A WOMAN OF LETTERS

Lavinia in Titus Andronicus

SARA EATON

I will learn thy thought;
In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
As begging hermits in their holy prayers.
Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
But I, of these, will wrest an alphabet,
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.
—(3.2.39-45)

Titus speaks to Lavinia in my epigraph, and he terms her a “map of woe” whose body must “talk in signs” (3.2.11), since, as Marcus puts it, “that delightful engine of her thoughts, / That babbl’d them with such pleasing eloquence, / Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage” (3.1.81-84). Their metaphors heighten the theatrical effects of Lavinia’s grisly appearance after her rape and mutilation, but they also anticipate scenes for the “wresting” of meaning, for the “practice” of reading and writing in the play, which follow the loss of Lavinia’s eloquent (theatric) voice and gestures and the sacrifice of Titus’s hand. Because of this arrangement in the plot, reading and writing in Titus are perceived by the characters and audience as supplementary to the body’s “usual” means of communication; in a sense, reading and writing are the spectacular products of extremity, depicted in the play as a “private” activity transformed by political violence into a “public” utterance.¹

Acts of literacy become violent, visualized ones. But Shakespeare replicates in this play contemporary understandings about reading and writing. Recent
critical studies of humanism, an ideology promoting the kind of literacy the Andronici exhibit, and its effects on early modern England have emphasized the social and psychological violence encoded within it. Mary Thomas Crane, for example, describes in detail how, in their educational practices, “humanists . . . reach toward transformation of the self but can only depict it as a painful violation, closely related to corporal punishment” and “depict their students as fragmented subjects, both alienated from and controlled by language” (76). These depictions of the self, manifested in literate behavior, infiltrated schools for both the upwardly mobile and the elite by the later sixteenth century and, Crane argues, were intentionally positioned against traditional aristocratic values: “Instead of the display of innate superiority at such courtly pastimes as hunting, singing, dancing, and romantic interchange, English humanists sought to establish a serious demeanor, aphoristic style, and constructive use of time as the signs of a powerful subject” (78). These humanist attributes Titus will come to display, in seeming contrast to Tamora and her brood, who murder as part of a hunt, and whose “romantic interchanges” are depicted as infidelity and rape.

But there is more at stake in the confrontation between Tamora and Titus than contested value systems. By the late sixteenth century, humanists and their heirs were the educators of monarchs and their most powerful advisers, making up the bulk of Elizabeth’s bureaucracy, but not without serious resistance from unreconstructed aristocrats and the humanist-trained elite who vied for access to the queen and the patronage system. In effect, the system which had educated Shakespeare and his contemporaries also signified, literally, a fragmented subject’s desires for public exercise of power. Moreover, for the English, the potential violence encoded in the educational training of humanist subjects and the implementing and display of their social power, as well as the frustration of it, acquired additional resonance in the context of the religious wars. The print revolution and subsequent increases in literacy facilitated the Reformation and maintained its momentum; as Elizabeth Eisenstein puts it, “The theme of printing as proof of spiritual and cultural superiority, first sounded in Rome in its crusade against ‘illiterate’ Turks, was taken over by German humanists trying to counter Italian claims” (147). As John Foxe explained it in Acts and Monuments, “The Lord began his work for His Church not with sword and target to subdue His exalted adversary, but with printing, writing, and reading” (as qtd. in Eisenstein 148). Titus, I will argue, reproduces variants on all these social attitudes and tensions by displaying literacy as a
weapon, by adopting pedagogical metaphors, by pitting the literate Andronici, who initially wish only to advise the king, against Tamora’s politics of “kind” or blood, and by depicting Titus as an explicitly humanist revenger, valued for his depictions of subjectivity as he cleanses the state of corruption.

In addition, Shakespeare also depicts the literally bloody action of the play as one inflected by gender. The play reflects contemporary sexualized attitudes toward aristocratic women as they are viewed, again, from a humanist perspective characterized by substitution and displacement of affect. Stephanie Jed has argued that humanism has its origins in the figure of Lucrece, another famous rape victim, and the fascinated responses of fifteenth-century humanists to her suicide, significant because the Roman republic thus has its beginnings in her defilement and death. The many treatments of Lucrece, Jed argues, are “inscribed in a language that invites sexual violence” (7) and infect humanist habits of reading and writing, re-reading and re-writing with “an eagerness to hear this tale over and over again, an eagerness which is, however, covered over by a certain solemnity and detachment from the rape” (7–8). The pattern of re-reading/writing Jed describes also can be applied to Shakespeare’s treatment of Lavinia and Tamora, the revisions of his source and the classical myths in the play, Titus’s own revisions, and much of the critical response to the play, as well as to Shakespeare’s own return to the scene of rape, his 

Lucrece, printed in 1594. While Lavinia’s body, like Lucrece’s, becomes the site for reproductive warfare and a successful repulsion of “barbaric” invaders, the play transforms the conflict into a matter of class and kind of rhetorical education, a social war juxtaposing the persuasive powers of speech to the equally compelling powers of writing. As a result, Lavinia’s dismemberment is a sign of the omnipresent violence which marks the play, a violence which encodes and politicizes contemporary attitudes toward humanist education and its products, reading and writing, especially in relation to learned women, the staple of reproductive exchange in early modern England’s aristocracy.

The physical instruments, or signs, for what become a humanist production of meaning—a letter, more letters attached to bundles of weapons and arrows, other texts, a stick, and, most important, the hand—become the stimulus for action in Titus after the initial attacks on the Andronici. The signs supplementing the tongue, the “delightful engine of thought,” transform dramatic action and produce it. The characters’ recourse to literacy reflects their sense that reading that writing and each other are similar interpretive and imitative
behaviors, persuasive acts performed by humanist “teachers” and imitated by “students” which can supplement and finally transcend speech.4

Significantly, writing and the effects of reading permeate the play after Lavinia’s rape and the loss of her tongue. Chiron’s mockery immediately following Lavinia’s rape—“Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so, / And if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe” (2.4.3–4)—anticipates when Titus will write his “heart’s deep languor, and my soul’s sad tears” (3.1.13) in the dust when his sons are judged murderers, and when his dismembered “good hand” (3.1.235) is carried in an “employ’d” Lavinia’s mouth (3.1.282) to signify his revengeful intentions. From his study, a room designed for private “ruminations” (5.1.6) and writing, and a fairly recent architectural innovation in the uses of domestic space, Titus writes coded (i.e., Latin) messages of his intentions attached to weapons, messages which “decipher” (4.2.8) his enemies, “blazoning [their] injustice everywhere” (4.4.18).

Failing to read well (or interpret correctly) has social and political consequences. When Chiron, the play’s representation of the naive or impolitic reader, responds to the message on Titus’s “gift” as a schoolboy would (“O, ’tis a verse in Horace, I know it well, / I read it in the grammar long ago”), Aaron remarks, “Ay, just—a verse in Horace, right, you have it. / [Aside] Now what a thing it is to be an ass!” (4.2.22–25). A wiser reader, Saturninus, the Emperor, reads Titus’s missives and responds by plotting with Tamora what becomes under Titus’s revisions the banquet scene in the last act. Titus cooks by the book: his text is drawn explicitly from Ovid’s description of Progne’s revenge of her sister in the Metamorphosis. First a reader, Titus then becomes the dramatist creating a spectacle when he declares, “for what I mean to do / See here in bloody lines I have set down: / And what is written shall be executed” (5.2.13–15), and then an actor in it, becoming “the cook” who dismembers Chiron and Demetrius for his “play” (5.2.205). Mixing also his texts, Titus justifies his killing of Lavinia by finding a “pattern” (5.3.44) for his action in the story of Virginius: “I am as woeful as Virginius was, / And have a thousand times more cause” (5.3.50–51). But the violent textual connections between humanist thoughts, words, and deeds are perhaps most poignantly made theatrical ones in the scene in Act 4 when Lavinia gives Titus, Lucius, and Marcus a “lesson” (4.1.106), ironically reproducing both Chiron’s and her father’s directives, first by drawing their attention to Ovid’s text and the story of Philomela, and then writing the names of her attackers in the sand by holding a stick in her mouth and guiding it with her stumps.6
Lavinia’s “lesson” in this scene is one of numerous allusions in the play to the humanist pedagogy of reading and writing. Teaching someone a lesson, of course, is the motivation behind revenge, but these scenes are frequently placed as an alternative to the social organization of a dramatic world based on kinship, or “kind,” a world characterized as “headless” (1.1.186), dismembered, and governed by persuasive speech.⁷ Lavinia suggests such divisions when she appeals to Tamora to stop her rape on the basis of their shared femininity and then appeals to her sons on the basis of their difference: “O, do not learn her wrath—she taught it thee” (2.3.142). She tries again with Tamora: “O, be to me, though thy hard heart say no, / Nothing so kind, but something pitiful!” When Tamora retorts, “I know not what it means,” Lavinia pleads, “O, let me teach thee” (2.3.155–58). Even if her voice fails her, Lavinia assumes here that education can change minds.

Lavinia has some practice in teaching social reform; she has read the classics to Lucius’s son like “Cornelia” (4.1.12).⁸ But Aaron, the only one of his kind in the play until the birth of his son, whose birth becomes, ironically, the cause of his death, repeats the assumption that learning transcends “kind” when he declares that he has been Chiron and Demetrius’s “tutor,” asserting “that coddling spirit had they from their mother”: “That bloody mind I think they learn’d of me” (5.1.98–99, 101).⁹ Likewise a tutor, Titus tells his grandson, who he hopes will “bear his pretty tales in mind / And talk of them when he is dead and gone” (5.3.165–66), that he will “teach [him] another course” (4.1.119) for revenge after they read Lavinia’s words in the sand. Keeping his father’s words in mind, Lucius, his son, after the revenge is completed, pleads to the Roman populace,

O, let me teach you how to knit again
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,
These broken limbs again into one body.
(5.3.70–73)

All of these scenes of teaching, reading, and writing, realized as political acts occurring when a humanist ideology collides with one based on lineage or “kind,” symbolized by and enacted through physical dismemberment, describe the scene for the humanist production of writing in early modern England, according to Jonathan Goldberg, in an essay in Shakespeare Quarterly exploring similar images in Hamlet. Goldberg cites two contemporary sources, among many:

Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, who writes that “it was above all for language that nature added hands to our bodies.” “Hands are the characteristic of rational nature,” he continues, since “it is, in effect, one of the marks of the presence of reason to express itself through letters.” Or I might have cited the Spanish writing master Andres Brun, writing in 1583: “Plato says that the difference which divides us humans from the animals is that we have the power of speech and they do not. I, however, say that the difference is that we know how to write but they do not. . . .” (307)

Goldberg argues that the hand that writes is a symbol of man as a rational creature to many in this period; in Goldberg’s analysis, the hand produces characters and character, identifying the writer and reproducing him inside a social structure determined by “written marks” serving as “class markers” (317). The popular and numerous copybooks in the period which demonstrate how to hold the pen and hand and how to form the letters correctly are like the similarly popular conduct books: they show how to simulate character. Goldberg argues, and I would emphasize, that writing thus creates a persona, a theatric character (316). The writing/written self in humanist ideology is a supplementary—or self-conscious—one.

As if to reveal to readers that the written characters may be detached from the writer’s character, all of the books Goldberg saw illustrated the text by picturing hands “detached from bodies, severed arms ruled by the pictorial frame” (317). These pictures, Goldberg writes, “illustrate the material circuit from a hand writing to handwriting, a production of value—good or naught—and an implicit idealization and dematerialization of the hand inserted within the practice of writing. . . . [T]he body has been detached from the hand, and the material production of letters has been moralized, spiritualized, placed, in short, within a regime of value that appears to take its source from some transcendent realm” (317). In a sense, as Goldberg says, “the mind arises from the hand” (319).

Goldberg’s interests are the applications of his research to Hamlet’s character(s), but his arguments can be applied more literally to Titus, a play abounding with severed hands and lopped limbs. Clearly, reading and writing in the play supplement the lost active hand, creating humanist scripts for social correction and change and a way of “knitting” the political body back together. While writing can teach and create social change, the words, the supplement, become the public expression of the body: they display the private hand which produced the writing, the hand which cannot be seen. If the results of writing
by the right kinds of hands are reified in the play—“moralized, spiritualized,” to repeat Goldberg—so are the writers. Titus’s recourse to writing ennobles his actions and allows his family to “transcend” his opponents socially, to vanquish them, because he has the textual justifications. At the same time, he is socialized. The more Titus writes, the more he sheds the look of the savage patriarch of act 1 who kills his son, his own kind, for disobeying him and acquires an interiority signified by humanist pedagogy and writing, the look of the “mad” Senecan avenger. And the more psychologically complex Titus appears, the more Tamora and her sons are characterized as “beasts and birds of prey” (5.3.198), unlettered, devoid of humanity, needing to be taught a lesson.

Goldberg suggests that “the hand moves in language, and its movement retraces the ‘being’ of the individual inscribed with social practice” (317). The social practice of writing produces the signs of a displaced subjectivity, of a distinctly humanist subjectivity, in Titus’s world, transcending the “kind” that Tamora inhabits. Hers is also constructed of words, but for her the spoken word informs the attached hand. She declares to Chiron and Demetrius that “your mother’s hand shall right your mother’s wrong” (2.3.121), and to herself, how “high-witted Tamora to gloze with all” (4.4.35) will accomplish her revenge. But her unmarked body signifies her words, and these are rendered “hollow,” unpersuasive, in this sense, unremarkable except as examples of monstrosity, by others’ (re)actions in the play.

Her quarrel with Titus begins when he ignores her words and kills her son. And Aaron and his “teachings,” his letter writing and scripting of the murders and rape at the pit, inform the revenge she does accomplish. Tamora presumes she will “enchant the old Andronicus” to his doom “with words more sweet, and yet more dangerous / Than baits to fish” (4.4.89–91):

For I can smooth and fill his aged ears
With golden promises, that, were his heart
Almost impregnable, his old years deaf,
Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue.

(4.4.96–99)

Significantly, when she announces that she wants to talk at his study door, Titus notes their difference: “No, not a word, how can I grace my talk, / Wanting a hand to give [t] that accord?” (5.2.16–18). Tamora’s assumption that her “monstrous” powers translate as linguistic powers, that her attached hands and tongue render her remarkable in her world, is heard as evidence of the politics of “kind. . . Titus does not obey” her “words more sweet, and yet more dan-
gerous.” Instead, she falls into Titus’s hands and script. As he says as he plans his revenge, he “o’erreaches them in their own devices” (5.2.143).

Titus refers to the rules of rhetoric here; “overreaching” is Puttenham’s term for the hyperbolic or the “loud lyer,” one of the ornaments or figures used in persuasion. Titus knows his revenge is a “great diffimation,” to quote Puttenham, one that “if we fhall meaure it by the rule of exact veritie, is but an vntruth, yet a more cleanly commendation then was maifter Speakers” (192). The “overreaching” that Puttenham discusses in this passage concerns the praising of a prince, and illustrates how humanist rhetoric and politics were intrinsically intertwined in early modern England. In this sense, Titus perceives himself as a “better” and more politic liar than Tamora, one whose actions are “more cleanly” commended.

If Titus’s revenge is successful as a humanist demonstration of rhetorical art with social and political effects, his actions and the action of the play also link what Patricia Parker, in her study of Renaissance rhetorics and literary texts, has termed “something described as divinely sanctioned or ‘naturall’ to something that can not only be learned and manipulated but disrupted, and hence is in need of being hedged about by careful distinctions, social enforcements, and laws” (118). If Shakespeare’s play assumes that the written and spoken word are both “divinely sanctioned” and potentially disruptive of the social order, what the play also demonstrates is how the dismembered hand, and by implication the alienated rhetorical subject, invested with “Roman” or humanist social practice and “being” triumphs, how the written word supersedes the spoken, because writing reifies and thus transforms social and political action. And, since Tamora speaks while Titus writes, the practice of writing is also, inevitably, gendered.

The act of writing differentiates Titus and his family from Tamora’s kind. Not surprisingly, opposing Titus, the revered “grandsire” (5.3.172), the “head” of the family, Tamora is perceived as “beastly” in her actions by the other characters and critics alike, analogous to the pit which has entrapped the Andronici, a great “swallowing womb” (2.3.239), a devouring mother, juxtaposed to the edifice built to honor the patriarchal family, the Andronici tomb. Between Titus and Tamora and what they signify, Lavinia writes—and is written on.

Lavinia, like Helena, Olivia, Portia, and Rosalind in the comedies, is a humanist-trained and educated woman—a rarity in her day. She is well read in the classics, “sweet poetry and Tully Orator” (4.1.14), obviously Ovid, and she...
has overseen the education of her nephew. According to Marcus, in the much-commented-on apostrophe following her rape and mutilation, her voice was a “heavenly harmony” (2.4.48) of modulation, her “pretty fingers . . . sewed better than Philomel” (2.4.42–43), her “lily hands” could “tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute / And make the silken strings delight to kiss them” (2.4.44–46).17

She is chaste and obedient, ready to marry Saturninus at her father’s bidding, then loyal to Bassianus and Saturninus when she chastises Tamora for her infidelity.

Lavinia is Shakespeare’s picture of the “Roman” matron, the educated and humanist aristocratic woman, the courtier’s lady. Castiglione describes this woman in the third book of The Book of the Courtier:

I will that this woman have a sight in letters, in musicke, in drawing, or painting, and skilfull in dauncing, and in devising sports and pastimes, accompanying with that discrete sober moode, and with the giving a good opinion of her selfe, the other principles also that have beeene taught the Courtier. And thus in conversation, in laughing, in sporting, in jesting, finally in everie thing she shal be had in great price . . .

And albeit stayednesse, noblenesse of courage, temperance, strength of the minde, wisedom, and the other vertues, a man would thinke belonged not to entertaine, yet will I have her endowed with them all, not so much to entertaine (although notwithstanding they may serve thereto also) as to be vertuous: and these vertues to make her such a one, that she may deserve to bee esteemed, and all her doings framed by them. (Castiglione [tr. Hoby] 195; qtd. in Jardine 6–7)

Castiglione ends this passage with conjectures that these learned “vertues” result in potential political and social role reversals: “I wonder then quoth the Lorde Gasper smyling, since you give women both letters, and stayednesse, and nobleness of courage, and temperance, ye will no have them also to beare rule in cities, and to make lawes, and to leade armies, and men to stand spinning in the kitchin” (195; Jardine 7). The educated woman is potentially unruly, “a threat in the social and sexual sphere,” as Lisa Jardine puts it (7), and is consistently ambiguously portrayed in humanist texts, popular pamphlets, and plays.

In early modern England, a humanist education for women was viewed as training, as a supplement to essential femininity, rather than a cultivation of what was inherited—i.e., the mind. “On the one hand,” Jardine suggests, “the [humanist texts on the education of women] encourage female aspiration towards real learning; on the other, faced with female intellectual achievement, male writers consistently mythologize it into iconic chastity, or into a glori-
ous emblem of the cultivatedness of the courts of Europe” (5). If education was perceived as an overlay, a potential making manly of the feminine body, humanist practice also rendered that body iconic, thus re-feminizing it as an object to be praised, an object to be observed, and an object to be read. Thus, Lavinia is “framed” by her doings as the image of the educated woman, but ravished, she becomes Titus’s “greatest spurn” (3.1.101); he says, “Had I but seen thy picture in this plight / It would have madded me; what shall I do / Now I behold thy lively body so?” (3.1.103-105).

Even though both Titus and Lavinia have lost their hands, the psychological “growth” as a tragic hero that Titus shows because he writes is not given to Lavinia, the tragic heroine. She does not acquire subjectivity because she, too, writes. Instead, the play emphasizes her “lively body” and her reinscription as a woman in a patriarchal humanist script.¹⁸ She carries Titus’s hand in her mouth, her “lively body” articulating her father’s words, fulfilling in macabre fashion Goldberg’s analysis of “the path of the hand towards its human destination, the hand filled like a mouth, given interiority (and mind) by the external imposition of a disciplinary regime” (Matter 97).¹⁹ For that reason, Titus, when informing Chiron and Demetrius of how and why he will kill them, paints a picture of social and political miscegenation rather than detailing the violation done to Lavinia’s “mind” as evidenced in hand and tongue:

Here stands the spring whom you have stain’d with mud,
This goodly summer with your winter mix’d. . . .
Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear
Than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity,
Inhuman traitors, you constrain’d and forc’d.

(5.2.170–71, 175–77)

I want to stress that Titus’s attitudes toward Lavinia do not change during the play as he becomes more complex psychologically and thus a humanist hero in the Senecan fashion; in fact, his attitudes toward Lavinia’s worth are reflected in others’ attitudes toward women generally. From the beginning, the play emphasizes the value of being female in a fragmented dramatic world. Lavinia is an object of exchange in Titus’s political dealings with Saturninus, her proposed marriage to him an “advance” of name and family (1.1.238–39) in exchange for Titus’s vote of allegiance to Saturninus. While Titus translates his sons’ behavior in Lavinia’s abduction and subsequent marriage to Bassianus as traitorous and dishonorable, a view shared to advantage by Saturninus, who prefers Tamora’s “hue” (1.1.261) and some distance from the Andronici,
Titus simultaneously calculates that Tamora will be “beholden to the man [himself] / That brought her for this high good turn so far[.] / Yes, and will nobly him remunerate” (1.1.396–98). The exchange of women in this dramatic world creates an arena of political and social remuneration in “public” and “private” spheres which are nearly indistinguishable. The politics of kind are conducted through marriages, as one would expect, but sexual preferments, sexual politics, create the “real” social and political world of the play, a world perceived by all of its inhabitants as fragmented and chaotic, “headless,” in its social structures.

In this world, Lavinia is a “changing piece” (1.1.309), her humanist education but an ornament, her only “real” value the possession of her chaste femininity. A “pretty hollow cage,” she is simultaneously perceived as potentially unruly and uniquely chaste, a paradoxical sign of constant change and stasis. Like Titus, her rapists also read her in that context; Demetrius argues:

She is a woman, therefore may be woo’d,
She is a woman, therefore may be won,
She is Lavinia, therefore must be lov’d.
What, man, more water glideth by the mill
Than wots the miller of, and easy it is
Of a cut loaf to steal a shive.

(2.1.82–87)

Passages similar to this one, Peter Stallybrass has argued, represent the articulations of the class aspirant in this period. He notes three possible class positions: the first, “the one attempting to maintain social closure and exclusion”; the second, “subverting class but reinforcing gender hierarchy”; the third, desiring a closed social structure worthy of his aspiration but flexible enough to admit him (134). Stallybrass suggests that the class aspirant’s “conceptualization of woman will . . . be radically unstable; she will be perceived as oscillating between the enclosed body (the purity of the elite to which he aspires) and the open body (or else how could he attain her?), between being ‘too coy’ and ‘too common’” (134).

It is tempting to label Lavinia “too coy” and Tamora “too common” and suggest an easy and static dichotomy in how the play represents its women, but the social and political structure of Titus is much as Stallybrass describes, from the opening scenes, when Bassianus and Saturninus with Titus compete to be emperor, to its close, when Lucius does the same. Creating among themselves
the conditions for “headless” social chaos, the men are in ceaseless competition for honors, from marriage to proper burials, and their exchanged women are in this sense a sign of their agonistic struggle. Their rivalry is gendered and imagined as a war of regeneration between matriarchal and patriarchal would-be rulers, between Tamora’s and Titus’s families, the play thus replicating the political tensions of England in the 1590s.

From this perspective, Lavinia and Tamora are similar “changing pieces,” as are their actions; their images “oscillate.” Both are motivated by the need for revenge, Tamora’s by the death of her son, Lavinia’s by the deaths of her brothers and husband. Tamora’s bloodthirsty words are countered by the image of Lavinia holding the bowl in her mouth under Chiron’s and Demetrius’s slit necks. If Tamora marries Saturninus too easily given her preference for Aaron, similarly Lavinia will marry either brother as her father or brothers dictate.

While productions of the play usually indicate through gesture an affection between Lavinia and Bassianus and there are textual references to a prior betrothal her father may not be aware of, nothing she says reveals more than loyal obedience to her father and husband, much like Tamora’s vigilant protection of Saturninus’s rule even though she seems unimpressed by her new role. Tamora’s affair with Aaron, her absence of chastity, is balanced by Lavinia’s rape, defined as “lust,” even a version of Petrarchan love (cf. 2.1.), by her attackers. Both women suffer devaluation, what Aaron terms a “trimming” (5.1.94), as a result of the play’s action from this point of view, and Titus kills them both, enclosing them as participants, as actors, in the humanist revenge script he reads, writes, and enacts, because they inspire “a pattern, president, and lively warrant / For [Titus], most wretched, to perform the like” (5.3. 44-45).

But the women are not perceived as “like.” Tamora is perceived as the “beast,” the monster mother, because of her adultery with Aaron and her attacks on the Andronici. Tamora speaks, incorporating into herself all of the stereotypes concerning unruly women as a result. Much has been written by Shakespeare’s contemporaries and twentieth-century critics concerning these stereotypes.20 Perhaps, in this case, the most pertinent texts for the woman who would speak or write come from humanist writers, from the conduct book writer Richard Brathwait, who said, “Silence in a Woman is a mowing Rhetorike, winning most, when in words it wooeth least” (90), and the educator and humanist Juan Luis Vives, who said, in The Instruction of a Christian Woman, “But I give no license to a woman to be a teacher, nor to have authority of the man but to be in silence” (1585 ed. 30; qtd. in Kaufman 893). Discussing this
commonly held view that "rhetoric is one thing that women should not be
taught," Parker locates writing and speech specifically in attitudes toward the
gender of the public and private bodies which spoke and wrote:

It was the public nature of rhetoric—taking women outside their proper
"province" or place—which disqualified them, in a long tradition dating from
as ancient an authority as Aristotle’s strictures that women were to be not only
silent but identified with the property of the home and with the private sphere,
with a private rather than a common place. (At least one Renaissance poet also
linked this private place, in the Politics, with the Aristotelian distinction, in the
Rhetoric, between koinoi topoi or “common places” and idio topoi or “private
places,” and their sexual counterparts.)

A woman who spoke displayed her voice, Parker argues, and was by definition
a “public woman” and a “whore” (104)—a woman, I would add, like Tamora,
who not only would rule her sons and husband, but literally travels to Rome
and then freely moves about the “public” areas of the play and whose body is
finally cast out.

Lavinia, who begins the play potentially unruly in her speech and her humanist
education, her writing, her teaching, is rendered a macabre and reified image
of the chaste, silent, and obedient wife and daughter after her mutilation—or
because of it—and is from her rape enclosed in her father’s house. From the
play’s beginning, and iconically, from the moment of her mutilation, Lavinia’s
written words are not the signs of the text to be read. Her mutilated body is
her “alphabet,” the sign of her meanings, her consciousness. Her missing hands
and tongue signify the loss of her chastity, where the attack on her father has
occurred, her dismembered body resembling Rome’s politicized images of
itself. Lavinia’s mutilated body duplicates and genders, in this sense, the frag-
mented political system at work in the play and its attitudes toward writing,
its attitudes toward humanism, demonstrating what Francis Barker describes
as “a materiality that is fully and unashamedly involved in the processes of
domination and resistance which are the inner substance of social life” (25).
But these “inner” workings are mapped on the exterior of Lavinia’s body, in a
literal paradox, on her “trimmed” and missing limbs. From Stallybrass’s and
Barker’s perspectives, Lavinia is turned inside out. The invisible “inner” sign
of social value, her chastity, is written on her missing extremities, and, as the
ideal aristocratic woman, her “private” place is “publicly” revealed to all who
view her.

She is revenged. Titus enacts the consequences of a “public” and alienated
patriarchal subjectivity by reading Lavinia and killing her, Tamora, and Tamora’s children. But humanist discourse makes for differences. Tamora, in spite of her staged reproductive capabilities, is rendered “hollow,” monstrous, one of her kind in a world which “swallows her own increase” (5.2.191) like her spoken words, the excess in a political world inscribed finally as a dismembered and dismembering female. Conversely, Lavinia, by definition of Tamora’s kind but self-inscribed and inscribing, becomes a visible woman of letters and a product of that extremity, capable of reproducing a humanist world in and on her body. Her missing tongue and limbs confirm her as an object of value and desire, signifying how her world violently possesses and exchanges women through a dislocation of words and hands. As the frontispiece to Martin Billingley’s The Pens Excellencie or The Secretaries Delight (1618) declares:

*Lingua, Penna: Mentis Muta*
1. The pen is the mute tongue of the mind.
2. The tongue is the mute pen of the mind.
3. The mute pen is the tongue of the mind.
4. The mute tongue is the pen of the mind.
5. The tongue of the mind is a mute pen.
6. The pen of the mind is a mute tongue. (As qtd. in Goldberg, *Matter* 276)

Lavinia is the visible sign of a humanist ideology which would displace the location of the subject and inscribe invisible—but “public”—social and political distinctions on women’s bodies: she is the image of the educated aristocratic woman.

**NOTES**

My title for this essay was inspired by Carolyn Kizer’s poem “Pro Femina, Three,” which begins “I will speak about women of letters . . .” (1973).

1. What is designated “private” and “public” has been the focus of much critical attention, especially in relation to the iconic condition of primarily aristocratic women’s bodies on the stage. See especially Stallybrass and Barker. Other critics have focused on the iconic value of such displays and politicized them, in effect politicizing what we would term “private” or personal; see Bergeron, Goldberg’s work on James, Montrose, and Tennenhouse. This intersection of the “private” with the political is one both Elizabeth and James were cognizant of; both referred to themselves as “set on stages” (as qtd. in Heisch; also Basilikon Doron 163, as quoted in Bergeron 43). Stage metaphors are pervasive in this period, but these critiques concerning the display of
the “private” female aristocratic body have influenced my reading of Lavinia. She is transformed into a “private” icon or text, read by her family as the motivation for revenge.

Other critics have particularized how royal icons were read in regard to shifting historical moments as the monarchs changed; see Berry, King, Levin, and Patterson. Titus, most likely written by 1594, reformulates an aristocratic Elizabethan political iconography for the stage. See Tennenhouse especially, who argues that Lavinia’s body functions as “synecdoche and the emblem of the disorder of things” (107). If the rivalry between Rome’s warring factions is mapped on her dismembered body, that rivalry is also gendered and imagined as a war of regeneration between matriarchal and patriarchal would-be rulers, between Tamora’s and Titus’s families. The play thus replicates what Lena Cowen Orlin has described as the social instability of patriarchal attitudes in the 1590s. Arguing that “domestic patriarchalism . . . preceded political patriarchalism,” which, because of Elizabeth’s position on the throne, would achieve fuller expressions during the Stuarts’ reigns, Orlin demonstrates how “as a domestic philosophy, patriarchalism was subverted in one key aspect. The patriarchal locus of power was necessarily defined with reference to those who were obliged to relinquish power, as it was the presence in the patriarchal schema of the woman—in her dual role as wife and mother—that was a radically destabilizing factor” (29). While Orlin’s comments would seem to apply most aptly to Tamora’s actions in the play, it is Lavinia’s mutilated body which literally externalizes and visualizes this debate.

2. Crane discusses at length these tensions in relation to Cecil, Lord Burghley’s control of the Court of Wards, noting that “young aristocrats like Essex and Oxford resisted his attempts to educate them into submission, while members of the upwardly mobile gentry and middle class (Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser) were frustrated by Burghley’s attempts to arrogate to aristocrats the traditional humanist credentials for upward mobility. How, under Burghley, was fitness for preferment to be displayed?” (128). See also Carole Levin’s discussion of Essex’s wooing of Elizabeth during the 1590s and his subsequent rebellion as a sustained bid for economic preferment (149ff.).

3. Thomas Docherty suggests that this juxtaposition, “broadly, the authority of writing and that of the voice, typographical literacy versus vocal orality, as it were,” “is central to an age in which, after Gutenberg, writing itself has become more of a social issue, related to questions of power” (7). Docherty’s work traces the historical emergence of the self-conscious author, what I will argue Titus himself becomes. Many critics of the play subsume speech and writing under a general category of oratory, rhetoric, or words, in juxtaposition to the body: S. Clark Hulse, for example, emphasizes that “as Titus learns to ‘wrest the alphabet’ of his mangled daughter, he learns a new action that supplants the old Roman oratory, because it alone can simultaneously probe the inner wounds of the spirit and inflict outer wounds on his enemies” (108). R. Stamm argues that the play is a study in logocentrism and translates what is seen into what is said, a point repeated by D. J. Palmer and Jane S. Carducci in their studies of the relationship between language and gesture in the play. Mary Laughlin Fawcett also emphasizes how the play works to “literalize [words] by writing them out on the stage” (263), with the
result that the Andronicus "become words" and "reduce their enemies to bodies" (272). Jane Hicks argues that the play depicts a rhetorical war between Titus and Tamora, and that once Titus substitutes "written discourse for oral, it is a small step to a metonymy of action that discloses all" (71). The metonymy of action Hicks describes is the violent disintegration of metaphors, of language itself, "as words disengage from casual usage and become literalized" (299) for Gillian Murray Kendall.

4. Crane documents the humanist belief that its training reproduces itself in the values held by its practitioners and their students, becoming the means for a humanist self-fashioning: Jed sexualizes that account.

5. According to the OED, "decipher" meant "to convert into ordinary writing" (emphasis mine).

6. Much has been written concerning the overt textual allusions to Ovid's Metamorphosis in the play, most notably by Eugene M. Waith and Barbara Mowat. Douglas E. Green discusses both the critics and these allusions in depth, but argues that "it is largely through and on the female characters that Titus is constructed and his tragedy inscribed" (319). In his discussion of the impact of writing in early modern Europe and the construction of the authorial self, Docherty suggests that "what is written can be considered as some kind of 'pre-text' of its performance" (12), an idea with obvious application to what I have been discussing. Docherty himself argues that Lavinia in this scene is "entirely dependent on anterior authority in the form of Ovid, through which she manages to reveal the tale of her rape" (126).

7. The events in act 1, especially the election of Saturninus by voice vote or acclamation, emphasize this state of affairs. Historians of early modern England have long debated the importance of "kin" or kinship in its social organization. David Cressy discusses this debate and concludes that "the English kinship system was egocentric and bilateral, contextual and informal. Although a patrilineal lineage bias affected the transmission of property, in other regards the system was fluid and flexible" ("Kinship" 67).

8. Cornelia was "the mother of the Gracchi, Roman political reformers, whose education she had carefully supervised," according to a textual note in the Riverside edition (n.12;1038).

9. Green argues that "the live burial of the still-railing Aaron and the casting forth of Tamora's body signify what this patriarchy cannot digest. The unassailable elements—racial as well as sexual otherness, and all that issues from such difference—crystallize in the sign of other life: at the end, whether dead or alive, whether an absence or a silent presence, the child of Aaron and Tamora, the infant for whom the Moor gave himself up, cannot be contained by Lucius' new order or by Shakespeare's play" (326). In contrast, Palmer thinks that "swallowing" as epitomized by the murderous pit, Lavinia's mouth, and Aaron's burial is "a nauseous and abhorrent act" (332). In terms of my argument to follow concerning the reification of writing, perhaps Aaron's head is left above ground in this last scene to signify that he is both a writer and the unassimilated other, a Moor or Turk.
10. David Cressy’s work on literacy in the period informs Goldberg’s argument and my own. Cressy has studied the numbers of English who could sign their names on public documents, assuming that the ability to sign corresponds with the ability to read. While people could read without writing, Cressy argues in some convincing ways that writing one’s name assumes an ability to both read and write.

11. Goldberg extends his discussion of writing in Hamlet to argue the political dimensions of writing and pedagogy in Writing Matter, in which he makes explicit how the act of writing conveys not only subjectivity but social class. “Letters,” he argues, “are inscribed within nature, and they inscribe nature, the human, and the social/ideological within their domain” (Matter 225).

12. Gordon Braden describes the seemingly paradoxical collapse of revenge with humanism in the depiction of the Senecan revenger.

13. Crane suggests that the humanist “educational program in turn gave rise to a version of authorship that was collective instead of individualistic, published instead of private, inscriptive instead of voice-centered, and aphoristic or epigrammatic instead of lyric or narrative” (4; emphasis mine). Her argument does not conflict with Goldberg’s as much as this quote would imply; both emphasize a fractured or “dismembered” humanist subjectivity.

14. Parker adds here that “it may be for this reason that rhetoric and language were so much the locus of anxieties about the problem of control, including the link between the ordered ‘chain’ of discourse and the disposition of a potentially wayward or unruly female materia” (118-19).

15. See, in particular, Marion Wynne-Davies’s discussion of the rape theme and Tamora’s dramatic treatment: “The pit in Titus functions as both a womb and a consuming mouth. As the play attempts to repress female sexuality through rape, so it denies female speech when Lavinia has her tongue cut out. Tamora’s unheeded plea for her sons is likewise a reminder of women’s muted state. Yet it is through the ‘consumption’ of a pen that Lavinia regains the power of communication, and at the end of the play, Tamora will literally eat her sons” (136).

16. David Cressy estimates that the illiteracy rate for women in England in the 1590s was well over 90 percent (145). While his methodology has been criticized, Cressy’s figures still demonstrate how rapidly this situation changes in the seventeenth century. For examples of later women writers, see Margaret George.

17. Kendall comments that Lavinia’s “literal lack of hands becomes equated with an ability to write, sew, or in any way create her story” (303).

18. Mary Laughlin Fawcett suggests that “contained in this scrawl-emblem of the father’s hand as tongue in the daughter’s mouth are ideas about the patriarchal nature of language (her tongue is her father), about the equivalence between speaking (tongue) and doing (hand), and about writing (what the hand does) as a substitute for speaking (what the tongue does). . . . The mother-tongue for this speaker is a father-
hand inserted incestuously between the teeth of a ruined mouth, a vagina dentata” (261-62). Her arguments concerning Lavinia’s role anticipate my own in many ways.

19. It is coincidence that Goldberg here seems to imagine *Titus*. He is discussing how the acts of writing and speaking are naturalized through pedagogy in the chapter in *Matter* titled “The Violence of the Letter.”

20. Recent studies on the unruly woman have been done by Jean E. Howard, Karen Newman, Mary Beth Rose, and David Underdown. Their studies focus on the disruptive potential of the unruly woman and how “such behavior is a form of simulation, a confusion that elides the conventional poles of sexual difference by denaturalizing gender-coded behaviors; such simulations pervert authorized systems of gender and power” (Newman 33).

21. To some extent repeating Laqueur’s hypothesis in *Making Sex*, Emily Martin notes that during this period, “what could be seen on men’s bodies was assumed as the pattern for what could not be seen of women’s” (30); more to my point, she compares historical attitudes of women and the medical authorities toward women’s reproductive lives, ending in the present, where, she says, “but [the metaphor of] dismemberment is with us still, and the ‘hold on the body’ has not so much slackened as it has moved from law to science” (21). Elaine Scarry’s work on the psychodynamics of torture is illuminating on this point. She argues that the infliction of pain is an attempt by the torturer to project, or inscribe, self-perceptions on the other, seemingly inert, body of the tortured. In the process of torturing, the body is “substantiated,” becomes as the torturer would perceive it, because it expresses pain. Pain validates perceptions as the victim’s body is “read” and seems to acquire “the sturdiness and vibrancy of presence” (280). From this perspective, Lavinia acquires “presence,” what Scarry terms evidence of sentence, when she is mutilated and because her family and the audience see her hurt. Her body in pain inscribes her.

WORKS CITED


Brathwait, Richard. *The English Gentlewoman, drawne out to the full Body: Expressing,


