

**Titus Andronicus Essay**

*Titus Andronicus* is a play rife with intertextual references that are frequently employed by the characters to cement their understanding of the world. This strong reliance on Roman and Greek literature has led critics like Danielle Hilaire to argue that ‘in Titus’s Rome, text is everything’ from the way characters interact to the morals they hold.¹ I intend to develop Hilaire’s argument to show that characters who are more aware of the appropriated texts have more narrative power, aided by their awareness of Titus’s deeply intertextualised Rome.²

Though Aaron begins the play as a slave character who put ‘[a]way with slavish weeds and servile thoughts’, he appears to be the character who is most aware of the canonical texts due to his confidence in utilising their plots.³ Shakespeare foregrounds this idea early in Aaron’s character arc as his opening soliloquy features a range of intertextual references from the ‘Prometheus [being] tied to Caucasus’ (*Titus Andronicus* 2.1.17) to the Greek Gods characterised in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Interestingly, Aaron’s literary knowledge – which Hilaire believes to be integral to establishing a ‘precedent’ in the world of *Titus* is doubly subversive as he contradicts the role of the illiterate slave whilst surpassing the Goths’ knowledge in the Roman canon significantly.⁴ It is clear that Aaron’s role in the play is not to be a realistically conventional character but rather a villain whose transformative abilities will rival even the Andronici family. He is at his most convincing when transforming Lavinia into an object to be lusted over and

---

⁴ Hilaire, p. 317
attacked when he states to Tamora that ‘[Titus’] Philomel must lose her tongue today’ (*Titus Andronicus* 2.3.43). As Aaron’s goal during this scene is to transform Lavinia into a Philomela-type victim, one could also argue that he experienced the same ‘unbridled desire[s]’ that afflicted Tereus in Demetrius and Chiron.\(^5\) Thus it is clear that Aaron’s gift goes beyond merely alluding to the tales of Ovid as he is able to transform and appropriate *Metamorphoses* at will to control the other characters of *Titus Andronicus* who must adhere to these narratives.\(^6\) This is further supported as Lavinia’s mutilation goes a step further than Philomela’s because Lavinia’s hands are removed to stop her weaving a tapestry to implicate her rapists. This seems to be Aaron’s idea as it highlights his ability to alter the plot rather than copy it – he is showing his literary skill by learning from the tales of Ovid and adapting the plot to increase the likelihood of success. By explicitly referencing *Metamorphoses* in Aaron’s dialogue as inspiration for the appropriations, Shakespeare is developing a precedent wherein canonical texts will strongly influence the characters of the play.

A prime example of this is Titus’ murder of Lavinia in the climax of the play, an action that even Saturninus condemns as ‘unnatural and unkind’ (*Titus Andronicus* 5.3.47). Though Titus’ actions would have been hard to justify for contemporary audiences, the moral systems implicit in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* actually suggest that Titus was right to kill his daughter. In Kline’s translation of *Metamorphoses*, Philomela condemns herself as her ‘sister’s rival’ (*Metamorphoses*, Bk. 6) as she was raped by Procne’s husband, suggesting that Philomela has been defiled and shamed by her rapist. Titus’ exclamation of ‘die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee’ (*Titus Andronicus*, 5.3.45) seems to adopt a similar ideology as Lavinia is said to be ‘shame[d]’ by Chiron

---


6 Though his argument does mention specific characters, see Jonathan Bale’s introduction for a discussion on how *Titus Andronicus’s* plot is influenced by Ovid’s texts: Jonathan Bale, ‘Introduction’ in *Titus Andronicus*, pp. 1-95, (p.34-35).
and Demetrius. Bethany Packard raises an interesting idea regarding Lavinia that ‘the tales of Lucrece and Philomela are used by Aaron […] to inscribe Lavinia as a raped woman’. Though Prichard’s argument supports my earlier point regarding Aaron’s textual abilities, I would develop her view to argue that Aaron used the tales to inscribe Lavinia as an Ovidian raped woman complete with the morals that surround the role. In this light, Titus is not bloodthirsty but is in fact using his own literary understanding to complete the character arc imposed on Lavinia by Aaron. Titus was forced to murder Lavinia as he had to remain faithful to Metamorphoses hence his action cannot be condemned. Indeed, one could also argue that Titus has two victories in the narrative over Aaron: he is able to defeat the Goths to allow the Andronici family to once again rule and he is able to kill his own child whereas Aaron is not. Though Aaron fails to murder his own child despite the fact that it would be the most politically advantageous action, Titus succeeds in murdering Lavinia due to his adherence to Ovid. If Aaron’s greatest strength is appropriating texts to serve his political purpose, Titus’ strength is doing anything to strengthen Rome, even if that means killing his son, Mutius, or his daughter, Lavinia.

As Lavinia is a silent character for most of the play it is easy to underestimate her as a victim, though she does show evidence of textual awareness before her mutilation. This is particularly clear in her battle of wits with Tamora when she transforms Tamora’s self-referential ‘power that some say Dian had’ (Titus Andronicus, 2.2.61) into having a ‘goodly gift in horning’ (Titus Andronicus, 2.2.67). In other words, Lavinia transforms Tamora from a the beautiful yet cruel Diana into an Actaeon-character as she is cuckolding her husband, Saturninus, by engaging with another man. Though Lavinia cannot manipulate characters using appropriation like Aaron,

---

she is certainly capable of critiquing the Goths’ unsophisticated use of text. Despite Lavinia’s clear textual understanding, critics like Packard frequently portray her as a silent victim who lacks agency, even going so far to say that Lavinia using Marcus’ staff is symbolic of a second rape.\(^8\) 

Certainly, the fact that she needs Marcus’ staff to communicate removes some of the ‘inventive’ (Metamorphoses, Bk. 6) agency afforded to Philomela in Metamorphoses though one cannot forget that it is Lavinia who first ‘turns over [Ovid’s] books’ (Titus Andronicus, 4.1.29) to communicate her rape to the Andronici family. Put simply, I refute the claim that Lavinia is a mere victim in the play because she cannot verbally communicate with the other characters. Indeed, the fact that Aaron saw it as necessary to remove Lavinia’s hands as well as tongue does suggest that he believed her to be just as capable as Philomela in Metamorphoses. As such, the perceived lack of agency that Lavinia has in the later scenes cannot be credited to the failures of her character but rather the shrewd forward-thinking of Aaron’s appropriative plan. Though Aaron’s manipulation of the source text certainly makes him appear more confident with Rome’s texts, his further brutality towards Lavinia suggests that she would have been wise enough to stop Aaron’s plan.

As much of the plot of Titus Andronicus relies heavily on Shakespeare’s characters explicitly drawing upon the works of Ovid to influence their world, it is clear that the use of appropriation is integral to the plot of the play. As such, one could argue that the most potent weapon in the play is a strong textual awareness rather than the sword, despite the criticisms that Titus Andronicus is too violent to be in a respectable canon. Those who have the greater awareness of the works of Metamorphoses can better appropriate Ovid’s plots to manipulate other characters,

\(^8\) Ibid, p. 293.
proving that the characters’ level of textual awareness directly correlates to the narrative agency they hold in the play.

**Word Count: 1,369**

**Bibliography**


I hereby certify that this submission is wholly my own work, and that all quotations from primary or secondary sources have been acknowledged. I have read the section on Plagiarism in the School Style Guide / my Stage & Degree Manual and understand that plagiarism and other unacknowledged debts will be penalised and may lead to failure in the whole examination or degree.