

The Crime Scene of Revenge Tragedy: Sacrificial Cannibalism in Seneca's *Thyestes* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus**

Carol Mejia LaPerle
Department of English Language and Literatures
Wright State University, USA

Abstract

Analyzing the parallel gestures of ritualistic brutality deployed in the cannibal banquet of Seneca's *Thyestes* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, I reveal how the genre of revenge tragedies is simultaneously an instance of, and challenge to, Georges Bataille's socio-economic theory of excess within a general economy. Excess, and not scarcity, is the motive and the condition for revenge. Both revengers react to a surplus of energy, or what I will call the "excess of possibilities," that threatens autonomy. Thus, the victims of revenge embody the excess of possibilities in the plays since they are reminders of the contingency, and potential indistinguishability, of the agents of revenge. Sacrificial cannibalism emerges as the revenger's means for autonomous differentiation, thus eliminating the unbearable interchangeability generated by surplus. Furthermore, by theorizing the excess of possibilities as the underlying pressure driving Atreus as a Senecan revenge figure, I argue that the citation of a specifically Senecan cannibal banquet, appropriated in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, is a gesture by the author to sacrifice, and thus gratuitously consume, the surplus violence generated by the act of representation itself.

Keywords

revenge tragedy, Bataille, Seneca, *Thyestes*, Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, cannibalism

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