

Titus Andronicus (Fall 2006)

Titus Andronicus was the first of Shakespeare's plays to be published, appearing in quarto form in 1594; Jonathan Bate speculates that it "perhaps did more than any other play to establish its author's reputation as a dramatist" [1], a possibility that may puzzle modern Bardolaters. Responding to Peter Brook's famous 1955 production, starring Laurence Olivier, the critic Jan Kott wondered, "I have recently reread it, and found it ridiculous. I have seen it on the stage, and found it a moving experience. Why?"¹

I second Kott's assessment of *Titus* as literature and, though I have never seen a live performance, I find Julie Taymor's 1999 filmed adaptation strangely gripping. Spectacle alone cannot be the reason—gruesome, shocking violence may distract from a script's failings, but it does not add subtext and shape to one-dimensional characters in a silly plot. Yet how inadequately this verdict fits Taymor's film, and in particular Anthony Hopkins's tour-de-force performance in the title role. Reading—and rereading—the play, I am baffled by the behavior of nearly every character: What could possibly compel people to make such stupid decisions? When these same characters are brought to life by skilled actors, their motives magically crystalize. Nowhere is this clearer than in the play's long-suffering protagonist,

Titus

The effect of Hopkins's performance is most striking at the play's beginning and end, when Titus performs his most monstrous acts. How does one comprehend, let alone sympathize with, the man Shakespeare gives us on paper—the proud Roman who stabs his son and snaps the neck of his raped and mutilated daughter! Titus sets the chariot

¹ Quoted in Russ McDonald's introduction to *Titus Andronicus* [xxx]

wheels of his tragedy in motion when he ignores the heartfelt pleas of Tamora, the captured Goth queen, to spare her eldest son's life; Titus has sentenced the youth to die in recompense for the military deaths of his own sons. "Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods?" Tamora cries out. "Draw near them then in being merciful" [I.i.120–1]. Alas, Titus draws all too near the nature of Rome's gods, for Jove and his ilk are as ignorant of mercy as are their brutal worshippers; soon enough, Titus's own pleas for divine intervention shall fall to Earth as pointlessly as the arrows his friends fire at the heavens [IV.iii.1–64].

Hopkins delivers his crushing reply to Tamora—"To this your son is marked, and die he must, / T' appease their groaning shadows that are gone" [I.i.128–9]—in flat tones, suggesting a man whose every compassionate instinct has been subordinated through lifelong service to the martial ideal. This ideal also helps to explain why Titus supports the decadent Saturninus, rather than the virtuous Bassianus, in the battle for emperor that begins the play—as the elder brother, Saturninus is first in the political chain of command. Unfortunately, the emperor is free to demand anything he desires of Titus—including his daughter, Lavinia; though Lavinia is already betrothed to Bassianus, Titus gives her, without hesitation, to Saturninus.

This readiness to act without thought to the consequences—these decisions all prove disastrous to the Andronici—goes a long way toward explaining Titus's character. "Tell me, Andronicus, doth this motion please thee?" Saturninus asks as he seizes Lavinia; Titus's reply—"It doth, my worthy lord, and in this match / I hold me highly honored of your grace" [I.i.246–8]—reminds us that he is subject and soldier before father. Still, it would be nice to know what the father is thinking. Earlier he called

Lavinia “[t]he cordial of mine age to glad my heart” [I.i.169]—surely Titus experiences *some* conflicting emotions as he watches her snatched from the man she loves. True, her new match makes Lavinia empress, but Saturninus has already shown himself to be a petulant child—angered that his countrymen prefer Titus (though Titus has explicitly refused the imperial burden), Saturninus lashes out in ways that do not bode well for his future in-laws:

Patricians, draw your swords, and sheathe them not
Till Saturninus be Rome’s emperor.
Andronicus, would thou were shipped to hell
Rather than rob me of the people’s hearts!

[I.i.207–10]

I am not suggesting Titus must fit into modern conceptions of fatherhood or believe marriage to be anything but a political tool. What seems odd—and what I suspect has motivated critics to try to assign this play to another, lesser author—is Shakespeare’s apparent lack of interest in exploring these tensions in such a dramatic context. Beginning with *Romeo and Juliet* (composed perhaps no more than a year after *Titus*) and continuing all the way through *Coriolanus*, he populates his tragedies with thinking men and women. Even in very early plays such as the three parts of *Henry VI*, Shakespeare gradually deepens the central figures—he may not always succeed, but we can sense the effort, the attempt to dramatize inner life. *Titus Andronicus* poses a different challenge to actors, who find few clues to what motivates characters beyond such stock emotions as grief and lovesickness—in this respect the play is unique in the Shakespearean canon, unless we count it with *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, both obvious farces. Indeed, for critics who reluctantly accept *Titus* as genuinely Shakespeare’s, a common refuge is to interpret the play as a parody of a revenge tragedy.

But to return to Anthony Hopkins: From his first appearance onscreen, the clarity of his actions is remarkable, and the cumulative effect of each choice is to humanize Titus to where we can sympathize with him. It helps to remember the impossible position in which Titus finds himself the moment he passes the diadem to Saturninus. “Give me a staff of honor for mine age, / But not a scepter to control the world,” he admonishes his fellow Romans [I.i.201–2], as though intending to retire from a world where he has excelled, we may suppose, his whole life. Perhaps Titus passes over Bassianus for emperor to keep him—and thus his “cordial,” Lavinia—by his side, a prop for his old age . . . or else to punish Bassianus for wanting to take Lavinia from him. As Titus enters Rome, Taymor films him carefully observing the tender reunion of his daughter and her betrothed—Hopkins’s expression is guarded and difficult to read, but Titus may well be contemplating (almost as Lear shall contemplate) a peaceful procession through his remaining days into the grave, “[where] lurks no treason, [where] no envy swells, / [Where] grow no damned drugs, [where] are no storms, / No noise, but silence and eternal sleep” [I.i.156–9].

But as Lear discovered—and Richard III and Othello and Mark Antony and numerous other Shakespearean protagonists—for the man of action, the most damning drug is idleness. One cannot simply withdraw from the world, at least not in its tragic dimension, without summoning nemesis. Humbled, the hero begs the gods to return their favor, but they are deaf; in the darkest plays, they have ceased to exist. Titus has not yet reached this point, but almost immediately his ordered world spins out of control: Saturninus demands Lavinia for himself; Bassianus, supported by Titus’s surviving sons, defiantly steals her back; in the quarrel, Titus slays his youngest son, Mutius;

Saturninus—eager to rid himself of the popular general to whom he owes his throne—banishes Titus, pardons the Goths, rejects Lavinia, and chooses instead for his queen the very person to whom Titus denied mercy, Tamora.

It is an incredible reversal of fortune, happening in the span of a hundred lines, and Hopkins registers every bewildering moment on his weathered face; when Titus stabs Mutius, his arms seem no longer to obey his will. By the time Tamora arranges for his reconciliation with the emperor (so that she can more easily exact her revenge), Titus's once-proud spirit is nearly broken—his exit lines (“Tomorrow, an it please your majesty / To hunt the panther and the hart with me, / With horn and hound we'll give your grace *bon jour*” [I.i.495–7]) no longer sound naïve or cheery, as on the page; they burst desperately from Hopkins, as though Titus already knows his fate.

The rest of the play alternates between scheming and calamity for all; the murder of Bassianus, the rape and subsequent mutilation of Lavinia, and the beheading of two of Titus's remaining three sons stand out from the carnage chiefly for their importance to the plot. The very act of listing the horrors serves to distance us—considered in their grim totality they seem unbelievable; to fully invest ourselves would be exhausting. Titus himself is keenly aware of this. Are we ever closer to him than while witnessing the spectacle of his brother's grief?

Marcus: Ah, now no more will I control thy griefs:
 Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand
 Gnawing with thy teeth; and be this dismal sight
 The closing up of our most wretched eyes.
 Now is a time to storm; why art thou still?

Titus: Ha, ha, ha!

Marcus: Why dost thou laugh? it fits not with this hour.

Titus: Why, I have not another tear to shed . . .

[III.i.259–66]

Even so, nothing prepares for the shock of the final scene, and not just because it features Tamora dining on meat pies made from her sons' finely ground bones. The thrill of revenge seems to snap whatever threads of sanity remain in Titus; he interrupts the feast to ask Saturninus an ominous, yet somehow still unexpected, question:

Titus: My lord the emperor, resolve me this:
 Was it well done of rash Virginius
 To slay his daughter with his own right hand,
 Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?
Saturninus: It was, Andronicus.
Titus: Your reason, mighty lord?
Saturninus: Because the girl should not survive her shame,
 And by her presence still renew his sorrows.
Titus: A reason mighty, strong, and effectual;
 A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant
 For me, most wretched, to perform the like.
 Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,
 And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die!

[V.iii.35–47]

Yet again, the lines on the page might be annotated “WTF?!” Pity about her father's sorrow, but as Harold Bloom exclaims, “At the least, one feels that the tormented Lavinia should have had some choice in the matter!” [80]. As if to underscore the absurdity of this latest twist, Shakespeare begins composing in rhymed couplets. Yet Taymor manages to stage the scene in a way that salvages Titus's humanity. In total silence, the actress who plays Lavinia, Laura Fraser, enters. Dressed in a white robe, her face veiled, she walks solemnly, ritually toward Hopkins's waiting arms. Father and daughter take a moment to acknowledge each other before she turns to face their enemies. Only then does Hopkins pronounce the death sentence—framed in close-up as he embraces her from behind, he seems to whisper the lines to Fraser alone, who stands serenely. Thus when Titus finally snaps Lavinia's neck, we are left with the distinct impression she *did* have some choice in the matter. Her husband and brothers are

slaughtered, her father's execution is inevitable, she has neither hands nor tongue, and her own vengeance is complete—perhaps the better question is why should she *not* choose death.

Taymor was surely not the first to stage Lavinia's death like this; regardless, the perspective is invaluable. “‘Titus Andronicus’ is no tragedy at all if pity and terror are essential to the tragic experience,” Mark Van Doren argues [28]. Titus may be too alien a creature—composed, in his own words, of “metal, . . . steel to the very back” [IV.iii.48]—for anyone of flesh and blood to love. But love is not essential to the tragic experience. If Taymor, Hopkins, and Fraser can pity Titus, so can we. Ultimately, what separates *Titus Andronicus* from other Shakespearean tragedies is its dependence on performance rather than playscript to engender the crucial emotions in us.

Miscellaneous Thoughts before Aaron

If Titus and his kin are the play's repositories of pity, Aaron the Moor is its primary architect of terror. Before I proceed to Aaron, I'd like to briefly consider several characters who contribute in some key way to the pervading nonsense:

- In a play overstuffed with stupid decisions, perhaps the stupidest belongs to Tamora's sons Chiron and Demetrius, who voluntarily linger in Titus's home, surrounded by Andronici, despite Titus's repeatedly pronouncing “how like the empress' sons they are” [V.ii.64]. Then again, they also reasoned that cutting off Lavinia's tongue and hands was a more secure way to hide rape than just killing her. (Then again, it nearly was! Did it never occur to Lavinia to lead Titus and Marcus to the palace, wait for her attackers to exit, and point her arms in their direction?)

- Speaking of Marcus, why does he carry out Tamora's request to invite his banished nephew, Lucius (busy leading an army of avenging Goths against Rome), to an imperial feast that has every reason to be a trap? Yes, Tamora is disguised, but Titus is not fooled. Does she manage to trick his considerably saner brother?
- Speaking of the avenging Goths, did not Lucius promise, in return for their help sacking Rome, "treble satisfaction" for the wrongs committed against them by Romans [V.i.7–8]? Why, then, at the end of the play do they stand around like chumps while Lucius takes up the imperial scepter and vows "[t]o heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe" [V.iii.148]? Truly Lucius has befriended the noblest Goths of them all. (They may be the most cultured, if the soldier who strays from his battalion "[t]o gaze upon a ruinous monastery" [V.i.21] is any indication.)
- Can we possibly praise as a "very excellent piece of villainy" [II.iii.7] any scheme that requires one strapping young man to fall into a pit hastily covered with brambles, then to pull his equally strapping brother in after him? Yet this is precisely what Aaron devises to undo the Andronici. Later, needing an encore, Aaron tricks Titus into chopping off his own hand.

Of course, from a certain perspective such objections are beside the point; one might as well object to the intentionally ridiculous plot of *The Comedy of Errors*. But therein lies the rub: That play is not labeled a tragedy. It is true that genre is a fluid concept in Shakespeare, and many scenes in *Titus Andronicus* do seem to work better as

travesties of tragedy. On the other hand, Taymor’s film—indeed, all successfully moving productions of the play—demonstrates the genuine feeling buried deep within the gore.

There is also the matter of the one character who demands further consideration:

Aaron the Moor

Aaron is by far the most actor-friendly role in the play—Shakespeare gives him plenty of scenes to steal, culminating in a kind of infernal apotheosis. Captured by Lucius’s army of Goths, a halter around his neck, Aaron is accommodating enough to catalogue his many villainies:

Even now I curse the day, and yet I think
 Few come within the compass of my curse,
 Wherein I did not some notorious ill:
 As kill a man, or else devise his death;
 Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it;
 Accuse some innocent, and forswear myself;
 Set deadly enmity between two friends;
 Make poor men’s cattle break their necks;
 Set fire on barns and haystacks in the night
 And bid the owners quench them with their tears.

[V.i.125–34]

Actually, these lines are anticlimactic following Aaron’s promise to show Lucius

“wondrous things / That highly may advantage thee to hear” [V.i.55-6]. Not so the next

item—in a better play, this might have been one of Shakespeare’s most remembered

images:

Oft have I digged up dead men from their graves
 And set them upright at their dear friends’ door
 Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,
 And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
 Have with my knife carved in Roman letters
 “Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead.”

[V.i.135–40]

Has human history produced even one instance of such an act? It's ludicrous, nonsensical . . . and brilliantly dramatic—the perfect capper for a man whose earlier thrill to chop off Titus's hand is practically orgasmic: “O, how this villainy / Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!” [III.i.202–3].² To borrow from a similar villain, the crookbacked Richard of Gloucester, Aaron is *himself alone* in Rome³ . . . until he begets a son. Admiring his child, Aaron taps into music heard nowhere else in the play—certainly not by Titus, who is more than willing to sacrifice his children for some imagined greater good, be it patriotism or wounded reputation:

My mistress is my mistress; this myself,
The vigor and the picture of my youth.
This before all the world do I prefer,
This maugre all the world will I keep safe,
Or some of you shall smoke for it in Rome!

[IV.ii.107–11]

Smoke for it indeed! Most of what characterizes *Titus Andronicus* is “cartoon” violence, too outrageous—too distant—to inspire terror. (Taymor emphasizes this point by opening her film in the 21st century, as a modern boy wreaks havoc on his action figures. We then follow the boy through Shakespeare's play; unofficially adopted by the Andronici, he begins to feel compassion for their wretchedness.) In contrast, Aaron's defense of his “first-born son and heir” [IV.ii.92] is profoundly human, though the end remains bloody. “But say again,” he asks the nurse who delivered Tamora of the baby (and who urges infanticide, lest the empress be shamed), “how many saw the child” [IV.ii.140]; we see the nurse's fate before she does: “Weeke, weeke!” Aaron exclaims as he kills her. “So cries a pig prepared to the spit” [IV.ii.146–7].

² Compare Aaron's response to Tamora's lusty advances: “Madam, though Venus govern your desires, / Saturn is dominator over mine” [II.iii.30–1].

³ See *3 Henry VI* [V.vi.84]

Aaron's "[c]oal-black" son [IV.ii.99] also reminds Aaron of the most obvious difference between himself and the Romans. It is no surprise that most of the play's white characters are racist (to speak anachronistically); less expected, I think, is Aaron's supreme dignity. If Shakespeare indeed intended *Titus* as farce or parody, why did he create so justifiably proud a villain? "Zounds, ye whore! is black so base a hue?" Aaron demands of the nurse, then turns to his son: "Sweet blowse, you are a beauteous blossom, sure" [IV.ii.71–2]. Later, as he defends the child, Aaron pronounces:

Coal-black is better than another hue
 In that it scorns to bear another hue
 For all the water in the ocean
 Can never turn the swan's black legs to white
 Although she lave them hourly in the flood.

[IV.ii.99–103]

In response, Queen Tamora's sons "blush to think upon this ignomy," their mother's interracial affair; Aaron's swift reply is one of the finest in the play:

Why, there's the privilege your beauty bears.
 Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing
 The close enacts and counsels of thy heart!
 Here's a young lad framed of another leer.
 Look how the black slave smiles upon the father,
 As who should say "Old lad, I am thine own."
 He is your brother, lords, sensibly fed
 Of that self blood that first gave life to you,
 And from that womb where you imprisoned were
 He is enfranchised and come to light.

[IV.ii.115–25]

Perhaps an Elizabethan audience—schooled in the prejudices of an era that prized, as the highest standard of beauty, red cheeks and lily brows—would have heard even these lines as parody. It's a fine joke by Shakespeare to locate the play's truest love in its most unrepentant character, whose final words—"If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul" [V.iii.189–90]—would disavow his successful

efforts to protect his child. Why should a parodist trouble his audience with such complexities? Once again Shakespeare seems unable to fully distance himself from his characters, and the result—as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—is more confusing than coherent. He shall plunge through this uneven terrain once more, in the aptly titled *The Life and Death of King John*, before emerging at last into a new kind of drama: the masterful trio of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Richard II*, in which character and plot cohere gloriously. If nothing else, early efforts such as *Titus Andronicus* demonstrate just how far Shakespeare moved to achieve his masterworks.

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *Titus Andronicus* are from the Pelican Shakespeare edition of the text, published by Penguin Books (cited above).