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Titus Andronicus and the Violence of Tragedy

Titus Andronicus begins with the looming threat of a three-way civil war. Saturninus and Bassianus, the two sons of the recently deceased emperor, enter with separate appeals to their supporters. The first words of the play place Saturninus very much at the head of the aristocracy:

Noble patricians, patrons of my right,
Defend the justice of my cause with arms. (TA 1.1.1-2)

His claim to the throne relies on primogeniture. Bassianus, on the other hand, bases his on “desert in pure election” (TA 1.1.16). He too is prepared to fight. The situation becomes even more complex when Marcus Andronicus arrives in his capacity as Tribune of the People:

Princes, that strive by factions and by friends
Ambitiously for rule and empery,
Know that the people of Rome, for whom we stand
A special party, have by common voice
In election for the Roman empery
Chosen Andronicus, surnamed Pius
For many good and great deserts to Rome. (TA 1.1.18-24)

Marcus’ use of the word “election” should be understood as “choice” rather than an elective process as such, and the implications are clear. The beginning of the play displays the crucial

faultlines that lie at the heart of the middle imperial Roman state: internecine dynastic struggle and class division.¹ The use of separate entrances plus the positioning of Marcus above the stage emblematises the splits in the state.

The crisis is further exacerbated with the arrival of Titus as a conquering general, fresh with royal captives from his latest bloody campaign against the Goths: Tamora, the queen, and her three sons, together with Aaron, Tamora's Moorish servant. Despite the rather hazy history here, Shakespeare manages very quickly to establish a series of set pieces that function as vignettes of Roman politics. Crucially, this context of constantly simmering civil tension is set up before Tamora pleads unsuccessfully with Titus for the life of her eldest son Alarbus.

In other words, the imperial Roman state is shown to be anything but civil, since civil war always seems to lurk beneath the surface when an emperor dies, and when a conquering general returns from campaign. The continuous possibility of internecine strife degrades the supposed high civilisation of Rome from within. Any easy assumption of a straightforward binary opposition between Rome and its barbarian Gothic "other" is thus extremely problematic from the outset.² The barbarism demonstrated by Titus when he sacrifices Alarbus in revenge for his family's losses in the wars will return to haunt him and his when Saturninus falls for Tamora.

All of the foregoing is familiar enough, but it accounts for neither the play's roaring success on its own stage, nor its denigration by later critics. Even its more recent rehabilitation seems somewhat partial, if not grudging. Titus Andronicus tends by its own excessive violence to attract extreme responses. Tragedy is a gory genre, of course, but this particular play seems to operate as a sort of limit text, a tragedy that extends tragic logic as far as possible to see what happens. Shakespeare deploys of all of the techniques and conventions of dramaturgy that are available to him, constructing a performance piece that

displays its own metatheatricity. This too is well enough understood, but it still seems somewhat inadequate as a means of dealing with the issues of performance and reception raised by this play. It is almost as though the critical vocabulary functions to insulate one from Titus Andronicus, rather than allowing it to be described or fully analysed.

In part this may be due to the exalted status given to Shakespeare well after his death. The bardic construct does not sit so easily with the constant eruptions of anguish and physical trauma throughout this play. The single most important element of the British Bard's make-up is his even-handedness, his supreme rationalising of the via media. But such a version is inevitably compromised by the embarrassment of Titus, and so his play is reduced to an early career aberration, almost as though it were a piece of juvenilia. Either that, or it should be deleted altogether. The Arden 3 editor gives an especially good example:

[...] Ravenscroft's statement was pounced on by eighteenth-century critics who wanted to excise Titus from the canon. They had to make the excision because they thought that it was a bad play and their Shakespeare could not have written anything that was uniformly bad. For 'bad', read principally, though not exclusively, indecorous.³

Jonathan Bate is here characterising the debate started by Ravenscroft's later adaptation of the play. But even if the play is allowed to be by Shakespeare, it must have been written when he was just finding his way in his profession; he is trying out his voice and it is only to be expected that he will make some errors of judgement in the process. There are flashes of brilliance that point towards the later plays, especially the tragedies.⁴ But in and of itself, Titus Andronicus is a bit of an obscenity.

Underpinning the difficulties posed for the figure of the Bard is its corollary, the historically recent fetishising of the individual. Titus Andronicus poses a particularly severe challenge to a critical practice that privileges psychological character coherence. The main stumbling block is the assumed need to identify with the flawed tragic hero, something that the violence displayed by Titus renders impossible. The root cause of this issue can be traced to a post-Romantic misconception of Aristotle's theorising of the tragic function:

Hamartia, then, is a deed, an action; it is something protagonists do, not what they are intrinsically. It is not a flaw in the character, nor is it the result of one. Aristotle is both consistent and insistent upon action, not character, as the essential consideration in tragedy, and what the tragic hero does is extrinsic to moral or psychological makeup, which in any case are modern concerns that completely deflect Aristotelian principles. For Aristotle, the basic "goodness" of the hero is a given; tragedy arises when "good" is problematized by plot or circumstance.⁵

Here Naomi Liebler is developing the analyses of G.F. Else.⁶ She demonstrates that the scope of tragedy is cut when it is reduced to a poetics of the individual, a manoeuvre that removes the protagonist from his or her all-important social function as a dramatic construct. Titus Andronicus cannot easily be reconciled with a partial theorising of tragedy, and it is this which complicates the play's reception out with its own period.

This is not to say that critics who believe in the all-encompassing morality of individual tragic heroism are just simply wrong. Many of them acknowledge the fundamental problems posed by this play when it is judged by such criteria. However, rather than reflect the question of the status of Titus Andronicus back upon the critical reception, it instead remains as a partially digested early text in the manner already noted. In other words,

the play disrupts the critical discourse, and is then explained away, rationalised rather than taken seriously.⁷

Social Violence

Critics who believe in such commonplaces as the primacy of the tragic individual inevitably refer to its concomitant moral category of the human condition. Even so, when they deal with this play's characters they veer into a language of social encoding. This is fascinating, because it does not just point to the ways in which Titus Andronicus disrupts the primacy of the individual. It also inscribes other potentialities into the critical text, resulting in some extremely astute observations in spite of the critic's own suppositions. Jonathan Bate again provides an excellent example: "There is a certain dramatic force in this sudden revelation of the schemer's humanity – it makes us reassess our judgements on the action [...]"⁸ This comes in the midst of an otherwise useful description of Aaron in Bate's Introduction, but it seems like an awkward insertion, almost as though the critic needs to refer back to the psychology that is assumed to lie behind this particular dramatic fiction. The appeal to audience (or reader) collusion via the plural tries to bring the modern Shakespeare consumer into line with Bate's view, although of course it is unclear whether or not the "we" here pertains to everyone who has ever seen or read the play. Historical difference is thus elided by reference to an assumed "humanity" that "we" all share. And yet Bate's commentary on Aaron stands well enough on its own without this aside.

Jonathan Bate is not alone in his conditioned reflex. In a very recent book on English Renaissance, Warren Chernaik writes something very similar when describing Deborah Warner's 1987 production of the play: "By initially presenting Titus as a 'spiritual bankrupt', Warner's production made his subsequent journey into tragic awareness more convincing".⁹ This comes in the midst of a very detailed and convincing long section in which Chernaik

relates the play to the critical revival of its fortunes in the later twentieth century. But if Naomi Liebler is right and the focus on the tragic individual misses the point via a fundamental misreading of Aristotle, there is no journey to be made into tragic (or spiritual) awareness. In any case, any such assumed movement is rendered meaningless in the case of Titus when he kills Lavinia as part of the glorious excess of tragic violence with which the play ends. Such extreme violence is a generic requirement for tragedy on the Elizabethan stage, and it has nothing to do with the tragic awareness of the protagonist. The very concept is alien to Shakespeare's stage precisely because it is not an element of tragedy in his period.¹⁰

If tragedy comes about through externalised action rather than some internal dynamic, then its logic can only be found in the pseudo-society that is temporarily created on the stage. This makes tragedy relational, a set of dynamic negotiations between the various characters and also between them and the dramatic world they inhabit. These relations are where the motors of tragedy are located. In this analysis, hamartia occurs as the necessary social condition for tragic conflict, not as something that somehow inheres within the individual. Terry Eagleton theorises the social function of tragedy as encoding a "political meaning" via the mechanism of the scapegoat.¹¹ He sees tragedy as representing a society that is in crisis. So much so, indeed, that it requires to be violently unmade so that some form of progress can be instituted, a formulation that reworks Raymond Williams' conception of "tragedy as revolution".¹² Accordingly, Eagleton resolutely focuses on the social structure that produces the tragic situation: "It can be claimed that tragedy springs not from violating a stable order, but from that order itself being caught up in a complex transitional crisis".¹³ Such a formulation permits a move beyond the narrow range of tragic resonance that has been constructed for the protagonist alone, as though he or she were a real person. Tragedy does not disrupt society; instead, a conflicted social world produces tragedy. For example, in the

ancient Greek mode, Orestes could be located as a site of contestation between two absolute social prohibitions: he must avenge his father and he must not kill his mother. Moreover, the logic of his predicament is extended to the furthest reaches of possibility because these social laws are underpinned by divine command. The action of the tragedy is driven by the necessity of an impossible choice, not a character flaw. In the English Renaissance, the figure of Hamlet is presented with an equally unachievable choice: he must avenge his father's death and so restore his own claim to the throne; and he must not commit regicide.

This is not to ignore the specific historicities of these two examples, as though tragic action is somehow essentially the same in all places and at all times, for all cultures. It is this historical specificity that is obliterated by the insistence on the protagonist as the privileged locus of being and meaning. In the case of Hamlet, the possible courses of action available to him are complicated even further. The fact that the knowledge of his father's death is made known to him by the Ghost renders that knowledge suspect, because it is supernatural and therefore potentially inspired by infernal powers. This marks the play as belonging at least in part to a Christian ethos. Even if the information is correct, Claudius has been anointed King, and in some respects could be said to have had the sin of murder and usurpation wiped away by the sacramentary nature of his elevation. Additionally, a very precise English Renaissance formulation occurs with the reference to Claudius' incest with Gertrude. It parallels exactly the marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, and is further echoed later in his infamous marital career in Henry's relationships with Mary and Anne Boleyn. Hamlet therefore encodes a whole series of social anxieties which go well beyond the internal conflict so beloved of character studies. Prince Hamlet procrastinates in his revenge because of these issues, not just because of some tragic flaw of indecisiveness. This logic of social relations is fundamental to revenge tragedy on the English Renaissance stage.

In the case of Titus Andronicus, it would be easy to argue from this position that the vengeance wreaked by Tamora and her two remaining sons arises from a situation that is created by the Romans, in a manner familiar from deconstructionist moves. However, the play layers its effects much more subtly than this. It does so by means of two specifically social mechanisms: absent parents, and the associations of names.¹⁴ In the case of the missing parents, the play further masculinises the Andronici by making Titus the sole surviving parent, in effect a singly powerful paterfamilias, albeit with some help from his brother Marcus. Presumably the mother (or mothers – Romans often married several times for reasons of dynastic advancement and social connections) of his numerous offspring has died before the action of the play proper. The text's relative silence on the matter reinforces the gender divide in Roman society.¹⁵ It should also be noted that both parents of Saturninus and Bassianus are dead, or at least absent. Of course, they too may not have had the same mother, and it is important to note in this connection that it is not stated who is the mother of the younger Lucius, another absented woman. One further point occurs in relation to women and family: Shakespeare names Lavinia after the Latin wife of Aeneas, the supposed founding father of Rome and ultimate ancestor of the family of Julius Caesar.¹⁶ In emblematic terms, the rape and mutilation of Lavinia functions as a direct assault on the lineage of the Roman state itself.¹⁷

It might be expected that the Goths are effectively feminised, in direct opposition to the Romans, but in fact this is not the case at all. Partly it is a consequence of the representation of Tamora as an out of control, "masculine" woman. Moreover, it is not entirely clear what has happened to any husbands or lovers she may have had. Perhaps Shakespeare's audience takes it for granted that a king of the Goths has been killed by the Romans under Titus. Even so, the powerful presence of Tamora turns her into something of a matriarch as she takes advantage of the only means available to her to avenge herself on

Titus: Saturninus' infatuation with her (if that is indeed what it is). In this context, the names of her sons are especially informative. The eldest, Alarbus, is killed off very quickly. His name is of indeterminate origin, perhaps being Shakespeare's attempt at a Gothic designation. His brothers, though, very definitely have classical Greek names and as Liz Oakley-Brown among others has shown, Demetrius and Chiron know their Ovid.¹⁸ These supposedly Gothic princes commit horrific acts that are directly inspired by Greek myth in a play in which Romans sacrifice captives and feed sons to their mother. The demarcation between civilisation and barbarism is not at all clear, so much so that it is difficult to state where the cycles of violence begin.

It could be argued that the play's resolution works to contain and then expel these conflicting elements. The Rome with which the play ends would then be seen as purged, ready to begin afresh with a new dynasty guaranteed by Lucius, both father and son. But it should be remembered that they are able to take control only by virtue of more Goths, this time in the form of an invading army. A Roman general returns to end internal strife by conquest, and his success is underpinned and guaranteed by leadership of a barbarian army. These particular Goths are now a major element of Rome's armed forces and as such they reinforce the power of the new emperor. Thus although Shakespeare's use of historical detail is rather imprecise, Titus Andronicus ends with a very accurate delineation of the constitutive logic of the later Roman state.

This play therefore undoes the classical model of the early Roman Principate from within. The beginning of the action shows with extreme clarity the fissures that structure this state. The precarious agreement between the new Emperor, his brother and the Andronici cannot stand the strain of these constitutional faultlines. A new set of circumstances is coming into being, a power configuration in which the presence of Goths at the centre of the imperium will be a crucial determining factor. Following Eagleton's suggestions, it can be

said that the logic of tragedy requires the unmaking of the older state to be as excessively violent as possible. Only then can the new formation take its place. The new Roman state needs a good old-fashioned Roman bloodbath.

Absent Sources and Obscene Women

It is Shakespeare's mythologizing of Roman history in Titus Andronicus that has long made it a sort of limit text for the playwright's originality. In his introduction to the Arden text in the complete works edition published in 1998, Jonathan Bate writes: "Despite the presence of many motifs present from Ovid's Metamorphoses (a book used in its action), Seneca's tragedies and the plays of Marlowe, the plot of Titus appears to be original."¹⁹ Bate is especially careful to note here that the plot "appears" to be Shakespeare's own work. It is a hesitation that seems sensible, given Shakespeare's well known propensity to adapt, rewrite and overgo his source material. Naomi Liebler provides a much more precise identification:

The term "Goth" functions in Shakespeare's play as part of a differential economy as the "other" of Roman civilization. In fact, long before any Gothic invasions, Rome was nearly destroyed from within by the same Bassianus Spencer mentions. This Bassianus was a Libyan on his father's side (the emperor Septimius Severus) and a Syrian on his mother's (Julia Domna), and converted his court to the manners and customs of Syrian theocracy. His reign and those immediately following constituted a long and bloody period of religious and political instability in Rome. For these events Shakespeare did indeed have a specific source, previously unidentified by the play's editors and critics. That source, which is also the source of Guevara's Decada and thus of Hellowes's Chronicle, is Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire. Herodian tells of a Rome governed for sixty years by an Afroasiatic dynasty, its

religion converted to a Syrian theocracy spearheaded by a politically clever and ambitious materfamilias and her two sons, one of whom had the other killed and proceeded to rule as one of the more vicious tyrants in Roman history.²⁰

In this long passage, Liebler relocates Shakespeare's source material. Although other critics have noted the Herodian reference, they have not expanded on its implications in the way that Liebler does here.²¹ This could be explained by the bias in classical studies towards "Golden Age" or, at best, "silver" Latin. As a writer from a later period, Herodian is not one who would normally be studied by those Shakespearean scholars who have some Latin. Shakespeare changes the name of his villainous emperor to Saturninus, but retains Bassianus for the emperor's brother. Liebler goes on to note that:

Herodian's History was translated into English by Nicholas Smyth and printed by William Copland circa 1550 as The History of Herodian, a chronicle, modelled on Plutarch's Lives, of the late empire from Marcus Aurelius (161-80) to Gordian III (238-44), including the reign of Bassianus and his successors. Here is the lesson Tudor England would have learned from Herodian.²²

There is, of course, another lesson implicit in Liebler's commentary here: the relationship between Roman and "Goth" as that of civilisation and its other. In point of historical fact, the Goths were not yet a major threat at this point in the history given by Herodian. Many in Shakespeare's audiences would be aware, however, that they go on to loot Rome in 410 CE. The restoration of Roman power at the end of this play can therefore only be provisional.

The figure of Tamora works to condense various elements of this partial vacuum. In this respect she is very reminiscent of another great woman enemy of Rome, Cleopatra. In

his book Epic and Empire, David Quint analyses in great detail the episode of the shield of Aeneas from Virgil's poem. He sees its central image as that of the flight of Antony from Actium, the climactic moment of the struggle between Octavius Caesar and Marcus Antonius that will seal the latter's fate and inaugurate the Principate. Quint links this image with Octavius' carefully constructed propaganda machine, in which he displaces the latest in a long series of civil wars onto the figure of Cleopatra. She represents the feminised and demonised eastern "other", a convenient method for erasing the uncomfortable historical fact that what is effectively ended at Actium is the civil war that sees the end of the Roman Republic. The method is familiar enough, but it is its very familiarity that fascinates Quint. He analyses why it has become such a commonplace, and concludes that it is the founding trope of Empire: "The danger for the West is to repeat the fate of Antony, to become Easternized and womanish".²³ Quint goes on to discuss how the epic tradition following Virgil celebrates imperialism by means of this double displacement.

The resonances associated with Cleopatra are similarly figured forth in Titus Andronicus by Tamora. She is very much emblematic of Rome's Gothic enemies, a movement that is further reinforced via dramatic patternings that oppose her to Lavinia. Thus the negative feminine stereotype is set up against a supposedly positive one, while the trauma visited upon Lavinia is so obscenely excessive that Shakespeare enacts it offstage. Her mutilation renders her incapable of describing what has happened to her, and so her rape remains undiscovered to her family for quite some time. As far as the audience is concerned, dramatic irony combines with the importance of absence to focus attention on how Lavinia's situation will be interpreted.²⁴ In this respect, it should be remembered that many of the most important events in Renaissance drama occur offstage, and are available only through the mediation of the onstage characters. The Spanish Tragedy begins with multiple conflicting descriptions of the action in Portugal before the play begins. Desdemona in Othello is

similarly described in different ways by various characters, all of whom have their own viewpoints, before she finally appears onstage in person. The supposed seduction of Hero in Much Ado About Nothing is witnessed offstage by many of the men in the play (and they get it wrong). All of these instances draw attention to how the event will be perceived, represented and miscast by the various interested parties in each of the plays. In other words, the logic of absence draws attention to the process of representation. Significantly, it is usually the most well known of these crucial non-events that modern film makers in particular feel the need to show directly: Branagh's film of Much Ado, or Polanski's depiction of the death of Duncan in Macbeth. And this is not to mention Millais' depiction of the drowning of Ophelia, another event that does not take place on stage. Many more examples could be adduced.

There is a peculiarly modern need to fill in the gaps left by Renaissance productions. It points to yet another difference between Renaissance England and its later manifestations in late modernity. The contemporary audiences of these plays will have realised the crucial importance of absence in ways that are simply unavailable to those from later cultures. Renaissance playgoers are tuned in to the resonances in representation of offstage events as a staging technique. Absence inevitably draws their attention to the various competing discourses by which the onstage characters seek to represent these events. Titus Andronicus foregrounds exactly this representational model in both the violence meted out to Lavinia and also how it is (mis)interpreted. The play manages this logic by means of the language used by the various members of Lavinia's family as they try to come to terms with her trauma.

As a major component of the play, the verbal responses to Lavinia have received a great deal of consideration.²⁵ It is therefore somewhat surprising to note that the same is not true of Tamora, even when critics do take notice of the dramatic counterpointing of the two women. Tamora figures in her own point of departure from the stage, in an earlier moment

of absence that also has extremely serious repercussions. It occurs when Lavinia is borne off by her brothers, Bassianus and Marcus (I.1.293), leading infamously to the death of Mutius at the hands of his father. At the same time, Saturninus and Tamora leave the stage, together with Demetrius, Chiron and Aaron. By this point in the play civil war has been averted and both Titus and Bassianus have acknowledged Saturninus as emperor. Titus attempts to make a marriage alliance between Saturninus and Lavinia, but is thwarted by Bassianus and his own sons on the grounds of a prior contract with Bassianus himself. Titus kills his own son Mutius as the latter tries to prevent his father from exchanging Saturninus for Bassianus. This is the play's first onstage death and it is committed by a Roman upon his own son. Until now, all of the deaths have resulted from the conflict between Romans and Goths. Now Titus marks himself as equivalent to the Goths who have killed so many of his other sons, erasing the boundaries between civic Roman identity and the Gothic barbarian enemy. Terry Eagleton defines this doubled compound of associations as "the ambivalence of the tragic scapegoat".²⁶ It links Titus with a whole series of cultural figures such as Oedipus, Jesus and Abraham.²⁷ As the ultimate Roman general and father, one who almost became Emperor, Titus is well-placed to function as the tragic protagonist.²⁸ The death of Mutius begins the spiral towards catastrophe that will revolutionise the Roman state and end the play. His name, to recall comments made earlier, has particular resonance. Derived from the same Latin root as the term mutability, the name Mutius encapsulates change. The death of Mutius mutates the Roman state.

However, the whole situation is extremely complex, and many of its nuances can easily be missed in the speed of a performance. One point that should be noted is that the betrothal of Lavinia to Bassianus must have existed prior to the opening of the play, adding another layer to the interplay between Titus, Bassianus and Saturninus for the throne. There is therefore already a link between the Andronici and the new emperor's younger brother.

The defiance shown by the sons of Titus to their father places Titus at the intersection of competing social obligations. On the one hand, Lavinia is already betrothed and therefore that match must stand. On the other, Titus is faced with disobedience and rebellion from his own sons, something that has to be punished if his patriarchal authority is to be maintained. In the manner of tragedy already alluded to above in the separate cases of both Orestes and Hamlet, Titus must choose, and such a choice will always be wrong depending on which social obligation he violates. Again it must be stressed that this choice is a tragically social one, not some sort of issue for characterisation. As a soldier faced with insubordination, Titus strikes and kills Mutius.

Even so, this does not resolve the issue. Lucius re-appears on stage only to continue to defy his father:

LUCIUS [returning]

My lord, you are unjust, and more than so:

In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son.

TITUS

Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine:

My sons would never so dishonour me.

Traitor, restore Lavinia to the emperor.

LUCIUS

Dead if you will, but not to be his wife

That is another's promised lawful love. (1.1.297-303)

The conflict here encapsulates in extraordinarily precise form a series of social dislocations. The verbal imprecation of Lucius as a traitor is crucial because it compresses the conflict in

the state together with the fighting within the family. Social codes that are supposed to structure the internal harmony of both instead bring them into collision, with tragic results.

Events such as this one are structured and presented as short set-pieces within the overall framework of the play's first act. This may be another reason why later audiences and readers have issues with the play, but it is not uncommon on the Renaissance stage.²⁹ It constitutes a very specific performance logic, one that does not accord with the representational dictates of Aristotelian logic. Even though all of the main events of Act 1 take place in sequence, an immense amount of change is enacted upon the Rome of the play. It is clear that each sub-sequence works emblematically rather than realistically. The whole effect violates the Aristotelian unities, but it does so in the name of a specifically Renaissance form of tragedy. This is another historically precise point that needs to be noted.

Furthermore, the death of Mutius, obscene though it is in the violence it renders to the familial code, both attracts and distracts the audience's attention. While Titus is distracted from high affairs of state by the state of his family, Tamora and Saturninus are cementing their relationship offstage at exactly the same time. When they return, again accompanied by Demetrius, Chiron and Aaron, Saturninus announces that he has no interest in Lavinia after all. He also denounces the Andronici:

SATURNINUS [aloft]

No, Titus, no, the emperor needs her not,

Nor her, nor thee, nor any of thy stock.

I'll trust by leisure him that mocks me once,

Thee never, nor thy traitorous haughty sons,

Confederates all thus to dishonour me.

Was none in Rome to make a stale

But Saturnine? Full well, Andronicus,
 Agree these deeds with that proud brag of thine
 That saidst I begged the empire at thy hands.

TITUS

O monstrous! What reproachful words are these?

SATURNINUS [aloft]

But go thy ways, go give that changing piece
 To him that flourished for her with his sword.
 A valiant son-in-law thou shalt enjoy,
 One fit to bandy with thy lawless sons,
 To ruffle in the commonwealth of Rome. (1.1.304-318)

This is a statement of realpolitik at its finest. Having survived the possibility of losing the empire that he sees as his rightful inheritance, Saturninus has managed to gain the support of his brother and the Andronici, his previous competitors for the throne. He now shows that he no longer has any need for them. As emperor, he has his own power base, and he proceeds to lump in his brother together with the Andronici almost as a single party within the state. He characterises them as “traitorous”, thus echoing Titus’ own description of his sons when they disobey him. And it is a group that he is determined to cut down to size; after all, they could still represent a threat to his overlordship. The one thing that the play has demonstrated for sure by this time is how precarious any hold will be on its version of the later Roman state.

The basis for the emperor’s new found confidence is of course his decision to initiate an alliance with Tamora. Nevertheless it is crucial to realise that on his re-entry to the stage, Saturninus makes his political statement rejecting Bassianus and the Andronici before he

reveals his marriage plans for Tamora. The stage business of the killing of Mutius is now over, and Shakespeare reveals just what has been taking place offstage in the meantime:

SATURNINUS [aloft]

And therefore, lovely Tamora, queen of Goths,

That like the stately Phoebe 'mongst her nymphs

Dost overshadow the gallant'st dames of Rome,

If thou be pleased with this my sudden choice,

Behold, I choose thee, Tamora, for my bride,

And will create thee empress of Rome. (1.1.320-325)

But is it really so sudden? Saturninus has demonstrated the kind of political acumen that Titus lacks, and the audience's attention is now fixed on the meanings generated by his absence from the stage with Tamora. Saturninus' seemingly sudden announcement of amorous passion for Tamora seems stage-managed by an astute manipulator, one who has already demonstrated that he feels strong enough to forswear his opponents. A survivor like this is hardly likely to do anything at all without prior calculation, which begs the question of what might be the underlying rationale for his new marriage. A Renaissance audience alert to their stage absence at such a critical point in the action will be asking what is really going on here. At the very least, the silent offstage episodes demonstrate that in this tragedy, the meanings generated by absence are at least as potent as its violent onstage mutilations. Indeed, the latter simply serves as a visual mask for the real underlying violence, the structural imperatives that are at work behind the scenes in the play's representation of the later Roman Empire.

Within this immediate context, it does not take Tamora very long to reveal to the audience the underlying logic of her relationship with Saturninus:

[aside to Saturninus]

My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last,
 Dissemble all your griefs and discontents.
 You are but newly planted in your throne;
 Lest then the people, and patricians too,
 Upon a just survey take Titus' part,
 And so supplant you for ingratitude,
 Which Rome reputes to be a heinous sin,
 Yield at entreats – and then let me alone:
 I'll find a day to massacre them all,
 And raze their faction and their family,
 The cruel father and his traitorous sons
 To whom I sued for my dear son's life,
 And make them know what 'tis to let a queen
 Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain. (1.1.487-460)

This is good cop, bad cop, with a vengeance. Saturninus marries Tamora because he needs a new party in the state to support his throne. The Goths may have been defeated, but as the return of Lucius at the head of yet another of their armies will demonstrate, they are still militarily powerful, and thus useful to the emperor. Their presence in Rome adds a new ingredient to the mix of internal politics; Saturninus simply wants to make sure that he is the one who gains control over it through Tamora. Despite her hold over the emperor, it is clear

from his political statements that, at least to begin with, the initial decisions are made by Saturninus.

Tamora, of course, needs him at least as much as he needs her in this new political configuration. From her starting point as a captive of a successful Roman commander, she can only gain her revenge against Titus by means of a relationship with the newly installed emperor, the one man who wields more power in Rome than the conquering hero. She begins the process by cautioning subtlety to Saturninus and the action will move on from here. In a sense, it does not matter whether or not either of them is really in love with the other, as though these were fully realised subjectivities. The crucial point is how the relationship between them itself interacts with their various relationships with the other characters; it will be the social logic of these strands of the web that will give the tragedy its momentum.

The argument here necessarily entails a reworking of the meanings evoked by the figure of Saturninus, but the effort is well worth making. His absence from the stage together with the entire membership of the new faction inevitably flavours the pronouncements he makes on his return, as well as Tamora's aside to him. And although a great deal of critical effort has been expended on what Tamora does from this point onwards, very little attention has been paid to Saturninus in the meantime. To return briefly to the play's use of names, Saturninus is a diminutive of Saturn, father of Jupiter and the other Roman deities. He is the mythical ruler over the 'Golden Age' of Italian agriculture prior to the emergence of human cities and their rulers. He is commemorated in the midwinter festival of the Saturnalia, with its ritual reversals of social hierarchy. He is also a cruel god, devouring his own offspring so that none would depose him. Shakespeare may have come across the name via Herodian and his incorporation into Titus Andronicus as the new emperor lends his reign a whole series of half-buried associations. The cruel, pleasure-seeking Saturninus seems very close to his partial namesake. Indeed, by allowing Tamora to destroy his brother and the Andronici,

Saturninus clears the way for something like a new age of Saturn, with himself in the position not only of emperor, but of king. The very concept of kingship is anathema to the Romans because of the expulsion of the Tarquins (with obvious parallel between Lavinia and Lucrece). It is especially revealing that Aaron describes Saturninus as king at 2.2.206, as does Tamora in discussion with Titus:

Andronicus, I will entreat the king;

Fear not thy sons, they shall do well enough. (2.2.304-5)

This conversation takes place when Quintus and Marcius Andronicus have been discovered in the same pit as the body of Bassianus. They shall indeed “do well enough”, but not in the sense Titus thinks. The ambiguity is reinforced by the use of the word “king”, with all of its attendant associations for Romans of excessive power without appropriate responsibility. The deeds may be accomplished by Tamora and Aaron, but they can only take place in the reign of Saturninus.

The Obscenity of Language

Aaron is particularly well suited to the Machiavel role due to his multiply overdetermined liminal position. Although he is Tamora’s servant and lover, he remains outside the power structure that is set up by Tamora and Saturninus. He conducts his various machinations with the often-expressed glee of the outsider and indeed his alien figuration has attracted a great deal of critical comment, as Jonathan Bate’s description of Ravenscroft’s adaptation shows. His many actions form another violent strand in the play, but his language is also especially virulent, as has also been noted. However, there is one element that is, on the face of it, rather puzzling. In 5.1 one of the invading Goths enters with Aaron and the baby Tamora has

borne him. The Gothic soldier has found them offstage in a ruined monastery and presents them to Lucius as his commanding general. Aaron says to Lucius that he will unfold events to him so long as he swears that the baby shall live:

AARON

Swear that he shall and then I will begin.

LUCIUS

Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god.

That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?

AARON

What if I do not? – as indeed I do not –

Yet for I know thou art religious

And hast a thing within thee called conscience,

With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies

Which I have seen thee careful to observe (5.1.73-77)

It seems strange indeed that the very Lucius who requested Titus to sacrifice Alarbus should be described as “popish”. However, the reference to a ruined monastery as Aaron’s hiding place invests this sequence with contemporary Renaissance religious associations. It recalls the predations of Henry VIII and the emblematic meanings of Rome as the great enemy of Protestantism, with the pope as the antichrist. Aaron’s careful delineation of popish ceremonies and observations couches his insult in terms that later cultures would consider anachronistic. However, perhaps this is a glimpse of a certain kind of temporal logic, one in which the two levels of historical time and contemporary meanings exist at the same moment. For many protestants, the very mention of Rome inevitably carries horrific apocalyptic

connotations. The bifurcated logic of this situation reinforces the negative associations of the Renaissance English stage presentation of Rome, complicating any straightforward assumption that it is always only positive. The same could be said of the patterning of Rome with Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra. The usual opposition drawn between Cleopatra's sensual Egypt as opposed to the sterile Rome of Octavius Caesar would be underscored further because of these overtones.³⁰ It is possible to investigate traces of Cleopatra's Greek heritage in that play as one means of moving beyond the usual stereotyping of the distinction between Egypt and Rome. It is also possible to take the movement one stage further by means of very real Renaissance English anxieties about the papacy. Aaron's calculated verbal violence reinforces his obscene physical violence in ways that still need to be dissected. This doubled layering of meaning cannot be reduced to the character of Aaron; it is the dramatic equivalent of the anamorphism that appears in Renaissance paintings such as Holbein's The Ambassadors. The stage machiavel occupies a position analogous to the sideways glance; at once part of and separated from the play's action, he comments upon it in a knowing way that disrupts any easy assumption of a psychologically coherent subjectivity. The technique is historically precise to this particular form of public entertainment.³¹

The Death of Tamora

When Lucius speaks the final words in Titus Andronicus, his speech encapsulates a doubled attitude:

Some loving friends convey the emperor hence,
And give him burial in his fathers' grave;
My father and Lavinia shall forthwith
Be closed in our household's monument;

As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora,
 No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed,
 No mournful bell shall ring her burial,
 But throw her forth to birds and beasts to prey:
 Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,
 And being dead, let birds on her take pity. (TA 5.3.190-199)

The Romans are resolutely separated out from the Goths in what is effectively the first proclamation of Lucius' own reign as emperor. In death, Saturninus is to be interred in his family mausoleum by his "friends", which is shorthand for family, dependants, clientes and political allies. Despite his actions, then, there is an underlying sense that Saturninus retains some sort of power base among the Roman elite right up to his death, even if the associations lie silently behind the struggle with the family of the Andronici. As a Roman, then, Saturninus has every right to be buried alongside his ancestors, just like Titus and Lavinia.

Tamora, of course, is simply left to rot in the open. As a "ravenous tiger", she is resolutely differentiated as entirely bestial. Compare one of the insults heaped upon Margaret of Anjou: "O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!" (3 Henry VI 1.4.137). The emblematic use of the tiger picks up on associations that diverge from those of, say, the lion. A tiger is pitiless, vengeful and excessive; the lion carries connotations of royalty. These more positive aspects have to be denied royal women who step over the boundary of what is conventionally deemed acceptable by their male enemies. Lucius plainly excises Tamora from the Roman body politic, with the intention to eliminate her from the communal memory. Denied even a final resting place, a tomb or monument, she is cast out from the city and her tenure as empress is to be erased from official history.

The marriage between Saturninus and Tamora threatens to place a hybrid dynasty on the throne, a form of Romano-Gothic miscegenation. In Roman law, the marriage automatically makes Tamora's two remaining sons heirs to the empire. Instead, the resolution of the play exterminates this possibility, replacing all of them with a steadfastly Roman family in the form of the Andronici, longstanding servitors of the state. However, the obscenely violent cascade of mutilated bodies inevitably undercuts any such simplistic closure, as memories remain of the ruptures in the state and the bodies of the various victims. And the fact that the new dynasty's power is underpinned by Gothic military might reinforces the structural faultlines rather than effacing them. The welter of blood that fills the stage by the end of this play makes it an Elizabethan tragedy par excellence, as its contemporary popularity attests. It also makes it a very difficult piece to comprehend from a much later viewpoint that privileges selfhood as locus of meaning.

Paul Innes

¹ The term comes from Alan Sinfield: Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

² The dynamic interrelationship between Goths and Romans in the play is theorised in Francis Barker: The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 146-151.

³ Jonathan Bate ed: Titus Andronicus (London: Methuen Drama, A&C Black Publishers Limited, 1995), 80. This is the edition used in my present essay.

⁴ See for example Bate (1995), 2.

⁵ Naomi Conn Liebler: Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 43.

⁶ G.F. Else: Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967), especially 383-5.

⁷ There is no point in rehashing all of the old "theory wars" arguments against liberal humanist criticism in detail here. A good starting point is Catherine Belsey: Critical Practice (2nd edition London: Routledge, 2002). She develops her reasoning in relation to Renaissance drama in her book The Subject of Tragedy (London: Routledge, 1991). See also the essays collected in Terence Hawkes: Meaning by Shakespeare (Routledge: London, 1992).

⁸ Bate (1995), 50.

⁹ Warren Chernaik: The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 69.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton theorises the differential logic of characterisation among other things in Shakespeare in Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 145-6. His comments come from a different perspective from mine, but they do touch upon similar ground.

¹¹ Eagleton (2003), 27.

¹² Eagleton (2003), 58. Here Eagleton is developing Raymond Williams's work in Modern Tragedy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

¹³ Eagleton (2003), 143.

¹⁴ For the significance of names in another of Shakespeare's Roman plays, see Paul Innes: "Pluck but his name out of his heart: A Caesarean Cross-section" in Jonathan Holmes and Adrian Streete eds: Refiguring Mimesis: Representations in Early Modern Literature (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005). The emphasis is different in relation

to Julius Caesar in the section later in the present essay, but names remain especially important in Roman civil wars due to associations of lineage and prestige.

¹⁵ Coppelia Kahn discusses masculinity as a constituent element of the Roman state, via the concept of virtus. See Coppelia Kahn: *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* (Routledge: London, 1997), 1-26.

¹⁶ Coppelia Kahn also notes how the epithet “pius” applied to Titus echoes the Aeneid, at Kahn (1997), 48. For similar points, see Bate (1995), 16-20.

¹⁷ Kahn (1997) discusses the value of Lavinia’s “treasury” as part of this complex series of associations at 48-57.

¹⁸ Liz Oakley-Brown: “Titus Andronicus and the Cultural Politics of Translation in Early Modern England” (Renaissance Studies Vol. 19 No.3 (2005). This is a relatively recent treatment of Shakespeare’s use of Ovid in Titus Andronicus.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bate: “Titus Andronicus” in Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan eds: The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works (Surrey: Thomas Belson and Sons, 1998), 1123.

²⁰ Liebler (1995), 134.

²¹ See for example the discussion in Bate (1995), 93.

²² Liebler (1995), 135.

²³ Quint (1993), 29.

²⁴ Chernaik (2011), 69-72, is a full discussion of the problems posed for verbal representation by Lavinia’s mutilation. He especially notes the appropriately difficult time Marcus Andronicus has when trying to describe what it might mean.

²⁵ Kahn (1997), 57-67 is a very full discussion.

²⁶ Eagleton (2003), 13.

²⁷ Eagleton (2003), 33 (Oedipus), 35 (Jesus) and 44 (Abraham).

²⁸ Eagleton (2003) ends with a long discussion of the function of the sacrificial scapegoat from 274ff.

²⁹ A related discussion can be found in Paul Innes: “Out of the Repertoire: Women Beware Women and Performance History” in Andrew Hiscock ed: Women Beware Women: A Critical Guide (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 43-58.

³⁰ I owe this point to a comment made by Adrian Streete in a discussion about the multiple meanings of Rome in Renaissance English drama.

³¹ Similar points about Aaron’s staging are made in Liebler (1995), 145.