



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

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**Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and the Gender of Revenge**

**MA thesis, ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2023, 73 pp.)**

**Opponent's review**

Comparing the title with the actual content of the thesis as well as its presentation in the introductory chapter, it would seem that the project had a somewhat convoluted genesis. *Titus Andronicus* in fact represents just one, however significant, focus of analysis; at the same time, gender perspective may come across as the privileged one, but the thesis addresses also issues of ethnicity and race, thus providing a potential for a more comprehensive treatment of the subject. In fact, as the author suggests in the introduction, her goal was to provide a preliminary study in what she sees as 'a potential new interdisciplinary field [of] "revenge studies"', primarily treating revenge as a response to trauma and, accordingly, informed by trauma theory. To this end, she traces parallels between the representation of revenge, its mechanisms, motivations and targeting, across periods and media in her analysis of selected plays by Shakespeare (*Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*; ch. 2) and films by Tarantino (*Inglourious Basterds*, *Kill Bill*; ch.3). The thesis thus represents an ambitious and relevant project.

At the same time, it has to be said that its execution is not entirely successful. The references in the introduction show wide reading and awareness of both early and late, dramatic and cinematic treatments of the topic; the limitations imposed by the scope of the thesis are clearly recognized; but the confrontation of the wide prospects and the necessity to provide a representative illustration of the issues involved does not produce a coherently argued selection of material. One is left with the impression that many of the texts/films discarded might have served the purpose better than the material actually included (e.g. *Henry VI* vs. *Othello*). The introduction refers to the genre of the "tragedy of revenge" in Early Modern drama, but it does not explain why *Othello* should be included in that category. A more systematic confrontation of Shakespeare's approach with earlier specimens of the genre would provide a sounder basis for comparison with contemporary revenge narratives.

As noted above, the thesis interprets revenge as a way of coping with a trauma which has threatened the character's sense of self. Within this framework, it makes a number of valid points in its reading of both Shakespeare and Tarantino. One concerns the layered nature of the traumatic injury in the narratives of revenge, which affects various aspects of a character's identity (e.g. Tamora's identity as a mother and a queen) and which correspondingly has to be addressed on each of those various levels; this represents an important structural point which organizes the individual readings. Additional core observations touch upon the mirroring or re-enactment of the traumatic event in the act of revenge and the element of "staging" revenge. However, the argument lacks backing by a more comprehensive representation of trauma theory in the introductory chapter.

In formal terms, the argument would benefit from a more systematic organization: for example, the subchapter on "Early Revenge Tragedies" in the Introduction in fact soon switches from a summary survey of the genre to a discussion of the concept of revenge and its psychological mechanisms. In terms of referencing, the thesis prefers working with direct



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quotations where often a paraphrase would provide the reader with a better idea of the original argument and its relation to the present debate. Moreover, a set of core statements tends to be invoked repeatedly, which is rather awkward. There are occasional errors in concord and phrasing (e.g. “Beatrix’s narrative, like most revenge stories, are tales of displacement”, 57; “Female revengers are not a new figure, 59”; “a way to contain the humiliation”, 35).

There are some specific problematic/unclear points that the defence might clarify:

- 1) The issue of Tamora’s cannibalism: Pp. 23-24 it is stated that “Tamora’s potential for death is so frightening that she is presented as a cannibal and indeed it also seems to reflect a deep-seated fear of males being devoured by women [...]”. Does the fact that this unwitting act of Tamora’s is a part of Titus’ revenge in any way affect that reading?
- 2) “One could make a case that Othello’s insecurities represent more broadly male insecurities when confronted with women” (p. 36) – how does Othello’s racial alterity, so consistently highlighted, fit in with this claim?
- 3) “Gertrude’s gender seems to mark her as irredeemable. Much like Tamora, Lavinia and Desdemona, once Gertrude has made a mistake in judgement the only conclusion to her character arc is death” (p. 43) – is this what marks the women out? In contrast to men? Could this be discussed?

I would like to ask the author to select one of these issues and comment on it at length.

In addition, there are some larger issues which I would like to ask the author to address in the defence:

- 1) With regard to the central focus of the thesis, I’d like to ask the author to illustrate, in a succinct fashion, the statement on p. 29, “The many ways in which [Tamora and Titus] oppose each other are accompanied by mirroring moments which create a symmetrical equilibrium throughout the play that remains unbroken even as both characters perish. An undercurrent of gendered differences permeates all of their interactions.” The thesis addresses both these aspects, the parallels and the differences, but it would be good to have these summed up, with perhaps a concluding word on what the author considers as more important: the parallels or the (gender) differences?
- 2) The thesis explores revenge in intersection with other issues: gender is privileged, but race/ethnicity is also featured. Broadly speaking, could it be said that revenge is regularly/dominantly linked with disempowerment in the plays/films analysed?

Conclusion: I recommend the thesis for defence and propose a preliminary grade of 3.

7 June 2023  
Mgr. Helena Znojemská, Ph.D.