Title of Paper: The Nature of Victorian Aversion to Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus
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Abstract: Much scholarship on Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus analyzes the use (or overuse) of violence and violent behavior. Literary scholarship on this play includes one glaring gap; there is little to no scholarship on Titus Andronicus and the Victorians. The central reason for this gap lies in the overwhelming Victorian aversion to Shakespeare’s first tragedy. 19th century audiences often espoused an outward veneer of virtue that prevented them from indulging plays that vigorously showcased violence the way that Titus Andronicus does. Reaching a grand total of fifteen murders, this play also touches on themes of rape, dismemberment, bodily mutilation, filicide, and cannibalism. For the “virtuous” Victorians, violent images like these resulted in the overall banning of this play’s production. Or could it be something else?

Hosting such infamous criminals as Jack the Ripper and Typhoid Mary, 19th century people were not unfamiliar with violence or criminal behavior. Banning a play like Titus Andronicus for its violent themes and imagery seems weak at best. However, this morally upright populace was known for suppressing anything deemed “unsavory.” Therefore, it would make more sense that the play’s thematic relevance would have struck a much stronger chord than its violence. I argue that performances of Titus Andronicus were banned because the types of excessive violence resonated too strongly with Victorian audiences.

Keywords: Titus Andronicus; Shakespeare; Victorian culture; spectacle; Victorian Theatre

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Introduction

While the existing body of scholarship on Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* analyzes the use (or overuse) of violence, this body includes one glaring gap: there is little to no scholarship on *Titus Andronicus* in the Victorian era. The central reason for this gap lies in the overwhelming Victorian aversion to Shakespeare’s first tragedy. Nineteenth-century audiences often espoused an outward veneer of virtue that prevented them from indulging in plays that vigorously showcased violence the way that *Titus Andronicus* does. Reaching a grand total of fifteen murders, this play also touches on themes of rape, dismemberment, bodily mutilation, family murder, and cannibalism. For the “virtuous” Victorians, violent images like these resulted in the overall banning of this play’s production. And yet, avidly consuming sensational materials about such infamous criminals as Jack the Ripper and Adelaide Bartlett, nineteenth-century people were not unfamiliar with violence or criminal behavior. Banning a play like *Titus Andronicus* for its violent themes and imagery while simultaneously popularizing brutal murderers seems paradoxical. However, this morally upright populace was known for suppressing anything deemed “unsavory.” It would make more sense that the play’s focus on justifying actions like betrayal, family murder, and cannibalism would have struck a much stronger chord than the staging of violent imagery. I argue that performances of *Titus Andronicus* were banned because the types of excessive violence contained therein resonated too strongly with Victorian audiences.
The “Virtuous Victorians”

With the variety of violence in both style and gore, it would seem as though the Victorians had every right to object to this play based on imagery alone. In a society concerned with upright morality and outward virtue, the action of *Titus Andronicus* would be objectionable – especially to the theatre-going upper class. However, an aversion to gore, especially of the murder and dismemberment variety, is not something Victorian scholars attribute to the culture. Judith Flanders, in her book *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime*, claims the Victorians invented “murder-sightseeing” where curious “visitors traipsed though the gore-spattered rooms, peering not only at the blood splatters and other grisly reminders of the atrocity, but also at the bodies themselves” (5-6). Considering they had a desire to see actual dead bodies of grisly murder victims, it seems hardly plausible that the fake gore of a staged play would so easily deter these same audiences.

The absence of scholarship on the topic of *Titus Andronicus* in the Victorian period (1837-1901) stems from the lack of stage adaptation that occurred during this time. For a while, the production of “Titus” was discouraged for its excessive violence, gore, and immorality. This banning even included the “*Titus Andronicus* [that] had been adapted in the seventeenth century by Edward Ravenscroft” that implied off-stage violence and greatly lessened the amount of violence that happened on stage (Waters 71). Historically, there was only one production of *Titus Andronicus* that occurred during the traditional Victorian period; Ira Aldridge, a famous Black actor who sought innovative African roles that could expand his portfolio,
spearheaded this version. In her book, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character*, Hazel Waters explains, while Aldridge found mainstream success as Othello, he “drastically reworked” *Titus* so that Aaron’s portrayal was much more sympathetic and, as a whole, the play’s “revolting scenes of necessity were omitted, and the catastrophe changed, so that, excepting the title, Tamora the Queen of the Goths, and some other characters, it had a very small resemblance to the original” (Waters 81). The rewriting of “Titus” created a play that, though less gory and violent, was much more approachable for Victorian audiences. In this light, it seems overwhelmingly illogical that they still had an aversion to the play when it omitted all those things they found objectionable. Because of this, it would make much more sense that the Victorians did not simply object to the gore of the play but the familiarity of the violence it implied.

While the list of violent Victorian criminals seems unending, two names stand out among the rest: Jack the Ripper and Adelaide Bartlett. While the actual crimes of Jack the Ripper occurred late in the Victorian period (1888-1895), he was not alone in committing violent crimes of a public nature. However, the Ripper exemplifies the kind of fear that settled itself in the hearts and minds of the Victorian populace. In a time before forensic science and the modern detective, the Ripper’s crime went unsolved and unpunished. Fear of Jack the Ripper stems from the idea that his crimes are “entirely unknowable. The date they began, or ended, is open to question; the number, and sometimes even the names, of the victims is disputed…there was no arrest, no trial, no verdict to draw a line under the case, only a shadowy figure and lists of suspects that is almost comic in its inclusiveness” (Flanders 224).
Compounding this fear was the belief that Jack the Ripper, with his surgical dissections of the corpses, was a man of means and education, resulting in widespread panic about the murderer who could be anyone – even aristocracy. The newspaper coverage of the Ripper, as well as most other famous murders of the day, increased widespread panic about the dangers of being cut down in cold blood. And the constant speculation by sources of varying repute meant that almost anyone could be capable of violence at this level. Taking these facts into consideration, the types of physical violence realized in “Titus” would have resonated all too strongly with Victorian audiences. To visually experience the dismemberment of Alarbus, Lavinia, and Titus was to experience one’s own dismemberment. Watching the murder of Bassanius, his irreverent disposal, and Lavinia’s rape and mutilation at the hands of Chiron and Demetrius, made visualizing one’s own emotional and physical suffering too real to stomach – especially for female viewers. Secondarily, watching Lavinia’s resulting helplessness mimicked the helplessness of women in a society that only allowed them the protection of their male superiors who, once dispatched, could no longer provide the security they needed.

Similarly, Adelaide Bartlett, made famous for the alleged poisoning of her husband, Edwin, enhanced social fears that plagued the Victorian people. In this particular crime, Edwin Bartlett “swallowed a lethal amount of liquid chloroform, and died” though there was much speculation about how the chloroform entered his system (Flanders 312). Poisoning was a preferable method of murder in the Victorian period as there were few means of identifying poison in a dead body. Furthermore, poison was often administered via food which enhanced fears about food preparation,
especially because many people had their food prepared by cooks or servants. Within
“Titus,” this fear would have been realized through Tamora’s ignorant cannibalism of
her two sons. The even more unsettling implication is that Titus, a man of means and
status, “plays the cook” and prepares the meal rather than a servant. In connection to
Bartlett’s alleged poisoning of her husband, there lies a fear of food and what could
be hidden in it. The implication that food is not always what it seems held anxieties
about trust within one’s private circles. Tamora never suspects that Titus would enact
such visceral and barbaric revenge. By consuming the flesh and blood of her two
sons, Tamora has been poisoned, by Titus, through her food as consuming human
flesh is perceived as impure and immoral. Similar to the experience of watching the
dismemberment and rape at the beginning of the play, the dramatic irony of an
audience watching Tamora consume her sons without her knowledge echoed the
anxiety of unknowingly consuming poison in one’s supper.

Rounding out the social anxieties experienced in “Titus” through Bartlett’s
alleged crime, the idea that an individual can so easily murder a family member
unsettled audiences at base level. Bartlett, through this crime, successfully murdered
her husband – her family member though the bond of marriage. Murders involving
husbands and wives, and even children, popped up in newspapers, broadsides, and
pamphlets. When the most trusted people, family, have the capacity to turn against
you, it provides a bleak future where there is no one you can trust. According to
reports from the trial, Mrs. Bartlett was “a good wife” who often sought “her
husband’s approval” (Flanders 312). By all appearances, she was the ideal woman to
marry and start a family with. However, her capacity to attempt poisoning her
The husband mimicked the type of familial coldness present when Titus murders his son, Mutius. While the nature of the violence differs (poisoning is far less brutal than stabbing) the similarity between their crimes is altogether horrifying. Just as the previous comparisons, watching Titus coldly stab his son to death forced audiences to envision themselves as Mutius or, for a darker comparison, envision themselves as the murderer of their family member. Flanders sums up, while “murder as sensation and entertainment became ubiquitous,” the sheer amount and authenticity of violence in Titus Andronicus was too much for a Victorian audience to stomach (1). When examining the parallel violence of Titus Andronicus and the Victorian era, it should come as no surprise that they objected to the violent imagery. However, the reason for this objection is not moral or ethical; it is because audiences seem to have seen themselves in the play, and the reflection was nothing short of unsavory.

**Violence in Titus Andronicus**

Within Shakespearean scholarship, it is no secret that Titus Andronicus remains the bloodiest and most violent of the Bard’s plays. Hosting fifteen corpses within its five acts, the play as it is written “was in some ways too much for the sensibilities of its early nineteenth-century audiences” (Waters 71). In a society that upheld, at the very least, outward moral virtue and propriety, the ghastly level of violence presented by Titus Andronicus repelled most theatre-goers. But the function of violence in this tragedy is not only to shock and awe. Instead, the violence highlights the hypocrisy of imperial cultural elitism (whether British or Roman). As the inheritors of Rome’s legacy, the sympathetic Andronici embody that which is civilized, whole, and good. In contrast, Tamora and her sons, the Goths, are the
The Victorian remnants of a conquered, barbaric civilization. For Victorians, the Andronici would have been the foil for Britain, the Goths a foil for India, Africa, Asia, and all other nations colonized by the British Empire. Through this lens, portraying both the Goths and the Andronici as vengeful, violent, and comprehensively unforgiving people, Victorian audiences would have been repelled by the play’s violence because it commented on the inherent equality present in humanity rather than Britain’s superiority to less “civilized” nations. Each variety of violence explored in the play (i.e. rape, dismemberment, family murder, and cannibalism) served to point out to the Victorians that their own society suffered from acts of barbarism that they preferred to keep in the dark.

The most famous of these barbarisms, the rape of Lavinia, Titus’s daughter, functions as the most shocking display of brutality throughout the plot of “Titus Andronicus.” Tamora, Queen of the Goths and new Empress of Rome, urges her sons to not only murder Lavinia’s husband, but then proceed to rape her on her husband’s dead body, cut out her tongue, and chop off her hands to prevent her from accusing her attackers verbally or in writing. Despite his many other sufferings, this is the act that Titus cannot abide – even more so than the murder of his sons or the mutilation of his own hand. Before murdering Chiron and Demetrius, Titus exclaims, “You killed her husband… her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity, inhuman traitors….you could not beg for grace” (V.ii. 176, 179-181, 183). While the act of rape occurs quickly, as does the removal of Lavinia’s tongue and hands, it reverberates throughout the remainder of the play because Lavinia does not die as a result of her injuries. Instead, the audience is forced to relive
her brutalization for the duration of the play as she spends much of the latter half on
stage, walking around with her stubs and blood stained mouth. Shakespeare indeed
highlights this visceral imagery with lines such as Titus’s direction to Lavinia (after
his own hand is amputated) to “bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth”
(III.i. 286-87). The matter is not resolved quickly like in the rape of Lucrece. Lavinia
does not kill herself and is not killed by anyone else until the very end of the play.
The rape, happening in Act II, remains forced into the mind of the watcher. Just as
Lavinia can never forgive or get past the violence done to her, neither can the
audience.

While there is only one rape in “Titus Andronicus there is an abundance of
dismemberment. In the opening act of the play, Tamora’s son, Alarbus, exits to be
sacrificed per Roman customs against a conquered people. Despite Tamora’s plea for
her son’s life, Titus insists, “Alarbus’ limbs are lopped, and entrails feed the
sacrificing fire” (I.i. 143-44). This first act of bodily mutilation “initiates the play’s
cycle of dismemberment and revenge that will lead to [Titus’s] family’s downfall and
suffering” (Paster 165). Beginning the play with a brutal, violent act such as this,
Shakespeare sets a foundation for to the types of violence that will follow. The
aforementioned rape of Lavinia is not merely a sexual violation, but also an act of
dismemberment. Chiron and Demetrius have not only removed her virginity -- a
forceful removal of the hymen and, with it, her purity – but they took her hands and
tongue as well. Because she is a woman, Lavinia’s hands represent her function as a
wife and mother; she can no longer perform womanly duties dictated by both Roman
and Victorian societies. Without hands, her ability to cook, clean, soothe babies, do
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laundry, or groom herself have been stripped. By cutting out her tongue, the brothers have also removed her ability to speak and engage in any activity that requires verbal communication. For Shakespeare scholar Gail Kern Paster, the excessive dismemberment present in “Titus” represents “suffering as the locus of bodily self-experience” (167). Bodies, within the context of the play, are only vehicles for the experience of suffering. Therefore, dismemberments become the outward manifestation of internal suffering; the characters in “Titus” do not suffer in silence. Their suffering is made known to the audience through the constant stream of bodily mutilation that befalls most of the characters in the play. Titus, though the patriarch of the Andronici and the play’s “protagonist,” is forced to cut off his own hand in an attempt to spare the lives of his two remaining sons. However, a messenger arrives with “the heads of thy two noble sons, and…thy hand in scorn to thee sent back” (III.i.241-42). This action reinforces the idea that internal suffering joins with physical pain. Titus’s grief over the loss of his last two sons intersects with the pain of the dismembered hand. While this type of physical dismemberment occurs frequently throughout the play, one of the more peculiar acts of non-physical dismemberment would be Titus’s act of family murder, more specifically the murder of his child.

The inherent horror in family murder lies in the ability for an individual to kill those considered to be an extension of the self: family. While the ritual sacrifice of Alarbus is the first act of physical dismemberment in the play, it is Titus’s murder of Mutius, his son, is the first non-physical act of dismemberment and proves more shocking to both the play’s characters and its audience than the sacrifice. Compounding the horror of family murder is that fact that Titus, once the father of
twenty-five sons, now has only four left. For the average play-goer, it would be within the realm of belief that Titus would want to preserve the lives of those remaining four. However, Titus, angered with Mutius for preventing him from seeking out Lavinia (i.e. his property), states, “What, villain boy, Barr’st me my way in Rome? [He stabs Mutius]” (I.i.295-97). All the while, Mutius calls out to his brother, Lucius, for aid, but dies before Lucius enters the scene. This act horrifies not only the audience who have witnessed the first on stage murder of the play, but Lucius who scolds his father, “My lord, you are unjust, and more than so! In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son” (I.i.298-299). For “Titus,” family murder functions in an interesting way; Lucius’s admonishment of his father’s actions draws a human connection between these characters and the audience. Individuals have an instinct to protect their kin as they are a natural extension of themselves. Therefore, the audience would have an innate inability to see the justification in Titus’s action. Titus’s detachment from a child, his child, disturbs viewers because they cannot relate to it. This detachment from children causes dismay in viewers as they cannot process this as a part of the natural human experience. The dismemberment of child from parent goes against humanity’s instinct for preservation – this rings especially true for a country like Victorian Britain that, historically, placed great stock in parentage and legacy.

The last, and possibly most barbaric, act of violence in “Titus” is Tamora’s cannibalism of her two sons, Chiron and Demetrius. What comes as the final act of violence before the mass murder that concludes the play, Titus murders Chiron and Demetrius for their transgressions against the Andronici. In a dramatic monologue, he claims, “I’ll play the cook” and “grind your bones to dust, and with your blood and it
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I’ll make a paste, and of the paste a coffin I will rear; and make two pasties of your shameful heads…and in that paste let their vile heads be baked” (V.iii. 209, 190-93, 205). This scene is particularly gruesome because Titus comprehensively dehumanizes Chiron and Demetrius. Initially, he strips them of their names, stating, “The one is Murder; and Rape is the other’s name” then slits their throats, like that of an animal, and drains their blood into a basin being held by Lavinia’s stubbed arms (V.ii.159-60). As horrifying as this scene is itself, the gore is compounded by the following scene where the “baked pasties” are served to and consumed by Tamora, Chiron and Demetrius’s mother. Titus not only insists upon her consumption of the human flesh pies, but also ensures that Tamora knows what she has done before he kills her. According to Paster, though “Shakespeare makes it impossible for us to sympathize with Tamora, he also lets us see her undergo, in horror, the climactic unmaking of her world” just as we have seen Titus’s world unmade (168). Though Tamora, a Goth barbarian, enacts the act of cannibalism it is Titus, a member of the civilized Roman world, masterminds the situation. The equality between their crimes (cannibalism and murder) ensures the play ends on a note of barbaric equivalency between these two different classes of people.

Conclusion

While *Titus Andronicus* will never be considered one of Shakespeare’s greatest triumphs, the violence and actions of the characters represent something universal about human nature. The human capacity for violence is ubiquitous and the play serves to remind people that, regardless of class, gender, or life experience, there is a capacity for violence inside each and every one of us. For the Victorians, the
The Victorian play’s focus on betrayal, family murder, cannibalism, rape, and dismemberment, resonated on a level that made viewing the action on stage supremely difficult. It was this internal difficulty that led to the Victorian rejection of *Titus Andronicus* and not the physical staging of these “excessively violent” acts. The characters and plot of *Titus Andronicus* provided Victorians audiences with an element of verisimilitude that largely prevented its production for the duration of the era.
Works Cited


