



You have downloaded a document from
RE-BUŚ
repository of the University of Silesia in Katowice

Title: “Titus Andronicus” or the Dramatization of Wildness

Author: Jacek Mydla

Citation style: Mydla Jacek. (1997). “Titus Andronicus” or the Dramatization of Wildness. W: T. Rachwał, W Kalaga (red.), "The wild and the tame : essays in cultural practice" (S. 54-72). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Uznanie autorstwa - Użycie niekomercyjne - Bez utworów zależnych Polska - Licencja ta zezwala na rozpowszechnianie, przedstawianie i wykonywanie utworu jedynie w celach niekomercyjnych oraz pod warunkiem zachowania go w oryginalnej postaci (nie tworzenia utworów zależnych).



UNIWERSYTET ŚLĄSKI
W KATOWICACH



Biblioteka
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

JACEK MYDLA

Titus Andronicus or the Dramatization of Wildness

Wildness and Shakespeare Criticism

There is a tradition of regarding Shakespeare's talent and work in terms of the opposition between the wild and the cultivated. In the *Preface* to his edition of Shakespeare's plays, S. Johnson evokes the platitudinous metaphor likening the Bard's *ouvre* to a wild forest where the flora of poetry grows unrestrainedly:

the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses; filling the eye with awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endless diversity.¹

Milton's couplet from *L'Allegro* (ll. 133–4), with the metaphor of the unpremeditated Muse-nightingale, gives a finishing touch to the image: "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child, / Warble[s] his native wood-notes wild".

However, as there is more than one meaning to the word "wild," there is also another side of Shakespeare's wildness, a more virulent and derogatory one for a change. *Titus Andronicus* is the play that has long passed for a wild affair in any meaning the word can carry. First of all, it has been censured as the poet's unruly piece of juvenile muddle, extravagantly gory and devoid of decorum.

¹ S. Johnson, *Selected Writings: "The Oxford Authors" Series* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 436.

S. Johnson was appalled and voiced his disapproval thus: "The barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience."² Others were less discriminate in their rebuke and described the play as "a heap of rubbish" (Ravenscroft),³ "intended to excite vulgar audiences" (Coleridge),⁴ "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (T. S. Eliot).⁵ Fortunately, in the past few decades a reversal in criticism has been taking place culminating in the 1995 edition of the tragedy for the Arden Shakespeare,⁶ which, along with the successful recent productions,⁷ gives the play its due credit. This is not to say that the imputed bizarre nature of the work is thereby done away with, and indeed in what follows I shall argue for the assumption that the tragedy is one of the most deeply-searching and radical artistic approaches to the motif of wildness ever.

The following brief analysis of the representation of wildness in *Titus Andronicus* will be undertaken in two stages. After an introductory paragraph suggesting a possible differentiation of the meanings of "wild," we shall relate the thus-obtained categories to the drama in order to illustrate the aptitude of the undertaken task. This part of the presentation will then be followed by a dispute over the play's artistic exploits and dilemmas within a wider ideological spectrum.

The Meaning of "Wild"

The OED enumerates 15 meanings of the word "wild".⁸ They can be roughly grouped in three main categories: topographical, psycho-aesthetic and

² J. Bate, *Introduction*, in Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (London: Routledge, The Arden Shakespeare, 1995), p. 33.

³ Cf. E. M. Waith, "The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ J. Bate, *Introduction*, p. 34.

⁶ I am greatly indebted to J. Bate's inspiring *Introduction* in his new edition of the play for the Arden series. The year 1995 also saw the publication of a vast collection of criticism of the play, both literary and theatrical: Ph. C. Kolin, *"Titus Andronicus": Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Pub., 1995).

⁷ J. Kydryński relates his impressions of P. Brook's production (with Laurence Olivier as Titus and Vivian Leigh as Lavinia) and the performance given by the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Poland in these words: "Znakomity zespół dał wtedy spektakl fascynujący, pozwalający zapomnieć o wszystkich niedostatkach sztuki. ... Momenty, w czytaniu dziś dla nas groteskowe, bynajmniej nie śmieszyły, niektóre sceny ... wywoływały wstrząs, ale wstrząs pełen zachwytu nad kunsztem aktora. W całości ta makabreska przynosiła niewątpliwie *katharsis*, działała oczyszczająco i pobudzająco." (*Posłowie*, in W. Shakespeare, *Najżałośniejsza rzymska tragedia Titusa Andronicusa*, trans. M. Słomczyński (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), p. 143.)

⁸ A possible development from "wild beast".

ethical.⁹ The following review shows that language carries an indecisive attitude to wildness, but an increasingly derogatory evaluation of the phenomenon becomes manifest.

A. Topography

“Wild” means [1] “(of animals) living in a state of nature, not domesticated”; [2] “growing in a state of nature, not cultivated”; [3] “produced or yielded by wild animals or plants (naturally, without cultivation)”; [4] “(of a region) uncultivated or uninhabited (waste, desert, desolate)”.

This seems to be the topos of archetypal wildness,¹⁰ spontaneously intruding upon the user of the English language where the senses of “wild”, “wood”, “wilderness” intertwine providing ready-made associations: “Wild” as a noun meaning “a beast”, “wild animals collectively”, “hunted animals”; “wood” as an adjective meaning “insane” but also “wild”, “extremely excited”, etc.¹¹

This category of the wild is defined through locale and origin. It becomes one counterpart in the demarcation between the human and the non-human (hence the poetic and ideological topography of the wild). On the one hand it stresses man’s detachment from nature. Territories settled and subdued by man’s hand are delineated against those unspoiled, impenetrable, unsettleable. On the other hand, the latter provide the standard recess for the native Muse, as in the above-quoted lines on Shakespeare from Milton’s *L’Allegro*.¹²

⁹ The numbering of the *OED* entry is given in square brackets. The meanings listed in the dictionary as the fifteenth (“aimed wide at the mark”, “at random”, “astray”) are not included. Some simplifications of the original definitions could not be avoided.

¹⁰ See e.g. Milton’s description of the paradisiacal sylvan scene in *Paradise Lost* (Book IV, 131–72).

¹¹ All the synonyms are taken from the respective *OED* definitions. For Shakespeare’s use of *wood* in this meaning see: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* II.i.192.

¹² They provide another example of the self-generated string of stock-associations supplied where one word would perfectly do the trick; e.g. “woodnote” is defined as “a *natural untrained* musical note or song like that of a *wild* bird in a *wood*” (*OED*).

B. Psychology and Aesthetics

“Wild” means: [9] “(of the sea, stream, weather) violently agitated, rough, stormy, tempestuous, raging, full of disturbance”; [10, 11] “highly excited, agitated, vehement or impetuous, violent”; [12] “not having control of one’s mental faculties, demented, distracted, foolish, unreasonable”; [13] “(of actions) going beyond prudent limits; rashly venturesome, going to extremes of extravagance”; [14] “artless, free, unconditional, fanciful, having barbaric character”.

The primary object of reference here seems to be the unpredictable, uncontrolled phenomena in nature, inspiring awe and overpowering. The common denominator in the above listed meanings lies in their reference to human experience of nature in both the external or internal sense. The idea of extremity is perhaps the most characteristic of the notion of “wild” in this category. The stigmatisation of something or somebody as wild implies either aesthetic or psychological evaluation where conventions, or a sense of decorum, provide the measure. “Wildness” describes Hamlet’s “antic disposition” with its precedent in Kyd’s *Hieronimo* and, more directly, in the character of Titus.

Poetic fruitfulness of the affinity between violent occurrences in nature and human passions is obvious and has often been exploited. It is in *Titus Andronicus* that Shakespeare tried his hand at the rhetoric of an emotion brimming over. After suffering another blow of Fortune, Titus delivers a lament of archetypal figurativeness:

If there were reason for these miseries,
Then into limits could I bind my woes.
When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o’erflow?
If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad,
Threatening the welkin with his big-swollen face?
I am the sea.

(III.i.220)

C. Ethics

“Wild” means [5] “(of persons) uncultivated”, “uncivilised”, “savage”, “uncultured”, “rude”, “rebellious”, “resisting government”; [6] “not submitting to control or restraint”, “disposed to take one’s own way”, “uncontrolled”; [7] “unruly”, “insubordinate”, “wayward”, “self-willed”; [8] “fierce”, “savage”, “ferocious”, “furious”, “violent”, “destructive”, “cruel”.

In this class of synonyms the element of evaluation, so characteristic of our intuitions concerning the word despite its baffling ambiguity, is most conspicuous. The unrestrained is seen as intrusion, as violation of values, be it life itself, chastity, urbanity (culture, heritage). Here transgression does not translate into spatial relationships (as is the case in 1.) as it occurs *within* a social context. Wildness as savageness or barbarism has a threatening emphasis and “wild” in this sense is a morally pejorative epithet.

In many contexts this category is used metaphorically with the help of the remaining two. And again in *Titus Andronicus*, physical circumstances of atrocity closely correspond to the wrongful deed itself, sharing its qualities: Lavinia, Titus’ daughter, was “Ravished and wronged as Philomela was, / Forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods” (IV.i.52). In *The Rape of Lucrece* human propensities towards evil are transposed onto what we called the topography of wildness: “In men, as in a rough-grown grove, remain / Cave-keeping evils that obscurely sleep” (l. 1249).¹³

In all of the above-distinguished categories the quality of wildness has no definite aesthetic value despite the fact that it may and often does acquire one within a given artistic context. In other words, marking an element of a given artistic creation as wild (the character of Hamlet, for example) obviously cannot imply that a like classification of the whole work of art is justifiable. Wildness, in any meaning that can be ascribed to “wild”, *within* a work of art does not automatically delimit the range of its aesthetic appreciation. At the outset of our analyses, therefore, the inference stating the allegedly poor quality of works as barbaric and horrifying in content as *Titus Andronicus*, seems to be unjustified.

Wildness in *Titus Andronicus*

A. Civil Wilderness

The topography of wildness in *Titus Andronicus* is elaborate. The tragedy opens in Rome in the midst of a political crisis. The pomposity of Titus’ entrance as victorious conqueror of some barbaric lands soon gives way to the disgrace of

¹³ However, the converse is also possible, when, to strengthen the image, the poet subjugates violation (notion 3.) within a pastoral context (notion 1.): “Yet doubt I much if heaven can give / A place where I so soon would live / As this sweet garden, sacred haunt / Of birds whose soft melodious chaunt / *Ravished* mine ears; the nightingales here sang...”; *The Romance of the Rose*, l. 653 (trans. F. S. Ellis).

a fatal domestic altercation. In Act II the setting changes as the action shifts to a hunting park or “chase” in the surrounding wood. There a catastrophe strikes following which the City turns into a wilderness of inhumanity.

The City as setting is a clear prompt. “Rome suggests . . . a military civilisation, self-conscious masculinity, stoical self-denial, the inexorable rule of law – the collection of ethical icons that long dominated the European sense of culture.”¹⁴ True, but the standard antithesis between barbarity and civility is not taken for granted. Even before changing the setting Shakespeare questions the stereotype. Discord creeps into the heart of the established order in the way the supposedly civilised fraternise with the barbarians or imitate their rituals and codes. The antithesis between Romans as the civilised nation and Goths as their barbaric counterpart is introduced at the outset and then largely reflected in the play’s macroscopic topography. None the less it is by no means a clear-cut opposition. In the 1st Scene/Act, Shakespeare makes use of both the upper and the lower extension to the basic level of the stage. The gallery “aloft” stands for authority and jurisdiction; the cellarge where the war-dead are laid – for the value of heritage. The rites of commemoration, subject to varying moral evaluation, lead to a sort of culture clash. The Goth queen, Tamora, now a captive, pleads for the life of her son about to be sacrificed in a bloody rite to appease the spirits of the war victims. The Goths, as we first hear them speak, are appalled at the barbarity of the *quasi*-civilised act of human sacrifice (“O cruel, irreligious piety!”, I.i.133) that sets in motion the spiral of retribution.

In a rapid reversal Tamora and her retinue are liberated and elevated to a superior position. Titus – anticipating Lear in his fatal wilfulness and lack of foresight – is the inadvertent cause of the imminent miseries. He helps impede lawful election, breaks the betrothal of his daughter to Bassianus provoking a broil in which he slays one of his sons and finally, in order to amend the impasse, suggests a panther-hunt outside the urban gates that supplies his enemies with an ideal opportunity to get even.

Saturninus’ marriage to Tamora is symbolic. In pursuing his selfish goals and because of his blindness to the true nature of the marriage which is to advance her personal revenge the new emperor invites disorder and lawlessness. Some critics even see in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Saturnine in *Titus* and the rapist Tarquin in *Lucrece* an element of revolutionary republicanism.

The already-mentioned manoeuvre in setting introduces a clear topographical antithesis: the forest outside the city becomes a scene of deceit, fornication, murder, ravishing, and mutilation. Here the lower level of the pit-trap adopts further meanings, becoming a representation of the nether realm suggestive of – as a critic has it – the fecundity of evil.¹⁵

¹⁴ G. K. Hunter, “Shakespeare’s Earliest Tragedies: *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 27 (1974), p. 5.

¹⁵ A. H. Tricomi, “The Aesthetics of Mutilation in *Titus Andronicus*”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 27 (1974), p. 18.

The hunting-event is of course yet another advance in the direction of exploring the wildness theme. Being customarily treated as a manner for a civilised society to “get back in touch with the wild”,¹⁶ hunting for sport changes its initial meaning as diversion turns into man-hunt. First Lavinia, the rape-victim, comes to share the properties of the hunted game. Marcus, the first sympathising person to meet her after the rape, sees her as she “flies away”. The comparison is self-evident: “O, thus I found her, straying in the park / Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer.”(III.i.89)¹⁷ Titus and his kin gradually realise their metamorphosis into the game, the “wild”, but their hunters are no less inhuman for that. Ultimately the City itself loses its civil qualities. Titus comforts his son sentenced to banishment:

dost thou not perceive
That Rome is but *a wilderness of tigers*?¹⁸
Tigers must prey, and Rome affords not prey
But me and mine.

(III.i.53)

Shakespeare exploits fully the artistic resourcefulness of the wild setting in act II. Titus enters the soon-to-prove-fatal domain in an elated and amicable mood of serenity: “The hunt is up, the morn is bright and grey, The fields are fragrant and the woods are green.” (II.i.1) In the same mood Tamora makes libidinous advances to her black paramour – a sylvan sequence strongly inspired by a narrative in the *Aeneid*.¹⁹ The pastoral mood is stuck but only as a counterpoint to the intrigue. The audience knows that the backwoods are already penetrated by knavery and that traps are set. The two “lustful” rapists, Tamora’s sons, prompted by the arch-villain, Aaron, see the surrounding as opportune: “The palace is full of tongues, of eyes and ears; / The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf and dull: . . . / There serve your lust, shadowed from heaven’s eye, . . .” (I.i.628) Soon, Titus referring to the act of the ravishing of Lavinia in the selfsame place he extolled, echoes Aaron: “[Lavinia was] forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods.” The victim, by physical mutilation denied the possibility of oral expression, partakes of the properties of the wild setting having become a dumb witness to the crime. Here Shakespeare enriches the standard representations. Wildness is portrayed as lack of discernment even on the most basic level of sensory perception. The cruelty

¹⁶ J. Bate, *Introduction*, p. 7.

¹⁷ The *OED* lists “shy”, “avoiding the pursuer” as one of the meanings of “wild”.

¹⁸ Both L. Ulrich and M. Słowczyński in rendering the key metaphor try to stay in tune with the setting of the previous act, translating it as – respectively – *jaskinia tygrysów* and *matecznik tygrysów*.

¹⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book IV; during a hunt, enamoured Dido makes love to Aeneas after taking refuge from the storm in a cave.

of insensitivity is to some extent counterbalanced by the presence of “the eye of heaven”, evidently meant to signify a sense of the original guilt inscribed in the awareness of man’s relapse into savageness.

This inhumane nature of the territory is finally summarised in Titus’ remonstrance juxtaposing culture (including religion and art) and barbarity and fusing them in a powerful image of a cruel (dis)play:

O, why should nature build so foul a den
Unless the gods *delight in tragedies*

(IV.i.58)

From the perspective of the topography of wildness the restoration of order taking place towards the close of the play does not bring any new developments. Theatrically, both the extensions of the basic level of the stage return to their initial senses of jurisdiction and cultural continuity.

B. The Poetics of Dismemberment

Even in terms of stage technique, Lavinia attracts the most attention of the viewer and becomes the central character. At the beginning of Act II.iii she enters, as the stage directions read, “her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished”. This not only creates a dra(u)maturgical precedent,²⁰ challenges the inventiveness of the director and the actress, and puts a strain on our sense of decorum – it also gives the tragedy its internal impact. Titus’ complacency is shaken; revenge becomes a must, but before a scheme of retaliation can be embarked on, Lavinia has to recover her *lingua*.²¹ Her secret has to be retrieved (“forced out”); she has to be reopened both to help reveal the ravishers and her husband’s murderers, and to purge the name of the Andronici of the taint of false accusations (soon to breed a cruel sentence and merciless execution).

It seems to have been important for Shakespeare to present the wickedness of the Goths as native in contrast to the literature-cognisant tactics of Titus’ schemes. The shearing off of Lavinia’s hands was meant as a security device against a written testimony and *not* to forestall Lavinia’s following the example of Ovidian Philomela, who divulged the secret of having been raped by Tereus, her sister’s husband, by means of a piece of embroidery. Nevertheless, the audience, Shakespeare presumes,

²⁰ I assume that in the context of such a cathartic play as *Titus Andronicus* this coinage fusing “drama” and “trauma” has some justification.

²¹ Meaning of course both the organ of speech and language. Lavinia does this *via* literature.

ought to recognise the resemblance as Titus' kin do. In Marcus' speech (II.iii.13–43) on meeting his bleeding niece, the names of Tereus and Philomela both appear twice, echoing Aaron's ominous: "His [i.e. Titus'] Philomel must lose her tongue today" (II.ii.43). This modelling of the lifelike suffering presented on stage against the literary precedent enhances the effect, univocally stressed by critics, of the metamorphosing violation as impersonalisation or loss of the individual self.²²

The savageness of what happens on stage is from now onwards related to the fictive world of a work of literature. In taking up the Ovidian motif, Shakespeare not only created a technical difficulty for the production of the tragedy but also posed a question for himself as an artist. Ovid's Philomela is turned into a nightingale. She regains her voice by becoming a songster of her woes and the Muse. In the *Metamorphoses* we find a chilling description of the way in which the severed organ, "emancipated" and metaphorised into a domesticated animal, seeks to reunite with the owner:

The stumpe whereon it [the tongue] hung
 Did patter still. The tip fell downe, and quivering on the ground
 As though that it had murmured it made a certaine sound
 ... The tip of Philomelaas tongue did wriggle to and fro,
 And nearer to hir misstresseward in dying still did go.

(A. Golding's translation²³)

The story of Philomela appears twice in Shakespeare's plays, for the first time in *Titus* and later in *Cymbeline*.²⁴ Naturally, it is repeatedly recalled in *The Rape of Lucrece*, and an interesting handling of the motif is also found in Sonnet CII, where Shakespeare not only carries out the traditional matching of the nightingale with the mythical sufferer but identifies himself with the latter as well, anticipating Milton's metaphor of the wild Warbler.²⁵ We would expect a lover and an aspiring poet to resort to this sort of metaphor, combining, as is the case later in one of Milton's sonnets, Muse and Love.²⁶ However, whereas Milton evades the

²² E. M. Waith, p. 42.

²³ A. Golding's translation of 1567, *Appendix*, in W. Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, p. 279. Here we can perhaps recognise the same *lingua* with whose charm wild animals were tamed by Orpheus, hacked to pieces by the Ciconian women. "Wonderful to relate, as they [the poet's limbs] floated down in midstream, the lyre uttered a plaintive melody and the lifeless tongue made a piteous murmur, while the river banks lamented in reply." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IX, trans. M. M. Innes (Penguin Books, 1973), p. 247.

²⁴ Cf. A. Thompson, "Philomel in *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline*", *Shakespeare Survey*, 31 (1978), pp. 23–32. J. M. Nosworthy, the editor of *Cymbeline* for The Arden Shakespeare traces Shakespeare's knowledge of the Philomela-myth to Chaucer, Gower, and Painter; cf. the 1994 edition of the play, p. 51.

²⁵ Cf. also *The Passionate Pilgrim*, xx

²⁶ "Whether the Muse or Love call thee his mate, / Both them I serve, and of their train am I." (Sonnet I)

association, leaving out Philomela's name, Shakespeare, whom we know to have cold-bloodedly (mis?)handled the tragic potential of the story strives to institute himself as misery turned into a pleasing tune. Indeed, in skilfully juggling the expected references, such as "tongue", "lay", "pipe", "mournful hymns", "wild music", etc., the simile becomes highly self-conscious:

Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
 When I was wont to greet it with my *lays*;
 As *Philomel* in summer's front doth *sing*,
 And stops her *pipe* in growth of riper days:
 Not that the summer is less pleasant now,
 Than when *her mournful hymns* did hush the night,
 But that *wild music* burdens every bough,
 And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.
 Therefore, *like her*, I sometime hold my *tongue*,
 Because I would not dull you with my *song*.

(Sonnet cii)

The tragic as well as ironic potential of the rape-and-revenge narrative is hushed. The savage element of sexual enforcement, mutilation and the ensuing revenge through murder and cannibalism, which traditionally neutralised the primordial wildness of the bird's performance and confused the sexes in the process,²⁷ undergoes partial suppression. However, the initial wildness is not retrieved, nor is it meant to be. Philomela,²⁸ the Muse or/and the nightingale,²⁹ is invested with new mythology as a songster of "mournful hymns" of a supposed inborn or native quality. It is no wonder that such examples of the poetic artifice should provoke a demythologising backlash. "A melancholy bird? Oh! Idle thought! / In Nature there is nothing melancholy", was Coleridge's response aiming at restoring the bird, and calling its admirers, back to Nature, whose idea actually proposes a refreshing of the *myth* of positively charged wildness:

And youths and maidens most poetical,
 Who lose the deepening twilights of the spring
 In ball-rooms and hot theatres, they still
 Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs
 O'er Philomela's pity-pleading strains.
 My Friend, and thou, our Sister! we have learnt
 A different lore: we may not thus profane
 Nature's sweet voices, always full of love
 And joyance! ...

²⁷ It is the *male* nightingale that trills, not the female. This firmly established confusion is a fine illustration of the detachment of the myth.

²⁸ Lit. "lover of song" from Gr. *philein* and *melos* ("a song", "a dirge", but also "a limb").

²⁹ Oryg. "nightgale"; from the Teut. "night song".

And I know a grove
Of large extent, hard by a castle huge,
Which the great lord inhabits not; and so
This grove is wild with tangling underwood, ...
But never elsewhere in one place I knew,
So many nightingales; and far and near,
In wood and thicket, over the wild grove,
They answer and provoke each-other's song, ...

(The Nightingale, 35–58)

The invocations to “a most gentle Maid” or “Warbler” (ll. 69 ff.) sustain the long-surviving allegory of the poetically domesticated companion to mankind. Hence the need for a more radical emphasis of the disparity between the primeval but unresponsive, inarticulate and depersonalised wildness and the dismal realities of human existence:

And [the nightingales] sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud
And let their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.³⁰

This lengthy digression brings us back to Shakespeare's handling of the problematic motif in his tragedy in search of an attempt at rethinking and disputing the vacillating heritage which the playwright himself joined in a more compliant manner in his poetry. Having repeatedly reinforced the classical parallel for the tragic incident, Shakespeare makes the characters exploit it extensively. Once again Marcus draws the connecting lines dwelling now on the motif of singing: “[Lavinia's tongue] is torn from forth that pretty *hollow cage* / Where, like a *sweet melodious bird*, it sung / *Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear*”. (III.ii.85) This is not only another step taken towards dissipating Lavinia's identity against the conventional topography of aesthetically laudable, “native”, wildness, recurring in Milton's verse. The Ovidian precedent in which the gods turn Philomela into a nightingale is here reversed and the human wildbird becomes a “speechless complainer”. Shakespeare evidently places the natively innocuous and delightful *before* the savage but does it help to disencumber either of the poetic visions of transformation of their caustic irony?

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Sweeney among the Nightingales*. The Philomela narrative in the Ovidian version appears in a more redeeming context in *The Waste Land*. First evoked in line 99 it then recurs as a half-articulate motif: “Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc'd / Tereu” (203–6) reminiscent of a passage from *The Passionate Pilgrim*, as already indicated (see note 25).

C. Revenge and Voicelessness

Being a tragedy of revenge, *Titus Andronicus* brings wildness on the agenda through the very definition of “revenge”. In one of his essays, F. Bacon writes as follows:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office.³¹

The rhetoric of the argument uses the common images of wildness: nature as the untamed and “weedy” necessitating of the restraining function of the law. However, there is a kind of revenge tolerable in special circumstances: the incapacity of law, or more precisely, the absence of a law to deal with this or that particular wrong.³² Here, as in the other aspects, *Titus Andronicus* treats the motif of injustice with the characteristic extremity. On the one hand, the evil is impenetrable: the emperor sees only the tip of the cunning wickedness corrupting his estate. The savage are in power and the authorities of the law are either inapt or silent. The play treats us to a grisly display of the hacked bodies of the characters; severed limbs and heads lie around. Those who suffer injustice are always in the spotlight, but it is the theatrical presence of the appalled audience that silently secures the required compassion in view of the on-stage atrocities. Empathy is trimmed down to a group of martyred, muted (emotionally or physically) family members. Moreover, the tragedy questions the tradition of the rhetoric of sympathy.

One of Shakespeare's preoccupations in *Titus Andronicus* appears to be truth and meaning(lessness) in their manifold manifestations and involvements in the process of communication. The interdependence between thought, language, speech, and sign is poetically and dramatically elaborated under the predominant metonymies of tongue and voice. Conventional means of expression and their linkage with truth undergo a breakdown, and consequently have to be either re-examined or replaced. In the wilderness of tigers where tradition and culture are paid lip-service and substituted by a reign of resentment and injustice, social interaction has lost its operative medium of communication. Lavinia, the tongueless-handless sufferer, is the living exemplification of this deficiency. A new alphabet has to be “wrested” in order to establish the truth buried in her speechless memory.

It has already been mentioned that the character of Lavinia means for Shakespeare more than just a victim who must be avenged. The character is far more

³¹ F. Bacon, *Essays* (London: J. M. Denet and Sons Ltd., n. d.), p. 13.

³² *Ibid.*

complex and the tragedy probes its complexity to the bottom. Firstly, unlike Philomela's in the *Metamorphoses*, Lavinia's secret is heavier, as apart from having suffered herself she had also witnessed the murder of Bassianus, for which her two brothers were then unjustly beheaded. In consequence, she has become the warped key not only to the secret of her "private" misfortune, but also to that of the whole of the Andronici whose disgrace is the chief cause of the father's anguish. Understandably the character somehow both reveals and conceals the savage acts.³³

The predicament of speechlessness is by no means an unambiguous state-of-affairs and Shakespeare does not shun its perplexity. The scandalously guiseless spectacles are confronted by an insurmountable urge towards oral or written expression. The urge however is repeatedly frustrated, most conspicuously in the act of removing Lavinia's tongue. This incident alone would not make *Titus Andronicus* a tragedy of voicelessness were it not for its dense fabric of intertwining motifs of the loss or recovery of voice. Naturally, being a multi-personal event a play confers voice to only one character at a time thus dispossessing the others of the privilege of speech. In other words, there is a natural surplus of silence over speech on stage.³⁴ In *Titus Andronicus* silence plays a key role. Silencing is either forceful, from the most brutal forms of the removal of the organ of speech or killing³⁵ to simple gagging which occurs twice, not to mention other instances of physical mouth-stopping.³⁶ The crucial event, easily overlooked, is the loss of voice by Titus in the first scene of the drama. By no means a paragon of spotless virtue, Titus rashly and self-willingly renounces his political say bestowing the "voices and suffrages" (I.1.222) of the people upon Saturninus thus botching up the election. He loses his public voice never fully to regain it. His futile complaints delivered to stones after the Judges have passed him by or fixed as notes on arrows and shot wildly at the silent heavens, his outburst of laughter replacing relief into rhetoric – all depict the agony of becoming figuratively voiceless, i.e. impotent and vulnerable. His public merits have stopped speaking. And the agony is aggravated by the presence of the mut(e)ilated daughter and the two severed heads of his sons.

³³ Titus calls her "a map of woe".

³⁴ Cf. A. Krajewska, "Milczenie w dramacie" ["Silence in Drama"], in *Problemy teorii dramatu i teatru*, ed. J. Degler (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1988), pp. 94–103.

³⁵ Aaron stabs the Nurse, who has brought him the illegitimate child, as precaution against "a long-tongued, babbling gossip" (IV.ii,152; anticipatory of Hamlet's attitude to Polonius?). He then ransoms the baby's life by delivering an inventory of his intrigues and crimes.

³⁶ The mutilation of Lavinia is as much a subterfuge used by the ravishers to escape detection as it is, at least in a dramatically ostensible manner, a reaction to her offensive frankness. When faced with the prospect of being given over into the clasps of Tamora's 'lustful' sons, Lavinia contradictorily combines invectives stating Tamora's true nature with pleas for instantaneous death. Finally, before they abduct her, her mouth is covered (II.ii.173–84).

The nature of the affliction dictates the logic of revenge and prescribes its devices. The operation of mouth-stopping becomes an instrument of revenge *sui generis*. Tamora's sons are gagged before being spectacularly slaughtered on stage (V.ii.164). To borrow a phrase from *Othello*, "all that is spoke is marred" either by ill-intent or by its shocking literalness. Speech is double-edged; it rescues and mars. Before his mouth is "stopped", Aaron takes the opportunity to express his wish of going to hell in order to torment others with his bitter tongue (V.i.150). He delights in recounting his crimes simply as just another opportunity to accumulate evil:

'Twill vex thy soul to hear what I shall speak
 For I *must talk* of murders, rapes and massacres,
 Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
 Complots of mischief, treasons, villainies
 Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed . . .

(V.i.62-6)

But in this war of and for words it is the victims who have the moral mandate to speak:

Titus: Sirs, stop their mouths; let them not speak to me,
 But let them hear what fearful words I utter.

(V.ii.167-8)

In his urge to *write* first his complaints and then a plan of revenge, Titus resembles Hamlet, who after his interview with the ghost proceeds to tabulate the mind-blowing message. But Hamlet is a Titus who failed to relate his task to a precedent and therefore found himself "lapsed in time". The latter's cannibalistic banquet as the counter-retaliation is prepared "by the book", i.e. according to the fictitious "original", the *Metamorphoses*, which previously served Lavinia as an ingenious means to restore communication and trigger off revenge.³⁷ During his queer solitary musings over the favourite book in his study he "sets down in bloody lines" the course his requital will take. He becomes another collating author (Shakespeare's own likeness in the process of composing the play!) as he endeavours to outwit Aaron, the masterminding intriguer. And "what is written shall be executed". (V.ii.15) The analysis of the mounting heap of piled-up analogies and borrowings yields a perplexing image: Shakespeare's Hieronimo-like protagonist orchestrating a scheme copied from a book of poetry. Ironically, the similarity between Lavinia's predicament and that of Philomela is not only a channel through which the reality (truth) of what has happened to her peers in.

³⁷ This active role, in my opinion, restores to Lavinia a part of the individuality or authenticity, she was robbed of in being related to a precedent.

The final act of killing his daughter, after the plan of unmasking and copycat requital has been effectuated, is also marked by a sense of emulation. It, too, has its literary precedent, this time in (a history book by) Livy:

TITUS: *A pattern, precedent and lively warrant*
 For me, most wretched, to *perform the like*. [*He kills her*]
 (V.iii.43)

Letter and Stage vs. Barbarity?

In the light of what has been already said, the point to raise for a pertinent criticism of the play ought to be the relationship between literature and wildness. In *Titus Andronicus*, literature takes on an instrumental role, being actively but also equivocally related to the problem of revenge.

As we have stated, beside offering a stageful of horrors, Shakespeare introduces “literary patterning”³⁸ as a principle of construction and development of the revenge-motif. Instead of simply inserting or reusing the few literary precedents he exposes them not only self-consciously but, in some measure, ostentatiously and provocatively. Indeed, in *Titus Andronicus* the approach to the letter is as important as is the approach to the voice and to the tongue as its “engine”.

In his enlightening article on the use of metaphor in *Titus Andronicus*, A. H. Tricomi notes the peculiar relationship between language and event. In the tragedy, metaphor does not, as usually is the case, transcend the limitations of the stage but rather “becomes literalized”.³⁹ Figurative language, challenged by horrific events, undergoes “deliberate constriction”.⁴⁰ The critic points to Shakespeare’s endeavour to outdo the classical sources, i.e. Seneca and Ovid “by utilizing living stage in the telling of a tale more horrifying and pathetic than that of either of his models”.⁴¹ It seems to me that two further points need to be made for the interpretation to be complete: It is not directly Shakespeare who challenges the precedent, it is Titus himself, although, which has to be admitted, Shakespeare makes Lavinia suffer more deeply than her predecessor in affliction. Moreover, A. H. Tricomi fails to explore the full potentiality of his classification of the play’s figurativeness as literal, or of what he calls “the ironic denigration of metaphor”.⁴²

³⁸ The term is used by J. Bate in the *Introduction*. See also *Titus Andronicus* IV.i.55–8.

³⁹ A. H. Tricomi, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

To give due credit to the complex texture of the play, we have to observe its process of literalising in the different meaning of the word “literal”. “Literal” is not only “verbally exact” or “without metaphor, exaggeration, inaccuracy”, but also “pertaining to letters or literature”.⁴³ Titus takes up the role of literalising the revenge in this double or triple meaning of “literal”.

The idiom of the play, literalised through a dehumanising mutilation, is redeemed in a reverse process: metaphorising and rendering unreal which take place in the second part of the tragedy. The reversal begins when Titus’ laughter (III.i.265) decisively declares the bankruptcy of rhetoric when confronted with the facts. Unlike Hamlet, who erases the content of his mind in order to be up to revenge, Titus shuts himself up in his study to ruminate over books. This fiction-like, deliberately dramatised nature of his revenge is further emphasised by the pla-within-the-play device: Tamora and her sons put on a show in order to fix Titus in his supposed madness and incapacitate the impending political overthrow.

TAMORA: I will enchant the old Andronicus
 With words. . .
 . . . were his heart
 Almost impregnable, his old ear deaf,
 Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue.
 (IV.iv.89)

Titus sees through that masquerade, which is not devoid of some elements of grotesque, and takes his revenge on the “actors”. *His* plot has its climax at the cannibalistic banquet where he serves the guests dressed up as a cook. Obsessed with the idea of following antique precedents and turning them into spectacles, Titus stabs Lavinia as the last act in *his staging* of the drama.

Both Titus’ revenge and the action of Shakespeare’s tragedy are intended to be regarded as reality, if theatrical, that outstripped its literary model. What had been set down in poetry or history and educated young generations of the civilised is to take life. The piece of fiction provides a common denominator which helps transfer thoughts, reveal the truth and restore order. Titus himself is said to have been a teacher of literature to the younger generation;

LUCIUS: [*to his son*] 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.163-5)

⁴³ All definitions come from the pertinent *OED* entries.

Are they the “stories” with which Imogen beguiled her time before going to sleep⁴⁴ or which Lucrece heard retold in the trills of a nightingale?⁴⁵ Read by Shakespeare at school they suggested to him a most shocking theatrical experiment whose idiom weaves classroom passages of Latin into schemes of gory revenge.⁴⁶

The “craftier Tereus” is ultimately Shakespeare himself, who is outdoing Ovid in both the horror and the ingenuity of his narrative.⁴⁷

Titus Andronicus provokes reflections over the power of dramatic art: Is the story of Philomela presentable on stage, and if so, ought it to be produced? Some optimistically minded critics choose to believe in the didactic power of the theatre, or more precisely speaking, in the educating potency of catharsis. Jonathan Bate argues that “if Chiron and Demetrius had seen a dramatization of the Philomel story, instead of read it cold-bloodedly in the classroom, they would have wept for her instead of re-enact her rape”.⁴⁸ This interpretation is generally in spirit with Shakespeare’s. In *The Rape of Lucrece* we read an apology for the visual arts: “To see sad sights moves more than hear them told.” (l. 1324) Let us *believe* the Poet *trusting* that his execution of the letter on stage exorcises the barbarity it has come to epitomise. Otherwise the spectacle would transform the theatre audience into “the gods” reproached by Titus for taking cruel delight in tragedies put on in the “foul den” of the stage. But then again, is it not Shakespeare, the up-and-coming dramatist and actor, speaking his mind through the mouth of his protagonist:

Let us that have our tongues
Plot some device of further misery
To make us wondered at in time to come.
(III.i.134)

⁴⁴ Cf. *Cymbeline* II.ii. 45–6.

⁴⁵ Cf. *The Rape of Lucrece*, l. 1128–48.

⁴⁶ Cf. Chiron’s remark in IV.ii.22–3. and Aaron’s aside following it.

⁴⁷ A. Thompson, p. 24.

⁴⁸ J. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 112.