



2021

## Teaching Titus Andronicus in order to Re-examine Shakespeare's Evolution of the Tragic Form

Joanne E. Gates

*Jacksonville State University, [jgates@jsu.edu](mailto:jgates@jsu.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/fac\\_pres](https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/fac_pres)



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gates, Joanne E. "Teaching 'Titus Andronicus' in order to Re-examine Shakespeare's Evolution of the Tragic Form." Conference Paper Presented at Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture Conference, Silver Spring, Maryland. November 4, 2001.

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship & Creative Work at JSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presentations, Proceedings & Performances by an authorized administrator of JSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@jsu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@jsu.edu).

Teaching *Titus* in order to Re-examine  
Shakespeare's Evolution of the Tragic Form

Joanne E. Gates, Professor in English  
Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville AL

Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture Conference  
Silver Spring, Maryland. November 4, 2001

[Notes added concurrent to submission to Digital Measures, 2021: Many fruitful comparison / contrast papers emerged from encouraging students to look at production values. JSU students usually had access to the BBC Shakespeare through streaming at *Ambrose Video*. Julie Taymor's *Titus* was the topic of a Shakespeare Hour Live during the Pandemic, air date March 5, 2021. Taymor and actor Harry Lennix who played Aaron in both film and her earlier stage production were featured speakers. See in References. Also available at JSU streaming databases are the segments from *Standard Deviants* and the *Shakespeare in Perspective* series. The latter two titles are in the Films on Demand database. Teaching texts included the *Riverside Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, and, after 2016, The Norton Shakespeare, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (which excludes

the Fly Scene, 3.2, as it did not appear in Quarto texts). Complete editions of Shakespeare on line are also encouraged.]

This presentation is designed to share the strategies I use in teaching Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* as a means to expose students to deeper understandings of Aristotelian components of Tragedy. Rather than merely acknowledging the defects in the play or the excess of violence when viewed, then dismissing the play, and moving on, I use the contrasts between *Titus* and *Hamlet* and between *Titus* and *Othello* to lead my students to fuller understandings of *hamartia*, tragic form, and catharsis. With some reference to the two films of the play (the BBCs, directed by Jane Howell, which we view in class, and Julie Taymor's *Titus*, now commercially available on DVD), I suggest ways to use comparative production analysis and apply these concepts of tragedy to *Titus* films and to other recent Shakespearean filmed productions. The last thing I want to do, of course, is to re-teach A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Gary Taylor, in his *Reinventing Shakespeare*, did a superb exposé on the dominance of Bradley-influenced instruction in Shakespeare. Fortunately, I teach the selective early plays of Shakespeare, which gives me the opportunity to offer early comedies side by side with representative histories and tragedies, with two mandatory plays, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, built in to the course description. I will argue that catharsis and hamartia are dominant and important criteria for evaluating the potential

effectiveness of a play or production. I will use closer analyses of texts to clarify the virtues of the tragic hero and to emphasize the pace and timing of the final action. I will consider the views on Lavinia's victimization and the strategy of using Young Lucius as a frame character. I am particularly interested in demonstrating how Taymor uses scenic fluidity to take a long, scripted scene in Shakespeare, taking us from location to location, and by doing that from mood to mood in a scene and thus explore the text in ways that make it new. I think we understand Hamlet better when we are exposed to a Titus whose grief alters him so erratically. I think we understand Othello better when we see both Iago's and Othello's origins in Aaron. Ophelia's and Desdemona's rather constrained roles are better understood when appreciating the development Shakespeare accomplished after depicting his first tragic female victim, Lavinia.

Sometimes discussion of Shakespeare depends upon asking the right questions. Alice Walker's title character in her novel *Meridian*, makes the same point. In a time when black militants dominated the civil rights movement, Meridian wonders if teaching has any merit. Challenged to defend anything remotely connected to the system, the pacifist Meridian asserts: "I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don't see it as a handing down of answers. So much of what passes for teaching is merely a pointing out of what items to want" (Walker 188).

For several semesters, then, I have been refining a list of questions. In the past, they have served as guide to oral discussion. Knowing that this presentation was upcoming, I asked students to be prepared to draft written responses two days after the in-class viewing of the BBC *Titus Andronicus*. I am distributing a handout for this audience which duplicates the list of numbered questions they received ahead of time. (This is the first semester I have incorporated a supplemental unit of the course as a Discussion Board, using Blackboard.com, to which our university has a site license and provides workshops for instructors.) Students had most of a 90-minute Thursday class to begin their work. [Although they had until the following Monday to complete their posts on their own time, none pursued this extended due date.] I edited their posts for typos and spent a considerable time responding to each. I will circulate a copy of the full transcript of the on-line questions, their sequenced responses, and my replies to each response. The length of this "data file" prevents me from discussing it in entirety, and I am preserving their anonymity in keeping with methods I use in my classroom-based research protocols [not available in Digital Commons].

Let me summarize what I learned. First, I expected the nature of the questions to move beyond the obvious contrast of Senecan gore in *Titus* and less extreme violence of the mature tragedies. But this did not happen. Many responses both to questions one and two rehearsed the bloody violence. They

were also weak because when attempting to prove *Hamlet* or *Othello* more Aristotelian, they fell back on broad claims that lacked support. My responses, therefore, were directed to encouraging them to find the places where, in *Hamlet* or *Othello* they could illustrate the further psychological depths. More than one student asserted that soliloquies in *Hamlet* and/or *Othello* proved these later plays' superiority. I wanted more articulation of where in the soliloquies of the later plays they could find hard evidence. (And the next class after this *Titus* exercise, this past Tuesday, was a work-through of *Hamlet*, focusing on each soliloquy, so I emphasize that it is hard to get a meaningful portrait of the full scope of my course with this instamatic snapshot of one day's discussion.)

I often played devil's advocate in the manner in which *Titus* often got dismissed or lumped with the others in overbroad claims. I also refuted common preferences for Othello's more noble character or Hamlet's deep thinking in this manner. In reply to a response for Question 1, I wrote:

*Just to state that [Hamlet and Othello] have soliloquies is not in itself a support for the argument. What specifically makes them more tragic, that they debate with themselves the morality of their actions? Where? It might be argued that Othello is far more delusional in his error than is Titus, but the awakening to the horror he has committed is what makes that play tragic. Hamlet is so ambivalent in his most famous soliloquy, and spends [some time in this and in] other soliloquies blaming himself, that it is hard for us not to be also critical of him for his lack of right behavior. WHY is he then more Aristotelian? (Page 2)*

I have later exercises which reinforce this closer reading of the plays: [I have a short piece in the now published *Approaches to Teaching Hamlet* MLA

publication, edited by Bernice Kliman, which explains how I use Frank Kermode's claims that *Hamlet* is an overwritten play for a refutation exercise. Their task here is to break down and counter argue his claims, expressed in a few key paragraphs in his Introduction to *Hamlet* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, so that they use the text to prove that it is necessarily, not unnecessarily, over-long, multiple-plotted for a purpose.]

By the date of the *Titus* responses, we had previously discussed the occasions of catharsis in production, especially in relation to *Othello*. Earlier discussion board posts had responded to issues in *Othello* after a reading of the source by Cinthio. (It is on line at a Verdi opera site.) It is not an understatement to say that the students leaped forward in proficiency and thoughtfulness from their on-the-spot reactions to the Cinthio / *Othello* comparisons to these on *Titus*. I had also spent a considerable time in class previous to this giving an informal talk-through of a lecture I delivered Alabama Shakespeare Festival. One of its main points is that Emilia's self-discoveries make possible *Othello*'s. I summarized the conditions of my own reaction to a particular performance of that *Othello* production which approached a genuine catharsis. To begin the electronic discussion, I had planned both to review Senecan revenge play and to give a reading aloud of selections from Bruce Weber's account of the Olivier production of *Oedipus Rex*. (Instead, I foreshortened the presentation and posted the clip from the *New York Times* as the last entry on my data sheet). This was maybe a crucial oversight on my

part. Even though I thought the class was grounded in what makes a moment of catharsis, I regret not incorporating the illustration as an emotional component of tragedy to think about.

Still, after reading the first of these *Titus* posts it is tempting to sub-title any work that I do in the classroom on issues in which I engage them in discussions of tragic form, "Catharsis in the Classroom: NOT," to borrow the condensed form of the antithesis popularized by *Wayne's World*. (More on the difficulties of communicating "catharsis" in a few moments.)

Part of my task, in responding to students, was to probe a little deeper in asking for why their distinctions between *Othello/Hamlet* and *Titus*. For instance, in response to Lavinia as a representation of female victimization, I received excellent answers to Question Four. Yet I felt obliged to carry the discussion a few steps further. To the account of Lavinia's victimization, I replied:

*Knowing Lavinia was a precursor to Ophelia and Desdemona not only shows us the pattern of the lies, trickery, victimization, but also lets us admire a little improvement in the depiction of Ophelia and Desdemona. Lavinia is more an icon of a family's devastation. Silenced, objectified, mutilated, her condition instills the vengeful fury of the rest of the family, surely. Yet it is as if Shakespeare knew instinctively that there was a different and better way to develop this. In Laertes' concern for Ophelia, he gives Ophelia a human dimension. And Shakespeare gives Desdemona a lengthy and lyrical part when she displays ominous foreboding in her "Willow" scene (page 9).*

To the lengthy reply which linked Lavinia to the other victimized women, I added:

*You support the thesis with a solid list of men's uses of women. [Yet] Ophelia's madness is in its own way affecting and eloquent.*



*In fact, the rest of this issue might look for ways in which, despite the stereotype of victimization, Shakespeare writes female roles which demand developing or dynamic (changing, complex) characterization. (There's an obvious range of role in Ophelia and Desdemona, despite their mainly romantic connection to men.) And to play Lavinia, one has to chart the changes she goes through and decide how to moderate and piece out for the audience the agony, so that it is watchable, even though on another level it has to be unbearable. Too much writhing, too much gagging on blood, and it will not be tragic. I have also wondered how much Lavinia is able to eat, without her tongue. If her situation changes from one who suffers the shock of her brutalization in what is described by Marcus in 2.4 as something like a post-traumatic dysfunction, to some kind of lingering endurance after that, a production has to decide how to play it. Anthony Hopkins had a scene where he offered her food, then drink. Young Lucius [had] tried to restore her hands with manikin hands, but she gestured they were useless. Could her later scenes show her wasting-away misery, yet give her enough dignity to accuse her rapists and assist her father? I think the text supports this reading at 3.2.37-8: "She says, she drinks no other drink but tears, / Brew'd with her sorrow." If she is slowly starving to death, it better motivates Titus' rationale for her death in the last scene. (Page 10-11)*

In many of my replies, I try to emphasize for students the distinctions in tragic form. I hope that I can persuasively (gently, not over-critically), suggest to students that their instincts to dismiss *Titus* deserve rethinking. Though some of my posted comments point out some better choices made by Julie Taymor, I emphasize that it is misguided to pose as merely a cheerleader for Taymor's production. I pointed out to my students that Taymor more or less takes credit for the "frame" device of action seen through the eyes of Young Lucius, which Jane Howell has earlier employed in the BBC film, to good effect, I think. Taymor stresses that the censors objected to some shots of her orgy sex scene, and she was forced to cut these, but that she depicts on camera a lot fewer

violent acts than most R-rated popular "action" films. Yet I cannot quite endorse playing that video in front of a captive class, even in a college setting of mostly mature adults. However, I would recommend the DVD of her *Titus*, for private and critical viewing. It is one of the better 2-disc DVDs produced, with its interviews and supplemental material. I suggest that students and instructors watch it at least twice, the second time with her director's commentary as the sound track. Taymor's approach raises questions about humor and the celebration of the macabre in Elizabethan tragedy. Posts to the SHAKSPER LISTSERV on the subject of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* as "send-up" of the Senecan revenge play which Thomas Kyd had so popularized are divided. I have read good rationales for why it cannot be "camp," yet Taymor's production demonstrates the capacity for reading certain parts of it that way. In some ways, Taymor's work with *Titus* reminds us that this early play is nearer to the later Jacobean tragedies, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Changeling*, *Duchess of Malfi*, *The White Devil*, than we may have previously assumed. [Kyd's more contemporaneous *The Spanish Tragedy* is a neglected parallel.] Of what this reminds us, in turn, I think, is that Shakespeare's middle tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, at least—I might disagree with Bradley in counting *Macbeth* among the greatest four—are so distinctive. Each is so amazingly and richly different, yet each begs for a probing analysis. I reminded students,

*It would be wrong for Hamlet to commit suicide, though he thinks about it. But suicide seems to be Othello's only right response, once he discovers what he's caused.* (Page 4)

My last question on the handout, numbered TEN, alerts students to my course-long emphasis upon a less reductive definition of *hamartia* than most pre-college texts will admit. (Tragic "flaw" seems still to be the operant definition in high school manuals.) One useful description of *hamartia* as tragic trait is attributed to John Crosset in an essay by S. P. Zitner: "Self-delusion, specifically the sort of self-delusion that leads to a radical misinterpretation of experience, [is] essential to *hamartia*" (Zitner, "Hamlet and Hamartia" 199). I believe it is Helen Vendler who refers to a "mistake-making capacity" of human impulses. However, I cannot stress enough how much my own thinking on the tragic trait was reshaped by discovering James P. Hammersmith's essay, "Shakespeare and the Tragic Virtue" (which *Southern Humanities Review* has allowed me to put online). Hammersmith stresses that an error is not a blind mistake, not a "flaw" as may have come down to us from instructors' over-simplification of Bradley, but an excess of virtue. So, this is how a character can be so full of capacity for tragedy. Titus makes these mistakes:

*[From my Question # 10] He demands the sacrifice of Alarbus,  
despite Tamora's pleas;  
he votes for first born Saturninus;  
he grants his daughter to Saturninus;  
he turns other Goth prisoners over to Saturninus.  
He kills a son who tries to support Bassianus' claim for Lavinia.*

*At first, he refuses to bury this son in the family tomb.  
He is duped by Aaron's plot and the framing of his other sons;  
he assumes he can save his sons if he sacrifices his hand.  
He uses the sacrifice of his daughter to exact his revenge.*  
(Page 16)

Yet each time he acts, he acts in that way that is in his own mind right for that moment.

I can predict and anticipate a few things from the growth of the class in undertaking this exercise. Unlike a recent issue of *Shakespeare Magazine*, which--somewhat akin to what Taymor has done--tries to argue for inclusion of the play in the canon because violence is around us (and more today than ever), I think my students now have an innate sense of the development of Shakespeare as a craftsman of lasting tragic values. They recognize that some of my replies which assert the equal bloodiness of *Othello* and *Hamlet* (page 4) are meant to provoke the counter-argument, and they begin to look for what in *Hamlet* or *Othello* remakes the standards of Renaissance Tragedy. Just this week, we returned to closer examination of *Hamlet*; and my stress on the fact that the play raises questions on the morality and appropriateness of revenge as solution, even when the evidence for action is clear, very much hit home in ways it would not have had they not studied *Titus*. It is not that Hamlet is a constitutionally hesitant being, nor simply too excitable, too melancholic. He is distressed that a "life for a life" might not be the wisest moral choice. Hamlet is entrapped, looking for some way to honor a family obligation, yet wanting

desperately to break the cycle of violence (the first sane moralist in a barbaric world), sure that if he does honor his father, he is complicit in another, fiercer tradition. What a time, then, for *Hamlet* and for the contrast between *Titus* and *Hamlet*, for we are facing a complexity of moral response in the real world that is only measurable against heart-wrenching tragic experience. Yes, we hear discussions, in the faculty lounge, for instance, that have no reservations about admitting, "I want us to GET that Osama bin Ladin." Is he our Iago? Our Aaron? Our Claudius? Our Titus? Why is the cacophony of outrage against us, the "just" avengers, so haunting?

Students, I hope, will depart from a semester's work on the early plays of Shakespeare, ready for the time when catharsis might strike them. Like the teacher who invited his students to meet him on the steps of the state capitol at the turn of the millennium, I will invite them to remember this semester when they gave some attention to measurements of catharsis. That moment in the theatre, when it comes, will be utterly artful and utterly life-shattering. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle references catharsis in terms of the result of two clashing emotions, Pity and Fear. It is more powerful than either emotion held separately. In melodrama, we pity the victim; we empathize with the hero, and we fear and condemn the villain. Those can be powerful emotions, but the catharsis of tragedy is more powerful. I tell my students: you now have the capacity to recognize catharsis in the theatre, when it happens. It is gut

wrenching. It is profoundly draining. It is at the same time uplifting, but how, why?

We are grieved for the suffering of the tragic hero, yet understand how his tragic downfall came about; his situation is perhaps so human we are fearful of being in his situation, of having no way out, and recognizing it is somewhat his/our own doing. Partly we are experiencing, vicariously, an experience that is close to what could happen to any of us. If it is really catharsis, we really are impacted by it for the rest of our lives.

## References

Page references in the text are to the printout of the complete discussion of various prompts completed by the then current class on the Blackboard Discussion class page. The prompts themselves are enumerated in a handout that has been frequently used in the later teaching of the play.

Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Quotations following the references are transcribed from Laurence Perrine's *Literature: Structure Sound and Sense*. Online edition of the complete text, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm>

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan. Orig. 1904. On line at Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16966/16966-h/16966-h.htm>

Cinthio, Giraldi. *Hecatommithi*. Translation by J. E. Taylor, credited as 1855. Third Decade, Story 7. On line at *Classical Net* for materials related to Verdi's Opera *Otello* as "The Story that Started It All," <http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/works/verdi/otello/otstory.php>. Students might find useful the Bullough translation of Cinthio's tale in his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources* (Vol. 7, pp. 241-252). Bullough provides notes that link the action to the text of *Othello* and includes prefatory paragraphs to the story that show it in its context.

Shakespeare Company. Shakespeare Hour LIVE! Episode 38, *Titus Andronicus*.

Features Harry Lennix and Julie Taymor. March 5, 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3eoNrdRd6U>. Hosts Simon Godwin

and Dr. Drew Lichtenberg promote *Titus* as the best of Shakespeare.

Taymor acknowledged that something could be expedited to make her

film of *Titus* more accessible. In the meantime, the two disk DVD that

includes her commentary track and several extras is highly recommended.

Hosts Simon Godwin and Dr. Drew Lichtenberg promoted it as the best of

Shakespeare.

Taylor, Gary. *Reinventing Shakespeare*. Grove Atlantic, 1989.

Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

Hammersmith, James P. "Shakespeare and the Tragic Virtue." Originally

*Southern Humanities Review*. Vol. 24. No. 3 (Summer 1990), pp. 245-54.

Available at this site, now archived,

<http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/gates/shtragcv.htm>

Zitner, S. P. "Hamlet and Hamartia." In *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the*

*Western Tradition: Essays in Honor of John M. Crossett*. Edited by Donald

V. Stump, et al. Edward Mellen Press, 1983, pp. 193-210.



## Aristotle: Definition of Tragedy

Often provided as handout and PowerPoint

- ❖ According to Aristotle, tragedy has these important components.  
Tragedy, he wrote in *The Poetics*, is:
  - ❖ the imitation in dramatic form of an action that is serious and complete, with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith it effects a catharsis of such emotions. The language used is pleasurable and appropriate throughout to the situation in which it is used. The chief characters are noble personages ("better than ourselves"), and the actions they perform are noble actions. The plot involves a change in the protagonist's fortune, in which he falls from happiness to misery. The protagonist is not a perfectly good man nor yet a bad man; his misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment. A good tragic plot has organic unity: the events follow not just *after* one another but *because* of one another. The best tragic plots involve a reversal (a change from one state of things within the play to its opposite) or a discovery (a change from ignorance to knowledge) or both.
    - **Aristotle's concept of tragic hero**
  - ❖ Not a perfectly good nor a bad man but:
  - ❖ A good man, a great man, a man of nobility who has a flaw in his character.
  - ❖ Most critics until the 20th century took the concept of nobility in a tragic hero to be one of noble birth.
  - ❖ One could argue that a moral nobility is equally vital to the tragic hero.
    - **A Tragic hero makes an irreversible error in judgment**
  - ❖ The error caused by his lack of perception, his "flaw" (but it is better to translate *hamartia* as blindness, his misguided sense that he is in the right).

- ❖ Oedipus makes an error in his determination to find out the cause of the plague, little suspecting that he himself has something to do with it.
- ❖ Often in Greek Tragedy the Chorus comes to see the mistake before the main character comprehends it.
  - **The hero's recognition of his error is an important ingredient**
- ❖ Self-recognition but an awareness of error that comes too late to prevent a downfall.
- ❖ The awareness of guilt, the suffering, is more a component of tragedy than the fact that the hero dies.
- ❖ Oedipus blinds himself and punishes himself by self-exile as part of his suffering.
- ❖ In *Antigone*, Creon is left to grieve the suicides of son and wife.

See the separate document on *Titus Andronicus* and Tragedy, Discussion Questions.