

Titus Andronicus

INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE'S first, most sensation-packed tragedy appeared in print in 1594, and a performance record dating from January of that year appears to indicate that it was then a new play. But according to its title-page it had been acted by three companies, one of which was bankrupt by the summer of 1593; and the play's style, too, suggests that it was written earlier. Shakespeare seems to have added a scene after the play's earliest performances, for Act 3, Scene 2 was first printed in the 1623 Folio. The 1594 performance record may refer to the revised play, not the original, or to the play's first London performance after plague had closed the theatres from June 1592.

By convention, Elizabethan tragedies treated historical subjects, and *Titus Andronicus* is set in Rome during the fourth century ad; but its story (like that of Shakespeare's other early tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*) is fictitious. Whether Shakespeare invented it is an open question: the same tale is told in both a ballad and a chap-book which survive only in eighteenth-century versions but which could derive from pre-Shakespearian originals. Even if Shakespeare knew these works, they could have supplied only a skeletal narrative. His play's spirit and style owe much to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one of his favourite works of classical literature, which he actually brings on stage in Act 4, Scene 1. Ovid's tale of the rape of Philomela was certainly in Shakespeare's mind as he wrote, and the play's more horrific elements owe something to the Roman dramatist Seneca.

In its time, *Titus Andronicus* was popular, perhaps because it combines sensational incident with high-flown rhetoric of a kind that was fashionable around 1590. It tells a story of double revenge. Tamora, Queen of the Goths, seeks revenge on her captor, Titus, for the ritual slaughter of her son Alarbus; she achieves it when her other sons, Chiron and Demetrius, rape and mutilate Titus' daughter, Lavinia. Later, Titus himself seeks revenge on Tamora and her husband, Saturninus, after Tamora's

black lover, Aaron, has falsely led him to believe that he can save his sons' lives by allowing his own hand to be chopped off. Though he is driven to madness, Titus, with his brother Marcus and his last surviving son, Lucius, achieves a spectacular sequence of vengeance in which he cuts Tamora's sons' throats, serves their flesh baked in a pie to their mother, kills Lavinia to save her from her shame, and stabs Tamora to death. Then, in rapid succession, Saturninus kills Titus and is himself killed by Lucius, who, as the new Emperor, is left with Marcus to bury the dead, to punish Aaron, and 'To heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe'.

In *Titus Andronicus*, as in his early history plays, Shakespeare is at his most successful in the expression of grief and the portrayal of vigorously energetic evil. The play's piling of horror upon horror can seem ludicrous, and the reader may be surprised by the apparent disjunction between terrifying events and the measured verse in which characters react; but a few remarkable modern productions have revealed that the play may still arouse pity as well as terror in its audiences.