

Agrégation

ANGLAIS

William Shakespeare
Titus Andronicus

et le film de **Julie Taymor**
Titus

Sous la direction de
Denis Lagae-Devoldère
Guillaume Winter

ellipses



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Introduction

Denis Lagae-Devoldère et Guillaume Winter

Ici vous trouverez le crime en son char de triomphe

Corneille, *Médée*, Épître dédicatoire (1635)

La première tragédie de Shakespeare semble s'intéresser beaucoup au soin qu'on porte à ses morts, et plus précisément à la place, à l'emplacement concret réservé aux dépouilles, à cet endroit que la langue commune nomme, par un euphémisme non dénué d'hypocrisie, « la dernière demeure », et qui correspond, dans l'architecture du théâtre élisabéthain, à la trappe, appelé « hell ». *Titus Andronicus* est une pièce de la trappe. Bien plus que de la couronne impériale, qu'il va d'ailleurs refuser en raison de son grand âge, l'esprit de Titus, dès l'acte 1, est tout entier aux « rites » (1.1.78) qui doivent marquer l'enterrement des « tristes restes » de ses fils morts au combat (81). Ces « restes » sont encore « inensevelis » (« unburied » [87]) et il s'agit donc de les faire entrer dans le tombeau des Andronicus, autrement dit de les y faire descendre. Cette trajectoire descendante marquée apparaît également, dès le début du film *Titus* de Julie Taymor (1999), lorsque le soldat emporte celui dont on apprendra qu'il est le jeune Lucius et le transporte sur son dos, en empruntant un escalier, vers le Colisée romain : la tragédie qui va suivre aura lieu dans ce qu'on pourrait appeler un sous-sol.

Cette vectorisation vers le bas est rappelée de façon presque obsessionnelle dans le texte. Outre l'ouverture du caveau familial abondamment qualifié et décrit (1.1.89-93, puis 1.1.378), le territoire sémantique est saturé de références à des antres, des fosses ou autres gouffres béants¹, jusqu'à Titus fou de douleur déclarant chercher « l'ancre de la vengeance » (« Revenge's cave » [3.1.271]). L'espace du sous-sol suggéré dans le film pointe vers d'autres micro sous-sols. La gestuelle dramatique confirme cette plongée : le nombre

1. 2.1.24; 2.1.98; 2.3.129/176/210/215/224/227/230/235/239/249/277/283; 5.1.104.

d'agenouillements², de chutes³, d'invitations à s'asseoir (2.1.16/20 ; 4.1.64 ; 4.2.135), à descendre (5.3.146) ou de mouvements de prostration (3.1.11) y est singulièrement élevé. À l'inverse, et par effet de contraste, le motif de l'ascension (Saturninus devenu empereur, piteux « firmament » [5.3.17], Tamora la reine déchue soudain gravissant l'Olympe impérial [2.1.1], Aaron, mais aussi, *in fine*, Lucius), les multiples indications scéniques indiquant la position élevée (*aloft* et *above*) en parallèle de la chute de Titus, déploient toutes ses potentialités symbolico-stylistiques et le jeu dialectique entre sens littéral et sens figuré. Les lettres réclamant justice que Titus fait envoyer aux dieux par des flèches, et qui finissent par virevolter dans les rues de Rome (4.3 et 4.4) et l'échelle sur laquelle les Goths installent Aaron (5.1.58) disent assez le lien complexe et déréglé entre le haut et le bas.

Il n'est pas anodin qu'à l'ultime fin de la tragédie, les derniers mots du nouvel empereur Lucius ne portent pas sur quelque appel à l'unité et au retour à l'ordre – passage obligé de nombreuses tragédies à l'issue du bain de sang. De telles paroles sont certes prononcées, mais avant les ultimes moments de la pièce, et elles émanent non de l'empereur mais de Marcus qui, parlant aux citoyens de Rome, d'ailleurs peu convaincus (5.3.71-85), leur propose de leur « apprendre à rassembler... ces membres disjoints en un unique corps » (« teach you how to knit again/ These broken limbs again into one body » [5.3.68-70]) – analogie traditionnelle entre corps politique fragmenté et corps lacérés, qu'il s'agira de rassembler. La préoccupation de l'empereur Lucius est en effet, comme celle de son père au commencement de la tragédie et au tout début du film de Taymor, celle d'un croque-mort doublé d'un metteur en scène ou en espace : il se charge de distribuer les places/emplacements et d'attribuer, selon les mérites, les (in)dignités de sépulture. Une fois Titus dûment « confi[é] à la tombe » (« commit[ed] to the grave » [5.3.168]), pleuré et embrassé par son petit-fils, il reste à laisser mourir de faim Aaron : la figure du traître ne se verra pas gratifiée d'une tombe, mais sera maintenue dans un entresol, enterré jusqu'au cou, à crier famine (5.3.177-78). De même, Tamora n'aura pas droit à quelque ensevelissement ritualisé et demeure consacrée, conformes à son rang d'impératrice : elle sera jetée en pâture aux bêtes et aux oiseaux (5.3.196). La tragédie de la trappe s'achève au ras du sol, et propose l'extrême pointe du raffinement dans la cruauté impossible : du *cruor* sans effusion de sang.

2. 1.1.104/161/391/475 ; 2.3.167 ; 3.1.206/209-10 ; 4.1.86-87.

3. 2.3.176/186/197/203/245 ; 2.4.24 ; 3.2.34 ; 4.1.29 ; 5.3.134.

Les articles réunis dans le présent ouvrage s'attachent à commenter et à éclairer aussi bien le texte que son adaptation à la scène et sa transposition à l'écran. La première section contient des études qui développent les liens entre langage et action, rhétorique et émotion. On constate que les personnages invoquent les modèles classiques non pour guider leur conduite, mais pour légitimer la violence. L'éloquence est ici un instrument ambigu, capable de préserver l'ordre et de justifier la cruauté. *Titus Andronicus* apparaît ainsi comme une réflexion sur les pouvoirs et les dangers du langage, de la rhétorique et des textes, qui peuvent aussi bien construire une civilisation que conduire à la violence et à la destruction de celle-ci. Une lecture écocritique de cette tragédie mène par ailleurs à la conclusion que la pièce abandonne progressivement l'idéal romain de la maîtrise de soi au profit d'une vision du corps et du monde naturel totalement interdépendants.

La deuxième partie du volume examine la violence représentée ou plutôt les limites mêmes de la représentation de cette violence. La tragédie de vengeance, qui se veut une mise en scène et en image d'actes sanglants, illustre à l'époque de Shakespeare un appétit pour une forme de barbarie spectaculaire. La dimension extrême des actes commis dans *Titus Andronicus* conduit cependant à une tension dramatique et dramaturgique entre dire et montrer, tension qui révèle les limites du théâtre lorsque ce qui est donné à voir touche à l'inhumain et à l'insoutenable. On passe alors par la suggestion, utilisée dans de nombreuses mises en scène contemporaines, comme pour atténuer l'expérience traumatique et interroger les modalités mêmes de la catharsis.

La troisième et dernière partie de cet ouvrage propose des lectures critiques fines et nuancées d'un objet que Daniel Rosenthal a appelé « the greatest of all Shakespeare films⁴ ». On voit que le film de Taymor, adapté d'une première version au théâtre, explore les mêmes tensions que celles rencontrées sur scène entre possibilité d'un réalisme cru et mise à distance stylisée. Le spectateur de cinéma a-t-il d'autres limites que le spectateur de théâtre ? Taymor construit une œuvre intelligente, complexe et métafilmique qui interroge jusqu'aux notions de spectateur et d'acteur. Plus qu'une adaptation, *Titus* est une interprétation, une lecture esthétique et symbolique qui amplifie et magnifie la dramaturgie de la pièce de Shakespeare. Le film a fait date puisqu'il est devenu à son tour une inspiration pour des mises en scène très réussies, comme celle de Lucy Bailey au théâtre du Globe (2006 et 2014).

4. Daniel Rosenthal, *100 Shakespeare Films*, British Film Institute, 2007, p. 269.

Nous espérons que les analyses textuelles, dramaturgiques et filmiques contenues dans ce volume seront autant d'invitations à regarder cette tragédie avec la juste distance et à en déchiffrer le sens, autrement dit « understand [its] signs » (3.1.144).

Partie 1

**Des mots aux maux :
rhétorique, corporalité, émotions**

Invention in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

Claire Guéron

In a contribution to *Spectacular Science, Technology and Superstition in the Age of Shakespeare* (2017), Mickaël Popelard points to a trend in Shakespearian scholarship of including the word “invention” in the title. In addition to James Dougal Fleming’s *The Invention of Discovery 1500-1700* (2011), Judith Veronica Field’s *The Invention of Infinity: Mathematics and Art in the Renaissance* (1997) and David Wooton’s *The Invention of Science* (2015) (Popelard 2017, n.172), he might have mentioned Harold Bloom’s *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), which includes a very brief and very dismissive discussion of *Titus Andronicus*, nevertheless making the point that the play outdoes its Ovidian, Senecan and Marlovian sources in sheer “outrageous[ness]” (Bloom 1998, 82). One of the few Shakespearean plays with a (presumably) original plot, *Titus Andronicus*’s inventiveness has been noted by Jonathan Bate, who points to the play’s “collapse” of Roman history “into a single action” (Bate 1995, 17) and Albert H. Tricomi, who mentions the “inventive horrors in [its] plotting” (Tricomi 1961, 99). Tricomi also points out that Shakespeare self-reflexively boasts of his own creativity through his characters’ meta-poetic Ovidian references. When Marcus refers to his niece Lavinia’s attacker as a “craftier Tereus” (for cutting off both her tongue and her hands; 2.4.41), Tricomi notes that “that ‘craftier Tereus’ Marcus speaks of is really Will Shakespeare laying claim to have outwitted the Roman poet in the telling of a tale.” (107) What is remarkable about such meta-poetic strategies is that they contribute to making invention the play’s theme, rather than just its method. As Shakespeare reworks his sources into something new, he also explores the uses and pitfalls of invention in a broader sense. This paper will attempt to relate the play’s reinvention of the revenge tragedy to its exposure of the necessary, but dangerous uses of human invention. Adopting a philological approach, I will first look at how the concept of invention weaves its way through a play from which the word itself is absent, before exploring invention’s reliance

on the notion of place, a reliance that proves deceptive as *Titus Andronicus*'s inventions tend to slip their moorings. A final section will focus on Aaron as embodying the play's combined spirits of inventiveness and revenge, contributing to a loosening of the ties between Elizabethan revenge tragedy and its Senecan roots.

I. Finding invention in *Titus Andronicus*

Though the word “invention” never appears in *Titus Andronicus*, the plot relies in great part on a proliferation of clever and innovative ideas, whose authors occasionally delight in and gloat about them. Many of these ideas involve deception, as when Aaron “cunningly” (2.3.5) traps Quintus and Martius and tricks the Roman authorities into executing them for the murder of Bassanius, or when he tricks Titus into letting him cut off his hand in the hope of saving his sons, or when Tamora passes herself off as the allegory of Revenge to lure Titus into calling his exiled son Lucius back to Rome. Others involve the sheer pleasure of imagining new ways of inflicting pain, as when Saturninus vows to “devise/ Some never-heard-of torturing pain” (2.3.285) for Titus's sons.

In addition to specifications of novelty such as Saturninus's clunky “never-heard-of” compound adjective, the characters' many deceptions and cruelties are identified as inventions by a lexical network of terms denoting efficacious creativity, including “plot”, “complot”, “device”, “contrivance”, “cunning”, “stratagem”, “engine”, “shift” and “practice”. These terms, some of which carry nefarious implications, all denote inventive planning, and in some cases the instrument or product of that planning (device, e.g.). Less obviously connected to invention (from a 21st century perspective) are “discover/y” and “find”, which nowadays denote a lesser degree of creativity than “invention”, in the sense of creating something new from scratch, or giving a radically new shape and purpose to pre-existing material. This distinction, however, was only emerging in the late sixteenth-century.

As Helen Hackett reminds us, “invention” comes from the Latin *invenire*, meaning “to find”, to “come upon” or to “discover”. In Shakespeare's day, to “find” and “to discover” were synonymous with “to invent”, though, as Hackett also points out, “‘invention’ was also beginning to develop the modern sense of ‘inventiveness’, the capacity to devise something new” (Hackett 2022, 245).

In her discussion of the shifting meanings of “invention”, Hackett sticks to the realm of rhetorical and poetic endeavour. “Invention”, whether it describes the process of finding and redeploying existing material or that of fashioning new forms, refers to oratory or literary composition. Her study thus leaves out another shift in usage, from the word’s rhetorical and literary acceptations to its denotation of strategic thinking and technological innovation. An instance of the latter usage is William Bourne’s *Inventions or Devises* (1578), a description of novel methods, tools and apparatuses in the fields of navigation and warfare.

Keeping in mind this variety of meanings and applications of the term, it becomes clear that much of the dramatic action depicted in *Titus Andronicus* falls under some definition of “invention”. This includes Tamora’s reliance on rhetorical invention in her opening plea and Aaron’s “cunning [...] stratagem” (2.3.5-6) against Bassianus, Lavinia, and Titus’s sons. “Invention”, in the sense of “discovery” also applies to Quintus and Martius coming upon the “blood-drinking pit” (2.3.226) and “[finding]” (2.3.258) Bassianus’s body there, and also to Marcus “[finding]” Lavinia “straying in the park” (3.1.89). Technological invention (or “shift”; 4.1.71) intervenes when Marcus shows the tongueless and handless Lavinia how to use a staff as a prosthetic to write in the sand, and thus expose, or “discover” (4.1.73), the identity of her attackers¹. Plots and counter-plots then follow each other, culminating when Tamora “forge[s]” (5.2.71) a fiction of herself as the personification of Revenge, but falls into the trap of her own “device” (5.2.120) and leaves her sons in Titus’s power. Eventually, Lucius’s ingenuity closes the play, when he discards the gallows as a means of execution for Aaron and devises a strange lingering death for him instead. In a play devoid of battles, duels, and other forms of hand to hand combat, cunning wins the day.

The centrality of invention to the play’s various agonistic encounters is established not only through presence, but also through lack. Those who fail at invention are doomed. Thus Lavinia, backed into a corner by Tamora and her sons, desperately searches for the rhetorical trick that will convince her captors to let her go: “O, could I find it now” (2.3.150). Her failure at rhetorical invention signals her defeat. Her brothers are just as inept. When Martius falls

1. In *Titus*, her 1999 screen adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, Julie Taymor adds a (possibly feminist) twist to this episode when Lavinia improves upon Marcus’s technique by tucking the staff between her chin and shoulder instead of putting it in her mouth. Whether she opts for this method because it is more effective, or because she wishes to avoid a rape-adjacent form of penetration is left to the viewer’s consideration.

into a pit, Quintus's efforts to pull him out result in a farcical tug-of-war that ends with Quintus toppling into the pit as well. Unlike their uncle Marcus in the next act, they are not resourceful enough to realise that a tool is needed. When writing this scene, Shakespeare—and possibly his audience—would have been well aware of recent advances in lifting technology. Agostino Ramelli's *The Various and Ingenious Machines*, which, as Adam Max Cohen notes, "included [...] 10 different types of cranes" (Cohen 2006, 14) was published in 1588, just a few years before *Titus Andronicus*'s first performance in the early 1590s. Even without Ramelli, Shakespeare and his audience would have had ample opportunity to observe and perhaps use hoisting devices, living in rapidly developing London and working in an industry that increasingly integrated rigging mechanisms in its staging. Though not requiring the sophisticated lifting machinery that would be called for in Shakespeare's late Romances, *Titus Andronicus* unfolds on several vertical levels, suggesting that some thought was given to hoisting and lowering. In the pit scene, the handclasp by which Quintus attempts to save his brother provides an emblem-like vignette of love and ethical cooperation, but it is effectively useless. What the brothers need is a winch or lever, or at the very least a staff like the one their uncle will turn into a prosthetic in the next act, which Quintus could easily have broken off from one of the trees surrounding him.

What the pit episode highlights, moreover, is that not all forms of invention are equal. Quintus and Martius are not devoid of inventiveness, to the extent that they come up with rich poetic devices when describing the pit, such as personification, alliteration and heroic epithet ("detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" [2.3.224]) and intertextual classical references (231). These, however, are mere rhetorical inventions, which depend on the listener's cooperation. If we relate this episode to the shifting meaning of "*technologia*" which Adam Max Cohen discusses in *Shakespeare and Technology*, it seems that Quintus and Martius have failed to negotiate the historical shift from *technologia* as "rhetorical and philological method" (Cohen 2006, 6) to mechanical invention. In *Titus Andronicus*, rhetorical invention, meant to explain, edify and persuade, systematically fails, while scheming and mechanical contrivances typically succeed, at least until they are countered by a better device (as when Titus outwits Tamora).

Titus Andronicus thus works through a wide array of forms of invention, enacting a hierarchy between rhetorical invention, which is largely useless, and what could be called “craftiness”, to take up Marcus’s reference to “crafty Tereus”, encompassing cunning tricks and technological innovation. The hierarchy of effectiveness, however, is not a hierarchy of moral or ethical value, an aspect that can be explored through the play’s variations on “places of invention”.

II. Places of invention

The first of Shakespeare’s four Roman plays², *Titus Andronicus* is the only one to approach the neo-Aristotelian unity of place, most of its scenes being set in or near Rome (Act V scene 1 providing a notable exception). To an Elizabethan mind, Rome would have been the ultimate place of invention, both in terms of rhetoric, with Cicero and Quintilian providing the model for Renaissance treatises, and in terms of engineering and building, with Vitruvius’s *Ten books on Architecture* reaching Renaissance readers through Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Re Aedificatoria* (1485), Sir Henry Wotton’s *Elements of Architecture* (1624), and Solomon de Caus’s *Raison des forces mouvantes* (1615). In spite of its title, Vitruvius’s book is an engineering treatise as much as an architecture treatise, with Book 10, in particular, being devoted to “hoisting machines”, “pumps”, “catapults” and “scorpions”. Though unlike *Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus* does not reference specific Roman engineering works, it nods at Rome’s building and engineering tradition by centring the play’s first action on the Andronici’s monument and by introducing striking conduit (fountain) imagery in Marcus’s description of the mutilated and bleeding Lavinia. The description is doubly tied to Rome, as it is modelled on the tale of Philomela in Book 6 of *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*. From the first scene, Titus’s expressed pride in his “re-edifi[cation]” of the Andronici monument (1.1.353) anchors creative innovation in Roman soil and identity, thus paving the way for the broader awareness of place that pervades the play’s discourses on invention.

In Elizabethan England, the term “place of invention” would have probably most readily come up in the context of rhetorical composition. In classical and early modern rhetoric, a “place of invention” was one of the conceptual categories that an argumentative proof could be drawn from. Roman

2. The other three being *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Coriolanus* (1608) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606).

rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian developed the concept from Aristotle's four "topics" of argument, which included "definition, genus, property and accident". In the sixteenth-century, authors such as Thomas Wilson and Pierre de la Primaudaye took up the twenty-four "places" (*loci*) listed in Rudolf Agricola's *De Inventione Dialectica* (1479)³, which included, among others, "similarity/difference", "parts/whole", "causes/effects", and "circumstances". In *Titus Andronicus*, the practice of reasoning from places is well evidenced in the pleading speeches that unfold at various moments in the course of the action. For example, when pleading with Titus to spare her son, Tamora speaks from the place of "similarity", appealing first to Titus's love for his own sons, then to the shared piety, in the sense of devotion to country, of her Goth sons and Titus's Roman ones—in vain. In the next act, Demetrius openly argues from the place of "genus" in order to defend his plan to woo the happily married Lavinia:

She is a woman, therefore may be wooed;
 She is a woman, therefore may be won;
 She is Lavinia, therefore must be loved. (2.1.82-84)

Though this arguing from "places of invention" usually fails to convince, it contributes to the play's broader association of "invention" with "place", something that is encapsulated in the play's variations on the meanings of "plot". Because Aaron is referred to as an "architect" (5.3.120) of evil, a detour by way of early modern architectural theories, and the use Shakespeare made of them in another play, may help clarify what is at stake in *Titus Andronicus*'s exploitation of the polysemy of "plot".

As Roy Erikson has noted, Lord Bardolph's speech of warning to his fractious followers (2 *Henry IV*, 1.3.35-62), is peppered with architectural terms. The speech, which discusses the need for a proper plan before launching a military operation, takes the architect's preparatory blueprint as the "model" to be imitated (both by the architect himself and by the general imitating the architect). To Erikson, the most operative of these terms of architecture is "plot". The speech's careful articulation of the humanist principle of working from a "design", as he argues, is based on its fusion of the several meanings of "plot", including "a small piece of ground", a "ground plan", "[...] the action of a narrative or drama" and "a secret plan [...]" (Erikson 2001, 2-3). Explaining

3. See Trousdale 1982, 33-38.

that this emphasis on grounding a course of action on a well-designed plan is a matter of both efficacy and legitimacy, Erikson points to the concept of "*aedificatio*" (5), meaning both building and moral edification, as the governing humanist paradigm for this over-determination of the "plot" upon which the work is built.

With these practical and ethical stakes in mind, it is worth examining the kind of "plotting" underlying *Titus Andronicus*'s inventions. The word *plot*'s polysemy is in fact even more in evidence in this play than in *2Henry IV*, as the Roman play's various plots and devices are systematically linked with the ground on which they unfold. Thus Titus's sons' coordinated recovery of Lavinia from Saturninus is all the more unforgivable as it takes place "in Rome" (1.1.292) and Tamora's failed plea for her son's life is all the more deplorable as she begged "in the streets" (1.1.457). More often than not, the link between place and invention is an organic and causal one, with the place providing both the inspiration and the means for the plot. This begins with Aaron explaining to Chiron and Demetrius his plan to catch Lavinia for their enjoyment, playing on the polysemy of "path" (2.1.111; "walkway" and "method") and "unfrequented plot" (115; "lonely place" and "unusual stratagem"). Finding the right "plot" of land is part and parcel of the stratagem. This connection between place and plotting continues when Titus looks for a fountain where he may "plot some device of further miseries" (3.1.135), and, more constructively, when Marcus, looking about for "inspir[ation]" (4.1.66), sees a "sandy plot" (67) and gets the idea for a "shift" (71)⁴ that will allow Lavinia to write in the sand.

This dependency on place means that the characteristics of the place colour the value of the invention. If Roman soil establishes the stability of the Andronici monument in spite of its continuous refurbishing, the stretches of ground underlying most of the characters' plotting and conniving lie on the edges of the city, removed from civility and tradition. Thus Aaron and Tamora's plot against Bassianus and the Andronici is inspired by and reflects the deceptively Edenic forest spot where hunters roam and snakes lie "rolled" (2.3.13) and ready to spring. It is apt that Aaron's trap involves an "obscure plot" (2.3.77) followed by a "loathsome pit" (2.3.176). A counterpart to the Andronici monument (the same trap door would have served for both

4. Glossed by the editors as "an ingenious means of achieving an end."

on the Elizabethan stage⁵), the pit emblemizes the darkness and treachery of the trick, and its anthropomorphised opening offers a displaced representation of the rape and maiming of Lavinia⁶. As for the “sandy plot” (4.1.68) that inspired Marcus to invent the handless writing technique, its impermanent texture hints at the short-lived usefulness of the invention: the prosthesis will be discarded as soon as Lavinia has revealed the names of her attackers—along with her life.

The complete adequacy of the place where invention occurs to the invention itself is evidenced by the fact that these places frequently have no other defining features than those necessary to the implementation of the associated invention. In addition to the above mentioned “obscure” and “sandy” plots, this lack of topographical or social definition is notable in Lavinia asking Tamora to kill her “in this place” (2.3.169), in Titus weeping and pleading for his sons’ lives on a “stone” (3.1.29), in Titus hoping to find a plan in “Revenge’s cave” (3.1.271), in Aaron watching the outcome of his plot through “the crevice of a wall” (5.1.114), and finally in Lucius ordering Aaron buried “in earth” (5.3.177). The indeterminacy of these places is highlighted by the frequent use of the determiner “some”, as when Lavinia asks to be “tumbled” into “some loathsome pit” (2.3.176) or Martius compares the pit to “some monument”, or (2.3.228) or when Titus mentions “some fountain” (3.1.124). This use of “some”, which can be glossed as “any place that will serve the purpose” further subordinates the place to its use, thus giving it a strange portable quality at odds with any sense of place as a being rooted in history, laws, or tradition. “Place” takes on a metaphorical quality, but not as with rhetorical “places of invention”, which carry a tradition of legal and philosophical thought. Instead, the ground stands for the idea itself. Thus when Marcus calls Aaron the “[c]hief architect and plotter of all these woes” (5.3.120), he is referring solely to Aaron’s scheming, as opposed to Titus’s actual architectural works, i.e. his renovation of the family monument. This metaphORIZATION of place, whereby the “plot” stands for the device, and possibly also the mind that fomented the device, is reinforced by such figures of speech as personification, metonymy and hypallage. Two related examples of hypallage—applying an adjective to

5. Perry and Thomson argue for early performances at the Rose and Curtain theatres (Arden 2026, 54).

6. Discussed in Tricomi 1990, p. 105 and 110.

the wrong noun—are “subtle hole” (2.3.198) and “guileful hole” (5.1.104), both designating the fateful pit. The effect is of an untethered adjective, which effectively conflates the pit, the trick and the brain of its author⁷.

Insistence on place thus paradoxically leads to an unmooring of invention. In *Titus Andronicus*, mayhem is the product of free-floating inventiveness, of invention severed from history, community and principle, of invention reduced to device.

III. Invention as a free-floating device

One remarkable feature of many sixteenth-century inventions was their small size and thus mobility. Watches, miniature globes, miniature paintings and small printed books became available, offering those who could afford them the pleasure of holding the latest marvels of technology in the palm of their hands. Such handheld devices were clearly status symbols, as seen in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, when Malvolio imagines marrying Olivia and thereby rising to the status of watch-owner (2.5.57). What's more, though, is that such devices transferred ownership of technology to the individual. Not only was there a flowering of patent-issuing for inventors (Cohen 2006, 31), but owners of the device to some extent appropriated the technology. No longer depending on church-clocks or even household-clocks for the time of day, they could simply pull out the device at their leisure.

One of the symbolic fallouts of such availability may have been an enhancing of the emblematic connection between invention and the human hand. In *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage*, Farah Karim-Cooper points to early modern understandings of the hand as an “instrument of thought” (Karim-Cooper 2016, 36) and a “symbol of human discovery” (38). In her chapter on “amputation”, centered in great part on *Titus Andronicus*, she includes Ambroise Paré's detailed sketch of a prosthetic hand, an object that may be seen as both the means and the product of human ingenuity. Severed hands are also frequently featured in emblem books, as Karim-Cooper and Catherine Rowe have noted, thus offering a powerful heuristic for analysing *Titus Andronicus*. Though Rowe adduces the emblem tradition (associated with fetish theory)

7. In late medieval and Renaissance anatomical treatises, the brain was often represented as containing “cells” or “chambers” where information was processed.

to argue for the severed hand as a symbol of agency, it is more to the purpose of this essay to note its association with marvels of engineering in such works as Salomon de Caus's *Raison des forces mouvantes* (1615). The illustration for one of these inventions, a mechanical bird that sings and drinks water, shows a disembodied hand offering the bird a drink from a cup (figure 1, from Caus 1615, 17). As in the emblem tradition, the hand emerges from a "puffy cloud" (Rowe 1994, 287), which, by a slight stretch of fancy, also resembles a human brain.

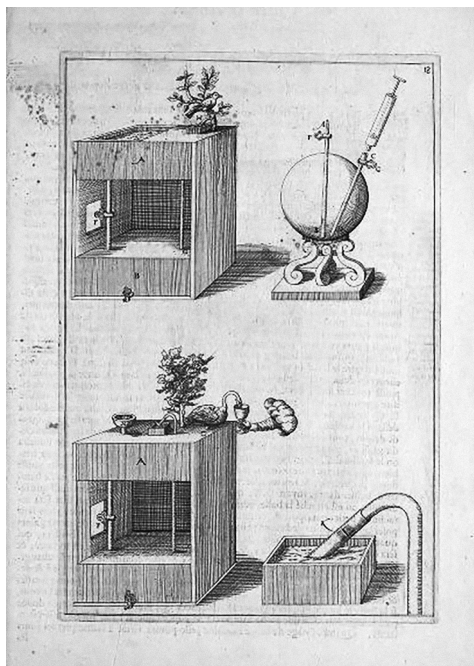


Figure 1: Caus « contrefaire la voix des petits oiseaux⁸ »

There is, of course, nothing sinister about the disembodied hands featured in emblem books like Whitney's emblems or Caus's *Raison*. I am doubtful, however, about Rowe's claim that *Titus Andronicus*'s severed body parts function as emblems of agency. In Shakespeare's revenge play, severed hands are part and parcel of the Senecan horrors *Titus Andronicus* is so notoriously full of. Increasingly unanchored to the rest of the body, hands circulate in a mockery of human inventiveness, highlighting the danger and morbidity of

8. Caus, Salomon de, Drouart, Jérôme, *Les Raisons des forces mouvantes* [...], 1624. Cariatide, bibliothèque numérique de l'INHA, NUM FOL KO 36. (En ligne, consulté le 19 juillet 2026, <https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/idurl/1/5647>)

unanchored craft. These severed body parts are not just emblematic, however, for they are the direct result of schemes and devices whose equally detached or “groundless” quality is signalled through imagery recalling the portable mechanical devices discussed above. Lavinia loses her tongue and hands as a result of a plan whose careful preparation and execution is underpinned by sinister images of coiling and uncoiling, beginning with Tamora’s evocation of the deceptively “rolled” (2.3.13) snakes, soon to be followed by Aaron’s mention of his “woolly hair uncurl[ing]” (34) like an “adder when she unrolls” (35), and of the “fatal-plotted scroll” (47) that, when unrolled, will confound Titus’s innocent sons. Connecting the dots, the image that appears is that of a trap being sprung, a mechanism released. Though such imagery may raise no eyebrows nowadays, it would have an exciting ring of novelty in the late sixteenth-century, evoking either the “scorpions⁹” in Vitruvius’s rediscovered work, or newfangled sixteenth-century innovations in watchmaking. In a chapter entitled “clockwork self, horological revolution”, Adam Max Cohen notes the gradual miniaturization of clocks and watches that followed the late-fifteenth-century shift from weights to springs in clockmaking. He argues that these spring-driven artefacts provided new metaphors for clever thought, as when, in *The Tempest*, “Sebastian tells Antonio that Gonzalo is ‘winding up the watch of his wit/ By and by it will strike’ (2.1.12-13)” (Cohen 2006, 137). The watch metaphor suggests a mode of thinking that is self-contained, quick, and requiring no firm foundation. In Shakespeare’s late tragicomedy, the metaphor is rather amusing, producing the laughable effect that, as Henri Bergson writes, occurs when humans are perceived to be acting in a mechanical way (Bergson 1900, 10). In his early tragedy, however, the dynamics of sudden uncoiling and striking, combining explicit snake and implicit watch imagery, strike a more sinister note. In her 1999 postmodern adaptation, Julie Taymor captures some of that sinister quality with the odd handheld or hand-shaped devices that pop up now and then: Saturninus’s booming remote control at 36:12, the claw-like serving forks Demetrius taunts Chiron with at 00:44:04 and the shears Aaron briefly considers using instead of the meat cleaver he eventually settles on to chop off Titus’s hand at 01:18:51. In both the play and its film adaptation, invention is quick, clever and efficient, untethered to place, precedent or principle.

9. A “scorpi” or “scorpion” was a small catapult.

This untethering also exists on a conceptual level, with the dissociation of invention and discovery. The two terms could still be used interchangeably in the late sixteenth-century, and were both synonymous with “to find”, but they were beginning to diverge. An illustration of this dissociation occurs in the scene when Aaron, after tricking Titus’s sons into the pit where Bassianus lies murdered, leads the Emperor to the “fatal place” (2.3.202). Quite a bit of “finding” occurs in this episode. Saturninus finds his brother’s body, and Martius twice reports “find[ing] [Bassianus] dead” (2.3.252,258). Thereupon, Tamora brings a damning (forged) letter she has found, in which the brothers supposedly promise a bag of gold to a “hunter” for the murder of Bassianus, and tell him where to find it. Thereupon, Saturninus very properly orders his attending lords to “find” (278) the hunter. With perfect timing, Aaron then “*finds the bag of gold*” (279) under a patch of nettles, in a gesture—a hand pulling a bag of riches from the ground—that could almost work as an emblem of “discovery”. To some extent, Aaron’s finding of the bag would seem to cement—rather than dissolve—the conflation of discovery and invention. Not only is finding (discovering) the bag part of Aaron and Tamora’s clever plot, but it is a clever device in and of itself, as it distracts Saturninus from going after the non-existent hunter to secure his testimony. And yet the severance of discovery and invention is consummated in this scene, as emphasized by Tamora’s hypocritical raptures about the truth coming out:

What? Are they in this pit? O wondrous thing!
How easily murder is discovered. (2.3.286-7)

By calling attention to the “wonder” of the “discovery”, Tamora is, in a foolhardy but somewhat characteristic way, taking the risk of calling attention to the improbability of the whole set-up (why should Martius and Quintus be in the pit with their victim? Why would the “hunter” drop the letter? Why would Titus’s sons want to kill Bassianus in the first place?). But what Tamora’s speech also drives home is that no “discovery” has taken place: the murder of Bassianus by Titus’s sons is pure invention—Tamora’s and Aaron’s invention. The same applies to Aaron “finding” the bag of gold; he did not “find” the gold but simply retrieved it from where he had hidden it. Dissociation of discovery and invention is also a feature of Marcus’s investigation of the crime against Lavinia. Marcus’s invention of the prosthetic staff device allows him to “find [...] treason” (4.1.66) and “discover” (73) “the traitors and the truth” (75). However, the invention of the writing device and the discovery of

the truth are two different events, the first being but the means to the second. This tension between discovery and invention is also worked into the plot through ambiguity. As Arden editors Perry and Thomson indicate in a footnote, Lavinia's above-mentioned desperate cry of "could I find it now" (2.3.150) can be taken in two ways. It could mean either "if only I could remember the story" or "if only your behaviour to me could bear out the principle of fierce creatures taking pity on their captives". In the first case, "find" denotes the active creativity of rhetorical invention, i.e. taking an old story and shaping it into something new, fitting the needs of the situation. In the second case, "find" is closer to "discover", involving the passive experience of something out of one's control.

There is of course a meta dramatic dimension to Lavinia's quandary. Like Lavinia, Shakespeare, in writing *Titus Andronicus*, had to "find" old stories (i.e. Ovid's Philomela, Seneca's *Thyestes*) and shape them anew, so as to please an audience that may or may not be disposed to be won over. This was in fact the general situation of any poet or dramatist writing in the late sixteenth-century, delving into Roman and Italian sources for raw material. In *Titus Andronicus*, however, inventive characters translate to generic innovation, with revenge taking on a loose, self-validating quality and the inventor offering a blueprint for a new kind of avenger.

IV. The avenger as inventor

The genre of the revenge tragedy was still relatively new in 1592-1594, when it was evolving out of Senecan tragedy, in the wake of Norton and Sackville's *Gorbuduc* and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Invention was already central to revenge tragedy, as the basic premise of the genre is that the original criminal, because of his power and status, is beyond the reach of the law. The avenger must therefore resort to clever deception in order to reach his target. Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* follows the Senecan model by having Hieronimo feign madness and organize a play-within-a-play which ends in the killing of his son's murderers, the avenger rather pointlessly cutting off his own tongue and then murdering Bel-Imperia, his daughter-in-law.

Clearly, many of these patterns of invention are to be found in *Titus Andronicus*, where Titus also feigns madness, Tamora stages a morality play in which she performs "Revenge" (also a character in Kyd's tragedy), and

Titus confounds his enemies in a cannibalistic feast before murdering his own daughter. Yet the pattern of untethered invention evidenced in the play's plot, language and imagery ushers in a new kind of avenger in Aaron.

The issue of Aaron's originality as a character is discussed in the introduction to the Arden edition, where Curtis Perry and Aryana Thompson identify "the devils and Vice figures in medieval morality plays" and Marlowe's "Barabas in the Jew of Malta" (Perry and Thomson 2026, 9) as precursors of Aaron, arguing that Aaron's specificity lies in his "awareness of the racist associations between black skin and a black soul" (10). I would add to this that Aaron may see his black skin as signifying a rootlessness that gives him licence to invent, free from the strictures of cultural norms, reasonable expectations, and even causality, as he is an avenger without a cause. Unlike Barabas, who is "of Malta", and unlike the Vice figure, who is mostly a prankster, Aaron is an "unmoored Moor", who claims the deadly seriousness of the avenger when, in a phrase that suggests strange machinery, he speaks of "blood and revenge hammering in [his] head" (2.3.39).

What is new in Shakespeare's first revenge play, then, is that its plot is driven by a so-called avenger with no reason, or "ground" (2.1.48) for revenge and no stakes in the game (at least until his son is born), who brings an unexplained intensity to doing evil in new and inventive ways. There is actually some question as to whether evil or ingenuity is the most rewarding aspect of the plotting when Aaron curses the day when he failed to:

[...] kill a man, or else devise his death,
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it [...]. (5.1.128-9)

Is there a hint in these lines that the idea, or design, may be sufficient in and of itself (which would make Aaron even more of a stand-in for the playwright than he already is)? At any rate, they suggest that unlike his stage predecessors, whose evil is stereotypical and unimaginative ("I walk abroad o' nights/ and kill sick people groaning under walls/ Sometimes I go about and poison wells¹⁰"), Aaron delights in inventiveness as much as in evil. Aaron's pride in his fatherhood aligns well with the pleasure taken in his inventions, his "brainchildren". In keeping with a Renaissance conceit that represents male intellectual creativity as a form of childbirth, Aaron's baby comes to stand for

10. Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, quoted in Perry and Thomson, p. 9.

his inventiveness both metaphorically, as his brainchild, and metonymically, as his motivation for “shift[ing]” (1.3.177). A “breeder” (5.3.176) of plots, an embodiment of jubilant inventiveness, an avenger without a cause, Aaron paves the way for characters’ such as *Othello*’s Machiavellian ensign Iago, but also perhaps for Prospero, another outcast whose plotting makes up most of the plot of *The Tempest*, but who ultimately rejects revenge.

Conclusion

Often pairing the word “device” with its anagram “deceive” (3.1.187, 191), *Titus Andronicus* is a play in which the drive to avenge becomes one with the drive to invent. On several levels, this conflation constitutes a form of liberation. For Aaron, devising is a way to reject the norms of Rome, his only piety being devotion to his creativity and to his son. For Shakespeare, inventing a horrific plot spearheaded by a “groundless” avenger means moving further along the path of shaking off some of the strictures of Senecan tragedy, including the decorum of offstage violence and the Stoic concatenation of cause and effect. It also means turning “invention” into a theme, in a way that reflected contemporary concerns about unbridled invention, as when Sir Henry Wotton warns against “extravagant inventions” in his *Elements of Architecture* (Wotton 1624, 21). On a semantic and philological level, the separation of “invention” from “discovery” may be seen as contributing to the liberation of the word “invention” itself, allowing it to break loose from the Latin “*invenire*”. It is also tempting to see *Titus Andronicus*, with its insistence on plotting and devices as paving the way for the term “plot device”, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, first appeared in 1836.

A thoroughly inventive play, *Titus Andronicus* may deserve the charge of “extravagance”, and it certainly has not met with universal approval. Yet again and again, in the course of its stage and screen history, the play has found its moment. In Julie Taymor’s 1999 *Titus*, for example, early modern inventiveness meets postmodernist mixing, mashing and displacing, in a most fitting reinvention.

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