

A FANTASTIC FEAST: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S  
*TITUS ANDRONICUS* AS GROTESQUERIE

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of  
California State University, Stanislaus

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts in English

By  
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December 2017

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks and appreciation to my thesis adviser, Dr. Tony Perrello, for his expert guidance, support, and mentorship throughout my entire span at Stanislaus State and for introducing me to *Titus Andronicus*. Also, I express my gratitude to Dr. Susan Marshall for not only participating on my thesis committee, but also for the encouragement freely given during my time in graduate school. Thanks to Dr. Matthew Moberly for his input as I revised this document and for the opportunities he placed in my path over the past couple of years, and to Tara Dybas for her input, encouragement, and friendship as we composed and revised our projects these past two semesters. I also thank those in the Stanislaus State English Department who personally invested in my education, growth, and development as a scholar, particularly Dr. Molly Winter, Paula Barrington-Schmidt, Dr. Jesse Wolfe, Dr. Andrew Dorsey, Dr. John Wittman, Tula Mattingly, and Patricia Ford. Most especially, I thank my husband, Patrick Hollcraft, whose love, support, and sacrifices have made all my accomplishments possible.

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## ABSTRACT

Criticism on *Titus Andronicus* neglects a comprehensive discussion on the play's grotesque characteristics; likewise, grotesque theorists fail to mention *Titus Andronicus* when they discuss Shakespearean grotesque. However, *Titus Andronicus* offers ample images and figures that exemplify the grotesque concepts of hybridity, the comic macabre, the fantastic, the bizarre, and the monstrous, which can be found not only in the script, but also in the play's source material, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid significantly influenced the flourishing of the grotesque aesthetic in the Renaissance, as he was extensively read by Nero, whose excavated Domus Aurea contained the "grotto art," or *grottesche*, that inspired the grotesque aesthetic. *Titus Andronicus* particularly exemplifies Mikhail Bakhtin's detailed exposition on Renaissance grotesque and the carnivalesque, especially the grotesque's emphasis on feasting, Saturnalias, carnival hell, bodily material, negation, and degradation. Furthermore, the performance history of *Titus Andronicus* displays an inherent understanding of the play as a grotesque through either a faithful adherence to Shakespeare's original script and all its grotesque elements or by an avoidance of the grotesque in order to appease the social and artistic sensibilities of particular audiences. The significant performances of *Titus Andronicus* in the past century reveal that contemporary directors and audiences are now willing to confront and contend with the disruption, shock, disgust, uncomfortable laughter, and wonder that

accompanies the grotesque. Special attention is given to productions by Peter Brook, Deborah Warner, Julie Taymor, and Lucy Bailey.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In his collection of critical essays on *Titus Andronicus*, Phillip C Kolin relays that Southern playwright Tennessee Williams confessed an appreciation for William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and its "grotesqueries" (Kolin 5). Williams claimed that *Titus Andronicus* "could be presented as a masterpiece . . . if you are willing to accept all the Gothic horror" and that it seemed to him "the theatre of the ridiculous" (Brown 269). Williams is one of the few to defend Shakespeare's much maligned work, and his comments reflect the possibility of a perspective on the play as a grotesquerie that most literary critics overlook. When literary critics and theorists of the grotesque aesthetic discuss Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* is rarely, if ever, mentioned. The play's absence from critical discussion on the grotesque most likely occurs because of its long history of disparagement by literary critics and audiences. Jonathan Bate claims that "those who have approached *Titus* in a spirit of scholarly enquiry rather than critical judgment have been prejudiced by their distaste for the play. In particular, they have been anxious to find ground for devaluing its place in Shakespeare's career or even dismissing it from the canon of his works altogether" (Bate 3). Alan Dessen warns that "Those who do see merit and potential in this play must therefore start in a defensive posture so as to confront an initial disbelief in a significant part of their audience" (Dessen 1). However, the proliferation of productions of *Titus Andronicus* in the past century and the droves of people

clamoring for this spectacle offer vindication for a play that has been rejected, bastardized, and consistently ignored for three-hundred years of its performance history. *Titus Andronicus*' surge in popularity indicates a contemporary audience ready to contend with representations of chaos, violence, power, and corruption that provoke reactions beyond the Aristotelian catharsis typical of dramatic tragedy.

Shakespeare establishes a nightmarish world turned upside-down, filled with chaos and contradiction. Prisoners become rulers, loyal soldiers are branded as traitors, fathers kill their children, and mothers eat their young. In *Titus Andronicus*, the Goth Queen becomes the Roman empress, a Roman general becomes the Goth leader, and Rome descends into barbarity while the Goth army's invasion reestablishes order. *Titus Andronicus* is excessive, gory, fantastic, ridiculous, and implausible from start to finish, but the play resonates with audiences left sickened or bewildered. As spectators contend with the play, they identify disturbing manifestations of dueling qualities within singular figures. Titus is both man and machine, rigid and comedic, powerful and degraded. Lavinia is both beautiful and mutilated, emblemized and desecrated. Tamora is both fertile and destructive, mother and cannibal. Aaron the Moor is a sadistic, murderous nihilist, but he sacrifices his own life in the hope of giving his infant son a future. The pervasive imagery containing contradiction, disruption, hybridity, deformity, and the comic macabre indicate that with *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare created a grotesquerie.

The grotesque as an artistic aesthetic can be traced back to the discovery of the grotto art—*grottesche*—discovered in the cavernous ruins of Nero's Domus

Aurea during the Quattrocento excavations in the fifteenth century. The frescoes, created by Fabullus during the Domus Aurea's construction in 64 AD, feature fantastic images of hybrid creatures, elaborate ornamentation, and a vibrant use of color. The style exploded in popularity throughout the Renaissance, but evolved into a darker, satiric mode during the Romantic period through present day. Grottesque theorist Wolfgang Kayser describes the grotesque as itself a hybrid of meanings and motivations:

By the word *grottesco* the Renaissance, which used it to designate a specific ornamental style suggested by antiquity, understood not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one—a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid. (Kayser 21)

Geoffrey Galt Harpham expounds upon Kayser's description and claims that “the grotesque can serve as a thematic metaphor for confusion, chaos, insanity, loss of perspective, social collapse, or disintegration, or *angst* . . . that the rules of order have collapsed; for this reason, it is strongest in eras of upheaval or crisis, when old beliefs in old orders are threatened or crumbling” (“The Grotesque: First Principles” 466).

Both Kayser's and Harpham's assessments of the grotesque aptly apply to *Titus Andronicus* and its fantastic moments of merriment in the midst of Titus' downfall. Titus meanders through periods of triumph, rage, confusion, giddiness, madness,

jocularity, and despair—sometimes within the same act and scene. The mutilated bodies and political upheaval contribute to the asymmetrical imagery of the play, as does the high literary language attached to such horrific and base acts. For Titus, Roman order has collapsed and no longer serves the general and his family who have long fought its wars and served its interests. The Rome of the Andronici is grotesque indeed.

However, when it comes to the employment of the grotesque during the Renaissance, critics, including Harpham, rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's comprehensive treatment of the mode. In his prologue to the English translation of *Rabelais and His World*, Michael Holquist explains that Bakhtin "was deeply responsive to the Renaissance because he saw in it an age similar to his own in its revolutionary consequences and its acute sense of one world's death and another world's being born" (Holquist xv). At the heart of Bakhtinian grotesque is carnival, the communal, festive season of celebration centered on laughter, ritual, feasting, carnal pleasures, and bodily material. Bakhtin's manifestations of the grotesque appear in ritual spectacles, comic verbiage, billingsgate (coarse, abusive language), cosmic terror, degradation, negation, and in the grotesque body. Bakhtin uses Carl Freiderich Flogel's definition of the grotesque, "all that which deviates from the usual aesthetic forms and which sharply emphasizes the exaggeration of the material bodily element" (Bakhtin 36), to support his own. However, Bakhtin's grotesque is also fruitful and regenerative, birthing new life and bringing rejuvenation to society. Bakhtin assigns a less ominous tone to the grotesque, and instead emphasizes the "subversive

openness” of the mode and the ways in which a society’s “officialdom” and social hierarchies are challenged. Bakhtin also repeatedly references the tradition of the feast of Saturnalias in his discussions of carnival feasting and the grotesque, claiming that that the grotesque “always represents in one form or another . . . the return of Saturn’s Golden Age to earth—the living possibility of its return” (Bakhtin 48). The Saturnalias celebrates a peaceful pre-Iron Age, before warfare, weaponry, and vice dominated humanity. An examination of *Titus Andronicus* shows that it fulfills Bakhtin’s definitions of the grotesque, functioning as a hellish carnival feast where the dismembered bodies, depraved behavior, and cannibalistic feasting of its characters represent a fractured civilization. The disordered Rome of the Andronici becomes permanently marked by barbarity and is swallowed up, both literally and figuratively, to give life to a new peaceful, ordered era.

It is worth noting that while Kayser, Harpham, and Bakhtin all mention Shakespeare’s skillful execution of the grotesque in his work, not one of them mentions *Titus Andronicus*. *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *Richard III*, and *Hamlet* are commonly referred to in discussions on Shakespearean grotesque, but *Titus Andronicus* seems to be the rejected stepchild of Shakespeare’s canon even in the arena of grotesque criticism—experiencing the same rejection and dismissal that grotesque figures often do. However, *Titus Andronicus* fully exemplifies all that Kayser, Harpham, and Bakhtin detail on the grotesque—most particularly Bakhtin’s examination of the festive carnival and the grotesque body. Not only do the thematic elements and characters contribute to *Titus Andronicus* as a grotesque, but so do the

literary form and style of the play. Additionally, *Titus Andronicus*'s source material, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, substantiates the play as a grotesque by providing Shakespeare with images of hybridity, contradiction, horror, and humor that he utilizes in his portrayals of Lavinia and of the final banquet feast. A close examination of the myths of Io, Daphne and Apollo, the Four Ages of Man, and most particularly of Philomela, Tereus, and Procne will reveal that *Metamorphoses* itself is grotesque, even though it was written long before the aesthetic was defined, because Ovid's form, style, and content illustrate the very qualities that constitute the grotesque, and because the same style Ovid implemented is what Fabullus presented through his art on the walls of the Domus Aurea, which was then used to generate the term "grotesque." Shakespeare's adherence to Ovid infuses his own work with the same grotesqueness of *Metamorphoses*.

Furthermore, a thorough examination of all the significant productions of *Titus Andronicus* over the past three-hundred years further cements its place in the grotesque aesthetic. Throughout the performance history of *Titus Andronicus*, the decisions by its various directors reinforce its grotesque nature. After its popular run and multiple printings during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, *Titus Andronicus* fell out of popularity during the Restoration until the mid-twentieth-century. When it was performed, directors heavily modified Shakespeare's original script and removed the violence and gore, considered inappropriate for the stage at the time, and any occasion that may provoke unwanted laughter from the audience. The changes made to *Titus Andronicus* indirectly recognize the play as a grotesque,

for all that was changed or removed were lines, images, and events that could be described as grotesque if performed according to the original script—moments of macabre humor, disturbing on-stage violence, mutilation, hybridity, and implausibility. When contemporary productions finally presented *Titus Andronicus* as originally scripted, the result was overt, astonishing, shocking grotesqueness that regularly caused audience members to faint. Over the past sixty years, contemporary productions of *Titus Andronicus* embrace its grotesqueness more with each incarnation, particularly the groundbreaking theatrical productions by Peter Brook in 1955 for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-on-Avon, Deborah Warner in 1987 for the RSC at the Swan, the film production of *Titus* in 1999 by Julie Taymor, and Lucy Bailey's 2006 production for the RSC at the Globe and its 2014 revival. The decisions and details implemented and emphasized by Brook, Warner, Taymor, and Bailey conjure reactions associated with viewing grotesques: shock, astonishment, confusion, laughter, and wonder. The grotesque is highly dependent on audience reaction to be grotesque, for when an audience becomes desensitized, the presentation ceases to be grotesque and instead assumes normativity. However, *Titus Andronicus* continues to shock and disturb contemporary audiences even as a sixteenth-century script, justifying the qualification of the play as a grotesquerie.

## CHAPTER II

### RENDERING *TITUS ANDRONICUS* AS GROTESQUE

Neither Kayser, Harpham, nor Bakhtin include *Titus Andronicus* in their discussions on the grotesque, though all concur on Shakespeare's mastery in his implementation of the mode in his body of work<sup>1</sup>. In order to frame *Titus Andronicus* as a grotesquerie, the varying parameters of the grotesque mode laid out by Kayser, Harpham, and Bakhtin must be synthesized and then applied to the play. Wilson Yates specifies the mythic consciousness of Harpham; the hostile, demonic, ominousness of Kayser; and the communal nature of the human body and the carnival spirit of Bakhtin as demarcations in the three theorists' discussions on the grotesque. However, Yates surmises, "whatever we identify as the underlying subject of the grotesque, it will inevitably be about some aspect of life that does not fit, that conflicts with the world as defined by our cultural norms, decorum, and values, by our acceptable ways of being. It will be about that which violates some aspects of the religious, moral, social, or natural world we have constructed and legitimated" (W. Yates 41). Yates essentially establishes that the commonality between the varying theories on the grotesque is the transgressive, subversive, and abject. However, *Titus Andronicus*, though it certainly encompasses the synthesizing convergence of transgression, subversion, and abjection, has particular qualities that correlate exclusively with Bakhtin's specific points of grotesque theory that set it apart as a

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin 1, 43, 123, 124, 127; Kayser 41, 51;

carnavalesque grotesque—its emphasis on the banquet and on the grotesque body.

While Kayser and Harpham substantially contribute to discussion on the grotesque in *Titus Andronicus*, the play aptly resides in the Bakhtinian grotesque.

### **The Estranged World of Carnival Hell**

Yates summarizes Kayser's exposition on the grotesque by identifying four basic premises to Kayser's definition of the mode: "(1) the grotesque is the estranged world; (2) the grotesque appears to be an expression of an incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal force; (3) the grotesque is at play with the absurd; and (4) the creation of the grotesque is an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (W. Yates 17). Bakhtin's delineations on the grotesque coincide with Kayser's concept of the estranged world, particularly his emphasis on the carnival season of feasting and the celebration of Saturnalias, the mythological age of peace that levels social hierarchies and refutes the official, typical realities society conforms to outside of carnival. As Justin D. Edwards and Rune Grauland explain, Kayser "assesses the grotesque as the appearance of a reality that is simultaneously of and opposed to the worlds in which the audience exists," which coincides with "Mikhail Bakhtin's deployment of the term in relation to the carnivalesque through the inversion of reality by temporarily destabilizing a closed, hierarchical society" (Edwards and Grauland 11). Edwards and Grauland also point out Bakhtin's assertion that there are uncontrollable, opposing forces at play in the grotesque, "a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere" (Edwards and

Grauland 22), which oftentimes is reflective of the inability to contain, define, or predict the qualities and behaviors of grotesqueries. Harpham claims that the grotesque calls into question “the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles . . . to represent a condition of overcrowding or contradiction in the place where the modifier should be . . . grotesques have no consistent properties other than their own grotesqueness, and that they do not manifest predictable behavior” (Harpham 3). The uncontrollable nature of the grotesque surpasses the grotesque figure itself and permeates the cosmic, metaphysical world around it as well.

One of the qualities of the grotesque is a sense that one is outside of time when immersed in the chaotic world of the text. The grotesque exists in liminality, in dream-like states, or in period of transition, rebellion, or revolution. *Titus Andronicus*’ setting possesses that same indefinite quality, as it is outside of any known point in Roman history. *Titus Andronicus*’ liminality disrupts the audience’s perception of what era Shakespeare’s play is reflecting and gives the play a universal quality. Robert S. Miola explains:

students of Shakespeare’s neoclassicism should recognize that his Rome, like Virgil’s, was constructed over time by the play of the poetic imagination on diverse materials . . . the eternal city is made from an ephemeral medley of things Roman—from shards of history, poetry, and myth, from half-remembered schoolbooks and well-studied texts, from the overflowing Renaissance cornucopia of allusion, allegory, florilegium, polemic,

translation, compilation, and moralization. Consequently, any approach which seeks to fit the various incarnations of Shakespeare's Rome to a single political or theological Procrustean bed does violence to the heterogeneity of the city's origins and character. (Miola 95)

*Titus Andronicus* certainly takes place during the time of a declining Roman Empire— well after Ovid since his *Metamorphoses* was an established text in Young Lucius's collection during the time in which the play is set<sup>2</sup> and serves as the only time-marker of the play. The indefinite time of the play indicates a transition between civilizations: “[grotesques] are ‘liminal’ in the sense that anthropologists use the word to describe the middle phase of primitive initiation rituals when the celebrant is ‘between two worlds.’ In a liminal image, opposing processes and assumptions coexist in a single representation” (Harpham 17). Since *Titus Andronicus* is a play outside of time, so to speak, its events and images take on the quality of spectacle rather than of realism, a quality classified as an element of carnival.

However, according to Bakhtin, spectacle is not something merely seen, but something experienced:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it . . . It was most clearly expressed and experienced in the Roman Saturnalias, perceived as a true and full, though

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<sup>2</sup> See *Titus Andronicus* 4.1

temporary, return of Saturn's Golden Age upon earth. The tradition of the Saturnalias remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival. (Bakhtin 7-8)

Bakhtin claims the grotesque spirit of carnival “represents . . . the return of Saturn's Golden Age to earth—the living possibility of its return” (Bakhtin 48). However, instead of a Roman Saturnalias, *Titus Andronicus* opens with the age of Saturninus, who is set on the throne by Titus himself after he refuses the people's appointment due to age and weariness from battle (1.1.190-203). Rather than an ushering in of a peaceful Saturnalias, *Titus Andronicus* presents a warped, inverted Saturnalias under a petulant, despotic ruler. The moment when Titus chooses Saturninus over Bassianus appears to be a moment of hamartia—the fatal misstep that sets all tragic events in motion. Saturninus' reign contradicts the image of the Golden Age of Saturn as a peaceful era before warfare and weaponry corrupted humanity. Instead, the audience witnesses the spectacle of violence as Rome descends into savagery, and by the final banquet scene, the audience instead must recall the image of Saturn devouring his children as Saturninus partakes of the meat pie with Tamora's two sons baked inside.

However, if *Titus Andronicus*' moment of harmartia is instead identified as Titus' decision to sacrifice Alarbus, Tamora's eldest son, to the gods in reparation for the lost Andronici sons killed in battle, then instead of mirroring the Golden Age of Saturn, *Titus Andronicus* provides an image of a hellish carnival: “Religiously [the gods] ask for a sacrifice / To this your son is marked, and die he must, / T'appease

their groaning shadows that are gone” (1.1.127-129). This questionably unholy sacrifice (“O cruel, irreligious piety!) signals less the age of Saturn and more the age of iron and barbarity, injecting what should be a festive, joyful carnival atmosphere with revenge, creating a carnival hell.

At the end of the Middle Ages, images of hell and carnival merged and “transformed the underworld into a gay popular spectacle” (Bakhtin 393). Examples of carnival hell imagery in the Renaissance in carnival parades included “dragons spitting fire . . . a giant devouring children, an old devil eating wicked wives . . . the Venus mountain, an oven for the baking of fools, a cannon to shoot ill-tempered women, a trap to catch fools, a galley with monks and nuns, and the wheel of fortune spinning fools. The whole contraption, stocked with fireworks, was usually burned in the town hall” (Bakhtin 394). The images of carnival hell are easily recognized in *Titus Andronicus*. First, regarding the wheel of fortune, Aaron acknowledges “fortune’s shot” (1.1.501) as Tamora ascends from the depths of misery to triumph’s heights after she is made empress of Rome. The images of fools caught in a trap and fools baked in an oven immediately recall Chiron and Demetrius at the hands of vengeful, mad Titus, used as a weapon against their ill-tempered mother:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,  
 And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste,  
 And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
 And make two pasties of your shameful heads,  
 And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,

Like to the earth swallow her own increase.

This is the feast I have bid her to

And this the banquet she shall surfeit on . . . (5.2.186-194)

The images of the cannibal giant devouring children in carnival hell alludes to the myth of Saturn devouring his children and connects to both Tamora and Saturninus eating her children. Additionally, the image of a trap for fools recalls the pit Aaron lured Quintus and Martius to in the woods, a trap designed to catch people rather than game (2.2.197-245). However, hellish carnival spectacles also include the therapeutic element of laughter, such as when the Andronici argue over whose hand will be severed in exchange for the lives of Martius and Quintus (3.1.158-186), when Lavinia grips her father's severed hand between her teeth (3.1.382-383), and whenever Aaron the Moor makes a nasty aside to the audience: "If that be called deceit, I will be honest" (3.1.189). The laughter is necessary to overcome the horror and foulness of the play: "All these variations of the carnivalesque hell are ambivalent and include in one way or another the symbols of fear defeated by laughter" (Bakhtin 394).

According to Bakhtin, the laughter of the carnival hell is a renewing life force: "carnivalesque hell affirmed earth and its lower stratum as the fertile womb, where death meets birth and new life springs forth" (Bakhtin 395). Depending on the tone of the production, the final banquet scene in *Titus Andronicus* provides the possibility of laughter when Titus, dressed ridiculously as a cook, urges Tamora to eat her meat pie made up of the ground up bones of her two sons (5.3.29).

Carnival laughter correlates with feasting, which is often associated with ecclesial rituals. Bakhtin explains the “Easter laughter” and “Christmas laughter” of the Christian church coming out of the Lenten and Advent seasons of penance and sacrifice: “Permission to laugh was granted simultaneously with the permission to eat meat and to resume sexual intercourse” (Bakhtin 79), showing how laughter is connected to the “material bodily element” (Bakhtin 79). On the Shakespearean stage, the image of the feast is presented through a banquet scene, which in the case of *Titus Andronicus* is rife with macabre humor, and becomes the grotesque cleansing needed to revive and reorient Rome back into a civilized era.

### **Feasting**

Bakhtin claims that in folk culture, banquets are lively, festive, comic feasts connected not only with ritual but also with the corporeal elements of the body. The grotesque body eats and drinks: “it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth . . . Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself (Bakhtin 281). Man and the world become intimately connected through the acts of eating and drinking, and *Titus Andronicus* fully displays Bakhtin’s ideas through Titus’ final banquet scene where he literally serves up his revenge to Tamora and Saturninus, turning them into cannibals as they chew-up Chiron and Demetrius and consume the murderous world they currently rule over. Titus’ banquet fulfills all that Bakhtin describes as comprising the banqueting spirit of the carnival feast:

The popular images of food and drink are active and triumphant, for they conclude the process of labor and struggle of the social man against the world. They express the people as a whole because they are based on the inexhaustible, ever-growing abundance of the material principle. They are universal and organically combined with the concept of the free and sober truth, ignoring fear and piousness and therefore linked with wise speech. Finally, they are infused with gay time moving toward a better future that changes and renews everything in its path. (Bakhtin 302)

The banquet is the result of Titus' labor of revenge and a fulfillment of the vow he made to the Andronici: "You heavy people, circle me about, / That I may turn me to each one of you / And swear unto my soul to right your wrongs" (3.1.277-279).

Bakhtin points out that the culmination of work and the celebration with food are a natural progression: "In the oldest system of images food was related to work. It concluded work and struggle and was their crown of glory. Work triumphed in food . . . As the last victorious stage of work, the image of food often symbolized the entire labor process . . . the struggle of man against the world, ending in victory" (Bakhtin 281). Bakhtin's description not only applies to Titus' triumph over Tamora and Saturninus, but also his triumph over the entire Roman world that Titus had fought for and served in vain.

Bakhtin also claims that banquets are "intimately connected with speech, with wise conversation and gay truth" (Bakhtin 281). Bakhtin's claim resonates in the banquet scene when Titus asks Saturninus about the myth of Virginius. Titus is

proposing a profound and seemingly rational discussion on the Roman myth of Virginius, a centurion who slayed his daughter to prevent her rape, although in some versions of the myth he slays her because she has been raped:

My lord emperor, resolve me this:

Was it well done of rash Virginius

To slay his daughter with his own right hand,

Because she was enforced, stained and deflowered? (5.3.35-38)

Saturninus takes the bait and responds in favor of Virginius' act "Because the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (5.3.40-41). Titus concurs with Saturninus' reasoning: "A reason mighty, strong, and effectual" (5.3.42), and then proceeds to kill Lavinia, although presumably with his left hand since his right has been severed, delivering a perverted realization of Saturninus' spoken wisdom, horrifying his banquet guests. Saturninus responds, "What hast thou done, unnatural and unkind?" (5.3.47), contradicting his words from moments before, which reflects the disordered nature of Titus' banquet. As Bakhtin explains about the banquet, "The themes of table talk are always 'sublime,' filled with 'profound wisdom,' but these themes are uncrowned and renewed on the material bodily level. The grotesque symposium does not have to respect hierarchal distinctions; it freely blends the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, the spiritual and the material" (Bakhtin 285-286). Titus and Saturninus's abstract discussion becomes material in Lavinia's body, quickly transforming the sublime banquet moment into a profane reality, with the banquet thenceforth descending

quickly into a bloodbath. However, immediately after the profanity of the slaughter, the Andronici ascend aloft (5.3.65) protected by the Goth army, exemplifying that while the banquet was Titus' personal triumph, it also serves as the point of the triumph of the Andronici over Roman sovereignty. Ultimately the Roman people triumph as they once again raise their voice to proclaim, "Lucius, all hail, Rome's gracious governor!" (5.3.145), and this time their voice is approved, and officialdom is restored—the carnival feast is finished.

### **The Grotesque Image of the Body**

Banquet imagery correlates food to the grotesque in that it connects the world to the material body. For Bakhtin, the open body is one of the primary avenues of the grotesque: "We find at the basis of grotesque imagery a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images" (Bakhtin 315). A grotesque body does not conform to the "aesthetics of the beautiful" of the Renaissance—a closed, complete, secret, individualized body (Bakhtin 29). Instead of clean, complete, closed, private, individualistic bodies, the grotesque is concerned with open bodies, bodily fluids and excretions, deformed and asymmetrical bodies, and communal bodies that reflect the world: "The grotesque . . . is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines. Special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside" (Bakhtin 317). The prominence of appendages in

*Titus Andronicus*—specifically of hands, but also of tongues and heads—correlates with Bakhtin’s explanation of the grotesque’s emphasis on that which protrudes from the body. Not only do the appendages of the Andronici protrude, but they become separate from the body, literally going beyond the body’s confines. Andronic characters in some fashion represent an extension into the world beyond either through a separation of an appendage from their body—as is the case with Lavinia and her severed hands and tongue, Titus with his chopped off hand, and Martius and Quintus’ decapitations—or through a literal journey to another part of the world—such as when Lucius is banished from Rome and unites with the Goth army. Each of these protrusions contribute to the final restoration of the Andronici to Rome—Lucius’ placement on the emperor’s throne. However, only the whole, complete bodies make it to the end of the play. Those Andronic bodies with severed protrusions are all destroyed, to return to the earth through burial in the Andronic tomb.

Bakhtin characterizes the grotesque treatment of the body as a “rehabilitation of the flesh” (Bakhtin 18)—having to do with materiality, the body, the earth—which Bakhtin terms “grotesque realism.” Grotesque realism indicates an approach to the body as a communal, earthly, life-giving treatment: “In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive . . . something universal, representing all people . . . it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body . . . the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character . . . it is not individualized” (Bakhtin 19). The body of the

people is expressed in exaggerated, excessive, abundant terms and is fertile, growing, and open. The grotesque body is transgressive, receptive, and consigning, and it is on display in an unfinished state—conceiving, pregnant, birthing, and dying. Tamora’s body also constitutes a grotesque body under Bakhtin’s explanation, for she conjugally unites with Aaron the Moor—which also constitutes a grotesque union of disparate individuals—and becomes pregnant. The child she births is one of the few surviving, whole bodies of the play, going forth into the world in a restored Rome towards an unknown future. However, Tamora’s body, after giving birth, swallows up her other two children and then is slain. Tamora’s body, though remaining whole, still morphs and transforms, herself becoming food for the earth and its creatures.

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body unites with the material earth and represents cosmic realities: “it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. It is an incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom” (Bakhtin 27). However, as ambient as the body is, it is not presented as straightforwardly beautiful: “the grotesque images preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed being. They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of “classic” aesthetics” (Bakhtin 25). Shakespeare propagates *Titus Andronicus* with bodies that are open, fertile, dismembered, violated, secreting, oozing, fertile, and consuming. The bodies of the Andronici and the Goths intermingle with one another in both typical and horrifying

ways, and the secretions of body fluids practically drench the stage in blood and gore. The most grotesque body on stage in *Titus Andronicus* is indisputably Lavinia's, for she is displayed ravished, mutilated, and presumably gushing or oozing blood throughout the play. Initially she is present in a classical context, as "Gracious Lavinia, Rome's rich ornament" (1.1.55) and "Rome's royal mistress" (1.1.245), but begins to be morphed into grotesque terms when she is raped and her tongue cut out. Bakhtin emphasizes the mouth's primary role as a member of the grotesque body: "the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss" (Bakhtin 317). After Lavinia is discovered dismembered and bloody by her uncle, Marcus asks her to speak, and her response is only to open her mouth, visually presenting on stage her gaping mouth mostly likely gushing blood (2.3.20).

The intermingling of Lavinia's inner body fluid with the outer world as her blood oozes from both her mouth and her bloody arm stumps is also qualified as inherent to grotesque realism: "The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body; blood, bowels, heart, and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one" (Bakhtin 318). Marcus immediately begins illustrating Lavinia with natural imagery, calling the blood flowing from her mouth a "crimson river" and "bubbling fountain" (2.3.23-24), and he likens Lavinia to a tree missing her "lily hands . . . like aspen leaves on a lute" (2.3.44-45). According to Bakhtin, the merging of human and natural imagery is

another move of the grotesque connecting the body with cosmic themes: “the grotesque body is cosmic and universal . . . This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe” (Bakhtin 318). However, the natural imagery Marcus attaches to Lavinia immediately mark her as an uncontrollable body: “That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated” (Bakhtin 320). In Bakhtinian terms, Lavinia’s dismembered body begins to intrude upon her world, and those around her, particularly Titus, cannot contend with her any longer. As Titus begins his vengeful banquet, the world is about to be reoriented back into a civilized one, and so Lavinia will no longer have a place in it. Before Titus brings about resolution to a dismembered Rome, he removes the cosmic image of dismembered Rome by killing Lavinia.

### **Praise/Abuse—the Blazon**

Shakespeare also utilizes language to dismember Lavinia in form. Grace Starry West points out how the language of *Titus Andronicus* itself is grotesque; the high literary language and style of the play contradicts its brutal, gory, base themes. The primary example West relies on is Marcus’s blazon upon discovery of Lavinia: “Marcus’ speech is filled with metaphor, simile, and allusion, much of it high-flown and grotesquely inappropriate” (West 66). Marcus sets himself in the grotesque liminal space at the outset: “If I do dream, would all my wealth would wake me; / If I do wake, some planet strike me down / That I may slumber an eternal sleep” (2.3.13-

15). He then immediately refers to the two negated spaces on Lavinia's body—her tongue and her hands: "Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands / Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare / Of her two branches" (2.3.16-18). As Chiron and Demetrius have dismembered Lavinia, Marcus dissects and dismantles her thoroughly, pointing out the "crimson river of blood" flowing from her mouth, her "rosed lips," "Honey breath," "pretty fingers," and lily hands" (2.3.22-44). Bakhtin explains how the blazon is a tool of the grotesque in dismantling the body piece-by-piece:

Poets began to blazon women's mouth, ears, tongues, teeth, eyes, and eyebrows, performing a systematic dissection and anatomization of woman in a tone of humorous, familiar praise or denigration . . . The blazon preserved the duality of its tone in its appreciation; in other words, it could render praise ironical and flatter that which was usually not to be flattered. Blazons remained outside the official system of straight and strict evaluation. (Bakhtin 427)

Marcus's blazon also involves the same duality of tone, exhibiting "the disparity between the beautifully polished surface of the language, replete with learned allusion and metaphor, and the gory events of the play: human sacrifice, rape, mutilation, and cannibalism" (West 63). West claims that the contradictions in the form, theme, and presentation of the scene disassociate the audience from the scene: "Many have noticed that the distance between the beautiful language and the horrible events of this play creates a distance between the play and the audience. In the view of most

critics, neither the characters nor the actions are believable and, hence, we cannot for a moment, or at least not for many moments, believe in the play” (West 73).

However, grotesqueries are not meant to be “believed in” per se by their audience, but leave the observers in a state of contention, wonder, bewilderment, astonishment, or shock.

Lavinia’s presentation as ravished, mutilated, and mute and Marcus’ ridiculous blazoning of her condition over time has become the most iconic scene of the play and has taken on an emblematic quality signifying social, political, and moral chaos. The prolonged nature of the scene, effected by Marcus’s lengthy blazon, exacerbates the visual impact of Lavinia’s stationary, silent presence on the stage, giving the scene the impression of a grotesque tableau. The spectacle of Lavinia is not an image an audience should accept or believe in, for embracing such horrific, violent, chaos contradicts the liminal and other-worldly experience of the grotesque. Rather, the audience is left in its disrupted state throughout the rest of the play, which will only produce more shocking images of dismemberment and destruction, until order and civility is restored through the Lucius’s ascendance to the throne. Only then is the audience’s disorientation remediated.

### **Negation**

Lavinia’s silence after her rape and mutilation reflects the quality of negation that Bakhtin assigns to the grotesque: “Negation in popular festive-imagery has never an abstract logical character. It is always something obvious, tangible. That which stands behind negation is by no means nothingness but the ‘other side’ of that which

is denied, the carnivalesque upside down” (Bakhtin 410). In Lavinia, grotesque negation is manifested through the silence produced by the literal removal of her tongue. The continual references to Lavinia’s tongue materializes silence, giving Lavinia’s lack of voice a loud presence in the play.

Because Lavinia has no voice, she communicates primarily through gesturing through most of the play. Adrian Curtin characterizes Lavinia’s gesticulating as “potentially disruptive semiotic ‘noise’” (Curtin 46), because Lavinia’s silence conveys more significance than most of her speech in the play. However, there also is the opportunity for silent gesturing that would recall the grotesque figure of the pantomime. Bakhtin mentions the carnival experience of the mime as containing the grotesque (Bakhtin 31) and explains that with the farcical nature of masks, *comedia dell’arte*, and pantomimes, “The object or person is assigned an unusual, even paradoxical role (due to absentmindedness, misunderstanding, or intrigue); this situation provokes laughter and renewal in the sphere of extraordinary reactions” (Bakhtin 374). Lavinia’s pantomiming in the play can take on varying contexts depending on the interpretation of the director and actor playing Lavinia. There are no stage directions for Lavinia throughout the play, but in Act 3.2, Titus indicates that Lavinia pantomimes in order to communicate with her family:

In thy dumb action will I be as perfect  
 As begging hermits in their holy prayers.  
 Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,  
 Nor wink, nor nod, no kneel, nor make a sign,

But I of these will wrest an alphabet

And by still practice learn to know thy meaning. (3.2.40-45)

Curtin points out how Lavinia “has been turned into a grotesque mute who does not even have hands with which to gesture, and yet she continues to gesticulate (with her stumps, presumably). The signs that he makes are largely indeterminate, although this does not prevent other (male) characters from (mis)reading her” (Curtin 54). Titus “reads” Lavinia’s signs to know her meaning, but he has been misreading every situation throughout the play thus far: from sacrificing Alrabus, to empowering Saturninus, to murdering Mutius, to trusting Aaron and cutting off his own hand. Curtin asserts that Lavinia “makes the condition of muteness visible, unpredictable, and potentially subversive” (Curtin 55). Depending on the production’s interpretation, Lavinia’s gestures could mean anything from supplication to protest, which could produce further humor or disruption in the audience if Titus continues to misread her.

Bakhtin also associates the mask with the idea of paradox or misunderstanding and mentions the tradition of the mask in his description of the festive, carnival spirit of the grotesque:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of

reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles.

(Bakhtin 39-41)

The presence of masks or disguises in *Titus Andronicus* could also be connected to Bakhtin's conception of negation in the grotesque, although it is Harpham who more closely makes the association. When Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius present themselves to Titus as images of Rape, Murder, and Revenge, the audience must assume they are donning disguises or masks of some sort.

Harpham describes the experience of viewings masks as "the ambiguous mixture of hilarity and terror, the anxiety, the bewilderment, the merging of Mask and face, the shadow of death passing over the sunny world of children at play, the sudden alienation, the vision into the abyss" ("The Grotesque: First Principles" 466). When Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius don disguises or masks to trick Titus, they negate their identities as Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius. However, this negation does not indicate nothingness or a departure of identity, but rather iterates Bakhtin's idea of metamorphosis and transformation. The negation signified by the mask realizes on stage the upside-down identities of the three Goths.

Though the stage directions Shakespeare provides do not indicate specifically that masks are donned, for he merely indicates "Enter Tamora and her two Sons disguised" (5.2), it is reasonable to assume some productions choose to do so. The 2014 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Lucy Bailey utilized Roman masks with grotesque faces in the scene and conveyed a burlesque quality to the trickery. According to Thomas Wright, the Roman masks were popular in both

comedies and tragedies of the Roman theatre, and that “they were probably the origin of many of the grotesque faces so often met with in medieval sculpture . . . no doubt, it was carried into the carnival of middle ages, and to our masquerades” (Wright 28). The mask also designated particular characters, such as the buffoon or the *manducus* (Wright 29-30). In *Titus Andronicus*, the three Goths don their disguises not to become stock characters but to represent barbaric actions—Rape, Revenge, and Murder—subverting the tradition of the *comedia dell’arte*.

Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius display the spirit of the mask by preying on what they believe to be Titus’ madness. They are gay, merry, and mocking in their presentation to Titus, and Titus plays along, adding to the festivity and whimsy of the scene, but he eerily indicates that his own madness is in fact a mask he has been wearing in preparation of his moment to seize upon his tormentors. The three Goths take on the analogous identities of Revenge, Rape, and Murder; however, only Tamora has assumed her own name of Revenge. As Bate points out, Tamora has only referred to them as “my ministers” (5.2.60), and it is actually Titus who identifies Chiron and Demetrius by their new names: “Lo by thy side where Rape and Murder stands” (5.2.45). However, Titus recognizes them. It is worth noting that in all other Shakespearean plays where a disguise is donned, the trickery works. *Twelfth Night*’s Viola and *As You Like It*’s Rosalind are both believed to be men, Kent is believed to be a brutish sycophant rather than Lear’s loyal servant, and Edgar is believed to be Poor Tom. *Titus Andronicus* is the only one of Shakespeare’s plays where the disguises do not work.

While the three Goths are the ones donning disguises, it is Titus who has been dissembling, and the three disguises and nicknames of Revenge, Rape and Murder are in fact the three Goths true identities. They are not actually wearing masks to play Revenge, Rape, and Murder—they have metamorphized into the three deadly vices and no longer retain their humanity. As Titus and his party seize Chiron and Demetrius, the scene transitions from a spectacle of merriment and trickery into a dark ritual spectacle where Titus and Lavinia oversee the slaughter of the formerly masked tricksters: “Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you. / This one had yet is left to cut your throats, / Whiles that Lavinia ‘tween her stumps doth hold / The basin that receives your guilty blood” (5.2.184-187). The conceit of a negation or inversion of identity is perpetuated as Titus strings Chiron and Demetrius upside-down before slitting their throats.

### **Degradation and the Upside-down of the Grotesque**

Titus’ inversion of Chiron and Demetrius also signifies a thematic representation of the upside-down nature of the grotesque. Bakhtin explains, “Another expression of this principle is the important role of the inside out and upside down in the movements and acts of the grotesque body . . . Bodily topography of folk humor is closely interwoven with cosmic topography” (Bakhtin 353-354). Chiron and Demetrius transition throughout the play from Tamora’s sons and Goth prisoners, to animalistic rapists, to the personification of rape and murder, to ground-up ingredients in a recipe—literal food being consumed and returning into the body of the woman who bore them from her womb. Their bodily topography signifies the

cosmic circulation of the play, from order to deranged chaos to destruction and descent back down to the origin. As Bakhtin explains, in the grotesque, “debasement is the fundamental artistic principle . . . all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images. We spoke of the grotesque swing, which brings together heaven and earth. But the accent is placed not on the upward movements but on the descent” (Bakhtin 370-371). For the cosmic course of *Titus Andronicus* to be corrected, there must be a return downward to the earthly, the material, the bodily. The display of Chiron and Demetrius hung upside down and sacrificed initiates the downward movement of the play and signals to the audience that a return to order is forthcoming.

Chiron and Demetrius are then swallowed down by Tamora in Titus’ meat pie during the banquet scene. Shakespeare again emphasizes the gaping mouth, and Tamora’s open mouth, and her consumption of her sons qualifies her swallowing mouth as a gateway to hell in Bakhtinian terms: “a leading role is played . . . by the gaping mouth. This is, of course, related to the lower stratum; it is the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld. The gaping mouth is related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction” (Bakhtin 325). Tamora as mother both gives birth and consumes her young back into herself, swallowing up the fruit of her womb as well as of her cruel revenge plots—her own barbarity coming back into her body through a meat pie. However, this degradation of Chiron and Demetrius back into the womb brings new life, is fruitful: “Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) . . . To degrade is to bury, to

sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (Bakhtin 21). After Chiron and Demetrius’ degradation and the subsequent defeat of Tamora and Saturninus, Lucius rises to the throne and restores justice and order, ushering in a rebirth of civilization.

Demonstrating *Titus Andronicus* as a carnivalesque grotesquerie in a Bakhtinian framework recognizes its subversive and restorative functions when juxtaposing a ritualistic, civilized society with savagery and barbarity. Rather than viewing the Goths as savages and the Romans as civilized, Shakespeare equalizes all in his perverted, warped representation of Saturnalias, culminating with the image of Saturn devouring his children in order to hold on to power. After Rome’s children are mutilated, killed, and devoured, Shakespeare ends *Titus Andronicus* with the image of a mutilated body reassembled as Marcus calls for order: “O let me teach you how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs again into one body” (5.3.69-71). However, at the center of the Bakhtinian framework of the grotesque is the incomplete body, one that is always in a state of becoming. The grotesque body does not represent an individualized body, but rather it represents the people as a whole, as a collective. The collective whole that represents all people is therefore continually changing, dying, and being renewed or reborn. As Bakhtin explains:

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other

indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (Bakhtin 24)

Bakhtin asserts that the grotesque image then becomes “the means for the artistic and ideological expression of a mighty awareness of history and of historical change which appeared during the Renaissance” (Bakhtin 25). *Titus Andronicus* reflects the Renaissance’s renewed attraction with the ancient world, but Shakespeare reminds his audience that the Roman Empire did not stand, but fell and was swallowed up, giving birth to new empires and civilizations—including his own. As Bate surmises, “Shakespeare is interrogating Rome, asking what kind of example it provides for Elizabethan England; in doing so he collapses the whole of Roman history . . . into a single action” (Bate 17). In order to provide an emblematic interrogation of ancient Rome in an effort to connect its descent to all people and civilizations, including Elizabethan England, Shakespeare turns to an ancient Roman source that itself contains grotesque images of transformation and apotheosis and contributed to the rise of the grotesque artistic aesthetic during the Renaissance—Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

## CHAPTER III

### SHAKESPEARE, OVID, AND THE GROTESQUE

#### **Ovid's Influence on *Grottesche***

The discovery of the elaborate frescoes of the Domus Aurea ignited interest in and imitation of grotesque artistic tendencies during the Renaissance. The same vibrant, fantastic, hybridized, mythological images on the walls of the Domus Aurea are also present in the language of ancient Roman literature, most particularly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare's source for *Titus Andronicus* and several of his other works. Harpham explains that Nero's Domus Aurea was heavily influenced by Ovid: "the designs on the Domus Aurea walls harbored mythological or 'Pythagorean' enigmas; some of the figures derived from Ovid, whom Nero had read assiduously" (Harpham 75). However, Harpham clarifies that the themes of *Metamorphoses* and the Domus Aurea were disparate even if Nero relied on Ovid's influence. Ovid's myths recall the origins of creation and the establishment of Rome, but the Domus Aurea addresses an apprehension about the "end of Rome" by reestablishing "a lost connection with the primordial past" and giving an emperor an opportunity to build a monument to his legacy and create for himself "a palace for a sun-king . . . an attempt to make of one's life a solar myth" (Harpham 76). Harpham connects the "grotto art"—*grottesche*—of the Domus Aurea to lost mythological cultures and claims that Nero was attempting to establish his own legacy on the foundation of ancient mythology. As Ovid influenced Nero and the Domus Aurea, in

turn *Metamorphoses* influences Shakespeare as he creates the Andronici's Rome, which descends into barbarianism via the cycle of revenge. As Ovid's influence resulted in the *grottesche* art that would generate the grotesque movement in the Renaissance, Ovid's influence on *Titus Andronicus* substantiates it as grotesquerie.

Ovid's grotesque humor, hybridized imagery, and images of transformation permeate *Titus Andronicus* and contribute to its grotesqueness. Shakespeare relies on the obvious Ovidian source for the plot surrounding the rape of Lavinia—the story of Tereus, Philomela, and Procne—but also the stories of Lycaon, the Four Ages of Man, Diana and Actaeon, Apollo and Daphne, and Io to depict various grotesque images throughout the play, mimicking Ovid's literal presentations of grotesque imagery that had previously been transformed into metaphoric conceits through the language of Petrarchan poetry. Furthermore, through the physical presence of *Metamorphoses* on stage and the varied allusions to Ovid's mythology by both the Romans and the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare illuminates the problematic nature of interpretation and the misuse of a Roman education that results in a grotesque display of educated savages. Through these moves, *Titus Andronicus* becomes a grotesque emblem of *Metamorphoses*, an Ovidian spectacle of brutality, carnality, deformity, mythology, humor, transformation, and contradiction.

### **The Rape of Philomela in *Titus Andronicus***

The predominant image of *Titus Andronicus* is Lavinia ravished, dismembered, and with her tongue cut out. Chiron and Demetrius deliver the allusion to Ovid through mockery as they leave Lavinia in her mutilated state: "So, now go

tell, and if the tongue can speak, / Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee” (2.3.1-2), referencing Philomela’s state after her tongue had been cut out of her mouth by her rapist, Tereus. In the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, Tereus, a celebrated war-hero who thwarted the “Sea-born bands / Of wild barbarians” (VI.425-426) that were attacking Athens, was given King Pandion’s daughter, Procne, in marriage, after which they had a son, Itys. After Procne appeals to Tereus that she be allowed to see her sister, Philomela, Tereus travels to make the request of King Pandion. His request is granted, but Tereus is consumed by lust for Philomela. Upon return to his homeland, Tereus drags Philomela to a remote cabin in the woods, rapes her, and then cuts out her tongue to keep her from revealing his crime. He returns to Procne, telling her that Philomela died on the voyage home. Philomela weaves her story on a tapestry and sends it to Procne, who is overcome “with visions of revenge” (VI. 594). Once Procne, the “savage monarch’s wife” (VI.587), discovers her sister’s plight, she descends into savagery herself, adopting her husband’s barbarous nature. Her rescue of Philomela and revenge against Tereus takes place during “the time of Bacchus’ festival, / Kept by the Thracian women each three years” (VI.595-596), indicating that her actions are influenced by foreign rites to the god of revelry and ritual madness. As she goes to Philomela, “Wild with her troop of women through the woods / She rushed, a sight of terror, frenzied by / The grief that maddened her, the image of / A real Bacchanal” (VI.595-596). After Procne bursts into the cabin, “screaming Bacchic cries” (VI. 597), she garbs Philomela in Bacchic gear and carries her back to her palace. Ovid accentuates the wild, maniacal qualities of the women

who are now under Thracian, Bacchanal, woodland influence. After Procne rescues Philomela, together they murder young Itys, cook him, and serve him to his father Tereus in a “frightful feast” (VI.665).

Recalling Bakhtin’s assertion that the open mouth is “the most important of all human features for the grotesque” (Bakhtin 317), Shakespeare does not provide an on-stage scene with Lavinia’s severed tongue, but in his source material, Ovid depicts a grotesque visual when Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue to silence her after he rapes her:

. . . he seized  
 her tongue with tongs and, with his brutal sword,  
 Cut it away. The root jerked to and fro;  
 The tongue lay on the dark soil muttering  
 And wriggling, as the tail cut off a snake  
 Wriggles, and, as it died, it tried to reach  
 Its mistress’ feet. (Ovid VI.553-559)

As Jessica Lugo points out, the grotesque scene involving Philomela’s writhing tongue punctuates Philomela’s loss of voice, which must somehow be conveyed onstage in *Titus Andronicus* without the benefit of the audience being able to see the literal tongue still attempting to speak: “The metaphor makes it impossible not to sympathize with Philomela’s loss of language as her tongue spasms on the ground, still straining to speak. This subtlety is lost onstage, in that it can’t be physically represented, so instead *Titus* repeatedly references Lavinia’s absent tongue in

gruesome detail” (Lugo 406). Lugo recalls how Titus approaches his daughter with a plea to kiss her lips in a perverse fatherly image where he must be kissing a mouth plastered with her dried-blood (406). Lavinia’s loss of appendages is emphasized by Titus’ request for her to carry his severed hand between her teeth at the end of Act 3.2. The images involving Lavinia’s mouth provoke horror mingled with fascination and convey ambivalence about whether the realm in which the Andronici exist is in fact civilized.

If Lavinia represents Roman virtue, and her ravishment indicates violation by outsiders, then her tongue being cut out indicates the loss of the civilized Roman voice, which would be its rhetoric. Lavinia is later able to voice her plight through the discovery of *Metamorphoses* in the hands of her nephew Lucius, and but rather than leading to a just restoration, the revelation Ovid provides to the Andronici only perpetuates the barbaric violence and establishes revenge and downfall as its final aims. By turning to *Metamorphoses*, Ovid’s narrative about the creation of the world and the founding of Rome, and literally following the fate of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, Titus’ revenge on Chiron, Demetrius, and Tamora serves as a reminder that the Rome cannot be viewed as a model of enduring civility. Shakespeare shrewdly inverts his version of the rape of Philomela to present not how civilization is built, but rather how it falls.

Both the tale of Philomela and *Titus Andronicus* climax during their respective banquet scenes, and both climaxes illustrate a complete descent into barbarity and brutality through cannibalism. *Metamorphoses* treats characters and

situations that traditionally contained tragic or serious overtones with doses of grotesque comedy and irony. For example, after Procne has served her husband Tereus the cooked remains of their son Itys in revenge for Tereus' rape of her sister, Philomela, Ovid describes her as unable to "hide her cruel joy, / And bursting to announce her deed of doom, / 'You have him here', she cried, 'inside!'" (VI.651-653), turning her monstrous deed into a clever joke. Ovid continues the grotesque scene with Philomela running to throw Tereus' son's face onto the banquet table, describing her as having "never wanted more her tongue to express / Her joy in words that matched her happiness!" (VI 659-660). *Titus Andronicus* serves up the same lines in its final banquet scene, with Titus revealing gleefully to Tamora "Why, there they are, both baked in this pie" (5.3.59), reveling as Procne did that her sons have been fed to her in a pasty.

Shakespeare perpetuates Ovid's themes of transformation and apotheosis, except while Ovid's characters transform into literal winged creatures—Procne and Philomela as the swallow and the nightingale and Tereus as a hoopoe—implying elevation, Shakespeare's characters experience a degradation rather than a transcendence, as Lugo points out: "Though a transformation caps the story, it is an extension of a mutation that overcomes the protagonist's souls" (Lugo 402). Lugo contends that in Ovid, the transformations of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus show that transformation is necessary to preserve the bounds of humanity: "the sisters are transformed into bloodstained birds, forever marked by their crimes against nature. Their transformation is necessary . . . . When all characters have crossed the line and

lost touch with civilization, they must be transformed and contained away from spreading their savagery to others” (Lugo 404). However, where Procne and Philomela are transformed into birds, Lavinia’s mutilation and death at the hands of her father “is the metaphorical rotting and alteration of one’s soul” (Lugo 411). Aside from her physical ravishment and dismemberment, Taylor points out that Lavinia’s interior transformation is displayed through her own merciless barbarism during the murders of Chiron and Demetrius:

Lavinia reveals that she, too, is an Andronici. She may be mute and limited in what she can do physically, but when she and her father have their loathsome rapists bound and gagged before them, she does not show a vestige of mercy. . . . From cherishing decency and humanity, Lavinia has descended into savagery, and in doing so, she follows her Ovidian counterpart, Philomela. (Taylor 76)

Lugo qualifies Lavinia’s transformation as being from “woman to monster,” and contends that Lavinia’s participation in the murder of her rapists shows that “In helping to destroy her enemy, she has become her enemy, and adopted all the savagery the position entails. When Titus murders her . . . dramatically it is because she, like the Goths and her father himself, has become a beast and must be slain” (Lugo 413). However, in the context of a grotesquerie, Lavinia’s death would return her back to the earth, where she can descend in order to give birth or give life to something new, an idea that retains Ovid’s hopeful ending of transformation and transcendence that Philomela experienced when she metamorphized into a bird.

## Lycaon

Tamora also experiences a monstrous transformation in the play from mother to cannibal. Cannibalism is intolerable in *Metamorphoses*, as shown through Lycaon's act of slaying a hostage for Jove, "slitting his throat, and boiled / Part of the flesh, scarce dead, and roasted part / And bade me -[Jove] eat" (Ovid I.227-230). Jove transforms Lycaon into a wolf after his barbaric deed, though Lycaon retains human features: "His clothes changed to coarse hair, his arms to legs - / He was a wolf, yet kept some human trace, / the same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same / Wild eyes, the same image of savagery" (Ovid I.236-239). By transforming Tamora into a cannibal during the final banquet scene, Shakespeare repeats Ovid's claim that the ultimate act of savagery is cannibalism. However, while Lycaon is transformed into a grotesque wolf-man figure after his act, "ravenous tiger, Tamora" (5.3.194) is transformed from a hybridized animal figure to food for "beasts and birds to prey: / Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity" (5.3.197-199). She no longer eats, but rather is devoured as food herself, joining her sons in their transformation into ingurgitated matter.

## The Four Ages of Man and Astraea

Tamora is not the only one transformed into a cannibal at the final banquet scene—Saturninus also eats of the meat pie containing her sons' remains. Miola connects Saturninus eating the meat pie to the myth of Saturn eating his children:

Cognizant of the myth which told of Saturn's eating his sons in order to escape despotism by one of them, Renaissance mythographers and artists

frequently represented the god as a child-devourer. . . . Saturninus in this play rules over a city which devours its children—figuratively by consigning them to the gaping maw of the Andronici tomb, and literally by serving them in the bloody banquet at the play’s end. (Miola 94)

Saturninus is a petulant, infantilized despot who also functions as a grotesque image of a ruler obsessed with remaining in power. Saturninus also lusts for power, but he also is the antithesis of Saturn’s rule over man in the Golden Age, a time when all people were peaceful, honorable, and obedient (1.88-112). Instead, the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* reflects the people of the barbaric Iron Age.

Titus himself connects his Roman world to that of Ovid’s: “*Terras Astraea reliquit*: be you remembered, Marcus, / She’s gone, she’s fled” (4.3.4-5). Titus recalls Ovid’s description of the transition from the Golden Age of peace when Saturn ruled to the Iron Age of bloodshed and immorality: “Honour and love lay vanquished, and from earth, / With slaughter soaked, Justice, virgin divine, / The last of the immortals, fled away” (I.155-157). However, though Titus and his family are victims of brutality and barbarism, the Andronici also reflect the savage people of the Iron Age. Miola claims Shakespeare “takes full advantage of the multiple meanings of *ferrum*, the Latin word for ‘iron’” and depicts a city “quintessentially an iron one—a military establishment protected by walls and filled with sword-carrying soldiers like the Andronici” (Miola 91). The duality the of the Andronici as civilized Romans yet violent savages represents itself through their mutilated bodies—their own bodies bear the marks of the weaponry of the Iron Age in which they inhabit and

perpetuate. A.B. Taylor also qualifies the Romans in *Titus Andronicus* as reflective of the age of iron, which he contends displays the ubiquitous quality of moral decay:

[The Andronici's] enemies, the Goths, may be patently 'barbarous', but the Andronici themselves, the defenders of civilization, also reflect the coarseness of this fallen world. These 'iron' Romans are merciless, performing human sacrifice without compunction . . . casually bringing about the death of a harmless, passing Clown . . . murdering each other in family quarrels. (Taylor 75)

Taylor goes on to say, "The Andronici are 'children of blood', fully attuned to the warring, fractious 'iron' world in which they live" (Taylor 76). The first act of the play demonstrates the bloodthirstiness of the Andronici, with Titus and his sons slaughtering Goth prince Alarbus in reparative sacrifice for the loss of their kin.

Miola explains how in *Metamorphoses*, "The corruption of *pietas*, the breakdown of familial bonds, caused the corruption of all human relations and the desertion of Astraea, the last divinity to leave the earth to its bestial inhabitants" (Miola 91).

*Pietas* connects to Tamora's accusation of a grotesque "irreligious piety" (1.1.133), for Titus is breaking apart her family—literally dismembering her son.

In her discussion on Astraea in Shakespeare, Francis Yates discusses the shooting of the arrows into Saturninus' court in Act 4.3 of *Titus Andronicus*, where Young Lucius' arrow hits Virgo: "O, well said, Lucius, Good boy: in Virgo's lap!" (4.3.64-65). Yates connects this allusion to Virgo to Titus' early reference to Astraea. In Roman mythology, Astraea becomes the constellation Virgo after fleeing earth

during the age of iron; therefore, Young Lucius' arrow signifies that "The apotheosis of Lucius at the end of the play thus perhaps represents the Return of the Virgin—the return of the just empire and the Golden Age" (F. Yates 75). Lucius' return with the non-Roman, Goth army not only restores order to Rome, but also restores the remaining Andronici to the Roman court, implying their release from the influence of the Iron Age. The return of Astraea to Rome also evidences itself through the removal of all the grotesque, barbaric, deformed, cannibalistic bodies of the play—only the whole, undefiled bodies of Marcus, Lucius, and Young Lucius remain in a renewed, peaceful Rome.

### **Diana and Actaeon**

Shakespeare also makes repeated references to the myth of Diana and Actaeon throughout *Titus Andronicus*, but Act II replicates the scene of the hunt from Ovid by turning Tamora into a Diana-figure and Lavinia into a feminine Actaeon who becomes hunted prey torn to pieces by hounds Chiron and Demetrius. Upon discovering Tamora and Aaron in the woods, Bassianus teases Tamora with allusions to Diana: "is it Dian, habited like her, / Who hath abandoned her holy groves / To see the general hunting in the forest?" (2.2.57-59). Tamora responds, "Had I the power that some say Dian had, / Thy temples should be planted presently / with horns, as was Actaeon's, and the hounds / Should drive upon thy new-transformed limbs, / Unmannerly intruder as thou art" (2.2.61-65). However, upon Chiron and Demetrius' attack on Lavinia, condoned by the pseudo-Dian Tamora, the allusion is transformed from a figurative literary remark into a horrifyingly literal reality as Lavinia is

transformed into prey and devoured by lustful hounds in a grotesque play on the imagery of the hunt.

Starks-Estes explains that Shakespeare's move toward the earlier lyric tradition of Ovid necessarily moved through Petrarch, who "himself refashioned Ovid's elegies . . . Petrarch also appropriated the mythological framework (Apollo and Daphne; Diana and Actaeon) and the dominant themes, conceits, or metaphors, such as the hunt, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" (Starks-Estes 54). Starks-Estes goes on to explain that what Ovid literalized in his mythologies, Petrarch transformed into extended metaphors; what Petrarch made abstract and figurative in his love poetry—the metaphor of the hunt to represent desire, the form of the blazon to represent dismemberment—Shakespeare re-literalized through dramatic presentation: "In this horrific Roman landscape, Shakespeare makes the typical conceit of the Petrarchan sonnet—the lover's hunt for his 'prey'—gruesomely 'real' in true Ovidian fashion. The conceit of the Petrarchan lover hunting his 'hart' becomes both an actual hunt in the play and a literal enactment of the lover chasing his object of desire as a 'game'" (Starks-Estes 54-55). In this literalized hunt, Lavinia becomes the Actaeon-figure, but rather than a stag devoured by hounds, she is "this dainty doe" (1.1.617) ravished by "the tiger's young ones" (2.2.142), Chiron and Demetrius.

Actaeon's transformation was literal, and he no longer assumed human form and was unrecognizable to his own hounds. In literalizing the hunt, Shakespeare physically transforms Lavinia's body as well, but her transformation is not total. Lavinia is recognized as Lavinia, but is also no longer Lavinia as "Rome's

ornament,” but is rather found “Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer / That hath received some unrecurrent wound” (3.1.90-91), indicating that her condition is incurable and permanent. Marcus presents her to Titus lamenting, “This was thy daughter” (3.1.63) and falling to his knees crying, “Ay me, this object kills me” (3.1.65), not qualifying her as a person or as Lavinia yet since his dismembering, deconstructing blazon upon discovering her. Titus responds, “Why, Marcus, so she is” (3.1.64), asserting both her identity as Lavinia and re-qualifying her as human. Because Lavinia was not fully transformed as Actaeon was, she stands as a deformed Rome, a grotesque image that has been mutilated, but still retains semblance of her humanity.

### **Apollo and Daphne and the Blazon**

Shakespeare also alludes to the story of Apollo and Daphne when Marcus discovers Lavinia in the forest after she has been raped and mutilated. The imagery Shakespeare implements in Marcus’ blazon echoes the transformation of Daphne into a tree after she is raped by Apollo:

Scarce had she made her prayer when through her limbs  
 A dragging languor spread, her tender bosom  
 Was wrapped in thin smooth bark, her slender arms  
 Were changed to branches and her hair to leaves;  
 Her feet but now so swift were anchored fast  
 In numb stiff roots, her face and head became  
 The crown of a green tree; all that remained

Of Daphne was her shining loveliness. (Ovid I. 550-557)

Marcus's blazon includes an arboreal reference to Lavinia: "Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands / Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare / Of her two branches" (2.3.16-18). Marcus also laments that her attacker had not "seen those lily hands / Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute" (2.3.44-45). Later, Aaron tells Lucius that Chiron and Demetrius "cut her hands and trimmed her as thou sawest" (5.1.93) when revealing what happened to Lavinia. In addition to animals and birds, humans regularly morphed into trees and rivers throughout *Metamorphoses*, and Shakespeare's repeated referenced to a foliate Lavinia reflects the arboreal transformation of violated women in Ovid.

The grotesqueness of assigning a raped and dismembered woman the qualities associated with the beauty and vitality of nature reflect Shakespeare's distance from realism in the play and his implementation of spectacle. Eugene Waith points out that in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid refrains from assigning moralization to any of the transformations: "If Tereus, Procne, and Philomela were turned into birds, so were Ceyx and Alcyone, those models of marital devotion. Were they also unworthy of human shape? . . . Then too we notice that while Daphne is turned into a tree to save her from Apollo's embraces, Myrrha is turned into a tree after her incestuous union with her father" (Waith 41). Waith also points out how Seneca described Ovid as being less interested in argument and more in human behavior (Waith 41-42), emphasizing the transformations people experience while overcome by the extremities of human emotion. Waith claims that those transformations and

heightened levels of emotions inevitably include violence, and that Ovid uses violence as “an emblem of the transformation,” (Waith 43) and as spectacle. Ovid’s spectacles of violence display personified emotion, but he conversely utilizes language detached, non-judgmental, and depersonalized. Shakespeare imitates this detachment in his illustration of Lavinia after her deformation and delivers a shocking image juxtaposed against Marcus’ blazon as commentary on the effects of humanity’s barbaric behavior on society.

### **Io**

Ovid continues his theme of the violated woman transformed in the myth of Io, who was ravished by Jove, after which he “transformed poor Io / Into a sleek white heifer (lovely still / Although a cow” (Ovid I.615-617). Ovid utilized grotesque humor throughout his myths, including ones containing scenes of the pursuit and rape of women. In Ovid’s many episodes detailing the pursuit, hunt, and capture of various women both by other men and gods, women experience transformation after rape. Io’s transformation leaves her without a voice—similar to Lavinia’s lack of voice after Chiron and Demetrius raped her and cut out her tongue. Io’s voice becomes a cow’s bellowing, and Ovid’s description of her attempts to complain about her circumstances to her warden, Argos, or to reveal her identity to her father are both pathetic and laughable:

And when, to please with Argus, she would try  
 To stretch her arms, she had no arms to stretch.  
 Would she complain, a moo came from her throat,

A startling sound—her own voice frightened her. (Ovid I.636-639)

When Io's suffering becomes unbearable, Ovid illustrates another tragically ridiculous image as Io attempts to raise her voice to Jove in lament:

Her head thrown back, she raised towards the stars

All she could raise, her face; her groans and tears,

Her wild grief-laden lowings seemed to send

A prayer to Jove to end her sufferings. (Ovid I.731-733)

However, it is Io's method of revealing her situation that Shakespeare echoes Ovid in Act 4.1, when Marcus encourages Lavinia to write the names of her attackers in the sand with a large stick, using her mouth and her stumped appendages to guide her writing tool. In *Metamorphoses*, Io reveals herself to her father while in the form of a cow:

Her tears rolled down; if only words would come,

She'd speak her name, tell all, implore their aid,

For words her hoof traced letters in the dust –

I, O—sad tidings of her body's change. (Ovid I.650-653)

Ovid himself becomes the means of revelation in *Titus Andronicus*; Lavinia uses Young Lucius's text of *Metamorphoses* to reveal the circumstances of her rape, and then under Marcus' suggestion, utilizes Io's method of writing in the sand to reveal her rapists' names.

The depiction of a voiceless Lavinia "writing" the name of her attackers with a large stick in her mouth—an exaggerated stand-in for her tongue—alludes to the

pathetic, humorous images of Io attempting to reveal herself to her father. Here Shakespeare mimics Ovid's use of conflicting tone and imagery to instigate peripeteia, when Titus, Marcus, and Lavinia vow to take revenge on the Emperor's house for the tragedies that have befallen them. Just as Io's revelation to her father precipitates the slaughter of her captor, Argus, and her restoration to human form, Lavinia's revelation precipitates the destruction of Chiron and Demetrius. Io eventually achieves apotheosis: "She is a goddess now, famous, divine / And linen-robed adorers throng her shrine" (I.43-44). However, Lavinia is not restored to wholeness, and there is no mention of transcendence or divinization for her when Titus kills her at the final banquet: "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die" (5.3.46-47). Io's body was transformed, not mutilated, and so her condition was repairable and temporary. Io's transformation into a goddess was her final metamorphosis. However, for Lavinia, her shame remains because her body is no longer considered whole or chaste. Her only life will be one of voiceless, isolated marginality. Lavinia's mutilated body could only exist in the violent age of iron, but since Lucius returned and order was being restored, her body had to be destroyed rather than exist as a grotesque on the fringes of the Andronici world.

### **Learned Grotesques**

By inverting *Metamorphoses* to suit his own aims, Shakespeare reveals the duplicitous nature of interpreting classical sources and performing them in atypical ways. Shakespeare also riddles his play with continual perversions and

misapplications of Ovid by the characters educated in the Roman classics. Elizabethan audiences were very familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, so much so that they would have recognized the discrepancies and misinterpretations manifested in and committed by the characters of *Titus Andronicus*. For example, R.W. Maslen points out how young Lucius associates a frantic Lavinia chasing him down for access to his book with the child-murdering Procne of *Metamorphoses*, misinterpreting her motives and aims. However, as Maslen eerily points out, "the men who raped [Lavinia] have subjected Ovid's text to a far more damaging exegesis. They have used it, in fact, as a kind of rapists' instruction manual. . . . Her uncle believes that they chopped off Lavinia's hands as well as her tongue in order to show themselves 'craftier' than Tereus, who left Philomela capable of weaving her story" (Maslen 16). The way Chiron and Demetrius have misused the story of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus to hide their ravenous, predatory behavior demonstrates a perverted world where misinterpretation and improper implementation are the norm, and a Roman education does not necessarily generate virtue, morality, or reason.

West discusses how *Titus Andronicus* portrays barbarians whose education in Roman letters did not serve them well. The characters of the play warp the aetiological premise of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and misapply its instructional value. If this Roman education embodies Roman culture, Shakespeare presents a Rome falling to its own depravity, both from barbarous invaders as well as from within at the hands of the cruel Andronici.

West points out that the characters of *Titus Andronicus* are not stupid or ignorant, but rather are clever, innovative, and learned: “Clearly Shakespeare shows us that his characters are well-educated, at least in the sense that they have read and remembered the ancient poets . . . Whether specifically alluding to an ancient poem or not, they all have the education—and the erudition—to speak as if they were characters in a beautiful book” (West 71). Chiron and Demetrius exemplify the perversion of classical education, warping Ovid’s meaning and misusing his text as they exacerbate Tereus’ example by cutting off Lavinia’s hands. West explains, “These Goths are as civilized and humane as Roman letters can make them. Yet their learning does not lead to wisdom; it only enables them to add refinement to their barbarism” (West 72). However, it is not only the Goths who misuse their education in Roman letters. Upon discovering Lavinia, Marcus delivers an inappropriate blazon, which rhetorically furthers her dismemberment rather than remedies her critical situation.

West explains that *Metamorphoses* transforms from a didactic text explaining the creation of civilization to an instruction manual on evil:

The juxtaposition of delicately allusive speech and villainous action in a play about Rome at the twilight of its greatness suggests that Shakespeare is exploring the relationship between Roman education—the source of all the bookish allusions—and the disintegration of the magnificent city which produced that education . . . the moral excellence which one would expect to be the fruit of such study is missing. On the contrary, Roman education,

which seems to stand for Roman tradition in general, has been twisted to become the teacher and rationalizer of heinous deeds. (West 65)

However, it is not only the Goths who are instructed by *Metamorphoses*, but also the Andronici, who strictly follow the example of Procne and Philomela in their pursuit of revenge. Titus takes on the role of Procne and slaughters the sons of Tamora and feeds them to her at a banquet table. Lavinia participates in the deed along with her father, retaining her function as Philomela in the play. Rather than shrink from the brutality of Ovid's tale, the Andronici continue their descent into depravity and abandon any sense of Roman dignity or virtue:

Shakespeare's characters do learn from Ovid's book; but they learn how to be evil, not good. Through this anomaly Shakespeare is showing us Rome at the end of its civilized greatness, ready to sink into barbarism precisely because its citizens, no less than its Roman-educated enemies, insist on going by the book, but have forgotten, if they ever knew, what books are truly for. (West 77)

In the context of West's observation, the cultured and well-educated of the play become the grotesque figures of contradiction and hypocrisy. The Andronici and the Goths are grotesque as educated men bent on base tendencies. Lugo surmises:

With an Ovidian blueprint to guide him, Shakespeare created a multifaceted world where all characters accuse one another of acting the part of bestial savages, though all share the role . . . . Shakespeare embraces Ovid's vision of

humanity existing a small degree away from the animal world . . . to force an audience to question its own hypocritical and violent nature. (Lugo 416)

In *Titus Andronicus*, *Metamorphoses* becomes a signifier, in inspiration and actuality, of the futility of education in the hands of humanity. Consequently, the strangeness of the misuse of *Metamorphoses* in *Titus Andronicus* advances a consideration of the strange use *Metamorphoses* by the hand of Shakespeare himself.

Shakespeare imitates Ovid by using violence as spectacle, creating an “emblem of disorder” (Waith 46) in order to inspire wonder, astonishment, and admiration (Waith 48). His conflation of violent or horrific images and events with the natural world in Ovidian style “point up the strangeness. The suffering becomes an object of contemplation” (Waith 47). Because, like Ovid, Shakespeare is not moralizing, Waith identifies the spectacle as “both horrible and pathetic, but above all extraordinary . . . an object of admiration” (Waith 48). As a spectacle of violence, *Titus Andronicus* certainly leaves its audiences astonished, and Shakespeare’s sweeping brush painting all characters in both barbaric and sympathetic contexts creates an ambiguous, ambivalent, confused statement on the brutality of humanity. Like *Metamorphoses*, *Titus Andronicus* emphasizes the strange and stimulates contemplation—much like grotesqueries do—rather than provides catharsis or instruction. Particularly when viewing *Titus Andronicus* through an Ovidian lens, audiences are left merely to wonder at the grotesque language, imagery, and spectacles and question their implications for their own societies in the real world.

## CHAPTER IV

### AVOIDING OR CONFRONTING THE GROTESQUE IN *TITUS ANDRONICUS*:

#### A PERFORMANCE HISTORY

For over three-hundred years, *Titus Andronicus* has itself been made abject by some critics and has had difficulty finding a comfortable dwelling anywhere other than on the margins of Shakespeare's canon. Considered by many to be unperformable, *Titus Andronicus* as originally written by Shakespeare has been almost absent—banished underground—for over two centuries. However, the abjection of *Titus Andronicus* correlates with the common treatment of grotesqueries. Yates explains, “In our denial of these aspects of reality, we have relegated them to the edge of our common experience, even though they are about something related to the core of our experience. We have banished the grotesque to the underground of our consciousness, though it remains related to our conscious world” (W. Yates 41). However, the twentieth century unearthed *Titus Andronicus* as originally scripted once again, and though it retains its grotesqueness, the play has overcome its banishment.

Productions of *Titus Andronicus* emphasize different qualities or aesthetic approaches, but each approach implicitly asserts the play as a grotesque by either utilizing grotesque devices or by eliminating grotesque moments to avoid uncomfortable, problematic reactions by the audience. More recently, directors utilize the grotesque explicitly in their productions, but productions from the

Restoration into the twentieth-century tended to remove or modify the inherently grotesque moments to deliver an anesthetized, straightforward, dignified production. By scrubbing out the disruptive, gory, excessive, or comic macabre from their productions, directors recognize the essential grotesque nature of *Titus Andronicus* and diagnose the capability of the audience of their time to digest it based on the theatrical and artistic sensibilities they hold. Dessen intuitively:

What is particularly revealing about *Titus* is the widespread suppression or adaptation of various passages for reasons analogous to the rationale for substituting red streamers for blood. Certain moments in this script, even in highly-stylised productions, cause severe problems for actors, directors, and spectators, so what happens to this playscript in the modern theater can reveal a great deal about the scenes Shakespeare crafted—and about us. (Dessen 54)

Regarding employing the grotesque, Southern grotesque writer Flannery O'Connor discusses the need to shock and disturb modern, secularized audiences at increased levels to jolt them out of a complacent desensitization people hold when regularly facing images of violence, upheaval, and absurdity in their own lives. While the provocative nature of a grotesquerie made post-Renaissance era audiences cringe, the artistic sensibilities of modern audiences contending with the aftermath of war, terrorism, and localized mass gun violence point to their ability, and possibly their need, to stomach less stylized and more realistic, gory representations of the grotesque themes of the play. As a result, contemporary directors have diagnosed their audiences as finally capable of grappling with *Titus Andronicus*.

However, modern twenty-first century audiences are not the first to appreciate *Titus Andronicus*. Though there are large gaps in its performance history, *Titus Andronicus* was quite popular when it was first performed and published. Dessen points out that when *Titus Andronicus* was first performed in late 1580's – early 1590's, the conventions of the subgenre revenge tragedy were still being formed. *Titus Andronicus* was performed when the public were flocking to see Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, and it contributed to the cultivation of the revenge tragedy genre: “The pyramiding of horrors and grotesque moments in both Kyd and *Titus* preview what is to come in such plays as *The Tragedy of Hoffman* and *The Revengers Tragedy*, not to mention *3 Henry VI*, *Hamlet*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*” (Dessen 3). First published in a 1594 quarto, the reprintings in 1600 and 1611 suggest its enduring popularity among Elizabethan audiences. Ben Jonson's compulsion to address *Titus Andronicus* and qualify it as old-fashioned and kindred to *The Spanish Tragedy* speaks to its continued relevance even into 1614 (Dessen 5).

Opinion of *Titus Andronicus* shifted after the theaters re-opened during the Restoration. One of *Titus Andronicus*' most well-known critics, Edward Ravenscroft ascribed the play's authorship to a collaborative effort in which Shakespeare merely added the finishing touches; he also described the play as “the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his works; It seems rather a heap of rubbish than a structure” (Ravenscroft, “To the Reader”). Likening the stage to the pulpit in its attempt to provide moral instruction when “ill manners and ill principles reign in a state” (Ravenscroft, “To the Reader”), Ravenscroft rewrote a version of *Titus Andronicus*

that was performed in 1678, revived in the mid-1680's, and published in 1687 (Dessen 7). Ravenscroft substantially altered Shakespeare's version by changing the plot, the characterization, and motivations of the main characters. Ravenscroft eliminated the on-stage violence, altered prominent speeches, and heavily modified stage directions. However, most notably, Ravenscroft removed or altered most of the parts of the play that contain grotesque elements: "More revealing that such tinkering with plot and motivation are Ravenscroft's solutions for a series of problematic moments that continue to bedevil today's directors (and often can serve as litmus tests for productions of this tragedy). Most of these moments involve on-stage violence or images that can elicit unwanted audience laughter" (Dessen 9). For example, Ravenscroft moved the scene where Titus has his hand chopped off, this time by an executioner, off-stage. Ravenscroft named Lucius' son "Junius," and he carries off Titus' severed hand, eliminating the grotesque image of Lavinia clutching the hand in her teeth. The on-stage punishment and execution of Chiron and Demetrius and the scene of Lavinia catching their blood in a basin were cut, and Ravenscroft eliminated the stage direction indicating that Titus appears as a cook at the final banquet feast. Ravenscroft also reduced Marcus' speech upon discovering a mutilated and ravished Lavinia to thirty-four lines, down from forty-seven (Dessen 9). Dessen claims that the effects of these alterations color the play with a melodramatic tone reflective of Restoration tastes rather than an uncomfortable, problematic, comic-macabre quality (Dessen 11).

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Titus Andronicus* fell into obscurity and was rarely performed, and when it was, the productions lacked similarity to the excessive, bizarre original. Other adaptations of *Titus Andronicus* also substantially altered the original play and removed much of the disturbing, grotesque moments. In 1839, a Philadelphia production starring N.H. Bannister boasted in its playbill that “every expression calculated to offend the ear, has been studiously avoided” (Dessen 11). An 1850’s adaptation by C.A. Somerset and Ira Aldridge, who played Aaron the Moor, drastically altered the play by adding scenes from *Zaraffa*, *The Slave King*, removed the rape of Lavinia, and significantly elevated Aaron’s role in the play (Dessen 11-12). In 1923 at the Old Vic, Robert Atkins attempted to stage *Titus Andronicus* in his ambitious move to stage all thirty-seven of Shakespeare’s plays in a seven-year period. Dessen describes one problematic moment for Atkins during the final scene of the banquet feast, where the rapid murders of Titus, Tamora, and Saturninus produced laughter out of the audience who ceased to take the production’s horror seriously any longer (Dessen 13). Additionally, the critical reception of Atkins’ premiere was poor, and so *Titus Andronicus* was replaced with *Much Ado About Nothing* (Dessen 14).

### **Peter Brook**

While the dismissal of *Titus Andronicus* suited the neo-classical and Victorian sensibilities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Philip C. Kolin details the shift towards a more favorable view of the play in the mid-twentieth century, with scholars acknowledging its stylistic adherence to the Renaissance revenge-play, the

utilization of Ovidian narrative, and its “theatrical potentialities” (Kolin 12). Ten years after the end of World War II, audiences were ready to contend with *Titus Andronicus* when Peter Brook staged his landmark production with the Royal Shakespeare Company on August 16, 1955, which Dessen calls “the second birthday for this script” (Dessen 15). Harpham’s assessment of the “energy of the grotesque” in the twentieth century explains why the world was ready to receive *Titus Andronicus* after the second World War:

Following the War, when it was swiftly perceived that the holocaust had not purged the times of their corruption and degeneracy (which were, in fact, advancing even more rapidly and spectacularly than before), the energy of the grotesque shifted again . . . The nineteenth century anticipated it: . . . Poe, Hawthorne, Maupasant, Stevenson, Wilde, Melville, Twain, Hugo, Keller, Kleist, Gogol, Carlyle, Hoffman, Dostoevsky—all, in their ways, testify to a sense of inner disruption, a self radically alienated from a dissolving social structure, and increasingly pointless world. (“The Grotesque: First Principles” 467)

Brook reflects Harpham’s assertion by explaining that his audience was receptive to *Titus Andronicus* because “‘the real appeal’ of the show ‘was obviously for everyone in the audience about the most modern of emotions—about violence, hatred, cruelty, and pain—in a form that, because *unrealistic*, transcended the anecdote and became for each audience *quite abstract and thus totally real*’” (Dessen 15)<sup>3</sup>. By

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from “Search for a Hunger,” *Encore*, July-August 1961, pp. 16-17.

emblemizing violence and cruelty in *Titus Andronicus*, Brook was able to present to audiences a spectacle that sensibly resonated the violent reality of a post-war, twentieth-century world.

According to Dessen, “Brook saw far more in this tragedy than did the wits and critics, so what was thought to be a parody or joke turned into a major event in theatre history” (Dessen 14). The performances of Sir Laurence Olivier (Titus) and Anthony Quayle (Aaron the Moor) were lauded by critics, though Vivien Leigh (Lavinia) was criticized as being cold, remote, and ineffective (Dessen 21). Brook’s ominous set resembled gigantic ribbed and fluted organ pipes that dwarfed the actors and darkened the stage. Dessen relies on Sally Beauman’s description of the set to describe how the sides of the set swung back to reveal an interior darkened stage space that could have been utilized as a tomb or the murder-pit and forest floor. The lighting bathed the stage in threatening hues of “bile green, blacks, reds and browns, and the liverish color of dried blood” (Dessen 16)<sup>4</sup>. Brook’s and William Blezard’s avant garde approach to the music of the production also contributed to the sinister atmosphere of the play with the utilization of household items to produce clanging effects and the mixture of disparate instruments and sounds to produce haunting, threatening, disorienting tones (Dessen 16-17).

Jan Kott describes Brook’s style as having “tension evenly distributed, there are no ‘empty places’ . . . He has created sequences of great dramatic images. He has found again in Shakespeare the long-lost thrilling spectacle” (Kott 397). Kott

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<sup>4</sup> Beauman, Sally. *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades*. Oxford, 1982, pp. 223-226.

describes Shakespearean plays as not being a sequence of scenes but rather of shots and sequences, which recalls the effects of a visual tableau. Brook's production elements contributed to the framing of the play as "grim Roman tragedy" and "beautiful barbaric ritual," and Brook claims that the play must be considered not in its parts but "in its completeness" (Dessen 15), a claim that ascribes the quality of grotesque spectacle to the production.

However, like Ravenscroft, Brook drastically altered key parts of *Titus Andronicus*, removing elements that might have been described as grotesque if he had adhered to Shakespeare's script. In his attempt to defy the skeptics, Brook ushered in an aestheticized version of *Titus Andronicus* that thematically resonated with the mid-twentieth-century audience, but mitigated the play so the audience would find the production palatable to their sensibilities. Daniel Scuro points out that "Newspaper accounts of the first night performance indicate that hardly one jarring laugh broke the intensity of the Grand Guignol unfolding on the stage . . . Brook and Olivier managed to seize their audience from the start and never let the intensity stricken or contemporary cynicism intrude" (Scuro 399-400). To successfully present *Titus Andronicus* as representative of the Roman body politic, Scuro claims Brook needed to play down the gore and instead illustrate the violation of Rome through symbolic and tasteful means:

The crucial problem for Mr. Brook was to turn the essentially external disease of barbarians into the inner Roman corruption found only in Shakespeare's later plays. By a delicate editing of the text, by the creation of an eerie

otherworldliness in production detail, and by sparing the blood without abating the savagery, Mr. Brook turned Titus into a revenge-horror tragedy with honor rising apprehensibly above the repulsive horror. (Scuro 402)

Brook substantially cut Shakespeare's script, most notably eliminating Marcus's blazon upon discovering Lavinia (Dessen 22). Scuro recounts one critic's praise of the decision: "reasonably enough, for the spectacle of the outraged Lavinia addressed in a stream of classical conceits by her uncle Marcus—it is an unactable passage—might have worried us sadly and snapped the cord" (Scuro 403)<sup>5</sup>.

Brook took other similar veins as Ravenscroft:

Brook had Chiron and Demetrius murdered off-stage, so this Lavinia did not hold a basin to catch their blood. The two heads were delivered in III.ii concealed in black cloths and steel baskets; Titus' severed hand was not displayed and Lavinia did not carry it off in her mouth; the midwife in IV.ii was strangled rather than stabbed; in IV.i Lavinia guided the staff with her hands rather than her mouth. (Dessen 22)

Additionally, rather than displaying the gore realistically, Brook utilized streams of scarlet ribbons to signify wounds. All references to Titus' severed hand were removed and Lavinia was no longer chasing Young Lucius around the stage as a mutilated pantomime in Act 3. Another omission in the script is Titus' answer to Saturninus' demand to bring in Chiron and Demetrius after learning of their attack on Lavinia: "Brook tactfully cut the last four words of Titus' virtually unspeakable line,

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<sup>5</sup> Scuro refers to comments from Mr. Trewin, *The Illustrated London News*, August 27, 1955.

‘Why there they are both, baked in that pie,’ as he served Tamora his cannibalistic specialty” (Scuro 406). Eliminating this line not only distanced the play from any comic macabre character, it also stripped the play of its Ovidian basis for the scene and muted the emblematic significance of the meat pie, which resulted in a less gag-inducing disgust on the part of Tamora and the audience.

Scuro specifically qualifies Brook’s play as “tastefully edited” of the “grotesqueries of the original text” (Scuro 403). Critics applauded Brook’s alterations and “visual restraint,” and Edward Trostle Jones applauded Brook’s “stylized distancing effects” that allowed the audience to contend with the horror of the play without the discomfiting revulsion, reaching the “beauty beneath the barbarism” of a play through necessary repressive methods of presentation” (Dessen 22)<sup>6</sup>. However, not all appreciated Brook’s restraint, particularly Evelyn Waugh and Richard David, who qualified Brook’s production as a still-born version of Shakespeare’s work (Dessen 23). However, while Brook’s reduction of the grotesqueries in *Titus Andronicus* may be disappointing to some as well as to twenty-first century audiences who are regularly dosed with violent images and gratuitous gore on the screen and stage, Brook’s production launched the progression of directors’ efforts to implement the grotesque in future iterations of *Titus Andronicus*. By reestablishing *Titus Andronicus* in the canon of Shakespeare’s performances worthy of production, Brook enabled directors of future productions to experiment

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<sup>6</sup>Jones, Edward Trostle. *Following Direction: A Study of Peter Brook*. New York, 1985, pp. 98.

with visual effects and attempt to present an adherence to the original script to future audiences primed to witness the spectacle.

### **Intermediate Productions**

In 1967, Douglas Seale directed a production of *Titus Andronicus* in Baltimore that retained the gore and brutality of the script and, according to Martin Gottfried, echoed Artaud's Theater of Cruelty (Gottfried 411-412). However, while subsequent productions altered Shakespeare's original script less and scrapped fewer scenes of onstage violence, directors still dragged their feet in their implementation of the grotesque qualities of the play throughout the mid-twentieth century. Gerald Freeman explains his concerns with his production of *Titus Andronicus* for the Delacorte Theater in New York in 1967:

How does one create a similar response to horror and violence in a modern audience? It would seem an easy task, living as we do in an era where violence on the stage in the manner of the Grand Guignol now appear ludicrous or stagey. Perhaps real violence has lost its power because it is too familiar . . . Somehow, if one wants to create a fresh emotional response to the violence, blood, and multiple mutilations of *Titus Andronicus*, one must shock the imagination and subconscious with visual images that recall the richness and depth of primitive rituals . . . with instruments and sounds that nudge our ear without being clearly explicit or melodic; with fragments of myth and ceremony and childhood fantasies that still have the power to set our imaginations racing. (Freedman 413)

So, while some directors mitigated their productions to appeal to audience sensibility, some felt the need to do so to convey human brutality in a manner that would resonate with audiences numbed to violence by their exposure to the actual brutalities of humanity. Freedman utilized theatrical devices such as a chorus, Roman masks, ritual, and music to abstract the brutality in order to increase the possibility that his audience would in turn believe in the brutality (Freedman 414-415). For Freedman, the grotesque qualities of the play, while uncomfortable to contend with, were distractions taking away from the play's impact, and he decided to stylize *Titus Andronicus* to build trust between the audience and production. Dessen recounts how Freedman's resistance to realism stems from problematic questions that naturally arise when performing *Titus Andronicus* realistically: "How could Lavinia suffer such loss of blood and still live?" or "Why doesn't Marcus take her to a hospital instead of talking?" or "Titus can't really be cutting off his hand on stage—what a clever trick" (Dessen 25). Granted, the events of *Titus Andronicus* are problematic from a realistic perspective, but from a grotesque perspective, the problematic nature of the events are crucial to the audience's reaction, on which the grotesque is dependent. By barring the grotesque from his production, Freedman acknowledged that it has an intrinsic place in Shakespeare's original script; however, he believed his audience unable to intellectually contend with it. Yet Dessen defends Freedman's decisions for his production, pointing out that, like Brook, Freedman "helped to bring *Titus* back into the circle of 'performable' Shakespeare plays" (Dessen 29). Though not yet fully allowing for a full demonstration of the grotesque, Brook and Freedman

established an effective foundation for future productions to take the risks that the grotesque demands.

It was still some time before directors were willing to take risks with Shakespeare's script as-written, particularly with the grotesque humor inherent in the play. The comic macabre was regularly discarded from productions of *Titus Andronicus* as it was with Ravenscroft's and Brook's productions. Paul Barry explains that in his 1977 New Jersey Shakespeare Festival production of the play, he emphasized ritual horror and Judeo-Christian and Roman symbols, and he required a most serious approach to the play by the actors. Barry asserts: "*Titus Andronicus* requires actors who can be deadly serious about the play. Some of the scenes are so outrageously conceived and written that even the tiniest bit of bad acting is amplified. One of my best actors playing the Clown with his basket of doves got roasted by all the critics because the comedy of his scene is so out of key with the rest of the play" (Barry 424). However, Barry misses the point and ignores the obvious implication of his statement: the comedy of this scene *reveals* the tone of the play. Barry does not mention the comic undertones of the scene where Titus and his kin fight over who will lose their hands or the scene of the Goths donning disguises for a supposedly mad Titus in the personae of Revenge, Rape, and Murder; and it is clear he overlooks the humor inherent in the banquet scene since he fails to mention the image of Titus dressed as a cook for his cannibalistic feast. However, Barry astutely points out that there is a fine line between delivering the absurd or the bizarre and bad acting. The

nuanced approach the grotesque mode requires must be handled skillfully to be effective.

Attempts at *Titus Andronicus* continued forward, inching toward a full-on display of the grotesque. According to Kevin Kelly's review of the Stratford, Ontario production of *Titus Andronicus*, directed by Brian Bedford in 1980, the ability to maintain intensity and seriously deliver a full display of the brutality of the play can be achieved with masterful hands. Bedford did not hold back on the gore, but exhibited restraint in various moves: a stoic portrayal of Lavinia, a reliance on strangling and stabbing rather than amputation, the concealment of amputated limbs within the folds of the costumes the actors wore, and the movement of the violence off-stage (Kelly 428). Even with a more restrained approach, Bedford successfully elicits an audience response consistent with that of spectacle: "This is the first play by Shakespeare I've seen in which the audience is mesmerized in its seats, with no program rattling, no coughing, no conversation, the entire theater held motionless, apparently afraid to do more than breathe" (Kelly 428). However, Bedford's emphasis on ritualistic brutality and horror still neglected key aspects of the grotesque, such as the comic macabre and the bizarre.

Jane Howell made a substantial move forward into the grotesque in her television production of *Titus Andronicus* for the BBC and Time-Life Television Shakespeare series in 1985. Mark Spilka's claims in his book *Dickens and Kafka* that the child-perspective is necessary when observing or viewing the grotesque:

the effect of the grotesque is attained through the infantile perspective: ‘For one thing, the child’s view of the world is literally oblique; he stands below the sight-line of adult activity, for which the man-made scene is built. For another, his view is often animistic . . . He also lacks control of inner promptings, and projects them into the scene before him, as we do in dreams. Finally, his affective innocence . . . Proves reassuring as the world around him cracks and topples. (Harpham “The Grotesque: First Principles” 464)

Howell reflects Spilka’s claim in her interpretation of *Titus Andronicus*:

I thought that there is a small boy at the end of that dinner table sitting alongside people with their hands cut off. And so, what kind of world is he being brought up in? . . . I couldn’t find any way into the world of the play except through the child. I suddenly thought that if a child watched a TV news bulletin with its catalogue of violence and war, read a book about the fall of Rome to the Goths, and then went to bed and dreamed, he would have dreamed a play like this. (Billington 436)

Though she admits that the play is not a dream sequence, Howell fulfills both the child-perspective advanced by Spilka and the liminality of the grotesque discussed by Harpham. By maintaining Young Lucius’ presence on-stage, the audience must contend with *Titus Andronicus* as a coming-of-age play of sorts as the child-like perspective is shattered by the barbarity he witnesses at every turn. Howell keeps the violence and gore realistic in the play and only stylizes the faces of the Roman people: “The only stylization I’ve adopted is the use of masks for the people of

Rome—it seemed like a society where everyone was faceless except for those in power. And it was, I hope, a strange, dislocating effect” (Billington 436). Though the gore is realistic, the dislocation Howell implements along with the child-perspective conceptualizes the violence and turns the play into commentary, forcing the audience to accept that the events are not literal, which makes room for the kind of consideration and contemplation that result from grotesque spectacles. Though Howell does not overtly mention the grotesque, she implemented the mode in her production, establishing her iteration as a prerequisite to other female directors’ attempts at *Titus Andronicus*: Deborah Warner, Julie Taymor, and Lucy Bailey.

### **Deborah Warner**

Warner’s 1987 production of *Titus Andronicus* for the Royal Shakespeare Company was the first production to attempt Shakespeare’s full, original script since the Early Modern era, and Warner’s method of doing so gave future productions the green-light to finally realize *Titus Andronicus* in all its various forms of grotesqueness. According to Dessen, the keys to Warner’s successful iteration of Shakespeare’s original script was “no overriding interpretation (or music or design concept)” and “the best actors available, actors who wanted to do this script” (Dessen 57). The group of actors, the director, and the production designer all went through the play and collaborated on decisions regarding the approach to the play and potential problems. What resulted, according to Dessen, was a production intimately connected to the script: “The word repeated constantly among *Titus* personnel was *trust*: trust in the script, in the audience, in the Swan (a major component in the

success of this show), in each other. What then emerged was a production vastly different from its predecessors that, like Brook's rendition in 1955, had a profound effect on many playgoers" (Dessen 57). Warner tapped into the grotesqueness of the play by abandoning any adherence to the artistic conventions and sensibilities of the modern audience and instead working through the problematic moments of the play—essentially, the production contended with the grotesque in the same manner as an audience necessarily would. Dessen explains: "to tackle all the scenes and passages in this daunting play is to take various risks . . . to test various hypotheses about Titus that have hardened into facts. Thus, to the surprise of many observers, scenes that editors, scholars, and directors have stated firmly were unplayable emerged in this production as powerful and highly meaningful" (Dessen 58). By contending with the grotesque, Warner was able to therefore articulate it to the audience in a manner that was not stagey, clumsy, or unacceptable (as her predecessors feared) but rather controlled, capable, and compelling.

One of Warner's riskier moves included retaining Marcus's entire speech upon discovering Lavinia, using it not as a "heartless verbal exercise" (Dessen 59), but rather to contend with the horror of the image he was observing. According to Stanley Wells<sup>7</sup>, Marcus's delivery gave the play a sense of timelessness by elongating "a sequence of thoughts and emotions that might have taken no more than a second or two to flash through the character's mind, like a bad dream" (Dessen 59). Sonia Ritter as Lavinia contributed to the grotesqueness of the scene by assuming

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<sup>7</sup> *Shakespeare Survey*, 41, 1998.

animalistic qualities in her performance: “Initially a loving daughter in a golden crown, she appeared in II.iv as a drab, crawling sub-human creature, caked with clay, characterized by intermittent, jerky movements (Ritter here drew upon the image of a wounded bird or horse that alternates between stillness and flight” (Dessen 66). Shakespeare’s script substantiates Ritter’s interpretation of Lavinia as a wounded animal, for earlier Lavinia was likened to a “dainty doe” (1.1.617) by Aaron as he instructs Chiron and Demetrius to “strike her home by force” (1.1.618), and her portrayal as wounded prey provides a grotesque image of hybridity where animal and human forms merge together.

Warner also confronted the opportunities for uncomfortable laughter in the play, finally incorporating the comic macabre into a contemporary production of *Titus Andronicus*. For example, Warner portrayed the moment Titus hands over one of his sons’ heads to Marcus and puts his severed hand into Lavinia’s teeth as humorous, eliciting laughter from her audience” (Dessen 65). Warner’s clown, played by Mike Dowling, was portrayed humorously, supplying Titus with “ink, pen, paper, and knife” as he called for them in the scene (Dessen 61). Brian Cox’s Titus flourished in a humorously deranged state in his scenes with the clown, as well as with Tamora and Marcus, combining laughter with terror and giving his scenes a dangerous tone (Dessen 62). In another eerie, yet humorous move leading up to the banquet scene, “Warner brought on a full complement of actors—whistling, in a minor key, the work song of the seven dwarves” (Dessen 67). Mary Harron describes Warner’s production as one where “laughter and horror become inseparable,” and H.R.

Woudhuysen surmises, “Warner’s production ‘moves unerringly between high tragedy and the most painful comedy’ so that ‘the audience is allowed to laugh, but at the right moments’ and is made to feel that here ‘laughter need neither be innocent nor happy’” (Dessen 62). As James Fisher describes Warner’s production, “the grotesque is leavened by the comic, and the audience is left wondering if it should laugh or cry” (Fisher 451). Additionally, Warner’s insertion of anachronistic props and costuming (the use of cheesecloth, a naked light bulb, an aluminum ladder, and a chef’s hat) established an immersion into grotesque liminality while also bringing a hint of levity to the stage. Warner’s decisive treatment of the comic macabre unflinchingly revealed the demented, unhinged quality of Shakespeare’s script, and her establishment of liminality never allowed the audience to situate itself as comfortable in a definitive time and space while watching the play. Warner’s willingness to “trust” the script and the audience allowed for the grotesque to finally manifest itself. From this point forward, future iterations of *Titus Andronicus* have followed suit.

### **Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (1999)**

Taymor had directed the off-Broadway version of *Titus Andronicus* in 1994, and her film version followed in 1999. Taymor originally was horrified and shocked when presented with the play by Jeffrey Horowitz, although she claimed that after her work with *The Lion King* and *Transposed Heads*, she understood why she was asked to direct a contemporary version of the play (Interview at Columbia University): she had proved her familiarity and expertise with grotesque themes and visual spectacle.

Taymor called *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare's "potboiler," his most successful popular play, and lauded Shakespeare's grasp of the revenge tragedy as a genre and how it would grab his audience (Interview at Columbia University). Taymor also appreciated how *Titus Andronicus* plays with the audience emotionally—no one knows who to root for (Director's Commentary) because all the characters oscillate from afflicted and pitiable to monstrous and despicable. In her considerations on how to bring a contemporary audience into the vivid, barbarous Andronici world, Taymor approached *Titus* with an eye for the grotesque, which was accomplished by maintaining the humor of the original script, incorporating the child-perspective of Young Lucius, establishing a fusion of locales and time periods, balancing the violence of the play between stylization and realism, and utilizing what she calls a "penny-arcade nightmare" motif to insert a sinister surrealism into key moments in the film.

Unlike her predecessors, apart from Warner, Taymor immediately perceived *and* embraced the implicit comedy of the play, explaining, "The main thing about *Titus Andronicus* is that Shakespeare has a tremendous sense of humor. So, it was obvious to me in the script when I read it originally as a play that the humor was paramount, that it was very important in this dark, incredibly tragic story, that the humor is always there" (Interview at Columbia University). The performances in the film, particularly by Anthony Hopkins as Titus, Alan Cumming as Saturninus, and Harry Lennix as Aaron the Moor, all capture the tension between sincerity, madness, humor, and despair. Taymor's humor is never straightforwardly funny, but rather

deranged, ridiculous, over-the-top, and disturbing in its manifestations, which include Titus' farcical facial expressions during the final banquet scene, Aaron's biting asides throughout the play, Chiron and Demetrius' adolescent gesticulations, and Saturninus' petulant irrationality as an infantile ruler. Taymor's humor displays itself through revolting moments of violence, such as when Aaron the Moor places Titus' severed hand in a plastic baggie, hanging it from his rearview mirror as he drives away. Taymor also infuses humor into the film when the Andronici shoot arrows into Saturninus' court in the middle of an orgy, deflating the gargantuan breasts of a floating mermaid as the naked Romans flop around trying to find cover, and when the heads of the Andronici brothers are returned to Titus, along with his severed hand, by a carnival clown with calliope music framing the scene. A particularly grotesque comic image Taymor features is the exaggerated facial grimace that the famed British actress Geraldine McEwan, who plays Tamora's nurse, supplies after being stabbed through the abdomen with a pool stick by Aaron. Each of these moments inspire what previous productions stubbornly avoided—uncomfortable laughter.

Taymor also adopts the original violence of the play, but maintains a twentieth-century sensibility and recognizes the contemporary tendency towards violence as entertainment. Taymor uses violence as a device to progress the story and not as a spectacle in and of itself, and does not cut out or hide any of the violence from the original script: "I put violence on the screen where Shakespeare put it on the stage" (Director's Commentary). However, Taymor did not want the film's violence to be entertaining or to imitate modern cinematic violence that is presented with

savviness, such as with a rock beat figured into the scene: “It’s not there to titillate you, you’re not there to have a good time; it’s there to tell the story” (Director’s Commentary). Taymor refers to Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* as a “dissertation on violence” (Interview at Columbia University), and her use of sobering violence in the film inspires consideration on what she terms “the inhumanity of man” (Director’s Commentary).

Taymor explains that she wanted to deal with the violence on two levels: first, she “Wanted to unsettle the audience by never knowing on what level you would experience something so that you don’t become numb by the elegant beauty of the stylization and you don’t become numb from the visceral reality, which is what we do on television” (Interview at Columbia University). For example, while the aftermath of Lavinia’s rape and dismemberment is stylized, with branches literally fused into her arm stumps as she remains planted on a burnt tree trunk, Bassianus’s murder and the violence leading up to her rape is straightforward and realistic. Taymor recognizes the tendency to stylize the violence in *Titus Andronicus*, alluding to Brook’s and others’ productions, but explains, “I thought, you can’t do that with this play . . . There are so many acts that are of violence . . . If you totally stylize it with the red streamers . . . If you completely stylize it, yes, you . . . can distance yourself in order to look at the action, but it doesn’t get you on a gut level” (Interview at Columbia University). Second, Taymor contended with the very Elizabethan ending of *Titus Andronicus*, claiming that the resolution at the end does not resonate with a contemporary, desensitized audience. For the bloodbath to resonate with her film

audience, she needed to insert the child-perspective, which echoes Howell's television production of *Titus Andronicus* and Spilka's comments about the need for an innocent eye when approaching the grotesque.

Taymor introduces Young Lucius first in her film as a twentieth-century child playing with action figures in a typical mid-century kitchen. Young Lucius's play becomes reality as explosions occur around him, and the clown comes in and, as Taymor puts it, transports Young Lucius down the "Alice in Wonderland" surreal hole into the world of *Titus* (Interview at Columbia University), emerging into the coliseum, a setting rife with the history of violence as entertainment. Young Lucius then becomes the passive observer of the events in the play, slowly moving into more active roles with each progressive scene. Initially, Young Lucius lurks in the background, spying the events of the play from a distance. He becomes more intimately connected to the events as they unfold at the Andronici home and at the family dinner table. In Taymor's film, before Lucius departs Rome to seek out help from the Goths, he delivers a speech that originally was spoken to Titus, Marcus, and Lavinia (Act and Scene) to his son, again reminding the audience of the child-perspective. Taymor also adds an intimate scene to the film that was not in Shakespeare's original script: the moment when Young Lucius lovingly chooses two wooden appendages from the wood-shop for his Aunt Lavinia. Taymor describes her intention for the scene being centered on the love of a child trying to find a solution to his aunt's pain. However, Young Lucius's loving care for his aunt quickly turns as he begins to participate in the savage plans of his mad grandfather, rolling the weaponry

and arrows that will be shot into the Emperor's court in a red Radio Flyer wagon through the streets of Rome as Titus gathers his kindred.

By the end of the play, Young Lucius functions as Titus' assistant—his right-hand man, one could say—as he aids his grandfather as he serves the meat pie to Tamora and Saturninus during the banquet scene. Taymor explains, “The idea of a child, this twelve-year-old boy watching his family go at it, watching these bloodlines, these tribes, these religious rites, this whole event . . . what is it we put the children through and what is the legacy that they're left with?” (Interview at Columbia University). Taymor's audience enters the world of *Titus* through Young Lucius, and in doing so contends with the bizarre, barbaric, surreal world of vengeance while also considering its effect on the boy; the audience also departs with Young Lucius as he carries Aaron's infant out of the coliseum towards the dawn, offering a sliver of hope for the two children emerging from a world of violence. As Harpham explains:

Obviously, the more naïve and intense our belief, the more violent will be the transition from one interpretations to another, and the stronger our experience of the grotesque. Fragmented, jumbled, or corrupted representation leads us into the grotesque, and it leads us out of it as well, generating the interpretive activity that seeks closure, either in the discovery of a novel form or in a metaphorical, analogical, or allegorical explanation. (Harpham 21)

Young Lucius' sustained presence in *Titus* provides the naïve, innocent perspective on the barbarity and savagery of man, which necessitates a suspension of the

desensitized, hardened bloodthirstiness the audience would presumably bring to its approach to the film. Instead Young Lucius inclines the audience to approach *Titus* with a more sober, discerning sensibility and forces the audience to consider the grotesqueness of a child saturated with the excessive violence of his world, witnessing the bizarre spectacle of vengeance presented by those who are charged with fashioning him into a man.

The unique artistic devices Taymor utilizes to exhibit the grotesque are the brief surreal interludes that she calls “penny-arcade nightmares,” which are a series of interposed images that punctuate the film with disturbing conveyances of the thematic concepts occurring in the play. The tone of the penny-arcade nightmares is ominous and theatrical, momentarily suspending reality and hinting at a demonic carnival. The penny-arcade interludes convey the exaggerated grotesque images that thematically represent the implications of the events of the film as they occur.

The first of the nightmares occurs after Tamora has reconciled Titus and the Andronici back into Saturninus’ favor. The first nightmare juxtaposes Titus and Tamora against the backdrop of fiery revenge, with lopped-off limbs spiraling between them and the dismembered torso of Alarbus bleeding from the mark Titus gave him before his execution. The nightmare establishes Alarbus’ death as the central motivator that instigates a series of forthcoming mutilations, and it emphasizes the enmity between Titus and Tamora. The visual also foreshadows the lopping of limbs and the dismemberment that will occur throughout the rest of the film and reflects the theme of Rome as a fractured society. The second penny-arcade

nightmare comes after Titus' two sons are captured, and his pleas for mercy for them go unheeded. The nightmare presents an image of a sacrificial lamb on an altar, and the head of the lamb transposes into Mutius' head, recalling the first son Titus unjustly slaughtered. The image also includes an appearance of an angel of mercy, reminding the audience that Titus himself had refused mercy to both Tamora and his son Mutius earlier in the film.

The third penny-arcade nightmare functions as a flashback for Lavinia as she reveals the identities of her attackers as she writes their names in the sand. This nightmare presents composite images of Lavinia with a doe's head and the Goth brothers as tigers leaping upon her, presenting her rape figuratively through the imagery rather than literally on camera. The interlude also allows the audience to access Lavinia's interiority as she relives her rape and mutilation through the nightmare. As the silent Lavinia recalls her trauma, the nightmare conveys her perception of her attack, and serves as her interior voice to the film audience in the same moment that she externalizes her "voice" by writing Chiron's and Demetrius' names. The nightmare reminds the audience of her disempowerment, contrasting with the moment where she asserts power, which in turn prepares the audience for her next scene in the film—when she vengefully holds the basin to receive the blood of her slain attackers.

Though Taymor did not specifically frame the scene when the clown comes with an odd little girl to deliver the heads of Martius and Quintus as a penny-arcade nightmare, Taymor calls it a moment of "strange levity," almost like a "penny-arcade

nightmare for real . . . The image we were creating in that moment is still-life, a literal still-life . . . You start not to know with this event what is real and what is not real” (Director’s Commentary). By filming the scene from behind the Andronici as they watch the clown reveal the decapitated heads of Quintus and Martius displayed in a carnival wagon, along with Titus’ severed hand, the moment is framed as a performance, and the Andronici initially sit in stunned silence as they hear the delivery of the Clown’s message from Saturninus’ court. Marcus and Lucius rise in anger and indignation, but Titus remains seated and laughs at the spectacle, because he has “not another tear to shed” (*Titus*). The spectacle of violence the scene represents communicates the same disturbed, surreal reaction of Titus to the film audience, who must contend with Taymor’s visual commentary on violence as entertainment and question the place violence should have in the audience’s own reality. Taymor then presents the moment Lavinia puts Titus’ hand in her mouth, calling it “the most absurd Shakespeare ever” (Director’s Commentary). Taymor justifies her use of the scene as Shakespeare scripted it: “People always want to cut that, but I think it’s fantastic. But what does that mean? She now has the power in her silence, in a way. You don’t have to get all the symbolism, but it’s quite extraordinary if you think about this notion of this silent, dumb woman having the power to condemn in her mouth, in her silence, which will happen later” (Director’s Commentary). Lavinia with Titus’ hand in her mouth provokes laughter that mirrors Titus’ earlier laughter after seeing his sons’ decapitated heads, and the image transposes to the audience a surreal realization that the violence of the film has

superseded sanity and reason, and is now utterly ridiculous, which is consistent with the rest of Taymor's imagery condemning violence as entertainment or spectacle in the film.

The last penny-arcade nightmare merges into the actual events of the film when Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius appear to Titus as Revenge, Rape, and Murder. Tamora appears as a "goddess of vengeance" with a crown of kitchen blades resembling a fat nursing mother with a pipe running from her breast to her son Murder, who is smoking from it. Demetrius is costumed as a Tiger representing Murder, with bear jaws on his hands, and Chiron is an Owl representing Rape. Taymor asserts, "It's absolutely the most surreal, outrageous, theater of the absurd that Shakespeare has written here to have these people come dressed up as who they are. Their awareness of who they are is just extraordinary" (Director's Commentary). Taymor illustrates the conflation of the spectacle of the disguised Goths and the reality of their barbaric actions by merging the penny-arcade image with their actual appearance before Titus' window. Initially the audience must discern whether they are seeing a hallucination by Titus in the form of penny-arcade nightmare, but then the image becomes authentic in the film, which represents the moment in the play when Titus is revealed to be fully aware of his circumstances and surroundings, and foreshadows the moment in which he takes control of the rest of the film by capturing and binding the ridiculously costumed Chiron and Demetrius.

Taymor also establishes the grotesque in the film through a blurring of eras and a series of ancient and modern stylizations and images that establish the

liminality of the grotesque in the film. After Young Lucius emerges into the world of *Titus* in the coliseum, Taymor presents a grand, choreographed prologue where the Romans and Andronici, along with their Goth prisoners as spoils, enter the coliseum. Taymor's prologue illustrates an effort to "blend and collide time" (Director's Commentary), and the scene is replete with a mixture of figures and objects of various ages, such as Roman soldiers, carts, tanks, guns, and motorcycles. The Andronici sons are brought into the family mausoleum modeled after ancient Roman catacombs, but their bodies slide into the walls on metallic slabs. After Titus buries his sons, Saturninus and Bassianus intrude boisterously upon the streets of Rome in their respective motorcades, with jazz music blaring over the clamoring crowd. Titus is proclaimed the people's choice for emperor, which he rejects, by his brother Marcus and the Roman senators, who are all garbed in costumes that are a combination of the robes of the ancients with contemporary white suits. The varying locations where the film was shot also contribute to the ageless tone of the film. For example, the backdrop for the scenes in the Roman court is Mussolini's government building in Rome. Taymor explains that the location was appropriate for this Roman play because Mussolini "wanted to recreate glory of the ancient Roman empire" and that the building "easily represents what is happening in the play" (Director's Commentary). Taymor justifies that the choice of Mussolini's building and Rome itself is appropriate because Rome itself is stratified—ancient ruins intermingle with modern buildings on every street in this historically significant but modern city (Interview at Columbia University).

Later in the film after Titus offers his hand to Aaron on the cutting board to be chopped off to save his sons, Aaron places the severed hand in a modern plastic baggy, zipping it shut. Taymor refutes the notion that these instances qualify as anachronisms: “you can’t say there’s anything anachronistic in this film because we’ve created our own time, so everything, even the Maseratis or the baggies here, this is a part of it. We have feelings about all of these props and the fact that such a banal little piece of plastic and putting a man’s great hand . . . I think that’s got humor, but . . . it says so much about the value of human life” (Director’s Commentary). The anachronisms therefore are not necessarily so, but rather represent that the play exists apart from time and without a chronological foundation. All in the film becomes suspended, uncertain, or inverted, including the ingrained values, ethics, and morals of society—even regarding human life.

Not only are objects and figures anachronistic, but they are subversively misused in the film as well, which perpetuates Bakhtin’s concept of the inverted or the upside-down in the grotesque. As Bakhtin explains, “We find a similar logic in the choice and use of carnival objects. They are, so to speak, turned inside out, utilized in the wrong way, contrary to their common use. Household objects are turned into arms, kitchen utensils and dishes become musical instruments. Useless and worn out items are produced, such as a pierced bucket with its bottom knocked out” (Bakhtin 411). In *Titus*, a butcher knife severs Titus’ hand, and it is contained in a plastic Ziploc baggy. Chiron and Demetrius are slaughtered in Titus’ kitchen, hanging upside-down amidst “pots and pans and salamis and the cheeses” (Director’s

Commentary). A meat pie turns Tamora into a cannibal, Titus stabs Tamora with a table knife, Saturninus impales Titus with a candelabra, and Lucius gags Saturninus with a large spoon. The misuse of each of these items represents a bizarre, inverted world and illustrates grotesque inhumanity during social upheaval and crisis. As in the play Lucius represents the return of justice and order to Rome, in the film, Lucius ends the bloodbath by taking out a gun and finishing Saturninus, reorienting the audience through a prop more appropriate to the violent scene and through a quick shift of the scene from Titus' dining room back to the coliseum.

Taymor's film ends with the cries of Aaron's baby multiplied into thousands of babies' cries, then into the cries of birds, into tolling of bells. The aural sensation recalls the theme of metamorphosis present in the play's Ovidian source material. However, for Taymor, the film, which was released in 1999, represents the last two-thousand years of "man's inhumanity to man" (Director's Commentary). As is characteristic of grotesqueries, the film ends without definitive resolution or the cliché happy ending, but still ends with order restored and a child going towards the dawn, indicating an awakening and an escape from the dream-state of the night.

#### **Lucy Bailey: 2006, 2014**

Taymor's film closed the millenium, and since then productions of *Titus Andronicus* proliferate in the twenty-first century. Contemporary directors have abandoned the tendency to shy away from the violence and gore of the original script. Whether the gore is stylized or realistic, twenty-first century iterations of *Titus Andronicus* directly confront issues such as violence against women, violence as

spectacle, and the dehumanizing effects of our barbaric world. Lucy Bailey directed a 2006 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Globe and its 2014 revival that set the standard for realistic displays of mutilation and gore in *Titus Andronicus*. Bailey's production is a bawdy farce where the players intermingle with the "groundlings" of the Globe, creating a rowdy atmosphere where the standing audience members have a minimal buffer between themselves and the grotesque spectacle of the play. One of Bailey's additions to the production is the lovable drunkard who functions as a fool that infuses the atmosphere with comedic relief as he converses with the audience. The drunkard moves throughout the balcony seating and into the ground arena, performing his interludes from a different position in the theater each time. The open quality of the Globe and the intermingling of players and spectators merge performance and reality in a confusing, disrupting move that also conflates observer with participant.

The grotesque imagery prevalent in Bailey's productions primarily revolve around the convergence of the human and the animal. Both Lavinia and Bassianus are hunted prey entrapped in nets after Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius commence their vicious plan to attack the two Romans. Lavinia literally begins to act as a doe as Chiron and Demetrius fling her forward onto the stage, dismembered and caught in a hunter's net. After Marcus discovers her and begins to deliver his blazon, Lavinia writhes and jerks around on the stage with wild eyes and clotting blood saturating her dress. Of Bailey's 2014 revival and Flora Spencer-Longhurst's portrayal of Lavinia, Thomas Anderson surmises:

After her rape and mutilation, Spencer-Longhurst's performance portrays her bloody, brutalized condition without compromise. It does not shy away from the physical effects of violence done to her body . . . Spencer-Longhurst's performance of Lavinia in the moments after her rape, however, offers more than only a spectacle of gore and abjection. Her Lavinia is not a docile body, pliant in its pain. Indeed, the actor's body agitates and twitches in a way that suggests volatility rather than compliance or defeat. Coupled with an empty gaze, her agitation appears unconscious, but the effect of her volatile body is powerful nonetheless, obviating critical questions of agency or will. With her agitating Lavinia, Spencer-Longhurst asks the audience to consider the extreme cost that the female body in pain exacts on humanity. (Anderson 81)

Bailey's Lavinia and her open, violated, oozing body represent a society that has been attacked, desecrated, and fractured, which aligns with the Bakhtinian perspective of the grotesque body, but the modern implications of such a body, particularly a gendered body writhing like an animal, reflect the objectification and dehumanization currently associated with sexual assault and gratuitous violence. As Rosie Milliard explains, referring to Bailey's 2006 production, though Brook may have handled Lavinia's wounds with red ribbons in 1955, "in this post-Tarantino era, that won't do, and Bailey knows it. We get through the rather tiresome political speeches and thudding comic relief at breakneck speed, but all the nasty stuff—complete with plenty of spurting stage blood—is done as if in slow motion" (Milliard 50). Rather than avoiding the gore, Bailey's production practically relishes in it, and Milliard's

reference to Quentin Tarantino is appropriate, for Bailey's level of violence as fantastic spectacle echoes that of Tarantino's edgy, stylized films. Particularly worth mentioning are the images of Aaron slaughtering Tamora's nurse in Act 4, when he rams a poker through her from behind as he chides, "Wheak, wheak!—so cries a pig prepared to the spit" (4.2.148), and Lucius biting out the throat of Saturninus in the final scene of Bailey's production (5.3.65). These gruesome excesses reflect the escalating barbarity of the play, but their shocking, graphic presentations force an audience to contend with their own cheers and shouts as participants demanding more violence for their entertainment.

Bailey also accentuates the humorous moments of the original script and welcomes the uproar from the crowd, such as when Marcus, Lucius, and Titus bicker like schoolyard boys over who will chop his hand off to save the Quintus and Martius brothers, stacking their hands atop of each other the way children do when determining who is "it" on the playground. Titus is portrayed as convincingly unhinged, and the deranged delivery of his lines repeatedly inspires peals of bawdy laughter from the audience. Aaron the Moor delivers his asides directly to the audience, often engaging, taunting, and making faces at them, exacerbating the rowdiness of the crowd. After the final banquet scene, the audience observes the players arise out of the bloody array of corpses, and the cast performs a spirited, grotesque jig for the crowd, still in their bloodied costumes, still missing appendages, and trampling on a stage covered in blood and gore. This grotesque final bow forces the audience to acknowledge what it has taken in as entertainment.

## Conclusion

The performance history of *Titus Andronicus* reveals varying attitudes towards the grotesque, which in no way diminishes or negates the play's function as a grotesque. Harpham explains that "in approaching a definition of the grotesque, we should not always take etymological consistency for conceptual accuracy; the definition of this concept, almost as fluid as that of beauty, is good for one era—even one man—at a time" (Harpham "The Grotesque: First Principles" 461). In fact, the fluid nature of the grotesque mode is best exemplified by the differentiations between the productions, for, as Harpham claims, the audience's anticipated reaction determines the decisions the directors make and the opportunities they utilize. However, with the proliferation of productions of *Titus Andronicus* in the past sixty years, one must question whether the play will saturate modern audiences with its grotesqueness, resulting in a desensitization toward the power and force of the play. Modern audiences regularly are exposed to grotesqueries, even relatively benign ones such as the works of Guillermo del Toro, Tim Burton, David Lynch, and Terry Gilliam. *Titus Andronicus* is not the only production with excessive displays of grotesque violence and macabre humor, but is rather one of a plethora of such productions prevalent in contemporary theater and film in recent decades, including *Natural Born Killers*, *Fight Club*, the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises, the *Sweeney Todd* stage production and film, and most of Tarantino's work—including his own revenge-themed *Kill Bill* films. Even *The Passion of the Christ* opens the door for more recalcitrant audiences to experience excessive violence as a grotesque

presentation of the sacred and the profane. Qualifying *Titus Andronicus* as a grotesquerie in the twenty-first century itself is a risky move as society moves further into the bizarre, comic macabre, fantastic, and excessive in its regular viewing entertainment. When viewing audiences cease to bat an eye at the spectacle of *Titus Andronicus*, as it may be in danger of doing if current entertainment trends continue, future directors and productions will need to make different moves to shock and destabilize their audiences lest the play becomes typical, boring faire and loses its grotesque quality.

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