

Learning to Scrawl: The Evolutionary Strain in *Titus Andronicus*

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the semiotic obsessions of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, less on their relationship with matters of theme. This paper argues first that the play's engagement with the mutual relationships between language, labour and society draws on classical and early modern accounts of the symbiotic evolution of language and civilised society. It then suggests that the play's particular rhetorical and kinesiological focus on hand and tongue anticipates the metonymies deployed in Darwinian accounts of human evolution. Key to this reading is the well-known *scrawl/scrowl* crux: far from opting for a definitive, exclusive meaning, the paper proposes that the semantic uncertainty unleashed at the crux mimics the play's representation of Rome's and, in the last resort, humanity's hesitation between literate civilization and creeping barbarism. No longer a merely lexical quibble over the competing, variously obsolescent and emergent, notions of crawling, gesticulating and scribbling, the crux becomes the touchstone of an evolutionary reading of the play. Just as *scrawl/scrowl* debates endlessly between different stages on the human evolutionary scale, so *Titus Andronicus* leaves its readers and audience in uneasy contemplation of Rome's – and their own – perpetual teetering on the brink of degradation.

KEYWORDS: *Titus Andronicus*, evolution, civilization, barbarism, language.



1. Introduction

Ever since *Titus Andronicus* more or less asserted its right to be taken seriously, it has become a commonplace of criticism to observe the semiotic obsessions of Shakespeare's first tragedy. Tricomi detects a dialectic between the falsifications of metaphor and the "irrefutable realities of dramatized events" (1974:11); Danson regards *Titus* as "a play about silence, and about the inability to achieve adequate expression for overwhelming emotional needs" (1974:12); Hulse reads the play as an attempt to bridge "the presumed gulf between language and action" (1979:111); Fawcett identifies a similar conflict between language and body, with the play's close "opening out language again" (1983:270); and Kendall exposes the same gap or chasm but believes the play is skeptical that it might be bridged (1989:308n).¹ For these critics, the play is a rather self-absorbed examination of metaphor and/or tragedy and/or silence and/or language and/or action and/or the body; its insistent picking at the tissues of language, eloquence and action (both rhetorical art of gesture and staple of dramatic semiology) is read as a sophisticated comment on its own linguistic, rhetorical and gestural physiology. What few attempts are made to interpret this obsession diegetically, as narrating some kind of story, often turn biographical and assert its appropriateness to a young playwright eager to demonstrate precocious mastery of his chosen craft; but in general, such criticism takes us no further than the impasse of, to adopt Bate's (1995:35) terms, "hermeneutic blockage or deconstructionists' 'aporia'."²

Another strand of criticism of the play attends to its political significance. Groundbreaking in this respect was James's (1991) contention that *Titus Andronicus* explores the implications of the contemporary theory of the translation of empire (*translation imperii*) westwards from Rome to Britain. For political readers of the play it therefore becomes important to consider how Shakespeare gauges the relative civility/barbarism of the Goths and the Romans, perhaps

¹ More recently, Joseph M. Ortiz (2005:53-74) has suggested that Lavinia's voicelessness situates *Titus Andronicus* in a larger debate about the relationship between language and music.

² It hardly needs saying that such an interest in meaning is by no means exclusive to this play among Shakespeare's works, nor to Shakespeare among early modern writers.

to establish at what precise historical period Shakespeare sets the play, and to assess the moral worth of the alleged redeemer Lucius. In this latter connection, Taylor's (1996-1997) characterisation of Lucius as "the severely flawed redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*" sparked a flurry of responses (Bate 1996-1997, Hunt 1997-1998, Kolin 1997-1998, Taylor 1997-1998) which sought to establish a definitive position for the redeemer on various sliding scales of barbarity/civilization, paganism/proto-Christianity, and/or perfect/flawed *romanitas* – surely a very odd endeavour in an age which extolled Shakespeare's essential ambiguity.

Few critics have attempted to relate the play's semiotic obsessions to its historical or political preoccupations, or vice versa.³ A notable exception may be Marti (2001) who, after demonstrating once more how the play runs the whole gamut of semiotic codes, including kinesics and proxemics, suggests that revenge is "the basic principle of communication" and that *Titus Andronicus* reminds us that, "just as Rome was founded on murder and rape" so "all our cultural achievements turn out to be based on origins which we now consider inhuman and beastly." In other words, for Marti, among other things the play's corporal semiotics serves diegetically to take us back to our beastly roots, thereby constituting an allegory of the distant origins of human civilization and culture.⁴ For his part Kaiser (2006) argues that *Titus's* inscription of a dialectic between the univocal semiotics of male corporality and the ambiguity of its female counterpart attests the contemporary challenge on the socio-political plane to the patriarchal symbolic order associated with an obsolescent feudalism.⁵ This paper will attempt to demonstrate how

³ The case is different with *Coriolanus*, another Roman play littered, on the figurative level at least, with body parts and interested in the semiotic potential of the body. Schabert (1997:165-9) relates the play to the function of scars in early modern male-self-fashioning, while Jagendorf (1990) reads its synecdochal dismemberment of the body as figuring the disintegration of Roman society.

⁴ Marti's language is redolent of Walter Benjamin's famous assertion that "there has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism" (2005), although it is a moot point whether Benjamin's "barbarism" is meant literally or figuratively (in so far as it may denote class exploitation).

⁵ In some ways related is Rowe's claim that "the tropes of dismemberment dramatised in *Titus Andronicus* are at odds with [the Hobbesian] notion of the 'acting person'. They imply that the capacity for effective action inheres not in persons but in the objects and instruments of action" (1994:280).

Titus Andronicus's absorption in semiotics engages with the self-servingly feudalistic, classical and early modern aetiologies of language and civilised society, while its particular focus on hand and tongue anticipate the modern metonymies deployed by Darwinian accounts of human evolution. Key to this reading is the well-known *scrawl/scrowl* crux: far from establishing for it a definitive meaning, the paper will argue that the audience's inevitable hermeneutic oscillation between the poles of its ambiguity mimics the play's representation of Rome's and, in the last resort, humanity's teetering between literate civilization and crawling barbarism.

2. The crux of the matter

In the midst of their doltish jeering at Lavinia's freshly violated and disfigured body, Demetrius and Chiron indulge in some heavy-handed ironising regarding the communicative options available to their tongueless, handless victim. The lines are well-known, but bear repeating as only one instance of the play's relentless picking at the deficiencies of conventional means of communication:

Enter the Empress' sons with LAVINIA, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out and ravished.

DEMETRIUS

So, now go tell, and if thy tongue can speak,
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON

Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
And if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.

DEMETRIUS

See how with signs and tokens she can scrawl.

CHIRON

Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

DEMETRIUS

She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash;
And so let's leave her to her silent walks.

CHIRON

And 'twere mine cause, I should go hang myself.

DEMETRIUS

If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord. (2.3.1-10)⁶

“Scrawl” (2.3.5) is something of a minor textual crux. Beneath the apparently straightforward verb proffered here by the latest Arden editor, Bate, lurks a semantic quandary: to the modern reader “scrawl” means something like “scribble,” but according to the *OED* that usage was not available to Shakespeare or his audience at the time the play was written and first performed. In his second series Arden edition, Maxwell (1953) had opted for “scrowl,” simply modernising the spelling of Q1’s “scrowle,” an apparent *hapax legomenon* which either requires lexicographical explanation or straight rejection. Onions glosses “scrowl” as “a form of ‘scrawl’, to gesticulate, with a play on ‘scroll’, to write down” (1986:241). This suggestion is accepted by Maxwell, whose comment on the line discovers “an ironic anticipation of the final disclosure” where Lavinia will write with a staff (held in her mouth and guided by her feet) the names of her ravishers in the sand.” Wells and Taylor (1987:214) reject Q1’s “scrowle” and the Folio variant “scowle” in favour of “scrawl” and thus, together with Bate, establish a sort of up-to-date, scholarly consensus regarding the lexical form and the semantic meaning of the verb. In his note, Bate affirms that Q1’s “scrowle” is merely an alternative spelling of modern “scrawl;” he is silent on F’s “scowle.” For Bate (note *ad loc.*),

Q1’s ‘scrowle’ is a variant spelling of ‘scrawl’, ‘to spread the limbs abroad in a sprawling manner’ (*OED v.*¹), with possible play on modern sense, ‘to write carelessly or awkwardly’ (*OED v.*², but no example before 1612), and perhaps also on ‘scroll’, ‘to write down’ (but *OED* has no example of this verb before 1606).

What is curious in Bate’s procedure is that, preferring a now obsolete meaning of “scrawl” (bodily gesticulation), he chooses to modernise the spelling of “scrowle” to “scrawl,” thus inadvertently prioritising the modern meaning “scribble” which, if anything, was only emerging at the time Shakespeare was writing. It is odd, too, that despite his sensitivity to the play’s stagecraft and kinesics, Bate makes no mention of the second usage of *OED v.*¹, “To move with a scrambling and shuffling motion. = CRAWL *v.*¹”, a usage the *OED*

⁶ Here and throughout this paper I quote from Jonathan Bate’s Third Series Arden edition of *Titus Andronicus* (1995).

illustrates with a quotation from the Tyndale Bible of 1530: "All that scrauleth upon the earth" (*Leviticus* 11.41). In this verse the Deuteronomist referred to all those unclean verminous creatures (winged insects, mole-rats, jerboas, thorn-tailed lizards, geckos, chameleons, and the like) which crawl over the ground and whose consumption would have polluted the Children of Israel. In a play teeming with venomous creatures both literal and metaphorical and concerned with issues of ritual, sacrificial and dietary cleanliness and purity, it is odd that the Levitician resonance of "scrawl" has not been noticed.

Even if merely morphologically, "scrawl" seems to have some relation to "crawl." Indeed, the definition of its modern meaning, "to write or draw in a sprawling, untidy manner," is achieved by way of "sprawl," a verb which is still associated with writing in the collocation "sprawling hand" despite being more commonly used to mean "to crawl from one place to another in a struggling or ungraceful manner" (*OED* [1]b.) or, more generally, "to move the limbs in a convulsive effort; to toss about or spread oneself out; in later use, to be stretched out on the ground, etc., in an ungainly or awkward manner" (*OED* 1[a.]). There would appear, then, to be some justification in seeking to account for the overlap between the semantic fields of "scrawl" (untidy writing) and "crawl" (motion over the ground) which in modern usage are kept quite apart but in Shakespeare's day were evidently much closer. Is there some conceptual relation between two such apparently distinct actions, one related to language – more precisely written, verbal communication – the other to bodily motion? Language and motion merge in gesture and gesticulation, the non-verbal language of the body; or perhaps it would be better put to say that gesture or gesticulation (a special form of which is denoted by the Folio's "scowl") amounts to an intermediate communicative code, a halfway house between meaningless movement and meaningful speech which was visited by early modern writers like Wycliff, Phaer and Stanyhurst.⁷ My own interpretation of Shakespeare's use

⁷ To illustrate the first usage of "scrawl v.1" = "to spread the limbs abroad in a sprawling manner", the *OED* draws severally on Wycliff (*Sermon* CXXX, c. 1380), Thomas Phaer's 1569 translation of the *Aeneid*, and Richard Stanyhurst's 1582 translation of books 1-4 of the same work and his rather free – or deeply imagined – rendering of Virgil's description of Laocoon struggling desperately to wrest the brace of sea-snakes from his neck: "Hee screams, and skrawling to the skye brayes terribil

of “scrawl” will be deferred until some sketch has been hazarded of what conceptual relationship between “scrawl” and “crawl” might underlie their semantic common ground, lost to modern readers but known to Shakespeare’s audience.

3. Darwin and the orators

Through its apparent diversification to cover concepts belonging to three different semantic fields (movement along the ground, gesticulation, writing), the unremarkable verb “scrawl” encapsulates the three principal stages in the myth of human evolution – part and parcel of which were rhetorical accounts of language acquisition – that Shakespeare’s age had inherited from classical times and which remained current at least as far as the nineteenth century. It hardly needs saying that the basic motor capacities (first learning to crawl and then to walk) and linguistic capacities (learning to speak) are developed by infants in relatively close temporal proximity, learning to crawl usually preceding the first attempts at verbal utterance. In English, the close interrelationship between the two capacities is heard in the audible similarity of the two verbs “walk” and “talk.” According to Bruce Chatwin, it was “Wilhelm von Humboldt, the father of modern linguistics, [who] suggested that men walked upright *because* of discourse which would not let them ‘be muffled or made dumb by the ground’” (1988:276) on which they groveled on all fours.

Cicero’s version in *De inventione* of the foundational myth of eloquence speaks of “a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals, and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength” (1948: I.i-ii).⁸ Then along came the first orator who gathered together those who had lived “scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats” and “introduced them to every useful and honourable occupation.” At first they rebelled but,

hoyseth” (*Aeneid* 2.222: “clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit”). For its first illustration of the modern meaning of “scrawl *v.*”= “to write carelessly or awkwardly”, the *OED* has to wait until Randle Cotgrave’s 1611 *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* and Richard Brindsley’s *Ludus Literarium* of 1612, with its admonition to scholars to “keepe their Greeke Testaments faire from blotting or scrawling.”

⁸ Earlier formulators of the myth include Aristotle and Isocrates; see Gera (2003).

“through reason and eloquence” that Ur-orator “transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.” Cicero restates this myth in *De oratore*, together with *Orator* one of the usual candidates for being “Tully’s Orator,” from which Lavinia read to Young Lucius (4.1.14): “To come, however, to the highest achievements of eloquence, what other power could have been strong enough to gather scattered humanity into one place, or to lead it out of its brutish existence in the wilderness up to our present condition of civilization?” (1926:1.viii.33). In short, for Cicero language raised man from a brutish, animal existence to life in society, civilization and productive labour.

In his preface to the 1560 edition of *The Arte of Rhetorique*, Thomas Wilson gave the Ciceronian myth a Christian and feudalistic gloss, locating man’s pre-lingual, animal condition in the dark, corrupted times after the fall when Cicero’s productive labour and living in society have been abandoned in favour of creeping rumination:

Long it was ere that man knew himself, being destitute of God’s grace, so that all things waxed savage: the earth untilled, society neglected, God’s will not known, man against man, one against another, and all against all order. Some lived by spoil; some like brute beasts grazed upon the ground; some went naked; some roamed like woodwoses; none did anything by reason, but most did what they could by manhood. (1999:74-75)

Cicero’s redeeming and civilising Ur-orator is transformed into certain God-appointed “ministers,” to whom He “granted [...]the gift of utterance” in order to “win folk at their will, and frame them by reason to all good order.” That “order” entailed knowledge of “what was gainful for mankind,” namely Cicero’s “useful and honourable occupation,” upon which Wilson enlarges as follows:

For what man, I pray you, being better able to maintain himself by valiant courage than by living in base subjection, would not rather look to rule like a lord than to live like an underling, if by reason he were not persuaded that it behooveth every man to live in his own vocation, and not to seek any higher room than whereunto he was at the first appointed? Who would dig and delve from morn till evening? Who would travail and toil with the sweat of his brows?

For Wilson, language’s great coup was to bring men together in society so that each, in the performance of his own trade or occupation, and without forsaking his position in the feudal scheme

of things, might labour usefully. Thus, language makes men “pass all other creature living” just as it keeps the majority of them in labouring thrall to a hierarchy that exploits their labour.

In a conventional elision of language and poetry, George Puttenham draws on the same myth in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) as filtered through Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (1928:II.391-369). He does not give it such extensive treatment as Wilson nor does he apply any Christian gloss; in fact, his Ur-orators are Amphion and Orpheus, the former building cities “to the sound of his harp,” the latter bringing “the rude and savage people to a more civil and orderly life” – “the rude and savage people” being figured by the “wild beasts” made tame by the “wholesome lessons [Orpheus] uttered in harmony and with melodious instruments” (Puttenham 1999:194, 220). Quite how language permits productive labour to be marshalled and labourers to be kept in their proper stations is overlooked by Puttenham, who is not so much concerned with a diachronic sketch of man’s evolution from bestiality to civilization as to determine a synchronic, class-based distinction between the language of the court and that of the lumpen; but the point is the same: linguistic capacity is a measure of civility, and the more refined and ornamental the language, the more civilized its user.

Consequently, when Shakespeare was writing *Titus Andronicus*, the conventional myth of language made of it the decisive criterion of civilization, that “Rubicon” which Max Müller, the great Sanskrit scholar, identified in his 1864 *Lectures on the Science of Language* as “the one great barrier between the brute and man” (qtd. Chapple 1986:131).⁹ Divinely ordained civilization was characterised by the way language brought men to live together in society and inculcated in them the practice of productive labour and the imperative that each individual remain in his station with no chafing at the bit or shows of disobedience towards society’s governors. Naturally, this account of the evolution of civilized, human society has all the substance of the myth that it essentially is; but that is not to say that it wasn’t also a self-serving allegory which, in a period when feudalism was already obsolescent, was retailed by the ruling classes in order to justify their exploitative mastery of the teeming majority

⁹ No evolutionist, Müller believed that language ruled out any developmental sliding-scale from animal to man since “no brute ever uttered a word.”

on the grounds of their linguistic and therefore civil and human superiority. Moreover, it was a myth that persisted even as empirical evolutionary science developed in the nineteenth century and, far from debunking it, worked it out in greater metonymic detail and established for it a grounding in observable facts.¹⁰

As is well known, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) shies away from including man in the evolutionary equation. Nonetheless, his correspondence shows us that while navigating the Horn issues relating to barbarism and civilization, and to the role of language in distinguishing the latter from the former, were a constant cause for meditation. Writing to his sister of "the native Fuegian" or "untamed savage" on 30 March 1833, he remarks that "the difference between a domesticated & wild animal is far more strikingly marked in man: in the naked barbarian, with his body coated in paint, whose very gestures, whether they be peaceable [*sic*] or hostile are unintelligible, with difficulty we see a fellow-creature" (qtd. Chapple 1986:131). Yet see a fellow-creature he does; so too does he confer on the Fuegian's "gestures" some semiotic intention, albeit an "unintelligible one." On 11 April of the same year, in a letter to J. S. Henslow, Darwin narrates another encounter with indigenous South Americans: "I shall never forget, when entering Good Success Bay, the yell with which a party received us. They were seated on a rocky point, surrounded by the dark forest of beech; as they threw their arms wildly around their heads & their long hair streaming they seemed the troubled spirits of another world." Here Darwin's description of the indigenes greeting him with their arms a-kinber lands us firmly in the territory of *OED*'s "scrawl *v.*" = "to spread the limbs abroad in a sprawling manner; to gesticulate," while "spirits from a troubled world" transports us fleetingly to Aeneas's descent to the underworld. Taken together with the earlier references to "untamed savage" and "barbarian,"

¹⁰ It is as much beyond the scope of this article to trace the persistence of the myth forward in time from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century as it is to trace the development of evolutionary theories backward from the nineteenth to the sixteenth century. It would not however be amiss to remember that Darwin's classic statements on the matter would have been impossible without earlier pioneers ranging from, say, Edward Tyson (1650-1708), Julien Offroy de la Mettrie (1709-1751), Denis Diderot (1712-1784), Charles Bonnet (1720-93), James Burnett, Lord Monboddo (1714-1799), and, most comprehensively, Darwin's own grandfather Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802). See, for example, Sambrook (1986:19-22) and Porter (2000:439-45).

this language acknowledges the origins of his discourse in the classical and early modern economy of civilization myths.¹¹ It is also a description that would be uncannily appropriate for the harrowing encounter of Marcus with his niece – that other “troubled spirit from another world” – in the forest.

More remarkable for its topical investment in that economy is Darwin’s description of “microcephalous idiots” (2004:45) in his discussion of “Arrests of Development” in *The Descent of Man* (1871). Intellectually impaired and incapable of speech, these “idiots” are given to scowling (“making grimaces”) and crawling (“ascend stairs on all-fours”). As if impelled by the original Greek meaning of “idiot” (= country dweller) or by the distant pull of classical and early modern evolutionary myth, Darwin is driven off to the forests and the hills in search of analogies and all but comes across Wilson’s woodwose; he notes too how a contemporary authority, Professor Laycock, calls “brute-like idiots *theroid*,” from the Greek noun for wild animal. Meanwhile, in their resemblance to “the lower animals,” Darwin finds a case of what he termed “reversion” and others “degradation” or “devolution.” One aspect of behaviour which signals such “reversion” is the use of the mouth to supplement the hands: the “idiots” used their mouths to assist their hands when grubbing around for lice; once she emerges from her forest, Lavinia will use her mouth to hold the stick which, in the absence of hands, her feet guide over the sand.

Darwin concurs with Cicero and Wilson on other points too. He judges, for example, that “primeval men, and even their ape-like ancestors, probably lived in society” and supposes that “the social instincts [...] must have been acquired by man in a very rude state, and probably even by his early ape-like progenitors”; man, apart from anything else, “is a social animal,” which we see “in his dislike of solitude” (Darwin 2004:132-133). Again, he speculates that “primeval men practised a division of labour; each man did not manufacture his own flint tools or rude pottery, but certain individuals appear to have devoted themselves to such work, no doubt receiving in exchange the product of the chase” (69). This consideration leads Darwin on to the following passage which

¹¹ Chapple (1986:132) reports how Captain Fitzroy of the *Beagle* regarded such encounters as reworking Caesar’s coming among the ancient Britons.

throws into close proximity the hand and mouth, analogous cases of evolutionary specialisation:

One can hardly doubt, that a man-like animal who possessed a hand and arm sufficiently perfect to throw a stone with precision, or to form a flint into a rude tool, could, with sufficient practice, as far as mechanical skill alone is concerned, make almost anything which a civilised man can make. The structure of the hand in this respect may be compared with that of the vocal organs, which in the apes are used for uttering various signal-cries or, as in one genus, musical cadences; but in man the closely similar vocal organs have become adapted through the inherited effects of use for the utterance of articulate language. (69)

In many senses, then, the evolution of man is predicated on hand and tongue which, in the conventional accounts, become metonyms for civilization and are the body-parts most fetishistically foregrounded in *Titus Andronicus*.

As Gillian Beer has written, “the double issue of man’s language and of his place in nature was at the centre of mythography and anthropology in the 1860s and 1870s – and they were bound up with the conflict between degradationist and evolutionist views” (1983:189). Darwin’s own theory of the development of language is familiar enough:

language owes its origin to the imitation and modification of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man’s own instinctive cries, aided by signs and gestures. [...] primeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably first used his voice in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing, as do some gibbon-apes at the present day; and we may conclude from a widely-spread analogy, that this power would have been especially exerted during the courtship of the sexes [...]. (Darwin 2004:298-299)

Significantly, for Darwin language is not the Rubicon between man and beast it was for Müller; quite the contrary, “there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties,” any distinction residing not so much in “articulate language” – available also to “higher animals” such as parrots and gibbons, as in man’s “habitual use” (106-109) of it. But Darwin’s was not the most prolific contribution to evolutionist theorising about the origin of language and its relation to the rise of civilization. T. H. Huxley wrote at length on the matter in his

Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature (1863), while F. W. Farrar's *Chapters on Language* (1865) was a direct influence on Darwin.

Of particular interest is explorer and writer William Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man*, published in 1872, a year after Darwin's *Descent of Man*.¹² Written on Reade's return from his second African expedition (1868-1870), *The Martyrdom of Man* had originally been planned as an evolutionary study of human psychology – indeed, it was to be entitled *The Origin of Mind*; but as the work developed into a history of the world portraying how “the human race has been tortured that their children might profit by their woes” and how “our own prosperity is founded on the agonies of the past” (Reade 1948:437), he finally decided upon its definitive title. For Reade, as for Darwin and unlike Müller, language is not what distinguishes man from the beasts, for “all gregarious animals have a language by means of which they communicate with each other;” indeed, “with most animals the language is that of vocal sound, and its varied intonations of anger, joy, or grief may be distinguished even by the human ear” (336). As for man, “The language of our progenitors consisted of vocal sounds, and also of movements of the hands” (336). Then, over time a series of natural, geological events led to the scarcity of food, which in turn led to “the habit of incessant combat”; thereupon for their better protection, “inferior to the chimpanzee in strength and activity, and its superior in mental powers,” “our ape-like ancestors” began to live in groups or, in Reade's term, “in combination,” and this “power of combination was entirely dependent upon their language” (337). These ape-like ancestors first communicated by “intonation, in which ideas are arranged on a chromatic scale;” the next “stage of language was that of imitation”:

these animals [our ape-like ancestors] began to notify events to one another by imitative sounds, gestures, and grimaces. For instance, when they wished to indicate the neighbourhood of a wild beast they gave a low growl; they pointed in a certain direction; they shaped their features to resemble his; they crawled stealthily along with their belly crouched to the ground.

¹² Reade's earlier work *Savage Africa* (1863), published after his first trip to the Dark Continent (1862-1863), had provided Darwin with considerable information about African customs and livestock.

It is to this stage of “imitative language,” the language of gesticulation, grimacing and crawling, to which Lavinia is reduced once trimmed of tongue and hands. Reade suggests that it was “the pleasure and profit obtained from thus communicating their ideas” that led to the invention of conversation in the third stage of “conventional” or, using a term Puttenham would have understood, “artificial” language. On a Radian interpretation, Lavinia’s scrawling would thus symbolize Rome’s intermediate position between brute savagery and civilization, between the crawling and the writing at tension in the crux.

If the first benefit of writing post-Darwin was Reade’s ability to presuppose a continuous line of descent from ape to man which could account for the existence of “natural” languages in those liminal territories frequented by other upper orders of animals (Darwin’s dogs, parrots and gibbons, for instance), the second was the availability of empirically grounded analytical categories to account for differences between apes and men of a sophistication and explanatory value that far exceeded early modern applications of simplistic naked/clothed or language/no-language binaries. Reade draws on the idea of adaptation or specialisation when discussing the hand, “the second weapon” in our species (the first being language):

With monkeys the hand is used as a foot, and the foot is used as a hand. But when the hand began to be used for throwing missiles it was specialised more and more, and feet were required to do all the work of locomotion. This separation of the foot and the hand is the last instance of the physiological division of labour, and when it was effected the human frame became complete. The erect posture was assumed – that it is modern and unnatural is shown by the difficulty with which it is maintained for any length of time. (1948:338)

In other words, the single (and most recent) physiological difference between monkey and man is the functional specialisation of the latter’s feet and hands, which led to man’s raising himself up from the ground and starting to walk. Once again, walking and talking are intimately related to man’s ascent over the beasts, whereas crawling and scrawling reduce him to their level. It is interesting too how, in order to find a term for what modern evolutionary science designates “functional specialisation,” Reade is led back to that same “division of labour,” now anatomical, which in

a socio-economic sense Wilson, following the hint in Cicero, had been at pains to justify, Darwin to explain in biological-evolutionary terms, and Marx and Engels to identify as a precondition of commodity production.¹³

In fact, it is a short step from Reade's evolutionary account of the origin of language to Frederick Engels's account in "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man," probably written in 1876, but not published until 1896. Predictably, Engels reprehends the socially and economically iniquitous effects of Wilsonian, exploitative myths of human evolution, which, for the rest, he essentially restates except for rehearsing, as did Reade, the centrality to human evolution of the functional specialisation of the hand. For Engels, the adoption of an "erect gait" "was *the decisive step in the transition from ape to man*" (original emphasis), a step which relied upon the fact that "other functions devolved upon the hands" (1975:2). Unlike Reade but like Wilson, and despite his antithetical ideological agenda, Engels pays great attention to the motive force of labour in this process of manual adaptation:

Thus the hand is not only the organ of labour, *it is also the product* of labour. Only through labour, through constant adaptation to new operations, through inheritance of the special development thus acquired of muscles, ligaments and, over longer periods of time, bones as well, and by the ever-renewed use of this inherited refinement in new increasingly complicated operations, has the human hand attained that high degree of perfection that has enabled it to conjure into being the paintings of a Raphael, the statues of a Thorwaldsen, the music of a Paganini. (3)

So, for Engels it was man's standing up which freed his hand – no longer required for crawling – for other operations, thus becoming the "organ of labour." This process had a knock-on effect (in accordance with Darwin's "law of correlation of growth") on "the rest of the organism," particularly the larynx:

The progress of labour necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by multiplying cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by giving each individual a clearer consciousness of the advantage of this joint activity. In short, men

¹³ Marx's account in *Capital* (1976:201-203) of the division of labour is strikingly evolutionist. Elsewhere in the same work he makes an impassioned plea for a Darwinian history "of the productive organs of man in society" (493).

in the making arrived at the point where they *had something to say to one another* [original emphasis]. The need created its organ: the undeveloped larynx of the ape was slowly but surely transformed [...] (5-6)

Unlike Cicero and Wilson, Engels makes productive labour in society the cause of language, not its effect, and accordingly for Engels it is not language but labour which “is the characteristic difference between the troop of apes and human society” (7).¹⁴ Like Darwin and Reade, Engels intimates a synergetic complicity in the evolution of hand and voice, the twin organs on which, like theirs, his account of man’s evolution from the ape hinge and which, consequently, assume a semantic surcharge as metonyms for human society and civilization. As we shall see, the benefits in terms of social construction and human civilization that labour might have are less than evident in *Titus Andronicus*.

The similarities between the accounts of Cicero, Wilson, Darwin, Reade and Engels easily outweigh the differences. For all, a salient distinction between man and his beast-like (pre-Darwin) or ape (post-Darwin)-ancestor is that the former walks upright while the latter crawl on the ground. For all walking precedes language, and language is a precondition of society¹⁵ and (except for Engels, for whom labour necessitated language) organised, productive labour. What the early modern accounts lack is the insistence on the functional specialisation of the hand which either brought us out of the trees or raised us up from the ground; in nineteenth-century

¹⁴ In the introduction to his *Dialectics of Evolution*, Engels expatiates on this point: “Darwin did not know what a bitter satire he wrote on mankind, and especially on his countrymen, when he showed that free competition, the struggle for existence, which the economists celebrate as the highest historical achievement, is the normal state of the *animal kingdom*. Only the conscious organization of social production, in which production and distribution are carried on in a planned way, can elevate mankind above the rest of the animal world socially in the same way that production in general has done this for men more specifically” (1975:20). In *The Part Played by Labour*, he expresses his impatience with the Darwinians by whom “[a]ll merit for the swift advance of civilization was ascribed to the mind, to the development and activity of the brain. [...] even the materialist natural scientists of the Darwinian school are still unable to form any clear idea of the origin of man, because [...] they do not recognize the part labour has played therein” (1975:10-11).

¹⁵ Reade suggests that our ancestors started to use language post-“combination”; Engels makes language prior to society, but labour is the necessary pre-condition of both.

evolutionary myths, the hand attains a near totemic force in its two-fold metonymic function as enabler and symbol of human society and civilization, predicated in equal parts on the development of labour and language. But the detail of the hand is all that is missing, the only other possible point of discord being the question of whether it was language *tout court* (as the early moderns upheld) or simply the degree of linguistic sophistication which, together with walking upright, distinguished men from beasts; but this was a question on which Darwinists themselves could disagree.

Across two millennia, then, language is indissociable from labour and society, while since Darwin it has been possible to identify the hand as at one and the same time the nexus between language, labour and society and the salient physiological factor which differentiates man and the beasts. It is the hand which released man from scrawling/crawling and would later enable him to scrawl/scribble. If for early modern evolutionists the arrival of language signalled man's rebirth into a state of social, civil and clothed grace, nineteenth century accounts simply emphasize the hand's role in delivering that rebirth; the rest is practically the same. As so often, the guiding spirit of human thought is continuity rather than change, a fact attested by the extent to which the metonymic economy of hands and tongues in Shakespeare's play is simultaneously consonant with early modern accounts of evolution and prescient of Darwinian accounts.

4. *Viae crucis*

As it charts the ways of the cross traversed by many of its characters, *Titus Andronicus* is in many ways a no-holds barred comment on that Radian "martyrdom of man." Titus' descent into barbarism is first signalled when his hand is sliced off by Aaron. Almost immediately afterwards he paints an apocalyptic skyscape premonitory of his impending eclipse and Rome's crepuscular decline:

[...] for heaven shall hear our prayers,
Or with our sighs we'll breathe the welkin dim
And stain the sun with fog, as sometime clouds
When they do hug him in their melting bosoms. (3.1.211-214)

This doom-mongering precedes the reduction of the tongue's functions to regulating the flow of vomit welling up from the bowels ("for losers will have leave | To ease their stomachs with their bitter tongues," 233-234). In other words, in an inversion of evolution, the loss of Titus' hand leads to an intimation of the degradation of the tongue from organ of speech to biliar release valve. This degradation is taken to an extreme when Lavinia's tongue is cut out; however, for the relegation of language before the aggrandisement of the corporal to be completed, it is necessary for Lavinia's hands to be cut off too. This way, her body is denied access to the two channels of verbal communication, air and text. Once denied all access to verbal linguistic expression, she is condemned to regress to the crawling – if "scrawl" is taken to mean "crawl" – and bestial or beast-like state of our pre-linguistic ancestors. In the scene (3.1) immediately following Lavinia's defilement, Titus lies down in order to plead for the lives of his sons Quintus and Martius: not only is this a remarkable parallel of Lavinia's immediately preceding kinesics of degradation, but Lucius's observation that there is no one to hear Titus' lamentations – "no man is by | And you recount your sorrows to a stone" (3.1.27) – locates his father in the same solitary, languageless condition of pre-social man, to which Demetrius has just abandoned Lavinia, leaving her to "her silent walks" (2.3.8). What is more, Titus' figurative efforts at writing "in the dust | My heart's deep languor" (3.1.12-13) is in telling anticipation of Lavinia's scrawling in the sand. In this pivotal scene, then, Titus traverses the devolutionary path from scrawling to crawling as he takes the first step on the road to his personal Calvary. Strikingly, the amputation of Titus' hand is soon followed by his and Lavinia's falling on their knees (SD at 3.1.208 and 210): his hand amputated, the sink from civilization to bestiality is further indicated by further kinesics of degradation. Quite when Titus and Lavinia regain their feet in the scene is a moot point, but it may be almost seventy lines later – a long enough time for such abasement by any standards.

It is chillingly congruous that the deflowering and pollarding of Lavinia takes place in what had been a *locus amoenus* considerately invented by Tamora so that Aaron, in the doldrums, might take cheer from the resultant picture of chirruping birds, docile snakes curled up in the sun and leaves quivering in the breeze, with the horns of Andronicus's hunting-party sounding off-stage. Tamora's thoughts are on a sylvan tryst in the manner of Aeneas and Dido's

amorous hunt interlude; but Aaron's thoughts cannot be swayed from revenge (2.2.30-46). Bassianus and Lavinia enter, the former reminding us that the scene is a forest (59), the latter locating the forest in a valley (84). When Chiron and Demetrius enter, Tamora effaces the fiction of her paradisaical *locus amoenus*, replacing it with a nightmarish description of what is now a de-elocuted "barren detested vale," where even in summer the trees are "forlorn and lean, | Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe," where the sun "never shines," where "nothing breeds, | Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven," and where at night "A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes, | Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins, | Would make such fearful and confused cries" (92-102). Not only has the landscape become wild and pregnant with death, it is also infested with a Levitic catalogue of teeming unclean beasts emitting inchoate sounds – a catalogue to which Lavinia, once soiled by rape and shorn of her tongue, will soon belong. And of course, once tongueless, Lavinia will be trimmed of eloquence just as Tamora has pruned the conventional tropes of the *locus amoenus*. As Marcus explains, the excision of Lavinia's tongue deprives her of *pronuntiatio* and, more significantly, *elocutio*: "O, that delightful engine of her thoughts, | That blabbed them with such pleasing eloquence, | Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage" (3.1.83-5). It is when Lavinia calls "confusion" upon Tamora ("bestly creature") that Chiron presages her own fate of bestial linguistic confusion with his vow "Nay, then I'll stop your mouth" (2.2.182-184).¹⁶ And once Lavinia's mouth has been stopped, Demetrius suggests she be abandoned to "her silent walks" (2.3.8), whereupon he and Chiron leave her to wander alone in the forest, in a trope which recreates man's pre-social, isolated existence in Cicero's "sylvan retreats." Shorn of the means of verbal communication, bereft of that eloquence it had been her pleasure to impart to Lucius by reading him "Sweet poetry and Tully's Orator" (4.1.14), henceforth Lavinia's only means of communication will be by "scrawling."

Marcus's discovery of Lavinia finds expression in a nexus of terms that confirm Lavinia's fall from the state of eloquent civility:

¹⁶ "Confusion" here, like the "confused cries" of the woodland fauna, is irremediably polysemous. But its connotations of disorder, particularly that social disorder where "noise" replaces language in a substitution symptomatic of civil society's degradation, should not be overlooked. Telling parallels are to be found in *The Tempest* (see Sell 2008:136).

“what stern, ungentle hands,” he asks, “Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare | Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments | Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in [...]?” (2.3.16-19). Lavinia’s loss of the physiological organs of language strips her body of the civilizing vestments of Puttenham’s ornamental eloquence; implicit too is Lavinia’s socio-political fall from station as she will no longer be a magnet for dynastic suitors. But most importantly, if, on the one hand, Shakespeare’s representation of Lavinia’s fall from linguistic grace touches most of the keys available in classical and early modern myths of human and civil evolution, on the other, by figuring that fall in the amputation of the hands and excision of the tongue, he also anticipates the metonymic detail with which Darwin was later to corroborate and make more scientific that myth. Lavinia’s “scrawling” at 2.3.5 is at best a gesticulation like that used by our ape-ancestors in Reade’s stage of “imitative language;” at worst, it is a crawling, animal supinity.

Shakespeare’s allegory of Rome at some evolutionary crossroads also anticipates Engels’s emphasis on the labouring function of the hand in man’s evolution from the ape, as if holding out the forlorn hope of a return for Lavinia to eloquent civility through labouring. Titus’ first reaction on seeing Lavinia’s mutilated state is expressed through polyptotonic word-play, paradox, oxymoron and conceits of doubtful taste but cloddish appropriateness which toy obsessively with the very organ his daughter is ostensibly missing (he doesn’t yet know about the excised tongue) and also call into question the worth of eloquence, if eloquence is to be like this:

Speak, Lavinia, what accursed hand
Hath made thee handless in thy father’s sight? [...]
Give me a sword, I’ll chop off my hands too;
For they have fought for Rome, and all in vain;
And they have nurs’d this woe, in feeding life;
In bootless prayer have they been held up,
And they have serv’d me to effectless use.
Now all the service I require of them
Is that the one will help to cut the other.
’Tis well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands,
For hands to do Rome service is but vain. (3.1.67-81)

Apparently subscribing to the Wilsonian view that hands are meant to serve, Titus regrets the service his hands have done to

Rome, and envies Lavinia her own handlessness: "For hands to do Rome service is but vain." If, according to Cicero and Wilson, eloquence had persuaded men of the virtue of work and, according to Wilson, of quietist obedience to those above them in the social hierarchy, Lavinia's de-elocuted body suddenly reveals to Titus the extent to which he has been misled into serving Rome. The public good for which eloquence persuaded man to set his hand to work seems of little worth indeed once eloquence disappears, leaving in its slipstream nothing but the bare body; for society itself is dismembered, falls apart and becomes meaningless once language – both instrument and product of society, like Engels's hand – has been forcibly removed. But although Lavinia's loss of manual ornamentation makes Titus question his own labour record, he is nonetheless able to put her mouth to good employment, instructing her to bear his own hand, freshly chopped off by Aaron (after Titus' rhetorical bombast had failed to do so), between her teeth (3.1.283) in a tactless and gruesome fusion of the physiological organs of communication and metonymies of civilization.

Notoriously, of course, Lavinia's stumps are also put to work, guiding the staff while the mouth holds it in order to write in the sand the names of her rapists and the crime they perpetrated. In fact, the possibility for hands to be technologically enhanced and, almost robotically, to become of a piece with their engineered prostheses is present in the words with which Saturninus opens the play ("Noble patricians, patrons of my right, | Defend the justice of my cause with arms," 1.1.1-2); as James points out, "arms" punningly refers to both human limbs and the swords they may carry and the swords themselves are attributed communicative powers ("Plead my successive title with your swords," 1.1.4).¹⁷ To Reade, Marcus's do-it-yourself ingenuity, thanks to which Lavinia is assisted to re-enter language, may have been a figure of martyred man's future redemption by intellect and technology. Certainly, the idea that Lavinia's scribbling in the sand may be somehow symbolic of her potential restoration to a state of grace is reinforced by Marcus's suggestion that she write "what God will have discovered" and his petition that "Heaven guide thy pen" (4.1.73-6). However, Lavinia's restoration is never completed; indeed, Reade's diagnosis of her

¹⁷ We might also note how Titus is alleged to have used his sword as a writing instrument: "he circumscribed with his sword [...] the enemies of Rome" (1.1.71-72).

pedal dexterity would have been that she had only reached the stage of the monkey whose “foot is used as a hand” (1948:338). Worse still, once she has produced her incriminatory testimony in the sand, the only value Lavinia has in the play is as a dumb *ficelle* whose services – or, more accurately, the services of whose stumps – may be recruited by Andronicus to support the basin into which he lets Aaron’s blood (5.2.181-200). That labour discharged, Andronicus cuts Lavinia off from language for good when his dagger seals her terminal redundancy (5.3.45-6). There is no cheering allegory of redemption here.

5. At the crossroads

Though necessarily selective, the foregoing discussion has demonstrated how *Titus Andronicus* is rife with evolutionary metonymies and kinesics. Like any art worth its salt, it is a play informed by the conceptual frameworks, ideologies and myths of its time, yet suggestive too of their future modifications. Shakespeare was no Darwinian evolutionist, but this play, like an ammonite thrust upwards by an anticline into a different geological stratum, is suspended between its own present and future, now our past. But more than that: in typically Shakespearean manner *Titus Andronicus*, not content merely to beckon towards new concepts, actually bequeaths new vocabulary to assist in that conceptualisation. This returns us to the crux with which we started.

As we saw before, the modern consensus seems to be that “scrawl” at 2.3.5 means something like “gesticulate,” with a possible pun on “scroll” = “write down,” which would ironically anticipate Lavinia’s later staff-writing in the sand. “Gesticulate” is no doubt right, an unnoticed point in its favour being Lucius’ command that Aaron’s son be hanged “that he may see it sprawl” (5.1.51) where, in a play that revels in verbal parallels, the near homophony recalls Lavinia’s convulsions. However, in view of the play’s evolutionary strain, I am not so sure of the pun on “scroll”: Shakespeare’s sights were set on greater game. It cannot be chance that on the level of plot the play’s interest in hermeneutics – how the characters interpret the signs produced by Lavinia’s disfigured body – is at its most intense between the “scrawl” crux at 2.3.5 and the writing in the sand at 4.1.76: the play’s hermeneutic crisis, in other words, is framed by

Shakespeare's deployment on the one hand of "scrawl" in one or other of two now obsolete usages and, on the other, by his dramatic representation of its now dominant usage which, at the time the play was written, was at best only emerging, at worst non-existent. "Scrawl" and the staff-writing not only mark the characters' sinking into and subsequent release from a hermeneutic quandary, but also pitch post-Brindsley readers into an inescapable interpretative dilemma, for the strength of the pull towards the modern meaning of "scrawl" = "scribble" is matched only by that of the intellectual effort required to reject it. As a result, the play's kinesiological creation of a new, as yet unwritten, meaning for "scrawl" leaves audiences and readers alike debating on the cognitive plane between obsolescence and emergence. In so far as the obsolete and emergent meanings of "scrawl" pinpoint two major epochs in human evolution¹⁸ – bestial speechlessness and eloquent civilization – between which progress was enabled by the functional specialization of the very organs, tongue and hand, which the play practically fetishizes, that cognitive debate is a re-enactment of the play's depiction of Rome teetering on the brink of barbarism and civility; and that teetering is, on the broader evolutionary and, ultimately, ethical plane, an allegory of humanity's perpetual hesitation at the bifurcation where one path leads onwards and upwards, the other backwards and downwards, and both are signposted confusingly "scrawl."

Titus Andronicus offers no indication of which path humanity will ultimately take; yet that very indeterminacy is a salutary corrective both to the comforting wisdom that man's evolutionary development will always follow a glorious rising trend and to what Reade termed "the shabby-genteel sentiment" or "vanity of birth, which makes men prefer to believe that they are degenerated angels rather than elevated apes" (1948:315-316). Rather, the play fixes an unerring eye on man's evolutionary and moral intermediateness, where, as Reade puts it, "we live between two worlds; we soar in the

¹⁸ My use here, and earlier, of such terms as "obsolete", "obsolescent", "dominant" and "emergent" is a partial cooption of Raymond Williams's triad: "dominant", "residual" and "emergent" (2005:31-49). However, I am not engaged in a materialist reading of the crux, which is not to say that my "evolutionary" reading might not benefit from a materialist interrogation. Simply, Williams's terms are useful for the purposes of explanation, although given the context of my own discussion, I prefer the lexicographer's "obsolete" to the materialist critic's "residual."

atmosphere; we creep upon the soil; we have the aspirations of creators and the propensities of quadrupeds." If optimism is to be found anywhere it is in the play's instantiation of literature's capacity to engender new meanings for old words. So long as literature continues to refurbish the lexicon in anticipation of new conceptualisations of the world, so long may ever-emerging civilization creep just beyond the reach of barbarism, bestiality and obsolescence. That is the hope which even so rebarbative a play as *Titus Andronicus* is able to inscribe in a minor textual crux.

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