

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Titus Andronicus 1588-93

Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

The play before us was probably written by Shakespeare in collaboration with George Peele, and was Shakespeare's first tragedy, adopting the bloody tragic manner of the ancient Roman dramatist, Seneca, in whom a kind of closet horror plotting became a delight to Roman audiences in the early Empire. The narrative is set in the later Roman Empire, and creates (no historical models) the story of Titus Andronicus, who is engaged in a bloody sequence of vengeance with Tamora, the Queen of the Goths. What we do know is that the play has had to tolerate constant changes of evaluation, from its creation to our time. Broadly speaking, the play has proven a mirror of its time. It was popular when it was created, answering to a taste for theatrical horror and blood, which were very much in the late Elizabethan vein—and which turned this play into a high success. The following centuries, especially the Victorian 19th, largely turned their backs on the play, widely considered as vulgar and violent—to no purpose. If there has been a revival it has been among a number of sharply revisionist playwrights, in our own time, who have concluded that this is a play for our moment, a moment of reckless violence and rapid destruction of human values.

CHARACTERS

Titus Andronicus, a noble Roman general, who has just returned from ten years of fighting the Goths on the eastern frontier of the Empire. He is present with his daughter, Lavinia, and with four of his more than twenty sons—the majority of them lost in the war. His return immediately puts him at the center of a power struggle for the Imperial throne. Offered the honor he rejects it, pleading his age and lack of ambition.

Lavinia, the daughter of Titus Andronicus. She stands out for the pathos of her mutilation by the sons of Tamora, the Goth Empress of Rome. Her mutilation—tongue removed, hands cut off—is mirrored by the feast of Tamora's own sons to which Tamora is treated by Titus at the end of the play. Lavinia herself is killed by her father, at the play's end, for the shame she implies is intolerable to him.

Saturninus. Elder son of the former Roman Emperor, and later Emperor himself. He murders Titus for the crime of having served Tamora's children to her in a pie.

Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and later Empress. She is the key figure in the revenge chain which dominates the play, for it is the initial murder of her child, by Titus, which initiates her need for the terrible revenge on Lavinia, the daughter of Titus.

Aaron the Moor, the lover of Tamora, evil incarnate, black and father of blackness, and to the end, even when being buried alive, repentant that he has ever done any act of good.

STORY

Setting. The play begins not long after the death of the Roman Emperor—hazy historical setting, in late antiquity—and presents us a tug of war for the succession, between the Emperor's two sons, Bassianus and Saturninus. This impasse is broken by Marcus, a tribune of the Roman people, who proclaims that the people's choice, for the new Emperor, is his own brother, Titus Andronicus, who is just returning to Rome after a ten year stint of fighting the barbarians in the East.

Revenge. Titus brings with him, as prisoners of war, Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, her three sons, and her black moor lover, Aaron. Immediately upon return, Titus sacrifices one of Tamora's sons, in

revenge for the loss of his own sons in the eastern campaign. For this act Tamora vows a revenge, which will trigger the events of the entire play.

Development. Meanwhile Titus himself refuses to accept the emperorship, and supports Saturninus for the role; Saturninus accepts, saying that his first act will be to marry Lavinia, Titus' daughter. To this Titus agrees, although Lavinia is already betrothed to Saturninus' brother, Bassianus, who refuses to release her. In a scuffle, Titus mixes it up with these rivals for Lavinia, in the course of which he murders his own son, Mutius. At this point—in the often loosely jointed forward movement of the play—Saturninus decides to mock Titus by marrying Tamora himself, and with her joining forces in a plan to avenge the recent sacrifice of Tamora's young son.

Horror. During a hunt the next day, Aaron the Moor persuades the sons of Tamora to kill Bassianus, so that they will be able to rape Lavinia, Titus' daughter. They carry out these amazing violences, raping Lavinia, cutting off her hands and cutting out her tongue. Aaron writes a forged letter, pinning the responsibility for these murders on the sons of Titus, who are accordingly sentenced to death. Marcus, Titus' brother, subsequently discovers the wasted Lavinia, whom he takes to her totally devastated father, who is trying to cope with the false accusations raised against his sons. Aaron subsequently appears, with an offer to Titus; Titus' son will be spared if Titus (or his brother) cuts off his own hand, and sends it to Aaron. Titus complies but is rewarded by dreadful tragedy in the return post: his own hand returned, plus the decapitated heads of his two falsely accused sons. (Yes, Aaron seems to be breaking a world record for evil!)

Playout. In the playout of these more than pregnant events, the maimed Lavinia figures out how to describe her attackers. Tamora gives birth to a mixed race child, fathered by Aaron, who flees with the infant to protect it from the hostility of the Roman crowds. Back in Rome, Titus' behavior—think of the stress on the man!—leads people to doubt his sanity, and Tamora the ever vengeful moves against him. (Her sons Chiron and Demetrius are with her.) Dressed as the Spirits of Revenge, Murder, and Rape, they visit Titus, with the promise they will aid him in taking revenge on all his foes, if he will dissuade his son Lucius from his imminent attack on the city of Rome. While arrangements are being made for that intervention,

Titus detains the two sons of Tamora, Murder and Rape, slits their throats, and bakes their heads in a pie. The next day, the unlucky Tamora consumes this frightful dish, there is a general brawl in Rome, during which Titus kills both his daughter, Lavinia, and Tamora, Titus' son Lucius is proclaimed Emperor, and the trumpets herald a new era of amnesty, peace, and reconciliation in Rome.

THEMES

Revenge. The entire development of the play centers around revenge. Upon return from ten years of war, Titus has ordered the sacrifice of the son of Tamora, the Goth queen who has been taken prisoner by Rome. This sacrifice opens the whole revenge narrative of the play. The subsequent rape and mutilation of Titus's daughter, Lavinia, traces back directly to Tamora's desire for revenge against Titus. Titus' ultimate revenge against Tamora must await the end of the play, and the news she has consumed the heads of her two boys in a pie prepared for her by Titus.

Sadism. Shakespeare stepped straight into the Senecan tradition, as well into a sure fire seller tradition of his own Elizabethan moment, when he wrote *Titus Andronicus* as his debut tragedy, very near the beginning of his own career. His characters perform the kinds of sadistic acts—raping, cutting out a tongue; serving up children's heads, twice, as cunningly disguised gifts—which innumerable viewers of TV shows like *Game of Thrones* will have learned to take in stride, and which a culture of cults, like that of Nigeria, will have long ago learned how to replicate.

Power. From the outset, with the return of Titus from ten years of fighting in the east, power control has been a crucial factor in this play. There is much struggle for control of Rome, with Titus' sons pitted against those of Tamora, and the backdrop of power struggle more generally, between Rome and its barbarian foes. Is there, in the play, evidence of the beauty of grace, charity, or even weakness? If there

is, it must be reserved for Lavinia to display it. Her invention of a new language, under the pressure of desperation, is perhaps the play's one tribute to ingenuity and grace.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Titus Andronicus

Character Titus Andronicus is the main character. We first meet him as a triumphant military victor, returning to Rome after ten years of fighting the barbarians. We learn about him from his decision not to accept the Imperial power for himself, on the grounds that he is too old and lacks strength. He is unable, though, to remain apart from the fray of imperial politics. He takes the self-engaging move of backing the sacrifice of Alarbus, the son of Tamora, and thereby subjecting himself—and his family—to the chain of revenge which Tamora will inaugurate, by seeing to the maiming and raping of his daughter, then, a bit later, to sponsoring the dirty plot by which he is tricked by Aaron into losing two sons and his right hand. Titus Andronicus is from that point on helpless to resist the maze of vengeance actions, which swallow him up and kill him in the end, though not before he has himself killed his precious daughter Lavinia. Good guy, no, but with more potential than any other character, to give something to the world as he passes.

Parallels. Three figures from Greek antiquity suggest themselves as parallels. **Nestor**, the wise old man full of wise old saws, in *The Odyssey*, carries with him the incense of former military greatness, like Titus, but is when we meet him retired from the fray. He is drawn on regularly for advice. **Agamemnon**, the leader of the Greek forces in the Trojan War, is forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, in order to make the winds blow, so that the navy can continue on its way to Troy. **Hector**, the commander of the Trojan Forces in the *Iliad*, is a vulnerable family man, like Titus, and like Titus he succumbs to excessive difficulties of life in the fast action lane. Like Titus, he ultimately dies at the hands of his deadly enemy.

Illustrative moments

Retiring. Upon return from the wars, many in Rome urge Titus to accept the imperial throne, but he refuses, insisting he is too old. Little does he realize into what a different kind of hell of revenge and hostility he is stepping.

Horrified. Looking upon the maimed and raped body of his daughter, Titus is horrified. He cannot contain his despair, which, as he says, overflows like the Nile. He is completely wiped out.

Vengeful. Titus plans his revenge against the children of Tamora. They will ultimately be baked in a pie for their mother to feast on, just the tit for tat that Titus, who has already inflicted death on one of Tamora's children, wants to damn the mother with.

Pure. Titus prioritized purity, after his cultural fashion, and is therefore particularly pained by the shame caused him by the defilement of Lavinia. By killing her, at the end of the play, he hopes to blot out his own shame.

Mad. Intermittently, signs of madness break through into the discourse of Titus, who is made particularly desperate—because of the mutilation of his daughter—to any emphasis on the word *hands*.

Discussion questions

Does Shakespeare intend for us to feel sympathy for any party or individual in this play, or is it a horror show from start to beginning? Does Titus, our 'main character,' win our hearts with his crushed despair at the loss of his daughter? Does Tamora win us over, with the same emotion at the outset of the play?

What is the image of the Moor or Blackamoor in this play? How does this image compare with what Shakespeare creates for Iago in *Othello*? What sentiment in his audience is Shakespeare creating, by

this presentation of blackness? Is it hatred or disgust? Or is there a touch of pop art here, a pressing of what is already a nasty prejudice into a self-mocking image?

Is Shakespeare just trying his wings in this play, which many critics view as a calamitous flop, a howler even? Or is he pop arting it, pressing evil to the limit, and at the same time writing stunning lines—now and then—to sweeten the mouths of his finer actors? Do we see anything of Timon or even Lear, sticking out in Titus?