

“False Shadows for True Substances”: Speech and Geographic Fictions in *Titus Andronicus*

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Writing on Titus Andronicus for Professor Frances Dolan's ENL 117 class gave me the chance to continue working on a problem which first became apparent to me a year earlier in Professor Gina Bloom's Shakespeare class: the tension between places as they are imagined in drama and place as it is manifest in the theatre. Titus is deeply concerned with spaces and places and the boundaries between them, but that concern is undermined by the material conditions of the theatre, where all of those supposedly distinct locales are in fact one and the same stage. Plays, before they are literary texts, are staged performances, and I was eager to tackle both the performative and the textual dimensions of the play. Professor Dolan's lectures on the earthiness and ecological concerns of Titus helped me think more clearly about the interplay between drama and theatre space, questions about which had been bouncing around in my mind for the better part of a year and have since grown into an all-consuming scholarly obsession.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I made a change to my Shakespeare syllabus in the fall of 2018: I decided to begin with the notoriously gory tragedy Titus Andronicus, decried by generations of critics as Shakespeare's worst play. I quickly learned from student response to the play, including Emily's wonderful paper, that the play stirs up conversation and inspires originality. This is the prompt Emily chose:

"Titus Andronicus is organized around a conflict between two peoples (Romans and Goths) and around the contrast between various

locations, such as the Andronici tomb, the palace, and Titus's house. Stage directions offer us little guidance about where various scenes take place. But many characters comment on the location of Act 2, scene 2 [a horrific rape scene]—before, during, and after. Collect as many descriptions of this location as you can. How does location shape or create action? That is, why can some things happen there that cannot or might not elsewhere? What symbolic meanings do you find in the descriptions of this location? What are the other places the play invites us to imagine? How are they described? How do they shape what can and cannot happen in them? You need not answer all of these questions. We raise them to get you thinking."

In response, Emily conceived a paper that draws together the material and figural, the actual ground on which groundlings stood and the symbolic significance assigned to earth in the play. It was especially exciting and gratifying to see how she took ideas I presented in lecture and ran with them, as well as how she brought to our class the questions and methods she had learned from Gina Bloom. The result is entirely her own. It is also the seed of her honors thesis.

—Frances Dolan, Department of English

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is animated in many ways by places and boundaries—ethnonational conflict between the Romans and the Goths churns alongside the interpersonal drama that plays out across various locations in the Roman court, the forest, and Gothic lands. The fact that plays demand to be read as staged performances adds an additional locale, as all of the fictive places of the story are rendered on the single real location of the theater stage. Scholars and theater historians generally agree that the early modern stage was relatively bare¹—props were scarce and there were no large constructed sets or backdrops, rendering all of the places in the play visually indistinguishable and spatially identical. Because the stage does not visually or materially create

¹ My knowledge of the early modern stage and of theater and of performance history is heavily indebted to a pair of ENL 117 class lectures given on Nov. 27, 2017 and Nov.29, 2017 by Professor Gina Bloom.

distinctive or distinguishable places, the audience must rely on the speech of characters alone to create intelligible places and geographies. But this reliance on speech poses a problem in that speech, in its immateriality and mutability, cannot create places that are stable; instead, these spoken places are volatile and ambiguous, revealing the unstable fiction at the heart of geographic boundaries.

Lavinia's horrific rape and dismemberment, the center of *Titus Andronicus'* tragic arc, takes place in the forest specifically because of the idea, first put forward by Aaron, that the place is fitting for the action by virtue of its inherent physical characteristics. When Aaron initially suggests Lavinia's rape to Demetrius and Chiron, he proposes that it be done in the forest because in it "many unfrequented plots there are, / Fitted by kind for rape and villainy" (II.i.122-123). He articulates the forest, to them and to the audience, as a space, outside of and separate from the court, where actions that would otherwise be impermissible or unnatural can occur. He argues that the forest, because of its inherent qualities of isolation and low visibility, is naturally the best place for violence and brutality. Critical to the forest's role in the tragedy is Aaron's coinciding argument that the forest is the most fitting place for Demetrius' and Chiron's crime because it is a place that cannot be seen. He tells them that "The Emperor's court is like the house of Fame, / The palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears; / The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull" (II.i.133-135). The diametric opposition of these lines and Aaron's explanation of the critical difference between the woods and the Roman court is set off by the fact that the woods and the emperor's court are, on stage, the same place. And that same place, if we consider audience as part of it, raises more complicated understandings of "deaf and dull" and "full of tongues, of eyes, and ears." The presence of an audience draws attention to the false assumption at the center of Aaron's dividing of places: he says that the forest has no eyes or ears or tongues, and is thus a safe place to commit acts that should not be witnessed, but of course the audience is there to witness it and his "forest" is in fact surrounded by eyes and ears. The necessary fact of the stage having an audience precludes Aaron's description of the "deaf, and dull" forest; the place he describes and thus creates in his speech is immediately counteracted by the more material place of the theater.

Creating boundaries for lawless or immoral action allows characters to indulge in the notion that violence can be contained and

controlled—a notion that generally proves untrue in tragedy. The facts of the stage emphasize this problem, since all locations are, in the eyes of the audience, the same location. There is only one stage, and everything must happen on it. And the early modern stage is particularly a vehicle for this tension because of its barrenness; there are few, if any, visual clues or sets to create different places, and so the fact that everything happens in the same place, and is actually not sequestered in proper places, becomes all the more apparent. On the stage, the forest and the court are functionally and materially identical, and throughout the play it becomes evident that little prevents the bloodshed of the forest from seeping, quite literally, into other locales. The boundary between the forest and the Roman court was always a fiction; Titus asks of Lucius, “[D]ost thou not perceive / Rome is but a wilderness” (III.i.55), countering Aaron’s earlier assertion that the forest and Rome are distinct places fitted by nature for different acts, individual moral codes, and social mores. As they already were on the stage, Rome and the forest become one and the same in the narrative as well. Part of the tragedy rests on the characters’ belief that misdeeds can be contained by proper places, hence Aaron’s insistence that the forest is “fitted by kind for murders and rapes.” Geographic and spatial boundaries are supposed to maintain order, but because they are so fragile and immaterial they easily break down.

This fragility is enhanced by the fact that characters’ descriptions and identifications of places are, for the most part, conflicting and unreliable and create places that range from the ambiguous to the impossible. In the woods, Titus says that “the moon is up” (II.ii.1), but moments later Tamora speaks of the “cheerful sun” (II.iii.13); later in the same scene, though, describing the forest she says “here never shines the sun” (II.iii.96). These conflicting descriptions of the same place, delivered in quick succession, obscure the physical reality of the forest. If the stage forces us to rely on characters to form geographies, the play presents us with patently unreliable narrators—even the same character cannot consistently state a fact as simple as whether the forest is sunny or not. Aaron says that the forest does not have tongues, like the palace does, but Tamora specifically mentions that “birds chant melody” (II.iii.12), contradicting Aaron’s earlier claim that there are no witnesses in the wilderness. Here is another moment where the contours of a place are not clear; while Aaron says that the woods are empty, Tamora says that they are full of animal life. More dramatically, characters’ speech can summon

places up out of thin air, as demonstrated by the multiple references to places of Catholic worship in a play set in pre-Christian times. One of the Goths tells Lucius that he found Aaron and the baby hidden in a “ruinous monastery” (V.i.21), an impossible place in pre-Christian Rome. Lucius’ Goth speaks into existence a place that cannot, should not, and does not exist, a place that is only a figure of speech. As a place it seems tangential to the plot—the significance to the narrative of Aaron and the baby being found in a Catholic monastery is unclear—and thus it is a figurative space, not a real one, existing in speech and metaphor only. Other anachronistic references to Christian places occur earlier in the play. Saturninus, proposing marriage, tells Tamora that “priest and holy water are so near” (I.i.330). He creates a place—“near”—that is at once vague, unseen, and impossible.

The bare stage compels us to receive nearly all of our understanding of space and place from the characters themselves while also working to undermine their descriptions and distinctions. The bare stage is a negative space that focuses attention back to the text while counteracting it and the assumptions at its core. *Titus Andronicus* occupies a wide geography—not just from the Roman court to the forest, but Gothic and Moorish lands, as well as the many references to Hades, Mount Olympus, and other mythical locales—but the fact that it is staged forces that broad geography back into a singular place. This geographic compression by extension forces everything else that becomes tied to or signified by geography—nationality, race, wealth, status, mortality, divinity, morality—into a similarly compressed state. Aaron’s argument and justification that the forest is an acceptable, even natural, place for rape and murder to occur (as opposed to the palace) is unconvincing when the forest and the palace are, to the viewing audience as well as to the actors treading the boards, the exact same place. And indeed, the imaginary moral boundary surrounding the forest breaks down quite quickly, as bloodshed begins to occur elsewhere, concluding over a meal at the center of the palace. Lucius, marching from Gothic lands, “returns” to a Rome that is, in reality, the same land that he just left, the play’s final motion in compressing all places into a single space. Places cannot enforce boundaries and fix categories as they are meant to.

Places, in *Titus Andronicus*, range from the amorphous and unstable to the anachronistic and impossible. Compounding the difficulty of creating clearly defined and stable spaces is the emptiness of the early

modern stage, which renders all spaces visually indistinguishable and, in the materiality of the stage, spatially identical. That is, all of the fictional places in the narrative are in reality one place: the stage in front of the audience. Because that physical world offers little in the way of defining places, we are forced to turn to the text and to the speech of characters. But as the vehicles for generating places, speech and text create more problems than they solve. Descriptions are contradicted and counteracted, boundaries between ostensibly distinct or opposing places are undermined, places that should not exist do, and the real world constantly intrudes on the fictional. The implications of spatial and geographic instability are many. Particularly in a play where ethnonational conflict looms large, the fungibility of place suggests that the many identities that coalesce around geography are likewise unstable. If places are central, as *Titus Andronicus* suggests, then the unstable spatial contours of the play and the stage remind us at every turn that the foundations on which we stand are insecure indeed.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Washington Square Press, 2005