

Our Primeval Pentant for Violence: The Modern Stage Success of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

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In 1977, G. Harlold Metz said of Shakespeare's gruesome *The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*: "this first fruit of Shakespeare's tragic muse has something to say to the contemporary world" (169). And the contemporary world seems to be listening: in the decades spanning the mid-20th and early 21st century theater-goers have experienced *Titus Andronicus* in productions, variations, and adaptations on film and stage around the globe. Why is this play experiencing such popularity at this point in its 400 year history? Perhaps it is because *Titus Andronicus* isn't, in fact, simply *saying* anything to modern audiences. Rather, it is screaming at, barking toward, and spraying blood all over anyone who comes near it. In this paper, I explore how *Titus Andronicus* touches on our primeval pentant for violence, drawing us into the theater under the guise of mere entertainment, and it leaves us with a with a sense cognitive dissonance that forces us to confront the horrors that humans heap upon each other outside the theater walls.

Titus Andronicus tells the story of a Roman general returning home after being away at war for ten years. He returns victorious, but also with captives and his deceased sons in tow. In a series of misguided decisions, he endorses a poor choice for emperor, sacrifices a young Alarbus despite the plea of Tamora, the captured Goth-queen, for her son's life, betroths his already spoken-for daughter, and kills one of his own sons. The intensity of the first act is carried through the subsequent four acts in which Tamora's remaining sons, Chiron and Demetrius, rape and mutilate Titus' only daughter, Lavinia; Titus' sons are framed for the murder of the emperor's brother; Titus chops off his own hand in an ineffective bargain for his son's lives; and eventually seeks revenge by killing Tamora's sons and serving her their remains for dinner. Woven into this action is the work of Aaron. As a skillful villain, Moor, and Tamora's lover, he persuades the action of nearly every character in the play. The body count at the end of play is at least twelve, not including the war casualties referenced in Act I.¹ This perhaps qualifies *Titus Andronicus* for the esteemed title of Shakespeare's most violent play. In fact, Jan Kott ironically suggests that "If *Titus Andronicus* had six acts, Shakespeare would have had to take the spectators sitting in the first row of the stalls and let them die in agony, because on the stage no one, except Lucius, remains alive" (345).

Although critics such as Dover Wilson suggest that the violence in *Titus Andronicus* is excessive and gratuitous, Philip C. Kolin, editor of *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, deems these views "culturally myopic" (306). Kolin argues that contemporary audiences are "not only ready for *Titus* but have internalized and projected its messages" (307) because contemporary society has experienced and can contextualize the violence found in the play. Kolin cites mass murders from the 1960s and 1970s including the Tate-La Bianca and Son of Sam murders, along with the horrors of the 1980s and 1990s such as the gruesome murders committed by Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. He even references O. J. Simpson's televised trial. Isolated atrocities such as these serve as only one example of contemporary western society's widespread understanding of violence; Kolin also cites modern parallels with *Titus* in terms of political

structure, landscape (urban), and the use of sexual violence in war. Such parallels serve as opportunities for modern productions to contextualize the violence in a way that truly resonates with modern, especially western, audiences.

The relationship between modern audiences and the violence in *Titus Andronicus* may be explained through the concept of cultural mobility, which Stephen Greenblatt describes as the process “by which the symbols, self-conceptions, modes of expression and ritual actions of people rooted in a specific place, time and society are detached from those roots and set in motion, to reach other places, different times” (“Words that...”). The violence found in *Titus Andronicus* can be detached from the cultural moment of its inception and reconsidered in terms of contemporary society.

Mariangela Tempera, in *Feasting with Centaurs: Titus Andronicus from Stage to Text*, links the violence found in Elizabethan society with the violence found in its theater:

In England as in continental Europe the success of the theater of blood was linked to the harshness of society itself. The spectators of the Rose would have brought to the theatre their familiarity with a world where cutting off a prisoner’s hand was not considered cruel and unusual, where executions were staged as spectacles, and the heads of traitors graced the city gates. The endemic bouts of plague ensured that survivors had very little squeamishness in handling dead bodies. Pain was an essential part of the life process—both in living and dying. (84)

Tempera’s description suggests that violence, especially the violence found in *Titus Andronicus*, was a way of life and would be easily recognizable and contextualized when viewed on the Elizabethan stage—it was nothing out of the ordinary. Although modern audiences in the west are typically not directly exposed to the sort of brutality that Tempera describes, violence still permeates the culture. Contemporary society craves violent entertainment. Summer blockbuster films typically revolve around violence—comic book heroes battle villains, people battle aliens, and of course, humans fight with one another. It is nearly impossible to turn on the television and not find a new or syndicated episode of *Law and Order*, *Law and Order Special Victims Unit*, *Law and Order Criminal Intent*, *CSI (Crime Scene Investigators)*, *COPS*, *Bones*, and *Without A Trace*. From the warm safety of our homes, we flock to televised scenes of heinous crimes, including brutal and sexual violence. And our societal fascination isn’t limited only to the fictional; nearly each major network has at least one television show that focuses on true-crime: *Dateline*, *Cold Case Files*, *20/20*, and *Forensic Files*. Network television has even taken on the task of stopping crime with shows such as *Dateline: To Catch a Predator* and *America’s Most Wanted*. The success of these shows demonstrates our collective penchant for violence: we are entertained by it, fascinated by it, perhaps even enraptured by it.

Tempera suggests that modern audiences have become somewhat anesthetized by “a steady diet of film or televised violence”; viewers have “limited direct, but extensive vicarious experiences with violence” (45-46). Perhaps our “limited direct” experience, coupled with our apparently insatiable desire for violent entertainment, explains why modern audiences have visceral reactions to modern stage productions of *Titus*. So many people fainted at a viewing of Brook’s stylized production that stage assistants kept a “body count” tally, with the highest coming in at twenty during one performance. Deborah Warner’s much more realistic 1987 production at the Swan saw as many as eight audience members carried out of the theater.

Trevor Nunn's 1972 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production (which also took a realistic approach to violence) often saw overwhelmed individuals leave at or before the intermission.ⁱⁱ Perhaps it is the mode of delivery – the theater – that fosters such extreme reactions in contemporary society.

Whereas Elizabethans may have seen cruelty as somewhat routine, contemporary western understandings of violence are mostly through a barrier. Technology, then, distances the viewers from the violent event as well as from the effects of the event. In the theater, "live" action takes place in real time. Despite the fact that the audience generally understands that the action is not "real," witnessing brutal actions in real time can be overwhelming and, as a result, reactions such as fainting occur. Given this, comparisons between Elizabethan and contemporary reactions to the play are not balanced. The theater was for the Elizabethans what film is to the modern era: an opportunity to view a semblance of real-life from afar and an opportunity to recognize the humor and horror in a sense of irony. Theater in our modern world creates an environment in which humans interact with each other in real-time.ⁱⁱⁱ Modern audiences understand that rape, murder, and mutilation take place, but for some, this is the first time it is witnessed without a technological barrier, thus making the theater a unique environment where the rational blurs with the fantastic. As Cynthia Marshall notes, "The phenomenology of theater structures an interaction through which viewers are aware of their own physical existence in the presence of other highly marked bodies on stage" (108). Because we are made subtly aware of our own physical presence, we cannot negate the possibility that what is happening on stage is *actually* happening. This in turn forces us to intimately connect with the atrocities that we know occur daily across the globe. Perhaps we would like to think of these acts as savage, base, or impossible in our civilized society, but we know the reverse is, in fact, true.

With easily recognizable, contextualized settings, the violence takes on a new meaning for modern audiences. Douglas Seale's 1967 Baltimore production of *Titus*, ensured that audience members would not walk away thinking that Titus was "a blood bath of horror which might be acceptable to those coarse Elizabethans, but hardly to sophisticated, civilized, educated humanitarians like us" (Dessen 34). To achieve this, he set his production in the 1940s, reminding the audience of the "horrors of the concentration camps, bombing of Hiroshima and mass executions at Nuremburg" (Dessen 34).^{iv} Trevor Nunn's 1972 RSC production also kept recent wars in the forefront of its production design. Colin Blakely, who played Titus in the RSC production, claims that realism is the only way to portray the violence because "people can see what violence is really like when they watch the news on television...Whatever we did, it would never be as horrible as that picture of the officer pushing a gun into a man's head in Vietnam" (Dessen 36). The Old Globe Theater in San Diego produced *Titus Andronicus*, directed by Darko Trsnjak during the summer of 2006 and juxtaposed light hearted music with appalling and recognizable images from current events. Although its cheeky musical accompaniment (including "A Comedy Tonight" from a *Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, "The Teddy Bear's Picnic," and "I Wanna Hold Your Hand") drew mixed reviews, references to Abu Ghraib—as near naked Goths were wheeled in cages by Romans dressed in army fatigues—provided shocking and powerful images that harkened what was taking place outside the theater. This juxtaposition served to increase the brutality of the scene.

Whereas Trsnjak sought to directly utilize images of contemporary violence and modern wars, other directors and actors believe that a less direct reference can be equally powerful. Antony Sher's *Titus* in the 1995 production at the Market Theater in Johannesburg capitalized on the underlying theme of racism in *Titus*, which would have been especially poignant in South Africa. The director, Gregory Doran, writes,

Whereas the scene can be absurd and revolting elsewhere, doing the play here in South Africa, a society which has suffered decades of atrocious violence, a strange reversal occurs. The acts of brutality, instead of being gratuitous or extreme, seem only too familiar, and the focus turns instead on how the characters deal with the violence and the impact of grief. (150)

After the first performance with an all-black audience, a man came up to Anthony Sher and said, tapping on his head, "I didn't understand it all here," and then tapping on his heart, "But I understood it here" (213). Subtly connecting the violence on stage with the violence found outside the theater allows for a visceral understanding of the play.

Acting out 400-year-old scenes before a modern audience is a challenge especially when the play is as violent as *Titus Andronicus*. For directors, the question of how to portray the violence is central to any production. Dessen claims that the options typically fall into three categories: "(1) to stylize or formalize the action (e.g., ribbons in place of blood); (2) to seek 'realism', often with an emphasis upon blood, severed heads, maiming, and brutality; (3) to focus upon the bizarre features of the play, whether to single out the horrors in the Grand Guignol tradition or to treat the script as a parody or burlesque" (24). Or, as Douglas Seale claimed, the director must decide "whether to play the nightmare for all it is worth, or spare the audience's feelings by avoiding too much realism (or seeming realism)" (qtd. in Dessen 33). The choices associated with these options directly impact the way the audience relates to the production.

Peter Brook's 1955 production of *Titus* which, as we've seen, started the revival, was highly stylized. Ivor Brown describes the method: "Brook's method was to drain off the rivers of gore, never to parade the knife-work, and instead, to symbolize a wound with a scarlet ribbon" (qtd. in Dessen 21). The red ribbons became the hallmark of Vivian Leigh's Lavinia: scarlet red ribbons stream from her wounds as she reappears, raped, mutilated, and escorted by her perpetrators, Chiron and Demetrius. Brook also used music to further stylize the production—especially scenes involving Lavinia. Richard David suggests that the most harrowing sounds accompanied Lavinia's abduction and return: "the hurrying carillon of electronic bells... and the slow plucking of harp-strings, like drops of blood falling into a pool" (128). For Brook, the stylized approach worked. He saw it as "a form that, because *unrealistic*, transcended the anecdote and became for each audience *quite abstract and thus totally real*" (qtd. in Dessen 15).

Although no one disputes that audiences had extreme reactions to the performances, some critics found fault with the liberties taken as Brook sought to stylize the violence. Some believe that it diminishes the reality of the plot. Wilfred Clark suggested that, especially regarding Lavinia, "a little more blood seemed indeed to be called for...though her mouth was half open, pityingly expressive and voiceless, the chin was clean, impossibly clean" (qtd. in Dessen 21). Stanley Wells, citing the concealed severed heads of Chiron and Demetrius,

suggests that Brook belongs to the group of directors who have “quite simply, cheated, either by omitting the most difficult actions or by presenting them in a stylized manner that evades the implications of the original directions” (213). In fact, most directors make serious adjustments to the play.

Deborah Warner’s 1987 production is one of the few (and certainly the most famous) to do the play in its entirety and the approach was subtle – not stylized, nor overly gory. She used blood, but typically against white linen (on Titus’ apron, on the bags containing severed heads, etc). Lavinia’s torture was “signaled not by visible blood or by silken streamer but by a coating of clay or mud, by what appeared to be hastily–applied wrapping on her stumps and by the abject posture of Sonia Ritter’s shamed, half-crazed figure” (Dessen 59). Warner’s staging allowed for the reality of the situation to set in for the audience, but also allowed the language to carry the horror of the scene. As Chiron and Demetrius mock Lavinia, the audience begins to grasp the extent of the atrocity:

DEMETRIUS. So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
Who ‘twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON. Write down they mind, bewray thy meaning so,
And if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe.

DEMETRIUS. See how with signs and tokens she can scowl.

CHIRON. Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

DEMETRIUS. She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash,
And so let’s leave her to her silent walks.

CHIRON. And ‘twere my case, I should go hang myself.

DEMETRIUS. If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord. (II.iii.1-10)^v

In Warner’s production, we see the mutilated Lavinia on stage, but her presence is not so out of context that we only focus on her presence. Her portrayal is logical—she is bandaged and looks as though she was harmed—and this allows the audience to avoid merely gawking at her. Instead, we are able to fully take in what we are witnessing and hearing. The language that Chiron and Demetrius use expresses a horror that visuals alone could not convey: in addition to her pain, Lavinia now cannot function – she cannot talk, write, wash, or even kill herself.

The presentation of the ravaged Lavinia is just one of many violent scenes in *Titus*. The severing of Titus’ hand and the presentation of Titus’ sons’ heads in III.i are moments about which directors must make critical decisions because, according to Shakespeare’s stage directions, the hand and heads both appear on stage. The 1974 Oregon Shakespearean Festival production, directed by Laird Williamson, handled each scene differently: the severed heads were lifelike and visible to the audience, but the severed hand was covered and portrayed in a stylized fashion, with red rhinestones^{vi} covering the cloth. Pat Patton’s 1986 Oregon Shakespearean Festival production was also a blend of stylized and real elements. He took a cue from Brook and portrayed the blood with streamers—red China silk to be exact—in all scenes with wounded persons, including Lavinia, Titus (severed hand), and Chiron and Demetrius (beheadings). Red banners were then used in the final scene to cover the bodies of the newly dead. However, the red China silk did not preclude the audience from witnessing gore: the heads remained on stage during the intermission, and Titus’ hand was displayed on a platter. Gerald Freedman’s 1967 New York Shakespeare festival production^{vii} also employed a platter,

but he opted for a highly stylized production: he chose to represent the heads of Titus' sons with primitive masks.

Realistic and stylized approaches are not the only ways to address the gruesome scenes: other directors have chosen to conceal the gore. Black plastic was the concealing method of choice for Doran's 1995 South African production. Titus lays out plastic before chopping off his hand, a handy and logical device to catch the blood and provide an easy delivery method for Aaron, all the while concealing it from the audience's view. The bags also make an appearance when a messenger delivers Titus' sons' heads. They are hidden from view in the same commonplace bag used for refuse around the globe. Doran reflects, "I hope this moment is somehow made worse by the black plastic, both concealing the obscenity and allowing our imagination to provide the awful reality" (150). By hiding the horror of the reality, Doran allows the audience to further engage—he asks us to rely on the imagination of what might be possible, to consider how two heads might really look tossed haphazardly into a trash bag.

The last lines of *Titus Andronicus* also ask the audience to rely on imagination. When Aaron indicates that he feels no remorse ("Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did/ Would I perform if I might have my will. / If one good deed in all my life I did/ I do repent it from my very soul" [V.iii. 186-189]), we are left wondering what other villainous actions Aaron would have committed if he had the opportunity. And then Lucius closes the curtain describing a gruesome image:

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 beasts and birds to prey:
Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,
And being dead, let birds on her take pity. (V.iii.194-199)

The play ends abruptly, leaving us to conjure up images of Tamora strewn in the fields. Although Lucius' decree is definitive—Aaron has been sentenced to death and Tamora's body will be left as food for scavenging animals—many questions still remain. Will order be restored to Rome? What has this violence and revenge accomplished? We, as audience members, are left to ponder these questions.

The violence in *Titus Andronicus* shocks audiences, even audiences exposed to copious amounts of violence daily on television, in film, and by way of computer screens. In fact, it is this type of daily exposure that makes the play even more shocking because Shakespeare provides something unexpected—an opportunity to reflect on why we're drawn to violent entertainment. We may be motivated to see *Titus Andronicus* for the same reason we are compelled to see any Shakespeare play – the desire simply to be entertained. But seeing this type of violence take place right before our very eyes, so seemingly real, creates a unique interaction with the violence, and there is nothing simple about the results. We've seen that audiences can become engaged in ways that cause them to have extreme physical and psychological reactions. The complex way in which Shakespeare allows the audience to get to know his characters and begin to understand their pain further problematizes the way modern audiences experience the violence in *Titus* and use violence as entertainment.

Deborah Willis suggests that the play is “most moving” in scenes of “shared suffering” and discusses the ways in which Marcus and Titus serve as a “community of witnesses” to the trauma of Lavinia’s rape. According to Willis, this knowledge “produces vicarious suffering and forces them to confront their own powerlessness” (44). Throughout the play, characters are rendered helpless and powerless in their situations; they act as observers to the events taking place before them. They serve as witnesses to the trauma and can suffer, but are unable to exert any power over the situation. Similarly, throughout this time, the theater-going audience sits powerless as well, unable to assist, deter or console in any meaningful way.

Through this passive activity, the audience becomes a bystander to what is happening on stage. Psychiatrist Judith Herman suggests that “when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides” (Herman 7). This is incredibly difficult given Shakespeare’s brilliance with character development and ability to craft a story from multiple perspectives. Willis reminds us, “... Shakespeare’s revenge plays frequently put the audience in the middle, producing divided loyalties and shifting, ambivalent identifications” (24). As the audience sits and watches the horrors unfold before them, they realize that not only are they helpless in this situation, they are unable to identify the villain from the hero.

If, as the curtain closes, the audience members can leave the theater unassisted (that is, assuming they did not fall faint at some point throughout the production) they may be pondering this villain/hero ambiguity. As Willis indicates, “Revenge plays’ interrogative endings put pressure on audiences to think again about revenge as a reflex response” (23). This pressure is only increased when the revenge play exudes extreme violence. It may also be amplified when the violence witnessed in the name of revenge is appallingly similar to that found on the nightly news, and thus in the modern world, forcing us to consider not only the role that revenge plays, but violence as well. In this way, *Titus Andronicus* engages and entertains us, but also continues to remind us that the bloodshed on stage is only a mirror to the horrors committed outside the theater and that we must be aware of our unique position: will we encourage, deter, or standby?

Notes

¹I use the term *at least* because the body count depends on how one defines death and tallies the bodies. Deaths in *Titus Andronicus* are onstage, offstage, or implied: Mutius (1.1 onstage), Alarbus (1.1 offstage), Bassianus (2.2 onstage), Quintus and Martius (3.1 offstage), Nurse (4.2 onstage), Midwife (4.2 implied), Clown (4.4 implied), Chiron, Demetrius, Lavinia, Tamora, Titus, Saturninus (5.3 onstage), Aaron (5.3 implied). There is some question as to whether Marcus kills Aaron’s baby or keeps his promise to allow the child to live. Marcus exclaims, “Behold the child” (5.3.118), but the language does not indicate whether or not the child is alive. Some productions, such as Taymor’s 1999 film *Titus*, depict a live child whereas others, such as Jane Howell’s 1985 BBC production, portray or suggest a dead baby. For other perspectives on the body count, see Philip C. Kolin’s essay “*Titus Andronicus* and the Critical Legacy,” *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, Ed. Philip C. Kolin, New York, Garland, 1995, especially page 6.

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- ⁱⁱTempera finds the extreme physical reactions to contemporary productions, especially RSC productions “surprising” (45).
- ⁱⁱⁱ For a thorough discussion of the use of the thrust stage, proscenium theater, and film see Hatchuel, Sarah, *From Stage to Screen*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, especially pages 15-21.
- ^{iv} Seale presented what may have been the first Fascist Titus, portrayed as the “classic Prussian officer, complete with saber scar. His clan of Andronici was depicted as Nazis who were “laden with swastikas” and the army that Lucius assembles in Act V was reminiscent of the Allied Forces.
- ^v All textual references are from the third edition of *The Arden Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus* (edited by Jonathan Bate).
- ^{vi} Williamson also used red rhinestones to signal blood when the audience is reacquainted with the maimed Lavinia.
- ^{vii} Dessen reveals that Freedman confessed to him that he “‘took more liberties with the text and form’ of this tragedy than he had with any Shakespeare play he had previously directed” (25).

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