

Titus Andronicus and Tamora: Revenge and “The Law of the Boomerang”

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Abstract Almost everyone has heard the name William Shakespeare. Many have read his plays, sonnets, and all his creations that are so valuable and important, interesting and comprehensive. Which topic is chosen by this or that person, which they consider most important, already depends on the reader, their thinking, views, and ideas. The topic of this research is Titus Andronicus. Why choose this play? Other plays that are no less interesting caught my attention, but in Titus Andronicus, we can see something that could be judged. At all times, especially in ancient times, revenge led to many conflicts or wars. Brother killed brother for revenge; no one trusted anyone. Revenge is the main focus of this research. The “law of the boomerang” says it all. This research explores the justification of the revenge of the characters, Tamora and Titus, and their ruthless behavior. Even today, we can see revenge in its various forms but with less cruelty, since the law deters people from similar conduct.

Keywords: Revenge, ruthless behavior, Tamora, Titus, law of the boomerang, Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare

Introduction

Shakespeare is a glorious and beloved writer for many, but not everyone understands him. Not everyone understands his words correctly. Many do not know what could have been hidden behind the author’s words, what the author wanted to say to us, and on which key topics we should focus. We read his creations, relying on various sources, but often blindly. So we do not understand its exact meaning and no more extended focus on how credible or acceptable it is even to us. The poet has always been, is, and always will be, the subject of discussion and difference of opinion. Many opinions have been expressed about him, a lot of research has been done, some may have evaluated his creations correctly, and some may have not. Many of his poems stand out and are much more famous than the others, such as Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, And each of them has its own meaning. The central theme of this research is revenge, but cruel revenge. Not verbal, but physical. We have a specific question that needs to be answered. Why

did Shakespeare write a play with such ruthless characters? We might get an answer from the author himself, which would be convincing, but since that is impossible, each reader must try to find a solution for themselves. We also find that the deeper we study Shakespeare and his creations, the more questions arise.

The Research Question

Is the behavior of Tamora and Titus justified? This question has been the subject of the attention of many critics, and there are differences of opinion everywhere.

Methods

When researching any topic, great attention is paid to the method. It can be said that the key is precisely the method and it must be appropriately selected and thought out. It is essential to know what techniques the author uses, what sources he uses, how well-chosen the sources are, whether he has selected the right approach, and how valuable his results are. For proper understanding and evaluation of the topic, research requires deep thinking and accurate perception of

the question, which will inevitably lead to the desired result since the review has the most incredible power. The Internet is also a helpful resource, where we find assessments in many different languages which provide valuable material. It is also an essential fact that Shakespeare wrote in Middle English, which is not easy to understand, especially for non-English readers. The sources help us find a modern version to make the play more understandable. This author found the most helpful approach to be a “close reading,” which allows us to formulate thoughts correctly, analyze them accurately, to single out key facts. Brainstorming can also discover things that no one has thought or written about.

Results

The Life and Times of William Shakespeare

Holderness writes, “...we do not know exactly (only approximately) when he was born; where, when or even if he went to school; what he was like as a child; if his family was very poor, or reasonably well off. We do not know if he worked for his father as a young man or did something else; what happened to him in the ‘lost years,’ how he became an actor and writer; or if he stayed in London to escape his family in Stratford. We don’t know for sure if he had to get married; if he loved his wife; if he ever lived anywhere but Stratford and London; if he had sexual relations with other women or men; if he was religious, and if so of what persuasion; if he loved his children; how much he cared about his writing; We know when and where he died, but not what he died from. We know nothing certain about the relationship between his writing and his life. We do not know what he believed in; what he cared about; what he thought about anything at all” (Holderness, 2011, p. 3).

He goes on to say that “ ‘A shilling life,’ as W. H. Auden said, ‘will give you all the facts,’ but is likely to omit what biography wants most of all to know, the interior life, the secrets of the private man: what he believed, how he felt, whom he loved. If we set aside the idea that the plays and poems are autobiographical, the Shakespeare

biography consists entirely of historical records. But as biographer Katherine Duncan-Jones admits, historical records deal only with public events, social interactions of law and property, baptisms, and burials. Surviving documents don’t take us very far in answering the questions that many post-Romantic readers may want to ask – did he love his wife? Who was ‘the dark lady’? What was his religious position, if any? Or his overall vision of the world?” (Holderness, 2011, p. 3).

William Shakespeare and Titus Andronicus

The central theme of this research is revenge and whether the behavior of Tamora and Titus is justifiable. Many readers seem to think the facts are apparent; however, Shakespeare is not always accustomed to writing so plainly. He does not give us the finished material but allows us to think about the finale, its significance, and possible options. Titus Andronicus is a bloody play that is not well known, perhaps because of the brutally cruel story. The main motive within this play is revenge, the extent to which a heinous crime is justified, and then, because of this crime, whether the revenge chosen by the victim and its specific form is also justified.

The first question that may come to mind is whether revenge is acceptable. In his commentary *Of Revenge*, Francis Bacon contends that “Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it offends only the law; but the revenge for that wrong goes past the law” (Bacon, 1561-1626).

Revenge is a phenomenon that both fascinates us and leaves us fearful. At some moment in our lives, we may all have felt the primal urge to get even when harmed. The passion of that moment makes revenge feel like the right thing to do. It is not only when we are hurt personally that revenge feels like the righteous response; we vicariously experience that virtuous feeling when others are harmed or when swift vengeance is dealt with the perpetrator of harm (Bies & Tripp, 1998a; Jacoby, 1983).

But we are also afraid of revenge. We fear the uncontrollable power of the passion for revenge (Tripp & Bies, 1997) when such emotions can cause events to escalate out of control, as in a feud or physical violence (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Cropanzano, 2001).

When considering the behavior of Tamora and Titus, it is essential to know their natures: what kind of person each of them was and how cruel they could be. Initially, the demand for revenge was sparked by Titus, who killed the son of the Gothic Queen as a sacrifice for his many sons who had died in the war. When describing the character of Titus, it is impossible to avoid his cruel behaviors. He later killed his own child, so, surprisingly, he regretted the loss of another's child. He resorts to cannibalism when he gives a mother the flesh of her own children to eat. What should have caused such a ruthless nature in Titus? Many readers may think that killing people in the war made him believe that taking a human life is nothing, a completely normal occurrence. However, this author does not believe this opinion would not be justified. The main reason one might think is that he was born that way. A cruel nature follows a person from birth to childhood and shows itself when he deems it necessary or compelled to act on it. "Public self is a conditioned construct of the inner psychological self." (Sigmund Freud, n.d.). Is it possible that Titus did not have a healthy childhood and was not loved, which is crucial in a child's upbringing? Obviously, his behavior is unjustified, and we cannot find any explanation, but we must also note that external factors significantly impact people. It is necessary to consider many details when painting a person's psychological portrait. In doing so, it may be possible to come to the correct conclusion, although it is often difficult to understand human nature because it is so complex, and its study can take the rest of our lives.

What about Tamora? How can we characterize her? An unhappy mother, a strong, intelligent woman, a fighter for justice, but just as ruthless as Titus. She schemes to have Titus' two

sons falsely accused of murder and beheaded. She urges her two sons to rape Titus' daughter and cut off her hands and tongue. Most of us cannot justify her behavior. Revenge can sometimes be called sweet but not justified. Inflicting the same cruelty someone else did to you cannot be justified. This is where the law of the boomerang comes into play. "...According to the law of the boomerang, the harder and faster you throw something, the faster and more violently it comes back to hit you" (Khan, 2016). The same happened to Tamora, most brutally. Titus kills her two sons and has their flesh served to her in a meat pie. Can there be anything more sadistic than this? Life retaliates against everyone - while Tamora is seeking revenge, she too suffers a terrible fate that ultimately costs her life.

We should also consider how Shakespeare characterized women and his attitude towards them. What do we see in Tamora's character? Strength, a courageous nature, the ability to deceive, self-sacrifice for the sake of her children. What guarantee did the Gothic Queen have that she would survive this affair? This is where Shakespeare's attitude comes into play. For more persuasiveness, let us take the example of *The Merchant of Venice*, where the savior of a man is a woman, Portia. Shakespeare portrays women as powerful beings, though sometimes doomed to injustice.

The modern American/British poet T.S. Eliot challenged *Titus Andronicus*. He found the play unworthy of critical combat since he merely pronounced it "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (Kerrigan, 1998, p. 195) and left it to die from the blow. Edward Ravenscroft, the seventeenth-century playwright who loosed the rumor that Shakespeare only "gave some master touches" to work not his own, would have agreed: he called it, simply, "a heap of Rubbish." It has since taken the play some time to recover from the embarrassment critics felt when faced with the possibility of considering it seriously. Peter Brook's 1955 Stratford production, with Laurence Olivier as Titus, did much to revive

critical interest, and since then, it has enjoyed on-and-off popularity (Willbern, 1978, p. 159).

When discussing Titus Andronicus, it is impossible not to focus on the complexity of the play and its real meaning. How should the dismembered body parts in Titus Andronicus be understood? The severed hands, heads, and tongues have always had an ambiguous status in the play's critical and theatrical reception. Are they perceived as grotesque or abstract, engaging or distancing, dramatically pivotal or superfluous? An essay by Albert H. Tricomi, published in 2009, "The Aesthetics of Mutilation in Titus Andronicus," precipitated intense interest in the play. In recent times the violence of the play has led to a psychoanalytic interpretation that equates dismemberment to castration. Psychoanalysis focuses on individual motive and ethical inquiry, into which the stage mutilation continues to draw its audiences" (Rowe, 1994).

"See how with signs and tokens she can scowl." At her urging, Tamora's sons, Demetrius and Chiron, have just raped and mutilated Titus's daughter, Lavinia. (II, iv, 5). We are directed to observe the body, seen and unseen, with all its violations: "Enter...Lavinia, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravish'd." Looking at this once-desirable woman, whom they have now changed into an object of wonder and horror, Demetrius invents a new word for the state she embodies: scowl. Lavinia's "signs" are more than scowls or scolds, while her "tokens" differ from scowls or scrolls. He locates an area of language that is not spoken, not written, not syntactical, and yet not meaningless.

One of these scowls displays a brilliant, bizarre emblem of the will to speak and ultimately of the choice to write. Lavinia finds a new tongue to replace the one she has lost when her father directs her: "Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth" (III, i). "Contained in this scowl-emblem of the father's hand as tongue in the daughter's mouth are ideas about the patriarchal nature of language (her tongue is her

father), about the equivalence between speaking (tongue) and doing (hand), and about writing (what the hand does) as a substitute for speaking..." (Fawcett, 1983, p. 261).

Recall the research question: Is the behavior of Tamora and Titus justified? From the sources reviewed above, given the brutal reality that each character has shown, we reiterate the view that their behavior brings nothing but cruelty and death to innocent people. How can we justify the behavior of Tamora and Titus? We must think that their caprice caused so much death and destruction, which started with Titus's behavior. Tamora is killed by Titus Andronicus, who Tamora's husband, Saturninus, then kills. Saturninus will be killed by the son of Titus, Lucius. A circle of revenge where the winner again remains on the side of Andronicus, an unfair reality that could have been avoided from the beginning, though that's the complexity.

A mother seeking revenge for the deaths of all her sons is scorned:

LUCIUS (the sole remaining son of Titus)

Some loving friends convey the Emperor hence

And give him burial in his father's grave.

My father and Lavinia shall forthwith

Be closèd in our household's monument.

As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora,

No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed;

No mournful bell shall ring her burial;

But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey.

Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,

And being dead, let birds on her take pity

They exit, carrying the dead bodies. (V.iii).

It is also remarkable how much Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, resembles Titus Andronicus. They both killed each other's children, and both killed their own children. Titus

kills his daughter; Tamora gets rid of her newborn son because he was fathered by Aaron the Moor, her lover, and because he was dark-skinned. Are they not matched in cruelty?

In criticism about racial issues in *Titus Andronicus*, blackness has usually been the focus, mainly because it is embodied in Aaron the Moor. Whiteness remains in the background, as Tamora has attracted much less attention. Nonetheless, the racial issues she raises are not any less interesting. If Aaron is coded as black, Tamora is represented as hyperwhite. Her husband, himself a Roman, singled her out and married her for her “hue.” Within the racial thinking of the time, the adulterous liaison between Aaron and Tamora that produces an illegitimate baby appears as a sort of enhanced miscegenation, ultra-black crossed with ultra-white (Royster, 2000, p. 432).

Discussion

The research raised various questions about whether the behavior of Titus and Tamora could be justified. The sources used and their authors emphasize complexity and cruelty. This author’s research supports the idea that the answer should be no. Shakespeare himself tells us nothing about whether he considers the actions of these two characters justifiable. Shakespeare entrusts the mind and imagination of the reader with the decision about the finale to make the correct conclusion from the episodes of this play. We must also remember that in Shakespeare’s work, as in Chaucer, we find irony even in tragedy. *Titus Andronicus* is an excellent example of this. Two people fight for justice and revenge, but both die, so they cannot reach their goals but, on the contrary, merely get more wounds. Each reader’s opinion may differ, since it depends on their consciousness, perception, logical assessment, and understanding of the issue.

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Biographical Note



Anano Makhshvili is 23-years old and lives in Gori, Georgia. She graduated from Gori State University with a Bachelor's Degree in English Philology. She will soon begin her second year of a Master's Degree program in Anglistics at Gori State University. Anano found her course in Shakespeare interesting and exciting and was especially attracted to the story of revenge in Titus Andronicus. She hopes her research paper will interest other readers.