

Titus Andronicus

Murder, Violence and Bodily Dismemberment

- Murder and violence play a huge role in *Titus Andronicus*. Characters are killed by a range of violent methods, and many of these are staged. This includes stabbing, cutting of throats, beheading, dismemberment, burning, and being buried in the earth and left to starve.
- Lavinia enters in 2.3 with her hands cut off and tongue cut out, having just been raped. Chiron and Demetrius perform this bodily mutilation to prevent her from being able to identify her accusers, meaning that this physical violence is very closely tied to the enabling of sexual violence.
 - The language used by characters to describe this mutilation can be very graphic. For instance, Marcus laments that she has been ‘lopped and hewed’.
- Aaron cuts off Titus’ hand on stage, having told Titus that his sons will be spared if a hand is delivered to Saturninus. This is later revealed to be a trick, when the heads of Martius and Quintus are delivered to Titus.

Cannibalism

- Titus provides a graphic description of his plans to kill Chiron and Demetrius and bake them into ‘pasties’, before serving these pies to their mother, Tamora (among others). This consumption of human flesh is then performed in the final scene.

Misogyny

- Lavinia is not asked for her consent to marry Saturninus and is later referred to by him as a ‘changing piece’ – suggesting that women are fickle commodities to be traded.
- The play features misogynistic rhetoric that imagines women as becoming stained, corrupted or contaminated by their sexuality. In other words, they are perceived as having less value if they are ‘less chaste’.
 - For instance, Bassianus argues that Tamora’s affair with Aaron has made her ‘honour of his body’s hue, / Spotted, detested and abominable’. Here, we can recognise the interplay of racist and misogynistic rhetoric.

Rape and Sexual Violence

- Lavinia’s rape is violent and graphic, and her experience following the event corresponds with what we would recognise today as trauma. It is likely that some students will find this particularly distressing.

- It's important to note that rape and sexual violence within the play are closely tied to misogyny, and to the idea that women are sexual objects with no agency over their own desire or bodies.
- Chiron, Demetrius and Aaron plot Lavinia's rape in advance, describing it in detail as a hunt, with Lavinia being the 'dainty doe'.
- Within the play, survivors of rape and sexual violence are subjected to a belief that it is better to die than to live with shame.
 - Lavinia begs to be killed, rather than raped – describing her incoming assault as 'worse-than-killing-lust'.
 - Titus ultimately kills his own daughter for this reason, having sought confirmation from Saturninus that 'the girl should not survive her shame'.
- Saturninus and Bassianus also use the term 'rape' in the context of abducting a woman, although sexual violence is not entirely absent from this meaning.

Racism

- The play features a significant amount of anti-Black racism, especially towards Aaron and his unnamed child. The role of Aaron was originally played by a white actor impersonating Blackness through make up, wigs and clothing.
- The language used in relation to Aaron plays into longstanding dramatic associations of Blackness with evil, sub-humanity and animality. Throughout the play, he is referred to as an 'incarnate devil', 'accursed devil', 'inhuman dog', 'black ill-favoured fly' and 'unhallowed slave'.
- In Bandello's source, the counterpart to Aaron is explicitly identified as a Moorish slave, and Shakespeare includes lines that allude to Aaron being formerly enslaved or not fully possessing freedom. He uses Tamora's new position as an opportunity to shed his 'slavish weeds and servile thoughts'.
- Tamora and Aaron's child is rejected due to his darker skin complexion, with the Nurse describing him as 'A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue.'
- The word 'barbarous' is used by the Romans and the Goths in relation to each other, as well as by white characters when describing Aaron. In early modern England, the term was used to describe people perceived to be uncivilised, inferior and less intelligent.
- The word 'fair' is used repeatedly and describes a form of beauty that relies on a white and radiant complexion.

War and Imperialism

- The play opens in the aftermath of 'weary wars' between the Romans and the Goths. This context may be sensitive for students, particularly in light of ongoing conflicts today.

- We are told that the Goths have been ‘yoked’, meaning that they have been conquered or brought under Roman imperial rule. The word yoke also had connotations of enslavement. Students may associate this representation of imperial subjection with more recent instances of colonialism or slavery.

Trauma, Mental Illness and Self-Harm

- The physical and sexual violence within the play leads characters to experience significant amounts of grief and trauma.
- Titus’s willingness to sacrifice his hand, alongside his offer to Lavinia to self-mutilate his body, may be interpreted as a form of self-harm that is proposed at a moment of extreme psychological distress.

Infanticide

- In 4.2, the Nurse proposes that the Goths should murder Aaron and Tamora’s newborn child, largely because his dark complexion reveals Tamora’s infidelity. Chiron and Demetrius initially support this proposed infanticide, and Aaron must fight for his child’s right to live.
- Lucius later gives instructions to hang the child and only promises Aaron that his child ‘shall live’ and be ‘nourished’ in exchange for his confession. The child’s fate beyond the end of the play is ultimately ambiguous.

Ableism

- Chiron and Demetrius use ableist language to describe Lavinia’s body after it has been mutilated, mocking her ‘stumps’ and her inability to speak or write.
- Eloquence was valued in classical and early modern culture, and Lavinia’s loss of voice is often described in ableist terms as a lowering of her value. For example, Marcus describes her as a ‘pretty hollow cage’.
- The text indicates that the actor playing Lavinia is still communicating through action, gesture and noise, despite being non-verbal. It’s difficult to say how much the original staging of Lavinia may have played into ableist tropes. Students may require additional scaffolding about choices relating to the performance of this mode of communication.
- The word ‘dumb’ is used in relation to Lavinia several times and is an outdated, offensive term used to describe someone who does not communicate verbally.
- Titus is ‘distract’, ‘mad’ and experiencing ‘lunacy’ – all ableist terms for mental illness.