

# THEMES in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

## ✚ Turmoil caused by an unsecured line of Succession

- Failing to secure the succession during his lifetime, the newly deceased emperor of Rome left behind an empire poised on the brink of a civil war between his two feuding sons, Saturninus and Bassianus, and their respective factions of armed patricians and senators; each brother appealed for nomination to the vacant throne—which Saturninus, at least, was prepared to encourage his followers to seize on his behalf through bloodshed. Collectively, the people of Rome, through Titus' brother, Marcus (a tribune of the empire), called upon their own particular choice for election: their “best champion,” Titus Andronicus. Presumably, the majority of soldiers would have been prepared to take up arms and fight for Titus' installation. When Titus demurred, the people, believing that he would do right by them, pledged to honor his choice. He fumbled the ball by selecting Saturninus.

## ❖ *Contemporary Elizabethan parallels*

- Although she vehemently denied knowledge of or involvement in the rebellion which Sir Thomas Wyatt led in 1534 against Queen Mary Tudor, Princess Elizabeth—by orders by her half-sister, the queen—was among the many courtiers incarcerated within the Tower of London.
- Determined to implicate Elizabeth in the uprising as justification for putting her to death, members of the Privy Council subjected many of the prisoners to torture—hoping to get them to lie by saying that they had conspired or took up arms on Elizabeth's behalf.
- Mary's Catholicism, the national reestablishment of the Catholic faith, and the torture and burning of non-believers made Elizabeth a widely popular and sympathetic figure.

- After the passage of two months, Mary, unable to break Elizabeth's spirit or obtain coerced evidence, decided upon a different approach towards her half-sister. Beginning on Palm Sunday, 1534—which happened to be the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beheading of her mother, Queen Anne Boleyn, at the Tower—Elizabeth was taken on a harrowing four day journey through the hinterlands to the Royal Manor at Woodstock. There, she was placed under house arrest. Every minute of every day for nearly a year, Elizabeth feared she would be murdered by intruders or upon Mary's orders. Under pressure from her husband, Philip II of Spain, Mary's treatment of Elizabeth eased, if only a tad.
- Though she survived Mary's reign, Queen Elizabeth I never forgot the fine line she had to walk or the knife's edge under which she had lived. She had been the target of ambitious men who had tried to utilize her for their own ends—whether it had served that ambition to crown her or to kill her.
- Rather than place her own self—and England—at anyone's mercy again, Elizabeth vowed never to marry. No foreign prince as her husband would dictate policy in her kingdom or be the cause of disharmony and faction. She would not give birth to an heir around whom an opposition could form to threaten her person and realm.

#### ✚ **Primogeniture v. “the right man (or woman) for the job”**

- On account of his lack of character, bad temperament, and dimwittedness, Saturninus was unqualified to be emperor; though he was the younger of the two brothers, Bassianus was infinitesimally the worthier candidate. However, by his adherence to primogeniture over merit, Titus bestowed the throne onto the elder, but not the best, of the two candidates.

## ✚ Xenophobia

- Rome is in a state of war against the Goths (a fierce Germanic tribe comprised of the Ostrogoths [eastern Goths] and the Visigoths [western Goths]).
- With the boundary of the empire constantly expanding, and foreign cultures being assumed (but not “melted”) into it, the distinction between what was Roman and what was barbarian became hopelessly blurred. Romans felt that their identity, customs, traditions were under constant threat and siege. The influence of the barbarian, of the “other,” which they feared more than anything else, created uncertainty, suspicion, and turmoil—a threat that had to be countered with the greatest possible force (even if, by their brutality, such acts were idiosyncratic).
- Among Titus’ Goth hostages were Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, and her three sons. When Saturninus freed then married Tamora, peace could have enveloped the empire with the two cultures being united. Tamora, however, was dedicated to Rome’s destruction, and subverted Roman law, justice, religion, and tradition. The real power in the empire, Tamora had at her disposal the authority of the throne as well as the Empire’s treasury, army and navy.
- Traditional Romans feared that the marriage would render the royal bloodline impure.

### ❖ *Contemporary Elizabethan parallels*

- Following Queen Mary’s marriage to the Earl of Bothwell—the presumed architect of the murder of her previous husband, Lord Darnley—a civil war broke out in Scotland between her supporters and those who wanted to supplant her with her infant son, James VI (under the regency of Mary’s illegitimate, Protestant half-brother, the Earl of Moray).
- When Mary’s army was eradicated at the Battle of Langside in 1568, she fled into England, placing herself at her cousin’s mercy. Until her execution, Mary was the cause of unrest in Scotland (her supporters often rebelled against the various regents appointed to govern for her young son) as well as in England.
- Because of Mary, Elizabeth faced a triple threat to her life—Mary, being of the same blood, had a claim to her throne; Mary, being

Scottish and French (though more French than Scottish), embodied a foreign threat to her throne; Mary, being Roman Catholic, embodied a religious threat to her entire kingdom.

- In his 1570 papal bull, *Regnans in Excelsis*, Pope Pius V excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I and sanctioned any action English Catholics might take that would result in her usurpation. Three plots arose and were put down, each with the same goal: Mary's rescue, Elizabeth's murder, and Mary's coronation: the Ridolfi [1571], Throckmorton [1583], and the Babington [1586]).
- Civil unrest gripped Ireland throughout most of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Backed with money, munitions, and provisions supplied by European Catholics, the Irish rebelled in 1579 (the Desmond Rebellion): the English responded by privatizing extensive land tracks for loyal courtiers, burning crops, and ruining fields—thereby causing mass starvation. In 1594, Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, launched a war which was only settled after the ascension of King James I in 1603.