

**Handout** used for class in the study of early Shakespeare Plays

Referenced in the Presentation for Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture Conference,

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

There are a several "givens" in the comparison / contrast of *Titus Andronicus* and Shakespeare's later tragedies.

A) Shakespeare at the beginning of his career stepped into a genre that was clearly defined by tragedy that was dominated by Senecan values. Thomas Kyd's revenge tragedy, *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) was extremely popular, as was *Titus Andronicus*.

B) Shakespeare must be credited with developing tragedy beyond the point it is in at the writing of *Titus*.

1. What, then, in *Hamlet* and *Othello* is a development beyond *Titus Andronicus*? Specifically, can you use Aristotle's points about tragedy to contrast the first tragedy with the later ones?
2. And conversely, what do you recognized in *Titus Andronicus*, despite its being driven largely by Senecan values, which show hints of Aristotelian tragic form?

**Other related questions:**

3. Especially interesting is the way that Titus's "madness of grief" informs a study of Hamlet. (The fly scene, the arrow-shooting scene, and Titus's entrapment of Tamora's sons when they come in disguise to visit him have the strange quality that indicate the lines of dialogue do not fully indicate what tone, and what underlying subtext is operating. How do moments when Titus is consumed with grief help us read Hamlet's sorrow and understand that a disguise of madness is useful to plot a revenge? How much is Titus faking his madness, especially in the latter scene, and how do we know this? What links can you make to the complexity of pretending madness in *Hamlet*?)
4. Can we also argue that Lavinia as victim of tragic circumstance is crucially integral to the action, as Ophelia is? (With Lavinia unable to speak, her presence and effect on others must be how we measure much of her performance. Knowing what we know about Shakespeare's roots

with Lavinia as a dramatic character, what can we say about his later tragic female victims, Ophelia, Desdemona?

5. A concern for the future of the state is an important factor in the last scene, just following the bloody carnage. How does Shakespeare's consideration of this in *Titus* resonate in *Hamlet*? Note especially the push by the remaining Andronici, Lucius and Marcus to convince the senators that they have a right to rule. Are we supposed to feel like order is rightly restored, or is there room for interpretation, in that there are still open questions about the way that the Andronici have asserted their control? (Compare/contrast to Fortinbras' entrance, to ends of *Richard III*, and *Othello*.) No longer Available:

You may want to consult the article by Anthony Brian Taylor in *Connotations*, 6.2 (1996-97): 138-157 Originally on line at:

<<http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/uni/nec/TAYLOR62.HTM>>

"Lucius, the Severely Flawed Redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*"

One can now download the original article as a PDF:

<http://www.connotations.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ataylor00602.pdf>

The root page for this contains links to a chain of replies to the original article,

<http://www.connotations.de/article/anthony-brian-taylor-lucius-the-severely-flawed-redeemer-of-titus-andronicus/>

6. Can you argue that Shakespeare divided the consciousness of Aaron when he wrote *Othello*? Do you see the roots of both Iago, the arch villain who is racist, and Othello, the victim of Iago's conniving, in his portrait of Aaron? Are there things we should admire about Aaron, and do the racist statements by others in the play indict the characters of the speakers? In light of *Othello*, can you make the argument that Shakespeare's attitude about race evolved?

7. Allusions in *Titus* and later plays. One can argue that Shakespeare is heavy handed in references to Ovid, Horace, other classical works and events. But does awareness of Shakespeare's use of allusions in this play make us better attuned to ways he develops his craft of allusions in later works? Re-examine *Hamlet's* references to Nero, Hercules, Christian Purgatory and salvation.

8. There are numerous questions about deliberate deception and staged deception (or designed play-acting) which link the three plays. Focus on Aaron's tactics OR on the way Titus plots and stages his revenge. There's a lot we are not directly privy to in the staging of the deaths in the last scene of *Titus Andronicus*. Only from a short aside do we know that Titus is not mad, as Tamora presumes he is (or does she?). How is this different from Hamlet's pretend madness or his staging of the Mousetrap?

9. Examine closely the lines that form the climatic action of the last scene and argue that *Othello* or *Hamlet* does a better job of pacing the multiple deaths, with enough dialogue and time between them for us to process the action. If you have seen Julie Taymor's *Titus*, comment on the effect of slow motion and still frame shots to underscore what in the text is too sudden for our full cathartic reaction. What other ingredients are present for the potential cathartic reaction?

10. **THINK QUESTION**, for discussion: Select one from a list of Titus's mistakes. (They may not equally rank as "mistakes," so you may want to consider that.) Using the Hammersmith rationale that *hamartia* is more a virtue than a flaw, argue that, in the moment he commits it, the mistake is not really that but a blind impulse to do what he thinks is the right thing; that his inability to see the consequences are what dooms the action as tragic. In what ways are Hamlet and Othello like Titus in this? Hammersmith's "Shakespeare and the Tragic Virtue" is on line (linked from *old* version of a class page) at:

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

Titus demands the sacrifice of Alarbus, despite Tamora's pleas;

He votes for first born Saturninus as ruler.

He grants his daughter to Saturninus;

He turns other Goth prisoners over to Saturninus (including Tamora),

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.