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## Feminist Criticism on Tamora in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*: A Review of Recent Scholarship

It has only been within the last thirty years or so that the idea of feminism has manifested itself into a broad area of study. Feminist critics have touched almost every type of genre. This has most definitely become an area of study in literature as well. Feminist criticism of William Shakespeare's works is a continually expanding area of literary research as well as a challenging one. Because "feminism" as we refer to it today, was not a concept present in Shakespeare's time, it has not been as explored as other areas of research. Of course there has been a great rise more recently but resources are still limited.

Exploring Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* from a feminist perspective is especially challenging because of it is his first tragedy, and only has recently been given the attention and credit it deserves. Because of the lack of interest in Titus, it is even more challenging to find criticism on specific characters. I am attempting to explore feminist criticism on the character Tamora in *Titus*. Because this is relatively unexplored, it is an exciting avenue to pursue. By gaining knowledge from feminist criticism on other aspects and characters of Shakespeare and some specifically on *Titus*, I intend to show how gender, specifically feminist, ideas are most definitely apparent in Shakespeare's portrayal of Tamora.

My first source of criticism is Douglas E. Green's "Interpreting 'Her Martyr'd Signs': Gender and Tragedy in *Titus Andronicus*." Green's main purpose appears to be focusing on the relationship between the female characters in *Titus*, Lavinia and Tamora,

and the main male character, Titus. In doing this he attempts to analyze their meaning and purpose within the tragedy. While many of his claims appear valid and interesting, it is his continual references to Tamora's connection and formation to Titus that seems to bring the focus away from the character Tamora as an individual female in this time period, associating her more with a male character. He states that: "Shakespeare's notable and notorious female characters [in *Titus*] are made to serve the construction of Titus" (319). This is an interesting approach and contributes partial understanding of the necessity of the female characters in *Titus*, but only because of their purpose in correlation with the male characters. There seems to be too much reliance on how Tamora relates to Titus, and therefore more emphasis on the male character instead of the female. Green also does not solidify his argument because of some of his contradictions. He explores the idea of Tamora and Titus as opposites as well as mirror images of each other, confusing his point. Though he mentions the idea of revenge, he does not really explore how this issue relates to gender and tragedy as much as would be expected. His thoughts on Lavinia actually serve best in forming ideas of Tamora, based on the differences between them that he inadvertently makes obvious. While there seems to be too much reliance on how Tamora relates to the main male character, and this seems to defeat the purpose of having her stand for something apart from him, this article is a valuable resource in its somewhat male-centered perspective. It is useful in forming new ideas and basing some ideas off of what he has explored.

My next source was actually surprisingly specific in exploring Tamora and its references to other themes in *Titus*, making it a more well-rounded opinion. Debora Willis's "The gnawing vulture": Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*"

focuses on all those ideas in the title as well as Tamora's contribution and significance in them. Her focus on gender and its relationship to the revenge theme in this tragedy presents detailed evidence to her arguments. Unfortunately, however, Willis also focuses more on females and their "male attributes" that sometimes identify them, but perhaps it is unavoidable especially because most all of Shakespeare's tragedies take place in patriarchal society. Willis's focus on the history taking place at this time and the type of society present is helpful in adding validity to her arguments. The downfall to the article was the lengthy focus on the trauma theory and the psychology behind revenge. It was not very useful for my research and dwelled a little too much on formulating ideas about the psyche of Shakespeare's characters. This can be problematic because they are characters in a play and going so deeply into these references treats them somewhat too much like real people. While much of the article was devoted to these explanations, Willis's focus on female character and revenge and specific references to Tamora make it a useful source.

The next article, "Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism" by Claire McEachern presents the most objective view of many of the articles I have come across. She focuses on the different types of feminist criticism of Shakespeare and the ideologies of each of them. Her knowledge of these makes her views seem less biased and more based on a compilation of different views as well as a very unique view of her own. She claims there is a proto-feminist patriarchal polarity, a cultural ideology, ego-psychology, as well as a new historicism viewpoint. By touching on Shakespeare's relationship to all of these ideologies, she points out how these are useful in some respects but also how they can be problematic. McEachern's focus on the relationship

between females in Shakespeare's plays and their fathers, while interesting, does not contribute very much to my argument. Because Tamora does not have a father figure in *Titus*, this approach can not really be used in defining her character. However, her references to Shakespeare's dramatizing of the difficulties of marriage, is significant to Tamora, even if a father figure was not necessarily present. McEachern's focus on the different aspects of feminist criticism is useful in directing my approach and especially in deterring me from those I do not want to get caught up in.

Another article, "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy" by Richard Levin was useful also in showing me what I did not want to end up doing in my research and paper. While much of this article was criticizing feminist critics and their approaches to Shakespearean tragedy, it fueled my desire to counter his arguments as well as steer clear his criticisms I felt were valid. He recognizes that the real challenge for female characters in Shakespeare is trying to maintain their sex and also unrealistically shedding it altogether in a male-oriented, male-thought dominated society. This could in many ways be seen as a female feminist critic's challenge as well. Levin proves this in his almost continual bashing of the techniques used by previous feminist critics. There appears to be an obvious level of testosterone in his writing. However, he does have some interesting and valid points. His main argument is how most critics focus more on thematics or some general idea, rather than particular characters. Levin stresses the importance of the static world in which Shakespeare's plays take place, claiming these worlds define the characters, *therefore* the action. He points out that when taking the "idea focus" approach to Shakespearean tragedy, locating "the cause of the tragic outcome in 'masculinity' or 'patriarchy'" is really looking how these concepts are

“operating though individuals and the society as a whole” (127). However, throughout the article he places judgements on critics for being narrow-minded, yet he is rather uncompromising in his views and uses either contradictory or redundant detail in attempting to support his claims. His idea of focusing on the characters has some merit, but he completely dismisses any thematic influence on these characters, therefore practically negating the very concept of feminism as an issue to begin with. He continually mentions that (primarily female) critics shouldn’t assume things about Shakespeare’s character, and of course feminism was not an issue then, but we are looking at relations today and underlying theories of feminism to explain and try to understand the “world” the tragedies take place in. He also uses references to almost all of Shakespeare’s tragedies, but does not mention *Titus* which seems to contradict some of his general claims, at the same time he is ridiculing feminist critics for taking examples out of context to support their claims for what they “want” to believe. While I had problems with much of this article, it allowed me more than the other articles, to form entirely new ideas, claims, and questions on my own. His ideas against thematicism and the way it detracts from characters of a genre is, however, something to consider, if not to just be conscious and cautious of when writing feminist criticism.

My final article, “Feminism and Beyond”, was interesting because it agreed with Levin’s attitude against focusing entirely on the thematics of Shakespeare when relating to feminist issues. This is interesting in that the writer of this article is a woman. Catherine Belsey’s article addresses the development of feminist criticism and the problems associated with it. Like McEachern’s article, Belsey looks at the concept of new historicism and its failure to cooperate with feminism. According to Belsey,

anthropology's treatment of cultures as homogeneous when feminism is "interested in struggle, resistance, and heterogeneity" (35). As a result, feminist criticism can easily become less scholarly and instead focus on areas that are simply of most interest to us. New historicism and feminism have different focuses as well, which sets feminist criticism in a league of its own and a challenge in making a convincing and relevant argument. She also makes interesting points on how the focus of misogyny in early modern literature is not necessarily evidence of its practice in early modern culture. Instead, "it might well indicate an anxiety about the increasing independence of women in society" (37). Though her article focuses more on the concept of feminism, it is valuable information to know when going about developing a feminist criticism on a character such as Tamora. Belsey does not dismiss feminist criticism altogether, but rather encourages moving beyond the simple concept of feminism into how other concepts of criticisms work into this idea.

When reviewing these articles, the most helpful points I received from them were valuable insights I gained from what was *not* said, or what made me think of new ideas and concepts to consider or reconsider. Interestingly enough, Levin's article that I disagreed with on the most points, helped me best begin formulation how I would go about presenting my feminist criticism on Tamora. It is unfortunate that, with the exception of parts of Green and Willis's articles, there are not many specific references to feminist criticism on Tamora in *Titus*, but that was to be expected. All of the articles supplied some kind of outlook on feminist criticism which will be useful in how I decide to go about presenting my views in a convincing manner.

### **Works Cited**

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