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# Revenge, Guilt, and Greed: Feast Scenes and Political Order in Shakespearian Society

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# Revenge, Guilt, and Greed:

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## Feast Scenes and Political Order in Shakespearian Society

**Ashley VanderWeele**

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of Johnson & Wales University  
in partial fulfillment of  
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## INTRODUCTION

**Strange** to see how a good dinner and feasting reconciles everybody. – Samuel Pepys

Feasts are a time of community unity, a time of imposed order even if chaos abounds. Feasts can be for celebratory reasons, they can be of a religious nature, and as Samuel Pepys points out, they can help mend rifts among people at odds with one another. Even when feasts have celebratory or religious purposes, they may also involve political matters. A monarch, for example, may host a feast to celebrate his wedding, but, while celebrating the joyous royal union, the guests are also celebrating the political union of two kingdoms. Many times a king marries to strengthen his kingdom and ruling power, not for love. His wedding feast is actually a political act.

These banquets, especially those given for political reasons, such as the crowning of a new monarch, epitomize the various elements of social order. For example, guests are seated according to status. The host sits at the center of the high table, esteemed guests sit next to him and the rest of the guests sit according to rank. The lowest ranking guests sit the furthest from the high table, sitting at the end tables. The courses of the meal are served in a standard order; dessert, for example, is served after the main course, not before. The food itself reflects the status of the host. The higher the rank of the host, the more unusual and expensive the food. The rules and rituals that govern feasts make them a time of order, a time when people can come together and restore order even if only temporarily.

Feasts bring people together for a brief time to enjoy multiple courses. At a number of these banquets, various entertainers perform for the enjoyment of the guests. The variety of entertainment depended on the amount of money the host is willing and able to spend. The wealth of the host could also influence the types of entertainment, determining whether he is able

to have several different groups of entertainers performing throughout the feast or only a small group of entertainers. In England, for example, a host could have jugglers or minstrels performing throughout the meal. Storytellers could recite poems or tell ballads and stories of heroes. Jesters, acrobats, and even actors could also provide entertainment during the meals.

Entertainment at the banquets was wide and varied and could include musicians, storytellers, or jugglers. Ballads of heroes, such as King Arthur and his Knights of Camelot or Robin Hood and his Merry Men, would be recited. The actions of legendary men in battles would be told, bringing to life their bravery and courage, and reminding the audience to honor these heroes. Accompanying some of these recitals would be mock reenactments of moments in the story. Similar to these mock reenactments was another form of entertainment: a small play or performance.

Plays can illustrate daily life or they can depict a transformative event, elongating it into an extreme and unlikely situation. Yet, there are still influences from life that audiences easily recognized, such as weddings, funerals, and feasts. Structure and order appear at these events, but because plays can depict an exaggeration of life, structure and order can quickly dissipate. In plays, this process of unity and disintegration is frequently apparent in feast scenes. Order underlines the entire flow of a feast, from the seating of the guests to the courses of the meal. Using feasts as scene settings allows the playwright to create events and problems that disrupt the feast that often reflect disruptions in the order of the audience's world. William Shakespeare was one such playwright who used feast scenes to explore larger problems in a disordered society.

Throughout Shakespeare's thirty-eight plays, several feast scenes take place, occurring for different reasons, including religious and celebratory reasons. However, in his tragedies,

Shakespeare's characters host feasts for various political reasons. In these scenes, a feast does not hold to the idea that a feast represents the political order of society. Rather, the occurrence of disorder at a feast reflects the collapse of the society in the play. The feast scenes of Shakespeare's tragedies influence an important change in the plotline, where disorder at the feast reflects on the lack of order in the political structure of the society.

In his comedies, feasts are for times of celebration, such as the wedding feast at the end of *Taming of the Shrew*. While feasts are not as common in the histories, they do appear, as in the banquet that is hosted by Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. The feasts in the tragedies, however, hold the greatest importance. These feasts represent symbols of political power and order, as all of his tragic plays revolve around a weakening political state. Furthermore, these feast scenes are crucial turning points, revealing the collapse of the order and structure of the state. This use of feast scenes is most apparent in Shakespeare's plays *Titus Andronicus*, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, and *Timon of Athens*.

## FEASTS

While feasts were prevalent during Shakespeare's time, they were not limited to the Elizabethan and Jacobin eras but have been a part of history since the times of ancient societies. These various feasts are found throughout history and are mentioned in a number of historical texts, such as the Bible and Ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

Feasts in ancient history were often associated with religion. Many of these feasts honored gods. One example is the Saturnalia, an Ancient Roman feast celebrated in mid-December in honor of Saturn, god of sowing, to give thanks for a plentiful harvest. After a sacrifice at the temple of Saturn, the people would gather for a public feast. In an unusual twist, slaves would become their masters' equals and the masters would serve food to the slaves (Ogilvie 98). During Saturnalia, the hierarchy of society was reversed, with the slaves in charge and the masters humbled. Like the ancient Romans, the ancient Greeks and Egyptians would also have a feast after the gathering of the crops to pay tribute and give thanks to the gods for the plentiful bounty. Even though these banquets were of a religious nature, there could also be a political connotation as well. The structure of society was often emphasized in the feast.

A different style of feasts made appearances in ancient texts such as the Greek epic poem by Homer, *The Odyssey*. The poem opens with a feast of the gods, setting up the plot. Later when Telemachus is inspired to search for information regarding his father, he travels to several different kingdoms. When he arrives at his first destination, the palace of King Nestor, a feast to Poseidon is underway, which he is invited to attend. Similarly, every night, Penelope's suitors would gather in the palace for a feast (Homer). A different text is the Latin work of fiction by Petronius, *Satyricon*, which has a section of fifty-two "chapters" that occur during a feast that one character holds for his friends and neighbors (Fletcher).

The food at these feasts was wide and varied as a way of allowing the host to display the wealth and power in society that he possessed. The types of food served were dependent on location and trade as well as how much money the host was able and willing to spend. The funeral feast of King Midas of Phrygia (Turkey) consisted of fresh figs, goat cheese, asparagus, flat bread, and lamb and lentil stew. There were sweet tarts, goat milk and honey desserts, dried apricots topped with sheep milk cheese and pistachios, and chicken and current stuffed dolmades. To accompany the meal was liquor made of honey, barley, and grapes. One of the dishes for a feast Roman Emperor Vitellius hosted was called The Shield of Minerva. This dish included pike livers, pheasant and peacock brains, flamingo tongues, lamprey spleens, and other items from all the corners of his empire. Trimalchio's feast, from *Satyricon*, had a large spread of dishes, portraying the host as a wealthy social climber. Among the wine, olives, pastries, and meats, was a Zodiac platter, showing Trimalchio's superstitious nature. The platter represented the signs of the Zodiac:

“Aries the ram represented by chickpeas; Taurus by a beefsteak; Gemini by pairs of testicles and kidneys; Cancer the Crab by a garland; Leo by an African fig; Virgo by a young sow's udder; Libra by two balanced pans of dessert; Scorpio by a sea scorpion; Sagittarius by a sea bream with eyespots; Capricorn by a lobster; Aquarius by a goose; Pisces by two red mullets.” (Fletcher 3).

The dish was then served with honeycomb and bread. The food was unique itself, but the unusual variety of food in the platter indicated to the guests that the host was quite wealthy, as he could afford foods from different regions of the Roman Empire. In the social hierarchy, he was high ranking and would have possessed greater political power.

Descriptions of famous feasts in history are not limited to the writings of ancient historians but are also found within the pages of world-renowned books, such as the Holy Bible. The Bible contains several important feasts that play a role in the Jewish and Christian faiths.

One of the earliest feasts mentioned in the Bible is the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the night of the Passover, in the book of Exodus, the Lord told Moses and Aaron to tell the man of each family to take a lamb and roast it over a fire with bitter herbs. In addition, for seven days, the Israelites were to eat bread made without yeast. The Lord also commanded the Israelites to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for generations to come as a way to remember the night the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt (*NIV Bible*, Exodus 12.1-27). This feast is still celebrated today by the Jewish community each spring. Religious meals, such as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, brought the community together, strengthening the ties of the people within it. The rituals and rules of this feast establish order and purpose in this small community, helping to add structure and stability to the larger society.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, or the Passover, is a part of a second feast mentioned in the Bible, the Last Supper. In the Gospels, Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Passover. During the meal, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it to share among the disciples, telling them that it was His body, given to them. He also took the wine, and after giving thanks, shared it with the disciples, telling them it was His blood, the new testament, shed for them (Luke 22. 7-23). These words and actions are still celebrated today as the Eucharist in the Christian community. Christians also celebrate Maundy Thursday in remembrance of the Last Supper before Jesus's death on the cross. Much like Passover of the Jewish faith, the Last Supper and communion bring together the community and aid in the institution of the rituals of the Christian faith.

Feasts continued to be a part of society, and different societies throughout the centuries held banquets for different festive reasons of religion, celebrations, and politics. The Romans held banquets in celebration of their gods, such as the Saturnalia for the god Saturn. The wealthy



would also host public feasts as a way to placate the general population and prevent potential revolts (Strong 36). The Nordics and Anglo-Saxons held feasts during the Early Middle Ages to celebrate victories over enemies as well as to form social bonds (Strong 55). By the time of the English Renaissance, feasts in England were primarily for celebrating religious holidays and also for numerous political reasons, such as political unions and advancements in court.

## ENGLISH RENASSIANCE

The people of the English Renaissance lived in a time when religion controlled nearly every aspect of their lives, so throughout the year, they would celebrate many religious holidays with a feast, such as Easter, a major holiday celebrated in the spring. The Easter holiday is preceded by a forty day period of abstinence known as Lent during which people do not consume favorite foods and celebrations would be minimal, as Christians prepare for the day of Christ's crucifixion. After the solemn observance of Lent, Easter, celebrating Christ's resurrection, becomes a day of feasting. Once the Easter services had concluded, people who could afford to would gather for an extravagant feast to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps the best known Christian holiday occurs at the end of the year, the day celebrating the birth of Christ, with the Christmas feasts and celebrations. The Christmas season begins with Advent, which follows the observance of Lent in the abstaining from certain foods and festivities. Advent ends on Christmas where early Christmas morning, people would rise for Christmas services, then attend several more during the day. The evening was spent feasting with family. From Christmas until the Epiphany, work was stopped and the days were spent in celebration, oftentimes with extravagant feasting for the wealthy (Ridgeway). The Christmas season would end January 6<sup>th</sup>, with the celebration of the Epiphany, held in honor of the visit of the Magi following the birth of Jesus and most often ended with a feast.

Feasts during the English Renaissance were not just for religious purposes. They were also given in celebration of marriages and alliances, or given on the simple whim of the monarchs. Whatever the main purpose of the banquet, there was oftentimes a secondary political reason. For instance, during the summer, the monarch would travel the country, visiting each nobleman's estate for a few days or even a week at a time. For the monarch, travelling in the

summer months was a way to avoid the plague as it made its way through the cities in the summer; more importantly, it also provided an opportunity to fill the royal treasury, drained in the winter months by the royal family's needs. At each estate, the nobleman would hold feasts for the monarch and the accompanying party during their stay. The types of food and entertainment at each feast varied depending on the wealth and generosity of the nobleman, which would later reflect on him. The more lavish a feast, the further a nobleman could find himself elevated at court. For the noblemen, extravagant feasts held in honor of their monarch could result in the reward of more power and wealth.

The feasts of the Elizabethan Era, at the beginning of the English Renaissance, were modeled on the feasts of the French court, because King Henry VIII was constantly in competition with the French King, Francis I, during his reign. In addition, his second wife, Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth's mother, had spent several years in France as one of Queen Claude's ladies in waiting. The cooks of Queen Elizabeth knew the high French standards for a feast and would strive to create similar feasts for the queen (Alchin). A typical royal feast would be multi-coursed with dozens of different dishes. There would be a wide variety of meats, various custards, tarts, and different types of sweet meats. A feast could conclude with the last course consisting of prepared wines and preserves of various fruits and sweet pastries. The imitation and modifications of French feasts provided Henry VIII, and, later, Elizabeth I, with a way to assert the perceived superiority of England over a similarly powerful France.

The feasts were not just about the wide variety of food and the number of different dishes served but also about the visual display these dishes created. Many of the birds, especially the swans and peacocks, were decorated with their full plumage after roasting. Roasts would be covered in gold leaf. Decorative sugar sculpting became very fashionable. Pastries could be

built into pyramids with sugar as glue and edible plates and goblets were sculpted out of sugar. The creativity of the cooks resulted in beautiful sugar showpieces, such as tall sculptures for centerpieces that could grace the banquet table. Sometimes the sugar centerpiece would be made in the shape of a large castle with live birds inside (Fletcher), though the sugar sculptures were not limited to the size of centerpieces. The sculptures could take up entire table such as the one made in celebration of Alessandro de Medici's wedding in 1536.

“No fewer than three thousand pieces depicted the journey of the bride from Lisbon to the Netherlands and her reception there. The voyage was shown as beset by storms, whales and marine monsters, with an effigy of Alessandro awaiting his bride's disembarkation at Middelburg. The tableau went on to record her triumphal progress through several cities before arriving in Brussels.” (Strong 198)

Other sugar dishes were made with marzipan and were model replicas of castles and Biblical scenes. Oftentimes, the sugar sculptures would be gilded as well. The visual displays of sugar were another sign of wealth and social status the host of a banquet had. They represented the political standing the host had in the kingdom.

During this time, food often symbolized the power and rank of the host of a feast. In the past, sugar was one such symbol of power and wealth as it was an expensive imported product; therefore only the wealthy upperclassmen, nobility, and royal family could afford to have dishes made with sugar. Spices were also a symbol of power and wealth during this time as they were also imported, and like sugar, were for those who could afford them. The more spices used in dishes and the more dishes made with sugar, the more money the host of the banquet had to spend on such luxuries. Sugar and spices helped to distinguish the nobility and royal family from the merchants and lower classes.

Food and feasts played an important role in English Renaissance culture, particularly in their symbolic reflection of wealth and power. This importance was not lost on playwrights of

the time, especially William Shakespeare, who uses feasts throughout his plays. Feasts and festivals in Shakespeare's plays have been studied by a number of different theorists, who have arrived at different conclusions as to their meaning in the plays. In his book, *Shakespeare's Festive History*, David Ruitter discusses the political purposes of the feasts in Shakespeare. Ruitter analyzes the moments of feasting in *Henry IV*, where Hal attempts to strengthen his political position through his description of Falstaff and the knight's diet and behavior to provide a feast within the play. As Ruitter points out, Hal "participates in the drinking, thieving, and joking more for his own political purposes than for genuine sense of brotherhood" (94). To Ruitter, Shakespeare's feasts are about political advancement as well as for strengthening current political power. Joan FitzPatrick's book, *Food in Shakespeare*, describes how Shakespeare uses food to introduce new settings and time periods, where food is used to explore the similarities and differences in these new settings. In *Titus Andronicus*, for example, Titus has his family eat just enough to survive in comparison to the Gothic gluttony and overindulgence as a way to distinguish between the eating habits of the Romans and the Goths (9). In the fifth chapter of her book, FitzPatrick explores profane and exotic consumption, such as cannibalism, in three of Shakespeare's tragedies, where revenge is used in the context of eating. Tamora, in *Titus Andronicus*, participates in the most profane consumption, cannibalism of her sons. FitzPatrick further explains this profane consumption as a form of punishment: "those who defy Rome are forced to suffer extremes of consumption: Tamora feeds upon that which is exotic and is, in turn, fed upon by birds of prey" (10). For FitzPatrick, food is used in a number of different ways in Shakespeare's plays, depending on the setting and events of the play. Food, feasts, and festivities were a vital part of the English Renaissance and several playwrights, especially Shakespeare, used food and feasts to reflect the order of society in their plays.

Shakespeare uses the feast scenes in his plays to create a setting that brings together many of the characters to witness the effects of disorder at a banquet as a reflection of the poor political health of a society. In his earliest tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare wrote a feast scene in which revenge plays a major role. Here, the audience witnesses the collapse of the society as Titus exacts retribution for the heinous acts committed by Tamora and her sons against his family. Towards the middle of his career, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, writing a feast scene where most of the lords of Scotland witness the effects of guilt on Macbeth's mental health that leads to the eventual downfall of Scotland. While *Timon of Athens*, one of Shakespeare's last plays, is different in that there are two important feast scenes, these scenes show the dismal consequences of greed of the lords of Athens on the demise of the order of society.

## TITUS ANDRONICUS

Shakespeare's first tragic play was *Titus Andronicus*, a graphically violent play centered on revenge. After Roman General Titus Andronicus finally defeats the Goths, he brings back prisoners including the Queen of the Goths and her three sons. Though she begs for her son's life, Titus ignores the Goth Queen's pleas and executes her son, initiating the revenge-filled events that lead to the play's ultimate act of vengeance. This final scene, a feast scene, uses an unusually grisly act of retribution to show the negative effects of revenge on the social order.

Titus executed the defeated Goth Queen's eldest son to avenge the death of Titus's sons in the war between the Romans and the Goths. When Tamora, the Goth Queen, asks Titus to spare her son, Titus replies,

“These are their brethren, whom you Goths beheld alive and dead, and for their brethren slain religiously they ask a sacrifice: to this your son is mark'd, and die he must, to appease their groaning shadows that are gone.” (I.i)

This execution of her eldest son initiates the subsequent acts of revenge that Tamora inflicts on Titus, leading to Titus's final retaliation in the last act. In an aside to her future husband Saturninus, the Roman Emperor, she states her intentions clearly, saying,

“I'll find a day to massacre them all and raze their faction and their family, the cruel father and his traitorous sons, to whom I sued for my dear son's life, and make them know what 'tis to let a queen kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.” (I.i)

Her plans for vengeance begin in earnest after this scene.

Tamora's plans for revenge are set into motion after she marries Saturninus, using her newly gained power and influence as Empress to inflict her vengeance against the Andronicus family for the death of her eldest son, and by doing so, leads Rome deeper into political disarray. Her first act is against Lavinia, who is raped and mutilated by Tamora's sons after having witnessed the death of her husband Bassinaus, also at their hands. Her next act of revenge comes

when two of Titus's sons are put to death because Tamora leads Saturninus to believe that they were his brother's murderers. At the end of the scene, Titus's hand, cut off as ransom for their lives, is sent back along with the heads of his sons. Tamora's final act of vengeance is to appear in disguise to Titus with her sons to convince Titus to convince Lucius to call off the mounting Gothic attack against Rome.

The final scene of the play is the turning point for Titus. The scene is set at a feast that Titus has prepared to have his retaliation against Tamora. He enters, dressed like a cook, and serves the pie to those gathered, before revealing Tamora's evil deeds. Titus begins with Lavinia, asking Saturninus,

“Was it well done of rash Virginius to slay his daughter with his own right hand, because she was enforced, stain'd, and deflower'd?” (V. iii)

Saturninus agrees, giving the reason that “the girl should not survive her shame, and by her presence still renew his sorrows” (V. iii), which Titus accepts as sound reasoning before proceeding to kill Lavinia. For Titus, it was an act of mercy, killing his own daughter. Though it seems to be an act of madness, Titus explains that Lavinia was able to name the empress's sons as her attackers. Titus proceeds to tell those present that “there they are both, baked in that pie; whereof their mother daintily hath fed, eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” (V. iii). By baking the sons into the pie, Titus not only gains revenge for his daughter against her attackers, but also revenge for himself against Tamora before killing her as well. Saturninus then kills Titus, but Titus has the last act of revenge. His remaining son, Lucius, kills the emperor, ending the need for revenge against Tamora's family.

Titus had a number of different options available to him for revenge. However, he chose to kill the sons, “grind their bones to powder” (V.ii) and their flesh into pie filling, and serve the pie to their mother before killing her. The pie as a form of revenge reflects the rigid military



personality that Titus, as a Roman general, has. In addition, as FitzPatrick suggests, the pie presents a way for Tamora to consume her sons and absorb the barbarity that she had herself encouraged (123), a way for evil to consume itself. The feast scene is the first time Titus is able to actually put his thoughts of revenge in motion and change the future of Roman leadership. While Tamora is responsible for all of the acts of revenge committed throughout the play, it is Titus who commits the final revenge acts at the feast.

The use of a feast scene as a setting for revenge is unusual for any of Shakespeare's plays. However, in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare does just that, where the form that Titus uses for exacting vengeance is a pie filled with the flesh of Tamora's sons to be served at the feast. Titus foreshadows this unusual form of revenge as well as the severity of the sons' impending deaths when he says "for worse than Philomel you used my daughter, and worse than Procne I will be revenged" (V.ii). As a part of his style, Shakespeare seems to have received inspiration from the story of Philomel and Procne for this method of vengeance.

Philomela is the main character of an Ancient Roman myth that tells the story of the nightingale and the swallow. Philomela was a princess of Athens, invited to visit her sister Procne and her family. Procne's husband, Tereus, escorting her to their kingdom, finds Philomela to be extremely beautiful and rapes her. Afterwards, he cuts out her tongue and tells Procne that her sister is dead. Philomela weaves a tapestry that tells her story and sends it to Procne. Procne rescues her sister and the two plot their revenge against Tereus. They kill Procne's son and serve him to Tereus, who eats him, after which they reveal that he has eaten his own son. Tereus chases the two, intending to kill them, but the gods transform them into birds: Tereus into a hawk (or hoopoe), Philomela into the song-less swallow, and Procne into the nightingale, who sings the sad tale to the world (Ovid). In the last lines spoken to the two sons

of Tamora, Titus not only emphasizes to them their fate but also references to the audience that this act of revenge has taken place before for the exact same crime. At last, Titus will have his revenge and much like Procne and Philomel, it will begin with a dish of cooked human flesh at a feast.

Shakespeare uses a feast scene because a feast would imply that everyone is gathered for a celebration, reflecting a state of political order and social peace. However, the feast in *Titus Andronicus* lacks all these elements. Rather, it is a meal where all the rules and social norms are ignored and nothing is as it appears. Titus invited Saturninus and Tamora on the pretense of peace and the opportunity for reconciliation. However, his true intentions were based on revenge. At the end of act five, scene two, Titus speaks to the captured sons of Tamora, describing how he will take their bodies and make them into a pie that he will force their mother to eat, declaring that “this is the feast that [he has] bid her to, and this the banquet she shall surfeit on” (V. ii). There is no hope of reconciliation, only death as a means to finally obtain revenge. Rather than striving for peace between the two families, Titus murders the two young men and is prepared to murder Tamora and mercifully kill Lavinia. The only celebration will be Titus’s once Tamora has eaten the pie and he has killed her, though it will be short-lived.

Saturninus, Tamora, the senators, tribunes, and the lords of Lucius’s Gothic army come to Titus’s feast and sit down at the table, waiting for Titus to appear, and for the feast over which reconciliations will be made to begin. At this time, Tamora and Saturninus believe Titus to be mad and suffering from “brain-sick fits” (V.ii). Titus enters, dressed like a cook and begins serving the pie, reinforcing their belief. Everything appears to be peaceful and calm, even with Titus mentally unstable. Yet, at this feast, nothing is as it appears. Titus is not mad, the feast is not one of peaceful gatherings and joyful celebrations, and the hearty pie is made with human

flesh. Every act of Titus has a deeper meaning that quickly comes to light as the play draws to a close and the final acts of revenge are performed.

Revenge is the central idea of the play *Titus Andronicus*. Throughout most of the play it is Tamora, Queen of the Goths and Empress of Rome, who has had revenge on the Andronicus family. It is due to her that Titus has lost most of his family and now seeks retribution. Yet, Titus is not given an opportunity to exact retaliation of his own until the last act. It is not until the end of the second scene of the final act that the last deeds of revenge are put into place.

The pie served at the feast is the symbol of this revenge as well as a symbol of the disarray of the political state of Rome. Ever since the previous emperor of Rome, Saturninus's father, died, and the two brothers competed for the title of emperor, the political state has slowly fallen into disarray and unrest. The making and eventual devouring of the pie puts the course of political restoration and calm into motion as evil devours evil. There cannot be peace until the final acts of revenge have played out (Farrell). The warring parties must come together for a feast where the pie is eaten as evil consumes evil and the horrible deeds of Tamora and her sons are brought to light. Lavinia must be killed to release her from her daily pain and undeserved shame. Tamora, Saturninus, and Titus must die. Then, and only then, can the state be restored and peace once again reign in Rome.

At the beginning of the play, Titus is a beloved general of Rome and is offered a chance to become emperor of Rome, which he turns down to support Saturninus. The betrayal of Saturninus turns Titus's world upside down, leaving him vulnerable to Tamora's revenge plot. Yet, in a twist of fate, it is the Andronicus family who gets the last act of revenge and restores political peace to Rome with just a pie and a feast. Shakespeare brings feasts to the play and

gives feasts a different meaning, one where it is necessary for revenge to occur and evil to be consumed by itself before the political order of society can be restored.

*Titus Andronicus* shows that revenge leads to the destruction of society and order is restored only after evil consumes itself. Evil begets more evil in a never-ending cycle. At some point the cycle must break temporarily. Through the self-consumption, this temporary relief is gained. In *Titus*, Tamora represents the embodiment of evil, and through childbirth, begets more evil in the form of her two surviving sons. She then eats her own children in the last act and evil devours evil through a pie at a feast. Thus, with Tamora's death, the cycle is broken as there is no one left of Tamora's line to bring about wickedness and destruction. In this momentary relief, order has an opportunity to be restored.

## MACBETH

Shakespeare wrote the tragedy *Macbeth* in the middle of his career. Whereas Shakespeare uses a feast scene in *Titus Andronicus* to show the negative effects of revenge on a society, the feast scene in *Macbeth* is less graphically violent and more focused on inner psychological complexity. Here, it is the appearance of a murdered friend's ghost at the banquet that causes the king to go mad with guilt, symbolizing the moral corruption at the center of the kingdom. Rather than the collapse of society as a result of revenge per se, as in *Titus Andronicus*, in *Macbeth* the king's mental breakdown reminds the audience that the stability of a monarch reflects the stability of the kingdom, and thus depends on the head of the political state being of sound mind and strong moral character.

The fatal actions of *Macbeth* begin with Macbeth and Banquo meeting three witches on the hearth, who greet the men with prophecies concerning Macbeth.

First Witch: "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!"

Second Witch: "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!"

Third Witch: "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (I. iii)

After delivering their next prophecy about Banquo, the witches disappear. A soldier then appears with the news that upon hearing of Macbeth's deeds during battle, the king has bestowed the title Thane of Cawdor on Macbeth. When Macbeth learns of this new honor, he realizes that the prophecy told to him by the three witches he just met was true. The last part of the prophecy was that he would "be king hereafter" (I. iii), and Macbeth's actions from that point on revolve around obtaining and keeping the crown of Scotland.

Macbeth's first action to ensure the fulfillment of the final prophecy is murdering Duncan and framing Duncan's sons for the murder, thus clearing the way for him to take the crown. Once Macbeth attains the crown, he proceeds to eliminate those who would oppose him. One

such person is his friend, Banquo, prophesied by the three witches earlier to “get kings, though [he will] be none” (I. iii). Banquo’s murder and the resulting consequences come together during a feast scene held in Macbeth’s honor as the new king.

The Macbeths host the feast as a way to fully establish their position as the new king and queen of Scotland. The thanes are required to attend to pay homage to the Macbeths as well as to show their support of the new rulers. Macbeth’s inquiry after Banquo is not simply out of concern for his friend. It is also Macbeth’s way of drawing the thanes’ attention to the idea that one of the thanes is in opposition of Macbeth’s coronation. That it is the king’s close friend that appears to oppose the new monarch, regardless of the true reason for his absence, generates an early indication that Macbeth’s rule is not set in stone.

The setting of this key feast scene is the Macbeths’ estate, where most of the lords are in attendance at the new king and queen’s feast. The Macbeths greet their subjects and invite them to sit and enjoy the feast. After the murderer enters, standing off to one side, and makes his report that Banquo is dead and Fleance has escaped, Macbeth returns to the table and inquires after Banquo.

“Here had we now our country's honour roof'd, were the graced person of our Banquo present; who may I rather challenge for unkindness than pity for mischance” (III.iv).

The feast continues in an orderly manner, as typical of a royal feast, for only a few more minutes. The moment Lennox suggests that Macbeth sit in an empty chair, disorder erupts. There in the empty chair sits the ghost of Banquo, shaking his bloodied head at Macbeth.

Feasts are normally about order and calm, much like the beginning of the feast in *Macbeth* when the lords enter and sit in order of rank, leaving the head of the table for the king and queen, visually symbolizing the hierarchy. The feast also serves to strengthen Macbeth’s ascension to the throne, establishing with whom the power of the kingdom lies as Macbeth hosts

the feast. By hosting the feast, Macbeth brings the lords together, demonstrating the extent of his control and power. However, at the point when Macbeth sees the ghost, the order starts to disintegrate. At first, Lady Macbeth is quickly able to reestablish order by playing the gracious host while Macbeth is momentarily distracted by the entrance of the murderer bringing news to Macbeth that Banquo “safe in a ditch he bides, with twenty trenched gashes on his head; the least a death to nature” (III.iv). Order continues as Macbeth approaches the table and asks of the whereabouts of Banquo, whose presence was required. The order of the feast quickly falls into disorder, however, as Macbeth continues to lie to his subjects, this time acting in wonderment as to where his friend could be when he has just been brought word that Banquo is dead.

One of the reasons for Banquo’s murder is his suspicions of Macbeth’s role in the death of Duncan. Banquo is the only person besides the Macbeths who knows about the witches’ prophecies. He is therefore a threat to Macbeth and must be eliminated. With this threat handled, it appears to Macbeth that there is nothing that can threaten his sovereignty. However, Macbeth does not realize that his supremacy depends on the loyalty and support of the monarch’s subjects. Without this support or loyalty, the reign is short-lived and the power is limited. Banquo’s absence thus gives the appearance to the other thanes that he does not support Macbeth as king.

The thanes do not only swear oaths of loyalty to their king but also provide money and soldiers for any battle the king engages in. Banquo’s apparent lack of allegiance means that the money and soldiers he would have provided gives rise to the idea that the money will go to an opponent of Macbeth’s. Yet, Macbeth brings about this lack of alliance from one of his thanes with Banquo’s murder. The appearance of the ghost results not only from Macbeth murdering a

friend but also a manifestation of the potential threat that has been created to the king of Scotland.

Banquo's ghost makes an appearance at a feast designed to cement the power of King Macbeth, but rather than the feast firmly establishing this authority, it begins the collapse of the political order of the society. Banquo's ghost causes Macbeth's guilt to so overwhelm him that he is driven to madness. As Macbeth begins to lose control of his mental stability, the thanes watch as the political solidity of the kingdom begins to deteriorate as well. With this instability, Scotland becomes a kingdom unable to fight off any foreign armies wishing to take the throne. Macbeth's own imbalance drives away the support of the thanes who start to question the political well-being of their kingdom with a mad king on the throne. Banquo's absence from the feast eliminates a problem for Macbeth but then soon creates a new one.

The banquet proves to be Macbeth's undoing, as disorder in both his life and the political state of the kingdom bring about inevitable collapse. The purpose of the feast is to celebrate Macbeth's ascension and to acknowledge the potential benefits for the kingdom Macbeth will create. However, the feast is shortly interrupted by a supernatural event, the appearance of Banquo's ghost that only Macbeth sees.

Shakespeare may have been influenced by the Bible story of Belshazzar, in which a ghost makes an appearance at a feast, much like Banquo's does. In the Book of Daniel, King Belshazzar of Babylon gives a feast for a thousand of his nobles. In the middle of the feast, he gives orders to the servants "to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem" (Daniel 5:2). He orders the goblets to be filled with wine so that all present may drink from the goblets and praise the riches taken from the temple. As they drank the wine,



“the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.” (Daniel 5:5)

The king had all of his enchanters, astrologers, and diviners brought to the banquet hall to interpret the message. When the men of the king could not interpret the meaning of the words written, Daniel was summoned to provide an interpretation. Daniel told the king that because he held himself equal to the Lord, his days are numbered and his kingdom shall be divided between the Medes and the Persians. True to Daniel’s interpretation, “that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom” (Daniel 5:30).

The ghostly fingers writing words on the wall spell the end of the reign of Belshazzar. The appearance frightens the king as he tries to learn the meaning of the fingers and their message. As each diviner reads the words and tells the king he does not know what they mean, the king becomes more terrified, much as Macbeth did with the appearance of Banquo’s ghost. The ghostly fingers bring the message to the king that he will die soon and his kingdom will go to another.

Though Banquo’s ghostly appearance at a victory feast arises from different causes, the apparition similarly hints at Macbeth’s own downfall. The ghostly fingers of the Book of Daniel and Banquo’s ghost are harbingers of death to the kings they appear before. The kings’ terror causes them to abandon the order and propriety of the feasts as they try to explain the ghostly presence away. Fear, as well as guilt, brings them from being elevated men of status, someone to look up to, down to the level of the average human. Belshazzar’s guilt over attempting to be equal to God and his fear of the ghostly fingers leads him to death as he is slain later that night, while Macbeth’s guilt over murdering Banquo and fear of his ghost causes him to descend into

madness before he is later slain. The political states, as known to the people, collapse in disarray as the kings are driven to terror and destroyed by their fear and guilt.

The ghost's appearance signals the coming disorder which even Lady Macbeth's attempts fail to cover up. After inquiring as to the whereabouts of Banquo, Macbeth is gestured to an empty seat by Lennox. However, as Macbeth turns to the seat, the ghost of Banquo appears and occupies it. In disbelief, Macbeth stares at the ghost and demands to know which of the lords called Banquo's ghost to the banquet. While Macbeth continues to talk to the silent ghost, his guests sit in wonderment, watching their king speak madness to an empty chair. Their concern growing, one of the lords tells the others "gentlemen, rise. His highness is not well" (III. iv). Lady Macbeth is quick to reassure them that all is well with their king. She tells them not to worry,

"My lord is often thus and hath been from his youth. The fit is momentary; upon a thought he will again be well. If much you note him, you shall offend him and extend his passion: feed and regard him not." (III. iv)

In her attempt to have the lords dismiss the matter, she tells them that Macbeth suffers from fits of madness, inevitably making things worse. The lords begin to worry about the state of the kingdom while a madman sits upon the throne. Macbeth's unusual behavior continues and though Lady Macbeth tries to reassure the lords, eventually she simply dismisses them. Her failure to appease and reassure them also signals Macbeth's eventual failure to govern.

A king is expected to have certain qualities that will enable him to rule his kingdom effectively and efficiently. He is to follow established protocol in all aspects; in religion, in politics, and in social occasions. The king is the model whom all the subjects aspire to emulate. Macbeth goes against all royal expectations beginning with the banquet at which Banquo's ghost appears to haunt Macbeth. As Macbeth stands at the banquet speaking to the ghost, he proves to

his lords how unsuitable he is for the role of host of a banquet and more importantly, the role of being the king. The appearance of the vision of a ghost pushes Macbeth into madness, and from there he is unable to effectively rule Scotland. Disorder ensues as the political health of the kingdom collapses with its king. Lords begin to plot the overthrow of Macbeth and one lord in particular, Lord Macduff, goes to join Duncan's elder son Malcolm and the army raised to overthrow Macbeth.

The feast scene of *Macbeth* is where the Macbeths attempt to establish themselves as royals and flaunt their new power. As the monarchs are hosting the banquet, all the thanes of Scotland are required to attend to allow the Macbeths to reestablish the hierarchy. The disorder that occurs during the feast scene due to Macbeth's guilt causing madness undermines this attempt. Rather, this collapse of order reflects the collapse of political order in the kingdom as the thanes not only question the sanity of their king but also well-being of a kingdom ruled by a mad monarch. The murder of Banquo does not just drive Macbeth to madness through guilt over killing a friend. Banquo's death is an indication to Macbeth that his murderous methods have destabilized the loyalty of the thanes, which in turn contributes to Macbeth's guilt-laden madness. The mental welfare of the monarch reflects the political well-being of the kingdom, and Macbeth's personal imbalance mirrors the political instability of Scotland.

## TIMON OF ATHENS

*Timon of Athens* is one of Shakespeare's later tragic plays. In this play, Shakespeare creates a more complex and less violent revelation of the failures of society during feast scenes. Unlike the gory revenge of *Titus Andronicus* and the madness of *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens* is about the destructive powers of greed on a society, and how Timon comes to this realization after a feast. Rather than exacting revenge like Titus or suffering madness-causing guilt like Macbeth, Timon channels his bitterness at society into a second feast to point out the destructiveness of greed.

*Timon of Athens* has two feast scenes. The first reflects Timon's skewed understanding of the Ancient Greek idea of hospitality while the second reflects the realization of his naivety. The play opens with Timon holding a lavish banquet for all his friends and acquaintances. No expense is spared, and food of all types and varieties are spread along the banquet table for the guests to enjoy. Throughout the banquet, several guests ask Timon for money, while others are presented with generous gifts, with Timon not sparing any expense in his gifts. Timon even pays a man's debt to allow the man to be released from debtor's prison and attend the banquet. This feast in the beginning of the play shows the generous nature of Timon and the lengths he goes to in order to help people to attain happiness. Yet the feast also shows one of Timon's greatest weaknesses, his inability to say no and risk upsetting someone. The feast sets up the events of the play.

Timon goes out of his way to ensure that everyone around him is happy. He lavishes gifts and bags of money on his fellow countrymen. However, the generosity of Timon depletes his funds to the point of bankruptcy. Timon's servant, Flavius, has repeatedly attempted to tell Timon that he is nearly out of funds and tries once more at the banquet. Flavius states:

“He commands us to provide, and give great gifts, and all out of an empty coffer: nor will he know his purse, or yield me this, to show him what a beggar his heart is, being of no power to make his wishes good: His promises fly so beyond his state that what he speaks is all in debt; he owes for every word: he is so kind that he now pays interest for 't; his land's put to their books.” (I. ii.)

Timon ignores Flavius once again and continues to hand out gifts to all present, seeing gift giving as a part of what defines friendship.

Throughout history, it has been a custom of some cultures, like Ancient Greece, for the host of a banquet to give gifts to the guests. Jewels, cloth, and money were among the types of gifts that a guest could receive, depending on the wealth of the host. Timon’s generosity reflects the Ancient Greek culture when he presents the various gifts to his friends and acquaintances at the banquet, much like the kings and queens of Homer’s well-known Greek epic poem *The Odyssey*. Throughout the poem, the two main characters, Odysseus and his son Telemachus, journey through kingdoms, the first searching for passage back to Ithaca and the latter seeking information about his missing father. As the two travel on their separate missions, they are invited to attend banquets given by the royals of the kingdoms they travel through. While feasting, father and son reveal their identities and their purpose in traveling. Moved by Odysseus’s story of hardship and woe and Telemachus’s story of oppression by plaguing suitors, the royal families of each kingdom visited are moved to give whatever aid they can provide. In addition to this aid, the queen presents the guest with a chest full of gifts from her family. In Book Eight of *The Odyssey* for example, the king of the Phaeacians tells the peers of the realm:

“Leaders and Counsellors of the Phaeacians, hear me. This stranger seems a man of the highest discernment. Let’s give him a friendly gift as is only right. Twelve illustrious princes rule our land, and I am the thirteenth. Let each of you twelve bring him a fresh tunic and cloak, and a talent of rich gold, and let us all arrange it swiftly, so the stranger may go to his supper with a happy heart having our gifts to hand. And let Euryalus make amends with a gift and an apology, for his unfortunate words.” (Homer 204)

The king then also tells his wife to present a chest to hold all the gifts as well as a cloak and shirt as her own gifts. In addition, Euryalus, the man who insulted Odysseus, presented him with a solid bronze sword with a silver studded hilt to make amends. As Telemachus prepares to leave the kingdom of Menelaus in Book fifteen, Menelaus asks him to wait until suitable gifts are prepared for him. Menelaus, his wife, and his son then present Telemachus with their gifts: a silver mixing bowl from Megapenthes, a double cup from Menelaus and a dress woven and embroidered by Helen for Telemachus's bride from Helen (Homer).

The banquet and gift giving scenes of *The Odyssey* illustrate the idea of *xenia* or hospitality. In Ancient Greece, offering hospitality wasn't just a polite action; it was part of the social code to show this level of kindness to strangers. The Ancient Greeks believed that *xenia* was enforced by Zeus. Giving gifts to the guests was therefore a way to show further hospitality to them. While the gifts were given out of the politeness of the host, they were also given as a sign of respect, on the off-chance that the guest was a god in disguise. Throughout *The Odyssey*, gifts were given to Telemachus and Odysseus to ensure that the hosts did not offend the gods and to show how great their hospitality could be. As a Greek, Timon's gift-giving follows the same customs, showing his kindness and hospitality towards his guests. Unfortunately for Timon, his generous gift giving leads to bankruptcy and his exile from Athens.

This first banquet sets up a turning point for Timon. It is after this feast that Timon learns that he is bankrupt. He sends his servants out to ask for a loan from his friends. However, because Timon just gave a lavish feast and numerous gifts to the attendees, none of the men will loan Timon the money for his debts. For the first time, Timon learns the true nature of his friends. They are simply men who enjoy feasting at the expense of another as well as receiving

gifts. Yet, it is the moment where Timon is made aware of the true nature of his friends, and his own personality changes from kind and generous to bitter.

Timon practiced the custom of giving gifts at a feast not so much for the sake of *xenia* or the possibility of a god in disguise appears at one of his banquets, but more out of kindness towards his friends. Timon's definition of friendship extends to where a person gives a friend a gift as a way of materially acknowledging their friendship. However, it is unnecessary for the friend to then give a gift in return. According to Timon's understanding of friendship, which he demonstrates at his banquets, friends give gifts with the intent of making the receiver happy and do not expect gifts in return. At every banquet, most of the lords and senators of Athens would be in attendance. Timon believed that they were there because the men were his friends.

Timon is a naïve character at the first feast. He truly believes that all the guests have come to the banquet because they are his friends. As a citizen of Ancient Greece, a host often gave gifts to guests at a feast to show off wealth as well as to ensure the gods' favor. While Timon follows these customs, his gift-giving is rooted in the belief that he is so blessed with all of these friends and so he freely shares his wealth. He upholds the tradition of gift-giving but, because of this misguided belief, for all the wrong reasons. He fails to understand the political ramifications that result from his generosity, and when misfortune occurs, cannot comprehend the reluctance of the lords to loan Timon money. The shock and surprise that none of the men he considered to be friends would loan enough money to cover his debts changes Timon as he realizes how much he has deceived himself into believing that his guests had attended the banquets out of friendship.

By the feast of Act three, Timon is aware of his naïveté as well as the cruel, greedy nature of his false friends, and his second banquet is symbolic of this awareness. Gone is the generous

man. Only the bitter, disappointed spirit remains. After chasing away the creditors, Timon begins to put into motion his plan of denouncing the corruptive behavior of the greedy society. He calls Flavius to him, ordering him to “go, bid all my friends again, Lucius, Lucullus, and Sempronius: All, sirrah, all: I'll once more feast the rascals” (III. iv.). Flavius though, is worried as there is hardly any food to prepare even a modest banquet, but Timon tells him not to worry, they will manage.

Timon’s self-awareness is emphasized by the lack of mindfulness of the lords and senators in attendance. When the banquet scene opens, the guests begin to appear and several discuss the loan requests of Timon. They speak of how sad they were in their inability to provide Timon with a loan.

Second Lord: In like manner was I in debt to my importunate business, but he would not hear my excuse. I am sorry, when he sent to borrow of me, that my provision was out.

First Lord: I am sick of that grief too, as I understand how all things go.

Second Lord: Every man here's so. What would he have borrowed of you? (III. vi.)

The First Lord replies that due to limited capital on hand, he was unable to provide a thousand piece loan. None of the lords or senators could believe that Timon needed a loan. All believed that Timon’s wealth was endless and ever increasing.

The moment arrives for Timon to face the men he once called friends and denounce their corrupt behavior. Timon enters and welcomes all of his guests to the banquet. He has his attendants bring in the covered dishes and invites his guests to the table to give thanks to the gods. It is during this grace of thanks that Timon’s plot to reveal the abuse of power by the senators of Athens begins to show. At first he thanks the gods and asks them to “sprinkle our society with thankfulness” (III. vi). However, by the end of the grace, Timon’s opinion and feeling towards his guests is apparent. He says to the gods,



“O gods--the senators of Athens, together with the common lag of people--what is amiss in them, you gods, make suitable for destruction. For these my present friends, as they are to me nothing, so in nothing bless them, and to nothing are they welcome.” (III. vi)

In this part of the grace, Timon admits that the men present are not truly friends as he once so naively believed only a short while ago. These men instead are liars and deceivers who profess one thing and do another when an occasion of need arises. “Uncover, dogs, and lap” (III. vi) cries Timon to his guests, insulting them further as the dishes are uncovered before them, revealing dishes of warm water and steam.

Even as they are confronted by their corruption, the guests are confused by the dishes. Their confusion only increases as Timon proceeds to throw water on the men, washing off the flattery they paid him. After throwing the water, Timon brings to his guests’ attention how terrible he finds them. He calls them “fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time’s flies, cap and knee slaves, vapours, and minute-jacks” (III. vi), insulting them for their betrayal of friendship. He criticizes them for praising him in order to continue receiving his gifts rather than out of true friendship. They are leeches, staying only long enough to get every last little gift from Timon before quickly abandoning him in times of misfortune. Timon’s last act against his betrayers is to throw the dishes at the guests and drive them out of his banquet hall before cursing Athens and humanity, and going into exile.

The way the society’s order collapses is unusual in *Timon of Athens*. Like Titus and Macbeth, Timon plays a role in the collapse of the political society; unlike the other two men, Timon’s last feast does not result in a violent collapsing of the order of society. Rather, it symbolizes Timon’s recognition of the corruption of the lords and senators, reflecting on the troubled moral state of Athens. While Timon does not bring about the disorder in the political society, he shows how it has deceived naïve individuals and how one can react to the deception.

Timon's last banquet was an attempt to show the lords that their words are simply smoke: once spoken, they evaporate and mean nothing. Timon was generous with his wealth, helping those in need and asking for nothing but friendship in return. Unfortunately, the lords and senators are unable to see beyond their need to hold onto their wealth, even if it means the destitution of another. The refusals cause Timon to quickly realize that the men were using him for their own gain. This self-realization becomes the driving force behind the purpose of the second feast and a reason why Timon goes into exile.

The second feast scene serves as a warning of the inevitable collapse of the Athenian society. While one citizen renounces society, another citizen plans an assault on the city with his troops, but a society with political order does not have citizens planning to attack their own city or shunning humanity and becoming misanthropes. These actions result from an underlying moral disorder. *Timon of Athens* is different from the other two plays because the feast scene does not directly lead to the collapse of the political order of society. Instead, the collapse is already in motion. Timon's second feast puts into motion the last actions that lead to the near total collapse of Athenian society.

Timon's banquet of water and stones reflects how he has come to view the people of Athens, as water and earth; common, plentiful pieces of the world that have the potential to be great or destructive. As he throws the stones and water at the men, he demonstrates his awareness that they are nothing more than forces of devastation; it is through them that the political order of society will collapse. Unlike Titus or Macbeth, Timon is not the cause of the downfall. Rather, he is a driving force that aids in escalating the society to the brink of turmoil. Timon's banquet in Act Three shows that he has come to recognize that the political order is crumbling and failing. Timon's self-realization changes him into a complete opposite of himself

and instead of trying to give aid to humanity; he gives gold to help destroy it. In this way, Timon hopes that order will be restored.

## CONCLUSION

**Those** who sit at the feast will continue to enjoy themselves even though the veil that separates them from the world of toiling reality below has been lifted by mass revolts and critics. – Mary Ritter Beard

Feasts are a time of unity, of peace, of order. They are a place of gathering of friends, family, neighbors, and the community. They are moments of good cheer and celebrations. They are opportunities for people to come together and just forget about the chaos and disorder of the world for a few brief hours. As Mary Ritter Beard notes, a feast creates a wall of separation between the calm of a feast and the reality of the troubles of the world. At a banquet, people celebrate joyous occasions, religious occasions, moments of reconciliation and friendship, and political matters. Yet it is these very qualities that make feasts a good source of conflict for a skilled dramatist like Shakespeare.

Shakespeare alludes to the separating veil to be taken down, and the feast scenes reveal problems of society. In *Titus Andronicus*, revenge is woven throughout the play. Titus finally exacts his own revenge through a pie made of human flesh offered to Tamora at his feast. This bloody, violent act of revenge leads to the near total collapse of order in the Roman society. Rather than fixing matters, revenge destroys everything it touches. In *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, the need for power drives Macbeth to commit murder and to hire others to commit murder. The guilt of his murderous actions drives Macbeth to madness, an undesirable quality in a king that leads to Macbeth's downfall. The guilt so overwhelms Macbeth at the banquet he is hosting that it becomes apparent to the thanes in attendance that the well-being of Scotland is at risk. As a consequence, Macbeth's guilt-driven madness leads to the near collapse of the Scottish society. In *Timon of Athens*, greed is the driving force of all the actions of most of the characters Timon encounters. The Athenian society has slowly become corrupted by the men in power, the same

men he believed to be friends. Timon demonstrates how this abuse of power has affected one man in the society. He ignores his idea of *xenia*, abuses his guests with the stones and water, and then renounces society. Timon's final feast shows how the disorder in the political society has deceived naïve individuals and how one can react to the deception.

The feasts and festivals of Shakespeare's plays have been studied by a number of theorists, who have arrived at different conclusions as to their meanings in his plays. One theorist, David Ruitter, concludes that the feasts play a role in political advancement and strengthening of political power. Joan FitzPatrick's conclusion is that the food is used to introduce new settings, time periods, and customs of foreign lands. However, a different conclusion is that the feasts in the tragedies are reflections of the political disorder and threat of collapse in society. Titus's need for revenge demonstrates the inevitable destruction of society, where order can only be restored after evil consumes itself. Macbeth's guilt causing madness reflects the effects of the king's moral corruption on the stability of the kingdom. Timon's self-realization leads him to reveal the destructiveness of the senators' greedy and corrupt behavior before denouncing society and later funding an attack on Athens. Feast scenes in Shakespeare's tragedies demonstrate the power of a person's actions on the political order of society and how malicious actions bring the society to the brink, and beyond, of total political collapse. Feasts are about unity and imposed order, even in times of chaos, though in Shakespeare's tragedies, they ironically provide a setting for the actions that lead to the disintegration of the society.

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