

Conflict, Catastrophe, and Retribution: Reviewing Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), a Cinematic Reworking of William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

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Titus Andronicus is in all agreement of the most of Shakespearean tragedies, and by far, the most prominent example of the playwright's early interest in Senecan revenge drama which dominated sixteenth-century theatre in England. Although the play has an interesting textual history, it has not received critical acclaim when it comes to performance and reception. Almost all discussions of the play open with a statutory apology for its content and its irreverent presence within Shakespeare's literary legacy. This follows from Thomas Ravencroft¹ who referred to the play in his edition as "*the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his [Shakespeare's] works*"², and further "*a heap of rubbish than a structure*"³. Ravencroft's ruthless attack went so far as to question the play's authorship – "*I have been told by some anciently conversant with the stage that it was not originally his but brought by a private author to be acted, and he only gave some master-touches to one or two of the principal parts and characters*"⁴. This devastating judgement led to a literary scramble, on the one hand, to locate the 'private author' Ravenscroft spoke of, and on the, to justify plainly that the play is indeed in its entirety, the 'master's work, something which today has received overwhelming opinion. While the play received more than a favourable response in the period of its inception, as noted by Manfred Draudt⁵ – being conceivably a significant influence on Jacobean revenge tragedies ranging from John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* to Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, it fell out of favour completely during the late Romantic period, following attacks by Dr. Samuel Johnson and August Wilhelm Schlegel⁶ among others. Since then, the play entered a period of 'dark ages' in its literary history in terms of transmission, and has only recently in the middle of the twentieth century been revived by Peter brook in a landmark 1955 Royal Shakespeare production (with Laurence Olivier in the title role and Vivian Leigh as his daughter, Lavinia) and received with favour. The reason for this twentieth-century revival is perhaps not unnatural. The themes of dissembling, blood feuds, torture (both physical and mental), incessant brutality, murder, dismemberment, mutilation and perhaps most poignantly, rape, are not new in the world we inhabit today. Considering the presence of these horrific, brutal and barbaric acts of vengeance in our daily lives, the play is

being looked into more as a relevant expression of modern culture as compared to that of a heinous and mercenary past.

In his 1987 version of the drama for the *Contemporary Shakespeare* series, A. L. Rowse speculates as to why the fortunes of the play have begun to change during the twentieth century – “*in the civilized Victorian age the play could not be performed because it could not be believed. Such is the horror of our age, with the appalling barbarities of prison camps and resistance movements paralleling the torture and mutilation and feeding on human flesh of the play, that it has ceased to be improbable.*”⁷

My interest in Julie Taymor’s film, *Titus*, produced in 1999 starring Antony Hopkins in the lead role and Jessica Lange in the role of Tamora, stems from the fact that it was the first theatrically-released full-length motion picture reworking of the drama. This was, however, not Taymor’s first association with Shakespeare, or with *Titus Andronicus* itself. Taymor received a great deal of acclaim as a stage director when she produced the popular musical, *The Lion King* in 1997, an adaptation of the popular animated film. She went on to receive two Tony Awards for her work on *The Lion King*, incidentally making her the first woman to receive a Tony award for directing a musical. In 1984, she worked in collaboration with Theatre for a New Audience (TIFANA), a performing arts organization founded by Jeffrey Horowitz in New York City, and produced an hour-long production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. She directed her first Shakespeare drama, two years later, *The Tempest* for cinemas for a new crowd. She then directed *Titus Andronicus*, an off-Broadway production in 1994 followed by Wagner’s opera, *The Flying Dutchman*.

It is interesting why Taymor chose to shift from theatre to film as a medium of representation. The form of cinema is a document of modernity and reflects among other things, our association with moving images, an element repeatedly reiterated throughout *Titus*. Cinema provides scope for experimentation and powerful editing which assists in the representation of mental symbolic images, montages or collages which are ordinarily limited by or at least are difficult to be portrayed on stage through the use of standard props. In around the late nineties, Taymor concerned herself with Shakespeare more meticulously in comparison to her previous work and found the subject of *Titus Andronicus* adequately engaging to be adapted into a film. She says that she was further drawn to the play because she found it to be the most “*relevant of Shakespeare’s plays for the modern era.*” As she believes we live in the most violent period in history, she feels that the play has acquired more relevance for us than it had for the Victorians; “*it seems like a play written for today, it reeks of now.*”⁹ Similarly, when evaluating Taymor’s film for *The New York Post*, Jonathan Forman opines that “*it is the Shakespeare play for our time, a work of art that speaks directly to the age of Rwanda and Bosnia.*”¹⁰

In an interview published in the cinematic journal *Cine’aste*, Taymor notes that Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is “*not meant to be read*”¹¹, “*but to be performed*”¹². It was precisely the play’s shocking juxtaposition “*of heightened drama, ruthless violence and absurdist black comedy*”¹³, which attracts modern audiences who are constantly desiring to be fed on violence. Taymor felt

strongly that the play lent itself to adaptation, especially because of its thematic resonance in an era when audiences “*feed daily on tabloid sex scandals, teenage gang rape, high school gun sprees and the private details of a celebrity murder trial ... a time when racism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide have almost ceased to shock by being so commonplace and seemingly inevitable. Our entertainment industry thrives on the graphic details of murders, rapes and villainy yet it is rare to find a film or play that not only reflects the dark events but turns them inside out, probing and challenging our fundamental beliefs of morality and justice.*”¹⁴

To begin with, the film although following the Shakespearean original deviates in certain areas to effectually include some original details. The first detail that fascinates me above all else, involves the experimental use of the younger Lucius, who is seen almost as an external observer to the events unfolding within the film. He operates as both the audience or the spectator and a young child. The entire film seems to portray the loss of his innocence and his emerging maturity. At the beginning of the film, the younger Lucius’ transportation into the fantastical world of *Titus Andronicus* directly seems to capture the audience who witness the events of the action unfold through his eyes.

Taymor has taken certain liberties with the arrangement of scenes in her adaptation. For instance, the original play opens at a place in Rome outside the Capitol followed by the gathering of forces by Saturninus and Bassianus, the two sons of the recently deceased emperor, both staking their respective claims to the imperial throne; Taymor’s film in comparison begins with a young boy playing a war game with toy soldiers and engaging them with rigorous violence on a modern 1950s style kitchen watching television. This game he plays is quite shocking because it involves many symbolic details involving toy soldiers breaking their necks and tomato ketchup being poured on them representing blood. The violence children are exposed to through television is immediately represented in the child’s play. He sees images of violence on television and tries to reproduce it. At this stage, the mind remains impressionable to the ferocious violence of the adult world. We may recall here Jean Baudrillard who famously suggested that the Gulf War was fought based on images, that is to say, Baudrillard draws on his concepts of simulation and the hyperreal to argue that the Gulf War did not take place but was a carefully scripted media event – a ‘virtual’ war.¹⁵ That is the modernity of violence. Images on the television screen were used to drive public opinion. We can even think in this context of what effects violent entertainment movies such as the Rambo series or the Terminator series have on children exposed to them.

The war game played by the young boy, who is later revealed as the younger Lucius, is interrupted by a bomb blast (possibly a shell) outside the kitchen window. He hides under the table but is rescued and taken to an enormous amphitheatre, wherein cheers are heard from a seemingly invisible audience. It is here that the film formally as it were, begins with the entry of an army resembling the plastic army the young Lucius was playing with. This was followed by the entry of the victorious Roman general, Titus and his captive prisoners, Tamora, Queen of Goths and her three sons – Alarbus, Demetrius, and Chiron.

The opening encounter is preceded by the lengthier conflict where Titus:

“From weary wars against the barbarous Goths, ...

Five times [he] hath returned

Bleeding to Rome, bearing his valiant sons

In coffins from the field. “(I.i.28-35)

Tamora, the queen of the Goths is forced to part with her dignity by shedding "*tears in passion*" (I.i.106) to the victorious Andronicus to pardon her eldest son, who is to be sacrificed to appease the spirits of those slain in battle. While Titus considers the act as a sacred duty, it is at the same time, unholy to Tamora who curses it as "*O cruel, irreligious piety!*" (I. i. 30), a somewhat ironic reference to Titus himself as he is "*surnamed Pius*" (I.i.23).

Deborah Willis in her article dedicated to connecting modern trauma theory with the play observes how Titus and his remaining sons return as survivors of war, haunted by their experiences in battle, returning with the coffins of those slain, along with their dead brothers. The sense of loss is undoubtedly extreme. According to the prose history of Titus Andronicus, often taken to be one of the sources of the play, Titus fought against his Rome's enemies for ten long years – "*He slew Tottilius, King of the Goths, and did many other brave exploits.*" However, his victory came at the cost of twenty-one children, a little less than "*Half of the children Priam had*". Suffering undoubtedly from battlefield trauma, Titus and his remaining sons, most notably Lucius, are suffering from what trauma theorists call 'survivor's guilt'. Survivor's guilt syndrome is a mental condition that occurs when a person perceives himself to have done wrong by surviving a traumatic event when others did not. It may be found among survivors of combat, natural disasters, and epidemics among others. Survivors often criticize themselves for the casualty of others, including those who died while extricating the survivor or whom the survivor attempted unsuccessfully to protect. While today's early disaster responses and grief therapy methods both attempt to prevent survivor guilt from arising, in Ancient Rome, the ritual of sacrifice was seen as a substitute. Willis argues that

"the ritual of sacrifice is designed to help survivors of combat cope with the loss of fallen comrades-in this case, comrades who are also family members and is a prerequisite for proper burial. Besides, the dead are full of unsatisfied anger. They require not only proper burial but also an "extra" death: neither victory on the battlefield nor the capture of the enemy's royal family has been enough to pay them back for their loss of life. The survivors owe them another killing: the ghosts would take out their rage on their own family if not allowed one further opportunity to humiliate the enemy. Moreover, this killing must be extravagantly bloody, recapitulating through the lopping off limbs and hewing of flesh the conditions of death on the battlefield. Therefore, the 'invisible' ghosts are in an important sense the play's first revengers."¹⁷

Thus, Tamora's pleading is in vain as it was since Titus cannot allow his dead children to remain in limbo and "*hover on the dreadful shore of the Styx.*" (I.i.88) Further, Lucius believes that if the "*shadows*" remain "*unappeased*", then they may be distributed by supernatural visitations or haunting (mental haunting in this case), which Lucius calls "*prodigies on earth*"(I.i.101).

Therefore, not appeasing the dead appears to Titus and the rest of his family as a 'double death' an idea which is in constant motion throughout the play – on the one hand, a physical death and at the same time a death of identity or reputation – a mental trauma which seems to haunt even the dying or dead victim.

This sacrifice is frequently related to being the inducement which begins the tragic progression. The first murder within the domestic space of the city crucial in assessing its relation to the battlefield. Rome, till now a civilized state, turns into "*a wilderness of tigers.*"(III.i.54)

Following the ruthless sacrificial execution of Alarbus, the eldest born of Tamora, the young Lucius is exposed to one of the prevailing customs of Rome, the dutiful sacrifice of an enemy prisoner to the Gods within the space of the tomb, a place where seemingly, the dead children of Titus call upon the sacrifice so that their thirst for blood is satisfied.

It is here that the political movement of the play begins to take shape and it will be worthwhile to reflect for a moment on this issue and see how it presents itself in the idea of death as an 'exchange'. The concept of 'death' as an exchange for something, possibly another death, is what seemingly classifies the classical conception of revenge as is understood to constitute the 'revenge ethic' which in this particular strand qualifies the works of almost all the Greek tragedians, going so far as Homer. Simply put, the revenge ethic makes justice the personal responsibility of the person insulted or hurt or, if that person is dead, of someone closely related to him, almost invariably a close blood relative. The murderer must be murdered, and that murder must be executed directly by the most appropriate character, who takes that responsibility as an obvious one. As Ian Johnston notes, "*it is a radically simple and powerfully emotional basis for justice, linking retribution to the family and their feelings for each other and their collective honour.* This idea of collectiveness as against the singularity of justice organizes the system of retribution in the play. After the death of Alarbus, Tamora later vouches to Saturnius:

"I'll find a day to massacre them all,

And raze their faction and their family,

The cruel father and his traitorous sons..." (I.i.450-52)

The traumatic legacy of war provides a key context for the sacrifice of Alarbus. The war between tribes now comes in the guise of a war between two families. The sacrifice is taken by the Goths at face value and is understood to be cultural subjugation of the inferior, one of hegemonic

excess. But what seems to strike us in the film is Lucius's exposure to the idea of revenge in the form of an eye for an eye. Following the execution of Alarbus, the scene shifts in the film to the Capitol building. The imagery here is quite modern in that the scene transforms itself into Mussolini's Italy giving us an effect of the idea that the Roman Empire survived into the modern era. The affair between artist and acting zone is compelling in both productions. Taymor's vision of Rome is reminiscent not only of the decayed ancient capital, but also of the infamous centre of Mussolini's fascist government, of the escalating violence in the American public schools, or of the ethnic conflicts and atrocities in Bosnia (the war broke off only months after Taymor's shoots in Croatia and Bosnia). This strong artistic statement seems to take into account the fact that the effect of witnessing is crucial in both theatre and cinema.

A major component of the film is the mixing of the old and the new; Chiron and Demetrius dress like Roman soldiers; some characters use chariots, some use cars and motorcycles as you've just seen; crossbows and swords are used alongside rifles and pistols; tanks are seen driven by soldiers in ancient Roman garb; bottled beer is seen alongside ancient vials of lavender; mics are used to address casts in antique apparels. As per Taymor, this antiquated format was build to emphasise the permanence of the bloodshed in the movie, to suggest that destructiveness is common to all mankind, at all age; *"Costume, paraphernalia, horses or chariots or cars; these represent the essence of a character, as opposed to placing it in a specific time. This is a film that takes place from the year 1 to the year 2000."*¹⁹

The film abounds with these binaries and shifts in scene wherein spaces of the past are seen in conjunction with spaces of the present, the central character of these spaces being that they are necessarily violent, and representative of a blood-feud based culture. The nature of hate embedded in individuals calls for a revision of what justice implies and also calls for a secure system of delivering justice, which seems to be lacking in *Titus Andronicus*. As in Ancient Rome, dictators in power often used to misuse it to their advantage, Taymor tries to project this same misuse of power within the world of Mussolini for instance or the world of today where dictatorial powers have not completely been abolished under the legacy of democratic government, but hide behind closed doors.

For Taymor,

"when hate is embedded in people, which is what happens in that scene in the mausoleum [when the victorious Andronici demand a sacrifice of the defeated Goths, the death of Tamora's eldest son, Alarbus.] an outsider – whether it's Hitler or Aaron – can harness that hate and turn it into violence. I want people to see that if you instill hatred and racism into any person – whether it's the average German in Germany... I keep using the Holocaust because it's the biggest event of our century – it can be twisted and manipulated. People in groups can justify their actions. I love the way Tamora says to Lavinia, "Hadst thou in person ne'er offended me,/Even for his sake am I pitiless./Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain/To save your brother from the

sacrifice,/But fierce Andronicus would not relent./Therefore away with her, an use her as you will;/The worse to her, the better loved of me.” [TA 2.3. 161 – 167 –ed.] That just says it all. These boys have been given license to kill. I think that violence is such an integral part of the human psyche and physicality. We live in our bodies – boxing and football and all of these sports are sublimated violent urges. They’re codified, I mean, why do we play football in a coliseum?”²⁰

The character of Aaron has often been cited to reflect the image of an outsider who tries to incite violence against the warring parties and simply enjoys the aftereffects of his inciting. He does not place himself either among the Goths or the Romans, but sees himself as allied only to his kind, the members of his race who are moors and have a bodily appearance, different from others within the film. There is a fundamental difference wherein Aaron may be connected to a more violent version of Shylock in that he directly participates in murder and also commits acts of villainy such as cutting off Titus’ hand with a false promise of Saturnius sparing his two sons from the gallows.

While Aaron commits his acts of heinousness, the younger Lucius is still witnessing to these events as they unfold. It is difficult to say what is tragic when we think here of a child's exposure to ruthless brutality. What appears to be tragic to me at least in comparison to traditional definitions is the mental transformation of children who are exposed to this spirit of vengeance and are brought up in a culture of dominating political violence. Thinkers from Blake onwards have always looked to shield children from the problems of the adult world and yet, they are inevitably at the forefront of violence, sometimes being used directly in engagement. I think here of the child armies in Africa or the Children's army of the Crusades as cases in point. Children who don't know what violence is are being sent to the front lines. They are also being used as shields or pawns in the game of politics. Incidentally, the film portrayed the younger Lucius who was sent as a messenger by Titus to Demetrius and Chiron to show Titus' loss of confidence in the world and deliver his weapons of allegiance. Demetrius manhandles the child who does not have the power to resist his captor. The real tragedy is not a loss of potential, but a loss of innocence and Taymor's adaptation reflects this fact.

One of the most significant additions that Taymor incorporated from the stage to the screen is what she calls *Penny Arcade Nightmares*, a sort of surrealistic cinematic montage devised as she explains:

“to portray the inner landscapes of the mind is affected by external actions. These stylized, haiku-like images appear at various points throughout the film counterpoising realistic events in a dreamlike and mythic manner. They depict, in abstract collages, fragments of memory, the unfathomable layers of a violent event, the metamorphic flux of the human, animal, and the divine. By the last of these surreal sequences, the line between illusion and substance becomes blurred. The nightmare takes over... madness becomes clarity and the unimaginable is realized.”²¹

The most significant of these Penny Arcade Nightmares (there are five in all) is the collage of seemingly fantastical, dreamlike images in succession being represented frame by frame as Lavinia writes down the names of her attackers, Chiron and Demetrius. We may recall that that one of the most brutal scenes portrayed in the film is the moment after the rape of Lavinia. She stands with stubs for hands and her tongue cut out, unable to name perpetrators of the crime. Through the Penny Arcade Nightmare, Taymor is successful in representing the horror of a rape victim asked to name her attackers and state their crimes, a traumatic recounting and re-living of the experience itself. When Lavinia manages to relate to Titus the story of the rape of Philomela, she goes on to inscribe the names of Chiron and Demetrius on the sand.

If we notice carefully, we see Lavinia as a Marilyn Monroe type figure, an objectified thing. In Act II, Chiron and Demetrius relate to Aaron how women are there just for the taking, and classify them as objects of lust or objects of stereotypical fancy. Demetrius tells Aaron in Act II, Sc. I:

*“Why mak’st thou it so strange?
She is a woman, therefore may be wooed;
She is a woman, therefore may be won;
She is Lavinia, therefore must be loved.
What, man! More water glideth by the mill
Than wots the miller of, and easy it is
Of a cut loaf to steal a shive, we know...”*

The figure of Lavinia is attacked from both ends by tigers, perhaps specifically chosen as Titus remarked that Rome is a wilderness of Tigers. Similarly, the rape of Lavinia took place in the forest which was seen to be the home of both tigers and deer. She is not killed but maimed and Titus tries to make sense of her martyred signs. Taymor notes that this Penny Arcade Nightmare *“happened right after the pit scene, before you actually tree stump...All of a sudden it hit me during the editing the right place for that PAN was in the flashback, as Lavinia is writing in the sand with the stick. I love it there because when a woman has to testify at a rape trial, she is re-experiencing the rape.”*²²

Taymor's film adaptation of the play is based around connections to history, films, music, and popular culture. Drawing parallels with both Jane Howell's 1985 BBC production of *Titus Andronicus* as well as Adrian Nobel's Royal Shakespeare Company production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996), Julie Taymor frames her film through the point of view of a child, Young Lucius. All these films critique the impact of violence on children through the use of a child character who acts as a liminal observer and witnesses the brutal violence that occurs

around them. Taymor's *Titus* is also particularly influenced by the post-World War Two Italian tradition of film making and contains many references to the films of Italian directors such as Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti. Through the mixture of periods, styles, culture and allusions that exist in Dante Ferreti's production design for *Titus*, Julie Taymor addresses the difficulties of contemporary society. Primarily achieved through the juxtaposition of 'moments' of comedy and ones of seriousness and horrific brutality, Julie Taymor re-contextualises *Titus Andronicus* in terms of contemporary social problems and in doing so, attempts to critique violence as entertainment in our culture as well as emphasise the impact of violence on children. Taymor becomes implicit in the system that she is attempting to criticize and her film *Titus* presents certain violence as justified, cathartic and entertaining.

Towards the close of the film, we see the cycle of revenge and vengeance coming to a close, seemingly centred on the actions of the young Lucius. The entire play operates based on the three elements of conflict, catastrophe, and retribution, the chronological determinant being the character at hand. The conflict with the Goths led to Titus' sacrifice of Alarbus that led to the revenge of Tamora fuelling Titus' revenge leading to tragic consequences. A play much like Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the cycle of revenge seems to be unending. In Taymor's film edition, we see the younger Lucius carrying the young child, the son of Aaron out of the Coliseum to a sunrise indicating the presence of hope, that innocence will prevail in a world ruled by violence. We knew that Aaron's child was spared in Act V, Sc. III, but there have been speculations where some productions declare him dead when the Romans went back on their promise. Here though, the message is significant for it opts for an ideal, peaceful society. The spirit of retribution, conflict, and catastrophe comes to an end with a note of hope.

Notes:

1. See Eugene M. Waith (ed.), "Introduction" in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p.1. Subsequent references, including act and scene divisions, are from this edition. A detailed discussion of the authorship question can also be found in Jonathan Bate's edited edition of the play – Jonathan Bate's (ed.) *Titus Andronicus* (The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series; London: Arden, 1995). It may be noted further that Taymor keeps to the original dialogues for most of the drama. In cases of shifts or discrepancies, notes will be furnished.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Manfred Draudt, "Rome is but a wilderness of Tigers: The Impact of *Titus Andronicus* on Jacobean revenge Tragedy" in *Colonial and Postcolonial Shakespeares: Papers and Proceedings of the World Shakespeare Conference, Calcutta 2000* (Kolkata: Avantgarde Press, 2001) pp. 243-55.
6. See A. W. Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1879), p. 442

7. A. L. Rowse, *Titus Andronicus*; Contemporary Shakespeare Series (Maryland: University of America Press, 1987), pg. 15
8. Julie Taymor, DVD Commentary for *Titus*; 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000
9. See The Charlie Rose interview of Julie Taymor (19 January, 2000) available at <https://www.tfana.org/news/productions/julie-taymor-charlie-rose> accessed on 14 September, 2019
10. *Titus* (1999) Film Reviews at <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/titus-2000> accessed on September 17, 2019
11. See Maria De Luca, Mary Lindroth and Julie Taymor, *Mayhem, Madness, Method: An Interview with Julie Taymor* in *Cineaste*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2000), pp. 28-31, published by Cineaste Publishers, Inc. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41689259> Accessed: 17/09/2019 11:37
12. Ibid, pg. 28
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995)
16. Deborah Willis, “The Gnawing Vulture”: Revenge, Trauma Theory, and “*Titus Andronicus*” in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), pp. 21-52
17. Ibid
18. See Ian Johnston, “Lecture on the Oresteia” as a lecture delivered, in part, at Malaspina College (now Vancouver Island University) in Liberal Studies 301 on September 25, 1995. That lecture was considerably revised on July 2000. This text is in the public domain, released July 2000 and found at <http://johnstoi.web.viu.ca/aeschylus/oresteiatofc.htm> accessed on 17.09.2019, 3.24 pm
19. Julie Taymor, DVD Commentary for *Titus*; 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000
20. See Note No. 11, Pg. 31
21. The text is taken from *The Director’s Notes on Titus* by Julie Taymor. The full e-text is available at <https://www.uv.es/~fores/TaymorJulie.uk.html> accessed on 17th September, 2019
22. See Note 11, pg. 30