

Circumscribed by Words: The Textuality of Experience In *Titus Andronicus*¹

The apparent “barbarity of spectacles”, “trash diction” and degeneration “into the horrible” have for long relegated Shakespeare’s early play *Titus Andronicus* to the sidelines as a “heap of rubbish” (Johnson, Theobald, Schlegel, Ravenscroft respectively in Taylor and Loughrey 1990: 31–32). Although such absolute castigation of the play or its blatant exclusion from the Shakespearean canon on the basis of taste is no longer in vogue, the infrequency of critical gaze directed upon it and the smack of apologia in those that do focus upon it demonstrate the extent of unease that the play continues to generate.² Yet, if one sifts the murder and mayhem and attempts to locate the violence alongside other integral aspects of *Titus Andronicus*, as this article proposes to do, the search yields an enriching multiplicity of intra-textual and textually bound encounters across generic, racial and gender borders that radically reorients our response to the play.

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² The tendency to *explain* the violence for example, is evident in even the most illuminating articles of the last fifty years namely Waith (1957); Sommers (1960), Tricomi (1974), Willbern (1978), Kendall (1989), Wynne-Davies (1991), Rowe (1994), Smith (1996).

Classical Sources and *Titus Andronicus*

The continuing debate over Ovidian versus Senecan influence on Elizabethan revenge tragedy in general and *Titus Andronicus* in particular testifies that neither of these is a straightforward engagement.³ The Ovidian tale of Philomela is crucial to the Lavinia episode and the subsequent shaping of action but the revenge motif is initiated by the sacrificial slaughter of Alarbus and extends beyond all rational thought very much in the manner of Seneca. Ovidian and Senecan narratives are in turn superimposed on Livy's account of Tarquinius Superbus, his son's rape of Lucretia and on the anonymous History of *Titus Andronicus* printed by Dicey around 1736/1764 in London but probably available in an earlier version in Shakespeare's time. Virgil's tale of Aeneas and Dido is perversely duplicated in Tamora's various sexual liaisons (Bate 1995: 18). In more recent times, Liebler has argued forcefully in favour of the English translation of Herodian's *De imperatorum Romanorum praeclare gesti* (1550) by Nicholas Smyth as another possible source for the chaotic setting of *Titus Andronicus* (1994: 263–78).

As illustrated by Waith (1984: 28–29), Harris (1958), Bartels (1990) and Neill (1998), Aaron is patterned on the various prejudices and popular stories about the Moors circulating in Shakespeare's time. The medley of traceable classical sources (leaving aside pervasive but diffused indigenous influences) inclines one to Spencer's view of the play as "a more typical Roman play" of Shakespeare than any other "grouped under that name" not merely because it advances "a summary of Roman politics" as Spencer suggests, but because it "get[s] it all in" – Roman mythology, fable, history, drama, epic and politics (1957: 32).

The multiplicity of structural *imitatio* suggests a transmission of competing and complementary influences apprehended through "sedimented layers of previous assimilations".⁴ Contrary to popular assumptions, the Senecan revenge tragedy and a medley of various classical sources and generic forms serve as "con-texts" to *Titus Andronicus* where "con-texts are themselves texts and must be read with" the text to register the "intersection of different discourses" in the play's construction (Barker and Hume 1985: 236 note 7, 195, emphasis authors'). Although Hunter argues, "Seneca all

³ The main contenders in this debate are Cunliffe (1893; 1910: 61–81), Baker (1939: 106–53), Bowers (1940, pbk. 1966), Waith (1957), Hunter (1967; 1984), Thompson (1978), West (1982), Charles and Michelle Martindale (1990, pbk. 1996: 47–56) and Miola (1992: 11–67).

⁴ This is a rephrasing of Frederick Jameson's well-known comment on reader-text relationship in *The Political Unconscious*, "texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through *sedimented layers of previous interpretations*" (1981: 9, emphasis added).

but disappears into the engulfing sea of Ovidian and quasi-Ovidian imitation” in *Titus Andronicus* (1967; 20), Seneca does provide a dramatic model as opposed to Ovid’s narrative one and *Thyestes* is as closely related to *Titus* as *Philomela*. Moreover, Seneca’s complete works were available in English translation since 1581, eight years prior to the earliest date suggested for the composition of *Titus*. In fact, the interplay of constitutive discourses allows for a radical reformulation of Senecan revenge apropos *Titus Andronicus*. Senecan vengeance concerns the high and mighty and focuses on disintegrating familial bonds and contending domestic allegiances. Revenge, whether single or collective, is a private matter primarily entailing individual consequences. The consequences are only obliquely political in the sense that as the elite constitutes the only social category in the Senecan world, it is the sole site of public negotiations and its various revenges displace one ruler with another thus effecting the public. Occasionally, the power to rule passes from one house to another as the cycle of blood-vengeance repeats itself in subsequent plays.

Early Elizabethan experiments with the Senecan format – Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (both 1589) – focus on revenge and emulate Seneca in horrifying details but introduce two distinctive extra-Senecan factors. Hieronimo and Barabas are especially motivated by the desire for self-empowerment. Their impotence in the face of authoritarian opposition leads them to redressive measures of a private and violent kind. For them vengeance is not the primary mode of retaliation as in Seneca, but a desperate choice forced upon them by circumstances. This is related to the other departure from the Senecan formula: the protagonist’s option of private vendetta in these plays denotes a breakdown of the system of justice, i.e., the authorised mode of restoring parity. The failure of social and political institutions to accommodate the grievances of the individual members signifies a flawed collective which erases its faultlines by pushing the avenger inexorably towards the periphery and forcing him/her to adopt the position of the demonic Other. In the Senecan plays, by contrast, avengers, victims and perpetrators of crime, inhabit a common world of destructive violence.

Titus Andronicus profits from the intersection of Senecan and Elizabethan dramaturgy and improves upon the revenge model. The Elizabethan tragedies mentioned above delineate the tension between the individual and the collective body but reflect only in passing, on its impact on the community. In *Titus Andronicus*, the rapid movement from the margins to the centre and vice versa blurs the distinction between multiple Others, creating a highly unstable political matrix. Tamora is visually and verbally identified as the vanquished alien during Titus’s triumphant entry and her subsequent pleading for Alarbus’ life –

Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome
 To beautify thy triumphs, and return
 Captive to thee and to thy Roman yoke;
 But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets
 For valiant doings in their country's cause?
 (1.1.109–13)⁵

But she is enshrined at the centre within the next 210 lines by none other than the new Roman emperor himself: “Behold, I choose thee, Tamora, for my bride,/ And will create thee Empress of Rome” (1.1.319–20).⁶ Titus moves in the opposite direction with equal pace. With Lear-like folly he abdicates in favour of the ungrateful Saturninus, and consequently, Tamora. The paradox is dramatically encapsulated in his spectacular entry with the spoils of war (including Tamora) and their transfer to the newly nominated emperor as he makes space for the royal pair on centre stage. The seeds of destruction are sown at the moment of Rome’s supreme glory by its chief architect – Tamora becomes “incorporate in Rome” (1.1.462) through Titus’s agency, and he admittedly throws “people’s suffrages” (4.3.18–20) upon a weak tyrant (Loomba 1989: 48). Throughout the rest of the play, a demonised nucleus inexorably pushes this epitome of Roman *virtu* towards the periphery and finally outside the pale of civilisation itself. The radical interchange of locations jeopardises the entire Roman State, which can only be righted through political and military solutions, namely the unseating of Saturninus by Titus’s son, Lucius, with the backing of the people and the Goths.⁷ The Senecan revenge formula thus expands to incorporate the public and the political in an essentially private and familial context.

The most fruitful encounter with classical sources occurs in the sphere of language-action interrelation. The primacy of language in Senecan drama is a critical commonplace: scepticism regarding their stageability is manifested in the general consensus that the plays are meant to be read, not enacted, an idea first mooted by T. S. Eliot as early as 1927 (27). Scholars have also noted the complex relationship between language and action in *Titus*

⁵ All references to the text are from Waith (1984).

⁶ The subversive Other’s encroachment upon the centre was brilliantly captured in Mark Reuter’s Santa Cruz production: Molly Maycock as Tamora was brought onto the stage huddled in a cramped cage and sinuously unwound herself stretching to full height in slow motion to suggest the unleashing of disruptive energy on Rome upon her release (Dessen 1989: 41).

⁷ The restorative capabilities of Lucius are inscribed in his name. Lucius Junius Brutus had been instrumental in expelling the Tarquins, Lucius Brutus was considered to be the founder of Britain and another Lucius was identified as the first Christian king of Britain (Bate 1995: 18).

Andronicus. Waith (1957), Tricomi (1974) and Kendall (1989) view the play's language as a means of distancing and vivifying action. Rowe (1994) illustrates the metonymic connection between dismembered hands and action; Hulse (1979) sees linguistic images being displaced by visual ones as the play progresses. For West, the "juxtaposition of delicately allusive speech and villainous action" furnishes a Shakespearean critique of Roman education, "the teacher and rationalizer of heinous deeds" (1982: 65). However, the absolute textuality of experience in the play largely escapes critical scrutiny.

Contrary to prevailing assumptions about literary allusions imaging action and enabling their comprehension on and off-stage, I argue that literature shapes, even determines action in *Titus Andronicus*. Aaron unfolds the plan to rape Lavinia with a reference to Lucretia: "Lucrece was not more chaste/ Than this Lavinia" (2.1.109–10) and informs Tamora of her sons' intentions with the following lines: "This is the day of doom for Bassianus;/ His Philomel must lose her tongue today" (2.3.42–43). Livy's account of Tarquin and more specifically, Ovid's Philomela narrative frame the text (act) of Lavinia's defloration (Ovid 1955: 159–66). She must be violated, mutilated and kept alive to transmit the tale and *shape* following events as per Ovid's directive. There seems no other reason to keep her alive – Chiron and Demetrius would have been safer had they killed her. Later, much before Marcus actually gets to know what has happened to his niece (4.1), he instinctively turns to the right text for comprehension: "But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee" (2.4.26). This tale, more than Lavinia's own condition, will help him eventually to read the mystery of her mutilation.

In pursuing the Philomela model for their crime, Chiron and Demetrius subject themselves to the narrative closure of the Ovidian tale. They attempt to *re-write* the plot in order to escape its prescriptive bounds. Lavinia's hands are severed precisely because Philomela had used hers to broadcast her tragedy by weaving the events in a tapestry – "Write down thy mind," taunts Chiron, "bewray thy meaning so,/ An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe" (2.4.3–4). They succeed in remaining undetected till Lavinia is able to cite the correct reference as it were: she opens the relevant page of *Metamorphoses* and scrawls "*Stuprum – Chiron – Demetrius*" (4.1.77). She could have written the same words much earlier with her stumps guiding the staff on the sand, but does not. It is as though the book directs and *authorises* her to write; without it she would not have been able to communicate her trauma to others. And Titus has to take recourse to another literary text, namely Seneca's *Hippolytus*, to make sense (or rather to underscore the senselessness) of it all: "*Magni dominator poli,*

Tam lentus audis scelera, tam lentus vides?" (4.1.80–81).⁸ Ovid overdetermines the ravishing and dismembering of Lavinia, its exposure, and its vengeance. Titus promises: "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter,/ And worse than Procne I will be revenged" (5.2.194–95). Tamora's sons have deviated from the script in cutting off Lavinia's hands; Titus will write/ right his vengeance to balance the excess.

The open-endedness of Ovidian metamorphosis, which turns Philomela and Procne into fleeing birds, does not suit dramatic requirements, nor does it accord with the chauvinistic orientation of *Titus Andronicus*. Heroines do not fly off the stage, and no patriarch can salvage his pride if the ravaged daughter outlives her experience. Ovid provides no script for re-inscribing "sacralized chastity" through a sacrificial killing of the despoiled body (Joplin 1990: 53). Titus therefore turns to Orosius's version of Livy's account of the Roman centurion Virginius, to *authorise* his slaying of Lavinia. In the Orosius version of the incident, available in Shakespeare's time through *The Pilgrimage of Princes* (1573), Virginia, raped by Appius Claudius, is killed by her father, Virginius "in open sight of Rome" (Waith 1984: 187 notes). Titus aligns himself with Virginius to elicit similar public approval from his royal guests:

Was it well done of rash Virginius
To slay his daughter with his own right hand,
Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?
(5.3.36–38)

And when they assent he turns to his daughter with, "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,/ And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die" (5.3.45–46).

Lavinia's act of writing highlights another facet of the play's obsession with the textuality of experience. *Titus Andronicus* not only conforms to its literary sources, the narratives that shape its action – Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's *Thyestes*, Livy's and Herodian's *Histories* – are all written texts. Writing is a formal recognition of existence: the very fact that something is written lends it an aura of permanence. In *Titus Andronicus*, writing is the crucial agency furthering and validating action. Lavinia has vital knowledge but can transmit it only when textual reference is conjoined with documentation. Writing *actualises* her experience and elicits the definitive response of revenge. It identifies the perpetrators of crime and informs Titus of the extent of injustice meted out to him: his sons, Quintus and Martius, have been unjustly implicated in murder and an unsuccessful attempt to save them has cost him his hand. Lavinia's written words have an

⁸ Seneca, *Hippolytus*, 671–72, trans. Waith: "Ruler of the great heavens, dost thou so calmly hear crimes, so calmly look upon them?" (1984: 149 notes).

almost divine power to illuminate his world differently, invest hitherto incomprehensible events with meaning and re-create him in the role of a revenger. The disintegration of this record will erase all proof of crime (synonymous to crime itself) and invalidate his new identity. He therefore needs to “get a leaf of brass,/ And with a gad of steel write these words,/ And lay it by” (4.1.101–03). The durability of the document is directly proportional to the magnitude of the offence and proclaims the legitimacy of Titus’s retaliatory measures.

In the Roman world of *Titus Andronicus* then, the written word is *logos*. Aaron understands this perfectly and frames the Andronici in Bassianus’s death by means of a “fatal-plotted scroll” (2.3.47). The letter, directing a huntsman to kill Bassianus, is scripted by Aaron but ascribed falsely to Martius and Quintus. Titus is particularly obsessed with formally recording and validating his intentions through written intimations. He shoots letters to unheeding gods, claiming justice (4.3.54–75), petitions Saturninus through the clown (4.3.94–109) and plays word games with Tamora’s sons sending them Horatian quotations whose implications they fail to decipher (4.2.18–23). The most explicit connection between the written word and legitimation is registered in the Roman citizens’ letters to Lucius, which urge him to return and replace Saturninus, thereby endorsing the act (5.1.2–4). Blood-vengeance is a mode of private redress outside the purview of the official system of justice; yet the bureaucratic insistence on docketing intentions before implementing and authorising them duplicates the procedure of issuing notice before taking legal steps. This parallel, consistently invoked in the play, reconstructs the individual and therefore the temporary act of vengeance as an alternate system of seeking justice (not merely retribution) which challenges the entire judicial procedure.

Race and *Titus Andronicus*

One way of distinguishing the barbaric Other from civilised Rome is the latter’s insistence on written documentation. Tamora and her sons participate in the Ovidian narrative but feel no compulsion to transcribe their plans on paper. Untroubled by any desire to enfranchise their motives, they inhabit the Senecan world of immoderate atrocities more comfortably than their Roman counterparts. In fact, their success depends on erasing all records of their heinous deeds; that they do not heed this and allow the mutilated Lavinia to survive spells their doom. Their effort at creating fiction is visually spectacular but a dramatic failure: Tamora, Chiron and Demetrius extemporising as Revenge, Rape and Murder deceive neither the

half-crazed Titus nor his aide, Publius (5.2.28–165). As seen earlier, any effort to create an independent text is destined to fail in a play unfolding strictly within the prescriptive bounds of already-written literature. But the Goths' readiness to intervene in the given script or of "new creating" it, is one way of charting their racial difference from the Romans who faithfully adhere to preordained parts.⁹

Aaron institutes a separate category of demonised foreignness. Lascivious, treacherous, slavish and "pathologically evil," this stereotypical Moor is the summation of Shakespearean and Elizabethan prejudices about the racial Other (Loomba 1989: 46). Emily Bartels notes the ironic fixity of Aaron's portrayal in a play that effects a chaotic blurring of all distinctions: he is "the one reliable measure of difference, the one stable and unambiguous sign of Otherness within a 'wilderness' of meanings (3.1.54)" (1990: 442). But a wilderness of hybrid meanings runs riot in the very naming of Aaron just as the Greek names of Chiron and Demetrius signal a misalliance between classical antiquity and Gothic barbarity. (Hybridity is not merely a negative marker of the barbaric Other in the play but a signifier of the chaotic blurring of boundaries, as *pure* Roman-ness is also tainted through its dependence on the military support of the Goths.) The idolatrous tendencies of his Biblical namesake seem to accentuate the Moor's deviant susceptibilities. Aaron, a common Jewish name, was equally likely to invoke the terror of "hungrily absorptive otherness" particularly manifest in emergent expansionist cultures like that of early modern England (Neill 1998: 363). As Michael Neill demonstrates, Renaissance imagination perceived a nefarious interrelation between the Moors and the Jews and viewed the latter as the most threatening alien whose "*secret* difference" masquerading as likeness, surreptitiously eroded the indigenous identity from within (1998: 363–64; emphasis author's). Aaron's Moorish-Jewish etymology reverses this model: his external and easily distinguishable Otherness conceals from view his complete absorption and effective manipulation of the Roman mode of comprehending reality through pre-existing textual signifiers. Literary antecedents once more gain precedence as disparate cultural and religious connotations of the name Aaron complicates the discourse of racial distinctions and constructs a composite image of alterity.

The distance between the savage Aaron and the noble Othello is often cited as an index of the indeterminate representations of the Moor in Elizabethan literature and Shakespeare's artistic ability to grasp its extremities: *Titus Andronicus* demonises the Moor while *Othello* exposes such demonisation. Bartels and Neill, for instance, present an extended discussion of the

⁹ Prospero similarly charts a moral difference as he recounts how Antonio "new created/ The creatures that were mine" (1.2.81–2) in *The Tempest* (Kermode 1958, pbk. 1964).

ambiguous and conflicting constructions of the Moor in Renaissance literature (Bartels 1990: 434–35; Neill 1998: 363–64). However, neither the stereotype nor the juxtaposition of the two blacks is as unproblematic as is first supposed. Aaron's defence of his son strains the stereotype (4.2.71–127, 5.1.49–58) and the dramatic potential of this humanising trait has been repeatedly exploited on the stage by actors like Ira Aldridge, George Hayes, Anthony Quale, Moses Gunn, Hugh Quarshie, Bruce Young and others (Dessen 1989: 7; Waith 1984: 45–50; Bate 1995: 51–58). Significantly, as Loomba (1989: 48) and Cowhig (1985: 3) note, it is also the moment of a proud reassertion of his racial integrity and a sense of selfhood: "My mistress is my mistress, this myself" (4.2.107). The stereotypical delight in unalloyed malignity is problematised by the unambiguous iteration of the constancy and superiority of his blackness: "Coal-black is better than another hue,/ In that it scorns to bear another hue" (4.2.99–100). Nor is the Aaron/Othello contrast always to the latter's advantage. More responsible towards his consort than Othello, Aaron ultimately devises a scheme to save both his son and Tamora's honour. He reiterates his Otherness whereas Othello resists the slippage into racial and ethnic identity with fatal consequences:

... in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus. [Stabs himself.
(5.2.353–57; Ridley, 1958, pbk. 1965).

These closing words of Othello, usually taken to signify an awareness of his ethnic identity, also indicate his desire to obliterate it even at the cost of his own life: he smites the "turban'd Turk" residing within to save his Venetian self and annihilates himself in the process.

The affinities between Aaron and Othello are even more striking. The duo's location in the author's scheme of things is identical: both die signalling an exorcising of the racial Other from their respective settings. Aaron's artistic pleasure in drawing up complex intrigues complements Othello's pride in his military prowess. Both are *culturally literate* and in contrasting ways, at the apex of the world they inhabit. Othello, "far more fair than black" (1.3.290) exemplifies the Renaissance ideal of the noble, valiant warrior-hero; Aaron, empowered through and only after the institution of a demonised nucleus, apprehends the literary agency of action better than any Roman. Replete with classical allusions, his speeches effortlessly establish

the link between textual and actual experience in the play. In his first soliloquy, for instance, Olympus, Prometheus and Semiramis are invoked within the brief space of twenty-four lines to review his current status (2.1.1–24). His ability to read the text of life enables him to detect the barbed threat implicit in the inscriptions on the weapons gifted by Titus to Tamora's sons: “*Intiger vitae, scelerisque purus, / Non eget Mauri iasculis, nec arcu*” (4.2.20–21).¹⁰ Fully cognisant of the potency of the written word in Roman civilisation, he uses a “fatal writ” to link Titus's sons with Bassianus's murder (2.3.264, 268–79) and suggests a staging of Lucretia's tale to seal Lavinia's fate (2.1.109–20). All Romans, including Titus, are subject to predetermined texts, only Aaron positions himself outside with authorial autonomy and *creates* fiction to impose it on other people's lives. His most significant act of creation, however, is more primal: he *authors* a coloured child in a white womb thereby contaminating it irrevocably yet simultaneously enfranchising the product: “from that womb where you imprisoned were” he reminds Chiron, “[h]e is enfranchised and comes to light” (4.2.124–25). The crucial shift in his location from the writer of the text to a character inscribed within it explains his inability to provide a script the one time he is directly implicated in the narrative – he has to barter his own life to save his son.

Aaron's sophisticated mastery over the textuality of experience strains the stereotype of the black, barbaric Other and problematises the projection of an essentialising Roman-ness. The Goths function in a similar fashion to a lesser degree. In *Titus Andronicus*, the Roman encounter with the aliens occurs at two levels: one individual, with Aaron and the other collective, with the Goths (apart from Tamora, the disruptive agent par excellence, who operates on an individual level). The Goths move from an antagonistic to a conciliatory position as the play progresses. As supporters of Lucius, they are crucial to the restoration of order. The need for external intervention to reassert Roman integrity and the recasting of enemies as liberators (especially those who eventually overrun the Roman Empire) throws wide open the question of what constitutes Roman superiority. Bate's assertion that the Elizabethan perception of the Goths as their ancestors and as deliverers of Europe from the popish yoke mediates their portrayal at the close of the play (1995: 18–20) is only partially true for it discounts the persistent idealisation of classical Rome as an exemplar and the Tudor claims of Roman descent through the half-British emperor Constantine (Kahn 1997: 3–4). The Second Goth's gazing upon a ruined monastery

¹⁰ Horace, Odes I, xxii, 1–2 trans. Waith, “The man of upright life and free from crime, does not need the javelins or bow of the Moor” (1984: 152 notes).

(5.1.21) does bring “a Reformation context into play” but its focus on the most destructive aspect of the English Reformation invests it with a critical function and is not laudatory as Bate supposes (1995: 19).

Gender and *Titus Andronicus*

In the overwhelmingly masculine world of *Titus Andronicus*, the absolute contrast between Lavinia and Tamora maps the extremes of gender stereotypes constructed by patriarchal ideologies. Lavinia’s beauty – “gracious” (1.1.52), “sweet,” “lovely,” with “rosèd lips”, “honey breath” and “lily hands” (2.4.16–47) – is complemented by her virtues – “gentle,” (2.4.16), “chaste” (2.1.109) and pliant. Roman *virtu*, an essentially masculine construct as exemplified by Kahn (1997: 14–15), must defend this material embodiment of civilised Rome – “virtue’s praise” (1.1.168) – to ratify its own virility. The identification with Rome is charted through the female body: foreign princes lust after her, Saturninus and Bassianus vie for her hand, Marcus acknowledges that she is one in whose “circling shadows kings have sought to sleep” (2.4.19). The innuendoes in Marcus’s observations illustrate the interrelation between sexual and territorial occupation. Possessive rights over her body secure one’s *bona fides* in the struggle for political ascendancy. Viewed in this context, Chiron and Demetrius’ violation of Lavinia is more than mere stigmatisation of the barbaric Other; it is simultaneously a symbolic avenging of their military disempowerment. Conversely, Rome’s inability to protect or possess her chastity denotes its political and sexual impotence.

This central signifier of Rome is herself surprisingly powerless. In her unviolated state, when she is both articulate and chaste, her role is that of a cipher. She either acquiesces (to paternal wishes of uniting her with Saturninus despite being betrothed to Bassianus, 1.1.240–72) or pleads (with Tamora and her sons to spare her, 2.3.138–78). Her aggression is directed at the only other woman protagonist in the play, Tamora, and reaffirms patriarchal constructs of endorsable female conduct by denigrating the latter’s deviant sexuality (2.3.66–87). Lavinia’s *discourse* is framed by the “politics of sexuality” that Kahn sees interwoven in the “politics of textuality” (1997: 47). However, the play’s central concern is not the “politics of sexuality” as Kahn asserts, but the *textuality of experience*, which is framed by patriarchal narratives written by men for men, and has the “politics of sexuality” inscribed within it. In reality, it is no discourse but mere intonation of the lines assigned her by the gendered, patrician ideology of the Romans.

Paradoxically her mute, mangled presence speaks much more eloquently to both the characters and the audience. As dramatic and critical responses testify, her *screaming* silence is extremely difficult to decode. Ravenscroft, Aldridge, Brooks *et al* resort to full or partial excision of the relevant scene (Dessen 1989: 9, 11, 22) while Waith (1957: 46–48). Tricomi (1974: 12–18) Thompson (1978: 29–32, Rowe (1994: 294–97) hone their critical faculties to invest it with meaning. Marcus (2.4. 11–57) and Titus (3.1. 62–149) apply a whole range of literary allusions, tropes and conceits to no effect. Kahn affords a clue to their inability: “Lavinia who existed before the rape as an object of desire and exchange was a construction of the language wielded by the men who exchanged and desired her” (1997: 59). Ravished and maimed, Lavinia has exited from the matrix of male desire and created a new text outside its linguistic parameters, which cannot be deciphered unless she translates it back into the vocabulary of patriarchal literature. The material presence of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is therefore vital for identifying her violators (4.1.41–77).

Kahn detects a continuing passivity in Lavinia’s post-polluted state: she is ascribed the part of “ineffectual empathetic sorrow – witness as opposed to agency” (1997: 63). But her violent expulsion from the realm of heterosexual desire, once communicated, motivates Titus to counter-action. His resumption of the role of paterfamilias is of course charged with the awareness that, unlike Prospero, he has lost control over his daughter’s sexuality and can no longer market this precious commodity. Yet it is significant that until she communicates her text, Marcus and Titus remain confined to literalising their sorrow through ineffectual metaphors and transferred epithets (2.4.1–57, 3.1.218–32, 3.2.1–45). This explains why Marcus is unable to interpret her condition: despite stumbling on the relevant text of Tereus and Philomela thrice (2.4.27–28, 38, 41–43) he moves on to draw less pertinent images of sorrow. This is because Lavinia is yet to sanction that reading through written translation. It is the interpretation of her wounds that galvanises the Andronici into action, making her agency crucial in empowering the execution of revenge. Paradoxically, her stigmatised, peripheral location, as opposed to her previous centrality, transforms a pious warrior into an avenger and provides the alibi for future action.

Tamora’s Gothic origins underscore her deviant womanhood. The liaison between Aaron and Tamora foregrounds the alliance between rampant sexuality and the barbaric and gendered Other. The categorisation of Tamora as an avenging mother or as a demonic womb “breeding outrages” fails to encompass the multiple threats she poses to the patrilineal order (Findlay 1999: 63–64; Kahn 1997: 55). She not only challenges Roman patriarchy militarily, sexually and racially as Loomba suggests (1989: 47), but all

forms of hegemonic masculinity. The three levels intersect to generate shifting oppositional strategies to suit different socio-political circumstances. Amazonian confrontation and public enmity, which initiate Tamora's engagement with the Roman polity, are translated into insidious subversion and personal revenge as she starts operating from within. Titus's proprietary rights over his daughter's pre-marital sexuality determines Tamora's choice of Lavinia as the medium for wrecking Titus and explains why Lavinia's rape, more than all the atrocities perpetrated upon him, urges him to counter-revenge. But it is also pertinent that Lavinia, the traduced embodiment of civilised Romanhood, must be the site for any political vendetta involving Rome: destroying or avenging her is synonymous to impairing or defending the nation she symbolises.

Unlike the black/white encounter in *Titus Andronicus*, the intra-European racial conflict – with various “hues” of whiteness contesting each other (Royster 2000) – occurs in the context of empire building. Titus, manning an outlying conquered province, returns home to neutralise the threat of Gothic invasion. Territorial and sexual occupations are interchangeable in the language of conquest where the desired or the forcibly possessed woman is the traditional trope for the vanquished nation. Titus's victorious return to Rome with the shackled queen of Goths and her symbolic triumph over Rome through the maiming and ravishment of Lavinia highlight the trope-like function of both women. Lavinia is easily identified as desirable and forcibly possessed but so is Tamora. Saturninus is drawn towards her just after selecting Lavinia as his bride (1.1.261–62) and her marriage is synonymous to coercive occupation because as the vanquished queen she has no option but to acquiesce to Saturninus's sudden preference for her (1.1.318–21). In the aggressively chauvinistic realm of empire building and patriarchal mores, women inevitably become instruments and victims of all vengeance, personal and political. However, the transgressive transvesticism of Tamora's role, as the vanquished and the conqueror, also draws attention to the heavily mediated projection of women on the Elizabethan stage through cross-dressing, which colludes with the object represented to construct a hybrid deviancy and undermines imperial and patriarchal discourses of purity.

Vengeance and *Titus Andronicus*

Gender equations are *normalised* when Titus not only subjugates Tamora but seizes her script to make it his own. Tamora's improvised theatre of Revenge-Rape-Murder stands little chance against the *performance* of Titus's

cannibalistic banquet doubly endorsed by Senecan and Ovidian narratives.¹¹ The feasts served by Procne in *Metamorphoses* and Atreus in *Thyestes* prove its mainstay but lesser known accounts like that of Hippodame (5.2.202–3) and Virginius (5.3.36–46) are interwoven to create a rich tapestry of classical sources. “Centaurs’ feast” (5.2.203), for instance, refers to the vivid recounting in *Metamorphoses* of the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs which ensued as Eurytus the Centaur attempted to abduct Pirithous’s bride Hippodame during the couple’s wedding celebrations (Ovid 1955: 297–306). Titus is not generating a new text but merely following a “pattern”, a “precedent” to reproduce a “lively warrant” and “perform the like” (5.3.43–44). The revered and familiar confines of these multiple *written* (i.e. recorded) tales paradoxically release him from inaction and galvanise him into fleshing out his rudimentary but given plot. Tamora’s upstart creativity is not discarded but subsumed: Titus continues to address Chiron and Demetrius as “Rape” and “Murder” after Tamora’s exit in 5.2.148 because he needs to sustain the “*dramatis personae*” constructed by her till he has assigned them new roles in his definitive script. Once inscribed within its prescriptive bounds they must be rendered mute – “stop their mouths” orders Titus (5.2.167) – to prevent the disruptive interjection of a counter-narrative. In the final act, Titus’s authoring ability supersedes that of Aaron: Aaron fails to write himself into the plot at a crucial juncture of his life whereas Titus drafts, directs and enacts a theatre of retaliation structured upon ordained classical precedents. The textuality of experience assumes such absolute proportions in *Titus Andronicus* that “Revenge” needs to be transformed into a character (in Tamora’s play) and incorporated into the Ovidian/ Senecan framework of Titus’s banquet before it can succeed. “Revenge” and Titus ultimately prevail because their joint public performance legitimises vengeance as a staged text through simultaneous reading, recording and replication circumscribed by literary parameters.

¹¹ Baker (1939: 119–39) and subsequent critics tend to discount the Senecan influence perhaps because unlike the mention of Philomela and Procne in 5.2.194–95 there is no explicit reference to *Thyestes* in either 5.2 or 5.3. Also, as West points out, *Thyestes* itself alludes to the Ovidian tale as the model for Atreus’s revenge (1982: 63 note 7), yet the diction and the theatricality of the vengeance scenes suggest an overarching Senecan ambience.

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