

**Moving Up: Racial and Ethnic
Transcendence in William Shakespeare's
*Titus Andronicus***

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The particular ethnic and racial attributes of Tamora and Aaron, Goth and Moor respectively, are initially seen by other characters in *Titus Andronicus* as weaknesses. In actuality, they are reclaimed traits, perceived as negative by the Roman majority but reversed and used to the minority's advantage in plots of revenge and ascendancy. Thus, the outsiders become insiders by using the underestimations of their captors to transcend their roles from prisoner to power player. The strengths they derive from their supposed deficiencies of background and skin color enable them to (temporarily) climb the political hierarchy. This unexpected mobility facilitates Rome's downfall, played out in microcosm in the text. The fetishization of Tamora's outsider status coupled with a repugnance towards Aaron's blackness by Romans comes at a price: the many deaths of those in higher ranks is the inevitable outcome of their inability to recognize violent shrewdness in those they deemed inferior. Tamora and Aaron's demise (the first explicit and the other ambiguous) at first glance seems to undercut their attainment of power, but the overall effect in Shakespeare's rendering is a revelation of surprising agency, where the presumed loser defeats the dominant power, albeit self-destructively. The status quo is upended, making even more tenuous the link of ethnicity and race to villainy, particularly in the playwright's evocation of Romans themselves as barbarians.

Tamora enters the play as a captive, designated as such by a specific reference to her prisoner status in the stage directions, as well as a captain's assertion that she and her compatriots have been "brought to yoke" (1.1.72). She is marked as a subordinate from the outset, which is a signal to the characters (and audience) to dismiss her. Shakespeare sets her up, perhaps intentionally, to be underestimated just by the mere mention of her arrival. She enters the play as a Goth, whose physical appearance draws the eye of Saturninus, the newly crowned

Emperor. Even though Saturninus is engaged to marry Titus's daughter - a strategic political move - he remarks in an aside about his attraction to Tamora, stating that she is "...of the hue / That I would choose, were I to choose anew" (1.1.264-265). Tamora is spoken of in body only, her personhood diminished to a color (echoed later by multiple mentions of Aaron's blackness). She is not equal to the Romans, and is to be broken down into parts and features, objectified sexually when Saturninus uses coded language to show her erotic value in relation to himself: "Princely shall be thy usage every way" (1.1.269). She is attractive because she *isn't* Roman, and thus can be fetishized and treated in ways that the noble women in his social caste cannot. Indeed, Saturninus's abrupt abandonment of Lavinia as his wife in favor of Tamora speaks to the allure of having someone that cannot refuse.¹ The choice is not mutual; Tamora's prisoner status doesn't allow her consent. By repeatedly identifying her as a Goth,² her ethnicity becomes something different from Saturninus; what makes Tamora appealing is that he can (supposedly) overpower her *because she is not like him*. Categorizing her as a non-Roman is a way of muting her agency, and this leads to a later inability to recognize her adroit manipulation and tactical skill. In some ways, Tamora's ascendancy was pure luck, but it was the very *fact* of her Otherness that allowed it to occur. Her ethnicity, then, was her selling point, perceived vulnerability, and hidden strength all at once.

The actions on Saturninus's part are imitated by other characters, enforcing a culture of miscalculation which allowed Tamora to satiate her need for revenge and to dismantle higher

¹ *Because* Saturninus sees her at her weakest moment (after the execution of her eldest son), his attraction also stems from his emotional and literal authority over her - a type of sadistic pleasure in dominance. What Saturninus fails to notice, however, is that the very act of overpowering Tamora is actually an admittance of her power - she is someone wild enough that she must *be* overpowered.

² Tamora's ethnicity as a Goth is mentioned in Act I in lines 272, 318, and 324.

authorities. Because Saturninus sexualizes her so early, it allows others to do the same - to their detriment. Tamora's supposed ethnic shortcomings are a target, seen most potently in Lavinia and Bassianus's ridicule. Their disrespect is rooted in ethnophobia, and they take cues from Saturninus's objectification to attack her. Lavinia states,

Under your patience, gentle empress,
'Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning,
And to be doubted that your Moor and you
Are singled forth to try experiments.
Jove shield your husband from his hounds to-day!
'Tis pity they should take him for a stag. (2.3.66-71)

The diction that Shakespeare uses for Lavinia is telling. "Horning," "experiments," and "stag" (all spoken with heavy sarcasm, particularly with the mention of "gentle empress") refer to sexual promiscuity, a trait that the characters associate with foreignness. That they are used in conjunction with Aaron's race ("your Moor") further exacerbates her transgression in their eyes. Tamora subverts their condemnation by recruiting Aaron, her lover, and her two surviving sons to murder Bassianus, the latter duo also raping and mutilating Lavinia. She uses the criticism of her sexual conduct as a rationale for violence,³ subverting the stereotypes of her ethnicity and gender by taking command of the slurs and reversing them graphically onto her foes. She forces her own sexuality onto Lavinia - they are both now united by non-Roman sexual encounters, making Lavinia a sexual equal, yet perversely so. In a sense, she utilizes the rhetoric of erotic deviance in her favor; it becomes a point of pride that enables her to resist her captors. Tamora is able to maintain her status as empress (albeit briefly) - she is able to "move up" - because she quashes those that draw attention to her Otherness. Once more, her ethnicity (channeled through

³ Tamora emphatically tells her sons that "...they call'd me foul adulteress, lascivious Goth, and all the bitterest terms that ever ear did hear to such effect: And, had you not by wondrous fortune come, this vengeance on me had they executed. Revenge it, as you love your mother's life..." (2.3.109-114).

sexual innuendo) marks her for contempt, but it is also the trait that she harnesses for violent action⁴ - and maintenance of her position.

Aaron, like Tamora, seeks to ascend to a higher station primarily for purposes of reprisal, but from the beginning his race is subject to scrutiny and ostracism.⁵ It is more difficult for him to move upwards in the same fashion because his racial categorization is more readily apparent than Tamora's. His initial plan is to "mount aloft with [his] imperial mistress" (2.1.13) where he will do away with "slavish weeds and servile thoughts!" (2.1.18). By attaching himself to her, he implicitly assumes a similar position. Aaron is a constant among others in loftier positions: he accompanies the new empress on the fateful hunting trip where the upper echelon tacitly allows his presence. He is nearly ubiquitous in palatial settings, interacting with Goths as well Romans. His ascendancy is *de facto*; he bears no title but that of a Moor, yet he is treated in tandem with Tamora. Even still, he plays a predominantly background role, where he is camouflaged (socially and in an abstractly racial way; his dark skin color allows him to fade into literal and metaphorical shadows where he is able to plot with ease). Even though his blackness is what makes him stand out, the Romans in their racist views cannot acknowledge him as any kind of threat to their power. These assumptions are his tools, and Aaron learns that to go from outsider to insider, he has to rely on both his internal and external blackness. He says of himself in the third person that he "will have his soul black like his face" [3.1.205]), the latter of which made

⁴ It must be noted that much of revenge plot is a result of Aaron's proaction. Tamora's ascent allows Aaron the opportunity to avenge both of them (indeed, he devises the plans that end in many deaths). Tamora can be seen as a passive character, subject to the conduct of her male relations (sons, lover), but what cannot be ignored is her rhetorical manipulation; she uses her silvertongue to coerce and deflect. Further, without the exoticism of her ethnic character and her allure to Saturninus, none of this would be possible. Even with her lack of physicality in revenge, she still is a supreme controller, however obliquely.

⁵ Aaron is bluntly labelled a "barbarous Moor" (2.3.78) and an "irreligious Moor" (5.3.121), while also frequently referred to derogatorily in subtextual ways.

him an outsider in the first place. His physical appearance and personality mimic and feed into one another, each reinforcing the other and enabling Aaron to carry out his malicious acts while simultaneously subverting the expectations of his race.

The final moments of *Titus Andronicus* pit two archetypes against each other: Aaron and Lucius (the last remaining son in the line of the Andronici) represent two of the extremes of the play: the stigmatized Other and the unraveling Roman. This seeming balance masks the power of what Aaron, with the aid of Tamora and her sons, has accomplished and what Lucius is unable to see. The outsiders, harnessing racial and ethnic underestimation (and the catastrophes they produced), pushed Titus and his family to enlist an army of Goths, “rais[ing] a power, / To be revenged on Rome and Saturnine” (3.2.299-300). The Romans must now unite with those they had originally held prisoner, reversing the situation from Act I. Those that they had scorned and put in chains are now the ones that they entreat for help; Tamora, now dead, and Aaron, sentenced to death, transcended their ethnic and racial boundaries by proxy, forcing their enemies to unite with their own kin. There is a potential implication that the Goths, now situated firmly inside Rome by invitation - and raised higher by their associations *with* the Romans - have ample opportunity to destroy it. The Goth and the Moor not only eliminated the Roman emperor and his closest allies, but also put at risk the empire they could only dream of eliminating altogether. They climbed the hierarchy that would normally have been closed off to them by their foreignness, and though it cost them everything, they nevertheless left behind a legacy of agency that would bring the imperium down with them. Lucius seems to believe he has control when he states in the last lines of the play that Tamora’s body will be “throw[n] forth to beasts and birds of prey. / Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take

pity!” (5.3.198). He equates her physical death with conquering her body, and is unable to acknowledge that he has been manipulated; her ascendance and impact lasts longer than her corporal being, a fact that Lucius seems to miss. Even more compellingly, it is Aaron and Lucius that have the last words, not Lucius *alone*. The victory seems hollow when the primary antagonist is both still alive and in conversation with the “victor.” Indeed, there is a hint of something unresolved in Aaron’s unseen demise.⁶ All of the other players in the text have been killed explicitly on stage or very clearly off-stage. There is strength in the ambiguity of his execution when all of the deaths have so much certainty. It could be argued that Aaron’s adroit command of his racial identity - and his ability to contort it so that it reflected back in his favor - is so insidious that his blackness is considered unworthy of being destroyed outright. Thus, he has the upper hand and effectively controls his own fate while Lucius maintains his unawareness.

Characters in William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* are constantly in motion: upwards, downwards, and even laterally at points. This dynamism is the foundation for Tamora and Aaron’s own movements, just as discrimination is the bedrock for their ascendancy. Using systemic prejudice in their favor, Tamora and Aaron are able to overcome the limitations assumed of their ethnic and racial backgrounds. The spectacularly theatrical way in which they do so makes their short-lived ascendance that much more impressive. Starting without leverage at the beginning of the text and then closing the play having crumbled Rome from within is both a demonstration of self-empowerment and a testament to the vigor with which Shakespeare writes of Roman racism. The exoticism of Tamora’s ethnicity catapulted her to a higher position,

⁶ Interestingly, Aaron’s form of punishment is to be “Set...breast-deep in earth... / ...fasten’d in the earth” (5.3.179-183), where he will die of starvation. Even this is an indirect death, occurring over time rather than in one brutal stroke.

which gave her the advantage she needed to mobilize herself and Aaron into plots of revenge.

Aaron usurped the widespread notion of non-whiteness as a hindrance; his machinations, evolving out of Tamora's escalation, allowed both to rise above perceived ethnic and racial boundaries. Most significantly, their upward mobility outlasted even themselves, compounding their transcendence and making their deaths less of a defeat and more of a hierarchal subversion. Tamara and Aaron's actions are ultimately not just about individual gain but also about wider and symbolic wins for future marginalized generations in the world of *Titus Andronicus*.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. New York: Penguin, 2000.