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READING LIKE THE JAPANESE: THE GOTHIC AESTHETICS OF HORROR IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TITUS ANDRONICUS*

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***Abstract:** Shakespeare's plays have been universally praised for centuries. However, *Titus Andronicus* was not included in this positive evaluation until the second half of the 20th century, when mainly feminist criticism contributed to an academically kinder re-assessment of this generally gory play. This paper, focusing on the issues of aesthetic value and the deletion of empathy, proposes a defamiliarized, a different reading of this Shakespearean play, from the perspective of the Japanese people, 'famous' for aesthetically enjoying the cathartic showing of gratuitous violence.*

***Key words:** aesthetics, alienation effect, empathy, Gothic, horror.*

Introduction

If Shakespeare were alive today he'd be hosting the 'Late review' and chairing a heated debate about who was better, Keats or Dylan. In his debate, Shakespeare would smugly remind his guests that Shakespeare provides the standard by which

all cultural evaluation is measured. If Shakespeare were alive today he'd be what he is: an impassable horizon protecting the Anglo-American world from anything resembling culture. He's the buffer-zone protecting the Anglo-American world from the claims of any writing that struggles to generate a new mode of perception or a new image of thought (everything is always already in Shakespeare), just as he provides the point of demarcation that delegitimizes any form of popular cultural expression (nothing is more popular both in sales and in the affections of the groundlings than Shakespeare). Shakespeare thus sustains the oppositional couplet, high-low culture, by being both and neither at the same time. Critical and cultural appropriations of Shakespeare, his name, work and myth, articulate multiple contradictory and conflicting positions within a given horizon. As such his fiction sustains a border that remains unstable, but also flexible within his large compass, site of the formation, reversal and dissolution of cultural values. (Botting and Wilson:194, emphasis added)

Following the line of hypothetical Shakespearean urges and self-evaluations expressed by Botting and Wilson in their *Gothic Shakespeares*, this study proposes yet another modality of perception for one particular play. Thus, it suggests that if Shakespeare were alive today, he would probably be sick and tired of centuries of adulation focused on his *oeuvre* in general but not on his first-born, *Titus Andronicus*. The Elizabethan playwright would most likely fume about the disparaged merits of the bloodiest of all his Roman tragedies and try to force us to perceive the carefully calculated effects of aesthetics above agony, beauty beyond blood, and charisma covering carnage. If Shakespeare were alive today, he would demand a fresh perception and maybe compel us to perform the journey to the East, to the Other, and see things through Japanese eyes.

In noticing the cycle of violence which is one of the staples of Japanese high and low culture as well as the crucial feature of *Titus Andronicus*, the present paper suggests a 'Japanese' reading of this

Shakespearean play. To this purpose, *Titus Andronicus* will not be read comparatively alongside a particular Japanese work/s. Rather, this study proposes placing the focus of interpretation on the issue of the *aesthetics of horror*, which, as will be argued below, is artistically achieved through a conscious *erasure of empathy* and an implementation of the *alienation effect*, processes that can also be discerned in Japanese culture at large.

About Gothic Aesthetics and its Relevance to the Subject Matter

Before proceeding with the text analysis, I would like to define the main theoretical framework, which is comprised in the subtitle of my paper, namely *Gothic aesthetics*. Adorno, in his well-known *Aesthetic Theory*, has written that:

Beauty is not the platonically pure beginning but rather something that originated in the renunciation of what was once feared, which only as a result of this renunciation – retrospectively, so to speak, according to its own telos – became the ugly. Beauty is the spell over the spell, which devolves upon it. The ambiguousness of the ugly results from the fact that the subject subsumes under the abstract and the formal category of ugliness everything condemned by art: polymorphous sexuality as well as the violently mutilated and lethal. (Adorno 1997:47)

Moreover, Adorno states, art cannot afford to “disavow remembrance of *accumulated horror*; otherwise its form would be trivial” (Adorno:324, emphasis added). If the negative and the horrific are to be kept as constitutive of aesthetics, it follows that aesthetics refers to a manner of perceiving which, in order to live up to its proclaimed aims – those of not merely establishing standards for evaluating artwork, but also pushing the

boundaries of pre-established responses – has to become an *experience*, “one which unnerves and disturbs” (Ng 2007:13).

The present study takes its cue from Adorno’s vision of what constitutes *aesthetics*; thus, it is designed to be read as the result of an incentive to comprehend what forms the aesthetic response when we approach a linked series of horrors almost gleefully related, like the ones in this Shakespearean tragedy. To re-formulate, I am interested in the aesthetic worth of the literary text and in the means of achieving it. Closely related to answering these tentative questions is also my suggestion that *Titus Andronicus* is a text informed by *Gothic aesthetics*. According to Ng, *Gothic aesthetics* is a composite of *literary aesthetics* (discussing the *Gothic-ness* of a text from the point of view of specific themes and motifs) and the *theoretical dimension* (i.e. employing contemporary theories, such as Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytical ones) (Ng:15). Moreover, it is also “a mode of engagement with an artwork that involves emotional, evaluative and intellectual appreciation” (Ng:12). For this particular case, as my analysis will strive to argue, the category of *emotional* engagement is almost void and is deliberately displaced by those of evaluative and intellectual appreciation – unless, of course, one were interested in how much emotional effort and involvement it takes *not* to become emotionally involved.

Without entering into too many details at this stage, I am suggesting an assessment of the Shakespearean play as a (proto)Gothic text, chiefly for two reasons. Firstly, as Coral Ann Howells argues, “instead of a sense of stability and harmony what we find in Gothic fiction is a dreadful insecurity in the face of a contingent world which is entirely unpredictable and menacing” (quoted in Ng 2007:15). Secondly, as Stewart mentions, the

Gothic-ness of the text is artistically achieved by an “accumulated sensation of threat as the narrative progresses, indemnifying instead of muting its element of horror” (quoted in Ng:16):

Rather than cancelling the significance of the original event by displacing it, the horror story increases the event’s significance, multiplying its effect with each repetition. It articulates a paradox of reversibility and irreversibility in the given social shape of death. For while death is irreversible in the nonfictive world, in the horror story it may threaten an infinity of reversibility; it becomes the finale which is not final, whose limits are determined by its narrative possibilities (qtd. in Ng 2007:16)

Although both Howell and Stewart focus their discussion on Gothic fiction and horror story respectively, it seems obvious to me that the features which they mention and which are instrumental in assessing the *Gothic aesthetics* of a given text are also the most obvious qualities of this Shakespearean tragedy. Hence, my text analysis will concentrate on arguing for the *Gothic aesthetics* of *Titus Andronicus* and consequently on the *experience* of horror which is, in my opinion, the most significant staple of the text.

Why the Japanese?

When one is attempting to establish one of the many Others to the European Self, the Japanese are among the first who spring to mind. The Europeans and the Americans alike are still captive to the myth that the Japanese are a race so different from the rest of the world that an authentic perception of their values escapes even the most astute of observers. In this respect, Ian Buruma’s fine study, *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture*, while deconstructing such perceptions of alterity, offers a survey of a faraway culture and civilization through an analysis of its fundamental practices, both ancient and contemporary. Buruma discusses

essential figures that appear in literature, theatre and television, such as kamikaze pilots, geisha girls, samurais, and lonely, unruly heroes (*burai*) in search of adventures, in order to understand the ‘mystique’ of the Japanese soul or, to put it more simply, how the Japanese perceive and portray themselves.

In old plays and folk tales we find ghosts and spirits of betrayed wives who psychologically but most frequently physically torment their unfaithful husbands till they drive them to a ghastly and sadistic death (Buruma 2001:6). During the *matsuri* festivals (a rough equivalent of Latin carnivals and *fiestas*), which frequently escalate into real violence, standing on smouldering bonfires or wading stark naked through icy rivers in mid-winter are common practice for contemporary Japanese (Buruma:10). Oshima Nagisa’s 1976 film *Realm of the Senses* tells the story of a love affair between a gangster and a prostitute which ends with the man being strangled by his mistress during a shuddering climax, after which she cuts off his penis in a supreme gesture of ownership (Buruma 2001:50). The main feature of modern Japanese pornography is its overwhelming sadism; sadism as an extreme example of aesthetic cruelty was the principal characteristic of the decadent art of the late Edo period (mid-nineteenth century) as attested by the woodblock prints of Kuniyoshi and his pupil Yoshitoshi and the grotesquely violent paintings of Ekin (Buruma:54). In *Hitori Tabi Gojusantsugi*, Tsuruya Namboku’s Kabuki play, possibly inspired by the horrible act of the emperor Buretsu who ‘had the belly of a pregnant woman opened for an inspection of the womb’, a pregnant woman is tortured and cut open and her infant is tossed up in the air (Buruma 2001:54-55). As Buruma claims:

Aesthetic cruelty, in Japan as elsewhere, is a way of relieving fear, of exorcising the demons. Because female passion is thought to be more demonic than the weaker, male variety – it is she, after all, who harbors the secret of life – and because of her basic impurity and her capacity to lead men so dangerously astray, it is Woman who has to suffer most (55).

Titus Andronicus

Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare's first tragedy, is set during the latter days of the Roman Empire, although unlike the other Roman plays its sources are entirely fictional ones. It draws its substance from a cycle of revenge and a spectacle of endless mutilations, its protagonists being Titus, a Roman general, and Tamora, the dispossessed Queen of the Goths. Due to its overtly gory flavor, *Titus Andronicus* was for centuries marginal in the Shakespearean canon. The Restoration playwright Edward Ravenscroft suggested that Shakespeare's authorial contribution could only have included "some Mastertouches to one or two of the Principal Parts of Characters" and that the raw quality of the language made it "the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his Works [...] rather a Heap of Rubbish than a Structure" (Ravenscroft, quoted in Craig 2008:55). Richard Farmer comments in his *Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare* that:

Indeed, from every internal mark, I have not the least doubt but this *horrible* Piece was originally written by the Author of the *Lines* thrown into the mouth of the *Player* in *Hamlet*, and of the Tragedy of *Lochrine*: which likewise, from some assistance perhaps given to his Friend, hath been unjustly and ignorantly charged upon Shakespeare. (Farmer 1903:203)

In 1765, Samuel Johnson remarked that "the barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience" (Johnson, quoted in Bate 1995:33). In the 19th

century William Hazlitt and Coleridge both doubted Shakespeare's authorship, while in the 20th century even such a Shakespeare *aficionado* as Harold Bloom expressed his negative view of the play, calling it "a howler", "a poetic atrocity", "an exploitative parody, with the inner purpose of destroying the ghost of Christopher Marlowe", "a blowup, an explosion of rancid irony" and concluding that "I can concede no intrinsic value to *Titus Andronicus*" (Bloom 1998:77-86).

Nevertheless, along with those who, disgusted by the goriness of the play, either doubted Shakespeare's 'paternity' of *Titus Andronicus* or remarked on its sub-standard literary features, there were also critical voices that sustained the very opposite, in emphasizing precisely the *barbarous* and/or the *Gothic* qualities of the play as indisputable proof of authorship. In 1762, Bishop Hurd, in his *Letters of Chivalry and Romance*, noticed an association between the 'Gothic' and the 'Shakespearean' which made Shakespeare an authentic inheritor of 'the Gothic system of prodigy and enchantment' (Hurd, quoted in Craig 2008:42). Writing seven years later, Elizabeth Montagu, in her *Essays on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*, was the first to call the author 'our Gothic bard' (Clery and Miles, quoted in Craig 2008: 43). In 1775, Elizabeth Griffith wrote:

I should suppose the intire Piece to be his [...] Because the whole of the fabric, as well as the conduct of it, is so very *barbarous*, in every sense of the word, that I think [...] he could hardly have adopted it from any other person's composition. (Griffith 1971: 403-4)

In the 20th century, prompted by the advent of contemporary literary theories which inspired a re-appraisal of canonical texts from new perspectives, the reputation of *Titus Andronicus* began to improve, especially for the reason that spectacles of violent and gruesome death and

torture are now unanimously acknowledged as staples, albeit problematical ones, of the Shakespearean corpus as a whole. As stated by Kott:

Titus Andronicus is by no means the most brutal of Shakespeare's plays. More people die in *Richard III*. *King Lear* is a much more cruel play. In the whole Shakespearean repertory I can find no scene so revolting as Cordelia's death. In reading, the cruelties of *Titus* can seem ridiculous. But I have seen it on the stage and found it a moving experience [...] In watching *Titus Andronicus* we come to understand – perhaps more than by looking at any other Shakespeare play – the nature of his genius: he gave an inner awareness to passions; cruelty ceased to be merely physical. Shakespeare discovered the moral hell. He discovered heaven as well. But he remained on earth. (Kott 1974: 281-2)

Moreover, *Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare, before the genius of Shakespeare reached its pinnacle; many if not all of the characters of this gory play are mere sketches for their sublime descendants. Thus, Titus' parental agonies foreshadow Lear's, Lucius – if only he had decided to enrol at the university at Wittenberg instead of fraternizing with the Goths in their camp – could have returned metamorphosed as Hamlet, Tamora – she most definitely is the precursor of the highly efficient Lady Macbeth, and as for Lavinia – her unawareness “of suffering” renders her a sister to Ophelia (Kott 1974:282).

True as Kott's remarks are, regarding both the amount of violence in *Titus Andronicus* and the exceptional qualities of the genius-in-former who penned it, modern readers and theatre-goers, in spite of being well-familiarized with and exposed to 'gore', still experience ambivalence in reconciling themselves to a play which draws its substance from rivers of blood. As Marshall claims:

[...] the Elizabethans had, like us, a penchant for gory entertainments [...] the correspondence of tastes is merely tautological when it comes to explaining the problematic appeal of this play's violence. To see the play as demonstrating the cycles of revenge, for instance, or offering the recuperative comfort of fantasy, or training its audience in acceptable responses to unimaginable grief – each of these approaches leaves the most basic question unanswered: why would an audience, any audience, enjoy *Titus*'s reiteration of violence against the human body? "Enjoy" may seem an odd verb to use here, since most viewers today will claim to appreciate the play *in spite* of its violence or alternatively to reject it *because* of the effects Palmer calls *horrific*. (Marshall 2002:107)

It is not my intention here to deny the obviousness of the *horrific*; nevertheless, it is my contention that we can read *Titus Andronicus* as an achievement in the *Gothic aestheticization* of horror, a complex process which, as will be argued below, is situated at the crossroads between the *formalization* of horror and the *annihilation* of emphatic reactions.

As has been pointed out by William T. Hastings, the world that *Titus Andronicus* recreates is a Renaissance world devoid of nuances, delineated by black and white, the basic chromatics that symbolise extremes (chastity versus lust, love versus hate). These extremes are designed to subvert the very idea of a moral code; instead, the play of instincts only focuses on complete self-sacrifice and unlimited revenge (Hastings 1942:117). Characters suffer from being depicted in terms of binary oppositions, in that they are assimilated to either supreme virtues or unspeakable vices, so that the audience feels compelled to disassociate itself from the events and protagonists on stage. Consequently, the very humanity of the characters is destroyed in the process, as they cannot be developed beyond their fulfilling of the function of classical echoes or "types" (Reese 1970:79). In this sense, the scene in V ii where Tamora and her two sons assume the allegorical roles of Revenge, Murder, and Rapine is representative for the dynamics of

characterization which inform the entire work (Reese:79). The *formalization of horror* can also be observed in the mirroring of words, phrases, scenes and images. Titus' entrance in Act I becomes a subject for parody at the opening of Act III where he begs for the forgiveness of his sons, ironically from the very same officials who had earlier celebrated him as Rome's savior. The scene in Act IV when the amputee Titus and his brother Marcus each bear the head of one of Titus' executed sons is mirrored in the scene where Lavinia gruesomely carries her father's severed hand between her teeth (Reese 1970: 80). Moreover, given the richness of the sources for this play, repetitions can be detected at the level of intertextual references; Shakespeare repeats Ovid, the midwife Cornelia repeats Cornelia of the Gracchi, and so on. As remarked by Laughlin Fawcett:

These flickers back and forth from one instance of a thing to another and from the figurative to the literal tempt us to speculate about the intersections of language and the body, and "art" and "life". (Laughlin Fawcett 1983: 268)

Apart from these echoes and instances of parody, the whole play is haunted by the spectral presence of the *hand*. Lavinia, the female victim, loses both of hers: Titus, whose hand had frequently saved Rome, loses one of his; his remaining hand he will use to "thump down" his heart "all mad with misery" (III. ii. 5-10); Lavinia is assigned the task of writing and identifying her attackers "Without the help of any hand at all" (IV. i. 70)

Besides the black and white chromatics that indicates the replacement of morality by the foul play of instincts, this binary opposition also denotes racial differences. As mentioned by Royster in *White-Limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus*, the Moor Aaron and Tamora, his adulterous lover, the Goth Queen turned

Roman Empress, are black and hyperwhite respectively; moreover, the fruit of their adulterous liaison “appears as a kind of enhanced miscegenation, ultrablack crossed with ultrawhite” (Royster 2000:432). Although traditionally black is associated with ‘Otherness’, in *Titus Andronicus* it is Tamora’s extreme whiteness that marks her out as racially different and makes her into a different kind of ‘Other’, ultimately no less threatening to the Roman world than her black lover (Royster 2000:433). Saturninus’ reference to Tamora’s “hue”, his acknowledgement of her Germanic paleness and beauty, develops into a classical comparison of significant aesthetic value. Thus, he compares her with the pale goddess of the moon: “lovely Tamora, Queen of Goths, / That like the stately Phoebe ’mongst her nymphs / Dost over-shine the gallant’st dames of Rome” (I.i.315-320). Interestingly, Shakespeare appears to deconstruct complacency in automatically associating white with purity and beauty, by having Aaron, the black character, deride Tamora’s sons’ skin colour and the disadvantages this brings with it: “Why, there’s the privilege your beauty bears. / Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing / The close enacts and counsels of thy heart” (IV.ii.117-118). Instead, Aaron proudly seems to suggest that *his* skin colour matches up to the standards of beauty, conceived as fixed, ‘non-treacherous’, resistant and eternal: “Coal-black is better than another hue/ In that it scorns to bear another hue; For all the water in the ocean/ Can never turn the swan's black legs to white/ Although she lave them hourly in the flood (IV.ii. 98-102).

Arguably the character who resides at the very centre of Shakespearean horror is Lavinia, whose maimed body and blood disrupt the black and white moral and literal imagery on which the play rests. Critics have commented on her as lacking status and agency and attributed this to

her overexposure as a pornographic image, an aspect to which I will refer below. Reese comments that horrible as Lavinia's fate is, we do not feel for her as we feel for Desdemona; the former is a mere emblematic figure, a symbol of Injured Innocence, whereas Desdemona is a real woman (Reese 1970: 79). At first sight, in *Titus Andronicus* Lavinia is even less than a type or an echo. What sustains her scenic presence is a mere "gulf of silence" whereas her horrible mutilation "is granted its own fetishistic attraction" (Marshall 2002: 109) as it is not only aesthetic but aesthetic *and* useful at the same time. Marshall suggests that her being described as "trimmed" by Aaron (V.i.93) may be read as a reference to the process of cutting off "the excrescences", or it may signify "to make comely, adorn, dress up", "by way of suggesting a third, overarching meaning: 'To put into proper condition for some purport or use' (OED 11, 7, 2)" (109). Thus, Demetrios and Chiron perversely prolong the effects of Lavinia's seductive physical presence even after having raped her; in "trimming" her, they freeze her attractiveness. Lavinia's all-too-graphic martyrdom is all the more pertinent because of its resemblance to images of the early Church's saints and martyrs, which frequently juxtaposed mutilation and eroticism. Such images of unspeakable physical assault and torture perversely enhance eroticism, but also, as previously mentioned, annihilate it via overexposure. In Marshall's words, Lavinia is "so thoroughly undone by this overexposure that [...] she fails to acquire a sense of subjective identity altogether [...] she remains merely a sketch, a cartoon, an unfortunate image" (Marshall 2002:127).

In this play, Lavinia's mutilations are grotesquely aestheticized in a twofold manner, as we can read her amputated corporeality as either *work of art* or *text*. As *work of art*, Lavinia arguably fails to achieve agency since

the role she fulfils is that of a speechless emblem – she is made into “*a work of art* [...] designated to show the limits of art and artful language” (Murray Kendall 1989:306, emphasis mine). When whole, Lavinia was “Rome’s rich ornament” (I.i.52), but now her arms/ornaments are horribly absent and she is transformed by Marcus’ words “into a kind of Daphne caught halfway in the process of her metamorphosis and mutilated by a woodsman [whose] arms “are “branches” that cast “shadows” (Murray Kendall 1989:307). The *horrible aesthetics* of the present *un-whole* Lavinia is juxtaposed with the image of Lavinia as *whole*, a Lavinia of the past, with “lily hands” (III.ii.44) and capable of producing with her “sweet tongue” (III.ii.49) a “heavenly harmony” (III.ii.48). The now mute Lavinia is compelled to walk and her ghastly/ghostly presence demands an explanation for her stubborn persistence in the text. As previously mentioned, apart from her ascribed qualities as *work of art*, she is also *text*:

[...] a “map of woe” whom, like a map, we must learn to read. She is, in Blakean terms, a kind of vortex, a point of intersection between the inner and the outer, a space seeming at once both finite (and further delimited by her mutilation) and infinite (in the sense of value held within her). Especially, her muteness places her in the situation of the audience of the play: knowing what has happened, possessing both seed and names, and condemned to watch others fumble toward her truth. (Laughlin Fawcett 1983:265)

Since she is now truth dismembered, the story of her rape and mutilation as speculated on by Marcus becomes a textual collage; Philomela, Cerberus, Orpheus, trees, rivers and human bodies are blended in a “desperate effort to match what has happened with *artistic precedent*” (Murray Kendall 1989:308, emphasis mine). As a text, Lavinia is waiting to be deciphered by others, but she is also the *producer* of text, in so far as her efforts to reveal

the names of her rapists/torturers result in the creation of *meaning*. In inscribing Demetrios' and Chiron's names, this horribly mutilated character actually achieves agency and temporarily erases – ironically by writing names in the sand – the overpowering tones of helplessness and victimization that have so far traced the contours of her presence in the text. Thus, the character of Lavinia, far from representing generic 'woman destroyed' (in Simone de Beauvoir's words), is decipherable through the acknowledgement of the common features that she shares with the *generic* artist/writer. As Laughlin Fawcett explains:

In Lavinia we see the possibility for communication moving from the tongue to the pen/staff. Her mutilation makes her write. Speech may be silenced, but as long as the body can move at all, writing will out; it is the basic tool (literally and figuratively) of thought. Further, perhaps her situation itself, in its iconic quality, embodies the situation of the artist as he assimilates himself to his role: the writer giving words to others to speak, asking others to do revenge for his unspoken and unspeakable wrong. (Laughlin Fawcett 1983:266)

The audience's sinuous road towards establishing agency is a different matter altogether, if we do not take into account spectators' will to oblivion. As a theatre official reported laconically of the 1955 Peter Brook production: "At least three people pass out nightly. Twenty fainted at one performance. Ten swooned on Friday" (quoted in Marshall 2002:106). Obviously, in the act of approaching the Shakespearean play, such is the strength of *horror* imagery that in the attempt to come to terms with it, the reading or the viewing subject is not allowed his own agency. *Titus Andronicus* is characterized by a thorough *excess of lack* (missing body parts which figuratively reclaim the aesthetic space) as well as a carefully-

sustained effect of gender. I read this *excess of lack* as equivalent to an *aestheticization of horror*, a voluntary annihilation of the effect and decomposition of empathy assessable from within the framework of the Brechtian A-effect (Alienation effect). The source for the concept of the A-effect (or V-effect, from the German *Verfremdung*) which Berthold Brecht employed in order to interpret Chinese theatre was Russian formalist literary theory. It appears to be a precise translation of Viktor Shklovsky's term "priem ostranenniya" - "the device of making strange" (Brecht 1936:99). The concept itself and its creative severing of the emphatic links between the actors and the audience actually enhance the *aesthetic* perspective and its consequent estrangement from the moral dimension of any play to be assessed from this angle. As stated by Brecht in his 1936 essay *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction*:

The dramatic theatre spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable. That's great art: it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (quoted in Willett 1978:71).

It is a common misunderstanding that the defamiliarization which Brecht argued for is intended to construct an arctic, emotion-free zone. Rather, as Mumford points out, there are only some forms of empathy and identification that Brecht remains suspicious of, namely those which constitute themselves in "the tendency to believe these experiences familiar, real and normal rather than to ask whether they are the norm, and if so,

whether they should be” (Mumford 2009:63). The Marxist Brecht initially advocated *defamiliarization* as theatrical technique, *precisely* to achieve spectators’ or readers’ more active critical and social engagement. However, there are many ways of perceiving Brecht, as there are many ways of assessing Shakespeare. When considering the A-effect as the most effective reading strategy for Shakespeare’s tragedy, I am obviously more interested in a shifting of focus from content to form, i.e. to *aesthetics*. Such a perspective seems the most legitimate, given the presence of hardly any moral and/or empathic dimensions in *Titus Andronicus*. The play abounds in scenes which betray an obvious fracture from the possible, from the real. One of the most significant is built around the crippled figure of Lavinia and her attempts to convey the meaning of the horror that has befallen her to her uncle and her father. From Act Two onwards, with her tongue cut out and her hands cut off, Lavinia can but mime pain and suffering, as voice and gestures are denied to her. What is left is just the mute message of the eyes, the painful flutter of veiled hands, the shape, the walk. Hence, in the stage and screen adaptations of *Titus Andronicus* there is only one way in which the very improbability of life in a body thus mutilated can be conveyed, i.e. via what I consider to be a superb example of the famous Brechtian *Gestus* of showing. Brecht regarded *Gestus*, ‘the art of *showing that you are showing*’, as a “feature of many presentational performances, including the popular entertainment and Asian traditions” and “often cited fairground ballad singers, acrobats, Chinese actors, comedic performers as well as law-court witnesses as sources of inspiration for this ‘theatre of demonstration’” (Mumford 2009:59, emphasis mine). I am suggesting here that given her mute presence in the play and her performance that has to rely entirely on the negotiation of enforced silence, Shakespeare’s Lavinia brilliantly

embodies *Gestus* and thus may be read as an aesthetic product of the Brechtian concept of alienation.

Conclusion

The present study has aimed at a different reading of *Titus Andronicus*, by arguing that the extreme chain of violence and gore that designates its plot and characters can be approached in terms of *Gothic aesthetics*. As suggested at the outset of this analysis, *Gothic aesthetics* in this particular play relies on the *formalization of horror* – achieved through various literary devices, such as parallelisms, repetitions, mirrored characters and events, as well as on the *alienation effect* – which prevents the readers from experiencing empathy and identification with the characters' plight. In support of the above argument, the paper has proposed a voluntarily alienating reading of this Shakespearean play – a 'Japanese' one, based on the extremely strong emphasis on various acts of violence, torture, and disembowelment which, as maintained by Buruma in his study of contemporary Japanese culture, are among its most poignant characteristics. My reading, naturally, does not advocate an undifferentiated assessment of violence when present in reality or in fiction. In this context, I would like to end this short study by quoting Buruma's words, which, in my opinion, best summarize the theoretical basis of my analysis and the findings of such a *purely aesthetic* enterprise:

Respect for human life, dignity, the female body and all those other matters we are taught to take so seriously in the West, are taken seriously in Japan too, but not on the level of play. For once again, it is not the overriding principle people adhere to, but the proper rules of conduct governing human relations. One has no relationship

with an actress playing a part, or a character in a comic-book, so why ever should one feel any compassion for them? (Buruma 2001:223)

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