

Gendered Severed Hands and “Acting” Disabled in *Titus Andronicus*

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Throughout its critical history, Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* has been positioned as relentlessly violent and morbidly obsessed with dismemberment to the detriment of the play’s interpretive value. While this seeming brutality has been evaluated from various points of view and through an array of theoretical lenses, previous scholarship has not yet seriously discussed the portrayal of intersectional disability in tandem with metatheatrical performance within this play. This essay aims to consider the embodied implications of the characterization of disability and gendered impairment in *Titus Andronicus* with a focus on the contrasting experiences of Titus and Lavinia. In particular, the motif of the severed, gendered hand embodies this concept as it holds significant socio-theoretical weight in addition to physical agentive power. The play establishes and enforces an ableist framework which alienates the disabled body from the agentive body, using disability as a synonym for incapacity in plot-making, which has significant ramifications in staging contemporary performance. Although previous disability scholarship on *Titus* has considered Titus and Lavinia equally through the lens of the traumatized body, this essay seeks to discuss the issue of intersectionality and disability in addition to the way the play interrogates true and performed disability in the text and on-stage.

Although both Lavinia and Titus experience impairment and disability on a spectrum, the disparity in their performed actions following dismemberment emphasizes the way that gender’s intersection with disability identity exacerbates a removal of personal agency. Despite and through his own impairment, Titus uses a performance of disability to uphold the ableist patriarchal framework of the play by “acting” disabled and willfully “putting on” a physical impairment to further enact plot. Through his actions particularly toward the end of the play, Titus presents disability—whether visible or invisible—as something that can be put on as easily as a costume. While the resulting metatheatrical duality between real and performed identity is already a significant point of interest in Shakespeare scholarship, the consideration of gendered embodiment of disability in *Titus Andronicus* furthers this conversation through investigating the experience and the performance of living and acting with a disabled body that is otherwise socially limited or privileged.

To examine the multiple layers of identity performance and disability in *Titus Andronicus*, I utilize a contemporary theoretical framework wherein “disability” applies to the “social category” of people who are stigmatized by their impairments rather than the actual impairments themselves.¹ This consciousness of identification between the body’s physical condition and reactionary social barriers proves necessary in clearly navigating portrayals of and reactions to bodily impairment and its impact on characters’ agentive abilities. An intersectional approach is also necessitated by the “recent emphasis in early modern studies on gendered and raced bodies and their distinct corporeal materialities” which “enhance conversations in disability scholarship about how to attend more carefully to the deeply embodied nature of impairment.”²

In the case of *Titus Andronicus*, impairment is especially made visible through social constructions of gender. Hobgood and Houston explain the phenomenon of the disabled body as perceived by claiming that disabled bodies often “are made less visible the more they demand notice, or, as Tobin Siebers offers, “according to the logic of compulsory able-bodiedness, the more visible the disability, the greater the chance that the disabled person will be repressed from public view and forgotten.”³ This repression is heightened by both Lavinia’s social category as a woman and

her visible impairment, an idea that Tobin Siebers underscores by explaining that “there is no system of disability without complementary ideals provided by sex-gender and sexuality; these ideals depend on bodily consistency, flawlessness, health, and normative mental states, and anyone who fails to achieve these ideals will immediately attract accusations of physical and mental disability.”⁴

While this interpretation of disability’s intersection with gender avows that departure from patriarchal and heteronormative idealism results in overstated disabled characterizations, one departure from idealism can heighten the non-normative impact of another in a real rather than representative way. The intersection of disability and gender in the formation of character identity within structures which repress non-normativity then transforms social perceptions of both concepts. In practice, this is demonstrated in the disparity between Lavinia and Titus’s experiences of disability contingent upon their social accommodations. Though Lavinia remains on stage for a fair portion of the play, dehumanized as a symbol of dismemberment for the audience to “stare at,”⁵ she is also silenced and spoken for to the point that she is treated much less as a character and more as an image of disability. In contrast, while his impairment cannot and should not be dismissed, Titus’s identity outside of his visible disability allows him to continue to move in society and to be relatively accommodated. Through his privileged masculine social position, he can manipulate perspectives aimed at his impairment and retain his agentive power as a plot-maker.

Throughout the play, the connection between the body and agentive ability is manifested in the imagery of the hand. While this motif has previously been approached as a literary or symbolic allegory for the fragmentation of the Roman political system, it is necessary to consider hands simultaneously through historical symbolic meaning as well as through the lived reality of disabled identity. In one of the first prominent instances of the hand as a stand-in for action, the Empress Tamora vocalizes the agentive properties of the hand as she violently attacks Lavinia. Addressing her sons, Tamora exclaims, “Your mother’s hand shall right your mother’s wrong” (3.1.121).⁶ By declaring that her own hand will be the very thing to seek vengeance on the Andronici, she isolates agentive power to a center in the body while simultaneously

declaring her own power in action; in her ability to wield her hand, she is an active character rather than a passive one. In contrast with Lavinia’s vengeance, enacted later in the play, Tamora is painted as the would-be agent of her revenge while Lavinia must rely on others to enact her supposed desires. In “I can interpret all her martyr’d signs’: *Titus Andronicus*, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation,” Cynthia Marshall constructs a distinction between the two women as “polarized images of female possibility” hinging upon the way that their sexuality is represented in relation to their utility.⁷ Within this argument, too, lies the crucial point that the violent rape enacted against Lavinia isolates her “within the play, within the theater, and within critical discourse, as an object of pity” who, through dismemberment, is “frozen in a posture of dependence and humiliation.”⁸

Although a comparison between Lavinia and Tamora’s social positioning within *Titus* is valuable in understanding the play’s construction of femininity, this also necessitates a much deeper investigation into the positions where their female identities intersect with other social barriers. As active as Tamora seems in comparison to the stifled character of Lavinia, the two women both are defined by power in relation to the men around them rather than through self-determination. Both deal with adversity stemming from their intersectional identities—Tamora as a racially “othered” and Lavinia as a disabled Roman—though to claim a sameness between the two would be disingenuous. As the only other woman in the play that the audience can look to, the Goth queen’s violent and deviant role becomes an exaggerated alternate version of female identity that ultimately “leads to Lavinia’s being mutilated and eventually killed, lest she evolve into another Tamora.”⁹ Finally, considering that both women die at *Titus*’s hands at the play’s culmination, it seems that silencing—whether through death or disability—acts as a social solution to problematized non-normative femininity and the threat of female agency.

While hands are continually used as a symbol of agency for various characters in the play and as a symbol for Rome itself, Nicola Imbraccio argues “that the symbolic power of the hand is especially acute in its absence, in its performative capacity to determine the disabled body as active and efficacious. Moreover,

when the absence of the hand is replaced with theatrical objects such efficacy is compromised.”¹⁰ This is demonstrated as Titus pleads to Marcus, “O handle not the theme, to talk of hands, / lest we remember still that we have none” (3.2.29-30). The repetition of hands “referred to either figuratively or literally nearly sixty times throughout the play”¹¹ has the rhetorical effect of pointing the audience’s focus inescapably toward the role of the body or lack thereof. Therefore, the agentive abilities and symbolism associated with hands are emphasized by removing them.

Although Imbraccio notes that the removal of limbs allows disabled characters in Titus to exercise agency and enact plot, I argue that the continued imagery which calls attention to loss aims at the very opposite. Because the non-disabled characters are so invested in removing the hands of their victims, it seems that this removal is a plot device aimed at incapacitating the body through assuming a lack of accommodation for impairment. This importance is emphasized when Titus asks Lavinia “what accursed hand / Hath made thee handless in thy father’s sight?” (3.1.67-68). Titus calls attention to the tropic significance of the hand itself as a symbol of personal agency and plot-making action. At the same time, he rhetorically inverts this trope through referring to one hand’s agentive exercise as the means of taking away agency, thus creating a dynamic where the non-disabled body is active and the disabled body is passive. This line also calls attention to the significance of disability as perceived rather than inherent to impairment through the lens of Titus’s gendered gaze, a concept which is reflected in the theatrical space itself through the audience’s viewership.

In the ancient Roman setting of *Titus Andronicus*, the body—centralized in the synecdochical symbol of the hand—is defined by its ability to act in alignment with prescribed gendered ideals and expectations. Rowe’s work considering Early Modern symbolic meanings attached to hands reveals a dichotomy between hands as “martial” actors for men and “marital” actors for women while stressing their connection to the “genealogical bonds so much at risk” in the socio-politically charged setting of *Titus*.¹² In the connection between female agentive power and sexual marital value, the violence enacted upon Lavinia becomes even further intertwined with an intentional attack on her utility in the restrictive patriarchal setting of the play. As Lavinia attempts to

escape Chiron and Demetrius’s attack, she begs Tamora: “O, keep me from their worse-than-killing lust, / And tumble me into some loathsome pit / Where never man’s eye may behold my body. / Do this, and be a charitable murderer” (2.2.175-178). Lavinia’s plea to the empress speaks directly to an anxiety around societal perception of the body as simultaneously reliant on gendered value and ability. Rather than fearing for her own life, Lavinia begs that no man will bear witness to her body, whether it is disabled or not. Instead, she approaches trauma and shame with the same bodily concern the play uses to approach dismemberment. According to Bethany Packard, “Lavinia’s longing for death indicates continued adherence to Titus’s tale of her chaste body. Indeed, part of what she begs to avoid is violent ejection from that.”¹³ This assertion that Lavinia’s focus on the visibility of her body has as much to do with patriarchal ideals as an anxiety towards disability points to the weight of intersectional bodily concerns in the play. Importantly, this seems to indicate that the perception of her body as disabled is as socially damaging as her actual visible impairments. Lavinia’s position as an impaired and consequently disabled individual then further complicates her position as a woman whose value is reliant upon her body: rather than facing only one set of prescribed social challenges, she is perceived through multiple layers of passivity and victimization and consequently objectified as such.

Titus’s assertion that death would be favorable to this perception of disability contributes to the play’s overall ableist mindset aimed at, as Margaret Owens argues, “disempowering and silencing the victim at the physical level.”¹⁴ Immediately after they dismember Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius cruelly vocalize the play’s equation between death and disability as similarly non-agentive states of being:

Chiron: And ‘twere my cause, I should go hang myself.

Demetrius: If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord.

(2.3.1-10)

In mocking Lavinia’s violently inflicted impairments, Chiron and Demetrius reflect a larger understanding of the way that dismemberment impacts personal agency in the play. Their repeated jests aimed at things that Lavinia can no longer do not only point the audience to continually consider the dismembered body and its parts, but additionally explain the ways that Lavinia

has completely lost any plot-making ability as a character. This establishes the idea that the “whole” body, as the play defines it, can enact plot and action, while the impaired body is completely devoid of this power. At the same time, the brothers’ brutality towards their impaired victim seems only to affirm their claim that death would be favorable to the dehumanization that they exemplify. Chiron voices this ableist view that death is preferable to disability, though Demetrius’s jab at Lavinia’s lack of hands figuratively and literally removes even that level of agency. This same sentiment is later echoed in an interaction between Marcus and Titus:

Marcus: Fie, brother, fie! Teach her not thus to lay
Such violent hands upon her tender life.
Titus: How now has sorrow made thee dote already?
Why, Marcus, no man should be mad but I.
What violent hands can she lay on her life?
(3.2. 21-25)

Marcus’s reference to the hands as centers of agentic power, even in their conspicuous absence, paradoxically continues the connection between the perception of death and disability as non-agentic states. In response to Marcus’s ironic plea, Titus underscores the idea of her disability and dismemberment. This conversation echoes the way that Chiron and Demetrius previously mocked Lavinia for her impairments, especially regarding her inability to end her own life. Even as he identifies with Lavinia’s experience of disability through his own impairment, Titus’s dismissal of his daughter’s remaining social utility enforces the dominant sentiment of personal value in connection to the body’s gendered agentic ability. After all, without the ability to benefit the family or political structure through marriage or genealogical continuance, Lavinia no longer serves a patriarchal purpose.

The final scene of the play in which Titus kills Lavinia to alleviate her suffering stresses a preference for dying over living with disability, though this action is based upon Titus’s own determinations rather than any desire exhibited by his daughter. Notably, when asking Saturninus whether it was right of the Roman historical figure Virginius to kill his daughter after she had been raped, he emphasizes “his own right hand” as the enactor of the murder while again calling to the martial purpose of clasped

hands (5.3.37). Therefore, Titus, using the agentive object of his remaining hand, enacts the murder of Lavinia in spite, or even because, of his own impairment. While he and Saturninus both justify the moral validity of this murder by casting the shame of sexual violence as unsurvivable, this reasoning points to the necessity of critical application of an intersectional view of disability and identity within the play’s patriarchal social structure. If, as Rowe argues, the female hand’s value is entirely reliant upon marital action, then Titus’s violent action simultaneously saves Lavinia from the shame of letting this role go unfulfilled while “[remaking] dismemberment into a trope of empowerment-by casting it within the conventions of martial emblem.”¹⁵ By applying his remaining limb in martial action that upholds gendered ideals through eradicating the non-normative, Titus then upholds not only the values of the Roman polity but the ableist and misogynistic framework that the play performs. Especially considering Titus’s role as a disabled individual acting upon his disabled daughter, it is crucial to understand Siebers’s claims that “sexuality, sex-gender, and disability exist in multiple reciprocity.”¹⁶ The socially isolating categories of gender and disability must not be considered separately and equally, thus creating a false comparison that devalues both experiences, but rather with an intersectional lens that considers their interconnectedness and mutual influence on lived experience. Therefore, while Lavinia’s disability identity is independent from her gender identity, within the play’s thematic focus on violence, action, and the body her experience of disability is altered fundamentally by the intersectional perceptions of difference aimed at her.

The text points to Lavinia’s “shame” and its reflection on her family as the reason for her death rather than her corporeal disability, though it is only through her impairments that the audience and her family alike are continually visually reminded of the cause of her trauma. While Scott justifies the death of Lavinia through considering her as a “ghostly figure” who must be “laid to rest” as part of “an intercessory rite,” this identification of Lavinia portrays her as more object than person, prioritizing her disability over her personhood as the text does.¹⁷ Were it not for her physical impairments, Lavinia may have been able to exhibit some agentive action. However, as her active powers are disabled through the

removal of her hands, she is removed from any ability to enact her own desires and finally from the play itself. Lavinia's murder embodies the stance the play takes on gendered disability and the body's agentive purpose and shows a social system where she could not have survived; stripped of her hands (signifying action) and her tongue (signifying communication), Lavinia is left purposeless in a social environment that places her body at the center of her self. With consideration to the tropic significance of hands as centers of gendered agentive power, Lavinia's severed hands point to her loss of personal identity alongside her body.

The definition of the body's value as its utility is illustrated when Marcus initially finds Lavinia hiding in Act 2 scene 3 and notes the visible ways that her body has been impaired. He additionally focuses on "ungentle hands" as the agentive bodies in this scene while Lavinia herself, now dismembered, is the object which has passively been "lopped and hewed" (2.3.16-17). Marcus identifies the value of the body with the values of patriarchal society, in this case pointing to value in the marriage market through characterizing her arms as "sweet ornaments / Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in / And might not gain so great a happiness / As half thy love" (2.3.18-21). If the body is defined by its ability to act, as I have claimed, then Marcus's lament makes it clear that the female body is inherently impaired in a social capacity. In line with Rowe's claims, while male hands are defined by their ability to contribute to Rome in battle and individual action, Lavinia's lost limbs are instead reduced to objects especially for male enjoyment; both before and after they are removed from her body, Lavinia's hands are active only for the sake of upholding patriarchal structures.

As Marcus assesses the damage done to Lavinia through terms of loss, he makes evident the idea that not only is the body defined by ability, but the female body is defined by ability in service to others. In fact, in establishing the agentive value of her lost fingers, he claims:

Marcus: O, had the monster seen those lily hands
 Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute
 And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
 He would not then have touched them for his life.
 Or, had he heard the heavenly harmony

Which that sweet tongue hath made,
 He would have dropped his knife and fell asleep,
 As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet.

(2.3.40-51)

Marcus's definition of female value through the body and its sexualized ability continues the tradition of characterizing disability through absence established by Chiron and Demetrius, an uncanny similarity of rhetoric that points to a larger cultural understanding of the value of self through agentive ability determined by bodily function. Marcus's description of gendered bodily ideals is emblematic of the play's claim that the body is defined by agentive ability directly in connection with gendered expectations. Considering this logic, it seems that in brutally losing her tongue and hands, Lavinia additionally loses her individual gendered worth. Lavinia is objectified because of her gender identity, her disability, and the trauma that is caused by (and causes) these social constructions.

Rather than painting the body's value in terms of ability like Marcus does, Aaron—another othered character defined by his enactment of violence—devalues Lavinia's bodily value through objectification as he recalls that Demetrius and Chiron “cut thy sister's tongue and ravished her / And cut her hands and trimmed her as thou sawest” (5.1.91-93). Aaron rhetorically conveys that, once dismembered, Lavinia ceases to be viewed as a woman and is instead perceived as little more than a piece of meat. Although certainly this imagery plays a rhetorical role in alluding to vengeful violence later in the play, this characterization also further establishes a sense of dismemberment as stripping away humanity. Lavinia “is progressively transformed through violence into the focal point of the play's insistent appeals to justice” as the enacting male characters see fit.¹⁸ Lavinia's dehumanization, even as it furthers the central revenge plot, also disables her role as an enactor and casts her as a catalytic object entirely removed from personal identity.

Considering Lavinia's bodily value defined by its active service particularly to men, the simultaneous social incapacity accompanying her loss of purity and the physical impairment embodied in her dismemberment further alienate her use in relation to the patriarchal structures of both the Andronici and

Rome. When Marcus initially presents Lavinia to Titus, an instance which strips her of agency through the very idea that she needs to be displayed, the text moves between objectifying and personifying her newly disabled body. Marcus initially signals a sense of loss through his past-tense reference to Lavinia, “This was thy daughter,” which removes her familial position in tandem with the removal of her limbs (3.1.63). While Titus refutes this by shifting to a present-tense understanding of who rather than what she is to him, Lucius voices the physical and rhetorical transformation of his sister to an “object” or spectacle (3.1.65). Lucius’s objectification of Lavinia continues throughout the play as he later laments, “Farewell, Lavinia, my noble sister, / O would thou wert as thou tofore hast been! / But now nor Lucius nor Lavinia lives / But in oblivion and hateful griefs” (3.1.293-296). This echoes the sentiment that Lavinia’s character is entirely altered by her lack of ability to the point that she is considered as good as dead. Although he objectifies himself in the same breath, it is notable that Lucius establishes his own mental and metaphorical loss through and as an appropriation of Lavinia’s physical impairment.

Similarly considering Lavinia as a spectral representation of loss and disability through her disfigurement, in “Groaning Shadows that are Gone’: The Ghosts of *Titus Andronicus*,” Lindsey Scott argues that “Lavinia herself becomes a kind of ghost after her mutilation and rape” and “through these verbal manifestations of absent body parts.”¹⁹ By continuously invoking Lavinia’s severed limbs, the text places an obsessive focus on the importance of the body particularly centered in the symbol of the hand. At the same time, the hauntology of the disabled female body echoes Lavinia’s previous desire to die rather than face the trauma and shame of rape and bodily dismemberment. In recognizing the social debilitation accompanying the severing of Lavinia’s purity from her body alongside her hands, it becomes evident that perceived disability in *Titus Andronicus* is exacerbated by intersectional frameworks of marginalization and impairment. The increased visibility of her impairments created through her intersectional identity, paradoxically, makes Lavinia invisible as an actor. As her displacement from her normative social role becomes more apparent, she is made more invisible. While Bethany Packard

argues that “at some point between Lavinia’s plea for merciful murder and her return to the stage, death ceases to be preferable to rape” this may only be because after her dismemberment Lavinia is, for all intents and purposes, a dead character in the eyes of the characters around her.²⁰ Hauntology points to gendered disability as a social construction created from the perception of impairment rather than the reality of impairment itself, as Lavinia demonstrates in being characterized as so disabled through her impairment that the other characters deem her a non-agentive ghost of her former self.

In Titus’ case, the value of his body centered in the symbol of the “martial hand” is defined through what it has accomplished for Rome in battle, action, and “political power.”²¹ This masculine agentive body is exemplified in Lucius’s declaration in the debate of who should sacrifice their hand for the lives of Quintus and Martius Andronicus. Lucius emphasizes the worth of the hand in its agentive power through the assertion that Titus’s limb is more valuable because of its use in battle “for that noble hand of thine / That hath thrown down so many enemies / Shall not be sent” to the Emperor (3.1.163-165). In establishing the idea of the body only as a means of performing action, the play reflects and enforces the ableist and patriarchal concept that the body’s value is contingent on its ability. Although Titus’s sacrifice comes with the anticipation of disability through dismemberment, it is also necessary to note that these characters expect to use this dismemberment to further a goal of the plot in contrast to Lavinia’s senseless loss. Impairment and disability in this scene, in contrast with Lavinia’s violent and involuntary dismemberment, is characterized by choice and the decision to willfully utilize the body for a purpose.

As a result, in discussing the gendered nature of disability linked to agentive power, I argue that—even impaired—the male body in *Titus* is not fully disabled in the same way, that the female body becomes a narrative ghost. This is a direct result not only of the physical difference in impairments between the two characters, but of accommodations magnified by social privilege in line with gendered agency. Lavinia’s experience of disability, then, is entirely different from her father’s as Scott cautions that “readers and spectators of Shakespeare’s play should not equate the dismemberment of Titus’s hand with the loss of Lavinia’s.”²² While

Lavinia is forcefully dismembered, it is necessary to acknowledge that Titus willfully gives up one of his hands in telling Aaron to “Lend me thy hand and I will give thee mine” (3.1.187-188). When Titus sacrifices his hand, he enacts his own claims from earlier in the scene and complicates the concept of disability by using the body to actively transact. Although Aaron’s hand is the agentive body which removes ability from Titus, Titus ultimately is the one who makes the decision to sacrifice his agentive hand. While this willful dismemberment continues the portrayal of the “whole” body as agentive and the dismembered body as disabled and non-agentive, it additionally muddles the understanding of gendered disability as performance through Titus’s previous expression of desire to mimic Lavinia’s impairment as a means of solidarity and revenge. This scene and the play as a whole then reinforce utility as power through displaying performed disability; through this, the biased perception of disability becomes the central issue rather than physical impairment. Because of Titus’s already agentive masculine identity, he faces a less dire lived experience as a disabled individual and instead can use perception to his advantage as he intentionality performs disability to alter interpretations.

Titus additionally demonstrates complicated gendered disability through the way that he metatheatrically “puts on” a performance of disability in addition to his physical impairment. In reaction to Lavinia’s mutilation, he orders: “Give me a sword, I’ll chop off my hands too” (3.1.74). The symbolic value of hands as instruments of political utility is exemplified in the idea that “one will help to cut the other” and mirrors the contrast previously created in Marcus’s lament over Lavinia’s lost abilities (3.1.79). However, even as Titus claims that he should cut off his own hands, it seems that he does not note the privilege of his ability. Not recognizing the importance of choice, Titus exclaims that Lavinia should also be glad to be dismembered, “For hands to do Rome service is but vain” (3.1.80-81). Not only does Titus use the event of Lavinia’s dismemberment to rhetorically disparage Rome and his own enemies, but he utilizes her experience as a reference for what it might mean to him to be disabled. In interpreting her disability, he then reveals the beginnings of a plot to costume himself in disability. This same idea is repeated when Titus questions:

Titus: Or shall we cut away our hands like thine?

Or shall we bite our tongues and in dumb shows

Pass the remainder of our hateful days?
 What shall we do? Let us that have our tongues
 Plot some device of further misery
 To make us wondered at in time to come.
 (3.1.128-136)

Like his previous threat to cut off his own hand, Titus suggests that he and his family should perform disability in an effort towards solidarity with Lavinia’s loss. However, this idea of mimicking her impairment points to the idea that disability can be performed by non-disabled characters and demonstrates the non-disabled male agentive body’s treatment of dismemberment as a sort of costume. Although Titus is in fact impaired in the course of the play, I argue that his performance of disability is performed rather than genuine. To step back from the text and to consider the ramifications of this idea in the theatrical setting, actors often perform disability for the sake of the play. The idea of gendered impairment and performance of disability is thus central to a critical understanding of mutually constructed characterization and audience perception.

Titus’s continued active role in the play, despite his impairment, is asserted by Caroline Lamb who argues that handlessness, or being an amputee, becomes an equally viable condition for agency as the “normatively ‘complete’ body.”²³ In fact, pointing to Titus’s plot-making throughout the play as evidence, she argues that “post-trauma, the handless Titus” can “empower himself and right his family’s wrongs” by “[adapting] to, or [working] to develop, new bodily possibilities.”²⁴ This argument hinges on the way that characters in the play adapt to their impairments and seek access through this adaptability, though Titus seems to be much more successful in achieving this than his daughter who is socially restrained by her gender. Shawn Huffman also articulates that, although Lavinia’s exercise of “spectral agency” “seems limited to the identification of her assailants,” something which is made accessible or necessary through her family’s desire for revenge, Titus’s tropic hand “appears in order to strike back.”²⁵ The necessary difference between Lavinia’s exercise of personal agency and Titus’s centers upon the difference between gendered exercises of agency.

Because Lavinia’s experience of disability intersects with her non-agentive gender identity, her impairment remains largely unaccommodated throughout the play. Although Lavinia

ultimately “transforms herself into a writing instrument, distorting herself” to condemn her rapists to seek some type of retribution, she is hindered in contributing to determining how this retribution will be exacted.²⁶ Through her transformation into an object that acts only as a “conduit for her father’s emotions, as she has been conceived of throughout as the conduit for other’s desires,” Lavinia exemplifies unaccommodated disability to the point of a dehumanization which justifies “her own slaughter.”²⁷ She is continually directed to act in place of others as an object rather than allowed to make her own decisions following her traumatic dismemberment, a position which doubly erases her individual visibility. Titus’s impairment, in contrast, is a performative echo of Lavinia’s disability, accommodated by his agentic gender role as a plot-maker in the play. While Titus shares some of Lavinia’s experience of impairment, he remains more accommodated through his remaining hand and ability to communicate. With this in mind, he manipulates the play’s and the audience’s perception of disability to achieve his revenge.

This contrast between the two characters and their disparate experiences is most strikingly evident in the morbid scene where Titus orders his daughter to carry his severed hand in her mouth. This passage continues to portray the body in the light of ability and activity as Titus declares: “And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed: / Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth” (3.1.282-283). The focus of the body continues to center on its ability to act: as Lavinia carries Titus’s impairment and the burden of it, she exemplifies gendered disability in the play and within patriarchal ableist structures. That Titus uses his ability to force his daughter to carry his own severed hand raises a question of how deeply he resonates with her experience as a non-agentic disabled character in the play and continues the ableist view toward Lavinia’s actual ability in contrast with her perceived ability. While he calls for his daughter to be an active participant in the plot, this activity accommodates Titus’s impairment in a modified continuation of the female body’s active purpose as service. Because of this gendered portrayal of disability, I argue that—though he is impaired—Titus’s privilege allows him to remain largely non-disabled in the context of the play and its theatrical setting. As the social burden of his impairment instead falls on Lavinia who is socially and corporeally

impaired, the audience then must consider spectrums of disability, performativity, and its implications on and off stage.

The construction of the body’s value as contingent on its ability is underscored in Titus’s question: “How can I grace my talk, / Wanting a hand to give it action?” (5.1.17-18). Titus depicts the disabled body as incapable of enacting “talk” because of dismemberment, though this same sentiment in extension to Lavinia portrays her as fully non-agentive. Because her abilities to act and to communicate are both disabled by the lack of accommodation for her impairment, Lavinia is fully barred from the potential to exercise agency. Instead, she takes on the dehumanizing role of carrying the weight of disability as a theme. Further, Titus’s lament about the disparity between talk and action is performative. The plot demonstrates that, though he is impaired, Titus faces no barriers to enacting his revenge. By considering this idea through the play’s ableist patriarchal framework, it becomes clear that the concept of disability has ramifications not only for a characters’ ability to have value in the making of plot, but also in perception of performance.

Finally, gendered performance of disability is embodied in the play as well as rhetorically present through the performance of invisible mental disability. Lavinia’s behavior, connected to actual mental disability or not, is perceived as madness by Young Lucius who exclaims that “some fit or frenzy do possess her” through the reasoning that “Extremity of griefs would make men mad” (4.1.17, 19). While the consensus seems to be that Lavinia’s fervor is attributable to her desire to communicate, the way that an audience interprets her is the ultimate manufacturer of disability rather than the proof of impairment. Again, it must be noted that Lavinia’s intersecting social identities within the play construct her role as a silent victim on which meaning is projected by the accommodating characters and the complicit audience alike. Not only is the act of determining whether a character has a mental disability or not rife with reliance on stigma and ableist bias, but the actuality of mental impairment is unnecessary to a discussion of disability. While an argument can be made that Lavinia and Titus alike experience mental impairments in reaction to trauma, I argue that the very question warrants a discussion of both the portrayal of disability and the curiosity of the audience.

Titus evidently represents the performativity of disability in his representation of “madness” which, real or fabricated, he continually manipulates in order to achieve his own agentic goals. Titus declares to both Tamora and the audience, “I am not mad, I know thee well enough” while simultaneously portraying madness (5.2.21). While the truth of his invisible condition cannot be determined with any certainty, the stigma that he manipulates in line with mental disability allows him to “masquerade [...] as a device” to “[embody] disability in the face of power.”²⁸ While Titus can effectively “pass” as non-disabled, he additionally can “pass” as disabled to his own ends. This is because, as Siebers claims, “people with a disability understand better than others the relation between disability and ability in any given situation,” though I additionally posit that his portrayal of mental disability comes from an appropriated perception of Lavinia’s “frenzy.”²⁹ Although he certainly experiences impairment through the loss of his limb, Titus also utilizes the ableist viewpoints of other characters and himself, observed in reaction to Lavinia’s disability, in order to enact his own plots through “acting” disabled according to “skillful [interpretations] of everyday life and its conventions.”³⁰ The success of this performance is evident as Tamora affirms that “This closing with him fits his lunacy” (5.2.70). While Titus performs mental disability, Tamora’s preconceived biases confirm this performance and reflect the way that an audience’s stigmas contribute to a performance’s overall construction of disability.

In the theatrical space, the dynamic performance of disability within *Titus Andronicus* calls contemporary productions to further examine the portrayal of social and physical disability on stage and the effect of portraying or denying binary or ableist stigma. While the text itself establishes a structure that works against characters like Titus and Lavinia through its patriarchal and ableist setting, performance offers an opportunity for subverting this constructed dynamic of difference by denying the desire to “prop” or look away from gendered disability. The stakes of performing disability on stage, as scholars like Imbracsio, Siebers, and Mitchell and Snyder argue, are equally contingent upon theatrical spectacle and the text. Indeed, the staged intention of Shakespeare’s text and the stakes of public performance are what necessitate an investigation of the play’s metatheatrical performance of gendered disability at all. It is

useful to recognize that “the fully dismembered bodies of Lavinia and Titus are able to perform gestures and commit actions—often bloody and violent—yet such efficacy is often undermined in twentieth-century performances.”³¹ Imbraccio argues against modern interpretations which “rely upon theatrical prosthetics to ‘prop’ Lavinia and Titus,”³² noting that productions like this reflect modern concerns and anxieties about disability rather than the anxieties of the text itself. In stage performance, this idea rings true as actors perform the loss of limbs rather than actually become dismembered. Imbraccio notes that “we cannot ignore that these acting, avenging, fragmented, and disabled bodies are in fact able-bodied actors who are performing disability.”³³ Titus’s textual desire to be wondered at reflects theatrical performance and spectacle as Siebers argues that “overstating or performing difference, when that difference is a stigma, makes one into a target, but it also exposes and resists the prejudices of society.”³⁴ Although performing disability, as a non-disabled character or an actor, suggests that stigma is reliant upon stereotype, Siebers notes that the portrayal of stigma on stage additionally exposes the social framework of disability and disability studies. This exposition allows for an opportunity to reframe the way that disability as perception in contrast to impairment can be interpreted and staged. With particular focus on Titus’s performance of disability, which both appropriates Lavinia’s trauma and demonstrates his own agentic ability in spite of impairment, the opportunity to consider the play’s characters through an expanded and reality-driven attention to humanity is ample and insofar largely untapped.

It is also necessary to avoid the inclination to “embrace a standard-bearer who suggests that power lies within the grasp of disabled people.”³⁵ While *Titus Andronicus* presents at least one character who exercises agentic power despite and perhaps because of his disability, it is necessary to avoid excusing Titus’s actions because of stigma. This is to say that Titus should not be praised for enacting violence because of the perception of his disability identity. Instead, considering his simultaneously performed and genuine displays of disability, Titus’s actions and identity warrant a critical response aimed at characterization of the whole rather than only selected parts. The same must be said considering Lavinia’s silenced character, which must be viewed within the silencing

context of the play's text as well as the continually ableist society in which it is performed. I argue that the play complicates the portrayal and performance of disability through not only blurring the boundaries between impairment and performance, but also presenting an intersectional example of disability embodied in Lavinia.

The play itself presents a framework which employs both ableist and patriarchal structures to inhibit the agentive actions of its characters, and these constraints on Lavinia ultimately reduce her character to a non-agentive object. In contrast, Titus can rely on patriarchal establishments and his ability to "pass" as non-disabled in order to continue enacting plot. An intersectional view of disability thus opens an entirely new opportunity for examining the degree to which gendered social impairment stands against physical impairment. Keeping in mind the stakes of theatrically staging disability, a contemporary staging of *Titus Andronicus* might attempt performances which demonstrate the ways that gender influences social disability especially in respect to Lavinia by using increased contrast or even reversal. To emphasize crucial differences between impairment- and perception-caused disabilities, an intersection-focused performance might feature a notably self-aware Lavinia who continues to present her humanity despite the other characters' insistence on turning her into a prop. Performance of disability might also be elucidated through a particular attention to the way that Titus evidently mimics Lavinia's presentation of trauma and impairment. In investigating this idea of disability masquerade and its attachment to gender within this play, I hope to present the opportunity for further consideration of Titus's dynamic social attention to disability and disenfranchisement within its larger scholarly importance as a text aimed at the "other."

Titus Andronicus's definition of the gendered body, especially the gendered impaired hand, relies on the concept of personal agency and action as determinants of individual value. The play's occupation with the hand as a symbol of agency in contradiction with the dismemberment of these hands not only others the characters who experience disability but places a level of importance on what those hands can or cannot achieve without significant accommodation. Additionally, the intersections between gender and disability allow

certain characters to perform their disability more intentionally than others, pointing to a complicated understanding of when and why disability might be socially performed to certain ends. The inclusion of intersectionality in the conversation about disability in *Titus Andronicus* enriches previous scholarship on the play’s violence which has historically relied on symbolic textual analysis to uncover the meaning behind dismemberment. Instead, I seek to consider a critical interpretation beyond symbolism which centers upon embodied intrinsic biases toward impairment and their implications on agentive power when unaccommodated. *Titus Andronicus’s* definition of the gendered body, especially the gendered impaired hand, relies on the concept of personal agency and action as determiners of individual value, and an analysis of the play which additionally employs an intersectional examination of gendered disability and disability masquerade enhances the text’s scholarly and performative potential.

Notes

1. Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, “Introduction: Ethical Staring Disabling the English Renaissance,” in *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 4.

2. Hobgood and Houston, “Introduction: Ethical Staring Disabling the English Renaissance,” 10.

3. Tobin Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade,” *Literature and Medicine* 23.1 (2004): 6, quoted in Hobgood and Wood, “Introduction: Ethical Staring Disabling the English Renaissance,” 3.

4. Tobin Siebers, “Shakespeare Differently Disabled,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2016), 450.

5. Hobgood and Houston, “Introduction: Ethical Staring Disabling the English Renaissance,” 1.

6. All references to Shakespeare’s play are from William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Routledge, 1995).

7. Cynthia Marshall. “‘I Can Interpret All Her Martyr’d Signs’: *Titus Andronicus*, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation,” in *Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama*, eds. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 193.

8. Marshall, “‘I Can Interpret All Her Martyr’d Signs,’” 194.

9. Marshall, “‘I Can Interpret All Her Martyr’d Signs,’” 195.

10. Nicola Imbraccio, “Stage Hands: Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and the Agency of the Disabled Body in Text and Performance,” in *Titus Out of Joint: Reading the Fragmented Titus Andronicus*, eds. Paxton Hehmeyer and Liberty

Stanavag (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 294.

11. Imbracio, "Stage Hands," 294.
12. Katherine A. Rowe, "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45. 3 (1994): 280.
13. Bethany Packard, "Lavinia as Coauthor of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 50.2 (Spring 2010): 297.
14. Margaret E. Owens, "The Return of the Repressed Body," in *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 219.
15. Rowe, "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*," 299.
16. Siebers, "Shakespeare Differently Disabled," 450.
17. Lindsey Scott, "'Groaning Shadows That Are Gone': The Ghosts of *Titus Andronicus*," *English Studies* 96.4 (2015): 414.
18. Karen Cunningham, "'Scars Can Witness': Trials by Ordeal and Lavinia's Body in *Titus Andronicus*," in *Women and Violence in Literature: An Essay Collection*, ed. Katherine Ackley (New York and London: Garland, 1990), 142.
19. Scott, "The Ghosts of *Titus Andronicus*," 414.
20. Packard, "Lavinia as Coauthor of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," 289.
21. Rowe, "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*," 288.
22. Scott, "The Ghosts of *Titus Andronicus*," 416.
23. Caroline Lamb, "Physical Trauma and (Adapt)Ability in *Titus Andronicus*," *Critical Survey* 22.1 (2010): 51.
24. Lamb, "Physical Trauma and (Adapt)Ability in *Titus Andronicus*," 52.
25. Shawn Huffman, "Amputation, Phantom Limbs, and Spectral Agency in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Normand Charette's *Les Reines*," *Modern Drama* 47.1 (2004): 71.
26. Cunningham, "'Scars Can Witness': Trials by Ordeal and Lavinia's Body in *Titus Andronicus*," 151.
27. Cunningham, "'Scars Can Witness': Trials by Ordeal and Lavinia's Body in *Titus Andronicus*," 153.
28. Siebers, "Shakespeare Differently Disabled," 446.
29. Siebers, "Shakespeare Differently Disabled," 443.
30. Siebers, "Shakespeare Differently Disabled," 444.
31. Imbracio, "Stage Hands," 293.
32. Imbracio, "Stage Hands," 295.
33. Imbracio, "Stage Hands" 302.
34. Siebers, "Shakespeare Differently Disabled," 444.
35. Siebers, "Shakespeare Differently Disabled," 452.