

The Rhetoric of Evil
Metamorphoses of the Forest in William Shakespeare's
Titus Andronicus

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In Cicero's *De Oratore* we find the following statement: 'If we pass on the capacity for oratory to persons without these virtues (i.e. probity and wisdom), we shall not be making orators, but putting arms in the hands of the mad'.¹ In English Renaissance drama there is no lack of characters who are proficient in the art of what Aristotle describes as 'observing the persuasiveness of which any particular matter admits', and who would probably be considered armed and dangerous by Cicero. In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* we meet the unscrupulous servant Ithamore, Shakespeare's Richard III, 'determined to prove a villain', conquers lady Anne by verbal means over the body of her slain husband, and in the words of George Hunter, 'we are bound to appreciate Iago's rhetorical powers'.² Exhibiting the same absence of links between rhetorical proficiency and ethical probity as these characters, Tamora and Aaron in Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus* also share the ability to recognise that persuasiveness may be the most effective strategy when unethical behaviour is called for. What sets the rhetorical strategies of

¹ M.T. Cicero, *De Oratore* 3. 61-63, in D.A. Russel and M. Winterbottom (eds.), *Ancient Literary Criticism*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 233.

² George K. Hunter, 'Rhetoric and Renaissance Drama', in Peter Mack (ed.), *Renaissance Rhetoric* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1994).

Aaron and Tamora apart, however, is their use of the dramatic landscape as material for eloquent manipulation of other characters.

In the following, the 'forest-speeches' of Tamora and Aaron will be discussed from what is in effect a triple perspective. First the characters are approached as orators and their speeches are seen as speech acts: what do they want to achieve and how do they go about achieving it? This means employing a fairly traditional kind of rhetorical analysis, identifying relevant figures and techniques. Secondly, the speeches are discussed from a more overall structural point-of-view, what is their dramatic function i.e. in relation to aspects like characterisation and plot, and thirdly, what kind of material does the dramatist employ in order to persuade his audience?

The landscape mentioned above is the countryside around Rome, and the sojourn in the forest in the second act of the play is a result of the uneasy relationship between two families and their retainers over the question of who is going to be the ruler of that city. In order to alleviate some of the tension between the newly-elected emperor Saturninus and himself, Titus suggests at the end of the first act that they hunt together. Saturninus accepts the offer, but as events turn out, the result of this fatal hunt is not peace and reconciliation, but rape, murder and bloody revenge. Titus' wish for reconciliation is undermined by the two characters already introduced; Tamora, who has recently married the emperor, and her secret lover Aaron the Moor. These two mastermind both the rape of Titus' daughter Lavinia and the murder of her husband Bassanius, and trick the emperor into believing that it is the sons of Titus who have committed the murder.

Aaron and Tamora also deliver the lines which create the forest in the fictional dramatic space and the eloquence which may accompany evil intentions is evident in Aaron's advice to Tamora's sons on how to satisfy their lust for Lavinia:

AARON The forest walks are wide and spacious,
 And many unfrequented plots there are,
 Fitted by kind for rape and villany.
 Single you thither this dainty doe
 The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf and dull
 There speak and strike, brave boys...'
 (1.1. 614-29)¹

The woods are still to be a place for hunting, but of a different kind than envisaged by Titus. The reconciling ritual of 'horns and hounds' is to be replaced by a carefully planned and executed criminal act, and in order to convince the brothers of the feasibility of his own plan, Aaron introduces a cruel and clever double transformation. By using a hunting metaphor, he is turning the intended victim into a legitimate prey, the 'dainty doe', the quivering and beautiful animal which so often was the object of the aristocratic hunt. The forest on the other hand, is represented as a willing accomplice whose alliterated qualities stand forth like the hammerblows of fate: '...dreadful, deaf and dull.' Aaron's powerful representation of the forest as a place for violence is also what Volker Klotz has termed a 'bedeutungslandschaft', it is a landscape which reflects and creates a character.² The skilful way in which he makes the boys follow his own plans indicates to readers and spectators that he is a resourceful man, with a command of the five stages of composing a speech, i.e. from *inventio* through *dispositio*, *elocutio* and *memoria* to *actio*. However, at this point in the play his speech also marks him out as a man of cunning rather than virtue, a Machiavel dressed in the clothes of a classical orator.

¹ All excerpts from the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

² Volker Klotz, *Geschlossene und Offene Form im Drama*, (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992).

His lover in secret, Tamora, is his equal at least when it comes to eloquence. In the scene where she meets Bassanius and Lavinia in the forest and which ends with the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, she, just like Aaron in the previous scene, uses descriptions of the forest as a means to promote her own sinister intentions:

TAMORA Have I not reason, think you, to look pale?
These two have 'ticed me hither to this place:
A barren, detested vale you see it is;
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,
O'ercome with moss and baleful mistletoe;
Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds
Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven.
(2.2. 91-95)

Tamora is at this point talking to her sons, and she has no problems in convincing them of the threats to her own security posed by Bassanius and Lavinia. However, there are differences between Tamora's and Aaron's methods of verbal persuasion. Using the terminology of rhetoric, it is clear that both of them are striving for *evidentia*, i.e. lucidity, in their representations of the forest. But in order to persuade, it is also necessary to amplify (which of course is a recognized rhetorical technique, *amplificatio*), and Aaron does this as we have seen by using figures; the forest is personified (*prosopoeia*) and he uses a hunting metaphor. Tamora, on the other hand, relies almost exclusively on the force of *pathos*, the orator's ability to move his audience, beside *logos* and *ethos* one of Aristotle's three categories of persuasion.¹ In order to achieve the effect of *pathos* in the speech, though, we find her employing a Renaissance favourite, *copia*, or multitude, in the way she

¹ Aristotle defines emotions as 'those things by the alteration of which men differ with regard to those judgments which pain and pleasure accompany', in *The Art of Rhetoric*, translated and edited by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, (London: Penguin Classics Edition, 1991), 1378a.

enumerates the distinctly sinister qualities of their surroundings.

Their conscious use of landscape representations reflect Aaron and Tamora's evil intentions and as such become essential indices of characterisation in the play. When Aaron faces his final destiny, he is proud to admit that 'I am no baby, I, that with base prayers | Should repent the evils I have done. | Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did | Would I perform if I might have my will' (5.3. 184-7). Although Jonathan Bate suggests that Aaron and Tamora actually represent the first step in a process of humanizing character types like the 'Machiavel' and 'the Overreacher', and which leads Shakespeare away from Marlowe, it is quite evident that Aaron essentially endorses evil all through the play.¹ Tamora, on the other hand, is represented as a slightly more complicated character. Her hatred for Titus and his family has a cause, it stems from Titus' actions in the first act when, completely disregarding her pleas for mercy, he executes her eldest son as a religious sacrifice. By the time of the scenes in the woods we know that Tamora wants revenge, and that she has said unequivocally to her new husband 'I'll find a day to massacre them all' (1.1. 455).

Earlier in the same scene where we find Tamora's skilful evocations of the dark forest, we get a representation of the forest from the same character which is quite different from the one cited above. In this speech she perceives the forest to be a landscape of love, more specifically a landscape which allows for consummation of the forbidden love between herself and Aaron the moor: 'My lovely Aaron, wherefore look'st thou sad | When everything doth make a gleeful boast? | The birds chant melodye on every bush, | The snake lies rolled in the cheerful

¹ The 'Machiavel' and the 'Overreacher' are character types from Marlowe's plays *The Jew of Malta and Tamburlaine*, see Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1997), p. 116.

sun,' (2.2 10-13). There is a marked contrast between the two passages, of course, and one can hardly deny that the love speech contributes to our seeing Tamora as a multidimensional character. I would like to suggest, though, that it is possible to detect an underlying note of uneasiness and tension even in her vision of the woods as a 'locus amoenus'. In addition to the introduction of the snake into this idyllic scenery, the diction of the passage undermines the attempt to portray the woods as a place of love. The use of words like 'conflict', 'noise', 'shrilly', 'mocks' and 'storm' signals disharmony, and the use of the adjectival 'quivering' for describing the movement of the leaves with its multiple connotations very easily conjures up images of fear, hunting and death, and also links the passage to Aaron's image of Lavinia as a doe. The 'locus amoenus' scene may thus be seen as indicating that Tamora is capable of love, but the subtext indicates that hatred and revenge pollute even her discourse on this subject.

The dynamic movement from idyll to tragedy in Tamora's representations of the forest can be construed as an example of her acute sense of what the classical rhetoricians termed *kairos*, i.e. the ability to speak at the appropriate moment or to find the words to fit the occasion. It is also interesting in this context to consider her representations in relation to the rhetorical figure *paradiastola* or redescription. Redescription in the rhetorical meaning of the word was in essence a way of amplifying a message by challenging and replacing descriptions. Quentin Skinner says about this method that:

The orator's aim in this case is to be taken to be that of redescribing a given action or situation in such a way as to augment or extenuate its moral significance, thereby hoping to alter the attitude of his audience and enlist them in his cause.¹

¹ Quentin Skinner, 'Moral Ambiguity and the Renaissance Art of Eloquence', in *Essays in Criticism*, vol. XLIV, October 1994, No. 4.

Tamora clearly redescribes the forest environment with the intent of enlisting her sons as accomplices in a conscious and deadly campaign against Titus Andronicus and his family, and I propose that it is the dynamic relationship between her speech to Aaron and her speech to her sons which constitute the paradiastole in this case.

As we have seen, Aaron and Tamora utilise the forest in a conscious rhetorical strategy to further their own evil purposes, but what are the attitudes of the other characters in the play? Prior to the tragic events, when the hunt is about to commence, Titus Andronicus remarks that 'The hunt is up, the morn is bright and grey | The fields are fragrant and the woods are green' (2.1. 1-2). At this point in the action, his innocent and straightforward way of conceiving the landscape illustrates rather neatly his naive assessment of the relations between himself, Tamora and Saturninus. He has confidence in the benevolent appearance of the landscape and he trusts Tamora when she states that 'we must all be friends', (1.1. 484). Thus Titus completely fails to recognize the potential for violence and deceit in the situation, to him the hunt and the sojourn to the forest seal a new state of peace and good will between the parties. In act 4, after the terrible events in the forest, Titus' conception of the forest has changed completely, he asks Lavinia whether she was 'Forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods' (4.1. 54). His brother Marcus concurs: 'O, why should nature build so foul a den, | Unless the gods delight in tragedies?'

At the end of the play, then, nature stands condemned, and a conception of the landscape as in a sense morally deficient links the forest in the play to contemporary ideas existing in what Thomas M. Greene termed *mundus significans* as well as

to Ovid's forest in his story of Tereus and Philomela.¹ Ovid's story, which is Shakespeare's major source for *Titus Andronicus*, presents only a rudimentary notion of the forest: 'the king dragged Pandion's daughter to a high-walled steading, hidden in the dark depths of an ancient forest'.² Philomela threatens to let the forest be filled with her voice, but to no avail. The forest becomes a place of rape and mutilation. In late sixteenth century England, however, the idea or the motif of the dark-forest was well established. As Keith Thomas points out, 'forests had originally been synonymous with wildness and danger... When Elizabethans spoke of a wilderness, they meant not a barren waste, but a dense, uncultivated wood'.³

This general idea of the forest as dangerous wilderness was available to dramatists in a number of different cultural manifestations. In the famous pageantry presented to the queen at Kenilworth in 1575 George Gascoigne himself played the role of the 'Salvage Man' or Silvanus who refers to the 'perillous passages which are in these woods and forrests'. In 1584 the Italian Gian Paolo Lomazzo published the first systematic account of landscape painting in his *Trattato dell' Arte della Pittura*, and included in his categories we find both 'sinister dens' and woods and terrible deserts. Perhaps the most interesting example, which combines text and image, can be found in Thomas Peacham's collection of emblems, *Minerva Brittanica* (1612). The text which accompanies the picture of a forest reads 'A shadie wood, pourtraied to the sight | With uncouth pathes and hidden waies unknowne: resembling chaos or the hideous night'.

¹ Greene uses the term 'Mundus Significans' in his study *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982).

² In Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, book VI, translated by Mary Innes, (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 148.

³ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, (London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 194.

As I mentioned briefly earlier, the green and beautiful landscape which Titus observes on the morning of the hunt cannot be upheld as an accompanying image to the moral outcome of the play. Tamora's skills in eloquence with its terrible results recreate the landscape as dark and sinister in the minds of all the characters in the play. That she is well aware of her own powers of eloquence is evident from a passage in 4.4. where she once more wants to make a fool of Titus Andronicus:

TAMORA If Tamora entreat him, then he will,
For I can smooth and fill his aged ears
With golden promises that, were his heart
Almost impregnable, his old ears deaf,
yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue
(4.4. 94-98)

Why do we get this kind of verbal analysis of her own powers of persuasion so late in the play? Meeting Titus in the final act she tries to convince him that she is not Tamora the empress but Revenge, sent from hell to assist Titus in 'working wreakful vengeance' on his foes. Once again she is deliberately using the motif of the sinister landscape in order to amplify her message:

TAMORA There's not a hollow cave or lurking place,
No vast obscurity or misty vale
Where bloody murder or detested rape
Can couch for fear...'
(5.2. 35-38)

This time, however, her powers of persuasion are failing. Titus knows the truth, and he gets his final revenge on Tamora by killing her sons and baking their flesh into pies. The ultimate failure of the evil characters in *Titus Andronicus* is thus intimately linked to the failure of immoral eloquence, and by

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letting Tamora reflect on her own powers of eloquence just prior to the final test rather than at the beginning, the dramatist makes sure that the audience is reminded that this is the case.