

Dossiê Shakespeare

**The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedy:
Titus Andronicus – Criticism, Stage History,
and Contemporary Readings**

Filipe dos Santos Avila

The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedy: *Titus Andronicus* Criticism, Stage History, and Contemporary Readings

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Abstract: This essay foregrounds William Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, overviews the critical debate concerning the play's controversial authorship, takes into account the play's reception and life on stage, and presents germane contemporary readings of the playtext drawn from different theoretical standpoints. The essay concludes that the text is not supreme in creating meaning or establishing authority and that these are a direct function of performance and criticism.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Titus Andronicus*; performance criticism.

Resumo: O presente ensaio topicaliza umas das primeiras tragédias de William Shakespeare, *Tito Andrônico*, revê o debate crítico acerca da controvérsia autoral relativa à peça, aborda a recepção e a presença da peça no palco, e apresenta leituras relevantes e contemporâneas do texto da peça, selecionadas a partir de diferentes posturas teóricas. O ensaio conclui que o texto não é supremo na criação de sentido nem no estabelecimento de autoridade, e que sentido e autoridade se constituem como função direta da encenação e da crítica.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare; *Tito Andrônico*; análise espetacular.

Introduction

Professor Coleman, a character from Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, says, in his first class on the classics, that Western literature begins with a quarrel: the quarrel over a young female, Helen of Troy in the *Iliad* (2001:4). The story of *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's most violent tragedy, could also be said to begin with a quarrel over a young female, that is, Lavinia, Titus Andronicus' daughter. However intricate the revenge plot of this early tragedy, ultimately the main conflict deals with the control of Lavinia, the aristocratic young female whose body, in a way, symbolizes the Roman Empire.

The play begins with the former Emperor's two sons fighting over succession and, subsequently, over the right to marry Lavinia. Moreover, Lavinia's rape and mutilation by

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the Goth Empress's two sons epitomize the barbarian invasions of Rome. But the history of *Titus Andronicus*, the play itself, is also filled with struggles over authority, meanings, aesthetic value, and so on. Was *Titus* written by Shakespeare? Did he write all of it? What were his sources? Is the play a parody, a tragedy or both? Is it republican? Is it reactionary? After all, is it a good play? These are some of the questions we want to address in this essay, not to ultimately answer them but to expose conflicting points of view and contribute to the understanding of the play. The very fact that such questions have often been asked shows that, independently of who the author is or of its aesthetic merits, *Titus Andronicus* is worth studying. Thus, in this essay we overview some of the debate concerning the play's reception, we take into account the question of authorship, the play's life on the stage, and we also present germane contemporary readings of the playtext from different theoretical standpoints.

Beauty, Shock and Authorship

Before briefly discussing the play's aesthetic status, we would like to address the question of authorship. As previously mentioned, it is not my aim to make an aesthetic defense of *Titus Andronicus*, but my goal in foregrounding this discussion is to highlight how fleeting the play's aesthetic status has been and how considerations about its "beauty" have influenced the question of authorship. The main sources of my discussion will be the introductions to modern editions of *Titus Andronicus*, namely, The Riverside Shakespeare, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, The Arden Shakespeare, and The Oxford Shakespeare (see References).

Critical consensus establishes that collaboration among playwrights in Early Modern England was a recurrent practice, and so, for a long time, scholars believed that *Titus Andronicus* could not be attributed solely to Shakespeare—he probably touched the play, but only to give it a few "Master-touches". Professor Alan Hughes dedicates a section of his introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play to the question of authorship and begins by pointing out that the only evidence—if we can call it that—that the play was not solely written by Shakespeare was an address to the reader written by Edward Ravenscroft, a seventeenth-century writer, in his own adaptation of the story of *Titus Andronicus*. The address, as quoted by Hughes, reads:

I have been told by some anciently conversant with the Stage, that it was not Originally his, but brought by a private Author to be Acted, and he only gave some Master-touches to one or two of the Principal Parts or Characters; this I am apt to believe, because 'tis the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his Works; it seems rather a heap of Rubbish than a Structure. (qtd. in Hughes 2013:10)

Ravenscroft's address comprises no scholarly argument. To his taste the play was bad;

therefore, it could not be Shakespeare's.

To Jonathan Bate, cogently, the motivation behind Ravencroft's remark is to validate his own work in writing an adaptation: he "may have created a fiction about Shakespeare as improver in order to give precedent and warrant for his own practice as improver" (2014:79). Ben Jonson's introduction to his play *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) also helped to start a "denigration process", as put by Eugene Waith, editor of the Oxford Shakespeare edition. Jonson, in his introduction, mocks as having an old-fashioned taste those who still think highly of *Titus Andronicus*, since the play was written in the early 1590's, almost thirty years before Jonson's. *Titus Andronicus* had been a success, but both its authority and its quality were being questioned. This denigration process "continued for many years, and often led to the conviction that the play as we have it could not have been written by Shakespeare. Recognition of its merits and of its close ties with other works by Shakespeare was slow to come. It has been more characteristic of the twentieth than of preceding centuries" (2014:1).

In the twentieth century, especially in the first half, scholars tried to formally question the authorship of *Titus Andronicus*. Bate expounds on how some compared *Titus Andronicus* to the works of George Peele, trying to establish him as author, and found several lexical parallels. Such parallels indeed exist, "but then there are equally striking parallels with anonymous plays such as *Selimues Emperor of the Turks* and *Edmund Ironside*, with [Christopher] Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, [Thomas] Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, and [Thomas] Lodge's *Wounds of Civil War*—and of course with Shakespeare's works" (2014:81). Bate reminds us that it was common for Elizabethans to imitate words and expressions they encountered in their contemporaries' works, hence rendering such comparisons rather unreliable in terms of establishing authorship (2014:81-2). But analyses of other linguistic elements, such as "connectives, articles, prepositions and pronouns [. . .] constitute a linguistic fingerprint as opposed to poetic plumage", and a "computer analysis of these suggests [. . .] that *Titus* is by a single hand and that at this level its linguistic habits are very different from Peele's" (2014:83). Yet, Shakespeare's fingerprint in the play is, as most scholars agree, not in the language of the verse, but rather on the spectacular stagecraft.

All evidence, both historical and linguistic, suggests that *Titus* was indeed written by Shakespeare, and that questioning its authority was due to its relative "poor taste" in comparison to other plays by the Bard rather than due to any historically valid claim. Thus the dislike for *Titus Andronicus* persists throughout the twentieth century. For T. S. Eliot *Titus Andronicus* is "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written [. . .]. There is a wantonness, an irrelevance, about the crimes of which Seneca would never have been guilty" (qtd. in Hughes 2013:32). Harold Bloom sees the play as necessary for Shakespeare in his maturing years, but not for us (86). For Bloom, the play's artistic failure lies in its problematic distinction between parody and tragedy. In the two performances Bloom attended, audiences "never quite knew when to be horrified and when to laugh, rather uneasily" (1998:77). Notoriously, Bloom writes that he would only attend another

performance of *Titus* if Mel Brooks, well known for comedies, parodies and farces, directed it (1998:86). Currently, Shakespeare's authorship is undoubtedly recognized, but certain critics, like Bloom, do not take the play to be a serious effort in writing tragedy. In spite of such negative opinions, *Titus* has seen a revival in its critical appraisal, especially due to performances after the Second World War.

Stage History

Titus Andronicus' performance history is special: it "is the only Shakespearean play for which we have a contemporaneous illustration" (BATE2014:38), i.e., Henry Peacham's drawing. Whether indeed a representation of a performance or simply a "quasi-emblematical representation" of the playtext, Peacham's drawing is considered by Bate an "early 'production'" of the play: "even if it is a production in Peacham's mental theatre, [the drawing] demonstrates how a contemporary of Shakespeare's visualized the play—and such a visualization must have depended on some experience of real theatre" (2014:41). Two features of the drawing are particularly worth noticing: the anachronism of the costumes and the stiff, emblem-like pose of the characters (BATE2014:43) (see figure 1).

Another register of a nearly performance of *Titus Andronicus* is of a private performance "in the household of Sir John Harrington at Burley-on-the-Hill in Rutland", (BATE2014:43) by, presumably, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's company at the time, in 1596. Bate mentions that Sir John Harrington "had links with the Essex circle", meaning that political aspects of the play may have interested him. However, the record we have of this performance does not concern its political aspects, but rather its theatricality: "Jacques Petit, a French tutor in the household, wrote home saying [. . .] 'La monstre a plus valu que le sujet'" (2014:43-4), that is, the spectacle has more value than the plot.

The theater and its audiences changed significantly after the Restoration. "Audiences were smaller, differently composed, and had acquired new tastes", Alan Hughes writes, and "the Restoration playhouse had a proscenium arch and pictorial scenery which imposed entirely new conventions" (2013:23). It is in this context that the aforementioned adaptation of the play written by Ravenscroft was performed. His distaste for the play is clearly related to the conventions of the theater of his time, which shows that it is difficult to separate, in this case, literary criticism from theatrical practices.

Titus was rarely performed in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. The American actor Ira Aldrige, known as the "African Roscius" and naturalized English, was responsible for the only known performance of *Titus Andronicus* in the British Isles in the nineteenth century (WAITH2008:47). Reviews of his production emphasized Aldrige's outstanding performance as Aaron, who, in Aldrige's reading of the play (and the role), was more of a heroic figure (2008:48-9). Eugene Waith calls attention to the fact that "only Saturninus is a truly villainous character"; even Tamora and her sons are not entirely evil in this production (2008:49). Another century goes by and the horrors present in *Titus*

Andronicus still seem unfit to be performed in their entirety, with their sheer spectacle and complex characterization.

Only in the Old Vic Theater in 1923 would the play be performed again, and for the first time “as Shakespeare wrote it since the early years of the Restoration” (WAITH 2008:49), but not until after the Second World War *Titus Andronicus* would regain part of its former glory as one of the most successful plays of its time. Alan Hughes highlights the difference in terms of reception before and after the war. Commenting on a negative review of the 1923 production, written by Herbert Farjeon, who thought the atrocities in the play were exaggerated, Hughes submits that “[o]f course, Farjeon was writing before the twentieth century had shown what it could really achieve in the way of atrocities” (2013:29).

Thus the post-war brought *Titus Andronicus* back to the stage, as if the atrocities seen and experienced in the war made the play less alien to contemporary audiences. After Auschwitz and the atomic bomb, perhaps, the rape, mutilation, and cannibalism present in the play no longer seemed far-fetched. Among the post-war *Tituses*, two productions stand out: Peter Brook’s and Deborah Warner’s. So successful was Brook’s production that, as noted by Alan Hughes, it challenged critical conceptions about the play itself. Concerning *Titus Andronicus*, Hughes writes, “literary tradition found it bad”, but “Brook confronted [literary tradition] with a production so successful that the consensus was called into question. Scholars began to return to the text” (2013:42). The success of Brook’s production calls attention to the fact that performance is neither subject to the text nor to criticism, exclusively, but that these factors interact in unexpected ways on an equal level. Brook’s take on *Titus* was symbolic, and violence was stylized. Further on, Deborah Warner, in the 1980’s, rendered *Titus* both a more domestic and realistic play. Other productions worthwhile mentioning are Jane Howell’s BBC-TV adaptation (1985), with its ritualistic and Brechtian overtones (cf. AVILA, M.A. 2014), and Julie Taymor’s movie adaptation, *Titus* (1999), with its rich intertextuality, ranging from Fascist Italy through Marilyn Monroe and Hannibal Lecter.

Contemporary Critical Views and Concluding Remarks

So far I have briefly covered the issue of authorship and stage history regarding *Titus Andronicus*, trying to elucidate whenever possible the relationship between these two aspects and the critical appraisal the play has received throughout the centuries. To conclude this essay, I would like to bring to discussion the significance of the violence in the play by evoking two opposite critical views. Leonard Tennenhouse argues that the exaggerated violence in the play is not gratuitous, but it serves a political purpose: it deals with a certain “political iconography” that displays the power of the monarch. The late Francis Barker, on the other hand, argues that the extravagant violence in *Titus Andronicus* serves to *occlude* real violence, i.e., State violence against the common people of Elizabethan

England. Succinctly put, for Barker, ignoring this violence and showing violence as something spectacular, *Titus* serves to legitimize State power.

In my introduction I briefly mentioned that Lavinia's body serves as a symbol for the Roman Empire itself. Tennenhouse develops this argument further, and at the same time he dismisses the violence of the play to be exaggerated or purposeless. He writes:

The sheer spectacle of a woman, herself dismembered, herself carrying her father's amputated hand in her mouth, has not earned this play a particularly high place in a canon based on lofty ideas and good taste. The mutilation of Lavinia's body has been written off as one of the exuberant excesses of an immature playwright or else as the corrupting influence of another poet. But I would like to consider these sensational features as part of a political iconography which Shakespeare understood as well as anyone else, one which he felt obliged to use as well as free to exploit for his own dramatic purposes. (2005:106-7)

Tennenhouse calls attention to the fact that such representations of the female body were produced in "an age which thought of state power as female. Under such circumstances, these representations—perhaps any representation—of the aristocratic female provided the substance of a political iconography which enhanced the power of the Elizabethan state" (2005:112). If in Elizabethan England "[d]isplaying the monarch's body was so essential to maintaining the power of state" (2005:106), it is difficult to conceive that such representation of an aristocratic female would be gratuitous.

But if Tennenhouse focuses on the display of power in *Titus Andronicus* and the political iconography evoked through such a violent passage, Barker famously claims that what is present in *Titus* is the aforementioned occlusion of violence. The passage that motivates his reading is the killing of the clown/messenger in act 4, scene 4. As opposed to the other murders in the play, the clown's hanging is "so undemonstrative and marginal that it has consistently escaped notice" (1993:165). This act, writes Barker, "is simply *there*: strange, *unheimlich*, and, I have found, haunting" (1993:168). Barker's conclusion is that the atrocities in the play shift the focus away from killings such as these, the unjustified execution of common people by the State, a common practice in Early Modern England as his painstaking historical research indicates. Thus, for Barker, *Titus Andronicus* endorses "an entire historical culture of violence which it domesticates" (1993:205).

These two readings, of course, do not exhaust the possibilities of thematic interpretations of the play, nor are these the only readings to be taken into account. Other possibilities pay to be pursued, such as, for instance, Andrew Hadfield's argument that *Titus* is a republican play, advocating for a limited, democratic government. After all, the text is not supreme in creating meaning or authority: these invariably operate in close relationship with performance and criticism. Textually, *The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedie of Titus Andronicus*, as the play is titled in the 1594 quarto, has remained the same for

these four centuries, but the status of *Titus Andronicus* as a cultural artifact has drastically changed.

Appendix



Figure 1

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