

**Representation of Rape Trauma in Shakespeare Onscreen: A Look at Julie Taymor's
Adaptation of *Titus Andronicus***

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Abstract: Shakespeare's world is a realm fraught with masculine anxieties and desires, often enacted upon the woman's body. Feminist scholarship has engaged in a prolonged struggle with Shakespeare's texts, exemplified by the examination of tragedies such as *Othello*, where Desdemona falls victim to male insecurity, or *Hamlet*, where Ophelia's tragic fate vividly portrays the patriarchal suppression of the feminine voice. Additionally, the protagonist Lear's famous diatribe against his daughters, whose wombs he bids the gods to "dry up," further accentuates how Shakespearean tragedies often privilege the masculine at the expense of eroding the feminine voice and agency. *Titus Andronicus*, one of the most violent of Shakespeare's plays, centres around the violent act of rape and mutilation of the character Lavinia. Lavinia's rape not only goes unrepresented on account of it happening off stage but also Lavinia's body in the play takes on the connotation of "enemy territory" needed to be conquered and rape is recognised not as a crime against the woman, but instead it is viewed as a crime against the men of the family particularly the father who usurps the role of the victim, robbed off his honour and property. Lavinia's rape is hence a traumatic event circumscribed within the male-authored discourse of the play's text. Lavinia as a victim of trauma does not exist on the pages of Shakespeare's text; rather Lavinia's trauma can only be viewed through a sensitised performance. Filmmaker Julie Taymor's 1999 adaptation addresses this by situating Lavinia's rape within the historical context of patriarchal violence. Taymor's film intervenes in Shakespeare's violent tragedy, refocusing on Lavinia's violated self and challenging patriarchal literary traditions that have excluded and misrepresented women's lives. This cinematic adaptation makes a much-needed feminist intervention into the play's text responding to the grand narratives perpetuated by patriarchal literary traditions.

Keywords: Adaptation, Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, Rape, Trauma

Introduction

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s linked women's private experiences of abuse, both physical and psychological, to the traumatic aftereffects which plagued women for their entire lives. Studies in trauma theory immensely benefitted from social movements like feminism; as Judith Herman, in her seminal work *Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), points out, the feminist movement brought together private and public experiences of women across the spectrum of race, class, gender and sexuality. These narratives of traumatic experiences exposed social structures and practices which perpetuated patterns of systemic abuse within societies. The study of sexual violence, particularly narratives of rape, have now been included within contemporary trauma studies. Further, Psychoanalytical studies have pointed out how the psychological manifestation of trauma from sexual violence and abuse results in repression and disassociation within survivors and therefore, historicising, theorising and narrating 'the event' becomes an important exercise to come to terms with the traumatic experience of sexual violence, both in the fields of psychoanalysis as well as literature. Theorists like Cathy Caruth, whose works have been considered pioneering in the field of trauma theory, talk about how literature plays a vital role in representing the experiences of trauma and abuse.

In her study *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma Narrative and History* (1996), Caruth talks about Freud's work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud himself takes the recourse of literature in the form of 16th-century Italian poet Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which includes the story of the hero Tancred who unknowingly kills his beloved in a battle and experiences a repetition of the traumatic events of the battle in his dreams and nightmares. According to Caruth, it is important to note that Freud turns to literature to describe the representation of trauma because literature, just like psychoanalysis, is often "interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing" (Caruth 3). Caruth adds that not only have experiences of trauma been represented profoundly within literature but also that literature has provided a particular language for the

expression and representation of these difficult experiences, which cannot be expressed otherwise in straightforward, linear ways. Literary narratives dealing with trauma are texts that ask “what it means to transmit and theorise around a crisis that is marked not by a simple knowledge but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (Caruth 5).

Feminist scholarship has had a long history of struggle with Shakespeare’s texts, often pointing out how Shakespeare’s plays privilege the masculine through a simultaneous and steady erosion of the feminine voice and agency. Feminist enquiries into the various forms and manifestations of early modern misogyny have led to a massive exercise of re-reading and re-examination of texts, especially Shakespeare’s plays, which often concern themselves with issues of female sexuality, feminine chastity and alternatively female sexual transgressions and its perils. The female body within Shakespeare’s plays becomes a site that evokes patriarchal desires for power, dominance and control. Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is one such play where the titular character Titus’s daughter Lavinia is raped not once but twice, first when she is abducted by Bassianus, implying the old Latin connotations of the term ‘rape’ as ‘to seize’, and later when she is sexually violated by Tamora’s sons to avenge the murder of their eldest brother at the hands of Titus. In both these instances within the play, as Kate Aughterson points out, the objectified and territorialised female body becomes “subject to the male political power, in a masculinised world where competition for women is a primary motivator of politics, war and games” (Aughterson).

***Titus Andronicus* (1594)**

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is often designated as the most violent and bloody of all the playwright’s tragedies. *Titus Andronicus* not only depicts the turmoil of war and violence within the civic and political sphere but also extends this violence to the horrific acts of rape and mutilation of Lavinia’s body, who becomes a victim of not only a political war of succession but also victim of deep-rooted misogyny and sexual violence. Thus, Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* qualifies as a trauma narrative which centres around the traumatic experience of rape and abuse of the most violent nature, where the trauma of Lavinia’s tortured, mutilated body becomes heavily circumscribed within

the male-authored discourse of the play's text. Lavinia's rape in Shakespeare's text is never recognised as a crime against her, the woman, but rather, it is viewed as a crime against the men of the family, particularly her father, Titus, who usurps the role of the victim, robbed off his honour and property.

This paper deals exclusively with the depiction and representation of rape trauma in both Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and its adaptation in cinema by Julie Taymor. Both these texts give a glimpse of the changing depictions of sexual violence and trauma both on stage and onscreen. In her article, "Rape's Metatheatrical Return: Rehearsing Sexual Violence Among the Early Moderns," critic Kim Solga states how the theatrical representation of sexual violence in Shakespeare's early modern stage was always tied to the "extra theatrical" discourse upon what 'the act' meant, how it should be reported and whom does it affect (3). Solga draws upon major early modern legal theories and treatises such as *The Laws Resolutions of Womens Rights* (1632), where the rape victims were encouraged to perform a show and tell, to give a report of their violation to "trustworthy men" to seek justice and reparations (4). In Shakespeare's play, likewise, the representation of the experience of sexual abuse onstage is somehow never designed to reflect the trauma that the terrible nature of the physical and psychological violence has unleashed upon its victim, Lavinia. Rather, the play's focus becomes the representation of the experiences of "those upon whom rape is reported", that is, the experience of the men in the Andronici who then take upon themselves the mantle of avengers (Solga 3). In this way, the experience of trauma is detached from the suffering of the violated female mind and body and identified or rather 'mis-identified' with men who exercise control over these bodies. According to Solga, throughout the thirteenth to sixteenth-century rape was considered a property crime, a violation of a woman's chastity, which was exclusively part and parcel to the family's asset and was defined as "theft" with or without the woman's consent (6):

The 16th-century emphasis on a woman's non-consent as the ultimate arbiter of rape, combined with misogynist assumptions about women's loose sexual appetites, resulted in

new fears of what Deborah Burka calls women's sexual defection. Was she raped or did she give herself (her husband's property) away? Failing to prove non consent a woman became not only complicit in the crime but, in popular prejudice her own rapist. (Solga 8)

Hence, not only was rape enshrined within the legalities of the property law but also it was incumbent upon the victim to provide proof of her non consent in order to illicit justice. Thus, in the light of such social cultural and legal prejudices surrounding rape the representation and staging of rape required similar elements of a 'show and tell' performance by the victim. As Shakespeare's play shows, Lavinia's performance of 'show and tell' is somehow supposed to lay bare the deep invisible and intimate wounds of the physical and mental assault of rape, in other words, Lavinia has to re-enact her trauma in order to give voice to it. Shakespeare's play explores the extremely vital but paradoxical effect of the mute Lavinia's 'voice' in the representation of her trauma. The play shows a world where Lavinia as a victim of rape cannot 'name' her rape, not only because she is mute but also because the act of rape has brought on a shame that "womanhood denies her tongue to tell" (Shakespeare 2.3.174). Lavinia's tormentors in the play have taken away her ability to speak mutilating her physical body and severing her tongue to keep her from testifying against the assault, additionally, even if she could speak, the nature of the early modern patriarchal society/culture is such that it disallows Lavinia as a victim of rape to speak due to the shame and stigma of defilement attached to her 'raped' body. And yet, while on one hand the raped victim needs to be 'silenced' within the patriarchal culture, which has put the onus of 'shameful' act solely upon her shoulders, but this silence becomes dangerous only when it comes in the way of a revenge, a justifiable act of retribution undertaken by the men of her family whose patriarchal property rights have been violated in the form of the rape of the woman of the family. Hence, Shakespeare's play makes its audience privy to the contradictory nature of early modern attitudes towards rape and how one hand it denies the women a tongue to report the crime but also feeds upon the unrest of revenge, violence and war that ensues after the crime.

In the play the men around Lavinia become the interpreters of her trauma, at first banking on her silence to mitigate the discomfort surrounding the sight of her mutilated body and later banking on her ‘voice’ and her performance of her trauma to exact their violent revenge upon their enemies. After Lavinia’s rape, she is found by accident in the woods by her uncle Marcus who upon the sight of her “lopped and hewed” limbs and her severed tongue, gives one of the longest speeches in the play, where he seems to immediately and rightfully arrive at the idea that Lavinia has been raped, invoking the story of Philomela from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*:

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.
And not withstanding all this loss of blood
As from a conduit with three issuing spouts
Yet do thy cheeks look red as Titan’s face,
Blushing to be encountered with a cloud.
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.
Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopped,
Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is.
Fair Philomela, 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 cut those pretty fingers off,
That could have better sewed than Philomel. (Shakespeare 2.4.26-44)

And yet, for the course of next two acts Lavinia's rape remains shrouded in mystery. It is only in the fourth act of the play that Lavinia, struggling to overcome her trauma and shame, trying to come to terms with her mutilated body, is finally able to gather enough courage to make use of her stumps "to play the scribe" (Shakespeare 2.4.4). In these scenes Lavinia is shown frantically turning the leaves of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* yet again to make her rape known as everyone around her, including Marcus fails to understand her. Lavinia who is described in the play's text as "deeper read and skilled" by her father is provided with books only as a means to comfort in her grief. In this way, as Detmer points out Lavinia is seen more as a "receiver of texts than an author of meanings" (8). Even as she tries her best, she never has an authority over the representation or interpretation of her own trauma, she is never seen as an "source of knowledge" (Detmer 8). Finally, when Lavinia is able to reveal her rape by carving the word "stuprum" in sand with a stick held in her mouth, the revelation does not illicit any identification or sympathising with her trauma rather the focus of the play immediately shifts to the act of revenge, as Lavinia is asked to kneel down by her father and pledge allegiance to revenge. Thus, as critics have pointed out Lavinia's rape and trauma do not remain her own rather, Shakespeare's play seems to present anxieties surrounding rape and its legal, socio-cultural dimensions in the context of early modern patriarchal culture, here the rape victim Lavinia 's final revelation, presentation/performance of her rape trauma is only for the benefit of her male protectors reinforcing her status as a dependent without any real agency. Lavinia's protectors urge her to speak and make known her "map of woe" (Shakespeare 3.2.113), yet her voice is ultimately silenced by the same protectors, who co-opt her trauma, refashioning it and making it all about them. Lavinia is finally asked to die with her shame and her father's sorrow, killed at the hands of her own father.

Titus (1999)

Julie Taymor's adaptation of the play *Titus Andronicus*, entitled *Titus* came out in the year 1999, the film borrows from a variety of contemporary and historical references to reframe violence as presented within Shakespeare's play. Prior to the film Taymor had adapted the play for a Broadway production in 1994. Both these versions of the play attempted to deconstruct the themes and metaphor

of violence within the play. In the director's own words Shakespeare's play is "as much about how the audience experiences violence as entertainment, as much as it is about the tragedy of the endless cycle of violence itself" (qtd in McCanless 488).

Taymor's 1999 film adaptation presents a stylised show of grotesque horrors where bodies are deconstructed and dismembered as much as the discourse upon violence and its representation is. The film challenges the viewer's response and ability to stomach the violence in the titillating as well as disgusting spectacle of rape, revenge and murder as it unfolds on screen. The film attempts to make a statement upon the legitimisation and perpetuation of such acts of violence within the socio-cultural reality. Through the usage of post-modern, abstract, highly reflexive style of representation, Taymor's film both distances its audience from a complete identification with the events onscreen as well as provides enough shock value to question the modern sensibilities that have been desensitised to violence, especially sexual and gender-based violence.

However, the difficult task of the representation of rape onscreen along with the complexity of depicting the trauma of the rape victim is not lost upon Taymor or her critics. According to Pascale Aebischer, a text like *Titus Andronicus* becomes difficult to reproduce for a modern audience for it heavily relies on the voyeurism inviting the audience to partake in the violence especially the titillating spectacle of rape as and when presented openly onstage (137). Hence the task of the modern director especially the modern female director lies in the representation of the traumatic experience of sexual violence in a way that does not naturalise Lavinia's status as the passive object/victim of male orchestrated violence.

In Taymor's film Lavinia's rape happens offscreen, whereby she is apprehended by Tamora's sons who kill her husband and drag her off into the woods. In the aftermath of the suggested sexual violation of Taymor's Lavinia, played by Laura Fraser, the viewer finds the action shift to a barren swamp forest, this setting, like one of the many in the film's highly surreal mis-en-scene, represents yet another horrific post-apocalyptic vision befitting the chaotic and violent world of Shakespeare's play. Here the audience finds a mutilated Lavinia standing on a tree stump, bloody and disheveled,

wearing only her petticoat, her hands have been cut and replaced by branches, thus invoking the lines from Marcus's lament upon the discovery of his raped niece in the play, "lopped and hewed and made thy body bare of her two branches, those sweet ornaments, whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in" (Shakespeare 2.4.19). According to Solga in these scenes Lavinia is presented as a "hysterical symbol, simultaneously sign and referent, morbidly, uncannily, sufficient in herself" (24). Even though maimed and muted, Taymor's Lavinia is not a picture of silent endurance of her trauma. Rather, her mutilated body draws the viewer in, speaking for itself in her slow movements which almost seem like an emotive dance performance expressing her profound pain.

Hence, modern feminist filmmakers adapting the text of the play *Titus Andronicus*, like Taymor, have to re-read the portrayal of the victimisation of Lavinia and by default the victimisation of femininity as a socially constructed ideal within early modern patriarchal imagination. Lavinia's constant identification in the play with a doe as the Petrarchan love object and symbol of feminine vulnerability and chastity is revisited within the film. In Taymor's film for instance this myth is revoked at a crucial moment when Lavinia revisits the traumatic memory of the rape. In these scenes which depict the tortured psyche of the rape victim, Taymor juxtaposes the reference of the hunt scenes from the second act of Shakespeare's play where Demetrius and Chiron are anticipating the rape of Lavinia, hoping to "pluck a dainty doe to ground" (Shakespeare 2.2.29).

In Taymor's film, Lavinia's recollection of rape presents a tableau of the hunt whereby she is transformed into a doe hunted mercilessly by Chiron and Demetrius who are transformed into vicious tigers. The scene, which Taymor describes as a Penny Arcade Nightmare or PAN, in an interview with the cinema journal *Cineaste*, to designate the frequently occurring surreal vignettes within the film, feature a dreamlike abstract sequence which become symbolic representations of gruesome acts of violence such as Lavinia's rape and mutilation.



Figure 1.1 Lavinia after her rape with her tongue severed and arms mutilated

In the particular scene where Lavinia reveals her rape, the scene begins, just like in the text of Shakespeare's play, with Lavinia running after young Lucius in order to get from him the book on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where she flips through the pages to arrive at the story of Philomela's rape by her brother-in-law Tereus, after which she is handed a staff by her uncle so as to write the names of her perpetrators in the sand. Just as Taymor's Lavinia frantically begins to write the names of Chiron and Demetrius, the scene cuts into a flashback to show her memory of the rape. Taymor in these scenes not only plays on the idea of Philomela as the doe being hunted for her flesh, by transforming Lavinia into a half-doe half-human woman dressed in white and desperately pulling at her skirt to hide her shame. But also, these scenes remind one of the popular image of the actress Marilyn Monroe striking a similar pose, pulling on her billowing skirt. The juxtaposition of these two images Shakespeare's of a hunted Lavinia and Hollywood's most objectified female artist not only symbolises Lavinia's objectification, her status as a pawn in the revenge war between Titus and Tamora in Shakespeare's play but also makes a telling critique of the cultural representation of sexualised and objectified female bodies in media.



Figure 1.2 Lavinia's memory of rape imagined as Penny Arcade Nightmare by Taymor

In the final and most controversial scenes of Shakespeare's play, Lavinia is murdered by her father after he has avenged her rape in the most violent fashion, baking the bodies of her rapists in a pie and feeding them to their mother Tamora as well as the rest of the dinner party in Saturninus's court. While in the play Lavinia is a silent observer in these scenes in Taymor's film Lavinia is very much an agent in her father's plan. As pointed out, Lavinia as a victim of trauma does not exist on the pages of Shakespeare's text, Shakespeare provides no insight into Lavinia's traumatised psyche in his text, hence Lavinia's trauma can only be interpreted and viewed through a sensitised performance by the actor/director of the text either on stage or on screen. Hence, Taymor's portrayal of Lavinia is a feminist re-claiming and re-creation of her trauma, otherwise made invisible in Shakespeare's original text. In this way, Taymor's film attempts to re-present and re-write not only early modern attitudes towards gender violence but also points towards the continued presence of such practices four hundred years after Shakespeare's play. Through the retention of the final scenes of Lavinia's death at the hands of her father, Taymor shows how the stigma surrounding shame and disgrace of the raped victim, continues to exist in modern times. In the film as in Shakespeare's play Lavinia silently accepts her fate, voluntarily walking towards her father who then kills her. In her interview regarding the ending of the film the director pointed out the reason why she chose not to change or omit Lavinia's unjust and brutal death was because Lavinia's fate reflected the reality of numerous

modern-day women victims of honour killings and bride burnings that continue to happen around the world in the twenty/twenty first century (De Luca et.al 31).

Conclusion

Taymor's adaptation presents a much-needed intervention into Shakespeare's most violent play. Through the study of violence as it manifests itself in the political, social and gendered dimensions, the film performs a re-reading of the play to represent the myriad of ways mindless violence results in cultural and individual trauma. Giving adequate voice and representation to Lavinia's fate in the play, becomes a social and cultural necessity. By looking at Lavinia's trauma which is a result of both her rape as well as the cultural attitudes towards her "victimised" "objectified" self, the text of both Shakespeare's play and Taymor's re-reading of it exposes the gaps and fissures within patriarchal cultures to map moments of gender-based oppression, resistance and survival.

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