

The real hero of titus andronicus



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I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble -Augustus Caesar (63 BC – 14 AD) In his essay, *Titus Andronicus and the Mythos of Shakespeare's Rome*, Robert Miola uncovers and explores the myths Shakespeare uses as bedrock for the background and plot of his first Roman tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. Most notably, Miola discusses two Ovidian myths, *The Rape of Philomela* and *The World's Four Ages*. *The Rape* provides Shakespeare with his basic characters and the events involving Lavinia, his Philomela, while Ovid's fourth age of iron describes Shakespeare's physical Rome, "a quintessentially iron city," writes Miola, "a military establishment protected by walls and filled with sword-carrying soldiers" (Mythos 91). The ancient Roman myth of the God Saturn, who devoured his children to remain in power himself, must have been another story Shakespeare used to develop his Roman characters in *Titus*, Miola says. For obvious proof, he points to the name of the emperor, Saturninus, and the final gruesome banquet during which this emperor literally eats his stepsons. Miola also cites Virgil's *Aeneid* as one of Shakespeare's primary influences. "Shakespeare's Rome, like Virgil's," Miola parallels, "was constructed over time by the play of the poetic imagination on diverse materials" (Mythos 95). Miola's discussion of the various sources Shakespeare brought together to create the Rome he illustrates in *Titus* is convincing. Thus, his final words on the subject, "The eternal city [Rome] is made from an ephemeral medley of things Roman... Any approach which seeks to fit... Shakespeare's Rome to a single... bed does violence to the heterogeneity of the city's origins and character," are ones I respect. In this essay, I want to explore the human character Shakespeare gives "Rome herself" (V. iii. 72) through his consistent personification of the city, and his simultaneous dehumanization, or

characterization of his manifestly human characters. Rather than this being a 'singular' interpretation, I think my reading directly supports the "heterogeneity of the city's... character" of which Miola speaks. All the persons Shakespeare depicts in Titus are two dimensional, either good or bad. The dividing line falls between those who support Titus, the tragic warrior hero, and those on the side of Tamora, the evil Queen-empress. The former are noble and selfless, demonstrating Roman pietas, while the latter are ignoble and selfish. In Jack E. Reese's essay, *The Formalization of Horror in Titus Andronicus*, he makes the point that Tamora and her sons' allegorical dressing-up as "Revenge, Murder, and Rapine can be viewed as a symbol of the characterization of the entire work" (Horror 79). In this scene, they are as they are, the symbol is exactly the same as the person. The only two characters who might be said to escape the dichotomy are Titus and Aaron the Moor. In Rome, Titus "sacrifices" both his son and his daughter, says Miola, "on the altar of his own personal honor" (Family 67). It is fair to say that personal honor is his concern in killing his offspring, for Mutius represents shameful filial disobedience (or mutiny) and Lavinia represents his inability to protect her and is a reminder of a shameful act done not only to her, but to her whole Andronici family too. It is also evident, however, that his true motivation was to act as selflessly as possible and that his "pride and misguided zeal" simply caused him to make "several tragic errors" (Horror 79). He kills his son to show he loves Rome more than his own blood. He kills his daughter so she might not live on in "shame" (V. iii. 40), showing he loves her honor more than his desire to keep her alive. Likewise, Aaron maintains, unlike all the other parents in Titus, who do everything from selling their children for gold, to killing them for pride, to eating them at

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banquets, an insurmountable desire to preserve the life of his illegitimate son. Again, though, the possible complexity this wish implies is undermined when we examine his motivation, a selfish desire to make himself immortal and un-aging through the instrument of his son, “ This myself, the vigor and picture of my youth” (IV. ii. 107-8, italics mine). In fact, the only ‘ character’ that has a range of emotions worthy of a serious artful depiction of a human is not a human at all. It is the city, Rome herself. The adjectives Shakespeare uses to describe her cover the whole spectrum. Starting from the negative side: in Demetrius’ opinion, she’s “ ambitious” (I. i. 132), later, Lucius finds her “ proud” (III. i. 289). At other times she is “ despising” (IV. ii. 113), “ ungrateful” (IV. iii, 17, IV. iii. 33, V. i. 12), and capable of being “ forlorn and desperate” (V. iii. 74). On the entirely other side, she has “ hope” (IV. ii. 13), she can be “ kind” (I. i. 165), and she can even “ reward” her followers “ with love” (I. i. 82). Likewise, her way of dressing, like any person, varies to suit her mood, both decorative and practical, beautiful and sad. Sometimes, she wears the “ Gracious Lavinia” as a “ rich ornament” (I. i. 52) on her “ glorious body” (I. i. 187). Then, at other times, she shows respect for her dead warriors by wearing “ mourning weeds” (I. i. 70). Rome is the only one who can reach across the spectrum of human emotion like this, from the devilish feeling of “ ingratitude” to the saintly acts of being “ loving” and “ kind.”

Now that Titus’s central, most human personality has surfaced, we must ask after her development. What is this complex human-esque doing throughout the play? Although her name is repeated over and over to punctuate lines and lend authority, Rome debuts in the first act as “ headless” (I. i. 186). She remains so even after Saturninus becomes Emperor because he is not strong enough to lead, as is evidenced by Tamora’s power to effect change in the

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state. In the second act, the manifestation of Rome's awful dismemberment comes across in the loss of her senses of hearing and sight in relation to those she should be most concerned with: the Empress, the princes, and the princess when they are in the forest. "The palace," the seat of Rome's power, Shakespeare tells us... is equipped with "eyes and ears" (II. i. 128). But Rome is deaf and blind, she must be, she is headless, to the rapes and murders that occur. By the end of the second act, though, Rome's dismemberment stops and continues only on the bodies of her inhabitants. Firstly, and most heinously, we find the mutilated and raped Lavinia. Having lost her tongue and hands, she perfectly complements and completes Rome's own loss of the human senses. Where Rome has become deaf and blind, Lavinia has now lost taste and touch. A scene later, she represents the loss of the final sense, smell, in her meeting with her father, Titus, who compares her to a "lily almost withered" (III. i. 113). In the next scene, Titus himself chops off his own hand. This is followed hard by the presentation of his two younger sons' heads to him. The boys mimic Rome's own current state of headlessness. Finally, the dismemberment carried out on her inhabitants pushes beyond Rome's own compromised position. This happens when Titus slaughters Tamora's two sons and removes their "blood," then "grind[s] their bones to powder small" and "bake[s]" their "vile heads" (V. ii. 197-200). This final act of dismemberment is the most complete possible as it separates the boys' bones from themselves over and over again until it is only a "powder," the result of hundreds of detachments. In a perfectly balanced turn when this ultimate act of dismemberment occurs, Rome promises to become her full self once more. Marcus will "teach" the Romans to "knit" her "broken limbs again into one body; Lest Rome herself be bane

unto herself" (V. iii. 69-72). Her being "bane unto herself" does have a precedent too, for she displaced her own falling apart onto the bodies of the family most responsible for her continued strength, the Andronici, and the bodies of her own Empress's sons. Rome's dynamic growth sets her apart from the play's 'real' humans and establishes her as the true hero, who evolves from a state of being in scattered contradictory parts to being on the brink of wholeness and singular individuality. Where the people deteriorate, learning nothing but more hurtful revenge from their pain, the city improves, learning the value of unity from awful discord. Rome is the only figure with whom the audience can reasonably sympathize. She is the only dynamic and complex character, the only hero. Aaron the Moor's final question, "Ah, why should wrath be mute and fury dumb?" (V. iii. 183) is an oddly apt end to Titus Andronicus. This is because the answer to his rhetorical question is the moral of Shakespeare's play. A body which is wrathful and furious is necessarily out of accord with itself, and so, of course, it does not possess the human ability that is reliant on the synchronized work of mouth, tongue, throat, and diaphragm. The city, Rome, is about to win that fine synchronicity when the play ends. All the literary essays I've read on Titus Andronicus begin with somewhat comic defenses of the work, citing the seemingly blind criticisms of everyone from the seventeenth century Ravenscroft who said that Titus was "incorrect" and "indigested" — "rather a heap of rubbish than a structure" (Waith's Intro 11) to the twentieth century T. S. Eliot who called Titus "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (Horror 82 footnote) to MacCallum who attributed it simply to "Shakespeare's pupilage and youth" and refused to even categorize it as one of his 'Roman plays' (Roman 177). It is

understandable that so many essays start on this note for it provides the perfect platform on which to begin praising Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus. This is because, if one has enjoyed the work, it seems obvious that these critics, resorting to such thick language as "stupid" were missing something. In my opinion, as I have outlined in my essay, these critics were unable to see the story as being about Rome, a person, whose faults, strengths and inner turmoil is examined through the course of the play. Accordingly, these limited readers read the faults they themselves suffered from onto Shakespeare's work, thinking it was un'structured' because they couldn't see the structure, 'uninspired' because they were too uninspired to think of the plot in novel terms, and not even about Rome, probably simply because, they weren't in Rome.

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