

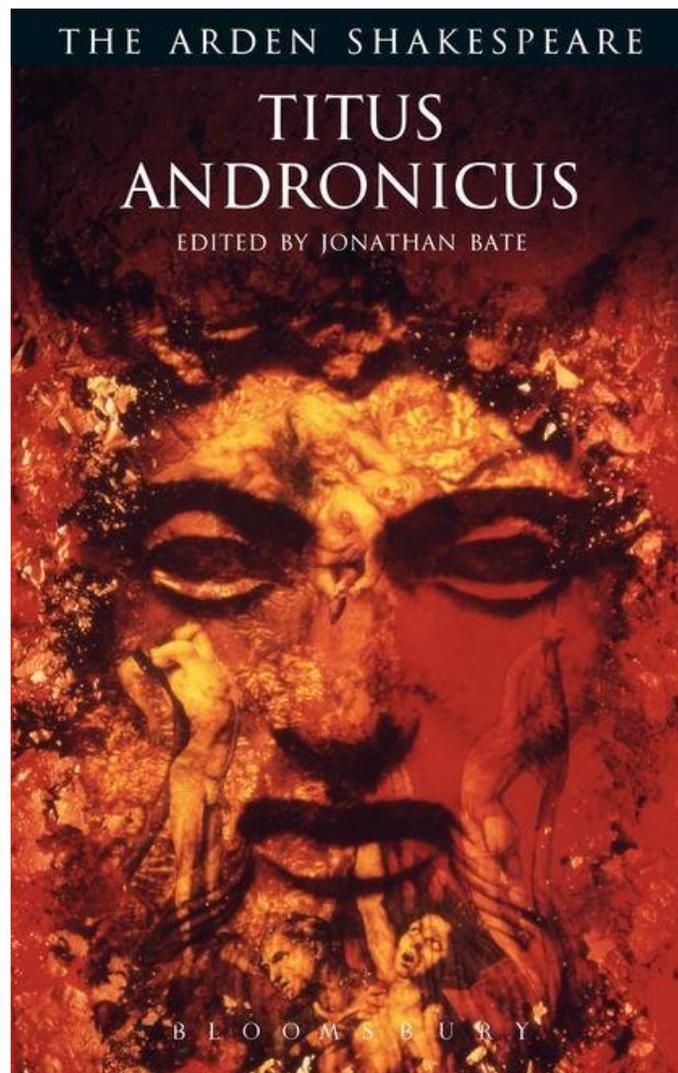
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Titus Andronicus in Contemporary India

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by Anna Kurian



TITUS ANDRONICUS, BLOOMSBURY 1995

Reading *Titus Andronicus* (1594) as the first text in a course on Shakespeare's tragedies, starting in January 2013, most of the M.A (English) students at the University of Hyderabad (a public university deemed to be among the elite higher education institutions of India but with a very mixed student demographic from rural, urban, and semi-urban areas), found the violence over-the-top, the characterization slim, and the lines themselves insipid.

It was only as we "read" Lavinia and the way women were narrated into and out of being that students began to see interesting parallels between a late 16th century text and 21st century India. My effort in classes was directed at pointing to the strange relevance of Early Modern ideas regarding gender and femininity, albeit refracted via imperial Rome, to present-day India. I used as the immediate context the brutal gang-rape in India's capital in December 2012 -- the victim died of her injuries. Three thematic parallels stood out in our discussions.

The Objectification of Woman and the Woman as Property

Beginning with Lavinia's epithet -- "Rome's rich ornament" (I.i) -- we examined her passage from hand to hand, in a show of gendered legitimate ownership. Her father, brothers, and betrothed all move her around like a chess piece, her desires irrelevant, her opinion unsought. Reduced by the Emperor Saturninus to "this changing piece," Lavinia remains largely silent. Then female students from conservative Indian backgrounds (irrespective of religious affiliation) saw the connection: their opinions regarding their futures were often ignored in the face of overwhelming societal and familial pressures that determined a suitable time for marriage and the choice of husband.

Women's Bodies: Sites of Honor and Enactments of Power

In the scene which precedes Lavinia's rape (II.iii), she articulates her fear of being dishonored, and to avert it, pleads for death at the hands of Tamora and her sons. My students perceived the internalization of the patriarchal code of honor which governs the lives of women in India's still largely traditional societies: an honor that is mapped on the body of the woman. We then spoke of India's long history of communal riots with its ignoble tradition of rape and mutilation, and also the use of rape in war. An understanding of rape as being not so much about sexual gratification as a demonstration and claiming of power by those who experience themselves as powerless resulted from a discussion of the ambiguous status of Lavinia's rapists in

Roman society. Their actions revealed to my students how in wartime and times of civil troubles women become "soft targets" for the vicious rage of men who perceive themselves as disempowered and seek to thus demonstrate their masculine superiority.

Women, Family-Honor, Honor-Killing

Reading the final scene, where Titus kills Lavinia, citing a noble precedent and approved by the Emperor, we discovered that 21st century India had not moved very far from Shakespeare's time (or Roman times as seen in the play). The "zinda laash" (literally a "live corpse," taken to symbolize death-in-life) argument often cited in our news reports and articulated by politicians in the aftermath of the December 2012 rape, characterizes the rape victim as a someone who would be better off dead, thus sparing herself and, more importantly, her family shame and sorrow. The same views are articulated by the Emperor: "Because the girl should not survive her shame,/ And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (V.iii). In India where women are commonly killed (if they marry "outside" their caste/community) to "preserve" family honor, students immediately recognized Lavinia/the Indian woman as a place-holder of family prestige.

Lavinia's life, rape, and eventual murder by her father consequently became a theme which resonated with beliefs and values that remain deeply entrenched in contemporary India.



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