Turning the Body of Texts into Spectacle: *Titus Andronicus*, Gender Performances and the Objectification of Lavinia

Carmen FLORESCU
"Ovidius" University of Constanta

Abstract

This paper focuses on Lavinia's book-assisted mystification and readerly mistreatment by the male characters of Titus Andronicus *to argue that the two closely related actions serve not only the interests of the stage – by iconizing Lavinia's performance of suffering – but also the interests of a patriarchal culture which objectifies women and entrusts them to men, whether father or husband. Classical allusions in* Titus *– or the book-assisted mystification – "script" the course of action as readerly response to the classics, yet Shakespeare's deliberate choice of texts of rape and masculine aggression suggests, I argue, less a critique of the humanist curriculum, as many Shakespeareans contend, and more his silent acquiescence in the* prescriptiveness *of the gender roles outlined in the classics and* performed *(in Judith Butler's sense) in this play, as feminist Shakespeareans do.*

Key Words: *Titus Andronicus*; Lavinia; gender performance (Judith Butler); women's objectification; body; patriarchy

MARCUS. But, sure, some Tereus hath deflowered thee,
And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue.
Ah, now thou turn'st away thy face for shame! …
Shall I speak for thee? shall I say 'tis so?
O, that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast,
That I might rail at him to ease my mind! …
Fair Philomel, why she but lost her tongue.
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind:
But lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee;
A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off,
That could have better sewed than Philomel.

(*TA* II.iv.26-7, 33-5, 38-43)

Marcus's speech on encountering Lavinia mutilated – as well as silenced and, invisible to him, raped – is not only (in)famous with critics for its highly contrived rhetoric (Weber 708), which, as Berit Åström (127) rightly argues, effects the audience's *distancing* from the suffering of the female character, but also the first landmark in the Shakespearean tragedy's convoluted course of reading, but especially misreading, Lavinia as an intertextual "map of woes" (*TA* III.ii.12),[1] in her father's words. This paper focuses on Lavinia's book-assisted mystification and readerly mistreatment by the male characters of *Titus Andronicus* to argue that the two closely related

[1] "Intertextual" refers to the many texts that inform *Titus*; "map of woes" suggests these texts' network-like orchestration by Shakespeare. It should be noted, nevertheless, that, like all Renaissance dramas, *Titus* is the product of collaboration: Act I, if nothing else, was written by George Peele (Weber 702-4).

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

actions serve not only the interests of the stage – by iconizing Lavinia's performance of suffering – but also the interests of a patriarchal culture which objectifies women and entrusts them to men, whether father or husband.

At first glance, Lavinia is the victim of her father's unwise choice to have Alarbus sacrificed, since it elicits revengeful feelings in Queen Tamora, the mournful mother. All this is, unsurprisingly in view of Shakespeare's massive reliance on classical texts about ancient Rome to create *Titus Andronicus*,[2] rather expectable. Let us parse the sacrifice episode in Act I to better understand its import for the subsequent developments. Presumably with Virgil's *Aeneid* 12 at the *back* of his mind (Martindale 96),[3] Lucius, one of Titus's sons, asks his father's permission to sacrifice their foremost captive (*TA* I.i.96–101) to the spirits of his brothers dead in battle. With the *Aeneid* 12 quite likely at the *front* of his mind, Titus chooses Alarbus, the eldest Goth prince (I.i.102–3), in an attempt, according to Danielle St. Hilaire (313-15), to save Rome from civil chaos and war by reconfiguring Roman revenge on the Goths as a single sacrificial expiation. On St. Hilaire's reading (316-17), everybody in the play construes Titus's decision not as presumably intended, i.e. as a re-enactment of Aeneas's dual gesture of founding violence, but as barbarian lapse – indicative of Rome's decadence – and, arguably, a terrible affront to the Goth Queen. Once married to Emperor Saturninus, Tamora vows to destroy all the Andronici (*TA* I.i.455-6) to avenge her son's death and her own humiliation (I.i.104-20). In the wake of this incident, Aaron the Moor plots how the queen's other two sons could rape Lavinia during the hunt subsequent to the double wedding, Saturninus's with Tamora and Bassianus's with Lavinia. Accordingly, Chiron and Demetrius bring the young woman before Tamora, who not only encourages the planned rape, but explicitly vindicates it as her own requital (II.iii.161-7, 187-9) for Titus's "cruel, irreligious piety" (I.i.130), despite Lavinia's pleas:

LAVINIA. O, let me teach thee [pity] for my father's sake,
That gave thee life when well he might have slain thee.

---

[2] In 1936 Kittredge (qtd. in Law 145) identified the five classical sources which *Titus Andronicus* repeatedly indicates: apart from Ovid's Philomela tale (for Lavinia's rape and mutilation and the lesson drawn therefrom), Seneca's *Thyestes* (for Titus's terrible revenge of his daughter's rape in the cannibal banquet served to Tamora, as an emulation of Ovid's like scene in the Philomela myth) and *Troades* (for the slaying of Alarbus to appease the shades at the Andronici tomb, as well as Titus's deafness to the pleading of Alarbus's mother), Plutarch's "Life of Coriolanus" (for Lucius's banishment from home and his subsequent return at the head of a hostile army), and Livy's *History of Rome* (for the account of Virginius and his daughter, Virginia, invoked by Titus to vindicate his plan to murder Lavinia). For Aaron, Shakespeare may have used "some story of a cruel Moor not unlike a tale in Bandello's *Novelle* (iii, 21),... develop[ing] the character as that of a Machiavellian villain" (Kittredge, qtd. in Law 152). Law (146–53) adds Virgil's *Aeneid* (another foundational text for the Andronici's acts and ethics) and Plutarch's "Life of Scipio Africanus" (for Titus's refusal of the crown on his triumphal return to Rome). See also West on the relation between classical allusions in *Titus*'s characters' speeches and their violent deeds.

[3] The sacrifice of Alarbus ("cruel, irreligious piety," 1.1.130) sets in motion the disastrous events of the play, but Titus could have cited the precedent of Aeneas, who, on the pattern of Homer's Achilles (oddly in view of a general Roman distaste for human sacrifice), slew Latin captives at the funeral of Pallas, and who, at the poem's end, shows no mercy for the defeated Turnus helpless at his feet.

(Martindale 96)

I would add another classical reference to a sacrifice demanded for the spirits of the dead, although not on their behalf but by the very beneficiary: this is the case of Achilles's ghost demanding the sacrifice of King Priam and Queen Hecuba's daughter, the virgin Polyxena (Ov., *Met.* 13.441-80), thence the Trojan women's and especially Hecuba's wailing (13.481-535); the episode furnishes the subject matter for Seneca's *Troades*, a play which Kittredge has identified as one of the sources of *Titus Andronicus*.

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

Be not obdurate, open thy deaf ears.
TAMORA. Hadst thou in person ne'er offended me,
Even for his sake am I pitiless.
Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain
To save your brother from the sacrifice,
But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
Therefore away with her, and use her as you will;
The worse to her, the better loved of me.
LAVINIA *[clasps her knees]*, O Tamora, be called a gentle queen,
And with thine own hands kill me in this place! …
TAMORA. Farewell, my sons, see that you make her sure.
Ne'er let my heart know merry cheer indeed
Till all the Andronici be made away.

(*TA* II.iii.158-69, 187-9)

Under the circumstances, Lavinia's are but ineffectual appeals to Tamora to show her womanly grace and rather kill the young woman than permit her ravishing (*TA* II.iii.168-9, 173-8, 182). In fact, Lavinia has already been "sentenced" to rape by Aaron – with the aid of Ovid's Philomela myth in the *Metamorphoses* (Ov., *Met*. 6.421-676); furthermore, she "must" be be ravished by the Goth brothers, since the Moor has just debunked their profession of *love* – when they vie with each other for Lavinia's affection (*TA* II.i.35–6; II.i.70; II.i.82–4) – as mere *lust* (II.i.130–1). With Tamora's full sanction, Lavinia's rape has all the trappings of "necessity" – in a dramatic world guided by the code of revenge and spawning emulation both intra- and extra-dramatically,[4] a world ruled by men in accordance with their androcentric view and where women's rape functions as a "constantly deferred origin of both plot and social relations" (Lyn Higgins and Brenda Silver, qtd. in Kahn 58).
Relatively few critics have noted, as Berit Åström (126-7) and Coppélia Kahn (58) have, that *Titus Andronicus* treats Lavinia as the object of exchange in the *homosocial economy of the patriarchal kin system on- and offstage*:

Lévi-Strauss' notes [in his theory of the kinship system] that the circulation of women [i.e. the exchange of women between men in return for power, status, goods or territory] is a near universal feature, but he does not question why it is women, rather than men, who are circulated, treating the exchange as a natural system. Other scholars, such as Gayle Rubin, have pointed to its constructedness. She argues that the concept of exchanging women (or women as "currency") "is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin" (1975, p. 177). The system is thus indicative of an asymmetry within the society, but an asymmetry that seems so natural that it does not warrant discussion.

[4] The inherently competitive dimension of emulation is reflected onto the women, yet exclusively as a function of men's competition. In this connection, we should note Kahn's observation that the scene where Tamora's adulterous liaison with Aaron is revealed by Bassianus and Lavinia "supplies a precipitating cause for the rape when she taunts Tamora for her 'goodly gift in horning' (2.2.67), by which Lavinia implies her own unspotted chastity" (53). According to Kahn (53), "[t]his slur functions somewhat like Collatine's boast of Lucrece's chastity" in the Lucrece text and "implicitly sets up a competition centering on a man's possession of his wife's body" translated here as a competition between the women regarding their sexual conduct in wedlock.

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

Women function as tradable goods, ending up, in Rubin's words, as a "conduit" between the giver and the recipient, but without agency or an independent position (1975, p. 174).
(Åström 126-7)

Ironically, Lavinia has been on and off the marriage market from the outset. When the Roman general Titus Andronicus returns triumphantly after vanquishing the Goths, he is offered the crown but refuses it in favour of Saturninus (*TA* I.i.223-29), the late Roman emperor's elder son and fierce contender for it with his younger brother, Bassianus (I.i.1-63). Grateful, Saturninus offers to forge an alliance with his surrogate father – "noble Titus, father of my life" (I.i.253) – through marriage to his daughter (I.i.234-42). Saturninus's fickleness regarding both politics and women is notorious: no sooner is he transferred the Goth captives and sets eyes on Tamora, than he fancies her – "A goodly lady, trust me! Of the hue / That I would choose, were I to choose anew" (I.i.261-2) – and during the trumpet flourish proclaiming his marriage to Lavinia he engages in a dumb show of courtship of the Goth Queen (I.i.275s.d.). This is the point when Bassianus claims Lavinia as his fiancé (I.i.276) and abducts her with the aid of the Andronici, despite Titus's struggle and his killing of his own son, Mutius, in the process (I.i.280-91). Lavinia will accordingly be formally rejected by Saturninus as "that changing piece" (I.i.309; see also I.i.299-300) – in favour of Bassianus (I.i.309-10) – for the dishonour (I.i.303) brought on him by her abduction – in modern English legislation, barely distinct from rape proper.[5] Now Saturninus can rightfully claim Tamora as his bride (I.i.315-20). On the more sinister side of the marriage market, when Chiron and Demetrius prepare to rape Lavinia, Chiron urges they do so over her husband's fresh corpse thrown down into a pit in the woods (II.ii.129-30), presumably to add insult (to men, both the dead husband and the living Andronici) to injury (of woman).[6]
In between Aaron's diabolical plotting of the rape, first by analogy with Lucrece (*TA* II.i.108-9) and then with Philomela (II.iii.42-5),[7] and the anagnorisis in Act IV (IV.i.41-54),[8] Lavinia is metaphorically tossed and turned between the male Andronici, merely a challenge for them as readers of signs but uppermost readers of classical texts. Compare (in reverse chronological order):

TITUS. Lucius, *what book* is that she tosseth so?
BOY. Grandsire, 'tis Ovid's *Metamorphoses*;
My mother gave it me.
MARCUS. For love of her that's gone [young Lucius's mother],
Perhaps she [Lavinia] culled it from among the rest.
TITUS. Soft! so busily she turns the leaves!
Help her!

[5] English statutes from 1555, 1558, 1576 and 1597 suggest the separation between abduction and rape as sexual assault (Williams 99-100; Detmer-Goebel 77-8).
[6] Åström reads this proposal as evidence that "the attack on Lavinia is intended as an attack on the men to whom she belongs" (128).
[7] "Lucrece was not more chaste / Than this Lavinia, Bassianus' love" (*TA* II.i.108-9); "This is the day of doom for Bassianus: / His Philomel must lose her tongue to-day, / Thy sons make pillage of her chastity, / And wash their hands in Bassianus' blood" (II.iii.42-5).
[8] The copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is identified by title (*TA* IV.i.42) by young Lucius, with the Philomela tale indicated by Lavinia vocally identified by Titus for everyone else's benefit (IV.i.48-50) and tentatively interpreted by him as bearing on Lavinia's present condition (IV.i.52-4).

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

What would she find? *Lavinia, shall I read?*
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape;
And rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy.
MARCUS. See, brother, see, note how she quotes the leaves.
TITUS. Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,
Ravished and wronged, as Philomela was,
Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?

(*TA* IV.i.41-54; my emphasis),

with:

TITUS. [*to Lavinia*] Thou *map of woe*, that thus dost talk in signs…
… Hark, Marcus, what she says –
I can interpret all her martyred signs
She says she drinks no other drink but tears,
Brewed with her sorrows, meshed upon her cheeks.
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 not 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.

(*TA* III.ii.12, III.ii.35–45; my emphasis),[9]

with:

TITUS. *Had I but seen thy picture in this plight,*
It would have madded me: what shall I do
Now I behold thy lively body so?
Thou hast no hands to wipe away thy tears,
Nor tongue to tell me who hath martyred thee.

(*TA* III.i.103-7; my emphasis)

From the earliest metaphor for Lavinia, a *picture* (*TA* III.i.103) – a grim aestheticization of the gory, mutilated young woman before his eyes or, on stage, the cross-dressed young male actor – if only hypothetically evoked,[10] to the fully present "*map* of woe" (III.ii.12) and finally to

[9] *Mutatis mutandis*, there is an uncanny, if patriarchally motivated, parallelism between Titus's endeavours here to "read" the signs of Lavinia's mutilation and Aaron's semiotically self-conscious rhetorical speech to Tamora early, claiming that she cannot interpret correctly the signs of his countenance as expressing a vengeful, not amorous, concern (*TA* II.iii.32–9).

[10] Compare with Marcus's self-description in the wake of Titus's left hand severance: "and thy brother, I, / Even like a stony image cold and numb" (*TA* III.i.358-9). The simile compares Marcus to a statue, yet we can find here a subtle allusion to the petrifying effect of men's encounter with Medusa; given Lavinia's dishevelled appearance – the stock visual metonym for rape – this interpretation is not so outlandish, since Medusa acquired her petrifying power over men in the aftermath of her rape by Neptune in Minerva's temple (Ov., *Met*. 4.794-801).

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

acquiescing *Lavinia* as the "sweet girl, / Ravished and wronged, as Philomela was" (IV.i.52-3), Titus's speeches trace his convoluted course of acknowledging the reality of rape – from disbelief to full objectification to acknowledging the living analogon of the Philomela tale – yet rather as irredeemable damage to his property, and implicitly to his position of power within his homosocial environment, than as hurting and maiming of a human being. Furthermore, in all these and many other speeches Titus does not simply claim a capacity to "understand her signs" (*TA* III.i.43) – contradicted at every turn – but especially seeks to establish, in proprietary fashion, what exactly Lavinia's reified image, her "signs and tokens" (II.iv.38), may mean: "But I, of these, will wrest an alphabet, / And by still practice learn to know thy meaning" (III.ii.44–5). As Douglas Green aptly notes, "[a]t one and the same time, Titus acknowledges the integrity and otherness of Lavinia's experience and intentions and yet claims the power to determine their meaning – along with her whole system of signs" (323). What Green fails to mention is Titus's use of a covertly violent metaphor, "*wrest* an alphabet" (III.ii.44), to describes how the *paterfamilias* will determine – simultaneously *understand* and *constrain* – the meaning of Lavinia's crippled, yet plural, embodied semiosis. Thus, Titus's metaphor accurately reflects his very (speech) acts to/about Lavinia in a patriarchal culture of proprietary rights over women. No different is, but for its straightforwardness, Marcus's early rhetorical question to the ravished Lavinia: "*Shall I speak for thee*? shall I say 'tis so?" (II.iv.32; my emphasis), uttered after he has spotted her bleeding mouth (II.iv.22-5) and has compared Lavinia's condition to that inflicted by Tereus (II.iv.26-7). The rhetorical dimension of Marcus's question is all the more apparent not since Lavinia is now maimed past physical articulateness, but since even when she had her tongue she was just as mute and spoken for, only never explicitly invited to acquiesce.

After the rape and mutilation of Lavinia – both tongue excision, as in Ovid's Philomela's case, and hand severance, with that text's lesson in mind – the wretched victim will be unable to express her plight for a long while. Found by her uncle Marcus (II.iv.16-27, 38-43), and self-censoring a nod to the explicit Philomela analogy in his lament (II.iv.26-7, 41-3),[11] Lavinia will only be enabled to "speak" about her violation by a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which she reaches for with her stumps to direct her family's attention to the Philomela tale (IV.i.29s.d.-53). Seizing on this – for the Andronici, still ambiguous – revelation, Marcus teaches her how to write on the sand with his staff held in her mouth and guided with her "lopp'd" members; Lavinia scratches, like Ovid's Io with her hoof (*Met*. 1.649-50): "Stuprum.[12] Chiron. Demetrius" (*TA* IV.i.78). Only now will Marcus and Titus cease their *fort-da* game of trying to understand Lavinia's plight by reference to classical texts, a game in which their correct allusions to the Ovidian Philomela myth are immediately retracted as if but hopelessly bookish analogies incapable to describe the case at hand (Weber 708-14).

The Andronici's countless misreading acts suggest the performance of a perverted *charade game* with a difference: the performing woman is not the actor, viz. agent, of the puzzling pantomime, but a passive victim of rape and mutilation and then of her "public's" failed attempts at deciphering her rueful countenance and gestures. Until she reaches for the *Metamorphoses* copy, young Lucius's handbook, and browses it with her stumps to point to Philomela's story, the

[11] When Marcus suggests that "some Tereus hath deflowered thee" (*TA* II.iv.26; see II.iv.26-7, 41-3), Lavinia demurely "turns't away [her] face for shame" (II.iv.28); through compliance with the "cultural prescription of silence [which] 'denies' women the 'tongue to tell' [II.iii.174]" their assault, Lavinia "misses the chance to confirm her rape" (Detmer-Goebel 81).

[12] The noun *stuprum* means (1) "dishonour, shame"; (2) "illicit sexual intercourse in any form (whether forced or not)"; the *OLD*'s order of these senses suggests the cultural stress laid on the dishonour implicit in various acts, among which adultery, for both the individual and society (*OLD*, s.v. *stuprum*).

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

ravished Lavinia enacts nothing of her own accord other than weeping profusely especially in response to certain observations by her kin (III.i.110-19)[13] or raising both her stumps to heaven not to ask for revenge – as Marcus's final "Or else" (IV.i.40) misreads the gesture – but to indicate that her rape was perpetrated by two, not one, Tereus-figure (IV.i.38-9):

MARCUS. I think she means that there were more than one
Confederate in the fact. Ay, more there was;
Or else to heaven she heaves them for revenge.

(*TA* IV.i.38-40)

Post-rape, Lavinia *is made to do things* inappropriately since she can no longer do and/or communicate anything with either words or hands: she is bidden by Titus to bear his severed hand between her teeth (*TA* III.i.282-3) and later is taught by her uncle how to use his staff as an oversized phallic pen[14] to scratch in the sand (IV.i.70-1). Yet, most compellingly, she *is made into a thing herself*,[15] as we have seen: a mute object speaking nevertheless volumes not just about the barbarous act of violation by Chiron and Demetrius, but especially about the even more barbarous act of being objectified by Aaron the Moor, a playwright persona, and his Goth

[13] TITUS. Look, Marcus! ah, son Lucius, look on her!
When I did name her brothers, then fresh tears
Stood on her cheeks, as doth the honey-dew
Upon a gathered lily almost withered.
MARCUS. Perchance she weeps because they killed her husband,
Perchance because she knows them innocent.
TITUS. If they did kill thy husband, then be joyful,
Because the law hath ta'en revenge on them.
No, no, they would not do so foul a deed,
Witness the sorrow that their sister makes….
LUCIUS. Sweet father, cease your tears, for at your grief
See how my wretched sister sobs and weeps.

(*TA* III.i.110-19, 146-7)

Cf. Marcus's "Yet do thy cheeks look red as Titan's face / Blushing to be encountered with a cloud" (II.iv.31-2) on first encountering Lavinia after her rape.

[14] The scene where Marcus teaches Lavinia to write with his staff held between her teeth and guided with her feet (*TA* IV.i.69–77) should be read dually: in Lacanian terms of the Name of the Father and in broader psychoanalytic terms of phallic metonymy. Regarding the former interpretation, Mary Laughlin Fawcett notes: "When [Lavinia] takes her uncle's staff into her mouth, she uses the language of the fathers, the cultural dominators" (qtd. in Leggatt 212 n. 22; see Cohen 85). Psychoanalytically, Marcus's staff becomes "a displaced sexual image like the taking of her father's hand" (Leggatt 23), although, and crucially, both acts are enjoined on her respectively by her uncle and father, which critics often fail to note: "Lavinia took a staff in her mouth when she named the rapists, enacting fellatio, or, if we take seriously the pun that Act 2 made on hell-mouth [i.e. 'this fell devouring receptacle, / As hateful as Cocytus' misty mouth' (II.iii.235-6)], re-enacting her own violation" (Clark Hulse, qtd. in Green 325).

[15] That "Lavinia depends not on the feminine art of textiles [like Ovid's Philomela], but … on the texts authored by men that authorize patriarchal culture" (Kahn 65), especially on bringing on stage the physical text scripting her fate, suggests to me the fundamental objectification of this female character as metonymic for women's condition under patriarchy. In a manner of speaking, Lavinia *becomes* on stage, in Shakespeare, the tapestry which Philomela weaves and which is itself preceded by Arachne's tapestry depicting the *caelestia crimina* (*Met.* 6.131), i.e. divine wantonness conducive to female violation (*Met.* 6.103-26), in Ovid's ekphrastic cross-voicing text.

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

"actors," as well as by the Andronici, her "public," at metadramatic level by Shakespeare emulating Seneca emulating Ovid,[16] and extra-dramatically by patriarchy.

Lavinia's onstage performance as an object to be deciphered by her male kin – her being scripted as a puzzling jigsaw of "signs and tokens" (*TA* II.iv.38), in Demetrius's words, by the various men in the play – thus becomes the *signifier* in a second-degree sign: the *performance of gender identity* (in Judith Butler's terms) in the play on the model of its *pre-texts*, i.e. the precursor texts which *Titus Andronicus* draws on, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, and under the overarching *pretext* offered by patriarchy under the guise of classicism or Renaissance neoclassicism. In this sense, I would argue, Danielle St. Hilaire observation that *Titus*'s dramatic world is a "Rome-constructed-of-texts"[17] whose power consists in their *prescriptive* thrust, not just *referentiality* aimed to enable the characters' comprehension of their current situation (316), takes a fresh cogency: Shakespeare's *choice* of texts of rape to build up his play's Rome plots a grim future for women both intra- and extra-dramatically. To me, as to many feminist readers of *Titus Andronicus*, it looks as if Shakespeare uses such texts of rape and generally violence to *prescribe* it as, if not natural, at least a condonable practice precisely owing to its distinguished literary pedigree – rather than merely to criticize the humanist curriculum, as many Shakespeareans argue (West 65; Bate, qtd. in Lugo 408; Dickson 380-1; cf. Weber 701).

Before I elaborate my contention of the likely prescriptiveness of classical texts which focus on rape, I need to define the notion of *gender performativity* as evolved by Judith Butler from J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, augmented with insights from the theories of feminist existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and anthropologist Victor Turner. With Simone de Beauvoir, Butler argues that one is not born, but becomes, a woman (or a man) through the systematic and public enactment, or performance, of a set of acts and meanings circumscribed by one gender or the other, as corresponds to one's biological sex (Butler 178-9): "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 143). For Butler, "[g]ender reality is

---

[16] Albert Tricomi argues that the "craftier Tereus" of which "Marcus speaks is really Will Shakespeare laying claim to having outwitted the Roman poet in the telling of a tale" and that in the revealing by Lavinia of her attackers Shakespeare creates a "solution to this puzzle ... that is much more unexpected and original than Ovid's." Tricomi speaks of "a witty competition with Ovid and Seneca," but this competition is about much more than wit, and indeed strikes at the social theories implicit in the earlier authors' works and the common decorous and emulative readings of these works in Shakespeare's time. Beyond this, as [Heather] James's work suggests, Shakespeare's criticism attacks [Queen] Elizabeth's own political self- and social constructions.

(Dickson 379)

Likewise, Leonard Barkan describes as *competitive* the *mode* in which Shakespeare appropriates Ovid: "What is horrible in Ovid's Tereus story Shakespeare makes twice as horrible in *Titus Andronicus*. Not one rapist but two, not one murdered child but five, not one or two mutilated organs but six, not a one-course meal but a two" (Barkan, qtd. in Kahn 46). See also Silk (241) on the Senecan drama's mediation through sixteenth-century Italian tragedies, from whose tradition Elizabethan drama derives its emphasis on revenge, blood and lust, and Green on *Titus*'s indebtedness to the contemporary genre of revenge tragedy, especially to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine* and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*.

[17] I would add: the *only* ancient Rome available to the Elizabethans, not unlike the mythical Athens of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. See Miola on the "heterogeneity of the city's origins and character" (95) in *Titus* and Kahn (1-26) on the importance of Rome for the Elizabethans: "for the English Renaissance, 'the Roman past was … not simply *a* past but *the* past' (Hunter 1977:95), legendarily linked to the moment in which Britain itself emerged into history," since English chronicles ever since Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136) connected the founding of Britain to "the founding of Rome through Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, founder of Rome" (Kahn 3).

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (173).

In this respect, Shakespeare's character Lavinia is quintessentially feminine, even a model of feminine virtue as lack of agency: she humbly eulogizes her father on his triumphal return to Rome (I.i.157-8),[18] is quietly passive in the men's game of marriage – where Saturninus, Bassianus, Titus and the other Andronici determine Lavinia's betrothal without ever consulting her[19] – but ready to die rather than be ravished, since the latter would incur shame on her and by extension on her father; after her violation, Lavinia does what her father and uncle order her to. Unlike Philomela, who, alongside her sister Procne and at the latter's instigation, actively revenges herself on her violator, Lavinia is *coerced* by Titus to collect the blood of her violators' slit throats (*TA* V.ii.183-4, 197-8). At this point, the *text averts our gaze from her feelings*: the revenge scene is practically Titus's monologue and conveys, in every sense, *his point of view*.

Only in two instances does Lavinia appear to assume agency: in the scene of pursuing her nephew to get the Ovid copy and in the pre-rape scene where she scorns the adulterous Tamora. Yet the climactic scene of anagnorisis still plays off the moment of active revelation – Lavinia's of her condition by indicating physically to the *Metamorphoses* Philomela text as an icon (in C.S. Peirce's sense) of her rape – against its just as active misprision, when Marcus also contemplates the possibility of Lavinia's action as symbolic, not an indexical one with an iconic end. In the pre-rape scene, the lower-key anagnorisis of the empress's adultery, Lavinia may appear just as active as in Act IV; however, she taunts Tamora (*TA* II.iii.66-71, 82-4) only after

---

[18] TITUS. In peace and honour rest you here, my sons!
LAVINIA. In peace and honour live Lord Titus long,
My noble lord and father, live in fame!

(*TA* I.i.156-8)

[19] Compare Saturninus's speech to Titus when the emperor chooses Lavinia for his bride (*TA* I.i.238-43) with Saturninus's one line addressed to Lavinia (I.i.270) – the only time she is ever consulted in the play – regarding his deferential treatment of the Goth Queen, his captive and new object of sexual interest, *not* his betrothal to Lavinia – whose approval he has just sought from Titus (I.i.243) – in terms of speech acts and degrees of perfunctoriness:

SATURNINUS. And for an onset, Titus, to advance
Thy name and honourable family,
Lavinia will I make my emperess,
Rome's royal mistress, mistress of my heart,
And in the sacred Pantheon her espouse:
Tell me, Andronicus, doth this motion please thee?
TITUS. It doth, my worthy lord, and in this match
I hold me highly honoured of your grace. …
SATURNINUS. [*aloud*] Clear up, fair queen [Tamora], that cloudy countenance.
Though chance of war hath wrought this change of cheer,
Thou com'st not to be made a scorn in Rome.
Princely shall be thy usage every way.
Rest on my word, and let not discontent
Daunt all your hopes. Madam, he comforts you
Can make you greater than the Queen of Goths.
Lavinia, you are not displeased with this?
LAVINIA. Not I, my lord, sith true nobility
Warrants these words in princely courtesy.
SATURNINUS. Thanks, sweet Lavinia. Romans, let us go.

(*TA* I.i.238-45, I.263-73)

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

Bassianus has done so himself (II.iii.55-9), which renders Lavinia's (speech) act a patriarchal echo of her husband's and shows Lavinia to be thoroughly compliant with the requirements of patriarchy, whether in ancient Rome or Elizabethan England.

The Roman past which Shakespeare holds up as a mirror of *romanitas* qua *virtus* for his contemporaries is not simply and unavoidably textual, but overly violent. The *Metamorphoses* tale of Philomela, which grounds the plot of *Titus Andronicus* and without which there would "be no rape, no mutilation, and no cannibalistic revenge. In short, … no play at all" (Weber 699), Ovid also briefly alludes to in his *Fasti*, even as rape itself is writ large in the substance of his *Metamorphoses* (AD 1-8). The *Fasti*, a poetical treatise on the Roman calendar,[20] virtually juxtaposes the tales of Philomela and Lucrece (Kahn 65): the feast day of "Caristia [VIII Kal. 22nd], from dear (*cari*) kinsfolk" (Ov., *Fast*. 2.617–18), is not a day to celebrate the likes of "Procne and her sister" or "Tereus, cruel to them both" (2.629); the day of Regifugium, or the Flight of the King [VI Kal. 24th], commemorates the institution of the Roman republic after the rape of Lucretia by Tarquin, the dissolute son of the current king, and her suicide (*Fast*. 2.741–834). In circular fashion, the account of Lucretia ends with an apostrophe to the swallow/Procne as the harbinger of spring (2.853–6). On the other hand, the *Fasti* Lucretia story (II.721–852), alongside its version in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (I.lvii–lx), grounds *The Rape of Lucrece*, which Shakespeare penned barely a year before the performance of *Titus Andronicus* in January 1594; unsurprisingly, the poem also mentions Philomela, however briefly (Newman 307-9). Yet rape, when not fundamental to Shakespeare's texts, may often be alluded to, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (III.i.209), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (V.iv.42, 57–8), *Macbeth* (II.i.52, 55) or *Henry V* (II.iii.21) (Williams 93, 103). Act II of *Cymbeline* provides a telling analogy with *Titus Andronicus*, since Imogen reads in bed "The tale of Tereus" (II.ii.45), a text thus revealed only after Iachimo is shown spying on her asleep. Accordingly,

> The presence of the classical book onstage menacingly registers the difference of perspective between the two characters – for Imogen it is presumably just what she happened to be reading before she slept, while for Iachimo it suggests a literal template for the kind of metaphorical violation of Imogen which he intends.
>
> (Burrow 19-20)

Looking at all these cases where Shakespeare either alludes to or more substantially draws on the text of Philomela's rape, it is hard to defend the argument that Ovid's tale simply provides a rhetorical artifice here and a cautionary scene there, especially considering how fundamental rape is for the *Metamorphoses* itself. To mention but Daphne's fate: her hardly averted rape by Apollo, resulting in her metamorphosis, consecrates the laurel as the sign of poetic excellence. Rape, even when failed, appears to be prescriptive in the homosocial economy of Ovid's poem.[21]

In the light of both the *Metamorphoses* and its emulation by Shakespeare, I subscribe to the feminist argument by the likes of Patricia Klindienst Joplin, Stephanie Jed or Jane Newman that the texts which the humanist curriculum offered for emulation and socio-political formation often encode, as the Philomela myth does, "social structures that establish sexual difference and

[20] Ovid implies he had nearly completed the *Fasti* by the time of his exile (AD 8), but he kept polishing it down to near the end of his life (Frazer xxiii).

[21] Only rarely become men – Narcissus' (Ov., *Met*. 3.390-1); Hermaphroditus' (4.368-70) – resisting subjects to rape-like advances, even erotic embraces, by nymphs – Echo (3.370-8, 387-9); Salmacis (4.346-67, 370-9).

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

hierarchy through violence against women, and textual operations that efface women's collective resistance and individual agency" (Kahn 20). On the other hand, in *Titus Andronicus*, as Kahn perspicuously argues, the "sophisticated awareness of the politics of textuality" manifested in the characters' acts of *writing* – Titus's on various occasions before his revenge: notes to the gods, to Saturninus and the rapists; symbolically, even Lavinia's scratching in the sand – or *scripting* – Aaron's of events in the play on the Ovidian template or Titus's of his future revenge – "is interwoven with the play's central concern: the politics of sexuality" (Kahn 47). Intra-dramatically men alone, with the telling exception of Tamora regarding herself and partially also concerning Lavinia's rape, determine the sexual fate of women.

I would argue, beyond Kahn, that the intertwining of these two types of politics brings performance to the fore: both the performance of Shakespeare's play on the Elizabethan stage and the characters' performance of gender roles in *Titus Andronicus* on the model of earlier texts. To mention two examples I have already considered: the Goth brothers and Lavinia. Chiron and Demetrius play the role of rapists, Tereus-fashion; this is an unfortunate textual twist to the gender role patriarchy ascribes to men: to act as competitive agents of change. Since the Goth brothers *are scripted* by Aaron to perform thus, when the instigator himself remains otherwise otiose, the play perhaps not so much undermines the notion of fully agentive masculinity as suggests the nefarious effects of political competition disguised as benevolent tutoring. Lavinia *is scripted and read* throughout; furthermore, when Marcus brings her before her father after her rape, she is pushed down a slope of passive femininity to be reified through self-performance: Lavinia is "paraded on the stage" (Bott, qtd. in Åström 129) and "turned into a spectacle before being killed" (Åström 129). The stage only highlights the objectification of women and their *spectacularization*, to retrofit Laura Mulvey's description of women in cinema[22] to the case of Elizabethan theatre. Chiron and Demetrius objectify Lavinia by treating her as an exchange object whose damaging will ruin her exchange value and thus deteriorate her father's political position; when they mutilate Lavinia so that she won't be able to expose them, they *literally inscribe on her body* the gory lesson learnt from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Marcus and Titus objectify the raped Lavinia by treating her as an artefact to be read, even as *an embodied cue for them to recall classical texts*; early, they disregard her as a human being when they trade her with other men on the marriage market. Although they do not physically mutilate her, father and uncle alike metaphorically "emblazon" Lavinia by regarding individual body parts – the missing ones – with a grotesque gaze, though poetically articulated, in a perverted echo of Petrarch's *blazon* genre which instigated the *fetishistic dismemberment* of the beloved's body. In the climactic Act IV scene i, when Lavinia indicates her post-rape condition as iconically identical to that of Ovid's Philomela she *performs the male-instigated reification of her body as a carved repository of classical texts*. Whether an obsequious critic of adultery, a chaste married woman's

[22] In her influential "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which draws on the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, Mulvey posits woman's *to-be-looked-at-ness* in mainstream film (837-40) as a "reflect[ion of] the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it" (834):

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: … she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.
>
> (Mulvey 837)

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

body to be raped and mutilated, a mutilated body/artefact to be deciphered, an embodied analogon for an Ovidian victim of rape, or the sign of a man's public shame which therefore invites killing by her father, Lavinia is *not herself*: she is exclusively what the male characters – in *Titus Andronicus*, the *Metamorphoses* or the *Aeneid* – and male authors alike – Shakespeare, Ovid or Virgil – script her to be, or rather a map of women's woes bearing the signs of violent gender performances under patriarchy. Lavinia the character performs her femininity as a passive inscription of the agentive performances of masculinity, from rape to interpretation – a masculinity wounded, hurt, even imperilled at times, yet always assertive, commanding and resourcefully capable to defend the artificial hierarchical articulation of genders, a "map of woes," as the most "natural" expression of *virtus*.

Works Cited

Åström, Berit. "Referred Pain: Privileging Male Emotions in Narrative Instances of Female Physical Suffering." *Journal of Gender Studies* 20.2 (2011): 125-37.

Burrow, Colin. "Shakespeare and Humanistic Culture." Martindale and Taylor, eds., 2004. 9-27.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.

Cohen, Derek. *Shakespeare's Culture of Violence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.

Detmer-Goebel, Emily. "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape." *Shakespeare Studies* 29 (2001): 75-92.

Dickson, Vernon Guy. "'A Pattern, Precedent, and Lively Warrant': Emulation, Rhetoric, and Cruel Propriety in *Titus Andronicus*." *Renaissance Quarterly* 62 (2009): 376-409.

Frazer, F. G. "Introduction." *Ovid in Six Volumes. V: Fasti*. Trans. Frank Justus Miller. 2nd ed., rev. G. P. Goold. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989. xi-xxx.

Green, Douglas E. "Interpreting 'Her Martyr'd Signs': Gender and Tragedy in *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.3 (1989): 317-26.

Kahn, Coppélia. *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Law, Robert Adger. "The Roman Background of *Titus Andronicus*." *Studies in Philology* 40.2 (1943): 145-53.

Leggatt, Alexander. "*Titus Andronicus*: This was thy daughter." *Shakespeare's Tragedies: Violation and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 8-28.

Lugo, Jessica. "Blood, Barbarism, and Belly Laughs: Shakespeare's *Titus* and Ovid's Philomela." *English Studies* 88.4 (2007): 401-17.

Martindale, Charles. "Shakespeare and Virgil." Martindale and Taylor, eds., 2004. 89-106.

Martindale, Charles and A. B. Taylor, eds. *Shakespeare and the Classics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Miola, Robert S. "*Titus Andronicus* and the Mythos of Shakespeare's Rome." *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1981): 85-98.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 833-44.

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)

Newman, Jane O. "'And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness': Philomela, Female Violence, and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.3 (1994): 304-26.
Oxford Latin Dictionary [= *OLD*]. Ed. P. G. W. Glare et al. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
Ovid. *Ovid in Six Volumes. III: Metamorphoses*. Trans. Frank Justus Miller. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968, 1971.
---. *Ovid in Six Volumes. V: Fasti*. Trans. Frank Justus Miller. 2nd ed., rev. G. P. Goold. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. Ed. John Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
Silk, Michael. "Shakespeare and Greek Tragedy: Strange Relationship." Martindale and Taylor, eds., 2004. 241-57.
St. Hilaire, Danielle A. "Allusion and Sacrifice in *Titus Andronicus*." *SEL* 49.2 (2009): 311-31.
Weber, William W. "Worse than Philomel: Violence, Revenge, Meta-allusion in *Titus Andronicus*." *Studies in Philology* 112.4 (2015): 698-717.
West, Grace Starry. "Going by the Book: Classical Allusions in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*." *Studies in Philology* 79.1 (1982): 62-77.
Williams, Carolyn D. "'Silence, like a Lucrece Knife': Shakespeare and the Meanings of Rape." *Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993): 93-110.

BDD-A24031 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-31 09:38:14 UTC)