

# Interpretive Multiplicity: Audiences and Mediators on the Shakespearean Stage

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The question of audience (dis)unity has been a central, if not always explicit, element of the theory and practice of drama since its inception. In this essay, I consider the staging of rhetorical expression and interpretation in Shakespearean drama, whereby the playwright intervenes in the relationship between audience and performance in order to problematize and retheorize the interpretive dynamics of the theater. There are many such moments of staged interpretation in the Shakespeare canon, but I will focus here on two plays which deploy subtle and complex strategies of interpretive disunification. In the first part, I offer a brief outline of theoretical debates about audience unity, and an overview of the intersections of oratory and dramatic performance. In the second part, I turn to characters who serve as “internal audiences” or “mediators” on the Shakespearean stage. I first consider the unifying nationalist rhetoric of the titular monarch in *Henry V*, analyzing the staging of resistance to that rhetorical unification by the always already alienated low characters in the play. Finally, shifting from spoken to silent rhetorical performance, I examine the complex dynamic between internal mediator and gestural performance in *Titus Andronicus*, whereby interpretive ambiguity operates in and destabilizes the drive toward both linguistic and socio-political unity.

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## Classical and Renaissance Notions of Audience

When Aristotle writes in *On Poetics* that tragedy, through “incidents arousing pity and fear . . . accomplish[es] its catharsis of such emotions” (1449 b [25-30]),<sup>1</sup> his analysis of the final cause of drama implies a unifying function for dramatic works, both at the

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1. Bywater’s translation of *On Poetics*. Parenthetical page numbers refer to the page

level of plot alone and at the level of performance. This sense of drama's unifying capacity is echoed in the *Politics*, where he acknowledges inherent differences between individual predilections toward emotion but emphasizes the inevitable purgative effect of poetry (which includes drama), whatever the individual tendency. He comments first that, "feelings such as pity and fear, or, again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all." Asserting the universal effect of tragedy, he adds: "in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions . . . all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted (Book VIII 1342 a [5-20])."<sup>2</sup> Thus, although an audience begins with different inherent tendencies and capacities to feel and respond, each is "healed"—that is, those emotions are produced and purged—by watching a tragic performance. The audience leaves the play exhausted and cleansed, basking in the theatrical union that produces actual effects from virtual experiences. For Aristotle, and for those Renaissance writers drawing on his theories of poetry, it is the process of stripping the chaos of history of its accidental, contingent elements, and shaping it toward a coherent, didactic purpose, that distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing.<sup>3</sup> Although this perception of the role of poetry does not imagine it as an instigator of public debate, it nevertheless implies a concept of a public sphere in which thea-

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and column of the standard Berlin Greek edition, with bracketed numbers referring to that edition's identification of line numbers in the Greek text.

2. This "purgative" notion of the final cause is complicated by other meanings of Aristotle's key term—it might be interpreted to achieve a "clarification" of the causes of the tragic fall, creating a sense of recognition and understanding, or it might serve to "purify" or "temper" the emotions by presenting those figures toward whom the feeling of pity and fear is appropriate—but the unifying effect is nevertheless asserted in each case. See David Richter's introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics* (41). Quotations are taken from Jowett's translation of *Politics*. Parenthetical page numbers refer to the page and column of the standard Berlin Greek edition, with bracketed numbers referring to that edition's identification of line numbers in the Greek text.
3. In other words, the distinction is not based on "versification" versus prose, but on the plot-driven, finite, and purposeful structure of a poetic text, as opposed to the contingent cumulative inclusiveness of history. For an extended study of the shaping of history into historiography, see Logan; for early modern assertions of the distinction between poetry and history, see Sidney, esp. ll. 79-86, where he suggests that historiography is most effective where it borrows strategies from poetry, and 478-96, where he discusses the difference between the universal and the particular in poetry and history respectively; see also Puttenham, esp. Book I. Puttenham's arguments resonate strongly with those of Sidney, and both draw on Aristotle, directly or indirectly.

ter serves as a site for the transformative experience and cathartic unification of the public.<sup>4</sup>

Shakespearean drama also posits an emergent public sphere, though it is clearly a contingent and ephemeral one. When Shakespeare declares, in the voice of Jaques, that “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.138-9),<sup>5</sup> he calls attention to the intersections of the “world of the stage” and the “stage of the world” that were in some ways a commonplace in his own time and that have become fundamental to scholarship on Elizabethan and Jacobean literature and culture. This chiasmic formulation signals the centrality of theater in social, political, and cultural life, as well as the theatricality of the realms of politics, social interactions, and indeed, of social place and identity itself. Performance in daily life was understood, at least within the middling and upper strata in early modern England, as a strategy of social participation that reified and/or destabilized the sanguinary hierarchy, while the newly emergent commercial theater was understood as a site of performative social contestation and intervention.<sup>6</sup> With its dialogic structure, a form of embodied public debate was at the core of Shakespearean theater, and the debates it represented seem to have been intended to continue beyond the confines of the performance.

The parallels between stage performance and oratory—that is, persuasive public discourse—are powerfully evident in the sixteenth-century poe-

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4. Contemporary poststructuralist theory offers a quite different view of the relationship between audience and cultural object, whereby even at the level of the word, meaning cannot be fixed and stabilized, and thus audience response is not determinable. This holds true not only for the “word” but also at the level of the phrase or sentence, as in Paul de Man’s well known example of the “*arché* de-bunking” of linguistic stability, whereby a “perfectly clear syntactical paradigm (the question) engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, one which asserts and the other which denies its own illocutionary mode . . .” (1015). For de Man, “it becomes impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely contradictory) prevails.” Thus, no unified response can be expected or elicited, because interpretive instabilities render up different meanings to different audience members, and debate rather than a shared release from emotion is the more likely outcome.

5. All citations of Shakespeare’s works are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*.

6. Shakespeare’s own self-conscious attention to the centrality of performance, registered in various ways throughout his opus, suggests the importance of performance as a social strategy. Scholarship on this topic in the last twenty years is abundant, but for a particularly useful theorization of this performative social energy see Agnew.

try and rhetoric handbooks, such as *The Arte of English Poesy*, attributed to George Puttenham.<sup>7</sup> In his entry on *hypotyposis*, which he renames “counterfait representation,” Puttenham describes this overarching rhetorical strategy in terms that signify the intersections of theater and rhetoric. In effect, he argues, to be persuasive is to depict the emotional, physical and psychological condition of the represented subject so effectively that they seem to be real and present (238-40). The actor, long associated with oratory, must carry this depiction one step further, to *embody* these qualities to the extent that they seem to be actually present and clearly decipherable, not only in the language of the play, but in the actions, expressions, and gestures he or she performs.<sup>8</sup>

This conjunction of the rhetorical and the dramatic can be traced back as far as Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, Latin pedagogue and rhetorician in the first century A.D., whose *Institutio Oratoria* establishes oratory as a central component of education and traces out the techniques of effective oratory.<sup>9</sup> In his discussion of *pathos*—the instigation of an emotional response in the auditors—as an effective persuasive strategy, he argues that to achieve this emotional sympathy, the orator must function like an actor, embodying and making real in himself the emotions he hopes to produce in his audience (Book VI, Ch. 2, section 25-29). In a somewhat different vein, Puttenham’s sixteenth-century re-articulation of the conjunctions between poetic and rhetorical strategies again emphasizes the power of embodiment—not in the poet himself but in the language he creates—and in doing so, reasserts the interdependencies of drama, poetry and oratory, as both vernacular literature and commercial theater rapidly gained a foothold in England.<sup>10</sup>

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7. In this treatise, Puttenham undertakes the “englishing” of Greek and Latin poetic terms, seizing from the orator the techniques and strategies of embodied expression that support rhetorical persuasion, and applying them to the writing of English poetry.

8. I include women in this performance history because, while actresses did not appear on the stage in the first phase of English commercial theater, they performed in many other venues, including in the closet drama of the aristocratic household, in court masques, and in theaters on the continent. See Cerasano and Wynne-Davies.

9. For a helpful discussion of the conjunctions of classical rhetoric and theater, see Roach, esp. ch. 1. My thanks to Justus Nieland for this reference.

10. Puttenham continually vacillates between the poet’s naturalness and his artfulness, and he emphasizes dissembling as a key aspect of the art, in part to disguise the very artfulness itself and give the appearance of naturalness to the poetic performance. See Book III, Ch. 35, for example. The views of these two writers are sometimes quite distinct, but as Puttenham was heavily indebted to the classical theorists, his concep-

Theater is inherently suited to producing the sense of embodied emotion in that it adds a “real” and “present” context for the impassioned, persuasive speeches of its characters. If oratory could persuade by uniting the audience in a shared ethical judgment made to seem viable through emotional embodiment, how much more effective the theater would seem to be as a site of emotional experience and unification. Yet, Shakespeare appears to draw on such theories of rhetoric and to challenge the assertion of unifying rhetorical persuasion that its theorists promote. Specifically, Shakespeare raises questions about interpretive universality, thereby reworking the classical theorists of poetry and rhetoric, pushing their consideration of the arts of persuasion toward a much more polysemic model. In Shakespeare’s hands, as I shall argue here, the dynamics of performance and reception on stage comprise an interactive, contestatory site for probing not only social and political questions and conditions but questions of linguistic and representational meaning and function at all levels of interpretation and practice.

### **Rhetorical Force and Staged Interpretive Resistance**

At times Shakespeare’s plays seem to assume, as in Aristotle’s theory of catharsis, that the audience is a more or less unified entity. We see this in the use of dramatic irony, for example, especially in the soliloquy or the aside, through which one character informant “confides” his “actual” intentions or perceptions, and thereby allows the audience to know more than the other characters on stage. Indeed, the experience of being made privy to this “external” level of “truth” or knowledge may serve a unifying function similar to that of catharsis for the audience, especially since it is one of the primary strategies through which pity, loathing, or fear might be effected. Yet, there are also many moments in which Shakespeare deliberately and emphatically undermines this sense of produced unity. These moments of explicitly recognized disunification have many forms, but for the purposes of this analysis I shall focus especially on those scenes in which one or more characters serve as interpretive mediators between performance and audience. Such moments simultaneously acknowledge the multiplicity of possible interpretive engagements and stage an “ideal” interpretation that in effect reigns in those possibilities, and in doing so they tend to raise questions about audience response and the seductions of rhetoric.

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tualization of the role and structure of poetry frequently overlaps with that of Quintilian and other classical rhetoricians.

We encounter an instance of staged audience response to rhetorical persuasion in *Henry V*, where the titular king offers a rousing speech to his troops at the gates of Harfleur, the French town they have attacked in Henry's bid to reclaim England's sovereignty over certain territories of France. The speech as a whole aims at rhetorically creating a unified military force through the king's ability to rouse a sense of shared identity among the soldiers. "On, on, you *noblest English*, / Whose blood is fet from fathers of war- proof," king Henry urges, "Be copy now to *men of grosser blood*, / And teach them how to war" (3.1.18-19; 24-25, emphasis added). Addressing the lower orders, he adds "And you, good yeomen, / Whose limbs were made in England, show us now the mettle of your pasture . . . / For there is none among you so *mean and base* / That hath not *noble luster* in your eyes" (3.1.25-27; 29-30, emphasis added). The king simultaneously acknowledges differences in status among his troops, making distinct appeals to each group, and elides those differences in his invocation of a unifying martial spirit dedicated to asserting England's "rights" in France.<sup>11</sup>

The rhetorical effectiveness of this speech is staged in the scene that immediately follows Henry's appeal to his troops, presented through the "martial frenzy" of Bardolf, one of the three main low characters in the play. Bardolf's opening line, "On, on, on on! To the breach, to the breach!" echoes the king's opening line of the previous scene "Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more, / Or close up the walls with our English dead" (3.1.1-2), and regurgitates Henry's "On, on, you noblest English," quoted above. This character's motive for following the king to war has been made explicit in Act 2, scene 3, where he joins with Pistol and Nim who journey to France, "To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck" (2.3.48)—they are all in this for their own, explicitly unethical material gain. Yet, in this scene, Bardolf is suddenly persuaded to commit his mortal body to the fight, to unite with his betters in sacrificing, if necessary, his very being in service to king and country. The rhetorical force of the king's speech is thereby emphasized and its unifying effect acknowledged, as the audience hears a lowly, corrupt, self-interested soldier interpellated by the king's speech, laying claim to English nobleness and ready to act on the shared noble English identity the king has invoked.

As a member of the play's staged audience for this speech, Bardolf's response is both impressive and ludicrous, as he simultaneously embodies and

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11. For previous engagements with these questions that are especially applicable to the present analysis, see Parker and Neill.

mocks the unified identity created through rhetoric's suasive force, performing for the play's actual audience the emotional effect of such language, even on someone like him, whose interest in the war until this moment has been strictly pecuniary. There is ambiguity, nevertheless, in his character's role at this point, and thus, in order to deflate any sense that Bardolf's transubstantiation is legitimate, Nim steps in and cautions him not to succumb to the speech's appeals, warning "The knocks are too hot, and for mine own part I have not a case of lives" (3.2.2-3). Pistol affirms that what Nim has argued "is most just," observing, "Knocks go and come, God's vassals drop and die" (3.2.6). If Bardolf is carried away by the speech's unifying rhetoric, his two companions mediate the speech's impact, demonstrating the collapse of those universalizing strategies in the pragmatics of self-preservation and disparate motives. The scene thereby offers the play's audience a didactic demonstration of the power of language and, implicitly, an ironic critique of their own susceptibility to that power.

This performed refusal of the interpellating call demonstrates the playwright's interest in the dynamics of persuasion and his awareness of audience disparity, and it offers a complex acknowledgment of the moral ambiguity of the war, the king's project, his rhetoric and the claims of history. The repudiation of Pistol, Nim, and Bardolf at the end of the scene by the boy who serves them offers the audience a moral judgment that seems to push for a negative response to these characters and their refusal, and Bardolf's hanging in Act 3, scene 6, for the theft of a pax makes the case even stronger. Yet, in the course of the play, the moral ambiguities on the other side of the argument also mount, so that there is no easy solution to the question of war's justice offered by the play and no ready unity of the audience in support of the version of history told from the perspective of national mythologizing. Even the heroism of veterans is called into question, as after his beating at the hands of Fluellen, the insistently self-interested Pistol vows "patches will I get unto these cudgeled scars, / And swear I got them in the Gallia wars" (5.1.79-80). If in the rousing speech before the battle of Agincourt that culminates in the English triumph the king has promised that the man who fights with him in this battle will annually, on the feast of St. Crispian, "strip his sleeve and show his scars / And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day' . . . He'll remember, with advantages, / What feats he did that day" (4.3.47-48; 50-51), Pistol's strategic reframing of his own ignoble behavior as heroism raises questions about the entire endeavor and reinforces the uncertainty attached to any telling of a story, personal or national.

The challenge to rhetorically produced audience unity evinced in these scenes from *Henry V* demonstrate the extent to which the more complex reactions suggested by this play rely on active, engaged, and disparate viewers—viewers potentially susceptible to being caught up in the play’s nationalistic rhetoric, but also potentially capable of recognizing their own susceptibility to the mythologies of rhetoric, or even capable of ironic detachment and negation. Working in another register, and offering an apparent “apology” for theatrical inadequacy, the introductory Chorus of this play pleads for the audience to imaginatively supplement the play’s necessarily limited and constrained representation of the great events of history. This “apology” nevertheless instigates a potentially ironic or contrary response, given the contestatory representations of the “greatness of history” and the agonistic model of interpretation and debate set forth by the play and set into motion by its challenges. Further, the actual action and interactions of the play belie the Chorus’s claims that the play’s success relies on the audience’s capacity to imagine armies and horses and to cope actively with the dizzyingly rapid changes of setting from France to England. The necessity of such imagination is hardly central to making sense of the play’s focus on the relationship between English king and subjects and English subjects and history, both readily represented through language. Henry’s own rhetorical performances during the play, wherein he conjures his troops to summon inner military might or imagined brotherhood as justifications for dying in battle, offer a second register of imaginative engagement, this time from within the action of the play, and that, too, is revealed to be resistant to subordination. This play repeatedly stages an invocation of the imagination, only to imply that it is not necessarily an effective target of rhetorical persuasion—that is, the imagination is not shaped and molded to a particular set of interpretive conclusions by the rhetoric of the play, or by *any* rhetorical performance.

Thus, while there can be no doubt that Shakespeare was deeply invested in stimulating the audience’s imaginative engagement, the imagination does not merely perform a compensatory role in making meaning out of the stage’s inadequate representational mode. Indeed, the rhetorical dynamics of *Henry V* seem to offer quite another concept of the role of imagination’s participation in the experience and interpretation of theatrical performance. If the explicit assertion is for supplementation and for the imagination’s vulnerability to manipulation, the implicit one is for a critical, skeptical and even ironic response to rhetoric’s blandishments. Shakespeare asserts disparate agendas, necessity-driven desires, moral heterodoxy and free will in



response to the putatively shaping effects of rhetoric, even as his play as a whole offers an invitation to engage privately in skepticism and publicly in debate. The audience is invited to recognize their own susceptibility to rhetoric, mythologized history and personal narratives, and to question that susceptibility. The play thereby creates only a unity of skepticism and ironic detachment that in fact, like poststructuralist elocutionary instability, points toward active socio-political debate and contestation, not toward a shared sense of emotional release.

### Staged Mediation and Interpretive Ambiguity

While *Henry V* deploys an internal audience as one of its primary strategies for both modeling and disrupting the unifying power of the rhetoric of nationalism, *Titus Andronicus* stages internal mediators to shape the audience's experience of Titus's daughter Lavinia as the maimed subject of abusive power in a context where barbarity and civility become indistinguishable. In an instance of interpretive multiplicity that undercuts the very desires and impulses it produces, *Titus Andronicus* offers staged mediations that intervene in the audience's experience of Lavinia's silence, while "inadvertently" calling attention to scripted disjunctions between action and interpretation. Titus's daughter Lavinia has become a familiar figure to contemporary audiences primarily through Julie Taymor's remarkable film *Titus*, a film that has in turn sparked an upsurge of interest in staging the play and in scholarly engagements with this most violent and troubling tragedy. Female vulnerability to male violence defines Lavinia's character, as she is first bounced from male claimant to male claimant, and then raped and dismembered by her father's enemies. In an escalation of the Philomel myth, she loses both her tongue and her hands as her assailants endeavor to prevent her from revealing their identities through either speech or writing. She has, in current scholarship, come to epitomize the silenced woman, the victim of male violence and the inadequacies of putatively protective mechanisms like law or family.

However, at the center of her character's performance lies the silent language of gesture. She is present in no fewer than five scenes after her assault, and in each she is given a rich array of performative opportunities, reliant on facial expression, physical demeanor and gesticulation. If *Henry V* undermines the concept of national and interpretive unity through the explicit staging of an audience for the king's strategic rhetorical performance, *Titus Andronicus* mediates the audience's direct experience of Lavinia's

maimed condition through the pathetic and interpretive responses of the other characters as she struggles to overcome the limitations of her voiceless position.<sup>12</sup> In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare engages with the complexities of silent performance in ways that reveal a fascinating awareness of and interest in the dynamics of interpretation and the disunity of audience response, as the violated Lavinia is shaped into an embodiment of intersecting interests, transgressions and critique.

*Titus Andronicus* stages the collapse of Roman law and order after the Roman triumph over the Goths. Returning to Rome a war hero, Titus, the titular military leader, is offered the imperial diadem as reward for his service, but he refuses both the “white toga” and the reward promised by Bassanius in his bid to claim imperial power. Instead, following the laws of primogeniture that would not necessarily have applied in ancient Rome, Titus supports the elder son of the late emperor, Saturninus. The outcomes of this choice resonate with the generally negative representation of primogeniture in Shakespeare’s canon, as Saturninus quickly takes up Tamora, queen of the Goths, as his wife. Blind to her desire for vengeance against Rome, Saturninus is drawn into the active destruction of the Andronicus family through Tamora’s manipulations. Tamora arranges to have Bassanius murdered and permits her sons Demetrius and Chiron to have their way with Lavinia; she then frames two of Titus’s sons, Quintus and Martius, for Bassanius’s murder, and they are subsequently executed. In the end, having lost three sons to the “justice” of Rome, and having discovered at last the identity of his daughter’s assailants despite their attempt to silence her, Titus has his revenge, slitting the throats of Demetrius and Chiron, and baking their blood, bones and heads into “pasties” that he feeds to Saturninus and Tamora. His vengeance culminates in his “mercy-killing” of his beloved daughter and his murder of Tamora—an act that drives the maddened Saturninus to take Titus’s life. Lucius, Titus’s last son, avenges his father’s death by killing Saturninus, and when the facts are revealed, Lucius is proclaimed the new emperor of Rome. It is a play shot through with ironies, deeply interested in questions of civility and barbarity, and it is a powerful meditation on the effects of monarchical incompetence, the tensions between law and justice,

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12. This dynamic is evident in many plays with scenes where action is performed by characters who do not speak, and in each case, other characters speak for them, translating their gestures into words. *Hamlet*’s dumb show is the most frequently discussed silent Shakespearean scene, but clearly the implications are significantly different in these two cases.

and the dangers of ideological complacency. It toys with audience response throughout, encouraging its spectators to bind their desires to those of the deeply wronged Titus and to glory in his vengeance even as he tramples down the limits of moral action, but also to recognize the danger of such a path and to question their own willingness to support the character's actions. It does so, in part, through the staged appropriation of Lavinia's body as an object of symbolic political and social significance.

Within the play's economies of vengeance, the terms of civic conflict are worked out in the realm of the corporeal and Lavinia's body in particular becomes the site of contentions over questions of virtue, value and legitimacy at the levels of the empire, the *civitas* and the family.<sup>13</sup> She first appears during the funeral obsequies at her family tomb, where her lamentations emphasize her duty and devotion to her father and family and where her father's blessing is for her long future as an exemplum of virtue. The funerary reparation and the anticipation of a shift from the violence of war to the long, peaceful future awaiting the Andronicii is disrupted before the fact by Tamora's disgusted condemnation of Roman "irreligious piety" (1.1.130), which demands the sacrifice of her son, and directly after by the threats and bribes offered in the fight between Saturninus and his younger brother Bassanius for the white toga of imperial power. Irresolvable conflicts of interest are at the center of this play. Lavinia's body becomes the signifier of conjoined family and state interests as well as conflicts between them when Saturninus claims her for his wife as a reward to Titus for supporting his imperial succession. When Bassanius carries off Lavinia, claiming a prior betrothal, and Titus's son Mutius steps in to bar his father from pursuing Bassanius, Titus slays Mutius, accusing him of treason against the emperor. He thereby reasserts his support for Saturninus and traditional hierarchy and privileges state interests over his private obligations and allegiances. As Saturninus first condemns Titus, blaming him for his family's disregard for imperial will, and then disingenuously returns him to favor, the rest of the action of the play seems to serve as a handbook for how a man like Titus, an unquestioning supporter of state interests and the dominant order, can be transformed into a scourge against the abuses of state power—initiating a violent purgation that even the avenger cannot escape.

In the scenes leading up to Lavinia's dismemberment and delinguafication, Shakespeare makes it clear that Saturninus has unjustly disenfranchised Titus along with his sons. Having taken Tamora for his bride in place

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13. See Loomba, esp. 128-45; 161-3; 180-92.

of Lavinia, Saturninus accepts Tamora's advice, given in an extended aside, to dissemble his forgiveness of the Andronicii, and embraces her pledge to avenge the "treasonous insult" to his authority offered by the Andronicus boys. Speaking for "his ears alone," she vows to "find a day to massacre them all, / And raze their faction and their family, / The cruel father and his traitorous sons" (1.1.447-49). Cautioning him against acting overtly and rashly, she reminds him that he is "but newly planted in [his] throne," and warns that "the people, and patricians too, / Upon a just survey [might] take Titus's part, / And so supplant you for ingratitude, / Which Rome reputes to be a heinous sin" (1.1.441-45). Tamora's strategic aside creates dramatic irony, giving the audience an awareness of the tragic implications of Titus's adherence to the law of subjection in the face of the emperor's present and future transgressions against the body of the state. We are given to understand that Saturninus's initial maiming of Titus's reputation, despite his demonstration of misguided state allegiance in the killing of his own son, is retracted only for the purposes of amplifying the impact on the body politic of the irrational, arbitrary power of the state. In a play so vividly focused on self-destructive state violence, the silence of the maimed body must be understood as a particularly pertinent cipher encoding the disjunctions between family and state, justice and vengeance, obedience and restitution. The vexed intersection of the economies of state and family is again emphasized when Aaron, Tamora's lover, advises Demetrius and Chiron to take advantage of the hunt in the woods the following morning to "serve your lust, shadowed from heaven's eye, / And revel in Lavinia's treasury" (2.1.131-32).

Lavinia, we might say, embodies both the state and the state's violence against itself, revealing in her pitiable silent performance the paradoxical conflict between the state's desire for political unity through obedience and the violence against the body politic such a desire produces. In this context, silence speaks its own critique, offering a taxonomy of the transgressions enabled by the state's pursuit of unity-through-excision. The effect is broader, though, as even Quintus and Martius, entrapped by Tamora and Aaron and found guilty of Bassanius's murder without a trial, are actively prevented from giving testimony in their own behalves. Saturninus denies them bail and commands, "Let them not speak a word—the guilt is plain" (2.3.301). His invocation of silence echoes Chiron's words to Lavinia earlier in the scene, where he cuts short her curse upon Tamora and threatens, "Nay then, I'll stop your mouth" (2.3.184)—a threat made good in the interim between this scene and the next, where the ravaged Lavinia, bereft of hands and

tongue, is returned to the stage by Demetrius and Chiron, who cruelly jest about her maimed condition. This scene begins the play's treatment of Lavinia as the silent, maimed body of the state, and it sets in motion the dynamic of staged interpretive narration that constitutes Shakespeare's engagement with the multiplicity of audience response—an engagement that in fascinating ways mimics and echoes the play's depiction of the state's desire for control and unification and that thereby instigates the very debates that violent, vengeful imperial power attempts to squelch. In effect, Shakespeare offers the audience a powerful but tightly bounded experience of Lavinia after her rape, transforming the physical horror of her metamorphosis into a poetic reclamation of her former beauty, insistently asserting that she remains a symbolic object of political, familial and social significance. As the experience of her silent performance is articulated for the audience, they are cast, in a sense, into a parallel position of limitation and potential frustration.

Lavinia is discovered by her uncle Marcus, who responds to her mutilation by dwelling at length on the physical and emotional impact of the sight, hoping first that he is dreaming and then that he might be struck dead rather than be forced to come to terms with this defacement. There is little doubt that Lavinia's condition would engender horror in all beholders, but the playwright offers a series of particular metaphorical images that connect Lavinia's body to the nation and the land, thereby encouraging a reading of her as a cipher for the maimed and voiceless state and the target of abusive imperial power. The first reference, to the appeal of her embrace, as a woman whose arms "kings have sought to sleep in" (2.4.19), makes explicit the conjunction of family and state, woman and nation, invoking the missing limbs in a requiem for what has been lost and reminding us that a ruler who enables or fails to control violence against his subjects deprives both them and himself of the benefits of civic stability. Yet we know that the problem is much worse than Marcus imagines, for the ruler is, in effect, the perpetrator of this transgression.

In an acknowledgment of the limitations of performance, Marcus's monologue goes on to make visible the details of Lavinia's agony for the audience, registering successive responses to her condition and explicating the atrocities she has undergone.<sup>14</sup> Realizing that she cannot respond to his

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14. This scene reveals the *actual* limitations of performance and the necessity of verbal supplementation, in clear contrast to the disingenuous invocations of audience response in the opening Chorus of *Henry V*, discussed above.

request that she name her assailant, he compares the blood issuing from her mouth to “a crimson river” that “Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind, / Doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips, / Coming and going with thy honey breath” (2.4.22-25). The speech traces out Marcus’s dawning realization that she has been inscribed within a mythological narrative, raped and silenced like Philomel, and in response to the lesson that myth embodies, that she has been additionally deprived of the means of silent communication that the resourceful Philomel relied upon. He asserts his conviction that “had the monster seen those lily hands / Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute / . . . / He would not then have touched them for his life” (2.4.44-45; 47) and adds: “Or had he heard the heavenly harmony / Which that sweet tongue hath made, / He would have dropped his knife and fell asleep” (2.4.48-50). Ironically, Marcus invokes the very qualities that brought Lavinia to the attention of her assailants in the first place, and there is further irony in the audience’s knowledge that her tongue’s “heavenly harmony” failed completely to obtain mercy from them. Her pleas in the scene leading up to her violation echo the pleas of Tamora to Titus in the beginning of the play, and Tamora’s refusal to show mercy is thereby also parallel. In this sense, Lavinia’s condition as Marcus translates it contradicts the audience’s knowledge of her relationship to other actions and transgressions in the play, for she begins, in Act 2, scene 3, by taunting Tamora for her affair with Aaron, the Moor, and condemning her as “Semiramis” and “barbarous Tamora” (2.3.118) before turning to Tamora’s sons in an attempt to win either instant death or her freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Marcus’s speech also opens up a direct connection between her current condition and the vengeance plot first articulated by Tamora in Act 1, and given specificity by Aaron, who leads Chiron and Demetrius to satisfy their desires through rape and explicitly refers to Lavinia as Philomel before her ravishment (2.1.104-132; 2.3.43). Shakespeare has been criticized for poetic self-indulgence in this scene, but clearly he is responding to the difficulty of making visible Lavinia’s injuries, endeavoring to offer the audience an opportunity to come to terms with their multiply significant implications. The insistent invocation of her beauty and appeal *even in this horrific condition* asserts, we might imagine, the impossibility of overcoming through violence what is natural, inherent and irrevocable. If we are

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15. Samiramis is “the mythological Assyrian queen who founded and ruled Babylon, and who also had attributes of Ishtar, the goddess associated with sexual lust” (2.1.22, n. 4).

encouraged by Marcus's speech to understand Lavinia as a cipher for the state, the scene seems to attest to the irrepressibility of the *vox poluli* and its resistances to state control, as Marcus articulates the impact of state violence and sovereign absolutism on the subject, despite this subject's incapacity to speak for herself and even as it substitutes Marcus's idealization of Lavinia for the more accurate knowledge of her by the play's audience.

What this and subsequent scenes with Lavinia emphasize is the staged production of interpretive specificity—the audience is offered a visual spectacle intended simultaneously to elicit both emotional and intellectual reactions. The viewers are immediately set to work as, presented with a visually horrific scene, they are guided toward an “appropriate” response which is reinforced by the malicious banter of Chiron and Demetrius—banter that both emphasizes their monstrosity and explains the injuries of the bloodied and victimized young woman. Marcus, through his sympathetic explication of her injuries and recollection of her former charms, more actively guides audience response. His speech also provides details that would be unavailable to most of the viewers, informing us, for example, that her countenance, which should be pale through loss of blood, nevertheless registers her shame in her reddened cheeks as he deduces “some Tereus hath deflowered thee” (2.4.26). He offers, finally, to become her voice: “Shall I speak for thee? Shall I say ‘tis so?” (2.4.33), he queries, even as he recognizes that he cannot offer her justice since she is unable to identify her assailants. Here, as throughout the scene, Marcus's observations supplement and index the implications of the silent performance. The speech, then, enriches, develops, guides and shapes the understanding of the audience, and there is no space on this stage for an unsympathetic response. Even if the libidinal energies of some members of the audience might have risen as the topic of sexual desire and satisfaction circulated in previous scenes, the externalization of the internally inflicted violence renders such energies suddenly and unequivocally monstrous. Similarly, whatever the truth of Lavinia's character—however much she has been made to align with the transgressions of the Andronicus family against Tamora's family and subjects—she is made insistently innocent of such transgressions by Marcus's mediation.

Nevertheless, the audience is presented with a “double” experience in such scenes, as they witness the silent performance, engage and interpret it on their own, feel the pathetic appeal of this silent character and then hear another character piece together the gestures they have witnessed and articulate the meaning of these gestures. The silence itself instigates interpretation, and the staged struggle to make sense of Lavinia's gestures allows the

audience, who in this case know more than Marcus, to experience an amplification of the horror of the moment they are witnessing, as well as to remember her own culpability and to consider the implications. If Shakespeare gives specificity to this experience through metaphor, his vivid visual imagery reinvigorates imaginative engagement, setting into motion a series of figurative juxtapositions that rupture the categories of understanding and transform Lavinia from the explicit victim of sexual violence into the implicit embodiment of other, less determinate significations.

The process of interpretation is thus both demonstrated and instigated, its complexity emphasized and its ambiguity at once reigned in and cut loose. While the audience might, until this point, have variously responded to the violence and machinations of the play's characters, from this point forward, wherever their imaginations might carry them, they are invited to sympathize with Titus in his pursuit of vengeance for his daughter's mutilation. When he achieves his revenge it is mythic in form, as Tamora and Saturninus feed on the bodies of Lavinia's violators—a vengeance that stages the consumption of the self in the microcosm of the family that abusive empery enacts at the level of the macrocosm of the state.

In Taymor's cinematic version of the play, in the final scene Anthony Hopkins as Titus cavorts in a chef's uniform of cylindrical toque, white jacket and checked pants, while his two human pies cool invitingly on the windowsill, checkered curtains wafting in the breeze. Taymor's ability to elicit laughter in such moments arises from her astute recognition of the play's built-in ethical conflicts. Indeed, despite the ongoing mobilization of sympathy for Lavinia and a general recognition of Titus's desire for revenge as appropriate and just, we are reminded more than once in the course of the play of Titus's culpability as the first cause of merciless violence, having ordered the execution of Tamora's eldest son. The play destabilizes any clear opposition between Roman and Goth, civil and barbaric, acceptable and unacceptable behavior, as each character is situated in relation to a mode of state power that is almost instantly decipherable as systemically produced and enacted transgression.

The play's representation of the vacillations of arbitrary imperial power, which might readily be understood to reflect back on Elizabethan England, invite censure and correction—but the reparation offered by the play's conclusion registers the threat to civil and moral viability that such individuated vengeance embodies. At the same time the silent and maimed Lavinia, cipher for the subjects of a self-destructive state, gestures toward an active reconsideration of the terms and conditions through which the ruler of such



a state brings his power to bear on those he claims to rule. Shakespeare shapes audience response to Lavinia's tragic condition through interpretive mediation, but rather than asserting an insistently univocal signification for that condition, the play offers no simple or straightforward resolution.

Both *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry V* engage implicitly with the question of public unity and with the concept of universal mores. *Henry V*, representing the value of dissonant voices and non-susceptible audiences—even those of reproachable moral condition—reveals the ease with which nationalistic beliefs and values can be stimulated. Yet it also stages the strategically produced rhetoric, fabricated material evidence and mythologized history upon which such values are built, challenging the unity of such beliefs as well as the universality of its own performative effects. *Titus Andronicus*, working more symbolically, considers the implications of “unity” achieved through the violent suppression of dissonance, disagreement and multiplicity, making explicit the reciprocal violence such suppression inevitably engenders. At the same time, this play turns the insistent force of the plot back upon itself, creating an almost irresistible argument for vengeance and simultaneously transforming it into a morally questionable desire. In both plays, Shakespeare takes up and transforms the tenets of unification through drama established by Aristotle and through rhetorical persuasion posited by classically-influenced rhetoricians. In place of the overpowering force of persuasive language *or* embodied emotion, and in contrast to the easeful emptiness of catharsis, these plays argue for and instigate the creation of an audience of internally conflicted viewers, whose resolutions of these ambiguities can only be provisional and whose relationship to their own socio-political context will be disjunctive, contestatory and agonistic.

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