

## POrTRaITS

# OF FEMALE AVENGERS: SHAKESPEARE'S TAMORA VS TARANTINO'S BEATRIX KIDDO

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### ABSTRACT:

The aim of this essay is to reflect on the paths of two female characters by analysing their differences and their similarities. They are Shakespeare's Tamora, in *Titus Andronicus*, and Tarantino's Beatrix Kiddo, powerfully interpreted by Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill Volume 1* and 2. While driven by the same inner desire for revenge, the two characters fulfil different destinies. The main reason for this is that Beatrix is mainly a mother, while Tamora is above all a queen.

### RESUMO:

Este ensaio procura reflectir sobre semelhanças e diferenças no percurso de duas personagens femininas. Falo de Tamora, personagem concebida por Shakespeare em *Titus Andronicus*, e Beatrix Kiddo, personagem criada por Tarantino, ganhando vida nos ecrãs através da poderosa interpretação de Uma Thurman em *Kill Bill Volume 1* e 2. Embora impulsionadas pelo mesmo desejo de vingança, as duas personagens cumprem destinos opostos. Neste ensaio, procurarei demonstrar que esta diferença básica se prende com o facto de Beatrix valorizar, acima de tudo, o seu papel de mãe, enquanto Tamora se afirma sobretudo como rainha.

### KEYWORDS:

Shakespeare, Tarantino,  
Revenge, Justice,  
Mother, Queen

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### PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Shakespeare, Tarantino,  
Vingança, Justiça, Mãe,  
Rainha

*You cannot say you have avenged a crime  
Unless you better it.*

*Thyestes, Seneca*

"Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out" (Bacon, 1985: 73). But what is a woman to do when no law can do her service?

In the pages that follow, I intend to bring high and popular culture<sup>1</sup> together by looking deeper into the journey of two major female characters – Shakespeare's Tamora and Tarantino's Beatrix Kiddo – two mothers, the same thirst for revenge, but very different endings.

Tamora is an emblematic character in Shakespeare's revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, but as the title makes clear, it is through the eyes of Titus, the male protagonist, that the story is seen. Beatrix, on the other hand, is the main character of Tarantino's revenge films *Kill Bill Volume 1* and *Volume 2*. The titles of both films indicate her deepest wish: to kill Bill. It is through Beatrix's eyes that the whole story is seen, it is her point of view that the audience is aware of.

*Titus Andronicus's* ancient Rome, Shakespeare's early modern England, Beatrix's society of hired assassins in 21<sup>st</sup> century United States of America, what do they have in common? They all encompass circumstances in which private revenge is likely to flourish.

In *Titus Andronicus*, the juxtaposition of private and public interests along with the overwhelming rule of patriarchy represent constant threats to order and justice. Women like Tamora and Lavinia are irrevocably trapped in a system that rejects, and literally annihilates, any display of femininity: "neither can live as herself in Rome, which can accept neither sexual disgrace nor sexual desire in a woman" (Leggatt, 2005: 27). Ironically, both women, being unable to change the system, use it when necessary.

In Lavinia's case, "literature [Ovid's *Metamorphoses*] and its interpretation are physical necessities for naming a violation – a way of pointing the finger" (Fawcett, 1983: 274). Yet one must not forget

that this literature and the culture in which it is inscribed are, at their very genesis, patriarchal. The same can be said of the few lines that Lavinia utters mainly to criticize Tamora, as we shall see later.

Tamora, Douglas Green observes, “embodies dangers *already* in the rule of men like Saturninus, Titus and even Marcus” (Green, 1989: 321). Indeed, she is Titus’s double, and vice-versa.<sup>2</sup> They both love power. They go by the same rules and codes. They expect full obedience from their children and they are ready to sacrifice them when their honour, their status or their self-absorbing pride are at stake. In short, they constantly intertwine private and public interests<sup>3</sup> which proves out to be disastrous to both.

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Nonetheless, patriarchy and the interference of public powers in private spheres are not the only reasons to explain the need for revenge experienced not only by Tamora but by most of the characters in *Titus Andronicus*. There is also a poignant sentiment that common justice simply does not work, or worse, that justice itself mimics the rituals of revenge. All in all, that is certainly the case in Shakespeare’s early modern England. Public executions, in Elizabethan time, were not that different from the spectacles of horror depicted in *Titus Andronicus*. That much we can conclude from Bate’s introduction to the play which includes a transcription of a sentence passed on a nobleman found guilty of treason, in 1589, and condemned to be hung, drawn and quartered:

That he should be conveyed to the Place from whence he came, and from thence to the place of Execution, and there to be hanged until he were half dead, his Members to be cut off, his Bowels to be cast into Fire, his Head to be cut off, his Quarters to be divided into four several parts, and to be bestowed in four several Places. (*apud* Bate, 2004: 23-24)

There is no law to protect Alarbus from a death sentence that is quite similar to the one quoted above:

**Lucius**

Away with him, and make a fire straight,  
And with our swords upon a pile of wood  
Let’s hew his limbs till they be clean consumed.  
(*TA* I.1.130-132)<sup>4</sup>

Titus and Tamora describe this sentence in totally different colours. In Titus's view, the Romans "Religiously (...) ask a sacrifice" (*TA* I.1.127); in Tamora's opinion, this sacrifice is nothing but a sign of a "cruel, irreligious piety" (*TA* I.1.133). Titus's children, hereby avenged, were killed in a context of war; Tamora's eldest son was killed to satisfy the whims of a Roman soldier and the Roman state in general. Thus, this blatant absence of justice also explains Tamora's struggle for revenge.

In *Kill Bill*, Beatrix faces a similar problem when it comes to justice: understandably, it does not apply among outlaws. Beatrix can not simply sue Bill for having shot her on her wedding day because the world they both live in works differently. In the course of the two films, Beatrix is not only shot in the head while pregnant, but she is also raped in the hospital when she is in a coma; she is buried alive when she runs out of the hospital and, during all this time, she believes her child to be dead. Her effort to escape this lawless world and to live peacefully with her baby was, as far as she knew, useless. Believing that her child was dead, the only thing left for her was revenge.

### **Tamora or the thin red line between the grieving Mother and the vindictive Queen**

Tamora's first speech, in *Titus Andronicus*, is quite unexpected. Indeed, the queen of Goths delivers quite a rhetorical speech in the language of civilization – that is to say, in the language of patriarchal Rome – in a desperate attempt to save her son's life:

#### **Tamora**

Stay, Roman brethren, gracious conqueror,  
Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,  
A mother's tears in passion for her son!  
And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,  
O, think my son to be as dear to me.  
(...)

Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge:  
Thrice noble Titus, spare my first-born son.  
(*TA* I.1.107–123)

Tamora pleads and begs but never once does she offer her life in exchange for that of Alarbus. Curiously enough, Titus, Tamora's male antagonist, will later on willingly, but uselessly, chop off his hand to save his sons from certain death. Tamora will not do that. She is, after all, a queen and her queenly pride far outweighs the grief of a mother:

**Tamora**

I'll find a day to massacre them all,  
And raze their faction and their family,  
The cruel father and his traitorous sons  
To whom I sued for my dear son's life,  
And make them know what 'tis to let a queen  
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.  
(*TA* I.1.455-460)

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As Deborah Willis shrewdly observes:

Tamora's villainy grows out of her acute sense of humiliation (...). It is as if the tenderhearted mother simply dies with Alarbus and in her place stands an insulted, vindictive queen, bent on a highly inflated form of payback – razing Titus's family and faction – an exaggerated form of vengeance for her damaged self-image. (Willis, 2002: 38)

There is yet another moment in which Tamora's self-esteem is deeply wounded, reinforcing her wish to get revenge on Titus and Titus's family. When Lavinia and Bassianus surprise Tamora and her Moorish lover in the woods, Lavinia – "the citadel of white pride and sexual purity" (Leggatt, 2005: 15) – overtly scorns her female counterpart:

**Lavinia**

Under your patience, gentle Empress,  
'Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning,  
And to be doubted that your Moor and you  
Are singled forth to try Experiments.  
Jove shield your husband from his hounds today:  
'Tis pity they should take him for a stag.  
(*TA* II.2.66-71)

Lavinia's blind pride, fittingly voiced in patriarchal terms, humiliates Tamora once again and when she later appeals to the Empress as woman to woman, it is too late: "I know not what it means; away with her!" (*TA* II.2.157). Tamora then uses her remaining legitimate white sons, Chiron and Demetrius, in order to get her revenge on Lavinia and, consequently, on Titus.

Chiron and Demetrius are not at all free of blame, but one word from Tamora would suffice to keep them from ravishing Lavinia and it would therefore have kept them safe from Titus's most certain revenge. Instead she urges them: "Therefore away with her and use her as you will:/The worse to her, the better loved of me" (*TA* II.2.166-167). Thus, Tamora not only fails to save Alarbus but she also plays an important role in exposing her two other sons to further dangers. Unlike Atreus, in Seneca's *Thyestes*, she is not able to spare her children from her revenge plans:

**Atreus**

Why should I need to implicate my sons  
In my dark deeds? Let me alone exact  
My own revenge...  
(*Thyestes* 59)

Given these precedents, Tamora's later desire to have Aaron's son killed is not that surprising. The black child was the living proof of her affair with the Moor. The baby would undermine her current position as the Empress of Rome and bring her ruin. As Alexander Leggatt concludes: "There is nothing here of her feeling for Alarbus; she is more like Titus killing Mutius in response to being dishonoured; once again the two adversaries mirror each other" (Leggatt, 2005: 15).

However, this little baby is a very important character in *Titus Andronicus*. He not only brings out the best in Aaron (which is not an easy thing to do!), but, as Ania Loomba points out, "Aaron's son is the only child of an interracial couple that we actually see on the early modern stage in England" (Loomba, 2002: 52).

To a certain extent, of all the parents depicted in *Titus Andronicus* and *Kill Bill*, it is Aaron who resembles Beatrix the

most. They are not blameless heroes; they very much seem to enjoy their killing and their deadly plots; but they would never sacrifice their children. They stand by them even when to protect the child means to let the other parent down.

When Bill asks Beatrix the reason why she ran away pregnant with his daughter, she answers that this was the only way to start a new life far from the world of violence and highly paid murderers that Bill and she shared. She knew Bill would never give up his lifestyle and that he would never allow her or their daughter to do it either. Beatrix's words are therefore revealing: "I had to choose. I chose her" (*KB V<sub>2</sub>*).<sup>5</sup>

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Aaron's words, in reply to Demetrius's accusation that to keep his child was to betray Tamora, very much resemble Beatrix's:

**Demetrius**

Wilt thou betray thy noble mistress thus?

**Aaron**

My mistress is my mistress, this myself,

(...)

This before all the world do I prefer,

(...)

(*TA IV.2.108-113*)

Yet, despite Aaron's clear demonstrations of paternal love, by the end of the play, the future of his offspring is uncertain and he is to be buried "breast-deep in earth and famish" (*TA V.3.158*). Tamora dies; Aaron's death is only a mere question of time; Bill also dies, but Beatrix remains alive and with her daughter BB.

**Beatrix and BB: "The lioness has rejoined her cub and all is right in the jungle" (*KB V<sub>2</sub>*)**

Ella Taylor once said that

Tarantino loves to toy with the forms of his beloved action genre: with his favorite themes of professionalism, loyalty and betrayal; but most of all with us, flipping us from laughs to sympathy to horror and back again – he's the maestro of mood swing. (Taylor, 2001 [1992]: 42)<sup>6</sup>

Although Taylor's statement was intimately related to *Reservoir Dogs*, I believe it can be applied to the ensemble of the director's work, and, most certainly, to *Kill Bill* in which the themes of professionalism, loyalty and betrayal among hired murderers are the basis to a revenge story full of bloody combats, dark comedy and dramatic moments, a package full of contradictory emotions conveniently wrapped in a woman's body.

Being a mother does not necessarily make Beatrix a better person. It is not as if she suddenly realises that killing people, as a metier, besides being totally illegal, is something ethically, morally and humanly unacceptable. She even goes so far as to kill another little girl's mother to get her revenge (*KB V1*).

Yet, right from the moment she finds out about her pregnancy, Beatrix is forced to come to terms with the sacredness of her body. When we think about it, she almost mirrors Thyestes who refuses to kill himself when he finds out that, in a most grotesque banquet, his brother Atreus had fed him with his own sons:

**Thyestes**

Lend me your sword, brother, lend me that sword  
 Already gluttoned with my blood; its blade  
 Shall set my children free. You will not? Hands,  
 Beat on this breast until it breaks in pieces! ...  
 No! Strike not, wretch! We must respect the dead.  
 (*Thyestes* 90)

Thyestes cannot harm himself because he realises that he has become his sons' guardian and their human tomb. Beatrix, on the other hand, becomes the guardian of a new life. From then on, the fearless killer is afraid of nothing but endangering her child's life. It is by using this argument that she begs Lisa Wong's hired assassin to walk away without fighting, as Beatrix intended to do the same for the sake of her baby. Curiously enough, Beatrix succeeds in her pleas and the other woman leaves the scene, congratulating her on her pregnancy. Quite unlike what happens between Lavinia and Tamora, in *Titus Andronicus*, solidarity does exist among female assassins in *Kill Bill*.

Hence, when the red curtain falls in *Kill Bill 2* and Beatrix and her daughter BB are reunited, we cannot help but applaud. There is a sense of poetic justice in this happy ending. The following credits define Beatrix as such: "Beatrix AKA Mommy" (KB V<sub>2</sub>). That is the main difference between Tamora and Beatrix. The latter is above all a mother; the former is above all a queen. Beatrix gives more importance to her private life and the security and happiness of her innocent daughter; Tamora gives more importance to her public image and her powerful status even at the expense of her sons. Beatrix's revenge aims at getting even with those who deprived her of her motherhood; Tamora's revenge is nothing but a way to satisfy her "narcissistic rage" (Willis, 2002: 37).

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Furthermore, Tamora's struggle for revenge – so blind and exaggerated that it eventually brings the death of her remaining sons as well as her own – perpetuates an on-going cycle of violence. Beatrix's revenge, on the contrary, although bloody and messy, is unavoidable. The audience fully understands that, in the end, the only way that Beatrix and BB could be reunited is through the death of all her opponents, including Bill. If Bill, or any other enemy of hers, was to stay alive, Beatrix would never have been able to abandon her personal cycle of violence.

Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from *Kill Bill*'s finale – "The lioness has rejoined her cub and all is right in the jungle" (KB V<sub>2</sub>) – is that there are circumstances in which humanity is ruled by the very same laws of the jungle: there are prey as well as predators; people die; and no child is likely to survive without a protecting mother, one whose maternal instinct should not resemble Tamora's, but Beatrix's. <<

## NOTES

[1] To read more about the presence of Shakespeare, the exponent of high culture, in popular culture, one must not miss Douglas Lanier's *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. It is a book-length study that addresses the "Shakespop" phenomenon through a series of case studies. As Lanier shows, quoting Pierre Bourdieu, sometimes the difference between highbrow and lowbrow culture is only a question of point of view: "To put it schematically, high culture depends upon reverence and professional distance, popular culture depends on approval and identification. Thus *Hamlet* might become high culture if we attended to Shakespeare's recasting of revenge tragedy conventions and popular culture if we booed Claudius and cheered for Hamlet in the final duelling scene" (Lanier, 2002: 6).

[2] In *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies*, Philippa Berry shows how Tamora and Titus mirror and oppose each other even at the most elementary levels: "Through Tamora, a feminine and bodily tomb – also implicitly allied with the deadly pit in the forest – is opposed to the masculinized family tomb with which the play begins: that of the aged and peculiarly Saturnian figure of Titus" (Berry, 1999: 113).

[3] This conflict between private and public interests is already an important issue in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra mourns the death of her daughter Iphigenia, sacrificed by her own father to appease the gods and gain favourable winds:

### Clytemnestra

Yes, he [Agamemnon] had the heart  
To sacrifice his daughter  
To bless the war that avenged a woman's loss  
A bridal rite that sped the men-of-war.  
'My father, my father!' – she might pray to the winds;  
No innocence moves her judges mad for war  
(*Agamemnon*, 223–228)

He thought no more of it than killing a beast,  
And his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece,  
But he sacrificed his own child, our daughter,  
The agony I laboured into love  
To charm away the savage winds of Thrace  
(*Agamemnon*, 1140–1144)

To avenge the brutal death of her daughter, Clytemnestra, in turn, kills her husband, Agamemnon. This woman could not accept that a war or any other public affair should be a reason to sacrifice an innocent girl, their beloved daughter Iphigenia. As Sarah Pomeroy explains, the *Oresteia* "makes clear [that] a city-state such as Athens flourished only through the breaking of familial or blood bonds and the subordination of the patriarchal family within the patriarchal state. But women were in conflict with this political principle, for their interests were private and family-related" (Pomeroy, 1998: 217–8).

[4] Henceforth all quotes from *Titus Andronicus* will be identified by its initials, *TA*.

[5] Henceforth all quotes from *Kill Bill* will be identified by its initials, *KB*, and the respective volume, *V1* for the first volume and *V2* for the second one.

[6] This is part of Ella Taylor's interview with Tarantino in 1992. It is entitled "Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and the Thrill of Excess," and it can now be found in a collection of interviews published in 2001 by the editor Gerald Peary.

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## Filmography

*Kill Bill Volume 1* (2003), dir. Quentin Tarantino, USA.

*Kill Bill Volume 2* (2004), dir. Quentin Tarantino, USA.