie wise & good men togethre, as hardly than could haue beene piked
out againe, out of all England beside” (B1r).
4. Peter Mack discusses the use of Erasmus’s textbooks in this mode of instruction,
particularly De conscribendis epistolis and De copia (25-43).
5. In his essay “Performing Texts in Titus Andronicus”, Philip C. Kolin shows how “reading,
formerly important for inculcating wisdom, is now engaged in the service of revenge”
(251). Writing also becomes a tool for Titus, according to Kolin, but he does not connect
this move towards inscription with Aaron’s abilities as an author-plotter. Jonathan Bate
addresses the play’s fetish for reading in his edition of the play. As he puts it, “when the
characters are not revenging or raping, they spend their time reading – reading events,
reading texts and citations, reading the book of Ovid in which the narrative of the drama
is pre-written” (35). In another approach, one that explores how various human activities
evolve in Titus, Kazuhiko Murai analyses the importance of speaking, writing and
reading to the play. Murai argues that the play values both reading and writing: “It is as if
language could be effective only if written” (11). This effectiveness is not immediately
apparent to Titus and his family, however. They must be taught by the master. Thomas
Anderson and Gillian Murray Kendall also attend to language and revenge in the play.
6. Murai argues that “the speaking activity itself is actually intended to appear somewhat
despicable” in the play, noting both the numerous examples of absurd alliteration as well
as the repeated, fruitless demands to the tongueless Lavinia that she speak up (10). The
first four examples of the latter phenomenon include Marcus’s requests, “Cousin, a word.
where is your husband?” (2.4.12) and “Speak, gentle niece . . . Why dost not speak to
me?” (2.4.16, 21); Lucius’s question, “Speak, gentle sister, who hath martyred thee?”
(3.1.81); and her father’s demand, “Speak, Lavinia, what accurséd hand/Hath made thee
handless in thy father’s sight?” (3.1.66–67).
7. W. Webster Newbold describes how vital writing was in the early modern period for
“career advancement, or even economic survival” as well as for petitioning for legal aid
(276). However, this reliance upon writing led to its own problems. For cultural anxieties
in the early modern period about trusting writing, see M.T. Clanchy’s chapter on trusting
writing in From Memory to Written Record (231–57).
8. In his discussion of maps and travel narratives in Elizabethan England, William Sherman
notes how plot may indicate a progressive movement towards future endeavours: “In most
plots . . . what was sketched out was not something already written or achieved but rather
a plan of action in some undertaking – an outline, that is, not of but for something” (4).
Aaron’s plots, as they map out Tamora’s revenge against Titus, also lead the Andronicii to
a different place: out of the Rome they know so well and into a world where their methods
of communication and understanding are inadequate. They become strangers in their own
land, easy marks for a conniving villain.
9. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine is repeatedly commended for his powerful rhetoric. The
quotation is drawn from Theridamas’s excuse to Cosroe, whom he has abandoned in
favour of Tamburlaine: “You see, my lord, what working words he hath” (2.3.25).
10. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, plot appears once, four times in *Coriolanus*, and not at all in *Julius Caesar*. The non-Roman plays are similarly plot-less: *Hamlet* has three plots, *Lear* three, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* none.

11. McDonald’s translation, (67, n. 20/C1 21).

12. When Chiron and Demetrius ask Young Lucius for the news in this scene, Titus’s grandson responds in an aside, “That you are both deciphered, that’s the news,/For villains marked with rape” (4.2.7–8). Not only can young Lucius read the villains clearly, but the written scroll he delivers to them from his grandfather subtly proclaims their guilt.

13. The 1594 and 1600 Quartos and the 1623 Folio use “between thy teeth” rather than the Oxford edition’s “between thine arms”. “Teeth” resonates more clearly for this critic, particularly considering Lavinia’s later use of her mouth as a newly discovered tool of inscription in 4.1. Additionally, Titus suggests that Lavinia “get some little knife between thy teeth” in the next scene (3.2.16), further suggesting the utility of her mouth.

14. Alan Dessen includes this scene in his chapter on theatrical italics – those moments that demand greater attention as a result of their spectacularity – because he believes it reminds the audience of the family’s complete violation (94–95).

15. See James Daybell’s chapter as well as Erin Sadlack’s article on petitions. Both concern how written pleas are used, particularly by women, in the early modern period.

16. Consider Pandarus’s detailed instructions to Troilus for writing an effective letter to Criseyde: “Biblotte it with thi teris a little” (Chaucer 2, 1027).

17. See Heather Kerr for the functionality of such correspondence in the play (3).

18. Charlotte Scott posits that Titus also uses the story of Virginius and his daughter as a means to release himself from the myth of Philomel. Only by changing books can Titus shift his paradigm, she argues (35).

19. The play here recognizes Titus as a teacher in his own right even more explicitly than it does for Aaron. Tamora, while disguised as Revenge, replies to Titus’s orders, “Well hast thou lessoned us. This shall we do” (5.2.110).

20. Consider the Prologue to *Eastward Ho!*: “Bear with our willing pains, if dull or witty;/We only dedicate it to the City” (Chapman et al. 13–14), or Jonson’s *Volpone*: “Now, luck yet send us, and a little wit/Will serve to make our play hit;/According to the palates of the season” (1–3) as two examples of many such Prologues.

21. The Oxford edits the line as “We are beholden to you”, whereas the 1623 Folio as well as the 1594, 1600 and 1611 Quartos all use “beholding”, a far richer and more provocative word choice for my reading.

22. The rhymes recall plays such as George Peele’s *Arraignment of Paris* (1584), which is written in rhyming fourteeners:

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JUNO Venus, what shall I say? For, though I be a dame divine,
This welcome and this melody exceeds these wits of mine.
VENUS Believe me, Juno, as I hight the Sovereign of Love,
These rare delights in pleasures pass the banquets of King Jove.
(1.4.6–9)
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The language also reminds one of the stilted and old fashioned *Mousetrap*, the play within a play in Shakespeare’s later revenge tragedy, *Hamlet*:

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PLAYER QUEEN So many journeys may the sun and moon
Make us again count o’er ere love be done.
But woe is me, you are sick of late,
So far from cheer and from your former state,
That I distrust you.
(3.2.154–58)
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23. This line appears only on line 203 of the Q2 printing of the play, and McDonald suggests that these final lines – which he omits from his Pelican edition – were composed in an effort to reconstruct the unreadable original, likely a defective copy of Q1 (106, n. 201–4).
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