



Props and Prostheses: Lavinia the “speechless complainer”

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In act IV of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia, daughter to the titular Roman general and now widow to the recently dispatched Bassianus, attempts to communicate to her father and uncle a crime of which she has been made victim. The crime – Lavinia’s violation and mutilation – has been perpetrated by the sons of the Goth queen Tamora, who were first prisoners to Andronicus and are now “incorporate” (l.i.467) in Rome through Tamora’s marriage to the newly ascended emperor Saturninus.¹ Her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, Lavinia must find some way to testify to the guilt of her assaulters in order for the revenge plot to advance. She haunts her nephew, young Lucius, like a spectre; unlike the outraged paternal ghost common to the revenge tragedy, however, Lavinia pronounces neither exposition nor instruction, and is capable only of indirect address. In addition to being deprived of speech, gesture, and the ability to end her own life, Lavinia has been stripped of her symbolic chastity, bound up at the start of the play with the competition for Roman rulership. She is trapped in an alienated body, obscure and frightening to her young nephew in a way that Titus’ corpse, viewed near the close of the play, is not.

Lavinia has transformed into a figure of otherness and must resort to external props in order to translate effectively what has happened to her into some sort of comprehensible discourse. What follows is a scene in which two male figures “read” Lavinia as she uses props and prostheses – a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* culled from Young Lucius’ grammar school books and a staff with which she traces names and words in the dirt – to make her plight known. The play foregrounds in this scene Lavinia’s compromised communication, as well as the interpretive problems attending Titus and Marcus’ mediation of the silenced female form who, in order to produce testimony, in order to name the crime and her assailants, must resort to literary and legal precedent and must make the texts of the past speak to her present conditions.

This article argues that Lavinia’s mutilation and subsequent attempts to communicate embody not only *imitatio* but also the fraught relation between evidence and testimony: the deindividuation that takes place when private crimes enter the public sphere. Titus, in

¹ William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate, The Arden Shakespeare Third Series, New York, Bloomsbury, 2018 [1989]. All in-text citations refer to this edition. The phrase is spoken by Tamora: “Titus, I am incorporate in Rome, / A Roman now adopted happily, / And must advise the emperor for his good” (l.i.467–469).

a preceding speech in III.ii added in the First Folio, delineates this interpretive process as both invasive and epistemologically compromised:

I can interpret all her martyred signs
Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought;
In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
As begging hermits in their holy prayers.
Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
But I will of these wrest an alphabet,
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning. (III.ii.39–45)

Lavinia's body is a text from which her father will "wrest" of each gesture an alphabet. Moving from the individual motion to a general sign, Titus will develop a hermeneutics of mutilation.

At the heart of public discussions of inequality, violence, and rape, is an overreliance on intrusive, interpretive deductions about the mental state and general character of the victim. The body becomes a text that is read as evidence. These circumstances threaten a kind of depersonalisation within publicly mediated discourse – the act of rape is replaced by a series of predetermined conditions and ambiguous abstractions. In writing this article I wish to avoid the pitfall of merely replicating the interpretive problems this play foregrounds, and also to address the problematic of adding another male voice to a concord that threatens to speak for, to overwrite and silence, female testimony.² Instead of interpreting Lavinia, I suggest that Shakespeare's play demonstrates how precedent and education offer both a vocabulary for broaching trauma but also a translation of experience into testimony that then enters the public sphere in regulated, manipulatable form.

Influence and citation, critical and rhetorical frames that provide linkage but threaten individuality, lend themselves to – are constituents of – a larger conversation about artistic and testimonial legitimacy. The way a student of rhetoric resolves a personal style out of a corpus of imitated texts; the way a speaker achieves consubstantiality with an audience; the filtered, mediated discussions about sexual assault and trauma that circulate in the public sphere: these activities hinge on processes of identification and interpretative intervention.³ Lavinia is only capable of communicating her trauma using a set of preestablished testimonials. *Titus Andronicus* offers spaces where the language of education and violence mesh, and I argue that it has something to say about the relation between the two.

² When I selected this scene for an early collaborative work session in Montpellier in October 2017, the #Me Too movement was gaining traction on social media. A year later, events surrounding the confirmation of a Supreme Court justice spoke to the ongoing presence of sexual coercion and violence in higher education while also demonstrating the ambivalence and uncertainty with which we treat differing forms of "evidence". Most recently, Harold Bloom passed away: while his passing was heralded by many as the loss of a great scholar, it also brought about renewed accusations of sexual misconduct, and an enflamed discussion of Bloom's exclusionary literary theory of Western Canonization. To learn about the #Me Too movement, please visit: <https://metoomvmt.org/>. For information on Bloom: <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2017/12/16/students-organize-response-to-saloveys-e-mail-on-sexual-misconduct/>; information on Kavanaugh can be found at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/16/761191576/reporters-dig-into-justice-kavanaughs-past-allegations-of-misconduct-against-him>. All accessed 14 November 2021. See also in this volume Sujata Iyengar, "Glitchy Language: The Rosetta Theatre Project", *Arrêt sur Scène/Scene Focus*, 10, 2021, *Scènes dans la langue de l'Autre/Scenes in the Other's Language*, ed. Sujata Iyengar and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin.

³ For identification, consubstantiality, and social cohesion in the rhetorical domain, see Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1950.

If Lavinia is mediated by her male spectator-interpreters, her selection of communicative props contributes to the over-determination of her testimony, an effacement of identity in lieu of identification. Lavinia's loss of voice and gesture, and her reliance on props and antecedent discourse, literalises Kenneth Burke's conception of "consubstantiality" between those whose interests are joined or linked via rhetorical acts of identification.⁴ Lavinia identifies herself with Ovid's Philomela myth; the text replaces her voice; she shares her plight with Philomela as she elaborates her own mutilated transformation with the details of someone else's. Philomela escapes captivity through artistic expression and eventually transforms from a silenced woman into the nightingale. The gesture toward the Philomela myth thus connects Lavinia to the nightingale and its symbolic artist transcendence.

Philomela provides a universally transferable symbol for transcendence, while Lavinia's inscription of the untranslated Latin word "stuprum" (iv.i.78), a legal term for sexual violation and disgrace, reduces the victim to an extension of the father or husband. "Stuprum" is a crime, a legal provision designed to protect the inviolability of the Roman bloodline from unsanctioned sexual acts. By identifying her assault as such, Lavinia makes her rape a matter of state, of Roman honour rather than wild justice. In tracing the word "stuprum", moreover, Lavinia signs her own death warrant, identifying the kind of transformation she has undergone with a word which has no equivalent in English, which collapses boundaries between rape, seduction, and adultery, virgin and widow, male and female. In both cases, male textual authority intervenes on the stage.

Whether Shakespeare is interested in this threat of depersonalisation specifically as it relates to violence against women, his interest in the depersonalising outcomes of what we might call prescriptive testimony is still analogous or applicable to our current interests.⁵ Shakespeare's play is concerned with how literary and legal precedent is inscribed on the bodies and behaviour of latter generations, how the antecedent both enables and compromises. Allusion, whether literary or legal, enmeshes one figure within a multitude; it offers entry into a shared yet predetermined discourse. Lavinia's gestural attempts to communicate thus suggest the process by which antecedent texts exert control over their inheritors.

If the play foregrounds problems of interpretation, of reading Lavinia, the critical history attending to Lavinia proliferates such problems. She has been read at turns as silenced and empowered, as subjected to the patriarchy and as an agent of emasculation, as representative of the damaged body politic, as an embedded coauthor to Shakespeare, as the play's true tragic hero, as a prop for her father's revenge.⁶ Emma Smith, in her

⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 21: "A doctrine of *consubstantiality*, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an *act*: and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*".

⁵ Wynne Davies, "'The Swallowing Womb': Consumed and Consuming Women in *Titus Andronicus*", *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 129–152. Davies argues that a 1597 Act of Parliament that withdrew benefit of clergy for those who committed rape "suggests a greater signification for the female identity as a whole in late sixteenth-century England" (p. 131). Others have resisted this claim.

⁶ Davies, "'The Swallowing Womb'", discusses castration and gender conventions. For silence as a form of empowerment, see Marlena Tronicke, "The Pain of Others: Silencing Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Seminar Online*, 13, Jan. 2015, pp. 39–49, <https://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/publications-3/shakespeare-seminar-online/sso-issues/issue-13-2015/?lang=en>. Accessed 13 November 2021.

podcast series *Approaching Shakespeare*, calls attention to the slipperiness of reading Lavinia as an interiorised subject rather than part of a divided dramatic psyche, even as she establishes a troubling link between Shakespeare's use of his source material and his character's own use of Ovid's stories: "Doing bad things with his sources", Smith states, "is something Shakespeare shares with the rapists Chiron and Demetrius: they are both perverted Ovid".⁷ The play, with its interest in filial bonds, imitation, and finally consumption of both the prior text and the issuing child, seems simultaneously to dramatise problems of literary and literal identity self-consciously.⁸ The stage of the 1590s, as a space of unfamiliarity, becomes a place to confront and embody the unspeakable, a platform on which to deploy the art and words of the other.⁹

Scholarship has noted the play's anxious treatment of Renaissance humanistic education, the rhetorical and artistic *imitatio* that made use of the works of antiquity in the service of aesthetics and statecraft.¹⁰ We can identify Chiron and Demetrius' self-aware cribbing of Ovid in their assault on Lavinia as a kind of perverted appropriation of Roman discourse. In this sense, her violation may function, as Arthur Little suggests, as "the mechanism through which the Roman world defines and celebrates its racial and masculine wholeness and clarity".¹¹ Considering Ovid's relation to the Latin grammar school education and the reality of Lavinia's performance by a young man on the Elizabethan stage, Lavinia's violation also, may additionally indicate a critique of pedagogical pederasty.

Lavinia's violation also connects her to Daphne, Callisto, and Lucrece: women whose rapes serve a kind of symbolic or ideological order by providing a narrative of origin or the impetus for political reformation.¹² Ovid, among other Latin poets, was prominent in the Latin curriculum of the grammar school; his writing would have contributed greatly to the store of words, often figured as either a treasure-trove or the physical body of the student

For a reading of Lavinia's compromised agency, see Emily Detmer-Goebel, "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape", *Shakespeare Studies*, 29, 2001, pp. 75–92; for Lavinia as co-author, see Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality*, New York, Routledge, 1987; for the violated body and political inefficacy, see Caroline Lamb, "Physical Trauma and (Adapt)ability in *Titus Andronicus*", *Critical Survey*, 22:1, 2010, pp. 41–57. For Lavinia as a prop, see Sonya L. Brockman, "Trauma and Abandoned Testimony in *Titus Andronicus* and *Rape of Lucrece*", *College Literature*, 44:3, 2017, pp. 344–378.

⁷ "Titus Andronicus", *Approaching Shakespeare* from *University of Oxford Podcasts*, 19 October 2011, <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/titus-andronicus>. Accessed 13 November 2021.

⁸ On sources and imitation: begin with Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare: Volume VI, Other 'Classical' Plays*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1966 and Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993. For Ovid and interpretation, see J. K. Barret, "Chained Allusions, Patterned Futures, and the Dangers of Interpretation in *Titus Andronicus*", *English Literary Renaissance*, 44:3, 2014, pp. 452–485. For comprehension and miscomprehension of the play's "garbled" classical citations, see Primit Chaudhuri, "Classical Quotation in *Titus Andronicus*", *ELH: English Literary History*, 81:3, 2014, pp. 787–810.

⁹ For the play's articulation of the unutterable and intolerable, see D.J. Palmer, "The Unspeakable in Pursuit of the Uneatable: Language and Action in *Titus Andronicus*", *Critical Quarterly*, 14:4, 1972, pp. 320–339.

¹⁰ For transmission, translation, and emulation, see Liz Oakley-Brown, "'Titus Andronicus' and the Cultural Politics of Translation in Early Modern England", *Renaissance Studies*, 3, 2005, pp. 325–347, as well as the expanded study in her full-length *Ovid and the Cultural Politics of Translation Ovid and the Cultural Politics of Translation in Early Modern England*, London, Ashgate, 2006, pp. 23–43. See also Vernon Guy Dickson, "'A Pattern, Precedent, and Lively Warrant': Emulation, Rhetoric, and Cruel Propriety in *Titus Andronicus*", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 62:2, 2009, pp. 376–409.

¹¹ Arthur L. Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2000, 48.

¹² Serena S. Witzke, "Violence Against Women in Ancient Rome: Ideology Versus Reality", *The Topography of Violence in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Werner Riess and Garrett G. Fagan, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2016, pp. 248–274.

rhetor, that Erasmus, outlining a process of imitative repetition and differentiation for use in humanistic education, referred to as *copia*.³³ *Copia* figures as the collection and development of an arsenal of rhetorical and performative moves. Shakespeare’s play envisions *copia* as the digestion and interiorisation of studied texts and also, in Lavinia’s case, as a process of dismemberment in which body parts are replaced with textual counterparts that offer access to preexisting discourse but limit invention in favour of repetition. Lavinia’s female education, which would have taken place in the sequestered domestic sphere, only complicates the matter of “going public” about what has happened to her: her private life has merely prepared her for public sacrifice. She makes the transition from a kind of marital commodity to a public spectacle upon which Rome, through her sacrifice and the dispatching of those who have wronged her, enacts its ritual of purification and rebirth.³⁴ If the play begins with the question of how a society incorporates the Other, Lavinia’s scene perhaps demonstrates how the text of the Other – here figured as Shakespeare’s Roman inheritance – speaks through and for its inheritors.

Unable to voice the individuated details of her assault, Lavinia’s expression recedes into anterior expressions of similar assaults. In IV.i, Titus offers Lavinia his library, providing her with a set of recognisable signs to replace the “martyred signs” that unnerve her nephew. The men in the scene defer to books for both assuagement and assurance, with Marcus reminding the troubled young Lucius that “Cornelia never with more care, / Read to her sons than she hath read to thee / Sweet poetry and Tully’s *Orator*” (IV.i.1). Lavinia read aloud to young Lucius, partook of his education; yet his reading also occasions his fear for Lavinia’s spectral presence, as he explains: “I have read that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad for sorrow. That made me to fear...” (IV.i.20–21). Lavinia “lifts she up her arms in sequence” (IV.i.37), gesturing to her father and uncle – which occasions yet another attempted interpretation of her signs – before “tossing” Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to the ground. Her actions go always accompanied by some sort of interpretation or guess-work from Titus or Marcus: “I think she means that there were more than one” (IV.i.38), Marcus responds, continuing, when noting the selected book, that “For love of her that’s gone, / Perhaps she culled it from among the rest” (IV.i.44). Lavinia’s pragmatic use of Ovid to illustrate Chiron and Demetrius’ crime is first interpreted as an act of sentimentality.

Marcus narrates as Lavinia “quotes” (IV.i.65) the “tragic tale of Philomel” (IV.i.47), a story of treason and rape. Just as the woods of Saturninus’ fateful hunt were “patterned” (IV.i.57) for brutality, this play has been patterned by previous references to the Philomela myth, who at once functions as the inspiration, explanation, and a source of comparison or competition for Lavinia’s trauma – the “root” of her “annoy” (IV.i.49). Shakespeare’s play references several of Ovid’s stories, but the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela offers the most sustained set of references and allusions in Shakespeare’s play, and is worth delving into in some detail. Aaron makes the first reference to Philomela, in Act II, when disclosing his plan to Tamora: Bassianus will die and “His Philomel must lose her tongue today” (II.ii.43). Following Lavinia’s rape and her subsequent discovery by Marcus, the references to Philomela draw on comparison rather than strict imitation, thus indicating

³³ Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1963.

³⁴ Oakley Brown, *Ovid and the Cultural Politics of Translation*, p. 30: On Lavinia going to read in the closet: “the episode dramatizes a common view of woman’s humanist education where learning takes place at home with the father, and Titus’ address to Lavinia draws further attention to the play’s concern with gender, textual production and censorship”.

both the creative license provided in Renaissance *imitatio* and a spirit of competition with the works of the past. Marcus states:

Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue,
And in tedious sampler sewed her mind
But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee.
A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off,
That could have better sewed than Philomel. (II.iii.38–43)

Titus later proclaims to Chiron and Demetrius: "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Progne I will be revenged" (v.ii.194–195), staging his revenge in a like form to Procne's revenge: surpassing the original myth in degree yet still binding himself to its precedent and modelling his revenge on Ovid's story.¹⁵ After inhibiting the men's ability to speak, Titus murders them and inters their dead flesh in a feast for their Goth mother.

The Philomela myth here acts both as source and salvation for Lavinia's assault: it creates a feedback loop that echoes itself into indistinction. Another story concerned with expression, with compromised communication and the dissolution of social categories and conduct, the story of Philomela engages with transformative trauma even as it provides Chiron and Demetrius with a schoolbook model for sexual violence. After the adulterous Tereus removes his sister-in-law Philomela's tongue, the young woman turns to art to express herself, weaving a tapestry which is then sent to her sister Procne as a coded communication of the crimes of her husband. Elisabeth Krimmer, discussing the dilemma of Philomela's narrative and legacy, explains that "narratives of rape are often suspended halfway between silence and discourse", as both victims and spectators are unsure of how to achieve a therapeutic release but not a "reinscription of the original trauma".¹⁶ Philomela's tapestry bridges the silence to the therapeutic release in the re-inscription of her assault in the form of artistic salvation. Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes Philomela's expressive discovery: "Great is the wit of pensiveness, and when the head is rakt / With hard misfortune, sharpe forecast of practise entereth in." (vi.734–735).¹⁷ Charles Martin's modern translation of Ovid conveys the message more explicitly: "from suffering / comes native wit".¹⁸ The suffering of this young woman naturalises her to an as yet unrealised expressive potential. Philomela's movement from trauma, to mutilation, to artistic expression and the ensuing violence of revenge informs a prototypical narrative of the sublimation of trauma into inspiration.

Philomela assists in the murder and subsequent meal-preparation of Procne and Tereus' son – yet another example of the incorporation of progeny, the absorption of issue back into ancestor. Just as Tamora and her sons have become incorporate – consubstantial – with Rome, Tereus digests and incorporates his only child. Titus models his behaviour on Procne and Philomela: the child, interred and ingested in the domestic sphere, becomes food for an unwitting parent. Unlike Tamora, Tereus does not die, but rather pursues the

¹⁵ On Latin as the language of revenge, see in this volume Janice Valls-Russell, "'Dammi un bacio' and 'Ulciscar': Loving in Italian and Killing in Latin in John Marston's *Antonio plays*", *Arrêt sur Scène/Scene Focus*, 10, 2021, *Scènes dans la langue de l'Autre/Scenes in the Other's Language*, ed. Sujata Iyengar and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Krimmer, "Philomela's Legacy: Rape, the Second World War, and the Ethics of Reading", *The German Quarterly*, 88:1, 2015, pp. 82–103.

¹⁷ Arthur Golding, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567*, ed. John Frederick Nims, Philadelphia, Paul Dry Books, 2000. All references to Golding's translation are to this edition.

¹⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vi.829–830, trans. Charles Martin, New York, Norton, p. 201.

sisters and transforms into a hoopoe mid-chase. Philomela then becomes the nightingale, and is transformed into a symbol deployed throughout lyric poetry as a sort of unseen, inaccessible emitter of pure expression. Inspiring and identifiable, the symbolic system, as Ferguson explains, eliminates ambiguity by eliminating personality.¹⁹ All nightingales are the same nightingale. The nightingale functions in its poetic legacy as a symbol against which the generally male speaker crystallises his own subjectivity as he measures his individual, particularised expressive abilities against a song that poetry can never encapsulate or translate.²⁰

One can compare the relationship of the male poet to the nightingale to that between Marcus and Lavinia, as the former draws on his sight of the mutilated latter, engaging in a sustained blazon of the dismembered female form. Marcus, appalled and inspired, states “Shall I speak for thee? Shall I say ’tis so?” (II.iii.33). Lavinia’s wounds occasion his invention, instigate it while preventing her own:

Why dost not speak to me?
 Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
 Like to a bubbling fountain stirr’d with wind,
 Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
 Coming and going with thy honey breath. (II.iii.21–25)

Marcus’ extended description of Lavinia’s bleeding mouth contrasts his issuing expression – the expressive ability Erasmus referred to as a “golden stream” – to her “crimson river”.²¹ Marcus speaks for Lavinia in part to apprehend the image that has appeared before him, and in part to expel his sorrow. He explains: “Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopped, / Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is” (II.iii.36–37). Marcus’ relation to this newly mutilated nightingale figure is still predicated on absence, as his ensuing descriptions of Lavinia’s body address her “lily hands” (II.iii.44) and “sweet tongue” (II.iii.49), her own expressive vehicles that have been removed.

Lavinia cannot overhear herself, cannot become one of Harold Bloom’s daemonic poets defining themselves against a misread father figure, can only be misread by the males who surround her. Bloom wrote of Shakespeare’s characters, in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, that “Self-overhearing is their royal road to individuation”.²² Bloom’s claim forecloses Lavinia’s possibility for development: trapped in stasis, she can only occasion the development of those who transform her into their own discourse. Bloom frames his discussion of personality in Shakespeare’s play with this concept of an overheard self, along with an argument for Shakespeare’s universalism. His study touches on *Titus Andronicus* for its alienating power. Despite the importance of misprision/misreading to Bloom’s earlier

¹⁹ This is a reference to Frances Ferguson. “Rape and the Rise of the Novel”, *Representations*, 20, 1987, pp. 88–112. Ferguson discusses a symbolic structure of rape in the story of Levite of Ephraim’s wife: “Violation precedes mutilation, which in turn leads to extermination. The efficiency of the symbolic system here is its absolute murderousness. The sense that there is nothing that needs to be said to explicate the twelve sections of the woman’s dead body is what it means for this symbolic system to be completely effective – and what it means for it to be a system that eliminates ambiguity as it eliminates persons” (p. 108).

²⁰ Patricia Klindienst, “The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours”, *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, ed. Laura McClure, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, pp.259–292. Klindienst urges a feminine reclaiming of the Philomela myth, to interrupt its pattern of rape and revenge, to transform revenge into resistance: “In undoing the mythical plot that makes men and women brutally vindictive enemies, we are refusing to let violence overtake the work of our looms again” (p. 278).

²¹ Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, p. 11.

²² Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, xix.

work *The Anxiety of Influence*, the brief section detailing *Titus Andronicus* makes no reference to the play's problems of reading and interpretation. Bloom does not examine Titus or Marcus' attempts to interpret Lavinia. Instead, he dismisses the play, suggesting that it possesses "no intrinsic value".²³ Lavinia becomes a generalisation, moving in the opposite direction from Bloom's individuating Shakespearean speakers, always in process, always reacting to themselves. Bloom wrote that, in poetic influence, anxiety makes "misprision inevitable": Shakespeare's erasure of Lavinia's personality illustrates and seems to critique this inevitable misplacement.²⁴ If misprision and substitution are inevitable, then Lavinia's violent fate is both predetermined and doomed to repeat.

Lavinia's inscription of the term "stuprum" potentially draws on Ovid's rendition of the Ursa Major myth, another story of rape and transformation, albeit one that emphasises the transformative guilt that assails victims from within and without. Callisto's story, and its reference to "stuprum", furthermore links the literary to the legal while furnishing Lavinia with her untranslatable Latin vocabulary. Like Lavinia, Callisto is raped in an idyllic location; like Lavinia, her rape is defined as shame. Juno, following Jupiter's rape of the young nymph, refers to the transgression as "stupri", a genitive conjugation of the word Lavinia writes in the dirt to implicate her own assailants. Juno, speaking to Tethys and Oceanus, states:

at vos si laesae tangit contemptus alumnae,
gurgite caeruleo Septem prohibete triones,
sideraque in caelo, stupri mercede, recepta
pellite, ne puro tingatur in aequore paelex. (ll.527–530)²⁵

[But if the disdain he shows your foster child
arouses you to anger, then deny
this constellation your cerulean depths,
drive off these interlopers who have been
turned into stars – the wages paid to sin!]

Juno blames Callisto for her assault and further complains that Callisto, transformed into the constellation Ursa Major, has been rewarded with fame and glory. Callisto the victim is portrayed, by a word that blurs the line between victim and assailant, making her at once an adulterer, a seductress, and a disgrace.

Translations of Juno's speech inform more on the position of the translator than offer insight into any one meaning of "stuprum". Arthur Golding presents the speech as follows, translating "stupri mercede" as "whoredom":

...But if that you doe make
Accompt of me your foster childe, then graunt that for my sake,
The Oxen and the Wicked Waine of starres in number seven,
For whoredome sake but late ago receyved into heaven,
May never dive within your waves. (ll.658–662)

²³ Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 86.

²⁴ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 54.

²⁵ *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 1-5*, ed. William S. Anderson, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, p. 79. William S. Anderson includes a note on "stuprum", which he classes as genitive and ablative of cause: "stuprum, a particularly precise word, is what is generally called 'unpoetic': it does not fit the decorum of grand poetry. This is the only place in the *Met.*: that it does occur says more about Juno's vitriolic temper than about Ovid's violation of decorum" (p. 297). The English comes from Charles Martin's modern translation of Juno's speech (ll.728–732).

Generally glossed as “rape,” “stuprum” is both dense and reductive in meaning and history. It appears only once in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, though it is also used in Quintilian, Cicero, Apuleius.²⁶ In classical sources the word emerges as a legal term during late republic Rome and during Augustus’ reign. The term simultaneously abolishes the distinction between genders, between forms of consent: it is a move toward a prescriptive generalisation of sexual control that in Shakespeare scholarship has received attention but has yet to be fully explored.

“Stuprum” blurs the line between the moral and the political in its specific designation as a crime that corrupts and violates the passive partner. Amidst Shakespeare’s translations and transfers of Roman poetry, it remains in the Other’s language. Elaine Fantham explains that “stuprum” “disregards the reality of consent”; as it can involve either the rape of a virgin or an ongoing seduction of a widow, it could be either voluntary or involuntary.²⁷ In “stuprum”, the victim is not the violated personage at all, but rather the father: male or female, consenting or not, the object of unsanctioned sexual penetration is treated as property. Fantham writes:

Both a wife’s adultery and the sexual activity of an unmarried woman of respectable status came under the term stuprum, and the term could also designate a lasting relationship, so that it is no contradiction to talk of a woman’s voluntary or persistent stuprum.²⁸

“Stuprum” applies to both male and female Roman citizens; it does not apply as a crime to slaves, or to foreigners. As a crime that specifically applies to the violation or degradation of citizens, one could identify Lavinia’s reference to “stuprum” as an assertion of her status in Roman society. She affirms her position in the social hierarchy even as she seemingly objectifies herself as her father’s property: if her reference to Philomela reduces her to a timeless symbol for violation and inspiration, her identification with “stuprum” further deindividuates her: she is ungendered, stripped of agency, and defined not even as an object but rather as the channel through which her father’s honour is besmirched. “Stuprum” as a legal designation both resists and denies specificity: it has no real English translation perhaps because it denies so many things that make a crime or the experience of trauma individual or particular.

Under Augustan Law, only a father can execute his child for her disgrace, but that same law abolishes Lavinia’s gender, marital status, her very ability to consent. Craig Williams, discussing “stuprum”’s relation between adultery and pederasty, makes the crucial point that as a crime “stuprum” is revelatory of patriarchal anxieties: if Romans were quick to morally and legally lump together all manner of sexual activity involving citizens, this designation indicates “questions of paternity”, a fear of not knowing how to trace one’s bloodline, a loss of certainty as to who one is.²⁹ If sexuality is not policed, then borders and identities may become confused. In this sense, “stuprum” represents and resists a loss of clarity, an uncertainty about precedent. The admission of “stuprum” threatens to destabilise or dissolve society and identity, and it is especially notable that Lavinia invokes

²⁶ *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. Accessed 13 November, 2021.

²⁷ Elaine Fantham, “Stuprum: Public Attitudes and Penalties for Sexual Offences in Republican Rome,” *Échos du monde Classique: Classical Views*, 35:3, 1991, pp.267–291, p. 271.

²⁸ Fantham, “Stuprum: Public Attitudes and Penalties”, p. 271.

²⁹ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 124.

this patriarchal anxiety when accusing two assailants who may be viewed by the Roman characters in the play as racial Others despite their recent entry into Rome's royal family.³⁰

Thus far Lavinia has appealed to her body as evidence, a prior text as testimony, and an untranslated Latin word dropped into the English play-text like a depth-charge. Her final execution relies, yet again, on precedent, albeit the transfer of precedent from the sterile space of education into the embodied fiction of the stage. Titus invokes Livy's account of Virginius as "A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant" (v.iii.43) for Lavinia's execution. Virginius slew his daughter Virginia to prevent the lustful and corrupt decemvir Appius from changing her status to that of a slave. Virginia's death leads to the dismissal of the decemvirs and the reassertion of political order in Rome with more power for the plebeian people. Like the rape of Lucrece, which led to the dissolution of monarchy in Rome, Virginia's rape is part of a Roman mythohistory: rhetorical signposts in a chronicle of political change.³¹ Virginia, Lucrece, and now Lavinia, become metaphors for change. Titus states:

My lord the emperor, resolve me this:
Was it well done of rash Virginius
To slay his daughter with his own right hand,
Because she was enforced, stain'd, and deflower'd? (v.iii.35–38)

Saturninus provides the stock response: it was appropriate for Virginia to die, "Because the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (v.iii.40–41). Saturninus regurgitates, not Tamora's sons, but the classroom response ingrained in his memory. The difference between Livy's episode and Shakespeare's is that the execution is preventative versus retaliatory, but the end result is the same: a woman dies to protect the honour of a man, the death leads to a political upheaval, and society moves forward while the discourse surrounding rape does not.

Titus Andronicus is interested in problems of boundary and distinction: the Roman and Goth figures both represent national, cultural, or racial groups from which the English could trace their own lineage. The play begins with a ritual opening up of Rome, after which various figures of otherness occupy and take position in Rome: Lucius, referring to himself near the end as the "turned forth" (v.iii.123), manages to take the city at the front of an army of foreigners. On a stage in Elizabethan England, everyone is Other, but only in show: Lavinia is not really a Roman woman of high birth but a young man in costume who identifies his trauma with a crime that ignores the distinction between male and female and that ignores agency and experience in favour of a reaffirmed patriarchal system of commerce masquerading as morality.

Why spend time on "stuprum"? I may not be able to prove how many of Cicero's letters Shakespeare read, but the fact stands that this term brings its own charge, bears its own load, despite whether it infiltrates or is invited, whether Roman law is critiqued or merely rehearsed, its fragments partially reassembled. To circle back to the play and Lavinia's use of both Ovid and this Roman legal term, I can spin out all sorts of strange connections and hidden meaning, but only from Ovid and Roman law: I am still trapped into discussing the

³⁰ See Francesca Royster, "White-Limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51:4, 2000, pp. 432–455.

³¹ Jim Ellis, *Sexuality and Citizenship: Metamorphosis in Elizabethan Erotic Verse*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003. Ellis writes that: "Lucrece, as a woman removed from the private sphere, becomes in effect rhetoric" (p. 209).

antecedents, relying on the past and precedent and fooling myself into believing that they coalesce into a “lively warrant”. I can only interpret aspects that are other to Lavinia. Lavinia, embodied on the stage yet inscrutable, stands in conjunction with her props, yet also in opposition to them. Shakespeare’s play demonstrates what is at risk in the way we choose to break our silences. Amidst the gore-fest of this play, what this scene gestures toward and what my discussion models is the need to open up a discourse that does not isolate or efface those who attempt to speak in the present.

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