

TITUS ANDRONICUS: A PANORAMA OF HORROR

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ABSTRACT

Titus Andronicus is Shakespeare's first surviving tragedy. It is a play rarely performed and neglected because it has been considered too violent. As a political play its heroes are involved in an action concerns the fortunes of the state. Shakespeare nourishes the circle of chaos with a rich variety: contrast, parallel, soliloquy, asides, irony, and imagery, all unified into a harmonious whole. The contrast dominates the play particularly the irony of conflict between the Roman honour and the gothic savagery. The concluding word which floats on surface is that suffering as an ennobling experience is invalid here. Titus never matures and he is never purified or humanized through suffering. On the contrary hatred and vengeance deteriorate him to be barbarian.

Key Words: tragedy, variety, honour, suffering, vengeance, barbarian

Thou art a Roman; be not barbarous.

(*Titus Andronicus*, Act I, Sc. I, L. 378)

According to G. B. Harrison's Shakespeare: The Complete Works, Titus Andronicus is Shakespeare's first surviving tragedy¹. The first mention of it occurs in Henslowe's Diary between 1593 and 1594, when the Earl of Sussex's men acted at the Rose playhouse a new play entitled "Titus and Ondronicus"². Shakespeare based the play on revenge tragedies which were popular on the Elizabethan Stage: Seneca's Thyestes and Kyds The Spanish Tragedy; besides other sources as Marlowe's The Jew of Malta and Ovid's Metamorphosis³.

Titus Andronicus is a Roman play rarely performed, neglected because it has been considered too crudely violent and sensational⁴. The historical period portrayed in Titus is not a period in which Rome was at the peak of its military power, rather on imperial Rome of several centuries later, notorious for its

occupation and depravity of its emperors and assailed by lawless enemies, the Goths who eventually destroyed it-⁵

Throughout the play one can distinguish principles of balance and contrast which Shakespeare sets up against one another. Two parties we may call good and bad are revealed in the main plot and represented by Titus, his sons and his brother, Marcus; whereas Tamora, the empress of the Goths, her sons, and the Eris Aaron occupy the subplot.

Titus is a political play wherein its heroes are connected with an action involving the fortunes of the State.⁶ The real hero is Rome and all characters are set against it as a background. This theme dominates the fifth act as the first.

The play opens with a ritual display of the splendor of Rome, The election of a new emperor, Saturninus, and Titus triumphant return from the wars in formal groupings and procession with drums and trumpets, Even since his appearance on the stage, Titus loyalty and commitment to Rome attracts one's attention, The first emotion he expresses is love for "kind Rome" (Act I, Sc. I, 165) twenty-two of his sons who are the "Sweet cues of virtue and nobility", (Act I, Sc. I, 93). are slain for their Country whose soil he greets with tears of Joy, Thus Titus.

A nobler man, a braver warrior

... ..

He by the senate is accited home from weary wars against the barbarous Goths,
that, with his Sons- a terror to our foes Hath Yoked a nation Strong, trained up in
arms.

(Act I, Sc. I, 25-30)

Titus, the "patron of virtue, Rome's best champion" (Act I, Sc. I, 65). refuses the throne of Rome which is offered to him as an emperor and gives it to Saturninus, He says "Give me a staff of honour for mine age/ but not a scepter to control the world" (Act I, Sc. I, 192-99). Moreover, he displays a Roman virtue, the love of his family. He addresses Lavinia, his daughter, as "the cordial of mine age to glad my heart" (Act I, I, 166).

But the Romaness of this scene is given an additional interest the spectacle of political sophistication and personal nobility contrasts the assumed barbarity of the Goths. What happens at the sacrifice of Tamora's son shows the savagery of the Romans. To give a decent burial to his sons, who "religiously ... ask a sacrifice" (Act I, I, 124). Titus rejects Tamora's plea of mercy for her son. This

incident sets the wheel of irony in the play and foreshadows the beastly disasters which follow. Lucius, Titus son, tells his father "Lest hew his [Tamora's on] limbs till they be Cleon consumed"(Act I, I, 129). This turns Rome to a savage Scythia,⁸ "oppose not Scythia to ambitious Rome", says Demetrius, Tamora's says (Act I, I, 132).

Furthermore, Titus enthusiasm for cause of honour makes him kill his own son, Mutius, for defending his sister's lone and choice of Bassianus, brother to the new emperor/ What is that Saturninus, Who Feels grateful (for a short time) to Titus for giving the throne to him, Publically pledged himself to many Lavinia (his brothers beloved) and suddenly led lay his appetite to choose Tamora as his bride. Thus, he proves to be the first offender against obligation. He starts the circle of chaos as a Roman married to a Gothic queen, for this Titus, murder to his son was for rotting. Saturninus. is not the worthy man, as his name indicates, a malevolent figure, Titus reckless act is intensified by a kind of impiety as he refuses to bury Mutius with his dead brothers. This is what makes Marcus, his brother, whose mildness throws into a higher relief the sterner traits of Titus (a foil to him), to Say "Thou art a Romani be not barbarous" (Act I, SC. I, 378).

Ironically enough in the Romans will set the chain of revenge in motion, Following Seneca's mode, the play will be a panorama al how or and a spectacle of human degeneration. Tamora and her "Spleenful sons" (Act II, SC. III, 191) will carry out the acts of revenge undo the Command al Aaron, the Machiavellian Moor.⁹ Tamora's foul desire for revenge will be the motivation force behind the tragedy "I'll find a dang to massacre them ali" says she (Act I, SC. I, 450). This "Semiremis"¹⁰ figure, as Aaron describes then, will be a "siren"¹¹ who will tempt both Saturninus and Aaron to destroy Titus and his family.

Aaron (the iron figure) is the "Chief architect and plotter" of the coming woes (act v) to mutilate Lavinia, "that bloody mind, I think they learned of me", says he (Act II, SC. I, 101). His splendid vitality grows from the soliloquy of ambition in Act II: he aspires "to be bright and shine in pearl and gold, / To upon this new- made empress" (Act V, SC. I, 19-20). All his asides assert his evil nature, "Aaron will have his black like his face", says he (Act III., SC. I, 206)¹². Talking to Tamora, he portrays his Saturn- like rapture:

Saturn is dominator over mine, what signifies my deadly- Standing eye, my silence
and my Cloudy melancholy

...

Even as on adder when she doth unroll to do some fatal execution?

...
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my Randi Blood and revenge are hammering in
my head.

(Act II, Sc. III, 37-39)

The theme of nobility-barbarity is translated in terms of the natural world, seen by the characters in a succession of emblematic description, The image of hunting is successfully used to govern the complete change of tone towards conclusion: " To hunt the panther and the hart with me, When horn and hound well give your grace bonjour, Says Titus to Saturnine (Act I, Sc. I, 93-94). The hunting accompanied by cries of hounds foreshadows the abduction of Lavinia through which Rome degenerates into "a wilderness al tigers", (Act III, SC. I, 54).The mutilation, accompanied by storm, is made to seem as a Violation of naturel order, not simply because Lavinia is innocent and helpless, but because it is carried out in naturally beneficent Setting When "the morn is bright and gay, ?The fields are fragrant, and the woods are green"(Act II, SC. II, 1-2). Whereas for Aaron "The woods ruthless, dreadful, deaf and dull" (Act II, SC. II, 128), correspond to his caning "Policy". Thus nature is at once a paradise garden and a barren Vale has the sane duality as msn, who may be noble or bestial, or both at once- as Titus himself.¹³

Titus abounds in parallels with Cuds Metamorphosis, The most striking parallel between Philomela and Lauinia,¹⁴ Marcus sees the brutality turned on Lavinia, delivers a long speech which shows how the wounds turned her to stone, using images reflecting her Lavinia pain:

Alas, a crimson river al warm blood, Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
Both rise and fall between thy rosèd lips, Coming and going with thy honey
beneath But sure, some Tereus hath deflowed thee,

...
Yet do thy Cheeks look red as Titus face

...
Fair Philomel, Why she but lost her tongue.

(Act II, Sc. (V), 22-38)

Thus, the cold detached tone of the past joined with a present fiery situation, making an emblem out of the situation, rather a narrative description of it.¹⁵

But the plague revenge exceeds Lavinia to infect the two brothers: Quintus and Martius, they are accused of killing Bassianus, another trick by Aaron. The picture is completely dark before Titus woe "far from help as limbo from bliss" (Act III,, SC. I, 149). Worse still, the tribunes do not pity his sorrow, they are "more hard thou stones" (Act III,, SC. I, 44). He exchanges roles with Tamora and pleads for his sons,

lives (as she did for her son). Yet once again he pleads through his threatened honour, he speaks as an honest warrior. Thus, Titus reaches a turning point in his life. Now, he is awakened to the misery of his family of which he is partly responsible. Henceforth, a note of self-lamentation and bitterness towards ungrateful Rome pervade all the scenes in which Titus appears. His Rome turned to a wilderness as he mourns his son's banishment:

Why, foolish Lucius, dost thou not perceive that Rome, is but a wilderness of tigers?

Tigers must prey, and Rome affords on prey but me and mine

(Act III, Sc. I, 53-56)

The note of self-pity appears once again when the disfigured Lavinia is seen by her father who says: "It's well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands, / For hands to do Rome service is but vain".

(Act III, Sc. I, 79-80)

As his grief aggravates to be "like Nilus [Nile] it disdaineth bounds" (Act III, Sc. I, 71), the idea of revenge is deepened. Titus explicitly states. "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter / And worse than Procne I will be revenged" (Act V, Sc. I, 94-95). With the help of his grandson, a minor character, Titus discovers the crime of Tamara's sons. The boy gives Ovid's metamorphosis, a book his mother gave it to him, to his aunt who points to the story of Philomela. Titus decides to continue Ovid's narrative of Tereus by preparing a cannibal banquet, to let Tamara eat her own sons' (Murder and Rape as be caused them) flesh, as did Procne, Philomela's sister, whose husband who eats his son's flesh. Furthermore, Titus tries to make his vengeance "Worse" as he threatened, he turns against his country, an echo of Coriolanus, and encourages his son, Lucius, to join the enemy camp. Such irrational reaction is described by Marcus "his sorrows are past remedy.../ Take wreak [vengeance] on Rome for this in gravitate" (Act IV, Sc. III, 31-33). Such metamorphosis of Titus from a noble to a total alienation, extending from a noble and gentle nature to a detested one. It also involves insanity as his agony pitches beyond endurance to make him like "amen thrust blind into a room full of whirring knives"¹⁶.

Violence provokes violence and evil breeds evil. The irony reaches its peak with the collapse of human dignity seen in the "farcical Spectacle"¹⁷, an effect develops from the horrid trick, by which Aaron mocks Titus to cut off his hand to be ransomed of his son's lives.

Sarcastically Aaron urges them (Titus, Marcus and Lucius) to "agree whose hand shall go a long;/ For fear they die before the pardon come"(Act III, Sc. I, 74-75)¹⁸. The final blow comes with the messenger's note.

Here are the heads of thy two noble sons and here's thy hand, in scorn to thee sent
back thy grief their sports, thy resolution mocked

(Act III, Sc. I, 37-39)

Such devilish trick of Aaron adds more blood to the scene. Titus with the heartless advice of Saturninus kills Lavinia, "Rome's rich ornament" "Because the girl should not survive her shame/ and by her presence still renew his [her father's] Sorrows"(Act V, Sc. III, 41-42), then by killing himself.

Towards the end, two main characters must be punished: Tamara and Aaron. Ovid's narrative, as a joint element in the play, is intensified by the reference to birds, to emphasize the beast imagery throughout the tragedy. Hence, birds are linked with Tamara's punish mat: this "heinous tiger" "Her life was beastly and devoid of pity; /And being dead, let birds on her take pity" (Act V, Sc. III, 199-200). As for Aaron, the "ravenous tiger" "set him beast-deep in earth and famish him"(Act V, Sc. III, 177). What is striking is that Aaron, who does not feel sorry for his deeds, and curses the day wherein he did not some notorious ill, and repents from his very soul any good deed he ever did, shows human love for his bastard son. His figure is part of the play's structural symmetry that as Titus increasingly reveals his bestiality, the beastly Aaron discovers a startling human feeling in defense of his baby.

However, it is right that Titus should himself be killed and his son, Lucius, should take on the government of Rome. It is only then, as Marcus declares, that Roman people can unite: "You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome" "Knit again.../ This scattered corn into one" (Act V, Sc. III, 69, 72-73). The play ends as it began with preparations for the rites of burial. This reference to traditional properties suggests that the city has returned to its former stability. Ceremonies are one of the ways in which Rome is restrained from following the law of the jungle.

To conclude, *Titus Andronicus* is "an-experimental play"¹⁹. It is crowded but it cannot be called confused. Shakespeare makes use of variety: contrast, parallel, soliloquy, asides irony, and imagery, all unified into a harmonious whole.

Titus is a Roman play around with Senecan vein of blood and horror which turns it into "an exercise

of woe"²⁰, besides references to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and the Roman Coriolanus, the contrast dominates the tragedy and informs every scene it. Not only the Romans oppose the savage Goths, but the contrast is clearly seen between members of the same party. Hence, Titus, the noble warrior- Aaron, the Machiavellian; Lavinia, the innocent- Tamara, the heinous beast; Saturninus, the bad- Bassianus, the loving the patriotic and brave sons of Titus- the sadistic sons of Tamara; besides Titus the reckless- Marcus, the mild character. The irony of struggle between the Roman hone our and the Gothic savagery is seen as the degeneration takes place within the Romans themselves: Saturninus by his marriage to Tamara, Titus, rejection of Tamara's plea for her son's life and Titus killing him, The tiger lurks within Rome as well as outside it. Shakespeare creates two parallels to Titus to heighten and reinforce the sense of foolishness in this in an :the bloody Tamora and Aaron reveal a deep love to thin children which deepens the disparity between Titus and his family.

His ill- considered actions, committed under the cover of honour alienates our sympathy. Horror gives rise to feelings of revulsion. The Succession of blows beneath which Titus reels until his mind gives way with grief and renders him a pathetic rather than a tragic figure. We pity him for he is unlike his enemies who are impervious to human feeling and enjoy the spectacle of others' suffering. Nevertheless, nobody can pretend to find in this play suffering portrayed as an ennobling experience Titus is never purified or humanized through suffering. He never matures and his self- knowledge and understanding of human condition never increase. On the contrary, his grief converts him to hatred and in his act of vengeance he sinks to their level. It is really a tragedy a man al honour deteriorated into barbarian.

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¹G. B. Harrison, ed., *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, INC., 1948), 294.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴John Wilders, "Titus Andronicus" in *New Perspectives to Shakespeare* (London: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1988), 40.

⁵Ibid.

⁶H. T. Price, "Construction in Titus Andronicus" in *Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Englewood: Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1989), 20.

⁷Shakespeare is inconsistent in the number of Titus Sons who were Killed, He wavers between twenty- one and twenty- two.

⁸Scythia a city in South Russia where the People are regarded as most savage.

⁹Probably Aaron is based on Barabas, the perfect villain in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. Aaron's name is linked with the metal iron to indicate his hard- heartedness in encouraging an planning evil.

¹⁰Semiramis is wife al Ninus, the mythological founder of the Assyrian Empire, a type al magnificent and lustful beauty.

¹¹Siren means temptress. The sirens are beautiful maidens who lurk on the shores al the straits al Messing and lure mariners to destruction by their singing.

¹²A mistake by Shakespeare who considers the moor as black. It is an echo al Othello, the moor.

¹³See Nicholas Brooke, "The Tragic Spectacle in Titus Andronicus and Juliet" in *Shakespeare: The Tragedies: A Collection al Critical Essays*, ed. Clifford Leech (Chicago: The University of Chicago press,1985), 248.

¹⁴Philomela is the daughter al Pandion, King of Athens who is raped by her brother, Tereus. The incident takes place as Tereus came to bring Philomela to see her married sister, Procne, He cuts out her tongue so as rot to reveal the heinous act. He tells his wife, Procne, that she is dead, Philomela weaves her story on a tapestry and sands it to her sister. Procne prepares a meal al her son's (Itys) flesh for Tereus. The legend says that both sisters are metamorphosed into birds: Philomela as a nightingale and Procne as a swallow to sing their misery, See Ovid's *Metamorphosis* trans, Mary M Innes (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 146-52.

¹⁵See Brooke, 244.

¹⁶Gustar Cross, "Introduction" to *Titus Andronicus* (London: penguin Books, 1985), 14.

¹⁷Brooke, 249.

¹⁸The alienation al the hero deteriorating into farce is hinted is *The Spanish Tragedy* and in a different way in *The Jewel Malta*.

¹⁹Brooke,250.

²⁰Cross, 22.

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