

The silencing of women in titus andronicus and jane eyre



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To what extent do literary texts silence the voices of women? Discuss with reference to William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1589-94) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Through questioning the extent to which literary texts silence female voices without particularising time period or genre, the title question allows critics to provide their own specifications. Theorists such as Sharon Wilson and Jack Zipes argue that fairy tales are 'the foundation of literary forms', [1][2] and I believe that this makes the genre an interesting place to examine the silencing of women generally. Therefore throughout this essay, I will argue that William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1589-94) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), utilise evolved forms of traditional fairy tale conventions, and that the extent to which women's voices are silenced/amplified within the texts comes through adherence and lack thereof to these conventions. Numerous academics have suggested that fairy tales act to silence women,[3][4][5] so logically the text which most reflects norms of the genre will most silence women. Revenge, the focal theme of *Titus Andronicus*, (1589-94), and the motivation for the majority of the play's action, also acts to link it with the fairy tale genre; Maria Tatar contends that fairy tales 'delighted in the possibilities of describing divine revenge',[6] and Katherine Roberts asserts that '[fairy tale] justice is primarily retributive'.[7] The nature of revenge enacted on the characters of Lavinia and Tamora particularly, within *Titus Andronicus* is telling of the silencing of women, with both of their 'punishments' being reliant on gender roles. The assault of Lavinia by Chiron and Demetrius is a crucial point within *Titus Andronicus*. In both the play's Roman setting, and Shakespeare's

Elizabethan era, societal norms dictated that women remained chaste; indeed, Lavinia is described in terms of chastity throughout, (' this minion stood upon her chastity', ' nice preserved honesty', ' some Tereus hath deflowered thee').[8][9][10] In taking this from her, her rapists take the majority of her identity, transforming her instead into the ' innocent persecuted heroine' archetype, common within the fairy tale genre from which it emerged.[11][12] By reducing Lavinia's character to this trope, she becomes anonymised, and thus silenced. Furthermore, by physically silencing Lavinia through removing her tongue – which Lori Schroeder notes is emphasised by Marcus' soliloquy upon finding her[13] – she is initially unable to identify her rapists, and as often occurs to wronged females in fairy tales, she ' is obliged to bear the responsibility for sexual violation'.[14] Moreover, once Lavinia has identified her rapists, Titus murders her, indicating that once ' ravaged' her only purpose was helping him achieve vengeance for her lost virtue. Comparatively, the retribution inflicted upon Tamora exploits the maternal gender role. Motherhood is stripped from her through her sons' murders, the trauma of which is intensified through her unknowing participation in cannibalising them. As much as Lavinia personifies chastity, ' Tamora is an intense embodiment of motherhood';[15] depriving her of this deprives her of her womanhood, socially suppressing her. Similarly, Jane Eyre can also be regarded as subscribing to fairy tale conventions, with Jane's rise from orphan to nobleman's wife reflecting the ' rags to riches' narrative; ' fairy tales trace a development from ... from punishment to reward... the dissolution of one nuclear family to the formation of a new one'.[16] However, the influence of early Feminism on Brontë is evident; far from behaving as the ' innocent persecuted heroine', <https://assignbuster.com/the-silencing-of-women-in-titus-andronicus-and-jane-eyre/>

Jane takes on the conventionally masculine hero role, where 'from an initial position of social inferiority, the heroes recover their social status while at the same time putting brides in their proper places'.^[17] Certainly, from even Rochester and Jane's initial encounter, he is unconventionally presented as being reliant on her, having injured himself. Jane 'saves' him during the fire in his bedroom, and when she leaves Thornfield, Rochester is blinded, suggesting a helplessness without her. Indeed, academics such as Covert have argued that Jane acts as both a moral and physical saviour.^[18] This analysis, far from reading Jane as being 'silenced', suggests Jane has a strong, narrative voice, positioning her as not only equal to Rochester, but superior. However, researchers such as Carl Plasa,^[19] Andrew Bennett, and Nicholas Royle,^[20] have noted that regardless of whether Jane is silenced, Bertha, Rochester's apparently mentally ill first wife, is inevitably more silenced as a racially other woman. Creole Bertha is dehumanised throughout the novel; when describing Bertha to Rochester, Jane uses the non-human pronoun 'it', and describes her as a 'vampyre'.^[21] This description generates connotations of the folkloric 'succubus' to exploit and reinforce the 'unchaste Creole woman' empire stereotype,^[22] dismissing Bertha as being a 'drain' on the empire, as a succubus was said to 'drain' men's health and sexuality. In *Titus Andronicus* also, the silencing of ethnic minority women is relevant. Similarly to Brontë's dehumanisation of Bertha, Shakespeare uses animalistic imagery in describing 'enemy of Rome' Tamora;^[23] her son is murdered sacrificially,^[24] as if he is an animal, she is described as a 'tiger',^[25] 'raven',^[26] and 'lion',^[27] and her body is discarded in the wilderness, to be consumed by animals.^[28] The effect of this is a conveyance of Eurocentrism; since she is not from 'civilised' Rome,

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Tamora isn't human. By dehumanising Tamora, Shakespeare renders her unsympathetic. Thus, though literary critics can empathise with the actions of Titus, blaming his murders on grief over Lavinia's rape,[29] or suggesting that – as Titus Andronicus is a renaissance play – his 'hamartia' is responsible,[30] they rarely afford the same empathy for Tamora's actions; her motivations are silenced. Dehumanising Tamora also means that though the rape of Roman Lavinia is presented as a horrific act, when the young male character of 'boy' encourages the rape of Tamora – 'their mother's bedchamber should not be safe'[31] – he is applauded by Marcus. Tamora, despite having been widowed by the Romans, abducted by the Romans, and having had her son murdered by the Romans, is dismissed as a 'Machiavellian and monstrous monarch'.[32] Within both texts, the process of dehumanising 'racial others', can be seen as an evolution of the fairy tale genre; where previously literal animals acted as villains, (bears, wolves, etc.), in Jane Eyre and Titus Andronicus, Bertha and Tamora assume the roles of the 'non-human' antagonists. In writing this essay, I aimed to consider how Brontë and Shakespeare utilised conventions of the fairy tale within their work, and how this affected the extent to which women were silenced within their respective texts. Within Titus Andronicus, women are silenced through means of revenge – a common fairy tale motif – which rely on feminine norms of virginity and motherhood; Jane Eyre, uses a traditional fairy tale narrative but challenges the notion of masculine heroes rescuing feminine damsels, and amplifies women's voices through its use of a female main character. Both writers use tactics of dehumanisation to silence women who fall outside of a contemporary Eurocentric view of the world, with Brontë referencing a folkloric creature to do so, and Shakespeare describing his '<https://assignbuster.com/the-silencing-of-women-in-titus-andronicus-and-jane-eyre/>

racial other' in terms of animals. Both of these literary devices leave the characters comparable to the non-human villains of traditional fairy tales. Conclusively, that Titus Andronicus is more conformative to fairy tale conventions than Jane Eyre, and that women are silenced to a much higher extent within the play, must be recognised. However, it should also be recognised that both texts silence racially other women, indicating that whilst Charlotte Brontë may be slightly more unwilling to silence British women through fairy tale conventions, 'the foundation of all literary forms' does indeed still provide a foundation for Brontë's limited 'amplification' of women overall.