

“WHEN WILL THIS FEARFUL SLUMBER HAVE AN END?”

REPRESENTATIONAL CHOICES IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TITUS ANDRONICUS* ON
TELEVISION AND FILM

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ABSTRACT: The article aims to discern the interpretative conceptions that underlie two filmic versions of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Jane Howell's 1985 production for the *BBC Shakespeare* television series is compared with Julie Taymor's 1999 feature film entitled *Titus*. Drawing on the concept of a “performance text” as postulated by Marco De Marinis, and also the term “scenography” employed by Dennis Kennedy to define the visual field of representation in theatrical performance, the two films are analysed as texts in their own right in an effort to eschew notions of “inherent” meaning in Shakespeare's writing. The chequered performance history of *Titus Andronicus* points to the representational challenges that its violent and visually disturbing content poses to directors, and the productions analysed here remain the two most prominent filmic versions of an arguably undervalued play. Comparisons are drawn between popular Elizabethan entertainments and the role of violence in twentieth-century society, indicating the theme of cyclical violence that is foregrounded by both directors. Some of the specific exigencies of televised Shakespeare are considered in opposition to those of the cinematic medium. Possible complications involved in translating Shakespeare from stage to screen are also discussed alongside an evaluation of the efforts made by the two directors to compensate for resultant performative losses. The now famous interpolation by Howell of positioning the boy character Young Lucius as a mediator between film and audience—appropriated and developed by Taymor—is assessed in terms of both its thematic implications and its potential to counteract the limitations of filmed Shakespeare.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare on Film; *Titus Andronicus*; Performance.

RESUMO: O presente artigo objetiva discernir os conceitos interpretativos por trás de duas versões fílmicas de *Titus Andronicus*, de Shakespeare. A produção de Jane Howell para a série televisiva *BBC Shakespeare*, de 1985, é comparada com o filme *Titus*, de Julie Taymor, de 1999. Partindo do conceito de *performance text*, conforme postulado por Marco de Marinis, e do termo *scenography*, utilizado por Dennis Kennedy para definir o campo visual de representação em produção teatral, os dois filmes são analisados como textos *per se*, de modo a evitar noções de significado “inerente” na obra de Shakespeare. A história inconstante de performance de *Titus Andronicus* denota os desafios representacionais que o seu conteúdo violento e visualmente perturbador oferece a diretores, e as produções aqui analisadas continuam sendo as versões fílmicas mais proeminentes de uma peça possivelmente subestimada. Fazem-se comparações entre atividades de entretenimento elizabetanas e o papel da violência na sociedade do século XX, indicando o tema de violência cíclica que é enfatizado por ambas as diretoras. Algumas das exigências específicas de Shakespeare para a televisão são consideradas em contraposição àquelas para o cinema. São discutidas também possíveis complicações envolvidas na tradução de Shakespeare do palco para a tela, bem como as tentativas de ambas as diretoras em compensar as perdas performáticas resultantes desse processo. A famosa interpolação de Howell ao posicionar o jovem personagem Young Lucius como mediador entre o filme e a audiência—apropriada e desenvolvida por Taymor—é avaliada tanto do ponto de vista de suas implicações temáticas quanto do seu potencial para contrapor as limitações de versões fílmicas de Shakespeare.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Shakespeare no cinema; *Titus Andronicus*; Performance.

This article examines the filmic representations of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* by directors Jane Howell (1985) and Julie Taymor (1999), and endeavours to draw conclusions about some of the interpretative conceptions that underlie each work. The aim is to foreground the merits of the films as texts to be analysed in their own right, unburdened by any search for “inherent” meaning in Shakespeare's writing. The specific exigencies of televised Shakespeare are compared with those pertaining to the more established cinematic medium in an effort to understand divergent representational choices. Attempts to bring *Titus Andronicus* to the screen, whether for television or the cinema, are of particular interest given the considerable challenge of representing to modern audiences the extreme violence that pervades the play, notoriously in the form of rape, murder, mutilation, and even cannibalism. Concerted attempts to distance *Titus Andronicus* from Shakespeare's legacy on account of gratuitous and abhorrent content began soon after the Restoration, and the play was shunned by subsequent generations (WELLS, 1998: 147, 182). The extensive resources given to both Howell and Taymor indicate the steady resurgence of interest in *Titus Andronicus* during the latter half of the twentieth century, following centuries of disrepute. Frank Kermode, in his introduction to the 1974 *Riverside Shakespeare* edition, commented that “there is a growing belief that the play has been unjustly despised” (KERMODE, 1974: 1019), and Howell's groundbreaking production would reach television audiences just over a decade later.

Titus Andronicus is commonly dated to 1593, representing Shakespeare's initial dramaturgical foray into the realm of tragedy.¹ Allegedly based on the story of a Roman general in the fourth century AD, the play espouses the conventions of the Elizabethan revenge tragedies exemplified by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Kermode underlines the significance of this point in Shakespeare's early career and in the wider context of Elizabethan drama: “[*Titus Andronicus*], though certainly the least of the

¹ E.g. the chronology presented in the *Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (BLAKEMORE EVANS, 1997: 79-80).

tragedies, illustrates the fantastic range of possibilities that were to be explored later. More immediately, it points the way from Kyd and Marlowe to *Hamlet*” (KERMODE, 1974: 1022). Given the contemporary Elizabethan fashions of revenge tragedies and bloodsports, it is no surprise that *Titus Andronicus* originally held mass appeal and is thought to have represented a great commercial success. Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men playing company was among several that competed with neighbouring animal-baiting houses and other lurid and lascivious entertainments on London's Bankside in a commercial environment that engendered excess.² In plotting the history of Renaissance tragedy, Robert Watson guards against a rush to judgement:

Before condemning the famous mayhem of Elizabethan tragedy as pathological [. . .] one must recall that violence has always been a selling point in commercial entertainments, and that Elizabethans were (necessarily) considerably less squeamish than modern Englishmen about many aspects of the human body, not just its violent abuse. (WATSON, 1990: 313)

In her own introduction to *Titus Andronicus*, Katharine Maus responds to retrospective aspersions cast on the play's reputation, noting how “the contrast between popular and elite culture was drawn differently in early modern England than it has been in later centuries.” As a revenge tragedy in the mould of Kyd, the play “taps into frustrations and ambivalences that must have accumulated in the hierarchical, deliberately inequitable social arrangements of early modern England” (MAUS, 1997: 371). As such, *Titus Andronicus* remains an important artefact of the developing English Renaissance drama, significant not only for its position in the Shakespeare canon, but

² “Bankside” is the term given to the district on the south bank of the Thames that was outside the jurisdiction of the City of London. During Shakespeare's career, the area was home to playhouses named the Rose, the Swan, and the Globe.

also for its enduring themes of violence and revenge. Stanley Wells summarises present-day attitudes to the much-maligned work: “If Shakespeare was ever 'of an age', it was in *Titus Andronicus*, but, given tactful handling, the play's scenes of suffering can still be powerful” (WELLS, 1998: 182). The play's weak performance history is in part attributable to the need for such “tactful handling,” as many modern directors have been deterred by the daunting challenge of presenting *Titus Andronicus* as anything more than a violent burlesque.³

For Shakespearean performance, the advent of the cinematic medium of representation in the twentieth century enabled a return to larger, popular audiences after a long history of elitist theatre production. The film industry witnessed the re-emergence of some of the controversial themes and violent scenes that had caused *Titus Andronicus* to linger in the performance wilderness for over a century,⁴ with Watson identifying a “common appetite for increasingly explicit gruesomeness in popular entertainments” that allows for the association of Elizabethan London with modern society (WATSON, 1990: 319). The concomitant moral platitudes related to the role of violence in society impinge upon all directors who bring Shakespearean tragedy – and *Titus Andronicus* in particular – to the big screen. In the case of televised Shakespeare, which reaches a yet wider audience directly in the family home, problems of representation are intensified. Such were the challenges faced by Howell and Taymor in their efforts to translate Shakespeare's most violent and viscerally disturbing tragedy for television and cinema respectively.

Taymor's 1999 feature film entitled *Titus*, starring Anthony Hopkins in the lead role, remains the most prominent cinematic interpretation of the play. It is a production that is clearly indebted to Howell's conception, which was realised in 1985 as *Titus*

³ “Burlesque” is defined as a “parody that ridicules some serious literary work by treating its solemn subject in an undignified style” (BALDICK, 2004: 31).

⁴ Wells states that there are no known performances of the play between 1725 and 1839 (WELLS, 1998: 182).

Andronicus became the last play in the Shakespeare canon to be brought to the small screen as part of the landmark *BBC Shakespeare* series. Although Howell's production drew on comparatively limited resources in financial and technological terms, many of its hallmarks are clearly identifiable in Taymor's big-budget rendering. The fundamental contrast between the works is the availability and use of space, in that the BBC production—in common with much of the *BBC Shakespeare* series—approaches “filmed theatre” as opposed to Taymor's more cinematic style. Howell's emphasis, lavish costumes and a versatile set notwithstanding, is very much on Shakespeare's language and its delivery, as the actors remain mostly still and the camera is in a fixed position. Taymor's approach prioritises movement and dynamism, with actors almost constantly moving and scenes characterised by cinematographic innovation and frequent cuts. In both cases it is well to consider the difficulties faced by the director in translating from stage to screen, described by Michèle Willems as “the specific problems attached to producing a Shakespeare play for a medium so different from that for which it was written and for the benefit of a public whose expectations and rapport with the play are so different from those of its original audience” (WILLEMS, 1994: 69-70).

From a theoretical perspective, it is instructive to remember that Shakespeare's dramatic work was always intended to be performed, and that every reading or performance of the extant printed text can constitute a new construction of meaning. Shakespeare's language is remarkable for its meaningful ambiguity that can be best exploited through performance, and the printed text itself is only the beginning of a complex process of meaning and interpretation that performance embodies. The notion of a “performance text,” as postulated by Marco De Marinis in *The Semiotics of Performance* (1993), underlines the potential significance of factors beyond the written word in shaping interpretations of the various units of discourse that can be considered as

“texts.”⁵ Theatrical or cinematic performances of a playscript are examples of such units of discourse, allowing De Marinis to conclude that “the units of theatrical production known as performances can be considered as texts, and can thus become the object of textual analysis” (DE MARINIS, 1993: 47). As such, the versions of *Titus Andronicus* offered by Howell and Taymor may be studied as texts in their own right, in terms of their interpretative conception of Shakespeare's play in performance. Such an approach enables an analysis of each performance text that is unburdened by any essentialist search for inherent meaning in Shakespeare's writing.

The semiotics of performance that De Marinis outlines includes the language and gestures of the actors but also the visual aspects of a production that have to be effectively combined with the spoken word in order to successfully realise any given conception of Shakespeare. Dennis Kennedy selects the term “scenography” to define the visual field of representation in theatrical performance, and it is a concept that also serves well when applied to the analysis of films and in the effort to regard a film or television production as a performance text of a dramatic work:

Of all the terms available, *scenography* is the one with the largest and most useful application, encompassing stage and costume design, lighting, the arrangement of the acting ground, the movement of the actors within it, and anything else proper to a production that an audience sees, including the interior architecture of the playhouse surrounding the stage: all the ocular aspects of the ludic space. (KENNEDY, 1996: 12)

⁵ De Marinis explains that “the term /text/ designates not only coherent and complete series of linguistic statements, whether oral or written, but also every unit of discourse, whether verbal, nonverbal, or mixed, that results from the coexistence of several codes [. . .] and possesses the constitutive prerequisites of completeness and coherence” (DE MARINIS, 1993: 47).

When substituting film set for the playhouse and also considering the role of the film camera, the importance of scenography in constructing interpretations of Shakespeare on screen becomes clear. Howell's *Titus* exemplifies the adaptability of Kennedy's concept across various media, since it is a televised production that espouses many theatrical techniques and which focuses primarily on the spoken word. Indeed, Willems asserts that "taken as a whole, the BBC series offers the original example of using a theatrical text as a film script with only minor changes, thus assuming that a visual medium can somehow accommodate an abundance of verbal signs" (WILLEMS, 1994: 74). However, the BBC productions fall short of genuine filmed theatre due to the notable absence of a collaborative and at times complicit live audience, which was among the most significant contributory factors to the successful Elizabethan drama. A more specific limitation of representing the theatrical mode of production on the television screen is the exclusive focus of the camera, which can fail to capture certain elements of the performance that a circumspect theatre audience could appreciate. In this sense the BBC production stands in stark contrast to Taymor's cinematic rendering, which exploits the scenography to consolidate its conception to a greater extent, and where the camera is the all-seeing eye. In such a work, everything that constitutes the *misé-en-scène* is carefully considered and the performance text is meticulously designed to be contained within the camera frame.⁶

In assessing the scenography of these two film productions, particularly the more radical offering by Taymor, a brief discussion of the play's ethos is apposite.⁷ Although set in Rome, *Titus Andronicus* may be said to lack the political and philosophical profundity of the later Roman tragedies such as *Julius Caesar*, with the setting almost incidental to the dominant theme of violence. Anachronisms such as "human sacrifice

⁶ The term "*misé-en-scène*" is used in cinema "for the combination of setting, lighting, acting, and costume, as distinct from camerawork and editing" (BALDICK, 2004: 158).

⁷ "Ethos" is defined as the "characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations" (**Oxford Dictionary of English**. 3rd ed. 2010).

and panther-hunting” also allow Kermode to comment that the play “offers, on the face of it, a very confused representation, with features drawn from different periods” (KERMODE, 1974: 1021). Taymor's film was shot in various locations including Rome and Croatia, and is notable for the almost disorientating multitude of places and epochs that it indicates. “Anachronism” is effectively a redundant term in relation to Taymor's conception, as she moves at breakneck speed between ancient Rome and the present day, between fascist inter-war Italy and the Balkans War. The overriding stylistic statement from Taymor appears to be that the themes of violence, recrimination, and revenge are cyclical and not particular to any time and place. In terms of set, Howell's production seems to take place resolutely in ancient Rome, with Willems offering the possible explanation that “the brief given by the BBC and its financiers, that the plays should be set in a period which Shakespeare would have recognized, did not encourage innovation or invention” (WILLEMS, 1994: 75). Nonetheless, some visual choices are not without reference to more contemporary fashions, such as the Goths that clearly recall the punk era of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Britain.

The “inconsistencies” of the setting in Taymor's film help to engender a sense of childish fantasy throughout and point to the most significant interpolation effected by both directors. Howell's extensive use of the boy character Young Lucius is a notable departure from Shakespeare as he does not appear in the play text until the end of Act 3, and Taymor has drawn from this innovation. In the BBC production, the involvement of the boy is foregrounded from the outset as the opening shot focuses closely on his face before he is shown participating in the ritual that takes place in honour of Titus's homecoming. The conspicuous, anachronistic spectacles he is wearing are far from an innocuous prop, as they imply that Young Lucius is seeing things differently from the other characters. The significance of his glasses in terms of providing an alternative perspective on events is reinforced through the intimate and contrived camera focus on

his face. The creation of such an implicative, intermediary character who straddles ancient Rome and modern audience is particularly effective in the context of what Maus calls a “world of collapsing distinctions” evoked by “the play's tendency to juxtapose opposites that turn out to have a great deal in common” (MAUS, 1997: 375). The director's own insistence on drawing associations between apparent opposites underlies her representational choices, as Howell draws attention to the parallels between Roman violence and modern society: “[. . .] the play is very like what is going on today. It is set at the end of the Roman Empire when the Goths were sacking Rome, but you can't shrug it off as some past barbaric age. People are still having their hands cut off. Women are still being raped. People are still being slaughtered” (HOWELL, qtd. in MAHER, 1988: 146).

Taymor's interpolation is similar but much more pronounced, as she initially locates the boy in a present-day kitchen playing with his toys. He arrives in the Roman setting of *Titus* by means of an imaginative timewarp or dream sensation, and when he touches his toy soldier in that alternative reality, the duplicity of his role is firmly established. The audience cannot be certain whether Young Lucius is within the narrative or not, and in fact he continues to function on both sides of this elusive divide. In the opening scene, his makeshift mask made out of a paper bag recalls a military helmet, and it is suggestive of the unreliability of events presented in the primary story as the entire action may be the subject of the child's playful imagination. Certainly the stylised movements of the soldiers in the Roman Colosseum would seem to recall the toys he was using on the “other side.” The suggestion that the story forms the subject matter of the boy's dream is consolidated by the wardrobe incongruities and varied settings which indicate multiple epochs in Taymor's rendering, but it is a concept firmly rooted in Howell's earlier production. In her article “Production Design in the BBC's *Titus Andronicus*,” Mary Z. Maher gives an account of the creative processes that she was

privy to as a guest of the producers. Maher confirms that “Howell's directorial concept was that the story could actually be the dream of Young Lucius [. . .] Howell's conception comes partly from her own son's experiences with nightmares at the age of nine, and partly from Titus' line at 2.1.251: 'When will this fearful slumber have an end?’” (MAHER, 1988: 144-5).⁸

Shakespeare's text supports the increased involvement of Young Lucius later in the film, as he has several lines of dialogue, but the decision from both directors to include the character so prominently from the beginning is conspicuous because he thereby represents and reaffirms audience complicity in on-screen events. In this sense, it is an interpolation that serves to partially counteract perhaps the most significant problem any director is faced with in translating Shakespeare from stage to screen, namely the loss of a present and responsive audience that helps to shape the theatrical performance. Indeed, the move to filmed Shakespeare only intensifies the performative loss already incurred when staging the plays in modern theatres, as one of the principal ingredients in the success of the Elizabethan playhouse was the proximity of actor to audience in what J. L. Styan has called “an act of creative collaboration” (STYAN, 1967: 17). Howell's bold move to redress the distancing of her television audience from the action, later adopted and developed by Taymor, earned the praise of Stanley Wells in an initial review of the *BBC Shakespeare* series:

Jane Howell adds no lines to the role, but to make the boy a minor participant in many of the scenes in which he does not speak is a brilliant stroke. His wordless reactions to the often bloody deeds form a welcome contrast to the heavily verbalized responses of many of the other characters. His grave compassion reflects and

⁸ This quotation from *Titus Andronicus* is erroneously cited as appearing at 2.1.251; the line is found at 3.1.251.

directs our response: he is the viewer on the other side of the screen. (WELLS, 1988: 313)

Audience perspective in both films is mediated throughout by the impressions of Young Lucius, and the climactic banquet scene is rendered all the more shocking because the boy who had been so innocently passive at the outset is now participating in excessive and grotesque violence. Again, in the case of Taymor's film, this is an indication of the cyclical inevitability of violence and destruction that she is attempting to foreground. More specifically, her concern is the corruptive effect of violent revenge on the younger generation. Taymor's farcical banquet scene is exemplary of the burlesque that *Titus Andronicus* had been designated for so many years, but it also reinforces the dreamlike, fantasy element that runs through the film. The discordant soundtrack, strange costumes, inconstant settings, and spectacular scenes of debauchery all contribute to the hyper-reality in which the young boy finds himself from the first few moments of Taymor's film. The technological and spatial resources at her disposal allow her to stretch such a conceit further than Howell could have contemplated. Despite also employing the boy character as a mediator, the BBC production is more implicitly suggestive of such a dreamlike, alternate reality, limited in part by comparatively rudimentary cinematographic effects and resources. For Howell, the principal function of Young Lucius is to allow the audience to make sense of what occurs throughout the play. Particularly amongst the carnage of the ending, the compassion of the boy in Howell's finale represents a connection to a "normal" television audience that has seen its moral values so thoroughly subverted by the havoc of revenge in *Titus Andronicus*.

While Taymor's film is evidently indebted to Howell's innovation, the respective endings indicate the most significant thematic divergence between the productions. Shakespeare's play text ends with the public condemnation of an unrepentant Aaron and

the recently murdered Tamora amidst overriding negativity and grief. The fate of Aaron's son remains unresolved beyond Lucius's tenuous promises at the beginning of Act 5 to ensure his safety. Howell again employs the character of Young Lucius to foreground the infant at the end of the film, showing the boy peering sorrowfully into a small black casket during the funeral oration given by Lucius. The close camera focus on Young Lucius, again combined with his arrestingly incongruous spectacles, intensifies the pathos of the final scene, with the implication that the boy—the “viewer on the other side of the screen”—is in an otherwise heinous society the only character who retains the moral perspective to grieve for Aaron's deceased child.⁹ To conclude the production, the face of Young Lucius is overlaid with the image of a human skull, a motif initially employed after the opening credits. The theme of inevitable and cyclical human violence, as witnessed by the boy, is thus consolidated. The faint hope that he may escape such a cycle, seemingly expunged by his participation in preceding events, is rekindled as he is shown to be “the one heir who retains his moral sensibility and mourns the death of innocent children” (MAHER, 1988: 150). Taymor again draws on Howell's decision to foreground Young Lucius and the fate of the infant, but offers a more explicitly positive ending that shows the boy taking Aaron's surviving son out of the Colosseum to imagined freedom. This image recalls and reverses the manner in which Young Lucius himself was initially transported into the alternate reality of *Titus*.

In addressing the considerable challenge of presenting the most visually disturbing of Shakespeare's tragedies to television and cinema audiences respectively, Howell and Taymor employ significant interpolations that are sustained by the play text and which help to assuage the horrors of revenge. The BBC production uses the boy character in an attempt to counteract the various limitations of performing Shakespeare

⁹ “Pathos” is defined as “the emotionally moving quality or power of a literary work or of particular passages within it, appealing especially to our feelings of sorrow, pity, and compassionate sympathy” (BALDICK, 2004: 187).

for television, ranging from production guidelines that discourage innovation to the absence of a live audience in a comparatively theatrical mode of performance. Taymor has married her predecessor's successful conceit of Young Lucius as observer of the action with the extensive spatial, financial, and technological resources available to her in order to consolidate the conception of a dreamlike hyper-reality that plays host to Shakespeare's *Titus*. The two productions indicate the range of interpretative possibilities afforded by the printed text, and both at times display the "tactful handling" that its violent content demands. It remains to be seen whether the next director to bring *Titus Andronicus* to television or the cinema will choose to retain and develop some of the interpolations effected by Howell and Taymor, or instead cut a new path in order to compensate for performative losses incurred when Shakespeare moves from stage to screen.

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