

Lucius, Still Severely Flawed: A Response to Jonathan Bate, Maurice Hunt, and Philip Kolin*

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Jonathan Bate shares many of my misgivings about *Lucius*.¹ Recognizing the ironic parallel with the brutal treatment of Alarbus, he questions his refusal of burial rites to Tamora; he queries how exactly he will reward the Goths; and he speculates about whether he will “resort to strong arm tactics.” All this makes him sceptical about the play’s ending and the prospect of the new emperor ushering in “a new golden age.” Where we differ is that I focus on the disastrous effect of Lucius’ flaws for his family and Rome in the play; he sees them largely as placing question marks against the future. He also gives much greater weight to virtues which, in his view, enable Lucius to redeem the situation and live up to his name and bring light to a darkened and confused world. This positive view of Lucius is considerably reinforced by his discovery of a Reformation context in the play, which makes it possible to interpret the Goths as the forerunners of the German reformers in opposing Rome and Lucius’ accession as a “Protestant succession.”² But seeing Lucius in this way gives rise to a degree of discomfort: it involves a *volte face* on the Goths midway through the play, for example, and a “Protestant” Lucius also necessitates standing a moment in the text on its head. When he is taken prisoner and asks for an oath to spare his son’s life, Aaron says he knows Lucius is “religious” and uses “popish tricks and ceremonies” (5.1.76).³ But, we are told, because the words come from

*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.

Aaron, "this strongly suggests Lucius should in fact be regarded as the very opposite of Catholic." Yet he himself has raised not the least objection to having his religion defined in Catholic terms, and tacitly accepted what has been said without comment. In addition, although there is no doubt that the Moor is "the great twister of truth" in the play, when taken prisoner, he uncharacteristically commits himself to telling the truth for two reasons: to save his son, and because he knows the truth will torment Lucius.

Notwithstanding Lucius' barbaric butchery of Alarbus and willingness to kill Lavinia rather than return her in the family quarrel, Maurice Hunt takes a sanguine view of Lucius in the early part of the play, seeing him as a "humane," "sensitive" candidate for "redemptive martyrdom." But the key to Lucius' eventual "apotheosis" in Hunt's opinion is the silent, unexplained conversion which Lucius and the Roman world undergo in Acts 4 and 5 when he "metamorphoses from a pagan devoted to Roman religion to a Christian." But this sudden Christianising of Lucius (and indeed, the Roman world)⁴ involves all kinds of difficulties. For one thing, it involves Hunt in what is, given the uncertain practices of Elizabethan composers, traditionally a Shakespearean mare's nest: assuming references to "god" in the text are upper case. A crucial piece of evidence in establishing Hunt's case is Lucius' response to Aaron's plea that he will spare the child: he cites it as, "Even by *my God* I swear to thee I will" (5.1.86, italics mine). Yet a stream of modern editors, including J. C. Maxwell, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Eugene Waith, Jonathan Bate, and Allan Hughes, find no evidence whatsoever of a Christian god in this line; in their texts, it reads: "Even by *my god* I swear to thee I will" (italics mine).⁵ And such is his anxiety to make Lucius Christian, Hunt accepts without demur the reference to his "popish tricks and ceremonies." So in a play written some time between 1589 and 1594, it is being suggested that Shakespeare is offering for the approval of an Elizabethan playhouse audience, a saviour-figure patently associated with the Pope, the Catholic head of the church of Rome who had blessed the Armada and offered pardon to anyone who might assassinate the Queen. Nonetheless, Hunt rounds off his reply impressively by praising his Christian Lucius for sparing Aaron's child and thus breaking the "pattern of retributive son-killing" in the play. The idea of the nightmare

finally ending is most appealing and would be convincing if Lucius exhibited the least spirit of compassion at this point. Instead, Aaron's child is a mere pawn to be produced as evidence of Tamora and his father's guilt while Lucius devises a protracted and agonising death for his father who is to "stand and rave and cry for food." The figure of Aaron breast-deep in the earth constitutes the play's final dramatic icon, and is proof that the nightmare goes on. The earth appears once more to be swallowing men, as it has swallowed the good and the bad, the living and the dead, from the very beginning of the play.

Philip Kolin holds the view that Lucius is a master of polity and the architect of a "*Pax Romanorum*." But neither Lucius nor anyone else refers to such a grand design in the text. When he addresses the Goths as he and they near the end of their triumphant march on Rome, he confines himself to promising them "treble satisfaction" in their desire for revenge on the city, seemingly preoccupied, to use the words of Jonathan Bate, with "how the Goths are to be paid off for their assistance." The other glorious opportunity to breach the subject is when as newly acclaimed emperor, he addresses the Romans, but on that occasion, having promised the avenging Goths a pound of Rome's flesh, he never so much as mentions the invaders whose menacing presence gives his promise to "heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe" (5.3.168) a decidedly hollow ring. So resonant is his silence about the Goths at this point that it is understandable that he was played in the 1985 BBC production as a hypocrite.⁶ Regrettably, all the signs are that Lucius will be as powerless to help Rome at the end of the play as his aged father was at the beginning. Kolin also quite rightly objects to my limiting discussion of redeemers in Shakespeare to Malcolm and Richmond. Lucius, he argues, belongs to a line of what he calls "savvy saviours" which includes Bolingbroke, Hal, Caesar, and Ulysses. But none of these figures at the outset personally butchers a living victim and then sadistically refers to the smell of burning human entrails as "perfume." None by "lopping" and "hewing" another human being introduces the bloody theme of dismemberment into a dramatic world in which throats are cut, hands chopped off, tongues torn out, and heads ground to powder; none, as A. C. Hamilton reminds us, sets a bloody and gruesome example that "first occasions the cycle of revenge."⁷

In the replies to my article, there is also discussion of the Goths. Kolin attempts to undermine my treatment of the Goths by remarking ironically that I see them all as "bloodthirsty varlets." But with respect, his rather quaint phraseology has connotations I would never place upon the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*. My view, consistently stated here and elsewhere, is that the Goths are "barbarous," the epithet used in the play, the kind of savage people who, left to their own devices, would rape and mutilate a defenceless woman, and, as soldiers, if ordered, would not hesitate to participate in atrocities like infanticide or the torture of prisoners. And in precisely placing the Goths outside the civilized pale with this word, I, and, I believe, Shakespeare, reflect the general Elizabethan estimate as expressed by such figures as Ascham and Thomas Cooper.⁸

But the real interest lies in Jonathan Bate's elaboration of the thesis that the Goths who follow Lucius are not the same Goths who earlier in the play terrorize Rome. In his reply, this involves a surprising construction being placed on Shakespeare's only reference to the Goths outside *Titus*, Touchstone's remark to Audrey: "I am here with thee and thy goats as the most capricious poet honest Ovid was among the Goths" (*As You Like It* 3.3.5-6). To take this as praise of the Goths is to ignore Touchstone's attitude to Arden—"when I was at home, I was in a better place" (2.4.15); alone among those exiled, the Clown is impervious to the benefits of Shakespeare's "green world," finding nothing in the forest but a contemptible, "greasy" existence where life is reduced to a crude matter of "country copulation." More significantly, it is to ignore Touchstone's characteristic play on words; "goats" in his remark gives way to "capricious" (goatish, witty, lustful) and then to "Goths" which, as Alan Brissenden, the recent Oxford editor of the play (OUP 1993), reminds us in his note on the lines, the Elizabethans pronounced "Goats." Touchstone is not praising the Goths; he is saying that they are little better than animals, which is just what Ovid said about them in his exile at Tomi. And there is evidence that the source of his remark, the *Tristia*, which was known to Shakespeare from his schooldays, also underlies the treatment of the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*. As Ovid bewails the savage and barbarous life-style of the Goths, he refers to the considerable Greek influence on their lives—they attempt to speak Greek, for instance, doing so with a Getic twang (*Tristia* V.vii.52).⁹ And this uneasy fusion

of Greek and Gothic culture is reflected in the names of Tamora's two sons, Chiron and Demetrius, Goths who behave like animals in the forest.

The claim that *Germania* underlies the Goths of the play's second part, rests on its praise of certain aspects of the Germans' lifestyle (primarily their simple diet and chastity) as idyllic in contrast with Roman decadence, but Tacitus also stresses their crudity (dressing in animal skins, using dung on their roofs) and their laziness, drunkenness, and brawling.¹⁰ Nor is there need to go to Tacitus to explain Aaron's resolve to take his child to the Goths and have him raised on a diet of berries and roots and live in a cave and be brought up "To be a warrior and command a camp" (4.2.174 ff.). This is the concept of the "selvage man" (or "noble savage") which frequently appears in Elizabethan writers who generally regarded it with healthy scepticism. Moreover, any inclination to put a praiseworthy gloss on Aaron's words is checked by the example of another Moor who was brought up from his earliest days "To be a warrior and command a camp"; in Othello's case, the result of such a "barbarous," uncivilized upbringing ultimately proved disastrous, allowing Iago to strip away the veneer of civilization and reveal the lecherous, savage "black devil" beneath who would "chop her into messes." And there is another more arresting, even closer parallel in the figure of another "selvage man," Caliban, that "thing of darkness," who was also, like the Moor's black child, the product of a union between "the devil" and his "dam,"¹¹ and who actually did grow up close to Nature, feeding on berries and dwelling in a cave.

For all the excellence of three distinguished respondents' arguments, I remain convinced that Lucius is a further, fascinating development of the play's central theme of "flawed *Romanitas*." An iron Roman, he has the virtues, devotion to family, selfless patriotism, courageous soldiership, that made Rome great; but he also has vices, mindless sadistic cruelty, an inability to grasp or respond to complex political situations, that represent the debility and coarsening in the Roman character that led to the city's fall. And that fall which is prefigured in the rape of Lavinia by the Goths is ominously at hand at the close where, as the politically naive young emperor fills the air with patriotic sentiments, Rome lies at the mercy of the avenging "barbarous" Goths.

In what has become a classic article, A. C. Hamilton traced the veins of Shakespearean tragedy in the play. But perhaps *Titus Andronicus* remains problematic because insufficient attention has been paid to its elements of un-Shakespearean tragedy. In this early play, the young playwright was heavily influenced by two great writers, Ovid and Christopher Marlowe, whose work is marked by structural irony coupled and invested with unexpected, sometimes startling, moral values. Beyond this point in time, however, as Shakespeare matured and found his own superb tragic metier, they would never influence him so heavily again.

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NOTES

¹Although I differ from Jonathan Bate somewhat in my appreciation of Lucius, I am conscious that no one has done more in recent years to illuminate the play for us, first with the stimulating treatment in *Shakespeare's Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) and then with the splendid recent New Arden edition (London: Routledge, 1995). I also owe him an apology; in quoting from the New Arden edition, I unintentionally gave a misleading impression by not acknowledging that he, too, found Lucius flawed.

²His perception of a reformation context in the play leans heavily upon the incident when a Goth serving Lucius surveys a ruined monastery harbouring Aaron, the play's devil, and his son. In my article the scene is interpreted as one more picture of the play's utterly fallen world.

³Reference is to the New Arden edition. Reference to other works is to *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. S. Wells and G. Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 1987).

⁴Hunt introduces the Christian metamorphosis of the Roman world with an ingenious decipherment of the Clown episode (4.3.77 ff. and 4.4.39-48); but his interpretation takes no account of a well established sixteenth-century tradition whereby Clowns stepped straight from the contemporary world using current Christian terminology into distant dramatic settings. (See my forthcoming article, "The Clown Episode in *Titus Andronicus*" in *N&Q*.) In discussing Christian references, he also refers to the elder tree growing by the pit in the forest (2.3.277), noting its association with Judas. But in the Warwickshire countryside where Shakespeare grew up, the elder tree was traditionally associated, not with Judas, but with the Cross on which Jesus died. That this particular tree should be growing over the pit, the perverse "swallowing womb" which contains not the seeds of life but a form of death in the figure of the one virtuous member of the Roman royal family, Bassianus, lying "like to a slaughtered lamb" (2.2.223), is deeply ironic; like the scene

involving the "ruin'd monastery," it is a bleak reminder that this is a dramatic world beyond redemption.

⁵Evidence of a Christian god is also seen in Marcus' remark as Lavinia is about to reveal the name of the rapists: "here display at last / What God will have discovered for revenge" (4.1.73-74). But this is set in a thoroughly pagan context, Marcus having begun speaking with "Apollo, Pallas, Jove or Mercury / Inspire me, that I may this treason find" (66-67).

⁶Lucius was played with "shifty eyes, an oily look, and the physical characteristics of Mussolini" (*Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Kolin [New York: Garland 1995] 37).

⁷A. C. Hamilton, "Titus Andronicus: The Form of Shakespearian Tragedy," *ShQ* 14 (1963): 202.

⁸Ascham regarded the Goths as a coarse, "beggerlie" people and reflects the orthodox Humanist view that the invasion of Italy by "Gothes and Hunnes" signalled the destruction of "all good learning"; and in his widely used dictionary, Thomas Cooper, Bishop of Lincoln, associates them with the most ferocious and savage of all peoples, the Scythians, writing that they "dyd depopulate and brynge in subjection the more part of Europa, and finally destroyed Rome." For Ascham, see *The Scholemaster, Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. G. Smith, 2 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1904) 1: 29, and for Cooper, see *Dictionarium Historicum et Poeticum* in his *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (London, 1555).

⁹Reference is to the Loeb edition, *Tristia: Ex Ponto*, ed. A. L. Wheeler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1924; rpt. 1965).

¹⁰Reference is to the Loeb edition of *Germania*, ed. M. Hutton, revised by E. H. Warmington (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1970). For the simplicity of the Germans' diet and their "fenced-in chastity" ("saepta pudicitia"), see 18 and 19, 23, for their wearing animal skins (17.2) and piling dung on their roofs (16.4), and for their drunkenness, love of noise and brawling, and habitual laziness (22.2, 23.2, and 15.2)

¹¹Cf. Aaron's comment on Tamora on learning of the birth of their child—"she is the devil's dam" (4.2.57), and Prospero's opening remark to Caliban—"Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam" (*The Tempest* 1.2.323-24).