

Titus Andronicus

W.Shakespeare

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Typical of children's narratives is the violence. B kills A and eats him, C kills B and eats him. And so on. In other words a mechanical and uninhibited sequence of violence is a mark of infantility and bespeaks a lack of imagination. And it is not uncommon in the plays of Shakespeare, one thinks about the conclusion of Hamlet for one, in which the author seems to be in a hurry to round things off, knowing that it would be a sure thing to gratify a wide audience, who may only feel impatience with finer sentiments and elegant formulations. In Hamlet it is only the very end of the play that there is violence, but as a compensation so much more of it. So much more in fact that most people tend to forget about. In 'Titus Andronicus' you cannot dismiss it as easily, it provides the entire plot. For this very reason it was long considered as slight work by the old bard, maybe even as pointless and useless. Harold Bloom was of the opinion that it had no redeeming features. However, in later years the play has been revived and interest in it risen considerably. Where formerly it provoked little admiration, this has now changed. In a way much of this change of fortune could be ascribed to the changes of fashion. Fashion is always looking for something new, and where this is nothing new to be had, as with the case of the dramas of Shakespeare, you have to look for the second best, i.e. neglected works.

The plot builds on a sequence of revenges. Titus has defeated the army of the Goths and as trophy he has brought the Queen of the Goths to Rome. Titus starts out by a ritual sacrifice of one of her three sons, who has been brought along, as a ritual revenge for those of his own sons (of which he seems to have an almost unending supply) who perished in battle during the campaign. Some protests are heard from one of his own sons, whom he immediately kills as a consequence. In other words Titus seems to have some trouble with his impulse control. Meanwhile the new Emperor and his brother have both designs on the purple as well as on the same woman - the Gothic queen - and the former - Saturninus - carries this prize as well, while the brother Bassianus, will have to do with Lavinia. Both surviving sons of the Queen lust after her, and there is also a Moor (i.e. a black guy) who is a lover of the Queen, who masterminds an involved scenario of revenge. Including the murder of Bassianus for which two of Titus sons are framed and implicated by a forged letter, being trapped in the hole in which Bassianus body has been dumped. More gruesomely yet, Lavinia is raped, ravished and at the end has her hands and tongues cut out, so as not to be able to tell. Titus is devastated, but receives a promise from the Moor, that if his hand will be chopped off and sent to the emperor, he will pardon his sons, and set them free. Titus desperate by grief, consents, the Moor cuts off his hand and soon thereafter the hand is returned together with the two severed heads of his executed sons. He has been tricked indeed. In the meantime his eldest son Lucius has allied himself with the Goths to descend on Rome and wreck revenge. Lavinia manages to disclose the identity of her rapists by using her stumped arms to trace with a stick in the dust their names. Titus plays mad and gullible, and consents to be part of ruse suggested by the

queen and her sons. But he now tricks them. Managing to keep the sons in his house he has them killed, their throats slit and the blood collected by Lavinia in a bowl. The bodies are crushed, their bones ground to flour and of the remains a big pie is baked. When the Queen arrives with the Emperor they are served the pie. Afterwards Titus asks Saturninus whether a father whose daughter has been raped should have her killed, and getting a affirmative response promptly kills his poor daughter. When the two sons of the Queens are called, it is revealed that they have just feasted on them, (maybe also being told that they also are the true murders of the Emperors brother), which leads to a rapid succession of further murders, the actual sequence of which, is hard to remember, but in the end not only Lavinia lies dead, but also her father Titus, the Queen and in the end the Emperor himself cut down by Lucius, who survives and is proclaimed the new Emperor, being the most likely to fill the vacancy he himself has created. The Moor, previously apprehended by Lucius, is about to be executed, but in view of his bottomless capacity for evil, mere execution is too mild an end. Instead he is decided to be buried to his chest and left to die from hunger and exposure, while the remains of the Queen be scattered as feed to birds and scavengers. Saturninus, on the other hand deserves a state funeral.

What to make of it? There are few lines which are memorable, and the story itself is neither instructive nor edifying, being a pure phantasy with no historical basis (although that does not mean that it does not have precedents in actual life, the works of Shakespeare always do). What is left is the horror of the graphic nature of the violence, which can be made quite effective on the stage, we are being told. One naturally wonders if it has ever been staged as an Opera, it certainly contains enough melodrama, to fit the bill.
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