

The Ghostly Treasure of Rome: A Close Reading of Lavinia in
William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

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William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is one of the playwright's earliest and most gruesome works, with some of its most disturbing actions committed against Lavinia. The daughter of Titus, Lavinia is a woman whose beauty is sought after by almost every man who lays eyes on her. As such, she is frequently reduced to nothing but her appearance, described by men using terms such as "ornament" (1.1.55) and "doe" (1.1.617). In Act Two, she is hunted down by the lustful Demetrius and Chiron as the pair take turns raping her before mutilating her body. They carve out Lavinia's tongue and chop off both her hands so that she has no means of communicating to anyone the identities of her attackers. She is left a ghost of her former self, silently wandering the stage as those around her try and interpret this speechless being. Throughout the play, Lavinia is presented as an object rather than a human: her entire identity is rooted in how the men of Rome view her. They objectify her as a "prize" (1.1.404) to be "won" (1.1.583) and dehumanize her as an animal to be hunted for pleasure. After her assault, when her chastity, innocence, and humanity are gone, she becomes an enigma. She, who can no longer speak for herself, is forced to have the men around her try to decipher her.

Lavinia's introduction sets the troublesome scene of her inhuman characterization. Before the audience lays eyes on her and hears her speak, Lavinia is objectified. While making his claim for the throne, Bassianus, to whom Lavinia is

“betrothed” (1.1.411), introduces her as “Rome’s rich ornament” (1.1.55). Lavinia, here, is not introduced as a person with her own agency, but instead as an object owned by the people of Rome. Further, the fact that she does not introduce herself, but rather another person introduces her, also serves to demonstrate Lavinia’s lack of agency, as she has no say in how she is represented. When Saturninus, Bassianus’ older brother, becomes emperor of Rome, he declares in a possessive manner that he will take Lavinia for himself: “Lavinia I will make my empress” (1.1.244). An argument breaks out between Bassianus and Saturninus regarding whom Lavinia belongs to as if she is not a human being but rather a “prize” (1.1.404) to be “won” (1.1.583). The brothers act like children fighting over a toy, with Bassianus staking his claim over Lavinia by “seizing” (1.1.280) her, saying “this maid is mine” (1.1.280). Throughout the ordeal, Lavinia has no say in her fate – the two men are the ones who decide who “own[s]” (1.1.285) her. In fact, Lavinia only speaks a total of ten lines in the whole scene – to “honour” her “noble lord and father,” to cry “tributary tears” for her fallen “brethren” (1.1.160-165), or to respond to Saturninus’ claim on her. She spends much of her time on stage purely as a set piece – quite literally objectified. She resides in the background of the scene whilst the men around her control her fate and refer to her in a possessive, objectifying, and dehumanizing manner.

The dehumanization of Lavinia is also presented when Chiron and Demetrius plot their assault on her alongside Aaron. Mirroring the argument between Bassianus and Saturninus, the sons of Tamora argue who has a right to have Lavinia for themselves: Chiron “plead[s] ... passions for Lavinia’s love” (1.1.535) whilst

Demetrius proclaims that “Lavinia is thine elder brother’s hope” (1.1.573). Lavinia, again, has no say in this argument for her hand, whilst men, again, use possessive language to insinuate they have power and control over her. To Chiron and Demetrius, just like to Bassianus and Saturninus, Lavinia is not a human but an object, a “prize” (1.1.404) to be “won” (1.1.583) and “loved” (1.1.584), whether or not she desires any affection at all: “She is a woman, therefore may be wooed; / She is a woman, therefore may be won; / She is Lavinia, therefore must be loved” (1.1.582-584). As the trio talk, their desires turn more sinister, as does their language: the men begin referring to Lavinia as a “dainty doe” (1.1.617) that they shall go “hunting” (1.1.612) for and that the brothers “both should speed” (1.1.601) in assaulting and raping together. They dehumanize her, likening her to prey – an innocent “doe” (1.1.593) – that shall be hunted for their sexual pleasure, reiterating later that “we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound, / But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground” (2.2.25-26). They are not hunting literal animals like the rest of the hunting party, but instead, Lavinia is their prey – their “dainty doe” (2.2.26). Aaron takes part in the dehumanization and objectification of Lavinia, telling the brothers to “single you thither then this dainty doe” (1.1.617), and then to “take your turns / There serve your lust, shadowed from heavens eye, / And revel in Lavinia’s treasury” (1.1.629-631). The men plot to take Lavinia violently and forcefully as their own in the woods and “make a pillage of her chastity” (2.2.44-45), disregarding her humanity in favour of their own sexual desires.

The attack on Lavinia objectifies and dehumanizes her in such a manner that she becomes an enigma for the remainder of the play. Once Chiron and Demetrius

have “ravished thee” (2.2.308), they “cut thy tongue” (2.3.309) and remove her hands, so she has no means of communicating the identities of those who have “deflowered” (2.3.26) her. Now, Lavinia has no voice to speak with, nor hands to write with – she has been so dehumanized and objectified to the critical point of becoming a *literal* object. Now that her voice and chastity have been pried from her, she becomes a ghost of her former self that her family struggles to understand and interpret. In trying to interpret her, her family often conflates their own sadness with hers, imparting their emotions to what they believe Lavinia is trying to communicate. When her uncle, Marcus, sees her for the first time after her attack, he is ashamed by the sight of her: “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” (2.3.26-28). Does Lavinia truly feel shame in this moment, or is she simply afraid for her uncle to see her in this state and so turns away to shield him from her gruesome wounds? Either *could* be true, but since Marcus feels shame for Lavinia at this moment, he interprets her actions as being shameful as well – and Lavinia cannot tell him otherwise. When Marcus brings Lavinia to see Titus and Lucius, he further dehumanizes her, telling Titus “[t]his was thy daughter” (3.1.63). He insinuates that the Lavinia before them is no longer the daughter of Titus because she has been “deflowered” (2.3.26) and “ravished” (2.2.308) and has lost the physical and metaphorical parts of herself that made her worthy of being family, and of being human, in Marcus’ eyes. Lucius, too, dehumanizes her, believing she is no longer the sister he once loved but rather just a pitiful object: “Ay me, this object kills me” (3.1.65). They both struggle to see her and interpret her as a person now

that she has lost both her chastity and the parts of herself that allow her to communicate. Titus, still seeing her as a person, claims to be able to interpret the meaning behind her wordless actions: “Mark, Marcus, mark! I understand her signs: / Had she a tongue to speak, now would she say / That to her brother which I said to thee” (3.1.144-146). Titus acts as an interpreter for Lavinia, though he often misconstrues his own grief as hers when speaking for her.

Once Titus loses his hand, he uses it as an opportunity to demonstrate a morbid connection to his daughter. As he says to Marcus: “Thy niece and I, poor creatures, want our hands / and cannot passionate our tenfold grief / With folded arms” (3.2.5-7). He speaks for Lavinia often, even getting angry on her behalf when Markus mentions hands: “O handle not the theme, to talk of hands, / Lest we remember we have none.” (3.2.29-30) Notably, though Titus claims that neither he nor Lavinia has any hands, he in fact *still* has one. In trying to speak her truth for her, he wrongfully writes over her trauma, misconstruing his trauma for hers and vice versa. He claims to understand Lavinia and her grief, as they have now both lost a part of themselves; however, Titus *chose* to lose his hand – “[w]ith all my heart I’ll send the emperor my hand. / Good Aaron, wilt thou help to chop it off? (3.1.161-162) – whereas Lavinia had no choice in her loss. Lavinia’s loss of her hands is symbolic, representing the violent and forceful removal of her chastity, innocence, and humanity and it is the culmination of her objectification throughout the play. It also demonstrates her lack of agency – she had no say in her fate, it was decided for her by the men around her who claim her as the “prize” (1.1.404) they are entitled. Titus may claim to understand the grief of his daughter, for he has lost one hand –

one he chose to give up for his sons – but he will never fully understand what she has lost. For his singular loss was a choice demonstrating personal agency, whereas her several losses were a violent theft of pieces of herself that no man can claim to truly understand. Titus, who has not been objectified or dehumanized, still has a hand left to hold, while Lavinia is left a “mangled” (3.1.256) husk of what – not who – she once was.

Throughout *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia is a character who is objectified and dehumanized at every turn, to the point where she becomes a literal object by the play's end: she loses her hands, her means of written communication, and her voice, leaving her no means to communicate with those around her. She is undecipherable, though the men around her try to interpret her, try to place their own meanings upon this woman whom they have reduced to something inhuman. Lavinia is never truly understood by any man in the play, for they never see her as a person. The men of her family cannot decipher her true meanings, and the other men of Rome see her as nothing more than an object of desire: a “prize” (1.1.404) to be won or a “doe” (1.1.617) to be slaughtered at the altar of their lust. Ultimately, she dies an unintelligible enigma, no longer a human to the world she leaves behind.

Works Cited

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