

# Cannibalism and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus

---

**Lepur, Helena**

**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2022**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:252583>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-11-27**



**Sveučilište u Zadru**  
Universitas Studiorum  
Jadertina | 1396 | 2002 |

*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[University of Zadar Institutional Repository](#)



zir.nsk.hr



DIGITALNI AKADEMSKI ARHIVI I REPOZITORIJ

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Helena Lepur**

**Cannibalism and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus**

**Završni rad**

Zadar, 2022.

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Cannibalism and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus**

Završni rad

Student/ica:

Helena Lepur

Mentor/ica:

Dr.sc. Monika Šincek Bregović

Zadar, 2022.



## Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

Ja, **Helena Lepur**, ovime izjavljujem da je moj **završni** rad pod naslovom **Cannibalism and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus** rezultat mojega vlastitog rada, da se temelji na mojim istraživanjima te da se oslanja na izvore i radove navedene u bilješkama i popisu literature. Ni jedan dio mojega rada nije napisan na nedopušten način, odnosno nije prepisan iz necitiranih radova i ne krši bilo čija autorska prava.

Izjavljujem da ni jedan dio ovoga rada nije iskorišten u kojem drugom radu pri bilo kojoj drugoj visokoškolskoj, znanstvenoj, obrazovnoj ili inoj ustanovi.

Sadržaj mojega rada u potpunosti odgovara sadržaju obranjenoga i nakon obrane uređenoga rada.

Zadar, 19. rujna 2022.

## Table of contents:

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Cannibalism in Fiction and Reality.....	6
3. Cannibalism in Classical Mythology and Literature, and Shakespeare's <i>Titus Andronicus</i> 11	
4. <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , Cannibalism and Revenge.....	16
5. Conclusion.....	23
6. Works cited.....	24
THESIS TITLE IN ENGLISH: Summary and key words.....	27
NASLOV RADA NA HRVATSKOM JEZIKU: Sažetak i ključne riječi.....	28

## 1. Introduction

Cannibalism as a phenomenon has existed since the inception of the human species. The act of eating another human being has fascinated society almost as much as it has evoked disgust. It is therefore not surprising that it also appears in the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome. The concept of cannibalism is extremely popular in literary works, and not only in oral tradition as is the case in mythology. In colonial literature, the concept of anthropophagy represents an act that distinguishes the civilized from the uncivilized and almost always alludes to the superiority of the Occident over the Orient. It served not only as proof of superiority, but also as a means of justifying colonization and exploitation. At the time of Shakespeare's literary output, philosophy and mythology of ancient Greece and Rome was ubiquitous in literary works, which resulted in the immense popularity of ancient mythology in the period of Renaissance. Since the mention of anthropophagy is common in mythology, it is not unusual that Shakespeare included it in his tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. What is unusual about this play is that it is quite different from the rest of Shakespeare's works. This is the reason why many critics<sup>1</sup> doubt that Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus*, arguing that the play's writing is weak, and almost substanceless. To some extent, the play can be considered to be comical in its bizarreness due to its violent scenes. *Titus Andronicus* features several grotesque scenes of gratuitous violence, which have generated a lot of criticism (Hamilton 201). As a result, it is considered one of Shakespeare's worst works.

In this paper, I will analyze the concept of man-eating along with other violent scenes in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Furthermore, I will compare *Titus Andronicus* with other literary works, especially those belonging to the area of anthropophagy. At last, the similarities between cannibalism in mythology and tragedy, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's bloody banquet in *Thyestes*, will be presented.

---

<sup>1</sup> Such as Alexander Pope, Nicholas Rowe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

## 2. Cannibalism in Fiction and Reality

Cannibalism refers to an animal's proclivity to murder and consume its own young or other weak members of its species. It is frequent in many wild species but also domesticated ones which suffer from distorted metabolism or are located in a small living area (Kapural). When it comes to anthropophagy in humans, instances of eating human flesh have been recorded throughout our history. The reason for that may be ritual cannibalism, which existed in nomadic cultures in the fourth century AD (Estes 2). Usually, cannibalism was carried out for funeral customs where a relative was consumed, but there are also cases where a complete stranger had been eaten (e.g. enemies of the tribe/community). In addition to funeral customs, cannibalism was present during the transition from a hunting-gathering lifestyle to a sedentary one (Estes 1). According to Kapural, the reason for this was a significant food shortage, indicating that people practiced cannibalism out of extreme necessity. People who practiced eating human flesh had been described by Herodotus, Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, and many other prominent figures in human history. Herodotus described ritual cannibalism, and Columbus his experiences with the peoples of the Caribbean. In addition, Columbus himself created the word 'cannibal', which is in use today (Estes 1). Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci described his expedition to the New World. In the letters he sent to Italian magnates, he stated that the population of the Rio de la Plata region had practiced incest, consumed the meat of those killed in battle, and lived without a government. Of course, there must be a certain amount of skepticism when studying texts written during the colonization period. The goal of the ruling colonial powers was to present the colonized as a subspecies, that is, to justify the goals of colonization. The subjugation of the peoples who lived in the colonized territories was portrayed as the victory of civilization over savagery. (Kapural)

When talking about other causes of anthropophagy in humans, famine comes to mind. For example, The Great Famine of 1315–1317, the famines in Russia and Lithuania, and the 'Holodomor' in Ukraine in 1932–1933 are just a few examples. Also, some examples of cannibalism emerged after maritime accidents where the chances of discovery were minimal. Consequently, one may survive by eating the flesh of deceased comrades. 'Law of the sea' was a term used to justify these kinds of actions, emphasizing the fact that people on the ship had no other option. One of the most recent examples of cannibalism is the plane crash that occurred in the Andes in 1972. Uruguayan footballers who were on the plane and survived the accident were forced to consume their dead colleagues in order to survive (Worrall).

In the twentieth century, episodes of 'political cannibalism' have been documented in Africa and Oceania. It is a type of terrorism that is developed from ancient tribal warfare practices and is used to intimidate the population of a community or a country. One such example surely includes Ugandan dictator Idi Amin Dada. At the end of his reign, he utilized incredibly morbid methods of murder. To make things even worse, there were some rumors about his tendency to keep human heads and other body parts in a refrigerator. Furthermore, he is said to have ordered the dumping of 4,000 crippled individuals into the Nile, where they would be ripped apart by crocodiles. He even confessed to anthropophagy in 1976 by saying: "I have eaten human meat", he said in 1976, claiming it was 'saltier than leopard meat' (Margaritoff).

The theme of anthropophagy has a significant impact on world literature. The aforementioned notion is prominently present during the colonial era, but it also appears in other time periods. In other words, apart from cannibalism in colonial adventure stories, it also exists in classic children's fairy tales. One of the most prominent children's classic stories, *Hansel and Gretel*, is a quality illustration of this occurrence. The work, written by the Brothers Grimm is certainly one of the most famous children's fairy tales ever written. However, what sets this fairy tale apart from others is the description of extreme violence involving cannibalism, in which a cunning witch tries to eat two sibling children. Of course, almost all fairy tales involve some kind of violence. In *Snow White* it is murder, in *Little Red Riding Hood* the wolf desires to consume a little girl and her grandmother, and in *The Little Mermaid* Ariel is experiencing a painful transformation from a sea creature to a human one. The reason for this reoccurring violence may be the fact that most of the classic fairy tales were written many years ago when the view of children was quite different from the view we have today. They were not considered as full-fledged human beings, but were viewed as small, i.e. incomplete adults. In other words, their childhood was taken away from them and they practically did not have the rights they have today.

When we look at classic fairy tales from today's perspective, we notice quite brutal and grotesque content that some people may find inappropriate for young children. On the other hand, violence can have a didactic purpose, teaching the children that if they display unwanted behaviors, a certain punishment follows. Also, fairy tales that contain examples of brutal violence can prepare children for possible sights of brutality in their adult lives (Heuze). Thus, the difference between past and present content for children is vastly different because in the past it was common to use violence within children's stories, usually to send some kind of a



message or to serve as a warning. Today, such practice is very rare or almost non-existent. However, in *Hansel and Grettel*, the displayed violence reaches extreme intensity, precisely because of the role of cannibalism. For starters, almost all of the characters in the fairy tale (except Hansel and Grettel) are portrayed in a very negative light. The mother wants to get rid of her children by leaving them in the woods, and the father does nothing to prevent it. On the contrary, the father even participates in the abandonment of his children, although he does not completely agree with this idea. The witch whom the children meet after failing to return home is described as the embodiment of ultimate evil. She is the children-eating beast with unthinkable intentions. Thus, the act of consuming another human being is seen as the embodiment of the greatest form of evil (Harper). The witch practices her cannibalistic tendencies by luring helpless children into her candy house. After the children start eating the parts of her carefully constructed home, the witch invites them in with the intention of eating them. Before cooking and eating them, she tries to fatten them up by feeding them, sweets. A parallel between the hunger that manifests in children and the one that manifests in the witch is evident. The children eat the house intending to satisfy their hunger, but they get punished for it. In didactic terms, it can be seen that the goal is to warn children that carelessness can lead them to extremely dangerous situations. Cannibalism leaves an intense impact on the reader (in this case the children), so its use in fairy tales guarantees that fear is instilled. This way, children pay more attention. The witch, who is a cannibal, portrays the extreme wickedness that manifests itself in her insatiable hunger for children. Although *Hansel and Grettel* are hungry as well, the motives behind their hunger are completely different. (Harper)

Dante's *Inferno* is another literary example of the use of cannibalism. The plot follows Dante, whom Virgil leads through nine circles of hell. In the ninth circle, Dante meets two people who are strangely close to each other. He soon notices a disturbing sight: one of the two men is feeding on the other's head. Dante approaches them and asks them about their story, that is, the very reason why they ended up where they are. One of the men introduces himself as Count Ugolino and goes on to explain that he is chewing the head of Archbishop Ruggieri (Forman 91). Count Ugolino was not a made-up character by Dante, as he was a famous historical figure who lived in Italy in the thirteenth century. The Count was active in the political sphere of the city of Pisa and was known to be a traitor. However, Dante considered him to be a traitor for different reasons than the general public (the two of them had belonged to opposing political parties). In *Inferno*, Count Ugolino describes his morbid past. After he was accused of treason, he was imprisoned in a tower together with his sons. For days he and his sons were

starving, and the door of the tower was blocked by Archbishop Ruggieri himself. After several days of agony, Count Ugolino dies of starvation after witnessing the fatal death of all his sons. Before dying of starvation, his sons offer themselves to be eaten so that Count Ugolino would stay alive and make death easier for them. In the end, the Count tells Dante that “then hunger did what sorrow could not do” (Nykł & Dante 33:75). It is not clear from the quotation itself whether the Count consumed his dead children, so that line is still open to interpretation. Thus, the Count is punished by eternal cannibalism in the ninth circle of hell, and Archbishop Ruggieri by being his eternal victim. The reason behind Ruggieri's punishment is clear, but this does not apply to the case of Count Ugolino. There is a possibility that he was punished for consuming his own children, but also that he was punished for betraying Pisa and his political party. Dante viewed the count's betrayal with greater disgust than his alleged act of cannibalism. In Dante's *Inferno*, the very act of consuming human flesh is portrayed as the ultimate form of human degeneration. If the Count was indeed punished for his cannibalism, the imposition of the perpetual consumption of human flesh for eternity is a distinctly ironic punishment. (Forman 90-95)

A more recent example of a literary text that features cannibalism is *Heart of Darkness*, which was created in 1899 by the English-Polish writer Joseph Conrad, and is considered to be one of the most prominent works of colonial literature. It is a contradictory novel, for it can be seen as a critique of the way imperialism was implemented, but not as a critique of imperialism itself. One of the dominant motifs Conrad uses in this work is the anthropophagy of the colonized population. In *Heart of Darkness*, cannibalism illustrates the problems of racism, the idea of degeneracy, and many other issues. This was not unique to *Heart of Darkness*, however, as most imperial novels were notorious for describing Africa and its people as cannibalistic. Even if this novel depicts the colonized territory as cannibalistic, another possible reading of the novella would be that it also depicts colonialism as a cannibalistic system that devours geographic areas, races, and the morality of its adherents (Brown 36). Before arriving in Africa, the colonists were symbolic cannibals who were hungry for domination. But after arriving in Africa, they might also become actual cannibals through the influence of the natives. Kurtz, one of the characters in the novel, and his possible descent into cannibalism, is undoubtedly an important theme in the story. At the time of the novel's publication, the idea of returning to a primal, savage state was very current (Brown 17). Therefore, cannibalism was a valuable motif to explore concepts of degeneration and decay. When it comes to the description of the cannibals in the novel, there is no sign of their age, nationality, or gender. The only description

given is about their teeth, which resemble vampire's teeth: "...and he had filed teeth, too, the poor devil" (Conrad 59). In his novel, Conrad depicts this heinous reality of European behavior in Africa. However, the idea of true evil remains African (Brown 38). After the initial success of the work, especially in the mid-twentieth century, criticism began to emerge. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe criticized the novella, and was also convinced that Conrad was a racist (Achebe 21). This view contributed to a different approach to *The Heart of Darkness*, especially concerning the way the work had been perceived until then. Of course, the question is whether the fear that surrounds the work is the result of disenchantment with European policies in Africa or disenchantment with the way these policies were implemented. According to critics such as Achebe, "The purpose of cannibalism was to portray the colonized as uncivilized savages, and the colonizers as bearers of knowledge and 'true' values. Certainly, this work is viewed with much more skepticism today than when it was written. The reason for this may be the criticism the work received from writers who originate from colonized areas (such as Achebe and Edward Said). But also the increased awareness of the harmfulness of imperialism has led readers to question the purpose of the work itself. In any case, *The Heart of Darkness* serves as a prime example of the use of anthropophagy in colonial literature, with instances of both literal and political cannibalism.

### 3. Cannibalism in Classical Mythology and Literature, and Shakespeare's *Titus*

#### *Andronicus*

Many writers draw inspiration from the myths of ancient Greece. As for Shakespeare, a number of similarities between *Titus Andronicus* and the myths of Tantalus and Pelops, and Thyestes and Atreus can be observed. This similarity is evident in Shakespeare's inclusion of almost identical examples of anthropophagy in his play. Thus, there is no doubt whether Shakespeare used elements of these myths in his work.

One of the most famous examples of cannibalism in Greek mythology is the myth of Cronus's consumption of his children. After learning that one of his children would overthrow him, he decided to swallow his children: Demeter, Hestia, Hera, Hades, Poseidon, and the youngest Zeus (Hansen & Simpson 91). By doing so, he utilized a similar method to his father Uranus, who tried to stop Cronus from being born. However, instead of Zeus, Chronushe swallowed a stone and subsequently recovered all the children he had eaten (Hansen & Simpson 91). Therefore, his attempt to preserve power by devouring his children was unsuccessful. Generational repetition often occurs in Greek mythology, so Zeus's son Tantalus will also try to initiate cannibalism by sacrificing his son Pelops. His attempt to force the gods into cannibalism, as will be discussed in the next paragraph, was unsuccessful. After Tantalus, cannibalism as a method of revenge will appear with his grandson Atreus. He will try to take revenge on his brother Thyestes, by cooking his children and serving them at a 'conciliatory' lunch. His vengeance, unlike Tantalus's, turns out to be successful because Thyestes does try the food (which will also be explained in this section).

The myth of Tantalus and Pelops is one of the myths that bear a striking resemblance to *Titus Andronicus*. The reason for this is the preparation of human flesh and its food-like presentation to the individuals who are completely unaware of what they are eating. Before describing the myth, it should be noted that the entire Tantalus lineage is cursed because of its sins. For this reason, the myth of Thyestes and Atreus will also be addressed in this paper. Thyestes and Atreus are in fact descendants of Pelops, the son of Tantalus. The myth describes the events that followed after Tantalus organized a feast for the gods. Tantalus had a son, Pelops, whom he cooked and offered as a sacrifice at a banquet. At the said banquet, the Greek gods immediately discovered that the food was human flesh and refused to taste it. The goddess Demeter, however, was troubled by the loss of her daughter Persephone, who was taken to

Hades. Due to her lack of sanity, she tasted the prepared food without knowing that it was human flesh. However, the gods managed to revive Pelops, who was missing part of his shoulder. It is assumed that the missing part was the part that Demeter had tasted. Eventually, Pelops was given an ivory replacement that served as the lost part of his shoulder. In addition to the above-mentioned transgression, Tantalus fed the mortals with ambrosia and nectar, which belonged exclusively to the gods. As punishment for his misdeeds, he was sent to Tartarus. His punishment consisted of being placed in a pool with a tree nearby. The branches of the tree hung near him and were full of delicious fruits which seemed within his reach. However, as soon as Tantalus approached them, the branches lifted and moved away from him. This way he could not consume the fruits of the tree and was condemned to eternal hunger. Also, if he bent down in an attempt to drink some water from the pool, the water level would suddenly drop. Therefore, he was also doomed to eternal thirst. The cruel aspect of his punishment was the fact that both fruit and water seemed to be readily available to him, and yet they were beyond his reach. Although this is quite unusual from today's perspective, the gods considered cannibalism a lesser sin than stealing ambrosia and nectar. This is also reflected in the fact that Zeus later expelled Pelops from Olympus out of anger at Tantalus. (Poochigian 115-123)

Roman mythology was noticeably more popular than Greek mythology throughout the Renaissance. Shakespeare was influenced by several Roman authors, including Ovid, Plato, and Seneca, in addition to a substantial portion of the theatrical heritage being characterized by Roman features. This is clear from his writings, which are rife with blood, murder, and suicide, which was rather frequent in ancient Rome (Kotsori 10). For example, *Titus Andronicus* shows similar elements of violence to those in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. However, unlike the Greek myth, this similarity is not manifested in cannibalism but in the dismemberment and rape of Lavinia and its similarities with Ovid's Philomela. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes the rape and mutilation of Philomela by her sister's husband, Tereus. It is obvious that Shakespeare was inspired by Ovid, given that a reference to Philomela appears several times in *Titus Andronicus*:

ARON THE MOOR.

""His Philomel must lose her tongue today,  
Thy sons make pillage of her chastity  
And wash their hands in Bassianus' blood"" (2.3:43-45).

In these lines, Aron the Moor suggests that Lavinia must have her tongue cut off after the rape so that she cannot reveal the name of her attackers. In the same way, Tereus cut off Philomela's tongue to make sure she wouldn't betray him. Also, Lavinia's inability to speak will help Chiron and Demetrius blame Bassianus for their atrocities:

MARCUS.

""Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue,  
 And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind;  
 But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee.  
 Soft! So busily she turns the leaves.  
 Help her! What would she find?—Lavinia, shall I read?  
 This is the tragic tale of Philomel,  
 And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape.  
 And rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy (2.4:38-51).

...

TITUS.

Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,  
 Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,  
 Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?  
 See, see! Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt—  
 O, had we never, never hunted there!—  
 Patterned by that the poet here describes,  
 By nature made for murders and for rapes"" (4.1:53-59).

In this scene, Lavinia tries to explain what has happened to her by insinuating at Philomela in the *Metamorphoses*. Unlike Philomela, Lavinia's arms were cut off as well. She opened Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and pointed at the pages describing Philomela's rape and mutilation. In addition, she managed to expose her attackers by writing their names on the floor with a stick. The similarity between *Titus Andronicus* and the *Metamorphoses* is particularly evident in the cannibalistic nature of both works. In *Metamorphoses*, Philomela's sister and Tereus' wife Procne decides to take cruel revenge on her husband after Philomela tells her what happened. Procne then decides to cook the son she has with Tereus and serve him to her husband as lunch. After Tereus has tasted his son, Procne tells him the truth. To conclude, an almost identical form of cannibalism is seen in *Titus Andronicus* after Titus serves Tamora her sons Chiron and

Demetrius. In both cases, the act of anthropophagy serves as an act of barbaric revenge aimed at inflicting maximum pain and humiliation on those who consume the "meal". (Miller 63-229)

Accordingly, when analyzing *Titus Andronicus* in the aspect of cannibalism, a striking resemblance to Seneca's *Thyestes* is evident. This is not a coincidence as Shakespeare almost copied the entire scene of the bloody banquet from Seneca's work. Seneca wrote his tragedy based on the Greek myth of Atreus and Thyestes. In his tragedy, Atreus decides to take revenge on his brother Thyestes for his betrayal and adultery with Atreus's wife. As an appropriate method of revenge, he chooses to kill and cook Thyest's three sons:

MESSENGER.

""With this inspection satisfied at length,  
With mind at ease, he now is free to plan  
His brother's awful feast. With his own hand  
The bodies he dismembers, carving off  
The arms and shoulders, laying bare the bones,  
And all with savage joy. He only saves  
The heads and hands, those hands which he himself  
Had clasped in friendly faith"" (318:760-765).

In both works, there is a special emphasis on the dismemberment of human bodies. Atreus mutilates Thyestes's sons beyond recognition making them look like a pile of meat. Seneca describes the barbaric act of their preparation in great detail, creating a hideous yet very effective impression on the reader. Shakespeare faithfully imitates Seneca's morbid precision by also providing the details of the dismemberment of Chiron and Demetrius. However, there is a difference between Titus's and Atreus's motivations. Atreus wants to get rid of Thyestes's children because they pose a future threat to him, while Titus focuses on Tamora. He uses cannibalism solely because he wants to punish her. Moreover, Atreus sees his act as a sacrifice and gives it a ceremonial role, while this role does not exist with Titus (LePerle 19). Both Atreus and Titus direct a play in which Thyestes and Tamora are actors. So the question arises as to who is the true cannibal: the one who directed the act, or the one who is the unsuspecting actor? Atreus is reportedly appalled by the man-eating he witnesses, as is the audience. By doing so, he assigns all moral blame to Thyestes. Furthermore, there is another difference between the two bloody banquets. Atreus promises Thyestes peace and hosts a banquet to establish good relations. Tamora and Saturninus visit Titus not as an act of trust or kindness, but out of political

necessity (LePerle 11). Examining this difference, the brutality that follows in *Thyestes* seems more unexpected and therefore worse. The morbidity of anthropophagy is reinforced by Seneca's description of Thyestes' voracious eating:

MESSENGER.

""The father tears his sons, and impiously feasts  
On his own flesh. See, there in state he sits,  
His hair anointed with the dripping nard,  
His senses dulled with wine. And oft the food,  
As if in horror held, sticks in his throat"" (319:775-780).

Another similarity with Shakespeare is that Tamora is described as eating her sons with great eagerness: "whereof their mother daintily hath fed" (5.3:62). From all the examples mentioned, it is clear that the similarity between the two works, at least as far as the aspect of anthropophagy is concerned, is undeniable. However, it can be concluded that Shakespeare not only drew inspiration from Seneca, but that his goal was to surpass him by creating an even more gruesome depiction of extreme violence. Moreover, his intertextual appropriation of Seneca's bloody banquet can also be construed as a form of cannibalism as well (LePerle 24).



#### 4. *Titus Andronicus*, Cannibalism and Revenge

Revenge tragedies were extremely popular in Elizabethan England. They usually contained scenes of brutal violence that often did not contribute to the plot. The purpose of these grotesque scenes was to provoke some kind of reaction in the viewer/reader. Of course, everyday life in the 16th and 17th centuries was very different from life today. This difference is easily reflected in the fact that the general population regularly witnessed public executions. Moreover, the general empathy level was much lower compared to today. When these facts are taken into account, the need to use rather disturbing content in the literary work of the time is easily understandable. *Titus Andronicus* was a resounding success immediately after its release. Although this tragedy was never considered one of Shakespeare's best works, or as a quality work at all, at the end of the 16th century it certainly had its audience. (Green 182-199)

The tragedy is replete with harrowing scenes involving the dismemberment of body parts, rape, and, the focus of this work - cannibalism. Even at the time, according to Soloski, *Titus Andronicus* could be considered an example of a play containing extreme violence. The tragedy, especially nowadays, is considered to be poorly written. For that reason, the question of authorship often arises. Namely, many critics believe that *Titus Andronicus* is such a horrible piece of literature that it cannot be considered one of Shakespeare's creations. Others claim that the work was indeed created by Shakespeare but in the early period of his career (Hamilton 202). In addition, there is a suspicion that some parts of the tragedy were created by Shakespeare, while other parts were written by some other writers. It is assumed that the last scene of the cannibalistic banquet was subsequently inserted, as well as the scene in which Marcus kills a fly (Green 186).

The play begins with the return of the Roman general Titus Andronicus from the war with the Goths. In parallel with his arrival, the election of the new Roman emperor takes place. Saturninus, one of the two sons of the recently deceased emperor, believes that he is the rightful heir to the Roman throne. He addresses the populace and the senate with the following words:

SATURNINUS.

""Noble patricians, patrons of my right,  
 Defend the justice of my cause with arms.  
 And countrymen, my loving followers,  
 Plead my successive title with your swords"" (1.1.:1-5).

The call for violence is present at the very beginning of the play. Such a beginning serves as a prelude to further violence that will permeate the entire tragedy. Bassianus, the king's second son, also advocates for his right to rule. While the debate is taking place in the House of Senate, Titus Andronicus, his sons Lucius, Quintus, Martius, and Mutius, and Titus's brother Marcus Andronicus appear. In the continuation of the mentioned scene, the phenomenon of violence becomes even more explicit:

"LUCIUS.UCIUS:

"Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,  
That we may hew his limbs and on a pile,  
Ad manes fratrum, sacrifice his flesh  
Before this earthy prison of their bones,  
That so the shadows be not unappeased,  
Nor we disturbed with prodigies on Earth"" (1.1.:96-101).

In his speech, Lucius refers to the Goth prisoners who had been brought to Rome. These captives consist of Tamora, Queen of the Goths, her sons Alarbus, Chiron, and Demetrius, and her secret lover Aaron the Moor. The first example of anthropophagy in the play can be observed in this Lucius's speech. Although Lucius does not explicitly express the desire for eating the Goths, he describes his wish to dismember and sacrifice them. In other words, even though the desire for anthropophagy is not clearly expressed, the way the flesh and bones of the enemies are described alludes to the sense of taste. This is quite noticeable in Lucianuses' desire to tear apart their body parts.

When analyzing the dismemberment of the human body in this work, it is necessary to refer to the term 'sparagmos', i.e. dismemberment of body parts for sacrificial purposes (Frye 148). This term appears in the myths of Osiris, Orpheus, and Pentheus, but its roots go back to the Dionysian ritual in ancient Greece, which usually consisted of sacrificing animals. Also, the ritual of sparagmos was often accompanied by omophagia, that is, the consumption of the dismembered body. Furthermore, the infliction of a physical handicap associated with sparagmos implies the anarchy we witness in *Titus Andronicus*. This anarchy manifests in never-ending acts of violence. On the other hand, omophagia is present at the end of the play, when Tamora eats her sons (which will be explained at the end of this chapter).

At the beginning of the play, Tamora is portrayed as a caring mother who will do anything to save her son (Alarbus) from a cruel death. In this respect, Titus Andronicus is her complete opposite: not only does he not spare her son, but he claims that he sacrificed twenty-one sons and that he does not weep for any of them. In a way, it seems that the act of sacrificing Alarbus set off a wave of bloodshed that will further continue in the play. This is reflected in the fact that Tamora, along with her sons Chiron and Demetrius, swore vengeance on Titus and his family. The difference between Tamora as a caring mother at the beginning of the play, and Tamora of an animalistic nature, is then evident. During the royal hunt, the most brutal act of violence in the entire play takes place. Tamora's sons Chiron and Demetrius, persuaded by Aaron the Moor, kill Bassianus and rape and mutilate Lavinia:

"LAVINIAAVINIA, to Tamora.

"No grace, no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature,  
The blot and enemy to our general name..." (2.3:181-183).

Before the attack on Lavinia occurs, she begs Tamora on her knees for mercy. That is, she does not ask her for some well-intended act of mercy, but for instant death. Tamora, saddened by her son's death and obsessed with revenge, shows no trace of humanity. Furthermore, she morbidly motivates her sons to make the act as painful as possible. Lavinia's rape is one of the most brutal acts in this play, as she experiences a monstrous fate. Not only is she a rape victim, but Chiron and Demetrius cut off her tongue and arms so she could not reveal their identity. Such a fate is seen as worse than death. In the time of ancient Rome, it was believed that a raped woman was a disgrace to her family ("Sexual Assault of Women"). In Lavinia's case, not only was she deprived of honor (according to the Romans), but she was also deprived of her voice. The dismemberment of her body can symbolize the alienation of her humanity: she can no longer express herself. After experiencing the attack, her character is treated as a shadow, without any active influence on her environment or the people around her. However, shortly afterward, more examples of body dismemberment appeared in the play. Titus's sons Martius and Quintus are accused of killing Bassianus and attacking Lavinia. To save them from certain death, Titus, Marcus, and Lucius are asked to sacrifice one of their hands:

ARON THE MOOR.

""Titus Andronicus, my lord the emperor  
Sends thee this word,--that, if thou love thy sons,

Let Marcus, Lucius, or thyself, old Titus,  
 Or any one of you, chop off your hand,  
 And send it to the king: he for the same  
 Will send thee hither both thy sons alive;  
 And that shall be the ransom for their fault"" (3.1:152-158).

However, his attempt to save his sons did not go as planned. The "gift" Titus receives in return were his sons' heads. After all these catastrophic events, Titus begins to sink into madness. All of his children except Lucius are either dead or mutilated - the only thing left for Titus is revenge. A comical paradox occurs when Titus criticizes Marcus for killing a fly. Titus is the character responsible for several human deaths. Not only that, but he is responsible for the death of his own son. However, he gets upset by the death of a fly. This can be interpreted in two ways: Titus has completely lost his mind, and his actions from that point onwards are the result of his madness. The second interpretation suggests that it may be possible that Shakespeare tried to include some humor in the play (Green 183). Also, the second interpretation is often regarded as more probable than the first one because it can be concluded that Shakespeare planned for this play to be ironic. In other words, by creating the character of Titus Andronicus the way he did, he was mocking revenge tragedies which were popular at the time. Although this part of the play is not necessarily related to cannibalism, it gives us an insight into the stylistic variety used Titus Andronicus, in which a series of contradictions emerge: ubiquitous human degradation is sometimes accompanied by banal moralizing. After Titus learns that Chiron and Demetrius are responsible for this atrocity, he devises his own plan of revenge:

TITUS.

""Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you.

This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,

Whiles that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold

The basin that receives your guilty blood." (5.2:184-187)

Their deaths symbolize the revenge promised to Titus by their mother, who visited came to Titus in his home disguised as rRevenge . Just before he kills them, Titus reveals his plan:

TITUS.

"Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,

And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,

And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
 And make two pasties of your shameful heads,  
 And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,  
 Like to the earth swallow her own increase.  
 This is the feast that I have bid her to,  
 And this the banquet she shall surfeit on"" (5.2:190-97).

Elements of anthropophagy dominate this scene. Titus describes the bodies of Chiron and Demetrius as the bodies of animals being prepared for a feast. He describes how he will "prepare" them as if they were ordinary food. Without knowing the context, one cannot conclude that this description refers to human beings. Titus's need for cannibalistic revenge is the result of his great anger and desperation. The whole play is full of violence, so an unimaginably violent climax is to be expected. Given that cannibalism is considered the ultimate stage of human degeneration, it is clear why Shakespeare included it in his play as a final act of revenge. After the murder of Tamora's sons, Titus invites Lavinia to a basin to collect their blood. Collecting the blood of the victims symbolizes their sacrifice. In this case, they were killed for their misdeeds but also sacrificed to take revenge on Tamora.

TITUS.

""Receive the blood: and when that they are dead,  
 Let me go grind their bones to powder small  
 And with this hateful liquor temper it;  
 And in that paste let their vile heads be baked.  
 Come, come, be everyone officious  
 To make this banquet; which I wish may prove  
 More stern and bloody than the Centaurs' feast.  
 So, now bring them in, for I'll play the cook,  
 And see them ready 'gainst their mother comes" " (5.2:201-210).

Having survived rape and mutilation, Lavinia serves as a mute symbol of endless suffering. By participating in Titus' 'preparation' of Chiron and Demetrius, she receives her revenge. Since she is the one holding the basin, she is given an active role in the play. Of course, this only applies to the time after the rape, as she was actively involved in the escape with Bassianus at the end of Scene II. Titus's decision to punish Tamora by making her eat her sons can be viewed from a symbolic perspective. For example, Lavinia's inability to eat can be the

reason for his way of revenge (Green 193). Having her tongue cut off prevents her from experiencing the sense of taste. For this reason, it is quite unusual for Titus to address her while talking about 'playing the cook' (5.2:209). Perhaps the cannibalistic revenge is actually to avenge Lavinia's inability to partake in the act of eating. Tamora, after all, looks forward to participating in the feast and tasting the food that has been prepared. Lavinia, on the other hand, is doomed to spend the rest of her life without this experience (Green 193).

At the end of the scene III Titus kills Lavinia, which surprises the guests, since they did not know that Lavinia had been raped<sup>2</sup>. After Titus describes what happened to Lavinia, Saturninus demands the culprits be brought to him. After Sturinin's request, Titus replies:

TITUS.

""Not I; 'twas Chiron and Demetrius:

They ravish'd her, and cut away her tongue;

And they, 'twas they, that did her all this wrong.

SATURNINUS.ATURNINUS

Go fetch them hither to us presently.

TITUS.ITUS

Why, there they are, both bakéd in this pie,

Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,

Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred"" (5.3:56-61).

When Titus admits that Tamora's sons are in a pie baked by Lavinia, he reveals his revenge. By forcing Tamora to consume her children, he commits the most brutal revenge imaginable. The cruelty of this act is heightened by his commentary on the fact that Tamora ate the food she was served in front of her. Of course, although scenes of violence throughout the play, the thyestean act of eating one's own children evokes a particular level of revulsion. Rape, dismemberment, and murder are undoubtedly horrific crimes, but cannibalism is a special form of depravity. As mentioned earlier, anthropophagy is considered one of the final stages of moral decay. However, the play is full of scenes of unimaginable violence, so this kind of climax is not entirely unexpected. Through his animalistic act, Titus reduced Tamora into an animal.

---

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the Roman Empire female rape victims were marked as disgraced. One way to 'wash away' this dishonor from a raped girl and her family, was to kill her. In addition, the act of rape is seen as an insult to the girl's father ("Sexual Assault of Women"). Thus, the greatest offense in rape was not inflicting suffering upon a woman, but damaging another man's property.

Shortly after this cunning discovery, a new slaughter begins. Titus kills Tamora, Saturninus kills Titus, and Lucius kills Saturninus to avenge his father. After the bloodshed, Lucius is elected the new emperor. He decides to place the bodies of Titus and Lavinia corpses in the family tomb. In this act, the sense of feeding is again evoked, as the family tomb in a sense swallows the bodies of Titus and Lavinia. Moreover, Saturn receives a state funeral, while Tamora's body remains unburied. Because of the hatred Lucius and the others harbor towards Tamora, her corpse is left for the wild animals to eat:

"LUCIUS. LUCIUS:

"As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora,  
No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed;  
No mournful bell shall ring her burial;  
But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey.  
Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,  
And being dead, let birds on her take pity"" (5.3:197-202).

Here, the man-eating sentiment reappears. Tamora's body will be consumed, just as she unwillingly consumed her sons. Of course, this is not a case of typical cannibalism, because humans and wild animals do not belong to the same species.

## 5. Conclusion

Cannibalism extends as the main motif in Shakespeare's work *Titus Andronicus*. The tragedy infused by rape, murder, and dismemberment is experiencing its climax in the depiction of the consumption of human flesh. It can be said that this form of ultimate degeneration is the result of revenge caused by the inflection of injustice. Almost all the characters in *Titus Andronicus* experience moral decay, and those who are at least somewhat sympathetic become victims of barbarism. In particular, Lavinia is the best example of a victim of dreadful violence.

In this paper, I have provided an overview of cannibalism in a historical and literary context. In the historical context, the focus was on examples of cannibalism as part of the culture of a particular community, but also as an act of desperation in hopeless situations. The well-known myths that served as an inspiration for Shakespeare and the other mentioned writers are described in the part of the paper dealing with cannibalism in Greek mythology. Also, the comparisons of cannibalism in *Titus Andronicus* with other literary works such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Thyestes* show the symbolism and purpose of this concept in literary works.

This work by Shakespeare has undergone several adaptations, and perhaps the most famous is the 1999 film *Titus* directed by Julie Taymor. In addition, the similarity between *Titus Andronicus* and the highly regarded series *Game of Thrones* is evident, because the latter also contains many elements of revenge tragedies, such as murder, suicide, and rape. In addition to adaptations on film and television, it is worth mentioning the theatre adaptation directed by Igor Vuk Torbica in The Zagreb Youth Theater, which was an exceptional success.

At last, it is still debatable whether this work is just a parody of revenge tragedies, or whether we have unjustly condemned it because we cannot relate to the time period in which it was written.



## 6. Works cited

Achebe, Chinua. "*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness.*" *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2016, pp. 14–27

Brown, Jennifer. *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, Ny, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darness and Selected Short Fiction*. New York Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.

Estes, Andrew. "*Cannibalism and Other Transgressions of the Human in the Road.*" *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 27 Nov. 2017.

Forman, Carol. "*Dante Alighieri's Divine comedy, the Inferno*". Woodbury, N.Y.: Barrons Educational Series, 1984.

Green, William David. "*Such Violent Hands.*" *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, Jan. 2020, pp. 182–99, <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v7i2.462>. Accessed 5 June 2022.

Hamilton, A. C. "*Titus Andronicus: The Form of Shakespearian Tragedy.*" *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1963, p. 201

Hansen, Wm. F., and Michael Simpson. "*Gods and Heroes of the Greeks: The Library of Apollodorus.*" *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 93, no. 367, Jan. 1980, p. 91

Harper, Matt DB. "*Dark Lessons: Cannibalism in Classic Fairy Tales.*" Owlcation, [owlcation.com/humanities/Cannibalism-in-Fairy-Tales](http://owlcation.com/humanities/Cannibalism-in-Fairy-Tales). Accessed 3 June 2022.

Heuzé, Tara. "*The 10 Darkest and Most Disturbing Fairy Tales.*" *Culture Trip*, 7 Apr. 2015, [theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/articles/the-10-most-dark-and-disturbing-fairy-tales](http://theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/articles/the-10-most-dark-and-disturbing-fairy-tales). Accessed 27 May 2022.

Kapural, Lucija. “*Kratka Povijest Kanibalizma.*” *Povijest.hr*, 2 Dec. 2020, povijest.hr/istaknuto/kratka-povijest-kanibalizma. Accessed 7 June 2022.

Kotsori, Ioanna-Soultana, and Kyriakos Manolis. “*Influence of Roman History on Shakespeare’s Works.*” *Open Journal for Studies in History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 21 July 2018, pp. 9–16. Accessed 17 June 2022.

Margaritoff, Marco. “*Why Idi Amin Dada, “the Butcher of Uganda,” Should Be Remembered with History’s Worst Despots.*” *All That’s Interesting*, All That’s Interesting, 23 July 2019, allthatsinteresting.com/idi-amin-dada. Accessed 6 June 2022.

Mejia LePerle, Carol. “*The Crime Scene of Revenge Tragedy: Sacrificial Cannibalism in Seneca’s Thyestes and Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus.*” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2012, pp.9-28.

Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism : Four Essays*. New York, Atheneum, 1966.

Nykl, A. R. Dante, "*Inferno*,". 1952.

Ovid, and Frank Justus Miller. *Metamorphoses ; of Ovid*. Heinemann, 1916.

Poochigian, Aaron. “*Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles,an Oresteia.*” *Translation Review*, vol. 80, no. 1, Sept. 2010, pp. 115–123

“*Sexual Assault of Women in Ancient Rome.*” *TheCollector*, 18 June 2020, www.thecollector.com/sexual-assault-of-women-in-ancient-rome. Accessed 25 May 2022.

Shakespeare, William. *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. S.L., Rock Point Gift & Station, 2019.

Soloski, Alexis. “*Let It Bleed: The Perverse Influence of “Titus Andronicus.*”*The New York Times*, 4 Apr. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/theater/titus-andronicus.html. Accessed 15 June 2022.

Worrall, Simon. "After the Plane Crash—and the Cannibalism—a Life of Hope." *Culture*, 3 Apr. 2016

## Cannibalism and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*: Summary and key words

Cannibalism, which is the subject of this paper, is considered a crime against nature. Nevertheless, the notion of anthropophagy is very popular within literary works. The paper gives an insight into the history of anthropophagy and the reasons for its occurrence in the human species. The mentioned concept is analyzed on the example of Shakespeare's work *Titus Andronicus*. The play shows scenes of brutal violence involving dismemberment, rape and murder. Moreover, cannibalism in this play is compared with similar examples from Greek and Roman mythology as well as from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Thyestes*. This paper examines human fascination with the act of man-eating, as well as its symbolism.

Key words: cannibalism, Shakespeare, Greek and Roman mythology, *Thyestes*, *Metamorphoses*

## Kanibalizam i Shakespeareov *Tit Andronik*: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Kanibalizam, koji je predmet ovog rada, smatra se zločinom protiv prirode. Ipak, pojam antropofagije vrlo je popularan u književnom radu. Rad daje uvid u povijest antropofagije i razloge njezine pojave kodu ljudskeoj vrsti. Navedeni koncept analiziran je na primjeru Shakespeareovog djela *Tit Andronik*. U djelu su prikazane scene brutalnog nasilja koje uključuje raskomadanje, silovanje i ubojstvo. Štoviše, kanibalizam u *Titu Anrdroniku* uspoređuje se sa sličnim primjerima iz grčke i rimske mitologije, kao i iz Ovidijevih *Metamorfoza* i Senekinog *Tijesta*. Ovaj rad ispituje ljudsku fascinaciju činom jedenja ljudi, kao i njegovu simboliku.

Ključne riječi: kanibalizam, Shakespeare, grčka i rimska mitologija, *Tijest*, *Metamorfoze*