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### Women and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus*

Shakespeare constructs Tamora and Lavinia to fill harmful patriarchal social roles: Lavinia a strong woman victimized by a patriarchal society, and Tamora the object of male desire; as well as a misogynistic archetype of the passion driven female villain. Why does Shakespeare fashion Tamora as so evil? Because she fills a role that she should not? This paper will analyze the ways Shakespeare represents Tamora and Lavinia, and how each affects their own and one another's acts of revenge. In other words, why did Shakespeare choose to exclude any sort of redeeming female character in *Titus Andronicus*?

Lavinia and Tamora threaten the dominance of the male hero in *Titus Andronicus*. Douglas Green in fact, claims, "Certainly Lavinia and Tamora, as utter victim and as consummate avenger, threaten to usurp Titus' centrality" (Green 319). Shakespeare uses Lavinia to further escalate the fashioning of Tamora as evil. Shakespeare's use of Lavinia makes it hard for audiences to look past Tamora's brutality. Shakespeare gives his audience what they want regarding acceptable social roles. Does Shakespeare think unmarried female monarchs should rule? Probably not. However, I definitely think he questions the norms of his society in *Titus Andronicus*.

As Queen of the Goths, Shakespeare characterizes Tamora by "othering" her, allowing the audience to identify her as barbaric and unlike themselves. Shakespeare portrays Tamora as a villain from the beginning of the play because of her non-Roman origin. Shakespeare turns this

binary of the Roman Empire and the Goths against itself when Saturninus takes Tamora as his queen. Shakespeare actively characterizes Tamora when she first begs Titus for her son's life. "Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge. Thrice-noble Titus, spare my first-born son" (1.1 ln. 119-120). The "mercy" Tamora begs remains important throughout the rest of the play. In this, Tamora sets up the non-noble or unmerciful Titus. Her line is ironic precisely because Titus does not wear "nobility's true badge" when he fails to evoke mercy.

Shakespeare uses Tamora as a physical representation of Titus's emotional upheaval and fall to revenge. Green argues that Tamora is Titus' "mirror image" while she also acts his adversary (Green 320). Tamora acts as an example for Titus to follow. She facilitates and fashions Titus's revenge as well as parallels it.

Shakespeare uses Aaron, Tamora's Moor lover, to accentuate the fashioning of Tamora as a villain. Aaron's characterization and representation aligns him with the devil, which by association aligns Tamora with the devil as well. When Tamora gives birth, the Nurse tells her sons and Aaron of "Our Empress' shame and stately Rome's disgrace" (4.2 ln. 60). Tamora's illegitimate child reinforces the characterization of Tamora as lascivious. The Nurse also indicates that Tamora has brought "disgrace" onto Rome, threatening Tamora's political power and Machiavellian masks.

Tamora embodies a Machiavellian renaissance self-fashioning when she wears different masks to manipulate others. From the control she has over her body to the unmerciful revenge plots she enacts, Tamora embodies masculine characteristics throughout the play. This is why Tamora remains so threatening politically. The Machiavellian chameleon ability she possesses correlates with politicians, men, and personal power itself, threatening the integrity of patriarchy.

Tamora exhibits Machiavellian fashioning when she puts on a sexual mask to manipulate

Saturninus:

For I can smooth and fill his aged ears  
 With golden promises that, were his heart  
 Almost impregnable, his old ears deaf,  
 Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue (5.1 ln. 95-98)

Tamora objectifies herself when she speaks to Saturninus, to manipulate him and also to convey that she will use herself physically to trap Titus. Tamora uses feminine words and images to trick the men. For Tamora, feminine language and identity becomes useful when whispering trickery into men's ears. Tamora can "smooth" and "fill" Titus' "aged ears" with "golden promises".

Tamora represents herself here with masculine images. Shakespeare's audience would have believed only men could "fill" someone's ear. The dominant ideology being that women cannot say something with enough substance to "fill" anything, let alone another's mind. Tamora uses hyper masculine imagery to fashion herself as overtly masculine. The heroic discourse emphasizes honor and fulfilling quests; the "golden promises" Tamora whispers to Titus align her with royalty and honor.

Tamora takes this masculine identity even further when she emasculates Titus, insinuating that he could become "impregnable" from her voice. If Titus's "heart" were "impregnable" then he becomes feminine, both physically and emotionally (Birth and Motherhood). Tamora thus becomes the masculine filler of "golden promises". We see further bombarding gender representations when Tamora represents Titus with masculine "aged ears", aligning him with wisdom, and reinforcing a masculine connotation. Tamora creates a binary when she then labels them as "old deaf ears," aligning Titus with wisdom but also implying he has no ability to listen or reason with others, because of his deteriorating "aged ears". Tamora on the other hand has the ability to affect both Titus's "ear" and "heart". Titus's "ear" linked with

his conscious thought, reason, and intelligence, and his “heart” being his passion and anger.

Tamora will control his body and mind with her “tongue” and in this she fashions herself completely masculine; she evokes the feminine images as tools to demean and subordinate Titus.

Shakespeare’s representation and subordination of Lavinia conflicts throughout the play. Tamora, in fact, uses phallic imagery to fashion Lavinia. When speaking to her sons in 2.3, Tamora tells them, “But when ye have the honey ye desire Let not this wasp outlive, use both to sting” (2.3 ln. 131-132). In these lines, Tamora captures the fluidity of Lavinia’s gender. Lavinia has “honey” representing her female sex organs. “Honey,” conveys sweet, feminine traits associated with utopian paradise. In biblical utopian discourses heaven is often referred to as the “Land of milk and honey”. The “sting”, however, also acts as a phallic symbol defining Lavinia’s quick wit and ability to foil Tamora. A wasp’s sting, which is straight and sharp, parallels a sword. Such a phallic image implicates, that Lavinia’s wit and strength could impale Tamora and her sons. The binary of Lavinia having both a wasp’s “sting” and sweet “honey” signifies her interchangeable gender identity. Since wasps do not produce honey, Tamora herein represents Lavinia as two opposite gendered insects, a male wasp and a female honeybee. Lavinia’s strength threatens Tamora’s hierarchy of power.

Tamora sees the depth and threat in Lavinia; the men in *Titus Andronicus* do not. Lavinia’s invisibility among the men directs the way she is moved around like a doll: pretty, but without agency of her own. Lavinia’s mutilation and pain is not her own in *Titus Andronicus*. At her most vulnerable state, Lavinia is represented as a tool for Titus’s revenge. Since Lavinia’s mutilation and shame is not her own but Titus’s, it is logical that he would consume and portray it as his own dramatic sentencing from Rome.

Give me a sword, I’ll chop off my hands too,  
For they have fought Rome, and all in vain;

And they have nursed this woe in feeding life;  
 In bootless prayer have they been held up,  
 And they have served me to effectless use.  
 Now all the service I require of them  
 Is that the one will help to cut the other.  
 'Tis well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands,  
 For hands to do Rome service is but vain. (3.1 ln. 72- 80).

Titus parallels Rome with those individuals who have mutilated Lavinia. He thus parallels his useless “hands” to Lavinia’s dismembered ones. By paralleling these “hands” Titus deploys Lavinia’s suffering as his own. Shakespeare’s audience would have identified the family-based discourse of identity that Titus evokes. The ownership Titus places over Lavinia’s honor, pain, and body, overshadows the love he reflects in his revenge. By owning Lavinia’s pain and shame, Titus becomes a model of Christian revenge opposed to a model of violent avenger. We see an example of justification from Titus when he claims, “For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, And worse than Progne, I will be revenged” (5.3 ln. 193-194). Titus evokes a common Elizabethan archetype from Ovid’s *“Metamorphoses”* as justification for his revenge in *Titus Andronicus*.

The audience sees Tamora and Lavinia as opposing throughout the play. Lavinia becomes the victim of Tamora’s revenge and Tamora becomes the prosecutor of Lavinia’s fate. However, the characters do connect to one another. Tamora begins the play pleading for her sons’ life, later to become more powerful than most of the men in the play. Lavinia begins as a defiant witty woman, later to become victimized by most of the men in the play. Tamora and Lavinia, are furthermore responsible for one another’s end, both directly and indirectly.

The interaction between Tamora and Lavinia in Act 2 is complex. In Act 2 we get a glimpse of the woman Lavinia was before tragedy befalls her. Lavinia’s words exhibit blatant irony when she tells Bassianus that he should “let [Tamora] joy her raven-colored love” (2.3 ll.

83). Tamora then kills Bassianus and turns Lavinia over to her sons. Tamora's language drips with phallic connotations and masculine self-fashioning to represent herself as a powerful Empress. When addressing Lavinia, Tamora exudes a cold demeanor, claiming she does not understand Lavinia saying, "What begg'st thou then, fond women? Let me go." (2.3 ll.171). Tamora subordinates Lavinia by referring to her as "women" instead of a given name. Tamora also uses irony when calling Lavinia a "fond women" mimicking the irony Lavinia shows earlier in the scene. In this scene Tamora fashions herself as a masculine dictator and forces Lavinia into the role of victim. In this dialogue, we see Tamora blossom into complete tyrannical and political glory.

Tamora and Lavinia represent two misogynist portrayals of women in Elizabethan England; one as a helpless victim dependent on men and the other as a lustful temptress. The text fails to provide any positive representation of a reasonable female. Shakespeare, however, represents men more flexibly in *Titus Andronicus*. Titus parallels Tamora because of their passion driven revenge plots, and Lavinia parallels Saturninus, because he allows Tamora to manipulate him. Although there are depictions of dependent and passion driven men, many of the men remain reasonable and would fit into the heroic paradigm better than Titus, such as Marcus and Lucius.

The parallels between Tamora and Titus are central to the reading and understanding of *Titus Andronicus*. Lavinia facilitates the revenge that drives both Tamora and Titus, making the most compelling parallel between the two. Shakespeare fashions Lavinia not so much as an actual person, but as a prop used by Tamora and Titus to alleviate their own grief and antagonism. When plotting his revenge Lavinia simply walks around with Titus and Marcus.

Titus uses her as a prop; if anyone questions his revenge he can physically refer to Lavinia as justification.

Building on this parallel, Titus displays a lack of Christian mercy when he denies Tamora's plea for her son's life. Tamora parallels this lack of Christian mercy when she tells Demetrius and Chiron to rape and mutilate Lavinia. Tamora's actions are seen as more barbaric than the unmerciful judgment of Titus in Act I. Though Tamora and Titus ignore the dominant ideology of Christian mercy in political ruling, they both enforce the biblical ideology of revenge: "an eye for an eye". Both characters feel justified in seeking revenge as biblical discourse commands.

Within a Christian context, Shakespeare's audience could have felt justice concluded the revenge and tragedy of the play. In the last scene, in fact, Titus is mourned as a hero and his revenge against Tamora justified. Herein lies the problem. If Titus's revenge seems justified, why not Tamora's? Tamora enlists her sons Chiron and Demetrius to rape and mutilate Lavinia. Titus murders Chiron and Demetrius, bakes them in pies, serves them to Saturninus and Tamora, and murders his daughter Lavinia.

Tamora and Titus's revenge and actions paralleled each other; however when the play comes to a close Shakespeare represents Tamora as the ultimate villain. These two characters, so similar in motive and action, befall two contrasting ends. The audience's expectations of performative identity contribute to the end of *Titus Andronicus*. We expect Titus to seek revenge, not Tamora.

Shakespeare's paralleling of Saturninus and Lavinia contrasts the paralleling of Titus and Tamora, both in sentiment and political hierarchy. Saturninus, as the Emperor, should be at the top of the political and social hierarchy. However, Tamora, as his Empress, is fashioned as more

influential than he in the power hierarchy. Tamora manipulates Saturninus throughout the play. Which parallels the manipulation of Lavinia by Titus to aid his quest for revenge. In the Julie Taymor film adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, Taymor costumes Saturninus as overtly feminine. Alan Cumming, who portrays Saturninus, wears an excessive amount of flamboyant makeup. The resulting accentuation of feminine features on his face, symbolizes the feminine features of his character. This feminine quality also reads through his use of language in the text, and his submissive regard to most of the action in the play. We see evidence of this when Tamora fashions men as weak and “impregnable” as she manipulates Saturninus in Act 5. Lavinia also embodies such femininity, and thus the parallel between Saturninus and Lavinia showcases the hierarchy of power associated with feminine characteristics. Saturninus as Emperor has no power over his queen or the play, signifying to playgoers that he has no political power. Lavinia, on the other hand, has power but loses all autonomy by Act 2.

Lavinia and Saturninus both convey the ability to embody certain feminine and masculine traits. Tamora uses femininity as a tool in Act 5. By contrast, Lavinia and Saturninus’s femininity is part of them. Lavinia and Saturninus are fluid in their gender identities. Lavinia’s submissive identity after her mutilation parallels Saturninus’s submissive identity, which we see after his union to Tamora. Lavinia and Saturninus’s submission facilitates the domination and power used to represent Tamora.

Deborah Willis provides a feminist response to *Titus Andronicus* stating that “The Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is an almost exclusively male world; its two female characters, their roles sharply circumscribed by patriarchal norms, are both dead by its end, and few other women are even referred in passing” (Willis 22). Tamora, born of Gothic birth, and Lavinia, daughter of a battered war general, are two representations used for the female roles in *Titus Andronicus*.

Shakespeare characterizes Tamora in control of her sexuality and intellect. This characterization is threatening to Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare represents Tamora as an archetype for a woman in power. For Shakespeare's audience Tamora is seen not only as a powerful ruler, but as a powerful individual as well. This paper is not trying about downplaying Tamora's brutality, but more questioning why Shakespeare chooses to fashion her so barbarically. Reading *Titus Andronicus* the first time, we see Shakespeare crafting the perfect anti-female power play; paralleling modern day sexist stereotypes regarding PMS and politics. More than that though, Shakespeare was commenting on gender identity, changing the interpretation of Tamora's evil fashioning as political fear.

In Shakespeare classes around the world students are studying plays produced hundreds of years ago. Why? Shakespeare is and will continue to be popular because our society still deals with the emotional and political issues addressed in his plays. The representations of Tamora and Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* matter to students in 2010, because these conflicting models of women are still seen in our society today. The "Tamora" in our society is the independent career driven female, a woman in charge of her own sexuality and unafraid to push against the sexist oppressions of her society. The fact that we have yet to elect a female president speaks volumes in agreement as to why Shakespeare is relevant. The same patriarchal ideology seen throughout his work and lifetime facilitates much of our culture.

"Lavinia" can model women in our society as well. The rape culture we live in attests to that. Jessica Valenti, for example, writes about the "rape schedule" women subconsciously adhere too in her book Full Frontal Feminism. Much like our cultural practices of blaming rape victims based on their attire or previous sexual experiences, Lavinia is seen as the culprit for shaming her family. The parallels between our modern stereotyping and the oppression women

faced in Elizabethan England are significant. Though Shakespeare's audience may have seen some of the play through a slightly different lens, most of the stereotypes and fears are still reinforced and functioning today.

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