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# Titus Andronicus: The Ultimate Predator Unleashed

María Laura Calderón\*  
Universidad del Salvador  
Argentina

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is a play that has often been regarded as gratuitously offensive, for its violence seems somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded with its gruesome wars and dictatorships, the play started to be taken seriously. It "it no longer seem[ed] so far-fetched as it did in 1923"<sup>1</sup>. It was in Peter Brook's production of 1955, with Vivien Leigh as Lavinia and Laurence Olivier as Titus, at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon that made the play's theatricality thrived, causing some to wonder if the author's genius has lain unseen until then, or if it was Brook's talent that turned a bad play into a great spectacle of violence.

Julie Taymor's film production of 1999, starring Anthony Hopkins as Titus, emphasizes this concept of violence as performance. The play begins with a close up of young Lucius wearing a paper-bag mask. His covered face reflects the intermittent light of a TV. By the sounds and music, we infer that on the screen an army is about to charge. He imitates the violent scenes on T.V. with his action figures and his food: he chops a soldier's head off with a knife, he crashes a plane against a cake, as if the cake were a building, then splashes ketchup as if blood were coming out of his plastic toys, and makes one of his figures commit suicide by drowning into a glass of milk. The havoc he creates gets out of his control and storms into the kitchen through the window in the form of a fire blaze. Now Lucius weeps, the game is no longer fun, and a big rough man takes him out of his house and into the Colosseum's arena. Violence is t(he)re today, on tv, on a boyish game and on the raging fire, as it was hundreds of years ago, performed as entertainment on the Elizabethan stage, and even before, when violence was blatantly executed before cheering audiences in the Roman circus.

Violence is part of our existence. It is a force inherent in nature, it lingers hidden beneath its beauty, ready to be displayed anytime. The shadow that provides shelter from the scorching sun can turn into daunting darkness that makes you lose your way, or the playful sea that gives refreshment and food can become deadly as the weather unpredictably changes into a storm. Glotfelty states that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it"<sup>2</sup>, therefore, humans, as creatures of nature, are not alien to this latent violence, no matter how much our culture might have restrained our animality. We are capable of savage fierceness to protect our own lives and interests as well as saintly self-sacrifice for a fair cause. But what tells the human from the beast? Viktor E. Frankl argues that "being human always points, and is directed to something, or someone, other than oneself"<sup>3</sup> He says that the more a man forgets himself, the more human he becomes, and that the way in which he faces pain gives him the opportunity to add more meaning to his life. He says that a man "may

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\* Actriz. Licenciada en Lengua Inglesa por la Universidad del Salvador. Correo electrónico: [laucalderon89@gmail.com](mailto:laucalderon89@gmail.com).

1. Alan Hughes, introduction to *Titus Andronicus*, by William Shakespeare (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 29.

2. Cheryll Glotfelty, introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xix.

3. Viktor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. (Boston: Beacon Press. 2006), 109, PDF.

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remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal"<sup>4</sup> So, humans are animals with an extraordinary capacity to create meaning out of suffering. Thus, our human potentialities can be actualized at the level of the animal species or at that of our individual uniqueness. We can turn out to be lawless predators or rightful self-conquerors, self-pleasing animals or self-denying men, revengeful beasts or fair humans.

To understand Titus's tragedy, we need first to understand his profession which justifies his actions throughout the play. A soldier "tends to develop persistent habits of thought that make the soldier mentality, which is consistent, in this sense, with the set of values, activities and perspectives inherent to the realization of his professional function."<sup>5</sup> Joaquín Blanco Ande states that the army is an instrument of organized violence at the disposition of the community to keep and protect its interests. To be efficient it must be committed to the ideological bases that constitute the legal system of the country they serve. He says that the army must be the reservoir of virtue and the keeper of the traditions and values, because to protect a nation means to defend its values. To achieve his purpose, a soldier has a strong sense of order and obedience. Besides, he has a deep sense of self-denial and sacrifice in service of his nation. In exchange, the army needs the support and respect of the people they have made their mission to defend and serve.

All these qualities are seen in Titus. After his successful wars against the Goths, he victoriously enters the arena of the Colosseum to receive the well-deserved cheers of gratitude from his people. He proudly shows his dead sons as evidence of his(their) sacrifice for Rome. Then, he honours religious traditions in the burial of his kin and in the ritual offering of Tamora's son. Furthermore, when he is offered the Empire, he rejects it, proving that he honours the military profession, that is not meant to control a country, but to serve it. He also follows traditions when he supports the first male son as heir to the late emperor<sup>6</sup> and finally he shows obedience by giving Lavinia up to the emperor for a wife, as requested. In his obedience he goes to the extent of killing his own son who had resisted the matrimonial move.

To our Christian eyes, the dismemberment of Tamora's son and the killing of his own on the altar of tradition and obedience are preposterous and unacceptable. But Titus has a noble transcendent reason to administer violence. When Tamora begs "if thy sons were ever dear to thee / O think my son to be as dear to me" (1. 1. 193-199) she is not speaking a language Titus can understand. She doesn't realize that as dear as his children are, Titus is willing to sacrifice them for a greater cause, and all his boys are expected to face their fate bravely. Self-preservation is not a soldier's main concern since it might put the whole army at risk. Titus sees Tamora's tears but responds with an explanation she cannot grasp:

"Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.  
These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld  
Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain  
Religiously they ask sacrifice;  
To this your son is marked, and die his must,  
T'appease their groaning shadows that are gone." (1. 1. 121-126)

Titus provides Tamora with a meaning for that death. He gives her religious reasons: her son

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4. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 72.

5. Joaquín Blanco Ande. "Rasgos del militar profesional" in *Cuadernos de estrategia* 19 (1990): 151. My translation.

6. Susana Biasi, Emeritus Professor of History at the Universidad el Salvador, member of the Shakespeare in English Research Team, has made it clear to us that this is a monarchic tradition. In the historical Roman Empire, the Emperor was usually a military leader chosen for his merits in battle. This is an anachronism. Shakespeare grafted the English tradition on the historical Roman use.

must be sacrificed to appease the dead. This is his duty to them and, following the Roman tradition, it's not right to take from the dead what belongs to them. Furthermore, when he kills his own son, Titus is exercising his right as paterfamilias to decide on the life and death of his family members<sup>7</sup>. He disposes of the son who, by his reckoning, has dishonoured him, the emperor, and consequently Rome. A traitor must be executed. He even refuses to bury him with his brothers. It takes quite a lot of effort to persuade him to the contrary, until Marcus finally pronounces the words that echo profoundly within him: "Thou art a Roman; be not barbarous" (1. 1. 374- 383).

This deep feeling of betrayal has for a moment blinded Titus on his duty as a Roman: To "be not barbarous" and provide proper burial to the dead. Once again, he denies himself and subdues his anger for the sake of the gods, the dead and his Roman dignity. Despite being furious, he must act accordingly because he wouldn't be preserving Rome by acting against the Roman values even in the privacy of his home.

Every single one of Titus's actions whereby he is usually judged at the beginning of the play is proven to be dutiful and righteous under the Roman standards. Titus is, in fact, so at ease with his actions, that he assumes Tamora will reward him for bringing her glory: "Is she not then beholding to the man / That brought her for this high good turn so far? / Yes, and will nobly him remunerate" (1. 1. 396-398).

But when the chance arises, Tamora, spurred by her lover Aaron, organizes *her own* hunt in the forest employing her sons as hounds. Then, not content with simply killing Lavinia, she allows her sons to torture her: "Therefore, away with her, and use her as you will, / The worse to her, the better loved of me" (2. 2. 161-167) Demetrius and Chiron ravish, prey and humiliate the Roman lady in the most unnatural manner. They not only satisfy their animal need, but go beyond to destroy all that is precious in her. They chop off her hands and her tongue and finally spit on what is left of her humanity with their taunting tongues:

DEMETRIUS: So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,  
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravish'd thee.

CHIRON: Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,  
An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe. (2. 4. 1-4)

Finally, when Martius and Quintus are accused of murder, Tamora promises Titus she would entreat the king, when she knows well enough that Saturnine plays on her side. He has no inner reason to give the boys any chance. He assumes their guilt for his own political convenience because Titus, as king-maker, is the only one who can overthrow him, so he must ruin him as soon as possible. Tamora's plot comes to him as if a gift from Heaven.

By now we, as audience, have seen Tamora's inhumanity and Saturnine's narcissistic ways and we know that the Andronici boys are doomed. Tamora and her pack behave as though the pain endured gave them the right to harm others. She feels entitled to destroy whatever good is around her just for her own sadistic pleasure. In relation to this, Frankl explains that one of the consequences of dehumanization is the moral deformity it produces on certain people. Those of a primitive kind, who lack of strong inner life, cannot escape the influences of the brutality endured. Once they find themselves in some position of power, they become "oppressors instead of the oppressed. They [become] instigators, not objects, of willful force and injustice. They [justify] their behavior by their own terrible experiences."<sup>8</sup> He says that these people must be slowly "guided back to the

7. Although Titus killing of his son might have more to do with that it is an effective way of charming the audiences.

8. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 92.

commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong, not even it wrong has been done to them”<sup>9</sup> if not they may keep doing more damage than good.

Tamora is indeed of a primitive kind. She lives her life at the level of the species. She is a “ravenous tiger” whose life is “beastly, and devoid of pity” (5. 3. 198). Unlike Titus, she uses violence to satisfy her own need of revenge. There is no greater purpose, no common good to which she yields except her own desires. She is unnatural even to the point of murdering her new-born baby to save her own life.

But, what adds some irony to Tamora’s revenge is that it goes completely misunderstood. Titus never makes the connection between his action and her reaction. In the same way, he cannot see that his appointing of the emperor arises the Emperor’s and the Tribune’s disdain rather than the expected gratitude. Tamora’s revenge proves meaningless the moment the person she intended to punish doesn’t get the message. Titus cannot make sense of these sufferings that have fallen upon him and this is precisely whereon his tragedy lies. All his life he had been able to bear every hardship as long as he could create meaning out of it, but he is destroyed the moment he realizes the Rome for which he fought “is but a wilderness of tigers”, and that “Tigers must prey and Rome affords no prey but [him] and [his]” (3. 1. 54- 56)

Titus begins his descent in act 3 scene 1, when he falls to the ground on his fours. He rhizomatically<sup>10</sup> becomes animal and begins to reconnect with nature. As he says “In the dust I write / My heart’s deep languor and my soul’s sad tears” (3, 1, 12-13), what he is actually doing is pouring the substance of his pain into receptive soil, seeking for nature’s embrace since culture has deserted him. So, Titus forges with it a new allegiance: he will no longer serve Rome with his hands, but nature with his tears.

“O earth, I will befriend thee more with rain  
That shall distil from these two ancient ruins,  
Than youthful April shall with all his showers.  
In summer’s drought I’ll drop upon thee still;  
In winter with warm tears I’ll melt the snow  
And keep eternal springtime on thy face,  
So thou refuse to drink my dear sons’ blood” (3. 1. 16-22)

Nature provides an answer: in Taymor’s movie, rain pours down on him as if crying with him and cleansing him at the same time. Titus is not (yet?) crazy. He knows he is talking to the stones but he has decided they are better than the Tribunes “for they will not intercept [his] tale; / when [he does] weep they humbly at [his] feet / receive [his] tears and seem to weep with [him]” (3. 1. 40-42).

If Rome’s forsaking makes Titus a servant of nature, Lavinia’s rape makes him want to become one single substance with it, by submerging completely in its wilderness. “For now [he] stands as one upon a rock, / environed by a wilderness of sea, / who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave, / expecting ever when some envious surge / will in his brinish bowels swallow him” (3. 1. 93-97) Further on he says “I am the sea” (3. 1. 224) If he is the sea, he is no longer Roman, so he allows himself to be barbarous, just as nature is.

For Titus, life has lost its meaning, thus he has descended to the level of the species, in which Tamora moves, to plot his revenge. But he is not a beast in the same way as she. He has the soldier’s training, he has been elevated, and then dehumanized. Hence, his vengeance is more perfect than Tamora’s, who fails to plan anything successful without her “black devil”. As Lugo points out: “the

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9. Frankl, 92.

10. Here I’m using the concept of rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari, as presented on *A Thousand Plateaus*.

only time she is left to her own devices to plot and scheme... results in the assassination of her two remaining sons."<sup>11</sup> When asked for his hand in exchange for his sons' lives, Titus knows his sons are already dead, but the soldier within compels him to chop off the hand he already considers useless, so as to entice Saturnine into feeling victorious. That hand is the sacrifice needed to fool the tigers of Rome, just as a lizard detaches its tail to fool a predator. That hand amputated and delivered is the phony sign of defeat that will buy him time to gather information and then plan and execute his revenge, that will not be with a dagger in their bosoms. Titus "will teach [us] another course." (4. 1. 119) Like a predator, he will wait under the protection of his supposed lunacy and when the opportunity arises, attack.

Tamora's animality is incapable of this level of elaboration because as a beast, she has never been able to truly sacrifice herself for any greater cause. She humiliated herself when begging, but Titus goes beyond her comprehension with that self-mutilated hand. With that piece of flesh, Titus doubles his bet but Tamora doesn't understand his game. Saturnine, who receives the hand, is too short-sighted to see what a dangerous sign the hand is. That hand will no longer serve Rome, it will no longer serve him. In the same way, Demetrius and Chiron are too illiterate to read the message in the jewels delivered. To the eyes of the beastly only a madman can cut off his hand and send gifts to its enemies. So, considering him demented, Tamora disguises as Revenge and foolishly hands in her sons to the predator she herself unleashed through her meaningless revenge. When his turn comes, Titus makes sure he gets his message across. This also adds to the perfection of his vengeance. But Titus's perfect revenge comes at a terrible cost: he has resigned his humanity, and this is the danger that haunts us all.

Nothing fruitful comes out of the exponential growth of violence, of this unleashing of our man-beast volition. Like for young Lucius in Taymor's film, violence finally gets out of control. We all end up dead: those responsible and those innocent alike. Still in the search for an unselfish transcendent purpose we man-species find the strength to elevate ourselves, to buttress our behavior and aim at goodness.

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