



Eating Revenge: Cannibalism, Gendered Violence, and the Body Politic in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus

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Abstract

This paper examines the trope of cannibalism as prevalent primarily in the Shakespearean revenge tragedy Titus Andronicus, whereby it collapses into a site where revenge, gendered violence, and the politics of the body are juxtaposed. Harking back to Ovidian and Senecan engagement with the theme of cannibalism and body politics, Shakespeare's examination of cannibalism in the play acts as a dual metaphor for spectacular violence and a sustained analogy for the patriarchal consumption of the female body. The paper accordingly argues about the ramified possibilities of political inspection of the acts of ingestion, dismemberment, and the event of the Thyestean banquet within the play, beyond them being just carriers of disruptive potential for the aesthetics of shock. This paper further explores Shakespeare's invocation of and departure from classical sources to explore the facets of sexual violence and compromised feminine agency within a staggering patriarchal order, the turpitude of revenge as a misogynistic displacement of culpability upon the female maternal body, as well as the attribute of "othering" as both a climactic symptom of the relentless hunger for consumption and the symbolic regurgitation of the feminized and racialized bodies within a colonial and necropolitical economy. Ultimately, a close reading of the play will draw on intersecting frameworks of feminist literary criticism, Body Studies, classical reception, Gothic affect, and colonial libidinal theories to contend that cannibalism becomes the primary rhetorical, theatrical, political, and literary device in the play through which Shakespeare dramatizes the disruption of paradigms and boundaries between civilization and savagery, self and the other, and victim and the perpetrator, whilst revealing the impossibility of redemption and resolution within a world strewn by revenge and destruction.

Keywords: Cannibalism, Swallowing womb, Ingestion, Otherness, Dismemberment.

William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (Third Series. Edited by Jonathan Bate, Arden Shakespeare, 1995) has been known as a canonical Elizabethan drama within the ambit of Revenge Tragedies, involving an unrelenting chain of violence and grotesque that hinges on revenge, rape, mutilation, dismemberment, torture, cannibalism, sacrifice, and exile. T.S. Eliot famously dismissed it in a 1932 essay as "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written," perhaps owing to its sheer gratuitousness and unnecessary acts of continuous violence (qtd. In Bate 1). The play violent inception is inaugurated with the ritualistic sacrifice of the Goth queen Tamora's son, Alarbus, by the protagonist Titus Andronicus, in disregard of the pleas of the queen, who later on elevates her position both

as a revenger and political authority by marrying Saturninus. Tamora avenges Titus by influencing her sons to rape and mutilate Lavinia. This, along with other violent events, forms the central action of the play. Herbert Farjeon, after watching one of the earliest productions at the Old Vic mounted by Robert Atkins, described the play as "one of the most Grand Guignolesque of all Elizabethan plays" – a work of "stage frightfulness" in which "horror piled on horror" (403). Shakespeare indulges in Senecan and Ovidian sources, primarily the Atrean model of the former and Ovid's tale of Philomela being the later. He departs from the plot of the 18th-century Elizabethan chapbook that told this story, mostly to bring about grotesque sensationalism and the Roman obsession with excess, majorly concerning the metaphors of the body politic, revenge and cannibalism.

Jonathan Bate, in *Shakespeare and Ovid*, pointing to the overlapping configuration of the two central rape narratives of Philomel and Lucrece, rightly describes Shakespeare's use of sources in *Titus* as "composed out of a series of precedents in the dramatic repertoire of the period and a series of patterns in Shakespeare's reading of the classics" (Bate 104).

Katharine Eisaman Maus, in her introduction to *Titus Andronicus* of *The Norton Shakespeare*, says that the "Rome-effect" that Shakespeare himself had talked about is comprised of an "eclectic process of extracting and combining motifs from a variety of classical stories" (80)

Titus Andronicus is definitely a revenge tragedy, one that follows from the inception of the genre by Shakespeare's predecessor Thomas Kyd. Plays like Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, and other dramas of the late 1580's are remarkable for their theatrical disposition and culture of spectacular bodily violence, corporeal excess and cannibalistic acts that are evocatively referred to as "bloody banquets" - which marked the genre's penchant for transgression. *Titus Andronicus* showcases this in one of its scenes, where Titus warns his daughter's assailants:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
Like to the earth swallow her own increase.
This is the feast that I have bid her to,
And this the banquet she shall surfeit on (5.2.186-93)

In keeping with the "*scelus*" or the unspeakable crime, the only way that the protagonist in question seeks self-satisfaction is by out-revenging the revenger. Seneca writes, "an act is not avenged, unless it is surpassed". Chiron and Demetrius, the rapists of Lavinia, are the prototypes of Tereus, not only in the rape but also far exceeded him in the act of cutting out not just Lavinia's tongue but also her hands so that she, unlike Philomela, cannot reveal the name of her assailants. The unspeakable grief and horror that Titus encounters is beyond the paradigms that is usually seen in revenge tragedies, which makes him turn to madness. Augustus Wilhelm von Schlegel, in *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, draws a pointed parallel between Titus's madness to Lear's because it allows for a wildness of expression and passion not permitted in rational discourse. Titus and Lear break the bounds of civilisation and explore an underside of tragic passion. In Titus's case, this wildness finds its ultimate expression in the cannibalistic banquet (253-54).

Shakespeare complicates the Senecan influence in the play by attributing the Atrean role to both Aaron and Titus, thereby disallowing any simple moral alignment; as both Titus and Aaron go on to occupy roles of cannibalistic avengers. The Senecan *Thyestes* is a major influence behind the horrendous banquet that Titus arranges at the end of the play, whereby he finally accomplishes his act of revenge by cooking Tamora's sons and feeding them to her:

Like to the earth that swallow her own increase.
This is the feast that I have bid her to,
And this is the banquet she shall surfeit on:
Far worse than Philomel you used my daughter,
And worse than Progne I will be revenged. (Shakespeare 5.2.191-194)

Titus Andronicus exceeds the classical limits of revenge and grotesque in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Thyestes* by accumulating spectacular acts of violent consumption that collapse the boundaries between justice and savagery. Derek Dunne in *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice* explains, "the Thyestian treatment of Chiron and Demetrius is gruesome in the extreme, but they are themselves guilty of the rape and dismemberment of Lavinia" (83). The use of the Senecan model by Shakespeare was therefore not just a means of seeking inspiration from a source, but also using it as a model to invoke revenge as a form of "justice". Seneca establishes a relationship between vengeance and excess. In *Thyestes*, Atreus punishes his brother for having adultery with his wife because, "since adultery left Atreus unsure of his heirs' paternity, the very fact of Thyestes' children being Thyestes' made them peculiarly killable." (Kerrigan, 116). Similarly, the fact that Tamora also orchestrated the rape of Lavinia through her own sons made Titus kill them, cook them into pasties, and feed them only to her.

Lucius invokes metaphors of consumption at the very beginning of the play, which drives us towards the imminent case of cannibalism that would take place later in the play, "Let's hew his limbs till they be clean consumed." (Shakespeare 1.1.132). A disconcerting structural symmetry is presented in the play. Alarbus's limbs are dismembered in Act 1, anticipating Lavinia's mutilation, her fate to be "lopped and hewed" in Act 2; Tamora is made to kneel and pray for her son's life in the opening scene of the play, foreshadowing that Titus would be made to do the same. Consumption is supposed to liberate and unite certain parties. In *Titus Andronicus*, however, the same occasion for reunification degrades all parties involved. Violence propagates with the mechanical logic of a self-consuming system. Lavinia, upon being subjected to barbaric torment, has been deprived of one of the many primary functions in life, eating. As Taylor and Duhaime observe, Lavinia becomes "a silent female victim of male violence, for whom the normal social rituals of eating and drinking have turned into a nightmare" (89).

The banquet, which should have been a mode of pleasure, is therefore turned into a walking nightmare for Tamora. The Goths' all-surpassing heinousness deprives Lavinia of her humanness, so Titus ensures that he will deprive Tamora of hers, as a mode of retaliation. The act of eating, then, is maniacally subverted into an act of cannibalism.

In a way, this act of eating one's own kind, or Cannibalism, typifies the idea of revenge served in "kind", thus uncovering one's own inhumanity. The Goths' vengeance on Lavinia for the murder of Alarbus renders Lavinia into an unreachable victim who has lost

the power of language and has steered far away from human discernibility. Marcus takes respite in a baroque of speech to jarringly express Lavinia's mutilated state, creating an extremely uncomfortable read. Titus, on the other hand, defers his grief to the elaborate and explicit banquet of cannibalism, having lost words to express his grief. This, at its very utmost, depicts the key rhetoric of Senecanism, through Titus's reliance on the full and terrible expression of his passion, by "rejecting the counsel of reason and moderation" (Miola 28). Tamora refers to Titus's Senecan *furor* depicted by his paralyzed grief, which converts into an engine of revenge as "cruel, irreligious piety" (Shakespeare 1.1.133).

When in Act 3, Titus is presented with the sight of a mutilated Lavinia, his heart turns to stone out of shock and pathos. He must break into "consuming sorrow", as Marcus calls it, as the human heart with suppressed grief is bound to shatter into pieces (Shakespeare 3.1.62). Consumption is a very important metaphor that continues to lurk around the problem of cannibalism in the play, because it is only after sorrow has eaten away his heart that Titus turns into a revenger, kills his own daughter, and makes Tamora unwittingly and ignorantly devour her own sons.

Lavinia, through her act of writing with a phallic symbol, the pen, morphs into a cannibal while inscribing, "Stuprum. Chiron. Demetrius" (Shakespeare 4.1.78). Her mouth re-enacts the "swallowing womb" of Act 2 when she consumes the phallic signifier and reclaims her discourse by overturning the logic of her violation. Her silenced mouth ironically speaks by ingesting the weapon of patriarchal authority. Wynne-Davies identifies this as the play's central ingestive irony: "it is through the consumption of a pen that Lavinia regains the power of communication, and at the end of the play Tamora will literally eat her children" (220). Robin L. Bott, however, argues that the consuming of the male signifier is another act of penetration, which, though Lavinia physically takes control of, is orchestrated by her father and uncle. This symbolises the return to patriarchal agencies of control that appropriate the act of revenge that Procne orchestrates against Tereus on behalf of Philomena. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the rapist father's uncontrollable and violent lust is punished through the literalized ingestion of his own child in the form of a pie. But, in making a woman the reader of another woman's story, Ovid creates a source of feminine community of revenge, which Shakespeare deliberately erases, leaving both Lavinia and Tamora at opposing ends of the rape and revenge. Even though Tamora's son's sacrifice is the engine of the plot, her support of Lavinia's rape by Chiron and Demetrius renders her into a figure of the uncontrollable Goth mother who represents feminine anger, even at the cost of destroying another innocent female figure.

The arc of female agencies in the play is viciously circular, marked by the isolation of women within patriarchal families. This begins with Lavinia's partial agency through the rhetorically cannibalistic self-expressive act of mouthing the staff and revealing the names of her rapists with the help of Ovid's book, and ends with her return to being silenced by patriarchal agencies when she is killed by Titus. There is no conflict between marital and natal relations that the female characters in *Titus Andronicus* visit, which furthers the imposition of the complicated character of Procne into the plot. The substitution of Ovid's male rapist-cannibal with the figure of the "evil mother" in the play, as Karen Robertson argues, "not only separates feminine anger from feminine victimisation in rape but doubly visits punishments for rape on women's bodies" (Robertson 219). Robertson in "Who Cooks the Thyestean Banquet?" further emphasises how the male body in Ovid, as a

punishment that conflates rape with unlawful eating, visits cannibalism, thereby manifesting its disorder. As Burns argues, "feeding the tyrant this chilling meal aptly reverses the terms of the original rape": where Tereus forced his body into Philomela's, Procne "forces another body into Tereus's open mouth" (135). We realise how feeding the tyrant this chilling meal aptly reverses the terms of the original rape. As retribution for Tereus having forced his body into Philomela's, Procne here forces another body into Tereus's open mouth." (135-137). In *Titus Andronicus*, however, the violent intrusion into Lavinia's body is punished by a horrific ingestion, not by the rapists but by their mother, thus symbolising a sharp deviation from the original source of revenge that Shakespeare follows. Shakespeare's deviation from Ovid displays an extreme version of Elizaethan patriarchy, where the culpability for rape is transferred from the rapists to their mother. In this logic, women are simultaneously their victims and agents – a doubling of punishment that forecloses the possibility of feminine solidarity. Tamora's unwitting consumption of her own sons furthers the complicated misogynistic conflation between the devouring womb and the tomb of the earth into a singularly collapsible image of maternal destruction, leaving Lavinia, victim of rape, doubly dispossessed of any agency, once by depriving her of any feminine alliance and twice by the elision of the punishment of her actual violators.

Tamora unwittingly eats her own flesh and blood, showing the extent to which "oral vengeance" can go and represents the "incestuous intercourse" associated with the malevolent mother (Kolin 101). The demonization of maternal anger that ensues from her son being killed materialises Tamora into a cannibal, who, along with her sons, was already labelled as "inhuman traitors" (Shakespeare 5.2.177).

Titus, who prepares the bodies of Tamora's sons, declares:

So, now bring them in, for I'll play the cook,
And see them ready against their mother comes.
(Shakespeare 5.2.204-05).

He later asks:

Will't please you eat?
Will't please your highness feed?
(Shakespeare 5.3.53).

The first question appears deceptively hospitable, offered from one human to another, while the second invokes a more animalistic register, as David B. Goldstein argues (99). The rejection of the Other-Tamora, by the Self – Titus, thus renders her both cannibalistic and animalised.

When Titus cuts the Goth Brothers' throats with his remaining hand, Lavinia collects their blood in the bowl held between her stumps. The bowl becomes metonymic of Lavinia's own feminine position as a vessel, but this time, she also is a participant in a cannibalistic revenge, as she consumes the blood of her tormentors back into her body. This renders her from a passive vessel to an active participant. Lavinia's cannibalism in the play is symbolic, not literalized, but it functions, as James argues, to "contaminate and digest literary sources" (123) that had cast her solely as a hapless victim. Titus engages Lavinia in a rather disturbing act: "And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed: Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth." (3.1.282-283). the act of carrying Titus's severed

hand in her mouth furthers Lavinia's symbolic ingestion of the blood of her perpetrators into a cannibalistic iconography of dismemberment.

The structural composition of the play is cannibalistic itself, as it begins and ends with acts of ingestion or theatrical cannibalism, with the opening noted by the Tomb of Andronici acting as a "swallowing" pit and closing with Tamora's womb turning into a matricidal tomb that consumes her own children.

While rape forms one of the central issues in the play, one of the corporal symbols is the "swallowing womb" (2.3.239), described variously as a "detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" (224), an "unhallowed and bloodstained hole" (210), and a "devouring receptacle, / as hateful as Cocytus' misty mouth" (235-36). This imagery speaks to both the female genitalia and the all-consuming "sexual mouth" of the feminine earth, which exists outside the male order of Rome and is, in a twisted way, sought to be controlled by it. Lavinia, who herself symbolizes the "all-consuming bloody pit" (Willbern 174), is thus suppressed because the control of the "womb" is necessary to keep the patriarchal order of society functional. The hole is one of familial descent as well as the centre of female sexuality. The play opens up paradoxical images of female sexuality, which Wynne-Davies articulates precisely: female sexuality in the play is defined by "the brutal denial of its existence," a space where "women can be both consumed and consuming" (231). Lavinia then, as the mutilated bride, reminds us of the unconscious proximities of sexuality, cannibalism, rape, death, and dismemberment on which the play builds.

The cannibalism and brutal violence depicted in the play are not without their purpose. It plays a major part in the presentation of the hero's metamorphosis into a cruel avenger. Waith's assessment remains definitive on this point where he argues that the violence in Shakespeare's play is "far from gratuitous" and constitutes "an integral part of his dramatic technique" (68-69). Philip C. Kolin, in "Come down and welcome me to this world's light", attempts to draw a pointed contemporary parallel, as he believes that *Titus's* Rome is analogous to contemporary America's violent landscape its gang warfare, rape culture, and political terrorism that aligns with the play's continuous logic of corporeal excess (305-316). Following this comment, we can bring to the fore Goldstein's delineation of the structural connections between the cannibalism of the New World expeditions (colonialism) and that of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, a discourse in which the consumption of bodies became both a symptom and a justification of imperial violence. The play's catalogue of slaughtered children is haunted closely by classical precedents of cannibalism. The shadows of Priam's sons, Hippolytus, Thyestes' sons, Itys, Virginus's daughter, all hover behind Alarbus, Mutius, Martius, Quintus, Chiron, Demetrius, Lavinia, and the threat of the killing of Aaron and Tamora's illegitimate son. Together they form the literary archive of child sacrifice, placing the play within the long history of instrumentalizing the child's body as a vessel for revenge.

Visual and verbal depictions of cannibalism in literary history can be drawn up to engage with the act of cannibalism in *Titus Andronicus*. Kronos eating his children emphasizes the metamorphosis of the child into ingested food. Peter Paul Rubens' *Saturn Devouring His Children* shows the impossibility of the reconciliation of the relationship between the inedibility of the food on one hand, because of its cannibalism, and the biological fact of eating it. Shakespeare widely follows such examples of anthropophagy that describe the trope of a moment of cannibalism. In Seneca's *Thyestes*, 140 lines take up

Thyestes's banquet, following which he bemoans the loss of his sons and the fact that he has unknowingly eaten them. This lasts even longer in Jasper Heywood's translation, who tries to draw out the horrifying feeling that Thyestes went through. In Ovid's Philomela story, Tereus half finishes his meal when he comes across the revelation that his own son was murdered by his wife, Procne, and fed to him by Philomela and Procne as an act of revenge against the barbaric rape and mutilation he had meted out to Philomela. In the banquet's double revelation, Titus inhabits both classical positions simultaneously: Procne's role as the revenging victim who feeds flesh to the violator, and Atreus's role as the calculating villain who orchestrates horror beyond the bounds of justice. But in *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora is stabbed just after Titus reveals to her that she has eaten her own sons. Tamora is not given any chance or space to register her ignorant cannibalistic action and bemoan her sons' murder. Titus's wish to avenge "worse than Progne" is fulfilled, and in doing so, Shakespeare conceives of the play in Ovidian terms by bringing the revelations of the murder and banquet into one painful anagnorisis. (Miola 29). In such reconciliation of Ovidian and Senecan terms, Titus is both a revenging victim and villain. But unlike *Thyestes*, which mostly revolves around Cannibalism, Shakespeare's dealing with this topic is problematised and extended to metaphorical issues.

In watching the spectacle of violence and torment in the play, we ask, along with Melville's Ishmael, "Who is not a cannibal?" as all human actions and language succumb in the face of an almost tragicomic display of cannibalism and the act of consumption, be it sexual, moral, or pertaining to the actual act of eating. The display of horrors, bestiality, and cannibalism of the play that we are subjected to is also a figuration of violent excesses, which are traced in Montaigne's discourse on Cannibals. Titus himself is one of the most complicated tragic characters of Shakespeare. The building of the tragic reality of the character tests the borderline between Romans and Goths, savagery and civilisation, humanity and bestiality. Through the portrayal of the horrific implications of cannibalism in the play, the playwright and Titus can no longer cordon off the state theatre of justice from the brutish justice in the newly developed "wilderness of tigers" that Rome has become in the course of the play. The mutilation of Lavinia represents the collapse of Roman virtue; Titus severed hand, with which he had defended Rome, is a reminder of his present political impotence. Tamora, eating her own sons, embodies what Sommers, invoking Thersites, calls the self-devouring appetite that "eats itself" (289).

Through the engagement of classical sources and allusions, Cannibalism becomes one of the most important tropes in the play, which marks the figurations of otherness and metamorphosis of the characters into a dissolution of humanity and socio-political and anthropological order. The play's cannibalism and counter-revenge do not achieve what Bate terms an "Ovidian-release" (116), the metamorphic transformation that in Ovid converts violence into something new. Instead, it slips into a perversion of apparent resolution that the last act seeks to bring about through the reinstallation of civilisation. All the characters have been in some way or other, devoured by the "swallowing-womb" of metaphysical barbarity and the vicious cycle of revenge from which escape seems impossible by the end of the play.

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