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A Language of Grief: Spectacular, Textual, and Violent Expression in Titus Andronicus

Keywords

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**A Language of Grief:
Spectacular, Textual, and Violent Expression in *Titus
Andronicus***

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As tragedies characteristically do, Shakespeare's early *Titus Andronicus* depicts its protagonist grappling with a tragic universe—a place where “supposedly immutable principles of divine, human, and natural order [are]... suspected of being no more than figural impositions on an essentially intractable reality” (Sacks 576). Through the course of the play, Titus suffers adversities that outdo by far their classical precedents. One of his greatest challenges, then, is to find a sufficient way of expressing the intense grief and horror that he experiences, for as Marcus says, “Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopp'd / Doth burn the

heart to cinders where it is” (2.4.36-7). While Hamlet—a later revenge tragedy protagonist—gives up on trying to express his grief, saying, “I have that within which passeth show” (1.2.85), *Titus Andronicus* is about Titus’s (and other characters’) exploration of and progression through alternative modes of expression, a process he is forced to continue as he successively finds each one inadequate. Collectively, these modes of expression constitute a language of grief. In Act 3, when Lavinia makes absurd gestures with her stumps, Titus says, “[O]f these I will wrest an alphabet, / And by still practice learn to know thy meaning” (3.2.44-5). Lavinia, out of absolute necessity, illustrates literally the strategy with which Titus and the others attempt to express themselves. When verbal language fails him, Titus too appeals to the eye, using spectacle and other alternative modes of expression to denote his misery.

The first mode of expression Titus finds inadequate is speech, but it is also the one with which he (like everyone else) is most familiar. Therefore, he has some trouble letting it go, even after he recognizes its deficiency. When he directs his verbal lament to the Tribunes, crying, “*Hear me, grave fathers*” (3.1.1 *italics mine*), he is asking specifically that they engage his aural appeal, confident that he will be heard. Yet, as Peter Sacks puts it, “Titus must suffer the impotence of language, as his pleas go unheard” (591). Immediately after this rejection, however, Titus experiments with representing his grief textually, announcing, “[I]n the dust I write / My heart’s deep languor and my soul’s sad tears”

(3.1.12-13). Whether or not the actor playing Titus actually writes in the dust at this point is ultimately a decision for the play's director, but even if he or she decides to forego literalizing this visual and textual appeal, these lines mark a turning point; Titus begins to think about alternative modes of expression. The words that Titus writes here are not as important as the fact that he writes them; he makes a spectacle of transcribing his grief in the dust because spoken language will not work. But, although he does begin to experiment with an alternative way of expressing his grief, Titus remains intent on using spoken language, and, in an absurdly verbal gesture, announces that he will "tell [his] sorrows to the stones" (3.1.36).

Lucius, on the other hand, adopts a strategy of spectacle; throughout this scene, he keeps his weapon drawn, hoping that he might "rescue [his] two brothers from their death" (3.1.46). Charles Frey sees this dichotomy between the expressive strategies that Lucius and Titus adopt as developing out of the initial conflict between Saturninus and Bassianus, the brothers who compete to be emperor. Frey notes that in the play's first lines, "Saturninus asks patricians to 'plead' his title with 'swords' (1.1.4) and not words" while "Bassianus, presented as the relatively democratist candidate, pleads for voice, choice, [and] election" (77). The form of expression by spectacle that both Saturninus and Lucius use impresses Titus, who has become dissatisfied with verbal language, though he has not yet rejected it completely. Lucius then becomes a model for the spectacular¹ form of expression to which Titus later turns.

When Lavinia enters, disfigured by Tamora's sons, Lucius again shows visually how he feels, "*falling on his knees*" (3.1.64 stage direction).

Titus initially rebukes Lucius for this visual expression of grief, suggesting instead a verbal assessment of the situation; he commands, "Speak, Lavinia, what accursed hand / Hath made thee handless" (3.1.66-7). When Marcus horrifically reveals that her tongue—"[t]hat delightful engine of her thoughts"—"[i]s torn from forth that pretty hollow cage" (3.1.82-4), Titus sees not only that speech cannot sufficiently denote his reaction to this new horror but also that speech itself is tangible, and can be forcibly rent from a person. He asks, "[W]hat shall I *do* / Now I behold thy lively body so?" (3.1.104-5 *italics mine*)—not "[W]hat shall I *say*?" It is important to note that when Titus says "do," he is not referring to the violent action that he will later direct outward; rather, he is talking about the act of making a passive spectacle. Soon after, he proposes a ridiculously melodramatic spectacle, in which the Andronici "sit round about some fountain," crying, until their tears fill it. This passive, but spectacular mode of expression is much like Lavinia's gestural language, from which Titus says he will "wrest an alphabet" (3.2.44). Hamlet lays out some of the letters of this alphabet, even as he calls them inadequate; "Tis not," he says, "my inky cloak...Nor windy suspiration of breath...nor the fruitful river of the eye / Nor the dejected havior of the visage, / Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief / That can denote me truly" (*Hamlet* 1.2.77-83). It is with "dumb shows" (*Titus* 3.1.131) such as these,

which appeal to the eye, that Titus now begins to express his misery.

When his two sons' severed heads are returned to him, Titus rejects *mere* spectacle as a means of expressing his grief. Frustrated with the uselessness of his efforts, he declares, "I have not another tear to shed" (3.1.265); then he wonders, "[W]hich way to Revenge's cave?" (3.1.269). The figurative direction to which he turns to find revenge is that of violent action. The distinction in linguistics between mimetic and performative language² perfectly delineates this shift. Before, Titus's language of grief sought mimesis; he tried in vain to use both oral language and a passive form of spectacle to mimic his internal feelings. Now, finding these strategies unhelpful, he turns his language of spectacle violently outward, attempting to affect the reality around him in simulation of its impositions on him. He does this certainly for revenge, but also so that he can see tangible evidence of his lament, something the tragic universe has thus far denied him.

Tamora also struggles with this issue—before Titus, in fact—when he kills her son in Act 1. Her struggle to express her sorrows is eerily similar to Titus's. When Titus brutally cuts short her verbal pleas for clemency, she sees language's ineffectiveness, just as he later does before the tribunes. She, however, does not progress through the numerous alternative modes of expression that Titus tries, instead jumping straight to violent action. Her first impulse is to express her grief to Titus by imposing her situation upon him; she says that she will "make them know what 'tis to

let a queen / Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain” (1.1.451-2). She does this quite effectively—she makes Titus know suffering far worse than her own and, more importantly, forces him into a situation in which he must confront the inadequacy of language. Ironically, Tamora’s attempts to make him know her situation become a model for Titus when he attempts to make *her* know *his* situation. Particularly with his reinvention of Progne’s revenge, Titus imposes upon Tamora in the same way she imposed upon him. Karen Robertson notes a major difference between Titus’s revenge and Progne’s:

In *Titus*, the cannibal feast
is prepared not for the
rapists, but for their mother,
Tamora, who devours her
own sons. . . . Thus, the
violent intrusion into the
body of Lavinia is punished
by a horrific ingestion, not
by the rapists themselves,
but by their mother. (220)

Titus creatively and very appropriately revenges the rape of his daughter; just as Chiron and Demetrius raped Lavinia on behalf of their mother, he (figuratively) rapes Tamora on behalf of Lavinia with her own sons’ flesh.

Titus’s turning away from verbal language and toward a language of action, spoken in terms of violent acts, also involves a turning from authority, from the Roman government. As Sacks notes, these rejections go

hand-in-hand: “When...the principle and operation of justice [are] found wanting, the revenger...find[s] himself suddenly outside the law, hence outside society, and... outside the public institution of language” (579). When Titus tries to “solicit heaven” with messaged arrows, in order to “move the gods / To send down Justice” (4.3.51-2), he is both subverting the Roman government and rejecting oral language in favor of his written messages and the performative display of firing the arrows. Titus’s simultaneous turnings from oral language and government, however, do not function together exactly as Sacks indicates—there is no violence involved. Titus’s gesture is subversive not because he doubts the Roman government’s ability to mete justice and tries violently to take justice into his own hands; rather, it is subversive because he (accurately) sees Rome as a very corrupt place and appeals to external forces in search of justice and order.

For Lavinia, too, the act of turning from verbal language is connected to a subversion of government or, in her case, that government’s cultural norms. Unlike Philomel, who turns to a characteristically feminine and domestic mode of expression when robbed of her ability to speak—that is, to sewing—Lavinia turns to modes of expression that disturb Roman conceptions of femininity. First, she precisely articulates her horrific rape in the poetic terms of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, invoking the masculine literary tradition. Problematically, she is “deeper read and better skilled” (4.1.33) than young Lucius. Then, as she is unable to convey the names of her rapists with this mode of expression, Titus

suggests she “[g]ive signs” (4.1.60) to indicate who raped her. She and Marcus devise a strategy much more disruptive of cultural norms, however; Lavinia takes up the staff of masculine potency and conveys textually the names of Tamora’s sons. She aggressively transcribes her thoughts with a new, phallic “engine of her thoughts” (3.1.82).

At the end of the play, after almost every character’s grief has been made violently manifest, Rome tries to transition away from the tragic universe and back to a place in which speech can be effective. Lucius is selected as the new emperor, and he seems to mark the beginning of a new, hopeful era for the Roman people. As Sacks puts it, “the image of inherited power, in which Lucius is compared to ‘our ancestor’ Aeneas, is precisely that of *speech*. The symbolic organ of renewal is now the very tongue that we have seen mutilated or so frequently stopped throughout the play” (592). A Roman Lord says to Lucius, “Speak, Rome’s dear friend, as erst our ancestor” (5.3.79). Lucius can then cathartically dictate his family’s woes to the public for the first time. But it seems that language is perhaps too prominently ineffective in the play to be redeemed in this final scene. Even in the midst of giving this restorative speech, Lucius reverts once again to spectacle, saying, “My scars can witness, dumb although they are, / That my report is just and full of truth” (5.3.113-14). Marcus also gives in to the impulse to use spectacle; he proposes that if the Roman people find any fault with him or Lucius, they will “hand in hand all headlong hurl [them]selves / And on the ragged stones beat forth [their] souls” (5.3.131-2). Young Lucius

actually cannot speak from crying; he says, “My tears will choke me if I ope my mouth” (5.3.174). Clearly, spoken language continues to be a difficulty for the remaining Andronici, and although Rome becomes drastically less corrupt as the play concludes, the atrocities they have faced indicate that oral communication is not totally sound. Words cannot completely denote the full spectrum of human feeling, Shakespeare seems to suggest, even as he tries to do just that with his own words.

Notes

¹The word “spectacular” is used here not in its modern sense (i.e., *OED* adj. 1a. “Of the nature of a spectacle or show; striking or imposing as a display”) but to mean “[t]hat which appeals to the eye” (*OED* adj. 1b).

²In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that “mimesis” seeks passively to describe or to mimic nature. Mimetic language is similarly passive and descriptive. Performative language is verbal action, and, as such, it seeks to affect the surrounding world. People use it whenever their words *do* things—when they swear, curse, invite, vow, and confess, for example.

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