

## The Spectacle of Violence

In his play, *Titus Andronicus*, William Shakespeare contemplates the function of violence in society. Violence is central to the play and sets the trajectory of the tragedy beginning with the murder of Albarus. The audience is subsequently presented with a series of atrocious acts which only increase in brutality as the plot unfolds. By amplifying the ferocity of violence throughout the play, Shakespeare portrays the characters' cruelty as a spectacle. Various characters engage in horrifying abuses, yet few are confronted with social consequences. In fact, the only consequence for enacting violence, is becoming subject to violence in the form of revenge. Thus, Shakespeare conveys that violence is permitted in society because it entertains society. Throughout the play, violence is equated to various forms of amusement including hunting, comedy and art. Stories of violence foretold in Greek mythology both entertain and inspire the characters. Utilizing various literary devices, Shakespeare explores the entertaining nature of violence to conclude that violence is cyclical.

Shakespeare employs metaphor to compare the rape of Lavinia to hunting, and depict violence as a sport. In his plot to disrupt Roman society, Aaron proposes that Chiron and Demetrius partake in "a solemn hunting" (2.1.113), in which they ravage Lavinia. By describing rape in terms of hunting — a socially acceptable form of violence — Aaron appropriates and normalizes the act. The severity of rape is diminished, as the victim is likened to a "dainty doe" (2.1.118). Aaron reconfigures rape into a more stimulating version of hunting to incite violence. Because Chiron and Demetrius emulate the sport of hunting when they rape Lavinia, it is conveyed that exposure to violence inspires more violence. As such, Shakespeare argues that when violence is presented as amusement, it becomes socially admissible and prompts a cycle of

derivative acts. Rather than being viewed as an affront to humanity, violence is transformed into a spectacle of beauty.

The ethereal imagery used to describe Lavinia's mutilated body equates the product of violence to art. Upon seeing Lavinia's mangled limbs for the first time, Marcus is not alarmed, but rather in awe. He proceeds to verbally illustrate her appearance: ". . . a crimson river of warm blood, / Like a bubbling fountain stirred with wind, / Doth rise and fall between thy [Lavinia's] rosed lips, / Coming and going with thy honey breath" (2.2.24-25). By portraying Lavinia's butchered body as a work of art, Shakespeare further probes society's perception of violence. The playwright questions the moral implications of continually putting violence on display for social enjoyment (be it in art, theatre, literature, etc.). In his description of Lavinia, Marcus alludes to the story of Philomela to exemplify the literal depiction of violence in art. Because Philomela's tongue was cut out, her only means of communicating the name of her assailant is by knitting a quilt representing the event. Thus, rape and mutilation are displayed on an artistic quilt. Furthermore, Demetrius and Chiron not only emulate the violence exhibited in the myth, but learn from it. Marcus claims that Lavinia has encountered "a craftier Tereus"(2.4.41) because the brother's eliminate Lavinia's agency by removing both her tongue and hands. In comparing rape and mutilation to art, Shakespeare again questions the recurrent consequences of appropriating violence.

Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony present violence as comedy from Aaron's perspective. Aaron orchestrates a ploy in which he ransoms the lives of Titus's sons for one of Titus's hands. However, Aaron has no intention of returning the sons alive — a fact understood by the audience, but not by Titus. While Titus, Marcus, and Lucius frantically fight for the right

to have their hand cut off, Aaron is utterly amused. When Titus deceives his brother and son to have his own hand butchered, Aaron laughs and exclaims, “If that be called deceit, I will be honest, / And never whilst I live deceive men so” (3.1.187-188). Aaron’s only motive for staging the violent scheme is for his own merriment. In the final act, Aaron proclaims his comedic perception of violence: “I played the cheater for thy father’s hand, / And when I had it, drew myself apart, / And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter . . . and laughed so heartily / That both mine eyes were rainy like to his” (5.1.111-117). As the most authentic character in the play, Aaron’s perspective reveals the true function of violence. The exaggerated brutality in *Titus Andronicus* is intended to entertain the audience in the same way that it entertains Aaron. Shakespeare puts violence on display in his own play to critique society’s glorification of it. While society and the primary characters in the play, claim to condemn violence, both turn to violence for entertainment. Aaron’s character exposes the hypocritical appropriation of violence when it appears in the form of entertainment.

The egregious violence presented in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* questions the cyclical consequences of normalizing violence in the form of entertainment. Throughout the play, violence is portrayed hunting, art, and comedy. These appropriations of violence inspire the characters to commit their own atrocities for amusement. Furthermore, the characters emulate the violence demonstrated in Greek mythology. The play itself employs violence to propose that while society claims to condemn cruelty, it simultaneously glorifies violent entertainment.