TITUS ANDRONICUS:  
THE STAGING OF SHAKESPEARE’S GORIEST PLAY

By

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Spring 2014

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in English  
in cursu honorum

Reviewed and approved by:

Submitted to  
The Honor’s Program, Saint Peter’s University

May 13, 2014
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Rachel Wifall for her patience and guidance through this process. I cannot thank her enough for all of her support. It is due to her knowledge and instruction that my love for English and Shakespeare has blossomed. Thank you.

Special thanks to: Mom and Dad, Marizel, Nathania, Friends, and every English teacher and professor who has inspired me.
Abstract

For years, Shakespeare’s most debated tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* has been bashed or dismissed by critics. “No detail of physical horror is spared; from beginning to end the stage reeks with blood, and the characters vie with one another in barbarity.” However, the questions arise: Can such a violent play be performed today? And how has it been staged in the past? There is no doubt that staging the play has its difficulties. The theatricality of *Titus* can pose a number of problems. Although the play is very theatrical, the violence has been interpreted several ways throughout the years. Today it seems that, to an extent, we as an audience expect deeds of violence from a tragedy. The word “tragedy” ignites images of violence and despair. Jonathan Bate’s assertion that, *Titus Andronicus* is “in fact complicated and sophisticated – and that it ought to be widely read and more frequently performed” may be correct.
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I. Introduction: Revenge Tragedies

Bloodshed, murder and violence: these are the words that immediately come to mind when one thinks of the revenge tragedy, the sub-genre including such famous tragedies as Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and of course, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The English revenge tragedy became most popular during the end of Queen Elizabeth’s reign and continued to grow through the reign of James I, roughly from 1587-1642. Why did the revenge tragedy experience such a boom during the 16th and 17th centuries? To answer that question, it is important to understand the situation in England and the ways in which the revenge plays reflected that situation.

During this time, England and Spain were exploring the seas; it was the Age of Exploration and expansion, but also a time of religious turmoil. There was gossip about the succession to Elizabeth’s throne as well as a war with Spain started by Catholic Phillip II, but undertaken by the Queen, who wished to defend Protestantism. “Renaissance drama first spoke powerfully to its audiences because it talked to them, through metaphors, of themselves, presented ‘lies like truth’” (Kinney 3). The tragedies often presented the truths of English life, though in a more extreme and dramatized manner. There was great tension between Spain and England especially with the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Thus, readers may find that the characters in English revenge tragedies often reflect a negative attitude towards the Spanish, and Catholics in general, with the villains often being either Spanish or Italian. For instance, if we look at Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, knowing the historical context, it is evident that the story reflects some current events. *The Spanish Tragedy* begins with the ghost of Don Andrea, a courtier in the Spanish court, and the allegorical Revenge. Don Andrea had died in battle against Portugal, in combat with Balthazar and he is assured by Revenge that he will watch Bel-Imperia
kill Don Balthazar. It turns out that Spain is victorious in the battle, but Andrea’s good friend Horatio takes Balthazar prisoner. Later, Balthazar falls in love with Bel-Imperia, but she is in love with Horatio. Later her brother Lorenzo and Balthazar speak of her, before appearing to hang Horatio and stabbing him. When his father Hieronimo sees him hanging from the tree, he and his mother, Isabella are devastated and he vows revenge on the murderer. Finally, in a play-within-a-play, Isabella kills herself, Hieronimo kills Lorenzo and Bel-Imperia stabs Balthazar before killing herself. When this is all over, Hieronimo bites off his own tongue before killing himself as well. Eugene Hill asserts that the play clearly takes into account the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

A generation or two ago, commentators typically dated *The Spanish Tragedy* before 1588 – since, they argue, a later production would surely have taken account of the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in that year. Revisionist scholarship has turned the argument on its head, suggesting that the downfall of the royal house of Spain that occurs in the play echoes the Armada events. But since the entire play is enacted on the Iberian Peninsula, the characters cannot recognize the larger revenge at work. The wheel of history is turning, and tiny England will replace Spain as the ascendant power…their [Spain’s] Senecan downfall functions as the counterpoint to the Vergilian rise of the English nation.

(328)

Perhaps the audience’s fascination with the Revenge tragedies then was not so much for the violent feats of revenge, but the parallels between the fictional action occurring on stage and the reality of their lives. Hill states, “The real tragic emotion, here as so often in revenge drama, is
not purging terror but Schadenfreude, our pleasure at the Spaniards’ collapse” (329). Most of Kyd’s play is set in Spain, “the great enemy of England” (331) in the later 16th century and the English audience could no doubt relate to the drama of the play.

The bewildered Andrea of the play’s opening has become a confident dispenser of what he takes to be justice. And if various Spaniards are in for an eternity or torture, that is something the contented Elizabethan spectators can no doubt live with. They too have been thrilled by the action of the play, rendered confident of their future, and not merely the literary future of the new sub-genre of tragedy that The Spanish Tragedy inaugurates. Andrea’s realized dream of vengeance is, unbeknown to him, the audience’s as well. (Hill 334)

Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy has long been revered as the ideal revenge tragedy as well as the influence for future writers such as William Shakespeare himself. It was a play to which audiences felt very connected. Elizabethan audiences felt disdain for the Spanish and Italian villains of the Revenge tragedies, particularly The Spanish Tragedy. Hieronimo, a character with whom the audience may have sympathized, emerged as a Machiavellian treacherous figure, at which point, Elizabethan audiences felt little compassion for him. Fredson Bowers sums up the Elizabethan attitude towards the Italian, “The Italian was almost always regarded as a villain of a particularly jealous and revengeful nature…The Elizabethan summed up the Italian in the person of Machiavelli, whose name was an English synonym for villain” (47-48). John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi is set in Catholic Italy and deals with a recently widowed Duchess who remarries a man, Antonio, of whom her two brothers disapprove. They do not wish to share their inheritance and so she marries Antonio secretly. Eventually the Duchess is executed along with
her children. Once a traitor, Bosola now turns against the two brothers and vows revenge. However, he mistakenly murders Antonio and then murders one of the brothers. Finally, Bosola and the remaining brother kill each other. “Elizabethan opinion, for all practical purposes, made no distinction between the villainy and revengefulness of Italian and Spaniard, and the two were often linked in condemnation” (56).

Aside from the likeness to the actual struggles of 16th century England, the revenge tragedies were also enjoyed by English audiences for pure entertainment. They were not queasy or uneasy about blood and violence as one might expect.

The Elizabethan who attended public executions as an amusement was used to the sight of blood and would scarcely flinch from it on stage. Rather, he would demand it, for he was keenly interested in murders for any other motive than simple robbery. Murder to expedite a theft was easily understandable, and the offender was promptly hanged; yet murder for different motives excited the Elizabethan audience’s curiosity. (Bowers 16)

Thus, although the revenge tragedies could be incredibly gory and violent, this was not a new phenomenon for Elizabethan audiences who were accustomed to public bloody violence and death. The Elizabethans supported the act of revenge in accordance to the act being avenged. Take Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* for example. The character of Hamlet is vengeful, but sympathetic. “To the people of his own time, and even to the audience of the Elizabethan age, Hamlet was called upon to perform a ‘dread’ [sacred] duty” (Bowers 35). The audience believed, depending on the circumstance, that violence in search of revenge was acceptable, even necessary. The
The popularity of the Revenge tragedy was further spurred by the translation of the highly violent, Roman author, Seneca into English between 1559 and 1581 (Bowers 41).

Revenge tragedies often display the influence of the classics, particularly the Senecan tragedies. With Kyd’s tragedy, the Senecan drama was adapted to the English stage. *The Spanish Tragedy* begins, and immediately it is easy to see the classical influences on the revenge tragedy. The play starts off with the character of Revenge. This use of allegory is a medieval idea, one used frequently in Greek mythology. Moreover, the first scene is abundant with footnotes explaining the classical allusions already prevalent in just the first few lines.

> When I was slain, my soul descended straight  
> To pass the flowing stream of Acheron;  
> But churlish Charon, only boatman there,  
> Said that my rites of burial not performed,  
> I might not sit amongst his passengers.  
> Ere Sol had slept three night in Thetis’ lap,  
> And slaked his smoking chariot in her flood,  
> By Don Horatio, our knight marshal’s son,  
> My funerals and obsequies were done (1.1 18-26).

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* also relies heavily on the classics, closely resembling Seneca’s *Thyestes*, a figure of Greek mythology adopted by Roman Seneca. In the play, Atreus also kills two sons and bakes them in pies, feeding them to their father, Thyestes. Titus also makes references and allusions to classical figures. For example, moments before killing his daughter, Titus asks the emperor if it was rash of Virginius to murder his own daughter. Furthermore,
Senecan plays dealt with mutilation, torture, incest, corpses and cannibalism in ways similar to *Titus Andronicus*. The difference of course remains that Senecan tragedies are dramas of violent extremes, meant solely to be read and not performed. In contrast, Shakespeare presents his plays to be enacted. He presents audiences with all the gore and horror, while portraying the issues of his own day.

Before we look further into the elements of the Revenge tragedy, it is relevant to first take a look at the tragedy itself. According to Aristotle, tragedies should incorporate certain qualities. A tragedy should consist of pathos or “a destructive or painful act, such as deaths on stage, paroxysms of pain, woundings, and all that sort of thing” (Jacobus). The revenge tragedy borrows from these Aristotelian ideas, though not completely. Pascale Aebischer asserts, “…the motifs these tragedies share – the ghost, madness, delay, plays-within-plays, murders and the eventual death of the revenger – results in a typology of the genre that is even more restrictive than Bowers’ formula for Kydian tragedy had been…” It is undisputable that the Elizabethan Revenge tragedies were greatly influenced by the works of the Roman playwright Seneca. Aristotle called for a more unified structure, not the great mess that is often found in Elizabethan tragedies. Still, Seneca was influenced by the Greeks and subsequently, Aristotle himself. “The influence of Seneca (or, to speak more correctly, of the tragedies ascribed to him) upon the Elizabethan drama is so plainly marked that no competent historian of our literature could fail to notice it” (Cunliffe 1). Senecan plays were dramas which amplified the horror of tragic situations and they dealt with the same level of violence and gore as Elizabethan dramas. Eugene Hill lists some of the common attributes of the Revenge tragedy,
Revenge tragedy is extraordinarily simple in some respects, built upon a handful of motifs (ghosts, madness, delay, horrible killing) that it derives from its ancient progenitor, the Roman tragic poet Seneca. At the same time, it bears a complexity of implication that will keep playgoers and readers intellectually stimulated and puzzled as well as thrilled by the exhibited gore. (327)

The influence of Seneca on the Elizabethan Revenge tragedy is incredibly vast. First and foremost, Seneca’s influence is seen in the external structure of the English dramas. “The most obvious way that Seneca affected the modern drama was in external form. From Seneca the European drama in general, and English tragedy in particular, received the five acts which have become the rule of the modern stage” (Cunliffe 32). Furthermore, the English Revenge tragedies often dealt with large questions of life. The tragic hero often has a fatal tragic flaw and the tragic events happening are beyond the individual’s control. Thus, as an audience we question whether or not the tragic heroes deserve their fates. Often, tragedies feature royal, powerful characters who experience a reversal of fortunes and fall from a position of great power or influence. The audience is meant to feel pity and fear and to experience pathos and catharsis or a purging of emotion. These characteristics are reflective of Aristotle’s ideals. Furthermore, the actions and themes are often far-fetching and violent while the character exacting the revenge is usually killed and is often seen gradually going mad. They are killed when they have fallen in too deep and there is no way for them to redeem themselves. Bowers explains the situation in which the tragic revengers find themselves which lead to their downfall:
That the majority of stage-revengers – Hieronimo, Titus, Hoffman, Sciarrha, and Rosaura, to name only a few – met their death, may be attributed either to the fact that they turned from sympathetic, wronged heroes to bloody maniacs whose revenge might better have been left to God; or else that they strain of the horrible situation in which they found themselves so warped their characters that further existence in a normal world became impossible and death was the only solution.

(40)

There is usually a female character who contributes to the tragic action and acts like a catalyst. There is sometimes an element of fatalism, in which the characters’ fates are unavoidable or at least predictable from the start. Still, perhaps the most obvious influence is seen in the bloody violence and extreme gore used by both Seneca and the later English playwrights.

Seneca’s plays were centered on violence and told stories of incest, cannibalism and the devouring of one’s own children, not unlike Titus Andronicus. “He [Seneca] contents himself with amplifying the horror of the tragic situations till they become disgusting, and exaggerating the expression of passion till it becomes ridiculous” (Cunliffe 18). Bowers describes the Senecan tragedy as bloody, but piteous.

Horrors are piled on horrors, with the cruelty of the scenes augmented by the keen delight Seneca takes in the realistic depictions of bloody actions and physical torture. Pity is felt, however, not only for the innocent but even for the guilty in the midst of the torments of their retribution or of their remorse. (43)

Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus is quite obviously inspired by Seneca’s most disgusting works. Cunliffe asserts, “The subject and style of the tragedy [Titus] are thoroughly Senecan. It is made
up of ‘murders, rapes, and massacres, Acts of black night, abominable deeds, Complots of mischief, treason, villainies’” (69). The most obvious point in relation to Seneca’s *Thyestes* is at the very end when Titus serves Tamora a pie baked from her two murdered sons. Cunliffe describes the bloodiness and graphic nature of Shakespeare’s earliest tragedy.

No detail of physical horror is spared; from beginning to end the stage reeks with blood, and the characters vie with one another in barbarity. Even the gentle Lavinia helps to prepare the Thyestean banquet; and Titus and his sons are no less eager for revenge, and no less cruel in its execution, than Tamora and Aaron. (69)

For years, Seneca’s influence was dominant in English tragic drama. His works are still influential even today. Cunliffe asserts that the Elizabethan tragedies, although they deal with far-fetched plotlines and extreme violence, connect to a universal audience.

Seneca is peculiarly free from local restrictions, and to this we may perhaps ascribe the fact that Elizabethan tragedy, though thrilled through and through with patriotism, deals with men and ideas of universal interest. Shakespeare glorified some of his plays with an impassioned spirit of healthy patriotism, but of his masterpieces it is peculiarly true they are “not of an age, but for all time.” (15)

Thus, the Senecan influence on the Elizabethan Revenge tragedies allowed them to appeal to a larger audience even today. Today, Seneca’s five-act tragedy is still with us and our idea of tragedy “leads us to expect deeds of violence and blood, vividly presented in highly wrought scenes, and weighted with well-expressed thought” (125). Today, we may not be comfortable witnessing a public execution or hoping to see blood and guts on the stage. However, we have a
pre-conceived notion of “tragedy” in our minds. The word alone ignites images of violence and despair. The Elizabethan Revenge tragedy has paved the way for the violence, gore and death we see on stage today in many modern, tragic shows.
II. *Titus Andronicus* as a Revenge Tragedy

*Titus Andronicus* is considered one of Shakespeare’s most grotesque plays and one of his inferior earlier works. In 1765, Samuel Johnson said, “the barbarity of the spectacles and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience.” Ravenscroft in 1678 stated, “It is the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his works.” T.S. Eliot has even called it, “One of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written.” There is much debate regarding the date of publication of the play, but it is widely held that it was published in full sometime in 1594. Still, while it is often dismissed by critics, there can be no doubt that *Titus Andronicus* utilizes many of the recurring ideas prevalent throughout the revenge tragedy genre. As I have briefly stated, *Titus Andronicus* is very thoroughly Senecan in its style and content. The play begins in Rome with two brothers, Bassianus and Saturninus arguing over succession to the throne. As the older of the two, Saturninus argues that, through primogeniture, he should be the next emperor. Bassianus, on the other hand, believes that he is the most deserving. However, it is revealed that Titus has been chosen as the next emperor.

A nobler man, a braver warrior

Lives not this day within the city walls.

He by the senate is accited home

From weary wars against the barbarous Goths,

That with his sons, a terror to our foes,

Hath yoked a nation strong, trained up in arms. (1.1. 25-30)

Seen as a brave and noble war hero, the play begins with Titus on a pedestal, a hero among his people. He has returned from war with Tamora held captive along with her sons and the moor
Aaron. He however, gives up the throne and allows Saturninus to rule because of his primogeniture, but not before killing Tamora’s eldest son. Soon after, he kills his own son Mutius in a fit of rage and Saturninus takes Tamora for his wife. Thus, the catalyst for revenge is set.

Tamora’s two sons, Chiron and Demetrius, spurred by their mother, kill Bassianus and then throw his body into a pit. They allow Titus’ daughter Lavinia to live deciding that they would rather rape her instead. Aaron leads Titus’ sons, Martius and Quintus to the pit and frames them for Bassianus’ death, for which they are sentenced to death. Meanwhile, Marcus finds the raped Lavinia with her tongue cut off and her hands dismembered. Aaron lies and tell Titus that if he cuts off his own hands, his sons will be set free. However, a messenger later arrives carrying the two heads of Martius and Quintus and Titus’ sacrificed hand. Titus sends his son Lucius to form a stronger army among the Goths to exact revenge on Saturninus and Tamora. Unable to speak, Lavinia turns the pages of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, to allude to her own tragic situation. She then writes the names of the two culprits Chiron and Demetrius using only her stumps and mouth, and Titus vows to get revenge. As this action occurs, Lucius is on his way home with an army of angry Goths. This upsets Saturninus, who fears that people will side with Lucius. Titus, feigning madness, is approached by Tamora, who claims to be Revenge, and she convinces Titus to tell Lucius to attend a banquet at Titus’ house. Titus agrees, but asks her to leave Rape and Murder (Chiron and Demetrius in disguise) with him. As Lavinia catches their blood, Titus kills them and plans to cook them into pies to feed to Tamora at the feast. At the banquet, Titus kills his own daughter and kills Tamora, but not before revealing the contents of their pies. Saturninus kills Titus and Lucius kills Saturninus, becoming the new emperor. He
has Aaron buried and left to die as he promises that he will restore Rome after so much murder and violence.

*Titus Andronicus* is not just a crude, bloody play. It exhibits the qualities of the quintessential revenge tragedy. The play starts with Titus as a character of significant importance. He has been chosen as the next emperor for his bravery and his sacrifice for Rome. However, as the play continues, Titus is brought down through his own tragic flaw and his fate is out of his control. He is the typical hero of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Titus is flawed because he is incredibly stubborn and more importantly, he has a temper which he refuses to control. His flaw is evident from the start when he returns and refuses to show mercy to Tamora’s son, Alarbus. Tamora pleads with Titus, “And if they sons were ever dear to thee, / O, think my son to be as dear to me” (1.1. 107-108). She also says, “Sweet mercy is nobility’s true badge” (1.1. 119). Titus, however, cannot show mercy. He kills her son without thinking twice. Moreover, he does not hesitate to kill his own son, Mutius. He quickly loses his temper when he realizes that Lavinia has run off with Bassianus and goes off on a rampage, refusing to bury his son properly. Thus, Titus’ character descends from war hero to crazed madman throughout the course of the play and falls from a position of great power.

In much Elizabethan drama, the characters who fall lower on the socio-economic scale almost always speak in prose. On the other hand, characters of higher social standing speak in verse. In *Titus Andronicus*, The Clown is a character who speaks in prose and is of a lower social class. “From heaven! Alas, sir, I never came there God forbid I should be so bold to press to heaven in my young days. Why, I am going with my pigeons to the tribunal plebs, to take up a matter of brawl betwixt my uncle and one of the Emperal’s men” (4.3. 89-93). The clown is responding to Titus’ questions about being sent from heaven. Titus believes the Clown is a
messenger sent from heaven. Here, after suffering such a great loss, Titus’ mental state is evidently deteriorating. Madness, feigned or real, a motif of the revenge tragedy, is prevalent throughout Titus Andronicus.

Titus is wrought with despair when he sees his daughter mutilated and his sons beheaded and exiled. He himself has hastily cut off his own hands trying to save his sons. However, instead of crying, Titus laughs. He explains, “Why, I have not another tear to shed; / Besides, this sorrow is an enemy, / And would usurp upon my wat’ry eyes, / And make them blind with tributary tears” (3.1. 265-268). Titus has no more tears to shed, so he laughs at this point, alluding to his madness. Soon after, Marcus kills a fly and Titus becomes enraged. He cannot fathom the thought of a living creature dying and claims that the fly might have a father or a brother.

How if that fly had a father, brother?
How would he hand his slender gilded wings,
And buzz lamenting doings in the air!
Poor harmless fly,
That, with his pretty buzzing melody,
Came here to make us merry! And thou hast killed him. (3.2. 60-65)

Titus’ reaction to the fly demonstrates that he has been seriously affected by the events that have occurred in his life. There is a shift in his mental state. After Marcus reminds Titus that the fly is black like the moor, Titus feels enraged and continues to strike the fly with a knife. Later, when Tamora shows up with her sons disguised as Revenge, Rape and Murder, Titus admits, “I knew them all, though they supposed me mad, / And will o’erreach them in their own devices, /
A pair of cursed hell-hounds and their dame” (5.2. 142-144). Titus feigns madness and he uses this to his advantage, convincing Tamora to leave him alone with her sons in order to kill them. Titus, like Hieronimo and Hamlet, feigns madness and uses his façade to his advantage. Madness is a recurring aspect of revenge tragedies, used many times as a strategic element of the revenger’s plans.

In revenge tragedies, a female character usually plays a pivotal role, especially for the revenger. The revenge tragedy often utilizes women as catalysts for some kind of tragic action. In Titus Andronicus, Lavinia is completely ruined by men and this ignites the fuel in Titus to act swiftly and cruelly. Titus is fueled with anger and a thirst for revenge as he laments the tragic state of his daughter.

Or shall we cut away our hands, like thine?
Or shall we bite our tongues, and in dumb shows
Pass the remainder of our hateful days?
What shall we do? Let us, that have our tongues,
Plot some deuce of further misery,
To make us wondered at in time to come. (3.1. 130-135)

Titus later kills his own daughter to free her from her misery and shame. It is through this mutilation of his pure, innocent daughter that Titus reaches his boiling point. He subsequently avenges his daughter, killing and baking Chiron and Demetrius.

Titus Andronicus is also riddled with a substantial number of classical allusions, especially from Seneca’s Thyestes. In the play, Atreus kills Thyestes’ two sons and bakes them in pies, feeding them to their father. Furthermore, there are many classical references in Titus
Andronicus, though Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* is of greatest importance. In *The Metamorphosis*, Tereus lusts after Philomela and rapes her even though he is married to her sister, Procne. He then cuts off her tongue to ensure that she will not reveal his crimes to anyone. Philomela however weaves a tapestry, and reveals what he has done to her. In turn, Procne kills their son and feeds him to Tereus. The sister’s present him with the severed head of his son. Like *Titus Andronicus*, this is all very graphic.

…he grasped her tongue with a pair of forceps, and cut it out with his cruel sword. The remaining stump still quivered in her throat, while the tongue itself lay pulsing and murmuring incoherently to the dark earth. It writhed convulsively, like a snake’s tail when it has newly been cut off, and, dying, tried to reach its mistress’ feet. (Ovid 163)

Fittingly, Lavinia turns the pages of Ovid’s *The Metamorphosis* to reveal the truth about her rape and dismemberment. Perhaps one of the most well-known speeches in *Titus Andronicus* is Marcus’ speech when he discovers the bloody Lavinia. His speech is filled with countless classical allusions. “But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee, / And, lest though shouldst detect him, cut they tongue” (2.4. 26-27).

Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue,
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind;
But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee.
A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off,
That could have better sewed than Philomel. (2.4. 38-43)

Later, as Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius, he exclaims, “For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Procne I will be revenged” (5.2. 194-195). Moments before killing his daughter, Titus asks Saturninus if it was rash of Virginius to murder his own daughter, echoing Livy’s story of the Roman centurion Virginius who kills his own daughter to prevent her from being raped.

Although *Titus Andronicus* is sometimes perceived as a gory, graphic, blood-filled story of no real substance, the opposite is true. It is the exemplary revenge tragedy. It makes use of a far-fetched, violent theme and the characters feign madness as a ploy to perform their revenge. Moreover, the female character, Lavinia acts as the catalyst for her male counterparts. *Titus Andronicus* is filled with the common motifs of madness, horrible killings and even the play-within-a-play. The entire play is very theatrical. For instance, Titus dresses like a chef and puts on a show for the emperor and his wife and Tamora and her sons dress up as allegorical figures and put on a show for Titus. The theatricality of Titus is undoubtedly extreme, as the tragedy ends in a bloody mass of corpses, with a large number of dead lying sprawled on the ground. This theatricality of this quintessential revenge tragedy can be interpreted in a number of ways.
III. Early Staging of Titus Andronicus

As many critics have bashed the play for its crudeness, the questions remain: How can such a bloody, violent play be performed? How have past productions depicted the infamous blood and murder on stage? Not much is known about the early stage life of Titus Andronicus, especially since there have not been many staged versions of the play. However, it is clear that, despite today’s critics, The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedie of Titus Andronicus was hot in its time:

The reasons for this early popularity or notoriety can only be inferred. Especially in the early 1590s, the very features that have proved problematic for subsequent editors, directors, actors, and readers (e.g., the mythological allusions, the long, rhetorical passages, the on-stage violence) may have appealed to playgoers still under the spell of The Spanish Tragedy and Tamburlaine. (Dessen 6)

It’s true that today, many consider Titus Andronicus to be “unplayable,” but at the peak of its popularity, Titus was taking audiences by storm. This could be because Titus Andronicus played to audiences’ tastes. One mustn’t forget the public executions and bear-baiting spectacles to which early Renaissance audiences flocked. Public execution was in fact a ritual with which Elizabethan audiences were very familiar and these executions were very theatrical events. The following is from a 1589 sentence passed on a nobleman who was found guilty of treason:

That he should be conveyed to the Place from whence he came, and from thence to the place of Execution, and there to be hanged until he were half dead, his
Members to be cut off, his Bowels to be cast into the Fire, his Head to be cut off, his Quarters to be divided into four several parts, and to be bestowed in four several Places. (Bate 23-24)

Evidently, Elizabethan audiences were not queasy about graphic violence. At a time when performances of gore and violence were frequently sought, Shakespeare’s Titus may not have been so unorthodox after all. In fact, it did appeal to audiences in the 1590s and early 1600s and was incredibly popular for its time.

The first performance of Titus Andronicus occurred in the early 1590s or the late 1580s (Dessen 5). “On 23 January 1594 Philip Henslowe recorded a performance by the Earle of Sussex’s Men of ‘titus ondronicus’, marking the play as ‘ne’ (i.e. new). It was repeated on 28 January and 6 February” (Waith 2). The first of these early performances were performed by Sussex’s Men at the Rose and the later performances were performed by either the Lord Chamberlain’s Men or by the Admiral’s Men. The image to the left is an image of the First Quarto of the play published sometime in 1954. The image demonstrates that the tragedy was performed by two other companies, Derby’s and Pembroke’s (“Plaide by the Right Honourable Earle of Darbie, Earle of Pembrooke”). Furthermore, on the first of January, 1596, Titus Andronicus was performed by a troupe of actors during a Christmas celebration at Burley-on-the-Hill in Rutland, but this was the last performance on record. “These are the only performances of which we have record prior to the closing of the theatres, but it is evident that a
large number of unrecorded performances took place” (Metz 155). This, and some other evidence of performance history, proves that *Titus Andronicus* was frequently performed.

The early staging of *Titus Andronicus* cannot be discussed without of course, mentioning the Peacham drawing. To the left is an image of the Peacham drawing, “a pen drawing, executed in fine detail in brown ink on one page of a folded folio sheet” (Waith 20).

Beneath the drawing, there is an invented stage direction, “Enter Tamora pleading for her sonnes going to execution,” and some actual lines from the play. These lines include Tamora’s plea to Titus, Titus’ response, some lines directed towards Aaron, and Aaron’s arrogant speech about his crimes in the final act. There is no exact date and it is still debated to this day. In the lower left margin there is a date, “m°q°gqto” and this has usually been interpreted as the year 1595. There is no evidence that Peacham actually saw a performance of *Titus Andronicus*. He may have simply read the play and drawn a sketch from his imagination of his own interpretation. Either way, the drawing gives insight as to how Shakespeare’s contemporaries may have staged the play. It is evident in the photo that Tamora is
definitely pleading with Titus, her hands crossed in front of her begging or praying. The two kneeling characters behind her are her two sons, Chiron and Demetrius. Aaron the moor is also present, pointing a finger towards the two sons or to his own sword. Although he is not present in this opening scene, the artist still decided to include Aaron in this drawing. The other two figures behind Titus are a little less clear. Some argue that the two characters are Titus’ sons, while others assert that they are actually soldiers (Waith 22). Jonathan Bate believes that the Peacham drawing is a representation of the entire play. He states, “Indeed, I think that the illustration may offer an emblematic reading of the whole play. To read it from left to right is like reading the play from first act to fifth” (41). If the drawing is read in this way, one begins with the image of two Roman soldiers, representing Titus’ military victory. Next appears Titus himself looking victorious and dignified. Opposite him is a pleading Tamora and then her two kneeling sons. Finally, Aaron appears pointing to his sword, boastful about his crimes.

Another interpretation of the Peacham drawing suggests that Peacham might have attended a performance of *Titus Andronicus*, perhaps the January 1 performance at Burley-on-the-Hill. Eugene Waith asserts, “If he was one of the guests at Burley-on-the-Hill, he might have made the drawing for his hostess, or otherwise for a friend. Its presence in a collection of papers belonging to someone else makes it unlikely that he was drawing purely for his own amusement” (25). He also believes it is obvious that Peacham was not sketching *during* a performance, while actors were still on stage, but *after* he had already seen one. Nevertheless, the importance of the Peacham drawing remains a universal fact. Waith states that, although the drawing is not an exact replica of any precise onstage moment, it can shed light on many different aspects of the Elizabethan performance:
The drawing cannot be taken as an accurate representation of any one moment in a performance of the play. Yet there is no reason to doubt that the portrayal of each figure is based on the physical appearance of actors in these roles. Their gestures and costumes give us a more vivid impression of the visual impact of Elizabethan acting than we get from any other source. (27)

The most interesting details of the Peacham drawing are the costumes worn by several of the characters. Assuming the Peacham drawing is based off of a live performance or that Peacham imagined a live staging, the drawing can help to illustrate the costume choices of the early Elizabethan stage. Sixteenth-century costumes were often based on the social status of the character. Color also played a large part in the visualization of a character’s social position. It is important to note that costumes were not always consistent or treated with historical accuracy. “There were costumes to match vocations, of course: doctors’ gowns of scarlet, lawyers’ gowns in black, blue coats for serving-men…fools’ coats with cap and bauble, and of course soldiers’ coats. These were worn with little concern for historical accuracy” (Gurr 198). The Peacham drawing itself demonstrates a lack of consistency and accuracy as the costumes vary from classic Elizabethan to Roman to medieval. Andrew Gurr states, “In the [Peacham] drawing the leading character is in a form of Roman dress reasonably like a toga, but the men flanking him are clearly dressed as Elizabethan soldiers” (198). Just as many of today’s theater companies take liberties with their costume choices, it can be inferred that Elizabethan theatres combined many different costume styles. After all, Titus Andronicus “addressed issues in contemporary history via a Roman setting, so the costumes mingle ages” (Bate 43). Thus, Titus wears a toga but his soldiers wear Elizabethan garb and Tamora wears what appears to be a medieval gown.
According to Bate, this was the beginning of today’s modern productions which “are determinedly eclectic in their dress, combining ancient and modern” (43).

Titus’ costume reveals his prominent, military power. He is dressed in a Roman toga and carries a decorated spear, a token of his victory in war. The Peacham drawing also demonstrates a dramatic standoff between the two characters, Titus and Tamora in which they are complete opposites. Opposed to his Roman clothes, Tamora dons the dress of a Goth. There is a stark contrast, as on one side of the drawing are the Romans and on the other, the Goths. If we interpret that Aaron is pointing, not to his sword, but to the two sons, we can assume that the lines written beneath the drawing demonstrate his boasting about their rape of Lavinia. It was after all, under his instruction that Chiron and Demetrius acted. Furthermore, Aaron is elegantly dressed because at the start of Act II he decides to dress “in pearl and gold” for the arrival of Tamora. For these reasons, the Peacham drawing provides necessary insight into the early staging of *Titus Andronicus* and it provides a much needed visualization of Elizabethan performances.

To better understand the early staging of this play, it is also important to consider the theatre in which it was performed. “The first production of which we have definite knowledge, the one on 23 January 1594 by Sussex’s Men, probably took place at the Rose Theatre on the Bankside” (Waith 43). The image to the right shows a painting by C. Walter Hodges, a reconstruction of the Rose Theatre in 1592. The Elizabethan amphitheatres were
usually round or polygonal, which is illustrated in the photo. Furthermore, near the front of the stage there was a large trapdoor often utilized in several productions:

The theatres built by the Elizabethans allowed for triple-layered performance.

There was a gallery or upper stage (Juliet’s window is the most famous use of this ‘above’ or ‘aloft’ space), the main stage which projected into the auditorium…and the ‘cellarage’ below the stage, reached by a trap-door. In *Titus Andronicus*

Shakespeare made bold and innovative use of all three levels. (Bate 4)

*Titus Andronicus* begins with the stage direction, “[Flourish.] Enter the Tribunes and Senators aloft; and then enter below Saturninus and his followers at the one door, and Bassianus and his followers at the other, with drums [and colours]” (1.1.) The play begins with trumpets sounding and the first entrance of Roman tribunes and senators “aloft,” or above on the upper stage.

Similarly, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* also begins “aloft,” with an entrance from above, but the characters who enter are a dead man and the allegorical character, Revenge. In this instance, it is as if the two characters are looking down on the action from above. However, in the case of *Titus Andronicus*, there are actual human beings in the action of the scene entering from above as if from a position of power:

Below them, on the main stage, there are doors at either end of the tiring-house which serves as a backdrop. Through them come rival claimants for power: the use of opposite doors dramatizes the brothers’ opposition in terms of the stage space. When Titus Andronicus enters in this victory procession, the third level,
the darkness below the stage which figures the underworld, comes into play. (Bate 5)

Shakespeare obviously made use of the theatrical space with which he was working. His stage directions indicate that he knew precisely where each entrance and exit was to occur. Scenery at the time was not very grand (except for the fact that the ceilings of many theatres were painted as a sky) so scene changes entailed characters simply entering and exiting the stage. Amphitheatres like the Rose relied on daylight and not lamps or candles. Therefore, night scenes were presented by having characters walk onstage with torches. Furthermore, they would simply rely on their spoken word to relate to the audience the time of day. Lightning noises would be made by banging on a sheet of metal or banging on a drum. The question remains: how did these early productions depict the violence and murder of Titus Andronicus so often avoided in today’s theatre scene?

When it comes to stage realism, one aspect of the theatre to affect the performance was the lack of a proscenium arch to separate the players from the audience. Thus, the presentation of realism and illusion became much more difficult, since the players were in such close proximity to the audience. For this reason, the trap door previously mentioned was incredibly significant:

The trap door provided another [visual signal], its position under the stage surface offering a hell for Marlowe’s Barabbas, and Faustus to sink into, for devils to spring from, and for the ghost of Hamlet’s father to descend into before he speaks from his purgatorial grave under the earth of the stage floor. (Gurr 182)
In addition to the trap door, Elizabethan players also made use of several other tricks to create different illusions for their audiences. To create blood, they would use “bladders” or sponges soaked in vinegar and hide them under their armpits. They would squeeze them to produce the image of dripping blood (Gurr 182). They may have even hidden them beneath their costumes.

In George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, three characters are executed and disemboweled on stage. To achieve this, real blood was used, though it may have been calves’ or sheep’s blood. It was not uncommon to use animals’ blood and body parts to portray bloody scenes. One play which calls for a decapitation includes the stage direction, “He thrusts out his head, and they cut off a false head made of a bladder fill’d with bloud. Exeunt with his body” (Gurr 184). The image on the left shows a device used for displaying decapitated bodies from Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). It may have been used on stages to display decapitated bodies.

Realism was also achieved through the use of noises and smoke used to create mist and fog. Lavinia’s rape scene, not shown onstage, was clearly hinted at through the characters’ mocking dialogue as well as the action of the pit.

There are no further records of early performances of *Titus Andronicus* prior to the closing of the theatres in 1642, after the English Civil War, although there must have been a number of unrecorded performances which took place. In the fall of 1678, after Charles II had re-opened the theaters, Edward Ravenscroft wrote a version of the tragedy to be acted. This would be the
first of many adaptations of *Titus Andronicus*. In his preface “To the Reader,” Ravenscroft begins by asserting that the play was in fact not written by Shakespeare at all, but by some other author who gave it to Shakespeare to be touched up. He goes on to say that, “It seems rather a heap of Rubbish than a Structure” (Dessen 7). It therefore comes as no surprise that Ravenscroft took the liberty of making substantial changes to Shakespeare’s original work:

Thus, Ravenscroft adds various moralisations (often in couplets), makes several substantive changes in the plot and motivation, adds some striking stage effects, eliminates much on stage violence, buttresses the parts of Tamora and Aaron, and reconstitutes Shakespeare’s Act V, particularly the last scene. (Dessen 7)

Ravenscroft’s version, with all of its cuts, removes several aspects of Shakespeare’s play. He cuts the preparation for the hunt in Act II Scene II, the fly killing scene, the on-stage arrow shooting, the clown’s scenes, and much of the violence usually displayed on stage. In Shakespeare’s version, Titus ignores Tamora’s pleas and this is what sparks a series of violent acts in retribution. However, Ravenscroft’s version makes Tamora less sympathetic:

In the 1687 version Titus and Lucius reveal that Tamora herself, when she had a son of Titus as captive, had been ‘deaf like the Gods when Thunder fills the Air’ and so ‘unmov’d beheld him made a Sacrifice / T’appease your Angry Gods’. In a long speech, Titus recounts a vow he made to his remaining sons to do the same ‘if any of the Cruel Tamora’s race / Should fall in Roman hands’…What for many interpreters is a pivotal choice or error in Shakespeare’s first scene is significantly
altered by Ravenscroft so as to set forth a less culpable Titus and a less sympathetic Tamora. (Dessen 8)

In this version, Tamora had behaved in the same fashion towards Titus and his son, so it is much easier for an audience to understand why Titus makes the decision to kill Tamora’s son. Furthermore, Ravenscroft also shortens Marcus’ speech in Act II Scene IV when he confronts Lavinia. He also cuts onstage violence by having Titus exit the stage and then reappear “With his hands off” rather than having his hands be cut off on stage. Moreover, Ravenscroft’s version also gets rid of the bloody executions of Chiron and Demetrius. Instead, he has Titus exit the stage and reappear covered in blood with a bloody weapon in his hand. Ravenscroft’s Titus was one of the first major adaptations of the play and it came with substantial cuts and alterations, but it was also great theatrical success. A second major adaptation was done by C.A. Somerset and Ira Aldridge in 1849.

Similar to the Ravenscroft version, this version eliminated much of the onstage violence. It omitted the rape of Lavinia, her dismemberment and the cutting off of her tongue, as well as all of the decapitations. Most notably, this version painted Aaron as the hero of the story. According to Alan Dessen, one reviewer has stated that, “Aaron is elevated into a noble and lofty character, Tamora, the Queen of Scythia, is a chaste though decidedly strong-minded female, and her connection with the Moor appears to be of a legitimate description’. In addition, Chiron and Demetrius become ‘dutiful children, obeying the behests of their mother’; Titus ‘is a model of virtue’; and only Saturninus ‘retains the
impurity of the original throughout”” (12). Aldridge’s Aaron is made to be the focus of the
show, with his character appearing gentler and more emotional. Many other reviewers however
have noted that this version is so far from Shakespeare’s version that it is completely cut off
from the original. “It represents the most extreme example of a long series of attempts (starting
with Ravenscroft) to reshape this script so as to make it palatable or meaningful to later
audiences who are deemed unlikely to accept essential features of the original” (Dessen 12).
These later adaptations of Titus Andronicus have been altered to appear less revolting. They
have been made to appeal to a broader audience, less numb to violence and gore on stage,
particularly late 17th century audiences with different values than their predecessors.

After this, there were not many notable adaptations of the play until the 20th century.
Time has brought about different attitudes and shifting opinions regarding Titus Andronicus.
These early performances and adaptations have paved the way for future performances, notably
Peter Brook’s landmark production in 1955.
IV. Modern Staging and Adaptations

One of the most notable modern adaptations of *Titus Andronicus* appeared in 1923 at the Old Vic in London. It was directed by Robert Atkins and was the first uncensored, unchanged and original production to take place in years. Audiences found it difficult to fully digest this version, as characters die one right after the other in the final scene. This can lead to unwanted laughter as audiences may take this scene as a sort of joke rather than a horrific, tragic ending:

Atkins’s rendition is significant in that it represents the first reappearance since the 1660s of Shakespeare’s script in a major professional production. The mixed reaction of those who saw it however, took its toll, for theatrical professionals who remembered the audience laughter at the Old Vic, especially at the climactic murders, were reluctant to commit their time, energy, and resources to this tragedy. (Dessen 13-14)

One of the biggest problems facing modern adaptors of this violent play is the audience’s reactions. Moments of onstage violence, if not done correctly, can lead to unwanted audience laughter. For this reason, many directors tend to choose to either stylize their productions or opt for realism. According to Alan Dessen, director Gerald Freedman asks the essential question, “‘If the Elizabethans were more receptive to blood and gore as theatre staples and if they accepted all the extravagance of emotion and intensity of feeling with a passionate response, how then does one create a similar response to horror and violence in a modern audience?’” (24) The goal of the modern director is to create a show filled with the horror it was intended to evoke. Furthermore, the violence of *Titus Andronicus* should ignite an emotional response in the
Thus, in 1955, Peter Brook made the decision to stage *Titus Andronicus* at the Stratford Memorial Theatre. Laurence Olivier played Titus, Vivien Leigh was Lavinia, and Anthony Quayle played Aaron. In his program note, Brook described the play as, "an austere and grim Roman Tragedy, horrifying indeed, but with a real primitive strength, achieving at times a barbaric dignity" (Dessen 15). To achieve this "barbaric dignity," Brook utilized a number of theatrical techniques, using both sound and visuals to achieve his goal. He utilized music and lighting to create a bloody, ominous setting. The lighting was described as:

Shadowy, smoky, flaring with the torches whose flames were contained within strange distorted cages… [Brook] worked with a limited palette of colours in both costumes, and set and lighting: bile green, blacks, reds and browns, and the liverish colour of dried blood. The production began in an unearthly greenish darkness; by the last scene the stage was bathed in an ominous blood-red light, the costumes were red, and it was as if the whole universe on the stage had been drenched with blood. (Dessen 16)

Furthermore, Brook used specific music to convey a mood at a particular scene. For Lavinia’s entrance in Act II, Scene IV, he utilized a simple, yet ominous tune on a harp and piano. Lavinia was revealed with red streamers emitting from her wrists and mouth as seen in the image to the left.
According to Jonathon Bate, this stylization of Lavinia’s rape and dismemberment “shaped the predominant theatrical approach to the play for thirty years” (59). Meanwhile, Chiron and Demetrius are seen slowly backing away from her in horror. Although this production used streamers and ribbons to convey blood, particularly with Lavinia, not all critics were fans of the device. One critic, Rosemary Anne Sisson, believed that she could not be emotionally invested in Lavinia’s horrible fate since, “‘though her mouth was half open, pitifully expressive and voiceless, the chin was clean, impossibly clean’” (Dessen 21). She asserts that more blood was needed in the scene. Moreover, Olivier played Titus, not as a triumphant war hero, but as a tired, old veteran, stubborn and indifferent to others’ happiness. However, his performance was met with critical acclaim.

Similar to Ravenscroft’s earlier interpretation, Brook also took some liberties with Shakespeare’s original play. He chose to stylize many violent, typically gory moments and he also cut about 650 lines from the script. According to Ivor Brown, “‘Brook’s method was to drain off the rivers of gore, never to parade the knife-work, and, instead, to symbolize a wound with a scarlet ribbon’” (Dessen 21). Essentially, Brook chose to create an ominous mood for his audience, not by drenching the stage in blood, but by doing the opposite. In a play abundant with murders, his production had no real gore. As a result, audiences did not laugh as they did with Atkins’ earlier production, but many did in fact faint. Also like Ravenscroft, Brook made the deaths of Chiron and Demetrius occur off-stage so that the entire scene with Lavinia holding a
basin of blood was omitted. When the two heads appear in Act III, Scene II, they were concealed by “black cloths and steel baskets” (Dessen 22). Furthermore, Titus’ detached hand was not displayed, the nurse in Act IV, Scene II was strangled rather than stabbed, and Marcus’ speech to Lavinia was completely cut. With few less-than-pleased reviewers, Brook’s production was momentous and significant for the future stage-life of the play. It paved the way for *Titus Andronicus* to be performed with more regularity.

A number of productions of *Titus Andronicus* took place in the years that followed. In 1967, Gerald Freedman directed a rendition of the play for the New York Shakespeare Festival at the outdoor Delacorte Theatre in Central Park. This production was also met with much critical acclaim. In his introduction to an edition of *Titus Andronicus*, Freedman explains his process:

If one wants to create a fresh emotional response to the violence, blood and multiple mutilations of *Titus Andronicus*, one must shock the imagination and subconscious with visual images that recall the richness and depth of primitive rituals; with the power of poetic conventions drawn from the ancient theatres of Greece and the Orient; with instruments and sounds that nudge our ear without being clearly explicit or melodic; with fragments of myth and ceremony and childhood fantasies that still have the power to set our imaginations racing. Thus the choice of music, mask and chorus seemed inevitable to me in order to make the violence, gore and horror of this play more meaningful and emotional to a contemporary audience. (Metz 165)

Similar to Peter Brook, Freedman stylized a great deal of the gore in his production. He used masks and music to create his own dark setting. His music included drums, rattles, horns and
strings and he also used costumes which he has said, “recreated an unknown people of a non-specific time” (Dessen 26). He also made use of a narrator to explain what would occur in each scene and a chorus to serve as the Roman people and also to act as the characters’ consciences. Freedman stylized the violence on stage as well by using wand-like instruments instead of swords or daggers. These wands “did not touch the victims but were whirled over their heads and then flicked smartly down as the bodies fell, so a great deal was left to the imagination of the playgoer who had to fill in the actual violence” (Dessen 27). Like the Peter Brook production, Lavinia’s dismemberment was displayed through the use of red ribbons coming from her wrists and mouth. Furthermore, one of the more successful effects of his stylized production occurred in Act III, Scene I when the severed heads of Titus’ sons are presented on a platter. When the platter was revealed, it contained only two empty masks and nothing more. This prompted gasps from the audience since, “the masks were now empty; it was the emptiness itself that was felt at the pit of the stomach” (Dessen 28). Freedman’s use of masks was quite an interesting choice. Instead of opting for the more popular fake heads or covered heads, he used a simple prop to produce audience reaction.

In the final scene in which all the characters at the feast end up dead, Freedman used another one of his stylizations. Dan Sullivan describes the effect:

A shadowy chorus envelops each figure in a billowing red cloth, which unwinds to reveal a black cloth underneath. Instead of pitching forward, the victim-head and shoulders now swathed in black- remains vertical: statues instead of corpses. The effect is powerful, dignified and almost liturgical. (Dessen 28)
Again, Freedman’s decision to stylize this scene had a positive effect. Rather than throw fake blood around and have the characters flopped over the table, he created a dark, menacing scene using a somber, yet unconventional technique. Once more, with this performance, *Titus Andronicus* was beginning to appear less “unplayable” and more directors were willing to take on the challenge of staging the play.

In a 1974 production directed by Laird Williamson, Williamson blended both stylized elements as well as elements of realism. For instance, the severed heads of Act III, Scene I appeared believable, but the audience would not see Titus’ amputated hand. Instead, they saw a white cloth covered in red rhinestones. Furthermore, Lavinia was wrapped in a net and dragged slowly off stage, a haunting image. Afterwards, the audience saw Lavinia in a hooded cloth covered in red rhinestones. In a later 1986 production, director Pat Patton also combined realism and stylization. He used red China silk streamers instead of blood for Lavinia’s mutilation, Titus’ amputated hand, and the murders of Chiron and Demetrius. In the final scene, the tree murders occur one right after the other, but in this production, soldiers came down with a red cloth to cover the bodies. The two severed heads were placed on poles and Titus’ hand was carried off by Lavinia on a platter. The obstacle of leaning towards realism or stylized effects was seen in these many productions of *Titus Andronicus*.

Another issue that arises in the staging of this play is the issue of cutting the script and omitting several lines. As Alan Dessen states, “Today’s director regularly cuts lines, speeches, and even entire scenes from Shakespeare’s playscripts” (51). One of the reasons for this is that directors are trying to “bridge the many gaps between the 1590s and today” (Dessen 51). *Titus Andronicus* needs to be presented in a way that audiences of today can understand and believe. Thus, directors choose to cut many scenes they deem “unplayable.” The scene in which Tamora
and her sons appear disguised as Revenge, Rape and Murder has proven problematic for several directors. Directors “usually resort to a darkened stage (to heighten the possibility of concealment), heavy make-up, and some kind of outlandish disguise for the three figures” (Dessen 78). Another problematic scene is Marcus’ discovery of Lavinia. His very long speech upon seeing Lavinia in her ravished state is often omitted. According to Dessen, “Faced with an audience that may have seen a Neil Simon comedy or Cats the previous night, today’s director will usually pare down such a speech which, to the modern ear or eye, seems ornate, even leisurely, rather than an anguished reaction to this horrible sight” (54). Consequently, directors choose to get rid of many lines they deem unnecessary or problematic in such an intense scene. There are few productions which present the play in full, exactly the way it was written.

One notable production which achieved success in this way was Deborah Warner’s 1987 production at the Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon and again at The Pit in London in 1988. It is one of the most significant productions because of its complete allegiance to the original script. Not a single line from the play was altered or cut and, in the end, this proved to be a smart choice. According to Dessen, “To the surprise of many observers, scenes that editors, scholars, and directors have stated firmly were unplayable emerged in this production as powerful and highly meaningful” (58). Whereas many past directors deemed Marcus’ speech unacceptable on the stage, Warner’s rendition proved to be highly appreciated. As Dessen states, Marcus’ speech shows him trying to make sense of the horrible image he sees. “We observe Marcus, step-by-step, use his logic and Lavinia’s reactions to work out what has happened, so that the spectators both see Lavinia directly and see her through his eyes and images” (60). In this production of the play, the speech is important, even necessary to fully grasp the extent of Lavinia’s suffering. Not only does the audience get a better idea of Lavinia’s terrible state, but they also grasp a
better idea of Marcus’ suffering. Jonathan Bate attributes the effect of Marcus’ powerful words to today’s society and views on rape:

The scene was so powerful to so many members of the audience because our culture is more conscious of rape and its peculiar vileness than many previous cultures have been: so it was that the words from the 1590s (when rape was very rarely reported to the authorities or acted upon by the courts) worked a new effect in the context of the 1980s. (65)

It is evident that words can have a profound effect on any performance. So, while some critics may believe that certain scenes or speeches are unnecessary, unplayable, or unrealistic, others may find that they can actually provide deep insight into the intricate emotions of a character or scene.

Furthermore, in this production of the play, very little stage blood was used. Blood was carefully used and almost always on white cloth. There was for instance, visible blood on the white bag that contained Titus’ severed hand and on Titus’ apron after the deaths of Chiron and Demetrius. When Lavinia appeared, she was not emitting scarlet ribbons or silk from her mouth and hands as is often the case in several adaptations. Instead, there was a mere trickle of blood coming from her mouth as her stumps were wrapped in some kind of cloth and her skin was covered in a substance like clay or mud. The image to the left shows Sonia Ritter as Lavinia and Donald Sumpter as Marcus in Warner’s production of *Titus Andronicus*. It is
evident that this production relied heavily on speech rather than intense visuals. Nevertheless, its simplistic drama added to its appeal. The scene between Marcus and Lavinia ended with him cradling her in his arms and he remained that way for the entire scene. Another aspect that made this production so successful was the venue. According to Dessen, “Significant here were the excellent acoustic of the Swan and the close proximity of most of the audience” (61). With Warner’s production we can see a stark contrast between her subtle realism and Brook’s intense stylization. It is a choice all directors have to make and it is their way of dealing with the many problems they find with an “unplayable” script. They may choose to stylize the action by doing things like using ribbons instead of blood or masks instead of severed heads. On the contrary, they may choose to seek realism, presenting gore and bloody scenes, lifelike severed heads, etc. These modern adaptations provide an interesting dynamic. Each director attempts to make the play work for its audience, a modern-day audience – not an audience of the 1590s.
V. Conclusion & Final Thoughts

*Titus Andronicus* is a problematic play for a number of reasons. As Shakespeare’s most violent, bloodiest play, it should come as no shock that directors and actors shy away from it. It is deemed as unworthy, outlandish, ridiculous or unactable and, to many, the play does not belong on the stage. However, this idea has been changing through the years. Take Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, for instance. According to Dessen, “Indeed, the proposition that *King Lear* is unactable was believed for many generations and was only put to rest by a series of highly successful productions after the Second World War” (1). Critics believed that many aspects of the play were improbable and that certain scenes, like the storm scene, were unbelievable. They also asserted that, right from the start, King Lear is too unsympathetic a character. Nonetheless, all it takes is one breakthrough production to set off a series of adaptations. In the case of *Titus Andronicus*, Peter Brook’s 1955 production was that hit. One should remember of course, that this success does not come without directors making a number of changes to the script and the staging. The fact that lines and scenes are altered or cut completely from most modern productions proves that staging this bloody play today requires a very different approach than it has in the past. Therefore, for *Titus Andronicus* to work for today’s audiences, most directors choose to completely alter Shakespeare’s original work and Dessen presents the following questions:

If a majority of actors, directors, and designers conclude that *Titus* must be cut or adapted to be playable today, does that assessment reveal flaws in the script that survive in the quarto or does it reveal something important about our sense of theatre or “realism” or style? For the historicist, do such cuts or changes provide
any revealing “windows” into the early 1590s, especially when directors on different continents unaware of each other’s work cut or change the same things?

(3)
The fact of the matter is that *Titus* in performance can reveal a great deal about both the 1590s and modern society. Dessen asserts that *Titus Andronicus* is “the most Elizabethan of Shakespeare’s plays” (4) and so we must understand that this further complicates the task of translating the play into a stage performance for today’s audiences. Dessen again asks us to consider some more questions:

To what extent would those moments that have puzzled or antagonized adaptors and directors since Ravenscroft have made more sense or have “worked” in the 1590s? A Shakespeare early in his career crafted this script for playgoers, players, and theatres that no longer exist, so what happens when today’s theatrical professionals reconceive that script for another, very different space or medium? To what degree, then, are our problems with *Titus* a result of such reconception or translation and therefore linked not solely to the play’s defects but also to the passage of time and to the consequent changes in notions about theatre, imagery, decorum, and realism? (75)

What Dessen asks us to consider here is that the passage of time plays a much larger role in our interpretation of the play. Scenes that may seem out of place, confusing, or unnecessary today may have been perfect for audiences in the sixteenth century. Our ideas about violence, rape, murder, blood, theatre, realism, stylizations, and acting styles affect our interpretation, not only of the script, but of the adaptations.
However, many of today’s audiences are constantly exposed to violence and brutality in their everyday lives – on television, in films, in video games, in the news, and even on stage.

For simple reasons of taste – of moral decorum – the nineteenth century could not bring on a rape victim as Shakespeare could in the late sixteenth century and Ravenscroft could in the late seventeenth. In the Victoria age, then, the rape of Lavinia was quite literally unstageable…In the twentieth century, with its looser decorums, the rape has been restored to the stage. (Bate 59)

Perhaps today’s playgoers have been desensitized to violence and have become more accepting of a play like Titus Andronicus. Audiences do not recoil from violence in the theatre. Instead, they are more open-minded to different interpretations and styles. Today’s theatergoers can handle the gore of Shakespeare’s Titus proving that audiences have not changed much since Elizabethan times. Of course, there are no public executions to attend, but there are numerous modern-day, gory tragedies which today’s audiences seem to enjoy. For example, Stephen Sondheim’s highly successful, contemporary musical Sweeney Todd deals with a vengeful barber who kills his clients and bakes them into pies. Essentially, the Elizabethan revenge tragedy has paved the way for the violence, gore and death we see portrayed in many modern, tragic shows. Clearly, the influence of the early Elizabethan revenge tragedies is prevalent in today’s works. Kenji Yoshino affirms this influence of the revenge tragedy on today’s society and films:

Our opinion of Titus, then, tends more toward the Elizabethan than the Victorian. The same could be said of our view of the genre to which the play belongs. It would not be hyperbolic to say that the revenge tragedy was the dominant form of
tragic drama in the Elizabethan period. It would also not be hyperbolic to say that
the revenge tragedy is a dominant form of tragic drama today. Focusing solely on
the last decade of film, even a moment’s reflection will produce the endless

*Batman* franchise, *The Brave One, Hard Candy, Kill Bill, The Last House on the
Left, Man on Fire, Memento, The Punisher, Sin City, Sympathy for Lady
Vengeance,* and *V for Vendetta.* (206)

It is evident in many of today’s modern films and stage performances that the Elizabethan drama
still affects much of the entertainment industry, especially considering the fact that these films
demonstrate the conventions of the typical revenge tragedy. Thus, graphic images of violence
and revenge would not have the shocking, offensive effect some directors fear.

History, as well as numerous effective and creative adaptations of *Titus Andronicus,* has
proven that the formidable play *can* be enjoyed and performed successfully. These performances
have shown us that *Titus Andronicus* does have something to say, a message to convey. It is not
only a play about revenge, death, and violence, but also a play that deals with leadership, power,
justice and tradition. Ultimately, Titus returns home from war having lost many of his sons. He
is a tired, overwrought old man and he makes a wrong decision for which he and many others
must pay.

Directors who share this point of view wish to convey Titus’ story with unfamiliar
audiences. In fact, more and more adaptations of *Titus Andronicus*
have emerged over recent years. The play was performed at the
New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park in 1989. A
decade later director Julie Taymor brought *Titus* to the big screen,
with Anthony Hopkins, Jessica Lange, and Alan Cumming in the
leading roles. The film does not shy away from the gruesome murders and atrocities so prevalent in play. Taymor exhibits them with extreme gore. In 2013, Michael Fentiman made his directorial debut with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), directing Titus Andronicus at the Swan Theatre. According to the RSC website, “Audiences were shocked by the realistic, bloody effects in this production. And Michael also enlisted the help of Richard Pinner, a professional magician, to help create some of the visual effects which had audiences and critics giving this production a very warm response.” The image on the left depicts Rose Reynolds as Lavinia in Fentiman’s production of Titus Andronicus. Even small, regional theater companies choose to tackle this formidable play. In 2013, The Hudson Shakespeare Company of Jersey City presented Titus in celebration of the Halloween season. The show was performed outdoors at a local cemetery and did not fail to leave audiences spooked with its graphic portrayal of violence. Currently, a production of Titus Andronicus is playing at The Globe in London until July of this year, to rave reviews. Clearly, the play has become a more prominent name for many theater-goers who have perhaps gained respect or appreciation for the play, rather than disgust.

VI. Bibliography


Yoshino, Kenji. "Revenge as Revenant: Titus Andronicus and the Rule of Law." *Yale*