

Exonerating Lucius in *Titus Andronicus*: A Response to Anthony Brian Taylor*

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Anthony Brian Taylor has recently argued in masterful prose that Lucius in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is so severely flawed and ironically portrayed that he does not qualify as a Roman redeemer worthy of being considered a precursor of his namesake, the first Christian king of Britain. Taylor, while admitting some of Lucius' virtues, nevertheless distorts his characterization, partly by neglecting key traits, and omits an apotheosis in this case from pagan to Christian. It is this apotheosis mainly that justifies the argument that Reuben Brower, Jonathan Bate, and I originally made for Lucius as enlightened redeemer.¹

For Taylor, Lucius generally amounts to a cruel pagan, whose bloodlust materializes in his demand that Tamora's captured son be ritualistically sacrificed, an act that elicits her hatred and thus the mutilation of Lavinia (I.ii.163-66).² In this instance, Lucius acts out of pagan religious piety, so that the hovering shades of his brothers recently killed by the Goths might be appeased and Romans not troubled by prodigies (I.i.96-102). Lucius' spoken order that Alarbus' limbs be hewn upon a fire until they are consumed (I.i.127-29), while grotesque, could be spoken piously rather than barbarously—with reverence for what Romans need to do to honor a family and its dead killed in war. Shakespeare appears more interested in historically characterizing a Roman than in portraying a bloodthirsty man of any age and time. Still, regarded from a civilized perspective, the practice is clearly savage.

Positive features of Lucius' piety, presented early in the drama, prepare for his apotheosis from pagan to Christian and make it believable. Lucius' family piety surfaces in his physical defense of his sister Lavinia's right

*Reference: Anthony Brian Taylor, "Lucius, the Severely Flawed Redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 138-57.

to marry her "lawful promised love" Bassianus rather than be forced into queenship with nasty Saturninus (I.i.292-98), in his telling his father Titus that killing Mutius in this cause is unjust (I.i.292-93), and in his informing Saturninus finally "That what we did was mildly as we might, / Tend'ring our sister's honor and our own" (I.i.475-76). Later, Aaron perversely asserts that the Andronici can save Martius' and Quintus' lives, charged with homicide, by sending to Saturninus a severed hand of a family member (III.i.150-56). Lucius' Roman piety profoundly expresses itself when Titus resolves that the hand shall be his own:

Stay, father, for that noble hand of thine,
That hath thrown down so many enemies,
Shall not be sent. My hand will serve the turn.
My youth can better spare my blood than you,
And therefore mine shall save my brothers' lives. (III.i.162-66)

Lucius' genuine filial and brotherly love qualifies him for a redemptive martyrdom, if Aaron's announcement were true and not false, and if tricked Titus did not chop off his own hand before Lucius can stop him.

Lucius' capacity for martyrdom reflects a significant sensitivity never admitted by Taylor. Concerning his exile, Lucius says he was "turn'd weeping out / To beg relief among Rome's enemies, / Who drown'd their enmity in my true tears" (V.iii.105-07). Bending over his dead father's face, he exclaims, "O, take this warm kiss on thy pale cold lips, / These sorrowful drops upon thy blood-stain'd face, / The last true duties of thy noble son!" (V.iii.153-55). Lucius' finer, humane feelings manifest themselves in his concluding words to his son:

Come hither, boy, come, come, and learn of us
To melt in showers; thy grandsire lov'd thee well.
Many a time he danc'd thee on his knee,
Sung thee asleep, his loving breast thy pillow,
Many a story hath he told to thee,
And bid thee bear his pretty tales in mind,
And talk of them when he was dead and gone. (V.iii.160-66)

Stereotypically feminine in their overtones of nurturance, these sentiments hardly square with the two-dimensional image of a bloodlusting warrior. Shakespeare perhaps imagined that such delicate

feelings justify the assertion repeated in the play that the common people love Lucius and wish that he were their emperor (e.g. IV.iv.69-77).

It should be noted that the sensitive Lucius becomes most apparent in the last acts of *Titus Andronicus*, after his return from exile. Taylor dismisses the argument, made by Robert Miola among others, that Lucius has undergone a transformation of character during his exile (143).³ Rather than “a bloodthirsty youth” who changes into “a man capable of wise leadership” (Miola’s reading), Lucius in my reading metamorphoses from a pagan devoted to Roman religion to a Christian—a worthy precursor of his Christian British namesake. An understanding of the extensive Christian context of *Titus Andronicus* helps playgoers perceive Lucius’ later Christian identity.

Taylor recognizes that “the play is set at a time when Rome was ‘at the end of its civilized greatness, ready to sink into barbarism’” (147). On the contrary, this would be the time that Christianity passed from being a favored religion of Rome to being the official faith of the Empire. Clifford Huffman notes that the postulated “[literary] source of [*Titus Andronicus*] locates the events in the time of the Eastern Emperor Theodosius (A.D. 378-95).”⁴ Shakespeare’s play could be said to be set in the time of a profound transition from pagan to Christian religious values. Mythological allusions and references to religious practices in the first three acts of *Titus Andronicus* are uniformly pagan. But then in act IV something quite remarkable happens. I have argued extensively that the Clown-pigeon episode of act IV ironically focuses Christian values in Titus’ iron world.⁵ Appreciated in the context of the non-pagan overtones of the Clown’s phrase “God forbid” (IV.iii.91), and the explicit Christian overtones of his word “grace” (IV.iii.100-01), his gift of pigeons by which he would reconcile one of Saturninus’ men and his uncle symbolizes the doves of the Holy Spirit (a spirit of forgiveness).⁶ The Clown exits with a plangent “God be with you” (IV.iii.120), unknowingly going to his death at Saturninus’ hands as a result of the cruel trick that Titus plays upon this messenger involving a knife secretly wrapped in a letter. That the Clown is meant in his death to be thought of as a kind of sacrificial victim is signalled in his greeting to Saturninus by his allusion to a Christian prototype of martyrdom: “God and Saint Steven give you godden. I have brought you a letter and a couple of pigeons

here" (IV.iv.42-44). "Go take him away and hang him presently" (IV.iv.45), Saturninus snarls, angered by Titus' claim in the delivered letter that the emperor has butchered Titus' sons.

The Clown's part in the play thus provides a Christian perspective that, by contrast, stresses Titus' lack of grace and unfitness for any kind of salvation. When Titus in act I tells Tamora—

Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
 These are their brethren, whom your Goths beheld
 Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain
 Religiously they ask a sacrifice:
 To this your son is marked, and die he must,
 T'appease their groaning shadows that are gone— (I.i.121-26)

his manner of expression focuses the need for a once-and-forever martyr—Christ—whose death can by itself rectify the souls of present and future dead. Along with his killing of Mutius, Titus' responsibility for the gratuitous death of the pious Clown qualifies him not for classic martyrdom but for the role of God's scourge in a Christian pattern of Providence, wherein (as in *Hamlet*) a once good but now coarsened ("bad") man destroys evil greater than his badness but also dies in the process (thus effecting a certain economy in sweeping the stage of taint).⁷ Christian elements in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman plays as a rule constitute anachronisms. But because of its historical date, *Titus Andronicus* represents the exception. References in *Titus* to an elder tree growing by hell-pit (II.iii.277)—the tree associated with Judas—and to a "ruinous monastery" (V.i.21) where Aaron is captured do not represent unequivocal instances of religious anachronism. The symbolism of the Clown-pigeon episode and these differences retrospectively valorize the first reference in the play to God rather than Jupiter—Marcus' invitation to Lavinia to "display at last / What God will have discovered for revenge. / Heaven guide thy pen to print thy sorrows plain" (IV.i.73-75).

Exonerating Lucius in *Titus Andronicus* depends upon placing his major oath sworn within the above-described larger Christian context of the latter part of the play. At the beginning of act V, Aaron tries to persuade Lucius to exempt Aaron's bastard son from execution in exchange for Aaron's confession of all the unknown heinous deeds he has committed. "Yet for I know thou art religious," Aaron exclaims,

And hast a thing within thee called a conscience,
 With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies,
 Which I have seen thee careful to observe,
 Therefore I urge thy oath . . .

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 . . . therefore thou shalt vow
 By that same god, what god soe'er it be
 That thou adorest and hast in reverence,
 To save my boy, to nourish and bring him up,
 Or else I will discover nought to thee. (V.i.74-78, 81-85)

Aaron's phrase "popish tricks and ceremonies" anachronistically invokes a Christian context for Lucius' solemn reply: "Even by my God I swear to thee I will" (V.i.86). Lucius' phrase "my God" has an intimate personal feel, carrying no association with the public deity Jupiter. Taylor notes that Lucius had planned to hang Aaron's bastard "that he may see it sprawl— / A sight to vex the father's soul withal" (V.i.51-52, Taylor 143-44). But Lucius' Christian oath supersedes this remnant of sadism in his character, and he keeps his word. Aaron's child lives through the concluding events of the play. Lucius had earlier described himself as a man who "loves his pledges dearer than his life" (III.ii.291), a man for whom "fulfill[ing] his vows is dearer . . . than life."⁸ Taylor asserts that the baby's hanging "is avoided only when [Lucius] is duped by Aaron into swearing an oath that he will spare the child" (144). Lucius is hardly duped. As a Christian, his God-sworn oath is no "popish" trick of policy; acting on principle, he saves an infant's life.

Taylor claims that the child's "fiend-like" face among those of the characters assembled at the end of the play incarnates the evil of his father and predicts the future savagery of the Goths that Lucius has brought within the Roman fold (151-52). I would argue on the contrary that Lucius' preservation of the child providentially breaks a pattern of retributive son-killing that began with Lucius' and Titus' determination to sacrifice Tamora's son Alarbus to appease the shades of the dead Andronici and included Tamora's resolution to kill Titus' sons Quintus and Martius in retaliation and Titus' afterwards to murder her remaining boys Chiron and Demetrius. At roughly the same time that he was writing *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare was showing in the latter parts of *Henry VI* that the retributive killing of the son of a homicidal parent

was a main catalyst for the Wars of the Roses.⁹ The miraculous preservation of the Earl of Stanley's son, whom Richard III had resolved to kill if his father defected (as he does) to Richmond, breaks a talionic pattern and plays its role in beginning a benign phase of English history, the establishment of the Tudor dynasty.

The fact that such a phase may not be in store for late-Imperial Christian Rome does not diminish the significance of Lucius' exemplary forbearance. "Lucius, all hail, Rome's gracious governor!" (V.iii.146), the people cry, emphasizing by the word "gracious" the enlightenment of Lucius apparent to astute playgoers. In an Elizabethan view, this enlightenment included a Christian governor's understanding of the need through violent execution to punish and deter crimes inimical to the welfare of the body politic. Taylor notes that the "Elizabethan playhouse was adept at catering for the taste of an age in which savage public punishments such as the cutting off of hands or disembowelling drew large crowds" (148). If a Catholic priest was disembowelled, he died ostensibly not because he was a Catholic but because his Catholicism had made him a traitor to the Church and state of England. The threat of politico-religious dismemberment that he posed came back upon his head in his disembowelling. Elizabethans understood that gracious Christian governors, such as they imagined their Queen was, routinely applied death penalties for homicidal treason, often in a way that mirrored the crime. They at least would not have questioned Lucius' justice—as Taylor does (144)—in ordering Aaron to be set breast-deep in the earth until he starves to death. Shakespeare has made the notion of earth swallowing her own increase a symbolic motif of *Titus Andronicus* (e.g., V.ii.190-91), and Lucius' decorous punishment for man-killing Appetite positively concludes it. As for Tamora, Lucius judges that, once dead, her body should be thrown "forth to beasts and birds of prey: / Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity" (V.iii.198-200). Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience almost certainly approved rather than condemned this early Christian governor's decorous punishment of—to use a celebrated phrase of 3 *Henry VI* (I.iv.137)—a tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide.

NOTES

¹Maurice Hunt, "Compelling Art in *Titus Andronicus*," *SEL* 28 (1988): 197-218, esp. 213-14; Reuben A. Brower, *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 1971) 194; William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Routledge, 1995) 21.

²All references to *Titus Andronicus* are to the text in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

³Robert Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983) 69.

⁴Clifford Huffman, "Titus Andronicus: Metamorphosis and Renewal," *MLR* 67 (1972): 730-41, esp. 735. Grace Starry West, in "Going by the Book: Classical Allusions in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," *SP* 79 (1982): 62-77, remarks that "we should remember that the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is Rome after Brutus, after Caesar, and after Ovid. We know it is a later Rome because the emperor is routinely called Caesar; because the characters are constantly alluding to Tarquin, Lucretia, and Brutus, suggesting that they learned about Brutus' new founding of Rome, from the same literary sources we do, Livy and Plutarch" (74). In this respect, Huffman describes the setting of Shakespeare's play as "late-Imperial Christian Rome" (735).

⁵"Compelling Art in *Titus Andronicus*" 204-06.

⁶In *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), James Hall catalogues the many painterly versions of the dove as a symbol of the Holy Ghost (109). "Pigeon" was a common sixteenth-century synonym for "dove," as the *OED* #1 and #2 definitions of the former term indicate.

⁷Ronald Broude, in "Roman and Goth in *Titus Andronicus*," *ShakS* 6 (1970): 27-35, remarks that the Andronici "bring about the regeneration of Rome in much the same way that, in Shakespeare's later revenge play, Hamlet, acting as 'scourge and minister,' operates on Denmark's 'hidden impostume'" (32-33). In "Four Forms of Vengeance in *Titus Andronicus*," *JEGP* 78 (1979): 494-507, Broude argues that "notwithstanding the paganism of the characters . . . the guiding force of the play is something very much like the Christian Providence of Shakespeare's histories" (496). For readings of Providence at work in *Titus*, see Broude's "Roman and Goth in *Titus Andronicus*" 27-34 and "Four Forms of Vengeance in *Titus Andronicus*" 500-07. Moreover, Irving Ribner, in *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1960), argues that "Shakespeare tries also to place the fall of Titus within a larger framework in which evil too is destroyed, so that the audience, while lamenting the damnation of one soul, may have a renewed awareness of the perfection of God's order and of the operation of justice in the world" (18). For Shakespeare's "Christianizing" moments in *Titus*, moments replete with "Protestant phraseology," see James L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama: The Argument of the Play* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971) 42-43.

⁸*The Riverside Shakespeare* 1083.

⁹See, for example, David Riggs, *Shakespeare's Heroical Histories: Henry VI and Its Literary Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971) 127-39; and Ronald S. Berman, "Fathers and Sons in the *Henry VI* Plays," *SQ* 13 (1962): 487-97, esp. 494-97.