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S H A K E S P E A R E
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«YET I'LL SPEAK» : SILENCING THE FEMALE VOICE IN *TITUS* *ANDRONICUS* AND *OTHELLO*

The phenomenon I would like to explore in this essay is hardly a recent discovery, since already in 1693, Thomas Rymer decided that the moral lesson to be obtained from *Othello* is that «[w]e may learn here that a Woman never loses her tongue, even tho' after she is stifl'd»¹. It is a shame that Rymer did not have a look at *Titus Andronicus* as well, or his statement might have been, more amazingly even, that «a woman never loses her tongue, even tho' after it is cut off». In fact, what these two particular plays show is an overwhelming will to speak on the part of the female characters, and an equally overwhelming will to silence those women or impose their own meanings on their speech on the part of the male characters. What is more, this opposition between female speech and male silencing or projection, which Shakespeare explored so thoroughly in these two plays, extends beyond the fictional worlds into the interpretations of critics and actors alike.

To say that Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* is literally silenced by having her tongue cut out and hands cut off once she has been raped could seem to be the most banal of observations. It would, indeed, be banal and gratuitous to write an essay on the subject were it not that the reverse side of the statement is so consistently ignored. This reverse side is, of course, that there would be no need to silence if there were not first the threat of forceful if not dangerous speech. In

their urge to distinguish between Lavinia, the passive, pleasantly quiet, innocent virgin, and Tamora, the violent and sexual Goth, whose power derives from her linguistic skills and her capacity for deceitful language, most critics have chosen to ignore the similarities between the play's two female protagonists. It seems that what Belsey claims for plays of the English Renaissance in general, namely that they «tend to include contrasted female stereotypes, one saintly, submissive, faithful, forgiving and silent, and the other predatory, dominating, usually lustful, destructive and voluble»², is what modern readers in the case of *Titus Andronicus* try to impose upon the play. If Belsey is correct in stating that such «[s]tereotypes define what the social body endorses and what it wants to exclude»³, then modern readings of *Titus* which insist on strongly contrasting Lavinia and Tamora reveal *modern* anxieties about «unruly» women.

Titus Andronicus does expose an equivalent anxiety, but in the play it cannot be traced in a contrasting stereotyping of Lavinia and Tamora. If anything, the anxiety is revealed in the ultimate *resemblance* of the two characters⁴. Apart from many structural similarities between Titus' only daughter and the Queen of the Goths, what strikes me most about the two female protagonists is that, although they clearly emerge from different backgrounds, both women have a command of rhetoric and a knowledge of mythology which is second to none of the male characters. Furthermore, both women are confronted with situations in which their speech, however rhetorically sophisticated and passionate, goes unheeded. Thus Tamora's revenge is motivated by the fact that when she was pleading for the life of her eldest son, the Andronici let her, «a queen / Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain» (I.1.454-5)⁵. How important this moment is in the play becomes clear when we consider that Henry Peacham chose this scene for his illustration of the tragedy and accompanied the drawing with a few lines of Tamora's plea and Titus' refusal⁶. No wonder that later in the play, Tamora will deliberately put the daughter of her adversary in an equivalent position, when she reminds her sons :

Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain
To save your brother from the sacrifice,
But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
Therefore away with her, and use her as you will ;
The worse to her, the better loved of me.

(II.3.163-7)

Three times in this scene, Tamora and her sons choose to ignore Lavinia's ever more desperate pleas. The last time, her mouth is physically stopped by Chiron before he drags her off to rape her off-stage. Later, Titus himself will be forced to plead for the lives of his sons in vain.

That the efforts of Tamora and her sons to silence Lavinia are «necessary» becomes clear when we realise that, in a play in which, as Titus remarks, words may be «razors to [his] wounded heart» (I.1.319), both Tamora and Lavinia are remarkably good at using offensive language. Indeed, as a line count shows, out of the 58 lines Lavinia speaks before her tongue is cut off, 22 contain more or less direct insults to her interlocutors. There is no justification for Helms' statement that «silence, which proclaims the victim's ritual consent, is the keynote of Lavinia's role, marking its sacrificial trajectory from the opening scene»⁷. Rather, as long as she is in possession of her tongue, Lavinia is shown to be a skilled orator, as when she greets her father and uses his own words to turn his thoughts from death to life (I.1.157-64). Her choice of silence, when she is abducted by Bassianus, her future husband, is politically canny, since it is the only way that she can assist the man she loves while compromising her family as little as possible⁸. Finally, her provocative speech to Tamora, which was described by Brooke as exhibiting a «vulgarity of tone [which] is at once cheap, stupid, and dangerous»⁹, shows that, when feeling secure, Lavinia is furthermore capable of irresponsible outspokenness. Her linguistic powers only dissolve in the face of the threat of rape, the «one thing ... / That womanhood denies [her] tongue to tell» (II.3.173-4). Even then, however, her last words are a final insult directed at Tamora :

No grace, no womanhood ? Ah, beastly creature,
The blot and enemy to our general name !
Confusion fall —

(II.3.182-4)

— at which point her mouth is stopped.

When Lavinia reappears, as the authorial stage direction puts it, with «*her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished*» (SD II.4), her condition poses several problems. First of all, whereas it is still relatively easy to impersonate a character with no hands and tongue, how on earth is an actor or actress to perform the state of being ravished ? After all, whereas the audience is supposed to

understand fully what has been done to Lavinia, her family must remain in the dark. Whereas the mutilations are visible, and, in view of the mythological precedent of Philomela, are oblique signifiers of the rape, the rape of a married woman itself is not only what Lavinia could not speak of, what Shakespeare decided not to stage, but also what is perforce invisible and not to be proved in the absence of a testimony.

The raped and mutilated Lavinia furthermore poses an insistent problem of interpretation both within the tragedy and for us, the spectators and critics. We must all find a way of listening to the voice of the silenced woman. Neither we nor her family may look away and ignore her, since there is no doubt about Shakespeare's deliberateness in keeping the dismembered mute woman on-stage for six scenes. After all, Shakespeare seems to have added the so-called «fly» or «banquet» scene (III.2) to the already completed play, so as to force us to observe Lavinia's pitiable attempts at feeding herself. Furthermore, Titus' eloquent complaint in this scene, that being bereft of his left hand deprives him of an important means of self-expression, emphasises how much more Lavinia is impaired¹⁰. Being bereft of both tongue and hands, Lavinia is in danger of becoming a blank page on which the men who surround her may write their own meanings, even at the risk of harming her physically. Thus when Lavinia starts to cry as she is trying to feed herself, Titus' interpretation of her tears is the following :

Hark, Marcus, what she says —
I can interpret all her martyred signs —
She says she drinks no other drink but tears,
Brewed with her sorrow, mashed upon her cheeks.

(III.2.35-8)

And, since Lavinia so evidently does not want to drink anything but her own tears, nobody assists her in holding a cup to her lips, and her thirst is not stilled at this banquet¹¹.

More subtly perverse than this projection of meaning onto Lavinia's signs is the fact that her family, which now seems so intent on interpreting Lavinia's actions, never wonders why she has been mutilated, but only asks who is responsible for the deed. I would like to suggest that the reason for this odd lack of inquisitiveness is that, to them, as to Tamora and her sons, silencing Lavinia makes sense. Although the Andronici mourn the loss of Lavinia's tongue and voice, the words which Marcus uses to

describe this loss actually reveal a contradictory attitude towards Lavinia's speaking. When Marcus explains that

that delightful *engine* of her thoughts
That *blabbed* them with such pleasing eloquence,
Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage
Where, *like a sweet melodious bird*, it sung
Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear

(III.1.83-7, my emphases)

he seems to be regretfully implying that there was some kind of objective justification for Lavinia's silencing, however much he enjoyed her «pleasing eloquence» and is shocked by the methods used for the silencing. The conjunction of the word «blab», which means «[t]o talk indiscreetly about what should be kept secret, to reveal or betray secrets» (*OED*) — a sense in which Shakespeare also used the word in *Twelfth Night* — with «engine», which, in the sixteenth century, could refer to either a tool or any offensive weapon (*OED*), can be considered as an indication that Marcus feels that Lavinia's speech was both indiscreet and offensive in revealing her thoughts which had best be kept secret. Marcus's subsequent commonplace comparison of Lavinia's tongue with a bird in this context serves to underline the carefree and unbridled nature of her speech. This reading of Marcus' words is corroborated by the fact that Lavinia's gruesome silencing is but one example of a larger drive to control women's speech in the play, since both the nurse and the midwife are killed by Aaron in an explicit effort to prevent their talking. Both «babble» and «tattle», the verbs he associates with these women, have the implication of excessive speech leading to the revelation of things that ought not to be made public. All women in the play, then, and not only the «[h]igh-witted Tamora» who can «gloze with all» (IV.4.35), are associated with excessive speech that must be contained. And all women are violently silenced, whether by simply losing their life, or losing their tongue and life, or, in the case of Tamora, having her «mischiefs be returned again / Even in [her] throat» (III.1.273). Being tricked into eating your own sons is, indeed, an oddly oral punishment, which effectively stops Tamora's voice — she has no more lines before she is stabbed.

In the case of Lavinia, however, it soon becomes evident that the amputations of her hands and tongue are not sufficient to silence her. In the scene following the banquet, we see her chasing her

nephew in search of the text that contains the blue-print for her experience. In fact, in a play in which all acts are motivated and/or justified by mythological «pattern[s], precedent[s], and lively warrant[s]» (V.3.43), it is highly significant that Lavinia physically seizes the patterning text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with its narrative of the rape and tongue-mutilation of Philomela, in order to appropriate this text, take control over it, and turn it into her own family's pattern for taking revenge. It is Lavinia who initiates the revenge of the Andronici through her determination to finally publish the rape of which norms of female modesty forbid her to speak. Not only does Lavinia write the names of the rapists and the word «stuprum» in the sand, thus insistently pointing to the hidden violation and the identity of its perpetrators. The fact that she furthermore identifies her experience with the myth of Philomela, who revenged her rape with the help of her sister Procne by killing the rapist's son and feeding him to his father, also provides the pattern according to which the revenge of the Andronici will, indeed, take place.

Yet Lavinia cannot win. She eventually loses against the force of mythological precedents precisely because she has defeated them, communicated when she should have remained unnoticed, lived when she should have died, and, most importantly, written what she should not (and could not) have told. By naming the unnameable and unrepresentable rape she publicises her dishonour and hence initiates her own death. For Lavinia and Titus seem to have differing cultural perceptions of rape. Whereas Lavinia believes herself in a «guilt culture», in which revealing her rapists and making clear that she was not complicit in the act (as her mutilations testify) should warrant their punishment and her survival, Titus operates within the «shame» paradigm, within which the victim's «pollution ... [can] be removed only by death»¹². Hence what is important in Lavinia's adherence to the patterning myth of Philomela is not merely that Philomela takes revenge, but perhaps more that, once the revenge has been accomplished, Philomela lives on in the shape of a nightingale, thus acquiring a new voice¹³. It doesn't come as a surprise that Lavinia's father and uncle, true to the «shame» paradigm, try to supplant the liberating myth of Philomela with the legend of Lucrece as soon as Lavinia has revealed that she was raped (IV.1.62-3; 90). This pattern, were Lavinia to accept it, would prescribe her suicide and leave the revenge to her male relatives¹⁴.

But Lavinia does *not* commit suicide, although she could easily jump off a cliff, which is an option that is explicitly available within the play, and which is moreover considered an honourable death. Instead, she goes on adhering to the precedent of Philomela and assists her father in the execution of her rapists, even holding the bowl, in which the blood of the murderers is caught, between her stumps. But instead of letting her survive the revenge like Philomela and acquire a new voice, Titus in the last scene suddenly wrests Lavinia out of her chosen pattern into that of Virginia. This pattern, then, becomes the «pattern, precedent, and lively warrant» that allows him to kill his daughter in order to eradicate her shame and his sorrow (V.3.43): «Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die» (V.3.45-6). It is certainly significant that no word of mourning is spoken for Lavinia once she has been killed, and that the single reference to her plight merely mentions her rape, and ignores both her mutilations and her murder. Once she is dead, more important matters may be discussed.

What never ceases to amaze me about Lavinia's death is the sheer endorsement Titus receives from critics and performers alike for his wresting of her into another myth which prescribes her destruction. It is as if everybody was secretly relieved to be rid of the obscenity her mangled body forces on us, as if there existed a conspiracy to refigure murder as euthanasia or assisted suicide. From the critics' point of view, this takes the shape of claims like the following: «Titus's action can be viewed as a substitute for the suicide she cannot manage alone»¹⁵, or: «[h]is killing of Lavinia is a private act, a commitment to a personal relationship»¹⁶, or: «the murder is shown as an act of love to which Lavinia gives her tacit consent»¹⁷. What on earth do people expect Lavinia to do apart from being tacit?

The same phenomenon can be observed in the theatre, where Lavinia's participation in the revenge is most frequently staged as happening against her will. Furthermore, all five major productions of the play in Britain in the past fifty years have had in common that, whether Titus snapped her neck, stabbed her, or cut her throat, Lavinia was always complicit in her killing. In one production, she even «handed» her father the knife with which he then stabbed her in a loving embrace. Obviously, Lavinia's voice is silenced and ignored not only within the play, but the character is even today subjected to an unwarranted and unwanted critical and theatrical euthanasia¹⁸.

However, women increasingly resent the silencing of Lavinia on-stage and in critical discourse. This is obvious on the one hand from the abundance of feminist articles which have appeared in the last ten years, and which have as a common aim to lend a voice to the silenced female character(s) in *Titus Andronicus*. On the other hand, actresses in their preparation of the role have resisted the allegorisation of Lavinia and attempted to re-emphasise the physicality of her suffering. Thus the famous RSC production of 1987, the only stage production of *Titus* to be directed by a woman (Deborah Warner) was clearly sensitive to the issue of rape, and Sonia Ritter's portrayal of Lavinia, for which she «drew upon the image of a wounded bird or horse that alternates between stillness and flight», was extremely powerful¹⁹. In South Africa, Jennifer Woodburn, for the production directed by Gregory Doran in Johannesburg in 1995, even consulted a doctor to find out how a woman who had been raped and mutilated like Lavinia would behave. Her idea that Lavinia could be pregnant or having a miscarriage was however not appreciated by either star or director, who both felt that giving Lavinia too much of a «voice» or stage presence would run the risk of up-staging Anthony Sher's Titus²⁰.

Let us return to Shakespeare and move on to Desdemona — whose fate should be that much more appalling than Lavinia's, if we are to believe one critic's claim that «We are shocked far less by Lavinia's fate [...] than that of Desdemona, because Desdemona is a woman, not an emblematic figure representing Injured Innocence, which Lavinia largely is»²¹. Even more than Lavinia, Desdemona is a character who is explicitly identified as being of «high and plenteous wit and invention» (IV.1.186-7). She is moreover commended especially for the beauty of her voice — she will, Othello asserts, «sing the savageness out of a bear» (IV.1.185-6) — and she is explicitly praised for being «free of speech» (III.3.188). From the very start of the play, Desdemona is set into contexts which foreground her wilful agency in marrying Othello and asking to be allowed to accompany him in his campaign. At the same time, she is presented to us in situations which problematise her «free speech» (III.4.128). Whereas her first appearance in the Senate gives extraordinary weight to her testimony, since Othello's life depends on it (I.3.115-21), Desdemona herself shows an awareness of the impropriety of her speech within this all-male political context. Her skilful understatement of her linguistic powers, when she begs the duke to «lend [his] prosperous ear» «[t]o [her] unfolding» «[a]nd let

[her] find a charter in [his] voice / T'assist [her] simpleness» (I.3.244-7) can hardly conceal the vehemence of her plea and the resonance of voice her choice of vocabulary implies :

That I did love the Moor to live with him
My downright violence and scorn [Q ; or F : storm] of fortunes
May trumpet to the world...

(I.3.249-51)

Furthermore, her demand for «[t]he rites for which [she] loves [Othello]» (I.3.258) reveals a sexual confidence which belies her father's description of her as «A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself» (I.3.95-7). That her request to accompany Othello on his military campaign is not as innocent as it may seem becomes evident when Othello feels the necessity to tortuously reassure the senators that he will not «scant» their «serious and great business / When she is with [him]» (I.3.268-9).

While the Senate scene shows that Desdemona's voice is potentially intrusive within the world of politics and warfare, her next appearance sets her voice within the context of misogynist discourse. This, in fact, seems to me to be the point of the scene on the seashore, which is so often cut in productions and which, like Lavinia's insults to Tamora, has provoked some critics to find in Desdemona a certain vulgarity of tone. Ridley, in the notes of his edition of the play, comments : «This is to many readers, and I think rightly, one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare. To begin with it is unnatural. [...] Then, it is distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap backchat with Iago, and so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way»²². Yet if we accept that the silencing of the female voice is a major theme in *Othello* as it was in *Titus Andronicus*, then Iago's misogynist discourse and the women's responses to it become an essential ideological backdrop for the events that follow. Not only does Iago for the first time explicitly condemn female utterance, but female speech even offends him when it is contained :

Des. Alas ! she has no speech.

Iago. In faith, too much !

I find it still when I have list to sleep.

Marry, before your ladyship, I grant,

She puts her tongue a little in her heart

And chides with thinking.

(II.1.100-7)

That both Emilia and Desdemona defend themselves against Iago's accusations is certainly telling, and so, too, is the fact that Desdemona closes the exchange by urging Emilia: «Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband» (II.1.162-3). Desdemona does more than insist on Emilia's right to oppose her husband, she also identifies Iago's speech as slander (II.1.113), an act of verbal violence against and projection of meaning onto women which was even punishable under early modern law²³. When a little later Iago and Cassio provide contrasting readings of Desdemona's features and actions (II.3.16-25), the process by which Desdemona's voice is obscured behind male projections of meaning has begun.

This process, of course, is most clearly visible in Desdemona's plea for Cassio, which thanks to Iago's slanders is misread by Othello as a sign of Desdemona's adultery. Desdemona herself eventually comes to realise how literally she has «talk[ed Othello] out of patience» (III.3.23) when she tells Cassio that she has «spoken for [him] all [her] best / And stood within the blank of [Othello's] displeasure / For [her] free speech» (III.4.128-30). Since, according to Iago, Desdemona's «strain[ing Cassio's] entertainment / With ... strong or vehement importunity» is a «proof» of her infidelity (III.3.254-5), the woman's speech becomes identified with falseness, and the more «stoutly» Desdemona speaks for Cassio (III.1.45), the more Othello believes her speech to be a sign of her sexual looseness. Whereas Lavinia's sexual pollution had been literally written upon her body through her tell-tale mutilations, Desdemona's «excessive» plea leads to her metaphorical transformation into a «fair paper» and a «most goodly book / Made to write «whore» upon» (4.2.72-3). This connection between female speech and sexual looseness is a commonplace in early modern misogynist discourse which taints the relations between all the three couples in the play²⁴: Emilia's accusations at the end of the play induce Iago to call her a «villainous whore» (V.2.227), and Cassio never doubts that the sexually available Bianca has, indeed, been guilty of indiscretion (IV.1.128). His fear of her «rail[ing] in the streets» would be comic were it not for the sinister context in which the scene is set (IV.1.160).

As in *Titus Andronicus*, furthermore, all three women in the play are put into situations where their speech is disbelieved or

ignored, only to be supplanted with the meaning projected onto it by their interlocutor. Apart from Othello's misinterpretation of Desdemona's advocacy of Cassio's cause, the play shows us that Emilia's assertions are not believed by either Iago or Othello. Whereas Iago does not believe in Emilia's sexual fidelity — a disbelief which re-enforces the parallel between Emilia and Desdemona —, Othello will not trust Emilia's protestations of her mistress' innocence. Even Bianca's words are not accepted as truthful. When Iago has wounded Cassio in the street-fight, her protestations cannot prevent her arrest. The mere fact that she is pale and shaking is interpreted by Iago as a proof of her guilt — «Do you see, gentlemen ? Nay, guiltiness will speak / Though tongues were out of use» (V.1.109-10) — and however forcefully Bianca opposes this interpretation, nobody else questions Iago's right to order her to «tell [them] another tale» (V.2.125).

Whereas judicial violence stops Bianca's mouth, conjugal violence stops the mouths of Desdemona and Emilia. All the acts of silencing and of violence towards the two women happen within a framework which the play marks as domestic. They are either committed in an enclosed domestic space (the conjugal bedroom), or, if public, they are explicitly marked as a marital action in a public domain. Othello's striking of Desdemona is a direct result of her advocacy of Cassio's cause before the Venetian ambassadors. Whereas in the Senate scene, Desdemona's testimony on Othello's behalf, though marked as intrusive, had been accepted, here her public speech on behalf of another man is punished by physical violence. This public striking of Desdemona is implicitly contrasted with Cassio's beating of Roderigo. The earlier instance of interpersonal violence, Vanita remarks, «is treated as a public act, a crime that must [...] be pursued and punished by the state»²⁵. Othello's striking of Desdemona, in contrast, may be disapproved of by its witnesses, but it is not considered to be punishable. Lodovico's reaction, «What ! Strike his wife !» (IV.1.272), neatly contains the act of violence within the private marital relationship. This situation is repeated in the murder of Emilia, which is explicitly meant to stop her voice, and which is defined by both characters and stage direction as Iago killing «his wife» (V.2.234, 236, SD Q).

But, like Lavinia before them, neither Desdemona nor Emilia will be silenced so easily. Surely it is telling that, when Shakespeare revised the play, he paid particular attention to the last scene in which those two women's voices can be heard one more

time on their own²⁶. The revised scene, with its added «willow song» for Desdemona and Emilia's new angry monologue denouncing the marital double standard, allows both women an amount of self-expression about adultery. This scene allows them to present a discourse of resistance to their victimisation, a discourse according to which they may claim equal rights within marriage and reject the suffering inflicted by their husbands. The scene thus becomes a counter-point to the early scene on the seashore, which provided the ideological backdrop for the centre of the play, setting Othello's distrust of Desdemona within the context of misogynist discourse and slander. Desdemona's willow song, while foregrounding the beauty of her voice and establishing a «sisterhood of grief» with the unfortunate Barbary who died of love²⁷, also allows her to distance herself from the «masochistic scenario» lived by Barbary²⁸. Surely it is no coincidence that Desdemona critically interrupts her song with «Nay, that's not next» precisely at the point when the lyrics would seem to accept female victimisation: «Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve» (IV.3.51-2). Girard's claim that Desdemona's song serves the function of «prepar[ing] her for death as she should for a night of love», since the murder «fulfills her most secret expectation»²⁹, seems to me to be no more than another instance of male projection of meaning onto Desdemona's actions and speech. The fact that Desdemona's song leads up to Emilia's eloquent condemnation of conjugal injustice and her advocacy of the right of wives to revenge themselves for their husbands' «peevish jealousies» and physical violence rather goes to prove that the scene veers in the opposite direction to that indicated by Girard (V.1.88-9).

It is within this context of acknowledgement of and resistance to marital injustice that we must see the scene of her murder. When Othello enters the bedroom with the intention to «put out [Desdemona's] light» (V.2.7), he is convinced that the «sacrifice» of his wife is necessary. Since he believes that her words do not correspond to reality, that however much she protests her innocence, she is a whore, the only way he can put an end to the discrepancy between her words and her supposed deeds is by killing her. The «fatal» woman «must die, else she'll betray more men» (V.2.6). Desdemona's immobility in her sleep, which makes it possible for him to project his own meanings on her body, is but a precursor of the relief he will find in the irreversibility of her death: «Be thus when thou art dead and I will kill thee / And love thee after» (V.2.18-9).

But Desdemona awakes. By being alive and speaking, she disrupts Othello's necrophilic dream of semiotic fixture in which he could safely label her «whore», thus justifying his «sacrifice». The only way that Othello can now secure the label «sacrifice» for his act is by making her confess to being a «whore», so that by killing her he may weld that designation to her body. Desdemona refuses to give him this satisfaction and fights to re-define his «sacrifice» as a «murder» (V.2.64-5). To the pre-determined meanings he has fixed onto all her utterances, Desdemona opposes vehement denials and a request for Cassio's testimony. Her belief in the value of speech as a warrant for truth is thus opposed to Othello's projections. What is most remarkable in this scene is Desdemona's sheer resilience, the way again and again she refuses to let Othello and the audience impose their meanings on her. Whereas her denials refute Othello's label «whore», her desperate pleas for but another moment of life oppose the audience's allegorisation as a «saint». Desdemona dies as a terrified human being, overpowered by her killer. Till the end, she protests, interrupting him, pleading desperately. Whether he «smothers» (SD Q) or «stifles» (SD F) her, what both terms connote is a forceful suppression of utterance (*OED*). That the murder is a final suppression of Desdemona's speech can also be deduced from the fact that it takes place in the middle of Desdemona's pentameter, which remains incomplete. But Desdemona, who has throughout insisted on having the last word, does so again. She moves or makes a noise — there is no stage direction — or possibly Othello simply mistakes Emilia's voice for Desdemona's. Whatever Shakespeare meant to happen at this point, it is evident that Othello makes a second effort at killing her, in the belief that to do so is a sign of mercy (V.2.86). And again, that killing is left incomplete, for Desdemona seems to stir once more before she finally revives twenty-two lines later and makes a last effort at imposing her meaning on her death: «O falsely, falsely murdered! [...] A guiltless death I die» (V.2.21) are lines which both identify her death as a murder and proclaim her innocence.

That Desdemona's much-discussed and problematic last words («Nobody. I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord — O, farewell!» (V.2.122-3)) may be interpreted to be as much an oblique reproach to her husband as an expression of her forgiveness may be concluded from Emilia's use of both interpretations³⁰. Whereas Emilia's assertion «She said so» acknowledges the ostentatious exculpation of Othello, her very next words, «I must needs report the truth» (V.2.126) changes the emphasis towards a need to vindicate

Desdemona's innocence. This emphasis on the posthumous vindication of Desdemona establishes an important link between the two women. Both will by the end of the play have died for pleading another's cause, and both will have spent the last moments of their lives in the attempt to establish the truthfulness of their speech. Emilia's initial insults directed at Othello accordingly increasingly give way to assertions of her need to speak. In the face of injunctions to «charm [her] tongue» both by Othello and Iago (V.2.179), who both threaten her with weapons, Emilia insists on making Othello's «private» murder of Desdemona public: «I care not for thy sword, I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives» (V.2.161-2). The sheer frequency of her references to the necessity for her speech is an index of how great the threat to her voice is. «I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak» (V.2.180), «Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak» (V.2.192), «'Twill out, 'twill out ! I peace ? / No, I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak» (V.2.217-20) — these assertions only lead up to her murder by her own husband (like Desdemona before her, she is killed in mid-pentameter).

But, like Desdemona before her, she does not die without having the last word. It is only now that she is mortally wounded, now that her voice, too, is threatened with extinction, that Emilia's words finally acquire the authority which both she and Desdemona were fighting for throughout the second half of the play³¹. Emilia's dying words fulfil several functions. Firstly, her request to be laid by Desdemona's side and her reminiscence of Desdemona's song, as well as the fact that, for the first time in the play, she «thous» her mistress, all strengthen the kinship between the two women while elevating Emilia's death to a heroic stature close to her mistress'. Secondly, the snatch of song itself for a last time foregrounds the beauty of the female voice at the point of its extinction. Finally, her dying words — «Moor, she was chaste, she loved thee, cruel Moor, / So come my soul to bliss as I speak true ! / So speaking as I think, I die» (V.2.247-9) — make of her death the proof of the truthfulness of her speech. Emilia's death is the only proof there can be of Desdemona's innocence in a world where women are but «fair paper» and «most goodly book[s] / Made to write "whore" upon» (IV.2.72-3) — or, in the case of Lavinia, to write «rape» upon by hacking off her hands and tongue.

In the fates of Lavinia and Desdemona, and to a lesser extent those of Emilia and Tamora, Shakespeare, then, shows us a construction of female speech as both beautiful and an index of the women's sexual pollution as perceived by the male characters. Stopping the female voice, eradicating dishonour, and killing the female character become synonymous in the societies represented in the two tragedies. That the concept of «killing the woman and loving her after», of crediting her voice more readily once it is extinguished, was germane to early modern English men is not only evident from medieval and Renaissance narratives of martyrs such as Saint Cecilia, whose speech once her head has been struck off becomes an emblem of truth³². It is moreover evident from the only contemporary witness report we have of a production of *Othello* in Oxford in 1610. Henry Jackson's lines indeed betray his belief that women are more eloquent when dead :

Moreover, that famous Desdemona killed before us by her husband, although she always acted her whole part supremely well, yet when she was killed she was even more moving, for when she fell back upon the bed she implored the pity of the spectators by her very face.³³

Roughly four hundred years later, Desdemona's voice is still often suppressed or the object of projections. Although on stage, her lines are not quite as radically cut as in previous centuries, her role and Emilia's are still often subjected to mutilations. Just as disturbingly, the Players of Shakespeare series, which gives an authoritative voice to Shakespearean actors, contains articles by actors of Titus, Othello, and Iago, but allows no actress playing the roles of Lavinia, Tamora, Desdemona, or Emilia to express her opinion of the role. And yet, actresses such as Ellen Terry at the beginning of this century, have spoken eloquently of both Desdemona and Emilia³⁴, and frequently it is the actress playing Desdemona who decides to resist the murder of the character in the last scene. It is furthermore striking that reviewers have a tendency to interview the director and the actors responsible for the parts of Othello and Iago, — I have not found a single interview with an actress in all the reviews of productions of *Othello* that I have had access to.

That this opposition between female speech and male suppression of this speech is also an issue in academic discourse

can be seen from the fact that Honigmann, the most recent editor of the play, re-attributes Desdemona's shocking reference to Lodovico as a proper, handsome man to Emilia. His justification is that «[f]or Desdemona to praise Lodovico at this point seems out of character»³⁵. Equally out of character, according to Honigmann, is Othello's praise of Desdemona as being «of so high and plenteous wit and invention» (IV.1.186-7), which the editor deems it necessary to footnote as «unexpected attributes» even if taken as «understanding and imagination»³⁶. Obviously Desdemona can be credited neither with intelligence and speech, nor with the least hint of sexual desire. Even today, Emilia's cry «yet I'll speak» is often stifled.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas Rymer, «From *A Short View of Tragedy* (1603)», *Shakespeare : Othello : A Casebook*, ed. John Wain, London, Macmillan, 1994, p. 45.

² Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy : Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, London, Methuen, 1985, p. 165.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Marshall's enumeration of the similarities between the two characters (Cynthia Marshall, «“I Can Interpret All Her Martyr'd Signs” : *Titus Andronicus*, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation», *Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama*, ed. Carole Levin & Karen Robertson, Lewiston, Mellen, 1991, p. 195.

⁵ See also Wynne-Davies, who states that «Tamora's unheeded plea for her sons is likewise a reminder of women's muted state» (Marion Wynne-Davies, «“The Swallowing Womb” : Consumed and Consuming Women in *Titus Andronicus*», *The Matter of Difference : Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 136. All quotations from the plays refer to the most recent Arden editions by Jonathan Bate for *Titus Andronicus* (1995), E.A.J. Honigmann for *Othello*

(1997), and Harold Jenkins for *Hamlet* (1982).

⁶ MS. In the library of the Marquess of Bath at Longleat (Harley Papers, vol. I, f. 159), facsimile reproduced in S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare : A Documentary Life*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975, p. 122.

⁷ Lorraine Helms, «“The High Roman Fashion” : Sacrifice, Suicide, and the Shakespearean Stage», *PMLA*, n°107, 1992, p. 557.

⁸ That she loves Bassianus is evident from her remark to Tamora that «Poor I was slain when Bassianus died» (II.3.171). This is supported by both Bassianus' and Lucius' assertions that the couple was betrothed before Saturninus chose Lavinia for himself, as well as by Marcus' statement that Mutius «died in honour and Lavinia's [not Bassianus'] cause» (I.1.377). See also Harris : «That Bassianus could claim they were already betrothed implies some volition on Lavinia's part, for betrothal presumed a contractual agreement» (Bernice Harris, «Sexuality as a Signifier for Power Relations : Using Lavinia, of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*», *Criticism*, n°38, 1996, p. 389.

⁹ Nicholas Brooke, *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies*, London, Methuen, 1968, p. 33.

¹⁰ Hands, we must remember, were thought to be such an important means of communication that John Bulwer in his *Chirologia* (1644) even attempted a codification of gestures. It is interesting that in *The Rape of Lucrece*, Lucrece feels that the painter of Hecuba «did her wrong, / To give her so much grief, and not a tongue» (XXX). It looks as if Shakespeare had deliberately chosen to do the actor playing Lavinia this wrong, forcing him to express grief without tongue and hands.

¹¹ Brian Cox reports that the company of the Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Deborah Warner in 1987 decided that «even here, ... [Titus] actually misinterprets her simple desire for a drink» (Brian Cox, «*Titus Andronicus*», *Players of Shakespeare 3 : Further Essays in Shakespearian Performance by Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company*, ed. Russell Jackson & Robert Smallwood, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 182).

¹² Carolyn D. Williams, «“Silence, Like a Lucrece Knife” : Shakespeare and the Meanings of Rape», *Yearbook of English Studies*, n°23, 1991, p. 94-5.

¹³ In the light of this, Trevor Nunn's decisions to cut all references to Philomela in his 1972 RSC production seems disastrous (Roger Warren, «Shakespeare in Performance, 1980», *Shakespeare Survey*, n°34, 1981, p. 156).

¹⁴ That Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece* sees herself as guilty of and shamed by her rape is made explicit at several points («my loathsome trespass», «How Tarquin wronged me, I Collatine», «Yet am I guilty of thy honour's wrack», etc. (XXX)), and her suicide is explicitly connected to her felt guilt : «Since thou [her hand] could'st not defend thy loyal dame, / And

was afear'd to scratch her wicked foe, / Kill both thyself and her for yielding so» (XXX). What is interesting is that although Lucrece, too, eventually achieves her revenge through the use of words («My tongue shall utter all» (XXX)), she, too, feels that her words are spoken in vain : «In vain I rail at Opportunity, / At Time, at Tarquin, and uncheerful night ; / In vain I cavil with my infamy, / In vain I spurn at my confirm'd despite : this helpless smoke of words doth me no right» (XXX).

¹⁵ Carolyn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁶ Robert Johnson, «*Titus Andronicus* : The First of the Roman Plays», *Essays on Shakespeare in Honour of A.A. Ansari*, ed. T.R. Sharma, Meerut, Shalabh, 1986, p. 85.

¹⁷ Maurice Charney, *Titus Andronicus*, Harvester New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare, London, Hempstead, 1990, p. 118.

¹⁸ For a discussion of different ways of killing Lavinia on stage see Alan C. Dessen, *Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare in Performance*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989, p. 94-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66. See also Bate's comments in his introduction to the Arden 3 edition (Jonathan Bate, «Introduction», *Titus Andronicus By William Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 62-5.

²⁰ See Anthony Sher and Gregory Doran, *Woza Shakespeare ! Titus Andronicus in South Africa*, London, Methuen, 1996, p. 144-5. In a lesser key, Brian Cox, as well, seems to have been a very self-centered Titus. In his article on his performance, he writes : «when members of the audience left the performance it was not, I think, because of the horrors of the play ; they left because of the man's grief» (Brian Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 182). It doesn't seem to occur to him that this could also have to do with the unbearable spectacle of Lavinia and her grief.

²¹ Jack E. Reese, «The Formalization of Horror in *Titus Andronicus*», *Shakespeare Quarterly*, n°21, 1970, p. 79.

²² M.R. Ridley, ed., *Othello : By William Shakespeare*, London, Routledge, 1958, repr. 1992, p. 54. See also the reaction of John Quincy Adams (quoted by Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello : The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961, p. 208). The critical response to the scene has been extensively discussed by Valerie Wayne, «Historical Differences : Misogyny and *Othello*», *The Matter of Difference : Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 153-79.

²³ Valerie Wayne, *op. cit.*, p. 161-3.

²⁴ Boose, in her analysis of the ritual of the bridling of scolds, states that «the talkative woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman, her open mouth the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere» (Lynda Boose, «Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds : Taming the Woman's Unruly Member», *Shakespeare Quarterly*, n°42, 1991, p. 196).

See also Jardine, who finds that in the Renaissance, the tongue was both thought of as a female weapon and a sexual instrument, and that female speech was therefore considered to be threatening (Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p. 104ff.

²⁵ Ruth Vanita, «“Proper” Men and “Fallen” Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*», *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, n°34, 1994, p. 348.

²⁶ For Shakespeare's revision of the play, see Nevill Coghill, «Revision after Performance», *Shakespeare's Professional Skills*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 164-208; E.A.J. Honigmann, «Shakespeare's Revised Plays: *King Lear* and *Othello*», *The Library*, n°4 (6th series), 1982, p. 142-73; and Thomas L. Berger, «The Second Quarto of *Othello* and the Question of Textual Authority», *Othello: New Perspectives*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan & Kent Cartwright, London, Associated University Presses, 1991, p. 26-46.

²⁷ Eamon Grennan, «The Women's Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence», *Shakespeare Quarterly*, n°38, 1987, p. 279.

²⁸ Barbara Hodgdon, «Kiss Me Deadly; or, The Des/Demonized Spectacle», *Othello: New Perspectives*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan & Kent Cartwright, London, Associated University Presses, 1991, p. 215.

²⁹ René Girard, «Shall We Desire to Raze the Sanctuary? Desire and Death in *Othello* and other Plays», *A Theater of Envy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 293. Amazingly, Girard is not alone with his opinion, since Green also believes that «[s]he finds pleasure in her husband's abuse» — but then, Green is also the person who thinks that «the whole mainspring of the tragedy lies ... [in] Othello's desire for Cassio» — with the justification «[n]o trace of this love for Cassio, which the psychoanalyst infers, is to be found in Othello's words; but is further proof of its plausibility required?» (André Green, «*Othello*: A Tragedy of Conversion: Black Magic and White Magic», *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 107 & 112.

³⁰ Depending on whether the tone in which the words are spoken is sarcastic, the line could be glossed as «defend my cause before my husband by law», with readings of the words «commend», «kind», and «lord» which were all available in early modern English.

³¹ See Bronfen's analysis of the representations of women's deaths in literature and art, which provide a context within which the deaths of Desdemona and Emilia may be read (Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1991, especially p. 293. Female speech is only accredited at the moment of its extinction, as Lavinia's «voice» is only given authority when her tongue has been cut out — even if the fact that she has «spoken»

eventually leads to her death. A disturbing parallel to this phenomenon can be found in Laertes' assertion in *Hamlet* that Ophelia is more persuasive once her speech has been disabled by her madness : «Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus» (IV.5.167-8).

³² I am grateful to Professor Margaret Bridges for drawing my attention to this legend.

³³ Salgado's translation of a letter in Corpus Christi College Library (MS ccc 304ff 83v and 84r ; quoted in Gàmini Salgado, *Eyewitnesses of Shakespeare : First Hand Accounts of Performances 1590-1890*, London, Sussex University Press, 1975, p. 30.

³⁴ Ellen Terry, «Desdemona», *Othello : Critical Essays*, ed. Susan Snyder, London, Garland, 1988, p. 61-7.

³⁵ E.A.J. Honigmann, *Othello : By William Shakespeare*, The Arden Shakespeare, Walton-on-Thames, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, p. 291.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.