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Shakespeare's Exceptional Violence: Reading Titus Andronicus with Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben

In this paper I explore the multifaceted relationship between violence, speech and power in the most graphic of Shakespeare's plays, *Titus Andronicus*. I take my cue from Hannah Arendt's reflections on violence as opposed to power, and as something "incapable of speech," but I read the play through the lens of Giorgio Agamben's notion of sovereignty as the suspension of the law. I consider the dichotomy speech/muteness as an example not only of the dichotomy power/violence (Arendt) but also of the opposition between *bios* and *zoe*, that is the difference between a life worth to be included in the political realm and a life understood as the mere condition of being alive, a condition common to human beings and beasts (according to classical philosophy). In *Titus Andronicus*, these distinctions are blurred, and *zoe* becomes fully exposed to the sovereign decision. While the image of a mutilated and mute body cannot match Arendt's idea of politics as the combination of speech and action bereft of violence, Agamben has developed the notion of a politics that renders life disposable, mute, bare, and can still be called politics or power, and precisely biopower. From this perspective, I argue, Lavinia and the other characters of *Titus Andronicus* are the embodiment of the concept of "bare life" as developed by Agamben, and Shakespeare's Rome is a State of exception and of exceptional violence.

key words: *Titus Andronicus*, violence and power, biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt

"O, Why Should Wrath Be Mute?"

Violence is a pervasive element in Elizabethan drama and takes on a great variety of forms in Shakespeare, ranging from purely mental torture to the horrific tragedy of blood. *Titus Andronicus*, allegedly the first of Shakespeare's tragedies, is often seen as an emulation of the contemporary revenge plays and is considered as one of the most violent works in Shakespeare's canon. In this paper, I explore the multifaceted relationship between violence, speech, and power in *Titus Andronicus*, taking as my point of departure Hannah Arendt's reflections on violence as a notion opposed to that of power, and as something "incapable of speech" (*On Revolution* 19). As a matter of fact, it is the lack of speech, muteness, that results from the atrocities committed against the characters of the play – especially, but not only, against Lavinia's body.

According to Arendt, violence, unlike politics and power, does not need language to achieve its goal, i.e. the subjection or annihilation of the other through physical coercion; however, Arendt's statement that "violence is mute" (*Human Condition* 26) could also mean that it deprives perpetrators and/or victims of the possibility of communicating, excluding them from the political arena, which is precisely the union of speech and action in her view. This political ideal – which challenges a tradition of Western thought that considers violence as productive –

found expression, according to Arendt, in the Greek *polis* and in Rome at the time of the *pax augustea*. Yet, the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is very distant from Arendt's ideal. In fact, it is a decadent Rome, where the Senate has little or no power. To a certain extent, it dramatizes, instead, an ongoing debate on the use of violence to retain political power,¹ even representing England at the time of Shakespeare, or "a privileged globalized arena in which to deal with the Renaissance expanding territories of the human" (Del Sapio Garbero, Isenberg, and Pennacchia 18). In other words, the setting in ancient Rome does not prevent Shakespeare from providing a modern (or early modern) perspective on violence, which is in its turn still fruitful today, and can allow us to reflect on violence and power through his plays.²

The Roman setting and the value of *Titus Andronicus* have, respectively, been widely criticized and disputed, and, for a long time, the tragedy was either ignored as a juvenile exercise or simply excluded from the group of the more appreciated Roman plays.³ For example, while arguing that *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Julius Caesar* display Shakespeare's genuine knowledge of the Roman Republic and Empire, Paul Cantor's volume on the Roman plays only mentions *Titus Andronicus* in a single note:

Though *Titus Andronicus* should in some sense be classified as one of Shakespeare's Roman plays, I have left it out of consideration entirely, because it is obviously an immature work and does not display the understanding of Rome Shakespeare developed in his later Roman tragedies. (211)

Challenging this judgment and scholars that dismissed Rome in *Titus Andronicus* as a mere setting for a revenge play,⁴ scholars such as Robert Miola have highlighted the distinctively Roman character of the play. Significantly for my approach, Miola insists on Shakespeare's interest in the "problems of power and order" and in the clash between "private interest and public duty" in the play (44). Similarly, Quentin Taylor, a scholar of political science, proposed a reading of the play directing particular attention to its political dimension, in contrast to the previously widespread perception that "Rome and its politics are but the backdrop to what is essentially a non-political story of decadence, evil, lust, and revenge" (130). Finally, a number of critical approaches have been recently used, which tend to point out the double dismembering of the body and of the city, the agency of the disabled bodies, the many dissonances and discomforts of the text (especially the essays collected in the volume edited by Stanavage and Hehmeyer).

Taylor supports his argument in favour of a political reading of the play by considering the subtext on power and law that permeates the tragedy. However, if we look at *Titus Andronicus* through the lens of Arendt's political theory, power is only invoked, for example when Saturninus says "if Rome has law and we have power, / Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape" (I.i.408-9). As the tragedy unfolds, it will become clear that Rome's law is incapable of regulating the "life in common" of human beings, as Arendt would define politics. From Arendt's

¹ See, for instance, Machiavelli's suggestion that the Prince should use violence in such a way as to make his enemy unable to retaliate: "the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge" (6). I would like to thank my anonymous reviewer for making the point that this is one piece of advice Titus definitely does not take.

² For a discussion of the general notion of violence in Shakespeare, see, among others, Foakes, Cohen and Marshall.

³ *Titus Andronicus* was "much disliked" by early critics (Hunter 1). T.S. Eliot, for example, famously argued that it was "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (82).

⁴ For example, Maurice Charney in his *Shakespeare's Roman Plays* (1961). However, Charney later regretted not having included *Titus Andronicus* among the Roman plays, because "it is so actively concerned with what it means to be a Roman" ("*Titus Andronicus*" 263).

perspective, such a legal system would not give rise to power, but rather to violence, which takes the place of the civil arrangement of the life of the *polis*. The monstrous cruelty in many scenes of the play is exactly what led critics to argue for an anti-Shakespearian attribution of the play (Taylor 129). When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, John M. Robertson wrote a book entitled *Did Shakespeare Write Titus Andronicus: A Study in Elizabethan Literature* (1905), he claimed to have discerned various hands at work in the play; but it was especially the play's bloodletting and graphic violence that were used to back up the tragedy's exclusion from Shakespeare's canon.⁵ Instead, Bate argues that the structural unity of the play suggests "a single authorial hand" (82). As a result of a series of critical assessments, *Titus Andronicus* is now considered important for the author's later artistic development (Miola 42), and for putting "an unforgettable emphasis on suffering and pain" (Charney, "*Titus Andronicus*" 262).

Samuel Johnson considered "the barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited" intolerable to any audience (qtd. in Bate 33). Massacre is the most impolitic event in Arendt's view. Victims of atrocities can suffer to the point that they cannot express their pain through language, but only by screaming if they still have voice; perhaps pain prevents people from phrasing their thoughts, that is, from making sense of their experience. Pain distorts and destroys human ability to speak and think, as aptly argued by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (1985). In Arendt's view, nothing of this sort pertains to the political arena: violence is disconnected from power, because real power does not need force. On the contrary, violence is precisely a sign of the lack of power. Therefore, I argue that the speech/muteness dichotomy is an example not only of the power/violence dichotomy but also of the opposition between a life worthy of being included in the political realm and a life understood merely as being alive, a condition that human beings share with other animals. In other words, to use the terms of a philosophical tradition that stems from Aristotle, we can refer to the juxtaposition of *bios* (meaningful life) and *zoe* (natural life). Moreover, if *logos*, i.e. speech, is what distinguishes humans from other animals (as Aristotle famously stated), it follows that depriving human beings of the capability to speak means destroying their very humanity, turning them into living beings in their "bare life," a concept I borrow from Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1995).

Does Lavinia lose her "self," her *bios*, her status of a citizen, when she is ravished and mutilated? If the ability to communicate is what makes a living being a human with his/her own political identity, the violence committed on her also excludes her from the community of the *polis*. On the other hand, does she regain her political agency when she "speaks" again through the language of literature, using Ovid's book to tell her own story, and writing three words that reveal her rape? How can the image of a mutilated body, in fact a mute body, relate to Arendt's idea that politics is impossible without speech? As Arendt puts it:

The point . . . is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence. Because of this speechlessness political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians. (*On Revolution* 19)

Rather than using Arendt's ideal notion of politics which cannot envision violence in the life of the *polis*, we must turn to another theoretical framework to find a notion of politics that renders life disposable, mute, bare, and can still be described as politics or power, namely that of biopower and biopolitics. From this perspective, Lavinia and the other characters of *Titus*

⁵ For a survey on the authorship tests conducted on the play, see Price. A discussion on the authorship is also to be found in Bate's introduction to the Arden edition (79-83).

Andronicus are the embodiments of Agamben's notion of "bare life." Yet, to a certain extent, Lavinia, I will argue, regains language, therefore humanity, through literature.

Biopower: From the Naked Body to Bare Life

Roman *civitas* is questioned from the very beginning of *Titus Andronicus*, when Titus surprisingly resorts to human sacrifice, which is inconsistent with Rome's historical practices.⁶ According to René Girard, sacrificial rites "divert the spirit of revenge into other channels," therefore sacrifice is one of the ways – along with the use of compensatory measures and the establishment of a judicial system – to avoid an "interminable round of revenge" (21). A similar situation is described in *Coriolanus*, where Martius is the perfect Girardian victim (see Walker 175). However, far from freeing society from violence by deflecting it onto this sacrificial victim, as theorized in *Violence and the Sacred*,⁷ Alarbus's sacrifice triggers off the revenge plot. Lucius gives what sounds like a Girardian explanation for the sacrifice:

Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,
That we may hew his limbs on a pile
Ad manes fratrum sacrifice his flesh
Before this earthly prison of their bones,
That so the shadows be not unappeased,
Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth. (I.i.99-104)

This "sacrifice of expiation" (I.i.36) is supposed to keep the gods' wrath away from the city. Yet, while Martius is the "perfect indifferent victim" (Walker 175), Alarbus is not sacrificeable: he is silent, but not "indifferent." Being a Goth, he is outside of the Roman law, therefore outside of its protection, and yet his sacrifice is not without brutal consequences. Agamben defines *bare life* as "the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (8). The gods, as a matter of fact, seem not to accept the offer. After the rite, a series of brutal actions take place on the stage – often simultaneously, as the play deploys the triple scene allowed by the Elizabethan stage – in which each character seeks his or her own revenge.

Alarbus is a *homo sacer* who can be killed without the killer being punished by law. Yet, his mother Tamora – first a victim of violence – becomes the cruellest revenge seeker. But in her thirst for blood, Tamora is just the counterpart of Titus in his role as the offended father after Lavinia's rape and mutilation. Similarly to what happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, two families are in conflict, but the conflict in *Titus Andronicus* subverts the political order of the city (Hunter 4). Since there is no justice in Rome, no law to regulate it, the controversy has to be *literally* fought out: the opponents are enemies to be physically vanquished, without the possibility of inflicting a modern form of punishment⁸ on any of them. As in Ovid's Iron Age, "*Terras Astrea reliquit* [i.e. Astrea, the goddess of justice has quit the Earth]: be you remembered, Marcus, / She's gone,

⁶ According to Bate, "[t]he religious rituals of a civilized culture, it was believed, involved animal rather than human sacrifice" (6). See also note 127 to the text on page 135. For a different reading of the sacrifice, see St. Hilaire, who contends that "Titus's sacrifice is entirely consistent with a similarly appalling scene in a Roman text," that is *Aeneid* 12 (314). In this line, Titus acts following the (mythological and not historical) precedent of the *pious* Aeneas when the latter killed Turnus, thus reenacting the founding of the city.

⁷ Girard maintains that, trying to control internal violence, every "society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect" (4).

⁸ In the sense described by Foucault of a "sign," i.e. something that clearly signifies the crime and shows the disadvantages of the crime to other people, so that nobody feels attracted to the crime itself (128ff).

she's fled" (Shakespeare IV.iii.4-5). Astrea has left the Earth leaving room to the demonic barbarism that transforms the very structure of the *polis*: "I am incorporate in Rome" (I.i.467) says Tamora, hinting at the metaphor of the political body constantly active in the play. Throughout the tragedy, Rome too is a dismembered body that needs to be reassembled ("to set a head on headless Rome," I.i.189), or a diseased body ("To heal Rome's harm and wipe away her woe," V.iii.147) carrying the "civil wound" (V.iii.86).⁹ Where the head is missing, judgment is lacking as well, and law yields to revenge. In such suspension of the law – which Carl Schmitt called the state of exception – all manifestations of violence can be included in legality.

For Agamben "The state of exception is . . . not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension" (18). The failure of politics in *Titus Andronicus* is marked by several, consecutive steps. When Titus is recalled by the Senate, he finds the city on the verge of a civil war. The tragedy is set in motion by the sacrifice of Alarbus, Titus's refusal of the crown, and his election of Saturninus, against the inclination of the people, as Titus will later admit: "Ah Rome! Well, well, I made thee miserable / What time I threw the people's suffrages / On him that thus doth tyrannize o'er me" (IV.iii.18-20). Titus acts as a sovereign that decides over the state of emergency, but then bestows the sovereignty onto somebody else. Rome therefore sees "the failure of institutions, leadership, and justice" (Taylor 132). The necessity to take revenge, as Bate writes, "reveals the inadequacy of the law" (26).

The body politic always configures itself as a system of inclusions and exclusions (Agamben 21). However, Lavinia's last words are: "Confusion falls" (II.ii.184). In the dismemberment of the city, an important role is played by the blurring of boundaries between the inside and the outside. "Confusion," Bate notes in his comments to this line, means "discomfiture, ruin, putting to shame, mental perturbation, throwing into disorder" (Shakespeare 179). However, the term brings with it also the meaning of obscuring the borders between distinctive elements. For example, the beastly and the human intersect at different levels in the play, and barbarity and civilization cease to be separate entities.

In the classical world, whoever was outside the polis was considered barbarous. However, although the text constantly associates the Goths with fierce animals ("wilderness of tigers" III.1.54), and despite the opposition Roman/barbarous ("Thou art Roman, be not barbarous" I.1.383), in *Titus Andronicus* Romans fail to represent civilization, justice and virtue. On the contrary, violence seems to be constitutive of the city even before the events represented in the tragedy take place. It is difficult to distinguish between barbarians and the civilized: it is the Goth Chiron who exclaims: "Was never Scythia half so barbarous!" (I.i.134), while his brother's answer contains a reference to Hecuba (I.i.139), and Aaron plots the rape of Lavinia with a Roman literary text as a guide ("His Philomel must lose her tongue today" II.ii.43).

If at the beginning of *Titus Andronicus* the walls of the city seem to delimit the ordered world (Hunter 5), and the forest corresponds to the reign of bestiality, gradually the distinction between *polis* and bare life becomes blurred. To put it in Agamben's terms: "when its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflict of the political order" (9). In the classical world, however, bare life was excluded from the political arena: "simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the oikos" (Agamben

⁹ In the same way as the language of medicine enters the language of politics, it seems to me that after the beginning of the modern era of biopolitics the reverse is also true. It is by no means accidental that Elaine Scarry writes: "This centering of the body in citizenship provides a doorway for the continual entry of political philosophy into medicine" ("Consent and the Body" 872).

2). For Aristotle “bare life” is the creaturely condition that needs to be transformed into “good life” in order to enter the political sphere.

In Shakespeare's fictional Rome, no aspect of life can be considered merely personal and private, and whoever has force uses it to control the bodies of other citizens: when Saturninus accuses Quintus and Martius of the crime of Bassanius's murder, he sends them to prison and condemns them to “Some never-heard-of torturing pain” (II.ii.185). Titus's hand would be a bargain for his sons' lives, and Lavinia, engaged to Bassanius, is first assigned to Saturninus (who refers to her as if she was a worthless commodity),¹⁰ then married to Bassanius (who refers to her as a property, “that is mine” I.i.413), and finally raped by Chiron and Demetrius (who refers to her as a deer, both a beast and an object of their sexual hunt). In Rome, no aspect of life can be spared from the struggles (Hunter 5). Power in the play is in fact *biopower* and politics is *biopolitics*, a concept Agamben developed drawing on Foucault and Arendt. The first, Agamben writes, “summarizes the process by which, at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into *biopolitics*” (3). Twenty years before, Hannah Arendt had seen the collapse of the distinction (the confusion, so to speak) between *zoe* and *bios*, private life and political life, in the rise of modern capitalist forms of labour.¹¹ However, according to Agamben, biopolitics has existed since the birth of sovereignty. When the human being as a living body is used in a political strategy, *zoe* becomes subject to sovereign power. The extreme expression of biopower is located by Agamben in the concentration camps, where life becomes totally disposable, or “bare” (Agamben 4 and *passim*).

In *Titus Andronicus*, power – but Arendt would say “violence” – transforms life into bare life, especially Lavinia's. As has already been mentioned, her body is repeatedly subjected to the male gaze and force (as “sub-jectum” in Agamben's sense), first through husbandry,¹² later through rape and mutilation. When Marcus sees her and says: “Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands / had lopped and hewed and made thy body bare” (II.iii.16-17), her nudity is not only an external characteristic but clearly represents an absolute lack of rights. She cannot speak and has no hands, and is therefore deprived of agency. Yet, worse things are to come: after the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, when Titus chops off his hand to save his sons from death, the messenger brings only their heads to their mutilated father. Lucius comments:

Ah, that this sight should make so deep a wound
And yet detested life not shrink thereat!
That ever death should let life bear his name
Where life hath no more interest but to breathe! (III.i.247-250)

Life not worth living, a state of being in which one's sole aspiration is to breathe, is exactly the bare life that can be disposed of. Every life is in the end disposable in *Titus Andronicus*, including that of Chiron and Demetrius, whose bodies become the ultimate substance that nourished bare life, that is, food.

¹⁰ Saturninus uses terms as “changing piece” (I.i.314), “churl” (I.i.490), Tamora calls her “fee” (II.ii.179), all expressions being related to the semantic area of money, as Bate points out in his notes to the text (Shakespeare 148, 158, and 178).

¹¹ Agamben claims that “Hannah Arendt had already analyzed the process that brings *homo laborans* – and, with it, biological life as such – gradually to occupy the very center of the political scene of modernity” (5).

¹² Husbanding and husbandry fall under the Agambian concept of biopolitic (see Reinhard Lupton, esp. the chapter “Animal Husbands in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” 25-68).

Making (Non)Sense of Violence

Titus Andronicus is a play about the (non)separation between biological life and political life, as well as between language and its referent (due to the literalization of metaphors that appear in the play, the examples of which will be discussed later in the article), bridging the gap between signifiers and signified, and challenging the limits of the representable, of theatrical *decorum*. The violent actions of and on the bodies induce the characters to describe them, although “the speech is rendered grotesque when visibly juxtaposed with the acts described” (Walker 170). Language itself is violent, to the extent that James Calderwood talks of “the rape of language” (Calderwood 29). The word “rape” itself is used metaphorically by Saturninus in I.i.409 (“Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape”), but it becomes reality – the play’s reality – in II.ii. In any case, if rape is “embedded within the language, institutions and social practices of Medieval and Early Modern culture” (Robertson and Rose 2-3), here it also connects with poetry through the figure of Philomel.

Before Lavinia’s rape takes place, Tamora says “I will not hear her speak,” and Lavinia cannot name that thing – rape – “[t]hat womanhood denies my tongue to tell” (II.ii.174). Both statements will soon prove literally true: Tamora, like everybody else, will no longer hear Lavinia’s voice; Lavinia, precisely because of her assaulted womanhood, will not be able to say “that one thing more” (II.ii.173).¹³

The play also stages the collapse between reality and fiction. The characters’ lives, their reality, are so similar to literature as to follow the patterns traced in the texts by Ovid and Virgil. Rome itself is not our historical Rome but a palimpsest of literary representations of the city, in the first place the one to be found in the *Aeneid*. In a reversal of the classical idea of art as *mimesis*, i.e. imitation of life, the characters’ lives imitates poetic narrative rather than real life. However, literature is also a way of reading reality. As St. Hilaire puts it, “older texts are recognized explicitly and invoked by the play’s characters themselves as the framework for the world in which they operate” (315-16). The text’s main question about how to interpret Lavinia’s “martyred signs” (III.ii.36) is in line with what Bate calls “the play’s characteristically Renaissance obsession with the problem of meaning” (Bate 34). Yet, there is no certain interpretation of her signs until she writes down the truth. Before writing, however, Lavinia is a reader and forces the other characters to read:

Titus
Soft, so busily she turns the leaves!
What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus’ treason and his rape –
And rape, I fear was root of thy annoy. (IV.i.45-49)

In other words, classical literary texts function as interpretative tools of the undecipherable signs of reality, that is, as a way to decode and make sense of an absurdly cruel sequence of horrific actions, which appear to have no motivation: “If there were reason for these miseries, / Then into limits could I bind my woes,” exclaims Titus in III.i.220-21. First, Marcus compares Lavinia to

¹³ A later, significant case in point in Shakespeare’s drama is *The Merchant of Venice*, especially the metaphoric narratives told by Shylock, who really starts perceiving Antonio’s body as something that can be divided and weighed (see Lucking 130). The linguist George Lakoff has aptly underlined the potentially dangerous use of metaphorical language in our understanding of the world in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), and famously stated that “metaphors can kill” (“Metaphor and War” 1991).

Philomel: "But sure some Tereus has deflowered thee / And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue" (II.iii.26-27). Then, the young Lucius invokes Hecuba in IV.i.20-21 ("I had read that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad for sorrow"), and finally Lavinia uses Ovid to narrate her tragedy:

Titus
Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,
Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,
Forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods?
[Lavinia nods.] See, see!
Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt –
O, had we never, never hunted there! –
Patterned by that the poet here describes,
By nature made for murders and rapes. (IV.i.43-53)

Much has been written about Lavinia's mutilation (see, for example, Rowe, Harris, and Tricomi). Lavinia is both handless and tongueless. She has lost all the parts of her body that represent agency, becoming an object, a stone, or an animal, which feels but cannot express. Her mute mouth, however, will prosthetically write what Marcus has already understood in act Four: "*Stuprum – Chiron – Demetrius*" (IV.i.78, italics in the text). After acquiring an interpretative key through literature, she acquires a prosthetic voice by means of the stick she uses to physically write on sand.

David Lucking has dealt with how Shakespeare's characters "make sense of experience through the medium of words, and with the limitations and hazards inherent in the strategies they deploy to this end" (xi). Like other plays written around the turn of the seventeenth century, *Titus Andronicus* shows Shakespeare's interest in what can be described broadly as the problem of knowledge, meaning the issue of what authority can be attributed to our knowledge, or of the role to be assigned to interpretation and explanatory paradigms (Lucking 5). In the case of Shakespeare's first tragedy, literature provides the narrative that explains what, in Titus's words, has no reason.

Lucking suggests that, although the narrative of the Andronici will prevail in the end (since the story of the Goths has been silenced when Chiron and Demetrius are served in form of a pastry to their mother), in the tragedy every narrative can be appropriated by different points of view and can be distorted, as the reference to the deception of the Trojan horse indicates (Lucking 56-57). Titus himself is a storyteller ("Many a story hath he told thee," V.ii.163), yet the question remains about the relationship between Lavinia's physical muteness and her finding a way to narrate her rape and her pain, and whether this mends her muteness. Once again, I will turn to Agamben, who, at the beginning of *Homo Sacer*, recalls the ancient distinction between voice and language:

It is by no chance, then, that a passage of the *Politics* situates the proper place of the *polis* in the transition from voice to language. The link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as "the living being who has language" seeks in the relation between *phonē* and *logos*. (7)

Lavinia might not have lost voice to lament, but she cannot articulate her story for some time. Agamben continues quoting from Aristotle:

Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings (since their nature has developed to the point of having the sensations of pain and pleasure and of signifying the two). But language is for

manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city. (7-8)

Body and voice, as Elaine Scarry writes, “are among the most elementary and least metaphorical categories we have” (*Body in Pain* 182). Violence has deprived Lavinia of her voice and has mutilated her body, but literature has restored, if not her political agency,¹⁴ at least her language, although for a short time, until her own father disposes of her life. While Agamben never refers to art, I would like to suggest that in recovering the ability to articulate her pain through literature, Lavinia recovers precisely the possibility to speak about “the just and the unjust,” which is exactly what makes a human being, “as opposed to other living beings,” that only live a natural life. In this sense, Lavinia ceases to belong to that realm that would exclude her from Arendt’s idea of politics – speechlessness. However, rather than leaving “its discussion to the technician” (*On Revolution* 19), her momentarily recovered capability to “speak” must indeed be confronted with violence.

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¹⁴ Douglas E. Green argues that Lavinia is allowed only a fragmentary language, which is to be interpreted by Titus, Marcus, and young Lucius. “Nevertheless, as sign, Lavinia is polysemic and disruptive” (325). Jessica Tooker, on the other hand, suggests that while Lavinia struggles against becoming a signifier, Aaron manages to reveal a new language, that is the rhetoric of transformative violence that cannot be fully silenced (36, 40)

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