Worse than Philomel, Worse than Actaeon
Dismembering Myth in Titus Andronicus

In the Metamorphoses, Ovid recounts the story of young Actaeon accidentally seeing the “chaste Diana, huntress queen” (3.156) bathing naked in her sacred grove. Embarrassed and enraged, the goddess transforms the youth into a stag and he is chased by his own dogs, “Till the whole pack, united, sank their teeth / Into his flesh” (3.236-7). With “fierce savagery,” the hunting dogs, “tearing deep / Their master’s flesh,” literally rip Actaeon to pieces, until his “countless wounds / Had drained away his lifeblood” (3.251-5). Later in the collection of tales, Ovid describes how the wicked Tereus drags the innocent Philomela—the sister of his wife—up to a remote cabin “And ravished her, a virgin, all alone” (6.530); after violating her, “he seized / Her tongue with tongs and, with his brutal sword, / Cut it away” (6.559-61). These two Ovidian myths provide a set of powerful frames for Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, both narratively and thematically, and each is specifically alluded to by the characters. When Tamora is discovered in the woods with Aaron by Lavinia and Bassianus, for example, the empress says,

Had I the power that some say Dian had,
Thy temples should be planted presently
With horns, as was Actaeon’s, and the hounds
Should drive upon thy new-transformed limbs,
Unmannerly intruder as thou art! (2.2.61-5)

And later, when Lavinia is found by her uncle, Marcus immediately suspects that “some Tereus hath deflowered” his niece (2.3.26). He painfully observes that because Philomela only lost her tongue, the mythical girl was still able to tell her story through sewing, “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” (2.3.40-3). Finally, when Titus
initiates his revenge against Chiron and Demetrius for the attack on his daughter, he tells the rapists, “worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Progne I will be revenged” (5.2.194-5).

This essay is a (very rough) initial attempt to Ovidian myths of hunter and hunted through to the violation of specific bodies in *Titus Andronicus*. It considers the gendering of dismemberment in the play, paying particular attention to the male and female bodies of the text as loci of different but equally horrific violence. I am especially interested in the way violence against male and female bodies is authorized and legitimized in the play. Like Philomel, Lavinia is clearly portrayed as a victim, guilty only of being seen; like Actaeon, Bassianus (as well as the other men in the play) is depicted more ambivalently, albeit guilty only of seeing. Audiences watching *Titus Andronicus* witness the reported deaths of Titus’ twenty-one soldier-sons, the ritualized killing of Alarbus, the slaying of Mutius, the murder of Bassianus, the maiming of Titus, the beheadings of Martius and Quintus, the hanging of the Clown, the cooking of Demetrius and Chiron, the dual stabbings of Titus and Saturninus, and the live burial of Aaron. Yet the critical discussion of bodies in the play has been focused almost exclusively on the violated body of Lavinia. These insightful investigations have helped us to re-read the violated body of Lavinia, but have done little to improve our understanding of the male bodies stacked up alongside her. Paying attention to the violated male bodies in the play will help to expose the ethics of violence connected to the gendered body and will help challenge the common, nearly universal feminist claim that, as Teresa de Lauretis puts it, “the subject of violence is always, by definition, masculine,” and the object of violence is always, by definition, feminine (43). Obviously, this cannot be true or we would not have hundreds, thousands, even millions of men

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killed or maimed in armed conflict,\(^2\) nor would we have ten times the number men than women killed in this particular play. Even in an exceedingly patriarchal system such as Rome (perhaps especially in such a system), male bodies face constant physical danger. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, “Male privilege is also a trap, and it has its negative side in the permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances” (50). In Shakespeare’s plays, and in Titus in particular, the assertion of manliness often means alarming physical risk, sometimes resulting in death. This is clearly seen when Titus, after he has made his “latest farewell to their souls” (1.1.149) and lowered his sons to rest in the Andronici tomb, describes his sons as having been “slain manfully in arms”:

    Rome, I have been thy soldier forty years,
    And led my country’s strength successfully,
    And buried one-and-twenty valiant sons
    Knighted in field, slain manfully in arms
    In right and service of their noble country. (1.1.193-7)

Like all of Shakespeare’s male characters, Titus’ sons are formed and informed by the sociocultural expectation of male violence; their appellative and effective manhood depends on their ability to perform the offices of men, and for those offices they are paid with an epitaph that extols their masculinity and lauds them for how “manfully” they died.

    In contrast, female bodies in Shakespeare are figured neither as appropriate sites of violence nor as appropriate agents of violence. When Tamora refuses to hear Lavinia’s imprecations in the forest, she unsexes herself (like Lady Macbeth) by denying womanly compassion and instead positions herself as an analogue to the merciless Tereus. She delegates the violence against Lavinia and Bassianus to her sons (appropriate masculine agents of

\(^2\) Such as at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, where all the combatants were male: British casualties were 420,000; French casualties were 195,000; and German casualties were 650,000 (Laffin 399).
violence), but rejects feminine mercy so thoroughly that by the end of the play she is described as a “ravenous tiger” whose “life was beastly and devoid of pity” (5.3 194, 198). Of course, as with every example of violated bodies, the relationship between Tamora’s gender and bloodshed becomes complicated by intersecting concepts such as revenge, nationhood, and barbarism, but the differences in audience response to her death and that of Lavinia’s rape and later death may stem from each woman’s adherence to or rejection of traditional feminine roles. Tamora may “bearest a woman’s face” (2.3.136), but she contravenes the normalized corporeal expectations of female bodies when she arrogates masculine authority within the realm of physical violence. Unlike Lavinia’s ravishment, which is depicted as criminal, Tamora’s murder becomes justified, in some part, as a reaction to her own unnatural transgression against femininity.

As Chiron and Demetrius’ disguised performances late in the play suggest, Rape and Murder are brothers, yet each act produces radically different, deeply gendered responses. The point here is not to belittle the horror Lavinia endures nor to denigrate the criticism that discusses her plight, but rather to point out the tendency to view Lavinia’s non-lethal ordeal as far more disturbing than the various lethal encounters that befall the men in the play. Not only do sociocultural biases promote the blackly humorous scenes of male destruction in Titus, such as when the Andronici compete to cut off their own hands (3.1.161-90), but such predetermined attitudes also render invisible the many instances of masculine death when viewed alongside the anguish of Lavinia. Even Titus, who has had twenty-one sons killed in battle, one son killed by his own hand, one son-in-law murdered, two sons condemned to death, and one son banished, declares that “that which gives [his] soul the greatest spurn / Is dear Lavinia” (3.1.101-2). Elisabeth Bronfen argues that “Because they are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death. Though in a plethora of representations
feminine death is perfectly visible we only see it with some difficulty” (3). But if we count the depictions of male death compared to those of feminine demise, we find three female bodies dead at the end of Titus (Lavinia, Tamora, and the Nurse); they are accompanied by thirty-one male bodies (or pieces of them) and the promise of one more (one Moor). Perhaps, because they are so prevalent, so multitudinous, we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of masculine death. These deaths are perfectly visible, but we only see them with some difficulty.

**Rape and the Female Body**

Of course, Lavinia also suffers grievous bodily harm in Titus, but the presentation of that violence is markedly different. Aebischer, discussing “the relative restraint of Shakespeare’s playtext” when it places Lavinia’s rape offstage, asks the insightful question, “If Titus can chop off his hand on-stage and Hieronimo, in Kyd’s roughly contemporary play, The Spanish Tragedy, can bite off and spit out his own tongue, why is the playtext so reluctant to portray the process of Lavinia’s mutilation?” (24). She observes that, in contrast to the performance text (the play on stage), the playtext (the play on page) removes Lavinia’s rape from her body and replaces it into the words of her male relatives; her suffering is thus subsumed by their grief. On stage, however, Lavinia’s textual erasure is necessarily reversed by her very real physical presence on stage. In her body, the “unspeakable” is spoken, the “unrepresentable” represented. Thus, bodies in performance open up the play in ways the playtext can only suggest. Aebischer notes that the stage direction for Lavinia’s return after her rape and mutilation, “in its explicit display of the opened-up female body, borders on sadistic pornography” (29). The rape is both “ob-scene” and obscene.

These are excellent observations, but Aebischer never answers her own question, nor
does she explore the implications of that answer. Why is it that we are able to witness male bodies suffering horrific acts of cruelty but cannot bear to see a woman’s body violated? Looking at Lavinia’s rape and mutilation, Aebischer quotes Lynda Nead’s description of obscenity: “Art is being defined in terms of the containing of form within limits; obscenity, on the other hand, is defined in terms of excess, as form beyond limit, beyond the frame of representation.” (20). Lavinia’s rape is something that the early moderns would have considered obscene. Consequently, it occurred ob-scene. In contrast, Titus’ mutilation, Hieronimo’s self-mutilation, and Mutius’ death were not considered obscene, and therefore none was performed ob-scene. The answer to Aebischer’s question, then, seems to imply that female mutilation exists beyond appropriate limits, that it is somehow more disturbing than male mutilation.

Of course, Lavinia’s violation complicates the question of obscenity because there is no crime against a man that is precisely analogous to the sexualized violation of Lavinia’s rape, and on the stage there is no equivalent violence that is similarly sexualized. The play anticipates the attack on Lavinia when Saturninus’ figures Bassianus’ abduction of Lavinia as a rape: “Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape” (1.1.401). Tina Mohler sees a similar metaphoric language in the scenes surrounding the pit, where the dual stabbing of Bassianus by Chiron and Demetrius “establishes a powerful structural similarity between what Chiron and Demetrius do to Bassianus and what we have been told they will now do to Lavinia, since perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the proposed rape is that it will be jointly undertaken”; she points out, however, that the “metaphoric rape of Bassianus is staged by means of the literal rape of Lavinia” (29, 24). This is true, but we might also note that the metaphoric death of Lavinia in this scene is staged by the literal death of Bassianus. No matter how powerful the literal death and metaphoric rape of Bassianus, the literal rape and metaphoric death of Lavinia, even when performed ob-scene, is
consistently described by critics and audiences as more disturbing.

Perhaps part of the obscenity in the case of Lavinia involves the eroticized act of sexual violence/intercourse, rather than simply the violence against a female body. In contrast to early modern men, who gained honor through death, women could only lose honor through sexual violation. Pieter Spierenburg observes that “In almost every society, male honor is considered to be quite different from female honor. Men may take pride in attacking fellow men, whether they use this force to protect women or for other reasons. Passivity, in violent and peaceful situations, is a cardinal feminine virtue” (2). Unlike the men we have been discussing, whose honor is intertwined with violence and physical threat, a woman’s honor is tied to her sexuality: a maid’s to her virginity, a wife’s to her chastity. In Jonson’s Volpone, for example, when Celia learns of her husband’s plan to offer her body to the supposedly ailing Volpone, she begs Corvino, “Sir, kill me, rather: I will take down poison, / Eat burning coals, do anything—” (3.7.94-5). When he bids her to respect his venture, she asks, “Before your honour?” (3.7.38), but her honor—even her immortal soul—is also at stake. Despite Corvino’s assurances that no other should know of her infidelity, Celia resists, once more questioning him: “Are heaven and saints then nothing?” (3.7.53). For Celia, sexual purity is not just a social code; it is a moral ordinance. The act of adultery represents for her a transgression against God, as well as a social or legal violation.

The situation would have been similar in the case of rape. As Ian Donaldson notes, “No distinction was made in this matter between adultery and rape, for the polluting effect of both acts was thought to be the same” (23). When Titus asks Saturninus, “Was it well done of rash Virginius / To slay his daughter with his own right hand / Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?” (5.3.36-8), the emperor contends that it was, “Because the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows” (5.3.40-1). Lavinia’s rape is associated
with “shame” and “sorrow” (5.3.46-7), and she must die in order to kill her shame (and her father’s). According to Arthur Little, Shakespeare’s depiction of the rape of Lavinia is connected to issues of sacrifice and racial purity: “According to the sacrificial principle, Lavinia becomes free of this private crime by having the crime publicly reenacted on her body” (56).\(^3\) The public nature of the killing highlights the communal aspect of the act and helps to re-frame Lavinia’s murder as a “sacrifice.” Celia Daileader also imagines Lavinia’s rape in terms of social sacrifice, but she broadens the scope of her examination to include a discussion of the woman’s place within the work of art itself. Recognizing the erotic function of “killing” a woman into art, Daileader explicitly connects these female sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ:

not only is Christ’s passion a necessary precondition for the eroticization of a woman’s death (or a man’s)—but the erotic element itself perpetuates this theme in art. The word “martyr” is Latin for “witness”: a witness of God; a death to be witnessed. Sacrifice requires an audience; thus, martyrdom is \textit{redeemed} as a subject for art. After all, Christ is killed into art every day. (105-6)\(^4\)

Daileader is speaking of the objectification of a woman’s body, with particular emphasis on her beauty, but “killing into art” also performs a memorializing function, where a woman’s beauty becomes timeless inside a painting.

\textbf{Death and the Male Body}

For men, there is a similar dialectic of sacrifice and immortalization, although bravery and manhood, rather than beauty, are usually transformed into art. For example, in a passage from \textit{Pierce Penilesse} (1592) that probably refers to \textit{1 Henry 6}, Thomas Nashe, commenting on the revival of “our forefathers valiant acts” asks, “what can be a sharper reprove to these

\footnote{3 For more on this, see Little, especially 29-54. Daileader also sees women as sacrifices in \textit{The Duchess of Malfi} and \textit{The Lady’s Tragedy}; see especially 79-106.}

\footnote{4 Daileader models her discussion on the work of Laurie Finke, who describes “‘killing’ a woman into art” (Finke 361); Finke herself borrows this phrase from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s \textit{Madwoman in the Attic} (14-17).}
degenerate effeminate dayes of ours”? He exclaims,

How would it haue ioyed braue Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, to haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least, (at seuerall times) who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (F3)

Notice that Nashe’s laudatory lines behold Talbot not in any engagement where he defeats the French, but when he is “fresh bleeding.” In this way, men are also sacrificial, like Christ. In The Soldiers Honour (1617), Thomas Adams asserts, “We are all soldiers, as we are Christians. [. . .] You bear Spiritual Arms against the enemies of your country” (A3). As a Christian and a soldier, there is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life for his friend. We tend to think of Christ as particularly un-warlike, but as Milton McGatch notes, “Christ was regarded as the lord and hero par excellence, unremitting in his demand of obedience, who overcame Satan’s power and his claims over the loyal Christian retainer. He had triumphed over death and would preside [. . .] over the eternal and blissful banquet of his chosen and faithful followers” (80). In fact, the blood-stained warriors of Shakespeare’s plays may have recalled the image of the Christus miles, such as the messianic Christ-figure of William Herebert’s medieval lyric, “What is he, this lordling that cometh from the fight?” whose garments have been stained by blood, as if he has been stomping grapes in a winepress. Unlike the victimized women discussed by Daileader, Christian warriors may sacrifice themselves and still retain their masculine agency. Thus, when men are sacrificed, it is glorious, in contrast to the “crime” of a woman’s death. In Titus, men remain on stage to have hands chopped off and throats cut because extreme violence against male bodies was not ob(-)scene for early moderns, not “beyond the frame of representation.” In fact, through what René Girard calls the “communal institution” of sacrifice (Violence 101-2), the destruction of male bodies in the play becomes explicitly linked to the survival of the body-
politic. Not only do men die in martial service to the nation, but their public and private sacrifices provide models of manhood. Unlike Lavinia’s rape, the violence against these men must be seen. As Daileader notes above, sacrifice requires an audience, and male martyrs provide witnesses to the appropriate bodily sacrifice required to maintain the social order.

The beginning of Titus emphasizes this communal nature of male sacrifice, when Lucius demands an offering for the sake of his brothers’ shades:

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 unappeased,
Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth. (1.1.96-9)

Unlike the murders of Saturninus, Titus, or Mutius, this death occurs offstage, but Lucius calls attention to the ritual’s spectacularity when he returns and asks his father to “see” (and smell):

“See, lord and father, how we have performed / Our Roman rites. Alarbus’ limbs are lopped / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire, / Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky” (1.1.142-5). Tamora describes the sacrifice as an instance of “cruel irreligious piety” (1.1.130), but the rite is not designed to benefit her or any of the other Goths. According to Girard, in sacrifices such as this one, the community selects an Other to act as a kind of scapegoat for its members. Girard’s model suggests that “The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissention scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice” (Violence 8). The situation in Titus comprises all the constitutive parts of Girard’s paradigm: the outsider (Alarbus), the elements of dissention (Saturninus’ and Bassianus’ competing factions), the potential violence (both internally and externally), and the bloody ritual itself. The problem, of course, is that the
sacrifice does not work. Violent discord continues unabated through the end of the play, and one might wonder, if Alarbus’ death is supposed to obviate future violence, why are so many bodies maimed and murdered on stage?

One possible explanation might be that external forces, in the persons of Aaron and the Goths, exert their contaminating influence on Rome and nullify the effect of the initial sacrifice. In this reading, the murder of the three Goths and the impending death of the Moor all serve to purge Rome of strife and violence—a second set of sacrifices to make up for the ineffectiveness of the play’s initial attempt. But this interpretation does not explain the Roman deaths at the end of the play, nor does it acknowledge the nearly dozen maimed, mutilated, and murdered male bodies that populate the play. Girard asserts that sacrifice protects “all the members of the community from their respective violence—but always through the intermediary of the surrogate victim” (Violence 102), yet he makes a distinction between “a scapegoat in the text (the clearly visible theme),” where “the text acknowledges the scapegoat effect,” but is not controlled by it, and “a scapegoat of the text (the hidden structural principle),” where the “text is controlled by the effect of a scapegoat it does not acknowledge” (Scapegoat 119). In Titus, Alarbus is clearly figured as the scapegoat “in the text.” I would suggest, however, that the more prevalent deaths—those of the thirty other men who die before, after, and during the action of the play—represent the scapegoats “of the text.”

An important difference between my interpretation of sacrifice in the play and Girard’s conceptual framework is that Girard conceives of sacrificial rites as inflicted on victims from outside the community, on external surrogates. In Titus, however, twenty-six of the slain males come from within the Roman citizenry. When considered in relation to the body-politic, the consumption of Chiron and Demetrius by their mother parallels the sacrificial consumption of
the Roman men *pro patria*. The image then is one of the Roman state eating itself, but this nationalistic cannibalism may have been understood as medicinal within the context of controversial contemporary medical theories. Louise Noble suggests that, despite the socially ambivalent reactions to actual cannibalism, “early modern European medical discourse constitutes a socially sanctioned form of cannibalism, where the human body is literally eaten for pharmacological purposes”; Noble identifies not only Tamora’s sons, but also Aaron as the play’s “surrogate victim, the *pharmakos*” (678) that is “meant to absorb (wipe away) the contamination” of Rome (701). Noble may overstate influence of medicinal cannibalism on the play, but if the anthropophagy is supposed to be read as therapeutic, then the men must symbolize the physic in that their sacrificial deaths work to heal an ailing Rome. Mars has long been acknowledged as an eater of men, and the men in the play are “plucked into the swallowing womb” of the deep pit of the grave (2.3.39-40), but from that tomb/womb the state gains new life, nourished by its feasting on men.

*Titus Andronicus* certainly is a play about dismembering (heads, hands, political states), but it is also a play about re-membering. Within the context of manhood, remembering dismembered bodies and acts of martial valor allows for a re-membering of the state. Thus, Lucius’ citation of his own “worthless praise” (5.3.116) at the end of the play is more than simple self-aggrandizement or mere digression; it is an essential element of masculine sacrifice:

> I am the turned-forth, be it known to you,  
> That have preserved [Rome’s] welfare in my blood,  
> And from her bosom took the enemy’s point,

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5 Noble argues that cannibalism represented a complex, paradoxical topic that signified the taboo and barbaric in the Other but could symbolize medicinal enlightenment in the European. In my experience, early modern allusions to British cannibalism seem to depict the act as destructive rather than restorative, as in the tendency of both royalists and Levelers during the Civil War to satirize each other as cannibalistic gluttons (see Potter 31-2).

6 Larry Benson suggests that the depiction in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* of Mars accompanied by a wolf (1.2041-50) is derived from the iconographical tradition of Albricus Philosophus’ *De deorum imaginibus*, which offers *mares vorans*, Latin for “devouring males,” as the etymological basis for Mars “Mavors” (836n).
Sheathing the steel in my advent’rous body.  
Alas, you know I am no vaunter, I.  
My scars can witness, dumb although they are,  
That my report is just and full of truth. (5.3.108-14)

Like Martius’ scars in *Coriolanus*, Lucius’ scars record a masculinity that is literally inscribed on his body. These marks of manhood must be seen and the healed cuts inflicted on male bodies must be remembered. Within this milieu, “fresh bleeding” figures of masculine sacrifice and valor provide models and inspiration for other men and help to atone for the sins of both the individual and the community. At the beginning of the play, Titus refuses to rule and “help to set a head on headless Rome” (1.1.185-6). This mistake damages the body-politic and impels the tremendous violence of the play, but Titus’ later sacrifice, combined with the sacrifices of the other men, provide Marcus with *exempla* to teach the “sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome,” how to re-member their state and “how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs again into one body” (5.3.66-71). This context, coupled with a better understanding of the sociocultural expectations for the hazarding and protection of gendered bodies, makes differing reactions to gendered violence in the play more comprehensible. Lavinia’s sacrifice may be necessary for the “art” of the play, but it provides only heartbreak and “consuming sorrow” (3.1.60) for her and her family. In contrast, the bodily sacrifices of the men provide memorials to their manhood and continuance of the state. Like Titus’ sons, these men will “sleep in peace, slain in [their] country’s wars,” resting with honor in a “sacred receptacle” of joys, a “Sweet cell of virtue and nobility” (1.1.91-3). What more could a man desire?

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7 Many critics want to read male wounds as marks of shame rather than marks of valor because they open the men up, making them “leaky vessels,” like women, but as Volumnia declares in *Coriolanus*, blood from a wound “more becomes a man / Than gilt his trophy” (1.3.36-7). And as Coppélia Kahn observes, “through the discursive operations of *virtus*, wounds become central to the signification of masculine virtue, and thus to the construction of the Roman hero” (17). Some may interpret wounds and wounded men in Shakespeare through a strict application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of *classical* (closed, singular, male) and *grotesque* (open, multiple, female) bodies, but Shakespeare is not Rabelais, and *Titus* reveals the limits of Bakhtinian body-theory reference to the plays.
Works Cited


