

## «So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus»: Biblical Resonances of an Ovidian Myth in *Titus Andronicus*

Janice Valls-Russell  
IRCL (UMR 5186 du CNRS), Montpellier  
janice.valls-russell@univ-montp3.fr

### Key Words:

Ovid, Pyramus and Thisbe, Shakespeare, Christ, night.

### Mots-clés:

Ovide, Pyrame et Thisbé, Shakespeare, Christ, nuit.

---

### Abstract:

This paper addresses a reference to the Ovidian myth of Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and argues that, given the intertextual deliberateness of the tragedy, this can be no mistaken or accidental allusion. Rather, a close reading reveals how it interacts with other mythological references. Furthermore, the figure of a Christ-like Pyramus presents analogies with drawings by Albrecht Altdorfer and Georg Lemberger, carrying Biblical resonances in a world that has plunged in the lasting night of barbary. The dramatic implications of this rich network are explored through Lucy Bailey's 2006 production of the play.

### Résumé:

Cet article se penche sur une référence au mythe ovidien de Pyrame et Thisbé dans *Titus Andronicus*, de Shakespeare, et s'attache à démontrer que cette allusion ne saurait être une erreur ni accidentelle dans une tragédie aussi délibérément intertextuelle. Une lecture attentive met en évidence l'interaction de cette allusion avec d'autres références mythologiques. En outre, la figure christique de Pyrame



---



---

présente des analogies avec des dessins d'Albrecht Altdorfer et Georg Lemberger, prenant une connotation biblique dans un univers plongé dans la nuit de la barbarie. La portée dramatique de ce riche faisceau se mesure dans la mise en scène de Lucy Bailey en 2006.

---



---

The most-readily memorable reference in Shakespeare's work and, indeed, in early modern English literature to the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, the young lovers of Babylon, is to be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. With *Romeo and Juliet*, the conflation of an Italian novella plotline and classical myths of fusional, tragic love —Pyramus and Thisbe, Hero and Leander— resulted in the emergence of an enduring, world-famous tale of love. Another identifiable reference to Pyramus and Thisbe is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Jessica and Lorenzo, in their «In such a night» duet (Act V), acknowledge the frailty of their own feelings in a teasing, melancholy remembrance of famous lovers of yesteryear. A fourth reference is often overlooked. It occurs in *Titus Andronicus*, where it is slipped into the textual and mythological fabric of the play, as if it had dropped out of Book IV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (lines 55-166), that rich compendium of interwoven tales from which Lavinia used to read to young Lucius and which she will turn to again to try and make sense of the literally unspeakable horror that has struck her.

The myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, as told and transmitted by Ovid, is associated in European medieval and early modern culture with tragic love, marked by youth, virginity, obstacles (the wall between their homes also stands for parental authority), flight, error and suicide. However, medieval allegory also approached ancient myths as propounding divine truths, which were revealed or explained in edifying commentaries appended to the texts. Anonymous works such as *Gesta romanorum* and *Ovide moralisé*, or Petrus



Berchorius's *Ovidius moralizatus*, used the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, alongside others, to recall the universality of Christ's love for the human soul: Pyramus became Christ, Thisbe the human soul for whom he gave up his life and who in return chose to follow him; Thisbe's blood-stained veil represented the erring human soul; the lioness or, in certain texts, the lion, which caused Thisbe to flee and Pyramus to think she was dead, was assimilated to Satan, while the mulberry tree under which Pyramus and Thisbe died was the cross upon which Christ was crucified. The reference to Pyramus thus appears to be doubly out of place in *Titus Andronicus*. The play's foremost concern is with the role of the *polis*, the extent —and limits— of its power over its inhabitants and its ambivalent relationship with barbarity, that insinuates itself into its walls and the Emperor's bed and saps its legitimacy, reducing Rome to the godless «wilderness of tigers» that threatens in the forest without the walls. An isolated allusion to Pyramus<sup>1</sup> seems irrelevant in a universe where the lust of military, political and sexual domination drives out all other considerations and begets a cycle of revenge, as predator and prey become interchangeable during the Roman emperor's tiger-hunt. One may therefore wonder whether the presence of this specific Ovidian myth seeks to explore a possible place for human and/or divine love, redemption and mercy in the *polis*, holding up a contrasting mirror to Philomel's overriding tale of rape.

In this paper, I shall address the way the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe functions in a play that vibrates with mythological references in a deliberate, multiple referentiality to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>2</sup> My approach rests on the assumption that, textually and dramatically, the play is no haphazard accumulation of mythological references within the format of the revenge tragedy. In this, I follow Coppélia Kahn, who considers that «this most self-

<sup>1</sup> Thisbe is never explicitly referred to directly in the play — just as Pyramus is never explicitly referred to in *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>2</sup> I shall not be discussing here the influence of Seneca. See my note 6.



consciously textual of all Shakespearean plays doesn't appropriate, imitate, allude to, and parody a host of classical authors merely to elicit plaudits for its author's learning and virtuosity» [2007: 47]. The mythological language and structures contribute to the dramatic coherence of the play, which has been brought into evidence on stage over the past sixty years by directors who, like Peter Brook, have been sensitive to the way it «begins to yield its secrets the moment one ceases to regard it as a string of gratuitous strokes of melodrama and begins to look for its completeness».<sup>3</sup> Lucy Bailey's production for Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London, in 2006, offers an example of the «completeness» Brook advocates and thereby provides, alongside textual analysis, possible clues for the presence of the Pyramus figure in the play.

Focusing on the one explicit reference to Pyramus in *Titus Andronicus*. I shall try to show how Shakespeare inscribes it within a cluster of mythological allusions, subverting genre and mode (pastoral, mythological, tragic) and thereby questioning their ethical limitations and apparent absence of Biblical/Christian values. I shall be leaving aside the way this reference reverberates, in my view, in other allusions that recall other aspects of the myth.<sup>4</sup>

\*\*\*

The allusion to Pyramus is a fleeting one. It occurs in Act II Scene 3:

MARTIUS. Lord Bassianus lies berayed in blood  
all on a heap, like to a slaughtered lamb,  
in this detested, dark, blood-drinking pit.  
QUINTUS. If it be dark how dost thou know 'tis he?  
MARTIUS. Upon his bloody finger he doth wear  
a precious ring that lightens all this hole,  
which like a taper in some monument  
doth shine upon the dead man's earthy cheeks  
and shows the ragged entrails of this pit.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brook, *Programme Notes, Titus Andronicus* (1955). See Dessen, 1992: 15.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of this, see Valls-Russell, 2009 (vol. 2): 392-402.



*So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus  
when he by night lay bathed in maiden blood.<sup>5</sup>*  
(II.3.222-32)

Bassianus has just been murdered by Tamora's sons and his body cast into a pit in the forest. In the following scene, the action takes place on and off the stage almost simultaneously: onstage, Titus' sons (Lavinia's brothers) fall into the pit and find the body; offstage, their sister, Lavinia, is raped and mutilated by the men who have just murdered her husband. This taut dramatic tempo, in which the horror of Bassianus' murder is reduplicated in those two overlapping scenes, is reinforced by rapidly shifting allusions to key Ovidian mythological figures: Dido, a sensual widow (II.3.21-24), Actaeon, the victim of unfair and arbitrary divine wrath (II.3.62-64), Philomel, a raped virgin (II.3.43), Pyramus, a chaste lover. These references act as possible sign-posts that can also prove delusive: Tamora is and is not Dido, Lavinia is and is not Philomel: the question we shall be exploring here is whether Bassianus, after being cast as Actaeon by Tamora, is, or is not, Pyramus.

Among the play's reworkings of Ovid and Seneca,<sup>6</sup> the reference to Pyramus invites barely a footnote indication of the source in most editions of the play.<sup>7</sup> Considered problematic and more often than not eluded by critics, it tends to be similarly ignored by directors and cut, in keeping with a broader tendency to suppress mythological and other allusions, the significance of which, it is assumed, modern audiences might miss.<sup>8</sup> The temptation to do away with seemingly tenuous references is all the more understandable when, as here,

<sup>5</sup> My emphasis. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare are to Wells and Taylor, 1986 (2005).

<sup>6</sup> On the influence of *Thyestes*, especially as regards *sparagmos* (dismemberment) and *omophagia* (cannibalism), see Conn Liebler, 1995: 137-44.

<sup>7</sup> No explanation is provided in the editions of the play by Maxwell (1953), Bate (1995), Hughes (1994) or Waith (1984). Waith, however, notes Shakespeare's use of «conduits» to describe the blood spurting from Lavinia's wounds, relating it to Ovid's image for the death of Pyramus (Waith, 1957: 47).

<sup>8</sup> «Often the first to go are mythological allusions» (Dessen, 1992:51).



they seem obscure, unenlightening and referring to an episode that is not generally perceptible on stage. Disregarding his own advocacy of respect for the play's «completeness», Brook suppressed the allusion in his 1955 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, as did Pat Patton in 1986, commenting: «how are we to believe in a ring that glows in the dark?»<sup>9</sup> Julie Taymor dropped it too in her film version, *Titus* (1999). Deborah Warner<sup>10</sup> and Bill Alexander (2003) kept it, without giving it any significance. Bailey's 2006 production for the Globe ensured that the spectators shared Martius and Quintus' experience of discovering Bassianus in the pit and falling into it themselves by materialising it with a net that was spread out over the Yard «to resemble an enormous spider's web».<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to consider that Pyramus' presence might be fortuitous and done away with. The First Quarto read «Priamus», which the printer of the Second Quarto amended to Pyramus, a decision modern editors follow.<sup>12</sup> The reference is reinforced by the image of the body in the «blood-drinking pit»,<sup>13</sup> lying «bathed in maiden [i.e. virginal] blood», and visible in moon-like pallor; this recalls Ovid's «bloody ground» (*cruentum... solum*, IV. 133-34), on which Pyramus' body is hardly visible in the moonlight, and the mulberry «roots, soaked with his gore» (*madefactaque sanguine radix*, IV. 126).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Dessen, 1992: 53.

<sup>10</sup> In her 1987 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon), Deborah Warner staged the play with no cuts.

<sup>11</sup> «The capture itself is effected with camouflege nets, and once dead, Bassianus' pit is created out of a larger net pulled out from the stage-edge into the yard, and held up to resemble an enormous spider's web». Collins, 2006: 50.

<sup>12</sup> See Maxwell's note to line 231 (1953: 50): «The Q2 correction of Priamus to Piramus shows some knowledge and intelligence. There is always the possibility [...] that the corrections had been made during printing in the copy of Q1 from which Q2 was printed».

<sup>13</sup> A similar image, recalling the blood flowing from Pyramus' wound to the roots of the mulberry tree, is to be found in the ballad of *Titus Andronicus*: «My brother Marcus, found her in the Wood, / Staining the grassy Ground with purple Blood» (Bullough, 1966: 46).

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise stated, references are to the Loeb edition of *Metamorphoses* (Ovid, 1916).



As in Ovid, the scene is set outside the city walls, in a forest where beasts lurk —far from the pastoral ideal of a welcoming Nature. Bassianus’ death sentence is tossed into his face by Tamora, with an allusion to Actaeon:

Saucy controller of my private steps,  
had I the power that some say Diana had,  
thy temples should be planted presently  
with horns, as was Actaeon’s, and the hounds  
should drive upon thy new-transformèd limbs,  
unmannerly intruder that thou art!

(II.3.60-65)

This follows delusively pastoral scene-setting, in which Tamora fancies herself playing Dido to Aaron’s Aeneas, in a style reminiscent of Marlowe’s *Dido Queene of Carthage* that might also anticipate the forest outside Athens, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: in her review of Bailey’s production, Kate Bassett noted in *The Independent on Sunday* that «Geraldine Alexander’s Machiavellian Tamora and her villainous illicit lover, Shaun Parkes’s Aaron, are enchantingly rhapsodic, like Titania and Oberon, when they meet in the woods». <sup>15</sup> Earlier, Aaron, as stage director, had announced the hunt to Demetrius and Chiron much as Juno, in Marlowe’s play, prepares the scene in the cave where Dido seeks refuge with Aeneas:

My lords, a solemn hunting is in hand;  
there will the lovely Roman ladies troop.  
The forest walks are wide and spacious,  
and many unfrequented plots there are,  
fitted by kind for rape and villainy.  
Single you thither then this dainty doe,  
and strike her home by force, if not by words,  
this way or not at all stand you in hope.

(II.1. 113-20)

In fact, this is neither Virgil’s world, nor Marlowe’s —Tamora, unlike Dido, is instigator, not victim, though she tries to make herself out as such. It is

<sup>15</sup> Kate Bassett, *The Independent on Sunday*, June 4, 2006. See *Theatre Record*, 2006: 632.



the world of Ovid: the shift from a pastoral depiction to a scene of «rape and villainy» reveals that the Roman forest belongs to the *topothesia* of horror depicted in *Metamorphoses*, where fears, such as those Hermia imagines in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, materialise. Perversion is thematic and structural, elements associated with the pastoral genre or comedy are used to lead actors and spectators astray. The forest is a place of danger, not a refuge from a dangerous court and oppressively patriarchal city. The world outside Rome's walls resembles that outside Babylon, where Thisbe is frightened by a lioness: «It not only serves as a suitable environment for men who like to hunt; it also serves as a metaphor for the bestial mind». <sup>16</sup>

The pastoral ideal is perverted in *Titus Andronicus*, used as a rhetorical trap by Aaron and Tamora. The mock aesthetics of pastoralism in the mouth of people bent on perversity and revenge retrospectively creates a *frisson* as the audience is hit by a brutal change of rhetoric and its literalisation in the action. Douglas H. Parker has shown how the lyricism with which Tamora greets Aaron in the forest shifts to a speech dripping with hatred as she persuades her sons to murder Bassianus. <sup>17</sup>

The depths of human behaviour that Shakespeare explores in the Roman forest, emblematised by the dark pit in which Bassianus lies, cast a long shadow that extends beyond the boundaries of *Titus Andronicus* over the pastoral universe of later plays, including the comedies. With ruthless, grinding irony,

<sup>16</sup> «Unlike the pastoral ideal of Shakespearean romantic comedy, this forest is uncivilized, wild, and bestial, truly an appropriate locale for men who behave like beasts». Parker, 1987: 490.

<sup>17</sup> «We must realize, of course, that the love that Tamora professes is adulterous and that the woman who can utter such pastoral delights will, in only a few lines and this same forest, hard-heartedly encourage rape and murder. [...] The extent to which this forest is, in fact, a dreadful environment full of malicious people with blood on their minds and hands, and not a fully realized pastoral context, is made clear by Shakespeare in the same scene. In order to convince her two sons, Chiron and Demetrius, that Bassianus and Lavinia are threatening her, she utters the following remarkable lines [II.3.92-108]. What she is now describing in frightening and ghoulish terms is what she had earlier described to Aaron in ideal pastoral terms [...] These two related but diametrically opposed descriptive speeches are central to an understanding to the comic potential of love and the tragic reality of lust and hate in the play». Parker, 1987: 491-92.



the hounds are unleashed by Marcus, who boasts that his are among the finest in Rome: «I have dogs, my lord, / will rouse the proudest panther in the chase, / and climb the highest promontory top.» (II.3.20-22)

The panther and the hart Titus refers to when he announces the hunt at the end of the first scene —«Tomorrow, and it please your majesty / to hunt the panther and the hart with me, / with horn and hound we’ll give your grace *bonjour*». (I.1.488-90)— will prove to be his son-in-law, whose body is described by Aaron as a «panther fast asleep» (II.3.194), and his daughter, Lavinia, who is offered up by Aaron for sacrifice as a «dainty doe» (II.1.118).<sup>18</sup> Such animal imagery suggests a journey into metamorphosis that includes the transformation of Actaeon into a stag by Diana and the perception of his cousin Pentheus as a boar by the latter’s mother and aunt (both episodes are in Book III of *Metamorphoses*). Tamora spurs on her sons in much the same way as Diana unleashed Actaeon’s hounds against him, while once again usurping mythological credentials, since the goddess was chaste and she is an adulteress. Bassianus falls under the blows of Tamora’s sons, just as Actaeon is torn to pieces by his hounds; like Actaeon and Pentheus, Lavinia has leisure to realise what is about to befall her, to endure the horror of not being heard («I will not hear her speak», II.2.137),<sup>19</sup> before her pleas are silenced in a mute agony, which does not, however, end with the release of death. The suffering Lavinia endures, on which Marcus, Ovid-like, will put words, can also be read as a

<sup>18</sup> «Titus’s enthusiastic endorsement of the hunt itself rubs off dangerously on this general attitude, for morally speaking he is just as much implicated in the predatory ethic of Rome as it is presented in this play as anybody else, and he is to become even more purposefully a hunter of men and women as time goes on. The fact that it is he who eventually kills Lavinia, admittedly not in anger but in grief, confirms the existence of his own pollution from the social disease». White, 1982 (1986): 31.

<sup>19</sup> Pentheus’ aunts and mother refuse to hear his appeals to family bonds. He suffers a combination of severings akin to those of the Andronici: his right hand is lopped off, then the left and, finally, his head. Nothing tells us that he was actually changed into a boar, he is perceived as such by his attackers in much the same way that Lavinia is perceived as a prey by Demetrius and Chiron. While there is no explicit reference to Pentheus in *Titus Andronicus*, the inability to convince others of one’s humanity and the lopping off of limbs do suggest a kinship in the imagery.



tension between the order of Virgil's world and the underground, subversive and subverting, forces of Ovid's.

Mythological allusions —and everything they suggest in terms of patterns and imagery— jostle one another in a kind of thematic and structural frenzy that recalls the bacchic fever at the end of Book III of *Metamorphoses*, before the almost unsustainable violence gives way, at the beginning of Book IV, to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, that is told in a shortlived, domestic interlude, until Bacchus' anger catches up with the Minyads. Bassianus' body is abandoned at the bottom of a pit, where it will serve as bait for yet more victims, while the figure of Lavinia collapses those of Actaeon, Pentheus and Philomel (VI.424-674).

Between the moment when Lavinia is dragged off the stage and her brothers fall in the pit, an anguish-laden lull settles on the forest and the audience, analogous in some respects to the pause that intervenes between the end of Book III and the beginning of Book IV of *Metamorphoses*, but also to the interval between Pyramus' suicide and Thisbe's discovery of his writhing, bleeding body. Death has transformed Bassianus into a *gisant*, a recumbent funerary figure, which Martius compares to Pyramus. This rare moment of awe briefly opens a window on compassion —as Marcus' depiction of Lavinia will, later— and potentialities of love. The audience has just witnessed lust and adultery, and knows that rape is being committed at that same moment. The image of Pyramus conjures up the image of a mutual love that is cut short at the very moment when it is on the point of being consummated; the staining of the veil, the sword wound, the mingling of blood and tears before the final mingling of bodies reduced to ashes can be read as another form of consummation. The reference to Pyramus occurs in a short speech that shuttles between an image of penetration («Upon his bloody finger he doth wear / A precious ring that lightens all this hole», II.3.226-27), the untimely death of a



young lover (Pyramus) and virginity («moon», «maiden blood»). Kahn reads the image of the ring<sup>20</sup> on the bloody finger as fitting in with the vision of Lavinia as a male possession: from Titus to Saturninus to Bassianus, then to Demetrius and Chiron, Lavinia changes hands before returning to her father, soiled, valueless and irremediably voiceless, after having been virtually silenced by male appropriation that reduces her status to a mere commodity. Kahn considers that this ties in with Bassianus’ proprietorial way of talking about Lavinia in the opening act («Lord Titus, by your leave, this maid is mine», I.1.276): «this image alludes, again obscenely, to Bassianus’ sexual guardianship of his wife, brutally mocked by both his murder and her rape» [Kahn: 2007, 53].

Yet Bassianus also pays a tribute to Lavinia in his very first lines («her to whom my thoughts are humbled all, / Gracious Lavinia, Rome’s rich ornament», I.1.51-52) and later speaks of her as his «true betrothèd love» (I.1.403) — in opposition to Saturninus’ prophetic allusion to rape. Bailey’s production suggests Bassianus and Lavinia’s mutual affection, having them clasp hands, embrace and kiss in the opening scene. Their marriage, which Saturninus and Titus have sought to prevent, is so recent that, as with Pyramus and Thisbe (who die before having time to marry or consummate their love), it carries an image of near virginity. Flouting imperial and patriarchal authority, they have shared their one and only night, like Romeo and Juliet. As Kahn notes, «Tamora uses the term “deflower” [...] representing Lavinia as virginal daughter rather than chaste wife, even before her husband is murdered and she returns to her father in the daughter’s position». Lavinia is buried in the Andronici vault and not alongside Bassianus, in a final reappropriation of her body by her father, after the banquet scene in which, before killing her, he

<sup>20</sup> See also the image of the ring as an allusion to the female sexual organ in *The Merchant of Venice*.



reduces her to «a grotesque, jiggling doll»<sup>21</sup> or «floppy ventriloquist's dummy»,<sup>22</sup> as in Bailey's production. The «deflowering» metaphor, which Shakespeare also uses in the Pyramus and Thisbe story in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,<sup>23</sup> and the images of Bassianus' ring and «maiden blood» encapsulate, as in the Ovidian myth, anticipated consummation and loss of virginity, which are displaced by Lavinia's rape and «deflowerment» that are occurring simultaneously offstage. The reference to Pyramus thus occurs at a key moment, in a rewriting that suggests that the Babylonian lovers' worst fears were founded: there were indeed, not one, but several beasts in the forest. As Pyramus dreaded, Thisbe has been, if not killed, mutilated by two beasts. Besides the sight of the body bathing in blood, the ring seems to capture a beam of the pale moonlight, in a synecdoche that refers to a moon which suggests a night that is not.

The pit is situated outside the city —like the Ovidian rendez-vous— at the foot of a tree, an elder with white berries that turn red when ripe, resembling the blood-soaked mulberry fruit. The reference to the myth lightens up a scene that, according to the stage direction, takes place in the pit (the trapdoor in the Elizabethan stage floor) and is intended to be invisible to the audience, except, as we have seen, in Bailey's production. Martius' speech announces Marcus' depiction of Lavinia, to which she can only passively submit, her status reduced to that of a silent prop, object of male *ekphrasis*. Linking the simultaneous scenes of Lavinia's offstage rape and her brothers' onstage baiting, Martius' brief description of Bassianus lying dead, Pyramus-like, prefigures Marcus' description of Lavinia's mutilations, that are the sum of those inflicted on Actaeon, Pentheus and Philomel, thereby ultimately leading back to the Ovidian source material. In both cases, language serves as a refuge, seeking to

<sup>21</sup> Sam Marlowe, *The Times*, June 1, 2006 (*Theatre Record*, 2006: 631).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Spencer, *The Daily Telegraph*, June 1, 2006 (*Theatre Record*, 2006: 631-32).

<sup>23</sup> Bottom/Pyramus says: «*O wherefore, nature, didst thou lions frame, / Since lion vile hath here deflowered my dear?*» (V.1.286-87).



master disarray through cultural reference and rhetorical pattern, as if the characters were striving to reassure themselves that everything is not falling apart in spite of appearances —until literary and linguistic codes implode under the pressure of horror, giving way to Titus’ manic «Ha, ha, ha», when his sons’ heads and his own lopped-off hand are brought to him.

The night here is moral. The tragedy is so steeped in desolation that a cloud seems to hang over the characters, as if day were fled. For Bailey’s Globe production, designer William Dudley shrouded the stage in black draperies and enclosed the theatre in a claustrophobic space by dimming the daylight with a dark velarium that enclosed the (usually) open Globe, trapping the spectators within an oppressive space, as if they and the whole theatre were sucked in billowing fog into a *mise en abyme*, danger flowing from the net in which Bassianus, Martius and Quintus were caught, to pollute the whole theatre. The darkness of the pit is announced in Titus’ dream hours earlier («I have been troubled in my sleep this night», II.2.29), its premonitory dimension emphasised by the shadow that Aaron’s words had cast over the coming hunt:

[...]

The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull:  
there speak and strike, brave boys, and take your turns.  
There serve your lust, shadowed from heaven’s eye,  
and revel in Lavinia’s treasury.

(II.1.129-32)

Lavinia too seems to sense danger, in a compact phrase that links the setting, which Tamora had found so welcoming, and the colour of Aaron’s skin, which is associated with luxuriousness and evil omens:

LAVINIA. [...]

(*To Bassianus*) I pray you, let us hence,



and let her joy her raven-coloured love.<sup>24</sup>  
This valley fits the purpose passing well.

(II.3.82-84)

TAMORA. The birds chant melody on every bush,  
the snakes lie rollèd in the cheerful sun,  
the green leaves quiver with the cooling wind  
and make a chequered shadow on the ground.

(II.3.12-15)

Although the scene takes place in full daylight, as Titus and Tamora had indicated moments earlier, the darkness becomes almost physical in the scene where Martius and Quintus discover Bassianus' body, with an atmosphere of oppressively lengthening shadows that mark the entrance into a cycle of horror akin to Dante's visit to the second circle in *Inferno*, that of *luxuria*, where he comes «into a place mute of all light»<sup>25</sup> (*in loco d'ogne luce muto*, V.28), with «people that are so lashed by the black air» (*genti che l'aura near sì gastiga*, V.51). Interestingly, one of the first shadows he crosses is that of Semiramis, the builder of Babylon, to whom Tamora has just been compared by Lavinia: «She was so given to lechery that she made lust licit in her law, to take away the blame she had incurred» (*A vizio di lussuria fu sì rota, / che libito fé licita in sua legge, / per tòrre I biasmo in che era condotta*, V. 55-57).

Quintus and Martius are heading for «Pluto's region» (IV.2.13), a spiritual hell. The brothers' steps towards their macabre discovery and ensuing downfall, after they literally fall in the pit, are guided by Aaron, the «barbarous Moor» (II.3.78), the stage epitome of the Pagan, an agent of error and satanic evil («Some devil whisper curses in my ear», V.3.11). In the context of the period, one understands that the corrector of the Second Quarto felt the need to add four lines at the end of the play to underscore the need for «justice» to be

<sup>24</sup> Tamora earlier referred to the «fatal raven» (II.2.97); see also Lady Macbeth, «*The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements*» (*Macbeth*, I.5.37-39).

<sup>25</sup> Alighieri, 1970 (vol. 1): 48-49. Following quotations are from 1970 (vol. 1): 50-51.



visited on that Moor —thereby reducing the impact of the seeds of disaster at the heart of Rome sown by Shakespeare in the opening scene of the play. The Moor is not alone: he is the ally and manipulator of two other figures of unbelievers, the young Goths, Chiron and Demetrius, sons of Tamora, who, as we have seen, is associated with Semiramis, queen of Babylon, a place that carries both mythological and biblical connotations. In Jeremy 51: 38, the people of Babylon are assimilated to lions as God prepares to destroy the city and Aaron compares his fury to that of a «mountain lioness» (IV.2.137) as he does his utmost to save his child from death.

Bearing Dante in mind, we see that Quintus and Martius are heading for a spiritual inferno, led by Aaron, to whom Tamora had described hell in terms that recall both fifteenth-century art and the inflamed preaching of puritan preachers. This is both Virgil’s and the medieval Christians’ hell, a scene of wintry, physical and moral desolation haunted by slimy, repugnant creatures over which the «nightly owl or fatal raven» watches, in which the only tree to be seen is the «dismal yew», associated with churchyards:<sup>26</sup>

A barren detested vale you see it is;  
the trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,  
O’ercome with moss and baleful mistletoe;  
here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds  
unless the nightly owl or fatal raven.  
And when they showed me this abhorred pit,  
they told me here at dead time of the night  
a thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,  
ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,  
would make such fearful and confused cries  
as any mortal body hearing it  
should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly.  
No sooner had they told me this hellish tale,  
but straight they told me they would bind me here  
unto the body of this dismal yew

<sup>26</sup> In *Romeo and Juliet*, Paris instructs his page to hide «[u]nder yon yew trees» when he visits the churchyard at night to lay flowers on Juliet’s tomb (V.3.3).



and leave me to this miserable death.

(II.2.93-108)

Tamora revels in this evocation, comparing herself to Christian martyrs bound to trees, before going on to invite revenge and murder. No-one is fooled by this piece of play-acting, yet it announces the hell-like moments to come: the torturing of Lavinia, the murder of Bassianus, the baiting of Martius and Quintus, Titus' killing of Tamora's sons and her own end, in a pit where she is left to die. The anaphoric rhetoric is literalised on the stage.

The spiritual descent into hell, to which Aaron directs the steps of Martius and Chiron, is situated in the antipodes of the Kingdom of Heaven. The treasure Aaron has hidden at the foot of a tree, near Bassianus' body, carries the threat of death, not promises of future, unlike the treasure Christ refers to in a parable: «Againe, the kingdome of heaven is like unto a treasure hid in ye field, which when a man hath founde, hee hideth it, and for joye thereof departeth, and selleth all that hee hath, and byeth that field». (Matthew 13:44)<sup>27</sup> Hell awaits Quintus and Martius.

In such a context, it is hardly surprising that, as they approach the pit, Quintus and Martius have the impression that their «sight is very dull, whate'er it bodes» (II.3.195). This sense of things being blurred, of unexplained fear, is extended in Martius' exclamation, after he falls into the pit, «My heart suspects more than mine eye can see» (213); «my compassionate heart / Will not permit mine eyes once to behold / The thing whereat it trembles by surmise» (217-19). This is like a first expression of the horror Marcus expresses moments later on seeing Lavinia. The forcefulness of signs imposes silence on her brothers too: after Martius briefly reveals his identity and Bassianus' death, they will not speak again.

---

<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the Geneva Bible (1560).



The crimes are perpetrated by members of the same family. This brings to mind Joseph and his brothers: «Come now therefore, and let us slaie him, and cast him into some pit, & we wil say, A wicked beast hath devoured him». (Genesis 37: 20) «... cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness...» (Genesis 37: 22)

In *Titus Andronicus*, there is no Ruben to ensure that the victim’s life be spared. The «detested, dark, blood-drinking pit» (II.3.224) in the Roman forest is steeped in blood, like the mulberry tree, a hellish place in Tamora’s «hellish tale» (II.2.105). While speaking of the «pit» (224), Martius also compares his fall to a descent into hell, a «fell devouring receptacle / As hateful as Cocytus’ misty mouth» (235-36). One thus finds, within a few lines, images of a pit and of devouring beasts, as in the attack on Joseph, the descent into hell being here a substitute for the Biblical «wilderness». The «pit» is also one of the mouths of hell: repeatedly used in the Bible, it is used four times in this scene within 300 lines, alternating with «hole», «grave» and «womb». The word «receptacle», meaning «vessel», also carries moral and religious connotations that indifferently point to salvation or to damnation.<sup>28</sup> Used by Shakespeare, in *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, to designate a repository of death, it serves here as a link between the pit and hell, but also between the worlds of Rome and the forest. Titus, in the opening scene of the play, described the

<sup>28</sup> «Receptacle. A place of receipt, or any vessell to receive a thing in» (Bullokar, 1616). Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, describes Abraham’s bosom as «the receptacle of all, that should enter in bliss» («A Sermon preached before the Kings Maiestie, at White-hall, on Saturday, the XXV. of December, A.D. MDCXIII. being Christ-Masse day», XCVI. sermons by the Right Honorable and Reverend Father in God, Lancelot Andrewes, late Lord Bishop of Winchester, 1629). Calvin’s comment to Mark 5: 9 («My name is Legion») is translated as follows: «for every man lieth open, not only to particular devils, but is a receptacle to whole multitudes of devils»: (Calvin, 1584: 264). In *Hypnerotomachia; The Strife of Love in a Dreame* (Colonna, 1592: B2), Poliphilus is lost in a wood that resembles both the forest of Athens, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the one outside Rome, in *Titus Andronicus*: «Whereupon my reason perswaded me to believe, that this vastwood, was only a receptacle for savage and hurtful beasts, such as the tusked Bore, the furious and bloud thirstie Beare, the hissing serpent, and invading Woolfe, against which I was unprovided to make resistance, but rayther as a prey sent amongst them, miserablie to have my flesh and bones rent and gnawne in pieces».



Andronici family vault as the «sacred receptacle of my joys» (I.1.92) —Juliet imagines herself awakening from her drugged sleep, «As in a vault, an ancient receptacle» (IV.2.38–39). Crime has sullied the receptacle in which Bassianus' body lies, just as the treasure buried by Aaron parodies the treasure that symbolises the Kingdom of Heaven in the Bible.

These repeated references to holes, materialised onstage in the pit, contribute to create a sense of downward verticality that literalises moral disintegration and the plunge into death. Christ's descent from the cross is emblematic of the two planes: the cross seems to dominate and overwhelm the body lying on the ground below and those that weep over it, while simultaneously pointing to God and the sky in a message of hope. There is no hope of elevation in *Titus Andronicus*. Instead, darkness, engendered by the language of night, rises from the «detested, dark, blood-drinking pit» (224) and spreads over the forest, the city and the whole play, as in Revelation 9: 2, «And he opened the bottomles pit, and there arose the smoke of the pit, as the smoke of a great fornace, and the sunne and the ayre were darkened by the smoke of the pit». This night is that of the «bottomless pit» in which Satan is bound and shut up (Revelation 20:1, 3), unlike the night that those who walk in the steps of God and Christ need not fear: «And there shalbe no night there, and they nede no candle, nether light of ye sunne : for the lord God giveth them light, and they shal reigne for evermore». (Revelation 22: 5)

In the bottom of the pit, there is no hope, as Job knows so well; to prevent the soul from «going into the pit» is to shun suicide and live in order to see the light: «And kepe backe his soul from the pit, & that his life shulde not passe by the sworde». (Job 33: 18); «He wil deliver his soule from going into the pit, and his life shal se the light». (Job 33: 28); «That he may turne backe his soule from the pit, to be illuminate in the light of the living». (Job 33: 30)



In the pit, the light of a candle which, as in some family vault, might throw a glow on the cheeks of a dead man, or the dim pallor of the moon, or the stone shining on Bassianus' ring might signify the faintest glimmer of hope and compassion to «lighten all this hole» (II.3.227), tentatively raising a corner of the dark drapery of a tragedy where death is not caused by suicidal error or savage beasts, but by a conspiracy that is all the more ruthless in that it is perverse and perpetrated by Pagans who are simultaneously supposed to be members of the same family.

Will that dim pallor suffice, though? Quintus is left grasping at rational straws: «If it be dark how dost thou know 'tis he?» (225). Similarly Martius and Quintus' classical culture,<sup>29</sup> whereby they attempt to create a distanciation with a terrifying reality by viewing it through a literary prism, cannot satisfy their questionings or ease their apprehension. The reference to Ovid, through Pyramus, to talk of their brother-in-law's body, is both adequate and ill-adapted. Bassianus is and is not Pyramus. He did not kill himself for love, he died because he was Lavinia's lawful husband; reasons of state and patriarchal arbitrariness sought to prevent their marriage, rising like a wall that he overleapt by kidnapping her. Neither reason nor classical culture is adequate to enable Martius and Quintus to realise what is happening: their heritage has failed them, perhaps because they lack Christian faith and a Biblical knowledge that, interacting with mythology, might have helped them to make sense of the seemingly senseless: «Lord Bassianus lies berayed in blood / all on a heap, like to a slaughtered lamb, [...]». Read in this context, the image of the sacrificial lamb suggests Christ, almost too easily, while Quintus and Martius' doubts recall those that preyed on the minds of disciples such as Peter, during that other night of betrayal, which was followed by a day of darkness, when Christ

<sup>29</sup> The characters try to read events or regulate their conduct through classical culture: the difficulty lies in choosing the adequate myths and being in a position of *integer vitae*. See Bate, 1993: 105-09.



was crucified: «And it was about the sixth houre: and there was a darkenes all over the land, until the ninth hour. And the Sunne was darkened...» (Luke 23: 44-45) The nearby presence of the elder reinforces the image of treason, since while the changing hue of its berries recall the mulberry, it is also, according to a medieval tradition that was still known at the Renaissance, the tree on which Judas hanged himself after having betrayed Christ.<sup>30</sup>

There is a great solitariness in that evocation of Bassianus lying dead in the forest, that may remind us of Christ's on Mount Olive and during his crucifixion. The work of Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538) and his pupil Georg Lemberger (ca. 1495-1559) is noted for their illustrations of early vernacular editions of the Bible, and closely associated with the German reformation. In 1512, a woodcut was made of a study of Christ by Altdorfer, *Die Beweinung Christi* (Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich), who also drew a solitary Pyramus lying in the forest below tall trees, with an archway in the background (Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, ca. 1510). A year later, Lemberger drew what seems to be his only mythological subject, *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Robert von Hirsch collection, Basel), which bears a striking resemblance to Altdorfer's *Die Beweinung Christi*, both in composition and framing as well as in the position of the *gisant* figure. Lying at the heart of the wilderness, near the opening of a tomb or vault, among gaunt lichen-clad trees and sharp rocks that are the hallmark of Altdorfer and Lemberger's work, Christ and Pyramus lie with their heads thrown back towards the viewer, knees folded. Christ's head is cradled in

<sup>30</sup> «Judas was hanged on an elder» (*Loves Labours Lost*, V.2.598). «A tree of evil associations in popular legend, and, according to medieval fable, that on which Judas Iscariot hanged himself, the mushroom-like excrescences on the bark still being known as Judas's (or Jew's) ears. Sir John Maundeville, speaking (1364) of the Pool of Sil'oe, says, 'Fast by is the elder-tree on which Judas hanged himself [...] when he sold and betrayed ou Lord'». Brewer, 1951: 388). In a note to the citation in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Richard David (1960: 176n) recalls the Mandeville quotation and also quotes Longland's *Piers Plowman*, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* («The hat he wears, Judas left under the elder when he hanged himself», IV.6.68) and Ben Jonson's *Every Man out of his Humour* («He shall be your Judas, and you shall be his elder-tree to hang on», IV.4).



Mary’s lap, while Mary Magdalen stands above him, bent and hands clasped. Pyramus lies on the ground in a similar, foreshortened position, his head resting on the edge of the semi-underground vault entrance, while Thisbe stands above him in a position of grief that recalls Mary Magdalen, albeit to the left instead of to the right of the drawing. The single tree rising above the scene and the rocks in the background provide a similar setting. The vault is more visible in the foreground in Lemberger’s drawing, recalling Christ’s entombing, Ninus’ funerary monument, near which the lovers planned to meet, and their future burial. Lemberger has added a ruined house in the background, as a possible reminder of the cleft in the wall and rift between the households. His *Pyramus and Thisbe* is, in Isabel Christina Reindl’s view, coherent with his approach, which «reduced Antiquity themes to their bare essential and linked them mainly to Christian representations of faith» [Reindl, 2006: 77].<sup>31</sup> Lemberger’s Christ-inspired Pyramus may in turn have influenced a later woodcut attributed to Altdorfer showing Pyramus and Thisbe (Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, 1518); this shows the *gisant* Pyramus facing the viewer, one leg bent, lying on a stone slab, with an archway in the background.

In *Titus Andronicus*, the solitariness is all the more absolute insofar as, after the moment of discovery, there is no Thisbe or Mary Magdalen to weep over him. Lavinia briefly throws herself on his body in Bailey’s production, before being dragged away in a net by Tamora’s sons — in much the same way as her husband’s body and her two brothers are later shown in a netlike trap. Bassianus’ body simply disappears. We do not know what becomes of it. All we know is that it will not rest alongside Lavinia’s. She will be laid to rest in the Andronici vault, besides her father, whose rigid patriotism and patriarchal views contributed to Rome having become a place without faith, which hope and redemption seem to have fled. Just after Bassianus’ murder and before

<sup>31</sup> For a reproduction of Lemberger’s drawing, see Reindl, 2006 (2): 315; for Altdorfer’s *Beweinung Christi*, see Reindl, 2006 (1): 120.



Lavinia's rape, Tamora had refused all mercy (II.2.151), declaring herself to be «pitiless» (162). The 1594 Quarto edition of the play closes on two lines that end with «pity», a rhyme that, given the context, is steeped in irony and creates an effect whereby the word cancels itself out,<sup>32</sup> instead of suggesting a sense of compassion in the new emperor: «Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,/ and being dead, let birds on her take pity».(V.3.198-99)

All potential of mercy is wiped out by the barbaric punishments Lucius inflicts on those who persecuted his family, with a determination to fight back «tooth for tooth, eye for eye», reminiscent of the Old rather than the New Testament. We are far from the «mercy» Portia invites Shylock to show, in keeping with Scripture: «I wil have mercie, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance». (Matthew 9: 13)<sup>33</sup>

\*\*\*

Ultimately, perhaps, the real hell, in *Titus Andronicus*, is not the one depicted in a rhetoric of horror, but the destruction of the only potential for love in the play, the combined barbarity of revenge and lust, the resulting spiritual desert, the absence of forgiveness and redemption that lays bare the terrifying solitariness of that corpse, forgotten at the heart of the forest and the play. Be it the union of Christ and the human soul, in the medieval Christian perspective, or the reunion in a single urn or vault of Pyramus and Thisbe's ashes, in the Ovidian tradition, the pity of the gods of Olympus —«Her prayer with the gods and with their parents took effect» [Golding, 1567]— and of the artist as *deus ex machina* seems impossible. There is no transfiguration of suffering into hope for the future, the wall of Roman law has neither held back the barbarians nor become that «living stone disallowed of men, but chosen of God, and precious»

<sup>32</sup> «What Lucius is advocating in the final couplet is an absence of pity» (Bate: 1995: 15).

<sup>33</sup> See Monsarrat (2005: 1-13).



(1 Peter 2: 4), on which «a spiritual house» (1 Peter 2: 5) and citadels of hope, not hatred, might one day be built.

Reviews of Bailey’s 2006 *Titus Andronicus* conveyed the sense of hopelessness she had explored in her production. Nicholas de Jongh and Charles Spencer described it as «a temple of death»,<sup>34</sup> Michael Billington noted the «cavernous exits [that] seem to lead to the mouth of hell».<sup>35</sup> In Farah Karim-Cooper’s view, staging choices, such as placing the «blood-drinking pit» among the groundlings, «involved the audience as a collective character, not only by engaging them emotionally and physically, but also by engaging their consciences as well» [Karim-Cooper, 2008: 68]. Shakespeare’s insertion of a reference to the myth of Pyramus, at the very moment when a brief gaze of horror, confusion and compassion rests on a forgotten corpse, seems to me to mark a potential junction between the classical and Christian worlds, a meeting-point between cultural and religious references that have been discarded in a pit at the heart of savagery. Placing that pit in the audience, at the heart of the theatre, as Bailey did, raises the question, for a modern public, of the extent to which it is complicit in a barbary that allows no room for figures such as that of Pyramus, and their mediating function between mythological and biblical patterns of thought and behaviour.

<sup>34</sup> *Evening Standard*, May 31, 2006 (*Theatre Record*, 2006: 630); *The Daily Telegraph*, June 1, 2006 (*Theatre Record*, 2006: 631-32).

<sup>35</sup> *The Guardian*, June 1, 2006 (*Theatre Record*, 2006: 630).



---



---

## Bibliography

- ALIGHIERI, Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Inferno*, transl. by Charles S. Singleton, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.
- BATE, Jonathan, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.
- , ed., *Titus Andronicus*, The Arden Shakespeare, London and New York, Methuen, 1995.
- Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1870), Centenary Edition, rev. Ivor H. Evans, London, Cassell, 1951 (1971).
- BULLOKAR, John, *An English Expositor*, 1616
- BULLOUGH, Geoffrey, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 6, *Other «Classical» Plays: Titus Andronicus, Troilus and Cressida, Timon of Athens, Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York, Columbia University Press, 1966.
- CALVIN Jean, *A harmonie upon the three Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke with the commentarie of M. John Calvine: faithfully translated out of Latine into English, by E.P.*, 1584.
- COLLINS, Eleanor, review of Lucy Bailey's production of *Titus Andronicus* (Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London, 2006), in *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 70, autumn 2006, 49-51.
- COLONNA, Francesco, *Hypnerotomachia; The Strife of Love in a Dreame*, London, Simon Waterson, 1592.
- CONN LIEBLER, Naomi, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy*, London, Routledge, 1995.
- DAVID, Richard, ed., *Love's Labour's Lost*, The Arden Shakespeare, London and New York, Methuen, 1951 (1960),
- DESSEN, Alan C., *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare in Performance Series, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992.



- 
- GOLDING, Arthur, *The XV. Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis*, London, Willyam Seres, 1567.
- HUGHES, Alan, ed., *Titus Andronicus*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- KAHN, Coppélia, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*, London, Routledge, 2007.
- KARIM-COOPER, Farah, «Shakespeare’s war on terror: Critical review of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (directed by Lucy Bailey) at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, London, 2006», *Shakespeare*, vol. 4, nos. 1-4 March-December 2008, 63-71.
- MAXWELL, J. C., ed., *Titus Andronicus*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Methuen & Co., 1953 (1968).
- MONSARRAT, Gilles, «Shylock and Mercy», *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 67, spring 2005), 1-13.
- OVID, *Metamorphoses*, transl. Frank Justus Miller, rev. G. P. Goold, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1916 (1999).
- PARKER, Douglas H., «Shakespeare’s use of Comic Conventions in *Titus Andronicus*», *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56, 4, summer 1987, 486-99.
- REINDL, Isabel Christina, *Georg Lemberger, Ein Künstler der Reformationszeit. Leben und Werk*, Inaugural-Dissertation, 2 vols., University of Bamberg, 2006.  
URN: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-opus-2538/ URL: <<http://www.opus-bayern.de/uni-bamberg/volltexte/2010/253/>> [accessed 27 October 2010].
- Theatre Record*, 21 May-3 June 2006, Reviews of Lucy Bailey’s *Titus Andronicus*, 630-32.
- 



- VALLS-RUSSELL, Janice, *Pyrame et Thisbé. Itinéraires d'un mythe ovidien dans l'Angleterre des XIVe-XVIIe siècles: transmission, appropriations, réécritures*, doctoral dissertation, 2 vols., Université Montpellier III, 2009.
- WAITH, Eugene M., «The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*», *Shakespeare Survey* 10, 1957, 39-49.
- , ed., *Titus Andronicus*, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- WELLS, Stanley and Gary TAYLOR, *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986 (2005).
- WHITE, R. S., *Innocent Victims: Poetic Injustice in Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, The Athlone Press, 1982 (1986).

