

Natália Pikli

## The Crossing Point of Tears and Laughter

A tragic farce: Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

The aged catch their breath,  
For the nonchalant couple go  
Waltzing across the tightrope  
As if there were no death  
Or hope of falling down;  
The wounded cry as the clown  
Doubles his meaning, and O  
How the dear little children laugh  
When the drums roll and the lovely  
Lady is sawn in half.

(W. H. Auden)

The circus described by the Stage Manager in the Preface of Auden's *Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*,<sup>1</sup> provides a highly revealing picture of the theatre in general, while highlighting how Shakespeare's plays work on stage, and in the theatre of our minds. The dramatic effect of his plays evokes two universal signs of emotion: tears and laughter. On the surface, laughter and suffering associate themselves easily with other binary oppositions such as light and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell – and in drama: comedy and tragedy. Still, they do not merely oppose but may cross each other, springing from the same roots. Tears of joy are made of the same material as tears of pain, and laughter may express pure joy or hide pain and misery.

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from W. H. Auden. "The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*." *Collected Longer Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.

The present paper focuses on such crossing points of violence, suffering and laughter,<sup>2</sup> first briefly highlighting some problematic points in their interrelation, then discussing these problems at greater length in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. The first section raises some questions concerning the nature and effect of violence and suffering in tragedies and in farce with Shakespearean examples. The second section discusses the interrelated notion of the grotesque, trying to provide a useful clarification of the term for interpreting Shakespeare. The third section discusses *Titus Andronicus* at greater length. After a short philological introduction, necessary to the "rehabilitation" of the play, the main grotesque motifs will be examined, in the play as a whole, in Titus' character, and on the linguistic-metaphorical level. Finally, the close analysis of one pivotal scene is given, which also presents how the method suggested by Thomson may be applied to Shakespearean plays.<sup>3</sup>

## I

Suffering and pain, the dominant emotions and themes of tragedy seem enigmatic in many respects. The internal and external experience of pain might appear radically different – one suffers and the other may take pity or may laugh at him. Pain is not physical, tangible for the other. In addition, the manifestation of misery may give rise to highly comic moments: an old man with his hair dishevelled, raging in and with the storm, without our awareness what has happened to him may seem only a mad old man, helplessly comic in his appearance. However, when the same old man is King Lear, the inherent comedy in his situation becomes uneasy as it is intertwined with a feeling of sympathy, evoked by the poetry of the play, which drags us into his situation, and takes us inside his suffering while not allowing us to maintain a distance. But the effect is reversed when our detachment cannot be helped, when there is a chorus of railing and storming kinsmen for the mad father's hand, chopped off in *Titus Andronicus*.

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the notions of 'violence' and 'suffering' as belonging to the same group when compared with 'laughter,' since they are strongly connected. Violence causes suffering, while suffering often calls for (more) violence. Suffering may be made to seem comic, or is seen as comic, while violence may be used for comic purposes, cf. chases in farce.

<sup>3</sup> "[...] any discussion of grotesque texts, if one is to show that they *are* grotesque, and why, must include the uncovering of comic patterns and structures." Philip Thomson. *The Grotesque*. The Critical Idiom 24. London: Methuen, 1972, p. 54.

Titus is not given the (dramatic) chance to rant with the effect Lear does: the multiplication (a basic comic device) and the shifting of the centre of suffering mark the scene as – at least potentially – comic. We watch suffering from the outside, the boundaries between us and the suffering hero is clearly felt, and we cannot help an uncomfortable urge to laugh. Suffering is thus made comic with a shift of perspective.

Suffering may also appear as comic in itself – in comedy, or even more clearly in its extreme form: farce. In *The Comedy of Errors* the servants are constantly beaten and one of the main characters, Antipholus of Ephesus, is brutally “exorcised:” bound, abused, driven to rage, recalling words familiar from *King Lear*: “the fiend is strong within him” (IV.4.105), “I’ll pluck out those false eyes” (IV.4.102).<sup>4</sup> We laugh at them, but our laughter is mixed with an uncanny feeling of pity, especially in Antipholus of Ephesus’s case, where violence is more excessive. In addition, in the clearly physical slapping and beating of the Dromios a basic question emerges: why do we laugh at somebody being beaten on stage? Is it only the Antipholuses who project – and thus try to eliminate – their inner misery by abusing and beating up an inferior, or are we doing the same while applauding the masters and jeering at their clowns, the clowns of a circus we can safely observe and enjoy from the outside? Though farce is not the genre which focuses on the character’s individual psychological credibility, archetypal fears and horrors are palpably felt within the hilariously comic and irresistible momentum of the play. Thus, comic suffering may become embarrassingly real, and tragic suffering may at times appear comic, even if the audience does not dare to laugh – the mere existence of doubt, the slight awareness of the potentially comic or tragic aspect is enough. The feeling of ludicrousness and pity mingle in “the ambiguous aura in which one may or may not laugh, but must perceive the laughter in the horror or vice versa.”<sup>5</sup>

The petty villains, representing the wicked humans on stage, often see the suffering afflicted by them as comic. Tamora’s sons, Chiron and Demetrius, whose will for wrongdoing is given concrete shape by the greater villains, Aaron and Tamora, obsessed with their ingenuity in raping and mutilating Lavinia, make cruel jokes at their victim, and become caught up more and more in the fun of it, ending up with exchanging a one-line banter with a cutting point:

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare. *The Comedy of Errors*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. R. A. Foakes. London and New York: Routledge, 1993 (1962).

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Brooke. *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy*. London: Open Books, 1979, p. 61.

DEMETRIUS So, now go tell, and if thy tongue can speak,  
 Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.  
 CHIRON Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,  
 And if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe.  
 DEMETRIUS See how with signs and tokens she can scrawl.  
 CHIRON Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.  
 DEMETRIUS She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash,  
 And so let's leave her to her silent walks.  
 CHIRON And 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.  
 DEMETRIUS If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord.  
 (II.3.1-10)<sup>6</sup>

These petty villains use (and release) a petty form of dark laughter. Joking at their victim's expense, they transgress a strongly held taboo. What is disturbing about their jokes is that at times we are apt to laugh with them, and share in this brutal taunting; the *id*, as Freud observed,<sup>7</sup> has no inhibitions and tends to enjoy the liberation of repressed desires in the villains' black wit. Therefore in *Titus Andronicus* we recognise and appreciate the wittiness and aptness of Chiron and Demetrius's jokes pointed at the laughable impotence of Lavinia. The disturbing aspect of their jokes is that we do not dare to laugh since then we would sink to their level, and become joking rapists and murderers. Still, we cannot repel their jokes entirely as ones made in bad decorum – if we did, we would have little insight in the real nature of the play (and of our human psyche).

The great villains, like Richard III, Aaron, and Iago present another vortex of violence and suffering – their demonic laughter, and their rejoicing at destruction opens up a wider scope in the interpretation of the problem.<sup>8</sup> The destructive – but mainly histrionic – humour of Vice is mingling with the metaphysical laughter of the Devil himself: his joy at total destruction, at the uncreation of creation, focusing on the nothing created out of something.<sup>9</sup> Aaron,

<sup>6</sup> All parenthesised references are to this edition: William Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus*. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. Ed. Jonathan Bate. London: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud. *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Ed. A. A. Brill. London: Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1922.

<sup>8</sup> The reception of either the petty or the great villain's laughter is a debatable issue. Nevertheless, the psychological motivations behind the villains' jokes and joy on stage and the audience's possible laughter have common origins.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jean Paul (*Vorschule der Ästhetik*): "the most destructive humour is perhaps the annihilating laughter of the Devil," as quoted in Philip Thomson, p. 16.

being a character in an early and mainly experimental play, can confess this kind of laughter openly, while the villains of smarter times “share” their joy with the audience only in soliloquies or asides. And while we enjoy our intellectual superiority over the other characters, which makes us silent accomplices to the villain’s schemes, a chord of terror is struck as well. Their humour is truly frightening. Through it we catch a glimpse of the world of uncreation – the void or the chaos, which is but “a tale / Told by an idiot [...] Signifying nothing.”<sup>10</sup>

## II

The complex relationship between violence and laughter demands the clarification of the interrelated notion of the grotesque. Accepting Thomson’s definition of the grotesque (applied mainly to its literary appearance),<sup>11</sup> it is the unresolvable and problematic juxtaposition of the seemingly incompatible, the laughable and the horrifying or disgusting, which juxtaposition creates a tension both within the work of art and in the response to it. “Horrible laughter” is the touchstone of the grotesque, no matter whether it is open, or only the possibility of it is realised.

The main question about the fusion of the comic and the horrifying is whether the grotesque imagery and attitude arising carry a metaphysical meaning, or serve a moral or satirical purpose. As Rhodes employs the notion in his book *The Elizabethan Grotesque*,<sup>12</sup> he discusses mainly occasional grotesque images within works which as a whole cannot be considered grotesque. These images – his “grotesque” – only serve as a device in the hands of a satirist.<sup>13</sup> As opposed to this predominantly moral or satirical view, which concentrates on specific imagery as a means to a higher goal, my paper primarily focuses on the grotesque as a prevailing mode, an overarching vision in a work of art, as, for example, in Kafka’s works.

<sup>10</sup> William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Kenneth Muir. Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997. (London: Methuen, 1951), V.5.26–28.

<sup>11</sup> During the examination of the grotesque and its affinity to the problem of violence and laughter, I will mainly rely on Philip Thomson’s comprehensive notion of the grotesque.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Rhodes. *Elizabethan Grotesque*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980. His main concern is Nashe’s pamphlets, and satirical journalism, though he goes on to examine some Shakespearean and Jonsonian dramas as well.

<sup>13</sup> In his analysis of the Falstaff plays he takes a somewhat different position, and interprets this figure as a grotesque image of the play and the play’s central conflict as between Carnival and Lent, offering valuable insights. Still, as a whole, his handling of the grotesque seems restricted.

The metaphysical grotesque of this kind works as a powerful metaphor: through the flash of the abrupt and startling juxtaposition of two distant (semantic and emotional) fields, it reveals something that our rational and moral make-up cannot explain, which, however, calls to our deeper understanding of ourselves and our world. If the metaphysical gap the grotesque exhibits is bridged with morals, we are passing the depth (and its monsters) without looking down, remaining undisturbed, which is the surest sign that the grotesque does not work for us. If it works, it deeply disturbs the reader or spectator. The “alienating effect” of the grotesque, as Chesterton states,<sup>14</sup> shakes us out of our old and comfortable beliefs and enables us (rather drastically) to see things anew.<sup>15</sup> However, the way the grotesque works should not be equated with Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* – the grotesque does not allow the emotional distance and thus the rational contemplation of the things presented.

The “revelation” of the grotesque relies primarily on demonstration. The grotesque does not separate sheep from goats, does not divide the world into a vale of tears or a circus, but juxtaposes and fuses them. To the grotesque the world is simultaneously a vale of tears and a circus.<sup>16</sup> Its strongly physical nature illuminates its closeness to the metaphor. The grotesque is anti-rational at its core, though a certain kind of intellectual awareness is indispensable as the grotesque fuses the real and the unreal in a special way. Its logic, though, is closer to that of the dream, relying more on intensity and association than the everyday logic of time and space. The very physical, palpable side of the grotesque, nevertheless, corresponds to our sense of reality while the strong irrationality of its exaggerations and fantasticality beckons to us with equal strength. As opposed to the fantastic, we do not suspend our beliefs in normality and reality altogether when confronted with the grotesque. The palpably physical side of the grotesque drags us into its world, not allowing the freedom of complete suspension and a more comfortable detachment. We are trapped within a frighteningly fantastic reality – or a palpably real fantasy, just as Gregor Samsa, who awakens one day in his own bed to find himself turned into an insect. This paradoxical nature of the grotesque threatens the comfortable analytical dualism, to which man is so prone

---

<sup>14</sup> G. K. Chesterton as quoted in Philip Thomson, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Though all great masterpieces of art inspire such a transformation of our views, the ways to achieve this effect vary considerably. The grotesque is only one of many.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Thomson, p. 63.

– the creature with two legs, two arms, two eyes, and the ready notions of light and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell.<sup>17</sup>

With the blurring of the distinctions between real and unreal, the grotesque creates a dangerous mixture. Danger arises from the elimination of the distance between things generally far apart, which, by threatening distinction, threatens the norms. The demonstration of the abnormal (cf. Bosch's or Brueghel's works) and the unnatural (a highly significant term in Shakespeare) underlines the notion of endangered norms. If the deviation of the norms is harmless, as in the case of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, we do not have the impression of the grotesque – the simply ridiculous, comic side prevails. When, however, the "abnormal" is menacing in some way, as in the figure of Malvolio or Shylock, the grotesque lurks behind the comic.<sup>18</sup>

When talking about the relationship between violence and laughter in Shakespearean plays, the term 'grotesque' proves very useful. The process of suffering becoming comic has strong affinity with, or appears in, grotesque images, like in *Titus Andronicus*, and what is more, this process may be associated with a (possible) concomitant metaphysical sense of the grotesque – as in *King Lear* for instance.<sup>19</sup> The petty villains' laughter reflects the practical, psychological effect of it – the "barbaric delight" of the torturer who sees the plight caused by himself as a source of infinite jests. The great villains' laughter, though seemingly close to the latter, has stronger ties with the former – the metaphysical joy of the Devil himself presents the world (of goodness) as a cosmic joke, contributing to the sense of the universal absurd, the metaphysical grotesque.

### III

*Titus Andronicus* is one of Shakespeare's most ambiguous plays. Not only its literary value but also its date and authorship have been questioned, producing a

<sup>17</sup> Howard Daniel. *Devils, Monsters and Nightmares: An Introduction to the Grotesque and Fantastic in Art*. London, New York, Toronto: Abelard-Schuman, 1964, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> With regard to this differentiation between Malvolio and Aguecheek, I am indebted to Philip Thomson, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jan Kott. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Translated by Boleslaw Taborski. London: Methuen, 1972.

wide range of opinions.<sup>20</sup> *Titus Andronicus* certainly appears to be an early play of Shakespeare. Beside the external evidence, his handling of the play supports the earlier date when he – as if in an examination showpiece – tries to prove his skill and his erudition in Ovid, Seneca, and some other classic authors, while outdoing the horror revenge tragedies of university wits, at times even with a touch of parody.<sup>21</sup>

The play is full of bright ideas in an embryonic form and of themes elaborated later in Shakespeare's mature works. Nevertheless, *Titus Andronicus* differs considerably from later tragedies, and these differences have often been accounted for as "mistakes" or failures. According to Stanley Wells,<sup>22</sup> in *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare fails to incorporate the violence in words, i.e. the action on stage and the words often do not match. However, as we will see, it is precisely this characteristic of the play which offers new possibilities in interpretation. The lack of psychological motivation, as István Géher points out,<sup>23</sup> may be considered

<sup>20</sup> For a collection and summary see G. Harold Mertz. *Shakespeare's Earliest Tragedy: Studies in Titus Andronicus*. London: Associated Univ. Press, 1996, and Philip C. Kolin, ed. *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*. New York and London: Garland Publ., 1995. By now, debates about the authorship of the play have finished, and no one doubts that it is Shakespeare's play. As to its dating, two clusters of critical opinion exist: 1589–90 or 1593–94, relying mainly on Jonson's gibe at old but still popular plays in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), and some verbal allusions in contemporary plays (*A Knack to Know a Knave*, 1592 and *The Troublesome Reign of John King of England*, 1591). Although Henslowe's *Diary* lists a performance of *Titus Andronicus* on 23 January 1594, the earlier date of composition seems likelier, not only on factual, but also on stylistic basis, taking the specific character of the authorial composition of the play into consideration. The former one is favoured by Mertz as well in his recent comprehensive study on the play, where he concludes that the play was staged around 1590 with a possible date of composition of 1589, adding that "I do not believe that it was his first play, although it may have been his first noncollaborative effort at drama" (G. Harold Mertz, p. 197). The ambitious character of the play supports his claim, though it also incites Jonathan Bate's enthusiasm in his edition of the play in the New Arden Series to such an extent that he casts it among Shakespeare's more mature plays (Bate in his preface to the Arden Edition, p. 3).

<sup>21</sup> In the critical tradition several critics agreed on the main classical and contemporary influences present in *Titus*: to the largest extent Ovid, then Seneca, especially his "aesthetics of violence" in *Thyestes* (R. S. Miola. *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, quoted in G. Harold Mertz, p. 174), Kyd's revenge tragedy of blood, Marlowe's soaring style in *Tamburlaine* (cf. Aaron's first soliloquy) and his tragic farce *The Jew of Malta*. Besides these, other minor classical allusions abound.

<sup>22</sup> This idea was expressed in his lecture on *Titus Andronicus* given at the Eötvös Collegium, Budapest, 10th April 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Géher István. *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv. Tükörképünk 37 darabban*. Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1990, pp. 176, 179.



as another shortcoming of the play. No character is consistently motivated throughout the play, there are breaks in the character and in the flow of the action as well (e.g. Titus goes mad several times). Still, the play is exciting – the characters are true to themselves, their doings may be psychologically justified in the given situation, even if not throughout the whole play, thus offering interesting insights into human nature. In this respect as well, *Titus Andronicus* has strong affinities with the genre of the farce, and may be best understood as a tragic farce, with hardly any consistent individual psychological motivation. Rather, the play displays a mosaic of the human psyche, presenting archetypal situations, and the ensuing human reactions.

The ambitious use of the stage metaphors (the tomb, the pit) also support the claim for a young author with high aspirations, and the horrifically comic use of metaphors in their literal sense alludes to a young but talented poet with a good sense of humour.<sup>24</sup> *Titus Andronicus* is characterised by this excess: the young poet and playwright is testing the limits of his own powers and the inherent possibilities in the genre.<sup>25</sup> His quest offers challenging results – and a wide range of opinions in its critical evaluation, being called “a heap of rubbish” (Dover Wilson), “a deficient melodrama” (Charlton) on one hand, and celebrated as a great play by Jonathan Bate on the other.<sup>26</sup> Excess appears in *Titus Andronicus* on the topical level as well – the characters within the play are put to a test of their limits of endurance, and are made to bear the unbearable.

The problem of violence and laughter, together with the appearance of the grotesque, is tangible in several layers of the play. The story itself makes an unequivocal reception impossible: the nakedness of the violence presented on stage terrifies and repels us, the excess of it at times reaches almost comic

---

<sup>24</sup> For the ideas concerning the literal use of different kind of metaphors, and the comic arising from it, I am indebted to Tricomi's article in the *Shakespeare Survey* (A. H. Tricomi. “The Aesthetics of Mutilation in ‘Titus Andronicus.’” *Shakespeare Survey* 27 [1974] 11–21).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. D. J. Palmer. “The Unspeakable in Pursuit of the Uneatable: Language and Action in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Critical Quarterly* 14 No. 4, Winter (1972) 320–339. “Perhaps it was this sense of testing the limits of his poetic and dramatic resources that attracted Shakespeare to the subject at the beginning of his career, for his early work is characterised by its tendency to display rhetorical and technical virtuosity, as well as by a desire to emulate and outdo his models. The early Shakespeare is more prone to excessive ingenuity than to a lack of skill or inventiveness.”

<sup>26</sup> William Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus*. The New Shakespeare. Ed. J. Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948; H. B. Charlton. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948; Bate in the Arden Shakespeare Third Series edition.

(parodistic) proportions – its sheer and brutal energy, however, simultaneously drags us into the middle of the happenings, blocking a clear-cut impression.

*Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare's first tragedy. Tragedy in its archetypal form is very close to the satyr-play, "a disorganised ribald farce."<sup>27</sup> Its main field of work, violence, has strong links with the main area of comedy – the carnival. Violence "is the excess that threatens to break through the surface of community,"<sup>28</sup> which demands a safe outlet: either in the form of the disorder of carnival or as "good violence" (Girard's term), i.e. ritual. Rituals channel and thus control the excess of violence, strengthening society itself – similarly to carnival where the forces of disorder are let full play for a given period of time, and finally, holiday being over, everyday can return with its day-world of order.<sup>29</sup> However, there are some problems with this seemingly neat division. "Good violence" means legitimised violence: ritual, war. Illegitimate violence, termed as criminal violence, threatens to upset society because it questions legitimacy, and bears the mark of revolution. If the distinction between "good" and "bad" violence is blurred, it is a symptom of an unstable society, whose values have started to dissolve,<sup>30</sup> as we can see clearly in the grotesquely "unnatural" scenes of *Titus Andronicus*.<sup>31</sup>

"Unnatural." this adjective appears again and again in the mutilation of the young, and finally at the killing of Lavinia, when Saturninus (one of the most unsympathetic characters of the play) exclaims: "What hast thou done, unnatural and unkind?" (V.3.47). The unnatural, on the other hand, is the result of the aborted and perverted rituals, confusing the norms of society. The murderous events start at the tomb of the Andronici, by attending the proper burial rites of the fallen sons – proper, according to Roman norms but simply murderous and barbaric to the representatives of another society, the Goths. From this point on, the perversion of rituals continues, and even at the end *Titus Andronicus* and

<sup>27</sup> Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New Jersey: Princeton, 1957, p. 292.

<sup>28</sup> René Girard as quoted in Naomi Conn Liebler. *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mihail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Revenge tragedies display precisely this problem, as we will discuss in more detail. Cf. also Eleanor Prosser. *Hamlet and Revenge*. Stanford: California, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Carnival raises the same problem: if the disorder of holiday becomes everyday, the whole idea of society is questioned – therefore a good king must banish the Lord of Misrule: Prince Hal at the moment of becoming Henry V must reject Falstaff.

Lavinia cannot be given a proper burial as they are missing parts of their bodies (not to speak of Aaron being buried alive, and Tamora thrown outside the city walls, as prey to ravenous birds).

The question of who is barbarous in Rome blurs the distinction between legitimised ritual ("good violence") and illegitimate murder ("bad violence"). Revenge, which dominates the actions in the play, in its excess of violence also threatens to overthrow the basic divisions between good and bad, just and unjust. Titus, who is looking for Astrae (Justice), becomes entangled in the vicious circle of revenge. Revenge is in itself problematic; the avenger has to discard the same god(s) he is appealing to for Justice. Hieronimo digs the earth to reach Justice, Titus sends arrows to the gods abiding in heavens – still, by taking the management of action into their own hands, they defy the same gods and assume their role, judging and taking lives away – without God's mercy.

Furthermore, the excessive violence incited by multiple revenge in the play creates a whole circus of avengers, chasing each other and devising increasingly horrible means of retribution. The potentially comic quality of this circus cannot be denied: excess threatens to turn into parody and the multiplication of avengers diminishes the emotional impact of the search for just retribution. That is why *Titus Andronicus* has been called a "revenge farce."<sup>32</sup> Violence corrupts the most decent men – Titus, the greatest soldier of Rome, well trained in the art of killing, cannot help getting caught in the web of revenge and violence, contributing to its horror according to his power.

Extreme violence in tragedy thus raises several questions – with society dissolving, belief in divine providence, in a cosmic order, is melting away, and the characters on stage are left to wonder whether the gods delight in tragedies and whether the heavens are empty.<sup>33</sup>

The main tenet of *Titus Andronicus*, revenge, and the concomitant excess of violence are made problematic. On the other hand, the extravagance and exaggeration of the play also create splendidly grotesque images – on both the linguistic and the theatrical-visual level. One of the most prevailing motifs in the play is that of madness, which, being potentially both ludicrous and terrifying, is

<sup>32</sup> James Black. "Shakespeare and the Comedy of Revenge." *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*. Ed. Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella. Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1986, 137–51.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gloucester: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th'Gods." William Shakespeare. *King Lear*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London and New York: Routledge, 1993. (1972), IV.1.36.

the perfect ground for the grotesque. The maniacal laughter of Titus in Act III Scene 1 marks the emotional climax of the play – as a reaction to a totally unintelligible and unsympathetic world – the void itself. Titus' laughter differs from simple hysteria, and its nervous, defensive laughter (with which Thomson equates maniacal laughter).<sup>34</sup> Hamlet and Edgar, the representatives of the latter, try to preserve something rational in the face of the void: they see it, the chasm has opened in front of their feet, but they do not succumb to its lure, they are fighting it still. Titus is an unreflective hero. He echoes the absurdity of existence for a terrible moment, but then recoils, and absconds from his experience by retreating to the formalised ritual of revenge – just as a conventional hero in a revenge tragedy. At the same time, however, he diminishes his stature as a full-fledged tragic character.

The grotesque focuses especially on the main character, Titus, although there are a number of other characters and situations which call for our (uneasy) laughter and a sense of the grotesque. Titus emerges as a tragic clown: he suffers in this circus of violence, and we laugh at him. However, his stance is different from that of a professional clown, who is endowed with a certain degree of consciousness. Although a professional clown may suffer as an individual but still make us laugh with his heart-felt though painted tears, there is an element of awareness in what he is doing. Before appearing in front of an audience, he paints his face – rendering a physical and visual expression to his act of suffering, and at the same time defending his personality by putting up a mask. The amateur, tragic clowns, like Lear and Titus, lack the defensive feature of awareness and of a mask: their faces are untouched by paint, and we cannot escape the feeling of real, heart-felt pity for them. The naked face suffers – and this image of plight intrudes our heart; the possibility of any detachment is blocked. Titus, however, mostly lacks Lear's cosmic burden of suffering, and the high poetry of his soaring madness, foreshadowing rather than forerunning the old king in several respects. Titus' pain is more physical and his poetry is more rhetorical, therefore we are more easily drawn to laugh at him.

The problematic fusion of laughter and violence appears on the linguistic level as well. Language itself is abused, metaphors, as well as the bodies on stage, are dismembered, their physical element is taken at face value with a horrible momentum of a jesting spirit in Aaron's case, and with maniacal stubbornness in Titus' speeches, brooding on repetitions of "hands" in a handless world. The

---

<sup>34</sup> Philip Thomson, pp. 52–53.

consistent and tragically comic wordplay casts its shadow on the whole atmosphere of the play. "If words become reality, if the way we use language shapes the world, the figures of speech are not just deadly dull, or clichés, but nightmares into which characters awaken," says Kendall.<sup>35</sup>

The nature of wordplay in *Titus Andronicus* underlies its deeper commitment to the world of the comic. Snyder distinguishes between two kinds of wordplay: tragic wordplay, where "the primary function of the pun is to illuminate by its conjunction of meanings some aspect of the tragic action," a central paradox, theme; while comic wordplay, although it may make direct comment on the action, is "essentially self-contained," the characters and the audience enjoy it for its own sake in its own field of reference. Comic wordplay can be expanded into whole wit-passages, which is precluded in tragedy, where these passages would "deflect emotional concentration from the tragic situation."<sup>36</sup> The puns in *Titus Andronicus* are closer to the comic wordplay: Titus, in the famous fly-scene (III.2)<sup>37</sup> refers to "hands" six times in ten lines, in the company of his hand- and tongueless daughter, and (probably) passionately gesturing with his one remaining hand, as the other one has been chopped off in vain to save his sons' life:

How now, has sorrow made thee dote already?  
 Why, Marcus, no man should be mad but I.  
 What violent hands can she lay on her life?  
 Oh wherefore dost thou urge the name of hands  
 To bid Aeneas tell the tale twice o'er  
 How Troy was burnt and he made miserable?  
 O handle not the theme, to talk of hands,

<sup>35</sup> G. M. Kendall. "'Lend me thy hand:' Metaphor and Mayhem in *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989) 299-316.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Snyder. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear*. New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979, pp. 33-34.

<sup>37</sup> The so-called fly scene, which first appeared in the Folio (although *Titus Andronicus* was so popular that it went through three Quarto editions in Shakespeare's lifetime), is probably spurious. Both external and internal evidence points to the fact that it was a later interpolation. (For further philological discussion of the problem, see Nicholas Brooke. "The Intrusive Fly: A Note on Act III Scene II of *Titus Andronicus*." *Filoloski pregled* 1-2. [Beograd, 1964] 99-102.) Still, the scene is interesting on its own merits, in the description of the oscillations and tensions of the unhinged mind, and in the combination of the serious and the comic, though it makes Titus' character even more fragmentary.

Lest we remember still that we have none.  
 Fie, fie, how frantically I square my talk,  
 As if we should forget we had no hands  
 If Marcus did not name the word of hands.

(III.2.23–33)

We cannot fend off the existence of a black wit with the assumption that the so-called fly-scene depicts Titus' madness, and is only a symptom of a sick mind. Titus' use of language, though not the pun itself, refers to a consistently recurring phenomenon in the play – the abuse of language. The repeatedly recurring images of “hands,” however, become almost self-indulgent, and echo the wit-passages from the comedies. Excess appears here again in Titus' boundless emotion, and brings with itself a comic potential.

Figurative language works powerfully in the play – besides the recurring *figura etymologica* (handle–hand), different kinds of metaphor are used and abused – the most frequent is to take a metaphor literally, which practice is started by Titus himself:

MARCUS Be *candidatus* then and put it on,  
 And help to set a head on headless Rome.  
 TITUS A better head her glorious body fits,  
 Than his that shakes for age and feebleness.

(I.1.188–191)

The other two most frequent figures of speech are the oxymorons (“irreligious piety”), which refer to a basically paradoxical and problematic interpretation of values, norms and rituals within the play, and the *pars pro toto*, so loved by Aaron (“Look by and by to have thy sons with thee / [aside] Their heads I mean,” III.1.202–203), which recalls the images of the missing body parts, the hands and heads irretrievably severed from the body.

Furthermore, the language is made problematic by its highly poetic quality. The Ovidian aesthetics of unutterable horrors and woes prevails in Marcus's speech on seeing the raped and mutilated Lavinia (which has baffled and repelled critics of decorum, but, as Deborah Warner's production of *Titus Andronicus* in Stratford proved,<sup>38</sup> can be performed effectively and persuasively).

<sup>38</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, Swan Theatre 1987. Directed by Deborah Warner, Marcus: Donald Sumpter.

The Andronici are forced to bear the unbearable, and try to find ways to utter the unutterable – either with horrible jokes or by aestheticising what by its nature defies the aesthetic. The paradoxical task of speaking the unspeakable finds way in the grotesque juxtaposition of incompatibles: joke and horror, beauty and blood.

#### IV

Act III Scene 1 presents several aspects of the interrelation of tears and laughter, suffering and the comic, therefore its close reading seems highly useful when probing into the nature of the play. By this time through the series of misfortunes befalling his family, Titus' pride is reduced to self-humiliation.<sup>39</sup> For his two sons, who are charged with Bassianus's murder as a result of the ingenious plot laid by Aaron and Tamora, he kneels and begs for mercy to merciless Saturninus. Then he pleads to the Judges, who do not listen but leave him in a comically pathetic scene of suffering. "Andronicus lieth down, and the Judges pass by him," says the stage direction, highlighting Titus' debasement – the honourable warrior is lying on the ground, ranting, blind and deaf to outside reality: a moving and highly comic picture at the same time. The image of the ranting man is inherently comic, as such wrath means the complete degradation of the mind, man's prime pride – just like Hamlet, the "sweet prince of reason" suddenly realises after he gave full vent to his fury.<sup>40</sup>

The inherent pitiful comedy of ranting is enhanced by the fact that his returning son, Lucius, calls Titus' attention to the fact that no one is by – twice in quick succession, but Titus only picks up his son's last line ("you recount your sorrows to a stone"), and transforms Lucius's literal meaning into the figurative language of a high flowing rhetoric style, developing a raging passion in the key of

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Bate in his introduction to the play suggests that Titus learns and becomes human through suffering, but this claim seems a little far-fetched in this play. Titus does become more human, but at the same time, he also loses his humanity pursuing the horrid acts of revenge. Besides, his character is not consistently justifiable in terms of psychological development. Titus does have a road he follows throughout the play, but this road is filled with traps: psychological and structural inconsistencies.

<sup>40</sup> "[...] Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous villain! / Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, / That I, the son of a dear father murder'd, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must like a whore unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A scullion, Fie upon't! Foh!" (William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Methuen, 1997. [1982], II.2.576–583).

“pleading to the stones,” arriving at the conclusion that stones are better judges than the tribunes of Rome. At first glance, his storming recalls Lear’s on the heath, with passion overwhelming judgement. However, Titus, in contrast to Lear’s poetically irrational passion, remains more rhetorical, developing a whole line of similes. “Yet plead I must” (III.1.35), says he, emphasising his need to verbalise and thus formalise his sorrow and suffering. The Andronici are obsessed with uttering the unutterable – and this retains a touch of rationalism in Titus. He is keeping just a pace back from the edge of the abyss of absolute suffering and complete madness.

Furthermore, Titus’ ranting is not consistently upheld. Suddenly he looks up, and asks a perfectly reasonable and practical question from Lucius: “But wherefore stand’st thou with thy weapon drawn?” (III.1.48). His sudden return to the world of reality (which is comic in its unexpectedness – a psychological or structural trap) is soon followed by another recourse to ranting, arriving at the powerful conclusion that “Rome is but a wilderness of tigers” (III.1. 54).

After he has given full vent to his sorrow, the raped and mutilated Lavinia is presented to him. The scene is a reverted picture of the reunion of Lear and Cordelia, where the daughter is not a balm for madness and sorrow, but a cause of them. Titus is faced with the problem that he should go mad again – it is both dramatic irony and deficiency that he should go insane twice in quick succession. Titus first resorts to Senecan Stoicism (“Let me see then,” “So she is”), and then displays an obsessed and in its passion cruel wit, erupting in a 15-line speech crammed full of references to hands which have been or will be chopped – in front of his handless daughter. As more and more causes for woe are presented to him, he finally finds the famous poetic metaphor for his fate, which was made central in productions stressing the serious aspects of the play:<sup>41</sup>

For now I stand as one upon a rock,  
 Environed with a wilderness of sea,  
 Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave,  
 Expecting ever when some envious surge  
 Will in his brinish bowels swallow him.

(III.1.94–98)

<sup>41</sup> These productions paid special attention to evading the latent comic potential, eliminating the ambiguity of the play with immense cuts, cf. Peter Brook’s production at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre with Laurence Olivier as Titus, 1955.



Yet, he cannot escape rationalism, and starts to recount the woes of the Andronici one by one. He is especially baffled with Lavinia's plight:

Had I but seen thy picture in this plight,  
It would have maddened me; what shall I do  
Now I behold thy lively body so?

(III.1.104–106)

The problem calls for one of the basic questions of the play – the collision of physical reality and literature, or bookish knowledge. The latter is highly significant for the characters, as they must be proficient readers to understand and react to the events, to survive and prosper in this half-real and half-book world, where a mutilated body is a “map of woe” that has to be interpreted.

Titus, however, is more concerned with what they shall do, and first proposes an unreal image of mutual mourning at a fountain, then quenching misery with afflicting further woes, “To make us wondered at in time to come” (III.1.136). His self-indulgent madness in these proposals, however, falls short of Lear's, whose madness is always tinged with sympathy – for his Fool, for Edgar. Titus, on the contrary, while giving full vent to his sorrow, only makes his daughter weep more, as the rational-minded Lucius observes.

As the chorus of the grief-stricken Andronici, led by Titus, reach the climax of suffering, the scene is becoming increasingly comic in its undercurrent. Marcus offers a napkin to dry Titus' tears, but as Titus aptly observes, it is too wet to dry any more tears. Marcus's sympathy is comically impotent, and its latent ridiculousness is enhanced by the repetition of the gesture – Lucius is offering an equally wet napkin to dry Lavinia's tears.<sup>42</sup> The scene is simultaneously comic and pitiful, and Titus realises its ambiguous nature as well: “O, what a sympathy of woe is this, / As far from help as limbo is from bliss” (III.1.149–150).

The ambiguity of tone erupts into open farce when Aaron comes with the impossible offer that the two sons may be saved by a hand chopped off. A pathetically comic rivalry starts among the kinsmen with his proposal: who should sacrifice his hand – Titus, Marcus, or Lucius (Lavinia having no hands any more). The argument reaches comic proportions, gaining momentum as the lines

<sup>42</sup> A dark variant of this gesture appears in *Henry VI Part 2*, when Margaret is offering the napkin soaked in Rutland's blood to his father, Gloucester, though the inherent comic potential of the impotence in the gesture is employed here for different effects – an evil joke.

are shortened. The comic pettiness of the argument is underlined by Aaron's (the spectator and outsider's) impatience: "Nay, come, agree whose hand shall go along" (III.1.175). Titus deceives his kinsmen with the old trick of folk tales – while sending them away to fetch an axe, he asks Aaron to chop off his hand. The aura of the scene is highly ambiguous. While we cannot deny its farcical nature, suffering is real enough to bar complete detachment of the emotions on stage: the distance necessary for laughter is there, but is not enough to enable us to repudiate these pitiful clowns of suffering. What is more, we are aware of the fact that Titus benevolently deceives his kinsmen only to be horribly deceived by a very literal-minded Aaron, who means only heads when promises to take back sons.

When the Messenger brings back the heads of the sons and Titus' hand, his words betray true emotions, and we are touched by genuine sympathy for the Andronici and Titus. The futility of his sacrifice gains a tragic overtone from the Messenger's, an objective outsider's, compassion. The nameless messenger has the same function as the nameless servant at Gloucester's blinding – their sudden and genuine emotional involvement in the horror on stage calls for a similar response from the reader or spectator, thus, by their unselfish humanity (which is otherwise so rare in these two plays), their words enhance the tragic effect.

The real horror of the mockery of sacrifice and sorrow, however, is loosened again by the ensuing strange substitution of roles. Marcus and Lucius rail for and instead of Titus, and even Lavinia pays her debt and kisses her brothers' heads, while the father stands dazed and silent, uttering only one of his most powerful lines of misery: "When will this fearful slumber have an end?" (III.1.253). Marcus, giving up his heretofore preferred function of reason in madness, resorts to a mad proposal worthy of Titus: "Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand / Gnawing with thy teeth..." (III.1.261–262), and warns his brother: "Now is a time to storm. Why art thou still?" (III.1.264).

And Titus laughs: "Ha, ha, ha!" At this climactic point three things are brought very close to each other: utmost pain, laughter, and madness. Titus, for a moment, catches a glimpse of an absurdly meaningless universe. However, Titus is not Lear – and soon turns to a rationally controlled and ritually formalised form of madness: revenge. It is a turning point in his character and in the play. Brian Cox, the Titus of the Warner production summarises the hero's emotional and tonal change very sensitively: "You [...] as an actor [...] change direction from the path you were on, and take another, the path of gallows humour, of black,

nihilistic humour, very twentieth-century in its mood [...] After that laughter [...] he dies – in spirit. And he says to himself: ‘Oh, I’m dead. I’m a dead man, and I can do whatever I like – because I’m dead.’”<sup>43</sup> The astonishment of Marcus and Lucius at Titus’ unusual response arises from the fact that they are clinging to “a normalcy which no longer exists,” while Titus realises his only rational (but poetically less effective) way of going on in an irrational world, where “conventional moral order has been replaced by Aaron’s aesthetic disorder,” and takes the path of witty, vigorous, and successful actions to achieve his perfectly managed and appropriate revenge by the end.<sup>44</sup>

From this moment on, Titus stage-manages the ritual of revenge: he makes his kinsmen kneel and vow, but the ensuing morbid procession of the living and dead, whole and part of the Andronici gives a horrible parody of the ritual. Titus and Marcus are going offstage with a head in their hands and Lavinia is asked to carry Titus’ severed hand between her teeth, as the literal picture of “a handmaid of Revenge.” The image is at the same time terrifying and ludicrous – the most powerful grotesque vision in the play, pointing to the absurd and ambiguous nature of revenge, and of the play itself.

*Titus Andronicus* yields many examples for the interrelation of the tragic and the comic, suffering and laughter. Nevertheless, the ambitious nature of the play (its “excess”) threatens to upset the poetical balance of the two, thus the tragedy drifts toward (self-)parody at some points. Later in his career Shakespeare used the same technique of mixing the tragic and the comic, tears and laughter in a more refined way, and with the virtuoso balancing of the two he created his greatest masterpieces.

---

<sup>43</sup> Brian Cox. “Brian Cox: Titus Andronicus.” *Players of Shakespeare 3: Further Essays in Shakespearean Performance by Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company*. Ed. Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993, p. 184.

<sup>44</sup> These ideas appeared in Richard T. Brucher. “‘Tragedy, Laugh On:’ Comic violence in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Renaissance Drama* 10 (1979) 71–91, p. 86.