
“The Hunt in the Forest”. An Ecocritical Take on Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594)

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Introduction

Our Shakespeare Research-in-English Team Project for the period 2019-2020 have shifted the focus from the English Civil Wars onto the so-called ‘Roman Plays’ whilst maintaining its central concern on the subject of VIOLENCE which we deemed relevant to our own time and place. Certain clarifications are in order at this point. We usually deal with four different plays for each Project according to the time allotted to the activity. In this case only two tragedies actually belong in the ‘Roman Plays’ category, *Antony & Cleopatra* (1606) and *Coriolanus* (1608). As for the other two texts, one is a long poem, thematically linked, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593/4) and the other, the play of our title, an earlier tragedy heavily indebted to Seneca’s *ars poetica*, Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and the History of Tito Livio. In *Titus*, we could study Shakespeare’s imagining processes at work and compare it with his later, greater plays. We also noticed that some of his recurring preoccupations with England’s destiny, stated openly in the tetralogies devoted to the Wars of the Roses are still very much in his thoughts here too, as an undercurrent. Indeed the Rome of the Andronicii looks very much like medieval England. (Cf. the use of anachronisms such as ‘monastery’, ‘St Stephen’, ‘poppish tricks and ceremonies’ at a time when Christians are nonexistent in context). With this project we intend to,

1. Re-interpret the Shakespearean saga from a contemporary Ibero-American viewpoint;
2. Do so from an ecocritical perspective, i.e. to tackle a discourse that appeals to the ‘human’ from the sheer inhumanity of their actions and passions;
3. Study the use of classical sources by Shakespeare and examine how Shakespeare himself becomes in turn a classical source for our own place and time;
4. Read the texts as scripts meant to be performed rather than read, bringing into our reception the languages of the stage that Shakespeare directly (stage directions) or indirectly (internal directions) communicates, and the conditions under which the

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theatre traditionally operates.

Titus Andronicus: the historical background

Titus is different from the so called “Roman plays” in the sense that it is not even remotely connected with any historical character or episode recorded by legends or texts, yet it introduces many traits of the Roman cultural scene, even when they are anachronistically displayed as the action advances.

On one hand, we may see in *Titus* the values and loyalties that were the foundations of the Roman republic, in spite of the fact that the drama apparently takes place in the late imperial period, when Rome was under the permanent threat of barbarian invasions, such as the Gothic tribes responsible for the fall of the imperial city in the course of the V century AD.

When facing the political dilemma of the choice of an emperor, the succession in this play is made dependent on progeniture, which is the rule for the monarchy in countries like England or Spain, but was not so decisive in the imperial system, where it was associated to military power and success in battle. At the time of *Titus*’ composition, Shakespeare was wondering, as his fellow countrymen, about the succession of old Queen Elizabeth. The play deals with a never ending cycle of revenge, in which the “civilized” Romans and the “barbarian” Goths display a savage programme of blind retaliations that destroy(s) each other. These wild reactions challenge the legal structure that Rome had built through the centuries, from the ancient Twelve Tables to the late Codes of Justice, meant to prevent the private actions that could, as in this case, create a chaos of unmanageable proportions and endanger the proper balance of the State.

The act of rape is associated with historical Rome, from the early episode of the Sabine s, that ensured the tribal demography of the Romans, to that of Lucrece, that inspired a political turmoil begetting the republic, but, in the case of Lavinia, it is not going to be get any fruit, it just becomes a metaphor of the body politic being torn apart by the invaders.

Rome is the URBS, the magnificent expression of an urban civilization, i.e. the heritage the Western world has developed with advantage, but, as it is clear in the tragedy, outside the city there are no rules, violence and wantonness prevail, the imperial law is powerless, so that, in the forest, Lavinia, the personification of the glorious city-state, is helpless at the mercy of her torturers. Sarmiento would appropriate this contradiction when he wrote “*Civilización y barbarie*”.

Titus Andronicus: the tragedy

The first part of our task for this project consisted of a close reading of *The Rape of Lucrece*; we identified human attitudes that triggered *dissimilar* behaviour in the male group: admiration, self-deprecation, secret envy, among others. An isolated negative reaction awakens a desire to destroy that which is being praised; this leads in turn to planning and executing a morally reprehensive act which, as it is carried out, gradually downgrades the very perpetrator who, from human, friend, prince descends into the amorality of a creature, the worst in its kind, a prayer on (h)its own species. As one of **our researchers**¹ noticed it, ‘Once the prey is set aside from the herd and unable to escape, the time comes to tear, feast, and finally retreat.’ The cue to this interpretation of a man resigning his manhood to relish in a beastly, nonhuman behaviour, comes from Shakespeare himself who uses the words ‘night-owl’, ‘wolves’, ‘lurking serpent’ to describe Tarquin, thus prompting his readers and/or audiences (for the poem has a dramatic quality and has been performed occasionally) to

1. Calderon, Laura: “Tarquin’s Hunting Strategies”.

evoked/recall the predatory nature of these animals.

The scrutiny of this poem was meant to allay the way into Shakespeare's first textual incursion into Roman culture, our play. There IS a rape in it, but there is so much more; murders, mutilations, cannibalism, executions of innocents, promotion of adulterers, filicides attempted and accomplished, treason and so on.

We have then skirted the symbolical in order to approach the Shakespearean discourse from an ecocritical perspective, a manner of reading that privileges *the earth* as the centre of reflection, with nature and the nonhuman given as much relevance in the text as the human. This approach fosters an active engagement with the environment. You cannot be a witness to meaningless destruction without attempting to somehow stop it, or stand for the aggrieved party. An understanding of the mechanisms of violence may, hopefully, lead us towards a prevention of it, a construction of a more sensible world.

Another of our researchers² brought the notion of *ecophobia* to the discussion. Defined by Simon Estok as 'the irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world' we wondered about its value to try and explain the all-destructive behaviour of the

character of Aaron, 'a Moor, her lover' according to Shakespeare direction, 'her' refer ring to Tamora, Queen of the Goths. Brought to Rome with the batch of regal prisoners at the beginning of the play to parade in front of the newly appointed Emperor, Aaron famously anticipates the character of Othello although his behaviour looks much more after Yago's. Barna says, 'Tarquinius chose to follow his ecophobic impulse for destruction, motivated by envy'. We say, Aaron could not help following his ecophobic impulse for destruction motivated by *self-hatred*. Here Shakespeare demonstrates with Aaron the position of 'the Other', a black person living among white foreigners. Traditionally assimilated to the devil over his darkness *he behaves as such*. As when Queen Tamora's children, inspired by Lavinia's grace, quarrel over who's going to court her, Aaron, while trying to appease their violence for the sake of decorum, spurs them on to go further with Lavinia and 'share' her. His words,

The Palace [is] full of tongues, of eyes and ears,
 The Woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf and dull
 There speak and strike, brave boys, and take your turns,
 There serve your lust, shadowed from heaven's eye
 And revel in Lavinia's treasury. **2.1. 128-132**

also serve to set the stage for the second act: the Palace or *civitas* in Roman terms pitted against the *wilderness* or 'woods'. In one of the spaces 'full of tongues, of eyes & ears' those lowlifes as Aaron and Tamora's children cannot prosper for their iniquity would be soon found out by witnesses & spies of various kinds: courtiers, servants, friends, followers...but the wilderness does not know anyone, whether high or low, and you must be on your guard for predators. There they would find themselves 'at home' for predators they are. In ecocritical terms, a human, a citizen, would be unsafe. The phonic value of the alliterative series of plosives reinforce psychologically what the semantic value of the words and the English imagination, a rural country for most of her history, could not fail to perceive. This confrontation between the inhabitants of two iconic spaces, the city and the wilderness, ends successfully for the 'wicked' for, although they're individually crushed by Titus in

2. Barna, Silvana: "Green Echoes in *The Rape of Lucrece*"

the end, this has not been without losses: Titus, dominated by an oppressive ideological system has lost his humanity. He too has been degraded. His estranged son, Lucius, will 'inherit the earth' to put it biblically, but the prestige and respect of Roman Law has sunk into madness in Titus's person.

Aaron, for his part, a prominent actant of Evil in the play, similarly experiences a *volte face*. When Tamora, already married to the Roman Emperor, gives birth in secret to his black baby, she sends it to him to kill it and so avert certain ruin. Instead, Aaron flees to the Goths's camp with his son in his arms and surrenders to Lucius. Lucius happens to have struck a deal with the Goths to attack Rome. He, in words of a Goth, 'threats in course of (t)his revenge to do as much as ever Coriolanus did (4.4.67-68) thereby linking this play with one written 13 years later.

Aaron succeeds in negotiating with Lucius an exchange of valuable info against an Oath by Lucius to look after his black child as one of his own. He does not ask for his life; he seeks to save only *that* which he thinks can have a chance of survival. And, at the final moment, he runs for it, for Lucius's Oath, a sacrament which only humans can have access to.

Conclusion

Out of the various instances of violence that Shakespeare dramatised in this play the hunt seems to be paradigmatic. Its outstanding quality consists of being an activity practised both by humans and nonhumans alike (animals) for the purposes of survival (feeding) but also one that in a cultural realm receives the name of 'sport'. The Oxford Concise Dictionary (1911), 4th edition, 1951, defines it as amusement, diversion, fun; and the first example provided is 'hunting'. The traumatic first act of Titus Andronicus ends by a restoration of harmony between the quarrelling parties, with Titus genially telling the Emperor,

Tomorrow an it please your majesty
to hunt the panther and the hart with me,
with horn and hound we'll give your grace *bonjour*.

And the Emperor pleasantly responding, 'Be it so, Titus, and grammercy, too.' Little did they know *what* the hunt would turn into, which is the matter of Act 2 and the cause of the vertiginous actions that follow.

Hunting was the favourite pastime of Queen Elizabeth, and to this day fox-hunting is a much debated issue in England: a bone of contention between animal defenders and hunters who pretend to be delivering the countryside of a 'pest'.

At the time of 'Titus', 1593/94, England was under the cultural influence of the Italian Renaissance. An Italian painter of the Quattrocento, Paolo Uccello, noted for his mastery of perspective, painted his *The Hunt in the Forest* (1470s)³. Comissioned as a gift for some notable's wedding, to our contemporary sensibility it does seem like a strange choice. But the picture visualises an association between sex and hunting in the mentality of the times. Still there are uncommon elements in this work that raise some questions, such as its *darkness*. As Titus told the Emperor how they would 'tomorrow' give him his *bonjour*, (the French for 'good morning'), how they would awake him to take him hunting, but you do not hunt at night, you have to see your prey. The 'vanishing point', Uccello's singular ability, is also leading our eyes beyond, into an unseen point that elicits the question: where are we going? Horses and dogs appear equally mystified...it invites the viewer, the spectator, the reader to wonder at the sense of the scene, at the meaning of

3. It can be seen at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

the activity or *all activities*. Is the hunter the male pursuer of a defenseless female deer? In the game of desire, the chase is much more uncertain so is the hind fleeing for her life or is she enticing the lover away deeper into danger? The hunter doesn't know but he can't stop himself; he's swept off into the forest to some point of pleasure up there, into the darkness. (*Lewis*, S3E3, 2009, UK).

References

