

(ARTICLES)

“by still practice learn to know thy meaning”:
Lavinia’s Silence and the Representations of
the Book in *Titus Andronicus*

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In Shakespeare’s Roman plays, there appear some women who are described as energetic and masculine. For instance, Fulvia, Antony’s wife, raises army against Caesar, while Volumnia, Coriolanus’s mother, is described as so energetic as to be referred to as “mad” (4.2.11). Nevertheless, it should be noted that what drives them to act in such violent ways is their deep concern for their husband or son; it is said that Fulvia fights against Caesar in order to bring Antony from Egypt back to Rome, and Volumnia behaves like Coriolanus’s father in order to educate him to become a splendid Roman warrior. That is, their deviation from the social norms is derived from a kind of devotion to men.

In general, women in Shakespeare’s Roman plays are assumed to be constructed of “melting spirits” (*Caesar* 2.1.121). Hence, they should be modest and subservient to men. In this sense, although both Fulvia and Volumnia, described as energetic and masculine, seem to defy the social norms for women, their motivations for their acts actually derive from their deep concern about their husband or son. Therefore, it can be said that these women, in serving men, do not essentially go against the social norms which require women to be loyal to their husband or father.

Although the society in Shakespeare’s Roman plays is described as being controlled with patriarchal norms, there appear some women who are described as energetic and masculine. What drives them to act in such violent ways is their deep concern for their husband or son. Their deviation from the social norms of womanhood is derived from their devotion to men. Men often unconsciously identify themselves with these powerful women, trying to prove their manly independence in Roman society. Though excluded from the male world, the existence of wives is undoubtedly essential to the survival of their husbands since only wives can produce legitimate heirs who can continue their patriarchal authority in Roman society. Wives were not regarded as equals, but indispensable to husbands, at least as a means to produce an heir. These men are heavily dependent upon their wives to continue their genealogy.

In contrast, unlike these courageously mannish women, Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*

(1594) is unique among women in Shakespeare's Roman plays. She does not show her mannish attitude, but through her knowledge she achieves her revenge on her enemies. Although Sharon Hamilton states in *Shakespeare's Daughters* that "Lavinia is simply the object of the men's pity and the spur to their revenge" (74), she is not a passive woman at all. From the beginning of the play, when Titus tries to build up male friendship with Saturninus, the Roman emperor, she does not assist him to do so. While her father ingratiates himself with Saturninus, offering a marriage to Lavinia, she ignores the offer, following Bassianus and her brothers, who declare that her marriage to Saturninus is illegal since she has been betrothed to Bassianus, the younger brother of Saturninus. Moreover, it is noteworthy that she achieves her desire to get married to Bassianus against will of both her father and Saturninus, men whom she is supposed to obey in the patriarchal society in the play. Although Lavinia does not make a clear demonstration of her refusal to marry Saturninus by following Bassianus and her brothers, she indicates that she has chosen Bassianus, her betrothal, acting against her father's will.

It is especially noteworthy that her mental strength is underlined by the fact that she keeps silent to Saturninus's marriage proposal in the public space, but she later takes action to demonstrate her refusal to the marriage. On the other hand, there are some women in Shakespeare's plays who contrive a way in order to fulfill their desire since they want not to defy the social norm of male superiority; they do not want to be regarded as rebelling against the social norms of male supremacy. For example, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) takes measures to make Bassanio choose the right box by means of a song and by cross-dressing as a male lawyer to save Antonio's life. Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) goes to the forest outside Athens in order to go to Lysander's aunt's house to get married since the Athenian law is not applicable there.

The effect of cross-dressing is not only to save women from the danger of travelling but also to enable them to act without spoiling their reputation. There are some women in Shakespeare's plays who cross-dress and leave their place in order to be freed from the constraints of patriarchal norms. This is because the patriarchal social norms of male superiority do not allow women to demonstrate their activeness or their knowledge. Therefore, Shakespeare's women often try to conceal their activeness and their knowledge.

In contrast, Lavinia fulfills her desire by getting married to Bassianus without employing any device. She marries Bassianus without her father's consent, rejecting the emperor's marriage proposal, and what is more, even after her marriage she stays in Rome, where both Titus and Saturninus live. From these facts, it is noted that she is less constrained by the social norms of male supremacy than other women such as Rosalind and Imogen who cannot ignore male supremacy. The reason why she does not contrive any means to carry out her desire is not that she does not understand the nature of the patriarchal social system in which she is placed. Though told by her father to marry Saturninus, she keeps silence. In fact, she speaks only once, when Saturninus begs her pardon for having praised Tamora:

Saturninus: Lavinia, you are not displeased with this?

Lavinia: Not I, my lord, sith true nobility

Warrants these words in princely courtesy. (1.1.274-76)

Her silence, however, does not mean passiveness at all; she is bold enough to run away with Bassianus against her father's will. The reason for her silence in this scene is that she knows that she should not demonstrate her opposition to her father's will. Since daughters in the play cannot resist the power of their father, and their disobedience to their father is equivalent to a serious rebellion, she thinks that keeping silence is the best way to avoid further conflict at this moment. That is, she is wise enough to be silent.

In contrast, she speaks a great deal to foreigners such as Tamora. When she meets Tamora and Aaron in the woods, she speaks with severe sarcasm and abuses them, sarcastically pointing out their adulterous relationship. She goes so far as to say: ". . . barbarous Tamora,/ For no name fits thy nature but thy own" (2.2.118-19). Even though Tamora is now a Roman queen, Lavinia evidently looks down on Tamora. Besides, imploring Tamora, Demetrius and Chiron not to rape herself, she speaks fluently in order to change their mind and not to rape her. These episodes suggest that she is not silent by nature but she becomes so when she thinks she should be. Thus, Lavinia's wisdom and knowledge function as a kind of means which other women in Shakespeare's plays often employ to fulfill their desires without obviously defying social norms.

The comparison of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* with one of its probable sources, "The Tragical History of Titus Andronicus, & c." makes clear that Shakespeare presents Lavinia as a mentally strong and educated woman. Unlike Shakespeare's Lavinia, Lavinia in this source, does not defy her father's will:

. . . brought up in all singular Virtues, humble, courteous and modest, insomuch that the Emperor's only Son, by a former Wife fell extremely in love with her, seeking her Favour by all bertuous and honourable Ways, insomuch, that after a long courtship with her father and the Emperor's Consent she was betrothed to him. (Bullough VI 39)

Lavinia in this source book is portrayed as a model of meek womanhood which Shakespeare's Titus would expect his daughter to be. Moreover, in "The Tragical History . . .," Lavinia's education and knowledge are not emphasized; unlike Shakespeare's Lavinia, Lavinia in this source does not disclose what had happened to her by using a book.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia is portrayed as deeply related to books. As Marcus, her uncle, says, she educated her nephew, reading poetry and books:

Ah, boy, Cornelia never with more care
Read to her sons than she hath read to thee
Sweet poetry and Tully's *Orator*. (4.1.12-14)

From his words, it is evident that Lavinia is educated enough to read poetry and *The Orator* to the boy; unlike *Metamorphoses*, which was used mainly to entertain people, *The Orator* is a highly academic work. As to the importance of the book in *Titus Andronicus*, Charlotte Scott suggests in *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Book*:

Within the sum of Shakespeare's drama a specific material book appears in only two plays, which mark the length of his career, *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline*.

In both plays it is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the text is the rape of Philomel.
(26)

As she points out, the book of *Metamorphoses* plays an important role in this play since it enables tongueless Lavinia to reveal her family what she had suffered from. Moreover, the concept of books itself is the key point to consider the change in Titus's attitude toward his daughter. He compares Lavinia to a book:

I can interpret all her martyred signs. . . . (3.2.36)

I will learn thy thought. (3.2.39)

. . . But I of these will wrest an alphabet
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning. (3.2.44-45)

From these passages above, it is clear that he portrays Lavinia by using an image of books about which Scott states: "Lavinia's body becomes the book from which Titus will learn to read" (28). He can hardly understand her "meaning" at this moment though he intends to construe it; having been out of Rome to fight against foreigners for a long time, he knows little about his family.

After he has lost his sense of honour, Titus attempts to build his relationship with his family. In other words, he begins constructing his own subjectivity as a father, trying to understand Lavinia as if he were reading her as a book. The change in his attitude toward his family can be seen in his suggestion that she should divert herself from her sorrows by reading books:

But thou art deeper read and better skilled:
Come and take choice of all my library,
And so beguile thy sorrow till the heavens
Reveal the damned contriver of this deed. (4.1.33-36)

He tells her that she should wait till the criminal is revealed by God. However, Lavinia in the play is not so passive, but she herself uncovers what was done to her and who the criminals were by using the book and writing their names, using the stamp, on sand. She leads Titus to take revenge on her enemies by means of her power of knowledge. Hence, she is more self-assertive and independent-minded than her father assumes. It is also to be noted that she takes her action as the subject throughout the play; though Titus thinks that he should control her since he is a patriarch, she always tries to carry out her own wishes.

Thus, Titus's lack of understanding about his daughter is underlined. Nonetheless, Marcus, his brother, understands her better than he; Marcus's relationship with Titus's children is much stronger than that of Titus's. For instance, just before Titus kills Mutius, who tries to protect Lavinia's marriage against his will, Marcus speaks to him as follows:

Suffer thy brother Marcus to inter
His noble nephew here in virtue's nest,
That died in honour and Lavinia's cause.

Thou art a Roman, be not barbarous. (1.1.380-83)

Marcus stands by Mutius’s side, referring to him as “noble.” He agrees with Lavinia and her brothers to turn down Saturninus’s marriage offer though Titus regards his children as traitors. On the other hand, he regards Titus as “barbarous” although he kills his son to maintain his dignity as a Roman soldier. Even if Marcus and Titus belong to the same generation, their value systems are different from each other’s. Marcus apparently possesses a value system in common with that of Titus’s children. Thus, the difference in the value system of Titus from that of his children does not come from the generation gap between them.

It is also to be noted that Lavinia’s body represents, in Leonard Tennenhouse’s words, the “aristocratic body” in the play. In Tennenhouse’s view, people in Elizabethan society got used to the equation between the state of the body of Queen Elizabeth and the social state (79). In consideration of such equation, even though Lavinia is not a queen of Rome, she is highly valued by other Romans; Bassianus refers her as “Rome’s rich ornament” (1.1.55) and to whom Saturninus, the Roman emperor, made marriage proposal as soon as he saw her; if Titus had become emperor, she would have been an emperor’s daughter. It is worth comparing the violence done to Lavinia’s body and that to the land of Rome. In the light of Tennenhouse’s view of the equation of the queen’s body and the social state, the rape of Lavinia can be considered as the violation of Rome by foreigners.

As to the rape of Lavinia, Tennenhouse also states as follows:

What is important in this—as in the other scenes where Lavinia’s body appears as synecdoche and emblem of the disorder of things—is that Shakespeare has us see the rape of Lavinia as the definitive instance of dismemberment. . . . Lavinia’s body encapsulates and interprets this seemingly gratuitous carnage in a way that must have been clear to an Elizabethan audience, for her body was that of a daughter of the popular candidate for emperor of Rome, the first choice of wife for the emperor of Rome, and the betrothed of the emperor’s younger brother. (83)

As he suggests, the violence done to Lavinia’s body represents violence done to the Roman Empire in the play.

Furthermore, in *Shakespeare’s Tragedy: Violation and Identity*, Alexander Leggatt also compares Lavinia to the city: “Lavinia guards the citadel of white pride and sexual purity, and it gives Tamora extra satisfaction to urge her sons to break into the citadel” (*Shakespeare’s Tragedies* 15). With regard to the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, the criminals are Demetrius and Chiron, the Goths. Moreover, the motive of their violence is originally derived from the Roman war against the Goths; Tamora encourages her sons to violate Lavinia since her eldest son was made a sacrifice by Titus, who followed the military tradition. Hence, Titus’s loyalty to military value system results in his daughter’s ruin, that is, the ruin of the Roman Empire. On the other hand, Lucius, his son, attacks Rome, destroying his home country together with his enemies of the past. Though Lucius is a Roman, he is a destroyer of his home country. Thus, Rome is portrayed in this play as destroying itself in various senses.

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