



Dinner is Served But it's Actually Just People: The Female Grotesque in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and specifically the characters of Lavinia and Tamora, to argue that the bodies of women in the play, bodies rendered grotesque through state-sanctioned violence and political subjugation, nonetheless find unique means by which to exert agency in a narrative dominated and dictated by the voices of men. The author argues that the female grotesque in the play is discursive of the way women's bodies are objectified by dominant early modern and contemporary male power structures, and explores how the grotesque may offer new readings on gender dynamics in early modern drama. In this way, *Titus Andronicus* offers unique insight into how the grotesque may be deployed in resistance to patriarchal power structures that threaten to, and often succeed in, controlling, deforming, and destroying women's bodies.

Keywords

Shakespeare, gender, Women's Studies, grotesque, Early Modern

The grotesque pervades Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), yet nowhere is the grotesque more powerfully embodied than in female bodies, those of Lavinia and Tamora, bodies that, through the acts they commit, and the acts committed upon them, enable the engine of the play's revenge plot. Tamora, former Queen of the Goths, is forced to watch her eldest son, Alarbus, dragged away to be ritually slaughtered before she is married off to Saturninus, the newly elected leader of the invading Roman army. In retaliation, Lavinia, the daughter of the general who captured her and subdued her people, is raped and mutilated, turned into—in the eyes of the play's male characters—a grotesque object. Though Lavinia's body outwardly reflects grotesque objectification, so too does Tamora's through symbolic association and her stature as the incorporated, appropriated Other, a body consumed by Rome that in turn consumes other bodies. In this essay, I argue that the bodies of Lavinia and Tamora, rendered grotesque through objectification by dominant male power structures, nonetheless function as agents of grotesque intervention, bodies capable of challenging dominant systems of power through the embodiment of abjection. Rather than embrace and reify the dominant power structures that objectify women, Shakespeare's play challenges early modern and contemporary audiences alike with grotesque representations that criticize masculine political and social dominance, and explores the female grotesque as discursive of the way women's bodies are objectified in patrilineal political and social structures.

To begin, I wish to review the grotesque mode both as it operated in early modern drama and literature as well as how it offers a contemporary conceptual framework for exploring the significance of Lavinia and Tamora. In his classic text, *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the early modern grotesque as an attempt to recover the body from medieval asceticism¹. The carnival excess and grotesque realism Bakhtin sees in Rabelais's work are reactions to a medieval materialism in which the body and its attendant flesh are vessels of severity, shells to starve, beat, and torture in submission to the spirit. The grotesque in early modern literature and drama is recuperative, a mode about recognizing the body as a constituent part of, and simultaneously apart from, a larger, more highly organized public body. Katrina Spadaro views the early modern grotesque as a genre of liminality, a parergonic "defined according to its relationship with genre and convention" (22). Within early modern fiction and drama, grotesque bodies represent the larger social tensions between deviancy and order, and play out on the stage, acting, Lai Sai Acon Chan reminds us, as tools of critique aimed squarely at the "metaphor of the body politic in Renaissance England by means of their representations of transgressive bodies" (92). In a state-sanctioned power structure in which deviance is consumed and made recognizable (what, for instance, happens to Tamora when she is absorbed into Roman state via her sublimation and marriage) the grotesque opens fissures in the process of incorporation and assimilation, and shows us how such "transgressive bodies" become focal points to explore alterity in personal and socio-political subjectivity.

¹ Bakhtin, p. 18

The grotesque in *Titus Andronicus* is centralized in Lavinia and Tamora, women whose bodies are made deviant and grotesque through brutal, often state-sanctioned violence and retribution. They embody, respectively, elements of the comic and the banquet, grotesque for their ability to commingle the horrendous and the disgusting with that which is alluring, attractive, and well-positioned in society. Philip Thompson calls this comingling of incompatibles in tension the “simultaneously laughable and horrifying or disgusting,” one relying upon “the co-presences of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable” (3). Within the grotesque, the comic and the terrifying don’t simply cross paths—they interact, directly, “in a state of tension” (Thompson 3) that produces discomfort. In the uncomfortable comingling of the comic and the horrible, the disgusting and the sublime, the grotesque refuses compartmentalization, acting as an affront to the mind’s classification systems (Harpham 4). But grotesque bodies threaten more than systems of classification; they threaten language itself, disrupting chains of linguistic signification through “thoughts that dangerously oppose and even threaten the artificial and contriving language of the court and the ideology within” (Chan 94). To disrupt language is to disrupt the structures, personal and social, relying upon its chains of signification, and through such disruption the grotesque may undermine dominant ideologies, disrupting their chains of signification, their systems of classification, and ultimately their ability to categorize. It makes plain, through its resultant discomfort, an awareness of the structures disrupted, the world and its organizations as directed by the forces shaken loose from their moorings. Discomfort redirects attention—splits it, one might say—toward both the object in question *and* our own uncomfortable bodies, and thus we perceive “not the world as we know it to be, but . . . as we fear it might be” (McElroy 11). In other words, the grotesque is the dialectic of subject-object, dominated and dominant, within, and perhaps in opposition to, a larger ideological framework.

In this re-direction of attention to object and objectified, dominated and dominant, the grotesque, even when deployed *by* dominant power structures, always subtly undermines such structures, creating moments in which a body “occupies a gap or interval,” a “narrative of emergent comprehension” (Harpham 15). Such gaps are moments of bodily discomfort so strong they compel the individual to scrutinize the bodiliness of flesh so often taken for granted, what Gail Paster describes as processes which “goes on daily, habitually, involuntarily, and universally; in this respect, bodiliness is the most rudimentary form of self-presence” (5). Paster’s book, *The Body Embarrassed*, explores how the grotesque and shame work in early modern drama to both construct and critique social structures of the time, and argues that bodiliness, rarely consciously considered, is precisely the symbolic body upon which the grotesque operates. Bodiliness is what the grotesque teases to the surface through discomfort, through dimpled flesh, queasy stomachs, and laughter. The grotesque makes plain the state of the body *as* the body, as a collection of interworking, interlocked biological systems, the smallest of which can impact the largest and most important. As a symbol, the grotesque body represents real human flesh and the relationship of the body to the social orders and practices, those functions of society and culture, involuntary to many people, that nonetheless comprise the self-presence of a larger social system of

knowledge and power. According to Paster, “because what is lived and true will approach conscious understanding only incompletely and intermittently, if at all, the silent and invisible effects of what might be termed bodily insignificant may be among the most powerful of social operations” (5). The grotesque body reveals not simply what is known and unknown about the body, but also the world it.

The grotesque is an ambivalent mode, and while I argue that its deployment often undermines or challenges dominant power structures, I admit it can just as easily be deployed *by and in support of* those same power structures. Early modern drama makes ample use of the grotesque, and while a survey of its many grotesque works falls beyond the scope of this essay, it’s worth noting how others, including other works by Shakespeare, contextualize the mode in the period and beyond. What, for example, to make of Moll Cutpurse in Middleton’s and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* (1611)? While not typically categorized as a grotesque, Miles Taylor correctly finds the play’s reliance on witty cant and gender liminality work to maintain a constant tension between “repugnance and fascination” (117), a tone and mood that permeates its characters’ uncomfortable interaction with the marginalized bodies of its women and queer characters. At the center of the play is Moll, whose body, Matthew Kendrick observes, aligns with Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body through its ability to destabilize gender and social categories (117). There is, of course, the works of Rabelais, whose grotesque comedies *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* are thoroughly discussed by Bakhtin; while not plays, Rabelais’s works share much in common with much early modern grotesque drama, and even later strains of the grotesque, particularly Italian grotesques of the twentieth century such as Chiarelli’s *The Mask and the Face* (1913) and Cavvachioli’s *The Bird of Paradise* (1918). Shakespeare’s own *The Tempest* (1623), published 29 years after *Titus*, incorporates many of the same elements--bawdy humor commingled with abjection and estrangement--and, as scholar Laurence Wright notes, purposely links the character of Caliban with relevant grotesque imagery of inhuman gargoyles and “topsy-turvy,” scatological depictions of joined human forms (22-23). In *Richard III* (1597), Michael Steig points out, Richard, Quilip, and Matzerath possess what seems at times supernatural talents, and alternately work to fascinate and repulse other characters and audiences alike while they “threaten the normal, official order of things” (170).

Titus is by no means exceptional for its incorporation of the grotesque, neither within early modern drama, nor when compared to Shakespeare’s other works. It is, however, a work deeply concerned with challenging dominant power structures, namely male-dominated state-sanctioned violence, and it does this primarily through its incorporation of the grotesque. In mapping *Titus* into a larger tradition of early modern grotesque works, I hope to show how the play offers, even when compared against Shakespeare’s other grotesque works, a unique and specific focal point of resistance: the disruption and criticism of socially, politically, and domestically masculine power structures by emphasizing estranged, abjected, and marginalized female bodies. Nonetheless, if the grotesque may result from terrible acts, such as the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, it is, as Leonard Cassuto emphasizes, “born of the violation of basic categories” (6). Within the grotesque lies a multiplicity of potential points of what Mary

Russo calls “hidden culture contents,” nodes of slippage calling into question dominant signs, signifiers, and, of course, entire chains of signification (8-9). The grotesque may be mapped onto a body, but the grotesque body will, by virtue of its grotesque quality, distort everything around it.

The mapping of the grotesque onto female bodies in *Titus Andronicus* begins in the relationship of such bodies to space, to geography, and more specifically to the land upon which Lavinia is brutalized and Tamora reigns. Aaron, Tamora’s secret lover, reveals as much when he lays out the plan to defile and disfigure Lavinia to Tamora’s sons:

A speedier course than lingering languishment
Must we pursue, and I have found the path.
My lords, a solemn hunting in in hand;
There will the lovely Roman ladies troop;
The forest walks are wide and spacious;
And many unfrequented plots there are
Fitted by kind for rape and villainy:
Single you there this dainty doe,
And strike her home by force, if not by words (2.1.114-22)

The “path” refers to both Aaron’s course of action and the literal path upon which Chiron and Demetrius will find Lavinia, the “forest walks” in and around which the “solemn hunting” will take place. Of note is the dominant adjective “solemn,” a descriptor that emphasizes the tremendous significance and seriousness of the designated event, the “hunting,” of Lavinia, the “dainty doe.” Already, then, Lavinia’s body is a grotesque merging of human and animal, one of the “ladies” in 117, and by line 121 a “doe,” and Aaron’s proscription is literal: In naming the forest as the site for civic sport *and* the brutalization of Lavinia’s body, Aaron emphasizes a symbolic and material connection between the land and the female body. Implicit in his threat is this: the body of Lavinia will be *unmade*—from human-animal hybrid to object—and reduced to another piece of geography open to exploitation, another patch of ground to make into a bloody pit. Caroline Lamb puts it succinctly when she writes, “*Titus Andronicus* also suggests a linkage between the trauma suffered by the political body and the physically violent trauma inflicted upon the human bodies of Rome’s citizens” (47). Indeed, the relationship between the objectified female body and the land of Rome in the play seems inescapable, even in adaptation. In directing her adaptation of the play, Julie Taymor emphasizes this when she elects to replace Lavinia’s hands post-rape with gnarled sticks and twigs, grafted to the end of her mutilated wrists, and frames the disfigured woman atop a tree stump amid a barren, swampy vista. There, as in the play, Lavinia’s body is made to match the land, degraded into a grotesque object silent, bleeding, and “fitted” for “villainy.”

But while Chiron and Demetrius remove her tongue, Lavinia is not truly silent. Deprived of speech, she finds other methods of communication. Act 4, Scene 4 opens with a strangely comic scene in which Lavinia chases young Lucius around the stage, unable to articulate her intent through speech. She turns instead to writing, holding a staff with her mouth and guiding it with her stumps, and in so doing communicates the nature

of her trauma: “Stuprum. Chiron. Demetrius” (4.1.79). In discussing Lavinia’s use of “Stuprum,” Emily Detmer-Goebel asserts that the term marks a noteworthy departure from the myth of Philomela, the base for Shakespeare’s disfigured heroine, in a way “suggestive not only of her sense of shame . . . ‘Stuprum’ might be read as naming her ‘transformation’ as much as it names what was done to her” (86). Through writing, Lavinia recognizes her grotesque objectification, from subject to object, from Roman daughter to Othered “it.” But her ability to articulate it literally spell it out from the ends of her grotesque, amputated wrist upon the ground both gives her agency over the naming of her trauma and reinforces her connection with the land. More importantly, it allows her to exert agency over the masculine social and political structures responsible for her brutalization, for it is through her authorship that the play’s revenge plot is enacted; her writing becomes the play’s central text, the confession needed to spur the Andronici men to action. As Detmer-Goebel notes, “Lavinia may be dependent on men to tell her story, but at the same time, the men are positioned as dependent upon her; without her authorship, they cannot know, let alone revenge, the rape” (85). This interdependence is, Lynn Maxwell states, uncommon in Shakespeare where women’s bodies rarely impact the larger social, political, and philosophical workings of the world, what she calls the “macrocosm” of early modern society (194). Lavinia’s ability to radically alter the personal and political landscape of Rome--her family will, after all, risk everything to butcher the Empress and her sons--indicates the power of the grotesque in the play. Grotesque bodies communicate in grotesque ways, inscribing their own traumatic narratives on the land, and in doing so, alter forever the way her fellow Andronici see the world around them. What is revealed at the end of Lavinia’s stumps is not simply a story of one woman’s rape and disfigurement, but the way in which all women, Roman and otherwise, are likewise vulnerable to brutal mistreatment under patrilineal power structures. However the Andronici once saw the world, after Lavinia finds her silent, grotesque voice, they perceive the world as they *feared* it to be.

More than anything, Lavinia is a force for instability, able to disrupt normative views of the world and land, instigate radical political change, and embody and reflect the worst, most violent and debased aspects of the play’s other characters. In discussing the instability generated by and contained within Lavinia, Bernice Harris writes:

That Lavinia might make choices on her own functions even more to destabilize power arrangements and negotiations. Thus, Lavinia can potentially function as a primary agent for the construction of masculine power and authority for any one of them. Lavinia is a construction deeply invested with discursive function and, as an unstable signifier, she can provide for any one of them an assured masculinity: Lavinia is a “changing piece.” (390)

The grotesque mode may work to generate discomfort and violate basic categories, but the play’s grotesque female bodies act cumulatively as the “unstable signifier” for Otherness in *Titus*. It is not only Lavinia’s body that holds such discursive power, but all female bodies precisely because all female bodies are grotesque—defined as they are, Mary Russo claims, against a masculine norm (12). For the characters in the play, particularly for the male characters, men’s bodies delineate the correct, normative

dimensions of the *human body*. The body of a woman, on the other hand, can never be anything *but* deviant, abnormal, not fully human.

Lavinia was grotesque before her rape and mutilation, and according to Margaret Payne, hers is a body “gendered and commodified before its violent treatment from the very opening scenes of the play” (12). Indeed, Lavinia is “commodified” and coded as a receptacle for men’s desires by Aaron when he coerces Tamora’s sons to rape and mutilate Lavinia: “There speak, and strike, brave boys, and take your / turns; / there serve your lust, shadow’d from heaven’s eye, / and revel in Lavinia’s treasury” (2.1.130-32). Here, “take” refers to the “strike” separates Lavinia from Bassianus and thus render her once more a tradable commodity, and to Lavinia’s body, the “treasury” in which Chiron and Demetrius are to locate what is most valuable: their own pleasure. Here, the female body becomes, according to Coppelia Kahn, an analog for the Andronicus family tomb seen at the beginning of the play:

[A] receptacle, an enclosed cell, that stores up the joy and sweetness of successive generations specifically through commemorating for posterity the fame gained by male ancestors through death in battle. The daughter’s womb is intended to produce sons for the state; the father’s tomb keeps them ‘in store,’ to generate ideological as distinct from biological *virtus*... . Lavinia is both the container they would break open and the valued nourishment it stores. (52-53)

Kahn makes clear the symbolic link within the play between the female body and the tomb: the former holds the potential for the extension and continued glorification the latter cements in time. Together, they promise the cycle of life, death, and rebirth fundamental to the grotesque, for as it promises pleasure and life, so too does it promise degradation and decay into death.

Lavinia’s grotesque body shocks and disorients, and even Marcus, Lavinia’s uncle, is not immune. When he first spies the mutilated Lavinia, he calls out: “Who is this? my niece, that flies away so fast!” (2.4.11). The mutilated and muted body of Lavinia now displays what was previously locked in grotesque potential. oth Titus and Lucius react in a similar manner:

Marcus

Titus, prepare thy aged eyes to weep;
Or, if not so, thy noble heart to break:
I bring consuming sorrow to thine age.

Titus

Will it consume me? let me see it then.

Marcus

This was thy daughter.

Titus

Why, Marcus, so she is.

Lucius

Ay me, this object kills me! (3.1.59-66)

Marcus introduces Lavinia is for the benefit of Titus, in order to emphasize, as Sonya Brockman puts it, “Lavinia’s new position as an object of spectacle; she is now only a

thing that provokes pity and sorrow” (335). Lavinia here is a grotesque object, the referent of the noun, “sorrow,” the “it” Titus has already beheld (she is present on stage with Marcus), and the literal “object” Lucius “kills”. Lucius’s reaction may be the most telling; made to see what has always been latent in the female body, Lucius is faced with a woman’s body that threatens normativity through her ability to symbolically link life to death, and for her refusal to remain silent about the crimes perpetrated against her flesh. What “kills” Lucius is not the sight of Lavinia, but the uncomfortable truths about Roman society inscribed upon her body.

The violence explicit in Lucius’s outburst indicates the degree to which Lavinia’s grotesque body impacts other bodies through discomfort. Any consideration of the grotesque must confront such points of discomfort, and one of the play’s sources of such is coupled to comedy. I pause here to ask: What is one meant to do with the humor in the play? Are we readers meant to laugh when Aaron compares Lavinia to a “dainty doe”? What about when Lavinia chases young Lucius about the stage, or when, at the play’s climax, Titus appears dressed as, of all things, a cook? Much of *Titus*’s comedy, I argue, stems from Shakespeare’s tendency to deploy humor to mock or parody power. The outrageous villainy of Aaron, not to mention the aforementioned reactions of Lucius and Titus above (along with the general plot of the play) fall into what Robert Maslen calls “one of Shakespeare’s favorite topics, the murderous link between masculinity and violence” (4). Like other playwrights of his age, comedy for Shakespeare was, Maslen argues, “inseparable from that of class conflict” (5). Shakespeare punched up with his humor, skewering his society’s elite even if they masqueraded on stage as Roman well-to-do. In this mockery by proxy, Shakespeare takes aim at those who dominate society’s social, political, and economic strata and exposes their greatest fears: a world in which women, even those so thoroughly brutalized and dominated they cannot enact their own revenge, nonetheless find ways to strike back at dominant power structures.

The humor of *Titus* is fundamentally grotesque, an examination of dominant and dominated. David Simon sees it positioned as “an interrogative attitude: a persistent sense of the possibility that appearances are duplicitous” (443). But neither Shakespeare nor *Titus Andronicus* favor a world in which women dominate men, politically or socially. Allison Meyer makes an excellent case that particularly in his histories Shakespeare often rejected then-prominent notions of queenly status in favor of a new masculine nationalism “marked by the exclusion of women and a revision of sources that recorded English history through the stories of its dynasties” (73). *Titus Andronicus* may not be one of the histories, but it nonetheless shares a world view with them. In *Titus*, men’s bodies are ground up for pies, mutilated, or ritually slain; women, on the other hand, are raped, mutilated beyond recognition, and subjected to a social and political systems in which they have always been grotesque objects, vessels from which (and into which) men find satiation. Both Shakespeare and the play may be toying with a vision of the world in which women can and do find their comeuppance, but the cost to female life and limb is staggering, and by the play’s end, none have survived to remark upon it.

Though spared the bodily trauma she helps to foist onto Lavinia, Tamora is no less grotesque. And it is Lavinia, snared between the men who will shortly rape her, who susses it out:

Lavinia

O Tamora! thou bear'st a woman's face—

Tamora

I will not hear her speak; away with her!

Lavinia

Sweet lords, entreat her hear me but a word. (2.3.135-37)

Lavinia correctly intuitively Tamora's grotesque nature, noting through the conditional phrase that though she appears ("bear'st") human, she is in truth *something* else, something inhuman: "No grace? No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature! / The blot and enemy to our general name! / Confusion fall—" (2.3.141-84). At the last, Tamora's grotesque nature is named, "beastly creature," a term fulfilled at the play's climax when she unknowingly consumes the bodies of her sons. And yet, Tamora's attitude regarding her children, particularly Alarbus, could not be more different than the attitudes of her Roman captors:

Stay, Roman brethren! Gracious conqueror,
Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,
A mother's tears in passion for her son:
And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,
O, think my son to be as dear to me!
Sufficeth not, that we are brought to Rome,
To beautify thy triumphs and return,
Captive to thee and to thy Roman yoke;
But must my sons be slaughter'd in the streets
For valiant doings in their country's cause? (1.1.104-13)

Tamora perceives the danger posed to her and her sons and opts to call the Romans, her captors, "brethren," elevating Titus above them as a "Gracious conqueror," one whose "Victorious" status, though clearly not in doubt, is emphasized and exalted for the purpose of flattery. Her appeal is to pathos, a comparison between Titus's "sons" and her "son," Alarbus.

Much of what makes Tamora grotesque to the Romans is her unflagging love and loyalty to family, something the Andronicis perform imperfectly (the play practically opens on Titus slaying his son for a perceived offense), and something the Roman state, with its highly-stratified social hierarchies, fails to achieve. Titus may love Lavinia, and he may be willing to cut off his own hand to save his sons, but as noted previously, his first reaction to seeing his daughter after she is raped and mutilated is to recoil in horror, to objectify her as an "it" as opposed to his flesh and blood, and he slays Mutius on the day of their return from conquest. No wonder Tamora misreads his sense of obligation as fundamentally civic and aesthetic in nature when it is, in fact, it is religious:

Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
These are their brethren, whom you Goths beheld
Alive and dead; and for their brethren slain
Religiously they ask a sacrifice:
To this your son is mark'd, and die he must,
To appease their groaning shadows that are gone (1.1.121-26)

The “sacrifice” is, of course, Alarbus, who is taken away and ritually slaughtered for the “shadows,” the spirits of “brethren slain”—good Romans who fell in battle to—who else? The Goths. In turning Tamora’s use of “brethren” on its head, in turning it around to break the link between Goth and Roman, Titus refuses integration and Tamora’s willingness to love one’s children for irreligious reasons. Even when elevated to Empress, Tamora will always be one of “you Goths,” the foreign Others who must have the “conqueror” culture—here the brutal ritual murder of Alarbus—explained to them not once but thrice, first from Titus, then twice from Lucius (1.1.127-29 and lines 142-147). Jo Eldridge Carney identifies this as the act that kicks off the grotesque carnage to come in which “tradition, spectacle, and eloquence are jarringly juxtaposed with extreme sadism and violence” (427). If Tamora misunderstood the nature of Titus’s sense of obligation, she stands corrected: “O cruel, irreligious piety!” (1.1.130). What’s more, she has learned the nature of Titus’s word play, turning his dispassionate speech on the religious nature of Alarbus’s execution into an “irreligious” display of false piety, a ritual killing thinly disguised as lip service to the dead (“shadows”). Here, Tamora undercuts Titus’s pomp and circumstance, and challenges Roman legal and religious authority by first decoding, and then deploying their own discourse of power, even when it fails to save the life of her son.

Like Lavinia, Tamora is objectified, treated literally and figuratively as a spoil of war. In the process, she is commodified in much the same way Lavinia will be—for men to satiate their pleasures. No sooner has Titus killed Alarbus than she is given away to Emperor-to-be Saturninus:

Titus

[To Tamora] Now, madam, are you prisoner to an
emperor;
To him that, for your honour and your state,
Will use you nobly and your followers.

Saturninus

A goodly lady, trust me; of the hue
That I would choose, were I to choose anew.
Clean up, fair queen, that cloudy countenance:
Though chance of war hath wrought this change of
cheer,
Thou comest not to be made a scorn in Rome:
Princely shall be thy usage in every way. (1.1.259-69)

Despite being addressed as “madam” and “lady,” the “fair queen” is, in fact, an object, a tool to be used—doubly so as constructions of the verb appear twice (“use” and “usage”) less than ten lines apart; both instances of the verb are directed at the other males in attendance as Tamora has no response for almost 50 lines—a lapse during which, in an act that borders on irreverent comedy, Titus kills his son Mutius, an act for which he faces no repercussion. And in such time, Tamora is made to stand and listen to outright lies. Her old identity and national identification are thrown away, and it is assumed she will accept the terms: though Saturninus calls her “fair queen,” she has not accepted his forthcoming proposal of marriage, and is, by virtue of her objectification, no longer the

ruler of a subjugated people—one brought to heel through military subjugation and ritual murder, not the “chance” Saturninus chalks it up to. Nor is it “chance” she has physically moved enormous distances, and thus unwillingly participated in what Patricia Akhimie and Bernadette Andrea describe as an occupation or activity largely relegated to men: travel (2). Of course, women in the late medieval and early modern periods *did* travel, just as they participated in colonial and economic expansion, even if the term itself, “travel,” remains nebulous when affixed to what women did and how they did it in accounts from those times. Akhimie and Bernadette, and the many authors of the book *Travel and Travail: Early Modern Women, English Drama, and the Wider World* (2019) charts a new historical account of early modern women’s travels and emphasizes how such travels were gendered by historians of the early modern (and later) periods into masculine endeavors. Tamora is brought to Roman lands as a captive, a prize, an object unable to choose the method of transport or destination.

Dehumanized and objectified, Tamora becomes a grotesque body for her ability to signify, via incorporation into Roman society, the deviant Otherness able to strike back (through her proxy, Aaron) at those who conquered her and her people. And while she has her revenge, she is at last tricked into consuming the flesh of her own children:

Titus

Why there they are both, baked in that pie;
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,
Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.

‘Tis true, ‘tis true; witness my knife’s sharp point. (5.3.60-63)

“Bred” here holds a second meaning, a pun referring to the dough that covers the pie made of human flesh, bones, and, of course, blood. In the same way the (“blood-drinking”) pit consumed Bassianus’s and Lavinia’s lives (as she herself indicates when she claims, “Poor I was slain when Bassianus died” [2.3.171]), Tamora’s mouth as pit now consumes new bodies—those of her sons—those she “bred.” Carney calls attention to the obvious, that in “the cannibalistic banquet scene of the final act, Tamora literally becomes the ‘devouring mother’” (429). Where Lavinia represents the pit as a coordinate of grotesque embodiment, Tamora’s represents a female body capable of inflicting terrible harm to men and the social positions, a grotesque monster to be feared not for the pitiful state to which it has been reduced, but *feared* for the terrifying power it wields. Marion Wynne-Davies famously reads Tamora’s body as symbolic of the swallowing womb, “the womb of the ultimate mythic female body—the earth—threatens to make Tamora mad . . . But in Titus that is not the case . . . The swallowing womb does carry the promise of death, but for men and not women. Its power is to castrate, not to madden” (219). Wynn-Davies views Tamora as a psychoanalytic terror, a body that connotes mythic masculine nightmares. Bassianus and Titus’s sons are slain and Lavinia is raped and mutilated; in quick succession, she symbolically castrates Titus by removing all his heirs, all his descendants, and paves the way for her own sons to take the throne when Saturninus dies.

I prefer, though, to read Tamora’s act of consumption as one in line with similar scenes in early modern theater. Margaret Owens views the play and its grotesque moments of consumption as part of a generic convention concerned with navigating the

semiotic potential of the body, a dramatic tradition “constructs a distinct economy of bodily semiosis” (102). Owens argues that the grotesquery of *Titus* owes much to early modern questions about the body and its precise place in society, an idea I mentioned previously in discussing Allison Meyer’s notion that Shakespeare refuted themes of queenly empowerment in favor of a masculine-centered historical revisionism. In revenge plays like *Titus*, grappling with the body’s semiosis means grappling with the impact of pain and brutality, the “physiological and the psychic denotations of ‘trauma’; indeed, the genre’s emblem might well be an open wound, one that not only resists healing but which acts as an open maw--the ‘blood-drinking’ pit that dominates the imagistic repertoire of *Titus Andronicus* (2.3.224), swallowing up victim after victim” (213). Like Owens, I don’t ascribe the term “trauma” to the text of the play--the term as we know it didn’t exist in the early modern context--but I do argue that Tamora embodies this concept of the open wound, the body as blood-drinking pit that consumes the bodies of others. Tamora’s suffering is itself grotesque, a thing forced upon her in much the same way she forces it upon others. She is, then, a true reflection of the society around her, but there the illusion is dispelled, the irreligious piety of Titus and the Romans revealed to be what it has always been: thinly disguised brutality, and an insatiable hunger for blood.

No sooner does Titus deliver the above lines than he kills Tamora. His revenge is Lavinia’s, according to William Weber, for she “finally achieves the death that her rapists cruelly thought to prevent” (716). Through Lavinia and Tamora, women who suffer terrible trauma under the auspices of a state-sanctioned power structure geared toward prioritizing male pleasure, we discover how female bodies—bodies rendered, I argue, grotesque *via* such trauma and objectification—find alternative ways to exert agency, generate new subjectivity, and act upon other bodies—*change other bodies*. Power is not exercised in a vacuum. It is, as Lavinia and Tamora well know, exercised upon bodies, often for the gratification of another dominant body. Often opaque, such power is exercised through countless entities, official and nameless. The grotesque punctures power with discomfort. In its ambivalence, it reveals the operations of power made manifest on and in the body. Neither the dominated nor the dominant are beyond the reach of the grotesque. It degrades, Bakhtin reminds us, all high and holy and sanctimonious into flesh, reveals in the Other the characteristics mapped onto it, the power structures that enabled such mapping (19-20). For the state, as for the Emperor and Empress, dinner is served, but it’s actually just people.

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