Titus Andronicus: A Healing Ritual Of Violence and Cannibalism?

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I. INTRODUCTION

*Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare’s first tragedy, was written between 1589 and 1592 and borrowed its structure of revenge play from Senecan models. Throughout the play, both protagonists and antagonists suffer unspeakable atrocities and display cold, rigid behaviour in enacting the equitable retribution or revenge they think those acts deserve. This grotesque caricature of *Lex Talionis* exemplified by the play, reminds us of Mahatma Gandhi’s words: An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.

An eye for an eye is indeed the driving dynamic within most characters. For instance, the deed that sets the whole chain of revenge murders in motion, is the murder of Tamora’s son by a vengeful Titus. For this, she will try to inflict similar harm upon Titus and his relatives.

The main purpose and hypothesis of this work is to show that, while revenge can be seen as a central theme in this play, I do not believe Shakespeare’s sole purpose is to shock his audience with an abundance of gratuitous violence.

After having attended two performances of *Titus Andronicus*, and having watched the movie several times, it appeared to me that this apparent gratuitous and grotesque presence of violence could be appreciated on an entirely different level, as some sort of cleansing ritual. I believe that the suggestion to examine *Titus Andronicus* in the context of rituality and theatricality, bore fruit. Beneath the covering veil of violence, another reality appears. In this thesis, I will strive to elaborate on this hypothetical point of view.

However, being both an observer and a reader, another question also arose. How does this play fit into the theatrical tradition of the 16th century, and is it possible to find a link with the Roman plays our bard from Stratford-Upon-Avon so liberally copied?

Additionally, we also have a historical-sociological fact which, in its turn, gave rise to a manifold of questions. How did people of the 16th century experience and respond to violence? Was violence present in their society in a similar manner as it is present in our contemporary civilization? Can we draw parallels with violence at the start of this millennium? And is this possibly the new reason why *Titus Andronicus* has recently been reevaluated? Can *Titus Andronicus* be considered the precursor of *Pulp Fiction*? After all, it is a play in which violence is sometimes performed in such a way that it tends to the grotesque
and risks becoming humorous through exaggeration. A play in which, to use a reference to Tarantino’s controversial movie, the slaughtering of human beings tends to be of less importance than how to remove bloodstains from the backseat of one’s car. In what follows, I will also elaborate briefly on these considerations and questions.

When one reads and thinks, one selects. Obviously, we also have to acknowledge that contemporary adaptations select portions of the original play, and certain scenes are left out. When one reads and thinks, today, these processes are strongly different from how people read and thought in the 16th century. I was unable to recover how things used to go in the 16th century, and what sort of selection directors made in the original performances. Therefore, from historical perspective, some modesty is recommended considering the universal validity of what is said in this thesis.

What I will endeavor to demonstrate in this thesis is threefold. First of all, I would like to argue that violence in this play is not merely used as a gratuitous means of catering to the crudity of the taste of the audience. Secondly, violence is also used in a ritualistic attempt to heal the conflicts that threaten to tear apart Roman – and by extension, every – society which is confronted with centrifugal forces. Cynically, in this play, we will be forced to realize these rituals create aggression instead of quenching it. Thirdly, I will attempt to demonstrate that these notions of violence and brutality cannot be comprehended without taking into account the socio-political and cultural context. Additionally, I considered it worthwhile to draw a number of parallels with our contemporary society. Therefore, this thesis will also elaborate on the society Shakespeare lived in and the role violence fulfilled in this society. I will also make use of scientific literature and insights concerning rituals.

During my work on this play, I had the opportunity to attend 2 different adaptations of Shakespeare’s original play. I also studied Taymor’s movie Titus. In the third chapter of this thesis, I will critically compare the interpretation of these works with the insights in obtained from studying Taymor’s film.
II. TITUS ANDRONICUS: A HEALING RITUAL OF VIOLENCE AND CANNIBALISM?

II.1. Rise, Fall and Rise of Titus Andronicus

Though being hugely popular in Elizabethan times, Titus Andronicus has had close to no stage performances up to the last few decades, as throughout the eras various critics used to describe this play as an abomination. “Some broken-down car, laden with bleeding corpses” were the exact words of Dover Wilson, and T.S Eliot remarked it was “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written”. The play was rejected because of its excessive violence, as critics did not seem capable of looking past, beyond the horrid actions taking place on stage. In some cases, this dejection of Titus Andronicus was so extreme, that critics refused to accept the play was written by Shakespeare himself, and instead defended the opinion that Titus Andronicus had been written by another playwright.

However, renowned productions of this dejected play enabled it in recent decades to reassert its position amongst other canonical Shakespearian works. The most influential of these plays having been Peter Brooks adaptation of the Shakespearian original in 1955, which starred Laurence Olivier as Titus. This version was still condemned by some eminent critics as a mere ‘twaddle’, a ‘horror comic’ without ‘poetic characterization’, a ‘preposterous melodrama’ and a ‘bloody awful play’, which is surprising as Peter Brook had made several adaptations to stage props which rendered the play much less gruesome than its Shakespearian original. This tuning down of violence was generally appreciated, however, and even led one critic to assert that “Mr. Brook has committed upon the text a butchery scarcely less severe than that suffered by most of the people in the play. Mr. Brook’s play is a far better one than Shakespeare’s”.

It is surprising that in order for Shakespeare’s play to become popular again, several scenes had to be adapted and made less gruesome. In a way, it is not Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus which succeeded in reviving interest in this play, but Peter Brook’s version of the play. As demonstrated by the quotes, critics were still unable – probably strongly influenced

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3 Levin, B., Truth (26 August 1955)
by the morals of their time - to fully grasp the purpose of violence in Shakespeare’s play. Therefore, when looking at gruesome scenes, they only saw that which their spoon-fed morals and prejudices of the time had taught them to condemn. As such, Shakespeare’s play was still considered unworthy of being performed in the way Shakespeare intended for it to be performed. Stunning and impressive as it may have been, Brook’s adaptation of Shakespeare, through the veiling of objects or scenes considered particularly offensive or appalling to a well-bred and refined audience, removed a layer of meaning. A layer which formed a quintessential part of Brook’s Shakespearian example.

In recent decades however this play – and its violent nature - has been revaluated by some prominent figures, A.C. Hamilton⁴ amongst them. In his essay “Titus Andronicus: The Form of Shakespearian Tragedy” he explores the possibility that in Titus, the violence is remarkably mild in a way, and should not be seen as repulsive or excessive. As he states: “To keep his violence sweet, Shakespeare ritualizes the language and action of this play”. He implies that Shakespeare alleviates the gruesome events that take place through usage of ritualized, highly rhetorical language and the fact that some atrocious events still take place off stage.

For instance, the rape of Lavinia is carried out off stage, as is the beheading of Titus’ two sons. However, other events are fully staged and shown in all their ghastliness and dreadfulness, e.g. Titus who slits the throats of Chiron and Demetrius. It should be noted that in some of these scenes, the use of highly rhetorical language also strengthens the horror. Hamilton gives a striking example, which can be found in Scene II where, after being raped and mutilated, Lavinia opens her mouth and blood gulps out. An act which Marcus describes as:

Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirr’d with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath.⁵

⁵ Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 2, Scene 4, 22-25
This example demonstrates how this highly rhetorical language – laden with words which bear positive connotations, for instance ‘rosed’, ‘honey’ - does not, as one might expect, soften the horror. At the same time this scene strongly contrasts with other gruesome scenes, which are carried out of the picture in both movie and original play, as if to soften the horror. According to Taymor: “This play is as much about how the audience experiences violence as entertainment as it is about the tragedy of the endless cycle of violence itself”\textsuperscript{6}.

Remarkable is that the rehabilitation of \textit{Titus Andronicus} at times tends to lead to contrasting appreciations. In his review of Taymor’s movie, Stone concludes that Taymor’s \textit{Titus} is the beginning of an entirely new appreciation and different angle of looking at Shakespearian tragedies: “Taymor’s \textit{Titus} opens a new window on Shakespeare’s tragedies. Perhaps \textit{Titus Andronicus} was the motherlode that started it all and not just a bad beginning”\textsuperscript{7}. I can only agree with this point of view.

Wood\textsuperscript{8} pointed out that Shakespeare was intrigued and fascinated by a number of themes which, subsequently, are also very much present in his work. Among these are notions of law, aggression, violence committed by those in command, the individual posing as an actor, the conflict between one’s conscience and the corrupting influence of power. All these topics are already present in his first play.

Another contemporary critic worth mentioning is Jan Kott, a well-known polish critic and theoretician of theatre. He too extensively studied this play, and claims that not only the critics and their opinions have changed. According to Kott, contemporary audiences have become much more accustomed to violence – a statement on which I will elaborate at length later on in this work – and react to the brutality and aggression of the play in a completely different way. Whereas even Peter Brook’s ‘censored’ version of Shakespeare was still heavily criticized by some for being too graphical, Kott states that in the few decades spanning the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the audience’s reactions have changed from a strong emotional response to a more rational approach and response to \textit{Titus}

\textsuperscript{6} Blumenthal, E. & Taymor, J. “Julie Taymor: Playing with Fire – Theatre, Opera, and Film” (1999), p. 194
\textsuperscript{8} Wood, M., In Search of Shakespeare, BBC Worldwide (2003)
Andronicus and the violence this play bathes in. According to Kott, a contemporary audience views:

the struggle for power and the mutual slaughter of the characters far more calmly than did many generations of spectators and critics in the nineteenth century. More calmly, or, at any rate, more rationally. . . . The violent deaths of the principal characters are now regarded rather as an historical necessity, or as something altogether natural. . . . When Titus Andronicus received a production like that of Peter Brook, today’s audiences were ready to applaud the general slaughter in Act Five no less enthusiastically than Elizabethan coppersmiths, tailors, butchers and soldiers had done. 

This ‘strange spectorial enthusiasm’ described by Kott is indeed one of the strikingly similar characteristics which is exhibited by both Elizabethan audiences and contemporary ones. In one of the following chapters, I will attempt to explain and support Kott’s claim of this ‘shared spectorial enthusiasm’ through discussing and critically comparing ways in which daily life in both eras was permeated by expressions of violence and how this permeation strongly influenced the response of the audience. However, before I can do this, it is necessary to delve further into the violence of the play itself, which can be linked with the rituals that take place in it; rituals which critics of Brook’s play could not discern in the original play, but which have been rediscovered and made visible by contemporary research.

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9 Kott, J., Shakespeare Our Contemporary (1967), p.5
II.2. Aggression in Elizabethan Context

If there is one word which really characterizes Titus Andronicus, be it when reading it, watching a performance, or criticizing the play; it is aggression. In this context, the question springs to mind how people coped with aggression in the 16th century. A contemporary audience experiences the acts of revenge as atrocious, but one cannot help but wonder how an Elizabethan audience experienced these acts. It is vital to realize that, when William Shakespeare entered London City, he most certainly was confronted with the chopped off heads which were exposed on wooden bars in the neighborhood of London Bridge. Aggression, torture and dead were an integral part of daily life. The citizens of London loved watching the cruel acts with animals fighting each other – which strongly reminds us of the violent entertainment Romans indulged themselves in. An overwhelming part of Elizabethan society delighted in the cruelty and the more the beasts suffered, the more amusing the entertainment became. Additionally, Wood argues that the execution of criminals was an extremely popular mass exhibition. People were hang, drawn and quartered. While still alive, their intestines were removed and burned, their genitals removed and their limbs exposed in public places. Death was omnipresent, and therefore one might logically assume that the raping and the chopping off limbs on stage was not considered terribly shocking at all for the average 16th century Englishman. Much like Romans had grown used to violence by attending brutal massacres at amphitheatres or racetracks, the Elizabethan audience had come to expect violent entertainment, which they had been accustomed to by public executions and a wide variety of shows where animals like bulls, tigers, lions, bears, leopards, etc. were pit against each other.

When we take a look at our latter-day society, we can discern a number of striking similarities. Although our bridges have not yet been decorated with the severed heads of politicians, aggressive behavior becomes increasingly present in the streets. More and more, carjacking, robbing, aggressive behavior on busses and trains have become an aspect of daily life in the city. And as long as we are not the victims, we enjoy watching. Acts of aggression are taped with mobile phones and exposed on the web. In this context, it might not be coincidental that in this time period, Titus Andronicus is profiting from a renewed interest, together with other personifications or incarnations of Evil.

II.3. Rituals in Titus on Stage and Screen

In what follows I will examine a myriad of ritualistic motivations which give rise to an overwhelming presence of cruelty and gruesome actions in this play. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the extreme level of gore depicted in vivid detail in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is not an exception, nor does it deviate from ancient Roman examples.

In *Titus Andronicus*, it is possible to distinguish a number of different rituals, which contribute in their own way to the play and the enactment of it. However, before we delve any deeper into this matter, it might be helpful to give a short overview of what rituals exactly are and how they are used to accomplish certain goals, which is what I will attempt to achieve in this chapter.

II.3.1. Rituals as Exponents of Chaos

First of all, key to all rituals is that they enter societies which find themselves plagued by troubles. Rituals are a means of acknowledging these problems, and attempting to solve or even completely prevent them. Thus it can be said that rituals are called into being in order to preserve a relatively idyllic state of society, where everyone and everything has its place.

The link to the actions which take place in the opening scenes of *Titus Andronicus* is clear: Titus’ killing of Alarbus is meant as a ritual sacrifice which should enable Titus to restore his own power, taken from him when Tamora killed his sons. However, he fails completely in his attempt to force Tamora to see the necessity of this ritual, and only incites her to more violence and murderous behavior. This ritual which is – for evident reasons - completely misunderstood by one of its beholders will be elaborated on at length in the following chapters.

II.3.2. Recurrent Nature of Ritual: Rigid Pattern

Another attribute of rituals which is relevant in this context is the fact that most rituals are characterized by a certain rigidity. A rigidity which is also very much present in Titus’ ritualized behavior, for instance in the opening scene where Titus insists on sacrificing Alarbus, Tamora’s eldest son even after it has been made very clear that the Goths have been defeated and are defenseless. In this context of sacrificing a human in order to achieve something, it is vital to quote Bernstein, who commented on the definition of rituals:
Ritual in humans generally refers to a relatively rigid pattern of acts specific to a situation which constructs a framework of meaning over and beyond the specific situational meanings. Here, the symbolic function of ritual is to relate the individual through ritualistic acts to a social order, to heighten the respect for that order, to revivify that order within the individual and, in particular, to deepen acceptance of the procedures used to maintain continuity, order and boundary and which control ambivalence towards the social order.\textsuperscript{12}

When looking closely at this citation, our attention is drawn to a key word of it: pattern. Bernstein specifically emphasizes that when discussing rituals, one should always keep in mind that they have a recurrent behavior. Rituals are never meant to only be executed once, and possess a recurrent nature by definition. Additionally, in his work on the ritual, Bossard\textsuperscript{13} states that the more frequently a ritual is repeated, the more rigid its execution becomes. This aspect of ritualistic behavior is also very much present in \textit{Titus Andronicus}. As I will endeavor to demonstrate, Titus grows more and more rigid in the execution of his restorative rituals. For when he fails to achieve what he had hoped to achieve with the killing and subsequent sacrifice of Alarbus, he never doubts his methods. Instead of questioning the effectiveness of the rituals he enacts, he rigidly adheres to them, so much that even the brutality and violence with which he kills his sacrificial targets grow exponentially. This increase in brutality can be seen as Titus growing increasingly desperate as his first, relatively civil, sacrifice of Alarbus failed to accomplish what he had intended for it to achieve.

II.3.3. Restorative Function of Rituals

That brings us to the question of what Titus intended to achieve with his sacrifice of Alarbus, and later on, also Chiron and Demetrius. One could argue that revenge for his fallen sons and mutilated daughter are a prime motive for this sacrifice. However, I believe, as mentioned before, that Titus was intent on completing a ritual of which the restorative powers would bring order back to Roman society. A paraphrasing of Bernstein will aid me in my explanation. According to Bernstein\textsuperscript{14}, the symbolic function of the ritual is to bind the individual through a myriad of ritual practices, to a social order, and to increase the respect

\textsuperscript{12} Bernstein, B., Ritual in Education, \textit{Biological Sciences, Volume 251} (1966), p.429

\textsuperscript{13} Bossard, J.H.S, Ritual in family living; a contemporary study by James H. S. Bossard and Eleanor S. Boll (1950)

\textsuperscript{14} Bernstein, B., Ritual in Education, \textit{Biological Sciences, Volume 251} (1966), p.154
of said individual to that order. Additionally, Bernstein continues to argue, the ritual has to
revive this order within the individual himself, and in particular, reinforce the acceptance of
those procedures which are used to enforce continuity, order and delineation of boundaries.
The ritual here serves to eliminate – or at the very least contain – the duality which exists in
the social order.

And this, I believe, is Titus’ main motive for the sacrifices he makes and the killings he
commits. Not personal revenge, but an effort to enforce upon the Goths the Roman legal
and political system. With the killing of Alarbus, Titus actively subjects the entirety of the
Goths to his law, the law of Rome. However, this is also an attempt to revive the order and
reinforce the acceptance of Roman procedures in the Goths, and specifically in Tamora. An
endeavor which, at first, seems to succeed, as Tamora hides her true nature and is
incorporated into the Roman society through her marriage with Saturnine, emperor of
Rome. With a gracious and congenial speech she pretends to understand that the killing of
Alarbus had a ritualistic purpose, and as such, was not an act of revenge. She even proceeds
to save Bassianus from Saturnine’s wrath, and then boldly states:

    Titus, I am incorporate in Rome,
    A roman now adopted happily,
    And must advise the emperor for his good.
    This day all quarrels die, Andronicus.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 399-402
By the time she utters these cordial words, the audience has already seen her true nature, and her intention to wreak havoc on Titus and his family which were unveiled in her soliloquy in the lines before:

I’ll find a day to massacre them all,
And raze their faction and their family,
The cruel father, and his traitorous sons,
To whom I sued for my dear son’s life;
And make them know what ‘tis to let a queen
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.\(^\text{16}\)

II.3.4. Mutual Commitment: Another Characteristic of Rituals

According to Van Der Hart, one of the purposes of rituals in societies all over the world seems to be that they help people (individuals, families or groups) to make the transition from one phase to another (as is the exemplified by rituals concerning adultery, marriage, birth and death). In such rituals of transition, everyone has a specific role to fulfill, everybody participates and all participants go along with the transition. All parties are committed.

At the onset of the play, a war has come to an end, and order is supposed to return. This can be seen as a transition, which could be smoothened by ritual practice. However, there are two parties involved, who had been at war with each other. The ritual Titus Andronicus exacts could be considered a manner of subjugation, which holds the germs of wrath in it. The only ritual that could have successfully established peace between the two people is a ritual in which both parties were involved, joining together in a common ritual as two relatively equal groups. Not a ritual of revenge. It is interesting that when there no ritual is enacted, people have difficulties in accepting and behaving in a transitional-adequate way.

Concretely, this is what is exemplified in the quotation above. Here, a vengeful queen of the Goths successfully feigns her acceptance of the ritual sacrifice of Alarbus. However, when Tamora utters these vengeful words, it is made clear to the audience that the ritual which Titus enacted has failed to enforce an acceptance of Roman order and the justice system. This ritual was enacted by Titus in an attempt to restore a social order; an order which had

\(^{16}\) Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 387-392
been severely disrupted by the killing of 22 of his sons on the battlefield, deaths which had
gone without retaliation. When Tamora utters her disparaging and irate lines, this ritual as a
way of evening things out, to restore order to a society which has swirled out of balance, is
denied its importance. Even more so, it completely loses its relevance.

This is what Onno Van Der Hart considers Empty Rituals. According to Van Der Hart\(^\text{17}\), empty
rituals are rituals which have been hollowed out and endured a process of eroding. In this
particular case, the sacrifice of Alarbus is stripped of its ritual value by Tamora, and loses a
layer of meaning. It is reduced to a murder committed by Titus out of pure vindictive
feelings. When Titus’ sacrifice of Alarbus is denied its importance and reduced to a murder
based primarily on a *Lex Talionis* principle, it has to be noted that the ritual itself also
becomes an empty ritual for Titus, through the denying of its importance by Tamora. The
tragedy of the play lies in the fact that throughout the entire play, Titus will adhere to his
rituals, without realizing they have been emptied out and thus have become void of any
meaning.

It is the merit of Shakespeare that, in his context where an eye for an eye was a daily reality,
he shows us a mirror: rituals of revenge are sustaining the bloodshed, not resolving it.

**II.3.5. Symbols as the ‘Building Blocks’ of Rituals**

Before turning our attention fully to the text, a last characteristic of rituals needs
mentioning. According to Turner, symbols are the “building blocks, the ‘molecules,’ of
ritual.”\(^\text{18}\) These symbols can take the form of symbolic actions, objects or even words or
formulae. In the chapters to come, I employ the term ‘ritualized language’, which can be
defined as exactly that kind of language which helps endorse and shape rituals. In
Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, the type of language which I consider ritualized, is the highly
rhetorical language present within the play, which adorns these rituals with much more
decorum than mere vernacular could ever hope to achieve. However, also in some
contemporary productions, symbols serve as a means to reinforce rituals which are to take
place. An example of this can be found in Julie Taymor’s *Titus*, which is interlarded with

\(^{17}\) Van Der Hart, O., *Rituels in Psychotherapy: Transition and Continuity* (1982)

symbolical objects and images. For instance, at the end of the first act of the play, a critic describes the disturbing image which is shown as:

Titus and Tamora square off against a backdrop of flame. Flaming arms and legs pinwheel toward the camera. A headless, limbless, but living human torso appears between them and gasps for air. An invisible blade opens a bloody gash across the torso's chest.¹⁹

This image can be seen as a foreshadowing of the rituals Titus will enact in an attempt to restore the wounded torso, which represents Rome, the wounded city. In this context, I would like to argue that the burning arms and legs can be seen as parts of the Torso/Rome which are being sacrificed in order to restore the torso itself to its former glory. Sacrifice which is symbolized by the arms and legs being consumed by a flame. A purging flame, one might argue, which echoes the words with which Alarbus’ remains received their final destination, incense for the gods. Additionally, the image of the hewed off limbs vividly reminds us of Lucius’ final words before disappearing from the stage for the first time:

Away with him! And make a fire straight,
And with our swords, upon a pile of wood,
Let’s hew his limbs, till they be clean consum’d.²⁰

A few lines further into the play, he reenters with the following words:

See, lord and father, how we have perform’d
Our Roman rites. Alarbus’ limbs are lopp’d,
And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,
Whose smoke, like incense, doth perfume the sky.²¹

²⁰ Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 64-66
²¹ Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 79-82
II.3.6. Summary

As I have attempted to demonstrate with this handful of examples, *Titus Andronicus* should be considered a play filled with rituals. Not only do we find rituals with restorative purpose in the play, but the language, objects and actions of the play are permeated and endorsed with an additional layer of meaning, which confirm their role as building blocks of this play's rituals.

III. AGRSSION IN SOCIETY, SCAPEGOATING AND RITUALISTIC CANNIBALISM

In this chapter I will attempt to more concretely scrutinize one of many rituals which I believe, can be found in *Titus Andronicus*. To that end, I will be analyzing a ritualized form of cannibalism which is very much present in the play itself. Additionally, I will situate *Titus Andronicus* in a tradition of works of art where ritualistic cannibalism has played a major part, and by which Shakespeare’s work was very much influenced. Furthermore I will be comparing how the exaggerated gruesomeness of these ritualistic, cannibalistic actions was perceived by Shakespeare’s contemporaries, and how they are perceived by audiences of the 21st century.

As mentioned in the paragraphs above, there are several types of rituals to be found in *Titus Andronicus*. One of the most prominent and prevalent rituals is ritualistic cannibalism. On this subject, René Girard22 has written extensively, and in the following paragraphs I will briefly chalk out those parts of his theory - which was developed in 1977 - that can be seen as relevant for this thesis.

III.1. Girardian Notions on Scapegoating and Sacrifice

*Titus Andronicus* could be considered an excellent example of René Girard’s theory about rituals. According to Girard, social or political rituals fulfill the function of a safety net in society. Whenever problems arise, rituals can be used as a means to restore a society or individual to its former glory. However, when sociopolitical rituals are no longer capable of

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connecting an individual with the society he or she lives in, problems arise. In an earlier chapter, these rituals were defined as having become void of meaning, empty rituals.

Through study of contemporary fictional texts and mythology, Girard has attempted to construct his own notion of sacrifice. Sacrifices take place when societies or problems are spiraling out of control and are part of a cleansing ritual. When such offers do not take place, or – as is the case in Titus Andronicus – are acted out inaptly, aggression arises. It needs to be noted that in this context, Girard does not consider aggression to be a part of the cause of conflict, but rather as part of the problem of conflict. Concretely put, aggression or violence is not the cause of the arising conflict in a society, but rather a consequence of a ritual enacted inappropriately.

When observing different societies and eras, Girard concluded that the form of violence, the physiology, varied “little from one individual to another, even from one culture to another.” According to him, characteristic of violence is that,

Once aroused, the urge to violence triggers certain physical changes that prepare men's bodies for battle. This set toward violence lingers on; it should not be regarded as a simple reflex that ceases with the removal of the initial stimulus. Story remarks that it is more difficult to quell an impulse toward violence than to rouse it, especially within the normal framework of social behavior.23

Vital to a deeper understanding of Titus Andronicus is that Girard states that it requires a greater effort to douse the spark of violence once ignited, than to light this spark. It is exactly here that ritualistic sacrifice comes into play. Girard believes that, when a conflict arises and no immediate satisfactory solution is found, tension builds in a society and a tendency to violence starts to increase as frustrations grow. As these aggravations continue to accumulate, they reach a certain point at which the process seems unable to be halted or even reversed. Jeramy Townsley, who studied the work of Girard, states that at this point, escalation of the conflict and ensuing anarchy have become real threats: “Presumably,

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it is inevitable only to the extent that if it does not occur, then community violence will continue to increase until the community self-destructs or until unification finally occurs.”

This dichotomy can be seen as a bifurcation: the troubled society has arrived at a point in time and space where only one of two options is possible. The escalation of the conflict leads to what Girard likes to call a ‘mimetic crisis’. At this critical moment, Girard argues, a society will turn against one individual who or a group of people which can function as a placeholder for the initial frustration. In Girard’s own words, “The creature that excited [their] fury…is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand”²⁵. This scapegoat is considered an arbitrary figure by Girard, but has some qualities which distinguish him or her from normative society and its members. In order to quench the violence, the society will sacrifice – i.e. ritually slaughter for the greater good - this scapegoat which is laden with all the sins and burdens of society. On the intended aim of this practice I will elaborate at greater length in the paragraphs to follow.

Due to the terrifying and utterly devastating nature of this mimetic crisis, it is only logical to assume that individuals will go to great lengths to prevent society from spiraling out of balance again. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the fear of a conflict which may shake the very fundaments a civilization was built on, partly accounts for the atrocious nature of Titus’ ritual sacrifices. It also furnishes a justifying explanation for the increasingly violent tendencies of our protagonist, which, as I demonstrated above, rapidly augment as the play progresses.

III.2. Sacrificial Scapegoat: Ritual Attempt at Renewal

According to Liebler, the severing of limbs very much present in Titus Andronicus (e.g. the severing of Titus’ hand, the beheading of his sons, the hewing off of Lavinia’s hands, etc.) is a manifestation of the nihilistic impact of a ritual which has gone awry. She states that “there is no renewal, none is possible, for a Rome so torn apart”²⁶. However, this does not mean that throughout the play, no attempt at renewal is made. As discussed before, the offering of one’s offspring to their own progenitor has a strong mythical and classical basis, and serves a ritual purpose. In ancient Rome Dionysian cults would sacrifice an animal or even a


person through the severing of the limbs which was called *Sparagmos* and which was often followed by *Omophagia*, the ritual devouring of the creature or individual killed. Such ritual killing of a scapegoat is also very much present in classical stories and myths. In the *Argonauts* Medea is said to have murdered and dismembered her own brother in order to provide a distraction while fleeing with Jason and the golden fleece, in *Orpheus and Euridice* Orpheus is said to have been rent to pieces by a cult of Thracian Maenads, and in the *Iliad* it is prophesied the vengeance of the gods can only be propitiated by the ritual sacrifice of Agamemnon’s own daughter, Iphigenia.

The search for a scapegoat to fill the role of this sacrificial offering has clearly been omnipresent throughout human history. According to Jean-Baptiste Dumont,

...The function of sacrifice is to replace the potentially multiple victims with a unique candidate: the ‘scapegoat’. In this procedure the ‘scapegoat’ becomes selected for sacrifice in order to purge social groups of their introspected violence. For this reason, ‘scapegoats’ are inevitably selected from a source as remote as possible from the selecting group.27

Already in ancient Greece there existed a tradition of casting out a pariah of society who was called the *Pharmakos* or scapegoat when a crisis occurred with the purpose of cleansing society of its sins. And during this process of exiling, there was and is always some sort of dehumanization of the scapegoat and the distancing of oneself from such an individual. Also in Christian tradition and in European history there are numerous cases where a myriad of minority groups were subject to being objectified into a scapegoat for an alleged causing of a variety of cataclysms and crises.

It should be noted that in *Titus Andronicus* as well as in history, the people to become a scapegoat were never considered being part of the society, as the paraphrase of Dumont confirms. According to Naomi Liebler,

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A culture defines itself in part by distinguishing self from other, “them” from “us”, citizen from alien, and does so along both national and racial lines of demarcation. Out of such defining divisions, or rather to secure them, ideology is formed, and ritual’s primary function, after guaranteeing physical survival, is to guarantee the survival of the cultural definition, that is, its ideology.”

In *Titus Andronicus*, one finds oneself looking for the scapegoat who caused this downward spiral of increasing violence and ghastliness. And the group of people elected to fulfill this role, meets the demands of Liebler’s definition quoted above. At the very beginning of the play, one of the chief wrongdoers of the play, the conniving Tamora vents her fuming anger and her malicious schemes in a soliloquy which leaves little to the imagination of the audience: “I’ll find a day to massacre them all, and raze their faction and their family, the cruel father, and his traitorous sons, to whom I sued for my dear son’s life; and make them know what ‘tis to let a queen kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.” Furthermore, in the first scene of the second act, it is made clear that Aaron is the machinating mastermind who plots the downfall of an entire empire through the seduction of its monarch by his mistress Tamora, whom he describes as “This siren, that will charm Rome’s Saturnine, and see his shipwreck and his common weal.”

A last notion worth discussing in the context of the branding of a group of people as scapegoat, is the term *Omophagia*, to which I referred earlier. According to Jan Kott in *The Eating Of The Gods* this process of mythic *Omophagia* should be considered as “genesis annihilated, moved back to its origins”. His point is that the whole cycle of life is interrupted by this act in which someone is devoured. This is especially apparent in *Titus Andronicus*, where a mother – bringer of life – consumes her own sons. This act is one of the most unnatural ones possible, it goes against our nature, and against nature itself: instead of progression through recreation, we have an act of regression. Furthermore, Kott argues that it can be seen as “the ultimate completion of the cycle. Cosmos has become chaos again so that everything can begin anew. Fertility is mortally wounded in order that it may be

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29 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 387-392  
30 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 2, Scene 1, 23-24  
renewed.” This quotation strongly reminds of Norse mythology, where it was believed that the world would meet its demise in a large-scale war, called Ragnarok and also known as Twilight of the Gods. After this cataclysmic event, life would begin anew.

III.3. Ritualistic Cannibalism in Titus Andronicus

In what follows, I will take a look at the ritualistic cannibalism present in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, a notion which fits in surprisingly well in Girard’s theory about violence which I briefly explained above. Ritualistic cannibalism – be it literal devouring or the sacrificial offering of a scapegoat to appease the sentiments of both Gods and men alike - is deeply intertwined with the cycle of revenge initiated by Lucius. For it is him who demands the sacrifice of Alarbus, son of Tamora at the beginning of the play, and who plots revenge against Tamora in the end. It is with his initiative and actions that the bloodlust and violence commence. He who at the end becomes the savior of the entire chaos, the rock upon which a new empire will be built, was also the one who introduced the savagery into the play. Part of this savagery can also be seen as a ritualistic attempt to cleanse all participants and to halt the cycle of violence and revenge. In her book *Shakespeare’s Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*, Naomi Conn Liebler is the first to explore the possibility that the cannibalism in *Titus Andronicus* is no mere attempt at evocating horror and repulsion, but instead serves a ritual purpose. A purpose deeply intertwined with that of Girard’s Scapegoat. She states that “From the beginning of his career, Shakespeare understood the resonances of ritualistic action in performance.”

III.4. Omophagia in Shakespeare’s England

In later stages of this chapter, I will discuss how cannibalism, and its ritualized uses, were common topoi in ancient mythology. Even though this subject was addressed by, for instance, Seneca, it was still regarded as belonging to a sphere which was strongly taboo, and the consummation of human flesh – a sin which for instance the Maenads that devoured Orpheus in the myth of *Orpheus and Euridice* had indulged themselves with - was believed to be one of the strongest possible offenses.

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32 Kott, J., The Eating Of The Gods, p.200

In the eons to come however, this attitude changed drastically. More specifically, it transformed – or rather evolved into - a more ambivalent approach to cannibalism. Strikingly, Omophagia was very much present in Shakespeare’s England. As Dawson argues, the consummation of human remains or parts had been present since the start of the 12th century, and would continue to play a relatively prominent role in the treatment of diseases up to the 18th century. According to Louise Noble, Shakespeare’s time had an abundance of references in pharmacopoeia – which were books containing directions on how to prepare or concoct medicines – to mummies. The ingestion of ancient Egyptian mummies was seen as having beneficial effects for the consumer, but bodily excretions were also thought to have certain therapeutic uses: blood, bone, fat, etc. However, Egyptian mummies were expensive, and hard to come by for the obvious reasons, and the ingenious nature of man found corpses where they were readily available. Mummies crafted in the manner of the Jews, were those mummies whose base ingredient was far less ancient than their Egyptian models. Slaves or criminals who had been sentenced to death and had met a violent demise – for it was believed those corpses provided the best mummies – were turned into facsimiles of their Egyptian paradigms. Ultimately, the transition from a perfectly healthy body to a curative elixir or potion was a smooth path.

Noble states that this discourse of showing how to use – certain – human parts as a panacea for all sorts of injuries and ailments “constitutes a socially sanctioned form of cannibalism, where the human body is literally eaten for pharmacological purposes – a practice which gave rise to a deep cultural ambivalence” Ambivalence, because cannibalism has long been associated with those cultures we, as ‘civilized’ Europeans preferred to distance ourselves from: the ambiguous and ‘barbaric’ other: “The human body in Titus Andronicus – abused, sacrificed, dismembered, and finally eaten – mediates the disturbing contiguity between the European medical consumption of human corpses and the barbaric eating of human flesh”

34 Dawson, Warren R., Mummy as Drug, Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, Volume 21 (1927), p.34-39
36 Noble, L, “And Make Two Pasties of Your Shameful Heads” : Medicinal Cannibalism and Healing the Body Politic in Titus Andronicus, English Literary History 70 (2003), p.678
37 Noble, L, “And Make Two Pasties of Your Shameful Heads” : Medicinal Cannibalism and Healing the Body Politic in Titus Andronicus, English Literary History 70 (2003), p.688
In this context Cannibalism can no longer be considered to be solely barbaric, as it is committed by Europeans as well.

It is worth noting that it is exactly this ambivalence that is also addressed in *Titus Andronicus*, for something similar takes place here. After the taboo act of *Omophagia* unwittingly committed by Tamora, a large part of the play’s characters, both antagonists and protagonists, meet their swift and brutal deaths – obviously they would make for excellent mummies. However, as mentioned above, this feeding of her own sons to Tamora, is not solely an act of revenge of Titus. Let us not forget Titus offered the meal to all the guests, his own family included. This serves as yet another indication that Titus wanted to accomplish something more than mere revenge with the killing of the sons of his adversary. By feeding the remains of Chiron and Demetrius to everyone, Titus attempts to subject all the guests to his ritual.

Of course, it can be argued that Titus is also intent on inflicting similar harm upon Tamora as the pain he went through. However, at the same time Titus is attempting to recreate Rome, to end the cycle of violence by attempting to break with it by committing this act of regression. The cannibalism taking place here transgresses its usual connotations of belonging only to the *other*, of being nothing more but a mere barbaric custom. Instead, very much like the mummy being consumed to attain a certain healing effect the act Titus performs is an attempt to cleanse Roman society of its ailments and to heal the body politic, an attempt to start over again, Titus’ personal Ragnarok.

Furthermore when Titus has both Chiron and Demetrius hanging upside down, he describes to Lavinia in detail how he intends to concoct that which is both a tool in his personal vendetta with the Goth queen and medicine for the body politic: “Receive the blood: and when that they are dead, let me go grind their bones to powder small, and with his hateful liquor temper it; and in that paste let their vile heads be bak’d”\(^\text{38}\). According to Noble, Shakespeare attempts to parody a contemporary, real life practice as blood, bone and skull, components in Titus’ cure for Rome, are also exactly those ingredients which people thought were able to cure diseases of the head, like epilepsy.

\(^{38}\) Shakespeare, W., *Titus Andronicus*, Act 5, Scene 2, 198-201
III.5. Interludium: Parallels With Ancient Literature

III.5.1. Cannibalism: Born out of Ancient Example

In her work Liebler\(^{39}\) argues *Titus Andronicus* can – and should - be seen as a continuation of the classic mythic base of infanticide and incest, of which the prime examples are well known. First of all there is the story of Tantalus who fed his own son Pelops to the Gods to find out if they were really omniscient, and subsequently was sent to Tartarus for his hideous crimes. Furthermore there is also the Ovidian myth about Tereus, Procne, and Philomela which Ovid wrote about in his *Metamorphoses* and where Procne kills her own child Ithys and serves it to Tereus, the story’s prime antagonist.

It has to be noted however, that Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* attempts to supersede its ancient models in their cruelty. Tantalus’ son is only eaten by Demeter, while the other gods discover Tantalus’ treachery and deception before they touch the prepared leftovers of Pelops. In *Titus Andronicus*, the remnants of Chiron and Demetrius are feasted upon by an entire company: Titus’ family, prominent leaders of Lucius’ Goth army, Tamora, etc. And whereas in the *Metamorphoses* only Procne’s tongue is cut out to prevent her from divulging her assailant’s name, Shakespeare lets Chiron and Demetrius take much more cruel measures to prevent Lavinia from disclosing their names: her tongue is cut out, and her hands are hewn off. The reasoning behind this is not clear cut, but Shakespeare critics have come up with a number of plausible explanations. According to Eugene Waith, there are five possible main motives for this exaggerated cruelty. As he states in *The Oxford Shakespeare – Titus Andronicus*\(^ {40}\). First of all, Shakespeare lived in a time in which there was tradition of bloody incidents on stage. Secondly, Waith assumes that one of Shakespeare’s incentives was merely to surpass and outclass his contemporary competitors as well as his classical examples Seneca and Ovid. A third justification of the abundance of gore in the play appears to be related to the mentality of an Elizabethan audience, as we stated earlier.

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According to Waith, “The implication seems to be that Shakespeare, knowing what kind of audience he would have in the public theatre, catered to the crudity of their taste.” More importantly however, he also states that “there is no longer any good reason to assume that the unlettered groundling dominated the audience of the public theatre” This view of an audience which is clearly more diverse and educated than one would have imagined, is also supported by Ann Jennalie Cook, who is convinced that “the social and economic realities of Renaissance London decreed an audience more privileged than plebeian” Therefore, Waith considers this last explanation to be the most plausible one: Shakespeare would merely have acknowledged the importance of the convention of cruelty his audience used to delight in, and at the same time would have turned this violence on stage into something which could be used as a means to sustain and support his new form of tragedy. The cruelty employed in this play thus becomes more than mere ‘catering to the crudity’ of the taste of spectators but should be considered instead a vital part of Shakespeare’s experimental play. Its artistic and dramatic values surpass its gratuitous nature. When mingled with the occasional comical scenes in Titus Andronicus, it “represents the political and moral degeneration of Rome when Saturninus becomes emperor.” Additionally, it is Shakespeare’s merit that in a world divided into black and white (for instance, Catholics and protestants, white people and colored people, etc.) he attempted to create a grey zone. According to Wood, Shakespeare possessed an instinctive feeling for the complexity of history and humanity in which good and evil existed on both sides of a conflict. A space in which protagonists also bore negative traits and fatal flaws, and in which even evildoers possessed some valued human qualities like for instance empathy.

III.5.2. The Aeneid as Ritual Text

Whilst I have attempted to explain and elaborate at length on the reason, motives and consequences of Titus’ actions, there still remains a lot to be said on Titus’ modus operandi. This once honorable and decorated commander of the Roman army commits heinous crimes in order to save his beloved city and family. However random these crimes may seem,

44 Waith, Eugene M., The Oxford Shakespeare – Titus Andronicus, p. 69
according to Danielle A. St. Hilaire, his (apparent) madness has not caused him to deviate from his ancient example. For when his brother Marcus describes him as “Chosen Andronicus, surname Pius”\(^{46}\), this epithet is not given to him without reason. The very same adjective was used to describe Aeneas, founding father of Rome, who, in *Titus Andronicus*, fulfills the role of mythical example to which Titus mirrors his own behavior. Hilaire argues that, through rigidly following the Aeneid as his model for justice, Titus chooses – out of the few available to him - those options that are the most appropriate, the most correct.

When about to execute the sacrificial scapegoat Alarbus to placate the spirits of the 22 sons he lost in battle (in the Renaissance it was a belief commonly held that the spirits of the deceased needed to be appeased), Tamora pleads for her son’s life in a way strikingly similar to Turnus in the Aeneid, who, after having murdered Aeneas’s surrogate son Pallas, and having been vanquished in his duel with Aeneas, also resorts to beseeching his victor for his life. Both implore their conqueror to have pity and Tamora seeks to save the life of her son Alarbus, resembling Turnus in asserting there is no reason to continue to fight now that they are beaten. Both are rejected in a similar cold and cruel manner. However, it is worth noting Aneas’ answer to Turnus appears much more vengeful and bitter than Titus’ reply to Tamora: “Shall you, dressed in the spoils of one of mine, be wrested from me? Pallas, with this wound, Pallas sacrifices you and exacts his due from your sinful blood”\(^{47}\) is a statement much more spiteful and vindictive than:

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Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld
Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain,
Religiously they ask a sacrifice.
To this your son is marked, and die he must,
T’appease their groaning shadows that are gone.\(^{48}\)
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One cannot avoid thinking Aeneas is led by a more powerful motive than just wanting to bring justice to this criminal. He has not succeeded in liberating himself from his personal vendetta with this already defeated man, whereas Titus appears to be more rational and pragmatic. However, Hilaire argues that Titus’ sacrifice of Alarbus is rendered meaningless as

\(^{46}\) Shakespeare, W., *Titus Andronicus*, Act 1, Scene 1, 21
\(^{47}\) Vergilius, Publius M., *Aeneid*, Book 12, 947-949
\(^{48}\) Shakespeare, W., *Titus Andronicus*, Act 1, Scene 1, 124-129
the Goths and their Queen are incapable of fully grasping the significance of the sacrifice as they are unfamiliar with the Aeneid (it is true that throughout the play, both Chiron and Demetrius quote Vergil, and pretend to recognize some of the verses he wrote, but their quotes and interpretations of the Latin verses are, as is known, incorrect and faulty).

After the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, Titus – almost in desperation – turns to his library as a resort where he might find solace or even succor from the vicious attacks made on his family: "Lavinia, go with me: I’ll to thy closet; and go read with thee sad stories, chanced in the times of old. Come, boy, and go with me: thy sight is young, and thou shalt read, when mine begins to dazzle". From this sanctuary, Titus attempts to make sense of the chaos that surrounds him. His recourse to the text and the act of reading is also shown when he utters the following verses:

Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought.  
In thy dumb action will I be as perfect  
As begging hermits in their holy prayers.  
Thou shalt no sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,  
Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,  
But I of these will wrest an alphabet  
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.

Again, it is made apparent how much significance Titus attributes to the correct reading of texts. It can be argued here that Lavinia herself, after her rape and mutilation, is transformed into some sort of text, which has to be read in order to be fully understood. In the scene quoted above, Titus appears to grasp the implication of Lavinia being turned into a deformed and speechless object: much similar to a text, she has to be studied and decoded. Hilaire describes this process of deciphering Lavinia and her mysterious signs by Titus as:

An important return to the crucial act of reading and recognition, reaffirming his commitment to textual integrity by promising to find the meaning hidden in the broken, inscrutable text before him.

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Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 3, Scene 2, 81-85  
Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 3, Scene 2, 39-45  
Hilaire, Danielle A. St., Allusion and Sacrifice in Titus Andronicus, Studies in English Literature 49 (2009), p. 322
The moment Lavinia is imbued with this function as text and Titus attempts to decode her, it is vital to remember that Lavinia is also a representation of the body politic. Raped and mutilated by Goths, she strongly resembles the dire situation the city itself has devolved into.

With Titus returning to his library and vowing to learn how to read Lavinia, a new episode of the cycle of vengeance has begun. The return to the text concretely implies that Titus will be relying more closely on the action and responses of the founding father of Rome to external threats. Whereas the gruesome actions of the Goths are rather chaotic and spontaneous, Titus’ revenge will be cunningly planned and executed. For instance, the murder of Lavinia and Bassianus, to whom she was betrothed, takes place in a killing frenzy which the Goth brothers enter when Tamora – anxious for being caught courting the black-souled Moor - claims that:

They told me, they would bind me here
Unto the body of a dismal yew,
And leave me to this miserable death:
And then they call’d me foul adulteress,
Lascivious Goth, and all the bitterest terms...

Both Chiron and Demetrius enter a berserker rage when they hear these brazen lies, and whilst their original plan was to merely rape Lavinia (“She is a woman, therefore may be woo’d; she is a woman, therefore may be won; she is Lavinia, therefore must be lov’d”) they now resolve to disfiguring and maiming her and slaughtering her fiancée. Should Lavinia and Bassianus have decided to take the scenic route of the forest, things might not have turned out so unfortunate for the both of them.

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52 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 2, Scene 3, 106-110
53 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 2, Scene 1, 83-85
However, it must be noted that not all of the antagonists are as disorganized as Chiron and Demetrius or Tamora. Aaron is the only one who manages to aptly read and understand the quotes and references to the Aeneid, and the murders he commits are craftily planned, much like Titus, which is clearly demonstrated by Aaron who, at the start of Scene 3 of Act 2 imparts his malicious plan to the audience in a soliloquy:

He that had wit, would think that I had none,
To bury so much gold under a tree,
And never after to inherit it.
Let him that thinks of me so abjectly
Know that this gold must coin a stratagem,
Which, cunningly effected, will beget
A very excellent piece of villainy.\textsuperscript{54}

Titus, strongly opposite to the Goths, yet much like Aaron, leaves nothing to coincidence. He cunningly manipulates his foes and uses his apparent madness to misguide those, who already think themselves triumphant over him: “I know them all, though they suppose me mad, and will o’erreach them in their own devices, a pair of cursed hell-hounds and their dam”\textsuperscript{55}. Additionally, a the third scene, where everyone – protagonist and antagonist alike – is invited at Titus’ table, Titus again plays out his role of rambling madman. The contrivance he conceives is a clever machination which at first reaffirms the antagonist’s convictions of his raving madness when he slays his own daughter in front of their eyes dressed in the attire of a cook: upon witnessing these events, a petrified Saturnine exclaims “What hast thou done, unnatural and unkind?”\textsuperscript{56}

Following this, Saturnine is tricked into approving the tale of Titus Livy about a similar subject – where Virginius cuts off his daughter’s head rather than let her endure any more suffering at the hands of her violator, and in order to prevent her from being raped (it might be worth noting that both Saturnine and Titus fail to grasp the fact that in the original story, Verginia was not raped but killed by her father who feared such thing was bound to happen, and are convinced her situation is the exact mirror image of the quagmire Lavinia finds

\textsuperscript{54} Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 2, Scene 3, 1-7
\textsuperscript{55} Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 5, Scene 2, 142-144
\textsuperscript{56} Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 5, Scene 3, 48
herself in). By approving this tale, Saturnine explicitly – yet unknowingly – endorses Titus’ behavior and therefore seals the fate of Tamora, and, arguably, himself.

For even while one can easily and rightfully accuse Saturnine of being a power mongering megalomaniac who appears fully prepared to subjugate any opposition and conquer the throne of Rome (“Romans, do me right. Patricians, draw your swords, and sheathe them not, till Saturninus be Rome’s emperor”\textsuperscript{57}), it remains unclear whether he actively partakes in the plotting and executing the Goths initiate.

If we recognize Titus as someone who ingeniously constructed his persona in such a way that it was misconstrued by Goths and Romans alike, and meticulously plotted his revenge, one might wonder why he himself became a victim of this thoroughly planned settling of scores. Hilaire argues that:

\begin{quote}
“Titus, himself a text damaged beyond repair and therefore incompatible with a complete Roman \textit{corpus}, must give himself up as victim by murdering his enemy in an act of impious rage, thereby completing his role as Aeneas and quite literally putting an end to Revenge.”\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Whilst I do concur with Hilaire on the point of Titus being an irreparable text himself and her argument that Titus truly believes that the events taking place at the banquet will put an end to revenge, I do not believe in the actual end of revenge itself. As I attempted to demonstrate in the paragraphs above, much of the quintessential value of the play lies exactly in the saddening verity that answering violence with violence will never go unpunished but rather tends to deteriorate the situation, and tends to develop into a downward spiral of escalating retaliatory aggression. At the end of the play, the grave punishments Aaron and Tamora’s corpse are to undergo, serve as a vivid reminder that Revenge has not ceased to exist after the gruesome events that took place during the banquet.

\textsuperscript{57} Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 140-142
\textsuperscript{58} Hilaire, Danielle A. St., Allusion and Sacrifice in Titus Andronicus, \textit{Studies in English Literature} 49 (2009), p. 325
As a conclusion of this section, I would like to emphasize that it is vital to point out that Titus rigidly believes that the ghastly acts he commits will serve Rome in an attempt to restore this city to her former glory. He inflexibly adheres to these rituals which he believes will save his beloved city, and restore it to her former glory, and fails to realize that his rituals have become hollowed out, lost their meaning as a number of both protagonists and antagonists failed to interpret them correctly. In his adhering to these rituals, Titus does not act without precedent.

For his deeds are not just mere spontaneous – yet grisly - deeds, but quite desperate attempts to mirror Aeneas’s acts, to reenact them in order to achieve a similar goal. Pius Aeneas with his last impious act – for he murdered a defeated, unarmed man who was pleading for his life – achieves what he wished for, the end of his journey and the settling down in the place which nowadays is known as Italy, the founding of Rome. The employment of a vicious deed, unnatural to Aeneas who had been given the epithet Pius for good reasons, thus functions as intended, and does stop the cycle of vengeance.

I would thus like to state that this close reading and reenacting of ancient texts (His behavior mirrors that of Aeneas in Aeneid, but also draws inspiration from other instances, e.g. Livy’s story about Verginia) Titus commits himself to, does achieve its goal on the level of personal revenge. The Goths Demetrius, Chiron and the ravenous tiger Tamora herself all meet their maker at the hands of Titus, and do so in quite bloody and creative ways. However, the higher purpose of this retaliatory violence is not accomplished. The cycle of vengeance is not stopped as the Romans themselves have not been cleansed of their vindictive feelings towards ‘the other’, but rather have remained unchanged by Titus’ attempt – and sacrifice – to restore order. This is exemplified by Lucius, who, after having been crowned emperor, still sees reason to continue his vendetta with the Goths: he denies Tamora’s corpse a proper burial and orders Aaron’s death sentence to be particularly cruel.

Furthermore, the Goths are not purged from the city: while the main antagonists have been disposed of, an entire Goth army finds itself inside the city walls, the legions which helped Lucius usurp the throne. The heterogeneity of the city has only increased. This might serve as a confirmation of the play’s implicit statement that the line between Roman and Goth/Barbaric behavior and culture has begun to fade at the start of the play, and has
almost completely vanished in the end. For in the end, it is no longer Romans who vie for control over the city with Goths, but Goths and Romans fighting side by side, both as protagonists and antagonists.

It must be noted that not the entirety of the antagonists is as disorganized as Chiron and Demetrius. Aaron is the only one who manages to aptly read and understand the quotes and references to the Aeneid, and one could argue that the murders he plots are meant to undermine that which Titus so desperately tries to achieve with the performing of his rituals. After all, it is he who incites Demetrius and Chiron to rape and mutilate Lavinia. A murder which painfully shows how void of meaning the rituals Titus adheres to have become. At this point, Titus should have realized that his rituals had inspired nothing but great wrath within the prominent antagonists of the play. However, he does not realize this and this failing to realize of Titus gives the play great tragic quality.

III.6. Cyclical Nature of History
III.6.1. Initiation of the Cycle
Tamora, Aaron, and by extension the entirety of the barbaric Goths, can and should be seen as an external threat to the more or less homogeneous empire of Rome, and scapegoats par excellence. Much to our surprise however, we find in Tamora’s soliloquy quoted some paragraphs above an explicit reference to the real wrongdoer in the play. For even while Tamora serves as an avenging nemesis and Aaron dutifully and with sheer delight carries out the role of architect of a cunning plan which should lead to the downfall of an empire, they are not the source, they did not plant the seed of vengeance in Rome’s society. The point of origin, it can be argued, is twofold. A first instigator is Titus, convinced follower of the Lex Talionis principle. In accordance with the quotation of Liebler mentioned above, I believe Titus is adamant in his conviction that Rome is still governed by one encompassing ideology, and acts accordingly. This explanation elucidates why Titus supports Saturnine running for emperor, fearing that should he run for office, the empire would be torn apart by the competition between the two would-be emperors. That this anguish of Titus is not without reason is shown by Saturnine’s vitriolic plea to win the people’s heart: “Romans, do me right. Patricians, draw your swords, and sheathe them not till Saturninus be Rome’s
Emperor. Andronicus, would thou wert shipp’d to hell rather than rob me of the people’s heart”59.

I firmly believe that this very same motive of trying to preserve this ideology which glues the empire together is the main reason which leads Lucius and Titus to exact a sacrifice for the multitude of sons that died a hero’s death in their continuing war with the Goths. Influenced by Lucius’ request of an offer, Titus agrees to turn Alarbus, Tamora’s eldest son and “the noblest that survives”60 into a sacrificial Pharmakos. He remains deaf to the emotional pleas of Tamora, and has her son executed. For both Titus and Lucius, the sacrifice of Alarbus to the Gods of Rome is a way of breaking even with the Goths that slew so many of Titus’ sons.

It is worth emphasizing here that not the Goths are responsible for much of the anarchy and violence which ensues after the slaying of Alarbus, but Titus and Lucius. Furthermore, the internal unrest and dispute within Rome have created a situation which gives rise to the opportunity of Tamora and Aaron to further destabilize this city. In a unified Rome, one could argue, these antagonists could never have acted as such a powerful catalyst of violence.

Moreover, it is my opinion that through subjecting the Goths to these rituals, ceremonies and laws of Rome, Titus and Lucius desperately attempt to conserve Rome’s cultural definition and ideology. However, their efforts prove futile when Saturnine decides to wed Tamora, queen of the Goths. With this tactical move, Saturnine effectively and officially integrates part of the Goths into Roman society.

However, that which is considered by Titus and Lucius as being merely a rite, the taking of an eye for an eye, a son for a legion of sons, appears as being nothing less but murder to the Goths. I would therefore like to state that Titus can arguably be considered one of the prime instigators, the one whose actions started the downward spiral of bloody vengeance. While the Goths were utterly defeated, with their queen and her surviving sons brought before Rome’s emperor during a celebratory ceremony, it is Titus who chooses to disrupt the peace,

59 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 140-143
60 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 2, 103
by following Lucius’ advice and having Alarbus offered to the Gods, with his rigid application of Roman laws. Furthermore, throughout the play, Titus can really be seen as a symbol of Rome. Whereas Lavinia, according to Tricomi \(^{61}\), represents the city as such, Pius Andronicus – the *Epitheton Ornans* given to him by Shakespeare, and an explicit reference to Pius Aeneas – is the embodiment of Roman mentality: poor political judgment and a cruel nature accompanied by a noble and patriotic spirit. In other words, Rome ready to sink into barbarism, yet desperately trying to halt this degradation.

The second, and foremost, agitator who ruptures the peace is Lucius. For it is him who, after hearing Titus lament the fate of his fallen sons, proposes – out of the blue – to sacrifice one of the captive and defenseless Goths in return: “Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, that we may hew his limbs, and on a pile *ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh, before this earthy prison of their bones; that so the shadows be not unappeas’d.”\(^{62}\) While Titus can certainly be seen as the sword with which this vengeance is enacted, Lucius is most certainly the brain behind the operation. However, there are more differences to be found between these two main inciters in *Titus Andronicus*.

During the opening scenes of the play, Titus and Lucius brutally disrupt a peaceful ceremonial ritual with their demand of a sacrifice and the execution of Alarbus, Tamora’s eldest son. This interruption of a Roman ceremony by Roman subjects should be considered a ritual neglect and violation, for which the transgressors will be brutally punished, according to ancient examples. The severing of limbs of Alarbus, and, in the scenes to follow, of Titus and his family members serves to indicate that a ritual was interrupted and that this disturbance has caused the downward spiral of bloody vengeance. According to Liebler, Alarbus’ and Titus’ respective “lopp’d” limbs and Martius’ and Quintus’ severed heads all separately and collectively represent fragments of a body of ritual practice that in another time and place would have signaled the start of a healing rite. This play’s deployment of *disjecta membra* demonstrates the nihilistic impact of a ritual gone awry. Consequently, the promised end, the scattered corn knit into one mutual sheaf, is set up as an impossibility. There is no renewal, none is possible, for a Rome


\(^{62}\) Shakespeare, W., *Titus Andronicus*, Act 1, Scene 2, 33-38
so torn apart and so far from the proper management of its foundational ritual practices.\textsuperscript{63}

III.6.2. End of the Cycle?
As exemplified by the archetypical mythic stories \textit{Titus Andronicus} has ties with, transgression of rituals or ceremonies never goes without reprimand. Again we refer to the story of Tantalus, who stole nectar and ambrosia – the two elements which, according to classical tradition, made up the delightful divine meal - from the table of the Gods, after having been invited to join their meal, and carried it off to his people. This felony, and the (attempted) feeding of his own son Pelops to the Gods, resulted in him being condemned to forever endure in tantalizing agony, both thirst and famine.

In \textit{Titus Andronicus}, too, the improper management of the ritual practices – in this case the rituals and ceremonies of Rome - will eventually lead to the punishment of the transgressors. Or more precisely, one of the violators. For, whilst Titus is doomed to witness the rape and mutilation of his daughter Lavinia and the massacring of two of his remaining sons while losing both his sanity and hand in the process, Lucius escapes relatively unharmed: he maintains his mental acuity and remains unscathed. Moreover, throughout the play the character of Lucius is developed increasingly as a character with certain messianic connotations. When the situation is most dire, right after the arrival of the messenger bearing both the heads of Quintius and Martius and Titus’ own hand, it is Lucius who is exiled and burdened with the task to raise an army and exact his revenge upon the pugnacious Saturnine and his belligerent queen.

When we eventually come to learn at the end of the play that Lucius is crowned and will be succeeding Saturnine as emperor of Rome, one cannot help but wonder if the prime inciter who instigated the whole cycle of violence with fervor by demanding a sacrifice, is not escaping his fate. For every transgression, there is a consequence which the transgressor will suffer. Whilst Titus appears to have been dealt with adequately for his wrongdoing, his disruption of the rituals, Lucius is rewarded with the crown of Rome.

One could argue however, that this crown is Lucius’s real punishment, one which can be at least as cruel as the tantalizing event Titus had to endure throughout the play. For in the end it is shown that Lucius has not changed, and has remained as bloodthirsty as when he first made his appearance on the stage, demanding for one of Tamora’s sons to be killed. This is shown first when a soldier of his Goth army discovers Aaron and his illegitimate child and Lucius is not hesitant in determining what to do with the cursed – yet still innocent – offspring of Aaron and he subsequently intends to turn it into a tool with which he will attempt to break Aaron’s will: “First hang the child, that he may see it sprawl; a sight to vex the father’s soul withal.”\(^{64}\) Furthermore, when he is made emperor, his parting words to Aaron are as follows: “Set him breast-deep in earth, and famish him; there let him stand, and rave, and cry for food: if anyone relieves or pities him, for the offence he dies. This is our doom; some stay to see him fasten’d in the earth.”\(^{65}\) And even for Tamora’s corpse there is no clemency or leniency: “As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora, no funeral rite, nor man in mournful weeds, no mournful bell shall ring her burial; but throw her forth to beast and birds of prey. Her life was beast-like, and devoid of pity, and, being so, shall have like want of pity.”\(^{66}\) He who accuses Tamora of having a nature void of all pity, does not express any commiseration towards the defenseless people whose fate lies in his hands either.

It is with these last acts of cruelty which lack empathy and understanding - a fault in both Titus’ and Lucius’ character – that the play ends. I would like to argue that Shakespeare, who portrays Lucius here as a rather spiteful, and not as a just and pure character purposefully, intends to show his audience with these acts that the play really ends where it began. At the end, nothing has changed: the emperor is dead, long live the new tyrant. To stress the cyclical nature of the play, Shakespeare ends with these four lines: “See justice done on Aaron, that damn’d Moor, by whom our heavy haps had their beginning: then, afterwards, to order well the state, that like events may ne’er it ruinate.”\(^{67}\) These rather cynical words are meant to make the audience ruminate upon the futility of Lucius’ and Titus’ actions undertaken to preserve the state of Rome. For at the end, it is made crystal-clear that Goth influence has penetrated up to the highest echelons of Roman

\(^{64}\) Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 5, Scene 1, 51-52
\(^{65}\) Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 5, Scene 3, 179-183
\(^{66}\) Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 5, Scene 3, 195-200
\(^{67}\) Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 5, Scene 3, 200-204
society, despite their best efforts. Lucius last command is not to sacrifice Aaron or to burn
Tamora’s corpse as incense for the Gods. Rather, it is a personal vengeance Lucius seeks.
Vengeance which smells of deep hatred, barbarity and savagery, exactly the sort
characteristics normally attributed to Goths.

However, in more contemporary productions, both on stage and on screen, there has been a
great variety in how directors chose to adapt the end of the Shakespearian original. While
some directors opted to stay true to the original text, others clearly deviated from their
Shakespearian example and turned the entire scene upside down. Instead of lamenting the
tragedy of the eternal cycle of violence, their movie or play ends with in a rather hopeful
tone. Evidently, this necessitates a new approach to the violence in this adapted movie or
play, as the ending scenes do not condemn violence as greatly as the Shakespearian original.
I will be elaborating on this fascinating matter later on in this work, when I cover a number
of contemporary productions.
IV. A CONTEMPORARY TITUS

IV.1. The Influence of Intertextuality

After having attempted to analyze and describe how Shakespeare’s contemporaries experienced cannibalism, I believe it is worth investigating how our contemporaries, viz. audiences of the 21st century, respond to the abundance of violence in *Titus Andronicus*, and more specifically, how this modern-day public deals with cannibalistic action in this play.

However, when one experiences a reworking or a remodeling of the work of a canonical author whose oeuvre is well known by many, it is common to be influenced by earlier performances of the material, or even the original text itself. To clarify this, a quote of Frederic Jameson is very appropriate. According to him, we:

“...never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read: we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretative traditions.”

Evidently, this is also the case when observing contemporary movie adaptations or plays which are based on Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. When comparing these contemporary refashioned Shakespearian plays, one needs to keep in mind that the judgment and appreciation of the audience will be heavily influenced by earlier readings or viewings of this material. Furthermore, as Jameson stated in his quote above, the very interpretation of the play or movie is strongly influenced by and based on interpretations of previous material. More concretely, when evaluating or commenting on an adaptation, one will often have a tendency of referring to the original, or other adaptations in order to create a framework or scheme for interpretation. One might say that we never look at something without possessing preconceived notions about it. We see what we see but not what there is. And as soon as the information comes in, we try to understand what we see by activating our knowledge of the world. Even when we cannot fit our observations in our schemes of

knowledge, we try the best we can to make them fit. In order to preserve the intactness of the schemes.69

In this process of evaluation and adaptation, it is quite obvious that a lot of attention will be given to exactly those passages or scenes which have undergone a strong modification. These modifications will also strongly affect the audience, in this way that one will be taken aback and startled at a sudden and unexpected turn of events. I believe directors are aware of this, and actively incite surprise as a means to force the audience to think about the ‘why’ of this change.

In what follows, I will subject two contemporary plays and a modern-day movie adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* to a comparison in which I will put emphasis on exactly those scenes or props that were altered, left out, or inserted. To this end, I attended two performances of *Titus Andronicus* by two different companies. Furthermore, in order to have a general impression of how writers of imitations of *Titus Andronicus* represent this violence in their art, I watched and studied certain aspects of Julie Taymor’s movie *Titus*.70

A first thing worth noting is that, in the 21st century, cannibalism is a topic still very much alive in popular culture. In a society and world growing more and more diverse, cannibalism is still considered one of the few remaining taboo subjects of this century. Horror movies gratefully (ab)use this topic to evoke harrowing scenes which only serve one purpose: to attempt to shock audiences which have grown accustomed to being exposed to an abundance of violence readily available through our culture in which mass media plays a prominent role.

However, in theatre and other higher arts, which are not about shocking an audience, but about moving it, forcing it to think about the matters presented to them, we see a tendency strongly different from that which thrives among producers of horror movies. Here cannibalism and violence serve a greater goal or purpose than shocking the audience.

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69 For example: I would become totally confused when at this very moment in time and space a blue creature with 8 arms would enter my room. However, should my religion have taught me this is in fact the avatar of a goddess, I would react amazed but maybe less confused. I could think “finally, I’m the chosen”. Additionally, since I read or heard stories and saw films about extraterrestrials, the possibility that I will look at this creature as an ET also exists and in fact is more probably. This being has to fit in one or another scheme, so that it becomes understandable, even in its incomprehensibility.

From what I observed during the two performances I attended, I would like to argue that the producers of the two plays I attended struggled in displaying the excessive violence – and by extension, the use of cannibalism – as being cold, rigid behavior. Instead, as I will go on to demonstrate, both opted to insert comical connotations in order to achieve laughter and enjoyment of the audience, rather than instilling fear or abhorrence.

IV.2. Titus through modern theatrical eyes

The first performance I attended took place at the 28th of March 2009 in the Museumtheater Sint-Niklaas, was performed by the Royal Acting Society Sint-Genesius, and bore the title Titus. In this play, two remarkable adaptations of the original Shakespearian version deserve closer attention.

First of all, the scene portraying act III of the original play in which Aaron plots on robbing Titus of his hand with his malicious scheme, and attempts to chop off Titus’ his hand when our flawed hero asks him to do so, has a twist to it as well. In a manner much similar to the scene described in the paragraph above, this excessive violence is turned into something with comical allure when Aaron unsuccessfully – and with growing frustration – attempts several times to hew off Titus’ hand. When this vile deed eventually succeeds, after numerous desperate attempts, the audience bursts out in laughter.

Secondly, violence, and specifically its gruesome portrayal, is even further impeded through the cunning use of stage props. No swords are drawn, no guns are slung. Instead, the director opted for buckets filled with a red fluid. A stage prop so strangely out of place that it draws the attention to itself and the acts it is involved with. In the play, people meet their maker by having someone pull the handle of a bucket while aiming this eccentric weapon at them, and then having the bucket placed over their head, with red fluid dripping out. Original to say the least. The deeper meaning of the replacement of common weapons by buckets soon becomes clear, when one observes the reaction of the crowd. puzzled and at a complete loss at first, their response soon turns into laughter and general amusement, as throughout the play more and more people find their end when faced with the menacing bucket. Additionally, every gruesome act which takes place in the play, is visualized on a video screen found above the stage. Instead of having actors perform rape, mutilation or
other gruesome acts of aggression, the director chose to have these scenes acted out by stick figures, which made the cruelty in the play even more banal and distant.

The second performance I attended took place on the 10th of December 2009 in the Bourlaschouwburg in Antwerp, was titled Titus Andronicus – Comedy of the Blood and was performed by Olympique Dramatique, in cooperation with a number of other acting companies. The subtitle was indicative of the interpretation of the director of this adaptation.

Before this play even started, the audience was already being prepared for the violence and gore the subtitle Comedy of the Blood promised. Actors were running on and off the stage, generally dressed in little more than combat boots and sleeveless shirts, conducting stretching exercises as alienating and violent metal music was played. The prominence of sleeveless shirts was also present in the performance of Royal Acting Society Sint-Genesius, and seems to be a symbolizing of the violence people who wear this type of clothing (also known as ‘wife beaters’ in American vernacular) are associated with. As the play progresses, it soon becomes clear that here too, the director made certain significant changes to the original Shakespearian text.

A first scene to get heavily modified is the scene in Act II in which Bassianus is murdered, and Lavinia – in the original Shakespearian play the latter took place off stage – raped. In an attempt to reconnoiter the boundaries of violence and taboo, the company also chose to have Bassianus’ corpse raped in an exceedingly brutal manner. Strikingly, this twist to the rape scene does not abhor the audience, but evokes laughter, as the twisted and ludicrous manner in which it is presented transforms the entire scene from something truly horrendous into something so grotesque that becomes subject to laughter and amusement.

A second notable adaptation takes place in Scene III of Act IV. In the original play, this appeared as a highly symbolical scene, where the protagonists, led by a seemingly mad Titus, shoot arrows at the sky, from which some land in the vicinity of the palace. In the performance of Olympique Dramatique, instead of shooting arrows at the skies, the protagonists gather a great variety of objects – varying from bundles of wet newspaper to plastic buckets, vegetables and even boots. As mentioned before, this scene clearly supports
my statement that violence, even ritualized violence with a symbolical goal, is often ridiculed in contemporary imitations.

A third and last scene which deserves our attention takes place shortly after Titus has Lucius deliver a bundle of arms to Aaron and the two Goth brothers. When the Tamora’s maid enters with Aaron’s newborn and unlawful child, Aaron decides to have her murdered in an attempt to silence anyone who witnessed the illegitimate birth and save his child from a horrible and untimely demise by the hands of the maid. In the original play, the silencing of the maid in Act IV, Scene II is acted out rather briefly. Aaron starts with a prevaricating line which is supposed to reassure the nurse she has no reason to fear him, after which he craftily places his dagger between her scapulas:

Go to the empress; tell her this I said:       [stabbing her]
Weke, weke! – so cries a pig prepared to the spit.71

Olympique Dramatique’s version of the facts is much more laden with gore and blood. The moment Aaron decides the nurse has to die in order for his child to have a chance at surviving, he stabs her several times. When she collapses on the stage, he arises triumphant. Shortly thereafter however, the nurse – who apparently was only feigning death – quietly and stealthily attempts to leave the stage. When this is noticed by Aaron, she is dragged back to the central part of the stage, and stabbed again. This process is repeated a couple of times, to great amusement of the audience. After some time passes, however, Aaron appears to grow tired of the obligatory recurrent stabbing. He then decides to drag the nurse into a small archway, hidden from plain sight, where apparently a final violent struggle takes place. Aaron emerges victorious.

However, upon surfacing from the archways, he is carrying the nurse’s decapitated head. After ensuring that this time, she most definitely no longer belongs to the living by hitting it a number of times with his fist and effectively breaking her cranium, he proceeds to eat the contents of her skull – which is revealed to be a watermelon bearing a wig. The deviation from Shakespearian text and the transgression of boundaries of the normal and accepted, is much stronger in this scene than the ones mentioned above.

71 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 4, Scene 2, 146-147
To this day cannibalism remains very much taboo. However, the grossly exaggerated difficulties Aaron experienced in his attempts to kill the nurse, already set the tone for the entire scene. It is not supposed to shock the audience, but rather serves as a comical interlude which contrasts with the highly rhetorical and ritualized language use present throughout the play. Therefore, when Aaron appears to be enjoying the contents of the nurse’s cranium, the public is bemused at first, but soon bursts into laughter at it is revealed the actor is in fact devouring pieces of watermelon.

IV.3. Julie Taymor’s Titus

In strong contrast with the two plays I attended stands Julie Taymor’s Titus. A selected number of scenes will serve as an example to signal how great the contrast with the two plays appears to be. What we see in Taymor’s version of the play is that Taymor follows her Shakespearian model quite rigidly in an attempt to portray the violence as realistic as humanly possible.

One has little reason to feel amused when Marcus finds the ravished Lavinia (the final scene of Act II in the original play). For Taymor’s Lavinia is presented in all her ghastliness and repulsiveness. Hands cut off, replaced by bushels of twigs, and blood gulping from her mouth as she attempts to utter a few words towards her perplexed savior. This mutilated and traumatized Lavinia evokes true horror with the audience, and the highly rhetorical soliloquy (copied unaltered from the original play) Marcus engages in after witnessing his marred niece in such a deplorable state only reinforces the horror:

Alas’ a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stir’d with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath.72

A second scene worth discussing takes place after Martius and Quintius have been accused and arrested for their alleged murder of their brother Bassianus, a consequence of Aaron’s malicious scheming. In the film, very much like the play, Titus is shown as grieving father

72 Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 2, Scene 4, 22-25
utterly overpowered by merciless government apparatus. In the original play, when Lucius arrives to see his father lament his faith and the rigidity of the judicial system long after his sons have been carried off to prison and no audience remains to hear his pleas, he exclaims: “My gracious lord, no tribune hears you speak.” To this, Titus replies that:

If they did hear,  
They would not mark me; if they did mark,  
They would not pity me; yet plead I must,  
And bootless unto them.  
Therefore I tell my sorrow to the stones,  
Who, though they cannot answer my distress,  
Yet in some sort they are better than the tribunes,  
For that they will not intercept my tale.  

These lines are mimicked in the movie, when Titus cries out his sorrow to the cold stones of the road on which he lies, whilst the procession which is carrying off his sons proceeds without appearing to notice him. The humongous sorrow and tragic qualities of Titus are displayed here to their fullest extent: one solitary man desperately attempts to oppose society and its rigid and ruthless mechanics. I chose this scene because it is particularly exemplary for the intentions of the movie as a whole. Violence is never covered with a thick layer of ridicule and comical side notes or events (as was the case in the two performances I attended). Rather, Taymor chooses to unveil this violence. She opts to do this by showing the audience the horror to its fullest extent. While some truly ghoulish scenes are carried out off-stage as it were, without being vividly depicted in the movie (for instance, the rape of Lavinia), a great number of appalling events are shown in all their atrocity. Taymor purposefully choose not to turn her Titus into a black comedy. In this context, it is worth quoting Mick LaSalle, employee of the San Francisco Chronicle, the largest newspaper in California, and one of the largest in the United States. In his review of Taymor’s movie, he stated that:

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Shakespeare, W., Titus Andronicus, Act 3, Scene 1, 33-40

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There are two ways to go wrong in directing "Titus." To try to pass it off as a normal, naturalistic tragedy would be to rein it in. This is a story about dismemberment, ritual murder, rape and cannibalism. It's not a normal story. Yet to wink at it, to play "Titus" as a black comedy, would be to undermine its power.\(^{74}\)

More so than the two plays I witnessed, Taymor’s movie deals with horrifying events that serve to confront the audience, through its primary entertaining function, with violence itself. Taymor herself stated in an interview with Douglas Eby that the goal of the film she made differed greatly from other contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare. According to her,

Our entertainment industry thrives on the graphic details of murders, rapes and villainy, yet it is rare to find a film or play that not only reflects on these dark events but also turns them inside out, probing and challenging our fundamental beliefs on morality and justice.\(^{75}\)

**IV.4. The Banquet as Intertextual Reference par Excellence**

The banquet scene can be considered one of the original play’s most pivotal scenes. Not surprisingly, in both contemporary plays and Taymor’s movie, this scene also received a lot of attention. Attention in the form of receiving slight modifications to complete overhauls of the entire scene. In this chapter I will explore the intentions of the three different directors which motivate this adaptation. This investigation of ulterior motives will be done in a comparative manner, while keeping Jameson’s quote about sedimented layers of previous interpretations in mind.

The first play I attended, which was performed by the Royal Acting Society Sint-Genesius, approached Shakespeare’s cannibalistic action in an extremely innovative way. At the onset of the play, a piece of meatloaf and a microwave oven are brought on stage by Titus himself, already foreshadowing what is about to take place in the latter scenes. Without any

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\(^{75}\) Eby, D., Julie Taymor on making 'Titus' (1999) [http://talentdevelop.com/interviews/jtaymor.html](http://talentdevelop.com/interviews/jtaymor.html)
knowledge about the original play or previous adaptations, an audience would be incapable of wholly grasping the meaning of this act, as the audience would have no knowledge of the horrendous events which would take place later on in the play. However, a viewer who possesses a relatively intimate knowledge of Shakespeare’s original play, or for instance, has watched Taymor’s movie adaptation, can fully appreciate the peculiar adaptation to the scene which is made here.

During the entire play, the meatloaf remains baking in this oven. It is only when the play approaches its final scenes that an audience unfamiliar with the story comes to realize the meatloaf actually represents the meat pie baked by Titus, and has the blood and remainders of both Chiron and Demetrius as main ingredients. When Titus himself reveals the true origin of this meatloaf to the protagonists and antagonists of this story, excessive vomiting of both protagonists and antagonists ensues – a rather understandable and reasonable reflex one would say – which, however, only evokes laughter from the audience, rather than abhorrence. The atrocious act of unwitting cannibalism is turned into something comically grotesque because of this exaggerated retching.

In the second play, the version by the theatre company Olympique Dramatique, this scene is approached in a completely different way, but, as I will attempt to demonstrate, with the same goal in mind. At the end of the play, after Titus, aided by a ravished Lavinia, slits the throats of Chiron and Demetrius, this latter-day adaptation also starts to deviate from the original. In Shakespeare’s text, the act of grinding Chiron’s and Demetrius’ bones into dust, baking them into a pie and preparing the banquet is carried out off stage. Olympique Dramatique however, chooses to display this process of preparing a meal on stage, with a twist. When a colossal table is brought in, we see Titus and Lavinia run on and off with a variety of food stuffs. In the mean time, the audience witnesses Demetrius and Chiron garner themselves with all sorts of food and adornments. Covered in grapes, whipping cream and yoghurt, they lie down and wait, frozen in place, for the arrival of the dinner guests. The whole process of dressing up as an appetizing meal soon gains in comical quality as it becomes clear both actors are intent on besmearing their target with as many distasteful food combinations as they can gather. Slightly off-putting is the fact that, when the guests finally arrive and are shown to their places on the table, none of the present
protagonists and antagonists appear aware of the fact that Demetrius and Chiron are displayed on the table in front of them. The guests only start vomiting after Titus chokes Lavinia to death and reveals that the two bodies on the table belong to Chiron and Demetrius, while it was clear to the audience that no fool could have been misguided by the cover of syrup, whipping cream, grapes and yoghurt. The director seems to be suggesting here that the characters he created are simple hypocrites, blind to truth until it is literally put in front of them and unveiled. Additionally, similar to the production of the Royal Acting Society Sint-Genesius, the greatly exaggerated gagging reflexes which follow Titus’ ‘stunning’ revelation, evoke great amusement from the audience.

Contrary to the two plays, Taymor does not resolve to humor or comedy for this banquet scene. When in the ending minutes of the movie, both antagonists and protagonists find themselves gathered at a table, with Titus’ repugnant dish presented in front of them. The dish itself looks terribly distasteful, with a grey granular base structure and, seemingly insufficiently cooked, appears still red and raw at some places. This would shock an audience rather than actually entertaining it.

Taymor subsequently has Titus kill his lethargic daughter Lavinia and then continue to attempt to murder the entirety of the antagonists. Deviating from the original play, at the very moment he dies, and Lucius succeeds in killing Saturnine by piercing his throat/brain with a spoon, the scene is frozen by Taymor. We see Lucius, the arm extended, holding the spoon with which he is stabbing Saturnine who is in progress of falling backwards off his chair. Utter astonishment reigns the minds – and faces - of the characters present to witness this rather surprising turn of events. One might wonder why Taymor opted to freeze the image at exactly this point in time and space. From an artistic and aesthetic point of view one could argue that the still was made at a very opportune and stylistically refined moment, as the entire scene looks like a stylized tableau.
However, when taking a closer look at the scene in question, it soon becomes clear that Taymor had motives other than just creating a scene which is a pleasure for the eye of the beholder. First of all, the spoon with which Lucius kills Saturnine is not only a makeshift weapon, but also bears strong symbolic meaning. For a spoon can be seen as a symbol of gluttony, and subsequently, greed. While no one in the play or movie comments on Saturnine’s eating habits, Saturnine can most definitely be considered a different sort of glutton. For at the very onset of the play it is already made apparent that Saturnine is willing to sacrifice everyone and everything in order to achieve his goal of ultimate power, and that there is no such thing as having accumulated ‘enough’ power. I believe that in this scene, Taymor exposes for a final time Saturnine’s power mongering politics, his endeavor to accumulate more and more power without ever reaching satisfaction. The spoon symbolizes Saturnine’s greed, and eventually, is the weapon with which his demise is brought about.

Surprisingly, the deeper meaning of the scene does not end with the analyzing of Saturnine’s demise. This still does not solely serve to make us appreciate its aesthetic beauty or analyze the symbolic meaning of the scene. For, the moment when Taymor chooses to freeze the entire scene is during the action. Not after Lucius has lethally spoon-fed Saturnine, not when Titus executed Tamora or gets slain himself. The frozen still of this – quite literally - falling emperor, serves as a Verfremdungseffekt which "prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer."76

76 Willet, J., _Brecht on theatre: the development of an aesthetic_ (1964), p.91
Concretely, here the audience is ripped out of the action, their willing suspension of disbelief is cancelled (a formula coined by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, which was published in 1817, which suggests that “if a writer could infuse a ‘human interest and a semblance of truth’ into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative.”77) Instead, they are forced to actively think about the role violence fulfilled in this play. And while one might, at this point, still consider violence and justice to be able to coexist in one character, namely the person of Lucius, this impression does not last. While all characters are frozen, and the camera is circling around the frozen scene, Lucius suddenly comes to life, as the only one in the scene, only to draw a gun and shoot Saturnine, as if to make certain Saturnine had met his maker. It is logical to assume that when one’s brain meets a spoon, the rather violent and sudden nature of this contact ensures instantaneous death. Therefore, it can be argued that, rather than attempting to make sure Saturnine has really deceased, Lucius unleashes his anger by drawing his firearm and firing it at a corpse, after which he spits on it. An action which shows Lucius’ thirst for vengeance and unforgiving nature, rather than his unrelenting endeavor to let truth and justice prevail. On this very moment Taymor shows the audience how violence (and, tied closely to this, vengeance) succeeds in corrupting even the most pure hearted and noble of our protagonists.

**IV.5. Summary**

When comparing the two contemporary plays I witnessed, and Taymor’s movie adaptation, I noticed several different approaches to the original play arise, some of which are worth discussing in the context of this thesis.

Through the scenes I have discussed concerning both contemporary plays, it would appear that contemporary directors – and by extent, the audience as well – struggle to cope with excessive violence and cannibalism. The two plays I witnessed have – successfully – attempted to transform *Titus Andronicus* into something which is not purely about retaliation and the endless cycle of violence. It is my belief that they attempted to achieve this by infusing the original play with an abundance of comical elements and black humor. Through this infusion, the audience is moved rather than absolutely shocked and disgusted with what takes place on stage.

77 “Suspension of Disbelief”, Wikipedia, 2010
Taymor’s movie however, chooses to follow Shakespeare’s original play much more closely than the two plays I attended. Nevertheless, watching violence on screen differs greatly from watching it on stage, as I can tell from own experience. On television – and in different forms of media as well, obviously - through both fictional and non-fictional programs, movies, series, etc. the viewer has become accustomed to watching great amounts of violence and gore, which often lack any sort of moral judgment or ethics. An excellent example of this is the recent variety of series which have ‘The World’s Most Shocking...’ in their name, and show the viewer – differing from series to series – police chases, fist fights, amazing crashes, etc. What we see here is a relatively recent tendency, the exponent of an age in which television makers have acknowledged that violence sells, and even series which feature but a random selection of violence feats ‘caught on tape’ prosper. In fact this type of sensational television making strongly reminds us of the Roman Panem et Circenses. Violence with one sole purpose in popular culture: entertainment. Here, the audience itself does not experience some sort of cathartic cleansing through the watching of horror, but rather watches – or chooses to watch – out of reasons of pure blood thirst.

Taymor chooses to take another approach to television making. When creating her movie, she did not choose the easy way out and opted to turn it into either a black comedy or a natural tragedy, as mentioned above. She did not, as the directors of both plays I watched, inject so many humorous and comical scenes into the original that it became something very much different. Instead, fully aware of the fact that a contemporary audience is used to explicit and abundant violence, and even appreciates this, in some sort of dark and twisted way, she made a movie about violence, or as she herself states: “It's about violence, as opposed to being a violent movie.”

To underline violence is a phenomenon of all ages, and that it has far from disappeared from our modern day society or world, Taymor makes a peculiar adaptation of the original play. The film does not, as the original, take place in Roman times, which would have enabled the viewers to distance themselves from it, maybe even lead them to believe that, even while Roman and Elizabethan times were extremely violent, contemporary individuals have much less violent tendencies. Instead, Taymor opted to fuse two time periods together. Ancient

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Roman ruins and costumes are mixed with artifacts from the era of Mussolini. Through creating her own time period, by merging objects from different time periods anachronistically, Taymor emphasizes the universality of violence. Suddenly, the violence does not seem so far away, but more contemporary relevant. At the same time, the anachronistic representation (for instance, in the opening minutes of the movie, one witnesses a combination of army vehicles and auto’s from the era of Mussolini with characters dressed in attire one would ascribe to Roman conscripts) has an estranging and alienating effect on the audience. It serves as a distancing tool, which is cunningly used by Taymor to prevent an immersion in the movie and the actions that take place which may hamper, or even fully eliminate critical thinking of the viewers. I will elaborate on this Verfremdungseffekt later on in this work.

This employment of anachronisms as a means to make the audience reflect, rather than indulge in and enjoy the violence, is a quality which makes Taymor’s work stand in shrill contrast to modern-day mainstream movie productions. Furthermore, when comparing her film to other modern productions, it should be emphasized again that Taymor actively attempts to not only shock her audience, but also force it to reflect on the role violence plays in contemporary media – and by extension, popular culture. When confronted with a comparison of the violence in her movie with movies like Braveheart or Saving Private Ryan, Taymor emphasizes that "Because of its depth, because of its poetry and richness, and because the characters are so developed, and have such unbelievable journeys, there's no gratuitous violence." Additionally, in her interview with David Eby, she comments on the violent tendencies present in Titus. Compared to modern-day movies, she asserts that:

...there's not tons of blood. It's not as graphic as other people could have made it. It's psychologically graphic. You feel it. And then there are moments where it is highly stylized, which makes it moving, poetic, and it really inspires a depth about the act, instead of just turning you off because it's so gruesome.\(^{80}\)


\(^{80}\) Eby, D., Julie Taymor on making 'Titus' (1999) [http://talentdevelop.com/interviews/jtaymor.html](http://talentdevelop.com/interviews/jtaymor.html)
At this point, it might be interesting to draw a link between this movie and its portrayal of violence to Roman ideology and other, more commercial, contemporary productions. When referring back to the Roman *Panem et Circenses* ideology one could assert that, while in modern-day movies graphical violence is exploited as a device to cater to the taste of the viewers, Taymor’s movie attempts to look at violence from a very different angle. It needs no elaborate arguing to assert that (a number of) contemporary media fulfill a role which appears to be very much similar to what took place in the circuses, the amphitheatres and a myriad of other violent forms of entertainment: the exploitation of violence as a quality with intrinsic entertaining values.

As a concluding note on Taymor, it might be useful to compare the role she attempts to fulfill, the goal she wants to accomplish with her movie to Shakespeare’s motives for writing *Titus Andronicus*. Much like Shakespeare, Taymor’s piece of art is not primarily about shocking its audience (and arguably, not even merely about entertaining its audience). Rather, as mentioned above, both Taymor and Shakespeare were intent on making their audience reflect about violence itself.

And here lies the greatest contrast between Taymor and the two plays I attended. Also it is here that we can draw the connection between contemporary and Shakespearian notions of violence, and how people deal with them. As I have attempted to demonstrate in the paragraphs above, the directors of the two plays I attended struggled greatly with the issue of how to display these extremely violent Shakespearian scenes (whilst Taymor fully embraced the original text). Both directors resorted to comedy and humor in their endeavor to transform the play into something easily digestible for contemporary audiences. These last paragraphs however, raise one vital question. One might wonder what reason allows for Taymor to be so true to the Shakespearian ideology behind the original play, while latter-day directors of stage productions cunningly avoid the ideology by infusing the original Shakespearian play with comedy. A possible explanation for this bemusing behavior was only briefly hinted at in the paragraphs above.

Contemporary audiences are continuously brought in contact with a growing myriad of different forms of violence through television and other media. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that these media serve strongly as a distancing factor between the material
which is conveyed and the audience. A distance which, as I would like to argue, is of vital importance for violence to be able to be portrayed. As we live our lives in a cocoon, a society which – overall – protects us against the atrocities that take place in, for instance, third world countries. This dearth of violence in our own society stands in strong contrast with Roman or Elizabethan societies, in which, as I have attempted to demonstrate in previous chapters, violence was abundantly present and penetrated all aspects of everyday life. This difference in lifestyle and the fact that modern-day people are rarely ever exposed to violence in person, accounts for a different approach to Titus, and, subsequently, a different interpretation of the original play as well.

While violence is scarcely present in our society, television and other forms of media bring it closer to us. When watching brutal scenes of a movie, or an extremely graphical report of yet another suicide bombing in, say, Iraq, the true power of television as a distancing factor is shown. Put rather bluntly, one could argue that, the further away the violence appears to be in either time or space, the less involved or empathic an audience will respond to the cruelty presented to them. When watching a movie, the television as an object itself mediates the interaction between public and material presented. In this way, an artificial distance is created between both.

When attending a play, there is no such mediator present. Evidently, people are fully aware the events which develop in front of them are but a figment of someone’s imagination, a fictive series of gruesome actions. Nonetheless, from what I myself observed during the two plays I attended, the audience experiences a closer bond with the characters, and what happens on stage, than, for instance, a family would while watching Titus on screen in their living room. I would like to argue that it is be exactly this bond, this strengthened empathic connection an audience forms with the characters and events on stage, which deterred the directors of the two plays I witnessed. Rather than risk estranging or even appalling an audience with an abundance of violence which would affect an audience much more strongly than a movie could ever hope to aspire, they opted for a safe way out. No realistic tragedy, no Shakespearian horror intent on forcing an audience to reflect upon the role violence itself fulfills in society and everyday (whether it be cheering at gladiators in the local amphitheatre, watching a convicted felon suffer decapitation during an official procedure, or
gawking in awe at the newest movie with incredible action sequences and even more blood and gore than its predecessor), but – a rather black sort of - comedy.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was manifold. First of all, I attempted to demonstrate that Shakespeare did not solely implement the violence to cater to the crudity and vulgarity of the taste of his audience. Instead, violence – and by extension, ritual cannibalism - should be considered a central and vital ingredient in this particular play of Shakespeare, as this notion adds to its tragic quality. A tragic quality which can be derived from the fact that Tamora fails to understand – or accept – that the sacrifice of Alarbus is but a mere ritual rather than the outcome of a heinous revenge plot, and Titus failing to grasp the rituals he adheres so rigidly to, have become void of meaning. Additionally, it is exactly this adhering to these rituals demanding a sacrifice, which accounts for the horrors Titus commits, and perhaps even succeeds in partially explaining Titus’ eccentric and alienating – for seemingly mad – behavior.

However, this ritualistic sacrifice of a scapegoat was not an innovative model thought out by Shakespeare, but instead was very much present as a dominating factor in a legion of ancient examples on which Shakespeare strongly based the plot for his play, exemplified by the parallels I drew between Titus Andronicus and Vergil’s Aeneid. Rather than merely copying these examples however, Shakespeare chose to supersede them: whilst for instance Ovid’s Philomel only lost her tongue in the process of being raped, Shakespeare’s evildoers Chiron and Demetrius act more dire, and also hew off Lavinia’s hands, reducing what remains of her arms to bloody stumps. In superseding his ancient models, Shakespeare succeeded in creating a new form of tragedy.

Secondly, believed it was vital to situate our contemporary response to Titus Andronicus and the excessive violence the original play contains, in a historic framework. As I have demonstrated, responses and – more importantly – interpretations of a play vary throughout the ages, and in this eclectic modern-day world, even from director to director. This myriad of varying interpretations is even further muddled by the notion that, as the
quote of Frederic Jameson pointed out, an analysis or appreciation of an adaptation is strongly influenced by these “sedimented layers of previous interpretations”\(^{81}\). The contemporary multitude of interpretations and adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* goes hand in hand with an highly intensified attention for and staging of the original play, which had often been criticized of being one of the worst plays ever written by Shakespeare, and was never considered part of his canonical work. The revaluation of Shakespeare’s play began in 1955, with Peter Brook’s adaptation. However, this adaptation cut out so much of the violence and gruesomeness, that one could argue Brook had created a different kind of play, which did not fully reflect the original intentions and intended depth of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. It is only in the latter half of the 20\(^{th}\) century that directors from both stage and screen adaptations rediscovered the true Shakespearian play, in all its ghastliness and dreadfulness.

Nevertheless, this surpassing of cruelty raised the question how Shakespeare’s play succeeded in entertaining rather than appalling its Elizabethan audience. In an effort to answer this tantalizing question, I asserted that the violence in *Titus Andronicus* which can be attribute for a large part to the rigidity of the rituals Titus feels he has to enact in order to have a chance at restoring Rome to its former glory, did not shock the Elizabethan or contemporary audience as much as it did with, for instance, audiences of the mid 20\(^{th}\) century. This can be explained by an overexposure to violence which permeated Elizabethan society – for instance, the very vivid trade in *mummia* which was widespread – and contemporary society – for instance, the popularity of horror movies, which have little else to offer to their viewer than absolutely petrifying revulsion, so much that they even tend to become grotesque in their portrayal of gruesomeness.

Thirdly, I attempted to demonstrate that the cycle of violence starts with the horrendous act Titus commits, supported by Lucius. Thus, unwittingly, our protagonists set in motion a chain of events which will lead to great anarchy within Rome, and vast amounts of personal sorrow for both of them. When exploring a comparison or possible link between the alleged end of this cycle in Shakespeare’s original play, and contemporary adaptations, some striking similarities and differences were found. The most noteworthy of these being that, while the

two plays I attended followed the major plot outlines of the original, Taymor chose to end her movie in a totally different – and extremely innovative – way. Shakespeare suggested that, with Aaron’s child presumably still at large, the excessive punishment of Aaron and the unjust treatment of the corpse of the play’s antagonistic ‘ravenous tiger’\(^{82}\), the cycle of violence had not ended at all. Instead, seeds are sown which guarantee a continuation of this cycle. Taymor transforms the final scenes of her movie in such a way that the banquet scene, which is frozen in place at the moment Lucius kills Saturnine, forces the audience to think about violence. Additionally, the final scene in which Aaron is sentenced to death through starvation and Lucius makes his vengeful speech, carries a different tone. The last image of the movie is that of Young Lucius carrying Aaron’s child, and walking towards an archway enveloped in a blinding white light. Rather than suggesting the cycle is being continued, Taymor adaptations hint at the real end of the cycle of violence, and bear an implicit message of hope. This stands in strong contrast with the two plays I witnessed, which follow their Shakespearian model closely considering their structure, but rather than using ritualized violence to add a layer of meaning to the play, they chose to turn it into something grotesque. In this way, it becomes something entirely different, which does not incite an audience to reflect about, but rather serves an entertaining purpose.

What can be distilled from what was written down here, is that Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is a layered play, a piece of art which through the ages, has not grown less but more differentiated in the approach and response people have to it. Central to this is how directors chose to deal with the violence which takes up such a vital and quintessential part of the play. However, when directors like Taymor chose not to turn their back to this violence and censor it like Peter Brook was forced to do, it becomes clear that this violence is but a mere exponent of ritualistic layer. A layer so deeply embedded within the play and the traditional mythology and ancient examples it builds on, that cutting in it results in a play far less rich and innovative than what Shakespeare no doubt intended it to be.

What did Titus Andronicus to me after all? I found it remarkable that, considering I studied one of Shakespeare’s most criticized and abandoned plays, my adoration for this play grew as I saw the performances, studied the movie, read, and thought about it. The old bard of

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\(^{82}\) Shakespeare, W., *Titus Andronicus*, Act 5, Scene 3, 195
Stratford taught me a lot. The wisdom that human relations are complex and the withdrawal of thinking in absolutes of black and white. The fact that this individual was able to see much farther than most of his (and possibly even our?) contemporaries is amazing. His empathic capacities, and the willingness to step in the shoes of the opponent and have some comprehension for their point of view is astonishing. It makes the difference between violence (give the people what they want) and violence as a multi-layered phenomenon. Looking through his eyes at our society might learn us something about the aggression we nowadays face as an actual problem of our society.

On the burial of William Shakespeare, his colleague Ben Jonson spoke the eternal words, which still remain true: He was not of an age, but for all time.83

Sam Rogiers

May 2010.

83 Jonson, B., To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare and What He Hath Left us, Prefatory Verse From the First Folio (1623), http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/folio1.htm#Beloved
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