

# Synopsis of *Titus Andronicus*

**A**fter the death of the emperor of Rome, the emperor's two sons Saturninus and Bassianus vie to replace him. Titus returns from 10 years of war with the Goths, having lost 21 of his 25 sons in battle. He also has captured Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and her three sons. Titus buries his dead sons and, despite her pleas, sacrifices Tamora's eldest to settle the score. Tamora vows revenge on Titus for this deed. The Roman tribune Marcus Andronicus announces that the throne has been offered to his brother Titus. Titus refuses the title of emperor, instead supporting the candidacy of Saturninus.

Saturninus becomes emperor and immediately chooses Titus' daughter Lavinia as his empress. Lavinia loves Bassianus, so the two run off together, leaving her brothers to defend them from pursuit. Titus rashly kills his son Mutius for disobeying the new emperor's command. When Saturninus sees Tamora, however, he gives up Lavinia and marries the Goth Queen instead.

Tamora's sons, Chiron and Demetrius, lust after Lavinia. Tamora's Moorish lover Aaron convinces them to take her by force. During a hunting party, Lavinia and Bassianus find Aaron and Tamora in the woods together and threaten to tell Saturninus of her infidelity. Chiron and Demetrius stab Bassianus and throw him into a pit and drag Lavinia off to rape her. Aaron lures Titus' sons Martius and Quintus to the pit, in order to frame them for the murder of Bassianus. Saturninus blames Titus' sons for Bassianus' death and takes them prisoner.

Marcus finds Lavinia in the woods, her hands and tongue cut off, and brings her to Titus. Aaron brings word that if Marcus, Titus or his remaining son, Lucius, will send Saturninus a severed hand, the emperor will send back Titus' two imprisoned sons in exchange. Titus sacrifices his hand, but a messenger returns, bringing Titus' hand back with the severed heads of Martius and Quintus. With all his other sons dead, Titus sends Lucius into exile for protection.

Lavinia chases after Lucius' young son when he is reading the story of Philomel, a mythical woman who was raped in the woods. She then writes the names "Chiron" and "Demetrius" in the dirt with a staff. Titus sends magnificent weapons to Chiron and Demetrius, and Aaron realizes that Titus has discovered their guilt. Suddenly, a nurse rushes in to tell the three men that Tamora has given birth to a



Cristofer Jean, Judith-Marie Bergan, Derrick Lee Weeden, B.W. Gonzalez and Gregory Linington as Goths in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2002 production of *Titus Andronicus*.

black child, and that they must kill it so that Saturninus does not find out. Aaron murders the nurse to keep her from talking and takes his newborn baby to the Goth camp to save its life.

Titus, pretending to be mad, orders his followers to shoot arrows into the sky with letters attached begging the gods to assist his revenge. Word arrives that Lucius has joined with the Goths and is marching an army to conquer Rome. Aaron finds his way to the Goth camp, where he reveals his crimes to Lucius in exchange for sparing the life of the child he carries with him. A Roman messenger offers Lucius a meeting to negotiate with Saturninus at Titus' house, and Lucius accepts.

Believing that Titus is mad, Tamora and her sons appear at his house, disguised as the gods of Revenge, Rape and Murder to answer his letters. Titus begs Tamora to leave Rape and Murder with him for a while. The instant she leaves, Titus orders Chiron and Demetrius bound and gagged. He slits their throats, and Lavinia collects their spilled blood. Titus prepares a pastry with their blood and powdered bones and bakes their heads into two pies.

Titus welcomes Lucius, Marcus, Saturninus and Tamora to his home, serving Tamora her own sons' flesh for dinner. After killing Lavinia to put her out of her misery, he reveals what is in the pie and stabs Tamora. Saturninus immediately kills Titus, and Lucius in turn kills Saturninus. Lucius becomes the new emperor, and his first act is to bury Aaron chest-deep in the ground to starve to death. He orders all the bodies buried except for Tamora's, which is to be thrown to wild animals.

# Romans, Goths and Moors

**The Romans** For Elizabethans, Rome was the ultimate model of civilization. They looked to the ancient Roman Empire, which had ruled Europe and parts of Africa and Asia for more than a thousand years, for examples of excellence in every aspect of life—from politics to architecture and poetry. In addition, the island nation aspired to one day become the next Rome. Under Elizabeth I the British had built a powerful navy, defeated the Spanish Armada, and explored new, faraway lands. Their education system was based on classical texts both Latin and Greek. Shakespeare and other playwrights wrote dramas that took place in an idealized Roman world.

Unlike his other Roman plays, which depict the emerging, or collapsing, political system in conflict with the masses or the egos of the main characters, *Titus Andronicus* portrays a very different image of the Roman Empire. This bloody, gory tale takes place in a society that is corrupt, in which formal justice gives way to personal revenge. The ideal of Roman Stoicism (remaining emotionless and free from passion) and the intricate codes of honor lead to the destruction of Titus' own family, as he stubbornly sacrifices his Goth enemy Alarbus, and then kills his own son Mutius for standing in his way. Through Shakespeare's pen Shakespeare creates a bloody cautionary tale where Rome becomes a "wilderness of tigers."



Photo by Angus McBeary/Harvard Theatre Collection.

Laurence Olivier as Titus Andronicus in Peter Brook's production, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1955.



20th Century Fox.

Jessica Lange as Tamora and Alan Cumming as Saturninus in Julie Taymor's 1999 film, *Titus*.

**The Goths** If the Romans symbolized civilization to the Elizabethans, then the Goths represented all things barbaric. Historically, the Goths were a group of Germanic tribes from northern Europe and Scandinavia. During the third century, tribes of Goths began to invade the Western Roman Empire, later leading to its collapse. The Goths in Shakespeare's play are portrayed as barbaric villains, capable of committing the worst kind of atrocities. When Tamora's pleas to Titus go unheeded and he sacrifices her eldest son, her thirst for revenge drives her for the rest of the play. Chiron and Demetrius rape and mutilate Lavinia without remorse but meet their own terrible fate at Titus' hands.

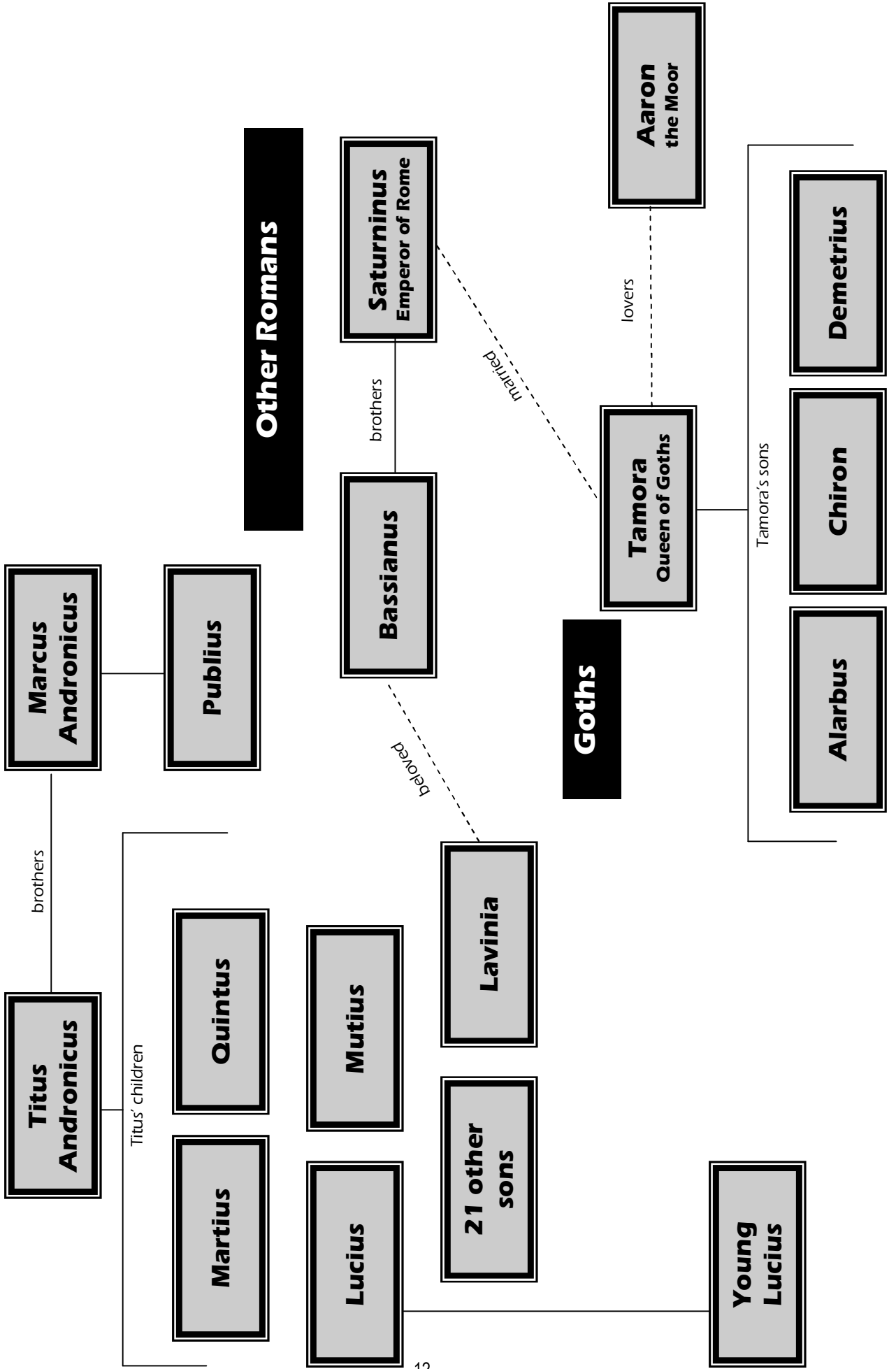
**The Moor** The term Moor, in Elizabethan times, had several meanings and not one clear definition. It could refer to someone who was Arab, Muslim or of black African descent. In general, it referred to a person who was different—in either race, religion or both—from white Europeans. This foreign appearance would have immediately signaled villainy to an Elizabethan audience. In Renaissance drama, Moors were almost exclusively villainous characters, often based on the Vice character (a one-dimensional personification of evil) from Medieval Mystery plays. Indeed, Aaron the Moor is the Vice character of the play, orchestrating much of the violence and delighting in his villainy. While Aaron never states a motive for his deceit, he exhibits moments of humanity when he must protect his illegitimate infant from murder. Here we can see Shakespeare incorporating and also wrestling with conventions of his time—creating the Moorish Vice character but not allowing him to be merely one-dimensional. (Shakespeare will later go on to write the first English play with a Moor as the tragic hero, further turning the convention on its head by creating a white Vice character, Iago, in *Othello*.)



Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection.

Keith Mitchell as Aaron and Barbara Jefford as Tamora at the Old Vic, 1957.

# House of Andronicus



# Vengeance Is Mine



Photo by Sarah Ainslie.

Brian Cox as Titus in *Titus Andronicus*, directed by Deborah Warner, RSC at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1987.


**T**itus *Andronicus* is a bloodbath, even compared to modern standards. Critics throughout the 18th and 19th centuries found the work crude and disgusting; it was both dismissed as an early, unfinished work and had its authorship challenged. During Shakespeare's lifetime, *Titus Andronicus* was his most popular and most performed play. Its success is also marked by the fact that it was Shakespeare's first play to appear in print in 1594. The play's early success can be better understood in the context in which it was written. The young Shakespeare had just arrived in London, and a popular form of tragedy, called revenge tragedy or "tragedy of blood," had just emerged on the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare decided to make his mark by contributing a play to the genre of revenge tragedy. Highly influenced by *The Spanish Tragedy*, which in turn was influenced by Senecan tragedy, Shakespeare tried his hand at this form and created a sensationally violent, revenge-soaked drama in *Titus Andronicus*.

The Elizabethans had just discovered the plays of the ancient Roman poet, Seneca. These plays were written to be recited, not performed. The typical Senecan tragedy involved a long plot of someone seeking revenge with graphic descriptions of violence, and usually a ghost or witch or two. A typical revenge tragedy takes place in a court setting, and contains any or all of the following elements:

- an unjust murder, often a good ruler killed by a bad one overtaking the throne;
- ghosts or the personification of revenge who call on the living to avenge murder;

- a play-within-a-play, or the use of disguise and trickery to discover guilt;
- severed limbs and heads, extreme violence and mutilation
- an eruption of general violence at the end, in which nearly all the characters die, including the avenger.

Thomas Kyd adapted this form and wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587-1590). In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo's son, Horatio, is killed, Hieronimo spends the entire play tracking down his murderers. His frustration drives him mad; his revenge is to stage a play in which he uses actual knives instead of fake ones to kill the wrongdoers. In the end, Hieronimo is captured, bites out his own tongue to prevent himself from talking, and then stabs his captor and himself with a penknife. The Elizabethan audience had acquired a taste for the bloody in its drama.

This bloody tragedy was followed by a slew of imitators, including *The Atheist's Revenge*, *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, *Antonio's Revenge* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Thomas Kyd's friend and roommate, Christopher Marlowe, also contributed to the genre with *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*. Today, *Titus Andronicus* is back on the critics' good side, mainly due to a few excellent 20th-century stagings of the play. Recent critics are looking at *Titus Andronicus* and seeing the master playwright hard at work, using a genre that was popular at the time and expanding it by including deeper, richer characters and more complex moralities. They also see germs of his future work, including the greatest revenge tragedy of them all, *Hamlet*. 

# Blood and Gore

**T**itus *Andronicus* was said to be one of [Shakespeare's] most popular plays. Elizabethan audiences were bloodthirsty. They took pleasure in bear baiting and were accustomed to public executions and heads rolling at the Tower of London. They lived and died with the plague: an epidemic closed the theaters during the two years Shakespeare supposedly wrote *Titus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The survivors relished mayhem and murder on the stage and Shakespeare gave them what they wanted." – Alan S. Stone, "Shakespeare's Tarantino Play," *Boston Review*, 2000.

Thirteen murders, two decapitations, four mutilations (three hands, one tongue), one rape, ritual sacrifice and cannibalism—in Shakespeare's works, there is not another play that is so gruesome. Partially due to its violent content (and partially due to critical opinion that the language in the play was sub-par), *Titus Andronicus* was not performed in any major, unadapted productions between Shakespeare's death in 1616 and 1923. Despite the play's popularity in Shakespeare's time, and its current revival in the 20th and 21st centuries, for most of the play's history it has been reviled as a critical disaster. Perhaps elements of Elizabethan and modern culture, and our attitudes toward violence, have helped to make a place for this play in both Shakespeare's time and ours.

*Titus Andronicus* was the most popular play, the most often performed, in Shakespeare's lifetime. One has to wonder if Shakespeare's intent was to give his audience the bloody violence they craved. In addition to being performed the most frequently, the play was also published in four different quartos, indicating a high demand for this script. We know that violent plays were very popular at the time—for example, in *The Battle of Alcazar* by George Peele, another play printed in 1594 (the same year as *Titus Andronicus*),

the list of the properties needed for a "bloody banquet" in the play include dead men's heads in dishes, dead men's bones and blood. In *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, murder abounds throughout the plot, and the main character even bites out his own tongue. The sheer magnitude of the violence in *Titus Andronicus*, however, and the comparison with Shakespeare's other plays (which are not like *Titus* at all), make critics question whether Shakespeare was attempting to mock or parody the violence of the other plays of his time. By the end of the play, the violence borders on the ridiculous, as a stage direction reads, "enter Titus, like a cook, placing the dishes" (V.iii.25) when he serves Tamora the pies containing the flesh of her own sons. Directors who

have tackled this play have struggled with this balance between violence and humor. Bill Alexander (director of *Henry IV, parts 1 and 2* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in the 03-04 season) directed a recent production of *Titus* for the RSC, and speaks about his experience with the play:

"The main problem for a modern production is getting the tone right; finding a delicate balance between the horror and dark humor of the play.




Brian Cox and Sonia Ritter as Titus and Lavinia, directed by Deborah Warner, RSC at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1987. Photo by Sarah Ainslie.

Shakespeare's audience must have had a profoundly different relationship to physical violence from us. They had a judicial system that made violence acceptable and public as part of its code. People were used to seeing their fellow humans hanging from gallows, thieves with amputated hands, heads displayed on bridges, traitors disembowelled on scaffolds, and to hearing the roar and laughter of the bear pit. They must have developed a sense of humor about it in a way we find difficult. This is going to be one of the main challenges in the rehearsal room."

– Bill Alexander, *Director's Diary for Titus Andronicus*, RSC, 2003.

This challenge is one of the elements that makes *Titus Andronicus* a difficult play to produce. Theatres with a strong sense of decorum, modesty and strict morality gained popularity after Shakespeare's death and into the 20th century. The violence in *Titus* caused the play to be not only avoided but also wholly reviled by critics for centuries. The first production to break this cycle was Robert Atkins' RSC production in 1923—performed merely because the RSC was producing every play in the canon—which drew unintentional laughter from the audience in the final scene. (Apparently the balance between horror and humor in that production was not carefully navigated). The first critically acclaimed production of modern times was Peter Brook's 1955 production at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Laurence Olivier played Titus and Vivien Leigh played Lavinia. The violence in the play was stylized. Lavinia's wounds were represented by blood-stained streamers from her wrists and mouth. Another famous production of the play was Deborah Warner's 1987 RSC production, which handled the violence in a very different way. The gruesome details were shown realistically and unflinchingly—and the production was famous for causing audience members to faint.

In 1999, American director Julie Taymor produced an adaptation of the play on film, called *Titus*. This production combined gruesome realism with a number of fantastical elements. For example, the film begins with a framing device in which a young boy stages a brutal battle in his kitchen with food and toy soldiers, only to be kidnapped and taken to ancient Rome. Also, when Titus' severed hand is returned to him with the heads of his two sons, the delivery is made by circus performers. The result of these devices is a dark, gruesome humor. Now, for the first time in its history, the Shakespeare Theatre Company will be producing *Titus Andronicus* in 2007, directed by Gale Edwards.

These recent productions show that the play has gained popularity in the 20th and 21st centuries—perhaps because audiences today are as bloodthirsty as their Elizabethan counterparts. News of violence across the globe, two world wars, and a culture of saturation of violence in media and entertainment has made violence a part of everyday modern life. This, in addition to a broadening of what is “acceptable” in the theatre, has led to a culture in which we can stage the entirety of Shakespeare's canon without censorship and learn from it. 



Shakespeare Centre, photo by Angus McBean.

Laurence Olivier as Titus, Vivien Leigh as Lavinia and Alan Webb as Marcus in Peter Brook's production of *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1955.

# Code of Honor in *Titus Andronicus*

From the beginning of *Titus Andronicus*, characters devise more and more horrible revenges for each other in retribution for wrongs committed against them. The violence ends only when nearly all of the characters have met their gruesome ends. However, the characters in the play believe that their revenge is justified. Each character maintains a code of “honor” that allows him or her to perpetrate grievous wrongs against others without guilt or remorse, believing that his or her actions are just.

When Titus returns from battle with the Goth prisoners of war at the beginning of the play, he believes he is acting rightly when he sacrifices Alarbus, Tamora’s oldest son, to appease the souls of his 21 sons killed in battle. Tamora pleads for mercy, but Titus proceeds; his code of honor, dedication to Rome and strict religious belief do not permit him to relent. Based on the code of the battlefield, and the traditions of Rome, Titus believes this act of murder is not only appropriate but right. Tamora calls Titus’ code of honor “cruel, irreligious piety!” (I.i.133)—a fitting accusation since Titus’ religious devotion is part of the motivation to murder. Titus’ act sets in motion the events of the play—Tamora vows revenge on Titus and his family in retaliation for the pain she has suffered. Tamora believes that any cruelty perpetrated on the Andronicuses is justified by the act of cruelty done to her son.

Soon after, Titus again acts rashly and stubbornly based on his code of honor. When Saturninus, the new Roman Emperor, requests Titus’ daughter Lavinia’s hand in marriage, Titus immediately offers her to him, despite the fact that she is engaged to Bassianus. Lavinia, of course, rejects the match, but Titus’ code of honor will not allow him to accept dissent and disobedience of an order from the emperor. Lavinia flees, and her brother Mutius draws his sword on Titus to prevent him from chasing her. Titus then kills Mutius, his own son—one of four remaining sons who returned from battle with him. Lucius questions Titus’ act, but Titus remains firm:

Lucius My lord, you are unjust, and more than so,  
In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son.

Titus Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine;  
My sons would never so dishonor me.  
(I.i.295-98)

Titus shows no remorse for Mutius’ death because he believes that Mutius has “dishonored” himself and the family. Although he lost 21 of his 25 sons in battle,



20th Century Fox

Anthony Hopkins as Titus Andronicus in Julie Taymor’s 1999 film, *Titus*.

and slayed Tamora’s eldest to appease their souls, he does not mourn for Mutius and initially refuses to let him receive a proper burial or lie in the Andronicus tomb.

Mutius’ death turns out to be in vain, for as soon as Saturninus views Tamora, he chooses her as his queen instead of Lavinia. This raises Tamora to a position of power in which she is able to manipulate events to enact her revenge against Titus. Throughout the play characters act on their desire for revenge disregarding any moral compass, this causes Rome to become a “wilderness of tigers” (III.i.53). Rome is no longer civilized; men and women are no better than beasts. By the end of the play; acts of dismemberment, rape and cannibalism have been committed, and the play ends with a mass murder.

The leadership of Rome then falls to Lucius, Titus’ eldest son, who has joined with the Goth army to invade Rome and remove Saturninus from power. In the absence of any code of honor besides revenge, the Romans have joined with the very enemy they spent years defeating to maintain control of their society. Shakespeare’s most violent play demonstrates how a society devoid of honor or justice brings about its own fall.



# Shakespeare's Symbolism

In his earliest tragedy, Shakespeare employs much more overt and heavy-handed symbolism than in his later plays. What follows is a discussion of some of the major symbols in *Titus Andronicus*.


## Hands and Dismemberment

Dismemberment is a common act of violence in the play. Rome continues its downward spiral, with more and more characters subjected to this violence. Lavinia's hands and tongue are severed. Titus cuts off his own hand in an attempt to save his sons. This offering is then returned to him with the decapitated heads of the sons he was hoping to save.

Hands, in general, are often perceived as instruments of communication. Because Lavinia has been relieved of her hands and tongue, she is unable to accuse the perpetrators of the violence against her. Hands are necessary parts of the body, used to hold items, manipulate tools, exchange greetings and offer affection. Lavinia is rendered completely helpless by the loss of her hands. Titus' act of removing his own hand shows how he is implicated in his own downfall—his loss of power over Rome and over his own mind—as he voluntarily becomes “lame.”

More symbolically, the political state was thought of as “The Body Politic” in Elizabethan times. Literally, the human body was a metaphor for society, with the head representing the king, and the other echelons of society representing the lower parts of the body. When the state was suffering, it was thought of as a disease affecting the body. Shakespeare shows hands and heads removed over the course of the play, mirroring the dismemberment of the Body Politic of Roman society.

## Animal Imagery

Shakespeare continually references animals in *Titus Andronicus*. Titus calls Rome a “wilderness of tigers” (III.i.53). The Clown delivers a basket containing two pigeons to the emperor before he is hanged (IV.iv). When Aaron slays the nurse who brings him his baby, he compares her to a pig: “Weeke! Weeke! / So cries a pig prepared to the spit” (IV.ii.146-47). At the end of the play, Lucius orders that Tamora's body be thrown “forth to beasts and birds to prey” (V.iii.198). Shakespeare weaves frequent references to animals into his text in order to underscore the bestial nature of the violence in the play and the disintegration of civilization. 



Sketch of *Titus Andronicus* by Henry Peacham, c.1595.  
Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Warminster, Wiltshire, Great Britain.