

Lavinia

❖ Classical parallels and textual references to the rape and dismemberment of Lavinia

- **Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (Book VI): The Rape of Philomela**

- Philomela and her sister, Procne, were the daughters of an Athenian king; they weren't just sisters—they were the best of friends.
- Procne was the wife of Tereus, monarch of the nearby kingdom of Thrace (portion of modern day Turkey stretching from Istanbul to the Bulgarian border).
- Several years had gone by since Philomela and Procne had last seen each other, and Procne could endure the absence of Philomela in her life no longer. Consequently, she asked her husband to travel to Athens and escort her beloved sister to Thrace. Philomela was equally excited by the prospect of being reunited with her sister.
- While en-route to Thrace, Tereus secretly brought Philomela to a wilderness cabin where he proceeded to dishonor the gods, himself, his wife, his sister-in-law, and his father-in-law by raping her. When she vowed to publically denounce him, he feared for his throne; to ensure her silence, he cut out her tongue and imprisoned her in the cabin under heavy guard. [The removal of Philomela's tongue has been symbolically interpreted as a double violation of her body: it was rape in itself. The cutting-out of her tongue—which deprived her of her voice, her right of free speech, her ability to denounce her attacker and obtain justice —represented Tereus' censorship of her].
- Returning home, alone, Tereus lied to Procne saying that poor Philomela had caught sick and died on the journey. Accepting his story, Procne was heartbroken, tore her glitzy, snazzy garments into shreds, donned black robes, and had a tomb built in her sister's memory.
- So that she could communicate to her sister and to the world the horror of what she had suffered, Philomela wove a tapestry with scenes depicting everything that Tereus had done to her. Upon its completion, she managed to have a servant sneak it out of her prison and take it to her sister. [The creation of the tapestry enabled tongue-less Philomela to “speak” once again].
- Stricken by the horror of her sister's plight, Procne found herself mute, unable to speak: she, too, was censored by her husband. Vowing to avenge her sister, Procne secretly left the palace, found Philomela's place of imprisonment, set her free, and together they plotted retribution.

- Being both mute, and unable to challenge Tereus in mortal combat, the sisters' revenge needed to be more subtle than overt. After murdering her and Tereus' son, Procne behead him, set aside his head, then proceeded to cut, chop, dice, mash, whip, and bake the bits and bobs of his torso into Tereus' favorite pie.
- After he had ravenously (and unknowingly) gobbled up his son for dinner, Procne collected the severed head, and carrying it by the hair like a trophy, brought it before her husband.
- Realizing that the unique ingredients which had given his dinner that extra frisson were the organs of his only child, Tereus got up, grabbed an ax, and chased both sisters around the palace with the intention of chopping *them* both up into tiny bits.
- Watching the scene from Olympus, Zeus intervened on behalf of the sisters, and saved both their lives by turning them into birds: Procne became a swallow and Philomela became a nightingale. They flew far, far away from Tereus to safety (hopefully, they were not caught and themselves eaten by owls, hawks, or eagles).

❖ **Lavinia, her father's dutiful pawn**

- When she greeted him upon his return, Titus made this prayer: "The cordial of mine age to glad my heart! Lavinia, live, outlive thy father's days and fame's eternal date, for virtue's praise!"
- While her father projected omnipotence, Lavinia projected moral rectitude, virtuousness, obedience, and chastity.
- Passive, submissively obedient to male authority, Lavinia was prevented by her menfolk from becoming a self-actualized being. She had no input into her destiny; she was restrained from fulfilling her own needs and desires.
- Lacking the power and ability of direct action, Lavinia was, at first, a dutiful, prospective bride—a prize utilized by her match-making father to secure potential alliances; later, her body, mind, and soul ravaged, she became a martyr to his hubris, a half-woman desired by no one.
 - When Saturninus announced his desire to take Lavinia as his wife, neither he nor Titus asked how she felt about it; she made no reply whatsoever (she made no mention of her betrothal to Bassianus).

- Within seconds of having proposed marriage to Lavinia and Titus' acceptance of it, Saturninus—right in front of everybody— seduced Tamora (what role could he give her, as he said, that would make her *greater* than the Queen of Goths—his mistress?) He had the temerity to ask Lavinia for her approval of his love-play; what could Tamora become but a rival, a threat to Lavinia? Rather than give him a good smack across the chops, Lavinia took the high road by declaring that he acted out of “princely courtesy.”
- When Bassianus grabbed her and took her away, breaking off her newly made engagement with Saturninus, she didn't speak or protest.

❖ **Lavinia's confrontation with Tamora and her sons**

- Lavinia's chaste nature and innocence in carnal matters was well known; she had even utilized it as a means to chastise other people: on the morning of the hunt, when Saturninus eluded to his and Tamora's busy wedding night by saying it was too early an hour for a new bride to stir out of bed, Lavinia retorted that she had been already been up and about for several hours (suggesting that very little of a sexual nature occurred overnight on her wedding night to have disturbed her sleep).
- Lavinia chastised Tamora for canoodling with Aaron, cuckolding her husband of less than 24 hours (Saturninus). She suggested that Tamora's lustiness and her taking married as well as single men as lovers was widely known throughout the court. Bassianus warned Tamora that her association with Aaron was making her like him: hateful, loathsome, repugnant, and despicable. If she had intended on keeping her liaison with Aaron a secret she was doing a bad job: for what other reason could it have been surmised that she dismissed her servants, rode off, dismounted, and then let her horse wander about on its own, unattended? When he threatened Tamora with exposure by informing his brother, Lavinia added that choosing a lascivious adulteress for a wife was but the latest in a series of Saturninus' bad decisions.

- When she was attacked, Lavinia tried to make Tamora reflect on the traditional qualities of womanhood; when that failed, she entreated Chiron and Demetrius not to initiate their mother's beastliness. When Tamora refused to honor her plea that she not be raped Lavinia uttered a curse which Chiron halted by gagging her.
- As avenger, fulfilling his daughter's curse upon her enemies, Titus ensured that Lavinia was his partner, his silent collaborator, and spectator. To mirror the severing of Lavinia's tongue, Titus gagged Chiron and Demetrius; to mirror her dismemberment, Titus bound their limbs; to replicate her bloody, gaping wounds, to compensate for her virgin blood spilled by rape, Titus severed their throats with Lavinia holding the basin to collect their blood. It was a ceremonial, ritualistic role reversal.
- In Lavinia's muteness, some scholars have seen a signification of what occurs in situations where language and rhetoric fail: situations so horrible and grotesque that there is simply nothing to say, or what is said is hollow, without meaning, accomplishing nothing. Words just cannot be found.
- To the Andronici, Lavinia, mute, with gaping wounds and flowing blood, was an ever present physical embodiment of their ruin.
- Of all the calamities suffered by his daughter, it was the loss of Lavinia's virginity which most anguished Titus—her chastity was beyond price, its loss their greatest shame. Determined to end both their suffering by killing Lavinia, Titus (who, again, found a precedent for a contemplated action in classical literature) questioned Saturninus about the legality of Virginius' murder of his daughter. Saturninus, conceding that collective honor is of more value to a family than any single life which might threaten it, considered Virginius justified. Buttressed by Saturninus' approval, Titus took his daughter's life.