

## Indecorum and empire in *Titus Andronicus*

Ayanna Thompson

"Human sacrifice. Gang rape. Mutilation. Ritual butchery. Mother-son cannibalism," was Katharine Maus' succinct summary of *Titus Andronicus*. And critics of the play have often focused on the goriness of the play's actions, with T. S. Eliot infamously calling it "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written." But those estimations often stop short by only describing the gore instead of pressing further to ask why is it so gory? What is the play about? The play is gory because in many respects it is about the ways that empires function indecorously. The idea of decorum in classical literature involved the ability to fit literary language appropriately to the characters and situations depicted. In Horace's "Ars Poetica," the dramatic writer is instructed to depict his characters according to a wise understanding of real social customs, such that a play is both a fitting depiction of different kinds of people and inherently instructive of social and moral order.

...he who has learned what he owes his country and his friends, what love is due a parent, a brother, and a guest, what is imposed on a senator and a judge, what is the function of a general sent to war, he surely knows how to give each character his fitting part.

If a decorous play, in Horace's sense, is one whose depiction of social life is reflective of a healthy social order, the wild indecorum spread throughout *Titus Andronicus* seems to be

Thompson, Ayanna. "Indecorum and empire in *Titus Andronicus*." *Throughlines*. [Throughlines.org/suite-content/indecorum-and-empire-in-titus-andronicus](https://throughlines.org/suite-content/indecorum-and-empire-in-titus-andronicus). [date accessed].

designed to reflect the loss of any correlative social order in the Rome it depicts -- a society whose global reach and principle of incorporation are built into the very model of its empire. For early modern English writers and audience members alike, thinking about politics inevitably entailed thinking about Rome. This is still true to some degree. In early modern England this was true both because of the longstanding pervasiveness of the Latin language and a canon of Roman writers within European intellectual culture, and because of ingrained habits of mind, whereby Roman political history served as a primary reservoir of both positive exemplars and cautionary tales that were used for illustrative comparison with the early modern present.

Unlike Shakespeare's later Roman plays, which take up well-known incidents from actual Roman history and use the scaffolding provided by Plutarch's *Lives* to help render characters and places semi-realistic, *Titus Andronicus* tells a story that appears to be entirely made up. The following quotation, from a remark by the poet Barnabe Googe, sums up an Elizabethan idea about late Rome that seems fitting for the play's setting:

Rome, while she maintained her soldiers, was mistress and commandress of the whole world: but when she fell to her own delicacies, and neglecting of them, she became not only a triumph and contempt to the rude Vandal and barbarous Goth, but as yet she remains a spectacle of miserable ruin to the universal world.

This capsule summary of the idea of imperial Roman decline could almost be read as a gloss of the play's opening act, where Saturninus' neglect of Rome's greatest soldier is one of the things that sets the play in motion. The idea of Roman decadence as explored in *Titus Andronicus* is bound up with the problematics of global empire. If, as in Googe's summary, "delicacies" led to Rome's decline, then the global imperial reach made possible by military might was its precondition. Titus describes Saturninus as the "wide world's

emperor" and all the foreign characters who come into the play's Rome from elsewhere are shown to be conversant in Roman literature, which is thus given as the playworld's defacto global culture. As for the play's repeated demolition of literary decorum, part of the underlying point is that a Rome that incorporates the whole wide world as well as all different eras of Roman history can no longer be said to have the kind of distinctive social and moral order that (for Horace) should provide the grounding of decorum.

As Noémie Ndiaye has suggested, the interest of the play's initial audiences in the depiction of a decadent Rome likely had a great deal to do with the increasing cosmopolitan nature of Elizabethan London itself, and with the mixture of desire and worry that the experience of such a global city might entail. *Titus Andronicus* depicts a global Rome that has lost itself and does so partly as a cautionary exploration of what global empire could come to mean for early modern London.

The imperial action that sets the play in motion is the conclusion of a ten-year war with the Goths, in which the Roman general Titus loses 21 of his children in battle. While Titus enters the play with the Goths enslaved as his prisoners of war, the first act ends with the Goths freed and Tamora made "incorporate in Rome" through her marriage to Saturninus. Like people stuffing themselves at a gluttonous feast, the late Roman Empire of *Titus Andronicus* seems indiscriminate in its incorporation of foreign matter. And while the religions, cultures and even the races of the Romans and the Goths are initially described as being in opposition, the actions of the Romans continually work to undermine putatively essential differences.

In *Titus*, the blending effects of imperial miscegenation coincide with the conventions of revenge narratives where (as many have noted), the moral and psychological distance and differences between the perpetrator and the revenger are

Thompson, Ayanna. "Indecorum and empire in *Titus Andronicus*." *Throughlines*.  
[Throughlines.org/suite-content/indecorum-and-empire-in-titus-andronicus](https://throughlines.org/suite-content/indecorum-and-empire-in-titus-andronicus). [date  
accessed].

shown to collapse. The revenger ends up resembling the perpetrator in terms of ethics, morality, and character because of their unreasoning pursuit of revenge. It is not surprising then that *Titus Andronicus* puts pressure on what exactly differentiates the Romans from the Goths. By the end of the bloody cannibalistic banquet, the audience can be sure that the Goths do not have the market cornered in barbarism. What makes the play unique in the early modern revenge tragedy canon, however, is its employment of racial differences to emphasize the boundaries that are being indecorously crossed.