TITUS ANDRONICUS : REVENGE IN BLACK AND WHITE

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Abstract:This article deals with Titus Andronicus and Aaron, its controversial villain who has more than often been considered a mixture of Othello and Iago, the latter giving Aaron his predominant traits. The main intention is to analyse the play from different angles with a particular stress on Shakespeare's treatment of the Other in a blood-and-thunder tragedy which the playwright's approach to revenge and otherness not only answered the expectations of Elizabethan playgoers but also shattered some of the common stereotypes regarding representations of the black onstage.

Keywords: Titus Andronicus, revenge, race, black, white.

The play was probably written two years earlier than the Queen's famous open letter to the Lord Mayor of London. It means that he was well aware of the presence of the Blackamoors in the streets of London. And he was not singular. In 1584, Christopher Marlowe had already written *Dido, Queen of Carthage* – featuring an African Queen, and in 1589, George Peele wrote *The Battle of Alcazar* – a play in which the great majority of the characters are Turks, that is *Others*, whom the same theatergoers were happy to recognize on the stage and give their credit to.

Actually, Shakespeare wrote two revenge tragedies – *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* – both of which were extremely popular during his lifetime and, to follow the reasoning of our dissertation, both of them may be viewed as representations of *Outsiders* – Aaron the Moor at the court of Titus Andronicus, and Hamlet, at his father's court. While *Hamlet* has retained its supreme popularity, *Titus Andronicus* has become the most despised of Shakespeare's plays. When it is allowed to be Shakespeare's (there has long been a tendency to deny *Titus Andronicus* any place in the canon), it is seen as his most inept and When it is allowed to be Shakespeare's (there has long been a tendency to deny *Titus Andronicus* any place in the canon), it is seen as his most inept and most offensive play.

It is most often seen as a prefiguration of later tragedies: of *Hamlet* if one concentrates on revenge; of *Othello* if one concentrates on character; of *King Lear* if one concentrates on plot. Nevertheless, *Hamlet* is considered the greatest of the tragedies of revenge. We thus have circumstances that easily lead to another instance of the classical paradigm of early experiment followed by the classic solution.

Titus Andronicus and *Hamlet* are both independent achievements, each a revenge tragedy, but each consisting of an individualized mixture of genres that shape the specific ends of each work. The relationship between *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* as apprentice piece and masterpiece, clarifies an important distinction between the classic and mannerist conceptions of canon.

In *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare uses revenge to explore emotional responses to actions circumscribed by an inflexible order of justice and morality. In *Hamlet* he uses revenge to explore responses to an ethical dilemma in which such generic moral codes seem irrelevant or inadequate. This is not to say that Hamlet's is not an ethical world, or that the play can be removed from the

ethical domain. What has sometimes been offered as the traditional morality of the revenge tragedy, including the sacred duty of revenge, is inadequate for Hamlet himself or for an audience watching him. In *Titus Andronicus* such a traditional morality is a given basis for the action of the play. *Titus Andronicus* presents revenge for the sake of the attendant emotions, while *Hamlet* presents revenge for the sake of ethical choice, deciding what action to take. Consequently, Shakespeare mixes Ovidian lyricism with Senecan revenge in *Titus Andronicus*, whereas in *Hamlet* he add elements of tragicomedy or what Robert Grams Hunter calls "the comedy of forgiveness with its implication of a Christian ethical dimension unavailable to the Rome of the earlier play. [**1**]

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- *Revenge as the motive of tragic action.* Both Titus and Hamlet are motivated by revenge.

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- *Revenge as the motive of tragic action.* Both Titus and Hamlet are motivated by revenge.
- *Blood and death.* In *The Spanish Tragedy*, eight of ten deaths occur on stage. In *Hamlet*, five of eight deaths occur on stage. In *Titus Andronicus*, nine of fourteen deaths occur on stage.

[1]Robert Grams Hunter, S*hakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 2

- *An elaborate system of parallel actions and characters.* The most obvious parallel in *Titus Andronicus* is between Tamora and her revenge and Titus and his revenge. The most obvious of such parallels in *Hamlet* are the four revengers who serve as parallels to the prince. Hamlet himself notices the parallels in the case of Fortinbras and Laertes, and there are also Pyrrhus and the nephew in *The Murder of Gonzago,* the play within the play, which Hamlet also calls "The Mousetrap."
- *The death of accomplices.* None of Titus's accomplices die, unless we stretch the term to include Lavinia. All of Tamora's accomplices die. Hamlet had no accomplices, but all of the King's accomplices die, even the innocent Ophelia.
- *A Machiavellian villain.* Aaron, who dies perversively repentant, is such a villain: "If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul. (V.iii.189-190)
- Claudius's machinations qualify him as such, but he is not totally free from the torments of a bad conscience.
- *The revenge is accomplished terribly, fittingly, with irony and deceit.* Titus's revenge is fitful, ironic and deceitful, while its bloody terror has been the most noted quality of the play. All of the qualifiers also apply to the last scene of *Hamlet,* where the revenge I terrible, fitting and ironic. The deceit, however, is not practiced by the revenger, but by the object of his revenge.
- *The display of a body, the wearing of black, the reading of a book before a soliloquy, and letters written by a melancholy revenger* – here are some other minor characteristics that Shakespeare's plays share with *The Spanish Tragedy.*[2]

Both *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* are revenge tragedies, but in both plays Shakespeare has altered many components of the genre. As a result of these alterations Bowers's list of elements can be used to distinguish the individuality of the two plays. Such is the case with the second element on the list: *that the actual revenge is set in motion by a previously successful revenge.*

The point only partially applies to *Titus Andronicus* and not at all to *Hamlet,* but a modification of this element applies to both plays. Both Titus and Hamlet are revengers and objects of revenge.

Hamlet's is an ethical world in which actions reveal morality. An evil deed, even one mistakenly committed, requires repentance and forgiveness, which is one of the bases of the tragicomic element in *Hamlet.* The world of *Titus Andronicus* is one in which ethical choice is circumscribed by law and tradition. It is Shakespeare's first conception of a Roman world that differs fundamentally from our own. Tamora's revenge is unjust because (1) it is for an act justly committed under Roman law and tradition; and (2) it manipulates and undermines Roman law. From the very beginning of *Titus Andronicus,* the orientation provided for the world of the play is Roman and non-Christian. The authorial stage-directions at the opening of the play make clear the specifically Roman orientation of the play. It is this Roman tribunal that oversees the action of the play – and no Kydian ghost – and almost immediately the audience is included in this Roman orientation.

Titus's actions are permitted under institutionalized law and religion in Rome. While such action would be barbarous in a Christian, it nevertheless establishes the expected behaviour of a Roman in this play. By sacrificing Tamora's son and killing his own son, Titus acts within the Roman orientation of the play. For the primary ingredient of Roman *pietas* was obedience to and humility before one's father as head of the household. When his son Mutius attempts the most

[2] Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642.* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959)

extreme impiety of physically opposing himself to the will of his father, Titus kills him. It is a rash deed; but it is not a deed outside the Roman orientation of the play.

Tamora's relationship with Aaron the Moor is outside the bound of law and religion, so is her revenge that he helps to implement. After her marriage to the Emperor Saturninus, she has open to her the course of Roman law, a law which she deceitfully manipulates to kill two of Titus's sons. But Titus has done nothing illegal or un-Roman, and therefore she must twist the law to reach him. Her revenge is illegal, private, and unjustified. Titus, on the other hand, has no other recourse except private revenge once Tamora has undermined institutionalized justice in Rome. The revenge Titus does take, although it necessarily rivals in cruelty and gruesomeness what has been done to his family, is nevertheless justified within the Roman orientation of the play.

The structure of the play is straightforward. The personal history of Titus and his family, especially in its relationship to Tamora's family, is mirrored by the changes in the Rome of the play. From Act I Titus is identified with Roman law and tradition – the basis in the play of Roman society. Titus's adherence to this tradition leads to Tamora's revenge in Act II. Titus's subsequent appeal to a Roman justice manipulated by Tamora only leads to further suffering in Act III. Act IV establishes the justice of Titus's private revenge, the accomplishment of which in Act V, with the subsequent placement of Lucius on the throne, restores the just and traditional Rome of the beginning of the play.

Here are some possible comments to Waith's analysis: (1) *Titus Andronicus* is not a failure on Shakespeare's stage, but an immense success; (2) the Ovidian material does intrude upon the dramatic structure outlined, but reinforces it. In addition to the metamorphosis of suffering in Marcus's speech, there is the metamorphosis of violence. (3) no matter what the function of the metamorphic language in Ovid himself, in Shakespeare this language is lyrical, not narrative.

Over a span of over two decades, between 1584 and 1605, six plays were written which expressly dealt with black characters: Christopher Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage* (1584), George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* (1589), Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion, or the Lascivious Queen* (1600), Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604), and Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605). Among them, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* – which impressed the audience through its amazing cruelty – was one of the four plays and a narrative history which he set in Rome. Among them, the only one that deals with Imperial Rome without observing accepted Roman history or legend is his completely fictional revenge tragedy of about 1593-94, *Titus Andronicus*. This is his bloodiest and most gruesome play, in which he resorts to horror only for the sake of horror. It is an early play in which Shakespeare was obviously experimenting with Senecan tragedy to produce a blood-and-thunder play according to the taste of the Elizabethan playgoers. Thomas Kyd's earlier *The Spanish Tragedy*, so similar to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, had scored an immense success. In *Titus Andronicus* the popular taste was fully satisfied. The audience could find anything in the play: blood and cruelty, disaster and revenge. Isaac Asimov, in his *Guide to Shakespeare* wonders if "he weren't deliberately pushing matters to the limit in order to express his disgust of the whole genre" (Asimov, I: 392).

In this particular case, Aaron proves to be a surprisingly complex character, the first Moor in a Shakespearean drama, where racial elements are introduced in the context of a horrific, gruesome revenge tragedy set in the political context of Ancient Rome. Shakespeare has all the reasons in the world to insist on Aaron's skin colour. The playwright is not a stranger to the sixteenth century racial stereotypes and he takes his time in portraying a "barbarous" Moor, or *Blackamoor* – to use a common term used by Queen Elizabeth I herself when referring to a black character. A detailed comparison with Iago might lead to a separate study; my intention was to

find out existing differences and similarities in the two characters, and show that the stereotypes defining a Blackamoor may easily apply to a white character. There are a number of questions we might ask, regarding those stereotypes: Aaron's (or the Moor's) sexuality; the *other*'s intellectual abilities; the character's resourcefulness.

This is how the play opens in ancient Rome with its inhabitants deep in the elections campaign, with two candidates and all paraphernalia of political elections available. Shakespeare did not provide any clues as to the identity of "the last that ware the imperial diadem of Rome." If Bassianus calls himself "Caesar's son," it does not mean he refers to Julius "Caesar" or Octavius "Caesar" for the simple reason that "Caesar" was the common appellation for all Roman emperors, one of their royal titles. Historically, one cannot determine the identity of the then deceased Roman Emperor; as it happens, Shakespeare's play is an unusual mixture of different periods of Roman history. One interesting detail is that Bassianus – otherwise known as Caracalla, because of the long cloak ("Caracalla") that he used to wear – was one of the dynasty of Septimius Severus, a Roman Emperor of African origins.

Nevertheless, besides the emperors, we have ample examples of the presence of the *Other*, such as the barbarian invaders of a much later period. The special claim of Titus Andronicus to the gratitude of Rome lay in the wars he had been fighting. Marcus says: "He by the senate is accited home / From weary wars against the barbarous Goths." (*TA*, I.1.27-28)

Who were, then, these "barbarous Goths", whose Queen, Tamora, had been captured by the Romans and was in custody of Titus Andronicus? They were a group of Germanic tribes who had begun raiding the Roman Empire about the middle of the third century, not long after the time of Caracalla. Roman Emperor Claudius II defeated them in 269, and this victory entitled him to call himself Claudius Gothicus. Then the Gothic danger diminished significantly until 375, when a branch of them, known as Visigoths, were driven into the Roman Empire by the Huns, and three years later, in 378, defeated the Romans in the Battle of Adrianopolis. Theodosius took full advantage and ascended the Roman throne, and by clever diplomacy and judicious bribery he managed to contain the Gothic menace. After his death, the same Visigoths raided Italy, conquered Rome in 410, then willingly left Italy and establish their own kingdom in southern France. Then, in 489, the Ostrogoths, who were just another branch of the Goths, invaded Italy and had their own kingdom established there. None of the Roman emperors and generals until this point could have served as a model, or source of inspiration for Titus Andronicus.

Anyway, in the prose story *The Tragical History of Titus Andronicus*, published one century and a half after Shakespeare's play, but presumably known by Shakespeare and used as a source of inspiration, it is mentioned that the Goths invaded Italy under King Tottilius – a real character, Totila, who was defeated in 552 by general Narses, appointed by Emperor Justinian of Constantinople to replaces his predecessor Belisarius, fight the Goths and reconquer Italy. In the *Tragical History* Titus Andronicus was a governor of Greece and came from Greece to rescue Italy, and that fits too. Again, the name "Andronicus" is best known in history as that of several emperors who ruled in Constantinople, so that the very name of Titus Andronicus focuses our attention on the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Finally, both Belisarius and Narses were ill requited by ungrateful emperors, and the tale of *Titus Andronicus* tells how the general of the title is ill requited by an ungrateful Emperor.

We can suppose then that *Titus Andronicus* was inspired by the events of the time of Belisarius and Narses, but none of the events in the play actually match the events in history.

The etymology is quite simple: in ancient Greek, the word μαυρός (Gr. *mauros*) meant 'dark', and the Greek navigators and colonists used the word to refer to the dark-skinned people

of North Africa. The Romans took over the word as *maurus* – hence Mauretania, the North African kingdom, where the Moors came from. As Latin was the lingua franca of mediaeval and Renaissance Europe, the French took over the term as *maures*, the Spanish changed it to *Moros*, and from this to the English *Moor* there was just one step. A further development of the semantic charge of the term was brought by the same Spanish, who had experienced almost eight centuries of Moorish rule: they applied the term to all Muslims. Later on, the Portuguese slave traders brought sub-Saharan slaves who, being definitely black, were referred to as 'black Moors" – hence the Elizabethan 'blackamoors', further shortened to 'Moors'.

In the particular case of Aaron, there are numerous hints in the text of the play to help us conclude that he was a 'black Moor' – a blackamoor, whose presence in Italy is easily explained by the control the East Roman Empire exerted on the North of Africa. Shakespeare's convenient solution was to simply introduce a black villain: to the Elizabethan audience the character's black face was enough to point to villainy, inhumanity, strangeness, repulsiveness – traits generally associated with the devil, and a handy stereotype.

In his attempt to depict Aaron as the most despicable character in the play, Tamora's lover and the mastermind in the revenge plot against Titus Andronicus and his whole family – the "chief architect and plotter of these woes" (*TA*, 5.3.3), Shakespeare created a powerful, complex and unpredictable character.

The interest for Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* resides not only in its being the playwright's first revenge tragedy, but also in the drastic re-interpretation of the racial discourse of positioning the white over black. The play challenges the assumption that – racially, at least – the black man was inferior to the white. The audiences had a clear picture of the black slaves in London, and Aaron breaks all the stereotypes: contrary to the practically illiterate blackamoors kept in London households, Aaron surprises by his literacy – he is a well-schooled Moor, well versed in the classics, well acknowledged with in the Latin classics, Ovid and Horace.

There are two more aspects to be considered: one refers to the Elizabethan assumption of unrestrained, uncontrollable black sexuality, the other one to miscegenation. In contrast to white Tamora and her two sons, Aaron is capable of sexual restraint, which was against the stereotype of the age. In case of miscegenation, the result is visible: there are two babies in the play – the one is black, the result of the relationship between a white woman (Tamora) and a black man (Aaron), and the other baby, just mentioned but not seen, is "fair", of a black African father and a white mother. The two babies must be seen as projections of contemporary anxieties about miscegenation; their different colours contradict one of the basic ideas of contemporary racial discourse that black men will invariably father black children. It is generally considered that what Shakespeare meant was to confer a note of incredibility to George Best's famous story that he had seen a black baby born on English soil to an Englishwoman and an Ethiopian,

"whereby it seemeth this blacknes proceedeth rather of *some natural infection* of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature" of the salubrious English climate, nor the fair "complexion of the mother concurring, coulde any thing alter."

If we were to give full credit to Best, the man's blackness was caused by some serious condition which he calls "natural infection" which nothing could heal, not even the mother's fair complexion. No doubt, Best was drawing attention to the fear of his countrymen of losing their national identity.

Shakespeare's position in *Titus Andronicus* contradicts Best by insisting on the line of thought suggested by Thomas Browne in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646) that the Blacks – just

like the English – are the descendants of Adam, and are similarly endowed (physically and mentally – to do both good and bad deeds.

He does not hesitate to mount a counterattack to bring home to Tamora, to the nurse, and emphatically to Tamora's sons that far from being "as loathsome as a toad" (*TA*, 4.2.69) the black baby is their brother "sensibly fed / Of that self blood that first gave life" to them (*TA*, 4.2.124-25). This is not meant to be a humanitarian plea, but rather a challenge to drop their "exclusiveness and see in themselves" the consanguineous "evil they see in their black brother."

It is as if *otherness* is taking over, and no one knows the Elizabethans' reaction to this speech, but we find striking similarities between Aaron's soliloquy and Shylock's famous defense of the Jewish community in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Elizabethan prejudice against blackness may explain the "mute wrath" and "dumb fury" in Aaron's speech; obviously, Shakespeare is aware of the voices of demystification of *the other*. In this particular case, *the other*'s voice is neither "mute" nor "dumb". There is much sarcasm in Shakespeare's Moor who, just like *the other* of the Europeans, argues that "coal-black is better than another hue" (4.2.99). As for Aaron's little baby, a new-born Moor, the nurse calls it "a devil", and "a toad."

In this particular case, the black-skinned baby is material, visible and tangible proof of the sinful love affair between Tamora the Goth and Aaron the Moor. The colour of the black baby provokes fear because, according to Barthelemy, "the baby's blackness, and not the baby itself" betrays their sin (Barthelemy, 94). In Shakespeare's play, Aaron's black baby survives all the violence around him; he is seen as "an allegory of European anxiety of the other", and, according to D'amico, "we do not know whether he might receive the kind of training his father imagines; it is in the play as a potential that grows quite literally out of the very center of darkness and destruction" (D'amico, 146).

Considering the general national context, and the huge turmoil provoked by the execution of Doctor Lopez, the play had an obvious political message fully relevant to Shakespeare's audiences and contemporary playwrights. Without going into details, we consider it important to develop upon the idea – so much cherished by twentieth-century critics – that *Titus Andronicus* indeed brought an entire reversal of the general perception of the African as a being inferior to the English. There are sufficient details that confirm that the racial discourse in Shakespeare's play had not lost its immediacy in 1595/96: the Guinea Company had been founded in 1588, leading to an increasing influx of sub-Saharan Africans; by 1593/94, when Shakespeare was busy writing *Titus Andronicus*, there were already too many Blackamoors in the realm. It all went as far as – when two young African prodigies from Senegambia and some other African students arrived – the event was considered as alarming by the British government. What Shakespeare was really doing was to respond to all these social, legal, and ethnic tensions in forms that he could finally put on stage: such cross-cultural encounters called into question the traditional English position on racial hierarchies.

To conclude, with *Titus Andronicus*, we are apparently dealing with the first play that managed to overturn the racial discourse of the time, and position black over white. Racially, the black man was no longer inferior, and Aaron the Moor was much above the sub-Saharan African slaves Shakespeare's audience had come to know. His literacy, his versatility in the classics – Aaron's knowledge of Ovid and Horace much surpassed that of Tamora's sons – was perhaps more than the audience could take. There is another aspect which did not answer one of the stereotypes of the age: the black African's boundless potency. Aaron's sexuality is far from being uncontrolled; he is capable of practicing sexual restraint, quite contrary to Tamora, the white queen

of the Goths and her two sons. Moreover, as compared to the Romans, Titus is an example of moderation and self-discipline, and even a vehicle of moral commentary.

We have already stressed the distinction between Aaron and Titus Andronicus in terms of moral values. Titus does not hesitate to kill his children in order to prove his adherence to the political and moral values of ancient Rome, while Aaron is an embodiment of paternal love in his attempt to prove his black son's humanity and his own paternity. It is a way to prove a certain barbaric dimension to civilized Rome.

It is not possible to do justice to the play's attempt to question the hostile response to the African in Elizabethan England without taking into account, besides the black presence, the early history of English slavery, the whole body of experience made by the English slaveholders and dealers dwelling in early modern Spain, which cultural historians, literary scholars, and Africanists have brushed aside as nonexistent. Ignorance of early English real-life encounters with Africans has, in a way, come in support of Winthrop Jordan's theory that the encounter of the early modern English with Blacks was a traumatic experience – for the English.

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