

“SEE HERE IN BLOODY LINES I HAVE SET DOWN, AND WHAT IS WRITTEN SHALL BE EXECUTED”: THE EFFECTS OF REPORTED AND ON-STAGE VIOLENCE

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Amongst the noteworthy entries in Philip Henslowe’s diary, a prop listed as “a Cauldron for the Jew” conjures in an instant the graphic nature of stage violence in the drama performed in the latter end of the sixteenth century. Most probably referring to an item used in Marlowe’s popular tragedy, *The Jew of Malta*, this entry suggests that Early Modern playgoers would have witnessed the boiling to death of Barabas, the Jew of the title. For such an occasion, it is not difficult to imagine the crowds cheering to the rafters as Barabas met his unpleasant end in a way similar to how spectators at the nearby Bear Gardens would roar their approval at the sight of a bear being torn to pieces by vicious hounds. While such animal cruelty is balked at today, many modern play-goers nevertheless still experience performances of Marlowe’s tragedy and ‘justify’ the theatrical pleasure derived from episodes of such blatant on-stage violence. A case in point, in Shakespearian terms, is the palpable violence of *Titus Andronicus*. While acknowledging the influence of Seneca, Shakespeare provides comparable theatrical shock tactics through his liberal use of severed limbs, extreme mutilation and a rapid succession of sequential acts of violence at the conclusion of the play’s central narrative.

Shakespeare used stage violence even at this early stage in his career not merely to titillate the spectator but to try to explain the *effects* of violence on his protagonists. As a dramatist he became increasingly interested in what R. A. Foakes terms “the inadequacy of motives to account for murder and acts of violence.”¹ In this Shakespeare asks the question that we are still, some four hundred years later, struggling to answer: how do we, as human beings, deal with random or unprovoked acts of violence against ourselves and those we love? By the time he had reached *King Lear*, an appalling scene of on-stage violence such as the blinding of Gloucester, although appearing as a random act of extreme cruelty, nevertheless underlines the themes of barbarity, madness and lack of vision that the play contains by coercing its audience to confront the act of cruelty itself.² *King Lear* has remained in favour on the stage (albeit with Nahum Tate’s re-writes); *Titus Andronicus*, by comparison, was dismissed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and questions of authorship have arisen partly as a result of the extreme acts of violence in the play.³

As we stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the brutalities of recent decades have informed our responses to the stage violence of dramas such as *Titus*

Andronicus. Brian Cox has described the play as “the work of a young man with a killingly clear grasp of nihilism,”⁴ while Antony Sher thinks “it’s a play about our capacity for cruelty and our capacity for survival; about the way violence breeds violence; about the search for truth in a brutal universe.”⁵ The regimes of leaders such as Saddam Hussein adopted rape, mutilation and murder to such a degree that they became almost commonplace. Public hangings still prevail in some parts of the world and we are numbed at the frequency of the beheadings that are carried out to justify various extremist causes – all easily available to witness at the click of a mouse on the internet. Harold Hobson, reviewing Peter Brook’s production of *Titus Andronicus* for *The Sunday Times*, expresses it well: “There is absolutely nothing in the bleeding barbarity of *Titus Andronicus* which would have astonished anyone at Buchenwald.”⁶ The violence in *Titus Andronicus* as Stanley Wells succinctly puts it, is not just a “pretext for theatrical titillation but a stimulus to meditation on man’s place within the chain of being on the significance and value of human life.”⁷ It is this violent ‘stimulus,’ and Shakespeare’s awareness of it, that forms this essay’s thesis.

The catalogue of horrors that *Titus Andronicus* contains – thirteen murders, two decapitations, four mutilations, one rape, one ritual sacrifice and cannibalism – read as the contents of a Hollywood “horror flick” (the play has already been dubbed Shakespeare’s Tarantino play). R. A. Foakes believes that “violence at once attracts and repels us” which may explain in part why *Titus Andronicus* is after a “wide gap of time,” still a work that intrigues and disturbs us.⁸ As if to emphasize this point, Julie Taymor’s recent film *Titus* used the theatrical framing device of a modern-day youth transported back to Titus’s Rome, whose presence throughout reminded us that while the city may well be a “wilderness of tigers,” we, the modern viewer, seek a re-evaluation of the acts of extreme violence that the play contains.⁹ That the film captures the ferocious intensity of the Shakespearean original is a credit to Taymor; but what is perhaps most striking is that even in this day and age when we have become so inured and jaded at the depiction of screen violence, we are still shaken by the play’s cruelty and ugliness. While critics such as Bloom dismiss the play as “ghastly bad” and see it as little more than an “exploitative parody, with the inner purpose of destroying the ghost of Christopher Marlowe,”¹⁰ this flippant statement negates Shakespeare’s use of violence not in a meaningless way, but in an attempt to reinforce the serious themes of the work which Alan Hughes sees as “the loss of innocence, the power of evil and the *consequences* of violence.”¹¹ To this I would add the failure of *language* to resist the urge to violent action.

“Where words prevail not, violence prevails” wrote Kyd in his *Spanish Tragedy* – a comment that could easily be said of *Titus*. It is Titus himself who instigates the cycle of revenge. The ritual sacrifice of Alarbus – to whom Shakespeare gives no words at all – comes a little over a hundred lines into act one. Lucius may well request the “proudest

prisoner of the Goths” (1.1.99)¹² but it is Titus who decides on the eldest son of the already “distressed” Tamora. The execution of Alarbus happens away from the eyes of the spectators and the news of his death is greeted by a mere “let it be so” from Titus. Accordingly, Titus suffers a series of retributive strikes that are a direct result of this action. It is clear that Shakespeare is suggesting that Rome has descended to a monstrous degree of barbarity, and that Titus is a leader who, like Macbeth, possesses a fatal flaw which will lead to his downfall. The level of violence here – the body of the Gothic prince thrown onto a woodpile, his limbs chopped off to feed the fire – is out of all proportion to the religious appeasing of the spirits of Titus’s own dead sons. Alarbus’s off-stage murder is indicative of a *premeditated* act of violence, one that is considered, thought through and performed. It receives little on-stage comment, save Tamora’s remark that the act was “irreligious.” Tellingly, Tamora is rendered speechless after this and her voice is only heard again some three hundred lines later in a sustained address to Saturninus. As Tamora’s revenge is central to the structure of *Titus*, we can see that the death of Alarbus fuels the narrative drive of the play and the increasing extremity of the violent action. It is some hundred lines later that Titus will kill his youngest son Mutius but this death will take place in sight of the onlooker. Although Jonathan Bate believes that both murders are “suggestively parallel” in that they are both “undertaken out of an obsession with honour as opposed to human kindness,” the second murder is different because Titus acts impulsively and, despite mourning the deaths of his many sons in battle, he further depletes their number with little regard for the consequences.¹³ This rash and brutal action confirms that Titus is set on a course of suffering, reminiscent of Lear after dividing up his kingdom. Mutius is allowed only four lines before being finally silenced.¹⁴ In light of the speed of Mutius’s murder we may well think the act gratuitous, but the speed of the next on-stage death – Bassianus’ slaying at the hands of Tamora’s sons – is unsettling not only for its haste but also for its presentation as a shocking injustice. This effect is exactly what Shakespeare was striving for: Thomas Gould believes that “if the poet can make us understand that injustice rules, not justice, we see that not only are we victims ourselves” but it permits us “to experience universal compassion, like Lear’s in the storm on the heath.”¹⁵ This injustice will extend to Lavinia who will suffer and be made speechless as a result: “Be not obdurate, open thy deaf ears” (2.2.160) she implores of Tamora, who has already stated that she will “not hear her speak” (2.2.137). Thus, Shakespeare has forewarned the audience that, when words are silenced, the results are horrific.

Lavinia’s injuries would, in reality, have killed her. Shakespeare is using Lavinia as a theatrical exploration of the emblematic nature of suffering and, to extend this, he keeps Titus’s mutilated daughter on stage for a further six scenes; whilst necessarily silent, she is a disturbing presence that forces the audience to confront her agony. As a writer,

Shakespeare knew that he could not have Lavinia's mutilation occur on-stage – the limits of stagecraft would reduce her suffering to a grotesque parody of violence that would only illicit laughter from the audience. Far more effective would be to focus on the imaginative horror created by the deed: there are limits to Shakespeare's resourcefulness, and “unavoidable limits to dramatic spectacle.”¹⁶ For all the poignancy of Lavinia's ordeal, the act of rape must also remain off-stage – literally *ob-skene*. While Albert H. Tricomi considers that Shakespeare's endeavor is “to reach the utmost verge of realizable horror” he also realises that Lavinia's violated chastity remained for Titus, the worst violation of all: “That more dear than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity.” (5.2.176).¹⁷ Pascale Aebischer maintains that “the actor's body [here meaning Lavinia] *represents* the absence of words,” in terms of the violation itself, and it is left to Marcus to use language, however ineffectual, to grapple with the enormity of the act.¹⁸

How successful this is in the theatre depends on directorial input. Intriguingly the two most memorable productions in recent years dealt with this moment in vastly differing ways. Peter Brook's 1955 production cut all of Marcus's lines, while Deborah Warner's 1988 production restored all the lines. Brook's production, although highly successful, was generally considered an adaptation of the play with some 650 lines cut from the text. Here the violence was depicted in a non-realistic manner – red flowing ribbons representing blood – concentrating the action on Lavinia in a stylized manner.¹⁹ Warner, using the full text, used mud to conceal Lavinia's stumps, and thus confronted fully the horror of her injuries and the impact it had on characters. The challenge that Shakespeare presents actors (and more latterly, directors) and audience with at this crucial moment becomes clearly evident in performance. One may well ponder the fact that Marcus does nothing to stem the flow of blood. However Shakespeare is asking us to look beyond realism and to see Lavinia not as a mere individual but rather as a metaphor for Rome itself; a stylized rendering of Lavinia's wounds (as in Brook's production), whilst necessarily reducing the reality and therefore pain and suffering of Lavinia, also diminishes the perilous state of Rome itself. The challenge in staging this unwieldy, blood-thirsty drama is not merely to remove those elements that might be considered unstageable but to focus on precisely what the juxtaposition of action with words is *meant* to signify. Frank Kermode dismisses Marcus's speech as an exercise in rhetoric believing that as a young playwright, Shakespeare was some way off from presenting dramatic silence on stage; “indeed an increasing interest in silence might be thought to mark a general development away from rhetorical explicitness and towards a language that does not try to give everything away.”²⁰ While this is clearly true – think of the final revelation of Hermione in *The Winters Tale* – it does, in this instance, underestimate Shakespeare's skill at drawing attention to the *inaction* of Marcus. His character echoes many of Shakespeare's elderly men: the Archbishop in *Henry V*, and

Agamemnon in *Troilus & Cressida* who struggle with the notion of ‘action.’ In these examples, it is clear that something should be *done* rather than discussed. In this, the most stark of examples, Marcus is prepared to let Lavinia/Rome bleed to death. As unfashionable as these ‘wordy’ roles may be to us today, I think the *inadequacy* of language is being highlighted; the failure of rhetoric when confronted by human suffering. As Titus supported Saturninus as Emperor - and in so doing, continued Rome’s descent into even more bloodshed and chaos - Lavinia’s imploring and now Marcus’ vocal failure ensure that where words prevail not, violence indeed has prevailed. Although many have been horrified by the inactivity of Marcus at this crucial moment, the true horror rests with Lavinia. As she is unable to comment, we look to the words of others to help us understand: Titus’s magnificent assertion (following Marcus’s “This *was* thy daughter”) that “Why Marcus, so she *is*” (3.1.64, my italics), confirms not only that the bonds of familial love remain strong but that it is crucial for Titus that Lavinia is not, by her defilement, robbed of her identity as she will be the spur and catalyst for his revenge: “What shall we *do*?” he implores (3.1.134). His course of action is set:

Let us that have our tongues
Plot some device of further misery
To make us wondered at in time to come. (3.1.135)

Stanley Wells’s concern, that the violence in *Titus Andronicus* is not integrated into the action and language of the play, is perhaps most clear in the cutting off of Titus’s hand. True, the act is not embedded in the language of the scene and comes at us with terrifying speed – and even though Bertrand Evans considers the amputation as “grossly contrived” he still feels that “it serves to rescue the scene from the tedium of incessant lamentation already stretched too far.”²¹ Surely this lack of integration, perceived by some as a weakness of the writing, is in fact a far more realistic depiction of the reality of spontaneous violent action? Victims of violent crime often comment on the swiftness of the aggressive act, its unexpectedness, and even though the severing of Titus’s hand may well approach “burlesque or parody” its immediacy cannot but stress the acute physical suffering of the victim. True, Titus makes no comment on any physical discomfort but his imagination takes extraordinary flight in his most memorable claim, “I am the sea” (3.1.226) – an attempt to escape the reality of suffering. The arrival of the heads of his two sons – again a *premeditated* concealed act – allows Titus to “walk off the edge of language” so that laughter (a brilliant preempting of any similar audience response) seems the only option remaining.²² It is a turning point in the revenge cycle of the drama. Eugene M. Waith believes that because of the sheer malevolence of his enemies, Titus is, up to this point, a “wholly sympathetic figure.” From now onwards his obsession with revenge will turn him into a madman: “his heroism is undeniable even though inseparable from horrifying fantasy.”²³ The burning of Alarbus took place in a ‘headless Rome’ while the battle for succession was still being

fought. The head – Saturninus – is now appointed but this ‘headless’ motif continues unabated and is now graphically real. Public death, as a result, is seen as an illustration of the “hollowness of monarchical power.”²⁴ Thus the clown’s hanging, a relatively minor event, continues the central theme, begun with the mutilation of Alarbus, which reiterates the hollowness of Roman authority. It is against this climate of disintegration that Titus’s descent is charted.

Lavinia in her ‘inarticulate vocality’ is present as Titus prepares for his bloody banquet and to witness the cutting of the throats of Chiron and Demetrius.²⁵ The visual non-verbal level elements of the scene exceed the limits of language. This is demonstrated explicitly in the stage-direction “*Enter Titus Andronicus with a knife and Lavinia with a basin,*” which prepares the spectator, in a manner that Titus’s words fail to do, for the closing of the revenge cycle. “What would you say if I should let you speak” (5.2.168) inquires Titus: we sense already that Tamora’s sons will have no opportunity to reply. As the blood runs from their slit throats, we do feel that, however graphic this scene is at some level, Titus’s revenge is partly justified. Brian Cox felt that the scene played on certain yearnings in the audience, which he considered “legitimate, truthful and honest” and that the death of Tamora’s sons “delighted” the audience.²⁶ Tellingly, Peter Brook’s production – which did much to restore the play’s reputation as a serious work – had the deaths of Chiron and Demetrius occur off-stage. Jonathan Bate rightly asserts that “revenge drama can deal as powerfully with emotional trauma as with ethical dilemma.”²⁷ There is no dilemma here for Titus; it is the emotional trauma he puts himself through – and not just the act of killing – that stops Shakespeare’s play being simply an exercise in Grand Guignol.

Titus’s preparation for his Thyesten banquet – the blood of Tamora’s sons served up to her in a pie – far exceeds Marlowe for repulsive spectacle. In quick succession Titus kills his own daughter and stabs Tamora, after which both Titus and Saturninus are killed onstage. There are no dying words; their deaths are swift and silent. It is in this final frenzy of blood-letting that Shakespeare confronts us with a “mixture of grand horror and low farce combining barbarism and pathos.”²⁸ Violence, then, is the key tool for Shakespeare’s examination of the central themes of *Titus Andronicus*: it exposes Titus’ role as an avenger, later fully explored in *Hamlet*, and that of the tragic hero, most fully realized in *King Lear*. Shocked as we are by the extremity of violent action in *Titus*, it is the humanity of suffering and grief – and not aggression and anger – that are the play’s twin pillars of construction. Hieronimo, Kyd’s creation in *The Spanish Tragedy*, maddened by his grief, bites out his tongue unable to express his anguish in words. Titus himself asks “Or shall we bite our tongues and in dumb shows / Pass the remainder of our hateful days?” (3.1.132-33) As long as we experience wars, acts of brutality, revenge killings, genocide and destruction, *our* frustration at the inadequacy of our own words

when confronted with such horror, ensures that Shakespeare remains, in terms of his tragic vision, very much our contemporary.

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Notes

- ¹ Foakes, R.A. *Shakespeare and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 15.
- ² Jonathan Miller's production of *King Lear* at The Old Vic in 1989 placed the blinding of Gloucester *off-stage*, focusing attention on Frances de la Tour's Regan. David Sumner, playing Cornwall, remarked to me in private conversation how audience members regularly complained of 'feeling cheated' by this directorial decision.
- ³ Eugene M. Waith's excellent chapter on 'Authorship' in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. 11-20) highlights the current debate on the co-authorship of the play with George Peele, although Waith himself feels the play is entirely Shakespeare's.
- ⁴ Cox, Brian. "Titus Andronicus." *Players of Shakespeare 3: Further essays in Shakespearean Performance by Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company*. Ed. Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 175.
- ⁵ Sher, Antony, and Gregory Doran. *Woza Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus in South Africa*. London: Methuen, 1996. 25.
- ⁶ Hobson, Harold. "Peter Brook's Titus Andronicus." *The Sunday Times*. 16 August 1955.
- ⁷ Wells, Stanley. "The Integration of Violent Action in *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespearean Continuities*. Ed. Batchelor et al. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997. 219.
- ⁸ *Shakespeare and Violence*. 17.
- ⁹ *Titus*. Dir. Julie Taymor. Perf. Anthony Hopkins, Jessica Lange and Alan Cumming. Fox Films, 1999.
- ¹⁰ Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999. 78.
- ¹¹ Hughes, Alan. Introduction. *Titus Andronicus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 47.
- ¹² Unless otherwise stated, all line references are from *Titus Andronicus* ed. Jonathan Bate. London: Arden, 2006.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ¹⁴ Bill Alexander's production of the play for The Royal Shakespeare Company in 2003 cut the death of Mutius altogether as he felt it was a later addition by Peele to cover Tamora's costume change to Empress. The director found the killing "incredibly casual" and tipped the balance of the play against Titus. (www.rsc.org.uk/titus/current/director.html)
- ¹⁵ Gould, Thomas. *The Uses of Violence in Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 12.
- ¹⁶ Tricomi, Albert H. "Aesthetics of Mutilation in *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespeare and Language*. Ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 235.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ¹⁸ Aebischer, Pascale. *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 26.
- ¹⁹ Brook, clearly aware of the sensibilities of 1950's England, toned down most of the violent action. Evelyn Waugh puts it best: "When she (Vivien Leigh as Lavinia) was dragged off to her horrible fate she ventured a tiny impudent, barely perceptible, roll of the eyes, as who would say: "My word! What next?" Waugh on Brook's *Titus Andronicus* in *Shakespeare and The Theatre* ed. Stanley Wells. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 255.
- ²⁰ Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. London: Penguin Press, 2000. 10.
- ²¹ Evans, Bertrand. *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- ²² Part of Tony Sher's research during rehearsals for *Titus Andronicus* was to consult Dr. Murray Cox, a consultant psychotherapist at Broadmoor – himself a co-author with Alice Theilgaard of *Shakespeare as Prompter* – in an attempt to understand an individual's urge to perform extreme violence, which many of Dr. Cox's patients have. During one rehearsal – many of Cox's notes from his therapy sessions was read out – including the one quoted. Thomas Kyd, as we have seen, expressed the same sentiment some 400 years previously. Sher, Antony and Gregory Doran. *Woza Shakespeare*. London: Methuen, 1996. 75-77.
- ²³ Waith, Eugene M. Introduction. *Titus Andronicus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. 63.
- ²⁴ Smith, Molly Easo. "Spectacles of Torment in *Titus Andronicus*" in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. 36.2 (1996): 315-31.

²⁵ Ibid, 151.

²⁶ Cox, Brian. "Titus Andronicus." *Players of Shakespeare 3: Further essays in Shakespearian Performance by Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company*. Ed. Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 187.

²⁷ Bate, Jonathan. Introduction. *Titus Andronicus: The RSC Complete Works*. Ed. Bate & Rasmussen. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007. 1617.

²⁸ Kay, Dennis. *Shakespeare: His Life, Work and Era*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1992. 107.