Cry Me a River: Tears and the Dissolution of Boundaries in *Titus Andronicus*

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Morbid curiosity, the concept of bloody and violent spectacle, first led me to *Titus Andronicus*. I just HAD to read the play that Edward Ravenscroft called "a heap of Rubbish,"[1] that T. S. Eliot criticized as "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written,"[2] and that Harold Bloom referred to as "a howler . . . a poetic atrocity . . . an exploitive parody . . . an explosion of rancid irony."[3] On my first reading I realized that, yes, *Titus* lacks many things that make Shakespeare "Shakespeare"—whatever that means. However, multiple readings revealed an interesting pattern: these characters mention crying, a lot. In fact, the word *tear*, the singular, and the plural *tears*, appears a whopping forty-two times; Titus himself says it twenty-three times. *Romeo and Juliet* contains the second-highest number, recording a paltry twenty-one occurrences.

In Donald Jellerson's article, "Tears and Violence in *Titus Andronicus*," he argues, "At the center of *Titus Andronicus,* there are only tears," and these tears "threaten an apocalyptic dissolution of boundaries, a drowning flood."[4] Jellerson

Journal of the Wooden O. Vol 16, 1-7

ISSN: 1539-5758

doesn't spend much time with this idea, so slowing down and illuminating tears and boundaries help explain what they mean for the play. In *Titus Andronicus*, tears mark the dissolutions of three thematic, plot-centric boundaries, as well as a fourth, metatheatrical boundary.

Understanding Titus's tears requires we first understand tears in our literary heritage. Noted psychologist Ad Vingerhoets points out that tears have been used as a common theme throughout the world's literature, saying that sometimes these tears represent "virtues and good character," and other times they're a "sign of weakness."[5] In Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, "crying was considered . . . an essential part of the behavioral repertoire of heroes." In Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedies, "the shedding of tears by men is much more accompanied by feelings of shame and embarrassment and associated restraint." Even Plato weighed in on tears, calling crying "a mere rhetorical trick." However, in *Titus Andronicus*, tears are so much more. Like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Titus features tears that "mark a crucial psychological turning point,"[6] in this case, three turning points, to be exact.

Boundary One: Country and Family. In act 3, scene 1, Titus's sons Martius and Quintus stand trial, falsely accused of murder. Up to this point, Titus has always been loyal to Rome. James Calderwood says, "Titus is the one character in the play whose conduct is dominated by a sense of authority and tradition."[7] Sylvan Barnet argues that Titus's "inflexible conception of honor alienates him even from those he loves" and that he remains "silent when lesser men would weep."[8] Titus confirms this when he says, "For pity of mine age, whose youth was spent / In dangerous wars whilst you securely slept; / For all my blood in Rome's great quarrel shed . . . / For two-and-twenty sons I never wept" (3.1.2-4,10).[9] Titus's Roman loyalty never falters until now. He continues, "And let me say, that never wept before, / My tears are now prevailing orators" (3.1.25-26).

Jellerson suggests that Titus's shifting identity matrix reveals that his "former sense of national identity as a Roman begins to collapse as he retreats into pleading for the integrity of his familial identity" and his family's survival.[10] After all, Titus has only three living sons, two of whom may not survive much longer should Saturninus get his way. The first time Titus weeps, Jellerson contends, he becomes "divested of his sense of belonging to Rome and left with only his family as a matrix for identity."[11] As Titus's tears fall, so does the boundary that separated his Roman identity from his familial identity. Titus no longer considers himself Roman, only an Andronici. His family is the only thing he has left.

Boundary Two: Civility and Barbarism. As Titus cries, his identity matrix shifts. His overall demeanor also changes. He says, "All the tears that thy poor eyes let fall . . . / Drown the lamenting fool in sea-salt tears" (3.1.18, 20). Many scholars agree that, in *Titus Andronicus,* Rome represents civility. Here, the lamenting fool represents civility, too. Since Rome represents civility, and since Titus's boundary between Roman identity and familial identity no longer exists, his boundary between civility and barbarism also dissolves. A barbaric, vengeful savage replaces the civil, lamenting fool.

In the latter part of act 3, scene 1, Aaron the Moor convinces Titus that sending Saturninus the hand of an Andronici will save the lives of Martius and Quintus. However, in act 3, scene 2, when Titus receives again his own severed hand, along with the heads of Martius and Quintus and an angry letter from the emperor, his tears end. Titus says he has "not another tear to shed. / Besides, this sorrow is an enemy" (3.2.267-68). Emotions like sorrow and emotional expressions like weeping have no place in Titus's new world; those concepts belong to the civilized.

Jellerson believes that "the end of Titus's tears means he can take up the revenge plot . . . The pitch of violence,

in other words, overtakes and effaces mourning as a viable response."[12] Calderwood discusses something similar: "'Thou are a Roman,' [Titus] was admonished in Act 1, 'be not barbarous.' Such an easy distinction between Roman and barbarian is no longer available since the noble Roman has indeed 'o'erreached them in their own devices'"[13] (that is, has surpassed the Goth's brutality) and has become as savage as his enemies. The end of human emotions creates an inhuman brute.

Boundary Three: Sanity and Madness. This inhuman Titus no longer obeys civilized social norms, and his new-found barbarism manifests itself as madness; his tears washed away what sanity he had left. Marjorie Garber argues that, like Lear's kingdom, the Rome of Titus "turn[s] all too quickly into the spectacle of a weeping storm and a heath full of madness."[14] Following his brutish transformation, his brother Marcus kills a housefly. Titus's response and the ensuing argument between brothers reveal just how mad Titus has become:

Titus: What dost thou strike at, Marcus, with thy knife?

Marcus: At that that I have killed, my lord – a fly.

Titus: Out on thee, murderer! Thou kill'st my heart;
Mine eyes are cloyed with view of tyranny.
A deed of death done on the innocent
Becomes not Titus' brother. Get thee gone!
I see thou art not for my company.

Marcus: Alas, my lord, I have but killed a fly.

Titus: But how if that fly had a father and a mother?
How would he hang his slender gilded wings
And buzz lamenting doings in the air.
Poor harmless fly,
That with his pretty buzzing melody
Came here to make us merry, and thou hast
Killed him. (3.2.52-65)

Titus mentions innocence, beauty, family, and music, four concepts that, at least on the surface, appear antithetical to a household pest. Titus himself says that his heart is "mad with misery" and that "no man should be mad but I" (3.2.9, 24).

However, some scholars argue whether Titus succumbs to madness or not. Titus tells Tamora he is not mad, and he tells the audience that the Goths only "suppose" him mad (5.2.142). Like Hamlet's insanity, Titus's madness can be interpreted multiple ways. Interestingly, even those scholars who believe Titus fakes his insanity understand that "he has suffered enough to make the onset of madness plausible."[15] What more could we expect from, as Barnet describes Titus, "a tragic hero pushed beyond the limits of human endurance?"[16]

Boundary Four: Characters and Audience. But do tears belong to Titus alone? One could argue that another boundary lies within *Titus*: the boundary between characters and audience. *Titus Andronicus,* as metatheatre, "becom[es] a kind of anti-form in which the boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved."[17] Tears belong not only to Titus; they belong to us, as well. Unfortunately, so does his suffering. Calderwood says, "The most acute suffering occurs among the audience."[18] H. T. Price explains that unlike Shakespeare's other tragedies, "we hope that Titus," our tragic hero, "will succeed against his enemies; at the end we wish that he had not."[19]

Why do we, as an audience, react negatively? Why do we wish that Titus had not successfully carried out his revenge? Barnet suggests that "in many ways *Titus* is a play of its age, but in our age of horrors we can see that it is also a play for our time."[20] *Titus* affects us the way it does because it reveals our own ruthlessness, our own responses to vicious and unspeakable tragedy.

The first time I read *Titus Andronicus*, I found myself astonished that Shakespeare could write such a grisly, gore-filled extravaganza. I agreed with many of the play's worst

critics. What purpose does Titus serve except trying to outrevenge the bloodiest revenge plays written by Shakespeare's contemporaries? As I've argued, a closer reading reveals that *Titus* contains much, much more than simple, mindless slaughter.

Remember the quote, "At the center of *Titus Andronicus,* there are only tears"? Jellerson's remark proves accurate, both metaphorically and literally. We can easily understand the metaphorical aspect. Repetition, all forty-two examples, makes it simple. Literally, though? Those three plot-centric, thematic boundaries, Country and Family, Civility and Barbarism, and Sanity and Madness, all dissolve in act 3, the play's center, and Titus's tears mark those dissolutions.

So, while *Titus* lacks much of what makes Shakespeare "Shakespeare," the play still contains the Bard's spirit, albeit a young and inexperienced version. When we approach *Titus Andronicus* differently, setting the hyperviolence aside, we find the one thing many critics suggest is not there: a play worthy of Shakespeare's name.

Notes

1. Edward Ravenscroft, *Titus Andronicus, Or, The Rape of Lavinia Acted at the Theatre Royall: A Tragedy, Alter'd from Mr. Shakespears Works* (London: printed by J.B. for J. Hindmarsh, 1687). Accessed at Early English Books Online: http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A59525.0001.001.

2. T.S. Eliot, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), 26.

3. Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 77-86; 83.

4. Donald Jellerson, "Tears and Violence," *On the Verge of Tears: Why the Movies, Television, Music, Art, Popular Culture, Literature, and the Real World Make Us Cry,* ed. Michele Byers and David Lavery (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 182.

5. Ad J.J.M Vingerhoets, *Why Only Humans Weep* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

6. Ibid., 238-41.

7. James L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama: The Argument of the Play in Titus Andronicus, Love's Labour's Lost, Romeo and Juliet, A*

Midsummer Night's Dream, and *Richard II* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1971), 39.

8. Sylvan Barnet, introduction to *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus,* in William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus and Timon of Athens,* ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 2005), 7.

9. William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* ed. Russ McDonald (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000). In-text act, scene and line references are to this edition.

10. Jellerson, "Tears and Violence," 177.

11. Ibid., 179.

12. Ibid.

13. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama,* 40.

14. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor, 2005), 82.

15. Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* (New York: Avenel, 1978), 412.

16. Barnet, introduction to *Titus Andronicus,* 12.

17. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama,* 4.

18. Ibid., 23.

19. H. T. Price, "Construction in *Titus Andronicus," Shakespeare: The Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Alfred Harbage, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 26.

20. Barnet, introduction to *Titus Andronicus,* 15.