



Aaron: the Baddest of Them All

LUCIUS
AARON

Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds?
Ay, that I had not done a thousand more.
Even now I curse the day—and yet, I think,
Few come within the compass of my curse—
Wherein I did not some notorious ill,
As kill a man, or else devise his death,
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it,
Accuse some innocent and forswear myself,
Set deadly enmity between two friends,
Make poor men's cattle break their necks;
Set fire on barns and haystacks in the night,
And bid the owners quench them with their tears.
Oft have I digg'd up dead men from their graves,
And set them upright at their dear friends' doors,
Even when their sorrows almost were forgot;
And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
Have with my knife carved in Roman letters,
"Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead."
But I have done a thousand dreadful things
As willingly as one would kill a fly,
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.

—*Titus Andronicus* 5.1.123-44

Most readers will cite Iago or Richard III or Edmund as the most malevolent villain Shakespeare created, but Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* makes them look like babes-in-arms. Aaron seems to love evil for its own sake. After inciting Tamora's sons to rape and mutilate Titus's daughter Lavinia, he organizes the murder of her husband Bassianus and implicates Titus's sons Quintus and Martius, who are executed for the crime. He then tells Titus he can save his sons by cutting off Titus's right hand.

Aaron is eventually captured and condemned to be set "breast deep" in the earth and starved to death. Evil to the end, his final words are "If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul" (5.1.123-44).

But his most depraved speech comes when Titus's sole surviving son asks him to repent. To get the feel of Aaron's "notorious ill," present 5.1.123-144 to the class and have them work through the activities that follow. ■

1. Read the speech out loud, taking turns around the room, switching readers at each punctuation mark.
2. Read it again, switching readers at periods, semicolons, or dashes.
3. Ask for a volunteer to read the passage in its entirety.
4. Briefly paraphrase the passage.
5. Try a few variations in reading the passage—in whispers, as a chorus, with pauses in various places, with ascending or descending volume, alternating male and female voices, etc.
6. Stage the scene. How would Lucius and the several Goth soldiers onstage react to Aaron's words? Set the stage with several characters and experiment with different physical gestures and actions.