

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAUSIBLE COMMUNITY: THE FIRST ACT OF *TITUS ANDRONICUS* AND ITS KYDIAN PRECEDENT

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1. Reclaiming Early Shakespeare

It is no longer in bad taste to take pleasure in a performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* or *Titus Andronicus*. The credit enjoyed by these two early masterpieces of public drama when they electrified late Elizabethan audiences with their shocking novelty lasted at least until the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century, if Ben Jonson's 1614 "Induction" to *Bartholomew Fair* attests the continuing popularity of Kydian and Shakespearean avengers. Jonson's aggression towards these plays indicates that they were still drawing audiences "five and twenty or thirty years" after their first appearance (Campbell 1995). However, what is certain is that most Restoration audiences and commentators seemed to have regarded the plays as distastefully violent if not openly offensive. In the eighteenth century *The Spanish Tragedy* was completely neglected; *Titus* survived in an adaptation by Ravenscroft (1687) who, emulating Chiron and Demetrius's "trimming" of Lavinia, as it were, "improved" the play by disfiguring it almost beyond recognition. Well into the second half of the twentieth century, only scholars with a bibliographical interest in Elizabethan drama paid serious attention to the plays. And even then, those prepared to grant the plays a historical significance could not suppress their revulsion for the bloodthirsty avengers. Thus, T.S. Eliot, otherwise so responsive to Elizabethan writing, pronounced his harshest verdict on *Titus* when he famously

described it as “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which it is incredible that Shakespeare had any hand at all” (Eliot 1999: 82).¹ This is no longer the case. The volume and intensity of theatrical, critical, and editorial attention received by the two plays in recent decades marks a turning-point in the history of their reception. Even university students appear to be strongly affected by what scholars of previous generations would have diagnosed as some sort of critical disease.²

The restoration of *Titus Andronicus* is part of the general restoration of the earliest Shakespeare, including the *Henry VI* trilogy and *King John*. It was only after the Second World War that these plays began to be taken seriously by both scholars and stage directors. There is no doubt that the recovery of this early group of plays is one of the important contributions of twentieth-century Shakespearean scholarship. Likewise, the re-establishment of *The Spanish Tragedy* has a broader significance as part of the rediscovery of the so-called pre-Shakespearean drama. Since the late eighteenth century, the pre-eminence of Shakespeare has overshadowed the plays of the early generation of Elizabethan public dramatists or University Wits: Greene, Peele, Lyly, Kyd, and Marlowe. Middleton, Webster, Marston, and the rest of the brilliant Jacobeans, have also paid a long tribute of silence to their immortal colleague. In the nineteenth century, the assumption of the superiority of Shakespeare was reinforced with the Romantic notion of the poetic genius. The poet, endowed with imaginative powers that apprehend the eternal truths, soars above the limiting circumstances of the present and becomes the timeless Bard. And Shakespeare “the Bard” did not write plays but “dramatic poems”. An aesthetic icon is thus substituted for the historical man of the theatre. Hence the professional, material, and institutional context in which Shakespeare worked is deemed to distort the true meaning of his production. To approach Shakespeare’s texts as plays written for the stage was to fail to grasp their artistic value. This view of Shakespeare has proved highly influential. The interpretative principles of Goddard’s well-known book, for example, show that this tradition has continued to flourish long after the nineteenth century:

Drama, as we have said, must make a wide and immediate appeal to a large number of people of ordinary intelligence. The playwright must make his plots plain, his characters easily grasped, his ideas familiar. The public does not want the truth. It wants confirmation of its prejudices. That is why the plays of mere playwrights have immediate success but seldom survive. What the poet is seeking, on the other hand, is the secret of life, and, even if he would, he cannot share with a crowd in a theatre, through the distorting medium of actors who are far from sharing his genius, such gleams of it as may have been revealed to him. He can share it only with the few, and with them mostly in solitude. A poet-playwright, then, is a contradiction in terms. But a poet-playwright is exactly what Shakespeare is. And so his greater plays

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are one thing as drama and another as poetry, one thing on the outside, another within.

The myth of Shakespeare's absolute originality goes hand in hand with the negation of the theatricality of his works and explains the reluctance to acknowledge the interactive nature of his creativity. As Martin Wiggins points out, "once part of a group, [Shakespeare] has been reduced over time to pre-eminent singularity —and it is easy, though obviously mistaken, to assume that his plays are bound always to be originals because they are the more familiar".

Yet Shakespeare was a man of the theatre through and through. As actor and playwright, he was professionally committed to his company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men), economically dependent on the takings at the box office, and fully responsive to those trends and vogues initiated by fellow and rival authors, with whom he did not shrink from collaborating on occasion. Indeed, Shakespeare saw his two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, published in proper editions, but did not seem to accord the same attention to the printing of his play-texts. Nor did he make any attempt to put the plays on a par with his poems by assembling them as his "Works", which is what self-regarding Jonson did with his Folio edition of 1616, to the astonishment of not a few. To recognize these basic facts it is necessary to re-inscribe the Shakespearean corpus within its original context: the London public stage. From this perspective, early plays like *Titus* can no longer be regarded as training exercises for the mature plays. Rather, they are seen as Shakespeare's response to each stage in the development of Elizabethan drama, that is, as testimony of his engagement with the new possibilities of a continuously evolving dramatic practice. Shakespeare's plays exist in dialogue with the drama of his time.

The parallel rediscovery of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* would not have been possible without this theatrical shift in focus. Nonetheless, our understanding of the relationship between them continues to be inadequate. That a relationship exists is often acknowledged, but is invariably explained away in the most general terms, as a matter of a few "startling features" (Waith 1998: 38). We are now prepared to admit that Shakespeare often responded to the example of others, but what is meant by that is simply a matter of localized borrowings. Hence it is granted that the Kydian precedent offered Shakespeare a model, but only a formal one. Waith, for example, concludes his examination of Shakespeare's debt to Kyd thus: "like *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus* is sensational, serious, learned, and spectacular" (Waith 1998: 38). However, the history of the emergence of Elizabethan public tragedy would seem to suggest otherwise. It is increasingly recognized that *The Spanish Tragedy* played a pivotal role in the progression of Elizabethan drama. What is more, in terms of the dramaturgical possibilities that

it opened up, it is possibly the single most influential play of Renaissance tragedy. C.L. Barber, for example, judges the play “nothing less than great, strategically great” (Barber 1988: 131), while McAlindon hails it as “quite the most important single play in the history of English drama” (1986: 55). It is a fact that Kyd’s play started off as an unprecedented success. Between 1592 and 1597, except for *The Jew of Malta*, no other extant play seems to have been performed as often as *The Spanish Tragedy*. It is believed that it may have been performed by at least four of the major Elizabethan playing companies and at no less than seven of the London playhouses. Such popular acclaim is confirmed by the number of editions it went through: eleven between 1592 and 1633, a number which no Shakespeare play can boast. Parodies and references to Hieronimo in both Elizabethan and Jacobean plays (e.g. Beaumont’s 1607 *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*) attest the continuing popularity of the play long after its appearance. Clearly, a young playwright at the outset of his career and eager to make his mark could not have ignored this spectacular success. There were not a few imitations of Kyd’s play, but *Titus Andronicus* was the one play which proved another smash hit. This is not accidental. There can be no doubt that the appeal of Kyd’s play had to do mostly with its innovative treatment of revenge. Extreme violence and cruelty feature in the play, but were not foreign to the pre-Kydian stage. The appeal of the Kydian avenger does not lie in sensationalism. It was Shakespeare who grasped the full implications of the new avenger for the public drama and sought to explore them further in his play. Yet in criticism the possibility of Shakespeare’s seriously creative engagement with Kyd’s tragic vision is never properly considered. This has to be a consequence of the lingering bias against Shakespeare’s first tragedy.

As a result, whenever the two plays are examined in the perspective of dramatic continuity, *Titus Andronicus* emerges as an inferior derivative of *The Spanish Tragedy* which as such can contribute little to the fledgling public drama. Shakespeare’s play is not the product of an intellectual engagement with the Kydian discovery of tragic revenge. It only appropriates a number of striking forms and motifs. In this respect, the verdict that Barber and Wheeler’s influential study passes on the play is representative:

Designed in obvious imitation of Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus* has an aged, worthy pillar of social piety, who suffers outrage to his children, is driven to desperate, extravagant grief and protest [...] and finally, by turning dramatic fiction into physical action, achieves outrageous revenge [...]. Because motives [...] are projected in symbolic action for which there is no adequate social matrix, there can be no control by ironic recognition, no clarification of what these motives mean as they are expressed in relation to a plausible community whose stability they disrupt. *Titus Andronicus* fails, by contrast with *The Spanish Tragedy* (let alone *King Lear*), because there is in effect no larger social world within which the outrage takes place,

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no ongoing business of state and private life within which the isolation of the injured hero can be presented, in the way that Hieronimo's desperate, helpless isolation is conveyed. The revenge motive as a struggle for vindication of what is at the core of society is only formally present in *Titus Andronicus*. (Barber and Wheeler 1986: 125)

This tells us that *Titus* is a disappointing failure because it offers symbols instead of a community of interacting characters. It thus looks to the medieval past rather than to the future of Elizabethan drama. Revenge comes across not as the tragic exploration of a profound sense of injustice (the case of Hieronimo) but as an exercise in gratuitous violence. Barber and Wheeler's negative verdict rests, then, on the claim that *Titus* fails in its representation of revenge because it fails in its representation of a community possessing a meaningful alternative to violence.

What I contend is the opposite claim: far from an opportunistic remake, *Titus* is a significant contribution to the new public drama which further develops the Kydian discovery of the interacting community. Behind Barber and Wheeler's indictment of the play is the received perception that *Titus Andronicus* is "more like a pageant than a play" (Bradbrook, as quoted in Hamilton 1967: 63). However, there remains a subtler and still more persistent assumption. It is that the first Shakespearean play to attempt a serious representation of Roman culture is the Plutarchan *Julius Caesar*. As Robert S. Miola points out, "the most striking feature of modern critical reaction to *Titus Andronicus* is the persistent refusal to consider it one of Shakespeare's Roman plays". A form that this prejudice usually takes is the claim that the author of *Titus Andronicus* conceived its avenger and his tribe more in pagan than in Roman terms. The defining features of the Roman nation are dissolved into a pagan barbarity that confuses Roman and Goth, villain and avenger. From this the conclusion is drawn that Titus's revenge is unrecognisable as a Roman act. Emrys Jones's well-known study of the early Shakespeare, for example, claims that *Titus* is "Greek in feeling", and that "the setting is Roman but the story it tells is one of Thracian violence". For Jones, who is trying to link the play to Euripides's *Hecuba*, the Greek character of the play manifests itself in its sanguinary atmosphere, to which the Romans contribute no less than the Goths: "the play's first act of barbaric violence is Titus's own —his sacrifice of Alarbus, son of Tamora. This act of sacrifice, an addition to the source, is itself not Roman but Greek" (Jones 1977: 106-107). Unlike Kyd, who successfully recreates a chivalrous community under God and their King, Shakespeare's lack of anthropological imagination, it would appear, frustrates his first attempt to put a living and interacting society on the Elizabethan stage. It is the perception of an uncivilized violence, common to Goths and Romans, then, that underpins the charge of Shakespeare's misrepresentation of society, which, in turn, supports the imputation of the meaninglessness of Titus's revenge. The implications of what we see enacted,

however, seems to me to be at the antipodes of this: even violence, which appears to negate the communal hold on the individual, bears the marks of his or her cultural, that is, social affiliation.

2. The Interactive Community in the New Drama

What Shakespeare represents in his tragedy of Romans and Goths is their reciprocal perception of barbarity, which is entirely different from the representation of a common barbaric disposition. From the start, the idea of barbarity is present as a means of differentiating rather than confusing identities. Admittedly, the first to perform a barbaric act are the Romans. Carrying the coffins of his dead sons, victorious Titus returns to Rome. He enters the city in triumphal procession, pays tribute to Jupiter at his Temple or Capitol, the religious heart of Rome, and opens the family tomb in order to inter his dead sons. This ritual re-encounter with the city after ten years of war is completed by a final ritualistic act —the sacrifice of Alarbus, eldest son of the captive Queen of Goths. To us, readers and spectators living in the allegedly civilized twenty-first century, the sacrifice is patently barbaric, and all the more because it involves the rending and disembowelling of the body, its severing into parts and its consumption by fire. But there is nothing here to allow us to assume that this ritual is un-Roman. Predictably, criticism has given this initial act of vengeance the “pagan” treatment, so that Ronald Broude, for example, in an often-quoted article presents it as a “characteristic example of pagan vengeance” (Broude 1979: 469). Nevertheless, Shakespeare stresses the fact that not only does the sacrifice respond to no vindictive impulse but that it is conducted in perfect accord with Roman religious practice. It is not the vengeful living but the dead that “religiously [...] ask a sacrifice” (I.i.127). As Lucius shows, the satisfaction that the Andronici take in Alarbus’s slaughter is the satisfaction of accomplished duty:

See, lord and father, how we have performed
Our Roman rites. Alarbus’ limbs are lopped,
And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,
Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky.
Remaineth naught but to inter our brethren. (I.i.145-149)³

For the mother of the victim, it is of course quite different. The violence that is being done to her children appears incomprehensible to her. But she condemns it as a mark of *romanitas*, which she so much hates —“O cruel, irreligious piety” (133). To her foreign eyes, the demands that Roman piety makes seem utterly inhuman. As outsiders to the faith, the Goths perceive in Roman rites nothing but

sheer barbarity. Compared to Rome, “was never Scythia half so barbarous” (134), says Chiron, one of Tamora’s two surviving sons. Chiron’s imputation of barbarism is an ironic reversal of the cultural righteousness of Marcus, who has just announced Titus’s return from “weary wars against the barbarous Goths” (28). These mutual perceptions of barbarity do not argue for a condition of barbarousness that Goths and Romans share. Rather, they establish a cultural relativity: in a truly interactive theatre, each culture is shown from the perspective of the other, so that their limiting relativity is exposed. “Barbarism” is the perceived cultural limitation of the other tribe that remains unperceived in one’s own. Thus, what Shakespeare establishes from the start is the limitation that a given culture imposes on its members. Contrary to what some critics assume,⁴ Shakespeare identifies the barbarity of Goths and Romans in order to emphasize the cultural divide separating them, and hence their distinctiveness as communities. The existence of these dramatic ironies should alert the audience to the fact that the imputation of barbarity does not exhaust the meaning of violence.

The importance of this relativity for my argument is that it defines a historical and cultural dimension for the community that makes its members’ dependence on it more, not less, definite than in *The Spanish Tragedy*. In comparison to Kyd’s drama, this dependence argues for a more profound conception of selfhood: characters are more definite in Shakespeare because they are more relative. And what they are relative to is their community. To claim, as Jones does, that a shared barbarity blurs the Romanness of the Andronici is to disregard a significant advance on Kyd’s generic representation of the community. Indeed, from the perspective of Shakespeare’s culturally specific communities, Kyd’s Spain appears abstract and schematic. *The Spanish Tragedy* certainly generates a sense of “ongoing business of state and private life” in a way unknown to the declamatory drama of its revenge predecessors like *Horestes* (printed 1567) or *Gorboduc* (performed 1561). And not only that: the play successfully represents a community the identity of whose members is shown—and not just stated—to rest on their location in a network of sexual, familial, and hierarchical relations, all of which are seen simultaneously at work in their actions and speeches. Speech ceases to be, as it was in the set-speech drama of the previous generation, a statement of ideas; in the new drama it enacts an identity that grows even as it reveals itself in dialogical action. Shakespeare, however, is not Kyd’s rival. What he does is to assimilate the Kydian example by taking it further: where Kyd’s achievement was to represent *the community*, the achievement of Shakespeare is to recreate *a community*.⁵ Of course, the social reality of *The Spanish Tragedy* is not timeless. The Spanish court appears as a recognizably traditional court of chivalric values.⁶ But Kyd’s main concern in dramatizing a community living up to chivalrous values and norms is to represent a God-sanctioned social ideal against which the atheistic savagery of Lorenzo the

villain can be measured. Though set in Spain, England's greatest colonial and ideological rival at the time, the audience is made to identify with the King and his pious servant Hieronimo, thereby fully registering on the spectators the devastating impact of Lorenzo's transgressions against the social, political and moral order. What is central to Kyd's conception of the community is its normative validity, which is meant as universal. By contrast, Shakespeare not only imagines a pagan world that is presented as completely foreign to the Elizabethan audience, but produces two different national groups whose beliefs and practices create insiders and outsiders, thus determining the identity of their respective members. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the different nationality of its characters remains purely nominal: nothing in their actions or speeches shows the Portuguese to be different from the Spaniards. In *Titus*, as the strategy of reciprocally perceived barbarity demonstrates, we continuously feel that a Roman acts and thinks as he does because of his Roman affiliations, as the Goth does because of his. The fact that this representation of the community is founded upon Kyd's example should not obscure the fact that it represents an advance on it.

3. The Avenger

Right from the outset, the hero of *Titus Andronicus* reveals Shakespeare's assimilation and development of the Kydian discovery of character as the product of interactive dramatic context. It also becomes clear from the start that revenge is central to this recognition. Because Kyd's community is conventional, his hero is presented as one of us. Hieronimo embodies the God-fearing family man, with whose suffering we fully identify when he is brutally uprooted from his secure world of respectability and affection. Only in his mad desperation does Hieronimo become capable of violent action. Titus's is a different case. How differently their characters are conceived is evident from the start. Hieronimo makes his first appearance on the occasion of Spain's victory over Portugal as another member of the party who welcomes the triumphant troops back home. Only when his son Horatio enters, leading the Portuguese prince captive, does he begin to stand out. It then becomes clear how profoundly he identifies with the values of his chivalric community: for him, service to his king and country expresses the natural law that regulates personal, familial and social life. Titus's first appearance similarly highlights his commitment to Rome. It becomes clear that this commitment is not of the common sort. In the speech that precedes Titus's entrance, Marcus refers to him as "Chosen Andronicus, surnamèd Pius" (I.i.23). The patriotic connotations of this epithet, famously related to Aeneas, should not be overlooked. As Barrow points out in his influential study of Roman civilization, "for

a ‘religious man’ the phrase is usually ‘a man of the highest *pietas*’”. In this profound sense, *pietas* implies a subordination to the claims that gods, family, and country have on you —“the claims exist because the relationships are sacred” (Barrow 1963: 22). To be “Pius”, then, is to excel in the awareness that you belong to others as well as to yourself, that is, to accept the full implications of the solidarity into which you are born as a Roman.

When Titus enters in ceremonial procession, the appositeness of Marcus’s epithet is confirmed. Titus’s opening rituals amount to an assertion of identity, both national and personal, in that they renew the Roman people’s commitment to themselves as a nation through his offer of the victory to Jupiter. In their study of Shakespeare’s engagement with classical culture, Charles and Michelle Martindale ask themselves “why does Shakespeare’s Rome appear to many so much more convincing than the Rome of other English Renaissance dramatists” in order to conclude that this is the case because only Shakespeare’s plays achieve “a sense of a possible past culture with its own imaginative consistency” (1990: 130, 125). Whereas his predecessors and rivals often mistake scholarly accuracy for imaginative consistency, Shakespeare shows religious and cultural practices to reflect a vision of life that is at the centre of the characters performing them.⁷ As Jacques Berthoud has perceptively pointed out, *Titus* is “the first sustained attempt to put a consistent foreign world on the [Elizabethan] stage” (Berthoud and Massai 2001: 25). My contention is that this remarkable achievement was possible in large measure because of the play’s capacity to show what it means for the Roman hero to have internalised as part of his identity the rituals and institutions of his ancestors’ land. Titus’s piety constitutes the purest expression of the Roman ideal of life. As Barrow further explains:

Throughout their history the Romans were acutely aware that there is “power” outside man, individually or collectively, of which man must take account. He must subordinate himself to something. If he refuses, he invites disaster [...]. Willing co-operation gives a sense of dedication; the purposes become clearer, and he feels he is an agent or an instrument in forwarding them; at a higher level he becomes conscious of a vocation, of a mission for himself and for men like him, who compose the state. When the Roman general celebrated his “triumph” after a victorious campaign, he progressed through the city from the gates to the temple of Jupiter (later in imperial times to the temple of Mars Ultor) and there offered to the god “the achievements of Jupiter wrought *through* the Roman people”. (1963: 9-10)

Unlike Hieronimo, a mere spectator of the triumphal return of the Spanish troops, Titus enters Rome (and the play) as an embodiment of national glory, of a martial virtue without which Rome could not quite be itself and indeed may cease to exist. Re-enacting the rite described by Barrow, he pays tribute to the god who has

directed him on his Roman mission. It soon emerges that Titus's identification with such a mission is absolute, quite beyond anything possible in Hieronimo's chivalric world. Titus's return is the final one over ten years of war against the Goths, during which he has lost twenty-one of his twenty-five sons. The epic simile with which he opens his salutation speech (I.i.74 ff.) shows that he projects himself in the light of the ancient warrior-heroes, in whose example he has made his greatest sacrifices, perpetuating the glorious tradition of Rome. Titus's invocation of mythical and historical precedent is characteristic of the Andronici, to the extent that it constitutes one of the salient traits of the play. Like the early *The Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus* is a learned work. This fact has been interpreted as a sign that in his first plays Shakespeare, who had no university education, was actively competing with his rivals the University Wits. Shakespeare, it is claimed, was asserting his classical learning against his erudite fellow playwrights. Hence Jonathan Bate, observing that "from the outset, the characters in *Titus* establish mythical and historical patternings for the action", concludes that "precisely because Shakespeare had less formal education than certain other dramatists, his play has more display of learning" (1993: 103). While this may indeed be the case, the fact remains that the traditional examples invoked by Titus show much more than his (or Shakespeare's) acquaintance with the Roman past: they reveal that he lives in emulation of heroic precedent—that is to say, that Titus is the product of the culture in which he exists. And, of course, this also holds for the Goths, who are shown to be Rome's cultural outsiders. Accordingly, where Titus is capable of the greatest sacrifice in deference to legendary precept, the Goths exhibit a contemptuous scepticism towards it—for example, in Tamora's allusions to Aeneas ("conflict such as *was supposed*/ The wand'ring prince and Dido once enjoyed" [II.iii.21-22, my italics]) or to Diana ("Had I the power that *some say* Dian had" [II.iii.61, my italics]).

4. The New Tragic Vision

The fact that Titus's commitment to his society is of an heroic dimension unknown to Hieronimo has to do with the fact that Titus's society is also heroic in a way that chivalrous Spain is not. In my reading of the plays, this opposing aspect of the heroes' identities confirms rather than denies the fact that Titus owes a great deal to Hieronimo as an avenger. Indeed, it reveals the full extent of Shakespeare's intellectual engagement with Kyd's new vision of revenge. What Shakespeare presents in his first tragedy is a *radicalised* version of the committed man of honour and paragon of civic virtue turned avenger. Titus's identification with the community is of the Kydian type, but taken to an extreme. The consequences of

this for revenge are disclosed only in Act V, after the suffering inflicted on the Andronici becomes more than is humanly bearable, even for a military Stoic like Titus. In Act III, the great Act of suffering, Rome pounces on his hero with a ferocity whose reality is incomprehensible to him: Lucius is banished from Rome, while Lavinia is discovered raped and maimed moments before the severed heads of his two captive sons are contemptuously returned along with the hand Titus sacrificed for their reprieve. But in confirmation of the unity of his play and of the control he exerts over it, Shakespeare provides an ominous hint of the consequences of any collapse of *romanitas* at the end of Act I, well before the calamities begin. This defining hint confirms what the tragic evolution of Hieronimo suggested —that revenge is a necessary kind of madness that results from the dissolution of the hero's internalised communal self. In other words, the unprecedented way in which Act I of *Titus Andronicus* recreates the condition of individual existence in society shows how Shakespeare capitalized on the new possibilities of the Kydian dramaturgy. But Act I not only establishes the interacting basis of its hero's identity— that is to say, his dependence on Rome for his sense of self. It also reveals the tragic contradictions that such dependence can generate, and does so by prefiguring the necessary breakdown of selfhood that must ensue when Rome ceases to sustain Titus's sense of who he is. Titus's reaction to the challenge to authority at I.i.286 and ff. suggests the full tragic potential of his absolute commitment to *romanitas*. From this perspective, it becomes clear how carefully worked out the pattern of Titus's disintegration into the madness of revenge is —indeed, how central to the play's tragic vision is the Kydian representation of the self in the community.

After his victorious return to Rome, his ceremonial progress through the city, and his reception of the people's tribute from Marcus, Titus refuses the offer of the "palliant of white" of imperial candidacy, and raises Saturninus to the throne (I.i.190 ff.). This is the first in a series of mistakes that precipitate a crisis at the centre of Roman power. Titus recklessly promises Lavinia to the emperor, but Bassianus, challenging Titus's decision, claims her as his own. The rest of the Andronici help in her abduction, provoking Titus's sense of challenged authority. Titus's reaction is as instinctive as it is brutal: when his son Mutius attempts to impede Titus's access to Lavinia, he kills him on the spot. Yet this merciless act constitutes an affirmation of *romanitas*: "what, villain boy, / Barr'st me my way in Rome?" (I.i.293-4). We are now made to feel very uneasy about Titus's uncompromising identification with his martial empire: in the course of this crisis it has begun to emerge that Rome is as dominated by appetite as its new emperor is. In the new Rome of Saturninus, Titus's uncompromising code of honour is beginning to prove dangerously inadequate. In its extraordinary ferocity, Titus's slaying of Mutius —one of his few sons to have survived the demands of Roman

service— bodes ill for his sanity in the face of the far greater challenges the emerging Rome has in store for him: grief, humiliation, impotence, and, finally, madness—a vengeance whose appalling barbarity would become legendary on the Elizabethan stage. It is beyond the scope of this paper to show the psychological depth and subtlety of Shakespeare's representation of the avenger's madness. It certainly demands a less mechanical analysis than received notions of revenge as private justice permit. The originality of the new avenger will be missed unless it is recognized that the inordinate ferocity of Titus's final act of retaliation is in direct proportion to his initial self-investment in civic virtue. To put it bluntly: it is Titus's radical commitment to Roman civilization that renders inevitable the frenzied carnage of Act V. This is the paradoxical recognition attendant on the emergence of the new revenge tragedy, driven as it is by a new and truer conception of the logic of the self-in-society. This new conception allows for tragic contradiction in a way unknown to the previous generation of Elizabethan playwrights. To ignore this fundamental aspect of the plays is to fail to do justice to Shakespeare's debt to Kyd and, even more important, to the playwrights' revolutionary part in the creation of Renaissance drama.

Notes

¹. However, in his well-known essay on William Blake, Eliot remarks that “[Blake’s] early poems show what the poems of a boy of genius ought to show, immense power of assimilation” and goes on to mention the early Shakespeare as an example of such powers, which assimilate precedent to generate something new: “Blake’s beginnings as a poet, then, are as normal as the beginnings of Shakespeare”, he claims (1950: 152-153). It is difficult to accept that Shakespeare should willingly have coarsened his creative powers when writing his first tragedy. Flat dismissals of the play continued to be common in Shakespearean scholarship for a long time after Eliot’s dismissal. Dover Wilson, for example, likened the play, which he edited, to “some broken-down cart, laden with bleeding corpses”, while Winifred Nowotny’s survey of Shakespearean drama devoted a single sentence to the play: “*Titus Andronicus*, a repulsive play, may be left out without regret” (as quoted in Hamilton 1967: 63).

². Thus Emrys Jones: “*Titus Andronicus* is no longer, or perhaps no longer so often, thought of as an embarrassing aberration. Indeed some may feel that, for many of our students, *Titus* has become almost too popular, too central a text” (2001: 35).

³. All citations to the play are taken from Berthoud and Massai (2001).

⁴. Jonathan Bate, for example, is in no doubt that the sacrifice of Alarbus is intended to “break down the distinction between Romans and barbarians” (1993: 108).

⁵. To stress, as I am doing, the groundbreaking novelty of these two early plays of the new drama is not to deny that

continuity also exists between this drama and the medieval tradition. This has been amply demonstrated by the pioneering work of Willard Farnham’s *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1936) and his successors’ classic studies: Bernard Spivack’s *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (1958), and David Bevington’s *From “Mankind” to Marlowe* (1962). For an up-to-date survey of the question see Rowland Wymer (2004).

⁶. How Spanish Kyd intended his play to be remains a disputed question. In a revealing article, J.R. Mulryne (1996) argues that the play, written at the time of the Armada, must have been regarded from a Hispano-phobic perspective by the Elizabethan audience. While a Hispano-phobic subtext may be present, as my description of Act I suggests, Kyd seems to me to make more demands on his audience than sheer jingoism. For a discussion of the historical dimension of the play see Ardolino (1995); for an updated comprehensive review of Kydian scholarship, see Erne (2001). The matter is further discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of my thesis (*The Subjectivity of Revenge: Senecan Drama and the Discovery of the Tragic in Kyd and Shakespeare*, The University of York, July 2002), from which some parts of this article have been adapted.

⁷. This applies to most of the 39 extant Roman plays of the period, from Thomas Lodge’s *The Wounds of Civil War* (ca.1589) —the first recorded— to Chapman’s *Caesar and Pompey* (ca.1604), of which Martindale observes that “characters [...] are quite carefully drawn, but not the society which produced them and against which they played out their struggles” (Martindale 1990:132).

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