

## The Vertue of Spectacle in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*\*

DANIEL KANE

### I

In *Connotations* 6.2, Anthony Brian Taylor provides us with an excellent reading of Lucius as “the severely flawed redeemer” in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. Taylor helps the modern reader to reassess Lucius as a character who (unwittingly?) makes farce out of a conventional narrative etiquette that insists a wise ruler may finally impose order on tragic chaos. Additionally, Philip Kolin’s reply to Taylor certainly—and thankfully—complicates and updates *Titus Andronicus*, if only through Kolin’s praise of recent criticism that “privileges ambiguity, indeterminacy, and complexity in the script” (95). However, despite these and other fascinating discussions of *Titus Andronicus* published in *Connotations* 6.2, 6.3, and 7.1, I found myself getting oddly frustrated with what I felt was the semi-conscious refusal of all involved to read *Titus Andronicus* outside the familiar binaries of ‘great art’ and ‘colossal failure.’

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\*Reference: Anthony Brian Taylor, “Lucius, the Severely Flawed Redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*,” *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 138-57; Jonathan Bate, “‘Lucius, the Severely Flawed Redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*’: A Reply,” *Connotations* 6.3 (1996/97): 330-33; Maurice Hunt, “Exonerating Lucius in *Titus Andronicus*: A Response to Anthony Brian Taylor,” *Connotations* 7.1 (1997/98): 87-93; Philip C. Kolin, “‘Lucius, the Severely Flawed Redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*’: A Reply,” *Connotations* 7.1 (1997/98): 94-96; Anthony Brian Taylor, “Lucius, Still Severely Flawed: A Response to Jonathan Bate, Maurice Hunt, and Philip Kolin,” *Connotations* 7.1 (1997/98): 97-103.

In neither of these essays was a new aesthetic for the play to be found, one that might simply begin with a discussion of Lucius in order to more significantly suggest the possibility that young Shakespeare may have developed *Titus Andronicus* primarily as an experimental and resolutely anti-narrative *spectacle* as opposed to a carefully-plotted and reference-rich tragedy. Though Taylor could have easily provided the desired new aesthetic in the context of his argument, he did not overtly suggest Lucius was developed and *used* by Shakespeare in part to rupture or at least threaten the associations and expectations one might bring to a reading of a "tragedy." Indeed, even Kolin, who recognized the "ambiguity" and "indeterminacy" in the text, nevertheless safely maintained the status-quo dividing "great art" from "exploitation" in his insistence that *Titus Andronicus* was an "aggressively problematic political play rather than a spectacle of violence an early Shakespeare served up to gore-happy Elizabethans" (95). The division between the yahoos and the erudite is maintained in Kolin's analysis, and Shakespeare survives with his genius intact.

I want to suggest that *Titus Andronicus* completely undermines both the solidity of tragedy-as-high-genre and the intellectual divisions that are assumed to distinguish those in the peanut gallery from those in the box seats. This kind of aesthetic was in some ways hinted at (especially by Taylor) but not satisfactorily developed in earlier critical work. I am not going to defend *Titus Andronicus* from naysayers such as the widely quoted T. S. Eliot, who almost succeeded in burying *Titus Andronicus* by describing it as "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which it is incredible that Shakespeare had any hand at all" (67). Nor would I insist that *Titus Andronicus* is great art, as, for example, Jonathan Bate has suggested when he describes *Titus Andronicus* as "one of the dramatist's most inventive plays, a complex and self-conscious improvisation upon classical sources, most notably the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid" (3). Instead, I rather agree with Jacques Petit, a Gascon servant whom Anthony Bacon had lent to Sir John Harington as a French teacher for his young son. Petit tells of how he found "le monstre" (the spectacle) to

be the best part of Shakespeare's play: "on a aussi joué la tragédie de Titus Andronicus mais le monstre a plus valu que le sujet" (quoted in Ungerer 103).

Petit provides us with the only known record of a performance of *Titus Andronicus* before the Restoration, a performance that occurred during Shakespeare's life (1 January 1596), and was probably performed by Shakespeare's Chamberlain's Men at "the household of Sir John Harington at Burley-on-the-Hill in Rutland" (Bate 43). Bate describes Petit's reaction as valuing "the visual spectacle ('le monstre'), not the narrative substance ('le sujet')." However, in the context of Bate's attempt to prove *Titus Andronicus* as "one of the dramatist's most inventive plays," his tone regarding Petit's review is potentially patronizing. That is, Bate wants us to see how *Titus Andronicus* is as terrific as *Othello* or *Hamlet*, so if we focus on the gore (à la Petit), we miss the greatness characteristic of everything Shakespearean.

Moving away from the bind Bate and other critics have placed us in of having to justify *Titus Andronicus* via a comparison to Shakespeare's other established works, I will argue that what makes *Titus Andronicus* effective is precisely what so many critics have pointed to when dismissing the play. The play's uninhibited and sexualized use of chaotic violence and a roster of characters who are either insane, inane, immoral, amoral, perverted, or an ambiguous mixture of the above transforms *Titus Andronicus* into an anti-narrative, an extended roar, an anticipation of Artaud's Theater of Cruelty.

*Titus Andronicus* serves as a play that meets Antonin Artaud's requirements of a "spectacle":

I want the theatrical performance to take on the aspect of a devouring hearth where action, situation, characters, images will reach a degree of implacable incandescence: I also want the audience when viewing my spectacle to be plunged in a bath of fire, agitated by the action and encircled by both the spectacular and dynamic movement of the work (quoted in Knapp 113).<sup>1</sup>

The violence in *Titus Andronicus* is so extreme that the play becomes a confrontation as opposed to an unfolding narrative. The dislocative shock attendant to witnessing *Titus Andronicus* can, if all action is

performed as Shakespeare sensationalistically designed it, supercede the individual intellectual response to the language of the play itself. After all, there are a dozen gruesome deaths performed for the sake of spectacle, and those are seasoned liberally with additional scenes of rape and cannibalism unequaled in terms of sheer number elsewhere in Shakespeare. Such an excess of viscera allows us to forget the story as we are overwhelmed and transformed by the allogical spectacle.

As director Julie Taymor recognized in her film adaptation *Titus*, the play is valuable primarily for its violent excess, its rupture of generic rules, and its sensual confusion. A review of Taymor's film properly places *Titus Andronicus* (both in terms of its screen adaptation and its life as a play) in the company of other contemporary highbrow exploitation films including Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* and Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*:

[...] there's probably a good reason this play has never been done as a major movie before, while the Bard's confection *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows up in multiple version: *Titus* is as gruesome as a live bullfight, filled with lopped-off hands, hacked-out tongues, rape, murder, and severed heads. The climax, which plays like *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Will Shakespeare*, finds Hopkins in full Hannibal Lecter mode as he finds a cannibalistic way to attain revenge on his foes (Daly 43).

The "gruesome" nature of both *Titus* and the other films Daly mentions exists primarily for the viewer's visual and emotional excitement—after all, no one wants to pay \$9.50 to be bored. Of course, the more excessive and spectacular the violence in a given text, the more the narrative of that text gets pushed to the margins. The desire for shock takes precedence over the need for a compelling story line.

Indeed, the word "desire" is crucial here for understanding the causes for the cautious but growing acceptance of *Titus Andronicus* as worthwhile theatrical event. Desire for spectacular excess—for an abundance of violence that undermines and mocks the relevance of story—neatly parallels contemporary critical culture's increasing recognition and appreciation of the slipperiness of the signifier, the new realism of the poetic fragment, and the moral bankruptcy of

rationalism. "Desire is what exceeds the signifier. And since desire's imperatives are absolute, it also exceeds the Law, which is orthodoxy, propriety and, above all, the order of meaning" (Belsey 86). In *Titus Andronicus*, all the ramifications of what Belsey refers to as "desire" become apparent. Sexual and blood-lust determine all action in the play, from the moment when Lucius calls for the dismemberment and burning of Alarbus—"Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs, and on a pile / *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh" (I.i.95-97)—to the obscene cannibalistic feast that comically echoes the soon-to-be "cooked" prisoner demanded earlier by Lucius: "Why, there they are, both baked in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred" (V.iii.60-62). Desire, as it is manifested (always) violently, becomes Shakespeare's alternative organizing principle in opposition to the Wizard of Oz-like delusions of conventional narrative and moral order. In *Titus Andronicus*, we do not have the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet*, or the comic ending of *All's Well that Ends Well*, or the stabilizing influence of the King Henry plays. Rather, a violent desire has won out, and made a mess of things.

The logically "believable" development of discreet individual characters within the play becomes overwhelmed by the enactment of unlegislated desire. "Chiron and Demetrius's glee when they rape and mutilate Lavinia is at odds with their initial protestations of love for her. Chiron's wish to 'serve' and 'deserve' Lavinia at the beginning of Act 2 contrasts dramatically with his fiendish delight at the sight of her maimed body . . ." (Ray 32). Violent spectacle transforms characters like Chiron and Demetrius into conflicting and fundamentally contradictory sites that conflate pleasure and pain, sense and nonsense, laughter and scream. Practically every character commits or assists in rape, murder, and/or torture. Even Lavinia (albeit for reasons of revenge) 'falls' when she, playing the role of perverse and fabulist young housewife, assists Titus in the killing and food-preparation of her rapists. It is this unabashed, inherently frenzied revelry in/of violence that makes *Titus Andronicus* different from all

of Shakespeare's other plays, and this is what makes relatively conservative critics agitated, especially those critics who wish to maintain Shakespeare's reputation as "the greatest." *Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare as arch-pornographer, seducing an audience despite the fact that what is being witnessed has no convincing moral counterbalance to what is essentially a laundry list of graphic rape/murders. *Titus Andronicus* embodies what Anthony Burgess would, in the twentieth century, come to term "ultra-violence" (Burgess 2).

If we are going to read *Titus Andronicus* as a text with structure, we might conclude that what "logically" justifies the play's chaotic composition is Titus's decision to kill Alarbus, Tamora's son. However, keeping that single murder in mind as the only cause for the subsequent action, it is not hard to see why Thomas Ravenscroft said, in 1687, that "'tis the most incorrect and undigested piece in all his works. It seems rather a heap of rubbish than a structure" (quoted in Waith 1). After all, while Titus showed unimpressive leadership skills by killing a prisoner of war over the protestations of that prisoner's own mother, the results that follow are completely disproportionate to the original crime. The spectacular nature of the graphic violence—its very showiness in staging, which calls for practically all pain incurred to be explicit—tends to overshadow and devour the one scene that initiates the action. Jacques Petit appeared to share the same view of the play when he praised the spectacle over the substance.

Eugene Waith writes, "recognition of (*Titus Andronicus's*) merits and of its close ties with other works by Shakespeare was slow to come. It has been more characteristic of the twentieth than of preceding centuries" (4). Waith's comment might suggest that *Titus Andronicus* was ahead of its time, in that it aestheticized and foregrounded violence at the expense of a developed narrative. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century audiences are now accustomed to representations of stylized violence for their own sake, particularly when the given "story" ends on a note not of resolution but of ambiguity. This type of aesthetic practice, if it has a point at all, most successfully serves as a theatrical *glamorization* of a nihilistic world-view, where violence

begets violence either without any denouement or without 'good' being done. For example, in Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction*, atrocities are committed for a variety of barely articulated reasons, and time itself is subverted when characters we thought dead unexpectedly reappear in unannounced and unarticulated flashback sequences. The 'point' in *Pulp Fiction* seems to be pure stylization, where violence is presented as spectacle without an underlying moral message. Ultimately, *Titus Andronicus* shares in this celebration of style over substance, its style—extreme violence—proving more memorable than the story that hovers on the margins.

However, despite the apparent modernity of Shakespeare's violent theatricality, Shakespeare certainly had precedents for such an aesthetic. As has been widely noted, debts were owed to Seneca and Ovid, both for their use of extreme violence in their texts as well as for their actual story lines. As Waith writes, "Philomela's revenge would surely have recalled Seneca's *Thyestes*, where Atreus kills his brother's sons and serves them to their father at a feast of reconciliation" (36-37). The Senecan cannibalistic feast of *Thyestes* is echoed at the end of *Titus Andronicus* when Titus serves up Tamora's sons as a main course. Offended literary critics object to this excess of violence whether it is related to *Titus Andronicus* or *Thyestes*. F. L. Lucas dismisses *Titus Andronicus* in half a sentence, "Titus Andronicus, which Shakespeare probably at least worked over." Then he hits *Thyestes*: "[E]veryone is limned in the same crude oleograph colours, with the same melodramatic exaggeration. His heroes are megalomaniacs, his virgins viragos so it goes on: but we, thank Heaven, need not. The revolting sufficiently intensified becomes the ludicrous" (63). Ultra-violence as an overriding aesthetic within a text becomes a problem in the mind of a critic searching for a more sublime aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic of frenzy is maintained up until the very end of *Titus Andronicus*. We see Titus murdered shortly after he murders his own child Lavinia. Lucius is implicated as a barbarian due to his judicial decision regarding Aaron's fate:

Set him breast-deep in earth and famish him;  
 There let him stand and rave and cry for food  
 If anyone relieves or pities him,  
 For the offence he dies; this is my doom. (V.iii.178-81)

Aaron himself, despite teasing us with a vision of humanity through his desire to keep his child alive, claims bombastically, "If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it from my very soul" (V.iii.188-89),<sup>2</sup> and is then promptly stuck waist-deep in mud and left to die.

Some may claim that there is resolution in *Titus Andronicus* due to the fact that Lucius becomes Emperor and secures moral retribution through the murder of Aaron. In defending Lucius against Taylor's reading, Maurice Hunt has suggested that Lucius is akin to a "gracious Christian governor" whose methods of punishment would not be at odds with his position as maximum moral leader:

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 (92).

In this case, Shakespeare apparently attempts to 'tie up' the play generically by providing this measure of retribution for the violence that preceded Lucius's ascension. But Lucius has been such a weak character throughout the play that there is no clear sense of how he will successfully carry out his promise to "heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe" (V.iii.147). While Lucius is one of the few people who attempt to offer a moral alternative to the madness, he is presented in the text as, well, a kind of *wimp*. He does not commit what might be interpreted as justifiable patricide when Titus kills Mutius, Lucius's own brother. Instead, Lucius protests meekly, "My lord, you are unjust, and more than so, / In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son" (I.i.293-94). While Mutius is dead because he was willing to

put his life on the line to ensure Lavinia's happiness, Lucius only challenges Titus verbally, and weakly at that.

Lucius continues to assert allegiance to Titus throughout the play, despite the fact that Titus has killed a number of Lucius's brothers and Lucius's sister Lavinia. Additionally, Anthony Brian Taylor has noted that, beyond his failure to stand up to Titus, Lucius commits what amounts to an extensive catalog of barbaric acts throughout the play. As Taylor points out when discussing Lucius's pleasurable description of the stench of burning flesh—"Alarbus' limbs are lopped, / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire, / Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky" (I.i.143-45)—Lucius has displayed an excessive relishment of savagery that drags him down to the level of the other characters:

What kind of brutal and coarse mentality is it, one wonders, that allows a man to compare the smell of burning human entrails with "incense." Moreover, the butchery Lucius is so savouring also sets a cycle of savagery in motion. Alarbus' "lopped" and "hewed" limbs signal the entry into a dramatic world where hands are chopped-off, a tongue torn from a girl's mouth, heads severed, throats slit, and events rise to a macabre crescendo when, in a bloody banquet, a mother unwittingly devours her murdered sons. (142)

Indeed, in his critique of the established readings of Lucius as a benevolent hero, Taylor rightly recognizes the near-comic anti-heroism and inherent dissonance embodied by Lucius: "It is one of the many ironies afforded by *Titus Andronicus* that it is the saviour figure who introduces the savage theme of dismemberment into the play" (142). As a result, any possibility of a peaceful and hopeful transfer of power seems ludicrous at best. That is, beyond his apparent ineffectuality as a leader, Lucius of course also has his vicious side. Sure that there will be no repercussions, Lucius kills flamboyantly under cover of righteous royal ascension. Lucius "is not merely dispensing justice: he is once again inflicting pain and agony with calculated *relish*" (Taylor 144, my italics).

Though it would, in all probability, be futile to look for a consistent political theory or for a convincing development of 'characters' in

*Titus Andronicus*, there are 'reasons' for the violence in this play. Again, the original act that initiated what was to become the cycle of blood, rape and terror was Titus's decision to kill Alarbus, "the noblest that survives, / the eldest son of this distressed queen" (I.i.102-03) despite Tamora's plea:

Andronicus, stain not thy tomb with blood.  
 Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods?  
 Draw near them then in being merciful;  
 Thrice-noble Titus, spare my first-born son. (I.i.116-20)

Here we have a setup that on the surface could lead the reader/theater-goer to think "O.K., Titus is bad, Tamora is probably good, especially since she's a worried mother, so Titus will probably get his comeuppance somehow for being such a vicious victor." This prediction is certainly established, but then *Titus Andronicus* ceases to be a 'Shakespeare' play in Eliot's sense, and becomes instead a catalogue of death, rape, and dismemberment that exists for/because of itself, for its own visceral thrill. This reading is supported in a later section of the text when we see how Tamora loses all semblance of humanity. Her maternal instincts disappear due to her blood-lust as she organizes the rape and dismemberment of Lavinia:

Remember, boys, I pour'd forth tears in vain,  
 To save your brother from the sacrifice;  
 But fierce Andronicus would not relent;  
 Therefore, away with her, and use her as you will,  
 The worse to her, the better loved of me. (II.iii.163-67)

Additionally, Tamora attempts to convince Aaron the "barbarous Moor" (II.iii.78) to kill her own child, the product of their miscegenation.

According to Bate, Titus presumably "learns (some)thing about love" when Lavinia is maimed (2). Bate is determined to insist that "to understand *Titus Andronicus* thus is at once to perceive its proximity to *King Lear* and to apprehend the difference between a slasher movie and a tragedy" (2). But Bate is again assuming clear objective differ-

ence between the structures of sensationalism and 'high art,' thus idealistically positioning *Titus Andronicus* as one of Shakespeare's 'Great but Misunderstood' dramas. However, he tends to neglect it as an unbelievably disturbing and effective piece of ultra-violence. Titus certainly did not learn "anything about love" in terms of his relationship with Lavinia—after all, he killed her. And he did this not out of some benevolent duty to save her from the horrors of living as a cripple, with the shame of rape coding her every move. Rather, Lavinia's death was necessary for the sake of style, to complete the list of perversions underpinning the final orgy of violence by adding infanticide to Titus's relationship with his daughter.

## II

When *Titus Andronicus* is willfully sensationalistic—then where is the evidence that Shakespeare himself wanted the play to be considered in such a light? Perhaps, examining *Titus Andronicus* as a work of wholly sadistic (and historically progressive) pornography may help to answer this question.

In *Titus Andronicus*, allusions to nature as a whole serve to center our gaze on violent enactments of genital sex. This occurs not just through action—i.e., the outdoor rape of Lavinia—but through more discreet language such as Marcus's insistent use of nature-metaphors to describe the violent results of Lavinia's rape:

[...] Why dost not speak to me?  
 Alas, a crimson *river* of warm blood,  
 Like to a *bubbling fountain* stirred with *wind*,  
 Doth rise and fall between thy *rosèd* lips (II.iv.22-24, my italics)

as well as "Blushing to be encount' red with a *cloud* (II.iv.32), "those *lily hands*" (II.iv.44), and so on. Cloud, flower, water, wind—pastoral tropes are co-opted into ironic gothic horror-show jokes.

In *Titus Andronicus*, as in *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses the forest as a metaphor where nature's

'wildness' contaminates the actions of the characters. However, where in the above-mentioned plays 'wildness' is exhibited mostly by humorous confusion over shifting gender identity and an increased awareness of sexuality,<sup>3</sup> the forest in *Titus Andronicus* is precisely a space where "desire can be acted out: Tamora comes to make love to Aaron, Chiron and Demetrius rape Lavinia" (Bate 7). The forest is not potential playground but scene of horrors. As Titus recognizes, the forest is "Patterned by that the poet [i.e. Ovid] here describes, / By nature made for murders and for rapes" (IV.i.57-58), and, as Marcus bemoans, "O, why should nature build so foul a den, / Unless the gods delight in tragedies?" (IV.i.59-60).

This use of nature as pornographic and violent performative space had its origins in myth. The main allusion in the love scene between Tamora and Aaron is to Dido's hunting and lovemaking in *The Aeneid*. Additionally, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shares with *Titus Andronicus* "hunting scenes (that) meticulously parallel scenes of seduction" (Wilbern 164). Nevertheless, Shakespeare's use of nature was far more exploitative, obvious, and shocking compared to his literary predecessors. Sexuality variously evokes or is invoked by violent fantasies. For example, when Tamora meets Aaron in the grove, she tells Aaron

We may, each wreathed in the other's arms,  
Our pastimes done, possess a golden slumber,  
While hounds and horns and sweet melodious birds  
Be unto us as is a nurse's song  
Of lullaby to bring her babe asleep (II.iii.25-29)

The "hounds and horns" that Tamora speaks of relate to the hunt that they are ostensibly in the forest for in the first place. Blood-sport and bird twitter are transformed into synonymous phrases evoking sexual pleasure:

Hunting and sexuality are traditionally connected in myth and literature, as well as by the common word "venery." These sexual undertones are intensi-

fied by the fiendish plans of Tamora's sons, whose hunt is not for the usual game: "Chiron," Demetrius tells his brother, "we hunt not, we, with horse or hound, / But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground" (Willbern 164-65).

As we can see, the metaphoric language of *Titus Andronicus* is unmistakably carnal, providing Elizabethan audiences with pornographic allusions free from legislative control. This language involves everyone in *Titus Andronicus* on a primarily violent—and wholly sexualized—level. Indeed, what characterized Elizabethan pornography was "a language not of lascivious delight but of sexual scatology—of slime, poison, garbage, vomit, clyster pipes, dung, and animality—that emerges connected to images of sexuality in the vocabulary of Iago and his brethren" (Boose 193). *Titus Andronicus* fits into what Boose's description of Elizabethan pornography is, not by presenting explicit sexual acts on stage—which would have been censored—but rather through a highly metaphorical use of language centered on gruesome *violent* acts, particularly the language describing the Pit.

The sexual metaphors related to the Pit (II.iii) are so obvious as to be almost comical—the scenes in and around the Pit perform a by-now-typical contemporary repositioning of violence as oddly funny. *Titus Andronicus* names the Pit/woman's genitals in the grossest terms:

a 'subtle hole', 'Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briers / Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood', 'the swallowing womb / Of this deep pit' where the dead Bassianus lies 'bathed in maiden blood.' 'This detested, dark, blood-drinking pit', 'this gaping hollow', 'the ragged entrails of this pit': the language becomes darkly obsessive, evocative not only of death and hell but also of the threatening female sexuality that is embodied in Tamora. There is a suggestion of Lear's disgust at what he calls the 'sulphurous pit' of women's genitals (Bate 8-9).

The metaphor of the vagina as disgusting and dangerous, taken to an extreme in Shakespeare's faux-disguised description of the Pit, advocates a horrific *and* attractive vision of female sexuality that continues to resound in pornographic texts today. For example,

phone-sex services with ad-copy including “My Wet Twat Can Take Any Cock!” or “I’m Open and Waiting For You” serve as contemporary examples of attaching pleasing/horrific associations—one is both welcomed into the Pit and consumed by it—to the vagina.<sup>4</sup> These associations are clearly set up by Shakespeare in his characterization of the Pit/vagina as a monstrous, all-consuming object into which men disappear.

As the genitals demarcate the center of our bodies (i.e., they are in the “middle” area between torso and legs), so the Pit is both physically and psychologically in the center of the text. “The dark forest with the pit at the center becomes a major dramatic symbol upon which the play turns” (A.C. Hamilton, quoted in Willbern 170). When Lucius sees Lavinia after she has been raped, “he is understandably frightened by her. She presents a grim image of the dangers of sexuality, and a constant visual reminder of the bloody pit at the deepest core of the play” (Willbern 170). The Pit, and its attendant meaning as vagina, is the main attraction. A spectacular female ogre swallows up all order (narrative, moral, and rational).

The only crime *not* visibly staged in *Titus Andronicus* is the rape of Lavinia. After Bassianus is murdered and thrown into the Pit, the stage directions read “*exeunt Chiron and Demetrius with Lavinia*” (II.iii.186). Only after Titus and Saturninus arrive at the Pit and after Tamora successfully lays the blame for the murder on Titus’s sons do we see the three characters again: “*Enter the Empress’ sons, Chiron and Demetrius, with Lavinia, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished*” (II.iv). This is, in a sense, the most sexual part of the play. Sex and violence come together so seamlessly in the act of the *implied* off-stage rape that the on-stage action around the Pit becomes a sexualized prelude and addendum to the rape itself. Every movement hints at what we as spectators were not allowed to see. *Titus Andronicus* becomes a tease, a radical and gory strip-show.

Even before her actual rape in the woods, Lavinia endures a more benevolent abduction when she is taken by Bassianus from Saturninus and her father. Titus later refers to this incident as a “rape,” and Bas-

sianus replies, "Rape you call it, my lord, to seize my own" (I.i.404-06). This incident "not only prefigures Lavinia's actual ravishment; it also suggests the unconscious equation of marriage and rape, sexuality and violence, which permeates the play" (Willbern 163). Again, the violent sexuality in *Titus Andronicus* is suggested, arousing the audience-members while not wholly satisfying them due to the play's legal inability to stage rape.

The techniques of titillation continue after the rape when Lavinia's uncle makes her put a stick in her mouth, which, besides alluding to a penis, also serves to continue the perverse tease; in a slow and agonizing manner, Lavinia uses the stick to write the word *stuprum* (rape). Moments like this—at one point Lavinia puts Titus' hand in her mouth, which is "as wounded as her genitals" (Bate 36)—seem "to reenact her rape in a way that oppressively reinscribes her absence from the sphere of articulation and action" (Rowe 282). Lavinia is a "speechless complainer but a bodily presence. Her body is at the centre of the action, as images of the pierced and wounded body are central to the play's language" (Bate 36). Her rape is manifested repeatedly for our horror/pleasure. Over and over again, we are given the opportunity to imagine what we cannot see.

*Titus Andronicus* echoes both the current highbrow exploitation flick as it conforms to Artaud's desire for a Theater of Cruelty that is a populist "mass spectacle," a "total theatrical experience," which "must furnish real subjects which emanate from man's dreams: crime, eroticism, desire for utopia, cannibalism" (Knapp 113). It is not surprising that as the twentieth century progresses into the twenty-first century, productions of *Titus Andronicus* increase in both their number and their willingness to stage horrors *realistically*. As Alan Dessen writes, "an age that takes for granted violence and brutality on television and in the cinema may finally be ready for the tragedy of blood" (1-2). In the place of 'great meaning,' Shakespeare gives us a pornographic spectacle that has the potential to complicate conceptions of the Bard as Deity, as exemplar of high intellectual taste and, ultimately, of the very values we attach to the definition of 'great art.'

*Titus Andronicus* becomes a play to revel in, to throw up over, and to be seduced by.

Kingsborough Community College  
New York

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All Artaud quotations are found in Knapp.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references from the play are taken from Waith's Oxford Shakespeare edition.

<sup>3</sup>In *As You Like It*, the Arden forest serves as a room for cross-dressing, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the forest leads to human identity itself being usurped, i.e. Bottom turning into an ass, sexual affection readministrated, intimations of bestiality between the fairy queen Titania and the ass.

<sup>4</sup>Ads found among the back pages of *Penthouse Magazine* (June 1995).

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