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**SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY "TITUS ANDRONICUS": A
THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE OF VIOLENCE AND
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Shakespeare's Play "Titus Andronicus": A Therapeutic Practice of Violence and Cannibalism

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Abstract – In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the audience are confronted with a nightmarish series of violent acts, increasing in ferocity and volume, which culminate in the Roman general Titus feeding Tamora, Queen of the Goths, her sons 'baked in a pie | Whereof their mother has daintily fed' (5.3.59-60).² Much of the play's reputation has been built upon the graphic depictions and reports of violence, which commence in state sanctioned execution, worsen to rape and mutilation, and climax in cannibalism. There is little doubt that the scale and manner of the violence in *Titus Andronicus* is horrific, but the significance and symbolic value of the acts has often been overlooked.

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INTRODUCTION

Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare's first tragedy, was written between 1589 and 1592 and borrowed its structure of revenge play from Senecan models. Throughout the play, both protagonists and antagonists suffer unspeakable atrocities and display cold, rigid behaviour in enacting the equitable retribution or revenge they think those acts deserve. This grotesque caricature of *Lex Talionis* exemplified by the play, reminds us of Mahatma Ghandi's words: An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.

An eye for an eye is indeed the driving dynamic within most characters. For instance, the deed that sets the whole chain of revenge murders in motion, is the murder of Tamora's son by a vengeful Titus. For this, she will try to inflict similar harm upon Titus and his relatives. The main purpose and hypothesis of this work is to show that, while revenge can be seen as a central theme in this play, I do not believe Shakespeare's sole purpose is to shock his audience with an abundance of gratuitous violence.

After having attended two performances of *Titus Andronicus*, and having watched the movie several times, it appeared to me that this apparent gratuitous and grotesque presence of violence could be appreciated on an entirely different level, as some sort of cleansing ritual. I believe that the suggestion to examine *Titus Andronicus* in the context of ritual and theatricality, bore fruit. Beneath the covering veil of violence, another reality appears. In this paper, I will strive to elaborate on this hypothetical point of view.

However, being both an observer and a reader, another question also arose. How does this play fit into the theatrical tradition of the 16th century, and is it possible to find a link with the Roman plays our bard from Stratford-Upon-Avon so liberally copied?

Additionally, we also have a historical-sociological fact which, in its turn, gave rise to a manifold of questions. How did people of the 16th century experience and respond to violence? Was violence present in their society in a similar manner as it is present in our contemporary civilization? Can we draw parallels with violence at the start of this millennium? And is this possibly the new reason why *Titus Andronicus* has recently been revaluated? Can *Titus Andronicus* be considered the precursor of *Pulp Fiction*? After all, it is a play in which violence is sometimes performed in such a way that it tends to the grotesque and risks becoming humorous through exaggeration. A play in which, to use a reference to Tarantino's controversial movie, the slaughtering of human beings tends to be of less importance than how to remove bloodstains from the backseat of one's car. In what follows, I will also elaborate briefly on these considerations and questions.

When one reads and thinks, one selects. Obviously, we also have to acknowledge that contemporary adaptations select portions of the original play, and certain scenes are left out. When one reads and thinks, today, these processes are strongly different from how people read and thought in the 16th century. I was unable to recover how things used to go in the 16th century, and what sort of selection directors made in the original performances. Therefore, from historical perspective, some modesty

is recommended considering the universal validity of what is said in this paper.

What I will endeavor to demonstrate in this paper is threefold. First of all, I would like to argue that violence in this play is not merely used as a gratuitous means of catering to the crudity of the taste of the audience. Secondly, violence is also used in a ritualistic attempt to heal the conflicts that threaten to tear apart Roman – and by extension, every – society which is confronted with centrifugal forces. Cynically, in this play, we will be forced to realize these rituals create aggression instead of quenching it. Thirdly, I will attempt to demonstrate that these notions of violence and brutality cannot be comprehended without taking into account the socio-political and cultural context. Additionally, I considered it worthwhile to draw a number of parallels with our contemporary society. Therefore, this paper will also elaborate on the society Shakespeare lived in and the role violence fulfilled in this society. I will also make use of scientific literature and insights concerning rituals.

TITUS ANDRONICUS: VIOLENCE AND CANNIBALISM

Rise of *Titus Andronicus* - Though being hugely popular in Elizabethan times, *Titus Andronicus* has had close to no stage performances up to the last few decades, as throughout the eras various critics used to describe this play as an abomination. "Some broken-down car, laden with bleeding corpses" were the exact words of Dover Wilson, and T.S Eliot¹ remarked it was "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written". The play was rejected because of its excessive violence, as critics did not seem capable of looking past, beyond the horrid actions taking place on stage. In some cases, this dejection of *Titus Andronicus* was so extreme, that critics refused to accept the play was written by Shakespeare himself, and instead defended the opinion that *Titus Andronicus* had been written by another playwright.

However, renowned productions of this dejected play enabled it in recent decades to reassert its position amongst other canonical Shakespearean works. The most influential of these plays having been Peter Brooks adaptation of the Shakespearean original in 1955, which starred Laurence Olivier as Titus. This version was still condemned by some eminent critics as a mere 'twaddle', a 'horror comic' without 'poetic characterization', a 'preposterous melodrama' and a 'bloody awful play'², which is surprising as Peter Brook had made several adaptations to stage props which rendered the play much less gruesome than its Shakespearean original. This tuning down of violence was generally appreciated, however, and even led one critic to assert that "Mr. Brook has committed upon the text a butchery scarcely less severe than that suffered by most of the people in the play. Mr. Brook's play is a far better one than Shakespeare's".

In recent decades however this play – and its violent nature - has been reevaluated by some prominent figures, A.C. Hamilton⁴ amongst them. In his essay "*Titus Andronicus*: The Form of Shakespearean Tragedy" he explores the possibility that in *Titus*, the violence is remarkably mild in a way, and should not be seen as repulsive or excessive. As he states: "To keep his violence sweet, Shakespeare ritualizes the language and action of this play". He implies that Shakespeare alleviates the gruesome events that take place through usage of ritualized, highly rhetorical language and the fact that some atrocious events still take place off stage.

Aggression in Elizabethan Context - If there is one word which really characterizes *Titus Andronicus*, be it when reading it, watching a performance, or criticizing the play; it is aggression. In this context, the question springs to mind how people coped with aggression in the 16th century. A contemporary audience experiences the acts of revenge as atrocious, but one cannot help but wonder how an Elizabethan audience experienced these acts. It is vital to realize that, when William Shakespeare entered London City, he most certainly was confronted with the chopped off heads which were exposed on wooden bars in the neighborhood of London Bridge. Aggression, torture and death were an integral part of daily life. The citizens of London loved watching the cruel acts with animals fighting each other – which strongly reminds us of the violent entertainment Romans indulged themselves in. An overwhelming part of Elizabethan society delighted in the cruelty and the more the beasts suffered, the more amusing the entertainment became. Additionally, Wood¹¹ argues that the execution of criminals was an extremely popular mass exhibition. People were hang, drawn and quartered. While still alive, their intestines were removed and burned, their genitals removed and their limbs exposed in public places. Death was omnipresent, and therefore one might logically assume that the raping and the chopping off limbs on stage was not considered terribly shocking at all for the average 16th century Englishman. Much like Romans had grown used to violence by attending brutal massacres at amphitheatres or racetracks, the Elizabethan audience had come to expect violent entertainment, which they had been accustomed to by public executions and a wide variety of shows where animals like bulls, tigers, lions, bears, leopards, etc. were pit against each other.

Rituals in *Titus* on Stage and Screen - In what follows I will examine a myriad of ritualistic motivations which give rise to an overwhelming presence of cruelty and gruesome actions in this play. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the extreme level of gore depicted in vivid detail in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is not an exception, nor does it deviate from ancient Roman examples.

In *Titus Andronicus*, it is possible to distinguish a number of different rituals, which contribute in their own way to the play and the enactment of it. However,

before we delve any deeper into this matter, it might be helpful to give a short overview of what rituals exactly are and how they are used to accomplish certain goals.

First of all, key to all rituals is that they enter societies which find themselves plagued by troubles. Rituals are a means of acknowledging these problems, and attempting to solve or even completely prevent them. Thus it can be said that rituals are called into being in order to preserve a relatively idyllic state of society, where everyone and everything has its place.

The link to the actions which take place in the opening scenes of *Titus Andronicus* is clear: Titus' killing of Alarbus is meant as a ritual sacrifice which should enable Titus to restore his own power, taken from him when Tamora killed his sons. However, he fails completely in his attempt to force Tamora to see the necessity of this ritual, and only incites her to more violence and murderous behavior.

VIOLENCE IN *TITUS ANDRONICUS*

In *Titus Andronicus* there are over a dozen lurid acts either implied or presented on the stage, but it is not so much the quantity of violent acts as the severity of these acts to strike us. The refinement which blossoms from classical allusions soon fades away when we see Lavinia wandering about the stage, handless, stained from head to toe in blood with much of the flow emanating from her mouth. The "pruning" goes on and we shiver when Aaron lops off Titus's left hand and when the same returns accompanied by a messenger along with the heads of Titus's sons.

The purpose of these and many other gruesome occurrences is fertile ground for criticism still today. Edward Capell and August William Schlegel, for instance, assert that "Shakespeare could not have been serious: the play was a youthful attempt to thrill the injudicious groundlings by outdoing the sensations of Kyd and Marlowe", while Richard F. Brucher argues that "Shakespeare deliberately made some violence comic in order to thwart conventional moral expectations". An analysis of Shakespeare's classical influences, particularly Ovid and Seneca, could help us to penetrate the motives of such grotesque violence.

Titus Andronicus is, as Derek Cohen describes it, "a play which embraces violence as way of life, an exploration of the sensation of physical pain and the sensation of inflicting physical pain". Within this context, among all the blood-letting, mutilation, cannibalism and butchery unique to *Titus*, I set out here to consider its most dramatic action, the disturbing spectacle of the mutilated Lavinia whose physical pain is stretched to the utmost.

For its senseless, gruesome occurrences, *Titus Andronicus* has been compared by Dover Wilson to a "broken-down cart, laden with bleeding corpses from an Elizabethan scaffold". I would say that the comparison fits in as it depicts a cruel, ordinary reality. During Elizabeth's reign, in fact, 6160 victims were hanged at Tyburn, and though this represents a fairly smaller amount than those hanged during Henry VIII's reign, Elizabethans were certainly quite accustomed to the spectacle of the hanged body and to the disembowelled and quartered corpse.³⁰ The famous Triple Tree, the first Londoner permanent structure for hangings, was constructed at Tyburn in 1671, during the same decade in which the first public theatre was also built. At Tyburn, seats were available for those who could pay and rooms could be also hired in houses fronting the spectacle.

The majority of spectators, anyway, stood in a semi-circle around the event, while hawkers sold fruits and pies, and ballads and pamphlets detailing the various crimes committed by the man being hanged - typically a criminal of the lower classes; executions were reserved instead for the upper classes and important criminals. In Elizabethan society, the public executions for treason or heresy were frequent, rituals of horror in which the crowd took a very active role. Accounts of the death of Roderigo Lopez (1594) report people's bitter hostility and desire to prolong the agony of a man who was probably innocent. The crowd, in the case of Father Henry Garnet of Gunpowder Plot fame (1606), called successfully for him to be left hanging until dead.³¹ Thus, hangings were performed on scaffolds just like tragedies were staged in the public theatres. It is notable how theatre and public punishments granted entertainment to the upper and lower classes, and how both events were generally well attended. The close association between theatre and public punishment envelops the great age of drama in England, which culminates with the public execution of King Charles I, in 1649.

***TITUS ANDRONICUS* AND THE NIGHTMARES OF VIOLENCE**

Titus Andronicus depicts a violent clash of two cultures, and from the dating of 1593 provided by Jonathon Bate is almost certainly the playwright's earliest attempt to represent Roman culture;³ Francis Barker writes: 'Judging from the early incidence of human sacrifice or from the prominence that it gives to an act of cannibalism, it could be argued that *Titus Andronicus* represents Rome as a primitive society'.⁴ This depiction, in a setting where legal jurisdiction becomes increasingly fraught, gives rise to what is by a considerable margin Shakespeare's most violent play, and a graphic analysis of the collision between the Self and Other.

The disgust with which critics of the long eighteenth century were to react to the play was encapsulated by Dr Johnson, who wrote: 'The barbarity of the spectacles, which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience'.⁶ However, the play has been embraced by twentieth and twenty-first century audiences, who have found it more than scarcely tolerable; this summer, for example, the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, Scotland have put on the play as part of their annual 'Bard in the Botanics' series, demonstrating the level of the continued interest in the play. Further to this, Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) was the play's first feature length film adaption, a reading which uncompromisingly portrays the explicit, sustained violence of the play. Jonathan Bate, in the introduction to his Arden edition, writes:

Audiences may still be disturbed by the play's representations of bloody revenge, dismemberment, miscegenation, rape and cannibalism, but theatregoers who are also moviegoers will be very familiar with this kind of material.

Taymor's *Titus* draws attention to the text's arguably carnivalesque release of energy through violence, providing at some points a darkly comic experience. A direct textual adaptation of *Titus Andronicus* does not offer the same visual violence as *Titus*, with several acts being reported; instead, it is the symbolic value of the acts that instils a nightmarish terror in the play, relying upon Early Modern patriarchal values that have to a certain degree prevailed in our own age to provoke fear. The rise in critical popularity of the play has been, I believe, largely as a result of the increased study of representation. For example, the rape and mutilation of Lavinia cannot simply be read as a crime against an innocent young woman; it is a profound statement to us on the situation of Early Modern women. Instead of the violence being seen simply as gratuitous and excessive, the symbolic value of the individual acts has been embraced by readers in the theoretical age.

Legal discourse saturates *Titus Andronicus*; from the opening lines of the play, when Saturninus says 'Noble patricians, patrons of my right, | Defend the justice of my cause with arms' (1.1.1-2), attention is drawn to the importance of the law. Lorna Hutson has written extensively on the importance of the forensic legal elements of the text in *The Invention of Suspicion*, offering what she refers to as a 'displaced jury trial' in the play:

The errors of a comic plot become deceptions as to the facts of a recent homicide, and the middle acts of the play represent the characters trying to reason out, from the uncertain, ambiguous probabilities of evidence, what the true facts are.

Although the play is often seen as belonging to the genre of revenge tragedy, Hutson suggests that she believes it is in fact an embryonic detective drama, where evidence, suspicion and juridical processes are

all carefully considered and foregrounded topics. The anachronistic elements of the play allow legal processes that an Early Modern audience would be familiar with to be drawn into the play, rather than it being a specifically Roman legal drama.¹⁴ The legal aspects of the text, and their use and misuse in the narrative, create a corrupt moral foundation upon which Rome is based; the Romans, and the Goths interpellated into Roman society, use this exploitative ethical code to achieve bloody revenge, but are propelled towards the bloody climax of the play by the environment in which they exist and operate. Juridical law exists primarily to assert and establish power within select groups of people or institutions, in order for power to be exercised over those who break laws by those who enforce them.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was manifold. I attempted to demonstrate that Shakespeare did not solely implement the violence to cater to the crudity and vulgarity of the taste of his audience. Instead, violence – and by extension, ritual cannibalism – should be considered a central and vital ingredient in this particular play of Shakespeare, as this notion adds to its tragic quality. A tragic quality which can be derived from the fact that Tamora fails to understand – or accept – that the sacrifice of Alarbus is but a mere ritual rather than the outcome of a heinous revenge plot, and Titus failing to grasp the rituals he adheres so rigidly to, have become void of meaning. Additionally, it is exactly this adhering to these rituals demanding a sacrifice, which accounts for the horrors Titus commits, and perhaps even succeeds in partially explaining Titus' eccentric and alienating – for seemingly mad – behavior.

However, This ritualistic sacrifice of a scapegoat was not an innovative model thought out by Shakespeare, but instead was very much present as a dominating factor in a legion of ancient examples on which Shakespeare strongly based the plot for his play, exemplified by the parallels I drew between *Titus Andronicus* and Vergil's *Aeneid*. Rather than merely copying these examples however, Shakespeare chose to supersede them: whilst for instance Ovid's Philomel only lost her tongue in the process of being raped, Shakespeare's evildoers Chiron and Demetrius act more dire, and also hew off Lavinia's hands, reducing what remains of her arms to bloody stumps. In superseding his ancient models, Shakespeare succeeded in creating a new form of tragedy.

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