

## The Body that Writes: Rape and Resistance of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*

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### Abstract

The violent rape of a woman is at the centre of Shakespeare's early tragedy 'Titus Andronicus'. The gang rape of Titus' daughter Lavinia unsettles our civilized sensibility in terms of its brutality and raises questions regarding rape's appropriation in socio-cultural space. The play shows, as I argue here, how the violated body of Lavinia has become a site of contestation representing a struggle between Roman patriarchy's attempted construction of narrative of shame and Lavinia's courageous rebuttal. Lavinia's subversion of this strategy of gender stratification by speaking through language of silence and then using writing as performance, shows a rape victim's regaining of her lost self. The narrative of rape and revenge thus turns into a narrative of resistance when more than the act of violation it is the consequence of violation of the body and the resultant trauma which is highlighted. This paper further shows that an environment that makes it shameful to speak of rape, disallows a critique of rape and the culture that sustains it. I conclude by suggesting that the death of Lavinia, even after registering her protest, bursts forth the state of crafty amnesia of a society which still is befuddled on the issue of appropriating rape both culturally and psychologically.

**Keywords:** Rape, patriarchy, gender-construction, protest, befuddlement

*And that deep torture may be call'd a hell,  
When more is felt than one hath power to tell.*

—Shakespeare, "The Rape of Lucrece"

Rape is the centerpiece of Shakespeare's fictional history of Rome in *Titus Andronicus*. The violent rape of Titus' daughter Lavinia unsettles our civilized sensibility in terms of its brutality and raises questions regarding construction of identity of a rape victim and its appropriation in the early Roman political culture. References to legendary rape stories of Philomela, Lucrece, and Virginus are used as ready reckoner in understanding motives of

characters in association with actions they are involved in. However, the basic narrative structure of *Titus Andronicus* is patterned on Ovid's version of the tragic tale of Philomel as occurs in the *Metamorphosis*, book 13, which Shakespeare replenishes situating rape and mutilation of Lavinia which is the outcome of Titus' decision of sacrificing Goth Queen Tamora's eldest son.

The motif of rape is not rare to find in Shakespearean canon. He deals with the attempted rape in the final scene of *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, remarkable rape in *Cymbeline* where Iachimo fantasizes over the sleeping body of Imogen; rape threat in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or verbal rape in the brothel of *Pericles*. But rape of Lavinia, it seems, surpasses all instances of violation of women's body in terms of brutality, for Chiron and Demetrius, two sons of Goth queen Tamora, not only rape her but cut off her hands, and cut out her tongue. Moreover, Chiron and Demetrius do not stop there but start taunting her in the aftermath of rape:

DEMETRIUS: So now go to tell, and if thy tongue can speak,  
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON: Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,  
And if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe  
(2.4.1-4)

"They use language", as Alexander Leggatt (2005) says, "to tell Lavinia she will never use language again"(8). For Lavinia her silence has become more eloquent than words and endowed her with a rare courage to chalk out strategy of resistance. If for Goth brothers rape is synonymous with expression of their power, what it means for Lavinia is "beyond language, beyond imagining"(Leggatt 2005,8). However, in *Titus Andronicus*, rape is not merely an act of sexual gratification, but a political ploy of raking revenge on the male Andronici. As Pascale Aebischer (2004, 25) says:

The rapists double intention of satisfying sexual desire and wreaking revenge on the male Andronici prefigures late twentieth-century debates about whether rape is an expression of sexual desire or power, showing it to be an effect of both: a sexualized technique of warfare. Rape in Shakespeare's tragedy is thus both personal and

political, a claiming of the women's body as a sexualized enemy territory to be conquered.

It is thus an early instance of women's body fraught with political dynamics of war among rival groups which exposes strategic use of women's body for war-time bargain. Here rape has put Lavinia's identity into crisis. What is she now? How will she negotiate with her new identity as a rape victim? What will be society's point of observation on this crime? To get proper answer to these questions we must be the witness to commotions that are formed in the network of relationships that form the community of her family because of Lavinia's self styled fabrication of her personality.

We notice here, how against an environment which makes it shameful to speak of rape, Lavinia subverts the attempted fashioning of her persona as a hapless victim of sexual atrocity by 'speaking' through her silence and saves herself from falling prey to conventional rape narrative where the victim internalizes the gendered construction of her identity as a shame object. Her silence, as I argue here, emerges as the most potent weapon of spontaneous resistance acting as an opposing force against a dominating culture which facilitates disappearance of subjects of sexual atrocities from the annals of dominant social narrative.

Rape of Lavinia cannot be viewed as a separate incident of torture but a part of ongoing feud between the Goths and the Romans. The root of the calamity is ingrained in an event that occurs in the play's opening scene. Having lost twenty-one of his twenty-five sons in battle Titus prepares for the burial of the last two sons that provides as part of the ritual the sacrifice of Alarbus, the oldest son of Tamora, Queen of the Goths, ignoring the desperate pleading of the mother. Thus we get a report from Lucius that – 'we have performed/Our Roman rites: Alabus's limbs are lopped/And entrails feed the sacrificing fire'(1.1.145-7). This initiates the revenge mechanism that leads to the rape of Lavinia — the sacrificial scapegoat. As recompense to this personal loss of the murder of her son in the name of the ritual, Tamora plans not to murder Titus' son, nor even that of a daughter, but rather a daughter's rape and mutilation. Against a patriarchal silhouette of the play the incident of brutal violation of Lavinia's body takes the centre stage offering a scope to reviewing of women's role in Rome's sexual politics.

Regarding the nature and scope of rape Claudia Card (1996, 7) writes:

If there is one set of fundamental functions of rape', writes "it is to display, communicate and produce or maintain *dominance* which is both enjoyed for its own sake and used for such ulterior ends as exploitation, expulsion, dispersion, murder. Acts of forcible rape, like other instances of torture, communicate dominance by removing our control over what enters and impinges on our bodies.

In war torn situation the victim's body becomes a site of contestation provoking us to read other resonances of this biological act of forceful intrusion. In times of communal conflicts and war, rape produces, as Raphaëlle Branche (2012,4) says: "a relationship of inequality between two kinds of men: those who asserts their physical and social virility by committing the assault and those for whom this same act represents a symbolic castration owing to their inability to protect their wives, sisters or mothers".

Tamora's decision to use rape as a means of revenge is thus aimed for two purposes: first, raping the daughter of Roman emperor will demonstrate the power of Goth as an ethnic group to Romans, who always considered them as "barbarous Goths"(1.1.28), and second, to expose the inability of the male kin of the victim to defend her honour. Together, it is a disgrace for Lavinia's male kin to have a raped victim as a member of the family. In the play Lavinia's worth resides in her exchange value as a virgin daughter. She is symbolically important to Roman patriarchy, she is an emblem of what Joplin calls "sacralized chastity", she is "the sign of her father's or husband's political power"—the power of male kin to control women's sexual desire and reproductive power (qtd. in Kahn 1997,49). Rape of Lavinia thus causes a rupture to Roman *virtus*, and purity which Titus vainly attempts to restore by committing the act of filicide. Titus invokes the story Virginia and Apius (5.3.34-52) in justifying the act of killing and feels that he has "a thousand times more cause than he /To do this outrage" (5.3.50-51).

The act of rape transgressed the boundaries of female body of Lavinia, polluting it to such a degree as to make it culturally impure for the Roman family. Lavinia's body becomes a site of two contrary motifs. In reality her violated body bears the testimony of brutal torture of Goth brothers, and symbolically, her raped body represents contamination of Roman body-politic. Against such circumstances Lavinia embodies the risk of attempting to create her own narrative of resistance which aims at subverting the conventional notion of valorizing chastity and purity as

accepted face of women's agency. The narrative of purity and pollution, which functions with its assorted covert cultural and linguistic tools, has been overtly exposed and unraveled by the actions and silence of post-rape Lavinia, which even the kin of her family found difficult to appropriate.

To present the most violent rape scene of his plays, Shakespeare has chosen an outdoor setting--- a countryside which is rhetorically conjured into existence by Tamora. It is a place where nature is "a barren detested vale", and "the trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean", where "never shines the Sun, here nothing breeds"; here "a thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes, / ten thousand swelling toads" would make "fearful and confused cries" (2.3.93-103)". Such a description of the nature along with Aron's tutorial on rape aimed for Tamora's sons Demetrius and Chiron, invest the scene with a figurative potential for carrying out acts of torture. To add upon the symbolic resonance of the impending brutal rape of Lavinia, an actual murder is committed when two Goth brothers stab Bassianus and throw him in the pit and then make arrangement "to make his dead trunk pillow to our lust" (2.3.130), while the mother as an onlooker encourages her sons to outrage Lavinia's modesty:

Away with her and use her as you will  
The worse to her, the better loved of me.  
(2.3.66-67)

The real rape is kept hidden from audience's sight only to project its symbolic potency as a crime and atrocity committed against Mother Nature. The "abhorred pit" (2.3.98) which is the epicenter of the atrocity committed against Lavinia, is described by two sons of Titus, as symbol of female genitalia:

What subtle hole is this,  
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,  
Upon whose eaves are drops of new shed blood  
As fresh as morning dew distilled on flowers?  
(2.2.198-201)

This deliberate alignment of the hole with female genitalia with 'new shed blood' cast the hole specifically in terms of rape of a virgin. The brutality of rape is increased by a successive use of words and phrases by the perpetrators comparing Lavinia's body like an edible commodity, "a cut

loaf" (2.1.87), a bread to be "snatch[ed]" (2.1.95), constituting verbal rape a rehearsal for the actual act, a ploy to incite sexual fantasy. Demetrius perpetuates the image when he taunts Lavinia as "the corn" (2.3.123) to be harvested, and Tamora calls her "the honey we desire" (2.3.131). In Greco-Roman culture as Coppelia Kahn (1997, 50) by referring to Page DuBois (1988, 97) says, the virgin daughter's womb was considered as prized treasure of her father to be guarded. This "thesaurization"—the representation of female body as vase, oven, and temple-enclosure—is put at stake, in case of Lavinia, by the perpetrators' use of language of sexual intimidation. Her partly consumed and therefore polluted married life provokes Tamora to use the rape intending to "deflower" (2.2.191) this 'virgin' daughter. Lavinia's body thus becomes a site of severe violation of her feminine exclusivity, "The virginal daughters' fertility is cut off at a womb-like place that associates rape and murder with the maternal" (Kahn 1997, 54).

The visual availability of her raped body, first to Marcus, then to Titus and others and finally to audience, ironically inverts her traumatized mental state as rape victim, in to a public domain where outer world inverts their erotic desire in to her already battered body. Ironically, it is the rape victim (rather than the offenders) who has to pass through an ordeal of shame and humiliation—a second rape—in a patriarchal tradition where the combination of political and the erotic devours the feminine in to the dreaded pit. After rape Marcus' first response after the discovery of hemorrhaging dismembered body of Lavinia surprises us:

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.  
 But, sure, some Tereus hath deflowered thee,  
 And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue.

(2.4.21-26)

This aesthetic appraisal of tragic fate of Lavinia with reference to classical precedents, I think, indicates asadomasochistic pervert pleasure that male folk may derive from a wounded female body lacerating blood. The use of the word 'river', with its alternative meaning "course", as

Lousie Noble (2003,695) suggests, has important semiotic implications here, meaning flow or flux; “courses” is frequently used in early modern English as an alternative to “menses”. Thus Lavinia presents “a spectacle of female bodily flow, of vaginal blood, of menstruation...”(697). Such problematic allegorization of Lavinia in the play text shows how Lavinia’s status as a victim of brutality is subsumed in the rhetoric of fantasy expressed in tainted speech leading to the complete erasure of the rape victim from contemporary Roman cultural praxis. This remind us the prevalence of the long legacy in art and literature to fetishize the body of the enraptured woman as at once terrible and titillating, both visible and yet beyond comprehension. *Titus Andronicus* thus marks not just Lavinia’s rape but the rape’s very disappearance one of the central subjects of its political critique.

When rape forcibly prepares the ground for her disappearance from the narrative of chastity and purity, Lavinia serves as a figure that is resistant to disappearance and embodies to create a narrative of resistance with multiple resonances. Firstly, she gathers up a rare courage to recover her vitiated body showing ways to woven out a separate space to rehabilitate a rape victim in a patriarchal cultural matrix which always treated such victim as ‘other’; and secondly, by reinterpreting the mythical rape narratives she shows how the same texts can be used as weapons of social change, with a new reading. Her brutalized body thus is thus invested with agency and her silence most eloquently calibrates counter-narrative of violation of femininity as it subverts rape scripts.

In his book *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare’s Open Silences* (1985), Philip McGuire concerns himself with the role and moments of silence of the characters, whether deliberate or otherwise, and their possible interpretations having bearing on the meaning of the play:

An open silence is one whose precise meanings and effects, because they cannot be determined by analysis of the words of the play texts, must be established by non-verbal, extratextual features of the play that emerge only in performance. (xv)

In this way Shakespeare’s open silence indicates moments when the playwright makes actors and directors as “virtual cocreators with him, to employ their power to fulfill the process that he began and framed but did not complete” (xx). The reference of off-stage rape in the play-text gains its

full meaning in performance when the victim's body is kept before the audience's eyes for six scenes. Such a prolonged presence unsettles male Andronici whose desperation to interpret Lavinia's silence with their own voice and project their own meanings to her gestures, seems to be guided more by an urgency to include a rape victim into society's patriarchal framework than expression of genuine sympathy for her. Marcus first offers to speak – "shall I speak for thee?" (2.4.33), and Titus speaks for her declaring "she says she drinks no other drinks but tears" (3.2.37", stressing on her docility. Lavinia has two options open to her: either to accept the interpretation of her father or to improvise a new means of communication with which she will be able to place herself outside the dominant narrative. Lavinia's rebuttal begins when she chooses the second option as she understands the need to speak out against a calibrated conspiracy for silencing her voice.

The persistent invocation of literary precedents and putting Lavinia within the confines of such precedents are the ways by which the male folk of Lavinia's family want to inscribe her in the conventional receptive tradition of the rape victims in the society. Looking to the ravaged body of Lavinia Marcus exclaimed:

But, sure, some Tereus hath deflowered thee,  
And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue.  
(2.4.25-26)

And again,

Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue  
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind:  
But lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee;  
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off  
That could have better sewed than Philomel.  
(3.1.38-43)

Titus also joins the gang when he said:

Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised sweet girl.  
Ravished and wronged as Philomela was?  
(4.1.51-52)

Or making connection to Lucrece:

Or slunk not Saturnine, as Tarquinerst,

That left the camp to sin in Lucrece' bed?

(4.1.63-64)

Lavinia's scheme of resistance also includes an attempt to thwart the Andronici's scheme of treating a rape victim in line with conventional mythical anecdotes of rape. Against the attempted homogenization of rape victims Lavinia's aim is to highlight her own agony and trauma as a case pertinent enough to draw special attention in terms of its severity.

Lavinia's protest gets final shape when she recovers language through writing and attempts scripting a counter narrative against shame-culture by which she resists her immediate family members' attempted ventriloquism to define her in terms of false notion of honour. In Act.4 Scene 1 we confront a transformed Lavinia. No longer kneeling and hiding her violated body, she chases her nephew and seizes a book from him which is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and turns to the tale of Philomel to drive her message home. Titus, who earlier extracted meaning from the medium which is her daughter's ravished body, now gets the direct message: "And rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy" (4.1.49). In this shifting role of Lavinia's body as the source of production of different meanings, we notice a wretched ordeal through which a rape victim has to pass through in reclaiming her body. Lavinia here is trapped in a state of, as Coppelia Kahn (1997) notes: "cultural double bind of women, who must either speak in the language of the fathers or improvise some other means of communication in its interstices"(61). But what is interesting to notice, is the ability of Lavinia to revert her apparent state of bondage by enticing an interpretative possibility of translation and semiotic appropriation of the Latin word of rape at a pivotal moment of the play through problematic mediation of various agencies.

Lavinia, does finally manage to write the Latin word for rape—*stuprum*-- in the sand holding her staff between her teeth and guiding it with her stumps but the meaning of the exercise thrives with possibilities of alternative meanings vindicating the ability of Lavinia to fight back. She writes "*Stuprum*, Chiron, Demetrius" (4.1.78) with the help of the stick but Shakespeare's decision of not using the English "rape" or the Latin "raptus," but *stuprum* must be a part of his greater design in fashioning the character of Lavinia as a rebel. In this regard it is pertinent to refer to Emily Detmer-Goebel's (2001) full exploration of the importance of this Latin term. She shows how the semantic value for Latin term is so much greater than its vernacular counterpart.

The archaic notion of *stuprum* seems to have been one pollution, so that the victim was irreparably tainted:

Interestingly, when Lavinia writes “Stuprum” in the sand, she uses the term for rape not found in Philomela’s story. According to the *Aconcordance of Ovid*, this term for unchastity (possibly through rape, in the context of the fable) is used only once in *Metamorphoses*, in book 2, the story of Callisto. Callisto, a member of Diana’s chaste group of women, was raped by Jove, who had assumed the form of Diana. Callisto does not tell any one of her rape, but her “uncleanliness” is revealed by her pregnancy. With this unquestionable evidence of the loss of her chastity, she is driven from Diana’s group. As the story goes, Juno, the wife of the rapist, becomes enraged by the injury done to her bed, and calls Callisto “Stupfi” as is calling her whore”. Early modern Latin-English dictionaries do indeed define “Stuprum” as rape. Yet in a play that examines the use of the English term “rape”, Shakespeare’s use of “stuprum” rather than “raptus” calls the readers’ attention to yet another Ovidian rape and allows us to surmise that Lavinia does more than identify the crime. Lavinia’s “Stuprum” is suggestive not only of her sense of shame; it also testifies to the consequence of her defilement. (86)

This relative importance to the “consequence of her defilement” – the taunting, jarring, sympathizing – what a rape victim has to undergo in a society, speaks volumes about the social and cultural conditions under which a majority of rape victims live their lives.

It is noteworthy that Lavinia’s decision to reveal the names of the perpetrators further shows her capacity of resistance. This constitutes an implicit rejection of ‘shame culture’ and prioritization of ‘guilt culture’. According to cultural anthropologists, the rape victim’s physical condition determines her status and in which regardless of victim’s refusal to collaborate in the rape her contamination can only be removed by death (cited in Aebischer 2004, 54). However, in ‘guilt

culture', Carolyn Williams explains, revealing the identity of the rapists and making clear that the victim was not complicit in the act should warrant their punishment and her survival. Within guilt culture attention is focused "on the victim's mind. Her utterance is crucially important...her ability to tell story afterwards vindicates her honour" (Aebischer 2004,55). Lavinia's desperation to 'speak' and reveal the names of the perpetrators, argues Aebischer (2004, 54), thus confirms the strategic shifting of her position from 'shame culture' to 'guilt culture' to attain revenge.

But the last scene perplexes us when Lavinia is killed by her father. This raises important questions regarding the fate of the women who, breaking the bounds of silence, come forward to reveal stories of torture. Lavinia enters the last scene veiled, making her less readable than ever. Titus, before killing her, links her condition with his:

Die, die Lavinia, and thy shame with thee  
And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die

(5.3.45-46)

Silence, we saw gave her extraordinary power to command attention and concern. So long as that silence was unbroken so too was the concentration of the family on her. when she recovers language they turn to avenging her (Leggatt 2005,26). Such an ending of the play, while it does not take an iota of Lavinia's refutation of shame culture for rape victim, indeed exposes the difficulty one victim of male atrocity has to fight with in making the act public. Her last minute betrayal by her father and her murder, as Aebischer (2004) opines, "can then be read as the culmination of the silencing and violent disciplining of her transgressed body that began with her rape and dismemberment (57)". Through her sacrifice Lavinia exposes the faulty social structure which, in the name of false notion of honour and shame, always suppress dissident self-expressive feminine voices who have been victims of physical torture and mutilation.

Lavinia's death shows how a violated body is culturally positioned to receive the ignominy of society which is yet to negotiate with the act of rape. The play thus explores the trajectories of rape's after life in an environment which makes it shameful to speak of rape, disallows a critique of rape and the culture that sustains it. Rape of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* stresses the need for

finding points of convergence between early modern text and wider cultural appropriation which reformulates society's state of crafty amnesia while building opinion on this heinous act of atrocity.

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