The Roman Plays on Film

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Until the millennium there were few significant cinematic versions of Shakespeare's Roman plays.[1] The most prominent exception is Joseph Mankiewicz's canonical *Julius Caesar* (1953), which has attracted large amounts of critical attention.[2] On the small screen, with the exception of the, by now rather dated, BBC Shakespeare, the pickings are even more slender.[3] While there has been talk for some time about a Roman equivalent of the history plays' *The Hollow Crown*, nothing has appeared to date.[4] Since 1999 two major films of Roman plays have been released which I consider here in some detail.[5]

Julie Taymor's *Titus* has been around the longest and so it has amassed a reasonable critical commentary but Ralph Fiennes's *Coriolanus* has not yet generated the sustained scholarly attention that it deserves. Both of these films challenge the formulaic representation of Rome as comprising sombre senates, sandals and togas over hairy legs. This hackneyed portrayal is radically updated by Taymor and Fiennes whose films speak to the recent conflicts in the Balkans, Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia. Jennifer Flaherty emphasises what she considers to be the films' shared sense of the reciprocation of classical and modern, and the manner in which they fold ancient and contemporary hostilities into each other, in order to deploy the Roman plays in the cause of pacific commentary: 'Both films suggest that violence and war are part of a continuous human condition – and that Shakespeare's early modern construction of Rome can be equally applied to antiquity or the present.'[6] In this way, these films offer a coherent as well as a

politically engaged post-millennial aesthetic and a hardy refutation of the pseudo-Romanness of both Mankiewicz (on the big screen) and the BBC series (on the small one).

Coriolanus

In an interview published in 2012, Ralph Fiennes describes how, in anticipation of his directorial debut, he sought the guidance of one of theatre's most experienced practitioners: 'I actually talked briefly to Peter Brook before we shot this, and I was able to ask his advice. When Brook made his film of *King Lear* [in 1971], he felt that the cinema does not tolerate anything that's overtly theatrical. It has to be naturalistic. That is what I tried for in *Coriolanus*, and so, if it is naturalistic, then the audience relaxes.'[7] In his voice-over commentary to the DVD version of the film, he emphasises how this spoken naturalism is at odds with theatrical conventionality: 'One of the things I felt in this was that the speaking of verse should be as naturalistic as possible. The scary word in all this is "theatre". I mean cinema and theatre are arguably miles apart and yet they're also extremely close.'[8]

When Fiennes played Coriolanus on stage at the Gainsborough Film Studios in 2000 (directed by Jonathan Kent for the Almeida), his performance was anything but naturalistic. My own response was critical of his overt theatricality, mainly to do with an exaggerated projection: 'His first furious entrance in which he mocks the citizens' cowardice was conducted at top volume and this left him hardly anywhere to go in subsequent scenes. A mere increase of volume on such an already high level was hardly noticeable and, very quickly, his performance became unnuanced.'[9] Similarly, Susannah

Clapp's verdict highlighted this histrionic tendency: 'a lot of the verse can't be heard. A lot of it is bellowed.'[10]

Reprising the role for the cinema, a decade later, Fiennes was determined to, in the words of Gary Crowdus, 'eliminate from the film any trace of theatricality, especially the declamatory style of verse speaking […] in favour of a more *naturalistic*, conversational style.'[11] Fiennes relied upon the experience of two Shakespearean veterans in his casting of the roles of Volumnia and Menenius: 'When you have actors like Vanessa Redgrave and Brian Cox speaking the lines, it sounds completely natural.'[12]

Fiennes's aspiration to stress cinematic naturalism, is perhaps his film's most conspicuous achievement. With its lumpy hand-held camera sequences (Barry Ackroyd, the director of photography, has a background in documentaries), its rolling television news (with real-life news anchor, Jon Snow), its war-torn situation, snatched conversations and its employment of factual settings, such as the Serbian parliament chamber in Belgrade, as well as its inclusion of authentic news footage of the war which led to the dissolving of Yugoslavia, this is a film characterised by a 'dangerous documentary-style realism'.[13] Robert Ormsby suggests that 'Fiennes's main concern is to allow the viewer clearly to follow the unfolding combat narrative while experiencing the disorientation of battle.'[14]

This realism is partly to do with psychological verisimilitude and partly to do with setting. In terms of character, Fiennes explains, of the protagonist: 'I think you can get closer to Coriolanus on film than you can on stage. […] whereas on stage, you just can't get in, film is often about getting into the eyes.'[15] At several seminal points the camera dwells on the facial expressions of key characters in a way that hints at the complexities

of their psychobiographies. On stage, of course, the closest we get to this is the soliloquy. In film this sense of an inner consciousness is often achieved by the close-up. Examples of this are plentiful throughout the film but notable here is the instance when an embarrassed Coriolanus waits in a corridor outside the Senate meeting, his anxiety clear from his eyes and his pained attempt to avoid the enquiring look of the cleaner (Bora Nenić) pushing his trolley. Later, arriving in Antium, the camera closes in on Coriolanus' eyes as he squints at a boy riding by on a horse. The tight close-up recalls the eyes of Clint Eastwood in *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* (directed by Sergio Leone in 1968). Katherine Duncan-Jones draws attention to Fiennes's 'piercing blue eyes, increasingly alienating and nihilistic.'[16] Subtle facial expression is part of the cinematic vocabulary unavailable (except in the most melodramatic of cases) to the theatre performer: 'Always for me the film was very much about faces. Every face, every moment of a face carries an expression, is a history, is a life, even for a fleeting moment.'[17]

Fiennes's ambition to make the film naturalistic is also reliant on its setting. The film's locale is not the classical majesty of Rome but the grimy remains of war-damaged Belgrade. A caption near the beginning distances us from the stoic nobility of ancient Rome: this is not the eternal city but 'A Place Calling Itself Rome'. This is the title of John Osborne's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1973). While Fiennes's film uses Shakespeare's language, Osborne's stage directions for the rioting citizens sound very much as they appear in Fiennes's film: '*a cross section* MOB *of* STUDENTS, FIXERS, PUSHERS, POLICEMEN, UNIDENTIFIABLE PUBLIC, *obvious* TRADE UNIONISTS [and, exactly as in Fiennes's film] *Roman troops can be in flak jackets and*

helmets.'[18] The effect of this slippery (mis)identification is to challenge our sense of classical gallantry, stoicism and endurance. Fiennes insists on the film's geographical *dis*-location: 'It could be Chechnya. It could be Afghanistan. It could be recent history in Latin America. It could be Israel and Palestine.'[19] He acknowledges the influence here of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996): 'What I did take from that film was, particularly, his complete creation of a world that I couldn't tell you where it was but I knew it was somewhere today and I believed it, whether it was Mexico or Miami or something.'[20]

This is not a place of historically underwritten nobility but a recognisable world struggling to be born, a world torn by the ravages of modern warfare, identical to the cityscapes of the Balkan conflicts we saw every night on our television screens throughout the 1990s. As Martius and his infantry take Corioles, we see the shattered citizenry sitting on doorsteps or in the dilapidated ruins of bombed-out houses. At one point, Aufidius (played by Gerard Butler) stumbles across a car containing the corpses of a slaughtered family. A small child lies in the dirt by the open passenger door; there is nothing heroic about this urban fighting. The contrast between the cyborg-like warrior in body armour (with hints of Jacob Epstein's terrifying sculpture, *The Rock Drill*, 1913 and Paul Verhoeven's film *RoboCop*, 1988) and walkie-talkie helmet and brandishing an automatic rifle, smeared with dirt and blood, and the crisp uniforms with gold swags and chests full of medals, underlines the dependence of ceremonial politics upon the carnage of guerrilla warfare. The trappings of civilisation are inseparable from the barbarism that supports them. Fiennes's protagonists are the opposite of classical heroes; rather they

personify the brutality of superpowers intent on military supremacy: 'Rome is what I call a power state in this film. It's suggestive of Russia or the US or China.'[21]

Coriolanus, in deference to his mother's wishes, appears at a television studio in order to mollify the people. Menenius and Cominius (John Kani) struggle to keep Coriolanus on the rails but, when he is accused of 'treason' (3.1.165) by the tribunes (James Nesbitt and Paul Jesson), he explodes with 'You common cry of curs…' (3.3.124). Ranting and spitting like a wild animal, Fiennes allows Coriolanus' fury full throttle. The crowd are silent, fearful and Coriolanus exits with the calm declaration, 'There is a world elsewhere' (3.3.139).

The alternative is the Volscian stronghold of Antium. This section of the film was shot in the Bay of Kotor, Montenegro, on the Adriatic coast. With its families eating at outdoor cafés, the town is sunny, friendly and welcoming. Coriolanus watches, tucked behind a wall, as Aufidius jokes and slaps the backs of the city's inhabitants with a demeanour that contrasts with his own frosty speechifying, earlier, in the Roman market place. But the nerve-centre of the Volscian army is quite different from the ceremonial display of the Roman Senate. Aufidius and his commanders meet in a series of low-ceilinged cellars – a sequestered hide-out in which we previously witnessed a captured Roman shot in the head by Aufidius himself. It is a dimly lit secret location, heavy with shadows, at which the sudden appearance of Coriolanus causes panic and the immediate bristling of several firearms.

Offering his enemy his service or his life, Coriolanus bares his neck for Aufidius' knife. With his blade pressed to his enemy's throat, Aufidius speaks of his intensely erotic adoration: 'Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart / Than when I first my

wedded mistress saw / Bestride my threshold' (4.5.117-19). 'That speech', Fiennes remarks, 'is the key acknowledgement of his romantic, erotic enthusiasm for Coriolanus.'[22] We next see a naked Coriolanus having his head shaved by an old woman. Aufidius takes over the ritual of this shaving. John Garrison notes how 'the scene is one of simultaneous purification, initiation, and erotic submission' and he points out that Coriolanus shifts his gaze from 'Aufidius's face to his crotch.'[23] For Fiennes the sexual undertones of the sequence are ineluctable; it is characterised by a 'gentle homoerotic undertone […Aufidius has] been dreaming about Coriolanus and he's obsessed with him. It's unquestionably there.'[24] For John Logan, responsible for the shooting script, this sexual interest is a development of the erotic energies of the protagonists' initial encounter: 'The first confrontation between the hated rivals – Coriolanus and Aufidius – is long, violent and very purposefully homoerotic.'[25] He goes on to describe their combat as 'something like a Francis Bacon painting: two men merged and grappling in something that is partly a hideous death struggle and partly great sex.'

The world of Aufidius' soldiers is exclusively masculine and, with shaved heads like Coriolanus, they are an undifferentiated mass of seething, drunken, sweating testosterone. Aufidius' alienation from his own army is figured in the way that he retains his tousled hair and full dark beard. His troops are now emulating the shaven inhumaneness of Coriolanus, and Aufidius registers the threat of his former enemy's growing influence over them: 'He watered his new plants with dews of flattery, / Seducing so my friends' (5.5.22-3). In their nighttime, drink- and drug-fuelled running amok, dancing and shearing one another's heads, they resemble the madmen of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Ormsby suggests that Coriolanus has

'exchanged the Rome of electronically regurgitated ceremonies for a world elsewhere of primal masculine rites more suited to the brutal spirit he displayed in battle.'[26]

Fittingly, a barber's chair, gilded with gold spray-paint, becomes the parodic throne in which Coriolanus slumps arrogantly to receive first Menenius and subsequently his family. Cominius' lines are given to Titus Lartius (Dragan Mićanović): 'he does sit in gold, his eye / Red as 'twould burn Rome' (5.1.63-4). Menenius, repulsed by his former protégé, makes his way, in despair, to a grim canal path and opens a vein with a pocket knife. For Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Menenius's slow, lonely death […] is one of the film's most imaginative additions. It is all the more moving for the old man's deployment of a tiny pen-knife with which he slits his left wrist.'[27] Peter Holland, however, finds that this sequence 'unsatisfyingly transmute[s] the play's drive. [Menenius' interpolated suicide contradicts] Shakespeare's decision that only Coriolanus should die in the play […] fracturing a crucial marker of Martius' separation from the rest of the cast.'[28]

With Menenius dead, Volumnia is Rome's last hope. As she and Jessica Chastain's Virgilia arrive at the derelict factory that forms the Volsci army base, they are wolf-whistled and cat-called. They face Coriolanus and kneel to him. Fiennes's account of the making of the exchange is worth citing. Note how, yet again, he stresses the importance of naturalism:

> I suggested she [Redgrave] kneel about six feet away, and she tried that, but then she said, "No, I think I need to be closer to you." She came really close and put her hands on my knees. With that physical proximity, it became very intimate. Then, when she began to speak, she spoke to me gently, very directly, privately. […] But she did this intensely naturalistic thing, which just unlocked it.[29]

Earlier in the film, as Volumnia dressed Coriolanus' fresh wounds, Virgilia put her head round the bathroom door. Met with the indifference of mother and son, and excluded from their intimacy, Virgilia quietly withdraws and makes her way to the bedroom of the sleeping Young Martius (Harry Fenn). She tidies his military toys and kneels down beside him breathing in his breath (recalling, though not actually uttering, the beautifully intimate description from Shakespeare's narrative poem): 'Comes breath perfumed, that breedeth love by smelling' (*Venus and Adonis*, line 444). These two parallel scenes (Volumnia tending to her offspring, Virgilia tending to hers), taking place at the same time, underline the importance of the maternal forces which seek to protect but which ultimately destroy, a power which will cost Coriolanus his life: 'O mother, mother! / What have you done?' (5.3.183-4).

The fate of Coriolanus is sealed and, in keeping with the anti-heroic status of the film, it takes place on a bare road, in a kind of no-man's land, near an abandoned petrol station. Aufidius and his henchmen have been waiting for Coriolanus and set the warrior in a rage with the use of the trigger word, 'traitor' (5.6.85) and the demeaning 'boy' (line 103). 'Let him die for't' (line 120), mutters Aufidius (in the play this line is spoken by the conspirators) and, following a violent struggle between Coriolanus and half a dozen of Aufidius' men slashing knives, Aufidius approaches Coriolanus to finish him off personally with the same knife we saw him hold earlier to his enemy's throat.

The homoeroticism of the previous violence is here too. The script's directions read: 'Aufidius steps to [Coriolanus]. Takes his neck. Pulls him onto the knife. Driving it into him. Cradling his head like a lover.'[30] Garrison's description of the moment notes how Aufidius 'tenderly grasps the back of Coriolanus's head – as if about to impart a kiss

rather than to deliver a killing blow.'[31] Having stabbed him, Aufidius gently lays the body onto the road. For Fiennes, this is the erotic climax: 'The end of the film is the closest there is to a homoerotic expression, and I wanted to show it through the murder, the closeness of the death and the way Aufidius holds Coriolanus, the way the knife, which is the opening image of the film, finally penetrates Coriolanus.'[32]

The play's coda, in which Aufidius expresses his regret, is cut, and the film's closing image is of Coriolanus' corpse being unceremoniously dumped onto the metal sheeting of a flat-bed truck, 'Like a sack of potatoes. Sprawled ungainly in death. No ritual or ceremony. No honour. Snap to black.'[33] His twisted limbs and bloodied torso suggest a crumpled parody of his military, political and familial authority. As the credits roll, a mournful singer (Lisa Zane) keens Mikis Theodorakis's *Sta Pervolia* in Greek, the very language of classical tragedy. Boika Sokolova explains: it is 'a plea to Death to release a soldier for a night, to allow him to embrace his mother'.[34]

Titus

In the closing sequence of Julie Taymor's *Titus*, Young Lucius (Osheen Jones) rescues the baby of Tamora and Aaron (Jessica Lange and Harry Lennix) from a cage and carries him in slow motion out of the coliseum into a

> bleak but open landscape that has water, which means there's possibility for fruition, of cleansing, of forgiveness. It's also a movement towards the sunrise, which is the next generation or the next one hundred years or the next millennium [the film was released in 1999].[35]

In spite of Taymor's utopian prognosis, it is not easy to make the case for any lasting benignity. As is well known, *Titus Andronicus* is a blood bath, involving severed heads, hands and a tongue, as well as cannibalism and a vicious rape. The play begins with the hewing of Alarbus' 'limbs till they be clean consumed' (1.1.129) and, in the film, we see Titus' sons enter with a dish containing his 'entrails [with which they] feed the sacrificing fire' (line 144). Clara Escoda Agustí suggests that the film's ubiquitous brutality is too intense to be quenched by its upbeat ending: 'this sense of violence being overpowering is certainly a feeling *Titus*'s audiences must leave the cinema with.'[36]

Taymor explained the importance of Young Lucius to her conception: 'I was intrigued with this idea of the child's experience of violence […] and the opportunity to have this child be the eyes for the audience.'[37] While Young Lucius is hardly in Shakespeare's play, he becomes almost ubiquitous in Taymor's film and just as he completes *Titus*, so he is seen in its opening sequence. Wearing a paper bag with eye-holes torn into it, he sits at a 1960s kitchen table eating sausages, drinking milk and playing with military toys – a combat helicopter, a Roman centurion, crawling marines, a robot, toy soldiers. As he simulates their fighting his meal disintegrates into carnage with lashings of tomato ketchup serving as blood, and a jet fighter crashing into a slice of cake. Carol Chillington Rutter suggests that 'This adult-free zone shows the continuity between consumption, violence and play.'[38] However, Elsie Walker reads this not as a moment of escape from the influence of adulthood but rather as an anticipation of its subsequent brutality: 'From the beginning of the film Taymor is concerned with the ways children are initiated into ongoing legacies of violence.'[39]

The fighting becomes increasingly intense and the ambient noise – the child's simulation of explosions and gunfire, traffic, human voices and *Pop Goes the Weasel* from a television set – all the more frenetic. The table-top battle becomes mysteriously real and the shaken kitchen cabinets shed glasses and crockery. The window is blown in by a bomb blast, forcing Young Lucius under the table from whence he is grabbed by a steampunk Clown (Dario D'Ambrosi) who carries him, to the whistles of falling bombs, down a staircase to emerge in a huge coliseum: 'the archetypal theater of cruelty, where violence as entertainment reached its apex.'[40] As the child is held aloft, a ghostly cheer greets him and he looks back to see the entrance to his apartment as a burning theatre set.[41]

In its slippage from one world to the next – 'sixties kitchen, steampunk dystopia, Roman coliseum (and later), 'thirties Fascism (Rome's EUR district), the Roman Forum (complete with a giant hand reminiscent of Shelley's 'Ozymandias' which adumbrates Titus' and Lavinia's severed hands) and cobbled streets, terracotta interiors, forests and pastoral gardens – Dante Ferretti's design juxtaposes and frequently superimposes widely separate historical periods. Titus (Anthony Hopkins) is in classical Roman armour and long cape while his brother Marcus (Colm Feore) wears a shirt with an Edwardian round collar and tie; Chiron (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) shows off an extravagant silver lamé suit that would not look out of place in *Star Trek*, while Alan Cumming as Saturninus in glossy lipstick, eyeshadow and a floppy asymmetric hair-do, is a cross between 1980s New Romanticism and Hitler. Lange's Tamora wears a gold *Wonder Woman* breastplate sculpted to reveal the contours of her breasts (and prompting Saturninus' lascivious comment 'A goodly lady' (1.1.265), pronounced with all the camp suggestiveness of the

famous British comedian, Frankie Howerd) while Lavinia (Laura Fraser) portrays a delicate Audrey Hepburnesque impishness and Givenchy grace.

The anachronistic aesthetic looks back to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) and ultimately Fritz Lang's futurist *Metropolis* (1927). Saturninus sits on a vast metal throne surmounted by the head of a snarling, steel she-wolf and Chiron and Demetrius (Matthew Rhys) party in a subterranean torture chamber, at one end of which is an enormous turbine sticking through the wall. Later the Clown reappears in a motorised tuk tuk while Titus' army pour into the coliseum in strange tank-like vehicles, horse-drawn chariots and motorbikes in a mash-up of *Ben Hur* (directed by William Wyler, 1959) and *The Wild One* (directed by László Benedek, 1953). As he sits on the steps of the Mussolini-era Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, a newspaper blows into Young Lucius, reminding us of the fatal disappearance of Robert De Niro's Harry Tuttle in *Brazil*. A frenetic orgy takes place in what looks like Rome's Pantheon (with the addition of a large pool), the hole in the ceiling allowing an entry point for the shower of Titus' arrows. In its multiple settings, spread across several centuries, *Titus* insists on the pervasive omnipresence of violence: as Taymor's commentary puts it, 'the film represents the last 2000 years of man's inhumanity to man.'[42] Just as Fiennes's location 'could be Chechnya [or] Afghanistan [or] Latin America', so the opening directions of Taymor's screenplay read, 'We could be in Brooklyn or Sarajevo.'[43]

But there is also a ludic quality to this multiple layering of different places, times, references and echoes. Indeed, one of the most allusively dense and intriguing examples of this is in the appalling reimagining of Lavinia's rape, the third (and most fearsome) of the film's five 'Penny Arcade Nightmare' sequences which, as Taymor puts it, 'depict, in

abstract collages, fragments of memory, the unfathomable layers of a violent event, the metamorphic flux of the human, animal and the divine.'[44] We have already witnessed the aftermath of the crime itself when Chiron and Demetrius leave the maimed Lavinia stranded on a tree stump in the middle of a mudscape. Later in the film, as Lavinia writes her rapists' names in the dirt, she re-lives the attack in a sequence of terrible intensity: 'when a woman has to testify at a rape trial she is re-experiencing the rape', explains Taymor.[45] Marcus demonstrates how she may, holding the top of Titus' stave in her mouth and steering it with her arms, inscribe the names of her attackers in the dust. He offers the penile tip to her mouth but she baulks at it and tucks it between neck and shoulder. To loud rock music, and in a wash of blue light, Lavinia is imaged with a doe's head and forefeet standing on a classical column as two tigers lunge at her. In this way the sequence picks up the language of Shakespeare's play but also figures the helplessness of Lavinia confronted by the male tigers of Chiron and Demetrius.[46]

The two sequences – the attacks, real and recalled – roll together into a complicated amalgam a number of allusions to other texts, theatre productions, films and sculptures. Lavinia's twigged hands are cruelly reminiscent of Bernini's *Daphne and Apollo* (*c*. 1623) as well as Tim Burton's cinematic fantasy, *Edward Scissorhands* (1991). The reimagining sees Lavinia in a white billowing skirt, which she attempts to hold down against an updraft in an allusion to Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* (directed by Billy Wilder, 1955). Taymor commented: 'The famous image […] seemed an apt modern iconic parallel to add to this scene of humiliation and rape. I was interested in exploiting our store of not only classical, but also contemporary myths.'[47] Monroe's sexually charged persona is juxtaposed, in Lavinia, with the regal modesty of Grace

Kelly whom Taymor, in a rather sinister way, describes as wearing 'little black gloves and a full bell skirt, daddy's little girl all ready for defilement.'[48]

Chasing Young Lucius over a field, leading into the above sequence, Lavinia is costumed in a long red dress with extended sleeves, dropping away from her wrists and reaching almost to the ground. The costume echoes the red ribbons worn by Vivien Leigh, standing in for blood, in Peter Brook's iconic theatre production of 1955. Ultimately, of course, underlying this confluence of references is the subliminal allusion to the classical Venus de Milo.

Taymor's is an inherently allusive and self-conscious style, one that thrives on a hybridity between old and new, serious and playful, canonical and popular. Perhaps the most wryly facetious example of this is Tamora's disguise as Revenge. She wears a fan of carving knives in a parody of a showgirl's ostrich-feather headdress but which also alludes to the spiked crown of the Statue of Liberty. The irony of Liberty's diadem comprising the murderous weapon which does for so many of *Titus*' characters, is both sardonic and ingenious.

The film's climax is its third violent banquet (which echoes the earlier ones of the opening kitchen table and that involving the murder of the fly). Six Goths sit opposite six Romans while Tamora and Saturninus occupy the heads of a long table. Titus, in full chef's whites and assisted by Young Lucius, dishes up large slices of pie. As the guests dig in, Lavinia, veiled, enters modestly and sidles up to her father so that she has her back against his chest. Following the discussion about Virginius slaying his own daughter (to prevent her being raped), Titus snaps Lavinia's neck and gently lays her to the floor. He names her rapists at the same time as he reveals their whereabouts: ''twas Chiron and

Demetrius […] / Why, there they are, both baked in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred' (5.3.55-61). As Tamora inserts her fingers into her mouth in order to gag, Titus thrusts his knife into her neck.

The play's chain-reaction of murders follows in rapid sequence: Saturninus, mounting the table tears, with his teeth, a candle from a candelabrum to reveal the third of three sharp prongs. These he rams into Titus' chest. Lucius snatches Saturninus by his collar and belt and drags him down the full length of the table, plates and cutlery flying in the mayhem. He dumps Saturninus back in his chair and, grabbing a large serving spoon, shoves this down the emperor's throat. The action suddenly freezes as Saturninus tumbles back from the table. Lucius' airborne spit and a goblet of spilled wine are suspended mid-air. As the film unfreezes, the spit lands with a thud and Lucius shoots Saturninus in the head.

The gunshot moves us instantly to the interior of the coliseum, the dining room carnage precisely reconstructed as a murderous theatrical performance. A densely packed crowd of spectators is faded in to occupy the seating around the action and while Marcus addresses them via a microphone, 'You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome…' (5.3.78), his sobering rhetoric is accompanied by the Clown casting clear plastic sheets over the various corpses. Lucius gestures towards Aaron's caged baby, held aloft by the Clown in an echo of the display of Young Lucius at the film's opening. Aaron, his arms lashed to a horizontal pole, is lowered into a hole, glancing directly at the viewer as he laments any good deed he might have done. Lucius announces the degrading disposal of Tamora's corpse – 'throw her forth to beasts and birds of [for the text's 'to'] pray' (line 197).

Young Lucius gingerly opens the lid of the cage and, as he takes the baby to his chest, the cries of many babies mingle with the caws of birds, the sounds of new birth and carrion scavengers forming a discordance which is then overlaid with the tolling of bells in clear defiance of Lucius' earlier decree: 'No mournful bell shall ring her burial' (line 196). The baby's tiny face looks back over Young Lucius' shoulder as he walks slowly from the coliseum into a new dawn, the movie freezing as the rising sun breaks the horizon. This closing sequence has aroused fierce disagreement among the film's commentators. For Peter S. Donaldson, 'nothing in the action of the film or in Shakespeare's play suggests that the territory outside the walls is safe. This is where Tamora's body will be thrown to be eaten by dogs and birds.'[49] Jim Welsh and John Tibbetts argue, by contrast, that Young Lucius' 'final exit out of the Coliseum towards the dawning of a new day with evil Aaron's baby in arms symbolically is a journey towards redemption' and Jonathan Bate is even more blithely cheerful: 'the movie ends on an uplifting note with a closing image of singular beauty, evoking a new dawn.'[50] Striking in its preservation of ambiguity here is Taymor's own uncertain description, hedged with hesitancy: 'The boy keeps moving towards the exit, towards the *promise* of a daylight as if redemption were a *possibility*.'[51]

Conclusion

For Shakespeare's first audiences, classical Rome provided an unassailable object lesson in the achievements of civilisation (*civitas*). With its pioneering developments in architecture, road building, sanitation, education, military discipline and mercantile efficiency, Rome offered a model of progress to which the early modern aspired. Its

colonial supremacy was testament to the city-state's political efficiencies as well as the ruthlessness of its ambition. In literary terms the eroticism of Ovid, the rhetoric of Cicero and the epic vision of Virgil, not to mention the theatre of Plautus and Seneca, demonstrated the kinds of edification fitting such an urbane culture.

But by Shakespeare's lifetime, Rome had become the epicentre of Catholic corruption, tainted by its association with Papal authority and a religion which – to the Protestant mind – harboured dangerous insurgency and an aggressive enmity. There is little evidence that Shakespeare partook in the extreme forms of Reformation zeal that characterised some of his contemporaries but Rome, for him as for them, was less a physical location than a contradictory set of ideas: ancient and modern, pioneering and bloated, innovative and complacent, pacific and brutal. Shakespeare's Roman plays offered their original audiences a sustained but unresolved series of ambiguities; in the cases of *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus*, heroism, loyalty, courage and influence as well as superciliousness, nepotism, corruption and violence.

By avoiding any specific locality, geographically or temporally, both Taymor and Fiennes ensure that it is this Shakespearean idea of Rome which both hosts and inflects their analyses of human conduct. Taymor's Roman vision is of a 'wilderness of tigers' (3.1.53), nasty, brutish and internecine but it is not one without humour, intelligence and a density of allusion which self-consciously improvises around Shakespeare's play in the context of contemporary culture. As for Fiennes's *Coriolanus* it too clearly demonstrates less the specific location or mechanisms of a particular struggle (between Romans and Goths) and more the dynamics of conflict itself, maternal, familial, tribal and national. In

these uncompromising ways, both films lay bare the continuing relevance to the twenty-first century of 400-year old plays about 2000-year old stories.

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[1] Graham Holderness and Christopher McCullough, 'Shakespeare on the Screen: A Selective Filmography', in *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: The Plays on Film and Television*, edited by Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18-49.

[2] Of the 13 essays in *Shakespeare on Screen: The Roman Plays*, edited by Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009), no fewer than seven are concerned with Mankiewicz's film.

[3] The BBC Shakespeare aired the Roman Plays as follows: *Julius Caesar*, directed by Herbert Wise (1979); *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Jonathan Miller (1981); *Cymbeline*, directed by Elijah Moshinsky (1982) and *Coriolanus*, directed by Elijah Moshinsky (1984). *The Spread of the Eagle* – a nine-part adaptation of *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Peter Dews, aired on the BBC in 1963.

[4] https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2016-05-16/bbc-looks-to-follow-hollow-crown-films-with-shakespeares-roman-plays/ [accessed 23 December 2018].

[5] Michael Almereyda's film adaptation of *Cymbeline*, entitled *Anarchy*, was released in 2015. Often considered a 'Late Romance' rather than 'Roman' plays, although it features a Roman general and part of its action takes place in Rome, I am excluding discussion of it here.

[6] Jennifer Flaherty, 'Filming Shakespeare's Rome: The "Preposterous Contemporary" Eternal City', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, 17 (2015), 228-40, p. 237.

[7] Gary Crowdus, Richard Porton and Ralph Fiennes, 'Shakespeare's Perennial Political Thriller: An Interview with Ralph Fiennes', *Cinéaste*, 37 (2012), 18-23, p. 22.

[8] Ralph Fiennes, voice-over commentary to DVD of *Coriolanus*.

[9] Peter J. Smith, 'Review of *Coriolanus'*, *Cahiers Élisabethains*, 58, (2000), 95-6, p. 95.

[10] Susannah Clapp, 'A Soldier to Cry On', *Observer*, 18 June 2000.

[11] Crowdus, Porton and Fiennes, p. 19 (my emphasis).

[12] Quoted in Logan, p. 117.

[13] Philip French, *The Guardian*, 22 January 2012.

[14] Robert Ormsby, *Coriolanus: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester Univesity Press, 2014), p. 227.

[15] Ralph Fiennes, 'The Question of *Coriolanus'*, in *Living with Shakespeare*, edited by Susannah Carson (New York City: Vintage Books, 2013), 220-7, p. 221.

[16] Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Shakespeare in bits and pieces', *TLS*, 5677 (20 January 2012), p. 17.

[17] Fiennes, commentary.

[18] John Osborne, *A Place Calling Itself Rome* (London: Faber, 1973), pp. 13-14.

[19] Jen Vineyard, 'Ralph Fiennes Teases Blofeld Role in New Bond Film *Skyfall*; Talks Shakespearean Adaptation of *Coriolanus'*, *Indiewire*, 7 November 2011.

[20] Kevin Polowy, 'Q&A: Ralph Fiennes on his Bard Badass *Coriolanus'*, www.mtv.com/news/2808659/ralph-fiennes-interview-coriolanus [accessed 23 December 2018].

[21] Cath Clarke, 'Interview: Ralph Fiennes on *Coriolanus'*, *Time Out London*, 10 December 2012.

[22] Fiennes in Carson, p. 223.

[23] John Garrison, 'Queer Desire and Self-Erasure in *Coriolanus* (2011)', *Literature / Film Quarterly*, 42 (2014), 427-32, pp. 433 and 432.

[24] Quoted by Vineyard.

[25] Logan, p. 107.

[26] Ormsby, *Coriolanus*, p. 237.

[27] Duncan-Jones, 'Shakespeare in bits and pieces', p. 17.

[28] *Coriolanus*, edited by Peter Holland (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 140.

[29] Crowdus, Porton and Fiennes, p. 23.

[30] Logan, p. 103.

[31] Garrison, p. 434.

[32] Fiennes in Carson, p. 223.

[33] Logan, p. 104.

[34] Boika Sokolova, 'An Anatomy of Collapse: Ralph Fiennes' Film *Coriolanus* (2011)', in *Built Upon His Rock: Writings in Honour of Péter Dávidházi*, edited by Panka Dániel, Pikli Natália and Ruttkay Veronika (Budapest: Kiadta az Elte Btk, Angol-Amerikai Intezet, 2018), 350-8, p. 358.

[35] De Luca, Maria, Mary Lindroth and Julie Taymor, 'Mayhem, Madness, Method: An interview with Julie Taymor', *Cinéaste*, 25 (2000), 28-31, p. 29.

[36] Clara Escoda Agustí, '*Titus* (1999): Framing Violence and Activating Responsibility', *Atlantis*, 28 (2006), 57-70, p. 65.

[37] De Luca, Lindroth and Taymor, 'Mayhem, Madness, Method', p. 28.

[38] Carol Chillington Rutter, 'Looking Like a Child – or – *Titus*: The Comedy', *Shakespeare Survey 56* (2003), 1-26, p. 11.

[39] Elsie Walker, 'Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), ten years on' in *Shakespeare on Screen: The Roman Plays*, edited by Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin, 23-65, p. 57.

[40] Eileen Blumenthal, *Julie Taymor: Playing with Fire: Theatre, Opera, Film* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), p. 220.

[41] The coliseum used in the film was not that of Rome (which has no floor) but the one in Pula, Croatia. Taymor writes, 'We shot the opening and closing scenes for the film in the winter of 1998. Two months later, with the war in Kosovo, this would have been impossible. The irony of shooting these scenes in Balkans lay heavily on all of us.' Julie Taymor, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), p. 182.

[42] Julie Taymor, voice-over commentary to DVD of *Titus*.

[43] Taymor, *Titus: Screenplay*, p. 19.

[44] Taymor, *Titus: Screenplay*, p. 183.

[45] De Luca, Lindroth and Taymor, 'Mayhem, Madness, Method', p. 30.

[46] Menenius tells Sicinius that 'There is no more mercy in him [Coriolanus] than there is milk in a male tiger' (*Coriolanus*, 5.4.29).

[47] Quoted in Blumenthal, *Julie Taymor: Playing With Fire, Theatre*, p. 188.

[48] Taymor, *Titus: Screenplay*, p. 181.

[49] Peter S. Donaldson, 'Game Space / Tragic Space: Julie Taymor's *Titus*' in *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, edited by Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 457-77, p. 474.

[50] Jim Welsh and John Tibbetts, '"To Sup with Horrors": Julie Taymor's Senecan Feast', *Literature / Film Quarterly*, 28 (2000), 155-6, p. 156. Jonathan Bate, 'Introduction' in Taymor, *Titus: Screenplay*, 8-13, p. 13.

[51] Taymor, *Titus: Screenplay*, p. 185 (my emphases).